

Robert Black. *Education and Society in Florentine Tuscany: Teachers, Pupils and Schools, c. 1250-1500.* Leiden: Brill, 2007. xxviii + 838 pp. \$222.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-15853-5.

Reviewed by David Lines (Department of Italian, University of Warwick)
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Tuscan Education in the Renaissance: The Exceptionalism of Florence

This book is the first of a two-volume study that places Florentine education within the much broader context of pedagogical practice in Tuscany as a whole during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Its massive documentation is a testimony to years of meticulous, collaborative scholarship that has explored numerous fondi, both in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze and in numerous provincial and communal archives.

The volume discussed here is made up of five chapters: “Literacy in Florence, 1427,” “The School Curriculum in Florentine Tuscany and in the City of Florence,” “The Decline of Church Education and the Rise of Lay Schools in Tuscany,” “The Rise of Communal Schools in Florentine Tuscany: 1262 to 1400,” and “Teachers, Schools and Pupils in Florence during the Fifteenth Century.” It is completed by eight documentary appendices: “Education in the Florentine Catasto, 1427,” “Education in the Florentine Catasto, 1458,” “Communal Schoolteachers in Florence up to 1500,” “Communal Schoolteachers in Florentine Tuscany (and Siena) up to 1400,” “Education in Unpublished Florentine *Ricordanze* (up to 1507),” “Education in the Matriculation Records of the Florentine Company of the Purification,” “Additional Documents on Education in Arezzo Discovered since 1996,” and “Documents on Education in Sansepolcro up to 1400.”

According to the preface, the planned second volume will include four chapters, respectively on communal schools in Italy during the fifteenth century, the revival of ecclesiastical schools in the fifteenth century (mainly in Florence), female education, and a comparison

of education and society between Tuscany and the rest of Italy. There will also be a number of appendices, including “a comprehensive series of bio-bibliographic profiles of schoolteachers known to have worked in Florence and Florentine Tuscany from the mid-thirteenth to the end of the fifteenth century” (p. xx).

An appropriate subtitle to this study might have been “The Exceptionalism of Florence.” Time and again, Robert Black uses the extraordinary range of his documentation to show how practices in Florence tended to be unusual when compared with what was happening elsewhere in Tuscany (although the cases of Siena and Lucca are explicitly omitted from Black’s analysis). In particular, Black explores the phenomenon of “elementary” (i.e., reading and writing) schools and their relationship to two kinds of “secondary” schools, which taught abacus and grammar (Latin). Black argues that grammar schools were far weaker and more poorly attended even in fifteenth-century Florence than was the case elsewhere in Tuscany, and he notes that many grammar teachers in Florence had to be brought in from the outside because of a poor internal supply. Furthermore, the grammar curriculum on the whole was little different from that used for teaching Latin in the Middle Ages? “only from the 1470s on does one see new texts being used in Florence (Cicero’s *Letters*, Lorenzo Valla’s *Elegantiae*) as well as a significant rise in the number of private tutors, almost always attached to eminent Florentine noble families. The main factor behind this phenomenon was, according to Black, the strong Florentine emphasis on commerce and wealth; the practical orienta-

tion of elementary and abacus schools was best suited to Florentines across the social spectrum, resulting in large-scale literacy. (Black, in fact, defends Giovanni Villani's estimate of school children in Florence in the 1330s as entirely plausible). Training in Latin, instead, was something pursued mainly by those wishing to become notaries, lawyers, physicians, or theologians.

Black's conclusions will not be especially surprising to those familiar with his previous work, but, in the present volume, he considerably expands on the subject of his *Humanism and Education in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (2001). There, he mainly took into consideration schoolbooks reflecting educational practice in Tuscany; here, his focus is more on archival material that tells us (although in a patchy way) who was teaching what, where, when, and with what remuneration. Especially useful from this perspective are the teaching contracts that survive for elementary teachers from various Tuscan localities; for a number of reasons, these tend not to have a counterpart in Florence, where Black must therefore fall back on different sources.

Black's archival sources include, for Florence, dozens of unpublished *ricordanze* from Florentine families, and he also uses, to novel effect, various Florentine *catasti* (1427, 1458, and 1480), as well as other documentation found in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, such as the Mercanzia, Compagnia poi Magistrato del Bigallo, and the Ufficiali della Notte. As is well known, the *catasto* of 1427 was mainly employed by David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber for insights into Florentine social and family life. Black examines it closely for information on how many Florentines were able to record their *portate* in their own hand; from this, he makes inferences about the degree of literacy in Florence (chapter 1). The Ufficiali della Notte yield records about teachers in Florence accused of pederasty. The records of the Company of the Purification sometimes indicate whether its members are studying at school or at the university. Equally important is Black's research into numerous local archives throughout Tuscany; special appendices are dedicated to Arezzo and Sansepolcro, but he has also uncovered useful documentation for many other noteworthy localities, including Pistoia and San Gimignano. By his own admission, for many places documentation before 1500 is scarce when compared with the sixteenth century; others may take up the implied invitation to continue the trajectory of Black's work beyond 1500.

