Three Meters of Aristophanic Dialogue

I. Iambic trimeter

A. The basic metrical unit

The iambic foot, as you may know from English poetry, is: —

In English, “pentameter” means “five feet,” thus: — — — — — —

But in Greek, “trimeter” means “three metra.” The iambic metron is: × — —

• × indicates an syllable that may be either short or long. Such a syllable is called anceps, which literally means “two-headed” in Latin.

• This metron is made up of two iambic feet, with the first syllable anceps instead of short.

B. The basic scheme of the verse

Iambic trimeter, therefore, is: × — — × — — × — — ||

• || indicates the end of the verse.

• Now that we have a schema for the entire line, it is important to know that the last syllable can be short; it’s still counted long because of the pause at verse-end. (This is called syllaba brevis in elemento longo. The unusual case in which it is not observed is called synaphea.)

C. Variations: Why have them?

Some beautiful poems have been composed in very strict meters, but, over the length of a play, a rigid meter without variation would tend to produce hopelessly wooden sing-song.

The same is true of English verse. No competent English poet uses — — — — — — over and over. Variety and expressiveness are achieved by several kinds of modification, including:

• exchanging the positions within a foot, so that we have a trochee (ーー) instead of an iamb (“reversal”)

• exchanging positions between feet (“swap”)

• omission of a short syllable (“catalexis,” which is here used more loosely than when used for Classical meter) or a long syllable (“rest”)

The most important principle that keeps the verse intelligible as verse, despite these freedoms, is that the last syllables of the verse should always return to the basic pattern.

Peter Groves (from whose article “Finding his Feet” [http://www.arsversificandi.net] I’ve taken the terms above) does a good job describing the difference that such variations make. Without them, the effect is

...monotony: not only is the metrical pattern rigid and unyielding in itself, but its absolute predictability destroys the possibility of tension between the metre and the prosody of a line. Prosodic variation becomes irrelevant because it cannot signal metrical variation, and the language of the verse is dragooned into a lifeless parade-ground regularity. The effect is to deaden our responsiveness to the language.

On the other hand, with effective variations, we may “escape this leaden-footed insistence, to exchange it for the dance and play of ‘counterpoint.’”
D. The variations in comic iambic trimeter

Resolution, which means the substitution of \( \sim \) where the strict scheme calls for a long syllable. This produces the modified scheme:

\[ \underline{\times \sim \sim \sim \times \sim \sim \times \sim \sim \sim} \]

Note that the intelligibility principle mentioned above dictates that the last foot remain iambic. There is one further variation, which is that an anapest (\( \sim \sim \)) may be substituted in any foot but the last. (Tragedy allowed fewer variations: see Birds 1238-1242, in a “tragic” style.)

E. The full scheme of the comic iambic trimeter

So the full scheme is:

\[ \underline{\times \sim \sim \sim \times \sim \sim \times \sim \sim \sim} \]

\( \downarrow \) marks a possible caesura (see below). Note that, for each foot, you will find either one of the possibilities allowed in the first line or an anapest. You can’t mix and match beyond that point (i.e., a \( \sim \sim \sim \sim \sim \) foot is not allowed).

F. Caesura

A caesura is a more or less regular break in the line (between words) that occurs in the middle of a foot. In iambic trimeter, there is frequently a caesura between the two halves of the third or fourth foot (not both: don’t be misled by the fact that both possibilities are marked above).

EXAMPLES from Birds / shows a change of speaker mid-verse

54 ἀλλ᾽ οἰσθ᾽ ὁ δράσον; ἵ τῳ σκέλει θένε τὴν πετρᾶν.  
foot 5 (θένε τὴν): anap.  ὀδρ, πετρ mute+liquid

55 σῷ δὲ τῇ κέφαλῇ γ᾽, ἵν᾽ ἡ διπλασίας ὁ ψόφος.  
feet 1-2: anapest  foot 4 (διπλασία) resolved

56 ὑπὸ τὸν δῆθεν ἄργον / τῷ σκελεῖ θένε τὴν πετρᾶν.  
foot 5: anap.  ἐχρ mute+liquid  foot 5: anap.

57 ἀλλ᾽ οὐκ ἔχειν ὁ λίθῳ κοπῆν λαβὼν.  
foot 5: anap.  πάλιν ἄργον

60 ἀλλ᾽ εἰσίν ετέροι: τῆς ἀδριάδος ὅποιντοι,  
foot 4 (τοῖ; τῖς ὅ) resolved  ὦ by correction before 1 (not discussed here)

65 ὑπὸ δεδιώτες ἐγώ γέ, ἵ παρόν ὄρνεόν.  
foot 1: anap.  ὐποδεδιόως ἐγώ, ἵ παρόν ὄρνεόν.

