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NOTE

This contribution is part of a larger dialogue of three articles and one responding piece that form the current issue of JOLCEL. The other contributions are “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). The response piece is “Playfulness, Pedagogy, and Patrician Values” by Catherine Conybeare (pp. 81–87).

The Comic Latin Grammar in Victorian England

JACQUELINE ARTHUR-MONTAGNE

High Point University, NC

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the first scholarly analysis of *The Comic Latin Grammar* by Percival Leigh, a satirical textbook of Latin grammar published in London in 1839-40. Sections I and II analyze the role of Latin education and the rapid publication of Latin grammar books during the nineteenth century. Sections III and IV conduct close readings of *The Comic Latin Grammar* to assess its techniques of parody and allusion. I conclude that the textbook achieves its satire of Latin learning by embedding two tiers of humor in its lessons designed for two types of readers: those with and without a background in Classical education. In this way, Leigh uses parody as a mechanism for constructing and enforcing social boundaries, but also satirizes the use of Latin as a shibboleth for polite society.

From the second century of the Roman Empire, a thorough knowledge of Latin grammar—and the Latin authors who exemplified 'good' grammatical principles—became one prerequisite for entry into the social and political elite of Western Europe.¹ Quintilian, who provides a definitive reading list of canonical authors and their literary styles,² was among the first in a long line of pedagogues to

¹ I wish to extend my appreciation to the anonymous reviewers of this paper, who equipped me with a more robust understanding of Victorian literary production. I am also grateful to RELICS at the University of Ghent for the opportunity to present this research and to Susan Stephens, for the initial encouragement to read *The Comic Latin Grammar*.

² Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.20–131.

promote Latin education as initiation into the ruling class, or at least into the exclusive circle of the cultured. The philological foundation of high culture was no different on the island of Britain, which was among the earliest destinations for scholars and Latin manuscripts after the fifth-century conquests of Rome.³ Britain's love affair with the Latin language is apparent both in the medieval clerical tradition and in the organization of the earliest universities, Oxford and Cambridge, which placed instruction in the Classics at the forefront of their curricula.⁴ The reliance on Latin as the cornerstone of scholastic activity in the United Kingdom passed largely unchallenged until the mid-eighteenth century, when statesmen and educators identified the need for more practical subjects in schools and presses increasingly published books in English.⁵ At the same time, Latin learning became increasingly 'popularized' as a growing middle class in the United Kingdom sought Classical education as a path to prestige. By the nineteenth century, Latin's paradoxical status as a language of little utility but great value made it a perfect target for Victorian humorists, who capitalized on the snobbery of schooling as the comedic setting. Knocking Latin and its gatekeepers from their lofty pedestal was well in keeping with a new Victorian sensibility that celebrated the progress of the modern era.

This paper analyzes a satirical textbook entitled *The Comic Latin Grammar: A New and Facetious Introduction to the Latin Tongue* and published between 1839 and 1840 (hereafter *Comic Grammar*).⁶ This grammar exhibits the humor and style visible in other comedic works of the mid-nineteenth century, such as *Punch* magazine and the novels of Charles Dickens; indeed, there is reason to believe that the grammar's author, Percival Leigh, was connected to both.⁷ It participates in a larger body of parodic publications in the nineteenth century that target the purveyors and institutions of establishment knowledge. This included the *Comic Almanack* of 1835, which built upon the satirical traditions of the *Poor Robin*

³ On the foundation of Latin schools in late antique Britain, see Putnam Fennell Jones, "The Gregorian Mission and English Education," *Speculum* 3, no. 3 (1928): 335–48 and Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature 600-899*, vol. 1 (London: The Hambledon Press, 1996), 1–7.

⁴ On the outgrowth of Classical scholarship and philology in Britain from the 17th-18th centuries, see James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 65–73.

⁵ Christopher Stray, "Education and Reading," in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature*, ed. David Hopkins and Charles Martindale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 79–102.

⁶ Percival Leigh, *The Comic Latin Grammar: A New and Facetious Introduction to the Latin Tongue* (London: Charles Tilt, 1840). The earliest edition of the *Comic Grammar* was published at the end of 1839, as is apparent from a review on page 6 of *The Planet*, December 1, 1839. This would seem to confirm an excellent suggestion by one of my reviewers that Tilt published the volume in anticipation of the Christmas market.

⁷ The first editions of the *Comic Grammar* were published anonymously but are widely attributed to Percival Leigh. His biography and attribution are discussed further in the second section of this paper.

almanac and spoofed the social calendars of urbane Londoners.⁸ It also encompasses Leigh’s *The Comic English Grammar* (1840) and Gilbert Abbott A’Beckett’s *The Comic History of England* (1847) and *The Comic History of Rome* (1852), all examples of a burgeoning genre of parody textbooks for the enjoyment of schoolboys and adult readers alike. At the nexus of this literary activity was the illustrator John Leech, who had studied alongside Leigh at St Bartholomew’s Hospital, and contributed etched plates and engraved vignettes to many of these publications. As the satires of the 1830s and 1840s placed increasing emphasis on visual caricature, Leech’s cartoons defined a generation of parodic writing on the “march of intellect” and the consequences of unprecedented social mobility.⁹

The *Comic Grammar* was written as a functional textbook: each of the 163 pages venture to teach some philological lesson or another. The *Comic Grammar*’s more explicit interest, however, is in creating a parody of Latin learning, from the perceived absurdities of the language itself to the people who valorized it. The word “parody” evokes many associations: ridicule, comedy, slapstick, invective. But the defining characteristics of parody are neither humor nor hostility, but imitation and distortion. First used to describe mock-epics and comic plays of Classical Greece, *parōdē* (παρωδή) expresses the idea of “singing after the style of the original, but with a difference.”¹⁰ Introducing that element of “difference” in parody often elicits laughter, but some parodies aspire to a form of critique more intellectual than comedic. The more subtle and allusive the distortion, the more cerebral its effect. Furthermore, the targets of parody often extend beyond the object of imitation. The parody of an author or text may also implicate the audiences, attitudes, and values associated with the original. It is for this reason that parodies have the paradoxical capacity to reinforce the very artifacts and interpretative communities they satirize; their allusions most reward those who are already “in on the joke.”

In this study, I investigate parody as a mechanism for constructing and enforcing social boundaries. While the *Comic Grammar* purports to “[hold] up the Latin Grammar to ridicule,”¹¹ I claim that its readers are the true targets of the book’s satire, as well as the contemporary intellectual climate that prioritized Classical learning. The *Comic Grammar* achieves this satire by embedding at least two tiers of humor within its lessons. On the one hand, the textbook represents an accessible work of nineteenth-century humor, written for the upwardly mobile. Many of its jokes require no real knowledge of Latin, but merely a passing familiarity with figures of the Classical tradition. A more educated reader of the text,

⁸ Frank Palmeri, “Cruikshank, Thackeray, and the Victorian Eclipse of Satire,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 44, no. 4 (2004): 755–57.

⁹ Henry Miller, “John Leech and the Shaping of the Victorian Cartoon: The Context of Respectability,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 42, no. 3 (2009): 267–91.

¹⁰ The earliest use of *παρωδή* occurs at Arist. *Poet.* 1448a12. See Frank Lelièvre, “The Basis of Ancient Parody,” *Greece & Rome* 1, no. 2. (1954): 66–81.

¹¹ Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 13.

on the other hand, detects a sophisticated layer of allusions to the specific texts and structure of Latin lessons in Victorian era schools. By invoking the conventions of Classical learning at the schoolboy level, the *Comic Grammar* activates a collective memory of Latin, not as a language, but as an avenue of social advancement. In this way, the *Comic Grammar* creates a division between those with a shared consciousness of Latin schooling and those who merely aspire to it. But while the result of this tiered humor may be to identify the “haves” and “have nots” of Classical education, neither class of reader escapes the textbook’s satirical bite.

