

# Playing with Latin

Learning Latin by rote was at the heart of the school curriculum in Shakespeare's Stratford.

**David Crystal** explores how he put his schooldays to lewd and dramatic use.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* Shakespeare illustrates the kind of thing that went on in the schools of his day. Mistress Quickly has asked Parson Evans to quiz young William Page about his schoolwork. Does Evans ask him about his arithmetic, or general knowledge, or history? No, it is the child's ability in Latin.

Much of the humour of the scene depends on Evans having a cod Welsh accent, and especially replacing the voiced [v] with [f] – something both Evans and Fluellen do – *falorous, prerogatifes, fery...* Some scholars have thought that the part was written with Robert Armin in mind, who replaced Will Kemp in 1599. Armin evidently specialized in comic Welshmen (such as Fluellen).

Evans: William how many numbers is in nouns?

William: Two.

The correct answer is singular and plural – but Mistress Quickly misunderstands:

Quickly: Truly, I thought there had been one number more, because they say 'Od's nouns'.

She has mixed up *nouns* and *wounds* – which in the pronunciation of the time would have rhymed (*wounds* sounding like *nouns*) – and thinks of the euphemistic form of the oath *God's wounds*, or *God's 'ouns*, as it was colloquially said.

Evans: Peace your tatlings. What is 'fair', William?

William: *Pulcher*

Quickly: Polecats! There are fairer things than polecats, sure.

You have to be on your toes in this scene. *Polecat* was pronounced 'pullcat' – which is close in sound to *pulcher* – and a *polecat* was a slang term for a prostitute. She thinks young William is saying that whores are lovely. No wonder she's horrified.

Evans: You are a very simplicity, 'oman. I pray you, please. – What is *lapis*, William?

William: A stone.

Correct. And in the manner of a good teacher, Evans tries to get William to do the reverse translation, but it goes wrong.

Evans: And what is 'a stone', William?

William: A pebble.

Evans: No, it is *lapis*. I pray you remember in your prain.

William: *Lapis*.

Evans: That is a good William. What is he, William, that does lend articles?

A difficult-sounding question, but this is a sentence taken almost exactly from Lily's Latin grammar, which school-children of the time would have learned by heart. *Lapis* is an example of a noun given on its first page. So William has his answer ready:

William: Articles are borrowed of the pronoun, and be thus declined: *Singulariter, nominativo, hic, haec, hoc*. 'Singular, nominative.' And he uses the three forms of the word for 'this' to illustrate: *hic, haec, hoc*. Things haven't changed. That was how I learned Latin in school, too. Evans repeats William's answer, then goes on to ask him about the case endings on Latin pronouns.

Evans: *Nominativo, hig, hag, hog*. Pray you mark: *genitivo, hujus*.

He adds the genitive case, expressing possession, which is always given along with the nominative in a Latin grammar, and then asks William for the next one in the list.

Evans: Well, what is your accusative case?

William: *Accusativo, hinc*.

Wrong. It should be *hunc, hanc, hoc*. And Evans quickly corrects him.

Evans: I pray you have your remembrance, child.

*Accusativo, hing, hang, hog*.

That's the First Folio version, in which Evans repeats William's error, suggesting that he is getting confused too, and that he isn't as good at Latin as he thinks he is. Some editors take *hing* as a typesetter's error, and change it to *hung*. Either way, Mistress Quickly gets the wrong end of the stick again:

Quickly: 'Hang-hog' is Latin for bacon, I warrant you. She is thinking of a proverb 'Hog is not bacon until it be hanged'. But then we get a very nice set of double entendres, which unfortunately are hardly ever picked up today:

Evans: Leave your prabbles, 'oman. What is the focative case, William?

William: O – *vocativo, O*.

Evans: Remember, William. Focative is *caret*.

Quickly: And that's a good root.

William is half-right. He has understood *vocative*, which is the case you use when you are saying such things as *O father, O moon*. But pronouns do not have a vocative case in Latin. Hence Evans' reminder. 'Focative is caret'. Now, *caret* is a Latin verb meaning 'is missing'. But this sends Mistress Quickly into another tiz. 'And that's a good root'. A good root. She hears *caret* as *carrot*, and that reminds her of *root* and both *carrot* and *root*, for obvious reasons, were euphemisms for 'penis'. But that's not all. She would have been confirmed in her view that Latin was a disgusting

language when she heard Evan's pronunciation of *vocative* – in effect, 'fuckative'.

You might imagine that things could not get any worse – but they do. Shakespeare is enjoying himself, and piling pun upon pun.

Evans: 'Oman, forbear. What is your genitive case plural, William?

William: Genitive case?

Evans: Ay.

William: Genitive – *horum, harum, horum*.

This nearly gives Mistress Quickly a heart-attack.

Quickly: Vengeance of Jenny's case! Fie on her! Never name her, child, if she be a whore.

This takes some unpacking. Mistress Quickly hears *horum* and interprets it as 'whore'; *harum* reminds her of 'harlot'. *Vengeance of Jenny's case* is a softening of 'God's vengeance on Jenny's situation'. 'A plague on Jenny's case', in other words. But *case* had a second meaning: it was a euphemism for 'vagina'. Indeed, to Mistress Quickly's ears, what else could it have meant, when preceded by *genitive* – compare *'gina*, with the unstressed syllable dropped, and *genitive*. It would have been even more effective in original pronunciation, for in the First Folio the name of the lady is spelled *Ginye*, which would probably have been pronounced 'jie-nee'. She concludes that Evans is talking about the local prostitute, and that he is instructing William in ways of calling her over. Evans – a parson, remember – is appalled at the suggestion.

Evans: For shame, 'oman.

But Mistress Quickly isn't put off, and she complains to Mistress Page:

Quickly: You do ill to teach the child such words.

He teaches him to hick and to hack...

She thinks of these words as *hiccup* – that is, 'get drunk' – and *hackney*, slang for a prostitute, in other words 'go whoring'.

Quickly: ... which they'll do fast enough of themselves, and to call 'horum'. Fie upon you!

To call 'horum' – whore 'em – in other words, 'fuck 'em.' This tips Evans over.

Evans: 'Oman, art thou lunatics? Hast thou no understandings for thy cases and the numbers of the genders? Thou art as foolish Christian creatures as I would desires.

Mistress Page tells her to shut up as well, and Evans continues.

Evans: Show me now, William, some declensions of your pronouns.

William: Forsooth, I have forgot.

Evans: It is *qui, quae, quod*. If you forget your *quis*, your *quae*, and your *quods*, you must be preeches. Go your ways and play. Go.

You must be preeches? Whipped on your behind. But note *quis, quae, quods*. We pronounce the *qu-* as [kw] today, but in those days loan words from French and Latin were usually pronounced without the [u] – much as modern French *question* is pronounced [kestion]. So this sequence would have been pronounced as [keez, kayz, kods]. And this is the wonderful bawdy climax of the whole episode, for *keys, case, and cods* were slang terms for 'penis', 'vagina', and 'testicles'. And after all this, Mistress Page – perhaps impressed by Mistress Quickly's interpretations? – adds:

Mistress Page: He is a better scholar than I thought he was.

Shakespeare must have had some very similar experiences to young Master Page. I wonder...

Shakespeare could have called the lad George Page, after his father, or Robert, or Fred, or anything. But he called him William.

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Illustration Belle Mellor

