

TEACHERS AFRAID OF THEIR PUPILS: PRUDENTIUS’ *PERISTEPHANON* 9 IN A SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

Prudentius’ *Peristephanon* 9 treats the martyrdom of Cassian, a teacher of stenography who was purportedly murdered by a stylus-wielding throng of his own students. The poem offers itself as a rich source of information about the presence of normative violence in ancient education and suggests how students may have internalized such treatment and responded to it. Parallels are drawn between this tale and others from ancient sources to demonstrate that neither the mode of murder nor the identities of perpetrators and victim were entirely unique. Ancient readers might have been bemused by some of the gruesome details of the tale, but would not have been surprised by either the disciplinarian nature of the school teacher or the resentful feelings of the students.

Le *Peristephanon* 9 de Prudence traite du martyr de Cassien, un professeur de sténographie qui a été prétendument assassiné par une foule de ses propres étudiants brandissant le stylet. Le poème s’offre comme une riche source d’informations sur la présence de la violence normative dans l’enseignement ancien et suggère comment les étudiants ont pu intérioriser un tel traitement et y avoir répondu. Des parallèles sont établis entre ce conte et d’autres provenant de sources anciennes pour démontrer que ni le mode de meurtre ni l’identité des auteurs et des victimes n’étaient entièrement uniques. Les anciens lecteurs ont peut-être été déconcertés par certains détails horribles du récit, mais ils n’ont été surpris ni par la nature disciplinaire du professeur d’école ni par les ressentiments des élèves.

ANCIENT HOUSEHOLDS AND SCHOOLS: TENSIONS AND VIOLENCE

This article concerns violence against slaves and/or lower-class children, as well as the kinds of retribution to which the victims took recourse.¹ It also deals with educators who exerted power and authority in a way that was not commensurate with their own relatively mediocre status in ancient society.

¹ Throughout this article, I quote Prudentius’ poem from Loeb Classical Library’s text and translation by H.J. Thomson (1953).

Violence in education and its use by lower-class educators have been central in the work of Mark Golden.

Long before ancient historians made children's emotions and agency a focus of their research agenda, Golden took up the challenge of describing how the presence of outsiders such as slaves and servants was particularly likely to introduce tensions within Athenian households.² Indeed, the sixth chapter ("Outsiders and Alliances") of his landmark monograph *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens* testifies to a remarkable academic courage and sense of adventure.³ Had not Sir Moses Finley himself warned against broad sweeping generalizations, based on modern prejudices and only supported by a small portion of selected sources?

There are too many variables that we cannot control. Modern psychology has been unable to reach any agreement in this field, and I remain a complete skeptic about the easy generalizations and causal statements of historians writing about a society that has long been dead and cannot be observed directly.⁴

Yet Golden convincingly demonstrated that more could and should be said. Not only did he analyze passages which reveal emotional ties that could arise between slaves and children, but also he showed that ancient aristocrats were aware that such relations could develop and tried to discourage too-close contacts. His suggestions even went further. Using a model developed by the eminent sociologist A.W. Gouldner, Golden asked what it could have meant for an Athenian child to receive orders from slave educators who were required to inculcate values that were not necessarily their own. Possibly, such slaves would discipline only flagrant and public misbehaviour, the minimum necessary to conform to the parents' and masters' expectations and wishes. In this way, Athenian children might have learned that it was public actions, not personal convictions, that mattered. Close alliances or associations possibly developed between children and slave educators to the exclusion of parents. Golden also invoked the Old South as comparative evidence against which to consider the link between slavery and violence in ancient Greece. In the former, the omnipresence of slaves has been said to have created a sense of insecurity amongst slave owners, who espoused the notion that frequent, cruel, and arbitrary punishments were not only acceptable, but even necessary. However, all this did not lead Golden to describe Athenian households as gruesome places of violence, sorrow, and tensions. He admits the possibility of a trade-off: though the presence of slaves indeed made society and families more violent, some may have developed open and

² For a recent volume focusing on children's agency and child culture, see [Laes and Vuolanto 2017](#).

³ Golden's 1990 book is now in its second edition. See [Golden 2015](#).

⁴ [Finley 1980](#): 108.

even deep emotional bonds with the social inferiors with whom they lived in close proximity. Although one does not need to be a historian to observe that human life experience is indeed open to almost endless variations and possibilities, social context inevitably plays a crucial orienting role; it is at this point that careful historical research is required.⁵

Ancient family history has been studied more intensively by historians of Roman society and of Late Antiquity than by Greek historians. Here, Keith Bradley's work has been very much in line with Golden's observations. Bradley's influential and engaging contributions have repeatedly pointed to the many factors that made Roman families emotionally unstable environments. Among these were the tensions and ambiguities caused by the omnipresence of the male and female slaves who acted as educators. These could exhibit affection toward their wards, but also degrees of sternness that we might consider harsh from our present-day, Western point of view.⁶ Although Bradley and other scholars of Roman childhood reject the impression that the world of classical antiquity was the proverbial nightmare from which children were to awake only in the twentieth century in the West,⁷ ancient historians widely agree that ancient society was an environment where casual violence was very much part and parcel of everyday life and figured implicitly in the contexts in which children were socialized and educated.⁸

This contribution deals with a remarkable case of violence in a Late Antique school context. One could argue that schools and households were quite different educational environments. In contrast to household slaves, schoolteachers did not live in close proximity to the children whom they taught, and they provided instruction for just a few hours a day on subjects that were entirely foreign to their pupils and often without immediate relevance to their daily reality. The relationship between pupils and teachers also differed from an apprenticeship in which artisans/masters became almost role models for the children with whom they would spend whole days.⁹ But household and school education shared some things in common. As in the household, so too in schools were educators mostly social inferiors; in addition, in both contexts, education, authority, and physical punishment were inextricably linked in the ancient mind (even in the case of apprenticeship, chastisement and brutality were regular presences).