The work's main achievement is to provide the fullest documentation to date—both in the appendices and

through numerous full quotations in the text—of the state of pre-university education in Tuscany. Its broad chronological limits allow Black to discuss change over time, something that is achieved in particular detail in chapter 5 on fifteenth-century Florence. The publication of many documents (practically all presented in the original Latin or vernacular) is an indispensable aid to further research, and the prosopographical information (both offered here and planned for the next volume) has obvious historical merit. It is also valuable to learn more about the development of private vs. communally funded education and the rise of schools, such as the elementary institution of Orsanmichele in Florence. Especially useful is Black's discussion of the configuration of the Florentine and Tuscan school curriculum. There one hears how students went about learning to read and write (both in the vernacular and in Latin), what the study of the abacus involved, and in what phases grammar and rhetoric were learned. Black has once again shown that education must be studied at the local level, on the ground, in terms of practice witnessed by documents and schoolbooks, rather than through generalizations often derived from ideal plans of study or rhetorical compositions. His work, therefore, is quite different in orientation and conclusions from that of other scholars who have worked in the field, chiefly Eugenio Garin and Paul F. Grendler. It should be noted, however, that Black's views (for example, on the use of books in Latin to first approach reading, or on the meaning of such terms as *latinizanti*) are not always accepted by other scholars. A very good book to read alongside Black's, also for a sense of the historiographical debate, is Paul F. Gehl's *A Moral Art: Grammar, Society, and Culture in Trecento Florence* (1993), where the same claim for the exceptionalism of Florence is made, but where the analysis rests on an examination of different sources (mainly surviving schoolbooks) and where teaching practice is explained differently. Although Black corrects or fills out Gehl's contribution on various points of detail, Gehl's work still remains a very rich and important study, and several conclusions are surprisingly similar, although arrived at from very different angles.

As many will know, the field of Renaissance education is one of the most fractious and controversial in Renaissance studies. Upholders of the merits and revolutionary practices of the humanists are regularly chastised by (and, in turn, attack) others who see more continuity between the classroom approaches of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Others, while viewing humanism as bringing about a real change, see this in

negative terms when compared to the contributions of the scholastics. Disagreements abound about the value of using programmatic statements as historical evidence, and, in contrast, about the extent to which one should rely on such sources as schoolbooks for evidence as to what went on in the classroom. Black's position emphasizes the continuity between educational structures and practices from around 1250 to 1500, strongly privileges archival sources, and tends to identify notes and glosses in surviving schoolbooks with the upper-limit of what was taught in the classroom.

The book's numerous lists, tables, graphs, and quotations are central to its purpose and aid in interpreting the data, but at times they interrupt the flow of the main argument and hamper the communication of a smooth narrative. On specific points, details are described well but leave the reader wishing for broader analysis. The following are examples of topics that the reviewer found especially interesting, but which could have become clearer with a bit of elaboration.

Black mentions salaries quite often. For example, on several pages, he discusses the first Tuscan grammar teachers whose salaries are known. (This information might better have been summarized by a table or placed in a separate appendix.) The salaries in question could have provided an opportunity to set matters in a broader context (e.g., to compare salaries of schoolteachers with those of other professional groups) and therefore provide further considerations on social status, which Black tends to offer only as asides. Equally, although Black notes significant variations in pay for grammar teachers in fifteenth-century Florence, he never indicates *why* that might be.

The practice of pederasty is another instance in which further explanation would have been welcome. The documentation offered suggests that sodomy could be a serious problem, yet in some cases denunciations of teachers by their (former) students (or their fathers) seem ambiguous as to whether the chief complaint was the sodomy itself or the fact that no money changed hands. Also, Black notes that several teachers of abacus were reprimanded for sodomy, but he does not state whether they had more opportunity than others, whether the age of the pupils might have been a factor, whether such teachers were typically prevented from further teaching or given other punishments, or whether the practice was more common in Florence than elsewhere. It would at least have been useful to be directed to secondary literature on the sub-

ject.

In the case of public and private teaching in Florence, one wonders how this relationship worked exactly. We hear of public teachers who were also engaged in private teaching, as is illustrated by the table of teachers in Orsanmichele and those in public grammar schools. But why did parents send their children to private schools when public education in grammar was available? And to what extent was the curriculum and typical number of pupils in the private setting comparable to what was offered in public schools?

In terms of content, the main points of disappointment concern Siena and Lucca, which are explicitly excluded. But for Siena, Black points to a forthcoming study by Peter Denley; indeed, Denley's book, *Teachers and Schools in Siena, 1357-1500* (2007), appeared shortly after Black's. In any case, Siena is less absent in Black's book than one might think: he lists schoolteachers in Siena from 1241 to 1448, and occasionally mentions Siena or Siennese teachers in notes and documents throughout. As for Lucca, whose absence is due to its position outside of the political boundaries of Tuscany, future explorations of its educational patterns will be a welcome complement to Black's masterful research here.

In conclusion, Black's book provides a goldmine of previously unavailable documentation, which repays careful reading even though it may seem overwhelming. It will appeal most to those who like their history raw rather than predigested. One learns a great deal about the practicalities of teaching, including the locations of schools, the rate of staff turnover, the workings of Florentine schools as businesses (*botteghe*), the ambitions of parents for their children to climb the social ladder, and the moral dangers that education was meant to prevent but which it nonetheless presented. And one sees the ways in which Latin culture tended to be looked down on in Florence and why; as Black observes, this might go some way toward explaining why the early humanists there had to defend themselves and their programs of study with such vigor. (This is also an interesting theme in Gehl's book.) One can only look forward to Black's second volume, which will offer us an even fuller picture of Tuscan education along with individual portraits of its teachers. But already in the first volume, he has offered an indispensable study that should be (but, given its prohibitive price, is not likely to be) on the shelf of anyone dealing with Italian education.

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