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MATTIA ZANGARI

RAINGARDE, THE HOLY MOTHER
THE REPRESENTATION OF RAINGARDE DE MONTBOISSIER (†1134)
BY PETER THE VENERABLE

This article analyses the hagiographic representation of the mother of Peter the Venerable¹, Raingarde de Montboissier² (†1134), whose portrait is delineated by the abbot of Cluny in a long letter from his well-known correspondence³. It is an extraordinarily dense and complex text – so much so that Peter von Moos called it ‘a masterpiece of medieval Latin literature’⁴ – not only because of the various themes that are developed in it, but also for a series of aspects that we intend to investigate; in particular, we shall dwell on the *narratio* where, surrounded by a hagiographical frame, the profile of Raingarde develops – first as a mother and then as a nun – through which Peter offers a mirror of virtue, an exemplary picture of Christian life, placing particular emphasis on the woman’s ability to prepare for a holy death, one of the central concerns of Cluniac spirituality.

¹ For Peter the Venerable I restrict myself to citing the texts I consulted; extremely interesting is the study by Jean Leclercq, who offers a portrait of Peter as the *bonne agréable*, in accordance with the *hilaritas* he thought so much of, *Pierre le Vénérable*, Abbaye Saint-Wandrille 1946. See also: P. ZERBI, *Tra Milano e Cluny: momenti di vita e cultura ecclesiastica nel secolo XII*, Roma 1978; J.P. TORRELL, D. BOUTHILLIER, *Pierre le Vénérable et sa vision du monde. Sa vie – son œuvre, l’homme et le démon*, Leuven, *Spicilegium sacrum Iovaniense*, 1986; M.T. BROLIS, *La crociata per Pietro il Venerabile: guerra di armi o guerra di idee?*, in *Aevum* 61, 1987, pp. 327-354; D. IOGNA PRAT, *Ordonner et exclure: Cluny et la société chrétienne face à l’hérésie, au judaïsme et à l’islam, 1000-1500*, Paris 1998.

² The bibliography on Raingarde is very slim; we have an article, now dated, by P. LAMMA (*La madre di Pietro il Venerabile*, in *Studium* 11, 1958, pp. 740-751) and a vignette of her by BROLIS (*Storie di donne nel Medioevo*, Bologna 2019, pp. 31-35). We shall go gradually through the text of the *epistula*, but here I should like to anticipate that Lamma’s work is especially valuable, since he investigates the stylistic and rhetorical-formal dimension. In addition to the data recoverable from the critical edition (see *infra*), other information on the stylistic, thematic and lexicographic level can be found in the collection by P. VON MOOS devoted to the *Consolatio: Consolatio. Studien zur mittellateinischen Trostliteratur über den Tod und zum Problem christlichen Trauer*, München 1971-1972, 4 vols., see vol. II, pp. 224-260.

³ This is II, XII, for which see Petrus Venerabilis, *Epistulae*, in *The Letters of Peter the Venerable. Edited, with an introduction and notes, by Giles Constable*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1967, 2 vols., (= Ed. Constable), see vol. I, pp. 153-173. This is not the place to dilate on the importance of this work of editing, but I should like at least to record that the text is based on the authoritative manuscript A (Aquinensis) ms. Douai, Bibliothèque municipale, 381 (XII, Anchin), which was used to define the orthography of the edition.

⁴ VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

THE LETTER OF PETER THE VENERABLE AND ITS PORTRAIT OF HIS MOTHER RAINGARDE

As Paolo Lamma noted many years ago, in the long letter, as well as the portrait of the pious mother, what especially stands out against the background of the Auvergne lordship – where Peter’s family lived – is the world of the monastery of Marcigny. It was here – in the microcosm enclosed within the Benedictine abbey of Cluny – to which Peter belonged – that Raingarde was professed a nun after the death of her husband. Light is also shed on the events relating to the Church at the time, grappling as it was with the council of Pisa and with the Roman schism of 1130⁵.

Four themes can be identified in the letter: the reception by Peter of the epistle bearing news of his mother’s death and his journey to Marcigny to celebrate her funeral; the evocation of the life of Raingarde, first a devout wife who abounded in Christian charity, then a nun devoted not only to the monastic office but also to mutual spiritual assistance; then the intensely dramatic moment of the woman’s passing; and finally a reflection on death, which provides an opportunity to revisit the theme of eschatological waiting. Let us now look at this text more closely.

First it should be said that, at the time when the letter arrived with news of Raingarde’s death, Peter was returning from the council of Pisa and was in the vicinity of Cluny. Between the arrival of the news and the moment when the author wrote his text, addressed – let us remember – to his brothers⁶, time had passed and yet the sorrow of the event was still vivid, palpable, just as the memory of their pious lady was still present to the nuns of Marcigny, each of whom, as we shall see in the text, was accustomed to devote to Raingarde a prayer, a thought, a memory⁷. And speaking of the memory of the dead, so dear to the tradition of the monks of Cluny, it can be noted that the mother’s epitaph becomes a medium that allows the author to extend the discourse to the problem of the legitimacy of the mourning for the dead, a theme of historical value, apparently jarring with respect to Christian spirituality, based as it is on the concepts of redemption and resurrection⁸. The abbot of Cluny however affirms that mourning is not the result of a lack of faith, but a natural, legitimate outcome of the mechanisms that pertain to a ‘mutual brotherhood’ – *Non noster talis dolor, quem generat non fidei defectus, sed nulla lege prohibitus mutuae germanitatis affectus*⁹ – so that the *planctus* ends up representing on the one hand a form of consolation and, on the other, a goad to seek the eternal after having verified the transience of earthly things¹⁰, a thesis corroborated by the Gospel and Old Testament examples adduced by Peter in his letter¹¹.

Immediately after this disquisition on the cult of the dead, the author delineates the profile of Raingarde, like a brightly coloured portrait; after some observations

⁵ LAMMA, *La madre di Pietro il Venerabile*, cit., p. 741.

