



PROJECT MUSE®

Geoffrey of Vinsauf and the Craft of Writing

Bernardo S. Hinojosa

New Literary History, Volume 56, Number 3, Summer 2025, pp. 569-594
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2025.a982260>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/982260>

Geoffrey of Vinsauf and the Craft of Writing

Bernardo S. Hinojosa

Abstract: In his *Poetria nova* (c.1208–13), Geoffrey of Vinsauf approaches literary composition as a craft that is cultivated through imitation, tentative exploration, and repetition. This essay examines how the compositional exercises prescribed in this versified treatise, as well as in other contemporaneous “arts of poetry,” encouraged writers to test different permutations of language until they attained the most effective form. Following the treatise’s advice, these writers engaged in a process of trial and error and developed strategies that they could use to shape future compositions. These writing drills thus provide a rare glimpse into the practices and habits of mind of medieval writers. At the same time, they reflect the shifting intellectual landscape of Western Europe at the turn of the thirteenth century, particularly the convergence of Neoplatonist and emerging Aristotelian thought. The treatise’s understanding of craft is informed by Aristotle’s notion of *techne*, dramatized in the crafting scenes that populate the allegorical poetry of the twelfth century, namely Bernard Silvester’s *Cosmographia* and Alan of Lille’s *Anticlaudianus*.

HAVING BEEN ASKED TO SPEAK ABOUT “some aspect of craft” to the students in the writing program at Columbia University, Zadie Smith questioned the parameters of the assignment: “I don’t believe in craft in the abstract—each individual novel is its own rule book, training ground, factory, and independent republic.”¹ While critics and academics can speak confidently about finished works, the writer cannot pass off this language “as an accurate representation of what it is to write a novel.”² Thus, instead of lecturing on *the* craft of writing, Smith recounted her own lived experience of writing a novel: how she “reworked” twenty pages for almost two years, spending “months switching back and forth.”³ Yet despite her refusal to provide a definition, Smith recognized something crucial to this term: “craft” indicates neither a set of precepts nor a particular skillset but an orientation towards the building blocks of language, a *habitus* formed through repeated practice.⁴

This understanding of craft has informed the teaching of creative writing in the United States for generations.⁵ Today’s MFA workshops promise their participants that they will flex their literary muscles and, through continuous writing and revision, cultivate that elusive quality we

call craft. But this understanding of literary composition as craft did not originate in the modern university. Indeed, it has long been recognized that medieval English poets understood their immaterial intellectual labor “in material terms.”⁶ Drawing on an earlier French tradition, they identified themselves as *makeres*; they thus distinguished themselves from the classical *poetes* and found fellowship with artisanal laborers such as cooks and potters who also craft new *makynges* out of raw materials.⁷

As it aims to grasp how medieval writers theorized literary composition as craft, the present essay looks toward an earlier Latinate tradition that recognized that writing, like other modes of human making, requires imitation, tentative exploration, and repetition. The late twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed the advent of the *artes poetriae* or “arts of poetry,” a body of texts that provided readers with instructions and imitable models for writing verse and prose: Matthew of Vendôme’s *Ars versificatoria* (c.1175), Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi* (c.1198–99) and *Poetria nova* (c.1208–13), Gervase of Melkley’s *Ars versificaria* (c.1215–16), John of Garland’s *Parisiana poetria* (c.1220, rev. 1231–35), and Eberhard the German’s *Laborintus* (after 1215).⁸ The most popular among them—the versified *Poetria nova*—survives in over two hundred manuscripts, which were copied and glossed for centuries throughout Europe.⁹ Cited and referenced by Geoffrey Chaucer and other Middle English poets, the treatise also played an important role in English literary history.¹⁰

Given the treatise’s popularity and influence, scholarship on the *Poetria nova* has focused primarily on its reception. Instead, this essay concentrates on Geoffrey’s work and on its intellectual and literary context: it aims to identify, describe, and assess the compositional exercises prescribed to cultivate the writer’s craft, as well as to situate the *artes poetriae* within a cultural landscape that witnessed the growing currency of Aristotelian thought in Western Europe at the turn of the thirteenth century. Owing especially to Marjorie Curry Woods’s trailblazing work on its manuscript and commentary traditions, the *Poetria nova* has been treated predominantly as a schoolbook, designed to provide young students with formative exercises on poetic and rhetorical composition.¹¹ Indeed, it is plausible that its compositional drills were actualized as hands-on classroom activities. Yet the commentary tradition suggests that the *Poetria nova* was taught at all educational levels.¹² It reemerged in England in the 1380s, not in elementary classrooms but among the Benedictines at Oxford.¹³ It becomes clear then that its exercises could nurture habits of thought for fledgling and mature writers alike. After all, the craft of writing cannot be mastered, for it is a *habitus* that requires continuous cultivation.

By shifting focus away from “theory” as it is traditionally understood and instead towards “practice” or “process,” the sustained examination of the *artes poetriae* can enrich our understanding of medieval literary thinking. Especially in the last two decades of the twentieth century, rather than subject premodern texts to the tools of modern theoretical inquiry, medievalists began to turn to commentaries, glosses, and freestanding prefaces (*accessus ad auctores*) contemporaneous with the literature so as to grasp what medieval writers thought literature was and what it was for.¹⁴ They found that, in keeping with an Aristotelian classification of knowledge, poetry was considered a subset of ethics, its primary function to foster virtuous behavior.¹⁵ And this was a task that later vernacular writers took to heart.¹⁶ Such accounts shed light on the ontological status of poetry in the Middle Ages, as well as on the ethical responsibilities (or the *why*) of authorship. They do not, however, tell us much about the craft of writing: about *how* medieval writers shaped and reshaped their materials and *how* they learned to do so. But the *artes poetriae* do: they show how poetry and prose come into being as products of thoughtful imitation and continuous experimentation, indeed as products of craft.¹⁷

Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s Literary Architect

Before writing can begin, Geoffrey of Vinsauf tells his readers, they must carefully devise the structure of the composition, mentally adjusting and readjusting the material. Geoffrey models this process towards the beginning of his treatise in a famous metaphor that compares the poet to an architect:

Si quis habet fundare domum, non currit ad actum
 Impetuosa manus: intrinseca linea cordis
 Praemetitur opus, seriemque sub ordine certo
 Interior praescribit homo, totamque figurat
 Ante manus cordis quam corporis; et status ejus
 Est prius archetypus quam sensilis. Ipsa poesis
 Spectet in hoc speculo quae lex sit danda poetis.
 Non manus ad calamus praiceps, non lingua sit ardens
 Ad verbum: neutram manibus committe regendam
 Fortunae; sed mens discreta preambula facti,
 Ut melius fortunet opus, suspendat earum
 Officium, tractetque diu de themate secum.
 Circinus interior mentis praecircinet omne
 Materiae spatium. Certus praeliminet ordo

Unde praearripiat cursum stylus, aut ubi Gades
 Figat. Opus totum prudens in pectoris arcem
 Contrahe, sitque prius in pectore quam sit in ore.
 Mentis in arcano cum rem digesserit ordo,
 Materiam verbis veniat vestire poesis.¹⁸

[If anyone must lay a house's foundation, his impetuous hand does not rush into action: the mind's internal line lays out the work beforehand, and his inner human outlines the succeeding steps in a definite order, and the mind's hand shapes the entire house before the body's. And its state is archetypal before it is perceptible. Poetry itself may see in this mirror the law that is given to the poets: let the hand not be hasty towards the pen, nor the tongue eager for the word. Do not commit the hands to the guidance of Fortune, but, as a preamble to action, let the discriminating mind suspend its operations and discuss the topic with itself for a long time so that the work prospers better. Let the mind's interior compass circle the material's whole extent beforehand. Let a specific order chart the point at which the pen may assail its course, or where it may fix its Cadiz. As a prudent man, execute the entire work in the mind's stronghold, and let it exist in the mind before it exists in the mouth. When order has arranged the material in the mind's hidden part, let poetic art come forth to clothe the matter with words.]

