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Translating Popular Wisdom into Learned Language and Practice: Egbert of Liège's *Fecunda ratis* and the Changing World of the Eleventh Century

Hiram Kümper
Historical Institute, University of Mannheim
hiram.kuemper@uni-mannheim.de

This paper explores the *Fecunda ratis*, Egbert of Liège's early eleventh-century didactic poem in Latin, as an example of the transformation of vernacular, orally transmitted wisdom into structured, literary pedagogy. Drawing on recent theoretical and philological research, it develops a typology of proverbial adaptation in Egbert's work and analyzes the rhetorical and poetic strategies employed to integrate popular sayings into the moral and educational discourse of the cathedral school. In doing so, the study situates the *Fecunda ratis* within the broader context of the emerging homiletic and didactic culture of the eleventh century, highlighting its role in shaping the clerical ethos and institutional memory through the literary canonization of the popular voice.

Keywords: classical learning, Latin, vernacular, cathedral schools, Middle Ages

Egbert of Liège's *Fecunda ratis* stands as one of the most ambitious and rhetorically refined didactic poems of the eleventh century, remarkable both for its formal complexity and for its systematic integration of proverbial material into a moral-pedagogical framework.[1] This study examines the *Fecunda ratis* as a sophisticated site of cultural translation, in which popular proverbial wisdom, often rooted in vernacular, situational discourse, is rearticulated in the formal register of Latin didactic poetry. Drawing on recent theoretical approaches and the typological and rhetorical frameworks developed by Barry Taylor and Dave Bland, the following analysis seeks to reconstruct the mechanisms by which Egbert transforms orally transmitted *sententiae* into structured tools of moral instruction within the pedagogical and homiletic milieu of the early eleventh century. Particular attention will be paid to the stylistic, thematic, and performative dimensions of this transformation, as well as to the broader educational and ecclesiastical context in which the *Fecunda ratis* emerged and possibly circulated.

1 Manutius, *Geschichte*, 535–39.

The Fecunda ratis

Egbert of Liège's *Fecunda ratis* (literally, "the fertile ship") is an extensive collection of sayings in hexameters consisting of two books, which Egbert dedicated to his childhood friend Adalbold.[2] It survived in only one eleventh-century manuscript kept in the Cologne Cathedral Library, which contains the poem, a Christmas hymn, and a short prayer.[3] The manuscript's tradition is characterized by eleven different hands following the main scribe with alterations and glosses, which indicates a lively reception and editorial work within the school. The poem was revised, glossed, and provided with alternative readings multiple times, especially by the hands E and L, whose emendations can be traced partly back to their own conjectures.[4]

The title of the work, *Fecunda ratis*, refers to the metaphorical idea of a school ship that is full to the point of overflowing, taking on proverbs, fables, parables, sayings, and stories from a wide variety of sources. However, Egbert himself also calls his work *liber de aenigmatibus rusticanis*,[5] which refers to the quality and origin rather than the final purpose of the metaphorical cargo: a collection of popular, often enigmatic proverbs with a didactic purpose that is brought to the new shore of learned education. The poem was thus created from the desire both to add to the traditional educational materials, such as the *Disticha Catonis* and the fables of Avian, and to provide a new teaching tool for the trivium level that taught skills that could be turned into practice in everyday life.[6]

The work is divided into two books: the first one has the title *prora* (bow) and the second one the title *puppis* (stern). The first book consists of two large parts, the original collection of one-line verses and two-line verses and the extension in longer sections. It thus forms the core of the didactic tradition of sayings. The first part of the book consists of 1,008 verses that can be read as a self-contained collection with a prologue (1.1–4) and an epilogue (1.1005–1008), which suggests that there may well have been an earlier, shorter version that has not survived. The second part consists of longer poems and thematic

2 All quotes from the *Fecunda ratis* follow the edition by Voigt, *Fecunda ratis*, were double checked with the Cologne manuscript, and are referenced by book and verse. All English translations are by the author of this article.

3 Cologne, Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek, Cod. 196. On this manuscript, see Plotzek et al., *Glaube und Wissen*, 321–23, and Senner, *Geschichte der Kölner Dombibliothek*, 204.

4 See Voigt, *Fecunda ratis*, v–ix.

5 Ibid., xxi.

6 On this development, see Baldzuhn, *Schulbücher,* vol. 1, 22–44.

elaborations, such as fables, allegories, satires, examples, and autobiographical reflections.

The second book, *Puppis*, contains a dense sequence of Christian ethical reflections, catechism-like pieces, verses about virtues and vices, quotations from Augustine, Gregory the Great, Ambrose, Jerome, and Bede, and Bible versifications and prayers. This book prepares students for the theological specialization, integrating the content of the spiritual curriculum in poetic form.

The stylistic orientation of the work is strongly influenced by the rhetoric of the trivium. There are numerous examples of *ordo praeposterus*, *prolepsis*, *epistulae*, and *exempla*, but also *satirae*, *allegoriae*, and *fabulae*, with echoes from classical authors such as Horace, Juvenal, Persius, Ovid, and Cicero as well as patristic authors and the Bible.[7] Egbert uses ancient and patristic sentences, as well as popular proverbs, local idioms, and stylized scenes from everyday life.

Particularly noteworthy is the juxtaposition and interweaving of erudite high language and simple, popular diction. The style varies between an elegiac tone, mocking satire, pathetic invocation, proverbial brevity, and epic narrative. However, a pedagogical impetus runs through the entire work. It is intended to instruct, entertain, educate morally, and promote intellectually at the same time and thus forms an ideal reading book for adolescent students. Egbert emphasizes several times that his collection should serve to help students recognize and interpret allegorical, moral, and exegetical meanings. Thus, it should be understood as preparation for the study of the Bible.

Egbert of Liège

Not much is known about the author of the *Fecunda ratis*, Egbert of Liège.[8] Sigebert of Gembloux, who lived roughly a generation after Egbert, made the following note: “Egbert, a cleric from Liège, wrote a book in metrical style about rustic riddles, initially brief. However, with an expanded reasoning, he wrote another book on the same subject, which was somewhat larger.”[9] This is essentially all we know from contemporary sources. However, Egbert provides some hints himself. His letter of dedication to Adalbold of Utrecht, his childhood friend and the recipient of the *Fecunda ratis*, reveals relevant biographical information and

7 For more details, see Weijers, *Evolution of the trivium*.

8 See Babcock, *Egbert of Liège and St Martin*.

9 Witte, *Catalogus Sigeberti Gemblacensis*, 93: *Egebertus clericus Leodiensis scripsit metrico stilo de enigmatibus rusticanis librum primo brevem, sed ampliato rationis tenore scripsit de eadem re librum alterum maiusculum.*

an approximate dating and localization of the work. Adalbold, born around 975, served as archdeacon at the cathedral of Liège and became Bishop of Utrecht in 1010. He died on November 27, 1026. The time span of his episcopal office then provides the widest possible range for dating the composition or at least for the revision of the collection. Some scholars, including Voigt, have proposed that the *Fecunda ratis* was presumably commissioned by or at least under the influence of Bishop Durand (ruled 1021–1025), while Provost Johannes and the later Bishop Wazo served as dean of the Liège church.[10] This seems well plausible although no exact evidence can be brought up. However, at this time, the cathedral school of Liège emerged as a pioneering center of a new manner of education, setting a precedent for cathedral schools throughout the Latin West.[11] Its foundational innovation lay in institutionalizing a curriculum that combined liberal learning with the cultivation of elegant manners *(honestas)* and moral discipline *(mores).* This dual focus marked a clear departure from the Carolingian emphasis on doctrinal and scriptural training alone, and it is clearly adopted by Egbert in his *Fecunda ratis*.

