The Forgotten Empire of Ars dictaminis (Eleventh-Fifteenth Centuries)

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Abstract: The discipline known as *ars dictaminis* was perhaps the most successful attempt to create an autonomous medieval doctrine of rhetoric. Emerging around 1080, it remained influential well into the fifteenth century. Although numerous studies have emphasised its importance in western communication, it is often described simply as a pragmatic art of writing letters, focussed on *salutatio* and social hierarchy. This paper tries to explain why, at its apogee (1180–1340) and even later, it was considered a total art of writing, with a complex ideology, a vast range of related textual forms, and a subtle balance between its literary potentialities and its political-administrative purposes. After a brief history of the development and evolution of the *ars*, we focus on its two most original characteristics: its distinctive deployment of metaphor and the technique of rhythmical ornamentation known as *cursus rhythmicus*. From there, we see how the expansion and dissemination of teaching material consisting of texts invented or recycled from chanceries led to the progressive development of a sort of medieval "database", and to the invention of a subtle semi-formulaic art of writing, very different from the reputation of the *dictamen* for simple formulaic prose.

Keywords: medieval rhetoric; *ars dictaminis*; letters; formularism; rhythm.

I *Ars dictaminis* as a Research Field: Some Methodological Considerations

It may at first sound rather preposterous to speak of the medieval Latin composition techniques known as *ars dictaminis* as a "forgotten empire". After all, the nature and extent of the *ars dictaminis* as a movement were the object of numerous debates in the second half of the twentieth century.[2] In particular, scholars specialising in the history of the origins of humanism and the Latin literatures of the *Trecento* are bound to take a stand on the delicate question of the relationship between *ars dictaminis* and humanist stylistics. As *ars dictaminis* flourished vividly in the Italian peninsula during the *Duecento*, the first two generations of humanists—names as evocative as Dante Alighieri and Giovanni del Virgilio—were obliged to master this form of Latin communication.[3] It seems thus almost impossible to envision the

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[2] On the *ars dictaminis*, see Murphy 1974, 194–268; Camargo 1991; Turcan-Verkerk 2006; Delle Donne & Santini (eds) 2013; Grévin & Turcan-Verkerk (eds) 2015, especially the catalogue of 153 edited, unedited, attributed, and anonymous *artes dictandi* in Felisi & Turcan-Verkerk; and a *status quaestionis* as of 2018 in Hartmann & Grévin 2019.

[3] Classifying Dante as a humanist requires some caution: at least he can be considered a participant in "pre-" or "early humanism" after 1310, if we think of the Classicising Latin eclogues which he wrote, in a dialogue with Giovanni del Virgilio, towards the end of his life.

birth of humanism without addressing the balance between the "medieval" aesthetics of the *ars* and the new Classicising canons which were progressively emerging in the Veneto and Tuscany around the beginning of the fourteenth century. Hence the memorable pages written successively by Paul Oskar Kristeller, Ronald G. Witt, Gian Carlo Alessio, and many other scholars on the transition between the two Latin worlds of *ars dictaminis* and Renaissance humanism.[4] A stimulating study by Witt, *The Two Latin Cultures and the Foundation of Renaissance Humanism in Medieval Italy*, is largely centred on the problem of the opposition between what he calls the rhetorical-legal culture of the *dictamen* on the one hand and the more "literary" aspects of Italian Latin culture on the other.[5] The clash of these cultures was, according to Witt, ultimately to give birth to humanist aesthetics.

My purpose here is *not* to propose a new version of this particular aspect of the humanist "grand narrative". On the contrary, I shall attempt to suggest what advantage we might derive from separating the history of *ars dictaminis* from the literary history of pre-humanism and focussing on it from an autonomous perspective. The history of *ars dictaminis* is not only a literary one, and it did not end with the death of Frederick II, or even with the birth of Petrarch.[6] Indeed, it spanned four centuries of the Middle Ages, survived well into the fifteenth century, and extended from England and Spain to Poland and Hungary.[7] The biggest challenge to this holistic perspective on the *ars*, however, may come from within the field itself. Scholars of Latin literature, and specifically of rhetoric, have tended to look at it from a theoretical point of view, as a medieval current of Latin rhetoric not uncommonly to be considered an aberrant scion of Ciceronian rhetoric.[8] On the other side, specialists in the history of medieval chanceries, of medieval administrative and political languages, and above all of the medieval papacy ordinarily work with an enormous number of Latin texts which were originally written according to the rules of *ars dictaminis*. It nonetheless remains exceptional that a real attempt is made to analyse these texts in light of what we could call their full rhetorical dimension.[9] Yet these two parallel and largely separate worlds of study treat what were merely two dimensions of one and the same practice and, moreover, of the same stylistic ideology. Indeed, at the zenith of its influence, *ars dictaminis* was considered by its promoters to be a total theory and method of

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[4] Witt 1982; Kristeller 1983; Alessio 2001; and on the question of the third stage (1300–1500) of the *ars*, Hartmann & Grévin 2019, 239–332.

[5] Witt 2012.

[6] On 1250 as a dividing line between the Middle Ages and the birth of a new aesthetics, see Witt 2000; Bourgain 2005, 448.

[7] This geographical and chronological extent in Grévin & Turcan-Verkerk (eds) 2015, 285–416.

[8] On the theoretical relationship between *ars dictaminis* and Ciceronian rhetoric, see above all Ward 1995.

[9] On the *ars* at the papal chancery, see Sambin 1955; Thumser 2015; Hartmann & Grévin 2019, 158–80; cf. Broser 2018, an interesting attempt to explore the style of papal letters around 1265 in relation to *ars dictaminis*, though lacking a certain literary empathy.

writing, fit to express the pomp and circumstance of lay and ecclesiastical powers as well as literary subtleties and personal feelings. But what exactly did one mean when one spoke of *dictamen*?