The force of the metaphor is clear: much like designing and building a house, writing poetry and prose necessitates not uninhibited improvisation but meticulous planning. This mental procedure must precede material realization, when literary devices "clothe the matter with words." Here and elsewhere, the *Poetria nova* relies on Neoplatonist conventions. It models "poetic making" on the "divine making" narrated in the *Timaeus*, the sole Platonic dialogue available to the medieval Latin West.¹⁹ In that dialogue, the Demiurge—"deus opifex" or "artisan god" in Calcidius's translation—fashions the universe according to the perfect and eternal plan contained within his divine mind.²⁰ However, unlike this "deus opifex," Geoffrey's literary architect is a human being who does not possess the unchanging mind that engenders the world's perfection.

Since the "archetypus" will not arrive fully formed in the writer's mind, Geoffrey urges him to experiment. In an inner dialogue, the writer must imagine the formal permutations in which the composition might be shaped, gauging their effects and overall success before anything has been written down. Each subjunctive verb that punctuates the passage indicates one such moment of reflection, as the writer is invited to design a particular form in the mind and rehearse imaginatively how it would unfold materially. The uncommon verb "praemetitur," which begins this

set of subjunctive instructions, combines the prefix *prae-* (before) with the verb *metor* (measure, mark out). The mind is thus asked to measure what does not yet exist. It is asked to explore scale and possible proportions, setting up defined constraints within which provisional poetic formulations can be tried out and assessed against a standard. Subsequently, the mind is asked to perform a dynamic set of projections and adjustments within this set of constraints: to pre-write [*prae-scribit*], pre-circle [*prae-circinet*], and pre-assail [*prae-arripiat*]. Again and again, the mind is asked to throw itself forward, to realize tentative projections that can be retried countless times. And this method and language proved enduring: the poem's parts, John of Garland would write a few years later, "must be pre-arranged" [*prae-ordinandae*] in the mind."²¹

Having introduced the mental actions that precede writing, Geoffrey offers more specific instructions on *dispositio* or arrangement:

Ordo bifurcat iter: tum limite nititur artis,
 Tum sequitur stratam naturae. Linea stratae
 Est ibi dux, ubi res et verba sequuntur eundem
 Cursum nec sermo declinat ab ordine rerum.
 Limite currit opus, si praelocet aptior ordo
 Posteriora prius, vel detrahat ipsa priora
 Posterius; sed in hoc, nec posteriora priori,
 Ordine transposito, nec posteriore priora
 Dedecus incurrunt, immo sine lite licenter
 Alternas sedes capiunt et more faceto
 Sponte sibi cedunt: ars callida res ita vertit,
 Ut non pervertat; transponit ut hoc tamen ipso
 Rem melius ponat. Civilior ordine recto
 Et longe prior est, quamvis praeposterus ordo. (*P*, lines 87–100).

[Order bifurcates the course into two: sometimes it advances along the path of art, sometimes it follows the paved road of nature. The line of the paved road is the leader there, when events and words follow the same course, and the discourse does not deviate from the order of events. The work travels along the path of art if a more suitable order presents what happened later before, or it drags earlier things later. But when the order is transposed, later things do not incur dishonor by their early appearance nor earlier things by their late appearance. Indeed, they boldly seize each other's chair without quarrel, yield to each other politely and willingly. Ingenious art turns things thus so that it does not pervert them; it transposes so that it may place the event better. It is more elegant than the straightforward order, and superior by far, although the order is distorted.]

This passage is usually taken to contrast two ways of organizing narrative: *ordo naturalis* and *ordo artificialis*.²² Geoffrey clearly prefers the latter: compositions that do not obey a temporal sequence of events signal the poet's "ars callida" or "ingenious art" (*P*, line 97). The writer transposes the order of events—for instance, by beginning the composition at the end or *in medias res*—without corrupting the subject matter. Still, Geoffrey does not force his reader to follow a particular path. Indeed, he then exemplifies eight "artificial" ways for beginning a composition (*P*, lines 167–202). Geoffrey thus grants readers freedom to experiment, although only within certain boundaries. They can try out eight different *ordines* and test their effects, finding the one that the subject matter demands. Some attempts will work, others will fail.

Geoffrey recognizes that any transposed *ordo* will be less straightforward than one that obeys the temporal sequence of events: it is not a paved road (*strata*) but a winding trail (*limes*). He thus upends readers' expectations of what kind of road would respectively represent nature and artifice, insinuating that transposed *ordo*, although usually deemed artificial, feels more natural than a sequential one: not like pavement but like dirt. Still, he does not (and, at any rate, cannot) explain why it is so, for it is a judgment that has emerged not from doctrine but from practice: from observing and producing manifold literary compositions and gauging their effects. By imitating this process, Geoffrey's readers can likewise develop an intuitive sense of the effectiveness and appropriateness of each transposition.

Craft and Crafting in the High Middle Ages (I): Aristotle and the Idea of Craft

The literary architect must therefore engage in a process of trial and error until he figures out an effective shape for his materials, at least tentatively. What he learns from this process will allow him to shape future compositions. As I will now argue, despite its advertised Neoplatonism, this account of literary composition reflects Aristotelian ideas that were beginning to circulate in the Latin West, including pertaining to craft.²³ Although the details of this story are continuously being fine-tuned, its overall shape is well known: in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, owing to expanding networks of intellectual exchange and translation, Aristotle's works became increasingly available in Western Europe.²⁴ The Aristotelian corpus offered thinkers within and beyond the schools a multidisciplinary framework for understanding the material world and human practices of making.

In its early stages, the intellectual revolution that the so-called “re-discovery” of Aristotle ushered in did not extend to the language arts. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* did not receive wide circulation until William of Moerbeke’s translation in the late 1260s; even then, it was primarily read for its political and ethical content.²⁵ Still, Aristotle elaborates the concept of “craft” or “art,” central to his rhetorical theory, elsewhere in the corpus. The first book of the *Metaphysics*, in James of Venice’s Latin translation (1225–50), states:

Et fere videtur scientie et arti simile experimentum esse, hominibus autem scientia et arti per experientiam accidit; experientia quidem enim artem fecit, sicut ait Polus recte dicens, sed inexperientia casum. Fit autem ars cum ex multis experimento intellectis una fit universalis de similibus acceptio . . . expertes enim ipsum sciunt quia quidem, sed propter quid nesciunt; hii autem propter quid et causam cognoscunt.²⁶

[And experience seems to be similar to science and art, but science and art come to men through experience. For experience made art, as Polus rightly says, but inexperience chance. Art comes to be when, from many things understood by experience, there arises one universal apprehension about similar things . . . for men of experience know that something is so, but do not know why; others (craftsmen) know the why and the cause.]

This passage juxtaposes experience (“experientia” or “experimentum”) with art or craft (“ars”), respectively *empeiria* and *techne* in the original Greek. Those who possess “experience” know only the practice: even if they sometimes succeed, they do not know why. In contrast, those who possess “art” have deep familiarity with particulars and can grasp the universal or theory. For instance, the physician—Aristotle’s quintessential craftsman—can infer, having treated enough sick people, the cause of an illness and devise an appropriate treatment for a class of patients. Moreover, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which would not be translated in full until the middle of the thirteenth century, Aristotle labels “architecture” [oikodomike, ars edificativa] a *techne*.²⁷ He then explains that *techne* is not merely doing, it is “identical with a state of capacity to make, involving a true course of reasoning.” *Techne* identifies not the material production of goods but “a mode of knowing” that enables future acts of making.²⁸

In the *Metaphysics* and the *Ethics*, Aristotle worries that some will arrive at the appropriate answer through luck or good fortune, rather than by a true course of reasoning. And this same issue was central to ancient rhetorical debates. In Plato’s *Gorgias*, Socrates argues that rhetoricians merely chance upon effective means of persuasion. Therefore, rhetoric

is a “knack” [empeiria] not a “craft” [techne].²⁹ In contrast, Aristotle argues that, although everyone engages in persuasion, most are unable to determine the conditions of their success: “Ordinary people do this either at random or through practice and from acquired habit.”³⁰ Yet rhetoricians inquire into “why some speakers succeed through practice and others spontaneously; and everyone will at once agree that such an inquiry is the function of art.” Through repeated practice and analysis, rhetoricians come to learn what works and what does not. This learning can, in turn, guide future compositions and performances. Thus, although Geoffrey almost certainly never read Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, his *Poetria nova* offers something resembling an imaginative rehearsal of the Greek philosopher’s notion of *techne*. The “course of reasoning” undertaken by Aristotle’s craftsman parallels the mental process that Geoffrey’s literary architect must perform. Indeed, Geoffrey even announces that writers must rely on “craft” or “art” [ars] not on “luck” [fors] (*P*, lines 1588–89).

