

## AN INTRODUCTION TO LATIN POETRY

The earliest European works of literature, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, were set to meter, both as an aid to memory (Homer's epics were composed and transmitted orally for some generations before finally being written down in the eighth or seventh century B.C.) and to appeal to our innate sense of rhythm. In content this early poetry was narrative, it told a story. In the *Iliad* it was a very human tale of the proud but impulsive Greek hero Achilles, his inept commander Agamemnon, and the Trojan prince Hector, of their complex motives in fighting the Trojan War, and of their courage, their weaknesses, and their suffering; in the *Odyssey* it was the exciting saga of Achilles' fellow warrior, the wily Odysseus (Ulysses, as the Romans called him), and the many perils he encountered and overcame during his return from the war to his homeland of Ithaca and his ever-faithful spouse Penelope. It would be an understatement to say that these poems, still widely read today, were enormously popular among the Greeks and even the Romans, who admired, embraced, and emulated so much of Greek literature and art.

Poetry in general was greatly appreciated by the ancients. Even their stage plays, tragedies and comedies alike, were in verse; and, both in public performance and at private dinner parties, a favorite entertainment was the recitation of poetry, whether epic, romantic, or comic. The reasons for their special attraction to poetry were many and complex, involving in certain instances even politics and religion. But the fundamental explanation, and one that applies equally well to our own love of verse and song today, was understood well enough by the Greek philosopher Aristotle: man is attracted instinctively both to rhythm and to storytelling, or "mimesis," as Aristotle called it, the dramatic representation of human action. We are all mimetic creatures—we love to tell tales, hear them, see them. And we are certainly all by nature creatures of rhythm, the rhythms of the seasons, of night and day, of our heartbeats. We are all, I might add, however well or poorly edu-

cated, infinitely susceptible to the power of words artfully arranged and expressively uttered.

The assumption that this phenomenon applies at least as much to the beginning Latin student as it does to others of the human species has provided the stimulus for this little text. However regrettable, it is a fact that the majority of Latin students today, especially those in the high schools, enroll in only one or two courses in the language (*lector cārissime*: be the exception!). Since “real” Latin of any sort, that is, continuous, unadapted passages from ancient authors, is generally not encountered before the second course, and Latin verse rarely before the third or even the fourth, most Latin students miss the opportunity of reading any significant excerpts from the works of some of Rome’s most admired and influential authors.

This reader, which is intended for use as a supplement to any first- or second-year Latin text, aims to remedy that situation by presenting in eight units a brief sampling from some of the most popular Latin poetry. The eight units, which are arranged chronologically but which may be read in any order, include two of Catullus’ lyric poems to his paramour Lesbia, Dido’s suicide scene from Vergil’s *Aeneid*, Horace’s ode on the death of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, excerpts from Ovid’s accounts of the legend of Romulus and Remus (from his poem entitled the *Fasti*) and of the mythical Golden Age (from the *Metamorphoses*), several of Martial’s epigrams describing the dedication of the Colosseum and some of the entertainments produced in that arena, a portion of Juvenal’s satiric depiction of the dangers risked in venturing out into the streets of Rome by night, and, finally, the book’s one non-classical selection, Thomas of Celano’s well-known Christian hymn on the Day of Judgment, the *Dies Irae*. Each unit is prefaced by a brief introduction to the poet’s life and works and comments on the particular selection(s) presented, which may be supplemented by your instructor through the assignment of outside readings, class reports, or other activities.

All the Latin is unadapted, that is to say, it has not been altered or “simplified” in any way. As an aid to reading, the Latin text, which appears on the left-hand page, is equipped with vocabulary and other notes on the facing page. Most words that you have likely not yet encountered in your study of Latin are glossed in these notes; others you can either locate in the vocabulary section

of your primary Latin textbook or define, as in the case of *clāmor* in Unit Two or *liquidās* in Unit Five, on the basis of English derivatives. Full principal parts are given for verbs, and nominative, genitive, and gender, for nouns. Any constructions and forms that may be unfamiliar, such as subjunctives, participles, gerunds, supines, and deponents, are translated in the notes, which will also call your attention to peculiarities of word order common to poetry (adjectives are often far removed from the nouns they modify, prepositions sometimes follow their objects, conjunctions occasionally appear as the second or third word in a clause, rather than at the beginning). The few abbreviations employed are all standard: M., F., N., and C., for masculine, feminine, neuter, and common gender; sing. and pl. for singular and plural; nom., gen., dat., acc., abl., and voc., for the cases; B.C. and A.D. for before and after Christ; cf., for Latin *cōnfer*, “compare”; ca., for *circā*, “about” or “approximately”; i.e., for *id est*, “that is”; and sc., for *scilicet*, “understand” or “supply.”

