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# THE MEDIEVAL LATIN AND ROMANCE LYRIC

## TO A.D. 1300

## I

EARLY LATIN VERSE, like modern European verse in general, was built on an accentual basis, and took no notice of the length or shortness of syllables. About 240 B.C., however, the principles of Greek versification were introduced, and artistic Latin verse from that time onward was written on the Greek quantitative principle. So great was the prestige of Greek culture and literature, that native verse in the old accentual or Saturnian metre was thenceforth considered unworthy of the attention of cultured writers. Throughout the classical period, all great Latin poets accepted the quantitative system as the only permissible one; and the accentual system passed to the limbo of the camp, the market-place, and the tavern.

The classical period of Latin literature came to an end about the middle of the second century after Christ, and with the death of Marcus Aurelius in A.D. 180 the Roman Empire itself began to decline. As it declined, Christianity, a hitherto despised religion, began to grow in power. Slowly but steadily it increased its strength, even though for many years to come it remained a proscribed religion.

Although the Christian Church was to be the medium through which Latin was "to pass itself off as a living language when it had been dead for centuries", it was at first a Greek-speaking body. Even at Rome, its liturgy was celebrated in Greek until about the middle of the third century. It was in Africa—the chief home of Latin literature during the third, fourth, and fifth centuries—that Christian Latin literature first arose, and that it produced its first writer of note in Tertullian, who flourished round about the year 200. Like nearly all the Latin Fathers for three centuries to come, he was educated in the pagan public schools, and the practical rhetorical training which he received



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there is evident in his writings as in those of so many of his successors.

During the third century, the Christian Church grew fast, but was still on the defensive. Hence, this century is, in Christian Latin literature, pre-eminently the Age of the Apologists. Faced with the necessity of defending the Christian faith, the Apologists had at first no time for verse-writing, but confined themselves to prose. Not until the middle of the third century at the earliest did the Latin Church produce its first verse-writer, in the person of Commodian, and it is by no means certain that he lived before the fourth century. His poems, of no value as literature, are nevertheless important linguistically, for in them are to be seen the beginnings of a return to the Old Latin system of versification and the introduction of a new principle which was in course of time to change the face of Latin verse.

As the classical period of Latin had progressed, the gulf between popular Latin and literary Latin had widened. Classical Latin verse, with its foreign basis, had obtained no deep hold on the people, and cannot have been fully appreciated except by the cultured few. The accentual system, on the other hand, though ignored in strictly literary circles, had never lost its hold on the masses; and Christianity, with its popular appeal and popular membership, brought it to the surface again.

As early as the second century A.D., the principle on which Classical Latin verse had its foundations began to break down, for the language itself was undergoing revolutionary changes. Long vowels and short vowels were tending more and more to be pronounced alike, and poets began to hesitate about the length of syllables. During the third century, their difficulties increased. By the end of the fourth century, the distinction between long and short vowels had probably disappeared entirely from unstressed syllables in ordinary speech, though it perhaps survived for another century or more in stressed syllables.

This breakdown is very evident in the works of Commodian. He aimed at writing his *Carmen apologeticum* in dactyls; but, of the 1066 lines in the poem, only 26 are quantitatively correct. On the whole, he observes quantitative distinctions in stressed



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syllables, but neglects them in unstressed syllables. He tries to end his lines with a spondee preceded by a dactyl, but his endings, when correct at all, are correct on the accentual principle only. Further, he introduces a principle which Latin verse had never known—the principle of rhyme. In pre-classical and classical writers, rhyme had been rare. Even where it appears, it is generally accidental, though in a few instances it is introduced for emphasis or rhetorical effect. Commodian's rhyme is but a rudimentary one in *e* and *ae*, but is evidently introduced deliberately as an ornament of style. His verse, therefore, sets the stage for two of the characteristic features of Medieval Latin verse—accent and rhyme.

Christianity entered a new phase of its history in the year 313, when Constantine's Edict of Milan gave it freedom of worship throughout the Empire. Its writers now began to take the offensive against paganism and also against the heresies—the greatest of them being Arianism—which soon began to divide Christendom against itself. The Church began to organize itself thoroughly. In public worship, extemporization gradually gave way to a fixed, written liturgy; and, before the end of the century, Latin hymnody had settled down to fixed verse forms.

The earliest Christian Latin hymns were, like the Hebrew Psalter which inspired them and the Greek hymns of which some of them were translations, in prose form, and in them the parallelism of the Psalms is a prominent feature. The *Gloria in excelsis* is a beautiful example of these early hymns; but the finest example of all is the *Te Deum*(63),* the rhythmical prose of which is (to quote Dr Raby) "a marvellous example of an inspiration that does not so much triumph over the rhetorical temptation which lay so very near as soar beyond it for ever".

