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The Interiority of Ability

IN 1635, ONE WILLIAM SCOTT, probably a young Merchant Taylor made free of the company the previous year, pondered:

Is the maine thing which raiseth a mans estate without him, or within him? *Quaeritur.* *Livy* tells us of *Cato senior*, that he was so well accomplisht in minde and body; that in what place soever he had been borne, he could have made himselfe a fortune. There are then open vertues which bring forth praise; but hidden and secret ones which bring forth fortune. Certaine deliveryes of a mans selfe, which have no name; like the milkie way in the skie, which is a meeting of many small starres, not seene asunder but giving light together, for there are a number of scarce discerned vertues, which make men fortunate.¹

Strikingly, Scott poses the question of fortune, which earlier would have pre-emptively invoked a capricious female personification to which a virtuous man could only respond with stoicism, in the privileged terms of early modern selfhood: inwardness and outwardness. Scott's question is interesting both because of the ideological change it signals in its attribution of men's fortunes to their abilities and because it constructs ability as an epistemological problem. The "thing which raiseth a mans estate" partakes of inwardness not only because it is the property of the fortunate individual, but also because, like the hearts and minds of others, it is "hidden and secret," inviting and thwarting our attempt to discern it. The association between inwardness and the qualities about which Scott speculates here, is enforced by the concerns raised by the rest of his pamphlet, which is entitled *An Essay of Drapery or The Compleate Citizen* and constitutes a conduct book for citizens. Likely a Watling Street Puritan, Scott's focus is on the moral probity of his citizen with respect to business practice. Noting the myriad ways in which the citizen might be tempted to engage in shady dealings, the latter is reminded that "God is *Totus oculis*, all eye; and so must see all

¹ William Scott, *An Essay of Drapery*, ed. Sylvia Thrupp (Boston: Baker Library, Harvard School of Business Administration, 1953) 29–30.

his Actions.”² Alone with his conscience and his capacity for self-interested scheming, yet always already discovered to God, Scott’s citizen embodies the existentially agonizing and empowering interiority which is imagined in a diverse range of early modern texts. To the extent that they are “hidden and secret” and in the service of self-interest, the virtues which bring a man worldly success seem to belong to this ambivalent discursive and conceptual complex.

And yet, the issue Scott raises is not quite captured by such an invocation of “interiority” either. For one thing, the way in which the virtues in question are hidden is not the same as the way in which a person’s thoughts or illicit actions might be, by the absence or impossibility of witness. They are “scarcely discerned” not because they are enclosed in a literal or metaphorical interior such as a closet or a body, but because like the stars in the Milky Way, they are myriad and, individually, small and apparently inconsequential. Moreover, although Scott poses the question of the cause of success in terms of the binary, “without”/“within,” and describes these virtues as part of the case for “within,” his account actually suggests something more like “between.” The virtues consist of “certain deliveries of a man’s selfe,” modes of interaction between that which is within a man and what Scott earlier concedes are the “outward accidents [which] conduce much to mans Fortune.”³ In short, the object Scott strives to imagine here is not an interiorized essence like a stubborn conscience or the secret iniquity of a hypocrite, but something profoundly un-essential, a tendency over time, subject to contingencies which include both outward accidents and the coincidence within the individual of qualities which in combination assure success—an object which he nevertheless seeks to assimilate to a model of the self characterized by both inwardness and self-possession.

The phenomenon which Scott addresses here, the abilities which differentiate one person from another, had been the subject of considerable discussion in the century or so which preceded the composition of *The Essay of Drapery*, most notably in the pedagogical literature which accompanied the transformation of educational practices under the Tudors. Texts such as Erasmus’s *De Ratione Studii* (1511) and *De Pueris Instituendis* (1529), Roger Ascham’s *The Scholemaster* (1570), Richard Mulcaster’s *Positions Concerning the Training up of Children* (1581) and even Henry Peacham’s *The Complete Gentleman* (1634), which served as Scott’s inspiration for his own pamphlet, all consider the question of abilities and the extent to which

² *An Essay of Drapery* 23.

³ *An Essay of Drapery* 29.

they can account for differing social outcomes. The early modern education system—or more precisely the aggregate of practices dedicated to the production of highly literate males—has not received much attention from scholars interested in the phenomenon of interiority in the period. There is a good reason for this: the almost complete absence in the pedagogical writing of the obsession with interiority which so conspicuously marks the religious practices of meditation and self-surveillance, the judicial interrogations, and the anatomical explorations of the period. Technologists for the production of subjects, the pedagogical writers nevertheless plotted the subject according to co-ordinates other than the binaries, such as inward/outward, mind/body, tongue/heart, which construct interiority in the period. To the pedagogical writers the individual is not an enclosure, but as Rebecca Bushnell has demonstrated, a plant.⁴ He (and I should stress that I am concerned principally with male education) is first a seed and at last a bearer of fruits whose abundance depends on the cultivation the burgeoning plant receives along the way. What is significant about this metaphor is not only the obvious way in which it activates questions of nature and nurture, questions which, then as now, bear on the moral value of social mobility, but also the way it insists on time rather than space as the medium through which knowledge of the individual subject progresses. If the subject harbours something within him he does so *latently* rather than secretly.

