

Umar Farooq *

Comments and Reflections on “Prosody” (A Correspondence with Encyclopaedia Britannica)

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Dear Editors Encyclopaedia Britannica,

Hope you are doing well in every way, enjoying good health. Please do consider what I'm going to point out in the following:

Firstly: Elements of Prosody: Scansion

The author of the article on prosody writes while discussing the Elements of Prosody:

“An analysis of *Vertue* by the 17th-century English poet [George Herbert](#) reveals how the elements of prosody combine into a complex organism, a life sustained by the technical means available to the poet. When the metre is scanned with the symbols, it can be seen (and heard) how metre in this poem consists of the regular recurrence of feet, how each foot is a pattern of phonetically stressed and unstressed syllables.

1 Sweet day, | so cool, | so calm, | so bright,
 2 The bri | dall of | the earth | and skie:
 3 The dew | shall weep | thy fall | to-night;
 4 For thou | must die.

 5 Sweet rose, | whose hue | an grie | and brave
 6 Bids the | rash ga | zer wipe | his eye:
 7 Thy root | is ev | er in | its grave,
 8 And thou | must die.

 9 Sweet spring, | full of | sweet dayes | and ro | ses,
 10 A box | where sweets | com pac | ted lie;
 11 My mu | sick shows | ye have | your clo | ses,
 12 And all | must die.

 13 Onely | a sweet | and ver | tuous soul,
 14 Like sea | son'd tim | ber, ne | ver gives;
 15 But though | the whole | world turn | to coal,
 16 Then chief | ly lives.

“The basic prosodic units are the foot, the line, and the stanza. The recurrence of similar feet in a line determines the metre; here there are three lines consisting of four iambic feet (*i.e.*, of four units in which the common pattern is the iamb—an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable), which are followed by a line consisting of two iambic feet. Thus the stanza or recurring set of lines consists of three iambic tetrameters followed by one iambic diameter. The stanzaic form is clinched by

the use of rhyme; in "Vertue" the first and third and second and fourth lines end with the same sequence of vowels and consonants: bright/night, skie/pie, brave/grave, eye/pie, etc. It should be observed that the iambic pattern (˘) is not invariable; the third foot of line 5, the first foot of line 6, the second foot of line 9, and the first foot of line 13 are reversals of the iambic foot or trochees (˘). These reversals are called substitutions; they provide tension between metrical pattern and meaning, as they do in these celebrated examples from Shakespeare:

$\begin{array}{cccccccccccccccc} \cup & \text{f} & \cup & \text{f} & \cup & \text{f} & \cup & \text{f} & \cup & \text{f} & \cup & \text{f} & \cup & \text{f} & \cup & \text{f} \\ \text{To be,} & | & \text{or not} & | & \text{to be,} & || & \text{that is} & | & \text{the ques} & \text{tion} & \dots & & & & & & \end{array}$
Hamlet

$\begin{array}{cccccccccccccccc} \cup & \text{f} & \cup & \text{f} & \cup & \text{f} & \cup & \text{f} & \cup & \text{f} & \cup & \text{f} & \cup & \text{f} & \cup & \text{f} \\ \text{His sil} & | & \text{ver skin} & | & \text{laced with} & | & \text{his gol} & | & \text{den blood} & \dots & & & & & & & \end{array}$
Macbeth

”

Here are some points unnoticed in the quoted paragraph to which I would like to draw the kind attention of the author of the article as well as the editors of the encyclopaedia:

The scansion of first and third line in the third stanza given in the article from George Herbert's poem "Vertue" is not in accordance with the second line of the very stanza as well as with those of other stanzas in number of feet and their stressed and unstressed syllables which are alike in those of diametric fourth line of each of the stanzas. To my money, it's not a free-verse poem. So, "of" in the first line in third stanza is to be shortened to "o' " merging it into the preceding syllable "full" as "full o' ", and the same is to be done in the third line with "have" and its preceding word "ye" to fuse them into a single syllable like "ye've" so to make the feet resemble the rest ones of the same line in this stanza and others. In so far as the third foot of the line 5 and the first one of the line 6 are concerned, the case is, as I guess, that the poet initially made both of the syllables in each foot resemble the others in their stress; and they could easily be uttered in the way other ones are

pronounced in these lines. Yet the connotational effect to be exerted required the other way to articulate them in a sort of reversal substitutions for the stress, defining the tension between metrical pattern and meaning. The same is the case with the syllables of third foot in the line taken from Macbeth. While first foot after caesura in the example derived from Hamlet should be defined just as we tackled the parted syllables in the illustrated third stanza from "Vertue", i.e. to merge "is" with preceded "that" in one syllable (that's) while scanning the line equally in its feet and their stressed and unstressed syllables; but to articulate that, however, in the way scanned in the article for connotational purpose of necessity is something, I think, not to be connected with scansion and metrical utterance of the lines in their feet and stress of syllables.