1 The Victorian ‘Grammar Rush’

In the decades between 1820 and 1880, the study of Latin in Europe and the Americas benefited from a surge of new grammars published in rapid succession. German students of Latin would have benefited from books like Krebs’ *Antibarbarus* (1843) and Menge’s *Repetitorium der lateinischen Syntax* (1873). In Italy, Latin-learners read Carducci’s *Elementi di grammatica latina* (1829) and Salvadore Manzi’s *Grammatica latina* (1847). English-speakers enjoyed perhaps the greatest variety of all, from Adler’s *Practical Grammar of the Latin Language* (1858) to Donaldson’s *Elementary Latin Grammar* (1872). The Eton College *Introduction to the Latin Tongue* released over twenty new editions in the nineteenth century. We find similar output of grammars even in Czech and Russian, necessitated in part by the policy of the St. Petersburg Academy of Science to publish treatises in Latin.¹²

More surprising still than the sheer volume of Latin grammars was its timing at the turn of the late modern era, when Latin ceased to be an active language of communication. In his study of the history of Latin, Leonhardt demonstrates that that the ‘grammar rush’ of the mid-nineteenth century occurred when Latin had lost most of its practical value. “These grammars were written in large part because people no longer heard, spoke, or wrote Latin as a matter of course,” he explains. “People who do not actually speak a language regularly need reference works.”¹³ Texts written in Latin, he shows, accounted for less than a quarter of all published texts in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ By the nineteenth, the language had concentrated within academies for dissertations, certificates, and ceremonial speeches. Academic journals increasingly published papers in their national languages, and

¹² On the role of Latin in the St. Petersburg Academy, see Ludmilla Schulze, “The Russification of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences and Arts in the Eighteenth Century,” *The British Society for the History of Science* 18, no. 3 (1985): 305-335 and Michael Gordin, “The Importation of Being Earnest: The Early St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences,” *Isis* 91 (2000): 13-23.

¹³ Jürgen Leonhardt, *Latin: The Story of a World Language*, trans. Kenneth Kronenberg (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 273.

¹⁴ Leonhardt, *Latin*, 246.

French began to replace Latin as the important intellectual tongue nearly everywhere but Germany.

The accelerated production of Latin grammars for populations that no longer used Latin conversationally points to a key paradox: as the practical value of learning Latin decreased, the status of the Classical tradition as a pedagogical tool and criterion of high culture increased. Although the *lingua Latina* was being supplanted by a *lingua franca* in the West, educators continued to support the study of Latin all the more fervently, citing one of two reasons.¹⁵ The first, stemming from German neo-humanism, was that the Classical languages were beneficial precisely *because* of their non-utility: the study of an ancient and refined language elevated the human spirit. Cicero and Virgil, as models for imitation, opened pathways to intellectual sublimity and propelled the student to new heights of liberal thinking. The second reason – opposed to the first and emerging from the natural sciences – was that Latin was an inherently logical language and could sharpen analytical skills. As mathematics and the sciences came to challenge the primacy of Classics as the core of the educational curriculum, the concept of Latin as a formulaic system of knowledge enabled teachers to defend its use in the classroom. It also reimagined aptitude in Latin as a predictor for one’s proficiency in scientific disciplines; Latin could be employed “to separate the good students from the bad.”¹⁶

The use of grammars to standardize learning and to differentiate high- and low-performing students was especially prevalent in nineteenth-century Britain.¹⁷ In the early 1800s, public schools in the United Kingdom developed entrance examinations that tested, among other subjects, adolescents’ abilities in Greek and Latin. In response, preparatory schools reoriented their curricula to prepare younger boys for these examinations and a new market of textbooks emerged, tailor-made to the individual exams. As Stray has documented, “When the new local and middle-class examinations began in the 1850s, they immediately generated a market for standardized textbooks [...] one finds books advertised as suitable for particular examinations – even for specific times of the year.”¹⁸ The selection of a particular grammar book therefore communicated one’s pedagogical preferences and academic aspirations. Stray also examines the motivations of individual schools and presses to produce grammars under their own names, which became a “stable source of profits” for academic publishers.¹⁹ At the same time, a growing market of working-class readers created a popular industry of self-guided

¹⁵ Leonhardt, *Latin*, 245–76.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁷ For a broad view of the textbook market during this period, see Leslie Howsam et. al., “What Victorians Learned: Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Schoolbooks,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 12, no. 2 (2007): 262–85.

¹⁸ Christopher Stray, *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities, and Society in England, 1830-1960* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 55.

¹⁹ Stray, *Classics Transformed*, 56.

grammars, such as Beard's Latin course in *Popular Educator* or the many series of interlinear editions. In this way, Classical education as a criterion of high culture was expressed even among working class audiences.²⁰

The popularization of the Classical tradition is also evident in the emergence of a new category of theatrical performance in the Victorian era: epic burlesques drawn from Homer and Virgil. The publication date of the *Comic Grammar* in 1839-40 marks something of a midpoint in the development of the epic burlesque genre, falling within decades of Thomas Dibdin's *Melodrama Mad! Or, the Siege of Troy* (1819) and F. C. Burnand's *Ulysses* (1965). The latter dramatist also made regular contributions to *Punch*, which may reveal a degree of overlap or inspiration between printed and performed parodies of the Classics. More significant to this study, however, is manner in which such burlesques appealed to a broad cross-section of Victorian society. Both the dramas and their printed advertisements, as Rachel Bryant Davies has noted, communicated "multiple valences for audiences with varying levels of familiarity with the Homeric epics."²¹ What educated gentlemen might have regarded as hilarious satires of the Trojan War stories may in contrast have represented a first encounter with Greco-Roman antiquity for viewers with less exposure to Classical education. The diversity of experience and education that audiences brought to the burlesques may also account for the mixed reception of the dramas. While the performances were "enormously successful," critics from publications like *The Literary Gazette* and *Universal Review* could at once describe the burlesques as degradations of the Classical tradition and too clever by half for the unschooled.²²

These institutionalized attitudes towards the Classics provide a helpful context for understanding the publication of grammars during this period; they also clarify how those at the top of the pedagogical pyramid justified continued instruction in a language with little practical value. The ideals of neo-humanism and the sciences, however, have little to say about the real experience of reading these grammars or of the intellectual environments they constructed. Some accounts of Classical learning in the modern era elide two important aspects of the Latin education in Victorian England. First, despite the fact that competency in Latin marked one's membership among the literati, it is not clear that all or even the majority of students who studied Latin with such grammars achieved any real fluency. We should not assume that the surge in the publication of Latin grammars was matched by a surge in the competency of contemporary Britons to speak or read Latin. In fact, Skilton has demonstrated that mediocrity in the Classical languages became a trope in Victorian fiction. Characters within the novels are

²⁰ On the rigidity of the Classical curriculum in spite of its inutility for middle class students, see Robert Ogilvie, *Latin and Greek: A History of the Influence of the Classics on English Life from 1600 to 1918* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 97-99.

²¹ Rachel Bryant Davies, *Victorian Epic Burlesques: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Theatrical Entertainments after Homer* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 6.

²² Bryan Davies, *Victorian Epic Burlesques*, 14-15.

often seen to engage with Greco-Roman culture in a fumbling or superficial way, which Skilton interprets as an effort to connect with a readership characterized more by the Latin they had forgotten than the Latin they remembered.²³

The Victorian novels are an especially helpful place to detect the practicalities of Latin learning because they speak to an audience that experienced the Classics in the schoolroom without necessarily ascending to the peaks of Classical scholarship. In Thackeray’s *The Adventures of Philip* (1861–62), for example, the venerable Lord Ascot exhibits both the expectation that aristocrats know Latin and also a foggy understanding of the language. When another character in the novel departs, he comments, “Exit Governor. What’s the Latin for Governor?” Thackeray describes Ascot as a figure of “much native humor, but not very profound scholarship.”²⁴ This is one example of many in *Philip* where characters struggle to remember a particular word or name they once learned in the course of their schooling. An episode in the *Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867) by Trollope stages another poignant moment in which a character confronts his loss of Classical languages – in this instance, Greek rather than Latin. In an effort to distract himself from a broken heart, the secretary Johnny Eames resigns himself to hard labor: translating Homer into English. But after purchasing a copy of the *Iliad* at half price, he realizes how difficult a challenge this would prove:

On the next day he was cooler and wiser. Greek he thought might be tedious as he discovered that he would have to begin again from the very alphabet. He would therefore abandon that idea. Greek was not the thing for him, but he would take up the sanitary condition of the poor in London.²⁵

This episode encapsulates the idea of the Classical languages as a challenging and noble pursuit, by which Johnny hoped to distinguish himself as a gentleman. But in some ways, the fact of having learned Greek, only to forget it, paints a more typical portrait of the educated Englishman in the nineteenth century.

