

***In primis et ultimis locis... in mediis quoque* (Pontano's *Actius* 49):  
the limits of alliteration**

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**Resumen:** En el presente artículo se pretende delimitar la aliteración señalando la posición que el sonido reiterado puede ocupar en la palabra, pues se trata de un tema que actualmente no se ha resuelto con satisfacción a juzgar por la falta de unanimidad en los diccionarios y manuales de retórica consultados. Para ello se ha hecho necesario recurrir al *Actius* de Pontano, texto en el que aparece por primera vez designada y definida la figura; en concreto, a la expresión *in primis et ultimis locis... in mediis quoque* (*Actius*, 49), en tanto que ha dado lugar a una interpretación genérica del fenómeno, haciéndolo extensible a cualquier posición en la palabra (inicial, final o interior, respectivamente). Este trabajo pretende refutar esta interpretación genérica del fragmento y defender con sólidos argumentos una lectura más restrictiva que acota la aliteración al inicio de palabra.

**Abstract:** This article aims to define alliteration by noting the position that repeated sounds may occupy in words, as it is a subject that has currently not been resolved satisfactorily, judging from the lack of unanimity in the dictionaries and manuals of rhetoric consulted. To do so, it has been necessary to make use of the *Actius* of Pontano, as it is a text in which the figure of alliteration is designated and defined for the first time; and, specifically, the expression *in primis et ultimis locis... in mediis quoque* (*Actius*, 49), which has given rise to a generic interpretation of the phenomenon, extending it to any position in the word (initial, final or internal, respectively). This work aims to refute this generic interpretation of the fragment and to provide solid arguments supporting a more restrictive reading which limits alliteration to the start of the word.

**Palabras clave:** Aliteración, *primis*, *ultimis locis*, *mediis*, Pontano, *Actius*

**Keywords:** Alliteration, *primis*, *ultimis locis*, *mediis*, Pontano, *Actius*

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## 1. Introduction\*\*

Alliteration, in particular, Latin alliteration, has been the subject of numerous studies, given the frequency of this device in the Roman world<sup>1</sup>. Its mnemonic effects means it

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\*\* The editions we have used in this article are, for Livius Andronicus and Ennius: A. Traglia (ed.), 1986; for Virgil: the edition on the website *Classical Latin Texts*, prepared by The Packard Humanities Institute: <https://latin.packhum.org/> [accessed 07.05.2021]; for Pontano: J.H. Gaisser (ed./trad.), 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A.F. Naeye, 1829; J. Maehly, 1864; E. Wölfflin, 1881; C. Boetticher, 1884, T. Peck, 1884; E. Loch, 1885; P. Rasi, 1889; W.Y. Evans, 1921; J. Marouzeau, 1935; P. Ferrarino, 1938; A. Cordier, 1939; A. Ronconi, 1939; N.I. Herescu, 1960; M. Barchiesi, 1962, pp. 300-310; A. Grilli, 1962; J.B. Hofmann – A. Szantyr, 1965; P. Valesio, 1967; N.A. Greenberg, 1980; L. Ceccarelli, 1986; J.C. Margolin, 1992; R. Coleman, 1999; Cl. Facchini Tosi, 2000.

proliferates in proverbs (*Mense MAio MALae nubent*), and legal (*Censuit Consensit Consciuit*), military (*Manu Militari, Domi Duellique*) and magic/religious contexts (*quod Fastum Felix Fortunatumque sit*)<sup>2</sup>.

The definitions given of the device differ on a number of points, one of the most important being related to its limits<sup>3</sup>. If we take a look at specialist dictionaries and manuals of rhetoric we see that these divergences are still latent today ('initial... in stressed syllables'<sup>4</sup>; 'all'inizio di parole'<sup>5</sup>; 'al comienzo de dos o más palabras o en el interior de ellas'<sup>6</sup>) or are diluted by imprecise definitions that add nothing in this respect ('consiste en combinar repetidamente ciertos sonidos iguales o afines a lo largo de un verso, de una estrofa o de una frase'<sup>7</sup>; 'multiple repetitions of an identical sound'<sup>8</sup>; 'répétition consonantique'<sup>9</sup>).