A cursory glance at the ancient literary record reveals that teaching at schools went hand in hand with meting out physical punishments. Aristotle's

⁵ See Golden 2015: 119–140 (“Outsiders and Alliances”), and especially 132–136 for the Old South as comparative evidence.

⁶ Bradley 1991 is a collection of contributions that can still be considered a “classic” in the field.

⁷ Bradley 1991, Rawson 2003, and Laes 2011 take issue with the nightmare thesis as repeatedly stated by the so-called psychohistorians.

⁸ Laes 2005 links this with matters of education and schooling.

⁹ Frasca 1999.

argument that education and pain are closely connected is embedded in a tradition of education that included violence.¹⁰ Even limiting ourselves to the Latin literary sources, numerous examples come to the mind. Notorious are Horace's *plagiosus Orbilius*; Ovid's description of children with hands swollen from the rod; Martial's annoyance with his neighbour, the verbally abusive schoolmaster who disturbs his sleep; and Juvenal's biting satire on cruel and recalcitrant teachers.¹¹ *Manum ferulae subducere* ("to withdraw one's hand from the rod") was a phrase that suggested the end of schooldays, or at least the transition from the *grammaticus* to the *rhetor*.¹² In the so-called *colloquia* or conversation books meant for use in schools, it is stated unabashedly that the pupil who knows his lesson is praised and the one who fails is beaten.¹³

Nothing changed in Late Antique schools. Augustine mentions the blows he got from his teachers and the fact that his parents had a good laugh over it.¹⁴ In his *Protrepticus*, Ausonius exhorts his grandson not to fear the schoolmaster. The man looks forbidding because of his age, and his hard voice and short-tempered expression seem menacing, but the child is to endure all this with philosophical resignation: it would be a sign of weakness to fear the whip, the screaming, the blows, and the harsh words. The cane (*ferula*), rod (*virga*), and whip (*scutica*) are referred to as tools of the master. Ausonius even offers the boy the cold comfort that both his father and mother had to go through the same—an unmistakable indication of the fact that girls, too, had to put up with physical violence at school.¹⁵

With this in mind, it is remarkable that sociocultural historians have paid relatively little attention to a poem by one of the most important late ancient writers and a prolific poet, Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (348–after 405), which provides a rather pathetic description of the martyrdom of the schoolteacher Cassian of Imola at the hands of his heathen, vengeful, and frustrated pupils.¹⁶ In fact, *Peristephanon* 9 is nothing less than a gold mine

¹⁰ Arist. *Pol.* 8.1339a28.

¹¹ See Laes 2005: 78–82 for an extensive list of instances from Greek and Latin sources, both Christian and non-Christian. Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.70–71 and Suet. *Gram.* 9 on Orbilius; Ov. *Am.* 1.13.17–18 and August. *Soliloquies* 2.20 for children with swollen hands owing to the all too liberal use of the *ferula*; Mart. 9.68 and 14.80; Juv. 7. 213–232. Cf. also Sen. *Ep.* 94.9 for a teacher lacking self-control.

¹² Juv. 1.15–16: *et nos ergo manum ferulae subduximus, et nos/consilium dedimus Sullae*. The phrase is generally understood as the poet stating that he has been through the standard educational curriculum. The first part refers to having attended the teaching of the *grammaticus*, and the second part to the instruction by the *rhetor* with the rhetorical exercises of the *suasoriae*. See Courtney 1980: 69.

¹³ Dionisotti 1982: § 37. See also Dickey 2012/2015: 2.60–61 and 225.

¹⁴ August. *Conf.* 1.9.1; *De civ. D.* 21.14.

¹⁵ Auson. *Protrepticus ad nepotem* 14–34 (the suggestion that girls were beaten is in verse 33: *haec olim genitorque tuus genitrixque secuti*). Cf. also Mart. 9.68.1–2, where the schoolmaster is called a plague *pueris puellisque*.

¹⁶ For sociocultural history, Teitler 1980 is an exception, to which this chapter owes much.

of practical information about everyday life in ancient schools, which also offers insights into the agency and psychology of Roman children. In the third and fourth sections of this contribution, I will elaborate upon these aspects. But first, the literary context and the contents of this rather remarkable poem require explication.

PRUDENTIUS' *PERISTEPHANON* 9 AND THE LITERARY CONTEXT

Promotion of the cult of the martyrs is one of the main purposes of Prudentius' *Peristephanon* ("Crowns of the Martyrs"), a collection of 14 lyric poems on a wide range of Christian martyrs. Together with poems 11 and 12, *Peristephanon* 9, consisting of 53 disticha composed of a hexameter followed by an iambic trimeter, forms a triad of *itinerarium* or pilgrimage poems.

