

HOW TO WRITE VERSE.

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PART II.

IAMBIC VERSE.



Iambus, or, with its tail cut, the Iamb, is a short syllable followed by a long syllable, $\upsilon -$. It is derived from a Greek verb, *iambon*, meaning "to rail"; and, verily, it has a tongue with a

tang. But one hardly feels the movement of a single foot. Let us take an Iambic line or two.

"The kirk | was decked | at morn | ing tide, |
The ta | pers glim | mer'd fair : ||

The priest | and bride | groom wait | the
bride, |

And dame | and knight | are there." ||

There, now! Mark that metre. Say the lines over and over till you feel their swing and cannot mistake it. It will carry you a long way into the mastery of English verse. Iambic metre is its characteristic movement, and this is iambic metre's characteristic mould.

Almost all the old ballads are written in this form; and so are fully half of our most familiar hymns. It is the C.M., or Common Measure, of the hymn-books; it is also known as 8 and 6 metre, the odd lines having eight and the even lines, six syllables each. That means very little, but if you call it Iambic 8's and 6's it will be significant enough, for that will give you the swing as well as the count.

Suppose we print the names again, big: "COMMON MEASURE," "IAMBIC 8's and 6's," "BALLAD VERSE." If you want to grind the thing into your brain in such a way that you will never quite get it out again, repeat to yourself a few times the refrain of Kingsley's ballad, "Lorraine Lorraine." Say it twice over and you will get a complete stanza—

"Barum | barum | barum | barum |
Barum | barum | barée. ||
Barum | barum | barum | barum |
Barum | barum | barée." ||

I have put accents instead of the marks $\upsilon -$, in case anybody ingeniously should have contrived to evade the beat of the verse.

But Iambic Metre may be written in lines of one iamb each, as in the case of this delicate little thing which I have composed especially for the present occasion:—

Hé jûmped |
In béd, ||
And bûmped |
His héad, ||

or, in lines of two iambs:—

Hé jûmped | in béd, |
And bûmped | his héad. ||

Now, please, write a poem after this model, and whenever I give a specimen mould something after its fashion; only, mind, go back again and again to your ballad metre. Mark, learn, and inwardly digest that. It holds, if not an ox in a teacup, the vital essence of English verse. Read the old ballad of "Chevy Chase." And when you have absorbed that, read and absorb Macaulay's "Armada." That is really written in ballad metre, only two lines are printed as one.

When the odd lines (first and third, etc.) do not rhyme this is very often done. The lines are then sometimes called 14's, or lines of seven iambs, but you must not fail to identify, in this slight disguise, your kind and good old friend.

Iambs can also be written in such lines as these, three iambs, or 6's:—

"Wē lōve | thē plāce, | Ō Lōrd, |
Whērein | Thine hōn | ōur dwells ; ||
Thē jōy | ōf Thine | ābōde |
All cārth | lī jōy | ēxcēls." ||

Again, these lines can be printed two in one. And it should be noted that in this shape the lines form the Alexandrine—that measure which has been adopted as the classical metre of the French stage. Only you should note that the double line gives far greater flexibility to the verses. The pause may be shifted about almost at will, and infinite variety of melody may flow from mechanical uniformity.

As a matter of fact, all lines composed of more than one foot, or accent, or period, may really be broken up into two or more. The way in which this distribution takes place is almost purely arbitrary, and very largely depends upon the absence or presence of rhyme.

Iambic verse has a very characteristic development in a modification of this form. Instead of lines of eight and six, we have lines of eight and eight. Instead of the alternate rhyme—the even line rhyming with the even, and the odd with the odd—we have the rhymes paired:—

"Cōme live | with mē | ānd bē | mý Lōve, |
Ānd wē | will āll | thē plā | sūres prōve, |
Thāt hills | ānd vāl | lēys, dāle | ānd fiēld, |
Ānd āll | thē crāg | gý moun | tāins yield." ||

