CHAPTER 1

The Iambic Pentameter Line

When Shakespeare and Marlowe and Ben Jonson sat around the Mermaid Tavern and talked like we are doing, iambic pentameter was wonderfully new and timely.

(WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, 29)

How to Read It

Iambic pentameter has often been called the most speechlike of English meters, and this is undoubtedly true, especially of its blank verse form. Whether it is true because English is a naturally iambic language is a more questionable claim. A language that insistently pushes the stresses on words to the front, to the first syllable, as all Germanic languages do, would seem to be distinguished by an impulse toward the trochaic, and certainly large numbers of English words, such as *window, table, swimming,* and *laughter,* are in themselves natural trochees. Natural iambs, on the other hand, are easily provided not only by iambic words (*alone, submit*) but also by combining *a* or *the* or prepositions with monosyllabic nouns, which are also numerous in English, or by combining pronouns with monosyllabic verbs: *I doubt, you see, he went.* But which of these impulses, iambic or trochaic, is stronger in English speech generally is hard to say. What seems beyond dispute is that the trochaic and iambic currents of our speech find an appropriate arena in meter that is iambic rather than trochaic, and this is because iambic verse accommodates a wide range of metrical variations and trochaic verse does not, though why this should be so is again mysterious.[1]

Patterns we find in poetry always derive from patterns we discern or intuit in the world around us.[2] The arrangement of words and phrases in poetic lines reflects our custom of speaking, and of hearing each other speak, in a succession of rhythmic units; if the lines are metrical, if they make patterns out of series of lightly or strongly stressed syllables, they reflect the fact that when we speak we speak a succession of syllables with greater and lesser degrees of stress. If verse is iambic, that means that it assumes as a fundamental feature of our speech the frequent—and sometimes regular and rhythmic—alternation of unstressed and stressed syllables, and that it mirrors our occasional tendency to use several of those two kinds of syllables in that order—a climactic order perhaps, a rising rhythm (as it is often called), in which the movement is repeatedly (and even noticeably) from the less prominent syllable to the more prominent. Within the line we will usually be more aware of a quick succession of syllables with contrasting degrees of stress than of an insistent series of iambs; it is easier to notice the alternation than to say whether at any point the rhythm is iambic or trochaic. The first "foot" in iambic verse, too, is frequently reversed, so that we start the line with a stressed syllable. The last foot, however, is rarely reversed, and the pattern we come to know as we keep listening to iambic meter is one that moves inexorably, through several different modes of passage, to a final confirmation of iambicity. On the other hand, poems that use many feminine endings tend to undermine this feature of iambic verse and may have some expressive reason for doing so.

Although the English syllables we speak can be spoken with many degrees or shades of emphasis (of loudness, sharpness, duration, and other ways of signaling importance), it seems likely that in most English speech we perceive two major levels of stress, and that we hear (and learn to produce so that others may hear) a continuous series of relatively stressed and relatively unstressed syllables. In any sustained string of spoken English words, the syllables uttered at one of these levels serve as background to the syllables uttered at the other. Whatever the actual loudness of a syllable, its place in a series (as stressed or as unstressed) will depend on its difference from the other sort of syllable with which it composes the series.

This Saussurean observation is a crucial one. Syllables are not stressed (´) or unstressed (˘) in any absolute sense, but only in relation to the essentially dual levels of stress established by each word-string.[3] This is

not to say, however, that every syllable is spoken with a degree of stress that makes immediately clear to which of these two levels it belongs. Stressed syllables may vary in strength, and unstressed syllables may vary in weakness, and a third group may strike us as uncertain, as falling into a range that seems stronger than unstressed but weaker than stressed (here marked as ˋ). In the most regular meters, such syllables are relatively rare; but their frequent appearance in English iambic pentameter helps to make this meter sound more speechlike than any other. In effect, iambic pentameter recognizes and incorporates an intermediate kind of syllable that may appear either in a stressed or in an unstressed "position," and that acquires interest and emotional resonance by being different from syllables we can more readily identify as either stressed or unstressed.

