

Great Teachers Who Have Shaped the World: The Glorification of Teachers in the Middle Ages. Literary-Historical Investigations

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Abstract

More often than not, medieval authors of a variety of texts offer us important glimpses into the world of education at various levels and in different institutions. From the early Middle Ages to the late fifteenth century – our chosen time frame here – we regularly hear from a wide range of authors what excellent contributions teachers had made to their own lives, to their society, and to the future generation. This is not to say that all teachers are admirable and respectable individuals, and it is also not to say that the pre-modern educational system was fantastic or superior to our modern system. What we can observe, however, is that numerous sources from the entire medieval period lend themselves particularly well to underscore the significance of education for the individual and society at large, and this, of course, already in the past. The focus of this paper will not rest on regular schools in medieval cities (e.g., Latin schools) or universities; instead, the emphasis is to bring out a trope relevant in all education until today, the model teacher who deeply influenced his/her student and thus contributed fundamentally to the further development of learning, knowledge, and hence the social context relevant for all. A protagonist who has the privilege of being well educated tends to thrive and overcome most problems and conflicts and gains a great reputation. Thus, good education based on dedication, friendship, and love proves to be, according to those pre-modern writers, the critical catalyst to transform society and to move humanity productively and constructively forward. We can learn from that in many different ways.

Keywords: medieval teachers, educational role models, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, Peter

Abelard, *Dolopathos*, Gottfried von Strassburg, *Die Minneburg*, *Josaphat and Barlaam*, didactic literature

1. Introduction

Even though many people believe that teaching is an easy profession because adults have, automatically, superior or more advanced knowledge than their young students, this is not the case. Without engaging with a vast amount of research on the best teaching methods, we can easily confirm that education is a highly challenging but also very rewarding occupation that demands much more than just the mastery of a subject matter. Aristotle had allegedly formulated this powerful insight: “Those who know, work. Those who understand, teach!” To be fair, it is much more likely that this phrase was coined by the American educational psychologist, Lee S. Shulman, in a paper published in 1986. He quoted the malicious and calumnious comment by George Bernard Shaw according to whom “He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches” in order to deconstruct its sarcasm as ill-informed and deeply misguided (Shulman 1986). Shulman rightfully concluded his study with this observation: “With Aristotle we declare that the ultimate test of understanding rests on the ability to transform one's knowledge into teaching” (14 – it remains unclear whether he had even read Aristotle, but we can certainly subscribe to his final insight, a premise for the present investigation).

If teaching were really such a simple process, we could easily employ an AI or a similar robot to carry out that task and run whatever class would be needed, but current research has raised numerous concerns and alerted us to deep flaws in that approach (see, e.g., Son and Philpott, 2026, who review the opportunities and dangers, balancing what is practical and useful with AI, and what could be dangerous and deconstructive; see also the contributions to Abdelgawad and Ashraf, eds., 2027). By the same token, there are many companies out there that sell teaching units, which require the students to go through the material by themselves without adequate assistance which tends to lead to highly questionable results, especially because much learning occurs not through rote memorization but through discursive explorations in a group setting.

Of course, in some areas, it might be enough for a student to work his/her way through the textbook, to answer questions, to memorize the data, and then to move on to the next chapter. However, that is not what real learning means since the latter cannot be replaced by mechanical studying, a phenomenon which all educators know only too well (see, for instance, Bazaluk, 2023). Hence, a native language speaker is not simply qualified to explain French or German to American students; and hiring current Chinese speakers to operate a Chinese-language program is certainly not the best approach. With all due respect, native speakers are hardly familiar with the grammatical rules, the etymology of words, or, most importantly, the pedagogical principles necessary for running a class in a foreign language.

Mutatis mutandi, this also applies to virtually all other subject matters. Students must be able to ask questions, to experiment, to probe issues, to get verifications, and to test out what they have learned. A teacher should not proselytize, pontificate, lecture, or exert inordinate pressure on students, but should share as much information as necessary or possible while

leading a discussion or group projects. A good class at whatever schooling level is determined by a friendly and welcoming relationship between teachers and students as mirrored by mutual respect, by a high level of motivation and commitment on both sides, by an excellently planned and executed class structure, and the availability of first-rate teaching, studying, and reading material. A good teacher must command a considerable degree of psychological comprehension to build a solid bridge to the students because an excessively authoritative or disciplinary approach can easily harm students' self-confidence and joy of learning, which would then undermine all efforts to educate the young generation and thus help them move into adult life. Good teaching does not require a high level of technology, even though that can certainly help. Instead, the ideal educator proves to be a person who wants to reach out to the young generation and empower it so that they can effectively operate in the future. A great example for this would be the recent and very meaningful Bhutanese movie "Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom" (2019; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lunana:_A_Yak_in_the_Classroom; last accessed on Oct. 3, 2026), where the young protagonist ultimately understands and accepts the principles and values of teaching because he 'touches the future,' as one of the boys in his class tells him when asked what profession he might want to choose later.

These idealistic terms might all sound self-evident, but they are certainly not universally accepted, which immediately explains why good teachers throughout time, exceptional in their role model, have enjoyed tremendous popularity and esteem. The Bolivian-born teacher Jaime Escalante (1930–2010), portrayed in the book *Escalante: The Best Teacher in America* by Jay Mathews and in the famous movie *Stand and Deliver* by Ramón Menéndez (both 1988), might well be the best role model in that regard (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaime_Escalante; last accessed on Oct. 3, 2026).

This paper is not so much focused on the pedagogical aspect of this topic; instead, it rather investigates how a variety of medieval poets have already addressed this issue in their works because it will shed important light on the fundamentally human dimension of all good teaching. Even though we might assume that learning has always been a matter of everyday activities for the young generation throughout time and across the world, true teaching and deep comprehension do not come by easily and require intensive preparation on the part of the teacher, or at least require a natural inclination toward practicing those pedagogical ideals (Brownlie and Schnellert, 2009). A good teacher would certainly be the person who manages to bring out the best in his/her students and helps them to grow into maturity and adulthood.

It goes without saying that teachers have always exerted tremendous authority over and influence on their students, and that hence there have also been many cases of abuse in schools. Being a teacher does not automatically mean an ideal or idyllic situation because all learning brings together people from different age groups, gender and/or cultural backgrounds. Hence, we ought to pay close attention also to the historical discussion of good teaching practices and pedagogical ideals to gain a deeper understanding of the long tradition of the pedagogical discourse, at least in the western world (see the contributions to Vaughn and Rubinstein, eds., 2006).

The selection of narrative materials below does not intend to suggest that all education in the past was superior to the situation today. There are no absolute conditions, and each school class and teaching set-up constitutes a new human challenge which every society throughout time has faced and handled in their own way. This paper will present evidence of high success in that regard as documented by the specific relationship between teachers and students as reflected in a large corpus of texts.

2. The Medieval Discourse

Throughout history, people have acquired knowledge, great and small, either by themselves or, which was mostly the case, from a teacher. We hear about that in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, and ever since, both in the East and in the West, and in all other parts of the world. This paper investigates what a selection of writers had to say about this situation, although we will have to leave out many others due to a lack of space. Numerous scholars have already discussed the history of schools and universities in the past (Orme 2006; Sheffler, 2008), which allows us to bypass much of the institutional, organizational, economic, and political aspects relevant for this topic.

Interestingly, we can begin with the tenth-century canoness Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, famous for having been the first woman in the Middle Ages to write plays, religious narratives, and also two historical poems, one about Emperor Otto the Great and one about her own convent in Gandersheim (for an English translation of a selection of her texts, see Wilson, 1998; for the critical edition of her works, see now the excellent work by Babcock, ed. and trans., 2025).

As we can learn from her own comments, she was rather troubled by the fact that she and her fellow sisters were exposed to the performances of the plays by the Roman playwright Terence (ca. 195/185–ca. 159 B.C.E.) although they were predicated on lascivious and erotic themes. Hrotsvit protested against this scandalous situation and endeavored to write her own plays in which she staged primarily the lives of dignified and martyred Christian women in late antiquity. The literary quality of those plays is so high that some of them are performed even today in modern theaters.

In her prologue to the legends (accounts of martyrs and saints), Hrotsvit emphasized how much she had profited from her teachers and gives them great praise:

I was first taught by Riccardis, the wisest and kindest of teachers, and by others thereafter, who continued my education / and then, finally, by my lady of high station / Gerberga of royal blood, my merciful abbess, under whose rule I now live. She is younger in years than I, but as befits the Emperor's niece, more advanced learning. / It was she, who, other authors concerning / continued my instruction / offering me an introduction / to the works of those writers whom she herself studied with learned men. (Wilson, trans., 19)

In her letter to the patron of her book, she highlights the glorious virtues and skills of her

teacher: “your magnificent good will and your affection’s generous magnitude / in worthy attestations of gratitude / on account of my own worthlessness” (43). This male teacher excelled in his “study of philosophy” and “found the little work of a worthless woman worthy of your admiration” (43). Hrotsvit received the necessary support from him: “invigorated by your judgment I will presume to continue my works / trusting you God and with His permission and to submit it to the examination of learned clerks” (43). Even though we do not know much more about the cultural and pedagogical situation in the monastic community, with a male scholar on the outside teaching these young canonesses, we recognize in this early medieval poet a strong voice (41), as she calls herself, who was fully aware of the central importance of a teaching situation within which each individual member of the convent could flourish.

While Hrotsvit was the most outspoken member of a convent willing to reflect explicitly on her teachers and the entire monastic school, we know that virtually every medieval monastery came along with an educational institution (see the contributions to Rury and Tamura, eds., 2019). In fact, we could equate many monasteries, at least to some extent, with boarding schools of modern times insofar as the novices who later turned into monks and nuns did not only practice the liturgy, sang the Mass, prayed, and meditated. Depending on what Order we consider, Benedictine, Cistercian, or Dominican (friars), the members of any monastic community were expected to attend school, to teach, to work in the scriptorium, to copy texts, or to illustrate manuscripts. Thus, they all belonged to an educational institution of central importance especially during the early Middle Ages, but they have survived until today to some extent.

This male teacher was a God-sent for Hrotsvit who praised him exceedingly for his inspiration and encouragement: “But touched by your good will and your encouragement, in the manner of the reed by the breeze, / I was encouraged, I was put at ease / to send you this little book for examination, which I have written with such an intention” (44). Hidden behind all of her stylized humility, she reveals her delight and even pride in having produced her writings under his guidance: “It behooves you to examine and correct it with no slight carefulness / as if it were the fruit of your own labor” (44).