Under Bishop Eraclius (959–971), a student of Brun of Cologne, the school was revitalized with a model that fused moral refinement with classical studies.[12] His successor, Notker (972–1008), further established Liège as a leading intellectual and ethical center, producing clerics whose *virtue* and *manners* were seen as qualifications for high office.[13] The pedagogical ethos prioritized visible comportment (how one walked, spoke, and gestured) as outward expressions of internal moral discipline. Wazo of Liège, who was active in 1005–1030, embodied this educational ideal by favoring students who excelled in manners over those merely proficient in letters. Under his leadership, Liège's reputation flourished as a school of *letters, manners, and religion*. Later laments by figures like Anselm and Goswin underscore the sad end to this golden age, further attesting to its formative influence. The novelty of schools like Liège lay in integrating ethical and social formation *(cultus virtutum)* into formal education, shaping clerical elites not just intellectually but as embodiments of courtly, ecclesiastical, and civic ideals. The cathedral school thereby became both a pedagogical and a cultural

10 On the development of the Liège cathedral school, see Renardy, *Les écoles liégeoises*. As a whole, Liège was a boomtown in these decades; see Hirschmann, *Konjunkturprogramme*.

11 Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels*, 54–56. The Liège cathedral school turned out to be especially influential in the German Empire, see Kupper, *Liege et l'église imperial.*

12 Lutz, *Schoolmasters of the Tenth Century*, 21.

13 The two volumes of Kurth provide a rich account: *Notger de Liege et la civilisation au Xe siècle*. For more on Notker, Liège, and his times, see the essays in Delville et al., *Notger et Liège*.

institution for training future church and court leaders in the virtues of public conduct and personal decorum.

Egbert's statement of age within the work (if we hold the poem *De debilitate ēvī nostrī* to give such an autobiographical indication)[14] suggests that he was born around 972. He probably received his education together with Adalbold at the famous Liège Cathedral School under Notker, which under his leadership became one of the most important educational centers in the empire. References in the text suggest that Egbert initially enrolled as a student in the lower classes of the cathedral school and then devoted himself to the study of the *septem artes liberales*, with a clear focus on the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, dialectic). Although the work also shows knowledge of the quadrivium (e.g. arithmetic, music), his profile is clearly that of a philologically and pedagogically oriented schoolmaster, not a mathematically and theologically educated cleric.

After having completed his education, Egbert seems to have remained in Liège as a teacher, although he never held the position of head of the cathedral school as *magister scholarum*. Rather, he apparently worked as a *submagister scholae* or *magister particularis*, as was typical for larger schools with a differentiated teaching staff.[15] In his dedication, Egbert describes himself as a *presbyter* and *servorum Dei humillimus*, that is, as a simple priest in the service of the church.

Egbert's life is characterized by a continuous commitment to education. Although he was denied the social advancement experienced by other Liège scholars such as Adalbold or Wazo (neither was he appointed bishop nor was he given a position in the court chapel), he left behind a didactic work, *Fecunda ratis*, which surpasses all known pieces of school poetry of his time in terms of scope, diversity and pedagogical reflection. In his old age (in the *Fecunda ratis*, he repeatedly refers to himself as an old man, for instance in 1.1497, 1.1508, and 1.1517), he apparently wrote (or rewrote) his work as a summary of a long life in the teaching profession, interspersed with complaints about the decline in willingness to learn (1.508–509, 1.739–740, 1.801–802, 1.979–980, 1.1093–1096, 1.1612–1617), the increasing use of corporal punishment (1.1253–1280), and the growing material insecurity of the teaching profession (1.1075–1078, 1.1170–1173, 1.1497–1506, 1.1675–1683).

14 Voigt, *Fecunda ratis*, 193 (1.1519): *Preteriitque (et eó plus) quinquagesimus annus.*

15 Renardy. *Les écoles liégeoises*, 321–23.

Poetics of the Medieval Proverb: from Situational Origins to Collectional Transformation

In the theoretical discourse of the last few decades, the medieval proverb has increasingly been approached not as a decontextualized maxim but as an inherently situated utterance, one that encodes fragments of lived experience within compact, formulaic linguistic forms. As, for instance, Sebastian Neumeister has argued, proverbial speech resists definitional abstraction precisely because its meaning emerges not from conceptual fixity but from pragmatic pliability.[16] Proverbs function less as detachable axioms than as mnemonic and hermeneutic devices: they anchor meaning in narrativized, affectively resonant scenarios, and they acquire significance through their repeated deployment in socially recognizable situations. Within this framework, literary proverb tales are not mere illustrations of gnomic content but acts of retroactive contextualization. They construct plausible experiential settings in which the proverb's semantic logic can unfold.

A strikingly congruent line of thought undergirds Manfred Eikelmann's philological study of the German proverb in medieval transmission, particularly as exemplified by the widely attested saying, *Wenn man den Hund schlagen will, sagt man, er hat Leder gefressen* ("If you want to beat the dog, you say he ate the leather").[17] While departing from different disciplinary platforms (literary theory and historical philology respectively), both Neumeister and Eikelmann converge upon a core insight: the proverb originates as a situational speech act, only subsequently becoming subject to processes of textual abstraction, literary stylization, and collectional systematization. Eikelmann's contribution lies in his meticulous reconstruction of the stages by which proverbial expressions migrate from primary use in contextualized speech into the secondary realm of textual collections, acquiring new functions and forms in the process. Taking up an idea of the theologian Claus Westermann, Eikelmann draws a fundamental distinction between two modes of transmission: the primary tradition *(primäre Überlieferung)*, where proverbs are embedded in lived communicative situations, and the secondary tradition *(sekundäre Überlieferung)*, where they are extracted from their pragmatic contexts and compiled into collections. Eikelmann uses this theoretical scaffolding to interrogate a range of historical sources, revealing

16 Neumeister, *Geschichten vor und nach dem Sprichwort*.

17 Eikelmann, *Sprichwort im Sammlungskontext*, 95–107.

the extent to which medieval proverb collections not only preserved but also transformed the epistemic and performative status of the sayings they contain.

