

# Remarks on Hexameter Rhythm

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The paper ‘Homeric Recitation, with Input from Phonology and Philology’ in the journal issue that this CD comes with (*Antichthon* 39:1-28, 2006) presents arguments to the effect that, rather than the hexameter feet being spaced at constant intervals in time, there was an allocation of ‘extra time’, often but not always deployed in the third foot. Unfortunately, the general arguments fall well short of specifying how this extra time ought to be allocated in each particular line, so a performer has to exercise judgement. In this discussion I’ll say a bit more about how I do this. It’s not part of the main paper for the reason that the principles involved are based on my own esthetic judgement rather than any kind of argument from evidence. Nevertheless, I think it’s worth putting some ideas forth, not only to help other people who might want to read Homer aloud, but also because a more detailed conception of how the putative extra time is managed might ultimately lead to more evidence, either for or against it.

## 1 Preliminaries

A major preliminary is that in order to get a reasonable effect from deploying extra time at all, it is necessary to read with a reasonable degree of fluency, in particular, without pausing between each word. Many people can’t seem to do this; the method I used to achieve it was by cheating, as follows: in class, I would try to figure out what passage it would be my turn to read aloud, and would practise it silently, until I could get through it fluently, so that when it became my turn to read, I generally could do so with considerable facility. After faking it for long enough, I became able to do a reasonable job at sight.

This suggests that people might be able to come to read better by taking a particular passage, and practising reading it out loud until there aren’t pauses between all the words. Of course one will pause at various points for phrasing, as for example one might when reading a story out loud to a child. If the target is Homer, the obvious thing to do is to memorize small passages. For poetry, it is certainly not at all necessary to be able to read fluently at sight; being able to work up a passage to a reasonable standard is all that’s required.

Another issue is the accents. It is known that in Ancient Greek, the accents represented pitch, not stress, and this is implemented in the performance, producing its sing-songy quality. Doing the pitches is quite hard, and isn't a realistic goal for people who can't do the rhythm (when I was starting out, I would first practise each line with just the rhythm, stressing the first vowel of each foot, and only when that was stabilized would I add in the pitches, intuitively in the manner of 'draping a tune' over the framework provided by the rhythm). While listening for the rhythm, I also decided that I had to switch from the 'Erasmian' pronunciation of phi, theta and khi as fricatives to the 'reconstructed' pronunciation as aspirated stops, because the fricatives were not producing the right results, as if the musical score wanted a drum-tap and I was producing a swishing sound instead. This is a refinement, and is not worth worrying about until/unless you feel the need.

A final point is that to discuss the rhythm, we need a scheme to refer to positions in the line. I'll use a mixture of two, first, referring to positions within and between the first, second, etc. feet, and, second, the half-foot numbering system introduced by O'Neill (1942). Here the divisions after the half-feet are numbered 1 through 12, so that the division between the first and the second syllables will fall at position 1, and the division between the end of the line and the beginning of the next one will fall at position 12. The first syllable of a foot is always a single heavy syllable, but the remainder can be either one heavy (spondee) or two lights (dactyl), in the latter case the two lights form the next half-foot, and the division between them is numbered with .5. So for example in a line such as this below, the divisions between the words are numbered as follows:

(1) \*                    \*                    \*                    \*                    \*  
       ho:de | de | tis | eipeske | ido:n | es | ple:sion | allon  
           1.5    2        3                    5.5            7    8                    10

I make the rhythm and positions easier to track by putting a '\*' above the first vowel of each foot; in a rhythmic recitation, these vowels will be stressed (not the accented ones, as is the usual practise in reading prose). I think this is better than the standard foot-division+macron/short sign scansion notation because it is less visually busy (the performers needed to keep their visual cortex free for imagery, in order to keep track of the story). Vowel-length is also marked by means of the ':', so that 'e:' is eta and 'o:' is omega.

The positional numbering is inherently confusing, not due to a defect of the scheme, but the deficiencies of our minds to deal with the subject matter, here a useful crib-sheet is, with traditional names included in parentheses:

- (2) a. Position 5: division after first syllable of third foot (penthemimeral caesura)
- b. Position 5.5: division after second syllable of dactylic third foot (tritotrochaic caesura)
- c. Position 7: division after first syllable of fourth foot (hepthemimeral caesura)
- d. Position 8: division after fourth foot (bucolic diaeresis)

Of the traditional names, only ‘bucolic diaeresis’ has a reasonable prospect of being encountered outside of specialist lieterature. For the examples below, you should examine them carefully to be sure you can tell what foot the metrical features discussed fall in or between, and what their position-number is, if at all possible.

In spite of all this, if you just want to sound better reading Homer, you can do better than 90% of the world (at least) by going no further, and merely practising until you can read fluently, putting in pauses and other phrasing just on the basis of what seems sensible in terms of the meaning. You can’t read fluently with phrasing arranged according to principles if you can’t read fluently at all, and the principles depend heavily on meaning and grammar.

