

Royal Fireworks

Language Arts

by Michael Clay Thompson

POETRY
and humanity

Second Edition

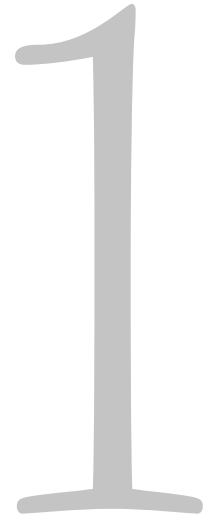
Michael Clay Thompson

Teacher Manual

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📌 Take a moment to look at each photo with the students and think about who the person in the photo might be and what he or she could be doing.



Poetry and Humanity

Almost all art is about humanity.

Human beings are the seeking species. We seek to understand what is outside of ourselves, and we seek to look within ourselves.

We want to know who we are. What we are.
Why we are. We want to understand the sources of joy, and sadness, and meaning. We want to understand what it means to be alive.

We want to understand love. And sorrow. And courage.
And loss. We want to understand how to reach our dreams, and how to find out what our dreams should be, and how to bring happiness to our family and our friends.

We want to understand what it means to be good.
We want to know how to know the right thing.
We want to care about something important, something greater than ourselves.

We want to see the humanity of all humanity and to understand those things that all of us, everywhere, have in common.

Like other artists, poets have turned their attention to human existence, pushing language to its maximum in order to express those things about humanity that are most true, or difficult, or subtle.

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📎 The voice makes many different sounds; it is more like an instrument, or a group of instruments, than we usually notice.

Sounds of the Voice

Different artists use different materials
to express what they see and think.

Painters use color and texture, shadow and form.

Composers use notes, rhythm, and harmony.

Sculptors use stone, metal, wood, balance, and shape.

Poets use their own good materials.

They use the materials of language—of the voice.

They use words, but within the words,
they use sounds.

A poet might use a fluty sound, like
the *oo* sound in the word *lute*.

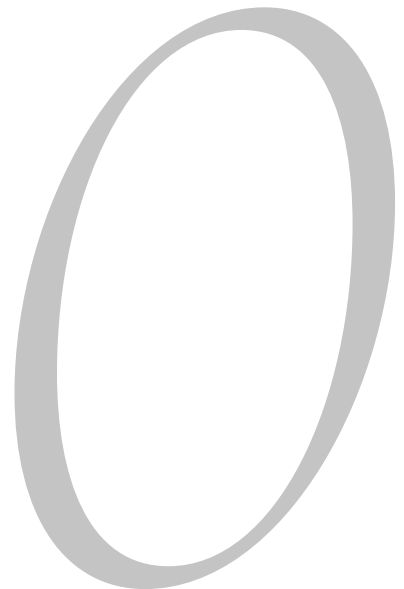
oo

Or a soothing, hummy consonant, like the murmuring *m* in *Mary*.

mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

Or a scratchy, spiky sound, like the harsh *k* sound
in the word *bleak*.

kk



Look, for example, at how British poet Thomas Hardy used the scratchy *k* sound, and its good friends the hard *g*, *b*, *d*, *p*, and *t* sounds, to suggest the severity of the winter, and by extension a form of profound pessimism, in his 1902 poem “The Darkling Thrush”:

I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-gray,
And Winter’s dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted night
Had sought their household fires.

The land’s sharp features seem’d to be
The Century’s corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seem’d fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,

bkrt

In **blast-beruffled** plume,
 Had chosen thus **to** fling his soul
 Upon the **growing** gloom.

So **little** cause for **carollings**
 Of such **ecstatic** sound
 Was written on **terrestrial** things
 Afar or nigh around,
 That I **could** think there **trembled** through
 His **happy** **good-night** air
 Some **blessèd** Hope, whereof he knew
 And I was unaware.

One student can read this poem aloud, with the rest of the students pronouncing only the hard consonants as they come up.