The proverb of the leather-eating dog appears for the first time not in vernacular German but in Latin, notably in the *Dialogus Salomonis et Marcolfi*, where it figures as part of a gnomic exchange between the idealized wise king Solomon and the grotesquely embodied trickster Marcolf.[18] In this dialogic context, the proverb is not merely cited but activated within a stylized confrontation of rhetorical registers. Salomon utters a high-minded sententia on the unreliability of enemy speech, to which Marcolf counters with the proverb: "Qui suum canem vult perdere, per rabiem imponit illi nomen" (He who wants to kill/beat his dog claims it has rabies). Here, the proverb functions subversively, dismantling the moral absolutism of its predecessor and foregrounding the instrumental logic of accusation. While the *Dialogus* does not simulate spontaneous oral discourse, its dialogical structure reinstates a facsimile of situational logic, within which the proverb's function is preserved as a performative utterance.

This early Latin transmission is paralleled in the *Schäftlarner Sprüche*, a twelfth-century florilegium from the Bavarian monastery of Schäftlarn. There, the proverb appears in a compressed, single-line form: "Suspendens catulum, vorat, inquit, opus coriorum" (As he hangs up the puppy, he devours, he says, the work of the tanners).[19] While the narrative context is absent, the line's framing within a monastic miscellany suggests a pedagogical function. It was perhaps to be glossed, recited, or imitated. Such texts underscore the role of ecclesiastical settings in the early formalization of proverbial knowledge, even before the widespread emergence of vernacular collections.

It is only in the thirteenth century that vernacular German attestations become frequent, particularly in didactic and literary contexts. Freidank's *Bescheidenheit* (c. 1230), a sprawling corpus of rhymed aphorisms and moral reflections, includes a stylized version of the proverb: "Der hunt hat leder gezzen, so man dienstes wil vergezzen" ([Claim that] the dog has eaten leather once you want to forget [his] service).[20] The formal integration into a metrical couplet, as Eikelmann observes, distances the saying from its situational moorings and

18 Benary, *Salomon et Marcolfus*, 15, v. 87b.

19 Singer, *Sprichwörter des Mittelalters,* vol. 1, 42. The closest translation to the vernacular is noted from a much younger, fifteenth century manuscript in Morawski, *Proverbes français*, 78 (no. 2146): "Qui son chien viaut tuer la rage li met sus."

20 Grimm, *Vridankes Bescheidenheit*, 183, v. 17–18.

transforms it into a *Kunstspruch*, a self-contained artefact of poetic wisdom.[21] The loss of contextual specificity is partially compensated by the stylization and compression of meaning, but it also signals a shift in the proverb's reception, from a tool of social interaction to a component of authorial didacticism. However, it also presupposes a considerable degree of cultural knowledge on the part of the reader. In fact, this version of the proverb is hardly understandable for anyone not familiar with its proverbial meaning. Literally it translates "The dog has eaten leather once you want to forget service." Thus, the question of whose service is forgotten is left absolutely open.

A more narrativized reintegration of the proverb's situational logic is found in Sibote's *Märe von der Frauenzucht* (mid-thirteenth century), where a knight plans to kill his horse as a warning to his unruly wife.[22] The narrator interjects the proverb, thus casting the knight's behavior in the moral light of opportunistic cruelty. Here, the proverb serves as a moral frame: it retroactively interprets the action and assigns it to a recognizable behavioral pattern. The tale does not merely *illustrate* the proverb but actualizes its logic in narrative form, a phenomenon Neumeister identifies as central to the mnemonic power of proverb tales.[23]

During the late medieval period, there is a proliferation of systematic proverb collections, many of which are tied to pedagogical or homiletic contexts. The *Proverbia Fridanci*, a set of Latin sermon outlines using vernacular proverbs as thematic prothemata, is particularly illuminating. In these texts, the dog-and-leather proverb is not only cited but subjected to allegorical exegesis: the dog becomes a figure for the preacher and the accusation of eating leather an emblem of unjust persecution. In one version, the commentary reads: "Canis spiritualiter est praedicator […] qui ex odio alterum vult persequi, causam fingit" (The preacher is spiritually a dog… who, out of hatred, wishes to persecute someone and fabricates a reason).[24] The allegoresis reconfigures the proverb for moral instruction, but in doing so, it also preserves the narrative and situational logic by re-embedding the saying within a moralized exemplum. The *Proverbia Fridanci* thus constitute a hybrid form: at once agents of collectional abstraction and mediators of pragmatic intelligibility.

21 Eikelmann, *Sprichwort im Sammlungskontext*, 111. On the theological term *Kunstspruch* and its implication, see Preuß, *Weisheitsliteratur*, 36–37.

22 Niewöhner, *Neues Gesamtabenteuer,* vol. 1, 17.

23 Neumeister, *Geschichten vor und nach dem Sprichwort*, 210.

24 Cited from a Berlin manuscript by Eikelmann, *Sprichwort im Sammlungskontext*, 103. On the *Proverbia Fridanci* see Klapper, *Sprichwörter*.

By the fifteenth century, the proverb surfaces in a range of vernacular compilations: the *Houghton Codex*, Bollstatter's *Spruchsammlung*, and the widely diffused *Proverbia Communia* (in Dutch, Low German, and Latin).[25] These collections display varying degrees of formalization. In some, the proverb is presented in bilingual format (for instance, "Coreum comedit canis dum pendere debet / Wenn man den hund hencken will, so hat er leder Gessen"), thereby serving the dual function of linguistic exercise and moral instruction. In others, such as the *Tractatulus proverbiorum communium* preserved in a Stuttgart manuscript, Latin hexameters are translated into rhymed German distichs, reinforcing the mnemonic architecture of the collection. These collectional forms participate in the broader humanist project of encyclopedic ordering, yet, as Eikelmann warns, they often efface the proverb's embeddedness in social praxis.[26]

Taken together, the historical trajectory reconstructed by Eikelmann illustrates how proverbs undergo a double transformation, first, from situational speech to stylized literary form and, second, from literary instantiation to collectional codification. In each phase, the proverb's semantic value is reshaped. The spontaneous, dialogical, and often performatively charged utterance becomes an object of curation and commentary. Yet as both Eikelmann and Neumeister insist, this shift does not entail semantic closure. On the contrary, the proverb retains a latent openness to context, a polysemous potential that collectional frames must either domesticate or accentuate.

Ultimately, the proverb resists total capture by either literary formalization or classificatory ambition. Its semantic vitality depends not merely on lexical content or syntactic patterning but on its capacity to conjure plausible scenarios of use, scenarios that are culturally coded, narratively inflected, and pragmatically legible. Eikelmann's historicized philology and Neumeister's theoretical poetics both converge on this point: the proverb, as a form of "discours répété", derives its power from being at once open to iteration and singular, recognizable and contingent, collected and lived.[27]

This being said, we can observe similar phenomena in Egbert's *Fecunda ratis*, and we can seek the modes in which he incorporated, transformed, and canonized popular wisdom in his Latin poem.

