

LITERACY AND SCHOOLS

EVERY CHILD TODAY, at about the age of five, must start to learn to read and write. 'Must' is a recent verb in this respect. School attendance did not become compulsory in England until 1880, or in most of the United States until about the same period. Before then, people lived in a conditional era when children 'might' begin to master these skills, also at five or so. The popular assumption of today is that the further back one goes into the past, the fewer the number of children who learnt to read. Certainly, the practice was never universal. Some who could read in pre-Victorian times mastered the art in later life, rather than in childhood. Nonetheless, there were always some children in medieval England, and after about 1200 several thousands of them, learning to read in schools or at home. The experience was part of growing up for many people.

Literacy in England dates back to at least the arrival of the first Christian missionaries in the year 597. They came from Italy and were speakers and readers of Latin. The Bible they brought and the services they held were in Latin, and when they recruited English boys and men to become clergy, these had to learn to read and speak Latin too. Within a short space of time after 597, however, this clerical Latin culture broadened out. First, because Latin was a difficult language to learn, writing (and therefore reading) began to be done in English. This happened surprisingly early; King Æthelberht of Kent, the king who received the first missionaries, issued a written code of laws in his native language by the time of his death in 616.¹ Secondly, reading spread beyond the clergy. Bede tells us in his *Ecclesiastical History* that Aldfrith, who became king of the Northumbrians in 685, had previously been in contact with clergy and was able to read Latin.² Aldfrith is the first clear case of a literate layman in England. Within a hundred years of the coming of St Augustine to Canterbury in 597, the English had entered modern times as far as education and learning were concerned. Those who could read were both clergy and laity, and reading and writing went on in English as well as in Latin.

The proportion of literate people, of course, was for a long time far smaller than it is today – not that we have any means of measuring it. Information about who could read or write in medieval England is fragmentary.³ The clergy were meant to be able to read and understand Latin, but there were plenty of accusations about individuals who allegedly fell short in this respect. Evidence about lay people is scattered and hard to collect. By the end of the ninth century, the historian Asser was praising Alfred the Great as a literate king who encouraged literacy within his family and among his nobility.⁴ By the twelfth century, when large numbers of texts and documents survive, there are references to the reading abilities of various kings, queens, noblemen, and noblewomen. By the early thirteenth, it is manifest that towns too were centres of literacy. Town councils were keeping records and individual townsmen could read or write. By the middle of that century, if not before, there were stewards and bailiffs in the countryside, with similar skills.

By 1250, at the latest, the whole of the population was in contact with writings



85 The ascent of knowledge. Lady Grammar gives a child the alphabet, with which to climb through the castle of learning to Theology on its topmost tower.

and literate people, whether or not they were personally literate. Even a serf attended a church where a cleric used books and a lord's court which kept written records, including ones relating to the serf's tenancy and duties. Even such serfs might have charters of their property to which they could refer with the help of educated people, and might acquire or convey property by means of further char-



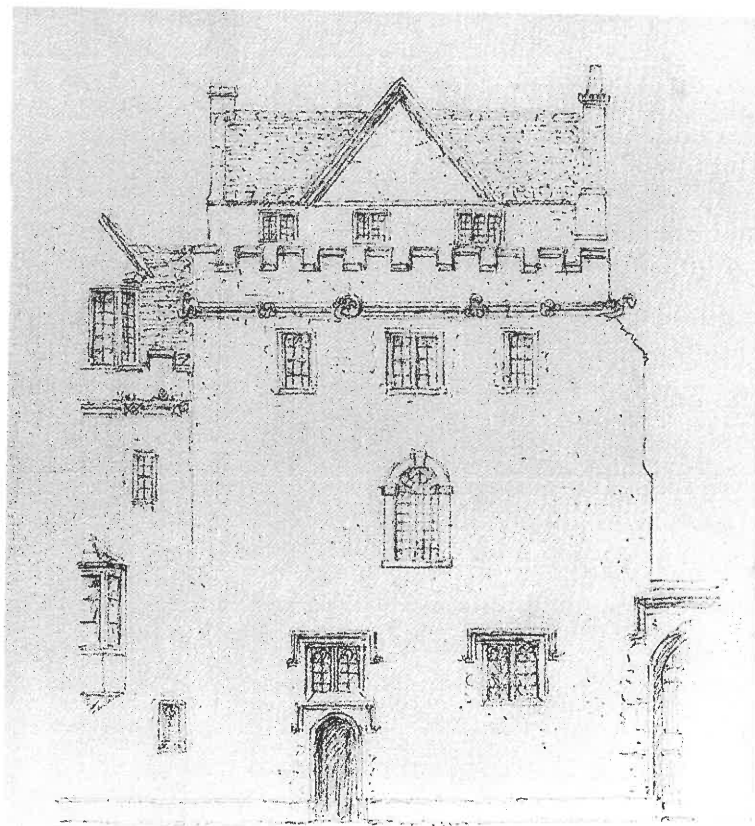
86 Aristotle teaching Alexander the Great, as a master might do in a noble household. Each well-dressed boy has his own book.

ters, authenticated with their own seals.⁵ We think of literacy as a personal skill, because we live in a society that places an emphasis on people as individuals. In the middle ages, communities were equally important: families, households, towns, manors, and villages, all of which included literate people. English society was collectively literate by the thirteenth century, and perhaps much earlier. Everyone knew someone who could read, and everyone's life depended to some extent on reading and writing.

How did people learn to read, and children in particular? In the case of the Latin needed by clergy, scholars, and administrators, the process was a difficult one. It required formal teaching by a Latinist with access to books: grammars, vocabularies, and reading texts. From the moment of its reintroduction to England, Latin was normally learnt in a special environment, a school.⁶ In Anglo-Saxon times, schools were chiefly attached to religious houses where recruits needed to be trained and literate clergy were available to be teachers. Many religious houses – cathedrals, monasteries, and collegiate churches – continued to have schools up to the Reformation, though these mostly catered for small numbers of boys or young men attached to the houses, such as altar-boys, choristers, or novices, rather than for the general public. Great households were other centres of education. King Alfred is said to have maintained children and to have

had them trained in letters and good manners, as early as the late ninth century. By the end of the middle ages, the royal household and those of the great nobility and clergy often included one or more schoolmasters to teach the lord's children, wards, and the boys who sang in the chapel (Fig. 86).

Schools such as we have today – free-standing public institutions taught by professional schoolmasters – first appear in records soon after the Norman Conquest and were common in later centuries. They were especially to be found in towns. Some were officially recognised bodies, controlled by a local bishop, cathedral, monastery, or lay patron, with their own buildings and a monopoly of local teaching. Others were private ventures, run by a master from his own house for a handful of pupils. Nearly all charged fees until the late fourteenth century, when a movement began to provide free schools. One such school was Winchester College, founded in 1382: a large boarding establishment offering free instruction and accommodation to seventy pupils chosen from the founder's family and the places where the college held land. Another was the grammar school of Wotton-under-Edge (Gloucs.), endowed by Lady Katherine Berkeley in 1384, offering free instruction to any boy wishing to study there. Though Winchester is the more famous, Wotton was the more typical, and many similar day-schools, small and free, were founded in England during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Fig. 87).



*Elevation of the South front of Saint Mary Magdalene Hall, Oxford,
as it appeared in 1820. (Woodcut, 1820.)*

87 Modern free-standing schools appeared in the late eleventh century. By the fifteenth, some like Magdalen College School (Oxford), founded by William Waynflete in 1481, provided free education.

Most schools were limited to boys and youths. Boys needed Latin for careers as clergy, merchants, and administrators, or for lives as gentlemen and noblemen. Girls did not become clergy or administrators, but those of the wealthy classes learnt to read enough Latin to look at a prayer book and French or English to read romances or works of instruction. We know less about the education of girls, but they may have gone to elementary schools, sometimes with small boys, sometimes without.⁷ The thirteenth-century treatise *Ancrene Wisse* forbids a woman enclosed as an anchoress to teach children, but allows her maid to do so to little girls who cannot be taught with boys.⁸ Nunneries often boarded small numbers of girls of gentry or merchant status, and these too were probably taught to read elementary Latin, French, or English. A priest of early-Tudor Norwich paid tribute in his will to a nun who 'was the first creature that taught me to know the letters in my book'; if she taught him, she may well have taught girls as well.⁹ In 1404, a woman named Matilda Maresflete occurs as a schoolmistress (*magistra scholarum*) in Boston (Lincs.),¹⁰ and at least two women in London had this word as a surname, presumably from pursuing a similar kind of work. One, E. Scolemaysteresse, is mentioned in a will of 1408; another, Elizabeth Scolemaystres, paid a tax levied on foreigners in 1441.¹¹ These mistresses are likely to have taught small girls, and some male teachers may have done the same. An elderly priest in London named William Barbour was said to have thirty young children in his care between 1505 and 1515, when he was accused of abusing one of them, a girl of eight years old.¹²

TEACHING AT HOME

SCHOOLS PROVIDE SO much of our schooling today that there is a tendency to assume that they must have done so in the past. This is not necessarily true of the middle ages. Learning Latin was best done at school, and schools (at least by the end of the middle ages) often had an elementary class in which small boys learnt the alphabet and how to read simple Latin or English prayers (Fig. 92). Elementary learning, however, did not need to be done in a school. It required only an ABC and a prayer book, and any literate adult could teach a child to do it. Once a child had learnt to read letters and words, he or she could abandon Latin as a subject and concentrate on the easier task of reading English. This involved no complicated grammar and little strange vocabulary. The process could take place in a child's own home, in that of an employer such as a tradesman, or in the households of the king and the aristocracy where noble children were brought up as wards or pages.¹³ It is reasonable to envisage gentlemen- and gentlewomen-in-waiting, clergy (friars, chaplains, or nuns), and merchants or their clerks, all teaching reading to children or young people, though evidence of the fact is hard to find. Some parish clergy certainly taught in this way. The recommendation of about the year 1000 that they should teach boys to help them in church never developed into an obligatory system, but instances of the practice are found from time to time.¹⁴ Orderic Vitalis tells us of his studies with Siward,

priest of Montgomery (Wales) in the 1080s,¹⁵ and the vicar of Bridgwater (Somerset) had a boy in his house in about 1500, being taught by the curate to 'learn [to] read and sing'.¹⁶

Parents too were potential teachers. 'The wise man taught his child gladly to read books and well understand them.' So runs the opening sentence of the register of Godstow Abbey (Oxon.), compiled in about 1450 to teach the abbey's nuns to read their charters in English.¹⁷ The sentence may have been proverbial. There was an ancient tradition of fathers instructing their sons, sometimes by writing texts for them to read.¹⁸ The books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Ecclesiasticus in the Bible profess to be aimed at sons, and Roman authors such as Marcus Portius Cato, Cicero, and Livy wrote with similar intentions. The Emperor Augustus himself was said to have taught his grandsons to read and write.¹⁹ A number of works by fathers for their sons were written in medieval England, and may owe something to these Biblical and classical models. They include Walter of Henley's treatise on *Husbandry* in the thirteenth century, Chaucer's *Astrolabe* at the end of the fourteenth, and Peter Idley's *Instructions* in the fifteenth. In France, Geoffrey de la Tour Landry began to compose *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* for his daughters in 1371, a book which later made its way to England, and he wrote another for his sons.²⁰ By the early sixteenth century, Sir Thomas Elyot used *The Governour* (1530), his influential book about the education of noblemen and gentlemen, to argue that it was 'no reproach to a nobleman to instruct his own children, or at least to examine them, by the way of dalliance or solace'. He cited Augustus as a precedent.²¹

Some of the writings by fathers for children are ambitious. *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* is indeed accessible to older children, and Chaucer's *Astrolabe* may have been used to teach reading to younger ones.²² Walter of Henley's *Husbandry*, on the other hand, is a technical handbook, as is Sir Thomas Littleton's great fifteenth-century legal work on *Tenures* in law French, also addressed to his son. Such works were suitable only for an adolescent boy or a young adult. In the earlier stages of life, children who were learning to read may have been closer to their mothers than to their fathers. One of the earliest stories in English history about a boy and his reading, in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, tells how Alfred's mother showed him and his brothers a book of English poetry and promised it as a gift to the first one who learnt it. Alfred took the book, went to his 'master', learnt it, and recited it to his mother.²³ The account does not say that his mother taught him, nor that he learnt the book except by memory, but it features her as a benign and positive influence. In less important families, without specialist teachers, a mother's role in this respect may have been still greater.

