

The Homeric Hexameter (contd.)

Pauses (Caesura and Dieresis)

Because the Dactylic Hexameter is a long line of verse, there is a tendency towards a pause, usually very slight, somewhere in the middle of the line. This pause, which is very frequent but does not occur in every line, is called the principal caesura (since caesura in Latin means “cutting” and this is the spot where the verse is cut in half for the purpose of a slight pause).

To avoid a monotonous rhythm, the ἀοιδοί (i.e. the singers in the Homeric tradition) preferred not to split the line exactly in half. A pause after the end of the third foot is therefore rare.

Instead, the ἀοιδοί would typically pause in one of the syllables immediately adjacent to the halfway point. Attention to this caesura can help you read the hexameter for two reasons.

- 1) It gives you a place where you can pause and take a breath within the long line.
- 2) It allows you to think of the hexameter as two shorter, more manageable units.

The caesura is marked with a double vertical bar (usually || or " is used with the standard fonts available for typewriters and word processors.)

Take as an example the first line of the *Iliad*.

- ∪ ∪| - ∪ ∪| - " -| - ∪ ∪| - ∪ ∪| - x
 Μη-viv ἄ-ει-δε θε-ἄ Πη-λη-ϊ-άδ-εω Ἀ-χι-λῆ-ος

Strictly speaking, there is a caesura both before and after the word θεά. But the principal caesura will usually be the one closest to the middle of the line. You can readily see that a slight pause after θεά makes good sense in terms of the meaning, and facilitates the reading of the line.

There are three very common positions for the caesura, as indicated in the following schemata. But remember: not every verse has a caesura! The phenomenon is common but my no means universal.

- (1) "Masculine caesura of the third foot" (very common)

— $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — " $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — $\cup\cup$ | — x

- (2) "Feminine caesura of the third foot" (most common)

— $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — \cup " \cup | — $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — x

- (3) "Masculine caesura of the fourth foot" (not uncommon)

— $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — " $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — $\cup\cup$ | — x

Occasionally, the poet will pause between feet rather than within the foot. This is known as dieresis. But, as we have already noted, the break after the third foot is avoided. Somewhat common is a break after the fourth foot.

- (4) "Bucolic dieresis" (because a favorite of bucolic poets)

— $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — $\overline{\cup\cup}$ | — $\overline{\cup\cup}$ " — $\cup\cup$ | — x

For dramatic effect, the poet will sometimes pause at an unusual spot in the line. Good examples are found in the second and fourth lines of the *Iliad* (see the next page), where the strong enjambement of ούλομένην (2) and ήρώων (4) is followed by a sense pause. The proem is unusual in having two enjambed lines in so brief a compass.

Example, *Iliad* 1.1-7:

$\bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \parallel \bar{\quad} | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} x$
 Μῆ-νιν ἄ-ει-δε θε-ἄ Πη-ληϊ-ά-δεω Ἄ-χι-λῆ-ος

masculine caesura
of the third foot

$\bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} \parallel \bar{\quad} | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} \bar{\quad} | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} x$
 οὐ-λο-μέ-νην, ἦ μυ-ρί' Ἄ-χαι-οῖς ἄλ-γε' ἔ-θη-κε,

unusual masculine
caesura of the
second foot

$\bar{\quad} \bar{\quad} | \bar{\quad} \bar{\quad} | \bar{\quad} \bar{\quad} | \bar{\quad} \parallel \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} x$
 πολ-λὰς δ' ἰ-φθί-μους ψυ-χὰς Ἄ-ϊ-δι προ-ϊ-α-ψεν

masculine caesura
of the fourth foot

$\bar{\quad} \bar{\quad} | \bar{\quad} \parallel \bar{\quad} | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} x$
 ἦ-ρώ-ων, αὐ-τοῦς δὲ ἐ-λώ-ρι-α τεῦ-χε κύ-νεσ-σιν

unusual masculine
caesura of the
second foot

$\bar{\quad} \bar{\quad} | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} \cup \parallel \cup | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} x$
 οἰ-ω-νοῖ-σί τε δ᾿ ἄι-τα, Δι-ὸς δ' ἔ-τε-λεί-ε-το βου-λή,

feminine caesura of
the third foot

$\bar{\quad} \bar{\quad} | \bar{\quad} \bar{\quad} | \bar{\quad} \cup \parallel \cup | \bar{\quad} \bar{\quad} | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} x$
 ἔξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶ-τα δι-α-στή-την ἔ-ρί-σαν-τε

feminine caesura of
the third foot

$\bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} \bar{\quad} | \bar{\quad} \parallel \bar{\quad} | \bar{\quad} \cup \cup | \bar{\quad} x$
 Ἄ-τρε-ϊ-δης τε ἄ-ναξ ἄν-δρῶν καὶ δῖ-ος Ἄ-χιλ-λεύς.

masculine caesura
of the fourth foot