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"Silencing the Widow with a Prayer for Peace: Gerson, Valentina Visconti and the Body of Princess Isabelle (Paris, 1404-1408)."

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## SILENCING THE WIDOW WITH A PRAYER FOR PEACE



In either November of 1408 or January of 1409, the chancellor of the University of Paris and one of the most respected preachers in that city, Jean Gerson (1363-1429), delivered a sermon titled "Let peace come" (*Veniat pax*) before members of the French royal court<sup>1</sup>. Gerson's sermon exhorts the king and the magnates of the realm to put aside their differences for the sake of Christian charity, the pious goal of ending the papal schism, and the peaceable governance of the realm. The issue before the king's court, however, was a difficult one. The king's cousin, John the Fearless, had admitted that he had personally arranged for the assassination of the king's brother, Louis of Orléans, which had taken place on 23 November 1407. Although John had secured a pardon during a private audience with the mentally unstable King Charles VI in March of 1408, the royal council grew impatient with John's unwillingness to express any remorse in public about what he had done. In July of 1408, the king revoked the letter of pardon he had issued John, and in September, the dauphin, speaking for his ill father, confirmed that justice would be done. John's military power, however, guaranteed that any attempt to punish him would result in a long civil war that would cause the suffering of many non-combatants<sup>2</sup>.

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1 I would like to thank the UCI Gender History Reading Group, Rebecca Davis, Katrin Sjursen, and Tanya Stabler Miller for reading earlier versions of this essay.

Jean Gerson, *Veniat pax*, in: idem, *Oeuvres complètes*, I-X, ed. P. Glorieux, Paris-Tournai-Rome 1960-1973, VIIIb, pp. 1100-1123. For the argument supporting the 4 November 1408 date of delivery see: L. Mourin, *Jean Gerson, prédicateur français*, Bruges 1952, pp. 187-196. For the January 1409 date see B. Guenée, *Un meurtre, une société. L'assassinat du duc d'Orléans 23 novembre 1407*, Paris 1992, pp. 215-220. For the most recent summary of Gerson's career, see B.P. McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation*, University Park 2005.

2 For a summary of the events that took place between Louis's murder and Gerson's sermon, see R.C. Famiglietti, *Royal Intrigue. Crisis at the Court of Charles VI. 1392-1420*, New York 1986, pp. 63-75.

Gerson claimed to speak out against the punishment of John for the sake of these non-combatants. Since his call for peace contradicted a published royal decision, however, Gerson had to present his case carefully. His task was further complicated by the fact that a university theologian, Jean Petit, had justified the assassination as tyrannicide in a speech he made before the assembled royal court in March of 1408. John the Fearless had then widely published this speech, giving the impression that the theologians of the university supported his cause<sup>3</sup>. A third challenge Gerson had to overcome was the fact that the crown engaged in elaborate public theatre surrounding its decision to prosecute John. John enjoyed the support of factions of Parisians because they believed him to be an advocate for political and fiscal reform<sup>4</sup>. The crown attempted to counter any potential support for John by portraying its decision to punish John as an act of mercy towards Louis's grieving family, in particular, his two sons and his widow, Valentina Visconti<sup>5</sup>. These challenges demanded that Gerson develop a strategy for assuring the royal court that the university remained obedient to the crown, neutral in the conflict between John and Louis, and compassionately disposed towards the victims of John's violence.

Gerson addressed all of these rhetorical challenges with one strategy. He elaborated upon the university's royally granted title as Daughter of the King<sup>6</sup>. In the process of this elaboration, he constructed a figure whose loyalty to the crown was beyond question, whose understanding of the situation was prophetic, and whose appeals for peace were as evocative as the appeals for justice that had been made in the name of Valentina Visconti and her sons. In short, Gerson mobilized a female personification for the University of Paris in a manner that activated a well-known and longstanding discourse about female persuasion. This discourse observed that women could play upon the affections of powerful men to good or ill effect, and as a result, urged women to persuade men to virtue and men to allow themselves to be persuaded only by the most virtuous of women<sup>7</sup>.

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3 For a discussion of Petit's speech and the pro-Burgundian scholarly milieu in which it was produced and circulated, see A. Coville, *Jean Petit. La question du tyrannicide au commencement du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 1932 (reprint Geneva 1974), pp. 100-101, 117-140.

4 For the idea that the University of Paris and the people of Paris supported John because of his reform policies, see: R.C. Famiglietti, *Royal Intrigue...*, pp. 47-48; T. Adams, *The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria*, Baltimore 2010, pp. 172, 174.

5 R.C. Famiglietti, *Royal Intrigue...*, p. 70.

6 For the origins of the title and a summary of Gerson's deployment of this title, see S. Lusignan, 'Vérité garde le roy'. *La construction d'une identité universitaire en France. XIII<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 1999, pp. 267-270.

7 K. Cooper, *Insinuations of Womanly Influence. An Aspect of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy*, "Journal of Roman Studies" LXXXII (1992), pp. 150-164.

Gerson, however, did not activate this discourse in a political or rhetorical vacuum. The fact that Valentina played an important role in the crown's justifications of violence against John necessitated that when Gerson activated the discourse of female persuasion, he cast the university as a virtuous female in opposition to Valentina. The way he did this, when considered in dialogue with the content of his sermon, formulated a powerful argument against the exercise of informal political influence by aristocratic women. In this sense, Gerson's sermon participated in a pervasive clerical and bureaucratic discourse which attempted to diminish, belittle, and call into question the extensive political powers aristocratic women exercised<sup>8</sup>. The way that Gerson's contribution to this discourse developed, moreover, demonstrates that these clerical challenges to female authority were inspired at least in part by the perceived disempowerment of the men who made them. For this reason, rather than telling us about Gerson's personal opinions about women, Gerson's sermon, "Let peace come", reveals the fragile nature of the university's authority in comparison to that exercised by the very aristocratic women he critiqued<sup>9</sup>.

#### GENDER AND THE FRAMING OF GERSON'S PRAYER FOR PEACE

Although Gerson's active feminization of the University of Paris reveals crucial information about the relationship between the university and the French crown, those familiar with Gerson's sermon "Let peace come" know well that constructing a female identity for the university and activating classical discourses about female persuasion were not the sermon's main goals. Rather, Gerson, with the backing of the university and the French church, addressed the French court for the purpose of preventing an imminent civil war. Such a war, Gerson warned, would bring unspeakable suffering to the poor, who would be taxed to starvation or even death. It would also destroy, or at the very least diminish, royal institutions like the university, which required peace to survive. Most significantly, he argued, war would disrupt negotiations designed to bring a thirty-year schism within the Latin Church to a close. The continuation of the schism, moreover, would empower the enemies of Christianity, while civil war in France would similarly

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8 For the role played by clerical discourse in obscuring the actual political power exercised by aristocratic and royal women, see T. Earenfight, *Without the Persona of the Prince. Kings, Queens and the Idea of Monarchy in Late Medieval Europe*, "Gender and History" XIX (2007) 1, p. 12.

