



Latin for All Identities

by Bethanie Sawyer

It is commonly known that in Latin, the verb that means to teach (*docere*) takes a double accusative: you teach a subject *and* a student. After a Master's degree and 12 years of teaching at the secondary level, I feel like I am pretty good at teaching my subject. But what I have come to realise is that the Latin teacher training program I graduated from did not prepare me quite so well as to teach my students – in the sense that there was a very important aspect of teacher training missing from my program and, as far as I knew, every other program out there. I never formally learned the importance of an inclusive and affirming classroom and curriculum, or how to achieve it.

Before we can talk about an inclusive classroom, however, it is important to take some time to self-reflect and become aware of the privileges we have in our own lives that allow us the freedom not to worry about or struggle with life in ways others are forced to. This is something we must keep in mind before we speak about any minority group we wish to include, as our own privileges can often stand in the way of our ability to understand and empathise with the challenges that others face.

What is privilege? It is the – often unnoticed – social and societal provisions that allow people of majority groups to go through life with more ease than those in other groups. For example, I, as a white person, always see members of my race represented in curricular material. To quote from '*White Privilege: Unpacking the*

Invisible Knapsack,² a 1988 article by American Peggy McIntosh, which was an early work publicising the idea:

'I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.'
(McIntosh, P, 1988, p. 2)

Race is not the only aspect of an identity that can confer privilege, however. If you feel comfortable with the gender you were assigned at birth, or you have never felt it necessary to lie about your sexual orientation, or you don't rely on public transportation, or you have never been cat-called, or you have graduated college, or there is a place of worship for your religion in your town, you may be experiencing societal privilege. Although these conditions may not *seem* like privilege to you, having these as part of your personal identity can make aspects of life relatively easier for you than for those who did not agree with the previous statements.

Privilege is a difficult topic to bring up, because people's immediate reaction is to go on the defensive. Privilege doesn't feel like privilege, to most people – it just feels like the way the world is. It is important to remember that you are not bad for having privilege. What you need to do is to be aware of it.

Being aware of privilege is important for various reasons, but for our purposes,

it is specifically important in terms of representation and inclusion – in our classrooms and our curricula. You may not be aware that your curriculum is excluding the identities of students in your class, because your privilege allows you to be unaware of it. If you always see yourself represented, you are less likely to think about those groups who are not represented.

Not only is it important to be aware of students with different identities and different privileges than you, but also make the effort to represent them. Not just for those students, but so that all students will be aware of different identities – representation is especially important in history and historical literature: these identities are not new. They are not fake. They are part of our history and our heritage and our society.

When we talk about representation, it's also important to remember that it is not enough to just mention or be aware of minority or underrepresented groups – our goal should be to include and affirm members of all identities in our classrooms and curricula. This does not mean doing a special unit on a minority group – special units only highlight these groups as minorities. The goal should be to include all people as a normal part of society.

Simply adding a minority character to a textbook storyline, for example, is not a successful means of positive representation and inclusion. You may have heard the phrase 'diversity is

counting people; inclusion is when people count.' Diversity is the very least we can do.

There are many identities we could discuss; I would like to focus on just a few that I feel are especially overlooked in Classical pedagogy, that we could easily include: race, gender identity and expression, and sexuality.

Something important to think about, in my opinion, when talking about race and ethnicity in the ancient Mediterranean world, is remembering *where* the 'ancient Mediterranean world' actually was. Africa and Asia were both part of the Roman Empire; Alexander the Great's empire encompassed absolutely *nothing* of Western Europe. Of course, race and ethnicity of peoples in those locations in the ancient world will be different to the people there today, but it is still an important and often overlooked distinction. I usually teach about science and maths in the ancient world, choosing to focus on some important contributors to modern fields of maths and science. Aside from Archimedes in Sicily, every single one of them (not by design, just by coincidence) lived in Asia or Africa. I think that's important for students to know. Rome communicated and traded with China. Of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, none were in Italy. Only two were in Greece. We are not just talking about Europe here.

Something we too often forget, I think, is that people in the ancient world weren't exactly as we usually see them portrayed. One of the greatest books I had as a kid was *D'Aulaires Book of Greek Myths* – a fantastic illustrated collection of myths that have interested many in the Classical world – but if you see an illustration of the Olympian gods from that book, they all have blonde hair and blue eyes.

