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The University in the Middle Ages: On the Invention of a New Use of Reason

Given the deadlock that the university as institution confronts us with, how is it possible to construct a new point of departure? This chapter endeavors to search for new beginnings that might permit telling a *different* story about the university and its relation to the world. Therefore, I will take recourse to the invention of the university in the Middle Ages, since it might start a story of the university that is different from either the narrative of its ruinous sell-out to capital or the nostalgia of its glorious past as a sanctuary where people could study “in freedom and solitude.”

Taking recourse to, however, does not mean returning to the past to find a model for future universities, or retracing the university’s origins. Instead, my aim will be to test the hypothesis of the university as an ecology of study to construct a historical argument that makes this proposition more palpable, as well as to provide insight into what it might mean concretely. In that sense, tracing the roots of our contemporary universities back to the *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* of the Middle Ages confronts us with a different image of the university altogether, namely as an association of masters and students that gathered in cities such as Paris and Bologna to read and study texts together.

Indeed, the Latin notion *universitas* did not imply a sense of universality, nor did it refer to the universe. Instead, it referred to two different but strongly interrelated meanings: association, gathering, or community on the one hand, and guild on the other hand. These two meanings—association and guild—point in two directions, internal and external. Externally, *universitas* as a mode of organization with very union-like features tells us something about the relation between the medieval university and the claims that were laid on it by external powers, most notably the church. Internally, *universitas* comes with a specific understanding of the relations between professors and students gathered in the university, namely in terms of artisans and apprentices. Hence, the two meanings

of *universitas* allow us to understand the relation between the university and its external world, and the internal organization of the community of studiers.

I will argue that the university was a specific way of dealing with the questions, problems, and challenges of its time and that it came with the invention of a new use of reason. It is important to stress that this chapter does not seek the title of a historical truth, but that it aims to construct a viewpoint that might afford us a novel perspective on the university discussing the sociopolitical field in which the university came into being, the paradigmatic cases of the universities of Paris and Bologna,¹ and the internal dynamics of the university as an assemblage of study. Advancing a particular account of the invention of the university, drawing on Isabelle Stengers, this chapter concludes by suggesting that, within the ecology of study that the medieval university was, a new use of reason came into being, at once facilitated and required by this new way of gathering around texts.

Before I set out, however, it might be helpful to outline in very general terms the historical context of the long twelfth century that was marked with the emergence of the university. Historians have called this time frame the Renaissance of the twelfth century, referring to its cultural revival after the decline of the early middle ages.² The two most important institutions of the time were the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire, who constantly quarreled among themselves about questions of power, of which the most famous example is probably the Investiture Controversy. At the same time, the feudal system was in decline, and people started to move from the countryside to the city to learn a craft in the workshops of artisans. Next to people migrating *to* the city, there was much migration *between* different cities as well, especially by poor, religious people, the so-called *clerici vagantes*, wandering clerks. One last thing to keep in mind, given its strong bearing on the intellectual dynamics of the medieval university, is that at the time the printing press was not invented yet, and hence textual sources were limited. This meant that texts were still copied by hand and were a scarce and expensive good.³

The Age of Universitas

I begin with discussing the sociopolitical context of the twelfth century at large and situating the newly emerged universities in relation to external claims of power that were being made, mainly on behalf of the church. Overall, different stages can be distinguished in the development of the first universities, corresponding to the variable dominance of different sociopolitical factors

(e.g., relations between church and emperor, feudalism as social structure). These factors not only constrained or molded the new universities, but, to a large extent, also afforded and even necessitated their coming into being. Put differently, it was only within a specific societal context that the university could materialize, insofar that this context required its invention to address certain problems of its time. This does not mean, however, that one can only understand the university *in function of* its time—if that were the case, it would not have survived. Nevertheless, it is only within the specific force field of the medieval society that the invention of the university could occur. It means, therefore, to understand the university *under the sign of the event* as a radically contingent event that nevertheless marked a decisive shift in the way people related to power, coming from the outside, and texts, to be found inside the university.⁴

A first crucial factor for the emergence of the university was renewed attention for ancient texts in the margin of the conflicts between ecclesiastical and secular powers, of which the Investiture Controversy (1076–1122) between Henry IV of the Holy Roman Empire and Pope Gregory VII about the competence to install high church officials was the climax. In order to defend their arguments, advocates of the pope and the emperor equally took recourse to the juridical arguments that could be found in collections of texts such as the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, the legal code of the Byzantine Empire. This renewed attention for Roman and Byzantine law soon resulted in a collection of both primary and secondary texts, compiled by the Bolognese monk Gratian, the *Decretum Gratiani*, a work that would become the central object of study of medieval canon law.⁵

It is hence within and due to a specific societal context—the struggle between secular and religious powers—that certain texts that had long been forgotten came to matter again, without it being prescribed, however, *how* they could come to matter. Byzantine legal texts, for instance, acquired new meanings in light of the quarrels between pope and emperor, whereby it was not just a matter of using them in the function of a predefined goal, but primarily of studying the modalities of their use, and raising the question how they could acquire a new significance in the organization of social and political life. In short, due to struggles between different institutions trying to lay claim on social life, it not only became relevant to read and study these texts, but in turn this studious activity also afforded the possibility for profound societal and cultural transformations, often in excess of the scope of its initial institutional instrumentalizations.⁶

In the wake of the Investiture Controversy, the church reinvented itself as *universitas fidelium* outside and above the hierarchical system of secular

feudalism and, hence, also outside and above the claims made by secular powers such as the emperor. In doing so, the idea of *universitas*—which at that time did not yet denote the collectives of studiers—acquired new relevance. The reformation of Cluny disconnected the bishops' spiritual dominion from the feudal order, while the church reconceived itself as one uniform association that could autonomously realize its goals, out of reach of any secular power. In other words, the struggle between secular and ecclesiastical power provided the stimulus for a political-theological revaluation of *universitas*, which up to that time simply meant a totality or a whole.⁷

The revaluation of *universitas*, however, was not merely a political-theological affair. In the end, it affected the organization of social life as a whole as well. Central to the rediscovery of *universitas* was indeed the question of how *libertas*, an essential medieval virtue, could be realized. In its original form, the medieval liberty pertained to the private sphere of the *familia*, with its associated ideas of peace and protection. People believed that the solidarity of the family tie granted the individual members their freedom. This freedom was not absolute; it did not express an independence of all possible bonds. On the contrary, these familial bonds were viewed as a precondition for freedom because they provided shelter for subordinate members. In the feudal system, this structure of organizing private life was extended to social life. Relations of dependence between suzerain and vassal, just like the relation between father and son, were believed to safeguard freedom through protection.

The rediscovery of *universitas* as a general principle to gather collectives (not yet the collectives of studiers specifically) gave way to a re-interpretation of the notion of *libertas*, understood henceforth as liberation from the web of dependency ties that pervaded the entire society. These dependency ties, which initially were believed to safeguard the individual's liberty, indeed stifled individuals in an exploitative and belligerent feudal sociopolitical organization. The social, horizontal ties of the people included in the *universitas* were meant as a radical alternative to the vertical ties characterizing the feudal system. Contrasting with the hierarchy, dependency, and inequality, implicated in feudal verticality, the *universitas* strongly upheld the personal freedom and mutual equality of its members.⁸

Some historians even go as far as to argue that the long twelfth century saw the rise of a genuine and general communitarian movement, permeating different layers of society, due precisely to the principle of *universitas*. Thus, not only did it help the church to reconceive itself as a community of believers, outside of the feudal order, it also provided the narrative through which the

newly proliferating cities began to understand themselves as *universitates civium*, associations of citizens. Moreover, within the cities, the idea of *universitas* aided the communities of craftsmen to organize themselves into guilds, of which the *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* was just one example, similar to the guilds of furriers, ironworkers, druggists, bakers, and saddle makers.

