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978-0-521-86740-5 - The Medieval World of Isidore of Seville: Truth from Words

John Henderson

Excerpt

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I believe that almost everyone who uses the book finds it more convenient to have recourse to the Index first.

(John Roget, Introduction to *Roget's Thesaurus* (1879²),
cited in *Roget* (2002) Introduction, xv)

Dear Alexander Valkner,

. . . It was a relief to come across your long, brilliant piece in a recent issue of *Comment*, namely: The History of Dictionaries.

. . . From intimacy you travelled to grandeur, then back and forth, like a marvellously controlled metronome. I admired the way your essay builds on itself so meticulously, and the way it is anecdotal, accessible, and, finally, shading toward the confessional. I recognized only too well the moment in which you were tempted to approach some of our great writers to see whether or not they 'indulge,' keeping a thesaurus hidden in their desk drawer.

(Reta Winters, in Shields (2002) 163–4)

More or less every publication on Latin literature today practises citation from Isidore. Through the twentieth century, this was a matter of itemic consultation via a modern Index. Until 1991, the closest that many, perhaps most, scholars ever came to *reading* Isidore's *magnum opus* was, for sure, recourse to the *Index Verborum* of Wallace Lindsay's *OCT* (1911a) Vol. 2: 371–442: Latin, and 443: Greek (with *ibid.* 444–50: *Loci Citati*).¹ Then, at a stroke, Francis Cairns' publication of Robert Maltby's invaluable *Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies* (1991) finessed this reflex from the Latinist's apparatus of automatic procedures:

¹ Lindsay's text (reproduced in Oroz Reta and Marcos Casquero (2000); see Díaz y Díaz (2000) 233–4) has incurred (foreseen) criticism for cavalier (classicizing) orthography (e.g. Wright (2002) 39, 246. In particular, Greek script is unwarranted: e.g. Marshall (1983), Introduction 12). Maltby (1999) catalogues (the many) Isidorian etymologies affected by changes in [post-classical] spelling/pronunciation. See Appendix for Lindsay and for scholarship on Isidore.

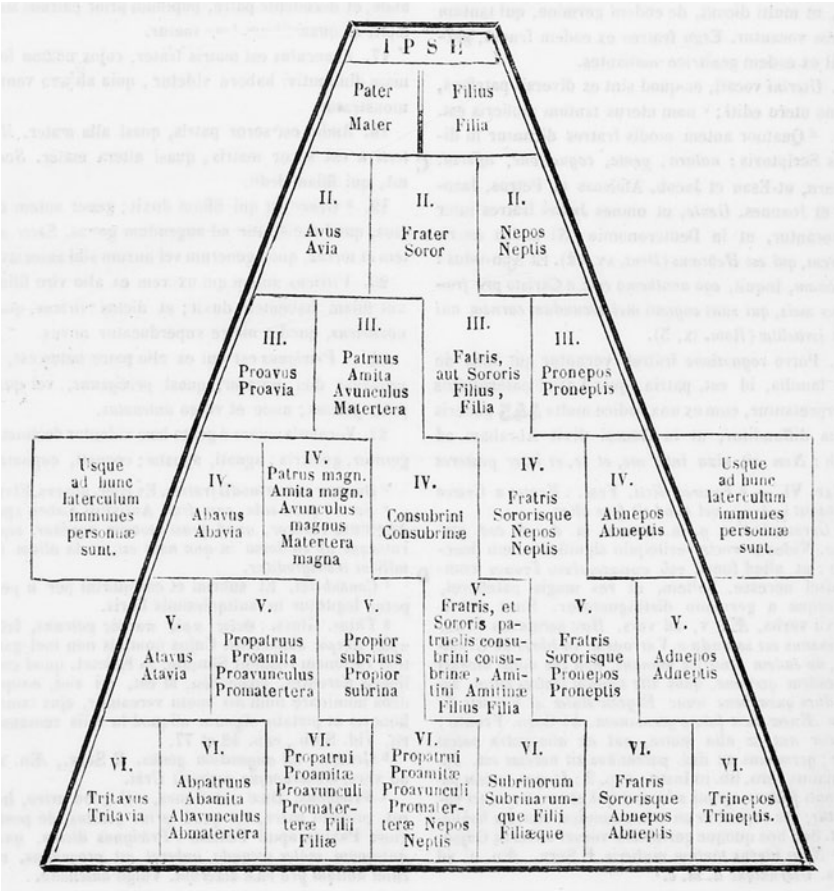


Figure 1 Pyramid kinship diagram from Arévalo.

