

December Liberties

Playing with the Roman Poets in the High-Medieval Schools

Abstract

This essay discusses how and to what ends eleventh- to early thirteenth-century writers from the schools, monastic as well as secular, more or less explicitly incorporated elements from and allusions to the canon of classical Roman poetry into their own work. What function did these elements have, beyond literary embellishment and erudite showing-off? This essay remains a historian's view and represents a historian's attempt to grapple with the meaning and function of this classicising literature in its particular social setting – namely that of the northern European educational milieus of the two centuries after the first millennium. The hypothesis is that these intertextual references played a crucial part in making it possible to engage in very direct and often outrageous satire – which functioned as a clever pedagogical tool to enliven teaching, but also seems to have had a connection to a specific time in the school calendar, namely the Christmas season, during which the unwritten rules of decorum and restrictions that governed social interaction in the school community were momentarily relaxed. It is my contention that these texts were not an aberration from a more solemn and serious norm, but integral parts of a didactic and distinctly performative practice, which included a deliberate, subtly regulated playing with roles of power and authority and, not least, role-reversals. This seems particularly to be the case in the correspondence (real or imagined) consisting of letter-poems – often erotically explicit – between teachers and their students. A select number of examples of this intriguing literature, from various milieus and settings, are presented, and the essay addresses the question of how we as modern scholars should interpret it – particularly if our aim is to use it as a repository of historical source material regarding the social life of the high-medieval learned milieus. It is contended that these remarkable and sometimes outrageous texts, as well as being vehicles of the teaching of Latin composition, became a tool for negotiating and defining intimate relationships between people within these learned milieus, whether between equals, between superiors and subordinates, or between men and women.

How and why did medieval school poets and writers of versified letters integrate Ovidian, Virgilian and Horatian elements, direct and indirect quotations or allusions into their own work? What function

did these elements of Roman poetry have, beyond literary embellishment and learned showing-off? On the surface, much of the abundant high-medieval school poetry may appear as tedious and contrived catalogues of classical allusions, displays of an inconsequential, encyclopaedic learning, a classicising mania resulting in an accumulation of trite *topoi* or just a literary and intellectual game for its own sake. This essay seeks to look beyond the surfaces of these texts, to look at their function within the social milieus from which they came and thus, from a historian's point of view rather than a literary scholar's or philologist's, ask how we may use these complex texts as historical sources.

There is a vast and growing body of excellent published research on many aspects of the medieval reception of the Latin classics, the poets Virgil, Ovid and Horace in particular – comprehensive companions and handbooks to all three authors have recently been published by Blackwell, Brill and Cambridge. Regarding the medieval letter-collections mentioned in this essay, commentaries have been published by several eminent literary scholars, such as Peter Dronke, Anke Paravicini, C. Stephen Jaeger, Ewald Könsgen, Constant Mews, and recently Barbara Newman.¹ This essay stands on the shoulders of these scholarly giants and does not presume to add more than some extra details to the hermeneutic mosaic.² My interest in this colourful and intriguing correspondence stems from my earlier work on the modes of social interaction of the schools, particularly the master-student relationship and its peculiar balances of power and authority. This essay represents a tentative revisiting of an earlier research subject of mine, namely the didactic function of eroticising discourse within the learned environment.³

My hypothesis then was that these texts, with their dense intertextual references and hidden allusions, played a crucial part in making it possible to engage in a very direct and often outrageous satire. This humorous feature functioned as a clever pedagogical tool to enliven teaching, but also seems to have had a connection to a specific time in the school calendar, namely the Christmas season, that momentarily lifted the unwritten rules of decorum and restrictions that governed social interaction in the school milieus as well as in the court milieus and political arenas where these schoolmen also moved. Thus, the texts also offer us a rare glimpse into an aspect of educational and intellectual culture that has commanded relatively little attention. The short prose pieces, poems, songs and versified letters, were integral parts of a performative practice, which includ-

1. Newman was in June 2016 – and I was unfortunately not able to consult it for the drafting of this essay.

2. In this context, I wish to express my sincerest gratitude for the thorough and very helpful comments and corrections suggested by the two anonymous reviewers of this essay. I have followed these closely, as far as I was able. Some of the suggested literature was, unfortunately, inaccessible to me within the time-frame of the deadline for the final draft of this essay.

3. Parts of this essay incorporate revised elements from two chapters in my unpublished doctoral dissertation (Münster-Swendsen, 258–87).

ed a deliberate, subtly regulated playing with roles and, not least, role-reversals. And as such, these discourses, mainly in the shape of versified letters, became a tool for negotiating and defining intimate relationships between individuals within these learned milieus, whether between equals, between superiors and subordinates, or between men and women. What enabled this power play was an intimate knowledge of the classics – mythological and literary characters, narratives, metaphors, and word-images shared between the interlocutors. On the ‘neutral ground’ of this shared textual canon, in the intimate and deeply personal environment of the high-medieval schools and learned circles, conflicts and oppositions could be staged and played out, without incurring the risk that actual, direct criticism might engender.