The broader communitarian movement, animated by the principle of *universitas*, inspired these collectives of studiers to organize themselves in the margins of the rules of cities, which gave them a special legal status. In the years before the emergence of the university as a collective of studiers, the number of people coming to the cities to study had strongly and rapidly increased. Around 1117, Guibert of Nogent wrote that years before, when he was a child, there were barely any masters in the cities. Besides, their knowledge was so limited that it was even hardly comparable to the bulk of knowledge that the wandering clerks of his older days transmitted from city to city. During the twelfth century, the amount of monastery and cathedral schools indeed exploded, and it became problematic for students to find appropriate housing. Moreover, an increasing number of students took the existing schools by storm. Therefore, masters started to organize their own private schools where one could obtain the *licentia docendi*, which allowed one at that time to become a master to teach in the schools of the diocese.⁹

The multiplication of readings and teachings of the Bible brought about by the proliferation of schools and masters posed a threat to the church. The *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, which differed from the monastery and cathedral schools, proved very helpful to the church in bringing order, and it becomes clear that from the beginning, the newly emerging universities were a matter of great concern for the church, which absolutely wanted to secure the right reading of the Bible. To preserve this monopoly, the church constantly tried to lay claim on the new university. Most particularly, the church granted the new university the privilege to hand out the *licentia ubique docendi*, the right to teach everywhere, outperforming the *licentia docendi* granted by the schools that allowed masters only to teach in one's own diocese. This made it possible to decrease the proliferation of monastery and cathedral schools, and hence could bring unity again in the teaching of the Scriptures.¹⁰

In conclusion, situating the newly emerging universities within the sociopolitical field of the long twelfth century, a threefold flow of power can be outlined. First, there was the necessity to read and study texts in order to deal with the pressing timely concerns such as the relationship between secular and religious institutions. Secondly, it is clear that during this time of turmoil,

new ways of organizing social and political life were sought after. In this regard, the communitarian principle of *universitas* that was already centuries old but slightly forgotten attracted renewed attention, ultimately providing a means to escape from the constraining and hierarchical ties of feudalism. In that sense, *universitas* also provided an emancipatory narrative for the newly emerging communitarian organizations within cities. Moreover, the *universitas* inspired people to gather as a collective of studiers precisely to read and study old texts. This finally brings me to the third flow of power, in which the church granted the young universities the *licentia ubique docendi*, the right to teach everywhere, in a move to discredit the teachings of the proliferating cathedral and monastery schools and to solidify its hold over these new collectives of studiers and their reading of the Holy Scriptures.

An Urban Invention

Although no determining factors can be distinguished that would cause or provoke the coming into being of a university, it is remarkable that the first universities were strongly integrated into the urban fabric of the emerging cities of the twelfth century. More precisely, it was in Bologna and Paris that the first associations that went by the name *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* or *universitas studii* appeared. Indeed, the university is a thoroughly urban invention, which played an essential role in the lives of the many wandering scholars inhabiting the growing cities. Both universities, however, also differed on crucial aspects, most notably regarding the contents of study, the university's relationship with the city, and the ties between professors and students.¹¹

To begin with, the university of Bologna, allegedly the oldest one, came mainly into being to serve the career interests of laypeople studying Roman law. It was lay both in terms of the people teaching and attending, and in terms of subject matter.¹² The focus on secular Roman law had everything to do with the flourishing of career opportunities for urban laypeople occupied with jurisdiction throughout the eleventh and early twelfth centuries. These demanded a professional training in practical legal skills such as the compilation of official documents and pleading in courts. Moreover, as hinted at earlier, the various events surrounding the Investiture Controversy renewed the attention for the texts of Roman law as well: for laypeople, the study of texts and arguments from Roman law often proved to be the best preparation for confronting the political claims of the papacy and for drafting original new political theories.¹³

Whereas Pepo was the first master to teach at Bologna's law university, its intellectual development primarily benefited from the presence of Irnerius, between 1116 and 1140. This scholar commented extensively on Justinian's *Corpus Iuris Civilis* and the *Digest*, using a method of critical analysis reminiscent of the Parisian scholar Abelard's *Sic et Non*, a set of hermeneutical rules of thumb to gather and confront different authorities or claims in one and the same authoritative text.¹⁴ Not much later, in the 1140s, the monk Gratian completed his *Concordia Discordantium Canonum*, whose significance for the establishment of canon law in Bologna ran parallel primarily to that of the Irnerian commentaries for Roman law. Thus, the combination of a quasi-curricular basis for Roman and canon law, on the one hand, and the method of scholastic dialectics, on the other hand, turned Bologna into the most important center for law studies, attracting students from all over Europe.¹⁵