Although it does not incorporate a discussion of luck, echoes of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* can be heard in the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, a major source for Geoffrey. This Roman treatise of uncertain authorship explains that while it is not overly difficult to discern whether a speaker follows the rules of rhetoric, only someone extensively trained in *elocutio*—here, not a “craftsman” but an “erudite” [eruditus]—can compose artful passages.³¹ The treatise’s opening also pronounces that the successful rhetorician requires “imitation” [imitatio], “practice” [exercitatio], and “art” [ars], categories that Geoffrey repeats in his versified treatise (c.f. *P*, lines 1705–08). Yet the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*’s definition for *ars*—“a rule that provides a clear road and a doctrine of speaking”³²—seems at odds with the tentative exploration that the *Poetria nova* endorses; the Roman treatise more closely gestures to “theory” or “doctrine” than to Aristotelian *techne*. In contrast, Geoffrey stresses that the writer’s road is not fixed. He must read, analyze, and assess manifold literary compositions; he must test diverse formal permutations until he determines the most effective one, for the benefit of future compositions. Although writers can be shown a “clear road” [via . . . aperta] by teachers and prescriptive treatises, they should “strive” [stude] to find it themselves (*P*, lines 1701–02).

Craft and Crafting in the High Middle Ages (II): Bernard Silvester’s *Cosmographia*

Prior to the widespread dissemination of much of the Aristotelian corpus, allegorical works such as Bernard Silvester’s *Cosmographia* (c.1147)

and Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus* (c.1182) offered thirteenth-century literary theorists not disquisitions on the nature of craft but striking representations of crafting that highlight such striving for a clear road.³³ The former, a prosimetrum in two parts, narrates the creation of the universe (*Megacosmus*) and the human (*Microcosmus*). The latter, in verse, recounts Natura's desire to create a perfect man who will rectify human degeneration. These works differ from the *artes poetriae* in method, genre, and scope: they tell a story and advance philosophical arguments, not teach writing techniques. Yet these twelfth-century epics were central to the development of rhetorical training and the *artes poetriae* in the thirteenth century: they were read as literary "masterpieces" fit for analysis and imitation from which the art of poetry can be learned.³⁴

Several *artes poetriae* explicitly recognize Bernard's influence. Matthew of Vendôme—who, he tells us in an epistle, studied under Bernard at Tours—cites the *Cosmographia* twice in his *Ars versificatoria*: it exemplifies antithesis and epithet.³⁵ In his *Ars versificaria*, Geoffrey's contemporary Gervase of Melkley praises and ranks those who previously wrote about this art: in ascending order Matthew, Geoffrey, and Bernard, a "parrot in prose, nightingale in verse" who examined this art "most thoroughly."³⁶ For his part, Eberhard the German recognizes that the *Cosmographia* teaches the *ars dictaminis* and its ornaments.³⁷ Unlike these writers, Geoffrey does not cite Bernard. However, this absence conforms to his citational practice, which follows the advice given in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* that the rhetorician devise his own examples:³⁸ whereas his prose *Documentum*, likely earlier, combines original compositions with classical examples, the *Poetria nova* only features Geoffrey's own.

Like the architectural metaphor in the *Poetria nova*, the philosophical content of the twelfth-century epics is indebted to Plato's *Timaeus*. They share the assumption that the "visible universe is a unified whole, a 'cosmos'; that is the copy of the divine exemplar; and that its creation was the expression of the goodness of its creator."³⁹ Indeed, towards the beginning of Bernard's *Megacosmus*, the allegorical figure Noys, self-described as God's *ratio*, explains that, before it can be realized materially with all its "adornments" [*cultus et facies*], "the origin of things" [*rerum nativitas*] must be celebrated in God's mind.⁴⁰ This two-step process resembles Geoffrey's architectural metaphor, also couched in Neoplatonist language: the writer's mental plan, like God's plan, must precede material composition. In fact, in a similar passage in Alan of Lille's *Plaint of Nature*, Natura characterizes God as an "elegant architect" [*elegans architectus*] and "skillful artisan" [*artificiosus Artifex*] who conceives the universe in his eternal mind.⁴¹ However, unlike the writer's mental blueprint, God's plan is not a plastic outline that can

be continuously redrafted. As Bernard puts it, creation was established “by rigid and invincible necessity” [rigida et invincibili necessitate].⁴²

The similarities between this scene of cosmological creation and Neoplatonist understandings of literary composition, including Geoffrey’s architectural metaphor, have long been recognized.⁴³ Yet Bernard follows this singular instance of divine creation with the *Microcosmus*, a longer narrative in which female figures who function as “mediators between God and the cosmos” engage in multiple acts of (imperfect) crafting.⁴⁴ Their alignment to the “Aristotelian craftsman” has not gone unnoticed.⁴⁵ These figures engage their materials in an “experimental” manner; they craft the human through “trial and error.”⁴⁶ Precisely because of their limitations—although divine, they are not God—they serve as appropriate models for human acts of making, including literary composition.⁴⁷

The *Cosmographia*, which was read to Pope Eugenius III around 1147, is roughly coeval with James of Venice’s translations of Aristotle. Direct engagement with Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is plausible but by no means certain. Yet the arrival of Aristotelian ideas into Western Europe preceded the wholesale translation of individual books, often indirectly via Arabic science.⁴⁸ In fact, medieval Neoplatonism already incorporated Aristotelian concepts. Calcidius’s foundational commentary on the *Timaeus* synthesizes key ideas in Aristotelian physics, especially pertaining to matter.⁴⁹ Notably, Calcidius also introduces a version of Aristotelian craft. In his discussion of wisdom, he explains that “assiduous use” [usu assiduo] and “frequent observation” [frequens observatio] can engender a “craft” or “art” [Artem].⁵⁰ In an earlier section, he explains that physicians can predict health or death based not on “fate” [fato] but on “technical reason, and practice, and experience” [artificiosis rationibus usuque et experientia].⁵¹ Granted, he also associates physicians with helmsmen who can predict storms and even with readers of oracles. Still, Calcidius highlights for medieval Neoplatonists how repetition and practice can produce the kinds of theoretical knowledge that underwrite human modes of inquiry.

A process of crafting, which combines Neoplatonist and Aristotelian precepts, is central to the *Cosmographia*. In the *Megacosmus*, Bernard labels the goddess Natura an “artifex” or “artisan.”⁵² In the *Microcosmus*, she summons other artisans [artificibus] to assemble a human being.⁵³ Among them, Physis sets out to build body parts out of unruly elements. To aid her work, she is given the “Liber Recordationis” or “Book of Memory,” a reference work that primarily catalogues nonhuman animals. But this book proves inadequate: only after much effort does Physis find an image, “dim and faint” [sublustrem, tenuem], of the human she must create (*M* 1.11). Physis thus lacks the perfect plan that, in accordance with Platonist cosmology, was given to Noys for the formation of the

universe. She is much closer to a human craftsperson than to the “deus opifex” of the *Timaeus*.

