

Latin Retrograde Verse: Puzzles for the Textual Editor and Literary Historian

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A note to participants: This workshop is **not** designed solely for specialists in Latin versification! Retrograde verse is strange, entertaining, and sometimes ridiculous stuff. A superficial familiarity with the structure of Latin hexameters and elegiac couplets will make the texts more accessible to you, but it is not a prerequisite for engaging with the questions that will be foregrounded during the workshop, which lie in the domains of manuscript studies, the history of education, textual editing, and poetics. Translations of Latin texts have not been included because the content is often beside the point. Those of you who wish to exercise your Latin skills may enjoy identifying and translating the prose lines of the text *Hec est forma* (item 6 below), but you shouldn't feel obliged to, as we will work through this text during the workshop.

1. What is retrograde verse?

Retrograde verse is a type of *Versspielerei* or “verse frivolity” in which the text is both metrically viable and syntactically sound when read either from beginning to end or from end to beginning, word by word. This feat, which was sometimes undertaken in a playful spirit and other times ostentatiously, was most easily accomplished in a language that communicated syntax primarily by means of inflectional endings rather than by means of word order, such as Latin. The history of Latin retrograde verse stretches back to the classical period and persists through the early modern period; its production peaked during late antiquity and again during the later Middle Ages. Many unusual quantitative forms of this genre are attested by the late antique grammarians, but the most common forms practiced by medieval authors were (1) hexameters that remain hexameters when read backwards, (2) elegiac couplets that remain elegiac couplets, and (3) rhythmic verses that become quantitative hexameters or elegiac couplets when read backwards. Examples of these are given below.

2. Why study retrograde verse?

- Retrograde verse presents the reader with several paradoxes. The feat of writing retrogrades is supposedly (according to some of its practitioners) virtuosic and ostentatious; however, most surviving specimens are hopelessly banal in content, and many are structured formulaically to lighten the task of adhering to severe metrical exigencies. To put it bluntly, most of this stuff isn't good poetry by the standards of any historical period. Moreover, though valued as an élite form of versification, it was also practiced by schoolchildren who were learning to compose Latin poetry, and copyists who took care to preserve it in manuscript often did not understand the mechanics of retrograde verse well enough to weed out their own and their exemplars' obvious errors.
- In their manuscript contexts, retrograde poems shed light on several aspects of the history of Latin literacy in the Middle Ages. The highly corrupted form of many longer retrograde texts sheds an unflattering light on the Latin literacy and versificatory knowledge of late medieval copyists. Formulaically composed work-in-progress retrogrades indicate the role of this genre and of the formulaic method in later medieval composition pedagogy.
- There are likely to be many more specimens of retrograde verse in manuscript waiting to be identified and edited, partly because brief specimens have gone unnoticed by modern cataloguers, and also because retrogrades of all varieties are indistinguishable from ordinary quantitative and rhythmical verses, so if the rubric indicating a poem's retrograde nature is omitted by a copyist at some stage, it is likely that subsequent readers and copyists will not recognize that it is a retrograde poem.
- The circumstances of the manuscript transmission of many retrograde texts pose intriguing challenges to the textual editor. When a longer retrograde text is preserved only in highly corrupt forms, should the editor emend (which is typically very easy because of the metrical exigencies that should apply) or present a diplomatic edition to reflect the compromised reception of the text? How can an editor clearly present lines of verse that amount to works in progress, with deletions and variations included? What is the most efficient and useful way to edit a brief text that is preserved in many variant forms—especially in cases where the content is so banal that it doesn't bear close scrutiny?

3. Scansion of common quantitative Latin verse forms

- For a refresher on determining syllable length in quantitative verse, with an emphasis on the dactylic hexameter, see this ten-minute video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGF47JT0hPA> .
- A more detailed and advanced discussion of the scansion of the dactylic hexameter is available at <http://www.skidmore.edu/academics/classics/courses/metrica/> .

- If you understand hexameter scansion, the elegiac couplet is easy: it's a hexameter followed by a pentameter. A pentameter is made up of two units of two and a half (dactylic) feet each:

- ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | - || - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | -
 Ausoniae decus, o lux pia Romulidum

Either the first or second foot of the pentameter can be a spondee instead of a dactyl, but this change is not allowed after the caesura:

- - | - - | - || - ~ ~ | - ~ ~ | -
 cor tranquillum, nec sis male dispositus

- In case you'd like to know more, a very accessible treatment of all Latin quantitative forms is found in D.S. Raven, *Latin Metre* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965; reprinted London: Bristol Classical Press, 1998).

