

Letter XVI: On Abelard's Misfortunes — A Letter of Chiding Consolation Fulk, prior of Deuil, to Peter Abelard

Translated by W.L. North from the edition in Patrologia Latina 178, cols.371-376, with a caesura in the text supplemented by the edition of Damien van den Eynde, O.F.M., "Détails biographiques sur Pierre Abélard," Antonianum 38 (1963): 217-223 at 219. A new edition and translation of Abelard's letters is being prepared by Jan Ziolkowski for Cambridge's series *Cambridge Medieval Classics* (no date for publication is given nor any indication of whether the edition shall encompass all of Abelard's correspondence or only the correspondence between Abelard and Heloise).

To Peter, now cowed, thanks be to God, brother Fulco, the consolation of the present and future life.¹

Whoever thinks that he can escape the risks of the secular life without risk seems to me to be no less a fool than the person who thinks himself a wise man, though he is a fool. Of course, it is not necessary for me to show [you] in what a great error of stupidity he is entangled, since it is clearer than day to the wise man. They are ruled by fortune who promise themselves to stand unmoved amidst the mutability of this happiness. How contrary to reason it is to think this, faithless felicity shows by its own mutability. It is not human to endure in stability. And yet, although human affairs are daily slipping into a worse state and the joyful vanity of happiness is wounded by contraries, wretched men — the intimates and greatest friends of this age - nevertheless fail to attend to the end of the world and how they are subject to many dangers and how, when they are distinguished by some little prosperity, they are measured by the eye of providence. Instead, when adversity rages, it either casts them into despair or raises them to the fruit of perception: but in the end they come to know what men are. To the desperate and the unrepentant, the mercy of the remission [of sins] is not available either in this world or the next, *but mercy shall surround those who hope in the Lord.*(Ps.37:16)

¹ On this as a letter of consolation, see David Luscombe, "From Paris to the Paraclete: The Correspondence of Abelard and Heloise," in Proceedings of the British Academy 74 (1988): 247-88. Luscombe is somewhat misleading about the contents of Fulk's letter; for example, Fulk does not "complain that he [Abelard] still takes on pupils and still spends his earnings on women, so much so that he is now beggared."(p.255) Rather, he says that Abelard's poverty after his castration is proof of his profligate expenditure of his sizeable teaching income on prostitutes (cf. p.2 of this translation). When he does mention that Abelard is still teaching (and hence making money), he does so without reproach (though he remarks that, as a monk, Abelard is not really entitled to the money he earns). Also, he does not "luridly" write about Abelard's visits to prostitutes; what he describes vividly is the avarice of prostitutes who, like roving lions, offer their prey no mercy as far as payment.

Most abundantly did the glory of this world caress you a short time ago, and it did not allow you to perceive that you were subject to the uncertain vicissitudes of fortune. Rome was sending its foster-children to you to be taught, and she who once used to pour forth the knowledge of all the arts to her listeners, now showed by the scholars whom she sent that you were wiser than she, herself a wise woman. No expanse of land, no mountain peaks, no deep valleys, no roads — although blocked by difficult dangers and robbers — kept them from hastening to you. The terrible sea and the tempest of waves which lay between did not terrify the crowd of English youths; rather, despising all danger when your name was heard, they flowed to you. Far off Brittany sent its animals to be educated. With their fierceness tamed, the men of Anjou served you in their [students]. The men of Poitiers, the Gascons, and the Iberians; Normandy and Flanders, German and Swabian strove assiduously to kindle, to praise, and to proclaim your genius. I'll pass over all those living in the city of Paris and in the nearby and most remote parts of Gaul who so thirsted to be taught by you that it was as if no training could be found with anyone but you. Deeply moved by the brilliance of your genius, the sweetness of your eloquence, the ease of your freer tongue as well as the subtlety of your knowledge, they hastened their journey as if [they were bound for] the clearest spring of philosophy. But with regard to what was, as they say, your downfall, namely the love of single women, and the traps of their lust, with which they capture their customers, it seems better for me to remain silent rather than to say something not in keeping with our order or the rule of our religious life.² For talk of such things often does good men more harm than good.