9 For the suggestion of a scholarly consensus attributing Gerson's misogynist polemics to the influence of widespread clerical misogyny, see W.L. Anderson, *Gerson's Stance on Women*, in: *A Companion to Jean Gerson*, ed. B.P. McGuire, Leiden 2006, pp. 307-314.



empower England and weaken the ties between the French magnates and those they ruled<sup>10</sup>.

These arguments contribute to Gerson's reputation as a compassionate political reformer, a committed advocate for university rights, and an ardent voice for Church unity<sup>11</sup>. The consistency of these arguments with those Gerson made in his other anti-war sermons, however, suggests that they tell us much more about Gerson's ideals than they do about his political situation. Gerson's ideological consistency extends throughout his preaching career from his first extant sermon, which he delivered in protest of a planned war against the Roman papal claimant in 1391, to his protest against the war that would necessarily take place if the crown attempted to punish John the Fearless for the murder of Louis of Orléans. Critiquing the ways in which un-Christian and illogical notions of honor, chivalry, and blood feud undermined aristocratic decision making, Gerson offered the University of Paris as the only rational adviser who could help the king rule for the benefit of his entire kingdom and the French church<sup>12</sup>.

That Gerson would have this political vision is hardly surprising. French kings had celebrated the university's collective authority when doing so served the needs of royal propaganda. Perhaps more importantly for understanding Gerson's perspective, the crown had justified the royal privileges granted to the university with reference to the university's important role in defining Christian doctrine for the kingdom. Despite fostering the appearance that the university's expertise played a crucial role in the governance of the realm, however, the crown consistently refused to accept unsolicited, freely offered, and independently generated academic advice. French kings and their representatives systematically excluded the university from most meetings of the royal council, prohibited university members from holding or debating certain political positions, threatened university members with violence when they expressed royally proscribed opinions, and bribed individual university members with promises of patronage in order to undermine the university's collective decision making process<sup>13</sup>.

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10 For a summary of the content of the sermon, see B.P. McGuire, *Jean Gerson...*, pp. 194-195.

11 For this portrayal of Gerson, see B.P. McGuire, *Jean Gerson...*; G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes, *Jean Gerson, Apostle of Unity. His Church Politics and Ecclesiology*, Leiden 1999; C. Burger, *Aedificatio. Fructus. Utilitas. Johannes Gerson als Professor der Theologie und Kanzler der Universität Paris*, Tübingen 1986; D. Taber, *Pierre d'Ailly and the Teaching Authority of the Theologian*, "Church History" LIX (1990), p. 174.

12 For the political messages of Gerson's earlier sermons, see L. Mourin, *Jean Gerson...*, pp. 55-116, 165-217.

13 W.J. Courtenay, *Learned Opinion and Royal Justice. The Role of Paris Masters of Theology during the Reign of Philip the Fair*, in: *Law and the Illicit in Medieval Europe*, eds. R.M. Karras, J. Kaye, E.A. Matter, Philadelphia 2008, pp. 149-163.

The combined effect of these policies was two-fold. First, the university was collectively silenced and prevented from carrying out the role of impartial and objective advisor to the crown that Gerson proposed<sup>14</sup>. Second, individual magnates could cultivate client scholars, who would then write scholarly opinions justifying their patron's partisan politics. These client scholars, such as Jean Petit, undermined the university's claims to impartiality with respect to the political feuds that plagued both France and the Latin Church<sup>15</sup>.

As the university attempted to intervene in the escalating feud between the Dukes of Burgundy and Orléans, the danger of the university's actions being misinterpreted as either partisan or insubordinate increased dramatically. Gerson responded to this increased risk of reprimand and retribution by constructing elaborate rhetorical frames for his sermons. He used these frames to make space for the university to intervene in politics. External factors, moreover, encouraged him to progressively feminize his framing of the University of Paris in accordance with the university's royally granted title as Daughter of the King. Although he first relied upon this title for the sake of assuring the royal court of the university's dutiful daughterly loyalty and obedience, in his sermon "Let peace come", he employed it as a means of competing with Valentina Visconti for the king's ear and the people's sympathy.

#### RESISTING THE DAUGHTER OF THE KING

In his systematic study of Gerson's reform theology, Louis Pascoe identified "the daughter of the king" as one of Gerson's favorite terms for the University of Paris<sup>16</sup>. The mere use of this term, however, reveals nothing about Gerson's

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14 For the university's understanding of its role in society, see: S. Menache, *La naissance d'une nouvelle source d'autorité. L'université de Paris*, "Revue historique" CCLXXVII (1982), pp. 305-327; O. Lewry, *Corporate Life in the University of Paris. 1249-1418. and the Ending of the Schism*, "Journal of Ecclesiastical History" XL (1989), pp. 511-523; I.P. Wei, *The Masters of Theology at the University of Paris in the Late Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries. An Authority Beyond the Schools*, "Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester" LXXI (1993), pp. 37-63; idem, *The Self-Image of the Master of Theology at the University of Paris in the Late Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries*, "Journal of Ecclesiastical History" XLVI (1995), pp. 398-431. For the university's struggle to overcome the crown's attempt to silence it, see A.E. Bernstein, *Pierre D'Ailly and the Blanchard Affair. University and Chancellor of Paris at the Beginning of the Great Schism*, Leiden 1978, p. 176; and S. Lusignan, *Vérité...*, pp. 179-299.

15 See note 3 above. Philip the Bold and his son John also patronized Gerson. See B.P. McGuire, *Jean Gerson...*, p. 59. Gerson's sermon, however, attempted to take a more measured stance with respect to the murder of Louis than Petit and his cohort. He preached against war without justifying John's crime.

16 L.B. Pascoe, *Jean Gerson. Principles of Church Reform*, in: *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions*, VII, Leiden 1973, p. 81.



personal opinions regarding women or his understanding of the ways in which the university's relationship to the French crown was gendered. Rather, it is highly likely that Gerson had little choice about employing this royally granted title when addressing the crown in the name of the university. The title had been granted to the university as a matter of privilege, and any failure to recognize the title might have seemed ungrateful. This was especially the case because the title reinforced the university's subordinate position. As the king's daughter, the university could not claim to address the crown on the basis of the masculine professional expertise that was so central to its professional identity. Rather, it was forced into a position of dutiful obedience. It accepted this position in exchange for royal support of the special legal and financial privileges the university needed to survive<sup>17</sup>. In fact, a chronological examination of Gerson's political sermons suggests that he applied the title "daughter of the king" to the university only reluctantly and as each particular situation dictated.

