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ELEGIA STANZA, elegiac quatrains, heroic quatrains. In Eng., the iambic pentameter quatrains rhymed abab. While it had been frequently employed without elegiac feeling or intention by other poets, e.g., Shakespeare in his sonnets and John Dryden in his Annuus Mirabilis, the term elegiac stanza was apparently made popular by its use in Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1750), though, in fact, the association of the quatrains with *elegy in Eng. appears at least as early as James Hammond's association of the *quatrain with *elegy in English poetry in his *Country Churchyard* (1750). W. J. Bate, The Stylistic Development of Keats (1945).

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ELEGY

I. History
II. Criticism

I. History. In mod. usage, an *elegy* is a poem of loss or mourning. The term is Gr., its initial significance metaphorical: *elegia* designates a poem in elegiac *couplets*. In antiquity, the meter is used for a range of subjects and styles, incl. the kind of combative, promiscuous love presented in the poetry of Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid. The popularity and prestige of what is still called an elegy are *pastoral*: the lament for Daphnis (who died of love) by Theocritus, the elegy for Adonis attributed to Bion, the elegy on Bion attributed to Moschus, and another lament for Daphnis in the fifth *eclogue* of Virgil. All are stylized and mythic, with hints of ritual; the first three are punctuated by incantatory *refrains*. The elegies on Daphnis are staged performances within an otherwise casual setting. Nonhuman elements of the pastoral world are enlisted in the mourning: nymphs, satyrs, the landscape itself. In Virgil, the song of grief is paired with one celebrating the dead man's apotheosis; the poem is usually read as an *allegory* on the death and deification of Julius Caesar. Virgil's poem becomes particularly influential and adaptable. In the 9th c., Paschiasius Radbertus composes an imitation in which the nymphs, Galathea and Phyllis sing of a deceased shepherd monk as a figure for Christ. At the prompting of humanism, Ren. poets experiment with the pastoral elegy and use it for a range of personal, political, and symbolic reference. Few collections of pastoral elegies in the Ren. are without at least one elegy, and there are important stand-alone examples, such as Clément Marot's "Elegy" in *omis* and *Lycidas* in Eng., on a close friend (1639). The latter is widely regarded as Milton's first major poetic achievement and the most successful vernacular instance of the genre. It was, nevertheless, sharply criticized in the next century by Samuel Johnson for its artificiality; he speaks for a growing disenchantment with the genre. Major poets, however, can return to it in full dress: P. Shelley in "Adonais" (1821) on the shockingly early death of John Keats, W. B. Yeats in "Shepherd and Goatherd" (1918) on an unnamed shepherd who "died in the great war beyond the sea." The presence of the genre can also be felt in less-adorned poems, in the general sense that the countryside is the right place for elegiac feeling (Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," 1750) or in the arch affirmation of natural sympathy with which W. H. Auden opens his elegy on Yeats (1939).

Pastoral, however, is only a specialized trad. within the wider field of poetic treatments of death and loss. Such poems (which may or may not call themselves elegies) show an immense diversity, within which filtrations can be complex. Some important examples are really sui generis among the few unforgettable Eng. poems of the first decade of the 16th c. is John Skelton's *Philip Sparrow*, 1,400 unpredictable lines on the death of a young girl's pet bird. The object in question is usually another person, often specifically identified: an important public figure or someone with a close personal connection to the poet, such as a spouse, lover, parent, child, or friend. Elegies on other poets are particularly common; elegies for oneself are at least as old as Ovid's *Exile* poems. Elegies for groups or classes of people (esp.
those killed in war) date back to the Greeks but become a particular feature of the 20th c. (such as Anna Akhmatova’s Requiem (1935, pub. 1963) on the “nameless friends” lost in the Stalinist terror of 1935–40). Poems can present themselves as epitaphs or as containing epitaphs, sometimes addressing a visitor to the cemetery (siste viator). Even in times that value poetic artifice at its most elaborate, poems of personal grief—such as Henry King’s “Exequy” on the dead wife he calls “his matchless never to be forgotten friend” (1634)—can be strikingly direct in their effect. In 20th-c. writing, the appetite for directness becomes conspicuous, at times brutal (“he’s dead / the old bastard”; W. C. Williams, “Death” [1930]). It is, however, an equally famous resource of elegies to proceed by complicated indirectness. In Chaucer’s The Book of the Duchess (ca. 1368), occasioned by the death of his patron’s wife, the dreaming narrator cannot acknowledge that occasion until the last of the poem’s 1,300 lines, long after the reader has divined it. The mourning in Keats’s ode “To Autumn” (1819) is almost entirely subliminal and inexplicit, but strong enough to make three stanzas of seasonal description one of the touchstone lyrics in the lang.

