**The beginnings of Philology in Rome: Translations and Transformations**

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Philology is based on a special attraction to language and a set of practices centered around texts. It came into being in the Hellenistic Greek-speaking world around libraries and, in the late third century BCE, came to Rome as a part of the cultural baggage of a few professionals. Once in the city, philology took residence not without conflicts, negotiations, and accommodations. Suetonius writes about these early Roman beginnings in his work *De Grammaticis et Rhetoribus* in the following way:

1. Grammatica Romae ne in usu quidem olim nedum in honore ullo erat, rudi scilicet ac bellicosa etiam tum civitate necdum magnopere liberalibus disciplinis vacante. Initium quoque eius mediocre extitit, siquidem antiquissimi doctorum, qui idem et poetae et semigraeci erant - Livium et Ennium dico, quos utraque lingua domi forisque **docuisse** adnotatum est - nihil amplius quam Graecos **interpretabantur**, aut, si quid ipsi Latine conposuissent **praelegebant**. Nam quod nonnulli tradunt duos libros de litteris syllabisque, item de metris ab eodem Ennio editos, iure arguit L. Cotta non poetae sed posterioris Enni esse, cuius etiam de augurandi disciplina volumina ferantur.

2. Primus igitur, quantum opinamur, studium grammaticae in urbem intulit Crates Mallotes, Aristarchi aequalis, qui missus ad senatum ab Attalo rege inter secundum ac tertium Punicum bellum sub ipsam Enni mortem, cum regione Palati prolapsus in cloacae foramen crus fregisset, per omne legationis simul et valitudinis tempus plurimas acroasis subinde fecit assidueque disseruit, ac nostris exemplo fuit ad imitandum. Hactenus tamen imitati, ut carmina parum adhuc divulgata vel defunctorum amicorum vel si quorum aliorum probassent, diligentius retractarent ac **legendo commentandoque** etiam ceteris nota facerent, ut C. Octavius Lampadio Naevi Punicum bellum, quod uno volumine et continenti scriptura expositum **divisit** in septem libros, ut postea Q. Vargunteius annales Enni, quos certis diebus in magna frequentia **pronuntiabat**, ut Laelius Archelaus Vettiusque Philocomus Lucili saturas familiaris sui, quas **legisse** se apud Archelaum Pompeius Lenaeus, apud Philocomum Valerius Cato praedicant.

(1) The study of grammar was not even pursued at Rome in early days, still less held in any esteem; and naturally enough, since the state was then still uncultivated and given to war, and had as yet little leisure for liberal pursuits. The beginnings of the subject, too, were humble, for the earliest teachers, who were also both poets and half-Greeks (I refer to Livius and Ennius, who gave instruction in both tongues at home and abroad, as is well known), did no more than interpret the Greeks or give readings from whatever they themselves had composed in the Latin language. For while some tell us that this same Ennius published a book "On Letters and Syllables" and another "On Metres," Lucius Cotta is right in maintaining that these were not the work of the poet, but of a later Ennius, who is also the author of the volumes "On the Science of Augury."

(2) In my opinion then, the first to introduce the study of grammar into our city was Crates of Mallos, a contemporary of Aristarchus. He was sent to the senate by king Attalus between the second and third Punic wars, at about the time when Ennius died; and having fallen into the opening of a sewer in the Palatine quarter and broken his leg, he held numerous and frequent conferences during the whole time both of his embassy and of his convalescence, at which he constantly gave instruction, and thus set an example for our countrymen to imitate. Their imitation, however, was confined to a careful criticism of poems which had as yet but little circulation, either those of deceased friends or others that met with their approval, and to making them known to the public by reading and commenting on them. For example, Gaius Octavius Lampadio thus treated the "Punic War" of Naevius, which was originally written in a single volume without a break, but was divided by Lampadio into seven books. At a later time Quintus Vargunteius took up the "Annals" of Ennius, which he expounded on set days to large audiences; and Laelius Archelaus and Vettius Philocomus the satires of their friend Lucilius, which Lenaeus Pompeius prides himself on having read with Archelaus, and Valerius Cato with Philocomus (Loeb translation with minor alterations).