Because the syllables we speak usually fall into one or the other of the two main kinds, stressed or unstressed, we are likely not only to listen for the stressed syllables but to perceive them as coming at fairly regular intervals. As one group of scholars has suggested: "it is the recognition of a pattern of recurrent stressed syllables against a background of unstressed syllables that accounts for the fact that widely different intervals between stressed syllables appear to the listener to be 'approximately' equal" (Faure et al., 77). This feature of English speech is also reflected in English poetic meters, most of which are isochronous. That is, the intervals between stressed syllables are perceived as fairly uniform. This uniformity can be kept in two ways. *If the meter is accentual,* it measures the interval between stressed syllables by the time that elapses between them, without specifying how many unstressed syllables appear in that interval. In looser forms (nursery rhymes, for example), the number of syllables that intervene between stressed ones may be extremely variable, from zero to six or so. *But if the meter is not only accentual but also syllabic,* then the interval between its accented syllables is marked not by a measured time-lapse but by the occurrence of a fixed number of unaccented syllables (usually one). In such a meter we hear a pulsation (see Halpern, 185) in each stressed syllable, but the intervals between stressed syllables are not so regular. In the most daring such meter, iambic pentameter, one or more pauses may occur in midline, but to the trained ear what counts is that the pattern of alternation which is structurally essential to the line will be resumed after each pause. As we know from many productions, when Othello says, "Put out the light, and then put out the light" (*Othello,* 5.2.7), the actor may make a

pause of some length after the fourth syllable, but the iambic pattern of the line is not disturbed, only suspended. This capacity for internal delay distinguishes poetic from musical meter.

The nature of iambic poetry in English, then, is largely determined by its sources in English speech, and these are, in summary, of two kinds: (1) our perception of two levels or ranges of stress, with a third, complicating range between them; (2) our perception of a series of pulsations, the intervals between which are in verse measured by the occurrence of one unstressed syllable. This sequence will be complicated by several standard kinds of variation from the regular pattern. But the effect of these complicating factors is both to bring iambic poetry nearer to spoken English and, for purposes of emotional intensification, to jeopardize our perception of the strict accentual-syllabic pattern.

It is especially when iambic poetry is cast in pentameter that these sources of complexity fully emerge. This is largely because pentameter is itself the most problematical line-length, and the mark of this is its resistance to simple division: it does not divide readily into two shorter rhythmical units. We tend to perceive other long lines as breaking in two: six- or eight-beat lines into two equal parts, seven-beat lines into one segment of four beats and one of three followed by a pause which is felt as a fourth beat:

6 beats

When I was fair and young, | and favor graced me
Of many was I sought, | their mistress for to be

(Poem by Queen Elizabeth I, in Hebel and Hudson, 54)

7 beats

As I in hoary winter's night | stood shivering in the snow,
Surprised I was with sudden heat | which made my heart to glow

(Southwell, "The Burning Babe," in Hebel and Hudson, 238)

8 beats

Do not, to make your ladies game, | bring blemish to your worthy name,
Away to field and win renown! | with courage beat your enemies down!

(Humphrey Gifford, "For Soldiers," in Hebel and Hudson, 101)

In the last quoted passage, the internal rhymes make doubly clear how decisive the midline break is. It appears that lines of more than five stresses have only a provisional reality.[4] Even when the midline break is accorded minimal value, we are still likely to perceive the lines as compound in nature and to hear distinctly the shorter lines of which they are composed.

Four-foot iambic lines, on the other hand, though they constitute a significant resource for poets writing in English, lack the amplitude of the five-foot line and seem as a rule unable to survive the absence of rhyme, a defect which partly limits their power to seem convincingly speechlike. The same is even truer of forms made up entirely of shorter iambic lines.

Pentameter, then, is the most speechlike of English line-lengths, especially when it appears without rhyme. Long enough to accommodate a good mouthful of English words, long enough too to require most of its lines to break their phrasing somewhere, it also resists the tendency to divide in half. In fact, it *cannot* do so. A midline pause, wherever it appears, leaves two stressed syllables on one side and three on the other. For iambic pentameter, however highly patterned its syntax, is by nature asymmetrical—like human speech. If we divide a ten-syllable line "in half," we do not get two equal segments but two unequal ones:

To witness duty, | not to show my wit (Shakespeare, Sonnet 26:4)

