CHAPTER FIVE

TEACHERS, SCHOOLS AND PUPILS IN FLORENCE DURING THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

Elementary Teachers and Schools of Reading (and Writing)

The largest sector of pre-university education in the city of Florence during the fifteenth century was elementary teaching, consisting mainly of instruction in reading, although some maestri di fanciulli or maestri di scuola (as the doctores or magistri puerorum of the thirteenth and fourteenth century were now often called) taught writing too. This initial phase of education remained entirely private in Florence: the larger towns of Florentine Tuscany, such as Colle Valdelsa, Pescia, Pistoia, Prato, San Gimignano or San Miniato, sometimes appointed elementary teachers alongside secondary grammar teachers (see above pp. 268 ff.), but in Florence elementary teachers either ran their own schools, or worked as private tutors residing in the households of prosperous families.

The most comprehensive profile of the Florentine populace as a whole was the Catasto of 1427, according to which (as will be seen below p. 447) the largest group of children in education were attending elementary schools of reading (and sometimes writing). The Catasto of 1427, as has already been seen (ch. 1 above), provided a wide-ranging portrait of the assets and activities of the Florentine population, including a significant, albeit sporadic, window onto their educational habits; subsequent Catasti in mid-century (for example in 1458) are less revealing about education. But a new Catasto, compiled in 1480, although not so rich a source with regard to family wealth and other demographic, economic and social data, provides more comprehensive evidence regarding children’s education than even the Catasto of 1427. The officials in 1480 ordered Florentine residents to provide full information about male family members, declaring what trade or profession they were pursuing, and what their salary was:

Et essendo maschi, dicha che exercitio o arte fanno et se stessi con altri, con chi et a che exercitio o arte et quanto anno di salario l’anno.  

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1 See Appendix 2.
This instruction was interpreted by heads of households to include children at school, with the result that, out of the 803 boys recorded as engaged in some kind of formal education, again the largest group consisted of pupils learning to read (see below pp. 462–63).

Despite the clear evidence that more Florentine children received elementary education than any other form of instruction, less is known about Florence’s reading (and writing) schools than about the two types of secondary education—abacus and grammar schools. There are a number of reasons for this anomaly. The main grammar teachers in Florence during the fifteenth were salaried by the commune, so that public records of their appointments and payments have normally survived. Grammar teachers often worked in partnership and sometimes employed assistants (ripetitori) as well, so that contracts for business associations have occasionally been preserved too. Grammar teachers sometimes handed on their premises to their successors: a physical grammar school is actually known to have existed in Florence for most of the fifteenth century, a location that a succession of teachers rented either individually or collectively. This school was situated on the first floor above a warehouse (fondaco) in the square known as Orsanmichele, opposite the famous oratory. It was let by the charitable magistracy known as the Bigallo, and so records survive of the rental agreements, including the names of teachers (see pp. 402 ff below). Florentine abacus masters, like elementary teachers, were entirely private in the fifteenth century, but they too, like grammarians, often worked together in partnerships, so that contracts of business associations have similarly sometimes survived. Moreover, abacus teachers tended to work in established premises or schools, and so rental agreements and property purchases have often survived, facilitating the process of identification (see pp. 362 ff below). Elementary education, on the other hand, was a much less organized and formal operation than either grammar or abacus schools. Almost all elementary reading (and/or writing) teachers worked individually, so that there are few surviving partnership agreements. Unlike abacus or grammar teachers, there is little indication that they worked in long established schools, handing on premises from one generation to the next. A number (for example perhaps the three women known to have taught reading in the fifteenth century) possibly took boys (and/or) girls into their own houses to teach reading, so that no records of rental for teaching premises have survived. Grammar teachers were usually laymen, and almost all known abacus