Dictamen, *ars dictaminis*, *dictator*. It is difficult to resist the temptation to translate these expressions as follows: letter composition, the art of letter-writing, writer of letters. From its beginning until the end, *ars dictaminis* was indeed closely associated with epistolography; and, if we must give a summary definition of what was the primary application of the *ars* for the greater part of its existence, we could join in unison the many voices which have declared it to be the art of composing letters and letter-like documents according to rules derived from an adaptation to medieval needs of the oratorical precepts of Ciceronian rhetoric.[10] We would likely thus find ourselves insisting on the importance of the treatment of the parts of the speech (*partes orationis*) and in particular of the *salutatio*, or initial salutation, in the theory and practice of the *ars*.[11] As summary definitions go, this is not necessarily a bad one: the majority of *ars dictaminis* treatises do in fact focus on epistolary composition, even if by the vague term "letter" medieval *litterati* understood every kind of official or personal addressed document, including the entire array of administrative and political documents which are nowadays studied by diplomatists as well as personal correspondence.

The real medieval meaning of *dictamen*, *ars dictaminis*, and *dictator* was nevertheless larger and broader in its implications. Properly translated, these terms refer to composition, the art of composition, and composer. To its inventors and followers, the doctrine of the *dictamen* covered the entire range of Latin composition, prose, rhythmical and metrical. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find *dictamen* treatises or textual collections which include rules or exercises of composition in rhythmical prose, rhythmical poetry, and metrical poetry: the numerous (and partly unedited) works of one early leading *dictator*, Maestro Bernardo, suffice to prove how intricate was the relationship between prose-writing and poetical culture in the northern Italian schools of the mid-twelfth century.[12] The consequences for the field of this inclusive idea of the *dictamen* as a doctrine concerning sophisticated Latin as a whole are great, but it was an organic development of its origins: the *ars dictaminis* emerged and grew during the late eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries as a

[10] E.g. Murphy 1974, clearly assimilating *ars dictaminis* to letter-writing; for a balanced approach underlining the closeness between the *ars* and epistolary practice without reducing the *ars* to the latter, see Camargo 1991, 17–8.

[11] On the parts of the speech and particularly on the doctrine of the *salutatio*, a point which received particular attention in the theoretical treatises due to its strong links with a hierarchical conception of epistolary communication well suited to the medieval understanding of society (but which must certainly not be confused with the essence of *ars dictaminis*), see most recently Hartmann & Grévin 2019, 375–88; and Delle Donne 2020.

[12] On the twelfth century in Italy, see Turcan-Verkerk 2010 & 2011; Hartmann & Grévin 2019, 56–93; and important new editions of Maestro Guido and Maestro Bernardo by E. Bartoli; Felisi & Turcan-Verkerk 2015, 433–40.

technique for modifying and rhythmically structuring ordinary prose, traditionally associated with the imperfection of natural language, to bestow on texts the status and beauty of "prose poetry." To this task, *litterati* applied all the riches and persuasiveness of what they considered to be the linguistic manifestation of the musical order of the cosmos—or, as *dictatores* like Boncompagno da Signa would have said, the harmony of the fabric of the world, *machina mundialis*.[13] Seen in this way, the theory of the *dictamen* was not just a superficial medievalisation of Classical rhetoric. Once, after a rapid evolution, it had stabilised around 1230, the *ars dictaminis* presented a coherent system in which rhythmical and metaphorical rules were linked to specifically medieval currents of exegesis, music, and poetry.[14] Therefore, despite its dependence to some degree on Ciceronian rhetoric, greater profit is derived from examining its relationship with other contemporary theories and practices of communication such as the *ars poetriae* or the *ars praedicandi* and the production of sermons, rather than by confining its study to the traditional history of Classical and post-Classical rhetoric.[15]

While the second part of this essay will offer a brief history of *ars dictaminis* (emphasising its long-lasting character), the balance will focus on the implications of the multiple links with features proper to medieval communication. Part III will thus consider the basic "grammar" of the *ars dictaminis* through a discussion of the role played by three major ingredients used by *dictatores* for composing texts: rhythmical ornamentation, metaphor, and Biblical literacy. Part IV looks at how the accumulation of texts composed according to the rules of the *ars* resulted in the creation of what was in effect a "database" of rhetorical composition. The fifth and final part explores how the in-depth study of such material by the practitioners of *ars dictaminis* ultimately encouraged a combinatory method of composition, leading to what could be described as a "semi-formulaic" art of writing.

II A Very Short History of the *Ars*

Long (perhaps surprisingly) as it was, the history of *ars dictaminis* can be understood in different phases. As a discipline its origins are associated with the Investiture Controversy of the late eleventh century, and the activities around 1080 at Monte

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[13] On the ideology of the *ars* as a supreme rhetorical form, see Grévin 2014b; on the use by Boncompagno of the concept of *machina mundialis* to symbolise the network of relations between the elements of the world which the *dictator* must master to write his metaphors correctly, see Grévin 2015b. A new edition of Boncompagno's *Rhetorica* with commentary is currently being prepared for SISMEL under the direction of Paolo Garbini: for now, see the edition of Gaudenzi (1892).

[14] On the links between *ars dictaminis* and music, see Grévin 2011.

[15] On the theoretical and teaching links between *ars dictaminis* and *ars poetriae*, see especially Woods 2003. Certain *artes poetriae* of the thirteenth century include numerous theoretical parts on the *dictamen* (as epistolary discipline); Camargo's introduction to the *Tria* sunt (2019, esp. viii) addresses the problem of interconnection between epistolography and *Ars poetriae*.