On first thoughts, it is somewhat surprising that Saint Hilary of Poitiers, who was writing about the time when the *Te Deum* was composed, abandoned the Christian prose tradition in favour of verse when he composed his hymns. Reflection will nevertheless provide a reason for the change.

Saint Hilary's hymns are essentially didactic. He was, before

* Figures in parentheses indicate the pages where the relevant texts are to be found.



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everything else, a teacher, and his supreme object in life was to confute the Arians. His exile in Greek-speaking lands had shown him the great value of hymns for teaching the faith, and he had only to decide what was the best form in which to cast them. As Christianity was not yet a fashionable religion, but was still drawing most of its converts from the uneducated classes, verse had advantages over prose for the object which he had in view. A prose hymn like the *Te Deum*, for all its magnificence, was not easy to remember; but a metrical hymn, divided into short stanzas, was much more easily committed to memory, and its stanzas could be sung to a recurring melody.

These reasons are sufficient to account for Saint Hilary's choice of verse in preference to prose, and also for his use, in one of the hymns attributed to him, of the trochaic tetrameter catalectic, or *versus popularis*. A favourite metre of the Greek poets, it was taken over by the Latins and became very popular with the masses. Well known from its use by the Roman legions in their marching-songs, it was admirably suited to Saint Hilary's purpose. His hymns, it is true, never became popular, for they were too didactic and lacked the poetic fire; but he was the first Christian poet to write in a metre which was to clothe some of the grandest of Latin hymns. Used to great effect by Prudentius about the end of the fourth century, by Fortunatus about the end of the sixth, and by many later writers, it became the basis of the greatest Sequences of the later Middle Ages and of one of the finest hymns of Saint Thomas Aquinas, nearly a thousand years after Hilary's time. Used again by the earliest Romance poets, it has remained a favourite in European verse, religious and secular, down to the present day. It is strange that hymn-books have no specific name for the metre of *Lo! he comes with clouds descending* and *Glorious things of thee are spoken*.

The popularity which Saint Hilary failed to achieve as a hymn-writer was won by his younger contemporary, Saint Ambrose (65–6), who stands out as the greatest figure in Latin hymnody. Like his predecessor, he wrote with a didactic purpose, and chose a popular metre of the time, but his hymns are much simpler. All of them are written in iambic dimeters grouped in quatrains—



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a stanza known ever since as the Ambrosian. This simplest of metres is combined with a plain, unadorned style, producing a dignified and virile effect, free from sentimentality. Exhibiting, as Archbishop Trench says, "the old Roman stoicism transmuted and glorified", Ambrose's hymns served as models to successive generations of hymn-writers. Through all the gradual changes which led from the unrhymed, strictly metrical hymn to the rhymed, accentual hymn of the Middle Ages, throughout the Renaissance, with its reversion to unrhymed hymns on a strictly quantitative basis, from the Renaissance to the present day, Saint Ambrose's supremacy has been unchallenged, and the Ambrosian stanza has been the staple of Latin hymnody, as it is—under the name of "Long Metre"—one of the two staples of English hymnody.

The disregard for quantity which has already been noticed in Commodian's verse is absent from Saint Ambrose, for Italy was more conservative linguistically than Africa. Consequently, Ambrose writes with strict regard for the quantitative principle. At the same time, his verse has a well-marked rhythm, based on accent, so that "the rhythmic syllabic character of the poetry of Ambrose marks in reality the beginnings of Romance versification, not because it was not known before him, but because of his constant adherence to the system on account of its popularity and effectiveness with the mass of the faithful".*

Surviving Saint Ambrose by some years, and forming with him the greatest trio of contemporaries that the Christian Church has ever produced, were Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine.

Saint Jerome's translation of the Bible[67, 69], completed during the early years of the fifth century, shows the changes through which written Latin had passed since the close of the classical period. Some of its characteristics, it is true, had been occasionally revealed even in classical literature, but they were regarded as the lapses of careless writers who allowed the Vulgar Latin of everyday life to penetrate into the sacred precincts of style. When they were on their guard, classical writers had been haunted by fear of using the language of the masses.

* Muller and Taylor, *A Chrestomathy of Vulgar Latin*, p. 115.