Five syllables on either side of the break, but different numbers of stressed and unstressed syllables, so that, though we may hear a syllabic symmetry, the line resists giving us a metrical balance to accompany it. The result is very different in feeling from, say, Browning's shorter line, "So might I gain, so might I miss" ("The Last Ride Together," line 40), where the metrical break and balance match the phrasal break and balance. Poets have sometimes set themselves the exercise of writing an iambic pentameter line with the balance that is natural to a more symmetrical line:

I shall find time, Cassius; I shall find time (*Julius Caesar*, 5.3.103)

Twelve year since, Miranda, twelve year since (*The Tempest*, 1.2.53)

Take your own time, Annie, take your own time
(Tennyson, "Enoch Arden," line 463)

Only the second of these is perfectly symmetrical, but at the cost of being headless. All of them are tours de force and work against the grain of a meter that characteristically resists such balances. Even in the highly ordered poetry of Pope, where line is set against line in the couplet, and phrase against phrase in the antithesis, the pentameter line keeps these oppositions from being worked out too simply. The meter of Pope's poetry is impressive just because the frame within which its binary oppositions are achieved is itself both binary (being iambic) and resistant to binary pattern (being pentameter).

It is probably because of these numerical oddities and our perceptual response to them that iambic pentameter, except in the hands of its dullest practitioners, keeps the most highly patterned language from sounding trivial. It can lend gravity, dignity, portentousness, even grandeur to statements and utterances; and where rhymed tetrameter couplets often evoke a feeling of ease, of elegance, of achieved simplicity, iambic pentameter, whether in rhymed stanzas, heroic couplets, or blank verse, usually conveys a sense of complex understanding, as if the speakers of such lines were aware of more than they ever quite say, or as if there were more in their speeches than even they were aware of. If the language of everyday life or even the language of other forms of poetry seems usually to leave untouched, unsounded, certain depths of human experience, iambic pentameter has seemed to centuries of poets and listeners the poetic form most likely to reach these depths and to make their resonances audible.

The iambic pentameter line, then, has amplitude and asymmetry sufficient to carry significant English speech. What makes it even more speechlike is its uncanny capacity to vary the metrical norm without fundamentally violating it. Over the centuries poets have experimented with different variations and their combinations, and the results suggest that this line can enter into pacts with almost any metrical devil and still keep its soul intact. By the nineteenth century most poets were willing to try an occasional anapest as an agreeable means of relieving a perceived monotony in the standard line, and some twentieth-century poets (for example, Stevens, Lowell, and Larkin) have gone much further in the direction of transforming it into a loosely accentual five-stress line, even into a kind of shadow norm that we sense in poems, such as those of Ashbery, that pointedly steer clear of it. But from Shakespeare's time to the early nineteenth

century (and, except for the anapestic variant, to the early twentieth), poets writing iambic pentameter habitually permitted themselves to diverge from the meter in three conventional ways in order to give variety, interest, grace, and sometimes expressive character to their lines. Most poets used other means as well—midline pauses and endline enjambments—but these are the three metrical variations that almost every poet writing in English has understood to be standard and permissible.

These three variations, with perhaps a fourth that has not been much noticed, are inherent in the structure of iambic meter. At a length as long as pentameter but no longer (not so long as to *have* to break repeatedly into smaller segments), poets soon found that they could not persistently write lines in which all five stressed syllables were equally stressed and the unstressed syllables equally unstressed. "Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow" (Shakespeare, Sonnet 106:6) represents only an extreme possibility, not an average pattern for English iambic pentameter, and even this line's rhythm can be shaded by a resourceful voice. On the contrary, when lines are devised that "fit" the meter without notable wrenching of accent, it will be found that some of the strong syllables are stronger than others, some weak ones weaker than others. To take a line at random from Spenser's *The Faerie Queene:*

But hè is óld, and wíthèred like háy (III.ix.5.1)

