

“Charisma and power in the literary correspondence of Peter the Venerable and Peter of Poitiers,” *Canadian Society of Medievalists* (Ottawa, 2015)

This talk is about two twelfth-century Peters, who lived and worked alongside one another for more than two decades at the monastery of Cluny. One Peter—known today as Peter the Venerable—was the abbot of Cluny from 1122 until 1156. Our other Peter was a Cluniac monk plucked from a small priory in Poitiers, who existed as his abbot’s shadow.¹ He was a loyal and faithful monk, diligent secretary, literary collaborator and confidante, if we trust the sources. We should, however, be wary about wholly trusting these sources, because the works exchanged between Peter the Venerable and Peter of Poitiers were intended to create and support very public personae. To talk about their relationship, I argue, is to talk about the textual history of their mutual and public admiration.

In the title of this paper, I use the term “literary correspondence” to describe a rather heterogeneous corpus of texts which were exchanged between Peter the Venerable and Peter of Poitiers over the course of their life. A portion of the surviving texts were letters (thus correspondence in an epistolary sense), mostly dating from the later years of Peter the Venerable’s abbacy. But we can see other literary “exchanges”. Peter of Poitiers wrote a verse panegyric of his abbot and in turn Peter the Venerable wrote a lengthy verse defense of this panegyric. Peter of Poitiers wrote a preliminary outline (*Capitula*) for the work that would become Peter the Venerable’s *Liber contra Saracennos*. Peter of Poitiers composed a lengthy letter rebutting critics of his own poetry which Peter the Venerable’s versified in the lengthy *Defence of his monk Peter*. And when Peter the Venerable wanted the Koran and other Pseudo-Islamic material translated, he sent Peter of Poitiers to render the translation into suitable Latin.

From their extant works, therefore we have preliminary evidence for seeing a longstanding literary collaboration between the two Peters. When we look at the manuscripts containing their works, moreover, we see that the two men’s works

¹ Constable’s *Appendix Q*, LPV II, 331-343. In the almost fifty years since Giles Constable put to rest the many misidentifications and misattributions of Peter of Poitiers, nothing substantial has been added to our knowledge of this monk. His a succinct and exhaustive account of existing information on Peter of Poitiers and the starting point for all research on Peter of Poitiers. He renders irrelevant the earlier accounts of Jean Mabillon, of the highly speculative entry in the *Histoire Littéraire de la France*, and of Lecointre-Dupont’s article, which misidentify him with Peter of Pithiviers (a Cluniac prior, who was prior of Cluny and abbot of Saint Martial in Limoges from 1156 until his death in 1160) and attribute to him works belonging to the Parisian theologian, Peter of Poitiers (ca. 1130-1205), among others. Constable ends his account with a positive reference to an article by Ferreira about the *Chronica Adefonsi imperatoris* attributed to PP, but this has since been discounted.

are integrated even more deeply. Peter of Poitiers' works are only found alongside his abbot's. In part, the reason for this is that several of Peter of Poitiers' letters – though addressed to his abbot – are written as public dedications to Peter the Venerable's works: one introduces the letter collection and reveals that Peter of Poitiers was responsible for copying and maintaining his abbot letter register. A second introduces the *Liber contra Sarracenos* and notes that he, Peter of Poitiers, saw fit to make some alterations to Peter the Venerable's prose in order to "more as you had conceived it in your heart". And a third letter pledges to send on his poems he wrote as a youth in Peter the Venerable's honour, newly corrected. This last letter notes that he has copied these poems out alongside his abbot's verse compositions, at the outset of his letter collection. The works and organization it describes is the same order and contents of the sole surviving manuscript tradition of Peter the Venerable's *opera*. Thus, we can conclude that without Peter of Poitiers we would likely have lost ninety-percent of Peter the Venerable's writings.

For most of my talk today, though, I want to focus on the two poems exchanged by the Peters, since they grant us access to the beginning of their relationship. Peter of Poitiers' *Panegyric* is his earliest surviving work and from it we derive all our knowledge –albeit incomplete– of his early life and his relationship with his abbot.

From hints about in the *Panegyric*, we know that likely sometime in the late 1110s or early 1120s, Peter became a young monk at the Cluniac priory of Saint-Jean d'Angéley. When Peter the Venerable visited that Poitevin house in 1125, the monk Peter wrote a short verse panegyric praising his abbot and presented it to him in person. This poem (or a version of it) is the first 62 lines of a work that Peter of Poitiers would expand to over 500 lines in the next eight years. This first stage of the composition praises Peter the Venerable's noble birth, it lauds his ancestors (both his family and his abbatial forefathers), and it depicts him as unmatched in learning. To give you a sense of the hyperbole, I will quote a short passage:

In the keenness of mind, he is the equal of ancient masters
None will be his equal in our time
In prose he is a new Cicero, in verse a new Virgil
He debates like Aristotle or Socrates.

