The “Happy Slave” Narrative and Classics Pedagogy: A Verbal and Visual Analysis of Beginning Greek and Latin Textbooks

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This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Classical Journal by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.
Abstract: In Greek and Latin textbooks, verbal and visual discourses function together to construe Greco-Roman systems of enslavement. This article is a survey of the words and images of enslavement in five popular Greek and Latin textbooks and includes sample lessons for educators to apply in their own classroom. Based on the theories and methodologies of multicultural education and systemic functional linguistics, the findings illustrate how the linguistic resources of appraisal (feelings and character) and transitivity (agency and action) function to sanitize and normalize enslavement. The accompanying comparative analysis to 19th-century American discourses on enslavement to demonstrate how the use of these linguistic resources are consistent across time and context. Therefore, although systems of enslavement in the Greco-Roman world were not race-based, the presentation of enslavement in Greek and Latin textbooks today engages in racist discourses that permeate the American education system.

Keywords: racism, antiracism, pedagogy, Greek, Latin, Classics, educational linguistics, systemic functional linguistics, discourse analysis, appraisal, transitivity, critical language awareness
One afternoon in June of 2017, I was sitting in a small tutoring room next to a large south-facing window framing a view of blossoming trees. I was preparing for a tutoring session with a student in our intensive Ancient Greek course when I came across the following statement on slavery in the textbook *Athenaze: An Introduction to Ancient Greek*: “In the country, the slaves of farmers usually lived and ate with their masters. Aristophanes’ comedies depict them as lively and cheeky characters, by no means downtrodden.” I was struck by the characterization of enslaved people as “lively and cheeky characters, by no means downtrodden” and wondered why Aristophanes, a comic playwright in the late 5th and early 4th centuries BCE, who famously parodied philosophers and joked about bodily functions, was being used as a reliable source on the experiences and emotional life of enslaved people in the ancient world. I then began examining the relationship between slavery and comedy in Greek and Latin textbooks and in the process unveiled a complex web of

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111 Balme and Lawall (2017, p. 20). The paragraph ends with the statement “We have given Dicaeopolis one slave, named Xanthias, a typical slave name meaning “fair-haired.” The names Dicaeopolis and Xanthias in *Athenaze* come from the names of an enslaver and his captive in *Acharnians*, a comedy by Aristophanes (Balme and Lawall (2017, p. 8)). The borrowing of names is another way ancient comedy has influenced the content of beginning Greek and Latin textbooks.

112 I use ‘enslaved’ and ‘captive’ instead of ‘slave’ as well as ‘enslaver’ instead of ‘slave master’ or ‘slave owner’ and ‘human trafficker’ instead of ‘slave trader.’ For more information on this language choice and why it matters see Foreman et al. (2019).
cross-linguistic and cross-cultural discourses on slavery, comedy, and race in American education culminating in the “happy slave” narrative.\textsuperscript{113}

The “happy slave” narrative is the systemic portrayal of enslaved people as joyous recipients in the institution of slavery. This storyline is reproduced and disseminated across texts, images, performances, and any form of communication that characterizes enslaved people as lucky, content, and even willing participants in enslavement. The “happy slave” narrative often emphasizes the quality of provisions and lodgings for enslaved people along with their loyalty to and close friendship with their enslavers. This narrative can be found in textbooks, novels, children’s books, posters, theatre, film, television, and countless other media in America including recent publications and productions.

Alarmingly, the metanarrative of the “happy slave” pervades Greek and Latin textbooks. The purpose of this paper is to help Classics instructors and students identify, articulate, discuss, and combat issues related to the presentation of slavery and the “happy slave” narrative. The tools and classroom activities provided are based in systemic functional linguistics (SFL), an educational linguistics theory and methodology. I explore how Classics textbooks reinforce the longstanding grammar and function of the “happy slave” narrative in word choice, syntax, and visual materials. This analysis also draws attention to the many ways these textbooks, although ancient slavery was not race-based like American slavery, directly and indirectly engage with the racist language and imagery of 19th-century pro-slavery American literature, propaganda, and performance and, as a result, propagate racism.

SLAVERY AND ANCIENT COMEDY IN CLASSICAL LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS

In Greek and Latin literature, slavery and comedy have a particular relationship with one another. Enslaved people are central characters in ancient comedy. They are often depicted as “clever” and, at the same time, frequently threatened with or experience violence.\textsuperscript{114} Both the threat of violence and violence itself are tools for eliciting laughter. Sometimes enslaved people are beaten on stage but many times

\textsuperscript{113} Aspects of this paper were presented at Boston College at ISFC 2018, University of Rhode Island at CANE 2018, University of Georgia at JOLLE 2018, and in San Diego at SCS 2019. My thanks to all attendees, colleagues, and friends for the helpful feedback. Special thanks to NECJ reviewers, Ruth Harman, and Denise McCoskey for their valuable suggestions.