In this essay, I have chosen a select number of texts, in order to highlight a number of different ways in which the classical canon was employed, emulated and transformed, in poetry as well as in prose, from the early eleventh to the middle of the thirteenth century. There is a quite a large and varied body of such literature extant, so the examples here have been selected primarily to illustrate the points that this essay attempts to make. The texts discussed in this essay, many of which are characterised by an eroticising language (homo- as well as hetero-), were almost universally underpinned by Ovidian allusions and quotations, this to such a degree that the period has earned the designation *Aetas Ovidiana*.⁴ On the twelfth-century map of learning a profound fascination with Ovid can be traced to a number of specific places, first and foremost the intellectual milieu of Orléans, which supported a dominant school for literary production and the study of the classics that was only gradually eclipsed by the nascent University of Paris during the thirteenth century. Another locus is the so-called Loire-Circle of poets (Baudri of Bourgueil, Marbod of Rennes, and Hildebert of Lavardin) but the German monastic schools, such as that of the Abbey of Tegernsee, too produced a significant body of Ovidian literature along with extensive commentaries on the Roman poet’s works, from the early eleventh century and onward (Coulson, “Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in the School Tradition” 48, note 2). The fascination with Ovid was a European phenomenon, not just a northern French one. What attracted these medieval readers and writers, and what they tried to emulate in their own works, was a distinct blend of political satire and erotics, however tweaked to suit their own, contemporary context, whether that be the courts of kings and (arch)bishops or the schools.

4. The concept was coined by Ludwig Traube to designate the twelfth and thirteenth-century paradigm in Latin poetry, which, according to Traube’s model, supplanted the *Aetas Horatiana* (tenth to eleventh centuries), which had followed after the *Aetas Vergiliana* – initiated by the Carolingian poets (Traube 113). This threefold scheme can be a bit misleading, if taken too literally, as all three major Roman poets kept being quoted and alluded to extensively throughout the ‘Ovidian’ phase.

Io Saturnalia! Satire in the schools

The liberating potential of satire and hilarity is celebrated in one of the many extensive and colourful examples of versification given by Master John of Garland in his *Parisiana poetria* – a school manual from the early university period, which in many ways sums up the literary and rhetorical achievements and tastes of the preceding generations of poets and writers. The occasion in this select example is the Christmas festivities of the scholars, and the students, who are here given voice (the author is of course the master himself), drift from an elaborate, sensual *descriptio pulchritudinis* of their teacher into an increasingly bawdy arena, with Ovid guiding the steps as each stanza ends with a direct quotation from the Roman poet (though in a single instance, one from Virgil). In fact, the *magister* is transformed into the *praeceptor amoris* – Ovid himself. Here are a few excerpts to give the reader the idea:

5. Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.742. This is the only quotation that is not Ovidian and, just as with the Virgilian quotations, the choice of this particular passage is not arbitrary. The sentence introduces the song of the philosopher-poet Iopas on cosmological order, which was performed at a festive gathering and again connects the quotation to the ‘Saturnalian’ theme.

6. John of Garland, *Parisiana Poetria*, 7, 188–90. Excerpts from the *Exemplum domesticum de rithmis quibus versus auctorum adiungitur; de licentia puerorum*. The identifications of the classical sources are the editor’s. The last sentence is from Ovid’s *Ars amatoria* (3.8.812), where it also concludes the work.

Ratione logica destruit errores,
 In arte sintaseos superat maiores,
 Dirigit erraticos, instruit minores,
 “Hic canit errantem lunam solisque labores.”⁵ [...]
 O doctor liberrime, dissolue catenas,
 Et disiungas compedes, et laxes habenas,
 Que nostras ex studio minuere genas:
 “Parte leua minima nostras et contrahe penas.”
 (Ovid, *Epistulae ex Ponto* 2. 8. 35)
 Magister de cetero ludet cum magistra,
 Dicens, “Crura candida nobis subministra!”,
 Ostendendo mentule turgide registra
 “Ceu gerat in dextra baculum clauamque sinistra.”
 (Ovid, *Fasti* 1. 99)
 [...] Noster doctor, doctior inter doctiores,
 Est inter discipulos mitis mitiores,
 Comis comes omnibus siue sint algores,|
 “Ceu mulcent Zephiri natos sine semine flores.”
 (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1. 108)
 Ergo qualis fuerit doctor si quis querat,
 Ex predictis animum certiozem gerat;
 Hic doctorem audiat, et audita serat;
 “Inscribat foliis, ‘Naso magister erat.’”⁶

7. Medieval schoolmen were familiar with first-hand accounts of these celebrations through the writings of several of their favourite Roman authors, such as Statius, Pliny, Seneca, Martial and not least Ovid, Horace and Macrobius. Interestingly, one of Horace's satires which is set in the context of the *Saturnalia*, stands as a close parallel to the master-student invectives discussed above. It is a Stoic, didactic dialogue cast as a debate between a slave and his master in which the slave, claiming his 'December liberty,' outrageously berates the master for being enslaved to his passions. See Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus), *Sat.* 2.7. The Roman theme of slave-master dialogues would thus be echoed in the debates between medieval masters and students.

8. "Hoc falsum nusquam; nihil est quo verius usquam. / Non iustum numquam; nihil est quo iustius umquam. / Ergo relicta / Iam nuce scolis [...] | Tu, Leo [...]" (Nowhere is this false; there is nothing truer than this. It is never unjust; nothing is more just than this. Therefore, Leo, leave this nut now for the schools [...]). Leo of Vercelli, *Metrum* 488. My translation is based on the Italian translation in Leone di Vercelli, *Metrum Leonis* 17. One of the reviewers of this essay drew my attention to the fact that the 'nut to be cracked' is an extremely common metaphor for unlocking the allegory or hidden true meaning of a classical text.

9. "Sed nec erit semper, mihi, mi Leo, crede, December." Leo of Vercelli, *Metrum* 489.

(He crushes errors with logical argument, he outsmarts his superiors in literature, he guides the erring, he instructs the young,

"He sings of the wandering moon and the labors of the sun."

[...]

O most liberal doctor, loosen the chains and unlock the shackles and free the reins that have thinned our cheeks with study:

"Raise us up from this trivial role and reduce our pains."

