LATIN ELEGIAC COMPOSITION

The following is a collection of notes I have made on the metre and composition of Latin elegiac verse over the past few months. The information, all strictly based upon the practices of Ovid, has been tentatively weaved together with a vaguely didactic thread running throughout.

THE METRE:

The elegiac couplet, as with nearly all metres found in Latin, is of Hellenic birth. The Greeks, with inspired ingenuity, tweaked the scheme of the dactylic hexameter (used, of course, in the seminal works of Homer and Hesiod) to form a lighter, daintier and, I think, more charming variant. Whereas dactylic hexameter is 'stichic', i.e. consisting of the repetition of a one-line rhythm, the elegiac couplet boasts a distichic nature, answering every line of hexameter with a pentameter. The scheme of this metre will now be briefly analysed.

[SIGLA: ~ = long syllable;   u = short syllable;   / = division between metrical feet;   // = caesura]

Most will, I hope, be familiar with the dactylic hexameter. A dactyl is the term given to the rhythm 'long-short-short' (~ u u), and in this particular hexameter verse it is the pulse that keeps the lines flowing. Dactyls can occur in the first four of the six feet, but each can be replaced by a spondee ('long-long'; ~ ~) on the principle that two short syllables 'equate' to a long. The fifth foot is always, for our concerns here at any rate, a dactyl. The final and sixth foot, however, is typically a spondee, so as to give a fixed rhythmical closure to each line, lest one's ears get lost in the whole dactylic mêlée of the verse. The typical ending for each line of hexameter is thus a dactyl followed by a spondee, often alluded to by the English mnemonic 'Strawberry jam pot', of whose prosody even Longfellow would have surely been proud. The final syllable of the line, however, can be replaced by a short syllable (a phenomenon known as *brevis in longo*), making the final foot a trochee ('long-short'; ~ u).

Readers of Homer, or indeed any Classical poetry, will have become familiar with the pause of rhythm that is naturally, and quite regularly, inserted into each line. Such a rhythmical break is termed a 'caesura' (literally 'cutting'), and in the dactylic hexameter it is employed with some regularity. In Latin elegiacs, with which we are here concerned of course, the hexameters typically have their caesura after the first (long) syllable of the third foot. This position is known as the 'strong', or for the less politically correct 'masculine', caesura, and is typical (for detailed figures, v. infra). Let us now see the notation of the hexameter:

$$\sim u\ u\ /\sim u\ u\ /\sim //\ u\ u\ /\sim u\ u\ /\sim u\ u\ /\sim\ \sim$$
$$\sim\ \ \sim\ /\sim\ \ \sim\ /\sim //\ \sim\ \ /\sim\ \sim\ \ /\sim\ u\ u\ /\sim u$$

It should be observed once more that in the first four feet either dactyl or spondee are possible, in the fifth dactyl essential and in the final spondee or trochee possible. An alternative caesura was occasionally employed by Ovid (*inter alios*) for variation, wherein the caesura of the third foot was placed after the first short syllable (i.e. after the third trochee). This 'weak', or braver still 'feminine', caesura, was always corroborated by a strong caesura in the second and fourth foot. Such a line can be represented thus:

$$\sim u\ u\ /\sim ///\ u\ u\ /\sim u\ //\ u\ /\sim ///\ \ u\ u\ /\sim u\ u\ /\sim\ \sim$$

/// mark the two principal caesurae; // marks the now subordinate weak caesura. Dactyls in the first, second and fourth feet could, of course, be replaced by spondees at will in this scheme.

Enough, then, on the basics of the hexameter. More on its prosody will be said in due course.

The dactylic pentameter, as mentioned above, came into being by a slight variation of the hexameter. Owing to the prevalence of the third strong caesura, it was tentatively regarded as a halfway marker of the hexameter line, though strictly appearing too early. The rhythm tum-ti-ti / tum-ti-ti / tum was therefore engrained upon the ears of the poet and audience alike. It is the repetition of such a rhythm, the *hemiepes* ('half-line'), which creates the dactylic pentameter. The former hemiepes can have spondees in place of the dactyls of the first and

second feet; the latter hemiepes, however, must retain the strict rhythm of dactyl, dactyl, long. The phenomenon of *brevis in longo* exists in the pentameter too, so the last 'long' of the line can be replaced on occasion by a short. Finally, there is a fixed caesura at the natural break in the line, between the two hemiepes. The Latin elegiac pentameter, then, can be notated thus:

$$\sim u\ u\ /\sim u\ u\ /\sim //\sim u\ u\ /\sim u\ u\ /\sim$$
$$\sim\ \sim\ /\sim\ \sim\ /\sim //\ \sim u\ u\ /\sim u\ u\ /\ u$$

The rhythm of elegiacs consists of the alternation of such hexameter and pentameter lines, each forming a balanced couplet, repeated at the poet's will.

