

Poetry Out Loud: A Performance Project for Students of Latin

Latin students today have many opportunities for oral expression in the language, from traditional reading aloud to full immersion in conversational Latin. Opportunities for actual *performance* in Latin classes are more limited, however, and typically involve declamation or Roman comedy. This paper describes a performance project for students in a typical fourth-semester Latin poetry class, a scheme modeled on Poetry Out Loud, the national recitation contest for students in grades 9-12 (<https://www.poetryoutloud.org/>). Christopher Francese, in his review of Clive Brooks' *Reading Latin Poetry Aloud: A Practical Guide to Two Thousand Years of Verse* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), stresses the unique point of view of the performer—as opposed to reader, poet, or critic: “This is the most welcome approach, because it focuses the mind, restricts the necessary amount of detail, and brings us back firmly to what many of us loved about Latin poetry in the first place: the sound of it, or rather the haunting marriage of sound and sense” (*BMCR* 2010.01.18).

As the first step of the project, students select a Latin poem or a stand-alone excerpt from a longer poem, something that they find especially engaging or meaningful. Next they prepare a script by metrically scanning the selection and by marking word accent, liaisons between words, and natural pauses in sense. Students then meet individually with the instructor to go over the script, to work on pronunciation, and to discuss the meaning of the poem and its unique “marriage of sound and sense.” After this meeting, students begin to rehearse and ideally memorize their selection. The project culminates in a class performance at the end of the semester.

A performance project is perfectly suited to students studying Latin poetry at the fourth-semester level. First and foremost, poetry is by its very nature ideal for memorization and performance. Second, students at this level are ready for the demands of a performance project. By this time they have developed some degree of familiarity, if not comfort, with the language. They have mastered basic grammar and have a decent working vocabulary. They also have a working knowledge of reconstructed ancient pronunciation that, with some coaching, can be elevated to real mastery. Finally, it is at this level that students are introduced to prosody, so that by the end of the semester they have a solid understanding of metrics and can accurately scan selections in different meters and read them aloud.

There are several pedagogical benefits to such a project. Recitation is probably the most effective way for students to engage with poetic meter, both as performer and as listener. Performing a poem also can bring a new dimension to even a well-known Latin text. More important, however, performing a poem creates a unique intimacy with the poet, and this intimacy can be taken a step further if the student chooses to memorize the poem. This process has been described as “internalizing” the poem. Finally, the project brings both performers and audience members closer to the way the Greeks and Romans encountered poetry—as an oral, social, and often public experience.

In addition to describing the basic steps of the project, this paper will discuss the teacher’s ongoing role in preparing students for the culminating performance. Although students do not select a poem and begin working on the project until relatively late in the semester, the teacher begins the scaffolding process on the first day of class. Other topics will include incentives to memorize the poem, strategies for memorization, dealing with performance anxiety, alternatives to live performance, and tips on evaluating live performances.