GENDERED KNOWING IN DHUODA’S LIBER MANUALIS

CONHECIMENTO DE GÊNERO IN DHUODA’S LIBER MANUALIS

Joseph Pucci
Brown University

Abstract: Dhuoda is well-known as the author of the Liber manualis, a ninth-century “princely mirror” written for her son, William. While much has been made of the fact that she emphasizes in the Liber her weakness as a woman and her rights as a mother, little attention has been devoted to the ways in which Dhuoda articulates a kind of knowing based on her gender and maternity. I therefore explore in this paper several moments in the Liber in which Dhuoda would seem to insist on a gendered way of knowing the world. These moments allow readers to understand more fully Dhuoda’s project as one both grounded in the traditions of the Christian handbook and the princely mirror, but also written on its own terms, as a record of a feminine way of knowing just as important as Christian truth or noble action plied in the world of powerful men.

Keywords: Gender, Dhuoda, Liber Manualis

Resumo: Dhuoda é conhecido como o autor do Liber manualis, um “espelho principesco” do século IX escrito para seu filho, William. Embora muito tenha sido feito do fato de que ela enfatiza no Liber sua fraqueza como mulher e seus direitos como mãe, pouca atenção tem sido dedicada às maneiras pelas quais Dhuoda articula um tipo de conhecimento baseado em seu gênero e maternidade. Eu, portanto, exploro neste artigo vários momentos no Liber nos quais Dhuoda parece insistir em uma maneira de conhecer o mundo por meio do gênero. Esses momentos permitem que os leitores entendam mais completamente o projeto de Dhuoda como um dos fundamentos das tradições do manual cristão e do espelho principesco, mas também escritos em seus próprios termos, como um registro de um feminino modo de saber tão importante quanto a verdade cristã ou a ação nobre que se infiltrou no mundo de homens poderosos.

Palavras-chave: Gênero, Dhuoda, Liber Manualis

The details of Dhuoda’s tragic life are reported in some detail in her Liber Manualis. That she was married in 824 (as she records in the Liber) allows one to posit a birth year of c. 805, while the evidence bearing on her birthplace points to what is now northern Germany (although France cannot be ruled out).

1 Her name is Germanic, on which see P. Dronke, Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (d. 203 to Marguerite Porete (d. 1310) (Cambridge, 1984), p. 37.
have hailed from a prominent, if not distinguished, family since her husband, Bernard of Septimania, was a close confidante, and second cousin, of Louis the Pious (re. 814-840), whose father, Charlemagne, had stood as Bernard’s godfather. Louis himself attended the couple’s wedding, which was held in Aachen, the imperial capital, in the Emperor’s private chapel. Dhuoda brought much to her marriage and would in time become a shrewd and talented proxy for her husband during his frequent absences.

Bernard, in turn, made an early name for himself as a military leader by defending the Spanish March, in consequence of which in 831 Louis appointed him Chamberlain, which wedded his fortunes ever the closer to those of the Emperor. In the meantime, Dhuoda gave birth, in 826, to a son, named William, at some point after which she and William were sent to live in southern France, in Uzès. In his role as Chamberlain, Bernard was involved in the struggles of Louis the Pious against his scheming sons, who were regularly at odds with, and eventually waged war on, their father and each other. Louis had not even been dead a year when one of his sons, Charles the Bald, began fighting in earnest for control of the empire, a mere 17 year-old whose youth ensured his endurance but also fuelled an arrogant zealousness.