The second nuance that Skilton brings to studies of Classical education in Victorian England is his claim that social status and communal intellectual identity were forged as much through the classroom experience as through the knowledge of Latin itself.²⁶ When nineteenth-century novelists embedded Classical “tags” in their narratives, these quotations activated a romantic memory of schoolboy days, of memorizing and rewriting the opening lines of the Classical

²³ David Skilton, “Schoolboy Latin and the Mid-Victorian Novelist: A Study in Reader Competence,” *Browning Institute Studies* 16 (1988): 39–55.

²⁴ William Thackeray, *The Adventures of Philip on His Way through the World* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1871), 44.

²⁵ Anthony Trollope, *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, vol. 3 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1915), 353–54.

²⁶ On the dominance and experience of the Classical tradition in the Victorian classroom, see David Turner, *The Old Boys: The Decline and Rise of the Public School* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 131–33 and 173–75.

texts most commonly used in the grammar schools. In Thackeray and Trollope, he argues, “Latin automatically means youth, companionship, and nostalgia [...]. The ancient camaraderie is at once re-established.”²⁷ Among the most memorable aspects of this experience were the Latin roll call (*adsum*), the recitation and repetition of purple passages from the canon, and the unrelenting persona of the schoolmaster. We get a rare taste of the structure and atmosphere of such classes in a transcript of Victorian learning: the minutes of a series of Latin and Greek classes at Winchester College, led by the *magister* Edmund Morshead (c. 1890). Excerpts from *The Mushri-English Pronouncing Dictionary*, published by Stray, reveal the classroom to be a stage for the performance of intellectual authority.²⁸ The schoolmaster Morshead bolsters his authority by making frequent references to the Classical dictionaries and reference works that support his teachings (“καί is oxytone. I have looked it out in my dictionary!”).²⁹ But these transcripts in the *Dictionary* also attest that schoolboy challenges to this authority were part and parcel of the learning experience. Spoofing on the lessons of the *magister* appears to have been a central component of learning Classical languages, and the identity of the student was forged in communal opposition to the instructor. This reciprocal relationship is visible in another passage from the *Dictionary*, where a boy named Chitty answers Morshead’s instruction to translate τίς πότε through repetition.³⁰ In an owl-like hoot, Chitty’s response – “Who-who?” – is met with raucous laughter and an insult by the instructor: “Chittay, do not be an oaf!” This faceoff between student and teacher, as preserved by the class minutes, illustrates the realities of Classical learning in a way that traditional grammars and pedagogical experts cannot.

The depiction of student–teacher exchange in Morshead’s classroom bolsters Skilton’s claim that Classical schooling fostered a camaraderie among young men in Victorian England. The schoolboy reliance upon and resistance to authority generated a social code among its participants, one that was built upon the Classics but did not require a perfect recall of the ancient languages. In concluding this background information, I want to call special attention to the comedic technique of Chitty’s response to Morshead: the humor of the joke is twofold. On the one hand, the simple act of making animal noises in class (the avian “who-who”) remains perhaps the most time-honored method of eliciting laughter from one’s peers. It represents a juvenile strand of humor, built for the classroom and antithetical to the lofty ideals of Classical learning. On another level, however, Chitty’s hooting disguises a deeper layer of laughter accessible only to those who know Greek. “Who, who?” is in fact an acceptable translation of an emphatic use of the

²⁷ Skilton, “Schoolboy Latin,” 46.

²⁸ Christopher Stray, “Schoolboys and Gentlemen: Classical Pedagogy and Authority in the English Public School,” in *Pedagogy and Power: Rhetorics of Classical Learning*, ed. Yun Lee Too and Niall Livingstone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 29–46.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 33–34.

interrogative pronoun in the Classical languages, a lesson one only acquires through instruction or reading of one’s grammar. In this way, one cannot enjoy the full parody of the Greek without already being an initiate of the Greek. Whether the author of the *Dictionary* embellished the minutes of this episode or whether Chitty indeed arrived at this joke in the spur of the moment cannot be determined. But it nonetheless provides an example of the comedic techniques that other Victorian authors employed in their mockery of the Classics, as we observe in the *Comic Grammar* as well.

2 Context of *The Comic Latin Grammar*

The *Comic Grammar* was published anonymously in London, with numerous reprints during the nineteenth century. Its London publisher, Charles Tilt, was known for illustrated publications and lithographs and he maintained a store on Fleet Street with large display windows.³¹ In addition to helping authors cut costs on illustrated publications, Tilt also released his own editions of inexpensive “handbooks for children.” This collection of twelve bound books was sold in a wooden case and included abridged classics like *Little Esop* and *Little Robinson Crusoe*.³² Given the specialization of the publisher, it might be reasonable to conclude that the *Comic Grammar* was intended as a novelty for schoolchildren, either those encountering the study of Latin for the first time or completing the course of their studies. The book includes more than fifty illustrations, some of them full page. The text of the *Comic Grammar* is widely attributed to Leigh and the illustrations to Leech, both of whom were affiliated with the satirical magazine, *Punch*.³³ Leigh was known to both Thackeray and Dickens, and his other publications include a *Comic English Grammar* and *Portraits of Children of the Nobility*.³⁴ These titles reveal Leigh’s keen ability to taunt British society from its roots up. His satire centers on institutions of education as a critical lens into contemporary values. As Noordegraaf notes, “Not only did Leigh make many a humorous observation on the linguistic usage of the lower classes, he also levelled sharp criticism against his social equals and superiors.”³⁵ Leigh’s double-edged

³¹ On Charles Tilt, see chapters 18-19 of Robert Patten, *George Cruikshank’s Life, Times, and Art: Volume 1: 1792-1835* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

³² Alyssa Currie, “The Victorian Thumb Bible as Material Object: Charles Tilt’s *The Little Picture Testament* (1839),” *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 84 (2016): 10.

³³ The earliest record that I can find that identifies Leigh and Leech as the author and illustrator of the *Comic Grammar* respectively is Mark Lemon, *Mr. Punch: His Origin and Career* (London: Jas. Wade, 1870), 22–23.

³⁴ Little is known of Percival Leigh. See Rosemary Mundhenk and LuAnn McCracken Fletcher, eds., *Victorian Prose: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 215 and Alan Young, *Punch and Shakespeare in the Victorian Era* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 34–45.

³⁵ Jan Noordegraaf, “Murray’s Dutch Mirror: On Rewriting the *English Grammar*,” in *Two Hundred Years of Lindley Murray*, ed. Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade (Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 1996), 115.

humor was not, I suspect, written for schoolchildren, but rather employed the conventions of schooling as a broader critique of grown-up society.

One possible challenge to the hypothesis of an adult readership for the *Comic Grammar* is explicit signaling to a youth readership in the preface and prologue of the text. In the first section of the book, the author describes his work as a “desirable addition’ to the breakfast of the young gentlemen.”³⁶ Separately, in the introduction, he claims that “holding up the Latin Grammar to ridicule is likely to produce in the minds of youth” a “beneficial effect.”³⁷ Even an earnest reader will find it difficult to take such pedagogical promises seriously in an introduction that denigrates the poets Byron, Shelley, and Goethe as “wet blankets” and praises the *Pickwick Papers* as a revolution in the republic of letters.³⁸ The frequent references to young men as readers of the *Comic Grammar* nonetheless raise the possibility that at least some buyers or recipients of the book were in fact of school age, and that the jokes within supplied Latin students with an arsenal of comic hijinks. A more persuasive interpretation of this prefatory framing, however, is that the author strives to activate a nostalgia for the classroom.³⁹ Skilton’s suggestion that Latin learning in the novels evokes camaraderie and the collective memory of youth proves relevant here. In the preface the author connects the concept of the grammar book with the memory of (mis)behaving in Latin class:

The “Comic Latin Grammar” can, certainly, never be called an imposition as another Latin Grammar frequently is. We remember having the whole of it to learn at school, besides being—no matter what—for pinning a cracker to the master’s coat-tail. The above hint is worthy the attention of boys.⁴⁰

This new *Comic Grammar* represents both a guidebook and a remedy for Classical learning. Here the author shows us how tightly the process of studying Latin was entwined with the subversion of Classics in the classroom. The *magister* was a welcome target, both because of his authority and because this authority rested on the oldest and most traditional of studies. The pleasure of the *Comic Grammar* lies in its willingness to engage in what the author openly acknowledged to be “literary high treason”: to treat the most reverent subject with utter irreverence.