Then the master will play with the mistress, crying, "supply us with white legs," expounding the annals of the swelling penis,

"As if he wielded a club in his right hand and a stick in his left." [...]

Our doctor, most learned even among the learned, is gentle among his more gentle students, a good friend to all, whether they be ice cold or whether

"As if the zephyrs caress the flowers that spring up without having been planted."

Thus, should anyone ask what sort of doctor he was, let him make up his mind from these lines: here let him hear the doctor, and let him sow what he has heard,

Let him inscribe his pages, 'Ovid was my master.')

The context implied in the poem is clearly the annual Christmas holiday, and the classicising quotations further suggest an identification with the Roman *Saturnalia*. Both the medieval feast, celebrating the Winter Solstice as well as the birth of Christ, and its Roman antecedents were occasions for revelry, mockery of authority, and the exchange of gifts.⁷ For the medieval school population it also comprised the only lengthy period of relaxation from the chores of studying and teaching during the year.

Two centuries earlier, in the wake of Emperor Otto III's demise, the great statesman, poet and scholar, Leo of Vercelli, fearing the prospect of an Ovidian exile, made use of this seasonal licence to libel in a masterly dramatised political satire on the workings of the imperial court, cast as an animal fable. In the final part, he bequeaths the intricate poem to posterity, not as a political pamphlet, but "as a nut for the schools"⁸ to crack and in the concluding stanza lets the curtain fall on the Saturnalian mirth with these lines: "But not always will it be for me, believe me, my Leo; December."⁹

10. See for example Justinus, *Historiarum Philippicarum*, 43.1: “[...] quorum rex Saturnus tantae iustitiae fuisse dicitur, ut neque servierit quisquam sub illo neque quicquam privatae rei habuerit, sed omnia communia et indivisa omnibus fuerint, veluti unum cunctis patrimonium esset.” (“King Saturn was reputedly so just that under him no one was in servitude, nor did anyone have any private possessions, but all things were held in common and undivided, as if the inheritance of one belonged to everybody.”)

11. A further parallel: in the Roman Saturnalia the *pileus* (a cap worn by free men) could be worn by all – including slaves. The *pileus* was also the term used in John’s time and before, for the schoolmaster’s cap. A similar parallelism was created between the senator’s toga and the medieval master’s gown.

12. This *caveat* when it comes to identifying the author’s gender does not imply that I think it impossible that women could have written these texts, or that the relationships they sketch are purely fictional – on the contrary. Several well-known, and named, masters nourished intense relationships with learned women in which the exchange of poetry was a main feature. In the case of the correspondences of Baudri of Bourgueil and Marbod of Rennes, these relationships also had a strong erotic element. It is just that in the case of at least two of the three examples of correspondence mentioned here it can neither be proved nor disproved that women were involved in their creation.

Texts as different as these two examples made extensive use of this ‘December liberty,’ a term directly borrowed from Horace, with its inversion of roles and carnivalesque mocking of superiors (*Liber-tas decembri*, see Horace, *Sat.* 2. 7. 4). The season of solemnity as well as indulgence saw the celebration of an egalitarian community spirit where every trace of hierarchy was momentarily dismantled in a reenactment of the original, blissful state of mankind when everyone lived according to the ‘law of nature’ – identified by the Romans with the mythical reign of Saturn.¹⁰ This equitable rule would for the moment serve as a mirror for the school, united under the reign of a celebrated *doctor* who would cast aside his gown of severity and, as facetious *lover* rather than strict and rigorous *father*, turn discipline topsy-turvy.¹¹ The literary staging included a playing with roles, in which interlocutors – students and teachers – assumed the personas of figures from Antiquity – tragic and comic characters, heroes and heroines, mythical persons, gods and demigods, not infrequently within a heavily eroticised frame. In these enactments inspirations from three main Roman poets in the school canon converge: Virgil for the epic aspects, tragic as well as heroic, Horace for the satire and banter, and Ovid for the irony and games of human love and affection.

Gender and erotics in a German letter collection

For our purpose here, let us briefly touch upon a number of twelfth-century examples of such amatory discourse in the form of ‘letter-poems’ (*Briefgedichte*) between male masters and what were, purportedly, their female students. It should always be kept in mind, especially regarding texts preserved in a school context, that just because the gender of the interlocutors can be implicitly or explicitly identified, it does not necessarily follow that the texts were written by women.¹² Just as it is possible that the master wrote the whole correspondence, it is equally probable that the texts do not only play with positions of power and authority, but also with those of gender. Indeed, boys would occasionally write their school poetry assuming the voices of famous female characters, as Marjorie C. Woods has shown in her quite disturbing study of the frequent use of rape narratives in medieval schools (“Rape and the Pedagogical Rhetoric” 56–86). Perhaps significantly, the female characters impersonated by

the schoolboys would first and foremost be women wounded in love, the tragic suicidal triad of Dido, Thisbe, and Phyllis.

