

GEOFFREY OF VINSAUF

Poetria nova

The medieval literary heritage is inextricably connected with the theory and practice of rhetoric. Rhetoric not only provided a repertoire of compositional techniques but also informed the very habits of mind of medieval writers and readers. The *Poetria nova*, written by the Englishman Geoffrey of Vinsauf shortly after 1200, was the most influential medieval treatise on rhetorical poetics. Modeled on Horace's *Ars poetica*, it is an art of poetry (and prose) in 2121 hexameter verses. Like its other chief source the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (attributed to Cicero during the Middle Ages), the *Poetria nova* takes its structure from the five canons of rhetoric. It treats invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory, with special attention to amplification and abbreviation, the figures of speech and thought, and the stylistic techniques of ‘conversions’ and ‘determinations.’ This synthesis of Horatian and Ciceronian doctrine, combined with an abundance of illustrative set pieces (such as the famous lament for King Richard Lion Heart), was an immediate and lasting success. Geoffrey Chaucer cited the *Poetria nova* more than once, and a century later Desiderius Erasmus still considered it a major authority on rhetorical composition.

First published in 1967, the lively translation by Margaret Frances Nims captures the flavor of the original Latin while providing a clear rendering of its sense. The annotations have been updated or corrected when necessary, and the translator’s useful introduction has been retained. Martin Camargo’s new introduction to the revised edition draws on the scholarship of the past forty years to place the *Poetria nova* more precisely within Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s career and to detail its complex reception during the Middle Ages. With its updated scholarship and improved format, this revised edition is a valuable resource for anyone interested in medieval literature or the history of rhetoric and writing instruction.

MEDIAEVAL SOURCES IN TRANSLATION

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GEOFFREY OF VINAUF

Poetria nova

Revised edition

Translated by
MARGARET F. NIMS

Introduction to the revised edition by
MARTIN CAMARGO



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Translator's Introduction

Poets, said Geoffrey of Vinsauf, are formed through a happy collaboration of three elements: *ars* – a thorough knowledge of the rules; *imitatio* – the study and imitation of great writers; and *usus* – diligent practice. The author, in writing his new *ars poetica*, hoped to provide comprehensive coverage of all three areas: he would offer precepts for the poet-in-training; scope for practice, in the form of model exercises; and adequate criteria for a systematic analysis and appreciation of the *auctores*.

Assuming that poetics was a part of rhetoric, Geoffrey of Vinsauf organized his treatise on the model of the rhetorical manuals, considering invention briefly and then devoting more extensive treatment to arrangement, expression or style, memory, and delivery. But since grammar as well as rhetoric claimed poetics as its province, Geoffrey digressed, between his discussions of style and memory, to consider routines of verbal invention that are well within the grammarian's special discipline.

The resulting system of poetics may seem to twentieth-century judgement singularly mechanical; however, our initial attitude of condescension should perhaps be reconsidered. *Natura*, the genuine poet's native endowment, was recognized, if not analyzed, in Geoffrey's time; but *natura* without *ars* was inconceivable in the creative artist. Words were the poet's medium, and almost nothing in the sound, shape, or chiaroscuro of words taken singly or in patterned sequence, taken figuratively or literally, escaped the attention of the theorist. This is not the place for a defence of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century *artes poeticae*; it is a fact, however, that they represent, and in some instances constitute, the training in expression of most of the poets of western Europe from the thirteenth century through the Renaissance.

The emphasis on verbal expression in the *artes* does not necessarily imply, on the part of their authors, subordination of content to style. Early in his treatise Geoffrey states that *Poetria*, as an art of words, is the handmaiden of *Materia*. The relationship is affirmed still more clearly in his *Documentum de Modo et Arte Dictandi et Versificandi* (II, 3, 2): "Substance [*sententia*] must be the writer's first concern, before he turns his attention to the harmonious arrangement of words; for words are dead

unless sustained by the sound vitality of substance, which is the life and soul of verbal expression." *Inventio*, however (in its broad sense, the finding of the material), was an area of discourse common to poetry and prose, and therefore special treatment in a handbook on poetics was not seen to be necessary.