\textsuperscript{114} Richlin (2017); Gold (2014).
the beatings are implied. In Plautus’ *Pseudolus*, Ballio hits one enslaved person more for showing pain during a beating; in *Poenulus*, Agorastocles attacks a person he enslaved for showing interest in the woman Agorastocles desired; in *Aulularia*, Euclio beats an elderly enslaved female in addition to others. Although beatings were likely a common part of the daily lives of many enslaved people, comic playwrights did not use characterizations of enslaved people to reflect the experiences of captives but rather to communicate ‘humorously’ to the audience messages about authority, power, and order in society. The violence and metaphoric intentions in ancient comedies make it all the more puzzling why textbook authors would cite playwrights like Aristophanes as objective sources on ‘happiness’ among captives.

Many first year Greek and Latin texts use adaptations of these ancient comedies to tell stories of enslavers beating the people they held captive, including the modified version of Plautus’ comedy *Aulularia* in the *Reading Latin* series. After Euclio discovers a treasure in his home, he calls for Staphyla and begins beating her:

**STAPHYLA**

quare me verberas, domine?

Why are you beating me, master?

**EUCLIO**

tace! te verbero quod mala es, Staphyla.

Silence! I beat you because you are awful, Staphyla.

**STAPHYLA**

egone mala? cur mala sum? misera sum, sed non mala, domine.

I am awful? Why am I awful? I am unfortunate, but not awful, master.

(secum cogitat) sed tu insanus es!

(She thinks to herself) but you are insane!

Staphyla responds to being attacked by asking him why and, in an aside, she ‘thinks to herself’ that Euclio is insane. Her comment on her enslaver’s mental stability is meant to be funny. Humor swiftly following violence links these actions and is a

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1 For violence against enslaved people in Roman comedy, see Richlin (2017, pp. 90–104) and Stewart (2012). In Greek comedy, see Hunt (2016, pp. 136–158).
2 Richlin (2017).
3 McCarthy (2000).
4 Jones and Sidwell (2012, pp. 8–9).
common feature of ancient comedy. In addition, throughout the story small images of enslaved people often appear in humorous situations like the enslaved Xanthias stealing a cake.

Plautus’ *Aulularia* is the first story that students read in the *Reading Latin* series and the text offers no historical context for ancient slavery or the role of enslaved people in ancient comedy.\(^5\) Without historical context, the instructor is evermore responsible for supplementing the material. As Barbara Gold contends, discussing intense and sensitive topics like slavery in ancient contexts can be distancing and not seem “real” to students because of the millennia of time between those experiences and the modern day. She also argues that White students may detach further because they think “this is not about me.”\(^6\) To combat this disassociation, Gold plans to provide more historical background in the future and draw comparisons between Roman slavery and American slavery. However, even when such historical context is attempted, many efforts fall short as the next section demonstrates.

**American Slavery in Classical Language Textbooks**

In the first edition of *Athenaze*, the authors state:

> On the whole, it seems fair to say that slavery was less cruel and degrading in Greece than one would expect and that in an economy that did not have the benefit of machines society could hardly have functioned without it. One might also remember that there were over four million slaves in the United States in 1860, where slavery was not abolished until 1865.\(^7\)

The passage claims that ancient slavery was less brutal, a natural part of the economy, and did not impact as many lives for as long as American slavery.\(^8\) However, ancient slavery is no exception to the inhumanity and violence of the institutions of slavery

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5 Jones and Sidwell (2012, pp. xiii-1). Other texts that do not include historical context on ancient slavery are *Wheelock’s Latin*, *Lingua Latina*, and *Alpha to Omega*.


8 The paragraph was removed by the second edition published in 2003. However, the impact of the earlier edition may continue because many learners do not have upgraded textbooks. See the report on the rising costs of textbooks by the US Public Interest Research Group (2014).
past and present worldwide, especially for those who worked in the silver mines.\(^9\) Furthermore, these misleading statistics do not take into account the difference in population size from the ancient world to 19th-century America and the relative proportions of enslaved people compared to enslavers.

