

**A HANDBOOK OF
MODERN
ENGLISH METRE**

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A Handbook of Modern English Metre by Joseph B. Mayor

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by

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PREFACE.

IN calling my book "A Handbook of Modern English Metre," I wish to denote that it does not profess to treat, otherwise than incidentally, of metre before the time of Henry VIII.

My chief object in the first eight chapters is to give a methodical and uncontroversial statement of the principles, which are alike the foundation and the outcome of my former work on English Metre, the second edition of which was published in 1901. In the later chapters I have gone on to treat of metre from the aesthetic side, and have ventured to put forward some suggestions as to the connexion between sound and sense in poetry.

The theory of metre here propounded, which assumes the foot as the unit of verse, is, in its main features, no new invention of my own: it has been held and acted upon by the great majority of English metrists previous to Dr Guest, whose learned but impracticable work appeared in 1838. Since then there has been a kind of epidemic of metrical theories, mostly ignoring or contradicting one another. No doubt the elaboration of these theories has been of value and interest to their authors, and may have served in some cases to call

attention to points which had been neglected by earlier theorists; but I think it cannot be denied that the conflict of experts has a tendency to produce confusion and uncertainty, or even entire scepticism, among the reading public. It is for this public I desire to provide, if possible, a clear and simple guide to metre, not hampered by the rigid rules of Pope and Johnson, but elastic enough to embrace the careless measures of the old ballads or drama, as well as the latest experiments of the twentieth century. Some may perhaps think that I have allowed too much space to the examination of these exceptional metres, which after all form a very small fraction of the great body of English poetry; but I was desirous to prove to myself and others that the system which I have followed was able to give a scientific explanation of anything which deserved to be called metrical, as well as to unmask at once any false pretenders to that title. I venture to indulge the hope that my book may be found convenient as a handbook for those who have not had a training in metre through the practice of Greek and Latin versification, and that it may be a useful substitute for the latter in schools of the more modern type. With this view I have added Exercises at the end of the chapters, to show how the study of metre may be made a means of training and testing the mental powers. These exercises are of course merely specimens, which may be multiplied to any extent by the teacher.

One reason why I have thought it advisable to bring out such a book at the present time is because I think it must be felt by all educated men that the present is a very critical time in the history of education. There has been for many years a growing dissatisfaction with

the results obtained in our old classical schools. Parents justly demand a training which will fit their boys for the work of life. "What," they ask, "is the good of giving up ten years or so to the study of Greek and Latin, if in the end the great majority of the scholars are incapable of translating at sight even an easy passage from either language? if their schooling does not train them in habits of accurate thought, or foster intellectual and literary curiosity, but rather tends to stunt originality, and keep them schoolboys still, caring more for amusement than for the serious performance of the duties of their business or profession?" Unfortunately such criticism often starts from a much lower level than this. It is apt to forget that it is to our Public Schools that some of the best qualities of Englishmen, such as public spirit, power to get on with others, common sense, truthfulness, straightforwardness, unflinching determination, patience, fairness, considerateness, a high sense of duty and of honour, are in great measure due; and it is based upon the narrowest possible view of what man's work in life is, and how he is to be prepared for it. Hence the mass of our parents and parents' advisers are only too ready to listen to the clap-trap of charlatans, ignoring the fact that the only solid foundation for the science of education is the knowledge of man's nature and of his surroundings, supplemented by the record of his past experience. Perhaps the most serious defect in modern utilitarian schemes of education is the neglect of the imagination, a faculty no less needed for the attainment of truth and the advancement of science, for the acquirement of a wide outlook and an intelligent forecasting of the future in practical matters, than it is for the true enjoyment of all higher forms of beauty. A

materialistic utilitarianism may help to earn a living: it is of little avail for the cultivation of feeling or intellect or character, for the right employment of leisure, and the moral and social elevation of humanity.

It is as a help to the training of the imagination that the study of poetry, even from the earliest years, is of such transcendent importance: and it is as a step to this that I venture to urge the claims of prosody in our secondary schools. I remember well the delight with which I listened to my father's reading of *Paradise Lost* to us children, long before I was able to understand the argument of the poem. It was enough that the sound sank into my ears: from that time to this, Milton has never ceased to be to me the type of all that is noblest in poetry and metre.

Perhaps it may be well to give here a caution against a possible misunderstanding of the classical terminology (applicable, strictly and originally, only to quantitative verse) which has been for many centuries applied by analogy to modern accentual verse by the metrists of all nations. English accent has not the same fixity as Latin quantity. In the latter the difference, as a rule, is absolute; a syllable is either short or long: in the former the difference is relative; the stress may be almost indefinitely varied. Hence modern stress is more subjective, more under the control of the poet or the reader, than ancient quantity. Especially is this the case in trisyllabic verse, where the strong rhythm at times overrides the syllabic accent, as in Browning's

Not a word | to each other; we kept | the great pace
Neck by neck, | *stride* by stride, | never changing our place.

For the same reason the same foot may be differently interpreted by different readers, one making it a spondee,