## 2 Third-Foot Caesura

As is well known, almost 99% of Homeric lines have a word-break in the third foot, and this is also a very popular location for major grammatical boundaries, such as between clauses:

- (3) a. \* \* \* \* \*  
teukseĩ toi kukeo: || baleei d’en pharmaka si:to:i  
(*Od.* 10.290)

- b. \*                   \*       \*                   \*           \*           \*  
 ne:son an' hu:le:essan || ego: d'es do:mata kirke:s  
 (*Od.* 10.309)

This is one reason that the third foot is a popular place to deploy the extra time (for those who believe it should be there). The principle that motivates putting extra time in the third foot in the examples above is what I'll call 'Major Syntactic Division':

- (4) Major Syntactic Division (MSD):

If the most important syntactic break in the line falls in the third foot (position 5 or 5.5), deploy all the extra time there.

Unfortunately, it's not always the case that a major syntactic division can be identified, and, fairly often, it's in the wrong place, too early or too late, such as the clause-boundary right after the first foot here:

- (5) \*                   \*           \*           \*           \*           \*  
 erkheu, ho ken toi kra:tos alalke:isin kakon e:mar  
 (*Od.* 10.288)

For many of these cases, a principle which I'll call 'Final Phrase' gives good results:

- (6) Final Phrase (FP):

If the material after a third foot caesura can be reasonably taken as a phrase, deploy all or most of the extra time there.

This formulation is a bit vague about what a phrase is allowed to be, but some typical examples are:

- (7) a. verb plus object or other complement (or, sometimes, subject)  
 b. coordinate phrase  
 c. member of a coordinate phrase  
 d. clause or clausula (reduced, or nonfinite clause)  
 e. pretty much anything else that it seems reasonable to take as a coherent syntactic unit

For (6) above, the Final Phrase is a Verb+Object combination. So we put the major break at position 5.5, rather than at the first-foot diaeresis:

- (8) \*                   \*                   \*                   \*                   \*                   \*  
 erkheu, ho ken toi kra:tos || alalke:isin kakon e:mar  
 (*Od.* 10.288)

Because of the syntactic break, I also tend to put in a bit of a pause at position 1.5, although it might be better to leave this out.

Some more examples are

- (9) a. \*                   \*                   \*                   \*                   \*                   \*  
 all' age de: se kako:n || eklu:somai e:de sao:so:  
 (*Od.* 10.284) FP=Coordinate Verb
- b. \*                   \*                   \*                   \*                   \*                   \*  
 panta de toi ereo: || olopho:ia de:nea kirke:s  
 (*Od.* 10.289); FP=Noun Phrase

### 3 Fourth-foot Caesura

But, as is well known, there are about 1% of Homeric lines where there isn't any word-break in the third foot, and a considerably greater number where the most natural place to deploy a significant amount of extra time is in the fourth rather than the third foot. Indeed, *all* lines that don't have a break in position 5 or 5.5 have one in position 7. Such a line is:

- (10) di:ogenes la:ertiade: || polume:khan' odusseu  
 (*Od.* 10.401, 456, etc.)

Lines where MSD or FP would suggest having a position 7 pause are:

- (11) a. \*                   \*                   \*                   \*                   \*                   \*  
 pharmakon esthlon ho toi do:so: || ereo: de hekasta  
 (*Od.* 10.292), MSD & FP=Clause
- b. \*                   \*                   \*                   \*                   \*                   \*  
 ophra ke toi lu:se:i t' hetarous || auton te komisse:i  
 (*Od.* 10.298), MSD & FP=Clause

c. \*        \*                \*                \*                \*                \*  
 argurea:s, epi de sphi tithei || khru:seia kaneia  
 (*Od.* 10.335) and elsewhere; FP=Noun Phrase

A further feature is that it is quite common for lines where the major break seems to naturally fall in the fourth foot to also contain a plausible location for a secondary break. For (a, c) above, for example, these seem plausible:

(12) a. \*                \*                \*                \*                \*                \*  
 pharmakon esthlon | ho toi do:so: || ereo: de hekasta  
 c. \*                \*                \*                \*                \*                \*  
 argurea:s | epi de sphi tithei || khru:seia kaneia

## 4 Bucolic Diaeresis

Finally, there are a substantial number of lines where none of the obligatory caesura positions seems like a good place to put the extra time. This could be seen as a sort of pragmatic argument that the whole extra time idea is wrong: if there is no extra time, then there is no problem concerning how to deploy it. But this has to be set against the evidence for it, and the interesting effects that it can produce, a choice that people have to make for themselves.

Many of these lines plausibly have the major break after a dactylic fourth foot, in position 8 (traditionally called the ‘bucolic diaeresis’). The first line of the sample is in fact of this kind:

(13) \*                \*                \*                \*                \*                \*  
 ho:s eipo:n para ne:os ane:ion || e:de thalasse:s  
 (*Od.* 10.274)

Here, insofar as the grammar is concerned, the reasonable places for a break would be positions 3 (after *eipo:n*) and 8. There is a word-break at position 5.5, but putting in a phrasing boundary doesn’t fit the grammatical structure, and feels extremely lame to me. I put the break at 8 due to the common occurrence on word-breaks and major syntactic boundaries in this position (Kahane 1994). Position 3 would, however, be a plausible location for a secondary break (implemented perhaps by a slight prolongation of the final vowel of *eipo:n*).