In this paper I want to explore the discourse of ability as it emerges in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, particularly with respect to the institutional contexts of humanist education. My aim is to excavate the ways of modeling individual experience, identity and value this discourse enables and to discern thereby its connections to social developments beyond the sphere of education. Early modern interiority is an important object of study, I would argue, because its forms constitute a crucial chapter in the history of the modern subject. But we cannot properly understand what interiority means in that history unless we see it in relation to other ways of talking about the subject that were also available in the period. As Scott's pamphlet suggests, by the earlier seventeenth century there seems to be some uneasy convergence between the discourses of interiority and ability in texts that are not directly concerned with pedagogy. Before we consider this convergence however, it will be necessary to turn to texts and institutional developments which, I want suggest, produced the question of

⁴ Rebecca Bushnell, *A Culture of Teaching* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1996) 73–116.

ability in the first place and in a manner that seems more concerned with the subject as a public resource than as a private sanctuary.

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In his treatise of 1521, *De Pueris Instituendis*, Erasmus imagines the schoolmaster confronting students who present the *ne plus ultra* of pedagogical skill: "What is to be done" the hypothetical schoolmaster asks "with boys who respond to no other spur [than beating]," to which Erasmus responds:

What would you do if an ox or an ass strayed into your schoolroom? Turn him out to the plough or the pack-saddle, no doubt. Well so there are boys good only for the farm and manual toil: send your dunces there for their own good.⁵

In his 1991 book, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation*, Richard Halpern cites this passage for the way in which humanist educational practices produced what he calls a "discourse of capacities," a way of accounting for social outcomes, including downward mobility, by reference to the abilities of individuals rather than to larger economic transformations such as the enclosures which deprived so many of the means of subsistence in this period.⁶ Halpern's rather literal reading of this passage as an account of the class fate of those who couldn't cut it in the Tudor schoolroom is in the service of a more general argument that while Tudor education functioned as a "relatively ecumenical" disciplinary mechanism, it also (and apparently more importantly) served as a demonstrative one, "meant to 'uncover' relatively immutable capacities and thereby to separate out the incorrigible and unfit from the gifted and industrious."⁷ In other words, Halpern imputes to Erasmus and other humanist educators' concept of ability not only the interiority which Scott seems to have also associated with it, but also the essentialism which seems ultimately to have eluded him. While I too will be arguing that the economic transformations of the period furnish an important interpretive context for the emergent concept of ability, I want to suggest that it is precisely the *reluctance* of the humanist pedagogues to essentialize the idea of ability, their tendency to subsume the demonstrative

⁵ Desiderius Erasmus, *De Pueris Instituendis* in *Concerning the Aim and Method of Education*, ed. William Harrison Woodward (New York, Teachers College, Columbia University: 1964) 209.

⁶ Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation* (Ithaca/London: Cornell UP, 1991) 88, 92.

⁷ *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation* 92.

function of education within the disciplinary one, which imparted social power to their program.

The distinction between human abilities and those of animals, which in the case of the ox or ass strayed into the classroom slides into a distinction between the educated and those doomed to manual labour, is one that Erasmus also makes earlier to slightly different effect when he asserts:

To dumb creatures Mother Nature has given an innate power or instinct, whereby they may in great part attain to their right capacities. But Providence in granting to man alone the privilege of reason has thrown the burden of development of the human being upon training. . . . This *capacity for training* is, indeed, the chief aptitude which has been bestowed on humanity. Unto the animals nature has given swiftness of foot or of wing, keenness of sight, strength or size of frame, and various weapons of defence. To Man, instead of physical powers is given a mind apt for training; in this single gift all others are comprised, for him at least, who turns it to due profit.⁸

