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NOTE

This contribution is the response piece to a larger dialogue of three articles that form the current issue of JOLCEL. The other contributions are “*The Comic Latin Grammar in Victorian England*” by Jacqueline Arthur-Montagne (pp. 2–31), “Reading and (Re)Writing the *Auctores*: Poliziano and the Ancient Roman Miscellany” by Scott J. DiGiulio (pp. 33–58), and “The *Hisperica Famina* as an *Ars Poetica*: An Interpretation of the A-Text” by Piet Gerbrandy (pp. 60–79).

Playfulness, pedagogy, and patrician values

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What do a seventh-century hermetic text, a fifteenth-century miscellany, and a nineteenth-century comic grammar have in common? That sounds like the beginning of an obscure scholarly joke.

If it were, that would not be inappropriate. For one thing that all these texts share is a delight in the Latin language and its possibilities for play. The three papers in this issue, analyzing these three disparate works, implicitly celebrate the sheer pliancy of Latin and its range of communicative possibilities over a magnificent thirteen centuries.

These texts have another very important factor in common. They were all written for readers whose first language is not Latin. Their playfulness and their didacticism turn out to be deeply intertwined.

This is obvious, of course, in the case of *The Comic Latin Grammar*, a rather laborious example from the venerable tradition of English mockery of Latin culture. Jacqueline Arthur-Montagne gives an example designed to demonstrate the cases of the second declension: “*Magister jurgatur*, the master jaws. *Derideo magistrum*, I laugh at the master.” This tradition of mockery is vigorously sustained through light verse of the Victorian and Edwardian periods (“What is this that roareth thus? / Can it be a motor bus? / Yes! the noise and hideous hum/ Indicant motorem bum...”—and so on through the grammatical cases). It continues in the efforts of Geoffrey Willans and Ronald Searle, channeled through the inimitable schoolboy Nigel Molesworth in the mid-twentieth century (Molesworth interrogates the Latin master: “Would you perhaps explane why latin never deals with the exploits of nero and one or two of the fruitier emperors. Or empresses for that mater” [all errors *sic*]). And it comes all the way into the present, with the standup comedy of Eddie Izzard in the twenty-first century (he closes a seven-minute skit on the encumbrances of the Latin

language—especially Roman numerals—with a typical twist, as he expatiates on the superiority of “English, the language that you speak and I speak, the language that’s become the *lingua franca*—whatever the fuck that means—around the world”).

When my father was at medical school in London in the 1960s, the annual revue—a sort of feast of fools: songs and sketches put together by the junior doctors for a glorious evening mocking their august senior colleagues and the institution as a whole—contained a song that played on the identity of the Latin *bufo*, toad, and the name of a popular pregnancy test: “You do the *bufo bufo* while you’re making hay,/ You can’t undo tomorrow what you did today... Do not cross the *bufo bufo*: / She’s not an ordinary toad.” For years, I had thought that this was simply an example of playful Latin erudition among the medical students. Upon investigation, I now learn that the test was quite literally performed by injecting the urine of women into toads: if the woman was pregnant, her hormones would, within a few hours, cause the toads to produce eggs. The song remains playful and clever, but the connection is not as abstruse as I had supposed. However, the fact that Latin served as Izzard’s *lingua franca* for these young doctors only two generations ago is indisputable: there are plenty of asides in the revue that assume some basic knowledge of the language.

The playfulness of Poliziano’s *Miscellanies* is perhaps easier to miss, but it is an important part of their texture. Scott J. DiGiulio observes that they need “intensive, intratextual reading.” This is a laudable goal, but rather earnest when Poliziano himself says that he has composed the work *saltuatim et uellicatim*—two wonderful adverbs used by his antiquarian predecessor Aulus Gellius and pretty much no-one else. The work is a magnificent Wunderkabinett of language, a repository of arresting linguistic curiosities and obscure allusions that wears lightly what is in fact a prodigious achievement of learning. Poliziano’s preface to Lorenzo de’ Medici, which (by contrast with the main text) oscillates between defensiveness and self-assertion, claims that his inspiration is the consummate *varietas* of nature herself. But if that is so, it is a version of nature that veers towards oddities and misfits—often amusing ones. Take, for example, the story from Africanus of the disgruntled Sybarite flute player that closes *Misc.* 1.15. The Sybarites had trained their horses to dance at banquets to certain tunes on the flute: the flute player delivered the Sybarite cavalry to their enemy simply by playing the tune on the battlefield, whereupon the horses “reared up on their hind legs, shook off their riders, and displayed ... the triple-time dance they had learned at home.” Sex is often used as a hook for an episode that will pursue more abstruse themes: *Misc.* 1.83 begins by quoting one of Catullus’ most obscene epigrams, and then discusses what it means to say that the (cuckolded, fellating) uncle of the poem has become a ‘Harpocrates,’ arraying passages from Plutarch, Varro, Tertullian, Augustine, and even (cited in Hebrew) the Psalms. (I am reminded of Erik Gunderson’s observation in his book on Aulus Gellius: “For an antiquarian there cannot be too many answers to a question.”) If the reader is dissatisfied, it is their

