

## Report of the SPQR Convention in 1978

Paper read before ICC, 1978

Published in *Classical Outlook*, May-June 1978

Published in German in *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, June 24, 1978

Last week I attended a most unusual convention. It was a one-day meeting of the SPQR. No, that does not mean what you think it does. It stands for *Scriptores Poetaeque Romani*. Once in the last quarter of each century, these literary figures of ancient Rome meet to analyze their current standing. The last time they had met, in 1890, they were not doing too badly, but this time they were facing the depressing question of why they were being deprived of their rightful place in American schools. All the ancient writers whose works have been studied in modern education had been invited, and many of them came. In addition, five American Classics teachers had been chosen by lot as observers, in the hope that they might serve as ombudsmen. I was lucky enough to be one of those chosen.

For the morning activities, the writers had been broken down into three "interest groups" to study the special problems of their particular area of literature.

The first session I dropped in on was that of the dramatists, a small group consisting only of Plautus and Terence and Seneca. Plautus was pacing the floor.

"*Edepol*," he said, "my stuff is funny, and I don't know why people don't read it any more -- or put it on the stage, for it is even funnier to see than to read. I have used all the standard tricks of comedy -- the bickering between the sexes, the outwitting of a stupid know-it-all, outrageous names, mistaken identity -- you name it, I've got it. Nobody can tell me that my *Miles Gloriosus* is not funnier than Carol Burnett or Jonathan Winters. A long time ago, an English fellow by the name of Shakespeare rewrote my *Menaechmi* and had quite a hit with it. And not too many years ago, some American paraphrased a line from the *Menaechmi* and made it the title of a fairly good imitation of me, called *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. But it did not have the impact on the audience that my plays had. He simply did not know as much about using all the tricks of comedy."

Terence interrupted testily, "That play, just like all your plays, was pointless, disorganized, and slapstick. Pie-throwing and the Gong Show took the place of your kind of humor. But my plays are carefully worked out and they often discuss a worth-while question, as in my *Adelphi*. I was clever instead of just rowdy. My plays are good drama, and I have never been able to understand why they did not catch on, not even in their own day."

"It's just because your plays don't have any zap. They lack the liveliness, the action, that I put in," retorted Plautus. "My plays should be and have been more popular than yours because I know how to make people laugh. As for your point, people don't ask for instruction in comedy; they're looking for entertainment. And comedy doesn't have to depend on plot for humor. Admit it: All our plots were pretty stereotyped anyhow."

"No more," said Terence, "than the modern plots of detective and medical stories that are so popular in the Twentieth Century."

At this point Seneca broke up the argument with a philosophical shrug. With his love for long soliloquies, he began: "This bickering will get us nowhere. We just have to admit that what people find amusing changes. Not many years ago Milton Berle and Jackie Gleason were the kings of modern comedy on TV. Today they get an occasional guest shot, during which the

viewer goes to the kitchen to get himself a fresh beer. Now the satisfaction a person is seeking from tragedy is more consistent. The reader or viewer wants to feel a sense of horror. Jupiter knows, I tried to satiate them with this. I elaborated in gory detail such things as Hercules' description of the torments of Hades, and I had the heads of Thyestes' sons carried onto the stage on a platter. I even did something that broke the traditions of ancient playwrights -- I killed "on stage" Jocasta and one of Hercules' children and one of Medea's children. But this kind of violence is too tame for an age that has the nuclear bomb and nerve gas. Even though I knew Nero well, all too well, nothing I wrote can compete with the sheer horror of *Jaws* or the Holocaust."

By this time I realized that nothing constructive would develop from this discussion, so I slipped out the back door and went into the room where the prose writers were meeting. This was a rather large group. As I looked around, I recognized Julius Caesar, Cicero, Livy, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, and Suetonius, among others. They seemed to be talking about what each had to offer a Twentieth Century student. Caesar was talking when I walked in.

"My *Gallic Wars* has probably been sampled by more students than any other Roman book, mostly because I wrote rather simple clear Latin, which Livy, with his sprawling sentences, and Tacitus, who tries to pack too much into too few words, can't claim. The usual criticism of my works seems to be that they are dull. Well, I can't see that."

Livy, stung by Caesar's reference to him, spoke up: "My sentences may not fit the pattern of subject, object, verb, but *satis constat* that my *Ab Urbe Condita* tells some of the most fascinating true stories in the world." [Tacitus looked at him with raised eyebrows]. "OK," Livy continued, "They were not always completely accurate. I changed a few details here and there, especially where the greatness of Rome might be tarnished, or where I wasn't quite sure which source to follow. But these are mere bagatelles. The overall effect of my book is glorious. Nobody will deny that."

