Thersites

My magisterial friend Thersites was recently reminiscing about his schooldays with Homer, Aristophanes, Virgil, Ovid (etc.) and the whole gang was soon rolling about the Elysian fields clutching their sides at the wizard wheezes and jolly japes they got up to. They were, as Omnibus readers will appreciate, a pretty ghastly set of schoolchildren, and it was an astonishing coincidence that they were all together in the same form at the same time. But that's historical 'intertextuality' for you – Thersites was keen to show he's up with all the buzz-words – and neatly explains why they all seemed to spend so much time 'influencing' each other: they'd been at it from the age of 11, and everyone knows that, with certain political exceptions, you never forget your schooldays, however much you may want to. Anyway, Thersites thought that the brilliant readers of Omnibus would like the curtain lifted on their heroes in the school-room and when I read the little piece he knocked together on the subject, I felt certain that Great Scholars too would have much to learn from it.

Class-ics

Scene: the Classical Remove. Utter chaos is, as usual, the order of the day. Herodotus has brought in a Parthian au pair whom Crassus is beating up in the corner, while Alcibiades is defacing the statues of venerable past headmasters that stand around the room. Mucius Scaevola is seeing how long he can hold on to a burning matchstick, and Publius Claudius if the form's pet chicken can swim. Ovid is occupying the rear end of a pantomime-horse, into the front half of which he is trying to lure a blond junior boy. Tacitus and Suetonius are taking it in turns to peer through a keyhole into the Headmaster's adjoining study. Xenophon is in full battle-dress, having just returned from weekend army camp, and is telling anyone who will listen all about it. Socrates is seeing how long he can stand on one leg, and Aristophanes is ragging Euripides for the disgusting jeans he is wearing. Horace is fast asleep. Cicero, the form prefect, is begging for a little concord and trying to get them all to shut up and sit down (or wake and sit up). No one pays the slightest attention. Then Horatius, who is keeping the door, shouts out 'Cave, chaps, he's coming'. 'Don't you mean cavete, you prehistoric oik:' sneers Caesar to sycophantic cheers from his three fags Weeny, Weedy and Weaky, but before Horatius can respond, enter the master, Orbilius.

Orb: Right, shut up you lot. I've got some essays to give back. Homer? Good, rather repetitive and digressive, but with a little editing that will be fine. Pindar? Couldn't understand a word of it. Do it again, boy. Aristotle? Disappointing: not much more than a collection of notes, really. Ovid? See me, please, and that goes for Catullus where is Catullus? Late again, I suppose – and Aristophanes, too. You've got one-track minds, the lot of you. Tacitus? The similarity with Sallust's essay was striking. Caesar? I tire of these

[Cries of 'Creep! Swot! Master's pet!']

Now then, open your books, Reading Latin, p.36. Yes, Demosthenes, I know you think it's rubbish and would rather do Greek. And kindly remove whatever it is you've got in your mouth. What was that, Aeschines, he's got a stone in his mouth? For heaven's sake, Demosthenes, spit it out at once. No wonder you stutter.

Gerbildygook

[Enter Catullus, eyes all red and puffy. Cries of 'Who was it last night. oh come on, tell us' echo round the class.]

Orb: Ah, you've made it. Well done. And what has made you so late this time? You were doing what? Writing a poem?

[Cries of disbelief arise from the class.]

Well well, so we have a poet in our midst. Makes a change from your usual preoccupations, I must say.

[Catcalls.]

And what, pray, was the poem all about? Oh come, do not be shy. These are all your friends. They can hardly wait to hear your latest masterpiece (stop giggling, Callimachus). Oh dear. How sad. Your girl-friend's gerbil's died.

[Cries of 'Yea, took one look at what they were doing and passed straight away, sir'.]

Lament for a Gerbil – it will make a splendid piece for the school mag. Do remember to give it to me after class.

[A snuffling noise is heard.]

Who's making that noise?

Maecenas: It's Virgil, sir. He's crying, sir.
Orb: Crying? What's the matter, Virgil? Oh come, come, it can't be as bad as all that. What's that you say? Yes, of course it's sad about Catullus' gerbil, but this world is a vale of tears, Virgil, and the time will come when you will look back on this unhappy moment with pleasure.

[Virgil brightens up and scribbles something in his rough book.]

Creative Imitation

Orb: Right, now where were we? Ah yes, p.36. Would someone wake Horace up, please? Thank you. Right, start work on your own on exercise 4.

[Silence reigns for five minutes. Then – ]

Homer: Sir, please sir.

Orb: What is it, Homer?

Homer: It's Virgil, sir.

Orb: Yes, Homer, what about Virgil?

Homer: He keeps on cribbing from me, sir.

Orb: Is this true, Virgil?

Virgil: Of course it isn't, sir. Anyway, who'd crib from Homer? He doesn't know any Latin at all.

Homer: But sir, look sir, what I've written sir, and now see what Virgil's written.

Orb: Well, I suppose there's a vague similarity but not much and yours is far better.

Homer: Ooh thank you, sir. [To Virgil, sotto voce] Ner nery ner ner, cheats never prosper.

Numb show

Orb: Right, let's see how you've done with this exercise. Number one, Socrates.

Socrates: I'm sorry sir, I don't feel very well.
Orb: What do you mean, you don't feel very well?

Socrates: Actually, sir, I don't feel anything at all.

Orb: Stop speaking in riddles, boy. How can you feel nothing?

[Plato looks up and makes a note.]

Socrates: It's my legs, sir. They've gone all sort of numb.

[Cries of 'Be kind to numb animals, sir.]

Orb: I suppose you've been sitting on them.

Plato: But you don't sit on your legs, you stand on them, sir.

Orb: That's enough from you, Plato. Get up and walk around in the playground, Socrates, and wait for it to wear off.

Plato: But how can nothing wear off, sir?

[Before Orbilius can strangle him, the bell goes and they all troop out for morning ecclesia.]