

Teaching Classics in English Schools, 1500-1840

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By

Matthew Adams

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For my mother and father

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ABBREVIATIONS

- ATS* Charles Hoole, *A New Discovery of the Old Art of Teaching Schoole, 1660*, ed. E. T. Campagnac (London, 1913).
- Carlisle Nicholas Carlisle, *A Concise Description of the Endowed Grammar Schools in England and Wales*, Vols. I and II (London, 1818).
- Clarke M. L. Clarke, *Classical Education in Britain 1500-1900* (Cambridge, 1959).
- ECD* A. F. Leach, *Educational Charters and Documents 598-1909* (Cambridge, 1911).
- EGS* Foster Watson, *The English Grammar Schools to 1660* (Cambridge, 1908).
- Simon Joan Simon, *Education and Society in Tudor England* (Cambridge, 1966).

INTRODUCTION

Isaac Williams, born in 1802, was sent at an early age to Harrow School where he was provided with the traditional classical education of his day. Years later he declared in his autobiography that “I took great delight in Latin exercises, especially Latin verse” and he found that “the great charm of my life at Harrow was with [verse] composition”. Indeed, such was his passion that he would compose verse themes in his head when lying in bed at night, writing them up in the morning before school. The Latin language was constantly in his mind, and

so much was I used even to think in Latin, that, when I had to write an English theme, which was rarely, I had to translate my ideas, which ran in Latin, into English.¹

Isaac Williams lived in an age which exalted the elegance, style and pretty cleverness that a facility in working with the Latin language might inspire. Latin (and Greek) was studied in the schools as a matter of course, but a measure of its importance might be considered by the ways in which it informed and infused society at large. It was widely accepted that an intimate association with the finest minds from antiquity could only improve pupil appreciation of taste, elegance and beauty of mind. As Edward Thring, headmaster of Uppingham School and founder of the Headmasters’ Conference, wrote:

Let the mind be educated in one noble subject. If this subject also embraces a wide field of knowledge, so much the better. The universal consent of many ages has found such a subject in the study of Latin and Greek literature.²

The Roman poet Horace was associated with taste and elegance and was particularly in vogue at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, when most fashionable gentlemen (and some ladies) could quote pages of the poet by heart.³ This was hardly surprising in an age when learning “without book” was a virtue of the school room. Pupils were expected to learn by heart for the following morning the passage which they had construed the day before. For centuries, English

schoolmasters demanded that their pupils should not translate the Latin authors, so much as construe or parse them. Essentially, this meant the dissection of each word, providing, for example, its gender, case and person, or tense, mood and person—translation into English played little part in the educational process in the sixteenth or even seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. Once a passage had been satisfactorily construed the next task was to learn it by heart, or “say without book”.⁴

Once acquired, the ability to learn something by heart is a relatively straightforward task. Learning by heart was an easy thing to teach and provided children with a store of classical quotations and a familiarity with poetry. In the early nineteenth century, as a thirteen year-old schoolboy at Winchester College, Thomas Arnold wrote home and told of rising at three o’clock in the morning for a week in order to learn to “say without book 3000 lines of Homer”, in the original Greek, and claimed already to have recited sixteen thousand lines of Latin. Charles Darwin, a few years older than Arnold and a pupil at Shrewsbury School, tells us that during morning chapel he used easily to learn forty or fifty lines of Homer in Greek for a test that day, only to have forgotten it forty-eight hours later.⁵ This book will examine the state of classical teaching in schools in England that allowed men like Williams, Arnold and Darwin to achieve so much in the classroom and to look back on their schooldays with fondness and relish for the Classics they learnt there. Williams’ expressions of delight in his autobiography at what he learnt at school are by no means unique, and examples of enthusiasm similar to his can be found throughout the pages of what follows.

