

WRITING ROMAN WIT:  
ROMAN HUMOR IN THE LETTERS OF GERBERT OF AURILLAC AND  
FULBERT OF CHARTRES

Courtney DeMayo

In early 990, Gerbert of Aurillac, former *magister* of the cathedral school at Reims, wrote a letter to his former student Romulf of Sens in which he stated that “nothing in human affairs is preferable to a knowledge of the most distinguished men, which, assuredly, is unfolded in the numerous volumes of their work.”<sup>1</sup> For Gerbert and his contemporaries, a knowledge of classical literature and the ability to incorporate that literature into one’s own written works was of the utmost importance. This knowledge was imparted through the study of classical literature in cathedral schools, and the later application of this knowledge demonstrated the shared social rank of writer and reader. Indeed, the variety and frequency with which Gerbert of Aurillac and his most famous student, Fulbert of Chartres, reference classical texts demonstrates the importance of mastering classical sources to tenth- and eleventh-century correspondence. Within that body of literature, classical satires and some comedies figure prominently.

Gerbert’s and Fulbert’s letter collections feature repeated references to Roman satires and comedies taught in the cathedral school at Reims. Both men’s letter collections contain a multitude of references to Horace and Terence, while the satirists Persius and Juvenal appear less frequently. The references to Horace, Terence, Juvenal, and Persius served multiple purposes in these letters: they were an important method for demonstrating social rank while adding the weight and authority of ancient authors’ words to an individual letter; they signified the common status of reader and author through shared language and mutual recognition of the classical references; and they provided a model for the proper and various ways an author could use ancient sources within his letters. Gerbert’s and Fulbert’s letter collections reveal the importance of references to classical works.

My analysis of references to classical satires and comedies contained in the letters of Gerbert and Fulbert is based on the various editions and translations of both letter collections. Gerbert’s letter collection is transmitted in two different manuscripts composed of roughly

---

<sup>1</sup> “Nihil enim nobis antiquius in humanis rebus clarissimorum hominum scientia, quae utique multiplicibus librorum voluminibus explicatur.” Gerbert of Aurillac, *The Letters of Gerbert With His Papal Privileges as Pope Sylvester II*, trans. Harriet Pratt Lattin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), *ep.* 175. For the Latin text, see Gerbert of Aurillac, *Lettres de Gerbert (983-997)*, ed. Julien Havet (Paris: Picard, 1889), *ep.* 167.

contemporary copies of the letters, though none of the originals survive. Modern scholars have created multiple critical editions and translated versions of Gerbert's letters based on a combination of these two manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> Like Gerbert, Fulbert kept copies of the letters he both sent and received, and like Gerbert, he does not appear to have edited the collection himself. Unlike Gerbert's letters, Fulbert's letters seem to have circulated more widely, as they survive in a number of English and French libraries, as well as the Vatican archives and Leiden, but none of the surviving manuscripts related to Fulbert's correspondence contains a complete register of the letters.<sup>3</sup> Frederick Behrends, the modern editor and translator of Fulbert's letters, provides both a Latin transcription and an English translation of the text, thus allowing for an efficient checking of the translation. The various editors and translators of Gerbert's and Fulbert's letter collections have meticulously identified the classical references contained in both collections, but neither Frederick Behrends, in the case of Fulbert's letters, nor Julien Havet, Nicholas Bubnov, Harriet Pratt Latin, nor Pierre Riché and J.P. Callu, in the case of Gerbert's letters, have analyzed the purpose of those classical references within the collections as a whole or within the individual documents.

Historians and literary scholars have focused a good deal of attention on medieval readers and interpreters of ancient literature. The common link between much of this literature is that it focuses on the construction of commentaries on the ancient texts, and some of this work connects to the analysis of Roman satires in Gerbert's and Fulbert's letter collections. James Zetzel, especially, has contributed to our understanding of the transmission of ancient texts and the medieval readers who interpreted them. Zetzel's work regarding ninth- and tenth-century exegesis on the work of Persius, for example, analyzes the textual history of the *Commentum Cornuti*, a text compiled in the ninth century that survives in four medieval manuscripts, one of which was copied at Reims in the tenth

---

<sup>2</sup> For this project, I compared several different editions of Gerbert's letters. My Latin citations employ the 1889 edition by Julien Havet (unless otherwise indicated) and my English citations are based on the 1961 translation by Harriet Pratt Latin cited above. I have chosen the Havet edition as the primary Latin transcription because his work is cited by all subsequent editors of the collection, and in all cases, Havet's transcription of the original Latin text was cross-checked against the 1993 Riché and Callu edition of the text, but no substantial discrepancies were found.

<sup>3</sup> Fulbert of Chartres, *The Letters and Poems of Fulbert of Chartres*, ed. and trans. Frederick Behrends (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), xxxviii-xxxix.

century.<sup>4</sup> The compilation of an extended commentary on Persius based on both ancient and early medieval sources, and the presence of a copy of that commentary at Reims, presents an interesting quandary for the study at hand: Gerbert's former student Richer clearly states that Gerbert taught Persius in his curriculum on rhetoric, indicating Gerbert's familiarity with it and Fulbert's knowledge of it, since Fulbert was one of Gerbert's students. But neither Gerbert nor Fulbert wrote extended commentaries on Roman humor; rather, they integrated Roman wit into their own writings. This method is more consistent with but chronologically before the subject of Bernhard Bischoff's excellent study, "Living with the Satirists," which focuses on the "process of assimilation from some commentaries on the satirists taken from the late eleventh and the first half of the twelfth century."<sup>5</sup> Bischoff's exposition of several of the lesser-known commentaries on Persius, Juvenal, and Horace demonstrates a consistent tendency among medieval writers to use contemporary comparisons, interpret the authors as moralists, and in Bischoff's own words, present antiquity "in the costumes of one's own days."<sup>6</sup> This interpretation of the ancients, and the assimilation of ancient literature into contemporary circumstances, is consistent with the use of Roman satires in Gerbert's and Fulbert's letters.

