

The Making of Textual Culture
'Grammatica' and Literary Theory, 350–1100

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Grammatica: a historical and methodological introduction

Litteras disce.

Disticha Catonis

For over 1,200 years, textual culture in Western Europe was governed by *grammatica*, the first of the liberal arts, which was known as “the art [or science] of interpreting the poets and other writers and the principles for speaking and writing correctly.”¹ But the social effects of *grammatica* were different in kind and degree from other arts and disciplines: *grammatica* was foundational, a social practice that provided the exclusive access to literacy, the understanding of Scripture, the knowledge of a literary canon, and membership in an international Latin textual community. The centrality of *grammatica* throughout *la longue durée* of the late classical to early Renaissance era is itself an astonishing fact of Western culture. Although the role of *grammatica* in the medieval model of the liberal arts is widely recognized,² the larger cultural work performed by this discipline – its social, intellectual, and ideological function – has yet to be recovered. This book is an attempt to describe the larger function of *grammatica* in early medieval literary culture.

Rather than approaching the history of *grammatica* simply as a history of theories, educational practices, or the doctrines of a discipline, I intend to disclose the broad social effects of the discipline and to recover the social and intellectual agenda that lies behind the often bewildering mass of sources – from individual treatises and commentaries to entire compiled manuscripts – that document grammatical methodology. This study, therefore, is an attempt to define what I call grammatical culture, the kind of literate and literary culture sustained and reproduced by *grammatica*, considered not only as a discipline with a circumscribed body of knowledge but as a model for textual culture with implications that extend far beyond the apparent objective contents of a discipline.

As the foundation of a series of disciplines, *grammatica* instituted a model of learning, interpretation, and knowledge that defined various regional textual communities and provided the discursive and textual competencies that were preconditions for participation in literary

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culture throughout medieval Europe. Grammatical discourse constituted a special field of knowledge – a canon of traditional texts, both Christian and classical (the *auctores*), and a normative written or textual Latin (*latinitas*), the structure and style of which was reduced to systematic description and instruction (*ars*). *Grammatica*, a Latinized Greek term, was also called *litteratura*, the discipline of the written, and one who was grammatically educated was a *litteratus*, competent in reading and interpreting Latin writings.³ As a discipline sustained by the dominant social and political institutions of medieval Europe, *grammatica* functioned to perpetuate and reproduce the most fundamental conditions for textual culture, providing the discursive rules and interpretive strategies that constructed certain texts as repositories of authority and value. In its foundational role, *grammatica* also created a special kind of literate subjectivity, an identity and social position for *litterati* which was consistently gendered as masculine and socially empowered.

Although *grammatica* was formalized as the first of the arts of discourse in early medieval school curricula, the discipline articulated cultural practices that extended far beyond scholastic institutions and the internal unity of the arts of discourse: by supplying the very conditions for textual culture, the culture of the manuscript book, *grammatica* functioned as an irreducible cultural prerequisite, a status never given to rhetoric or logic. In the terms of medieval scholars themselves, *grammatica* was “the source and foundation of liberal letters”⁴ or “the source and foundation of all the textual arts,”⁵ not only because *grammatica* was the only point of entry into literate culture but because *grammatica* was universally understood to supply the discursive means for constructing language and texts as objects of knowledge. *Grammatica* thus had an essential constitutive function, and was not simply one discipline among many, or even the first of many; it made possible a certain kind of literacy, reproducing the conditions for textual culture *per se*. The constitutive function of grammatical knowledge was thus presupposed throughout the whole system of text-based disciplines – the arts of discourse, biblical exegesis, literary interpretation, philosophy, theology, and law. The broad social effects of *grammatica* are therefore to be found outside the classroom: *grammatica* provided the readerly and interpretive skills for the production of literary and textual knowledge across the disciplines.