For instance, in his earliest political sermons Gerson employed this title sparingly and in a manner that minimized its feminizing effect. Gerson only mentioned the university's title twice in the sermon he preached in 1391 to oppose the crown's plan to remove the Roman papal claimant from the papal throne by force. In the first instance, as a means of limiting the reprisals the university might face for openly challenging royal policy, Gerson reminded the king that proof of his good Christian faith could be found in the favoritism he showed his "very humble and very devout daughter, the University of Paris". He then immediately reasserted the university's masculine institutional identity by explaining that this favoritism showed in the fact that the University of Paris enjoyed more privileges than all other universities and by congratulating the king on his support of the science of theology, which Gerson characterized as necessary to the defense of the faith<sup>18</sup>. These statements served to remind Gerson's audience that although the University of Paris enjoyed the special title of Daughter of the King that it was indeed an institution directed by learned male experts, whose expertise played a crucial role in the governance of the French kingdom.

Gerson's initial refusal to elaborate upon the university's female title as the basis of the university's political authority becomes even more apparent when the appearance of female figures in his 1391 sermon titled "They will

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17 For a comparison of the way clearly the title Daughter of the King feminized and subordinated the university, especially as it was used in the university's appeals to the Parlement of Paris, with Gerson's attempt to use the title to assert the university's authority, see S. Lusignan, *Vérité...*, pp. 268-281.

18 Jean Gerson, *Adorabunt eum*, in: idem, *Oeuvres complètes*, VIIIb, p. 530.

adore Him" (*Adorabunt eum*) is considered. For instance, while encouraging the king to guard his eyes against the sin of false love (*folle amour*), whom Gerson identified as a "harsh mistress" (*dure maistresse*), he recalled that in addition to forcing David to murder Bathsheba's husband, False Love also destroyed Troy through Helen, Samson through Delilah, Marc Anthony through Cleopatra, and "others without number". Although Gerson clearly placed the blame for male sins on the deadly sin of False Love in this passage, he also clearly reduced the women named to objects of temptation<sup>19</sup>.

Gerson's citation of these examples does not necessarily signify misogynist intent. It is possible that he merely chose these examples because he believed they would be the most evocative and readily recognized examples for conveying his message about the dangers kings brought upon their people when they succumbed to sexual sin. Further evidence of Gerson's belief that these examples would be effective can be found in their reappearance in his 1405 sermon titled "Long live the king" (*Vivat rex*) as part of an admonishment against the sin of worldly delight (*delit voluptueux*)<sup>20</sup>. What these examples do demonstrate, however, is Gerson's awareness of a longstanding tradition that negatively viewed the ways in which women could informally influence the behavior of powerful men.

Gerson's tendency towards seeing female influence negatively in 1391 is demonstrated by the treatment of women reputed for their virtue in this same sermon, "They will adore Him". When Gerson evoked the names of reputedly good women, such as the biblical heroines Judith and Esther, he did so only to remind his audience that God had saved his people from seemingly helpless crises in the past, namely "in the time of Judith and Holofernes, in the time of Esther and likewise in the time of the Maccabees"<sup>21</sup>. By reducing the exploits of two famous biblical heroines, Judith and Esther, to evidence of divine mercy, Gerson demonstrated that in 1391 he was not at all tempted to flesh out the informal authority implied by the university's title, Daughter of the King. The only persuasive women whose influence this sermon vividly recalled had brought the men they had persuaded to ruin.

In his 1408/1409 sermon titled "Let peace come", however, Gerson explicitly asserted that the university could be compared to Judith and Esther. When examined from the perspective of his 1391 sermon, the fact that Gerson explicitly embraced Judith and Esther as role models for the university in 1408 or 1409 demonstrates that he consciously decided to accept and elaborate upon the female subject position implicit in the university's title Daughter of

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19 Ibidem, p. 526.

20 Jean Gerson, *Vivat rex*, in: idem, *Oeuvres complètes*, VIIIb, p. 1167.

21 Jean Gerson, *Adorabunt eum*, p. 535.



the King. Judith and Esther, who had played upon the affections of powerful foreign men for the sake of sparing their people from destruction, served as the ultimate role models for royal and aristocratic women who sought to persuade their husbands to live more virtuous public lives<sup>22</sup>. For this reason, Gerson's decision to adopt these female figures as role models for the University of Paris signaled his decision to embrace the female political identity implied by the university's title as Daughter of the King.

#### EMBRACING THE UNIVERSITY'S FEMALE SUBJECT POSITION

Gerson elaborated upon the university's female title gradually and as a result of external consequences that severely limited his rhetorical choices. He first embraced the title as a means of defending the university's privileges in the face of aristocratic violence in 1404. In the fall of 1405, he elaborated upon its meaning for the purpose of affirming the university's loyalty to the crown following a summer of intense civil strife.

The first major development in Gerson's feminization of the university's public persona occurred in a sermon he wrote in 1404 titled "Be merciful" (*Estotes misericordes*). Gerson wrote this sermon because the Parlement of Paris seemed reluctant to punish the Duke of Savoisy for allowing his retainers to attack and injure the participants of a solemn university procession<sup>23</sup>. Gerson responded to this reluctance by casting this episode of aristocratic violence against a clerical institution as the rape of a devout and obedient king's daughter. Ventriloquizing for the university's imaginary female persona, Gerson lamented:

I suffer violence, says the Daughter of the King, and violence, not only in one of my parts and of my members, but in all and through my entire body. And each one already knows this; this detestable deed

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<sup>22</sup> Esther was more frequently celebrated as a mediator than Judith. For Judith and Esther as role models for medieval queens, see: J.A. Smith, *The Earliest Queen-Making Rites*, "Church History" LXVI (1997), pp. 25-26; A.A. Jordan, *Material Girls. Judith. Esther. Narrative Modes and Models of Queenship in the Windows of the Ste-Chapelle in Paris*, "Word & Image. A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry" XV (1999) 4, pp. 337-350. For a contemporary example of Judith and Esther as examples of pious women who saved their people, see B. Cornford, *Christine de Pizan's Ditie de Jehanne d'Arc. Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Charles VII*, "Parergon" XVII (2000) 2, pp. 75-106. For the possibility of Judith and Esther symbolizing the church, see A.A. Jordan, *Material Girls...*, p. 348, n. 8.

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed discussion of the event and the inability to precisely date Gerson's sermon, see L. Tournier, *L'Université de Paris et Charles de Savoisy. Une affaire d'honneur et d'état*, "Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de Paris et de l'Ile-de-France" CXXII-CXXIX (1997), pp. 71-88, especially p. 72, n. 5. For the acceptance of the authenticity of the sermon by Gerson scholars, see L. Mourin, *Jean Gerson...*, p. 165.

is so notorious that if I wished to hide it or conceal it, it would not be possible<sup>24</sup>.