Secondly: Prosodic Style: The Personal Element

- i) Let me | not to | the mar | riage of | true minds
Ad mit | im pe | di ments. | Love is | not love..

In my humble view, the lines are also adjusted to regular iambic pentameter in all of the feet to scan. In so far as the trochaic substitutions and pyrrhic-spondaic formation are concerned, they are needed only when one reads the lines to perform with all of the violent feelings and powerful conviction raised to command therein, giving enjambment in the first line towards the second, which is paused at the third foot to be resumed with a connotational effect of a reversal.

- ii) A line from Whitman's poem "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking":

O past! O happy life! O songs of joy!

could be scanned, if prosodists allow, according to the popular "Mātrās" scansion system of Sanskrit (or Hindi-Urdu) prosody, or less appropriately by the Japanese syllable scansion system that resemble the scansion in trochee metre. Thus, the line can be scanned as follows:

O pa (- -) st O (^ or -) happy (- -) life O (- - or -^)
songs of (- - or ^^) joy (-')

and would comprise 20 *mātrās* with a stop at the end; being the hyphen (-) denoting to a consonant with a vowel, where each one of consonant and vowel considered a *mātrās*; (^) indicates to a single voiced or unvoiced consonant, and (') points to a paused at consonant. Or the line consists of 10 Japanese syllables, where the ending stops or the open end is not taken into account.

The same prosodic pattern could be applied to the other lines of the same poem by the poet:

Shake out | carols!

(- -^) (- -')

Soli|tary | here, the | night's | carols!

(- -) (- -) (-^^) (-^) (- -')

Carols | of lone|some love! | death's | carols!

(- -) (- -) (- -) (-^) (- -')

Carols | under | that lag|ging, ye|llow, wa|ning moon!

(- -) (- -) (- -) (- -) (- -) (- -')

O un|der that | moon whe|re she droo|ps almo|st down
in|to| the sea!

(- -) (- -) (- -) (^-^ -) (^-^ -) (^- -) (-) (- -)

Hoping the above made suggestions to be taken into consideration, and, if the author (or expert) and editors are agreed, be incorporated in or annexed to the article accordingly,

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Dear Umar Farooq,

Thank you for your comments on our article on prosody.

As to your first point: you're right to note the irregularities in the third stanza of Herbert's "Vertue" as something significant, but there seem to be a range of interpretations available, of which our article's claim that the reversed feet are substitutions is just one. Your solution to

the matter of the extra half-feet (the elision of syllables) is an intriguing one, but the difficulty encountered in speaking lines may point to another possible explanation for Herbert's diversion from four-foot lines: that the lines simply sounded more pleasing. In other words:

Sweet spring, | full-o sweet | dayes and | roses

presents a considerable roadblock, in our opinion, by compressing "full of" to, essentially, one syllable. (We, perhaps unfairly, render your "full o" to "full-o" to emphasize the manner in which it would need to be pronounced.) Does not the inclusion of "of" allow the line as a whole to breathe and move more swiftly to its conclusion?

Your suggestion that line 11 of the poem be read as

My Mu | sick shows | you've your | closes

is also intriguing. (Again, we've altered your suggestion to "you've" simply for the sake of underscoring its assumed pronunciation.) Again, however, that compression, while it makes this line consistent with the pattern used elsewhere in the poem, represents to our ears a speed bump; there's not as much music in "you've" as "ye have," even though the latter risks suggesting that Herbert disregarded form and burst his own metrical pattern.

Analysis of these two lines may ultimately revolve around Herbert's intent, which is something that today, of course, cannot be known. We could accuse Herbert of a mistake, or we could suggest -- as our article does -- that he introduced these variations so as emphasize underlying meaning. Or our article -- as you suggest -- may be mistaken in its parsing of feet. If there exist drafts and/or previously published versions of this poem, they might also provide some insight into the evolution of this text. Or: Herbert may have written these lines in this manner simply because he found them more fluid and pleasing to the ear -- on something of a whim, in other words. We think all of these explanations may be valid, but we will certainly weigh your remarks and evaluate our marking of this poem.

To your second point, about Shakespeare's sonnet 116: we agree that these lines could be read as standard iambic pentameter. The author of our article makes a case -- and a strong case at that -- for the irregularity of these lines, but his case may be stated too strongly. We'll consider softening the argument made. If you have specific changes to the article that you would like to suggest, we would encourage you to use the Edit button at <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/479409/prosody> so as to submit those changes.

And to your third point, about the application of alternate scansion systems: do you think that Whitman might have been aware of these systems when he composed "Out of the Cradle"? Do there exist studies today of Whitman's poetry as scanned via these systems? What do you make of the fact that Whitman's poem can be rendered so readily into mātrāṣ? We ask these questions because, were we to incorporate that material, we'd want to establish a deeper link so as to further justify bringing these traditions into contact with each other, and we'd appreciate your thoughts on these matters.

