

Introduction

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Peter Abelard is a well-known thinker. General histories of philosophy give at least a passing mention to his theory of universals and, sometimes, to his ethics; whilst in surveys of the Middle Ages Abelard usually figures as the lover of Heloise and opponent of St Bernard, the representative of a new restlessness in intellectual life at the beginning of the twelfth century. Specialist work, too, has not been lacking. Almost every aspect of Abelard's work and life has been the subject of detailed study, from his logical and theological theories to his personal correspondence and the accusations of heresy made against him. Abelard is, none the less, a thinker who stands in need of a re-evaluation – and one which goes beyond the mere effort to compose a coherent picture from the mass of detailed research now available, or to provide a partial reinterpretation. For a single, underlying view has dominated discussion of Abelard's thought from the early seventeenth century, when a collection of his writings was first printed, until the present day.

This claim may seem surprising. Abelard was controversial in his lifetime and remained so after his death. The judgements of his work by historians seem, at first sight, sharply conflicting: some have seen him as superficial and misguided, whereas others have given him a hero's role in the development of philosophy. But, behind these differences, there emerges a remarkable agreement between his admirers and antagonists about the nature of Abelard's thought. Even his severest detractors have recognized the sophistication and ingenuity of his reasoning; even his eulogists have been ready to admit that he cannot be numbered among the great, original philosophers. His strength, both sides agree, lay in argument and criticism, not in constructing any coherent and wide-ranging system of thought. The judgements of two scholars, both leading experts on Abelard, show this common, underlying view very clearly – its development is studied in more detail below, in the appendix. Charles de Rémusat, writing his biography

of Abelard in the mid-nineteenth century, explained that Abelard was a thinker 'fecund in details, comments, arguments, but not rich in broad perspectives . . . a critic of the first class, but mediocre in invention'.¹ Over a hundred years later, Jean Jolivet (whose analyses have done so much to improve modern understanding of Abelard) writes in similar vein

Abelard is neither a giant of thought, nor an author of the second-rank. His is a lively but limited mind, both helped and hindered by his character and historical circumstances . . . [H]e is not responsible for any leap of genius, of the sort which goes beyond, and yet expresses, its age . . . In a word, neither in his life nor in his thought was Abelard an *inventor*.²

Moreover, the work of recent historians, which has done so much to free our understanding of his work from anachronism, has also tended to give added force to the impression of Abelard as brilliant but neither profound nor truly innovative. Earlier writers were inclined to describe Abelard, whether by way of praise or blame, as a rationalist, and to attribute to him a set of characteristic, unorthodox views on central areas of Christian doctrine. Modern scholarship, by contrast, has shown that Abelard was far from rationalism in any sort of eighteenth or nineteenth-century sense, and many scholars have argued that, on most questions of doctrine, Abelard was much closer to the thought (predominantly Augustinian) of his contemporaries than was once believed. Outside quite technical matters of logic, it is implied, Abelard must be seen as important only in matters of detail and method – an attitude strengthened by an idea which has been taken up by more recent historians but goes back at least to the fifteenth-century historian Trithemius: that Abelard's theology is characterized by its application of the methods of logic to discussing Christian doctrine.³

The aim of this book is to show that this view of Abelard as a mainly critical thinker is inaccurate and unjust. His was more than a fleeting, superficial brilliance. He was a constructive and, at times, systematic philosopher; and, although it is certainly true that he (like many of his contemporaries) used the methods of logic in treating Christian doctrine, his theology is remarkable for much more than its method. Abelard's writings do not, however, form a single, coherent system. Abelard's interests and achievements fall into two roughly chronological phases. As a logician, he worked within the structure provided by the ancient texts which made up the logical curriculum. He provided cogent and often original answers

¹ *Abelard* (Paris, 1845) II, p. 547

² *Abelard ou la philosophie dans le langage* (Paris, 1969), pp. 95–6.

³ See appendix (below, pp. 344–5).

to the philosophical questions which this study raised, but he did not pursue them systematically. He developed a sophisticated account of the semantics of universal words, but he did not resolve an underlying tension which runs through his ontology. As a writer on Christian doctrine, by contrast, Abelard strove to create his own theological system. Although he used methods and concepts he had developed within his logic, they were incidental to his main suppositions and aims. The bearing of Abelard's theological system was predominantly ethical: in the course of developing it, he elaborated a coherent, systematic and wide-ranging moral theory.