72 ᾠδοὶ ἀνεβάνεις ἐρετρείς τῆν ἄρχοντα.  
feet 1 and 3 resolved  ἄρχον mute+liquid

802 γελοίοτέρον οὖν εἴδον: οὐδὲποτότε  
foot 2 (δετέρο) resolved

1390 καὶ πτερόδονητά: ὅ ὁ δὲ κλῦιον εἰςεῖ τάχα  
feet 1 and 3 resolved  δὲ κλ mute+liquid

1391 οὖ δήτ᾽ ἐγώγε: ἵ νη τὸν ἄρκλεξα σῦ γε.  
foot 5 (ῥακλέξα) resolved, mute+liquid
II. Trochaic tetrameter catalectic

Trochee (foot): \(\bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}}}\)

Trochaic metron: \(\bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times (the\ mirror\ image\ of\ the\ iambic\ metron)}\)

Trochaic tetrameter: \(\bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times \bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times \bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times \bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times ||}}\}

Catelexis means the suppression of a verse’s final syllable. In this case, this again serves the purpose of making the verse form intelligible by means of a distinctive verse-end.

Trochaic tetrameter catalectic: \(\bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times \bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times \bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times \bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times ||}}\}

The full scheme, with resolutions everywhere except the final metron:

\[\text{\begin{align*}
\bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times \bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times \bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times \bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times ||}}\}
\end{align*}}\]

\(\|\) marks a regular diaeresis—a more or less regular break in the line (between words) that occurs between feet. In trochaic tetrameter catalectic, there is regularly a diaeresis after the second metron (i.e., at the verse’s “midpoint”).

EXAMPLES from Birds

\[\Rightarrow\quad \text{How to recognize it: A bit longer. The only dialogue meter that can (\& mostly does) begin } \bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times \bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times \bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times \bar{\bar{\bar{\bar{\cdot}}} \times ||}}\}.

268 \quad \text{όγαθ’ ἀλλ’ οὖν οὔτος καὶ ἵδῃ τὶς ὀρνὶς ἑρχεται}
νῇ Δί’, ὀρνὶς δὴτὰ τὶς πότ’ ἐστὶν; οὔ δηποῦ τὰῶς;

270 \quad \text{οὔτος αὐτὸς νῦν φράσει. τίς ἢ ἐστὶν οὔρνῳς οὔτος;}
οὔτος οὐ τῶν ἡβαδῶν τῶνδ’ ὥν ὁ ὀρᾶθ’ ὑμεῖς ἂεῖ,
ἀλλὰ λίμναιὸς. / βαβαῖ, κάλὸς γ’ καὶ φοῖνικίος.
eἰκὸτός γε’ καὶ γὰρ ὀνόμα’ αὐτῷ ’στι φοῖνικόπτερός.
oὔτος, ὥ σὲ τοῖ. / τί βωστρεῖς; /ι/ ἐτέρος ὀρνὶς οὔτοςι.  

275 \quad \text{νῇ Δί’ ἐτέρος δὴτα, χοῦτος: ἐξεδρόν χωράν ἐχοῦν.}
tὶς πότ’ ἐσθ’ ὁ μουδομάντες: ἀτόπος ὀρνὶς ὀρίβατῆς;
ὀνόμα τοῦτῳ μῆδος ἐστὶ. /ι/ Μῆδος; ὡναξ ἡράκλεις,
eἰτὰ πῶς ἄνευ κάμηλοῦ ἢ Μῆδος ὡν εἰσεπτάτο;
III. Anapestic tetrameter catalectic

This is a chanted meter especially associated with the opposing speeches in a debate scene (agōn) and the parabasis (speech in which the chorus addresses the audience).

Anapest (foot):

Anapest meter is varied, not by resolution, but by allowing substitutions of dactyls or spondees for anapests.

Dactyl (foot):

Spondee (foot):

The anapestic metron consists of two feet (like the iambic and trochaic metra), with all three possibilities allowed in each foot.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anapestic metron [A]:</th>
<th>with any pairing of anapests, dactyls, and spondees allowed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>˘ ˘ ˘</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ˘ ˘</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- - -</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As in iambic (and trochaic) meter, even with all the possible substitutions, a ˘˘˘ foot is not allowed (Birds 688, in the example below, is a rare exception). In this meter, the ˘˘˘ sequence is also prohibited across two feet (i.e., dactyl + anapest).

Using A to designate the anapestic metron, the full scheme of anapestic tetrameter catalectic is:

A : A : A ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘

Again, the first foot of the final metron requires a true anapest, to keep the verse form intelligible. There is regularly a diaeresis after the second metron, and usually also after the first metron.

EXAMPLES from Birds

How to recognize it: These lines are long! (And the ending ˘ ˘ ˘ is distinctive.)

685 ὁγε δὴ φυύδιν ἄνδρες ἀμαρόδιοι, ἐφολλών γένεξα πρὸθυμοῖ, ὀληνὸδρανέες, πλάσματα πῆλου, σκιδεΐδεα φυλ’ ἀμενήνα, ἀπτὴνες ἐφήμεριοί τάλασσοι: βρότοι ἄνερες εἰκέλονείροι, πρὸσεσχέτε τὸν νοῦν: τοῖς ἀθάνατοις: ἤμιν, τοῖς αἰέν ἐσόδων, τοῖς αἰθέριοις, τοῖς αἰγήρωις, τοῖς αἱρθία μηδομένοις,


Further reading

For more on these meters, see D.S. Raven, Greek Metre: An Introduction, London, 1962, whose information I have adapted in places above.

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