

## POETICALLY SPEAKING

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### THE FEMININE ENDING: AMPHIBRACH OR HYPERMETRICAL?

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#### Prefatory Remarks

This discussion deals specifically with verses written in *iambic pentameter* although it may apply to other metrical patterns. This metrical scheme, iambic pentameter, is commonly used in formal verse. Although variations are somewhat limited, they do exist and are utilized by poets to avoid the monotony of the strict iambic rhythm. For the reader, these variations can be welcome.

There are several valid substitutions for the iamb. These are the *anapest*, which is most common, the *amphibrach* and where appropriate the *trochee* and *dactyl*. The last two are less flexible in their placement within the verse.

What I propose to analyze is whether we should use the *amphibrach* as the last foot or consider the final syllable of the verse as *hypermetrical* when dealing with the *feminine ending*.

#### What is an Amphibrach?

In English verse, the amphibrach is accepted as a three-syllable foot consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable and finally another unstressed syllable (more about this later). Its representation in scansion is:

˘ — ˘

where the breve represents lesser stress and the macron stronger stress. It is a somewhat unusual or perhaps unexpected foot due to the major emphasis or impression on the middle syllable. Its pattern makes it ideal for the placement after the iamb or anapest because it will carry the rhythm well. It may work equally well before a trochee or dactyl or control the transition from rising and falling rhythm and vice versa.

# What are Hypermetrical Syllables?

Hypermetrical syllables are those syllables falling *outside* of the normal or expected metrical scheme. In a rising rhythm they are found at the end of a verse such as the feminine ending and in a falling rhythm at the beginning of a verse. In some instances, they may fall within the verse but are associated with a caesural pause. It is the first case we will be discussing — *hypermetrical syllables at the end of a verse*.

## What is a Feminine Ending?

The *feminine ending* is an accepted variation when writing verses in iambic pentameter. This is when the verse exceeds the normal length and ends with an unaccented or light syllable after the final arsis<sup>1</sup>. In rising rhythm<sup>2</sup> such as iambic pentameter, it is a hypercatalectic ending. Generally, the verse will have eleven syllables breaking from the normal and expected ten.

## Examples of the Feminine Ending

Many poets have utilized the feminine ending, and it can be very effective in giving some minor but pleasant variation to the strict iambic pentameter verse. The examples considered here will be from Shakespeare's sonnets.

### Example 1—Sonnet XXXII

- 1 If thou survive my well-contented day,
- 2 When that churl Death my bones with dust shall cover,
- 3 And shalt by fortune once more re-survey
- 4 These poor rude lines of thy deceased lover,

—First Quatrain

In this selection, verses two and four involve the feminine ending. By simply reading these verses, it is obvious that the verse ends with a light syllable. A simple scansion disregarding the metrical feet would be:

- 2 Whěn thăt chŭrl Dēath mŷ bōnes wĭth dŭst shăll cōvĕr

If we now mark out the metrical feet:

- 2 Whěn thăt | chŭrl Dēath | mŷ bōnes | wĭth dŭst | shăll cōvĕr

We see that the last foot contains three syllables and corresponds to the amphibrach. We naturally expect the companion verse to follow in a similar manner. Hence:

- 4 Thĕse pōor | rūde lĭnes | ōf thŷ | dĕcĕas | ěd lōvĕr

<sup>1</sup> The **arsis** is that part of the foot which has the metrical ictus. The remainder of the foot is known as the **thesis**.

<sup>2</sup> **Rising rhythm** is one where the stress rises from a low level to a higher one, then dropping back to rise again. This pattern is clearly identified in *iambic pentameter*.

In this case the word **deceased** is pronounced with three syllables, indicated by the grave. Again, the amphibrach appears in the last foot.

## Example 2—Sonnet XX

Sonnet XX is a very unusual sonnet because every line has a feminine ending.

A woman's face with nature's own hand painted  
Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;  
A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted  
With shifting change as is false women's fashion;  
An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,  
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;  
A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,  
Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.  
And for a woman wert thou first created,  
Till nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,  
And by addition me of thee defeated  
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.  
But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,  
Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.

The Bard was possibly having a bit of fun with this sonnet or at least experimenting with this variation. It is uncommon to have every verse with a feminine ending, especially a sonnet and you may detect a certain strangeness, albeit pleasant, in the reading. The question is: Why is it classified as *iambic pentameter* when there is an *amphibrach* at the end of each verse leaving only four iambs in each verse? Surely this cannot be correctly interpreted as iambic pentameter. This point will be considered later in this discussion.

How would this sonnet scan if we implement the use of hypermetrical syllables? Take as an example the first two verses of Sonnet XX:

- 1 Ā wōm | ān's fāce | wīth nā | tūre's ōwn | hānd pāint(ed)
- 2 Hāst thōū | thē mās | tēr-mīs | trēss ōf | mý pās (sion)

We see that the scansion shows both verses as purely *iambic pentameter* because hypermetrical syllables are **never** counted in the scansion. In fact, every one of these verses will now lose the appearance of the amphibrach. In effect, each verse can now be represented as iambic pentameter. There may be some slight variations, for example verse six, but overall, the scansion shows the expected metrical scheme as iambic pentameter. However, one may feel that this is cheating and done simply to classify the sonnet or any other *too-hard* verse, when it runs over, as iambic pentameter.