Readers learn immediately that the story *Peristephanon* 9 tells is situated in the northern Italian town of Forum Cornелиi, modern Imola (9.1–2). The traveller is the poet himself. On his spiritual journey toward Rome, he bows before the tomb containing the consecrated body of the holy martyr Cassian and repents his own sins and distresses of life (9.3–8). Lifting his face toward heaven, he confronts a colourful picture of the martyr bearing a thousand wounds and with skin covered in tiny pricks, surrounded by countless boys stabbing and piercing his body with little styluses (9.9–16). Appealing to the shrine's verger, the poet learns that what is depicted is no "vain old wife's tale" (*inanis aut anilis fabula*), for the story is recorded in books and is credible in its antiquity (9.17–20). The sacristan then tells the story: in times of cruel prosecution of the Christian faith, the teacher Cassian had refused to worship at the altars of the gods. The "contriver of punishments" (*poenarum artifex*, 9.33), learning that Cassian was teaching a company of young children, had him taken away as a prisoner and given as a present (*donetur*, 9.38) to his pupils. The martyr was stripped of his clothes, his hands were tied behind his back, and he was handed over to a band of pupils eager to punish him with their sharp styluses and wax tablets. The verger describes the torment in gruesome detail, highlighting the slow suffering wrought by the numerous light pricks (the agony worsened when the young boys grew fatigued) and emphasizing the cruelty of the scene by reporting the repeated harsh remarks of the vengeful pupils (9.43–92). Finally, the sacristan ends his story of Cassian's martyrdom, assuring the poet that the saint will undoubtedly hear with favour every prayer and fulfil each wish he finds acceptable (9.93–98). The poet tells his readers that he, embracing the altar and the tomb while shedding tears, prayed for the home he had left behind and for happiness to come. He was heard. He visited Rome, and found all well. He returned home to proclaim the praise of St. Cassian (9.101–106).¹⁷

Classicists have devoted attention to this remarkable poem.¹⁸ Both the sources and the *Nachleben* of the motif of so-called *vindicta scholarium*

¹⁷ Fux 2003: 322–324 offers a summary of the poem.

¹⁸ The fundamental and most detailed commentary by Fux 2003: 321–343 should be a starting point for any discussion on the matter.

(pupils punishing their teachers) have been highlighted, and will be further explored in the fourth section of this contribution. The almost sinister emphasis on the wounds afflicted—details that are said to be confirmed both in reliable books (*tradita libris*, 9.19) and in the colourful painting—fits well within the tradition of describing the passion of the martyrs imaginatively with strong visual images.¹⁹ Nesting the sacristan’s narrative within a narrative about the poet’s pilgrimage adds to this visual effect, as does the ingress to the story through the remarkably evocative painting;²⁰ the stylistic elaboration of abundant bloody details has been studied as an instance of *leptologia* or *enumeratio per partes*.²¹ An autobiographical reading of the poem has also been cautiously suggested; indeed, the poet says at the outset that he, in tears, was meditating on his own “wounds” (*dum lacrimans mecum reputo mea vulnera*, 9.7). Throughout the poem, the insistence on the enmity caused by literary education is striking. Could one suppose that Prudentius too had aroused enmity through his career in letters? Did he suffer strong antipathy in his native Spain (9.103)? And was his journey to Rome in some way caused by the necessity of circumventing the threats such opposition presented?²²

RECONSTRUCTING THE CLASSROOM

Let us turn now to the unfortunate Cassian. Regardless of how one weighs the degree of “historical truth” in the story of his martyrdom (we do not even know when his persecution would have taken place),²³ it remains a fact that Prudentius conjured a plausible setting and circumstance for his poem. It is possible to ask what exactly Cassian was teaching, how old his pupils were, to which social class they belonged, how large the class was, and whether it included girls. The poem points to answers to these questions, and, in addition, contains some remarkable details about vacation days and the way lessons were taught. These issues, though obvious and pertinent, have seldom been touched upon by commentators.²⁴

First and foremost: Cassian was not what we would label an ordinary schoolteacher, even though he is described as a *magister litterarum*. On

¹⁹ Roberts 1993: 140 on *repraesentatio* and the sermons of St. Augustine. See also Fruchtmann 2014 on Prudentius’ pedagogical ekphrasis.

²⁰ Roberts 1993: 140–141.

²¹ Roberts 1993: 141–143.

²² Roberts 1993: 145–148; Rivero García 1996: 162–163. See also Fux (2003: 321), who considers the relationship between Prudentius and Cassian of Imola as “une figure qui lui est proche, et qui est délibérément présentée comme médiocre.”

²³ Teitler 1980: 5. Bless-Grabher 1978: 63–64 has suggested martyrdom in 303, though there is no way of being certain.

²⁴ Apart from Teitler 1980, only Roberts 1993: 144 has briefly addressed the question, stating that “students of the *notarius* would be older and more physically capable of turning on their teacher.”

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several occasions, Prudentius explicitly points out that Cassian's main profession was somewhat different (9.21–24):

*Praefuerat studiis puerilibus et grege multo
saepius magister litterarum sederat,
verba notis brevibus comprehendere cuncta peritus
raptimque punctis dicta praepetibus sequi.*

He had been in charge of a school for boys and sat as a teacher of reading and writing with a great throng round him, and he was skilled in putting every word in short signs and following speech quickly with swift pricks in the wax.