There is a *caveat*, however, to these paeans of praise, for teachers of Classics in England over the previous five hundred years have not always found the journey to be as smooth as the words of Isaac Williams might suggest. One criticism of Latin and Greek in the nineteenth century was that construing, parsing and learning without book were as much a feature of a schoolboy’s education as they had been in the sixteenth century, and that teaching methodology had not progressed at all. Boys were prepared for their lessons by tutors and ushers, while actual lesson time was devoted to questioning and testing, not teaching. And parents were complaining that in the last year or two of their school careers sixth formers were merely repeating work they had already done and re-reading authors they had already read.⁶ As one Wykehamist commented of his schooldays: “the greatest pains were bestowed on Homer, Virgil and Horace, whose whole works (with a few omissions in the case of Horace) we read over twice or oftener while I was there”.⁷

Even before the sixteenth century there had been problems as to what should be taught to the young, for medieval moralists were as choosy as Renaissance educators in permitting what was to appear in the classroom. So often it has been the case that what is taught in schools is not what teachers want to teach, but rather what external forces think are the right things to be taught, what Grafton colourfully describes as the “select cuts, the choicest pieces of the ancient world”—which supports a theory that influences from without the classroom have ever affected what is to be taught in schools.⁸ Over the centuries Latin and Greek have been criticised as antiquated, irrelevant or immoral, for which reasons (or so many have thought) there should be no place given in the classrooms and school halls of England. John Bowdler, 1746-1823, of the family that edited Shakespeare, was not alone in objecting to Latin and Greek obscenity; and detractors such as William Dell in the 1650s could accuse exponents of the ancient languages of encouraging the study of heathenism and immorality among the young, drawing shocked attention to the “lies, fables, follies, vanities, whoredoms, lust, pride and revenge” of this despicable subject.⁹

Ovid was at least as controversial in the Middle Ages as he is today and his works have been heavily manipulated, edited, allegorised and expurgated since first they were written.¹⁰ Authors like Juvenal, Plautus, Terence and Aristophanes have for centuries been held at arm’s length on account of their potentially offensive content, tone and vulgar language: such was his disapprobation of the immorality contained within that Thomas Arnold could not bring himself to read Aristophanes until he was forty years of age; and he never read any Juvenal whatsoever.¹¹ Another intention of this book, therefore, is to look at the complaints of those who regarded an education in Latin and Greek throughout English schools as an introduction to immorality and profanity, and why they believed that this was so.

A large handful of English schools is mentioned in this work, but attention is paid especially to schools in the early years of the sixteenth century, whose importance to the development of classical education is writ large. This book will examine the foundation of St. Paul’s School, London, by John Colet, and recognises his role in establishing a school and curriculum which were to be copied by school founders in England for the next one hundred years. Winchester College and Eton College were more ancient schools, respectively founded 125 and 70 years earlier than St. Paul’s, but both were essentially medieval foundations operating on medieval educational methodology and principles, while St. Paul’s was the first school founded under the new monarch Henry VIII with explicitly humanist ideals, stated in its founding statutes. Magdalen College School,

Oxford, enjoyed remarkable humanist success at its foundation thirty years before the foundation of St. Paul's,¹² and its teachers were responsible for some excellent publications at the end of the fifteenth century. The influences of Magdalen College School and St. Paul's School were wide-reaching but the classical legacy of the latter lasted for a longer period of time than any other school in England, possibly before or since.

Each chapter of this book can be read as a self-contained unit, or as part of the united whole. Chapter One provides an essential background to appreciate later events, and briefly examines medieval education before the rebirth of learning, while Chapter Two deals with Colet's foundation, his humanist aims and his new curriculum, and with his conflicting humanist and religious wishes. The teaching of Latin grammar was a topic of debate in the early sixteenth century, and saw innovation in the methods of grammar teaching and conflict between teachers from Magdalen College School and St. Paul's, and Chapter Three will examine teaching methods employed in these schools and elsewhere. They provide a synthesis of classroom teaching in England, looking particularly at Latin speaking, *vulgaria* and *colloquia*.

Chapter Four looks at the introduction of Greek into English schools, and Chapter Five recognises that the brutality of some teachers so greatly affected public opinion that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the association of violence with the teaching of Classics helped precipitate demands for a reduction in Latin and Greek in the classroom. Chapter Six provides a synthesis of language composition taught in schools, and the compositional changes which began to occur, while Chapter Seven follows the complaints and criticism of the methodology of teaching Latin grammar which "is so long, tedious and preposterous that it breaks the spirits of the fine, tender, ingenious youths and makes them perfectly to hate learning".¹³ One reason for the survival of Classics at the end of the eighteenth century was that reform came from within the establishment, from the teachers themselves, and did not stem from state interference. Chapter Eight shows how the old curriculum was revived by outstanding teachers of genius, who consciously re-evaluated what was to be taught, and how. This was a phenomenal age for classical studies, and there are examples of some pedagogical brilliance in the classroom.

