

## RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PARENTS AND THEIR ABSENT ADOLESCENT OFFSPRING IN THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES

Relationships between parents and adolescents during the high Middle Ages were often marked by separation as young people left their families to be married, join a monastery, or pursue an education through apprenticeship in arms or a craft or at the newly formed universities. The relative independence of young people in the Middle Ages has led some scholars to argue that no life stage of adolescence existed at all during the Middle Ages,<sup>1</sup> or that children and adolescents were hopelessly emotionally scarred by their upbringing, creating hostile relationships with their parents and other authority figures.<sup>2</sup> My own ongoing research into medieval adolescence suggests that many parents in the high Middle Ages did not sever emotional ties with their absent adolescent children, but continued to demonstrate concern for the well-being of their offspring.

I will not attempt here to outline all my theories of medieval adolescence here. It is a complex topic, and the very use of the term “adolescent” has been a subject of controversy. I will, however, make one important claim. Although I would argue that adolescence was widely recognized as a significant life stage in the high Middle Ages, I would not argue, as some authors have assumed, that medieval conceptions of adolescence were identical to our own, nor that they remained static.<sup>3</sup> In fact, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of culture, I will go further and suggest that we ourselves have no uniform conception of adolescence, beyond our awareness of certain biological changes, the social significance and even the timing of which may be strongly affected by culture.<sup>4</sup> The experience and expectation of adolescence varies according to time, place, gender, social class or vocation, ethnicity, and personal history. While there may be parallels between adolescence in, say, inner city Los Angeles, rural West Virginia, and suburban Toronto, there are also tremendous differences. This doesn’t mean that we can never reach any conclusions about adolescence, since many clusters of widely held ideas occur due to shared lifestyle, cultural influences, and social interaction, although individual variations inevitably occur.

Many, although not all, North Americans assume that adolescents should be with their parents. Many medieval parents did not agree. A young person sent away from home could learn valuable skills and make important contacts not easily gained by staying at home at a time when commuting was a far less viable option than it is today. Medieval parents were anxious to make arrangements for their children that would be beneficial both to the young people and to the family as a whole. Young people sent away by their parents were in most cases not simply abandoned; often complex arrangements were made for their supervision and continued well-being and at least some parents remained in contact with their children while they were away from home. To illustrate the concern of parents for absent adolescent children, I will look briefly at

relationships between parents and children during a few kinds of absences that became common in the high Middle Ages: marriage, apprenticeship in crafts and arms, and entry into a university or monastery.<sup>5</sup>

Both men and women, especially those from elite families, could marry in their teens during the Middle Ages. Elite men married young usually remained with their families or tutors, but elite women were often sent to faraway places. Canon law by the twelfth century permitted women to be married at twelve, often interpreted as the twelfth year—that is, eleven. Although it is often difficult to judge the extent to which parents involved themselves in the welfare of their children after making the initial arrangements for their marriage, we do know that at least some parents went out of their way to make special arrangements for the continued well-being of their children. For example, daughters might be assigned tutors or guardians to provide for their care in a strange environment, as in the case of Margaret, daughter of Henry III, who was married to the equally young king of Scotland at the minimum age. In Margaret's case, as in a few other cases, her parents forbade sexual relations until both she and her husband should be a little older. Margaret's parents kept track of her well-being for several years. Her mother, Eleanor of Provence, sent a physician to care for the young Queen of Scotland, out of concern for her health and safety, and when Henry received complaints from Margaret about her treatment, he swiftly set out for Scotland with an army and resolved the situation. Margaret was also allowed to pay occasional visits to her parents in England, which she appears to have enjoyed. While Margaret's case is unusual in the amount of evidence we have about her parent's concern for her after her marriage, it is not unique.

