

# Latin and Power: Warnings and Opportunities from the Long History of the Language<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This essay explores the interrelationships of Latin and power over the history of the acquisition of the language and in the modern classroom. I argue firstly that a belief has persisted for two millennia that Latin possesses an intrinsic power. Françoise Waquet in *Latin or the Empire of a Sign* has demonstrated a close association between Latin and power from the Renaissance to the early twentieth century. This paper shows that such beliefs hold also for antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the contemporary world, so long as we focus not on elites but on groups excluded from the educational mainstream. Such people have tended to sense an intrinsic power in the language irrespective of the actual meaning of words. Their beliefs are reflected in the use of nonsense-Latin in spheres as diverse as medieval magical spells, Renaissance satire, and modern advertising. Secondly, I suggest ways in which teachers, rather than encouraging such mistaken beliefs, might draw on the long history of the language to empower their students. The use of texts that give voice to otherwise marginalized groups, such as colonial subjects, women, and pupils, serve to challenge the abusive power structures that have traditionally been associated with Latin. What is more, the vast temporal and cultural scope of Latin offers unparalleled opportunities for the enhancement of students' communicative abilities, as they learn both to understand and adopt the perspectives of writers across an extraordinarily wide range of texts and genres.

## KEYWORDS

Latin, power, education, marginalized groups, magic, second language acquisition, ESL, benefits of Latin, motivations for learning Latin, communication, reading, writing, fluency

A Latin teacher's greatest resource is the past. And I'm not just referring to the texts, cultures, and artifacts with which students engage. Ideally, teachers should be aware of the history of Latin pedagogy, whose successes and failures offer valuable support – or salutary warnings – to those attempting to improve language instruction in the modern classroom. It is in the hope of highlighting some of the dangers and opportunities inherent in Latin language teaching that I offer this paper. Firstly, I shall highlight potential hazards in Latin pedagogy by means of a survey of the often misguided motivations of learners of the language throughout history. I hope to show that, while elites have time and again justified learning Latin on utilitarian grounds, those excluded from the educational mainstream have, in their interactions with the language, consistently treated it as a repository of power that can be harnessed to control the uninitiated. Secondly, I would like to suggest how teachers nowadays, drawing on the resources of the past, might avoid perpetuating such attitudes. Far from using the language to subjugate and exclude, they can draw on the long history of Latin to empower learners from marginalized groups. Instructors can harness the many voices of Latin not only to challenge the abusive power structures that have been too often associ-

<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to John Gruber-Miller, Christopher Stray, Elizabeth Archibald, Jonathan Gnoza and my wife, Elena Poiata, for their advice on this paper.

ated with the language, but also to enhance students' powers of communication and understanding; they can do so, moreover, in a manner consonant with the insights of Stephen Krashen, the focus of this special section.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF MOTIVATIONS FOR LEARNING LATIN: BELIEF IN THE LANGUAGE'S UTILITY OR ITS INTRINSIC POWER

Most histories of motivations for learning Latin have focused on mainstream channels for the acquisition of the language. When we consider such a history, we find a succession of attempts to justify education in the language in terms of its usefulness in fulfilling certain life-goals of the learner. In the Western Roman Empire, acquisition of Latin was a prerequisite for provincial peoples in their efforts to interact with Roman administrators. In the east, while Greek served as a *lingua franca*, Latin remained the language of the very top level of the imperial hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> After the fall of the empire, Latin endured in the west as a language of learning and religion, serving as the idiom of the western church and the professions. In the Middle Ages, the learning of Latin was directed toward the acquisition of skills in rhetoric and dialectic, deemed necessary for pursuits such as theological inquiry and legal argumentation (Fried, esp. essays by Fried and Luscombe). Renaissance Latin-learners, on the other hand, pursued the more worldly goal of persuasive writing and speech in civic contexts, serving princes and plutocrats (Grafton and Jardine); education therefore emphasized the study of Roman orators and the honing of rhetorical skills through the imitation of their works (Black 331ff.). The language endured as the medium of learning and the professions into the Enlightenment, despite challenges to the usefulness of prioritizing study of an ossified second language over the contemporary languages of Europe (e.g. d'Alembert).

Latin declined in the professions under the pressure of forces such as the nationalistic promotion of vernacular languages and the threat to traditional elites from a new, capitalist bourgeoisie. In this climate, educators felt compelled to rebrand Latin as a means of achieving non-vocational, intellectual goals. In the early twentieth century, it was claimed that Latin strengthened the logical faculties of the learner. Instruction therefore focused on the language's formal, grammatical aspects (Stray). At this point, an education in Latin was about as far distant from Stephen Krashen's ideals as it could be. Krashen urges educators to prioritize the teaching of fluency in a foreign language over the conscious learning of linguistic forms; as he would see it, to conceive of grammar as the goal of instruction is to put the cart before the horse, or rather to abandon the horse – fluency – altogether. More recently, in a manner that would be more pleasing to Krashen, Latin-language education has focused on the acquisition of reading skills. The *Cambridge Latin Course (CLC)*, for instance, aims to teach grammar inductively, in the context of cartoon strips and longer passages. A secondary goal, which reflects the concerns of John Gruber-Miller's paper in this section, is the acquisition of cultural literacy; in the *CLC* and other coursebooks the learning of the ancient language is billed as a means to engage with an alien culture. Such justifications for learning Latin – to foster reading skills and cultural understanding – continue to be offered in classrooms today.

