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

John Henderson

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THE MEDIEVAL WORLD OF ISIDORE OF SEVILLE

In his *Etymologiae*, St Isidore of Seville put together a systematic survey of the world in the form of a vast thesaurus of Latin vocabulary, which supplies a more or less accepted or fanciful etymology for each term. It became one of the most influential books of European culture through the whole medieval period. This Latin 'Roget' is traditionally used as a reference work, accessed through an elaborate index system. In this book Professor Henderson, the most challenging critic writing on Latin literature and Roman culture today, presents the first full reading of all twenty books of the *Etymologiae*, showing how the material is sequenced so that its reader is treated to a thoroughgoing education in the world as it was apprehended in Jewish, Graeco-Roman and Christian culture. All Latin, including etymologies, is translated.

JOHN HENDERSON is Professor of Classics at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of King's College. His books on Latin authors include monographs on Plautus, Phaedrus, Seneca, Statius, Pliny and Juvenal, besides general studies of epic, comedy, satire, history, art, culture and the history of classics.

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Frontispiece: Murillo, *San Isidoro*.

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[More information](#)*Preface: When it's ajar ...*

Thesaurum iuxta Graecam proprietatem ἀπὸ τῆς θέσεως, a positione, hoc est a reposito, nominatur. nam θέσις positio dicitur, et est nomen ex Graeco Latinoque compositum. nam θες Graeci repositum dicunt, Latini aurum, quod iunctum sonat repositum aurum.

<Thêsa^urum> gets its name according to Greek usage <from **thes(is)**> = from **putting**, that is, from **put in (store)**. For <**thesis**> is the word for **putting**, and the name is a compound from a Greek plus a Latin word. For Greeks say <**thes-**> for **put in (store)**; Latin-speakers say **or** {gold}, and the splice says out loud **put-in-st+A^u**.

(Isidore, *Etymologiae* 16.18.6)¹

You might have dropped in the name of Sylvia Plath? It is well known that she really did use a thesaurus in the composing of her poetry, which seems rather shocking when you think of it.

(Reta Winters, in Shields (2002) 164)²

¹ Maltby (1991) 608, s. v. *thesaurus* indicates that Isidore owes this bastard etymology to Pope Gregory the Great (*Moralia siue expositio in librum Iob* 29.38; sixth century), or to a common tradition. Paul the Deacon (eighth century) preserves an excerpt from the (late second-century) dictionary by Sex. Pompeius Festus (*De significatu uerborum* p. 8 Lindsay), himself epitomizing the lost wordstore of M. Verrius Flaccus (late first century), which demonstrates that this Graeco-Roman fool's gold is a product of *classical* Latin scholarship.

Its twin, the most piss-poor etymology in Isidore (17.4.10), on the other hand, is very likely his very own (bungling a note garbled from the ancient commentary on Virgil's *Aeneid*): *pisum, quod eo pensabatur aliquid auri minutum. nam pis aurum dicitur* ('**Pea**: because a peace of gold dust used to pan by the **peand**'. For **peace of gold** is so called'). So the apparatus criticus in Lindsay (1911a) 2: 232: '*nam Pisaurum dicitur quod illic aurum pensatum est* ('For {the Italian town Pisaurum} **Peacedor** is so called because that was where **or** was pead over by the **peand**') Servius *ad Aen.* 6.825. *Nugatur Isidorus*', and the admission in Lindsay (1911b) 44, 'Isidore seems to have been at times capable of appalling mistakes, the worst being the oft-quoted "nam pis aurum dicitur"'. It bears pondering that these 2 glistening beauties are, for all that, as like as 2 peas in a pot.

² The film *Sylvia* (Christine Jeffs, 2003/4) makes damn sure you can't miss the *Roger* on the desk when Paltrow/Plath first sits down to try, and fail, to compose.

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Preface

This is a book about using a work of reference. And it is a book about facing embarrassment. (So the pair of epigraphs above.)³ A book about learning, about teaching and learning, and about learning about them. The *Etymologiae siue Origines* of St Isidore is a blessing for anyone involved or interested in pondering the Latin language and the drive of Roman (Graeco-Roman) culture. It amounts to a panoramic presentation of the terminology from which that world was construed and constructed, and hence a compelling attempt to systematize the conceptual archive of Roman memory. For Christendom, this monument to the power of book culture consecrates an account of one world created in terms of the Hebrew-Greek-and-Roman trinity of languages whose words bear the single truth of God's Creation. Every page organizes a series of explanations and explications into a verbal vision in its given place within the larger scheme of existence. The whole educates, informs and orients the reader to seize the workings of the world through absorption of the workings of language.