In the sample, further such lines are 284, 291, 316, 330, 333 and 334. Most of them seem to me to want a bit of extra time at at least one earlier position, usually but not always at an obligatory caesura position. 291 is another line where I'd want to put most of it in position 3.

## 5 Assorted Problems

Here I note all of the lines in the long sample which either don't fall easily under the principles presented above, or which raise some interesting issue.

(14) Kirke:s hiksesthai || polupharmakou es mega doma  
(*Od.* 10.276)

This division would be by FP, on a prepositional phrase that has had the possessor noun phrase of the object of its preposition pulled forward to the front, and then the head noun Kirke:s of that possessor pulled forward to the beginning of the line.

(15) entha moi Hermeia:s || khru:sorrapis anteboule:sen  
(*Od.* 10.277)

Here one could consider a bucolic diaeresis, but this sounds quite bad to me, so I split the subject noun-phrase instead, at position 5.

(16) te: tode pharmakon esthlon || ekho:n es do:mata kirke:s  
(*Od.* 10.287)

This is how I do it in the performance, but after ekho:n would also be a very plausible location for the pause, and arguably more in accordance with the principles given here (FP, on a prepositional phrase). The motivation for the position 7 pause in the actual performance might be to produce a pair of enjambements,<sup>1</sup> an 'internal' one of the participle ekho:n, and cross-line one between the line-final prepositional phrase and the first word of the next line, erkheu. Or, although I think it sounds better, it might just be a mistake.

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<sup>1</sup>Enjambement is putting some sort of significant phrasal/metrical boundary between some grammatical dependents and what they depend on.

(17) entha su me:ket' epeit' || apane:nasthai theou eune:n  
(*Od.* 10.297)

Here the problem is that the obligatory caesura, which is also the only suitable place for a major phrasing boundary, has elision across it. The solution is to implement the extra time by prologation of the second syllable of **epeit'**, and also to put less extra time than usual there.

(18) me: ti toi auto:i pe:ma || kakon bouleusemen allo  
(*Od.* 10.300)

Here the problem is that position 7 seems like a plausible alternative to the chosen 5.5. Not sure why I like it better (and the preference isn't strong). 307 gives the same problem as 297 discussed in (17) above.

(19) kai kalei || autar ego:n hepome:n | akakhe:menos e:tor  
(*Od.* 10.314)

Here I want to put most of the extra time at the clause boundary at position 2, with less at the position 7 caesura. There is also a word-boundary at position 5, but FP favors putting the break at 7. The fact the the final vowel of **kalei** is metrically short because it appears before a vowel ('epic correction'), might be taken as indication that there should be no extra time here, but epic correction doesn't seem to be very sensitive to phrasing.

(20) teukhe de moi kukeo: | khruiseo:i depa:i | ophra pioimi  
(*Od.* 10.316)

Not really a problem, but illustrates a case where there can plausibly be extra time both at position 5 caesura and bucolic diaeresis. Epic correction might again be taken to provide an indication that there shouldn't be extra time at position 8, and leaving it out seems OK, but as mentioned just above, this isn't really compelling. Line 318 is also like this.

(21) thauma m'ekhei | ho:s ou ti pio:n | tade pharmak' ethelkhthe:s  
(*Od.* 10.326)



Here it seems good to do all the extra time by vowel prolongation, at the caesural break at position 5, and also position 3 (phrasing there motivated by a boundary between main and subordinate clause).

(22) ho:s ephame:n || he: d'autik' apomnuen | ho:s ekeleuon  
(*Od.* 10.345)

This one is a real mess; the only obligatory caesura is at 5.5, and has elision across it, and the grammar doesn't support a major phrasing boundary there either. The grammar supports phrasing breaks at positions 3 and 8; the most important grammatical break is at 3, so that's where I want to put the extra time.

The fact that the obligatory caesura is *always* found (in one of the three allowed positions), even when it is not always of any grammatical importance, is one of the more mysterious facts about the hexameter. In fact there is one school of thought ('traditionalists', one might say), who consider this to be an important, real fact, and another ('colometricists', following H. Fränkel, as recently reviewed by Foley (1990)), who don't, and merely see strong but not invariant tendencies for word and grammatical boundaries to fall in various positions. Especially, colometricists are impressed by the fact almost 99% of lines have a word-boundary in the third foot, so see this as an 'almost obligatory' caesura, and don't group it together with the fourth-foot breaks, while traditionalists are more impressed by the fact that all of the lines lacking 3rd-foot word break do have one in position 7, so that 5, 5,5 and 7 are classed together as 'obligatory caesura', and treated as a different phenomenon from breaks in other locations, especially position 8.

Fortunately for the traditionalists, the hexameter is clearly a rather evolved form with a long history about whose origins essentially nothing is actually known, creating ample opportunity for peculiar phenomena and restrictions to arise.

## Bibliography

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