Comprehension questions are also included in each unit. Designed to focus attention upon, and test your comprehension of, essential details of the narrative, these are objective, factual questions which may be answered, either in Latin or in English, through direct reference to the text.

### *Reading Latin Poetry Aloud*

As suggested earlier, ancient poetry was composed to be read aloud (or, in certain instances, to be sung or chanted to musical accompaniment) and with the listening audience, not the reading audience, foremost in mind. The Latin poet hoped to appeal at once to the intellect and to the emotions—in varying proportion, depending upon the particular genre—and his approach to both was through the ear. Both the “music” and the “message” of poetry derived in part from its sound effects: its rhythm and assonance and such devices as alliteration and onomatopoeia might contribute much to the overall effect of a poem. When we read silently, therefore, or aloud but unexpressively, we are neglecting altogether an important aspect of the poet’s artistry, just as surely as if we were to experience the colorful paintings of Gauguin or Picasso only through the medium of black and white photographs.

Reading poetry or prose aloud in an expressive manner even in our native tongue requires some deliberate effort and practice, as you very well know, and certainly at least as much effort will be necessary to develop your skills in reading Latin orally. But the task is far from Herculean, and is best approached by stages.

### 1. Correct Pronunciation

The first and most important step in any beginning language course is to learn the sounds of the language, that is the correct pronunciation, and to exercise that knowledge through listening and speaking activities every day. Though Latin in its classical form is not spoken today, we do have abundant evidence of how it was spoken by the Romans from ancient testimony (a first-century B.C. Roman named Varro, for example, wrote a detailed monograph *De Lingua Latina*, portions of which have survived), from the way it has developed into its various modern forms (in Italian, French, Spanish, and the other Romance languages), and even from phonologically-based spelling errors found in graffiti and other ancient texts (just as the misspelling “kat” might tell non-English speakers something about one pronunciation of the letter c). Very straightforward rules for the pronunciation of classical Latin (some of the differences in medieval Latin are noted below, in the *Dies Irae* unit) are provided in the introduction of every beginning Latin text; again, they should be learned and applied every day in listening and oral reading exercises. The first step in reading a Latin poem aloud, then, is simply to read each sentence from beginning to end, following the rules for classical Latin pronunciation that you have already learned.

### 2. Meter

As you read, and especially if your pronunciation is careful and accurately reflects the differences between long and short vowels, the proper sounds of diphthongs (*ae*, *oe*, *ei*, *ui*, *au*, and *eu*), and so forth, you may detect a certain rhythmical pattern in the arrangement of the words. This, of course, reflects what Roger Hornsby has called “a vital, indeed a primordial, aspect of

poetry,” *meter* (from the Latin *metrum* and Greek *metron*, meaning “measure”), which may be defined as the measured arrangement of syllables in a regular rhythmical pattern. In English verse, as you know, and in the very earliest Latin verse, meter is determined by the patterned alternation of accented and unaccented syllables, an accented syllable being one that is spoken with greater stress or emphasis, such as the syllable *mid-*, in “Ónce upón ā mídníght dréary” (which is here “scanned,” the “scan-sion” indicating schematically the accented ['] and unaccented [˘] syllables).

In classical Greek, normal word accent was based upon pitch rather than stress (the language was therefore by nature far more “musical” than either Latin or English) and was not the prime determinant in verse rhythm. Rather than being “qualitative” (i.e., based on the stress quality of a syllable); Greek meter was “quantitative” (i.e., based on the quantity, or length, of a syllable); and, though it was not entirely suited to their own stress-accented language, the Romans adapted the use of quantitative meter to their verse from the time of the early epic poet Ennius (239-169 B.C.) onward (there was a return to qualitative meter in Latin verse during the Middle Ages, as is seen in the *Dies Irae* in Unit Eight).

That syllables may be defined in terms of quantity, i.e., that some may be “long” and others “short,” is clear enough from English: compare the time required to pronounce *e*, *be*, *beak*, *beach*, *beached*. Though the length of Latin syllables might vary considerably, as in these English examples, the Romans thought in terms of only two grades, short and long; a long syllable was felt to take about twice as long to pronounce as a short syllable (in musical terms, one might compare the half note and the quarter note). Latin quantitative meter is based upon the patterned alternation of long and short syllables, and the second step in reading Latin poetry aloud is to read each verse metrically, with an eye (or one should say, an ear) to this quantitative rhythm.