³⁶ Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

³⁹ Brian Maidment, “‘Larks in Season’: The *Comic Almanack*,” *Cabiers victoriens et édouardiens* 84 (2016): 18: “*The Comic Latin Grammar* also took endless delight in parodying the typographical structures of the ‘grammar’, using numbered lists, daft examples, mnemonic verses, italics, bold headlines, and the like to suggest the traditional patterning of a dull school textbook. The result was perhaps too sophisticated for ‘the use and amusement of schoolboys’, but it is easy to see the pleasures on offer to those educated readers who had previously undergone the tedium of a classical education.”

⁴⁰ Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 5.

Whether or not Leigh designed his textbook with younger readers in mind, the *Comic Grammar* certainly found adult admirers. *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* reviewed the book as “the most richly comic work [...] we have ever seen” and praised its ability to “beguile [the reader] into a competent knowledge of Latin grammar.”⁴¹ Another periodical, *The Literary World*, also predicted success for the book: “The public will buy it, and, what is more, read and enjoy it: its pages really contain a good deal of useful matter.”⁴² Copies of the *Comic Grammar* appeared in the 1850 *Catalogue of the Mercantile Index of New York*, as well as the 1890 *British Museum Catalogue of Printed Books*. In these indices, the *Comic Grammar* was listed alongside other grammars, which may indicate that the libraries regarded them as serious textbooks or that they had no other category of classification. A Dutch adaptation of the text, *De vermakelijke Latijnsche spraakkunst*, was published in 1866 by the novelist Jacob van Lennep.⁴³

A certain Chilton Mewburn, who attended St. Paul’s School in London in 1844, recalled that the Latin lessons of the *Comic Grammar* stuck more firmly in his adult memory than all the Latin classes he had learned as a child: “I can indeed remember the first line of *Lily’s Latin Grammar* [...] but such is the perverseness of human nature that I can still reel off far more of the *Comic Latin Grammar* which appeared about that time.”⁴⁴ These advertisements and anecdotes situate the textbook at the crossroads between comedy and pedagogy. They do not substantiate the *Comic Grammar*’s claim to a more effective method for learning Latin, but suggest – as evidenced by Mewburn’s recollections – that its humorous lessons made a required subject bearable. It is notable that *testimonia* on the textbook dwindle at the turn of the twentieth century; there are few discussions or direct allusions to the *Comic Grammar*, aside from catalogue entries and bookseller’s price lists.⁴⁵ This is not true for other comedic projects with which Leigh and Leech were affiliated. *Punch* magazine, for instance, achieved its peak circulation in the 1940s. The *Comic Grammar*’s popularity may have been limited to the Victorian era because of its topical humor, but also due to the narrowing market of readers who had studied Latin. As educational reforms in the late nineteenth century curtailed the requirement of Latin classes, the jokes of the *Comic Grammar* had little relevance to a later readership.

⁴¹ William Tait, “*The Comic Latin Grammar; a New and Facetious Introduction to the Latin Tongue; with numerous illustrations*,” *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 7 (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1840), 62.

⁴² John Timbs, “New Books,” *The Literary World* 40, December 28, 1839, 199.

⁴³ In fact, van Lennep appears to have plagiarized both of Leigh’s comic grammars (Latin and English) and faced accusations of this during his own lifetime. See Noordegraaf, *Murray’s*, 7–9.

⁴⁴ Robert Gardiner and John Lupton, eds., *Res Paulinae: The Eighth Half-Century of St. Paul’s School* (West Kensington: St. Paul’s School, 1911), 10–11.

⁴⁵ By the early twentieth century, the illustrations of John Leech were already considered classics of the Victorian age, as we see from an exhibition of his works in New York. The Grolier Club published this collection as *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Works by John Leech (1817–1864)* (New York: The Grolier Club, 1914). The *Comic Latin Grammar* is included from pages 25–29.

3 Pig Latin

Thus far this paper has reviewed Victorian education and grammar books as a historical backdrop to the publication of the *Comic Grammar*. The second half of this study examines the textbook's response to this social and intellectual context through close readings of its passages. In both the introduction and the discussion of the *Mushri-English Pronouncing Dictionary*, I proposed that the humor of the *Comic Grammar* operates on two levels: (1) as a superficial spoofing on the Classical tradition and (2) as a sophisticated parody of texts and conventions from the Latin classroom. This section investigates comic moments of the first sort in the book: jokes that require no extensive knowledge of Latin. Beyond simply reproducing and explaining these jokes, I attempt to answer what this tier of humor tells us about the popular appeal of the book. As Leigh and Leech strive to attract different segments of a literate market, what do they believe middle class readers will find funny? How do the mechanics of this humor operate? And where might we detect that the *Grammar* is in fact turning its satirical lens back onto the buyers? In the conclusion of this section, I provide one example of a known reader of the *Comic Grammar* who exemplifies the intended audience of this first tier of humor.

The most accessible level of satire in the *Comic Grammar* requires no thorough knowledge of Latin or the Classical tradition. It satirizes pedagogy and intellectual culture writ large, mixing jabs with topical jokes about Victorian England. On the third page of the text, for example, we are greeted by “Toby the Learned Pig,” who is credited with removing the ‘w’ from the Latin alphabet and whose doctoral attire makes a mockery of the *magister* (fig. 1). Toby stands on two cloven feet and holds his textbook before him, as if to begin dissertating before a room of schoolboys. He wears spectacles and dons the robes of a



Figure 1: John Leech, “Toby, the Learned Pig,” *Comic Latin Grammar*, 17.

professor. Toby is the first of many abuses that the *Comic Grammar* hurls against Latin teachers. Much like the *Musbri-English Pronouncing Dictionary*, this book places the persona of the *magister* at the nucleus of its humor. In the chapter on nouns, for instance, Leigh uses the interactions between student and schoolmaster as the template for the case system.⁴⁶ In the nominative: “*magister jurgatur*, the master jaws.” In the dative: “*protendo manus magistro* – I hold out my hands to the master.” In the accusative: “Whom do you laugh at? (behind his back) *Derideo magistrum* – I laugh at the master.” And in the ablative: “*Deprensus magistro* – caught out by the master.” In this way, the noun system is organized as a mini-narrative of the classroom. The routine of the Latin lesson – lecture, penalty, mockery, and apprehension – provides the blueprint for learning one’s second declension endings. The scene is focalized through the student, and therefore invites the reader to identify with the role of the wayward pupil. The “master” remains the medium through which the student learns the lesson, but the lesson also takes place at the master’s expense.

The master remains the butt of another pig-related joke in the chapter on substantive nouns. After a sample sentence that shows the use of the genitive case with ellipsis, the author informs us that the word “pig” can “denote a variety of little things, which it is sometimes necessary to keep secret.”⁴⁷ Some examples of “the pig” in the classroom include pinning a tail on the schoolmaster’s coat, putting wax on his stool, hiding away food in the corners of the dormitory when the master conducts inspections, or skipping class to travel into town. The joke concludes with word humor as the author emphasizes that these “pigs” can become a “bore” when at last the master discovers them. On one level, this discourse on pigs and bores aims at the same schoolboy nostalgia that was activated in the satirical narrative on noun cases with the *magister*: it reminds the reader that the dusty memories of learning Latin have as much to do with antics as academics. On a more critical level, however, this long reflection on the meaning of “pig” also invites us to read between the lines for hidden meanings.