Having perhaps been carried away within and above yourself by the convergence of good things upon you (although a wise man, if he does not snuff out the meaning of this word in himself, remains unmoved in spirit by these goods), you boiled up most foolishly into pride, the beginning and plague of all evils. And, as those who came to hear you most often say, with an air of boasting you esteemed all others, even the saints who had devoted themselves to wisdom, as your inferiors just to show off. But the all-powerful honor and kindness of God, Who makes the wind of pride vanish and multiplies the grace of humility, Who despises no one in just judgment who is languishing in the disease of pride and is

² It is difficult to decide whether Fulk's description of Abelard's weakness for prostitutes and/or *feminae singulares*, as he sometimes calls them, contradicts Abelard's portrayal of the uniqueness of his relationship with Heloise in his *Historia Calamitatum*. Certainly, he describes himself (cf. pp.66-67 in the Penguin trans. of the *Historia*) as both aware of how to seduce women and confident in his ability to do so, a portrayal which suggests, though does not explicitly refer to, prior experience. On this issue, F. Chatillon, "Notes Abélardiennes' III: Inconduite d'Abélard avant la rencontre d'Héloïse," *Revue du moyen âge latin* 20 (1964): 318-34.

laboring under other illnesses of the spirit — He, taking pity on you, subdued the inflammation of your mind and the pride of your eyes with this kind of adversity, so that you would not be proudly wise within yourself, you would cease to neglect other good men through your vituperation, and you would shine forth from now on in the sanctity of your purity and your praiseworthy devotion to continence.

How much this small part (partiuncula) of your body, which you have lost by the judgment and favor of omnipotent God, had injured you and did not cease injuring you as long as it remained, the diminution of your wealth teaches better than my words can show. In truth, whatever you were able to acquire by speaking in the sale of your knowledge, with the exception of food and what was needed for necessities (usus necessarius), you did not cease to sink (as I have learned by report) into the maw of consuming fornication. The avaricious rapacity of whores took everything from you. No age has ever heard of a whore who wished to take pity on another or who has spared the property of the men who desire them which they could [otherwise] have taken. Your profound poverty seems to prove this — you who had nothing but rags from so much gain, as is said, when you first fell victim to these vicissitudes of fortune.

You have indeed borne the punishment of your body in this age, and perhaps you think yourself or think that [others consider] you more worthless according to the vanity of the world: but everyone's opinion is unfortunate and it is a reputation utterly devoid of true reason. Instead, if you would truly examine, alone and with yourself, what is just and good by frequent and studious meditation, you would discover, once your vanity has been set aside, how much this mutilation of your parts offers you. First of all, you have escaped many passions that crush those who have not had such a loss. For the physicians affirm that such men are in no way held to be subject to [these passions], although they think most foolishly that these men have fallen from all happiness by the removal of this part of the body. Therefore, you shall no longer suffer any vexation from the heat of lust and the firebrands of luxury — evils by which even saints are sometimes touched — unless it comes from your thoughts alone. But now that the flame of the wildfire has been extinguished, it is necessary that you return to yourself and put your mind, which was wandering through the many sweet insanities of luxury, on a solid footing. Now free and with no lust holding you back, you can know the ways and causes of all lines of reasoning (rationes) which those who are snatched away by lust's various enticements, perceive little if at all. Add to this that your money, if you are allowed to have it (for it is not characteristic of monks to have any property without permission), shall not be subject to the vexation of those grabbing it away. From now on, you shall begin to possess what was, just a short time ago, snatched

away over the course of many eviscerations.

You should also consider this a great [advantage], namely that, suspect to no one, you may be received with the utmost safety as a guest by every host. The husband shall not fear from you his wife's violation or the shattering of his [marriage] bed. With the utmost decency shall you pass through the ranks of matrons inviolably. The choirs of virgins shining in the flower of youth, who can usually kindle even old men to the heat of lust with their motions, (even though they are already deprived of the heat of the flesh), you shall gaze upon safe and sinless, since you do not fear their walk and their traps. Finally, it is true that you constantly avoid the secret retreats of the sodomites, which the truth of divine justice detests as most detestable above all, and have always detested their foul and malignant company.

