

Parental Relations in the Middle Ages: An Exceptional Case, Christine de Pizan

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Abstract

Essentially, the transformations that have affected parents over time have characterised the father-daughter, mother-daughter dyad. Christine de Pizan, Italian excellence in the world, is as important for historical purposes as for reflecting on the pedagogical understanding of family dynamics. The paper highlights the role of the writer's father and mother, pointing out that these were decisive in the author's development of her talent. While remote through the centuries, the parental relationship characterising the de Pizan family is revolutionary with respect to the Middle Ages. An example that could teach: a relationship with one's parents and with the world.

Keywords: Christine de Pizan, family, father, mother, Middle Ages.

Abstract

Le trasformazioni che hanno interessato i genitori nel corso del tempo hanno caratterizzato la diade padre-figlia, madre-figlia. Christine de Pizan, eccellenza italiana nel mondo, è un esempio rilevante tanto a fini storici quanto per una riflessione sulla gestione pedagogica delle dinamiche familiari. L'articolo evidenzia il ruolo dei genitori della scrittrice, rilevando come essi siano stati decisivi per lo sviluppo del talento dell'Autrice. Sebbene remota nei secoli, la relazione parentale che caratterizza la famiglia de Pizan è rivoluzionaria rispetto al Medioevo. È un esempio che può essere di insegnamento: un modo di relazionarsi con i propri figli e con il mondo.

Parole chiave: Christine de Pizan, famiglia, padre, madre, Medioevo.

Introduction

These relationships were instrumental in shaping women's intellectuality and unlocking their potential. In keeping with contemporary historical research, that is attentive to the analysis of social effects, the

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contribution seeks to highlight the fact that the cultural apparatus of the late mediaeval period had shaped conflicting experiences that, penetrating into the depths of male and female behaviour, prevented private and public osmosis. Thus, these oppositions ended up becoming cornerstones of medieval education (Giallongo, 2019). The medieval feminisation of falsehood is a powerful, polyvalent literary trope that has opened the door to the investigation of pre-valent gender ideologies and multiple misogynistic currents with Howard Bloch and Denery. Moreover, recent research in France is interested in assessing the points of convergence between Gender Studies and the history of lies (Böhmsch, 2015).

An unavoidable starting point for the medieval history with respect to gender is Christine de Pizan's *Cité des Dames* (1405). Here lurks the aspiration for a new social balance between the sexes, here took root the critique of power structures deemed immovable and of social emotions, stratified over the centuries, that fuelled hostility, indifference and denigration towards the feminine. New horizons are opened up here.

In line with this idea, Christine from the beginning showed her resistance to the deleterious power relations between the sexes, which did not tolerate, education for women, accused of being prone to dissimulation and lying in private and public life. An entirely new perspective, manifested by the intention to draft an antidote-text to male lies. In this way, the city of Ladies, analogous to Augustine's city of God, reveals the aspiration to truth.

The always beautiful, always authentic stories of Reason, Righteousness and Justice totally re-spin the lies (*City of Dames*, I, VI), especially those that had damaged the female world. All narratives about the mythical and historic figures of the past legitimise the demand for access to education and culture.

Despite these challenges, the paternal figure emerged as a critical force in shaping women's lives and their intellectual development. Father figures who were attentive, sensitive, and understanding of their daughters' emotional and affective needs were instrumental in shaping their daughters' lives positively. These fathers often took on a completely new figure that replaced the traditional principle of *auctoritas* that had characterised society for a long time. Though this new figure retained the guiding and supporting function of the father, he was more of an interpreter of his daughter's needs, hopes, and dreams. However, while the paternal figure is given attention in this paragraph, the dimension of motherhood is also essential in the representation of women, not only in the past but also in the present.

Mothers serve as role models for their daughters and play a crucial role in imparting values and education by example. As the quote rightly suggests, «by the sole force of exemplum one teaches, or rather passes on [...] an education in doing» (Silva, Freschi, Caselli, 2018, p. 5, my translation). Therefore, it is not just the paternal figure but also the maternal figure in a family that helps in shaping a child's life positively. In the present contribution – which is thus linked to the most recent contributions of Gender Studies we would like to reflect in particular on the contrast between the so-called 'withdrawal of the father', also referred to by some as the 'rarefaction' of the father figure, and the emergence of the figure of new fathers or maternal fathers (Argentieri, 2014); in the case of Christine's family, the new father is expressed in his modernity and exceptional character.

