Learning to Scan

LING001 Fall 2018
Iambic Pentameter:

iamb = (˘ ˘) in quantitative systems like Greek and Latin
   i.e. short + long
   where long may be ”resolved” into two shorts

iamb = (w s) in accentual-syllabic systems like English
   i.e. weak + strong
   where ideally weak = “unstressed”
       and strong = “stressed”

pentameter = five “measures” = “feet”
What do “stressed” and “unstressed” mean?

We can take monosyllabic content words to be stressed; and in most polysyllabic words, the dictionary tells us.

So let’s take a look...
The first two lines of Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism*:

Tis hard to say, if greater want of skill

Appear in writing or in judging ill
Hamlet’s soliloquy:

To be, or not to be--that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep--
No more--and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep--
To sleep--perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
To be, or not to be--that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

• “feminine” line ending = extra-metrical weak syllable
• “inversion” = stressed syllable in w(eak) position after a break
From Shakespeare, Richard III:

Now is the winter of our discontent

w   s w s w s w s w s
.

Made glorious summer by this sun of York;

“elision” = vowel not counted as separate syllable
(because maybe not pronounced)
Harry of Hereford, Lancaster and Derby  
Am I; who ready here do stand in arms,  
To prove, by God's grace and my body's valour,  
In lists, on Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk,  
That he is a traitor, foul and dangerous,  

w s w s w s w s w s  
. . . . . . . . . .  
To God of heaven, King Richard and to me;  

“elision” can also be unstressed nasal as in “heav’n”
Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sonnet IV:

I shall forget you presently, my dear,
So make the most of this, your little day,
Your little month, your little half a year
Ere I forget, or die, or move away,
And we are done forever; by and by
I shall forget you, as I said, but now,
If you entreat me with your loveliest lie
I will protest you with my favorite vow.
I would indeed that love were longer-lived,
And vows were not so brittle as they are,
But so it is, and nature has contrived
To struggle on without a break thus far,—
Whether or not we find what we are seeking
Is idle, biologically speaking.
Whether or not we find what we are seeking is idle, biologically speaking.
Which of these are (or could be) iambic pentameter?

1. Vigil strange I kept on the field one night
2. And did those feet in ancient time
   Walk upon England’s mountains green
3. Amazing Grace, How sweet the sound
   That saved a wretch like me
4. Those hours, that with gentle work did frame
   The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell
5. The winter! the brightness that blinds you,
   The white land locked tight as a drum,
   The cold fear that follows and finds you,
   The silence that bludgeons you dumb.
6. Because I could not stop for Death –
   He kindly stopped for me –
   The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
   And Immortality.

7. The outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville Nine that day;
   The score stood four to two, with but one inning more to play,
   And then when Cooney died at first, and Barrows did the same,
   A sickly silence fell upon the patrons of the game.

8. When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
   And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
   And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
   Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep