JOHN L. GRONBECK-TEDESCO

An Application of Medieval Rhetorical Invention to Dramatic Composition: Matthew of Vendôme’s Ars versificatoria and Milo

The years between 1175 and 1280 are especially important for students of medieval letters. In addition to hosting the mendicant reform and the outset of the Aristotelian renovation of theology and philosophy, the era also produced the only extant artes (arts of poetry) to come down to us from the Middle Ages. Six in all, these artes are arresting not only because of the similarities in the principles they discuss, but also because they offer a unique poetics founded on a combination of medieval grammar and rhetoric. The six artes are: Matthew of Vendôme’s Ars versificatoria (1175), Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s Poetria nova (ca. 1208–1213) and Documentum de modo et arte diciendi et versificandi (after 1213), Gervase of Melkley’s Ars versificaria (ca. 1215), John of Garland’s De arte prosayca, metrica, et rithmica (after 1229), and Eberhard the German’s Laborintus (between 1233–1280).

Matthew of Vendôme, the author of the first treatise, is of special interest partly because he provides the fountainhead for the five later artes, and because Matthew, in addition to having been a teacher and theorist, was also a poet. Just before the completion of the Ars versificatoria, he wrote the Milo (ca. 1160–1170), a Latin verse-comedy of 254 lines that demonstrated the rhetorical poetics he was teaching

John L. Gronbeck-Tedesco is Assistant Professor of Speech and Drama at the University of Kansas. His more recent publications have appeared in Communication Education and Communication Monographs.

1 A comparison of the arts of poetry of the Middle Ages may be found in Douglas Kelly, “The Scope of the Treatment of Composition in the Twelfth and Thirteenth-Century Arts of Poetry,” Speculum 41 (1966), 261–78.


3 Murphy, p. 135.

4 For example, in his later work on poetry Gervase of Melkley cites Matthew’s influence.
at Orléans.\footnote{Gallo mentions that many of the Latin comedies of France written during this period seem to be the product of an interest and training in rhetoric. See Gallo, p. 51. Quotations from the \textit{Ars versificatoria} are from Gallo's translation, and hereafter will be cited in the text as \textit{Ars}, with the page number noted.} Passages borrowed and adapted from the Milo are used frequently in the \textit{Ars versificatoria} to illustrate the various principles of composition.\footnote{In the \textit{Ars versificatoria}, Matthew substitutes characters from classical literature and the Bible for the characters he uses in the Milo.}

Together the \textit{Ars versificatoria} and the Milo provide an unusual opportunity to examine the theory and practice of the same medieval teacher-dramatist. Thus far, little attention has been paid to the relationship between poetics and drama in the Middle Ages. This neglect is unfortunate because most medieval poets were educated individuals for whom poetic composition was a craft consciously acquired and consciously applied.

\textit{Rhetorical Invention in the Ars versificatoria}

The \textit{Ars versificatoria}, directed to Matthew's students and fellow academics, is a moderately complex work that assumes some prior knowledge of rhetorical theory. Over half the treatise applies \textit{invention}, the first canon of classical rhetoric, to poetic composition. The rest of the treatise deals with grammatical matters, such as the use of various figures of thought and speech contributing to style. Matthew took most of his ideas on invention directly from Cicero's \textit{De inventione}, a treatise on rhetoric, while the \textit{Ad Herennium} (Pseudo-Cicero) and Donatus's \textit{Ars minor} and \textit{Ars major} are more evident in the author's discussion of style and figures.\footnote{Winthrop Wetherbee, \textit{Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: The Literary Influence of the School of Chartres} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 17.} Of course, Matthew's understanding and use of these sources were conditioned in part by the neo-Platonism of the School of Chartres whose influence came to Matthew via Bernardus Silvestris, the author of a work on poetic composition no longer extant.

The great theme of the Carthusians, as members of the School of Chartres were called, was \textit{per creaturas ad creatorem} (through creation to the creator).\footnote{Accordingly, poetry was a proper vehicle for philosophy and theology—an idea to which Matthew gives explicit attention in the \textit{Ars versificatoria}. See Gallo's translation, pp. 80-1.} The cosmos and nature were considered metaphors for the realm of the divine. For example, the harmonious relationship between the planets and the stars, and between the seasons and the verdure of the fields, testified to a supremely intelligent and merciful God. For the Carthusians, concrete and tangible examples of reality were emblems of the transcendent. In order to translate the divine order into the human sector, mankind developed moral norms based on the observable world. Cosmic harmony, therefore, provided the model and analogy for social behavior.