However, when we consider the history of those excluded from the educational mainstream, but who have nevertheless been attracted to Latin, we find a very different set of motivations for learning the language, which may be a good deal less familiar to modern teachers and

<sup>2</sup> As James Adams has shown in the context of Roman Egypt, while Greek was the language of high culture, Latin was treated as a "super-high" language for official documentation, the military, and communication with high officials, including the emperor (Adams 527ff.).

scholars alike. I would argue that the enduring appeal of Latin to such marginalized groups has stemmed from its role in asymmetrical social structures – its role as a language of power.

To prepare the ground for such an exploration, we might consider recent work on the power structures reflected in and perhaps even promulgated by the teaching of English as a second language. Robert Phillipson in his influential book, *Linguistic Imperialism*, argues that English-language teaching is enmeshed in neo-colonialist projects of Britain and America, which seek to exert influence over other countries through the soft power of educational aid. Language is not to be understood as a politically neutral aspect of Anglo-American culture; rather, the teaching of English around the world serves the ends of English-speaking countries, especially the United States and the United Kingdom, which seek to maintain and strengthen existing power structures whose apex they occupy.<sup>3</sup> Building on Phillipson's findings, Alistair Pennycook observes that in the former British colonies and the contemporary American territories English is frequently the only passport to power, but is restricted to a small elite that holds sway over those familiar only with local languages and cultures. Conversely, within the United States and the United Kingdom persistent attempts are being made to induct all into the ranks of English-speakers.<sup>4</sup> However, as Ofelia García observes, the success of Spanish-speaking businesses in Florida, coupled with the enduring poverty of much of the Latino population even after acquiring fluency in English, would seem – at least in the United States – to problematize the notion that a knowledge of English necessarily empowers the learner.<sup>5</sup>

English, then, has real power in the world, power that is often jealously guarded by its possessors. And this is a position very similar to that which Latin once held as the language of the rulers of the Roman Empire. As we noted already, Latin was learned by subject peoples in the hope of joining the discourse of power, much as English is learned nowadays in the hope of advancement. Writers such as Tacitus, however, were under no illusions regarding the realities of the Roman culture that was being imposed on provincial subjects:

*Iam vero principum filios liberalibus artibus erudire, et ingenia Britannorum studiis Gallorum anteferre, ut qui modo linguam Romanam abnuebant, eloquentiam concupiscerent. Inde etiam habi-*

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3 Although some have regarded Phillipson's work as reductive, for instance in the lack of agency that it ascribes to politicians and educationalists in Third World countries (Holborow ch. 3), his findings have had the welcome consequence of alerting scholars to the political dimensions of language. (It might also be objected that this paper, too, shows insufficient concern for the agency of those excluded from mainstream educational channels; I would counter that a perception of the intrinsic power of Latin was the one consistent factor that attracted such people to the language, but that it does not in any way account for all aspects of the experience of learners at particular points in time.)

4 The UK government, for instance, operates tests for those hoping to become citizens, including English-language tests ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/4391710.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/4391710.stm)). Prime Minister David Cameron has recently suggested that jobseekers who fail to learn English should lose their unemployment benefits (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/8761311/Learn-English-to-get-a-job-or-lose-benefits-says-Cameron.html>). Both sites were accessed on 24 December 2012.

5 Further analysis of the interrelationships between language learning and power structures in ESL teaching is to be found in Fairclough, esp. 233-47. Bourdieu's notion of "linguistic capital" is also of relevance to our discussion of language-learning and power: an official language is imposed through education, which then becomes the valued idiom in the marketplace of linguistic interactions. This idiom is the preserve of social elites, the possessors of linguistic capital, while lower classes are excluded from it (Bourdieu 43ff.). Interestingly for this paper (see below), Bourdieu finds magic to be a productive metaphor for the effective use of language by those in authority – academic deans, churchmen, or doctors – and he compares the authoritative use of modern prestige idioms to that of Latin in earlier ages (Bourdieu 75-6, 80, 105-6, 107ff., 119-20, 208, 221, 224).

*tus nostri honor et frequens toga; paulatimque discessum ad delenda vitiorum, porticus et balneas et conviviorum elegantiam. Idque apud imperitos humanitas vocabatur, cum pars servitutis esset. (Agricola 21.2)*

*Now indeed we educated the sons of chieftains in the liberal arts, and gave preference to British talents over the learning of the Gauls, with the result that those who recently rejected the Roman language desired eloquence. Thenceforth our clothing was held in honor and togas were common; little by little they descended into the blandishments of vice – porticoes, baths and the refinements of feasts. And this was called “culture” among the subjugated when it was part of their servitude.<sup>6</sup>*

According to Tacitus, then, the Latin language is but one of many supposed benefits of Roman occupation advertised to the Britons, which in fact ensured their subjugation to the imperial power.

After the fall of the empire, something odd happened. While the political power of Rome fractured into a patchwork of independent realms, people continued to treat the language that had previously been associated with Roman dominance as a repository of power. This power endured in the liturgies of the Western church, where Latin persisted even when local populations no longer properly understood it; but a sense of the language’s intrinsic power was nowhere more clearly in evidence than in the realm of magic, the dark underbelly of religious spheres, where the language was employed to cure the sick (Kieckhefer, *Magic*, 56ff.), harm enemies (*ibid.* 80-85), and compel spirits (Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, 69-95, 126-53).

