Some Comments about the Epic Caesura
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The caesura has mixed fortunes these days. Some think it's of vital interpretive importance, others think it a fiction of Alexandrian grammarians. As a result some beginning textbooks omit mention of the caesura at all, and others offer a mechanical exercise in scansion, marking feet and the caesura, often without explaining very well why you might want to do this.

I think at least part of the confusion about the caesura comes from how we usually think about Epic verse, using foot analysis and notation. Even the name we use — dactylic hexameter — presupposes an analysis by feet. There's good reason to believe later Greek poets thought of the verse that way, and it's quite useful to be able to talk about this or that foot. But when looking at the poems of the earliest poets using the Epic line thinking in terms of feet is probably a mistake.

Most kinds of Greek verse are best thought about as being composed of *cola*, larger groups of long and short positions. There is a large-ish set of these cola which pop up a lot, in many different poets, so we're on pretty solid ground talking about them. 2500 years of literary criticism mean there's a flourishing vocabulary for the names of the different cola. But for an example, here are two:

$$\text{telesillean} \quad \cup\!\!\!- \, -\cup\cup- \; \cup-$$
$$\text{reizianum} \quad \cup\!\!\!- \, -\cup\cup- \; -$$

Greek poets could just string cola along into more complex forms. Sometimes there would be no word break required at the cola boundary:

$$\cup\!\!\!-\!-\cup\cup\!-\!\cup\!-\cup\!\!\!-\!-\cup\cup\!-\!- \; \textit{(tel + reiz)}$$

Other times the cola are strictly marked off by word boundry:

$$\cup\!\!\!-\!-\cup\cup\!-\!\cup\!- \mid \cup\!\!\!-\!-\cup\cup\!-\!-$$

And yet other times there is a word break required *one syllable* after the start of the next colon:

$$\underset{\smile}{\smile}-\smile\smile-\smile-\underset{\smile}{\smile} \mid -\smile\smile--$$

This last join is usually called *dovetailing*.

The $-\overset{\smile}{\smile}-\overset{\smile}{\smile}-$ colon, the hemiepes, not only starts off every line of Homer, but is doubled to create the so-called pentameter of the elgiac couplet. It is an easily identified building block in the larger verse forms of the the choral poets, too.

What about the bits after the hemiepes? The paroemiac, $\overset{\smile\smile}{\smile}-\overset{\smile}{\smile}-\overset{\smile}{\smile}--$, also has a vigorous life on its own. In Epic verse, we expect the $\overset{\smile\smile}{\smile}$ position to be – or $\smile\smile$, but there are actually a few lines in Homer where that position is filled with a single short syllable,[2] suggesting that the Epic line was probably originally hemiepes + paroemiac, with a break either after the hemiepes or dovetailed on a paroemiac starting with $\smile\smile$. Many of the formula phrases and epithets fit nicely into one of these cola patterns.

Now, all those runs of $-\smile\smile$ seem to have forced the regularization of the opening of the paroemiac, leaving us with something that looks like it's composed of six dactyls. As I mentioned above, it seems clear that later poets thought of the line as six dactyls with rules about word breaks. But if we think of the epic poet attending to cola while composing, it makes sense that there would be a tendency for a sense break to match the required word break at cola boundaries. But only a tendency; often it's a strain to imagine any but the weakest sense break at the caesura boundary.

Now I'm going to go through the first 21 lines of the first book of the Iliad (following Pharr's text) with an eye on the caesura, which I will mark with a single bar. It will be convenient to speak of *hemistichs*, "half-lines", the first hemistich before the caesura, the second after.

1   μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά, | Πηληϊάδεω ᾿Αχιλῆος

First, it's clear that closely related words can cross the caesura boundry. The genitive phrase in second hemistich goes with the first word in the line, "the rage of Achilles, the son of Peleus." Second, the phrase *Πηληιάδεω ᾿Αχιλῆος* occurs six times elsewhere in the Iliad, and always in this position (see line 322 in Book 1). These formulaic epithets quite often fit into a particular half of the epic line.

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[2]Or rarely other paroemiac shapes. See M.L. West *Greek Metre*, p.35 for examples

2   οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρί᾽ | Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε᾽ ἔθηκεν,

The first striking thing is οὐλομένην, which agrees with μῆνιν, the first word of the
previous line. A single word in a syntactic group running over to the beginning of
the next line is called enjambment. Many scholars are inclined to see an enjambed
word as emphatic by virtue of being first in the new line.

   Note that the word before the caesura has had its final vowel elided. Some-
times special metrical licenses are allowed at the caesura boundary. But elision
here is not uncommon, and suggests that whatever pause was at the caesura —
assuming there was one — was brief enough to allow elision.