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Saint Jerome, ardent Ciceronian though he was, had no such fear. He had, indeed, a fear of an entirely opposite kind, for he had received a vision in which he saw himself damned for ever for being a better Ciceronian than Christian. Consequently, the Vulgate is written in the natural, unstilted, everyday Latin of the closing years of the fourth century. Received at first with violent hostility from the people for whom it was written, and even accused of shaking the foundations of the Christian faith, the Vulgate never obtained the direct official approval of the Church. Its vast merits, however, brought it universal recognition when the older generation died out, and it had no rival for a thousand years.

The Vulgate, says Milman, "almost created a new language. The inflexible Latin became pliant and expansive, naturalising foreign Eastern imagery, Eastern modes of expression and of thought, and Eastern religious notions, most uncongenial to its own genius and character; and yet retaining much of its own peculiar strength, solidity, and majesty." On it the liturgy of the medieval Church was built, and from it the language of the medieval Church was drawn. Even when Latin had ceased to be any man's native tongue, and few could understand the artificial Latin of the classics, those who spoke a Romance language could yet understand the Vulgate with little difficulty; for Jerome's language, being of his own time, leaned in the direction of Romance. Further, it was so magnificently written that, throughout the centuries, Latin and Romance poets, both religious and secular, found in it a source of unfailing inspiration. Saint Jerome's version of the Psalms has been the most widely read collection of poetry in the world's history.

Saint Augustine's fame as a writer rests entirely on his prose works. He left, however, a didactic poem which, though of little aesthetic merit, is of considerable importance in the prehistory of Medieval Latin versification, for in it the transition from classical to medieval principles is carried farther than in Commodian's verses. We find in it, in embryo, three main features of Medieval Latin versification—accentual rhythm, isosyllabism, and rhyme. Its structure is not perfectly regular; but, generally



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speaking, its lines have sixteen syllables each, with a caesura in the middle, an accent on the penultimate syllable of each half-line, and a simple monorhyme in *e* or *ae*.

Tradition also ascribes to Saint Augustine the authorship of the magnificent prose lyric, the *Exsultet*[72], which, if it is not by him, is at least worthy of so great a writer.

A number of extracts from the poems of Prudentius[71], a Spanish contemporary of the great trio of Latin Fathers, were used as hymns throughout the Middle Ages and have remained in liturgical use to the present day. Their author, however, unlike Saint Ambrose, wrote with no congregation in view. His poems, strictly correct from the point of view of classical prosody, are written in a variety of metres, handled with a skill which has earned him the title of "the Virgil and Horace of the Christians". Sometimes, as in his well-known *Corde natus ex parentis*, he uses a popular metre; but the appeal of many of his poems, even if they were widely known in his time, must have been practically limited to educated circles.

Yet, although he was not writing with a liturgical purpose, he had a didactic one. It was identical with Chénier's:

*Sur des pensers nouveaux, faisons des vers antiques.*

Christianity was now the established religion of the Empire, and the educated classes who were flocking into the Church needed a Christian substitute for the charms of pagan Latin literature, towards which many of them must have cast longing glances backwards. This substitute was provided by the lyrics of Prudentius, and by the poems of his contemporary Juvencus and of fifth-century writers such as Dracontius and Avitus, all of whom presented Bible stories, from both the Old Testament and the New, in the style of Virgilian epics.

The future of Latin verse, however, did not lie with the imitators of Virgil, but with the followers of Saint Ambrose. During the fifth century, the cycle of the Breviary Offices was completed, and the Rule of Saint Benedict, drawn up in the earlier part of the following century, required hymns to be sung at all the canonical hours. During the same period, the cultus of the



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saints grew apace. Many new festivals were instituted, and there was an increasing demand for hymns at these celebrations. Educated Christians soon ceased to be a novelty; and, as the memory of paganism receded more and more into the background, Christian poets ceased to write epics and turned increasingly to hymnography.

For about 150 years after the deaths of Saint Ambrose and Prudentius, no great Latin hymnographer arose, but a number of hymns were composed in Ambrosian stanzas. In these—in Sedulius's *A solis ortus cardine*(74) and the anonymous *Ad cenam agni providi*(75), for instance—we find Latin verse developing farther and farther away from the classical pattern. Accent is gradually replacing quantity as the metrical basis, metrical ictus and word-accent tend to fall more and more on the same syllable, and an increasing amount of assonance is introduced.

