

Roman Culture and the Roman Curriculum

If Rome inherited the civilization of Greece, it was not because the Roman mind was constituted like the Hellenic, but rather from the force of those circumstances which established her power throughout the Mediterranean coasts. For among the Romans there was little evidence of a natural versatility of interest, little power to elevate facts into ideals, or to construct new worlds of imagination, little disposition even to wander into untrodden paths of thought. They looked often to the practical side of life and seldom to the theoretical; their prose was the expression of legal formulae or the practical eloquence of the forum, their very poetry, until the period of so many translations from the Greek, no more than a form of worship.

In the field of drama, the Romans had a native form of comedy, but were indebted to the Greeks for the beginnings of tragedy. The original types of Roman comedy included the Fescenninae practised at rustic festivals and harvestings, the Saturae performed by rural clowns with music, dancing or gesticulation, and the Mimi or mountebank representations, scurrilous yet sententious, which held a subordinate place in literature from the period of the fall of the Republic to the final stage of imperial culture. Types of comic characters were developed in the Atellanae, plays of a burlesque sort, often performed as afterpieces. There was no material for the education of the young in the indigenous Roman comedy, which was not only licentious in the extreme, but written always in an undignified plebeian strain.

Roman comedy of the more pretentious kind was an imitation of Greek originals and applied itself to Greek subjects. From Livius Andronicus to Terence, it appears to have gained in refinement of expression rather than originality of idea. The plays of Terence were favored by literary students of the empire, and in general the palliata or comedies from the Greek were studied in academic circles to the exclusion of the coarser but more national togata which dealt with Roman situations and characters of a more realistic, but a baser type.

Tragedy was not indigenous to Rome, but an exotic flower of Greece. At best the tragic poets were few and their genius of a secondary character. Seneca, for example, was read rather than acted; but his tragedies furnished a part of the subject-matter of literary studies under the later empire.

Epic poetry began to be used in the Roman schools under the Republic, with the Latinized version of the "Odyssey" by Andronicus. Naevius followed with a poem on the Punic war, and Ennius with an epic version of the Roman Annals. Even Cicero and Octavianus attempted the epic, while the imperial period produced Lucan's "Pharsalia", together with a host of courtly and antiquarian epics which tended to express ingenuity and scholarship rather than patriotism or feeling. Epics of the heroic rather than the historical type were usually written on Greek subjects which necessitated pedantry, imitativeness and a labored recourse to foreign mythology.

These limitations were surmounted with great success by Vergil, whose "neid" became the standard text of grammarians, its sonorous lines being recited everywhere in the schools. In the meantime numerous Christian epics were written; but, naturally enough, they found no place in the schools as centres of pagan learning.

Certain poems, however, of a purely didactic though seldom of a religious character, were written expressly for the use of students. Some of the poems of Ausonius, such as those on the calendar, belong evidently to this class, while there were also treatises in verse upon letters, prosody, rhetoric and other subjects which might be schematized and committed to memory. Such verses were written by the grammarians of the later empire exactly in the spirit and mode which was afterwards to become common among the more enterprising mediaeval schoolmasters.

The so-called Disticha Catonis, probably written previous to the period of the official adoption of the Christian religion, comprised a collection of moral sayings arranged in couplets for the use of schools and actually retained their vogue to the end of the middle ages. But it is probable that greater attention was bestowed upon the form of poetry than its content. Scholars were practised in the use of various metres, and in the composition of imaginary epistles both in verse and prose. Towards the close of the empire considerable attention began to be paid to fables, riddles, acrostics and similar trifles; and hexameters began to be embellished with rhyme. While lyric poetry was less congenial to the Roman disposition than narrative, it is clear that epigrams became extremely fashionable, while elegies were written and studied in schools as exercises in style. The mastery over poetic form appears to have increased in proportion to the diminution of inspiration and power.

Prose occupied a subordinate place in the curriculum of Roman education, as it had done with the Greeks. It had a rhetorical character, partly owing to the practical use that was attached to the command of prose; and partly, perhaps, from the influence of Cicero, who first made it worthy of study in the schools. Prose was employed in history, but as long as this study flourished more in the interests of rhetoric than fact, history meant little for education, although the annalists