Even with the poet's implied directive to pronounce the *-ed* of "withered" (or the line will fall short of its ten syllables), we will not give it so strong an emphasis as we give "old," "with-," and "hay." Probably, too, "he" is somewhat more lightly stressed. On the other hand, "like" would probably, in anyone's recitation of the line, receive more emphasis (be said louder, or more sharply, or at a higher pitch, or take longer to say, or a combination of these) than the other "unstressed" syllables of the line. Such variations of stress among stressed or among unstressed syllables do not alter the iambic character of the line: every even syllable still receives at least a shade more stress than the syllable it follows. But they suggest that the art of iambic verse, especially of iambic pentameter, is an art requiring continuous negotiation of the stress-values of syllables. Even if, as we said earlier, English syllables mainly alternate between two general levels of

stress, as they appear in English words and phrases the degree of emphasis we give them varies greatly, depending on necessities of local sense as well as on conventions of lexical and phrasal stress.[5]

If there is, in fact, a characteristic pulse for iambic poetry, which we recognize crudely by such formulas as ti-TUM, ti-TUM, ti-TUM, ti-TUM, ti-TUM, we also know that so exact a repetition is *always* violated by the particular words that appear in actual lines (this could be avoided only by using the crude formula itself as a line), for different vowels differently enclosed by consonants will not be given the identical value in speech. Again, this does not mean that from the point of view of scansion, a mildly varied line is not "regular." But "regularity" in iambic meter denotes only the uniform recurrence of a *relative* superiority of stress in every second syllable (or in most of them) over the one it follows; it does not denote an equality of stress among the strong or among the weak syllables.

In a meter so constituted, where variation is inevitable, the degree of variation in each of a line's five feet will determine the contour of the line. So long as the variation is minimal, hardly perceptible, and does not change the basic relationship between the two syllables of any so-called foot, the reader is likely to take it in stride, will probably not much notice the small differences between strong or between weak syllables and will keep on hearing the iambic current. But when a syllable that appears to be in one of the strong positions is substantially weakened or a syllable in a weak position notably strengthened, a listening reader will become aware that one of the major traditional variations in iambic meter is taking place.

Whén ĭn | disgrace with for|tŭne ănd | mĕn's éyes

This opening line of Shakespeare's twenty-ninth sonnet includes three feet that appear to violate the expected iambic pattern: a trochee in the first foot, a pyrrhic in the fourth, a spondee in the last. Nevertheless, when the line is spoken or heard silently by a reader with some auditory experience of the tradition, it does not violate the pattern: enough of the line is still iambic to sustain the iambic feeling, especially when earlier lines (from the previous sonnets in the sequence) and later ones in this poem adhere more unambiguously to the iambic design, so that our experience of this line is influenced by our iambic set. But the line is less divergent than it appears. For one thing, the so-called pyrrhic and spondaic feet do

not run counter to the basic iambic requirement that the second syllable in the foot be pronounced more strongly than the first. It is only that the differences here seem minimal, that "-tune and" seem almost equal in value, though both are lightly stressed, and that "men's eyes" seem almost equal, though both are quite strongly stressed. Since absolute equality of syllable stress rarely occurs, however, it seems likely that in both cases the second syllable is somewhat more strongly stressed than the first (or is so perceived) and that what we have in the last two feet of the line are, essentially, a pyrrhic iamb and a spondaic iamb. For clarity's sake, some critics avoid these terms; many who retain them do so with the understanding I have just described.

The trochaic pattern in the opening foot is also a standard variation for iambic pentameter. Trochees occur elsewhere in some lines, too, but Renaissance poets used them especially often at the beginning of the line or at midline following a pause, where they were welcome as a metrical flourish that could enliven the usual pattern. The initial variation was so common that the sequence of trochee and iamb must often have been perceived as a double foot (equivalent to a Greek choriamb), one of the rare such forms in English verse.

All three variations work not only to give an attractive variety to the iambic line but to convey a greater complexity, to hint at a wider range of feeling and a more richly patterned world of social eventfulness than a stricter meter would register. If the line had read, for example,

* In deep disgrace with fortune, eyes of men

its straightforward meter would not have caught the uneasiness, the uncertainty, about "men's eyes" that in Shakespeare's line is conveyed not only by the phrase itself but by the more deeply inflected meter as well.

