INTRODUCTION

I first met Richard Fazzini an unmentionable number of years ago when we sat next to each other in class, reading Middle Egyptian texts with Henry Fischer. So, on the occasion of his Festschrift, I think it would be fitting to return to the school milieu as a way of reminding us of the wisdom and insights he has taught us all on such a wide range of subjects, from his excavations at the Mut precinct and his contributions to the study of Third Intermediate Period iconography and religion, to say nothing of his delight in Egyptomania and popular perceptions of Egypt. Above all, I offer this essay as a small repayment to Richard’s generosity to students and colleagues alike.

We know more about Egyptian education in the Ramesside Period than for any other period, yet there are still many important questions that remain unresolved. As part of a much broader study that I am in the process of preparing, I would like to address one aspect of this vast and complex issue—how did Ramesside scribal students learn to write their Late Egyptian dialect? Although some of our most important manuscripts of Middle Egyptian texts were produced for didactic purposes during the New Kingdom, instruction in Late Egyptian must certainly have been the chief objective of scribal training for the vast majority of students. After all, what could be more practical than the ability to read and write in the contemporary dialect of one’s era? To be sure, instructional material in Middle Egyptian comprises a substantial portion of the evidence on Ramesside education overall, but skill in what had essentially become an obsolete dialect in daily usage most likely would have represented a later specialization in the curriculum. During the Ramesside Period, the vast preponderance of Middle Egyptian texts with known provenances, whether on ostraca or papyri, derive from the specialized environment of Deir el-Medina (and the Theban West Bank generally).
where the older dialect still had an important function as the formal language, an “officialese,” so to speak, employed in a wide range of high-register texts such as royal inscriptions, tomb texts, the religious afterlife works such as the Book of the Dead, and other materials connected with what one might rightly describe as the mortuary industry of Thebes.4

What Identifies a Manuscript as Didactic?

My discussion here shall concentrate on the collection of the student texts generally known as Late-Egyptian Miscellanies,5 with some occasional references to The Satirical Letter.6 Some of the literary tales published in Gardiner’s Late-Egyptian Stories may have also come out of the didactic process, but since most of those papyri lack what are probably the most reliable indications of didactic materials—a high degree of repetitiveness and preservation in many copies or editions—we can not be certain as to their nature. In this preliminary study, I shall restrict the discussion almost entirely to papyri, since, with few exceptions, we identify texts on ostraca as being thematically didactic because they possess parallels on papyri, rather than the other way around. The individual papyri among the Miscellanies are essentially collections of works with a similar tone and subject matter; many are model letters or else texts thematically similar to The Satirical on the Trades. These texts share several characteristics: repetition or copying of certain texts; specialized vocabulary and stock phraseology connected to this milieu; and marked references to teachers and student-teacher relationship in titles, as well as to the learning process and the schoolroom milieu. In addition, we can speak of a distinctive appearance that these papyri present: frequent use of rubrics, particularly at the beginning of each section; rubricized goh-signs to mark their close; dates that most probably indicated the completion of a lesson unit;7 and a special orientation of fiber and text common to nearly all “literary” papyri.8 A frequently present, but less reliable, feature of didactic materials is the presence of “verse points,” a detail that I shall examine at greater length near the end of this paper.

At the risk of exaggerating somewhat, one might say that the contrast in quality between the fluid, clear, elegant handwriting and the numerous orthographical and grammatical inaccuracies in these texts is one of the most curious aspects of these papyri.9 The scripts are usually quite studied, to use an appropriate description. In fact, the high quality of handwriting is often such that these documents sometimes can appear like exercises in calligraphy, even if the hieratic forms used are hardly free of errors.10 These papyri leave one with the impression that the chief objective at this stage of instruction was to produce documents

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8 For a description of the manner in which documentary papyri were handled, see Jaroslav Černý, Late Egyptian Letters, Biae 9 (Brussels: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1939), xvii–xx. The reason for this arrangement perhaps lay in the fact that papyrus was available in rolls, where the side with the horizontal fibers running parallel to the outside upper edge was normally placed on the inside surface of the roll. Apparently, this arrangement allowed for easier storage of rolls. Consequently, the surface with this fiber orientation was always the better protected of the two surfaces.

9 Significantly, Alan H. Gardiner, in his introduction to his edition of the major Late Egyptian student papyri, frequently uses the word “uncial,” to describe the handwriting, thereby employing a term frequently used to describe the calligraphic hands of classical and medieval manuscripts; see Late-Egyptian Miscellanies, xii–xiii passim [henceforth cited here as Gardiner, LEM]. At the same time, he also rightly describes “the extreme carelessness of the orthography,” ibid., xi.

10 These inaccurate forms are catalogued in Gardiner, LEM, 140a–141.