Classical Education for the Modern Student: The Place of Poetics among the "Rival Sisters of the Trivium"

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Abstract
The study of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric - the "rival sisters of the trivium," as Marshall McLuhan dubs them - dates back to the early Greeks, whose approach to education cast a long shadow over western history. Classical learning is not, however, a dusty syllabus limited only to the past; within the recent revival of "classical" education, trivium-based schools have taken up the three language arts as developmental stages of learning, roughly understood as the movement from content (grammar) to analysis (dialectic) and finally to synthesis (rhetoric). But there is a sense in which the arts of the trivium might be considered not complementary but, rather, competitive. Building upon McLuhan's insights in <italic>The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time</italic>, this study explores how the three language arts can be taken as distinct visions of the word and, consequently, of the world itself. Seen in this light, the trivium suggests something radical about the language arts: they are different approaches to reality. The rivalry between rhetoric and dialectic is thus a rivalry between orator and philosopher, or between anti-foundationalism and foundationalism. Organizing the trivium with grammar - the art of symbol - as the fundamental art reveals a potential referee for that rivalry: poetics. That is, the creation and interpretation of imaginative works ought to be considered not a subsidiary of rhetoric, with which it is commonly confused, but, rather, a heightened form of grammar - a more sophisticated form of the making and interpretation of symbols. This would include, of course, a more conventional understanding of poetics as a focus upon a work's literary aspects; it would also suggest a more expansive understanding of poetics, in which a work as a whole may serve as a symbol of that which, absent the work itself, would be otherwise unavailable. Finally, the claims of Paul Ricoeur regarding symbol make conceivable a form of poetics potentially compatible with contemporary classical education. In this dissertation's last chapter, the genre theory of Louise Cowan - one may call it a grammatical poetics - is suggested to those seeking to know poetics' place within the trivium.

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holds that human beings are thinking creatures. The same observation applies to the realm of politics, the financial and industrial world, and all other facets of American life. Employers are constantly amazed at what their employees do not know and therefore cannot do. The students of these schools will study the traditional liberal arts—language and literature, history and government, mathematics and the sciences, music and art—in a coherent and orderly program. Each curriculum will run from the rudiments of basic literacy and math skills to the higher orders of thought and expression. Classical Christian education is an approach to learning which emphasizes biblical teachings and incorporates a teaching model from the classical education movement known as the Trivium, consisting of three parts: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. According to Douglas Wilson, this method of instruction was developed by early Christians as part of the Seven Liberal Arts. Wilson's writings and the Logos School he founded have been cited as being influential in reviving the Trivium and fueling a modern This common usage of the word causes problems for the serious modern student of rhetoric, because the term can legitimately be defined, as it is in my Random House dictionary, as “the undue use of exaggeration or display … concerned with mere style or effect.” As one of the classical liberal arts, rhetoric, along with its sister arts grammar (not what we call “grammar”, but more akin to the modern discipline of semantics) and dialectic (a system of learned disputation similar to what we now call informal logic), was one of parts of the trivium, the foundation of education in classical and medieval times. Among other questions a rhetorician asks is “What view of the world would the audience need in order for this discourse to make sense to them?