In medieval times, magic was practiced by clergy and laypeople, and both groups harnessed the power of Latin in their spells. Clerics fashioned incantations from fragments of holy scripture in the hope of accessing the spirits, both kindly and malign, that were alluded to in mainstream church doctrine. For instance, a fifteenth-century handbook in the Bavarian State Library focuses on demonic magic, which was most often the purview of wayward clergy, and is written entirely in Latin, a further indication of clerical authorship (Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, 35-8; Kieckhefer, *Magic*, 6ff.).<sup>7</sup> Other books, by contrast, such as the “Leechbook of Bald” and the *Lacnunga*, both from the eleventh century, or the Wolfsthurn book of magic, from the fifteenth, mix Latin with vernacular languages and gibberish; for that reason they are more likely to be the work of laypeople (Kieckhefer, *Magic*, 3ff., 64ff.). For instance, the Wolfsthurn cure for toothache consists of “a few snippets of religious vocabulary... and then the unrelated counsel that a person suffering this affliction should write a mixture of Latin and nonsense (‘rex, pax, nax in Cristo filio suo’) on his cheek” (*ibid.* 4). The words *rex* and *pax*, perfectly good Latin lexemes, are joined by a nonsense word, *nax*, in a phrase that makes only the vaguest of sense. For a more serious condition, possession by a demon, the book recommends that a jumble of nonsense, almost-Latin and almost-Greek be recited into the victim’s ear:

*Amara Tonta Tyra post hos firabis ficiliri Elypolis starras poly  
polyque lique linarras buccabor uel barton uel Titram celi mas-*

<sup>6</sup> Latin text from Ogilvie and Richmond; translation my own.

<sup>7</sup> The handbook is Clm 849 (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich), fols. 3<sup>r</sup>-108<sup>v</sup>. On church Latin and magical power, see also Waquet, *Empire of a Sign*, 107-8.

*sis Metumbor o priczoni Jordan Ciriacus Valentinus. (Kieckhefer, Magic, 4)*

The *Lacnunga*, whose author evinces a stronger knowledge of liturgical language, incorporates Christian prayers in Latin alongside nonsensical terms. A healing spell begins with prayers in Latin, before proceeding to Latin incantations and the following words: “*acre arnem nona aernem beoðor aernem nidren acrun cunað ele harassan fidine.*” According to Richard Kieckhefer, the phrase is “gibberish possibly derived from some foreign language” (*ibid.* 65-6). However, given the use of Latin in other magical texts, I would suggest that, while some of the words contain non-Latin phonemes, the first few and the last are probably imitative of the language – note especially *acre* and *nona*, both perfectly respectable Latin words in other contexts.<sup>8</sup>

It would seem that these spells attempt to draw strength not so much from the meanings of Latin words, but from the very fact that they are, or appear to be, Latin. Often, as we have seen, they contain strings of nonsense words, and, even when individual phrases do make sense, their collocation in the spell as a whole renders them meaningless. I submit that the imperfectly educated laypeople who either compiled these handbooks or contributed to the spells collected therein thought of Latin as a language of intrinsic power, which could be accessed merely by stringing together words of the appropriate type.<sup>9</sup>

Such attitudes were not confined to the Middle Ages. In an age when Latin had come to be more readily associated with the professions than with the church, Molière’s phony doctor in *Le Médecin malgré lui*, 1666, spouts a random stream of Latin, hoping to impress his patient’s father with his mastery of medicine:

*SGANARELLE: Do you understand Latin?*

*GÉRONTE: Not at all.*

<sup>8</sup> *acre* means “bitter,” “keen,” or “fierce” – perhaps an appropriate description for a magic potion; *nona* means “ninth” or “the ninth hour,” one of the times of prayer for medieval religious communities.

<sup>9</sup> The widespread use of nonsense Latin in magic spells appears to have been a medieval innovation, following the demise of spoken Latin. The vast majority of magical texts from antiquity that are cited in Gordon and Marco Simón’s volume, while not all sterling examples of grammar or orthography, are at least in recognizable Latin. Moreover, while nonsense Latin was occasionally used in ancient magic (e.g. the curse-tablets at *ibid.* 171-2; according to Blänsdorf, these belong to a class of texts that “the writer intended. . . to be read only by the deity” [*ibid.* 152]), this would seem to constitute a rather different phenomenon from later examples. While medieval nonsense Latin might give unlettered readers/listeners the impression that they were in fact reading/hearing Latin, the ancient equivalents were intended to confuse readers who were already familiar with Latin. The perceived Latinity of the medieval examples was all-important; ancient composers of nonsense texts on the other hand were seeking to distance their writings from Latin. As Christopher Stray has pointed out to me (*per litteras*), the use of Latin or almost-Latin to impress appears to have been a more general characteristic of learned culture in the Middle Ages, thus further distinguishing that period from antiquity. The impressiveness of the language was felt not merely in the realm of magic but also in linguistic scholarship, as is suggested by the common origin of the terms “grammar,” “grimoire,” and “glamor” (Reid; Ziolkowski 161; see also Rollo on the “glamorousness” of arcane works of literature). And there was some degree of slippage between the two spheres. Medieval Latin grammars were often characterized by bizarre wordplay; Vergil the Grammarian appears to parody this practice, but his deviant usages may, in a manner similar to magical texts, be intended to conceal mysteries of otherworldly import (Law). On the other hand, his namesake, the epic poet, was regarded in the Middle Ages not only as a grammatical exemplar but also, in the popular imagination, as having been a great magician (Comparetti). Facility in the one sphere of learning implied accomplishments in the other, and both disciplines were strongly associated with the perceived “glamor” of Latin.