The end point for this book is 1840, nearly three hundred and fifty years after the foundation of St. Paul's School, when Thomas Arnold was at his prime in the classroom. Arnold was headmaster of Rugby School from 1827 to 1842, a man as significant in his day as Colet had been in his, and absolutely influential in transforming the way Classics was taught in English schools. Perhaps, too, what counted for many was that he

endeared himself to generations of schoolboys by abolishing compulsory verse composition at his school, the same verse composition that was such a delight to Isaac Williams at Harrow. The Rugby School of Thomas Arnold was one of the leading schools of the nineteenth century due to the commanding personality and effective teaching of its headmaster.¹⁴ Social, political and educational changes were to follow, but the age of Arnold was a privileged age of classical education in English schools and a suitable end point for my work.¹⁵

CHAPTER ONE

CONTEXT: SETTING THE SCENE

A medieval education

In AD 668 Pope Vitalian consecrated Theodore of Tarsus and sent him to England in the company of Abbot Hadrian to become Archbishop there in 669. Theodore and Hadrian sought to educate the English in the word of God,

and because...both men were exceedingly learned in sacred as well as in secular literature, they gathered a crowd of pupils, whose hearts were irrigated by the rivers of saving knowledge which flowed daily from their teachers.

The two men were accomplished linguists, their teaching was phenomenal and their pupils were inspired to worship and study the sacred literature. "A proof of this," says Bede, "is that even today there are still living some of their pupils who know the Latin and Greek languages just as well as their native tongue."¹⁶

After the departure of Rome from Britain and the rise of Christianity in its stead, education in England at least had been to a great extent associated with the Church. Bede himself makes mention of his own education and how, at the age of seven, he was sent by his family to the care of Abbot Benedict to be educated in the monastery of St. Peter and St. Paul at Wearmouth and Jarrow, "applying myself entirely to the study of the Scriptures and to...the daily task of singing in the church".¹⁷

Singing might be taught in specialist song schools which would also teach reading (generally the reading of plainsong), and which were open to members of the public as well as to novices. While monasteries in England might look to educate the young for a number of reasons, not least the need to maintain a supply of educated youth to promote Christianity, prior to the tenth century what teaching there was rarely existed as a profession

in its own right: rather, teaching was a religious duty, a work to be performed by monks, nuns or clerics, in churches and in monasteries where there existed sufficient quantities of texts and tracts (many of which were religious) and where the relatively scarce skills of reading and writing were maintained to a reasonably decent level. For the Church, the means of providing an education was a serious matter, for it was “particularly in the study of literature and the liberal arts that the commandments of God are revealed and declared”.¹⁸

Where education flourished in England, it tended to thrive more in those towns and cities which already possessed monasteries or cathedrals, since these “had some built-in advantages over other places: they brought together a numerous body of clergy, some of them learned; they necessarily supported a school of at least modest pretensions; [and] they generally had a monopoly of teaching in the city, or even over a wider area”.¹⁹ Where education foundered, decrees might come from the pope himself to urge bishops and archbishops to fulfil their duty and establish teachers and schools in suitable locations, as was the case in 826 when Pope Eugenius complained it had come to his notice that “in some places there can be found neither masters nor endowment for the teaching of literature”.²⁰

Schools provided study in elementary Latin along with Latin mass, singing (chanting) and reading and writing—the basic requirements of the clergy—and are confirmed by Bede’s own experiences, above.²¹ Sometimes the different activities were taught together in one place, sometimes they were separated into different schools. Alcuin, once headmaster of the Cathedral school at York, wrote in 796 to Eanbald II, the Archbishop of York (and Alcuin’s former pupil), recommending the separation of the grammar, song and writing schools there, with a particular schoolmaster for each class: “let there be separate divisions for those who read books, those who serve singing, and those who are assigned to the study of writing; and each class should have its own master.”²² As Nicholas Orme says, the separate grammar schools received greater status than the song schools as they demanded the harder teaching and learning of Latin grammar.²³

