

TO SIR WITH LOATHING: STUDENT REVENGE FANTASIES IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LYRICS

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When early modern writers look back on the medieval school system, they tend to emphasise one feature above all — its overwhelming brutality. Hence Erasmus gives a colourful portrait of grammar teachers presiding over ‘torture-chambers’ (‘carnificinae’) or ‘flour mills’ (‘pistrinae’), describing how these figures terrorise ‘the frightened crowd with menacing face and voice, as they hack at the wretched boys with canes, rods, scourges’, creating an environment in which ‘you hear nothing but the crack of canes, the din of rods, the sobbing and wailing, the terrible threats’.¹ A little later Montaigne makes almost identical comments, also seeing the grammar school as a ‘prison of captivated youth’ and outlining its supposed torments: as Florio’s translation puts it, ‘you heare nothing but whipping and brawling, both of children tormented, and masters besotted with anger’ (Montaigne 1: 175). In England, the same view occurs in Roger Ascham’s recollection of his own schooling, probably at Kirby Wiske, North Yorkshire (Ryan 11). Ascham bitterly recalls his trials at the hands of ‘a fond Scholemaster, before I was fullie fourtene yeare olde’, which ‘draue me so, with feare of beating, from all loue of learninge’ (Ascham 177). In fact, these ideas are so prevalent that they become a standard theme in comedies, and are often inflated to grotesque proportions. Thus a 1560 interlude by the Cambridge student Thomas Inglelend features a ‘tormenter...of infantess’ who is nothing short of murderous: he not only lays ‘an honest mannes sonne...dead and colde’ through ‘many strypes’, but also hangs up another ‘by the heeles togyther’, whips his ‘bealy and buttocke greuouslye’, and finally crushes ‘his head to the wall’ (Inglelend 8). The visual arts follow much the same course, as Pieter Breugel also portrays the school as a place of hellish punishment in his 1556 drawing *Den esele ter scolēn* (‘The Ass goes to School’). In Otto von Simon’s summary, this shows a ‘dilapidated room...filled with a bewildering crowd of little figures, most of whom are crowded around the teacher who has stuck the inevitable birch in his hat...every one of these pupils seems underfed, prematurely old, enslaved, almost insane’ (29).

Although these portrayals are interesting in a number of respects, one of their most striking details is the wholly passive relationship they set up between the student and aggression. Not only do the students

experience violence only as its victims, as the targets of ‘canes and rods’ who are ‘enslaved’ by their teachers, but the process in fact serves to negate any agency they might otherwise possess. Their voices are replaced with wordless ‘sobbing and wailing’, their bodies restrained as though they are prisoners or torture victims, and even their minds disabled, ‘driven’ from learning and reason. Throughout these pieces the pupils are simply the inactive objects of classroom violence, and are rendered all the more helpless by its operation. Inglelend’s ‘dead and cold’ student merely pursues these topoi to their logical extreme, spelling out the enforced passivity present in all of the texts.

On the one hand, it would be rash to dismiss this idea out of hand. Despite the obvious exaggeration at work here, these texts do contain at least a kernel of truth. There is a clear tendency throughout the Middle Ages to associate beating with the power of the teacher and the resignation of the pupil. In the first place, a number of sources fetishise the implements of schoolroom punishment into markers of authority. Hence from the High Middle Ages onwards the phrase ‘under the rod of the masters’ (*sub magistrali ferula*) functions as a shorthand for the study of grammar as a whole: in a letter of 1170, Philip of Harveng refers to Henry I of Champagne ‘following the instruction of the schools for some years under the rod of the masters’, while a provision granted by the city of Lucca in 1348 places boys of school age ‘under the rod of the master so that they may preserve the honour of learning’.² The same idea also appears in the iconography of education. The frontispieces of early printed schoolbooks, such as Horman’s *Introductorium Lingue Latine* (1495) or Whittington’s *De Concinnitate grammatices et constructione* (1517), generally show the teacher in quasi-regal terms, with his pupils as his subjects, and make punishment a central part of this elevation: as well as being figuratively enthroned in his *cathedra*, the pedagogue brandishes a *scopa* or birch in place of a sceptre or sword (Figure 1). Other sources tell a similar story. In Peter Abelard’s *Historia Calamitatum* (c.1132) the link between beating and power attains a particularly forceful pitch. When describing his employment by Héloïse’s uncle, Abelard hints darkly at the level of influence the license to beat gave him, reflecting: ‘when he surrendered her to me not only to teach but also in truth to discipline vigorously, what else did he do but grant my desire licence...that what I might not be able to do with flatteries, I could easily compel with threats and blows?’³ Again classroom violence is an exercise of the teacher’s power, squarely in his hands and wholly in the service of his wishes: as Catherine Brown comments, the rod is treated as a manifestation of ‘absolute pedagogical authority’ (71).