Below we group together the different approaches that demarcate this device, according to their more or lesser restrictive nature:

—Alliteration may use both the initial and non-initial position of the word (*nOn... Obliqu(o) OculO... cOmmOda...*, Hor. *epod.* 1.14.37-38)<sup>10</sup>.

—Alliteration can occur both in the initial part or non-initial part, of a word, provided that the repeated sound constitutes an accented syllable: (*paTér nosTér, saTúrni*, Liu. *Andron. Od.* 2)<sup>11</sup>.

—Alliteration only uses the start of the word (... *Virum Vera Virtute Viuere Animatum Addecet*, Enn. *trag.* 160.1)<sup>12</sup>.

The divergence between the views blurs the precise outlines of the figure, making essential a study that can establish them<sup>13</sup>. For this purpose, we analyse Pontano's expression *in primis et ultimis locis...*, *in mediis quoque*. Its interpretation 'in initial and final positions... also inside the word' has served as a basis for more generic definitions of alliteration, meaning those that do not limit the technique to a specific part of the word. This work uses contextual arguments in favour of a different interpretation that fixes the limits of the figure at the start of a word.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. A.F. Naeke, 1829, p. 326; C. Boetticher, 1884, p. 1; T. Peck, 1884, p. 58; J. Baske, 1884, p. 6; P. Rasi, 1921; J. Marouzeau, 1935, pp. 42-44; K. Lesiak (doctoral thesis), 2007, pp. 22-24; Ch. Guittard, 2007, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. C. Boetticher, 1884, p. 2; W.Y. Evans, 1921, p. xiii; P. Valesio, 1967, p. 7; L. Ceccarelli, 1986, pp. 1-2; M. Barchiesi, 1962, p. 300; N. Criado, 2002, p. 509; J.L. Calvo Martínez, 2011, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> A. Preminger – T.V.F. Brogan (edd.), 1993, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> G.L. Beccaria, 1996, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> A. Marchese – J. Forradellas, 2013, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> P.H. Fernández, 1979, p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> B.M. Dupriez, 1991, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> O. Ducrot – J.-M. Schaeffer, 1995<sup>2</sup>, p. 559.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. A.F. Naeke, 1829, p. 331; R. Klotz, 1876; E. Loch, 1885; P. Rasi, 1889, p. 124; J. Defradas, 1958, p. 38; P. Valesio, 1967, p. 28; L. Arbusow, 1974, p. 76; G. Highet, 1974.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. B. Gerathewohl, 1891, pp. 70 and 155; F. Garlanda, 1907, p. 9; W.Y. Evans, 1921, p. 43; J.A. Cuddon, 2001, p. 42.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. R.E. Volkmann, 1872, p. 439; C. Boetticher, 1884; J. Marouzeau, 1935, p. 42; P. Ferrarino, 1938, p. 93; A. Ronconi, 1938, p. 297; M. Barchiesi, 1962, pp. 300-310; L. Ceccarelli, 1986, p. 2; Cl. Facchini Tosi, 2000, p. 10; C. Bussolino, 2006, p. 15; P. Auger, 2010, p. 11; K. Wales, 2014, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. L. Ceccarelli, 1986, p. 1.

## 2. Pontano (1429-1503) and his work

We will deal briefly here with Pontano himself, recalling the essential elements of his life and work (although it may be known), to understand his purpose better.

Giovanni Gioviano Pontano was a fifteenth-century poet, historian and humanist<sup>14</sup>. In Perugia he was a disciple of the master of rhetoric Guido Vannucci until 1448, the year in which he moved to Naples with the title of royal chancellor. There he formed part of the literary group of *Porticus Antonianus*, founded by Antonio Beccadelli ('Panormita') in 1443. In 1471, after the death of Panormita, Pontano took charge of the presidency of the academy, which is why it later became known as the Pontaniana. His participation in the institution was critical for writing and preserving his dialogues, in which he used the names of some of the members of the group to write about the subjects discussed at their meetings<sup>15</sup>.

