



Exploring the classical world

The Alcaic stanzas of Horace

Hello. I would like to give you a chance to hear some poems in their original Latin, and in the poetic metres in which they were composed. These audio segments are meant for your enjoyment and are designed to introduce you to the wonderful sounds, language and rhythm that are found in Latin poetry. I hope that you will enjoy learning about the rhythms and hearing the readings. Poetry may be thought of as a type of speech that has a regular recurring rhythm; this rhythm can be produced by a variety of different means. In English poetry rhythm is typically produced through the alternation of unstressed and stressed syllables. This rhythmic undulation produces an effect much like a heartbeat:

Da DUM/ da DUM/ da DUM

Such a rhythm is then fitted to a metre. A metre is simply a recognizable rhythmic pattern for a line of verse. For instance, if we take our alternating rhythm of unstressed and stressed syllables and repeat this pattern five times, we have created a line of verse in the most common English poetic metre: iambic pentameter. This metre is simply an ordering of the da DUM/ da DUM/ da DUM rhythm into a line of ten syllables.

This is the type of verse that Shakespeare most typically uses; listen to the following line of poetry, which is taken from one of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*:

/ / / / /
And yet/ to times/ in hope/ my verse/ shall stand

Ancient Greek and Latin poetry, however, works on somewhat different premises to the types of poetry we are familiar with from English verse. English poetry is typically organized around patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables, whereas classical poetry is determined by patterns of long and short syllables. Both are means of producing and controlling rhythm but they do it in different ways.

First of all we shall consider the lyric poetry of Horace. Ode 3.6 was composed in a poetic metre called "The Alcaic stanza", the most common metre used by Horace in his collection of lyric poetry. In a moment we will listen to my colleague from A219, Martin Thorpe, read the beginning of Ode 3.6 in Latin. First, though, let us take a closer look at this particular poetic form.

Take a look at the Latin version of Ode 3.6. You will see that the poem is set out in units of four lines; each of these four line units is equivalent to one stanza of Alcaic poetry.

In line with the principles of classical poetry, the rhythm here is produced by a recurring pattern over each of the four lines of poetry of long and short syllables. Each line though of poetry is complete in itself and so although the whole stanza is made up of four lines there is a natural pause in the rhythm after each of the 4 individual lines.

Listen now as I tap out the basic rhythmic pattern of a stanza of Alcaic poetry:

Long long short long long/ long short short long short short

Long long short long long/ long short short long short short

Long long short long long/ long short long long

long short short long short short/long short long long

Like the English iambic pentameter in its pure form there are a set number of syllables per line of poetry; 11 each in the first two lines, 9 in the third and 10 in the fourth but unlike the English form of verse the rhythm is not created principally by a pattern of stressed or unstressed syllables but by a sequence of long and short syllables where each long syllable is roughly equivalent in length to two short syllables.

Listen to the tapping out of the rhythm on the previous track several times and see if you can discern some regular patterns to the sequence.

You will notice, for instance, that the first two lines have the same rhythm,

Long long short long long/ long short short long short short

and that the third line starts with the same pattern:

long long short long long/

notice too that the last two lines end in the same way,

long short long long

and that the endings of these lines are like a slightly extended version of the ends of the first two lines:

long short long long as opposed to: long short long

You can also hear the start of the last line has a distinctive rhythm of its own,

long short short long short short/

before it repeats the rhythm of the end of the third line:

long short long long

There are, then, a number of recognizable patterns and similarities between the different lines in the Alcaic stanza and also a number of variations. This pattern of long and short syllables is a set template for the poet to use. There is, however, one variation that occurs in each line and that is that the last syllable can be either long or short; this is a general rule in fact of Latin poetry.

There is though another consideration apart from rhythmic variation that can cause a thickening of the poetic texture and that is how the rhythm of verse and the accent of words as they are pronounced naturally interact with one another. This is true of English poetry as well as Greek and Latin. For instance we discussed earlier that in the iambic pentameter we ideally have a da DUM/ da DUM/ da DUM rhythm where a stressed syllable follows an unstressed one. But this is very much an ideal pattern and it is not one that each line of iambic pentameter invariably follows. If it did the verse would be remarkably monotonous but also the natural pronunciation and accent of the English words would be continually deformed to simply fit the underlying rhythmic pattern. True, poets, do sometimes bend the normal rules of how a word would normally be pronounced in order to suit the metre of their poetry but more often the natural stresses of the prose usage of words are allowed to stand in a sort of counterpoise to the metrical pattern of the verse. This creates for poetry a virtually infinite number of rhythmic variations around the basic or ideal pattern. For instance, the line of Shakespeare we took before as an example of iambic pentameter,

 / / / / /
And yet/ to times/ in hope/ my verse/ shall stand

Follows the ideal pattern where the da DUM/ da DUM/ da DUM rhythm is matched by a word stress on every second syllable. Yet most lines of iambic pentameter in Shakespeare will demonstrate some variation on this pattern when the reader recites them with respect for the natural pronunciation and stresses of the words used, and some lines are quite radically different, consider, for instance, the line,

/ / / / /
Friends/, Romans/ Countrymen/, lend me/ your ears

Here the rhetorical emphasis of the poetry is foremost as the line begins with three words and three different metrical forms that increase in a crescendo-like fashion from one to three syllables with the word stresses falling on the first syllable of each word and only the last stress of the line falling in the ideal position.

In this manner, we might say that verse involves a continual and fruitful tension between the prosaic and the poetic in a feast of rhythm and sound. In the hands of a skillful poet the reader's expectations of the rhythmic norm of the metre will be placed in a counterpoint against the linguistic norms of normal prosaic word pronunciation and stress.

Latin poetry also thrives on the interplay between the stresses that the rhythm of the metre creates and the stresses that are produced by the normal accentuation of the words in Latin. The rhythmic stress of Latin poetry falls on the first long syllable of each metrical unit or foot but this metrical stress does not always coincide, in fact often does not coincide, with the normal accentuation of the Latin words. This again combines to produce a dynamic interaction between rhythm and content, or what we might call the base and superstructures of poetry.

Time, now to take a break from the technical details and analysis, and listen to Martin Thorpe reading the first part of *Ode* 3.6 for us. As you listen to the reading of the poem see if you can pick out the familiar rhythmic strains of the Alcaic stanza but remember at the same time that you will also be hearing subtle variations on this pattern and that the rhythmic stresses of the metre are overlaid by the accentuation of the Latin words. What you are listening to is not pure rhythm or pure sound but an intricate entwining of word and metre.

Reading of the first three stanzas of *Ode* 3.6 read in Latin.

Now let's listen to Leighton Pugh reading a translation of the same lines. As you listen to the two readings think about the different experience of hearing the poem in its original rhythm and language and hearing it in an English translation.

Reading of the first three stanzas of *Ode* 3.6 in translation

An English translation can certainly capture the spirit and tone of the Latin original but you will probably have noticed that although the English version does produce a sort of rhythm and pattern of its own it does not really replicate the sound and rhythm of the original. Rather, the English translation is an approximation of the effect of reading Horace's lyric poetry in Latin. To some extent this is inevitable because as we have seen Latin poetry is based on metres that use long and short syllables, whereas English poetry uses stressed and unstressed syllables. To try to reproduce Latin poetry in English verse is likely to result in an unsatisfactorily hybrid form that does justice neither to the potential of Latin or English verse.