Hostility toward Bernard’s family was not hard to come by, nor was it exclusively the domain of Charles. Already Bernard’s sister, Gerberga had suffered a violent death at the hands of Lothar, Charles brother, who accused her of sorcery, sealed her in a wine cask, and threw her into the Saone. To this was added the widely circulated rumor that Bernard had carried on an affair with Charles’ mother, the Empress Judith. In this highly-charged setting, Bernard returned to Uzès in 840, reunited with Dhuoda long enough to impregnate her a second time, and then traveled north to pay homage to the king, a necessity attending to the fact that Bernard had not assisted Charles during the battle of Fontenay, in which the young king, with the aid of his brother Louis, defeated their brothers Pippin and Lothar. Moreover, as an earnest of his good will toward the mercurial young king in the face of his current ascendancy, Bernard handed over his son, William, to Charles’

---

2 William was named after his illustrious paternal grandfather, William, Count of Toulouse, known also as St. William of the Desert.
safekeeping, in effect making William a hostage to the king’s caprice. Moreover, when Dhuoda’s second son was born, in 841, Bernard holed that child up in Aquitaine, at a stronghold surrounded by bishops and nobles loyal to him, presumably as a safeguard to the family’s future fortunes.

Amidst the obvious bereavements occasioned by the separation from her two sons, one of whom was a mere infant, Dhuoda struck on the idea of composing a book in which she might record for William those things she would teach him were he still under her care. This book, the so-called Liber Manualis, belongs generically to two kinds of writing: the handbook tradition of a kind represented by Augustine’s Enchiridion, offering instruction in how to live a life in service to God; and the Furstenspiegel, or “princely mirrors,” a tradition of writing extolling the ideals of noble living in the here and now. Yet there are important differences separating Dhuoda’s Liber from other, especially Carolingian, handbooks and princely mirrors. In particular, as I hope to suggest in what follows, Dhuoda stresses in her Liber the unique qualities attending her gender, not least the access it brings to a certain way of perceiving the world, that is to say, a gendered way of knowing it. Many have thought about the ways in which Dhuoda presents herself in gendered terms, emphasizing her maternity while acknowledging her weakness. But I hope to expand on that general sense of the Liber by exploring a series of moments in the work that ramify the specific kind of knowledge Dhuoda claims to possess and, further, its importance in the training of her absent son. It is not simply that Dhuoda emphasizes her status as a mother, weak though she might be, but also that she affirms a unique power to understand the world in ways only she can teach.

I hope it will become clear that I am not superimposing onto Dhuoda’s Manual a category of analysis that is not itself found there. On the contrary: the

---

3 The full title of the work is Liber manualis Dhuodane quem ad filium suum transmisit Wilhelmum.
conclusion to the incipit of the Liber, written in the name of the Trinity, announces an interest in gender in bold and, in my view, in no uncertain terms:

Cernens plurimas cum suis in saeculo gaudere proles . . . o fili Wilhelme . . . hoc opusculum . . . dirigo . . . quod, si absens sum corpore . . . libellis tibi ad mentem reducat quid erga me . . . debeas agere.

(Incip. Lib. 4-10)

Seeing that this is a time in which many women take joy in their children and are able to be with them . . . oh, my son William . . . I am sending . . . this little book to you . . . because, if I am absent in body, nonetheless this little book will draw your mind back to those things you are obliged to do on my behalf.7

The first two words are of interest in this vein. Cernens suggests mental discernment and perception,8 and clearly designates a kind of knowing specific to Dhuoda, while plurimas further specifies the objects of her discernment, viz., the women of Dhuoda’s day who have not been separated from their children amidst the depredations of political turmoil. Both words betoken a unilaterally gendered perspective on experience, that is, the perspective of a woman taking stock of her situation specifically as a mother.

Nor is diction the only important marker of gender in the Liber’s bold opening. By composing her work in the mixed style, Dhuoda also emphasizes through the alternation of prose and poetry modes of expression that contrast rational, that is masculine, and emotive, that is feminine knowing simultaneously.9 The form of Dhuoda’s Liber thus can be understood to affirm the masculine world of power while simultaneously pressuring that world through a way of knowing that privileges a feminine and specifically maternal perspective.

