

## Pessimus Poetarum? Cicero and Archaism

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While Cicero (106-43 BCE) is obviously best known for his towering 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. His influence on Latin poetry is not insignificant and he contributed to the regularization of the Latin hexameter, especially in the development 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 Augustan verse.

As Cicero matured, however, he was increasingly drawn to the severe style of Rome's earliest poets, especially Ennius (239-169 BCE), and came to reject the developing experimentation of the neoterics or "Poetae Novi" as he derisively termed them. His return to traditional forms of versification, however, did not garner the critical acclaim that met 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 meager poetic value and their wearisome self-congratulation:

*O fortunatam natam me consule Romam*

*Cedant arma togae, concedat laurea laudi*

It should be noted that this style is not without precedent in Latin literature and he undoubtedly sought to emulate the "pure" Latinity of Ennius, the first great Roman poet, whose taste for obsessive anaphora is well attested: *e.g. o Tite, tute, Tati, tibi tanta, tyranne, tulisti* ("Oh Titus Tatius you brought upon yourself such great misfortunes").