*SGANARELLE: rising up in astonishment: You don't understand Latin at all!*

*GÉRONTE: No.*

*SGANARELLE, with various ridiculous postures: Cabricias arci thuram, catalamus, singulariter, nominativo haec Musa, "Muse," bonus, bona, bonum, Deus sanctus, estne oratio Latinas? Etiam, "yes." Quare, "why?" Quia substantivo et adjectivum concordat in generi, numerum, et casus.<sup>10</sup>*

Taken in its historical context, this barbaric assortment of *non sequiturs* and solecisms served to satirize the medics of Molière's day and their absurd pomposity, their tendency to hide shallow competence behind a screen of learning. But if we compare the magic spells of medieval laypeople with Sganarelle's speech, which mingles imperfect memories of grammar drills from the Renaissance schoolroom with nonsense words and a reference to the Latin mass, we see similar tendencies to use Latin to impress, hoodwink, or compel the uninitiated. And, in both cases, it matters not at all what sort of Latin is employed. Géronte is won over by the mere fact that Sganarelle is using Latin, not by the meaning of the words, and believes in the language's power to heal his daughter.<sup>11</sup>

The academicians satirized by Rabelais present a similar case to Molière's doctors: their Latin is little better, but is likewise deployed to impress those with even less learning than themselves. In *Pantagruel* book 1 ch. 6, the hero and his companions, after hearing a student's bizarre Latinized French, conclude that he is attempting to speak French like a Parisian but is in fact butchering Latin. In *Gargantua* ch. 19, a drunken scholar, sent to retrieve the bells of Notre Dame from Gargantua (who is using them for cowbells), delivers an oration replete with technical jargon and Latin phrases, some of questionable grammaticality, including this conciliatory dinner invitation:

*By my faith, domine, if you want to dine with me, in camera by God's-body charitatis, nos faciemus bonum cherubin. Ego occidi unum porcum, et ego habet bon uino. But from good wine one cannot make bad Latin.<sup>12</sup>*

Although this is supposedly the speech of a genuine academician, the Latin is only slightly better than Sganarelle's. The syntax is basic, but does not prevent the scholar from substituting the third person *habet* for the first person verb *habeo*, and the garbled *bon uino* for the proper accusative form, *bonum uinum*. Again, it seems that the primary motivation for the scholar's use of Latin is to impress rather than to communicate; he might have imparted his meaning to Gargantua much more directly in French, but hopes that the use of the ancient language will charm his giant interlocutor in a way that plainer words could not.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> I translate from the French text of Couton.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Molière's *Le Malade imaginaire*, which concludes with a medical degree ceremony in Latin interlarded with French. Though the learned doctors' Latin is somewhat better than that of the impostor Sganarelle, the target of the satire is the same: medics' use of Latin to obfuscate and impress. On the abuse of medical Latin in Molière and elsewhere see Waquet, *Empire of a Sign*, 233-6 and R. Porter. Waquet notes that "those Latin words, devoid of genuine science, worked on the patients like charms" (234), while Porter observes that "the value of certain arcane terms and formulae has consisted in their distinctive magico-psychological healing power..." (44).

<sup>12</sup> I translate from the text of Huchon.

<sup>13</sup> On the use of Latin by characters in Rabelais see also Burke and Porter 7 and 28. I am grateful to Michael Josiah

Rabelais' academicians participate in an educational climate that regarded Latin as a language of power with which the imperfectly educated could attempt to assert authority over the even less educated. Such attitudes persisted in later centuries but in a different guise, centering on the oppression of pupils. As Françoise Waquet has shown in *Latin or the Empire of a Sign*, the attainment of many pupils in the Enlightenment and later ages was woeful (Waquet, *Empire of a Sign*, Part II); but, at the same time, Latin was imposed at the sharp end of the ferrule by many an uninspiring schoolmaster, who drew on the language to reinforce his authority over his young charges. In that respect at least he inherited the position of the Roman educators who, according to Tacitus, promoted the language as a means to keep provincials in their place. And Latin in the early twentieth century reinforced hierarchies not only of age but also of gender. Remarkably, in France, promoters of the value of Latin in the education of girls argued that the oppressive difficulty of the subject for many pupils might prove beneficial, serving to inculcate in young women a sense of their subordinate status in society (Waquet, "Latin for Girls"). Shocking though this is to modern ears, such promoters were battling against a cultural milieu in which girls were utterly excluded from Latin. The choice was between the use of the language to exclude or to oppress women, but, in either case, it symbolized male authority and remained a possession of men.<sup>14</sup> In recent centuries, then, the language has all too often been used to justify the domination of others – young, female or both – rather than as a means of communication.<sup>15</sup>

Waquet's book offers a highly persuasive account of the symbolism of Latin in the modern era, including its use to confuse or impress the unlettered. But I depart from her work in one crucial respect: as I see it, the belief that Latin possessed intrinsic power does not appear to have been confined to the period from the Renaissance to the early twentieth century. Rather, this attitude appears to have both predated and outlasted other beliefs about the language which were prevalent in that period, such as the idea that it possessed a supranational universality or the notion that it could form and strengthen the character of pupils.<sup>16</sup> As we have seen, medieval laypeople believed in the intrinsic power of Latin. What is more, these attitudes appear to persist in the present day, even when the numbers learning the language have sharply declined.

Modern advertising and marketing, for instance, draw on the perceived power of Latin to sell products, often with little regard for the meaning of the words employed. The model-name of my car, a Nissan *Versa*, should mean "turned around," but is probably intended to mean precisely nothing, and I was recently sold a Raleigh *Misceo*, a term whose prurient implications were no doubt lost on the marketing executive who came up with such a name for a bicycle. Hasbro, on the

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Call and Robert Hudson for bringing these passages from Molière and Rabelais to my attention.