In the last few years, Gender Studies have highlighted the key role of historically oriented aspects of fatherhood, which involve male patterns of identity and the related pedagogical and regulatory implications. Imposing, oppressive, interfering, sometimes lonely, the fathers present in a vast literature of a pedagogical, legal and autobiographical kind have long been unavoidable rules so radically engrained as to preclude, at any rate in appearance, any kind of recognition of their own legitimacy (Covato, 2002).

On the other hand, of the gradual decadence of the normative devices that have long governed the relationships of families in western history, has been emphasised, in a recent debate involving many fields of knowledge historical-anthropological and now also historical-educational knowledge, the resulting crisis of male gender identity, which followed a long supremacy and has been aired since the late 19th century (Covato, 2014).

The identification between father and norm, in a tradition that has lasted centuries, has not prevented us, in the context of the more recent historiographical panorama, from paying attention to the traces; of a male word that has expressed towards daughters and sons, not so much the desire to exercise parental authority, but rather that desire for care and affective involvement traditionally destined for the maternal *figura* (Becchi, 2019). The plurality of voices and heterogeneous backgrounds give rise to a polyphonic work that rebuilds how the concept of childhood has been grasped and interpreted throughout the century.

In conclusion, the history of women is a nuanced one that offers contrasting experiences – from struggles to triumphs, from obstacles to possibilities. The role of the father and mother in shaping a child's life posi-

tively cannot be overemphasised. We must recognise the significance of both maternal and paternal figures in promoting gender equality and creating an equitable society (Cambi, Olivieri, 1994).

1. *Christine de Pizan and Thomas, the father*

In a singular time, Christine de Pizan represents an astonishing destiny. She was fortunate to receive a rare and highly favorable education from her father, who was a renowned doctor and astrologer. In what is now the municipality of Monterezzo (Bologna), Tommaso lived in the second half of the 15th century. He studied at the University of Bologna where he specialised in medicine and astrology, soon earning a reputation that led him to work in Venice and then Paris, always keeping the name of his family's place of origin. A name that traces Christine as special, as lucky. Her father Tommaso Gaetano was a doctor and an astrologer; in the Middle Ages being an astrologer meant being knowledgeable about human behaviour. He was a very famous personage, a scholar, a learned advisor to the Venetian Republic, known throughout Europe. A university professor, his fame as a cultured man was so great that he was requested by other courts, so much so that King Charles Quintus of France contacted him and convinced him to go to his court to work for him. Therefore, Tommaso da Pizzano takes his family and leaves Venice. Cristina was only four years old when the family moved from Venice to Paris and from being Christine de Pizan, she then became Christine of the court of King Charles VIII of France.

Both the king of France and the king of Hungary would have wanted Thomas at court, whom they esteemed above all for his astrological knowledge (Duval, 2018). In Paris, Thomas was granted land and annuities for a decade or so, things went well for the family and for Christine and during that time the girl received a rare education. This upbringing contributed significantly to Christine's intellectual development and allowed her to cultivate a deep appreciation for literature and philosophy. Her father's guidance and support helped her to become a prolific author and intellectual in her own right, and she went on to write numerous influential works that challenged the social norms and expectations of her time.

Fortunately, Christine turned out to be a bright and graceful child, it was not difficult to learn the etiquette of the French court, but what made her a future scholar was her father's teachings; Thomas, in disa-

greement with his wife, endeavoured to cooperate with his daughter in spite of her sex a high-profile literary culture. Although Christine did not represent an only child, she had two younger brothers, her father decided to invest in her education (Gilroy, 2020). He decides to apply himself as a teacher and lecturer for about 10 years.

