

## The Limits of the Trivium

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Most classical schools in the country define themselves as classical in relation to what is known as the trivium. Their understanding of the trivium is taken principally from the now famous address by Dorothy Sayers at Oxford called “The Lost Tools of Learning.” While I think there is much to be learned from that address, I do not think that the second wave of classical education in this country will find it to be the governing model of what a school ought to be. While it provides a good *analogy* for how children learn or for how any subject is to be acquired, whatever the age of the learner, the centrality of the trivium has been overstated, and the trivium itself is not the *telos* of learning.

I shall assume that the reader of the present essay has already read Sayers. As such, I provide no summary. Here are the advantages of the trivium as she explains it. First, it offers a way of ordering learning according to the levels of a child’s development. Doing so is particularly important since progressive “educators” place such a great emphasis on method. Much time is spent in ed school on “cognitive development,” and anyone who is to swim in the waters of public schooling—particularly when writing a charter for a state department of education or district—must offer a counter to the psycho-babble emanating from the educational establishment. There is certainly something to the idea that children must acquire facts before moving onto more complex concepts and later being capable of articulating those concepts in an intelligible argument. Further, it is useful to think about teaching subjects to students at any level in the grammar-logical-rhetoric order. Sayers is most persuasive on the grammar stage. We live in a culture in which facts—real articles of knowledge—are dismissed as being irrelevant, unnecessary, inconvenient, or merely a roadblock to “critical thinking.” In fact, the educational establishment very rarely uses the word “memorization” without the adjective “mere” as a modifier. Yet as any defense or prosecuting attorney, as any accountant, as anybody but a public school teacher knows, the facts are stubborn and vital things. The trivium, then, provides an excellent corrective to the anti-intellectual current of progressive educational theory.

Nonetheless, there are some problems with the trivium. It is also true that the idea of classical education that Hillsdale embraces departs significantly from the approach taken by many, and perhaps most, of the classical schools currently operating.

*Problems with the trivium.* The most obvious difficulty is that the trivium is not really classical. It is medieval. Why, if classical education is to be the aim, should we go back to the Middle Ages for our model of education? While it is true that in the Roman master Quintilian we can find elements of his program that look like the trivium, it would distort his project immensely to force it into the medieval trivium. Indeed, it would distort what the medievalists meant by the trivium to use it in the fashion Sayers did—unless we take her recommendation to be an analogy, not a fixed design. For example, Sayers’s reading of the trivium leaves the impression that one’s education ends at the rhetorical stage and therefore the two previous stages are preliminary. Neither is true. The medieval trivium is to be followed by the quadrivium. Moreover, grammar and rhetoric were far more than

feeder disciplines in the Middle Ages. In fact, dialectic was the primary passion and style of argumentation of the medieval scholars. Peter Abelard—one of the greatest (and most infamous) scholars of the age—made his reputation by scholastic dispute. Aquinas could not be farther away from the style of Cicero, arguably the ancient world’s most renowned rhetorician. As a result of these obvious differences, the emphasis placed by scholars and teachers on the trivium waned significantly during the Renaissance. With the rediscovery of ancient texts—among them Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*—and a rejection of the dry predictability of scholastic writing (when compared to lively writers such as Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Alberti), humanist educators compelled their students to cast off what were perceived as the corruptions of Medieval Latin and logic and return to the pure Latinity and stately elegance of Tully.

This account of the trivium might itself at first glance seem like a useless exercise in professorial pedantry. Yet there is a more important story behind it. The ancients and the medievalists had this fundamental difference. The former were citizens; the latter were not. The ancients owed their understanding of life—and consequently of education—to the polis or the *res publica*. The medievalists had no polis. The Renaissance was, then, not just a rejection of medieval style. It was a return to the civic humanism of the ancient world. Education followed suit. Though there are traces of the trivium in the important humanist Vergerius, he expatiates most fervently on the “new disciplines”: poetry, moral philosophy, and, above all, history. History is vital because in order to be able to create and defend a state—a fatherland—one must know its history or the history of politics in general. What do we not find in the trivium and the quadrivium? History, government, economics (which had not even been invented yet), and ethics: the very disciplines that are central to the ancient and, later, the Enlightenment efforts to live a good and happy life in civil society. We do not find poetry and art, either, though music is there. That is a lot to leave out.

