

# The Failed Struggle for Recognition in Peter Abelard's Autobiographical Letter *Historia calamitatum*

Peter Abelard'ın Otobiyografisi:  
*Historia Calamitatum*'daki Tanınmaya Yönelik Başarısız Çabası

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## Abstract

In this article, I intend to use the struggle for recognition paradigm in order to provide a new interpretation of Abelard's autobiographical letter, *Historia Calamitatum*, through a psychological analysis of the author's personality and his physical and psychological traumata. My working hypothesis is that Abelard's desperate need to be recognized as an exceptional human being set him on a course that led to an unsuccessful rebellion which, in turn, provoked some of the unjust acts directed against him in both his personal and public life. Unable to align his negative qualities with the (positive) perception Abelard had of himself, he systematically projected his envy and jealousy onto others. After several traumatic events, he felt stripped of his dignity and incapable of maintaining control over his life. However, the struggle to restore his good name led to antagonistic and inimical confrontations with others, and these confrontations produced more rejection time and again.

**Keywords:** self-narrative, dispositional envy, psychological trauma, emotional struggle, mutual recognition.

## Öz

Bu makalede, Abelard'ın otobiyografik eseri olarak kabul edebileceğimiz *Historia Calamitatum*'a yeni bir yorum getirmek amacıyla yazarın kişiliği, yaşadığı fiziksel ve psikolojik travmalar ile ilgili psikolojik analizler yoluyla tanınma paradigma çabasını kullanmayı amaçlanmıştır. Üzerinde çalıştığımız hipotez, Abelard'ın olağanüstü bir insan gibi görünme çabasının verdiği umutsuzluğu, başarısız bir başkaldırışı hem kişisel yaşamında hem de toplumsal yaşamda kendisine karşı haksız kışkırtmaları konu alır. Abelard'ın sahip olduğu (olumlu) algıyla olumsuz özelliklerini dengeleyememesi giderek onu kıskançlığa ve bu kıskançlığı başkalarına yansıtmasına neden olmuştur. Yaşadığı birkaç travmatik olaydan sonra, onurunu kaybettiği ve hayatı üzerindeki kontrolü elden bıraktığını hissetmiştir. İtibarını geri kazanma mücadelesi, başkalarıyla düşmanca ve meydan okumalara yol açmıştır. Bu çatışmalar sonucunda düşüncelerinin tekrar reddedilmesine neden olduğu bilinir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** öz-anlatı, yatkinliğe imrenme, psikolojik travma, duygusal gerilim, karşılıklı tanıma.

## Introduction: New Ways of Reading Abelard's Autobiography

The aim of this article is to exemplify the way in which the struggle for recognition is depicted in medieval literature by examining Peter Abelard's famous letter of consolation, *Historia calamitatum*. Abelard's purpose in writing this work is, it

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seems, to comfort a suffering friend by recounting the misfortunes in his own personal and intellectual life before 1132/1133. Looking back at many years of social failure and emotional instability, the author fearfully contemplates his future as he recalls some of the most defining events of his life. The impressive “self-narrative,” as Ricoeur describes it in *Temps et récit* (108), that Abelard produces for this occasion (to console a friend) is almost impossible to properly label among the usual genres in medieval literature. For a long time, McLaughlin, in “Abelard as Autobiographer: The Motives and Meaning of His ‘*Story of Calamities*’” (463) and others considered *Historia calamitatum* to be the most original and the most significant medieval autobiography. At the same time, Sweeney regards Abelard’s letter as a work of “self-martyrology,” “self-apology,” “self-revelation,” and even “self-consolation” (305). In the present study, which is based on a psychological reading of Abelard’s text, I will argue that the interpretative framework represented by the struggle for recognition paradigm can highlight some important aspects of the author’s personality. My working hypothesis is that Abelard’s constant claim to be recognized as an exceptional human being caused him to unsuccessfully rebel against behavioral patterns that were held to be more ‘normal’ in the social, and ecclesiastical environments of his time. According to his testimony, the recurrent impression of being unjustly persecuted was reinforced by some traumatic events—such as his involuntary castration or his condemnation by the church—which radically affected his ability to assert his identity in a socially accepted way. Stripped of his dignity and unable to seek reconciliation, he struggled to restore his good name through antagonistic confrontations, which, unsurprisingly, only resulted in additional rejection by people and institutions.

