ON MISTAKE AND MEANING:
SCINDERATIONES FONORUM IN MEDIEVAL ARTES
MEMORIAE, Mnemonic Verses, and Manuscripts*

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Among the most obscure medieval texts, are the two treatises on grammar by a curious author calling himself Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, probably living in the first half of the seventh century,1 perhaps in Ireland.2 They are entitled Epitomae and Epistolae3 and are formed on the model of Donatus’ Ars maior and Ars minor. The non-negligible difference in comparison to Donatus lies in the fact that Virgilius’

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1 This assumption (which is, however, not unanimously accepted) is based on Virgilius’ dependence on Isidore of Seville and on being quoted in some sources from the second half of the seventh century. The first full surviving manuscripts come only from the ninth and tenth centuries.

2 Although there is no direct evidence, his Irish origin is much promoted by Michael Herren (“Some new light on the life of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus,” Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy 79, section C (1979): 27–71), and his works are often seen as precursors to the specific Irish poetic tradition later developed in Hisperica famina and culminating in James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake. Vivien Law thought that the author might have been English (Vivien Law, Insular Latin Grammarians (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1982), 87. Virgilius himself makes an indirect mention of his origin in Gall. Abbo of Fleury calls him Tolosanus (of Toulouse). He was also considered to be a Jew: many of the strange words he uses seemed to be of Hebrew origin. The most curious (and the least accepted) is the idea of Leo Wiener, who sees Virgilius as coming from an Arabic culture, interpreting most of his obscurities as words of Arabic origin (Leo Wiener, Contributions Toward a History of Arabico-Gothic Culture (Piscataway: Gorgias Press LLC, 2002), 21.

grammar deals with fictional grammatical rules and features, uses made up words, and cites nonexistent authorities. Its most famous passages include a fourteen-day debate over the vocative of ego and the discussion of twelve types of Latinity. The purpose of the whole has been much disputed.⁴

Among other things, Virgilius discusses a strategy which he calls *scinderatio fonorum*, the breaking of words. The term encompasses a number of practices on different levels: the change of order of verses, the change of order of words, or splitting up a word and placing each of its parts at a different spot in a sentence. At the level of the individual word it means changing the order of syllables or letters in a word, transforming the word by adding or omitting some of its letters or syllables, as well as changing some letters or syllables. Thus, on this level, *scinderatio fonorum* is basically any transformation of a word into a word composed of the same or partly different letters. Virgilius explains that there are three reasons for this practice:

Ob tres causas fona finduntur: prima est ut sagacitatem discendentium nostrorum in inquirendis atque in inveniendis his quaeque obscura sunt adprobemus. Secunda est propter decorum aedificationemque eloquentiae. Tertia ne mystica quaque et quae solis gnaris pandi debent passim ab infimis ac stultis facile reperiantur, ne secundum antiquum sues gemmas calcent.

[The words are cut apart [and then mixed] for three reasons: first, so that we establish the acuteness of perception of our students in searching and discovering these obscure things. Second, because of the ornamentation and construction of the speech. Third, so that mystical mysteries and those which should be apparent only to the knowing ones, would not be by chance easily found by the inferior and the stupid, so that, according to an ancient saying, the swine would not tread on precious stones.]⁵

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⁵ Epitome 10 (Huemer, *Virgilius* 76; Polara, *Virgilius*, 128), my translation.