The Role of the Mother in Vincent of Beauvais' De eruditione filiorum nobilium

Rebecca J. Jacobs-Pollez  
University of Missouri

The thirteenth century was a time of transformation and expansion in higher education. The educational environment was stimulated by an increase in the urban population, influences from Islamic scholars, the reintroduction of a number of classical texts, and the transition of higher education from cathedral schools to universities.¹ In this flourishing and fertile environment for learning, Queen Marguerite of Provence (1221–1295) and her husband, King Louis IX of France (1214–1270), determined to educate their children according to a plan of studies suitable for noble youths. They requested that the prolific Dominican encyclopedist, Vincent of Beauvais, write an educational manual suitable for the training of their royal children. The resulting treatise, De eruditione filiorum nobilium, was one of a number of educational documents written at nearly the same time, but it was the first manual to present systematically a comprehensive method of instruction for noble children, and the first to directly address the educational needs of noble women.² At the time when Vincent composed his educational treatise, mothers generally instructed their offspring,

especially during infancy and early childhood, and this was a practice accepted by educational writers. Vincent did not follow this standard, however. Although he dedicated the book to the queen, he rarely mentioned mothers individually. Instead, he either assigned duties to both parents or most often stressed the responsibility of the father in a child's education and moral upbringing. This article ultimately argues that the reason why Vincent emphasized the father's role was because *De eruditione filiorum nobilium* was strongly tied to the king's patronage. First, it provides context on the accepted position of mothers in the education of their children, then discusses Vincent's proposals for teaching noble children, and, finally, examines several possible explanations for why Vincent deviated from the accepted practice.

At the time when Vincent wrote, children were usually taught at home until the age of seven when it was commonly believed the period of infancy had ended. Most children learned the beginnings of their faith by listening to their mothers, who took them to church, showed them sacred images and statues, and taught them gestures for prayers. Medieval mothers played a particularly important role in the education of daughters, transmitting practical knowledge in domestic matters to prepare daughters for their future roles as wives. Often high status mothers also taught their children to read, an activity so common that a poem listing female occupations in about 1300 includes the line "women teacheth child on book." Using psalters, mothers could teach their children letters, prayers, moral values,

---

3 Fijalkowski argues that Vincent gave the mother no role in the education of children, but, as will be shown, Vincent did allow a very small role for the mother. Adam Fijalkowski, "The Education of Women in Light of Works by Vincent of Beauvasi, OP," *Miscellanea Medioevalia* 17 (2000): 513–26 at 515.


5 Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, 16.
and both to know their role in society and to fulfill its requirements.  

Among some of the best educated medieval women were the early Capetian queens, who also played important roles in royal government. When they traveled with their husbands, they conducted such business as establishing monasteries, issuing charters, settling disagreements among religious houses, and making decisions in cases of disputed inheritances. Documents containing her name show that Adélaïde of Maurienne, wife of Louis VI, shared power. Forty-five royal charters include it along with the king's, and six charters contain her personal seal. These charters made ecclesiastic appointments, settled legal cases, granted donations to monasteries, and confirmed donations made by other parties. Capetian queens were also responsible for educating their children. Louis' mother Blanche of Castile took the education of her son quite seriously, instructing her son in moral values and his letters from her psalter, which contains a notation on the last page indicating that he had had been taught from it. Marguerite of Provence also played a role in educating her children. In a letter to her heir Philip, Louis advised his son to accept the good teaching from

6 Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1990), 166–67. In the medieval world, saying that someone knew “letters” usually implied not only learning the alphabet but also the ability to read, usually in Latin. It did not necessarily imply the ability to write.