In the case of Gerbert and Fulbert, both men incorporate references to Roman wit, taught in the cathedral schools, into their own writings. Gerbert incorporated those texts he taught at Reims; Fulbert incorporated those he learned at Reims and later taught at Chartres. Gerbert and Fulbert's use of Roman humor in their surviving letters is consistent with the moralizing tendency and the presentation of antiquity in a contemporary context, but rather than write extended commentaries for educational or explanatory purposes, the two men incorporate these works into their own letters to lend additional weight to whatever purpose the individual letter serves. Their use of Roman humor, especially Horace's and Juvenal's satires and Terence's plays, served a pedagogical purpose consistent with both writers' emphasis on education and their backgrounds as educators. Giles Constable poignantly observed that "the act of

---

<sup>4</sup>James E. G. Zetzel, *Marginal Scholarship and Textual Deviance: The Commentum Cornuti and the Early Scholia on Persius* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2005), 10-11.

<sup>5</sup>Bernhard Bischoff, "Living with the Satirists," *Mittelalterliche Studien: Ausgewählte Aufsätze zur Schriftkunde und Literaturgeschichte* 3 (1981): 262.

<sup>6</sup>Bischoff, "Living with the Satirists," 266.

collecting was . . . in many ways as important as the act of writing letters,”<sup>7</sup> indicating that writing, collecting, and editing letter collections were deliberate acts reflecting the choices of the writer, editor, and compiler, as well as their understanding of the texts’ significance, context, and meaning. These acts, and the choices they indicate, transformed the letters into public documents serving any of several purposes: a pedagogical purpose as models for letter writing and evidence of how medieval thinkers and writers understood classical literature, a moralizing purpose as examples of proper religious belief and practice, or a political purpose as they promote a particular political worldview. Gerbert’s and Fulbert’s letters, in particular, stand out as models for letter writing, as windows into both men’s understanding of Roman texts and Roman humor, and as evidence of the common intellectual culture of tenth- and eleventh-century West Francia.

The common intellectual culture of tenth- and eleventh-century West Francia was created and maintained by the network of cathedral and monastic schools that flourished in the period, many of which followed a similar curriculum. Particularly within cathedral schools, the study of Roman literature formed the basis for instruction in the arts of the *trivium*. The study of Horace, Juvenal, Statius, Terence, and Persius at Reims, for example, is directly mentioned by Gerbert’s former student Richer.<sup>8</sup> A similar curriculum was followed at Liège and Chartres but includes Plautus in the list of authors, though Plautus is absent from the curriculum at Reims.<sup>9</sup> The significant point in this discussion is that the clerics with whom Gerbert and Fulbert exchanged letters belonged to a common intellectual culture and had studied the same body of Roman literature. Likewise, subsequent readers of the letter collections were well-acquainted with the same classical texts and would have recognized the references contained therein. This recognition is significant to the reception and the purpose of Gerbert’s and Fulbert’s letters; the authors assume their readers would recognize and identify their references to Roman humor, and the

---

<sup>7</sup> Peter the Venerable, *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, ed. and trans. Giles Constable, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Richer of Saint-Rémi, *Histories*, ed. and trans. Justin Lake, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), III.47.

<sup>9</sup>At Chartres, the same body of literature was available for study, as most of these works were present in the cathedral library. A copy of Plautus was at the Abbey of Bobbio in the seventh century and Gerbert may have encountered that manuscript during his brief tenure as the abbot of Bobbio, but we have no clear evidence that he did. See also L. D. Reynolds, ed., *Texts and Transmission: A Survey of the Latin Classics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 303.

later collectors and editors of the collections would likewise assume their audiences would recognize the integration of Roman wit into both the individual letters and the collections as a whole.

The classical references and the references to Roman humor contained in Gerbert's and Fulbert's letters are clear reflections of the cathedral school education provided in Francia. Within Gerbert's more than two hundred letters, Lattin has identified no fewer than sixty individual references to works of classical literature. These references are to works by Roman authors such as Terence, Horace, Virgil, Cicero, Quintilian, Sallust, and Seneca. Of these sixty references to classical works, twenty-five refer to works of Roman comedy or to manuals of rhetoric that discuss humor. Eight citations are references to Terence, seven refer to Horace, seven cite Cicero's works that discuss humor and wit, and three make reference to Quintilian. Gerbert discusses Statius's *Achilleidos* twice—once when he requests the text from Remi of Trier and again when he chastises Remi for failing to complete the task—but he does not quote or paraphrase the work.<sup>10</sup> References to Terence's works in Gerbert's letters included *Hecyra*, *Phormio*, *Andria*, and *Heauton Timorumenos*.<sup>11</sup> The works of Horace that Gerbert cites include the *Epistolae*, *Ars Poetica*, and *Odae*.<sup>12</sup> Gerbert's letters do not, however, contain any direct references to the satires of Juvenal or Persius. Within Fulbert's one hundred thirty-one letters and multiple poems, Frederick Behrends has identified frequent classical references, but they only appear in approximately thirty individual letters. The citations Behrends has identified include seventeen references to Terence, six to Horace, one to Cicero, and one to Juvenal. Fulbert's letters, like Gerbert's, do not contain any reference to Statius. Fulbert's letters include references to *Adelphoe*,

---

<sup>10</sup> Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert*, *opp.* 142 and 156.