The appeal to the struggle of recognition paradigm is justified by the overall methodological principles underlying my approach. In reading Abelard’s text, I deliberately pay only scant attention to the literary, theological, philosophical or historical points of view, because I mean to favor a psychological perspective. Those familiar with Abelard’s works are fully aware of how rich the material is presented in his letter. Incidentally, the scope of Abelard’s material explains the many different ways in which *Historia Calamitatum* was read and interpreted over time. While I acknowledge, of course, the legitimacy and the importance of contributions made by fellow scholars guided interested in the literary, theological, philosophical, or historical perspectives, I choose to build my analysis on the “psycho-critical method,” which Charles Mauron developed in his *Des métaphores obsédantes aux mythes personnels*. The material I will consider consists mainly of particular words that Abelard uses ‘obsessively’. While it is certain that Abelard spoke about himself in the ‘codified’ manner typical of his (medieval) time and his particular cultural and social environment, a primarily psycho-critical analysis will not stress these particular aspects Abelard’s literary work. Indeed, the psycho-critical method will shed light on some of the author’s psychological patterns, which become visible when one examines his ‘obsessive metaphors’. The present approach aims to restore the author’s ‘personal myth’ defined as the (subconscious) image he had of himself and which emerges from his own words. The present approach is unconventional because it applies the struggle for recognition paradigm to a remarkable and complex work of medieval literature, and because I am guided by the principles of the psycho-critical

method. Working thusly, I am taking into account the possible objection that there is a structural incompatibility between a concept developed in modern times, that is, the struggle for recognition paradigm, and the reality of a medieval society. However, I will argue in favour of the idea that the struggle for recognition paradigm proves to be a useful intellectual tool in a current (psychological) interpretation of a text written nearly ten centuries ago. I am especially interested in the psychological reality of the author's experience and am mindful of the fact that the modern concept of self-consciousness cannot apply, as such, to the medieval man. From among three types of truth that, according to Bellemin-Noël, are present in any literary production, namely, (1) the historical truth of the narrative itself, (2) the personal truth of its author, and (3) the truth that goes beyond this subjective experience to reach the universality of the work of art, I am particularly interested in the second form of truth, that is, the author's personal truth (96).

A discussion of Abelard's intellectual, social, and moral attitudes towards people around him constitutes a new angle for the present analysis, and I will emphasize some aspects of his tragic romantic relationship with Heloise and his intense academic relationship with his masters, his fellow disciples, and with monks in some of the abbeys where he resided after his retirement from public life. In light of these elements, I aim to show that the failure of Abelard's struggle for recognition is partly motivated by his profound inability to recognize other people's identity and the need of others to be esteemed. Furthermore, I argue that Abelard's attitude was fueled by a characteristic called 'dispositional envy,' which was triggered whenever he found himself in a position of horizontal or vertical rivalry with other people. The goal is to point out not only discontinuities but also continuities that exist between medieval mentalities and modern (Western) culture.

The normative and psychological dimensions of the concept of recognition are fundamental for the present approach. Indeed, most theories of recognition assume that to develop their identity, human beings fundamentally depend on the feedback they get from care-givers and from society as a whole. According to this view, those who fail to experience adequate recognition in their childhood, or later in life, tend to develop unsuccessful relationships with their own selves. Since recognition constitutes a "vital human need" (26), any form of misrecognition is a threat to the identity of subjects who then need to engage in a struggle for recognition. Furthermore, this type of struggle does not only concern the realm of personal experience, because the subject of recognition also is, simultaneously, an object of recognition in any given interpersonal situation.

A difficulty arises when one asserts that mutual recognition is not a self-evident concept. In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, for instance, the interpersonal encounter between two subjects culminates in a life or death struggle (Kojève 28). By fighting against others, the subject expresses his autonomy, but this attitude can lead to difficult confrontations when mutual recognition is not achieved (Hegel 111). In his treatise *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel had already developed the importance of the mutual recognition in the interaction between individuals by

referring to the three spheres of any individual's life, namely that of (1) love within the family, (2) contractual respect within civil society, and (3) solidarity within the state. The intricate connections between these spheres allow the subject to find meaning in his or her life in a process of mutual recognition (Laitinen 322). The recognition related to each of Hegel's three spheres can thus be interpreted as genealogically distinct stages that a subject passes one by one to gain self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. In any case, the recognition of individuality in contexts of loving care is, from a psychological point of view, of utmost importance.

