

Teaching the Classics: Pedagogy and Conservatism in the Roman Empire

Though scholars have long noted the inherent conservatism displayed in the reading lists for students of grammar and rhetoric proposed by such educators as Quintilian, Aulus Gellius, and Ausonius, little attention has been devoted to their pedagogical concerns in constructing these lists. That is to say, each teacher's focus on past authors to the exclusion of more contemporary literature reflects not necessarily his own ideas about which authors are clearly exemplary, but rather which authors would best serve the students receiving their education within their particular social milieux. Of the reading lists provided by the three authors, Ausonius' is by far the most conservative, and I argue that the cultural, social, and political environment of late fourth century Gaul particularly informed his choices about what to include.

In this paper, I first consider Quintilian's decision to formulate a canon of great masters in order to better accommodate the influx of students seeking upward social mobility that began in the early empire and continued into the Flavian period when Quintilian was writing. Then, I demonstrate how Aulus Gellius, writing about a century after Quintilian, when grammarians such as himself had become the gatekeepers to elite culture through education (Kaster 1988), offers his *Attic Nights* to an audience looking for an easy way to learn the language of the elite without devoting years to the study of literature. Finally, Ausonius, who was no doubt influenced by the two preceding authors (Green 1991), puts forth a decidedly backward-looking canon of authors in the *Protrepticus* written to his grandson at the end of the fourth century. What is remarkable about Ausonius' conservatism, however, is that it is more pronounced than that of his predecessors. The most recent of the suggested authors, the Flavian Valerius Flaccus, is older than some of the authors proposed by Aulus Gellius writing two centuries earlier. The list even scales back the Silver Latin authors, which were included in the Gallo-Roman school

text, believed to date to the early fourth century, that survives in the manuscript of Celtes (Dionisotti 1982).

Ausonius, who as an established grammarian was called to the imperial court in Trier to tutor the prince Gratian, enjoyed considerable political influence when the young Gratian ruled as sole emperor after his father's death and before moving his court to Milan. In this capacity, the primary aim of Ausonius' pedagogy, as reflected in Gratian's policies, was stability. Thus, a canon of early literature already fossilized as the language of high-ranking Roman officials was the key to educating future members of the Roman elite and ensured the continuity of Roman culture in a time when political instability was predominant. Religious instability was also patent, with non-Christians still trying to assert their superiority in an increasingly Christian Roman Empire and varying types of Christianity enjoying waves of dominance and persecution as emperors adhering to each sect came and went. In this regard it is significant that the latest work on Ausonius' list pre-dates even the earliest Christian works of literary merit. As a whole, the list consists entirely of non-controversial works, something Ausonius would have thought necessary as a teacher educating students in the politically and religiously fraught fourth century.

While Ausonius takes a similarly conservative stance in constructing his reading list to Quintilian and Aulus Gellius, his reasons for doing so are different. The conservatism evident in the *Protrepticus* reflects more than anything the atmosphere of the fourth century and presents a canon of stable, non-controversial literary works of the past as a way of handling the turmoil of the present.

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