Human wisdom resided in the knowledge of the interrelated, gradualistic patterns that gave testimony to the agency of a creator. Poetry with its overt concern for metaphor, analogy, and complex relationships between verbal patterns became the very figure of wisdom.\footnote{For an extensive discussion of Matthew's antecedents and sources see Murphy, Chapter 4.} Matthew's notion of the function of poetic description was
adapted from Cicero’s concept of epideictic discourse (De inventione, 1. 5. 7). Therefore, in the Ars versificatoria, poetry is a means of persuasion intended to induce an audience to admiration or antipathy for fictional characters and events. Matthew intended the socio-religious role of poetry to exercise an audience’s moral sense. Whereas logic appeals almost directly to the intellect without engaging the senses, poetry, because it does appeal to the senses, more closely approximates the force of direct experience upon the audience members. Unlike the workings of the intellect, then, the experiential force of poetry arouses the volitional faculty to moral choice. Poetry thus possesses an important susasory capacity unshared by other arts of discourse.

In Matthew’s view rhetorical invention was at the core of the poet’s method, and developed from a neo-Platonic view of the relationship between the particular and the universal. A poet directed his audience to regard particulars not only as the components of an overall moral order, but also as the emblems of that order. Ciceronian invention in Matthew’s poetics sought to discover the particular attributes of character that in turn helped establish a sense of an underlying moral type. “The particular designation should be taken to stand for a general designation according to the nature of the subject and not according to the subject used to exemplify that nature” (Ars, 71).

Following Cicero, Matthew viewed the topics of invention as preexisting, categorical sources of a poet’s subject. The topics show a poet where to look for something to say. As Gallo points out, “the use of topics involves the assumption that all possible kinds of relevant facts are classifiable before the specific subject arises for discussion.” Topics provide the poet with repositories of particular human attributes that help the audience to acquire knowledge about a character. Far from preempting the imagination, the topics of invention provide it with resources that can be used in a variety of ways, as we will see later. Matthew abided by Cicero’s division of the topics into attributes of person and attributes of action. His lists are nearly identical to Cicero’s. Moreover, Matthew’s definitions of attributes seem to assume his reader’s familiarity with De inventione.

A. The attributes of person:
   1. Name; a character’s name may tell us something “good or evil about him.” For example, “Caesar takes his name from his action; the ‘hewing’ all of his name explains the meaning of his valor” (Ars, 73).
   2. Nature; that which determines an individual’s overall moral disposition. Nature may be divided into three subtopics,
      a. physical attributes tell us something about the character’s moral disposition through his appearance.
      b. spiritual attributes are traits of the soul, often taking the form of virtues and vices.
      c. external attributes include elements of the individual’s situation and social con-

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11 Gallo, p. 53.
text, such as his “fatherland,” “age,” “kindred,” and “sex” (Ars, 73), as well as his social rank and office.

3. Way of life; nearly synonymous with vocation or advocacy. Matthew uses examples such as “begging,” “fulsome,” and “preaching” (Ars, 74).

4. Fortune; a person’s lot in life bestowed by circumstance rather than choice.

5. Acquired disposition or habit; a personal characteristic taken on consciously by application, such as Ulysses’ eloquence.

6. Pursuit; a character’s goal.

7. Feeling; “a sudden or transitory change of a soul or body” (Ars, 75), resulting in a state of arousal, as in the case of anger or passion.

8. Deliberation; how a character goes about making a moral choice.

9. Accident or chance; “the outcome of a disaster, through which something is proven concerning a person” (Ars, 75).

10. Speech; “one’s accustomed manner of speaking through which something is established concerning the speaker” (Ars, 76).

11. Deeds; a character’s accomplishments through which “we come to know something about him” (Ars, 76).

In addition to the eleven topics of person, Matthew enumerates nine topics of action, a discussion occupying over one third of the section on invention. Action, characterized by free choice and moral implication, “is a deed or word through which some man or woman is brought to the bar of divine justice as guilty” (Ars, 76).