When written, not in quatrains (or four-line stanzas), but in stanzas of various length, or in cantos without any such break, this octosyllabic verse—verse of four Iambic accents—is one of the elect vehicles of narrative verse. Samuel Butler adapted it in his famous satire *Hudibras*, and from that poem it has derived the name of Hudibrastic verse; but it reached the summit of its glory in the hands of Swift. Scott also made it the staple of his verse in the "Lady of the Lake." But in that poem, and far more in "Marmion," Scott varied the length of the line and the rhyme system, producing a combination by its swiftness and directness, with sufficient variety, is almost unequalled for story verse. Macaulay followed Scott, and contrived to add to the verse, by a certain breadth and freedom of handling, a weight and sonorosity such as Scott very seldom attained. As a poet, it need not be said, Macaulay belongs to a far inferior order to that of Scott; but he was a great master of narrative verse, and he brought this special genre to its utmost perfection of form.

The next Iambic Metre is one of supreme importance. It is Iambic verse of ten syllables, and it is commonly known as Pentameter Verse—pentameter meaning nothing more than ten-measure. This metre, when written in pairs of lines, or rhyming couplets, is known as Heroic Verse. It is the metre of Pope, Johnson, and Goldsmith. It is capable, in the hands of the wisp of Twickenham, of flash and glitter, and sting and prick, such as no other verse has ever attained. In the hands of the wise and sad Philosopher it became deep and sonorous, as other verse could never be.

"Deign on the passing world to turn thine eyes,

And pause awhile from learning, to be wise;
There mark what ills the scholar's life assail—

Toil, envy, want, the patron, and the gaol."

And in the hands of a great modern master, William Morris, it acquires a new and far more pleasant music. It ceases to flash and clash; it ceases to roll; it moves with a natural sweetness, a various grace; it has the flowing line of a Grecian dress upon a Grecian figure.

I must say a great deal more about Heroic Verse by-and-by, but for the present please read over Goldsmith's "Traveler" and Goldsmith's "Deserted Village." On the whole, as it seems to me, Goldsmith managed this measure in a more characteristic manner than any other master. He suggests, not what a man of genius may do with the metre, but what the metre was meant to do. In his verse there is the ordered charm—the garden sweetness—which is the most essential gift of the Pentameter.

When you feel the flow of Goldsmith's verse you may write some Pentameters. And when you feel fairly safe about your Pentameter couplet, you may turn to Gray's "Elegy."

You will observe that in that exquisite poem we have the ten syllables, the five accents in each line, just as in Goldsmith and in Pope, only there is a re-arrangement of the rhymes. Instead of the clash of couplet we have the lengthened sweetness of alternate rhymes.

Now this slight formal change has an inestimable effect on the spirit of the verse. We have, instead of couplet stanzas, a music at once more varied and more limited, and an effect more periodically recurrent.

This particular form of Pentameter (four-line stanzas, with lines alternately rhyming) is known as Elegiac. That is why Gray's poem is called an elegy. Only the last three stanzas comprise an elegy proper—a sorrowful eulogy on the dead. But such poems were so commonly written in this metre that they have given their name to the form, and whatever you write in that form is an elegy.

When Iambic decasyllables are written without rhyme they make blank verse. Strictly speaking, of course, any unrhyming verse is blank verse. The Iambic decasyllabic form, however, is so much more common and—as being the vehicle of Shakespeare and the poetic drama—so vastly more important than any other, that practically it has monopolised the name. When we refer to other unrhyming lines we generally define the form with more or less exactitude. These ten-foot Iambic lines are what we mean by blank verse:—

"Ā lit | tlē ōn | wārd lēnd | thý gui | dīng
hānd, |
Tō thēsē | dārk stēps, | ā lit | tlē fūr | thēr
ōn." ||

By-and-by I shall have much to say about blank verse. It is at once the easiest and the hardest of all metrical forms. It is almost exclusively an English possession. It is, by excellence, the language of the serious stage. For the present I merely mention it, and pass on.

I hope that my readers have already grasped, from the examples adduced, a principle which has not explicitly been asserted.

Iambic stanzas can be composed in infinite variety. The lines can be of almost any number from two to thirty or forty, and the