This book considers Abelard primarily not as a theologian or a logician, but as a philosopher. Since, however, his ethics is intimately bound up with the doctrinal questions he explored, Abelard's theology cannot be ignored, although his views on the various controversial questions about the faith are not its central concern. And since Abelard's consideration of ontology, semantics and epistemology is conducted in the course of logical commentary, technical questions of logic cannot be avoided, although they will not be pursued for their own sake.

The plan is simple. Part I gives a general account of Abelard as a whole: his life, his writings and teaching and the overall shape and growth of his thought. Part II looks at the mainly coherent, but unsystematic philosophy which he developed in close connection with his study of logic. Part III examines the ethical system which binds together his theology.

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PART I
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Chapter 1

A life

The main source for all except the last decade of Abelard's life is his own *Historia calamitatum*. Recently, some scholars have queried this work's authenticity, but their arguments are unconvincing (see excursus).¹ Although it is Abelard's own composition, the *Historia* must, none the less, be used with care. Abelard wrote with particular literary and didactic aims in view, exercising a careful control, which was not that of the dispassionate biographer, over what he included, what he emphasized and what he passed over in silence.² A range of other evidence can be used to fill in and correct the account in the *Historia* and throw light on Abelard's last years – contemporary letters and poetry, charters, chronicles and hagiographies. Above all, the wider political and ecclesiastical history of the period helps to put the details of Abelard's life into perspective.³

LE PALLET

Peter Abelard⁴ was born in 1079 and grew up at Le Pallet, on the very edge of the Duchy of Brittany, only a few miles west of the boundary with Anjou and north of that with Poitou, in easy reach of the towns of the

¹ See below, pp. 82–93.

² On the genre and aims of the *Historia*, see below, pp. 73–4.

³ Two particularly valuable studies from this point of view are: R.-H. Bautier, 'Paris au temps d'Abélard' in *Abélard en son temps*, pp. 21–77 (Bautier) and D. Luscombe, 'From Paris to the Paraclete: the correspondence of Abelard and Heloise', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 74 (1988), 247–83. A succinct but detailed account of Abelard's life is included in C. Mews, *Peter Abelard* (Aldershot, 1995) (Authors of the Middle Ages 5. Historical and religious writers of the Latin West), pp. 9–20.

⁴ The correct form is almost certainly pentasyllabic: 'A|ba|e|lar|dus': cf. C. Mews, 'In search of a name and its significance: a twelfth century anecdote about Thierry and Peter Abaelard', *Traditio* 44 (1988), 171–200, at pp. 171–9, 196–200. 'Abelard' will, however, be used in this book since it is the accepted English version of his name.

Loire where learning flourished. It is not certain whether Abelard spoke Breton,⁵ or whether his family was even Breton in origin.⁶ His parents belonged to the minor nobility. Berengar, his father, may have been the castellan of Le Pallet or, more probably, one of the knights who guarded the castle and the castellan in return for small landholdings.

Peter was the eldest son and could have expected to follow his father as a knight and landholder. But Berengar had received a rudimentary literary education before he learned knightly pursuits and he saw to it that his sons too would be educated (*HC* 62: 13–17).⁷ Abelard explains that the more he learned, the fonder he grew of study, until he decided to give up ‘the pomp of military glory along with his inheritance and the privileges of the eldest son’ (*HC* 63: 22–3). Choosing the ‘arms’ of dialectical reasoning and preferring the ‘conflict of disputations to the trophies of battle [Abelard] . . . wandered disputing from place to place – wherever [he] heard that the art of dialectic flourished’ (*HC* 63: 25 – 64: 30). He could hardly be vaguer in the *Historia* about exactly where he studied, except to suggest that it was at more than one place. Here he seems to have made a deliberate omission. The young Abelard was taught at Loches and Tours ‘for a long time’ by one of the most famous logic masters of the time, Roscelin – as Roscelin himself reveals in a letter written over twenty years later.⁸ Although Roscelin was not, as some nineteenth-century historians made him, a heretic, free-thinker and martyr for intellectual liberty, even stripped of his legend

⁵ At *HC* 98: 1244 where Abelard says that he could not understand the language of the monks of St Gildas (cf. Mews, ‘In search’, p. 194); but Peter Dronke has pointed out to me that Abelard may have been saying, not that he was ignorant of Breton, but that he could not understand the dialect of Breton spoken in the Vannetais, the area of St Gildas.