Cassino of Alberico di Montecassino, author of several treatises which show how the technique was first conceived to provide *clerici* who fought on the papal side the tools for composing better propaganda.[16] The abbey of Monte Cassino belongs to the region of Campania known as the Terra di Lavoro; this region and the papacy itself were two of the three most important Italian centres of production for the *dictamen* throughout its history. The other major centre was Bologna, where, after twenty years during which the trail goes cold, the *ars* resurfaced in the circle of Adalbertus Samaritanus and was quickly professionalised and combined with the specialised studies developed for the needs of the notarial class.[17] It spread from there to the burgeoning cities and towns of northern Italy, expanding into different systems of communication adapted to life in the communes, most notably in the form of the *ars arengandi*, or "art of speech-making", as articulated most extensively in the thirteenth century.[18]

Crossing the Alps around 1150, the *ars* took root in southern Germany and in the French cathedral schools of both Capetian and Plantagenet obedience. In Orléans, Tours, and Meung it became the key medium of communication, and was soon brought to an early point of perfection by writers such as Peter of Blois and Bernard of Meung.[19] This expansion gaining pace rapidly in the second half of the century, by around 1200 the *ars* was being taught throughout most of western Europe.[20] The interaction between the French and Italian forms of teaching and practising in these years was complex, and needs further investigation: many of the treatises of this period remain unedited (or edited unsatisfactorily), documentation is scarce from before *ca.* 1200, and reconstructing the diffusion of the *ars* is subject to numerous hypotheses, particularly in regard to the reciprocal influences between north-Italian, papal, and French currents towards the end of the twelfth century. Recent scholarly breakthroughs have included putting in perspective the supposed originality of some of the French school's doctrines of the years 1170–1230, whose antecedents are now traceable in earlier Italian treatises (1140–70).[21]

The year 1200 marks the beginning of the central period of *ars dictaminis*, which lasted for the entire thirteenth century. This phase of its history is ordinarily summarised as one of theoretical stabilisation and practical effervescence. With the generation of the great teachers at Bologna—Boncompagno da Signa, Bene da Firenze, and Guido Faba—the *ars* is supposed to have found a definitive form

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[16] Alberico di Montecassino, *Breviarium*.

[17] See Hartmann 2013.

[18] See also, on the *ars arengandi*, most recently Artifoni 2011.

[19] On the introduction of the *ars* in France, see now Turcan-Verkerk 2015a; Hartmann & Grévin 2019, 94–116; on Bernard of Meung and the French *dictamen*, see esp. Vulliez 1984.

[20] For its official introduction in Spain, see Gómez-Bravo 1990.

[21] On the problem of contradictory French and Italian theoretical influences around 1200, see Witt 1985; corrected by Turcan-Verkerk 2015b, proving the existence of the so-called French theory of *cursus rhythmicus* (at least in prototypic forms) already in 1140s Italy.

and, implicitly, to have lost some of its evolutionary momentum.[22] Meanwhile, further struggles between the papacy and the now Sicily-centred empire of the last Swabians under Frederick II and Conrad IV degenerated into a full-scale and protracted propaganda war (often alongside war of the traditional kind). In this context and in the hands of Tommaso da Capua and Pier della Vigna (Pietro, Piero; Petrus de Vinea) above all, the *ars* bequeathed new forms of political rhetoric which were soon echoed and imitated across Europe.[23] The thirteenth century therefore represents a second wave of European expansion for the Italian *ars dictaminis*. The northern (mainly Bolognese) theoretical treatises, as well as the southern, papal, and Sicilian-imperial collections of political letters, which had been created to formalise and organise the legacy of the propaganda war of the first half of the century, enjoyed continental dissemination, and these novel manifestations of the *ars* ultimately mingled with (or marginalised) earlier local products. It was the art of composing documents according to thirteenth-century Italian tastes and rules, as exemplified by papal and "Sicilian" (though almost entirely produced on the mainland) texts of the years 1220–66, which would serve as model and canon in the royal, princely, and episcopal chanceries of Europe in the later phases of the *dictamen*'s history.[24] One peculiarity of this dissemination was the growing importance of central and eastern European production. As early as the 1270s, the kingdom of Bohemia became a centre for spreading the newest Sicilian and papal modes of the *ars* into the Polish lands and Hungary.[25]

This *ars dictaminis* was not quite the same as it had been when a young discipline in the early twelfth century. It had retained from its Bolognese incubation a strong link with legal studies but had since developed into a full-scale stylistic ideology, very different from the rather parched counsels of the first treatises.[26] Theoretical expositions of the rules and techniques of rhythmical ornamentation, which had defined the practice of the *ars* from the start, existed by around 1150, albeit in rather embryonic form. But in the years 1190–1230 they developed fully. The use of *cursus rhythmicus*, a set of rhythmically organised endings of clauses for adorning prose texts, was fully integrated into the *ars*, and practitioners began to conceive of *ars dictaminis* as a rhetorical and musical tool for realising almost-divine harmony.[27] While this is not the place to present in detail the mechanics of this device, one

[22] Three figures subject to abundant bibliography yet lacking up-to-date editorial treatment: see Felisi & Turcan-Verkerk 2015; Hartmann & Grévin 2019, 117–39.

[23] On the propaganda war, see Shephard 1999, though with conclusions about the decadence of the practical *ars dictaminis* after 1240 contrary to those advanced here. The *summa* of Pier della Vigna has received a modern edition, *L'epistolario*; and awaits a forthcoming edition for the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*; the texts of the *summa dictaminis* linked to the activity of Tommaso da Capua have been pre-edited in *Die Briefsammlung*.