With practice a student can read a Latin poem metrically at first sight. Beginning students, however, will need to learn the mechanics of scanning a line on paper, i.e., of marking the long and short syllables and separating off the feet in each verse (a “foot” is the smallest characteristic group of syllables in a particular rhythmical pattern, e.g., a short syllable followed by a long one consti-

tutes a foot in iambic meter—a “verse” is the smallest characteristic grouping of feet in a particular meter, e.g., a series of five iambs is an iambic pentameter). Such scansion is a fairly mechanical matter and involves the following steps:

- a. *Mark the long and short syllables using the macron (¯) and the breve (˘), respectively.* In your initial introduction to Latin pronunciation you learned to identify a syllable as either long or short (necessary for determining placement of the stress accent in ordinary Latin speech—see the appendix, pp. xvii-xviii): a syllable is long only if it contains a long vowel or a diphthong or if the vowel, though itself short, is followed by two or more consonants. In this last instance, when attempting to determine the quantity of a syllable occurring at the end of a word within a verse, you must take into account any consonants occurring at the beginning of the next word: thus *et errō* scans *et errō*, but *et terrā* scans *et terrā*. In the opening line of Vergil’s *Aeneid*, *Arma virumque canō Trōiae quī prīmus ab ōrīs*, the long and short syllables would be marked as follows:

Arma virumque canō Trōiae quī prīmus ab ōrīs.

When a word ended with a vowel or a diphthong or a vowel followed by *-m* and the following word began with a vowel or a diphthong or a vowel preceded by *h-*, the final syllable of the first word and the beginning syllable of the next were usually slurred together, or “elided,” into a single syllable. The syllable resulting from such “elision” was usually treated as short, when both of the original, unelided syllables would have been short; where either or both of the unelided syllables would have been long, the elided syllable was long. In writing out your scansion, the elided syllables should be connected with a line and the macron or breve should be centered above the space between the two words, as illustrated in the third verse of the *Aeneid*, which contains two elisions:

litora. Multum ille et terris iactātus et altō

Occasionally the conditions for elision will exist but the poet will choose for metrical or other purposes not to elide; this phenomenon is called “hiatus,” from the Latin word for “gaping” or “yawning” (a very apt term, as the mouth would remain open from the vowel of the first word, across the brief intervening pause, and on through the vowel of the following word).

- b. *Mark off the feet using the slash (/).* In order to do so, you must, of course, recognize the particular metrical pattern in which the poem is composed. Again, with practice you will be able to do this at sight; in this text, however, the particular meters employed are identified in the introduction to each unit and the first few lines of each selection are fully scanned. The four metrical patterns you will encounter are these:

- i. *Hendecasyllabic* (Unit 1). An eleven-syllable line, as the name implies:

-- / -- / -- / -- / --

or

--

or

--

Here, and in the other meters described below, the symbol [=] indicates that either a long or a short syllable is permitted.

- ii. *Dactylic Hexameter* (Units 2, 5, and 7). A six-foot line, with a dactyl (ˉ ˘ ˘) in the first five feet and a spondee (ˉ ˉ) in the sixth (the last syllable of the line, even if apparently short, was regarded as long due to the natural pause occurring at the end of each verse). In any of the first four feet, a spondee might be substituted for the characteristic dactyl, often with the intended effect of slowing down the movement of the line.

-- / -- / -- / -- / -- / --

The first line of the *Aeneid* would be scanned as follows:

Arma virumque canō Trōiae quī primus ab ōris.

iii. *Alcaic Strophe* (Unit 3). A strophe is a stanza or characteristic group of verses of varying metrical pattern; the strophe is repeated any number of times in a lyric poem. The Alcaic Strophe is a four-line stanza following this pattern:

- - - / - - - / - - - / -  
 - - - / - - - / - - - / -  
 - - - / - - - / - - - / -  
 - - - / - - - / - - - / -

iv. *Elegiac Couplet* (Units 4 and 6). A metrical pattern common in epigrams and in elegiac and romantic poetry and consisting of alternating dactylic hexameter and pentameter lines in the following scheme:

- - - / - - - / - - - / - - - / -  
 - - - / - - - / - - - / - - - / -

- c. Mark the principal pause in each line, using a double slash (/). In longer lines of verse, the rhythm was usually slowed by one or sometimes two major pauses that generally coincided with the close of some sense unit (i.e., the end of a phrase, a clause, or a sentence) and which, therefore, are often easily noted in a modern text by some mark of punctuation. More often than not the principal pause occurs within a foot, where it is called a "caesura," rather than at the end of a foot, where it is called a "diaeresis"; in fact, in classical Latin poetry, the majority of the word endings in a line are caesurae, or, to put it another way, most words begin in one foot and continue over into the next, a deliberate device intended to interweave the feet more closely and prevent a choppy, sing-song effect. The first three lines of Vergil's *Aeneid* are thus fully scanned (note that the second *i* in *Lāvīnia* is treated as a consonant):

Arma virumque canō Trōiae quī primus ab ōris.