8 Ibid., 29–30.

9 Jean Joinville and Geoffroi de Villehardouin, *Chronicles of the Crusades*, trans. M. R. B. Shaw (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1963), 182. Some of the major sources of information concerning Louis IX and his mother Blanche of Castile are the writings of Jean de Joinville, Louis' seneschal, and the canonization records for Louis. As these records were documentation collected to validate Louis' sanctity, they are biased in favor of presenting Louis as a virtuous leader. Henri Auguste Omont, *Miniatures du Psautier de S. Louis, Manuscrit Lat. 76a de la Bibliothèque de L’Université de Leyde* (Leyde: A. W. Sijthoff, 1902), vi. Omont warns readers not to assume that Louis IX made any of the writing in the margins.
his mother and to trust her counsel.10

Vincent of Beauvais, the man whom Louis and Marguerite charged with the important task of guiding the education of their children, is best known for the encyclopedic Speculum maius, which was also produced for and dedicated to Louis.11 Little is known about Vincent's personal life. His own appellation "Belvacensis" seems to indicate that he was born at Beauvais, probably between 1184 and 1194, and he likely died there in 1264.12 He became a Dominican at Paris sometime before 1220.13 There is no evidence that he either earned a degree or taught at the university there.14 Louis made Vincent a lector at the monastery of Royaumont, a Cistercian abbey near Paris founded by Louis in 1228.15 Here Vincent was probably a teacher of theology for the monks, "a court preacher, a research worker, and a sort of educational expert for the royal family."16 He probably completed De eruditione shortly before the royal couple left for a crusade to the Holy Land in 1249.17

13 Daunou, "Vincent de Beauvais," 452–53.
In a manner similar to the composition of his encyclopedia, Vincent filled *De eruditione* with ideas from earlier authors who had developed concepts for both the proper material of study and the appropriate ways to teach children. Early in the treatise, he declared that "the clearest kind of teaching is in the introduction of examples," and he followed this precept in his own work.\(^\text{18}\) Interspersed in his original text are extensive quotations from authoritative sources, not only because they served as examples, but also because they were necessary during the medieval period to establish the credibility of a text. Guidelines for educating children had been produced by several first-century writers, including Plutarch, Quintilian, and Musonius. Arguing that a Christian could read all sorts of books to take only what was useful from them, Vincent included precepts from these classical authors.\(^\text{19}\) He quoted, among others, Ovid, Seneca, Cicero, and the Muslim writer Alfarabi,\(^\text{20}\) and he referred to Boethius, Augustine, Origen, Cyprian, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Hugh of St. Victor.\(^\text{21}\) Citations in the chapters for girls are almost entirely from St. Jerome's letters to his female disciples.\(^\text{22}\)

The organization of Vincent's educational treatise is methodical, hierarchical, and topical. He expected students to learn a number of subjects. While he emphasized theology as the highest branch of learning, royal children were also to be instructed in grammar, dialectic, music, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, ethics, economics, and politics.\(^\text{23}\) The work is divided into two parts: forty-one chapters describing the instruction of boys, followed by ten chapters on that of girls. In both sections, the earlier chapters covered the education of younger children, while later chapters presented issues relevant to older youths, the

\(^{20}\) Steiner, Introduction to *De eruditione*, xviii–xix.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., xx–xxi.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., xiv.
\(^{23}\) Steiner, Introduction, *De eruditione*, xxvi; Gabriel, "Educational Ideas," 17–18.
process of becoming an adult, and marriage. The section on boys began by informing parents of the appropriate qualifications for a tutor, followed by the methods to be used for teaching boys and the type of problems that they might encounter in trying to learn. Vincent began the chapters on the education of girls by saying that good ethics and habits applied as much to girls as they did to boys. The remaining chapters contained advice on the behavior of girls.

