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ALEX PREMINGER  
AND T. V. F. BROGAN  
*CO-EDITORS*

FRANK J. WARNKE,<sup>†</sup> O. B. HARDISON, JR.,<sup>†</sup>  
AND EARL MINER  
*ASSOCIATE EDITORS*

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## MEDIEVAL POETICS

MEDIEVAL POETICS. Like Aristotle before them and Sidney after, the philosophers and poets of med. Europe speculated about the nature, the kinds, and the functions of poetry in order to illuminate an art they cherished. Their claims for it were, for the most part, comparatively modest. The notion of a poetic imagination (q.v.) which could supplant nature's brazen world with a golden one was not given to them. Artistic originality (q.v.) was often equated in Platonic thought with falsification (see FICTION). Lit. was praised for its didactic efficacy, its ability to offer salutary instances of good and evil (see DIDACTIC POETRY), but nobody imagined that it could modify the moral sensibilities of an audience in the Aristotelian manner. Nevertheless, many learned and engaged minds applied themselves during the Middle Ages to questions bearing on p. They kept the intellectual trad., of Cl. p. (q.v.) alive and prepared the ground for the great theoretical undertakings of Ren. p. (q.v.).

At Byzantium, accurate and perceptive reflections on Aristotle's *Poetics* appear in the *Suda* (late 10th c.). These did not, however, reach the West until the 16th c., and indeed, an accurate text of the *Poetics* was not available in the West until 1500 (Gr. text 1508, trs. into Lat. 1498 and 1536, and into It. 1549). The substance of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, considerably simplified, was preserved in Cicero's *De oratore* and *Topica*. Throughout late antiquity, rhet. had as large a role as grammar—which meant basically the study of poetry—in generating theoretical reflections about lit. By the 4th c., rhetoricians, teachers of the arts of persuasion, were claiming that Virgil really belonged to them and that the *Aeneid* was an argumentative, lawyerly defense of its hero's actions. This emphasis on rhet. maintained itself into the Ren. The text on p. best known in the Middle Ages, Horace's *Ars poetica*, was regularly quoted, and in the 12th c. it occasioned a certain amount of emulation, but it does not seem to have inspired much reflection.

The allegorical interp. of poetry was practiced in Cl. antiquity and, following a complicated series of Jewish and Christian adaptations, magisterially applied to Scripture by Augustine. The first half of Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana* is devoted to a grammatical analysis of the Bible, the second to a rhetorical one. Under the heading of grammar, he gives classic expression to the theory, developed earlier by the Egyptian schools of Scriptural exegesis, that the Old Testament was allegorical throughout and that all interpretive difficulties could be resolved by an appeal to a hidden Christian significance placed in the text by God (see INTERPRETATION, FOURFOLD METHOD). Elsewhere he grounds this view in a theory of history, asserting that God has installed meanings not only beneath the words of the Old Testament but within the historical facts it relates. An emphasis on exploring these hidden meanings pervades the med. sense of textuality (q.v.). Lactantius and others had maintained earlier that the *Aeneid*, Book Six in particular, contained Christian allegory (q.v.), though for the most part this was ascribed to God's purposes rather than Virgil's. In the 6th c., Fulgentius' *De continentia Vergiliana* proposed that Virgil hid profound philosophical truths in the poem and analyzed it as a vast allegory describing the three ages of man and the passage from nature to wisdom to felicity.

Grammar and rhet. are the announced subjects of the first two chapters ("De metris" and "Depoetis") of Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* (ca. 560-636), a conscientious but poorly informed digest of Greco-Roman, late antique, and Patristic doctrine, distantly related to Aristotelian mimetic theory, and med. Europe's most influential encyclopedic statement about poetry. This is a work of conservation rather than original thought, an effort to preserve and order the remnants of a shattered trad. Defining a *carmen* as a metrical composition, Isidore offers a

shaky generic classification and settles, for purposes of definition, on the distinction between poetry, history, and fable. History deals with what actually happened, poetry with what might have happened, fable with what could not possibly have happened. Isidore (rather inconsistently) follows Lactantius in defining the poet as one who disguises historical fact in a gracefully indirect, figurative manner. Not every metrical composition is a poem. Comedy deals with joyous events and private persons of low moral character with the aim of reprehending vice. Tragedy is a mournful song which tells of the deeds and the crimes of ancient kings “while men look on.” It employs “fictional plots fashioned to an image of truth.” In drama the characters speak and the author does not. Only the author speaks in the *Georgics*. In the *Aeneid* both author and characters speak. Despite its manifest inadequacies, the *Etymologiae* remained a major source of information throughout the Middle Ages, and was cited with great respect into the Ren.