Given the immediate political context, this elaboration upon the university's female title is not surprising. Since Gerson was addressing the Parlement of Paris for the purpose of defending the university's clerical protections against violence, it makes sense that he would deploy the university's title as daughter of the king in the same manner that other university defenders had deployed it in their pleas before the Parlement of Paris since the 1380s. Namely, Gerson used this title to encourage the Parlement to give the university a favorable ruling on the basis of her fictive kin relationship with the king. He even admonished the Parlement to take the public dishonor suffered by the university seriously because "as the honor of the daughter influences the honor of the father, equally, the daughter cannot be dishonored without the dishonor of the father"<sup>25</sup>.

The vividness of the imagery Gerson deployed in recounting "this detestable deed", however, also may have reflected the changing political situation in Paris. Gerson attempted to appeal to his audience's outraged emotions rather than relying upon the Parlement of Paris to enforce the university's royally granted institutional privileges. This strategy reflects, at least in part, the rapidly deteriorating political situation in Paris that had developed because of the king's failing health.

King Charles VI, who had experienced his first bout of temporary insanity in 1392, continued to slip in and out of a competent mental state from that time forward. Since the onset of the king's mental instability, the dukes of Orléans and Burgundy had competed with each other for control of the crown. Duke Philip the Bold of Burgundy had died in the spring of 1404 and tensions between the duke of Orléans and the house of Burgundy had intensified as Philip's son John the Fearless assumed his father's position as duke. John was desperate to defend his father's possessions, royal revenues, and relative power in relationship to Duke Louis of Orléans. Louis was desperate to continue amassing power at John's expense<sup>26</sup>.

The university found itself caught between three claimants of royal power as this conflict evolved. These were the mostly unavailable King Charles VI, John the Fearless of Burgundy, and Louis of Orléans. Savoisy, whose retainers attacked a the university's procession, for instance, enjoyed the patronage

24 Jean Gerson, *Estotes misericordes*, in: idem, *Oeuvres complètes*, VIIa, p. 329.

25 Ibidem, p. 332. For the connection between a father's power and his daughter's honor in late medieval political discourse and marriage practices, see F.H. Stoertz, *Young Women in France and England, 1050-1300*, "Journal of Women's History" XXXIV (2001), pp. 22-46.

26 R.C. Famiglietti, *Royal Intrigue....*, pp. 16-17, 23-37.

of Louis of Orléans<sup>27</sup>. Gerson characterized the university in this situation as an orphan, bereft of the protection of her royal father<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, this characterization was largely accurate. Although the university was mostly powerless to direct the course of the intensifying feud between Louis and John, it could not avoid being swept up into it. As an institution that served to bolster the crown's authority, the university was expected to authenticate royal policies<sup>29</sup>. However, since the university could only discern who was exercising royal power in a given moment but not who would be exercising it in the future, it always risked authenticating policies that favored one or the other contenders in this feud.

This dilemma was further complicated by the fact that Philip the Bold of Burgundy and his son John the Fearless had both presented themselves to the university and the people of Paris as proponents of a type of political reform that would increase urban rights and bring about a more equitable distribution of the tax burden. For this reason, both the university and factions within the city saw John the Fearless, who was Gerson's patron until 1411, as a natural ally<sup>30</sup>. The university, however, could not afford to be seen as a partisan supporter of John without undermining its identity as a representative of the crown, spokesperson for the oppressed people, and a defender of universally valid Christian truth. King Charles VI exacerbated this problem by seeming to fluctuate in his support of both Louis and John as he attempted to pacify their bellicose tendencies<sup>31</sup>. The king had no choice in this matter if he wanted to ensure that the feud between John and Louis did not undermine their loyalty to the crown. This unofficial royal policy, however, left the university and all other royal institutions in a politically vulnerable position.

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27 For the suggestion that the crown attempted to protect Savoisy from punishment, see L. Tournier, *L'Université...*, p. 78.

28 Jean Gerson, *Estotes misericordes*, in: idem, *Oeuvres complètes*, VIIa, p. 327.

29 See n. 13 above.

30 See n. 4 above. For the end of Gerson's financial dependence on John the Fearless, see B.P. McGuire, *Jean Gerson...*, p. 199.

31 For an account of King Charles VI and Queen Isabeau's conscious efforts to negotiate between these two magnates, see T. Adams, *Christine de Pizan. Isabeau of Bavaria. and Female Regency*, "French Historical Studies" XXXII (2009) 1, pp. 1-32, especially pp. 8-15. For the suggestion that such mediation was the central task of maintaining monarchy, see T. Earentight, *Without the Persona...*, pp. 10-15. For the popular idea that nobles could legitimately revolt against a king who infringed upon their rights, see: M. Jones, 'Bons Bretons et Bons Francoys'. *The Language and Meaning of Treason in Later Medieval France*, "Transactions of the Royal Historical Society" XXXII (1982), pp. 93-94; C.D. Fletcher, *Narrative and Political Strategies at the Deposition of Richard II*, "Journal of Medieval History" XXX (2004), pp. 323-341. This belief did not allow for regicide. See G.M. Cropp, A. Hanham, *Richard II from Donkey to Royal Martyr. Perceptions of Eustache Deschamps and Contemporary French Writers*, "Parergon" XXIV (2007) 1, pp. 1-2.



All of the ways in which this situation undermined the university's safety and authority became readily apparent after John the Fearless marched on Paris with an army of 1700 men in the summer of 1405. Fearing a coup, Louis of Orléans and Queen Isabeau fled the city. The Parisians and the University of Paris, having little choice, welcomed John, cooperated with his reform propaganda, and performed processions in his honor. They refused, however, to provide John with military support against Louis<sup>32</sup>. Their cautious and tempered co-operation illustrates the difficult position such royally protected institutions occupied. They were forced to obey the ruler of the moment, while simultaneously preparing themselves to survive any subsequent transitions of power. Such behavior, however, revealed their powerless position and opened them to claims of partisanship once power shifted.

Eager to reaffirm the university's loyalty to the crown in the aftermath of this summer of civil unrest, Gerson relied again upon the university's title as Daughter of the King. In the fall of 1405, he opened one of his most famous political sermons titled "Long live the king" (*Vivat rex*) with the assurance that because the Daughter of the King's "well being, success, honor, care and protection depend upon the king as on a true father", her political intentions could be trusted. As Gerson summed up, "her health is his health"<sup>33</sup>.

Gerson's assurance resonated with a commonly held assumption that unmarried daughters, who relied upon their father's protection of both their physical bodies and their reputations, were understood to be the only individuals their fathers could trust completely. In fact, the French crown had made this exact argument to Richard II of England in the 1390s as it negotiated the marriage between the then six-year-old Isabelle of France to Richard. For instance, in his "Open Letter to King Richard", the court orator Philip of Mézières indicated that because Isabelle was so young, Richard would be like both a father and a husband to her, and as a result, he could be assured that she would be a loyal wife<sup>34</sup>.

