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QUAE NON HABET INTELLECTUM:
THE DISAPPEARANCE OF FIFTH-FOOT SPONDEES FROM
DACTYLIC HEXAMETER VERSE

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1. *Introduction*

The dactylic hexameter was the most frequently used of the classical Greek and Roman metres. It was praised by ancient and medieval authors alike for its versatility, being suited to both lofty and common subjects. The vast amount of hexameter poetry in various genres testifies to this quality: it was used not only by the epic poets, but also by satirists and composers of didactic works, not to mention in commemorative inscriptions and graffiti. It also appears in the longer lines of elegiac couplets and forms a part of several different lyric stanza-types.

Although the popularity of the quantitative classical metres in general began to wane in the Middle Ages, the hexameter retained its former prestige, having been adopted for such new and quintessentially medieval genres as verse hagiography. The medieval form of the hexameter generally remained remarkably faithful to its classical models: although rhymes were often applied to the metre, attempts to compose rhythmic, or non-quantitative, hexameter poetry seem to have been remarkably rare. The hexameter remained a touchstone for poets because of the unusual demands it made on their learning: as spoken Latin had lost its syllable quantities, mastering the long and short syllables of quantitative verse required a long and strenuous apprenticeship. This also partly explains the great interest that grammarians and composers of metrical treatises showed in the dactylic hexameter, and their tendency to err on the conservative side in their views on it from time to time.

The dactylic hexameter is a quantitative metre that consists of long and short syllables. It has six feet, with either a dactyl (long-short-short) or a spondee (long-long) in the first four, generally a dactyl in the fifth, and a spondee or trochee (long-short) in the sixth. As

I have stated, the fifth foot of the hexameter line is generally—but not always—a dactyl. Lines with fifth-foot spondees are unusual to the extent of having acquired a name of their own, being called *spondeiazontes* or *spondiaci*, or, in English, spondaic verses.

This article investigates Anglo-Saxons' attitudes to spondaic verses, contextualising them within the earlier history of Latin hexameter verse before investigating the ideas and influence of the Anglo-Saxon authors Aldhelm and Bede. Spondaic verses have a very distinctive character: they lack the “dum-di-di-dum-dum” cadence that for most people, presumably even in antiquity, is the most recognisable part of the hexameter line. This may be why hexameter poets have always tended to either use these verses very sparingly or eschew them altogether. They were more common in Greek literature than among the Romans, and after Vergil, they became increasingly rare in Latin poetry, to the point of virtual disappearance in the Middle Ages, a trend reflected in the views medieval grammarians took on the structure. Aldhelm and Bede were markedly hostile towards fifth-foot spondees, the latter to the point of virtual disbelief in their existence, and these views appear to have profoundly affected subsequent generations of poets.

2. *The dactylic hexameter: early history*

The roots of the dactylic hexameter extend as far back as the oral epic traditions of the Greeks, and possibly even earlier. It has been pointed out that the metre is rather different from other forms of epic verse known to the Indo-European peoples, and it has even been suggested that its origins may not be Indo-European at all.¹ Whatever the case may be, in its original form, the hexameter may have been purely dactylic, and the substitution of spondees for dactyls may have been an innovation, necessitated by the prosodic structure of the Greek language.²

As the dactylic hexameter came into Roman usage around 200 BC, further adjustments had to be made to its structure in order to accommodate a different prosodic system. One such adjustment was a sub-

¹ Antoine Meillet, *Les origines indo-européennes des mètres grecs* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1923), 57.

² C. M. J. Sicking, *Griechische Verslehre*, Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft 2/4 (Munich: Beck, 1993), 70–71.

stantial increase in the number of spondaic feet. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the first major works of hexameter poetry, are also among the most highly dactylic. A prime specimen is the opening line of the *Odyssey*:

Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ

[Tell me, o Muse, of the man of many devices.]

where all of the first five feet are dactylic. Of all the combinations of dactyls and spondees, this so-called holodactylic type is the most common in Homer's poetry, constituting over 20 per cent of all his lines.³ Although several later Greek poets were more ponderous and preferred a more liberal use of spondaic feet, Greek hexameter poetry remained very highly dactylic until late antiquity.⁴

The dactyl-spondee ratio was one of the issues on which the pioneers of Roman hexameter poetry had to make some compromises when they adopted this foreign metre for their own use. For several historical reasons, long syllables are considerably more common in Latin than in Greek, which often made the use of dactyls impracticable. Quintus Ennius, the first Latin hexameter poet, solved the problem by changing a primarily dactylic metre into a predominantly spondaic one.⁵ The result was a form of hexameter poetry that was heavier than anything conceived by the Greek poets, though it undeniably had *gravitas*. A good example is a fragment of Ennius' annals in which king Pyrrhus states his terms to the enemy:

Nec m(i) aurum poscō nec mī pretium dederītis:
nōn caupōnantēs bellum sed belligerantēs,
ferrō, nōn aurō, vītam cernāmus utrique⁶

[I do not ask for gold or ransom;
let us fight the war, not bargain for it,
and decide our fates with swords, not with gold.]

