

# Transformation and Continuity in the Teaching of Rhetoric in Late Medieval Universities: The Case of the *Poetria nova*

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The most widely read rhetorical treatise of the later Middle Ages, Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova*, has survived in more than 200 manuscripts, almost two thirds of which are accompanied by commentaries or collections of glosses. For the most part these are codified sets of teachers' notes, sometimes individual efforts but sometimes a record of pedagogical techniques passed down over academic generations.<sup>1</sup> I am completing a book-length study of all of the commentaries on this most popular of all medieval rhetorical treatises, more than two dozen manuscripts of which are probably of university origin. The scope of this project has brought into relief ways that traditional divisions and categories of university history do not fit the patterns that emerge when we focus on these material products of medieval university culture.

The *Poetria nova* is a 2,000-line poem written in imitation of Horace's *Ars poetica*, called the *Poetria* in the Middle Ages. The *Poetria nova* also incorporates much of the doctrine of the Pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, including the tropes, figures of words, and figures of thought. The *Poetria nova* begins and ends with addresses to Pope Innocent III, and also treats methods of starting a work, natural and artificial order, amplification and abbreviation, the theory of conversions, and the theory of determinations.

Its author, Geoffrey of Vinsauf (fl. 1200), exemplifies within his text the techniques that he is teaching. Thus, the treatment of amplification is amplified, the treatment of abbreviation abbreviated. Metaphor is discussed in figurative language, periphrasis is discussed in a roundabout way, and so forth. The rhetorical doctrine in the *Poetria nova* was considered as applicable to prose as to verse, and the various ways it could be used in the classroom, combined with the range of styles that Geoffrey used to illustrate techniques, made it the general all-purpose medieval rhetorical treatise *par excellence*.

The manuscripts of the *Poetria nova* of confirmed or probable university origin or provenance are from Central Europe: what we now refer to as Germany, the Czech Republic,

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<sup>1</sup> See the dates and versions of *An Early Commentary on the 'Poetria nova' of Geoffrey of Vinsauf*, ed. Marjorie Curry Woods, Garland Medieval Texts 12 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985), pp. xxxvii-lii.

Poland, and Austria. Archival evidence supports this geographical distribution. Both the earliest and latest documented usage of the text at a university level is in Prague,<sup>2</sup> beginning in 1366 and continuing throughout the fifteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Documented use of the *Poetria nova* at the University of Vienna is limited to the the last decade of the fourteenth century,<sup>4</sup> but we can assume that it continued to be taught there throughout the fifteenth century as well. At the University of Erfurt the *Poetria nova* is listed among the required books early in the fifteenth century, in 1412.<sup>5</sup> And according to documents relating to the University of Krakow, the *Poetria nova* was taught there at both the beginning and the end of the fifteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the requirements of the 1436-37 statutes of the University of Leipzig require simply *aliquis liber in rhetorica* ‘some book of rhetoric’, a phrase that Sönke Lorenz has argued refers to either the *Poetria nova* or the *Laborintus* of Eberhard the German.<sup>7</sup>

It is often stated that rhetorical teaching at the Central European universities was remedial, that is, that students studied rhetoric at university there because they had not received sufficient preparation before. There is some evidence that such was the case. For example, students at the University of Vienna had to study a text like the *Poetria nova* at university if they

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<sup>2</sup> *Monumenta Historica Universitatis Carolo-Ferdinandae* 1,1: 76, cited in J.F. Hautz, *Geschichte der Universität Heidelberg* (Mannheim, 1884; reprint, Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1980), p. 356.

<sup>3</sup> Josef Triska, *Literarni Cinnost Predhusitke University*, Sbirka Pramenu a Prírucek K Dejinám University Karlovy 15 (Prague: Universita Karlova, 1967), p. 163.

