

THE SOUL OF THE AMERICAN ACTOR  
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Excerpts from the chapter "Scanning the Verse" in "'All the Words on Stage, A Complete Pronunciation Dictionary for the Plays of William Shakespeare". Published by Smith and Kraus.

Shakespeare wrote his plays over an approximately twenty-year period. He and his contemporaries sought to achieve a theatrical reality through the use of language. Consequently, they experimented with iambic pentameter, the English language, and the best theatrical forms for the expression of their ideas. One of his first plays ("Titus Andronicus") was almost entirely in verse. Others combine verse and prose ("The Comedy of Errors", "Two Gentlemen of Verona", "The Taming of the Shrew"). While a few plays ("2 Henry VI", "3 Henry VI", "Richard II", and "King John") are completely in verse, other plays (1 Henry IV, 2 Henry IV, The Merry Wives of Windsor, "Much Ado About Nothing", and "As You Like It") examine the potential of prose. In some early comedies ("A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "Love's Labor's Lost") almost half of the play is in rhyming verse. However, a later tragedy like "Antony and Cleopatra" contains 90% blank verse (i.e. verse that does not rhyme). Blank verse then becomes the predominate means of expression in the later tragedies and romances. In addition to these larger categories, Shakespeare investigates changes to the iambic pentameter line in individual plays. He experiments with long lines, epic caesuras, and short and shared lines. He was able to do this because iambic pentameter closely follows the rhythm of spoken English and, thus, has an extraordinary ability to accommodate a host of variations.

Beginning students often ask how they can determine the difference between verse and prose. A short answer is that prose follows the rules of grammar, while verse obeys both grammar and additional principles, which serve to heighten our attention to the rhythm of the language. A line is a segment of verse determined by its page layout that adheres to a set of metrical principles. An iamb is composed of two syllables, the first unstressed, the second stressed. This is called an iambic foot. A foot is merely a theoretical division of a verse line. Metrical refers to meter. Meter is the organization of the regularity of speech into a strict pattern that can be identified and counted. Pentameter means that there are five metrical units in each line of verse, since *penta* is the Greek word for five. Therefore, iambic pentameter is a line of five iambic feet, which contains ten syllables. For example:

There is no virtue like necessity.  
RII I, 3, 278

Scansion is the orthographic or written attempt to represent the meter and stress of verse by noting the light and heavy stresses in the line. It seeks to capture the interplay of word and metrical stress. This interplay is often referred to as the rhythm of the language. Rhythm, however, can neither be seen, nor heard, nor read. Rhythm is something that is felt. It is a pulse, a beat, a sense of movement through time. Rhythm is innate, yet invisible. It is a pattern or series of beats that produce energy. Rhythm goes through time as movement goes through space. It is difficult, if not impossible, to portray rhythm on the page, though this is what scansion sets out to do. Capturing rhythm is like trying to capture breath. One can sense the act of breathing, but one doesn't see the air that is the component of the breath. In order for the audience to sense rhythm, the actor must establish it. And, once established, it must be maintained so that the variants, which heighten the expressiveness of the verse, can be *felt* as opposed to observed or heard. The variants need to be experienced as *variants*.

The expressiveness and force of the language often stem from the variants to the iambic pentameter form employed by Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists. In the past, these variants were sometimes dismissed as an example of sloppy craftsmanship or ascribed to

misguided typesetters. The actor should use and exploit variation and difference, not homogenize them. An individual line does not stand on its own but must be considered, eventually, both in relation to the other verse lines and to the prose surrounding it. As the variants are discovered and explored, the actor will find that they provide a map or sketch of the thought processes of the character, allowing the actor to create the verse line in the present moment. It is important to note that Shakespeare and other writers of the period organized the arrangement of particular stresses - the beats and off-beats of the lines - not to fulfill arbitrary standards, but rather to reflect the emotional and psychological state of the character.

The most common variant to the ten syllable line is the longer line, specifically that which contains an eleventh or extra syllable, which is never stressed. (In the past, these line endings were referred to, in a form of literary misogyny, as “feminine” because of their “weak” or unstressed ending.) The most famous line in Shakespeare has an unstressed ending:

To be or not to be, that is the question  
HAM III, 1, 55

The line is almost naturalistic in its simplicity, yet the iambic rhythm is present.

Some lines have twelve syllables. This type of line is referred to as either an alexandrine or a hexameter (six metric units to the line). An example is:

Allow obedience, if you yourselves are old  
LEAR II, 4, 186

Whereas the iambic pentameter line of five units cannot divide itself in half, the hexameter line can. Two sections of three feet each give a sense of difference, perhaps a heightening of emotion, or crisis in the character. When two characters share a twelve-syllable line, a sense of charged confrontation or heightened exchange exists between them. The twelve syllable line might also be reflective of a heightened emotional state in which the speaker is cramming twelve syllables into the time normally reserved for ten. The twelve-syllable line does something new, perhaps something disturbing, to the established iambic pentameter rhythm that has been set down for us.

Sometimes Shakespeare makes use of a short line. The syllabic count falls short, but the iambic rhythm remains. The pause should be filled with some sort of non-verbal behavior which can be either physical activity or silent psychological action such as Horatio’s anticipation of the Ghost’s response to his demands in the first scene of “Hamlet”. On rare occasions, in plays filled with such articulate characters, the pause may reveal a character at a momentary loss for words. The duration of either the psychological action or the physical activity will, ideally, maintain the iambic rhythm of the verse.

Our attention to rhythm and Shakespeare’s use of metrics in the compilation of this dictionary is intended to help the actor speak a living, breathing, supple language, rather than recite a printed text. As obvious as it seems, it might be good to note that the printed text is not the spoken word. The goal should be to experiment with the verse form in order to achieve a spoken language that is heightened yet realistic, thoughtful yet engaging. It is the unseen quality of the verse - its rhythm and the corresponding system of metrics - that gives the words their drive, power, and presence.