In his enthusiasm for his educational mission Erasmus conjures up a category, “the human,” in which all social distinctions are suspended in favour of the single, universally shared capacity for training. It is easy to see how this invocation of the “human” can become the basis for invidious distinctions among humans; he who fails to turn his capacity for training to due profit falls, not just out of the running for preferment, but out of humanity itself. But Erasmus’s really remarkable power play in this passage, I would argue, is not with respect to the sub-human dunces but to the remaining mass of trainable humans. In evacuating human “capacity” of any specific contents save a nearly universal susceptibility to cultivation by the pedagogue, Erasmus vastly enlarges the field within which his own program can operate, and its power to shape individual outcomes. Education is not a tool for fitting people to their pre-ordained social roles, nor for identifying and realizing particular talents, nor even for producing an aristocracy of ability. Rather it is a set of techniques and practices—the special knowledge of the pedagogue—with the potential to produce almost limitless social transformation. Indeed, so slight is Erasmus’s investment in producing distinction, and so great is his enthusiasm for the pedagogue’s power to override apparent differences among individuals that, having made the capacity for training the feature which distinguishes humans from animals, he then extends it to dogs, concluding the passage with the story of Lycurgus’s hounds, in which the “poorly bred but well-drilled” dog beats out one of “good mettle but untrained.”⁹

⁸ *De Pueris Instituendis* 183–84.

⁹ *De Pueris Instituendis* 184.

Erasmus is extreme in his confidence that training trumps “breeding” understood both as the social status and the innate ability of a pupil, and in his universalizing of the pedagogue’s domain. Richard Mulcaster, the headmaster of the Merchant Taylors’ School from 1561 to 1586 writing in 1581 from the other side of the Tudor grammar school explosion, is obsessed with *restricting* access to schooling. He fears that:

the rowmes which are to be supplied by learning being within number, if they that are to supply them grow on beyond number, how can yt be bot too great a burden for any state to beare? To have so many gaping for preferment, as no goulfe hath stooore enough to suffice ... how can it be but that such shifters must needes shake the verie strongest piller in that state where they live, and loyter without living?¹⁰

Thus, while he asserts that every parent “desireth to have his child learned,” (a remarkably “ecumenical” claim in itself) the good of the commonwealth requires that “all may not passe on to learning which throught hithertoward,” and he even goes so far as to propose laws that restrain access to school (146). But despite Mulcaster’s concern with social order, the principles of selection he proposes for who may pass on to learning do not coincide, as we might have anticipated, with pre-existing conditions such as social status or ability. He writes:

Some doubt may rise here betwene the *riche* and *poore*, whether al *riche* and none *poore*, or but some in both may and ought to be set to learning. For all in both that is decided alreadie, No: bycause the whole question concerneth these two kindes, as the whole common weale standeth upon these two kindes. If all *riche* be excluded *abilitie* will snuffe, if all *poore* be restrained, then will *towardnesse* repine. If *abilitie* set out some *riche* by private purposes for private preferment: *towardnesse* will commende some *poore* to publike provision for publike service. (143)

With respect to the social background of the pupils, the demographic of the school must be mixed. There must be rich boys because they are the ones who can pay—“ability” here refers to the capacity to pay one’s way—but there must also be poor boys because the claims of talent must be recognized. However, if Mulcaster’s fondness for balanced periods suggests an intrinsic connection between poverty and merit or, by implication, between wealth and untowardness, he makes clear elsewhere that no such connection exists: “Be there not as good wittes in wealthe, though oftentimes choked with *dissoluteness* and *negligence*, as there be in *povertie* appearing

¹⁰ Richard Mulcaster, *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children*, ed. William Barker (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994) 139.

through *paines* and *diligence*? Nay be there not as untoward *poorelinges*, as there be wanton *wealthlinges*?" (151). Thus the admission of the poor is not in fact necessary in order to glean "toward" students. Moreover, Mulcaster insists that towardness does not entitle a poore boy to go to school. If the meritorious poor can't find scholarships, then so be it; they may "passe on and bewtifie some other trade: that also is very good, seeing they serve their country" (149). Indeed Mulcaster is remarkably willing to waste talent in his zeal to curb the population of the learned. Thus he counters the argument that had there been restricted school admissions in the past they would have cost the state some of her best servants, with the assertion that there would undoubtedly have been others to take their places. The school population is to be constructed in such a way as to keep different social groups happy, to prevent snuffing and repining and to capture enough talent to run the state and resources to fund the schools, but neither talent nor social standing actually entitles one to admission.

If Mulcaster reconceives Erasmus's dream of the universal capacity for training as the nightmare of the multitude thronging to learning, what is notable about the writings of both men is that neither makes the function of education either the reproduction of a social class or, perhaps more surprisingly, the discovery and cultivation of an aristocracy of talent. The failure to construct the aim of education as class reproduction is especially notable in Erasmus's case, given that the ostensible purpose of his treatise is to advise the Duke of Cleves on the education of his son, an education that in 1529 would likely have been conducted exclusively by private tutor with the express purpose of fitting the boy to accede to his pre-determined social position. Unlike Roger Ascham, whose 1570 treatise *The Scholemaster* is "specially purposed for the private bringing up of youth in gentlemen's and noblemen's houses," Erasmus doesn't situate his advice within the scene of aristocratic education, instead creating through his various examples a sort of virtual schoolroom, in which the son of the Duke of Cleves sits cheek by jowl both with the sons of dissolute noblemen who "sprawl drunkenly" before their children at banquets and care more that their "horses and dogs are of the right breed" than for their children's education, and with boys who, if they prove dunces, can be turned out to the "plough and the packsaddle."¹¹ In this respect Erasmus can be said to anticipate rhetorically something of the institutional reality that Mulcaster knew so well: the *school* as an institution in which boys of differing social

