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Feminism, Anti-Racism and Wheelock's Moral Vision: a request for dialogue

Wheelock's Latin is one of the most-used introductory Latin textbooks in U.S. secondary schools and colleges. Its advantages are numerous: it offers a graded, systematic approach to grammar and vocabulary, with simple grammatical explication; each of 40 chapters contains practice sentences utilizing the concepts just introduced, and quotations from ancient authors. Its emphasis on Stoic and Stoicizing authors and moral maxims was clearly a welcome change from older textbooks' dogged use of Caesar's military memoirs as a basic learning text. One serious drawback of the approach to Latin of Wheelock needs further discussion, however. It used to be commonly said of Wheelock that it was sexist; and the addition of more female figures, words and stories into the 5th and 6th editions was gratifying: But what about the broader moral vision of Wheelock as a way of teaching Latin?

I offer first an analysis of the moral tenor of sentences and passages in the textbook, attempting to show what virtues seem to be being recommended by the text, and how. The virtues espoused by Wheelock (primarily patriotism, peaceful civilian life as contrasted with war, loyalty, diligence and hard work, qualified individualism, practical intelligence, and leadership skills) reflect the values of post-WWII U.S. liberalism, as well as Roman ideals of virtue. Moreover, they are precisely the qualities that were in 1956 and later the object of instruction within modern U.S. schools aimed at upper-class future (white male) business and political leaders. While they do find their roots in a certain humane and generous view of human nature and do not exclude progress within the system so to speak, they implicitly exclude certain communitarian virtues, virtues practiced within the family or among women, values of lower-class communities, and social justice as we are beginning to come to understand it; and they do not receive internal critique on this score. I have struggled with my own formulations of these values, as have many of us who teach from Wheelock, and often wondered about this text's social utility—keeping in mind always that social utility is a more or less explicit aim in the morals pointed by the text. This analysis is one attempt to come to terms with teaching Latin as it touches on personal ethics.

The second part of the paper shows how the value-system of the text is exhibited in its maxims and pithy sayings, attributable to heroic literary figures and charismatic personalities. Reading passages frequently emphasize understanding the point of the "quotable" maxim, and drive students to mathematical deciphering of the text to this end. Wheelock is not alone in this: along with many other beginning texts, Wheelock's Latin underscores the colorful incident and the individual's personality at the expense of a broader (and, let us admit, grimmer) cultural vision of the Roman aristocratic and imperialist republic and empire. But this format implicitly confirms a certain gender and class hierarchy and unfortunately (perhaps inadvertently) offers students a moral canon for imitation, a canon found to reside in the actions and attitudes of the Roman ruling class.

Finally, I offer some suggestions for engaging with this vision of Latin and the Romans in the classroom. For this purpose I will offer a handout with a summary of some imaginative first-year exercises in language skills that could lead students (and teachers) to a more organic understanding of the Latin language, and a more complicated and interesting vision of Roman (and perhaps U.S.) society.