With the basics of the metre out of the way, the more pressing strictures of Latin elegiac verse need now be addressed.

<div align="center">RULES:</div>

Alongside the aforementioned circumscriptions of the metre, there are a certain number of rules that must be adhered to by the Latin elegiac versifier. I should iterate that it is Ovid, the man who produced the most refined couplets in the Latin tongue, whose precepts are here being followed.

In the hexameter:

- The line should end with either a disyllable or a trisyllable.

- The line should not, however, end with two consecutive disyllables - an ending such as *magnam tibi causam* was thought to be cacophonous by the Roman ear.

- The line should begin with a dactyl, an initial spondee being employed perhaps every six lines of hexameter.

- A molossus ('long-long-long', ~ ~ ~) should be avoided after the third strong caesura (i.e. filling up the second half of the third, and all the fourth, foot), for it creates a rather ponderous and weighty rhythm. Such a striking slowness, however, could occasionally be employed with skill where the context demands.

In the pentameter:

- The line must end with a disyllable (polysyllabic Greek proper nouns are mentioned briefly below).

- This disyllable should be a verb, noun or pronoun (whether personal or possessive), and not preceded by a monosyllable.

- The first hemiepes should not end with a monosyllable, unless (i) it is preceded by another monosyllabic word, (ii) it is preceded by a pyrrhic word ('short-short'; u u), (iii) it is *est* and elided onto the preceding word, such as in the hemiepes *ipsa nihil; pavido est* // (Ov.*Am*.1.7.20).

- The line should begin with a dactyl, an initial spondee being employed perhaps once in every five lines of pentameter, preferably for effect.

- There should not be a strong grammatical link over the caesura, i.e. it should not separate preposition and dependent noun, or noun and adjective in agreement without food reason.

With the above rules being obeyed, you will certainly be writing *correct* elegiacs.

Let a few caveats now be listed for the versifier's benefit (and perhaps future hair-tearing):

CAUTIONS: (N.B. exceptions exist to all 'rules', but such licence should only be adopted when the writer is confident he can equal Ovid in poetic skill.)

- Frequent elisions are to be avoided throughout.

- The elision of monosyllables, so crude to the ear, is to be especially avoided.

- Elision should only occur once every nine lines or so.

- There should never be elision over the caesura in the pentameter.

- Elision of long –*e*, long –*i* and long –*o* should be avoided, unless of *certe* (*ego*), *vidi* (*ego*) or *ergo*. Long -*a* and diphthongs are best not elided.

- A short open vowel (-*a, -e*) should not stand at the end of a word before *sc-*, *sm-*, *sp-*, *st-* and *z-*, e.g. phrases such as *corpore stellarum* and *flamma hastae* (which, with elision, leaves short a before –*st*) are forbidden.

- The pentameter should not end with a short -*a*, and endings in short -*e* are to be generally avoided, unless an ablative singular such as, say, *vice*, *bove* or *Iove*, which can occasionally be employed.

- *is*, *ea*, *id* and their various forms should not be used. Certain formulaic phrases, such as *quidquid id est* and *vix ea fatus erat* are, however, permissible.

- The repetition of a sound in consecutive syllables is not very welcome, e.g. *at attentat.*.

- *atque* is best not used, unless elided.

The scansion of the line is standard and with little surprises. The notes below, however, are the points I regard as of especial interest.

- *ego, puto, scio, ita, cito, bene* and *male* scan as pyrrhics ('short-short'; u u), and are thus of great use in elegiac composition.

- *mihi, tibi* and *sibi* can scan as iambs ('short-long'; u ~) *or* as pyrrhics.

- Compounds in *prae-* have this first syllable shortened when before a vowel, e.g. *praeeunte* scans as short-short-long-short.

- Words with cretic rhythm ('long-short-long'; ~ u ~) are intractable in elegy so must be avoided. Accordingly, feminine abstracts in –*tio* are impossible to get into the verse if the syllable before the –*tio* scans long, which it usually does. A word such as *emptio*, therefore, cannot be used, except in the nominative with elision of -*o*, ugly as that is.

- Nouns and adjectives in -*ius* should have their masc. and neut. genitive singular in -ii (short-long), not the contracted form in –i..

- Hiatus, the unelided presence of a final vowel (or –*m*) before an initial vowel (or *h-*), is exceptionally rare in Latin poetry, and should for the Latin elegiac versifier be avoided altogether.