At first these variations may appear peculiar, since they to some degree challenge the stability of iambic meter itself. But the very pattern of iambic verse and the variability of stress in the language insure that they will occur. So long as the iambic foot remains in place and does not accept trisyllabic or monosyllabic "substitutions," the natural flexibility of English stress will inevitably result in the weakening or strengthening of stressed or unstressed syllables here and there in most lines. In practice, the poet may produce the following changes in the normal iambic foot:

1. Increase the difference in stress between ˘ and ´ (strong iamb).
2. Increase the stress on the unstressed syllable (spondee).
3. Diminish the stress on the stressed syllable (pyrrhic).
4. Combine 2 and 3 (trochee).

In a different analysis, there are two principal kinds of variation from iambic rhythm. If the term *iambic* designates an increase of stress from the first to the second of a pair of syllables, the possible variations are decrease of stress (trochee), or level stress. Level stress may be found in any degree of stress: weak, intermediate, or strong. Weak level stress is pyrrhic, strong is spondaic; for intermediate we have no traditional name, but it frequently occurs (see Chapter 13), as we will hear in this line if we give it a natural reading:

Ay, that's the fírst | *thìng thàt* | we have to do (*3 Henry VI*, 4.3.62)

These variations, commanded by a skillful poet, can go a long way toward making iambic pentameter carry a strong flavor of natural English speech. Shakespeare's use of them to convey a great variety of states of mind, Donne's to suggest the stumbling, precise discourse of a lover or arguer feeling his rhetorical way, Milton's to shadow forth the grand motions of his epic narrative, all exemplify ways of manipulating the counters of this expressive system so that it answers these poets' different purposes. Later, we shall see how these variations from the strictly regular iambic foot are used in specific passages and how effectively they can "represent" the speech of characters under stress or the feelings appropriate to different states of mind or visions of reality.

The Two Orders

Simple as this system seems, critics and scholars sometimes take radically opposed views of its principles or its practice. This is not the place to enter into lengthy theoretical dispute with metrists of different persuasions. Later passages and notes will do so occasionally. But the view of iambic meter pursued in these pages differs strongly from those held by three groups of contemporary analysts of meter, whom we may conveniently identify here as Counterpointers, Four-stressers, and Phrasalists.

Counterpointers understand lines of verse to exhibit two separate patterns at once—the prose rhythm of the words and the metrical norm—and what they find interesting is the divergence of the rhythm from the meter. This is not, on first view, an unreasonable position, but it has frequently become so when, under the influence of structural linguists, it maintains that these two forces, the rhythm and the meter, remain quite separate and that what we enjoy is the abstract difference between them.[6] My own view, briefly, is that best enunciated by W. K. Wimsatt (1970a): that we must often in practice, in performance, "tilt" (785) the phrasing in the direction of the meter and that if we fail to do so the divergence is likely to be so extreme that we hear a hodgepodge, not a counterpoint. In fact, we hear, not two lines, but one—one actual rhythmic line that *realizes* the meter in its own idiosyncratic way. Variant lines depart not from a form we hear but from a form we *expect* to hear. The distinction is crucial. (See below, Chapter 4, note 5, and Chapter 13, pp. 186–88.)

Four-stressers, noticing that one of the major points of stress in an iambic pentameter line is often weaker than the others, have speculated that an undercurrent of the four-stress meter of Old English may still be perceived under later iambic pentameter.[7] But a line of verse cannot be two meters at once—it is either one thing or another; and even in a pyrrhic foot (that is, in a foot that lacks a speech stress) we continue to hear a pulse, a metrical stress, just as in a foot that harbors two strong speech stresses we can distinguish the one that receives a metrical pulse from the one that does not.

Thus, we do not read this line as a four-stress one:

Whén to the sessions of swéet silent thought

If we do, the line cannot still be understood as iambic pentameter. If it is something else, it is not that. Rather, we recognize that the pyrrhic and spondee in the third and fourth feet involve a pulse on "of" but not on "sweet," though "sweet" is stressed more strongly than "of":

Whén tŏ | the ses|siŏns ŏf | swéet sí|lent thought

Phrasalists maintain that poets from Chaucer to Shakespeare frequently wrote loose combinations of rhythmical phrases rather than metrical lines.[8] This theory comes dangerously close to imposing an anachro-

nistic free-verse structure on poetry of a much earlier period than our own. The view presented here is that poets do not compose verse in phrases rather than in lines, but in both at once; it is in the play *between* the metrical line and the rhythmical phrase that the great interest of meter lies.

