(De)Forming the Present: Politics of 'renaissance' in Medieval Latin Poetry

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Introduction: Some Problems

When considering the central topic of the congress from which this volume originates, 'Political Poetry in European Literature from the 12th to the 15th centuries', I, as a Latinist, find myself facing certain challenges. This is particularly the case because the scope is limited to lyric poetry. As such, the topic presents several issues to a Latinist that are difficult to overlook.[1]

The first challenge pertains to the specified time frame. The period under discussion spans from the 12th to the 15th century, a time when Latin poetics finds itself in a transitional phase – between the height of what is often termed medieval Latin (the 'renaissance' of the long 12th century) and the flourishing of humanist Latin, which only truly takes off in the 15th century.[2]

Moreover, during this transitional period – perhaps best described as the peak of scholastic Latin – much of what was previously expressed in poetry gradually shifts to prose. This era witnesses significant growth in prose-writing, with many older poetic works being transformed into prose, alongside the development of new prose forms, such as the short story. The poetic genres that endure the longest are epic and didactic poetry, which retain their traditional political dimensions – that is, the politicity as it is inscribed in the genre, as will be discussed further.[3]

Latin lyric poetry suffers the most during this period. Its last notable peak is represented by the 'Carmina Burana', which, as is well known, largely originates

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1 I want to thank once more the organizers, Paolo Borsa and Martin Rohde of the Université de Fribourg, for the initiative taken and for their patience.

2 Both terms are so well established that it is impossible not to use them. Nonetheless, we must keep alerted to several facts. First, there is not 'one' medieval Latin but a great variety of the ways Latin was written. This is one of the points touched upon by Witt, Ronald. G., In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni, Leiden/Boston 2000, esp. pp. 28–29. Secondly, humanist Latin shows more continuity with what precedes than generally assumed, as we will see.

3 Latin of what is called the later Middle Ages remains still an understudied field, due to the strong focus that for this period is traditionally put on the humanists. But whereas humanism in the 13th to 14th centuries remains a local and peripherical current, writings in what one might label scholastic Latin flourish. Reappraisal of the period in recent times is largely due to

from the 11th and 12th centuries, even though it was only compiled in the early 13th century. While politicity is prominent, particularly in the satirical poems, they mark more of a conclusion than a continuation or a fresh beginning. The political nature of these works can even be seen as an anomaly within Latin poetry, typical of the 12th century, with politicity being more closely associated, as mentioned earlier, with the epic genre.

Consequently, I find it necessary, later in this contribution, to focus on certain poets who lie at the fringes of the designated period. These poets represent significant poetic trends that influence Latin tradition and, subsequently, vernacular literatures. Before examining these poets in detail, however, it is essential to address two further fundamental issues:

1. Why I choose not to refer to 'political' poetry, but instead use the less common term 'politicity'.
2. Why this 'politicity' appears to be an inherent characteristic of Latin during both the Middle Ages and the early modern period.

I. Why Politicity?

The term 'politicity' is employed across various disciplines to denote the political implications of an action, social event, or cultural phenomenon, without necessarily linking it directly to concrete political action.[4] Rather, it refers to the political charge or potential inherent in the subject under discussion – the way in which its intrinsic qualities might be utilised by rulers, authorities, or those in power.[5]

As a Latinist reflecting on the literature and writing cultures of the past, I find that the concept of 'politicity' allows me to circumvent the significant issues associated with the concept of 'political poetry', particularly when applied to historical contexts. If we understand 'political' as denoting the relationship between the

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the efforts of Thomas Haye, who has dedicated several studies to literature of the period. See among many other titles Haye, Thomas, Das lateinische Lehrgedicht im Mittelalter. Analyse einer Gattung, Leiden 1997; id., The Latin Literature of the Late Middle Ages: Construction of a Period, in: Latinitas Perennis 1: The Continuity of Latin Literature, ed. by Verbaal, Wim, Maes, Yanick and Papy, Jan, Leiden/Boston 2006, pp. 169–184.

4 See, e.g., Ugalde, Rocío Fernández, Teachers' politicity as a sociohistorical juncture: bringing a Freirean angle to education policy studies, in: Globalisation, Societies and Education 22/1 (2024), pp. 77–89 (https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2023.2209525), who tries to define the concept. The term indeed poses a problem as it is used in different disciplines without being neatly defined or circumscribed.

5 For that reason, probably, the term can be found in studies concerning education, art, health care, entertainment industry…

written word and those of higher social or cultural status,[6] it becomes necessary to question whether any poetry from the majority of (Western) European literary history can truly be considered non-political. Most writers, after all, were dependent on patrons for both their writing and its dissemination.

