

# The Use of Latin Literature During the Transition Period Between the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire

## —How Latin Literature was Utilized to Achieve Various Political Approaches

Zhikai Li

Mercersburg Academy, USA

**Abstract.** Julia Caesar and Augustus Caesar are two of the most important figures on the Roman history: one ended the old Roman Republic, the other started the Roman Empire. During their lifetime, the Rome complete the dramatic shift from a republic to an empire. The Gallic War and the Aeneid, two of the most influential Latin literatures, were also composed around that time period. Both were composed partially, if not wholly, as politically propagandas. For Caesar, integrating multiple idealism and glorifying his personal figure in the Gallic war paves his road to take over the government. For Augustus, deifying the emperor's family and legitimating his power stabilizes his rule. The study will be mainly discussion how different types of writing techniques were used in those two works and how they could influence politics at the time, the core of Roman value revealed by those two works will also be discussed.

**Keywords:** *Latin literatures, politics, Roman spirit, republic to empire, status, influence*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Origin

Latin is a language spoken mainly by the Roman people in the Mediterranean area.[1] It is believed that its origin may be traced back to the seventh century B.C when the city of Rome was found, and it flourished as the official language of Rome while the Romans were conquering the Mediterranean world. The masterpieces of Classical Latin-the Aeneid, Gallic War, and the Odyssey- were composed between 100 BC and 150BC along with the rise of the Roman Empire. During that period of time, Latin was brought into even more regions such as Gaul and Britain by the Romans. At the pinnacle of the Roman empire, the entire Mediterranean region and most of the Europe uses Latin as an official language. People stopped using Latin as spoken language after the fall of the Roman empire.[2] Religious institutions, especially churches and monasteries, used Latin for the purpose of preserving religious documentations. Many monks were still able to fluently read and write Latin, though no one used in as in daily life- from there Latin has become a dead language. Due to continuous warfare and plagues during the Dark Age, a huge number of classical Latin texts were lost, and the Latin language remained unpopulated until the Renaissance. [3]

### 1.2 Comparison with Other Languages

Latin is a very concise language- it only requires few words to say something that may take a whole sentence in English.[4] For instance, "amatus te" can be translated as "with you having been loved by me". Latin only has around three thousand basic roots, though each root has 144 different forms. For most languages, tenses are used for the purpose of specifying the chronological background of the context, but it is a bit different for Latin. There are six most common forms for indicative and subjunctives. Unlike English, a Latin passage may jump between different tenses either to express certain feelings or to juxtapose certain things.[5] Serious literatures like epics were required to strictly follow the Dactylic Hexameters. Different from English, various obscure tenses are often used in Latin, for instance, passive past pluperfect singular feminine. The tense is usually used to represent time, but also has a deeper meaning.[6]

## **2. Republic**

### **2.1 Gallic War: Latin Literature Early Use in Politics**

#### **2.1.1 Caesar as a Populist**

As a legion commander who conquered many areas including Gaul, Caesar himself has gathered a huge amount of booty and slaves through battles which were all transferred into an incredible amount of wealth.[7] Different from other generals, Caesar was very generous in the distribution of wealth. He gave out most of the war profits to his legion soldier, makes them loyal follower of his. Another action Caesar did was sending back a considerable amount of wealth back to Rome for the purpose of hosting free gladiator shows and other public entertainment. Both actions made him famous in the Roman people and won his support. [8]

#### **2.1.2 Pietas**

At the time of the Roman Republic, stoicism and hedonism were two mainstream philosophies, representing two opposite lifestyle. Having fought war in Gaul, Caesar compose Gallic War, one of the most essential work of Latin literature. Caesar not only integrated a lot of self-flattering in this book, but also incorporate his understanding toward “pietas”, which he considers as a quality that all Romans should have.[9] By telling stories of various battles, he gradually sketches out what pietas means to him: wisdom, courage, moderation, and legion spirit. As *De Bellum Gallic* got spread over the country, more and more people knew his military success and outstanding wisdom while the concept of pietas became more well known.

#### **2.1.3 Why Must the New Empire Rise**

Toward the end of the Roman Republic, the Senate no longer has as much control over this nation. Over expanding and continuous warfare made it difficult for many provinces to pay taxes in time, which usually result with rebellions. On the other hand, private army started gaining power due to the Senate’s inability to pay enough salaries. Eventually, the First Triumvirate gave the old republic a decisive strike, completely dive the nation into three major groups. Roman people, however, were tired of civil wars that happened every few years in the past few decades, seeks for a strong leader who may unify the nation.[10]

