

INTRODUCTION

The history of classical education in Britain may be said to begin in the year 78, when the Roman governor Agricola, after the spectacular military successes with which his governorship began, took measures to bind his subjects more closely to Rome. He encouraged the Britons to adopt the Roman way of life, and provided a liberal education for the sons of the local chieftains, ‘so that those who had lately rejected the language of Rome now wished to acquire eloquence’. The words of Tacitus make it clear that the Britons were not only taught the Latin language; they were taught, as were the Romans themselves, to study literature in the school of the *grammaticus* and to practise the art of self-expression in the school of rhetoric.

Britain produced no Ausonius to celebrate her teachers, and evidence for the further history of education in Roman Britain is all but non-existent. None the less it is fitting that we should turn to the ancient world by way of prelude to this study, for it is there that we must seek the origins of the type of education we know as classical. Under the Roman Empire the established system of education was one based on the study and imitation of the best models of literature, one moreover in which a foreign language and literature, that of Greece, was regarded as having a claim on the schoolboy no less strong than that of his own language and literature.

The main function of the ancient *grammaticus* was to expound the poets. He would explain allusions and difficult words, expound the metre and insist on correct reading aloud. The Greek *grammaticus* would begin with Homer and proceed to the dramatists, Menander in particular; the Roman *grammaticus*, closely following the Greek example, concentrated on Virgil and on the Roman Menander, Terence. Sallust was read in the schools of the later Empire, but otherwise prose writers were generally ignored.

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Grammar in the modern sense of the word had a place in the ancient grammar-school course, but the part it played was somewhat different from that which it plays in modern classical teaching. It was not the means of acquiring a knowledge of the language, but part of a course in language and literature for those who could already read and write. The Roman did not have to learn his own language by means of the grammar book, and the same may be said of Greek too; the Greek world and the Roman were so closely intermingled that Greek was hardly a foreign language to the Roman.

Closely connected with the school of the *grammaticus* was that of the rhetorician, to which the boy passed after completing his grammar-school course. In theory the functions of the *grammaticus* and the rhetorician remained distinct, and the teaching of composition belonged to the latter, but in practice it was usual, at any rate in the Latin schools of Quintilian's day, for *grammatici* to prepare their pupils for the rhetoric school by starting them on the preliminary exercises known as *progymnasmata*. Once under the rhetoric master the boy would concentrate on learning the theory of rhetoric and practising declamation, and would emerge from his training a thorough master of words, able to express himself elegantly and eloquently on any theme.

The tradition of the Roman schools, though it survived faintly, was very much weakened in the Middle Ages. The idea of an education based on literature and rhetoric, on the lies of the poet and the vanities of the orator, came under heavy fire from the fathers of the Church, who preferred to take from paganism only what was useful, and to subordinate this to sacred learning. The seven liberal arts handed down by the encyclopaedists of later antiquity became the trivium and quadrivium of medieval education, and though the study of the poets might creep in under the head of grammar and rhetoric, the first two stages of the trivium, it was at most periods of the Middle Ages very much in the background. It showed signs of returning in the eleventh and

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twelfth centuries, but was once more thrust out by the rediscovery of Aristotle in the thirteenth century and the new interest thereby aroused in philosophy, moral and natural.

There was no lack of grammar schools in England of the later Middle Ages, and, though evidence about their curriculum is scanty, it appears that in them the schoolboy might read some Ovid and Virgil and even compose Latin verses. But the level of scholarship was low, the elegances of classical Latin were little appreciated and there was no Greek. The student soon put grammar behind him and proceeded to the disputations of the universities.

In the early sixteenth century a new spirit came into the English schools, the spirit of humanism. The humanists spurned as barbarous the utilitarian Latin of the Middle Ages, and cultivated the classical elegances of Cicero and the Augustan poets. The study of Latin meant for them the study of the classics and the reading and imitation of the best classical models. It was not enough to be able to speak and write Latin; the student must learn to speak and write the best Latin, and to do this he must undergo a course of reading the best authors. And as the Romans had studied the classics of Greece as well as those of their own literature, so the second great language of antiquity was added to the programme of school studies.