From our viewpoint, Suetonius’ representation of philology’s early days in Rome is more significant for what it reveals about the understanding of philology than for its historical accuracy. Let us start from terminology. I am using the term “philology” Suetonius does not: he uses the word *grammatica*. *Grammatica* relates to *philologia* in a narrow way by referring to *gramma*, the written letter, rather than to language more broadly; moreover, with *grammatica* the emphasis is on the development of a set of specialized skills, *techne* or *ars,* through induction and teaching, and specifically reading (*praelegere, legere*), commenting (*commentari*), and analyzing/translating (*interpretari*). The emphasis on induction and teaching in the Roman context is germane to the fact that philology was not a native practice but brought from abroad. Suetonius makes this clear from the start, as the Romans did not have a literary culture before the third century BCE. The Livius Andronicus and the Ennius mentioned here as the very first to engage with texts and their words are also traditionally recognized as among the initiators of Roman poetry. By representing the establishment of philology and poetry as historically simultaneous and attributable to the same individuals, Suetonius suggests that they were cultural practices intimately related: poetry provided the material and philology the means for making this material workable and available. This mutual relation affects how Suetonius organizes the narrative, in three movements: the first involves semi-Greek poets (Livius and Ennius) translating/reading Greek texts and their own compositions, the second includes the arrival of a philologist from the library in Pergamon (Crates of Mallus) who sets an example on how to deal with texts, and the third features Lampadio who uses Crates’ example and acts upon the text of an earlier Roman poet, Naevius, by reorganizing it and a number of followers who build upon his example in turn. What connects the three movements is that all of the actors are concerned with texts and with creating an environment within which texts could be understood, appreciated, and circulated at the same time. Philology in Rome then can be said to have had from the very start a rather more dynamic nature than in the Greek-Hellenistic context. Whereas in the latter context we detect an attitude towards texts that is primarily conservational, in the Roman context this attitude is primarily transformational. With this in mind let me turn to those who laid the foundations to the growth of Roman philology and gave its transformational features: the semi-Greek professionals who moved to Rome, facilitated the access to Greek texts and produced poetry by engaging with translation. As we shall see, their contribution to the establishment of philology is detectable in the little remains that we have.

According to Suetonius (and the tradition), one of the first who engaged in any sort of philological work (reading, translating, and commenting) was Livius Andronicus. We have no evidence of that outside of Suetonius but what we do have are a few remains from his translation of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Livius’ choice to translate the *Odyssey* seems natural enough when considering the contemporary concern on the recovery of the Homeric texts that guided the work of philologists in the libraries of Alexandria and other Hellenistic cities. Livius’ *Odusia*, however, was not simply a translation (and there is nothing simple about translating anyway); it was also a piece of poetry informed by a philological attention to words and a translational approach that is, in part, exegetical.

The first line of the *Odusia* goes:

Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα…

*Àndra moi ènnepe, Mousa*

Virum mihi, Camena, insece versutum (*Ody*.1)

Sing to me, Muse, of the man of twists and turns

It is traditional to look at this line very narrowly, so Gianbiagio Conte in his *History of Latin Literatur*e comments: “**Livius Andronicus, in his translation of the *Odyssey*, shows his acute awareness of the position of the translator: he admits in his first line that his freedom is limited, showing a respect for the original that is almost obsequious.[[1]](#footnote-1)”** Like other commentators before and after, Conte remarks on the archaizing choice of *insece* for ¶nnepe, emphasizes the semantic parallelism between *versutum* and polÊtropon, notices the alliteration *virum*-*versutum*, and considers the substitution of the local goddess *Camena* for the Homeric MoËsa. More recently, however, Stephen Hinds notices that *versutus* does not simply translate polÊtropow, it also refers to “translation” as *vertere* is the technical verb for that, which is exactly what Livius was doing. As such, we have a connection created here between Livius the translator-poet and Odysseus the cunning man. This connection becomes even clearer if we think that the first part of Livius’ cognomen is Andro- (Andronicus), and Ἄνδρα is the first word of the *Odyssey*. Accordingly, his translation into *virum* hides and yet manifests the claim of poetic authorship staked out by Livius the translator. But Livius was more than that; he was also a philologist. His philological skills transpire in the exegetical work that informs the line above and that we may easily miss out.

As Martin Bloomer points out, the philologist reads a text with a suspicious attitude in search for errors that may or may not be immediately apparent. We can see how that attitude is stretched and transformed: the words in the text are accepted but their meaning is explored and enlarged. The final product clarifies the Homeric text for the benefit of the Latin speaking reader but it also inserts and exposes a further layer of signification into the Homeric tradition; in this case, the most noticeable is the relationship between “turns of languages” and “turns of mind”.