Vincent saw the most important aspect of education for both boys and girls as establishing the ethics and discipline that would form a good Christian. He advocated early training for children to calm the turbulence of youth. He emphasized the need for boys to learn discipline. The longest chapters in the section devoted to boys concerned morals, discipline, and obedience, especially filial obedience. He included a section on caution and moderation, and he advised both boys and girls to restrict their companions to good people and to comfort and assist those in need. Vincent followed St. Jerome's guidelines concerning girls. In the letters to his female disciples, Jerome had understood the value of teaching women to be literate, but he emphasized moral training; abstinence from wine, rich foods, and material luxuries; the avoidance of vanity and pride; keeping a pure spirit; and virginity. When Vincent argued for female literacy, he did so with the idea that women would use this skill

24 Vincent, De eruditione, ed. Steiner, 178.
25 Ibid., 3.
26 Steiner, Introduction, De eruditione, xxvi; Gabriel, "Educational Ideas," 17–18.
27 Vincent, De eruditione, ed. Steiner, chapter iv.
28 Ibid., chapters xxviii and xxxv, for example.
29 Ibid., chapter xxii.
30 Ibid., chapters iv, xxxii, xxxiii, and xlv.
mainly to read Scripture. According to him, girls needed to study "because often they will carefully shun harmful thoughts to follow this honorable occupation and avoid carnal lusts and vanities." He required girls to remain confined to the privacy of the home where they could be kept busy, and he considered reticence to be the chief virtue of womanhood.

Since many of Vincent's instructions for a laygirl's education prepared her for her role as a wife, he also included instructions for families seeking husbands for their daughters. The family had to choose a qualified and compatible, wise and virtuous husband with the girl's consent. She was required to look to her husband for moral guidance and direction. Vincent included other instructions for the young bride, defining five areas in which a married woman had to display proper behavior: "to honor her parents-in-law, to love her husband, to rule her family, to govern her house, and to show herself blameless." And she must remain modest while performing these tasks. Like her unmarried sisters, she must not paint her face or dye her hair, even if she just wished to please her husband. Vincent reminded women and their families that a widow might remarry and that, rather than succumb to fornication, a young widow should be married. Otherwise, she should remain celibate and act as modestly as she had before her husband's death.

---

32 Vincent, *De eruditione*, ed. Steiner, 176–77. Literacy in the medieval period was not clearly defined. It often meant the ability to read or specifically the ability to read Latin. Sometimes it simply described a learned person, who might have learned everything by listening. It did not always include the ability to write as a wealthy person could hire a scribe.


34 Vincent, *De eruditione*, ed. Steiner, chapter xliii.

35 "Qualified" is my translation of the Latin "sufficiens," which means "sufficient" or "qualified." Vincent probably meant a young educated man from a family at the same or similar rank to the daughter. Ibid., 195–96.

36 Ibid., 146–47.


38 Vincent, *De eruditione*, ed. Steiner, 198–99.

39 Ibid., 201.

40 Ibid., 205–11.
In these discussions Vincent did not provide guidelines for ensuring that a woman would have the ability to teach her own children. Instead, following St. Jerome, his emphasis was on her morality, taciturnity, and prudence—all qualities that would make her a good wife or nun. He spent many pages admonishing girls against habits that could lead to "fleshly lusts, the enemy of chastity." He disdained vanity and the deception implied by "immoderate adornment in either the choice of clothes, arrangement of the hair, painting of the face, and such things." Other habits needed to be controlled as well. Too much food might lead to lustful thoughts, so, following Jerome's advice, a girl should "eat so that she is always hungry and immediately able after food to pray and to chant." Sleep, with its similarity to drunkenness, was also to be limited. The best habits a girl could develop were humility, silence, and maturity or seriousness. Vincent did not even mention the skills needed to teach her children.

