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MODULE 4: POETRY

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1. Introduction

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, poetry is:

Composition in verse or some comparable patterned arrangement of language in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm; the art of such a composition.

(*Oxford English Dictionary*, “poetry,” 2a)

or

The product of this art as a form of literature; the writings of a poet or poets; poems collectively or generally.

(*Oxford English Dictionary*, “poetry,” 2b)

A poem then can have different manifestations:

- A piece of writing or an oral composition, often characterised by a metrical structure, in which the expression of feelings, ideas, etc., is typically given intensity or flavour by distinctive diction, rhythm, imagery
(*Oxford English Dictionary*, “poem,” 1)
- A composition in prose having elements in common with a poem.
(*Oxford English Dictionary*, “poem,” 2a)
- An artwork or piece of music having elements in common with a poem.
(*Oxford English Dictionary*, “poem,” 2b)

The length of a poem can vary from a couple of words to a multi-volume book.

If length is not a decisive feature of the poetry genre, verse or some comparable patterned arrangement of language, metrical structure, and metaphorical language certainly are.

The use of metaphorical language is for some critics an argument in favour of the treatment of prose poetry as a form of poetry, while for other critics the absence of a patterned arrangement of language and metrical structure is an argument in favour of the treatment of prose poetry as a form of prose. Likewise, Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, which was often written in verse by authors such as William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Middleton, and Ben Jonson, can be considered drama or poetry just as the chorus in a Greek play that was originally composed to be sung.

The TEI Guidelines don't interfere with this poetry/prose debate by treating texts by their document types rather than by their genres. That's why the TEI Guidelines present a chapter on verse, not on poetry. The document type is—contrary to what it may seem—not an innate property of the document, but a formalised analysis of a document by a subjective agent such as a scholar, editor, or encoder who identifies a text as prose, verse, or drama through their own subjective reasoning. For the detailed documentation of the possible encodings of the thus identified text, the encoder or scholar may then turn to the appropriate sections of the TEI Guidelines.

In this module on poetry, we take a step back and consider poetry by example. We will analyse different instances of poetry structurally and encode them for their defining features such as:

- patterned arrangement of language
- rhyme
- metrical structure
- metaphorical language