

Latin

Mors Iabrochii

Coesper erat: tunc lubriciles ultravia circum
Urgebant gyros gimbiculosque tophi;
Moestenui visae borogovides ire meatu;
Et profugi gemitus exgrabuere rathae.

“O fuge Iabrochium, sanguis meus!
Ille recurvis Unguibus, estque avidis dentibus ille minax.
Ububae fuge cautus avis vim, gnate! Neque unquam
Faedarpax contra te frumiosus eat!”

Vorpali gladio juvenis succingitur: hostis
Manxumus ad medium quaeritur usque diem:
Jamque via fesso, sed plurima mente prementi,
Tumtumiae frondis suaserat umbra moram.

Consilia interdum stetit egnia mente revolvens:
At gravis in densa fronde susuffrus erat,
Spiculaque ex oculis jacentis flammae, tulscam
Per silvam venit burbur Iabrochii!

Vorpali, semel atque iterum collectus in ictum,
Persnucuit gladio persnucuitque puer:
Deinde galumphatus, spernens informe cadaver,
Horrendum monstri rettulit ipse caput.

“Victor Iabrochii, spoliis insignis opimis,
Rursus in amplexus, o radiose, meos!
O frabiose dies! Callo clamateque Calla!”
Vix potuit laetus chorticulare pater.

Coesper erat: tunc lubriciles ultravia circum
Urgebant gyros gimbiculosque tophi;
Moestenui visae borogovides ire meatu;
Et profugi gemitus exgrabuere rathae.

Augustus Vansittart

“Jabberwocky” in Latin: “Mors Iabrochii”

Carl F. Miller

Lewis Carroll enjoyed a lifelong fascination with Latin to the extent that it inspired his literary pseudonym, which resulted from Charles Lutwidge Dodgson rendering his middle and first names into Latin (Ludovicus and Carolus) and then Anglicizing them. So it is little surprise that Carroll’s own work has been a source of ongoing intrigue for Latinists, and no work more so than his iconic nonsense poem “Jabberwocky” from *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), which has been the source of a number of memorable Latin translations. Carroll’s uncle, Hassard Dodgson, released “Gaberbochus” in 1872, although it would not be published until its inclusion in *The Lewis Carroll Picture Book* in 1899. Hubert Digby Watson published the well-received “Jubavocus” in his 1937 *Jabberwocky Etc. (More English Rhymes with Latin Renderings)*. And Clive Harcourt Carruthers, in his 1968 full-length translation of *Through the Looking-Glass (Aliciae Per Speculum Transitus)*, produced a pair of distinct Latin translations of “Jabberwocky”: “Taetriferocias” and “Gabrobocchia” (the latter utilizing the rhymed accentuated style of Medieval Latin verse).

However, the most well-known Latin version of “Jabberwocky”—“Mors Iabrochii”—was translated less than three months after the publication of *Through the Looking-Glass* by Augustus Arthur Vansittart, a classical scholar who enjoyed a distinguished career as a fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge. (In fact, his translation of Carroll’s verse was first published on a pamphlet headed “Trinity College Lecture Room—March 1872.”) While originally intended only for private circulation as a translation model, it quickly became a notable poem in its own right. Carroll himself was both familiar with and complimentary of it; in his diary entry dated 3 April 1876, Carroll writes that he sent a copy of

“The Hunting of the Snark” to Vansittart in return for his Latin translation of “Jabberwocky.” In 1881 Oxford University Press printed an edition of “Mors Iabrochii” for limited distribution, and Vansittart’s poem would be the only translation of “Jabberwocky” (in any language) to appear in the posthumous 1898 collection, *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll*, assembled by Carroll’s nephew, Stuart Dodgson Collingwood.

Vansittart’s Latin translation of “Jabberwocky” has been almost universally praised for both its technical virtuosity and its fidelity to Carroll’s spirit of linguistic invention. While eschewing the rhyming verse structure of “Jabberwocky” (as classical Latin generally does not rhyme), “Mors Iabrochii” mirrors its English original in stanza structure, and while the title words are obviously metrically similar to “Jabberwocky,” the pronunciation of the Latin title also sounds surprisingly akin to the original English title—with the substantive “iabrochius” roughly translating as “projecting animal teeth” (based on its classical root usage by Lucilius). Vansittart incorporates a novel series of Latin portmanteaus in line with Carroll’s iconic nonsense terms, opening the poem with “coesper,” a synthesis of “coena” (“dinner”) and “vesper” (“evening”)—thus allowing “Coesper erat” to mimic “‘Twas brillig” both in spirit and in meaning. This is further evident in Vansittart’s translation of “slithy”, for which he uses “lubriciles”—a portmanteau of “lubricus” (“slimy”) and “graciles” (“slender”).