25 Simon, *Priamel, Short Verse Poems, and Proverbs*, 30–33.

26 Eikelmann, *Sprichwort im Sammlungskontext*, 105.

27 See Coseriu, *Structure lexicale et enseignement du vocabulaire*, 194–96.

Proverbs and Popular Wisdom in the Fecunda ratis: *A Typology of Transmission*

The search for vernacular origins in the rich proverbial and gnomic material of the *Fecunda ratis* can draw upon a variety of indications, including (1) explicit signs of being derived from the vernacular, such as the phrases *vulgus* or *vulgo dicitur*, (2) proverbs with thematic roots in rustic or popular everyday life, (3) formulaic expressions of demonstrably Germanic or Romance origin, and (4) popular sayings incorporated into scholastic or moralizing allegory.

Occasionally, Egbert prefaces a proverb with an explicit marker of its vernacular status, such as *vulgo dicitur* or analogous phrases. These cases are relatively rare but striking in their transparency. At least nine instances of such explicit attribution occur in the *Fecunda ratis* (1.31, 1.103, 1.106, 1.160, 1.179, 1.384, 1.387, 1.1162, and C 25, a variant of 1.385).

In his article *Brotlöffel, haariges Herz und wundersame Empfängnis*, Wolfgang Maaz offers a convincing demonstration of the second modus of transforming popular wisdom into learned knowledge. He shows how Egbert of Liège strategically integrated quotidian experiences into the fabric of his didactic poetry. The so-called "panificum coclear (edible spoon) – non crescit edentis in ore" (I 1368) offers a particularly vivid instance of Egbert's use of lived experience. While the *Fecunda*'s editor Voigt left this verse uncommented, Maaz, drawing on S. Singer's collection *Sprichwörter des Mittelalters*, identifies it as a proverbial reflection of a widespread eating practice.[28] The bread spoon *(coclear ex pane)* was a common substitute for wooden or metal utensils, and it was consumed along with the meal itself: "Coclear ex pane utendo consumitur: sic omnis res frequenti usu minuitur."[29] Aristophanic Greek, lexical testimonies from Julius Pollux, Hesychius, and the *Suda* corroborate the antiquity of this usage, yet no proverbial form predating Egbert has been found.[30] The second motif, that of the "pilose heart," found in a fraudulent man's corpse, leads Maaz into an intertextual investigation of anatomical lore. Egbert writes: "Verum defuncti rimantur viscera testes / Inventumque nefas mirantur et hispida corda" (But the witnesses probe the entrails of the dead, / and marvel at the discovered crime and the bristly heart).[31] Although Voigt considered this a medieval invention,

28 Singer, *Sprichwörter des Mittelalters*, vol. 1, 94–95.

29 Voigt, *Fecunda ratis*, 80.

30 Maaz, *Brotlöffel, haariges Herz und wundersame Empfängnis*, 110.

31 Voigt, *Fecunda ratis*, 173 (1.1140–1144).

Maaz traces a compelling genealogy to Valerius Maximus, who recounts the vivisection of Aristomenes: "pectus dissecuere viventi, hirsutumque cor repertum est" (they cut open the chest of the living man, and a bristly heart was found). Here too, Egbert adapts a literary topos to a moralized didactic frame. Notably, the parallels in phrasing *(callidior/calliditatem, fraudes/astutia, inventumque/invenerunt)* suggest direct reception, which Maaz substantiates further through comparison with Rodulfus Tortarius' *De memorabilibus*, whose Latin phrasing closely mirrors Egbert's. Egbert's realism extends beyond literary sources into empirical knowledge. Maaz draws on pathophysiological explanations of the *cor villosum* to interpret the "hairy heart" as a case of fibrinous pericarditis, possibly similar to conditions described by Salimbene de Adam, where autopsies revealed lesions and vesicles in the heart area. Through these case studies, Maaz not only dismantles the assumption that medieval school texts lacked engagement with lived experience but also reveals how Egbert's work interweaves learned citation and empirical reality. More important for our case, the *Fecunda ratis*, though rooted in classical and patristic tradition, emerges in Maaz's reading as a uniquely grounded and innovative contribution to medieval pedagogy. Consequently, other such references to rustic and agrarian wisdom (such as 1.73, 1.77, 1.130, 1.253, 1.258, 1.293, 1.617, 1.1162 and 1.1676) deserve similar in-depth investigation in the future.

The third modus of coping with vernacular material is indicated by proverbs found in later Middle High German or Old French collections. These proverbs suggest that Egbert tapped into a transregional corpus of popular *sententiae*. Examples can be found in 1.69, 1.78, 1.92, 1.96, 1.128, 1.398, 1.579, and 1.1164. Some were identified by Voigt in 1886, but since then, possibilities for wider recognition have increased markedly, most of all after the completion of the thirteen volumes of the *Thesaurus proverbiorum medii aevi* (1995–2002).[32] In the future, digital methods may also add to the analysis of large historical corpora and will help identify related phrases, translations, and varieties of the "discours répété."[33]

A fourth and final modus in Egbert's *Fecunda ratis* consists of proverbs or proverbial forms that Egbert expands into mini-narratives or allegories. These texts are often longer, and though they preserve a sentential core, they are recontextualized within didactic exegesis or moralizing *exempla*. Examples

32 See Mieder, *Thesaurus proverbiorum medii aevi.*

33 For an inspiring though not historical example, see Hamidi et al., *Proverbs Translation.*

include the tales of the fox and the sick lion (1.1174–1189), the sleeping student and the inattentive class (1.739–740), the gluttonous monk who prefers the kitchen to the choir (1.703–705), and the student who mocks his teacher but is later praised (1.1199–1220, 1.1221–1247). This last category attests to Egbert's didactic craft: proverbial wisdom becomes material for rhetorical elaboration, moral reflection, and institutional critique.

Working with Popular Wisdom: Transforming the Vernacular into Latin

Building on the typology developed above, we now ask about the rhetorical and stylistic details of the transformation from vernacular into Latin. To do this, Barry Taylor's influential study *Medieval Proverb Collections: The West European Tradition* (1992) offers one of the most comprehensive frameworks for analyses of medieval proverbial literature, particularly as it oscillates between the oral and the written, the vernacular and the Latinate, the popular and the learned. Rather than defining the proverb narrowly in terms of content or origin, Taylor proposes a functional and rhetorical understanding: a proverb, in the medieval context, is a brief moral statement on conduct, typically paratactically constructed and transmitted either as isolated maxims or within larger compilatory structures. He does not insist on terminological exclusivity (terms such as *proverbium*, *sententia*, *maxima*, and *paroemia* often overlap in medieval sources) but instead attends to their performative, literary, and didactic roles. The proverb, in Taylor's reading, is not merely a relic of rustic speech, but a mobile form capable of participating in various textual economies: from schoolroom instruction to theological commentary, from moral florilegia to rhetorical handbooks.