4. Analysis of rhythmic Latin verse

- The best-known system for describing rhythmic Latin verse is that developed by Dag Norberg, whose classic manual is now translated into English: *An Introduction to the Study of Medieval Latin Versification*, trans. Grant C. Roti and Jacqueline de La Chappelle Skubly, with an introduction by Jan Ziolkowski (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004).
- Norberg describes each repeated rhythmical unit (usually a stanza) according to the number of syllables in each sub-unit (usually a single verse). This number of syllables is followed by *p* if the final stress-accent of the sub-unit falls on the paroxytone (i.e. the penult) and by *pp* if the final syllable of the sub-unit falls on the proparoxytone (the antepenult).
- For example, the rhythm of each of the following four stanzas from John of Garland's *Parisiana poetria* would be notated as (2 x [7pp + 6p], 2p):

7pp	+ 6p	+7pp	+ 6p	+ 2p
Patribus hec ómnibus,	genibus curuátis,	leuatisque máníbus,	pedibus nudátis	scríbo.
Canibus a uílibus,	grauibus saluátus,	iocatusque páribus,	gradibus firmátus	íbo.
Creticus et rústicus,	liricus blandítor,	sitorque tétricos,	Geticus largítor	mórtis.
Patria me lúlia,	uenia ditáuit,	leuauitque fúria,	muria mundáuit	sórtis.

[John of Garland prefaces these verses by explaining that they are in the voice of "a certain cleric absolved by the Holy Father." Translation: "I write these verses to all my elders, with knees bent, hands raised, feet bare. I shall go about saved from vile and oppressive dogs, and laughing to my friends, because my rank as a cleric has been reaffirmed. The judge is a rustic, melodious flatterer, a cruel thirster, a Gothic dispenser of death. The land of Caesar has enriched me by its kindness, freed me from the Fury, cleansed me from the dregs of my lot." The *Parisiana poetria* is edited and translated by Traugott Lawler (New Haven: Yale, 1974); I have made small adjustments to Lawler's translation.]

5. **Common forms of retrograde verse.** Text in the right column is the retrograded version of the text in the left column.

- **hexameter \leftrightarrow hexameter** (from Oswald the Younger of Ramsey, *Centum concito*).

<p>- ∪ ∪ - - - - ∪ ∪ - x Ingeniosis ars hec paret nescia mismet: - ∪ ∪ - - - - ∪ ∪ - x experientis sens(um) exercet sepius ipsam, - ∪ ∪ - - - ∪ ∪ - - ∪ ∪ - x doctilogorum nam socium dat doctificando.</p>	<p>- ∪ ∪ - - - ∪ ∪ - - ∪ ∪ - x Doctificando dat socium nam doctilogorum, - - ∪ ∪ - - - - ∪ ∪ - x ipsam sepius exercet sens(um) experientis: - - ∪ ∪ - - - - ∪ ∪ - x mismet nescia paret hec ars ingeniosis</p>
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- **elegiac couplet \leftrightarrow elegiac couplet** (from anonymous *Hec est forma componendi*). Note the effect of *nec* and *non* on the meaning of the retrograded text.

<p>- ∪ ∪ - ∪ ∪ - - - ∪ ∪ - x Sis homo non fera tu, leuis non asper; habeto - - - - ∪ ∪ - ∪ ∪ - cor tranquillum, nec sis male dispositus. - ∪ ∪ - ∪ ∪ - - - ∪ ∪ - x Subsidium mihi tu confer nec subtrahe; dextram - ∪ ∪ - ∪ ∪ - - ∪ ∪ - ∪ ∪ - porrige nec miserum me fuge, spes mea tu.</p>	<p>- ∪ ∪ - ∪ ∪ - ∪ ∪ - - - ∪ ∪ - x Tu mea spes, fuge me miserum nec porrige dextram; - ∪ ∪ - - - - ∪ ∪ - ∪ ∪ - Subtrahe nec confer tu mihi subsidium. - ∪ ∪ - ∪ ∪ - - - - ∪ ∪ - x Dispositus male sis, nec tranquillum cor habeto; - - - - - ∪ ∪ - ∪ ∪ - asper non leuis, tu fera non homo sis.</p>
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- **rhythmic verses \leftrightarrow elegiac couplet:** If you reverse the lines from John of Garland's *Parisiana poetria* printed above, each stanza of (2 x [7pp + 6p], 2p) becomes an elegiac couplet.

