

# VIRTUS

30 | 2023



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## Learning the morals of nobility in Medieval Europe

178

Claudia Wittig, *Learning to be noble in the Middle Ages. Moral education in North-Western Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022, 295 pp., 9 illustrations, index).

In this impressive new book, Claudia Wittig offers the first comprehensive examination of how the aristocracy of medieval Europe learnt to ‘be noble’. That is, how did the nobility of this period come to understand how they should act, what functions they were expected to perform, and how their proper behaviour, once learnt, could benefit wider society? To achieve this, Wittig focuses on didactic literature – literature written specifically for the purpose of education – from across Europe, in both Latin and vernacular languages, to consider what and how the nobility learnt the morals associated with aristocracy. This includes many well-known texts by famous authors such as John of Salisbury, Gerald of Wales, Godfrey of Viterbo, Vincent of Beauvais and Giles of Rome, to name but a few, as well as several less famous ones. The problem with such texts is, of course, that they invite questions as to how far the principals espoused within them reflected the sentiments of the wider population: just because a moral philosopher believed something to be true, the noble audience for whom they were writing did not necessarily agree. Here, however, Wittig succeeds in demonstrating that the complex literary world that emerges from her texts did indeed map closely with reality, not least because, as she points out, there is ‘a close connection between discourse and the structures of power that control the discourse’ (p. 28). This is of importance to many of Wittig’s central arguments and allows her to demonstrate that these texts, while varying (at times considerably) across time, place and context, shared a number of core themes that reveal a great deal about what it meant to be noble in the period. Most no-

tably, this includes the notion that acting with ‘virtue’, and all that this entailed, was the central pillar around which a noble education was built.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first (‘Teaching morality’) sets out how the nobility learnt in this period. It thus provides useful context for later chapters. It covers not only the education of noble children, which often took place at home, as part of cathedral schools or within the household of another, more senior noble, but also recognises the importance placed on ‘lifelong learning’ for the nobility. This chapter also introduces the most important didactic texts on which Wittig’s analysis is based. What Wittig does particularly well here is to recognise that, while there were a great number of similarities across the various cultures of noble learning that existed in Europe in this period, which are important for her arguments in later chapters, there were also considerable differences. The literature produced at English and French courts, for instance, tended to be more geared towards royal audiences. By contrast, German didactic literature was more commonly aimed at those towards the middle and lower end of the noble echelons.

Chapter two (‘Models of authority’) continues in a similar vein by discussing the linguistic and literary strategies employed by authors of didactic literature to establish a connection with their readers. It shows that the authors often sought to emulate real-world teaching situations (such as a father teaching a son, a mother teaching a daughter, or a priest teaching his parishioners) to imbue their work with a sense of authority and validity. Different scenarios could be used for different purposes: a parent talking to their child might include some back-and-forth, an element of questioning and answering, a dialogue. An authority on doctrine talking to a lay audience, however, was more likely to engage in a monologue, providing information to be listened to and internalised rather than queried. These differences notwithstanding, as Wittig argues, all didactic texts were concerned to some degree with hierarchy, and educating the reader on where they fit within this hierarchy. In this respect, they were contributing to the creation of a well-structured ‘society of values’ (p. 107).

Chapters three and four move on to consider what it was the nobility were actually learning. Chapter three (‘The courtly cosmos’) examines this in the context of court life, a central arena, as Wittig shows, both for learning noble behaviours (be that through imitation of, or gentle nudges in the right direction from, more experienced courtiers) and demonstrating to the world what one had already learnt. Here, Wittig argues that didactic texts largely succeeded in creating an idealised ‘courtly community’. This enabled writers to paint a picture of court life that emphasised its cohesion and harmony as a way of justifying the nobility’s particular right to sit at the head of society. Whether this translated into reality is, however, questionable, and Wittig is no doubt correct to suggest here that the authors of the texts she studies probably focused on this idealised community precisely because of the shortcomings that the nobility showed in living up to it.