⁶ All three of Peter the Venerable’s brothers entered the religious life: Ponce became prior of Vézelay; Jordan, abbot of Chaise-Dieu; Armande, abbot of Manglieu.

⁷ Ed. Constable, I, p. 155.

⁸ LAMMA, *La madre di Pietro il Venerabile*, cit., p. 744.

⁹ Ed. Constable, I, p. 156.

¹⁰ LAMMA, *La madre di Pietro il Venerabile*, cit., p. 744.

¹¹ Ed. Constable, I, pp. 156-157.

on her becoming a nun¹², the abbot takes a step back and speaks of the time when his mother was still living in the world, emphasising her hospitality and prodigality, since she was always ready to succour pilgrims and hermits:

Ea de causa cum ciues civitatis illius cui inhiabat et ad quam suspirabat, forte occurrissent, adorabat, suscipiebat, colebat, et abiecta omni domestica et mundana cura, se totam in eorum affectus et obsequia transfundebat. Suscipiebantur monachi, trabebantur heremitae, et omnes habitu vel fama religionis ornati, passim ad hospitandum etiam cum resisterent cogebantur¹³.

Mention is made of Raingarde's link with the preacher Robert d'Abrissel¹⁴ and especially of the agreement she reached with her husband, an agreement that – according to the practice of *conversio coniugatorum* – envisaged the entry into a monastery of each of them after a suitable period of time¹⁵. After this the author recalls the moment when the woman assisted her dying husband, projecting her figure in a 'framing' that evokes both unstinting devotion and lucid pragmatism: Raingarde worked on favouring her husband's holy detachment from his own body, but at the same time took precautions to prepare his Will and settle his estate – *A qua ne vel in modico infirmantis intentio auocaretur, ab omni cura corporali eius primo animum absoluit, testamentum eo praesente composuit, lites diremit, heredes instituit, castra diuisit, et ad unguem uniuersa perfecit¹⁶.*

Having rejected the idea of a second marriage¹⁷, on the night before her entrance into the cloister, Raingarde – in the presence of a monk – went to Sauxillanges, to her husband's tomb, where she abandoned herself to a liberating lamentation, a singular effusion of sentiments sublimated in religious passion, so that this detail has been seen as the precursor of later literary treatments¹⁸:

Nocte itaque diem mundi ultimam praecedente, Nichodemum emulans, nocturna aduenit, et o inaudita deuotio, sepulchrum coniugis adiit, et clam uniuersis praesente tantum iam dicto monacho, se supra illud proiecit, et lacrimarum fonte laxato, largis illud ymbribus inundauit¹⁹.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 158-159. It could be interesting to note Peter the Venerable's distrust of the new forms of religious life, at that time still in embryo and embodied by Robert d'Abrissel, a distrust highlighted by that 'famosus ille' referred to the founder of Fontevrault, who promoted a spirituality so different from the Cluniac one. This observation was made by LAMMA (*La madre di Pietro il Venerabile*, cit., p. 745) and was repeated by BROLIS (*Storie di donne nel Medioevo*, cit., pp. 32-33); for the analysis of the text, see the ed. Constable p. 158 ('famoso illi Roberto de Brussello'). For Robert d'Abrissel and his ability to 'attract' women, one may consult D. DUFASNE, *Donne moderne del Medioevo. Il movimento delle beghine: Hadewijch d'Amersa, Matilde di Magdeburgo, Margherita Porete*, Milano 2009, pp. 51-54. For an overview about Robert d'Abrissel: J. DALARUN, *Robert d'Abrissel, fondateur de Fontevrault*, Paris 1986; *Robert d'Abrissel et la vie religieuse dans l'ouest de la France*, Actes du colloque de Fontevraud, 13-16 decembre 2001, ed. par J. Dalarun, Turnhout 2004.

¹⁵ Ed. Constable, I, p. 159.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁸ LAMMA, *La madre di Pietro il Venerabile*, cit., p. 747: «Raingarde (...) abandoned herself to an effusion of sentiments so agitated and profound, even though expressed in the form of religious passion, as to suggest the sublimation (easily possible in that age of chivalry and of amatory poetry) of a more terrestrial and human passion and to constitute a precedent for literary treatment down to our own day».

¹⁹ Ed. Constable, I, p. 161.

The account continues with the departure of the holy woman from Montboissier together with some followers; having broken her journey at Cluny²⁰, she proceeded to the monastery of Marcigny, abandoning all the pomps of this world²¹. Only in the shadow of the cloister did she then meet, albeit several times, her son Peter²²: *columba super rivulos aquarum*²³, Raingarde now showed her son her own body sanctified by penitence, entrusting him to the safekeeping of the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin²⁴. Perfectly fulfilling the Benedictine ideal, the woman seemed to realise a perfect synthesis between the active and the contemplative life²⁵, spiritually accompanying her son wherever he went, from the seas to the Alps, from Britain to Rome and to the mountains of the Apennines²⁶. The narrative becomes more intense because the narrator speaks no longer in the third person but in the second – Peter addresses himself – and even if, further on, he resumes the third-person narrative, the tone remains unchanged because Raingarde, now at the end of her earthly pilgrimage, dies in odour of sanctity: not only does she have a vision of a maiden who preannounces her demise²⁷, but, at the moment of death, she kisses with rapture the holy Cross, which Peter would exalt in his works against the heretics:

(...) *crucem cum domini imagine sibi deferri rogavit. Qua allata, totum ad iterandos gemitus concitat monasterium. Adhibet ori suo dominicam effigiem, et pedes eius lingua allambens, uultui suo tota uirtute corporis imprimit. Adorat saluatoris passionem, et eius mortem ac uulnera, sibi salutem conferre adiurat. Nullam sibi gloriam, nullam spem superesse salutis, nisi in cruce domini sui omnibus audientibus profitetur*²⁸.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE NARRATIO

