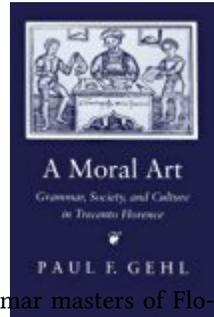


H-Net Reviews

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Paul F. Gehl. *A Moral Art: Grammar, Society, and Culture in Trecento Florence*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993. x + 304 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-2836-4.

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In *A Moral Art*, Gehl constructs a portrait of the attitudes of the elementary grammar teachers and the curriculum of the grammar schools of trecento Florence based on a survey of existing grammar and reading books that can be identified as being from Florence or Tuscany. This survey is included as the appendix to the book. Gehl defines grammar as he sees the people of the time to have understood it, “as an introduction to the meaning of Latin culture within a bilingual civilization” (p. 18).

Gehl chose Florence as the focus of his study for several reasons: (1) the amount and quality of the available source material; (2) Florence was the commercial and intellectual center of Tuscany; (3) Florence boasts a number of famous sons; (4) Florence had no university and thus grammar masters were much more independent than their counterparts in other areas of Italy; and (5) Florence is geographically separate from the rest of Europe and so the products of its educational structure are easier to identify. Gehl studies the period from about 1260-70 to the 1390s. Thus, Gehl interprets the fourteenth century broadly, because around 1240 some fairly solid records of municipal support for grammar schools in Tuscany appear; by the mid-1200s, the bishops had retreated from local politics, leaving the conduct of public affairs, including education, in the hands of the cities; and the 1300s marked Italy’s independence from French cultural domination.

The overall thrust of *A Moral Art* is that the trecento Florentine grammar masters clung tightly to the medieval (specifically, monastic) use of grammar as a moralizing element; that there was no standardized structure of grammar education in Italy; and that there was in fact no sharp distinction between late medieval and humanist grammar pedagogy in fourteenth-century Flo-

rence. According to Gehl, the grammar masters of Florence (largely because the city had no university) were insulated from the specialized scholastic curriculum and also from the humanist innovations. The grammar masters of Florence concentrated their Latin instruction not on reading the classics for their own sake or developing a polished Latin style, but rather on the Latin tradition contained in moral texts. Thus, as the students were learning Latin, they were also learning moral principles.

Gehl argues that previous studies have concentrated on the humanists’ work in the fifteenth century, while the roots of humanism in the fourteenth century have been ignored. Thus, humanism and its achievements are not clearly understood. In order to comprehend the background of humanism, Gehl asserts that earlier misconceptions must be discarded: there was not “a sharp and sudden contrast between the pedagogy introduced by the second generation of humanists about 1400 and the medieval program against which they polemicized” (p. 2). Gehl also argues that to study the pedagogy we must concentrate, not on the leading intellectual figures, but on the humble elementary grammar masters. It is from them that we can learn about Latin pedagogy.

Gehl asserts that modern treatments of Italian schooling are inadequate. Garin and Grendler, e.g., interpret the polemical writing of the humanists against scholastic education uncritically, thus setting up a “medieval strawman, ‘medieval pedagogy,’” which is criticized mainly because of its failure to appreciate the classical Latin style (p. 8). Gehl criticizes Grendler and Garin for attributing substantial reform to the early fifteenth century, thus treating the trecento “monochromatically” (p. 8). On the other hand, Gehl finds that the interpretation of Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine “accords bet-

ter than Garin's with the limited evidence about when humanist thought effectively took over the elementary classrooms of Renaissance Italy" (p. 9). But he criticizes their study as being limited, since it concentrates on major figures in the humanist reform movement and, by minimizing the work of the educational reformers of the early fifteenth century, Grafton and Jardine overestimate the positive qualities of medieval education. Neither of these approaches sees the fourteenth century as anything but medieval and neither distinguishes the differences in education practice between Italy and the rest of Europe. Gehl, like Robert Black, believes that these scholars have argued for too sharp a break between medieval and humanist pedagogy. So Gehl places himself in the camp with Paul O. Kristeller, Charles Davis, Ronald Witt, and Francesco Bruni, who do not see humanism as a sharp contrast with the Middle Ages.

Gehl charges that historians have tended to search for organization and standardization in educational practice where there is none. Gehl states that "the most important single lesson of this book is that trecento Florence had a teaching corps, a teaching tradition, and a restricted Latin curriculum that were unique to itself" (p. 239). He argues present historiography has overlooked local/regional educational diversity and furthermore notes that present secondary literature has commonly misread the sources relating to medieval pedagogy. Medieval curricula, Gehl says, reflect the ideal course of education and not necessarily the course that was practiced in the schools.

Gehl argues that the humanists in Florence did not exert a profound influence on the city. The population of Florence developed a strong vernacular culture, one which saw little value in the study of Latin. More-

over, there was not enough political support or intellectual depth within the city to make the founding of a university successful, and grammar masters within the city continued to hold to medieval methods of instruction. According to Gehl, the grammar masters found that the only appeal the study of Latin could have for the commercially/professionally minded parents of their pupils was in its moral aspect, and so they tended to discard from their curriculum any texts which might seem frivolous or immoral. The curriculum of the Florentine grammar masters, then, emphasized the moral aspects of grammar study, and their very conservativeness in this field—"a classic case" of conservatism and complacency—prevented any far-reaching changes in the nature of education (p. 237). The Florentine masters were not particularly creative or educated, and it was simpler for them to adjust the reading list in response to criticism than it was to reformulate the entire curriculum. So it would seem that while other areas of Italy offered increased grammar instruction, Florence offered a diminished program.

A Moral Art is a welcome addition to the ranks of educational studies, a field which has received increased attention in recent years. Gehl's book, based on sound primary research, presents an interesting study of grammar masters of trecento Florence. He has convincingly argued that Florence is unique and has rightly noted that it is impossible to devise a standardized, comprehensive system of Italian education of the Middle Ages or Renaissance, because there was none. The book, however, does not necessarily support Gehl's contention that there was little difference between late medieval and humanist grammar pedagogy in Italy of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

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