Minds Molded Like Wax: The Shift from Charismatic to Intellectual Learning in the Twelfth Century

The beginning of the twelfth century ushered in a new type and style of learning that had its roots in the profound transition from the charismatic learning of the cathedral schools to the intellectual culture of the scholastic centers of Paris.\(^1\) Though gradual in nature, this shift impacted people during the high Middle Ages in far-reaching ways. Eleventh-century theologians like St. Anselm of Canterbury and Hugh of St. Victor embraced an old learning model in which people during the time learned to become men whose “manners” were more “composed.”\(^2\) In other words, students achieved educational goals through the imitation of a teacher, following his *exempla*. The idea of *exempla* went beyond the boundaries of intellectual learning, encouraging a student to embody all attributes of his or her teacher.\(^3\) A student “acts, walks, behaves, carries themselves, and constitutes their body, mind, facial gestures, voice, and words.”\(^4\)

The transition away from this model of learning model was marked by a shift to an intellectual culture in which it suddenly became acceptable to be overtly proud of

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2 Ibid., p. 4.

3 An explanation is required for the inclusion of “her.” Though this learning model was meant to apply to men only, it also applied to women. For example, Heloise, a powerful abbess and head of the Paraclete, also followed by *exempla*. It is important to note, however, that this learning model’s intended audience was predominantly male.

one’s knowledge, to violate laws of *reverentia* and *pietas*, and to contradict, argue with, and embarrass one’s teacher publicly. Theologians like twelfth-century philosopher-scholar-teacher Peter Abelard embodied the newer model fully. However, despite Abelard’s championing of a new type of learning, elements of the ideas of *exempla* as a pedagogical tool were never entirely absent, even in his own work. The role that specific analogies played—such as wax—played in the way in which scholars of the time wrote to describe their experiences perhaps best illuminates the nuanced approach to intellectual culture that became a cornerstone of learning in the twelfth-century renaissance. The context of these analogies, and in particular, the intended audiences of their lessons, highlights the precise ways in which the medieval authors embraced the different charismatic and intellectual methods of teaching simultaneously.

Eadmer, contemporary and biographer of St. Anselm of Canterbury, provides a helpful analogy for understanding the process of charismatic learning in his work *Vita Anselmi (The Life of St Anselm).* In describing the process of training an eleventh-century student, he states: “He compared the time of youth to a piece of wax of the right consistency for the impress of a seal. 'For if the wax,' he said, 'is too hard or too soft it will not, when stamped with the seal, receive a perfect image. But if it preserves a mean between these extremes of hardness and softness, when it is stamped with the seal, it will receive the image clear and whole.'” Eadmer’s description of the consistency of the wax illustrates the importance of the pupil’s adequate preparation by his or her instructor. For

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5 *The Envy of Angels*, p. 217.


7 Ibid., p. 21.
if the student had not been prepared acceptably, the stamp would not hold and the image would be distorted. A certain amount of instruction, then, was required before the student could imprint or embody the model of the teacher fully. The intellectual learning of book culture could not be entirely set aside as the teacher needed to prepare the student before he or she was “stamped.” However, once the stamp has been imprinted, the process made it permanent, unchangeable, and forever in that same form.

Eadmer assumes that students have different “consistencies” of wax exist prior to instruction, indicating how able they are to imprint.8 He describes the consistency of young students’ wax as being “almost liquid, and incapable of taking the image of the seal.”9 Older students who are described as having “hardened wax” are similarly unable to imprint.10 Neither of these two parties, therefore, is capable of receiving the stamp, indicating the necessity of teaching students of ripe age so that the instructor “can shape him as you wish” by providing the student with proper instruction from an early, though appropriate, age.11 For if the instructor waits too long, the student’s wax has already begun to harden and the student has already imprinted, indicating the importance for instructors to identify and correct students’ flaws from inception: “Realizing this, I watch over the young men with greater solicitude, taking care to nip all their faults in the bud” so that following instruction “they may form themselves in the image of a spiritual man.”12 Eadmer’s words reinforce the importance of instructors taking on students who

8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.,
10 Ibid.,
11 Ibid.,
12 Ibid.,
will be able to successfully imprint and providing them with adequate instruction so that they can be crafted in the image and likeness of the instructor.