One place we might begin to detect a deeper message is in the caricature of Toby on the third page of the *Comic Grammar*. For “Toby the Learned Pig” (also known as the “Sapient Pig”) was not merely a cartoon from the textbook, but also a famous curiosity of the early nineteenth century. Toby was a trick pig who appeared in London’s Spring Gardens to play cards, read the time, and spell words. In 1817, Toby’s owner published the pig’s memoir (“written by himself”) which reads like an Apuleian tale of travel and self-discovery.⁴⁸ According to the memoir, the pig’s education spanned every subject from Pythagorean philosophy to Shakespearean drama. The book remains a curiosity of the Regency, but also a reflection upon its values. At a time when any individual might improve his station through

⁴⁶ Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 22–23.

⁴⁷ Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 74.

⁴⁸ Nicholas Hoare, *The Life and Adventures of Toby, the Sapient Pig* (London: H. Lyon, 1817).

learning, why not a pig? By including an allusion to this memoir, therefore, the *Comic Grammar* pokes farmyard fun at the hallowed halls of the university. Perhaps every professor of Latin is merely a pig in doctoral disguise! But the textbook also invites a more cynical interpretation: that the object of mockery is not the scholar, but the notion of self-advancement beyond one's station. In this way, Toby the Pig stands as an emblem of progressive aspirations. For the *Comic Grammar*, perhaps, a pig who reads Latin and wears academic robes is... still a pig.

A similar commingling of the Classical and contemporary culture occurs in the *Comic Grammar's* chapter on relative clauses. One sample sentence on antecedents pits the third-century Emperor Heliogabalus against Edward Dando in an eating competition: "Heliogabalus, at one breath, swallowed two dozen of oysters, which beats even Dando out and out."⁴⁹ Dando, an infamous gourmand of 1830s London, became famous for consuming vast quantities of shellfish at oyster houses before informing the waitstaff of his inability to pay. His culinary misdeeds found their way into the *Morning Post* on several occasions, which decried him as a "terror of shell-fish dealers."⁵⁰ The fun in the comparison of Dando and Heliogabalus rests not on a deep learning of ancient history, but rather upon the Victorian perception of the emperor as a glutton. This reputation likely stems from Heliogabalus' sensationalized biography in the *Historia Augusta*,⁵¹ but reemerges in Victorian spoofs on the Roman Empire. Whiting's *Memoirs of a Stomach* (1853), for example, ponders whether "Heliogabalus [was] born for oysters, or oysters for Heliogabalus."⁵² This example demonstrates that the most accessible tier of humor in the *Comic Grammar* targets not the Classical tradition so much as popular perceptions of the Classics. One need not have read ancient histories of Heliogabalus to be in on the joke; more important is one's membership in a culture of Classical appreciation, a community that understands Roman history as a resource for contemporary analogies.

⁴⁹ Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 71: "Heliogabalus, contento spiritu, viginti quatuor ostrearum demersit in alvum, quod Dandoni etiam longe antecellit."

⁵⁰ "Death of Dando the Oyster Eater," *Morning Post*, September 1, 1832, 4.

⁵¹ *Hist. Aug.* 17.19: "primus fecit de piscibus insicia, primus de ostreis et leiostreis et aliis huiusmodi marinis conchis et locustis et cammaris et scillis."

⁵² Sydney Whiting, *Memoirs of a Stomach* (London: W. E. Painter, 1853), 33. See also John Doran, *Table Traits, with Something on Them* (London: Richard Bentley, 1854), 405.

One final instance of this “entry-level” humor in the *Comic* is the convergence of Classical and American culture. In the chapter on impersonal verbs, Leigh notes the absence of a nominative subject in such phrases. One sample sentence of this grammatical phenomenon invokes the figure of Socrates: “mirificum visum est Socratem in gyrum saltantem videre.”⁵³ A loose translation of this example arrives on the following page with an illustration of Socrates performing a minstrel dance: “It seemed wonderful to behold Socrates jumping Jim Crow.” Here Socrates waves his left hand and swings his feet in a garish imitation of the blackface performance, clearly modeled on “Jump Jim Crow” illustrations from American sheet music in the 1830s (fig. 2-3).



Figure 2: Jim Crow (New York: Firth and Hall, 1829), 1.



Figure 3: John Leech, “Socrates jumping Jim Crow,” *Comic Latin Grammar*, 68.

Hanging above his head is a basket, alluding to the comic depiction of the philosopher in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*. Socrates in the *Comic Grammar* does not wear blackface, which would suggest that the notion of the philosopher dancing is the source of comedy, rather than the satire of African-American culture. And yet the image is clearly intended to provoke by reducing the greatest thinker of the ancient philosophical tradition to a mere stage performer.

It is not clear whether Leigh or Leech had ever witnessed a minstrel show or simply based their dancing Socrates on Jim Crow images circulating during the early nineteenth century. Blackface minstrelsy entered Britain in the 1830s as a solo performance genre and became in the decades thereafter a widespread

⁵³ Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 67.

form of theatrical entertainment involving an entire troupe.⁵⁴ Thomas “Daddy” Rice first performed his signature “Jump Jim Crow” song in the Surrey and Adelphi Theatres in 1836, only four years before the publication of the *Grammar*. A market of “Jim Crow” merchandise—hats, cigars, and spin-off books and songs—flourished as the caricature of the American South caught fire across all social classes. What British audiences made of the racial humor and ethnic stereotyping in such performances is difficult to assess. Some scholars have evaluated the genre as a response to slavery abolition laws in the British Empire, while others have examined the popularity of “Jump Jim Crow” in light of its innovative dance style.⁵⁵ In the context of the *Comic Grammar*, the invocation of blackface performance appears less concerned with racial humor than debasing the Classics.⁵⁶ Race does play a factor in other illustrations of famous Roman figures as archetypes from minstrel shows. The chapter on active and passive verbs show us Brutus and Caesar in the style of “Zip Coon” the black dandy (fig. 4). And in the chapter on Latin adverbs, Caesar is depicted once more as a strapping black man “astonishing” white natives (fig. 5). The question is not merely whether these images encapsulate prejudices of the period (certainly they do), but for whom they were designed. The *Comic Grammar* deploys racial humor as the lowest common denominator. While there is no evidence on contemporary responses to the racial humor of the *Comic Grammar* within its surviving *testimonia*, we can identify one case study of a reader anticipated by this “first tier” humor. William Thomas Fernie, a physician of late Victorian England, published a number of manuals on wellness and medicinal treatments. His books, bearing titles like *Herbal Simples* and *Precious Stones for Curative Wear*, offered advice on the use of plants and gems in everyday ailments. But they also showcase the breadth of Fernie’s literary interests. His manual on *Animal Simples* (1899) features a quotation from Shakespeare’s *King Henry IV* on the title page; the text within quotes from medieval medical treatises, Victorian novelists, and translated passages of Latin (apparently from periodicals and interlinear editions). Fernie also uses Latin from the *Comic Grammar* in two quotations. In the first instance – a chapter on venison – Fernie quotes a line of culinary wisdom:

⁵⁴ Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2008), 4–15.

⁵⁵ On the former, see Robert Nowatzki, *Representing African Americans in Transatlantic Abolitionism and Blackface Minstrelsy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 42–79. For the latter, see Pickering, *Blackface*, 9–10 and Robert Hornback, “Extravagant and Wheeling Strangers’: Early Blackface Dancing Fools, Racial Impersonation, and the Limits of Identification,” *Exemplaria* 20, no. 2 (2008): 197–222.

⁵⁶ Contrast this with the representation of slavery in burlesque adaptations of Homer, as described by Bryant Davies, *Victorian Epic Burlesques*, 22–23.



Figure 4: John Leech, “Brutus and Caesar,” *Comic Latin Grammar*, 40.



Figure 5: John Leech, “Caesar Astonishing the Natives,” *Comic Latin Grammar*, 57.

“*Quod olfactu foedum est, idem est esu turpe,*” says the *Comic Latin Grammar*; that which is foul to be smelled is also nasty to be eaten (except venison, onions, and cheese).⁵⁷

The Latin quote, its translation, and the parenthetical statement are taken directly from the *Comic Grammar*, as Fernie cites. What is striking here is that Fernie does not need the Latin quote to justify his recommendation of venison; the phrase he requires is “except venison, onions, and cheese.” I suspect that he merges the translation and the parenthetical statement because he does not know enough Latin to recognize that the clause of exception is not in the Latin quote. This is further suggested by his alternation of the punctuation of the quote. In the *Comic Grammar*, the clause of exception is printed as its own sentence; in Fernie, it is placed in parentheses. Either Fernie cannot read Latin, or he has changed the formatting of the sentence so that the Latin would appear to support his claims to someone who cannot translate Latin.