The Conquest of William of Normandy had a major influence on the re-routing of English education. As well as Latin, some elementary schools taught the English vernacular which hitherto had been gaining some status, and this experienced a disastrous collapse after 1066, as almost at a stroke the official language of the classroom was changed from English to French, and the vernacular lost weight as a language for teaching or for writing. The Normans reorganised religious houses

throughout the country and altered the manner of education which took place there. They read and wrote official and religious documents almost entirely in Latin, which had a deleterious effect on the writing of English; and by bringing in teachers from France they inevitably gave impetus to French speaking and the teaching of French, especially in aristocratic and courtly circles, as well as in the realms of education, the law and the Church.²⁴ In spite of all this, the Conquest did help revive English education to a degree; at this date the French cathedral and secular schools were far superior to those of the English, and even after William's reign it took another century or so for English schools to catch up with their continental peers.²⁵

Church services were always in Latin and so we might expect that with one priest as well as a clerk in every church who could—or should be able to—speak Latin, there were potentially two teachers per parish.²⁶ And as the eleventh and twelfth centuries saw a growth in the number of small parish churches being built across England, these in time set up their own small schools which helped to disperse education away from the larger monastic centres alone. Schools were increasingly scattered in villages, towns and cities throughout all parts of England, indicating a practice of scholastic education which must have been at least reasonably well spread across the country, in distribution if not in depth. Large numbers of elementary schools were established during these centuries, and this development in turn allowed for the growth of education at a more advanced level in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.²⁷ The increase in the number of elementary schools led to an increase in grammar schools which led to the development of universities: each stage pushed development to the next level, because able and ambitious students required further teaching. Their ambition, not their religion, was an impetus for intellectual advancement in these centuries.

Nevertheless, the clergy held a monopoly on teaching in these years and, although there was an official expectation that schooling of the young was done *gratis* and as a duty, the practice is that fees were charged for providing an education. Fees were also charged to those who wished to set themselves up as schoolmasters (as opposed to song masters) and who therefore needed to purchase a licence from the church or monastery to allow them to teach.²⁸ Evidence for this can be seen by frequent orders demanding an end to charging pupils for their education, or an end to charging teachers for a licence to teach. Thus Pope Alexander III wrote to the Bishop of Winchester in c.1160: “Make sure you prohibit anyone in your diocese from demanding money for a licence to teach or even from promising money.” And in 1179 the Lateran Council of Rome demanded

that nothing be exacted for a licence to teach, for “a cathedral church ought to provide a master with a benefice, that he may teach the clerks of the church and other poor persons *gratis*; and the seller of a licence to teach, or preventer of a fit person from teaching, is to be deprived of his benefice”.²⁹

Although the song schools were run by the clergy, the actual employment was usually hired out to a song master, but remained the jealously-guarded right of cathedrals who saw them as a method of making money.³⁰ Outside these formal schools there was likely to be other schooling available beyond that provided by the church, though doubtless this, too, had to be paid for. In addition to informal schools (i.e. those run by teachers without a licence), there must have been a number of such as scribes, or clerks, who took on private tutoring to supplement a meagre income; and the homes of the wealthy and noble would have encouraged and provided for lessons at home, delivered privately by tutors.

The larger medieval grammar schools would have had a hall for teaching, along with living rooms for a master and his pupils; perhaps the school would have also a *prepositus*, or a second master, though this would depend on the size of the establishment. These schools were essentially independent units out of which corporations or “universities” of masters later developed.³¹ Before the rise of universities it was possible for some teachers to attain high social status, though perhaps this was the exception rather than the rule: Boniface became Archbishop of Mainz, Tatwine became Archbishop of Canterbury, while Alcuin of York became an important figure throughout Europe.³²

From the end of the eleventh century, song schools in England began to disappear in the face of a progressively more literate society. Doubtless those educated privately at home would learn to read and write, but not to sing; and as increasing literacy forced the change, song schools fell out of favour. A growing population and a growth in wealth meant that more and more people were seeking education for themselves or for their children. The spread of literacy plus a rising demand for schooling led to gradual and now open challenges to any ecclesiastical hold on education, which might lead to acts of illegality or else legal cases brought to court.