...

Scarcely was Jerome able to teach him anything,
Gregory did not surpass him one iota in clear and open speaking,
Nor does Ambrose outdo him in rhetoric.

It goes on like this for some time. The poem thus communicates the absolute sanctity and perfection of the abbot. Peter of Poitiers then injects himself into his

own poetry, setting the precedent for his later writings. He justifies his panegyric, saying,

An eager youth licitly recites praise for him
Because our praise properly becomes respect [*honor*] for him.

I should emphasize that Peter of Poitiers is referring to himself here when he cites the “eager youth” who hoped to increase public renown for his abbot. With this justification, he, first, represents himself as a legitimate poet, whose activities are justified by utility, and second, argues that his subject is worthy of additional public praise.

First, I will address this last point– that Peter the Venerable deserved more praise. Peter of Poitiers was writing this first panegyric section in 1125, a little more than two years after Peter the Venerable’s disputed election as abbot of Cluny, and a year after rumours of a former abbot Pontius’s return had begun to circulate in France. In hindsight, we know that there was good reason for Peter of Poitiers to worry about what was being said about Peter the Venerable, since the *ecclesia clunacensis* would be riven by factions for a decade after 1125 – first by the attempted coup by the Pontius of Melgueil and his supporters, and later by the papal schism of Anacletus and Innocent II.

Both of these forces of disorder are condemned in the additions to the panegyric made between 1126 and 1133 (lines 63-500). This second stage of composition thus builds up his abbot by attacking his enemies, invective being an expected part of Classical panegyric. It inveighs against those who threaten the unity of the *ecclesia clunacensis* under him. The Cluniac supporters of the anti-pope Anacletus II and of former abbot Pontius of Melgueil are condemned at length as devil-spawned heretics and schismatics. Pontius in particular is represented at length as a heartless and imperious two-faced, spawn of hell. This section ends with Peter the Venerable’s defeat of Pontius’ supporters in late 1126 as proof of his divinely mandated leadership. And we are left with an image of Cluny united under Peter the Venerable.²

This vehemence and cartoonishness of the invective, however, complements a newly softened portrait of Peter the Venerable. Gone is the untouchable genius. “Your voice is so much more, I see now, than how it sings” (l. 162), Peter of Poitiers writes, tempering his earlier unfettered praise of his abbot’s magisterial bearing. Instead he moves to what his abbot was like in private:

² Whether real or not, we see this representation of Pontius’ defeat repeated in subsequent Cluniac accounts, such as the *Vita Petri* written by Ralph of Sully between 1163 and 1173 and later in the fourteen-century *Chronicon cluniacense*. Peter of Poitiers’ account, therefore, becomes the official record in Cluniac public memory.

If, with stiffness put aside, words were being enjoyed
They would always come as a holy joke from a serious initiate
And the sweetness of the Father was not absent in the gravity of the monk
And the gravity of the monk was not without elegance.

In this softer portrait, Peter of Poitiers highlights especially the abbot's ability to use discretion, to forgive sinners and to reconcile with the schismatic. The poem thus changes the public representation of abbot Peter in order to deal with the new situation of the *ecclesia cluniacensis* of the 1130s. He is a leader, Peter of Poitiers claims, able to reconcile the disparate factions and restore unity.

The second motivation – I get to finally– underlying the *Panegyric* is Peter of Poitiers' attempt to make an appeal to his abbot. In the second redaction, Peter of Poitiers is no longer content to remain an anonymous "eager youth". Now he asks Peter the Venerable:

O Lightbearer, glittering with heavenly light on earth
Bring your pious hands, I ask, to take my text,
Receive the words of your poet with your typical piety
And read the insignificant verses of your littlest Peter.
O greatest Peter, it is I, Peter, your littlest monk,
Who offers these insignificant writings in praise of you. (l. 115-120)

This passage sets up a shift in the text. It stops addressing Cluniac monks and speaks directly Peter the Venerable. It reminisces about their first meeting –back in 1125– when Peter the Venerable had promised to take on the Poitevin monk as his disciple and take him away from Poitiers. I should note that Peter of Poitiers is far more the subject of this section than his abbot and the reader is made to experience Peter the Venerable through the eyes of his loving monk. The poem relates writes about how *he* –Peter of Poitiers– was so excited when he first heard rumours of his abbot's coming. He relates how, when he saw and heard his abbot for the first time, *he* was so awestruck and so overcome by his learning and comportsment. And so on. Peter of Poitiers thus simultaneously presents himself humbly as "the littlest Peter" (*minimus Petrus*) and also somewhat presumptuously as the only voice capable of mediating Peter's un-narratable³ presence. The close of this section bemoans the "years of tears", the silence of his beloved abbot and how his life is a "living death" without him. By addressing this

³ While your eloquence has been greatly praised by us
Who is able to repeat it with sufficient praise?
I heard it, I confess, but it is unnarrateable
I heard a tongue exceptional among leaders
Powerful sermon! I do not dare to write anything about you
Lest I weaken the pen so seriously that it break the work. (l. 149-154)

portrait to Peter, moreover, he asks the abbot Peter which he misses so much, to experience his feeling of loss.⁴ There is thus a not so subtle emotional rhetoric used here.

