



Harrison, J. (2010) 'Dico, dico, dico: Latin language in popular culture'

Rosetta **8.5**: 34-46.

http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue8supp/harrison_latin/

Dico, dico, dico: Latin language in popular culture

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Latin's a dead language

As dead as dead can be

It killed off all the Romans,

and now it's killing me!

This rhyme has been popular among schoolchildren for years, though its popularity is, perhaps, fading now, as fewer and fewer children study Latin in school (though the case for Latin in state schools is being made again at the moment). Latin, however, is far from a dead language; indeed, it has crossed the boundary from the ancient world to the modern, used not only in official contexts (such as legal documents and scientific naming conventions) but in many diverse areas of popular culture.

In some cases, Latin has crossed that boundary via an official usage that continued long after the fall of the Roman Empire – most notably, in the case of the Catholic Church. Although, since the 1960s, Mass is no longer celebrated in Latin every week, the language is still strongly connected with the Church, certain prayers are often still recited in Latin and Latin Masses are still held occasionally in many places. As a result, Catholic Latin (pronounced in the Italianate style preferred by the Church) frequently appears in popular culture. When, for example, President Bartlet (Martin Sheen) of *The West Wing* shouts furiously at God, he does so in Latin rather than in English because Latin is the language of Bartlet's Catholicism – by telling God to 'go to hell' (*cruciatu in crucem*) in Latin, Bartlet emphasises his crisis of faith by throwing God's own language back at him (*The West Wing*, 'Two Cathedrals', dir. Thomas Schlamme, 2001).

The importance of Catholicism in some occurrences of Latin in popular culture is best exemplified by Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Gibson's film is shot in three ancient languages: Latin, Aramaic and Hebrew. Since the most basic historical research would confirm that Greek was the *lingua franca* of the East of the Roman Empire at that time, the decision to use Latin instead is clearly not the result of ignorance. There are several reasons for this. One is that, by restricting the use of Latin to Roman characters and allowing Jewish characters to understand only Aramaic, Gibson is able to further emphasise Jesus' divinity; while Pilate (Hristo Naumov Shopov) must converse with all other Jewish characters in Aramaic, Jesus (James Caviezel) responds in Latin. Like the flashback scene in which Jesus builds a table in a style which will not become fashionable for another few centuries, the use of Latin allows Gibson's Jesus to display divinely acquired knowledge that sets him apart from other characters. Further, Griffiths has argued that the use of ancient languages in the film is intended to privilege the imagery over the spoken words.¹ Latin in particular is used in this way during the scourging scene, in which Jesus' Aramaic is subtitled but the soldiers' Latin is not, encouraging the audience to empathise with Jesus and not with the Romans.



Figure 1: A traditional 'Station of the Cross' from the interior of a Roman Catholic Church. Photo by the author.

¹ Griffiths 2007: 26.

However, there is a more fundamental reason for the use of Latin in the film: Gibson's Catholicism. There are several elements of the film in which Gibson demonstrates his attachment to Catholic tradition. It is widely accepted, for example, that condemned criminals carried the *patibulum*, the cross-bar of the eventual cross, on their shoulders on their way to the place of execution, where this was put on to the taller piece.² The two other criminals executed with Jesus are both shown carrying their cross-bars in this way in the film. Jesus, however, is forced to carry the entire cross on his shoulder. Although this perhaps makes it easier to show Simon of Cyrene helping him carry the cross, there is really no solid reason for depicting Jesus in this way, while the other two crucifixion victims appear in the more 'historically accurate' fashion – why, for example, would Roman soldiers have a complete cross at their disposal to give to Jesus if this was not the usual practice? We find our answer, literally, in the Church. Every Roman Catholic church displays a series of illustrations on its interior walls showing 'The Stations of the Cross', fourteen incidents traditionally associated with the execution of Jesus. In most Catholic churches, Jesus is depicted carrying a full cross over his shoulder, just as Caviezel does in the film. It seems that it is more important to Gibson to depict these scenes in a manner which reflects traditional Catholic worship and meditation on the Stations of the Cross than in an historically accurate fashion. Similarly, using Latin allows Gibson to use the traditional language of the Roman Catholic Church. This allows phrases like *Ecce homo!*, for example, to stand out much more clearly to Catholic viewers than *Idou ho anthropos* would.

