

SOME BASIC METRICAL VOCABULARY FOR LATIN POETRY¹

Aeolic meters: the types of lyric meters used by the Greek poets Sappho and Alcaeus (the “Aeolian” poets), and the Athenian dramatists in their choral odes, and imitated by Latin lyric poets (Plautus in his *cantica*, Catullus, Horace, Seneca in his choral lyrics, Statius, and later poets such as Ambrosius, Boethius and Ausonius). Aeolic meters are based on a *choriambic* nucleus (– u u –) with the addition of a “tail.”

anceps: a position that can contain either a long or a short syllable.

carmen, carminis (n.): Latin word for “sung poem,” often used to refer to lyric poems such as Catullus’s poems.

colon (pl. *cola*): A large unit, around 8-12 syllables that cannot be subdivided into feet (e.g. Aeolic meters).

caesura: the ending of a word within a metrical foot; denoted by a |; it is more strongly felt when reinforced by a word grouping and/or punctuation.

contraction: the use of one long syllable for two short, as in a dactyl: – u u → – –.

diaeresis: the coincidence of the end of a foot with the end of a word; denoted by a ||.

distich: “two-liner.” A unit consisting of two unlike periods, e.g. elegiac couplet.

elision: the suppression of a final vowel or vowel + *m* before an initial vowel or *h-* in the following word; synonymous with *synalaepha*.

elegy: verse composed of one or a sequence of distichs consisting of a hexameter and two hemiepes (first half of a hexameter line: – u u – u u –).

element: the space occupied by a longum, breve, or by an anceps in conformity with the basic structure.

foot: a metrical unit in some, but not all, kinds of verse. A small unit, typically two or three syllables.

hiatus: the “gap” between a word ending in a vowel (or diphthong) and a word beginning with a vowel (or diphthong), when elision does not occur.

¹ Raven. 1965. *Latin Meter: an Introduction*. London ; J.W. Halporn, M. Ostwald and T.G. Rosenmeyer. 1994. *The Meters of Greek and Latin Poetry*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing. Allen and Greenough. 2001. *New Latin Grammar*, edited by A. Mahoney. Focus Publishing.

lyric: literally “(sung to) the lyre;” this adjective refers generally to poetry that mixes various kinds of rhythmical units, not just repeating the same kind of rhythm over and over, in order to form a larger, rhythmically varied stanza. The meters used by Roman poets who wrote “lyrics” in Latin were based on meters used by Greek poets, whose poems were in fact usually sung to the lyre or another stringed instrument, hence the name.

meter: The rhythmical pattern in which a period of poetry is composed.

metron (pl. *metra*): “measure.” The smallest metrical unit, consisting of a given sequence and number of long and short elements, of a period made up of several such units. In some meters, it consists of one or two **feet**.

mora (pl. *morae*): “delay.” The smallest musical or rhythmical element; it is the length of time required for the enunciation of one short syllable. A long syllable is equal to two *morae*.

ode: Greek word meaning literally “song;” originally a term for a single choral lyric poem with no responding stanza (*antistrophe*). In Latin lyric it refers to a lyric stanza, or to a series of stanzas that form one poem.

period: used variously of a) a “line” of poetry marked off from the next by means of a pause; b) a group of periods rounded off by a clausula within a stanza; and c) the structure of a whole stanza.

prodelision: suppression of initial short *e* instead of a preceding final vowel; e.g. *meum est* → *meum'st*.

prosody: the patterns of stress and quantity in poetry.

responsion: The parallelism of metric schemes between strophe and strophe or strophe and antistrophe.

scansion (v. *scan*): the process of identifying long and short syllables, then identifying the feet or cola of the verse.

stichic: literally “by line;” this adjective refers to poetry in the form of repetition of a single rhythmic line, rather than the mixture of different lines within a stanza to form a rhythmically varied unit. It is sometimes (not always) used to contrast a style of poetry with lyric’s stanza format. (But of course lyric poetry can include some repeated lines in a particular metrical scheme as well, so the contrast is not complete.)