Another comparison between ancient and American slavery can be found in the historical context section titled “Connecting with the Ancient World: Slavery in Ancient Rome” in *Latin for the New Millennium* which reads:

Ancient slavery was by no means identical to slavery in more recent periods and countries, such as colonial America. The Romans did not reduce a single race or culture to slavery; rather, slaves came from all over the ancient Mediterranean world and typically fell into servile status by capture in war.\(^{10}\)

This comparison emphasizes that Roman slavery was not race-based but instead determined by political and military circumstances, and assumes that the students understand American slavery was race-based. Without that assumption, the purpose of the statement “The Romans did not reduce a single race or culture to slavery” would not be clear. The effort made to distinguish the American institution of slavery from the ancient implies a concern among educators that students by transference may erroneously think that slavery in the ancient world was race-based as well (a misguided presupposition witnessed in my own classroom). The passages above and others like it indicate that any discussion of slavery (particularly in an American classroom) bears with it a subtext of race and racism in slavery. A similar statement is found in the *Cambridge Latin Course* which proclaims:

In the Roman empire, slavery was not based on racial prejudice, and color itself did not signify slavery or obstruct advancement. People usually became slaves as a result either of being taken prisoner in war or of being captured by pirates; the children of slaves were automatically born into slavery.\(^{11}\)

Acknowledging that American students bring with them an understanding of the

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9 Richlin (2017); Hunt (2016); DuBois (2014); Konstan (2013).
10 Minkova (2008, p. 51). The period of colonial America lasted from 1492 until 1763. Limiting the comparison strictly to colonial America raises questions about how one views the distance in time and ideology between modern American society and slave-era America.
11 Pope et al. (2015, p. 78).
link between slavery and racism as they approach their studies is important. But without greater critical discussion of the reason for this association, authors and instructors who emphasize that ancient Greek and Roman slavery was not race-based risk sending the message that race and racism should be understood separately from slavery in general. However, the link between racism and slavery likely remains embedded in students’ minds because of their education and experiences in America and elsewhere. Students may then be left with a discordant understanding of the relationship between racism and slavery.

One way to address the potential confusion in understanding the relationship between racism and slavery is for textbook authors and educators to explain to students that the earliest known recorded instance of racism can be found in the 15th century biography of Infante Henrique (1394–1460). Henrique, known as Prince Henry the Navigator, was a Portuguese human trafficker and the first leading figure to exclusively enslave African people. To justify the targeting of Africans, his biographer, Gomez Eanes de Zurara (1410–1474), compared Black people from Africa to “beasts” and classified them as inferior to White Europeans. Slavery therefore was instituted first and the social construction of race and racism arose later out of a desire to justify the targeted capturing of Black people. After comprehending this socially constructed association between racism and slavery, students will be better equipped to absorb and engage with the complex similarities and differences between ancient and modern slavery.

TEACHING SLAVERY IN AMERICAN CLASSICS CLASSROOM

Some instructors of Classics already make a discussion of race a clear part of classroom activities by having students draw comparisons between ancient and American slavery. Page DuBois describes one such lesson in which her undergraduate and graduate students compare ancient texts on slavery to the narratives of Black enslaved people in America. DuBois states that she is attempting to “undo white students’ imaginary sense that their skin color protects them from slavery, convince students that in antiquity slaves were often Greeks, not the heroic founders of a new nation, but rather the tortured, beaten, short-lived victims of their masters.” While having the voices of Black enslaved people in the classroom is powerful and should continue, one problem with her explanation for this approach to teaching

about slavery is that it centralizes the experiences and feelings of White people, an issue addressed in the Southern Poverty Law Center’s 2018 report on the teaching of slavery in America titled _Teaching Hard History: American Slavery_.

_Teaching Hard History: American Slavery_ details serious issues with the way slavery is taught in the American education system. This extensive report identifies seven key issues in the teaching of slavery in the American classroom including centralizing the White experience, not providing students with sufficient context, and the avoidance of connecting slavery to the underlying ideology, namely, White supremacy. Another key issue is the continued use of damaging pedagogy. For example, the study reveals disturbing common practices among educators including staging simulations. In her future courses on ancient comedy, in addition to providing more historical context, Barbara Gold considers having students reenact “scenes of beatings or threatened beatings” in order to make performances of enslavement vivid. However, as the Southern Poverty Law Center report explains, this teaching approach would be traumatizing for students and therefore should not be a part of Classics pedagogy.

Working toward improving Classics pedagogy in secondary education, there have been recent criticisms of the “happy slave” narrative in the form of op-eds on *Medium* and *Eidolon*. In his article, Erik Robinson brought to light a profound example of the “happy slave” narrative in the 5th edition of _Cambridge Latin Course_ where there is a drawing of two enslaved people smiling after beating away a dog that had violently attacked them. Below the image is the Latin phrase _servi erant laeti_ “the slaves were happy.” As Robinson explains:

Students love the characters in the Cambridge Latin Course, most notably Grumio, the somnolent kitchen slave who is depicted living a perfectly happy life in the Roman villa; there is no hint that Grumio could ever be subject to arbitrary beating, crucifixion, or torture. Grumio has developed something of a cult following among those who learned Latin with the CLC, yet I have never heard anyone ask about or acknowledge the fact that he was not living a life of his own choosing. While it is true that the

