Rhythm and Meter in English Poetry - Understanding Prosody

English poetry employs five basic rhythms of varying stressed (/) and unstressed (x) syllables. The meters are iambics, trochees, spondees, anapests and dactyls. In this document the stressed syllables are marked in boldface type rather than the traditional "/" and "x." Each unit of rhythm is called a "foot" of poetry.

The meters with two-syllable feet are

- **IAMBIC (x /)**: That **time** of **year** thou **mayst** in **me** **behold**
- **TROCHAIC (/ x)**: **Tell** me **not** in **mournful** **numbers**
- **SPONDAIC (/ /)**: **Break**, **break**, **break**/ On thy **cold gray stones**, **O Sea**!

Meters with three-syllable feet are

- **ANapestic (x x /)**: And the **sound** of a **voice** that is **still**
- **Dactylic (/ x x)**: This is the **forest primeval**, the **murmuring** **pines** and the **hemlock** (a trochee replaces the final dactyl)

Each line of a poem contains a certain number of feet of iambics, trochees, spondees, dactyls or anapests. A line of one foot is a monometer, 2 feet is a dimer, and so on--trimeter (3), tetramer (4), pentamer (5), hexamer (6), heptamer (7), and octamer (8). The number of syllables in a line varies therefore according to the meter. A good example of trochaic monometer, for example, is this poem entitled "Fleas":

Adam
Had'em.

Here are some more serious examples of the various meters.

iambic pentameter (5 iambs, 10 syllables)

- That **time** | of **year** | thou **mayst** | in **me** | **behold**

trochaic tetrameter (4 trochees, 8 syllables)

- **Tell** me | **not** in | **mournful** | **numbers**

anapestic trimeter (3 anapests, 9 syllables)

- And the **sound** | of a **voice** | that is **still**

dactylic hexameter (6 dactyls, 17 syllables; a trochee replaces the last dactyl)

- **This** is the | **forest pri** | **meval**, the | **murmuring** | **pine** and the | **hemlocks**