Thus, even though the manuscript was dedicated to the queen, the children's mother, Vincent made little mention of a woman's role in the education of her children. He assigned the tutor responsibility for teaching them to read and write. Vincent allowed both parents to provide moral education to their children. He advised them specifically to "plainly teach their children faith and justice: what they ought to believe, what they ought to do and of what things they ought to be aware." However, he usually placed the teaching responsibility in the hands of the father. For example, one of the longest chapters on the education of boys concerns filial obedience. The father was also almost entirely responsible for

---

42 Ibid., 380.
43 Ibid., 378.
44 Vincent, De eruditione, ed. Steiner, 180.
46 Ibid., chapter ii.
48 Vincent, De eruditione, ed. Steiner, chapter xxviii.
ensuring that the daughter was moral and for guarding her virginity. Her failure became his: any shame that the daughter suffered was reflected on her father or her father's house. If she misbehaved, the father became a laughing stock. 49 Vincent gave the mother almost no direct control over the education of her children. Only once did he note that a young wife must teach them. 50 In another chapter he acknowledged that a mother was involved in discipline because the children feared her rod. 51 And he admonished mothers to always be with their daughters in public. 52 Ironically, some of his sources contained examples of mothers teaching their children, 53 including a quotation from Saint Augustine concerning the advice that his mother Monica gave to him. 54

If a common practice was for mothers to provide or oversee the early education of their children, and if some of Vincent's sources contained examples of mothers doing so, then why did he almost completely ignore their role? There are several possible explanations. De eruditione covers the period from age seven until early adulthood. The mother's strongest educational influence would be expected to occur during the child's infancy, a period that Vincent discussed in the Speculum doctrinale, the third volume of the Speculum maius. There he outlined the proper regimen for children, beginning with the mother's pregnancy and continuing through adolescence. However, the mother's role in teaching her children was not included in the Speculum doctrinale either. 55 Rather, Vincent noted that a child was handed over to a tutor at the age of six. 56 Perhaps in De

---

49 Ibid., 173–74.
50 Ibid., 202.
51 Ibid., 159.
52 Ibid., 176.
53 Tobin, 83.
54 Vincent, De eruditione, ed. Steiner, 112:85–89.
56 Ibid., book 12, chapter xxxl.
eruditione Vincent attempted to define what he considered the optimal method for instructing children. It is likely that not all families were able to meet his standards. For some families, the practical solution was for the parents, especially the mother, to teach the children both their early religious values and reading. Perhaps in writing about royal children, Vincent considered their special place in the world. With the growth of administrative kingship, the queen's function in governing the realm was being replaced by men working in an incipient bureaucracy. Consequently, Vincent might have been attempting to ensure that the royal children, especially the males, were raised by those who had a good understanding of the children's future roles and thus could better prepare them. Another possibility is that he was tailoring his message to suit his patron, Louis. Knowing that Louis was interested in the children's education, perhaps Vincent emphasized inculcating of Christian values. His de-emphasis on the mother's role might simply have been an effort to accentuate Louis' role in the education of his children. On several occasions Vincent described the father as the main teacher of his son as, for example, in a series of quotations including, "He that teacheth his son, shall have joy in him and shall glory in him before the family." This emphasis also would help explain why, though the treatise is dedicated to the queen, it placed more importance on the role of the father than the mother in the education of children.

Louis definitely took an interest in the education of his children, sons and daughters, talking with them each night before going to bed. Not only did he insist that they learn the Hours of the Virgin, he also required them to repeat the Hours of that day. In consideration of their positions, he discussed problems of leadership and governance. By comparing the actions of good and bad kings, he reminded his children that, when they confronted similar issues, they should consider how God would

---

view their actions. Louis provided a good example for his children, acting much as a man would have if he had been raised according to Vincent's guidelines. His biographer and seneschal, Jean de Joinville, described the king's piety, concern with ethical values, his desire to live a proper Christian life, and his efforts to help those in his care to live similarly. Practicing moderation, the king never ordered special meals for himself, and he mixed water with his wine to avoid drunkenness. His garments were plain and not excessively expensive, and he expected the same from the men who served with him. Joinville described a number of churches and abbeys that Louis founded, as well as his generosity to the poor in building hospitals and a house for former prostitutes. Joinville also praised the king for often welcoming groups of the poor into his own house where he fed them "with bread and wine, meat or fish." These are all actions that matched Vincent's precepts.