If we were to delete all of the other letters from the poem, and just look at the harsh *k, g, b, d, p,* and *t* consonants, and put a dash to indicate new lines, it would look like this:

g d tpcppgt—tpctg—dtdgddt—kd—
 tgdbtcdk—ktgbk—dkdttd—dtd—
 dptdb—tcptt—cptcdcp—ddt—tpdb—
 kddd—dptp—d—t—bktgd—td—td—
 dgtd—btbdp—dt—pgg—ttcc—cttd—
 tttt—d—tcdkbd—ppgdt—bdp—d

It is a kind of Morse code, tapped out in tough consonants, to let us know that the scene is serious—cold, sharp, and inhuman. It is quite astonishing; Hardy filled every crack of the poem with severity. Poets often do this—use vowels and consonants as a kind of sound effect, as the music behind the plot.

But wouldn't any group of, say, two hundred words have some *k*'s or *g*'s? Well, that would be likely, but we would not see the defining presence of such sounds. Clearly, Hardy has poetically pushed the harsh sounds to the front, probably tripling or quadrupling the incidence of such sounds and making it impossible to read the poem in a sweet or soothing way.

That is why even though there are also some softer consonants in the poem, they do not cancel out the harsh sounds. The soft ones are overwhelmed by the harsh ones and pushed back into the shadows of our attention. This dominance happens in reverse, too. When a poem is predominately made of pretty and soft vowels and consonants, its few normally scratchy-sounding sounds take on the tone of the overall poem and can even sound pretty because of their context—because of the way they work with the sounds beside them.

In William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare always gave Juliet beautiful sounds to speak, like *f*'s, *th*'s, *wh*'s, *r*'s, *n*'s, *m*'s, and *o*'s. These are sounds that sing and that blend softly with the sounds next to them.

In the famous balcony scene, where the hidden Romeo is listening to Juliet talk about him, she reflects that it is just his name, *Montague*, that is her enemy, since the two families are feuding. Why, she complains, must you be a Montague! Look at the soft and pleasant sounds that Shakespeare gives her lines:



'Tis but **thy name** that is **my enemy**.
 Thou art **thyself**, though not a **Montague**.
 What's **Montague**? It is **nor hand**, **nor foot**,
Nor arm, **nor face**, **nor any other part**
 belonging to a **man**. O, be some **other name**!

Notice that there is not one *k* sound in the passage.
 And notice how the words tend to begin with soft sounds that set
 the tone: *thou*, *though*, *other*, *nor*, *foot*, and even *Montague*.

When a painter paints a sunset with a red and purple sky,
 he or she does not paint the entire painting only in a two-tone
 red and purple style. For the complete painting, there may
 be dozens or even hundreds of colors and shades. Poetry is
 like that. Shakespeare did not use *m*'s and *r*'s exclusively
 for Juliet's language; rather, he worked through the words,
 blending in touches of softness throughout the passage in a
 way that would have an effect on those who hear the words,
 like a tongue-twister. The point is not to call attention to the sounds,
 but to use the sounds artistically, secretly,
 to bring the character to life.

r m n r th r n f m n f m r th r m

👂 Hum this cloud of
 consonants aloud, like
 a chorus, all together.
 Listen for the soft
 quality, as compared to
 the harsh consonants.



METER

When we talk about rhyme and its variations, we are talking about patterns that we not only hear but in most cases see. Alliteration is usually evident to the eye, and words that rhyme usually look alike.

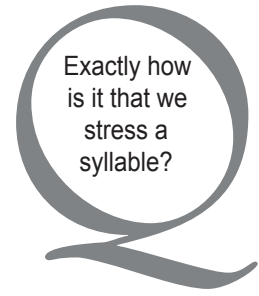
But there is a fundamental part of poetry that cannot be seen; it can only be heard, and it often takes some practice to learn to hear it. It is called **meter**, the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that poets arrange in order to control not only the vowel and consonant sounds but also the rhythm of the sentence, the rise and fall of the **stresses**.

Imagine a sound-effects machine that creates a wave sound; an approaching wave would sound louder, stronger, and then the sound would fade until the next wave came, and then the wave sound would grow louder again.

Our voices are like that. Without even thinking about it, we give more volume and emphasis to some syllables, and not to others. This emphasis is called **stress**. For example, we say CHICKen, not chiKEN; baNAna, not BANana or banaNA. The word *fruity* sounds like FROOtee, not frooTEE. The name Bobby is pronounced BOBee, not boBEE. We pronounce *misery* MIZZeree, not like *Missouri*.

