

Dhuoda was a baroness and Frankish noblewoman who wrote the *Handbook for William* beginning in 841 CE. The manuscript was written for her son William who was being held hostage by Charles the Bald. Her purpose for writing this book was of importance in three ways: rule (*norma*), model (*forma*), and handbook (*manualis*).¹ Although Dhuoda was part of a very patriarchal religious society, she elevated herself above authority and clergy in social hierarchy to spiritually educate herself and her sons. Dhuoda thought beyond the mainstream of society and knew her importance of her role as a mother and counsel for her son. In society, she was subject to rule first under God and clergy; then her husband. Thus, her children were the only thing she had power over in this male society.

This historic piece of literature gives insight to Carolingian society. Education for children then was based on their sex. If you were a male, you were taught hunting and riding; but young girls were taught feminine skills such as weaving. This wide difference of education helped keep men in control and more intellectual. This manuscript tells us how society viewed women and what kind of woman Dhuoda was; depicting her as an intelligent and educated woman for her time. *Handbook for William* also tells us that men were of more importance in society and religion as the central key point. Men were clergy; and boys were given higher importance to education as first students then eventually possibly a teacher. In her own words, Dhuoda portrays herself as a kind and loving mother worried about her son's future and well-being.

Her writings have a strong emotional intimacy and provides a sense of her maternal authority. Dhuoda writes as she expresses that her son's teachers do not have "a heart more

¹ Valerie Garver, *Women and Aristocratic Culture in the Carolingian World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 151.

ardent then I, your mother, have for you my firstborn son.”² This next quote shows that she is exalting herself to knowing what may be best for William above his teachers which more likely were monks or priest. Women in this time were supposed to yield education and training to the patriarchal ruling society, but she doesn’t seem to really care about this:

Dhuoda, by her own reading and personal interpretation of two specific text- the Bible and the *Rule of St. Benedict*- makes an argument regarding power, authority, and society that turns traditional medieval notions on their head and shreds surprising new light both on her own authorial voice and her personal claim to authority.³

More specifically, Dhuoda assimilated “parts of the *Rule of Benedict* and made them her own, so much so that she draws on both its language and its imagery [what she thought significant].”⁴

Based on what we know of societal ideas then, this was a remarkable way for a woman to interpret any text much less a spiritual text. Women of this day were expected to retain a virtuous life and be a dutiful wife and mother in this patriarchal society. The *Rule of Benedict*, was written to instruct monks as well as other Christians. Because clergy were the appointed spiritual advisors, women had little right to instruct their children spiritually. From what we know, this would have been the duty of the church. Evidence from this period “demonstrates that [female instruction] took place not only in religious communities but also in lay households and courts.”⁵

² Dhuoda from Marcelle Thiebaux, *Dhuoda: Handbook for her Warrior Son* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 3.

³ M.A. Claussen, “Fathers of Power, Mothers of Authority: Dhuoda and the Liber Manualis,” *French Historical Studies* 19.3 (1996), 788.

⁴ M.A. Claussen, “Fathers of Power, Mothers of Authority: Dhuoda and the Liber Manualis,” *French Historical Studies* 19.3 (1996), 797.

⁵ Valerie Garver, *Women and Aristocratic Culture in the Carolingian World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 122.

Dhuoda in the second chapter of this book asserts more spiritual authority over her son William. She relates that she seeks God and calls on his help without ceasing.⁶ Then she explains more by writing:

[Dhuoda says she is like that] “insistent little bitch, scrambling under the master’s table with the male puppies,” who is able to grab and devour whatever crumbs that fall. The puppies, she explains later, are the priests, and the crumbs are [words of God]... that God “in accord with his ancient mercy, has opened my understanding, and given me discernment.”⁷

She has positioned herself as the same standing the clergy spiritually and she believes to pass on God’s word. This could be interpreted as her in a sense telling him she is to be listened to more than the clergy or his father Bernard. Dhuoda believes that God has intervened directly and inspired her to counsel her son; and it is her duty to educate William by writing this book for him.⁸ She asserts that her authority comes from her “natural rights as mother, not only from the divine intervention in her life...but the duty of an individual to rectify the behavior of another.”⁹ Dhuoda many times tells us her thoughts and discernment from her spiritual readings and eventually and that is why she is writing this book. What an impact these readings must have had on her beliefs. This was quite a unique way for a woman to think and perceive her role through scripture.