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14 Southern Poverty Law Center (2018).
15 In 2019, a 5th grade teacher in New Jersey was investigated for holding a mock slavery auction in her classroom where White students purchased Black students (Haller 2019).
17 Bostick (2018); Robinson (2017).
18 Pope et al. (2015, p. 71).
CLC presents a brief historical sketch about slavery in the ancient world, it is little more than a sanitized cultural note, and does little to dispel the impressions created by the story itself.\textsuperscript{19}

The sanitation and normalization of slavery as exemplified by Grumio in the \textit{Cambridge Latin Course} has allowed slavery to become a comfortable topic and to escape critical analysis where it is needed most. Dani Bostick explains that the “sanitized view of slavery can inadvertently reinforce misguided beliefs that slavery was an acceptable part of life in other periods of history.” And she goes on to advocate: “What we teach about slavery has implications far beyond our classroom. We have a responsibility to teach the difficult truth.”\textsuperscript{20} In January of 2018, \textit{The Endless Knot} podcast hosted by Mark Sundaram and Aven McMaster aired a two part series titled, “Race and Racism in Ancient and Medieval Studies.” When interviewed about what classicists can do to address racism in the field, Rebecca Futo Kennedy stated, “When we do classical reception, we need to stop thinking about theatre productions, and we need to start thinking about American education, American science, the use of Classics as not just a gatekeeper but also as an actual tool for creating the structures of racism in our country.”\textsuperscript{21}

In answer to these calls for a change in Classics curriculum from an educational perspective, the rest of this paper will be a demonstration of how Classics instructors can use systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to examine the “happy slave” narrative in the classroom. My work is guided by the following research questions: 1) What are the common linguistic features of the “happy slave” narrative? 2) In what context do these features appear in Greek and Latin textbooks? and 3) How do these features, particularly in the historical context sections, contribute to meaning-making in the context of slavery discourses in America?

**METHODOLOGY**

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is a sociolinguistic and educational theory and methodology that examines the grammar and function of discourses.\textsuperscript{22} SFL is a fitting approach for examining the “happy slave” narrative in Classics pedagogy because it is an educational toolbox meant to articulate and combat social injustices

\textsuperscript{19} Robinson (2017).
\textsuperscript{20} Bostick (2018).
\textsuperscript{21} Sundaram and McMaster (2018).
\textsuperscript{22} Halliday (2009); Halliday (2006); Halliday (2004); Martin and Rose (2003); Eggins (1994).
through language. Although not commonly used in classical language pedagogy yet, SFL has been practiced by scholars for decades to address the visual and verbal content of textbooks in other related fields such as history and political science. Two principles of SFL are featured in this paper: transitivity and appraisal. Simply put, transitivity refers to action words and appraisal refers to descriptive phrases and adjectives. By examining transitivity and appraisal in “happy slave” contexts, patterns in the actions and adjectives that compose the narrative can be identified across texts and the power of word choice that authors have when construing history and society can be more clearly understood.

An inquiry into action and agency in SFL is known as a transitivity analysis. A transitivity analysis can help one understand how a text is contributing to the “happy slave” narrative by bringing to the forefront the ways in which the discourse is presenting a positive interpersonal relationship between slaves and their enslavers. In her study on the construction of history genres, Coffin explains how the “temporal ordering of experience brings history into relationship with a widespread cultural practice of story-making whereby social experience is given a beginning, middle and end structure. Such a structure is the basis of the traditional literary narrative.” A transitivity analysis of historical context sections on slavery takes into account the grammatical elements and values the text as a story telling of social interactions between enslaved people and their enslavers. This type of examination seeks to answer the questions: Who did what to whom? When? What was the impact? In the classroom, identifying and examining the action and agency of participants through a transitivity analysis can help students understand how participants are positioned in relationship to one another and consider the problematic aspects related to the framing of these interpersonal interactions.

An appraisal analysis is the linguistic examination of expressions of feeling and character. Since the “happy slave” narrative relies in part on the presentation of positive feelings and a joyful disposition of enslaved people, an appraisal analysis is fitting. Appraisal analyses can help students comprehend the word choices that authors have when writing history and “control of the [appraisal] system contributes significantly both to the construction of an interpretation of the past and to the

23 Westerlund (2018); Avila et al. (2017); Coffin (2005); Abdou (2016); Coffin (1996); Eggins (1993); Rubino (1990).
24 Miller and Bayley (2016); Eggins (1994).
26 Martin and Rose (2003); Eggins (1994).
positioning of a reader to accept the interpretation.” In other words, if students understand the genres of history writing and the choices that authors can make when construing history, they will be better equipped to critically analyze the texts before them and recognize issues in rhetoric.

