

Cruelty and the Medieval Intellectual: The Case of Peter Abelard

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Talking about cruelty is a delicate matter. Even nowadays, when the law and the society, as well as our personal moral code and our experiences are supposed to help us to define clearly what is cruel and what is not, there are and there always will be different opinions as to what constitutes cruelty, based on religion, occupation, personal interests, psychological particularities, and age. The problem becomes even more complicated when, looking back in time, we try to understand what was considered cruel in societies with cultural, religious and economic characteristics which cannot be compared to our own.

In this context the case of Peter Abelard is of special interest. He was one of the leading dialecticians of the 12th century, controversial both as a man and as a scholar. He had devoted pupils and hostile teachers,¹ passionate supporters² and fierce enemies.³ He was a well-respected logician, convicted heretic, ardent lover, and castrated cleric. His life and love for Heloise carries a never-fading fascination for the romantic mind. But what I will be dealing with is not at all romantic, on the contrary, I would

¹ The teachers of Abelard were firstly the well-known dialectician, William of Cham-paux, with whom Abelard argued about the nature of universals, thereby causing him to lose many of his pupils, and secondly the theologian, Anselm of Laon, who forbade Abelard to teach in Laon after being beaten by him in his own field.

² The text of *Apologeticus*, written by Abelard's pupil Berengar of Poitiers, is published in P.L. 178, 1858-1870 and V. Cousin, *Petri Abaelardi Opera* II (Paris 1849) 771-786. Abelard himself speaks in the *Historia Calamitatum* about Geoffrey, Bishop of Chartres, who spoke in his defence at the Council of Soisson. See also D. E. Luscombe, *The School of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge 1969).

³ Among others, Alberic of Rheims and Lotulf of Lombardy, fellow-students of Abelard from Laon, who led his prosecution for heresy at the Council of Soisson in 1121. Also St. Bernard of Clairvaux, thanks to whom nineteen points from Abelard's *Theologia* were condemned as heretical at the Council of Sens in 1140.

rather call it drastic, and I am sure that everybody would agree with me on this, and if not everybody, at least the men.

The event in question is the merciless and tragic castration⁴ of Master Peter, which took place around 1118-1119 and was engineered by the Canon Fulbert, the angry uncle of Heloise. Two people tell us what happened, why it happened and what the consequences were: Abelard himself and his friend Fulk, the prior of St Eugene at Deuil. To be sure, Heloise also mentions the fact in the two so-called personal letters she wrote to Abelard, but since she gives no specific details, we are left with Abelard's autobiographical letter, the so-called *Historia Calamitatum*,⁵ with his second replay to Heloise,⁶ and with the consolatory letter of Fulk,⁷ which he wrote to Abelard shortly after the latter's entry into the Abbey of St Denis in 1119.

In all three of these letters, plus the short remarks of Heloise, we can find only three sentences which say directly that the castration of Master Peter was a cruel thing to do. Two of them are by Abelard himself, who in the *Historia Calamitatum* calls the act of Fulbert and his assistants *crudelissima et prudentissima ultio*, and then talks about *crudelitas prodi-*

⁴ According to Fr. Bergmann, "Origine, signification, et histoire de la castration, de l'eunuchisme, et de la circoncision", *Archivio per lo studio delle tradizioni popolari* 2 (1883) 279-280, there is a clear difference between, as he calls them in French, "castration" and "châtrement ou eunuchisme". "Castration" in his interpretation means the complete ablation of the *membrum virile*, while "châtrement" refers to the excision of the testicles only. We have no way of knowing which one of these two operations was performed on Abelard, but it was probably the second one. Two facts support our assumption: 1) The complete castration was a severe mutilation which caused the death of almost all men who suffered it, cf. K. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge 1978) 190 n. 50 who refers to an instance where 87 out of 90 boys died after castration. Although not stated by the author it was probably a complete castration which had been performed on the boys; Hopkins does not seem to be aware of the two ways in which castration could be effected), while Abelard not only survived, but also pretended that it did not hurt so much, cf. *Historia Calamitatum*, ed. Muckle, *Mediaeval Studies* XI (1949) 207. 2) In the *Historia Calamitatum*, ed. Muckle, 190, Abelard tells us when referring to his situation, that he was forbidden to enter the Church, like all eunuchs whose testicles were *amputati vel attriti*.