Dhuoda begins in Book 2 to asserts her own authority over William. She instructs him:

[Dhuoda begins to constrict the powers of fathers, biological or regnal] by commanding William, after his daily round of prayers, to go “out in the name of the highest God to do

⁶ M.A. Claussen, “Fathers of Power, Mothers of Authority: Dhuoda and the Liber Manualis,” *French Historical Studies* 19.3 (1996), 800.

⁷ M.A. Claussen, “Fathers of Power, Mothers of Authority: Dhuoda and the Liber Manualis,” *French Historical Studies* 19.3 (1996), 800.

⁸ M.A. Claussen, “Fathers of Power, Mothers of Authority: Dhuoda and the Liber Manualis,” *French Historical Studies* 19.3 (1996), 800.

⁹ M.A. Claussen, “Fathers of Power, Mothers of Authority: Dhuoda and the Liber Manualis,” *French Historical Studies* 19.3 (1996), 800.

your earthy service that awaits you, or whatever your lord and father Bernard or your lord Charles commands you to do so, if God so allows.”¹⁰

Dhuoda believes that William owes his full and complete obedience to God. She further states that he should serve his father only if there is no spiritual conflict.¹¹ What is surprising when reading this text is how far she strays from the other writings in this manuscript where she instructs William repeatedly to obey and honor his father always. She seems to be conflicted in some way between societal and Biblical rules of honor and respect on one hand; then she feels that if certain things conflict with God’s ideals that it is best to follow Him and not earthly men.

Dhuoda’s tells how she thinks of her role over her son at the end of book 3:

“Therefore, my son William, hear my admonishing you, listen to and observe the teachings of your father, and do not ignore the sayings of the holy fathers.”

[Claussen writes] She is paraphrasing the first line, the most famous line, of the *Rule of Benedict*- “Listen O son to the teachings of your master”- but Dhuoda is putting this phrase in her own mouth.... It is clear at this moment Dhuoda has claimed herself William’s father. She is the one to whom William should listen, it is to her teachings that he must give ear.¹²

Claussen asserts that she isn’t laying claim to patriarchal power or privilege but on filial piety.¹³

She is contradictory in this statement from her other advice to William to always obey his father and follow the examples of this in the Bible. In Book 3 she continually reminds him to “honor thy father, my son, and pray for him devotedly, that thou may be longlived upon this land.”¹⁴ In a

¹⁰ M.A. Claussen, “Fathers of Power, Mothers of Authority: Dhuoda and the Liber Manualis,” *French Historical Studies* 19.3 (1996), 802.

¹¹ M.A. Claussen, “Fathers of Power, Mothers of Authority: Dhuoda and the Liber Manualis,” *French Historical Studies* 19.3 (1996), 803.

¹² M.A. Claussen, “Fathers of Power, Mothers of Authority: Dhuoda and the Liber Manualis,” *French Historical Studies* 19.3 (1996), 803-4

¹³ M.A. Claussen, “Fathers of Power, Mothers of Authority: Dhuoda and the Liber Manualis,” *French Historical Studies* 19.3 (1996), 804.

¹⁴ Dhuoda, “Book 3 (complete), in “Handbook for William. 1999., Handbook for William. Edited by Carol Neel. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University Press), 21.

sense, she is saying that you should obey me based on parental respect as if I am your ‘father.’

Yet, she writes so humbly that:

I ask you... just as if I were with you in person- and to those to whom you may offer this letter book for perusal, that they not condemn me or hold it against me that that I am so rash as to take upon myself so loft and perilous task as to speak to you about God.¹⁵

According to these contradictory ideas she relates, Dhuoda appears to be conflicted as to which side to take. Should she be humble and follow God the way she was taught or follow her own instincts regarding educating her son in all ways?

As I have proven, Dhuoda clearly demonstrated by her writings her important role in educating her child. She clearly demonstrated unusual ideas for this time as she counsels her son spiritually and with confidence. In doing so, she elevates herself to the status of clergy by taking upon their role. Dhuoda then tells William that he must listen to God first above his father while conveying numerous times that if he didn't respect his father he would be disobeying God. Finally, she asserts her role of being another ‘father’ figure as she guides him properly. Dhuoda feels that God has listened to her and that she has received divine wisdom to teach her son. She writes with deep feeling what her role should be, and she asserts that privilege. Dhuoda was an exceptional woman for this time because she knew what she must do and persevered through this loving task of instructing her son.

¹⁵ Dhuoda, “Book 3 (complete), in “Handbook for William. 1999., Handbook for William. Edited by Carol Neel. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University Press), xx.

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