There are certainly signs, later on, of mothers taking an interest in their children's education. A good example is that of Denise de Montchensey, an Essex lady of the thirteenth century. She wished to teach her children French, a language already difficult to acquire in England, and Walter of Bibbesworth obliged by composing his *Tretiz de Langage* for her in about 1250.²⁴ By about 1300, the linkage of women with children's reading was familiar enough for a poem comparing men and women to include the statement 'woman teacheth child on

book'.²⁵ The mother in London who taught her daughter to say mass in 1391, evidently from a missal, was highly unusual in the nature of her teaching, but mothers who helped children simply to read a prayer book must have been common.²⁶ When the Yorkshire knight Sir Robert Plumpton was away from home in about 1506, it was his wife Isabel who wrote to remind him, 'Sir, remember your children's books'.²⁷ Literary works by mothers for their children are rarer than those by fathers, but there is one from the fifteenth century: the treatise on hunting in English verse known as *Tristram*, which claims to be composed by a woman for her son.²⁸ The claim could hardly have been made if mothers had not been regarded as possible teachers.

Another indication of their role in this respect is the rise of interest in St Anne as the teacher of her daughter, the Virgin Mary. In the second century AD, a work was written, called the 'Book of James', to supply the gaps in the Gospels about Mary, Joseph, and the birth of Jesus. It claimed that Mary was the only child of long-infertile parents, Joachim and Anne. In gratitude, her father and mother dedicated her to God, and sent her at the age of three to live and serve in the Temple at Jerusalem. She stayed there until she was twelve and reached puberty, when the priests arranged for her to be married. The widowers of the district were summoned, and Joseph was chosen after the appearance of a dove which settled upon his head.²⁹ Nothing is said about reading or teaching in this story, or in medieval writings based upon it. The best-known of these, the famous collection of saints' lives known as *The Golden Legend*, written by Jacopo da Varazze in about 1260, gives a similar account to the 'Book of James'. Mary is offered in the Temple at the age of three, stays there until she is fourteen, and spends her days in prayer and at weaving.³⁰

Artists, in contrast, developed a different tradition. By the early fourteenth century, they were portraying Anne and Mary in an educational relationship for which there is no room in the the older account of Mary's childhood. Mary is pictured as a well-developed child or adolescent, reading a book under her mother's instruction (Fig. 88).³¹ The scene occurs in continental sources, but it was especially popular in England where it is found in manuscripts, wall paintings, and stained-glass windows.³² In one example, Mary's reading appears to consist of a tablet or primer used to teach children the alphabet.³³ In another, now destroyed, it was a roll containing the letters ABC.³⁴ Most often, she holds a book containing a text of scripture. One of the earliest portrayals of the scene in England, a window image in the church of Stanford-on-Avon (Northants.), represents the words of the book as being *Domine, labia mea aperies, et os . . .* ('O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise').

There are two ways of interpreting such scenes. One is that they were symbolic. Mary's reading may be meant to emphasise her role in conceiving and giving birth to the Word of God, hence the liking of artists to place texts on her book which speak of praise to God.³⁵ 'O Lord, open my lips' was the opening sentence of the medieval 'hours' or liturgy in honour of the Virgin, said by thousands of worshippers each day. Equally, her act of reading may have been meant to be real. The scene of Mary and Anne appears in art just as we hear in literature that



88 Parents too might teach their children to read. Here St Anne instructs her daughter the Virgin Mary.

‘woman teacheth child on book’, at a time when artists were portraying Mary and Jesus in lifelike houses and landscapes. These portrayals tended to imagine the Holy Family living in the style of wealthy people of the later middle ages, and it would have been natural to attribute Mary with the kind of education current among such people. In turn, the scene may have affirmed such education, encouraging mothers to teach their children to read.

Whoever did such teaching – fathers, mothers, or tutors – it seems to have started at an early age, at least in wealthy and enlightened households. Margaret Plumpton, daughter of a Yorkshire esquire and granddaughter of a knight, had nearly learnt to read from a psalter in 1463 when she was only four.³⁶ A few years later, the ill-fated Edward V, eldest son of Edward IV, had ordinances drawn up for his education in 1473, including his ‘learning’, when he was two months short of his third birthday.³⁷ Henry VII’s sons Arthur and Henry VIII had schoolmasters by the ages of four or five.³⁸ Sir Thomas Elyot thought that noble boys should learn to read well before seven, despite contrary views by certain ancient authors, and an early start continued to find support in later times.³⁹ Charles Hoole observed in his book *The Petty Schoole* (1659) that four or five was the usual age of

beginning school in towns, and six or seven in the countryside where journeys to school were more lengthy. He thought the earlier the better, and considered that a child of three or four was already capable of looking at a book.⁴⁰ Lower down in society, of course, it was less easy to get educated: to find a school, pay school fees, or (most of all) conceive that schooling was useful. Poorer children, even if they or their parents were favourable to reading, might have to postpone the undertaking until adolescence or adulthood, and might not begin it at all.

THE ALPHABET

LEARNING TO READ involves learning the alphabet: its characters, their names, and their sounds.⁴¹ You can do this by memorising the twenty-six letters in order, and then use your knowledge to spell words. Alternatively you can begin with words, learn the letters out of order, and get to know the order last of all. It has been suggested that children in Anglo-Saxon England may have learnt by the word method,⁴² and the same may have been true of some who learnt informally in homes in the later middle ages. By Chaucer's time at the latest, however, it was common practice to learn the alphabet first, especially in schools and probably in many homes. This is the better documented of the two procedures, and the easier to reconstruct and imagine. Learning the alphabet for the first time is a fresh experience for a child, interesting and stimulating or hard and baffling. This must have been as true in the middle ages as it is today, but in another respect the medieval experience was very different from ours. Our ancestors' alphabet contained more than the twenty-six letters. It gave some letters in alternative forms, it contained additional signs, and it was set in a religious framework. It was like an historic building which had grown organically and acquired an aura of mystery. Its teachers, let alone its learners, may not have known exactly why it was like it was.

The alphabet used in medieval England came, like writing in general, from Latin. It was based on that of the Romans, and was similar to the alphabets in use in the other countries of western Europe. The Roman letters numbered twenty-two – excluding 'j', 'v', 'w', and 'y' – and this became a twenty-three-letter alphabet during the middle ages through the addition of 'y', originally a Greek letter and still known in France as 'i-grec' and in Germany and Italy as 'ypsilon'. The twenty-three letters, however, were not wholly adequate for use in medieval England. One shortcoming was that they did not cater for all the sounds of English, especially 'th' and 'w'. The Anglo-Saxons therefore borrowed two signs for this purpose from the independent runic alphabet, consisting of 'thorn' [þ] for 'th' and 'wyn' [w] for 'w'. They also developed two additional signs: [ð], a form of 'd' that modern scholars call 'eth', which was also used for 'th', and 'yogh' [ȝ], a form of 'g', for 'gh' and 'y'. 'Wyn' and 'eth' disappeared by about 1300, 'wyn' having been replaced by 'w', but 'thorn' and 'yogh' survived until the late fifteenth century. Indeed 'thorn', by then indistinguishable in shape from 'y', persisted later still in one or two abbreviations such as 'ye' and 'yt' for

'the' and 'that', the basis of the modern humorous misunderstanding, 'ye olde inne'.

The other problem about the Roman alphabet was that people did not write it uniformly. In an age of writing everything by hand, different forms of letters were in use, notably the famous long 's' like an 'f', which went on being used in England down to the eighteenth century. The modern 's' was used only at ends (and sometimes beginnings) of words. Abbreviations were employed to save time – lines and twirls for 'n', 'per', 'pre', 'pro', 'que', and so on – and whole signs for one or two common words like *et* ('and') and *est* ('is') in Latin, as well as for 'and' in English. Learning to read was therefore a complex task, though not necessarily more so than today. You needed to know the classic letters, variant forms, and abbreviations, just as modern children learn printed letters in one form, encounter them in others, and practice writing them in yet more.

Teachers of reading were already grappling with these difficulties by the late Anglo-Saxon period. Although we have no ABC books from this period, we possess copies of alphabets which people scribbled in books during the tenth and eleventh centuries. A particularly good one occurs in the margin of a manuscript now in the British Library (Harley MS 208), a copy of the *Letters* of Alcuin.⁴³ This gives the alphabet from 'a' to 'z', the signs for Latin *et* and English 'and', and four Anglo-Saxon letters:

a d [sic] c d e f g h i k l m n o p q r] t u x y z & 7 p þ æ ð

It is followed by

pater noster qui es in celis sanctificetur nomen tuum adveniat reg

– in other words by the opening phrases of the Lord's Prayer in Latin.⁴⁴ Some other Anglo-Saxon alphabets contain the extra signs and letters, with slight variations, so that 'æ' may come after 'eth' and 'eth' appear in its capital and minuscule (lower-case) versions. The ABC is beginning to ripen into its characteristic late medieval forms. Its regular troop of letters has acquired a group of camp followers – runes and abbreviations, a more disorderly throng which does not always keep to the same sequence. The layout of the letters and signs is already designed to prepare one for reading both Latin and English. And, once the letters are mastered, the first text to be learnt is the Paternoster, the Lord's Prayer.

These developments continued during the twelfth century. Here valuable information is forthcoming from another British Library manuscript (Stowe MS 57), a miscellany including a Latin poem in which a father undertakes to instruct his son.⁴⁵ The poem is followed by five alphabets including one in Latin. Its letters appear in capitals, and in some cases also in minuscule forms, and they are given their pronouncing names, similar to our own. Then, as before, come the camp followers:

A B C D E F G H I K L M N O P Q R S T V X Y Z & ÷ Amen

Finally the writer lists ‘letters in English’ (*Anglice littere*), consisting of ‘wyn’, ‘eth’ (which this text uniquely, but perhaps correctly, calls ‘thet’), ‘thorn’, and the sign for ‘and’ in English. Two important changes are visible here, also significant for the future. First, the sign ‘+’ for *est* in Latin has crept in after *et*. The alphabet gives it a name, ‘titel’, from *titulus* in Latin, meaning ‘a sign’. Secondly, the word ‘amen’ has arrived at the end. ‘Amen’ is the word for concluding a prayer. The ABC is no longer a mere list of letters; it has become something that you offer to God, just as you do when you pray.