own fault—they are *nec ingenio satis uegeto nec eruditione solida*, they lack “a lively intellect and a sound education”—though Poliziano has, he says, flung in some vulgarities to make the book *uendibilior* (*Misc.* pref. 5). Where *The Comic Latin Grammar* was designed for use in schools, the *Miscellanies* evokes the preternaturally learned reader who is refining his Latin skills with their help. The *Grammar* is redolent of ink blots and mechanical classroom chants through the cases and the conjugations; the *Miscellanies* conjures a virtual library, a dream world of learned texts through which the aspiring scholar can wander at will, sifting obscure data and plucking pertinent exempla.

The *Hisperica Famina*, on the other hand, suggests an unruly rural community of reluctant learners. One of the advantages of insisting on reading the *Hisperica Famina* as a literary unity is that (as Piet Gerbrandy makes clear) it brings the sheer playfulness of that text into the foreground. Its polyphony is not a muddle but a joyful contest of voices: the neophyte and the master at the beginning strive to outdo each other in florid language; the little essays with which the work (or at least, the A-text) closes are delightful vignettes of parodic didacticism, complete with handy formulae to deter further inquiry. “innumera congellat plasmamina, / quae non loqueloſo explicare famulor turno” (“the chapel contains innumerable objects, which I shall not struggle to unroll from my wheel of words”). I use Herren’s translation here, which strives against the text for some sort of clarity; I simply cannot imagine how one could translate it into English in a way that captured the cascade of crazy coinages and grecizing neologisms in the text. The result feels like the love-child of Prudentius and Cúchulainn, spouting Latin learned from Vergilius Maro Grammaticus.

One of the paradoxes of the *Hisperica Famina*, as Gerbrandy points out, is that it combines outlandish vocabulary with simple syntax. We may perhaps infer from this that its compositors and readers—presumably native speakers of Old Irish or Old English, not Latin—were gaining pleasure precisely from the play of sound and the accumulation of rarefied verbal knowledge. The nimbus of Greek (*plasmamina* above is not atypical) added to the pleasure. Consider the simile near the beginning of the work that describes the group of scholars as bees:

Velut innumera apium concauis discurrunt examina apiastris
melchillentaque sorbillant fluenta alueariis,
ac solidos scemicant rostris fauos. (vv. 42–45)¹

¹ “As when countless swarms of bees run to and fro in their hollow hives / and swallow floods of honey from their beehives, / and make their solid combs with their probosces.” (tr. Herren, addition italicized)

In the second line, particularly, sense is all but subsumed in mellifluous sound effects. This is the sort of linguistic striving that Aldhelm seems playfully to mock in the letter (quoted by Gerbrandy) to his protégé Heahfrið. But Aldhelm himself, of course, was more than capable of extraordinary feats of verbal virtuosity. The preface to the hexameter section of his opus geminatum *De Virginitate* is enlivened by an acrostic on the phrase *metrica tirones nunc promant carmina castos* ('now let metrical songs promote chaste recruits') which runs vertically from top to bottom of the line beginnings and from bottom to top of their endings. In this excerpt, the poet is praying to God for support and aid,

Ne praedo pellax caelorum claudere limeN
 Uel sanctos ualeat noxarum fallere scenA,
 Ne fur strofosus foueam detrudat in atraM,
 Conditor a summo quos Christus seruat OlimpO,
 Pastor ouile tuens, ne possit rabula raptorR
 Regales uastans caulas bis dicere puppuP,
 Omnia sed custos defendat ouilia iam nunC.²

Just like the *Hisperica Famina*, albeit in a somewhat less anarchic manner, the poem plays with near-synonyms and with aural effects: three alliterative descriptions of the devil (*praedo pellax*, *fur strofosus*, *rabula raptor*), for example, culminating in the explosive onomatopoeic *puppup*. This is an insulting, disdainful fart, a diabolical victory cry; Aldhelm seems to have been the first person to put it in writing, though it is also found in Hrabanus Maurus, Dunstan, and Abbo of Fleury.