The ways in which the mixed style speaks to masculine and feminine kinds of knowing is ramified in the epigrammatic poem that follows the incipit. For

---

6 My text is Riché, Dhuoda, a revised and enlarged version of the 1991 edition (which itself expanded on the original 1975 version), all of which have Latin facing French translations.
7 English translations are my own except where otherwise indicated.
8 OLD, p. 302, s.v. cerno, especially 5, 6, 7.
Dhuoda makes this opening poem an acrostic, that is, a poem which, much like the mixed style, offers two distinctive narrative modes. After all, the acrostic is read across the horizontal axis, as any text is normally read, but the vertical axis also reveals a less obvious, but no less important, message. Formed from the first letters of the first words of the hexametrical lines of the poem is a private message from mother to son: Dhuoda dilecto filio Wilhelmo salutem lege: “Dhuoda to her beloved son William, greetings, read.” The power of the poem’s feminine voice is perhaps increased, too, given that it is written not in classical quantities but rather in accentual verses based on Germanic poetry that also reflect Dhuoda’s presumed native Germanic language. These lines thus gesture William, as they do Dhuoda’s readers, toward the speech patterns of Dhuoda herself in the words of this opening piece and their placement.

Several thematic aims are set into play in the incipit and the opening acrostic. Already having affirmed the unique perspective of her treatise as grounded in the discernment of a mother, Dhuoda has now ratified her opening gambit in two further ways: by exploiting the mixed style that contrasts modes of narrative with ways of knowing; and by confecting a poem that itself offers two contrasting ways of knowing, one more straightforwardly apprehended on the horizontal axis, the other more obscurely resident on the vertical pole.

Dhuoda goes on a few lines later in her prologue to think more carefully about her way of knowing as she fleshes out some of its implications:

Multis plura patent, mihi tamen latent, meae quoque similes, obscuro sensu, carent intellectu, si minus dicam, plus ego . . . Dhuoda quanquam in fragili sensu, inter dignas vivens indigne, tamen genetrix tua, fili Wilhelme, ad te nunc meus sermo dirigitur manialis . . . ut . . . hunc libellum a me tibi directum frequenter legere . . . velut in speculis atque tabulis ioco . . . .

(Prol. 1-3; 5-8; 14-16)

Many things are patent to many people that are hidden from me, and there are those like me with a hidden sense, lacking intellect, so that if I say less, I say more . . . . Although I have a fragile sense and live unworthily among worthy women, still I am your mother, William, my son, and I am sending you now the discourse of my

---

10 See Dronke, Women Writers, p. 88.
Dhuoda characterizes her way of perceiving the world in several discrete ways. First, she contrasts her kind of knowing to the perceptions of the many, for whom, she says, “many things are patent” ([multis plura patent] that are “hidden from me” ([mihi tamen latent]). She also insists on the fact that she lacks intellect ([carent intellectu]) but possesses a “hidden sense” ([obscurat sensu]) of things. Finally, she goes on to assert that she is an unworthy woman living among worthy women, as she points yet again to her maternity ([genetrix]) and to the larger purposes of writing from the perspective of a mother.

These self-described qualities of perception help Dhuoda further to insist on a gendered way of knowing. [Intellectus] suggests the faculty of reason and reason’s discourse, a masculine kind of knowing; whereas [sensus], especially a [sensus obscuratus], suggests emotion, something less rational and more intuitive, and therefore something more uniquely feminine. This is perhaps more clearly emphasized by Dhuoda in her insistence that she is possessed of a “fragile sense” ([fragile sensu]) of things. This is so precisely because this “sense” is uniquely feminine, engaging as it does with a kind of knowledge that lacks [intellectus], cast apart from the world of reason and reason’s discourse, involving instead other, more rarified kinds of knowing. Dhuoda goes on, finally, to equate these feminine ways of knowing to peering into a mirror or playing a board game, which, apart from being regular activities meant to suggest the frequency with which the [Liber] should be read, also betoken a kind of ponderous attention that involves examination and reflection.\textsuperscript{11}

One instance in the Prologue, however, goes perhaps most powerfully to ramify the ways in which Dhuoda is possessed of a unique kind of knowing. When Dhuoda avers in the Prologue’s first sentence that “if I say less, I say more” ([si minus dicam, plus ego]) she draws on 2 Cor. 11:23 for her diction\textsuperscript{12}: [ministri Christi sunt].