At least as complex as the matter dealt with is the structure of the *narratio*, subdivided into two macro-sections according to the scheme *de vita et obitu*, sandwiched between praise of the virtues. The life is narrated much less extensively than the death – in fact the author skips the customary account of the subject's origins and youth, and dwells on her *conversio* – and the narrative interval by which we pass from the *ortus* to the *obitus* (*Ad quae ut compediosum transitum faciam*)²⁹ could therefore be called 'abbreviated' (*verkürzend*)³⁰. In general we can say that the *narratio* has a tripartite structure typical of hagiography and of ancient biography – where the *laudatio* was frequent – in which the praise of the virtues is 'framed' not by chance by two biographical parts, in as much as the spiritual life is ideally located in the transformation between life

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 166.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 164 e 167.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 168-169.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³⁰ VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

and death³¹. When he is about to begin the *narratio*, the author appears hesitant, in accordance with the rhetorical praxis of the dilemma between speaking and remaining silent, rendered by three antitheses; but it is his filial duty, evoked by the key word *natura*³² – that finally gets the narrative going: *Sed quid agam? Ignorantia prohibet, amor impellit. Materia deterret, caritas adhortatur. Ponderus premit, natura istigat*³³. On the other hand, the context that sets the tone for the discussion of *conversio* is different, that is, the lamentation at the tomb of the deceased husband, which we mentioned above; everything takes place in the sign of the alternation between joy and sorrow³⁴ – the *hilaritas* arising for example from love for one's neighbour and the pain due to *celestium appetitus* – which represents an element of connection both with respect to the prologue of the letter, in which, as we have seen, there was talk of the need to justify and temper the pain, and with respect to the conclusion of the epistle, which is entirely consolatory³⁵. Immediately after the *conversio* comes the *descriptio mortis*, permeated by the motif of the *trepidatio*, in which the pathos is increased by certain rhetorical devices, such as the apostrophe to one's own soul³⁶ (in the style of Jerome and Isidore) – the syntactic parallelism³⁷ and, more in general, the choice of the monologue: (...) *diem in noctem mutari formidas, cuius te dulcedo reficere, cuius te claritas solebat illustrare. Quae si de aliis tanta meretur, quanta de te eam aestimas promereri? Quid enim illa in terris adeo coluit? Quid ita dilexit? Quid in humanis affectibus tibi non dico praetulit, sed saltem aequavit*³⁸.

The image of the multiple birth, of Augustinian derivation, helps to amplify this *laudatio*³⁹:

*Et erant certe illi alii filii, sed in amore materno collati, uidebantur alieni. Fuerat illa tibi non semel tantum mater, quae multo cordis angore te parturiebat frequenter. Instabant inquam ei frequentes partus, et cotidiano ad omnes casus tuos pauore innouatis te rursus doloribus pariebat*⁴⁰.

Compared with Augustine however, as can be gathered from the passage we have quoted, Peter is speaking of a mother who, as well as fearing for the salvation of her son's soul, fears also for his problems of 'practical' life⁴¹:

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 238.

³³ Ed. Constable, I p. 159.

³⁴ See for example *ibid.*: *Quare tristis es anima mea, et quare conturbas me? Et consolando subiciebat: Spera in deo, quoniam adhuc confitebor illi, salutare uultus mei et deus meus*, p. 164.

³⁵ VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

³⁶ Ed. Constable, I, p. 167.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-168.

³⁹ A. TRAPÈ, A.M. RAGGI, *Monica*, in *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, IX, Roma 1967, coll. 548-561; B. JIMÉNEZ DUQUE, *Monica*, in C. LEONARDI, A. RICCARDI, G. ZARRI (a cura di), *Il grande libro dei santi. Dizionario enciclopedico*, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano) 1998, pp. 1459-1460. For the maternity of Monica, see also: M. MORE O' FERRALL, *Monica the mother of Augustine*, in *Recherches augustiniennes* 10, 1975, pp. 23-43; A. TRAPÈ (a cura di), *Sant'Agostino. Mia madre*, Milano 1975; C.W. ATKINSON, *Your Servant, My Mother: the Figure of St. Monica in the Ideology of Christian Motherhood*, in C.W. ATKINSON, C.H. BUCHANAN, R.R. MILES (eds.), *Immaculate and Powerful: the Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, Boston 1985, pp. 139-172.

⁴⁰ Ed. Constable, I, p. 168.

⁴¹ VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

Sollicitabatur assidua cura, et tibi totum cogitatum impediens, sui sepius obliuiscatur. Metuebat omnia tibi neque aliquid satis esse tutum putabat. Suspendebat animum ad omnes euentus rerum, et rumores etiam optimos formidabat⁴².

We may note that, by means of the verbs *sollicitabatur*, *metuebat* and *suspendebat*, the abbot of Cluny draws attention to the typically female fears of his mother Raingarde, and thus develops a contrast to the *virilitas* of which we will speak shortly⁴³. And notice how, immediately afterwards, the list of the voyages that Raingarde undertakes spiritually in order to accompany her son on his real *peregrinatio* – the spiritual voyage, as is well known, was dear to epistolography – allows Peter to compose one of the most beautiful ‘ecclesiastical poems’ (*altkirchlichen Gedichte*) on the theme of filial love⁴⁴:

Si ad Britannias transfretasti, si Italiam penetrasti, si Romam adisti, tecum Maria enauigauit, Alpium horrenda cacumina, Appennini profunda exsuperauit, pericula uniuersa subiuit, et ad omnes aspersos casus comes inremota permansit⁴⁵.

So at the end of the *narratio* the motif of *trepidatio* returns, which is replicated like a frame, emphasised by the rhetorical questions⁴⁶: *Quomodo ergo hanc morientem uidebis? Qualiter hanc defecisse narrabis? Quo spiritu expirantem cernere, quibus uerbis salutare, quibus lacrimis ad deflendum tantum funus sufficere praeualebis?*⁴⁷.