The students coming from other Italian cities, or more far-off regions, however, were not protected by the city laws of Bologna. Therefore, in November 1158, Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa issued the *Authentica Habita*, the foundational formulation of a *privilegium scolarium*, a privilege that protected academics and their freedom from humiliations and malpractices such as reprisals for debt. Since Bolognese students were already protected by municipal law, and canon law students by canon law itself, this mainly entailed an amelioration of the rights and privileges of the many foreign students (*causa studiorum peregrinantur*). At the same time, the *Authentica Habita* protected students from exterior factors but left open the question of the organization of the student body.

Echoing the emergence of communes, craft guilds, and trade guilds, characterized by their democratic and anti-feudal nature, the students could subsequently organize themselves effectively as a *universitas*, a self-governing, and self-protecting association of students.¹⁶ This was a student association with elected officers, statutes, and an independent legal status. Each *universitas* had its own elected student rector. The masters were external to the university and were hired upon the initiative of the student body. They assembled in a quite rudimentary association for the regulation of examining procedures and the entry to their professional group.¹⁷ Whereas students were very well organized, masters did not form a strong association. In that sense, the university of Bologna was really a student university, a collective of people interested in civil and canon law that had organized themselves in order to study ancient legal texts.

After some time, the student association became so strong that it started to resemble a totalitarian regime. Students had a distinctive social status, were assembled in executive committees, and treated masters as hirelings who had

to take an oath of submission. Each year, the students elected several masters whose income depended on the student fees. The statutory controls imposed by the students were extremely rigorous, which granted them a very powerful position. More than it was a university of masters and students, the university of Bologna was a collective of students with a large degree of autonomy.¹⁸

University life in Paris developed more or less in the same period as in Bologna. However, it took a few years longer for the Parisian university to crystallize. Already in the eleventh century, there was much educational activity in Paris, more specifically around the cathedral schools in the houses of the canons attached to Notre-Dame. Throughout the twelfth century, the social and cultural climate of Paris became even more fruitful for the expansion of schools, as the city attracted many people who taught philosophy and theology, the two most important fields of study in Paris. Whereas the cathedral schools of Notre-Dame remained the most important for theology, the old and new monastic schools around the bridges and on the left bank offered refuge to the masters in logic and grammar. Just as in Bologna, many of the people studying or teaching in Paris came from other parts of the continent.¹⁹

At that time, the students, often poor people who traveled from one city to another, were extremely dependent on the church, who provided them with clerical rights on the condition that the students themselves were considered to be clerics, *clerici vagantes*, religious people who led a nomadic life attending a school in a town which was not their hometown. In this way, and functionally similar to the *Authentica Habita* protecting the Bolognese students, foreign students in Paris were submitted to ecclesiastical jurisdiction to guarantee their security and privileges.²⁰

In that sense, the Parisian university came into being throughout negotiations between masters and bishops, in which one of the major stakes was the conferral of the right to teach. After all, the dispersion of schools had resulted in a situation where the church became practically incapable of controlling what was taught in these schools. Many masters taught on the basis of different interpretations of the Bible, and the church feared that the multiplication of schools would go hand in hand with a multiplication of heretic readings. Hence, what developed in the course of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century was a tactical alliance between the church and the masters. Where the latter endorsed this alliance in pursuit of their quest for educational autonomy, the church primarily designed this in an attempt to protect the Christian doctrine.²¹

The conferral of the right to teach, the *licentia ubique docendi*, would be crucial for the birth of the Parisian university. At the end of the twelfth century,

the first embryonic associations between Parisian masters and their schools came into being to claim more rights from the bishop of Paris. These hesitant associations quickly gained momentum, resulting in an overarching community of masters and students in Paris, which was granted its statute in 1215, thereby officially transforming this association into a quasi-autonomous university.²²