<sup>4</sup> It was the subject of lectures in 1394, 1395, 1396, 1398, and 1413. Paul Uiblein, *Acta Facultatis Artium Universitatis Vindobonensis 1385-1416* (Graz: Böhlau, 1968), pp. 106, 121, 138, 164, and 401. See also Joseph Aschbach, *Geschichte der Wiener Universität im ersten Jahrhunderte ihres Bestehens* (Vienna: K.K. Universität, 1865), p. 88; James H. Overfield, *Humanism and Scholasticism in Late Medieval Germany* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984), pp. 40-41. Sönke Lorenz, “*Libri ordinarie legendi*: Ein Skizze zum Lehrplan der mitteleuropäischen Artistenfakultät um die Wende vom 14 zum 15. Jahrhundert,” *Argumente und Zeugnisse*, ed. Wolfram Hogreb, *Studia Philosophica et Historica* 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1985), p. 219.

<sup>5</sup> J.C.H. Weissenborn, *Acten der Erfurter Universität II*, *Geschichtsquellen der Provinz Sachsen* 8.2 (Halle, 1884; reprint Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1976), p. 134.

<sup>6</sup> In 1406-09, the time of the great migration of students from Prague to Krakow, Leipzig, and Rostock, the statutes of the University of Krakow list *Poetria nova aut exercicium rhetorice* as a required text, and it was the subject of lectures in Krakow throughout the last decades of the fifteenth century. Stanislaus Stanno lectured on it in 1487, others in the later years (in 1489, 1490, 1491, 1495, 1496, and 1498): Stefan Zabłocki, “The Medieval Versified Treatises and the Eighteenth Century Jesuit Teaching in Poland,” unpublished paper quoted with the author’s permission.

<sup>7</sup> Lorenz, “*Libri ordinarie legendi*,” p. 219.

had not done so elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Also indicative of this phenomenon is the presence of “elementary” school texts copied in fourteenth and fifteenth-century university manuscripts from Central Europe, works recently studied by Nikolaus Henkel, and, with a specific focus on the *Fables of Avianus*, Michael Baldzuhn.<sup>9</sup> Were these texts seen as remedial? That is, were lectures on works such as the *Fables of Avianus* and the *Poetria nova* to make up for weaknesses in the students’ backgrounds when they arrived at university (sometimes as young as eleven), or were these texts part of the “real” curriculum? The answer is, probably both.

At the University of Vienna, where as we saw students could pass out of the rhetoric requirement if they had received prior training, professors drew lots to see who would teach what work. The *Poetria nova* seems to have occupied a sort of middle ground, definitely not one of the works chosen first, but not the last either.<sup>10</sup> (Claudia Kern argues that the choice was not so wide open, and that junior professors almost always taught the “lower” subjects, such as grammar and rhetoric.<sup>11</sup>)

Paradoxically, however, the Central European universities where the *Poetria nova* was taught include those in which humanism arrived the earliest. A case in point is the University of Leipzig, which in the mid-fifteenth-century was a center of translation of works from Latin into German specifically for use in the university. This is the same period during which copies of the *Poetria nova* (and other texts) were made at Leipzig by students Hartmann Schedel, who later became a famous physician, historian, artist, humanist, and book collector, and Johannes Tegernpeck, who became Abbot of St. Emmeram (1471-1493). These manuscripts of the *Poetria nova* have survived, and today both are located in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich.

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<sup>8</sup> Overfield, 40-41: “At Vienna and Ingolstadt students seeking their bachelor’s degree were required to have heard one lecture series on an unspecified book of rhetoric....In the 1390’s for example, a Viennese master lectured on *the Poetria nova* of Geoffrey of Vinsauf.”

<sup>9</sup> Nikolaus Henkel, *Deutsche Übersetzungen lateinischer Schultexte: Ihre Verbreitung und Funktion im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit, Mit einem Verzeichnis der Texte*; and Michael Baldzuhn, “*Quidquid placet*. Stellung und Gebrauchesformen der ‘Fabulae Aviani’ im Schulunterricht des 15. Jahrhunderts,” *Schule und Schüler im Mittelalter: Beiträge zur europäischen Bildungsgeschichte des 9. Bis 15. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Martin Kintzinger, Sönke Lorenz, and Michael Walter (Cologns: Böhlau, 1996), pp. 327-383.