If we instead take 'political' in the classical Aristotelian sense, as relating to a kind of 'constitutional' structure, one might argue that political poetry only emerges with the rise of communes and cities. This may even explain the chronological scope of this conference. From this perspective, one might conclude that no truly 'political' poetry was written in Latin during this period.

Besides, if we define 'political' in the modern sense – pertaining to governance or constitutional authority – another problem arises: can we impose our modern understanding of political rule onto earlier historical periods?

In summary, I refrain from using the term 'political' poetry in this contribution, as doing so would presuppose a shared and clear understanding of what 'political' means. Instead, I prefer the more unusual term 'politicity', which conveys the potential for political use, action, or interpretation. This allows for a more open argument, avoiding the fixed readings that I aim to sidestep.

II. Latin's Inherent Politicity

The second issue to consider is the fact that 'politicity' appears to be intrinsic to the existence of Latin throughout the Middle Ages and into the Modern Era. This is because the survival of Latin beyond antiquity cannot be attributed to a natural historical or cultural evolution. Rather, it results from a deliberate political decision that interrupts the natural flow of history. Here, the term 'political' is used in its concrete sense, referring to the implementation of a directive by a governing authority – an exercise of power.

This observation is not a novel one; it should be common knowledge that, without the combined efforts of Charlemagne and Alcuin of York, Latin would likely never have wielded the influence or possessed the enduring history we recognise today. Yet, it seems that few scholars truly appreciate the full implications of this fact. For this reason, it is necessary to briefly revisit this aspect of Latin's history, despite it preceding by far the period of interest in this study.

Charlemagne's decision to adopt Latin as the administrative and legal language of his empire was not original to him. However, he provided the decisive impetus that revitalised Latin. The Carolingian era is the only period that genuinely merits the title of a 'renaissance,' in the sense of reviving antiquity. Subsequent renaissances were built upon the foundations established by the Carolingians and were merely

6 As one could deduce from the dictionary-entries.

renewals of their achievements. Notably, the so-called 'Renaissance' in Italy was, in essence, a revival of antiquity based on Carolingian manuscripts and might more accurately be termed a 'Carolingian Renaissance' rather than a classical one.[7]

Charlemagne's motivations were certainly not aesthetic, unlike those later expressed by Petrarch and his contemporaries.[8] Charlemagne had clear political objectives. He required a 'political' language – that is, a legal and administrative language that could be understood across his empire, which encompassed diverse peoples and languages. Latin had the advantage of being a neutral language, not tied to any dominant class or ethnicity. It was a language that everyone needed to learn, rather than one inherently belonging to any group.

Moreover, Latin served as a liturgical language, especially as various missionaries of British and Irish origin had worked to refine it according to the classical standards they had acquired in their education. Its use also facilitated closer ties between the Carolingian rulers and papal Rome (despite the relatively recent establishment of Latin's dominance over Greek in Rome). The Carolingians, being usurpers and lacking the natural right to rule that the Merovingians had claimed, sought to ground their royal legitimacy in divine, and thus papal, authority. They were, in fact, the first rulers to be anointed as kings.[9]

Additionally, Latin was closely associated with the memory of the Roman Empire, which in its fourth-century Christian form served as one of the models for Charlemagne's vision of empire. This vision aimed to restore the Latin counterpart to the Byzantine Greek continuation of Roman antiquity.

Thus, Latin's revival was the result of a deliberate, politically motivated decision, meaning that anything written in Latin could not avoid the implications of this politically revitalised language, even if it did not pursue overtly political objectives. For this reason, it seems reasonable to assert that 'politicity' is an inherent characteristic of writing in Latin.[10]

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7 It needs no clarification that to my knowledge this background of the Italian renaissance has received little or no attention. Scholars studying the transmission of texts have clearly demonstrated that for almost the entire Latin Antiquity the oldest extant manuscripts were or must have been Carolingian manuscripts. See still Texts and transmission: A Survey of the Latin Classics, ed. by Reynolds, Leighton D., Oxford 1983.

8 See on the importance of aesthetics in the early humanists, Witt, Ronald G., In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni, Chapter Two: The Birth of the New Aesthetic (Studies in medieval and reformation thought 74), Leiden 2000, pp. 31–80.

9 See Jacobson, Paul A., *Sicut Samuhel unxit David*: Early Carolingian Royal Anointings Reconsidered, in: Medieval Liturgy: A Book of Essays, ed. by Larson-Miller, Lizette, Abingdon 2020 (e-book; originally New York 1997), pp. 169–182.

