

*Doctus Sermones Utriusque Linguae?:*  
how well did Roman poets expect their readers to know Greek?

Hail, holy Light, offspring of Heaven firstborn,  
Or of the Eternal coeternal beam  
May I express thee unblam'd? since God is light,  
And never but in unapproach'd light  
Dwelt from eternity, dwelt then in thee  
Bright effluence of bright essence increate.  
**Or hear'st thou rather pure ethereal stream,**  
Whose fountain who shall tell?

These lines, with which the already completely blind John Milton opens the third book of *Paradise Lost*, are deservedly famous, but line 7 is comprehensible only if we realize that he is using a calque on a Greek idiom by which verbs of hearing may mean “to be called”. Commentators through the centuries have felt obliged to explain the expression. Milton will have decided its obscurity was outweighed by its enhancement of the passage’s elevated tone.

What are we to make of Catullus’ use of much the same Grecism at 68.109ff.?

quale ferunt Grai Pheneum prope Cylleneum  
siccare emulsa pingue palude solum,  
quod quondam caesis montis **fodisse** medullis  
**audit falsiparens Amphitryoniades.**

Such adventurous use of Greek is found throughout Roman poetry. Catullus’ nominative and infinitive at 4.1f., *Phaselus ille, quem uidetis, hospites, ait fuisse nauium celerrimus*, is not too challenging, nor indeed is Vergil’s nominative participle with a verb of perception at *Aen.* 2.377 *sensit medios delapsus in hostis*. But, how comprehensible is, to give just one example here, *frigida pugnabant calidis, umentia siccis, mollia cum duris, sine pondere habentia pondus*, right at the beginning of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*? My paper will discuss several such idioms in Roman poetry, not all of which have been recognized before.

Since there is no consensus among scholars on such basic questions as the percentage of the Roman population that was literate in Latin, we need hardly expect to be able to assess with any precision the receptiveness of contemporary readers to Greek in Roman poetry. Nevertheless, the issue is of fundamental importance: it affects, for example, our readiness to accept the bilingual etymological plays and the very intricate allusions to Greek poetry proposed by scholars with greater frequency and subtlety now than ever before. Much excellent work is being done on Greco-Roman bilingualism nowadays: among the studies particularly significant to my paper are:

Adams, J.N. (2002), *Bilingualism and the Latin Language*, Cambridge.  
Adams, J.N. and Mayer, R.G. (eds.) (1999), *Aspects of the Language of Latin Poetry*, Oxford.  
Boyancé, P. (1956), ‘La connaissance du grec à Rome’, *REL* 34: 111-131.

- Dubuisson, M. (1992), 'Le grec à Rome à l'époque de Cicéron. Extension et qualité du bilinguisme', *Annales ESC* 1:187-206.
- Horsfall, N. (1979), 'Doctus sermones utriusque linguae', *EMC* 23: 79-95.
- Oniga, R. (ed.) (2003), *Il plurilinguismo nella tradizione letteraria latina*, Rome.
- Seamann, W.H. (1954-5), 'The Understanding of Greek by Plautus' Audience', *CJ* 50: 115-119.
- Weise, O. (1882), *Die griechischen Wörter im Latein*, Leipzig (reprinted 1964): 11-42.