This change in education was a part of the movement we know as the Renaissance. The revival of learning involved not only the reading and study of the classics but also the attempt to recover the ancient way of life, and the ancient way of life included the educational methods of antiquity. Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, the full text of which was discovered by Poggio in 1416, became the acknowledged authority on education, and the ancient schools were revived with such modifications as changed conditions made necessary. The English grammar school as it was established in the sixteenth century, and continued for some three centuries after, was essentially the grammar school of the ancient world, or, to be

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more precise, a combination of the ancient schools of grammar and of rhetoric, with the former predominating. Its curriculum and methods were not very different from those of the Roman Empire, and an Etonian under Keate would have felt quite at home in the schools of the time of Quintilian or Ausonius.

The year 1509, in which St Paul's school was founded by Colet, may be taken as the date of the introduction of humanism to English education. During the preceding century there had been a number of individual humanists in England, men who had visited Italy and learnt from Italian scholars, who read the classics and collected manuscripts and who could write respectable classical Latin. But they had little effect on education. They were noblemen and churchmen and men of affairs, not teachers or educational reformers. The main impulse to reform in education came from Erasmus, who first visited England in 1499 and made the acquaintance of English humanists such as Colet, More, Grocyn and Linacre. Of all humanist scholars Erasmus devoted most thought to education, and not only to theory but also to details of curriculum and method; and he found in Colet one who was ready to put his ideas into practice. St Paul's owed much to Erasmus; he took a keen interest in the school, helped in the compiling of a grammar book for it and wrote his *De Copia* for use there. It was here too that for the first time it was specifically laid down that Greek was to be taught.

The humanist ideas embodied in St Paul's soon spread to other schools, whether old foundations such as Winchester and Eton or the numerous schools founded or refounded under the Tudors. A regular system of grammar-school education was established, was embodied in statutes and ordinances, and, aided by the multiplication of school-books which the invention of printing made possible, long outlived those who initiated this reform in education. The English tradition of classical education goes back to the grammar schools of the sixteenth century, and it is with them that we begin our survey.

CHAPTER I

THE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY
GRAMMAR SCHOOL

In 1518, a few years after the establishment of St Paul's school, Colet provided it with statutes.¹ The directions which he gave with regard to the curriculum are curious and a little puzzling. We might expect a kind of manifesto of humanism; what we find is in some respects out of keeping with what humanism normally involved and suggests that Colet's belief in the virtues of the classics was somewhat half-hearted.

As towchyng in this scole what shalbe taught of the Maisters and lernyd of the scolers it passith my wit to devyse and determyn in particuler but in generall to speke and sum what to saye my mynde, I wolde they were taught all way in good litterature both laten and greke, and goode auctors suych as have the veray Romaine eliquence joyned withe wisdome specially Cristyn auctours that wrote theyre wysdome with clene and chast laten other in verse or in prose. [He goes on to express the wish that after the Catechism in English and the Latin Accidence, the boys should read Erasmus's *Institutum Christiani Hominis* and his *Copia*.] And thenne other auctours Christian as lactancius prudentius and proba and sedulius and Juvencus and Baptista Mantuanus and suche other as shalbe tought convenyent and moste to purpose unto the true laten spech all barbary all corrupcion all laten adulterate which ignorant blynde folis brought into this worlde and with the same have distayned and poysenyd the olde laten spech and the varay Romaine tong which in the tyme of Tully and Salust and Virgill and Terence was usid, whiche also seint Jerome and seint ambrose and seint Austen and many hooly doctors lernyd in theyr tymes. I say that ffylthynesse and all such abusyon which the later blynde worlde brought in which more ratheyr may be callid blotterature thenne litterature I utterly abbanysh and Exclude oute of this scole and charge the Maisters that they teche all way that is the best and instruct the chyldren in greke and laten in Redyng unto them suych auctours that hathe with wisdome joyned the pure chaste eloquence.²