10 Scholarship on the reasons behind the Carolingian choice for Latin is almost entirely missing. It has been taken too often as self-evident without considering the implications this choice had and its consequences, of course. I have touched the problem sideways in Verbaal, Wim, The Conquest of Literacy: The Vernacular Disintegration of Latin Hegemony in Medieval

III. Latin's Formal Politicity

The politicity of Latin during Carolingian times is perhaps most vividly demonstrated by what was long considered the foundational text embodying the new Carolingian perspective on writing: the poem 'Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa', now attributed to Modoinus († 840/3).[11] However, this characteristic can also be observed in numerous other texts from the first two generations of Carolingian writers.[12]

Carolingian literature is crucial for understanding developments in the subsequent centuries, particularly with regard to the politicity inherent in Latin writing. Indeed, no other period in the history of Latin literature so transparently displays its political dimensions, shaping the political aspects of Latin literature for the future in significant ways.

In terms of form, political poetry in Latin would be almost invariably composed in a classicist style, employing classical meter and genres, with a strong preference for the epic form. While rhythmical poetry also emerged during the Carolingian era, it rarely carried explicit politicity. Similarly, melodic poetry, which originated in liturgical contexts and includes sequences, tracts, and some secular poetry, seldom engaged directly with political matters. Exceptions do exist, such as some Ottonian poems found in the 'Cambridge Songs', but the vast majority of politically-oriented poems adhered to classicist conventions.

The expression of politicity could be overt, as in 'Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa', where it typically involves a form of direct or indirect panegyric poetics. Another example of this open expression is provided by Ermoldus Niger's († after 838) poem in honour of Louis the Pious.

Politicity, however, could also be conveyed in a more subtle or indirect manner. This is evident in Walahfrid Strabo's 'Hortulus' (written in the 840s), which contains significant political undertones.[13] Later examples include the numerous 'Troy'-epics of the 12th century, which reflect the political tensions between the French king and his powerful vassals, particularly the Duke of Champagne (with

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Europe, in: Introduction to Medieval Latin Literatures in Europe and Beyond, ed. by Stella, Francesco, Dolezalova, Lucie and Shanzer, Danuta, Amsterdam 2024, pp. 553–573.

11 For the attribution of the poem and its scholarly history, see the article by Stella, Francesco, Autore e attribuzioni del 'Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa', in: Am Vorabend der Kaiserkrönung: Das Epos 'Karolus Magnus et Leo papa' und der Papstbesuch in Paderborn 799, éd. by Godman, Peter, Jarnut, Jörg and Johanek, Peter, Berlin 2002 (https://doi.org/10.1524/9783050056272), pp. 19–34.

12 The classic on political poetry in Carolingian times is Godman, Peter, Poets and Emperors: Frankish Politics and Carolingian Poetry, Oxford 1987.

13 Verbaal, Wim, Eros im Kräutergarten. Eine spirituel-pädagogische Lektüre von Walahfrid Strabos 'Hortulus', in: Sacris Erudiri 43 (2004), pp. 131–233.

Troyes as its chief town) and the Duke of Normandy, who also held the title of King of England.[14]

As mentioned earlier, the epic remained the most prominent genre through which medieval politicity found expression in Latin, although other genres could serve similar functions. Didactic poetry, for instance, often lay close to this tradition. The Carolingians demonstrated a keen ability to push the boundaries of these literary forms. One particularly notable example is Walahfrid Strabo's († 849) poem on the statue of Theodoric, which Charlemagne brought to Aachen.[15] Bucolic poetry, too, was adapted for panegyric purposes by Modoinus of Autun († 840/3), following the models of Vergil and Nemesianus, though this tradition remained relatively underdeveloped until Dante revived it.

Interestingly, especially during the Carolingian period, not all of these works offered unqualified praise of rulers. Many contained critical undertones, revealing a more nuanced engagement with the political realities of their time.

IV. Latin's Lyrical Politicity

It should now be evident that lyric poetry with a political dimension has always been a rarity, including during Antiquity. Even the works of Horace never truly found resonance in subsequent periods, and those of Statius only gained attention during the height of humanism. While Carolingian poets occasionally ventured into expressing their political views through lyrical poems, these instances are generally limited to isolated cases.