All the lines have the same pattern: four spondees followed by a dactyl and a spondee or a trochee. This was Ennius' favourite line-pattern,

³ George E. Duckworth, *Vergil and Classical Hexameter Poetry. A study in Metrical Variety* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 37.

⁴ Duckworth, *Vergil*, table 3.

⁵ David S. Raven, *Latin Metre* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 91; Duckworth, *Vergil*, 37.

⁶ Enn. ann. 183–185. The line numbers correspond with *The Annals of Q. Ennius*, ed. Otto Skutsch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

and although subsequent generations of poets did their best to develop the hexameter in a more dactylic, and less repetitive, direction, the Roman hexameter persistently remained more spondaic than its Greek counterpart.

3. *Fifth-foot structure: dactyls vs. spondees*

There was, however, one prominent exception to the tendency of Latin hexameter poetry to be more spondaic than Greek—the fifth foot of the hexameter. Even in the earliest Greek hexameter poetry, lines with a spondee in the fifth foot, or spondaic verses, are relatively rare, constituting only about five percent of all lines.⁷ Some Greek hexameter poets, however, found more use for them. Perhaps the most celebrated example is the opening of Hesiod's *Works and Days*. The spondaic fifth foot adds to the line's air of slow majesty:

Μοῦσαι Πιερίθεν, ἀοιδῆισι κλείουσαι

[Pierian Muses, praising with your songs].

Later, such lines became a favourite device of the Alexandrian poets Theocritus and Callimachus.

In Latin hexameter poetry, spondaic fifth feet were, from the very outset, much rarer.⁸ Of the extant hexameter lines of Ennius, only one in fifty lines has a fifth-foot spondee,⁹ and over the course of time, such lines gradually fell more and more into disuse. This is one of the most intriguing differences between Greek and Roman hexameter technique: if the Roman poets were, on the whole, so much more spondaic than their Greek predecessors, why did they eschew spondees in the fifth foot? The question contains its own answer: in a metre that in principle was dactylic but in practice mainly consisted of spondees, a dactylic fifth foot was required to make the metre recognisable. Some of Ennius' own lines show us what can happen when this is not observed:

Olli respondit rēx Albāi Longāi¹⁰

[The King of Alba Longa replied to him].

⁷ Duckworth, *Vergil*, table 3; Sicking, *Griechische Verslehre*, 74.

⁸ Raven, *Latin Metre*, 92.

⁹ Duckworth, *Vergil*, table 1.

¹⁰ Enn. ann. 31.

Intrödücuntur lëgātī Minturnënsës¹¹

[The Minturnese delegates are brought in].

The lines contain no dactyls, and were it not for their original context, it would be hard to tell that they are hexameter lines at all. In a hexameter line with a pronouncedly spondaic beginning, the fifth-foot dactyl was essential to reassert the nature of the metre.

There were, however, circumstances under which a spondaic fifth foot proved useful. Because it was unusual and perceived to be somewhat at odds with the fundamental nature of the dactylic metre, it could be used to striking effect by a bold poet, often to convey an image of heaviness:¹²

Proximus huic, longō sed proximus intervallō¹³

[Nearest, but still a long distance away].

Fifth-foot spondees could also be used in emulation of Greek poetry, and they are one of the metrical mannerisms that the neoteric Catullus chose to affect, echoing Theocritus and Callimachus:¹⁴

Ēlēctōs iuvenēs simul et decus innūptārum¹⁵

[Chosen youths and the very best of unmarried girls].

As a user of fifth-foot spondees, Catullus is unparalleled in the history of Latin poetry, exceeding even most of the Greek poets (he uses one on average every 13.6 lines), and no other poet followed his example.¹⁶

All the same, the spondaic fifth foot remained associated with Greek imagery. It could be used in conjunction with Greek words or names:

¹¹ Enn. ann. dubia 9.