70 preserved many facts and traditions that were more often embodied or summarized from  
 their several predecessors than dictated by their own experience or observation.  
 Antiquarian learning was not without its devotees, and Ausonius depicts for us the  
 type of a research student who knew more about recondite studies than the history and  
 literature of Latium. The most learned of the Romans was M. Varro, the greater part  
 of whose work has perished. From the period of Varro, which was also that of Cicero,  
 75 an academic and erudite class was rapidly developed which took possession of the  
 schools at the same time that it sacrificed the ancient connection of theory with the  
 practical affairs of life. Learning became the monopoly of the grammatici, who gave  
 themselves largely to etymology, grammar and the making of dictionaries. The  
 textbooks of Latin grammar by Donatus in the fourth century, and Priscian early in  
 80 the sixth, retained their celebrity throughout the middle ages. The grammatici were  
 critics as well as grammarians, so that as Suetonius says their business was the  
 emendation of texts, the discrimination of meanings, and the compilation of critical  
 notes. They did little, however, beyond the imitation of the Greeks. Each new work on  
 grammar embodied copious extracts from its predecessors, usually without  
 85 acknowledgment, until there finally arose an incredible confusion of authorities.  
 Meanwhile the grammatici taught not only etymology and grammar but also mythology in  
 their schools. The mythology was borrowed from Greece; but the etymology might have  
 either a Greek or a Latin basis according to the grammatical school to which the  
 teacher happened to adhere. Oratory, more than any other study, occupied the  
 90 attention of the talented Roman youth. In politics, jurisprudence or war, oratorical  
 skill was equally indispensable. A manual of oratory is ascribed to the elder Cato.  
 In the words of Livy, some were carried forward to the highest offices by  
 jurisprudence, others by eloquence, others by military glory. Oratory then was  
 recognized in the Republic and earlier Empire as a high road to advancement and fame.  
 95 Cicero regretted that whereas for the Greeks it had been an end in itself, for the  
 Romans it was but a means to success at the bar. The youths trained in oratorical  
 schools would begin to speak in the forum at eighteen or nineteen years of age, at  
 times making their debut in a funeral oration. From the time of the elder Cato it  
 became customary for speakers to write down and publish their orations which had  
 100 previously been delivered without notes. The speeches of Cicero, Quintilian and  
 others were taken down by clerks, probably in shorthand, and published with or  
 without the consent of the author, sometimes in garbled versions. Under these  
 conditions the study of rhetoric in Rome was anything but the perfunctory occupation  
 that it seems to be at the present time.  
 105 It was a practical and profitable thing, frowned upon by the old-fashioned Censors  
 (who decreed the expulsion of the rhetors from Rome in 92 B.C.), but welcomed by the  
 ambitious youth. One reads that only four years after the decree above cited a  
 freedman of Pompey, one Vultacilius Plotus, skilled in Latin rhetoric, had opened a  
 school in the city. There were also numerous teachers of Greek and Asiatic oratory in  
 110 Rome during and subsequent to the age of Cicero. Under the Empire oratory became less  
 genuine and more servile. Forced to renounce serious topics, the schools became the  
 centre of a host of fictions. The ancients had been orators, the moderns were but  
 rhetoricians; at least, such was the judgment of Tacitus. The Empire was never so  
 sure of maintaining a check upon freedom of speech as after it had begun to pay the  
 115 salaries of eminent professors of rhetoric, the first being Quintilian himself in the  
 reign of Vespasian. Gaul and Africa in the third century became important centres of  
 rhetorical study, Gaul being signalized by the skill of her professors in the  
 manipulation of forms of style; Africa by the energy of her rhetors, including  
 Tertullian, Arnobius, Cyprian and Augustine, in the defence of Christianity.  
 120 When a pupil had completed his task under the grammaticus he went naturally to the  
 school of the rhetor, where his work began with demonstrations, and proceeded to  
 declamations, deliberations and controversies. Controversies included case law, the  
 subdivision of the subject, and the appeal to mitigating circumstances. But the cases  
 125 cited in the schools were strangely unreal. Pliny, Petronius, Tacitus and others  
 ridicule the questions that were accustomed to be raised and disputed, dealing with  
 tyrants, or pirates, or the sacrifice of maidens. Contemporary politics were  
 practically tabooed. It was the opinion of Petronius that such instruction made  
 youths into fools. Little realism was attached even to historical debates about Sulla  
 and Hannibal; none at all to declamations on subjects taken from Vergil, Ovid, or  
 130 Homer. But the same stereotyped empty fictions continued to be treated in the time of  
 Ausonius, the same in the days of Augustine, the same even as late as the sixth  
 century. The subjects appointed for prose composition were no more vital than topics  
 of debate. In particular, among the favorite exercises of the schools was the  
 composition of fictitious letters; for example, an advanced pupil would be called  
 135 upon to write a letter from Cicero to Caesar, or from Seneca to the Apostle Paul.  
 Fairy tales, romances and love stories were licentious and unsuitable for declamation  
 in the schools, but as they had been suggested even in Homer, and by the time of Ovid