Many of the parents of adolescents apprenticed in crafts also showed continuing concern for their children. Entrance into apprenticeship for boys most often occurred between twelve and twenty, with a very large proportion entering between thirteen and sixteen. Female apprentices, however, were frequently much younger. Although many young people were placed into apprenticeship because one or both of their parents had died, surviving parents, especially the parents of younger apprentices, often negotiated contracts or served as sureties for their offspring. While contracts vary, many suggest that parents made careful provision for the care of their children when placing them with a master. Frequently contracts made the master responsible for food, clothing, and shelter, in addition to the provision of an adequate education in a craft. Some caused the master to promise to care for the apprentice like his or her own child, or in a manner appropriate to a bourgeois child, or in sickness or in health. A few contracts allowed for visits home. William of Norwich, a twelfth-century skinner's apprentice, was permitted to visit his widowed mother. Parents clearly obtained news of their children, as some, hearing about violations of contracts or abuse of their children, complained to the authorities. For example, in several

cases, parents brought actions against masters who beat their children severely. Thus many parents not only made advance provision for children entering into apprenticeship, encouraging the masters to play a parental role, but also continued to monitor the welfare of their children during the apprenticeship, taking action if the child suffered.

University students in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries enjoyed a remarkable amount of freedom, but at least some remained in contact with their parents. Although students probably entered the universities between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, most lived in lodgings without obvious supervision. This did not mean that their connection with their families was severed, however. Some students visited their families during vacations, and sometimes returned home, occasionally in response to parental summonses, after their time of study had been completed. Parents, in many cases, appear to have provided financial support for students. Students wrote home to demand money and other goods, request things left behind, and report their progress. Some carefully described their good companions and their dedication to study in what appear to be transparent attempts to please their parents. Parents in return sent letters, money, and goods, although some complained that their sons lived dissolutely, making little progress in their studies. Such letters reveal that some parents sought news of their sons via other channels, such as the student's master. The profusion of letters from parents and adolescent sons suggests that families were deeply concerned about the welfare of their absent sons.

Elite boys around the age of puberty were often sent to the courts of kings and nobles, not only for training in knightly skills and behavior, but also to make social contacts that would shape their lives. Although I have found no examples as yet of elite parents staying in contact with their absent adolescent sons, the kings and nobles to whom such boys were sent assigned tutors and other caregivers to oversee their education and wellbeing. The sons of the kings and great lords tended to be brought up at the court of their father, but even in these cases, a period of separation often occurred. Newly knighted men might travel to tournaments or wars to gain experience and prove their ability. In such cases, parents sometimes sent experienced guardians to look after and further instruct the "youths." After a period in which they gained education and experience, at least some sons returned home. I have found the most evidence of parent/adolescent conflict in this group, probably because of the desire of sons to control land and power.

In theory, children sent to monasteries were supposed to have no contact with their families. In the twelfth century, child oblation was increasingly banned as monastic leaders began to emphasize free choice as a necessary prerequisite to the monastic life. The legal age of puberty, twelve for girls and fourteen for boys,

became the minimum age of entry. Many monasteries set even higher age limits, although many also ignored the age limits, particularly in the case of girls. Within the monasteries in this period, adolescents were increasingly segregated and subjected to special restrictions. Most monasteries found it necessary to ban contact and personal gifts from families, suggesting that some families wanted to maintain a relationship with their children. Such rules, in practice, were not always obeyed. At least some socially prominent religious enjoyed gifts and even visits to their families. A striking example is Mary, daughter of Edward I of England. Mary, put into a monastery as a child, was allowed to visit her family at court, on which occasions she was much indulged. At other times she was given various gifts, including money to pay her gambling debts. Again we see that even when a child's absence was permanent, some parents continued to show affection for their offspring.

I do not want to paint too rosy a picture of relationships between parents and their absent adolescent offspring. One can find many instances of unhappy relationships—for example the rebellions of the sons of Henry II of England. Moreover, our evidence for contact between parents and absent adolescents is often scanty, and it is quite possible that many parents made no attempt to maintain communication with their offspring. We can say with confidence, however, that at least some parents did not forget about their adolescent offspring when they sent them away, but continued to show concern for the health, well-being, happiness, and in some cases even the educational progress of their children.