Alliteration appears designated and analysed for the first time in the dialogue *Actius* (1499), which was the academic name of the poet Jacopo Sannazaro, to whom the work is dedicated<sup>16</sup>. In paragraphs 49 and 50 *Actius* examines the use of the figure –which was *uitanda* (to be avoided) by Roman rhetoric– in Virgil, in order to extol the work of the poet<sup>17</sup>. The aim to praise through this rhythmical procedure explains its prolix description in the dialogue<sup>18</sup>.

## 3. Demarcation of alliteration in Pontano

One of the fragments of Pontano that have been considered crucial in defining the technique is as follows:

*Delectat autem allitteratio haec mirifice in primis et ultimis locis facta, in mediis quoque, licet ibidem aures minus sint intentae*' (Pontan. Act. 49)<sup>19</sup>.

'Moreover, alliteration is wonderfully pleasing when it has been produced in the first or last positions, but also in the middle, although there our ears are less attentive'<sup>20</sup>.

Many critics have interpreted the expression *in primis et ultimis locis... in mediis quoque* as the first, last or middle position, respectively, within a word. According to this reading, alliteration is a technique used in any part of the word, and thus includes specific techniques of repetition such as *homoeoteleuton* (at the end of the word) and interior harmony or paronomasia (within the body of the word)<sup>21</sup>. The most general definitions of alliteration, those that do not establish a limit, are based on this interpretation (*locis* = position of the word), as formulated explicitly in a number of authors, including<sup>22</sup>:

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<sup>14</sup> Pontano was author of a number of books of poetry (*Parthenopei siue de Amorum Liber*, *Lepidina*, *Hendecasyllaborum seu Baiarum Liber*, *Lyra*, *De amori coniugali libri* and various eclogues). He wrote treatises on astrology (*Urania*, *Liber Meteorum*, *Liber de Luna*), the virtues (*De Prudentia*, *De Fortitudine*, *De Liberalitate*, *De Beneficentia*, *De Magnificentia*, *De Splendore*, *De Conuiuientia*, *De Oboedientia*, *De Immanitate*, *De Magnanimitate*), fortune and governance (*De principe*, *De obedientia*). He also wrote the historical work *De Bello Neapolitano*. For more on his life and work, see B. Figliuolo, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Pontano wrote five dialogues in prose: *Charon*, *Antonius*, *Actius*, *Aegidus* and *Asinus*. Only in the case of *Charon* are the speakers not identified with any members of the academy, as the characters are taken from classical mythology, specifically those living in the underworld.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. M. Deramaix, 1987, pp.171-212; M.J. Vega Ramos, 1992, pp. 30-38; F. Tateo (ed./trad.), 2018; J.H. Gaisser (ed./trad.), 2020, pp. 164-170. Not strictly related to the *Actius*, but still interesting for the Pontanian way of understanding the alliteration, it is G. Parenti, 1975, pp. 89-110.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. J.H. Gaisser (ed./trad.), 2020, pp. 164-170.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. M.J. Vega Ramos, 1992, p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> J.H. Gaisser (ed./trad.), 2020, p. 166.

<sup>20</sup> J.H. Gaisser (ed./trad.), 2020, p. 167.

<sup>21</sup> H. Beristáin, 1995<sup>7</sup>, p. 37 cites as forms of alliteration repetition, paronomasia, play on words, *polyptoton*, *derivatio*, *homoeoptoton* or rhyme.

<sup>22</sup> The italics in definitions I-IV are mine.

- I. 'Naeke und seine Vorgänger (wie z B Pontanus) haben eine dreifache Art der Alliteration angenommen, je nachdem dieselbe *am Anfang oder in der Mitte, oder am Ende der Wörter* erscheint also auch der Reim, das homoeoteleuton fällt unter diese Betrachtungsweise' (J. Maehly, 1864, p.208).
- II. 'le première partie limite l'allitération à la répétition de phonèmes aux *places initiales des mots*; mais la seconde y admet celle de phonemes aux *places médianes et finales*: il y a confusion avec l'assonance intérieure et l'homéoteleute' (A. Cordier, 1939, pp. 1-2).

