

TEACHING REPORT

Latin for Early Modernists,
University of Oxford
Lent and Trinity Terms, 2009

Visitors to this website may be interested to learn of a new course I offered at Oxford last year. After consultation with Professor David Norbrook, it was agreed that there was a strong need for some kind of Latin provision at graduate level for early modernists, especially in the English department. Although Oxford offers several beginners' language classes open to graduate students, there had not previously been any guidance or teaching designed specifically for those using Latin in their research on early modern topics.

With the approval of the English faculty, and funding from them, I designed and ran a series of weekly reading classes for early modernists in the course of Lent and Trinity terms of last year. The classes were aimed at students with at least some prior knowledge of Latin, and we focused upon 'real' readings from the start. Mindful of the anticipated core audience of English literature students, most readings were taken from British texts. The response was remarkably strong: around forty people, a mixture of graduate students, research fellows and more senior faculty expressed initial interest and attended a pre-term meeting. 25-30 were regular attenders, dropping to around fifteen for the second term. Numbers held up very well, despite many conflicting demands upon participants' time, and the fact that no member, not even the masters' students, derived any official "credit" for taking the course.

The mixture of participants was particularly striking and contributed to the strength and interest of our discussions: the group had a core of students from the English department (roughly equally divided between MSt and DPhil students); in addition, we had loyal participants from History, Modern Languages, Music, Theology, History of Medicine and History of Maths. As well as MSt and DPhil students from these departments, our group included two post-doctoral research fellows, several lecturers, and a handful of more senior faculty members, including one retired fellow and one visiting fellow from Japan. This remarkable range, both in seniority and in discipline, demonstrates I think the great demand that exists for a Latin reading class of this kind, and contributed to the peculiarly supportive and enjoyable atmosphere.

For the first term's work I wrote a series of four 'units', each consisting of graded readings with some notes and context provided. My particular aim was to address the real-life needs and challenges faced by graduate students (especially of English literature and history) using Latin in research: for that reason, although we read some fine pieces of prose and verse, literary merit was not my prime consideration. The sessions did not follow a specified program of language work – basic familiarity was assumed – but in practice each class typically included a review of several points of grammar and (especially) of syntax.

The four units of the first term were as follows:

Unit 1: Latin verse in early modern commonplace books and miscellanies

This unit included extracts from manuscripts ranging from simple Latin puns or insertions in English poems (often of political or scurrilous content), to epigrams circulating in parallel English and Latin versions, through to some challenging original Latin verse. Transcription conventions were intentionally chosen to replicate the appearance in the mss as closely as possible – including errors, or difficulties in transcription. Most of the material was anonymous. The unit was intended both to be a fairly gentle introduction for those whose Latin was rusty – because much of the material was accompanied by an English 'version' of some kind – and also as a chance to discuss and prepare for the particular difficulties of unedited manuscript material.

Unit 2: Early modern commentaries

In this topic we looked at short extracts from five early modern Latin commentaries, presented roughly in order of difficulty. The extracts were drawn from: Ascensius' 1502 edition of Terence; Manutius' 1584 edition of Virgil; Grimoaldi's 1591 edition of Virgil's *Georgics*; Farnaby's 1624 edition of Seneca's *Tragedies*, and finally Cowley's 1662 edition of the *Plantarum Libri Sex* (in this latter case, Cowley's commentary is upon his own work). We looked at the equivalent section of the two editions of Virgil (the introduction to and opening of the *Georgics*) to allow for some direct comparison.

The topic was designed to introduce students to the distinctive features and conventions of commentarial prose (such as its concision, preference for simple word order, syntactical incompleteness and abbreviations). It was also intended to give some sense of the typical blend of information found in early modern commentaries, and the ways in which paratextual material of this kind was formative upon early modern reception and understanding of canonical texts.

Unit 3: Dedicatory inscriptions and epistles

This topic aimed to introduce students to the kind of paratextual material that is often of considerable literary or historical interest, but which is very frequently omitted from later editions of major texts. The unit was designed to lead students from the relative simplicities of dedicatory inscriptions to the challenges of complex periodic panegyric prose, the typical medium of prefatory epistles in early modern books.

We began with the dedicatory inscription to Camden's 1607 *Britannia*, followed by the dedication and the opening sentence of the prefatory epistle to Bacon's *Historia Regni Henrici Septimi* (1622). We then read a portion of the prefatory letter to Edmund Campion's *Rationes Decem* (1581), two sections from the Preface to Camden's *Britannia*, and finally we tackled the whole of the (fairly short) dedicatory epistle to Case's *Apologia Musicae tam Vocalis quam Instrumentalis et Mixtae* (1588).

Unit 4: Poetry and politics

This more literary topic was designed to introduce students both to the most commonly encountered forms and styles of early modern occasional verse, and to the extent to which even very conventional or panegyric poetry may carry political force. This topic also offered an opportunity to discuss poetic diction, metre and classical allusion: especially the deployment of classical allusion to contemporary effect. Readings were taken from Milton's *In Quintum Novembris* (1626), Thomas Campion's *Ad Daphnin* (c. 1590) and *Ad Thamesin* (1595), and Cowley's *Plantarum Libri Sex* (1668). This cluster of material was chosen in part for its interconnection: each is concerned with Britain's emergent identity as opponent of the Spanish and as a colonial power in America.

The students were expected to prepare the readings in advance to the best of their ability. In practice, a useful balance emerged between students with stronger language skills and other participants with less linguistic experience but greater historical and contextual knowledge. This was much enhanced by the range of disciplines, backgrounds and seniority of those attending. I circulated translations of each unit after we had completed it, so that students could assemble a complete 'set' of readings and translations to refer to afterwards.

In the second term of the course, the participating students themselves provided readings drawn from their own research. In each case, the student sent me their proposed section, with some notes and queries, around ten days before the class. Some more confident participants also provided a provisional translation. I checked and lightly edited the chosen sections and circulated them in advance to the group as a whole to prepare. Naturally, the range of readings reflected the very wide range of disciplines and research interests of the group.

Second term readings included extracts from:

John Milton, *De Doctrina Christiana*

Adriano Banchieri, *Conclusiones de Musica* (1627)

Juan Luis Vives, *De Causis Corruptarum Artium* (1531)

George Herbert, letter to Lancelot Andrewes

Andrew Marvell, *Hortus* (we compared this to his English version, *The Garden*)

John Donne, verse letter to Dr Andrewes

Hobbes, *Appendix ad Leviathan* (1668)

Patrick Young, unpublished manuscript letter to Thomas Young (1626)

John Ray, *Catalogus Plantarum Angliae* (1670)

Victorius' preface to Pliny's *Natural History* (1553)

Overall, this experimental course was deemed a success. Feedback was very good, and several participants also commented on the interdisciplinary advantages of getting to know people working on similar or related material within different departments. Every text that we read, including several I thought I knew very well, was considerably enhanced by the perspectives of class members from other disciplines.

I have compiled this report in the hope that it may be of use to any others planning or considering similar reading groups. I am very happy to answer more detailed questions about the design and organisation of the course.

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