---

\textsuperscript{11} Dhuoda returns to this metaphor at [Lib. Man. 1.7.15-18].
\textsuperscript{12} As Riché, [Dhuoda, p. 80, n. 1, suggests].
minus sapiens dico plus ego . . . ; “they are ministers of Christ and I speak as one who is less wise, but I am more . . . .” One translator renders Dhuoda’s phrase this way: “If I say that they (the translator’s emphasis) lack understanding, all the more do I.  

Riché has this sense of Dhuoda’s words: moi plus qu’elles, et c’est trop peu dire.

But as much as Dhuoda would seem to rely on Paul’s diction in this phrase, she also allows herself to be understood on her own terms. As a reader of scripture she certainly culls the sense in which Paul claims that he is “more.” For Paul’s point is that though he is less wise than the ministers of Christ he has just mentioned, he “is more” (plus ego) in the work he has done for Christ, that is to say, in the jails he has slept in, the beatings he has endured, in the deaths he has witnessed. Though he is less wise, he is lesser than no man in suffering. This would seem to be Dhuoda’s point also: she may say less than learned figures, but she has suffered more than most. Moreover, in saying less, as my translation suggests, she is able to say more precisely because the form her knowledge takes is, as she has already admitted, sometimes obscure, a function of her fragility, beholden to hidden perceptions, and communicated, as in the case of the acrostic poem, in ways that exploit alternate modes of expression. To say less can be, and often is, to say more.

The Preface to Dhuoda’s Liber offers further perspectives on a gendered way of perceiving the world, taking up the masculine world of power by placing William in the context of his birthright, recalling the details of Dhuoda’s marriage and aspects of her biography, her brief life with her husband, William’s birth, and the birth of the infant Bernard. In these lines Dhuoda is careful to contrast the harsh world of Carolingian power to her own increasing infirmities. The burdens of this masculine world, associated in her telling with kings and princes, deaths, battles, and other depredations, lead her to sound the alarm of doom.

She declares, for example, that “with the miseries and calamities of this world growing and increasing, amid the many vicissitudes and discords of the kingdom, it happened that the emperor went the way of all worldly things...” (Voluente et crescent calamitate huius saeculi miseria, inter multas fluctuaciones et discordias regni,

13Thiébaux, Dhuoda, p. 47.
14Riché, Dhuoda, p. 81.
imperator . . . viam omnium isse non dubium est; Praef. 10-12). Scenes such as this, powerful in their own right rhetorically, allow Dhuoda the chance to contrast carefully the world of power to her own personal world and her view of it—in which she continues to lack intellectus, a lack that makes stark the beginning of her work proper, whose focus shifts from the masculine world of power to topics more akin to Dhuoda’s way of knowing.

The Liber proper begins with a phrase, Diligendus est Deus atque laudandus, "God must be loved and praised," that forms the abstract, emotional, and other-worldly view that Dhuoda has claimed for herself, and she is careful to admit and even to celebrate her infirmities in taking up the topic of God and the praises owed to Him. Yet in drawing attention to God and explicitly away from the masculine world of power that she only moments ago described, Dhuoda asserts her own strength of perspective and the virtue of its content, a vigor fleshed out in subsequent chapters as she draws attention increasingly to the more hidden and therefore more important features of her knowledge of God.

One quality of this unique knowledge of divinity is ramified in terms of etymology, word-play, and numerology:

... Deus duae continentur sillabae et quatuor litterae ... D enim nostra, a quo Dei incipit nomen, apud Graecos vocitatur delta. Nam id expressa, secundum illorum compoti elementa, quaternarium perfectionis continet numerum; secundum latinitatem quoque nostram, praescripta D. Quinquies centum erigit ad summum. Et hoc non vacat a sacrosancto misterio. Unus, II, III et IIII, quamquam in seipsis ita consistant, tamen implicati per partes in alium transcendunt numerum . . . quinquies quini, XXV; duplicati itidem, ad quinquagesimum transvolant culmen. V L D.

