

Schoolboys and Schoolmasters on the Stage

As chapters one and three have shown, dialogues, used in schools as a way of teaching Latin (and other languages), could be seen as a primitive form of drama, requiring pupils to learn lines and act them out – not necessarily by means of a ‘performance’ but in order to utilise the conversational and colloquial style of the text with some degree of realism.

It is not a big step from dialogues to full-length drama and, indeed, drama was a major feature of Tudor school life. Its importance was emphasised by Richard Mulcaster, headmaster of Merchant Taylors’ School, in his 1581 treatise on education, in which he urged that schoolboys should be trained to ‘pronounce without booke, with that kind of action which the verie propertie of the subject requireth, orations and other declamatory arguments’.¹

William Malim, headmaster of Eton between 1561 and 1563, had held similar views – according to T.H. Vail Motter, in his book, *The School Drama in England*, ‘The art of acting, he wrote, is a trifling one, but when it comes to teaching the action of oratory and the gestures and movements of the body, nothing else accomplishes these aims to so high

1. Richard Mulcaster, *Positions Wherein those Primitive Circumstances be Examined, which are Necessary for the Training up of Children, either for skill in their booke, or health in their bodie* (London: T. Vautrollier, 1581).

a degree.² Westminster School, at its refounding in 1560, incorporated drama into its statutes, with the declaration that within twelve days of Christmas the scholars should perform one play in Latin and another in English.³

However, the growth of drama, both in schools and commercially, was not universally welcomed, and opposition came particularly from the Puritans, who objected to drama's basis in mimicry, which allowed people to be presented as or become that which they were not.⁴ Nonetheless, drama in schools was tolerated, just, with the clergyman John Northbrooke cautioning that comedies could be performed as long as they did not include 'ribaudrie and filthie termes and wordes', and that acting should be educational, and in Latin only.⁵

Later, and rather ironically, Ben Jonson (1572–1637) used Westminster, where he had been educated in the 1580s, as a target of savage criticism voiced by three gossips – Mirth, Tattle and Censure – in his 1625 play, *The Staple of News*.⁶ The gossips have been watching a play and, in their animated discussion after the first act, Mirth, referring to the play's author, reminds Tattle that a friend had once pointed out that: 'he was a profane Poet, and all his plays had Devils in them: that he kept School upon the Stage, could conjure there, above the School of Westminster'. Their criticisms are stronger after the third act, with Censure complaining that schoolmasters: 'make all their scholars play-boys! Is't not a fine sight, to see all our children made enterluders? Do we pay our money for this? We send them to learn their grammar, and their Terence, and they learn their play-books?'

The objection here, of course, is not on religious grounds, but rather on the grounds that boys were sent to school to be educated, rather than

2. T.H. Vail Motter, *The School Drama in England* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1929), p. 51.

3. See F.H. Forshall, *Westminster School, Past and Present* (Wyman & Sons, 1884), p. 468.

4. See, for example, J. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 96.

5. John Northbrooke, *A Treatise Wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine Playes or Enterludes with other idle pastimes etc. commonly used on the Sabboth day, are reprevd by the Authoritie of the word of God and auntient writers* (London: George Byshop, 1577[?]).

6. It was first published in 1631. The extracts here are taken from W. Gifford, *The Works of Ben Jonson, with Notes Critical and Explanatory, and a Biographical Memoir* (London: W. Bulmer & Co., 1816).

to learn to act. While Jonson was obviously being satirical, the text reflected a degree of public opinion that existed at the time.

Some of the dialogues of Aelfric and Aelfric Bata allowed pupils to play the role of adults outside school, in various trades and professions, as a way of preparing them for adulthood. In his dissertation, '*Ludi Magister: The Play of Tudor School and Stage*', Paul Sullivan suggests that the Tudor grammar school did a similar thing, providing 'an arena in which boys of widely different social origins experimented publicly with self-dramatisation as a preparation for – and a miming of – social advancement'.⁷ He goes on to point out that: 'Tudor schoolmasters used play, both competitive and dramatic, to teach children to perform coveted roles of authority in church, city, and state.'⁸

School drama played an important role in demonstrating a school's ability to transform schoolboys, from a variety of backgrounds, into gentlemen, able to attend university or achieve upward social mobility. The school play was as telling an advertisement as to a school's status as sports teams were to become in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, while schools were staging plays in the fifteenth, sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – both internally and for public performance – hardly any of these were actually about school, or school life.⁹ Schools, schoolboys and schoolmasters did, however, make occasional appearances in Tudor drama, in particular, in plays which were concerned with education and the family. Unlike the dialogues which had preceded them, which were written for use inside schools and therefore had a limited audience, plays were aimed at a much wider – public – audience, and plays concerning schools and education therefore have to be seen alongside the public perception of these issues, which in turn was governed by the changes in and the growth of education in the Tudor period.