14 Cf. Joseph Farrell's exploration of the perceived masculinity of Latin (Farrell 52ff.; see further below) – "By the nineteenth century, Latin becomes an emblem of accomplishments to which women aspired in vain" (97) – and in particular his analysis of a passage from *Little Women* (1869): "'You needn't be so rude, it's only a 'lapse of liny,' as Mr. Davis says," retorted Amy, finishing Jo with her Latin.' Here a common Latin tag (*lapsus linguae*) is figured as male speech (attributed to Mr. Davis [a schoolmaster]) disfigured in female usage by ludicrous assimilation to the vernacular; but it is still recognized as Latin and, like a magic charm, it retains its power to humble those against whom it is pronounced" (*ibid.*).

15 Cf. Ong's ("Puberty Rite") argument for a connection between the exclusion of women and the prevalence of corporal punishment in Renaissance education, which survived into the nineteenth century: an education in Latin was a "puberty rite," which served to toughen the (male) pupil and introduce him to the "tribe" of men. See also Ong, "Latin and the Social Fabric," where he observes that such rites throughout the world act as an introduction to "the religious, magical, and quasi-scientific lore of the tribe" (26).

16 Cf. Waquet, *Empire of a Sign*, 178-206 (formation of character), 231-43 (the power to confuse or impress), 257-70 and Part I (universality).

other hand, did not wander too far from the meanings of the equivalent Latin adjectives when it named its mightiest Transformer Optimus Prime, nor Shell petroleum in the marketing of Optimax fuel.<sup>17</sup> However, even where companies stick closely to the sense of the original words, the point, I would argue, is not to communicate meaning but to impress the consumer (who is assumed not to know Latin) with the portentous, Latinate sound of such coinages.

What is more, several of the themes we have studied in this paper are replicated in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series – a publishing phenomenon whose very success attests to the continuing belief of the general public in an association between Latin-sounding words and power. The pupils at Hogwarts School are not educated in Latin *per se*, but hone their magical powers in a half-Latin argot. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, for instance, Hermione freezes her friend Neville to the spot with the spell *Petrificus Totalus*, a phrase that combines English words of Latin origin with extra Latin endings – about the level, in other words, of Sganarelle's garbled schoolroom drills. Earlier in the same book Hermione succeeds in raising a feather off her desk with the spell *Wingardium leviosa* (Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone*, 273, 171). The second word clearly draws on the *leu-* root in Latin, meaning “lift,” but not in a form that any Roman would recognize. The first word juxtaposes an English lexeme connected with feathers – “wing” – and a Latinate ending. Belief in the power of the spell, then, appears to depend as much on the Latinate sound of the phrases as on their meaning (or lack thereof) – a phenomenon that we have observed both in the speech of Renaissance quacks and the writings of medieval magicians.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the half-Latin magical language of Harry's world has the potential to serve as a tool of oppression. Muggles, the non-magic people, are utterly excluded from the magical idiom learned at Hogwarts, and Lord Voldemort yearns to subjugate them using his own command of spells. The realities of his vision for the world become clear to the characters in the final book of the series when the disguised heroes visit the Ministry of Magic, now controlled by the cronies of the Dark Lord:

*“It's horrible, isn't it?” [Hermione] said to Harry, who was staring up at the statue. “Have you seen what they're sitting on?”*

*Harry looked more closely and realized that what he had thought were decoratively carved thrones were actually mounds of carved humans: hundreds and hundreds of naked bodies, men, women and children, all with rather stupid, ugly faces, twisted and pressed together to support the weight of the handsomely robed wizards.*

*“Muggles,” whispered Hermione. “In their rightful place...” (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 242)*

17 For other names of modern companies and products that hew closely to the meaning of their Latin roots, see [http://www.billcasselman.com/unpub\\_sept\\_2011/latin\\_greek\\_company\\_names.htm](http://www.billcasselman.com/unpub_sept_2011/latin_greek_company_names.htm) (accessed 24 December 2012).

18 Further *Harry Potter* spells, together with their Latin origins and meanings can be found at <http://grinhamlatin.wikifoundry.com/page/Latin+in+Harry+Potter> or in the lesson plan at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid\\_4670000/newsid\\_4675100/4675187.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid_4670000/newsid_4675100/4675187.stm) (both accessed 21 November 2012). If teachers draw on these resources, however, they might at the same time encourage students to explore the consequences of Rowling's use of almost-Latin, which are not acknowledged by these sites: it appears that these distorted phrases are not intended primarily to communicate the meaning of the original Latin lexemes, but in large part to impress the reader through their evocation of a supposedly powerful language.



In a manner reminiscent of the practitioners of dark arts in medieval Europe, who used Latin to harm the uninitiated, Voldemort wishes to harness the power of Latinate words to enslave ordinary mortals.

I would argue, then, that from the earliest times to the modern day a belief has persisted that Latin has some sort of intrinsic power, a belief that has proved remarkably durable despite the separation of the language firstly from the power of the Roman Empire, secondly from the professions, and thirdly from the mainstream school curriculum. This belief has been particularly prevalent among those acquainted only slightly with the language, such as imperial subjects in Roman Britain, laypeople in medieval Europe, the medics of Molière's time, modern advertising executives, and the Dark Lord himself.