Comparatively well informed Carolingian comments on drama appear in the 8th-c. Terentian scholia. These contain, untypically, bits of solid information on staging and dialogue. Their moral doctrine is somewhat more inclusive than Isidore’s: drama instructs by offering images of both vice and virtue to be avoided or emulated. This view made a more spectacular appearance in the distorted Lat. tr. of Averroes’ commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics* made by Hermannus Alemannus in 1256. (The *Poetics* itself was tr. in 1278 by William of Moerbeke, but appears to have received almost no notice.) Averroes had never seen a play and probably never read one. He supposed that a tragedy was a narrative poem recited in public, and so rigorously transposed all of Aristotle’s dramatic terms into strictly ethical ones, beginning by translating tragedy as “praise” and comedy as

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[p. numbers refer upwards. I.e. read them as being at the bottom of the page]

“blame.” Tragedy imitates the deeds of virtuous men in order to inspire virtue in the audience. (The tragic flaw is not mentioned.) Comedy imitates evil actions in order to reprehend vice and encourage avoidance. Averroes was read in the Middle Ages and even into the Ren., though evidently not very widely; the extent of his influence is disputed.

In the 13th c., Vincent of Beauvais’ *Speculum doctrinale* situates Isidore’s traditional claims for poetry next to a revolutionary one extracted from Alfarabi’s *De divisione naturae*. “Alfarabi says that it is proper to poetry to cause by discourse something which is not really fair or foul to be imagined as such by an auditor so that he will believe and either shun it or accept it, since although it is certain that it is not thus in truth, still the souls of the auditors are stirred to shun or desire the thing imagined” (3.109). Imagination—*imaginatio* or *ingenium*—figures prominently elsewhere in 12th-c. Lat. speculation about the powers of the soul, but Vincent’s citation is the first med. European text to connect it with the appeal of poetry. He does not explore the connection, however, and concludes by reformulating Evanthius’ 4th-c. observation that tragedy begins in joy and ends in misery, while comedy does the opposite.

He also says that Alfarabi took poetry to be the least reliable branch of logic, producing a simulacrum of proof. Alfarabi had in fact removed poetry from Aristotle’s class of productive arts and placed it in the *Organon*, thus associating it with the operations and powers of the mind. This is what Aquinas, a fine poet himself, had in mind when he called poetry the lowest of the sciences and when he observed that it had very little of the truth about it. The poet, he says, “leads the mind aside” by his metaphors and figures. This is not a derogation of poetry but a

reference to its imaginative origins and a crucial advance from the unreflectively mimetic assumptions of prescholastic comments on art, like those of Hugh of St. Victor, which tend to treat the poet's craft in much the same terms as the tinker's. It is also a corollary of the scholastic view that truth was *formalissima*, obtained from the scrutiny of abstract essences and not from images of everyday reality or the stuff of concrete experience, and not far removed from 16th-c. notions about poetry as a tissue of enthymemes or "weak proofs."

During the 12th and 13th cs., the texts known collectively as the *artes poeticae* ("arts of poetry"; the major texts are collected in Faral) employ a strictly rhetorical vocabulary to describe the composition of a poem. The poet, like the orator of Aristotle and Cicero, invents material by consulting the topics or commonplaces (*inventio*). He thereupon disposes it (*dispositio*) and decorates the result with appropriate tropes (*elocutio*). The best known *ars poetica*, Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova*, strongly emphasizes premeditation: the poet proceeds like an architect, drawing a plan before building the house. One great resource of art is *amplificatio* (see AMPLIFICATION), the process of turning a short poem into a long one and a long poem into one even longer. He has little to say about endings and nothing about middles or about coherent development in general. John of Garland's *Parisiensis poetria* offers a list of topics along with advice on amplifying. He recommends the diagrammatic aids to memory which Cicero borrowed from Aristotle and provides a diagram of his own—the so-called Wheel of Virgil—for help in finding images appropriate for each level of style, high, middle, and low. As Bede had done long before in his *De arte metrica*, John offers information not only about Cl. meters but about contemporary accentual ones. These treatises were, to be sure, written for schoolboys, but so was the logical treatise of Peter of Spain which represented the state of the art. Despite their practical tenor, the treatises were presented and regarded as major statements. Other important specimens of the genre include Alexander of Villedieu's *Doctrinale*, Matthew of Vendôme's *Ars versificatoria*, and the *Laborintus* of Eberhard the German.

