

# How to Understand Early Modern Poetry

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To understand poetry—any poetry—you need to know what it is. Consider the following definition:

Poetry is not prose.

That's not very helpful unless you know what prose is. So here's a definition of prose:

Prose is not poetry.

Still not helpful? Here's some historical perspective. In the Early Modern period English playwrights observed a convention in which characters of higher social class and those conceived as having more noble minds spoke in **verse** (another word for poetry). Characters of lower social class or with more crude mentalities spoke in prose. Authors could then create interesting effects by straying from this convention. You can see the practice in action if you compare two quotations from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the first by Prospero, the Duke of Milan, and the second by Stephano, a drunken butler:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air:  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep... (IV.i.148-158)

This is some monster of the isle with four legs, who hath got, as I take it, an ague. Where the devil should he learn our language? I will give him some relief, if it be but for that. if I can recover him and keep him tame and get to Naples with him, he's a present for any emperor that ever trod on neat's leather. (II.ii.64-70)

It is not the line breaks that make Prospero's speech poetry; it's the fact that it *is* poetry that has led to its being printed with line breaks. We'll get into what *actually* makes it poetry below. But we can start by saying that prose lacks the supposed beauty or deep meaning of poetry. It is the source of the word **prosaic**, some common synonyms of which are "ordinary", "everyday", and "commonplace". In Renaissance plays, these terms could be used to describe the minds of those who speak in prose.

## Metre

What really makes poetry different from prose is the use of a regular rhythmic structure known as **metre**. In Old English, metre was based around lines, half-lines, and beats. There would be two beats per half-line, two half-lines per line, and the two half-lines would be connected by alliteration. A good example is the last line of *Cædmon's Hymn*:

fírum fóldan Fréa ælmihti

The accents indicate the first syllable of a beat, but a beat could consist of multiple syllables.

In Middle English, beats tended to correspond more regularly with syllable patterns, a trend that increased in frequency over the course of the period (probably through the influence of French poetry). Most lines in the *Canterbury Tales* tend to be about ten syllables. This regularity allowed some important developments to take place in the Renaissance.

Renaissance poets immersed themselves in the poetry of Classical Greece and Rome. In Greek and Latin verse, the metre was organised around regular groups of syllables called **feet**. Since the syllable numbers in late medieval English poetry were almost as regular as Greek and Latin, it was very easy for Renaissance poets to begin using Classical feet to write their own poetry.

The most common foot types were the **iamb** and the **trochee**. Here are some definitions:

Iamb: An unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (represented ∪ /)

Trochee: A stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable (represented / ∪)

Stressed syllables have slightly more emphasis than unstressed syllables. The following words indicate stressed syllables with an acute accent: *béggíng, begín*.

A line that has mostly iambs is called **iambic** and line that has mostly trochees is called **trochaic**. A good example of a line of poetry that has a regular foot pattern is

∪ / ∪ / ∪ / ∪ / ∪ /

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?

Since all one-syllable words are inherently stressed in speech, you'll notice that some of them have to be "demoted" to fit the regular foot pattern. In general, small function words like "and" and "the" tend to get demoted. You can see from this that poetry is basically a fitting of natural speech rhythms to an artificial pattern.

Poets may use some more radical means to make their lines fit their chosen metre. One is **elision**, the "eliding" of syllables. For example, "The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces" has eleven syllables; probably the "e" in "towers" is elided so that the line can be **scanned** like this:

˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /

The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces

Note the *really* artificial stress at the end of “palaces”.

Another technique is to insert a trochee in an otherwise iambic line:

˘ / ˘ / ˘ / / ˘ ˘ /

Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff

**Important: Where the majority of feet in a line are iambic, the whole line is considered iambic.**

In Classical poetry various other types of feet were used: the dactyl (/˘˘), anapest (˘˘/), and spondee (/ /). But these are not used much in Early Modern Poetry, so you don't need to worry about them.

In the examples above, there are five feet per line, which is known as pentameter. Four feet per lines is known as tetrameter, and six feet per line is hexameter. In Renaissance poetry **iambic pentameter** became the archetypal metrical line type in English.