In fact, as a *notarius*, Cassian mainly taught stenography. Throughout the poem, stenographical metaphors are used. *Punctum* could denote a stenographical mark:²⁵ the references to the teacher's skin broken with tiny pricks (*ruptam minutis praeferens punctis cutem*, 9.12) or the sadistic exclamation of the pupils, "we like making pricks" (*pangere puncta libet*, 9.77), thus gain an extra dimension.²⁶

This leads to the question of the pupils and their age, too. They must have acquired some reading and writing skills before moving on to stenography.²⁷ It is true that Prudentius once explicitly calls one of them an *infans* (*Maior tortor erat, qui summa pupugerat infans*, 9.59)²⁸ and makes a general reference to the students' age category as *infantia* (*nec dulcis ulli disciplina infantiae est*, 9.28). Once, they are referred to as "the little ones" (*parvulis*, 9.38). But by Late Antiquity, the term *infantia* was used more loosely, and it certainly no longer referred exclusively to the very young (that is, children up to seven years of age).²⁹ I roughly estimate that Cassian's pupils belonged to the age category of 10–15 years, old enough to have acquired some basic skills of reading and writing, though some of them probably were only seven or eight years of age. As a collective, they had not yet reached the biological stage of adolescence (*impube vulgus*, 9.26), for some lacked physical strength and vigour.³⁰ The use of the rather vague term *pueri* is surely suitable to this

²⁵ Auson. *Ephemeris* 7.1–2 and 4–5; Jer. *Ep.* 60.19. See Teitler 1980: 7; 1993: 143; Fux 2003: 327.

²⁶ The metaphor of writing and torture has been discussed by Ross 1995.

²⁷ Here Fux (2003: 329) is unconvincing, claiming that the art of stenography must have been so well dispersed that children learned it already on an elementary level of schooling. In fact, Suet. *Titus* 3.3 does not suggest anything about the age at which emperor Titus acquired his remarkable skills in stenography.

²⁸ See Fux 2003: 327 for a convenient and exhaustive list of all references to pupils' age categories.

²⁹ Laes 2011: 98, referring to Jer. *Quaestiones Hebraicae* 21 (PL 23.968).

³⁰ *Este, precor, fortes et vincite viribus annos* (9.65); *Sed male conatus tener infirmusque laborat* (9.67).

age category.³¹ The presence of mixed ages is further suggested by the macabre detail that the child who lacked force was a greater torturer since he only pricked the surface of the master's flesh, while the more robust and stronger one would strike deeper into the vital organs and thereby bring death nearer (9.59–64). The term *ephebus* surely refers to somewhat older youths (*doctor amarus enim discenti semper ephebo*, 9.27).³²

Although we are not very well informed about the teaching of stenography, the available evidence shows that this technical skill was particularly (though not exclusively) practiced by slaves who acted as their masters' private secretaries.³³ However, we should be sensitive to the common aristocratic prejudice latent in the works of many ancient authors, who scorned manual labour and technical skills.³⁴ Professional jealousy and elite concerns were surely behind the rhetor Libanius' disgruntled remarks about stenographers who derided those who concentrated on rhetoric (*Or.* 2.44), about parents preferring to send their children to stenographers rather than to teachers of oratory (*Or.* 31.28; 18.160), and about stenography teachers who grew richer than the rhetors (*Or.* 31.33). One surely must not take Libanius' pronouncements on *notarii* occupying seats in the Senate literally, but his remarks and exaggerations reveal an intellectual's disdain for this sort of manual work, which to Libanius really was slave labour (*Or.* 18.131).³⁵ At the same time, Libanius' remarks suggest the professional success stenographers could have, as is amply attested for shorthand writers in Late Antiquity.³⁶

Schoolteachers generally taught large numbers of students. Prudentius indicates that this was the case for Cassian too; he mentions the "great throng" (*grege multo*, 9.21) and refers to "two hundred hands" (*manus . . . ducentae*, 9.57) that worked collectively to pierce Cassian's whole body. Surely we should not take this number literally, as it implies the presence of 100 pupils,³⁷ but readers were certainly meant to imagine an educational commonplace: a large group of lower-class children acquiring professional training. Indeed, both the reference to such a large group of students and

³¹ *Innumeri circum pueri* (9.13); *praefuerat studiis puerilibus* (9.21); *agmen tenerum ac puerile gubernat* (9.35); *talia ludebant pueri per membra magistri* (9.83).

³² *Fux 2003*: 330 sees a certain ambiguity between the use of *ephebus* and the idea of *infantia*, but the ambiguity may well be explained by the mixed ages of the class.

³³ See the epitaph *CLE 219* for the young slave Xanthias of Cologne, who, as a stenographer, was his master's confidant. He is buried together with Sidonius, a young flute player. The language of the inscription has similarities to that of Ausonius' *Ephemeris*. See *Laes 2008*: 256–257. On tachygraphy as slave labour, see *Teitler 1985*: 27–29 and 31–34.

³⁴ *Verboven and Laes 2017*.

³⁵ *Teitler 1985*: 27–28 on Libanius and his disdain for shorthand writers.

³⁶ See particularly *Teitler 1985*: 54–72 on "the golden age of the imperial *notarii*." See also *Franchina 2010* for the evidence of Late Antique Africa.