(M.) has assembled all the explicitly attested etymologies of Latin antiquity, from the predecessors of Varro to Isidore of Seville; he has covered glossaries and scholia as well as the standard ancient etymological source-works.²

So, why would you bother further with Isidore, neat?³

First, who *is* Isidore? Dante knew he's in *Paradiso* (10.130), but the saint's earthly remains were (must have been) removed from Seville to

² Jacket blurp.

³ By my reckoning, something like 40% of the Maltby entries (excluding cross-references) include Isidore's testimony; perhaps 1 in 8 of the words etymologized, and around ¼ of the etymologies compiled, are given by Isidore alone.

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keep them from ‘the Moors’, whose invasion ended the world he knew – traditionally dated to the 711 débâcle of Visigoth King Roderick, less than a century after Isidore’s death. The shrine up-river was later destroyed, but the recently celebrated monastery-cum-castle of San Isidoro del Campo marks the site.⁴ Down in today’s totally Hispanicized city, he and his brother San Leandro (no. 41 of 46 or 28 of 33 in the two redactions of Isidore’s *De uiris illustribus*) represent a strong parochial hold on their home town and Andalusian region’s command of Spain’s Atlantic searoutes to the treasure and trade of the Latin American empire. Granted, San Pablo and San Pedro are grand national and ecumenical custodians of Santa Maria de la Sede inside and outside this thirteenth-century Cathedral (the largest Gothic building anywhere). Yet the two local heroes have their share: matching chapels set into the width of the walls on either side of the western entrance, Leandro’s to right home to a fine painting of *his* Council of Toledo starring sister Florentina (the revered Virgin),⁵ and Isidoro’s to left, aptly dedicated to keeping the choir books (Leandro’s, however, dates to 1734; Isidore’s was finished in 1661),⁶ [Figure 2]. The newly fashioned ‘Museum’ area (at tourist reception) draws visitors to a 1650–55 canvas by Ignacio de Ries, where *San Leandro’s* gesture of benediction matches with *San Isidoro’s* quill and book clutched under arm. But what absolutely guarantees the brothers’ visibility, beyond a doubt, is the dominant display of 1655 twin portraits by Seville’s favourite native artist Murillo (1617–82),⁷ which span the former Cathedral ‘museum’, safe in the niches they were commissioned for, on the facing side walls of the *Sacristía Mayor*. Here, since 25 August 1655, Bp Leandro’s scroll exorcizes Arian heresy: ‘CREDITE O GOTH CONSUBSTANTIALEM PATRI’;⁸ whereas this Bp Isidoro cons Scripture, while beside him sit his own writings: ‘DE SUMMO BO(NE)’ fittingly tops the

⁴ González (2002) is the commemorative volume produced by the cultural department of the Junta de Andalucía.

León (<– *Legio*), however, proudly celebrates its own reception, at his own request, of the saint’s remains, flanked by Leandro and sister Florentina, on 22 December (since 1063), buttressed with centuries of high-profile popular cult, la Casa de San Isidoro, la Real Colegiata de San Isidoro (cf. (1964) *IX Centenario de la Llegada de San Isidoro a León y de la Dedicación de su Basílica: Reunión Internacional de Estudios sobre el Románico y la Basílica Isidoriana: León, 6–11 de julio de 1964*, León): Viñayo González (1961), de Gaiffier (1961) 281.

⁵ Recipient of Leandro’s *De institutione uirginum* (MPL 72: 873–94; with 10 additional chapters, in Navarra (1987) 75–111). ⁶ Ángulo-Íñiguez (1981) II: 258.

⁷ Established and prolific, the painter (himself baptized in the Cathedral) founded the Sevillian Academy of Arts in 1658.