That Fernie desires the appearance of erudition without possessing a genuine knowledge of Latin, is suggested by his second quotation from the *Comic Grammar* in a chapter on chicken meat. Here he advises the reader on which parts of the bird are most medicinal and explains: “Quoth the *Comic Latin Grammar*: ‘*Pectoribus inhians, molles en deserit alas,*’ which means, as translated by an eminently practical schoolboy, ‘Intent upon the breast, lo! he deserts the tender wings’.”⁵⁸ The quote, which indeed appears in the *Comic Grammar*’s chapter on

⁵⁷ William Fernie, *Animal Simples: Approved for Modern Uses of Cure* (Bristol: John Wright, 1899), 505. The quote is from Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 125.

⁵⁸ Fernie, *Animal*, 185.

prosody,⁵⁹ has some vague relevance to the avian advice in the medical book. There is even a hint of irony in Fernie's reference to the "eminently practical schoolboy." But the physician does not seem to recognize the deeper philological joke of this line, which spoofs a verse from Virgil's *Aeneid*. The correct verse in Latin is memorable to schoolmasters for its unusual lengthening of *ūs* in *pectoribus* and reads: "pectoribus inhians, spirantia consulit exta ("gazing into their chests, [Dido] consults the breathing entrails," *Aen.* 4.64). The *Comic Grammar*'s sophisticated joke is to take a reverent line of a religious haruspicy in Virgil and transform it into dinner-table humor. The textbook reimagines Dido as a diner who "considers the breasts" of a cooked fowl and then "abandons the tender" wing meat. Fernie has likely selected this Latin passage from the *Comic Grammar* because he believes it to be a relevant Classical allusion to chickens. In so doing, he reveals himself to be as much as much the butt of joke as Virgil.

Leigh and Leech, of course, could never have anticipated that their Latin jests would wind up in the pages of a medical volume. Their prologue advertised the text as light Latin learning for young minds. And the degree to which Fernie regarded these quotations as a source of Classical authority is also unclear. Perhaps he included them as curiosities or entertaining snippets in order to balance out his use of weightier authors like Sextus Placitus and Bartholomeus Anglicus. Fernie nonetheless represents the sort of reader that the *Comic Grammar* targets with its first-tier humor, and here "targets" carries both a commercial and critical connotation. On the one hand, the text as printed by Charles Tilt targets a commercial market of aspiring middle-class readers. As Skilton has argued for nineteenth-century fiction, "Plenty of men with a thorough Classical training existed who could still use their Latin and Greek actively, but they did not keep a mid-Victorian novelist in business."⁶⁰ Fernie is precisely the sort of reader whom Leigh and Leech might envision as their purchasing audience: socially-mobile men and women who valued the trappings of gentility. While this group possessed a shaky command of Classics at best, a few lines of Latin with a witty translation offered a path into polite society. But the *Comic Grammar* also targets such readers in a critical way, as sources of humor themselves. Toby the Learned Pig and Socrates jumping Jim Crow embody this popularization of the Classics: they were both participants in and parodies of this process. In this way, the *Comic Grammar* takes aim at precisely the sort of reader like Fernie, who has the pretensions to know Latin without the foundation of a Classical education.

4 Dog Latin

If indeed the *Comic Grammar* proved the commercial success that reviewers predicted, then the book almost certainly had more buyers in the mold of William

⁵⁹ Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 185.

⁶⁰ Skilton, "Schoolboy," 43.

Fernie than of Latin schoolmasters. But while many of its jokes were designed for easy laughs, there nevertheless exists a more sophisticated tier of humor that only those with an educated understanding of the Classics may “unlock.” In the previous section, for instance, we encountered a spoof on a line from *Aeneid* 4: a parody that Fernie appears to have missed in his quotation, but one that a capable reader of Virgil might well have remembered from meter drills. This section examines more jokes of this sophisticated tier in order to analyze how the *Comic Grammar* enforces the social boundaries of the Classically educated, at the same time as it purports to facilitate the process of learning Latin.

The insider jokes of the *Comic Grammar* require some reading between the lines of the text. But for a Latinist, allusions and parodies lie in plain sight. The first chapter of the book, for instance, presents its audience with an immediate test by which true students of Latin may identify themselves. This chapter divides the branches of the language into three:

Of Latin there are three kinds: Latin Proper, or good Latin; Dog Latin; and Thieves’ Latin. Latin Proper, or good Latin, is the language which was spoken by the ancient Romans. Dog Latin is the Latin in which boys compose their first verses and themes, and which is occasionally employed at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, but much more frequently at Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Glasgow. Thieves’ Latin, more commonly known by the name of slang, is much in use among a certain class of conveyancers, who disregard the distinctions of *meum* and *tuum*. Furthermore, it constitutes a great part of the familiar discourse of most young men in modern times, particularly lawyers’ clerks and medical students.⁶¹

Neophytes will see little more in this passage than a mockery of philology and may take a special pleasure in learning that the hallowed halls of Britain’s universities teach only “dog Latin.” But initiates will recognize a parody of a literary model: the opening lines of the *De Bello Gallico*. Just as in this passage, Caesar begins his treatise by explaining that “Gaul as a whole is divided into three parts,” and then proceeds to survey the inhabitants of each territory in more detail. Part of the irony in the *Comic Grammar*’s parody of the *De Bello Gallico* is that Caesar crafted this introduction for an audience with little personal experience of Gaul. His first chapter concerns itself with geography and definitions; he provides a mental map of river boundaries and mountain ranges that Romans have not seen. He sketches the characteristics of the individual tribes so that we may better understand the actors in his narrative. The *Comic Grammar* has selected Caesar’s introduction as a model for precisely these qualities: the text does not presume any foreknowledge of its subject matter. But in the same breath, it deploys this allusion as a dog whistle to Latinist readers that a second layer of humor is afoot.

⁶¹ Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 15.

The *De Bello Gallico* was and remains a standard school text in Latin classes, both because of the fame of its author and its reputation among the ancients for its prose style. Caesar's name appears in Erasmus' *De Ratione Studii* (1511) alongside Cicero and Sallust as the three most important prose authors for a young man to read. In the decades before Leigh and Leech, we find the opening lines of *De Bello Gallico* included as reading specimens in the *Leeds Grammar School Magazine* (1828) and the *Quarterly Journal of Education* (1831). The second class of Thomas Key's Latin program at the University of London took examinations on *De Bello Gallico* in 1829.⁶² Leigh could therefore be reasonably certain that the formulation of Caesar's work would be recognizable to those who had studied Latin in school and that it would evoke memories of slogging through its complex subordinate clauses.

Caesar is not the only school author to undergo this treatment in the *Comic Grammar*. In a lesson on locatives, Cicero's great counsel that *parvi sunt foris arma, nisi est consilium domi* ("weapons are of little value abroad unless there is good judgment at home") is co-opted as a crack against the Canadians.⁶³ Sallust's sober account of Catiline becomes a parable of populist disgruntlement: "*pulvere nitrato Catilina senatum subruere voluit*. Catiline wished to blow up Parliament. Catiline was a regular Guy."⁶⁴ The love story of the *Aeneid* is used to teach students about the use of *opus* with the ablative case, but also about marriage contracts: "Dido had need of a husband. Aeneas had need of a dinner."⁶⁵ Cato is castigated as a grump, and Ovid is reimagined as an opera-lover.⁶⁶ The canonical authors from one's childhood Latin classes reappear as fleshed-out personalities, familiar and resented. "All names of the male kind you masculine call, *ut sunt* (for example), *Divorum*, Mars, Bacchus, Apollo, the deities all, And Cato, *Virgilius, virorum*. Latin's a bore, and bothers me sore, Oh how I wish that my lesson was o'er." These types of jokes—many of them puns or cheap shots against polite society—elicit little more than groans from a modern readership. But this humor only seems trivial to those who know such stories prior to reading the *Comic Grammar*. Without a foundation in the Classics, the reader cannot appreciate Catiline as a predecessor to Guy Fawkes or the idea of Aeneas playing the lover in exchange for a hot meal. Another possibility is that Leigh designs these juvenile jokes to resemble the tenor of classroom humor, thus transporting the reader back to the boyish pranks of grammar school.

