Mastering Discipline and the Discipline of Mastery – An interpretation of relationships of power within the early University of Paris

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When the secular masters of Paris issued their encyclical letter in October 1255[1], explaining their position in the fierce conflict with the mendicant masters, they stated that a community could not be forced together, but had to be built on voluntary commitment, solidarity and mutual affection. This is what was understood by the concept of *universitas*; it was not merely a legal term but also a social entity. The secular party thus declared that nobody had the right to force upon their association an alien element with other, foreign obligations and loyalties. This would cause disruption of the community. The friars were perceived as a threat to a unity whose foundation rested upon community spirit and common identity rather than strict formal rules. When surrounding authorities did not respond to their claims, the secular masters reacted with the capital weapon of a professional community of this type, and called for a general cessation, thus dissolving their association – though only temporarily. This is but one among many examples of the university acting as a community when trying to achieve political or legal goals or solving a crisis.

The university in Paris was not founded by a single charter, but through a gradual and painful effort of bringing together highly diverse – and often unruly – elements into one single body. The guild-like spirit of the early university gave it its strength as well as its weakness. Common identity had to be created – and strenuously upheld - to secure the survival and independence of a community that was still remarkably fragile. Moreover, bonds of loyalty and obligation had to be forged between the individual members of this highly competitive and mutable environment.

Behind the apparent, horizontal community structure, other far more "vertical" relationships existed, notably that between master and student(s). The masters formed the core of the early university, exercising fundamental intellectual, spiritual, and social power. But how was magisterial authority maintained? And what did mastery mean to students as well as masters? That is, how did the internal power structures of the university function?

The subject is huge and difficult to study. We will have to base our enquiry upon other types of sources than those traditionally used in the field of the history of universities. The

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[1] Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis (CUP), vol. I, nr.256, pp.292-297 ed. Denifle & Chatelain

Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis is not enough – we will have to delve into the whole spectrum of literature and texts from the scholastic milieu – fictional as well as "factual". Likewise, we will have to cross the borders between current fields of research and not confine ourselves to the work of historians alone. I think the work by John W. Baldwin on scholastic culture and by C. Stephen Jaeger on courtliness provide excellent examples of how to deal with these problems, and I am in great debt to their path-breaking studies.

In this paper I intend to make a few suggestions on how to grasp the subject of medieval mastery and its relation to the creation of scholastic culture and identity, and rather than provide answers I will devise a model. This is still "work in progress", and I hope you will join me in these initial phases of investigation.

The *scholastici* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries differed from other contemporary social groupings by a couple of central traits. They carried a social status that was *not* hereditary. Likewise, honour and titles were *not* bestowed by birth, they were largely independent of one's original social standing. Merit was won by the gradual perfection of knowledge through education. It required skill and labour and it could not be bought (at least ideally not so). Being a scholar – a man of letters - was both a profession and a life-style: the title of *magister* was a title for life, not connected solely to the profession as teacher. Success or failure depended largely upon the single individual and his abilities and talents and the masters of the schools demanded an honour and respect that was at least equal to that of the warrior-aristocracy. They saw themselves as differing fundamentally from, but socially on a par with, the knightly elite.

Being a *magister* means not only being a master of a craft, but also being a master of someone. It is essentially a title of power and the relationships that surround it are hierarchical and based upon the exchange of power. The scholastic master had mastery in a direct way over his students, and it was he, together with his assembled colleagues, who exercised authority in internal affairs at a time when the system of university officials was still in the making[2]. He was the nucleus around which the whole system of the university evolved. Scholastic discipline rested on authority, both intellectually and literally, and power and authority were indeed the central themes that made up the image of the medieval master.

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[2] The division of power can be glimpsed from the decree drawn by papal legate and theological master Robert of Courson in 1215, CUP I, nr.20 p.79

Being a centre of power greatly influenced the master's self-image and gave rise to both his fears and his aspirations. Contrary to the mere title, actual *mastery* was not automatically conferred upon the candidate by the inception ceremonies. It had to be earned. Though invested with power, the master's position was in fact a rather insecure one, continuously challenged by students, by society, and by the vicissitudes of life as such. Precisely because it was so exalted, this magisterial self-image was always in danger of becoming ridiculous, as can be seen in the many contemporary satires on the scholastic environment.