**DATA SET**

The data in this paper is taken from five beginning Greek and Latin textbooks commonly used at secondary and higher education institutions in America today: *Athenaze: An Introduction to Ancient Greek, Latin for the New Millennium, Ecce Romani, Cambridge Latin Course,* and *Reading Latin.* There is greater representation of Latin textbooks because Latin is more commonly taught than Greek at both the secondary and college level; emphasizing the instances of the “happy slave” narrative in Latin may be of greater use to most readers. This is not an exhaustive list of occurrences but rather a sample to demonstrate this pervasive narrative. The examples are thematically arranged: enslaved people as immigrants, enslaved people as imported goods, enslaved people as fed and sheltered, and enslaved people as happy and friendly.

**ENSLAVED PEOPLE AS IMMIGRANTS**

A simple transitivity analysis charting the agents and actions may bring to light and spark discussion of the embedded “happy slave” narrative in this statement from *Latin for the New Millennium*:

> Ancient slavery was by no means identical to slavery in more recent periods and countries, such as colonial America. The Romans did not reduce a single race or culture to slavery; rather, slaves came from all over the ancient Mediterranean world and typically fell into servile status by capture in war.”

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28 Balme and Lawall (2017); Pope et al. (2015); Jones and Sidwell (2012); Lawall (2009); Minkova (2008).
Transitivity of Enslaved People and Enslavers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENSLAVED PEOPLE</th>
<th>ENSLAVERS</th>
<th>INANIMATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transitivity</td>
<td>came from all over</td>
<td>did NOT reduce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(action):</td>
<td>fell into servile status</td>
<td>a single race or culture to slavery</td>
</tr>
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The assertion that “slaves came from all over the Mediterranean” positions enslaved people as the agents of the action and suggests that they had a choice in moving to Rome. When enslaved people are labeled immigrants, those responsible for their enslavement are not held accountable. Ben Carson, the Housing and Urban Development Secretary of the United States weighed in on the immigration debate in America:

That’s what America is about, a land of dreams and opportunity. There were other immigrants who came here in the bottom of slave ships, worked even longer, even harder for less. But they too had a dream that one day their sons, daughters, grandsons, granddaughters, great-grandsons, great-granddaughters, might pursue prosperity and happiness in this land.\(^\text{30}\)

Carson’s comments were widely criticized for labeling enslaved Africans as immigrants. In the same way, we should be critical of statements in Classics textbooks that suggest the enslaved characters immigrated or traveled or otherwise voluntarily chose their lot. Textbooks that position slaves as immigrants reinforce a false understanding of the experiences of enslaved people and feed into racist narratives in an American slavery context.

In *Latin for the New Millennium*, the statement ends by offering a bit of clarity and explaining that at least some enslaved people “fell into servile status by capture in war” and were not immigrants. However, this account sanitizes the experience by describing enslaved people as ‘falling’ into slavery. The responsible agent here is not expressly the Romans or the enslavers but rather the inanimate “capture.” In fact, the Romans are identified only for what they did NOT do, namely, they “did not reduce a single race or culture to slavery.” Therefore, war and the subsequent capture are responsible for enslavement and not the people doing the capturing.\(^\text{31}\) The entire

\(^\text{30}\) Stack (2017).

\(^\text{31}\) This example shows how the agent of an action does not have to be the subject of the sentence. If
section on slavery ends with: “The condition of slaves, however, improved somewhat as a result of laws passed during the early imperial period.” The description of slavery thus begins with what the Romans did not do in regard to slavery and ends with the measures they took to improve enslavement.

One reaction to these problematic statements might be to not assign these sections for students to read. This approach, however, may lead to students filling in the blanks themselves without an adequate understanding of slavery. Perhaps a particularly eager student will read the section on their own anyway and the “happy slave” narrative will be further entrenched. In other cases, the stereotypes students have read or seen elsewhere may carry on without contradiction. By not assigning the section in the hopes of avoiding pro-slavery sentiment, instructors are not combating the issue but rather betting on students to lack the initiative to read beyond what is expected of them (a detrimental gamble on multiple fronts). Instead of avoiding the problem, educators should lead classroom activities that engage students in discussion and bring about a better understanding of the issues.

In addition to charting, students may engage in critical thinking and conversation by working together or individually on coding a passage. For example, students could code the participants in bold to indicate the actions of the enslavers, underline the actions of enslaved people, and italicize objects that are agents: “The Romans did not reduce a single race or culture to slavery; rather, slaves came from all over the ancient Mediterranean world and typically fell into servile status by capture in war.” After coding the passage, students can discuss the impact of grammatical choice on their understanding of a situation. They can also consider other ways that interactions between human traffickers, enslavers, and the enslaved people could be framed. For example, this section could instead read:

Unlike American enslavement of Africans, enslaved people during the time of Roman rule were not subjugated based on the color of their skin. Romans captured men and women of many races (including both White and Black) whom they conquered in war. Romans forced captives into slavery, bringing them back to Rome and other provinces to serve Roman enslavers.

