

Otium Didascalii (What a Classics Tutor Does for Fun)



Classics tutors have strange ways of making themselves useful to society at large. Since I took up my post at Jesus in October 2000, a month seldom passes without my receiving a request, formal or casual, sometimes from total strangers in faraway lands, for a translation or interpretation of Latin or Greek – and, quite regularly, for translation *into* Latin or Greek of a motto, phrase, or passage. I'm happy to oblige. After my Pindaric *Ode to Athens* for the 2004 Olympics (reported in that year's *Record*) was published in the worldwide media, some people assumed I must be the uncrowned laureate of classical verse composition. Thereafter the flow of requests increased, including

some passed on to me by Classics tutors who felt that they were thereby let off the hook. Composition is rewarding and fun, but there are risks involved. It can take hours and even days of thought and study to produce something that is lively, idiomatic, and one must hope – since one courts the criticism of lynx-eyed scholars – error-free. For short pieces, I find that verse is often the best option; classical metres, in particular the elegiac couplet or elegiac distich, are well suited to epigrammatic expression. But the languages themselves are so rich in nuance that my compositions often contain (assuming it is appropriate to the subject) some element of verbal manipulation and humour. I have preserved a few of my versions, and hope that readers of the *Record* will enjoy the selection that follows.

There is a noble tradition in England of creating puns, using Latin, on personal and proper names. Perhaps the best-known example is the single-word telegram sent by General Napier from India after conquering the province of Sindh in 1843. He acted without permission from the military authorities back home; and knowing that he had exceeded his orders Napier chose to send the news via the disarming message *PECCAVI*: 'I have sinned' – both an apology and a wonderful pun, 'I have Sindh'. I once

suggested a similar pun when I briefly studied the cello with Paul Tortelier in the 1980s. The maestro described how his children had broken a fine cello-bow by accident before his eyes, whereupon in fury he grabbed two other bows from their hooks and snapped them in two 'to make the tragedy complete'. It was an impulsive act for which he had not forgiven himself. The bows were the work of the master French bow-maker Dominique Peccatte (1810-1874); they were irreplaceable, and worth many thousands of pounds. I wryly suggested to him that his Latin epitaph should be *Peccata Solvi*, to be interpreted equally as 'I've paid for my sins' and 'I broke my Peccattes'. Somewhat surprisingly,

'reason'. I accordingly came up with the following couplet:

*Verborum Dominus, Venator nomine vero,
non avium, pulchrae sed rationis, erat.*

His name spoke true, he was a
Don of words,
and Fowler of fine wisdom - not of birds.

I ventured a dodgier pun in response to a request recently put out on a Classicists' website. Someone had founded a society of retired professionals called 'the Has Beens', and wanted a Latin tag for it. The straightforward solution, *EMERITI*, would have worked if the society just met annually for a *merry tea*.

"Rather than try to translate verbatim, one must often try to find a suitable equivalent in the ancient languages."

Tortelier was taken with the suggestion, and made me write down the Latin words for him, presumably so that they might be engraved in his heart, if not on his gravestone. Another name that seemed to me ripe for punning was that of my predecessor at Jesus, Don Fowler. After the Fowler Memorial Lecture a couple of years ago, I suggested to the Corpus Professor of Latin that an honorific couplet should be composed for Don. 'Don' as in 'Oxford don' derives from Latin *dominus*, master; a fowler is someone who hunts birds, *venator avium*; and Don's eloquent writings focus on Lucretius, whose Epicurean philosophy the Roman poet had extolled as *ratio*,

But 'has beens' made me think of the philosopher-sage Pythagoras, who was notorious for saving beans from the pot in the belief that they contain human souls; his detractors joked that the doctrine stemmed from the propensity of beans to induce wind. A pentameter line suggested itself: *nos meritis fruimur, Pythagorasque fabis*, that is, 'we are happily retired – and Pythagoras has beans'. The Has Beens turned down the motto; after all, it might be thought to imply that they were Old Farts.

At the 2005 annual Jesus Classics Dinner, the guest of honour was the Grammatikos (Oxford's official tutor of classical languages), Andrew Hobson.