The most important model that the *Comic Grammar* parodies, however, is no work of Classical literature but of contemporary pedagogy. *An Introduction to the Latin Tongue* was first published in 1758 for the students of Eton College and

⁶² As described in the awarding of prizes in "The London University," *The Athenaeum and Literary Chronicle* 90, July 15, 1829, 447.

⁶³ Cicero, *Off.* 1.76: *parvi enim sunt foris arma, nisi est consilium domi*.

⁶⁴ Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 114.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 71 and 124 respectively.

quickly became a favorite among Anglophone teachers. This Eton grammar takes a mirthless approach to Latin; in the place of pictures are complex charts and lists with mechanical explanations.⁶⁷ The *Comic Grammar* imitates its sober form and content, but with a satirical twist, as a comparison of select passages with an 1833 edition of the Eton grammar reveals:⁶⁸

<i>An Introduction to the Latin Tongue</i> (1833)	<i>The Comic Latin Grammar</i> (1840)
The nominative case cometh before the verb, and answereth to the question ‘who?’ or ‘what?’ as, ‘Who teaches?’ <i>magister docet</i> , the master teaches. (p. 3)	The nominative case comes before the verb [...]. It answers to the question, who or what; as in, Who jaws? <i>magister jurgatur</i> , the master jaws. (p. 22)
Of verbs, there are two voices: 1, The Active, ending in <i>o</i> ; as, <i>amo</i> , I love; 2, The Passive, ending in <i>or</i> ; as <i>amor</i> , I am loved. (p. 20)	Verbs have two voices...The active ending in <i>o</i> —as <i>amo</i> , I love. The passive ending in <i>or</i> —as <i>amor</i> , I am loved. In these two words is contained the terrestrial <i>summum bonum</i> —In short, love beats everything – cock-fighting not excepted. <i>Amo! Amor!</i> (p. 38)
The relative agreeth with its antecedent in gender, number, and person; as, <i>Vir sapit, qui pauca loquitur</i> . The man is wise, <i>who</i> speaketh few words. (p. 69)	The relative and antecedent hit off very well together; they agree one with the other in gender, number, and person, as <i>Qui plenos haurit cyathos, madidusque quiescit,</i> <i>Ille bonam degit vitam, moriturque factus.</i> “He who drinks plenty, and goes to bed mellow, Lives as he ought to do, and dies a jolly fellow.” (p. 70)

⁶⁷ On the authority and use of the Eton grammar at the turn of the nineteenth century, see Christopher Stray, *Classics in Britain: Scholarship, Education, and Publishing 1800-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 332.

⁶⁸ Dozens of editions of the Eton grammar were published after the first in 1758, with slight variations in content and title. I have chosen this edition because of its proximity to the date of the publication of the *Comic Grammar*: John Davis, *An Introduction to the Latin Tongue, Compiled for the Use of Eton College* (Belfast: Simms and McIntyre, 1833).

For most of the topics and sample sentences in the “straight” Eton grammar, the *Comic Grammar* has a humorous equivalent. Its method of parody is to replicate basic lessons of the Eton grammar but then fill the sample passages with jokes. In creating an almost chapter-by-chapter spoof of the Eton text, the *Comic Grammar* communicates to its audience in several ways. First, Leigh demonstrates his own mastery of Latin language by using the premier textbook on its grammar. Parody marks an elevated form of humor because its success depends on the author’s command of the original. In these jokes, Leigh shows himself an adept classicist.

Second, by selecting the Eton grammar as his exemplar, Leigh mocks the pinnacle of Classical pedagogy in Victorian England. The Eton grammar had earned this privileged position among Latin textbooks by its status as the dominant grammar in English-speaking schools. Adapted from the *Lilly’s Grammar*, the Eton grammar became the most widely-used text in eighteenth-century British public schools.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the grammar maintained this status for nearly a century by opposing the composition of new standardized Greek and Latin grammars: into the 1830s, Eton would endorse no new texts or revised editions except for those published at Eton.⁷⁰ For this reason, Leigh could assume that the Eton grammar would be a successful medium by which to communicate to a Classically-educated audience. A Victorian reader who had studied Latin in school had likely done so with the Eton grammar in hand. Eton College’s well-known opposition to the development of new grammars may also have been a motivation for the composition of the *Comic Grammar*. One way to thumb a nose at the Etonian resistance to newfangled grammars was to compose a perfect parody of its lessons: the teachings replicate Eton’s concept for concept, but take creative liberties with the Latin examples and translations.

The parodies of Eton in the *Comic Grammar* aspire not merely to be funny, but also subversive to the former’s social messaging. The Eton grammar includes sample sentences from Classical Latin authors, but far more are contemporary moral maxims composed in Latin. In the parallel passages above on relative pronouns and antecedents, the Eton grammar describes the wise man as one who can hold his silence; for the same syntactical concept, the *Comic Grammar* celebrates the jovial drunkard. While the Eton grammar teaches the degrees of adjectives by emphasizing virtues (*doctus*, *doctior*, *doctissimus*), the *Comic Grammar* teaches the same lesson by ranking grammars according to their charm: “The Eton Latin Grammar is *lepidus* [...]. The Charter House Grammar, is *lepidior* [...]. The Comic

⁶⁹ On the composition of the *Eton Latin Grammar* and Eton’s royal patronage in the late eighteenth century, see Christopher Stray, “Paradigms of Social Order: The Politics of Latin Grammar in 19th-Century England,” *Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistic Ideas Bulletin* 13 (1989): 14–16.

⁷⁰ Stray, “Paradigms,” 17: “In 1835, Thomas Arnold tried to interest the headmasters of Eton and Harrow in [producing a standard public school grammar], suggesting that each school should contribute a section, but the attempt came to nothing.”

Latin Grammar is *lepidissimus*.”⁷¹ In this way, Leigh creates a topsy-turvy vision of the Eton grammar, in which the pedagogical architecture remains the same but the values conveyed through that structure are quite the reverse. What the educated reader quickly recognizes is that this parody has little to do with Latin; mockery fixates upon the ideological import of learning the Classics and Latin’s status as a marker of gentility. For “insiders” in this Latinist tradition, the *Comic Grammar* demonstrates how Latin can also be used as a marker of satirical wit and social subversion.

Although the parodies of the Eton grammar construct a circle of “insiders” who recognize the *Comic Grammar*’s pedagogical model, Leigh does not exactly disguise the relationship between the two. The name “Eton” is planted on fifteen occasions throughout the text, hinting at an antagonistic relationship between the book and its model. In only one of these instances is the reference to Eton openly derisive: “*exitio est avidis alvus pueris*. The belly is the destruction of greedy boys. Particularly those of *Eton College*.” In most other places, the author cites the Eton grammar as an authority. To learn more information about irregular comparative adjectives, for example, the *Comic Grammar* recommends the reader enumerate “the exceptions to this rule, mentioned in the Eton Grammar.”⁷² In other cases, Leigh quotes a sample sentence and translation from the Eton grammar, and then appends a humorous observation immediately thereafter, as in: “*Urbi pater est, urbique maritus*.—Gram. Eton. He is the father of the city, and the husband of the city. He must have been a pretty fellow, whoever he was.”⁷³ These encouragements for the reader to consult or compare with the Eton grammar may be interpreted as further signaling by the author about his own education. But in the gestures towards Eton (“we have no wish to detract in any way from the merit of the illustrious poet in the Eton Grammar”⁷⁴) the reader also detects sarcasm. Etonian Latin is both the target and the medium of this more sophisticated tier of humor. In fact, a later edition of the text in Leigh’s compilation, *Paul Prendergast* (1858), was explicitly titled *The Eton Comic Grammar*.

