

## Dissertation Concept Paper

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What can artificial intelligence tell us about an almost two-thousand-year-old poem from ancient Rome? Although science fiction books and films have conditioned a modern audience to imagine a post-apocalyptic world ruled by robots when they hear the words “artificial intelligence,” scholars of literature use artificial intelligence algorithms and computational analysis to address complex literary problems—a far more mundane reality than science fiction would have us imagine. A key component of my dissertation is the insight provided by artificial intelligence about literary tone. Can a computer algorithm recognize literary tone? If so, relying on what metrics? Can literary register be quantified? I address these questions using a broad range of texts from the early Imperial period of the Roman Empire (roughly the first century CE), an era notorious in literary studies for its overblown and hyperbolic register.

The first part of my dissertation uses machine learning, a form of artificial intelligence, and high-dimensional statistical analysis to establish quantitative metrics for determining the hyperbolic register in Latin literature relying primarily on grammatical, syntactical, and sub-verbal elements. In other words, I set out to determine what indicators of tone exist in Latin literature on a formal level, prioritizing how language is structured. Computational analysis is an integral part of this endeavor for two main reasons. First, the scope that computation enables is integral and allows me to gather an immense amount of accurate data. Second, computers allow me to analyze this vast amount of data since they can perform complex statistical calculations that human beings have difficulty even conceptualizing with ease. The picture of the hyperbolic

register of the first century CE in Latin literature that emerges from this analysis is varied, and the methodology of this analysis has far-reaching implication for digital study of non-English languages.

The second part of my dissertation analyzes what this hyperbolic register means in Latin literary history with a focus on the epic poem, the *Thebaid*, written by Statius. I argue that Statius draws on the hyperbolic aesthetic present in Lucan's *De Bello Civili* partially as a response to Vergil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, representatives of the dominant epic tradition. Tone, then, has an ideological component, and adherence to or divergence from a specific tone represents a political action. Unlike previous scholarship, however, I argue that the hyperbolic character of Statius' *Thebaid* is not only a response to the epic literary tradition, but is a product of maximization and renewal of Rome under Emperor Domitian, who reigned from 81 to 96 CE.

I analyze how Statius' maximizing register affects the epic genre itself, arguing that the poem's excess breaks down the norms of epic itself in an effort to show the complete dissolution of society. Part of this generic breakdown stems from the inability of epic to accommodate the generic register Statius adopts, but another part derives from the *Thebaid*'s interest in non-epic motifs. For a Roman, epic poetry was a genre designed to valorize the past and, above all else, to educate the young on how to behave properly. In portraying deeds beyond wicked that the literary idiom of epic can hardly sustain, Statius destabilizes the genre by refusing to adhere to one of the literary genre's core needs. In doing so, Statius comments on the place of literature in the Early Roman Empire, a society with increasing authoritarian rule and global connection on

an unprecedented scale. For Statius, the traditional epic of foundation, heroes, and ideals is replaced by an epic of horror and death, an epic bent on its own generic destruction.