<sup>11</sup> *Hecyra* is cited in Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert*, *ep.* 21, and Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, *ep.* 14; *Phormio* in Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert*, *ep.* 45, and Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, *ep.* 37; *Andria* in Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert*, *opp.* 61, 182, 216, and Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, *opp.* 56, 173, 203; *Heauton Timorumenos* in Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert opp.* 92 and 136, and Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, *opp.* 86 and 127.

<sup>12</sup> *Epistolae* is cited in Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert*, *opp.* 7 and 204, Gerbert of Aurillac, *Opera mathematica (972-1003): Accedunt aliorum opera ad Gerberti libellos aestimandos intelligendosque necessaria per septum appendices distributa*, ed. Nikolai Bubnov (Hildesheim: George Olms Verlagsbuch-handlung, 1963), 23-24, and Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, *ep.* 191; *Ars Poetica* in Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert*, *ep.* 82, and Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, *ep.* 75; *Odae* in Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert* in *opp.* 23, 61, 94, and 117, and Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, *opp.* 16, 55, 88, and 189.

*Andria*, *Eunuchus*, *Heauton Timorumenos*, *Hecyra*, and *Phormio*.<sup>13</sup> Fulbert's letters include references to *Ars Poetica*, *Carmina*, *Epistolae*, and *Satirae*.<sup>14</sup> Fulbert's letters also provide a reference to Juvenal's *Satirae* and Persius' *Saturae*, though the reference to Persius may also be a reference to Horace, and is discussed below.<sup>15</sup>

While the knowledge of classical literature is hardly surprising, the methods by and frequency with which Gerbert and Fulbert employ references to works of Roman humor, and especially satires, demonstrate both the utility and necessity of studying these works in West Frankish cathedral schools. The most basic purpose of such paraphrases is to highlight the erudition of the author to the recipient and therefore demonstrate the social rank of the writer. In the context of the cathedral school culture of the late tenth century, however, such allusions also demonstrate the shared intellectual culture of the writer and receiver of such letters. Some such references are only a few words, indicating that even the most brief and cryptic of citations would be understood and recognized by the recipient. By integrating classical references into the text of his letters, Gerbert draws upon his breadth of knowledge to demonstrate his erudition. At the same time, such references give his words additional *gravitas*, for they connect his ideas, concepts, and phrasings with the exalted wisdom of ancient writers, men whose literary style must be emulated and imitated.

The citations of Horace's writings in the letters of Fulbert and Gerbert reveal that the Roman poet's *Satirae* functioned mostly as a school text in terms of both form and content, rather than being incorporated into learned discourse. Of Gerbert's seven references to Horace, not one includes a citation of the *Satirae*. Similarly, Fulbert's letters include six references to Horace, but only one of those citations is of the *Satirae*. This reference is included in a letter to Fulbert's friend and confidant, Hildegard, whom Fulbert begs to "stick to your purpose,"<sup>16</sup> a variation on Horace's

---

<sup>13</sup> *Adelphoe* is cited in Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, *ep.* 22, 25, 29, 91, 98; *Andria* is cited in Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, *ep.* 94 and 116; *Eunuchus* is cited in Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, *ep.* 11, 65, and 115; *Heauton Timorumenos* is cited in Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, *ep.* 43 and 69; *Hecyra* is cited in Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, *ep.* 12; *Phormio* is cited in Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, *ep.* 22, 25, 34, and 114.

<sup>14</sup> *Ars Poetica* is cited in Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, *ep.* 59; *Carmina* is cited in Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, *ep.* 105; *Epistolae* is cited in Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, *ep.* 49, 75, 115; and *Satirae* is cited in Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, *ep.* 108.

<sup>15</sup> Juvenal's *Satirae* is cited in Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, *ep.* 149; Persius' *Saturae* is cited in Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, *ep.* 75.

<sup>16</sup> "Precor ergo ut propositum urgeas..." Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, *ep.* 108.

phrase “et urget propositum,” which is spoken by Davus, who says, “Some men persist in their love of vice and stick to their purpose.”<sup>17</sup> This is a reference to Horace’s second book of satires, in particular the seventh satire, in which Horace pokes fun at himself, but in this context Fulbert’s letter is not similarly self-effacing. Rather, Fulbert adapts Horace’s self-mockery to encourage constancy in his correspondent that alters the original meaning of the quotation, in which Horace is critical of those who do *not* see the error of their ways. Fulbert’s use of Horace, in this case, encourages the behavior Horace is expressly criticizing.

Although Gerbert does not reference Horace’s satires, and Fulbert does only once, both men make frequent references to Horace’s other works, implying a working knowledge of the Roman poet, satirist, and humorist. Both men reference Horace’s *Epistolae*, a text that is in many ways a continuation of Horace’s *Satirae*; Fulbert’s letters contain more frequent citations, but both letter collections indicate more than a passing familiarity with this work. Gerbert references Horace’s *Epistolae* in two letters. The first, a letter to Gerbert’s former student Constantine of Fleury, expressly references Horace’s *Epistolae* II.1 to remind Constantine of Gerbert’s prowess with the abacus while denigrating the work of one of Gerbert’s contemporaries and rivals, Abbo of Fleury.<sup>18</sup> In the letter Gerbert writes, “Although really still a learner along with me, he [Abbo] pretends that only he has knowledge of it, as Horace says,”<sup>19</sup> which is a close rendering of Horace’s *Epistolae*, in which Horace writes, “and [whoever] would alone seem to understand what he knows as little as I do.”<sup>20</sup> Gerbert’s use of Horace in this context is deliberate on many levels: Gerbert is using Horace’s text literally to demonstrate his own knowledge of ancient literature and to add weight to his criticism of Abbo of Fleury. Gerbert’s letter also mirrors Horace’s tone in the text: just as Horace adopts the role of teacher in *Epistolae* II, Gerbert is reinforcing his role as Constantine’s former teacher.