The discourse of medieval mastery may be investigated from what I perceive to be its three main aspects:

1. Intellectual mastery – i.e. the authority in handling and distributing knowledge and being the one who settles the score in disputations. This is reflected in the structure of medieval educational practice and is the most obvious.
2. Social mastery – primarily the power over students by virtually taking the position as the *pater familias* in the scholastic circle. It receives its codification in the early university "statutes", such as those given by Robert of Courson.
3. Self-mastery. I.e. self-control and restraint on behaviour as shaped by the ethos of both classical mores and the ideals of courtliness. This requires individual perfection and an outward appearance that mirrors inner qualities: knowledge and virtue.

These three aspects are all interconnected and are only separated here in order to make it easier to provide some comments on their specific features. As for the first, it was secured by the *licentia docendi* – the official recognition that one was a man of learning and capable of transferring knowledge unto others. It shows what was perceived as the master's main function - to teach - a function he carried with him even into court service (where he often, more or less officially, kept the role as teacher – or at least counsellor).

In disputation or in writing, when the medieval master cited authorities, ancient or modern, pagan or Christian, he inscribed himself into their ranks by creating an illusion of continuity between himself and "the giants". He was their mouthpiece, but their sentences were used also to uphold his own authority in matters of scientific knowledge, poetical taste, or religious doctrine.

In the end, the teacher's task was to bring those beneath him up to his own level (perhaps even to surpass him). This shift in the power relation between master and student, when the latter aquired the title himself, was (and still is) a notoriously difficult phase in a scholar's life. Not least when the hierarchical relationship between the two had been the bonding factor

in the scholarly circle, whose centre could only contain *one* leading figure from whom power and knowledge emanated.

> "She increases the severity of one of her hands with a whip with which she punishes the faults which youth in its way absorbs. Thus by blows she makes the milk more bitter, by the milk she makes the blows more mild. In one and the same action she is father and mother."[3]

This is the allegorical description of Lady Grammar in the *Anticlaudianus* of Master Alain of Lille, but it might just as well describe the teaching arts-master. In a similar way, the iconography of the era usually depicts the master with the instrument of punishment in his hand. It is the main attribute of discipline, a word which both contains the fields of science and the mode of power through which knowledge was distributed. Furthermore, the whipping-instrument symbolised the harsh love of parents towards their offspring. It is therefore reasonable to take a closer look at this, the most visible aspect of the master's wielding of power.

Medieval pedagogues found it difficult to imagine an upbringing or an education without physical punishment, without violent correction, and medieval people clearly had another relationship towards physical power than we have today. Corrective violence was found on all levels of society as a completely normal part of human relationships, whether in families, in the relation between married couples, in monasteries, in jurisdiction, or in schools. This does not imply that the exercise of such power was unproblematic. Like all other actions, it had to be guided by the right means and measure. Too frequent or directly unjust use of the birch would be understood as an indication of weakness or insecurity on the part of the punisher; it could engender loss of respect, or even virulent hatred. When Master Peter of Poitiers exhorted his readers to show self-discipline, he remembered the pain of physical discipline imposed upon him during his own schooldays:

> "When we were boys and still under the rod of out teachers, we did not have an appetite for discipline, nor did we like letters, so we fled from the school and were

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[3] Alain of Lille: Anticlaudianus, Book II, p.85 in J.J.Sheridan's translation, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto 1973)

flogged. Indeed we so dreaded our teachers that we were prepared to kill them had our strength and age been sufficient to do so.[4]"

Ideally, the master would exercise both the disciplinary harshness of the father and the nourishing tenderness of a mother, but apparently many forgot the last precept. The most famous example of the psychological implications of a malfunctioning master-student relationship is found in the "autobiography" of Guibert of Nogent. Though from an earlier period than the one we are dealing with here, it might be worth looking into for a moment. In Guibert's case, the teacher used physical correction to an extent that was clearly perceived as unfitting, both by Guibert's mother[5] and by himself in old age. The regime of the rod had a profound effect on the young Guibert, who developed a strange love-hatred relationship towards this master, which modern psychology would at best describe as deviant or masochistic.

"I conceived much love for him in response, in spite of the many weals with which he furrowed my tender skin, so that not through fear, as is common in those of my age, but through a sort of love deeply implanted in my heart, I obeyed him in utter forgetfulness of his severity.[6]"

But Guibert provided an explanation for the master's excesses – weakness and lack of learning. There was clearly something pathetic about his abuses, even as Guibert saw them; he had exceeded the right measure and become a tyrant – he did not have *real* mastery.

