

The Spider Who Learned to Speak Latin

A luncheon talk for the State High School Latin Tournament finals, April 1991

Since you have been in Monmouth, you have been given several things, including a test and a little book. Now that you have told your friends how unfair the test was, let's talk a little bit about the book.

A good place to start is with the inscription on the first page, so that you can impress your fellow students back home by translating it with ease. The verb here is *legas*. The "s" makes the subject "you" and the "a" makes the form subjunctive. A subjunctive in the 2nd person as a main verb expresses one of two things -- a mild command (please close the door) or a wish. This time it is a wish. Since *lego*, *legere* means to read, this part of the inscription means "may you read." And *cum gaudio* means "with pleasure."

Now let's spend a few minutes talking about the book itself.

Almost forty years ago a man named E. B. White wrote a so-called children's story about the 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 the little 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.

The author called this story "Charlotte's Web". It has passed the most difficult test of the quality of a piece of writing in that after forty years it is still widely read. In fact, it has been translated into approximately twenty languages, including French, Spanish, Italian, German, modern Greek, Hebrew, Japanese, an obscure African language -- and now Latin. It is one of the 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 big words, like "salutations" for "hello"; the complaining rat Templeton is a forerunner of Sesame Street's Oscar -- with a little bit of Garfield mixed in; the sheep are always snobbish; the goose talk too fast and keeps repeating words or syllables). When somebody says something in the book, you never have to wonder which character said it. Each animal is different from the others. Let's prove this with a few examples:

Someone in Chapter XV says to Wilbur. *Versatilis sum* ("I am versatile"). To Wilbur's comment that he does not know what "versatile" means, this character replies: *Versatilis significat me multa facere posse* ("Versatile means I can turn with ease from one thing to another"). Who would have used this word?

CHARLOTTE

In Chapter IV, when lonely Wilbur is looking for somebody to play with him, he approaches one of the animals who replies to his request: *I et solus lude. Cum porcis ego non ludo* ("Go play by yourself. I do not play with pigs).

A LAMB

In Chapter XII, one of the animals finds the rest having a meeting to try to find a way to save Wilbur's life. When told what is going on, he says: *Eum solvite. Mihi taedio conventus sunt* ("Well, break it up. Meetings bore me").

TEMPLETON

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. illicere conatur in captivitatem -- tatem* ("Don't -- don't -- don't do it...He is trying to entice you back into captivity -- tivity).

GOOSE

2. Around these characters, a simple but interesting plot is carefully worked out. Wilbur the pig's life is threatened by the farmer's looking on him as basically "pork and ham" -- with a little bacon on the side. Somebody is going to have to save him from the butcher's knife. But how? Most of the book is revolves around what trick Charlotte, the spider, devised to save her friend Wilbur and how she got it to succeed.

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

4. And 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 immature child's mind. A good example of this is Charlotte's comparing the Queensborough Bridge to a spider's web, and her comment that men are just constantly rushing 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 at another time, her trick for saving Wilbur is successful mostly because people are so prone to believe anything they see in writing. These little touches are thrown in all through the book. Thus, White has produced a book that is well developed, easily readable, and with an appeal for all ages -- not an easy accomplishment.

I decided to see whether this book could be turned into the same kind of book in Latin. That 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 that simply did not exist when Cicero was making speeches and Caesar was fighting wars. For instance, how would the Classical Latin have said "sneakers" or "balloon" or "slot machine" or "merry-go-round" or "soap flakes" or "corn flakes"? The list could go on and on, but this is enough to show you the challenge. I used no "new" words in this book. Every word used can be found in a Classical Latin dictionary. Sometimes the ancient meaning had to be stretched a bit to fit the modern idea, e.g. "airplane" = *vehiculum aerium* ("a vehicle in the air") and a "bathing suit" = *vestis natandi* ("the clothing for swimming"), which the ancient Romans did not bother with! But all such stretching has been duly noted in the vocabulary at the end of the book.

Closely related to this problem 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 some of her words like "salutations" or "sedentary" or "versatile" meant; and even Charlotte was confused by the "new and radiant action" of a brand of soap flakes. After all, a spider does not worry much about laundry. But Charlotte was not a quitter. With my help, she learned her Latin and how to use it (although I'll admit that at times she complained about how hard it was, which is normal). She also led those around her to be comfortable in this new language. She changed

into Latin the words she had put into her web: SOME PIG became *Quam Bonus Porcus* (“what a good pig”); and TERRIFIC became *Mirabilis* (“great”). And eventually a book in simple English became a book in simple Latin.

But Charlotte did not learn her Latin overnight, any more than you did. Sometimes it was discouragingly slow. But her sense of achievement was great, and she felt that it was well worth the effort it took. I hope that you feel that your learning Latin is equally rewarding. And Charlotte and I both hope you thoroughly enjoy reading her story -- in Latin! *Cum gaudio legas!*