Referring to example 1, verses two and four would scan with hypermetrical syllables as follows:

- 2 Whēn thāt | chūrl Dēath | mý bōnes | wīth dūst | shāll cōv(er)

and

- 4 Thēse pōor | rūde līnes | ōf thý | dēcēas | ěd lōv(er)

Note that any measure of stress is removed from hypermetrical syllables in the final scansion.

# What is the Difference?

The short of it is that the difference is more in the naming rather than what has been done in the scansion. The Greek terminology that is in use today does not apply precisely to our English use. We need to realize that Greek verse is very different to English verse, yet we use the same terminology. As a result, there can be some confusion when using this classical terminology with English verse. Often there is the case that the classical definitions are altered to suit our own interpretation.

With respect to the *amphibrach*, the classical definition meant *short on both sides*, or the Greek name for a *combination*, hence it cannot strictly be a metrical foot. Our English interpretation allows the amphibrach to represent a metrical foot, and there are some, perhaps many, who do allow it in scansion but few of whom do not.

To scan a verse with a feminine ending is better understood or should I say, *more easily understood* and acceptable using the amphibrach rather than the hypermetrical syllable even though the classical definition of amphibrach does not technically sit well. However, the amphibrach is not the only classical foot that comes under suspicion in English verse. The *spondee* and *pyrrhic* are feet that have been grossly misinterpreted in English verse and thus cause confusion by attempting to manipulate too much of the classical definition to create an acceptable English definition. The Greek system can only fit the English to a point, and in some cases, it is only a mere approximation. So, which of the two, amphibrach or hypermetrical syllable is correct?

There are two cases we can consider:

1. That every syllable must be accounted for; and if not
2. What purpose does this *extra* syllable serve?

The first case can be argued successfully in most instances, but it may result in some very erroneous scansions. Scansion must represent the verse as it is spoken. We cannot scan one way and read the verse in another, the two must go hand in hand. However, there can often be the problem where we cannot include all syllables in a sequence of logical, acceptable metrical feet, and we find ourselves with monosyllabic feet which cannot be complemented by a compensatory pause, thus making the scansion invalid. Although the amphibrach is accepted as a metrical foot in English verse, it is more correctly suited as a connector mid-verse, as its classical definition would suggest.

In the second case, the *extra* syllable fills the natural pause between verses, and a very smooth transition is created between the verses albeit there is a minor weakening in the rhythmical character of the verse. This *extra* or *hypermetrical* syllable is outside of the verse's metrical scheme and so is not counted in the scansion of the verse. The hypermetrical syllables are always light and perhaps insignificant compared to the syllable before and simply carry through the pause into the next verse. Even though they are enunciated, they act more as a filler or substitution for the natural pause between verses. Such is the case that they do not affect the scansion of the verse, and with some careful contemplation we will understand the logic of their presence, purpose and use.

## Conclusion

So, which should it be, an amphibrach or hypermetrical syllable? The answer to this question depends very much upon which school of scansion you subscribe to. You will find scansion which does not mention the amphibrach but considers hypermetrical syllables and vice versa. There are some who will use both depending on the circumstances.

I find that the amphibrach is easier for most people to comprehend. It is an acceptable substitution for the iamb, and when properly placed does not violate the iambic rhythm. Its position at the end of a

verse may be questionable due to its classical linking purpose. However, this can be overcome by considering that it is essentially linking one verse to the next in a very smooth and unnoticed manner. Today, it does not cause any great disruption for the classification of a verse or poem due to its substitution property for the iamb.

As with everything, especially in scansion, there are advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of the amphibrach lies in its simplicity to solve the problem of the ultimate syllable. The disadvantage is that it fails to be convincing when classifying a poem with many of these variations.

Iamb, trochee, dactyl and anapest *are* metrical feet. The amphibrach is *not* strictly a metrical foot due to its makeup and classical use which it still maintains today. Its main purpose is to connect and correct. In other words, connect feet which would not normally appear together or correct the rhythm. That is, reestablish the iambic (rising) rhythm from a trochaic (falling) rhythm. A similar situation applies to trochaic rhythm.

With scansion, there is no, and never has been, any requirement that every syllable in a verse must be included in a metrical foot. The scansion is to detail how the line is read using the required metrical scheme. We know very well that some syllables do not make as great impression as others, while yet others are hardly sounded at all. As in the case of the feminine ending, these are hypermetrical syllables.

The use of hypermetrical syllables is by far the most accurate method to explain such endings and easily show how and why a verse or poem has been classified. In the case of iambic pentameter, we can clearly see the iambs in their progression through the verse. The fact that there is a hypermetrical syllable is irrelevant to the scansion of the verse. This ultimate syllable is light and runs through the pause to connect to the next verse, the metrical scheme is still iambic pentameter.

As we may come to appreciate, scansion can be complex and is not always the case of marking varying degrees of stress. However, the result of detailed scansion is very satisfying and explains **why verses are as they are and not otherwise**.