⁶ According to an epitaph cited by Richard of Poitiers (*Chronicon*, MGH Scriptorum 26, p. 81: 26; quoted in Mews, *Peter Abelard*, p. 9) Abelard’s father was Poitevin, his mother Breton. Mews (‘In search’, pp. 193–5) points out that the name ‘Abaelardus’ was shared by a contemporary, the son of Humphrey, the Norman count of Apulia, and he goes on to suggest that Abelard’s own family was Norman. This may be correct, but the evidence for the supporting argument Mews adduces – that there was ‘an ethnic divide’ between Bretons and Normans at the court of the count of Nantes – is very shaky.

⁷ Such literacy in a knight was by no means extraordinary: see M. Clanchy, *From memory to written record* (2nd edn, London, 1993), pp. 224–52.

⁸ *Epistola ad Abaelardum*, ed. in J. Reiners, *Der Nominalismus in der Frühscholastik* (Münster, 1910) (BGPMA 8, 5), pp. 63–80; cf. p. 65: 26–7: ‘Turonensis ecclesia vel Locensis, ubi ad pedes meos magistri tui discipulorum minimus tam diu resedisti.’ Abelard’s time as Roscelin’s pupil is also mentioned in a rather garbled note copied into the first folio of a twelfth-century manuscript, Munich Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, clm 14160 (ed. in L. Hödl, *Die Geschichte der scholastischen Literatur und der Theologie der Schlüsselgewalt* (Münster, 1960) (BGPMA 38, 4), p. 78 and in Mews, ‘In search’, pp. 172–3 (with translation)).

he remains a controversial figure.⁹ By the time he taught Abelard, he had already developed a trinitarian theology which provoked attacks from Anselm of Canterbury and, many years later, from Abelard himself.¹⁰ But theological matters were not, at this stage, Abelard's concern. He may well, however, have learned from Roscelin a rather special way of interpreting the ancient logical texts as discussions about words, not about things – although later he came to regard Roscelin's logic, no less than his theology, with utter contempt.¹¹ Little wonder that he had no wish to reveal that he had once sat at Roscelin's feet!

PARIS

'At length', Abelard arrived at Paris. He was drawn, not by the political or intellectual eminence of the town – in 1100 Paris was fairly unimportant, both politically and scholastically – but by the master there, William of Champeaux, 'who was at that time outstanding in the teaching of this subject [logic (*dialectica*)] both in reputation and reality' (*HC* 64: 33–4). Surviving sources allow a glimpse – no more than that – of William's work as a teacher of the arts. As well as the logical *Introductions*, commentaries by him on two rhetorical works are known, as well as reports of his logical doctrines, which show that he had distinctive ideas about many areas, including topical argument, division, signification and modal logic.¹²

In the *Historia calamitatum*, Abelard casts William in the villain's role. His account of the years from c. 1100 to c. 1117 is the story of William's moves and machinations against his young pupil, and Abelard's counter-attacks, checks and final victory. William's initial approval of him vanished,

⁹ For a critique of the legend, and a reconstruction of his biography, see F. Picavet, *Roscelin philosophe et théologien d'après la légende et d'après l'histoire* (Paris, 1911).

¹⁰ Roscelin had to defend his views on the Trinity at a council held in Soissons in 1092, after which he went to England and then, perhaps, Rome (Picavet, *Roscelin*, pp. 50–2). Whether he taught Abelard in the period immediately before 1092 (until Abelard was about thirteen) or later in the 1090s, or at both periods, is not certain.

¹¹ See below, p. 109 (on Roscelin's method of reading logical texts); pp. 57–8 (on Abelard's contempt for him).