It is the same in Spanish. Each syllable is either stressed or unstressed. The word for friend, *amigo*, is pronounced ahMEEgo, not ahmeeGO. When we learn the vocabulary of a different language, we have to learn how to stress the words, just as we do when we learn new words in English.





How do you say *calamity*? Don't you say kaLAMMitee?
The second syllable is stressed. What about *refrigerator*?
We say reeFRIJerater, not refriJERater.
Leopard is LEPPERd. *Mushy* is MUSHee, not muSHEE.
Forlorn is forLORN, and *goofy* is GOOfee.

What if someone came up to you and said,

It SEE bit SEE spy DURR.

Would you understand? Probably not. But if the person said,

IT see BIT see SPY durr

then you would know at once that you were hearing a nursery rhyme.

Itsy bitsy spider.

Look at these two stanzas from a poem by Emily Dickinson.
We will put stressed syllables in purple. What do you notice?

The moon is distant from the sea,
And yet with amber hands
She leads him, docile as a boy,
Along appointed sands.

He never misses a degree;
Obedient to her eye,
He comes just so far toward the town,
Just so far goes away.

A pause like this in the middle of a line of poetry is called a **caesura**.

Every second syllable is stressed. Dickinson carefully arranged all of the words in the poem so that the rise and fall of stresses is perfect, an exact rhythm. The question now becomes: What is the **pattern**? What is the pattern of stresses that repeats in the poem? In this poem, the pattern is a two-syllable group, with the first syllable unstressed and the second syllable stressed. Then that pattern repeats itself all the way through the poem.

● ● ● ●
The moon / is dis / tant from / the sea

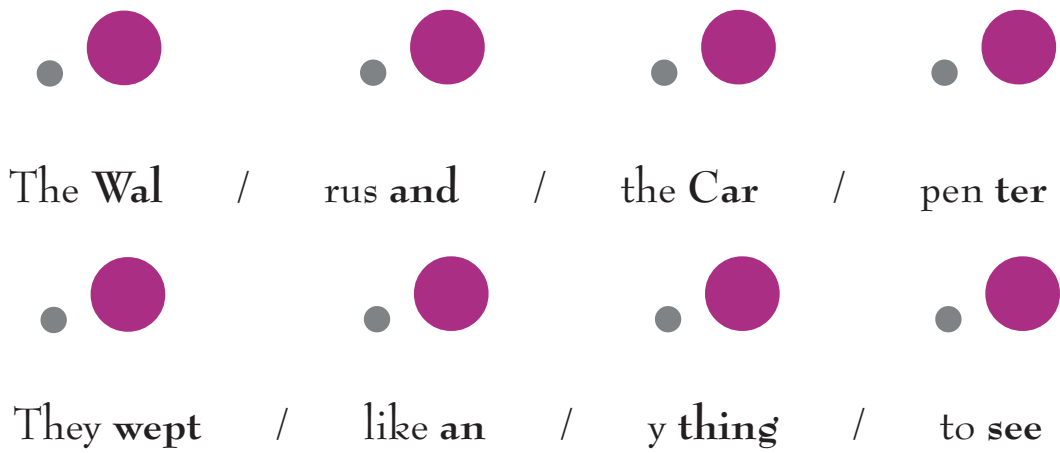


In *Alice and Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll wrote a poem about the Walrus and the Carpenter at the beach. The fourth stanza is:


The Walrus and the Carpenter
 Were walking close at hand;
 They wept like anything to see
 Such quantities of sand:
 “If this were only cleared away,”
 They said, “it would be grand!”

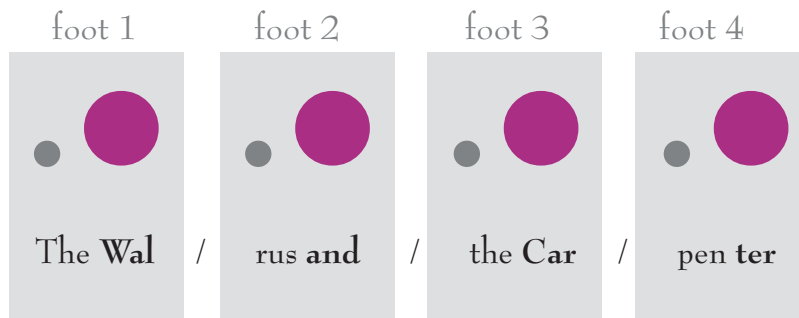
foot

The pattern of stresses is the same as we saw in Emily Dickinson’s poem:



Each line has four of these two-syllable patterns, and we would call each one a **foot**. In other words, each line has four **feet**—four two-syllable **feet**.

