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This is the first introduction to rhythm and meter that begins where students are: as speakers of English familiar with the rhythms of ordinary spoken language, and of popular verse such as nursery rhymes, songs, and rap. *Poetic rhythm* builds on this knowledge and experience, taking the reader from the most basic questions about the rhythms of spoken English to the elaborate achievements of past and present poets. Terminology is straightforward, the simple system of scansion that is introduced is suitable for both handwriting and computer use, and there are frequent practical exercises. Chapters deal with the elements of verse, English speech rhythms, the major types of metrical poetry, free verse, and the role of sense and syntax. *Poetic rhythm* will help readers of poetry experience and enjoy its rhythms in all their power, subtlety, and diversity, and will serve as an invaluable tool for those who wish to write or discuss poetry in English at a basic as well as a more advanced level.

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# Poetic rhythm

*An introduction*

DEREK ATTRIDGE  
The University of York



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*For Edward Weismiller*

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## Preface

The approach to rhythm and meter in this book broadly corresponds to the one I set out at length in *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (Longman, 1982). Readers who wish to follow up the introductory discussion here in more detail should turn to that book, in which a fuller account of the complexities of rhythmic movement in verse is presented. I have changed the notation used in that book, partly because of the advent of the personal computer since it was written: the symbols used here are easy to write by hand and to produce on a computer. (A simple macro will make any symbol a matter of one or two keystrokes.) However, there is no difficulty in converting these symbols to the ones used in *The Rhythms of English Poetry*, and vice versa. The only substantive difference is that I now distinguish between successive stressed beats separated by a perceived offbeat (a “virtual offbeat”) and those separated by nothing more than the necessary pause induced by the linguistic rhythm (an “implied offbeat,” though I do not use the term in this book). This change makes possible a clearer distinction between the movement of stress verse and that of syllable-stress verse.

Chapter 8, on phrasal movement, is indebted to the work of Richard D. Cureton, notably his *Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse* (Longman, 1992), though I take full responsibility for the adaptation and simplification of his arguments. Not all readers will wish to enter the little-explored realm of phrasing, but my hope is that many will be persuaded of the importance of this young branch of prosodic study.

This book owes a great deal to others who have committed themselves to the movements of poetic language, whether in writing poetry or writing about it, and if it were another kind of book it would be studded with references to their publications. One debt I am especially happy to acknowledge – to someone whose commitment to poetry has been of both kinds – is signaled in the dedication.

Many people have contributed time and expertise to this project in a more direct way. The book has benefited enormously from the careful reading of the manuscript at different stages of its evolution by Tom Furniss, John Gouws, George Kearns, and Suzanne Hall. The readers for Cambridge University Press were both generous and scrupulous in their com-

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ments. Richard Cureton counseled me on phrasing, and Bruce Tucker gave me just the right advice about rap. Laura and Eva Attridge have reminded me how important, and how pleasurable, the experience of rhythm and meter is in our earliest years.

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D.A.

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## *On using this book*

The primary aim of this book is to help readers experience and enjoy the rhythms of English poetry in all their power, subtlety, and diversity. A secondary aim is to provide ways of talking and writing about the contribution made by rhythm to the meaning and force of individual poems. These two aims aren't as separate as they may sound, since we recognize and respond to the rhythmic features of poetry all the more fully if we possess some basic tools of rhythmic analysis. No understanding of the history of poetry, or of the place of poetry in history, is possible without an understanding of poetic rhythm. Moreover, a thorough acquaintance with rhythm is essential to the writing of good poetry, and this book is also designed to help poets – and those who wish to become poets – to develop that necessary familiarity.

This book does not, however, offer a metrical *theory*, in the strong sense of the word. It does not attempt to formulate rules that would enable a reader (or a computer) to decide if a given line is an acceptable example of a given meter. No successful metrical theory in this sense has yet been produced, though there have been many attempts. The approach in this book is different: bearing in mind that poetry is a matter of hearing and experiencing meaningful sounds and not calculating with abstract symbols, it introduces the reader to the basic ingredients of rhythm and meter and shows how they function in the most common types of verse.