¹² Raven, *Latin Metre*, 92; Louis Nougaret, *Traité de métrique latine classique* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1948), 46, also suspects that Ennius and Lucretius may have used the spondaic line to suggest “une certaine gaucherie”. There may, admittedly, be an element of parody in such lines as Ennius’ “Ollī respondit rēx Albāi Longāi” or “Intrödücuntur lëgātī Minturnënsës,” where the metrical heaviness can be thought to reflect the pomposity of the characters portrayed by the lines.

¹³ Verg. Aen. 5.320.

¹⁴ L. P. Wilkinson, *Golden Latin Artistry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 225; Raven, *Latin Metre*, 92.

¹⁵ Catull. 64.78.

¹⁶ Duckworth, *Vergil*, table 1.

Flāvit ab Ēpirō lēnissimus Onchesmītēs¹⁷

[The gentle breeze blew from Epirus].

Margine terrārum porrēxerat Amphitritē¹⁸

[(Nor had) Amphitrite stretched out (her arms) along the edge of the lands].

It could also be used to evoke images of Greek things in general or suggest an air of oriental languor and effeminacy, a practice reflected in the remarks of Quintilian, who characterised such cadences as weak (“praemolle”).¹⁹ In such cases, the spondaic fifth foot often appears in conjunction with other unusual or Greek-sounding metrical phenomena such as hiatus (the absence of elision of final vowels before the initial vowel of the following word):²⁰

Stant et iūniperi // et castanae // hirsūtae²¹

[The junipers stand with the shaggy chestnut trees].

Often, at least in the poetry of Vergil, lines with such metrical Graecisms are direct paraphrases of Greek lines.

As the fifth-foot spondee was relegated to this role of special effect, some further restrictions were imposed upon it: starting with Lucretius, fifth-foot spondees are always preceded by a dactyl in the fourth foot, and word-division is strenuously avoided between fifth and sixth feet, to avoid the creation of a false cadence. In developed hexameter

¹⁷ Cic. Att. 7.2. This line in Cicero’s letter to Atticus is intended to parody the style of Catullus and the Neoteric poets. Cicero goes on: “hunc *spondeiazonta* si cui voles *ton neoteron* pro tuo vendito” (‘you can sell this *spondeiazon* as one of your own to any of the new poets’).

¹⁸ Ovid. metam. 1.14.

¹⁹ Quint. inst. 9, 4, 65:

Est in eo quoque nonnihil, quod hic singulis verbis bini pedes continentur, quod etiam in carminibus est praemolle, nec solum ubi quinae, ut in his, syllabae nec-tuntur, “fortissima Tyndaridārum” (Hor. sat. 1, 1, 100), sed etiam quaternae, cum versus cluditur “Appenninō” et “armāmentis” et “Ōriōne.”

[There is also something in the fact that here two feet are included in one word, something that is excessively weak even in verse, not only when a word of five syllables ends a verse, as *fortissima Tyndaridārum*, but even when the concluding word consists of but four syllables, as *Appenninō*, *armāmentis*, *Ōriōne*.]

Quintilian equates a spondaic ending consisting of one quadrisyllabic word with a line-ending consisting of a single pentasyllable (dactyl + spondee). Quintilian’s main target here, however, is Cicero’s prosodically similar prose clausulae.

²⁰ Raven, *Latin Metre*, 101.

²¹ Verg. Ecl. 7.53.

poetry, lines with spondaic fifth feet almost invariably ended with a four-syllable word.²²

4. *After the Augustans*

The fifth-foot spondee's gradual disappearance can be observed in the statistics compiled by George E. Duckworth in his *Vergil and Classical Hexameter Poetry*. In Ennius, we have one fifth-foot spondee per 51.5 lines; in Lucretius, one per 230.2 lines; and in Vergil's *Aeneid*, one per 409.5 lines. Horace seems to have been particularly averse to spondaic fifth feet: his satires have none at all, and his Epistles and *Ars Poetica* only have one each.²³

Among the poets of the silver age and late empire, we encounter even lower frequencies of fifth-foot spondees: one every 618 lines in Lucan, one every 1,387 lines in Statius's *Thebais*, and one every 5,586 lines in Valerius Flaccus. Admittedly, some of the late authors show comparatively high frequencies of spondaic fifth feet (one per 109.1 lines in the silver age Juvenal and one per 134.3 lines in the early Christian Prudentius), but at least an equal number of late Latin poets gave them up altogether: Corippus, Proba, Paulinus of Périgueux, Dracontius, Cyprianus and Arator have no spondaic fifth feet at all.²⁴

This tendency may reflect a general increase in the rigidity of poetic structures. As the hexameter line became more formalised, quirks like the unusual cadences that the Augustan poets employed from time to time, albeit cautiously and tastefully, were no longer willingly tolerated. We can assume two further reasons for the spondaic fifth foot's disappearance: the decline of Greek letters in the western parts of the empire,²⁵ and the prosodic changes that took place in late antiquity.