[24] Grévin 2008, 539–873.

[25] Ibid., 391–404, 707–16; Nechutová 2007, 67–73; Hartmann & Grévin 2019, 195–211.

[26] On the link between *dictamen* and law, see Witt 2012, 229–67.

[27] Grévin 2009; Grévin 2014a.

can nevertheless get a glimpse of the three different principal rhythmical schemes and of the importance of their use from this short letter taken from the popular *summa dictaminis* of Tommaso da Capua (d. 1238), whose corpus was reorganised and disseminated during the thirteenth century. The accents symbolise the musical stress to be followed:

> Pro induménto letítie (*cursus tardus*) pannum recépimus quem misístis (*cursus velox*), assurgimúsque ad grátes (*cursus planus*). Verum ne tua videamur munúscula inhiáre (*cursus velox*), mitti de cétero prohibémus (*cursus velox*).[28]
>
> (As a garment of joy we received the cloth you sent, and soar to render thanks. Yet that we do not appear to be lusting after your little gifts, anything else to be sent we forbid.)

The musicality of these rhythms is palpable, particularly if one accentuates the Latin words strongly, in the Italian way. The *cursus velox*, consisting of a succession of one accentuated syllable, four unaccentuated syllables, one accentuated syllable and one last unaccentuated syllable, allows the reader to accelerate before the phrase finishes with a cadence. It is perhaps the most spectacular of the three principal patterns, hence its popularity during the thirteenth century (reflected by its frequency in this short letter). The pervasive use of these recurring rhythmical schemes would ultimately have a major impact on the lexical and writing habits of the *dictatores*, as we shall see.

The beginning of the thirteenth century also registered a series of changes in the use of rhetorical figures and metaphor. At some point during the second part of the twelfth century, theoreticians of the *ars* borrowed (probably through the channel of the *artes poetriae*) from French grammatical and theological schools the double concept of *transumptio* and *translatio*, terms for the tools which were used to develop a new theory of the metaphor, with strong exegetical implications.[29] According to this theory, the gifted *dictator* had to be able to find in his memory the chain of symbolic metaphors best fitted to the theme to be treated. These *transumptiones* would give full efficiency to the composition (*dictamen*) thanks to their agreement with the cosmic order of the world, in full knowledge of the correspondences between plants, animals, human beings, supernatural creatures, and the characteristics of the *machina mundialis*. In practice, as suggested by analysis of the most famous political or literary *dictamina* of the Italian thirteenth century, be they of papal, Sicilian, or northern origin, *dictatores* called on a generous helping of Biblical metaphors, themselves linked to new forms of Biblical exegesis and Biblical or pseudo-Biblical culture in Italian and European society. The use of metaphors for establishing the right correspondence between the object of the writing and

[28] In *Die Briefsammlung*, 210 (VIII, 57).

[29] On *transumptio*, see Forti 1967, 127–49; Purcell 1987; Grévin 2015b.

the order of the world was a pliable practice, however: it easily integrated images taken from both the stock of Classical references and from medieval folklore.

Indeed, an array of techniques and theoretical links reflecting the grammatical, exegetical, musical, and civil law culture of the time were now at home in the *ars dictaminis*: as a fully equipped medium, it dominated significant spheres of Latin communication in Italy and Europe, and was deployed as a matter of course by the officers of growing states. As the thirteenth century was the age of cathedrals *par excellence*, so too was it the age of *dictamen*. The tell-tale sign of periods ending in the *cursus rhythmicus*, combined with half-standardised combinations of words and recurring metaphorical figures, enables us to retrace the growing influence of its modes and teachers, now spreading beyond the domain of letter-writing across fields as varied as canon and civil law, political treatises, and historiography: indeed, a number of the most well-known chronicles of thirteenth-century Italy are written in accordance with it.[30] It also influenced heavily the first tentative steps to formalising political letters in other languages, such as Italian, Catalan, and German.[31]

The last phase of the *ars* (1300–1500) is certainly the most obscure, for two main reasons: first, the enormous amount of documentation from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; secondly, a lack of impetus for research due to the diffused cliché of a rapid decadence of *ars dictaminis*, degenerating after 1300 into standardised forms of epistolography and ultimately condemned to obsolescence by the triumph of humanist Latin. As with every cliché, this one also contains a morsel of truth. To borrow the title of a special issue of the journal *Rhetorica* (19.2, 2001), the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries indeed witness the progressive waning of *ars dictaminis*. This was due to the substitution of the *ars* by humanistic rules as the supreme canon in matters of prose writing, as well as to the ascent of writing in the western European vernaculars, which more or less rapidly drove Latin into the margins of the Castilian, French, and English chanceries.[32]

This general sketch must nevertheless be corrected in at least three major respects. Firstly, fourteenth-century Italy, especially the period 1300-1355, was still characterised by a hybrid culture, in which the resurgence of a taste for Classicising Latin poetry was combined with new forms of prose *dictamen*, cherished and employed in political, administrative, and also personal correspondence and other writings even late into the century. The state and personal letters of Cola di Rienzo (mostly written between 1347 and 1354) are one of the most famous instances of this general tendency, often obscured by the ready denigration of *ars dictaminis* texts as symbols of the past, opposed to the "humanistic" future.[33] In

[30] E.g., *Die Chronik des Saba Malaspina*; Rolandino da Padova.

[31] On the difficult question of the adaptations of the rhythmical practices of the *ars* to the vernaculars, see Hartmann & Grévin 2019, 313–7; and, more generally on the transition between Latin and "vulgar" *ars dictaminis*, Adamska 2015.

[32] On the rise of vernaculars in western European chanceries, see Lusignan 2004.

