

SHAKESPEARE'S BLANK VERSE AND PROSODY (AL DRAKE)

Meter. What is blank verse? It's Shakespeare's go-to pattern or *meter* for conveying dramatic dialogue, and it makes up the great majority of his plays' content. This pattern is made up of a series of unstressed and stressed syllables, divided into five distinct but interlocking units. *Iambic pentameter* is the technical term for blank verse. Iambic pentameter lines will contain five units (called "feet"), with each consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. This unit is called an *iamb*. So a regular iambic foot consists of a pair of syllables, the first one unaccented (~) and the second accented (' or -). A regular line of iambic pentameter looks like the following, with " | " used as a separator between each foot:

| ~ ' | ~ ' | ~ ' | ~ ' | ~ ' | or | de **Dum** | de **Dum** | de **Dum** | de **Dum** | de **Dum** |

Beat. All English verse is rather like music in the sense that it has a *beat*. The beat of blank verse is in keeping with the strongly accentual quality of ordinary English. The basic beat will run, as shown above, de **DUM** de **DUM** de **DUM** de **DUM** de **DUM**. As with music, you can tap your foot to such a regular, strong beat. So the *beat* is the constant, steady pulse of the verse line. It's what we keep coming back to.

Rhythm. The *rhythm* of a line of poetry refers to the movement of sounds flowing across the basic pattern. The rhythm is established by the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables as we move from one foot to the next through to the end of the metrical line. To think of rhythm is to think of a certain complexity, a certain sophistication, of the "notes" that play across a basic, unvariegated framework. It brings *variation* into play.

How can we describe the "variations" used by the poet? Poetics offers several rearrangements of stress within a given foot, aside from the iamb itself.

Anapest ~ ~ ' a very common variation for an iamb (Greek: ἀνάπαιστος, *anápaistos*, lit. "struck back")

Trochee ' ~ a fairly common variation for an iamb (Greek: τροχᾶιος, *trokhaios*, "running, tripping")

Dactyl ' ~ ~ epic or heroic verse is in dactylic hexameter (Greek: δάκτυλος, *dáktulos*, "finger")

Spondee ' ' common in classical verse (Greek: σπονδή, *spondē*, "libation," associated with music)

Pyrrhic ~ ~ common in classical verse (Greek: πυρρίχη, *pyrrikhē orkhēsis*, associated with "war dance")

A number of benefits flow from using iambic pentameter blank verse. The first is that any kind of iambic pattern sounds close to everyday speech. Second, the poet gains freedom from the demands of rhyming. (Milton said rhyme is "no necessary Adjunct or true Ornament of Poem or good Verse.") A third benefit of blank verse is that it frees up the dramatist to adopt a searching or questioning tone. It's hard to do that with heroic couplets, as Pope's verses show: "True wit is nature to advantage **dressed**; / What oft was thought, but ne'er so well **expressed**; / Something, whose truth convinced at sight we **find** / That gives us back the image of our **mind**." That sounds like forceful *rap*. But for conveying dramatic action and the various shades of emotion, blank verse functions as a *blank slate*: dramatists can do whatever they like with it.

Now let's run through an example of how an actor or reader might "mark up" a passage of iambic pentameter to make it suit its meaning, emotion, and the pertinent action it's involved in.

Below is a typical blank-verse passage in *Julius Caesar*. The lines are spoken in Act 1, Scene 1 by the angry tribune Marellus, who is determined to give the common people of Rome a piece of his mind for “mak[ing] holiday to see Caesar.” Let’s start by *scanning* the passage merely to show the bare accentual pattern. As it turns out, this is a pretty regular set of lines—no need to mispronounce or “wrench” any of the words to suit the barebones iambic scansion.

You **blocks**, | you **stones**, | you **worse** | than **sense-** | less **things**!
 O **you** | hard **hearts**, | you **cru-** | el **men** | of **Rome**,
 Knew **you** | not **Pom-** | pey? **Man-** | y a **time** | and **oft**
 Have **you** | climb’d **up** | to **walls** | and **bat-** | tle- **ments**,
 To **towers** | and **win-** | dows, **yea**, | to **chim-** | ney **tops**,
 Your **in-** | fants **in** | your **arms**, | and **there** | have **sat**
 The **live-** | long **day** | with **pa-** | tient **ex-** | pec- **ta** -tion,
 To **see** | great **Pom-** | pey **pass** | the **streets** | of **Rome**.

But let’s get serious here. We aren’t going to read the lines this way in performance. Pronouncing the lines as strictly iambic might honor the back-beat, the pattern, but it would keep us from reading the passage with proper attention to the meaning and feeling it conveys.

How, then, shall we play the music off of the iambic pentameter “back beat”? Let’s read the passage for its meaning, its feeling, and tone, and we’ll see how it looks when scanned for practical performance. We know that Murellus is angry with the plebeians for deserting their workday to celebrate Caesar. Murellus clearly prefers Pompey, Caesar’s murdered rival, over Caesar: the Tribune is aggrieved at how easily these commoners have forgotten Pompey, whom they once adored. Let’s mark up the passage with that in mind.

You blocks , you stones , you worse than sense- less things !	
O you hard hearts , you cru- el men of Rome ,	2 nd foot = pronounce as spondee
Knew you not Pom- pey? Man- y-a time and oft	1 st foot = trochee
Have you climb’d up to walls and bat- tle- ments ,	1 st foot = pyrrhic / 2 nd spondee
To towers and win- dows, yea , to chim- ney tops ,	5 th foot = (semi)-pyrrhic
Your in- fants in your arms , and there have sat	2 nd foot = pyrrhic
The live- long day with pa- tient ex- pec- ta -tion,	5 th foot = feminine ending
To see great Pom- pey pass the streets of Rome .	2 nd foot = regular or <i>maybe</i> spondee

Opinions may vary, but this seems like a reasonable estimation of how to pronounce the above lines in keeping with the desired feeling and tone. Along with pregnant pauses, gestures, and other things in a trained actor’s bag of tricks, such a reading captures the meaning and the feeling that we would like to draw from the passage. The audience, we hope, will understand from this opening passage that Caesar’s ascendancy has made him not only a lot of fair-weather, holiday-loving friends but also serious enemies, men who do not mean him well.

As readers who want to get the most out of our experience studying Shakespeare, all we really need to do is read dramatic verse for its *sense*, including whatever we can gather from the immediate context of the lines in question regarding feeling, attitude, tone, purpose, and so forth. The iambic pentameter or some other pattern will give us our starting point, and we’ll take things from there.