²² Nougaret, *Traité de métrique*, 45–46; Hans Drexler, *Einführung in die römische Metrik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967), 85–86. The most notable exceptions in Vergil are the aforementioned *castaneae hirsutae* (ecl. 7, 53) and *cum magnis dis* (Aen. 8, 679), which is a direct loan from Pyrrhus' speech in Enn. ann. 190.

²³ Duckworth, *Vergil*, table 1.

²⁴ Duckworth, *Vergil*, table 1.

²⁵ This is discussed extensively in Pierre Courcelle, *Late Latin Writers and Their Greek Sources*, trans. Harry E. Wedeck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), esp. at 410–421.

We noted previously that spondaic fifth feet were commonly used in imitation of Greek models or in evocation of Greek themes. As the Greek hexameter poets, whom the early Roman poets had emulated, fell more and more into obscurity in the West, the traditional allusions of *spondeiazontes* were likely to be lost on readers. This may have led to a loss of prestige for this metrical structure, which is perhaps best illustrated by a line from the *Vita Sancti Martini* of Venantius Fortunatus, sometimes called the last Roman poet. It is the only line with a spondaic fifth foot in this 2,243-line verse hagiography, and describes a cow kneeling before St. Martin:

Flexit et ipsa genū, quae nōn habet intellēctum²⁶

[Even she who has no intellect knelt down].

The line is one of Venantius's metrical jokes: the heavy fifth-foot spondee reflects the slow wit and great weight of the animal. Divested of its associations with higher learning, the heavy spondaic line-ending had become for Venantius a vehicle of parody, suitable for the portrayal of brute beasts.

The virtual demise of the fifth-foot spondee may also reflect the changes in syllable quantity in late Latin, which undermined the very basis of the classical poetic metres.²⁷ Poets had to rely more and more on the authority of previous generations of poets in questions of prosody, and syllable quantity had to be gleaned from pre-existing lines. This cramped the artistic freedom of late antique and early medieval poets and made unorthodox metrical solutions unfeasible, which, in turn, contributed to the critical view the Anglo-Saxon authors Aldhelm and Bede took on the spondaic fifth foot.

5. *The Anglo-Saxon Age: Aldhelm*

The Anglo-Saxons are acknowledged as the first non-Romance people to compose Latin poetry in quantitative metres, and this they did, on the whole, very well, despite the rather intimidating challenges presented by the quantitative prosodic system, which must have seemed

²⁶ Ven. Fort. Mart. 3.315.

²⁷ See Dag Norberg, *Introduction à l'étude de la versification latine médiévale*, Acta universitatis Stockholmiensis, Studia Latina Stockholmensia 5 (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1958), 7–28.

obscure and alien to the early Anglo-Saxon scholars.²⁸ The earliest metrical treatises composed by Anglo-Saxons for Anglo-Saxons include Aldhelm's *De metris* and *De pedum regulis* and, most notably, Bede's *De arte metrica*. Both Bede and Aldhelm deal extensively with syllable quantity and methods of determining it, relying heavily on word-lists, mnemonics and the examples provided by earlier poets. In doing this, they continued the tradition of the late antique grammarians. This is reflected in Aldhelm's own verse technique as well: his lines are, in Andy Orchard's words, "almost wholly cobbled together from a combination of repeated phrases, both borrowed and newly coined."²⁹ Aldhelm's poetry is exceedingly formulaic, and many of his lines are composed of three distinct building-blocks: a combination of two dactyls or spondees and one long syllable, a molossus (a word or word combination of three long syllables), and a final cadence formed from a dactyl and a spondee or a trochee.³⁰ With careful substitution and permutation, this formula could be used to generate countless new, if somewhat repetitive, hexameter lines. In practice, this approach precluded all but the most predictable prosodic structures.

