

What can Taylor Swift, Miley Cyrus, and Adele do for your Latin Prose Composition students?

One of the singular difficulties in teaching the finer points of analyzing ancient poetry to undergraduate Latin students is getting them to see that the compositional structure of the poem, and in particular the various poetic devices used, helps give poems literary texture and influences their emotional and figurative significance. In fact, most students throw their hands up when asked to explain what *anaphora*, *metonymy*, or *chiasmus* adds to Horace's artistry and message in one of his *Odes*. One of the reasons for this exasperation seems to be the two-fold struggle of learning to translate the Latin into coherent English while simultaneously translating Roman poetic ideals into 21st century American ones. One option for developing these skills—that is, the recognition that structural devices matter for the meaning of the poem and what they mean—is to practice close-reading skills with Latin poetry. This paper outlines the use of close-reading assignments in a Latin Prose Composition course in a novel way, with contemporary pop music, to overcome the barriers of time and culture for our Latin students.

Outside the Vatican and certain secret societies, composing Latin in good Ciceronian or Livian idiom is no longer the necessary skill that it once was. As such, Latin Prose Composition courses have become places for the concretization of Latin grammar, especially the more nuanced features like the intersection of grammar and an individual author's style, and the development of close-reading skills. In the past, I have had great success teaching stylistic analysis in Latin Prose Composition courses through the use of "close reading" assignments for Cicero, Livy, and Tacitus. In those instances, I first spent time developing the students' knowledge of important rhetorical and literary devices in Latin and then gave them a passage to analyze. The results were excellent; my students demonstrated an increased ability to "see" and understand style in prose authors through the author's use of rhetorical devices. When I tried similar assignments with Latin poetry, however, giving them passages from Vergil and Horace, my hopes were dashed. Latin poetry, it seemed, was

perhaps too metaphorical, idiomatic, and rigid in structure for the average 21st century American Latin student to penetrate. My students, who were likewise disappointed with the results, suggested that we try a two-part assignment: 1) analyze pop music songs, such as Taylor Swift's *Bad Blood* (1989. Big Machine Records, 2014), Miley Cyrus' *Wrecking Ball* (*Bangerz*, RCA Records, 2013) and Adele's *Hello* (25. XL Recordings, 2015), for poetic devices that are also common to Latin poetry and 2) translate these songs into grammatical and poetically attested Latin, paying careful attention to reproduce the appropriate poetic devices.

The intimate knowledge of mood and message in contemporary pop music allowed my Latin Prose Composition students to remove the challenging barrier of cultural difference and focus on poetic practice and analysis. They were able to recognize poetic structure and the way that literary devices change tone while simultaneously having fun. In addition, I observed students to be capable of deeper and more significant analysis in upper-level Latin poetry reading courses (Latin Prose Composition was taught in the same semester as a reading course on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). Because the use of pop music, of which they were intimately familiar, had demystified poetic style and structure for them, they were less intimidated when approaching Ovid and could finally understand why their professor considered Latin poets to be heroes.