THE THEMES

We can therefore affirm that, in this letter, by means of the sophisticated instruments of monastic rhetoric, the form, although highly controlled – Peter’s letters were in fact conceived to be read out loud⁴⁸ – is always modelled on the basis of the need to highlight certain content. But what are the salient motifs of the *narratio*? First of all, as we have anticipated, it should be said that Raingarde’s story serves to overcome *horror mortis*; as Peter von Moos noted, it can in fact be seen as a *speculum* intended to prepare one for an exemplary death, in accordance with the Cluniac tradition, which laid on the monks the duty of showing the faithful the royal road to a holy death⁴⁹. Also present and structuring is the theme of *Charitas* – or of love, we may say – which in accordance with the medieval ideal was directed both to God and to men⁵⁰. For example, Raingarde *exercebatur ardor dudum concaepae caritatis*⁵¹, or *nullo*

⁴² Ed. Constable, I, p. 168.

⁴³ VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Ed. Constable, I, p. 168.

⁴⁶ VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

⁴⁷ Ed. Constable, I, p. 168.

⁴⁸ Ed. Constable, vol. II, p. 92.

⁴⁹ VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, pp. 236 and 238.

⁵⁰ Innocent III, *De sacro altaris mysterio libri sex*, in *Patrologia latina*, 217, coll. 773-915, col. 795.

⁵¹ Ed. Constable, I, p. 164.

*modo (...) hospitum et pauperum obliuiscatur*⁵², but above all *'abnegans semetipsam, tollens crucem suam et sequens Christum, quidquid sibi olim in saeculo uixerat, totum uiuens aliis expiabat*⁵³. On the crest of this discourse on Raingarde's love for neighbour, it may be interesting to pause, at the same time, on the lexicographic analysis of some places in the text and to see, gradually, the subtlety with which Peter constructs his discourse, creating at times implicit games of meaning, not immediately understandable. For example, when the abbot of Cluny sketches the profile of his father, the prodigality of his mother is recalled through the expression *'hospitum indiscreta suscepcione'*⁵⁴, by means of which the writer of the letter seems to underline the violated virtue of *discretio* in order to express solidarity with her husband, a man overshadowed by the strong personality of his very generous and strong-willed wife⁵⁵. As Maria Teresa Broliss has noted⁵⁶, the impulsiveness and the shattering affection of the holy woman are often emphasised in the text, as for example when we find expressions such as: *impulsa, uiolento aestu animi*⁵⁷, *facibus ardebat*⁵⁸, *feruens spiritu animus requiescere nesciebat*⁵⁹, or *amoris stimulis agitata*⁶⁰, which suggests the agitation aroused by love, so that the mother multiplied her pilgrimages and her alms-giving⁶¹.

Continuing with our analysis of the contents, at the death of Maurice, we recall, Raingarde went sorrowing to his grave and later entered the monastery of Marcigny: two cathartic gestures, but also narratively connected. The woman in fact bursts into tears in the presence of a monk, to whom she confesses the sins of her conjugal life (*et deinde propria peccata seu crimina coepit*)⁶²; the monk imposes on her a penance, that she will spend the rest of her life in the monastery she will soon enter⁶³; and it is this penance that represents the connecting link between the *planctus* and the *conuersio*. From it we gather Peter's ideas about marriage, which in the medieval manner he sees as a form of contamination⁶⁴.

Returning for a moment to the relation between form and content, we may note how, at the moment when the author speaks of his mother's sharing of his labours, her solicitude is emphasised by means of an epanodos which, with the triple repetition of the words, serves also to underline the three facets of unitive love: Christian love (directed to everyone), love for the cloister and affective love (of a 'personalist' nature)⁶⁵:

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁵⁴ Constable, I, p. 159.

⁵⁵ LAMMA, *La madre di Pietro il Venerabile*, cit., p. 745.

⁵⁶ BROLIS, *Storie di donne nel Medioevo*, cit., p. 33.

⁵⁷ Ed. Constable, I, p. 158.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Ed. Constable, I, p. 161.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Among the studies of marriage as contamination that are known to me are: R. CANTALAMESSA (a cura di), *Etica sessuale e matrimonio nel Cristianesimo delle origini*, Milano 1976; C. TIBILETTI, *Verginità e matrimonio in antichi scrittori cristiani*, in *Annali Facoltà Lettere e Filosofia di Macerata* 2, 1969, pp. 10-27. The observation about the connection between *planctus* and *conuersio* is in VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

*Discurrerat, stagebat, orabat singulas,
 orabat omnes,
 ut pro te satagerent
 pro te misericordis domini
 misericordiam implorarent,
 debere hoc eas caritati,
 debere tibi,
 debere sibi,
 caritati ex mandato
 tibi ex debito
 sibi ex obsequio.
 Ho sororibus,
 hoc fratribus,
 hoc advenientibus indefesse dicebat,
 et omnes absque discretione
 longe amplius pro te
 quam pro se exorabat⁶⁶.*

Coming now to the concluding part of the *narratio*, of great interest is the figure of the young maiden who appears in a dream to the holy mother Raingarde shortly before her death (*Et ecce conspicit decori uultus feminam sibi asstare, et ut se sequeretur, nutu et signo manus uocare*)⁶⁷; whether this girl represents death or not we do not know, but we can affirm that, as well as signifying the call to eternal life (the *signum vocationis*), she embodies the beatific side of death. We may note moreover that the fact that the maiden calls Raingarde thrice (*tertio a formosa uisitatrice est ut sequeretur uocata*)⁶⁸ refers both to the three days of the woman’s illness and to the *triduum sacrum*⁶⁹.