In many other cases, however, the use of Latin in a popular context is separate from its more official uses. Farrell has argued that a 'bifurcation' in the use of Latin occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and persists to this day, in which the academic study of the Latin language and ancient literature written in Latin has become separated from Latin as it exists in 'the modern imaginary'.³ The two are perhaps furthest apart in those

² See for example Windsor-Garnett 1971: 236

³ Farrell 2001: 96.

cases where, within fantasy literature and popular culture, Latin becomes the language of magic.

Well known popular stories of magic, including the Harry Potter series of books and films and the long-running television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, often use Latin for magical spells. There are distinct advantages to using a real, ancient language rather than made-up words for magical spells. As Pinsent has pointed out, the use of Latin for magical spells in Harry Potter, where other children's books (such as those of Ursula le Guin) have used invented words or languages, prevents the magical world from being 'totally private'.⁴ Latin makes the world of magic and the skill of using magical spells something that is different, separate from everyday experience, exotic and not especially accessible, but, importantly, not impossible to access. Bassnett has suggested that the ability to work through the linguistic games in the Harry Potter novels is part of their appeal for children.⁵ It may be impossible to fly on a broomstick or wear an invisibility cloak, but the enterprising child can, if they want to, learn the spells and understand *why* they mean what they do. Further linguistic 'games' are provided by the use of Latin for magical first names – a child with some knowledge of ancient mythology may gain great satisfaction from guessing the nature of Remus Lupin's problem, for example (he is a werewolf). Even if the majority of readers never actually learn enough Latin to translate the spells themselves, the knowledge that such an achievement is possible makes the magical world seem that much more real.

This 'real' element is even more important for a series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in which, in season seven, Dawn (Michelle Trachtenberg), studies a number of ancient languages in order to translate important spells or documents. In Harry Potter, Latin is the language used for nearly all magical spells, with the notable exception of the killing curse, *Avada Kedavra!*, which, according to author J. K. Rowling, derives from the Aramaic *Abracadabra!*⁶ In

⁴ Pinsent 2002: 31.

⁵ Bassnett 2002: 107.

⁶ Rowling discusses this in a 2004 interview given at the Edinburgh Book Festival, archived online at http://www.jkrowling.com/textonly/en/news_view.cfm?id=80, accessed 11.32am, 02/04/2010.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, a much wider variety of ancient languages is used, depending on the imagined origin of the spell. Because these are real languages, it becomes plausible for the characters to study and learn the language, giving them greater ability with the spells. The notion of plausibility is a delicate one – Dawn learns Sumerian far more quickly than would be possible in reality – but the mere fact that it is a real language with real origins makes her achievement just plausible enough for the series.

However, it is because Latin is more familiar to audiences that it is frequently chosen over other ancient languages when spells or magical incantations are required. This is partly because Latin is so close to a number of modern European languages, so the spells sound ‘right’ – *petrificus totalus*, for example, ‘petrifies’ someone ‘totally’.⁷ Latin is sufficiently old and mysterious and, at the same time, sufficiently recognisable to make an effective magic spell that sounds plausible, yet out of the ordinary.