When royal sergeants killed several students during street riots in 1229—a severe violation of the clerical privilege which exempted them from civil jurisdiction—the masters decided to strike. They initiated an exodus from Paris to other cities in the north of France, Toulouse in the south of France, and even England. Concerned about the intellectual climate of the city, Pope Gregory IX soon after promulgated the bull *Parens Scientiarum*, in which he proclaimed Paris as the new Cariath Sepher, the brilliant city of books and letters mentioned in the Old Testament. This bull granted the Parisian masters the right to confer the *licentia ubique docendi*, the right to teach everywhere. Whereas schools were only able to confer the right to teach within the same school, the university could grant the right to teach all over the continent, and as such, so the pope must have reasoned, the university, devoted to the study of theology, could also become a full partner of the church in the protection and preservation of the Christian doctrine.²³

Theology was, however, not the only subject taught at the university of Paris. It also had a large faculty of arts, which functioned as a propaedeutic to the superior faculty of theology, and later the other superior faculties of medicine and canon law. Each superior faculty had its own organization and dean. All students with the degree of master of arts were full members of the university government. Regular students of the faculty of arts were considered to be members of the university government whose assemblies they could attend without having an actual voice or power of decision, however. Once a student had moved on to the superior faculty of theology, canon law or medicine, he could actively participate in decision making. Granting both masters and students a place in the university government warranted the democratic nature of the Parisian university, as opposed to the dictatorship of the students that characterized the Bolognese university.²⁴

For both the university of Paris and Bologna, processes of migration over the European continent as well as urban expansion were of great importance, forcing foreign students and masters to organize themselves to obtain the necessary protection from authorities. In Bologna, this protection was ultimately safeguarded by the *Authentica Habita* issued by the emperor. In Paris, it was the pope who, after the dramatic strike of 1229, granted the universities the right to

award the *licentia ubique docendi*. Despite the difference in content matter (law in Bologna versus philosophy and theology in Paris), and the organizational core of the university (students in Bologna versus masters in Paris), the stories of the origin of these universities have a few much more remarkable features in common. In both cases, the migration to the growing cities went hand in hand with a migration of the text from secluded spaces (e.g., monastery, cloister, archive) to the public urban life. However, the ways of dealing with the texts also underwent major shifts, and it is this precise meaning of study as a specific technical relation to a material object, which, dovetailing with the *universitas*' connotation of an association of craftsmen, will be the next issue to be addressed.

The Craft of Studying

Three ingredients of the historical context in which the university emerged are of particular importance to understand its function as an *assemblage of study*. Calling the new universities assemblages of study first of all emphasizes the social dimension of these universities, which were constituted as gatherings of masters and students. Furthermore, the notion highlights the material and technical dimensions that need to be taken into account for understanding why those collectives were not just discussion groups or "think tanks," but really gatherings of *studiers*, of people who study *something*. Taking these three connotations together, the relation between masters and students in these associations, the rediscovery and translation of ancient texts as study materials, and the particular techniques applied while reading and studying these texts come into view now.

First, picking up on the discussion of *universitas* as a communitarian principle of organization, it is noteworthy that not only the church and the emerging cities conceived of themselves as *universitas* (*universitas fidelium* and *universitas civium* respectively), but also people within the cities formed associations around their craft for mutual support and advancement of their profession. Not merely in Paris and Bologna, but in other cities as well, people practicing the same craft generally lived and worked close to each other, and because of their shared socioeconomic interests, it was, to a certain extent, helpful and relevant to work together. Unlike the feudal structures, the urban context facilitated a self-organization of people in labor associations where they could meet as a community around their craft, and together claim the same rights and privileges.

Universitas, in that sense, no longer denoted merely an association, but more specifically an association around a craft, in the sense of what is mostly called

a guild: it brought together master-craftsmen and apprentices, who collectively engaged with the specific materials and techniques of their craftsmanship. It was also in this sense that the organizational structure of *universitas* sparked the interest of the communities that formed themselves around texts in order to study them.