Alphabets become more common at the end of the fourteenth century, when they start to appear on the first pages of some lay prayer books of the kind known as ‘primers’, or ‘primmers’ as the word was pronounced.⁴⁶ Primer alphabets are broadly similar from the late fourteenth to the mid sixteenth centuries and from England to the continent, although there are slight variations of detail.⁴⁷ One of the oldest primers to contain an ABC, a manuscript in Glasgow University Library (MS Hunter 472), dating from Chaucer’s time, sets out the letters as follows (Fig. 89):

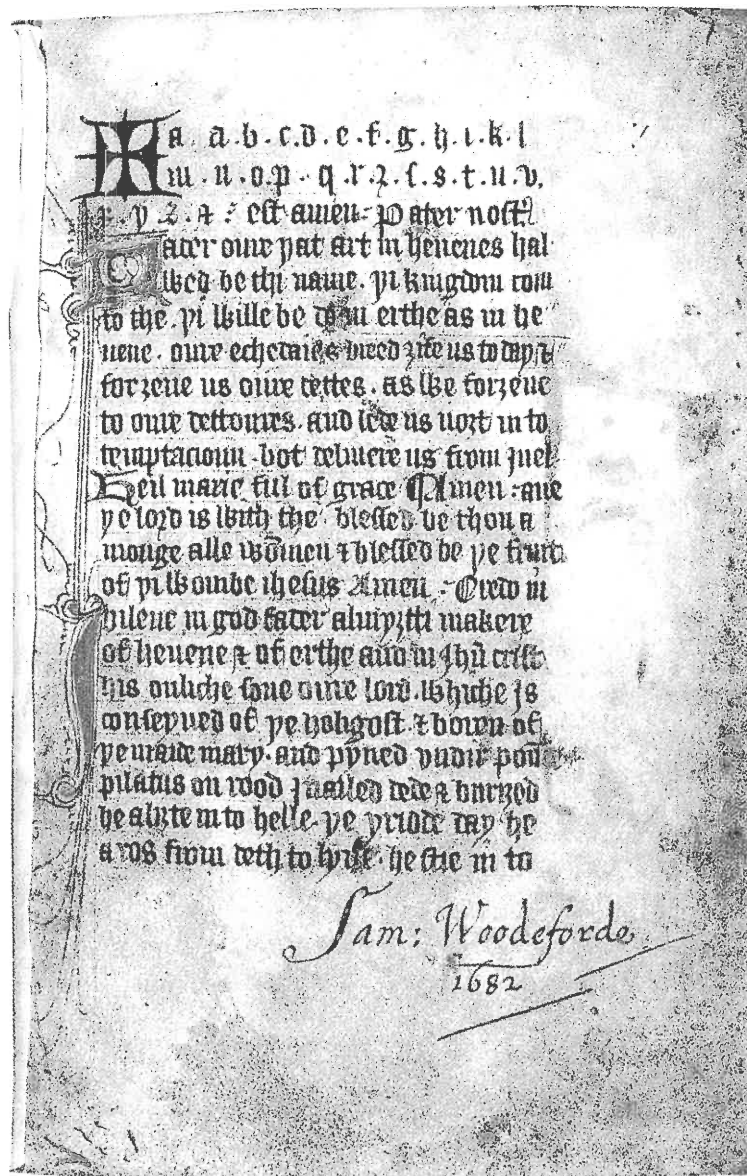
+ a.a.b.c.d.e.f.g.h.i.k.l.
m.n.o.p.q.r. ⁊. f.s.t.u.v.
x.y.z.&. est : amen:⁴⁸

At the other end of the timescale, *The ABC both in Latin and English*, a primer printed in 1538, gives them as follows:

+ A a b c d e f g h j k l m n o p
q r ⁊ f s t v u x y z & ⁊ ÷ est Amen.⁴⁹

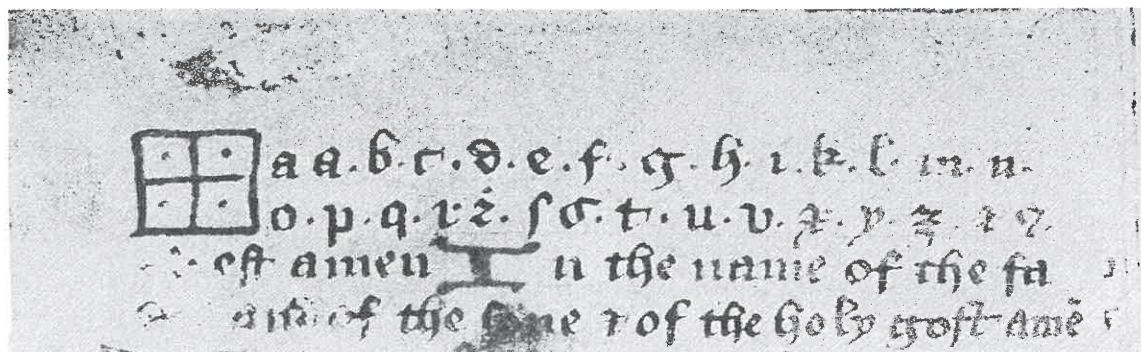
The primer alphabets, therefore, begin with a cross and present the letters, usually in minuscule form, sometimes divided by stops and sometimes not. ‘A’ now appears twice, and three other letters are given in alternative forms: ‘r’, ‘s’, and ‘u/v’. The traditional ‘&’ after ‘z’ is followed by the Latin abbreviation for *con-* and by an arrangement of dots. ‘*Est*’ has been inserted in front of ‘amen’. Continental alphabets were set out similarly, except for differences in the abbreviations and the absence of the words *est* and ‘amen’.

Some features of this pattern need explaining. Excluding the cross for the moment, the first problem is the double ‘a’ at the beginning. Some alphabets, like that in the Hunter manuscript, present each ‘a’ in minuscule. Others put the first ‘a’ in capitals – a practice found in Italy by about 1400, and in England by the late fifteenth century.⁵⁰ This second usage became very common in Tudor times, and eventually, as we shall see, the three strokes of the capital A came to be interpreted as a symbol of the Trinity. That, however, is unlikely to have been the original function of the first ‘a’, in view of its minuscule form in some of the late-medieval alphabets. The Hunter primer and one other from the fifteenth century give each minuscule ‘a’ in a slightly different shape.⁵¹ A better explanation might therefore be that the two were put in because pupils might meet different forms of ‘a’, as they would in the case of ‘r’ and ‘s’.



89 The opening page of a late fourteenth-century 'Hunter' primer, containing the Latin alphabet and basic prayers in English.

There is also a third possibility that the first 'a' stands for something other than the second. The double 'a' is common in alphabets throughout Europe, making it likely that the doubling stems from one tradition of teaching. All the teaching of Latin in medieval Europe went back ultimately to the grammarians of the Roman Empire, and if we consult the most famous of these, Priscian and Donatus, we find that, in trying to identify the most basic elements of language, they begin with *vox*, the voice or vocal sound, and then go on to discuss the written letters.⁵² Schoolmasters, trying to follow this scheme, may have spent their first lesson with pupils by getting them to articulate sounds. Support for this view comes from a fifteenth-century *Ballade de ABC* from France, which tells us how a pupil went to school and learnt, in his first lesson, 'a' 'a' 'a', and then 'a' 'b' 'c' in his second.⁵³ 'A' was supposedly the basic sound, the first one to be articulated by a new-born baby.⁵⁴ Making children start by pronouncing a sound would have had the value of getting the young, shy, and tongue-tied to speak clearly enough for the master to be able to check that they were indeed all speaking. This was an essential step



90 The cross and alphabet from another primer of about 1400.

to ensuring that they learnt the ABC, because that process involved them pronouncing the letters aloud.

The rest of the primer letters down to 'z' were straightforward except for the alternative forms of 'r', 's', and 'u/v', included because pupils would encounter them in manuscripts. One might expect that a separate 'i' and 'j' would also have appeared in the table, since they were originally variant forms of the same letter, and this was so on the continent but not in England, where only one of the two appears, usually 'i'. By putting in these double forms, the primer alphabets followed the Anglo-Saxon practice of making the ABC a guide to palaeography, the art of reading manuscripts. For the same reason they included, after 'z', at least a couple of the common abbreviations used in handwriting: '&' and *con-*. The dots after *con-* are evidently the descendants of the sign for *est* in the twelfth-century alphabet. They too were known as 'tittle' or 'tittles', as the *est* sign had been. Their form varies: two dots like a colon, three such dots, a line between two dots (like a division sign), four dots placed in a diamond shape, and three lines. The reason for this seems to be that the *est* sign fell out of use in the thirteenth century. While this was happening, the word *est* was added after the tittles, as an explanation. The meaning of the tittles was eventually forgotten and they became mere decorations, but *est* kept its place. Other European countries put the '&' and *con-* signs after the alphabet, but the tittles and the *est* seem to have been unique to England.⁵⁵

One or two further observations can be made about the primer alphabets. There was no accepted way of setting them out, other than the sequence of letters. Writers of books did not assign so many letters to each line; they simply wrote them out in the space available. Most alphabets are Latin ones, but versions with English letters are occasionally found, as in earlier times. One example from York in the late fifteenth century has a 'thorn' at the very end, and a second, from Winchester at about the same period, has a 'w' before the 'x', a 'thorn' after 'y', and perhaps the letter 'yogh' (for 'gh' and 'z'), unless it is an alternative form of 'z'.⁵⁶ 'Yogh' was dropping out of use by this time and 'thorn' was becoming indistinguishable from 'y', so one would not expect to find them in alphabets after 1500, but it was long before 'w' gained general recognition. Indeed this was still not always the case by the Reformation.

The alphabet, then, as normally presented to children in late-medieval and

Tudor primers, had evolved a good deal from its classical form. It had been Christianised with a cross at the beginning and 'amen' at the end. It had been adjusted to medieval writing practices. It had become a rigmarole relating to the past as well as to the present, since the original function of the tittles no longer existed. Did Tudor teachers and pupils understand the meaning of the tittles and of the word *est*? It is possible that they did not, and that when they said the word *est*, they felt that they were making an affirmation. They had recited the alphabet, and 'it is so!'

THE CHRIST-CROSS ROW

THE OTHER DISTINCTIVE feature of the late-medieval alphabet was the cross. It led the letters like a cross-bearer and the letters marched behind it like a force of crusaders or a parish procession. In due course, the cross also gave its name to the letters that followed. The word 'alphabet' was not common in English speech or writing until the late sixteenth century. Medieval people were more likely to talk of the ABC or 'abece', which means much the same as 'alphabet',⁵⁷ but by the 1520s a third name was becoming popular: 'Christ-cross row', or 'cross row' for short, and this name was widely used in Tudor and Stuart times.⁵⁸ The alphabet cross was more than a symbol too. It was a rubric: an instruction to readers to say a short prayer before they pronounced the letters that followed. The recitation of the letters also became a prayer, and the word 'amen' was said at the end of the process, just as it was at the end of a prayer.

That the alphabet should be presented as a Christian text or icon, with 'amen' for good measure, is not surprising in a society and culture as Christian as that of medieval England. Indeed, the linkage of letters and religion is far older than the middle ages. Christians do not have a story about the invention of the alphabet, but the Bible comes close to giving it a divine origin. Writing is first mentioned in the Old Testament in the accounts of God's delivery of the Ten Commandments to Moses, in the books of 'Exodus' and 'Deuteronomy'. 'The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain. Stay there and let me give you the tablets of stone, the law and the commandments, which I have written down so that you may teach them".' He then gave the prophet two tablets 'written with the finger of God'. These first tablets were broken by Moses in anger at the worship of the golden calf by the people of Israel, and replaced by new ones written, according to 'Deuteronomy', by God himself, but in 'Exodus' by Moses at God's dictation.⁵⁹

It is not explained how Moses learnt to write, and the gift of writing is not clearly ascribed to God. But God could certainly write, and his new relationship with his people was expressed through this means. Not only were the Commandments preserved on tablets; they were copied by people and kept on their bodies in amulets. God's later communications with his prophets were also recorded in writing. The religion of Israel became 'a religion of the book', which depended on written texts for its understanding and practice. So did Christianity. 'I am the alpha and omega', says Christ in the 'Book of Revelation', 'the begin-

ning and the end' – an image which links him with the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet.⁶⁰ Christianity too was based on books: the Bible, Roman and canon law texts, and prayer books for worship. The leaders of the Church and its worship – the clergy – had to be able to read these and other relevant spiritual works.