The day before the dinner, my students informed me that Andrew had just got engaged to be married; he was greatly looking forward, they said, to receiving an elegiac couplet from me in Latin or Greek to mark the occasion. I had no choice. Andrew's surname gave me the chance to play on the notion of 'Hobson's Choice', a phrase defined as 'a free choice in which only one option is offered' i.e. the choice is between taking the option or not taking it. The phrase in fact originated in the 17th century, when Thomas Hobson, a Cambridge stable owner, used to rotate the use of his horses by offering customers the option of taking 'either the horse in the nearest stall, or none at all'. Since the name 'Andrew' itself originates from the Greek word *andreios*, meaning 'manly' or 'brave', I decided to produce both Greek and Latin versions of a celebratory couplet as follows:

Brave Andrew chose a wife to wed: now
praise him with one voice.

He chose, and yet he didn't choose; for his
was Hobson's choice.

*Eligit Andreas uxorem: extollite cuncti.
eligit, atqui non eligit: actus amat.*

εἶλετ' ἄρ' Ἀνδρείος γαμετήν·
μακαρίζετε πάντες.
εἶλετο, καὶ μὴν οὐχ εἶλετο·
δοῦλος ἀνήρ.

The last two words of the Latin version above mean 'he is forced to love',

while those in the Greek mean 'a man is a slave'. Rather than try to translate verbatim, one must often try to find a suitable equivalent in the ancient languages. This principle was illustrated earlier this year when a colleague passed on a request from Acer Nethercott, cox of the Boat Race for a number of years including the victorious 2003 Oxford crew, for a Latin inscription to adorn the clock of the new University Boathouse. The 2003 win was the closest Boat Race win of all time, won by the heaviest crew on record. They had won by just 1 foot, so the clock was to be built with hands exactly 1 foot long; and the crew wanted a Latin version of 'Every second counts, but so does the size of your nutsack.' My colleague had added 'I suppose 'nutsack' is a euphemism like 'lunchbox''. One assumes that it is; but a Latin inscription would hardly have allowed a vulgar word like *scrotum* to besmirch its lapidary dignity. I therefore suggested the phrase *VINCIT VELOCITAS, NON SINE VIRIBUS*, explaining that it literally meant 'Speed wins, but not without manly strength'. Acer (whose name in Latin means 'sharp') emailed me with thanks, and repeated that what was wanted was a translation of the phrase 'Every second counts, but so does the size of your nutsack.' I sent him a lengthier explanation of my rationale, and suggested that, for a more personal note, they might wish to add the words *ACER EGO TESTIS*, meaning 'I, Acer, am witness'. Inscribed on the clock face, however, these words would equally mean 'Keen witness am I',

suggesting that Time itself had attested to the close victory. The phrase would also introduce, after all, an equivalent for ‘nutsack’, since *testis*, the root of words like ‘testify’, ‘attest’ etc., is also Latin for ‘testicle’ (raising a further, less flattering, implication for *Acer ego testis*). According to a plausible etymology, *testis* acquired the meaning ‘witness’ because Roman men were required to swear on their private parts when giving judicial ‘testimony’ (but linguistic experts today doubt that this is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth...).

Punning on names, using verbal jingles and repetitions, playing with quiriness and paradox provide - as the above examples show - rich possibilities for epigrammatic humour. All these devices are found in ancient satirists such as Martial, whose clever *ad hominem* squibs have resurfaced in many different contexts. A famous instance is the story of Tom Brown, a student at Christ Church in the 1680s, who was summoned for some misdemeanour by the unloveable Dean, Dr. Fell. Opening a volume of Martial, the Dean asked Brown to translate the following epigram (l. 33. 1) at sight: *Non amo te, Sabidi, nec possum dicere quare; / hoc tantum possum dicere, non amo te* (a loose rhyming translation might be ‘Sabidius, I love you not, nor can I tell you why;/ But ’tis a fact, I love you not; I cannot tell a lie’). Brown allegedly turned away decanal wrath by translating it, with admirable nerve, as follows: ‘I do not love thee, Dr Fell, the reason why I cannot tell;/ But this I know, and know



Detail from a wall painting, Pompeii, House of the Vettii

full well: I do not love thee, Dr Fell.’ I sought to make a more affectionate pun on Peter North’s name when he retired as Principal in 2005; the epigram I composed played with the image of the ‘Northern light’ shedding its lasting gleam on the College (*lux Borealis in his aedibus usque micet*, see *Record 2005*). At that time I suggested that the name of the incoming Principal might one day be put to work in similar fashion, since Krebs is the German word for ‘crab’, *cancer* in Latin. The occasion arose for a Martial-style epigram when Sir John was ennobled in March 2007:

*Olim Cancer erat, sed solum nomine pravus:
Nobilis, ecce, redit qui modo Cancer erat.*

There was a man whose name was Krebs,
but Crabby just in name:
He who was Crabby once, behold, a noble
Lord became.