The remarkable collection of versified messages from Bavaria, entitled the *Regensburger Songs* (*Carmina Ratisponensia*) by its modern editors, survives in the one and only manuscript known to have existed, consisting of highly diverse late eleventh- and early twelfth-century material in a fifteenth century binding (Wattenbach, *Carmina Ratisponensia*; Paravicini, *Carmina Ratisponensia*).¹³ Peter Dronke and Anke Paravicini have both described the manuscript as a mess – a “magnificent chaos” in Dronke’s words.¹⁴ While it mainly comprises ordinary didactic material, sermons, and spiritual treatises, a good part of the codex (folios 83v–119v) appears to be an arbitrary gathering of the fragmentary notes and writings of a schoolmaster, consisting of miscellaneous *scholia*, grammatical commentaries, proverbs, satirical and political poetry, and the so-called *Regensburger songs* – all written in the same hand.¹⁵

These ‘songs’ comprise 68 versified messages or ‘letters’ dealing with amorous relationships between clerical men and women – more precisely between a certain ‘Master of Liège’ and his female students from a convent in Regensburg. They record the exchange of flirtations, taunts and blatantly sexual suggestions all apparently played out in a teaching environment. There are numerous references to Classical mythology. The ancient deities mentioned are Apollo, Minerva and Mercury, along with the Muses. Orpheus plays a distinct role and so does the unfortunate satyr Marsyas, who was punished so brutally by Minerva/Pallas for his mockery of her. Often these tragic male figures are made to represent the main male interlocutor, the Liège-master, himself. The male figure may then explicitly or implicitly be paired with his female counterpart, whether dominant or subordinate, in the storyline, represented by the female student. The collection of texts is too complex to summarise fully here, so these excerpts are meant to provide the reader, who may be unfamiliar with it, with a sense of its content and style. The Liège-master opens the correspondence with an allegory on viticulture complaining about the “sour grapes of the region” to which he has now returned. The master represents himself as the hungry fox, making the grapes a metaphor for the women he “wants to pluck,” but annoyingly, because of his period of absence, he has come back to find them “already pressed by the other treaders” (*Carmen* 1 in Paravicini, *Carmina Ratisponensia* 17). The allegory neatly combines Biblical images from the Song of Songs (the little foxes destroying the vineyard)

13. München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 17142. Its later, medieval provenance was the monastery of Schäftlarn.

14. Dronke also calls the manuscript “one of the strangest in the entire Middle Ages.” (Dronke 221–27, at 221).

15. See Paravicini 7. Dronke presents an intriguing hypothesis: “It seems that a scholar had left a mass of notes, private papers, and private correspondence in no particular order, and that perhaps some decades after his death someone was set the task of copying them, and being indifferent to or ignorant of their content, or unable to put them in any order, copied them exactly in the chaos in which he found them” (221).

and the well-known and didactically much-used Aesopian fable on the fox and the sour grapes. A series of exchanges then follows in which the male-female balance of power shifts back and forth. Seen together the texts present no straight narrative, and it is impossible to ascertain how many individuals were involved in the correspondence (whether fictitious or not). The short, distinctly elusive, and allusive missives only seldom allow us to grasp the context, except from a few instances and these directly link them to the educational setting. The students strive to obtain the Master's affection in competition with their companions – jealous rivalry, frustration and anxiety are prominent features in the women's responses.

Corrige versiculos tibi quos presento, magister,
 Nam tua verba mihi reputo pro lumine verbi,
 Sed nimium doleo, quia preponas mihi Bertham.

(Correct these little verses that I am presenting to you,
 Master,
 For I consider your words to be to me like the light of the
 Word,
 But I grieve sorely, since you prefer Bertha to me.¹⁶)

16. *Carmen* 7 (Paravicini 19). My translation is based on Dronke's (424).

To which he replies with brazen invitations such as this:

En ego, quem nosti, sed amantem prodere noli.
 Deprecor ad Vetulam te mane venire Capellam.
 Pulsato leviter, quoniam manet inde minister.
 Quod celat pectus modo, tunc reteggit tibi lectus.

(It is your lover who writes – do not betray him!
 I implore you to come to the old chapel at dawn.
 Knock softly on the door, for the sacristan lives there.
 Then the bed will reveal to you all that my heart now keeps
 hidden.¹⁷)

17. *Carmen* 16 (Paravicini 21). Translation by Dronke (as *Carmen* 14, on p. 426).

If we are to judge from the content, the master has seduced the students into engaging in a poetical game of love – a competition where the various interlocutors constantly try to outdo each other in rhetorical eloquence, ironic banter and palpable expressions of a rather hefty, yet strongly controlled passion. When the master seems to go too far, as he frequently does, the student(s) answer with an elegant rebuttal, mocking him for his pretentiousness, and the game can start over again. The texts show a remarkable playing with the roles of au-

18. *Carmen* 47 (Paravicini 36). The master writes to the female students, excusing his delay in replying to their letters: “Peniteat que sclavi consimilesque tui, huius desidiæ nosti quia causa fuere” (“You and your companions should feel sorry for this slave, because, you know, they were the cause of this defection.”)

Translation by Dronke (as *Carmen* 35, on p. 437). The use of the term *sclavus* instead of the more common *servus* underscores the submissive pose he is assuming.

19. *Carmen* 39 (Paravicini 30). Translation by Dronke (as *Carmen* 30 on p. 432). “Tritonian Pallas” might well be a reference to Virgil’s *Aeneid* where Pallas, in her role as teacher of Nautes, the adviser of Aeneas regarding leaving some of his people behind in Sicily, carries this epithet, but it is found commonly elsewhere in Classical epic poetry too (in Statius and Lucan), so this particular designation of the goddess of eloquence and wisdom is not enough to conclude with safety, that this is a reference to that particular place in the *Aeneid* – as the anonymous reviewer of this essay has made me aware of.

20. “[...] Ne sine muneribus discedere te sineremus / Unanimes sobolem dedimus tibi Mercurialem – / Quam si fastidis, melioraque dona requiris, / Iunonis comitem dabimus, quacunquē placentem.” *Carmen* 39 (Paravicini 30). Identifying the master with Aeolus, lord of wind and raiser of storms, connects him to characteristics such as turbulence and impermanence, but may also contain an ironic taunt: the master can be a bit of a windbag. These designations all refer to Virgil’s *Aeneid* 1 and 4.