Crucially, Taylor develops a set of criteria for tracing the transformation of proverbs, especially those of vernacular origin, into Latinate literary and didactic formats. These criteria include, first, the degree of semantic literalism or elaboration in the Latin version, with attention to whether the original structure is maintained or expanded for rhetorical effect. Second, the treatment of figurative language, especially the tendency to replace concrete, image-rich vernacular expressions with abstract or allegorical formulations. Third, the presence of pleonastic formulations or explanatory expansions, often indicating a transition from elliptical oral structures to grammatically complete and interpretively secure written ones. Fourth, the degree of formal restructuring, particularly the imposition of meter, rhyme, syntactic symmetry, or antithesis, which elevate the proverb into the realm of *ars poetica*. And fifth, the level of

contextual embedding, or in other words, whether a proverb remains an isolated utterance or is integrated into thematic sequences, moral exempla, or exegetical commentary.

Taylor's model is not merely descriptive but interpretive. It illuminates the cultural work performed by medieval proverb collections, especially those which seek not to preserve the vernacular for its own sake but to reshape it as an instrument of Latinate ethical instruction. This model proves particularly fruitful when applied to Egbert's *Fecunda ratis*, which bears witness to a deliberate and sophisticated process of vernacular proverb adaptation. Egbert's collection does not include overt markers of source language or explicit claims to translational practice. Yet the idiomatic simplicity, the imagistic familiarity, and the thematic range of many of his couplets suggest that they derive, at least in part, from orally circulated vernacular wisdom. The task, then, is to analyze how Egbert appropriates, transforms, and integrates such material into a highly structured Latin didactic poem, and Taylor's criteria offer a precise heuristic for doing so.

One of Egbert's most revealing translations of a likely vernacular source occurs in 1.84: "Neglegentibus pueris uerbera debes intentare, ut corrigantur; senibus et canis, quo digni sunt, honorem impendere" (You must threaten negligent boys with the rod, so that they may be corrected; but to the elderly and grey-haired, you should accord the honor they deserve).[34] The moral economy at play is familiar: young people are to be disciplined, elders are to be honored. This combination appears in multiple vernacular traditions, including medieval German and Old French gnomic verse. Yet Egbert's Latin formulation is not a mere calque. He expands and balances the structure syntactically, pairing two contrasting imperatives in a symmetrical construction. The verb *intentare* introduces an element of juridical abstraction ("you must threaten" rather than "you must beat"), while *ut corrigantur* provides a telic clause that rationalizes the punishment in moral terms. Likewise, *quo digni sunt* implies a measure of ethical discernment in bestowing honor. The line thus avoids both brutality and sentimentality, positioning itself within a moderate, reasoned discourse of pedagogical governance. According to Taylor's schema, this constitutes a case of semantic and structural elaboration, coupled with didactic contextualization: the vernacular core is preserved but rearticulated in a moral-Latin idiom suited for clerical and scholastic reception.

34 Voigt, *Fecunda ratis*, 20 Fn. 84.

Egbert frequently employs strategies of condensation and parataxis when adapting proverbs whose force lies in suggestive brevity. The line "Quando domus uicina flagrat, proximat ad te" (1.719: "When the neighboring house is ablaze, the flames draw near to your own) captures a classic motif of neighborly peril: the danger that befalls another may soon be one's own. This idea, common across European languages, is expressed in Latin without any explicit interpretive frame. Egbert refrains from adding a moral imperative (such as *cave* or *vide*), instead relying on juxtaposition and implicature. The result is a maxim that simultaneously asserts and insinuates. Taylor observes that brevity itself can be a source of obscurity, especially when surface syntax remains simple but deeper meaning must be inferred. Egbert exploits this dynamic by maintaining a minimal lexical field: *flagrat* and *proximat* are semantically rich but syntactically undemanding verbs. The proverb's moral significance (solidarity, vigilance, shared vulnerability) is conveyed not through exposition but through structured understatement. Here, the translation strategy involves not expansion but elliptical refinement, preserving the proverb's gnomic form while transferring its imagery into an elegant Latin construction.

Other examples reveal Egbert's propensity for allegorical intensification. "Lancibus appositis in villam transilit ignis" (1.384) is a proverb dense with symbolic potential. Literally, "once the platters are set out, fire leaps into the house," the line evokes the dangers of opulence or complacency, perhaps warning against the vulnerability created by feasting or indulgence. The imagery may derive from a domestic warning in the vernacular, but Egbert's phrasing is anything but rustic. The alliteration of *Lancibus* and *appositis*, the sudden violence of *transilit*, and the quasi-dramatic culmination *in villam* combine to produce a line of striking poetic energy. Taylor notes that in many medieval collections, proverbs are made obscure not only by brevity but by figurative saturation. Egbert clearly embraces this tradition, transforming a concrete domestic image into a moralized parable. The proverb, while still recognizable in content, becomes a tableau of moral consequence, in which lexical selection and rhetorical rhythm collaborate to enhance memorability and interpretive density.

This tendency toward poetic stylization is particularly evident in proverbs involving anthropomorphic allegory. "Qui credit vulpi, nudus ad horrea currit" (1.583: He who trusts the fox runs naked to the granary) exemplifies the fusion of vernacular folklore with Latinate moralism. The fox, a longstanding symbol of cunning and deceit, serves here as the focal point of misplaced trust. The image of running naked to the granary is deliberately absurd, designed to provoke not

laughter but shame at credulity. Egbert does not tone down the grotesqueness; rather, he deploys it to reinforce the social cost of foolishness. The proverb's structure (a conditional clause and a paradoxical consequence) is retained from the vernacular, but Egbert sharpens it with an almost Horatian sense of moral ridicule. The vernacular message is neither diluted nor merely repeated, but re-presented with formal concision and moral urgency.

A similar pattern appears in "Verba nocent aliquando magis quam tela cruenta" (1.387: Words sometimes wound more grievously than bloodstained weapons), where the familiar idea that words may wound more than weapons is cast in a strikingly symmetrical structure. The antithesis between *verba* and *tela* and the hyperbolic adjective *cruenta* create a poetic tension that elevates the saying from truism to thesis. He transforms vernacular into classical language which must have been apparent at least to his learned contemporaries.[35] Moreover, Egbert's lexical choices are calculated for rhetorical weight: the abstract noun *verba* is positioned first, giving it syntactic and semantic primacy; *magis quam* sets up a scalar evaluation; and *aliquando* introduces a note of prudent qualification. The line becomes not merely a proverb, but a statement of general moral anthropology, one that recognizes the power of language as a vehicle of harm. The Latin here does not translate a specific vernacular form, but reconstitutes a widely shared sentiment within the conventions of Latin gnomic verse.

In many cases, Egbert seems to reorganize the lexical structure of the proverb to match the syntactic expectations of Latin verse while retaining its ethical charge. The pervasiveness of thematic and lexical parallelism *(pueris… senibus*, *verba… tela*, *credit vulpi… nudus currit)* reflects a commitment to memorability and stylistic harmony. Moreover, Egbert's preference for non-rhymed but rhythmically measured lines, often constructed in dactylic or elegiac cadence, indicates a desire to stabilize the proverb as a *unit of instruction*, not merely as a record of speech. Taylor's observation that the imposition of meter and rhetorical structure serves to "canonize" the proverb within literary culture finds clear confirmation here.