In adding new layers of signification, someone like Livius Andronicus schooled his readers into having a philological approach to texts, by being suspicious about the choice of words in the text and by pushing them to search for meanings that are not necessarily self-evident. In just this line we can see the kind of work that philology did in Rome when it first arrived and how it helped create a particular disposition to literature alongside specific ideas about the process of reading and writing texts. I believe that if we want to understand anything at all about the place of philology in Rome’s cultural history we need to look further into early poetic texts. In what follows I will provide a few examples to clarify my point.

(1) In Ennius’ *Annales* (7.211 Sk) we read:

Nec quisquam sophiam, sapientia quae perhibetur,

In somnis vidit prius quam sam discere coepit.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Nor was ever anyone who saw in a dream *sophia*,

which is called *sapientia*, before he has begun to learn it.

It has recently been argued that the dream of *sophia* looks at the Pythagorean tradition and relates to the process of metempsychosis that opens up the poem, when Ennius dreams about his encounter with Homer and learns that he is the Greek poet’s reincarnation. In this view, the equation *sophia-sapientia* sustains the incorporation of Greek *sophia* into the Roman tradition of *sapientia* at a time when *sapientia* referred to aristocratic assertions and advisory competence. In the Greek context*,* however*, sophia* did not refer solely to philosophy; it also incorporated into its semantic area the Callimachean meaning of poetic *tekhnê*, i.e. the ability to create poetry that can only be judged through the poetic object.[[3]](#footnote-3) Accordingly, the equation of *sophia* with *sapientia* (*sapientia quae perhibetur*) is not at all straightforward and shows its complexity as soon as we reflect on it from a philological perspective. And I am saying philological because philological is also the way in which Ennius proceeds: by building upon glossing. Whereas glosses tend to exist at the margins of a text here the gloss is inserted into the poetic text making the text both a poetic object and a philological study.

(2)

**insece** Musa **manu** Romanorum induperator

quod quisque in bello gessit cum rege Philippo.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Pursue Muse what each of the Roman generals carried out *by feat of valor* in the war against Philip

Pursue Muse *with my hand* what each of the Roman generals carried out in the war against Philip

These two lines Ennius are based on Livius’ invocation to the Camenae in the first line of the *Oduseia* in two ways: (1) through poetic allusion, and (2) through philological emendation. Ennius emends Livius by stretching the meaning of *insece* from “sing” to “pursue” and, perhaps, goes as far to correct graphically *insece* into *inseque*. What Ennius’ ultimate choice was is hard for us to reconstruct since already in antiquity it was not at all clear which of the two verbs Ennius had chosen.[[5]](#footnote-5) Yet the meaning of “pursuing/following” seems to be corroborated by the insertion of *manu*. Critics tend to translate *manu* into “by feats of valor” and, therefore to translate the line into something like “sing/pursue Muse what each of the Roman generals carried out by feats of valor in the war against Philip.” But if we leave behind Livius altogether and focus on Ennius by understanding *insece* as “pursue”, *manu* can well be seen to relate to Ennius’ own hand and his own poetic and philological competence. That said, we may well decide that Ennius played with both meanings of *manu*, leaving open the possibility to choose between the two semantic variants.[[6]](#footnote-6) Whatever the case, the fact is that centuries later Horace substitutes *insece* with *insector* in *Epistles* 2.1.71, with *insector* becoming a gloss to the *Annales* that makes explicit the idea of “pursuing” as Ennius’ original choice. Accordingly, Horace acknowledges the emendation performed by Ennius on Livius’ text, while redeploying and flaunting his own philological expertise in his own poetry. By doing so, Horace continues and renovates the tradition initiated by poets like Livius and Ennius.

(3) In the second century BCE the use of philological principles in the creation of poetry gave life to a very dynamic cultural environment based on the use and preservation of Greek texts, on the one hand, and their translation and transformation into poetic artefacts in Latin, on the other. In this regard, the Prologues to Terence’s comedies provide us with some interesting evidence.