Most Christians, of course, did not use the alphabet and language of Israel; they wrote in Greek in the East and Latin in the West, using the appropriate letters. The Greeks had a legendary hero named Cadmus who was said to have introduced their alphabet, and the Latins had a female one, Carmentis. When Isidore of Seville (d. 636) wrote his famous dictionary called the *Etymologies*, he took a broad view of the origin of writing. He thought that the Syriac and Chaldaean alphabets stemmed from Abraham, the Hebrew from Moses, and the Greek and Latin from Cadmus and Carmentis – a view that did not see alphabets as particularly holy in themselves.⁶¹ Later in the middle ages, however, Latin and its writings so dominated the culture of western Europe that there was less awareness of other alphabets and their scripts. The Latin ABC of twenty-two letters came to be seen as part of God's scheme of things, just as the Hebrew alphabet did to the writers of 'Exodus' and 'Deuteronomy', although in reality the Latin version was a comparatively late development.

There is a good example of this view in a ninth-century tract on the alphabet, surviving in a manuscript from Berne in Switzerland. The author of the tract attempts to show that the Latin letters have Christian characteristics. He asks 'why is the first letter "a"?' He explains that this is because it is the first letter of angel, *anima* ('life'), and Adam – all early creations of God. The three strokes of the capital 'A' signify the Trinity, and the whole letter stands for God as a unity. He tries to give similar values to other letters: 'c' is the Church, 'e' the Trinity, 's' the Old and New Testaments, and 'x', of course, the Cross.⁶² A similar kind of approach can be seen in Bartholomew's thirteenth-century encyclopaedia, *De Proprietatibus Rerum*. God, says Bartholomew, did twenty-two works in the first week of his creation. The generations from Adam to Jacob were twenty-two in number, the Old Testament was written in twenty-two books, and there are 'two and twenty letters of ABC, by the which all the lore of God's law is written'.⁶³ In the same way, a medieval French book illustrator could imagine Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with ABCD written on his tablets.⁶⁴

By the tenth century, the fact that the Church was grounded on writings was visibly demonstrated every time a new church building was consecrated. During the consecration ceremony, the presiding cleric – the bishop – wrote letters across the floor of the church. The directions about this state that 'the bishop shall begin at the left-hand [corner] of the east end to write the alphabet on the pavement with his staff up to the right-hand corner of the west end, and he shall write the alphabet similarly from the left-hand corner of the west end up to the right-hand corner of the east end'.⁶⁵ A great St Andrew's cross of letters was thereby scratched across the floor of the building: one alphabet in Latin and one in Greek. In *The Golden Legend*, Jacopo da Varazze tried to attach meanings to this cross of letters. It represented the joining together of the Gentiles with the Jews under

Christ, and the two Testaments of the Bible (which interlink with one another). Thirdly, it stood for Christian belief. ‘The pavement of the church is like the foundation of our faith, and the characters written on it are the articles of the faith.’⁶⁶ Learned extrapolation, perhaps, but the consecration alphabets were an appropriate symbol of the ways that Christianity rested on the written word and that letters, in consequence, acquired religious significance.

It fitted with all this that medieval children learnt the alphabet in a Christian form and as a Christian task. It was not only to be looked at, but pronounced aloud and pronounced like a prayer. The cross at the beginning was not simply a visual reminder of Christianity; it was a trigger for a phrase that you spoke before you started saying the letters. John Trevisa, in his translation of Bartholomew’s encyclopaedia, begun in 1398, included a prologue recalling how, in his school-days,

[A] cross was made, all of red
 In the beginning of my book,
 That is cleped [*called*] ‘God me speed’,
 In the first lesson that I took.
 Then I learned ‘a’ and ‘b’,
 And other letters by their names.⁶⁷

The first thing that a child learnt in school, according to John Alcock, bishop of Ely, in the 1490s, was ‘“Christ’s cross be my speed”, and so beginneth the ABC’.⁶⁸ You pronounced the phrase, crossed yourself, and were ready to say the alphabet. In fact, although these were the commonest words, the phrase existed in several versions. We find it in texts associated with, or alluding to children, as:

God me speed [also, God speed me].⁶⁹
Du gveras [‘God help’, in Cornish].⁷⁰
 Cross Christ [me] speed.⁷¹
 Cross of Jesus Christ be ever our speed.⁷²
 Christ cross me speed.⁷³
 Cross and courteous Christ this beginning speed.⁷⁴
 Christ cross me speed, and St Nicholas.⁷⁵
 Christ cross be our speed, with grace, mercy in all our need.⁷⁶
 Christ’s cross be my speed, in all virtue to proceed.⁷⁷

The phrase was not unique to children, and was said by adults too when making the sign of the cross. Thus the hero of the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* exclaims ‘Cross Christ me speed’ while he is riding on an adventure and prays to God for somewhere to stay during Christmas.⁷⁸ Schools probably took the phrase from general use, but it became especially identified with them. By the early fifteenth century, a character in a story could ask another how long ago he said ‘Christ cross me speed’, knowing that readers would associate the words with being a schoolboy.⁷⁹

Saying the text before you recited the alphabet meant that you commended yourself to God and entered into a spiritual mode. When you had finished the recitation, you said 'amen' as in a prayer. Indeed, on the first page of a primer, the alphabet with its 'amen', placed above other short prayers with theirs, looked remarkably like a prayer itself.⁸⁰ The process that we have seen beginning in the twelfth century had become fully developed. Once the alphabet was seen as religious text or icon, it was tempting to go on spinning religious meanings from it. Bartholomew's twenty-two letters are one instance of this, and we shall encounter others in which even the alphabet book and its rubrics could be compared to the cross and wounds of Christ.

LEARNING THE ALPHABET

HAVING ESTABLISHED THE shape of the alphabet, we need to know how it was put into children's hands and heads. Modern schools have blackboards, whiteboards, or projectors to show material to a class. Medieval schools may have displayed large alphabets, and three Tudor ABCs survive on the vestry wall of the church of North Cadbury (Somerset), apparently from its use as a schoolroom. But pupils then, like pupils today, needed their own copies of the alphabet, and this was especially true in homes where reading might be taught to one child at a time. It was already common by the thirteenth century to use small wooden tablets for this purpose with a parchment cover attached to one or both sides. The sermon writer Odo of Cheriton, writing early in that century, uses such a tablet as an illustration of the crucifixion of Jesus. 'Just as the sheet (*carta*) on which the ABC taught to children is fixed with four nails to a board, so the flesh or skin of Christ was stretched out on the cross'. Christ on the cross was an image of the ABC, 'rubricated with the vermilion of his own blood'.⁸¹ The alphabet tablet is mentioned again by Friar Robert Holcote, writing between 1326 and 1349. 'You know', he says, 'that children, when they are first instructed, are not put to learn anything complicated but only what is plain. Therefore, they are first taught from a book with letters written large, affixed to a piece of wood, and afterwards, by progress, in letters from a more sophisticated book'.⁸²

The fullest account of the tablet appears in an English poem about the passion of Christ, written in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. This poem survives in two versions, one in a Harley manuscript in the British Museum, the other in a Bodleian manuscript, which differ slightly in details.⁸³ The Harley text, which is perhaps the earlier, begins as follows:

In [every] place as man may see,
When a child to school shall set be,
A book [for] him is brought,
Nailed on a board of tree [*wood*],
That men calleth an ABC,
Prettily wrought.

Wrought is on the book without [*outside*],
 Five paraphs [*paragraph marks*] great and stout,
 Boled [*embellished*] in rose red;
 That is set without doubt
 [Full of letters about]
 In tokening of Christ's death.

Red letter in parchment
 Maketh a child good and fine
 Letters to look and see.
 By this book men may divine
 That Christ's body was full of pain
 That died on rood tree [*on the cross*].

On tree he was done full blithe
 With great paraphs, that be wounds five,
 As you may understand.
 Look in his body, maid and wife,
 When they began [to] nails drive
 In foot and in hand.

The poem then goes on to discuss the crucifixion, in terms of the alphabet tablet. Christ's body was marked with red wounds, like paragraph marks, and with blue bruises from the blows delivered to him. His marks, says the poet, can be read like an ABC, and he or she proceeds to discuss a number of aspects of Christ's passion alphabetically, such as his bonds, faintness, love, mercy, and suffering. The Harley alphabet ends with the abbreviation '&', but the Bodleian version contains two further stanzas incorporating the three tittles, *est*, and *amen*.

These literary sources teach us at least three things about the medieval alphabet tablet. First, people called it both an 'abece' and a 'book', although it was not a book in the usual sense. Secondly, the tablet was covered with a piece of parchment (doubtless for durability), attached by nails, and containing writing. The Harley text talks about red letters on the tablet; the Bodleian version refers to letters of red and black. Most tablets probably displayed the alphabet letters in black, for cheapness and durability, though there may have been rubrics or embellishments in red. The mention of five paragraph marks may mean that the writing was divided into five sections or contained five items (alphabet, Paternoster, and other basic prayers). Finally, there is the emphasis on the tablet's religious significance. Not content with the alphabet cross as a reminder of Christ, Odo and the alphabet poet seek to use the whole tablet and its red ink as images of the cross, Christ's wounds, and his sacrifice for us. In their view, not only was the alphabet a religious text, but the tablet itself an icon which you could venerate just as you did an image of the crucified Christ in a church. 'The word made flesh' becomes 'the flesh made word' (Fig. 91).

The writers mentioned so far do not tell us, unfortunately, what was written on



91 Christ on the cross was seen as a kind of book, and the marks of his Passion as letters that teach us lessons.

the tablet. For this, we have to go to sources from the continent and from later in English history, because alphabet tablets were widely used in western Europe during the late medieval and early modern periods. Illustrations of them on the continent suggest that they were oblong, at first often lateral in shape but later more usually vertical, especially by the sixteenth century. They had one or more handles or a carrying cord, which might be at the top, sides, or bottom, the latter being especially associated with the later, vertical form. Pictures of alphabets on lateral tablets appear in fifteenth-century Italian paintings, one of them depicting the young Jesus and two illustrating the school days of St Augustine of Hippo. The Jesus alphabet begins with a capital 'A', followed by 'a' and the rest of the letters in minuscule.⁸⁴ The others start with a cross and then give 'a' and so on in minuscule.⁸⁵ A fourth example comes from a woodcut in Gregor Reisch's *Margarita Philosophica Nova*, printed at Strasbourg in 1508, which depicts Lady

92 An elementary class, about 1450. One boy reads the letters A B C D, with physical encouragement from the master; others recite the Paternoster in Latin.