⁵ Ed. Muckle, 189-190, 206-207.

⁶ Muckle, *Mediaeval Studies* (= MS) XV (1953) 88-91.

⁷ *Epistola XVI* in P.L. 178.

tionis illius in his second replay to Heloise.⁸ The third passage is by Heloise who says that she still accuses God of *summa crudelitas* because of the injustice done to her lover.⁹ But along with these three cases, in the letters of Abelard we also find expressions such as *vulneris passio*, *haec plaga*, *haec singularis infamia*, *in tam misera contritione positus*, *corporis detrimentum*, *haec proditio*, *corporis diminutio*,¹⁰ *summa tui avunculi proditio*,¹¹ etc. Even though these passages do not express very cheerful emotions, they do not explicitly mention cruelty. Similar expressions are also used by Heloise¹² and even by Fulk,¹³ whose primary goal was to comfort his depressed and angry friend.

There is no doubt that Abelard was shocked by what happened to him. He describes his feelings in details in the well-known passage of the *Historia Calamitatum* and draws a vivid picture of himself being talked about, laughed at, and pointed a finger at by the whole world. The fact that two of his assailants were deprived of sight and genitals,¹⁴ and Fulbert of his possessions,¹⁵ did not console him very much. It was not the physical pain which made him suffer but the shame.¹⁶ It was not the loss of his masculine power which depressed him but the end of his brilliant career as

⁸ Muckle, MS XV (1953) 82.

⁹ Ibid., 80.

¹⁰ *Historia Calamitatum*, ed. Muckle, 190, 196, 197, 207.

¹¹ Muckle, MS XV (1953) 89.

¹² Cf. *in corpus tuum summae proditionis iniuria*, Muckle, MS XV (1953) 68; *summa et ubique nota proditio*, *ibid.*, 70; *tantum scelus*, *ibid.*, 78; *una corporis plaga*, *ibid.*, 81.

¹³ Cf. *damnum quidem in hoc tempore tui corporis pertulisti, particularum ista mutilatio, huius partis corporis privatio, haec diminutio, hoc tuum vulnus et damnum, hoc dedecus*, P.L. 178, 373-374; *mutilus hac corporis parte*, P.L. 178, 375.

¹⁴ Cf. *Historia Calamitatum*, ed. Muckle, 190; also Fulk in P.L. 178, 375. This is an interesting detail which deserves more attention. Why did the attackers of Abelard lose both eyes and genitals? They had to lose only the latter, if it was a case of the application of the ancient law of talion. There is one law promulgated by Justinian (*Novellae*, 142) which says that the man who dares to castrate another man shall suffer the same as a punishment or, provided he escapes unpunished, his possessions shall be confiscated. This law, if it was still valid in the time of Abelard, explains why his attackers lost their genitals and why Fulbert was deprived of his riches, but still does not explain why the eyes of the assailants were put out.

¹⁵ Fulk in P.L. 178, 375.

¹⁶ Cf. *Historia Calamitatum*, ed. Muckle, 190: *multo amplius ex eorum compassione*

a teacher and as a philosopher. (He thought that he had to give up teaching in public, since he felt that nobody could take him seriously anymore, after his castration.) On many occasions Abelard repeats this point of view,¹⁷ especially after he was accused of heresy for the second time and compelled to throw his cherished book *Theologia*¹⁸ into the fire with his own hands. So we can conclude here that as a prominent intellectual, Abelard considered the insult to his brains as a much greater personal damage than the mutilation of his body. At least, this is what he says himself. The question is whether we can believe him or not. Is it not possible to assume that he was left with no choice, and behaved like the fox trying to reach the grapes?