We do not know the extent to which physical disciplinary measures were used on the highest levels of education. The higher one came on the ladder of studies, the less became the gap of age between student and master. And while flogging boys was a relatively common thing, beating an adult was quite another matter. It was an assault upon his honour and he might

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[4] Peter of Poitiers, Secundum multitudinem dolorem, in ms Oxford, Bodl. Laud.269 f.30vb and in Paris Bn.lat 14593 f, 9va – cited and translated in Stephen Ferruolo: "The Origins of the University - the Schools of Paris and their critics 1100-1215, Stanford University Press 1985, p.259

[5] "I went to my mother's knee after a more severe beating than I had deserved. And when, as often happened, she began to ask me repeatedly whether I had been whipped that day, I , not to appear a telltale, entirely denied it. Then against my will she threw off my inner garment (which is called a shirt or chemise) and saw my little arms blackened and the skin of my back everywhere puffed up with the cuts from the twigs. Grieved to the heart by the very savage punishment inflicted on my tender body, troubled, agitated, and weeping she said: "You shall never become a clerk, nor any more suffer so much to get an education". Guibert of Nogent, De vita sua, Book I, Cap.6 pp.49-50 in J.F. Benton's translation (Benton: "Self and Society in Medieval France - the Memoirs of Abbot Guibert of Nogent", University of Toronto Press, Medieval Academy Reprints 1996)

[6] Guibert of Nogent, De vita sua, Book I, Cap.6 p.49 in the translation of J.F. Benton

strike back[7]. Discipline had to be imposed in more subtle ways; it could be interiorised through self-disciplinary practises, it could be inspired by love.

De disciplina scolarium, written in the first half of the 13th century, but ascribed to Boethius[8], tells us how the relationship between master and student at the university level was to be shaped.

First, the student ought to know his position in the relationship, which is subjection (*subjectio*) in three different ways: through *attencio* (the student must listen), *benevolentia* (the student must show good will towards his master) and *docilitas* (the student must let himself be formed without showing resistance to the master's teaching or person)[9]. Obedience lies at the heart of these precepts, but the master must show himself worthy of such reverence. He should be "*eruditus, mansuetus, rigidus, antiquus, nec necgligens* (sic!)*, non arrogans*"[10], that is, besides being learned, rigorous and mature (*antiquus* here, as the author explains, has nothing to do with age[11]), he should show himself amiable (*mansuetus*) and be neither arrogant nor negligent. The master held a responsibility for his students, for their advancement and well-being, not unlike that of a parent.

Thus, the master takes the position of the father in the scholastic *familia*, literally becoming the *paterfamilias* with all that this role implies. The students, being masters *in spe*, must show both love and reverence towards the man who is essentially an image of what they aspire to become.

In a relationship that was based on affection rather than terror, the Master would have another way of punishing students which hurt much more than simple physical chastisement – he could expel them from the community, show negligence of them – or at worst abandon them completely. When Abelard in the 1120s moved away from his students to pursue his chosen solitude at the Paraclete, one of them, Hilary of Orleans, reacted and gave voice to one of the few complaints we have from a medieval student on this matter. Though from an earlier period than the one we are dealing with here, I believe that the sentiment it expresses is highly representative for the early thirteenth century also. Hilary accused the famous master of having unjustly deserted them, of having turned their "*oratorium*" into a "*ploratorium*"; the

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[7] Pseudo-Boethius: De disciplina scolarium, 6. L.16-20, p.100 in O. Weijers' edition (Olga Weijers: Pseudo-Boèce: De disciplina scolarium, E.J.Brill, Leyden 1976) . Here students are told not to be violent towards their masters. The admonition would have been meaningless if such reactions did not occur.

[8] The work is known through 111 extant manuscripts and 23 of them from the 13th century. It was written in Paris by someone who taught there, but published under the name of the ancient authority, probably to give it more weight. The date of composition is highly insecure, claims have been made to place it in the late 12th Century, but its editor, Olga Weijers, argues that it should be placed between 1230-40. See Weijers' introduction pp.8-11

[9] ibid, 1. L.8-11 and 2. L.12-16 p.99

[10] ibid, 6, l.18-19, p.124

[11] " Antiquus non annis sed perpetuanti sciencia", ibid, 6. L.13, p.125

school (which was the oratory of the Paraclete) into a place for weeping[12]. The Old French refrain to the Latin poem shows a student's distress at being left by the "father": "*Tort a uers nos li mestre*"[13] – *the master is doing us wrong!*

Hilary was criticising a beloved, almost God-like figure, who had abandoned him. This master was not a mediocre tyrant of the whip, but a man who had inspired strong feelings of affection and reverence among those subject to him. The dissolution of a circle of friends, the pain of banishment and exile, was definitely worse than a striped back.