B. Topics of action:

1. Summary of the action; a short synopsis describing the behavior being treated; for instance, “a wandering man about town, a devouring parasite . . . is Davus” (Ars, 76). This description tells us what sort of behavior to expect from Davus.

2. Motive of the action; the reason for a character’s behavior. The topic of motive is divided into two subtopics.
   a. impulsive motive is an involuntary and strong tendency towards a certain behavior.
   b. deliberate motive is the conscious “pursuit of the favorable and the avoidance of the unfavorable” (Ars, 76).

3. Circumstances before the act precede the action and may include causes.

4. Circumstances after the act follow the action and may include effects.

5. Circumstances during the act accompany the action.

6. Facilities for the act; whatever aids in accomplishing the act. In the passage, “to deceive a trusting girl is no hard-won glory” (Ars, 77), the girl’s gullibility facilitates the act of deception.

7. Quality or manner of the action; the way in which an action is performed.

8. Time; an action occurs at or during a particular time.

9. Place; where an action occurs.
Matthew summarizes his treatment of the topics of person and action with a brief mnemonic device:

Who, what, where, with what aid, why, how, when. Who contains the eleven attributes of person; what contains the summary of the action and the threefold execution, that is, before, during, and after the action; where contains place; with what aid, the facility of acting; why, the motive of the actions; how, the manner or quality; when, the time.

[Ars, 80]

The Milo

Matthew's Milo is a product of a rediscovered classical tradition nourished during the Middle Ages in various academic centers of Europe, such as Gandersheim, Chartres, Orléans, Fleury-sur-Loire, Blesois, Touraine, and Vendôme. The Milo is one of the dramatic pieces from the Théâtre Scholaire (of which the Latin comedies are a part), presumably written to exemplify classical style.

The poem contains broad and abundant sections of narration typical of much medieval drama, especially in the French repertoire. Labelling his work "ludicra" (Milo, 1. 6)—a sequence of spectacles or vignettes—Matthew remained true to those medieval glosses and dictionaries describing drama very broadly as any poem containing the thoughts and dialogue of characters. An apparently similar characterization can be found in De inventione. The lack of sharp distinction between drama and narrative literature seems all the more natural when we remember that the Christian liturgy, perhaps the most important influence on the form of medieval drama, contains large expanses of narrative throughout its structure. The interpenetration of genres common in much of the Middle Ages cautions us against the application of modern literary classification to the Milo.

Gustave Cohen, the Milo's anthologizer, speculated that along with other Latin comedies the Milo was probably performed by more than one individual. Narrative passages might have been sung or given a spirited recital by students or even by jongleurs, a type of dramatic presentation of the narrative passages occurring in

12 For example, St. Basil viewed the Song of Songs as a drama, a notion he probably derived from Origen. Similarly, Bede the Venerable considered the Canticle of Solomon to be a drama. See Mary Marshall, "Theatre in the Middle Ages: Evidence from Dictionaries and Glosses," Symposium 4 (1950), 1-39, 366-89.

13 Cicero apparently regarded drama as "a form of narrative . . . of such a sort that in it can be seen not only events but also the conversation and mental attitude of the characters" (De inventione, 1. 19. 27). For an example, Cicero turns to Terence's Adelphoe, 2. 60-4.

14 Aurelius, a major liturgist of the ninth century, viewed the Roman Mass essentially as a drama, despite its many narrative portions. In addition, liturgical drama was itself interspersed generously with choral narrative, and extraliturgical religious drama also exhibited large portions of expository narrative. See O. B. Hardison, Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), p. 31, and Jorg O. Fichte, Expository Voices in Medieval Drama (Nurnberg: Verlag Hans Carl, 1975), Essays I and III.

some monasteries and abbeys and sharply denounced by local bishops.\textsuperscript{16} In the \textit{Milo} the abruptness with which some action begins and ends certainly allows for the use of a dumbshow to add clarity to the oral presentation.\textsuperscript{17}

A brief summary of the \textit{Milo} will serve as a useful prologue to an examination of its invention strategies.\textsuperscript{18} The poem begins when Afra, a young and virtuous maiden, has become eligible for marriage. Milo, a soldier in the King’s army, marries her but is soon called away to service. The king becomes enamored with Afra and forces an affair. Milo responds by avoiding Afra completely. The high point occurs when Afra’s brothers charge Milo with neglect and bring him before the king, his rival, for judgment. Milo defends himself eloquently and wins the respect of the king, who in addition to relinquishing his affair with Afra, promotes a reconciliation between her and Milo.