What makes this all the more important is that the same ideas also underlie much modern commentary on violence in the medieval classroom. A number of scholars have echoed the early modern sources, and concluded that punishment demanded simple submission from the student. Thus Philip Ariès refers to schoolboys being subject to ‘a culture of beating’ (247), while Nicholas Orme speaks of ‘a strict penal code, based on corporal punishment’ reigning in the schools (146). Other writers go further, and argue that violence in the classroom reduced medieval pupils to the status of inert matter, powerlessly waiting to be ‘moulded’ or ‘engraved’ (Carruthers 106). Robert Mills, for instance, argues that ‘the rule of the rod’ rested on ‘equivalence between the hammering home of knowledge in the mind and the production of painful impressions on the body’, as both involved imposing ‘constructions violently on the pupil’ (155). Much the same position has been put forward by Jody Enders, who identifies a similar ‘equivalency between intervention upon the memory and painful intervention upon the body’ (130). This again casts students as passive recipients of violence. As in the work of the early modern educationists, the students are viewed here as wholly dominated by aggression: they are raw material to be formed and imprinted, only able to accept blows without resistance.



Figure 1: Two images of the teacher as king of the classroom, from William Horman, *Introductorium Lingue Latine* (1495) and Robert Whittington, *De Concinnitate grammatices et constructione* (1517).

Nevertheless, this issue is complicated by a clutch of texts which show a rather different view of the students' relationship with beating. These pieces raise some interesting problems when they are viewed against received wisdom about the medieval schoolroom. The texts in question fall into the broad category of 'student songs': short, comic lyrics preserved in a range of manuscripts, which refer directly to the lives of schoolboys or clerks, and usually contain specialised vocabulary connecting them to education (see Symonds 1–40). One of the earliest relevant examples has been dated to 1375–90 (Utley 194), and is preserved MS Arundel 292, a collection originating from Norwich cathedral school (Wirtjes ix–xv). This reports the lament of a tone-deaf choirboy named Walter, and produces a string of extravagant similes to represent his difficulty carrying a tune. The narrator bemoans how 'I rore as a rook' as he 'stumbllest and stikes' over the notes, until he sounds like 'an old caudron' that 'biginnest to clonder', a cooking pot boiling over (Sisam and Sisam 184–87; *NIMEV* 3819). This conduct inevitably brings chastisement from Walter's master, who has 'ofte horled my kailes' ('knocked down my skittles'), and even leaves the boy 'so wo that wel ner wil he blede' ('so wretched that he will almost bleed'). But as the text progresses, it begins to invert the castigation, as the continued awfulness of the chorister starts to inflict pain on his master. Walter's errors start to be represented in vivid corporeal terms: the flat notes mutate into weapons, 'crooken away-ward as a flesh-hook', that do actual harm to the listener, leading his master to protest 'now I know how judicare was set' ('now I know what punishment is'). These metaphors are interesting, as they hint at a reversal of the roles introduced at the outset. Through the introduction of these symbols, the errant student and the master come to switch places, as the infliction of pain in the classroom begins to flow in the opposite direction. The pupil, in short, becomes the tormentor of the teacher, not the passive recipient of his threats and blows.

Nor is this an isolated episode. A comparable lyric from a century later, this time connected to the school at Lincoln cathedral (Thomson 102–3), takes a more direct approach in wishing injury on the teacher. The target this time is the school's usher or *hostiarius*, the under-teacher charged with discipline, and the narrator imagines ambushing this figure 'at the milne-stones, or at the crabbe tree' and beating him so extensively 'That all thy kin shuld rewe thee...for that thou hast us don and said' (Luria and Hoffman 130–31; *NIMEV* 3895). The desire for vengeance extends to the teacher as well, as if he tries to protect his deputy, he will receive identical treatment:

And though Sire Robert with his cloke
 Wold thee helpe and be thy poke
 The were thou shuldst fare,
 And for his prayer the rather we wold
 Yiven him strepes al uncold. (ibid)

The same pattern also arises in another fifteenth-century song preserved in Balliol College MS 354, the commonplace book of the London grocer Richard Hill (Collier). Here the narrator ‘wold fain to be a clerk’ but finds that the usual drawbacks of scholarly study stand in his way: he complains that ‘it is a stronge werk’ as ‘the birchen twigges be so sharp’, adding that his master has often ‘pepered my ars with wel good spede’ (Davies 289–90; *NIMEV* 1399). Although the text makes clear that he largely deserves this treatment, as he is whipped after arriving late and giving the excuse that his mother made him ‘milke the dukkes’, it still permits him to envisage turning the tables. It ends with a curious hallucinatory sequence in which the clerk dreams that he is pursuing the teacher, both having undergone an odd bodily transformation:

I wold my master were an hare,
 And all his bokes houndes were,
 And I myself a joly hontere;
 To blow my horn I wold not spare,
 For if he were dede I wold not care. (ibid)

Again the usual pedagogic roles are reversed here, as the student becomes the persecutor of his teacher, hounding him to his death. As these pieces show, there is a clear tradition in medieval English lyrics of inverting the established hierarchy between teachers and students, depicting pupils avenging themselves painfully on their instructors. In sum, all three of these songs challenge the usual view of classroom violence, as they grant schoolboys the ability to punish, rather than treating them as automatically subordinate to the rod.