Contiguous with the previous one is the scene where Peter ‘photographs’ the lamentation of the nuns around the dying Raingarde. This is a scene constructed in contrast to the lamentation over Maurice de Montboissier, for whom – as the author said – the people shed useless tears (*populi fletibus inutiliter*)⁷⁰. Having received news of Raingarde’s imminent demise, the nuns abandon their ordered procession, as the monastic Rule prescribes in cases of death, and run from all directions, *velut ad matrem filiae. Fit statim uniuersarum concursus ad eam, et luctuoso gemitu illam ex omni parte circumdant. Concurrunt uelut ad matrem filiae, et quasi cum ea defungi deberent, dampnum ut dicebant irreparabile lamentatur*⁷¹. The desperation of her fellow nuns contrasts with the certain hope (*firma spe*) of the dying woman, which pours trust into the hearts of the nuns; the certainty of the things hoped for (Heb 11:1) evokes, automatically, the image of the mustard-seed that is not frozen with the arrival of winter; and the mention of the ‘ardens fidei fervor’ recalls the parable of the Wise Virgins⁷²:

⁶⁶ Ed. Constable, I, p. 168.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 168-169.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁶⁹ VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

⁷⁰ Ed. Constable, I, p. 160.

⁷¹ Ed. Constable, I, p. 169.

⁷² VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

*Colloquitur sororibus, confitetur peccata, petit absolui, absolvitur ab omnibus, expectat firma spe dominum suum quando reuertatur a nuptiis, nec aliquid sacrorum salutarium intermittit. Viguerat in ea ardens fidei feruor, ut pene secundum dominum grano sinapis potuisset aequari, qui nec longo uitae cursu ueterascere, nec gelidae mortis incursu potuit refrigescere*⁷³.

Extremely moving, also for the eschatological dimension it contains, is the passage where Raingarde has the Crucifix brought to her, on which she bestows passionate kisses, imploring the nuns that it may not be taken away – *Quid uultis auferre dominum meum? Permittite eum michi quamdiu uiuo, ad quem statim sum moriens transitura*⁷⁴. Even more moving is the place in the text where Peter, in anguish, describes his mother's solitude in the face of death: (...) *piissime redemptor, quo corpus hoc deferatur, nec quo anima sit transferenda ignoro. (...) Quis eam suscipiet? Quis occurret? Quis consolabitur? Quis a morte, doloribus, mereoribus liberabit? Quis locum, uitam, quietem, post tot mundi labores prouidebit?*⁷⁵. Raingarde's solitude, which is the *arcta solitudo* of the dying, implies a total abandonment to God and, by the same token, a distancing from her friends in the world⁷⁶ – as required by the Cluniac ideal. This distancing had been preannounced when the woman affirmed:

*Stultum est in homine ultra spem ponere, cum nec in amicissimis spem quilibet ualeat inuenire. Agendum michi est pro me ipsa, nec in alio spes salutis propriae reponenda, ne forte dum alienum ociosa praestolor auxilium, per meam culpam amittam diuinum. Laboret corpus dum uiuit, et pro se ipsa deum anima exoret, ne si prius defecerit, non sit qui pro mortua interpellat*⁷⁷.

Now, on the threshold of death, Raingarde consigns herself to the Most High, and does so concluding with the words spoken by Christ on the Cross: *Tibi ego quod creasti committo, tibi me omnium malorum ream confiteor, a te misericordiam quamdiu expectaui nunc postulo, et in manus tuas corpus et animam meam commendo*⁷⁸. Through the passage just cited, the Christomimesis of the holy mother Raingarde takes form, for she not only utters the same words as Jesus but – like Christ – dies at the sixth hour (Luke 23: 44) so that, by evoking the central moment in the history of salvation, Peter now seals, immediately before the *commendatio*⁷⁹, the central moment in his soteriological biography⁸⁰. The woman's *christiformitas*, looked at closely, is completed also because, once she has expired, her face shines with an intense light (*faciei miraculo*)⁸¹, analogous to the brightness of the face of Jesus both at the Transfiguration and at the Ascension⁸², but also to the lifeless face of the saint who was 'most exemplary in the whole

⁷³ Ed. Constable, I, p. 169.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁷⁶ VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

⁷⁷ Ed. Constable, I, p. 163.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 171: *Inde post modicum hora illa qua prius redemptor pro mortuorum uita moriens, inclinato capite tradidit spiritum, mitis eius famula placido fine transiuit ad dominum.*

⁸⁰ VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

⁸¹ Ed. Constable, I, p. 171.

⁸² VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

of the West', Martin of Tours († 397), a sign of the 'gestation' of the nascent hagiographical genre⁸³.

The *narratio* concludes with the so-called *descriptio funeris*, devoted to the nuns of the monastery of Marcigny, companions of the holy Raingarde. In this passage Peter the Venerable draws attention to some contents that at least deserve a mention. For instance, for example, he declares here, with repeated references, the importance of eternalising the deceased through the memory of the heart, which then redirects to the concept of the dead who rests safely in God⁸⁴: *Recesserunt merentes, secum eam a tumulto cordibus referentes. Quam licet in sepulchro exanimem relinquerint, apud se eam uiuere dum uiuunt, perpetuo confitentur*⁸⁵. The author's gratitude to the nuns is touching when he affirms: *Nam servastis animam meam michi eripuistis eam a morte, oculos meos a lacrimis, pedes meos a lapsu, liberastis me de laqueo uenantium, et a uerbo aspero, factae estis domus passeris, petra refugium erinacii*⁸⁶. Thus Peter declares that the nuns, by eternalising the memory of Raingarde, have saved a part of him, indeed have saved his very soul. In this way he not only makes his *elogia* to the dead woman, but makes it also to her 'travelling companions', who have ensured that the holy Raingarde, in Christian fashion, bring to a conclusion her mission in this mortal life⁸⁷. Finally it is worth mentioning the innovative *memento mori* constructed by means of a poetic and joyful *descriptio* of spring, larded with scriptural references⁸⁸:

*Seruntur interim uelut in orto arborum semina, sic in sacro cimiterio uestra corpora, quae secundum apostolum uiuificari non possunt nisi prius moriantur, nec resurgere nisi occidant, nec reuiuere nisi putrescant. Oportet plane illa putrescere, ut possint reuiuere, arescere ut possint florere, occidit ut possint resurgere, mori ut possint uiuere. Toleranda est hyems praesentis uitae, et niuium ymbriumque magnanimitate asperitas sustinenda, quamdiu arborum fructuosa amenitas latet, quamdiu nondum apparuit quid eritis, quamdiu uita uestra abscondita est cum Christo in deo. Veniet tempus, quando aere serenato, gelidis tempestatibus uer aeternum succedet, cum sol nunquam occasurus exoriens splendore tenebras, calore frigora uniuersa propellet, et ingognito terris lumine mundum natura stupente profundens, ueteri nocte deturbata nouam et continuam diem adducet. Tunc tepore mirabili tellus faetata, in nouos flores ac fructus semina corporum uestrorum erumpere coget, cum corruptibile hoc incorruptionem, et mortale hoc induerit immortalitatem. Tunc affectu et re ipsa cantabitis, quod uoce ac fide cantatis, flores apparuerunt in terra uestra, quando sponso cum ardentibus lampadibus occurrentes, ad nuptias nunquam finiendas intrabitis*⁸⁹.