21. Another central sub- and intertext here is of course Martianus Capella’s *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* and its allegorical didactic programme.

thority and submission, especially in regard to the position of the Liège-master. He is in a constant state of metamorphosis, shifting between teacher and seducer, magisterial authority and, as he calls himself, “slave” (*sclavus*).¹⁸ One moment he is defiant and pretends to be unmoved by it all. In the next, though, he admits that he has been conquered by the woman’s poetical eloquence and addresses her submissively in the high style. To which the female student, assuming a posture of mild bemusement, replies – with a reference to Virgil:

Quod me collaudas, tanquam Tritonia Pallas
Fecerit ignitam metrique sub arte peritam
Me, non ingratum mihi, quamvis gratia verbum
Hoc tua prestiterit potius quam res solidarit.
Laus etenim quam fert dilectio non reprobatur.
Sed dare velle manus te miror, cum neque victus
A me dicaris neque penam promerearis.

(You praise me as if Tritonian Pallas had kindled my fires and made me skilled in the art of verse, and I am grateful, though it is your courtesy rather than my accomplishment that has prompted what you say. And yet the praises uttered by love cannot be rejected. But I am amazed that you want to surrender, when I have never called you captive, and when you deserve no punishment.¹⁹)

The woman interlocutor then grants him choice of the companionship of three figures from Classical mythology: “a scion of Mercury,” “a companion of Juno,” and if these do not please him, he, now titled “Prince Aeolus,”²⁰ may take Deiopeia with him. This is no random selection of characters: Mercury/Hermes is an unstable, fleeting character who flits from place to place, an ironic reference to the inconstancy of the master who comes and goes – the context of the poem is that, much to the regret of the students, the master has momentarily had to leave the school. But Mercury/Hermes is also connected to sexual attraction: among the children begotten from his union with Aphrodite were Eros, Priapus, Hermaphroditus, and Fortuna.²¹ As *psychopompos* Mercury/Hermes led Eurydice back to Hades when Orpheus failed his mission to rescue her, and generally, both in his Roman and Greek shape, he is regarded as a messenger of the gods. The unnamed “companion of Juno” must refer to Mercury’s female counterpart, Isis, also a bringer of messages (both high-

lighting the genre: letter-poems), and Deiopeia (meaning “divine face”) is one of the Nereids, or sea-nymphs, who may come to the aid of sailors during storms at sea. The allusion to sea travel occurs again and again in the poems. All this is also an intertextual reference to Virgil’s *Aeneid*, book I, where Deiopeia is given in marriage to Aeneas by the menacing Juno in return for causing a storm that upsets the Trojan fleet on its way to Italy. The storm forces Aeneas’ ship to land in Carthage, and thus pushes him into the arms of Dido – the Carthaginian queen who will end up pining (and dying) for his love. Dido is not mentioned in name but it seems highly probable that the author intended a hidden reference to this tragic love story to serve as a parallel to the distress of the student-lover left behind. Dido had to let Aeneas go, just as the author of these verses must – regretfully – give the master leave.²² The major part of this poem as well as most others in the collection would have been virtually meaningless for a reader who did not know his or her Virgil and Ovid well – the canon of school classics is the key to decode this letter and most others in the collection. Yet what is referred to, through this literary encoded language, is far from certain. Even if we identify all the quotations and allusions, the message remains opaque.²³

A significant number of the missives in the Regensburg collection involve some kind of exchange of real or imaginary gifts. Besides the verses themselves, which are the main gifts bestowed, the former comprise books, a fine drinking goblet, garlic (as stated, for medicinal purposes – garlic was also known to be a strong aphrodisiac), and a holder for the tablets offered to the master by one of the female correspondents. In one of the responses to the master’s donation of a message, the women, speaking as a group, give the master the “gifts of the festive season.”²⁴ These exchanges do not create any parity, though. At no point do the interlocutors address each other as equals. Even in his passive and submissive position as the loved one who is spurned, the teacher retains his mastery. It is he who writes the student into the role as the cruel beloved, he sets the rules of discourse, and he rests so secure in his authority that he can afford the magnanimous gesture of humbling himself before his inferior. When the master titles himself *sclavus* or *servus* – the very opposites of *magister* – the inversion works two ways: as a concession to the student, yet one that draws attention to, and emphasises, the *real* distribution of power. The power reversals that these texts engage in may seem to challenge social boundaries, but I do not believe that they transgress or even threaten these. The limits of respectability are brought into

22. He appears to perambulate between Regensburg and another place, possibly Liège. One may speculate whether he, perhaps, held teaching positions in both places – not uncommon at the time.

23. This is the literary device known as *integumentum* – explaining complicated matters by the introduction of fable and allegory while at the same time obscuring the message. In this case there are several concurrent layers of meaning.

24. “Credimus esse parum nisi demus nos quoque donum / Temporibus festis [...]” (We think at the very least we too should give a present at festive times [...]). *Carmen* 36 (Paravicini 28). Translation by Dronke (as *Carmen* 27, on p. 430).

25. “Quos incesta iuvant, consortia nostra relinquunt.” *Carmen* 22, line 4 (Paravicini 23).

26. “Hunc mihi Mercurius florem dedit ingeniosus, / quo possim viciis precibusque resistere fedis.” *Carmen* 22, lines 1–2 (Paravicini 23).