### **Psychological Commentary of *Historia Calamitatum***

Abelard's *Historia calamitatum* is a highly atypical production in the field of medieval literature. The author gives an account of his actions, thoughts, and emotions in an attempt to retrospectively explain a series of important and dramatic events in his life. Since I refer to a historical time where self-revelation was socially codified and controlled for cultural and religious reasons (Von Moos 131), it is not important for me here to find the exact correspondence between Abelard's description of his life and the actual events he recounts. The work is proof of his desperate need to maintain the feeling of continuity in his own existence. Using the pretext of writing to a (maybe imaginary) friend, he consciously directs his thoughts towards posterity, in general, and expresses his need to re-establish the truth about his life as he perceived it. Some contradictions can certainly be found in his account, but I will refrain from interpreting them as incoherent elements that discredit his narrative, because mine is not a historical, but a psychological method and interest.

### ***Abelard's early academic achievements in relation to dispositional envy***

The first objective of my analysis is to identify the most important points in the structure of Abelard's letter. From the very beginning, he focuses on two main topics in his discourse which are rivalry and persecution: "Attend to me a moment, hear but the story of my misfortunes, and yours, Philintus, will be nothing as compared with those of the loving and unhappy." (Abelard 52). From a psychological point of view, the concept of rivalry is directly related to the place occupied by each of the siblings in the family dynamics in their early childhood and to the recognition they received from their primary care-givers with regard to their respective position. According to the information given by Abelard, he was the eldest of his siblings both boys and girls (Cook 207). His position in his family could partially explain his constant need to assert his identity both from a psychological and a socio-economic point of view, since he was the rightful heir of the family title and fortune and he had specific privileges and duties related to this position. His father, who belonged to the rural nobility in Brittany wanted his sons to be instructed in the arts before joining the military. However, Abelard developed a keen interest for studying and decided to give up his privilege as the first born in order to pursue an academic career:

As I was his eldest, and consequently his favourite son, he took more than ordinary care of my education. I had a natural genius for study, and made extraordinary progress in it. Smitten with the love of books, and the

praises which on all sides were bestowed upon me, I aspired to no other reputation than that of learning. To my brothers I leave the glory of battles and the pomp of triumphs; nay, more, I yielded them up my birthright and patrimony. I knew necessity was the great spur to study, and was afraid I should not merit the title of learned if I distinguished myself from others by nothing but a more plentiful fortune. (Abelard 52)

This choice was definitely not an easy one to make for Abelard and this may be the reason why he conceived the discipline of dialectics as a combat where he had to defeat his adversaries at all cost. From the very beginning, he presented himself as a warrior of the spirit and he probably expected his future victories to bring him the trophies which he gave up, namely fame, fortune and political dominance: "Furnished with the weapons of reasoning I took pleasure in going to public disputations to win trophies; and wherever I heard that this art flourished, I ranged, like another Alexander, from province to province, to seek new adversaries with whom I might try my strength" (Abelard 53). After these introductory remarks, Abelard talks about his arrival in Paris, where he became the student of William of Champeaux, who was considered by that time to be the most notable scholar in the field of dialectics. Abelard described himself as the best disciple of the best master that he wanted to surpass as a philosopher. The rivalry is present both in relation to his master, an older man who could be seen as an oedipal figure of authority and to his colleagues and peers who were outraged by Abelard's arrogant attitude.

The ambition I had to become formidable in logic led me at last to Paris, the centre of politeness, and where the science I was so smitten with had usually been in the greatest perfection. I put myself under the direction of one Champeaux, a professor who had acquired the character of the most skilful philosopher of his age, but by negative excellencies only as being the least ignorant! (Abelard 53)

Abelard seems to have sincerely thought that the real reason for the harsh criticism from the part of his peers was that they felt envious for his genius and his many academic talents, all the more since he was the youngest of them all and the last to have joined the school. At this stage of my analysis, his attitude could be interpreted as being narcissistic and somewhat tainted by a paranoid way of relating to others. He later stated that he truly believed that his growing academic and social fame intensified his colleagues' envy which was actually the origin of his misfortunes culminating in the failure of all his personal and professional projects.

In spite of his young age, Abelard aspired to become the chief of his own school of dialectics, and he chose to start his independent academic career as a teacher in Melun, an important city and royal residence at the time. He soon became very successful and he especially enjoyed the social recognition that his fame brought him, while all his rivals remained in his shadow. The question of fame and good reputation seems to be vital to Abelard and he does not appear to be able to conceive that this kind of social recognition could be shared with his peers or his teacher who is presented as being overwhelmed by envy in a process of mutual

recognition. On the contrary, once he started teaching, he proceeded to successfully multiply his attacks against his academic adversaries.