\textit{Strategies of Invention in the Milo}

Cicero’s topics of invention were transformed by Matthew from the tools of discursive reason-making into the means of iconic argumentation. Thus, the topics supplied a medieval author with basic materials and parameters which helped determine the content and shape of his characterizations in ways capable of influencing the perceptions and judgments of the audience.

Matthew begins his drama with a passage based on the first topic of action, \textit{summary of the act}: “The hook of love is sharp and its net more vast than the world, since together hook and net open and seize unabated upon everything” (\textit{Milo}, ll. 1–2). The two major metaphors that determine the parameters of the summary compare love to a hook and to a net. They tell the audience that Matthew’s story will be a \textit{manifestatio} of the cruel effects of sexual passion on human relationships. The major \textit{passio} in the story is to be the suffering of the characters caught by the hooks and nets of eros. The condemnation of raw sensuality, then, underlies the didactic course of the poem.

Matthew initiates the plot with a lengthy description of Afra. He draws his description almost exclusively from the topic of \textit{nature}, employing the subtopics of \textit{physical} and \textit{spiritual attributes}: “The honorable beauty [\textit{spiritual attributes}] of the maiden has only just matured. A becoming figure [\textit{physical attributes}] blesses Afra. . . . Weak from birth, her well-graced figure makes up for what appears missing in strength [\textit{physical attributes}]” (\textit{Milo}, ll. 8–9, 11–12). Although physical attributes predominate, Matthew’s description of Afra is not particularly sensual. It is clear that her physical beauty is an emblem of pristine spiritual character; she is presented

\textsuperscript{16} Richard Axton, \textit{European Drama in the Early Middle Ages} (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975), Chapter I.

\textsuperscript{17} This approach would have been in accord with the opinion of some medieval scholars, among them Isidore of Seville, who believed that the Romans often staged productions in which a narrator read to an audience while actors mimed the substance of what was being spoken. See Axton, pp. 24 ff.

\textsuperscript{18} The source of Matthew’s story is the \textit{Recueil des Sept Sages}, which appeared in verse in the twelfth century.
as a finely wrought icon meant to elicit respect and admiration. Basing his description almost solely on the topic of *nature* helps the author to keep Afra from acquiring too human a dimensionality which the use of multiple topics tends to bestow, as we shall see presently. The poet underscores his enshrinement of Afra as a symbol of spiritual and physical beauty with a brief scene in which her suitors come to her in a processional line: “She moves down a line to be spoken to [by her suitors] one at a time” (Milo, l. 41).

Milo’s appearance in the work is sudden. The first line to mention him also carries the abrupt announcement of his marriage to Afra: “Afra is given to Milo as a wife” (Milo, l. 43). These are the only words devoted to the marriage. There is no account of the courtship, nor is there an epithalamion extolling the pleasures of the wedding night. In other words, the topics of *circumstances before and after the action* (of getting married) go unused. Accordingly, Matthew manages to introduce Milo as Afra’s husband without destroying the pristine, spiritual impression he has just created.

Matthew’s description of Milo follows the one-line account of the wedding. The poet draws materials from the topics of *way of life*, *physical* and *spiritual attributes* of *nature*, and *fortune*: “Though having little property [fortune], he is a very loyal [spiritual attributes] soldier [way of life]. His poverty [fortune] does not break him, nor does his determination allow the winter of prosperity to suppress his honorable bearing [physical and spiritual attributes]” (Milo, ll. 44-46). The invention strategies at work in this passage help to present Milo to the audience as someone involved in the world and subject to its vicissitudes. He is drawn less spiritually than Afra and is more human as a result. Matthew expands the sense of Milo’s humanity through the topics of deeds: “Setting aside his daily earnings [deeds], Milo’s modest fortune grows steadily” (Milo, ll. 49-50). Milo is an everyman, modestly short of money; his primary virtues are patriotism, honor, industry, thrift, and a devotion to duty.

The poet’s choice of topics in his description of Afra and Milo can sponsor contrasting audience-character relationships. The emphasis on Milo’s constant striving in the face of unfavorable fortune solicits some degree of identification and sympathy, whereas the salience of Afra’s physical and spiritual perfection encourages the audience to keep its psychological distance at this stage in the plot’s development.