What is offered here is just a first step. There is space for only a limited number of examples, and nothing like a full account of the intricacy and expressive potential of poetic movement is attempted. Just as students of music need to know the elements of harmony and counterpoint before proceeding to more complex analytical, critical, and comparative tasks, students of poetry need to become familiar with the elements of rhythmic form. But it is not enough just to know the conventions that govern the use of rhythm and meter. This book attempts to *explain* the features that it describes: why are certain metrical forms common in English poetry and others rare, why do certain variations in the line cause major disruptions while others don't, how do the movements of English verse spring from the characteristics of the language we speak? In coming to understand the

reasons for the particular choices made by poets down the centuries, we appreciate more fully the poems they wrote.

The organization of chapters reflects this approach. After an initial chapter on rhythm in poetry, chapter 2 presents an outline of the significant rhythmic features of the English language out of which all verse is crafted. Chapter 3 introduces the workings of meter, especially in its familiar four-beat version. Chapter 4 builds on the foundation of the previous two chapters to consider stress meter, the most common type of English meter outside the literary canon. Chapters 5 and 6 examine syllable-stress meter, the major literary form of meter in English. Free verse is the subject of chapter 7, and chapter 8 discusses the role of syntax and meaning in poetic movement (with further consideration of free verse). Each chapter except the first includes a number of exercises, which offer a small sample of the many ways in which the tools of analysis may be deployed. Chapters are followed by brief summaries of their more technical points.

There are four appendices: the first summarizes the activity of *scansion* that is crucial to the development of sensitivity to rhythm, the second is a *glossary* of terms used in the study of rhythm and meter (including terms not employed in this book), the third lists the *sources* of the quotations given throughout the book, and the fourth provides suggested *responses to the exercises* where these involve scansion of examples.

Most of the poetry discussed in this book is in regular meters, even though the majority of poets writing in English today use some form of free verse. There are a number of reasons for this emphasis. First, in the history of English poetry, free verse represents a relatively recent preference, and the great bulk of existing verse is written in metrical lines. Second, free verse is usually written, and gains by being read, in relation to this tradition, which it resists and embraces in varying degrees. And third, becoming familiar with the working of regular meter is a good way to gain an understanding of the rhythms of spoken English, upon which all verse, free or metrical, is based.

In discussing rhythm and meter some technical terms are necessary; and it's an unfortunate fact that the field of prosody, as the study of rhythm and meter has traditionally been called, presents a dizzying array of such terms, without very much agreement about their precise meanings. It has been said of the most traditional method of analyzing meter – in terms of “feet” – that it works only for those who already know what is going on and are able to make the vague gestures which others who also know what is going on can understand. This book tries to avoid such elitism by using the simplest terms available and keeping close to their commonest meanings, and it ignores the fact that many of these terms have been the subject of lengthy disputes. Readers should be prepared to find different terms in other books

on poetry, as well as some of the same terms being used with different meanings. Appendix 2 will help to relate the vocabulary used in this book to that found in other studies of verse. Much of the traditional terminology of prosodic study in English was originally derived from Greek prosody, and since these terms – however misleading – are in wide use they are explained in chapter 5, in the section on “Foot-scansion.”

This book contains numerous examples of poetry scanned to show how they might be read. Examples are numbered, and those that are not invented are identified in Appendix 3. Lines that have been rewritten to illustrate a point about their rhythm are indicated by a letter after the number, thus: (7a). (Where appropriate, older spellings have been modernized.) No poem has only one correct mode of rhythmic delivery; on the contrary, the study of prosody makes it clear that poems on the page allow for a number of alternative realizations, much as a musical score allows for a variety of different performances. The value of poetry lies partly in these multiple possibilities. The test of a system of scansion, therefore, is not that it should fix the manner in which lines are read, but that it should provide a way of clearly showing alternative readings. In the discussions that follow, however, it will often be necessary to choose one option and therefore impose one interpretation, and all readers are bound to experience moments of resistance to some of these choices. As long as allowances are made for individual preferences, these moments should not affect the exposition of the argument.

Scanning a poem – especially if it involves attention to phrasal movement as well as to the rhythm of stressed and unstressed syllables – has its own value, as a way of becoming intimate with it, hearing it with the fullest possible attention. But it is only one element in appreciating a poem, and this book offers no recipe for moving from a particular metrical or rhythmic feature to an interpretive or critical commentary. The same feature has very different effects in different poems, and even in the same poem may be interpreted very differently when it appears in dissimilar contexts. Though I have included as many examples of the critical usefulness of rhythmic analysis as space has allowed, the major emphasis in this book is on hearing and understanding the movements of the language themselves. Whatever critical approach to poetry a reader wishes to use will benefit from accurate and responsive dealings with rhythm and meter.