<sup>10</sup> See Uiblein, *Acta Facultatis*, pp. 106 for the meeting to decide courses on August 30, 1394; 121 for September 1, 1395; 137-38 for September 1, 1396; 164-65 for November 10, 1398; and 401 for September 1, 1413.

<sup>11</sup> Claudia Kern, “Patterns in Arts Teaching at the Medieval University of Vienna,” *Viator* 18 (1987): 321-327 and tables; here 321-23.

Schedel's manuscript, Clm. 237, was copied in 1462. Tegernpeck's manuscript, Clm 14529, was copied in 1465 and 1466.<sup>12</sup>

[ASIDE: Such specific information in these Leipzig manuscripts of the *Poetria nova*, in which a student-scribe states where and when he studied the text, is in stark contrast to the documentary evidence for the teaching of the *Poetria nova* at Leipzig, which as we saw was very vague. In fact, only eight of surviving manuscripts of the *Poetria nova* of probable university origin, including these two, can be assigned to a specific university. Thus, while it is possible to construct a generic picture of the teaching of this text, it difficult to make geographical distinctions among the was the text was taught based on manuscript evidence alone.]

Their copies are not written in the cramped student gothic script found in many other university manuscripts of the *Poetria nova*, but rather in a more graceful (but not humanist) cursive. The relationship of gloss to text in each is also unusual for a university manuscript, in that the text dominates the gloss, the opposite of the treatment of the *Poetria nova* in other Central European university copies of the text. Thus, Schedel's and Tegernpeck's manuscripts greatly resemble the school manuscripts of the *Poetria nova* made earlier and further west.

Yet, perhaps only coincidentally, the University of Leipzig also saw the contemporaneous arrival, in the person of Peter Luder, of Italian humanism into northern Europe. And other manuscripts of the *Poetria nova* of probable university origin or provenance contain works by Luder and other humanists. Were Tegernpeck's and Schedel's "school" commentaries, with their emphasis on textual analysis and citations of classical authors in the glosses, in any way influenced by the textual and literary interests of the Italian pre-humanists who also wrote commentaries on the *Poetria nova*? This suspiciion is strengthened by more than a dozen fourteenth and a dozen fifteenth-century Italian copies the *Poetria nova* that contain classical texts of special interest to humanists or works by humanists as well as typical medieval schooltexts.

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<sup>12</sup> Samuel Jaffe, *Nicholas Dybinus' "Declaracio,"* p. 272. The catalogue descriptions for each are found in Carolus Halm et al., *Catalogus Codicum Latinorum Bibliothecae Regiae Monacensis* (Munich, 1892), I, 1, 59-61 (for Schedel); II, 2, 188 (for Tegernpeck). Tegernpeck's manuscript was housed in the library at St. Emmeram ("Em. F 32").

One possible explanation of what appears to us to be a confusion of pedagogical levels in Central Europa was a tradition of sending monks to universities (a number of the manuscripts of the *Poetria nova* copied in university format have survived in or are from monastic collections). These university-trained monks would, after their sojourn in the big city, return to teach students at lower levels back at their monasteries. Thus, they could have been studying elementary works at university in order to teach them at schools at home.<sup>13</sup>

Some Central European copies of the *Poetria nova* of probable university origin are, indeed, extremely elementary in nature, concentrating on provided translation help and glosses on difficult words or allusions; that is, they concentrate on the text of the *Poetria nova*. Others, however, reflect a much more general interest in rhetorical theory. This university emphasis on the *Poetria nova*'s theoretical content at the expense of its verse form is carried to an extreme in a work called the *Compendium Poetrie nove* by Otto of Lüneburg.<sup>14</sup> This compendium retains little that is unique of the *Poetria nova* but is instead a competent digest of general rhetorical principles. Martin Carmargo argues that this work originally was intended not to replace but to supplement the *Poetria nova*, although it was often copied without the *Poetria nova* but with its own sets of glosses and commentaries.

