

This is the submitted version of:

Laetitia Ciccolini, Amedeo A. Raschieri, *Between Grammar and Rhetoric in the Late Latin Literature*, "Rivista di Cultura Classica e Medioevale", 68, 1, 2026, 11-17.
<https://doi.org/10.19272/202606501001> [ISSN Print 0035-6085 | e-ISSN 1724-062x]

The final published version is available online at:

<https://www.libraweb.net/articoli3.php?chiave=202606501&rivista=65&articolo=202606501001>

Rights / License:

The terms and conditions for the reuse of this version of the manuscript are specified in the publishing policy. For all terms of use and more information see the publisher's website.

This item was downloaded from IRIS-AIR Università degli Studi di Milano (<https://air.unimi.it>)

When citing, please refer to the published version.

BETWEEN GRAMMAR AND RHETORIC IN THE LATE LATIN LITERATURE

Laetitia Ciccolini (Sorbonne Université, Paris)

Amedeo A. Raschieri (Università degli Studi di Milano)

1. INTRODUCTION

Grammatical instruction, based on the reading of works in prose and poetry, and rhetorical instruction, according to the methods of the *progymnasmata* and declamation, constitute the two pillars of late antique schooling. The interactions between these two areas of expertise, however, became increasingly frequent both within the school context and in literary production. This reciprocal dialogue, moreover, found a further element of innovation in the development of Christian literature. Through the presentation of case studies or more general reflections, two aspects of the interaction between grammar and rhetoric in the field of late Latin literature are explored:

- the relationships and points of intersection between grammar and rhetoric in Latin works with didactic aims. How does this relationship develop in teaching practice? What consequences does it have for the interpretation of texts? What skills does it foster in students? What traces of it can be identified in literary texts?
- the relationships and points of intersection between grammar and rhetoric in works of Christian content and/or written by Christian authors. How does the grammatical and rhetorical training of authors and their audiences influence the composition of works on Christian subjects? How is grammatical training placed at the service of exegesis and of the interpretative challenges posed by the biblical text? How do poetry and rhetoric interact in the works of Christian authors?

The contributions, written in French and Italian by established scholars and early-career researchers, derive from a selection of papers delivered at two study meetings held at the Department of Literary, Philological and Linguistic Studies of the University of Milan (25–26 May 2023) and at the Institut d'Études Augustiniennes and Sorbonne Université in Paris (4–5 December 2023). The Milan meeting focused on texts with didactic and literary aims, while the Paris meeting was devoted to biblical exegesis. The initiative received the support of the International Society for the History of Rhetoric and the *Label scientifique* of the Université franco-italienne (2nd call for projects, Label 2022)¹.

¹ The editors of the volume wish to thank the members of the Scientific Committee of the conference: Massimo Gioseffi (University of Milan); Concetta Tania Longobardi (University of Naples Federico II); Céline Urlacher (Université de Mulhouse); Vincent Zarini (Sorbonne Université). This introduction was prepared through close collaboration between the editors: Amedeo A. Raschieri is responsible for paragraphs 1, 2, and 4, while Laetitia Ciccolini is responsible for paragraph 3.

2. FROM SCHOOL TO LITERATURE

The contributions gathered in the first section of the volume investigate, from different yet converging perspectives, the structural relationship between educational practices and literary production in Late Antiquity, calling into question any rigid separation between grammar and rhetoric, between school and literary work, between didactic exercise and authorial elaboration. The picture that emerges is that of a formative and cultural system in which categories, tools, and models characteristic of teaching—guided reading, paraphrase, textual segmentation, etymology, progymnastic exercises, and dialogic forms—do not remain confined to the school environment, but are instead reactivated, transformed, and refunctionalised within literary exegesis and poetic creation.

Late antique schooling thus appears not merely as a place for the transmission of knowledge, but as a laboratory of forms, capable of exerting a profound influence on the ways in which canonical texts are interpreted and, more generally, on writing practices. The essays brought together here show how the boundary between “grammatical reading” and “rhetorical reading” is in fact porous and dynamic, and how it is precisely this porosity that allows for a better understanding both of the character of ancient commentaries and of the literary and ideological ambitions of many works produced in an explicitly didactic context.

