

Mind the Iamb

Of Cretics and Amphibrachs

by Abigail Ardelle Zammit

*[I]f, for matters of prosodic convenience, a meter is decided not to exist,
it will drag a whole trail of potential poems along into oblivion with it.
Meters bring words and ideas along with them, more than the other way around.¹*

There's a pitfall, as I see it. A risk—often overlooked by writing tutors and creative writing curricula—a rhythm that unspools itself at the height of composition when you think you've become voice and poetic utterance, when the line draws to its conclusion in a befitting array of sound—that feel about it that there's no other way of writing it.

Five strong beats, even four, or six.

And always rising: ta TAM ta TAM...

But you don't always see it for what it is unless somebody points it out, unless you undertake the task of scanning it. And why would you? You're not a formalist. Free verse is your credo, your fall-upon style.

Beware. There's a peculiar strain to a poem that's been free verse throughout, only to fall upon the iambic metre at the end. Or a poem that wants to be iambic, and a writer that doesn't hear where it's going, or where it could have sauntered had it been left to its own devices.

To master the craft of writing is to see beyond your inspirational thrill and come to the poem as a reader might. Yes, even a critic with a well-trained ear. Which is sometimes to acknowledge that what you think of as free verse has the stamp(ede) of the ta TAM about it.

And the iambic—I confess to having lain with it many a time, often in a drunken stupor—has a knack of insinuating itself everywhere, under pillows and in the recesses between sleep and wakefulness. It's got all the seductive flair of a well-

practiced preacher. And how could it not when the vast majority of formal verse in the English language is iambic? How could it not when we've been taught that it's closer to the rhythm of spoken English than any other metrical foot?

For many of us, in fact, to write formally is to master the iambic; we might play with trochees for a little while. At most, we'll dabble with dactyls and anapaests—and then go back to that most 'natural' of signs.

Don't misconstrue this: I love the iambic. So many of my favourite poems are in iambics—Edwards' 'Rain', Plath's 'Mad Girl's Love Song'. The list is endless.

How much of this editorial note is in fact iambic? And how much of what you know is written in three-syllable feet? 'Over hill, over dale, / Thorough bush, thorough brier'²: TA ta TA | TA ta TA... Or this: 'The orchard, the meadow, the deep-tangled wild wood'³: ta TA ta | ta TA ta... The cretic. The amphibrach. Respectively. (Respectfully). These two feet, mostly unknown except as in-betweens, practised on the margins, in the interstices between story and fable.

The first cretics I ever heard as a full poem, putting aside Blake's juvenilia, were by Annie Finch. In 'Lammas Chant (August 1)' which is sung in two voices, the dual processes of creativity and destruction are enacted through the incantational pull of the verses, the grain sacrificed for the making of bread:

Fill the earth's belly full.
Bring the food, bring the grain.
There are cold months ahead
Give them peace in the ground.⁴

/ u / | / u /
There are cold | months ahead

/ u / | / u /
give them peace | in the ground

The cretic lends itself to ritual, outrage, dissent. Although rare, it has great potential for the downtrodden and dispossessed. Perhaps it's no coincidence that most of the poets experimenting with cretic metre are women. In this extract from 'Marcha de la Muerte',⁵ I've used the cretic's subliminal energy to question the ethics of lithium

mining in the Atacama desert, turning the names of the offending companies into compositional elements for public scrutiny and accountability:

SQM, Albemarle—

was it you fathered drought,
drained the gold from its brine,
ripped the lung from its heart?

/ u / | / u /

SQM, | Albemarle—

/ u / | / u /

was it **you** | fathered **drought**

The obverse of the cretic is the amphibrach, also a rocking metre, its strong middle syllable surrounded by two weaker ones—known mostly for limericks, but capable of much more than it is given credit for. In conversation with a Slovenian translator, having mentioned that the amphibrach is the staple metre of Russian poetry, it was edifying to discover that it's also the foundational metre for traditional Slovenian poetry.⁶ Listen to the amphibrachic breath of the first Slovene art ballad 'Povodni Mož' ('The Waterman') by France Prešeren. The waves of push-pull capture the allure of the water sprite who carries proud Urška away:⁷

"Fear not," he declares, "if the thunder resounds,
Fear not that the water so noisily pounds [...]"

u / u | u / u | u / u | u / (u)

"Fear **not**," he | declares, "if | the **thunder** | resounds,

u / u | u / u | u / u|u / (u)

Fear **not** that | the **water** | so **noisi**ly **pounds** [...]"

If the ballad form is easy to dismiss, consider the brilliance of the amphibrachic dimeter in 'A Saving Aphasia' by Philip Metres:⁸

I'm dreaming your body
 undone of the bindings
 of leather and thread –
 a thrumming vibration
that stitches my mouth shut

and opens my eye –

u / u | u / u
I'm **dreaming** | your **body**

u / u | u / u
und**one** of | the **bind**ings

This isn't a manifesto against the iambic, but a gate creaking open to metrical otherness. For the Modernists who chose free verse to break away from the tyranny of iambic pentameters, metre was their inheritance. For us who are steeped in free verse, composition is not as consistently deliberate as it could possibly be. Perhaps this is also a plea for awareness. Of a kind. Music of a kind. For 'undoing the bindings' with vigilance and care.

There can't be innovation without mastery.

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Endnotes

- [1] Annie Finch, *The Body of Poetry: Essays on Women, Form, and the Poetic Self* (University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 15. This epigraph acknowledges the thorough scholarship in metrical diversity that is the lifelong work of poet, translator and critic Annie Finch.
- [2] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act II, Scene I, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (Simon & Schuster, 2016).
- [3] Samuel Woodworth, 'The Old Oaken Bucket', as reproduced in Annie Finch, *A Poet's Craft: A Comprehensive Guide to Making and Sharing Your Poetry* (University of Michigan Press, 2012), p. 407.
- [4] *Measure for Measure: An Anthology of Poetic Meters*, eds. Annie Finch and Alexandra Oliver (Everyman's Library, 2015), p. 245.
- [5] From 'Ruta 27', first published in the *Tupelo Quarterly*, Volume VII, Issue 32, and forthcoming in *:deserere #desertum* (Tupelo Press, 2028).
- [6] O prevajanju slovenske poezije v malteški jezik / Prevodni Pranger 2025
- [7] France Prešeren: POVODNI MOŽ
- [8] As reproduced in *Measure for Measure*, p. 176.