27. The letters were first edited and published by Könsgen. Strangely, his thesis remained undiscussed by Abelard scholars in the 1970s, probably because the dominant theme at that time was the rather unfruitful debate concerning the authenticity of the more famous letters of Heloise and Abelard. A translation with extensive commentary was published by Constant Mews and Neville Chiavaroli in 1999 and sparked a new, intense debate.

play as norms that order the game, and the participants often remind each other of their existence. The love-play only works as long as everybody stays within its framework of social as well as literary, grammatical and rhetorical rules. As the students explicitly state, “[t]hose who delight in what is incestuous must leave our company (*consortia nostra*).”²⁵ The “flowery gift of Mercury,” that is rhetorical eloquence, becomes the guardian of chaste virtue²⁶ even though it is the very same instrument that is used to transmit the most steamy erotic enticements. The Liège master uses eroticism as a pedagogical instrument and the students respond approvingly; there seems to be nothing lurid about his advances and, judging from the calm matter-of-factness of the tone, the exchange appears surprisingly unexceptional. Thus, what on the surface seems paradoxical is in fact a highly sophisticated discourse, to be decoded by the participants in a culture that saw no conflict in using the language of physical desire as a medium to achieve intellectual and spiritual cultivation. The governing structure in this discourse is a coupling of *amor* and *eruditio* as a vehicle to enhance *virtus*. The interlocutors frequently use metaphors of radiance and speak not just of the flames of passion, but of the *fire of virtue* which is nourished by the exchange of refined Latin poetry. Though the emotions displayed in these verses might indeed be genuine – students did and do sometimes have crushes on their teachers and vice versa – the messages of the *Carmina Ratisponensia* do not solely reflect private sentiments, but an educational method and a conception of the educational process as a consciously erotic affair, as C. Stephen Jaeger has described so vividly, particularly in his *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility* (1999).

Other examples of such *Briefgedichte* between male master and female student are extant, most notably the twelfth-century collections known as the Tegernsee letters (*Tegernseer Briefsammlung des 12. Jahrhunderts*) and the much discussed and debated *Epistolae duorum amantium*. Regarding the latter, the intense debate of attribution has unfortunately occupied the centre of scholarly attention.²⁷ It should be noted that whether these texts stem from monastic or cathedral school environments makes no difference in regard to the tone and content, and in the context of this essay, it does not really matter whether we can safely attribute the *Letters of the Two Lovers* to Abelard and Heloise or not. These letter collections all refer to the same canon of texts and hence, the selection of favourite *autores* to emulate and play with remains exactly the same in all three letter-collections between men and women: the moralists, orators and letter-

writers Cicero and Seneca coupled with the poets Virgil, Ovid, and Horace, a selection which deliberately combines cool and calm Stoicism with sometimes voluptuous sensuality.

A school for scandal: The limits of bawdiness

In their literary aspects the rules governing this correspondence between (real or imagined) men and women do not differ markedly from similar examples of literary interchange and interaction between men (homosocial or even explicitly homoerotic). Let us have a brief look at the latter: in 1097 Bishop Ivo of Chartres (arguably the greatest canonist of his time) wrote to Pope Urban II, complaining about the elevation of the archdeacon John to the episcopal see of Orléans. The central part of his argument concerns the non-canonical investiture: John had bought his way to his office by bribes and had ousted the other candidate, none other than the great Loire poet Baudri of Bourgueil, through his court connections. As though that were not enough, Ivo explains that this John is part of a literary community with some rather ‘queer’ habits:

Quidam enim concubi sui appelantes eum Floram, multas rhythmicas cantilenas de eo composuerunt, quae a foedis adolescentibus, sicut nostis miseriam terrae illius, per urbes Franciae in plateis et compitis cantitantur, quas et ipse aliquando cantitare et coram se cantitari non erubuit. Harum unam domno Lugdunensi in testimonium misi, quam cuidam eam cantitanti violenter abstuli. (Ivo of Chartres, “Ad Urbanum Papam,” *Epistola* 66; I.296)

(Some of his bedfellows have given him the name Flora, and they have composed numerous rhythmical songs about him, which are now sung throughout the cities of France, in the squares and byways, by these depraved youths who, as you know, are the affliction of that land. And he is not even ashamed to sing them himself at times or having them recited before him. As a testimony, I have sent one of them, which I stole by force from one who was singing it, to the lord [archbishop] of Lyons.)

28. Ivo of Chartres, “Ad Hugonem Lugdunensem Archiepiscopum,” *Epistola* 65 (L.282): “De hoc enim rex Francorum non secreto, sed publice mihi testatus est quod praedicti Joannis succubus fuerit [...]”

And if that was not enough, in the accompanying letter to the archbishop (Hugh of Lyons), Ivo states that he had even heard the King of France publicly declare to him that he had slept with the said John!²⁸ Twelfth-century society was not particularly tolerant of practices we today would call homosexual, but neither was its literature prudish when it came to describing these goings-on, whether approvingly or deploringly. What connects these literary monuments to illicit passions is the central role that the classical canon plays. To the critics, it was the impassioned reading of the Roman poets that directly inspired the homoerotic literary culture that had found a home in the highest of circles. The satirical corpus of one of the most widely copied of contemporary learned poets, Walter of Châtillon, is quite explicit while condemning what he regards as a destructive, rapidly spreading contagion, particularly emanating from the French intellectual milieu. However, curiously, a thirteenth-century gloss to Walter’s great epic poem, the *Alexandreis*, gives us a glimpse of an odd triangle involving none other than William of the White Hands (Archbishop of Sens and Reims and uncle to Philip Augustus), Walter himself, and a certain Magister Berterus:

Quidam dicunt quod hec fuit prim<a> causa subcepti operis, videlicet reintegratio amoris magistri Galteri ad dominum Guillermm archiepiscopum Remensem et odium quod circa eum incurrerat propter magistrum Berterum, quem dominus Guillermus archiepiscopus, si fas est dicere verum, subagitabat, et magister Galterus ei invidebat. Siquidem quodam tempore accidit quod archiepiscopus misit magistrum Berterum Romam ut <causam> suam perageret. Magister Galterus, putans quod ibi aquireret aliquam dignitatem sub specie dilectionis, misit ei hos versus in literis clausis, significans ei quod non frangeret sigillum donec esset in presentia domini pape, et factum est ita.

