

## The Spider Who Learned Latin

A banquet speech for the Eta Sigma Phi national convention, held at Monmouth College, March 1992

Don't be misled by the subject of this talk. I am not an arachnophile; in fact, I am a confirmed arachnophobe. The smallest spider can fill me with chilling fear. But all rules have exceptions, and I have great affection for the spider I am talking about this evening.

Forty years ago E. B. White wrote a so-called children's story about a friendship between a little pig named Wilbur and a spider named Charlotte. Wilbur, the runt in a litter of pigs, was adopted as a pet by an 8-year-old girl, Fern. But as he grew older (and larger), his presence in the household (and his appetite) understandably became a problem, and he had to be sold to Fern's uncle down the road, to live in the barnyard with the other farm animals. It was here that he became acquainted with Charlotte, whose web hung in one of the upper corners of the barn door.

As you probably know, the story about these two is called *Charlotte's Web*, and it has passed the most difficult test of the quality of a piece of writing in that more than forty years later it is so widely read that it was listed in October, 1991, as the favorite book of children; and it has been translated into approximately twenty-five languages, including French, Spanish, Italian, German, modern Greek, Hebrew, Japanese, and an obscure African language. It is one of just a handful of stories in the world which are enjoyed by children of all ages -- from 7 to 77. Some of the things that make it more than just another children's story are these:

1. First of all, the characters: although most of them are barnyard animals, they have names and distinct personalities (e.g. Charlotte likes to use multi-syllable words like "salutations" for "hello"; the complaining rat Templeton is the forerunner of Sesame Street's Oscar -- with a little bit of Garfield mixed in; the sheep are always snobbish; the goose talks too fast and, as a result, keeps repeating words and syllables). When somebody in this book says something, you never have to wonder which character said it. Each has his distinct personality traits. Which character would have said (Let me give these to you in Latin):

a. in Chapter XV: "Versatilis sum." CHARLOTTE, of course

When Wilbur commented that he did not know what versatile meant, she explained:  
"*Versatilis significat me multa facere posse.*"

b. in Chapter IV, Wilbur is lonely and asks one of the animals to play with him. This animal replies: "*I et solus lude. Cum porcis "ego" non ludo.*" A LAMB

c. In Chapter XII: one of the animals finds the others holding a meeting to figure out a way to save Wilbur from being butchered. When told what is going on, he snarls: "*Eum solvite. Mihi taedio conventus sunt.*" Nobody but TEMPLETON is capable of this kind of sneer.

d. Then in Chapter III: when Wilbur has escaped and is about to be lured back into his pen with a bucket of food scraps, one animal calls out to him: "*Noli -- noli -- noli -- id facere. Te illicere conatur in captivitatem -- tatem.*" the GOOSE

2. Around these characters a simple but interesting plot is carefully worked out. Wilbur the pig's life is threatened by the farmers' looking on him as basically so many pounds of pork and bacon. Somebody is going to have to save him. But how? Most of the book revolves around the ingenious trick Charlotte devised to accomplish this, and how she got it to succeed.

3. The story is then told in vivid but simple language (like such powerful things as the Gettysburg address). The action moves swiftly and smoothly.

4. Finally, cleverly interwoven with the story on the children's level are observations of adult human behavior to give the book an appeal beyond that of the child's immature mind. e.g. Charlotte compares the Queensborough Bridge to a spider's web but she makes the comment that, unlike her sitting quietly in her

web, men just constantly rush from one end of the bridge to the other as if something better were at the other end, when really there is not. And, as she remarks at another time, her trick of saving Wilbur's life by writing words in her web is successful mostly because people are so prone to believe anything they see in writing. These little psychological observations are unobtrusively tucked in all through the book. Thus, White has produced a story that is well developed, easily readable, and with an appeal for all ages -- not an easy accomplishment.

After my retirement, I no longer had stacks of term papers to read nor classes of students to whom to explain the technicalities of the ablative absolute and the fact that the verb "write" in the English sentence "I know that he writes well" is an infinitive in Latin, but is not an infinitive in a Latin sentence meaning "I bought paper to write you a letter." I needed some kind of stimulating hobby to replace these activities. So I decided to see whether this beautiful book in English about Charlotte and Wilbur could be turned into the same kind of book in Classical Latin.

This involved several problems, the most serious of which was that this rural modern American story, first published in 1952, referred to a number of things, of course, that simply did not exist when Cicero was making speeches and Caesar was fighting wars. I had no compunction about "stretching" the meaning of Latin words a bit to make them fit modern concepts e.g. *vestis natandi* became bathing suit (something the Romans did not bother with); but I conscientiously avoided creating neologisms. Every word I used can be found in a Classical Latin dictionary, and all such stretching is duly noted in the vocabulary at the back of the book. But to accomplish this was a real challenge.

[Discuss handout list of words here]

Closely related to this problem of vocabulary was the question of how to teach these barnyard animals to speak and understand Latin when they were sometimes confused about the meaning of the English words they encountered. Wilbur was constantly asking Charlotte what her words like "salutations" or "sedentary" or "languish" meant; and Charlotte herself was confused by the "new and radiant" action of a brand of soap flakes. After all, a spider does not worry much about laundry. My task here was not an easy one, and Charlotte did not learn her Latin overnight any more than you did. But I had had comparable experience in teaching human students, and Charlotte was not a quitter. With my help she learned her Latin well and how to use it -- although I'll admit that at times she complained about how hard it was, which is normal. Eventually, she began to enjoy instead of endure this new language. She led the other animals around her to be comfortable in it. And she even changed into Latin the words she had woven into her web. [Show two slides]

So -- after eight years of sometimes frustrating writing and polishing and negotiating with publishers, she and I had a book (not a best seller, since most bookstores do not stock their shelves with books in Latin for some reason), but a book that is beautiful and that both she and I are proud of.

Thank you for your attention. To paraphrase Charlotte in speaking to her friend Wilbur:

*"Estis amici mei. Hoc est maximum, et vos amo."*