The most popular format for 12th- and 13th-c. literary commentary and analysis was provided by the *accessus ad auctores*. These were partly biographical, partly interpretive schoolroom introductions to major authors, with antecedents in the prologues of Servius. The richest example is the 12th-c. *Dialogus super auctores* of Conrad of Hirschau. Among the ancients, Conrad says, seven things were required for the sufficient discussion of a book: author and title, type of poem, intention of the writer, order and number of books, and explanation. The moderns, however, favor another scheme: material treated, author's intention, final cause of the work, and branch of philosophy to which it belongs. In the 12th c., the branch of philosophy was customarily ethics. An *accessus* to Ovid's *Epistles*, for example, would class it as a work of moral philosophy, maintaining that the author's intention throughout was to praise chaste love, reprehend shameful love, and invite us to live chastely ourselves. In the 13th c., by contrast, the branch of philosophy is frequently logic. Much 12th-c. Scriptural commentary adopts the pattern of the secular *accessus*, a tendency now thought to be related to the increasing concern of the time with the literal and historical significance of the Old Testament.

Bernardus Silvestris, one of the leading spirits of the 12th-c. Neoplatonic revival, followed Fulgentius in claiming that Virgil was an allegorist who hid profound philosophical truths beneath the beauty of his poetry. He was no doubt thinking of his own cosmological epic *De mundi universitate* when he distinguished Scriptural *allegoria* as a vehicle for revealed truth from *integumentum* or *involucrum*, his terms for a hidden philosophical wisdom. This sapiential emphasis continued and culminated in the poetry of Dante, who distin-

guishes in the *Convivio* between the allegory of the poets and the allegory of the theologians, claiming that he had covertly installed profound philosophical statements beneath the surface of his *canzone* to the *donna gentile*, poems which the rest of the world had erroneously taken to be expressions of mere passion. The *Vita nuova* describes the invention of the *dolce stil nuovo* (q.v.), which he regarded as a recovery of the practice of the ancients, who were both poets and sages. The foundations of the *dolce stil* were, he maintained, assiduity in art and the cultivation of knowledge.

In the 24th canto of the *Purgatorio*, Dante explains the difference between his verse and that of his Sicilian predecessors, themselves the continuators of the troubadour (q.v.) trad. The Occitan poets had invented or perhaps borrowed from the Arabs an entirely novel theory of poetic inspiration(q.v.), locating it in the exalted joy and vigor which was paradoxically kindled by a socially refined but sexually passionate love for an unattainable lady. Dante appears to have seen their exaltations and laments as insufficiently reflective and analytical. His own verse, he claims, is a precisely observed transcription of the emotions inspired by Love. This is what his friend Guido Cavalcanti had in mind when, in his *canzone* "Donna mi prega," he refused to write about affairs of the heart without *naturel dimostramento*, "scientific demonstration." The true poet is passionately and accurately wise, and it is this kind of wisdom which, in Limbo, made Dante the sixth member of a company which includes Virgil, Homer, Lucan, Ovid, and Horace.

The dedicatory epistle to the *Paradiso*, addressed to Dante's patron Can Grande della Scala, is in outline a traditional *accessus*, though it is probably not by Dante. Its definition of comedy and tragedy is traditional, its account of allegory Augustinian. Perhaps its most Dantesque assertion concerns the method of treatment, which balances five logical modes against five literary ones (poetic, fictive, descriptive, digressive, metaphorical).

Genuine or not, this allusion to an imaginative realization of philosophical truth is basic to Dante's conception of art. In his unfinished *De vulgari eloquentia* (ca. 1303), he conducts a search for an It. poetic lang. appropriate to verse which aspires to the same lasting fame as that of the ancients. This would be a standard dialect divested of provincial peculiarity and worthy to be spoken at the royal court of Italy, if only Italy had a royal court. The subjects—lofty ones—fit for such a lang. are considered. The matter of form and style leads to an unprecedented analytical survey of contemp. poetic practice in Italy, Provence, and France. This expertly principled and engaged account of verse writing in Dante's time decisively transcends the med. Speculative trad, and indeed makes much 15th-c. It. theorizing and commentary seem dim by comparison.

See now MEDIEVAL POETRY. For discussion of Med. Lat. poetry see LATIN POETRY, *Medieval*. For discussion of the transition from Med. Lat. Poetry and p. to the vernaculars, see FRENCH PROSODY; ITALIAN PROSODY; SPANISH PROSODY; SECONDE RHETORIQUE; then see ENGLISH PROSODY; GERMAN PROSODY. See also HEBRAISM; HEBREW PROSODY AND POETICS; HERMENEUTICS; INTERPRETATION, FOURFOLD METHOD; RENAISSANCE POETICS.