

THE EDUCATION OF NOBLE GIRLS IN MEDIEVAL FRANCE: VINCENT OF  
BEAUVAIS AND *DE ERUDITIONE FILIORUM NOBILIUM*

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ABSTRACT

The educational treatise by Vincent of Beauvais (1184/1194-1264), *De eruditione filiorum nobilium* (On the Education of Noble Girls), was the first medieval educational text to both systematically present a comprehensive method of instruction for lay children and to include a section devoted to girls. Vincent also included many details supporting his theories of education within his most famous work, the massive encyclopedia the *Speculum maius* (The Great Mirror). The first three books of the third volume, the *Speculum doctrinale* (The Mirror of Doctrine), deal directly with pedagogical issues. Subsequent books within this volume address subjects pertinent to discussions in *De eruditione*. Vincent planned for *De eruditione* to be part of a greater work, an *Opus universale de statu principis* (Universal Work on the Royal Condition), a guideline for the governance of the French realm that would provide instructions for the behaviors and duties of the prince, his family, and his court. Even before beginning his educational treatise Vincent had begun to determine the various roles that the king, his family, and his courtiers would play both at court and in governing the kingdom. Vincent planned to

write three volumes of political manuals that would record his theories of governance. Together with *De eruditione*, they would form the four volume *Opus*; however, he only completed the first of the political manuals, *De morali principis institutione* (On the Foundations of Royal Morals), a guideline for the king to use as the head of the royal domain.

*De morali* reflects ideas about kingship current at the time that Vincent wrote. For several generations French kings had slowly been establishing a type of administrative kingship, a governmental structure that was less feudal, more centralized, with a stronger monarchy supported by an incipient bureaucracy. Vincent's patron, King Louis IX of France (1214-1270), actively continued this process during his reign. A close reading of the *Speculum* shows that Vincent included material that reinforced the transition to administrative kingship. Although *De morali* concentrates on the king's responsibilities and the role he would play in the new government structure, within it are clues to the behaviors that Vincent expected from others at court. Specifically, he virtually eliminated the duties of the powerful Capetian queens. Since *De eruditione* was the last volume of the *Opus*, Vincent almost certainly wrote it in part to train royal children to fit their new roles. Applying the principles of *De eruditione* to the education of boys would create the ideal king defined in *De morali*. Vincent's proposals for girls' education went against traditional Capetian practice, especially the strong roles that queens and noble women played in government and in training their children. Instead, matching the reduced role for royal women in *De morali*, girls educated according to the instructions provided in *De eruditione* would no longer be fit to participate in the governmental functions they had previously so adequately filled, or provide the education their children needed. Thus,

examining the details of Vincent's proposals for female education through placing *De eruditione* within the scope of his overall work shows that Vincent was not simply providing advice about women's edification and spiritual improvement, but that he wanted to form women fit to participate in his larger concept for the governance of the kingdom, a concept that matched Louis IX's own goals. Fully implementing Vincent's educational goals would have advanced administrative kingship, but at the expense of French queens and with the loss of the skills these women had often brought to support their husbands and sons in administering the French realm. However, by including women in the discussion of education, in even a limited way, he set the stage for later pedagogues to advance women's educational opportunities and within a few centuries the number of learned women increased significantly.