

Elementary Concepts of Greek Meter

Long and Short

Except for a few words here or there, everything in ancient comedy (and tragedy) is poetry, not prose.

Greek metrical patterns are based on long (ˉ) and short (˘) syllables. The rhythms of Greek are *quantitative* because they depend on the contrast between the length of time spent on a long syllable vs. a short syllable (basically 2:1). (English meter is based on stress, not quantity.)

A syllable is *long* if...

- ...its vowel is long.
 - η and ω are always long.
 - diphthongs are always long: αἰ αὐ εἰ εὐ οἰ οὐ υἰ etc.
 - α, ι, υ may be either short or long.
 - The odds favor assuming they're short.
 - The deictic suffix -ῖ, as in ὀδί, οὔσι, etc., is always long, and it is extremely common in Aristophanes.
 - The last syllable of a line is always counted long, because of the pause at line-end.
- ...its vowel is short but followed by two or more consonants.
 - Word divisions don't count for anything. Thus the first syllable of τῶν Πῶσεῖδῶ is long.
 - Remember that ζ [zd], ξ [ks], and ψ [ps] are double consonants. (On the other hand, θ φ χ are single consonants.)
 - *Exception.* Mute (π β φ, κ γ χ, τ δ θ) + liquid (λ μ ν ρ) generally leave the preceding syllable short.
 - *Exception to the exception.* The heaviest such combinations (βλ, γλ, γν, γμ, δν, δμ) usually will make the preceding syllable long.

A syllable is *short* if its vowel is short and it is followed by no consonant, a single consonant, or a mute + liquid.

EXAMPLES At this point, you should go ahead and look at some of the lines scanned as examples in the "Three Meters of Aristophanic Dialogue" handout.

Spoken, Chanted, and Sung

The actors generally spoke their verses in the action scenes (or *episodes*). But the chorus's odes between episodes were sung (and danced) by the entire chorus. There are also songs in comedy and tragedy for a single actor to sing. There are only a few, very regular, meters used for dialogue ("Dialogue" handout), but even a single play like *Birds* shows an astonishing variety of complex lyric meters.

- The "Structure" handout identifies exactly which lines are spoken dialogue (meter given to the right of line numbers) vs. sung lyric (meter given in italics to the left).
- Sommerstein's translation usually indicates sung passages through indentation. When the Greek text gives lines to the chorus (Χο.), the translation always distinguishes between lines spoken by the CHORUS-LEADER and lines sung by the whole CHORUS.

Some lines would have been delivered in a style neither spoken nor sung, but chanted (sometimes called recitative), often accompanied by the *aulos* (an oboe-like instrument).