³⁷ *Or 200*, if we assume that with *manus* the right hand is meant, as suggested by *Fux 2003*: 327 and 335.

the suggestion of their young ages together encourage the impression that Cassian's student body was nonelite. These were not older children sent to the stenographer instead of to the rhetor by their upper-class parents.³⁸ Instead, instructors such as Cassian taught the children of the less well to do, and even slave children. In the context of instruction in stenography, one might mainly imagine classes full of slave children sent by their masters or children whose parents invested in stenographical and basic literary training for their young ones. Such classes would typically consist of boys and girls; although Prudentius does not explicitly state that girls took part in the cruelties visited upon Cassian, this possibility cannot be excluded, since terms such as *pueri* can refer to both girls and boys.³⁹

Not many details about everyday practices in Cassian's classroom are to be found in Prudentius' presentation. Most of his readers were already familiar with these, and so explanation or elaboration was not required in the poem. But on at least two occasions we can read between the lines to gain insights into educational practices in ancient schools. At one point, a pupil reproaches Cassian for his distress, pointing out that Cassian has no reason to complain: "You see, we are giving you back all the thousands of characters which as we stood in tears we took down from your teaching" (*reddimus ecce tibi tam milia multa notarum, / quam stando, flendo te docente excepimus*, 9.71–72). Of course, one can hardly imagine these pupils standing when they had to listen to the stenographer's teaching, or when they had to take notes on their wax tablets. Rather, what is being referred to is student recitations of lessons while standing in front of the teacher, or their reading back of dictation to ensure they had taken it down correctly. Possibly, pupils, standing to perform, were punished in the event of a poor recitation. A passage in Juvenal refers to proclaiming and standing in the classroom of a *rhetor*, but as far as I know, no link between the two fragments has ever been made. In this capacity, there may be a comparison to be made between declamation (in which stance and gesture are part of the performance) and recitation of dictation, and perhaps the stenographer enhanced his instruction by giving it the more prestigious air of a class of rhetoric.⁴⁰

³⁸ Moreover, such wealthy parents would secure private instruction for the elementary teaching of their children, rather than send them to a *ludimagister*. See Booth 1979a and 1979b, Laes 2011: 129–130 for a summary of the question. Even the Late Antique fragments by Ausonius and Augustine (cf. supra notes 13 and 14) do not necessarily refer to the very first elementary teaching in a class with a schoolmaster.

³⁹ Teitler 1985: 31–32 and 211–213 on two possible instances of female stenographers (Amm. Marc. *Res Gestae* 18.3.2 and *CIL* 6.33892).

⁴⁰ Juv. 7.152–153: *nam quaecumque sedens modo legerat, haec eadem stans / perferet atque eadem cantabit uersibus isdem*. Courtney 1980: 369 has suggested that *sedens* and *stans* refers to different pupils rather than to one and the same class. Less advanced students would have read their speeches without standing, while the more experienced would stand up to proclaim.

The same pupil then makes the following revealing remark: “We are no longer asking for what was so often refused when we were under your instruction, you stingy teacher—a holiday from school” (*Non petimus totiens te praeceptore negatas, /avare doctor, iam scholarum ferias*, 9.75–76). Only recently has the often-repeated assumption of long summer holidays from Roman schools been exposed as a myth that depends upon too easily drawn parallels with present-day conditions and a careless reading of the sources.⁴¹ The crucial detail supplied here by Prudentius has for the most part been overlooked in the discussion, but it points in the same direction. Cassian was surely not a schoolteacher who would put up with an unpaid two-month holiday. The more days his pupils came, the more he was paid. We are in addition reminded of the low social position of the pupils involved. Their education had to be as fast and condensed as possible, no doubt to make it economically profitable for the persons by whom they were sent: parents, relatives, or masters.

THE LANGUAGE OF VIOLENCE AND RETRIBUTION

It is hard to imagine a poem in which children’s agency is treated more explicitly than it is in this one. It is repeatedly stated that all the children’s acts were imbued with a deep sense of revenge and desire for recompense. They simply paid their teacher back in kind for all the wrongs they had suffered from him. All this is described with a sense of irony: “make the children a present of the man who used to flog them” (*donetur ipsis verberator parvulis*, 9.38). The term *verberator* only occurs here, and might have even been invented by Prudentius to depict the flogging schoolteacher: “It is a pleasant thought (*ludum . . . volupe*) that the strict teacher should himself furnish sport to the pupils he has too much held down” (*ludum discipulis volupe est ut praebeat ipse/doctor severus, quos nimis coarctat*, 9.41–42). The Latin is far more expressive than H.J. Thomson’s Loeb translation that is offered here, since *ludus* obviously carries the double meaning of both school and play: the kind of school the students like is the one that offers this inversion of power.⁴² It is remarkable that these explicit references to physical violence come from the words of the magistrate (who perhaps should not be trusted); but the reaction of the pupils implicitly demonstrates that violence was part and parcel of the educational context.⁴³

Ancient humoral theory also enters at this juncture. Children and young people were often connected with a sanguine or choleric temperament: “All the hatred long conceived in silent resentment they each vent down, burning with gall that has at least found freedom” (*Quantum quisque odii tacita*

⁴¹ Voessing 2017.

⁴² Fux 2003: 332 observes a similar play on words at 9.39 and in *Perist.* 5.65.

⁴³ Cf. supra on the possibility that Prudentius somehow identified with Cassian, which may explain this more sympathetic stance toward him.