Lines of iambic pentameter generally have a more or less discernable pause after the second or third foot. This is known as the **caesura**. The caesura can often be used to produce interesting effects, such as in the following lines from Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*:

Here thou, great Anna! whom three realms obey,  
Dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes tea.

Anna is Queen Anne (1666-1714), here pictured as taking counsel from her ministers as head of a mighty empire, only to have that undermined by after the caesura by the somewhat less imposing image of her taking tea.

## Rhyme

Middle English poets began employing rhyme, probably in imitation of French poets. Sometimes they used rhyming **couplets**, groups of two rhyming lines, as in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. This was often the case in long narrative poems. But they also developed lyric poetry base on the model of songs, which often had complex **rhyme schemes**. These were typically sustained over the course of a group of lines called a **stanza**. A very simple stanza can be found at the opening of Christopher Marlowe's “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love”:

Come live with me and be my love,      a  
And we will all the pleasures prove      a  
That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,      b  
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.      b

This is one is known as a **quatrain**, or four-line group, but it is really just a grouping of two couplets, as you can see from the letter pattern (“love” and “prove” rhymed in Early Modern English). The use of the

same letter for the same rhyme is a traditional way to describe a rhyme scheme. So the rhyme scheme of the stanza above can be described as “aabb”.

Typically, a stanza is a line group set off from another line group, but you can also talk about couplets and quatrains within stanzas. The classic stanza type known as the English sonnet has fourteen lines: three quatrains followed by a couplet.

## Sonnets

Although many types of lyric poems were written in Early Modern English, the fourteen-line sonnet is one of the most important developments of the period. It was based on Italian models and gradually transformed for use in English. The most common type is known as the **English, or Shakespearean, sonnet**. Shakespeare did not invent it, but he used it for all his sonnets: hence the name. Here is the format:

abab cdcd efef gg

quatrain quatrain quatrain couplet

The other type of sonnet used is the Italian, or Petrarchan, sonnet (named after fourteenth-century the Italian poet Petrarch). It is composed of an eight-line grouping called an **octet** followed by a six-line grouping called a **sestet**. The rhyme scheme of the sestet varies. Here are two common patterns:

abbaabba cdecde

abbaabba cdccdc

The division between the octet and the sestet is marked by a **volta** (Italian for “turn”), and it often marks a sudden shift in direction in the poem.

It is important to realise that the rhyme scheme imposes a structure on the ideas of the poem. A good way to look at this is to imagine a version of the English sonnet with another quatrain at the beginning. That is four quatrains plus a couplet, or five groupings. That would make it quite a like the classic five-paragraph essay! So one way to understand lyric poems is to look at how ideas are structured by the rhyme scheme.

## Unrhymed Poetry

Whilst sonnets and other lyric poems are bound to a rhyme scheme, we have already noted that plays use a form of verse (almost always iambic pentameter) that does not rhyme. Unrhymed iambic pentameter is known as **blank verse**.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a technique of writing “poetry” without regular metre developed. This is known as **free verse**. The distinction between free verse and prose is debatable, but the main thing you need to know is that free verse was not used during the Early Modern Period. Just don’t confuse the term with “blank verse”.

## Why Should I Bother to Learn All This?

Consider all these patterns: two syllables per foot, five feet per line, fourteen lines in a sonnet, quatrains rhyming abab, and so on. Renaissance poets considered what they were doing to be something very precise, almost mathematical. They even referred to poetic structure as “numbers”. So it is important to be sensitive to the structure of their verse in order to understand their ideas. What does it mean if Shakespeare has a monster speak in verse? How does a sonnet construct the particular pieces of argument? Are there deviations from regular iambic pentameter that might lead certain words to be emphasised. These techniques were not only the ones used by Renaissance writers to write poetry but also the techniques used by Renaissance readers to identify the *ideas* within the poetry. If you can learn to do this, you will have acquired the ability to read and interpret it. Once you get good at it, it will become effortless. You will have mastered the Renaissance art of *sprezzatura*!