We Latin teachers have much to be grateful for in the Cambridge Latin Course; for good reason it remains by far the most widely used Latin course book in UK schools. However the regular revisions it has been through have thrown up some issues. Admittedly, few perhaps will mourn the passing of the story in which Salvius painted the faces of Loquax and Anti-Loquax black and tried to sell them off as exotic African slaves at a huge profit; but one story in particular has been transformed from merely unlikely to quite preposterous. The authors seem to have struggled to make any sort of sense of it, yet for understandable reasons it has retained its place. I offer the following as a commentary on the astonishing adventures of Modestus in Stage 27.

Having been responsible for the mass prison breakout, Modestus and Strythio hide out in the granary as a way of eluding the centurion and the search party. In the previous version they hid under the granary, which they accessed by crawling into the narrow space under the floor; the barreum being built on stilts, as in the Lunt reconstruction, this all made perfect sense, though it might not be thought of as a particularly effective hiding-place. Now they hide in the granary, and in order to gain access they again crawl through the 'narrow entrance' (per aditum angustum). It should be noted that the most obvious way in, the door, is not a particularly narrow entrance. Presumably this door was locked - a sensible precaution with Modestus at large in the camp. So what 'narrow entrance' could possibly be meant? Although there is no mention of it in the textbook or teacher's commentary, they must have crawled in through the grain delivery hatch at the rear (like the one at Corbridge on Stane Street). They thus end up in one of the grain bins; the inside of the granary would certainly be searched by the centurion's men, but Modestus and Strythio could quite possibly bury themselves in the grain until the search party leaves. So far, the revision seems to be an improvement. But now the story takes a turn for the incredible, as Modestus complains after two days in the camp food store that he is starving to death!

Beneath the granary, it made perfect sense for Modestus to complain of being hungry, since the only food to be had was the grains of wheat that were too mouldy even for the mice. The prospect of a dinner party being held in such a cramped and wretched location was suitably ridiculous; low blood sugar levels would certainly help to explain the generally deluded state of both Modestus and Strythio. However, Modestus now hides inside the granary and complains of being hungry: as he puts it, there is grain everywhere, but he cannot eat any. Furthermore, it would be a highly unusual barreum that did not have, beside the grain for milling into flour, vast quantities of preserved meats, cheeses and the like hanging from the rafters. Modestus should be like a kid in a candy store; his reluctance to eat any of this cornucopia is unexpected, to say the least. We must assume that this is a special wheat-only granary and that Modestus has a gluten allergy. (Did the Romans ever suffer such problems?)

The starving and deluded Modestus now comes up with the idea of holding an impromptu dinner party in the granary. Strythio is to go and make the arrangements, including seeing the cook and getting some friends on board with wine and a lamp. This was always a little difficult to take seriously as a plan - men in hiding would not normally indulge in such attention-grabbing behaviour. And which cook were they going to see? There were no cooks in the army (except presumably for the legatus); men cooked their own food back in the barracks. Still, perhaps one of Modestus's barracks buddies acts unofficially as cook for their hut. This is not enough for Modestus, however, who also suggests that the dancing-girl Nigrida should be brought in from the village. A nice touch when they were underneath the granary - what sort of dancing could he have had in mind? Now that they are inside, the incongruity is of the less obviously amusing sort - how to smuggle a girl into camp from the village without
narrative could then be visualised without completely suspending disbelief. All that would be required would be a drawing of a suitable moment in the story featuring the granary and the entry point.

I may be accused of taking the whole episode far too seriously; the *miles gloriosus* motif is supposed to recall the rough-and-tumble of Roman stage farce rather than a realistic setting. The trouble is that it is a realistic setting, with Modestus and his friends clearly inhabiting the same world as Agricola, Salvius and Quintus. And the standard of the writing throughout the rest of the CLC is so overwhelmingly excellent that in nearly every case the sort of questions about the text that I have raised about Modestus can be explored to good effect. For example, I always find it delightful that it is Salvius who asks for the dancing bear at Cogidubnus’ banquet. This is highly fortuitous as far as Belimicus is concerned; is it just a lucky coincidence? Why would Salvius do this? Would a sophisticated Roman prefer a performing bear to dancing girls? Very unlikely. He stands motionless while the bear goes on a rampage - not so much out of cowardice, but out of guilt; and the next time we see Belimicus and Salvius together (Stage 24), Belimicus is already in Salvius’s pocket. Evidently, Belimicus had needed a stooge for his stunt not to be too obvious, and it had cost Salvius nothing to agree to do it; into the bargain he then has Belimicus in his debt, an advantage which he proceeds to exploit ruthlessly. None of this is even hinted at in the teacher’s book and may or may not have been intentional on the part of the authors, but it is a characteristic of such well-written story-telling that these psychological patterns all tie up so well. There are many such instances, and when one is teaching the same texts year after year, it is the ability of the stories to encourage and reward such interrogation that makes it a pleasure to return to them again and again. Sadly however this does not apply to the Modestus episode, and its psychological and narrative shortcomings only become more grating the more one reads them……

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