Equally telling is the organization of the *Fecunda ratis* itself. Proverbs are arranged in thematic constellations: on speech, on punishment, on old age, on friendship, on folly. This allows Egbert to group vernacular wisdom within a moral architecture, reinforcing patterns of association and supporting gradual ethical acculturation. Such sequencing reveals that the translated proverb is not

35 I thank Péter Bara for pointing me at this.

intended to stand alone, but to function within a cumulative pedagogy. Taylor's distinction between reference collections and didactic anthologies is particularly apt in this regard: Egbert writes for edification, not for citation.

In sum, Egbert's translation of vernacular proverbs is marked by a combination of semantic fidelity and stylistic sophistication. His practice aligns closely with Taylor's descriptive categories: he elaborates and stylizes, metaphorizes and moralizes, compresses and expands. The result is a corpus in which the oral wisdom of the laity is absorbed into the moral discourse of Latin letters. The vernacular is not preserved in its original idiom, but transformed into a medium fit for moral instruction, poetic admiration, and clerical transmission. Thus, Egbert's *Fecunda ratis* exemplifies the cultural work of translation in the high Middle Ages. It is not simply the mechanical reproduction of popular speech, but its disciplined reinvention within a literary and ethical order.

Between Auctoritas *and* Vox Populi: *The Didactic Potential of the* Fecunda ratis

After examining the popular sources that Egbert drew on and the techniques of its translation and remodeling, now the function of the proverbs in his collection should be considered, building upon Dave L. Bland's seminal study of the rhetorical, poetic, and didactic value of proverbial expressions in the Middle Ages.[36] His analysis of the *ars poetriae* and *ars praedicandi* sheds light on the functional polyvalence of proverbs in medieval literary culture and provides a critical framework for an understanding of their broader epistemological and sociocultural implications. This framework proves particularly fruitful when applied to the *Fecunda ratis*.

Bland's argues that proverbs, far from serving as mere ornamental devices, were deeply embedded in the inventive processes of medieval discourse. Writers such as Matthew of Vendôme and Geoffrey of Vinsauf are shown to integrate *sententiae* into the very structure of poetic composition, recommending them as legitimate and effective means of beginning a text. *Sententiae* functioned not only as figures of speech in the classical rhetorical tradition but, rather as sources of invention and amplification. From this point of view, the proverb becomes a dynamic point of departure for the expansion of meaning, adaptable to

36 Bland, *Use of Proverbs in Two Medieval Genres of Discourse*.

a variety of contexts and capable of sustaining complex moral and philosophical reflections.

The same holds true for the *ars praedicandi*, in which proverbs fulfilled a similarly multifaceted role. Preaching manuals by authors such as Robert of Basevorn and Henry of Hesse reveal that proverbial expressions were integral to all structural components of the sermon, from the antetheme and *exordium* to the subdivisions and *conclusio*. Proverbs served as mnemonic aids, attention-catching devices, markers of division, and moral signposts. They carried the weight of *auctoritas*, whether sacred or secular, and often functioned as points of access between learned culture and the lived experience of the laity. Bland's extensive reference to Alan of Lille's *Ars praedicandi*, with its pronounced reliance on scriptural and classical proverbs, further underscores the strategic value of the proverb as a bridge between the rhetorical elite and the oral culture of the common people.

Egbert's *Fecunda ratis* can be productively analyzed within this discursive horizon. While Bland does not explicitly mention Egbert, the patterns he describes resonate deeply with Egbert's method of proverb adaptation and didactic framing. In *Fecunda ratis*, proverbs function not only as moral axioms but also as generators of narrative exempla and ethical instruction. Egbert often begins or concludes a section with a proverb, which is then paraphrased, elaborated, and contextualized in a manner strikingly similar to the practice outlined in both poetic and preaching manuals. Thus, the proverbs in *Fecunda ratis* should be understood not as quotations but as rhetorical kernels from which complex interpretative and ethical structures emerge.

One of the most significant parallels lies in the role of proverbs as mediators between written and oral traditions. Bland emphasizes that proverbs are deeply rooted in the *vox populi*, the wisdom of the people, and that their presence in elevated discourses signals a recognition of this communal epistemology. Egbert's frequent use of vernacular or vernacularly-inflected sayings, subsequently rendered into Latin, reflects this same dynamic. Proverbs such as "Neglegentibus pueris non discere, senibus autem non posse convenit" (Not to learn befits the careless young; not to be able to learn befits the old) encapsulate commonly held views on education and age, which Egbert then integrates into a broader ethical and theological discourse. These formulations serve to anchor his moral instruction in the everyday experiences of his audience, thus fulfilling the rhetorical ideal of *docere, movere et delectare*.

Furthermore, Bland's insight into the casuistic use of proverbs in ethical reasoning finds a clear echo in Egbert's textual strategies. Many sections of *Fecunda ratis* can be read as micro-case studies in applied morality, in which proverbs serve as both premises and conclusions. This resonates with Bland's discussion of the proverb's role in casuistry, where it provides guidance in exceptional or marginal cases. Egbert's moral pedagogy is similarly attentive to the complexities of human behavior and frequently uses proverbs to illuminate ethical dilemmas, particularly those involving interpersonal relationships, familial obligations, or the responsibilities of youth.

In addition, the proverbs in *Fecunda ratis* mirror the formal characteristics identified by Bland as conducive to rhetorical and didactic efficacy. Their brevity, rhythmic balance, and semantic openness make them ideal vehicles for transmission and commentary. Egbert's treatment of proverbial material often involves layering multiple interpretive voices (scriptural, patristic, classical) around a central gnomic core. This strategy enhances the text's rhetorical force and underscores its participation in the broader tradition of sapiential literature, a tradition that, as Bland notes, spans both sacred and secular domains.

Finally, Bland's reflections on the mnemonic and performative dimensions of proverbs in oral-literate cultures offer a compelling lens through which to view *Fecunda ratis*. Egbert's text, though written in Latin verse, is suffused with oral resonances, and the proverbial expressions embedded in it would have facilitated both comprehension and memorization. This aligns with the educational and moral objectives of the text, which aimed to instill virtuous conduct in a young clerical readership. By encoding moral lessons in proverbial form, Egbert ensured their retention and internalization, thus fulfilling the pedagogical aims also articulated in the *ars dictaminis* and *ars praedicandi*.

The Fecunda ratis *and the Educational Renewal of the Eleventh Century*

After the first millennium, the Latin literary culture of Western Europe experienced a renewal in both pedagogical methodology and textual production, primarily centered in cathedral and monastic schools. The cathedral schools of Liège, Reims, Chartres, and Bamberg, as well as monastic institutions like Saint Emmeram in Regensburg, emerged as intellectual hubs fostering a learned Latin style that was both anchored in Carolingian precedent and open to rhetorical

innovation.[37] The educational literature produced in this period reflects a vibrant interplay between didactic intention, rhetorical craft, and spiritual formation. Two figures stand out for their contributions to this evolving landscape: Otloh of St Emmeram (c. 1010–c. 1070) and Arnulf of Saint-Pierre (fl. c. 1050), whose works exemplify the literary ethos of the cathedral school environment and offer valuable parallels for the textual strategies of Egbert's *Fecunda ratis*.