So, Bernard emphasizes Physis’s struggle, implicitly juxtaposed to Noys’s frictionless creation of the universe: “She would plan the work according to her ability, but she felt herself inadequate having yielded to the weight” [Ingeniis aptaret opus, sed pondere visa est | succubuisse minor] (*M* 12.9–10). As signaled by the subjunctive verb “aptaret”—plan, prepare, adjust—Physis tests different possibilities for her design. But the outcome is disastrous. Bernard imagines a laborer who, miscalculating her strength and the demands of her material, drops a heavy load. This image associates Physis with the literary arts. Horace’s *Ars poetica*—the earlier work that Geoffrey’s “new” poetry seeks to revise—asks that the poet “ponder for a long time what [his] shoulders refuse to carry and what they have the strength for.”⁵⁴

As she performs her labor, Physis successfully assembles “spines and nerves” [cervisque nervosque] according to divine “lines” [lineas] (*M* 13.2). But shortly thereafter, she discovers that her raw materials, infused with Silva’s “malignant filth” [malignans illuviens], are inherently flawed. In a striking image, Bernard describes how the now-liquified materials began “flowing through her fingers and slid out of the shape that the artisan had intended” [defluens quidem eliquavit in digitos et a specie quam intenderat Artifex lubricavit]. It is, however, this moment of failure that allows Physis to devise a more solid plan. With her “sharp understanding” [ingenium . . . argutum], she reviews the unwieldy raw materials, eventually realizing that these are not perfect elements but “dregs” [faeculentas] leftover from the universe’s creation (*M* 13.3). Thus, Physis considers necessary adjustments, attuned to the demands of the materials:

Collibratis igitur humoribus et eorum potentiis exaequatis, cum usiae substantiam qualitates confecissent, secuta est partium quae corpus efficit plenitudo. Cumque formam exposceret consummata soliditas ad perfectum, totam concretionis materiam per ternas primum partitiones oculis fidelibus committitur. Eas rudi primum inpressione in liniamenta distrahit, subindex in eam quae membrorum est speciem configurat. (*M* 13.9).

[When the humors had been measured and their powers balanced, when their qualities had combined into the essential substance, the fullness of parts followed, which the body completes. And since the attained solidity required form for its completion, with trustworthy eyes, she first divided all the material of the concretion into three parts. These, she first divided, with a rough impression, into lineaments, then shaped them into the shape of limbs.]

Like a medieval physician, Physis works to stabilize the humors, the dregs of creation. The language of measurement and balance captures not instantaneous production but tentative exploration: she tinkers until “fullness” is attained. Bernard highlights Physis’s attention: her “trustworthy eyes” survey the materials, which allows her to assemble an effective “form” or “species.” In contrast to earlier scenes of failure, in which liquified materials flow through Physis’s fingers, Bernard envisions a methodical artisan who engages in a step-by-step process of formation, transforming a draft or “rough impression” into perfectly crafted limbs.

Craft and Crafting in the High Middle Ages (III): Alan of Lille’s *Anticlaudianus*

Alan of Lille, a careful reader and successor to Bernard Silvester, incorporated similar portrayals of crafting in his poetry. His works thus showcase the currency of Bernard’s ideas towards the end of the twelfth century, just before Geoffrey composed the *Poetria nova*.⁵⁵ Indeed, although such a claim must remain at the level of conjecture, it is plausible that, as a student in Paris, Geoffrey crossed paths with Alan.⁵⁶ Regardless, Geoffrey’s language signals familiarity with Alan’s works: he describes metaphor as “a pilgrimage of words” [peregrina . . . verborum] (*P*, lines 963–64), an image that, Katherine E. C. Willis has documented, Alan enjoyed.⁵⁷ This connection is unsurprising: like Bernard’s *Cosmographia*, Alan’s *Anticlaudianus* (c.1182) came to occupy a leading role in rhetorical training with surprising rapidity. At the beginning of his *ars*, Gervase of Melkley even claimed that the *Anticlaudianus* indirectly teaches poetic composition.⁵⁸

In Alan’s earlier *Plaint of Nature*, Natura recounts that she delegated the formation of earthly life to Venus, to whom she gave “two reliable hammers” [duos legitimos malleos] and “splendid workshops” [nobiles officinas]. She also gave her a “powerful reed-pen” [calamum praepotentem] for depicting different creatures according to Natura’s “rules of orthography” [orthographiae normulam], linking writing with other crafts. Natura then performed “the final revision” [supremae expolitionis], perfecting Venus’s work.⁵⁹ In the *Anticlaudianus*—a sequel of sorts to the *Plaint of Nature*—Natura does not delegate this task. She desires to “forge” [cudit] a new perfect human who will rectify past failures.⁶⁰

Natura recognizes the difficulty of the task, which, at first, she judges “beyond her” [ultra se, supra se] (*A* 1.12–13). Yet rather than throw herself headfirst, she approaches the task methodically, “withstanding the mind’s sudden movements” [subitos animi motus perpressa] (*A* 1.15).

Rather than “run suddenly towards the tasks” [repente | currit ad haec opera], she “deliberates” [deliberat] on her own abilities and “weighs” [pensat] each concern on the “scale of reason” [libram rationis] (A 1.15–17). Employing a widespread metaphor for authorial revision, Alan also envisions a mental process as a material one: a mental “paring knife” [scalpro] and “a better file” [lima meliore] allow Natura to fine-tune her plan (A 1.21–22).⁶¹ Having assembled this plan, in the poem’s middle section, Natura embarks on a celestial journey in search of a soul. Upon her return, she puts the plan into motion:

Ergo sollerti studio Natura requirit
 materiae summam, de qua praesigne figuret
 hospitii, carnisque domum quam spiritus intret
 caelestis radietque suo domus hospite digna.
 Excipit a terra quicquid purgatius in se
 terra tenet, quidquid puri sibi vindicat humor,
 quidve magis purum purus sibi destinat aër,
 vel fedaecatam retinet sibi purior ignis.
 Dividit a toto, divisaque rursus in unum
 colligit, in summam commiscens; dumque futurum
 sic praelibat opus, humani corporis aptat
 materiem, signans operis vexilla futuris. (A 7.8–19)

[Thus, Natura searches, with skilled study, for the best of the materials, from which she may form distinguished lodgings and a home of flesh that a celestial spirit may enter and illumine, a home worthy of its guest. She draws from the earth whatever the earth holds more purely in itself, whatever purity moisture can claim for itself, or what pure air determines purer for itself, or what purer fire holds for itself purified. She divides from the whole and again collects the divided things into one, combining them into a perfect thing. Meanwhile, she foretastes future work: she adapts the material for the human body, signaling the standards of future work.]

A sequence of active verbs—“requirit,” “excipit,” “dividit,” “colligit”—demarcates each step in Natura’s process. This pattern captures the mood of Natura’s “skilled study” as she aims to craft a human who embodies the Platonist principles of harmony and order. Like Bernard’s Physis, she judiciously assesses the demands of her materials, which in this case are not dregs but pure elements. Dividing and purifying further, she assembles the human form. Her goal is not to design *this* human being but to set the “standards of future work.” Indeed, the uncommon verb *praelibare* (fore-taste)—which resembles those in Geoffrey’s architectural metaphor—suggests that Natura can anticipate the sensory features

of still-immaterial work. A true Aristotelian craftsperson, she lays the groundwork for future acts of making through repeated trials and a “true course of reasoning.”⁶²

Several scenes of crafting precede Natura’s exploratory yet ultimately smooth formation of the perfect human. Before she begins her work, Natura summons the Seven Liberal Arts to build a chariot that she can commandeer in her quest for a soul.⁶³ Like a poem, the chariot must be mentally assembled before it can be realized materially. In a sequence that relies on metaphors of pregnancy and miscarriage, Arithmetic assembles the wheel’s form “in the mind’s womb” [mentis in alvo]. With care, she avoids any “sudden motion” [moto subito] and thus an unanticipated birth (A 3.341–49). It is only after she sets up “a mental wheel” [rota mentalis] that she can depict it “in material likeness” [materiali effigie] (A 3.356–57). To design and build the chariot’s parts, Arithmetic must then perform repetitive actions, which are compared to human manufacturing processes. She performs “the stonecutter’s labor” [latomi stadium] and “with her craft, tames the marble’s hardness” [domat arte rigorem marmoris] (A 3.360–61). Guided by craft knowledge, her actions are neither instantaneous nor mindless.