From here, let us turn to the late Middle Ages though the source to be used reflects on the late twelfth century. For a fifteenth-century example, where the situation proves to be much more complicated and yet similar because of the monastic setting, we can refer to Heinrich Haller, a member of a very remote South-Tyrolean Carthusian monastery of Allerengelberg, who was intensively involved in translating medieval Latin texts into German upon the instruction of his abbot (see the contributions to Pinter and Siller, eds., 2026). Granted, he viewed education through a somewhat different lens, as we can see in his comments about the foundation of his Order, but he also revealed deep respect for his teachers. Translating the *Narratio inchoationis ordinis Carthusiensis* (ca. 1300) from the Latin to Early Modern German around 1470, he included the horrifying story of a much beloved teacher, a professor at the famous university of Paris. He was a “gemener vnd wirdiger mayster vnd lerer in de[r] heyligen geschrift” (16; He was a beloved and worthy master and teacher of the Holy Scripture).

However, after he has died, deeply mourned by all his students and colleagues, his corpse comes briefly back to life before it is buried. The dead man screams that he has been taken to God's court and been found deeply guilty. This scene re-occurs two more days, each time with the dead man confessing publicly: "Ich pin verdampt mit rechtem gericht vnd vrtayl gottes" (16; I am condemned by the final court and God's judgment). One of the scholars present among the crowd, Bruno of Cologne, draws the only logical conclusion and warns everyone that obviously not even the wisest and most learned person/teacher could rely on his previous accomplishments and would have to face the horrors of the Day of Judgment. Bruno thus advises everyone to flee the city and to retire into the wilderness where they might be able to recover their souls and prepare themselves properly for the afterlife (17). This then happens, with many people following his example, which thus constitutes the foundation of the Carthusians. Behind the story, however, we observe the intensive and warm relationship between students and teachers, although even the best learning would not be a warranty for anyone in face of God's final judgment.

Both in Gandersheim and in Allerengelberg, the monastic community provided profound education to the novices and helped them grow into mature members of monks and nuns/canonesses. Other examples of the deep impact a teacher could have can be found in the writings of the famous Cistercian novice master Caesarius of Heisterbach (ca. 1180-1240), who composed the highly popular *Dialogus miraculorum* (Classen, 2024). In a constant exchange between teacher and student, the author emerges as a well-meaning, concerned, dedicated, and passionate instructor who deeply cares about his students and provides him with a vast array of narrative examples of miracles, the workings of the devil, the Holy Ghost, Christ, or the Virgin Mary (Scott and Swinton Bland, trans., 1929; for a modern critical edition along with a German translation, see Nösges and Schneider, eds. and trans., 2009).

There are not many personal comments by Caesarius or his students about their pedagogical relationship, but the enormous appeal of these miracle accounts underscores the huge impact which this novice master had on the young generation in his monastery, on his colleagues far and wide, and on posterity when many of his tales were commonly used by preachers far into the late Middle Ages to assist them in their efforts to reach out to their parishioners during their sermons. But the constant exchanges between both persons, which structure the entire *Dialogus* sheds important light on the kind of educational principle observed by Caesarius, who grants the novice a central role in this story telling process. In fact, without the novice, an essential component for the author's endeavor would be missing.

Caesarius begins with a global statement, "I desire to speak of conversion" (vol. 1, 5), and is immediately interrupted by the Novice: "Before beginning your discourse upon conversion, will you please tell me where, and by whom, and under what pressure our Order was founded" (5). The Monk, i.e., Caesarius, never hesitates to respond, so the give and take in their discussion amounts to a harmonious balancing out of roles; both need each other, since the Monk needs an audience and the Novice needs information. The latter intervenes regularly and begs for clarifications of terms or general aspects, and he actually challenges the Monk as well, so when he questions him regarding the arrangement of the discourse: "I have been thinking of the order of your proposed instruction as shown in your preliminary

discourse, and I am puzzled to understand why you have placed the grace of conversion before contrition” (7-8). In fact, the Novice, who might well serve as Caesarius’s own second voice, goes so far as to question the Monk: “because it seems to me an utter absurdity that anyone should be converted until he has first repented of his sins” (8). The Novice needs examples, which thus motivates the Monk to retrieve cases from his memory and to elaborate on them. Those then tend to intrigue the Novice, which then inspires the Monk to expand on his dissertation and specific case. We hear the Novice formulate this doubt, this puzzlement, and this curiosity all the time: “I should much like to know how so great and wonderful a change was wrought in him” (9). The Monk never tires to pick up this challenge and to elaborate on his explanations of the cases presented. This way, teacher and student play an intellectual ball game and contribute almost on an equal level to the long-term storytelling process, almost like in the Arabian *One Thousand and One Night*, whether Caesarius was familiar with it or not. The Novice regularly responds with his own comments, quotes from the Bible, and questions, all this merged into a meaningful interaction with his teacher who would thus not even be able to develop his many narratives without the student’s input in the form of inquiry, challenges, and curiosity. For instance, after a lengthy explanation of conversion by the Monk, his listener replies: “Though all these causes seem likely enough, yet I shall be much better satisfied if you will give me examples of each” (12).