Gerbert’s second reference to Horace’s *Epistolae* draws upon book I.18, in which Horace writes, “‘Tis your own safety that is at stake, when

---

<sup>17</sup> Horace, *Satires*, trans. H. R. Fairclough (Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1966), II.7.6.

<sup>18</sup> This letter is one of the few that were not included in the Havet edition of Gerbert’s letters. The Latin text of this letter was edited by Nikolaï Bubnov.

<sup>19</sup> “vult tamen videri solus scire quot mecum ignorat, ut ait Flaccus...” Gerbert of Aurillac, *Opera mathematica*, 6-8; Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert*, ep. 6.

<sup>20</sup> “illud, quod mecum ignorat, solus vult scire videri.” Horace, *Epistles*, trans. H. R. Fairclough (Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1966), II.1.87.

your neighbor's wall is in flames, and fires neglected are want to gather strength."<sup>21</sup> Gerbert's interpretation of this passage is contained in another letter to Constantine of Fleury, when Gerbert again complains of the actions of Abbo of Fleury. Gerbert's statement that "true is the proverb: 'Your affair is in peril when the nearest wall burns'"<sup>22</sup> is intended as an ominous warning of the potential results of Abbo's campaign against Gerbert's election as Archbishop of Reims. Gerbert's use of Horace in this letter is quite similar in intent and content as his previous reference to the *Epistolae*; Gerbert draws upon Horace's *gravitas* as an ancient and revered author to emphasize the potential peril Gerbert faces at the hands of his political rival, and in doing so he maintains the moralizing and advisory tone adopted by Horace in the original text. Finally, Gerbert's statement immediately before his reference to Horace, that "greater is his [Abbo's] complaint and what he seeks than I who am humble and of little account,"<sup>23</sup> emphasizes the inequality of the two participants in this dispute, just as Horace's *Epistolae* I.18 centers on the unequal relationship between patrons and clients.

Fulbert first uses Horace's *Epistolae* in a letter to Abbot Odilo of Cluny in which Fulbert writes, "So it behooves you in turn, father, to help me by your holy prayers, your little servant who depends on you and looks to you with full confidence,"<sup>24</sup> a reference to *Epistolae* I.1 in which Horace writes of that "friend who hangs upon you and looks to you in all."<sup>25</sup> In this letter, Fulbert uses the reference to Horace as part of an extended plea to Odilo for advice, a request consistent with the general advisory tone of Horace's *Epistolae*, but slightly out of step with the specific text Fulbert references, which is the introductory epistle and claims to explain why Horace has given up writing lyric poetry and has chosen to embrace philosophy instead. Horace intends this epistle as an explanation of his philosophical position, which is not aligned with any one particular school of philosophy. Part of this explanation is an exposition of the value of wisdom and virtue, values to which Fulbert appeals in his plea for Odilo's advice. In this case, Fulbert uses Horace's words to demonstrate his

---

<sup>21</sup> "nam tua res agitur, paries cum proximus ardet, et neglecta solent incendia sumere vires." Horace, *Epistolae*, I.18.84.

<sup>22</sup> Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert*, ep. 204; "Verumque proverbium est: 'Tua res agitur, paries cum proximus ardet,'" Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, ep. 191.

<sup>23</sup> Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert*, ep. 204; "Majus est quod queritur, et quod appetitur, quam ego humilis et parvus," Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, ep. 191.

<sup>24</sup> "Decet itaque, pater, ut tu quoque uicissim me tuum seruulum de te pendentem, teque non sine magna fiducia respectantem." Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, ep. 49.

<sup>25</sup> "de te pendentis, te respicientis amici." Horace, *Epistolae*, I.1.105.



consistency with some of Horace's sentiments, but differs from Horace in intent.

The second and third references to Horace's *Epistolae* are similar in their push for following a middle path or embracing wise indifference to contemporary events. One of these references, in a letter to Gauzlin of Bourges, is likely a dual reference to both Horace and Persius, as Fulbert uses the term *bestius* as part of his condemnation of an abbot facing trial for immorality. In a letter to Gauzlin of Bourges, Fulbert discusses the case of Abbot Tetfridus of Benneval. In the letter, Fulbert refers to Tetfridus using the word *bestius*, which may be a reference to Bestius from Persius' sixth satire or Horace's *Epistolae*, or quite possibly both.<sup>26</sup> In both Persius's work and Horace's letters, Bestius is a frequent critic of extravagance, and this context would make sense, as Fulbert criticizes Tetfridus for the unreasonable demands he levies on other clerics. Horace's *Epistolae* provides a rather scathing condemnation of Maenius while admitting that he (Horace) is like Maenius:

This fellow, whenever he got little or nothing from those who applauded or feared his wicked wit, would sup on plates of tripe and cheap lamb, enough to satisfy three bears, so as actually to proclaim that prodigals should have their bellies branded with a white hot iron – he, a Bestius reformed!<sup>27</sup>

Horace's and Persius' presentations of Bestius are consistent in tone and purpose, which is not surprising considering that Persius modeled his sixth satire on Horace and Lucilius.<sup>28</sup> Persius mirrors some of Horace's language, especially the phrase "maris expers," though Persius uses it in a different context than does Horace. Persius writes, "And then Bestius has his fling at the Greek philosophers: 'It's always so; ever since this emasculated wisdom of ours entered into the city with dates and pepper, our haymakers have spoilt their porridge with thick oils!'"<sup>29</sup> This passage is a condemnation of Bestius as a critic of all things new, a man who

---

<sup>26</sup> Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, ep. 75.