### DRAWING ON THE LONG HISTORY OF LATIN TO EMPOWER OUR STUDENTS

But where does this leave us as Latin teachers? How are we to avoid fostering in our students such undesirable beliefs about the language? How might we rather communicate the potential benefits of a knowledge of Latin? Many of us know from our own experience in the classroom, and from the research of others (Churchill; Haley; Ronnick), that Latin has the potential to empower students from otherwise marginalized groups, once they are welcomed into the educational mainstream. How might we draw on the long history of Latin to promote such empowerment, rather than keeping students "in their rightful place"?

To answer these questions we could do much worse than draw on Joseph Farrell's survey of the Latin language in *Latin Language and Latin Culture*. Farrell seeks to disrupt metaphors that have traditionally been applied to Latin: its supposed poverty, its masculinity, its human-like life-cycle. In their place he proposes a new model of a "polyglossic" Latin, whose many tongues, or expressive registers, embrace male and female, elite and everyday, rich and poor. By accessing these various registers, teachers can challenge past abuses of Latin – its use to dominate or exclude others (women, the poor, *et al.*); also, more positively, they can broaden and strengthen the communicative capabilities of their students – that is, the mutually reinforcing strengths in reading, writing, speaking, and listening explored in John Gruber-Miller's volume, *When Dead Tongues Speak*.<sup>19</sup> Latin, as opposed to modern foreign languages, would appear to be uniquely well placed to deliver such gains. While it may be true that any one language is fully capable of meeting the pragmatic demands placed on it by individual speakers (Holborow 66ff.), the vast temporal and cultural range of Latin would seem to transcend such particularity and offer learners an array of modes of expression and communicative contexts considerably broader than that afforded by the study of modern languages in only a contemporary context.<sup>20</sup>

This is, in short, a resurrection of the argument from utility, but in a more general form. As Kitchell observes, appeals to the utility of Latin at particular moments in time have been too many and too various to suggest any one quality of the language that we, as teachers, might reliably identify as the best reason for learning the language. But if instead we take a broad view of the history of Latin, we gain a powerful and compelling rationale for our subject that is not tied to the particular demands of any moment in time. Yes, we will always have to justify our subject to administrators by matching up the skills imparted by Latin with the exigencies of the contempo-

19 The interpretative processes of reading or listening are acts of communication no less than writing or speaking (Gruber-Miller, "Introduction," 11).

20 As Gruber-Miller reminds us ("Introduction"), effective communication is closely tied to cultural context; see further below.

rary world, but we can also make the more general, and stronger, argument that a familiarity with the rich history of Latin, with its extraordinary versatility of genre and register is a uniquely potent resource for the development of learners' communicative powers.

Space does not permit me to cover such a vast historical range with any thoroughness, but I would like to recommend some texts beyond the usual temporal scope of Latin pedagogy that would, I believe, not only encourage students to gain a critical understanding of exploitative power structures, but also offer them the opportunity to broaden their expressive capabilities. Texts with performative potential include the *Carmina Burana* from the twelfth century CE; these bawdy celebrations of love, the spring, and drinking were authored by the subversive Goliardic poets, who left the church to expose clerical hypocrisies and to sing of secular life. (Most of the content is suitable for high schools, but teachers would be advised to check through individual poems before using them in class.) The poems are best known through the musical settings of Carl Orff, and Orff's Latin texts are available in Judith Lynn Sebesta's Bolchazy-Carducci edition, with translations, vocabulary help, and essays that pose questions concerning both the poems and Orff's music. I would particularly recommend "O fortuna" (an evocation of the vicissitudes of Fortune, captured by Orff's rousing opening [*carmen* 1]), "Ecce gratum... ver" and "Estuans interius" (two jaunty songs of love and passion [*carmina* 5 and 11]), and "Olim lacus colueram," in which a cooked swan bemoans the loss of its bright, white hue, set by Orff to a painfully high tenor melody (*carmen* 12). These stress-verse poems could be recited rhythmically to express their meaning, or could even be sung by particularly brave souls. For sheer variety, Keith Sidwell's *Reading Medieval Latin* is hard to surpass. Some texts may not be suitable for non-denominational schools (the book focuses for the most part on Christian texts), but excerpts from, e.g. Heloise and Abelard's letters describing their ill-fated love affair (278-85), would probably be enjoyed by students in any setting. They could respond to the couple with letters of their own, questioning the characters' motives and actions, or they might perhaps recast Heloise's writings in a more assertive manner; to modern eyes she appears rather too accepting of the exploitative dynamics of a relationship with her much older tutor, Abelard. In addition to Heloise's writings, use of Laurie Churchill's [Medieval Women Writers](#) site and her three volumes of *Women Writing Latin*, edited with Phyllis Brown and Jane Jeffrey, could broaden the curriculum beyond the male authors that usually dominate Latin studies – as indeed Farrell recommends (52-83). From *Women Writing Latin*, learners could study Hrotsvit's plays, whose female characters assert their moral principles in the face of male lust and violence (Damen); or Hildegard of Bingen's accounts of her visions, which profess her physical weakness while taking to task such august figures as the Holy Roman Emperor; or the poems of the Dutch scholar and champion of women's education, Anna Maria von Schurman. Such study of the history of women's communication could have the obvious benefit of engaging female students more effectively; they might otherwise feel excluded from Latin courses, which have traditionally been dominated by male perspectives and male-authored texts (Churchill). Women's texts offer ample opportunities for investigating the authors' viewpoints, both through reading activities and through the adoption of such perspectives in composition exercises.<sup>21</sup>

I would like to focus in particular on two later-Latin texts that may well be unfamiliar to teachers, but which can, I believe, make especially valuable contributions to the modern classroom, bolstering students' communicative skills and challenging the abusive power structures traditionally associated with the Latin language. My first example, Rafael Landívar's *Rusticatio Mexicana*,