On more than one occasion the Church, attempting to guard its rights and its purse, would lodge complaints against the increasing number of teachers—some of them clerical—who were caught teaching without a licence, as was the case at St. Martin’s School, Canterbury, at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Whenever the usher from Canterbury School visited in order to confirm the number of scholars was exactly as the licence permitted, the “extra” pupils used to hide out of sight. In this

way St. Martin's School always maintained the appearance of the correct number of thirteen pupils.³³ In 1367 the Archbishop of York reprimanded chaplains and clerks of that city who maintained their own schools in private houses and parish churches, and who were thereby undermining the cathedral's monopoly and one source of its revenue. His complaint was that song schools should not be kept in York by "chaplains, holy water carriers and many others of this kind" unless a licence had been granted by the cathedral precentor.³⁴

In London, in a bid to cope with the demand, masters might set themselves up to teach Latin grammar without seeking beforehand a licence from one of the three ancient foundations which held a monopoly in the city—the cathedral church of St. Paul's, the church of St. Mary-le-Bow and the royal free chapel of St. Martin's-le-Grand. In 1393 several schoolmasters were summoned before London's ecclesiastical courts on the charge of teaching without a licence, which reveals not only a surge in popular demands for education but also a growing willingness to risk the Church's wrath.³⁵ In 1395 the chapter of Lincoln Cathedral summoned the chaplain John Austin to demand from him why he kept a number of boys to whom he taught singing without first having obtained a licence from the master of the cathedral song school; and in 1408 one of the vicars-choral at Lincoln was fined for privately teaching three boys in the cathedral close.³⁶

The rapidly growing population of London in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries ensured that there was high demand for places in schools. In 1447 a petition was made to King Henry VI for the endowment of four more grammar schools within London itself, for consider "how few grammar schools there are these days and the great harm that is caused by this". The petition continued:

For where there is a great number of learners and few teachers, and all the learners are compelled to go to the same few teachers and to no one else, the schoolmasters grow rich in wealth and the learners grow poor in knowledge.³⁷

By the middle of the fifteenth century there was a clear need for educational change throughout the country and the private teachers, and those who had dared take on the power of the Church in delivering education, had prepared the way for the extraordinary changes that were to begin in the reign of Henry VIII. One of the greatest foundations of the new king's reign was to be that of St. Paul's School, London.

In these various ways laymen established an increasing stake in education, and the monopoly of teaching exercised by ancient ecclesiastical foundations had been broken well before the close of the [fifteenth] century. All this explains why John Colet could found, in place of the cathedral school which had for centuries dominated teaching in London, a public school placed squarely under the control of the leading city company.³⁸

Teaching and Learning

Whether they were taught in classes by members of the clergy, in licensed or unlicensed schools by independent teachers, or privately at home by individual tutors, children who began their elementary education would follow a similar pattern of teaching. They would first encounter the letters of the alphabet, before learning to read by following the Lord's Prayer in Latin—the Latin *Paternoster*, which was usually written below the alphabet in school hornbooks.³⁹ The hornbook was a wooden tablet containing a sheet on which was written the alphabet and the Lord's Prayer. This sheet was covered with a very thin, transparent layer of animal horn, as protection and to maintain its longevity. So, after mastering their alphabet children were put through their paces not by means of texts written in English, but rather in Latin, since the relative availability of religious texts and books, the vast majority of which were written in Latin, made common sense of such instruction.

This was a pattern familiar to any educated child throughout Europe. Many European city grammar schools had more or less the same study programme as those in England—indeed, grammar schools in the Netherlands were simply called “Latin schools”, and contained a programme of what was essentially a thorough grounding in Latin grammar, literature, writing and speech.⁴⁰ In France, young children were still being taught to read through the medium of Latin even as late as the seventeenth century, a date by which the vernacular had long held sway in English schools.⁴¹

Concomitant with learning to read was learning to sing, still entirely an oral tradition in church, and after the *Paternoster* came the psalms, which were chanted and learnt by heart, and later read from a psalter. Once pupils could read, or perhaps while they were learning to read, they would also be expected to learn their religious texts. In an age before printing the shortage of books meant learning by heart was a necessity, though doubtless children had been attuned to hearing these texts spoken or chanted for the first six or so years of their lives and knew many of them by heart even before learning to read and to memorise. The act of

teaching, in the elementary schools at any rate, was closely associated with church services and with participation in the mass. But children would be able to read some books in English for pleasure—especially, perhaps, girls who tended to be taught informally by their mothers at home, rather than in schools.⁴²

Young girls and boys might learn the basics of reading and writing together in shared elementary classes, which could be run by women and which probably also acted as day-nurseries. Thereafter girls tended to receive less formal education than boys, although “there were remarkably many opportunities for women to be educated, mainly outside the realm of official schools”.⁴³ Double houses for men and women were established in England during the seventh century, where girls, like boys at monasteries, might be offered as nuns in girlhood. Others may have entered nunneries when older, where abbesses or more likely nuns performed the duty of teaching.⁴⁴ Some wealthy fathers might even send their daughters abroad to provide a good education for their daughters: Bede tells how some Christian parents sent their daughters to France to be taught in nunneries there, in the 640s.⁴⁵