Nevertheless, at the time of his great victories in the academic field, he became nervously exhausted on account of his excessive intellectual effort and he felt the need to return to his parents' house in order to recover from his illness. He remained convinced during his absence that everyone missed him and wanted him to come back. In psychological terms, Abelard was experiencing a process of regression due to the pressure under which he was probably living:

The rush of travelling threw me into a dangerous distemper, and not being able to recover my health, my physicians, who perhaps were in league with Champeaux, advised me to remove to my native air. Thus I voluntarily banished myself for some years. I leave you to imagine whether my absence was not regretted by the better sort. (Abelard 54)

Abelard resumed his struggle for academic recognition when he decided to directly challenge William of Champeaux, who was teaching a new course. In order to get the recognition he craved for, Abelard 'destroyed' his master's theory of the universals and thus completely discredited him as a teacher. He also found great satisfaction in 'stealing' some of his master's students, including his own ex-adversaries. When William of Champeaux decided to give up teaching, he conceded his post to one of his students considered to be best suited for this position. However, according to Abelard, William's successor was so impressed with his own intellectual qualities that he offered to him the position recently granted. According to Abelard, William's assigned successor willingly accepted to take place among his students rather than be his teacher. In his personal perspective on things, this is the high point of Abelard's academic career. He then felt that he was the greatest thinker in his field. Regardless of his success, William of Champeaux continued to persecute him, since he did not approve of the changes made in his school after his departure and decided to appoint a second successor. Abelard's reaction was virulent and almost hateful. Since his master preferred one of his rivals for a position that was rightfully his own, Abelard decided to take over his old school by organizing an intellectual 'siege' destined to overthrow his opponent. From a psychological point of view, it is highly remarkable that when he related this episode, Abelard mentioned 'his place' and 'his post' unjustly denied to him by his former master. As a reaction to this painful rejection, he started once again teaching on his own and he successfully managed to defeat all his intellectual enemies. But once again, Abelard is consumed by the idea that his peers are envious of him. The same situation is later reproduced in Laon, where he went to study under Anselme of Laon's supervision. Despite his new master's remarkable reputation, Abelard noted that he was actually worthless from an intellectual point of view: I was recommended to one Anselm, the very oracle of his time, but, to give you my own opinion, one more venerable for his age and his wrinkles than for his genius or learning. If you consulted him upon any difficulty, the sure consequence was to be much more uncertain in the point. They who only saw him admired him, but those who reasoned with him were extremely dissatisfied. He was a great master of words and talked much, but meant nothing. His discourse was a fire, which, instead of enlightening, obscured

everything with its smoke; a tree beautified with variety of leaves and branches, but barren of fruit (Abelard 55).

He felt again that the other students were particularly envious of him and that they constantly tried to marginalize him. However, this did not stop him from giving a brilliant conference in theology without any previous training in the commentary of the Bible normally requested for this task. According to his perception of this event, even his most fierce opponents were impressed by his performance but his intellectual victory did not prevent them from turning Anselm against him.

Abelard systematically presented himself as the unfortunate victim of unjust persecution. In each account of these repeated attacks against him, he is always struggling to get the intellectual recognition he felt that he deserved. In a strictly psychological perspective, Abelard appears as the victim of a pathological behavioural pattern. The only explanation he found for the conflicts with his rivals is their envy. This could be the sign of a pathological personality feature essential for understanding the exact nature of Abelard's way of thinking. In order to clarify this particular aspect, I will appeal to research from the field of social psychology dealing with the concept of "dispositional envy." According to a study conducted by Kenrick et al., human beings naturally try to achieve social status in relation to their need for respect, admiration and influence (Kenrick et al. 293). Accordingly, any threat to personal status can provoke strong emotional reactions such as envy. Usually described as morally reprehensible and highly maladaptive, the inclination to experience intense envy could actually prove to be functional in some cases and may even contribute to the regulation of social hierarchies at an interpersonal and societal level (Steckler and Tracy 202).

