

## PESSIMUS POETARUM? CICERO AND ARCHAISM



While Cicero (106-43 BCE) is best known for role in politics of the Late Republic and his influence on Latin prose and rhetoric, he also devoted considerable energy to poetic pursuits. In his youth, Cicero composed numerous poems on Greek mythological subjects. His most successful composition was the *Aratea*, a Latin translation in hexameters of Aratus's *Phaenomena*. As a poet drawn to the experimentation and learned artifice of the Alexandrian poets, his youthful compositions position Cicero as a precursor to the Neoterics, like Catullus and Cinna. Although often overlooked, his influence on Latin poetry is significant, contributing to the regularization of the Latin hexameter and the standardization of certain metrical-verbal arrangements. Typical of his efforts in this regard is the following line:

*aestiferos validis erumpit flatibus ignes*

in which the line is constructed in 3 sections (two adjectives - one verb - two nouns) with an interlocking *a b c b a* syntactical arrangement. Such elegant, balanced verses are quite distinct from the chaotic run of archaic hexameter and approach the fluid grace of the Augustan verse of Vergil, Horace, and Ovid.

As Cicero matured, however, he was increasingly drawn to the severe, archaic style of Rome's earliest poets, especially Ennius (239-169 BCE), and came to reject the developing experimental style of the Neoterics or "Poetae Novi," as he derisively termed them. In embracing this archaizing style, Cicero sought to emulate the "pure" Latinity of Ennius, the first great Roman poet, whose taste for obsessive anaphora is well attested, as in this famous line:

*O Tite, tute, Tati, tibi tanta, tyranne, tulisti*

"Oh Tyrant Titus Tattius you brought upon yourself such great misfortunes"

*Machina magna minax minitatur maxima muris*

"The titanic, threatening tool totally threatened the *tecta*"

His return to traditional forms of versification, however, did not win the acclaim that greeted his juvenile works, and his epics on Marius, his consulship (*De Consulatu Suo*), and his return from exile (*De Temporibus Suis*) were routinely derided in antiquity. From the sections of *De Consulatu Suo* (60 BCE), which Cicero himself took pains to preserve by including in his prose work *De Divinitate*, two verses have drawn particular criticism, both for their perceived meager poetic value and wearisome self-congratulation:

*O fortunatam natam me consule Romam*

*Cedant arma togae, concedat laurea laudi*