Some important elegies are expansive in their reach. In Walt Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” (1860), a child (as in Philip Sparrow reacting to the death of a bird) hears from the sea a message of “Death, death, death, death, death” that is also the start of a visionary poetic calling. Paul Valéry’s “Le Cimetière marin” (1922) sets an individual attempt at spiritual and intellectual transcendence amid the felt presence of the dead in a seaside graveyard at noon (its text is appropriated by Krzysztof Penderecki for “Dies irae” [1967], an oratorio on Auschwitz). Perhaps the most distinguished 20th-c. poems to call themselves elegies are R. M. Rilke’s Duineser Elegien (written 1912–22), which move between a sense of insufficiency and loss basic to human consciousness—“And so we live, and are always taking leave”—and a higher order of awareness among beings whom the poet calls “Angels.”

II. Criticism. Critical thought about elegy has been an attempt to come to grips with this diversity, sometimes inadvertently amplifying it. Despite, e.g., current acknowledgment that they have little claim to the term, a number of poignant OE poems have for 200 years been called elegies in a move so closely associated with a sense of their value that the designation is unlikely to change. The prestige and longevity of the genre have increased its variety, and it has often splintered and fragmented. Such evidence suggests that elegy is a kind of manual of grief, that its mode is primarily lyric, with certain characteristic generic markers (apotheosis, exclamation, pathetic fallacy, epideixis, pastoral topos, allusion, epitaph); and that its indigenous moods are sorrow, shock, rage, longing, melancholy, and resolution—often in quick succession. Most literary historians have understood elegy as closely linked to the history of mourning. Pigman’s Grief and Renaissance Elegy and Sacks’s The English Elegy are two particularly influential studies, both pub. in 1985, that continue to set questions and topics for later scholars. While studies vary in the extent of their embrace of psychoanalysis or cultural history, they concur in describing the elegy as, in Pigman’s phrase, “a process of mourning.”

The publication of elegy awaits further study. Chau-
ELISION (Lat., "striking out"; Gr., synaloepha). In prosody, the general term for several devices of contraction whereby two syllables are reduced to one. The Gr. term *synaloepha* nowadays tends to be restricted to only one form; other terms formerly used for elision in cl. prosody include *crasis* and *sineesis*. The forms of elision are: (1) *apharresis*: dropping of a word-initial syllable (vowel); (2) *syncope*: dropping of a word-internal syllable; (3) *apocope*: dropping of a word-final syllable (vowel); (4) *syneresis*: coalescing of two vowels within a word; and (5) *synaloepha*: coalescing of two vowels across a word boundary, i.e., ending one word and beginning the next. (The corresponding terms for addition of a syllable to the beginning, middle, or end of a word are *prosthesis*, *epenthesis*, and *proparalepsis*, respectively.)

Collectively, these are sometimes called, on the analogy of rhet., the "metric figures" (Elwert); Johann Susenbrotus, e.g., gives a taxonomy, calling the types of elision *metaplasms*, i.e., the class of figures for adding or subtracting a letter or syllable. Elision of whole words or phrases is *ellipsis*. Probably at least some of the older terminology is confused, and certainly many prosodists over the centuries have failed to grasp that the reductive processes at work here are normal linguistic ones, not "poetical" devices peculiar to metrical verse. The shortening of words and smoothing out of the alternation of vowels and consonants are both common processes in speech. The opposite of elision is *biatus*.

In Gr., elision, variable in prose but more regular in poetry, is indicated by an apostrophe (’) to mark the disappearance of the elided vowel (generally short alpha, epsilon, and omikron as well as the diphthong ai occasionally in Homer and in comedy); but when elision occurs in Gr. compound words, the apostrophe is not used. In Lat., a final vowel or a vowel followed by final m was not omitted from the written lang.; but as a rule, it was ignored metrically when the next word in the same measure began with a vowel, diphthong, or the aspirate h. In the mod. vernaculars, the apostrophe was retained to indicate graphically certain types of elision, but outside these, there is a larger case of words that have syllabically alternate forms in ordinary speech, e.g., heaven, which some speakers pronounce as a disyllable, some as a monosyllable. This syllabic variance is, of course, useful to poets who write in syllable-counting meters; thus, Sipe shows that in the overwhelming number of cases, Shakespeare chooses the one or other form of such words, which she terms "doublets," so as to conform to the meter.

There is some presumption that the number of syllables in the word that fits the "scansion of the line will be the number uttered in "performance (reading aloud) of the line. Robert Bridges, however, who has one of the seminal mod. discussions, uses the term *elision* in a special sense, to denote syllables that should be elided for purposes of scansion but not in pronunciation, a theory that divides scansion from performance. Ramsey has termed this "semi-elision," in his crit. of Bridge's position. The problem of poets' alteration of the syllabic structure of their lang. for metrical purposes is far more complex than is usually assumed; indeed, the very problem of determining what was ordinary speech practice at various times in the past itself is very difficult. Most of the hist. of Eng. metrical theory from ca. 1650 to 1925 could be framed in terms of dispute about elision, i.e., syllabic regularity.