¹² See K. Fredborg, 'The commentaries on Cicero's *De inventione* and *Rhetorica ad Herennium* by William of Champeaux', *CIMAGL* 17 (1976), 1–39; 'William of Champeaux on Boethius' *Topics* according to Orléans bibl. mun. 266', *CIMAGL* 13 (1974) (= *Studia in honorem Henrici Roos septuagenarii*), 13–30; L. Reilly ((ed.) *Petrus Helias. 'Summa super Priscianum'* (Toronto, 1993) (Studies and texts 113), pp. 22–6) has argued that William also wrote the *Glosule* to Priscian, but his view has not gained general acceptance. On William's *Introductions*, see below, p. 38, n. 3. On William's life, see J. Châtillon, 'De Guillaume de Champeaux à Thomas Gallus', *Revue du moyen âge latin* 8 (1952), 139–62, 247–72.

he says, in the face of his tendency to question and his success in disputation (*HC* 64: 34–8); and his older fellow pupils became envious of his abilities. Abelard decided to set up his own school and – since Paris was at this time still a straightforward cathedral school, with a single master – he chose Melun, the favoured residence of the king. William tried to prevent a rival school being set up so near, but with the help of some of William’s powerful rivals Abelard had his way (*HC* 64: 45–57). He taught at Melun probably between *c.* 1102 and *c.* 1104 – and perhaps it was there, teaching close to the royal court, that he acquired the epithet ‘Palatinus’, which plays on his town of origin (Palatium) and the word’s usual meaning, ‘courtly’. Abelard’s fame as a teacher of logic grew, he says; that of his fellow pupils and even of William himself disappeared. Abelard decided he could now move nearer to Paris, and transferred his school to the location of another royal palace, Corbeil. But after only a little time there, he became ill, he explains, from overwork and had to leave France for Brittany (*c.* 1105), although even there he was sought out by some enthusiastic pupils (*HC* 64: 58 – 65: 69).

By the time he returned to Paris, probably about 1108, William had given up his archdeaconry and moved with a few disciples to St Victor, a hermitage on a deserted site on the left bank of the Seine. There he followed the Rule of St Augustine, living the life of a regular canon, but continuing all the same to teach publicly.¹³ Abelard decided that he would once more follow William’s teaching, this time on rhetoric. Among various disputations with him, Abelard attacked William’s view about universals and compelled him to abandon it for another (*HC* 65: 80 – 66: 100).¹⁴ As a result of this victory, William’s keenest students deserted him for Abelard, and the pupil whom William had appointed as his successor at the school of Notre Dame gave his position up to Abelard and became his student (*HC* 66: 101–8). But Abelard was not allowed to teach at Notre Dame for long. ‘After I had been in charge of teaching logic there for a few days’, says Abelard, ‘my master began to grow pale with such envy, to burn with such anger as words cannot easily express.’ William managed to have his original appointee as successor (who had handed over teaching to Abelard) removed entirely from the school, accused of grave wrongdoings, and in his place he put a rival of Abelard’s (*HC* 66: 108–16). Abelard then set up his school once more at Melun. Not long afterwards (*c.* 1111) William moved away from the outskirts of Paris to the countryside, spurred

¹³ *HC* 65: 71–80. Cf. J.-P. Willems, ‘Saint-Victor au temps d’Abélard’ in *Abélard en son temps*, pp. 95–105 and Châtillon, ‘De Guillaume de Champeaux’, pp. 145–6.

¹⁴ For William’s view about universals and Abelard’s criticisms, see below, pp. 113–14.

(according to Abelard) by rumours that his conversion to the religious life was incomplete. Abelard took the chance to move back to Paris but, since Notre Dame already had a master (William's new appointee), he set up his school on the Mont Ste Geneviève. William promptly returned and reopened his school at St Victor, but the effect of this was to attract away the pupils from his appointee at Notre Dame, who was thus forced to give up teaching altogether (*HC* 66: 116 – 67: 144). From about 1110 to 1112, the two schools of logic, William's at St Victor, Abelard's on the Mont Ste Geneviève, existed together, and their pupils and masters engaged each other in disputations.¹⁵ Abelard, by his account, was victorious.¹⁶ He was called back to Brittany by his mother, who had decided to enter monastic life (as her husband had already done). By his return to France in 1113, William had already been made bishop of Châlons, and Abelard decided to go Laon to study *divinitas* (see below) (*HC* 67: 155–63). After his brief stay there, he returned to Paris and from about 1113 to 1117 he was at last able peacefully to be the master at Notre Dame (*HC* 70: 241–51).