In this version, word choice and syntax illustrate greater agency on the part of human traffickers and enslavers, and more accurately depict the capture and involuntary oppression of slavery while also distinguishing race-based from non-race-based systems.

**ENSLAVED PEOPLE AS IMPORTED GOODS**

In *Latin for the New Millennium*, Minkova states: “White chalk on the feet indicated that the slave was imported” and “A tag around the neck gave the slave’s name, nationality, and described his character, a guarantee for the buyer that he was making a good purchase.”\(^{33}\) The language is that of economic exchange. Emphasizing the inanimate economic mechanism of slavery (and states’ rights in the case of the U.S.) is another common way of deflecting attention away the brutality of slavery. In the first book of the *Ecce Romani* series, one historical context section on ancient slavery is titled “The Slave Market.” Describing the experiences of enslaved Davus, the text states, “He felt pretty uncomfortable standing there like an exhibit at the cattle-market, but he put the best face on it, looking around challengingly at the bidders.”\(^{34}\) The authors make a direct comparison to animal food markets and, although they humanize Davus, they present him as a competitor on the stage desiring to be sought after.

There is also an emphasis on economy in discourses on slavery in America. In 2018, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported that only 8% of American students identify slavery as the cause of the Civil War. Instead, most students point to the economy and states’ rights as the causes of the war. However, the economy relied upon enslavement and Confederate generals themselves stated that the Civil War was fought over slavery.\(^{35}\) Linguistically diverting attention away from slavery by talking about the economy as a separate agent denies the violence against slaves and clouds the racism. This position also suggests that the economic systems such as capitalism which fueled the human trafficking are ideologically neutral. For a transitivity analysis of these types of passages, students can highlight each sentence that addresses the economy of slavery, identify the participants, and create a list, a chart, or simply discuss the agents and actions. To contextualize the economic language of slavery, a comparative analysis can be made between the textbook and other works like the speech of Alexander Stephens. A longer lesson, paper assignment, or class-

\(^{33}\) Minkova (2008, p. 51).

\(^{34}\) Lawall (2009, p. 37).

\(^{35}\) Stephens (1861).
room activity could include a reading of multiple texts about ancient societies and their economies of enslavement compared to the U.S. and its institution.

**ENSLAVED PEOPLE AS FED AND SHELTERED**

The following passage from the Greek text *Athenaze*: “In the country, the slaves of farmers usually lived and ate with their masters. Aristophanes’ comedies depict them as lively and cheeky characters, by no means downtrodden”⁶⁶ lends itself to both a transitivity and an appraisal analysis. The interpersonal interaction between the enslaved and their enslavers is that of eating and living together. The subsequent statement that enslaved people are “lively and cheeky...by no means downtrodden” are appraisals of the disposition the enslaved. Both the transitivity and appraisal work together to paint the “happy slave” narrative.

Food and shelter have often been cited as evidence of the comfort and contentment of enslaved people for centuries. In 2016, Bill O'Reilly responded to Michelle Obama’s comment about how her family now lives in a house built by enslaved Black people:

> Slaves that worked there were well-fed and had decent lodgings provided by the government, which stopped hiring slave labor in 1802. However, the feds did not forbid subcontractors from using slave labor. So, Michelle Obama is essentially correct in citing slaves as builders of the White House, but there were others working as well.⁷⁷

O'Reilly places emphasis on the positive support that enslaved people had by classifying them as being “well-fed” and having “decent lodgings provided by the government.” This positive presentation also occurs in depictions of enslaved people cooking food for others. A children’s book titled *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* by Ramin Ganeshram depicts enslaved people happily baking George Washington a birthday cake.⁸⁸ The illustration on the cover is an older enslaved Black male and a younger enslaved female in the kitchen smiling, almost at the viewer, as they mix the batter. The message in text and image is that the enslaved people whom George Washington owned were happy, loyal, and enjoyed their experience in the kitchen. Amid criticism, Scholastic stopped distribution of the text, citing the misrepresen-

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⁶⁶ Balme and Lawall (2017, p. 20).
⁷⁷ Victor (2016).
⁸⁸ Ganeshram (2016); Jackson (2016).
tation of slavery.

Another relationship between food, lodging, and happiness often distinguishes between enslaved people in the house and the field. *Latin for the New Millennium* holds “slaves who worked in the fields and mines might have existences no better than those endured by beasts of burden.” However, this division between ‘house slaves’ and ‘field slaves’ has been challenged by scholars for simplifying and glossing over the experiences for all enslaved people, including the rapes and violence endured by those forced to work in the house. In his criticism of the house/field binary discourse in American slavery contexts, Hasan Kwame Jeffries explains how the ‘house slave’ and ‘field slave’ divide oversimplifies the system of slavery and does not take into account the breadth of experiences including the type of forced labor, crops, the size of the land, location, gender, age, and origin (e.g. born in Africa or in America). For Jeffries, “Reducing the manifold experiences of enslaved African Americans to a simple binary might be good for making political points. But it obscures far more than it reveals.” This same observation can be applied to the misrepresentation and simplification of enslaved people’s experiences in the ancient world.