These three dubious doctrines diminish English poetry by reducing its formidable polyphonic music to an abstract exercise, to a rattling dogtrot, or to a meager harmony of rhythms-without-meter. Their partisans all misunderstand the nature of metrical counterpoint and the place of phrasing in the metrical system of iambic pentameter. Some old-time prosodists had an exaggerated reverence for metrical correctness and were insufficiently sensitive to the natural rhythms of English phrasing. But these newer schools, in their zeal to correct the excessive strictness of traditional prosodists, have gone so far as either to discard or to neutralize meter in favor of the infinitely various freestanding rhythms of spoken English. Some of them seem essentially hostile to iambic pentameter, finding it tedious and mechanical and hoping to rescue from what they see as its dead hand the lively literature it once roused to exuberant life. The belief on which this book rests is that there are always at least two structural orders simultaneously audible in iambic pentameter—the metrical and the phrasal (actual lines and stanzas, and actual phrases and sentences)—and their varied rhythmic interplay constitutes the great beauty of the form.

The disposition to read metrical lines as composed of phrases is in itself eminently sensible. Although the phrasal organization of a line is not its meter, anyone can see or hear that a line of verse is composed of words in phrases. We regularly group together successive words that can conveniently form a unit of breath or a rhythmic unit:

> How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea
> Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
>
> (Shakespeare, Sonnet 65:3–4)

Even lines like these, without internal punctuation, seem to fall naturally into two or three syntactical groupings, although a reader certainly need not pause at the phrase boundaries.

Of all English meters, iambic pentameter makes the most of divergences between the stress pattern of a line and the phrasal pattern. As we

have already seen, the stresses need not be equal in weight or come at equal intervals, but the variety of ways phrases of different lengths and shapes may be fitted to the line is almost infinite. Pauses may appear after any internal syllable; the line itself may be cut into several distinct segments, as in Shakespeare's

> Where is thy head? Where's that? Ay me! where's that?
>
> (*Cymbeline*, 4.2.321)

or in the line Ben Jonson distributes among six speeches spoken by three characters:

> *Face.* Bawd!
> *Subtle.* Cow-herd!
> *Face.* Conjurer!
> *Subtle.* Cutpurse!
> *Face.* Witch!
> *Doll.* O me!
>
> (*The Alchemist*, 1.1.107)

The ingenuity with which Renaissance English playwrights fit the phrase to the line is dazzling. Clearly, they mean us to hear two orders of language at once: a metrical order, in which the stresses alternate five times from weak to strong (with variations), and the order of the phrase or sentence, an order that seems to move along, to say what it has to say, without noticing the metrical pattern. But we as listeners have the opportunity to observe and to hear *both orders of language alive in the same words.*

If this counterpoint contributes such variety to single lines, we feel it even more strongly in extended passages. One important feature of any poet's prosody is the way successive lines move together so that we perceive a stanza or a couplet or a passage of blank verse as a significant union of lines that flow into one another and compose a rhythmical unit larger than the isolated line. The Renaissance English poet habitually composed long poems in stanzas, which required a skill in persuading readers that a series of rhymed lines belong together semantically and syntactically as well as metrically. In stanzas or quatrains like the following, poets tried not only to make effective single lines but to give each passage a continuity, an ease, that testifies to a command of line-flow:

When in the chronicle of wasted time
I see description of the fairest wights
And beauty making beautiful old rhyme
In praise of ladies dead and lovely knights (Shakespeare, Sonnet 106:1–4)

As when the mast of some well timbred hulke
Is with the blast of some outragious storme
Blowne downe, it shakes the bottome of the bulke,
And makes her ribs to cracke, as they were torne,
Whilest still she stands as stonisht and forlorne:
So was he stound with stroke of her huge taile.
But ere that it she backe againe had borne,
He with his sword it strooke, that without faile
He joynted it, and mard the swinging of her flaile.
(Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, V.xi.29)

For every houre that thou wilt spare mee now,
I will allow,
Usurious God of Love, twenty to thee,
When with my browne, my gray haires equall bee;
Till then, Love, let my body raigne, and let
Mee travell, sojourne, snatch, plot, have, forget,
Resume my last yeares relict: thinke that yet
We'had never met. (Donne, "Loves Usury," lines 1–8)

