THE LATE MEDIEVAL SUMMA IOVIS
AS A CASE STUDY FOR THE USE OF POEMS AS 
MNEMONIC AIDS

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This article aims to present a didactic poem containing teachings of the _ars dictaminis_ as a particular case study. Within the scope of this case study _memoria_ does not refer to either “rememberance” (like the _memoria defunctorum_) or to a specialized mnemotechnics (as mentioned in the anonymous _Rhetorica ad Herennium_), but to a more general concept of memory and memorization: education. Thereby the issue of “how can something be committed to memory” is restated in two ways: “how do I convey knowledge” and “what is the best way to approach it.”

In the usage of the terms pertaining to the _ars dictaminis_ the distinctions proposed by Martin Camargo will be used: therefore, _ars dictaminis_ means the discipline of letter writing and _ars dictandi_ refers to a textbook about the discipline of letter writing. Furthermore, when “didactic poem” is mentioned I am referring to the definition of the genre _Lehrgedicht_ by Thomas Haye in his postdoctoral thesis in 1997. A “didactic poem,” as Haye defines it, is a poem explaining a complex subject (e.g., grammar), a poem characterized among other things by the frequent use of enjambment, by typical kinds of prologues and epilogues, by the use of a didactic and structuring vocabulary, by the employment of technical terms, and by the reader being directly

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2 Martin Camargo, _Ars dictaminis, Ars dictandi_, Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental, no. 60 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991), 20–21. As Camargo noted, this distinction does not reflect the medieval usage of these terms.
addressed in the imperative or in the second person singular of the subjunctive present or perfect. Defined in this way, the “didactic poem” is distinguished from a similar text such as a Merkvers (mnemonic rhymes). A “mnemonic rhyme” is a verse or several verses containing terms or teachings (e.g., the five officia of the orator) in a very brief manner, which are meant to be memorized. It is often characterized by the correspondence of the end of a verse and the end of a sentence. So while both of these types of texts use the poetic form as a vehicle to convey knowledge, that is to say, to aid memorization, a didactic poem differs from mnemonic rhymes in complexity not only in regard to its more complex subject matter but also to the characteristics typical for its genre.3

The ars dictaminis is the medieval art of writing prose, especially of letter writing. Although there was certainly an art of letter writing in earlier times, the teachings of the ars dictaminis as an independent discipline were first systematized in early twelfth-century northern Italy. Like other artes, for instance the ars praedicandi that came into being in the High Middle Ages, the ars dictaminis evolved from ancient rhetoric. It was a highly specialized and genuinely medieval adaptation of rhetoric orientated towards the practical needs of the society developing in the High Middle Ages.4

The aforementioned Latin poem is called Summa Iovis de arte dictandi (Iupiter’s outline of the ars dictaminis) in most manuscripts. It is frequently attributed to an author with the pseudonym Iupiter who is sometimes given the epithets Monoculus or Francigena in accompanying commentaries.5 It consists of 107 leoninian hexameters, that is, hexameters where the masculine caesura in the third foot, the pentymereres, rhymes with the end of the verse. The Summa Iovis comes down to us in 38 manuscripts; five of them offer only a fragmentary text. Most of the codices are from the fifteenth century, six manuscripts and two fragments are from the fourteenth or the early fifteenth century. Today most of the manuscripts are located in southern Germany and Austria, though some of them are found in libraries in France.

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4 For a comprehensive discussion of the ars dictaminis see Camargo, Ars dictaminis.