There is nothing in the text which confirms such an assumption, though. After the first shock and confusion, in the silence of the monastery, Abelard calms down and tries to reason. The consolations of Fulk no longer seem so much out of place. In his turn, Abelard seeks to comfort Heloise, first by proving to her that everything that happened to them, and to him in particular, was justified by their sinful behaviour,¹⁹ and secondly by listing all the advantages that castration gives to a man seeking God. And there are many. Reading only Abelard and Fulk, it would seem that the best thing that can happen to a man is to be castrated. One is freed from all temptations and carnal desires, one is cured from lust,²⁰ one is spared the erotic dreams and the shameful habits of the Sodomites, one does not need to worry about the vengeance of deceived husbands, one can disre-

quam ex vulneris laederer passione, et plus erubescantiam quam plagam sentirem, et pudore magis quam dolore affligerer.

¹⁷ Cf. *Historia Calamitatum*, ed. Muckle, 196–197: *Parvam illam ducebam prodicionem in comparatione huius iniuriae* (sc. the burning of the *Theologia*), *et longe amplius famae quam corporis detrimentum plangebam*. See as well *ibid.*, 207: *Sed quod tunc forte minus pertuli ex vulnere, nunc ex detractatione diutius plector, et plus ex detrimento famae quam corporis crucior diminutione*.

¹⁸ In the *Historia Calamitatum* the book is called *De Unitate et Trinitate Divina* and is known to us as *Theologia Summi Boni*.

¹⁹ Abelard points out at least three major offences which in his opinion deserved an even more severe punishment: (1) making love in the refectory at Argenteuil, (2) shamelessly deceiving Fulbert, while living in his own house, and (3) the sacrilegious disguise of Heloise as a nun, when she ran away from home to Abelard's family in Brittany upon discovering she was pregnant; cf. Muckle, *MS XV* (1953) 88–89.

²⁰ *Historia Calamitatum*, ed. Muckle, 191 and 182.

gard with dignity "the bunch of married women" (as Fulk calls them), and have no fear of the traps of the unmarried ones. One can even save some money which otherwise would have been needed to pay the prostitutes.²¹ To Abelard personally the castration meant two more things: it helped him to become "a true philosopher not of the world but of God"²² and it gave him the possibility of discovering a new dimension of love: namely that of a man and a woman united in Christ.

After all this, do we have to wonder why Abelard repeatedly calls his disgrace *dispositio mihi saluberrima, tantum bonum, illa saluberrima plaga, liberatio et medicina*,²³ and why he continually thanks God for his *misericordia, clementia, and gratia*?

But was it really so simple? The opinion of many early Christian Fathers was that post-adolescent castrates did not actually lose their sexual desire.²⁴ We have the well-known passage from the treatise attributed to St. Basil, entitled *Liber de vera virginitatis integritate*, in which the author says that after castration men become even more intemperate in their lust.²⁵ We have the words of John Chrysostom who shares the opinion of St. Basil.²⁶ We have the statement of Origen himself that the act of castration causes only disturbances in the functioning of the body²⁷ without helping the soul to free itself from all temptations and desires. Moreover, holy men such as Athanasius,²⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus,²⁹ and Jerome³⁰ also assure us that the eunuchs were impious, lustful and deprived of any virtue what so ever, as does Cyril of Alexandria whose *Sermo adversus eunuchos* is a real catalogue of their shameful and perverted habits.³¹

²¹ Fulk in P.L. 178; 373-374.

²² *Historia Calamitatum*, ed. Muckle, 191.

²³ Muckle, MS XV (1953) 88-89.

²⁴ Abelard was around 40 years old when he was castrated.

²⁵ P.G. 30, 793-796.

²⁶ *Homil. in Matthaeum* LXII,3 = P.G. 58, 599-600.

²⁷ According to Origen there are: loss of beard, headache, dizziness, hallucinations. (cf. *Comment. in Matthaeum* XV, 3 = P.G. 13, 1261).

²⁸ *Historia Arianorum* 38 = P.G. 25, 738.

