Exploring the classical world

Exploring Roman elegiac poetry

Roman Elegiac poetry is composed, like Horatian lyric, of patterns of long and short syllables. More precisely an elegiac couplet consists of two specific patterns of long and short syllables in alternation: first a type of verse called a hexameter, and second one called a pentameter. This pattern of hexameter followed by pentameter builds up to form an elegiac poem.

Let us look now in more detail at the two metrical forms that combine to make an elegiac couplet.

First the dactylic hexameter: a dactyl is a metrical form made up of one long syllable followed by two short ones, rhythmically it sounds like this:

long short short

As you can hear, this is one long beat followed by two short beats; a true dactylic hexameter would be made up of six units, or feet, based on this rhythm; the last unit, though you will notice, is a little shorter. When we put it all together it sounds like this:

long short short/ long short short/ long short short/ long short short/ long short short/ long short

However, the hexameter also uses another metrical form, called a spondee comprised of two long syllables, which sounds like this:

long long

The hexameter is a fairly flexible metre and so in the first part of a line of verse, the first four units, or feet, can consist of either dactyls or spondees. So either the line can trip along quite quickly like this:

long short short/long short short/long short short/long short short

or it can move along with a more ponderous sound like this:

long long/ long long/ long long/ long long

The end of a hexameter though, the fifth and sixth feet, usually follows the same pattern and this sounds like the English mnemonic “strawberry jam jar”:

long short short/long short

Listen now to a few samples of the possible rhythms of a line in hexameters:

long short short/long long/ long long/ long long/ long short short/long short

or this,

long short short/ long short short/ long short short/ long short short/ long short short/ long short

or this,

long long/ long short short/long long/ long long/ long short short/long short

Can you hear that a great variety of rhythms are possible when the faster sound of the dactyl is combined with that of the spondee. This allows the poet to speed up or slow down his verse and in this manner the rhythm to be used to mirror the action and sound of what the poet is describing.

It is very unusual for lines to be made up predominately of either the fast tripping rhythm of the dactyl or the slow ponderous beat of the spondee. Such repetition can be used for special effect but it would become too predictable and boring if repeated over and over. Let me just show you one such example of a repetitive rhythm that does serve to reinforce the meaning and sound of the words. This is line of Virgil, a true dactylic hexameter, where the short quick rhythm of the dactyls meshes with the harsh sound of the consonants to convey the sound of a galloping horse:

Quadrupe/dante pu/trem soni/tu quatit/ ungula/ campum

Let us turn now to the second part of an elegiac couplet which consists of a line of poetry known as a dactylic pentameter. This is a metre made up of five metrical units, or feet, but it is easier really to think of the metre as consisting of two half hexameters fitted next to each other. Again, a true dactylic pentameter would have a quick tripping rhythm like this:

long short short/ long short short/ long // long short short/ long short short/ long

But once again the pentameter also allows the use of spondees to vary the rhythm. This variation, however, can only happen in the first half of a pentameter. So the beginning of a pentameter could move along briskly like this:

long short short/ long short short

or it could move along more slowly like this:

long long/ long long

However, the second part of the line always follows this pattern:

long // long short short/ long short short/ long

The only variation possible here is that the last syllable can be long or short.

In practice most pentameters combine long and short rhythms. Here are a couple of examples of the rhythm of a pentameter in action:

First this,

long short short/ long long/ long // long short short/ long short short/ short

and now this,

long long/ long short short/ long // long short short/ long short short/ long

Now let’s listen to two examples of the rhythm of a complete elegiac couplet, a hexameter followed by a pentameter, first this,

long long/ long short short/ long short short/ long long/ long short short/ long long

long short short/ long short short/ long// long short short/ long short short/ long

now this,

long short short/ long long/ long long/ long long/ long short short/ long short long long/ long long/ long// long short short/ long short short/ long

You will notice here how the second example of an elegiac couplet has a far slower rhythm than the first. In this case the rhythm mirrors the sombre thoughts that the poet is trying to express; the rhythm of these lines matches a couplet of Propertius that translates as, “Once the dead have entered the jurisdiction of the underworld, the way is barred by inexorable steel.” Here the poet has deliberately employed a slower rhythm to reflect the content of the couplet.

Again, this has been an analysis very much focused on the underlying rhythmic patterns of this form of poetry. We do though have to bear in mind once more that the stresses of the rhythm are only one aspect of the total effect of the poetry which also relies on a dynamic interplay of rhythmic and word stresses.

It is true though that in the Latin hexameter the stresses of the rhythm and natural stresses on the Latin words as they are pronounced almost always coincide at the end of the line so the listener is reminded at the end of each hexameter at least of the basic rhythmic pattern.