Traditionally, envy is presented as a painful emotion occurring when people feel that they lack another's superior quality, achievement or possession. Envious people try to obtain the advantage or wish that the other loses it. Therefore, envy elicits the motivation to level the difference between the self and the superior standard (Van de Ven et al. 428). In essence, envy is conceptualized as an immoral emotion of inferiority, resentment for the other and hostile tendencies. However, the one-dimensional character of this emotion could be completed by a positive perspective on envy. Recent research in psychology shows that "dispositional envy" could be associated with admiration (Schindler 22) and increased positive desire to obtain the other's advantage (Crusius and Mussweiler 150). Van de Ven et al. incorporated these conflicting findings into a unified theory of envy as a dual construct. More specifically, recent theories distinguish between a "benign" and a "malicious" form of envy (Van de Ven et al. 420). Thus, malicious envy and hostility toward superior others is completed by a form of benign envy which is also painful because of the underlying feelings of inferiority but which motivates individuals to improve themselves. It especially motivates behavioural tendencies to re-gain status and leads to increased personal well-being in contrast with the dispositional malicious envy which motivates behavioural tendencies to harm the other's status and which finally leads to decreased personal well-being and potentially societal disruptions.

Finally, the relation between narcissism and envy needs to be emphasized here (Lange et al. 168). In many ways, narcissists are complicated human beings, who are often admired and celebrated, but at the same time they push the others away by their inflated egos. Indeed, it seems that narcissists are highly driven by their enhanced desire for status, and they are mostly subject to malignant envy (Wallace and Baumeister, 821). These seemingly opposing effects can be explained by two distinct yet positively correlated facets of grandiose narcissism, namely narcissistic admiration and narcissistic rivalry.

In Abelard's case, as described by himself in his autobiographical letter, he appears to be a narcissistic personality motivated by malignant envy in his struggle for recognition. However, he is not aware of his hostile feelings, which he cannot integrate in his personality by admitting them, so he constantly projects them onto others. The paradox in this situation is that his need to be recognized is at the same time completely legitimate but also somewhat abusive in the name of this unshakable idea that he was a persecuted genius superior to everyone. His attitude certainly pushed people away from him, because he was unable to conceive a positive way to go past rivalry and share the social and psychological benefits of mutual recognition. The tragic consequences of this situation will be outlined in the next sections of my paper.

### ***The psychological implications of Abelard's emotional and sexual life***

According to Abelard, when he came back to Paris from Laon, he dominated the academic environment for a few years. Once his successful career was well established, he genuinely thought about himself as being "the only philosopher in the world": "Thus I, who by this time had come to regard myself as the only philosopher remaining in the whole world, and had ceased to fear any further disturbance of my peace, began to loosen the rein on my desires, although hitherto I had always lived in the utmost continence" (Abelard 56). By the time he became highly appreciated for his teaching, he fell prey to the two moral 'diseases' of vanity and lust from which he suffered until he was set free by divine intervention: "Thus did it come to pass that while I was utterly absorbed in pride and sensuality, divine grace, the cure for both diseases, was forced upon me, even though I, forsooth, would fain have shunned it" (Abelard 56). Abelard who described himself as young and handsome, felt invincible and irresistible especially because of his excellent reputation. Fully aware of his social achievements, he was looking for a woman to seduce. Soon he decided that this person should be Heloise, a young woman of noble origin whose truly exceptional intellectual gifts had already secured her a great reputation:

There was in Paris a young creature (ah, Philintus!) formed in a prodigality of nature to show mankind a finished composition; dear Heloise, the reputed niece of one Fulbert, a canon. Her wit and her beauty would have stirred the dullest and most insensible heart, and her education was equally admirable. Heloise was the mistress of the most polite arts. You may easily imagine that this did not a little help to captivate me; I saw her, I loved her, I resolved to make her love me. (Abelard 57)

Guided solely by his passion and his selfish desire to seduce her, Abelard did not seem to contemplate for one moment, at least at the beginning of their relationship, the consequences that his plan could have on her own life from an emotional and, especially, from a social point of view. On the contrary, he manipulated Fulbert, the young woman's uncle and tutor, into believing that he was sincerely interested in giving her private lessons while he actually only wanted unrestricted access to her. Unaware of Abelard's intentions regarding Heloise, Fulbert entrusted him with the education of his niece, compared by her future seducer to a "tender lamb" handed over to the "ravenous wolf" that he was. This particular aspect of Abelard's life, which was widely discussed in the secondary literature mostly because the correspondence between the two lovers was several times edited and published over the centuries. From his letter, Abelard appears to have been quite ambivalent towards Heloise. Based on his own writings, he does not seem to have chosen her for what she really represented as a woman and as a human being but because she was a trophy that he felt entitled to claim for himself since she was young, beautiful and very well instructed in the arts. In fact, he did not see in her, at least at the beginning of their relationship, an equally dignified human being but an object suitable for his own desires and sexual impulses. Furthermore, Abelard most likely used Heloise in order to mirror himself in her as an exceptional feminine version of himself in a very narcissistic way of relating to the object of his affection.