- *O* in certain exclamations is the exception to this rule – *o utinam* is a common opening to either line, scanning as a dactyl followed by a long.

- Owing to the elision of –*m* before all vowels, and unavoidable syllable lengthening before the consonant of the following word, it is well worth noting that no word ending in -*m* can ever be a short syllable.

- The first syllable of *fio* is long in all its parts, except when an 'r' is present in the word, thus *fiant* is a

spondee, *fieri* an anapaest ('short-short-long'; u u ~).

- The scansion of the first syllable of *do, dare, dedi, datum* and its various parts is noteworthy. It is always short except in 1st pers. sg. present active indicative *do*, 2nd pers. present sg. active imperative *da* and 2nd pers. sg. present active subjunctive *das*.

- The final syllable of *antea, interea, praeterea, propterea* and *postea* is long. The last therefore is inadmissible in all elegy.

- *pro-* is often short although typically long. When employing a word prefixed with *pro-* a good dictionary should be consulted for Ovidian usage and scansion. Similarly with *re-* in compounds.

- The strictures of the verse mean that that the latter hemiepes of the pentameter will consist of: (i) a dactylic word, followed by a trochaic word, followed by the disyllabic closing word (iamb/pyrrhic), or (ii) a trochaic word, followed by an amphibracchic word ('short-long-short'; u ~ u), followed by the disyllabic closing word, or (iii) a long monosyllable, followed by a pyrrhic word, followed by a trochaic word, followed by the disyllabic closing word. In the last, the pyrrhic and trochaic could of course be replaced by a quadrisyllabic word, scanning as a paeon (here 'short-short-long-short'; u u ~ u).

Although this may seem a barrage of rules and circumscriptions, many such dicta are things that would naturally strike the writer as jarring, and therefore do not often cause great problems.

A few points may now be made on the point of style and manipulation, though the close reading of Ovid brings the finest teachings.

POINTS OF STYLE:

- In many cases it is well within poetic licence to use plural for singular or *vice versa*, thus *nos* and *noster* and their various forms are often used for *ego* and *meus*, and *miles* and *eques* are often used for 'soldiery' and 'cavalry'.

- It should be noted, however, that *vos* and *vester* are not used for *tu* and *tuus* and their respective forms.

- Abstract and concrete ideas can be interchanged with fitting poetic licence, though none of the sense should be lost.

- Metonymy, the use of a part of something to refer to the whole, is very common. Thus for *navis* (ship) one often finds *carina* (keel), *puppis* (stern), *prora* (prow) or *ratis* (raft) used metonymously.

- Vocatives abound, are often of particular use in the latter hemiepes of the pentameter, where the final short syllable of most vocatives is a welcome character.

- Syntax of the verses is typically far less complicated than that found in prose, favouring parataxis (the use of clauses that are parallel grammatically) over subordination (the placing of clauses in dependence of others). It is rare to find clauses more complicated than simple relative, final (purpose), consecutive (result), conditional and dubitative clauses.

- Often a perfect active infinitive is found in place of a present active infinitive. This substitution is especially prevalent in the latter hemiepes of the pentameter, where the *-isse* termination aids the necessary production of dactyls. A fine example of its use in the hexameter is Ov.*Am*.2.13.31 *tutius est fovisse torum, legisse libellos* ('It is safer to keep a couch snug and read little books').

-The imperative can be translated, other than by the imperative mood, by: (a) a future indicative; (b) *debeo* or *oportet* with infinitive; (iii) a nominative gerundive with a part of *esse*; (iv) *fac* or *effice* with the subjunctive.

- Enclitic *–que* and *–ve* are occasionally postponed *metri causa* from their typical position and instead placed later, particularly after a quadrisyllable beginning the latter hemiepes of the pentameter, so as to leave space for only a disyllabic closing word.

- Adverbs are relatively rare in elegy and best covered by an adjective in the nominative (e.g. for 'he did this willingly', *libens hoc fecit*) or adjective and noun in the ablative case (e.g. for 'you sang sweetly', *dulci cecinistis voce*)

- A preposition governing a noun phrase can precede the adjective or, if present, a dependent genitive instead of the main noun. Similarly, when two nouns are both dependent upon the same preposition, it can be placed with either, or perhaps both. Thus, 'through shallows and pools' could be *per vada lacusque*, *vada perque lacus* or *per vada per lacus.*

- Expansion of the line, the inclusion of sufficient words so as to fill a line of verse, can often be aided by the substitution of a verb for a periphrastic verb and noun phrase, for instance *vasto* can be replaced by *do vasta*, or *fatigo* by *lassos facio.*

For most, all the information above should serve as a sufficient resource of the rules to which one must adhere. For the yet more interested, a detailed analysis of the metre follows, with especial mention of the placing of secondary caesurae and diaereses (division of words coinciding with division of metrical feet).

