

BOOK REVIEW

Prose Unseens for A-Level Latin. A Guide through Roman History. By MATHEW OWEN. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. Pp. xi + 334. Paperback, \$13.68. ISBN 978-1-4742-6916-2.

At the bottom of the back of the title page of this work, there appears a box whose enclosed text begins: “This resource is endorsed by OCR for use with specification OCR level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in Latin (H043) and OCR Advanced GCE in Latin (H443).”

For American readers and potential adopters of this textbook, all this requires some translation and a rather diligent pursuit of acronyms.¹ **OCR** is the acronym for “Oxford Cambridge and RSA,” an entity created in 1998 through the merger of the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) and the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) Examination Board (RSAEB) (see <http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/our-heritage/>). According to its website (<http://www.ocr.org.uk/about/who-we-are/>) the OCR “is a leading UK awarding body. We provide GCSEs and A Levels in over 40 subjects and offer over 450 vocational qualifications.” As in America, with the ACT and SAT it is one of the major tools used to determine admission into colleges and universities. Like them, it too has been plagued with controversies. Predictably, just as is the case with the American College Board Advanced Placement courses, a cottage industry of textbooks designed to help students do well on these standardized tests arose and continues to evolve as a given examination changes its contents or criteria.

Thus, in the preface the author states clearly that the book is “particularly tailored ... to the needs of students preparing for the OCR A-Level in Latin.” (vii). A-Level (Advanced) is a subject-based qualification a student can earn as part of the GCE (General Certificate of Education) and at the same time serves

¹ The reviewer wishes to thank Steven Hunt, University Lecturer in Classics Education at Cambridge for his assistance in helping him make his way through this labyrinth.

as a qualification upon leaving secondary education for entrance into university. The system applies to English, Welsh, and Northern Irish schools, but not to Scottish ones. Satisfactory performance on the tests is also used by the government as a gauge of a school's effectiveness.

Americans are well aware of the influence that standardized testing has exerted on high school Latin curricula. Brave is the teacher who can withstand the pressure (student, parental, administrative school district based) to teach only AP Latin in years three and/or four. And teachers who lament the subsequent inability to teach favorite authors such as Catullus, Cicero or Horace (gone since the elimination of the AP Latin Literature Exam after 2008-2009) often have no recourse other than to swallow their dissatisfaction or rebel and teach a non-AP course.

This review, therefore, will confine itself to the potential of Owen's book as a textbook for advanced Latin students in English speaking, but not British, schools and universities.

The book consists of 80 passages of Latin, the first forty of which contain passages drawn from Livy and the second forty passages from other prose authors. The selections are designed to give students a sense of the scope of Roman history. The first forty "reflect the division of the language element of the A-Level between two papers" with the second group stressing questions on comprehension, interpretation and grammar. "All passages have been adapted to a greater or lesser extent," either through omission or modification (viii).

The first passage does not make its appearance until page 80. It is prefaced by an "Introduction to Latin Prose Writers," (1-38), "Grammatical Reminders," (39-64), "Rome's Story: An Introduction to the Historical Overviews," (65-66) and an introduction to Part I. This reviewer finds this approach unfortunate and quite outdated. The proper place for an introduction to Nepos is on page 188, just before that student reads Nepos, not on pages 13-15. The pedagogically optimal time to review a grammatical concept is the first time it appears. At the very least, reference should be made in the notes accompanying a passage to the numbers in the grammatical review that elucidate the grammatical concept under discussion. Yet, in the "Discendum" boxes that accompany each of the first 40 readings, very little, if any, reference is made back to the grammatical overview. They seem rather to rehearse questions that might appear on the GCE exam. Example (153): "Explain the grammar of the following words: (a) *petendum* (l. 2), (b) *utantur* (l. 5), (c) *vindicarent* (l. 15)." Such questions are fine, but students, in this reviewer's opinion, should be given a trail of breadcrumbs back to relevant

portions of the grammatical reminders. This is especially important since the grammatical reminders are short, very intelligible and use apt examples.

What of the passages themselves? The first twelve readings from Livy are entitled "In the Beginning" and their introduction is written in language that will appeal to the average student. The first three cover the period from "Romulus and Remus" to "Manlius and the Geese." "War with Carthage" is 1.13-1.26, while "Rome and the East" is 1.27-1.40. The average length of a passage is 15 lines, and "knowledge of basic vocabulary has been assumed" (ix). A list of 900 Latin words appears at the back of the book but they are arranged differently from common practice. They are arranged into "Check Lists" of about 100 words each and each tied into four passages. Thus, the first list corresponds to 1.1-4 and 2.1-4. An introductory list of 100 words represents assumed vocabulary. Words "that are neither likely to be known nor appear in the vocabulary list" are underlined and glossed below the passage, and the glossing diminishes deeper into the book (ix). Each passage is prefaced by a short introduction giving the historical context of the reading and is followed by a "Discendum" box variously discussing a stylistic, grammatical or syntactical point. The first three are: "Historic Presents"; "-ere for -erunt"; "alius."

The results are a bit mixed. For example, glossed vocabulary is listed in order of appearance but without line numbers. Such a practice can frustrate students and it certainly wastes their time. There are no long marks in the text or vocabulary, perhaps a nod to the standardized tests' practice, but their lack can certainly pose problems. The first three passages are fairly easy to read and the language of the "Discendum" boxes is very approachable, the product of an experienced and sensitive teacher. The Latin is largely unchanged, but is simplified by the omission of complex subordinate clauses.

Passage 1.40 (= Livy 45.7-8) ends the first part of the book. As one might expect, it is less changed than earlier passages. One change I noticed is that the sentence beginning paragraph 8, normally followed by a question mark, is printed here with a period. A minor point, perhaps to be addressed in a later edition. The "Discendum" section would be more familiar to American teachers, asking students to pick out and write down things like a pluperfect subjunctive or to turn forms like *ingressus est* into first person present indicative active.

Overall the passages are well chosen. They contain passages that are old chestnuts because they are so lively and engaging as well as less common ones. This first half brings Roman history down to 168 BC.

Part II of the book is entitled “Problems of Empire” and, as stated above, has a focus on comprehension. Passage 2.1 begins with Nepos on Cato the Censor (195-149 BC) and 2.40 is the famous letter of Pliny the Younger on the Christians, AD 112. Other authors include Cicero, Caesar, Sallust, Seneca the Younger, Velleius Paterculus, Valerius Maximus, Frontinus, Tacitus, Suetonius and Florus. This alone will appeal to teachers who wish to expose their students to the broad scope of Roman historical prose. “Discendum” boxes disappear and are replaced by what seem, to this reviewer, as a well balanced variety of comprehension questions.

To return to the question at hand, then. Is this book a good choice for American teachers, pre-collegiate and collegiate alike, for upper division Latin? In my opinion the answer is “yes,” albeit a somewhat guarded one. The vocabulary lists in the back in lieu of a lexicon and the grammatical introductions will require some work on the teacher’s part to integrate into the course. The book offers precious little practical advice on how to deal with unseens. Some will treat them like regular assignments to be taken home, translated and done aloud next class. I see, rather, great potential for using this book in a flipped classroom, where the majority of “translating” was done in class, probably in groups under a teacher’s guidance. If a teacher is searching for a prose reader that has breadth and does not suffer from traditional dryness, that teacher should give this book a close inspection.

KENNETH KITCHELL

University of Massachusetts Amherst (emeritus), kitchell.kenneth@gmail.com