7. Paul Vincent Sullivan, '*Ludi Magister: The Play of Tudor School and Stage*' (PhD dissertation, University of Texas, 2005), p. 7.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

9. The most famous companies of boy actors in the sixteenth century were the Children of the Chapel (later the Children of Blackfriars), a theatre company affiliated to the Chapel Royal, and Children of St Paul's, affiliated to the choir school at St Paul's Cathedral. They achieved a small degree of notoriety for the way they occasionally pressganged boys into joining. They performed for wealthy and influential audiences, although they were twice closed down, in the 1580s and then the early 1600s, when the dramas they were staging, which were often politically satirical, fell foul of censorship laws.

Schooling in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was subject to major upheavals, particularly the movement of the control of schools away from the Church to secular authorities, and the adoption of a more humanist curriculum. Education became, for many families, free or at least inexpensive – schools were established by means of endowments from wealthy benefactors, and schoolmasters were no longer obliged to charge fees. The huge growth in the number of schools meant that education became available to many more children, and to children from a wider cross-section of society.¹⁰

The nobility, however, remained largely untouched by this. Ursula Potter, in her thesis, ‘Pedagogy and Parenting in English Drama, 1560–1610’, suggests: Book learning was regarded by the elite as a sedentary occupation, which was potentially unhealthy and therefore not consonant with images of masculinity.¹¹ (Indeed, this attitude was reflected in some eighteenth-century school stories). The nobility and the gentry tended to limit the education of their sons to the arts of riding, hunting, shooting and so on, preparing them for their roles as inheritors of estates and protectors of their lands and, indeed, protectors of the country itself. This attitude to learning amongst the upper classes led to an ambivalence in the social status of many schoolmasters – treated with respect, because of their education and skills, amongst the lower and middle classes, but shunned by the aristocracy. As Ursula Potter puts it:

Underlying all the critical commentary on schoolmasters is a social paradox: schoolmasters were in status little different to servants, hired by parents or civic authorities, and as such they were entitled to little social prestige. By dint of their learning, however, which was presumed to be superior to that of the parents, they were entitled to a professional respect within the community.¹²

However, teachers of very young children – aged between four and eight – were often incompetent. Many taught in parish schools, dame schools, petty schools and other types of ‘elementary’ school, where education usually centred on learning the alphabet and reading, and

10. For a detailed study of education in this period, see Nicholas Orme, *English Schools in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1973).

11. Ursula Potter, ‘Pedagogy and Parenting in English Drama, 1560–1610’ (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2001), p. 23.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.

religious instruction. Teachers were poorly paid and often themselves poorly educated. In addition, many schools had only one schoolroom and one schoolmaster for pupils ranging in age from six to sixteen (or even older), and the difficulties of teaching such a range of ages are obvious. Schoolmasters also frequently had jurisdiction over their pupils outside school, thereby blurring the role that they shared with parents. Children could be expelled from school because of their behaviour outside it. This both cemented the authority of the schoolmaster within the community itself, while at the same time leading to tensions with parents.

Such tensions lay at the heart of several plays, written during the Tudor and Jacobean periods, which focus on the relations between school and parents, and the attitudes of parents to the schooling their children were being given. Some plays portrayed schools – and education – in a negative light, whereas others were more positive, and were an encouragement to learning. Other plays also took the opportunity to poke fun at school – and in particular schoolmasters, who were often portrayed as pompous and semi-literate buffoons, characters who either provided light relief or who were central to a plot which condemned verbosity and delusions of grandeur.¹³

One of the earliest stage dramas to touch on education was *The World and the Child* (*Mundus et Infans*), a morality play published by Wynkyn de Worde in 1522 (although it may have been performed as early as 1508).¹⁴ This is an allegorical play in which the World follows a man from birth to adulthood – the man is initially christened Child, then Wanton, Lust-and-Liking and Manhood, when he meets characters such as Conscience, Folly and Perseverance.

As Wanton, he declaims to the audience an element of childhood behaviour – the stealing of fruit – which harks back to Aelfric Bata, and which had vivid echoes in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth century school story:

and every day
When I to school shall take the way,

13. For a detailed discussion of drama and education in this period, see Darryll Grantley, *Wit's Pilgrimage: Drama and the Social Impact of Education in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

14. The play has been published several times. See, for example, W. Carew Hazlitt (ed.), *A Select Collection of Old English Plays* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1874), from which the extract here has been taken (volume 1, pp. 246–47).

Some good man's garden I will assay,
 Pears and plums to pluck.
 I can spy a sparrow's nest.
 I will not go to school but when me lest,
 For their beginneth a sorry feast
 When the master should lift my dock [i.e. when his
 schoolmaster prepares to beat him].¹⁵

A similar morality play was *The Play of Wit and Science*, written around 1540 by John Redford, a composer of early English keyboard music and vicar choral at St Paul's Cathedral. The play only survives in manuscript form and in modern reprints.¹⁶ In this play, each of the characters are personifications of human behaviour – e.g. Reason, Instruction, Wit, Diligence, Idleness etc. It was written for the choristers of St Paul's to perform at Court and, like many morality and allegorical dramas, portrays a journey, undertaken in this case by Wit, who gains understanding and knowledge on the way. Education is, of course, a central theme in Wit's journey, although, as with other allegorical plays, this is in a general sense rather than as a reference to school or institutional learning.