⁸ ‘Oyez, ye Goths, avow the creed of homousic relation of Christ to God the Father’ (cf. 7.2.14; and see 17 n.19. I have not seen Domínguez del Val (1981), but see Navarra (1987), with Murillo’s *San Leandro* on the front jacket.

saintly pile;⁹ beneath it, the other legible spine on view fades into its shadow: 'ETYMOLO(GIAE)' – **truth** showing, **word** half-obscured; the compounded **truthofword**'s com-posite-ness intact . . . [frontispiece].¹⁰ Which must amount to the truest, as well as the most graphic, portrait there could be of the role of this encyclopedic learning as cultural support for a militant ministry.¹¹

Twentieth-century Sevillanos' modest tribute to a Roman past amounts to celebration of Trajan and Hadrian's birthplace at nearby Italica, marooned by the river's vagaries, within the Museo Arqueológico, blessed by Franco.¹² But San Isidoro has the honour of having his head star in the row of 52 heroes of Spanish history medallioned along the baking frontage of the 1929 Ibero-american exhibition showcase of the Plaza de España, that shimmering esplanade inset into the superb Parque de Infanta María-Luisa [Figure 3, p. 26].¹³ He left his mark on time, too. For 1960 was Isidore's Year in Andalucía, and every 4th April is still St Isidore's Day across the Catholic world, the anniversary of his death. Now, though, for the virtual spatiotemporality of the twenty-first century, Isidore has netted a new role – as the officially designated patron saint of computer users and programmers, and of the internet: recommended for prayer by whichever site seeker, world wide.¹⁴

⁹ This is Isidore's *Sententiae*, also known as *De summo bono* from the first words: *Summum bonum deus est, quia incommutabilis est*, . . . (MPL 83: 537–738 (cf. 81: 177)), 'The highest boon is God, for that He is non-subject to change, . . .': see Cazier (1998), Campos Ruiz and Roca Meliá (1971).

Today, the portraits read within the idiom of painterly 'tenebrismo': Ángulo-Íñiguez (1981) I: 281–96, esp. 290–3 on the *Isidoro*, = II: 258–60, Cat. 317, = III, plate 108; cf. Valdivieso (1990) 94–5 (88 = *San Isidoro*). Calvert (1907) 123 (on plate 54) catalogues plain-style: 'The saint, seated in full canonical, with an open book before him, is attentively reading. He wears his mitre, and has his crozier in his right hand. His ecclesiastical vestments are extraordinarily rich.'

¹⁰ Martínez Montiel and Morales (1999) 97: the story is that Murillo gave Leandro the face of Alonso de Herrera, Isidoro that of Juan López de Tabalán (Cathedral choirmaster, deceased 1655, and a licentiate cleric in the Cathedral admin.). Murillo includes the two brothers in a 'Conception' theme set of medallion heads in the vault of the Sala Capitular (1667–8): Ángulo-Íñiguez (1981) II: Cat. 48–9, plates 210–11. They are also carved on the doors of the Great Vestry, and *La Antigua* chapel includes another Isidoro painting (by Domingo Martínez).

¹¹ In 1722, Pope Innocent XIII formally decreed the universal ecclesiastical doctorate of Isidore: de Gaiffier (1961) 278–81, Viñayo González (1961) 297. Murillo's preliminary pen sketches (now in the Louvre and British Museum) do not yet polarize the brothers as engaged scholar vs confrontational militant (Ángulo-Íñiguez (1981) II: 259).

¹² The exhibition room dedicated to Visigoth culture contains one label referring to Isidore: as authority on scents and perfumes. For fragments of Roman Seville: Campos Carrusco (1986).

¹³ In this swansong for Primo de Rivera's dictatorship, Isidoro is beside the North Tower, second after Seneca (they blatantly turn away from each other), before De Pelayo, El Cid, . . ., Sorolla ('Exposición Iberoamericana de Sevilla': Braujos, Parias, Alvarez (1990) 2: 66–80).

¹⁴ www.scborromeo.org/saints/isidores.htm. Bulletin from the Vatican, 14.06.99. San Isidoro saved Spain by politely warning Mohammed off in a dream (MPL 81: 136–7; for his full legend, see *ibid.* 15–162; cult: de Gaiffier (1961), Domínguez del Val III: 36–8). He is *not* to be confused with his

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And the *Etymologiae*? The prolific and polymathic seventh-century Bishop of Seville was a vastly influential conduit for classical antiquity into the medieval world, but, sorry to say, his encyclopedic storehouse of Latin commands attention from Latinists strictly as a putative witness to earlier etymological ‘lore’, otherwise lost to us. For, while it is possible to write an outline history of ancient etymological scholarship, spanning from ‘cosmogonic’ theorizing to ebullient bullshit, we have *only* Isidore extant as anything like a complete text. Because of his date, however, he is virtually absent from classical scholarship. *Chuckle* is typical (i.e. *CHCL: The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*): Isidore appears here in just the one tralatitian sentence that begins with Varro, then runs through the list of names down to Isidore, in order to gesture towards his ‘all-pervasive’, if ‘not always at first-hand’, subsequent ‘influence’.¹⁵ Publications and reviews on Isidore scarcely figure at all in *classical* journals.¹⁶