At this point Pliny, dressed impeccably in the latest style of toga, spoke up: "Well, if modern man wants to know the tastes and way of life for a Roman gentleman, he can do no better than to read my letters. After all, I selected them carefully and revised them to give a favorable picture. And I always managed to end them with a clever punch line. My friend Tacitus and I, as you know, were recognized as the outstanding literary men of our time."

Cicero, who had been sitting quietly, now spoke; and everybody listened. "I am not sure that the modern American is much interested in ancient history or civilization. He is obsessed with the present, the moment, today. His first question about his education is what job it will prepare him for. He wants to study only something which has an immediate and tangible benefit for him. *Quae cum ita sint*, I think that I have something valuable to offer him. If he wishes to develop an effective style of expression (and the gods know he needs this), where can he turn for a better model than my Latin." [Pliny nodded vigorously]. "Where else can he find such beautifully constructed sentences, such logically organized presentation of thoughts, such a subtle build-up of an idea as he will find in my works?"

He would have continued, for he always did like to hear himself speak, but Suetonius broke in: "I feel that modern Americans are not the least bit concerned about speaking and writing styles. Verbal communication is almost a lost art these days. But if Roman writers are to give people what they really want, I have the perfect book. They are inordinately interested in scandal, especially as it concerns people in high places. Look at how many millions of dollars have been made out of books written by children of prominent people exposing their

parents' cruelties, and think of how wide the circulation is of that weekly scandal sheet, the *National Enquirer*. My *De Vita Caesarum* should be very popular now."

Tacitus was standing up to speak next. I would have liked to hear what he had to say, but I left because I still wanted to sit in on some of the poetry discussion before these group sessions ended.

When I went into the poetry room, Catullus was talking. "Passion and sex are as universal as eating and sleeping. I don't know of any other poet who has dipped his pen into his very heart's blood and expressed every phase of this experience any more convincingly than I did. The beautiful ecstasy of being in love, the disillusionment and bitterness of betrayal, it's all there in my poems, and I think that almost everybody everywhere can relate with these."

Ovid spoke up: "This is an age that is casual about love affairs. I understand that a great many people who live together these days never even bother to get married. Of course, my *Metamorphoses* is considered my greatest work, and I'll admit it is good. But that little book, the *Ars Amatoria*, that got me into so much trouble in my own day should be just the thing for modern consumption."

Vergil spoke next: "Love poetry is all right, of course, but limited in its scope. Only the young are in general obsessed with it. My *Aeneid* (which I wish I had been able to get polished!) contains one of the world's famous love stories, but it also contains much more. It is included in many modern lists of great literary masterpieces. Granted that I used a lot of Homer's ideas (even his phrases), but the coloring is all mine, and almost every page is a word picture. I did work hard to make it enjoyable and varied. Some pedant who made a study of the vocabulary in the first four books claims that half the words I used there appeared only once. I didn't realize that I had gone quite that far."

Horace, growing bald and looking every inch a "porker from Epicurus' sty," was sitting next to Vergil. He smiled and said, "You know how much I love you, Vergil; and I certainly am not running your work down when I speak of what my poems have to offer. But if we are looking for a book that has something for everyone, written with just the precise words, I might refer modern man to my collected works. As for my style, many of my statements have become stock phrases -- *aurea mediocritas* (which has been translated into "the golden mean"), *carpe diem*, *in medias res*, to name a few. And I used a greater variety of Latin meters than any other Roman writer. (I'm afraid that is one thing that drives modern students crazy). As for subjects, I wrote on a greater variety of subjects than any other Latin poet. A few of my pet themes seemed to keep popping up, like the nearness of that equalizer death, the pleasures of having good friends and good wine, the delights of my little Sabine farm; but I also wrote love poems (of a sort), literary criticism, and satires -- that form which was created by us Romans."

Juvenal and Martial had been sitting together somewhat apart from the rest. At this point Juvenal burst out with: "Horace, you don't know what the word satire means. Your so-called satires are far too gentle to have any punch. Now I wrote satires, especially when I was young; my later ones lost some of their zing. But my early satires -- wow! When modern people think of ancient Rome, the first picture that comes to their mind is that vividly ugly (and I might add accurate) description that I wrote. I knew my writing would not improve matters. In fact, the same unsavory conditions that existed then have continued through history. Sam Johnson, in the 1700's, paraphrased my satire on Rome and called it London; and my statements could be used, almost unchanged in 1978, to describe Chicago."