 This is a good point at which to pause and have students try to write a few lines of iambic tetrameter. Let them experiment with stress until they can hear it well.



Once we understand that a **foot** is a stress pattern that is repeated in a poem and that this foot-based rhythm is called **meter**, we begin to wonder, “What are the possibilities?” Wouldn’t it be possible to make lots of different rhythms in poems?

Couldn’t we create beats in poems, similar to drum beats?

Yes. Just as we saw that poets have deep understandings of the intricate possibilities of rhyme, we will see that they also have deep understandings of the possibilities of meter.

Even though, in truth, there are shades of stress, with some stressed syllables being even more stressed than others, we think of syllables as either/or: they are either stressed or not. This means that we create our stress patterns with a sharp sense of clarity, like the dots and dashes of Morse code.

What does this imply?

Well, it means, for example, that there is no one-syllable foot.

A line of poetry in which every syllable were stressed or unstressed would have no repeating pattern. It is the combination of stresses and unstresses that makes the pattern.

The next possibility is that a foot would have two syllables, as we have seen.

Yet all of the examples we saw were of two-syllable feet with the second syllable stressed. Can the first syllable be stressed instead?

And is there such a thing as a three-syllable foot?

The **W**al / rus and

Let’s look at the four most common types of foot in traditional poetry.

On the following pages, we will have an overview, and then we can explore in detail afterward.

The Two-Syllable Foot

IAMB, iambic

An iamb is a two-syllable foot with the stress on the second syllable.

The iamb is the most common foot in English poetry. It has a natural sound.

Examples: *below, maliciousness, a never-ending night, Mine eyes have seen the glory of...*



TROCHEE, trochaic

A trochee is a two-syllable foot with the stress on the first syllable. It is also common.

The trochee is an anti-iamb; it often has an evil feel.

Examples: *mustard, happy, chicken fingers, lurking menace, double trouble*



SPONDEE, spondaic

A spondee is a two-syllable foot with both syllables stressed.

Spondees are often used for emphasis in a line of iambs. They are not unusual, but unlike iambs and trochees, there are no poems made entirely of spondees.

Example (italicized): And suddenly ahead there was a *huge wave*.



The PYRRHIC FOOT

A pyrrhic foot is a two-syllable foot with both syllables unstressed. Poems are not written entirely in the pyrrhic foot; it is used for rhythmic variation to break up the too-regular sound that may occur with perfect iambs or trochees.

Example (italicized): And *suddenly* ahead we saw the wave. *Apparently* it worked.



The Three-Syllable Foot

DACTYL, dactylic

A dactyl is a three-syllable foot with the stress on the first syllable.

Many poems are written in dactyls.

Examples: *Hand him the, happily, whether the, Onward and onward and onward...*




ANAPEST, anapestic

An anapest is a three-syllable foot with the stress on the third syllable.

Examples: *On the top, analytical tree, If an elephant's trunk was as long...*

'Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house...



 Traditional poems are written in the top four feet. Spondees and pyrrhic feet are used for emphasis and variety. Amphibrachs and amphimacers are rare and often are not mentioned.

AMPHIBRACH (AM-fih-brack) (RARE; listed for scholarly interest)

An amphibrach is a three-syllable foot with the middle syllable stressed.

The adjective *fantastic* is a natural amphibrach. The Greek stem *brachy* means short, and *amphi* means both. An amphibrach is a foot that is short at both ends! *aMOEba, gaLOSHes, exPLOsion*



AMPHIMACER (am-FIH-mah-sir) (RARE; listed for scholarly interest)

An amphimacer is also a three-syllable foot, but in this case the middle syllable is short, and the first and third are long. *ANoDYNE, ULtraLIGHT, MACerATE*



English poems are traditionally written in iambs, trochees, dactyls, or anapests, though many modern poets use loose cadence rather than regular meter.

Instructor Section



To the Instructor

There are central goals for *Poetry and Humanity*, and all of them are about affecting what students think when they have finished the book.