It was certainly possible, though not common, for girls to be educated to a very high level, confirmation of which comes with the example of the English nun Hugeburc and her *Hodoeporicon*.⁴⁶ Hugeburc was a young Anglo-Saxon nun living in Heidenheim, Germany, who took down the account of the life and travels of St. Willibald, c.700-786, Bishop of Eichstätt, an account which was dictated from his own mouth, probably about ten years before he died. The account was Willibald’s but the composition is very much Hugeburc’s.⁴⁷ One value of her *Hodoeporicon* (“travelogue”) lies in its being the only extant narrative of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the eighth century,⁴⁸ and Hugeburc’s “record is in fact the first travel narrative of an English pilgrim to Jerusalem, as it is the first original narrative of English travel to Italy”.⁴⁹ Hugeburc’s example shows that women could be educated to a very high level, but there were fewer opportunities available for girls than for boys.

Medieval schooling was founded on the “liberal arts” curriculum of Rome and involved the three disciplines of the *trivium*, namely grammar, logic and rhetoric, all of which could only be taught after initial instruction in elementary Latin and Latin grammar.⁵⁰ In the *trivium*, grammar was taught first as the foundation of learning, concerned with the knowledge of language and of speech; then logic (also known as dialectic), because all knowledge depends on reasoning and only reason can distinguish good from evil and discover the truth; and finally rhetoric, which lends substance to the ordering of words, though rhetoric was very much a third

subject after the other two. For school education in the Middle Ages, Latin was essentially identified with grammar above all, and for many years the teaching of grammar became the “sacred cow” of education.⁵¹ In practice, the teaching of logic and rhetoric dropped out of the medieval curriculum to be taught instead in university, and this allowed schools to focus their efforts more on the learning of grammar.

Latin was learnt not only from religious tracts, but also from secular texts and from oral exercises, for it was a vibrant and spoken language and, in the Middle Ages, still very much a living one. But it was also a foreign language, and even in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the books chosen to provide tuition were Roman grammars which had been written almost one thousand years earlier. The accepted text for many centuries was that of Aelius Donatus, often referred to in schools simply as “Donat”, a Roman rhetorician who had once taught St. Jerome. Donatus’ fourth century *Ars Grammatica* (“The Art of Grammar”) was employed as an elementary Latin grammar, and throughout the medieval period “his grammar was the most generally used elementary text book on the subject”.⁵² Donatus taught the forms of Latin words, or “accidence”, and he was “the most widely read Roman grammarian in post-Roman times”.⁵³

Donatus’ text was really divided into two separate works, the *Ars Minor* (which contained the elementary rules for writing Latin) and the *Ars Grammatica* (also known as the *Ars Maior*, the more advanced grammar book) which covered not only the use of language but also points of style, chiefly taken from Virgil.⁵⁴ Donatus was the accepted grammar book throughout much of northern Europe as well, where the *Ars Minor* remained the pre-eminent school text well into the sixteenth century, to such an extent that in the Netherlands it was reprinted 29 times in only 20 years, from 1500 to 1520.⁵⁵

After a basic mastery of the Latin grammar, pupils might progress from Donatus to the more advanced work of Priscian, another early grammarian, one who had taught at Constantinople in the early sixth century. His book *Institutiones Grammaticae* (“The Foundations of Grammar”), written shortly before his death c.526, was a painstakingly detailed treatise on Latin grammar, and “for over a thousand years Priscian’s work was regarded as the leading and authoritative text book on the subject” of Latin grammar.⁵⁶ It was a prose work on grammar (later grammar books tended to be written in verse) written in eighteen books and was used in England from at least 700, and by 800 Priscian had become a widely respected authority.⁵⁷ Books 1-16 of his *Institutiones* were a detailed examination and exposition of Latin accidence and were known in schools as the *Priscianus Maior* (“the Major Priscian”); while

Books 17-18 explored syntax, or the construction of a sentence, and were known as *Priscianus Minor* (“the Minor Priscian”), or *Priscianus de constructione* (“Priscian on the construction [of a sentence]”). Priscian taught syntax in a more accessible fashion than Donatus, a Roman who had been writing for Romans, as he had acquired his skills in Constantinople where “his interest in syntax was perhaps a result of the fact that most of his pupils were Greeks, and teaching them Latin was like teaching a foreign language”.⁵⁸