Sincerely,
Britannica Editors

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Dear Editors Encyclopaedia Britannica,

In continuation of my comments on *Prosody* and with reference to your reply accordingly, I can only share my reflections on the matter in connection with the third and last point mentioned by you, i.e. the application of alternate scansion systems:

Firstly: Although Japanese is an intonative or qualitative language that depends on modulation of voice, pitch and a certain kind of stress, while English and Sanskrit (and likewise Hindi/ Urdu) are quantitative languages, but the scansion of poetic meters in all of them depends on syllables,

be they light (*laghū* = a consonant with a short vowel, i.e. one *mātrā*, where short vowel makes the consonant voiced) and heavy (*gurū* = a consonant with a long vowel, i.e. two *mātrās*, where long vowel plays the role to voice the consonant with a paused at end) as is the case in Sanskrit Pingala (prosody), or as the syllables are stressed and unstressed in their feet (Sanskrit *pādas*) in English prosody, and likewise in Japanese scansion system with a slight difference of pitch in stress. Thus scansion of an English line into feet and their stressed and unstressed syllables (in troche metre for example), can easily be converted into *mātrās* scansion system of Sanskrit, and Japanese stressed and unstressed syllables in their pitch.

Secondly: *Al-Bairunī* said in his famous treatise on India commonly known as *Kitāb-ul Hind* that Indians used light (*laghū*) and heavy (*gurū*) syllables in scansion of their poetic meters, and same had been the case insofar as the Arabic metrical system was concerned, as the Arabs used light syllable (*sabab khafīf* = a consonant with a short vowel joined by a paused at letter, as in *hub*) and heavy syllable (*sabab saqīl* = two voiced consonants, as in *quiva* pronounced with shortened *a* in equivalent) in their poetic scansion. Then there are four other units (or groups like *ganas* in Sanskrit Pingala) named *watid majmūʿ*, *watid mafrūq*, *fāsīlā sughrā* and *fāsila kubrā*. These units/groups constitute feet (*pādas*) in Arabic. The names of these units or groups, as *Al-Bairunī* discovered, had a close similarity to what the Greeks used for the units and feet in their poetic metres, with the difference that Arabs derived these names from the tent they used to live in, i.e. after the names of things related to a tent like rope (*sabab*), peg (*watid*) etc., while the Greeks took the names from horse (its hands, legs etc.) as they called their poetic feet/units after limbs of a horse. *Al-Bairunī* further asserts that *Al-Khalīl bin Ahmad Al-Farahīdī*, who derived prosodic rules in Arabic, was quite familiar with Sanskrit tradition, and – as another Arab historian *Salāhuddin As-Safadī* wrote in his book *Al-Ghais Al-Musjam* – *Al-Khalīl* followed the Greek tradition as well, especially in

naming the units/feet in a poetic metre. So, *Al-Bairunī* reached the conclusion after an analytical study he made that both the Arabic and Greek prosodic systems derived most of their rules from Sanskrit prosodic tradition. (And this Sanskrit prosody, as a contemporary Arab prosodian *Safa Khulūsi* discovers, was derived from ancient Babylonian prosody.)

[See:

صلاح الدين الصفدي، الغيث المسجم في شرح
لامية العجم، دار الكتب العلمية، بيروت، ط2،
1411هـ / 1990م، ج1، ص54؛ أبو الريحان
أحمد بن محمد البيروني، كتاب ما للهند من
مقولة مقبولة في العقل أو مرذولة، نقلا عن:
محمد طارق الكاتب، موازين الشعر العربي
باستعمال الأرقام الثنائية، [مطبوعة مصلحة
الموائى العراقية، البصرة، ط1، 1391هـ/
1971م، ص38.

Lastly: In Japanese syllable scansion system, "the normal Japanese term in the context of counting sounds in poetry is *on*" that is equal to characters counted in a Japanese poetic line, which resembles the *mātrās counting system* in Sanskrit/Hindi scansion. And there is, of course, a kind of disjunction between English *syllable* and Japanese *on* in their *moras* (syllable weight or stress and timing), but "it often happens that the syllable count and the *on* count match in Japanese-language haiku", and since the *mora*, as [James D. McCawley](#) defined it, is "something of which a long syllable consists of two and a short syllable consists of one", as is the case in Sanskrit *gurū* (light) and *laghu* (heavy) syllables, the syllable weight and stress in English is found to be resembling the stress and timing in Japanese syllable. Thus the **Japanese scansion system** (as well as the **Hindi mātrās system**) can be used as an alternate for the scansion of some of the English poetic metres.

[See **Japanese Prosody** in Encyclopaedia Britannica,
and ***on, mora*** in Wikipedia]

Sincerely,
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