THE MODEL OF GRAMMATICA IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Since the history of thought is a history of models – an archive of ways of conceiving and representing a world of objects – we must first con-

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sider the underlying model of *grammatica* and the way the discourse of this discipline constructed the objects considered to belong to its domain. In its role as a discursive practice at the foundations of culture, *grammatica* arrogated authority to itself alone to do the work of conceiving and representing linguistic and textual objects – “correct” written Latin, the elements of language, texts and literary genres, normative rules of style, the meanings and values of texts – both for itself and for other textual disciplines.

The medieval model of *grammatica* can be seen as an extended series of glosses on the model instituted in late imperial Rome, which was based on the encyclopedic model articulated by Varro (116–27 B.C.) in his *Libri disciplinarum*. According to the standard model, *grammatica* had two levels, the introductory, termed *litteratio*, which meant beginning training in reading and writing, and *grammatica* proper, termed *litteratura*, which included the interpretation of literary texts, higher linguistic theory, and encyclopedic learning in the tradition of the late classical polymath.⁶ Diomedes, a late fourth-century grammarian in the Varronian tradition whose *Ars grammatica* was copied by a monastic scribe and dedicated to Charlemagne around 780,⁷ presents a typical and widely known definition: “the whole of *grammatica* consists primarily in the understanding of the poets, prose writers, and histories by ready exposition, and in the principles of speaking and writing correctly.”⁸ The focus of the definitions in the early medieval *artes* was thus on reading, interpretation, and using grammatical knowledge for access to canonical texts.

The definitions in the *artes grammaticae* reveal that *grammatica* instituted the study of linguistic objects in two related divisions: (1) the systematic study of literate discourse (termed *ratio scribendi et loquendi*, the rules for composing and analyzing grammatically and stylistically normative written Latin) and (2) the methods for reading and interpreting the central texts of the culture’s written tradition (termed *scientia interpretandi* or *enarratio*, the principles for interpretation and the topics of commentary). These two basic language and literature divisions were known as the “definitive” and the “exegetical” parts of a complete methodology.⁹ The division of *grammatica* into language and literature components had a long history, extending to the Renaissance. The language division, furthermore, had two levels, the elementary (basic Latin literacy and grammatical pedagogy) and the advanced, which embraced the theory of speech, writing, style, and figurative language, subjects ordinarily not considered part of “grammar” in the modern sense.

Hellenistic Greek and Roman grammarians emphasized that the discipline took its name from *grammata*, the Greek word for

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“letters,” in the sense of writings or texts, not in the sense of the letters of the alphabet or elementary matters.¹⁰ While modern notions of “grammar” usually presuppose speech as the primary form of language, *grammatica* was primarily a textual discipline that privileged writing over speech. Even in the linguistic division of *grammatica*, the object of analysis and the model for grammatical rules was the language of classical literary texts, not ordinary speech. Until the development of theoretical or speculative grammar in the twelfth century, which accompanied the reconfiguration of the *artes sermoneales* (the “arts of discourse”) around logic in the universities, the primary orientation of *grammatica*, at all levels of learning, was textual.¹¹

The textual role of *grammatica* is often emphatically asserted in the tradition. Augustine, echoing Seneca, termed *grammatica* the *custos historiae*, the guardian of the textual forms of memory that constitute a cultural tradition, and Isidore of Seville, drawing from Augustine, stated that whatever was committed to writing as worthy of memory, including histories, necessarily became the subject of *grammatica*.¹² The role of *grammatica* in constructing a model of textuality itself is disclosed in Martianus Capella’s playful definition, spoken through the voice of an allegorized Lady Grammatica, which links together the central terms of the discipline, each of which are stated as cognates of *littera* (letter, writing): “my art has four parts: letters/writing (*litterae*), the discipline of the written (*litteratura*), the man of letters (*litteratus*), and skill in writing (*litterate*). *Litterae* are what I teach, *litteratura* is I myself who teach, the *litteratus* is whom I have taught, and *litterate* is what he whom I form practices expertly.”¹³

The literary division of the discipline, *scientia interpretandi*, was understood to have four main parts or methodological divisions – *lectio*, the principles for reading a text aloud from a manuscript, including the rules of prosody; *enarratio*, exposition of content and the principles for interpretation, including the analysis of figurative language; *emendatio*, the rules for establishing textual authenticity and linguistic correctness; and *iudicium*, criticism or evaluation of writings. The common abbreviated definitions are provided by the *Ars Victorini*, a text used in numerous medieval compilations:

How many functions (*officia*) of *grammatica* are there? Four. What are they? Reading (*lectio*), interpretation (*enarratio*), correction (*emendatio*), criticism (*iudicium*). What is reading? The proper oral delivery according to accent and necessary meaning. What is interpretation? An exposition of every description according to the poet’s intention. What is correction? The correction of errors in the poets and falsehoods. What is criticism? The approval of things well expressed.¹⁴

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Of course, much more is assumed than stated in these brief, catechetical definitions. Each of these methodological divisions generated a long tradition of genres of discourse and distinct kinds of treatises – for example, the gloss, the running commentary, the handbook (*ars*) – but *enarratio* was the most extensively practiced part of the whole literary division.¹⁵ The protocols for treating texts are found in a large corpus of glosses, commentaries, and exegetical literature like the commentaries on Vergil by Servius and Fulgentius, Augustine’s commentaries on Genesis and the Psalms, or Remigius of Auxerre’s diverse corpus of glosses on the *auctores*.

The medieval sources thus reveal that *grammatica* was far more inclusive than the modern term “grammar.” The term *ars grammatica* could designate the entire discipline, from elementary literacy to advanced scholarly study of Latin language and literature, or simply “a handbook on grammar”, *ars* frequently having the sense of a systematic treatise on a discipline. In medieval terms, Donatus’s *Ars grammatica*, Servius’s commentary on Vergil, Bede’s *De schematibus et tropis*, and the large corpus of prefaces, commentaries, and glosses on standard *auctores* are all “grammatical,” forming a body of discourse on textual language and literary works. Throughout this study I reserve the term *grammatica* for the whole discipline concerned with literacy, the study of literary language and texts, and the principles for interpretation and criticism. I will use the term “grammar” specifically for the elementary level of *grammatica* and, where appropriate, in the modern sense, the study of the structure of a language.

Figure Int.1 illustrates the traditional division of subject matter and methodology within the arts of discourse and *grammatica*. Following the main divisions I have also indicated some of the corresponding genres of grammatical methodology in medieval literary culture.

This model of methodology was perpetuated in various forms from at least the first century B.C. to the twelfth century, at which time the functions and methodology of *grammatica* underwent a reconfiguration that endured to the Renaissance. All forms of literacy, textuality, literary competence, and literary theory in the broadest sense were defined in the terms of this model, since there were no others. Indeed, grammatical discourse constructed readers, texts, and writers as irreducible constituents in a basic social practice; that is, grammatical methodology presupposed a set of social relations reproducible through a universally practiced discipline.

Anglo-Saxon, Irish, and Carolingian sources preserve extensive elaborations on the basic definitions of *grammatica* and its methodological divisions, disclosing the textual and literary ends of the discipline as well as its constitutive function in the whole order of knowledge.