There is, however, one comic scene in which Ignorance is schooled by Idleness, who, possibly uniquely in the drama of the time, takes the role of a schoolmistress. Ignorance (whose character is spelt 'Ingnorance' in the manuscript, in order to match the contrived method by which he is taught his name) is not allowed to attend school by his mother, so Idleness sets out to teach him how to spell his name, breaking it down into its constituent syllables. 'Ing' is the first half of England; 'no' is his answer to the suggestion that Idleness should beat him; 'ran' refers to a dog; and 'hiss' is what a goose does: the whole being pronounced 'Ing / no / ran / hiss'.

In a later version of this play, *The Marriage of Wit and Science*, published by W. Marsh in or around 1570,¹⁷ Wit is warned by his mother, Nature, that, if he wants to marry Science (the daughter of Reason and Experience), he must work hard, over a period of time, before he will be in a position to do so. She then goes on to emphasise the value of

15. Hazlitt, p. 246.

16. See, for example, James Orchard Halliwell (ed.), *The Moral Play of Wit and Science* (London: Printed for The Shakespeare Society, 1848).

17. For a modern reprint, see John S. Farmer (ed.), *Five Anonymous Plays* (London: Early English Drama Society, 1908).

education, as impressed on her by a higher power: 'he will'd me to inspire, the love of knowledge and certain seeds divine'. Wit is sent to be educated under Instruction, Study and Diligence, although he soon tires of this and it is only after a series of mishaps that he comes to realise that learning is the key that unlocks success, in life as well as love.

In plays such as these, education and learning were seen simply as steps on a journey. Other plays, however, focussed much more closely on education, and, in some cases, school and school life were integral features.

The Rebels and Petruscus

The foundations for drama with a school setting were laid in *The Rebels*, written by the Dutch writer Macropedius in 1535, and in a similar play by the same author, *Petriscus*, written in 1536. Both of these early plays were translated and performed beyond the Netherlands and they also inspired other plays, in particular, English plays such as *Nice Wanton*, *The Disobedient Child* and *The Glasse of Governement* – which feature the dire consequences of pupils who reject learning or neglect their education.

Macropedius was born Joris van Lanckvelt in Holland in 1487. After attending the local parish school, and then a grammar school, he became a member of the Brothers of the Common Life, and changed his name to Brother George Macropedius. After ten or so years he was ordained as a priest and started teaching Latin. He went on to become headmaster of St Jerome's school in Utrecht, where he also wrote Latin textbooks and plays. He died in 1558.

The Rebels, the first stage play to centre on school life, is also the precursor of many later plays and stories which feature four key themes in the development of the boys' school story: the influence of indulgent mothers, the effects of neglecting education, the brutality of schoolmasters, and the reform of rebellious and disobedient boys. In this case, as in most other similar plays and stories, the central message is based on the biblical precept of 'spare the rod, spoil the child'.¹⁸ As such, it seems remarkable that it has hitherto been wholly overlooked in the history of school drama and fiction.¹⁹

18. Proverbs 13:24.

19. For a modern translation of the play, see Macropedius, *Two Comedies: Rebelles (The Rebels)*, Bassarus, ed. and trans. from the Latin, with an introduction, by Yehudi Lindeman (Leiden: Brill/Hes & de Graaf, 1983).

Although *The Rebels* breaks new ground with its subject matter, it still draws on earlier drama – medieval folk tradition and, in particular, Roman comedy. Most notable, perhaps, is the portrait of the two mothers, Philotecnium and Cacolalia, who are soft-hearted and have lost all control over their sons' education and moral progress.

The play begins with a Prologue which suggests that the play was written, initially at least, for an audience of schoolboys. We then see Philotecnium, the mother of Dyscolus, on stage, alone, bemoaning the fate of both herself – with 'the burden of a coarse man for a husband' – and the fate of her children, for whom she wishes to have a 'rich and respectable life', which they would do if it were not for:

the wicked, mindless attitude of the teachers who have been beating his delicate young boy's skin ... we have seen nothing but hard and cruel measures: always the same story, the lad returns home from school with his buttocks black and blue, thus showing through the punishment he receives (oh woe is me) the venom and hatred of the master.²⁰

Philotecnium and her friend, Cacolalia, the mother of Clopicus, decide to place their sons with Aristippus, a schoolmaster with a reputation for gentleness. When the two boys learn of this, they are naturally delighted:

Dyscolus: I know what our parents have decided to do.

Clopicus: Please tell me, what is it?

Dyscolus: They demand that we be instructed without being beaten.

Clopicus: No beating?

Dyscolus: Correct.

Clopicus: No beating?

Dyscolus: Without beating.

Clopicus: Oh immortal God, how very foolish is a mother's mind, yet how convenient for us.²¹

The mothers then take their sons to the school run by Aristippus, who agrees to take them in as pupils but not wholly acquiescing with the mothers' plea to treat them gently, saying that he will apply discipline if necessary. These are the first examples in school literature of indulgent

20. Lindeman, p. 35.

21. Lindeman, p. 41.