How much the king had been influenced by Vincent is unclear. Louis was himself a well-educated man who founded a library at Sainte Chapelle. He certainly knew about and probably read *De eruditione* as well as some of Vincent's other works, and he had heard Vincent's sermons. Louis wrote letters to his son Philip and daughter Isabelle when both were adults. He likely composed the letters between 1267 and June 1270 after Vincent's death, and there is much similarity between the friar's and the king's guidance. Louis' first admonition to his heir Philip was to

---

60 Ibid., 343–44.
61 Ibid., 168–70.
62 Ibid., 342–43.
love God. Among other requests, he instructed his son to avoid mortal sins, to suffer willingly any ills sent by God, to accept gratefully any prosperity, and to keep friends of good quality. He also told his son that, were he to become king, he must rule with virtue, take care of the poor, and maintain his land and the church, but avoid unnecessary wars. Louis mentioned his wife once, saying that he hoped that Philip loved his mother and, as noted already, accepted her good teaching and trusted her counsel. Several times in his letter Louis emphasized the need for his heir to be loyal to and protect the church and to follow the advice of his confessor and of good men—all precepts that Vincent would have supported. The much shorter letter he wrote to his daughter Isabelle was almost solely concerned with her spiritual well being. Again, Vincent would have been in agreement with this as the most important concern for a woman. Louis began the letter as he did the letter to his heir, that is, admonishing her to love God. A few of the directions Louis gave to his daughter include choosing a saintly, well-educated confessor, and then, echoing Vincent, Louis told his daughter to avoid pride and the lure of fine clothes and jewelry, to shun friends with bad reputations, and to give to charity. Louis advised Isabelle to obey her husband, the King of Navarre, her father, and her mother, in that order.65

Although Vincent was innovative in including details for the education of girls, an examination of De eruditione indicates that, rather than formulate any new concepts for their education, his proposals upheld older medieval traditions that stressed modesty, virginity, and piety. He simultaneously displaced the mother from her previous role as the primary educator, and he emphasized the role of the father in teaching children. Louis and Marguerite accepted Vincent's guidelines and followed them in educating their children, and Louis probably encouraged Vincent's ideas to be accepted at his court. Administrative kingship grew during his reign, so both Louis and Vincent might have seen the role of the queen quite differently from Louis'

65 Louis IX, Instructions, 15, 78–81; Louis IX, Teachings, 55–60.
father and grandfather. The types of activities performed by Adélaïde of Maurienne and Blanche of Castile were increasingly taken over by male functionaries. Limiting the role that queens and, by extension, other noble women were expected to play required Vincent and Louis to change the purpose of their education and the method by which they were taught. They emphasized their role as wives, not as participants in governmental affairs. At the same time, the purpose and method for teaching boys was also changed. In their case, the material taught to young princes and nobles sought to ensure that they became politically astute leaders.

Why Louis and Marguerite initially saw the need to have an educational manual written by an expert rather than follow the proven traditional system (instruction from the mother) is a question that still needs to be answered. Whatever their motives, they were clearly not the only people interested in providing an organized system for training children as a number of similar manuals were written slightly before and after Vincent's work. Each of these authors brought new ideas that contributed to professionalizing an educational culture in flux.\textsuperscript{66} In requesting that Vincent design a curriculum for their children, Louis and Marguerite, intentionally or not, helped bring about changes that ultimately diminished the role of the medieval mother in her children's education. And although women's education had always lagged behind men's, the gap grew even more significant as men began attending the new universities while women continued to be trained at home less formally than their brothers. It is clear, then, that Vincent's mix of earlier medieval behavior standards combined with literacy as the goals for educating women harmonized with other changes in the thirteenth-century educational milieu.

\textsuperscript{66} For example, in \textit{De regimine principum}, Giles of Rome promoted marriage for women and emphasized the need for girls to be taciturn. Steiner, Introduction to \textit{De eruditione}, xxvi; Gabriel, \textit{Educational Ideas}, 17–18.