For various reasons, the relationship between the two lovers became very complicated. First, Abelard's passion for the young woman overcame his passion for study, which was an important step back in his efforts to maintain a positive image of himself and to assert his intellectual superiority: "But I was so far from making any advances in the sciences that I lost all my taste for them, and when I was obliged to go from the sight of my dear mistress to my philosophical exercises, it was with the utmost regret and melancholy" (Abelard 59). Soon after that, when Heloise's uncle Fulbert learned about her love affair with her teacher, his reaction to this act of betrayal soon turned into tragedy for both of them. Abelard seemed sincerely affected by this situation not only for himself but also for Heloise's sake: "The anger of Fulbert seemed too moderate on this occasion, and I feared in the end some more heavy revenge. It is impossible to express the grief and regret which filled my soul when I was obliged to leave the Canon's house and my dear Heloise" (Abelard 60).

At the same time, Abelard received the news of Heloise's pregnancy, presented as a moment of great joy for her. Since they were not married, he intended to protect her, so he took her to his sister in Brittany in an attempt to keep her safe until the birth of their child, a boy named Astrolabe. Abelard's guilt over betraying Fulbert's trust did not disappear after he became a father. Surprisingly enough, he did not feel that he owed anything to Heloise, since in his opinion women were the cause of the fall of many great men: "from the very beginning of the human race, women had cast down even the noblest men to utter ruin". But since he wanted to make amends, he promised Fulbert to marry Heloise on the condition that their union

remained secret. In this way, his reputation was protected and he could continue his academic career to which he intended to devote his life:

I began to pity his misfortune, and to think this robbery which love had made me commit was a sort of treason. I endeavoured to appease his anger by a sincere confession of all that was past, and by hearty engagements to marry Heloise secretly. He gave me his consent, and with many protestations and embraces confirmed our reconciliation. (Abelard 64)

Heloise's long plead against marriage in the text where she supposedly urged him not to inflict the miseries of married life on himself seems to echo his own fears to publicly accept his responsibility as a husband and a father: "She urged all that was possible to divert me from marriage--that it was a bond always fatal to a philosopher; that the cries of children and the cares of a family were utterly inconsistent with the tranquility and application which study require" (Abelard 65). Proof of his reticence in this sense is Abelard's decision shortly after the secret wedding ceremony to send Heloise to a monastery near Paris. Although she gracefully accepted her husband's decision, her family did not agree with this project. In their eyes, Abelard was only trying to get rid of his spouse, so they decided to take revenge on him for his behaviour. Assisted by one of Abelard's servant, who betrayed him for monetary gains, they broke into his house during the night and there they immobilized him and proceeded to castrate him:

I now thought Fulbert's anger disarmed; I lived in peace; but alas! our marriage proved but a weak defence against his revenge. Observe, Philintus, to what a barbarity he pursued it! He bribed my servants; an assassin came into my bedchamber by night, with a razor in his hand, and found me in a deep sleep. I suffered the most shameful punishment that the revenge of an enemy could invent; in short, without losing my life, I lost my manhood. (Abelard 66)

When recalling this traumatic event in his life, Abelard mentioned the stupefaction that this violent attack against him had on his own family and friends, but he did not talk much about his own feelings, except to say their empathic attitude was "pure torture" to him. According to Abelard, the real reason for his suffering at that time was the way in which people looked at him after his castration, especially when they showed him any compassion. I would like to stress here the importance of the negative experiences of disrespect since even in situations where the victims know that their degradation is not justified, they cannot but feel humiliated all the same. It was particularly the case with Abelard's forcible castration, which could be one of the reasons why he lost complete faith in his capacity to control his life. Indeed, in the course of mistreatment or torture, which was definitely the case with Abelard, the perpetrators do not only intentionally inflict pain and injury on their victims but also deride their agency, and this undermines basic self- and world-trust (Scarry 31). However, it is worth noticing that Abelard was definitely not looking to be recognized as a victim. In fact, being perceived as a victim by the others was actually very hurtful for him, even more hurtful than the act of castration in itself. According to his testimony, Abelard saw this barbaric mutilation as an attack against his good fame and as an unbearable humiliation. Indeed, he felt terribly dishonoured, fearing that he had been

deformed from a physical and spiritual point of view and turned into a monster in the eyes of society and an abdominal being in front of God.