**ENSLAVED PEOPLE AS HAPPY AND FRIENDLY**

Another “happy slave” narrative is the expression of close friendships between enslaved people and their enslavers. From a transitivity perspective, the enslavers are agents who treat the enslaved people in captivity as friends and who allow for warm-hearted relationships. In *Latin for the New Millennium*, Minkova claims, “slaves might be treated much like personal friends.” She provides as an example the comic playwright Terence and his former enslaver: “Terence himself was a freed slave, who apparently enjoyed close ties to his master.” In *Ecce Romani*, the authors explain that “Davus enjoys a high position among Cornelius’ slaves and takes pride in his responsibilities. Of course he has the good fortune to work for a master who is quite humane by Roman standards.” While the authors do address violence against enslaved people, Davus does not appear to suffer such brutality. Davus’ central role in the text coupled with his experience as an enslaved person with a “benevolent master” risks implying to students that his storyline is representative of most enslaved people’s experiences. The prioritizing of “positive” experiences for enslaved people

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41 Minkova (2008, p. 52).
42 Lawall (2009, p. 75).
in non-fictional and fictional stories such as Terence and Davus deemphasizes and mitigates the systemic reality and atrocity of slavery by shifting focus away from the corrupt system and onto the perceived kindness and happiness of individuals. This narrative also sends the message that any “kind master” has substantial power to assuage the oppression of slavery.

As written records attest, there are cases in history when a formerly enslaved person recounts their experiences themselves and shares that they were not as brutalized as others. However, these same victims of slavery often make it clear that there exists no form of enslavement that could be preferred over freedom. Henry “Box” Brown (ca. 1815-1897), a Black man formerly enslaved in Richmond, Virginia, states in the preface of his freedom narrative:

The tale of my own sufferings is not one of great interest to those who delight to read of hair-breadth adventures, of *tragica* occurrences, and scenes of blood:--my life, even in slavery, has been in many respects comparatively comfortable. I have experienced a continuance of such kindness, as slaveholders have to bestow; but though my body has escaped the lash of the whip, my mind has groaned under tortures which I believe will never be related, because, language is inadequate to express them…

Brown spends six chapters recounting beatings and abuse perpetrated by enslavers and human traffickers on others including the sale of his pregnant wife and three children whom he never saw again. He then reflects, “My master treated me kindly but he still retained me in a state of slavery. His kindness however did not keep me from feeling the smart of this awful deprivation.” Seven months after losing his family, Brown nearly died when friends helped ship him to freedom in a small box for twenty-seven hours by wagon, railroad, steamboat, and ferry from Richmond to Philadelphia. Lived experiences like Brown’s stand in contrast to enslavers’ efforts and the efforts of textbook authors to communicate a world of peaceful and fair co-existence with enslaved people even under “kindly” circumstances.

Although a transitivity analysis can illustrate this aspect of the “happy slave” narrative, overt depictions of joy are especially fitting for appraisal analysis. To conduct appraisal analysis, a text must express the feelings or character of a subject. For instance, earlier the Latin phrase *servi erant laeti* “the slaves were happy” appeared.

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43 Brown (1851, pp. i-ii).
44 Brown (1851, p. 40).
45 Pope et al. (2015, p. 71).
Here the adjective “happy” is the element of appraisal as it expresses the emotion of the enslaved. Appraisal can also be found in “Aristophanes’ comedies depict them as lively and cheeky characters, by no means downtrodden.” In this case, the adverbs “lively,” “cheeky,” and the phrase “by no means downtrodden” are terms of appraisal because they describe the demeanor and character of enslaved people. In the classroom, students can chart or code appraisal elements and discuss their function and value much like the sample transitivity analysis.

Texts and images also work together to reinforce the “happy slave” narrative. In *Latin for the New Millennium*, the section on slavery titled “Connecting with the Ancient World: Slavery in Ancient Rome” features images of enslaved people laboring including the following Carthaginian mosaic.

2nd-century C.E. mosaic, Carthage

On the page to the right of the open book is the beginning of the excerpt on Roman comedy titled “Exploring Roman Comedy: Roman Productions and Modern Renditions.” The section on comedy features the comic mask below.