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conceperat ira, effundit ardens felle tandem libero, 9.45–46).⁴⁴ The cruelty of their acts is depicted in great detail: some throw their wax tablets and break them against the teacher's face, others launch at him with both sides of their styluses, the sharp iron pricks and the ends by which the letters are rubbed out (9.47–54). The result of all this is pointedly summarized as follows: "With the one the confessor of Christ is stabbed, with the other he is cut; the one end enters the soft flesh, the others splits the skin" (*Hinc foditur Christi confessor et inde secatur, pars viscus intrat molle, pars scindit cutem*, 9.55–56). When the vocal pupil mentioned above starts to speak out, his words sarcastically allude to the world turned upside down (9.73–82):

*Non potes irasci quod scribimus; ipse iubebas
numquam quietum dextera ut ferret stilum.
Pangere puncta libet sulcisque intextere sulcos,
flexas catenis impedire virgulas.
Emendes licet inspectos longo ordine versus,
mendosa forte si quid erravit manus,
exerce imperium: ius est tibi plectere culpam,
si quis tuorum te notavit segnus.*

You cannot be angry with us for writing; it was you who bade us never let our hand carry an idle style . . . We like making pricks, twining scratch with scratch and linking curved strokes together. You may examine and correct our lines in long array, in case an erring hand has made any mistake. Use your authority, you have power to punish a fault, if any of your pupils has written carelessly on you.

These statements reveal a poet (and an audience) with eyes open to the traumatic conditions of Roman schools, and generally speaking, ancient authors seem quite aware of the difficult situations schoolchildren had to deal with. Dio Chrysostom's fifteenth *Discourse* has the form of a scholarly, if informal, debate on slavery and freedom. One of the debaters defines slavery as being kept by a master, and having to do whatever he commands or else take a beating. Another responds that as far as obeying and being thrashed are concerned, one can assert that the boys who take lessons from schoolmasters are likewise their servants and that the gymnastic trainers are similarly the slavemasters of their pupils, as are those who teach anything else, for they give orders to their pupils and trounce them when they are disobedient. One can hardly underestimate the weight of such a statement in a society in which status was always at stake. For a boy of a certain standing, being thrashed by a social inferior could indeed be a traumatic experience,

⁴⁴ See [Laes 2011](#): 86–87 on childhood and humoral theory. See also Prudent. *Perist.* 3 (on 12-year-old Eulalia), *Perist.* 10.656–845 (martyrdom of a young infant), and *Perist.* 14 (on 13-year-old Agnes) for rebellious behaviour of child martyrs.

the world turned upside down. Or was degradation so ingrained that, for some, their whole sense of self became eroded? And what about lower-class children? While they might have taken this treatment as a “deserved” reification of their low status, Prudentius here represents a large group of children who have not internalized the social logic that those of lower social worth deserved to have their lower status demonstrated through subjection to violence.⁴⁵ With a lighter hand, one can read here the observation that students do not like to be beaten and therefore turn the tables on their teachers. But in a certain way, in the case of lower-class children, this also represents a failure of the normative powers of violence to be normative.⁴⁶

But one can hardly say that Prudentius’ description reveals much empathy for the children. Indeed, the pupils are “the bad ones”; the schoolmaster is the hero and martyr who remains faithful to his Christian belief. Also, the internal rhetoric of the poem assumes that Prudentius’ audience would have found these children’s behaviour shocking—or at least it seems that the poet tried to elicit this reaction. One can look for parallels of such unexpected childish behaviour. To probe deeper into the issue of lacking empathy and to find earlier examples of violence committed by children, we must explore this story’s possible forerunners.

MODELS AND NACHLEBEN

Stabbing a person with a stylus is not entirely unheard of in the ancient sources. During the reign of Augustus, the Roman knight Tricho nearly met his death this way. He was attacked by a crowd of fathers and sons wielding their pens, angry because Tricho had flogged his own son to death. Only the intervention of the emperor saved him from execution by the pen. The “bad” emperor Caligula, on the other hand, had a senator cut into pieces with styluses (*graphis*; Seneca uses the same word) when he entered the senate. He was only satisfied when he saw the man’s limbs and intestines dragged through the streets and exposed before him.⁴⁷

Nor was Cassian the first schoolmaster to be attacked by his pupils. Indeed, one is immediately reminded of the story of the schoolteacher of

⁴⁵ Fux 2003: 329 has usefully gathered all the instances in which the authority of the master stenographer is expressed with almost political terms: see 9.21 (*praefuerat*), 9.22 (*magister . . . sederat*), 9.31–32 (*moderator alumni/gregis*), 9.35 (*agmen . . . gubernat*), 9.73 (*ipse iubebas*), 9.81 (*exerce imperium*).

⁴⁶ Recently, Jerry Toner has ventured to speculate about what all this would have meant for adults’ mental health and the ways in which they coped with childhood memories: Toner 2009 and 2014 are two studies which are again very much in line with Golden’s empathic approach toward history. See Dio Chrys. *Or.* 15.19 for the statement on schoolteachers and their pupils.

⁴⁷ Sen. *Clem.* 1.15.1 (Tricho); Suet. *Calig.* 28. See Teitler 1980: 5. For a rabbinic parallel, see PT Taan. 4.6, where schoolchildren state that if the enemy comes, they will march against him and blind them with their styluses. See Hacham 2005. I am grateful to Hagith Sivan for this reference.