In his *De metris*, a dialogue-form treatise on the basic poetic structures, Aldhelm expressly says that, of the six feet of the hexameter line, the first five can be either dactyls or spondees. He is, however, highly critical of the spondaic fifth foot, characterising it as uncouth: "minus lenis est versus, qui quinto loco spondeum habuerit" ('a line with a spondee in the fifth foot is less smooth').³¹ He also quotes an

²⁸ Andy Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 74.

²⁹ Orchard, *Poetic Art*, 111.

³⁰ Michael Lapidge, "Aldhelm's Latin Poetry and Old English Verse," *Comparative Literature* 31 (1979): 209–231, at 221–223; Andy Orchard, "After Aldhelm: The Teaching and Transmission of the Anglo-Latin Hexameter," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 2 (1992): 96–133, at 102. A good example of this structure is a passage from Aldhelm's *Carmen de Virginitate* (Aldhelm, *Opera*, ed. Rudolf Ehwald, MGH AA 15 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1919), lines 44–48; translation from Aldhelm, *The Poetic Works*, trans. Michael Lapidge and James Rosier (Cambridge: Brewer, 1985), 104):

Omnia regnandō / dispēnsat / saecula simplex
 ēn prōmissa novō / scribantur / carmina versū
 garrula virgineās / dēprōmat / pāgina laudēs
 cōlaque cum pedibus / pergant et / commata ternīs.

[(God) guides in rule all generations as one. Behold, let these promised songs be composed in new verse! Let the fluent page issue praise of virgins, and let the clauses and caesuras of the verse proceed with three types of foot.]

³¹ Aldhelm, *Opera*, 83.

Ennian line with no dactyls at all, and warns his reader: “quod genus versificationis adeo durum et horrens est, ut Albinus...vetet” (‘this form of versification is so hard and rough that Albinus...forbids it’).³² Aldhelm’s reference to the obscure grammarian Albinus comes from the grammarian Audax, on whose *Fragmenta* Aldhelm draws very heavily in his *De metris*.³³

For reasons unknown, Aldhelm seems to have a strangely ambiguous attitude to the spondaic fifth foot. Although in his initial definition of the hexameter he grudgingly admits that it may be used, he elsewhere decrees that the fifth foot must be a dactyl: “nec in fine dactilus poni debet nec spondeus in quinto loco” (‘one must never place a dactyl at the end of a line or a spondee in the fifth foot’).³⁴ Aldhelm himself appears to have always followed this rule,³⁵ except—and this is hardly to be believed—in the self-same *De metris*. To demonstrate all the possible permutations of a hexameter line that contains exactly three dactyls, Aldhelm presents his reader with no less than ten lines, four of which have the inevitable spondee in the fifth foot:³⁶

Iam veneranda Deī sobolēs mundum salvāvit

[God’s venerable progeny saved the world];

Iam memoranda Deī prōlēs cruce salvat saecla

[God’s memorable offspring saves the world on the cross];

In cruce suspēnsus sine crīmine salvat mundum

[Hanging on the cross without crime, He saves the world];

Mundum iam veneranda Deī sobolēs salvāvit

[God’s venerable progeny saved the world].

Some might think that a structure that has no place in poetry has no place as an example in a metrical treatise, but not so Aldhelm. His four

³² Aldhelm, *Opera*, 84.

³³ Orchard, *Poetic Art*, 128. For Audax’s condemnation of spondaic fifth feet, see *Audacis excerpta de Scauro et Palladio*, ed. Heinrich Keil, GL 7, (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1880; reprinted Hildesheim: Olms, 1961), 320–361, at 338–339.

³⁴ Aldhelm, *Opera*, 83.

³⁵ Lapidge, “Aldhelm’s Latin Poetry,” 213.

³⁶ Aldhelm, *Opera*, 87. Although Ennius might have approved of the structure of these lines, they would have struck even Lucretius as archaic: in a *spondeiazon* of the developed type, the fifth-foot spondee is always preceded by a dactyl (unlike *mundum salvāvit*) and word-division between the fifth and sixth feet is strenuously avoided (unlike *salvat saecla*).

solitary spondaic verses in *De metris* must be viewed as a self-indulgent exercise in the mathematics of the hexameter.³⁷ As such, they illuminate Aldhelm's verse technique, based on the endless permutation of metrical units, very well indeed.

In fact, not only does Aldhelm condemn spondaic fifth feet in his metrical writings, but he goes so far as to pray for protection against them in the invocation at the beginning of his *Carmen de virginitate* (verse 49):³⁸

Spondaeī quintam contemnat sillaba partem

[Let the syllable of the spondee shun the fifth foot].