The most important source of Abelard's distress seems to be the way in which he was perceived because of the terrible stigma represented at the time by castration. The narcissistic wound was greater for him than the physical mutilation of his body. However, I would like to insist on the idea that the forcible castration is a very traumatic event in itself, regardless of the interpretation given to it by the victim or the perpetrator, because this kind of attack destroys the conscious (and the unconscious) image that people have with regards to their own body. Regardless of the circumstances in which it occurs, this kind of event deeply alters the self-representation based on the physical and psychological experience of one's own body. This kind of radical change, even when it is accidental, always has a deep impact on identity. The victims who manage to restore a positive self-image necessarily go through a long and painful process of psychological adaptation to their new situation. The multiple consequences of this trauma may not have threatened Abelard's reputation as a scholar, but he was nevertheless under the painful impression that he was from then on being denied basic recognition as a human being and as a man. He therefore decided to retire from public life in an abbey near Paris and insisted that Heloise did the same. From that moment on, the two spouses and lovers were physically separated until the end of their lives. However, their relationship continued through their correspondence, which was fortunately preserved, edited, translated and published many times since the twelfth century.

### **Abelard's Failed Struggle for Basic Recognition**

#### ***The condemnation by the church of his theological work***

According to Abelard, before he retired from public life, he pursued a teaching career mainly for money and glory. In the new setting of his life, he decided to resume his academic activity for the sole purpose of becoming 'the true philosopher of God'. Once again, he described himself as being unjustly persecuted. It is interesting to note here that Abelard, who previously admitted his own immoral conduct regarding Heloise, felt that he was morally entitled to take action against the 'obscene and scandalous' behaviour of some monks from the Saint-Denis monastery just as corrupted as the abbot himself. In his own words, his attitude made him become the person most hated by all the members of the community. Unable or unwilling to adjust to his new environment, Abelard decided to go outside the monastery and start teaching again. Like before, he described his success as being immediate, in spite of the fact that his envious rivals continuously denigrated him. By this time in his life, the perception he had that he was an innocent victim took on hyperbolic proportions. The coup de grace in this process was the ecclesiastic attacks initiated against his teaching in theology by his former colleagues. Another psychological aspect of the problem of recognition arises when he recounts the circumstances that led to the resembling of a church council against him in Soissons. Abelard's complaint that he was not recognized as one of the intellectual and spiritual heirs of his former master,

William de Champeaux, is somewhat surprising, especially since he had acted in the past against him and even managed to discredit his philosophical doctrine of the universals. Just as before, Abelard did not react well in the context of rivalry for the approval of this symbolic father whom he had previously rejected.

According to Abelard, the main purpose of the council of Soissons was to condemn his theological treatise on divine Trinity. Abelard presented his opponents as hateful people dominated by jealousy. At the same time, he said that during the council, all his adversaries were very impressed by his defense of his theological work. In his opinion, the genuine admiration that people had for him intensified the anger that his opponents felt against him. Indeed, Abelard felt hunted, threatened, and accused of all kind of offences among which the fact that he was 'presumptuous'. By the council's decision, he was forced to throw his theological treatise into the fire with his own hands. The church authorities did not want to listen to his defence and only ordered him to recite Athanasius's credo as a symbol of faith. According to his testimony, this was meant to infantilize and silence him: "[...] my enemies declared that it was not needful for me to do more than recite the Athanasian Symbol, a thing which any boy might do as well as I. And lest I should allege ignorance, pretending that I did not know the words by heart, they had a copy of it set before me to read. And read it I did as best I could for my groans and sighs and tears" (Abelard 68).

For Abelard, this was an intellectual and a spiritual humiliation of a truly traumatic nature. After his official condemnation by the council, Abelard presented himself as being overwhelmed by confusion, shame and despair. Soon after, he was sent 'as a prisoner' to the Saint M nard abbey where he also faced different conflicts. In this part of his letter, he recalls his castration as a form of physical torture which he compared to the moral torture represented by the public attacks against his good name and reputation. In his attempt to give a rational meaning to these extreme events, he justified his physical mutilation as a well-deserved punishment for his sins, whereas his intellectual persecution remained in his eyes completely unjustified and morally reprehensible. In any case, Abelard assures his readers that he was "the most miserable among men":

Comparing these new sufferings of my soul with those I had formerly endured in my body, it seemed that I was in very truth the most miserable among men. Indeed that earlier betrayal had become a little thing in comparison with this later evil, and I lamented the hurt to my fair name far more than the one to my body. The latter, indeed, I had brought upon myself through my own wrongdoing, but this other violence had come upon me solely by reason of the honesty of my purpose and my love of our faith, which had compelled me to write that which I believed. (Abelard 67)