This academic distinction between true classicism and medievalism has a point. That point hinges upon what the true ends of education are. As tools—whether as an analogy or as a real curriculum—the trivium has its use. But the trivium does not provide the true ends of education, at least not for an American. The Founding Fathers wrote extensively on education. The Scots and English, from whom they borrowed a number of their ideas, did as well. No one writing on education in the eighteenth century took the trivium as a guide. Rather, the purpose of education for the Founders was in the broadest sense both humane and political. The Founders insisted upon training the mind in the disciplines of language, mathematics, the natural sciences, and, above all, history in order to impart the learning and character necessary for self-governing citizens in a republic. They looked at medieval learning as pedantic, monkish, and not worthy of a free man. They did not shy away from using the word “useful” in describing education, meaning useful for the man and the citizen.

The Hillsdale approach to classical education embraces the Founders’ vision rather than the medievalists’. Therefore, the *telos* is the student becoming a good and useful citizen. The beauties of the English language (though better understood via Latin), the

first principles of American history and politics, and the desirability of acquiring good character, therefore, are the chief desiderata and the primary elements to be emphasized.

In addition to the foregoing historical and theoretical reasons for emphasizing an American or Founders' approach to classical education over the medieval trivium, there are a few very practical reasons. First, when you want to attract parents to the school or explain to the community what you are doing it is much better to use the American ideal. Parents like the idea of knowing that you are making good citizens. What are you going to tell them when the trivium is elevated? That you are making trivialists? Second, the trivium often confuses teachers in a school when it is used too stringently. Elementary teachers are led to believe that because they are operating at the grammar stage they are not allowed to ask students a question expecting anything but a fact spouted back or to have anything resembling a discussion. While it is true that having a discussion with first graders is hard, by the time the students reach third grade, they should be capable of short discussions that show insights into literature, history, science, and so on. Furthermore, if high school teachers imagine that they will be only operating at the rhetorical level, they are in for a rude awakening. Much of their work will still be at the grammar stage since there is so much to know, students forget things, and new students will always be coming to the school. The age-level reading of the trivium, when taken as anything other than a general analogy, paradoxically both underestimates and overestimates students' abilities. Third, one of the unintended consequences (I think) of undue emphasis on the trivium is that it overshadows an authentically classical means of education: the Socratic method. Classical schools give far too little attention to how the Socratic method is to be used in the teaching of texts, events, mathematical problems, and even scientific concepts. There should be at least as much emphasis on the Socratic method and how it is to be employed in the school in the various disciplines as on the trivium. Moreover, the Socratic method very conveniently serves as a foil to the public-school nonsense about "critical thinking," which those schools never define very critically or very thoughtfully. Finally, not only is the Socratic method something that every teacher should employ to some extent; we also have a model of it in the dialogues of Plato. What do we have as a model of the trivium? Fourth, just as the trivium does not address the Socratic method, so it is silent on what kinds of materials are to be studied. One assumes that a classical school will read good books. Yet to make that claim, other traditions of classical education have to be brought in, particularly the great books tradition that grew out of the University of Chicago during the presidency of Robert Maynard Hutchins. Similarly, the trivium is silent on the issue of primary sources, which in the high school is leading difference between them and us. I am sure parents will want to hear more about their children reading the *classics* (another sense of classical beyond just Latin or the ancients) and primary sources than about this mysterious thing called the trivium.

Please do not misunderstand me. I do think the trivium is useful as an analogy and has a place in any classical school. But it is not the *summum bonum* of a classical school. We can easily make an idol out of it if we are not careful.