Matthew uses the topics of *feeling*, *impulsive motive*, and *pursuit* for the transition into the love complication: ‘The demure Afra touches the king and imperial passion [feeling and impulsive motive] for the radiance of her beauty descends upon him. . . . The king begs for base intercourse [pursuit] and the royal solicitation wins the mild Venus to the lowly conjugal bed’ (Milo, ll. 51-52, 55-56). Sexual passion is the *feeling* that controls the king’s relationship with Afra. Its intensity is felt by the audience because of the monarch’s directness and lack of finesse. In addition to the topic of *feeling*, passion serves the topic of *impulsive motive* by provoking the king’s behavior towards Afra. Therefore, the single word *amor* (love/passion) serves a double invention strategy.
The king's character is no more diverse than Afra's. He is an emblem of the effects of passion, a man of high station in the order of being who has given over control of his will to sexual desire. The king is a despoiler of innocence, and the weak Afra his victim. Matthew's task was to control the audience's perceptions, sympathies, and judgments in ways appropriate to the moral concerns inherent in the characters' situation. His control is most plain in a finely crafted narrative montage juxtaposing the fidelity of Milo with the weakness of Afra and the opportunism of the king. The structure of the montage rests upon the topics of facilities, nature, deeds, and time: "With Milo gone [facilities] the base [spiritual attributes] king continues the sexual relationship; . . . Milo's absence [facilities] reinforces the sensual ardor of the king. While [time] the wife enters into an affair with her suitor, her husband's hard work increases their wealth. The husband is absent [facilities]; the wife consents to the affair with the king [deeds]' (Milo. ll. 63–64, 67–69). Matthew's invention strategies provide difficult perspectives on the three characters. First, the audience sees the affair as an instance of crass opportunism on the part of the king. The author invites this perspective by the first use of facilities. Second, the use of time presents the adultery as a betrayal of Milo's good faith and industry. Third, the use of deeds in the final line establishes Afra's consent to the affair, giving it the look of a conspiracy against the absent Milo. These three major perspectives impel the audience to develop a distinct moral attitude towards each character. Because the king "continues" the affair, his baseness is confirmed. His "topical" relationship to the girl is strictly exploitive. For her part, Afra now appears somewhat less the victim. Her "consent" to the affair establishes a degree of moral guilt. The strategic line mentioning Milo's faithful "hard work" comes between the two lines just discussed, and thereby accentuates the moral contrast between Milo and the other two characters.

The next major section of the drama dwells on the protagonist's inner turmoil. Milo's growing suspicion evokes a range of feelings which threaten to overwhelm him: 'Milo is shocked [feeling] that his wife may be losing her grip on the reins of fidelity, that her fidelity may be cooling [feeling] and her love [feeling] for him becoming lukewarm. He weighs [deliberation] these evil inklings and also his fears" (Milo. ll. 95–97). Milo moves through a succession of emotional states to a cognitive state, from shock (obstropet) to consideration (conieptat). Despite his turmoil, he finally remains faithful to reason. The shift from feeling to thoughtful consideration of the situation presents him as a rational person who refuses to allow his feelings to lead him on into unwarranted action which he may later regret. Together the topics of feeling and deliberation work to continue the symmetry of Milo's dimensionality. He is a man who feels deeply but manages to give his intellect the primacy a medieval academic audience would have admired. When Milo discovers his suspicions are founded, he refuses to share his wife's bed.

The climax of the drama is played out in a dramatic confrontation that involves Milo, Afra's brothers, and the king. Undifferentiated in the text, the brothers speak as one character. Having been embittered against Milo by Afra, they bring him before the king. Their accusations against Milo are stated through an elaborate and somewhat self-conscious garden metaphor, the structure of their testimony relying
on a variety of invention. Matthew has the brothers use *summary of the action* to initiate their major charge of neglect against Milo: "The vineyard, having been surrendered to Milo with hope of fruit, comes up in thorns and lies amidst tangles. This runs contrary to our hope; the vineyard languishes and suffers from the absence of its own vinedresser" (Milo, ll. 173–176). According to Afra's brothers, Milo's action was one of sinful neglect, violating the Pauline injunction of physical compliance between husband and wife. The brothers conclude their case against Milo with less metaphorical language, using topics of *quality* and *deeds*: "Therefore, may the idle [quality] hand of Milo be paid back damage for damage, punishment for crime. He who promised us offspring allows his fidelity to have perished by disobeying the law [deeds]" (Milo, ll. 189–192).