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While these directions show the true humanist scorn for unclassical Latin, they appear to propose that the authors studied in school should be not the recognised classics of the ancient world, but those Christian poets, whether belonging to late antiquity or to the period of revived classicism, who imitated their style. ‘No more deadly or irrational scheme could have been propounded’, is C. S. Lewis’s comment.¹ It is indeed so strange that Colet has been suspected of disingenuousness.² It is true that elsewhere he shows himself highly suspicious of pagan writings,³ but he had expressed admiration and approval of Erasmus’s *De Ratione Studii* (1511), in which it was proposed that the authors read in school should be Plautus and Terence, Virgil and Horace, Cicero, Caesar and Sallust. Moreover, in a letter to Erasmus of 1512 he refers to the criticisms of a certain bishop who had described St Paul’s as a house of idolatry, ‘because the poets are read there’; no doubt it was the pagan poets who gave offence, and Colet here shows no signs of uneasiness.⁴ There is in fact little doubt that the pagan authors formed the staple of the curriculum at St Paul’s from the beginning. William Lily, the first High Master, in the *Carmen de Moribus* prefixed to his Latin grammar, mentions Virgil, Terence and Cicero as the authors whom the schoolboy will read, and in the curriculum designed by Cardinal Wolsey in 1528 for his school at Ipswich, which is probably derived from St Paul’s, we find an exclusively pagan course of reading.⁵ In the third form Aesop and Terence are to be read, in the fourth Virgil, and in the fifth Cicero’s letters; the sixth form reads Sallust or Caesar, the seventh Horace’s *Epistles* and the *Metamorphoses* or *Fasti* of Ovid, while the eighth and highest form is to read ‘any ancient authors’.

Whether Colet’s statutes represent a genuine desire to christianise the grammar-school curriculum, or were merely designed to appease his critics, they had little influence on school practice, either at St Paul’s or elsewhere. Christian Latin poets were occasionally prescribed, probably in deference to Colet, in the statutes of other schools,⁶ but the only such author who seems to have been

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regularly used was Mantuanus, the ‘old Mantuan’ of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.¹ Grammar-school reading was in the main pagan, and the English schoolboy was brought up on the same classics as his counterpart in ancient Rome.

The foundation of grammar-school education was the Latin grammar. Among the modest but not unimportant services of the humanists to education was the rescuing of Latin grammar from the mystifications with which it had been surrounded in the Middle Ages, so that it might be a useful instrument for learning the language. A beginning in this direction was made by John Stanbridge and his pupil Richard Whittington,² but their work was superseded by that of Lily of St Paul’s. In the early years of Colet’s foundation Lily, with some help from Colet and Erasmus, compiled the grammar which became the standard text-book for the English schools. Henry VIII ordained in 1540 that it should be used throughout the kingdom, and the mandate was confirmed by Elizabeth I.

This old grammar book will probably suggest to many a dismal picture of a class of boys chanting ill-understood rules before a dull pedant armed with the birch. But by no means all Tudor schoolmasters were dull or pedantic. Roger Ascham makes much of his idea of teaching syntax through retranslation of Cicero instead of what he calls ‘the common waie used in common scholes, to read the Grammer alone by it selfe’,³ but his method is not very different from that advocated in the address to the reader prefixed, from 1546, to Lily’s Grammar, which must have had a considerable influence on school practice. Here it is suggested that after learning the declensions and conjugations, with numerous examples, so that they may ‘best understand and soonest conceive the Reason of the Rules’, the schoolboys should accompany the learning of syntax by the reading of ‘some pretty Book, wherein is contained not only the Eloquence of the Tongue, but also a good plain Lesson of Honesty and Godliness’. Sentences from this should be turned from an English version into the original

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Latin, and the rules of syntax learned as they arose in connection with these sentences.

In some sixteenth-century schools the boys were encouraged to teach one another grammar by ‘appositions’, that is by asking each other questions. The statutes of Bury St Edmund’s school lay down that half an hour before leaving school for dinner or supper the scholars should ask each other the inflections, cases, conjugations, tenses and moods, and a similar provision is found at Friars School, Bangor, whose statutes are closely copied from those of Bury, and at Harrow. In London grammatical disputations were conducted in public. The practice, which went back to the Middle Ages, was still in use at the end of the sixteenth century. Each year on the eve of St Bartholomew the boys of the City grammar schools went to the churchyard of St Bartholomew the Great, ‘where,’ says Stow, ‘upon a bank boarded about under a Tree, some one Scholar hath stepped up, and there hath apposed and answered, till he were by some better Scholar overcome and put down: And then the Overcomer taking the Place did like as the first’. When this practice came to an end the City schoolboys ‘did for a long Season disorderly in the open Street provoke one another with *Salve; Salve tu quoque. Placet tibi mecum disputare? Placet.* And so proceeding from this to Questions in Grammar, they usually fell from Words to Blows, with their Satchels full of Books, many times in so great Heaps, that they troubled the Streets and Passengers.’¹