If these texts are interpreted in line with conventional ideas on classroom beating, then they can only be judged in the terms they present themselves: as a sort of compensatory fantasy, a piece of impotent wish-fulfilment or, in the words of Freud, ‘a correction of unsatisfying reality’ (148). In fact, comparable episodes in medieval literature have attracted this form of reading. Rita Copeland, for instance, examines a number of similar hagiographic works in these terms, considering them as ‘horror-fantasies of student rebellion’ which imagine the ‘counter-institutional possibility that children might really have the power in the

classroom' (9). However, if we reconsider the relationship between medieval students and violence more fully, some rather different meanings begin to emerge. The fact is that medieval students did not have the wholly passive relationship with violence that is often assumed. Frequently they were the perpetrators of violence, and not merely its victims. Their position in relation to pedagogic violence is therefore highly complex, and in several respects as active as the lyrics portray.

In the first place, there is evidence to show that pupils engaged in forms of violence that were specifically discouraged by the schools and other authorities. There are, for instance, several well-documented cases in which students became involved in severe disturbances outside their schools and universities, such as the notorious St Scholastica's Day riot at Oxford in 1355 or the comparable events at Paris in 1200, in which a tavern-fight resulted in a running battle between a group of German students and an armed band of citizens, leading to the death of the bishop-elect of Liege (Dales 219). Alongside such full-scale unrest however, there are numerous records of students committing more minor infractions, such as murders, fights, and assaults (see Hammer, Shephard). The threat to public order posed by students was in fact sufficiently serious for university authorities to draw up measures against it. In 1313 and 1432, Oxford issued rulings against students carrying weapons in the town, with the second defining a number of further offences (Rait 51–52). Under the terms of these regulations, 'threats of bodily harm to any scholar, or attacking anyone in the service of a student' carried a fine of twelve pence, 'drawing weapons for reason of aggression, or shoving with a shoulder' incurred a fine of four shillings, and 'striking with a stone or stick' or 'striking with a sword, knife, baselard, dagger, hatchet or other kind of instrument of war' brought penalties of six shillings eight pence and ten shillings respectively.⁴ Most serious of all, however, was 'forming a group of armed men or any other type of conspiracy, or joining together against the peace or against the execution of justice, or to commit bodily harm', a crime that would cost its perpetrators the hefty sum of thirty shillings apiece.⁵ As this makes clear, there was a clear expectation that students presented a particular danger to civic order, especially when assembled into groups, and that they needed to be subject to particular control and regulation.

Along the same sort of lines, there are also allusions to pupils carrying out violence within their schools. Several documents mention forms of behaviour that might be classified as bullying, which suggest that schoolmasters were sufficiently concerned about this danger to take preventative measures against it. One clear witness to this is a set of rules compiled for the chorister's school at Westminster Abbey in the

thirteenth century. These articles outline several possible contraventions: for instance, they promise that ‘for each lie the boy is subject to discipline’, and ‘any hand in which dice are discovered will feel one blow for each spot, with a switch on the bare skin’.⁶ The rules reveal two particular sites of anxiety. One of these, unsurprisingly, is any conduct in church which might disgrace the school publically, as students are instructed that during services they ‘must not have their eyes drawn towards the laity, but rather toward the altar’ and ‘must not laugh, or chatter, or giggle, or mock anything, if the reading or singing is less than perfect’, under penalty of ‘feeling the rod without delay’.⁷ However, an area of comparable concern is violence against fellow pupils within the school itself. One lengthy article specifically prohibits a variety of aggressive or intimidating acts against other boys, including ‘breaking the bed of a classmate where he would sleep, or hiding his clothes, or throwing his shoes or pillow into an inaccessible nook, or making tumult, upsetting the dormitory’.⁸ As these statements show, medieval students were as likely to perform violence against fellow pupils within the school as they were to cause violent disorder outside it.

Of course, it is difficult to draw larger conclusions about these tendencies, given their emphatically illicit, even anomalous status. The occurrences described here have to be considered aberrant events, violations of normality: rather than extending out of the educational culture of the Middle Ages, they are acts that this culture actively opposed and sought to suppress. Nevertheless, they represent only one level at which medieval students were involved in violence. There is evidence of other, more endemic forms of aggression which actually grew out of the educational framework rather than transgressing it. For example, there are a number of documented activities which use ritualised violence to play off the status of the school or university as a privileged, self-regulating space within its host town. Thus in his entry for 1264, Robert of Gloucester records an odd mock-ritual at Oxford. When the townsfolk of Oxford closed the gates against the future Edward I during De Montfort’s rebellion, the students reacted angrily, although for reasons that had little to do with politics: the closure apparently restricted their seasonal merrymaking, causing them to lose, as Robert puts it, ‘þer þoru muche solas’ (740). Their retaliation took the form of a peculiar performance, one which seems designed to remind the townsfolk of the separate legal status of students: they took axes to the gate, ‘& þat ȝat to hewe & to dasse þere’, before carrying the smashed remnants through the town in a parodic funeral procession, singing the Office of the Dead ‘as me deþ wan a ded man me wole to putte bringe’ (ibid 742). Although the aggression here is a response to particular set of