Just as in the case of conceptualizing “first-tier” readers of the *Comic Grammar*, it is helpful here to consider an example of a Classically-trained insider whom Leigh and Leech target with this deeper critique of Latin *through* Latin. Lewis Carroll, the Latinate penname of Victorian author Charles Dodgson, was another of the earliest known owners of the *Comic Grammar*. A first edition of the textbook, which was published when Carroll was only eight years of age, was sold with his estate after his death in 1898. We do not know when or how Carroll acquired a copy of the book; he may have received it as a gift during his early years at the Richmond Grammar School or purchased it himself during his lectureship at the University of Oxford. In either case, Carroll was an accomplished Latinist. His

⁷¹ Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 33–34.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

first literary compositions were in Latin verse, the earliest an 1844 poem about the setting of the sun.⁷⁵ But Carroll also had a knack for Latin wordplay and schoolboy humor of the sort we see in the *Comic Grammar*. In 1853, he wrote a mock-epic entitled “The Ligniad” for his friend George Woodhouse, a double-pun on *Iliad* and the Latin word for “wood” (*lignum*) as an allusion to his friend’s name.⁷⁶ His 1888 poem, “A Lesson in Latin” puns on the linguistic similarity of *amare* (“to love”) and *amaris* (“bitter”) to indicate that the most important lesson he and his peers learned in Latin class was that love hurts.⁷⁷

Carroll never mentions the *Comic Grammar* by name in his writings, but he may have included an allusion to the text in his Alice books. In the second chapter of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the heroine encounters a mouse and attempts to communicate, twice crying out in the vocative, “O Mouse!” Carroll explains this formal address in parentheses, noting:

(Alice thought this must be the right way of speaking to a mouse: she had never done such a thing before, but she remembered having seen in her brother’s Latin Grammar, ‘A mouse—of a mouse—to a mouse—a mouse—O mouse!’)⁷⁸

When Alice’s address in English proves unsuccessful, she tries with the opening line from her French textbook (“Ou est ma chatte?”). Because the line of French has been identified with a real French textbook from the nineteenth century, Selwyn Goodacre postulated that Alice’s reference to a Latin grammar must also point the way to a real Latin book, and identified this as the *Comic Grammar* in Carroll’s possession.⁷⁹ As Goodacre notes, the noun “mouse” (*mus, muris*) is not used as a paradigm in Victorian grammars because of its grammatical irregularity. But in Alice’s glance at her brother’s grammar, she may have misread the Latin word *musa* (“muse”) as “mouse,” and thus determined “o mouse” to be the correct vocative address for such a creature.

The *Comic Grammar* does include a funny noun declension of *musa musae* in the form of rhyming couplets: “*Musa musae*, the Gods were at tea, *Musae musam*, eating raspberry jam.”⁸⁰ If Carroll owned a copy of the textbook at this time, he might have used the poem as inspiration for Alice’s address. But there are two possible challenges to Goodacre’s theory: the first is that the *Comic Grammar* never includes the vocative translation of the noun “o muse!” that Alice has in mind during her conversation with the mouse. The second is that many other Victorian grammars use *musa* as a paradigm (although not the Eton grammar and

⁷⁵ The poem appears in Stuart Dodgson, *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1989), 23.

⁷⁶ Edward Wakeling, *Lewis Carroll: The Man and His Circle* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 28–29.

⁷⁷ Dodgson, *The Life*, 276–77.

⁷⁸ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1866), 24.

⁷⁹ Selwyn Goodacre, “In Search of Alice’s Brother’s Latin Grammar,” *Jabberwocky* 4, no. 2 (1975): 27–30.

⁸⁰ Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 29.

few English grammars published prior to the *Comic Grammar*). Carroll may therefore have taken the idea from a different text entirely, or simply from the common usage of *musa* as a paradigm in nineteenth-century Latin classes. One possible point in favor of Goodacre’s reading lies in Carroll’s famous wordplay on the Latin *jam* in his second Alice book, *Through the Looking Glass*. Here the White Queen chides Alice that she cannot have jam today because, “The rule is, jam tomorrow and jam yesterday – but never jam *to-day*.”⁸¹ This odd rule in the White Queen’s kingdom has nothing to do with edible jam, but with the Latin adverb *jam* which can express the meaning “now,” but only in past or future time.⁸² If indeed Carroll had a fondness for the *musa* poem in the *Comic Grammar*, this notion of a wordplay on *jam* and jam may have come from that same poem, which imagines the gods “eating raspberry jam” at a tea party. But this hypothesis remains speculative at best.

Whether or not Carroll used the *Comic Grammar* in his Alice novels, his knack for Latin wordplay exemplifies the qualities that the Leigh envisioned for his most educated audience. The textbook appeals to readers who possess both the facility in Latin and the whimsy to enjoy its satire. As a buyer or recipient of the textbook, Carroll did not come to the *Comic Grammar* for Latin instruction. For readers of this tier, Leigh’s textbook serves not to teach but to recall the memory of Latin teaching and, in so doing, to reinforce a sense of belonging. It reminds Carroll and readers like him of their membership in an elite circle of young men who attended the best schools and received a Classical education, in which Latin served as a code of social recognition. But with its parodies of the Eton grammar, the *Comic Grammar* also advances a critique of this practice. Elite groups invariably disguise the mechanisms by which they achieved and maintain their power in the vestments of gentility. Leigh in turn holds up these disguises to the light and reveals them for what they are: the pretensions of a bygone era. Gentlemen who communicate their status through the purple passages of a long-dead literature are made to confront the silliness and inutility of continuing this institution.

Conclusion

In the introduction to the *Comic Grammar*, Percival Leigh defends his humorous treatment of the Latin language on the basis of his historical moment. Tracing time from Hesiod’s Golden Age to the modern era, he claims that comicality has heretofore emerged “in isolated sparks and flashes.”⁸³ But at last in Victorian England, silliness tinges every innovation: railroads and air balloons “have something

⁸¹ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1872), 94.

⁸² Angelika Zirker, “Alice was not surprised: (Un)surprises in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice Books*,” *Connotations* 14 (2004): 26-28.

⁸³ Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 9.

funny about them.” The medical profession is a tragi-comedy of quackery and quasi-scientific dissent. The British legislature has made a mockery of the law. How, in such an environment, can teachers expect students of Latin “to learn what they cannot laugh at”? Leigh’s survey of comedy across the ages also touches on poetic geniuses past, crediting Horace’s *Satires* as “comical enough” and imagining the laughter at Shakespeare “performing the part of the Ghost, in his own play of *Hamlet*.” He espouses a proto-Darwinian theory of literary humor, in which the comic strains of previous generations have at last culminated in the authors of nineteenth-century Britain. The moment has arrived in which the Classical tradition can be funny for teachers and students alike.

Leigh’s theory of comedic evolution could not, of course, be substantiated even if it had been proposed with serious intent – and serious intent was antithetical to the very essence of his textbook. But I suspect that amidst the silliness of his pedagogical project Leigh correctly identified his era as a critical moment in which the ridicule of curricular conventions could take place. The *Comic Grammar* was composed and published at a turning point in the history of Classical education: a juncture when the social value of Latin remained high as its practical value plummeted. The British market for grammar books and interlinear texts expanded during the first half of the nineteenth century in response to an unforeseen readership that desired not to master Latin, but to achieve the appearance of a Classical education. Self-starters like William Fernie needed a few clever lines to ease their passage into polite society; longstanding members of the literati like Lewis Carroll took an “insider” pleasure at memorializing schoolboy lessons learned and largely forgotten. The *Comic Grammar* welcomes both types of readers, and this paper has disentangled the different techniques by which it appealed to both. But I have also tried to demonstrate that the satirical lens of the *Comic Grammar* did not stop at the Latin language. It swept with equal interest over the institutions and professions that perpetuated class divisions on the basis of Classical education. It invites novice readers to reconsider the rationale and practicality of learning Latin for appearance’s sake; it asks Eton veterans to acknowledge the silliness of using Classical tags as a shibboleth of intellectual status. If there is one tag that the *Comic Grammar* truly embraced and that encapsulates its parodic moral, however, we find it waiting in the chapter on adverbs: “satis eloquentiae, sapientiae parum.”⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Leigh, *Comic Latin Grammar*, 135 quoting Sall. *Cat.* 5.4: “Plenty of eloquence, not enough wisdom.”

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