Conceived as a guild, the first universities' main task was not so much the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next, or the production of new knowledge for society's needs, but rather the application of reading and writing techniques on textual study materials. To that extent, it was really a community of master-artisans and student-apprentices that practiced the crafts of reading and copying together. In doing so, the university partly took over the work that had for centuries been done by monks in the monasteries, namely the copying of ancient texts—a work to be done by hand as the printing press had not yet been invented. Hence, with the invention of the university, knowledge workers that traditionally worked in total seclusion, behind the walls of cloisters and monasteries, suddenly moved into the light of communal urban life.²⁵

The second and third features shed light on studying as a craft within the guild-like structure of the *universitas*. The second feature concerns the textual materials that were being studied at the first universities. In this regard, the rediscovery of ancient texts (such as, most famously, of Aristotle) via the Arab world has been of particular importance. The twelfth century saw some extremely fruitful exchanges between intellectuals in the Arab world and people working with texts on the European continent, most notably in Italy and Spain.²⁶

This was mainly due to the presence of translators and translations. From the eighth century onwards, many translations of ancient texts had been produced, which, for instance, had already made the Bible, texts by the Church Fathers, and certain other classical authors widely accessible. A considerable amount of Latin and almost the entirety of Greek literature, however, remained practically undisclosed. Translators living close to the Arab and Byzantine world, for instance, James of Venice, Burgundy of Pisa, Aristippe of Palermo, and John of Sevilla, rediscovered many of these works, especially from Greek philosophy and science.²⁷

In other words, the quantity—and quality—of secular and religious texts that had become accessible in translation represented an enormous amount of intellectual materials that could be investigated and studied. Nevertheless, in the times before the invention of the printing press, accessibility should not be overestimated. Texts were available in Latin, but needed to be carefully copied and transmitted, which cost much time and money.²⁸

This brings me to the third feature, which concerns the technical conditions of the new universities. Some have argued that the uniqueness of the university as an intellectual gathering stands in direct relationship to the specific techniques of mediating and studying text. Texts were scarce at that time because they could not be copied *en masse*. In other words, there were not many texts and authors, and from the texts that existed, there were only limited copies.

Before the invention of the university, texts were copied in the monastery cells of the monks. Reading and studying texts was therefore an exclusively monastic activity that required one to retract from public and communal life in order to devote oneself to the text. As such, the relation toward text was a religious one, and the activity of copying came close to praying. Accordingly, when the monks read and copied the text, the text was recited out loud, which again implied that it had to be done in isolation. This was also due to the fact that texts did not have interpunction, and the words were not separated by blank spaces (*scripta continua*) to economize on writing space. Because of this specific textual configuration, reading was by definition not done in silence, but involved mumbling and ruminating the words of the text.²⁹

In the twelfth century, around the time of the emergence of universities in growing cities, the text, the principal material that the masters and students of the *universitas* worked with, underwent drastic changes, which made it possible to relate to it differently. More precisely, the text became readable without recitation (as we can still do nowadays) due to its new features which included a more extensive use of punctuation, footnotes, and paragraph structure. Perhaps the most significant shift, however, was the separation of words with blank spaces: whereas before the text had to be read out loud in order to be understood, it could now be read “at a glance.”³⁰

This technological shift thus induced a transformation of the experience of reading. Before the emergence of the so-called university script, reading had been a spiritual exercise, requiring not only the eyes, but also the mouth and the ears. After this technological shift, the eye took center stage as the text became readable at a glance. Illich argues, “[t]he page was suddenly transformed from a score for pious mumblers into an optically organized text for logical thinkers.”³¹ Instead of being a matter of sensory embodiment of the divine text, reading became an exercise in distancing oneself from the text. At the same time, the text was no longer something that could only be believed in, but became something that could be crafted and studied.³²

