Understanding Early Modern Poetry

# Structure

Poetry in the early modern period can be defined as anything written in verse. Verse is language with a mostly regular rhythmic patterning of sound called **meter**.

In the early modern period, English meter could be described in approximately the same way as the meter of Classical Greek and Roman verse. In fact, Classical meters were consciously imitated.

In Classical meter, segments of text are broken down into **lines** and **feet**. Each line consists of a number of feet.

Metrical feet consist of two or more syllables which may be stressed or unstressed. Stressed syllables are perceived to have greater weight than unstressed syllables.

Identifying the metrical feet in a line is known as parsing the meter. When a line of poetry is parsed, stressed syllables are indicated by **/** and unstressed syllables by **˘**.

Metrical feet fall into different categories or types, depending on the number of syllables and the order of stressed and unstressed syllables. Here are the most common types of feet:

* **Iambs**: Unstressed-Stressed (**˘/**). Lines made up of iambs are considered **iambic**. Iambs are the most common foot type in English.
* **Trochees**: Stressed-unstressed (**/˘**). Lines made up of trochees are considered **trochaic**.
* **Anapests**: Unstressed-unstressed-stressed (**˘˘/**).Lines made up of anapests are considered **anapestic**.
* **Dactyls**: Stressed-unstressed-unstressed (**/˘˘**).Lines made up of dactyls are considered **dactylic**.
* **Spondees**: Stressed-stressed (**//**). Lines cannot be made up of spondees, though it is possible to refer to a "spondaic" foot. Spondees can replace other types of feet for variation. Two consecutive unstressed syllables can be used in a similar way.

There are names for the number feet in a line. The most common are **trimeter** (three feet), **tetrameter** (four feet), **pentameter** (five feet), **hexameter** (six feet).

There most common English meter is iambic pentameter.

The meter of a line need not be absolutely regular. If the majority of feet in the line are iambs, the line is considered iambic. For instance, in iambic pentameter the first foot is frequently replaced by a trochee.

In most lines there is a natural pause somewhere in the middle, which is called the **caesura**. The caesura is easiest to detect when it coincides with a grammatical break (often indicated by punctuation).

Unrhymed iambic pentameter is known as **blank verse**.

When two consecutive lines rhyme, this is known as a **couplet**.

More than two lines can also be grouped by a rhyme scheme. For instance, a **tercet** had three lines and a **quatrain** has four lines. It is not necessary for all lines in the group to rhyme. For instance, in a tercet only the first and third lines need to rhyme.

Since not all lines need to rhyme in a line grouping, it is possible to have different rhyme schemes. When parsing verse, the rhyme scheme is normally indicated with matching letters, as in the following tercet and quatrain:

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low, a

Each like corpse within its grave, until b

Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow. a

When the voices of children are heard on the green a

And laughing is heard on the hill b

My heart is at rest within my breast c

And everything else is still. b

Sometimes line groupings can form larger patterns which repeat. Each repetition of the pattern is called a **stanza**. Some poems can consist of only one stanza.

In the Early Modern period, writers experimented with many types of verse. Perhaps the most famous was the **sonnet**. This was originally a dance form, which had been used for courtly love poetry in late medieval Italy and France. The most famous writer of courtly love sonnets was Francesco Petrarca (known in English as **Petrarch**). He not only mastered the form of the sonnet but also attached to it many courtly love conventions which were widely imitated.

The stanzaic form of sonnets can vary. In the Italian tradition, sonnets consisted of an octet (8 lines) followed by a sestet (6 lines). In England, another type consisting of three quatrains and a couplet developed, although the Italian type was also used.

The **Italian sonnet** (also called the **Petrarchan sonnet**) consisted of an octet, rhyming abab abab, plus a sestet. The rhyme scheme of the sestet could vary; it was frequently cde cde or cdc cdc.

The **English sonnet** consisted of three quatrains and a couplet, rhyming abab cdcd efef gg. The English sonnet is often called the **Shakespearian sonnet** because Shakespeare used it, not because he invented it.

The structure of the Italian sonnet has a natural shift between the octet and the sestet. This is known as the ***volta*** (Italian for "turn"). It is very natural to structure ideas around the *volta*. For example, a poet might ask a question in the octet and answer it in the sestet. The English sonnet imposes a more method of structuring ideas. Early modern poets explored how the structure of poetry could enhance the presentation of their thoughts.

For the modern reader, being able to understand the structure of an early modern sonnet is a key part of understanding the poem. Start by identifying the sonnet type and then break the sonnet down into line groupings based on the rhyme scheme. These line groupings can correspond to "thought groupings". Ask yourself what ideas and images dominate each thought grouping and then ask how all the groupings relate to each other in achieving the sonnet's overall purpose.