### COMPETING FOR THE KING'S EAR

As a matter of course, Gerson's celebration of the Daughter of the King's virtue implicitly contrasted her with the flesh and blood aristocratic women

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32 R.C. Famiglietti, *Royal Intrigue...*, pp. 46-51; T. Adams, *The Life and Afterlife...*, pp. 168-175.

33 Jean Gerson, *Vivat rex*, in: idem, *Oeuvres complètes*, VIIIb, p. 1138.

34 Philippe of Mézières, *Letter to King Richard II. A Plea Made in 1395 for Peace between England and France. Original Text and English Version of Epistre au Roi Richart*, ed. G.W. Coopland, Liverpool 1975.

associated with the French royal court, namely Princess Isabelle of France, Queen Isabeau and Valentina Visconti. Since none of these women had been explicitly identified as advocates of the positions Gerson opposed in his earlier sermons, however, he did not directly oppose the university to these women before writing his sermon "Let peace come". In "Let peace come", however, Gerson subtly identified Valentina Visconti as a proponent of war and negatively contrasted her to the university's personification as the Daughter of the King. In many ways he had little choice. Valentina's role in royal theater surrounding the conflict brought the similarities between her subject position and the university's into high relief. The established discourse of female persuasion then determined that only one of them could be correct.

Although the French royal court had decided to prosecute John by July of 1408, it did not openly announce this decision until Valentina publicly demanded justice. As the *Journal* of Nicolas de Baye, who was a clerk of the Parlement of Paris, reports, Valentina entered the city in a somber funeral procession comprised of individuals and horses draped in black on 28 August 1408. She presented herself at the Louvre to appeal to the king for justice on 5 September 1408, only to be told that the king was indisposed. Then on 11 September 1408, the abbot of Cérisy evoked both Valentina and her son as Louis's aggrieved survivors when he denounced Jean Petit's defense of John the Fearless<sup>35</sup>. Gerson countered this appeal to the people's sympathy for this grieving widow and her children with the insinuation that Valentina's demand for justice derived from a misguided attachment to honor and a confused understanding of what she owed to her dead husband. For this reason, he concluded, her demand for justice actually promoted a type of injustice that would serve the goals of the devil. In short, Gerson pursued peace through the character assassination of the symbolic and actual female leader of the opposing party<sup>36</sup>.

The rhetorical effectiveness of Gerson's decision to contrast the imputed virtue of the university's female persona to Valentina's misguided demand for vengeance depended upon classical and medieval discourses on female persuasion that regularly opposed virtuous women to their seductive counterparts. For instance, Plutarch's *Life of Antony* opposed the virtue of Antony's rejected wife Octavia, to the seductive Cleopatra, suggesting that

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35 R.C. Famiglietti, *Royal Intrigue...*, pp. 63-73; Nicolas de Baye, *Journal de Nicolas de Baye. Greffier du Parlement de Paris 1400-1417*, ed. A. Tuetey, Paris 1885, pp. 238-239, 241-242; A. Coville, *Jean Petit...*, pp. 225-232.

36 Since Valentina's oldest son was a minor, she was the natural leader of the group demanding justice for Louis' death. See K.A. LoPrete, *Women, Gender and Lordship in France, c. 1050-1250*, "History Compass" V-VI (2007), pp. 1921-1941.

had Antony given himself to Octavia instead, he would not have brought himself to ruin<sup>37</sup>. These oppositions were also enshrined in powerful allegorical discourses on the virtues and the vices. Expressions of this tradition include the opposition of Wisdom and Folly in the Book of Proverbs, the opposition of Virtue and Vice described in detail as women dressed modestly and immodestly in Xenophon's account of the temptation of Hercules in the *Memorabilia*, Philo of Alexandria's discussion of the man with two wives in *On the Sacrifices of Abel and Cain*, and Prudentius's *Psychomachia*<sup>38</sup>.

This tradition was so established in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds that a man's reputation and political authority could be seriously damaged by the mere insinuation that the women in his household were inclined to vice. Moralists urged women to use their attractiveness to seduce their husbands to a life of philosophy; publicly performed marital concord announced a man's freedom from political corruption. Early Christian theorists expanded this tradition to include examples found in the Bible. The most significant biblical tradition available to medieval thinkers was of course the opposition of Eve, whose arguments persuaded Adam to sin to the detriment of all humankind, and the Virgin Mary, whose influence upon her son was thought to save contrite sinners from the jaws of hell. Building upon these combined traditions, Christian saints' lives and histories of early medieval Christian kingdoms credited virtuous Christian women, usually the wives of early medieval barbarian kings, with the conversion of their husbands to Christianity. Drawing upon this widespread, firmly established and politically useful tradition, medieval clergy members regularly charged women to plead with their husbands to encourage them to behave in a more Christian and charitable manner<sup>39</sup>.

Medieval queens and noble women also found particular inspiration in Esther, a biblical queen who pleaded successfully with her husband so that he would show mercy on her people. The example of Esther provided medieval rulers with a means of peacefully resolving the recurring tension that

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37 K. Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride. Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 1-19.

38 For Xenophon and Philo's use of women as symbols of virtue and vice, see L. Vinge, *The Five Senses. Studies in a Literary Tradition*, Acta Regiae Societatis Humaniorum Litterarum Lundensis LXXII, Lund 1975, pp. 21-26. For the suggestion that Philo's use of feminine personifications of virtue and vice influenced the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius, see M.W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins. An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept*, East Lansing 1952, pp. 64-65.

39 K. Cooper, *Insinuations of Womanly Influence...*, pp. 150-164; S. Farmer, *Persuasive Voices. Clerical Images of Medieval Wives*, "Speculum" LXI (1986), pp. 517-543.



arose between the political need to punish a rebellious subordinate and the military impossibility of doing so. In these cases, male rulers could pronounce terrifyingly strict sentences in anger and then allow their wives to persuade them to adopt a more merciful and politically sensible position without losing the appearance of being able to punish rebellious subordinates at will<sup>40</sup>.

The public roles assumed by the women of the French court conformed to the expectations created by this aggregate tradition of female persuasion. Queen Isabeau, for instance, often mediated between warring French magnates in a manner that brought about meaningful peace agreements, while the marriage of her six-year old daughter, Isabelle of Valois, to King Richard II of England in 1396 was celebrated as the most promising solution to the ongoing conflict between France and England. In fact, all elite marriage alliances were forged upon the premise that the bride would be able to bring about concord and shared purpose between her natal and married families as the result of her skillful persuasion<sup>41</sup>.

Wives, however, could also always be doubted because their liminal position as members of two families meant that neither family could trust them completely. One of the most intriguing illustrations of the liminal position aristocratic women occupied is the case of Valentina Visconti, the woman whom Gerson opposed in his sermon "Let peace come". Valentina's father, Giangaleazzo Visconti, the duke of Milan, had married her to Louis of Orléans in 1389. He hoped the marriage would ensure that the French court would neither retaliate against him for forcibly removing his rival from the throne of Milan nor prevent the expansion of his territories in Italy. When Valentina's father and the French king started pursuing divergent political strategies, however, Valentina suffered. She was exiled from the French court on the charges that she had bewitched the king, causing his intermittent spells of insanity<sup>42</sup>.

