

### The Homeric Hexameter

The Iliad is written in lines containing six (ἕξ) units (“feet” or “metra”, τὰ μέτρα), the hexameter. Like all ancient Greek meters, the hexameter is *quantitative* in the sense that the metrical value of a syllable is decided not by its accent or loudness, but by its *quantity*, that is, by the time taken to pronounce it.

#### Long and short syllables

There is a fairly strict system governing which syllables are considered to have a *long* quantity and which syllables are considered *short*. Here are the rules.

1.0 The syllable is long if the vowel itself is long:

1.1 If the syllable contains the long vowels η, ω.

1.2 If the syllable contains the diphthongs αι, ει, οι, υι, αυ, ευ, ου, ηυ, ωυ.  
This is true even where rules of accentuation treat a final diphthong as short.

1.3 If the syllable contains  $\bar{\alpha}$ ,  $\bar{\iota}$ ,  $\bar{\upsilon}$ .

In the first lines of the *Iliad* the following syllables are long because the vowel is long (marked schematically by an overbar):

$\bar{M}\bar{\eta}$ -νιῦ ἄ- $\bar{\epsilon}$ ι-δε θε- $\bar{\alpha}$  Π $\bar{\eta}$ -λ $\bar{\eta}$ -ἰ- $\bar{\alpha}$ δ- $\bar{\epsilon}$ ω Ἀ-χι-λ $\bar{\eta}$ -ος

$\bar{o}$ ὔ-λο-μέ-ν $\bar{\eta}$ ν,  $\bar{\eta}$  μ $\bar{u}$ -ρί' Ἀ-χ $\bar{\alpha}$ ι-οἶς ἄλ-γε' ἔ-θ $\bar{\eta}$ -κε,

2.0 The syllable is long “by position” when two or more consonants follow.

2.1 Consonants can “make position” even when they are part of the next word. Thus the first syllable of the phrase τὰ πρῶτα is long because of the two consonants (πρ-) which begin the next word.

2.2 The “double consonants” (where a single Greek letter is used for two consonants) can “make position”: these are ζ (zd or dz), ξ (=ks), ψ (=ps). Thus ἔξ is long “by position”. Note that this rule does not

apply to the aspirated consonants φ (=ph), χ (=kh), θ (=th) – these are single, aspirated consonants and do not by themselves “make position”.

The final lines of the proem contain the following syllables which are long “by position” (some of which are also long because of the long vowels):

ἐξ οὖ δὴ τὰ πρῶ-τα δι-α-στή-την ἐ-ρί-σαν-τε

Ἄ-τρε-ῖ-δης τε ἄ-ναξ ἄν-δρῶν καὶ δῖ-ος Ἄ-χιλ-λεύς.

- 3.0 If a syllable is neither long because of the vowel quantity nor long “by position” then syllable is short.
- 4.0 There are, of course, some wrinkles to this simple system. These will be noted in the commentary as they come along. But three are common enough to warrant immediate attention.

- 4.1 Correption. (Very common.) When a word ends in a long vowel or diphthong, and the next word also begins with a vowel, the long vowel at the end of the first word may be shortened.

Thus e.g. the final syllable of ἐκηβολου is short in the line:

— ∪ ∪| — —| — ∪ ∪| — ∪ ∪| — —| — x  
 στέμ-ματ' ἔ-χων ἐν χερ-σὶν ἐ-κη-βό-λου Ἄπ-όλ-λω-νος

- 4.2 Synizesis. (Fairly common.) To suit the meter, two neighboring vowels will sometimes be pronounced together as one (rather like a diphthong). Thus in the first line of the Iliad -εω of Πηληϊάδεω must be pronounced as one syllable:

— ∪ ∪| — ∪ ∪| — —| — ∪ ∪| — ∪ ∪| — x  
 Μῆ-νιν ἄ-ει-δε θε-ὰ Πη-λη-ῖ-άδ-εω Ἄ-χι-λῆ-ος

- 4.3 Occasionally, the combination of a mute (that is, a consonant like π, β, δ, τ, κ, etc.) followed by a liquid (that is, ρ or λ) is treated as though a single “consonant” and does not “make position”: e.g. in the following line the final syllable of πτερόεντα is treated as though short:

— —| — —| — ∪ ∪| — ∪ ∪| — ∪ ∪| — x  
 καί μιν φω-νή-σᾶς ἔ-πε-α πτε-ρό-εν-τα προ-σηύ-δᾶ

## Dactylic Hexameter

The Homeric Hexameter is called the dactylic hexameter because the basic unit is a dactyl, which is one long syllable followed by two short syllables (— ∪ ∪). Each unit in the line consists of either one dactyl or one spondee, which is a foot composed of two long syllables (— —). There are six (ἕξ) of these units (“feet”) in each line. An exception is the final foot, which is always two syllables, the first long and the second either long or short (represented schematically by x).

The six feet of the dactyl can range from a line of all dactyls, such as

— ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — x

to a line of all spondees, such as

— — | — — | — — | — — | — — | — x

But usually there is a mix of dactyls and spondees. The possibilities can be schematically represented as follows:

— — — | — — — | — — — | — — — | — — — | — x

Let's take the first lines of the Iliad as an example

— ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — x  
 Μῆ-νιν ἄ-ει-δε θε-ἄ Πη-ληϊ-ῖ-ά-δεω Ἄ-χι-λῆ-ος

— ∪ ∪ | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — x  
 οὐ-λο-μέ-νην, ἦ μυ-ρί' Ἄ-χαι-οῖς ἄλ-γε' ἔ-θη-κε,

— — | — — | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — x  
 πολ-λὰς δ' ἰ-φθί-μους ψυ-χὰς Ἄ-ῖ-δι προ-ῖ-α-ψεν

— — | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — x  
 ἦ-ρώ-ων, αὐ-τοὺς δὲ ἐ-λώ-ρι-α τεῦ-χε κύ-νεσ-σιν

— — | — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — x  
 οἰ-ω-νοῖ-σί τε δ᾿ ἄι-τα, Δι-ὸς δ' ἐ-τε-λεί-ε-το βου-λή,

— — | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — x  
 ἕξ οὐ δὴ τὰ πρῶ-τα δι-α-στή-την ἐ-ρί-σαν-τε

— ∪ ∪ | — ∪ ∪ | — — | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — x  
 Ἄ-τρε-ῖ-δης τε ἄ-ναξ ἄν-δρῶν καὶ δῖ-ος Ἄ-χιλ-λεύς.