One sound practical reason for the ultimate victory of the accentual basis of Latin hymnody has been pointed out by Dom Anselm Hughes:

> "Latin hymnody of the earliest periods", he says, "introduced for the first time the custom of singing stanzas or strophes to fixed recurring melodies. This was practically an innovation, for early Christian hymns written in Greek rarely had more than one or two stanzas—if, indeed, the stanza-form is evident at all in the few remaining examples. This must have created a natural demand for the change, for in most of the classical metres the number of syllables may vary: amphibrach may replace trochee, dactyl may become spondee, and so on. To sing a number of stanzas, the corresponding lines of which might contain a varying number of syllables in different verses, to a fixed recurring melody is impossible without continual adaptations and 'footnotes'; the system, if ever tried, must have been found unmanageable, and a modification of practice is therefore to be expected. To this fact, quite as much as to the individual development of poets working under Byzantine or Oriental influences, the change should probably be ascribed."

In the second half of the sixth century, the growth of the new principles is strongly evident in the hymns of Venantius Fortunatus(77), the first great Christian Latin poet since Saint Ambrose and Prudentius. His short secular poems are pretty,



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but it is as a writer of hymns that he shows himself a great poet. His fame is secure as the author of *Vexilla regis* and the equally famous *Pange, lingua*—both of them occasional poems. In the former, he uses the Ambrosian stanza to magnificent effect. In the latter, he uses the trochaic tetrameter catalectic. Since his time, the same metre, in its classical or later forms, has been used frequently by Latin hymn-writers and by vernacular poets, sacred and secular, down to the present day; but by no poet has it been used to more sublime effect than by Fortunatus. Written though they were before the Middle Ages opened, his two great hymns, both in matter and in manner, provide a fair test of anyone's appreciation of things medieval.

In the anonymous *Verbum supernum* [78], which probably dates from the seventh century, we find accent gaining still further ground at the expense of quantity. In the hymns of the Venerable Bede, who died in 735, the defeat of quantity is complete, for his poems are based entirely on accent.

From his time onwards, with one short interval, the new system held its ground throughout the Middle Ages. During the classical revival under Charlemagne, quantity regained its ascendancy for a while, and Latin hymnody was enriched with the *Veni, creator* and the Sapphic hymns of Rabanus Maurus and other writers, but their triumph was a short-lived one. When the great figures of the Carolingian revival passed away, accent resumed its dominion. From time to time, scholars wrote Latin verses, as was but natural, on the classical principle, sometimes—as in *Hora novissima*—with magnificent effect; but hymn-writers, great and small, continued to write rhythmical verse. When Romance verse, which was based on the same principle, began to produce rivals in the daughter-tongues of Latin, the parent lyric learned from them in turn and developed in directions which Saint Ambrose had never contemplated. Accentual Latin verse, reinforced by fully developed rhyme, held sway in both the liturgical and the secular spheres until the Middle Ages passed away. Only in the sixteenth century, when the principles of the Renaissance managed to penetrate into liturgical places, was the accentual hymn all but swept out of the Breviary, leaving only those specimens which



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were spared for the sake of the renown of their authors or the ardent attachment of the faithful to them after centuries of usage.

By the end of the eighth century, hymns had been incorporated into breviaries throughout the greater part of Western Europe, largely owing to the wide diffusion of the Benedictine Rule. On the other hand, the hymn had not succeeded in forcing its way into the missal, nor has it ever done so. During the ninth century, however, the Mass evolved a new feature which, in the course of time, stood in much the same relation to the Mass as the hymn did to the Office.

In the celebration of the Mass, the Epistle is followed by a prose text—generally scriptural—called the Gradual. This, in non-penitential seasons, ends with the word *Alleluia*. When church music was elaborated, the singing of the final syllable of the *Alleluia* was prolonged on a melody called the Sequence. Probably about the end of the eighth century, words were added to this melody to help the singers to remember it—a syllable to each note—and the words themselves came to be known as Sequences. This new form of composition soon outgrew its mnemonic origin, and Sequences became increasingly popular as the ninth century advanced. The texts were improved, and in time new texts and new melodies to accompany them were written simultaneously.

In spite of long-established legends to the contrary, the Sequence as a literary type most probably originated in France, but a Swiss monk, Notker of Saint Gall, who died in 912, was the first to spring to eminence as a Sequence-writer.

The earliest Sequences were written in unrhythmical prose, divided into phrases of unequal length. A striking feature in many of them, particularly in those of French origin, is that every phrase ends in *a*, thus echoing the final syllable of the *Alleluia* from which the Sequence sprang. The same monorhyme in *a* occurs in the Modenese watch-song, *O tu qui servas armis ista moenia* (85); and Gottschalk's secular poem, *Ut quid jubes, pusiole* (83), has a monorhyme in *e*. Both of these were probably written in the second half of the ninth century, when the monorhymed Sequence in *a* was flourishing.



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