
H-France Review Vol. 8 (October 2008), No. 136

Jan Ziolkowski, trans., *Letters of Peter Abelard: Beyond the Personal*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 2008. lii + 231 pp. Bibliography, general index, index of scriptural references. \$29.95 U.S. (pb) ISBN 978-0813215051.

Review by Kevin Guilfooy, Carroll College.

The correspondence and love letters exchanged between Peter Abelard and Heloise are well known and much studied. Abelard and Heloise are two of the leading personalities in twelfth-century Europe. Their story of, learning, politics, spirituality, and love cut short has captivated centuries of readers. In this book Jan Ziolkowski translates and critically introduces thirteen letters on various topics. Some are previously untranslated into English; none has received the scholarly or general attention given to Abelard and Heloise's personal correspondence. The translations are excellent but this book is much more than a collection of excellent translations. Each letter is accompanied by a critical introduction. These introductions incorporate the very best scholarship to provide historical background, political and cultural context, and the kind of insight into Abelard's character that is the soul of the very best biography. This is a valuable book for Abelard scholars, students, and for a general reader engrossed by the story and personality of a man who considered himself the smartest in Europe—and may have been correct.

As Abelard himself argues in letter nine, and as he unintentionally demonstrates in letter ten, there is no substitute for reading in the original language. But these translations come close. Ziolkowski's translations brilliantly capture Abelard's tone and content, but there is much more to recommend them. Ziolkowski has rendered Abelard as readable in English as he is in Latin. Very often the precision of a logician is lost or glossed over by a translator. That is not the case here. Where Abelard is struggling for precision and exactness of thought, the translated passages require that same careful attention from the reader. Where Abelard is giving vent to the extremity of his indignation, the translator's word choice and phrasing convey Abelard's emotion to a modern reader. There are many notes to the translations indicating where there is a subtlety in Abelard's Latin that cannot quite be captured, and many more where Ziolkowski indicates that he made a particular choice of word or phrase (and that there might be some cause to disagree). This book is an excellent example of the translator's art.

The letters are organized into three general categories: Heloise and the nuns of the Paraclete, Bernard of Clairvaux, and "Other Controversies." The first category contains *Letter Nine: To the Nuns of the Paraclete* and the preface, dedication, and prologues to the hymnal, sermons, and commentary on the six days of creation that Abelard had written for the Paraclete. Due to accidents of medieval compilation, letter nine was not part of the earliest manuscript collections or subsequent translations of Abelard's letters and so has been largely ignored. This is unfortunate. Letter nine picks up several themes present in these other letters: the need to read texts critically, the need for understanding and knowledge rather than mere acceptance of authority, and the benefits and necessity of women's education. Quoting extensively from St. Jerome, letter nine is a lengthy argument about the need to read critically the Holy Scriptures in their original languages. Abelard understands the intricacies and ambiguities of language, and here applies this insight to the problems of translation. Abelard himself notes an almost contradictory irony here: he did not read the Greek or Hebrew that he argues is essential to the proper

understanding of Holy Scripture. He makes a plea for the women of the Paraclete to step in: "What we have lost in men let us recover even in women, to the condemnation of men." Abelard argues that women have the intellectual ability, but he is not as enlightened as he is sometimes presented to be. Letter nine ends with the admonition that women have "a lesser capacity to sweat in manual labor than do monks and can slip more easily into temptation...owing to the weakness of their nature." In other words, the women of the Paraclete should focus on learning to prevent fornication (p. 33).

Abelard's prefaces, dedications and prologues each contain brief glimpses of his views on language and the authenticity of ritual performance. Ziolkowski's introductions provide further context as well as a discussion of the genre of letter writing and the arguments for counting these texts as letters.

The second section of the book, St. Bernard, contains *Letter Ten, To Abbot Bernard*; *Letter Fifteen, To His Comrades Against Abbot Bernard*; and the *Apologia Against Bernard of Clairvaux*. The conflict with Bernard is one of the central themes in Abelard's life; these three letters provide glimpses into their relationship at a fairly calm stage in their conflict, as well as views on the eve of and just after Abelard's ultimate defeat.

Letter ten is likely dated to 1131 (some ten years before the council of Sens) and, if typical of Abelard's and Bernard's correspondence, indicates a fair amount of disrespect (if not hostility) on Abelard's part. The introduction to letter ten offers some speculation about their early relationship and the translation masterfully conveys Abelard's tone. This letter was written after Heloise had relayed Bernard's criticism of the version of the Lord's Prayer Abelard had written for the Paraclete. In the letter Abelard writes to defend his use of the phrase "supersubstantial bread" from Matthew's Gospel rather than "daily bread" from Luke's. The letter is another tour de force of Abelard's method of analyzing authoritative texts. (However, as Ziolkowski points out, if Abelard had had the linguistic skills he advocates in letter nine, he would have known that Luke and Matthew use the same word—"supersubstantial"—in the original Greek.) Abelard does not stop at merely proving his point: he goes on at length in a tone that indicates he does not appreciate Bernard's input. Ziolkowski sums up the remainder of the letter: "With a backhanded magnanimity [Abelard] volunteers to be tolerant of the Cistercians for their odd practices if in turn they allow him to be true to the words and spirit of Christ"(p. 83).

