

Poetry and Prose in Early Modern Plays

PART ONE: POETRY

Who speaks in poetry in Early Modern plays? The answer is: most people (at least at some of the time).

Why were the plays written this way? Convention. Most classical plays (from Greek and Rome) are in verse, and this is the model Early Modern playwrights were imitating. Even folk plays and mystery plays from the Middle Ages are usually in some kind of verse (though it is often very sing-songy, doggerel).

In general, more elevated or noble characters tend to speak in verse, but this is just a generalization. Noble characters who lapse into more ordinary conversational topics often lapse into prose.

The other general rule is that the earlier the play by Shakespeare, the more likely it is that the **meter** of the poetry is going to be very regular. The meter in the poetry of the later plays tends to be quite loose.

Meter in Poetry

Meter is the arrangement of a line of poetry by the number of syllables and the rhythm of stressed and unstressed syllables.

For example, in English the stresses in the word “poetry” fall on the first and third syllables. The standard way to mark these stresses is with this symbol above the syllable: *ˈ*. The standard way to mark unstressed syllables is with this symbol above the syllable: *˘*.

ˈ ˘ ˈ
po e try

It's more complicated than that, though, since English metered poetry is categorized by the pattern of these stressed and unstressed syllables within metrical feet. A **foot** is two or three syllables that together make up the smallest unit of rhythm in a poem.

Unfortunately, English poetry takes the names for these types of feet from the Greeks, so they all have hard to remember names:

- **iamb**: metrical foot of two syllables-- one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable (*˘ ˈ*); the word “de-**scribe** is a natural iamb
- **trochee**: metrical foot of two syllables-- one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed syllable (*ˈ ˘*); the word “**gar**-den” is a natural trochee
- **spondee**: metrical foot of two syllables-- both of which are stressed (*ˈ ˈ*); the word **faith-ful** is a natural spondee, as both syllables get approximately equal weight; this meter is very rare in English
- **anapest**: metrical foot of three syllables-- two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable (*˘ ˘ ˈ*); the phrase “to the **moon**” is in this meter
- **dactyl**: metrical foot of three syllables-- one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables (*ˈ ˘ ˘*); the word “**hap**-pi-ly” is a natural dactyl

There are other meters, but they are much, much less important.

The meter is classified by how many feet it contains: dimeter (2), trimeter (3), tetrameter (4), pentameter (5), hexameter (6), heptameter (7), and octameter (8).

Here are the first six lines of a poem written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge to help people remember the various meters. It is called "Metrical Feet":

Trochee trips from long to short;
From long to long in solemn sort
Slow **Spondee** stalks, strong foot!, yet ill able
Ever to come up with **Dactyl**'s trisyllable.
Iambics march from short to long.
With a leap and a bound the swift **Anapests** throng.

Here is the poem divided into feet, with the stressed and unstressed syllables marked. Doing this is called **scanning** a poem:

/ ~ / ~ / ~ /
Tro chee | trips from | long to | short; → This line in made up of trochees.
~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
From long | to long | in sol | emn sort → This line in made up of iambs.
/ / / / / / / / / ~
Slow Spon | dee stalks, | strong foot!, | yet ill | ab le → This line in made up of spondees.
/ ~ ~ / ~ ~ / ~ ~ / ~ ~
E ver to | come up with | Dac tyl's tri | syl lab le. → This line in made up of dactyls.
~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
I am | bics march | from short | to long. → This line in made up of iambs.
~ ~ / ~ ~ / ~ ~ / ~ ~ /
With a leap | and a bound | the swift An | a pests throng. → This line in made up of anapests.

The Normal Pattern in Early Modern Plays

Typically these plays (including the ones written by Shakespeare) are written in what is called **blank verse**. Blank verse is defined as unrhymed iambic pentameter. In other words, there are five iambs in a line (two syllables apiece, for a total of ten syllables), and the last words in a line do not rhyme.

Example from *Titus Andronicus* (the speaker is Saturninus):

Noble patricians, patrons of my right,
Defend the justice of my cause with arms;
And, countrymen, my loving followers,
Plead my successive title with your swords.

(I.i.1-4)

/ ~ ~ / ~ ~ / ~ ~ / ~ ~ /
 No ble | pa tri | cians, pa | trons of | my right,

Irregularity: the first foot replaces an iamb with a trochee.

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
 De fend | the jus | tice of | my cause | with arms;

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
 And, coun | try men, | my lov | ing fol | low ers,

/ ~ ~ ~ / ~ ~ / ~ ~ / ~ ~ /
 Plead my | suc ces | sive tit | le with | your swords.

Irregularity: the first foot replaces an iamb with a trochee.

Things to notice: You would not expect the “of” in the fourth foot of the first line to carry the stress, but it does because it follows a word where the last syllable is unstressed. It is stressed, in other words, in comparison to the previous word. A similar thing happens with the “of” in the third foot of the second line and with the “with” in fourth foot of the fourth line.

In other words, just because a word is short does not mean that it will not take a stress. Also, sometimes words will be stressed in one circumstance, but unstressed in another (example: “with” is unstressed in the last foot of line two but stressed in the fourth foot of line four).

Understanding the Formatting in Your Copy of the Plays

If a line of the poetry is carried over to another speaker, it will be indicated in this way:

MARCUS Let not young Mutius, then, that was thy joy,
 Be barred his entrance here.

