



DIURNA

NEWSPAPER OF THE 24TH LATIN SUMMER SCHOOL: DIES MERCURII, JANUARIUS XVII

**Abbey's Bookstall continues near the inside fountain
in The New Law Building**

**The second of the Nicholson Museum tours takes
place today at 12.35 pm**

The post prandium lectures at 1.30 pm today are:

Bob Cowan

“Beyond scansion: why metre matters in Catullus,
Horace and Ovid”

New Law School Annexe SR 340

John Coombs

“Gildas and the Ruin of Britain”

New Law School Annexe SR 342

Robert Forgács

“Handel, Antiquity and his opera *Agrippina*”

New Law School Annexe SR 344

**The Unseens class with Dane Drivas will take place
between 1.30-2.30 pm in the New Law School
Seminar 020**

**The activities for school students continue in New
Law School Seminar 028**

**The Special Interest Series for Level 4 continue
today from 2.50 pm to 4.00 pm:**

**1. Dexter Hoyos “Caesars and Critics: Emperors in
their own words and in later criticisms” New Law
Annexe 344**

**2. Kathleen Riley ‘Loquacissimae manus’: Fred
Astaire’s Ancient Eloquence, New Law School
Annexe 342**

First prize-winning entry in the Diurna Competition

A FORGOTTEN ART

A review of David J Califf’s *A Guide to Latin Meter and
Verse Composition*

By Daniel Forrest

S. G. Owen claimed in the preface to his *Musa
Clauda*¹, a collection of translations of English poetry
into Latin verse, one hundred and twenty years ago, “A
knowledge of the structure of their verse is necessary
for the appreciation of the ancient poets, who for
purity of form and sincerity of feeling are unsurpassed
and unsurpassable.” Yet despite the various encomia
made by early 20th century classicists as Owen and
Phillimore, the practice of “learning ancient prosody
by writing it” slowly fell out of the traditional model of
English classical education, in favour of what Owen
dubs the “continental fashion of writing treatises
about it.” But what can be learnt from an art that was
last practiced at Eton close to a century ago, an art
that seems more like a forgotten relic of an English
education rather than a powerful method in the
appreciation of Latin verse?

¹Owen, S. G., and Phillimore, J. S., *Musa Claudia: Translations
into Latin Elegiac Verse*, Oxford, 1898



That is a question that David J Califf attempts to answer in his 21st century treatise *A Guide to Latin Meter and Verse Composition*². After an exhaustive preface that describes the difficulty of defending Latin verse composition as “describing love to the loveless,” Califf proceeds with a swift enumeration of the benefits of versification, taken straight from Richard Burnet’s *Various English and Latin Poems*:

- I. It exercises, and of course, strengthens, the memory.
- II. It cultivates the taste.
- III. It quickens the intellect, by the necessity of having recourse to perpetual contrivance to put together miscellaneous things regulated by certain laws
- IV. It strengthens the judgement, by the habit of selection
- V. It gives a more critical knowledge, not only of the Latin tongue, but of the force and nature of language in general, from the continual habit of considering the various and minutely-differing shades of meaning which distinguish words that would otherwise be taken for synonyms.³

Califf adds to this classical defence the advances in second language acquisition theory, namely the return in European foreign language pedagogy to the natural method, which emphasizes the need for both a large body of comprehensible input, as well as continuous verbal and written composition in order to achieve fluency. Indeed, this approach has been speedily adopted by the most preeminent continental Latin schools, with a resurgence in Oerberg’s method and the *Lingua Latina* series at the *Vivarium Novum* in Italy, the *Collegium Latinitatis* in Spain, and even the upcoming *Rusticatio Australiana*. Califf’s work takes this knowledge and poses a venerable question to readers: surely, if it is allowed that continuous prose composition facilitates fluency in reading prose and accuracy in determining the *differentia inter verborum*, then it must also be accorded that verse composition enables more fluent, perceptual reading of Latin verse.

Califf’s volume then takes a bold turn from the traditional 19th and 20th century English verse books: as if to make his didactic purpose clear, he dedicates the first XII exercises to the understanding of prosody and its effect to enhance meaning in Latin poetry. This provides readers an economical and rather utilitarian introduction to the art of verse composition, instructing them on *how to use* the

Latin verse, rather than simply how to construct it, affording readers an instant degree of facility in their quest to better appreciate Latin poetry.

Califf then guides readers through the composition of verse, leading them one foot at a time through the hemistichs of the hexameter, and, to the delight of readers desiring a comprehensive volume, through the poetics of half a dozen other meters, including the Sapphic, the Hendecasyllabic, and even the Asclepiadic. A possible, yet most definitely deliberate, oversight of the author has been that due to the work’s ambitious aim to be both comprehensive and concise, the reader is, at some stages, left with a paucity of exercises to consolidate his ability to compose effectively in each meter. It is recommended that readers seeking further practice seek older volumes, often specific to each meter, most of which are now freely available online. J. H. Lupton’s *Latin Elegiac Verse Composition*⁴ is particularly excellent.

It seems fitting to end this discussion with an example of Latin Verse Composition, and what better than a translation of Spenser’s *Beauty Immortalized by Verse*, which both speaks to the eternal beauty of poetry, as well as Owen’s mastery of the forgotten art of Latin verse composition.

*Vita, tuum in sicca scribebam nomen harena,
id tamen assurgens eluit unda maris.*

*signa iterum totidem sculpsi litusque notavi,
frustra, namque meum devorat aestus opus.*

*'nil agis' exclamas ; 'tu rem servare caducam,
inprobe, nequiquam tempus in omne paras.*

*nil mortale manet ; mortalis et ipsa peribo ;
delebunt nomen fata diesque meum.'*¹

*'vana refers' inquam : 'mediocria pulvis habeto :
tu fama vives effugiesque rogos.*

*nam mea tam raras celebrabunt carmina dotes,
nominis et tanti testis Olympus erit.*

*illic, cum tandem mors vicerit omnia, noster
vivet amor, spatiis additus usque novis.'*¹⁵

S. G. Owen

² Califf, David J, *A Guide to Latin Meter and Verse Composition*, Anthem Press, 2002

³ Burnet, Richard, *Various English and Latin Poems*, Norwich, 1808

⁴ Lupton, J. H., *An Introduction to Latin Elegiac Verse Composition*, London: Macmillan, 1885

⁵ Owen, S. G., *Musa Clauda*