1. Introduction

Latin syllables are traditionally divided into long and short ones, using the same terminology as for the vowels. In order not to confuse the two things, we will here speak of heavy and light syllables. A light syllable is one ending in a short vowel; all other syllables are heavy. Both accent placement and the metrics of Latin poetry depend on this distinction.

Latin school grammar (see § 2 for the historical source) contains a metric rule that renders a syllable ‘long by position’ (positione longa). The rule says that, for metric purposes, a syllable containing a short vowel nevertheless counts as heavy if it is followed by two consonants. Therefore, although the /o/ in the word formas ‘forms’ is short, the first syllable is heavy, so that the word can occupy a dactylus (Ov. Met. 1, 1). This rule suffers an exception conditioned by a constellation known as muta cum liquida (‘stop plus liquid’), which comprises sequences of any of /p t k b d g/ plus either of /l r/.1 The exception says that a syllable preceding a muta cum liquida cluster may count as light in poetry. Verses such as the following (with feet separated by vertical slash),

\[
\text{et pri\textcopyright mo simi\textcopyright lis uolu\textcopyright cri, mox \textcopyright vera uo\textcopyright lucris}
\]

‘and first similar to a bird, then a real bird’

(Ov. Met. 13, 607)

where the second syllable of uolucri(s) ‘bird’ is first light, then heavy, prove that the exception rule is treated as optional in poetry. It normally does not apply if there is a morpheme boundary in the group. Thus, the second syllable of integro ‘integer’ is light, but the first syllable of abrumpo ‘break off’ is heavy. In the space available, a comprehensive treatment of

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1 We will restrict the concept ‘liquid’ to /l/ and /r/, excluding the nasals. More on this in § 4.
initial clusters is not possible.\textsuperscript{2} We will ask to what extent the fricatives behave like stops, and the nasals and glides behave like liquids, in the \textit{muta cum liquida} cluster.

2. \textit{The Ancient Doctrine}

In Donatus's \textit{Ars maior}, chapter 2, \textit{de littera} (p. 367), consonants are divided into \textit{mutae} and \textit{semivocales}. The \textit{mutae} comprise the letters \{b c d g h k p q t\}, corresponding to the phonemes /p t k b d g/. Donatus himself is doubtful about \{h\}, which did not correspond to a phoneme in his time. The \textit{semivocales} are \{f l m n r s x\}. A subgroup of these, viz. \{l n r\}, is called \textit{liquidae},

\begin{align*}
\text{ex quibus} & \text{ } l \text{ et } r \text{ faciunt communem syllabam (p. 368)} \\
& \text{‘of which} \{l\} \text{ and} \{r\} \text{ make a syllable together [with a preceding muta].’}
\end{align*}

Donatus then goes on to say:

\begin{align*}
\text{item ex illis} & \text{ } f \text{ littera superponitur liquidis } l \text{ et } r, \text{ quem ad modum muta quaelibet, et communem syllabam facit (p. 368)} \\
& \text{‘Again, from among these [\textit{semivocales}], the letter} \{f\} \text{ may precede the liquids} \{l\} \text{ and} \{r\} \text{ just like any \textit{muta} and then forms a syllable together with them.’}
\end{align*}

This correct statement of the facts is taken by Priscianus (II, 6, 11) as the decisive criterion to classify /f/ as a \textit{muta} instead of a \textit{semivocalis}.

In chapter 3, \textit{de syllaba}, Donatus distinguishes short, long and “common” (i.e. \textit{aniceps} ‘ambivalent’) syllables. He explains about the concept \textit{syllaba longa positione} ‘syllable which is long by position’ and enumerates the kinds of \textit{syllaba communis}. The first of these is the following:

\begin{align*}
\text{sunt etiam syllabae quae communes dicuntur, cum aut correptam uocalem duae consonantes secuntur, quorum prior aut muta quaepiam est aut } f \text{ semiuocalis et sequens liquida, aut ... (p. 369)} \\
& \text{‘there are also so-called ambivalent syllables when either a short vowel is followed by two consonants the first of which is some \textit{muta} or the \textit{semivocalis} \{f\} and the second a liquid, or ...’}
\end{align*}

This passage is the \textit{locus classicus} for the traditional concept \textit{muta cum liquida}. At the same time, it is clear that grammarians like Donatus were

\textsuperscript{2} Cf. Lehmann (2005). This work contains an extensive list of references, which allows me to minimize the bibliography appended here.