Falerii. The story, which was told by several authors discussed below, goes like this in broad strokes: during the Roman siege of this town, a Falerian schoolteacher led his group of pupils outside the city walls as though they were going for a walk. He then handed the children over to the Roman dictator Camillus, hoping for a reward: the parents would surely be prepared to surrender to the Romans in order to get their children back. Camillus, however, was not pleased with the offer. He had the schoolmaster punished and sent him back to Falerii in the children's custody. On the road back to Falerii, the pupils beat their schoolteacher. The Falerians were allegedly so touched by Camillus' clemency that they decided that it was better for them and their town to live thereafter under the protection of the Romans and in peace with Rome.

Though scholars have tried to link the story of the Falerian schoolteacher to Cassian's tale, it should be pointed out that, all in all, the story of the treacherous school master of Falerii only bears superficial resemblance to the story of Cassian's martyrdom.⁴⁸ In fact, the only similarity lies in children performing the role of torturer or executioner at the bidding of an adult superior ("the contriver of punishment" for Cassian, Camillus for the Falerian schoolteacher). But in the case of the schoolmaster of Falerii, the high-class children are additionally justified in their actions: in the story, the teacher is the "bad guy" and traitor, while Cassian of Imola, on the other hand, is a saint and a martyr. In this context, there are two striking differences between the two stories. The first is the degree of purported bitterness on the part of the students. This emotion is the focus of Cassian's tale, but it is a detail left out of tellings of the Falerian tale, perhaps suggesting that readers were meant to assume this emotion was absent: the children were merely following orders. The second difference is the status of the children relative to their schoolmaster. To appreciate both of these points, let us have a brief, closer look at the different versions of the Falerian tale.

Livy is eager to note that, according to Greek practice, the Falerians had just one teacher and attendant for a group of pupils. We also are told that the teacher in question was a man of learning and wisdom whose students belonged to the most important families of the town. In my opinion, these statements can only be read as foils for Roman practices in Livy's times, when primary education for high-class children was always obtained by private instruction at home.⁴⁹ When Camillus finds out about the teacher's treacherous behaviour, he has his clothes stripped off and he hands over the rods to the pupils, who bring their teacher back home while they flog him. Dionysius of Halicarnassus' telling is much in line with Livy's story, similarly

⁴⁸ Bieler 1962 rather unsuccessfully tries to link the two stories, as did some scholars of hagiography, mentioned by Roberts 1993: 143.

⁴⁹ Livy 5.27: *Mos erat Faliscis eodem magistro liberorum et comite uti, simulque plures pueri, quod hodie quoque in Graecia manet, unius curae demandantur. Principum liberos, sicut fere fit, qui scientia videbatur praecellere erudiebat.*

pointing out that the teacher was taking care of the sons of the most prominent families. After consulting the senate, Camillus ordered his attendants to tear off the teacher's clothes and to whip him severely. He then handed rods out to the boys and ordered them to conduct the man back to the city with his hands bound behind his back, beating him and maltreating him in every way.⁵⁰ Plutarch in turn again adds the detail that the Falerians, like the Greeks, used one teacher in common. He also has Camillus take the initiative of having his attendants tear off the teacher's clothing and tie his arms behind his back. The boys are given rods and scourges to chastise their evil master while driving him back into the city.⁵¹ In the third century AD, Cassius Dio offers a remarkably sober and realistic version of the same story, also suggesting that anger or frustration possibly prompted the schoolmaster's actions.⁵² In the year 395, Saint Jerome still refers to the story in an angry letter in which he defends himself against charges of falsifying an original which he had translated.⁵³ In short, reading the story of the schoolmaster of Falerii as evidence for children's agency and their taking revenge for a harsh education does an injustice to the authors' intention. This is in fact a story about how values and laws should not be transgressed in times of war: Camillus—and by extension the Roman people—are fair and just rulers, who do not resort to such evil and desperate gambits as taking children as captives of war in order to end a siege.⁵⁴

Closer parallels can be drawn from fourth-century Christian material, however. Gregory of Nazianzus elaborates in gruesome detail on stylus-prodding by schoolboys in the case of an elder priest in an unnamed town. We are informed of the grisly fact that the martyr's maltreated body was smeared with honey and exposed to wasps and bees. From Sozomenus we know that the story relates to bishop Mark in the Thracian town of Arethusa, who became a martyr during the reign of the emperor Julian (361–363). Like Gregory, Sozomenus mentions the martyr's old age, the schoolboys and their styluses (γραφίδες), and the exposure to wasps and bees.⁵⁵ This is,

⁵⁰ Dion. Hal. *Rom. Ant.* 13.1–2.

⁵¹ Plut. *Cam.* 10.

⁵² Dio Cass., 6 fr. 24.2–3: the teacher acted “either under the influence of anger or through hope of gain” (εἴθ' ὑπ' ὀργῆς ἢ καὶ κέρδους ἐλπιδί). Dio quite rightly remarks that the Falerians surely had enough liberty left and that the siege was not that pressing, since their children could still go to school, and since there was the possibility of a walk outside the walls. With Dio, one finds no details on the beating: the traitorous teacher's hands are bound behind his back and the children lead him home again. The fragment preserved by Zonaras 7.22 (an excerptor of Dio) offers no new information for our purpose.

⁵³ Jer. *Ep.* 57.3.

⁵⁴ Waldstein 2011.