In summary, in order to appreciate the novelty of the internal dynamics of the first universities, three factors were of particular importance: first, the rediscovery

of *universitas* as an organizing principle for craftsmen associations; secondly, the accessibility of study materials in the form of texts; and thirdly, the development of university script as a textual format. The invention of the university took place against the backdrop of the power struggles between pope and emperor, migratory movements throughout Europe, urban expansion, and intellectual discussions over the interpretation of the Bible. All of these developments shaped the university in a double sense. If they unquestionably facilitated its coming into being, they also implicated it in specific societal concerns (e.g., how to live together outside the feudal system? how to organize urban life? what are the legal competences of church and empire?). Of course, these concerns often elicited political debate, yet most importantly, they initiated and gave shape to concrete practices of study. Due to the rediscovery and translation of a vast amount of ancient texts, and to the fact that these texts were transcribed into university script, which provided a different sensory experience of the text, it became possible for readers to acquire a certain distance between themselves and the available texts in order to study them.

A New Use of Reason

The availability of texts, a shift in writing and reading techniques, and an urban and collective culture of reading were vital ingredients for the coming into being of the university. What is remarkable is that the invention of the university facilitated another way of relating to textual sources at the same time as it paved the way for a new use of reason. The radicalism of the invention of the university consisted in breaking with the prayer-like divinatory reading that was done in the seclusion of the monastic cell, and in using reason in a way to confront different authorities without getting bogged down in mere antagonism.³³

This new use of reason was, of course, shaped by distinct contextual constraints. The first one concerned the strong sense of authority attributed to the texts. It has already been mentioned that although many translations of ancient texts had become available, the fact that these needed to be copied by hand made them a scarce and expensive good. This also meant that for every field of study, only limited texts were read: where theology focused on the reading of the *Scriptures*, the law universities occupied themselves with interpretation of the *Digest*, and the *Decretum Gratiani*, lastly, was the primary focus in the faculties of canon law. In the faculty of philosophy, which prepared studiers for the higher faculties, the works of Aristotle had, at a certain moment, become the key source of interest.

Hence, given the limited number of authors read, the authority of the studied texts increased. In fact, it is very likely that the etymological affinity of “authority” and “author” has its origin in the workshops of the master-craftsmen and student-apprentices, signifying the secure connection between the work and its maker, with the one “speaking for” the other’s skill. Consequently, texts written by authors such as Aristotle had the same authority as their authors. The texts could be glossed upon, but not contradicted. Put differently, the text had an absolute authority which meant that it could not be discussed critically, proving the author right or wrong, or analyzing the conditions under which the author could be right or wrong, a way that would authorize the content of the text *anew*. Since the authority came from the text itself, an authorization based on critical discernment of the conditions under which an author had made such and such a statement was utterly irrelevant.

This is key to understand the way in which texts were being read within the medieval university. Even though the text was no longer read in a religious, prayer-like way, as Illich convincingly shows, the shift in writing techniques did not yet allow for a genuinely critical attitude toward texts in the habitual modern sense. The bookish text that was the primary material of study of the medieval university was a composite of the different authorities that could not be repudiated or proven wrong. In that sense, there was a strong sense of loyalty to what was written by the ancient authors.

Still, this in no way implied a way of reading that was completely submissive to the authority of the text. The authority of the text was understood in terms of the reliability of a witness that is called upon. If this meant that indeed the truth of the words of the authors could and should not be questioned, it was still the task of the studiers to construct the precise meaning and implications of these words.

The transformation of the manner of studying texts becomes evident in the rise of the *quaestio* in the medieval university. Whereas the *lectio* was a way of reading texts out loud and glossing over them in the presence of a public (instead of secluded in the monastic cell), the *quaestio* put forward a problem or issue on which different authorities disagreed. During the *quaestio*, these different (ancient) authors were called upon as reliable witnesses to this problem in the form of shorter or longer citations abstracted from their context. That is why in the written accounts of the *quaestio*, a problem is literally placed in the middle, around which quotes from different authors are assembled to confront each other.³⁴

Here again, it should be emphasized that the purpose of the *quaestio* was not to settle once and for all who is right and who is wrong, a way of doing that would require the students to oppose some of the authorities to solve a contradiction by taking away one of the terms. In that sense, it is not about debunking, denouncing, criticizing, or judging. Rather, during the *quaestio*, success or failure depended on the achievement of a peaceful cohabitation of different citations of authorities within one, univocal text. In the newly crafted text, the different positions could be affirmed despite their relative contradictions, or in other words, that these contradictions had been transformed into contrasts.³⁵