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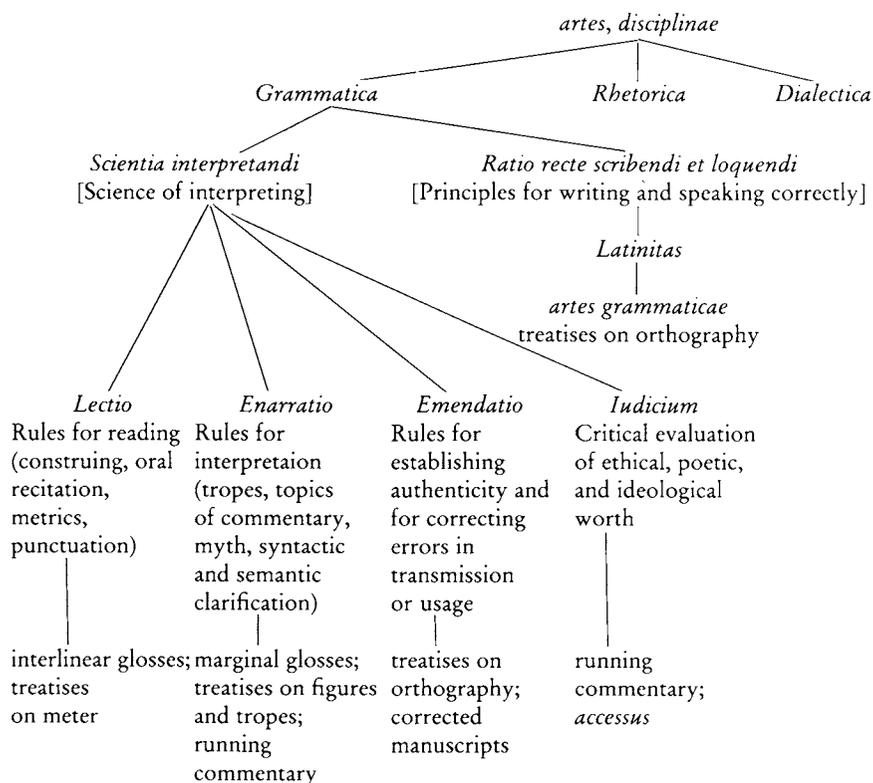


Figure Int.1 Divisions of *grammatica*, c.350–c.1150

Aldhelm, writing in England in the last quarter of the seventh century, assumed that *grammatica* embraced all the arts and disciplines that were based on texts.¹⁶ A group of related treatises compiled in Carolingian centers – Alcuin’s *De grammatica*, an *Ars grammatica* attributed to the Irish scholar Clemens, and the compilation known as *Donatus orthigraphus* – define *grammatica* as the foundation of an entire system of written knowledge, which was termed “wisdom” (*sapientia*) or *philosophia* generally.¹⁷ One of the most telling comments appears in an anonymous commentary on Donatus in a ninth-century grammatical compilation from Corbie: “What is the difference between a grammarian and a philosopher, and can a philosopher be a grammarian and a grammarian a philosopher? A certain wise man (*sapiens*) said that there are no grammarians who are not philosophers and no philosophers who are not grammarians.”¹⁸ To be a “philosopher” in this context means to know and understand the central writings of Christian textual culture. In Carolingian texts,

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grammatica was often termed the *scientia* or *ars litteralis*, the science or art of things written,¹⁹ and Rabanus Maurus, the student of Alcuin and leading teacher of the ninth century, considered the discipline indispensable for monastic textual culture as a whole, calling *grammatica* “the judge of all the books” (*omnium iudex libroriorum*).²⁰ Similarly, Ælfric, in the preface to his *Grammatica*, an English version of the *Excerptiones de Prisciano*, defines *grammatica* (“stæf-cræft” in Old English) as “the key which unlocks the meaning of the books.”²¹ Two anonymous grammatical tracts simply assert “the letter [or writing] is the foundation of all wisdom.”²²

Since *grammatica* served as the introduction to the other *artes*, it provided a model of knowledge that positioned itself at the center or foundation.²³ Many grammatical treatises and commentaries – for example, the *artes* attributed to Maximus Victorinus and Audax, Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana* (1–3), the commentary on Donatus known as the *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum*, and the *artes* by Alcuin and Clemens – begin with an introduction to the system of knowledge that a student was entering, classifying and defining the *disciplinae* to which *grammatica* provided access. After a survey of the liberal arts, the *Ars Clementis* states: “which of these seven kinds of liberal disciplines is to be learned first? Clearly *grammatica*, which is the source and foundation of liberal letters and the principles of speaking and writing correctly. For how can anyone understand the aforementioned kinds of liberal arts unless one has concentrated on learning *grammatica*.”²⁴ Because *grammatica* was the art of reading and interpretation, all other learning depended on the skills and methods it taught.²⁵

The positioning of *grammatica* at the center of a cultural encyclopedia based on texts has broad implications. Even if the model of a system of arts and sciences articulated in the grammatical *artes* was only an idealization, rather than a body of knowledge actually obtained by most medieval students, it served to justify *grammatica* in the light of its epistemic function, its status in the whole order of signs and things. Grammatical discourse thus inserted itself in the order of knowledge as an arbiter in the system itself – classifying, ordering, and distributing knowledge according to a model of discourse and objects, signs and interpretation.