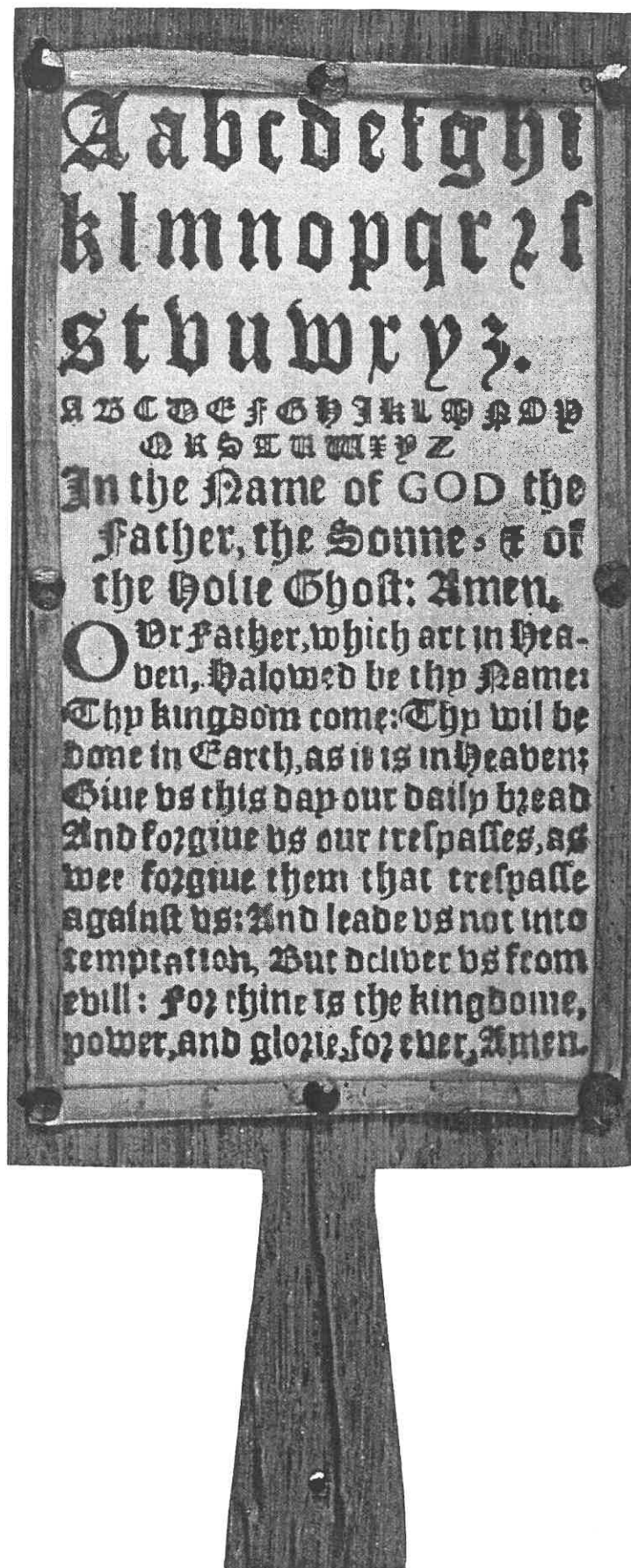
Grammar giving one to a schoolboy. This is a vertical tablet, and contains an alphabet of twenty-three letters in minuscule (Fig. 93). None of these alphabets appears to contain alternative forms of the letters or abbreviations.

Real tablet-books survive from England after the Reformation, chiefly from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the 1580s, these were known as 'horn-books', because by then they were often covered for protection with a thin transparent sheet of horn, but it is not clear if this material was used in earlier times.⁸⁶ The typical horn-book was a vertical oblong tablet, about three inches wide and six high, with a handle at the bottom (Fig. 94).⁸⁷ A printed sheet was pasted on the tablet containing two alphabets, one in minuscule and one in capitals. This was followed by a list of vowels and a table of two-letter syllables, the invocation 'In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost', and the Lord's Prayer in English.

Medieval tablets in England certainly contained the alphabet. But was it a simple ABC, as in the continental pictures, or the more complicated one of the primers with the alternative letters, abbreviations, *est*, and 'amen'? It is difficult to be sure about the alternative letters. The references we possess to children reciting the alphabet suggest that they simply named the basic twenty-three letters and did not say, when they got to 's', 'long s' and 'short s'. If the alternatives were in their copies, children may have been told to ignore them for reciting purposes. There are several pieces of evidence, however, that the abbreviations, *est*, and 'amen' were said, and these may well have appeared in the tablet alphabet. But, before discussing that point, we need to establish how children pronounced the ABC when they said it. Naming the letters aloud, after all, is fundamental to understanding them. When we are accomplished readers, we read at sight and usually silently, with little attention to sound. For children who are learning to read, a different



93 An alphabet board, 1508 (detail from Fig. 85).



94 A horn-book of a type used in Tudor and Stuart England, containing the alphabet and Lord's Prayer.

approach is needed. They have not only to look at letters and recognise their shapes and values, but to pronounce their names and understand their sounds. Only by naming the letters can they learn their qualities and relate them to words that they have hitherto known only as sounds. Only by children reading aloud can adults ascertain that they are doing so correctly.

The Greek alphabet possesses letters with names which once had meanings. 'Alpha' itself came from the Semitic word *aleph*, 'an ox', and a capital letter 'A' is an ox's head that has been turned upside down. The names of our own letters, 'a', 'be', 'ce', are merely pronouncing names which tell you the sound of the letter, apart from 'zed' which comes from the Greek word *zeta*. These names, like the alphabet, go back to the Romans. Medieval teachers adopted them from Roman grammarians and they appear in such texts as the Stowe manuscript, already mentioned. There are plenty of references to show that they were used in late-medieval England, in popular speech as well as in school, as they have been down to the present day.⁸⁸ Their names in France – a, bé, cé, dé, e, ef, gé, ah, i, ka, el, em, en, o, pé, qu, er, es, té, u, iquece, i-grec, zed – were almost exactly the same.⁸⁹ People in England differed mainly from their continental neighbours in having their own name for 'y'. This appears as 'fix' in the twelfth-century alphabet, and as 'wy' by about 1200.⁹⁰

One of the earliest references to a pupil saying the alphabet in England occurs not in the English language but in the fifteenth-century Cornish text *Beunans Meriasek*.⁹¹ This is a play about the life of the Breton saint Meriadec, written for performance at Camborne whose parish church was dedicated to him. It tells how Meriadec was sent to school, and describes the scene when he got there. One of the schoolboys begins to recite the alphabet:

*Du gveras! A, b, c,
An pen can henna yv d,
Ny won na moy yn lyver.*

[God help! A, b, c;
The end of the song is 'd'.
I do not know any more in the book.]

He is presumably a beginner, who is learning the first four letters. Another boy says,

*E, s, t, henna yv 'est'.
Pandryv nessa ny won fest;
Mur na reugh ov cronkye;
Rag my ny ve 3af the well*

[E, s, t, that is 'est'.
I do not quite know what is next.
Do not beat me greatly, because I shall be no better.]

This scholar has reached the end of the alphabet, but the play makes the joke that having reached *est*, he does not realise that he has only to say the word ‘amen’ in order to finish.

We learn something else from this scene: that reciting the alphabet continued after ‘z’ with the additional material. Writers in Tudor England record that this material was pronounced ‘and per se, con per se, tittle est amen’; indeed, ‘tittle est amen’ became a figure of speech for an end or conclusion.⁹² *Per se* is Latin for ‘by itself’, and meant that the signs for ‘and’ and *con-* were complete in themselves. Further light on reciting the alphabet comes from Thomas Morley’s musical setting of 1597, a setting not necessarily meant for children but aiming to use a familiar (and perhaps amusing) text for instruction in music. His version goes:

Christ’s cross be my speed, in all virtue to proceed, A.b.c.d.e.f.g.h.
i.k.l.m.n.o.p.q.r.s and t. double-u.v.x. with y. ezod, and per se, con per se.
tittle tittle est amen. When you have done begin again, begin again.⁹³

There may have been a method of chanting the alphabet similar to this musical arrangement, in which the letters were arranged in roughly stressed or metrical lines. And unless his final sentence is his own addition, it may represent an instruction used in schools to make children go on chanting indefinitely. Hoole says that in his day children were usually ‘made to run over all the letters in the alphabet, forwards and backwards’, until they could tell any one.⁹⁴ This was still done in the nineteenth century. Flora Thompson recalled the beginners in an Oxfordshire village school in the 1880s chanting the ABC forwards, then backwards in a metrical form, over and over again. ‘Once started, they were like a watch wound up, and went on alone for hours.’⁹⁵

Was there a scheme by which children built up their knowledge of the alphabet? Did they learn one letter per lesson, or more than one? The words in use for the alphabet may throw some light on this. ‘Alphabet’ itself, of course, comes from Greek and relates to the first two Greek letters, but two other words were common in medieval Europe. One is *abecede*, found in Latin as far back as Roman times, and the other ‘abece’, especially popular in English. They suggest that there may have been two schemes in operation, one teaching the letters in threes, beginning with ‘a’, ‘b’, and ‘c’, and one in fours including ‘d’ as well. The French *Ballade de ABC* says that after the first lesson, when the master taught ‘a’ ‘a’ ‘a’, the pupil learnt three letters at each lesson, beginning with ‘a’ ‘b’ ‘c’, down to the ninth, containing ‘y’ and ‘z’.⁹⁶ A French treatise called *Civilité honeste pour les Enfants*, published at Paris in 1560, proposes that the four letters ‘a’ to ‘d’ be learnt on the first day and four more on each of the next four days, leaving the last three to be mastered on the sixth.⁹⁷ Another French writer, Jacques Cossard in 1633, joins in recommending the method of three letters per lesson.⁹⁸ A third alternative is suggested by the alphabet tablet in Gregor Reisch’s book. This tablet, which divides the letters into two lines of four followed by three lines of five, may reflect a five-day scheme (Fig. 93).

In England, the Cornish play provides the best evidence found so far for a system of learning four letters each day. The mention of five paragraph marks in the poem about the alphabet tablet might indicate something similar to the Reisch book, but it is not clear if the marks refer to divisions of the alphabet, or to the alphabet and other prayers. One can well imagine medieval teachers liking a scheme of four letters, because it would enable the alphabet to be taught from Monday to Saturday, leaving Sunday as a holy day. This would have been an elegant imitation of God's creation of the world in one week, and would have chimed with Bartholomew's comparison between God's twenty-two acts in that week and the letters of the alphabet. But we need to be cautious in this matter. The system of three letters, implied by 'abece', may have been in use as well, and the abbreviations had also to be learnt. Teachers may not all have taught in the same way, a situation suggested by the lack of a standard layout of the alphabet in the primers. Moreover, schemes of learning letters are more suited to a school environment, where pupils do the same task in a classroom. They need not have been followed in a domestic relationship between a parent and child.

If pupils followed one of the schemes mentioned above, they might have learnt to say the ABC in as little as a week. Understanding what the letters meant, and linking them with their symbols, normally took longer. A comic story about Edward IV's jester Scoggin, recorded in 1626, tells how Scoggin taught a rustic boy, the son of a husbandman (or farmer), the first nine letters of the ABC. The boy took nine days to learn them, and he then asked in dialect 'Am I past the worst now?'.⁹⁹ Hoole, a careful observer, noted a wide variation in his day. He knew of one child who learnt the alphabet, both names and signs, in eleven days, thanks to a toy box and wheel showing one letter at a time. Slow witted children, on the other hand, could take a whole year, even when beaten to make them.¹⁰⁰

LEARNING SYLLABLES

'A CHILD', OBSERVED John Wycliffe in about 1378, 'first learns the alphabet, secondly how to form syllables, thirdly how to read, and fourthly how to understand.'¹⁰¹ Having mastered the ABC, the next stage was to recognise and pronounce the letters in syllables. In medieval times, the first groups of letters which children encountered were prayers, perhaps on the tablet and certainly in the primer: the Paternoster, Ave Maria, and Creed. As we shall see presently, these were often in Latin up to the 1530s, so the learning of syllables (and later of words) was frequently done in a language which children did not understand. It is not easy to find how this stage of learning worked in the middle ages, but some light is thrown on it in the sixteenth century by playwrights who show dull or rustic people trying, or being taught, to read. In John Rastell's play *The Four Elements*, written in about 1520, a comic character mocks another for his learning, and offers to teach him:

Lo, he hath forgotten, you may see,
 The first word of his ABC.
 Hark, fool, hark! I will teach thee:
 P, a, pa; t, e, r, ter.¹⁰²

In *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe (c.1593–4), the clown Robin steals one of the doctor's conjuring books and tries to read out a spell:

A per se, a; t, h, e, the; o per se, o; deny orgon, gorgon.¹⁰³

These examples suggest that children were made to read out the letters of each syllable individually, and then pronounce it, finally putting the syllables together to make the whole word. 'P, a, pa; t, e, r, ter; pater'. If the word contained only one letter, as in 'a', they were taught to say, in Latin, *a per se a*, meaning 'a by itself is a'. There were four words which required you to say *per se* when you spelt them out, the others being 'I', 'O', and '&'. The modern word 'ampersand' for the '&' sign comes from the practice of making children say 'and per se and' when they encountered it.¹⁰⁴ Rastell's evidence indicates that 'Pater' was the first whole word that most children learnt to spell and pronounce; it was, after all, the opening word of the prayer that usually came first after the alphabet in primers.¹⁰⁵ The custom may go back to Anglo-Saxon times, as the Harley manuscript of Alcuin implies, and would have been appropriate in a Christian society. Just as one of the first whole words that children learnt to say was the name of their earthly father, so the first whole word that they learnt to read would be that of their heavenly one.