Hollywood, too, of course, does us a disadvantage – the problem of 'white-washing' in movies is rampant and inescapable. The *Cambridge Latin Course* software, that has live-action videos of many of the stories in the book, is made entirely of British (and traditionally northern European-looking) actors and actresses. The Cambridge series, which I use in my classes, spends a lot of time in Pompeii and Alexandria, both of which were port cities in the ancient world, and are described *in the book* as having a widely diverse population. Yet there are very few characters of colour in the stories. How

can we show the racial and ethnic diversity that actually existed in the ancient world, especially if our materials are lacking?

To be fair, people who make textbooks are starting to realise that not everyone in the ancient world looked like a northern European. In the newest (fifth) edition of the *Cambridge Latin Course*, they've added some people of varying skin tone to their start-of-chapter drawings. The Pericles Group, the creators of *Operation: LAPIS*, an online Latin learning curriculum, have made a conscious effort to include diverse characters in their storyline and curricular materials.

But no matter what textbook platform you're using, what can you do? If nothing else, you can also use a lack of diversity in your textbook as a teachable moment. If the students have learned how diverse the ancient cities actually were, it is a good starting point to a discussion about what is missing from the stories in the textbook, or to talk about how the book portrays stereotypes, for the few people of colour who are portrayed.

Although it is tangential to the subject matter, in your general classroom procedures, if you introduce new vocabulary or other concepts with pictures, make the effort to ensure that not all the people represented in the pictures you use are white.

I don't find this to be a satisfactory solution to the issue of lack of racial representation, but I also believe that it is a larger problem in our society. This does not mean we should give up or cease from attempting to make our curricula more inclusive of people of colour; inclusion is a never-ending process. The first step is to be aware of it.

There is a long history of awareness and debate over the representation of women in classical studies (or the lack thereof). I remember hearing criticism of the *Cambridge Latin Course's* lack of female characters when I was studying from that text in high school in the 1990s. Since then, the newest (fifth) edition has added two female characters to the first book in the series, but here is where we again encounter the difference between diversity and inclusion. Neither of the two added characters is a major player in the story line; the more prominent character has the exact same story arc as a character in the fourth book, and all the female characters in the storyline of the first book die in the last chapter of that

book. Just because female characters have been added to the story line, it does not mean that the creators of the book have positively represented and affirmed the existence of women in the ancient world.

I think the automatic argument people have, when I complain that the few female characters represented never *do* anything, is that we have so little information about women's daily lives in the ancient world, and even less of that from *actual women*. Just because you don't know what was, that doesn't mean we didn't do anything. Shouldn't this be a great blessing to story writers, that they have so much freedom to create lives for female characters?

The importance of positive representation continues at the more advanced levels of Latin, too. We all know that women aren't generally very well represented in the ancient world, and indeed many of the women that the Romans actually value are valued because they do not very good things, like kill themselves. That's not the sort of affirmation that you want to be teaching students.

At the upper levels, I greatly enjoy reading some Catullus poems and then Cicero's *pro Caelio*, because they are the two sources we have for the existence and character of Clodia Metelli. And it is a great way to talk about representation, because neither Catullus nor Cicero are especially *nice* to Clodia, but they both have very clear agendas in their writing – it's easy to see why Catullus might be mean to Clodia – he is broken-hearted. We know why Cicero was so mean, he was trying to distract from Caelius' probable guilt in order to get his client acquitted. We have that other mention of Clodia in Cicero's letters, in which he mentions he conducted some business with her, and there's no indication of the viciousness he employs in his speech. I think this provides such a good opportunity to talk about the intent behind some of these texts, and how they affect (and effect) representation. And then have the students attempt to create a character outline of Clodia, and/or find a modern woman who is portrayed with similarly biased accounts.

It is also easy to look at the representation of women in Ovid – as a writer Ovid is pretty horrible to his female characters, but it is a good exercise to *look* at that with students – for example, Vergil

has a version of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, in which Eurydice actually speaks! She doesn't, in the Ovid version. There are ancient versions of many of Ovid's myths, as well as more modern versions (often written by women) – and I love having students read the differing accounts to realise what the different perspectives are, and what is missing from or problematic about each one. This – looking at the perspective towards and representation of the character – is also important to do with Dido, if you are reading the *Aeneid* – especially since Dido's story ends in suicide.

If you are looking at history, Tanaquil is a great character in terms of representations of powerful women. There are several women throughout Roman history who arguably held total control of the empire – Livia, Agrippina, and Pompeia Plotina, to name a few.

For all that Classical history is – traditionally – tied up in the 'oldest dead white European males', there are quite a lot of places where you can find and talk about and teach about women – even if you have to say we don't know a lot about her, or we only know about her through these really biased accounts – because I think it's also important for students to see that every historical account has some sort of biased perspective, and to remember that, whenever they see something or someone represented.