The tentativeness and difficulty of this manufacturing process is more palpable in the actions of Arithmetic’s sisters. To shape an axle, Logic “attempts to soften the hardness of iron, bend its rigidity, erase its sluggishness, chase away its numbness” [ferri temptat mollire, rigorem flecterem, torporem delere, fugare stuporem] (A 3.91–92). A sequence of infinitive verbs demarcates the various steps in the sister’s craft: soften, bend, erase, chase away. But the active verb that governs the infinitives—“temptat”—signals that, rather than achieve her goals forthwith, Logic must grapple with the materials in an exploratory manner, perhaps even undoing her work at times. She concludes her work only after “much toil of sweat” [multum sudoris opus] and a “battle of struggle” [proelia luctae] (A 3.99). In turn, as she mentally assembles her own plan, her sister Geometry “assumes the role of the smith” [fabrum induit] (A 3.514–15). With her “mind” [mente] and “hands” [manu]—body parts that the *Poetria nova* associates with the writer’s craft—she “attacks” [invadit] the leaden material until a pleasing form is impressed (A 3.516–18). Bellicose language pervades the whole episode: it signals the task’s difficulty and the need for repetitive action. To impose a pleasing form, Geometry’s hammer must “repeatedly” [crebro] pound the lead (A 3.517). By the end of the episode, all seven sisters have “pounded and pounded out” [cudit et excudit] the chariot’s parts until perfection is attained (A 4.72).

Geoffrey of Vinsauf's Mental Workshops (I):
Abbreviatio and *Amplificatio*

In the *Poetria nova*, Geoffrey of Vinsauf envisions the writer's mind, in which words are hammered and fused together, as the kind of workshop brought to life in the twelfth-century epics, in which allegorical personifications assemble bodies and chariots. These earlier representations of crafting may have therefore offered Geoffrey a framework with which to understand the craft of literary composition. Most notably, in his discussions of amplification (*amplificatio*) and abbreviation (*abbreviatio*), Geoffrey likens the raw materials of literature to wax and molten iron, moldable in the writer's mind:

Formula materiae, quasi quaedam formula cerae,
Primitus est tactus duri: si sedula cura
Igniat ingenium, subito mollescit ad ignem
Igenii sequiturque manum quocumque vocarit,
Ductilis ad quicquid. Hominis manus interioris
Ducit ut amplificet vel curtet. (*P*, lines 213–18)

[The shape of the matter, like a certain shape of wax, is first hard to the touch: if unremitting attention kindles mental ability, the material soon softens towards the mind's fire and follows the hand in whatever way it requires, malleable to anything. The interior human's hand leads it to amplify or curtail.]

Once again, Geoffrey frames a mental process as a material one: the "mind's fire" and the writer's inner hand warm and melt the hard wax. In turn, the content matter of the poem, like moldable wax, can follow the hand "in whatever way it requires." Figurative comparison highlights the tentative exploration inherent to literary composition. The molten wax remains pliable, allowing the craftsman to test as many possibilities as he wishes, perhaps with different degrees of strength or for different lengths of time, both to amplify and to curtail. For Christopher Cannon, this image "unites the immaterial realm of thought" with "the solidity of the finished poem."⁶⁴ But the logic of the comparison suggests that the composition is never permanently solid, never quite finished: if the wax hardens, the writer can rekindle his mental fire and warm it up again.

Geoffrey's account of *abbreviatio* more explicitly associates the mental planning of a literary composition with the material processes portrayed in the epics. Here, the writer's mind becomes a metallurgy workshop:

Si brevior vellet brevis subsistere meta,
 Dormiat in primis omnis sententia. Verbi
 Non meminisse velis; sed tantum nomina rerum
 Scribe stylo cordis, virtus ubi tota reclinat
 Thematis. Hoc facto quasi fungere lege fabrilis:
 Ferrum materiae, decoctum pectoris igne,
 Transfer ad incudem studii. Permolliat illud
 Malleus ingenii, cuius luctatio crebra
 Formet ab informi massa peridonea verba.
 Verba, coadjunctis aliis quae verba sequuntur,
 Post conflent folles rationis, nomina verbis
 Verbaque nominibus, quae totum thema loquantur. (*P*, lines 718–29)

[If one wishes to keep a short thing within a brief limit, let every statement sleep at first. Do not wish to be mindful of verbs; rather, write down the names of things with the mind's pen, where the entire strength of the theme reclines. When this is done, perform as in the mode of the workman: transfer the iron of the material, refined in the mind's fire, to the anvil of study. Let the intellect's hammer soften it completely, let its repeated struggle fashion, from the unformed mass, the most suitable words. Afterwards, let the mind's bellows fuse the words, with others added to follow the words, nouns with verbs, and verbs with nouns, which may speak the whole theme.]

To impart this lesson, Geoffrey first employs personification: statements must be allowed to sleep. This choice subverts assumptions that literary matter, like the reluctant matter subdued in the epics, is inert and fully subservient to the writer's will.⁶⁵ He then invites his readers, in their mental metallurgy workshops, to hammer and shape the personified language into effective forms. The metaphor that governs this passage is a classical one: Horace recalls that Quintilius Varus would ask poets to “return poorly shaped [*male tornatos*] verses to the anvil [*incudi*].”⁶⁶

However, as in the architectural metaphor, Geoffrey's version focuses not on revision—or even writing—but on the extensive mental planning that must precede putting pen to paper, dramatized in the twelfth-century epics. Indeed, he characterizes this mental procedure as a “repeated struggle” [*luctatio crebra*] and thus couches it in belligerent language reminiscent of the *Anticlaudianus*. Crucially, what Geoffrey counsels is a counterintuitive suspension of the normal focus of the composition (the *sententia*) in favor of a more exploratory accumulation of nouns, which can then disclose possibilities of poetic utterance likely to be lost in the impulse to formulate clausal and sentential utterances. Indeed, he counsels the deliberate and systemic imposition of controlled pa-

rameters of composition, which aim to focus the writer's attention on the raw materials of poetry: words as sound, rhythm, and association.

Geoffrey of Vinsauf's Mental Workshops (II): *Determinatio*

Geoffrey's discussion of *abbreviatio* exemplifies how the *artes poetriae* focus readers' attention on individual words, which can be recombined into more artful expressions.⁶⁷ In his *Ars versificatoria*, Matthew of Vendôme pairs words into successful “marriages” [matrimonia]. These resemble precious gems whose artful deployment [ex quarum artificiosa positione] heighten a garment's overall excellence.⁶⁸ For the benefit of his youngest readers, Matthew even provides a catalogue of effective adjectives, nouns, and verbs that can be deployed elsewhere.⁶⁹ In contrast to Matthew, Geoffrey assembles more elaborate exercises that prepare readers for large-scale planning and writing: from the “verse line” to the “architectonics of form.”⁷⁰ Thus, in his *Documentum*, Geoffrey advises readers to “write down infinite verbs” [scribat infinita verba] and practice turning each into a metaphor (*D* 2.3.8). Later *artes poetriae* propose similarly ambitious activities. John of Garland advises that writers collect every noun associated with their chosen topic. For instance, if the composition is about a shepherd, they should collect nouns such as “pasture,” “ram,” and “wolf.”⁷¹

In the *Poetria nova*, Geoffrey extensively models two compositional exercises of this kind: *determinatio* and *conversio* (c.f. *D* 2.3.48–131). When writers engage in *determinatio*, they string together nouns, adjectives, and verbs in quick succession, eventually producing what the *Documentum* designates “articulus” or “inculcatio,” a kind of rhythmic, paratactic line (*D* 2.3.87–88). The term *determinatio* would have been familiar to many of Geoffrey's readers: in twelfth-century grammar, a word “determines” the one next to it and thus disambiguates its meaning.⁷² But Geoffrey does not focus on semantic clarity. Rather, he emphasizes the aesthetic effects of this technique, and it is this version of *determinatio* that later treatises explore. For John of Garland, *determinatio* allows rhetoricians to “write lightly and plainly” [leviter dicere et plane].⁷³ He thus juxtaposes this paratactic fragmentation to the rhetorical ornateness and syntactical complexity of the high style.