This same interpretation can be found in later authors who allude to Pontano's definition of alliteration. According to them, he does not establish any limit in the characterisation of the resource:

- III. 'On devra à l'humaniste italien Pontano, au XVe siècle, le nom d'allitération, par lequel il entend *toute répétition de sons*' (N.I. Herescu, 1960, p. 131).
- IV. 'Przedstawiona przez Pontano definicja to bez wątpienia *definicja aliteracji* sensu largo, *bardzo pojemna*, zawierająca w sobie prawie wszystkie możliwe figury, które z aliteracji wyprowadzić można' (K. Lesiak, 2007, p. 47).

This article does not aim to correct the fragment of Pontano, but to understand it properly; because, as is clear from the above critics, it has not been interpreted correctly, giving rise to a confusion that still exists today. To do so it will be necessary to look at the context of the phrase:

### 3.1. Contextual arguments

One of the questions which arise when analysing Pontano's expression *in primis et ultimis locis...*, *in mediis quoque* is what precisely the term *locis* refers to. Examined in isolation it is difficult to extract definitive conclusions, which is why we have to look at the context:

Argument I: Alliteration is previously defined as the repetition of initial sounds:

[sc. Allitteratio] *Fit itaque in uersu quotiens dictiones continuatae, uel binae, uel ternae ab iisdem primis consonantibus, mutatis aliquando uocalibus, aut ab iisdem incipiunt syllabis aut ab iisdem primis uocalibus...* (Pontan. Act. 49)<sup>23</sup>.

'It [sc. Alliteration] comes about in a verse whenever successive words –two or three– begin with the same consonants, sometimes with changes of vowels, or with the same syllables, or with the same initial vowels...'<sup>24</sup>.

The technique is well defined in the preceding lines, which restrict it to the start of the word. There are explicit references to the start of the word (*primis, incipiunt, primis*) which lead us to reject the interpretation of alliteration as a technique of repeating the sounds in the initial, internal and final part of the word.

Argument II: The expression *in primis et ultimis locis...*, *in mediis quoque* is exemplified by sequences of words that start with the same sounds<sup>25</sup>.

*Delectat autem allitteratio haec mirifice in primis et ultimis locis facta, in mediis quoque, licet ibidem aures minus sint intentae, ut 'saeua sedens super arma' et 'tales casus Cassandra canebat' et 'insontem infando indicio' et 'longe sale saxa sonabant' et 'magno misceri murmure pontum' et 'quaeque lacus late liquidos'*<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> J. H. Gaisser (ed./trad.), 2020, p. 164 and 166.

<sup>24</sup> J. H. Gaisser (ed./trad.), 2020, p. 165 and 167.

<sup>25</sup> I base this argument on L. Orzalesi, 1970-1971, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> J. H. Gaisser (ed./trad.), 2020, p. 166.

'Moreover, alliteration is wonderfully pleasing when it has been produced in the first or last positions, but also in the middle, although there our ears are less attentive. For example: *saeva sedens super arma*, and *tales casus Cassandra canebat*, and *insontem infando indicio*, and *longe sale saxa sonabant*, and *magno misceri murmure pontum*, and *quaeque lacus late liquidos*<sup>27</sup>.

Another key argument for the restrictive interpretation of alliteration is that offered by the examples used by Pontano to demonstrate that alliterations in initial, final and central positions are particularly pleasing. In all of them we see the phonic repetition is produced at the start of the word (*Saeva Sedens Super*; *CASus CASSandra CAnebat*; *INsontem INFando INDicio*; *SAle SAXa Sonabant*; *Magno Misceri Murmure*; *Lacus Late Liquidos*). If we put Virgil's lines in the fragment into context we see that the only change produced in them is the place of the alliterative sequence in the line: the first four sequences are *in primis et ultimis locis* and the two remaining ones, *in mediis*, as described in the expression we have analysed:

*saeva sedens super arma et centum vinctus aënis* (Verg.*Aen.*1.295)  
*sola mihi tales casus Cassandra canebat* (Verg.*Aen.*3.183)  
*insontem infando indicio, quia bella vetabat* (Verg.*Aen.*2.84)  
*tum rauca adsiduo longe sale saxa sonabant* (Verg.*Aen.*5.866)  
*interea magno misceri murmure pontum* (Verg.*Aen.*1.124)  
*quaeque lacus late liquidos quaeque aspera dumis* (Verg.*Aen.*4.526)