The situation seems equally confusing in fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Italy, where manuscript evidence shows that the *Poetria nova* was taught at the most elementary level as part of a conservative pedagogical movement in Tuscany,<sup>15</sup> as well as at an advanced level in

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Robert Babcock has noted the close connections in the fifteenth century between one Austrian monastery, Lambach, and the University of Vienna in the fifteenth century and suggested this possible explanation to me. See Robert Babcock, *Reconstructing a Medieval Library*, p. 71: "Close connections between Lambach and the University of Vienna existed in the fifteenth century—Lambach monks and abbots studied and even taught at the university—and the abbey had ties with important humanistic figures, including Nicholas of cusa and conrad Celtis."

<sup>14</sup> See Martin Camargo: "'Si dictare velis': Versified 'Artes dictandi' and Late Medieval Writing Pedagogy," *Rhetorica* 14 (1996): 265-88, esp. 269-71 and 283-85. Camargo notes that "During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the Compendium was widely used at universities in the German-speaking region from Bavaria east to Prague, south to Vienna, and including parts of Switzerland--what Worstbrock refers to as the area that provided students for the university at Vienna. In the course of the fifteenth century it also came to be taught at universities in Poland": a very similar geographical distribution to that of the *Poetria nova* itself.

<sup>15</sup> Paul F. Gehl, "Latin Readers in Fourteenth-Century Florence; Schoolkids and Their Books," 387-440; see also the revised version of this material in *A Moral Art: Grammar, Society, and Culture in Trecento Florence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

studies such as that in Padua by teachers in the vanguard of early humanism, such as Pace of Ferrara.<sup>16</sup> Pace's commentary is the most detailed of all surviving commentaries on the text, and also among the most admiring of Geoffrey of Vinsauf as a teacher of rhetoric. The various formats of the surviving Italian manuscripts support this wide range of approaches, from those copied in large script with few abbreviations for young readers to very long double-columned manuscripts of commentary only, without the text of the *Poetria nova* itself. While there is no documentary evidence of the *Poetria nova*'s being taught at a fully incorporated university in Italy,<sup>17</sup> the significant number of long, complex, sophisticated commentaries on the work written in Italy during the fourteenth century and copied at least until the middle of the fifteenth century indicate a continuing interest in, use of, and appreciation for a medieval rhetorical treatise of proven utility at all pedagogical levels.

I must emphasize that I do not think that pedagogical conservatism alone accounts for the continued concentration on the *Poetria nova* in Italy. The textual interests of the early Italian humanists have many formal and thematic similarities with the textual focus of medieval remedial pedagogy.<sup>18</sup> Whether there is a causal connection to this similarity or not, this broad similarity of approach between the most basic and the most innovative of medieval pedagogical traditions should give us pause.

Thus, the case of the *Poetria nova* raises a number of questions about curricular history. What makes a pedagogical text like the *Poetria nova* or an approach like close textual analysis seem remedial in one context and revolutionary in another? What are we looking for in the concepts of transformation and continuity when we determine one kind of evidence to be more important than another? How do we evaluate differences between what educators say and other kinds of evidence of what they actually do? These are questions that cannot be answered by reference to a single text or a single period, and I welcome the opportunity to present this evidence before such a diverse and knowledgeable audience.

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<sup>16</sup> On Pace and the manuscripts of his commentary on the *Poetria nova*, see Woods, "A Medieval Rhetoric Goes to School—and to University," *Rhetorica* 9 (1991): 55-65.

<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Paul Grendler for supplying me with this information, which will appear in his forthcoming study of universities in renaissance Italy, and to him and to Ron Witt and Paul Gehl for discussing with me the place(s) of the *Poetria nova* in Italian education of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

<sup>18</sup> Woods, "A Medieval Rhetoric."