circumstances, and treated by the students themselves as a festive relaxation of normal standards, taking place ‘after mete’ and assuming the burlesque forms of popular celebration, it nonetheless shows an interesting convergence between violence and the conditions of education. The symbolism of this action is unmistakable, as it involves a direct assault on one of the physical barriers defining the scope of the medieval town. As a result it serves to broadcast the students’ legal exemption from such strictures, the fact that they are not subject to civic regulation but follow other principles instead. The violence is therefore not a contravention of the rules of the medieval university, but in fact draws from these rules, reflecting the university’s sovereignty. In effect the conditions of instruction seem to have fostered this form of violence.

Similarly, there is also evidence of other aspects of university life lending themselves to dramatisation through violence. One such element is the student body’s status as a closed community, as aggression was often used to mark the entry of new students into academia. Violent initiation rituals appear to have been fairly widespread, if not commonplace. Towards the end of the period in particular there are a number of references to the strange custom of the *depositio cornuum*, or ‘de-horning’, which was apparently performed at a range of universities in Germany and the Netherlands. The *depositio* is first mentioned in the educational handbook *Manuale Scholarium* (1481), where it is connected with undergraduates at Heidelberg, but it is also recorded by Andreas Meinhardi at Wittenburg (Reinke 275–86), Crispijn de Passe at Antwerp (Veldman), and Martin Luther at Erfurt (Märker 31). According to these sources, the *depositio* ritual dramatised the transition from ‘roughness’ to ‘good habits’ that education was intended to bring about. It involved dressing the incoming student or *beanus* in animal garb, such as a cap mounted with horns, and then forcibly trimming away his supposedly bestial characteristics, ‘polishing him smooth with whips and carving him with iron’ in De Passe’s phrase.⁹ Thus in the *Manuale* the university entrant appears in suitably animalistic costume as ‘the filthiest of beasts’: he is said to be ‘horned’ with ‘ears like an ox’, and wears false teeth ‘sticking out in both directions from his jaw’, like those of ‘a wild boar’. Two sophomores then carry out a procedure to humanise this ‘shape of nothing’: his face is smeared with a ‘poultice’ made of fat, his horns are sawn off, his teeth are drawn out, his ‘ears are shortened with knives’, and his bristles are removed with tweezers and ‘a very sharp razor made of an oak splinter’ (Seyboul 27–29). Elsewhere the *depositio* might entail paddling with oversized hammers, mock quartering on a carpenter’s bench, grinding the *beanus*’ fingernails with files, pressing his nose to a grindstone, clipping his hair and beard, or rubbing his skin

with rags; finally, after the horns were removed, the *beanus* would be stripped, washed, and dressed in his clerical gown (Nuwer 95). Such a procedure, even though at best semi-official, again uses violence in a way that mirrors the conditions of university life, dramatising the enlightenment new undergraduates were due to undergo: it obviously revolves around two metaphors of cultivation or refinement, treating the incoming student as an animal to be tamed, and as raw material to be crafted into a better shape. More importantly, however, it also casts students in an active role, as torturers as well as casualties.

Nor is the *depositio* a lone example of this sort of cruelty. A comparable ceremony linked with colleges at Oxford and Cambridge is the ‘salting’ of incoming students. Although most of the materials describing this ritual date from the early seventeenth century, it was apparently in operation at least as far back as 1510 (Morgan and Brooke 144–45). Salting basically involved new freshmen delivering a declamation to their ‘Fathers’ or ‘Sophisters’, the older students within the college; between four and six of these orations are still extant.¹⁰ However, the event was not purely a display of rhetorical skill, as it was also marked by elements of injury and coercion. The lengthiest account, that of Anthony Wood, looking back to his own initiation at Merton in 1647, records how the student audience would register their verdicts on these speeches. He notes that ‘if any of the freshmen came off dull, or not cleverly’ when instructed to ‘speake some pretty apothegme, or make a jest or bull’, they were not only made to drink the salted beer from which the ritual took its name, but were also given ‘tucks to boot’: ‘some of the forward or pragmatistical seniors would tuck them, that is, set the nail of their thumb to their chin, just under the lipp, and by the help of their other fingers under the chin, they would give him a mark, which somtimes would produce blood’ (Wood 34–36). Moreover, the point of this ceremony was not only to commemorate the students’ entry into a new community, but also to foreshadow their eventual assessment: as Marsden observes, it was ‘a sort of burlesque upon the public exercises of the schools’ (1: 14). Like the *depositio*, salting developed violence from the conditions of learning, performing and mimicking its forms.