Yet contemporary logophilia and, in general, the graphematic turn in criticism have emphasized the semiotic prevalence of etymologizing mentalities in Roman culture,¹⁷ so that this particular titan of taxonomic knowledge is coming under the sort of pressure to deliver bona fide goods to the marketplace that Isidore has not known for a millennium. While (truth to tell) it has proved enough for most purposes to back up a proposed ‘word-truth’ with a bare reference culled from *any place* within the curtilage of ‘the ancient world’, it has been necessary to repress interest in the genesis (the origins) of Isidore’s materials, and in particular recognition of Isidore’s agenda. In fact, the shock that awaits anyone prepared to *read* the *Etymologiae* is closely analogous to the shock that hits the user of *Rogert’s Thesaurus* when it dawns that *that* monumental word-store represents the bastardization of a determined attempt to systematize a forceful ideology. Mediated through successive revisions of the original Rogert’s original scheme, the teleology of the classification led (leads) from abstract concepts through the material universe, to humanity, and, for climax, the apex of significance: morality and religion: ‘the imperfect forerunner of that

catachresis, the peasant hero San Isidro (Labrador) of Madrid – that centrepiece capital fantasized into existence by Philip II in the distant future. Cf. de Gaiffier (1961) 277, showing that Isidore’s traditional date of canonization stems from just such confusion.

¹⁵ Kenney and Clausen (1982) 2: 286; Sandys (1903) 442–4 gave a bare list of contents. Conte (1994) 720–1, ‘Literature in Spain’, is an honourable exception.

¹⁶ They concentrate in Iberian *Helmantica*.

¹⁷ For etymology as carnival in Plautus: Gaide (1999); as fantasia in Ovid *Metamorphoses*: Michalopoulos (2001). Ancient etymologizing in general: essays in Nifadopoulos (2003), see 31 n.9. More broadly poetological: e.g. Ahl (1985), Cairns, (1979) esp. 87–110, ‘Verbal learning’, O’Hara (1996), Oliensis (1997), Paschalis (1997) . . . – But ask any Latin scholar, any Latin student. For ancient texts on synonymy: Moussy (1994).

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Universal Language to which Roget and his fellow reformists aspired'.¹⁸ The editions we use today ring-fence the *Thesaurus* with dense paratextual assurances that stylistics and crosswords dwell here, so as to tuck the distracting creationist programming just out of our eyeline. But *Roget* once had a theoretical tendency – *was* an agenda.¹⁹

What, then, of the *Etymologiae*? When editors such as Lindsay preface Isidore, to the contrary, with a run of his letters followed by an agglomerated index plus scheme of chapter-headings through the 20 books ahead, the sloganized value-system of the *Etymologiae* is loudly advertised up-front, and heavily underscored for attention. These *praemissa* waymark and type the main principles, categories and hierarchies of Isidore's taxonomy, on the path that leads from *Grammatica* and *Rhetorica* through to a finale of *instrumenta hortorum* and *equorum*. To read, you need one eye trained on the difference brought to his Varronian inheritance by Isidore's position as a Latinate Christian authority who had no Hebrew, and little Greek,²⁰ but who posited revelation of the creator's design through these 3 sacred tongues;²¹ and the other eye upon the textuality and *writing* that shape this vast icon of conceptual order. As the great Curtius outlined in his foundational book on the entire Middle Ages, in *this* pangram, it's downhill all the way:²²

the great Isidore of Seville, who in his great compilation of all human knowledge chose the road from designation to essence, from *uerba* to *res*, and accordingly named his work *Etymologiarum libri*. . . . The importance of this work . . . can hardly be overestimated; it may be called the basic book of the entire Middle Ages (*Grundbuch des ganzen Mittelalters*). It not only established the canonical stock of knowledge for eight centuries but also moulded their thought categories.

¹⁸ *Roget* (2002) xvii, cf. Roget (1852¹) Introduction (cit. *ibid.* xxx–xxxi), 'a *Philosophical Language* . . . , the establishment of a *Universal Language*'. John Roget (*filius*) extended the system of cross-references and recognized the importance of the Index – Peter (*pater*) 'Roget himself had thought of it only as a last resort – his original notebooks had not had one', as the 150th anniversary edition rather dimly notes ((2002) xv). The Index secured primacy over the *Thesaurus* for the twenty-first century: 650 to 581 pages in 2002 vs 312 to 400 pages in 1962 (ed. R. A. Dutch, Harmondsworth).