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Since the Poet has found that his writings are carped at by unfair critics, and that his adversaries represent in a bad light the Play that we are about to perform, he shall give information about himself; you shall be the judges whether this ought to be esteemed to his praise or to his discredit. The *Synapothnescontes*is a Comedy of Diphilus; Plautus made it into a play called the "Commorientes." In the Greek, there is a young man, who, at the early part of the play, carries off a Courtesan from a Procurer; that part Plautus has entirely left out. This portion he has adopted in the *Adelphi*, and has transferred it, translated word for word. This new Play we are about to perform; determine then whether you think a theft has been committed, or a passage has been restored to notice which has been passed over in neglect.

The prologue of the *Adelphoi* unfolds before our eyes how early Roman comedy was composed. Plautus - who belonged to a generation before Terence - composed his plays by exercising the freedom to excise scenes and to cut out portions of Greek originals, translate them, and recompose them into new poetic outputs. By the time of Terence this does not seem possible any longer. The rules seem to have changed and the use of texts to have become highly regulated: once used, a portion from a Greek original cannot longer be used; re-using a portion that has already been used by another poet is associated with stealing. Here the Prologue defends Terence saying that what the poet had done was to pick a portion left untouched by Plautus; by doing so, he has actually saved that portion from neglect. What stands out in this claim is the philological principle of preservation and transmission, expressed in philological terms (*locum integrum*), and, in turn, the transformation of this principle into the promotion of poetry as the means by which preservation and transmission themselves are achieved.

(B) *Andria* - Prologue

Menander fecit Andriam et Perinthiam.  
qui utramvis recte norit ambas noverit:               10  
non ita dissimili sunt argumento, [s]et tamen  
dissimili oratione sunt factae ac stilo.  
quae convenere in Andriam ex Perinthia  
fatetur **transtulisse atque usum pro suis**.  
id isti vituperant factum atque in eo disputant       15  
contaminari non decere fabulas.  
faciuntne intellegendo ut nil intellegant?  
qui quom hunc accusant, Naevium Plautum Ennium  
accusant quos hic noster auctores habet,  
quorum aemulari exoptat **neglegentiam**                20  
potius quam istorum **obscuram diligentiam**.

# Menander composed the *Andrian* and the *Perinthian*. He who knows either of them well, will know them both; they are in plot not very different, and yet they have been composed in different language and style. What suited, he confesses he has transferred into the *Andrian* from the *Perinthian*, and has employed them as his own. These parties censure this proceeding; and on this point they differ from him, that Plays ought not to be mixed up together. By being thus knowing, do they not show that they know nothing at all? For while they are censuring him, they are censuring Naevius, Plautus, and Ennius,whom our Poet has for his precedents; whose carelessness he prefers to emulate, rather than the mystifying carefulnessof those parties.

This passage adds to what we learn in the Prologue of the *Adelphoi*, allowing us to look more into Terence’s approach to philology and the literary environment that took shape in the course of the second century BCE. Here we read that the poet has transferred textual material from one Greek play into the other, and that he has translated them and made use of them as if his own. The claim of ownership here is very strong, and it relies on an equally strong understanding that it is only by reading and knowing and absorbing texts that any judgement regarding language and style can be made. The tension between philological conservatism and poetic innovation is here very clear, and it is in a passage like this that we can also see how and when the split between philology and poetry started to emerge. While giving credit to the philological principles that gave him the foundations to his craftsmanship, Terence also manifests his predilection for the poetic and transformational paradigm. He prefers the sloppiness of Plautus than the *obscura diligentia* (the mystifying diligence) of his detractor, who, in his view, use their philological knowledge only to chastise and denigrate.