Similar events seem to have taken place in the grammar schools. One clear analogue is the initiation rite carried out at Eton which would later develop into the ‘Montem’ procession (Brand 1: 432–41). This also pitted older boys against their younger counterparts. According to a register of ‘old school customs’ compiled by William Malym, headmaster of Eton from 1561 to 1563 (Wright), every January ‘around the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul’, new pupils were taken by the older boys to a ‘hill that is a sacred place in the childish religion of

Eton...owing to the beauty of the field, the sweetness of the grass, the coolness of the shade, the singing of melodious birds'.¹¹ What Malym goes on to describe, however, is something rather less pastoral than his florid language might suggest. Once they have arrived at the hill, 'these novices or freshmen, who have not yet manfully and vigorously withstood blows in the battlefield of Eton, are first cured with salt'.¹² This 'curing' does not involve being forced to take a noxious drink, as at the university saltings; instead it inflicts the 'salt' of ridicule on the pupils, in order to make them cry 'salted tears'. Malym writes:

Lampoons are made about the freshmen...each vying to outdo the other. Whatever comes from the mouth is freely permitted to emerge, as long as it is made in Latin, as long as it has sophistication, and as long as it avoids obscenity and scurrility of words; finally salted tears moisten their faces and eyes, and then through these rites they are initiated into the old community. There follow speeches and a small parade, and they are cheered in earnest from their former trials, through their entry into a delightful company of fellow soldiers.¹³

Although the aggression here seems to be predominantly verbal, it is still informed by a desire to intimidate and humiliate. After all, the entire point of the exercise is to make the newcomers weep, on the grounds that their tears will act as a symbolic preservative, metaphorically toughening them for the rigours of the classroom. But what is important here is the way that the ritual directly emulates instruction, observing the same rules as a classroom exercise. Not only does it take the overall form of a scholarly dispute, it also avoids the vernacular and 'obscene words and scurrility'. Malym even emphasises the affinity between this violence and the everyday violence of the grammar school, referring to grammar education as a 'battlefield' in which 'blows' must be endured, and the boys are themselves 'a company of fellow soldiers'. In other words, he clearly sees the rite as derivative of schooling, and lends it his approval as a means of bringing boys to maturity. At any rate, such rituals again show how boys at schools were participants in violence, not merely its victims, and how the violence they performed was often an outgrowth of their status as scholars.

What makes these customs all the more significant is that, despite their excesses, they are not far removed from actual duties required of students. Throughout the Middle Ages students were chiefly responsible for administering discipline among themselves: cohorts as a whole were

charged with monitoring one another's conduct, and imposing appropriate punishments when necessary, usually through elected rectors (Cobban 185–86). This independence in disciplinary matters can clearly be seen in a 1261 city statute relating to the University of Padua, which states that any 'affray and discord' among the scholars is to be settled by them alone, as 'neither the *podesta*, nor the commune of Padua, will be obliged or be able to intervene, give judgement, or investigate' (Hermans and Nelissen 73). It was only at the end of the Middle Ages that teachers took over the task of imposing penalties at universities, with figures such as Jan Standonck introducing flogging to new college foundations (Pickering 56–57; Durkheim 195–96). In the later stages of medieval education, therefore, most physical punishment would have been the direct responsibility of students. Moreover, it seems that this is also true of the earlier levels of schooling. In some cases it appears as though trusted students were charged with carrying out the day-to-day beating during lessons at grammar schools. In the mid thirteenth century, Vincent of Beauvais directly advises that the teacher should delegate beating to a 'didasculus', which seems to mean a student deputy here, on the grounds that 'it is unworthy for a prince or judge to strike the condemned in his own person, and so he should commit them to others'.¹⁴ From pictorial sources, it seems that this advice crossed from theory into practice (Figure 2). An illumination from a 1360 manuscript of the *Omne Bonum* clearly shows an older boy, bareheaded like the other pupils, assisting a schoolmaster in birching a pupil. A similar image occurs in a twelfth-century manuscript, this time of Helpericus' astronomy textbook *De Computo*. The marginalia accompanying the text includes the motto 'Afficitur plagis qui non vult discere gratis' ('he who does not freely wish to learn is afflicted with blows'); to drive home the point, the initial A of 'afficitur' is formed from one figure whipping another (Hughes 32). This again seems to depict a student in the role of punisher, as both figures are identical in size and dress; most tellingly, both are apparently the same age, being equally beardless (Clever). It therefore seems that students would often be required to administer punishment, or to assist in its execution, as a range of sources show schoolboys meting out these measures to one another.