In the *Poetria nova*, Geoffrey employs the language of ancient physics to explain this kind of line and its aesthetic effects. A solitary word, he tells his readers, is “like raw matter, like a thing rough and without form” [quasi mater hyle, quasi red rudis et sine forma] (*P*, lines 1761–63). The addition of “a companion” [sociam] will confer *forma*: a term that, in me-

dieval Latin, can mean “form,” “shape” or “beauty.”⁷⁴ Geoffrey describes individual words as “hyle,” which in Plato’s *Timaeus* identifies the prime matter out of which the Demiurge fashions the universe. However, as he did in the architectural metaphor, Geoffrey stresses that the human maker, lacking a perfect plan, must engage in more exploratory work. He thus directs readers to fashion long chains of lexical or phrasal units until they cohere into “form.”

So that his readers can learn how to assemble this kind of chain and attain the desired form, Geoffrey proposes a two-step activity whose goal is an effective description of a disappointing meal:

Vel collige voces
 Complexas et eas multas et in aggere tali:
 “Venit in opprobium mensae mensale lutosum,
 Panis furfureus, cibus asper, potus amarus,
 Vernula pannosus.” Vel mobile sic germinemus:
 “Mensa fuit pauper et parvula, mappa vetusta
 Et contrita, cibus incoctus et horridus, ipse
 Potus acetosus et turbidus, assecla mensae
 Vilis et illepidus. Totum fuit absque decore.” (*P*, lines 766–74)

[Or collect embraced utterances, many of them, in this kind of heap: “There came, to the disgrace of the table, a soiled tablecloth, bran bread, rough food, bitter drink, a shabby servant.” Or we may germinate the adjective: “The table was poor and small, the tablecloth old and tattered, the food raw and rough, the drink bitter and turbid, the table’s attendant base and unpleasant. Everything was without elegance.”]

This passage establishes controlled conditions for producing literature. As he carries out this exercise, the writer joins together pairs of nouns or adjectives, which he can then “germinate” by adding more adjectives. Once again, the writer is asked to focus neither on narrative nor on *sententiae* but on the aural effects of language, to produce rhythmic fragmentation. The choice of object—a failure of culinary craft—bolsters the pedagogical aims. Negative examples can impress themselves more firmly on the reader. Moreover, the language of blame might provide an unintimidating model of aesthetic assessment: as readers analyze culinary failure, they develop habits of thought that they may direct towards poetic analysis and independent revision.

Geoffrey’s final model for imitation, which demonstrates the *determinatio* of a verb, employs first-person pronouns and thus intensifies this kind of readerly engagement:

Lege quidem simili rectos ita congero verbis:
 Iam mihi contrahitur pellis, quatitur cor, anhelat
 Pulmo, riget lumbus, curvatur spina, tremiscit
 Corpus et ad limen stat mors. (*P*, lines 1803–06)

[Thus, by a similar rule, I bring together nouns in the nominative case with verbs: now my skin shrivels, my heart palpitates, my lungs gasp for breath, my loins stiffen, my back curves, my body trembles, and death stands at the threshold.]

Relying on a double entendre that may have gone unnoticed by his youngest readers, Geoffrey strings together nouns and verbs in rapid sequence unencumbered by conjunctions: the poetry reflects the ecstatic body. The passage affords different kinds of imaginative work. As he recites this *determinatio*, the reader can inhabit this first-person voice, which the example provides with a body. The reader can also picture a teacher, perhaps Geoffrey himself, as he performs the compositional exercise. Turning to the second-person, this imagined teacher then invites the reader to inhabit the role of student and perform his own *determinatio*: “you may prepare” [aptes] adverbs to match verbs (*P*, line 1817).

Geoffrey demarcates each kind of *determinatio*—for instance, verbs with oblique nouns or verbs with adverbs—with the conjunction “aut” [or], thus implying that the writer can try out each technique or even combine them. In fact, Geoffrey concludes his discussion of *determinatio* with an extended passage that collects all these techniques, written in the “manner and custom of Sidonius” [modus et mos Sidonianus] (*P*, line 1825). The phrase “modus et mos” points towards what we now call style: a term that paradoxically labels both the particular (“the micro-level of the writer’s work”) and the general (“what is possible at a particular time”).⁷⁵ Sidonius has a personal style; poets can write in the style of Sidonius. Thus, as they read, parse, and even imitate a passage written in the “modus et mos Sidonianus,” Geoffrey’s readers become attentive both to particular style and an idea of style: to the units of language that accumulate into a writer’s “modus et mos.”

Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s Mental Workshops (III): *Conversio*

Geoffrey pairs his account of *determinatio* with a much longer discussion of *conversio*: a technique that also focuses attention on the lexical or phrasal unit as sound. Unlike *determinatio*, *conversio* is not a rhetorical technique that will be legible in the finished composition. It is an exercise that allows writers to find words that they can arrange on the

page. Here, Geoffrey establishes the most explicit procedure of trial and error in the *Poetria nova*. To engage in *conversio*, the writer “converts” a verb, an adjective, or an uninflected word into one or more nouns: *doleo* becomes *dolor*, *candidus* becomes *candor*. In turn, the writer declines the noun in all cases. The exercise thus establishes artificial constraints that prompt the writer to choose “the most felicitous form of expression for the specific purpose.”⁷⁶

As the *Documentum* puts it, the writer converts words “until he reaches some assemblage that responds well in both mind and ear” [donec incidere in aliquam juncturam quae bene respondeat et animo et auri] (*D* 2.3.121). As signaled by the preposition “donec,” this is an open-ended exercise that aims to strengthen writers’ literary instincts: having collected a large assemblage of words, they can figure out what works and sounds well in a composition. This kind of assessment emerges again at the end of the *Poetria nova*. As he highlights the importance of independent revision and editing, Geoffrey asks that his readers, relying on the “triple judgment of mind, ear, and usage” [judicium triplex et mentis et auris et usus], determine whether a particular word pollutes the whole (*P*, line 1949). This triple judgment is possible because the writer has performed exercises such as *conversio* and therefore engaged in the ongoing cultivation of craft.

To stress the difficulty of this exercise, Geoffrey employs language reminiscent of the crafting scenes in the twelfth-century epics. The mind, compared to a boxer or wrestler (“pugil”), fights against itself (*P*, lines 1750–51). Its efforts are “violent” (*P*, line 1755). And to illuminate what these difficult efforts aim to achieve, Geoffrey gestures to an idea of craft:

Quid deceat nosti dicisque decencia dici,
 Forte tamen casu ductus, non arte. Nec in re
 Sentis quid primo visu speculeris et in quo
 Praefundes studium, quis sit locus unde studendi
 Anticipes cursum, quae gignat origo decorem
 Verborum; sed mens hac parte vagatur et illa,
 Et vaga sunt dubiae mentis vestigia, tanquam
 Caeci palpantis qua vel quae sit via, cujus
 Est oculus baculus et dux fortuna. Quid ergo?
 Arte domes animum, qui quasi scurra vegetur. (*P*, lines 1588–97)

[You know what is fitting and you say what is fitting, yet perhaps you are guided by chance and not by art. And you do not perceive what to look for in a subject at first, on what part you concentrate your attention, at what point you must apply yourself to the course, what source brings forth the adornment of words. But your mind wanders

from one part to another, and the aimless steps are of a dubious mind, just like those of a blind man feeling where or what his way is, whose cane is his eyes and fortune his leader. What then? With art, you may tame the mind, which wanders like a jester.]

Like Aristotle, Geoffrey warns his readers not to associate luck with skill. In fact, he explicitly employs the Aristotelian language of craft (*ars*) to identify the habits of mind and technical knowledge that will allow the writer to develop a framework for approaching later work. To cultivate the writer's craft, *conversio* works to prevent routinization: it prevents the writer from the unthinking selection of a word. Therefore, Geoffrey draws a clear distinction between attentive and rote repetition. Only the former nurtures literary habits of mind. By establishing a clear starting point, *conversio* harnesses the writer's scattered brain, which aimlessly wanders "from one part to another," providing an antidote against distraction.

