

BOOK REVIEW

Latin Synonyms for Latin Lovers: A Select Thesaurus. By CHRISTINE E. MEYER. Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc., 2013. Pp. xi + 264. Paperback, \$29.00. ISBN 978-0-86516-794-0.

Say “thesaurus” and English-speakers will almost certainly think “Roget.” That classic was intended to be comprehensive, organizing not only English words, but also the very concepts they express, into categories analogous to Linnaean taxonomy.¹ Christine Meyer’s new synonym book was inspired by the author’s participation in a week-long workshop on Latin verse composition, and is informed by her years as a high school teacher. Meyer had encouraged her students to keep “synonym maps,” and then felt the need for a metrically diverse repertoire of synonyms when she was composing verse.

This “select thesaurus” consists of word lists, organized according to a hybrid scheme of concepts and grammatical categories. A section of verbs runs from “Afflicting” through “Writing,” with entries listed by conjugation; a section of nouns runs from “Access” through “Work,” with entries listed by declension; and so on. Each Latin word is defined with several English synonyms, but the Latin words are not otherwise distinguished from each other. This makes the book much less useful than it could have been. Ideally, a user would learn the nuances of a cluster of similar, but not identical, words, e.g. *ago*, *facio*, and *gero*, and their associated idiomatic usages. I would have preferred *fewer* entries under each rubric, with *more* discussion of nuance and usage. Putting cognate parts of speech under a single conceptual rubric would also be better than breaking up meaningful groups to fit arbitrary grammatical categories.

A weakness specific to the section of verbs is the listing of multiple compounds of the same basic verb. For example, under the rubric “Bearing, Bringing”

¹ Roget was trained not as a linguist but as a physician, and even contributed several volumes to a series designed to popularize science for the masses. See Joshua Kendall’s 2008 biography *The Man Who Made Lists*, which I heartily recommend to all word nerds, or as Christine Meyer calls us, “language lovers.” Of special interest to Latinists, its end-papers reproduce one of Roget’s earliest synonym lists—a schoolboy’s vocabulary list of Latin words with English meanings.

are listed eighteen Latin verbs, which include three compounds of *porto*, four of *veho*, and four of *fero*. The compound forms are not really synonymous, and may belie the book's origins in the need for metrically convenient alternatives, since the prefixes vary in number of syllables, quantities, and initial vowels and consonants. For students learning vocabulary, an introduction to the simple verbs along with a general discussion of how prefixes work, might be a more effective route to mastery. Furthermore, that rubric also includes *gigno* and *pario*, which belong with "Bearing" only because "Bearing" is an *English* synonym for "giving birth." Similarly, the rubric "Leaving" includes Latin words which mean not only "departing" but also "abandoning" (i.e. leaving *behind*), and "Sending" lists not only *mitto* and 6 compounds, but also words which mean "sending *for*" (*arcesso* and *accio*). Better to include only the simple forms but explain their nuances. As for idioms and usage, neither under "Living" nor "Life" (nor in the list of "Expressions") does one find the idiom *vitam agere*. Perhaps best are the sections on adverbs and conjunctions, those "little words" which bedevil beginners. The English rubrics are indexed, but not the Latin synonyms themselves.

As a resource for classroom lessons on distinguishing Latin synonyms I have relied on two 19th century synonym books. Not surprisingly, these are English translations of German handbooks: Lewis Ramshorn's *Dictionary of Latin Synonymes* [sic], translated by Francis Lieber in 1838, and Ludwig Döderlein's *Handbook of Latin Synonymes* [sic], translated by H.H. Arnold in 1858. Both of those compilations are arranged alphabetically by the first word in a synonym cluster; in each, the Latin words are limited in number, and they are explicitly differentiated and illustrated with Latin citations. Quite surprisingly—to me—both are now available online, Döderlein as a free amazon Kindle download, Ramshorn through the Hathi Trust. Using them online, however, must be rather cumbersome. Döderlein is also available as a paperbound reproduction (Nabu Press 2013).

I had hoped that Meyer's thesaurus would be a briefer, fresher, and more accessible alternative to those 19th century handbooks, one that high school and college students could use. Its drawbacks, however, would lead me to recommend that instructors glean class materials from either Ramshorn or Döderlein or two more recent works—the old warhorse Meissner's *Latin Phrase-Book*, now available under yet another imprint (Forgotten Books [!] 2012), and Bolchazy-Carducci's own 4th edition of Traupman's *Conversational Latin for Oral Proficiency* (2007). Both of those are organized topically, with rubrics reminiscent of Roget's.

A published book is a rare achievement for someone who must also meet the demands of public high school teaching. I do not fault Christine Meyer for the shortcomings of this book so much as I do its publisher (and referee?), who might have guided her to a more fruitful approach. Limiting synonym clusters to 3 to 5 words and their idiomatic usages, would have presented that information more crisply, and in a perhaps more useful layout. Fewer items per page would leave room for explication and a space for students to add their own notes.

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