This theme is discussed in further detail in chapter four (‘Communities of values’). In this chapter, Wittig focuses on the common themes and ideas that pervade her sources in an attempt to paint a picture of the ideal nobleman and noblewoman, as envisioned by the authors of didactic texts. This includes a thoughtful discussion about the *pruedome* and ‘chivalric knight’, two models of the ‘ideal man’ to which noblemen traditionally aspired. These two models overlapped heavily – as Wittig points out, the latter was more overtly militarised than

the former in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. During the later Middle Ages, the differences between these two models actually narrowed significantly as the conduct of warfare and the nature of knighthood changed across Europe (although this is outside the chronological scope of the book and so the author may be forgiven for not exploring this). That said, it might have been interesting had the author examined a little more fully the link that existed between moral education and contemporary understandings of masculinity in this period, although there was certainly an acknowledgement of this. This aside, one cannot help but be impressed by the work in this chapter. Wittig is able to offer a nuanced picture of what noble children and young adults were being taught the ideal medieval noble was in this period.

180 By better understanding this, we are able to more fully appreciate contemporary understandings of nobility, and how these became so engrained in contemporary thought and practice. Importantly, this is not confined to noblemen. Noblewomen are considered in equal measure. Indeed, in this chapter Wittig also offers an illuminating outline of the *prued-femme* – the feminine counterpart to the *pruedome*. Elsewhere in the book, meanwhile, we are treated to nuanced analyses of the different expectations placed on male and female nobles. In chapter two, for example, Wittig outlines the key similarities and differences that exist in two German didactic texts – *Der Winsbecke*, a stylised account of a conversation between father and son and *Diu Winsbeckin*, the same for a mother and daughter – to highlight the differing expectations placed on the conduct of men and women. The overall effect of this is that Wittig is able to provide a particularly rounded account of noble learning, and indeed noble identity, in this period.

The fifth and final chapter (‘Organizing knowledge’) returns to the question of how nobles learnt. In this sense, it sits a little awkwardly at the end of the book and it may have been better placed earlier (perhaps after chapter one). Nevertheless, it offers a valuable account of how poetry gave way to prose as the primary and most authoritative way of communicating knowledge in this period. In one sense, this was unfortunate for the learner, as poetic forms tended to be more palatable and exciting for young nobles. However, with a ‘rising awareness of the distinctions between fact and fiction’ in this period, it was inevitable that texts that sought to provide moral education, as with all educational works, would become increasingly formal and comprehensive in their structure. This serves as a useful reminder that, while much was constant in this period, much was also changing.

Overall, there is thus a tremendous amount to recommend Wittig’s book. Because the author works from such a breadth of literature, produced by a range of cultures and in a variety of languages, she is able to offer a wonderfully rounded account of how and what the European nobility were learning about their place in the world in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. She also succeeds in the difficult endeavour of linking the idealised world that was constructed in these texts with the reality of noble life. This is not to say there were not some areas that may have benefitted from further exploration. A more sustained discussion on what nobles learnt about their role as lords of lesser men would, for instance, have been welcome. Similarly, Wittig talks in many places of ‘communities’. This includes a reference to a ‘pan-European community of values’ which pervaded the nobility at this time (p. 193). There is little doubt that strong commonalities existed, and that writers were keen to emphasise these. But, given the diversity of noble thought and experience across Europe in

these two centuries, which Wittig herself acknowledges, one might question whether ‘community’ is too strong a word here. Even so, there is no doubt that this book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the nobility of medieval Europe, which will be of immense value to scholars in many fields.

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## Dossier Aristocratic collecting practices in Belgium and the Netherlands (ca. 1780-1950)

Aristocratic collecting practices in Belgium and the Netherlands (c. 1780-1950).

An introduction

11

*Ulrike Müller, Ilja Van Damme and Gerrit Verhoeven*

'Like a Tale from the Thousand and One Nights'. Reconstructing the taste and collections of William Williams Hope (1802-1855)

25

*Barbara Lasic*

A noble collector without a private collection. The case of Count Louis Cavens

46

*Britt Claes and Valérie Montens*

The baron, the collector, the hunter. W.A.A.J. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Duivenvoorde and his family collection (1912-1957)

63

*Simone Nieuwenbroek*

Preserving conservative values in a Liberal world. Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh and 'her' museum in Antwerp around 1900

85

*Christien Schrover*

The *Collection de Ramaix*. The diplomatic corps, noble status and the reappraisal of Delftware

105

*Jo Tollebeek*

A digital future for a dispersed noble heritage. The Arenberg Art Collection Project

133

*Soetkin Vanhauwaert and Ulrike Müller*



30 | 2023



9 789464 550986