<p>- - - - ∪ ∪ - ∪ ∪ - ∪ ∪ - x // - - - ∪ ∪ - - ∪ ∪ - ∪ ∪ - Sortis mundauit muria, furia- que leuauit, // ditauit uenia lulia me patria. Mortis largitor Geticus, tetricus- que sititor, // blanditor lyricus rusticus et creticus. Ibo firmatus gradibus, paribus- que iocatus, // saluatus grauibus uilibus a canibus. Scribo nudatis pedibus, manibus- que leuatis, // curuatis genibus, omnibus hec patribus.</p>
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6. Transcription of Oxford, Bodleian Library, e Mus. 96, p. 456.

- This transcription aims to represent faithfully the text preserved on the manuscript page, without any emendations. The text is laid out in two columns, in the same alignment presented here. I have used a semicolon to represent the *punctus elevatus*.
- This is just the first of two pages of the text in the Bodleian MS; the only other known copy of the text, which is preserved in London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 120, fol. 200v, is far more corrupt. The opening line of the text means "This is a model for composing retrograde verses."
- What would you do with this if you were the editor? What errors would you fix, and how might you reconstruct the text? Is it more useful for the present-day reader to see your reconstruction or the text as it stands in this manuscript? (This is one of two known copies of the text, and it is by far the more complete and intelligible copy.)

Hec est forma componendi uersus retrogradientes

In progressu et regressu istorum uersuum est eadem

sentencia · nec metrum mutatur

Iustificantem te colo dantem premia christe

Me rege consulo · me tege presidio · In regressu

horum uersuum qui fiet a secundo et quarto uersu

fit pentameter exameter · et e conuerso nec mut

atur sentencia ·

Ecclesie decor et decus inuiolata maria

Virgo dictandi det mihi materiam

Subueniat · mihi quae manet intemerata maria

Virgo carnales reprimat illecebras

In hiis uersibus est eadem sentencia metro mutato

Pax tibi sit bone rex Neomannos perdere noli

Francia francorum ; rex · tibi · sufficiat

Pacificam · tibi · se ; substernit mentria genti

Parcere pacate ; sit tibi · propositum · Isti uersus

concordant cum octo precedentibus

Pauperibus bene fac modico pro munere multis

Plurima largitus · est · omnipotens

Pauperitas tua te transfacto tempore iuuat

Tempore presenti tu pete diuicias · Isti etiam sunt uersus

sunt eiusdem generis cuius duodecim proximo precedentes

Precipuum tibi sit ; peruersos uertere mores

Querere uirtutes sit tibi fructiferum

Perpetuum tibi · sit celorum gaudia nosce

Tristia cum fugias sit · tibi · plausificum

In progressu istorum uersuum habetur omnino contraria

sentencia metro non mutato

Pacem succindere uis nec sismata tollere gestis

Tu male scismaticus ; non bene catholicus

Nutris scismata nec fidei das lumina uere

Te duce non duce me fit uia perfidie

Isti uersus concordant penitus cum proximis premissis .

Esse decet monachum uirtutis non uicium uas

Mens proba nec reproba cor graue non leue sit

Christe colo te dantem premia ; iustificantem

Presidio tege me consilio rege me

Plaudo tibi · commendo te collaudo cano te

Sanctifica tibi me · pacifica mihi · me

Materiam mihi dictandi uirgo maria

Inuiolata decus et decor ecclesie

Illecebras reprimat carnales uirgo maria

Intemerata manet quae mihi subueniat

Sufficiat · tibi · rex francorum francia noli

Perdere normannos rex bone tibi sit pax

Propositum tibi sit pacate parcere genti

Neustria substernit se tibi pacificam

Omnipotens deus · est · largitus plurima multis

Munere pro modico fac bene pauperibus

Diuicias pete tu presenti tempore · iuuat

Tempore transfacto te tua pauperies

Fructiferum tibi sit uirtutes querere · mores ;

Vertere peruersos sit tibi precipuum

Plausificum tibi sit fugias cum tristia nosse

Gaudia celorum sit tibi perpetuum

Gestis tollere sismata ; nec uis scindere pacem

Catholicus bene non scismaticus male tu

Vere lumina das fidei nec scismata nutris

Perfidie uia fit ; me duce non duce te