As a close to this part of the poem, Peter of Poitiers promises an eternal oath:

I pledge to surrender myself to you in perpetual servitude:
I wish always to have you as father under Christ
Render Peter to Peter, the littlest to the greatest, highest Peter
Thusly Peter might be your very own pious key-bearer.

With this oath, the reader is asked to view the poem as the expression of a pact. The oath is not just the obedience of a monk to his abbot, but an act of a poet promising always to praise and support his patron. The poem thus performs not just as a gift to Peter the Venerable, but a gift requiring reciprocation (i.e. Peter of Poitiers release from Saint-Jean d'Angély). And Peter of Poitiers has really shown himself committed to Peter the Venerable because he writes and disseminates this poem before 1133, when he is still a monk in Saint-Jean d'Angély in a house he so strongly condemns for its support of Anacletus II.

A letter written by Peter of Poitiers to his abbot dating to the early 1140s acknowledges that Peter the Venerable's return to Poitiers in 1133 did in fact mark the entrance of this monk into his service. His freeing of Peter of Poitiers thus, is our first evidence of what would be a lifetime of mutual support for his monk. This support, is later made particularly explicit in Peter the Venerable's poem *In defence of his monk Peter*, which I do not really have time to discuss in detail.

What I will note about the poem, however, is it defends Peter of Poitiers' *Panegyric* against what seems like considerable criticism for its poor metre and its interweaving of self-promotion with praise of his abbot. Peter the Venerable characterizes the critic as an embodiment of Envy who wants "to gnaw on this sacred song".⁵ She spits poison and pollutes ears with her criticism; she is criminal, demented, barbaric and demonic. She is depicted in terms similar to

⁴ The poem, therefore, addresses and seeks to influence Peter, not unlike a letter requesting a favour. But does so in a much more elegant manner. And in a manner which makes it suitable to circulate generally among Cluniac monks.

⁵ Prefaced with a couplet, likely by PP: "The duke speaks for his poet, skewering savage (*rabidam*) envy (*invidiam*). Addresses, "greedy envy", envy (p2, *livoris*); Envy judges Jerome guilty gnawing on "a sacred song"; gnaw at with your sharp teeth (p. 5), "my jackal" (*cani*, p. 5) You consider your actions a public service, you say.

Polluting a pure stream, Vomiting poison, polluting our ears; venom and envy (p. 4)

Criminal (*scelus*, *sclerata voluntas*)

Barbarian: demented (*demens*),

Hellish: mind in the Stygian depths, shade of Tartarus, from the Underworld

how Peter of Poitiers described the supporters of Anacletus and Pontius. [As a side note, I do want to mention that this is Peter the Venerable's first stab at the kind of polemic discourse he would later direct against outsiders (heretics, Jews and Muslims) – a precedent which needs to be explored further]. Paralleling the *Panegyric* of Peter of Poitiers, this invective is complemented by praise for Peter of Poitiers as the greatest poet of his age. The abbot Peter, thus repays his monk's support by defending his verse.

The reason for this defence is, I believe, both his relationship with Peter of Poitiers, and that their two identities had become linked through the Panegyric, as becomes clear by the end of the *poem*. According to Peter the Venerable, "Envy" claimed that Peter of Poitiers was not only guilty of false metre (creating disharmony in the verse), but was also guilty of falsehoods (disharmony in content). Peter of Poitiers was a proxy target. The criticisms against his monk impute the abbot's failings. So – in defending his monk, the abbot defends himself. He defends the literary representation of his own greatness circulating in Peter of Poitiers' poem. And, mirroring the second section of the *Panegyricus*, where Peter of Poitiers depicts his abbot as a peacekeeper against the supporters of Anacletus II, Peter the Venerable repeats this representation, saying to his unidentified critic that he comes to make peace, not to fight further. He thus uses his defence of his monk to make his own identical claim to a public persona.

Peter the Venerable closes his poem with a telling reference, ostensibly, to Cicero's *De republica*.⁶ He comments, "The republic, [Cicero] said, rests on a leader standing firm on his own. And it also falls with his fall." With praise, Peter the Venerable continues to explain, more men are attracted to the leader, and thereby "the republic fears no collapse". This is the ultimate purpose (or *utilitas*) of this literary debate: to defend the praise of Peter the Venerable so that their republic does not collapse.

And thus we get to the core of the relationship of Peter of Poitiers and Peter the Venerable – they are united in their drive to write their way to Cluniac harmony. And harmony demands a little self-promotion.

⁶ justifying Ambrose's praise of Theodosius and Valentinian