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21 For the potential benefits of students' adoption of the perspectives of others in composition exercises, see Gruber-Miller, "Teaching Writing."

which is available with text, translation, and commentary in Andrew Laird's recent edition, might prove particularly engaging for students in North and South America, especially those of Latino origin. Landívar was a Jesuit priest, born in Guatemala in 1731, who was later expelled from the Americas along with other Jesuits, as Carlos III of Spain strove to dilute the power of the church in New Spain (Laird 23-4, 32-3). In exile, Landívar completed the *Rusticatio Mexicana*, an epic description of Mexico and surrounding lands. The poem served as an advertisement of the author's homeland to Europeans, who were often snobbish about both the geography and the inhabitants of the Americas: some attributed to Mexico mutually reinforcing inferiorities of place and people (Laird 25; Kerson). For this reason, while describing the geography of Mexico, Landívar seeks also to promote its peoples. In doing so, he appears to assert a fledgling South American identity, distinct from that of Europe: he contrasts the *Hispani* (European Spanish) with the *Mexicani* (both European settlers like himself and native Americans, Laird 73). Study of Landívar's poem could therefore act as an antidote to neo-colonial chauvinisms – including the sorts of cultural imperialism studied by Phillipson. It would help students to see that the Latin language was and is a possession not merely of the Roman empire, and not merely of Europe, but also of the peoples of the New World (Laird 3-8). Incorporation of the *Rusticatio Mexicana* into the modern classroom can, then, play an important part in responding to the diverse backgrounds of students and encouraging them to see Latin as part of their own heritage.<sup>22</sup>

However, if educators draw on Landívar's epic in their teaching, there may only be time to look at particular sections. I would recommend focusing on Book 2, which describes the volcanic eruption in Jorullo, Mexico, in 1759. The book is 355 lines in length, but could be cut down further by omitting lines 19-113, which describe the land prior to the eruption and the warnings of an old man. The following extract is taken from the prologue. It gives a flavor of the book as a whole, but also suggests the interrelationships of peoples with each other and with the land that are explored by Landívar elsewhere in his epic: both the land and its inhabitants are devastated by the eruption, and while Landívar does not speak of a single, Latino people, the plural "nations" are unified by their common suffering in the face of the disaster:

*Nunc quoque Xoruli Vulcania regna canendo  
Persequar, et nigras montis penetrabo cavernas,  
Qui mala tot populis, clademque minatus acerbam  
Divite florentes populavit germine campos,  
Flammarumque globos, et ruptis saxa caminis  
Impatiens vomuit, gelida formidine gentes  
Concutiens, postrema orbis quasi fata pararet.*

(Landívar, *Rusticatio Mexicana*, 2. 1-7)

*Now will I continue by singing also the Vulcanian kingdoms  
Of Jorullo, and I will penetrate the black caverns of the mountain,  
Which, threatening evils for so many peoples, and bitter disaster,  
Devastated fields flowering with rich seed,  
And spewed remorselessly balls of fire and rocks*

22 Cf. Laird: "once the multivalent connections between the Greco-Roman tradition and the ethnically complex Hispanic American tradition are better understood, classical studies may have a new part to play in today's curricula, which are naturally bound to reflect the cultural diversity of society at large" (5-6).

*From ruptured forges, shaking nations with chill  
Fear, as if it were readying the final doom of the globe.<sup>23</sup>*

Such materials can readily be incorporated into existing Latin curricula. Landívar's accounts of the eruption and the reaction of the local populace invite comparison with Pliny the Younger's letter describing his uncle's death in the eruption of Vesuvius (*Letter* 6. 16), and can readily be paired with other opportunities to study the eruption of 79 CE, as for instance in *Cambridge Latin Course* Stage 12, or indeed with accounts of modern-day natural disasters. Students would thus be encouraged to explore the ways in which experiences of such traumatic events are communicated to others. They could also attempt reports of their own – perhaps short news bulletins of the Jorullo eruption, or comic strips with Latin captions.

Still greater opportunities to challenge traditional power structures and to develop students' communicative abilities are offered by the *Colloquies* of Ælfric Bata from around 1000 CE, available with introduction, text, and facing translation, edited by Scott Gwara and David Porter. Despite the passing of a millennium, the *Colloquies* offer striking parallels for the approaches favored in today's language classrooms (Gwara and Porter 35-43; D. Porter). I believe that they offer the opportunity not only for the productive application of modern methods of second language acquisition to the teaching of Latin, but also for effective fusions of such methods with more traditional approaches, focused on the conscious learning of grammar.

Firstly, as Gruber-Miller points out ("Introduction"), it appears that language-learning takes place most effectively when linguistic data are placed in a cultural context. Bata's dialogues mirror such concerns: they are embedded in settings familiar to students of monastic schools, but which are also readily adaptable to the modern Latin classroom. Many of the situations will be (all too) familiar to today's teachers: in *Colloquy* 3, for instance, two students start to squabble after one tries to borrow the other's book; classmates post lookouts so that they are not caught idling when the teacher returns (*Colloquy* 5); a student has not done his classwork because he did not have anything to sharpen his pen (*Colloquy* 14); some of the students have not done their homework (*Colloquy* 6). It is possible, then, to use excerpts from the *Colloquies* wholesale; alternatively, enterprising teachers might adapt them a little for modern contexts by, e.g., removing the (not particularly widespread) references to religious matters.<sup>24</sup>

In a second parallel with modern language pedagogy, these lively, context-based dialogues are designed to build fluency while at the same time teaching vocabulary and grammar (Gwara and Porter 34-43; D. Porter) – the sort of subconscious acquisition of the nuts and bolts of language recommended by Krashen. In *Colloquy* 18, the master peppers a student with a series of equivalent questions that showcase a variety of second-person forms and question-formulae:

*<Q>uid queris, puer mi, aut quid uis, quid cupis, aut quid aspicias,  
aut quid cogitas, aut quo properas, uel quid loqueris, quid agis, aut  
quid dicis, aut que est necessitas tua, uel pro qua causa huc uenisti?*

*<W>hat do you want, my boy, or what do you wish for, or what do  
you desire, or what are you considering, or what are you thinking  
of, or where are you hurrying to, or what do you say, what are you*

<sup>23</sup> Text from Laird; translation my own.