Eadmer continues to use this wax analogy in other parts in *Life of St Anselm*. He describes St. Anselm’s reflection upon a specific matter, occurring for an extended period of time. Upon enlightenment, St. Anselm wrote his newfound wisdom on “writing tablets” and stored them for safekeeping with a monk from the monastery.\(^{13}\) However, these tablets were lost, so St. Anselm wrote another draft on different tablets and gave them to the same monk, who placed the tablets by his bed.\(^{14}\) In the morning, the monk found the tablets and the wax scattered throughout the room.\(^{15}\) The monk decided to take them to Anselm for restoration: “After the tablets had been picked up and the wax collected together, they were taken to Anselm. He pieced the wax and recovered the writing, though with difficulty.”\(^{16}\) Continuing with the wax analogy in which wax is symbolic for students and the process of learning, this example demonstrates the teacher’s ability to reshape students, even if the students had assumed a broken and imperfect form. Teachers, then, were capable of remolding students no matter how flawed or distorted their pupils were, demonstrating their ability of patterning and shaping students as their own.

Hugh of St. Victor, scholar and teacher of the School of St. Victor, a school that emphasized the importance of training in *mores* and behavior, wrote extensively about the necessity of imitation in student-teacher relationships. He offers a somewhat different

\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 30.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.,

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 31.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.,
example using this wax analogy, in which he appeals to a newly literate audience.\textsuperscript{17} The people who would understand his analogies, then, were generally wealthier individuals part of the nobility class contemplating on which religious institutions or monasteries they wanted to send their children. They had come to understand the role of wax in the process of making and strengthening the authenticity of medieval documents and could follow the analogy that Hugh of St. Victor proposed for learning and educational process.

In his work \textit{De institutione novitiorum}, Hugh of St. Victor states:

\begin{quote}
Why do you suppose, brothers, we are commanded to imitate the life and habits of good men, unless it be that we are reformed through imitating them to the image of a new life? For in them the form of the image of God is engraved, and when through the process of imitation we are pressed against that carved surface, we too are moulded in the likeness of that same image...We long to be perfectly carved and sculpted in the image of good men, and when excellent and sublime qualities...stand out in them, which arouse astonishment and admiration in men’s minds, then they shine forth in them lie the beauty in exquisite statues, and we strive to recreate these qualities in ourselves...\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

He offers his own opinions of the image of the seal impressing its carved surface into wax. In this example, the teacher is the seal and the student is the wax. Hugh of St. Victor’s teaching method, however, has prerequisite conditions, specifically that “the wax is first softened.”\textsuperscript{19} For if it is not, “it cannot receive the form, and thus also a man can not be kneaded to the form of virtue through the hands of another’s actions, unless he is softened and all pride and stiff-necked contrariness removed.”\textsuperscript{20} His view on the process of imprinting requires the student to be humble and describes the process as a whole as


\textsuperscript{18} Hugh of St. Victor, \textit{De institutione novitiorum (Inst.)}, ch. 8.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., ch. 7.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.,
being absolute. Hugh of St. Victor felt it was necessary to state that humility was a required condition for his students to succeed, implying that students during this time period were becoming less humble and more proud of their work. The inclusion of humility in Hugh of St. Victor’s work, then, suggests a very gradual transition away from following by *exempla* entirely and shifting towards being overly proud in one’s work, resulting in marked difficulties with imprinting. In addition to the necessity of student humility, Hugh expresses other required prerequisites, including obedience, modesty, and measure.21 Once a student “gives up contentiousness in word and deed; he must avoid anger, shun contumely and malice, and keep to ‘moderation and the golden mean’ in speech, gesture, action and dress,” after which he or she is able to receive the image of his or her teacher.22 That is to say, he or she can imprint to be “reformed for the better.”23

Considering Hugh’s background as an instructor and scholar at the School of St. Victor, a school that emphasized the role of imitation in teaching, it is not surprising that Hugh believed in the importance of following by *exempla*. Hugh believed that students could become more religious individuals by identifying the model’s virtuous qualities and following them while ignoring their ignominious counterparts: He writes that “…we who seek to be reformed through the example of good men, as through some marvelously sculpted seal, perceive in them the traces of actions, some of which are sublime and eminent, but others abject and debased”24. Furthermore, Hugh stresses the fact that students wishing to be more pious individuals should incorporate religious men’s most

21 *The Envy of Angels*, p. 283.