The first two contributions address the presence of Virgil in the educational and literary practices of Late Antiquity. In this respect, M. Venuti analyses the *Argumenta Vergiliana* as a privileged zone of interference between didactic practice and literary craftsmanship. Through an examination of the manuscript tradition and a comparison with ancient commentaries, the study shows how these texts, originally conceived as aids to reading, gradually acquire formal and interpretative autonomy, eventually taking shape as exercises in rewriting endowed with their own authorial ambitions. Also focusing on Virgil, A. Ameduri concentrates on practices of punctuation and discourse segmentation in Book 4 of the *Aeneid*, highlighting the role of *distinctio* and emphatic reading as exegetical tools. The analysis demonstrates how choices that appear merely technical in fact respond to precise interpretative and moral requirements, rooted in the school context and in rhetorical reflection on *pronuntiatio*.

The subsequent contributions examine various aspects of late antique commentaries on Virgil, Horace, and Cicero. A. Pizzotti’s essay investigates antiphrastic etymology in Servius, showing how a category traditionally associated with grammar intersects with rhetorical theories of tropes. Etymology *per contrarium* thus emerges as a complex exegetical tool, capable of guiding the reading of poetic texts and of conveying cultural and ideological judgements. C. Formenti addresses the

problem of “absent rhetoric” in the Horatian commentaries of Porphyrio and Pseudo-Acron. Through a comparative analysis of the different recensions, the contribution highlights the predominance of a grammatical approach based on paraphrase and glosses, while also questioning the limits and potential of such an approach in capturing the rhetorical dimension of the texts. M. Gay’s study examines Virgilian exegesis in Marius Victorinus’ *Commenta in Ciceronis Rhetorica*, showing how poetic quotation functions as a bridge between rhetorical teaching and exegetical tradition. What emerges is the image of an advanced scholastic audience, for whom the reading of Virgil becomes an integral part of rhetorical training.

The panorama of late antique didactic practices is further expanded in the following contributions. In particular, L. Pirovano addresses the so-called “paradox” of the Latin *progymnasmata*, namely their central role in rhetorical education despite the scarcity of surviving manuals. The essay offers historical and cultural explanations and highlights the profound influence of these exercises on the late antique *forma mentis* and on exegetical practices. M. Oliva, for her part, reconstructs the history of *erotapokrisis* as a didactic form shared by grammar and rhetoric, tracing the transition from a dialogue with literary aspirations to a pedagogical scheme. The long *durée* of this modality testifies to its effectiveness as a tool for organising and transmitting knowledge. The contribution by M. T. Galli analyses the anonymous *De epistolis* (RLM, p. 589 Halm), comparing it with Julius Victor and Demetrius. The investigation clarifies the didactic function of the treatise and underscores its importance for understanding the late antique systematisation of epistolary *topoi*.

The final two contributions in this section focus on Ausonius. A. Bresson offers a comprehensive reading of Ausonius’ didactic works, in which grammar and rhetoric are constantly intertwined. The essay shows how didactic writing functions as a space for literary experimentation and as a vehicle for self-representation. Finally, E. Recupero Porcino analyses Ausonius’ *Ludus septem sapientum* as a work situated between epigram and progymnasma, highlighting the role of mnemonic techniques, paraphrase, and Greek–Latin bilingualism in the construction of a text that combines educational aims with an ambition towards *novitas*.

Taken together, the contributions in this section outline a coherent and innovative picture of the continuity between school and literature in Late Antiquity. The idea of a sharp separation between grammar and rhetoric is thus significantly scaled back: the two disciplines appear instead as communicating domains, united by shared practices and a common educational horizon. Commentary, exercise, paraphrase, textual segmentation, etymology, and dialogue are not merely ancillary tools, but fully-fledged interpretative and compositional devices, capable of shaping the reading of the classics and of generating new literary forms.

One of the most significant elements to emerge from these studies is the centrality of the school as a place of cultural mediation: not merely a space of preservation, but also one of transformation of models. The didactic dimension does not stand in opposition to literary ambition; on the contrary, it often constitutes its very precondition. This applies both to the exegesis of canonical texts and to works that originate explicitly within the school context and that, precisely by virtue of this origin, develop a strong formal and authorial self-awareness.