Aldhelm's verse composition proved to be the single most influential model for subsequent Anglo-Latin hexameter poetry. For many poets, especially those of the so-called Southumbrian school, this meant the wholesale adoption of the three-part structure of the Aldhelmian hexameter. In Anglo-Latin hexameter poetry, the fifth foot is almost invariably a dactyl, and this can probably be largely attributed to Aldhelm's influence.³⁹

6. Bede's views on spondaic fifth feet

In his condemnation of spondaic verses, the Venerable Bede was even more explicit than Aldhelm. In his metrical treatise *De arte metrica*, he echoes the late Latin grammarians in taking a cautious view of all metrical oddities, and in many respects goes even further. His definition of the structure of the hexameter states unequivocally:

Constat autem ex dactylo et spondeo et trochaeo, ita ut recipiat spondeum locis omnibus praeter quintum, dactylum praeter ultimum, trochaeum vero loco tantum ultimo.

[It consists of the dactyl, the spondee and the trochee, taking a spondee in any foot except the fifth, a dactyl in any foot excepting the last, and the trochee only in the last.]⁴⁰

³⁷ On Aldhelm's mathematical approach to metre, see Carin Ruff, "The Place of Metrics in Anglo-Saxon Latin Education: Aldhelm and Bede," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (2005): 149–170, at 154–165.

³⁸ Aldhelm, *Opera*, 355.

³⁹ Orchard, "After Aldhelm," 97, 99.

⁴⁰ Bede, "*De arte metrica et de schematibus et tropis*" (hereafter Bede, *DAM*), ed. Calvin B. Kendall, in *Beda's Venerabilis opera. Opera didascalica*, ed. Charles W. Jones, CCSL 123A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1975), 59–171, at 108–109.

The definition is lifted almost verbatim from Mallius Theodorus,⁴¹ but the words “praeter quintum” (‘excepting the fifth foot’) appear to be Bede’s own contribution. It seems that Bede did not believe that fifth-foot spondees had a place in the dactylic hexameter, and his efforts at explaining those cases in which they do appear are often very convoluted.

One such effort appears in his chapter *De episynalipha vel diaeresi* (On fusion and resolution),⁴² where he presents the reader with a complex “parasite-vowel theory” to excuse a number of hexameter lines with a spondaic fifth foot. The lines are taken from the Christian poets Juvencus, Paulinus of Nola and Prudentius, and are the following:⁴³

Illī continuō statuunt ter dēn(a) argentī⁴⁴

[They immediately agree on thirty pieces of silver];

Et spatii coepēr(e) et culminis incrēmenta⁴⁵

[They began to grow in both breadth and height];

Sic prope, sic longē sita culmina respergēbat⁴⁶

[So (the storm) sprayed the buildings near and far];

Dixerat haec et laeta Libīdinis interfectae⁴⁷

[She had said this, and, rejoicing in the death of lust];

Palpitat atqu(e) aditū spīrāminis interceptō⁴⁸

[She shudders, and her intake of breath is cut off].

⁴¹ Mallius Theodorus, *De metris*, ed. Heinrich Keil, GL VI, (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1874; reprinted Hildesheim: Olms, 1961), 585–601, at 589.

⁴² Bede, *DAM*, 122–127. Bede’s terminology in this chapter differs from our standard usage: he employs the term *diaeresis* for the resolution of vowels, the antithesis of *synaeresis*, or fusion of vowels, which he, in turn, calls by the name “episynalipha” (= episynaloepha); he does not use *diaeresis* to denote a word-break that occurs between feet.

⁴³ Bede, *DAM*, 124–125.

⁴⁴ Iuvenc. 4.426.

⁴⁵ Paulin. 28.202.

⁴⁶ Paulin. 28.919.

⁴⁷ Prud. psychomach. 98.

⁴⁸ Prud. psychomach. 594.

Bede contends that these lines, despite their appearance, do not really have spondaic fifth feet, but that their final words are to be scanned *arigentī, incerementa, resperigēbat, interefectae* and *intericeptō*, respectively. In other words, he supposes that a transitional vowel (either *i* or *e*) would be inserted into the word, thereby effectively turning the spondaic fifth foot into a dactyl. This would, according to Bede, happen naturally in conjunction with the *r* sound, which would otherwise be “too harsh” next to another consonant. Bede does not appear to mind that in the case of *incrēmenta* the vowel lengths would also have to be tampered with (*incrēmenta* > *incērēmenta*).