Around this time I was set to composing another elegiac couplet in response to an email from Jonathan Musgrave, an Old Member of the College. Jonathan himself is no mean Latinist: his translation of Beatrix Potter's Jemima Puddle-Duck into Latin as *Fabula de Jemima Anata-Aquatica* was published in 1964. Copies are hard to come by (I own one, courtesy of the translator), but in view of the worldwide fascination with *Arrius Potter* and the like, a reprint is surely due. Jonathan wrote to me after his son, the author and horticulturist Toby Musgrave, asked him to provide a Latin epigram for a forthcoming book on Britain's master gardeners. Toby wanted to say something like 'Master gardeners of old and today, we salute you'. The model he had in mind was the so-called Roman gladiators' farewell (actually a Hollywood myth) *MORITURI TE SALUTAMUS*, 'we who are about to die salute you'. Since Jonathan's prose version lacked the evocative power of this model, I suggested that a Latin distich would be preferable. This required me to come up with some additional words to 'pad out' the second half of the pentameter. The irrepressible John Griffith, my predecessor but one at Jesus, who tutored me when I was an undergraduate at Merton during my tutor's period of leave, scorned meaningless padding in Latin verse composition; if you need to fill up the measures of verse, try to say something interesting. My version, now printed on the frontispiece of Toby's fine book *The Head Gardeners: Heroes of*

Horticulture (Aurum Press 2007), ends with the phrase '*floreat omne genus*'. This final flourish can mean equally 'may all their (or your/our) kind flourish' and 'may every genus (of plant) flourish':

*Hortis qui praesunt, vos nunc
priscosque ministros
rite salutamus: floreat omne genus.*

Head gardeners of old, and those who
follow on behind,
We pay you homage due; long flourish
all your kind.

In June this year I received an email from an old school-friend of mine, Stephen Wolfram, a notable physicist and computer scientist who developed the hugely successful computation program *Mathematica*. Now based in Chicago, he runs his own billion-dollar corporation, Wolfram Research Inc., and hosts annual conferences to promote the 'theory of everything' which he elaborated in his book *A New Kind of Science*. The background to his email, headed 'a strange but rather urgent Latin question...', was that he wished to honour a friend of his, the mathematician Gregory Chaitin, with a specially minted medallion on his sixtieth birthday in a few weeks' time. Chaitin is known for his invention or discovery of the mathematical concept of Ω (*omega*), defined as 'a number that contains all other numbers but is not itself computable', and he has argued (somewhat on the lines of Gödel's Undecidability Theorem) that

mathematical truths are only discoverable on an *ad hoc* basis. One of Chaitin's heroes, the mathematician and polymath Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), was the discoverer of the binary system (as well as the eponymous honorand of choco-Leibniz biscuit); the image of the 'Leibniz medallion' that appears on Chaitin's website was the impetus for Wolfram's idea. But the inscription on the Leibniz medallion, which was designed but never actually minted, is in Latin...so Stephen wrote to me asking if I could provide a Latin translation, post-haste, of the following indigestible doctrines which sum up Chaitin's work: 1) 'Everything can be summarized in one thing, but the thing itself cannot be reached', and 2) 'The truths of mathematics emerge at random'.