Matthew's use of invention throughout the testimony helps shape the brothers' case into a brief model of legal prosecution. The issue the brothers bring to the king is, in Cicero's idiom, qualitative, for it presupposes Milo's neglect to be a fact and deals rather with the "import, the nature and essence" of his neglect (De inventione, 2. 21. 62). The case is intended to arouse the king's sense of justice. But the overseeing audience realizes that righteous indignation is impossible since the king has helped to create the situation. Given the king's behavior up to this point, the audience is likely to expect some attempt to silence Milo by manipulation of the law. Suspense springs from not knowing how the king will respond to Milo's defense. Matthew takes advantage of the moment. He postpones Milo's defense and the king's final judgment by injecting a brief narrative introduction to Milo's monologue: "Milo arises and in his turn invokes his eloquence [acquired disposition] as a weapon in his defense" (Milo, ll. 193–194).

The potency of Milo's eloquence is asserted in the way he takes up the garden metaphor and turns it to his own purposes. He begins with a passage built on the topics of *fortune*, *quality* or *manner*, *circumstances before the act* (cause), and *deeds*. These topics contribute to a portrayal of Milo's devotion to Afra before the king's advances: "The vineyard flourished and grew strong having surrendered to me rich fruit [fortune], green with remarkable foliage [quality]. Because of my guidance [circumstances before], the vineyard looked upon jove with a clear face [quality], saluting the sky with its luscious neck. Wakeful, industrious, and alert [acquired disposition], I domesticated, cultivated, and favored [deeds] the little branch, the earth and the fruit with sickle, mattock and hand" (Milo, ll. 199–204). Invention strategies produce a portrait of Milo's world before the subsequent, tumultuous effects of the king's sexual passion. All had been harmonious at the careful hand of a virtuous husband. Milo sees himself as a solicitous Adam who has paid abundant attention to his responsibilities. He uses the garden metaphor begun by the brothers to conjure up an idyllic portrait reminiscent of Eden before original sin.

Milo's shift to an account of his present condition creates an abrupt change in tone which heightens the sense of injury and rekindles the audience's indignation. Matthew invests Milo's passage chiefly with *acquired disposition*, *spiritual attributes of nature*, and *fortune*: "Constant, undeserving [acquired disposition], innocent [spiritual attributes], I harvest, bear, take up crimes, damages, evil [fortune] instead of praise, glory, and good" (Milo, ll. 209–210).
The comparison of Milo’s life before and after the king’s intrusion is but a prologue to his description of the king’s part in his plight. Matthew has Milo continue the garden metaphor, since it clearly affords the opportunity for diplomatic circumlocution. Paralleling the brothers’ prosecution, the central portion of Milo’s defense develops out of summary of the action. But it is a summary drawn from the defendant’s point of view, with which the audience is already in sympathy. The most telling part of Milo’s testimony grows out of the topics of feeling, acquired disposition, and pursuit: “Fear [feeling] of the lion halts my undertaking and I stop work, so that I may not seem neglectful [acquired disposition] towards what is mine? Certainly, he who attempts the injury of the innocent [pursuit] affirms only his own harm” (Milo, ll. 217–220).

Matthew’s invention devices underpin a model of legal eloquence by which Milo defends his alleged crime of neglect with what Cicero calls an assumptive plea based on “extraneous circumstances” (De inventione, 1. 11. 14). Milo’s specific argumentative strategy takes the form of remoto criminis, by which the defendant “claims he ought not be punished since the fault is in another not in himself” (De inventione, 2. 29. 91). The audience realizes that Milo’s neglect of Afra is not the product of deliberate malice but a normal reaction to the king’s usurpation of the husband’s marital rights. The fault thus lies with the king, whose lust has brought about Milo’s conjugal neglect.

