CHAPTER 14

The Seducer’s Tongue: Oral and Moral Issues in Medieval Erotodidactic Schooltexts

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Through erotodidactic texts many generations of medieval schoolboys in Western Europe were introduced to sexuality, and taught how to seduce girls. Such teachings gave vital importance to a young man’s choice of words and to how he used his oral skills for seduction. The way he seduced with words would also show his good breeding and his ‘urbanity’, or courteous behaviour (as opposed to country manners, considered the epitome of commonness). And, in an era where schoolchildren had to use their memory because of scarcity of material on which to write, some of these verse works, with their patterns for seduction, were expected to be learnt by heart and then recited, like other elementary schooltexts.

Erotodidactics was coined by Alison Goddard Elliott in her edition of the twelfth-century text Facetus ‘Moribus et vita’ and I apply it to those texts that aim to train men in seducing women, and especially, but not only, young boys in seducing maidens, giving specific advice on how to talk and how to act.1

The first steps of the child in school were based on oral teaching. In many places in Western Europe, one of the first things students learnt was to memorize and recite the Psalter and prayers. Even in the fifteenth century students learnt their letters, spelling, and vocabulary from school materials like the tabula, which included the basic prayers (Pater Noster, Credo, Ave Maria), the seven Psalms of repentance and the first parts of Donatus.2 The student started by memorizing and reciting the correct answers catechism-style: The master asks his students, ‘What do you read?’; they respond, ‘I do not read, I listen’. ‘To what do you listen?’ ‘I listen to the tabula’.3 In the fifteenth century ‘important aspects of elementary education, and even higher levels of instruction,

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3 ‘Es tu scolaris?’ ‘Sum’. ‘Quid legis?’ ‘Non lego sed audio’. ‘Quid audis?’ ‘Tabula[m]’, quoted, translated and commented upon by Scheffler in his Schools and Schooling, p. 99 and n. 54.
remained essentially aural/oral experiences'. Orality also was often present in vernacular schooltexts, composed usually in rhymed form so as to facilitate memorizing and reciting them. We should add to the crucial role of orality in the medieval schoolroom the practice of oral debates based on dialectics, one of the *trivium* disciplines. I will address this later. The other important oral practice in school was dictation. Dictare meant ‘to dictate’ as well as ‘to compose’: the master often dictated his lesson, articulating distinctly so that students could write down his oral performance.

We must, then, consider the medieval *artes amandi* against this background of schools in which the spoken word had a fundamental role. It was only natural to rely on speech, in a world where writing materials (paper, parchment) were scarce and expensive.

Of course there is no subject closer to the hearts of gossipers than sexual relationships, therefore it comes as no surprise that discretion was among the principal pieces of advice given by erotodidactic texts to the would-be seducer. Obviously, medieval Christian moralists decried this kind of text. Naturally enough, they were not amused by these works, and protested against their use and diffusion among young men – without much success, though, as these titles kept appearing in collections of schoolbooks, where they influenced literary works at least until the fifteenth century, and were read up until, at least, the seventeenth century.

However, the Middle Ages was an era of extreme contrasts, even of contradictions. That moralist preachers and writers had an important social

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4 Scheffler, *Schools and Schooling* p. 99 and n. 55