Another example of a spondaic verse in a Christian poem appears in Bede’s chapter 15, *Quod et auctoritas saepe et necessitas metricorum decreta violet* (‘How metric rules are sometimes violated either by authority or out of necessity’).⁴⁹ The line is from Caelius Sedulius’s *Carmen Paschale*, a hexameter epic on the Christ’s Passion, and represents Sedulius’s only use of the structure:

Scribitur et titulus: Hic est rēx Iūdaeōrum.⁵⁰

[And the inscription is written: this is the king of the Jews.]

In this case, Bede is willing to concede that the spondaic fifth foot may be genuine, but he still suggests an alternative scansion in which the beginning of *Iūdaeōrum* is scanned as a dactyl (possibly with the initial *i* as a long vowel and *ae* as a short one: *ī-u-de-ō-rum*).⁵¹

Quod quomodo scandendum iudicaverit, videat qui potest, utrum “Iūdaeōrum” duos spondeos quinta et sexta regione contra morem, an solutis syllabis, iuxta quod supra monstravimus, dactylum fieri voluerit et spondeum.⁵²

[Let those who can decide for themselves how the author wanted this line to be scanned: whether he wanted *Iūdaeōrum* to be two spondees

⁴⁹ Bede, *DAM*, 127–129.

⁵⁰ Sed. Pasch. carm. 5, 196.

⁵¹ Bede, *Libri II de arte metrica et de schematibus et tropis. The art of Poetry and Rhetoric*, ed. and trans. Calvin B. Kendall, Bibliotheca Germanica, Series Nova vol. 2 (Saarbrücken: AQ-Verlag, 1991), 125.

⁵² Bede, *DAM*, 129.

in the fifth and sixth feet, which is contrary to practice, or whether he wanted it to be a dactyl and a spondee with the syllables resolved in the manner previously demonstrated.]

Bede's explicit intention was to create guidelines for good Christian poetry, which apparently contributed to his sometimes suspicious opinions on pre-Christian authors. He devotes an entire chapter to the metrical transgressions of the pagan authors, giving it the title *Ut priscae poetarum quaedam aliter quam moderni posuerunt* ('On the differences between ancient and modern poets'). He classifies the curriculum poets as either "ancient" or "modern", the former being the pre-Christian classics (mainly Vergil), and the latter the late antique Christian poets. In this chapter he explains several metrical liberties taken by the "ancients", including unusual line-endings, hiatuses and the like. The chapter is presumably intended as a caveat to young poets, who otherwise might run the risk of picking up archaic and obsolete poetic techniques, and the quotations Bede uses to illustrate these techniques are traditional text-book examples. The chapter's one example of a spondaic fifth foot is from the *Aeneid* (7, 654), a rather well-circulated quotation also cited by Audax, Aldhelm and Victorinus:

Aut lēvēs ocreās lentō dūcunt argentō

[Or they make smooth greaves out of malleable silver].

Here again Bede brings his "parasite-vowel theory" to the rescue:

Quamvis hoc rarissime inveniatur, nisi ita ordinatum, ut . . . spondeus qui in quinta regione est R litteram habeat alteri consonanti vel praepositam vel subiectam, cuius duritia per adiectam vocalem levigata, dactylus sentiatur in sono, cum pareat spondeus in scripto.⁵³

[Although this is rarely encountered unless it is arranged so that the spondee in the fifth foot has the letter *r* either preceding or following another consonant and its harshness is softened by the addition of a vowel; thereby we hear the foot scanned as a dactyl, although it appears as a spondee in writing.]

Bede's suggested reading for the final word of the line would presumably be *arigentō*.

In Bede's *De arte metrica*, we witness the spondaic fifth foot finally excised from the repertory of accepted verse techniques. Bede excludes

⁵³ Bede, *DAM*, 130.

it as a possible structure from his definition of the dactylic hexameter, and elsewhere states that it is “contrary to practice”, even going to considerable lengths to prove that what appear to be spondaic fifth feet really are nothing of the sort. Not only does Bede explicitly proscribe fifth-foot spondees, he appears to harbour serious doubts as to whether they had really existed at all.