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46 Balme and Lawall (2017, p. 20).
The text accompanying the image includes the statement, “There were two holidays that gave ordinary people an opportunity for free entertainment at comedies, to laugh away their cares, and to identify with clever slaves who could outwit and out-talk their masters and bring a complex plot to a “happy ending.” 47 The juxtaposition of the layout in this textbook reinforces a relationship between slavery and humor and is emblematic of the presentation of slavery in Classics textbooks. Without correct contextualization of their actual experiences in the previous section on slavery, summarizing the characterization of enslaved people here as a source of entertainment and morale boost for “ordinary people” further distances the audience and thus the textbook user from the system of slavery and its viciousness. Both the lived experience and the comic performance of an enslaved person are dehumanized and conflated into a singular inanimate metaphor for power and powerlessness. The understanding of a brutal system of oppressing other humans with real consequences, pain, and agency is lost.

CLASSICS TEXTBOOKS AND THE RACISM OF AMERICA

Similar to the texts and images in Classics course books, verbal and visual elements
in American slavery contexts have worked together to reinforce the “happy slave” narrative for centuries. On stage, the “happy slave” narrative of 19th-century America was fortified with blackface minstrel shows. Minstrelsy was marketed as comic entertainment and often featured White men in blackface portraying dim-witted enslaved people singing and dancing in buffoonish style. In comparing minstrelsy to ancient comedy, Kathleen McCarthy observes that in both types of performances, “slaves were so debased that these creature comforts and simple pleasures [e.g. eating, dancing, singing] meant more to them than their freedom.” Image IV features “Jim Crow,” one of the most well-known blackface caricatures.

1832 playbill, Thomas D. Rice as Jim Crow, New York

Jim Crow was created and performed by a White man named Thomas D. “Daddy” Rice in the mid-1800s. Racist caricatures like Jim Crow were the windows through which White audiences watched what they understood to be in some capacity an authentic expression of Black people and culture. Although the nature of the performances as fictional may have been understood to some degree, the stereotyping of Black people as lazy, mentally deficient, and goofy by consumers and producers of these shows persisted outside the realm of theatre with very real consequences in education, housing, politics, and all aspects of society. For example, the discriminatory

“separate but equal” laws upheld by the 1896 Plessy vs Ferguson case were dubbed Jim Crow laws. In the 2018 music video for his hit song “This is America,” hip-hop artist Childish Gambino embodies the infamous Jim Crow movements illustrated above as he criticizes entertainment, social media, distraction, gun violence, racism, and the continued exploitation of Black people.

Despite widespread awareness of the racism and offensive stereotypes minstrelsy and blackface perpetuates, nearly 200 years after their initial rise in popularity, minstrel shows continue to appear in American entertainment and media. The 2010 Broadway production of Scottsboro Boys directed and choreographed by Susan Stroman drew criticism for its offensive inclusion of minstrelsy. Like the beatings of enslaved people in ancient comedy, a product of pain and suffering had become the producer of laughter and happiness for the audience. In 2018, NBC cancelled the Megan Kelly Today show because Kelly defended blackface Halloween costumes. And in 2019, two White female students at the University of Oklahoma were expelled from their sorority after they posted a Snapchat video of themselves in blackface making explicitly racist comments. With incidences like these still happening today, it is all the more imperative that the relationship between slavery, comedy, and race be thoroughly and appropriately contextualized in Classics classrooms. If not, textbook authors and instructors may reinforce racist discourse by relying on the equivalent of minstrel shows (i.e. ancient comedy) to teach students about the lived experiences of enslaved people in antiquity.

CONCLUSION

Over the centuries, permutations of “happy” enslaved people in texts, images, and performances fabricated a storyline with shared features that have transcended time and place. Although ancient slavery was not race-based like American slavery, the fact that Greek and Latin textbook authors are compelled to begin their historical explanation of slavery with statements that directly connect the two indicates that American slavery, race-based slavery, and thus race itself, particularly in an American classroom setting, are intricately woven together in students’ and teachers’ understanding of slavery as an institution no matter the context. If not responsibly
addressed, the socially constructed and damaging intersection between slavery, comedy, and race becomes further entrenched. On the complexity of racism in Classics, Yung In Chae states:

I’ve realized that the problems are bigger and thornier than I had ever imagined. I don’t know where the Gordian knot begins or ends. I certainly don’t know how to untie it. What I do know is this: whatever those solutions are, they’re going to be not progressive but radical. They’re going to fundamentally change what the field is and whom it’s for. Because the way to solve a Gordian knot is not by untangling it but by severing it completely.54

For my part, I enact solidarity pedagogy by developing systemic functional linguistic-based lessons for students. I aim to inspire instructors, textbook authors, and learners of all subjects to critically consider the content and context of any material they read. Finally, I strongly advocate for the reform of Classics textbooks and the increased use of antiracist Classics pedagogy to fight against these narratives. As teachers and students engage in activities and discussions about troubling presentations of slavery through discourse analysis, the hope is that critical thinking skills grow and begin to dismantle the centuries of desensitization to the violence and inhumanity of enslaving another human being.

54 Chae (2018).
Textbooks


Works Cited


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