¹⁹ Bp John Wilkins, first Secretary of the Royal Society is the key reference here (*Roget* (2002) xxx n. 2). Cf. McArthur (1986) 119–23. Wilkins supplies the most telling of *missing* links between those systematians Borges and Lacan: Irwin (1994) 442–9.

²⁰ Next-to-no Greek: this is strenuously argued by Fontaine, esp. (1988) essay iv: 535 (*pace* e.g. Courcelle (1959)). Besides operating at the most basic of levels (*perhaps* considerably), Isidore does make astonishing mistakes with Greek (cf. Lindsay (1911b) 44), but when did the question 'What is it to know ancient Greek?' *ever* sustain a simple answer? (Ditto Hebrew – and Latin.)

²¹ Cf. McNally (1959) 50–2 for this sacred chain of truth in words.

²² Curtius (1953) 496–7, cf. Hillgarth (1983) 883–93, and esp. Bischoff (1966), Maaz (1993) 302–3, Ribémont (2001). In the post-Foucauldian idiom, Isidore authorizes etymologico-grammatical knowledge as the 'master-discipline' produced by the discursive system of his explanatory praxis: 'The world of the encyclopedia is a book, or a library' (Amsler (1989) 171; 165, cf. 12, 134).

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Where Lindsay could only *disqualify* his text – ‘this encyclopedia is not a literary work of art’²³ – Curtius invokes the requisite category of ‘powerbook’. For sure, this mighty spree of articulated knowledge plays across the world visible to etymology while enactively *creating* a world from etymology. In relays of feedback loops, what can and cannot be learned about the universe from its dividends for etymology feeds into and on what can and cannot be learned about etymology from its stocktake of Creation. All the while, his writing models the belief system it subtends, as the monumental text morphs through its taxonomers’ paradise of totalization through system, dramatizing power *as* power over knowledge. Performative display of the power/knowledge nexus takes a scholastic turn to cosmogonic enumeration as interpretation builds its shrine to interpretation. Here mapping inculcates an unfolding world of values, as exegetic modality delivers its particular blend of protreptic regimes: pedagogic, devotional, ecumenical, revelatory – classical/post-classical, through early medieval, to pre-modern. The clerical authority valorizes his schedule of the known, affixes limits to the knowable; but this clerk of words writes *with* appreciation and awe, warms or boils as he records and preaches. He discriminates for and against, as well as between the items and grids he chooses to love or list; favours his favourites, scolds the demonized, recommends this tool or that technology, plots his narrative to beguile the reader no less than shape nature.²⁴

One constant dimension is, happily-cum-necessarily, language consciousness, a textualizing semiotic of book culture – a cult of the book that lines up a ‘liberal arts’ manual as flagship and bearer of a mission to educate. Isidore profiles civilization as inherent within the structures he avers: fixing origins for a permanence glossed as eternity; placing, contextualizing, opening out traditional schooling as conduit to the one-world superpower ideology of universal Rome – Rome pegged to Christ as the continuous present realm of *Latinitas* wherein ‘we’ (*nostri* – ‘our lot’) dwell. Language-centred, language-obsessed, but not necessarily -blinded or -bound, Isidore’s lexicographical, indexical, sign-fixated world nevertheless serves a specific Iberian catholicizing politics within a durable Mediterranean cultural habitus.²⁵

* * *

²³ (1911b) 50.

²⁴ See esp. Carey (2003) 19–40, ‘The strategies of encyclopedism’, Murphy (2004) esp. 29–48, ‘The shape of the *Natural History*’, and essays in König and Whitmarsh (2006) for contemporary thinking on Roman encyclopedism (esp. the Elder Pliny). On the modelling of *eruditio* dramatized in Gellius’ cult of the book of book culture, see Gunderson (forthcoming).