This foundational encyclopaedia is also a monument to efficient organization of data for the purposes of consultation. Book culture has made it possible to produce and use such books without reading them. The same information technology, of indexing, heading, and paragraphing, that permits the panoramic compilation to function as a work of reference also occludes the design values and perspectives written into the programming of the items for instant accessibility. As I shall begin by suggesting, *Roget's Thesaurus* makes a useful contemporary point of comparison. Don't we all blush to realize we rely (dote) on a book without respecting it – without troubling to read it, or about it? A book that gets us where we want to go, without detaining us beyond the moment. Ever an adjunct to some other purpose to hand. Surely we *abuse* the reference work when we use it?

Like *Roget*, Isidore's manual of Latinity is prefaced with preliminary self-declaration. It fronts up to us in 2 divergent directions. In Part I, I shall first take note of the orientation provided, and then explain how the indexing system delivers the goods. For we are given a hefty if engagingly oblique steer towards the authorized interpretation of the *Etymologiae* before we are

³ I want to thank John Moles and the Newcastle Literature Seminar for encouraging this project at first blush. (Cringe.) Carlotta Dionisotti and Malcolm Willcock, too, for lessons in Lindsayian glossology and metrics; Stephen Hinds and Rosamond McKitterick for their expert advice; Helen Carron, Librarian, Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and Karen Henderson for providing the figures. And Michael Sharp, plus the translating team, for permitting me to read Barney, Lewis, Beach, and Berghof (2006) before publication. Both these books were supremely fortunate in having Muriel Hall for their copy-editor. Her tireless vigilance saved me from so much embarrassment, and you from no end of nonsense.

Part I re-tools 'Isidore tells the truth of language: *Etymologiae siue Origines*', in König and Whitmarsh (2006).

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handed the depersonalized mechanism of an analytic directory for locating desiderated information without delay or diversionary distraction. In Part II, which occupies the bulk of the volume, I shall present a serial reading through the *Etymologiae*, attending to the exegetical sequencing and processing of the topics into a cumulative cosmography. On the one hand, I mean to show that Isidore does package his stack of entries into a reflexive and processual narrative. Something you could read out to yourself and/or others, and expect to shape thinking in the process. On the other, I plan not merely to read through, but to read *through* this specialist Latin primer – to reveal the core of teaching that it inculcates as it passes rhythmically from each block and category and dimension to the next. In a word, I shall back the thesis that the truth in learning is to be found in the successive generation of analytic operations and the acquisition of replicable strategies of reasoning. From this perspective, Isidore's *opus magnum* creates an intelligible world to read. Teaches how book culture produces resources for thinking how to think to some purpose.⁴ Models a truly privileged literacy through Latinity.⁵

NB **Words etymologized and etymologizing are highlighted in bold type.** Translating etymologies levels distinctions between evident and fantastic, credible and absurd, agreed and beyond countenancing. Wherever feasible, I have entered boldly into the spirit of things: contrast the full translations into English by Barney, Lewis, Beach, and Berghof (2006), and into Spanish by Oroz Reta and Marcos Casquero (2000³).

The symbols '→' and '<-' indicate *either* direction of etymological derivation, *or* order of succession in a sequence.

All translation is mine. Transl(ite)r(ation) from Greek appears within angle brackets: <Greek>.

Information supplied by me to help with etymologies, etc., appears within breech brackets: {explanation}.

Remarks concerning the text, especially material from or about the engrossed version of the *Etymologiae* that constitutes the 'Spanish' textual tradition, appear within square brackets: [Spanish].

⁴ *Litterae thesaurum est et artificium numquam moritur*, as one fictional subliterate almost knew to say ('Letters in the thesaurus? Gold in store, Art that never dies', i.e. the alphabet lays golden eggs: elementary teaching is a trade forever in demand, Petronius, *Satyrica* 46.8). Naturally, the notion of a knowledge 'store' was dramatized and (of course) fetishized: e.g. Henderson (2002) 124–5 on Columella's housewife (71 n.83), Gunderson (forthcoming) on Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, *Praefatio* 2, *quasi quoddam litterarum penus* (and *ibid.* 4.1).

⁵ For my part I blush to think of Karen Frascatore's copy of *Roget*, which I long ago scorned – but long since broke the spine. (This book is for that book.) The more I think about teaching – about learning, the better I realize I never gave it a 2nd or second's thought. Did anyone?