<sup>27</sup> hic ubi nequitiae fautoribus et timidis nil  
aut paulum abstulerat, patinas cenabat omasi,  
vilis et agninae, tribus ursis quod satis esset;  
scilicet ut ventres lamna candente nepotum  
diceret urendos correctus Bestius. (Horace, *Epistolae*, 1.15.33-37)

<sup>28</sup> Susan H. Braund, *Roman Verse Satire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 35.

<sup>29</sup> "et Bestius arguet doctores Graios: 'ita fit; postquam sapere urbi cum pipere et palmis venit nostrum hoc maris expers, faeniscae crasso vitiarunt unguine pultes.'" Persius, *Saturae*, trans. G. G. Ramsay (Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1979), VI.37-40.

blames the Greeks for all the evils of the day by importing their philosophy into Rome along with their foods. In Fulbert's letter, he uses the term *bestius* not as a substitution for an individual's name but rather as a double meaning: he is literally using the term to describe someone who makes unreasonable demands ("*iudicium bestius*"), while connecting his own condemnation to the writings of Persius and Horace through the use of a term that would, almost certainly, have reminded his readers of the character from Horace's *Epistolae* and Persius's satires.

The last reference to Horace in Fulbert's letter collection was written to Fulbert rather than by him. This letter, from Fulbert's disciple Hildegard (likely the man who edited Fulbert's letter collection), follows Horace's language verbatim when he writes, "Call the wise man mad, the just unjust / If even for virtue's self he strives unduly",<sup>30</sup> Horace's sixth epistle states, "Let the wise man bear the name of madman, the just of unjust, should he pursue Virtue herself beyond due bounds."<sup>31</sup> In this letter, Hildegard stays very close to Horace's *Epistolae*, both in the literal language that Hildegard uses, and also in the general tone and content of the letter. Hildegard's letter is advisory, a warning regarding the perils of Fulbert's position against the elevation of Henry as co-king of the Western Franks. Just as Horace's epistle advises Numicius to practice wise indifference, Hildegard advises Fulbert to do the same. Hildegard believes that rather than choosing sides in a disagreement between the queen and king of the Franks over the succession, Fulbert should allow such affairs to proceed without his intervention, demonstrating wise indifference to contemporary events; once the king presents his successor to the bishops, Fulbert and his peers should act only to confirm the king's selection.

Both Gerbert and Fulbert also reference Horace's *Ars Poetica*, a poem-letter providing instruction for poets that some historians and literary scholars believe belongs with the *Epistolae*.<sup>32</sup> Both Gerbert's and Fulbert's references to this work come from Horace's discussions of tragedy rather than comedy and are integrated into letters with a somber tone, in both cases reflecting the original intent of the classical text. In Gerbert's case, the *Ars Poetica* is integrated into the epitaph of King

---

<sup>30</sup> "Insani nomen sanus feret, aequus iniqui, ultra quam satis est uirtutem si petat ipsam." Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, ep. 115.

<sup>31</sup> "insani sapiens nomen ferat, aequus iniqui, ultra quam satis est Virtutem si petat ipsam." Horace, *Epistolae*, 1.6.15.

<sup>32</sup> Gian Biagio Conte, *Latin Literature: A History*, trans. Joseph B. Solodow (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 296.

Lothair,<sup>33</sup> for Fulbert, into a letter to King Robert the Pious informing the king of Fulbert's declining health.<sup>34</sup> In the case of Gerbert's epitaph, he uses Horace's reference to seeing the king dressed in royal purple to describe the king's appearance at his funeral. Richer's account of the funeral reiterates Gerbert's, and likewise contains another reference to Horace's *Ars Poetica*, as he explains, "the body was dressed in a linen shroud and covered with purple cloth adorned with gems and interwoven with gold."<sup>35</sup> In the *Ars Poetica*, Horace writes of seeing one "whom we have just beheld in royal gold and purple."<sup>36</sup> In all three sources, Gerbert's epitaph, Richer's history, and Horace's *Ars Poetica*, the authors emphasize the rank of the person described, even in death, through the imagery of his royal robes. In the case of Fulbert's letter, the bishop writes to King Robert to inform him of the troubles plaguing the diocese. Fulbert writes, "Beset by these and other difficulties, which the law of propriety forbids me to recount,"<sup>37</sup> referencing Horace's phrase "the laws of your task."<sup>38</sup> Fulbert's reference takes considerably more creative license than Gerbert's: Fulbert uses language reminiscent of Horace's work, but changes both the context and meaning. Horace's passage is a discussion of whether or not an author should or can follow tradition; Fulbert's is a statement bemoaning his diocese's poor treatment at the hands of the king's enemies. Therefore, although Horace's *Ars Poetica* deals with both tragic and comedic content, both Gerbert and Fulbert choose tragic materials to incorporate into their correspondence, preserving the original intent of the text they paraphrased, just as they did with comedic works. This reflects the erudition of both authors, as they were familiar enough with Horace's work to choose those sections that best fit the linguistic construction of the particular letters, and that best fit the intent of those letters.

The references to Horace contained in Gerbert's and Fulbert's letter collections imply several points about these two medieval scholars' understanding of Horace. First, both men seem to consider Horace's *Satires* primarily a school text; neither referenced the work in the letters

---

<sup>33</sup> Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert*, ep. 82, and Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, ep. 75.

<sup>34</sup> Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, ep. 59.

<sup>35</sup> "Fit ei lectus regalibus insignibus adornatus. Corpus bissina veste induitur ac, desuper palla purpurea gemmis ornata auroque intexta operitur." Richer, *Histories*, III.110.

<sup>36</sup> "regali conspectus in auro nuper et ostro." Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 228.