Letter fifteen is written a decade later, and it is apparent that Bernard and Abelard have never really got on. Sometime in 1140 (the dates are in dispute), Bernard received a list of thirteen heretical propositions allegedly found in Abelard's writings. He and Abelard met twice to discuss the issues; this attempt at fraternal correction failed. It is tempting to speculate that these men disagreed as to who was being fraternal and who was being corrected. In letter fifteen, Abelard writes that he thought the problem had been solved and he is shocked and insulted to hear that Bernard had been rubbishing him around France. Bernard is quoted as calling Abelard's work not "theology" but "stupidology." (Neither man was renowned for his wit.) Letter fifteen is an open letter to all Abelard's friends and supporters urging them to attend the council of Sens in 1141, where he believes he has been granted the chance to publicly debate the issues. The tone and content of letter fifteen are inflammatory: Abelard accuses Bernard of being a liar and a hypocrite, motivated purely by envy for Abelard's fame. In the end, the council of Sens turned out badly for Abelard. His supporters did show up in some numbers, but he was not allowed to debate. Bernard had successfully arranged a condemnation even before Abelard arrived. Abelard appealed to the pope, but Bernard had beaten him there also. Abelard's student, Arnold of Brescia, was causing trouble closer to Rome by preaching against church ownership of property. In a flurry of manipulative diplomacy, Bernard was able to link the two in the mind of Pope Innocent II. The pope excommunicated both and condemned them to perpetual silence.

The *Apologia against Bernard* is the surviving fragment of Abelard's attempt to respond to the thirteen specific charges Bernard had brought. Ziolkowski's introductions discuss the circumstances of the council, Abelard's and Bernard's possible thoughts and motivations, the political wisdom or folly of

Abelard's letter and subsequent actions, and also the literary style of the letters: Abelard's choice of various quotations from scripture and classical authors. What is perhaps best is that Ziolkowski indicates where he is speculating (e.g. about Abelard's political instincts and motivations) and where his inferences are based more solidly on textual or other evidence. It is this degree of clarity and precision in Ziolkowski's argument that make this volume valuable as a teaching text.

The final section, "Other Controversies," contains only four letters. This is no doubt due to poor contemporary archiving of Abelard's correspondence and not to his collegial nature, which is quite well hidden in these texts. In this section Ziolkowski presents the following documents: *Letter Eleven, To Abbot Adam and the Monks of St. Denis*; *Letter Twelve, To a Regular Canon*; *Letter Thirteen, To an Ignoramus in the Field of Dialectic*; and *Letter Fourteen, To Bishop G[ilbert] and the Clergy of Paris*. The four letters in this section reveal Abelard at his combative intellectual best and his self-righteous obtuse worst. Ziolkowski's introductions explain the context for each controversy, and his translations masterfully convey the force of Abelard's intellect and his emotions.

Letter eleven is Abelard's infamous argument that the Abbey of St. Denis, as well as the king and nation of France, had identified the wrong Denis as their patron saint. Ziolkowski precisely unpacks the problem. There are four Denis/Dionysiuses: Dionysius the Areopagite (converted by St. Paul), Dionysius Bishop of Corinth (c. A.D. 170), St. Denis the martyr (third century), and Pseudo-Dionysius "who is known now not to have been who he claimed to be" (p. 136). The Abbey and the king were quite happy to believe there was only one Denis: their Denis, Denis the Areopagite. Abelard's letter gives a very close reading of the textual and historical evidence available. After a detailed discussion of the criteria for ranking authoritative texts, Abelard concludes there are two Denises: Denis the Areopagite and a later Denis who founded the monastery. Once again Abelard found himself inexplicably unpopular. In his autobiography, the *Historia Calamitatem*, Abelard claimed to have made his case in a collegial and even humorous fashion. The text reveals that he did not: letter eleven is the work of a scholar who thinks that being right is self-justificatory.

Letters twelve and thirteen are rigorous defenses of Abelard's life as a monk and a logician. It is not clear if either is addressed to any specific recipient, but they reflect the reasons and emotions Abelard felt in his dispute with St. Norbert and St. Bernard—Norbert on the superior virtue of the monastic life to that of the canon regular and Bernard on the need to study logic. The distinction between monk and canon has been mostly lost, but seems to have been a vital part of Abelard's spiritual self conception. While much is written about Abelard's (and Heloise's) thoughts on the spiritual orders for women, letter twelve presents Abelard's thoughts on orders and rules for men. Although it cannot be explored here, there are at least hints that Abelard thought there was a greater difference between male and female spirituality than is found in the correspondence with Heloise.

Letter thirteen presents—in fairly standard fashion—Abelard's arguments for the study of logic. Much of his reasoning is probably better explained in letter nine where he has a concrete problem at hand to work with. Letter fourteen is a very brief appeal for a hearing to adjudicate a dispute with his former teacher Roscelin of Compiègne. Although short, it offers a clear glimpse into Abelard's self-righteousness and sense of wounded pride; it reads like an e-mail sent to the entire faculty by a disgruntled colleague on the occasion of his latest perceived indignity.

Ziolkowski states a fairly modest goal that this volume will be useful to interested readers "without fluent Latin and access to large libraries" (p. xlviii). The translations are wonderful even for people with fluent Latin and the originals close to hand. All interested readers will find the introductions and discussions valuable. This volume is a much-needed contribution to Abelard studies.

Kevin Guilfooy
Carroll College
kguilfooy@cc.edu

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172