Martial broke in with, "While we are on the topic of paraphrases, don't forget that Ben Jonson has been said to have done more translating than original writing, and most of what he translated was my works."

While he was talking, a buzzer sounded, signaling the break for lunch. It was just as well because the discussion seemed to be going off on tangents.

After lunch, everybody assembled in the big auditorium. Maecenas had been invited to preside at the general session. After calling the meeting to order, he asked for suggestions from the floor. Somebody spoke up from the back of the room. I couldn't see who it was from where I was sitting.

"A number of modern teachers are convinced that the best way to keep our works known is to teach them in translation."

For a minute dead silence filled the room as the writers looked at each other in consternation. Then bedlam broke loose. I was sitting next to Vergil, who is usually rather shy in a crowd, and I heard him mutter: "*miserabile dictu!*" Then he stood up and asked for permission to speak. Maecenas nodded, and Vergil said:

Our thoughts and feelings are inseparable from the language in which they are expressed. They can't fail to lose something of what we are trying to say if they are taken from their native dress and costumed in the ill-fitting language of another civilization. How, for instance, would an American express my "*pius*" Aeneas, or my "*lacrimae rerum*"?

By this time everybody was clamoring for a chance to be heard. Maecenas asked that each section choose one person to speak for their whole group, in the interest of time.

Plautus, in the drama section, was waving his hands in the air, and, when recognized by Maecenas, he practically yelled:

One of the major ways we have to get laughs in comedy is the pun. How in Hades can puns be transferred from one language into another?

Terence nodded agreement. This was the first time I had ever seen Terence agree with Plautus about anything. And I heard him say to Seneca, who was sitting next to him: "I have never yet seen anybody who could translate one of my favorite little word-plays in the *Andria*, where I have Davos tell the silly lovers that they are behaving like *amentes* instead of *amantes*."

Cicero was shaking his head as he stood up to speak for the prose writers. "Such an idea is foolish, stupid, preposterous. In my *De Senectute*, what sense would it make to say that the highest governing body was called the senate because it is composed of "old men"? Not only is vocabulary a problem in translation, but also..." He was obviously getting ready to deliver a complete oration, but there was sudden confusion over in the poetry section. The other poets were trying to quiet Martial, who was not scheduled to speak, but he was always difficult to control when he wanted to say something. He kept asking to be recognized, and Maecenas finally decided that the simplest thing to do was to make an exception for him. Besides, Martial had a reputation for brevity, so his comments probably would not take too long.

"These translation freaks are crazy," he snapped.

Just let them find somebody who can do justice to such epigrams of mine as the one on Cinnamus, who wanted his name shortened to Cinna [6:28], or my little masterpiece on that busybody Attalus [1:79], where I had so much fun playing with the various meanings of *agere*. Or there's Catullus' poem about Arrius [84], with a habit of putting "h"s at the beginning of words like Ionian and *insidiae* -- just as some Americans add an "r" to the end of words like Cuba or China. I only wish that I had written that Arrius poem. It sounds more like me than him, anyhow. Well, just find someone who can translate these without mutilating them!

And now Horace, who had been asked by the poets to speak for them, stood up. He began:

The writing of a poem is like creating a delicate filigree of silver intertwined with gold. There can be no substitute for the material from which it is made, and any change in the arrangement distorts the entity that the artist produced. What can English do with such technical devices as the chiasmus or the anastrophe? As for the heart of poetry, the meter, the English language is not adapted to the meters of Greek and Latin because it uses a whole different system, depending on accent rather than on length of syllable. I have seen some so-called translations of my poems. They are terrible. Those writers who use the English meter have weakened the effect, but worst of all are those translators who try to imitate my meters. The results are invariably stiff and awkward, completely lacking in the natural ease that I worked so painstakingly to attain.

By this time it was pretty clear that there was one point on which a consensus existed -- in their opinion, the means of survival did not lie in translation. But, as in most conventions, those present had failed to find a solution to the problem they were there to discuss. And I left the meeting with a feeling of regret tinged with fear, for I knew that if somebody did not come up with an answer to the question of their survival, the American student would soon not have access to one of the most rewarding sources of pleasure in the world.