By the fifteenth century, educationists (at least in Italy) were giving children practice at saying syllables before they attempted whole words. A painting of about 1400 at Lucca shows the child Jesus holding an ABC tablet containing the alphabet in two lines, followed by two rows of syllables:

Ba. be. bi. bo. bu.
 Ca. ce. ci. co. cu.¹⁰⁶

Gerardus de Lisa published an *Alphabet and Syllabary* in Italian in about 1478–80, which printed the alphabet, then the vowels, and lastly lists of syllables, some beginning with a vowel ('ab eb ib ob ub') and others with a consonant ('ba be bi bo bu').¹⁰⁷ It is possible that medieval English children were trained in pronouncing syllables in this way, but the method is not recorded until it is found in printed Latin primers of the mid and late 1530s (Fig. 96).¹⁰⁸ These books resemble the Italian sources in giving the alphabet, vowels, and a shortened list of syllables, down to the letter 'g':

+ A a b c d e f g h i k l m n o p
 q r z s t v u x y z & ʒ est Amen.
 a e i o u a e i o u

ab eb ib ob ub	ba be bi bo bu
ac ec ic oc uc	ca ce ci co cu
ad ed id od ud	da de di do du
af ef if of uf	fa fe fi fo fu
ag eg ig og ug	ga ge gi go gu

It may be, although this is not specified in the English texts, that children worked through the whole of the alphabet in this way. The method was a slow one, but it would have grounded pupils more securely. Pupils would take longer to get to *Pater* but be more likely to say it correctly when they did so.

LEARNING WORDS AND TEXTS

HAVING LEARNT SYLLABLES, pupils could practice reading whole words and sentences. Which words and sentences? Teachers of reading were not necessarily clergy, especially if they were parents, and the Church did not formally specify how they should teach. Nevertheless, Christianity was a powerful influence on the process. We have seen that Church leaders, from Anglo-Saxon times, emphasised the need for all children and adults to learn the Paternoster, the Creed, and (by about 1200) the Ave Maria.¹⁰⁹ People should know these basic prayers 'at least in the mother tongue', meaning in English or French, but 'at least' implies a concession for less intelligent people. In church, the clergy said these prayers in Latin, and schools and schoolbooks were more likely to teach them in that language. The Anglo-Saxon alphabet in the Harley manuscript, followed by the opening words of the Paternoster in Latin, suggests as much.

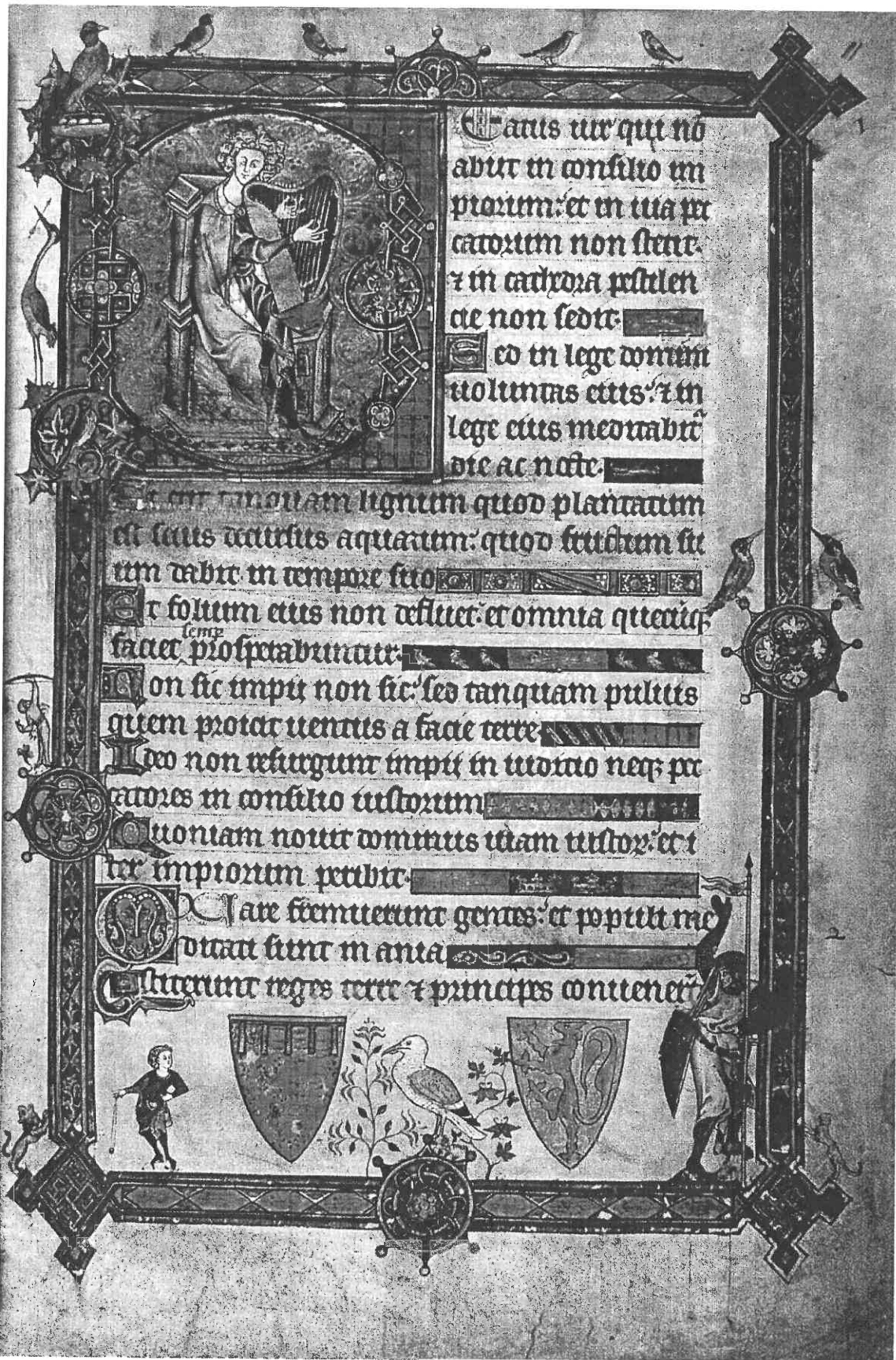
Alphabet tablets may have included basic prayers like the Paternoster, as horn-books did in later centuries. But a tablet had only limited space for texts, and sooner or later readers were likely to go on to a book with pages. Up to the thirteenth century, Latin church service-books were probably used for this purpose, notably psalters and antiphonals. The psalter included the 150 psalms, which were said or sung by clergy in their daily prayers, the whole sequence being read through every week. The antiphonal contained antiphons, short biblical texts which were said or sung before and after the psalms. Such material was especially suitable for boys or girls training as clergy or nuns, and, from Anglo-Saxon times, the most junior members of the clergy were known as 'psalmists', implying that one learnt the psalms before going on to higher studies and duties.¹¹⁰ But learning them was not confined to religious trainees. King Alfred's children, Edward and Ælfthryth, both did so in their youth, and both grew up as lay people.¹¹¹ Later, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, many major churches and towns had a 'song' school, whose business apparently centred on learning to read and sing the psalter. These schools too probably catered not only for future clerics but for children who would stay in the secular world.¹¹²

In the thirteenth century, new kinds of prayer books developed alongside the

older church service-books.¹¹³ One was a book of basic prayers, sometimes in Latin, sometimes in English. It included the Paternoster, Ave Maria, Creed, confessions, graces, and other texts, and sometimes began with an alphabet, as we have seen. Another was the 'book of hours', 'hours of the Virgin', 'hours of Our Lady', or simply 'hours'.¹¹⁴ This contained shorter, simpler versions of the daily church services said by the clergy, with special devotions to the Virgin Mary. Books of basic prayers and hours were usually in Latin, although there were a few in English by the late fourteenth century. The hours were sometimes read in church by clergy in addition to the normal daily services, but they and the basic prayer books were specially suitable for use by literate lay people. They could be read at home as a private devotion, or in church while attending a service. The well-known Venetian account of England in about 1500 mentions how people took the hours of Our Lady to church, and read it verse by verse, with a companion.¹¹⁵ Books of hours became common possessions of wealthy people, sometimes in beautiful and expensive copies, and they are frequently mentioned in wills and inventories of books.

A special word developed to describe lay prayer books, 'primer' – a term apparently special to England. It is found in Latin by 1297, and in English by Chaucer's time.¹¹⁶ Rather confusingly, it seems to have been applied both to books of basic prayers and to books of hours. The word is an interesting one, because it means 'first [book]', and may have come into use, as John Hilsey believed in 1539, because a prayer book or book of hours was 'the first book that the tender youth was instructed in'.¹¹⁷ There are a number of references to children reading basic prayer books and hours during the later middle ages. The Carthusian priory of Hinton (Som.) owned two books called 'primers of children' in 1343.¹¹⁸ Bishop Grandisson of Exeter wrote in 1357 of pupils learning to read and write the basic prayers and the hours of the Virgin before they went on to study Latin grammar.¹¹⁹ In the 1490s, Bishop Alcock of Ely mentioned children in school learning graces and the hours.¹²⁰ We have already noticed the encouragement of wealthier and nobler boys and girls to say the hours when rising in the morning.¹²¹ But prayer books and hours do not seem to have quite driven out the use of the psalter and antiphonal for teaching the young. Song schools would have continued to use such books, and some children in noble households did so. A beautiful illuminated psalter was begun for the use of Prince Alfonso, son of Edward I, when he was eleven in 1284, and after his death in that year it apparently passed to his younger sister Elizabeth (Fig. 95).¹²² Walter of Dinedor, a young noble ward of the bishop of Hereford, had a psalter bought for his use in 1290–1, and Margaret Plumpton, as we have seen, was learning one as late as 1463.¹²³

Because most books of hours were in Latin, as were psalters and antiphonals, there was a strong Latin framework to learning to read, even for those who did so privately at home. Primer alphabets were normally Latin ones, though some (as we have seen) had extra English letters. They contained a Latin word, *est*, and the phrase *per se* used in spelling was Latin too, implying that you were engaged in a Latin process. Most readers therefore began as Latin scholars, and seem to have read their earliest texts in that language. When your master teaches you, observed



95 The Psalter of Prince Alfonso, a beautiful manuscript produced for a boy prince who died in 1284 before it was finished.

the writer of a fifteenth-century courtesy book for boys, he will teach you the Paternoster, Ave Maria, *Credo*, *In nomine Patris*, *Confiteor*, and *Misereatur* – in other words the basic prayers in Latin.¹²⁴ This made learning to read a different process from today for many children, because it was in an unfamiliar language. Pupils would learn to recognise words and pronounce them, but they could not understand the meaning without being told.