Finally, the section shows how the analysis of educational practices allows for a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which meaning is constructed in late antique literature, opening up new perspectives on the relationship between interpretation, teaching, and textual production. In this sense, “from school to literature” does not indicate a simple linear trajectory, but rather a circular and productive movement, which constitutes one of the most distinctive features of late antique culture.

3. CHRISTIAN TEXTS

The rise of Christianity and its institutionalisation profoundly changed the literary landscape. It was therefore essential to focus the investigation on Christian texts. Some of the contributions in this volume are thus devoted to the complex and dynamic appropriation of grammar and rhetoric by Christian authors.

The central role of the Scriptures in Christian intellectual life gives the use of classical disciplines a unique significance. In much of Christian literary production, the Scriptures – a closed or nearly closed corpus – became the constant reference point. This production can therefore be seen as a vast enterprise of commentary, regardless of the literary genres it employs. However, the Scriptures do not lend themselves naturally to the disciplines of the ancient school. From the point of view of traditional rhetorical canons, they appear to be poorly crafted texts; grammatically, they constitute a space of infractions, due to their status as translated texts and their circulation in various forms.

The question of the proper use of these academic disciplines to grasp and transmit the content of the Scriptures is theorised by Augustine in his *De doctrina christiana*. The very organisation of the work testifies to the interplay between grammar and rhetoric and the influence of the school curriculum, now applied to the Bible: the art of reading, understanding and interpreting texts (books I-III) is the domain of grammar, while the art of composing, speaking and transmitting (book IV) is the domain of rhetoric. Later, Cassiodorus devoted himself to this instrumental use of the classical disciplines, as reflected in the very structure of his *Institutions*.

The papers collected in this volume do not seek to directly question the theoretical positions adopted by Christian authors. Rather, they propose to examine, through representative case studies, the concrete practices and intertwining of the two disciplines.

The contributions of A. D'Incà and E. Castelnovo shed light on how the rhetorical and grammatical traditions are reappropriated to transform the Bible into a more powerful poetic subject. A. D'Incà shows that Commodian consciously uses Cicero's *status legales* to assert that the true interpretation of Scripture belongs exclusively to the Christian people. For her part, E. Castelnovo draws a parallel between two poets, Claudius Marius Victorius and Dracontius, who each offer a poetic paraphrase of chapter 3 of Genesis: both poets transform the biblical narrative into a legal controversy in which the guilt of the protagonists is examined in minute detail. Each study, in its own way, illustrates the debates surrounding the appropriation of classical culture by Christian authors. In the case of Commodian, special skills and a close reading of the text are required to detect the "rhetorical exegesis" of an author whom Gennadius of Marseille, for example, considered mediocre. The ambivalence of these disciplines is also evident in Claudius Marius Victorius' *Alethia*, where the serpent appears as a virtuoso grammarian, but is surpassed in this field by the poet, who applies the method of *enarratio* to the biblical text.

The epistolary genre is widely practised by the ancient writers and also well attested in the biblical corpus. This volume features two contemporary letter writers, Augustine of Hippo and Paulinus of Nola. J. A. Diaz Valero analyses Paulinus of Nola's Letter 40, highlighting the subtle interplay between biblical exegesis and rhetorical devices. The letter adopts a classical rhetorical structure, inspired in particular by Cicero. The interest of this epistle lies in the inclusion of methods of grammatical analysis, such as the etymological analysis of the word *nycticorax* (Ps. 101:7) used by Paulinus to derive a scriptural interpretation. The exceptional abundance of biblical quotations, harmoniously inserted throughout the text, transforms the letter into a sermon on Scripture. As P. Descotes shows, Augustine's Letter 140 is a rhetorical and exegetical tour de force. Faced with five disparate questions posed by Honoratus, Augustine focuses his remarks on a unifying theme of his own choosing: the grace of the New Covenant. P. Descotes highlights Augustine's rhetorical virtuosity, which, while scrupulously commenting on the biblical texts, directs their interpretation to support his refutation of Pelagianism. The two letters combine grammar and rhetoric. However, a comparison with *the Enarratio* on Psalm 21 allows us to grasp what distinguishes a letter such as Augustine's 140 from a simple explanation of the text.