(Lib. Man. 1.5.1-19)

The word "Deus" (God) contains two syllables and four letters...and our "D", with which the name of "Deus" (God) begins, among the Greeks is called "delta;" and this is expressed according to their system of counting by the number 4, that is, the perfect number. "D" in our Roman numerals denotes 500, and this number is not absent a sacred mystery. 1, 2, 3, and 4, stand on their own as such, but nonetheless, when they are implicated with each other they change into other numbers: 5 x 5 = 25; 25 doubled is 50. In Roman numerals V (5), L (50), D (500).
This ability to extemporize on the implications of numbers is presumably one aspect of Dhuoda’s *obscuratus sensus*: her ability to ferret out the meanings of mysterious and holy implication in the details of letters and their relationships to numbers dramatizes a way of knowing that turns away from the obvious (the masculine) and toward the hidden, that refuses the horizontal proclamations and reasoned discourses of moral and ethical proscription and that instead affirms the vertical discourse of harder, deeper, more exotic truths.

Those truths strike closer to home, as several important moments in subsequent chapters of the *Liber* suggest, in which Dhuoda proceeds to fill out her lengthy work by attending to the twin issues of moral instruction and right behavior, but always articulated with her own gendered perspectives. For example, Dhuoda enjoins William to pray by recalling that prayer, *oratio*, is derived from the phrase *oris ratio*, “reason of the mouth,” but as if to turn away from rational discourse at the same time, she immediately goes on to say that she cannot be pleased by any prayer, short or long, though this is, she insists, no reason for William not to pray. Nonetheless, she composes the prayer she would have William pray, whose words stress, as it turns out, the inability of reason to ascertain the fullness and complexity of divinity—claims her own broader notion of knowing are founded upon.

This conscious strategy of contrast and comparison between her more rarified perceptions and those of the wider world is used to good effect as Dhuoda more formally considers right behavior, the correction of moral imperfection, and the balancing of human needs with spiritual progress—and much detailed advice concerning these important topics fills the middle portions of the *Liber*. Consistently here the masculine world of power and intrigue is held up against the purer, more ephemeral, feminine world of spirit, to which Dhuoda has better access. For example, William must honor his father, Dhuoda says, but she frames that admonition in the context of the potential for worldly intrigue and the details of Old Testament history that make this well-worn admonition seem fresh.

In particular, Dhuoda calls on those special qualities at her command—the powers of procreation and generation, and transfers them to her absent husband. He is the source of life in the world in every way, for which reason William must
honor him. But, of course, Dhuoda’s larger point is that this masculine world is also evil and ought to be understood in the context of her more private explanation of it. Her advice is two-sided, then, vertical and horizontal, emotional, and rational. She pursues much the same path when instructing William in the proper attitudes he must hold toward his peers and lords. They are owed respect, Dhuoda says, as are their families, because in the larger social structure in which she and her son live, it is important to remain, as she says, "faithful, truthful, watchful, useful, prompt," toward one’s Lord, and his family.

But when Dhuoda goes on in subsequent passages to enjoin William to be kind to great and small, the vocabulary and imagery of hierarchy, of masculine political power—lord to knight, son to father, vassal to dominus—gives way to a parable based on Psalm 41, which begins with the image of a deer longing for the running waters. The deer holds up a useful image in longing for the water, Dhuoda says, for when it needs to cross rivers with rough currents or rapids, the herd of deer gather together and form a line in which each deer supports the deer immediately in front of and behind it. Slowly the lead deer drops back to rest and a new leader assumes his place, so that the line remains refreshed, and the water’s dangers can be collectively resisted:

Deer habitually behave in the following way: when a herd sets out to swim across bodies of water, or wide rivers with turbulent currents, one deer after the other lays its head and horns on the back of the one before it. By resting a little, they may quickly and more easily cross the water. They are so intelligent and have such subtle instinct that when they sense the leader is beginning to flag, they let him drop back to second place and choose the rearmost
deer to swim at the head, so as to support and refresh the others. This way, as each changes places with the others in turn, a fraternal creaturely kindness surges through all of them. They always take care to hold head and antlers above the water and to breathe, lest they be swallowed up in the depths of the river.15