First, I want students to experience an overwhelming sense of the substance of poetry, that it is an art form of surprising power, a body of knowledge so impressive and elaborate that it is a shock—it isn't what they thought. I want students to learn that you can analyze two small quatrains for page after page, and even then there is still more detail to find in the poem. I want students to realize that it is not absurd to inspect poems for such minute detail because the details are usually there, and they matter. Yes, I want students to love poetry, but real poetry. I want them to love the real thing, to be dazzled by masterpieces, and not to be blinded by the glint of fool's gold. There are, from time to time, poets who become briefly popular precisely because they are not challenging; I want students to love the great work, the most challenging poems, to admire the technical genius that inspires them.

Second, I want to project poetry as a mind-changing revelation about how *carefully* all good language, not just poetry, is written. We live in a fast-food, fast-word culture, and many students seem not to realize, at all, the exciting, slow intensity of planning, revising, and deciding that is involved in written excellence. Once students see poetic strategies up close, they will also begin to notice that those same strategies are employed in outstanding prose, and this then has the power to change their attitude toward all writing—toward language. In this way, teaching poetry is a strategy for introducing writing generally, for puncturing casual assumptions and academic languor, and for sitting students up, eyes open, aware that they are seeing something far more impressive than they had expected.

Third, I want students to hear. We are so involved in our own language that we often do not hear ourselves. One of life's greatest, most human experiences is to be transported (to use Emily Dickinson's word) by the assonant notes and consonant percussions of the human voice; it is this collection of sounds that we are first drawn to in our mother's voice, this collection of sounds that we respond to in song, and this same collection of sounds that is the palette of poetry. What poets have done is to explore deeper—much deeper—into the subtleties of these sounds, to employ them in related groups, and to arrange them in deliberate ways according to ideas and thoughts—to compose with them. Students are sometimes completely unaware of sound as a factor in vocabulary choice when they are writing essays and other works, as though word meaning were the only consideration. It is important to help students see that even in excellent daily prose, sounds and rhythms are important.

Fourth, I have developed this book with a strong tacit subtext, which is that knowledge is real. Poetry is just one example, but as an example, it is extraordinary. When we first come to grips with the magnitude of knowledge involved in poetry, not just in being a poet but even in being an informed reader of poems, we are filled with a kind of cognitive dissonance: we just did not realize that you had to know so much! It is hard to believe. The sheer knowledge requirement

involved in reading poetry alertly is itself a revelation, and this serves as a paradigm for education generally. There really is such a thing as being educated, and there really is such a thing as being uneducated, and to be truly educated involves an effort of learning that poetry helps to instill. The study of poetry is an outstanding paradigm for scholarship.

The knowledge involved in becoming educated about poetry includes, on the one hand, becoming aware of the enormous technical elements in poetry—the rhyme schemes, alliteration, assonance and consonance, the meter, the stanza forms, the figures of speech and other devices that poets employ to create writings that are really poems, not just rhymed prose—and on the other hand a direct acquaintance with greatness; in the poetry of Byron, Dickinson, Yeats, and others, students will find short works of dazzling genius and will begin to acquire a knowledge of great poets and great poems that is part of the informed mind that educated people around the world share.

Fifth, I have tried to disrupt false stereotypes. Poetry, like grammar, labors under a set of scurrilous stereotypes that put it at odds with cultural and academic norms and that misinform students about its nature. Even in the context of an academic English class, poetry may be relegated to the sidelines, limited to interpretive discussions, and regarded as “pretty” or as a way to “express your feelings.” It may even be presented as a way to discard the inhibitions of language rigor and express oneself freely. Poetry may be seen as more appropriate for girls than boys. These and other stereotypes violently disregard the truth about poetry. Poetry is so important intellectually that it must be one of the core components of formal language study, along with vocabulary and grammar. Great poetry, though sometimes beautiful, is often tough, often an examination of tragedy or failure, often difficult to face. Great poetry is not more appropriate for girls than for boys, and in fact, much of the greatest poetry has been written by men. And poetry is certainly not a relaxed way to write; it is strenuous and requires an almost unimaginable control of vast technical knowledge—poets are like composers of symphonies; they do things that ordinary people cannot do and could not understand without serious preparation.

