CHAPTER SIX

MASTERING AUTHORS AND AUTHORIZING MASTERS IN THE LONG TWELFTH CENTURY

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The long twelfth century witnessed many, extraordinarily rapid and extensive changes. In this study I will identify developments in the roles of magistri over this one-hundred-fifty-year period. My examination will entail looking at twelfth-century understandings of magister. It will also involve exploring the relations of masters to authors and authority. Once masters undertook to produce their own chefs d’oeuvres, far-reaching adjustments were required in the curriculum as well as in attitudes toward the masterworks of earlier eras.

Let me explain in more detail what I hope to achieve. First, I will deliver in a few brushstrokes a Forschungsbericht on what work has been done lately on masters in the long twelfth century, from 1075 to 1225, roughly. Then I will paint the background of what magister meant in antiquity and the early Middle Ages and what new denotations and connotations it unfolded in the twelfth century. Against this backdrop, I will hazard a few ideas about the place the master occupied in the social and intellectual structures of the times, vis-à-vis knights, tradesmen, students, and of course the Church. Finally, I will evaluate the effects of writing by masters on the curriculum of texts by authors they interpreted. The whole will comprehend seven short parts.

Modern Masterliness

An overview of magistri in the long twelfth century demands not only gazing through a telescope at the remoteness of the Middle Ages but also peering through bifocals at the past thirty years. In the anti-authoritarian late sixties the only books with the relevant word on their covers that garnered much attention in the Anglophone world were the very popular Human Sexual Response (1966) and Human Sexual
Inadequacy (1970) of Masters and Johnson. But obviously (if maybe sadly) this Masters is no more germane to our subject of magistri than is that other inadvertently master-laden issue, masturbation. From the late 1960s through the 1980s blistering academic debates focused not upon masters but instead upon authors. In 1987 the famous assertion that the author was dead was capped and canonized in an article with the retrospective title “What was an Author?”

The wrangle over the demise of the author now looks almost as quaint as the New Criticism and structuralism which preceded it, since times and predilections have changed. Since the 1990s masters have emerged from the shadows and have even stepped forward to share the limelight with authors. The past dozen years have seen a burgeoning curiosity about medieval schoolmasters, particularly of the twelfth century. Jacques Le Goff’s Intellectuals in the Middle Ages was finally published in English translation in 1993. C. Stephen Jaeger’s The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950–1200 came into print in 1994. Peter Godman’s The Silent Masters: Latin Literature and Its Censors in the High Middle Ages appeared in 2000. More broadly, George Steiner’s Lessons of the Masters, ponderings on the ties between masters and disciples through the ages, became available in 2003. Beyond studies that make masters an overriding preoccupation (even if the relevant keywords are sometimes absent from their indices), the magister plays a bit part in almost every tome on twelfth-century intellectual history. Yet gaps remain. For example, the entry on masters in the index to Le Goff’s classic contains no page references to the chapter on the twelfth century, while the index to Jaeger’s wide-ranging volume has no heading at all for master. It is into these voids that we will now leap.

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1 Masters W.H. – Johnson V.E., Human Sexual Response (Boston 1966) and Human Sexual Inadequacy (Boston 1970). Masters was a gynecologist, Johnson a psychologist. These books and others by them (many co-authored with Robert C. Kolodny) were based on their observation of sexual activity in a laboratory setting.