In addition to these prominent instances of fidelity to Carroll’s original verse, Vansittart demonstrates in “Mors Iabrochii” the clear objective for this to be a work of Latin verse in concert with classical literature—effectively invoking the signatures of others while creating his own distinct translation. Vansittart’s version borrows from the Latin literary canon (most notably Virgil) in multiple instances, from his use of the phrase “sanguis meus” (“my blood”)—taken verbatim from Anchises in the *Aeneid*—to his “spoliis insignis opimis” in the opening line of the penultimate stanza, which rearranges Virgil’s order of those words from the *Aeneid*’s description of Marcus Claudius Marcellus. Equally telling is Vansittart’s classical method of describing the boy’s brief sojourn in the third stanza, where the Latin used (“sed plurima mente prementi / Tumtumiae frondis suaserat umbra moram”) translates roughly as “but while his mind treads on many things / the shade of the branch of the Tumtum tree urges a delay.” The shade/shadow is in this case cast as an actor—and a forceful one at that—something not at all evident in Carroll’s original, a shift which owes much to the poem’s fidelity to classical Latin. In addition to the contemporary conflict within this description (as delay is most often cast in opposition to urgency, rather than in concert with), its style is strikingly reminiscent of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in which objects are often

active participants in the narrative.

Most unique in Vansittart's translation, though, is the title of the poem. While one could make the case that "Mors" was added simply to generate metric equivalency with the original title, it just as surely offers another clear objective to make this poem fit within the classical canon. The title "Mors Iabrochii" has a number of potential translations—most obviously "Death of [the] Jabberwock," but this may vary slightly depending on a few factors (including whether "Jabberwock" is the beast's name or its taxonomy). Vansittart's title could simply be a useful way to emphasize the gruesome outcome of the poem for the Jabberwock (as it is a poem about death) or it could be a thinly veiled homage to the mythological character Mors, the Roman personification of death who was used by virtually every Latin literary luminary (including Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, and Horace). However, it could also be a more subtle reason that marks this translation as a true classical exercise: Namely, that the poem is not about the Jabberwock, but rather about the boy, and that the title conveys a rite-of-passage narrative decidedly prominent in classical Latin literature, with the boy assuming hero status precisely because of his slaying of the monster. While there are any number of parallel Latin legends, perhaps the most influential is Ovid's treatment of Perseus and Medusa, in which Medusa is framed as the paradigmatic monster and Perseus sets out on a near-impossible task with his adamant sword to kill her. Perseus ultimately beheads the Gorgon and emerges as the hero of the narrative, much the same as the boy in "Jabberwocky" and specifically because of the slaying. Thus, in a move that varies from virtually every other translation (in any languages) of the title of "Jabberwocky," Vansittart emphasizes the role of death in the original text while simultaneously aligning the translation even more thoroughly with the Latin literary canon.

Beyond being the best-known Latin translation of Carroll's "Jabberwocky," Vansittart's "Mors Iabrochii" would establish an influential model for translating children's literature into Latin that is evident to this day. Rather than catering to amateur Latinists with a primary interest in children's literature, the Latin translation of children's literature has instead been the domain of a number of prominent classical and language scholars over the past 150 years—many of whom had no previous background in children's literature and verse. And despite its intended use for language learning, Vansittart's translation has subsequently often been viewed as either an esoteric academic exercise or a cultural curiosity. (Even its inclusion in Collingwood's edited collection can partly be attributed to the comic synthesis of nonsense verse in Latin.) Likewise, the contemporary commercial translation of children's literature into Latin is often done with

little interest in establishing an actual readership and more with an eye toward canonizing already popular works or generating novelty publicity—if not often sales.

In spite of this, Vansittart’s exquisite translation just as surely emphasizes the beauty, the utility, and the potential of translating children’s verse into Latin, while also offering a reminder of the serious academic interest by adults in Carroll’s verse. Vansittart did not produce “Mors Iabrochii” in a nostalgic homage to his childhood (he was forty-seven years old when *Through the Looking-Glass* was published) and its usage was specifically intended for the students and faculty of one of the most eminent colleges at Cambridge. This is a Latin translation of expert quality by a scholar of exceptional dexterity and integrity. Consequently, in a time of rebirth for classical language study and models of education, it is easy to envision “Mors Iabrochii” serving as a consequential testament to the ongoing significance of both Lewis Carroll’s verse and Latin scholarship.

Translations into Latin

- Carroll, Lewis. *The Diaries of Lewis Carroll, Vol. II*, edited by Roger Lancelyn Green, Oxford University Press, 1954.
- Carruthers, Clive Harcourt, translator. *Aliciae Per Speculum Transitus*. By Lewis Carroll, St. Martin’s Press, 1966.
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- Watson, Hubert Digby, translator. *Jabberwocky Etc. (More English Rhymes with Latin Renderings)*. Basil Blackwell, 1937.