<sup>37</sup> "His itaque et pluribus aliis difficultatibus circumuentus, quas uel pudoris lex uel breuitatis enumerare uetat." Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, ep. 59.

<sup>38</sup> "pudor vetet aut operis lex." Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 135.

they either write or receive, indicating that while Horace's *Satires* were studied in West Frankish schools, they may not have been considered appropriate for wider use outside the school environment. Additionally, in their use of Horace's *Epistolae*, both Fulbert and Gerbert are consistent; they follow Horace's moralizing tone and stay close to the original language and meaning of Horace's work. Fulbert takes more creative license with his use of Horace's *Epistolae*, but both men are consistent in their use of the documents: Gerbert uses Horace to help condemn his fellow cleric and rival, Abbo of Fleury, on two separate occasions; Fulbert writes and reads Horace within the letters as a means of encouraging the reader to follow what Horace would call a "path of wise indifference."

It is possible that Juvenal and Persius served more as literary models than as sources of content for Gerbert and Fulbert. Gerbert's letters provide no references to Juvenal's *Satires* or to Persius's *Satires*, though Richer does state that both satires were required reading in Gerbert's pedagogy on grammar and rhetoric. This omission implies that Gerbert considered both authors, Juvenal and Persius, school texts. Fulbert's letters include only two potential references to Juvenal and Persius. Fulbert's writings provide one reference to Juvenal, whose work is cited in Fulbert's poem "The Joy of Peace." This poem contains a citation of satire 10.22, in which Fulbert writes, "before the highwayman's very eyes the unarmed traveler sings aloud."<sup>39</sup> This is an allusion to Juvenal's statement in Satire 10 (*The Vanity of Human Wishes*) that "the empty handed traveler will whistle in the robber's face."<sup>40</sup> Fulbert, like Juvenal, presents a comical example of the peace of mind and carefree nature enjoyed by an impoverished traveler. Without worldly possessions, the traveler can lose nothing to the thief. Thus, the highway robber has failed in his illegal escapades, while the traveler is no worse off than before their encounter. Fulbert's main purpose in this poem is not to advocate or promote a life of poverty, but rather to exalt inner peace. Fulbert writes, "Peace brings riches to the lowly and despoils the mighty."<sup>41</sup> The image of a poor traveler singing before a dangerous highwayman is amusing, and evidence of Fulbert's erudition and mastery of Juvenal's satirical repertoire. In this case, the citation of Juvenal's witty image of an impoverished traveler provides a reference point in ancient literature that supports Fulbert's main contention.

---

<sup>39</sup> "Predo manum cohibet furcae memor, et latrone coram / Inermis alte precinit uiator." Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, ep. 149.

<sup>40</sup> "cantabit vacuus coram latrone viator." Juvenal, *Saturae*, trans. G. G. Ramsay (Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1979), 10.22.

<sup>41</sup> "Pax ditat imos, pauperat superbos." Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, ep. 149.

Perhaps most notable in the myriad of Roman comedic writers at their intellectual disposal, Gerbert's and Fulbert's mastery of the works of Terence's plays reveals the extent to which comedic writings could be incorporated into learned correspondence, and both men were likely familiar with commentaries on Terence in addition to the playwright's works. The library list on folio 61v of Munich MS 14436 includes a text entitled *Commentum Eugraphii super Terentium*, or *Eugraphius' Commentary on Terence*, which was probably also available in Reims or Chartres, though neither Gerbert nor Fulbert makes direct reference to it. Both men allude to a variety of Terence's works, including his *Hecyra*, *Phormio*, *Andria*, *Adelphoe*, *Eunuchus*, and *Heauton Timorumenos*. All of these works are classified as comedic writings, and Gerbert and Fulbert reference them a total of twenty-three times in their letter collections. Gerbert's references to Terence's work intersperse paraphrases of the text with direct quotations. The variation in reference style appears dependent on the context within the letter: when direct quotations serve the author's purpose more clearly, he quotes the texts directly. These quotations often deviate from the actual, letter-by-letter, written text, implying that some of them may have come from memory. In other cases, Gerbert opts to paraphrase the texts, as this form of citation enables him to alter the text to better meet his purpose in the letter. Fulbert, on the other hand, generally stays as close to the original text as possible, retaining both the tone and meaning of Terence's passage.

Gerbert is particularly fond of recreating the sense of Terence's words and mimicking his language without quoting Terence verbatim. For example, Gerbert opens a letter to Pope John XIV with a reference to Terence: "Whither shall I turn?"<sup>42</sup> This may be a reference to Terence's *Hecyra*, in which Myrrina says "Oh dear, dear, what am I to do, which way to turn?"<sup>43</sup> Here, Gerbert uses a passage from Terence to demonstrate his sense of desperation, thus using Roman humor in serious situations while still poking a little bit of fun at himself. Similarly, Gerbert uses the passage from Terence to demonstrate his loyalty to the Emperor Otto III, as he asks a member of the German palace "whether I shall remain in France as a reserve soldier for the camp of Caesar."<sup>44</sup> This is likely a reference to

---

<sup>42</sup> Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert*, ep. 21. "Quo me vertam..." Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, ep. 14.

<sup>43</sup> "Perii, quid agam? Quo me vortam?" Terence, *Hecyra*, trans. John Sargeant (Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1964-1965), IV.i.1.

<sup>44</sup> Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, ep. 45; "an in Frantia velut miles succenturiatus pro castris Caesaris remaneam..." Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, ep. 37.