<center>The elegiac metre, foot by foot</center>
<center>(s = strong caesura; w = weak caesura; d = diaeresis)</center>

In the HEXAMETER:
Caesurae and diaereses
(all percentages based upon Ovid's amatory works - *Amores* (2456 lines), *Ars Amatoria+Remedia Amoris* (3144 lines) *and XIV Heroides* (2192 lines))

1s   -   no comment
1w   -   no comment
General note: *It is preferable to begin with a dactyl rather than a spondee.*

2s   -   no comment
2w   -   must, if employed, be followed by an iambus ('short-long'' u ~), i.e. a 3s caesura
2d   -   rather rare (2.5%), for a 'false ending' of the preceding words is created. Of the 260 examples in the Ovidian corpus, all but two have a 2s caesura (v. Platnauer 19ff.).

3s   -   Main Caesura, very common (c.91%)
3w   -   must, if employed, NOT be preceded by 2w or followed by 4w, i.e. must be followed by an iambus to allow 4s. (c.8%) and preceded by 2s.
     There are only nine Ovidian instances of hexameter lines with no 3rd foot caesura (v. Platnauer, of the amatory examples: *Am.*2.10.25, 3.1.25, 3.9.53, 3.15.5)
3d   -   must accordingly, if employed, be preceded by monosyllable or pyrrhic.

4s   -   no comment
4w   -   relatively rare (5%)
4d   -   the Greek 'bucolic diaeresis', though of no significance in Ovid on its own (43%)

5s   -   should, if used, be preceded by (i) monosyllable, (ii) sense pause at end of 4th foot, and (iii) 4th foot dactyl (85% of amatory 5s caesurae follow these rules; exceptions are (of rule ii) *Am.*1.4.67 and (of rule iii) *Am.*2.17.21). The three amatory violations of rule i - *Ars.*2.185, 3.13, 3.181 - are of Greek words).
5w   -   no comment

6s   -   no caesura occurs, though word division does occasionally occur when latter word is a form

of *esse* or a relative, indefinite or personal pronoun, and former word is a conjunction,*non* or *nec*, since the two words are analysed as a pair.

29% of sense pauses in Ovid's amatory poetry are between the hexameter and the pentameter

In the PENTAMETER:
Caesurae and relevant diaereses

1s   -   no comment
1w   -   no comment
1d   -   after a dactyl typical (c.50%), after a spondee with strong sense pause, very rare (in amatory works only *Am*.1.6.30 and *Ars*.3.764; nine examples elsewhere).

2s   -   no comment
2w   -   to be avoided, if preceded by a 1st foot dactyl, for the first half of the pentameter is then interchangeable with the latter half. Such 'reversible' pentameters are rare (2.5%), and 17% of these are used for a jingle in the pentameter, e.g. *Am*.2.2.36 *Nereidesque deae Nereidumque pater* .
2d   -   when not followed by enclitic *est*, must be preceeded by a pyrrhic. In Ovids' amatory works, the following words occur as the monosyllable following 2d: *hic*(etc.) thrice, *fit*, *dos* and *vir* once (*Am*.3.2.46, *Ars*.1.124, 3.552; *Am*.1.2.10; *Ars*.1.524; *Ars*.3.258)

        -       Main Caesura: must not be elided over, or be between preposition and governed noun (the two amatory exceptions are *Ars*1.230 and 3.418, though there the prepositions are somewhat adverbial.)

3s   -   no comment
3w   -   no comment
3d   -   typical (c.50%)

4s   -   to be avoided, for a trisyllabic ending is caused, of which Ovid only has three instances, all in the *Epistulae ex Ponto* (v.Platnauer 15ff.)
4w   -   essential
4d   -   impossible, v.infra
        The pentameter must end with a disyllabic word, preferrably an iamb, though pyrrhics are admissible. (There are twelve pentasyllabic endings in Ovid and 31 quadrisyllabic; 28% of these are proper nouns. All 45 occurrences are, however, post-amatory)

        95% of Ovidian couplets end with a sense pause; if continued into the next couplet, it will either be a couplet in paraxtaxis or subordinated (or, of course, the main clause with a subordinated couplet preceding). See Am.*2.13.7-15 for an especial run-on.*

Many beginners find an overwhelming abundance of spondees in their versions and too few dactyls. It is true that Greek serves as a far richer store of short syllables, but the following data should remind the versifier of the need to employ dactyls, especially in certain places.