[33] Grévin 2008, 803–82; see also Internullo 2015 and Internullo 2016.

the 1320s, there was a coexistence between Classicising and *dictamen* prose styles, between a *stylus antiquorum* and a *stylus modernorum*: the *dictamen* and the great *dictatores* of the thirteenth century were still regularly exalted, read, and imitated as modern counterparts to Cicero and other Classical orators.[34] Secondly, while it is indeed true that in western Europe beyond Italy the modern languages began their rise as administrative and political tools in the years 1250–1350, this was precisely the same time in which the solemn political *dictamina* composed at the papal and Sicilian-imperial chanceries were acculturated. Imitation was fostered by the diffusion of the great *dictamina* collections, the so-called *summae dictaminis*: the most famous of these textual compilations were named after Pier della Vigna, the great judge of Frederick II, Tommaso da Capua, the papal vice-chancellor, and Riccardo da Pofi, also active at the Roman curia. The result of this widespread imitation was the creation of a pan-European Latin rhetoric, which itself prolonged and solidified the influence of the *ars* on political and administrative phraseology.[35]

Finally, though the ideology, theory, and practice of the *ars* ultimately did go into decline, this did not affect central and eastern Europe until the late fifteenth century. The persistence of Latin in these regions for political and administrative communication had remarkable effects on the later history of *ars dictaminis*. In particular, the *ars* enjoyed an extraordinary revival in the lands of the Bohemian crown from the mid-fourteenth century until the Hussite revolution. A new set of treatises and anthologies of *dictamina* were created, which spread through Silesia into Polish territory over the course of the fifteenth century.[36] This eastern history of the *ars dictaminis* is often totally neglected by western scholars, amongst other reasons because of ignorance of works written in Czech or Polish by the specialists of these fields, but also because of a lack of curiosity. There is an enormous mass of theoretical and practical documentation awaiting the scholar who wishes to explore fully the various aspects of this later *ars dictaminis*. It is difficult to specify exactly when the story ends in this part of Europe, but it is certain that these eastern branches of the *dictamen* were still in full bloom late into the fifteenth century.

III In the Heart of the Machine, 1: Musicality, Metaphorical Mechanisms, and Biblical Continuum

Let us now enter the engine room of the *ars dictaminis*. It is all very well to assert its importance at a European level for four centuries, and to insist that at its zenith it conditioned a major part of Latin textual creation, both at the level of the chancery and in personal production. But what exactly were the characteris-

[34] On this coexistence, still largely unexplored, see Kristeller 1961.

[35] On Riccardo da Pofi, see Herde 2013.

[36] Wutke 1919; Nechutová 2007, 135–40; Grévin 2008, 716–29; Nechutova 2007; Koczerska 2015; Hartmann & Grévin 2019, 272–8; on teaching the ars in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Germany, see Lorenz 2013.

tics and the consequences of this long hegemony? For an answer, we must look beyond the theoretical treatises to which scholarship in the twentieth century was mainly restricted. As much as they can teach us about the ideas and debates of the teachers of the *ars* concerning aspects as important as the use of metaphor or *cursus rhythmicus*, the universe of the treatises remains an artificial one, confined within the school walls. Theory rarely kept pace with practical innovations, and therefore this literature can only explain at best partially the logic at work behind the emergence and the growth of the *ars*. Eloquent in this regard is the chronological gap between the appearance of the *cursus rhythmicus*, already present in the first decades of the *ars* (and long before that), and the much slower and drawn-out development in the treatises of detailed explanations of how to construct these ornamentations.[37] Studying attentively the way the most popular collections of *dictamina* were assembled, organised, and read in the thirteenth century tells us much more, and that much more concretely, about the teaching of the *ars* than does the analysis of the treatises alone.

The teachers themselves considered these often very schematics works as mere introductions to the study of specific letter models, rather than as the core of the discipline. John of Briggs (fl. late 14th century), for example, advised the reader of his short treatise on what letter collections and other texts the would-be *dictator* ought to read so as to acquire a good style.[38] Specialists normally refer to collections of model letters (often real letters "reformatted" to become models) by the name *summae dictaminis*, with the title *artes dictandi* reserved for the theoretical treatises; but this nomenclature remained fluid throughout the Middle Ages, and the spectrum of possible forms included a variety of half-theoretical, half-practical treatises. It is not that the treatises can be ignored; it is rather that their significance can only be revealed when studied alongside and treated equally with the model-texts forged specially for the needs of the schools, and the political, administrative, and personal *dictamina* which were regularly recycled in anthologies for the twin purposes of teaching and commemoration. Only in this way can a scholar grasp the entirely of *dictamen* culture, with its complex patterns of textual circulation between the world of the chanceries and the atmosphere of the schools.[39] Even then, the various formal characteristics of the *dictamen* as fully developed are not unique. They often originated in ancient redaction techniques, which seems to have been first employed and diffused, but not theorised, by the papal chancery of Late Antiquity for its letters: *cursus rhythmicus* itself is one of these.[40] The *dictamen*'s Biblical metaphors drew inspiration from and grew alongside late medieval

[37] Cf. Turcan-Verkerk 2015b, on the deeper background to these theories.
[38] In *Medieval Rhetorics*, edition of the *ars dictandi* of John of Briggs, 99.
[39] On the feedback loop between school and chancery production, see Grévin 2015a.
[40] On the fluctuation in the use of *cursus rhythmicus* through the early and central Middle Ages, see Janson 1975.

preaching techniques. It is in the characteristic combination of these factors that the *dictamen* found its formal uniqueness.