The Novice has much to offer, though he is still learning, but his questions to the teacher are essential for the latter to develop his own thought-processes further and to integrate the countless miracle accounts into his theological system, such as: “You think then that the Order is a higher vocation than a pilgrimage?” (13). Once the Monk has answered in detail, the Novice responds: “I am glad that I asked you this question, since it has brought me so illuminating an answer” (13). Moreover, the Novice has good reasons to question somewhat the Monk’s statement: “I marvel greatly that the holy angel of the Lord should deign to prostrate himself so humbly at the feet of a man” (14), which forces the Monk to specify and solidify his own arguments and explanations. And by summarizing in his own words what the teacher had conveyed to him, the student demonstrates his learning process, which satisfies the older man in turn: “That is credible enough; since the vision of that shining star would show the virtues of the departing soul” (15). And when one aspect has been elucidated, yet not the other, the Novice intervenes and prods on his teacher to be more specific: “I agree with all you say; but give me, I pray you, an example of the contrary, how some of converted by the direct impulse of the evil spirit” (17). When the Novice agrees, “Surely it is a grievous sin for a novice to return to the world” (21), the Monk adds to it yet another example, so the storytelling continues and turns into a veritable lesson on many relevant topics in the life of a future monk. This works particularly well when the Novice demonstrates his understanding and yet remembers a seemingly contradictory teaching: “If it is so mortal a sin for a novice to return to the world, what then is the meaning of S. Benedicti’s instruction” (23). The Novice is always certain that the Monk could help him in his learning process by providing yet another example: “May I have examples of this?” (23), and so the string of miracle stories keeps flowing, as is so characteristic of all medieval storytelling, whether we think of Petrus Alfonsi’s twelfth-century *Disciplina clericalis*, Don Juan Manuel’s *El Conde Lucanor* (1335), Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (ca. 1350), Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (ca.

1400), the anonymous *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* (ca. 1460), or, much later, Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* (1558/1559).

But in the case of Caesarius, we notice a maybe much more intensive exchange and collaboration between teacher and student because the latter contributes in a critical fashion to the further development of the instructions, summarizing what he has learned and understood and in what respects he needs further instructions: "The examples you have given me about preaching have fully satisfied me; now I pray you give me some about prayer" (27). Of course, Caesarius projects here an ideal teaching situation with the student more than willing to interact with him. Indeed, the Novice always serves as a catalyst to inspire his teacher to explain more and to illustrate his lessons with new examples: "These are indeed stupendous wonders, and surely it seems to me that the prayers of the faithful ought to be coveted by sinners more than all else in the world" (28). At the same time, the Monk has a specific lesson plan in mind and responds to his student either approvingly or confirming what the latter had to say about the example: "Know this, that many, without any exhortation of preaching and unaided by any special prayers, are daily drawn to the Order by good example along" (29). All this then develops further in the course of the long discourse between these two, and the Novice increasingly takes on the role of Caesarius's own spokesperson, summarizing the conclusion and outlining analogies or parallels: "This vision agrees with the miracle in the second chapter of the seventh book, where the image of the Mother of God is said to have sweated with fear of imminent judgment" (vol. 2, 345).

Granted, the Novice never comments specifically on this pedagogical set-up, serving anyone primarily only as the author's projection of himself to accelerate the telling of miracle stories. But Caesarius was obviously fully aware, based on many years of personal experiences as Novice Master, what concerns, questions, or troubles his students would have, so we may assume that the narrative projection actually mirrored the daily school situation in the monastery. To be sure, the Novice always expresses respect for his master, acknowledges his authority, but also begs for more explanations, and at times challenges him a little to go further into details or to elaborate on difficult theological issues.

3. The Perfect Teacher Par Excellence: Peter Abelard – Beloved and Hated

Much has been written about this brilliant, highly loved, but also heavily contested teacher and, as we would call him today, university professor, Peter Abelard (d. 1142), though the University of Paris had not yet been fully established at that time. We know much about his radical, unconventional and innovative research especially in the field of theology, which aroused much jealousy and anger among his colleagues. But most famous, he was the tutor of a young woman, Heloise, hired by her uncle Fulbert to introduce her to advanced studies. They developed a love affair, she became pregnant, they married in secrecy so that he could continue teaching, but Fulbert hired a gang of criminals who castrated Abelard as a punishment for this dubious marriage, allegedly having dishonored his niece. The two then separated and ultimately joined a monastery. After he had written his sort of autobiography, his *Historia calamitatum*, she received a copy of it and embarked on a correspondence with him. Those letters represent some of the most contested 'literary' works from the entire

Middle Ages because of their questioned authenticity. All this does not concern us here; instead, with Abelard, we have another most remarkable case of a deeply loved and highly influential teacher, as those letters and his own narrative indicate clearly. Indeed, this man must have been a smashing success, deeply influencing not only his male students, but also Heloise, and the public at the same time.

Here I focus on his own self-reflections which allow us to gain at least an approximate understanding of what made Abelard to such an idealized and admired individual. Several aspects can be ignored for the purpose of this paper. He was in constant conflict with his colleagues and the Church authorities, and if he had not died a natural death in 1142, he would have probably faced the Inquisition for his heretical views. Abelard entertained a love relationship with Heloise, which we today would identify as a case of sexual harassment not allowed at all for any teacher in any institution. Finally, the correspondence with Heloise has stirred huge controversies across the world of scholarship, but this needs to be left aside for other discussions (see the contributions to Wheeler, ed., 2000). Irrespective who might have written these letters and then also the (auto)biographical account, both serve our purposes well to identify what made this man to such a beloved teacher and how he managed to exert such a global influence (for a translation of the *Historia calamitatum*, see Martin McLaughlin and Wheeler, trans. and eds., 2009).