Thus, it is particularly noteworthy that there is a brief, specific period in which lyric poetry appears to be the primary vehicle for a strong sense of politicity: the decades around 1100, during which the so-called poets of the Loire were active. The reason for this may lie in these poets' deliberate attempt to distance themselves from the more traditional poetics embraced by earlier, more conventionally-minded generations.[16]

For these older generations, the epic remained the standard mode of expressing their allegiance to political power, as seen in works like the 'Carmen de Hastingae Proelio' byGuy of Amiens († 1075). This traditional poetics relied heavily on the imitation and adaptation of classical models. In contrast, the new poetic style prac-

14 Verbaal, Wim, Homer im lateinische Mittelalter, in: Homer Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung, ed. by Rengakos, Antonios and Zimmermann, Bernhard, Stuttgart 2011, pp. 329–336.

15 See for the interpretation of the poem as an anti-panegyric Romig, Andrew J., The Wrong Kind of Flattery: Critique and Praise in Walahfrid Strabo's 'De imagine Tetrici', in: In this Modern Age: Medieval Studies in Honor of Paul Edward Dutton, ed. by Booker, Courtney M. and Latowsky, Anne A.,Budapest 2023, pp. 23–45.

16 The following forms part of my forthcoming book Loire Poetics: Toward a European Literature.

tised by figures such as Marbod of Rennes († 1123), Hildebert of Lavardin († 1133), and Hugh Raynard de Bar, Bishop of Langres († 1085), was rooted in a technical analysis of classical metre. Their approach prioritised technical mastery and knowledge over the older methods of imitation, adaptation, and rewriting. This emphasis on technical skill likely explains the preference for shorter poems, which allowed for greater refinement. Additionally, the focus on lyric poetry may have aligned with the poets' desire for renewal, setting their work apart from the more traditional epic forms.

A further reason for the prominence of lyric poetry during this time might be its dialogic relationship with emerging vernacular poetics. It was during these same decades and in the same regions that the first troubadour, William IX († 1127), began to compose his works. Moreover, the Norman Conquest of 1066 facilitated the interaction between Norman culture and the rich vernacular literature in Old English or Anglo-Saxon. Moreover, the melodic songs in the 'Cambridge Songs' may have been Latin counterparts to existing Germanic song traditions.[17]

Regardless of the underlying reasons, during these decades around 1100 and among these poets – mainly from the Anglo-Norman realm – there emerged a strong preference for shorter poems in classical metre. Many of these poems might appear as mere light-hearted diversions, but this is often due to their removal from the original contexts. In fact, within their proper context, these poets frequently arranged their works into poetry collections that adhered to strict compositional schemes. In such collections, a poem that might seem like an innocent amusement piece can take on a much deeper significance. This will be explored further when examining the work of a specific poet.

This lyrical approach to expressing politicity, however, soon gave way again to the more traditional epic forms. Although the poets of the Loire also composed longer narrative poems, these works rarely matched the scale of earlier or later epic compositions. The epics of the 12th century, however, differed significantly from those written before the new poetics that emerged around 1100. This shift can perhaps be attributed to the simultaneous rise of the vernacular epic. It is no coincidence that Walter of Châtillon composed his 'Alexandreis' in the 1180s, following the earlier composition of the first Romans d'Alexandre in the first half of the 12th century. Similarly, the emergence of the first 'romans d'antiquité' coincides with a major revival of Latin epics centred on the story of Troy. This epic tradition in Latin continued well into the 13th century, but as mentioned earlier, it was gradually supplanted by prose narratives, while poetry became an increasingly significant literary form in the vernacular languages.

17 See for the interaction between Latin and vernacular literature, Verbaal, Wim, The Conquest of Literacy: The Vernacular Disintegration of Latin Hegemony in Medieval Europe, in: Latin Literatures of Medieval and Early Modern times in Europe and beyond. A millennium heritage, ed. by Stella, Francesco, Doležalová, Lucie and Shanzer, Danuta (A comparative history of literatures in European languages 34), Amsterdam 2024, pp. 557–577.

The early humanists, such as Lovato dei Lovati († 1309) and Albertino Mussato († 1329), largely remained faithful to this Latin tradition. For them, too, politicity found its primary expression through epic poetry and other highly classicist forms, while lyric poetry occupied a more marginal position. Their literary motivations were significantly less directed against contemporary Latin than is often assumed; instead, they reacted against the dominance of the French language, as is evident in Lovato's letter to the poet Bellino Bissolo.[18]

Overall, these early humanists were more aligned with the existing contemporary Latin tradition than is commonly believed. Within the history of Latin literature, they represent a continuation rather than a rupture. The only major shift was in the cultural centre of gravity, moving from France, which was weakened by the Hundred Years' War, to the Italian communes.

V. The Politicity of Some Lyrical Poets

V.1 Albertino Mussato

Our theoretical and historical overview now warrants illustration through examples that can shed further light on the distinctive characteristics of various periods and the ways in which lyric poetry served as a medium for expressing politicity. To begin, we will examine a brief poem by Albertino Mussato, one of the most prominent figures of early pre-Petrarchan humanism, who exerted a significant influence on Petrarch himself.