Perhaps the best way to get a sense of the *dictamen* and its deployment of metaphor as these actually worked is through examining one of the "self-referential" texts composed by the *dictatores* for the *dictatores* at the apogee of the *ars* culture in the papal and Sicilian chanceries: that is, one of the *dictamina* which circulated within the groups of notaries and teachers of rhetoric. In these texts, the best redactors addressed themselves to their counterparts, and thus, feeling free from the constraints of legal or political communication, displayed the full resources of their art.[41] A genre well fitted for ornate expression, the *litterae consolationis* or letters of condolence, composed on the occasion of the death of a notable or a parent, were favoured terrain for these displays: the great Sicilian and papal *summae* each dedicated a chapter to them.[42] One of the most famous of these exercises in high style and rhetorical *tour de force* is the letter written by a teacher of the Neapolitan *studium* around 1240 after the death of the renowned master Bene of Florence (Bene da Firenze). This text was later included among the *dictamina* of the fourth book of the so-called letters of Pier della Vigna.[43] In this exercise, the redactor takes advantage of the circumstances to display his command of the techniques of metaphorisation, with a dazzling succession of what the masters of the time would have called *transumptiones*, as well as other grammatical games.

Master Bene is thus successively compared to or identified with a lamp (an allusion to his *Candelabrum* treaty), a fertile Euphrates (also a probable allusion to the prologue of the *Candelabrum*), an eagle, Moses, the offspring of a swallow, a turtledove.[44] All these symbols have direct referents in medieval culture, numerous exegetical implications, and numerous parallels in the ever-growing stock of *dictamina* produced between the Neapolitan *studium* and the Sicilian *magna curia* at this time. Not only the deceased professor but also the entire letter is subject to this near-histrionic metaphorisation: the weeping *studentes*, who mourn the loss

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[41] On the distinction between "intra-notarial" or "intra-dictatorial" correspondence and official production, and its relevance to studying *ars dictaminis* as a rhetorical ideology, see Grévin 2008, 330–70. The *certamina rhetorica* exchanged between papal or Sicilian notaries and literati of 1230–90 in order to demonstrate their rhetorical excellence offer a good starting point: see the edition *Un certame*; and Delle Donne's 2003 edition of Nicola da Rocca, *Epistolae*.

[42] On this genre, see Von Moos 1971.

[43] The letter is included in the fourth book (*consolationes*) of the Pier della Vigna summa, identified in its most diffused version as IV.7: in Delle Donne 2009, 210–14 (no. 24); Pier della Vigna, *Epistolario*, 737–40.

[44] See in particular the following sequences, ibid.: "Est […] gramaticae artis nouiter extincta lucerna, desiccatus est fons irriguus, frugifer Eufraten, magister B. uidelicet, qui non ab infimo positiui, sed ex superlatiui nomine meruit deriuari, cum supra se nullum habuerit ascendentem, immo sicut aquila transcendens omnia genera pennatorum […] Nam ipse […] quasi de culmine montis Synai, alter Moyses legifer a Deo et non ab homine sibi scriptam gramaticam hominibus reportauit […] ad cuius exequias concurratis omnes […] orantes pro illo doctore mirabili, qui a mane usque ad uesperas clamauit sicut pullus yrundinis, et meditatus est ut columba, ponendo animam pro scholaribus […]."

inflicted by *mater grammatica*, are likened to infants crying in their cradles; the *artes* become the walls of the crumbling temple of the language; and Grammar herself is identified with Rachel wailing for the loss of her husband. Ultimately, the letter itself is overcome by suffering, the excess of grief depriving it of a rational *exordium*.

This kind of rhetorical exercise certainly takes the potentialities of the *ars* to their limits. Extreme metaphorisation could be sternly restrained in other textual genres, such as the imperial mandate or the ordinary papal letter. That is not to say, however, that these more official forms of writing fundamentally lacked rhetorical sophistication or ambitions. This will be evident through examining an extract from the most official textual genre: the law. The same milieu behind these rhetorical jousts, made of up of men who taught the *dictamen* at the *studium* of Naples and who penned the propaganda of the Sicilian chancery, was also that of those who taught civil law and who were responsible for the redaction and commentary of one of the most famous corpora of civil law from the later Middle Ages: the *Constitutiones Friderici II*, also called the Constitutions of Melfi (1231). The rhythmical structure of a law on the restriction of familial penalty for personal crime reveals the extent to which the search for rhythmical harmony according to the rules of *cursus rythmicus* affected redaction choices. Frederick's jurists also associated the idea of the effectiveness of the law with its formal perfection at an alliterative level. All this is clear from the hammering beat of the "p" in the following sequence: "qui propter paupertatem pena pecuniaria puníri non póssunt (*cursus planus*) penam pecuniáriam exsolvéndo (*cursus velox*)."[45]

The obsession with rhythmical coding at least appears to exist on a sort of continuum, as a common characteristic of all production under the rules of the *ars*. The conformation to the rhythmical structure of *cursus rhythmicus* formed the *basso continuo* upon which notaries would build different levels of metaphorisation and *double entendre*, according to the genre, the occasion, the aim, and the seriousness of the text. As late as the middle of the fourteenth century, in places as different as Durham, Rome, and Prague, a strict adherence to the rules of the *cursus* remains the best clue to the proximity of an author to the doctrine of *ars dictaminis*: such disparate texts as Richard of Bury's *Philobiblon* on the love of books, the political letters of Cola di Rienzo, and the imperial privileges of the emperor Charles IV of Luxembourg are all still conforming to the same rhythmical rules, and occasionally even to the same metaphors and amplifications.