22 Ibid.,

23 Ibid.,

24 *Inst.*, ch. 7.
exemplary behavior into their own lives: “When [saintly men] act in such a way as to arouse the admiration of human minds, then they appear as exquisite sculptures. What stands out in them should be recreated inwardly in us.”

Hugh’s last point about following by *exempla* again reinforces its importance: to be a pious individual, one must have acted according to *exempla* during this time period. And closely imitating one’s teacher’s behavior required a certain amount of humility because it involved accepting the fact that as a student, he or she must do exactly as the teacher instructed. This humility began to disappear during the transition from old learning to new learning.

In juxtaposition to this view, Peter Abelard had his own, distinct opinions on the process of imprinting and the role of wax, which stood in stark opposition to the views of both Hugh and St. Anselm. Abelard, a student of William of Champeaux who later retired and taught at the School of St. Victor, was one of the individuals at the forefront of the transition to a new model of learning. He offers his nuanced commentary on the process of imprinting and wax in a letter written in the 1130s by him to Heloise, a powerful abbess and head of the Paraclete about educating nuns. Abelard’s letter states: “And when has begun to direct the stylus to the wax with her hand either let her tender joints be guided by the hand of another person or let the rudiments be formed on the tablet, so that the traces are drawn inside the margins, enclosed by the same grooves, and she should not seek to wander outside.”

Crafting a letter at this time, and especially within the context of the Parisian schools, began with a wax-like material present on a tablet, serving as

25 Ibid.,

scratch paper. Before making the final copy on parchment, the author would draft his copy of the wax material. Eventually, the letter written on the parchment that was sent to the letter’s recipient was a copy itself because it copied exactly what the author had written on the wax. However, this image offers a contrasting view compared to the wax analogy mentioned earlier by Eadmer in *Life of St Anselm of Canterbury* and in Hugh of St. Victor’s works, displaying Abelard’s challenges to the established system. The wax-like material in the scenario that Abelard describes is ephemeral and in a constant state of flux. The author can erase what is written on the tablet, start from scratch, and craft something completely new and different. In Eadmer and Hugh of St. Victor’s examples, however, the stamp is permanent. Once the stamped had been pressed, it was final. Carrying this idea a step further, considering the teacher to be the stamp and the student to be the wax, once the student had imprinted, it was unalterable: the student would forever be a cookie cutter of the teacher. However, a transition occurred at the beginning of the twelfth century that led to Abelard’s example in which students were capable of changing themselves and their ideas instead of being an exact replica of his or her teacher. This emergence can be attributed to the increase in popularity of new learning.

Though many of Abelard’s works certainly demonstrate the increase in popularity of new learning, the old model of learning was never lost entirely, as evidenced by some of his other works. In fact, Abelard considered a different wax analogy for the process of learning in which students and teachers have some of the same properties and their ideas do not diverge entirely. He states: “A wax image, for instance, may be identical in essence and number with the wax of which it is made,” demonstrating that the student
may indeed have some similarities in beliefs as the teacher.\textsuperscript{27} Despite potential differences in the wax, the waxen image and the wax have some of the same properties, substantiating the claim that the old learning model continued into the twelfth century.

Abelard states:

Look at a waxen image. Consider that in it is the mixture of wax: that is, the wax itself as substance. From this wax, the image becomes, in philosophical language, materialized out of material. The same essence is both the wax itself and the wax image. We can predicate of the wax that it is the image, and of the image that it is the wax. Nonetheless, it is also true to say that the waxen image is from the wax. But the wax is not from the waxen image. The wax itself is, however, the material of the image. The waxen image is not the material either of the wax or of itself. Again, we can assert that the image was realized out of the wax of which it is composed. Yet neither the wax itself nor the image itself were composed simply out of the image. Now if we take these names of wax and waxen image absolutely, not relatively to one another, we can assert anything of them that will be true of both because the substance is identical.\textsuperscript{28}

Though this quotation is lengthy, it further reinforces the claim that the beginning of the twelfth century didn’t signify the end of the old learning model.

Differences in how students respected their teachers accompanied this transition away from old learning towards new learning. In \textit{Life of St Anselm}, Eadmer describes how St. Anselm viewed his teacher Lanfranc’s opinion in a situation that emerged about veneration of a particular saint. St. Anselm states: “These arguments, reverend father, so far as I can see, are what reason itself teaches me to be sound. But it is for your judgement to correct and restrain me if you feel differently, and to teach and declare to

\textsuperscript{27} English translation from McCallum, \textit{Abelard's Christian Theology}, 75 (Latin text is in PL, 178: col.1247 D and 1248 B).