From early on, Abelard was deeply intrigued by advanced learning and voluntarily abandoned his inheritance rights to his younger brother: “I finally abandoned the court of Mars to be educated in the lap of Minerva” (17). Dialectics fascinated him above all, and so disputations, for which he was later to become truly famous, and this very much to the dismay of his fellow scholars and teachers because they could not live up to his level, including his own teacher, William of Champeaux. His fellow student also disliked him out of envy because they were more advanced in their studies, so this “was the beginning of my calamities” (18). Despite his youth, Abelard set up a school of his own in Melun, which aroused much rancor in William, but Abelard gained enough local support to proceed with his plans. As he admits himself at least indirectly, he must have greatly irritated many members of the school in Paris, especially when he was so successful as a teacher of dialectics that he could afford to move his institution to Corbeil near the seat of the royal court. Then came the backlash, him falling so sick that he had to return home for several years. Nevertheless, his students tried their hardest to seek him out and gain more instruction in logic (18).

Upon his return, Abelard gained even more success in his harsh disputations with William, and his own teachings attracted constantly growing numbers of students, including those who had previously rejected him and had followed William’s concepts. Quite obviously, his former teacher was filled with ever more envy (19). To evade him, Abelard moved his school back to Melun where he gained the greatest reputation: “the more openly his jealousy pursued me, the greater my prestige became” (20). As much as Abelard tries to embrace modesty in his account, we easily recognize the true extent of his arrogance because he was such an intellectual light and cast huge shadows over the other teachers there, such as Anselm of Laon, an expert in theology. But Abelard realized here once again that this old man was no match for him, and this then led himself to the study of the Bible and the writings of the Church

Fathers. The conflicts continued coming, and yet, Abelard's fame as a teacher grew in leaps and bounds: "My lectures were, indeed, so popular with those who had heard them that they considered me no less gifted in the teaching of Holy Scripture than I was in philosophy" (22).

However, the downfall was then to follow soon, as he himself was more than ready to admit, and the entire account really serves as a lesson to indicate how quickly arrogance and success can turn into their opposite. Once he had made the first contact with Heloise, serving as her teacher, his catastrophe loomed large, which does not need to be pursued here in detail. But his strong feelings of love made Abelard compose poems which quickly gained much traction, adding even further to his public reputation: "a great many of these songs are still popular, and they are sung in many places, especially by those who are attracted to the same way of life" (24).

The more he profiled his many steps toward glorious successes as a teacher and composer, the more the warning sounds could be heard: "But evil fortune caressed me, as they say, and found an easier opportunity cast me down from the heights, so that, in my excessive pride and my neglect of the grace I had received, the divine pity might restore me humbled to itself" (23). The true calamity then emerged because Abelard entered into a passionate love relationship with his young student, which they could keep a secret for some time, until the truth came out, resulting in Abelard's castration.

Once the city had learned about this heinous crime against this famous teacher, all the people "thronged around me, and I can hardly tell you how stunned they were, how loudly they mourned, how they tormented me with their clamor, and upset me with their laments!" (29). This was basically the end of Abelard's career, as the subsequent sections of the *Historia calamitatum* outline in drastic terms. We learn, for instance, "on the day of my arrival, the people almost stoned me and those few students of mine who were with me" (32).

We do not need to trace the subsequent developments in Abelard's life, especially because it would lead us into the arcana of theological debates as they raged at that time. What is clear, however, is that this teacher was simply too large for his contemporaries and irked all his colleagues up and down the social and educational ladder. Whenever he was able to teach again, under whatever circumstances, students always flocked to him and provided for him whatever might have been his needs (39). But the persecutions never came to an end; there were just too many envious enemies, who ultimately managed to ruin Abelard's life. Hence, this *Historia* can be seen both as a autobiographical narrative and as a defense treatise, a moral and religious rumination and an appeal to his friend to have pity with him: "It should suffice, as I said at the beginning of my letter, to make you consider your trouble little or nothing compared with mine, and help you to endure it the more patiently, the less important you consider it to be" (48).

Even here, at the lowest point of his life, this famous teacher moves himself into the center of attention and claims the highest level of suffering affecting him and no one else. Nevertheless, Abelard concludes with comforting words that apply to all: "those clearly depart from righteousness who grow angry at any trouble of theirs, when they know very well that this happens to them by divine decree" (49). Altogether, then, we recognize here an amazing

personality, a truly impressive teacher who was so superior to all his contemporaries that his students and colleagues either loved or hated him (Clanchy, 1997; see now the studies by Luscombe, 2020). His best and most qualified student, Heloise, subsequently entered into an intense correspondence with him, if we can accept the authenticity of those letters. Disregarding this philological problem, we still can conclude with the observation that Abelard deeply influenced entire generations of students, including Fulbert's niece, and can be identified as one of the most inspiring pedagogues of his time. Otherwise, all the hatred and envy of him would be difficult to comprehend. A vast number of students simply loved him and happily followed his lead in the dialectical approach to all theological studies.

4. The Ideal School with Wise Teachers

4.1 *The Evidence of Dolopathos*

If we ever wondered about cultural-historical connections between East and West during the Middle Ages, we only would have to point out several literary works that originated either in India or Persia (at the turn of the ninth century) and were then disseminated through many different translations across the world. One of those was the unique work entitled *Dolopathos* written by the Cistercian monk Johannes de Haute-Seille in his monastery located in Lorraine. He composed his version around 1200 in Latin, and this was subsequently translated into Old French by a certain Herbert at the royal court of King Phillip II Auguste (1180-1223). Often, this text was called *The Seven Wise Men (of Rome)*, and it experienced a tremendous popularity far into the late Middle Ages when it was rendered into many different vernaculars (Classen, 2013; cf. the contributions to Keene, ed., 2019, though *Dolopathos* is not mentioned at all). Whereas many versions of this text locate the events in Constantinople or Rome, Johannes chose Sicily as the country where the protagonist's father rules. Despite some noticeable differences between the eastern and the western branch of this long text tradition – the former being identified with Sindbad in connection with the collection *One Thousand and One Night* – in essence, we find strong similarities and can thus draw from *Dolopathos* for information about the role of good teachers (Müller, ed., 2025; for the English translation, see Gilleland, trans., 1981).