Otloh, a monk of the Benedictine abbey of Saint Emmeram in Regensburg, composed a number of texts that straddle the boundaries between autobiography, hagiography, and moral instruction. His *Liber de tentationibus suis*, written between 1050 and 1060, presents a confessional narrative of his spiritual struggles and also a model of Latinity accessible to educated clerics and advanced pupils. In a closely related genre, his *Dialogus de tribus quaestionibus*, which is framed as a conversation with the bishop of Regensburg, illustrates the discursive style cultivated in advanced schooling contexts, one which combines dialectical method with stylistic elegance. While Otloh was primarily a monastic writer, his works circulated in cathedral school milieus, a fact that betrays a sensitivity to the pedagogical needs of intermediate and advanced Latin readers. Notably, his *Liber visionum* compiled edifying exempla in an accessible narrative form, anticipating later developments in school collections of moral tales.

Arnulf of Saint-Pierre, a lesser-known but significant figure active in the ecclesiastical province of Reims, collected a corpus of prose letters and grammatical exercises which survive partially but are suggestive of the type of Latin composition training offered in cathedral schools. His epistolary style, while less ornate than that of contemporaries such as Gerbert of Aurillac (the later Pope Sylvester II), exhibits a clarity and conciseness aimed at instructing pupils in the art of correct and effective Latin expression. Fragments attributed to Arnulf include explications of Priscian and glosses on classical authors, underscoring the continuity of the Carolingian school tradition while adapting it to local didactic needs. His pedagogical output complements the broader effort observable in the early eleventh century to systematize Latin instruction through manageable, thematically coherent units. often using proverbs, fables, and moralizing narratives.

Both Otloh and Arnulf reflect the centrality of Latin prose composition and moral instruction in the curriculum of the early eleventh-century cathedral school. Their works, alongside those of figures such as Gerbert, Fulbert of

37 See Jaeger, *Envy of Angels*, 53–75, and Steckel, *Kulturen des Lehrens*, 689–885.

Chartres, and Notker Labeo, created a literary and didactic environment in which compilatory works like Egbert of Liège's *Fecunda ratis* could flourish. Egbert's text, though unique in its ambitious scope and its explicit program of proverb exegesis, partakes of the same impulse to educate through a mixture of moral authority, stylistic variety, and structural coherence. The intellectual and literary culture of early eleventh-century cathedral schools thus laid the groundwork for a genre of Latin educational writing that was at once creative, mnemonic, and deeply moral in orientation.

From School to Practice: The Fecunda ratis *in the Context of an Early Homiletic Movement*

Beyond the notable development of learned education in the cathedral school, Egbert's times also marked a crucial though still largely preparatory phase in the development of Western European preaching culture.[38] This period, long overshadowed by the more prolific twelfth-century explosion of vernacular sermon collections and the rise of scholastic homiletics, deserves new attention as a time of quiet restructuring. From monastic reform centers in Burgundy and Lorraine to cathedral schools in Liège and York, a broad intellectual and pastoral current emerged that redefined the role of preaching in the Christian community. While the period still lacks systematic vernacular homiletic corpora, it offers rich evidence of rhetorical, doctrinal, and moral experimentation that laid the groundwork for such later developments.

In the Latin West, the dominant institutional impulses for reform and pastoral revitalization came from monastic centers such as Cluny, Saint-Vanne at Verdun, and Fleury. These communities, especially under abbots like Odilo of Cluny (d. 1049) and Richard of Saint-Vanne (d. 1046), stressed the internal spiritual discipline of monks and a reinvigoration of liturgical life, but they also supported a more didactically sensitive preaching practice. Although Cluny was primarily liturgical in its orientation, the sheer expansion of its monastic network (the *ordo Cluniacensis*) created new contexts for spiritual instruction, particularly for lay patrons, dependents, and oblates. Cluniac liturgical commentaries and the exemplary homiletic style found in the *Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel* or later in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux (whose roots lie partly in this pre-1100 milieu)

38 See McLaughlin, *The Word Eclipsed?*

reflect a homiletic culture that, though still Latin, was increasingly attuned to the moral and spiritual needs of a broader audience.

Parallel developments can be traced in northern France and Flanders. The Benedictine houses of Saint-Bertin (Saint-Omer), Marchiennes, and Elnone began to show signs of liturgical and moral reform, supported by counts like Baldwin IV of Flanders (d. 1035). Although these reforms were primarily disciplinary, the increasing attention to clerical education and the use of simplified Latin texts for the instruction of *conversi* or lay brothers indicates a growing functional awareness of preaching as pedagogy. Similarly, the region's close contact with Anglo-Saxon England facilitated the transmission of texts and models of popular preaching, particularly through shared hagiographic traditions and exempla.

Indeed, in Anglo-Saxon England, the eleventh century witnessed a remarkable resurgence of vernacular preaching centered on figures such as Ælfric of Eynsham (d. after 1010). Ælfric's Homilies, written in Old English and based on patristic sources, were explicitly designed to provide priests with the materials to instruct the laity clearly and doctrinally soundly. His prefaces frequently express concern for the poor Latin competence of local clergy and the pastoral needs of their unlettered congregations. While Ælfric's work is geographically removed from Egbert's milieu, it nonetheless exemplifies the same reformist impulse: the desire to make Christian teaching morally effective and theologically correct across different social strata. Furthermore, Egbert's re-Latinization of popular moral ideas can be seen as a mirror image of Ælfric's vernacularisation of patristic doctrine.

In Lorraine and the Meuse region, the so-called *Saint-Vanne Reform*, while less centralized than Cluny, offered an even more directly didactic model. This network, which was associated with monasteries like Saint-Hidulf at Moyenmoutier and Saint-Evre at Toul, combined monastic observance with active pastoral outreach. Under Richard of Saint-Vanne, the region became known for promoting the intellectual and disciplinary renewal of both monks and secular clergy. Here, the integration of cathedral schools into the reform effort was more direct, and it is within this context that Egbert of Liège emerges as a key transitional figure. His alignment of rhetorical formation, moral didacticism, and pastoral purpose places Egbert in close proximity to the emerging preaching culture of the reform era. He reflects a world in which Latin homiletics were increasingly concerned with accessibility and affective impact, even if still formally composed. In this sense, *Fecunda ratis* may be seen as a pre-homiletic anthology, forming part of

a larger pedagogical infrastructure for the training of future preachers in the cathedral and collegiate settings of the Western Empire.

Overall, the eleventh century saw preaching shift from a ritualized and largely elite practice to one increasingly invested in the formation of preachers, the codification of themes, and the pastoral effectiveness of rhetoric. While full-blown sermon cycles or vernacular collections would not appear until later in the twelfth century, the groundwork was already being laid in monastic, canonical, and scholastic environments. Figures like Egbert of Liège, Odilo of Cluny, Richard of Saint-Vanne, and Ælfric of Eynsham embody different strands of this emerging homiletic culture, one that was fundamentally moral, pedagogical, and reform-driven. Their works, though diverse in form and audience, share a common vision: that preaching, whether formal, poetic, liturgical, or proverbial, should serve the deeper transformation of Christian society. It is precisely in this formative ambiguity, between school and pulpit, between proverb and sermon, that the true contours of the early eleventh-century preaching movement in the West come into view.