Since these two authors were as much in vogue on continental Europe as in England, even the Norman Conquest had little effect on their popularity in English schools. Donatus’ *Ars Minor* kept its place as the standard elementary textbook and Priscian remained important enough to be copied, edited and summarised.⁵⁹ Other important school texts used throughout England and Europe included the *Disticha* of Cato and the *Doctrinale* of the French grammarian Alexander de Villa Dei, writing at the end of the twelfth century.⁶⁰ The *Doctrinale* is written in hexameters (2,645 of them) and deals with accident, syntax, metre and style.⁶¹ The following hexameters explain the pluralisation of nouns:

*Pluralem numerum retinent aes atque metallum;
raro per reliqua dabitur plurale metalla.
aequor et unda, fretum, mare, melque, latex, aqua, vinum,
pocula, fons, flumen, fluvius pluralia servant,
stagna, lacus, amnes, limphae, limus, palus, imbres.
cetera pluralem reinent humentia raro.*⁶²

Cato’s *Disticha* is a collection of maxims and moral advice, written in hexameter verse couplets, purportedly by Cato himself, although the work was anonymous.⁶³ The distichs give the young learner advice, in Latin, on how he should lead his life:

*Iratu de re incerta contendere noli,
Impedit ira animum, ne possis cernere verum.*

*nec te conlaudes nec te culpaveris ipse:
Hoc faciunt stulti, quos gloria vexat inanis.*⁶⁴

Cato’s *Disticha* is one of several such poetic texts giving guidance on behaviour and advice on how to live, which were extremely popular throughout the medieval period and beyond. Other texts included the shorter *Stans Puer ad Mensam* (“Boy, standing at the table...”), which dealt with courtesy in general and table manners in particular. The poem was written by Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln from 1235 to 1253,

and was translated by John Lidgate into English for school use in the early fifteenth century. The poem's ninety-six lines list the sort of behaviour and manners boys should employ when they serve or even eat at the table of a noble house.⁶⁵ Advice and admonitions for the boys include warnings and other such maxims familiar until comparatively recently to generations of English school children. This example (lines 22-32) gives advice on how the boy should begin eating:

Pare clene thy nailes, thyn hands wasshe also [Clean your nails and wash
your hands]
To-fore mete, and whan thow dooest arise; [Before and after eating;]
Sitte in that place thow art assigned to; [Sit where you're told to;]
Praise nat to hye in no manner wise; [Don't rush;]
And til thow se afore the thy service, [Wait until you are served,]
Be nat to hasty on brede for to byte, [Don't nibble at the bread,]
Of gredynesse lest men wolde the endwyte. [Lest men call you greedy-
guts.]
Grennyng and mowes at the table eschowe; [Don't grin and make faces;]
Cry nat to lowed; kepe honestly silence; [Be quiet in a civil fashion;]
To enboce thy iowis with mete is nat diewe; [It is impolite to stuff your
jaws with food;]
With ful mowthe speke nat, lest thow do offence.⁶⁶ [Don't talk with your
mouth full.]

In village, town and city, lessons in schools developed from the hornbook to the primer of Latin prayers and from the psalter to lists of grammatical and syntactical rules, expounded orally and by heart, with the lessons taught out of grammars which had been in use for centuries, a pattern familiar both in this country and abroad. A medieval grammar school was essentially "a class in which elementary instruction was given in Donat and in the power of speaking Latin".⁶⁷

More advanced work would involve the study of Priscian and various Christian authors, written in Latin, as knowledge of Latin "was regarded not as an end in itself, but as a means towards the better understanding of the Bible".⁶⁸ Classical writers of Latin were respected as authorities on their areas of expertise, but often the medieval classroom saw these writers as unsuitable or immoral, and, if they were read in schools at all, they were simply the means to an end and were certainly not to be studied for their own sake. As the classical influence took hold in England at the end of the fifteenth century, it was the humanists who turned education and began to study classical texts for their style and content, just as much for their grammar and rhetoric.⁶⁹

The arrival of humanism

Educationalists of the Renaissance looked to the development of pupil behaviour, character and morality in humanist education, though perhaps this was only a minor shift from the moral code of the medievalists. William of Wykeham's founding precept for his new school at Winchester was *Manners Maketh Man*, revealing that a focus on "manners", or behaviour, lay at the very heart of the educational ideal.⁷⁰ While study of religion and the worship of God still occupied the fifteenth century classroom, there was an increasingly critical analysis of exactly how Holy Scripture might best be employed for education.