This is brotherly love and compassion, Dhuoda says, but it is also an attitude runs at cross purposes to the reasons Dhuoda has just articulated regarding the respect owed to one’s peers and their families. That respect, based on rank, power, and hierarchy, is contrasted here to the smooth, well-moving line of deer, who are exemplary because they do not operate hierarchically, because they are not stepping on each other's backs or submerging each other's heads, because they realize the equality of their situation with respect to the larger world around them, just as humans, whose larger world is God, should realize. In this sense, then, Dhuoda affirms in a fresh way her own notion of moral fairness and right action apart from the world of masculine power, by drawing attention to a purer world energized by feeling, compassion, and the words of the Psalmist, whose full sentiment, with its music, its emotional pull, and its deeper viewpoints up the soul longing for you God in the same way that the deer longs for the running waters.

The poetry of the Psalms returns, if only in spirit, in several original poems that mark the concluding pages of the Liber, one of which concerns me here. The poem in question, at Lib. Man. 10.2.1-74, not surprisingly, highlights the singularity of Dhuoda’s position as a woman and a mother, for she longs now, so she says, to see how her son has physically matured, remembering how small he was and how he grew from infancy to boyhood. This poem, like the epigram that opens the Liber, is an acrostic, whose vertical axis spells out what Dhuoda more privately wishes to say: Versi ad Wilhelmmum F[ilum], "verses for William, my son." But the poem’s horizontal axis is equally important, especially its concluding stanzas, for in them Dhuoda tries to visualize her son:

Multum a me videtur longior esse,  
Cernere volens tuae specie tenorem,  
Si daretur virtus, attamen ad haec merita

15 This translation is owed to Thiébaux, Dhuoda, p. 113, with slight modifications.
Non mea vigent.
(*Lib. Man.* 10.2.58-61)

I have seemed for a long time to desire
To see the shape of your face,
If only the strength were given me,
But I am tired.

After acknowledging that William is now sixteen years old and averring that he is therefore now a lord of sorts, Dhuoda goes on to imagine William before her, though, as she admits, her strength is waning. She then affirms the singularity of her role relative to William, lamenting her ill-health and bad luck, composing her own epitaph, in which she commends her soul to people of both sexes, but always focusing her narrative on those aspects of her life that make her uniquely a woman—the fact that she is a mother, that she has access to deeper, rarified truths as a result, that her knowledge attends not to power, politics, the hierarchies of wealth and prestige, but rather to the feeling for her son that she commends to him and to all her readers as the touchstone of what she knows best and most deeply.

In the final poem to her son, as she meditates on his absence and her longing to see him, there is something to be made of the fact that Dhuoda returns to the verb *cernere* to frame her desire to see William in the flesh. This dictional moves highlights, after all, what it could only adumbrate in the opening line of the *Liber’s* incipit, viz., the fragility of her discernment, her commitments not to power, wealth, or ambition, but rather to the feelings that bind in an excellent and fair way and that commit us most powerfully and most completely to each other. Dhuoda had said as much in her first acrostic at the start of the *Liber*, where, in praying to God, she also had, yet again, boldly declared who she was in feminine terms, as if even God, masculine to her, did not know it: *Mis michi similem non habebit umquam, / quanquam indignam genetrixque sua;* “He’ll never have anyone like me, like me / I am unworthy but I am his mother” (*Lib. Man. Epig.* 62-63). I would like to think that these words and others like them helped William in the time leading up to his death in that world his mother had warned him against so carefully. Presumably they could because they are so very much like their author, whose *Liber*, while culling the
traditions of the Christian handbook and the princely mirror, was also written on its own terms, as a record of a feminine way of knowing just as important as Christian truth or noble action plied in the world of powerful men.