### **2.2 The Aeneid: Latin Literature as a Powerful Tool**

#### **2.2.1 True Roman Epic**

For a long time, the Roman people were not quite clear about their ancestries. Though stories about the founding of Rome on the Seven Hills has lingered around for a long time, no one could quite tell what happened before that. Augustus, the new emperor, decided to compose an epic that only belongs to the Romans. Virgil was given this mission. Ask payback, his land properties that soldiers took earlier were given back to him and a decent salary was also granted. Virgil decided to trace the founding of Rome back to the fall of Troy, where Aeneas, the son of Venus, started his great voyage around the entire Mediterranean Sea. The *Aeneid* traces Romans’ lineages all the way back to Troy, specifies the close relationships between the Roman people and the gods.[11]

#### **2.2.2 The Circle of Maecenas**

Many Statues of Augustus that we see today portray him as a middle-aged strong man in his armor but with a toga around his waist. This statue perfectly shows Augustus’s identity as a politician and a military commander. In reality, Augustus is an old short man in his fifties. This statue is part of Augustus’s large political propaganda. In order to strengthen his control, he hired a group of artist, poets and singers, whose chief goal was to spread positive words about him. The statue mentioned earlier was required to be place in every city center. All of these were done secretly and purposefully.[12] There was never clear record about the exact size of the Circle of Maecenas, but it is for sure one of the earlier professional groups established for political propagandas.

### 2.2.3 Noble vs Vulgus

In order to secure his rule, Augustus started pushing the idea that the “vulgus”-mob or crowd in Latin- need the social elites to lead their way. He has given himself titles such as “Nobilissimus Caesar”-“most Noble Caesar”. In the Aeneid, such hints occurred multiple times through the book. In book I the scene where the deers following the leading deer immediately fell into chaos after the leading ones were killed by Aeneas is an perfect example. After seeing years of civil wars, August became a strong believer of elite-rule. The mobs would always fall into chaos and self-destruction without having a few rulers leading their way; he considers a dictator being beneficial for the Roman people. Deifying the imperial family was an idea first practiced in Egypt areas and later was introduced to Rome and utilized by the Roman emperors. Often, Augustus was portrayed as Apollo in sculptures and paintings. The idea that the emperor is the living god not only further legitimated the emperor’s rule, but also enhances his political power. In many temples and shrines built at the time, Augustus’s statue as Apollo was very prominent.[13]

## 3. Conclusion

### 3.1 Latin after the Fall of the Roman Empire

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Latin used it for about 100 to 200 years in areas that previously belonged to the Roman Empire. Slowly, Latin was no longer used as a spoken language in the medieval era. However, Latin was still widely used in inscription, especially those written for religious purposes. Since Bible, the most influential pieces of religious production, was written in Latin, monks and other church leaders were required to know Latin so that they may interpret the original work. The form of Latin did change a little- it evolved into what is now called medieval Latin. Many classical literature were lost in that period because the lack of professional scholars and church policies against “vulgar literature”. During the Renaissance Era, the status of Latin as a spoken language was strengthened again in a short period of time.

### 3.2 Latin in 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Officially, Latin is now considered as a dead language- no one speaks or writes in everyday activities. However, its essentially position in the development of the western civilization cannot be ignored. Until the mid of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most colleges still required students to take Latin as a part of as part of elite education, which was later abandoned in the 1980s. As a subject, Latin still exists in many high schools and colleges, but no more literature has been written.

## References

- [1]. Palmer, L. R. (1988). *The latin language*. University of Oklahoma Press.
- [2]. Swain, S. (1996). *Hellenism and empire: language, classicism, and power in the Greek world, AD 50-250*. Oxford University Press.
- [3]. Highet, G. (1949). *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- [4]. Crystal, D. (2004). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language*. Ernst Klett Sprachen.
- [5]. Miller, J. H. (1982). *Fiction and repetition: Seven English novels*. Harvard University Press.
- [6]. McArthur, T., Lam-McArthur, J., & Fontaine, L. (Eds.). (2018). *Oxford companion to the English language*. Oxford University Press.
- [7]. Mattingly, D. (2008). *An imperial possession: Britain in the Roman Empire, 54 BC-AD 409 (Vol. 1)*. Penguin.

- [8]. Nussbaum, M. C. (2013). *The therapy of desire: Theory and practice in Hellenistic ethics*. Princeton University Press.
- [9]. Riggsby, A. M. (2010). *Caesar in Gaul and Rome: war in words*. University of Texas Press.
- [10]. Geary, P. J. (2003). *The myth of nations: the medieval origins of Europe*. Princeton University Press.
- [11]. Freewalt, J., & Scalzo, J. (2014). **VIRGIL'S EXPLANATION FOR THE "ROMAN MIRACLE": A REVIEW OF THE AENEID.**
- [12]. Blanning, T. W., & Blanning, T. C. W. (2002). *The culture of power and the power of culture: old regime Europe, 1660-1789*. Oxford University Press on Demand.
- [13]. Johnson, W. R. (2015). *Darkness Visible: A Study of Vergil's "Aeneid"*. University of Chicago Press.