As the natural rallying point of the Armagnac demand that the death of Louis of Orléans be avenged, Valentina occupied a vulnerable position once again, just before her death in December of 1408. This vulnerability was heightened by the role she played in royal propaganda about the decision to punish John. John's increasing military strength encouraged the crown to

40 L.L. Huneycutt, *Intercession and the High-Medieval Queen. The Esther Topos*, in: *Power of the Weak*, eds. J. Carpenter, S.B. MacLean, Urbana-Chicago 1995, pp. 126-146; T. Adams, *The Life and Afterlife...*, pp. 74-88.

41 For a discussion of Queen Isabeau's role as a mediating queen, see: T. Adams, *The Life and Afterlife...*, pp. 89-112; eadem, *Christine de Pizan...*, pp. 1-32, especially pp. 8-15.

42 T. Adams, *The Life and Afterlife...*, pp. 6-7. Valentina had many supporters and detractors. It is significant that while she stayed away from the French royal court that Queen Isabeau continued to send her gifts. See R.C. Famiglietti, *Royal Intrigue...*, pp. 238-239, n. 183.

reconsider its decision to pursue justice. When Gerson activated the Esther topos to present the University of Paris as an advocate for mercy, he presented the royal court with the option of distancing itself from Valentina's position for the purpose of making peace with John. The fact that the court eventually did just this further strengthened Gerson's implicit assertion that the University of Paris would make a much better informal adviser to the French crown than the noble women who had regular access to the magnates of the realm by nature of their kinship relations<sup>43</sup>.

### UNIVERSITY AS ESTHER

Gerson's decision to openly oppose Valentina is readily apparent in the framing he chose for his sermon. This framing pairs one of Gerson's most aggressively authoritative depictions of the University of Paris as the Daughter of the King, which opens the sermon, with a detailed description of the biblical wise woman of Tekoa, who is the central figure in the sermon's conclusion. Whereas Gerson's previous depictions of the University of Paris as the Daughter of the King had emphasized her daughterly submission and loyalty, Gerson's deployment of this figure in 1408 emphasized the Daughter of the King's independence and prophetic authority. Rather than focusing upon her adoptive kinship with the French king, Gerson emphasized her divine parentage. When combined with Gerson's association of Esther with the widow of Tekoa, this framing device served to undermine Valentina's claims to authority, and as a result, the political position she represented.

Gerson explained that "the Daughter of the King, the teacher of truth, the mother and fountain of all studies, the beautiful and clear light of the very noble and very Christian kingdom of France" demanded peace because she was the daughter of the King of Peace, namely God. Following this introduction, he asserted that the peaceable are considered "sons of God" and the seditious, "sons of the enemy". Then, mirroring his previous sermons in a manner that challenged royal authority, Gerson described a tearful Daughter of the King imploring God, rather than the French king, to deliver his Christian people from peace. Only then, did he observe that the Daughter of the King had decided to address the French royal court because she had determined that sermons and solemn processions were not enough<sup>44</sup>.

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43 The king publicly pardoned John on 9 March 1409 and at the same time forced Louis's surviving sons to swear they had banished vengeance from their hearts. Famiglietti suggests that Valentina's death the previous December made it easier for the king to pardon John. See R.C. Famiglietti, *Royal Intrigue...*, pp. 73-75.

44 Jean Gerson, *Veniat pax*, in: idem, *Oeuvres complètes*, VIIb, pp. 1100-1102.



This opening statement implicitly threatened the crown with a loss of the university's support. In addition to claiming God rather than the French king as the university's father, Gerson identified the Daughter of the King with Athena and "all philosophers of this university since the beginning of the world"<sup>45</sup>. These references to the Greek goddess of wisdom and a long lineage of previous philosophers evoked a trope often used by members of the University of Paris in their negotiations with the king for authority and power. This trope argued that divinely granted wisdom followed divinely granted imperium. In other words, if the king failed to recognize his Christian responsibility, the university, as the representative of divine wisdom, would abandon him, indicating that he had lost his divinely granted power to rule<sup>46</sup>. Although Gerson briefly identified the university as the king's "humble and willing servant by worthy adoption" immediately following these assertions, he had already claimed a nearly prophetic clarity of thought for the University of Paris that would suggest that if the king were to disagree with the university, he would certainly be excluding himself from the company of sons of God<sup>47</sup>.

Gerson made a similar assertion about the university's moral clarity in the conclusion of his sermon by recounting in detail the interaction between the widow of Tekoa and King David (2 Samuel 14). Gerson explicitly stated that he found this story so appropriate to the situation in France that it was worth recounting in detail. He then explained how the king's servant Joab reconciled King David with his son Absalom, who had murdered his brother Amnon and then fled the kingdom. Joab, demonstrating a keen awareness of the same politics of female persuasion that made Valetina's public plea for justice so effective, enlisted the help of the wise old woman of Tekoa. He instructed her to approach the king in a visible state of mourning and to lament to him about her wretched fate. She did this, explaining to the king that she was a widow whose two sons had fought each other until one of them was dead and the other faced execution at the hands of his own kin. This strategy was successful. When the widow shared her fears of the profound loneliness she would face after the execution of her last immediate family member, King David, promised that no harm would come to her only surviving son. She then explained that it was the king's own situation of which she spoke and begged the king to make peace with his son as a means of protecting his people from further suffering. This argument convinced the King to allow his son Absalom to return<sup>48</sup>.

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45 Ibidem, p. 1101.

46 S. Lusignan, *Vérité...*, pp. 225-277.

47 Jean Gerson, *Veniat pax*, in: idem, *Oeuvres complètes*, VIIb, p. 1101.

48 Ibidem, pp. 1119-1120.



Curiously, this exchange between David and the wise woman did not readily serve Gerson's purposes. This is because David immediately realized that Joab had commanded the wise woman to perform her grief in front of him and when confronted with the king's suspicion, the wise woman admitted that Joab had "put all these words into the mouth of your maidservant" (2 Samuel 14:19). This admission would seemingly align the male theologians of the University of Paris, who hoped to advise the crown in a masculine and official capacity, with Joab and not the wise woman. Gerson, however, prevented such an interpretation by explicitly associating the university with the widow of Tekoa in a manner that also explicitly co-opted the persuasive position that Valentina had assumed for the University of Paris. He explained the relationship of the university to the male members of the French royal court as follows:

One may compare the University of Paris, not only to Judith and to Esther, who placed themselves in danger of death for the peace of their people, but also to this wise woman from Tekoa, who is interpreted as a buccin or trumpet. The University is wise as one knows, and it is the buccin of truth. Each good lord or knight who loves the king of France according to the example of Joab, who loved David his king, may send this wise woman, with approval and recognition, to speak of peace<sup>49</sup>.