From the grammar book the schoolboy passed to his first reading-books. These were of an improving character. That old favourite of the Middle Ages, the ‘Distichs of Cato’, a collection of maxims in verse, which was re-edited by Erasmus along with other moral maxims such as those of Publilius Syrus, was regularly used in the schools of the sixteenth century, and with it usually went the Fables of Aesop, in a Humanist Latin version.² These well-established works were supplemented by books of dialogues devised by humanist scholars to help the young to acquire a

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command of conversational Latin. Of these the most popular was Erasmus's *Colloquies*, first published in 1519, which was being used at Eton by 1528, and is attested for a number of schools after that date.¹ A similar work was the *Colloquies* of the famous Spanish scholar Vives, otherwise known as *Exercitatio Linguae Latinae*, first published in 1532.² Second only in popularity to the *Colloquies* of Erasmus were those of Maturin Cordier, or Corderius (1479–1563), which were in use at Westminster in the 1570's and had a long life in the grammar schools after that date. Religious instruction was conveyed in dialogue form in the *Colloquia Sacra* of Castalion (1545), which was used in a few schools in the second half of the sixteenth century.³ Latin poems of an improving nature prescribed for use in the lower forms include Lily's *Carmen de Moribus*, printed with his Latin grammar; Erasmus's *Christiani Hominis Institutum*, which, in view of its references to Catholic practice, presumably did not survive the Reformation; the elegiac poem *De Moribus in Mensa* of Sulpitius Verulanus (Sulpizio of Veroli) and that of Mancinus (Dominic Mancini) *De Quattuor Virtutibus* (1516).⁴

Among the classical authors to be read at school Erasmus had given first place to Terence as being the best author for teaching colloquial Latin.⁵ His usefulness for this purpose gave him a place in almost every grammar-school curriculum. As Wolsey put it in his directions for Ipswich school, 'of those authors who contribute much towards a pure, terse and finished conversational speech is any wittier than Aesop or more useful than Terence?' Each of these authors, he goes on, is by the very nature of his subject not unpleasing to the young. That the subject-matter of Terence was largely illicit love did not worry the educationalists of the Tudor period; indeed Erasmus thinks of his plays as providing lessons in philosophy, and in the statutes of one sixteenth-century school we find him included among those authors 'which may induce and teach them to vertue to godliness and to honest Behaviour'.⁶ Erasmus had suggested that some of Plautus's plays

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might be added to those of Terence, but in the English schools Terence was generally found sufficient.¹ At one school, Rivington in Lancashire, we find the *Adelphi* specified, but normally, we may surmise, the English schoolboy, like his Roman counterpart, began with the first play, the *Andria*, and in most cases perhaps this was the only play read.²

School reading was sometimes supplemented by the acting of the whole or part of a play. The Shrewsbury ordinances lay down that the first form, in this case the highest, ‘shall for exercise declame and plaie one acte of a comedie’, and there is a similar provision at the North Wales school of Ruthin. Where a whole play was acted it was normally done at Christmas. At Eton plays either Latin or English were performed at this season.³ At Sandwich there was a statutory provision that every Christmas, if the Master thought fit, a ‘comedy or tragedy of chaste matter’ in Latin was to be played. So too in the Westminster statutes we read:

That the boys may with greater profit spend the season of Christmas and become better accustomed to a proper delivery and pronunciation, we ordain that each year within twelve days after Christmas day, or later at the discretion of the Dean, the master and usher shall cause their pupils to perform in the hall, in private or public, a Latin comedy or tragedy, and the master of the choristers an English one. And if they do not each do this, those whose negligence is responsible for the omission shall be fined ten shillings.

The explicit nature of the statute was no doubt the reason why the Westminster Latin play survived when similar productions at other schools had fallen into disuse.⁴

From Terence the schoolboy passed on through Ovid to Virgil and Horace. Of Ovid’s works the *Metamorphoses* and *Tristia* were about equally popular; the former is found in Wolsey’s Ipswich curriculum of 1528, the latter not until the middle of the century. Other works of Ovid occasionally used in schools of this period are the *Epistolae* (*Heroides*), the *Fasti* and the *Letters from Pontus*.⁵