Christine receives an exceptional education over the years under the guidance and supervision from a father the daughter describes as “a man of great treasures” (Scott, 1980, p. 47), a dear father full of treasures such as virtue and wisdom. The kind words used by Christine to define her father reveal an affection and high regard for her parents. In the *Mutacion de Fortune* (1403) Christine had spoken of the custom of the times that condemned women not to benefit from education, cursing this custom because of which she herself, who received an education from her father, could not make full use of her father’s wisdom. The father was not only the teacher of his daughter, who was able to master a study of difficult subjects, but also managed to find a husband who lived up to her expectations. Thanks to his position at court, Thomas finds for Christine a young gentleman, Etienne Castel, whose talents he appreciates.

The marriage was celebrated at the beginning of 1380, the girl 15 years old and her future husband 24, a happy marriage in all respects both sentimental and financial. This is also fortunate because marriages were arranged and the ingredient of love was certainly not expected. It is true that she loved her husband deeply. In 1389, during a large epidemic, her husband Etienne died. Christine discovered that her husband had not been paid for years and found herself at 25 years of age without a father, without a husband, without money, with three children and a mother to support. So in the immediacy of making Christine have to make a choice as a woman in the Middle Ages, the easiest and perhaps most immediate most obvious choice might have been to remarry and look for a new husband to take care of her daughters and elderly mother (Mills, 2020).

Despite the many obstacles that she faced as a woman in a male-dominated society, Christine de Pizan was able to carve out a unique place for herself in the world of letters. Her work had a significant impact on the development of early modern thought, and she is widely regarded as one of the most important writers of her time. Her writing was notable for its intellectual rigor and its willingness to engage with the pressing social and political issues of the day.

One of the key themes that runs throughout Christine’s work is the importance of education and intellectual development. She believed that

education was the key to unlocking human potential and that it was essential for individuals to cultivate their minds in order to live a fulfilling and meaningful life. In particular, she emphasised the role of parents in providing their children with a strong foundation in learning and intellectual growth. She believed that parents had a responsibility to instill in their children a love of learning and a desire to explore the world around them.

2. *Christine: the mother, and the motherhood*

Christine's father, Thomas, played a pivotal role in her life and intellectual development. He was an interpreter, attentive to the emotional and affective needs of his daughter, who was often struggling with complex and modern issues. Thomas was a completely new type of father figure compared to the traditional principle of *auctoritas* that had characterised society for a long time. Despite his innovative approach, his role as a guide and supporter remained unchanged.

In addition to her father, Christine also had a strong relationship with her mother. The role of motherhood was essential in the representation of women, not only during Christine's time, but also throughout the centuries. However, the dimension of motherhood is not limited to its reproductive function. Instead, it extends to the realm of education and upbringing, where mothers have traditionally played a significant role in shaping the values and character of their children. In Christine's case, her mother played a more subtle role in her intellectual development, but it was still an important one. Her mother encouraged and supported her daughter's pursuits, allowing her to cultivate her intellectual interests and passions. This subtle yet crucial support from her mother allowed Christine to pursue her interests and eventually become one of the most celebrated writers of her time.

Overall, the parental relationship that characterised the de Pizan family was revolutionary for its time. While the Middle Ages were marked by rigid social structures and gender roles, Thomas and Christine's mother provided their daughter with the freedom and support to pursue her intellectual passions. This support was crucial in the development of Christine's talent and allowed her to become a prominent figure in Italian literature and philosophy.

The early 15th century French writer Christine de Pizan had personal conflicts with her mother and daughter, as we know from the 'autobio-

graphical' passages included in the works she composed from 1402 to 1405. Christine's examples of mother-daughter conflict resolution were models for the spiritual kinship and emotional bonding that she, following the thinking of the theologian Jean Gerson, believed was necessary to mould the nascent French nation into a great Christian family. The important message starts with '*Have you forgotten*'?² Christine's mother sets a good example for her daughter, for whom patience was a difficult virtue to acquire. *Dame Philosophie* tries to convince the protagonist that she is indeed lucky to have such a mother vividly living with her. She especially praises the advice and comfort Christine's mother gave her (Duncan, 2020).

Christine expresses her mother's disapproval of her desire to study, as Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski has noted, it is in this work «to which her mother appears in the most negative light as the first obstacle to Christine's education» (Blumenfeld-Kosinski, in Altmann, McGrady, Eds., 2003, p. 11). *Dame Raison* touches on the conflict in a discussion with the protagonist. While her father encouraged her studies, Christine's mother urged her to take up more traditionally feminine occupations such as sewing. Like *Dame Nature*, Christine's mother is a natural mother figure. We can deduce that she recognised in Christine's talent, inherited from both parents, as all children do, the natural inclination to become a scholar like her father (Walters, 2021).