(C ) Prologue – *Heautontimorumenos*

…  
[Nam](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=Nam&la=la&can=nam0&prior=sum" \t "morph) [quod](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=quod&la=la&can=quod1&prior=Nam" \t "morph) [rumores](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=rumores&la=la&can=rumores0&prior=quod" \t "morph) [distulerunt](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=distulerunt&la=la&can=distulerunt0&prior=rumores" \t "morph) [malevoli](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=malevoli&la=la&can=malevoli0&prior=distulerunt" \t "morph), 16  
[Multas](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=Multas&la=la&can=multas0&prior=malevoli" \t "morph) **[contaminasse](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=contaminasse&la=la&can=contaminasse0&prior=Multas" \t "morph)** [Graecas](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=Graecas&la=la&can=graecas0&prior=contaminasse" \t "morph) [dum](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=dum&la=la&can=dum0&prior=Graecas" \t "morph) [facit](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=facit&la=la&can=facit0&prior=dum" \t "morph)   
[Paucas](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=Paucas&la=la&can=paucas0&prior=facit" \t "morph) [Latinas](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=Latinas&la=la&can=latinas0&prior=Paucas" \t "morph); [factum](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=factum&la=la&can=factum0&prior=Latinas" \t "morph) [hic](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=hic&la=la&can=hic1&prior=factum" \t "morph) [esse](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=esse&la=la&can=esse2&prior=hic" \t "morph) [id](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=id&la=la&can=id2&prior=esse" \t "morph) [non](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=non&la=la&can=non1&prior=id" \t "morph) [negat](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=negat&la=la&can=negat0&prior=non" \t "morph),   
[Neque](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=Neque&la=la&can=neque0&prior=negat" \t "morph) [se](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=se&la=la&can=se0&prior=Neque" \t "morph) [pigere](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=pigere&la=la&can=pigere0&prior=se" \t "morph): [et](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=et&la=la&can=et2&prior=pigere" \t "morph) [deinde](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=deinde&la=la&can=deinde1&prior=et" \t "morph) [facturum](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=facturum&la=la&can=facturum0&prior=deinde" \t "morph) [autumat](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=autumat&la=la&can=autumat0&prior=facturum" \t "morph).

Habet bonorum [exemplum](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=exemplum&la=la&can=exemplum0&prior=bonorum" \t "morph), [quo](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=quo&la=la&can=quo0&prior=exemplum" \t "morph) [exemplo](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=exemplo&la=la&can=exemplo0&prior=quo" \t "morph) [sibi](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=sibi&la=la&can=sibi0&prior=exemplo" \t "morph) 20  
[Licere](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=Licere&la=la&can=licere0&prior=sibi" \t "morph) [id](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=id&la=la&can=id3&prior=Licere" \t "morph) [facere](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=facere&la=la&can=facere0&prior=id" \t "morph) [quod](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=quod&la=la&can=quod2&prior=facere" \t "morph) [illi](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=illi&la=la&can=illi0&prior=quod" \t "morph) [fecerunt](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=fecerunt&la=la&can=fecerunt0&prior=illi" \t "morph) [putat](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=putat&la=la&can=putat0&prior=fecerunt" \t "morph).

… For as to malevolent rumors spreading abroad that he has mixed together many Greek Plays while writing a few Latin ones, he does not deny that this is the case, and that he does not repent of so doing; and he affirms that he will do so again. He has the example of good Poets; after which example he thinks it is allowable for him to do what they have done.

Using portions of texts that have been already used by other poets or deploying two or three originals in order to create a new play in Latin, this seems to be the basis of rivalry and criticism. *Contaminatio*, this is how Terence’s detractors define the transformational work inherent in the poet’s production of his plays. The word has strong religious connotations, and it does denote the gravity with which texts (Greek or Roman) had began to be handled and scrutinized.

Two decades or so ago Sander Goldberg remarked that the charges of *contaminatio* lodged against Terence had less to do with aesthetic issue sthan with the practical fact that, by making many plays into a few, he was unfairly reducing the store of Greek originals available to the poets operating in Rome.[[7]](#footnote-7) In another way, however, Terence’s prologues alert us to the fact that by the mid second century BCE Rome enjoyed a well established a philological and literary culture. At the same time, they reveal that the poets - who had been responsible for the establishment of both - were losing control over texts and their circulation.

1. Conte 1986: 82-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ennius, *Ann*. 7.211 Sk. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See especially Grilli 1965: 17-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ennius, *Ann*. 10.322-3 Sk. For Ennius’ clearly alluding to the first line of Livius’ *Odyssey*, see already Gellius 18.9.3. As for the interpretation of this line as a “correction”, see Skutsch 1985: 499. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gellius 18.9.5. See also Hinds 1998: 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Skutsch (1985: 499): “used somewhat redundantly to denote feats of valour of which *manus* (pl.) is synonym in Virg. *Aen*. 6.683.” A more compelling parallel is perhaps to be found in the lines from one of Naevius’ comedies, preserved for us in Gellius, 7.8.5: *etiam qui res magnas manu saepe gessit gloriose,/cuius facta viva nunc vigent, qui apud gentes solus praestat/ eum suus pater cum pallio uno ab amica abduxit*. But compare also the use of *manu* in relation to poetry, authorship, and performance in Plautus: *apporto vobis Plautum, lingua non manu*, Plautus, *Men*. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Goldberg 1986: 95.. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)