But there is one further form of student violence which is even more important than these other practices, which are after all peripheral to instruction itself. This is the aggression which students were required to perform as part of the actual process of learning. Evidence of this is provided by the *vulgaria*, collections of simple English sentences which students would be called on to translate into Latin. The numerous

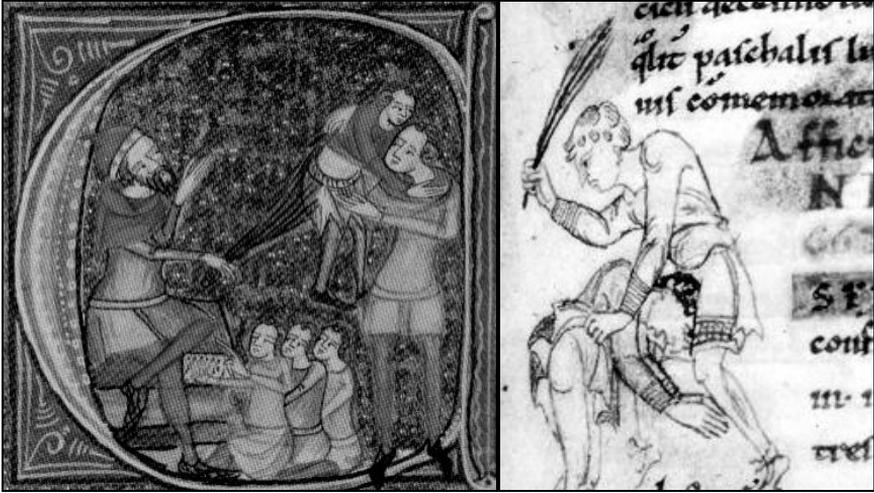


Figure 2: Medieval pupils administering and assisting in punishment. From MS Royal 6 E. VI, f.214, and Durham Cathedral Library MS Hunter 100, f.44.

extant compendia contain at least some reference to beating, from the earliest extant collections, such as John Drury's *Parve Latinitates* (1434), to the printed volumes of William Horman and John Stanbridge. The *vulgaria* teach children such invaluable phrases as 'my hede is all swollen with buffetes' (Anwykyll 66), 'he was foule entreated and sore beate' (Horman 85), 'the mayster gave me a blowe on the cheke' (White 19), 'Myn ars coming to scole xal be betyn' (Meech 82), and 'what meyns shall I use to lurne withoute betyng? for I fere the rodde as the swerde' (Nelson 28). Some are remarkably salacious in dealing with this theme: the phrases drawn up by the Oxford schoolmaster Robert Whittington attain a striking pitch of brutality, including such idioms as 'My mayster... hath made me to renne a rase that my buttockes doeth swette a bloody sweat', 'He hath torne my buttockes. so that theyr is lefte noo hole skynne vpon them', and 'My mayster hath bette my bak and side/ whyles the rode wolde holde in his hande' (White 89, 102). What is more, although these pieces date from the late Middle Ages, they seem to represent a longstanding teaching practice. As far back as the beginning of the eleventh century, Aelfric of Eynsham produced the *Colloquy* (c.1005), a dramatic dialogue which served as an oral translation exercise (Hall 208). This also calls on violence from the first. In its opening section Aelfric puts a statement of submission in the mouths of his pupils, causing them to say: 'we children bid you, teacher, that you teach us to speak Latin properly.... We would prefer to be

beaten for learning than not know; but we know you to be merciful, and you will not inflict a flogging on us, unless we compel you'.¹⁵

At first glance, it may appear that these allusions to beating can only serve to subordinate children to the aggression of their teachers, reminding them of their constant vulnerability to the rod. However, on closer inspection a slightly different possibility emerges, as the manner in which the *vulgaria* were used hints at a less repressive function. One witness to their employment is the work of Charles Hoole, headmaster of schools at Aldersgate and Lothbury in the seventeenth century, who describes his own schooling under this system. Hoole recalls that every day the pupils 'were put into this book, and there made to construe and parse two or three Sentences at once out of meer Latine', adding that this method was informed by 'an ignorant presumption that we could easily say' which 'made us spend our time in idle chat' (Hoole 108). Clearly these were oral exercises, to be spoken or 'chatted' on the spot, miniature dramas which the boys recited before one another. What the *vulgaria* offered to the boys, then, is a chance to role-play: in Paul Sullivan's phrase, they were 'scripted daily rehearsals of a broad range of social roles', a quasi-theatrical process which allowed students to adopt a variety of parts through speaking prescribed utterances (196). In the episodes related to beating, therefore, the boys were not only playing the roles of schoolboys professing fear over being beaten, but the role of masters licensed to issue such discipline; they would assume the part of the voice ordering 'geve me my roddes: stretch your hand' or 'untrusse you: untie you: put your hosen downe' as well as the boy pleading for mercy (Hollyband 6). Hoole in fact specifically mentions that 'we had no help at all' in decoding the Latin, suggesting that the master would not take a direct part in exercises, leaving it to the boys to perform them (108). These scripts do not only insert boys into the position of sufferer, but also cast them as performers of violence, assigning them the position of beater as well as beaten. As a result, the teaching methods of the medieval grammar school obliged the boys to think of themselves as potential enactors of violence, if only temporarily. Even in the classroom itself, in other words, the power to implement violence was often transferred to children, as during the very acquisition of literacy they were asked to adopt this capability.