### ***Abelard's final struggle for elementary recognition***

Thinking that he had no other choice than going back to Saint-Denis, Abelard soon realized that everybody hated him and acted like enemies. A new disagreement opposed him to the community, but once again he refused to take any responsibility for the situation and complained that he was persecuted. After this new confrontation, he felt as if "the entire universe was conspiring against him". Therefore, he tried to take refuge outside the abbey and resumed his teaching

activity. In his letter, he explained that many disciples came to his school even though the living conditions were extremely difficult. Abelard thought that their perseverance in following him attracted the envy of his adversaries, who recruited new 'apostles' against him. Terrified at the idea that new attacks against him could be initiated, he relived the humiliation of his condemnation at the council of Soissons.

By the end of his letter, Abelard appears anxious and completely dominated by the jealousy he systematically provoked in others. Desperate to find a noble purpose to his life, he accepted a position as an abbot at Saint Gildas de Rhuys in Brittany, where he intended to reform the monastery despite the opposition of the monks. The atmosphere in the community became very hostile and Abelard, who even received death threats, was forced to face the fact that his efforts as a religious leader were completely ineffective. The unsuccessful role of a symbolic father for the community of monks is a new failure for Abelard, since his spiritual sons rebelled against him and wanted to eliminate him. In his new position, he strongly condemned the insubordination of the monks and denied them any kind of legitimacy while he never doubted his own behaviour.

But now has Satan beset me to such an extent that I no longer know where I may find rest, or even so much as live. I am driven hither and yon, a fugitive and a vagabond, even as the accursed Cain (Gen. iv, 14). I have already said that "without were fightings, within were fears" (II Cor. vii, 5), and these torture me ceaselessly, the fears being indeed without as well as within, and the fightings wheresoever there are fears. Nay, the persecution carried on by my sons rages against me more perilously and continuously than that of my open enemies, for my sons I have always with me, and I am ever exposed to their treacheries. The violence of my enemies I see in the danger to my body if I leave the cloister; but within it I am compelled incessantly to endure the crafty machinations as well as the open violence of those monks who are called my sons, and who are entrusted to me as their abbot, which is to say their father. (Abelard 69)

Abelard certainly experienced an existential crisis and he was deeply hurt by the failure of his projects. He described himself as feeling completely powerless and unable to govern his own life which seemed futile to him. His pessimism was reinforced by his conviction that he was forced to roam aimlessly like Cain, the biblical figure of the unfortunate man who killed his own brother because he was jealous of him. Abelard felt that he was wandering hopelessly. At this point in his life, he was no longer looking for social and intellectual recognition but basic acceptance as a human being. Not only did he not find his place anywhere but he could not even find refuge in a place where he could feel safe without the constant fear for his life. He hoped he could go back to his old oratory "Paraclete" passed under his wife Heloise's authority who had become the abbess of a congregation of nuns. Despite his sincere charity and his purified love for Heloise, the church authorities did not allow him to join her community because of their immoral past. Once again, he perceived this attitude as an attack on his good name. And once again, it was less hurtful for him to be reminded of his physical castration

than to endure the repeated hostile acts meant to discredit him from both a social and a moral point of view.

Abelard based his attitude on a subtle distinction between a good name, which is more valuable than great fortune, and moral conscience. Although he was aware that he was a sinner in front of his own conscience and in front of God, he still wanted his reputation to be flawless. Since this was no longer possible because of his romantic past with Heloise and his subsequent castration, the idea that his failure was public knowledge was a constant source of torment for him. Alone and defeated, Abelard ended his letter on a moral note, stating that the history of his misfortunes which go back to his early childhood should be an example for the ambitious people who constantly try to assert themselves as being superior to all the other human beings.

In light of these elements, I would like to summarize the main ideas presented in this article. (1) As a philosopher specializing in medieval studies and a clinical psychologist, my approach is a psychological interpretation of Abelard's medieval autobiographical work by means of the struggle for recognition paradigm. (2) This paradigm is highly compatible with recent psychological studies concerning especially the topic of dispositional envy and narcissistic personality disorder. (3) By applying these intellectual tools to Abelard's text, I was able to show that Abelard was probably a victim in his struggle for intellectual and social recognition, (4) The failure of his struggle for elementary recognition as a human being (especially after his forced castration and his condemnation by the church) could be partially explained by his incapacity to take part in any form of mutual recognition. (5) This new interpretation reinforces the idea that recognition is vital both for the process of subjectivation of individuals and for society as a whole.

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