

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.

A particularly interesting phenomenon is that of the woman (or girl) as a cipher for male power. In *Erec et Enide*, the story of a medieval marriage, Enide is described primarily in connection with the relationship between her future spouse and her father. Given no name for several hundred lines of verse, she is described with language appropriate to her father's horse. She is more or less a political tool, whose cachet is that of a prize for the spouse, as well as the *means* toward wealth for her father. She mirrors the patriarchal value of ownership, she is a "deal" between two men, the father who wants to marry her to the first available suitor, and the suitor himself. Enide serves both men, as the narrative makes clear when the father says, « Bele douce fille, prenez / Cest cheval et si le menez, / En cet estable avec les miens » ("My dear sweet daughter, take / this horse and lead it / to the stable near mine," 451-3). Enide is called upon initially to care for her future husband's horse, then later to care for the man in the same fashion; « Bele fille chiere, / Prenez par la main cest seignor, / Se li portez mout grant honor, / Par la main le menez lasus » ("My dear daughter, / take this lord by the hand / doing him very great honor, / and lead him upstairs," 470-3). The father and suitor speak not of the woman, but of her clothes, yet the father declares great adoration for his daughter: « C'est mes solasz, c'est mes conforz » ("She is my solace, she is my comfort," 544).

The benevolent, adoring father, with all the ensuing paradoxes, transmogrifies into what we may call the "enlightened father" in Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la cité des dames*. The daughter of an enlightened father herself, Christine was educated well by her father, not prohibited from using her intellect. The enlightened father cherishes his daughter and validates her intellectually. On the surface, paternal pride is the basis for a few of the tales spun by Christine in her book, which she claims is a response to historically prevalent male oppression of women in literature.

The stories of three historical female figures which she retells in the *Cité* present a progression from paternal benevolence to violent cruelty. Whether built on conflict or harmony, the father-daughter relationship is central to the portraits of women. Images of daughters cherished by their fathers abound in the *Cité des Dames*, such as the story of Hortense, in which female intellect is one criterion for paternal love: "he cherished [her] particularly because of the vivacity of her intelligence" (179). Intelligence is therefore grounds for love, and yet the following declaration by the narrator is itself grounds for the father's narcissism: « Elle excella tant en cette dernière discipline que, d'après Boccace, non seulement elle ressemblait à son père pour l'intelligence, la rapidité de sa mémoire et l'élocution, mais aussi pour l'éloquence et l'art oratoire, si bien qu'elle l'égala en tout » ("She excelled so in this last discipline [rhetoric] that, according to Boccaccio, not only did she resemble her father in intelligence, speed of memory and elocution, but also in eloquence and the art of oratory, so

well that she equaled him in everything," 179). Hortense's success in attaining such accolades could be seen as a case of "like father like daughter." Another interpretation is possible, however: such equality could be threatening to the father. Christine de Pizan's point of view is not clear, for comparing father and daughter might simply be a way to undermine the daughter's success.

Such acclaim is blocked by the obstacle of physical beauty in the case of another heroine described by Christine, Novella. Her father proudly places his daughter directly in an arena of male intellectual prowess—literally, before the Magistrate of the Court, to make a speech. Despite her abilities, her face must be hidden by a curtain lest her beauty distract her (male) audience: « Mais afin de soustraire aux regards du public une beauté qui l'eut distrait, on fit tendre un petit rideau devant la chair » ("But in order to take away from the public view a beauty which would have been distracting, a small curtain was hung in front of her flesh," 179). Here, a woman is prevented from being fully what the patriarchy wants her to be, beautiful *and intelligent*. Her two most prized attributes are not permitted to coexist. Full integration of her own personality is thus dissected in two. The use of the passive voice ("*a small curtain was hung*") limits our understanding of the dissection: *who* made the decision to hide Novella's beauty, Novella herself, or her father?

This motif of disintegration is pursued further by Christine's discussion of yet more women torn in two, such as Sigismonde, daughter of Tancred, Prince of Salerne. This father is so possessive that the daughter must fight the threat of incest. Paternal authority poses the threat of complete abuse of power. There are many examples of the *jealous father* in the *Cité des Dames*, but the final example here goes farther. The *jealous father* becomes the *tyrannical father*, as in the story of the author's namesake, Saint Christine. One of many Catholic martyrs in medieval literature, Saint Christine is persecuted so violently by her father, King Urbain, because of her faith, that the misogyny seen throughout these works is taken to its farthest conclusion: infanticide.

Maureen Quilligan sees the torture present in so many saints' stories as a social microcosm: "Explaining male hostility to women has been a singular burden of Christine's argument throughout the text of the *Cité des Dames*, and her representation of torture in the saints' vitae implicitly acknowledges that while domination exists throughout all levels of society, sadomasochistic family relations are a more intense, one might say more personal, textbook version of it. Their pathology replicates the larger structure of society . . ." (222). Indeed, exploring relationships between fathers and daughters provides varied contexts for the study of male hostility to women.

In Saint Christine's ability to survive her father's attempts to destroy her, the biological father is replaced by the spiritual father: « Tyran sans pitié, ne t'ai-je

pas déjà dit que mon Père Jésus-Christ m'a appris cette constance et cette haute vertu en la foi du Dieu vivant? » ("Pitiless tyrant, have I not already told you that my Father Jesus Christ taught me this constancy and high virtue in the faith of the Living God?" 257-258). Saint Christine actively replaces her sadistic father with a benevolent one. It is through powerful resistance against paternal abuse that Saint Christine transcends humanity and becomes a woman of extraordinary power: a saint.

These three paternal types (or one could say *archetypes*), studied in the order in which they appear in the *Cité des Dames*, paint a picture of progression from benevolence to tyranny, from the father's possessive love of the daughter to his complete destruction of her. The violent struggle between Saint Christine and her father seems to play out in a concrete way the struggle of women against the tyrannical authority not just of men in general, but specifically of fathers, as seen in other medieval works. The conclusions which could be drawn from these struggles would certainly be complex. Must we always see the role of the father as oppressive? At what point does benevolence become oppressive?

The fathers in these works define their daughters in many different ways. One is responsible for gender manipulation (*Silence*); one dictates his daughter's transition from girl to wife (*Erec et Enide*); one even competes with God for his daughter's adoration (*Cité*). In all the works discussed here, fathers not only play central roles in the lives of their daughters, but are in fact, significantly more influential than mothers.

Catherine L. White
Department of Romance Languages and Literatures
University of Cincinnati
P.O. Box 54221-0377
Cincinnati, Ohio
Telephone: (513) 556-1829
E-mail: whitcl@email.uc.edu

WORKS CITED

- Chrétien de Troyes. *Erec et Enide*. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1992.
- Christine de Pizan. *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*. Paris: Stock, 1986.
- Heldris de Cornwall. *Le Roman de Silence*. Ed. and trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi. East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1992.
- Quilligan, Maureen. *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's Cité des Dames*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991.