Italiā fātō profugus Lāvīniaque vēnit

litora. Multum ille et terris iactātus et altō

Once you have worked out the scansion of a passage you are ready to read it aloud. We know that the Romans, while not ignoring the actual word accent, gave extra emphasis to the first long syllable of each foot in a verse (it is a peculiarity of Latin poetry that this verse accent, or "ictus," and the normal word accent did not always coincide). In reading aloud, therefore, you should stress the first long syllable of each foot as well as observing generally the long and short quantities and the principal pauses (i.e., the ends of phrases, clauses, and sentences). In this last regard, it may be noted that classical authors tended to avoid an excess of end-stopped lines in favor of enjambed or "run-on" lines; that is, instead of concluding each clause or sentence at the end of a verse, the sense was often carried over to the beginning or the middle of the following line, thus ensuring a more continuous flow. Accordingly, the reader should avoid an exaggerated pause at the end of a verse, unless it happens to coincide with the end of a sense unit.

### 3. Expressive Reading

The final step, and this is a challenge in reading English aloud as well as Latin, is to read expressively. The ancient poet, as we have noted already, wrote for recitation, to entertain a listening audience: the poetry recitation was a performance and, if successful, a moving one. Vergil would not have recited a book of his *Aeneid* in a sing-song monotone, but would have read dramatically, varying the tone of his voice to suit the mood and giving proper emphasis to key words and phrases. As you are completing each unit in this book, once you have translated and discussed a passage as well as worked out its scansion, you should read the passage aloud one last time, rhythmically and expressively, in order to approximate as nearly as possible the effect intended by the Roman poet.

## Appendix: Syllabification, Syllable Quantity, Accentuation

The following procedures for syllabifying a Latin word and determining the quantity of its syllables and the placement of its accent apply to Latin prose but may be profitably reviewed in connection with an introduction to Latin verse.

1. *Syllabification*: A Latin word has as many syllables as it has vowels and diphthongs. To syllabify, divide
  - a. between two vowels or between a vowel and a diphthong (*ae, oe, ei, ui, au, eu*)  
e.g., *eō*: *e/ō*; *meae*: *me/ae*
  - b. before a single consonant  
e.g., *laudō*: *lau/dō*; *moneō*: *mo/ne/ō*
  - c. before the last consonant, where there are two or more consonants, but *not* before the *h* of aspirates (*ch, ph, th*), nor between *q* and *u*, nor (except occasionally in poetry) between a stop (*b, c, d, g, p, t*) and a liquid (*l, r*)  
e.g., *esse*: *es/se*; *servāre*: *ser/vā/re*  
BUT *patria*: *pa/tri/a*; *philosophia*: *phi/lo/so/phi/a*; *atque*: *at/que*
2. *Syllable Quantity*: A syllable is long, i.e., takes longer to pronounce, if
  - a. it contains a long vowel  
e.g., *amō*: mark the syllable long in this way: *a/mō*
  - b. it contains a diphthong  
e.g., *meae*: *me/ae*; *laudō*: *lau/dō*
  - c. it ends with a consonant  
e.g., *puella*: *pu/el/la*; *vēnisset*: *vē/nis/sēt*

3. *Accentuation*: In a Latin word of two or more syllables (as in English), one syllable was accented, i.e., pronounced with greater stress; in Latin the position of the accent was determined in strict accordance with the following rules:

a. In a two syllable word, the first syllable is accented.

e.g., *amō*: á/mō̄; *esse*: é/sē

b. In a word of three or more syllables, the next to last (penultimate) syllable is accented, *if it is long*; if the penult is short, the preceding syllable (the antepenult) is accented.

e.g., *puella*: pu/él/la; *servāre*: sér/vā/re;

*Catullus*: Ca/tul/lūs

BUT *moneō*: mó/ne/ō̄; *patria*: pá/tri/a;

*Catulus*: Cá/tul/lūs