Medieval students were therefore expected to participate in violence at several different levels. At one end of the spectrum, there is entirely illicit violence staged inside and outside the school or university, such as bullying or public disturbances; at the other there is the violence that permeated learning itself, which encouraged students to see themselves as performers of punishment in the course of their studies. Between these

points there are other degrees of student-led violence as well, such as the semi-official rituals of the medieval education system, and the official practice of charging students with keeping discipline and order amongst themselves. Of course, it stands to reason that medieval education should place violence in the hands of students, however surprising this claim might first appear. As Marxist and post-structuralist social theory has shown, an institution cannot function purely by repression and coercion. It must also secure the compliance of the individuals it seeks to subordinate, 'recruiting' them as active performers and perpetrators of its system, 'inserting them into practices governed by rituals' (Althusser 123). Obliging students to be the actors of violence, giving them charge over the rituals of punishment and enrolment, is one way medieval schooling might generate this collusion: its use of violence conforms to Foucault's observation that 'power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who do not have it; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them' (27). What is more, being able to perform managed aggression is also entirely consistent with the preparation for adulthood that education aimed to supply. After all, boys would be called on to exercise aggression once they matured, either as they assumed the masculine responsibilities of adulthood (Karras 67-108), or as prospective teachers themselves, with their own classes to supervise and discipline (Ong 109). In short, it is entirely reasonable for the medieval school to demand violence of its students, as this expectation ensures their ultimate 'submission to the rules of the established order' of the school (Althusser 89).

These conditions also begin to explain the appearance of aggression in the student songs, and why it takes the specific forms it does. Far from being revenge fantasies, an expression of basic impotence, they are better seen as medieval students responding to the demands made on them by the system of medieval education, which did require students to become violent as they acquired literacy and knowledge. In fact, this can be clearly seen in the songs, especially in their habit of presenting aggression as a result of instruction, not a threat to it. In all three pieces the knowledge students acquire paves the way for their attacks, as learning gives them the resources for expressing and even staging the assaults they envisage. This is most readily apparent in the piece from Norwich cathedral. By transforming musical notes into implements for torturing the instructor, 'hookes', 'caudrons', and carrion-eating 'rookes', the text presents aggression and education as directly analogous. In the text, the information conveyed in the classroom is closely tied to violence, as it proves readily adaptable into injury. This is also true elsewhere. The Lincoln lyric shows a similar overlap between

violence and instruction, as the students waiting to avenge themselves on the usher and teacher use the conditions of the classroom to justify the ‘strypes’ they will inflict. At its conclusion the text treats the power to discipline as something mobile and transferable. Its final verse begins ‘for ofte sore we abeye/ The twinkelinges of his eye/ The maister us to beat’ (Luria and Hoffman 131). This statement turns on a complex piece of word–play, as the word ‘abeye’ encompasses two distinct meanings in Middle English. On the one hand, it can mean ‘pay for’ or ‘suffer for’, as in the idiomatic threat ‘ye shul it deere abeye’, used in the *Physician’s Tale* and elsewhere (Chaucer 191; Mannyng 1: 233). On the other hand, it can mean ‘obey’ or ‘defer to’, as when Margery Kempe states that she ‘must abeyn þe wil of God’ (Meech and Allen 228). This in turn means that the stanza can be read in two different ways, as the boys suffer as a result of the master’s ‘twinkelinges’ to the usher, and think that they can obey these signals as well, inflicting their own punishment on their detested persecutor. Such a pun, then, brings together the reason for revenge with a rationalisation of it: the pupils believe they can act on instructions to carry out beating, as they are subject to the teacher no less than the usher. More importantly, it again emphasises the link between education and perpetrating physical attack, since it is simply their status as scholars that entitles them to commit injury, their subjection to a teacher. In the eyes of this piece, the very fact that the boys are undergoing education seems to justify their implementation of bodily assault.

However, perhaps the most emphatic and inventive of the three is the London lyric, with its dramatic, dream–like depiction of the teacher turning into a hare and the boy into a ‘joly hontere’. This peculiar image carries strong classical overtones, as it is clearly meant to evoke the work of Ovid. The lyric is not only picking up on the Ovidian theme of ‘bodies changed into new shapes’ but also specifically recalls the transformation of Actaeon from Book III of the *Metamorphoses*, as the teacher destroyed by his own books echoes the hunter who becomes ‘the quarry, alas, before his own faithful hounds’ (Ovid 86). What makes this allusion important is the central place that Ovid occupied in the medieval curriculum. His importance in medieval schooling is difficult to overstate: as Curtius and several other commentators have noted, the *Metamorphoses* not only functioned as an introduction to literacy in many cases, but served as a reference point for comprehending the culture of antiquity itself, a ‘repertory of mythology’ which mediated ‘the schoolroom...encounter with the classical world’ (Curtius 18; Clark 1). The narrator’s vengeful fantasy is therefore framed in the terms that the education system supplies, as the student calls on his learning to

formulate his attack on the teacher. Violence again proves not to be a subversion of the schoolroom, a carnivalesque inversion of its power-structure, but something rooted in education itself, as knowledge gleaned in the classroom enables this possibility to be conceived. In short, what these lyrics show is a general acceptance that medieval education was also an initiation into the performance of violence. Their playfulness discloses a deep-seated association between learning and becoming an active performer of aggression. Ultimately, the comic portrayal of student rebellion in these lyrics arises directly out of the culture of the medieval school. The poems emerge from a system of instruction which not merely called for schoolboys to serve as the objects of aggression, but which recruited them as its implementers. Their content cannot really be understood without appreciating this aspect of medieval education.