Ideally, the relationship between a student and his master was built on what could be called a "hierarchy of love", not unlike that found in the contemporary theories of friendship. It rested on mutual obligations which tied persons together, but it also served as a guard against the arbitrary measures of tyranny. Moreover it fitted neatly with the still more prevalent idea, that society was better structured and ruled through affective relationships than by brute power. Nevertheless, affective relationships are not devoid of power, on the contrary, they lie in the very midst of a network of power relations. Power should not be understood negatively in these contexts, rather power was - and is - formative and crucial for any educational practice. Students and masters needed each other to be able to perform the functions ascribed to them, and one should remember that though equality among men was an ideal also in the Middle Ages, it pertained solely to the celestial spheres.

Seen in these contexts, education implied an exchange of power relations as the student moved from the position of subject to become a master himself. The author of the *Disciplina scolarium* reminded his readers that all masters had gone through this process, and that one could not attain mastership without learning subjection first; without having been a student, a disciple, a subject of the power of mastery[14]. And parallel to this, he could not be a master who did not know the art of self-mastery; how to make himself a subject of severe self-scrutiny.

> "If you wish to rise up in full strength against the ridiculous, assail them in this form of speech: offer praise, but in a facetious manner; reprove, but with wit and grace; have

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[12] " Per impostum, per deceptorium/Si negare uis adiutorium/Huius loci non Oratorium/Nomen erit, sed Ploratorium." - Originally Abelard's students had followed him into the "wilderness" where he went to establish himself as a hermit at the home-made oratory of the Paraclete. Hilarii Aurelianensis: Versus et ludi, epistolae. Ed. Walther Bulst & M.L. Bulst-Thiele, Mittellateinische Studien und Texte, band XVI, E.J. Brill, Leyden 1989, Carmen VI (ad Petrum Abaelardum), verse 10, p.31
[13] ibid, Carmen VI (ad Petrum Abaelardum) pp.30-31
[14] De disciplina scolarium (see above), 2, p.99

recourse to gestures, but let these be constantly fitting. Give your speech teeth, attack with biting force - but let your manner rather than your lips devour the absurd."[15]

The perfect master derived his power from being both a man of letters AND an image of virtuous perfection. *Litterae* and *mores* were interconnected and high medieval educational practice aimed at producing a man who possessed both: A creature who could truly be "a man of all seasons"; a scholar enabled to take up civic office as well as a teacher's position, a bureaucrat, statesman, church official, administrator, royal counsellor, bishop – just to mention a few of the career options for educated men in the European High Middle Ages. The practice of *curialitas* was necessary to move in the circles of power. It was a profoundly rational and utilitarian system of behavioural and ethical codes aimed at acquiring influence, goodwill, friendship, respect, status, and honour. Yet it demanded serious self-monitoring (of habits, gestures, speech, etc.), that is, the mastery of the self – the most ennobling power of all. Wit and grace conspired to produce the cultivated man – a spectacle for society to behold, a marvellous creature to imitate and copy, a man whose whole composure was his own making.

Education in the Middle Ages, the Liberal Arts in particular, should therefore be seen not merely as skills – as mere "arts". At the very core of the system lay an ethos that sought to create order in the widest possible sense, in society as well as of the self. Grammar, as an example, was not only a system of textual and linguistic rules – it reflected the ideal order in all its aspects. In this train of thought, medieval grammarians - notably Master Alain of Lille - would explicitly use grammatical rules as analogous expressions of social and religious ethics as such. Thus, grammar was both a tool and a morality of which the medieval scholastic master was both subject and object. The master's social powers rested upon his purely intellectual as well as his more "charismatic" abilities, his power over himself showed that he was worthy to govern and direct others.

I think that the glue that bound the university together in its earliest, formative phases was a combination of shared identity (as professional scholars and men of letters) and direct, "face-to-face" personal relationships, rather than the strictly institutional framework. And since the university was defined as an association of masters (and students), the relationships between these must be of major concern to historians of the formation of the universities. I hope that these initial remarks of mine may engender further discussion on this intricate subject.

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[15] Geoffrey of Vinsauf: Poetria Nova, p.31 in the translation of M.F. Nims (Margaret F. Nims: The Poetria Nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Universa Press, Wetteren 1967)