The same Virgilian sequences can be found used in Isidore of Seville to exemplify the figure of *parhomoeon*, which according to the ancient grammarians and Latin orators, consists of repeating the sounds in the initial position of the word. The same lines are used in the definition of *parhomoeon* (called *paranomeon*) by Mateo de Vendôme (*Ars Versificatoria*, 3.10), based on the work of Isidore himself. In the fragment of Pontano the concurrence with Mateo de Vendôme goes beyond the examples from Virgil, given the parallelisms such as *trium* (Mateo de Vendôme) / *ternae* (Pontano); *dictionum immediate positarum* (Mateo de Vendôme) / *dictiones continuatae* (Pontano). These correspondences note the identification of the *allitteratio* with the Latin *parhomoeon* and as a result its demarcation at the start of the word<sup>28</sup>.

Thus, with the prepositional syntagmas *in primis et ultimis... in mediis quoque*, Pontano is not referring to the position of the repeated sound in the word, as Maehly and Cordier had interpreted<sup>29</sup>, but to the position of the alliterative sequence in the line, with the internal position being the least perceived by the listener<sup>30</sup>.

Argument III: there is an explicit reference to the position within the line (*versus*) a few lines later:

*Fit interdum per continuationem insequentis uersus, ut in his Lucretianis:*  
*adverso flabra, feruntur / flumine* (Pontan. *Act.* 49)<sup>31</sup>.

'Sometimes it is continued into the next verse, as in these words of Lucretius: *aduerso flabra, feruntur / flumine*<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> J. H. Gaisser (ed./trad.), 2020, p. 167.

<sup>28</sup> For more on this, cf. M. Salvador Gimeno, (doctoral thesis in preparation), *La aliteración como recurso estilístico en la poesía latina arcaica*, Madrid: Complutense University of Madrid.

<sup>29</sup> J. Maehly, 1864, p. 208 and A. Cordier, 1939, pp. 1-2; *supra* 4.

<sup>30</sup> On the way alliterative sequences at the start and end of the line can be perceived better in Virgil's hexameters, J. Kvičala, 1881, pp. 439-440. It is to be noted that in some lines Pontano cites Virgilian passages in which the repetition occurs within words (*agiTaTa Tumescere*, *G.* 1.357, p.168) or in juxtaposed syllables of two contiguous words (*aeRE Ruebant*, *Aen.* 1.35, p. 170), causing a confusion between alliteration and other phonetic figures. This is because in Pontano there is a broader and more versatile interest in acoustic effects that lead him to approach other sound devices that are not limited to the more rigid definition of alliteration. For more on this, P. Ferrarino, 1938, 128.

<sup>31</sup> J.H. Gaisser (ed./trad.), 2020, p. 166.

<sup>32</sup> J.H. Gaisser (ed./trad.), 2020, p. 167.

The idea that *locis* is a 'position of alliteration within the line' and not a 'position of repeated sound within the word' is much more persuasive if we take into account that following the examples of Virgil, Pontano describes and illustrates, this time with a verse of Lucretius, a type of alliterative sequence that takes place in two adjacent lines, specifically in the clausula of one line and the beginning of the next one. With this interpretation Pontano's text maintains a consistency when moving from possible positions within the same line (initial, final and internal) to positions in two or more adjacent lines. As in the case of the Virgilian examples, the alliterative terms in Lucretius's line share an identical initial F(L): *FLabra, Feruntur / FLumine*.

#### 4. Conclusions

We believe that we have demarcated the limits of the alliteration at the start of the word, interpreting the expression of Pontano *in primis et ultimis locis..., in mediis quoque*, as an initial, final and internal position of the alliterative sequence within the line and not as the position of repeated sounds within a word. This interpretation is based on a threefold argument derived from the context: 1) The author earlier restricted the figure to the start of the word; 2) the Virgilian sequences with which he illustrates his expression are formed by words whose initial sounds are the same, but location in different positions in the line, i.e. initial, final and internal (*in primis et ultimis locis..., in mediis quoque*); and 3) he continues his exposition alluding to a new position within the line (not within the word), specifically in the clausula of a line and the start of the next.

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