In terms of general classroom life, I would encourage you to attempt to not always choose 'he' as your default pronoun in verb conjugations, or a masculine ending in adjectives. Writing a story for an assessment? You can include incidental female characters. If you introduce vocabulary with pictures, don't just pick the first picture you find – take the time to look for a picture including women, or people of colour, or women of colour, or people of indeterminate race and gender. There is no default for the human experience – endeavour not to present one.

On the topic of defaults and gender, however, we might also consider those who identify as transgender, agender, or otherwise genderfluid or gender-nonconforming. These identities, although not new to human experience, are often still new ideas to cisgendered society. A transgender person does not identify with the biological sex that they were assigned at birth. This is an internal

feeling and may not show in their gender expression, which are external characteristics (such as hairstyle, clothing style, etc.) that are socially defined as masculine or feminine. Some people do not identify as male or female, some identify sometimes as male, sometimes as female, and still others identify somewhere in the middle. Human gender identity is a spectrum – there are vastly more than two possible points on a spectrum.

In terms of the ancient world, there are several characters who seem to us to be transgender, or gender-nonconforming, or something of the sort. As a general topic, trans- and non-binary gender in the ancient world seems not to have had a very large corpus of research. Often it has been conflated with (or sublimated to) sexual orientation, for various reasons.

Just by means of example, there are a few people from the ancient world who defy traditional gender categories, whom you might have occasion to speak about in class.

First of all, Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, whom you may read about in Ovid, and who, of course, give us the term *hermaphrodite*. The problem with using this story as representation is the simple fact that transgender people are not hermaphrodites. Also the general preferred term for people who are born with both male and female sexual organs is *intersex*. *Hermaphrodite* is considered a derogatory term when used of people – so it might not be something you're really going to want to have teenagers say a lot.

The story, however, can be useful – apparently there are multiple versions. In some, Hermaphroditus was born intersex and became one with Salmacis; in others, including the version I read, Hermaphroditus was born male, but seemed to express more traditionally feminine behaviour. Salmacis, while female, seemed to express more traditionally masculine behaviour – though the end result was the same union of both, the story always seemed to me to be about non-traditional gender roles.

I also consider non-traditional gender roles to be a pretty significant theme in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* – particularly in the *Choephoroi*, with Clytemnestra, but of course in the *Eumenides*, with Athena, who famously votes her nature, which is all male.

These are examples of characters who are gender-nonconforming, whereas Tiresias and Elagabalus seem to represent more actual transgender ideas. Tiresias lived as a woman for seven years, by the intervention of Hera. Because Tiresias is present in many Greek myths, you may be more likely to come across him; or students may be – I frequently have students who read the *Odyssey* and *Oedipus Rex* in their English classes. The aspects of his story – that he is blind but has the gift of foresight; that he lived as a man and a woman; that he is mortal but lived seven lives – all point to his existence as a symbolically liminal figure – he is not of one world or another, but both. And all of his experiences add to his wisdom (and mystery): a fairly surprisingly positive outlook.

Of course, all of these are mythical characters; one of the most well known actual persons from history who was considered transgender is Elagabalus, the Roman emperor from 218-222 AD. Due to the stories that Elagabalus presented himself often as a woman, considered himself the wife of the charioteer Hierocles, and offered money to any physician who could provide him with female genitalia, modern scholars suspect that he may have been transgender. This is very possible, though it is difficult to know for certain, of course, not in the least because Elagabalus was considered a horrible emperor, and was assassinated by a plot orchestrated by his own grandmother when he was 18, and *damnatio memoriae* followed.

In the current fad for reclaiming the goodness of Roman emperors, it seems Elagabalus may follow in the footsteps of Nero, and we could argue the wisdom of that trend another time. I think the case of Elagabalus is interesting in and of itself, and if you were studying the later empire, certainly you would come across him, and likely you would talk about these aspects of his life. However, here is a *caveat* of representation – if you happen to speak about Elagabalus and the possibility of his transgender identity in your class, it is equally important to talk about other people from history who were transgender and NOT considered horrible by the Romans and/or history. Having only one example causes students (and others) to assume a one-to-one correspondence between one uncommon-to-them aspect of a person's

life and another. Consider ‘all Indians walk in single file – at least the one that I saw did’. Beware that you are not inadvertently teaching them to stereotype that transgender people are also crazy or psychotic or however Elagabalus might otherwise seem.