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1 Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Random House, 1962) is the best known proponent of this idea. More recently, James Schultz has provided qualified support for the idea in James Schultz, "Medieval Adolescence: The Claims of History and the Silence of German Narrative" in *Speculum* 66(1991): 519-39, a view slightly softened in his more recent work, *The Knowledge of Childhood in the German Middle Ages, 1100-1350* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995). My own research suggests that medieval people conceived of adolescence as a distinct life stage with its own strengths and dangers.

2 See for example, Jane K. Beitscher, "'As the Twig is Bent. . .': Children and their Parents in Aristocratic Society," in *Journal of Medieval History* 2(1976): 181-192. Ariès, Lawrence Stone, Jacques Le Goff, and Edmund Shorter, among other authors have likewise argued that there was a lack of affectivity between parents and children. Much more positive pictures of the relationship between parents and children have been drawn by a number of scholars, including Megan McLaughlin, Shulamith Shahar, Ilene Forsyth, and Barbara Hanawalt.

3 For example, I would argue that a significant change took place in the perception and experience of adolescence around the twelfth century.

4 Margaret Mead in the 1920s first challenged the notion of a uniform, universal experience of adolescence. A recent article summarizing the debate over her claim is James E. Cote, "Was Mead Wrong About Coming of Age in Samoa: An Analysis of the Mead/Freeman Controversy for Scholars of Adolescence and Human Development" in *The Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 21(1992): 499-527. Alice Schlegel and Herbert Barry, *Adolescence: An Anthropological Enquiry* (New York, 1991), provide a useful cross-cultural analysis of adolescence in 186 societies, based on the findings of scholars who have written about adolescence.

5 The analysis that follows is based on a diverse array of primary and secondary sources. In keeping with *The Medieval Feminist Newsletter's* policy of including only limited notes, I have omitted what would otherwise be a very lengthy list of citations. Please contact me for more detailed references.

## WOMEN AND THEIR FATHERS IN THREE FRENCH MEDIEVAL LITERARY WORKS

A feminist perspective on French literature of the Middle Ages, if imbued with historical relativity, allows twentieth-century readers, especially women readers, to focus on the relationship between female protagonists and their fathers. Three works are particularly good subjects for such a study: Heldris of Cornwall's *Le Roman de Silence*, Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide* and Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*. The following is a discussion of a work in progress on the theme of daughters and fathers as illustrated in these three works.

The significance of fathers with regard to their adult daughters seems to be composed of two dominant facets: protection and oppression. The price the women pay for this protection, is, ultimately, the elimination of their own power. The father is the ultimate source of all social determinations, and therefore of all aspects of female existence. One might go so far as to say that the father is the *original misogynist*.

Women are usually placed in amorous contexts, as with *Le Roman de Silence*, thereby highlighting the adversarial nature of their relationships with men. In this novel, Silence, a woman born to noble parents, is victimized even before her birth. A royal decree has declared that females may no longer inherit, and to "beat the system," as it were, Silence's parents create an instant medieval gender bender: they raise her as a boy. Here we first see the *benevolent* father, loving, caring, looking out only for his daughter's interests. Determined to protect his daughter, the father becomes, nonetheless, more and more confused, as the narrator tells us, « Mais par lui mesme i est la doute, / Qu'il rova porter la noviele, / Que qu'il eüst, malle u femiele, / Qu'il eüst un bel fil eüt » ("But he himself had caused this doubt / when he asked her to announce / that he had a fine son / whether it was a boy or a girl," verses 1990-93). Silence's destiny (and her name is not to be taken lightly, for she does, in fact, speak very little) seems to hang in the ambiguous space between « malle » and « femiele ». Here we see that the father plays an essential role in gender manipulation. The daughter's identity is always shaped, at least in part, by her father.