(Some say that the work’s instigation lay in the restoration of Master Walter’s love in the sight of Lord William Archbishop of Reims, and in the enmity which he had incurred in his sight because of Master Berterus. If the truth is fit to speak, the Lord Archbishop William was using Berterus sexually [“subagitabat” is the euphemism here], and Master Walter envied him. And indeed, at one point it happened that the

archbishop sent Master Berterus to Rome to plead his case. Master Walter, thinking that he might there acquire some dignity under the guise of that affection, sent him these verses in closed letters, indicating that he should not break the seal except in the presence of the Lord Pope, and this is how things turned out.²⁹)

29. The gloss is found in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, lat. 8358 and printed in Colker's introduction (xiii) to Walter of Châtillon, *Galteri de Castellione*. Colker does not comment on the sexual allegations in the text.

30. The gloss also gives an alternative reason for the composition of the *Alexandreis* – Walter was quarrelling with Matthew of Vendôme about who was the best writer. Thus Walter wrote the epic *Alexandreis* and Matthew composed his *Tobias*. This explanation does not disqualify the gossipy tale involving Berterus.

31. See Bond 192. Bond gives a description of this “subculture:” “Taking Ovid instead of Virgil for its central text, this subculture differed markedly from the ascetic values of the dominant ecclesiastic culture. Its humanistic credo included a cult of the auctores, an optimistic depiction of a man-centered world, a faith in the virtue of human amor, a cult of individual genius, and a passionate belief in the value of literary activity.” The problem lies with the assumption of the existence of a “dominant ecclesiastic culture” directly opposed to it, as most of the writers of Ovidian verse in the twelfth century were part of the high end of the ecclesiastical establishment.

The enclosed verses, recited before the pope, ostensibly force the archbishop out of the closet by thinly veiled references to his liaison with Berterus. William is infuriated, throws Walter out of his circle, and, as the story in the gloss tells, this is why Walter composed his great work in honour of the Archbishop to regain lost affection as well as patronage and his position at the episcopal court.³⁰ The story might of course simply stem from malicious, unsubstantiated gossip, but what makes it interesting is that it was thought sufficiently plausible to be included in the scholarly glosses, as an explanation for why the epic, a great medieval bestseller, was written. Though it may never have differed from other such connections, the close relationship between poet and patron shines through the text. Though the *Alexandreis* purports to be about the deeds of Alexander the Great, the first letter of the ten books spell out the name of the archiepiscopal dedicatee in acrostics: GUILLERMUS. In this manner, Walter inserts his patron, if not directly into the grand narrative of Alexander's exploits, then into the frame of the entire epic, making the archbishop's name constantly present as a literary, structuring feature.

The Northern French poet-scholars, the Orléanais in particular, enjoyed a dubious reputation for sodomy and sexual excesses, vices that contemporary moralists saw as somehow connected to their overwhelming obsession with the poets of antiquity – especially Ovid. Walter of Châtillon quoted Ovid extensively in his satirical verses and so did Peter of Blois and many other contemporaries participating in a wide-embracing ‘textual community’ centred on the *Ars amatoria*, the *Remedium amoris*, the *Heroides*, and the *Metamorphoses*. Gerald A. Bond has termed this an “Ovidian subculture,”³¹ yet as far as I can judge there is nothing “sub” about it. On the contrary, this “culture” lies at the very heart of mainstream learned discourse in the twelfth century. During this period, the works of Ovid gained their place as an integral part of the curriculum throughout Europe, from the Mediterranean to *Ultima Thule* – or thereabouts. As the Icelandic bishop Jón Ögmundarson noted, to his great consternation, even in the rough climate of the North Atlantic, Ovid's works were read with an enthusiasm more becoming to the Scrip-

32. *Jóns saga byskups* (Biskupa Sögur) IF 15.1. CCXXIII, in which the bishop chastises his student Klængr, later bishop of Skálholt (1152–76) for reading the *Ars amatoria*. See also McKinnel 206–07.

33. Alexander is most famous as the author of a manual of grammar, the *Doctrinale*, which was used as a standard text in preliminary teaching of grammar at the European universities well into the sixteenth century.

tures.³² The great *artes poeticae* of Matthew of Vendôme, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Gervase of Melkley, and John of Garland, along with the numerous less elaborate manuals of grammar and rhetoric of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, all contain countless Ovidian elements – often in sexualising contexts. A century earlier, the so-called Loire circle, including Marbod of Rennes, Baudri of Bourgueil and Hildebert of Lavardin, had been under the Ovidian spell, and they also wrote about homoeroticism, Marbod and Baudri from a personal and not only disapproving standpoint. None of them can be said to be marginal figures. This is not to say that the subject matter was never contentious, but to find a sustained criticism of this ‘Ovidianism’ and the literature and teachings inspired by it, we need to look beyond the twelfth century.

Alexander of Villedieu,³³ an influential didactic author who taught in Paris in the first half of the thirteenth century, included a lengthy tirade directed against the scholars of Orléans in his *Ecclesiale*, a treatise otherwise devoted to liturgical matters (this is just a brief excerpt):

Restat adhuc plures involuens feda scolares
Secta, nec a tali cessant errore magistri.
Sacrificare deis nos edocet Aurelianis,
Indicens festum Fauni, Iovis atque Liei.
Hec est pestifera, David testante, cathedra
In qua non sedit vir sanctus [...]. (Alexander of Villedieu,
Ecclesiale 10–11)

(There still remains a foul sect that overwhelms many scholars, nor do the teachers of this sect cease from such error. This sect teaches us to sacrifice to the gods of Orléans, proclaiming the festival of Faunus, Jupiter, and Bacchus. This is the pestiferous chair of learning in which, according to the testimony of David, there sits no holy man [...]).