The articles by S. Nastasi and E. Bona examine the philological work of Augustine and Jerome. In both cases, the use of grammar can be explained by the importance of the biblical text, both as a

sacred text and as a translated text. This dual characteristic prompts reflection on language, its tools of analysis and its limitations.

E. Bona highlights Jerome's acute awareness of the distinctive features of each language, which make translation a complex and potentially unfaithful endeavour. Jerome was particularly attentive to the tensions between literal fidelity and stylistic adaptation, between respect for the original meaning and the requirements of clarity, elegance and intelligibility in the target language. For him, the translation of sacred texts is a hermeneutic act, inseparable from grammatical and rhetorical reflection. S. Nastasi, for his part, examines Augustine's treatment of *soloecismus* in the *Locutiones in Heptateuchum*. Augustine analyses turns of phrase that deviate from the grammatical norm and questions their origin: literalism in a translation faithful to the Greek, differences between manuscripts, the influence of *consuetudo Scripturarum*. The analysis highlights a genuine philological approach, which attests to a concern for linguistic precision in the service of a correct interpretation of the sacred text. The two studies reveal that Augustine and Jerome – despite the well-known debates between them – shared a common awareness of the linguistic challenges of exegesis. To conclude the volume, P. Moretti's article proposes a chronological extension by focusing on the reversal that is taking place in the reciprocal links between Christian exegesis and school grammar. The anonymous text *Quae sunt quae*, written between the end of the 7th century and the beginning of the 8th century in a centre of insular tradition (probably Corbie), illustrates this change. P. Moretti offers a representative selection of quotations used by the author, whether scriptural, classical or patristic. This is a conscious attempt to bring the Bible (and its commentaries) into line with Donatus. In this way, aspects of theological doctrine are linked to grammatical elements, such as the three persons of the verb and the three persons of the Trinity.

This undertaking demonstrates the continuity of the ancient grammatical heritage and its reorientation in the service of Christian thought. Moretti's study also provides insight into the active circulation of materials between *scriptoria* and outlines a scholarly culture in which grammar and exegesis are no longer separate but deeply intertwined, even in technical texts.

4. CONCLUSION

Taken as a whole, the contributions provide a broad and coherent reconstruction of the relationship between grammar and rhetoric in late Latin literature, outlining a cultural system in which the two disciplines, while retaining distinct domains and functions, interact in a continuous and structurally significant manner. By taking the school as their point of departure—conceived not merely as a site for the transmission of knowledge, but as a space of methodological and formal experimentation—

the essays demonstrate how didactic practices, ranging from guided reading and paraphrase to textual segmentation and progymnasmatic exercises, constitute a common ground upon which both the exegesis of classical texts and literary and theological production are developed.

The first section foregrounds the profoundly dynamic character of the pagan scholastic tradition: commentary, etymological argumentation, reflection on *pronuntiatio*, and dialogic forms reveal a sustained osmosis between grammatical competence and rhetorical categories, thereby challenging the traditional dichotomy between “grammatical reading” and “rhetorical reading”. The second section shows how this dialogue is further intensified in the development of Christian literature, where the demands of biblical exegesis, translation, and doctrinal transmission call for a particularly self-aware deployment of linguistic and rhetorical tools, giving rise to innovative formal and interpretative strategies.

Among the principal strengths of the collection are its consistent attention to the concrete practices of reading and teaching, its precise analysis of the materiality of texts and their transmission, and its capacity to relate diverse phenomena within a long-term historical perspective. The balanced treatment of pagan and Christian contexts further enables an assessment of continuities, adaptations, and transformations without recourse to rigid schemata. The resulting picture is one in which late antique culture emerges not as a phase of mere conservation, but as a period of intense intellectual and textual elaboration, in which grammar and rhetoric operate jointly in the construction of meaning, in the shaping of literary forms, and in the articulation and transmission of cultural authority.