The play with sound and synonyms, the fascination with the peculiarities of the Latin language, that is common to all these texts—from Aldhelm and the *Hisperica Famina* all the way to *The Comic Latin Grammar* and beyond—suggests the ludic as a site of learning. This is the 'artful play' that Mary Carruthers celebrates in the first chapter of her book *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Nemo as an inexhaustibly amusing dialogue participant, for example) or that is at the basis of many of the dialogues printed by Eleanor Dickey in *Learning Latin the Ancient Way* (see the instructive conversation between a hung-over *paterfamilias* and a reproachful interlocutor: "non potest/ turpius/ nec ignominiosius/ euenire/ quam heri gessisti," ("it

² "... lest the tricky pirate should close the threshold of heaven / or cheat the saints by devising harm; / lest the devious thief should thrust into the black pit / those whom Christ creator saves from highest Olympus, / a shepherd watching his flock; lest the raging despoiler should / twice say 'puppup' as he destroys the royal folds: / may the guardian defend all his sheep-pens even now."

is not possible/ more shamefully/ or more disgracefully/ to turn out/ than [what] you did yesterday”).

Dickey observes in her introduction that “because non-native speakers have different needs from those of native speakers the Latin grammars designed for Greek speakers were actually more useful [than those for native speakers] in the Middle Ages.” This brings me back to the point that all the works under consideration here were composed for, and by, non-native users of Latin. The emphasis on sound and on recondite vocabulary bespeaks the estrangement effect characteristic of learning a second language. When the learner understands a sentence imperfectly, they focus on individual words or sounds; sometimes this makes them seem funny, sometimes speciously profound. (We can simulate the effect simply by repeating a word or phrase in our own language until its sense falls away and it degenerates into a sequence of sounds.) The process of estrangement provides, in any case, the grains of mockery and derision that flourish in the response to Latin across the centuries, and which seem to have been sown as Latin gradually assumed the status of non-native language.

An important aspect of the dynamics of mockery is that it implicitly acknowledges the power of what is mocked. There is an excellent example of this from the period when Latin was still the first language of both author and audience. In Plautus’ play *Poenulus*, when the Carthaginian referred to in the title finally comes on stage, he is burbling in a vaguely Semitic nonsense-language that is clearly intended to imitate Punic (which was indeed a Semitic language); the name of one of the play’s protagonists, Agorastocles, is ominously dropped into the middle of the nonsense. Then suddenly the Carthaginian changes mode, and speaks in perfect Latin: “deos deasque ueneror, qui hanc urbem colunt” (“I revere the gods and goddesses who take care of this city”). This makes the joke even better when, a little later, Agorastocles’ slave Milphio claims to be able to translate the language himself, and garbles the results. Bear in mind, meanwhile, that this play was first produced in the middle of the Punic wars: Carthage was an active enemy of Rome, the greatest challenge yet to its dominion. The portrayal of the Carthaginian, Hanno, is in fact a notably generous one; but the linguistic joke gets its piquancy from the fact that Punic is a language of power *and the characters on stage need to understand it and cannot*. As far as I know, after Carthage fell in 146 BCE its language was no longer mocked. Why would it be? It no longer represented a threat to be defused, however temporarily, with satire.

This takes us back to my father and his cohort of medical students, laughing at the senior doctors (and in the ‘*bufo bufo*’ song, perhaps rather anxiously, at the possibility that they would get someone pregnant—the cohort of ‘they’ being, of course, almost entirely male). It takes us back to Poliziano, who casts himself at the beginning of his preface as a second Juvenal, a humble satirist who from his lowly position can puncture the grandiosity of other Latin writers. Or—more directly—it takes us

back to the mockery through the centuries of multitudes of hapless *magistri* and their pedantry and pretensions.

This situation comes about because the extraordinary thing about the Latin language is the way in which, from the fall of Carthage onwards, it has quietly aligned itself with political, social and economic power. In more fraught, contested and explicit ways it has also, of course, been aligned with the power of Christianity. As a result, for most of its many centuries of existence—and to a degree unlike that of any other European language (French is the closest rival, over a far more confined span)—Latin has not been *only* a language. Latin is a symbol. It is a symbol of culture; of aspiration; of fitness to rule.