The problem with all these is that they are isolated accounts – whereas the Gallai – priests of the Phrygian goddess Cybele, who was later worshipped at Rome – seem to be the best option for attempting to understand trans or non-binary gender in the ancient world. If you are not reading Catullus 63, you might not have occasion to bring this up in class, but it will have some relation to the general classroom, as we shall see.

Attis, originally, and then the Gallai after him, castrate themselves in the service of their goddess. Catullus refers to Attis with feminine pronouns/adjectives after his castration, but not exclusively (and there is some textual corruption which makes it difficult to tell); in the poem Cybele still refers to Attis with masculine pronouns. There is no use of neuter pronouns, it should be mentioned, despite the fact that Attis has, effectively, neutered himself.

After the cult of Cybele becomes popular and official in Rome, under Claudius in the first century AD, the head priest of the cult was a Roman citizen, which means he was not castrated, but even some depictions of the *archigallus* show some elements of gender nonconformity. Of course, the priests themselves were sometimes called Galli and sometimes Gallai.

There is textual evidence to support the fact that the Gallai considered themselves – and were considered by society – to be a separate, third gender, neither masculine nor feminine. Valerius Maximus mentions a court case in 77 BC:

‘quod diceret Genucium amputatis sui ipsius sponte genitalibus corporis partibus neque virorum neque mulierum numero haberi debere.’

And a later Christian writer, Prudentius, in the 4th century AD, also mentions that the priests of the Magna Mater (Cybele) prefer neither gender:

‘uterque sexus sanctitati displicet, medium retentat inter alternum genus, mas esse cessat ille, nec fit femina’

This seems to me to be a clear case of non-binary gender, as far we can tell. Although it’s likely, to me, that the Romans may have generally used masculine pronouns for the Gallai (if they were being polite, or feminine if they were not), they probably were not thinking of modifying their language to include this third group. One wonders, if the Gallai were around today, speaking Latin, what changes might they be making to the language to better suit their needs.

The idea of a gender-neutral singular pronoun has been a hot topic in English in the past several years. The American Dialect Society’s Word of the Year for 2015, in fact, was ‘they’ used as a gender-neutral singular pronoun. This is a topic that will more than likely appear in your classroom. Supposing you had a student whom you knew to identify as a non-binary gender, and you were creating an assignment that would require students to refer to or describe themselves in Latin – how would you advise them to make their adjectives agree? Though you may not feel this applies to you at the moment, you want to have thought of this before you need it, and you have absolutely no way to confirm whether or not you need it.

A casual survey of Latin teachers led to a fairly heated debate as to how – or even if – Latin could be used to describe people of non-binary gender. The main argument against the possibility that Latin could even be used to describe non-binary gender seemed to be focused on the idea that Roman society had vastly different cultural conditions, values, and perspectives than our modern society, and for this reason we should not and could not use it to express these modern ideas. Here is where representation (and awareness of privilege) matters: non-binary gender is not a social perspective. Identity is not a social perspective. Non-binary-gendered people do and always have existed.

So how *do* you use a gendered language to describe someone who does not identify as a specific gender? General consensus suggests using third declension adjectives and genitives of description. Beyond that, you could also add third declension endings to first and second declension paradigms for pronouns and adjectives. This sparked another level of debate – that we, as non-native Latin speakers, do not have the authority or proper ability to create new endings. This,

however, is a fairly awkward statement to make in the light of hundreds of years of Latin neologisms, all created past the time of the last native speaker. But this gives us a choice.

If you are teaching Latin as a relic, a language of history that cannot be changed, then you cannot expect to use Latin as an active language in your classroom. The one rule of active language is that it changes. If you *are* using Latin as an active language in your classroom, then it is good to show students what language use is capable of producing – including word creation, semantic shift, and grammatical change. We are not doing our students a disservice by suggesting they use and manipulate language. That is how language works. To quote from Twitter: ‘Language is a forest, not a fortress. Let it grow and change and flourish’. There are many worse things you could do to a language than to give it a gender-neutral pronoun. There are few better things you can do for your students than to ensure they feel safe and included in your class.

Since I first began thinking about how to describe people in Latin without specifying gender, I did end up emending an activity I like to do with classes for Valentine’s Day – we read some poems in Latin from Martial and Catullus, and then they make Valentine’s cards – now all the adjectives I give them to use are either 3rd declension or genitives of description. Not only might students not feel comfortable using masculine or feminine adjectives for themselves, they might not want to show in any obvious way the gender of the person to whom they are writing a Valentine.