There was no trace of what was becoming known as the "new learning"—that is, the critical and historical study of the scriptures in the original texts and of patristic writers, as opposed to the old learning which confounded divinity with the pagan philosophies of the ancient world. The first acquaintance with this outlook came in 1497 when John Colet returned from Italy to lecture at Oxford on the Pauline epistles.⁷¹

At the same time as the ecclesiastical grip on education began to weaken, civic societies began to take a greater interest in the foundation of schools. Among these were the Merchant Taylors, Haberdashers, Skinners and Brewers, founding companies whose names reflect their commercial rather than religious interests and whose descendant companies even today still hold the management of many of the schools they founded.

By the end of the fifteenth century England was intellectually behind much of Europe, as evidenced by the fact that in 1500 there were only four printing presses in England compared with seventy-three in Italy (plus a Greek press in Milan) and fifty in Germany. English culture and literature were under-developed and perhaps few visited England from Europe—Petrarch, for example, made unfavourable comments about Britain and its inhabitants in a letter to Thomas Messanensis, in 1330.⁷² But it was during this period that England began to encounter a re-birth of learning in many spheres of public and private life, a Renaissance late to reach its shores, one which was to have a massive effect on what was to be taught in schools. After the fall of Byzantium in 1453, many refugee Byzantines, travelling via Crete and Venice, went to live in Rome: all these places grew into centres of learning where the refugees earned a living by teaching languages or by copying texts.

The centres of learning became beacons of light for burgeoning English scholarship, as numbers of scholars left home and travelled abroad, to Italy especially, to further their learning and gain acquaintance

with Greek.⁷³ William Grocyn travelled to Italy when past the age of 40, and spent two years there expressly and deliberately devoted to the study of Greek. He was back in Oxford by 1491 where he delivered lectures on Greek at the University. Thomas Linacre left Oxford for Italy in 1487, ostensibly travelling to Rome on a diplomatic mission for the Crown: but while abroad he studied Latin poetry under Poliziano and Greek under Chalcondyles in Florence, before moving to Rome where he lived for some years. A fellow-student of Linacre's was Grocyn's godson William Lily, who had been admitted to Magdalen College, Oxford in 1486, aged 17. Quite probably Lily was travelling in Italy alongside his godfather Grocyn, and he registered in the English Hospice at Rome in November 1489 with Thomas Linacre. He studied in Rome under Sulpicio and Pomponio Laeto. In 1493 John Colet was also to be found studying in Rome: he later gained a doctorate in theology from Oxford, in 1504.⁷⁴

On their return to England, to Oxford, Cambridge and London, these scholars carried with them fresh ideas about what was to be taught in schools, and how. Greek in particular began to exert its fascination by means of these extraordinary men of letters, and the international scholar Erasmus himself was deeply impressed (and perhaps surprised) by the Latin and Greek learning he found in England.⁷⁵ When Erasmus came to England in 1499, he met Grocyn, Linacre and More in London, and found a handful of intellectuals ready and about to take the educational world of England by storm.⁷⁶ He writes that

When I listen to Colet it seems to me that I am listening to Plato himself. Who could fail to be astonished at the universal scope of Grocyn's accomplishments? Could anything be more clever or profound or sophisticated than Linacre's mind? Did Nature ever create anything kinder, sweeter or more harmonious than the character of Thomas More? But why need I rehearse the list further? It is marvellous to see what an extensive and rich crop of ancient learning is springing up here in England.⁷⁷

A new interest in Latin and Greek from those who had travelled and studied abroad widened horizons, for themselves and for others, and Oxford benefited the most, where in *c.*1480 William Wainfleet provided places for thirty pupils and two masters of grammar at his new foundation of Magdalen College School.⁷⁸ The first headmaster there was John Ankwyll and his assistant was John Stanbridge. Together they taught grammar based on Italian methods—innovative, radical and exciting. William Horman and William Lily were pupils here: the former was afterwards headmaster of Eton firstly, then Winchester, while the latter became headmaster of St. Paul's School, London. Other pupils at