There are some cases in which Farrell’s ‘bifurcation’ is less clear-cut, as the popular use of the language stems from educational experiences with Latin. The divide between academic study and popular culture remains clear, but the two share a common root in the experiences of those who learned Latin in school. The best known example of this sort of use of Latin, which is usually humorous, is the sequence in *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (dir. Terry Jones, 1979) in which Brian’s (Graham Chapman) Latin graffiti is corrected by a Roman soldier (John Cleese). Much of the humour of this sequence relies on the audience having some knowledge of Latin teaching in school, as the Roman demands that the hapless Brian conjugate the verb *eo*, ‘I go’, and decline the noun *Romanus*. The Pythons, like the author of the anonymous rhyme quoted at the beginning of this article, studied Latin in school, and it is because they did so that they use Latin in the film. The joke is particularly amusing to those who have studied, and been frustrated by, Latin, especially when the Roman soldier (incorrectly) brings up the dreaded locative case, a

⁷ Rowling 1997: 198.

phrase which can mean nothing to anyone who has not studied Latin but which will bring back many memories for men of the Pythons' background.

Even comic uses of Latin which do not rely on the audience understanding the language play with echoes of education. In the first and last episodes of the 1980s situation comedy *Chelmsford 123* Latin is used for sequences set in Rome, and here the audience is not expected to understand the Latin or its grammar. By the 1980s, few state schools in Britain were teaching Latin and in those that were, it was not compulsory after age 14, so the writers could not assume any Latin knowledge on the part of their audience. One joke, for example, in which the Emperor's divorce from a goat is said to be sad because 'there were kids involved', clearly works only in English (*Chelmsford 123*, 'Arrivederci Roma!', dir. John Stroud, 1988).

Some jokes do rely on the audience recognising the general tenor of the word, or at least recognising a rude word when they hear one – exclaiming *Testiculos!* and subtitling it 'Bollocks!', for example. The reason that this sort of use of Latin in *Chelmsford 123* is funny is because it is out of context. A Roman would not feel that way, of course, but between the cleaned up Latin used in education and the association of Latin with the Catholic Church, there is something funny to a modern audience about Latin being used in a relaxed context or to say rude words. Because Latin is associated with dry grammar exercises or Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, it sounds funny to hear people talk about love and sex in this language. Anyone who has studied Latin to a fairly high level, of course, will not find this at all strange, since they will have read Catullus, Ovid and Propertius, but the majority, who have either never studied the language or who have given it up at around age 14, find the mere use of the dry, old language in this context highly amusing.

One of the inevitable consequences of the lack of Latin teaching in state schools is that Latin becomes associated with power and elitism, and in a popular context, it can be used to symbolise such power. This is not restricted to British popular culture. In *The West Wing*, when Latin is not being used

because it is Catholic, it is used because it demonstrates Bartlet's extensive education, as for example in the early episode 'Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc' (dir. Thomas Schlamme, 1999), in which Bartlet shows off to his staff with his use of the Latin phrase. Bartlet is depicted as a very clever (Nobel-prize winning) highly educated man, and his use of Latin confirms his right to be in power because he is so clever and so well-educated. Bartlet's privilege comes both from birth (his family 'founded [the] state' of New Hampshire, according to 'In the Shadow of Two Gunmen Part 1', dir. Thomas Schlamme, 2000), and from his own enthusiastic pursuit of knowledge, making the best use of the resources at his disposal, and these factors combine to make him creator Aaron Sorkin's ideal leader, and result in *The West Wing's* great appeal to those who share these values.⁸

In the British situation comedy *Yes, (Prime) Minister*, the use of Latin is particularly bound up with its place as a language of power derived from birth and upbringing. Bernard's (Derek Fowlds) display of his knowledge of Latin and Greek grammar in *Yes, Minister*, 'The Bed of Nails' (dir. Peter Whitmore, 1982) is so enthusiastic even Sir Humphrey (Nigel Hawthorne) is taken aback, but Bernard remembers to include a dig at Hacker (Paul Eddington) for attending the LSE, implying that his knowledge of the ancient languages is therefore lacking and thus implying a certain inferiority. In *Yes, Prime Minister's* 'The National Education Service' (dir. Sydney Lotterby, 1988), the point is even more vexed. Hacker is arguing that Latin should be brought back into schools, while Humphrey argues that it is useless. During the conversation, Humphrey throws several Latin phrases at Hacker which Hacker does not understand, leaving Humphrey to exclaim in frustration, 'What's the use of [Latin]? I can't even call upon it in conversation with the Prime Minister of Great Britain!' Whereas Hacker wants to move Latin away from being an elitist language known only to a privileged few, Humphrey wants to keep it that way – mainly because this suits his plans for the