¹¹ Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster*, ed. Lawrence V. Ryan (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P and The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1967) title page; *De Pueris Instituendis* 189, 184, 209.

backgrounds and prospects are brought together and subjected to a common discipline and invited to master a common body of knowledge. The tendency to link education to schools, and to imagine the latter in at least heterogeneous if not universalizing terms—as a temporary community that does not correspond to any otherwise existing social group, unified only by a syllabus, a disciplinary regime and, of course, a sex—is a marked feature of much early modern educational writing.

To some extent of course this emphasis on schools corresponds to the historical reality of the explosion in the founding of grammar schools under the Tudors, which famously provided for the education of some glove-makers', cobblers' and bricklayers' sons. This is not a story I need to rehearse here save to make a couple of points about the demographics of schooling during the period. We tend to think of the accessibility of humanist education to the sons of artisans as a progressive phenomenon, albeit one that, as Halpern points out, is cut off by the advent of early capitalist manufacturing which tended to harden class lines and turn schools into mechanisms of class reproduction.¹² But it might be more proper to think of the presence of poor boys in the Tudor classroom as an historical leftover. The Tudors of course did not invent schools but rather took a system of chantry and cathedral schools, intended for the training of boys up to the clergy, and reformed and enlarged it in order to train boys up for service to the state. To the extent that late-Medieval schools were intended to fill the ranks of religious orders or the lay clergy, they were intended largely for boys of non-gentle background. Thus what was remarkable about the demographics of the Tudor grammar schools was their inclusion not of poorer boys but of ones from gentle or even noble families, an inclusion that was enabled by the de-coupling of their educational program from the reproduction of a particular status group.

This demographic phenomenon was even more marked at the universities which as Mark Curtis, Lawrence Stone and others have argued, saw an influx of the well-born over the course of the sixteenth century which substantially transformed their character and function.¹³ Curtis cites the

¹² Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation* 6–7.

¹³ Mark Curtis, *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition, 1558–1642* (Oxford, Oxford UP, 1959) 54–82; Lawrence Stone, "The Educational Revolution in England, 1560–1640," *Past and Present* 28 (1963): 41–80 and Lawrence Stone, "The Size and Composition of the Oxford Student Body 1580–1909," in *The University in Society*, vol. 1, ed. Lawrence Stone (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1974). See also J.H. Hexter, "The Education of the Aristocracy in the Renaissance," in *Reappraisals in History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); James McConica, "Scholars and Commoners in Renaissance Oxford," in *The University in Society*,

records of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge which indicate that during the 1560s 55% of the students matriculating were the sons of yeomen, husbandmen or other men of small means. By the 1620s however, this group made up less than 15% of the student body, while 42% were sons of noblemen or gentry and 33% were sons of merchants or professional men.¹⁴ While there is considerable controversy among historians about the timetable, the exact character and the evidence for this transformation, it seems fairly clear that from a perspective looking forward from 1500, it is the presence at Cambridge not of Christopher Marlowe but of the Earl of Oxford which deserves comment.¹⁵ To contemporary commentators it was the well-born who were out of place at the university, for as Sir Humphrey Gilbert noted, "now the youth of nobility and gentlemen, taking up their scholarships and fellowships, do disappoint the poor of their livings and advancements," and William Harrison makes a similar point in his *Description of England* (1587).¹⁶ Gilbert offers this comment in the course of a proposal, one of several advanced in the sixteenth century, for an academy dedicated exclusively to the education of "the youth of nobility and gentlemen" which would have had a curriculum dedicated to the production of

vol. 1, ed. Lawrence Stone; Rosemary O'Day, "Room at the Top: Oxford and Cambridge in the Tudor and Stuart Age," *History Today* (February, 1984): 31–38; Elizabeth Russell, "The Influx of Commoners into the University of Oxford before 1581: An Optical Illusion," *English Historical Review* 92 (1977): 721–45; Joan Simon, "The Social Origins of Cambridge Students, 1603–1640," *Past and Present* 26 (1963): 58–67.

¹⁴ Curtis, *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition* 60–61.

