

Christopher Francese. *Ancient Rome In So Many Words*. New York: Hippocrene Books, 2007. Pp. 248, incl. further reading and indices. ISBN 13: 978-0-7818-1153-8 / ISBN-10: 0-7818-1153-8.

Patrick Hunt
Classics Department
Stanford University
phunt@stanford.edu

Samuel Johnson's 1755 *A Dictionary of the English Language*¹ cleverly defined words with deep irony and set some qualified precedent for the *O.E.D.* to follow later with selective chronological and word usage entries. An abbreviated anecdotal example suffices of the Johnsonian voice in basso polished mahogany, probably dripping with oiled sarcasm, about an unpleasant carriage ride where in sweaty rectitude he opined:

“Madame, I beg your pardon. To correct you, I do not *smell* – in fact, you do - I merely *stink*.”

Johnson also wittily commiserated while beginning his wordsmithing, no doubt with a sly sideways smile at his profession:

“I... knew, that the work in which I engaged is generally considered as drudgery for the blind, as the proper toil of artless industry, a task that requires neither the light of learning, nor the activity of genius, but may successfully be performed without any higher quality than that of bearing burthens with dull patience and beating the track of the alphabet with sluggish resolution.”²

¹ Jack Lynch, ed. (2004). *Samuel Johnson's Dictionary: Selections from the 1755 Work That Defined the English Language* (London: Atlantic Books).

² Lynch (2004) 565.

Such levity would drive his pedantic lexicographic colleagues into paroxysms of glossalalic pharisaism, as he defined *lexicographer* as a “writer of dictionaries, a harmless drudge”, but it is not with a trace of regret that we have forgotten most of his contemporary lexicographers’ names. Dr. Syntax could easily be any one of them lampooned. One cannot help but remember two jests from *Hudibras*:

“Beside, 'tis known he could speak Greek
As naturally as pigs squeak;
That Latin was no more difficile,
Than to a blackbird 'tis to whistle...
A Babylonish dialect,
Which learned pedants much affect.”³

Another predecessor of Christopher Francese, John Lempriere with his *Bibliotheca Classica* (or *Classical Dictionary*) in 1788 – not to be confused with the brilliantly enigmatic and dense 1992 novel by Lawrence Norfolk that it inspired, *Lempriere’s Dictionary* – followed Samuel Johnson down one quasi-lexical path, but not in any way as amusing or trustworthy.

Not that we should take Francese any less seriously than his erudite compilation deserves. It is a page-turner, a wonderful and witty work of scholarship hard to put down for anyone who loves the quixotic stories that words can often tell. In his Introduction, Francese’s linguistic claims are sensible:

“I am not, however, under the illusion that these words provide unique keys to understanding the Romans. Indeed quite a few of them show how shifty, deceptive, and downright misleading vocabulary can be. And of course, as the Roman philosopher Seneca points out, “There are a

³ Samuel Butler (c. 1663). *Hudibras*, Part I, First Canto, 51-4.

vast number of things that have no name “ (*Ingens copia est rerum sine nomine*). Language is an interesting vantage point from which to look, but it hardly provides a complete or unambiguously reliable view of anything but itself.”

Francese shares some of his antecedents that shaped his authorship in mind, not the least of which is Metcalf and Barnhart’s *America in So Many Words: Words That Have Shaped America* (Houghton Mifflin, 1997). Part of the strength and utility of his book rests on a well-planned format, which is summarized below.

First, he has structured his book carefully and clearly in the following ways. Different categories of common word groups are provided: e.g., childhood, family, education, status and class, public places, life in the country, money and business, jobs and professions, the social contract, government and politics, army and empire, technology, slavery and virtues. Mostly in the second half of the book, Francese offers picaresque groups of words having to do with debauchery, crime and punishment, religion and magic, madness, insults and final moments. In his 20 word groups, Francese maps out about 500 words throughout the book (also indexed at the end).

Second, the organization per entry is also useful in its format and consistency. To take one word as example from the word group section on money and business, on pp. 90-1, Francese first lists a word on each left-hand side of a two-page entry in large font bold caps, e.g., *annona*:

ANNONA, with definitions in smaller caps, **THE GRAIN HARVEST OR SUPPLY; THE PRICE OF GRAIN; A FREE DISTRIBUTION OF GRAIN**

where each successive subdefinition follows in majority usage. Below, the word is used in varying illustrative quotations (in this

case six) from sources here including Ulpian in Justinian's *Digest of Roman Law*, Asconius, a Plautus comedy, and several *ILS* (*Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*) loci, often epigraphic. For example, here is a quip from Plautus (*Stichus* 179)

“My father said I was born when grain was scarce [*per caram annonam*]. That must be why I'm so hungry now.”

Following all this, on each right-hand side of the usual two-page entry is a discursive qualifying paragraph or so about the selected word entry in various historical contexts and always within the framework of its social history, not without caveats and qualifications on its ambiguities or even misuse. Francese includes a bibliography and further sources at the end of each entry, often from Latin literature, philological studies (e.g., not on *annona* but such as excerpted from Susanna Braund's *Satire and Society in Ancient Rome*, Exeter, 1989:5-22 on *amicitia*), or standard Classical reference works such as *TLL* (*Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*), *RE* (*Paulys Real-Encyclopädie...*), *CIL* (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*), and in this specific case mentions *TLL* 2.110-113 above on *annona*. There are always many epigraphic and philologic avenues supplied for further lexical or literary exploration.

Francese will never have to crack the putative *flagellum* whip over his students who decline aloud such nouns as *flagitium* (one of his entries on pp. 178-179) with such a pedagogical formula as this:

“I also remembered that the most successful parts of my own Latin classes are not my spellbinding explanations of the ablative absolute but the stories I try to tell to make the new vocabulary more memorable.”

Each entry is useful and instructive, and while one less gifted in wit than Samuel Johnson might wonder why (rather than

how) Francese compiled both his 20 word groups and his 500 or so individual entries, I cannot think of any argument against the fascinating lexicography - *fascinated* is even one of his entries (see pp. 96, 194-195) in the best sense of the word – from the fertile latifundia he has thus (often amusingly) constructed by carefully applied and organized labor out of so many possible lexical choices. One suspects his students are very fortunate to have one who loves to teach if his book is any measure of his anecdotal style. Drudge he is not. The book is thus highly recommended for entry level to collegiate Latin students of any age.