Since this time, the quest for knowledge has become Christine's daily occupation, with her mother playing an ancillary but important role by preparing the dinner that will fortify her hard-working daughter against the anti-feminist slingshots she will read about the next day (de Pizan, [1405], 2018). This provides an explanation for the elaborate praise Christine lavishes on her mother in *The Council*. Christine also makes us realise that people can engage in contemplative devotion, study and active life in varying proportions. Her daughter Marie becomes a 'pure' contemplative, while her mother uses contemplative devotion to sustain her life in the world.

This example of Christine de Pizan and her family provides a valuable lesson for parents and educators today. It serves as a model for how parents can support and encourage their children's intellectual development, even in the face of societal barriers and expectations. The

² Christine's references to her mother in *Advison* 3:18 allow us to imagine their reconciliation was the result of the conversations they had between them (*Ivi*, vv. 366-67), *Author's Note*.

importance of parental support and guidance cannot be overstated, particularly in today's fast-paced and ever-changing world. By following the example set by the de Pizan family, parents can help their children become successful and fulfilled adults, capable of making their mark on the world.

Conclusions

The importance of studying and reflecting on the role of parents in education and pedagogy cannot be overstated. The contributions of contemporary scholars, as well as the long historical perspective on this issue, offer valuable insights and perspectives that can help shape future research and interventions in the field of pedagogy of the family (Pati, 2014). Christine's story is important in that it may represent an example of women's emancipation, she played an important leadership role at a time when women's role in the family as well as in society was strongly compromised.

One of the key themes that emerges from the discussion of the role of parents in education and pedagogy is the importance of emotional and affective support. As demonstrated by Thomas's relationship with Christine, fathers, and mothers alike must be attentive to the emotional needs of their children and provide a supportive environment that fosters intellectual and personal growth. It is indisputable that the new millennium has opened under the banner of a strong renewal, in educational and pedagogical terms, of the paternal and maternal parental role (Recalcati, 2015). Contributions that attest to the vitality of research at both the national and international level and help broaden the contemporary debate on the new parental figures, the need to rethink the role of motherhood in society. Women must be encouraged to pursue their intellectual and professional goals while also embracing the joys and responsibilities of motherhood. This requires a fundamental shift in societal attitudes and the creation of supportive structures that allow women to balance their various roles and responsibilities (Margolis, 2020).

Finally, the discussion of the role of parents in education and pedagogy highlights the need for ongoing research and dialogue on this important topic. As the contemporary family continues to evolve, so too must our understanding of the role of parents in shaping the intellectual and emotional development of their children. This requires ongoing collaboration and dialogue between scholars, educators, parents, and po-

licymakers to ensure that our understanding of this issue remains current and relevant to the needs of contemporary society. The biological difference is then *culturally* channelled, creating a multiplicity of difference that manifests itself in social roles, labour divisions, status hierarchies, consciousness structures, body stylisation, as well as individual desires and aspirations. In the interdisciplinary field of Gender Studies, researchers have originated a number of important classifications to shed light on the complexity of gender as a composite of sex, sexuality, sexual identity, gender identity, gender role identity, social relations, cultural norms and institutional arrangements.

In conclusion, the role of parents in education and pedagogy is a topic of great importance that requires ongoing study and reflection. By embracing a more nurturing and supportive approach to parenthood, rethinking the role of motherhood, and engaging in ongoing research and dialogue, we can ensure that the intellectual and emotional needs of our children are met and that they are equipped to thrive in the complex and rapidly changing world of the 21st century. Scientific progress, studies on education, increasing attention to children's needs, and achievements in the field of education seem to confirm this thesis.

In the light of the child of the 20th century, the reflection on the role played by a family, a father, a little girl from the late Middle Ages, such as Christine is an example of how what determines what we will be is built every day with behaviour that transcends time and gravitational currents, but is established in that family bond that 'smells of infinity'.

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