So, the *propositum* addressed to the nuns is based on the example of Raingarde who, dead to the world from her *conuersio* and having entered the true life through her *transitus*, well illustrates the Paschal theme of 'dying and becoming'⁹⁰. At the *con-*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁸⁵ Ed. Constable, I, p. 172.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

⁸⁸ Ed. Constable, I, pp. 172-173; VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 253. See, for example, the affinity between *uiuificari non possunt nisi prius moriantur* and I Cor. 15, 45; or the reference to Mt. 25, 1-13 in the phrase *Quando sponso cum ardentibus lampadibus occurrentes, ad nuptias nunquam finiendas intrabitis*.

⁸⁹ Ed. Constable, I, p. 173.

⁹⁰ In German 'Stirb und werde'; for all this, see VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

clusio of the epistle their mother's example is offered by Peter to his own brothers, who are exhorted to her *imitatio* in a substantially Christocentric context that, once again, guarantees the biography's internal unity⁹¹: *Parturiat uos exemplo et precibus, donec formetur Christus in uobis*⁹².

ONE, NONE, A HUNDRED THOUSAND: THE 'FACES' OF RAINGARDE IN THE SPECTRUM OF REPRESENTATIVE *TOPOI*

The analysis of the contents and, more specifically, the analysis of Raingarde's profile makes it clear how the writer of the text means to make the figure described take shape by resorting to the *topoi* characteristic of the Christian biographical tradition, to the 'ideal types of woman'⁹³ that represent a scale of moral and religious values, each assuming its own function and each representing certain virtues⁹⁴. The innovative emphasis given to women by Christian biography and autobiography caused Christian writers to address the problem of the formation of a mystical ideal of woman, which finally fully asserted itself in the fourth century⁹⁵ and thus three ideal types of woman were consolidated, namely the *virgo*⁹⁶, the *vidua*⁹⁷ and the *mater*⁹⁸, and alongside these phenotypes, these macro-categories, 'lateral' *topoi* established themselves.

As we shall see, thanks to the treatment of Peter the Venerable, Raingarde seems to embody several *topoi* at the same time, so as to represent – with its many faces – a 'plural' didactic model. It should also be said that, initially charged with a soteriological and ideological meaning, these types ended up representing, *mutatis mutandis*, mere commonplaces⁹⁹, also and above all because they were no longer referred to women – who really existed – on the basis of which they had been modelled, but served as a paradigmatic biographical model for the presentation of the new holy women of the Christian pantheon, the cult of which was appropriately promoted through *vitae*¹⁰⁰.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁹² Ed. Constable, I, p. 173.

⁹³ E. GIANNARELLI, *La tipologia femminile nella biografia e nell'autobiografia cristiana del IV° secolo*, Roma 1980, p. 12.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁹⁶ *Virgines* by antonomasia are Macrina – described by Gregory of Nyssa in his *Vita sanctae Macrinae* – and Asella – portrayed by Jerome in *Ep. XXIV*. GIANNARELLI, *La tipologia femminile*, cit., p. 13 and passim.

⁹⁷ *Vidua* is obviously to be understood in the Christian sense as she who, freed from the marital yoke, devotes herself to the ascetic life. These matters are discussed by Paul in *I Tim.* 5, 9, as well as in the *Constitutiones Apostolorum* and in the *Didascalia*. I have taken this information from GIANNARELLI, *La tipologia femminile*, cit., p. 12, n. 12. A *vidua*, for example, is Paula, of whom Jerome writes in his *Epitaphium sanctae Paulae*.

⁹⁸ The prototype *matres* are Monica and Nonna, described respectively by Augustine in his *Confessiones* and by Gregory of Nazianzus in his *Carmen de vita sua*.

⁹⁹ GIANNARELLI, *La tipologia femminile*, cit., p. 24.

¹⁰⁰ Among many possible references I indicate here only: A. BENVENUTI PAPI, *'In castro poenitentiae'. Santità e società femminile nell'Italia medievale*, Roma 1990; M. ZANGARI, *La Legenda di Agnese da Montepulciano: il classicismo delle fonti e i motivi tradizionali dell'agiografia femminile tardomedievale*, in *Caterina da Siena e la vita religiosa femminile. Un percorso domenicano*, Roma 2020 pp. 181-196.

The most complete female typology was that of the *vidua* because the widow subsumes in herself, all at once, the values of chastity and of physical and spiritual maternity¹⁰¹. It can be affirmed that Raingarde beautifully embodies the *typus* of the widow because, like Paula and Melania¹⁰², widows *par excellence*, she was obstructed in her desire to devote herself to the ascetic life on the death of her husband, refusing a second marriage; Peter the Venerable's mother had in fact been obliged to pretend she wanted to marry again in order to organise, secretly, her entry into Marcigny¹⁰³; moreover, as in the cases of Melania and Paula, the obstacles that stand in the way are traced back to the deceit of Satan. Also pragmatic is her intolerance for the condition of *uxor*, because the marital yoke represents an impediment for asceticism and contemplation; if Jerome had made Melania say about the deaths of her children and husband *Expeditus tibi servitura sum, Domine, quia tanto me liberasti onere*¹⁰⁴, in the same way Peter affirms (...) *cum in flore faeni adhuc recubans iuncta esset uiro, alligata mundo, ad ea uelut captiuus ad libertatem, uinctus ad solutionem, exul ad patriam suspirabat, et se coniugali uinculo praepeditam, hominibus ignoto, deo cognito mentis angore deflebat*¹⁰⁵. In addition to nobility and wealth¹⁰⁶ – which Peter alludes to in a preterition¹⁰⁷ – a quality connected to the type of *vidua* is wisdom¹⁰⁸, emphasised by the author in several places in the text (*columba (...) prudentia predita*¹⁰⁹, *ut si eam audires, non mulierem, sed episcopum loqui crederes*¹¹⁰, *filium materno animo singulari sapientia instruebat*¹¹¹), which makes a pair with intelligence, appearing in the ability to read and understand Sacred Scripture, according to the precept of Gregory of Nyssa¹¹² (*cum igitur omni studio spirituali theoriae intendere*)¹¹³.

