CHAPTER ONE

THE LATIN DONATUS

The use of Aelius Donatus’ *Ars minor* and of other grammars derived from it during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance bears witness to the effectiveness of Donatus’ method for teaching elementary Latin. At the same time, the many modifications that the text underwent throughout the course of the centuries—in particular, its “contamination” with Priscian’s *Institutiones* and other medieval works on grammar, as well as the massive insertion of paradigms—correspond to important changes in the teaching methodology used for Latin. This chapter analyzes the causes and effects of the evolution of the *Ars minor* into one of its many new forms, *Ianua*, which became the most common Latin elementary grammar in the Italian schools of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. An early version of *Ianua* constituted the original of Greek Donatus a.

1. Aelius Donatus’ Artes: A Pedagogical Program

During the Middle Ages, the Latin grammarian Aelius Donatus, although pagan, was held in the greatest esteem. He owed much of his fame to Saint Jerome, who proudly referred to him as his teacher (*praeceptor meus Donatus*: *Contra Rufinum* 1. 16, *PL* 23, 429 A; etc.).¹ Donatus, *grammaticus urbis Romae*, was active between 354 and 363 C.E. The name “Donatus” is especially attested to in Africa, which was also the place of origin of other grammarians of that age, including Probus, Nonius Marcellus, and perhaps Charisius.²

Aelius Donatus’ grammatical works constitute a *corpus* (*Ars grammatica Donati*) of four books. The first book, known as *Ars minor*, contains a synthetic treatment of elementary morphology—the eight parts of

---

¹ Humanists explicitly attributed to Donatus the merit of Jerome’s refined literary education. See Brugnoli 1965; Rice 1985, 85; and the passages quoted *ibid.*, 231 n. 5.
² On Donatus’ life, see in particular Holtz 1981, 15–20; and Kaster 1988, 275–278. For a survey of Donatus’ life, work, and fate, see Holtz 2005.
speech—in a catechistic format. The last three books make up the *Ars maior*, where grammar is treated more extensively. The second book (*Ars maior* 1) deals with the constituent elements of words and phrases: letters, syllables, accents, and punctuation. The third book (*Ars maior* 2) analyzes the eight parts of speech: noun, pronoun, verb, adverb, participle, conjunction, preposition, and interjection, paying particular attention to the properties (*accidencia*), i.e., the changes to which words are subject when related to other words. The fourth book (*Ars maior* 3) focuses on style and contains a description of its qualities (figures of speech) and defects (barbarism, soloecism, etc.).

The genetic structure of the *Ars maior* and its transition from simple to complex, from essential to ancillary elements, correspond to the method followed in classrooms. At the same time, however, the *Ars maior* has the framework of the rhetorical-philosophical treatises of antiquity: there is, in fact, a clear attempt to codify previous knowledge into an all-inclusive, self-contained system. The pyramidal structure of each chapter, the division of the matter into classes and subclasses, the exposition by antitheses and complements, and especially the dogmatic tone, make the *Ars maior* a complex work. Adding to this complexity, Donatus does not ever declare his aim or his general plan. At any rate, a comparison between the *Ars minor* and the *Ars maior* reveals that Donatus conceived the two works as two stages in the study of grammar. The *Ars minor* is a compendium, a textbook for an introductory course; it focuses on the rudiments of the language and presents them in a form that is easy to memorize. The *Ars maior* meets the demands of more advanced students, who require a real reference book in order to accomplish the stylistic ideal of artistic prose.

Although the treatise in three parts was by far the most common method in expounding grammatical material, short grammars like

---

3 See the observations by Holtz, 1981, 61. Lomanto (1987, 1113ff.) has focused on the uniformity in structure of Roman *Artes grammaticae*, of which Donatus’ *Ars maior* represents a clear example. Based on the Stoic distinction between λέξις (*dictio*, the word considered *per se*) and λόγος (*oratio*, the word within a context), most *Artes* deal first with the elements of λέξις (*de voce, de littera, de syllaba, de dictione, de oratione, de accentibus, de tonis or de distinctione or de posituris; de rhythmio, de metro, de pedibus*), then with what concerns λόγος (the eight parts of speech), and finally with the elements of style (*Latinitas*). This tripartite structure seems to have been elaborated by Remmnius Palaemon in the first century C.E.

4 As Holtz remarks (1981, 54): “Il ne s’agit pas ici d’un corps de doctrines qui se crée sous nos yeux dans une libre méditation, […] mais d’une série de très pesantes affirmations qui ont pour effet de constituer une sorte d’inventaire.”