Bede’s approach to the subject of fifth-foot spondees reflects his hands-on approach to metre. Ever critical of older grammarians, he is not afraid to reformulate metrical rules when his cited examples seem to require it. At times, he tends to be more dogmatic than his predecessors, and his views on fifth-foot spondees are a case in point. In his *De arte metrica*, he has effectively turned what used to be a general tendency into a fixed metrical law. For him, spondaic fifth feet are not merely unaesthetic or outdated, but well-nigh impossible.

Bede’s treatise on metre turned out to be a massive success: it was rapidly disseminated throughout all of Western Europe, and it remained a standard textbook until well into the twelfth century. Bede’s views on metre affected subsequent generations of poets, often even in the cases where his definitions are faulty.⁵⁴ Apparently, his views on fifth-foot spondees were often followed by equal zeal.

Medieval hexameter poetry is generally based on imitation, often of Vergil. Stylistic variation can usually be attributed to the background, education and personal tastes of each individual poet. On the whole, however, the spondaic fifth foot seems to be the one Vergilian device medieval poets were reluctant to adopt. In his analysis of the 2,928 lines of Heiric of Auxerre’s ninth-century *Vita sancti Germani*,⁵⁵ Dag Norberg has found only three spondaic fifth feet, all of which belong to the conservative type in which the line is ended by a quadrisyllabic word, while in the *Vita Aegili*, by Candidus of Fulda,⁵⁶ there are none at all.⁵⁷ There are no spondaic fifth feet in such works as Alcuin’s *Versus de patribus, regibus et sanctis Eboracensis ecclesii*,⁵⁸ or, according to my

⁵⁴ As Norberg points out, Bede’s erroneous definition of the trochaic septenarius as always having a trochaic third foot was slavishly followed at least by Hrabanus Maurus, Walafrid Strabo, and Hincmar of Reims. See *Introduction*, 77.

⁵⁵ MGH PAC 3, 428–517.

⁵⁶ MGH PAC 2, 94–117.

⁵⁷ Norberg, *Introduction*, 64–65.

⁵⁸ Alcuin, *Versus de patribus, regibus et sanctis Eboracensis ecclesiae*, ed. and trans. Peter Goodman, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), cviii.

observation, in Walahfrid Strabo's *De visionibus Wettini*,⁵⁹ or the verse hagiography *Vita Sancti Galli Confessoris*,⁶⁰ although Strabo uses other unusual metrical structures, such as pentasyllabic and monosyllabic words at the ends of lines, and once, in his *De cultura hortorum*,⁶¹ elides the final vowel of a line; but these, of course, are not irregularities that Bede had explicitly condemned. Strabo's *De cultura hortorum* has a sole fifth-foot spondee in its line 43, a metrical joke in the manner of Venantius Fortunatus, where disagreeable plants are depicted with a disagreeable line-ending:

Sponte renāscendum complexibus urticārum⁶²

[(Having weeded out) the tangles of nettles that grow back on their own].

7. Final remarks

The history of the fifth-foot spondee reflects the whole evolution of Latin metrics from Ennius to the Anglo-Saxons. Over the course of nine centuries, Latin poetry went through the complex stages of imitation, experimentation, and ossification, and there were bound to be some casualties. Through trial and error, some metrical structures were found to be more suitable than others, the spondaic fifth foot inevitably falling into the category of "the others". Although several poets delighted in this structure, relishing in its unique weightiness and associations with Greek culture, it had the serious drawback of making the hexameter line less recognisable, and it never quite shed its image of being a metrical quirk. This is reflected by the sometimes paradoxical nature of the objections it excited: it was "too soft" for Quintilian, but "too hard" for Audax and Aldhelm. By the time of the earliest Anglo-Saxon hexameter poets and grammarians, the history and aesthetic function of the spondaic fifth foot had fallen into obscurity, and at a time when classical prosody had become a thing gleaned from books, it was an unaffordable luxury. Aldhelm recognised fifth-foot spondees as a strictly theoretical construction that had no role in actual poetry, a view reflected in the poetry composed by

⁵⁹ MGH PAC 2, 301–333.

⁶⁰ MGH PAC 2, 428–473.

⁶¹ MGH PAC 2, 335–350.

⁶² MGH PAC 2, 336.

the later Anglo-Latin poets who came under his influence. Bede, in his *De arte metrica*, took an even more radical line, ruling out fifth-foot spondees from the very definition of the dactylic hexameter. Bede's treatise turned out to have an even more extensive influence on subsequent poetry than Aldhelm's: it quickly became an authority even in continental Europe, and may effectively have consigned spondaic fifth feet to oblivion.

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