So runs Abelard's own account. But there was another, political dimension to these events of which he says very little.¹⁷ William of Champeaux was not only a distinguished teacher; he was also an important figure in public life – 'almost the chief adviser to the king', as a student reported of him at the time just before he gave up his archdeaconry.¹⁸ Through him Abelard was dragged into the pattern of rivalries and alliances which formed round Philip I and his successor, Louis VI. William was closely associated with Ivo, bishop of Chartres, a leading exponent of the Gregorian reform in France. William's greatest rival was also an archdeacon of Notre Dame: Stephen, a member of the influential de Garlande family, who at various times between 1101 and 1137 was chancellor and seneschal to the

¹⁵ St Goswin's hagiographer describes what may well have been such a dispute, in which, accompanied by a group of friends, the young Goswin – at that time a student of logic – goes up the Mont Ste Geneviève, interrupts Abelard's class, challenges what he has said and (it is claimed) has the better of the argument: see the *vita prima* of St Goswin in R. Gibbon (ed.), *Beati Goswini vita ... a duobus diversis eiusdem coenobij Monachis separatim exarata* (Douai, 1620), pp. 14–17.

¹⁶ *HC* 67: 144–54. D. Robertson (*Abelard and Heloise* (New York, 1972), p. 112) argues that the Ovidian quotation through which Abelard makes this point is being used ironically; there is a fine discussion of the whole question in M. Clanchy, 'Abelard – knight (*miles*), courtier (*palatinus*) and man of war (*vir bellator*)', in S. Church and R. Harvey, *Medieval knighthood* v (Woodbridge, 1995), pp. 101–18, at pp. 102–3.

¹⁷ It has been reconstructed in *Bautier*, pp. 58–67.

¹⁸ P. Jaffé, *Monumenta Bambergensia* (Berlin, 1869) (*Bibliotheca rerum germanicarum* 5), §160, p. 286, cited in Luscombe, 'From Paris to the Paraclete', p. 251, n. 29.

king. It seems clear that Stephen de Garlande was the chief of the powerful rivals of William (cf. *HC* 64: 54–5) who helped Abelard to set up his first school in Melun (where the king, at that time their ally, was residing); and that Abelard's move from Melun to Corbeil was dictated by the king's break with the de Garlande family.¹⁹ Abelard's period of sickness in Brittany (c. 1105–8) corresponds to a time when the de Garlande family was out of favour; whilst William's retreat to St Victor, and Abelard's return to the schools of Paris, coincides with its rehabilitation, and the Mont Ste Geneviève may have recommended itself to Abelard because Stephen de Garlande had been appointed dean there.²⁰ The period from 1113 when Abelard was at last able to teach at Notre Dame was also a time when the de Garlande family was at its most powerful, and when the bishop of Paris was the man who had handed over the school of Notre Dame to Abelard in 1109, much to William of Champeaux's anger.²¹

This political dimension, rather than intellectual differences, may explain why the hostility between Abelard and William was so intense. Although Abelard certainly attacked William's views on universals, at no point in the *Historia* does he slight his master's intellectual abilities. In his logical writings, Abelard on occasion mentions a view as William's, and sometimes disagrees with it; but never contemptuously, in the manner he treats Roscelin's opinions. In the *Dialectica*, Abelard reports a view about the analysis of certain problematic statements of existence as 'his master's' – by which he almost certainly means here William's – and then goes on to explain how 'in order to defend his master's view' he would argue in a particular way.²² This suggests a considerable degree of intellectual partnership between Abelard and his master.

There was less common ground, however, between Abelard and William's own master, Anselm, whose school at Laon Abelard attended to study *divinitas*. For Anselm – as Abelard's account (*HC* 68: 164 – 70: 240) makes clear – *divinitas* consisted of glossing the Bible. Abelard was not impressed by Anselm, calling him a fire which produces smoke not light, a leafy tree without fruit. He attended Anselm's classes less and less frequently and then, despite his lack of experience, made his fellow students the offer that he himself would comment on an obscure part of scripture – the prophecy of Ezechiel. By the third of his lectures, he reports, the students were all

¹⁹ *Bautier*, pp. 54, 61–2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 63–4.

²² *Dial.* 136: 19–20: 'Sed ad hoc, memini, ut Magistri nostri sententiam defenderem, responderere solebam'; cf. p. 135: 29–32 for William's view.