Chaucer's picture of a school in the 'Prioress's Tale' depicts two pupils at this stage of learning. The boy hero of the story, aged seven, sits in the school at his primer, whatever that means: alphabet tablet, basic prayer book, or book of hours. A second older boy is part of a group learning the antiphonal. Its members are singing the text in praise of the Virgin, *Alma Redemptoris Mater*. The younger boy, through listening, learns the first verse by heart. He asks the older pupil what it means, but this boy is not sure. He has merely heard that it is a hymn to the Virgin, saluting her, and asking for her help. He explains the defect in his knowledge thus,

I learn song; I know but little grammar.¹²⁵

At the moment, he is mastering reading at sight and pronunciation. He will not understand the meaning of the words and sentences until he learns Latin grammar.

This makes it hard to say how long it took to read, from beginning the ABC to understanding whole sentences. A Tudor estimate of 1561, shortly to be discussed, makes the optimistic prediction that someone could do so in six weeks, probably imagining a keen adult or a well-motivated child. But such a person, of course, could only have understood a text in English after such a short time. He or she would have got no further in reading Latin than word recognition and pronunciation. Some children must have struggled to decipher Latin words and pronounce them properly, and probably took months to do so. A sentence in John Palsgrave's French grammar of 1530 says, of a dull pupil, 'He hath been at school this half year, and yet he cannot spell his Paternoster'.¹²⁶ Even intelligent boys had to spend months, perhaps years, in a grammar school to master the grammar and vocabulary of Latin sufficiently to understand what it meant.

Some readers (chiefly boys) went on to learn such things. Many others probably did not, but all children, whatever their next stage of learning, would sooner or later meet with material in their own spoken language: French or English. Children, especially girls in homes, may have deviated from Latin to reading English soon after learning the ABC. Alfred's children are said to have learnt not only psalms, implying Latin ones, but 'English books, especially English poetry'.¹²⁷ An Anglo-Saxon alphabet, as we have seen, might include the letters peculiar to English. Some early fourteenth-century primers may have contained the basic prayers in French, and primers in English like the Hunter manuscript certainly existed by the end of the century.¹²⁸ We saw in a previous chapter how English rhymes and songs might creep into notebooks in grammar schools, showing that pupils were evidently used to writing (and therefore reading) English. In our next

chapter, we shall explore the wide range of literature in English, available for children to read after about 1400. Some of it was practical, some recreational; some was produced for children, some for adults, but all shows signs of usage by young people.

In one area of reading, however, Latin clung on tenaciously. This was the reading and reciting of prayers from prayer books, including the basic prayers. One might expect this practice to have changed from Latin to English in Chaucer's time, when English was coming into use for so many official and literary purposes. But this happened only to a limited extent. Some basic prayer books and hours were written and used in English during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and some orthodox devotional works for the laity included the basic prayers in English. The late fourteenth-century treatise called *The Chastising of God's Children* observes that some folk 'say in English their psalter and mattins of Our Lady, and the seven psalms, and the litany'.¹²⁹ The Lollards, who emerged in the same period, emphasised the value of prayers said in a language that people understood. John Mirk, an orthodox writer, supported such practices too. His *Instructions for Parish Priests*, written in the late fourteenth century, provided rhymed versions of the basic prayers in English, and his book of model sermons, *Festial*, urged the use of English too. 'It is much more speedful and meritable to you', he told his lay readers, 'to say your Paternoster in English than in such Latin as you do. For when you speak in English, then you know and understand well what you say, and so, by your understanding, you have liking and devotion to say it.'¹³⁰

But Mirk's words reveal that he was trying to alter ingrained habits of prayer. No doubt people made use of English to pray personally and extemporally, but where the basic prayers and other formal prayers were concerned, the majority view, both in and after Chaucer's day and among both clergy and laity, seems to have been that Latin should be used. This applied both to the literate who read such prayers from books and those (literate or illiterate) who said them from memory. When Langland compiled the 'B' version of *Piers Plowman* in the 1370s, and the 'C' version a few years later, he wrote in English with a deep feeling for the language. Yet he criticised slothful parishioners for not having a perfect knowledge of the Paternoster 'as the priest it singeth', in other words in Latin.¹³¹ Prayer books and hours in English were a minority of their kind, up to the Reformation. Most manuscript primers and hours, and the printed versions which began to take their place in the late fifteenth century, were wholly or largely in Latin. Even those with alphabets, implying use with the young, were just as likely to contain the basic prayers and other devotions in Latin as in English.¹³² Most people who read the hours up to the Reformation therefore did so in Latin, as the Virgin Mary was shown doing in pictures. Indeed, some devout lay people in the later middle ages owned copies of the same breviaries and missals that were used by the clergy; these too were in Latin.

There was more than one reason why Latin remained so popular as the medium of prayer. It was the language of the clergy and of Church services. English, by contrast, may have seemed an inferior substitute. The author of *The Chastising of God's Children* noted that some authorities disapproved of translating

religious texts into English, because this could not be done with sufficient accuracy. He himself was willing to allow such translations to help people understand their Latin prayers, but not as replacements for them.¹³³ When John Wycliffe's radical followers, the Lollards, appeared in the 1380s, the use of English for religious texts became more controversial. The Lollards translated the Bible into English and produced sermons and tracts in the language, but they were accused of holding heretical views about the Church, which tended to discredit the use of English for religious purposes. The Lollard translation of the Bible was prohibited in 1409, and some people in the fifteenth century came under suspicion of Lollardy in part because they possessed English primers – though not necessarily wholly for that reason.¹³⁴ Praying in Latin, by contrast, was approved officially, and demonstrated one's orthodoxy. It helped accustom children to the language they would have to learn if they wished to attend a grammar school. And it conferred on adults, whatever their rank in society, a sense of superiority, of being like the clergy.

Nor was the appeal of Latin confined to the higher ends of society. It reached far down. There is a late but telling instance of this in Thomas Ingelend's play *The Disobedient Child*, written by 1553.¹³⁵ A cook-maid says that although she now works in the kitchen, she once went to school and learnt her primer in Latin. Challenged to say how the text began, she replies, *Domine, labia aperies*, the opening phrase of the hours of the Virgin, with one word missing. Even people who could scarcely read – or not at all – still clung to using Latin by memory. Nicholas Canon's mother knew how to cross herself and invoke the Trinity in Latin, and tried to teach him to do the same.¹³⁶ In about 1510, the printer Wynkyn de Worde published a humorous story called *A Little Jest how the Ploughman Learned his Pater Noster*.¹³⁷ It tells how a parish priest tricked a rich but ignorant farmer into learning the prayer by heart, and this too was done in Latin not in English.

The primacy of Latin in people's formal prayers does not appear to have changed, in fact, until the Reformation. It was only in the 1530s that English began to oust Latin widely from popular prayers and devotions, and not until 1549 that its dominance became absolute with the introduction of the Book of Common Prayer. The first *Primer in English*, 'very necessary for all people that understand not the Latin tongue', was printed in London in 1534.¹³⁸ In 1536, royal injunctions of Henry VIII ordered clergy, parents and masters to teach their children and servants the Paternoster, Creed, and Ten Commandments in English – the Commandments now taking the place of the Ave Maria.¹³⁹ John Moreman, vicar of Menheniot (Cornwall) at that time, was said to have been 'the first in those days that taught his parishioners and people to say the Lord's Prayer, the Belief, and the Commandments in the English tongue'.¹⁴⁰ The earliest known ABC with prayers in English as well as in Latin appeared in 1538, and by 1545 there was a similar work entirely in English, 'set forth at the king's commandment'.¹⁴¹

For a while, in the middle of the sixteenth century, there continued to be ABCs in print with the basic prayers in Latin and English. During the reign of Mary Tudor (1553–8), there may indeed have been a revival of Latin. *An A.B.C. for*

C The. **B** A **C** bothe in latyn
and in Englyshe.

† A a b c d e f g h j k l m n o p
q r s t v u x y z e e Amen.

a e i o u a e i o u

ab eb ob ub ba be bi bo bu

ae ee ie oe ue ca ce ci to cu

ad ed id od ud da de di do du

af ef if of uf fa fe fi fo fu

ag eg ig og ug ga ge gi go gu

In nomine patris & filij & spiritus
sancti. Amen. **C** In the name of
the Father and of the Sone and of
the holy ghoſt. Amen.



Ater noster quies in celis
sanctificetur nomen tuum.
Adueniat regnum tuum
Fiat voluntas tua sicut
in celo et in terra. Panem nostrum
quodiduanum da nobis hodie. Et
dimitte nobis debita nostra sicut et

96 A sixteenth-century printed primer, still recognisably similar to its medieval ancestors.

Children, published in about 1561 and perhaps a reprint of a 1550s edition, still provided the Paternoster, Ave Maria, and Creed in Latin and English, albeit with the Latin in smaller type, and apparently aimed itself at adults as well as children. It asserts that 'by this book a man that hath good capacity and can [*knows*] no letter on the book may learn to read in the space of six weeks, both Latin and English'. That meant reading Latin in Chaucer's sense of recognising and pronouncing the words correctly, not understanding the meaning.¹⁴² Even after the last known bilingual ABC came out in about 1570, when copies contained only English material, their contents and layout remained broadly traditional.¹⁴³ Protestant horn-books in English during the seventeenth century continued to head the alphabet with a cross and to follow it with the invocation to the Trinity and the Lord's Prayer.¹⁴⁴ As late as 1630, an English book of anecdotes by Thomas Johnson explained the alphabet, as learnt by children, in a thoroughly medieval manner:

A is thought to be the first letter of the row because by it we may understand Trinity and Unity: the Trinity in that there be three lines, and the Unity in that it is but one letter. And for that cause, in old time, they used three pricks at the latter end of the cross row . . . which they caused children to call tittle, tittle, tittle: signifying that as there were three pricks, and those three made but one stop, even so there were three Persons and yet but one God.¹⁴⁵

Eight hundred years after the ninth-century commentator, the alphabet could still be viewed as a religious text.

SWEETENING THE PILL

MEDIEVAL SCHOOL EDUCATION may seem primitive in its resources, dour and dogged in its nature. That is because we know little about it, especially about its less formal aspects. After 1500, when more writings survive on the subject of education, they show greater signs of inventiveness and humanity than are visible earlier. Sir Thomas Elyot, for example, suggested that children's first letters should be 'painted or limned in a pleasant manner', in other words in a decorative book.¹⁴⁶ Hoole in the mid seventeenth century mentions toys for teaching the young to read. These included ivory dice with letters on their faces, playing cards with letters on their backs, and boxes containing a wheel or a scroll which showed a letter when turned.¹⁴⁷ Evidence like this may tempt us to think that the philosophy of education changed markedly after 1500; the deduction, however, would be an unsafe one.

Although medieval methods of teaching young children to read are elusive, enough is known to suggest that some teachers devoted both time and ingenuity to making the process attractive.¹⁴⁸ We hear in fifteenth-century Italy of alphabet letters 'in fruit, cake, sugar, and other children's foods'. Pottery bowls occur in France, Spain, and the Netherlands in the same period which carry the text of the Ave Maria and may well have had a function with children. Some books of hours were decorated and illustrated, and although these were usually meant for adults, they may have been shown to children or commissioned for those of high status, like Alfonso's psalter. A list of jewellery – rings, brooches, and crowns – belonging to Henry III in 1255 included an *abece*, which may have been an alphabet tablet of precious metal, or an object decorated with the ABC.¹⁴⁹ In 1415, an alphabet with letters of gold was purchased for the five-year-old Jeanne, daughter of Charles duke of Orleans in France.¹⁵⁰ In Yorkshire, an esquire named John Morton bequeathed 'a silver bowl with ABC written on the cover' to one of his male relatives in about 1431.¹⁵¹

A real bowl, similar to Morton's, still exists in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The 'Studley Bowl', as it is known, consists of a bowl on a foot with a matching cover. It is of silver gilt, 14.5 cm high with a diameter of 14.3 cm, and was made in England in about the late fourteenth century (Fig. 97).¹⁵² Its original owners are not known and nothing is recorded about it until it appears in the pos-

session of a Yorkshire gentry family in the late nineteenth century; it could have been Morton's or another example of the same type. The cover of the bowl has a knob on the top, decorated with a minuscule 'a', and the cover and bowl are each engraved with an alphabet, embellished with foliage. Counting the knob produces the double 'a'. Each alphabet is laid out in an identical way, with some differences from those in the primers:

+ a b c d e f g h i k l m n o p q r s t u x y z & est : 7

The cross is present, but there are no alternative letters; the *est* is placed before the tittles and *con-*, and there is no 'amen'. It is tempting to interpret the bowl as a utensil for a child who was learning to read, and such a function is plausible but

97 The Studley bowl. Was it meant to be used by a child, who would learn the alphabet while doing so?



not certain. The alphabet may be a decorative motif, or reflect the view that the ABC harmonises with God's creation and underlies all knowledge. Such a bowl could well have been produced with both adults and children in mind, or intended for one group and also used by the other.