Sixth, I have implemented a strand of Socratic exploration in the book. In various ways, I have included questions that are open-ended. Often, these Socratic questions are written inside a large capital Q that cannot be missed on the page. The key is for both the instructor and the students to be relaxed and enjoy the questions; these are not the standard textbook questions in which a “right answer” is expected. They are to stimulate thinking, brainstorming. The process for these questions should be to read through the page, then read through the question together, then take a minute or two for students to reflect and write down thoughts, then conduct a discussion in which students share their thoughts about the question. The discussion never should lead to a coronated winner, just to the elaboration of a number of strong possibilities, with students coming in with supporting thoughts about each others’ answers. These Q’s also often involve preference, asking students for their favorite stanza or line; the key here is that we must engage both the cognitive domain and the affective domain if students are to internalize the knowledge, so it is highly intellectual to guide students toward caring about the poetry. Emotions are brainy;

typically, if you do not care about a topic, you probably do not understand it well. The affective response is an index of cognitive comprehension.

Finally, in writing this book I wanted to situate this most human art in a most human concept: the great common ground of human nature. To that end many of the poetry selections—but not all of them—focus on people and their experiences, and the book is filled with a series of photographs of people, of faces especially, that make our common humanity plain to see. I have included photographs of children and adults, boys and girls, men and women, and people from all over the world. In these multicultural faces we see our own feelings and dreams reflected. Every face is our own, every child our own child, every grandfather our own grandfather. I hope that these photographs and ideas can become one brick in a wall of tolerance, acceptance, and identification that will promote feelings of concern for the happiness and welfare of all people, nationally and internationally. Many of history's atrocities are based on a dehumanization that allows individuals to do the unthinkable because they have blinded themselves to the humanity and equality of another. To perceive, respect, and love our common humanity is among the most important ideas encountered in education.

There are other design elements that should be mentioned.

One is that the book is made to serve a dual purpose, both as a stand-alone text and as a book in a series. Each book in the series goes beyond the previous book. In *Poetry and Humanity*, even though anything discussed previously is presented again but with new examples, there are also new concepts at every level so that the series continually moves students forward. Furthermore, this book moves into more mature content areas than the previous books; in the first books, I attempted to focus on positive poetry for younger children, but in this volume I have moved on into more serious topics, including tragedy. In addition to offering more advanced topics, I have included longer works and more challenging poems.

A second point is that the book itself, like my vocabulary and grammar books, builds in a cumulative way. I begin with a chapter on sounds, rhymes, alliteration, and so forth. Then there is a chapter on meter, but in the meter chapter we examine new poems for meter *and* sound. In the following chapter on stanza, we begin looking at the stanza, and the meter, and the sounds of poems. So all terms presented become live and are immediately employed whenever possible. It keeps building.

You will also see that the overall design and feel of the book are defiant of the typical norms for textbooks. You will not find here the lock-step dull pattern of text presentation, then questions at the end of each chapter for the students to work on at their desks. That is not what we want; it would be an affront to the subject we are studying. I have tried to make this book more comfortable to live in, with good paragraphs to relax in and paintings on the walls. I want instructors and students to be able to go into the book and look around. And go back. The book is designed to offer great flexibility; you can teach it as a separate unit, or you can do a piece of it in each term, or you can bring it in when you are reading poetry in another text and let it light the space.

On the following pages you will find things to talk about and things for students to do. They are divided into sections that correspond with the chapters of the book. You have the option of using each part as you finish that chapter or of waiting until you finish the book and then conducting a major review with those questions. There is no one right way; do what works best in your classroom.

The book is also different from the norm in the details of its content. Most texts mention alliteration, but very few mention, as I have, amphimacer or terza rima. The fact is that the typical presentation of content in most academic subjects stops too soon. Let's teach a lot; that is what I think. Do we think that students who can learn anapest cannot learn amphimacer? Even though students will not find many poems written in amphimaciac meter, there is real value in presenting it; it puts a frame around the four common meters, and it saves students from the error of thinking that they have reached the border. Giving them a glimpse of amphimacer or of the villanelle is like showing them the land and then climbing to the hilltop to point out the valley beyond. The land of poetics is not so small, not so confined as most texts make it appear, and students need to know that.