¹⁵ While Stone and Curtis both stress radical demographic transformation which made the universities the site of social heterogeneity, O'Day stresses that the universities were simply "dominated by the requirements of the social elite." Russell argues that the high-born had always been present at the university and that the transformation in the universities, particularly the rise of the college system which is generally thought to have accommodated the increasing gentility of the student body, was in fact meant to exert religious control. Controversy among historians is enabled by the ambiguity of evidence, the gaps between college registers and university matriculation records, the variations across colleges and across time in the ways in which family status is specified, and the possibility which Russell points to, that in the earlier part of the century well-born men could have come to the university, lived in a hall or rooms, never matriculated, and so left without a trace. My own conviction is that Stone and Curtis are largely correct. Not only do contemporary commentators indicate such a transformation was occurring (see below) but a quick comparison of the well-known Henrician courtiers and later Elizabethan ones shows a marked increase in university attendance among the latter.

¹⁶ Sir Humphrey Gilbert, *Queene Elizabethes Achademy*, ed. F.J. Furnivall, E.E.T.S., extra series VIII–XVI (London: Early English Text Society, 1872) 10; William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. Georges Edelen (New York and Washington: Dover Publications and the Folger Shakespeare Library, 1968; rpt., 1994) 71.

an aristocracy “meet for present practize both in peace and war.”¹⁷ None of these schemes ever took off. Rather, the noble and gentle eventually became the dominant element in the universities, which, however, they continued to share both with the sons of professional men and a residuum of poorer scholars destined for the clergy.

Thus one remarkable feature of the transformation of English schools and universities under the Tudors was the degree to which educational institutions and practices were disconnected from the specific needs, values, and resources for identity of established status groups. Of course, actual experience of these institutions must have varied considerably. The degree and kind of heterogeneity any given school offered would have depended on the location of the school. Moreover, in contrast to the severely disciplined grammar schools, the universities were a site where noble and gentle youth could and did assert their social distinction. Thus a 1578 Cambridge decree chastises the masters of colleges for “suffering of sundry young men, being the children of gentlemen and men of wealth, at their coming to the ... university, to use very costly and disguised manner of apparel.... unseemly for students in any kind of human learning.”¹⁸ Henry Peacham, in *The Complete Gentleman* (1634) admonishes the gentle university student, “for the companions of your recreation, [to] consort your selfe with Gentlemen of your own rank and quality.”¹⁹ But if such proscriptions and admonitions indicate that the university functioned as territory for status display, they also suggest that these displays formed part of a struggle between status concerns and the agenda of “human learning” in which the well-born were also seeking to participate. After all, Peacham’s admonition makes no sense unless the university did present gentlemen the temptation to mix with others of different rank. In the dining hall at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, while the Fellow Commoners (young men of the highest social rank) sat with the Fellows, the table adjacent to the Fellows was reserved for scholarship-holders, of whom Marlowe was one, while the pensioners who were wealthy enough to pay their way but

¹⁷ *Queene Elizabethes Achademy* 10. The other schemes were proposed by Nicholas Bacon and Thomas Starkey. See Curtis, *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition* 66–68. Starkey distinguished between the universities, which were intended to educate those “youth determined to the spirituality and exercise therein” and “places appointed for the bringing up togidder of the nobility, to the which I would the nobles should be compelled to set forward their childer and heirs, that in a number togidder they might the better profit.” *A Dialogue between Reginald Pole and Thomas Lupset*, ed. Kathleen M. Burton (London, 1948) cited in Curtis, *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition* 66.

¹⁸ Curtis, *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition* 55.

¹⁹ *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition* 319.

who had not won scholarships sat further off.²⁰ In other words, the space was demarcated in order to recognize the claims of both social and academic distinction without one clearly being subordinated to the other. Moreover, gentlemen as well as poor scholars participated in exercises and disputations, practices which produced ability as the basis for distinguishing, however temporarily, among individuals.

Ability as an object of knowledge emerged then within a space not exactly of social indeterminacy but of temporarily interrupted social determination. Or to put the point another way, to the extent that education in England became *schooling*, the aggregating of youth according to age and program of study, it functioned as a procedure for subjecting boys and young men to a question about their identity to which “ability” rather than information about their parentage was the desired answer. While it is easy enough to see how such a development might improve the prospects of Mulcaster’s toward poorelings, it is too simple merely to cite this development as evidence of social mobility in the period. For one thing, the trajectory of the demographic transformation in Tudor educational institutions, the fact that the “the flocking multitude which will needes to schoole” which so exasperated Mulcaster, was increasingly swollen by the *well-born* suggests that schooling, with its unceasing production of questions of ability, enabled a systemic transformation in modes of social distinction and self-knowledge, rather than mere place-changing for a few able but previously disadvantaged individuals.²¹ At the same time, the social heterogeneity of the schools and universities—or, more precisely, the disjunction between the academic cultivation of ability and the larger status-based social system—meant that the direct social effects of schoolroom demonstrations of ability were limited, insofar as they neither ensured the acquisition of place for the toward poorelings (the point Mulcaster made so tirelessly) nor threatened the maintenance of place for the wealthlings, wanton or otherwise. Moreover, if pedagogical theory and school practices conjured up the *question* of ability, they did so in a manner which thwarted the production of definitive answers which could then be used to justify social outcomes.