The request initially made my heart sink; composition is often the art of paraphrase, but I had little idea what these paradoxical-sounding concepts of Higher Mathematics actually meant. When I looked up the Leibniz medallion on Chaitin's website, I realised that I had to accept a yet greater challenge. There the rationale for the whole binary system is summarised with a neat phrase, printed around the top of the medallion's face, composed in a perfect Latin hexameter: *OMNIBUS EX NIHILO DUCENDIS, SUFFICIT UNUM* ('if everything is to be derived from nothing, one suffices'). I set myself the task of imagining how every number might be involved in the unattainable omega, and came up with the following: *OMNE UNO*

IMPLICITUR, QUOD NON ATTINGITUR IPSUM ('everything is implicated into one thing, which itself cannot be attained'). The first three words pleasingly elide into one another (*omn-un-implicitur*), thus illustrating the notion of everything being incorporated into a unity. I suggested that, to emphasise the point of Chaitin's discovery, the *o* of *uno* could be printed as Ω (thus, everything is summarised in 'one Ω '). The second proposition, which was to be engraved on the lower part of the medallion's face, now surely needed to be versified as a pentameter to make an elegiac couplet. Luckily, 'mathematics' in Latin is scanned (like the Greek) with a long *e* – *mathēmatica* – which allows the word to slot neatly into the verse: *FORTUITA EVENIUNT VERA MATHEMATICAE*. (Classicists may recall that Ovid regularised the ending of the pentameter as a disyllabic word, but as this 'rule' was not consistently applied by poets such as Catullus and Propertius I feel no compulsion to do so unless I am composing expressly Ovidian verse). Chaitin's achievement was duly



honoured on his birthday, and the couplet was engraved on a limited edition of gold-plated medallions, followed by the words *ad laudem Gregorii Chaitin MMVII* ('in honour of Gregory Chaitin 2007'). On the reverse, Wolfram had the design created for Leibniz engraved as well, thus finally honouring the latter in the manner originally intended. Together with Chaitin himself, I am now the proud possessor of one of these superbly minted medallions, a photo of which is shown overleaf. Who can deny that Latin verse composition has its rewards?

Latin is, of course, a vehicle for sober philosophical thought as well as for wit and humour. One of my more serious versions was composed in response to a request from Gareth Poole, son of the late Sir David Poole, a former Jesus classicist, Honorary Fellow of the College, and High Court judge. David had been a regular and congenial visitor to Jesus before he died quite suddenly of cancer last year. Gareth wrote to say that a friend of his, whom his father had known and liked, had also died of cancer, at the age of 26. The parents had asked for help with the wording of their son's headstone in Latin. Gareth wrote 'My father, whose passion for Latin and all other languages never seemed to fade, would have relished the challenge of preparing a suitable translation into Latin, but unfortunately it is no longer possible to call on his keenness and ability.' What was wanted was to combine the following two reflections into a single Latin sentence: 'It is not living, but living

well, that we ought to consider most important' (Plato), and 'If I can rejoice for a moment, death at an early age would still be a long life' (Yüan Mei, 1716-98). As so often, the logical clarity of Latin required the phrases, especially the latter (translated from the Chinese), to be elucidated and recast. Thus 'if I can rejoice for a moment' means 'if a moment is sufficient time for me to experience joy', and the statement that 'death would still be a long life' needs to say 'a life that ended early would count as having been a long one'. Accordingly, my Latin version ran as follows:

Non vitam sed bene vivere maximi aestimare nos oportet; quodsi mihi exiguum tempus sufficit laetitiae, tum vita etiam prima aetate perfuncta tamen longa fuisse videatur.

Literally this means 'It is not life but living well that we ought to consider of most importance; and if a moment is sufficient for me to experience joy, then even a life completed at an early age would still seem to have been a long one.' Verbal rhythm is present in Latin prose as well as verse; the quantities of the six final syllables *-isse videatur* (long-short, short-short-long-short) make a particular rhythmical cadence called a 'clausula', which Cicero often used to lend a sense of authority to his sentences.

Quite recently I was asked to provide the Latin for a similar sentiment in a very different context. In this case it is the motto for an old people's home which, in the words of the home's

Director, 'rather eccentrically caters for people with thwarted theatrical ambitions'. The phrase was 'No one should depart this earth before they have starred in a show'. The straightforward prose translation (*nemo vitam relinquit priusquam primas partes in fabula egerit*) seemed to lend itself to expansion into an elegiac distich, with the theatrical image extended, as in Shakespeare's 'all the world's a stage', to life itself. Noting that *vela* ('sails') is the Latin term for 'theatre

awnings' and *scaena* means 'stage', I should let this be my last word, at least for now:

*Vitae vela prius nemo scaenamve relinquat,
primas quam partes egerit in fabula.*

From life's bright stage let none
release their soul,
Till on the boards they've played
a starring role.

DR ARMAND D'ANGOUR