Before the king’s response to the two sets of testimony, Matthew injects a brief narration describing the king’s inner state. The major topics employed are the spiritual attributes of nature, quality or manner, feeling, and speech: “The wicked [spiritual attributes] king listens with an open ear [manner or quality], and is amazed [feeling] that an earthen vessel is so full of nectar [speech]” (Milo, ll. 221–222). For the first time, Matthew openly labels the king “wicked,” and thereby aligns his own sentiment with the audience’s. But in the same passage we are told that the king had not lost his capacity to be moved; the loyal soldier’s eloquence amazes him. Hence, the king shares the academic audience’s sensitivity to language. Moreover, like the audience, the king grasps Milo’s analogy: “The king understands who is the lion, who the vinedresser and who the vine” (Milo, l. 227). Sensitivity and understanding are positive traits which characterize the king just before his act of judgment. Suspense is effectively heightened since the audience cannot quite predict the actions of a king who has just demonstrated qualities inconsistent with evil. The final words of the antagonist solicit a reversal of the audience’s view: “You who cultivate the land, go back in peace; till your vines. You will find no more signs of a lion. Put off your fear. . . . May the vine having been reconciled to your husbandry, sprout buds on its branches and nurture its fruit” (Milo, ll. 237–238, 241–242). Matthew has the king escape the “hooks and net” of passion by restoring the relationship between Afra and her husband. The impetus to do justice is a result of Milo’s eloquence, an eloquence which sets the king free from vice and brings the story to a happy resolution.

The moral world of the poem has come full circle, and the sympathies of the audience have been invited to follow that world through its various changes. Milo, virtuous though human, has moved from a state of fortune through misfortune back to
fortune. Afra has gone from virtue through a fall from grace back to virtue. And the king, once a prisoner of sexual passion, has been set free by the powers of eloquence. In addition to witnessing a demonstration of the poet’s craft, the audience members who have followed the several shifts in fortune and virtue have had their moral sensibilities exercised. They can depart satisfied that the moral order has been reaffirmed.

Viewed conjointly, the Milo and the Ars versificatoria illustrate how one poet-teacher conceived of and applied the topics of invention to what he considered a dramatic composition. Matthew employs his interpretation of Ciceronian invention to bring about several ends.

First, the topics with their termini in particular features of the human person, his character, behavior, and situation, allow the poet a good deal of control over the shape and complexity of each character. A passage based on one topic or a small number of topics generally yields limited dimensionality and enforces a less comprehensive view of the character. For example, the first description of Afra, based almost entirely on nature, renders the maiden in solely statuesque terms that keep her at a distance from the audience and conceal some of the more human qualities that emerge through the use of other topics much later in the play. In contrast, the use of several different topics in a single passage usually helps to create a greater sense of complexity, allowing a more fully rounded view of the character. Milo, for example, is constantly presented from the several angles of vision afforded by the simultaneous use of multiple topics. Therefore, he often seems somewhat more dimensional than Afra.

Second, inventional strategies also help create the audience’s moral perspectives towards the characters. The topics—Matthew’s sources of “who, what, where, with what aid, why, how, when” (Ars, 80)—supply the audience with information about the characters and their situations from which to draw moral inferences regarding guilt and innocence. In their capacity of informing the audience’s moral perceptions and judgments, the topics serve as vehicles for rendering the principles of a Christian universe in terms of particular examples of humanity. The portrayals of Milo, Afra, and the king exemplify an order in which unbridled sexual passion—usurping free will, damaging human dignity, and impeding social harmony—is finally checked by reason and morality. For eloquence (defined in Carthusian terms as the “skillful use of striking verbal patterns which act on the will as well as the intellect”) is a principle agent for good, analogous in function to Christian grace.

Third, Matthew’s conception and use of invention also sponsor his own persona in the poem. He is an author who, through his writing, appears before his scholarly audience as a skillful artist and an astute moral guide, well-grounded in Christian theology.

Conclusion: Rhetoric and Medieval Dramaturgy

Taking its place among the trivium and quadrivium as one of the seven major categories of learning, rhetoric occupied a central position in medieval education.
Whereas logic and grammar provided principles governing abstract reasoning and the clear use and interpretation of language, rhetoric supplied guidelines for suasive and informative communication applicable across a broad array of situations. As a practical art, rhetoric contained norms both specific and broad enough for free and ubiquitous use throughout the culture of the Middle Ages. For example, rhetoric governed the transmission of ideas from the painter’s imagination to the canvas as readily as it guided communication from scholar to student, priest to congregation, legate to ruler. In Rhetoric in the Middle Ages, Murphy sees rhetoric in its pervasiveness as being the very basis of the medieval communication arts. In the major conclusion of his study, he observes that the fundamental principles governing eloquence were similar throughout all the genres of discourse. Although the relationship between medieval rhetoric and dramaturgy has been largely neglected by theatre scholars, a considerable amount of material, such as Matthew’s work, is extant and would help, I think, to illuminate the craft and art of the playwright.