⁸ Finn notes that *The West Wing* did especially well in households with an income of more than \$100,000 per year, possibly because the high value placed on the upper tier of education appeals to those who have undergone a similar education themselves; Finn 2003: 119.

education system, but also because that way, he reserves this particular symbol of power for himself. He has this knowledge which is associated with power and access to power; he does not want others to get it.

Latin's usefulness as a language associated with power and elitism may be slowly reduced by its growing place as a source of private entertainment, as a hobby. The success of the Latin translations of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* and *Winnie the Pooh* indicate that there are people who wish to read Latin for fun, in their own time, at home (although there is great potential for using these texts as teaching tools, this has yet to be realised, as the current preference in Latin teaching tends to be for using 'real', i.e. ancient, texts exclusively). Amazon.co.uk's sales ranks indicate that the Latin translation of the first Harry Potter book is more popular than the similarly niche translations of the books into Welsh, Irish Gaelic or Ancient Greek.⁹ The translations themselves use complex Latin phraseology, the author enjoying demonstrating their abilities with the ancient language to the reader, who is expected to understand and appreciate their effort. There is clearly an appetite for Latin as a source of entertainment and an exercise for the brain.

For the most part, however, this is still bound up with the old elitism, for it is those who studied Latin in school and have some knowledge of it already who are most likely to study Latin for pleasure in later life. That author Harry Mount believes this to be so is made abundantly clear in his popular Latin grammar book *Amo, Amas, Amat... and all that*. The title by itself is a good indication of the author's target audience. The verb *amo* (I love) is the one traditionally used in Latin classes to teach students how to conjugate verbs of the first conjugation and it is one of the first items one comes across in a traditional Latin textbook or grammar book such as *Reading Latin*.¹⁰ The phrase, like *Life of Brian's* invocation of the locative, brings memories flooding back to those who studied Latin in school in this way. However, this phrase means less to

⁹ At 4.30-4.45pm, 13/10/2009, the Latin version's sales ranking in 'Books' was 22,412, while the Welsh edition was at 86,042, the Ancient Greek at 106,519 and the Irish Gaelic at 313,682.

¹⁰ Jones and Sidwell 1986: 7-8.

those who have studied Latin in school more recently, as the Cambridge Latin Course is now the more popular introduction to the language for school children and it does not fully conjugate a first conjugation verb until the end chapter. Moreover, the series chooses *porto* rather than *amo* as a paradigm for the first conjugation. Of course, the phrase means nothing at all to someone who has never studied Latin.¹¹ Although Mount claims that it is ‘no matter’ if his readers never learned Latin in school, he confesses that it is ‘all the better’ if they did and he spends much of the discursive parts of the book discussing the experience of learning Latin in school.¹² Mount’s book’s primary appeal is clearly to those who learned Latin in school using a ‘traditional’, that is, perhaps more old-fashioned, textbook.