But Raingarde, as well as being an exemplary *vidua*, is also a *mater*, in her multi-form virtues that are proper to the religious and literary dimension of this *typus*¹¹⁴. A particular characteristic of the mother in Christian biography and autobiography is the overtaking of physical maternity on the part of the spiritual dimension; Augustine, for example, affirmed in connection with Monica: (...) *quae me parturivit et carne, ut in hanc temporalem, et corde, ut in aeternam lucem nascerer*¹¹⁵ and we may consider

¹⁰¹ GIANNARELLI, *La tipologia femminile*, cit., p. 65-66.

¹⁰² Hier. *Ep.* 45, 4.

¹⁰³ Ed. Constable, I, p. 160.

¹⁰⁴ Hier. *Ep.* 39, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Ed. Constable, I, p. 158.

¹⁰⁶ GIANNARELLI, *La tipologia femminile*, cit., p. 52.

¹⁰⁷ Ed. Constable, I, p. 158: *At ego nec claritudinem generis, nec amplitudinem possessionis nec quantamlibet in ea commendandam suscepi gloria carnis (...).*

¹⁰⁸ GIANNARELLI, *La tipologia femminile*, cit.

¹⁰⁹ Constable, I, p. 164.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² See Jerome's instructions addressed to Leta in Hier, *Ep.* 107, 9, which envisage an articulated educational programme: *Reddat tibi pensum cotidie Scripturarum certum. Ediscat graecorum versuum numerum. Sequatur statim et latina eruditio, quae si non ab initio os tenerum composuerit, in peregrinum sonum lingua corrumpitur et externis vitiis sermo sordidatur.*

¹¹³ Ed. Constable, I, p. 164.

¹¹⁴ GIANNARELLI, *La tipologia femminile*, cit., pp. 67-81.

¹¹⁵ *Conf.* 9, 8, 17.

specular to this important passage in the *Confessiones*¹¹⁶ the passage in which Peter, speaking of himself, affirms *Fuerat illa tibi non semel tantum mater, quae multo cordis angore te parturiebat frequenter. Instabant inquam ei frequentes partus, et cotidiano ad omnes casus tuos pauore innouatis te rursum doloribus pariebat*¹¹⁷. In addition to chastity¹¹⁸ and *spes in deo*¹¹⁹, both present in Monica¹²⁰, in Raingarde there also shines the characterisation of the *famula Dei*¹²¹ – which had also distinguished Augustine’s mother¹²² – understood as not only emphasising humility, but also as re-semanticising a feminine ideal that was already biblical and pagan¹²³. The *mater*, in the complexity of her many facets, allows us to gather an important literary module that was destined for the *longue durée*: that of the woman of salvation, which from Augustine’s *mater salutaris*, passing through intermediate texts such as that of the abbot of Cluny¹²⁴, extends as far as the *dolce stil novo* and the poetry of courtly love¹²⁵ – we may think of Dante’s Beatrice, who is not only a woman of salvation¹²⁶, but is actually identified with salvation¹²⁷.

Juxtaposed to the type of the widow and the mother, seen according to the spectrum of lateral *topoi*, we find in the portrait of the pious Raingarde a *typus* that we encountered at the beginning – when speaking of the death of Maurice de Montboissier – i.e. that of the *gynè andréia* or *mulier virilis*¹²⁸ (*[...] testamentum eo praesente composuit, lites diremit, heredes instituit, castra diuisit, et ad unguem uniuersa perfecit*¹²⁹, *familiae multitudo, nobilium caterna mesta gemitabat, sola mulierem excedens, siccis oculis, uirili constantia perdurabat*¹³⁰), already present in Seneca¹³¹: Raingarde abandons the female dimension, connoted by physical and moral frailty, and becomes a man in the spirit, reacting to

¹¹⁶ Monica’s spiritual maternity is to be considered the key to her presence in the work, so that, for instance, she is proposed almost as a *titulus* to part of Book IX; see GIANNARELLI, *La tipologia femminile*, cit., pp. 76-77.

¹¹⁷ Ed. Constable, I, p. 168.

¹¹⁸ The author means the chastity when he talks about *conuersio coniugatorum*, *ibid.*, pp. 159-160.

¹¹⁹ *Spera in deo, quoniam ad huc confitebor illi, salutare vultus mei et deus meus*, *ibid.*, p. 164; (...) *expectat firma spe dominum suum* (...), *ibid.*, p. 169; (...) *beata spe domini misericordiam expectabat*, *ibid.*, p. 159.

¹²⁰ Cf. *Conf.* 9, 10, 26.

¹²¹ Ed. Constable, I, p. 164: *piissimi redemptoris humilis aius ancilla* (...); p. 168 *famula dei, Ancilla dei*; p. 165 *et ancillarum dei se famula esse*.

¹²² Cf. *Conf.* 9, 9, 22.

¹²³ For this, see: GIANNARELLI, *La tipologia femminile*, cit., pp. 64-65 e 77-78. For example in Plin. *Ep.* 5, 16, 2 we read: *Nondum annos tredecim impleverat, et tam illi anilis prudentia, matronalis gravitas erat et tamen suavitas puellaris cum verginali verecundia*.