<sup>24</sup> Admittedly, in some places unusual Latin forms might need to be adapted or glossed for students familiar only with classical idioms; Bata's usage appears to reflect his medieval Anglo-Latin dialect (Gwara).

*doing, or what are you stating, or what is your need, or for what reason have you come here?*<sup>25</sup>

Bata's students might have chosen (and their modern counterparts could choose) one alternative from such lists when they perform(ed) the *Colloquies* (D. Porter); we might compare the lists of alternatives in modern-language phrasebooks. Alternatively, students could run through the entire list to practice the different forms. The effect is to improve their fluency and communicative range; from their existing knowledge of one or more of these questions they could learn a variety of L2 constructions, but without the need for teaching in the L1 (Gwara and Porter 38; D. Porter 470).

Other passages from the *Colloquies* focus to a greater extent on grammatical forms. To give one (bizarre) example, the following speech from *Colloquy 9* drills the unusual declension of the fourth declension neuter noun, *cornu* (here "drinking horn"), at the same time as practicing the present infinitive:

*Cornu bibere uolo. Cornu habere debeo, cornu tenere. Cornu uocor. Cornu est nomen meum. Cum cornu uiuere, cornu quoque iacere uolo et dormire, nauigare, equitare et ambulare et laborare atque ludere.*

*I want to drink the horn. I ought to have the horn, to hold the horn. I am called "horn." Horn is my name. I want to live with the horn, also to lie and sleep with the horn, to sail, ride, walk, work and play...*

The setting – in this case, a drinking party – creates a lively context for practicing forms that would otherwise have to be learned purely by rote. The dialogue could readily be acted out in the modern classroom, so long as it wasn't taken too seriously.

However, despite the resemblance between Bata's methods and those of modern language teaching, the *Colloquies* would have existed alongside materials that, like nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Latin textbooks, emphasized the conscious learning of grammar through tables of forms (D. Porter 464). Bata might have used both sorts of material in his classrooms: language points explored in the dialogues could later be rehearsed more thoroughly and more consciously using grammar primers. Perhaps, then, the subconscious acquisition of language recommended by Krashen can, in the case of Latin, work profitably in tandem with more conscious learning, in order to meet the challenges of a language that is more heavily inflected than most of those encountered in modern-language classes. Students' performances of Bata's entertaining dialogues could then be followed up with closer study of the grammatical items that those texts present.

What is more, the *Colloquies* offer the opportunity for students to reflect critically on the dynamics of the traditional Latin classroom, and especially on the use of Latin to impose authority. While many of the settings are reminiscent of the modern classroom, some situations described in Bata's dialogues might at first sight cause unease for modern students and teachers – particularly the frequent threats of corporal punishment. However, as Irina Dumitrescu has shown, such elements appear to form part of a wider strategy on Bata's part of encouraging students to explore their present and future roles and the ethical problems associated with them. The effect is to interrogate existing power structures, which might otherwise go unchallenged, through a playful subversion of the roles of master and student; Dumitrescu suggests that learners may have taken

<sup>25</sup> Latin extracts from Bata's *Colloquies* are quoted from Gwara and Porter; the translations are my own.

on both roles, and their modern counterparts can certainly do so. While the teacher is for the most part depicted as a respected and respectable figure, his authority is at times undercut. In *Colloquy* 25, for instance, he attempts to read the riot act, in highly colorful language, to a lazy student, but gets more than he bargained for when the latter replies in kind. In *Colloquy* 28, a boy complains as he is being beaten, and the teacher coldly reminds him, *non es mortuus adhuc, sed uiuis* (“you’re not yet dead, but you’re alive”). This unsympathetic portrayal of authority appears to critique the cruelty that underlies a reliance on corporal punishment. Bata’s text, then, acts as an antidote to the tendency in the history of Latin for the language to be utilized as a repository of unquestioned, unjustified, and/or abusive power. If we would empower our students, Bata’s approach is one that we might emulate.

I hope not only to have revealed some mistaken beliefs that have been associated with Latin throughout its long history, but also to have demonstrated ways in which we might counteract such attitudes in our own teaching. Rather than indulging the notion that Latin is a language of intrinsic power, we should encourage students to question such mistaken beliefs and the power structures with which they have been associated, while helping them to develop genuine powers of expression and communication from interpretative reading of and response to the extraordinary range of texts that we have inherited from the long history of the language. We can have them read Landívar’s verse, sing the *Carmina burana*, compose in the voice of Heloise, act out the dialogues of Ælfric Bata. Engagement with such a huge variety of sources has the potential to strengthen students’ communicative abilities beyond what is possible in the modern language classroom. Perhaps only the breadth of culture of an ancient language like Latin can sufficiently empower students for the vast communicative demands of the modern world.

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