The late classical and early medieval arts of discourse – *grammatica*, *rhetorica*, *dialectica* – constantly overlapped as a result of their common subject matter – language and meaning. *Grammatica* shared with *rhetorica* the subject of style, figurative language (the schemes and tropes), and the methods of composition or textual production, and with *dialectica* the subject of the philosophy of language, the

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theory of signs or the semiotic foundations of language, and the grammar of propositions. By the eighth century, many of the principles of classical rhetoric had been appropriated or assimilated by the grammarians, a process at work even in late antiquity.²⁶ The first two branches of the arts of discourse thus provided the rules for the two essential rule-governed activities of the text-centered culture of medieval society: the procedures for reading and interpreting texts already received into the tradition (*grammatica*), and the rules governing the production of new texts (*rhetorica*).

As a discipline that claimed linguistic and textual objects as its special sphere of knowledge, *grammatica* was not simply descriptive, isolating and labelling the parts of its subject matter, but *productive* of knowledge: it supplied a network of presuppositions, discursive strategies, and rules for argumentation that governed inquiry and provided the grounds of possibility for knowledge. *Grammatica* was thus a paradigm, in Kuhn's sense of a conventional and consensual epistemic model acknowledged in varying degrees of self-consciousness by individual practitioners of a discipline,²⁷ and a discursive practice that supplied the conditions for knowledge, providing the discursive means for constituting textualized linguistic objects as objects of knowledge *per se*.²⁸ *Grammatica* can thus be investigated at two levels of analysis – statements and definitions transmitted in the central genres of the formal discipline, and the deeper cultural conditions supplied by the discipline that remained unacknowledged in any reflective way, the discursive procedures for establishing meaning in the texts central to a culture based on texts.

THE SOURCES FOR A STUDY OF GRAMMATICAL CULTURE

The sources that document the development and influence of *grammatica* in medieval culture are both extensive and diverse, since the grammatical curriculum and grammatical methodology embraced many kinds of texts and several genres of manuscript books. In fact, a large percentage of all surviving medieval manuscripts are directly related to *grammatica*, both texts used in the grammatical curriculum and genres that can be considered products of grammatical methodology. Approximately 15 per cent of the Latin manuscripts surviving up to the eighth century, as catalogued in Lowe's *Codices Latini Antiquiores*, pertain to *grammatica* (*artes, auctores*, glossaries, and related commentaries).²⁹ My own survey of the manuscripts from the eighth through eleventh centuries convinces me that the record for this period is even more impressive.³⁰ Bursill-Hall's extensive catalogue of grammatical manuscripts from the eleventh to the fifteenth

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centuries includes more than 4,000 manuscript books, containing more than 7,000 treatises and 3,000 different initials.³¹ What is even more astonishing about this tally is the realization that Bursill-Hall's catalogue is concerned only with treatises on the linguistic division of *grammatica* in the later Middle Ages: it excludes the vast amount of material from the early Middle Ages as well as from other genres like curriculum authors, commentaries, and treatises on poetics that were produced within grammatical culture and were classified as part of *grammatica* in medieval libraries. The parchment trail left by the practice of *grammatica* in Western culture could not be more evident: manuscripts associated with *grammatica* constitute the largest documentary record of medieval culture after manuscripts of the bible, biblical commentaries, theology, and liturgy.

If it were possible to reduce the vast amount of source material to a snapshot of the major sources, it would look something like the outline in Figure Int. 2.

Although the major identifiable or named sources can be mapped out diachronically, we must not forget that medieval grammatical books contained a large corpus of anonymous and miscellaneous texts and that, from the perspective of reception history, ninth-century copies of Priscian, the Latin Christian poets, Vergil's works, or Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* functioned as contemporary books, not as historical records from an earlier era. In other words, a composite array of texts in nearly contemporary copies formed a synchronic library of grammatical *artes* and *auctores* in medieval communities.