As is typical in the *Poetria nova*, Geoffrey compares this technique to a manufacturing process. He asks readers to transform their minds into yet another workshop:

Hoc igitur studium fundens rem sic age. Nomen
 Quemlibet in casum varies et cuilibet aptes
 Talem juncturae seriem quae serviat apte
 Proposito. Sed ad hoc sudabis pectore toto;
 Mentis in incude studiose cude, recude,
 Denique quod deceat excude. Sed ordo sit iste.
 Ante modos omnes in pectore collige. Post haec
 Elige quid melius, sub quo sententia casu
 Auribus instillet jocundius. Hic operetur
 Judex discretus, discrete videat. Istud
 Ut bene discernat, opus est simul artis et usus. (*P*, lines 1611–21)

[Therefore, lead the subject in this way, pouring eagerness on it. Change the noun into whatever case, and fasten to it such series of connected words, which may serve aptly for this purpose. But to this end, you will exert yourself with the entire mind: pound and re-pound eagerly on mind's anvil, and finally pound out what is fitting. But let the order be this. First, collect all the grammatical modes in the mind. After, choose what is better, the case through which meaning may enter the ears most joyfully. Here, let a discerning judge work, let him see with discernment. To discern well, there is need of both technique and practice.]

Like a metallurgist, the writer hammers words—again and again—into different cases: he must “pound” [cude] and “re-pound” [re-cude] the

words until they can be “pound[ed] out” [ex-cude] into an appropriate literary configuration. The verb *codere*, itself hammered into different shapes, evokes the crafting scenes in Alan of Lille’s *Anticlaudianus*, where Natura “forged” [cudit] a perfect human and the Liberal Arts “pounded and pounded out” [cudit et excudit] the chariot’s parts (A 4.72).

By engaging in this kind of compositional exercise, the writer develops an ear for poetry: he can now identify and, like an Aristotelian craftsman, even foresee the effects of a literary configuration. Thus, at the end of this passage, Geoffrey explicitly advances a claim that animates much of the *Poetria nova*: that the cultivation of a literary practice requires both theory and practice, and that these categories are mutually constitutive. Writers cultivate their craft or art (*ars*) through habit or practice (*usus*); craftsmen grasp the universal through knowledge of particulars. By engaging in *conversio* and similar exercises, writers, whether elementary or mature, can harness their own minds, discover the best lexical choices for a composition, and develop a baseline understanding of how literature works, thus facilitating future acts of making.

Except when multiple authorial versions exist or when later works incorporate an author’s earlier compositions in a new context, pronouncements about a medieval writer’s craft tend to be pronouncements about a finished work, or as it is often the case, about a work left unfinished. Like holograph manuscripts, authorial notes or sketches are rare. Thus, it is from the finished product that the circumstances and processes of production can be inferred. Indeed, even studies that examine the “formation” or “making” of medieval literature must, by necessity, begin with the final product.⁷⁷ Our understanding of medieval literary theory relies, moreover, on authorial statements incorporated into the works, as well as on early critics’ glosses and commentaries on finished products.

The compositional drills proposed in the *Poetria nova*, which emerge from a rich intellectual tradition that illuminated the relationship between the language arts and other modes of human making, bring into relief the imperceptible scaffolding that enables and conditions a literary practice and thus makes the finished work possible. Open-ended exercises such as *determinatio* and *conversio* aided writers in cultivating their craft prior to drafting a particular piece. Since these were plausibly carried out decades and centuries after the early thirteenth century—and the sheer popularity of the *Poetria nova* attests to this—the exercises can make visible the ephemeral aspects of the literary craft of later writers,

including of those writing in the vernacular. The *artes poetriae* remind us that the literary works copied in manuscripts or printed in modern editions were the product of continuous planning, adjustment, and revision that took place primarily in the writer's mind. Their exercises offer a rare glimpse into these arduous, often invisible practices, which underlie any polished work of literature.

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

NOTES

- 1 Zadie Smith, "That Crafty Feeling," in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (Penguin, 2009), 5.
- 2 Smith, "Crafty Feeling," 6.
- 3 Smith, "Crafty Feeling," 7.
- 4 As Katharine Breen explains, *habitus* identifies something like "an art or a craft," which becomes engrained through repeated performance. *Imagining an English Reading Public, 1150–1400* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 44.
- 5 See Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 22–23.
- 6 Lisa H. Cooper, *Artisans and Narrative Craft in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 59.
- 7 J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland, and the "Gawain" Poet* (Yale University Press, 1971), 23–28; Glending Olson, "Deschamps' *Art de Dictier* and Chaucer's Literary Environment," *Speculum* 48, no. 4 (1973): 719–21; Anne Middleton, "Chaucer's New Men and the Good of Literature in the *Canterbury Tales*," in *Literature and Society*, ed. Edward W. Said (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 30–33. Although, see also Taylor Cowdery, *Matter and Making in Early English Poetry: Literary Production from Chaucer to Sidney* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 10.
- 8 Overviews are offered in Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter, *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300–1475* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 544–60; Douglas Kelly, *The Arts of Poetry and Prose* (Brepols, 1991); James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (University of California Press, 1974), 135–93. On Geoffrey's career and the dating of his *Documentum* and *Poetria nova*, see Martin Camargo, "From 'Liber versusum' to 'Poetria nova': The Evolution of Geoffrey of Vinsauf's Masterpiece," *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 21 (2011): 1–16. Unless otherwise noted, I cite the editions of the *artes poetriae* in Edmond Faral, ed., *Les arts poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle: recherches et documents sur la technique littéraire du moyen âge* (Champion, 1924). Translations from Latin are my own.
- 9 Marjorie Curry Woods, *Classroom Commentaries: Teaching the "Poetria Nova" across Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Ohio State University Press, 2010), 21.
- 10 See Martin Camargo, "Chaucer and the Oxford Renaissance of Anglo-Latin Rhetoric," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 34 (2012): 173–207; Rita Copeland, "Chaucer and Rhetoric," in *The Yale Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Seth Lerer (Yale University Press, 2006), 122–46; Cowdery, *Matter and Making*, 8–9, 118–24; James Simpson, "'Gaufred, deere maister sovereign': Chaucer and Rhetoric," in *The Oxford Handbook of Chaucer*, ed. Suzanne Conklin Akbari and James Simpson (Oxford University Press, 2020), 126–43.
- 11 Woods, "The *Poetria nova* as School Text," chap. 2 in *Classroom Commentaries*, 50–93.

- 12 Woods, "The *Poetria nova* as Early Humanist Text" and "The *Poetria nova* as University Text in Central Europe," chaps. 3 and 4 in *Classroom Commentaries*, 94–162, 163–233.
- 13 Camargo, "Chaucer and the Oxford Renaissance," 177–181.
- 14 See Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott, eds., *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c. 1100-c. 1375: The Commentary Tradition*, rev. ed. (Oxford University Press, 1991).
- 15 See Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction* (University of Toronto Press, 1982); Vincent Gillespie, "The Study of Classical and Secular Authors from the Twelfth Century to c.1450," in *The Middle Ages*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson, vol. 2 of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 160–86. Although, see also Gillespie's later reassessment in "Ethice Subponitur? The Imaginative Syllogism and the Idea of the Poetic," in *Medieval Thought Experiments: Poetry, Hypothesis, and Experience in the European Middle Ages*, ed. Philip Knox, Jonathan Morton, and Daniel Reeve (Brepols, 2018), 298.
- 16 See Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).
- 17 My approach thus aligns with Adhar Noor Desai's recent account of early modern (and modern) compositional practices, "a conception of authorship rooted not in effortless production but in a process of continual critical reexamination." *Blotted Lines: Early Modern English Literature and the Poetics of Discomposition* (Cornell University Press, 2023), 9.
- 18 *Poetria nova*, lines 43–61, in Faral, ed., *Les arts poétiques* (hereafter cited as *P*).
- 19 Simpson, "Gaufred, deere maister souverain," 132.
- 20 Calcidius, *On Plato's "Timaeus,"* ed. and trans. John Magee (Harvard University Press, 2016), 30d.
- 21 John of Garland, *Parisiana poetria*, ed. and trans. Traugott Lawler (Harvard University Press, 2020), 3.1.
- 22 See Jean-Yves Tilliette, *Des mots à la Parole: Une lecture de la "Poetria nova" de Geoffroy de Vinsauf* (Droz, 2000), 74–81, and Mary Carruthers, "The Concept of *Ductus*, or Journeying through a Work of Art," in *Rhetoric Beyond Words: Delight and Persuasion in the Arts of the Middle Ages*, ed. Carruthers (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 190–92. See also Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi*, 2.1.1, in Faral, ed., *Les arts poétiques*. Hereafter cited as *D*.
- 23 See also Paul Binski, "'Working by words alone': The Architect, Scholasticism, and Rhetoric in Thirteenth-Century France," in *Rhetoric Beyond Words*, ed. Carruthers, 26; Anya Burgon, "The Mechanical Arts and *Poiesis* in the Philosophy and Literature of the Twelfth-Century Schools," (PhD diss., Cambridge, 2018), 113–18.
- 24 For an overview, see Bernard G. Dod, "Aristoteles Latinus," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism, 1100–1600*, ed. Norman Kretzmann et al. (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 43–79.
- 25 Rita Copeland, *Emotion and the History of Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 184–88.
- 26 Aristotle, *Metaphysica Lib. IV.4: Translatio Iacobi sive "Vetustissima,"* ed. Gudrun Vuillemin-Diem (Brepols, 1970), 1.1 (981a-29).
- 27 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton University Press, 1984), 6.4 (1140a6–11).
- 28 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Harper, 1971), 57.
- 29 Plato, *Gorgias*, in *Lysias. Symposium. Gorgias*, ed. and trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Harvard University Press, 1925), 462b-463c.