3   πολλὰς δ᾽ ἰφθίμους | ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν
4   ἡρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ | ἑλώρια τεῦχε κύνεσσιν

In line 3, notice how the first word of the first hemistich, πολλάς, also agrees with
the first word of the second, ψυχάς. This is quite common in Homer. In a single
line the first word of one hemistich may be closely related (noun and adjective;
noun and genitive) with the first word of the other.

   In line 4 we again find enjambment, and this time instead of going with the
first word of the previous line, the enjambed word goes with the first word of the
previous hemistich, ψυχὰς ἡρώων, *the souls of warriors*.

   The caesura must be after δέ since that word is, if not enclitic by accent, so
closely attached to the word it follows that it cannot begin a line or a hemistich.

5   οἰωνοῖσί τε δαῖτα, | Διὸς δ᾽ ἐτελείετο βουλή,

This is the first line so far where the caesura clearly coincides with a strong syn-
tactic break.

6   ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα | διαστήτην ἐρίσαντε
7   Ἀτρεΐδης τε ἄναξ | ἀνδρῶν καὶ δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.

In line 7 one might be tempted to say that the rare fourth foot caesura makes more
sense (after ἀνδρῶν). However that should be reserved for when a long word
crosses the entire third foot.

8   τίς τ᾽ ἄρ σφωε θεῶν | ἔριδι ξυνέηκε μάχεσθαι;

Now in line 8 there is a clear phrase separation between the hemistichs. By this I
mean we have two noun prases on one side of the caesura (τίς θεῶν, σφωε) and a
predicate phrase in the other. However:

9   Λητοῦς καὶ Διὸς υἱός. | ὁ γὰρ βασιλῆι χολωθεὶς

In line 9 the caesura matches a very strong break.

10   νοῦσον ἀνὰ στρατὸν ὦρσε | κακήν, ὀλέκοντο δὲ λαοί,

Notice once again how the first words in each hemistich are in agreement, *νοῦσον κακήν*.

11   οὕνεκα τὸν Χρύσην | ἠτίμασεν ἀρητῆρα

In line 11 we find that instead of the first words of the hemistichs being in agreement, the last ones are, in this case in apposition, *Χρύσην ἀρητῆρα*, *Chryses the priest*.

12   Ἀτρεΐδης. ὁ γὰρ ἦλθε | θοὰς ἐπὶ νῆας Ἀχαιῶν

Again we have an enjambed word in line 12, this time the subject of the verb which starts the previous hemistich.

13   λυσόμενός τε θύγατρα | φέρων τ᾽ ἀπερείσι᾽ ἄποινα,

Here the two hemistichs are grammatically parallel: participle *τε* accusative.

14   στέμματ᾽ ἔχων ἐν χερσὶν | ἑκηβόλου Ἀπόλλωνος
15   χρυσέῳ ἀνὰ σκήπτρῳ, | καὶ ἐλίσσετο πάντας Ἀχαιούς,
16   Ἀτρεΐδα δὲ μάλιστα | δύω, κοσμήτορε λαῶν·

In line 14 we have *ἑκηβόλου Ἀπόλλωνος*, a common forumla (see line 21). In line 15 the caesura again coincides with a stronger syntactic break, and in line 16 the first words of each hemistich are in agreement.

17   "Ἀτρεΐδαι τε καὶ ἄλλοι | ἐϋκνήμιδες Ἀχαιοί,
18   ὑμῖν μὲν θεοὶ δοῖεν | Ὀλύμπια δώματ᾽ ἔχοντες

In both lines 17 and 18 the final hemistich is filled with an epithet phrase.

19   ἐκπέρσαι Πριάμοιο | πόλιν, ἐὺ δ᾽ οἴκαδ᾽ ἱκέσθαι·

And here in line 19 we have a case for not overinterpreting the strength of the caesura. Both words, *Πριάμοιο πόλιν*, are closely associated.

20   παῖδα δ' ἐμοὶ λῦσαί τε | φίλην, τά τ' ἄποινα δέχεσθαι

21   ἁζόμενοι Διὸς υἱὸν | ἑκηβόλον Ἀπόλλωνα."

In line 20, the first words of the hemistichs agree. Compare line 21 to 14.

I should now leave you with a few warnings.

First, there is dispute among classicists about the true nature of the heroic hexameter. Here I have presented an analysis which links epic and lyric meters. Some current scholars support this view, but some do not, and this little article isn't the place to revisit the competing arguments.

Second, in my comments on the Iliad lines above I have hinted that just as the first words of each hemistich are often in close syntactic association, so should we also look for some link in the previous hemistich in the case of single-word enjambment (lines 1–2, 3–4, 11–12). This is probably overstating the case, and you can easily find such enjambments where there isn't any particularly strong association between the enjambed word and the leading word of the previous hemistich. But checking for the possibility is sometimes interesting.