Thus drawing upon the long tradition of measuring a man's virtue by the women whose company he kept and, as a result, whose influence he welcomed, Gerson separated the magnates of the French realm into two groups. On the one hand, there were those who loved peace and as a result authenticated the efforts made by the University of Paris to foster peace within France and within the Church. On the other, there were the seditious "sons of the enemy", whom Gerson had identified in the first paragraph of his sermon. The logic of Gerson's argument implied that in the particular instance regarding the punishment of John the Fearless, these sons of the enemy were those nobles who supported Valentina Visconti's demand for justice.

## SILENCING THE WIDOW

Considering the way that Gerson framed his sermon in dialogue with existing political debates about punishing John, and, more importantly, with an existing royal performance of that debate, it is not necessary to assume that his implied opposition of the wise woman of Tekoa and Valentina reflects any personal animosity towards Valentina. In fact, if Gerson's references to

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<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, p. 1120.

Valentina's role in the crown's decision to punish John had been limited to the sermon's gendered frame, it would be possible to argue that the sermon contained an accidental rather than a sustained critique of Valentina's character and authority. Gerson, however, more aggressively undercut Valentina's authority in the body of the sermon by casting her both as an embodiment of the dangerous vice Fury and as a sinful silly woman, whose narcissistic concerns prevented her from recognizing how her behavior affected the health of the kingdom.

Gerson associated Valentina with the vice of Fury during the course of a debate he imagined occurring within what he called the Parlement of his mind. In this debate, Reason, who usually represented the University of Paris, forwarded twelve sound arguments for peace, only to be countered by Retribution (*affliction la rigoreuse*), who demanded justice in a loud voice. Characterizing her as "the harsh step-mother of humanity", Gerson mobilized the personification of Retribution for the purpose of rendering war unpalatable to his audience. Retribution, as he explained, who was "accompanied by poverty, rage, hunger, and thirst", fulfilled two functions. The first was to punish for the sake of destroying, and the second was to punish with the intent of encouraging the sinful to amend their ways<sup>50</sup>. She embodied the very ruthlessness the French magnates would have to embrace if they decided to pursue the long civil war that would be necessary to punish John.

Gerson debated Retribution with the intent of destabilizing the moral certainty that would be needed to fuel such ruthlessness. Although Gerson introduced Retribution as an agent of divine will, who was brought to life only by the conjunction of the wicked will of humans and the activity of the devil, he questioned the validity of her uncompromising demand for justice in the case at hand. Noting that absolute justice served peace, he argued that when the pursuit of justice required war, it was injustice rather than justice<sup>51</sup>. By aggressively challenging the assertions made by the apparition of Retribution he encountered in his imagination, Gerson insinuated that she was something other than she seemed. This insinuation allowed him to perform obedience to the magnates who were intent upon punishing John without retreating from his uncompromising moral and ecclesiastical opposition to war with John. In fact, he told them that if they were sure that they had a case against peace on behalf of Lady Retribution, they should take that case to someone else. He would think only of peace<sup>52</sup>. Similarly, although he assured his audience

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50 Ibidem, pp. 1107-1108.

51 Ibidem, pp. 1108-1109.

52 Ibidem, p. 1109.

that he spoke only for peace and not against justice, he had already indicated quite clearly in his argument with Retribution that because justice served peace, John could not be punished in the name of true justice<sup>53</sup>. Finally, he admitted to undertaking these rhetorical moves consciously. As he explained to his princely audience, "by such a figurative manner of speaking" he had hoped "to convey that the Daughter of the King wishes neither to prescribe or proscribe retributive justice for one party or another" because she is in agreement with royal authority. Rather than trying to usurp authority, he explained, the Daughter of the King only advocated for peace, "because it is so desired, so religious, so worthy, so amiable, and so fruitful, so honorable and so glorious"<sup>54</sup>.

When considered in light of his imaginary debate with Retribution, Gerson's explanation for his figurative language indicates that he argued with an imaginary impersonation of divine Retribution because he could not argue directly with Valentina. By casting doubt on all of the arguments that could be made in the name of retributive justice and personifying Retribution as he did, however, Gerson cast doubt upon the motivations behind Valentina's solemn entrance into Paris and the justifications for punishing John that the Abbot of Cérisy forwarded in her name. Furthermore, in case the princes remained uncertain about whether or not Gerson had given them permission to wage war, he followed up his apology for treating Retribution so dismissively with an uncompromising condemnation of war.

This condemnation added weight to Gerson's subtle suggestion that the figure he had debated had been of a diabolical rather than a divine nature. He had, after all, explicitly opposed this figure's arguments to the arguments of Reason. By association, he had also explicitly demonized the position forwarded by Valentina. Gerson framed his condemnation of war with the example of the sacrifice Jesus made when He assumed the guilt of all sinners and then suffered a painful death for the sake of their salvation<sup>55</sup>. In contrast to the example of Christ's generosity, Gerson then reflected upon how the devil delighted in war because war allowed him to collect souls in bulk, namely city-by-city and empire-by-empire rather than one-by-one. For this reason, Gerson explained, the "desire to murder all at once is the desire of the devil and those who delight themselves in war and in division for gain or for vengeance have a similar desire"<sup>56</sup>.

By asserting so forcefully that vengeance could only be diabolical in nature, Gerson deconstructed any possible argument the crown could

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53 Ibidem, pp. 1109, 1113-1114.

54 Ibidem, pp. 1109-1110.

55 Ibidem, p. 1110.

56 Ibidem, pp. 1110-1111.



make for punishing John in the name of justice. Through this move, he reduced the murder of Louis of Orléans to a matter of blood feud rather than a matter of royal authority. Blood feud, however, was one of the strongest organizing forces of late medieval French politics<sup>57</sup>. For this reason, Gerson had to undermine Valentina's pleas for justice in accordance with her personal relationship with her husband as well as in accordance with official propaganda regarding the exercise of royal power. He did this by ventriloquizing for the souls of French princes in purgatory.

Through the speech of unnamed souls in purgatory, Gerson rebuked Valentina explicitly. Noting that those in purgatory participated in divine charity and thus were unable to wish other souls ill, Gerson explained that wars hurt these souls by robbing them of the prayers and masses they needed to shorten their punishment and win their way to heaven. For this reason, these souls cry out to their friends on earth, asking them to do good deeds that will lessen rather than increase the suffering of these souls<sup>58</sup>. In particular, these souls rebuked "women and children" against "adding evil upon evil", asking them how causing "thousands or hundreds of thousands of evils" to avenge one death can possibly help the dead soul in question<sup>59</sup>. Having skillfully rebuked Valentina's demand for justice with the stated needs of dead souls including that of her dead husband, Gerson countered the last remaining justification for war, namely family honor. He then contrasted the now seemingly petty demand for justice with the university's and the French church's cry for charity, mercy, and peace.