²⁹ *In laudem Athanasii* 21 = P.G. 35, 1106.

³⁰ *Adversus Jovinianum* 47 = P.L. 23, 287; *Ep.* 107, 11 = P.L. 22, 876; *Comment. in Matthaeum* III, c. XIX = P.L. 26, 141.

³¹ P.G. 77, 1105-1109.

So, we are faced with an interesting paradox here. In the fourth and fifth centuries people seemed to have believed that eunuchs were involved in post-castration sexual activities of all kinds,³² while in the twelfth century Abelard, Heloise and Fulk thought that after castration the libido was completely gone. If we are to believe the medical experts,³³ Abelard was closer to the truth than his fourth and fifth century colleagues, whose prejudiced opinion was probably influenced to a great extent by the negative public image eunuchs had during this period.³⁴

We have now shown that even if Abelard took his mutilation very hard in the beginning, in the course of time he began to consider it as something quite positive, probably first out of desperation, but then, typically enough for a human being, believing sincerely that what had happened to him was really the best thing to have happened.

Finally, a last question should be posed: were there some disadvantages in being castrated, after all? Abelard says that, besides the shame, what made him most desperate was the fact that *secundum occidentem legis litteram* the eunuchs were forbidden to enter the Church.³⁵ However, as it has been pointed out before,³⁶ such an ecclesiastical law does not in fact seem to have existed. Only men guilty of self-mutilation deserved punishment and were rejected by the Church.³⁷ Those who were castrated as a result of human treachery, which was indeed the case of Abelard, were permitted ordination by the law.³⁸ This explains why the mutilation of

³² There are some notions from Antiquity as well. For the full account see P. Guyot, *Eunuchen als Sklaven und Freigelassene in der griechisch-römischen Antike* (Stuttgart 1980) chapter 3.3, "Eunuchen als Lustknaben".

³³ J. J. Bremer, *Asexualisation* (New York 1959) 305; G. Ross, *Essentials of Human Physiology* (London 1978) 578-579.

³⁴ See K. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, (Cambridge 1978) chapter IV "The political power of eunuchs".

³⁵ *Historia Calamitatum*, ed. Muckle, 190.

³⁶ Muckle, *MS XI* (1949) 190, n. 33.

³⁷ See the first canon of the Council of Nice which was later confirmed by *Canones Apostolorum* c. 22-23; the second Council of Arles, c. 7; Martin of Braga, c. 21; Pope Clement III, c. 4; and Gratian, *Dist. LV*, c. V (cf. *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique* V.2, 1939, s. v. Eunuque, and *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie* II.2, 1910, s. v. Castration).

³⁸ *Licite ordinetur episcopus, qui per hominum insidias eunuchizatur* (Gratian, *Dist. LV*, c. VII).

Master Peter did not prevent him from being accepted as a monk in 1119, and why he a few years later was even made Abbot of the monastery of St Gildas.³⁹ All this convinces us that the fears expressed by Abelard about being shut out of the Church because of the *monstruosum spectaculum*⁴⁰ which he presented, can be considered more of a stylistic exaggeration than a real concern.

Another disadvantage which Abelard does not talk about, but Fulk does, is the change which castration causes in the somatic state of the castrated person. Fulk points out three features which make eunuchs easily recognizable, namely, the lack of beard, wrinkled face, and extremely pale skin.⁴¹ The description given by Fulk is not at all original. The post-castration effects were common knowledge during Antiquity and the Middle Ages,⁴² and the observations made then are generally accepted as true nowadays.⁴³ What can we say about Abelard in this respect? Not a thing. There is no evidence showing how the castration affected his body. Writing to Heloise, Peter the Venerable mentions that, during his last days, Abelard was tortured more than usual by *scabies* and *quaedam corporis incommoditates*;⁴⁴ but there is no way of knowing whether this had anything to do with his previous castration or was just a sign of his approaching death.

³⁹ In about 1125.

⁴⁰ *Historia Calamitatum*, ed. Muckle, 190.