Of all the minority groups mentioned so far, in some ways, people who have a non-heteronormative sexual orientation seem to me to be the easiest to include in a Classics curriculum.

I suspect that, if you have had a class in which you’ve read some Greek mythology, at least, you may have heard some sort of variation on the question: ‘Wait, so, was one of the gods, like, gay?!’ There are very many stories in mythology of gods having same-sex partners – which makes the inclusion of LGB people in your curriculum difficult to avoid – sort of. Again it’s a matter of perspective, and it’s important to separate modern perspectives from ancient perspectives. For example, the terms ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ were not coined until the

1800s. And, as I would also think is common knowledge among us, Romans and Greeks did not really categorise sexuality based on the gender of the participants.

Earlier this year, one of my Latin 3 students asked me that question (“Wait. So was Apollo, like... gay?”) at the start of class, and I took the opportunity to talk briefly about Roman perspectives on sexuality, and that not only characters from mythology but also many emperors and many people from Roman and Greek history did have same-sex relationships. The kids paid attention; we moved on. This is a conversation I am prepared to have in every class, every year. And I generally have this conversation about that often. It is something you should be prepared to discuss, no matter how young or old your students are. Avoiding talking about it only makes the classroom less safe for kids who are or might be or love someone who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual. It’s important to know that people like us exist, and that it isn’t something that adults are afraid to tell them. Don’t teach your students that it’s scary or something they’re not old enough to know. Your straight students are old enough to learn that not everyone in the world is like them, and that’s normal. Your gay, lesbian, and bisexual students are old enough to learn that people are and always have been like them, and *that’s* normal. You have no idea the power that representation has.

It’s not hard, when studying Classics, to find people who had same-sex relationships. But, if you are going to represent them, you must actually talk about those relationships. It doesn’t have to be a big deal. For that same Valentine’s activity, for example, I start by having the students read some poems – we read some Martial because not everyone likes Valentine’s Day, and then we read a poem Catullus wrote to his girlfriend, and then a poem Catullus wrote to his boyfriend. And I say it just like that, like it’s no big deal. Because you know what? It’s not.

I enjoy reading Suetonius’ *Life of Julius Caesar*, and I always read the chapter about Nicomedes (if you are looking for examples of *praeteritio*, by the way, there’s one in about every sentence, too).

Suetonius wants to make it pretty obvious that Caesar’s (supposed, likely) affair with Nicomedes followed him throughout the entire rest of his career – and yet none of the students (nor myself, until I started

reading Suetonius) had ever had any idea Caesar had affairs with men.

I always read Catullus 48 now, when I teach Catullus, even though I had never read it in any class; it goes perfectly with 5 and 7 in terms of poem theme. We talk about Sappho when we read poem 51. What I’m saying is that you don’t have to go out of your way to include people in your curriculum – they’re already there. You just have to not be afraid to talk about them.

Something to keep in mind, whether in school or life, if you’re going to be an ally to people of other identities (and I hope you will consider being so), is to actually *know* how to do it well. Remember, it’s *not about you*. And you don’t get a cookie for being a decent person. You’re going to mess up, and you have to be prepared to take full responsibility for that. Saying ‘I’m sorry if you were offended’ is not apologising without a caveat. Our society is inherently racist, sexist, and otherwise discriminatory - so you’re going to have a lot of thoughts, actions, and perspectives that you might not even realise are harmful – self-reflect a bit. And remember: if you want to really be an ally, you can’t do that without speaking up. You cannot be an ally if you are silent, and there is no neutrality when bigotry is the status quo. You get no points for just existing.

If you aren’t feeling like you’re ready to be more active in your school community, then, if nothing else, I hope that you will think about this topic, and work to be inclusive of multiple identities in your classroom and curriculum. When you read about people from history who might have identified as transgender, or a person of colour, or some minority group, I hope you bring that up. Talk to your students about it. Show diversity in your incidental characters, pictures, and sentences on worksheets. What is common does not define what is normal. There is no default to the human experience.

It’s not hard at all to include multiple identities in your curriculum. There are hundreds of ways, and almost anything and everything you read in Roman literature will provide you at least some opportunity. Don’t waste it.

In order for students to learn, they need to feel safe. In fact, according to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Human Needs, safety is the *first* thing they need, after food, water, clothing, and shelter. For the

students in your classrooms who are struggling with their own identities – you had better believe that pretty much the whole rest of the world is against them. Think of how much it would mean if they had just one (more) place they felt safe. If nothing else, you can make the time they’re learning Latin with you that place.

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