Grammatical discourse was dispersed through a wide range of texts and genres, and my analysis, therefore, strikes a line through several bodies of discourse: (1) grammatical treatises (the *artes grammaticae*), both the late-classical texts transmitted in the early Middle Ages and the new treatises, usually compilations of classical sources, produced by medieval scholars themselves, including the subgenre of the specialized treatise (with titles like *De orthographia*, *De arte metrica*, *De tropis*), (2) medieval commentaries on late classical grammatical treatises, (3) encyclopedias (products of grammatical culture like Cassiodorus's *Institutiones*, Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, and Rabanus Maurus's *De clericorum institutione*), (4) commentaries on classical and Christian literary works (the tradition of commentaries on Vergil from Donatus to Fulgentius and glosses on Christian Latin poets), (5) biblical commentaries, (6) extant library catalogues and book lists, and (7) evidence found in the form and content of manuscript books produced within grammatical culture. I consider these genres, bodies of discourse, and material data as elements of various

<i>Artes</i>	Commentaries	Other Genres and Sources
Hellenistic		
Dionysius Thrax	Heraclitus, <i>Quaestiones Homericae</i>	The Alexandrian library
Stoic treatises	Scholia on classical authors	
Roman		
Varro, <i>Disciplinarum libri</i>		Suetonius, <i>On grammarians</i>
Palaeon		Aulus Gellius, <i>Attic Nights</i>
Charisius		
Diomedes		
Donatus	Donatus, <i>On Vergil, On Terence</i>	
Servius	Servius, <i>On Vergil, On Donatus</i>	
Marius Victorinus		
Maximus Victorinus		
Audax		
Phocas		
Augustine, <i>De ordine; De doctrina christiana</i>	Pompeius, Commentary on Donatus	Ausonius, <i>On the Teachers of Bordeaux</i> ; poems
Priscian, <i>Institutiones grammaticae</i>		Macrobius, <i>Saturnalia</i>
6th and 7th Centuries		
Martianus Capella		
Cassiodorus, <i>Institutiones</i>		
The Christianized Donatus	Fulgentius, <i>On the Content of Vergil</i>	
Julian of Toledo		
Isidore of Seville		
Virgilius Maro Grammaticus		

**Insular and Carolingian,
Early 8th to late 9th centuries**

Anonymous *artes*
The “Anonymus ad Cuimnanum”
Aldhelm
Bede, *De arte metrica*
De schematibus et tropis
Boniface
Tatwine
Donatus Ortigraphus
Ars Ambianensis
Ars Bernensis
Peter of Pisa
Alcuin
Clemens Scottus
Hrabanus Maurus
Anon. compiled *artes*

10th and Early 11th Centuries

Abbo of Fleury, *Questiones grammaticales*
Anon. compiled *artes*
Ælfric, *Grammatica*
Byrhtferth of Ramsey, *Manual*

Compilations of *artes* and *auctores*
Glossaries

Carolingian poetry
Aenigmata collections
(Boniface, Aldhelm, etc.)
Library Catalogues and booklists

Carolingian legislation

Paul the Deacon, *De verborum significatu*

Murethac, *In Donati arte maiorem*
Smaragdus, *In partibus Donati*
St. Gall glosses on Boethius
John the Scot, *On Donatus*
Scholia Bernensia on Vergil
Sedulius Scottus, Commentaries on Donatus
and Priscian
Carolingian court poetry

Remigius of Auxerre, Commentaries on:
Donatus, Priscian, Bede, Boethius,
Prudentius, Arator, Disticha Catonis, etc.
Anon. Glosses on Christian Latin poets

King Alfred’s translations and Preface to
the Old English *Pastoral Care*
Old English literature from Latin sources

Compilations of *artes* and *auctores*
Library catalogues and booklists
Old English literature from Latin sources
Ælfric’s translations and prefaces

Figure Int.2 Overview of the Grammatical tradition: the major sources