Terence's words from the *Phormio*, as at the end of Act I, Geta says "I shall lie in ambush here as a reserve force."<sup>45</sup> Perhaps the most amusing of Gerbert's paraphrases of Terence occurs in a letter to Constantine of Fleury, in which Gerbert writes, "May he who has thought you the filth in our nostrils feel that it was said of himself."<sup>46</sup> In this section, Gerbert is referencing Terence's *Heauton Timorumenos* only at the end of the sentence, with the closing phrase "ne se dictum existimet," which mimics Terence's statement "ne ille pro se dictum existimet,"<sup>47</sup> but the connection of such a humorous and rather base phrase with the lofty words of Terence would only elevate Gerbert's slight against Constantine's detractor, the Abbot of Fleury Oylbold, who Gerbert considered an intruder in the monastery.<sup>48</sup>

These examples demonstrate that Gerbert's use of Terence's language and ideas are not limited to the literal meaning of the words or the original connotation of the text. Rather, Gerbert incorporates Terence into his own letters more freely than he does the words of Horace, for example, whose writings he incorporates into his own work a bit more literally. Gerbert's use of Terence also demonstrates a wider variety of uses than his references to Horace. While some references are still serious in tone, others are more playful and humorous; the desperation of *ep.* 21 stands in direct contrast to the humorous reference to unspecified foul stenches in *ep.* 92, discussed above.

Fulbert's references to Terence's work are a bit more direct than Gerbert's and remain closer to the original text in both language and intent. In a letter to King Robert the Pious, Fulbert references a passage in Act III of the *Andria*. Fulbert's letter reads, "If he rejects you, he will be sailing in dangerous waters, while you are safe in the harbor."<sup>49</sup> The passage in the *Andria* reads: "Now the risk is his, my ship is in the harbor."<sup>50</sup> Though Fulbert's statement is not a verbatim quotation of Terence's work, Fulbert

---

<sup>45</sup> "ego in insidiis hic ero subcenturiatus..." Terence, *Phormio*, trans. John Sargeant (Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1964-1965), I.230.

<sup>46</sup> Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert*, *ep.* 92; "simulque laeteris anima dversione nostra in pervasorem, et qui te coenum nostris putavit in naribus de se dictum existimet." Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, *ep.* 86.

<sup>47</sup> Terence, *Heauton Timorumenos*, trans. John Sargeant (Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1964-1965), Prologue 30.

<sup>48</sup> Introduction to Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert*, 30.

<sup>49</sup> "Quod si detrectauerit, ipse in periculo, tu nauigabis importu." Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, *ep.* 94.

<sup>50</sup> "nunc huius periclo fit, ego in portu navigo." Terence, *Andria*, trans. John Sargeant (Cambridge MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1964-1965), III.i.480.

does adopt the style, language, and imagery of Terence in this passage, and stays close to the original text. Fulbert employs the same methods for citing Terence in another letter, this time to reprimand Bishop Thierry of Orleans. Fulbert writes, “Whether you are committing these sins out of ignorance or by design we cannot tell,”<sup>51</sup> while in the original text in Terence’s *Phormio*, Antipho says: “whether to say he’s doing this through folly or mischief, through stupidity or design, I’m in doubt.”<sup>52</sup> Again, Fulbert incorporates both the language and meaning of the original text into his letter, this time transforming a witty statement into a biting one. In another example, this time written to Bishop Franco of Paris, Fulbert again retains the original meaning of the text, including the declamatory and lamenting tone, and introduces only a few changes to the language itself. In this letter, Fulbert bemoans Franco’s declining virtue. Fulbert’s letter reads, “Heaven and earth, what can I say, or how can I rebuke you as you deserve?”<sup>53</sup> The original passage, from Terence’s *Adephoe*, has Demea exclaiming, “What cries and protests are enough? O heaven and earth!”<sup>54</sup> In this letter, Fulbert adopts the language, meaning, and tone of the passage: in both Terence’s play and Fulbert’s letter, the speaker mourns his inability to affect change in his companion.

Gerbert also provides direct quotations in some of his letters. He provides two direct quotations, one from Horace (discussed above) and one from Terence, when he discusses the problems of the day. The quotation from Terence comes from the *Andria*, and Gerbert cites the passage as, “If you cannot do what you wish to do, then wish to do what you can.”<sup>55</sup> This statement comes from one of Terence’s characters, Byrria, in Act II of the *Andria*: “what you wish for is impossible, better wish for what is possible.”<sup>56</sup> Gerbert is so fond of this statement that he recycles it, using it again in a letter to the bishop of Verdun, though he does change the phrasing a bit from his previous letter by omitting one word of his alteration, *saltem*: this time he writes, “Si non potest fieri quod

---

<sup>51</sup> “Vtrum tamen imprudenter an consulto haec facias habemus incertum.” Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, ep. 22.

<sup>52</sup> “utrum stultitia facere ego hunc an malitia dicam, scientem an imprudentem, incertus sum.” Terence, *Phormio*, IV.iii.659-60.

<sup>53</sup> “O caelum, O terra, quid clamen, aut quo tuis meritis digno modo te obiurgare possim?” Fulbert, *Letters and Poems*, ep. 91.

<sup>54</sup> “Quid clamem aut querar? O caelum, o terra...!” Terence, *Adelphoe*, trans. John Sargeant (Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1964-1965), V.ii.789-790.

<sup>55</sup> Gerbert, *Letters of Gerbert*, ep. 61. “Si non potest fieri quod vis, id saltem velis quod posit.” Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, ep. 55.