No wonder the study of Latin appeals to so few minority participants (with the possible exception of those invested in same-sex relationships—though even that engagement comes at the cost of highly selective vision). No wonder Black Latinists, in particular, have such difficulty finding congenial textual spaces in which to work. The power of Latin tends not to let them in on the joke—or rather, the ‘joke.’ A symbol is much harder to interrogate, to examine, to reshape or displace than a mere language.

Look at what the Latin language meant for Poliziano and his peers. It gave them access, not just to a tradition, but to an entire way of being. Taking Aulus Gellius as his model of encyclopedism, Poliziano could take his place in a transtemporal parade of the erudite, proudly purveying his recondite knowledge. He describes his essays as *simplices munditiae*, in a loud echo of Horace *Odes* 1.5 and the exquisite Pyrrha, who was *simplex munditiis*. He offers his essays to the reader, therefore, as elegant but cruel young ladies with whom they too may wish to toy. His readers are real men. They are *certainly* not gay: excerpt after excerpt and its surrounding commentary display a prurient interest in the marks of a man who wants a man, and particularly a manly man (e.g. *Misc.* 1.7, on those “qui digito scalpunt uno caput” (“who scratch their head with one finger”). One fears that the implied gender dynamics have seeped into the brand new translation of Dyck and Cottrell: in the above essay, a mere *nota*—the aforementioned scratching—becomes a ‘mark of infamy’; and why, in *Misc.* 1.96 (*Quanta in muribus salacitas*) are the male mice *salacissimos*, ‘very salacious,’ when a few lines later the *salacissimam* female mouse is translated as being ‘randy’? Be that as it may, the audience for the original essays is clearly male, and the culture that received it homosocial. I need hardly say that the same goes for both the *Hisperica famina* and *The Comic Latin Grammar*.

Arthur-Montagne observes in her essay on the *Comic Grammar*: “Elite groups invariably disguise the mechanisms by which they achieved and maintain their power in the vestments of gentility.” The statement seems incontrovertible; it is made the more piquant by the fact that, in ‘gentility,’ she evokes the fabulously protean word *gentilitas* that started by tracing connections of family (*gens*), went on to designate

non-Jews in New Testament texts and pagans in later Christian texts, was promoted over time to the prefix in ‘gentleman,’ and finally gave modern English its saccharine yet corrosive concept of the ‘genteel.’ I am more doubtful, however, about Arthur-Montagne’s immediately subsequent sentence: “Leigh [the author of the *Comic Grammar*] ... holds up these disguises to the light and reveals them for what they are: the pretensions of a bygone era.”

Was the acquisition of Latin “the pretension of a bygone era” when the *Comic Grammar* was published in 1840? This in no way vitiates the paper as a whole, but I’m not sure I would support the point even if it were made for 1940. Arthur-Montagne notes that Latin by the nineteenth century had the “paradoxical status” of being “a language of little utility but great value.” The missing link is how even apparently useless activities, when endowed with so much social capital, may intersect with the acquisition of very real power. It was arguably part of the ruffled mystique (now not so much ruffled as shredded) of the current British prime minister Boris Johnson that he had read classics at Oxford, and that trite Latinisms and Latin phrases found their way readily into his speech. Disclaimer: I too read classics at Oxford; I too am prone to trite Latinisms. But I have no intention of parlaying them into political power. I merely observe that, at any rate in the British context, it remains possible to do so.

Having said this, the hold of Latin on general cultural life is undoubtedly diminishing. Given that this hold has generally taken exclusionary forms, this seems to me an excellent thing. One small example: I recently wrote a review of a book on Alaric the Goth for the *Times Literary Supplement* (issue of October 23, 2020). When I received the proofs, the review had been entitled—in a deliciously apt echo of Cicero’s speeches *In Verrem*—‘Civis romanus non erat.’ But clearly, between then and publication, a more senior editor wielded the red pen. The review was published under the more democratic title, ‘Citizen of the world, but not Rome.’

So what can we do with Latin now? We can work to make its acquisition and the cultural knowledge to which it gives access far more inclusive. After all, there is no other single language in Western culture that gives its readers so many points of entry to so many different places and times and styles of reading and writing and thinking. These three widely diverse papers together form an excellent illustration of that fact. There are so many ways in which Latin can be enticing. But only if it is demoted from its symbolic status and loses its classist charge; only if its literature becomes subject to vigorous interrogation.

What else? Well, we can play with Latin. We don’t have to be burdened. We can rewrite tradition, and let others in on the joke. These papers show, explicitly or implicitly, what fun we can have with it.