It is especially noteworthy for those interested in dramatic composition that the plays of Terence and Plautus were considered the standard exemplars of rhetorical technique throughout the age. While a few teachers from early in the medieval period may not have realized that the dramas they used to help impart the principles of eloquence were intended for production, many others, for instance, Isidore of Seville, Rabbanus Maurus, and John of Salisbury, did know. Several of the student imitations of Roman comedies, which grew out of courses in grammar and rhetoric, included stage directions, sight-gags, and routines, suggesting that their authors were familiar with production. For example, Babio and Aulularia contain several comic devices and directions which would have been virtually unintelligible to anyone not familiar with the concept of performance.

Also pertinent to estimating the association between medieval rhetoric and dramaturgy is the work of another Roman, Horace. His Ars poetica, a work explicitly about drama, provided the basic matrix to which Matthew and subsequent theorists added their rhetorical principles to form the new poetics of the Middle Ages. Horace’s medieval admirers had little compunction about extending his comments on dramaturgy to other forms of imaginative literature. Their free and easy attitude towards generic distinctions allowed for a methodological flexibility later forgotten by European culture.

Specific instances of the conjunction between rhetoric and dramaturgy are also readily available. For instance, Brunetto Latini’s Tresor (ca. 1294), a work about

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19 Medieval and Renaissance painting masters advised their student’s to study the rhetoricians because rhetoric governed poetry—the art thought to be the analogue of painting. Like poetry, painting was expected to teach (docere) as well as to please (placere), the first objective falling directly within the realm of rhetoric. See Rensselaer W. Lee, "On Pictura Poesis," The Art Bulletin 22 (1940), 179–269.

20 For his conclusion, Murphy quotes Cicero’s De oratore. 3. 23: “Eloquence is one... regardless of the regions of discourse it is diverted into.” Murphy, p. 363.


22 For a summary of Latini’s work, see Charles Sears Baldwin, Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959), pp. 178 ff.
politics and rhetoric, digresses at one point to comment on the colors of rhetoric. To exemplify these colors at work, Latini quotes the character Adam's well-known description of his young wife, Marie, in the first act of Adam de la Halle's Le Jeu de la Feuillée, written around 1276. By choosing to illustrate rhetorical principles by means of passages from a play, Latini attests to the association between medieval rhetoric and dramaturgy.

Adam de la Halle’s play yields yet another piece of evidence pointing up rhetoric’s influence on dramaturgy. The description of Marie in Le Jeu de la Feuillée follows the same structure as Matthew of Vendôme’s portrait of Afra in Milo: both begin with the head and work towards the feet. In his important study of Le Jeu de la Feuillée, Alfred Adler traces Adam de la Halle’s use of this technique to Bernardus Silvestris, a spokesman for the School of Chartres and a key influence on Matthew. The movement of poetic description from head to foot constitutes a figure of how nature (the concern of the first topic of invention) creates the human body: "Nature (physis) forms man beginning from the head, working member by member until it finishes its work with the feet." Adam de la Halle’s familiarity with Carthusan philosophy comes from his schooling at Paris where the neo-Platonic tradition remained strong well into the scholastic era. Adam, the playwright’s persona in the play, uses the monologue about his wife to express his resolve to return to Paris in order to resume his studies. Of course it is impossible to reckon Adam de la Halle’s exact debt to the poetics of the period. But it does seem that Le Jeu de la Feuillée owes the principles of its craftsmanship to a climate of ideas made explicit in the Ars versificatoria and exemplified in the Milo.

Taken together, the sorts of evidence discussed here indicate that medieval dramatic composition as practiced by educated authors falls well within the compass of rhetoric. Exploring the nature and implications of the relationship between medieval rhetoric and dramaturgy offers, I think, productive ground for future research.

23 The colors of rhetoric and grammar are distinguished in this way: the former includes stylistic devices intended to give persuasive weight to a discourse; whereas, the latter are stylistic devices meant to enhance clarity.
26 Adler, pp. 6–9.