To hear this type of poetry in Latin let us listen now to Martin read the first part of Propertius book two, poem seven,

Reading of Propertius 2.7

Now let us listen to Leighton reading a translation of these same lines of the poem

Reading of translation of Propertius 2.7 in English

Once again, an English translation of a Latin original is invariably a matter of compromise, the production of good English idiom has to be traded off against the attempt to reproduce the sound and rhythm of the Latin. The English translation you will notice is fluid and accessible and puts across the sentiments of the poem forcibly but do you get a sense of the rhythm and sound of the elegiac couplet?

We will listen to some readings of brief extracts from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Virgil’s *Aeneid* is written in continuous hexameters – the metre that comprises the first line of the elegiac couplet that we have just listened to.

To give you a sense now of the rhythm of Virgil’s hexameters in action listen to the rhythm of the following, this is the metrical scheme for the first seven lines of Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

long short short/ long short short/ long long/ long long/ long short short/ long long

long short short/ long long/ long short short/ long long/ long short short/ long long

long short short/ long long/ long long/ long long/ long short short/ long long

long short short/ long long/ long short short/ long long/ long short short/ long short

long short short/ long long/ long long/ long long/ long short short/ long short

long long/ long short short/ long short short/ long short short/ long short short/ long short

long long/ long short short/ long long/ long long/ long short short/ long long

Can you hear how the patterns of dactyls (long short short) and spondees (long long) combine to form different rhythms. In these seven lines there are 5 different rhythmic patterns. The first three lines are all different and then the fourth line repeats the rhythm of the second line and the fifth line repeats that of the third line. This gives you some idea of the variety of rhythms that can be achieved with this metre and also how a poet can skillfully entwine repetitions of the same pattern.

Now let us listen to Martin read out some extracts from the *Aeneid*. The first passage you will hear consists of the first seven lines of the poem, see if you can hear the rhythm of the lines we have just been through, in Martin's reading. You will then hear an extract from book four, lines 693-705.

Reading in Latin of the first seven lines of Virgil's *Aeneid*

Reading in Latin of *Aeneid* 4. 693-705

You will probably have noticed several things as you have listened to these passages. First of all you may have been able to pick out snatches of the rhythmic patterns of the hexameter in the Latin reading. It is, though, perhaps more difficult than you might expect because although there are regular patterns, there are also constant variations. As we have noted throughout this discussion rhythm is only one aspect of the totality of Latin poetry which depends also on a vibrant interaction between the conflicting expectations of rhythmic consistency on the one hand and normal word accentuation on the other. Poetry is a melting pot we might say of the rival claims of rhythm and words and this is what gives it its great vibrancy and variety.

Now, let us listen to Leighton read out English translations of the Latin passages.

Reading of the translation of the first seven lines of the *Aeneid*

Reading of a translation of *Aeneid* 4. 693-705

You will have noticed in these readings that the English translation does not recreate the rhythm of Virgil's hexameters, nor does the sound of the English version mirror that of the Latin. Coleridge, the English poet, once said, "If you take from Virgil his language and metre what do you leave him?" and we can see in this question the crux of the problem of translating Latin poetry into English. However, it is perhaps a little too bleak to assume that an English translation can give us nothing of the Latin original. The rhythm and sound of the original may be largely lost, and arguably as we said earlier, it may be a mistake to try and recreate them too slavishly, as this is likely to lead to something that is simply awkward and ungainly in English, and so gives little accurate impression of artistic achievement of the Latin. The translations that you have just heard are by David West. In his introduction he tackles the problems of translating head on. He freely confesses that he is not a poet and suggests that we should not underestimate the power of English prose as an effective tool of expression. For David West his prose translation of Virgil's Latin verse is, as he says, "an attempt to respond in living English to the poetic eloquence of its great original." Although, studying Latin poetry in translation inevitably distances us somewhat from the rhythms, sound and language of the original poems, it is far from a futile activity. The effect of poetry resides not only in its sound and form but also in its depth of feeling and power of expression as we have clearly heard in Leighton's readings, so to answer Coleridge, there is actually a great deal left in Virgil after the metre and language are stripped away.

On one level poetry can seem to be an almost elemental force of nature, its rhythms can echo natural speech patterns and the beautiful mesh of sound and rhythm (as in music) can carry us along with it in a rapture of seeming spontaneity. On the other hand when we start to study poetry more closely and pick apart its rhythms and the way metre and language interact with one another it can seem to be a rather complicated and abstract activity. I hope you have been helped to see the complexity that underlies Latin poetry (or indeed any type of poetry) but also to appreciate through the readings we have listened to the sheer beauty of this art form.