From Segment to Structure: 'Coherence' without 'Cohesion' in Egbert of Liège

While Egbert's *Fecunda ratis* has long been appreciated as a compendious repository of moral instruction, its textual organization merits closer attention, not merely for its didactic architecture, but also for its subtle, rhetorically governed coherence. In contrast to cohesion, which is typically marked by lexical, morphological, or syntactic links between clauses, coherence refers to the underlying conceptual and pragmatic unity that renders a text intelligible and meaningful to its reader. As Helen Chau Hu stresses, coherence is "rhetorical and pragmatic," while cohesion is "grammatical and semantic."[39] In the case of Egbert, who works with sources ranging from scriptural *sententiae* to oral vernacular proverbs, the challenge lies in ensuring that the textual units he composes retain thematic unity while exhibiting semantic range and formal independence.

A first observation is that Egbert eschews narrative or syntactic continuity across long stretches of his poem, yet his use of structural parallelism, thematic clustering, and serial progression creates a discursive fabric that can be described,

39 Hu, *Cohesion and Coherence*, 34.

following de Beaugrande and Dressler,[40] as globally coherent. The coherence of Egbert's proverbial corpus is not primarily a matter of grammatical devices but of conceptual chaining: individual couplets or distiches are rarely linked by anaphora or connectives, yet they participate in an implied topical progression, for instance by moving from one age group (children) to another (elders) or from social vices (lying, greed) to their corrective virtues (truth, moderation).

One need merely consider, for example, the aforementioned proverb "Neglegentibus pueris uerbera debes intentare, ut corrigantur; senibus et canis, quo digni sunt, honorem impendere (You must threaten negligent boys with the rod, so that they may be corrected; but to the elderly and grey-haired, you should accord the honor they deserve).[41] This couplet functions both as a standalone ethical maxim and as the culmination of a thematic unit on age-appropriate moral treatment. While it lacks syntactic ties to its neighboring lines, it is conceptually coherent with them, continuing a pattern of juxtaposition that Egbert exploits frequently: youth and age, discipline and respect, ignorance and dignity. This rhetorical device corresponds to what van Dijk calls linear or segmental coherence, the relation between successive propositions that develop through difference, refinement, or contrast.[42]

Another strategy that reinforces coherence in Egbert's work is the use of repetition and lexical thematization, both of which contribute to what Hadla calls "paragraph unity."[43] Though the *Fecunda ratis* is not organized in paragraphs, one can detect clusters of lines that cohere through partial repetition of key terms or motifs. A sequence may, for instance, use the verb *fallere* (to deceive) in several successive lines, either through lexical recurrence or through synonyms *(mentiri*, *circumvenire*, *dolo uti)*, generating what Papegaaij and Schubert term "thematic progression by lexical variation."[44] This constitutes a higher-order kind of rhetorical coherence, in which the transmission of moral knowledge is facilitated by the reiteration of core concepts under different verbal guises.

Egbert also makes frequent use of binary structures that resonate with what text linguists identify as one of the primary vehicles of coherence: the organization of textual information into *theme* and *rheme*. While Egbert rarely employs grammatical devices such as pronominal anaphora or explicit

40 Beaugrande and Dressler, *Introduction*.

41 Voigt, *Fecunda ratis*, 20 Fn. 84.

42 Van Dijk, *Text and Context*, 93–95.

43 Hadla, *Coherence in Translation*, 178.

44 Papegaaij and Schubert, *Text Coherence*, 202.

connectives, he constructs lines in which the *theme* (the known or morally fixed point) is set against the *rheme* (the action or consequence to be advised or avoided). For instance, in "Quando domus uicina flagrat, proximat ad te," the thematic anchor lies in the familiar setting *(domus uicina)*, while the rheme *(proximat ad te)* introduces an inferred threat. The rhetorical function of the proverb depends upon the reader's ability to grasp this *given–new* structure, even without formal markers of such organization. This reflects what Brown and Yule call "top-down coherence," whereby interpretation arises not from textual cues alone, but from the readers' background knowledge and expectations of logical or experiential continuity.[45]

Egbert's coherence strategy is therefore not discursive in the sense of classical narration, but rather structural-rhetorical. He builds a "text" not out of narrative flow or grammatical cohesion, but out of moral adjacency, logical analogy, and thematic resonance. This aligns with what Hadla describes as a translation-relevant model of coherence, where the task is not to reproduce cohesion across texts but to retain conceptual and rhetorical connectivity, even when formal links are absent or restructured.[46]

A further dimension of coherence in the *Fecunda ratis* concerns its didactic sequencing. Egbert frequently arranges proverbs according to conceptual logic: a warning is followed by its remedy, a vice by its punishment, an error by its correction. This results in what Papegaaij and Schubert term "thematic patterns as a summary mechanism," a cumulative coherence whereby the whole is more than the sum of its parts.[47] For example, after the warning cited above about the neighboring house in flames, Egbert proceeds to related metaphors of contagion, including the aforementioned "Lancibus appositis in villam transilit ignis" (1.384: Once the platters are laid out, the fire leaps into the house), an image that maintains thematic proximity to the previous line through the motif of fire, while shifting the scene from neighborhood to domestic festivity. The referential continuity is thus lexically oblique but semantically tight, creating a coherence not by cohesion but by logical and metaphorical adjacency.

Notably, Egbert's text is not a mere collection of isolated *sententiae*, nor does it read like a *florilegium* in which authorities are listed alphabetically or by source. Rather, it is constructed according to moral topology, a textual geography in which clusters of wisdom are arranged in proximity to reinforce one another's

45 Brown and Yule, *Discourse Analysis*, 66.

46 Hadla, *Coherence in Translation*, 181.

47 Papegaaij and Schubert, *Text Coherence*, 127.

didactic effect. The result is a rhetorical coherence that arises less from textual signals and more from the reader's recognition of moral progression, structural symmetry, and thematic echo. This coherence, while "covert" in Beaugrande and Dressler's terms, is nonetheless forceful, precisely because it relies on cognitive continuity rather than on mechanical linking.[48]

In sum, Egbert's *Fecunda ratis* demonstrates textual coherence, despite or rather because of the sparseness of overt cohesive devices. His strategies are aligned with the classical rhetorical principles of *dispositio* and *decorum*, and anticipate what modern text linguistics describes as pragmatic, logical, and thematic coherence. Egbert does not require syntactic bonds to hold his text together. He relies instead on the reader's capacity to perceive moral structure, ethical consequence, and rhetorical patterning. In this sense, the *Fecunda ratis*' coherence is not merely a function of textual arrangement, but an artefact of interpretive design.

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48 Beaugrande and Dressler, *Introduction*, 31.

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