The major source for Geoffrey of Vinsauf's treatise is the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, or *Rhetorica Nova*, accepted throughout the Middle Ages as a work of Cicero's. As Geoffrey echoes the title of that work in his own, so too he indicates his second important source, Horace's *Ars Poetica*, known to the twelfth century as the *Poetria*. Writing in verse, as Horace had, Geoffrey contributes his "little work, brief in form, vast in import" to the long tradition of versified manuals in the liberal arts which extended back beyond Horace and continued long after the twelfth century.

Of Geoffrey himself, very little is known. Manuscript attributions of his treatise to "Galfridus Anglicus" seem to confirm his implied statement (PN I. 31) that he was an Englishman. His apparently authentic complaint preserved in the Hunterian Museum manuscript¹ adds two probable biographical facts: that he had studied in Paris and taught at Hampton in England. According to the dedication of the *Poetria nova*, he had visited Rome. Anything beyond this is conjecture.

Until further work is done on the very numerous manuscripts of the *Poetria nova*, it will not be possible to establish precisely its date of composition. The following points are relevant:

(1) ll. 326–66 suggest a date before King Richard's death in 1199 – not conclusively, however, for the lines may be a *post factum* exercise in prophecy.

(2) ll. 368–430 were, more certainly, written shortly after Richard's death.

(3) ll. 469–507, giving the complaint of the cross, seem to be part of the preparatory campaign (well under way by 1200) for the Fourth Crusade; or possibly for the Fifth Crusade, which took place after Innocent's death in 1216. This second period seems less likely since no mention is made of the tragic Children's Crusade of 1212.

(4) ll. 517–26 have their greatest relevance between 1199 and 1204. See, however, the note on this passage.

¹ *Causa magistri Gaufredi Vinesauf*, in the Hunterian Museum manuscript 511. A transcription of this fifty-line poem was printed by Edmond Faral in *Studi Medievali*, new series 9 (1936), 56–7. See also H.G. Richardson, "The Schools of Northampton in the Twelfth Century," *English Historical Review* 56 (1941), 595–605.

(5) ll. 2081–98 refer most probably to the years 1212–1215, although an earlier date is possible. Since these lines have no intrinsic connection with the *Poetria nova*, and since it seems unlikely from the nature and length of the poem that it was originally composed as an occasional piece, the date suggested by the passage is valid only as a *terminus ante quem*. Indeed, the entire passage is missing from the best early manuscripts I have seen (e.g. CCC 406, Laud Misc. 515, and the three Trinity College manuscripts).

(6) ll. 2099–2116, the secondary dedication to William of Wrotham, or William of London (or some other?) may also be a later addition, and would be appropriate for either of these men any time between 1200 and 1215.

Until further evidence appears, there seems no strong reason for assigning a date later than 1200–1202 for the substantial completion of the *Poetria nova*. Revisions, deletions, additions were probably made as late as 1215.

A great deal of work remains to be done on the Latin text of the *Poetria nova*, and on its manuscript tradition. It is gratifying to know that a definitive edition is now being prepared. This present translation is based upon the only readily available Latin text, that of Edmond Faral in *Les arts poétiques du XII^e et du XIII^e siècle*, Paris, 1924. I have consulted P. Leyser's two editions of 1721 and 1724, and have examined some twenty manuscripts in English libraries. From several of the earliest and best of these I have adopted a number of readings that differ from Faral's; all such variants I have listed in an appendix. Translation has been rendered difficult at times because of the uncertainty of the text, at other times because of Geoffrey's fondness for novel metaphor. It was pleasant to discover from the glosses that even early readers of the *Poetria nova* were occasionally baffled by the extravagance of its "transferred" meanings.

I am grateful to Professor Theodore Silverstein of the University of Chicago for encouraging this translation in its early stages; to Dr Richard W. Hunt of the Bodleian Library for valuable advice on the manuscripts; to Professor C.R. Cheney of Corpus Christi College for placing at my disposal his great knowledge of Geoffrey's age during my visit to Cambridge; to Professor R.J. Schoeck of St Michael's College for several helpful suggestions; and to Reverend L.K. Shook of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies for his constant and encouraging interest in the project.