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Writing Ictus and Accent: A Versifier's Look at Rhythm in Performance

This paper proceeds from the (perhaps unusual) premise that a good way to understand ictus and accent in Roman poetry is through original Latin verse composition in the style of the ancient authors. Focusing on the dactylic hexameter and elegiac couplet, the paper is divided into three roughly equal sections: basic principles of verse composition, practical concerns for writers, and implications for recitation.

Part one surveys the traditional "school textbook" composition rules that bear on the issue of ictus and accent, e.g., the prohibitions against the 2nd foot diaeresis and mono- and polysyllabic line endings; the principle that ictus and accent should generally coincide in the fifth and sixth feet, rarely in the third, and infrequently elsewhere as well; and so forth. Variations from the norm are often used for special poetic effect -- a practice that, by definition, reaffirms the validity of the rules. All compositional principles will be illustrated by examples from classical Latin poetry.

Part two applies these general principles to the actual composition of original Latin verse. Exercises on ictus alone, accent alone, and ictus and accent in combination will be presented and discussed. The role ictus and accent play in the compositional process will be emphasized throughout, with specimens of student verses serving as illustrations.

Building on the preceding analysis, part three proposes that a reciter of Latin poetry should strive to maintain the quantitative rhythm of Roman verse (in which long syllables receive approximately twice the duration of short syllables) while also adding a qualitative accent to those syllables that are properly accented in normal spoken Latin. Demonstrations will be attempted. Such a performance technique admittedly requires a great deal of practice and vocal dexterity, but it has the advantage of capturing in recitation a key metrical principle of written composition: that the interplay between ictus and accent and the variety of coincidence and conflict should be maintained.

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