Mussato's primary body of work is historical in nature, with a clear political agenda aimed at defending the position of Padua against Can Grande, the lord of Verona. However, his poetic contributions – comprising letters, prayers, and short historical epics on contemporary Paduan events – have had a more enduring impact. He is most renowned for his tragedy 'Ecerinis', which depicts the tyrannical rule of the former lord of Verona, Ezzelino III da Romano († 1259), whose reign had been a harrowing period for Padua. This tragedy is widely regarded as the first revival of classical tragedy since Antiquity. Although Mussato had composed a commentary on Seneca's tragedies, 'Ecerinis' remains somewhat 'medieval' in its core themes and structure, portraying Ezzelino as the offspring of the devil who seduced Ezzelino's mother. For this politically charged tragedy, Mussato was awarded the laurel crown by his hometown of Padua, making him the first individual to receive such an honour since Antiquity.[19]

18 On these early poets, see still Witt (note 8). For Lovato's letter to Bissolo, see Ludwig, Walther, Lovatos Versepistel über die Dichtkunst – Edition und Interpretation, in: Humanistica Lovaniensia 36 (1987), pp. 1–43.

19 Mussato's work enjoys recently some renewed interest. Several of his larger writings are critically edited. His shorter poems, however, remain a bit neglected.

Mussato is often considered an early exemplar of what would later be termed the Renaissance. For this reason, I aim to compare him with representatives of other so-called 'renaissances' to highlight both the parallels and the distinctions between them. Of course, this analysis will be limited by the fact that we are contrasting only one poem from each figure, and so the extent to which these contrasts can be generalised is necessarily constrained. Nonetheless, this approach can provide valuable insights into the evolution of politicity in lyrical poetry across different eras.

Anxia Cesareas sese convertit ad arces:
  Romulidum veteres occubuere patres.
Suspicis Adriacis dominantem fluctibus urbem?
  Praemia castalio sunt ibi nulla deo.
Occidit in terris, si quis fuit em(p)tor Agavae,[20]
  Et Maecenatem non habet ulla domus.
Territus effugio pennati stagna caballi:
  Judicat infirmas has Galienus aquas
Cumque vetet princeps immunes esse poetas,
  A Tritone rubri me trahit unda Tagi.
Frons, Henrice, mee satis est incomta Camene,
  Lecta tamen veri nuntia fida soni.
Et michi grata tamen; saltem quia reddet amicum
  Me tibi, sulcandum iam bene stravit iter.

(My anxious muse looks toward Caesarian heights; / the ancient Roman fathers have gone to their rest. / Do you look at the city dominating the waves of the Adriatic? / There are no prizes here for the Apollonian god. / If someone has purchased Agave, he has died on land / and no house has a Maecenas. / Terrified, I flee the swap of the winged horse. / Galen considers these waters dangerous to the health / And since a prince refuses to give immunity to poets, / the wave of the red Tagus draws me away from the sea. / The brow of my song, O Henry, is rather rough; / yet it is read as the faithful messenger of true sound / and is pleasing to me; at least, because it will give me as a friend to you, / it has already laid open the way to be plowed.[21]

The poem was composed for Henry VII of Luxembourg around 1310, at the time of Mussato's first encounter with him, or possibly even before that meeting.[22] It consists of seven couplets, written in a highly classical style, both in language and imagery. Although addressed to the German emperor, the poem's references are

20 Agave probably as the sea-nymph in the Iliad around Thetis and thus for a 'muse'.

21 Text from Luigi Padrin, Lupati de Lupatis, Bovetini de Bovetinis, Albertini Mussati necnon Jamboni Andreae de Favafuschis carmina quaedam ex codice Veneto nunc primum edita: Nozze Giusti-Giustiani, Padua 1887, pp. 26–27, in: Billanovich, Guido, Lovato Lovati, L'epistola a Bellino: Gli echi da Catullo, in: Italia medioevale e umanistica 32 (1989), pp. 101–153. Tr. Witt 2000 (see note 8), p. 121 with adaptations and corrections.

22 For the relationship between Mussato and Henry VII, see Modonutti, Rino, Totus ero talis […] tibi quails eris. Albertino Mussato ed Enrico VII, in: Emperors and Imperial Discourse in Italy, c. 1300–1500: New Perspectives, ed. by Huijbers, Anne, Roma 2022, pp. 263–282 (https://books.openedition.org/efr/42284).