As I have already suggested, there was considerable range of opinion in the period with respect to the matter of innate ability, what Halpern calls the “relatively immutable capacities” which humanist education would “uncover.” Erasmus seems to imagine an almost universal susceptibility

²⁰ David Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004) 66.

²¹ Mulcaster, *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children* 148.

to education, the “capacity for training” he invokes, displacing the question of individual differences in kinds and degrees of ability. Elsewhere however, he speaks of “the special gifts with which [Nature] has endowed the [individual] child,” “the peculiar bent to particular disciplines, such as Music, Arithmetic or Geography,” which the schoolmaster must attend to or “nothing can well be accomplished.”²² It is typical of Erasmus though that these are essentially lateral distinctions rather than socially hierarchizing ones. Mulcaster, unsurprisingly, acknowledges more “ingenerate abilities” which differentiate one individual from another and which one way or another “will out” although characteristically, he can’t make the point without wry awareness of the ongoing constraints of social reality in determining their meaning, noting that:

“He that beareth a tankarde by meannesse of degree, and was borne for a cokhorse by sharpenes of witte, will keep a canvase at the Conduites, tyll he be Maister of his companie. Such a sturring thing it is to have wittes misplaced, and their degrees mislotted by the iniquitie of *Fortune* which the equitie of *nature* did seem to meane unto them.”²³

Henry Peacham (in striking contrast to Mulcaster) goes so far as to align rank and ability, claiming “that there are certaine sparkes and secret seeds of vertue innate in Princes and the Children of Noble personages” although it is to be noted that his account of true nobility ends with the celebration of a son of hangman who became a great military commander.²⁴ But despite all this discoursing of capacity none of these writers can imagine ability as something which could be “uncovered” or in any way known in its “ingenerate” form. Mulcaster comes closest, savoring the moment “when of them selves without any either great feare, or much hartening, [pupils] begin to make some muster and shew of their learning to this more then that, then is conjecture on foote to finde, what they wilbe most likely to prove.”²⁵ But he also notes that “oftymes that wit maketh least shew at the first, to be so plyable, which at the last doth best agree with [the needs of the state] ... wherefore precise rejecting of any wit which is in way to go onward before due ripenes, as it is harmeful to the partie rejected, so it bewraieth some rashnes in him that rejecteth bycause the varietie is exceeding great, though conjectures be as great.”²⁶ Indeed all these writers make clear that the course

²² Erasmus, *De Pueris Instituendis* 212–13.

²³ *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children* 37, 142.

²⁴ Henry Peacham, *Peacham's Compleat Gentleman, 1634*, reprint with an introduction by G.S. Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906) c3v, 17.

²⁵ Mulcaster, *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children* 155.

²⁶ *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children* 153.

from ingenerate ability to outcome or “fruit” is highly uncertain. Even Peacham concludes the encomium to the nobility’s “secret seeds of vertue” by noting that only “if cherished, and carefully attended in the blossome, will [the seeds] yeeld the fruit of Industry and Glorious Action.”²⁷

The agricultural metaphor which Peacham adopts here is, as Rebecca Bushnell has demonstrated, one of the most common and revealing metaphors in the pedagogical writings of the period. Pupils are alternately seedlings or land to be cultivated. A good teacher, Erasmus notes, is like a farmer “who will [never] see his land lying fallow, not even a little field, but he will sow it with young grasses, or lay it down to pasture or use it as a garden. . . . Land as we know, when newly ploughed up must be sown with some crop, lest it bear a harvest of weed.”²⁸ He must start education early like “the husbandman who fashions and trains the sapling to suit his taste or to further the fruitfulness of the tree.”²⁹ On this point Mulcaster, typically, is less sweeping, more concerned with individual variation, but he resorts to the same metaphor: “At what years [schooling should begin] I cannot say, because ripeness in children, is not tied to one time, no more than all corn is ripe for one reaping.”³⁰ Bushnell argues persuasively that there was extensive conceptual interpenetration of pedagogical and agricultural discourses in the period, that both were concerned with the conflicting claims of nature and nurture in determining outcomes and thus had important implications for how the social order could be conceived and justified. Although some writers pull harder in one direction or the other—the royal Botanist for Charles I weighed in for nature and posited “a natural ‘aristocracy’ in the botanical world”—according to Bushnell most acknowledged both the existence of individual properties in boys, plants and soils, and the power of diligent cultivation to determine how those properties will manifest themselves.³¹ Moreover, they embraced time as the medium in which both forces demonstrated themselves. While I

²⁷ Peacham, *Peacham's Compleat Gentleman* c3v.