²⁵ Cf. esp. Fontaine (1959) 733–888, ‘La culture d’Isidore de Séville’, and the vast storehouse of Gerli (2003) for all aspects of Hispanic cultural history between 470 and 1500 CE. Barney, Lewis, Beach, and Berghof (2006) present a detailed historical narrative in their *Introduction*: cf. esp. McKitterick

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'*Isidore of Seville*.' Surely everyone knows what it can mean to be told at an impressionable age where the name of your home town comes from? It is one of the surefire ways to awaken a sense of place and history in pupils and people. In the case of Isidore – he was born to etymologize the universe! Start from ultimate **Seville** (14.4.28, cf. 14.4.70), and you will embark on a review that moves from Atlantic margin to Mediterranean centre to engross the whole of post-Graeco-Roman culture. For **Seville** is originary eponym of all *Romanized Spain* (9.2.109):²⁶

Hispani ab Ibero amne primum Iberi, postea ab Hispalo Hispani cognominati sunt.

Hispanics were first called **Iberians** from the River **Ebro**, but afterwards got the nickname **Hispanics** from **Hispalus**.

There's more to say yet, and think, with Seville. Symbolically, or as Isidore would realize, naturally, Seville had been first-born child of nascent imperial Rome (15.1.71):

Hispalim Caesar Iulius condidit, quam ex suo et Romae urbis uocabulo Iuliam Romulam nuncupavit.

Seville was founded by **Julius** Caesar. He entitled it **Julia Romula** after the words for himself and for the City of **Rome**.

Still more instructively and inspirationally, the call to world destiny did not obliterate, but immortalized, the truth-in-the-word of **His-palis** (ibid.):

Hispalis autem a situ cognominata est, eo quod in solo palustri suffixis in profundo palis locata sit, ne lubrico atque instabili fundamento cederet.

Seville is nicknamed for its location. How so? Because it was sited on soil with marshy **pools**; beneath **Hispalian** Seville, **pole pallets** were stuck down in the deep, so it would not fail to bear up to having foundations that were unsure and unstable.

Piledriving allegory or sustaining myth of origin, this tale of the town makes the perfect platform for the project of envisioning our world as worked in words. Isidore's origins tell us about our own marmalade. For every home town marks that [space] where the primeval slipperiness of unstable swamp did enter upon localized identity through cultural effort reified in nominalization. The foundations of our habitus are always stakes driven deep into the unplumbable ~~bed~~ of unnamable ooze, sunk into the

Footnote 25 (*cont.*)

(2001). For continuity from late Roman imperial rule through to the Visigoth eras, see Kulikowski (2004). ²⁶ From Justin, *Epitome* 44.1.2.

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pre-semiotic [gloop] – the ‘chora’ beyond the pale of language. The whole Story of Man is staked out in this tale of graphic underpinning, from foundering to founding. There was a **pool**, and so it called for a **pole**: *palus* → *pâlus* (*palustris* → *palis*). These mere **poles** beneath Visigothic *Spalis* were the basis for Isidore’s polis,²⁷ so his **pallet palisade** props up re-founded Hispania for the imperial Roman *orbis* grounded on the underlying subsumption of every *ville* in the Latin dictionary within the mould of the originary *urbs*. What’s at stake in fathoming these *Origins*? To this ‘punctual’ way of thinking, the truths in Latinity subtend a panoramic synthesis of mainstream experience since we emerged from the slime (*lubricus* meant ‘slippery’, and so came to mean ‘ungraspable’, ‘hazardous’, ‘tricksy, unstable, unreliable’). Where we all were born, and are borne again by Thesaurus Rex.

More sinned against than sinning? Epic – titanic – scholarship recovers, traces, and appraises Isidore’s intertextual work and performance of excerption and absorption (see *Appendix*, pp. 212–13); and several of the stalwarts and heroes *will* take a bow or two in the pages ahead: Varro, Pliny, Jerome, Augustine, Cassiodorus . . .²⁸ Truth to tell, the long and short of it is that *Etymologiae* knows full well that it makes a very grand introduction to *classics*.²⁹ But this book, *The medieval world of Isidore of Seville*, is trained on the intratextual production and reticulation of its world from, and in, words that bespeak and realize *theurgy*.

²⁷ The requisite traces of pine stakes have duly been located along the banks of Rio Guadalquivir (esp. beneath Calle de Tetuan): Blanco Freijeiro (1979) 1.1: 105–7, esp. 106.

²⁸ Among prime contributors to *Etymologies* ranks the paradigmatic Christianizing historical geography of Orosius: see Merrills (2005) 35–99.

²⁹ Conte (1994) 721 hits the mark (in translationese): ‘the ensemble of his works should be considered, not as an aseptic product of the study, but as an organic proposal (and a functional proposal, as his fortune throughout the Middle Ages would demonstrate) to systematize culture for the purpose of training new generations and new ruling classes’.

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