<sup>56</sup> “quoniam non potest id fieri quod vis, id velis quod possit.” Terence, *Andria*, II.i.5-6.

vis, id velis quod possit.”<sup>57</sup> The use of essentially the same quotation twice might imply that Gerbert was only familiar with a few phrasings from the *Andria*, but he did cite the text a third time, making reference to an entirely different section of the text with the statement “do nothing in excess,” probably written to Archbishop Siguin of Sens in 997.<sup>58</sup> This reference is to the well-known phrase “ne quid nimis,” which is stated by Sosia to Simo in the first act of the play and was also inscribed in golden letters over the temple to Apollo at Delphi.<sup>59</sup> These examples indicate that Gerbert routinely adapted the text of Terence’s work to fit the needs of the particular letter he was composing at the time.

The references to Roman humor in the letters of Fulbert of Chartres and Gerbert of Aurillac demonstrate the wide array of uses in medieval letter writing, many of which were simultaneous in presentation. In some cases, the references were mostly entertainment, designed to amuse the readers with witty turns of phrase or well-constructed Latin prose. In other instances, classical references were intended as performances of social rank, demonstrating the learning of both the letter’s writer and reader. In yet other cases, a request or plea was rendered even more substantial through the use of well-known phrases borrowed from antiquity. In all cases, references to Terence, Horace, Persius, and Juvenal served as models for the presentation of antiquity in the “costumes of one’s own days.”<sup>60</sup> Both Gerbert and Fulbert chose strategic examples from ancient writers that could be adapted to serious correspondence, indicating that northern French scholars and students treated Roman comedies as serious business, even when those comedies were used for entertainment.

Gerbert of Aurillac’s and Fulbert of Chartres’ use of Roman comedies in their letter collections demonstrates the versatility and literary flourish of the medieval letter writer. The mastery of Roman humor enabled the persuasive writer to draw upon a wide variety of examples and literary styles. The pedagogy and letters of Gerbert of Aurillac and Fulbert of Chartres demonstrate that Roman humor was an important component of both education and letter writing. Within both letter collections, Gerbert and Fulbert use the language and meaning of classical authors as best befit the situation at hand; in some cases, both men stay close to the original text in form and function, in others, both men stray far from the original

---

<sup>57</sup> Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, ep. 173.

<sup>58</sup> Gerbert, *Lettres of Gerbert*, ep. 216. “ne quid nimis.” Gerbert, *Lettres de Gerbert*, ep. 203.

<sup>59</sup> Terence, *Andria*, I.i.61.

<sup>60</sup> Bischoff, “Living with the Satirists,” 266.



meaning of their classical sources. The variety with which both men incorporate these references into their letter writing indicates that there were no hard and fast rules for such practices and that medieval letter writers could exercise some creativity in their use of ancient references. In all cases, Gerbert and Fulbert wrote letters with the assumption that their readers would recognize and understand those references, whether verbatim quotes or obscure and fleeting references to single words or short phrases. Thus, the incorporation of references to Roman satires and comedies was a clear demonstration of social rank and education to the author, the recipient, and the subsequent reader of the letters.

*Heidelberg University*

## Bibliography

- Bischoff, Bernhard. "Living with the Satirists." *Mittelalterliche Studien: Ausgewählte Aufsätze zur Schriftkunde und Literaturgeschichte* 3 (1981): 260-70.
- Braund, Susan H. *Roman Verse Satire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Conte, Gian Biagio. *Latin Literature: A History*. Translated by Joseph B. Solodow. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.
- Fulbert of Chartres. *The Letters and Poems of Fulbert of Chartres*. Edited and translated by Frederick Behrends. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.
- Gerbert of Aurillac. *The Letters of Gerbert with his Papal Privileges as Pope Sylvester II*. Edited and translated by Harriet Pratt Lattin. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961.
- . *Lettres de Gerbert (983-997)*. Edited by Julien Havet. Paris: Picard, 1889.
- . *Opera Mathematica (972-1003): Accedunt Aliorum Opera ad Gerberti Libellos Aestimandos Intelligendosque Necessaria per Septem Appendices Distributa*. Edited by Nikolaï Bubnov. Hildesheim: George Olms Verlagsbuch-handlung, 1963.
- Horace. *Epistoles*. Translated by H. R. Fairclough. Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1966. Print.
- . *Satires. Epistolae*. Translated by H. R. Fairclough. Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1966.
- . *Ars Poetica. Epistolae*. Translated by H. R. Fairclough. Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1966.
- Juvenal. *Saturae*. Translated by G. G. Ramsay. Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Kurth, Godefroi. *Notger de Liège et la Civilization du dixième siècle*. Paris: Picard, 1905.
- Minnis, A. J., A. B. Scott, and David Wallace, eds. *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c.1100-c.1375: The Commentary Tradition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.
- Persius. *Saturae*. Translated by G. G. Ramsay. Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1979.

- Peter the Venerable. *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*. Translated by Giles Constable. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967.
- Reynolds, L. D., ed. *Texts and Transmission: A Survey of the Latin Classics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983.
- Riché, Pierre. *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West from the Sixth through the Eighth Century*. Translated by John Contreni. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1976.
- Richer of Saint-Rémi. *Histories*. Vol. 2. Edited and translated by Justin Lake. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Statius. *Silvae*. Vol 1. Translated by J. H. Mozeley. Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1961.
- Terence. *Adelphoe*. Translated by John Sargeant. Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1964-1965.
- . *Andria*. Translated by John Sargeant. Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1964-1965.
- . *Hecyra*. Translated by John Sargeant. Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1964-1965.
- . *Phormio*. Translated by John Sargeant. Cambridge, MA: Loeb-Harvard University Press, 1964-1965.
- Weber, Harold. "Humour and Tragic Spirit: The Augustan Distinction between Horace and Juvenal." *Classical and Modern Literature* 1 (1981): 275-89.
- Zetzel, James E. G. *Marginal Scholarship and Textual Deviance: The Commentum Cornuti and the Early Scholia on Persius*. London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2005.