²⁸ Erasmus, *De Pueris Instituendis* 219. Bushnell's translations of Erasmus are her own. For the sake of consistency, I have provided the passages as they appear in Woodward's edition. Bushnell translates this passage as follows: “[The teacher is like a farmer] who never ceases to cultivate every part of his land, whether with grain, trees, pasture, or gardens; for a recently plowed field must be sown, unless, uncultivated it bring forth thistles: for surely it must yield something” (98).

²⁹ Erasmus, *De Pueris Instituendis* 183.

³⁰ *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children* 31, cited in Bushnell, *A Culture of Teaching* 110.

³¹ *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children* 106, cited in *A Culture of Teaching* 110.

appreciate Bushnell's analysis, as far as it goes, I would also suggest that taking the nature/nurture problem for a perennial human problem, as she does, and proceeding to delineate different early modern opinions on this topic, obscures the underlying question of why the topic becomes salient at this time in the first place. Or to return the question to the educational sphere, why does a technology for social reproduction develop from within a rigidly hierarchized, status-based society which poses again and again the question of *ability*, querying its origin, demanding its demonstration but constantly deferring its definitive performance?

We can begin to address these questions by considering the connection between educational practices and economic production which Bushnell's exploration of the pedagogues agricultural metaphors makes possible. The agricultural manuals which Bushnell cites are the manifestation in print of the concern with "improvement" which marked English agriculture from the early sixteenth century onward. As Ellen Meiksins Wood has argued, following Robert Brenner, it is here, in the desire to improve agricultural yields, that we can detect that elusive beginning of the transition to capitalism. Woods asserts that "the specific pre-condition of capitalism is a transformation of social property relations that generates capitalist 'laws of motion': the *imperatives* of competition and profit-maximization, a *compulsion* to reinvest surpluses, and a systematic and relentless *need* to improve labour-productivity and develop the forces of production."³² In England this transformation had to do with an increase in the number of tenants whose conditions of land tenure took the form of leases with rents responsive to market conditions and who therefore had to find ways to increase productivity in order to meet rising rent costs. Thus in the agricultural context the focus on the nature/nurture question emerges because of a need to increase the yields of plants and land, a need, in other words, to imagine their "abilities" as open-ended rather than fixed by already determined properties. When Erasmus speaks of a universal human "capacity for training" I suggest that we can detect not only the levelling implications of the humanist ideal but also the wishful thinking of an improving landlord. Evacuating the resistance of innate properties, or more properly fantasizing a pedagogical skill which can manage these properties, feeding and shaping them to greatest effect, the pedagogue presides over a substantial increase in the national yield of sapience. But if the process of agricultural improvement is symptomatic of an actual structural transformation, the humanist pedagogical project bears a more fugitive relation to the modes

³² Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002) 36.

of production in the period. Its material instantiation, the school, while intended to enlarge the governing apparatus, in fact seemed to produce surplus that could not productively be reinvested, hence Mulcaster's emphasis on restriction of access. At the same time though, Mulcaster's difficulty in determining a basis for *admission*, his curtailing of the claims of status in favour of the claims of ability and then of those of ability because the kind which suits of the needs of the state is so hard to detect, suggests that he shares with Erasmus a sense (which sometimes emerges as a dread) of the open-endedness of humanist education as a mode of social reproduction. The desire for expanding outputs, we might say, requires the preliminary indeterminability of inputs.

The question of ability as it is articulated by humanist pedagogues, I would suggest, does not directly serve an emergent mode of production but rather results from the homologous thinking the latter enables. In this respect it occupies a liminal position between still-dominant pre-capitalist social and economic structures and a newer way of thinking about and exploiting resources as capital. As we have seen the question of ability posed in the institutional context of the school produces a disruption of status-based social reproduction, albeit in most cases a minor or temporary one, both because of the demographics of the school and because the curriculum through which ability is demonstrated bears an oblique relation to the needs of any particular status group. Interestingly, William Scott, who probably attended the Merchant Taylor's School, cautions his citizen that "if he study the liberall Arts, he must doe it superficially; so as not to bee swallowed up of them," evidently fearing that this course of study will compromise the citizen's mercantile identity, although Scott then goes on to support his point with several classical quotations.³³ Christopher Warley has argued recently that "class" emerges in the period not as a determinate relation to the mode of production but rather as a restless process of necessarily self-reflexive classificatory thinking that can be called "spectral" insofar as its origin is obscure and its effects non-conclusive. This formulation displaces "class consciousness" with an active and unceasing struggle to overcome uncertainty about identity and value, a struggle which is nevertheless enjoined upon the individual by the gaps between older social and economic structures and emergent ways of thinking about and exploiting resources.³⁴ It is thus useful in addressing what may seem otherwise a puzzling phenomenon in

³³ Scott, *An Essay of Drapery* 24.