The premise of this work consists of the experiences of Lucinius, son of King Dolopathos who rules in Sicily and is greatly admired as an excellent king. The young prince is sent to Rome to gain the best possible education from Virgil. After his mother's death, however, Lucinius is called back home, but Virgil forces him to swear an oath never to say a word as if he had lost his voice, and this until he himself would have arrived. This grieves his father badly, but his son assures him in writing that his mourning for the deceased mother caused his complete muteness. Nevertheless, Dolopathos's second wife pretends to her husband that she would be able to make the young man speak again, but in reality, both she and her chambermaids intend to seduce him in a most lascivious manner. Since the stepmother is most inflamed in love with him, she tries to force him to have sex with her, but he escapes from her. To avenge herself, she then pretends that Lucinius had tried to rape her, for which the enraged father demands the death penalty – this is, of course, the biblical motif of 'Potiphar's Wife' (Genesis 39:5–20). Just before he is to be thrown into flames, one of the

seven sages of Rome appears and tells a story that sheds different light on the entire situation, so the execution is delayed by a day. This becomes a pattern for the next six days, always one of the sages achieving further delays by means of their stories. Finally, Virgil also appears and tells his own story, which then leads to the dismantling of the legal court and Lucinius's liberation. He then begins to speak, reveals the truth about the evil stepmother, who then is thrown into the flames together with her chambermaids.

At the beginning, King Dolopathos is introduced as an ideal ruler defending the poor and the weak, standing up for justice, and pursuing all evils irrespective of any perpetrator's social standing (6). The reason for his success consists of his admiration of and respect for "the wise men and elders of the kingdom" (5), certainly teachers in their own right who enjoy enormous reputation and guarantee, because of their good advice, that the kingdom flourishes, that peace and justice rule everywhere, and that happiness dominates everywhere. Eventually, his wife becomes pregnant and delivers a boy, named Lucinius, who is raised by nurses for seven years. Thereafter, following ancient Plato's advice that a true king should be a philosopher and a philosopher should be the king, he is sent to Rome to study under Virgil (13). We know already the subsequent events and only need to notice that after the queen's charge against her stepson – rape – Dolopathos becomes helpless and subject to his wife's and then the sages' advice and recommendations. He is without a teacher or a guide and thus unable to make a rational decision in this case. By contrast, his son, strictly following Virgil's advice, stays mute the whole time and thus can save his life when he teacher arrives on the scene.

Before we proceed, let us examine what the poet tells us about the master's teaching approaches and subject matters. He takes quite some time to outline the various teaching strategies and materials employed by Virgil, whom he characterizes as gentle and persuasive toward the boy (14). Lucinius quickly demonstrates great learning abilities and progresses amazingly fast because he listens carefully and grasps and contains everything his tutor is telling him. Both this teacher and his unique student quickly turn to more advanced study matters. Virgil goes so far as to let him read his own book which contains all the secrets he had learned over many years. No one in the world enjoyed the privilege to take a look into this book, but the teacher makes an exception with Lucinius "because he wished him to progress rapidly" (14). The two explore together the Liberal Arts "like two friends" (14), so Virgil demonstrates what really qualifies a true teacher, that is, mutual respect, care and maybe even love for the student, compassion, and eagerness to share as much as possible all his knowledge with the student.

Even when envious people try to assassinate him with the help of poisoned wine, they fail because Lucinius had insisted to be accompanied by Virgil, and when the chalice with the tainted wine arrives, the boy forces the hosts to drink first, which they cannot refuse, so they all die. As he says upon the invitation to that fateful banquet: "He assured them, however, that he did not dare to do anything at all without his teacher Virgil, who was his guardian and whose ferule he feared very much" (15). This concept is repeated soon after, but it only underscores the boy's great respect for his teacher and his sense of humility since he refuses to be identified by Virgil as his equal: "He always remained under his ferule and discipline as

if he were then learning the alphabet for the first time. His humility was especially attested by the fact that, although he was very tall and Virgil was small . . . his body was always stooped so that he might not seem taller or bigger than Virgil” (17).

When Lucinius, studying Virgil’s secret book more closely and learns astrologically that his mother has died and that his father has married another woman, he faints and seems to have passed away. Yet, with the help of a doctor’s treatment, he recovers, but the reaction by Virgil upon hearing the terrible news that his student has allegedly succumbed to death, is revealing: “Although he was a man of great spirit and had been taught by the examples and deeds of brave men to balance the good and the bad on an equal scale he could not completely conceal his grief” (18). Once Lucinius has recovered and revealed what he has learned, Virgil actually displays true happiness of a teacher: “I rejoice to see that you are skilled in all knowledge and have risen through all the grades of philosophy. You must remember, however, that you learned the beginning of these arts from your friend Virgil” (19).