NOTES

Abbreviations

EETS	Early English Text Society
NIMEV	Boffey and Edwards, <i>A New Index of Middle English Verse</i>
STC	Short Title Catalogue

¹ In the original, ‘Adeo sibi placent, dum pavidam turbam, minaci vultu voceque territant: dum ferulis, virgis, lorisque conscindunt miseros, dumque modis omnibus suo arbitratu saeviant’ (Erasmus, *Stultitiae Laus* 138), and ‘Praeter crepitem ferularum, praetor virgarum streitum, praetor ejulatus ac singultus, praetor atroces minas nihil auditur’ (Erasmus, *Declamatio* 427). All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

² ‘Horum concursu scholarum disciplinam per annos aliquot prosecutus sub magistrali ferula’ (Philippus de Harveng 151); ‘Sub magistrali ferula ad decus doctrine valeant pervenire’ (Barsanti 195).

³ ‘Qui cum eam mihi non solum docendam, verum etiam vehementer constringendam traderet, quid aliud agebat quam ut votis meis licentiam penitus daret...ut quam videlicet blanditiis non possem, minis et verberibus facilius flecterem’ (Abelard 22).

⁴ ‘Pro minis de corporali damno alicui Scholari, seu alicujus Scholaris servienti inferendo, duodecim denariis; pro latione armorum contra statute, duobus solidis; pro extractione armorum violenta, vel impulsione humerali aut percussione pugna, quator solidis; pro percussione cum lapide vel baculo, sex solidis octos denariis; pro percussione cum gladio, cultello, sica, vel daggario, securi aliove hujusmodi instrumento bellico, decem solidis’ (Anstey 1: 314).

⁵ ‘Pro congregatione armatorum vel aliorum quorumcumque conspirantium, aut confederantium contra pacem vel contra executionem iustitiae, seu ad damnum corporale alicui inferendum, triginta solidis’ (ibid 1: 314–15).

⁶ ‘Pro quolibet autem mendacio quilibet subeat disciplinam’; ‘Item, in cuiuscunque manu inventi fuerint decii, pro quolibet puncto ictum virge sentiat super nudum’ (Armitage and James 68).

⁷ ‘In choro quidem stantes vel sedentes non habeant oculos deflexos ad laycos, sed potius versus altare; non ridentes, non garrientes, non cachinnantes, non deridentes alicui si minus bene legit vel psallit...predictorum vero transgressores ictum ferule sentiant sine mora’ (ibid).

⁸ ‘Item, quicumque hora cubandi lectum sociorum fregerit, vel pannas absconderit, aut calciamenta seu pulvinaria de angulo in angulum jactauerit, vel rabiem fecerit, seu familiam turbauerit’ (ibid 69).

⁹ ‘Quo rudibus positis faciles assumere mores...vexatur levibus flagris ferrisque fecatur’ (De Passe, qtd. in Veldman 335).

¹⁰ The surviving saltings are surveyed and discussed by Bowers, Nelson (2: 996–97), and Richek.

¹¹ ‘Circiter festum Conversionis Divi Pauli...itur a Pueris ad Montem. Mons puerili religione Etonensium sacer locus est. Hunc ob pulchritudinem agri, amoenitatem graminis, umbraculorum temperationem, canorum avium concentum, etc’ (Creasy 77).

¹² ‘His novitii seu recentes, qui annum nondum viriliter et nervose in acie Etonensi ad verbera steterunt, Sale primo condiuntur’ (ibid).

¹³ ‘Deinde in recentes Epigrammata faciunt...alter alterum superare contententes. Quicquid in buccam venit libere licet effutire, modo latine fiat, modo habeat urbanitatem, modo careat obscena verborum scurrilitate; postremo et lacrimis salsis humectant ora genasque et tum demum veteranorum ritibus initiantur. Sequuntur orationes et parvi triumphii et serio laetantur cum ob praeteritos labores, tum ob cooptationem in tam lepidorum Commilitonum Societatem’ (ibid).

¹⁴ ‘Princeps vel iudex dampnatum percutere sua persona iudicat indignum, et ob hoc alii committit, cui tale competit officium’ (Vincent of Beauvais 90). Vincent is echoing Augustine, *De Diversis Quaestionibus Octoginta Tribus* 1.53.2.

¹⁵ ‘Nos pueri rogamus te, magister, ut doceas nos loqui latialiter recte.... Carius est nobis flagellari pro doctrina quam nescire. Sed scimus te mansuetum esse et nolle inferre plagas nobis, nisi cogaris a nobis’ (Garmonsway 18–19).

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