

## A— Introduction

### AA— Medieval Latin, Past and Present

*Trust ye me, all langage well nygh is but rude beside latyne tonge.*

Barbarus (mihi crede) est sermo fere omnis preter latinum.\*

The Latin language has existed for some 3,000 years and has exerted an influence that is nothing less than astonishing. Its classical form, the literary language of the Roman Republic and Empire and the vehicle of a great literature, is still taught in schools and universities. Its vulgar or popular forms were the precursors of the Romance languages—Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Catalan, Provençal, Sardinian, Romansh, Rumanian, and their many dialects. Its medieval form was Europe's lingua franca, offering the incomparable advantage of a living language common to the whole of Western Christendom and transcending local linguistic variations. Its revived "classical" form was the learned language of humanism and of early modern Europe until late in the seventeenth century. The present "deadness" of Latin can in no way obscure its historical role as the West's culturally preeminent instrument of thought and expression for well over 1,500 years. What is perhaps most remarkable about its survival is that it continued to be learned and used for literary, scholarly, liturgical, administrative, and many mundane purposes long after it had ceased to be anyone's native language.

The Latin used in the Middle Ages is the subject of this guide. Here interpreted broadly to include late antiquity and therefore to extend from c. A.D. 200 to 1500, this 1,300-year epoch was a period of profound linguistic change, of fluid interaction of languages: Latin responded to the influence of the classical literary tradition, Christianity, and the developing vernacular idioms, and these new languages were simultaneously receptive to the influence of Latin, borrowing not only lexical material but also themes, images, rhetorical devices, compositional techniques, and texts to be translated.

Though sometimes confused with Vulgar Latin, the colloquial language of Roman soldiers, colonists, and farmers, Medieval Latin is in fact the direct descendant of the literary, learned Latin of the classical period. As a literary language it resisted linguistic change more forcefully than its spoken counterpart, because it was formally taught by schoolmasters who drew upon an established and revered literary

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\*From fol. 11V of a fifteenth-century collection of 387 short English prose passages with model translations into Latin, assembled as exercises for the boys of Magdalen Grammar School, Oxford, and preserved in Arundel MS 249 of the British Library, London. See chapter DL.

heritage and sought to inculcate standards of correctness. Its conservatism did not, however, mean that it was hostile to innovations; like all living languages it was constantly being exploited for new purposes that required linguistic flexibility. Its writers, who were primarily male and clerical and nearly bilingual in Latin and their own vernaculars, produced over many centuries a vast body of texts and documents in all areas of human life. They wrote every imaginable kind of Latin, from simple, unadorned, expository prose to sophisticated rhythmical verse, latinizing words as necessary from common speech and in other ways testing the limits of the language. For many, Latin was an essential professional tool; others chose it as the only way of ensuring that their works would be widely read. In all the inherited classical literary genres, Medieval Latin authors produced works of power and imagination, imitating and reshaping Roman models, while also incorporating many new elements and responding creatively to entirely new influences. They did not merely transmit the traditions of antiquity.

Medieval Latin's most conspicuous feature, its astonishingly rich mixture of old and new Latin words and of old Latin words with new meanings, reflects the extent to which it resisted lexical purism and the rigid classical distinction between prose and poetic vocabulary. The Christianization of Latin in late antiquity, the most important factor in its postclassical development, imposed a new and extensive terminology in areas of ritual, belief, and administration, while the language, syntax, and themes of the Vulgate Bible penetrated all literary genres. Abstract thought pulled the language in fresh directions, forcing it to become, in the hands of the Schoolmen, a dialectical instrument of remarkable flexibility and originality. Other developments, including changes in the processes of government, the birth of universities, the growth of legal systems, the establishment and expansion of religious orders, the rediscovery of Aristotle, contributed many new terms. Its prestige—some would say tyranny!—required that almost all activities, scholarly and mundane, be described or documented in Latin. Its influence extended even to the compulsory cataloguing of everyday objects in contracts and wills.

Despite its richness and diversity and the excellence of much of its literature, Medieval Latin has often been dismissed, by austere classicists and others, as a debased form of Classical Latin—*infima latinitas* ("the lowest form of latinity," "kitchen Latin")—and a cloud of disparagement and prejudice has obscured its vital role in the transmission of Western culture. Scholars have acknowledged its profound cultural impact and its centrality in medieval life, but its importance as a linguistic and literary phenomenon was not fully recognized until modern times.

The rehabilitation of Medieval Latin began in the nineteenth century, assisted by the establishment of various editing and lexicographical enterprises and by the remarkable growth in recent years of interdisciplinary programs in medieval studies. Before these programs were initiated, Medieval Latin was studied most intensively at German universities, particularly Munich, to which American scholars traveled in the early years of this century for instruction from Ludwig Traube (1861–1907). Medieval Latin thereafter found a place in graduate curricula—it has never done well at the undergraduate level—at Harvard, Chicago, Toronto, and The Catholic University of America, followed more recently by other North American institutions when interdepartmental medieval studies programs were established. These programs bring together medievalists, both faculty and students, in such areas as Medieval Latin and vernacular languages and literatures, history, philosophy, theology,

music, art and architecture, liturgy, law, and science and technology. Their aim is to reconstruct and study a distant but not completely alien civilization in all its parts, including the language that united its various cultures and subcultures. More and more institutions in North America are offering graduate degrees in medieval studies; many others provide medieval curricula through traditional departments such as classics, English, history, or Romance languages; several more offer certification or graduate minors. The consolidation of these programs, and the acknowledgment that Latin is the key to understanding medieval society and culture, has led in a few cases to the formal appointment of medieval latinists to serve the needs of graduate students in medieval studies. The proliferation of institutes, graduate centers, programs, and committees concerned with teaching the Middle Ages clearly reflects a growing interest in the study of the medieval period and its preeminent language; this enthusiasm is apparent also in the annual listing of scholarship in the bibliography *Medioevo latino*, which reveals that thousands of publications relevant to the field are now appearing every year.

### **Select Bibliography**

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