Unlike Mount’s book, which, though full of minor errors and over-simplification, does aim to leave the reader with some increased understanding of Latin as a language, most popular Latin phrase books do not actually try to teach the language or increase understanding of Latin itself at all. This is made particularly clear in a relatively recent publication, *21st Century Latin: From ASBO Teens to Being Green*, in which the English phrase is placed above the Latin, clearly emphasising the amusement value of being able to say a particular, thoroughly modern (indeed, so modern some are already starting to sound a little passé) phrase in an ancient language, rather than emphasising the skill required to adapt an ancient language for a modern context unlike *Harrius Potter* and *Winnie Ille Pu*. Similarly, *Laughable Latin: Witty Latin Phrases for All Occasions*, although it prefers to list phrases the modern imagination supposes Romans might use, such as ‘I’d like to ask the soothsayer if I should go to the North or South’, also places the English phrase above the Latin, deriving entertainment value chiefly from the assemblage of a rather odd collection of phrases.¹³ Henry Beard’s *Latin for All Occasions*, which was an early example of this genre, set the tone; also placing English above Latin, Beard uses headings like ‘All Music is Classical

¹¹ Cambridge School Classics Project 1990: 198.

¹² Mount 2006: 12.

¹³ O’Mara and Williams 2004: 1

Music in Latin', 'Flattery Sounds More Sincere in Latin' and 'Embarrassing Situations are Less Embarrassing in Latin' to get the aim of his book succinctly across to his readers.¹⁴ The idea of this book is not to gain any knowledge or understanding of Latin, but to make yourself sound a bit more sophisticated and to entertain yourself by making mundane things sound more exotic, much as the use of Latin for magical spells makes the phrases used sound more interesting. Understanding of the language itself is reserved for the few who are privileged enough to have been taught it or dedicated enough to have studied it for themselves; for the majority, a simple, non-literal translation of one phrase to another is considered sufficient.

However, the success of the more challenging Latin popular books indicates that there are those who willingly read and study Latin in their spare time. Why choose Latin, rather than a 'useful' modern language like French or German? It is because Latin, despite the anguished arguments of classicists everywhere proclaiming its great usefulness as a basis for a number of modern European languages, is widely perceived as a 'dead' language that it forms appropriate material for a hobby. A hobby is something we do outside of work, for no purpose but our own pleasure. Because Latin is not perceived as 'useful', because it does not seem to be connected to work or labour of any kind, it can become something pursued purely for pleasure. The nature of popular books in Latin emphasises this aspect; *Amo, Amas, Amat... and all that* adds to its traditionalist Latin grammar-derived title the phrase 'and all that', clearly allying itself not with traditional grammar books, but with the perennially popular, anti-educative *1066 And All That*. Although some of the Latin phrase books available provide translations of traditionally popular Latin phrases like *quis custodiet ipsos custodiet*, most focus on phrases such as *furnulum pani nolo* ('I don't want a toaster').¹⁵ If any amateur students do advance far enough to be able to read Latin, they may choose to read Harry Potter or *Winnie Ille Pu* in preference to Cicero, because it is more fun.

¹⁴ Beard 1990: 43-4, 56.

¹⁵ Mount 2006: 242; Beard 1990: 36.

Classics and, in particular, the study of 'Classical Civilization' is currently undergoing something of a 'renaissance' in school-level education, as Bassnett has put it, and this may lead to even more Latin peppering popular culture.¹⁶ The title of this paper comes from the motto of the Fool's Guild in Terry Pratchett's Discworld series of fantasy books.¹⁷ Because, in our culture, the mottos of a number of institutions – dating from a time when Classics was an essential part of the upper-class school curriculum – are in Latin, in the Discworld, 'mirror of worlds' mottos are in the 'old' language of Ankh-Morpork.¹⁸ This use of Latin – taking advantage of its age, inherent comic value, its association with power and with magic – rather neatly sums up its most valuable asset in a popular context. Latin is useful because it is old. Latin is funny because it is amusing to hear everyday things discussed in an ancient language. Latin is representative of power because it represents a knowledge linked with those in power for many decades, and it is magical because it is a language no longer used in everyday contexts. Latin makes an interesting hobby because it cannot be used for a practical purpose. It is precisely because Latin is a 'dead' language that it remains so alive in modern popular culture.

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¹⁶ Bassnett 2002: 107.

¹⁷ Pratchett and Briggs 2003: 171.

¹⁸ Pratchett 1990: 9.

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