In fact, this teacher then identifies himself as Lucinius’s friend with whom he has shared absolutely everything he knows, making the young man to the most learned person on earth next to him. In conclusion, this amazing teacher requests from his student: “I now ask that the love which has existed between us never be destroyed or broken by any passage of time. Let it be renewed day by day” (19). And when Virgil commands him to stop speaking as soon as he has left him to go home, his student, although very grudgingly, obeys, which ultimately will save his life (20). In fact, at the end, Virgil comes to Lucinius’s rescue when he tells the last story, which seals the queen’s life and saves the prince. We could thus describe *Dolopathos* as a romance about teachers, students, and the ideals of education which makes it possible for the most qualified young man to learn more than anyone else and to equal if not to supersede his master.

The poet thus identifies good teachers as individuals who deeply care for their students and make their best effort to share with them everything they know because they love them dearly and trust completely in their ethics and morality. Virgil and Lucinius thus emerge as an ideal pair whose collaboration ultimately profits the entire country because the former ensures through his pedagogy that the latter transforms into the best possible ruler, while the evil queen dies a miserable death.

4.2 Other Teacher-Student References in Late Medieval Literature

One of the most impressive students in all of courtly literature proves to be Tristan, such as in Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan and Isolde* (ca. 1210). After his parents’ death, his foster father sends him to the best teachers in the world who instruct him, above all, how to speak many languages and to play perfectly numerous music instruments. He also demonstrates great skills as a knight and orator, having learned so many different subject matters from his chosen teachers. Before he plunges into a love affair with the Irish princess Isolde, he leads a very successful life at the court of his uncle, King Mark of Cornwall. However, just as in the case of Abelard, Tristan eventually arouses much hatred and envy which make him fear for his life. Hence, he embarks on a second trip to Ireland to woo for the hand in marriage of the princess Isolde on behalf of Mark – the first time he had sought healing from his virtually

incurable wound infected by poison originally concocted by the Irish Queen Isolde who then eventually is able to counteract it and thus to save the stranger. She does so because she believes that he is Tantris and not Tristan, hence not her arch enemy who had killed her brother Morold. Moreover, Tantris serves as the best teacher for her daughter, which already sets up a personal relationship between these two young people. But only when Tristan and Isolde later drink the love potion – also brewed by her mother – does the actual love affair set in causing huge and lifelong problems for the two lovers who are closely guarded and observed by Isolde's husband, Mark and make every effort to get together secretly.

All we need to observe here as additional evidence for our argument about the glory of good teachers as already projected in the Middle Ages, would be the intensive learning process young Tristan is going through, which makes him a perfect polyglot, multi-talented musician, hunter artist, and accomplished knight, and all this at the same time. The narrator states very clearly how much Tristan's teachers deserve our respect because they provide him with so much knowledge and expertise in playing music instruments, reading books, studying languages, and other subject matters that he is fully recognized as a prodigy upon his return home at the age of fourteen (Whobrey, ed. and trans., 2020, 33-34; for the critical ed., see Tomasek together with Frank Schäfer, eds. 2023).

Unfortunately, the poet does not linger on the teachers and only highlights young Tristan's outstanding learning success, but the results confirm that the poet indirectly gave much praise to the various tutors: "Along with these two main areas of study, that is books and languages, he spent much of his time playing various stringed instruments. He spent so much of his energy in this endeavor, at all times of the day and night, that he became a real prodigy" (33). Later, however, when he is seeking healing for his poisoned wound from the Irish Queen Isolde, he can convince her to save him because he promises to teach the daughter his musical art. Everyone in the Dublin harbor who hears him singing accompanied by his harp believes that "God himself would have enjoyed such music in his heavenly choirs" (99). Once the Queen has realized the great educational opportunity with this stranger, she commissions him to take over the role of teacher for her daughter: "If you possess knowledge and skills unknown to her tutor or me, then teach her for my sake. As a reward I will give you back your life and your body, in full health and good look" (101-02).

Indeed, once Tantris/Tristan has been healed, he assumes his task as Isolde's instructor: "He devoted much of his effort and time to her, with the best of what he knew, school subjects and fine arts, which I'm not going to list here. He introduced these to her so that she could choose what to study based on her own inclinations" (103). At the same time, Isolde proves to be already highly educated and is thus very receptive to the ultimate refinement provided by the foreign teacher: "Whatever she had already learned she was able to improve upon, and her teacher, the minstrel, made her ever more accomplished in all things. Among her many studies he introduced her to one subject we call *moralité*" (103). Already within six months, his teaching produces wonders in her: "The entire country was talking about her perfection, and her father the king was overjoyed as was her mother" (103). Even though the narrator focuses almost exclusively on young Isolde's astounding accomplishments, this does not exclude the critical role which her teacher played: "Beautiful Isolde had taken Tristan's

teaching to another level” (105). There is little wonder that these two young people subsequently fall in love with each other, whether due to the love potion concocted by her mother so that her daughter would experience love in her marriage with King Mark or due to the fact that both already felt a certain degree of attraction, which the narrator might have suggested without fully telling us so. Keeping this complex and intensive love relationship between teacher and student in mind, it makes good sense, as I have tried to argue earlier, that Gottfried might have known of the famous scandal involving Peter Abelard and Heloise and transferred their tragic passion to his own story, merging the literary tradition with the historical account (Classen, 2000). At any rate, both here and there, the male protagonist operates as a teacher which ultimately opens the door to the heart of his female student.

