PART IV

TRANSITIONS?
CHAPTER EIGHT
BRINGING UP THE REAR:
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE
LATIN POETRY OF LATE ANTIQUITY

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The Latin literature of Late Antiquity is abundant and diverse. The period was one of generic innovation and experimentation in which a changed conceptual world gave rise to correspondingly new forms of expression. Most evidently, in Latin prose the didactic and rhetorical needs of the Christian teacher and community produced a range of different forms: for example, works of apologetic, polemical, anti-heretical treatises, sermons, biblical commentaries, ascetic treatises and hagiography. The centrality of a sacred text, the different aesthetic of Judaeo-Christian scriptures and their different exegetic techniques lent patristic writings qualities not easily paralleled in classical authors. At the same time, all these Christian authors had received the standard education in grammar and rhetoric (there was no other until the very end of the period). With it they acquired a sophisticated array of exegetical and discursive skills: techniques of textual analysis and explanation, a diverse arsenal of strategies, both structural and stylistic, for effective expression, and an understanding of how to achieve persuasion, attuned to audience and discursive context. They also acquired a regard for the canonical authors studied in the schools and for classical literary forms, as well as for the values Rome claimed to stand for, as embodied in exemplary figures from history and legend. Christian authors varied in their attitudes to this cultural legacy. Individuals might change their minds during the course of their lives or prove more accepting in fact than in theory, but all were shaped to some degree by the categories and practices learnt in the schools.

In this article I will limit myself to one specific area of late Latin literary production, that of poetry. It is a form of literature that makes an especially interesting test case for questions of continuity and change in Late Antiquity. Writing poetry was a high-status activity, a badge of cultural standing, that conveyed, in differing degrees depending on