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the kind of reasoning elicited by the text in the medieval university had something to do with the postmodern “anything goes”-mentality which, by affirming diverging authorities, mainly affirms the absolute truths of difference or subjectivity. On the contrary, the work to be done by the students at the university during the *quaestio* was to create an agreement between the authors in spite of their relative incompatibilities and contradictions, and this could only be done by adding to the text, making it richer and more comprehensive, instead of drawing out the statements that did not fit, based on the statements transmitted by another author. To that extent, the use of reason that was invented in and with the university could be called a *diplomatic use of reason* that tried to negotiate between different authorities and forge a precarious and always contestable agreement.

In Paris, the aim of this diplomatic use of reason was especially pertinent to resist a total bifurcation between the worldly truths of philosophy, as found in the Corpus Aristotelicum, and the religious truths of Christianity, as revealed in the Bible. The Condemnations of 1277, in which the Bishop of Paris Stephen Tempier listed 219 prohibitions or constraints that the masters and students were required to respect, can be read precisely from the background of this concern. Generally, it is assumed that Tempier merely took issue with the unorthodox conclusions of Averroist masters such as Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia, and that the Condemnations manifested a repressive manner of exerting power over what was being taught at the university. However, they could also be read as exhibiting a concern not to cut the world into two pieces, secular and religious, preferring instead to create new folds that would allow diverging statements to coexist.³⁶

Therefore, the work of the medieval masters and students was performed under a double assumption. First, it was assumed that the different authorities never lied and, as such, could be called upon as reliable witnesses while dealing

with a question. These authorities had to be respected, which meant that they could not be left out of the discussion, even when their statements did not fit in the general understanding of the problem, and even though they could not be contradicted or proven wrong. Secondly, it was assumed that there only exists one truth and that every separation in different “worldviews” should be resisted. This indeed did not mean that different positions (e.g., Christian, Aristotelian) toward a question were unequivocally accepted, but rather that the divergence in statements concerning the question actually *posed* a problem, which the work of the masters and students strove to deal with through the creation of a precarious peace, “rendering relatable that which previously inhabited irreconcilable worlds.”³⁷

From a more conceptual perspective, the efficacy of the diplomatic use of reason is to create coexistence amongst contradictory claims. It differs sharply from the critical use of reason that aims to denounce or debunk certain positions in order to unveil the reality behind different statements. In that sense, the critical use of reason is made for cutting, for taking away those claims that have been proven false or that have been discredited, whereas the diplomatic use of reason is made for folding, for creating the conditions under which diverging positions can be made to coexist in a precarious and always partial agreement.³⁸

However, the diplomatic use of reason does not only differ from the critical use of reason. It also differs from the experimental use of reason inaugurated by Galileo that became paramount at the university in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, Stengers draws a parallel between scientific thinking on the one hand and the dealing with texts as performed in the medieval university on the other hand. More precisely, she claims that both traditions resemble each other in the importance attributed to authority and the necessity of staging authority in the course of an argument. Whereas the medieval studiers had to reckon with the fact that ancient authors simply had authority, leaving them with the question of how this authority should be taken into account, scientists respect “nature” as their only authority, leaving them with the challenge of how to make nature create authority, or put differently, “how to make nature speak.”³⁹ This means that whereas the authority of the authors is given in the text, the authority of “nature” needs to be *produced* during scientific practices. It needs to be decided how nature can be recruited as a reliable witness in debates amongst scientists, as well as how scientists can come to listen to nature.

Here, a difference can be discerned between the practices of the medieval studiers and the practices of the early scientists. Whereas scholastic practices

intend to *stabilize history* through the production of an agreement between conflicting statements, scientific practices are predicated on the experimental achievement which constitutes nature as an authority on the one hand, and which *interrupts* history, bringing something new to the world in the experiment, on the other hand. Given our interest in the three traditional tasks of the university, this leads us to the next question: How, starting from this medieval conception of university study, can the sciences be given a place at the university?