IV In the Heart of the Machine, 2: Birth, Growth, and Exploitation of a Medieval Database

This structural affinity of texts composed for different purposes in distant places during the fourteenth century was probably a consequence not so much of the

[45] *Die Konstitutionen Friedrichs*, 220 (I, 57.1).

standardisation of *dictamen* theory as of the common diffusion and use by clerks of a standard set of textual models. By this, of course, I mean the collections of letters or *dictamina*, principally but not uniquely originating between 1180 and 1280 and usually known as *summae dictaminis*. These textual collections coalesced progressively during the second phase of the *ars* (thirteenth century). Their ubiquity as the ordinary working tools of European chanceries gave to the third and last phase its distinctive flavour.[46] To be sure, letter collections had been created, diffused, and reused for practical or stylistic purposes in the Latin world since Late Antiquity (and the *Variae* of Cassiodorus were reused by the notaries of the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries alongside the more modern collections), but the organisation of the biggest *summae dictaminis* of the thirteenth century represented something partly new: these were documents selected and reorganised by the same milieu of *litterati* from which they had emerged.[47] These men were born in the Terra di Lavoro in localities around Monte Cassino or Capua and worked in the shadow of the Sicilian and above all the papal chanceries.[48] Around 1268–71, in the midst of a momentous papal vacancy, an entire notarial team restructured, selected, and formalised the *summae dictaminis* attributed to Pier della Vigna, Tommaso da Capua, and Riccardo da Pofi, while also reworking some material accumulated earlier under the names of Peter of Blois and Transmundus of Clairvaux.[49]

The total number of texts which were elaborated to form *dictamina*, thus becoming stylistic models for the use of future generations of notaries, is astounding. The three great *summae* total some 1200 letters or acts, and the entire constellation of textual collections which gravitated around this central mass amounts to perhaps ten thousand textual units. Indeed, every notary or clerk in every corner of Europe from the 1280s onwards had the opportunity to select for his personal use a distinct blend of these textual corpora in order to form his own private collection—as for example did Richard of Bury in a famous manuscript now held in Aberystwyth.[50] During the fourteenth century, a great number of super-*summae*, collections in one manuscript of the three main *summae*, also circulated in the milieu of the royal chanceries.[51]

The success of these special instruments can be explained by the similar structure of the most diffused versions of the three *summae*. Perfectly mirrored, perfectly balanced between rhetorical-literary creativity and administrative-political formali-

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[46] On the near-simultaneous growth of these *summae*, see Thumser 2015.

[47] On the use of Cassiodorus, see Barret & Grévin 2014.

[48] On this milieu, see Delle Donne 2007; Grévin 2008, 263–417; *Die kampanische Briefsammlung*; Hartmann & Grévin 2019, 140–80.

[49] On the *summae* of Tommaso da Capua and of Pier della Vigna, see above; on Transmundus, see Heathcote 1965.

[50] Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Brogyntyn 21.

[51] See Schaller & Vogel 2002, 469–70, index with numerous examples, and 59–60, for an example with the three integral collections, BAV, Barb. lat. 1948 (French, ca. 1320).

sation, so characteristic of the practice of *ars dictaminis*, these anthologies were conceived as thematically organised repertories: a section for violent political letters, for example, a section for *litterae consolationis*, a section for model privileges, another for rhetorical jousts. A notary well versed in this corpus could thus select at leisure a series of model letters of grace, or founding privileges for a university, or threats against cardinals who proved slow in electing a new pope. Often as not the notaries of the royal chanceries would mix two, three, or four different texts from this common corpus, blending them into a new rhetorical combination. The prologue of the privilege of foundation for the Charles University in Prague is a patchwork of four different letters which emanated from Frederick II and Conrad IV, and which are found in the third book of the letters of Pier della Vigna.[52] It was not rare for notaries to blend *dictamina* from different, ideologically contradictory but stylistically similar sources, as were the great papal and imperial *dictamina* of the thirteenth century. To my knowledge, a record is achieved in the preamble to a solemn privilege delivered by John II of France (1350–64) to the count of Montfort: a gigantic patchwork of seven different sources selected from the *summae* of Pier della Vigna, Tommaso da Capua, and Riccardo da Pofi.[53]

It is right, then, to speak of the later *ars* as possessing a common rhetorical database. This was at the disposal of every good notarial team or even the individual clerk from the late thirteenth century on, and so influenced the practice of the *ars* that it ultimately homogenised the political rhetoric of most of Europe. Indeed, one of the most fascinating results of this growing influence is the series of echoes and parallel uses of the same sources traceable almost everywhere. In the very heart of the preamble written for the count of Montfort, we find an adaptation of a most famous passage of the imperial rhetoric of Frederick II: a bold adaptation of one of the *Variae* of Cassiodorus, used to exalt the emanating power of the sun-like emperor, whose brightness does not diminish when he illuminates the other dignitaries around his throne.[54] These prose stanzas to imperial power were originally composed for an act that went nowhere: they were conceived for the preamble to the act of exaltation of the duchy of Austria into a new kingdom, a project which ended unrealised in 1245.[55] But the draft of this privilege was included in the sixth book of the letters of Pier della Vigna, and became a cherished motif reused in every European royal chancery, from Aragon to Hungary, through France, England, the Empire, and (within the Empire) Bohemia, until late in the

[52] Grévin 2008, 716–21; Delle Donne 2015.

[53] Grévin 2008, 604–8.

[54] Pier della Vigna, *Epistolario*, VI.26, 1096: "De fulgore throni Cesarei, uelut ex sole radii, sic ceterae prodeunt dignitates, ut primae lucis integritas minorati luminis non sentiat detrimenta, tantoque magis imperiale sceptrum extollitur, et tanto cura regiminis plurima solicitudinibus releuatur, quanto tribunal ipsius digniores in circuitu circumspicit consimiles regiones […]." This preamble and its Cassiodoran inspiration are discussed by Fichtenau 1958, 37.