⁴¹ Fulk in P.L. 178, 375.

⁴² Cf. H. Herter, *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* IV (1959), s. v. *Effeminatus*.

⁴³ J. J. Bremer, 307.

⁴⁴ Ep. XXI, P.L. 189, 351.

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Preface

The present volume is a collection of the papers read at the conference which was held in May 1991 at the University of Turku on the theme *The Politics of Cruelty in the Ancient and Medieval World*. The general aim of the conference was to advance interdisciplinary and international collaboration in the fields of humanistic studies and particularly to bring together scholars who have common interests in the study of our past. The choice of the subject of cruelty naturally resulted from different study projects concerning the political and social history of late antiquity and the Middle Ages – the Roman imperial propaganda, the conflict between paganism and christianity, the history of the Vandals, the Byzantine empires, the Medieval miracle stories, to name some of them. Perhaps also contemporary events had an influence on the idea that cruelty could be the theme which conveniently would unite those various interests. And the idea emerged irrespective of considerations whether or not we should search for models in the Ancient World or join those who, as it seems to have been a fashion, insist on investigating what we have common with the Middle Ages.

One might argue – and for a good reason indeed – that cruelty is a subject for anthropologists and psychologists, not for philologists and historians. Where does the student of history find reliable criteria for defining the notion of cruelty in order to judge the men of the past and their actions, to charge with cruelty not only individuals but also nations and even ages (“the *crudelitas imperatorum*”, “the Dark Ages”, “the violence of the Vikings”, “the cruel Muslims”)? Is it not so that the only possibility is to adapt our modern sensibilities to the past and to use our own prejudices in making judgements about others? The prejudices – yes, but this is just what makes the theme interesting for the historian because our prejudices – our conception of cruelty, for instance – are part of the heritage of past centuries. The events of our own day – maybe more clearly than ever – have demonstrated that we live in a historical world. When we investigate the history of the concept of cruelty we, as it were, look ourselves at a mirror and learn to understand ourselves better. The concept of cruelty has two sides. It is a subjective concept used to define and describe those persons

and those acts that according to the user of the term are negative, harmful, humiliating, harsh, inhumane, primitive and unnatural; in everyday life it is associated with religious habits – with crude remnants of primitive religion, it is associated with passion, an uncontrolled mental state, or with violence and with the exercise of power without justice. On the other hand the term is used to classify people by their ethical and social habits, to accuse, to invalidate and injure others; therefore the accusation of cruelty refers to basic features of ancient and also Medieval thought, to the fear of anything foreign, to the aggressive curiosity to define and subsume others simply by their otherness.

Such were the considerations which gave inspiration for arranging the “cruelty”-seminar. The conference was accommodated by the Archipelago Institute of the University of Turku, in the island Seili (“Soul island”), in an environment of quiet beauty of the remote island and sad memories of the centuries when people attacked by a cruel fate, lepers or mentally ill, were banished there from the civilized community.

The conference was organized by the Department of Classics of the University of Turku in collaboration with the Departments of Cultural History and Italian language and culture of the same university. It is a pleasure to us to be able to thank here all those who helped to make the congress possible. We would like especially to express our gratitude to Luigi de Anna and Hannu Laaksonen for their assistance in preparing and carrying out the practical arrangements. The financial assistance given by the Finnish Academy and by the Turku University Foundation was also indispensable. Finally, we close by expressing our gratitude to Gerhard Jaritz, the editor of the *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* for the *Gesellschaft für Erforschung der materiellen Kultur des Mittelalters*, for his kind co-operation and for accepting this collection of papers to be published as a supplement to the series of the studies on the Medieval everyday life. One of the starting-points for organizing the “cruelty”-conference was the firm conviction that the Graeco-Roman Antiquity did not end with the beginning of the Middle Ages, but these two eras form a continuum in many respects, and the continuity was felt not only in the literary culture, in the Greek and Latin languages which were still used, but also in the political, social and religious structures of the Middle Ages. We think that this continuity is amply demonstrated by the studies of the present volume.

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