And after the fluctuations of this most fragile fragility, what is to my mind the great gift of God in this situation is that just as you certainly shall not feel the nocturnal illusions of dreams, so it is certain that, even if the will should be there, no effect will follow. A wife's soft words and the touch of bodies, without which one cannot have a wife, and the extraordinary care of children (by which you are less pleasing to God) — [none of these] shall hold you back. How great a good do you think it is that you have been removed from the dangers of sinning and settled in the safety of not sinning? And so, now proud, you shall be able to avoid the lion-like ferocity which [whores] show to those coming to them for the first time, the trickery of their snake-like deception, and the incontinence of their captivating luxury. You will know what I am talking about from experience better than I am able to explain in words. That fellow Origen, whose sublime wisdom is everywhere proclaimed and revered (except for the fact that he did not correct certain errors, which nevertheless is the fault of his disciple Ambrose, as Jerome says, who published his works (edita) prematurely and without his knowledge) — the famous Origen, I was saying, willingly deprived himself of this part of the body to avoid all suspicion of lust.³ John and Paul, Protus and Hyacinth, and many other glorious martyrs who are crowned with glory and honor in the presence of God amidst the supercelestial regions, rejoice in having lacked genitals for this short time.⁴ And blessed are those who have castrated themselves for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.⁵ I could, perhaps, have given many more examples of men

³ As recounted by Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical History, bk.6, c.7.

⁴ I.e. the brevity of this life as opposed to the eternity of the next.

⁵ Cf. Matthew 19:12: "And there are eunuchs who castrated themselves for the sake of the kingdom of heaven."

like this, but let what has been said suffice.

And so brother, do not grieve nor grow sad nor be shaken by the disturbance of this annoyance (*incommodum*), especially since, as I have said, it offers so many fruits and because what has been done in this way shall always remain irreparable and widely known. Let it be a constant solace to you that what nature does not allow to be made whole, can be more easily tolerated. *Take these comforts with you as well*,⁶ that at the time of your diminution you were not caught either violating the marriage bed of others or amidst some poisonous act of fornication. You had given your members over to rest and were not preparing to do evil to anyone when, behold, the hand of impiety and the deadly blade did not hesitate to shed your innocent blood *gratis*. This is why the kindness of the venerable bishop laments this wound and injury of yours, and he has taken pains to spend as much time seeking justice as has been allowed to him. The multitude of liberal canons and noble clerics laments. The citizens lament, because they consider this a dishonor to the city and are troubled by the fact that their city has been violated by the shedding of your blood. How shall I describe the lamentation of single women who, upon hearing the news, streaked their faces with tears, in the way women do, for the sake of you, their knight whom they had lost, just as if each had discovered that her husband or friend (*amicus*) had been killed in war's lot? Indeed, so great was the sorrow of all that it seems to me better that you should wish to have perished yourself than to wish to have kept what has perished. A happy man does not know that he is loved. Almost the entire city has wasted away in grieving for you. You have within you the earnest money of true love, which you would not, in my view, have considered comparable to any riches, if you had known of it before.

But perhaps you shall try to respond to me with that prophetic saying:

My soul refused to be consoled. (Ps.81:3) I cannot not lament when touched by so trying a misfortune because a man of this kind usually brings about his own old age. After a while, my cheeks shall be stripped of their adornment of whiskers, the glory of the skin upon my face shall be turned to wrinkles, and an unfitting pallor shall suffuse my face. Those who once knew me shall know from the moment they see my face that I have been mutilated in that part of the body. I shall therefore exact vengeance for my dishonor and shall strive to intimate the full weight of my injury to Roman ears and to the extent

⁶ Lucan, *Pharsalia* VI.5.802.

I can, I shall utterly confound the bishop as well as the canons, because they plotted to change the initial judgment concerning the man who was wicked to me, and then finally they shall understand how contrary to honor it is to have deviated from the rigor of justice.