\textsuperscript{28} English translation from McCallum, Abelard's Christian Theology, 85-86 (Latin text is in PL, 178: col. 1288 C, D, 1289 A).
the church of God a better way of looking on this important matter." St. Anselm clearly viewed his teacher with reverence. He valued his opinion, and if Lanfranc were to offer a contrasting view, St. Anselm would latch onto it. Additionally, St. Anselm believed in the necessity of seeking guidance when making decisions. The following excerpt describes Anselm’s thought process while choosing his counselor:

Knowing therefore that it is written, ‘Do all things with counsel, and when they are done you will not repent,’ he was unwilling to commit himself unadvisedly to any one of the walks of life on which his thoughts were turned...when he came to choose that one counsellor in a thousand on whom he could rely utterly in these matters, he chose Lanfranc. He came to him and told him that he was undecided between three courses of action, but that he would hold to the one which Lanfranc judged best and reject the other two.\(^{30}\)

Anselm states quite clearly in this passage that he is willing to follow any advice or suggestions that Lanfranc had for him. This respect provided Anselm with the necessary learning to become closer to God.\(^{31}\)

Abelard’s own perceptions of learning *mores* departed significantly from Anselm’s reverence. In his autobiographical works, he projects an overt pride in his knowledge, writing “…my mind bent itself easy to the study of letters...And because I was his first born, and for that reason the more dear to him, he sought with double diligence to have me wisely taught.”\(^{32}\) Abelard’s manifest pride mirrors the progression of

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29 *The Life of St Anselm*, p. 53.

30 Ibid., p. 10.


the culture of learning and the new emphasis on dialectic argument. Additionally, Abelard describes his relationship with his teacher:

I came at length to Paris, where above all in those days the art of dialectics was most flourishing, and there did I meet William of Champeaux, my teacher, a man most distinguished in his science by both his renown and by his true merit. With him I remained for some time, at first indeed well liked of him; but later I brought him great grief, because I undertook to refute certain of his opinions, not infrequently attacking him in disputation, and now and then in these debates I was adjudged victor.⁵³

Abelard’s rejection of modesty in the portrayal of his disagreements with his teacher, which was something absolutely unheard of in the model of old learning, in which students respected and clung to their instructor’s every belief and opinion. The following quotation also reiterates his blatant conceit and vanity: “Now this, to those among my fellow students who were ranked foremost, seemed all the more insufferable because of my youth and the brief duration of my studies...From this small inception of my school, my fame in the art of dialectics began to spread abroad, so that little by little the renown, not alone of those who had been my fellow students, but our very teacher himself, grew dim and was like to die out altogether.”⁵⁴ While clearly demonstrating Abelard’s arrogance, the passage also shows the decrease in popularity of the old model of learning in cathedral schools. He states that his school, part of the intellectual culture of the scholastic centers of Paris, had become increasingly popular at the expense of old learning institutions, clearly demonstrative of a shift in popularity away from charismatic learning to intellectual culture.

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³³ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁴ Ibid.,
The transition away from the old model of learning to the new model paved the way for the twelfth-century renaissance, forming the base out of which philosophy grew and expanded for the rest of the Middle Ages. Additionally, some of the beliefs of the twelfth-century formed what modern-day scholars now call humanism, which “asserted itself in lyric poetry, in some grand allegorical-philosophical epics, in Latin prose style, in architecture and sculpture, and in some of the vernacular courtly romances,” and laypeople now call the period the “renaissance.” Friendship, including “courtly love” and monastic friendship, was a necessary prerequisite for humanism, as R.W. Southern argues. Thus the humanist movements were responses to the twelfth century renaissance, and without them, the resulting time period would be drastically different.

Abelard’s own choice to use a metaphor of continually changing wax over seals reinforces the claim that a change in the type and nature of learning occurred during his time period. Seals were in fact more common in his day than they were in centuries previous in which only kings and bishops used them. Whether Abelard’s innovation or own arrogance, he resisted conforming to seeing young minds as something firm and fixed like seals, but rather something that was fluid. He thought of young minds in this same way.

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35 *The Envy of Angels*, p. 278.

36 Ibid., p. 280.
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