Did the ingenuity in making visual alphabets extend to presenting them in other written or graphic forms? There are a number of late-medieval poems whose lines each start with letters in alphabetical order. They deal with such topics as the Passion of Christ, the Virgin Mary, flowers, morals and manners, satire on the clergy, and the ribald poem 'A for Alyn Mallson'.¹⁵³ None of these, however, seems aimed at young children. The earliest poem to survive with such a purpose appears to be one by Richard Whitford, brother of Syon Abbey (Middx.), in his religious treatise for lay people, *The Work for Householders*, published in about 1531.¹⁵⁴ This poem addresses itself to a 'child', and someone has scribbled an alphabet beside it in the British Library copy. The verses begin,

Always love poverty, with vile [*humble*] things be content.
Be also in good works busy and diligent.

The rest of the letters give advice on behaviour (don't speak too much, be charitable, forgive your enemies) and religious observances (keep fast days, receive the sacraments frequently, and remember your Lord's passion). At the end come the abbreviations, and the poem manages to pack *con-*, the tittles, and the other final elements into the last two lines:

Conceive here two tittles more, two precepts for ten:
Love God and your neighbour both, so conclude *est*, amen.

Was Whitford a pioneer of alphabet teaching to children, whose seriousness others would lighten in years to come? Or was he trying to make serious a method of teaching that already existed in more playful forms? By the seventeenth century, children were learning the famous sequence 'A was an apple-pie, B bit it, C cut it', and so on, and by the Georgian period there were rhyming alphabets in print.¹⁵⁵ It would be risky to rule out the existence of similar devices in medieval England, given the variety of teachers and pupils, and the frivolity even of lessons in grammar schools.

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182. T. West, *The Antiquities of Furness*, 3rd edn. (Ulverston, 1822), p. 195.
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201. *Ibid.*, pp. 111, 130, 150.
202. Lyndwood, p. 142; Stephenson, p. 493.
203. Hanham, p. xvii.
204. *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical 1604*, ed. J. V. Bullard (London, 1934), p. 94. Material on the history of clerks is collected in Legg, pp. xvii-lxii, where the tendency of the clerk to become an adult also seems to emerge.
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CHAPTER 7: LEARNING TO READ

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59. Exodus, xxiv.12, xxxi.18, xxxii.16–19, xxxiv.1, 28; Deuteronomy, ix.9–17, x.4.
60. Revelation, i.8, xxi.6, xxii.13.
61. *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols (Oxford, 1911), i, I.iii.4–5, I.iv.1, V.xxxix.10–11.
62. *Grammatici Latini*, ed. Keil, viii, 302–5.
63. *On the Properties of Things*, ii, 1373–4. Compare, however, Bartholomew's contemporary, Vincent of Beauvais, whose *Speculum Doctrinale* (Venice, 1591), book ii, chapters 6–8, gives a more just and historical account of the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin alphabets in the manner of Isidore.
64. Alexandre-Bidon, 1989, pp. 957–8.
65. Banting, p. 38; cf. *The Claudius Pontificals*, ed. D. A. Turner, Henry Bradshaw Society, 97 (1971), p. 44; *Pontificale Lanaletense*, ed. G. H. Doble, Henry Bradshaw Society, 74 (1937), p. 7; H. A. Wilson, p. 105.
66. Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, ed. Ryan, ii, 182.
67. *On the Properties of Things*, i, 40.
68. Nichols and Rimbault, p. 2.
69. *Index*, no. 33; *On the Properties of Things*, i, 40.
70. Orme, 1993, p. 9.
71. Furnivall, 1868a/1931, p. 181.
72. Clark, 1905, p. 4.
73. STC 14546.5; J. Ames, *Typographical Antiquities*, ed. T. F. Dibdin, 4 vols (London, 1810–19), ii, 367–9.
74. *Pierce the Ploughmans Crede*, p. 1.
75. *Index*, no. 604; Cambridge, Caius College, MS 174/95, p. 482; *Cambridge Middle English Lyrics*, ed. W. R. Person (Seattle, 1953), pp. 5–6.
76. E. Wilson, fol. 56v.
77. STC 18133; Thomas Morley, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (London, 1597), p. 36.
78. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, lines 761–2.
79. *A Selection from the Minor Poems of Dan John Lydgate*, ed. J. O. Halliwell, Percy Society, 2 (1840), p. 42. The text is not now attributed to Lydgate.
80. See, for example, Plimpton, p. 19.
81. H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 140, 417.
82. Beryl Smalley, *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1960), p. 192.
83. *Index*, nos. 1523 (BL, Harley MS 3954, fol. 87r; also Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 18.7.21 fol. 122v) and 1483 (Bodleian, MS Bodley 789, fol. 152r). The first of these is printed in *Political, Religious and Love Poems*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, 2nd ed., EETS, os 15 (1903), pp. 271–8.

84. Reproduced in Schreiner, plate 19, no 32.
85. Reproduced in Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, pp. 145–6.
86. *OED*, s.v. 'horn-book'.
87. On horn-books, see the detailed but rhapsodical account of Tuer, with numerous illustrations.
88. See *OED*, under the letters of the alphabet.
89. Alexandre-Bidon, 1989, p. 968.
90. Robinson, p. 450; *OED*, s.v. 'Y'.
91. Orme, 1993, pp. 9–10.
92. *OED*, s.v. 'tittle'.
93. Morley, *A Plaine and Easie Introduction*, p. 36.
94. Hoole, p. 4.
95. Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise* (Oxford, 1939), chapter 11.
96. Alexandre-Bidon, 1989, p. 968.
97. *Ibid.*, p. 967.
98. *Ibid.*, p. 968.
99. STC 21850.7; *The First and Best Part of Scoggins Jestes* (London, 1626), pp. 10–11.
100. Hoole, pp. 4, 8–9.
101. John Wycliffe, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ed. Rudolf Buddensieg, 3 vols, Wyclif Society, 29–31 (1905–7), i, 44.
102. Rastell, p. 55.
103. Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. John D. Jump (London, 1962), scene vii, lines 7–8.
104. *OED*, s.v. 'I', 'O', 'ampersand'.
105. Compare the Hunter primer, which places the Latin words *Pater noster* in red after the alphabet, and before the English text of the Paternoster (Young and Aitken, pp. 392–3).
106. Schreiner, plate 19, no 32.
107. Alexandre-Bidon, 1989, pp. 986–7.
108. STC 19, dated 1538: *ABC*, ed. Shuckburgh, fol. 1r; compare STC 17.7, dated c.1535: *ABC*, ed. Allnutt.
109. *Councils and Synods I*, i, 321, 483; *Councils and Synods II*, i, 61, 134, 465; ii, 1076.
110. Banting, pp. 17, 157; Lyndwood, p. 117.
111. Asser, p. 59; Keynes and Lapidge, pp. 90–1.
112. Orme, 1973, pp. 63–6.
113. Clanchy (p. 111) suggests that the book of hours originated c.1240.
114. On the nature and history of primers, see Littlehales, 1895–7; Clark, 1905, pp. 4–12; *ABC*, ed. Allnutt; E. Birchenough, 'The Prymer in English', *The Library*, 4th series, xviii (1937–8), pp. 177–94; Plimpton, pp. 18–34; Wolpe, 'Florilegium Alphabeticum', pp. 69–74.
115. Sneyd, p. 23.
116. *Visitations of Churches Belonging to St. Paul's Cathedral in 1297 and in 1458*, ed. W. Sparrow Simpson, Camden Society, new series 55 (1895), pp. 49–50.
117. STC 16010: *The Manuall of Prayers, or the Prymer in Englyshe* (London, 1539), sig. C.i verso.
118. E. Margaret Thompson, *The Carthusian Order in England* (London, 1930), p. 323.
119. *The Register of John de Grandisson, Bishop of Exeter*, ed. F. C. Hingeston-Randolph, 3 vols (London and Exeter, 1894–9), ii, 1192–3.
120. Nichols and Rimbault, p. 10.
121. Above, pp. 69–70, 208.
122. Alexander and Binski, p. 355.
123. Webb, i, 132, 135; *Plimpton Letters*, p. 30.
124. Furnivall, 1868a/1931, p. 181.
125. Chaucer, 'Canterbury Tales', VII 495–538 (B² *1685–1726).
126. Palsgrave, fol. 368v.
127. Asser, p. 59; Keynes and Lapidge, pp. 90–1.
128. Examples include the Hunter MS; the MS featured in Plimpton, pp. 19–33 (late 14th or early 15th century); Bodleian, MS Rawlinson C 209 (15th century); and primer material in BL, Add. MS 60577 (E. Wilson, fols. 120r–180r (late 15th century)).
129. Margaret Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible* (Cambridge, 1920, repr. 1966), p. 337.
130. Mirk, 1974, lines 410–53; Mirk, 1905, p. 282.
131. Langland, B.v.401; C.viii.10.
132. E.g. *ABC*, ed. Allnutt.
133. Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible*, p. 338.
134. *Ibid.*, pp. 357, 368.
135. STC 14085; *The Dramatic Writings of Richard Wever and Thomas Ingelend*, ed. John S. Farmer (London, 1905), p. 59.
136. Above, p. 206.
137. STC 20034.
138. STC 15986.
139. *Visitation Articles*, ii, 6–7.
140. Frances Rose Troup, *The Western Rebellion of 1549* (London, 1915), p. 108.
141. STC 19, 19.6.
142. STC 19.4.
143. STC 17.7–19.5.
144. Tuer, *passim*.
145. STC 14708.5; Thomas Johnson, *A New Booke of New Conceits* (London, 1630), sig. A.v recto.
146. Elyot, fol. 18v (book i, chapter 5).
147. Hoole, pp. 6–9.
148. On what follows, see Alexandre-Bidon, 1989, pp. 971–9.
149. *CPR 1247–58*, p. 400.
150. Alexandre-Bidon, 1989, p. 973.
151. *Testamenta Eboracensia*, vol. ii, ed. J. Raine, Surtees Society, 30 (1855), p. 15.
152. For description and bibliography, see Alexander and Binski, pp. 525–6.
153. *Index*, nos 0.1, 160, 239, 312.5, 455.8, 604, 607, 1378.5, 1483, 1523, 2201, 4155.
154. STC 25412, sigs. K.viii recto – L.i. verso.
155. Opie, 1997a, pp. 53–4, 57.

CHAPTER 8: READING FOR PLEASURE

1. On this subject, see Coleman.
2. Asser, p. 59; Keynes and Lapidge, pp. 90–1.
3. Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain*, ed. T. B. W. Reid (Manchester, 1948), lines 5360–79.
4. Montaiglon, p. 4; Caxton, 1971, p. 13.
5. BL, Harley MS 2398, fol. 94v; another version is printed in *Select English Works of John Wyclif*, ed.