- 30 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1.1 (1354a6–11), in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Cf. Aristotle, *Rhetorica: Translatio Guillelmi de Moerbeka*, ed. Bernhardus Schneider (Brepols, 1978).
- 31 *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, ed. and trans. Harry Caplan (Harvard University Press, 1954), IV.4.7.
- 32 [Ars est praeceptio, quae dat certam viam rationemque dicendi]; see *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, I.2.3.
- 33 Bernardus Silvestris, *Poetic Works*, ed. and trans. Winthrop Wetherbee (Harvard University Press, 2015); Alan of Lille, *Literary Works*, ed. and trans. Winthrop Wetherbee (Harvard University Press, 2013).
- 34 See Kelly, *Arts of Poetry and Prose*, 57–68; Woods, *Classroom Commentaries*, 47–49; and Copeland and Sluiter, *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric*, 26–28.
- 35 Matthew of Vendôme, *Ars versificatoria*, 3.28, 3.41, in Faral, ed., *Les arts poétiques*.
- 36 [Scriperunt autem hanc artem Matthaëus Vindocinensis plene, Gaufrroi Vinesauf plenius, plenissime vero Bernardus Sylvester's (in prosaico psittacus, in metrico philomena)]. See Gervase of Melkley, *The Art of Making Verses*, ed. Traugott Lawler (Harvard University Press, 2025), Pref. 2.
- 37 Eberhard the German, *Laborintus*, 1.597.
- 38 *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, IV.6–7.
- 39 Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: The Literary Influence of the School of Chartres* (Princeton University Press, 1972).
- 40 Bernardus Silvestris, *Megacosmos* 2.1, in *Poetic Works*.
- 41 Alan of Lille, *Plaint of Nature* 8. 28, in *Literary Works*.
- 42 Bernardus Silvestris, *Megacosmos* 2.1, in *Poetic Works*.
- 43 See especially Kelly, *Arts of Poetry and Prose*, 65.
- 44 Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 2.
- 45 Brian Stock, *Myth and Science in the Twelfth Century: A Study of Bernard Silvester* (Princeton University Press, 1972), 195.
- 46 Stock, *Myth and Science*, 229; Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry*, 181.
- 47 On Natura's limitations, see Rebecca Davis, "*Piers Plowman*" and the Books of Nature (Oxford University Press, 2016), 62.
- 48 See Richard Joseph Lemay, *Abu Ma'shar and Latin Aristotelianism in the Twelfth Century: The Recovery of Aristotle's Natural Philosophy through Arabic Astrology* (American University of Beirut, 1962); Stock, *Myth and Science*, 23–30.
- 49 Calcidius, *On Plato's "Timaeus"*, 13.280–89. See Stock, *Myth and Science*, 112–17; Gretchen Reydamas-Schils, *Calcidius on Plato's "Timaeus": Greek Philosophy, Latin Reception, and Christian Contexts* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 141–50.
- 50 Calcidius, *On Plato's "Timaeus"*, 9.216.
- 51 Calcidius, *On Plato's "Timaeus"*, 7.185.
- 52 Bernardus Silvestris, *Megacosmos* 4.1 in *Poetic Works*.
- 53 Silvestris, *Microcosmos* 1.4 in *Poetic Works*. Hereafter cited as *M*.
- 54 "aequam | viribus et versate diu, quid ferre recusant." See Horace, *Ars Poetica*, in *Satires, Epistles, and Ars Poetica*, ed. and trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (Harvard University Press, 1926), ll.38–39. On Geoffrey's attitude towards Horace, see Copeland, "Horace's *Ars poetica* in the Medieval Classroom and Beyond: The Horizons of Ancient Precept" in *Answerable Style: The Idea of the Literary in Medieval England*, ed. Frank Grady and Andrew Galloway (Ohio State University Press, 2013), 27–30.
- 55 See Mark Kauntze, *Authority and Imitation: A Study of the "Cosmographia" of Bernard Silvestris* (Brill, 2014), 160–66.

- 56 See Margaret E. Nims, "Translatio: 'Difficult Statement' in Medieval Poetic Theory," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (1974): 221–22.
- 57 Katherine E.C. Willis, "The Poetry of the *Poetria Nova*: The *Nubes Serena* and *Peregrinatio* of Metaphor," *Traditio* 72 (2017): 281–83. On this metaphor, see also Tilliette, *Des mots à la Parole*, 117–34.
- 58 "Sed *Anticlaudianus* indirecte nos instruit plenius quam directe" (Gervase, *Art of Making Verses*, Pref.7). See also G. Raynaud de Lage, *Alain de Lille: Poète du XIIe siècle* (Institut d'études médiévales, 1951), 131–62, and Copeland and Sluiter, *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric*, 518–19.
- 59 Alan of Lille, *Plaint of Nature* 10. 2, in *Literary Works*.
- 60 Alan of Lille, *Anticlaudianus* 1.5, in *Literary Works*. Hereafter cited as A.
- 61 Michele Kennerly, *Editorial Bodies: Perfection and Rejection in Ancient Rhetoric and Poetics* (University of South Carolina Press, 2018). See also, on the early modern afterlife of this metaphor, Desai, *Blotted Lines*, 13–14.
- 62 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 6.4 (1140a6–11).
- 63 On these figures' limitations and their place in an Aristotelian classification of knowledge, see James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille's "Anticlaudianus" and John Gower's "Confessio amantis"* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 32–42.
- 64 Christopher Cannon, "Form," in *Middle English: Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford University Press, 2007), 182.
- 65 See also Kellie Robertson, "Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto," *Exemplaria* 22, no. 2 (2010): 111–18, and Cowdery, *Matter and Making*, 2–3.
- 66 Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 1.441.
- 67 See Franz Quadlbauer, *Die antike Theorie der genera dicendi im lateinischen Mittelalter* (Hemann Böhlhaus Nachf, 1962), 71; Kelly, *Arts of Poetry and Prose*, 38.
- 68 Matthew of Vendôme, *Ars versificatoria*, 2.11, in Faral, ed., *Les arts poétiques*.
- 69 Matthew of Vendôme, *Ars versificatoria*, 2.12–46.
- 70 Jennifer Jahner, *Literature and Law in the Era of Magna Carta* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 68.
- 71 John of Garland, *Parisiana poetria*, 1.21.
- 72 Copeland and Sluiter, *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric*, 447.
- 73 John of Garland, *Parisiana poetria*, 2.11.
- 74 *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, "forma," 1a, 1b, 3, accessed July 19, 2025, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/forma>.
- 75 Maura Nolan, "Style," in *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, ed. Brian Cummings and James Simpson (Oxford University Press, 2010), 396, 397.
- 76 Woods, *Classroom Commentaries*, 85.
- 77 See, for instance, Kara Gaston, *Reading Chaucer in Time: Literary Formation in England and Italy* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Cowdery, *Matter and Making*.