O what a truly wretched plan, devoid of all profit!! Have you never heard about the avarice and the impurity of the Romans? Who has ever been able to satisfy the greedy maw of those harlots with their own wealth? Who has been able to fill the bags of their cupidity with their purses? Therefore, as far as I can reasonably gather, to even contemplate this is known to be wise counsel for neither you nor your Church. And you should especially strive to profit rather than harm your monastery, to which you are bound. No one who knows [the situation] shall in any doubt how much harm you shall do to it, if you set your mind on this course of action. The substance of your property, since it is either modest or nonexistent, will not be enough for a visit to the Roman Pontiff.⁷ What shall you throw to the palace dogs when they bite? Since *all* of your relatives and friends *hate you because of you*, the support of family property or that of others shall in no way serve you.

The situation, then, is this: if you head for Rome, you will have to make the journey using the wealth of your monastery, an action which would do it grand harm. If [your effort] should fail but you complete your journey nonetheless, it is right that no one doubt that you toiled in vain. For how many in our own time approached that See without a heavy weight of money and left confused and rejected, after their case was lost? If you should be stubborn and wish to set forth your case among them, you shall make them laugh at you but you shall obtain no justice. And so you shall lose the fruit and effort of so much labor and you shall turn the bishop and canons of the Church of Paris into the most bitter and troublesome enemies of your monastery and your brethren. As the Historian says, it is a mark of the greatest insanity to strive in vain and acquire nothing but hatred.⁸

⁷ At the time of Abelard's castration and conversion to the monastic life (ca. 1117), Paschal II was reigning as Pope. Fulco's remarks, however, seem to refer not so much to the vice of this particular pope as that of the papal curia in general. For the dating of this letter prior to 1118, see the arguments (which have been generally accepted) of van den Eynde in his "Détails biographiques sur Pierre Abélard," *Antonianum* 38 (1963): 219-220.

⁸ The two preceding paragraphs do not appear in the text printed in the *Patrologia Latina* 178, 375B, but are published by D. van den Eynde in "Details biographiques sur Pierre Abélard," *Antonianum* 38 (1963): 219, on the basis of his collation of Paris, Bibl. nat. lat. 13057 and Paris, Bibl. nat. lat. 2545, both of which are XVth or XVIth century mss.

If you are looking for the vengeance which your soul greatly thirsts for and desires, then stop being gnawed by continual suffering and wasting away. For vengeance, for the most part, already seems to have been fulfilled. Some of those who harmed you have been mutilated by the loss of their eyes and the amputation of their genitals. The man who denies that it happened on his account (*per se*) has already been utterly destroyed by the seizure of all his possessions. Therefore, do not call the canons or bishop "the shedders of blood" or "destroyers of your blood", for they set their minds on justice for your sake and for their own, to the extent they were able.⁹ Listen instead to the good advice and consolation of a true friend. You are a monk and you took on the habit of holy religion not through coercion but of your own free will. As a consequence, you are no longer allowed to demand vengeance, if in truth you wish to hold to and love what is shown to be contained in the meaning of this word. But if you should consider with hatred even the enemy who did this deed and do not cease hating him, whatever anyone else says, I shall say with confidence that you indeed wear the dress of Christ but it will do you no good. *Pursue peace and holiness with all, says the Apostle, without which no one shall see God.*¹⁰ *Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and therefore I shall repay.*¹¹ If you want to be perfect, then begin to love Christ perfectly and you shall be able to love. Stop pouring forth threats and bombastic words for nothing. You cannot fulfill what you desire! An injury unjustly inflicted is infamy not for the one upon whom it is inflicted but for the man who inflicts it. Do not suffer any longer over a lost happiness which was always accompanied by the discomforts of adversity. But if you persist to the end in your holy purpose and do not fail, Christ shall reform everything you have lost marvelously and many times over when He glorifies the bodies of the blessed in the future, and then finally the rule of the dialecticians shall appear false who habitually say that a privation can never be restored.

Farewell in the Lord.

⁹ The involvement of the bishop and canons of Paris in the avenging of Abelard's injury was probably complicated by the fact that Fulbert, Heloise's father and the purported instigator of the castration, was himself a cathedral canon.

¹⁰ Heb.12:14.

¹¹ Rom.12:16.