Valentina, however, was not the only proponent of honor-driven feuding in late medieval France. Her appeal for justice had only been symbolically effective because it resonated with the values of the nobility as a class. Even if Louis did not want his wife to pursue the feud with John for his sake, John's violation of a shared code of honor required that John be punished. Gerson navigated this challenge, however, by gendering the demand for vengeance as female and encouraging the princes to separate themselves from this demand. Reinforcing his uncompromising condemnation of war, he reached out to the princes.

Noting that those who pillage are "worse than unbelievers and servants of the devil" because "their meat is the innocent blood and human flesh of poor people", he appealed to masculine reason. Observing that, as "good knights and squires", they knew that "good chivalry" and "good religious conscience" demonstrated that peace within the kingdom was so much better than war,

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57 For the suggestion that feud rather than centralized rule was the political norm in late medieval Europe, see T. Adams, *The Life and Afterlife...*, pp. 89-92.

58 Jean Gerson, *Veniat pax*, in: idem, *Oeuvres complètes*, VIIb, pp. 1111-1112.

59 Ibidem, p. 1112.

he asked them to consider the good of their wives and children. "There is no more beautiful a heritage that you could leave to your children, no more rich a dower that you could leave to your wives if they survive", he admonished, "than peace"<sup>60</sup>.

Through the cumulative effect of all of these arguments, Gerson converted Valentina from an aspiring voice of social conscience demanding the just punishment of a cold-blooded killer into a helpless and misguided widow in need of charity. By addressing her explicitly and dismissively, he feminized and belittled his opponents' demands for vengeance. Although he did not explicitly associate Valentina with the figure Retribution, he insinuated that her demands served the needs of the devil and, as a result, allowed the frightening characteristics he had ascribed to Retribution to settle on Valentina. By associating Valentina's demands for justice with the destruction of war and likening the pursuit of war for the sake of retribution to "a body, which for the loss of one of its fingers, cruelly tears itself into pieces", Gerson associated Valentina with irrational rage, or the deadly vice Fury<sup>61</sup>. Finally, by contrasting this rage with the example of Christ, Gerson explicitly denied vengeance any place in a Christian polity.

This examination of the details of Gerson's argument demonstrates that Gerson discredited Valentina for the purpose of undermining feud politics, which threatened the survival of royally sponsored institutions like the University of Paris, as well as hospitals, charitable institutions, religious orders, and churches. These institutions could not thrive in a state of constant civil war<sup>62</sup>. He did so, moreover, for the purpose of promoting the kind of peace that would both allow the Church to recover from the papal schism and allow the poor people of France to live lives free of unnecessary violence and poverty. In other words, it would be difficult to argue that Gerson wrote his sermon, "Let peace come", in order to pursue a misogynist agenda.

In fact, Gerson singled out Valentina because she already played an important role in the royal debates about John's fate. As the natural leader of the Armagnac faction and one of the plaintiffs in the Abbot of Cérisy's rebuttal of the Burgundian position, she invited attack. In making this attack, moreover, Gerson pursued the most effective tactic. He attributed the Armagnac demand for justice to the misguided and isolated opinion of a furious, misguided, and narcissistic widow and her minor sons. He then

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, p. 1115.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, p. 1117. For a comparison of classical treatments of furor, which characterize it as a feminine vice, with more egalitarian treatments of the vice in early French Romance, see N. Margolis, *Flamma. Furor. and the Fol'amors. Fire and Feminine Madness from the Aeneid to the Roman d'Eneas*, "Romanic Review" LXXVIII (1987) 2, pp. 131-147.

<sup>62</sup> Jean Gerson, *Veniat pax*, in: idem, *Oeuvres complètes*, VII, p. 1115.



discredited her opinion as a means of discrediting feud violence in general. The weight of his argument, however, implied that only foolish women valued vengeance. For this reason, male rulers, who understood the value of peace and loved their king, would follow and publicly support the advice of the University of Paris, the Daughter of the King of Peace. In short, he equated the structural forces that compelled European aristocrats towards constant feuding with the wrong kind of female persuasion.

This association between feuding and female persuasion allowed Gerson to imply that the University of Paris could better fill the advisory roles that were occupied by aristocratic women. Considering the informal, substantial, and negotiated nature of aristocratic women's power in this time period, Gerson's sermon attempted to make what can only be characterized as a misogynist intervention into practical theories of lordship. Noting, however, that Gerson crafted this argument in dialogue with existing discourses and the public performances of a powerful aristocratic woman, Valentina, supports Theresa Earenfight's argument against reading medieval clerical texts that disparaged women's ruling abilities as accurate reflections of either aristocratic sentiment or the authority individual royal or noblewomen could exercise in a given reign or moment. In fact, instead of demonstrating the subordinate position of medieval aristocratic women, Gerson's sermon demonstrates both the politically weak position of the University of Paris and his willingness to use all available rhetorical tools to improve that position. For this reason, the sermon suggests that gender, like lordship, is made and remade in daily negotiations over power and influence<sup>63</sup>. Moreover, as the example of Gerson indicates, these negotiations were often driven by concerns far removed from the participants' feelings about woman as a category, despite their subsequent role in shaping women's experience and public roles.

#### ABSTRACT

Desperate to interject rational arguments into a political situation that was quickly devolving into civil war, the influential Parisian intellectual, Jean Gerson, elaborated fruitfully upon the university's royally granted title as daughter of the king. In this manner, he created a place for the university in royal deliberations despite the magnates' general distrust of unsolicited academic advice. Significantly, he did so in dialogue with the example of female persuasive power he saw both in the actions of Queen Isabeau and in the actions of Valentina Visconti, Duchess of Orléans. The university had built a dependent, privileged, and subordinate royal persona out of its title as daughter of the king during the course of its legal pleas before the Parlement of Paris. Gerson, however, associated this persona with more authoritative female roles such as mother or widow. Moreover, his elaborations upon the university's authority as

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63 See T. Earenfight, *Without the Persona...*, pp. 12-13; K.A. LoPrete, *Women...*, p. 1929.



Daughter of the King explicitly mirrored the particular authority claims forwarded by the queen as mother of the royal children and Valentina Visconti as widow of the king's brother. At the same time, Gerson insisted that the prophetic female persona he constructed for the university possessed a masculine and other worldly ability to discern truth that separated her from the real women who both inspired her creation and served, to some extent, as her competition. My examination of this elaborate male-female prophetic hybrid locates the University of Paris and the royal women on a grid of political power. In particular, it reveals their relationships to each other, identifies the shared vulnerabilities that encouraged them to use the same authentication strategies, and explains the crown's dependence upon their actions.