In the first two examples, most lines are endstopped, but parallel phrasing or forceful syntax facilitates the easy movement from one line to the next, and we are likely to take in each set of lines as an especially melodious and integral group. Donne's stanza has a comparable ease of movement, but it conveys a headlong excitement partly through its use of run-on (or enjambed) and short lines. The sense of Donne's breathless sentence spills over lines 5–6 and 7–8; not even the rhyme can hold back the voice; it seems, on the contrary, to be powering its way past rhymes to its highly animated and outrageous assertion. Much of the metrical interest of the lines (and of Donne's lines generally) derives from the tension we feel between the strictness with which he observes the metrical requirements and the urgency of a passion that speaks as if it wanted to knock down all such irritating barriers.

For, despite critics' interest in isolating and defining "the iambic pentameter line," a line of verse does not stand alone. We may recognize a set of ten English syllables as exhibiting an iambic pentameter pattern, but it does not normally become a line of verse until it appears among others similar in syllabic structure. And the specific character of a line depends a great deal on whether it appears in a rhyming stanza, as one of a pair of rhymed lines in a sequence of couplets, or in a passage of blank verse. It also depends on the degree to which it and its surrounding lines are end-stopped or enjambed—that is, on how much and how frequently the sense of a line runs over into the next line without punctuation or notable pause. Even syntactical patterns—rhetorical figures of repetition or contrast—will significantly affect the movement and emphasis of metrical lines. When Macbeth tells his wife, in a trenchant figure,

> I dare do all that may become a man;
> Who dares do more is none, (*Macbeth*, 1.7.46–47)

the assertion acquires a special force from the fact that the phrasing is parallel but the meter is not. Pope's parallel ideas proceed very differently—in metrically matched lines:

> True wit is Nature to advantage dressed,
> What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed
> (*An Essay on Criticism*, II.297–98)

These ways of accommodating the rhetorical balance to the metrical measure are radically different in effect. Rhymed verse sets up an expectation of pattern; in stanzas the expectation is usually fulfilled after an interval; in couplets, much sooner. The waiting time is shorter, and the matching rhyme must come with comparative rapidity. The anxiety with which we wait for it is therefore more intense, and its release is much more of a relief. To be disappointed of that rhyme would be shocking or comic, a failure to meet the terms of the virtual contract which the poet has negotiated with the reader. (See Hollander, 1975, 187–211.)

In blank verse, too, especially when it is severely enjambed, we hear a music composed of the two simultaneous orders of meter and rhetorical period:

Not poppy, nor mandragora,
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
Which thou ow'dst yesterday. (*Othello*, 3.3.330–33)

Our revels now are ended. These our actors
(As I foretold you) were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air (*The Tempest*, 4.1.148–50)

Long time in even scale
The battle hung, till Satan, who that day
Prodigious power had shown, and met in arms
No equal, ranging through the dire attack
Of fighting Seraphim confused, at length
Saw where the sword of Michael smote, and felled
Squadrons at once (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, VI.245–51)

In the first passage, the full middle lines can be heard quite distinctly as lines; in the second, because line 149 does not possess the same syntactical integrity as the others, we may lose a little the sense of line and only regain it when the lines that follow meet the metrical pattern more audibly (see Chapter 14). The third passage exhibits Milton's unusually complex sentence patterns, which drive through the metrical lines with an astonishing mixture of authority and deference.

Renaissance readers of verse (and even listeners in the theater) were expected to follow the twin authorities of meter and sentence, to feel the tension in their divergence and the harmony in their congruence. Different poets would take different views of how far that divergence might be carried and what kinds of harmonies the poet should aim at—certainly the verse of the English Renaissance progressively educated the reader in the range of these harmonies—but it was clear to everyone that the writing of poetry meant more than the creation of splendid single lines. The single line extends into couplets, stanzas, passages, speeches, even cantos and scenes, and the test of a poet's powers lies largely in his ability to master the arts of line-flow and strophic construction. It follows that any useful account of iambic pentameter must attend not only to the variant structure of the single line but to the ways lines are combined into larger prosodic and dramatic structures.[9]