had come to furnish a part of the staple material of literature, they were actually employed in education to an extent difficult to determine, but certainly appreciable. The romances were at first of the nature of Greek translations, and were generally called "Milesia". The Metamorphoses of Apuleius were to become the prototype of a certain kind of mediaeval romance. It was alleged that the schools of the later empire were addicted more to fiction of this kind than to the books of Plato. At least it appears to have been the policy of the emperors to encourage the study of trifles in order to divert attention and criticism from the field of politics. While the bent of the Roman mind was distinctly more practical than theoretical, and accordingly not so much addicted to philosophy as law, it could not escape from the influence of Greek speculation upon the constitution of the universe and the nature and destiny of man. It was unfortunate that the contact of Rome with Greece was altogether subsequent to the fiery creative epoch of Greek thought. It was but an afterglow of Greek philosophy that warmed the stubborn intellects of the Romans to attempt ambitious flights. Epicureanism, Stoicism, the Peripatetic philosophy, the New Academy, Neo-Platonism, and a degenerate form of the Pythagorean philosophy became domiciled in Rome, but were looked upon with suspicion and regarded as exercises rather than paths to objective truth. The bare shoulder and cloak of the professional philosopher were often the marks of a mere charlatan. Philosophers were actually banished from Rome by Vespasian and Domitian, but at other times they conducted their informal schools without molestation, and even with honor, so that one philosopher, Marcus Aurelius, came to occupy the throne. In the earlier imperial period Epicureanism, in the later Stoicism, was the most popular form of philosophical creed. The study of philosophy revived in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries because of the fact that the pagans were driven to its tenets in order to maintain themselves against the Christian propaganda. A last desperate attempt to preserve the ancient philosophy was made not without success in the sixth century by Boethius. His partial translation of Aristotle into Latin and his book on the "Consolations of Philosophy" were studied in the early mediaeval schools. The opinion of Gellius as to professional philosophical teachers was that they would run and sit at the gates of wealthy youths and persuade them to waste the whole night in drinking wine, ostensibly as a vehicle, no doubt, for discussions and dialectic. The opinion of the average Roman was certainly that philosophy was irreligious, a waste of time, and a veil for mercenary motives.

Totally different was the Roman estimation of Law. From the earliest times the Romans had a natural genius for law and order, a shrewd practical intelligence, and a disposition to dispute any conceivable infringement on their individual or collective rights. It is declared among the Roman traditions that there were schools for reading and writing in the forum from the earliest days of the Republic; and whether this be an exaggeration or not, the origin of the custom of teaching the laws of the twelve tables to the children is lost in the same obscurity with the origin of these elementary schools. Collections of the sources of law were made as early as 204 B. C, and by degrees the habit of collecting decisions in typical cases developed a new field for study alongside the examination of the laws themselves. For law the Romans were by no means primarily indebted to Greece, and it has been remarked that the more national a Roman poet may be, the more prominent the position the law holds in his writings. The schools of oratory were obliged to devote considerable attention to the study of jurisprudence, but the relative emphasis upon good oratory or good law appears to have varied according to the legal knowledge or conscientiousness of the teacher. A consulting lawyer learned his business by accompanying a distinguished jurisconsult and listening to his opinions. Cicero's opinion of the jurisprudence of his day is sometimes respectful but here and there contemptuous. It was not under the Republic, however, but under the later empire that Roman law attained its majority and became the chosen field of the ablest and most honorable minds. Gaius became the first professor of civil law, and began to write his "Institutions" by way of an introduction to the subject. His most notable successor was Ulpian. The codification of the laws ensured their place once for all as a subject of study in the universities of the later Imperial period. Masters of law and students of law are mentioned in inscriptions, the latter with frequency.

For the purposes of this introduction, other subjects of study in the Roman schools require no more than a cursory reference. Arithmetic was taught in the schools, as is indicated by Horace, but we know little of what was done in the subject in his day, although there are some indications that the decimal system of notation may have been known much earlier than has been supposed. No advance was made upon the knowledge formerly possessed by the Greeks in arithmetic and geometry, which suffered in the estimation of scholars by their supposed alliance with astrology. The Romans were by no means the equals of the Alexandrian Greeks in mathematical attainments. Neither did they study natural history at first hand, but only from Greek texts, which were gradually corrupted and confused by the introduction of superstitious auguries and

credulous allegories and fables.

210 The study of agriculture flourished among the Romans, but in a private and individual way, and by means of books rather than schools. Medicine was a purely Greek art, although under the later Empire the Arabic physicians had already begun to dispute the palm with the Greeks; this art also depended upon books and individual instruction but not schools. The same general status is characteristic of architecture and military science. Geography, music and astronomy were actually  
215 taught in school, but only in the first of these subjects did the Romans show any originality or tendency to add to the sum of human knowledge. The measurement of land, however, was so important from a legal and military point of view that special schools of surveying were established under the Empire, the first impulse having been given by Caesar, who summoned Greek teachers in this field from Alexandria to Rome.