RHYTHM
In the HEXAMETER:

As the fifth and six feet are dactylic and spondaic/trochaic respectively, only the first four feet of the hexameter need be considered. Consequently, there are 16 possibilities of various dactyls and spondees. For convenience, here are the possibilities, listed from best to worst, i.e. commonest to rarest (based upon*Ars*.2; v. Platnauer 36ff.).

Foot:	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Best:	D	S	D	S (13.8% of Ovidian hexameters in *Ars*.II)
	D	S	S	S (13.7%)

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
	D	D	S	S (12%)
	D	S	S	D (10.7%)
	D	D	S	D (10%)
	D	S	D	D (9.5%)
	D	D	D	S (9%)
	D	D	D	D (6.7%)
	S	D	D	S (3%)
	S	D	S	D (2.4%)
	S	D	S	S (2.1%)
	S	S	D	S (2.1%)
	S	D	D	D (1.6%)
	S	S	D	D (1.6%)
	S	S	S	S (1%)
Worst:	S	S	S	D (0.5%)

From this it can be observed that:

- 80% of Ovidian hexameters begin with a dactyl , thus *in ten lines of elegiacs, roughly one hexameter should begin with a spondee, ideally for effect.*

- A wholly dactylic hexameter line is still over twice as desirable as the most common line beginning with a spondee.

- Note that nearly one in seven hexameter lines is of the form D S S S (13.7%)

- Ovid was apparently indifferent to the rhythm of the second foot (S: 52.9%; D.47.1%)

- Ovid was also apparently indifferent to the rhythm of the third foot (S: 53.4%; D.46.6%)

- In the fourth foot, however, a spondee is slightly more preferable, it seems (S: 55%; D.45)

- Therefore, the later in the line, the more preferable a spondee, though the independent rhythm of a line and the sound on the writer's ear will determine its true value.

NOTE ON THE FIFTH FOOT SPONDEE:
- In Ovid's amatory works there are only three instances of a fifth foot spondee, and they are all within a quadrisyllablic Greek proper noun ending the line (*Am*.1.6.53; *Am*.2.13.21; *Ars*.3.147).

In the PENTAMETER:

There are, of course, only four possibilities (for only the first and second feet are variable):

Foot:	1st	2nd
Best:	D	S (52.4%)
	D	D (30.9%)
	S	S (8.4%)
	S	D (8.3%)

From this it can be observed that:

- 80% (based upon all Ovidian amatory works) of pentameters begin with a dactyl, thus *in ten lines of elegiacs, roughly one pentameter should begin with a spondee, ideally for effect.*

- Three in five pentameters have a spondee in the second foot (60.8%)

- If a spondee was employed in the first foot, Ovid was apparently indifferent to the rhythm of the second.

NOTE ON THE FINAL WORD OF THE LINE:

In the HEXAMETER:

- 80% end in substantives or verbs

- Only 2% end in adjectives, i.e. *should not be employed unless in a composition of some hundred lines*.

- An ending avoided was a short '*a*' (of fem.sg. or neut.pl.) coupled with an adjective, in whatever order.

In the PENTAMETER:

- Again, 80% end in a substantive or verb.

- 17% end in a pronoun, whether possessive or personal, i.e. *in ten or twelve lines of elegiacs a pentameter ending in a pronoun would be fitting.*

- The remaining 3% end in adjectives, adverbs, conjuctions, and numerals, listed in increasing rarity.

- In 20% of Ovidian pentameters the final word rhymes internally with the final word of the first half, e.g. *visat et indici*is, *aegra sit illa tul*is - Ov.*Am*.2.21-2. Of these 90% are from the agreement of adjective and noun.

- Short vowel endings to the pentameter should be avoided, unless one of the following words: ablative singular of third declension, esp. *ope*; *dare, fore, fuge, sine, date* and *mare*.

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Some helpful notes can also be found in the appendix by T. W. Melluish in De Silva's Latin Elegiac Versions (John Murray, 1966).

It would certainly be worth your while tracking down one of the various English-Latin*gradus*, thatof Yonge (1850, onwards) or Ainger and Wintle (1890, onwards) or a battered copy of the much older '*Gradus ad Parnassum, sive, Novus synonymorum, epitethorum, phrasium poeticarum, ac versuum thesaurus*'.

For perhaps the best treatment in all fields cf. Naso's *Corpus Ovidianum* (self-published, c.1 B.C.).

Happy versifying,

~DJB
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