TITUS Rise, Marcus, rise

Titus Andronicus (I.i.383-384)

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
 Be barred | his en | trance here. |

~ / ~ / ~ /
 Rise, Mar | cus, rise

} Even though these are two speakers, they are one line of iambic pentameter, so they are treated as one line when citing from the play (I.i.383).

If a syllable would not normally be pronounced, but it has to be in order to maintain the meter, it will be marked in this way:

They told me here at dead time of the night
 A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,
 Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins,
 Would make such fearful and confused cries
 As any mortal body hearing it
 Should straight fall mad or else die suddenly.

Titus Andronicus (I.i.99-104)

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
 Would make | such fear | ful and | con fu | **sèd** cries

Normal Variations in Iambic Pentameter

- 1) Replacing an iamb (~ /) with a trochee (/ ~); occasionally another metrical pattern might also replace the iamb (anapest, dactyl, or spondee)

Example from *Titus Andronicus* (the first feet of both I.i.1 and I.i.4):

/ ~ ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
 No ble | pa tri | cians, pa | trons of | my right,
 / ~ ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
 Plead my | suc ces | sive tit | le with | your swords.

- 2) A **headless line**, in which the first foot is missing the first unstressed syllable

Example from *Titus Andronicus* (the first feet of I.i.369 in the First Folio version of the line):

/ ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
 He | is not | him self, | let us | with draw

- 3) A headless line followed by an anapest (~ ~ /)

Example from *Titus Andronicus* (the two feet of V.iii.191):

/ ~ ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
 This | is the feast | that I | have bid | her to,

- 4) A **feminine ending**, in which the final foot has an extra unstressed syllable at the end

Example from *Titus Andronicus* (the last foot of I.i.183):

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~
 And name | thee in | e lec | tion for | the em pire

Variation: Iambic Pentameter with Rhyming Couplets

A “couple” is two of something. Therefore, a **couplet** is a pair of lines in a poem that somehow go together (usually completing a single thought).

In Early Modern plays, one finds rhyming couplets with very elevated speakers, very elevated discourse, discourse about very elevated subjects, or sometimes just for emphasis (as in the example below).

There are a lot more rhyming couplets in early Shakespeare, than there are in late Shakespeare.

Example from *Titus Andronicus*:

SATURNINUS What, was she ravished? Tell who did the deed.
TITUS Will't please you eat? Will't please Your Highness feed?
TAMORA Why hast thou slain thine only daughter thus?
TITUS Not I; 'twas Chiron and Demetrius.
They ravished her and cut away her tongue,
And they, 'twas they that did her all this wrong.
SATURNINUS Go fetch them hither to us presently.
TITUS Why, there they are, both bakèd in this pie,
Whereof their mother daintily hath fed,
Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred.

(V.iii.53-62)

/ ~ ~ / ~ ~ / ~ / ~ /
What, | was she ra | vished? Tell | who did | the DEED.

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
Will't please | you eat? | Will't please | Your High | ness FEED?

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
Why hast | thou slain | thine on | ly daught | er THUS?

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
Not I; | 'twas Chir | on and | De me | tri US.

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
They ra | vished her | and cut | a way | her TONGUE,
~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
And they, | 'twas they | that did | her all | this WRONG.

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
Go fetch | them hith | er to | us pre | sent LY.

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
Why, there | they are, | both bak | èd in | this PIE,

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
Where of | their moth | er daint | i ly | hath FED,

/ ~ ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /
Eat | ing the flesh | that she | her self | hath BRED.

These would have rhymed in Early Modern pronunciation.

At some point in this class we will discuss original pronunciation and the Great Vowel Shift (but not today).

This is called a **slant rhyme**-- where the vowel sounds are different, but otherwise it would rhyme.

PART TWO: PROSE

Prose is normal speech. It has no meter.

Who speaks in prose in Early Modern plays? Comic characters usually do, as do rustic or low-born characters.

More high-born characters can also speak in prose if discussing something mundane.

These are just generalizations, though, and Shakespeare will switch between poetry and prose for various reasons. With a little thought you can usually figure out a logic behind it.

The exception to this are plays where we don't have a terribly good text. The late play *Cymbeline*, for example, only exists in the First Folio, and there are passages that are printed as prose, but they can be scanned as poetry (at least in part). Some editors try to break this prose into lines of poetry, especially since there are other textual problems with this play. In other words, movement from poetry to prose in this play may be arbitrary due to printer errors, or they may be due to a corrupt or difficult-to-read copy text from which the printers worked.

How Prose is Formatted in the Plays

This is easy to spot, since the first letter of the lines will not be capitalized.

Prose is also one of the reasons why every editor of Shakespeare will have slightly different line numbers for the plays. There is no standard place to begin each line of prose, so how each edition breaks it up is due to column size, font, and font size.

Example from *Titus Andronicus*:

TITUS	Why, there it goes. God give His Lordship joy!	}	poetry
<i>Enter the Clown, with a basket, and two pigeons in it.</i>			
	News, news from heaven! Marcus, the post is come.— Sirrah, what tidings? Have you any letters? Shall I have justice? What says Jupiter?		
CLOWN	Ho, the gibbet maker? He says that he hath taken them down again, for the man must not be hanged till the next week.	}	prose

(IV.iii.76-82)

Note that the first letter of each line is not capitalized.

This example fits the general rule: where high-born characters speak in poetry and low-born or comic characters speak in verse.