

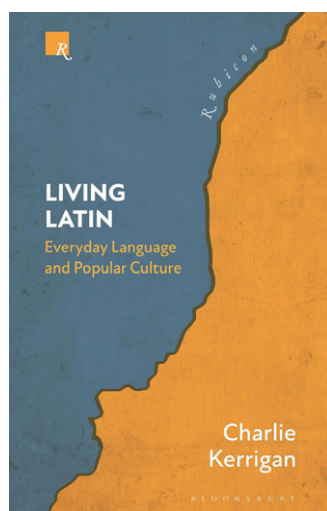
Book Review

Living Latin. Everyday Language and Popular Culture

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In *Living Latin: Everyday Language and Popular Culture*, Charlie Kerrigan brings together multiple works from Latin authors and modern scholars as support for a history of and precedent for everyday Latin. This publication stems from a blog that was the work of the *Living Latin Project* out of Trinity College, Dublin. The mission of this group is “to make a subject with a reputation for difficulty and exclusivity more welcoming and inclusive, particularly for beginners” (vii). This mission starts with deflating

Latin of its perceived intellectual exclusivity and exposing the forgotten fact that Latin was first and foremost a spoken language. As the infamous Reginald Foster said, “Prostitutes, beggars, and pimps in Rome spoke Latin, so there must be some hope for us” (Frankovitch, 2021). Kerrigan structures this resource around three chapters. The first looks to examples of everyday classical Latin in the forms of graffiti, funeral monuments, and other texts that are not of the elite class from which most of the classical canon derives. The second chapter examines case studies of Roman theatre, history, and mythology and how they have impacted those ages which came after them. Chapter three looks at what Kerrigan calls “high” and “low” Latin: “a high language of culture, literature, religion and education, and a low language of everyday life” (77) which would become the Romance languages.

“The Latin of Ordinary People” is the first chapter in *Living Latin* and examines the beauty of the mundane. The exclusivity of Latin has long relied on the implied importance of philosophy and speeches. These texts have reached a certain distinction of gravitas

by the intellectual elite over centuries. They have allowed the authors, mostly men, to become the lives by which Roman habits and history are studied and learned. Among Kerrigan’s examples of Latin in the everyday that challenge this tradition is a roof tile with two short sentences of graffiti written by women. Only their names and origins are apparent in what they left on the tile and all else is tantalisingly out of reach. Pedagogically speaking, graffiti are plentiful and in small enough chunks that beginning students are able to immediately interact with Romans who are not held up as fine orators. Kerrigan also mentions the Vindolanda letters and Egeria’s travel journal which, again, give modern Latin students a look into the everyday lives of ancient individuals and serve as evidence that Latin is not only for public addresses or elegiac poetry (for example). This chapter is rich in resources which bring up often overlooked Latin that is approachable for early Latin students because the intended audience is not the same as for those speeches of elevated rhetoric tradition.

The second chapter, “Pop Classics”, spends a lot of time, and rightly so, examining the pragmatic nature of Roman comedy. Roman comedy abounds with vernacular and explicit Latin that would not be heard within the Curia but rather outside in the Forum and back alleys of Rome. Although many plays include acts of sexual violence which do not lend themselves to be tossed out with the bath water. Terence may have been the playwright that made it into the early Latin textbooks but Plautus is really the source by which readers today can hear what most closely resembles the Latin spoken by the women, slaves, and merchants. Kerrigan discusses how the tropes and storylines of Roman comedy have found their ways into the minds of more modern creatives, such as Pedro Almodóvar and Maya Angelou. Catullus and Petronius also make an appearance in this chapter as extant authors of genres that have reflected less robust voices, such as Trimalchio the freedman in the *Satyricon*. Kerrigan finishes the chapter with Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Virgil and Ovid are both exemplars of Rome’s Golden Age of literature and while the Latin used by both authors has more vocabulary and complex syntax than most, the themes and myths encountered within their works have had innumerable effects on western literature as a whole.

Finally, Kerrigan succinctly traces Latin’s evolution into the Romance languages and the outcomes of this process in the third chapter entitled “Latin to Romance”. Kerrigan refers to “high” Latin as that grammatically-focused Latin of the educated class against “low” Latin which was spoken in regional vernacular and eventually became the Romance languages. Kerrigan points out that Charlamagne only widened this divide when he sought to revive the “correct” Latin of the Romans and emphasise that it was the language of the political and religious elites. This dichotomy led to Latin being the language of the church and was used as a tool for power as well as contemplation by Christian authors like St. Augustine.

There are many good points made throughout *Living Latin: Everyday Language and Popular Culture* that prove Latin is not only a language used in formal settings by the affluent and intelligentsia. That notion was perpetuated by those who would use it as a means by which they could exert discrimination and exclusion which now is hard to shake. However, Kerrigan's work pokes many holes in this idea and should be part of a modern, comprehensive Latin education today. Should anyone seek an introduction into why Latin need be taught as a living language and how to reject the long-held notion that Latin is somehow to be

reserved for a small slice of the privileged, Kerrigan's work is indeed a fine choice.

Reference

Frankovich, N. (2021). Tradition without Traditionalism: Reginald Foster Requiescat in Pace. *National Review*, January 2. Available online: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/01/tradition-without-traditionalism-reginald-foster-requiescat-in-pace/> (accessed 18 October 2024).

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