Alexander of Villedieu, *Ecclesiale* 65–66)

Alexander’s main accusation centres on ‘idolatry.’ *Idolatria* was often connected to *sodomia* and both held a central place in the high-medieval image of ancient paganism. In Alexander’s denunciation the two converge in homoerotic worship of ‘the gods on earth’ – *i.e.* handsome young men as well as personifications of Roman deities – and in the preoccupation with certain kinds of literature. The theme of homoeroticism would recur again and again in the textual

interchanges of those belonging to the major circles of Latin poets of the time, but nowhere do we find it in a more outspoken manner than precisely in the intellectual and ecclesiastical milieus of twelfth-century Northern France. The paradox remains that many of the same authors both commend and condemn it. This whole discourse of homoerotic romance is so fraught with contradictions that we might be tempted to dismiss it all as nothing more than puerile play and/or a clever pedagogic tool to attract the attention of a crowd of bored students. What matters here, though, is not whether they did 'it,' but rather the function of the discourses of transgressive eroticism within the scholarly world, its place within the economy of pleasure, and not least of power, in the regimes of the high-medieval schools.

Whether the gossipy tale involving Berterus and the most powerful archbishop in France is true or not, there seems to have been a surprisingly free licence to libel within these intellectual and literary circles – if done with facetiousness and verve. Hence, Walter of Châtillon, in another of his moralist rants, could without any censure get away with accusing the pope of indulging in this homoerotic extravaganza. According to Walter, the Roman pontiff was “a goat among goats – the most well-known ditch/cunt [Latin: *fossa*] among the Socratic sodomites.”³⁴ The line was lifted directly from Juvenal's *Satires* (2.10).

34. Walter of Châtillon, “Multiformis hominum,” poem no. 5 (Walter of Châtillon, *Moralisch-Satirische Gedichte* 75). “Dic Papa, dic, pontifex, spes sponsi, sponse dos, / Cur mores redarguis et sermones fedos, / Cum sis peior pessimis, hedus inter hedos, / Inter Socraticos notissima fossa cinedos!” The derogatory term *cinaedus* for a sexually /gender deviant male, is virtually untranslatable. It connotes effeminacy and being at the receiving end of anal intercourse, but not necessarily that the person so designated is a homosexual.

Concluding remarks

So what should we make of these texts? As always, that depends on the questions we ask. They certainly point towards a practice of teaching that was entertaining and ostensibly also, quite effective. We will never know if the Liège master wrote all the ‘songs’ himself, or if there really were two real human lovers behind the strongly emotional missives that a late-fifteenth-century Cistercian librarian, Johannes de Vepria, found important enough to transcribe, or if the female voice in the Tegernsee letters was really that of a man. Does it matter? Or put in another way: Do these uncertainties make these texts *more* problematic than other literary evidence in regard to revealing the reality of life beyond the veil of words – if that is what we are seeking to uncover? Indeed, how far can we go in using these texts as historical evidence – and for what?

The blatant audacity of eleventh- and twelfth-century satire and banter, from the schools, as well as from the centres of secular and ecclesiastical power, still has the potential, if not to shock and enrage, then certainly to startle modern readers. Equally, its erotic content may well seem quite unfitting in an educational setting. In these times of heightened sensitivity to such issues one might well ask: how did they get away with it? Firstly, timing is everything – and several of these texts refer to the context of Christmas festivities during which ordinary norms were suspended. Secondly, they flourished in a fairly closed milieu in which there were few limits if one could express oneself facetiously, with humour and wit. Finally, and here the references to Classical Latin authors play their particular role: wrapped up inside fables, as *integumenta*, or dressed in ancient literary garb, as direct quotations, stark criticism and ridicule of the highest authorities could be voiced by proxy. The Roman *auctores* emerge here not just as *subtext* – but as *pretext* as an author could hide behind the excuse: it was not *I* who wrote it – Ovid (or Juvenal, or Horace) did!

Like many medieval texts, the writings discussed in this paper all contain a strong element of bricolage. Some appear to be nothing more than mosaics of more and less verbatim quotations. So what about originality and uniqueness; what about individuality? From the viewpoint of an historian: how can we use these texts as historical sources, to express ‘actual,’ ‘true’ or ‘real’ sentiments and attitudes if they mainly consist of well-worn *topoi*? That medieval intellectual culture did not value uniqueness and individuality is plain wrong, but creativity, novelty, or originality (whatever we may call it) were construed differently: as the virtuosity of playing with all the tools of rhetorical *inventio* – most importantly, the mastery and intimacy with the literary canon. The writers formed by the schools, in which the Roman classics played such a central role in the curriculum, and that at the most formative stage of learning Latin grammar and composition, not only incorporated the words of the ancients into their works – these words, so familiar, so intimately incorporated into their thinking and reflecting, became their own and by this osmosis a kind of second nature. Thus it is not just a faint, twisted and obscured repetition of the classical tradition that reaches us through empty refrains from bygone eras. It is the high medieval men – and a few women – who speak through the slits in their literary masks, through carefully staged literary impersonations, in their assumed voices. But how much of their hidden layers we may uncover depends on our own familiarity with this vast and multiform tradition.

The classical canon and the medieval reception and transformation of certain aspects of the culture of Roman Antiquity remain both key *and* lock to the full meaning of these texts.

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