⁵⁵ Gregory Nazianzen *Contra Iulianum* 1.89 (PG 35.620); Sozom. *Hist. eccl.* 5, 10. See Roberts 1993: 143.

therefore, another story of pricks and stings:⁵⁶ the correlation of education under a harsh schoolmaster with slow torture to death seems quite timeless and points to the recognition that the experience of daily violence in an educational context was felt to be a protracted erosion of a pupil's strength. And yet it was precisely such stories that guaranteed one a successful after-life in hagiographic literature. According to the twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury, the early medieval philosopher Johannes Scotus Erigena (d. ca. 877) died after he was perforated by the very pupils he had educated.⁵⁷ At least four other martyrs seem to have died the same death in a school context: Artemas of Pozzuoli (stabbed to death by his classmates), Archippus of Colossi, Felix of Pincis, and Cassian of Todi.⁵⁸

CONCLUSIONS

For a sociocultural historian, it is possible to read Prudentius' fascinating, overlooked, and quite unexpected story of Cassian's martyrdom on different levels. First, it adds to the evidence for the use of coercion and violence in ancient education and the potential to engender desire for revenge and recompense. Quite unsurprisingly, the story is recounted by a poet who had characterized childhood as an age of weeping due to frequent punishment by the rod.⁵⁹ It is hard to think of a better illustration of Mark Golden's argument, with which I opened this contribution, that the context of children's education was potentially rife with tensions. And it surely helps to imagine these "frustrated" children as subjected to everyday violence in a domestic context, too. The modern reader needs only to reflect upon how, even now, the experience of violence can prompt violent behaviour in children toward others. Surely, one must think of Roman society as a place where violence was part of daily life. Thus, Prudentius' poem is attuned to the routine brutality of imperial justice and education in antiquity.⁶⁰

Second, there is something about the casual tone in which the violence is mentioned that particularly affects modern readers. Prudentius' telling is clearly not intended as a critique of the treatment of pupils, given that the schoolmaster Cassian is praised in an utterly sincere and serious way as a martyr. The way that he was martyred was nothing more than a "logical"

⁵⁶ O'Hogan 2016: 63–67 sees an intertextual link between Prudent. *Perist.* 9.13 (*innumeri pueri*) and Verg. *Aen.* 6.706–712 (*hunc circum innumerae gentes populique uolabant: ac ueluti in pratis ubi apes aestate serena*). A link is made between stylus-stabbing and bee stings.

⁵⁷ Wilhelmus Malmesbiriensis *Gesta pontificum Anglorum* 5.240: *a pueris quos docebat foratus animam exiit*. See Bieler 1962: 383 and Teitler 1980: 5.

⁵⁸ Teitler 1980: 5–6, 8–10. The numerous and complicated details of the hagiographical tradition are treated by Bless-Grabher 1978.

⁵⁹ Prudent. *Cath.*, *Praef.* 7–8: *aetas prima crepantibus/fleuit sub ferulis*.

⁶⁰ Frilingos 2009 on the brutality of imperial justice.

consequence of his teaching profession. In the same way that a baker could be punished by being put into his own oven, so Cassian was subjected to the ordeal of his “working material,” namely his pupils wielding the instruments of their trade to deliver death by a thousand pinpricks. As I explained above, most ancient readers would expect these pupils to have been children of lower social classes or of servile origin. This surely adds to the sense that their exhibition of extreme violence was “appropriate.” To the ancient readers, Cassian’s pupils were no students of ancient *paideia*, and they would never be. No control of one’s passions and anger could be expected from such beings.⁶¹

Third, some descriptions explicitly point to small children being involved in the story of Cassian’s martyrdom. While the poet surely aimed to elicit shock and to present inherent contradiction, I presume that ancient readers must not have found this tale as shocking and offensive as modern readers might. Indeed, ancient discourse has a whole tradition of discussions of childish anger and violence, closely connected to the lack of self-restraint that was considered typical of this stage of life. As such, it may be argued that Christian audiences similarly would not have been uncomfortable with stories of short-tempered and vengeful young children. Like non-Christian readers, they could think of children as unruly and violent subjects who were able to protest against or even turn on their educators.⁶² Again, it would be anachronistic to imagine any disapproving reflection among ancient readers upon the harsh conditions of childhood. At best, the reader of Prudentius likely would have been rather bemused by the somewhat bizarre circumstances of Cassian’s death, in the same way as he would smilingly glance at depictions of a baby Hercules strangling the snake sent by Hera, or the chubby boy killing a goose by choking the animal.⁶³ But that reader’s response would have been similar to our own puzzlement at or fascination with reports of bizarre accidents or strange ways of dying.⁶⁴ There was still a long way to go toward the recognition of children’s rights during this period, when the hero/saint was depicted as an unsympathetic teacher and what we would consider a violent disciplinarian. After all, it is precisely the authoritarian and punitive aspects of the profession that were emphasized in order to prove that Saint Cassian was an able teacher and a worthy patron of stenographers.⁶⁵

⁶¹ See [Upson-Saia 2013](#) on lack of self-control; [Frilingos 2009](#) on violence and the absence of *paideia*.

⁶² [Laes 2011](#): 98 on Christian audience and on the tradition of childish anger and violence.

⁶³ [Kleijwegt and Amedick 2004](#): cols. 936–937.

⁶⁴ [Laes 2004](#).

⁶⁵ [Teitler 1980](#): 82 quotes a letter by Pope Pius XII of 23 December 1952 on Cassian as a patron of teachers and stenographers (*AAS* 45.2 vol. 20 [1953]: 390–391).

TEACHERS AFRAID OF THEIR PUPILS

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