¹²⁴ Ed. Constable, I, p. 168: *Canonem precum ipsa sibi praefixerat, ut si forte alia intermitterentur, illud pro salute tua cotidie domino solueretur*.

¹²⁵ GIANNARELLI, *La tipologia femminile*, cit., p. 80.

¹²⁶ Dante, *Vita Nuova* 3, 4.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 11, 3.

¹²⁸ For the *topos* of the *mulier virilis*, discussed not only by Seneca but by Varro in his *De lingua latina* (5, 73) and by Isidore in his *Etymologiarum libri* (11, 2, 18-19), see U. MATTIOLI, *Astbeneia e andrea. Aspetti della femminilità nella letteratura classica, biblica e cristiana antica*, Roma 1983; C. MAZZUCCO, “E fui fatta maschio”. *La donna nel cristianesimo primitivo (secoli I-III)*, Firenze 1989; K. ASPEGREN, *The Male Woman. A Feminine Ideal in the Early Church*, Stockholm 1990.

¹²⁹ Ed. Constable, I, p. 159.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.

¹³¹ We may think of the exemplary figure Elvia (see E. GIANNARELLI, *La tipologia femminile*, cit., pp. 17-18).

adversity without abandoning herself to excessive expression of grief – note that human perfection was male for the philosophers of antiquity, and this is also true of Christian theory, given that Christ became incarnate in a male body¹³². That of the *gynè andréia* was therefore a foundational type for Christian female biography, as illustrated for example in the *De virginitate*¹³³ and in the *Vita Macrinae*¹³⁴ by Gregory of Nyssa. Closely connected to the theme of the *mulier virilis* – and we are now coming to the end – is the metaphor of the *militia Christi*, which can be glimpsed when Peter informs us about Raingarde's struggle against those who would like her to be married again to a mortal man; this is why we can discern here another facet – yet another – of the portrait of the holy mother Raingarde, which is therefore, as a whole, extraordinarily iridescent, informed not only by Peter's writing talent, but also by the models that the typology of the early Christian βίος puts at the service of female hagiography-biography in its most advanced phase. It follows that the representative requirements end by altering the authentic lineaments of the biographee, so that we may well wonder how much of this portrait is idealisation and how much is reality.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the letter we have examined presents particularly articulated themes, sometimes elusive, and this complexity appears as much in the contents and the form as in relation to the problem of gender which, by choice, we have deliberately avoided. Epitaph and at the same time *consolatio*, though also a funerary lament in the guise of a letter¹³⁵, apart from the problem of genre (which seems resolvable by the happy formula *Kreuzung der Gattungen*), the letter acts also as a 'frame' for the pen-portrait of the holy mother Raingarde. In a refined game of mirrors, Peter the Venerable presents her profile which, suspended between reality and legend, between now and then, takes shape not only with the characteristics of the *mater* and *vidua*, but also with the typical signs of *famula dei*, *mulier virilis*, *domina salutaris* and *miles Christi* declined in the feminine. In a gemmation of images and rhetorical formulas that reciprocally engage, everything stands out on two themes, two basic co-ordinates that, together with the Christ-centred model, confer unity on the ensemble: death and love.

¹³² GIANNARELLI, *Lo specchio e il ritratto. Scansioni dell'età, topoi e modelli femminili fra paganesimo e cristianesimo*, in *Storia delle donne II*, Firenze 2006, pp. 159-187: p. 164.

¹³³ Gregorius Nys., *De virginitate*, ed. M. AUBINEAU, Sources Chrétiennes 119, Paris 1966.

¹³⁴ Idem., *Vita Macrinae*, ed. P. MARAVAL, Sources Chrétiennes 178, Paris 1971, see for example I,26-28.

¹³⁵ Peter von Moos, for example, tried to clarify the question of the genre of the letter as a whole, concluding that, although, from an epideictic point of view, it can be classified as an epitaph, the text also presents the characteristics of the funeral lament and, at the same time, of the *Consolatio*. Following his indications, it can be said that the *epistula* is, in essence, a hagiographic and autobiographical text inserted into a letter – which is why the discourse also responds to the taste of epistolography – that acts as a frame, as a 'lining', where the genre of the *consolatio* prevails over that of the funeral lament. For all this, see VON MOOS, *op. cit.*, pp. 256-260.

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the hagiographic representation of the mother of Peter the Venerable, Raingarde de Montboissier (†1134), whose portrait is delineated by the abbot of Cluny in a long letter from his well-known correspondence. It is an extraordinarily dense and complex text, not only because of the various themes that are developed in it, but also for a series of aspects that we intend to investigate; in particular, we shall dwell on the *narratio* where, surrounded by a hagiographical frame, the profile of Raingarde develops – first as a mother and then as a nun – through which Peter offers a mirror of virtue, an exemplary picture of Christian life, placing particular emphasis on the woman's ability to prepare for a holy death, one of the central concerns of Cluniac spirituality.

Questo lavoro è inteso ad analizzare la rappresentazione agiografica della madre di Pietro il Venerabile, Raingarda di Montboissier (†1134), il ritratto della quale è delineato dall'abate di Cluny in una lunga lettera del suo noto epistolario. Si tratta di un testo straordinariamente denso e complesso, non soltanto per la presenza dei vari nuclei tematici in essa sviluppati, ma anche per una serie di aspetti che ci proponiamo di indagare; particolarmente intendiamo soffermarci sulla *narratio* ove, incorniciato da un'intelaiatura agiografica, prende corpo il profilo di Raingarda – prima madre e poi monaca – per mezzo del quale Pietro intende offrire uno specchio di virtù, un quadro esemplare di vita cristiana, ponendo l'accento soprattutto sulla capacità della donna di prepararsi alla morte santa, che era poi un caposaldo della spiritualità cluniacense.

KEYWORDS: Raingarde de Mointboissier; Peter the Venerable; Hagiography; Love; Death.

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