³⁴ "Shakespeare's Fickle Fee-Simple: *A Lover's Complaint* and the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism," forthcoming in *The Middle Ages and the Age of Shakespeare*, ed. Curtis Perry and John Watkins.

the history I have recounted: the apparent eagerness of individuals to compromise their status by subjecting themselves to schooling and the question of ability which it posed, or in other words, the willingness of improving landlords to let their sons be construed as land or trees rather than at least as the future owners of land or trees, if not the bearers of a mystified nobility. For, in the pedagogical literature and the practices of the schools and universities the person whose ability is in question never seems to actually be in possession of it; his ability is instead always alienated from him, to the future and/or to the skill of the steward/teacher. He is split between subject and object, between his determinable status and his undetermined ability. While ability might be said to belong to a one's self, one could hardly look within and contemplate it or imagine it lodged within the self understood as any kind of enclosure. Paradoxically, if the logic of agrarian capitalism had the effect of eliminating commons and consolidating private property, the discourse of ability which it enabled undermined the self-possession of privileged males, including the owners of such properties.

However, by the earlier part of the seventeenth century, as I have suggested, there seem to have been attempts to imagine what we might call the subject of ability: attempts in other words by individuals to claim their talents as their own and in the process to assimilate ability to a discourse of inwardness. I want to conclude with a very brief look at one telling example, Milton's commentary on his own talent in the second book of *The Reason of Church Government*. Asserting the burdensome necessity of his entry into ecclesiastical controversy Milton, writes that "God, even to a strictness requires the improvement of these his entrusted gifts" and proceeds to give us an account of his emerging sense of his abilities:

I must say, therefore, that after I had from my first years by the ceaseless diligence of and care of my father (whom God recompense) been exercised to the tongues and some sciences, as my age would suffer, by sundry masters and teachers both at home and at the schools, it was found that whether aught was imposed me by them that had the overlooking, or betaken to of mine own choice in English or other tongue, prosing or versing, but chiefly this latter, the style by certain vital signs it had, was likely to live.... [here he gives an account of similar response to his work in the academies of Italy] I began thus far to assent both to them and divers of my friends here at home, and not less to an inward prompting which now grew daily upon me, that by labor and intent study (which I take to be my portion in this life) joined with the strong propensity of nature, I might perhaps leave something so written to aftertimes as they should not willingly let it die. These thoughts at once possessed me, and these other; that were I certain to write as men buy leases, for three lives and downward, there ought no regard be sooner had than to God's glory by the honor and instruction of my country.³⁵

³⁵ John Milton, *The Reason of Church Government*, in *John Milton, The Complete Poems*

What is striking here, first of all, is that Milton's claim to authority is based specifically on his *ability* which has been demonstrated through academic exercises, a claim that provokes a repeated resort to the passive voice, and locates agency in the diligence and care of his father or of sundry masters and teachers rendering himself an object: "I had been exercised.... it was found that whether aught was imposed me by them or betaken to of mine own choice" When Milton finally emerges as a grammatical subject—"I began thus far to assent"—it is still to answer his English and Italian friends who have been witness to his academic achievements. But the gesture to these external interlocutors also permits him to acknowledge another, "*inward* prompting" (my italics), to construe his ability as analogous to conscience, an inner voice which must be heeded regardless of the authority of others. Milton visibly *introjects* the agency of his father and teachers, gesturing to an interiority which we can nevertheless see merely recapitulates the commanding and evaluating functions of the teacher. But we should also notice that he represents himself from the beginning of the passage as a landholder, conscious that he holds his estates in trust (a way in which any landowner would describe his position) and of an obligation to improve his holding which, in producing the fruits of his writing, he suggests through the concluding analogy to the purchase of leases, will expand the capital of his heirs. Milton's struggle to position himself in relation to his ability, plotting himself on a temporal continuum from object to subject, from outward to inward prompting and from "exercise" to self-knowledge—while asserting his status as owner all along—suggests that if ability might be annexed to interiority, the two concepts nevertheless interfere with one another as elements in an account of the self. In the early seventeenth century interiority and ability have long histories in front of them. While interiority and its relationship to modern selfhood has long been the province of literary studies, ability is a concept that has largely been left to the social sciences, perhaps because it invites objective measurement rather than subjective expression. Attending to the ways in which ability functions in early modern pedagogical discourse, however, suggests that this concept, like interiority, helped to define what it meant to be an individual in the period. Indeed it may be precisely the conceptual interference which ability posed to interiority, the interference to which Milton's autobiographical musings attest, which we should take as constitutive of the early modern self.