5. Conclusion

Teachers appear more often in medieval history and literature than we might have assumed. Poets and chroniclers paint most positive pictures of those highly influential figures, such as when we turn to the profoundly influential text of *Josaphat and Barlaam*, which circulated both in East and West since the second and third centuries relating in new constellations the life of Gautama Buddha (de la Cruz Palma, ed. 2001; Marcus, 2018). The hermit Barlaam teaches young Josaphat the principles of Christianity and can thus convert him (Cordoni, 2014). We also hear of a highly influential teacher in the courtly allegory, *Minneburg* (early fourteenth century, Middle High German), where the protagonist searches for the wisest person in the world to help him understand the nature of love as represented by a castle and a mysterious child. This turns out to be Master Neptanaus in Alexandria, Egypt, the ultimate expert in the Seven Liberal Arts who “could make Latin and Hebrew, Greek, and Chaldean [sound] better through his florid speech, just like his mother tongue” (McConnell, trans., 2026, 108-09). He also demonstrates his profound understanding of the sciences because he takes with him on their journey back to the Castle of Love these instruments: astrolabium, cylindrium, and quadrant” (109). He uses all his skills and understanding to inform the child about the “circumstances of your birth and all about your life, and what the stars of the firmament have given to you. The older you become, the greater your strength will become, but your sight all the fainter. . . I will show you that you are, in fact, love itself” (110).

There is little doubt that the anonymous poet drew from a long tradition of similar allegorical narratives dealing with the phenomenon of love, and since Neptanaus displays such a full understanding of every facet of love, we can easily correlate him with the teacher speaking in Andreas Capellanus’s famous love treatise, *De amore* (ca. 1180-1190), though the many different situations presented develop somewhat differently, with a greater emphasis on debates, dialogues, and the use of various narrative genres to elaborate on the nature of love, here disregarding the third book in which Andreas utterly condemns both extramarital love and women at large (Knapp, trans., 2006). As we can observe throughout the *Minneburg*, the poet’s purpose was, very similar to his probable source, to have the child of love question the master and have him thereby analyze the many different facets of love as a universal force: “Noble, honorable Master, answer one more question for me. Were I to come with a grand company and enter the reason of a man, so that he might love a woman, how should he go about making her aware of this fact?” (127). This also reminds us once again of the narrative

approach by Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus miraculorum*, to which we could also add Don Juan Manuel's *El Conde Lucanor* (1335). Neptanaus responds: "Such is the nature of love that when a person aspires to it, he very often perceives that love is reciprocated and he becomes completely aware of it, even before he wishes to hear it spoken" (127). Through their constant back and forth, the poet succeeds in bringing to his audience's attention what one could possibly say about love, its affects, properties, and attributes, such as when the Master replies: "Together with you were born anew desire, constancy, and loyalty. They are well-suited to your birth" (130).

Love needs to be discussed, studied, and learned, as countless medieval poets underscored in a myriad of texts in different genres. Hence, the literary discourse itself thus assumes the function of the teacher, whether s/he speaks out as explicitly as in the *Minneburg* or whether this is only implied. Didacticism was one of the major aspects of all of medieval literature, and hence the poets regarded themselves as teachers of their various audiences. Thus, it does not come as a major surprise that many times a narrative reveals the extent to which education had taken place, which means that a teacher stood in the background and yet then received full recognition in the literary discourse.

The idealization and trope of the good teachers has continued also throughout the post-medieval period and maybe even until today, especially if we consider the genre of the *Bildungsroman* popular since the middle of the eighteenth century, such as Christoph Martin Wieland's *Geschichte des Agathon* (1766), Karl Philipp Moritz's, *Anton Reiser* (1785/1790), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795/1796), Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833–1834), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Gottfried Keller's *Der grüne Heinrich* (1854/1855), Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) Hermann Hesse's *Demian* (1919), Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (1924), or J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) (Moretti, 1987; Jeffers, 2005).

However, we live today in a post-modern world, often disillusioned and frustrated because of the lack of values and ideals and the global absence of directions and purpose. But the concept of the ideal teacher lives on, and we can hence profit deeply from the literary and historical examples in the Middle Ages. In fact, our future depends on a good education system, hence on good teachers, whatever that might mean now considering the flood of new pedagogical technologies and materials. But nothing will change even for the next generations regarding the ideal of true and deep education provided by individuals who care for and love their students, and vice versa.

All this, to be sure, is intimately predicated on the philosophical notion that each person, from early childhood onwards, needs to grow, to acquire knowledge, to gain intellect, and to turn into a responsible, rational, respectful, and upright citizen. Of course, teaching has much to do with data, facts, formulas, and specific information. Yet, in reality, true teaching, i.e., education in the traditional Humboldtian sense of the word, aims for the student gaining independence in thinking, in the evaluation of the conditions of our lives, and for the development of ethics, morality, rationality, and sensitivity.

Only a good teacher, as profiled in many medieval narratives (cf., e.g., Wolfram von

Eschenbach's *Parzival*, ca. 1205, here not included in our discussion), and then also in modern *Bildungsromane*, can achieve that desired goal. This teacher is a guide, a role model, a sage, a friend, and a life-long supporter. While AI and many other computer programs make it much easier today to go through the process of rote learning, this does not lead at all to true education. Of course, those working in the profession of teaching constantly face new students, new conditions, new challenges, and they have to respond to ever-changing societal demands. But when we read any of those medieval texts where the good teacher is introduced or alluded to, we face timeless models of what it means to live up to this ideal in pedagogy.

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