[55] On this context, see Hausmann 1974.

fifteenth century.[56] Every variation of detail teaches us something of the reception and reuse of this rhetorical motif at different local levels, and yet it is but one of the thousands of themes which could be extracted by the busy secretaries from our database of *dictamina* in order to compose their texts.

V In the Heart of the Machine, 3: a Formulaic Style between Prose and Poetry?

The intense exploitation of this textual repertory brings us to a last, crucial question concerning the evolution of the *ars*. Did the progressive growth of these anthologies and the success of their diffusion mean that the art of composing texts according to the rules of the *dictamen* became, in the later phases of its history, increasingly mechanical and standardised? It is hard to reject this charge outright. In some parts of western Europe, especially those in which other administrative and literary languages were emerging, the practice of this form of communication relatively quickly took on the character of the composition of textual patchworks.[57] In this way, practice became detached from what had been the rhetorical ideal of the *ars*, with its aim of writing everything, on every subject, in the most perfect form possible. As the *dictamen* progressively lost the battle for dominance, it came to assume the form of a simple administrative routine, a notarial and juridical knowledge of valid forms, whereas literary creativity was monopolised by the vernacular languages or other forms of Latin writing. I would nevertheless like in conclusion to present some of the evidence which make me think that this simple history—a progressive acculturation into the common ground of administrative practice—leaves something to be desired still, and that there is yet more in the writing techniques developed under the influence of the *ars*.

As we have seen, the stylistics of *dictamen* were widely used everywhere around 1350 for composing different sorts of texts, including creative literary essays like Richard of Bury's *Philobiblon*. More generally, the inspiration which the notaries drew from the database of the thirteenth-century *dictamina* was not absolutely restricted to patchwork. In the rhetorical compositions of the major chanceries of the time, profoundly original works do alternate with what a more conservative literary perspective might view as mere plagiarism. In order to explain how the notaries oscillated between these dull imitations and an apparent creativity without transgressing the general rules of the *ars*, we have to consider the operation of imitation at different levels: that is, combining not only greater but also smaller parts of texts, and thus creating a text apparently new but in fact constituted of a

[56] Reuses in Europe (except Aragon) analysed in Grévin 2008, 602–731; for Aragon, see Grévin 2015c.

[57] On the diffusion of tables of automatic epistolary composition from the beginning of the fourteenth century, see Murphy 1974, 262–3 with figures; the most famous of these is by Lorenzo of Aquileia, on which see Felisi & Turcan-Verkerk 2015, 473–6.

discrete combination of "micro-imitations". The key to this more subtle combinatory technique would have had to be a very fine knowledge of the pre-existing variations on a given theme at the syntagmatic level in the database of the *dictamina.* As *ars dictaminis* texts were conditioned by their series of rhythmic ornaments, the habits of selecting terms according to their rhythmical structure and of varying expression across a series of analogous letters led in short order to the creation of entire series of equivalent syntagms: this was achieved by the time of the maturity of the *ars*. Notaries who mastered the *summae dictaminis* had at their mental disposal innumerable series of analogous terms fitting in a given rhythmical pattern, which they could substitute at will to vary their means of expression.[58]

One telling example comes from texts of papal and Sicilian origin contained in the *summae* and thematically related to crusading or battle, which offer up a plethora of rhetorical and semantic variations on the idea of covering something or someone with blood. All these variations agree with the *cursus velox*: *sánguine rubricárunt*, *sánguine saturávit*, *sánguine maculátus*, *sánguine cancelláret*, *sánguine purpurátus*, *sánguine consecrávit*.[59] Analogous syntagmatic chains can be found by the hundreds if we work our way with a strategic selection of terms into the core of our *dictamina* database. My bet is that future analysis will be able to prove scientifically that many of the writing techniques developed under the guidance of *ars dictaminis* correspond to a very specific genre of composition with which it has never been comparatively studied. By this I mean that they were dependent on mechanisms of composition akin to, though not exactly alike, the formulaic modes of composition of ancient metrical or rhythmic poetry, like the Homeric epics or the *Chanson de Roland*. We might choose to call the practice which we find in the later Middle Ages "semi-formulaic composition", to distinguish it from its poetic counterparts. The rhythmically organised parts of the *dictamina* favoured habits of substitution analogous to traditional semi-oral poetry, whereas the parts of the texts not so organised were less conditioned by this pressure.

Though this research is still underway, its implications are evidently complex and numerous. The problem of composition must be brought together with the study of the use of metaphor, singly and in combination, and with the question of the oral aspects of notarial culture in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Implicit in this hypothesis is the notion that notaries must have learned their art through a process of memorising which involved entire sets of *dictamina*, so that they could later recall almost automatically, reflexively, the potential series of combinations to be used in a new composition. These processes would also help explain the somewhat mysterious osmosis between apparently literary and apparently administrative production characteristic of the *dictamen* in medieval Europe. An entire part of administrative and political writing would, structurally and to

[58] On the importance of an orthodox use of *cursus rhythmicus* for establishing the status of texts as school and learning models, see Camargo 1994, repr. in Camargo 2012.

[59] Sequences selected from the three main *summae*: for further detail, see Grévin 2014a, 91.

its exponents, have been very much like traditional composition—certainly more so than has been thought by researchers mainly interested in analysing political languages and the creation of the phraseology of the modern state. We would consequently have to rediscover a forgotten empire of the *dictamen*: an empire consisting not only of plain and iterative formulas, but also of a subtle balance between rhythm and liberty, administrative repetition and literary creativeness, Classical ideas and medieval inspiration.

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