

Should Latin Versification be Entirely Forgotten?

Alluding to the many benefits of Latin verse composition, J.C. McKeown stated: “if you can’t write a hexameter, you can’t read one” (Califf 2002, ix). While this seems like a rather bold claim, it brings to the foreground a problem in Latin pedagogy which has received little scholarly attention. Latin verse composition has virtually disappeared from classical curricula of the 21st century. This paper addresses the roots of this loss and its impact on modern Latin instruction.

The teaching of Latin verse composition seems to have peaked in the late 19th century, as demonstrated by the many verse composition textbooks printed during this period. It began to dwindle in the succeeding years (Godley 1917). Opponents assert that the study of Latin verse composition is, in the words of Dr. Abbott, “tedious, mechanical, and profitless” (quoted in Lyttelton 1897). One of my main concerns in this paper is to refute this claim. I endeavor to show that the primary goal of Latin versification is not to produce seasoned Latin poets; rather, such study furnishes students with essential skills in Classics. Moreover, the student who is educated in Latin versification gains a deeper appreciation of the beauty and intricacy of Latin poetry, which is central to Classical studies (Ellingham 1935).

In order to shed light on this subject, I take into account the history and role of Latin verse composition in different methods of education, including those of the British, Jesuits, and Renaissance humanists. I then explore the many benefits of this art, as attested to by Latin authors, such as St. Augustine. Finally, I examine Latin versification in the light of 21st century Latin pedagogy. Many modern Latin programs favor active language acquisition. The student who struggles to compose an accurate line of dactylic hexameter actively engages with the Latin language in a unique way. This paper therefore suggests that Latin verse composition be reintroduced into modern Latin curricula. To this end, I offer a practical method for teaching this

subject in today's Latin classroom, drawing upon my study of Latin versification manuals and teaching experience.

Bibliography

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