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## **Unpleasant Affairs That Please Us: Admonition and Rebuke in the Letter Collections of the Archbishops of Canterbury, 11th and 12th Centuries**

**ROLAND ZINGG**

Let me start with a remark that may seem to be strange on first sight: Whenever an accident happens on a highway the result will be a traffic jam. That is quite easy to understand as it is a direct consequence of the accident. But from time to time we have an interesting phenomena: On the other side of the highway, where the cars drive in the opposite direction, will be a traffic jam as well – not as a direct result of the accident, no but for a reason that could be called “curious onlookers“. What seems to be abnormal or at least irritating – and probably really is – is as well an anthropological constant. There is some kind of fascination in terrible, evil and forbidden things. As cars didn’t exist in the Middle Ages I don’t have any accidents for you to “enjoy” but only a few letters concerning deviant behaviour, disobedience, trouble of all kind and unpleasant affairs in general that might give you a little bit of this special pleasure. To be honest: When I was working on the letter collections of the archbishops of Canterbury I was much more attracted by the scandals than by letters that concerned things of really pleasurable nature<sup>1</sup>. And I would like to share some of this pleasure with you. I shall not do this in the form of a great theory of pleasure in the Middle Ages as a whole or of pleasure as a subject of medieval letter collections – no, I would like to share this kind of feeling with you in a much more medieval way – as I believe – by giving you some examples. But first I have to speak briefly about the archbishops of Canterbury and their letter collections. From the Norman Conquest in 1066 up to the famous “murder in the cathedral”<sup>2</sup> in 1170, six archbishops of Canterbury ruled over the English church, left away the last anglo-saxon primate Stigand who was notorious for his misconduct and finally deposed by a papal legation<sup>3</sup>. His successor was Lanfranc, ruling from 1070 to 1089, followed by the most

<sup>1</sup> Zingg, Roland. *Die Briefsammlungen der Erzbischöfe von Canterbury, 1070–1170. Kommunikation und Argumentation im Zeitalter der Investiturstreitkonflikte*. Zürcher Beiträge zur Geschichtswissenschaft 1 (Cologne, Weimar and Vienna, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> The expression has become quite common for the events of the 29<sup>th</sup> December 1170 and exists even in a German translation (Mord im Dom) but first was just the title of a Drama by T.S. Eliot published in 1935.

<sup>3</sup> C.f. Stenton, Frank Merry. *Anglo-Saxon England*. The Oxford History of England 2, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1971), p. 659.

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famous Anselm after a vacance of four years. After another gap in the list we find two persons not that well known as the others, Ralph d'Escures (1114-1122) and William of Corbeil (1123-1136). William's successor Theobald (1138-1161) is a much less obscure character because of the role he played during the civil war between the Emperess Mathilda and King Stephen. But of course he is far from being that prominent as his archdeacon and successor should become: Thomas Becket, archbishop for eight years, the saint, the victim of one of the most famous crimes of the whole Middle Ages<sup>4</sup> that nearly cost a king his crown.

Four of these six archbishops of the first century after the Norman Conquest somehow left us a letter collection. This might not seem that special, but it is very unusual for the time. In fact, we don't have any episcopal registers in England up to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and this is not a phenomena restricted to England. Indeed, there is not even a constant tradition of the papal correspondence before 1198<sup>5</sup>. It is only due to lucky circumstances that at least parts of the correspondence of four of the six primates were conserved and give us a remarkable insight of the office in the High Middle Ages. Although this is a fantastic opportunity, we must be cautious when it comes to conclusions: The four letter collections are very different in many aspects and that's what we should keep in mind whenever we talk about these sources. It would take too much space to fully explain all the aspects of the problem in detail<sup>6</sup>. What I can do here is give you an impression of it: we have to suggest that Lanfranc never intended to present his letters in the form of a collection<sup>7</sup>. There must have been materials in the archiepiscopal archive when he died in 1089. The collection of 61 letters as we know it today was probably put together shortly after, in the time when the see was vacant, that means before 1093. It is nearly entirely focused on the legal matters of the business. Other popular subjects of this period such as monastic friendship or theological problems are scarcely

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<sup>4</sup> Becket's assassination is probably as well the best documented murder of the Middle Ages, c.f. Föbel, Amalie. „Thomas Becket. Canterbury, 29. Dezember 1170“, *Politische Morde. Vom Altertum bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Michael Sommer (Darmstadt, 2005), pp. 109–116, here p. 109.

<sup>5</sup> C.f. Zingg, *Briefsammlungen*, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed overview see my chapter about the archbishops' biographies, the formation of the respective letter-collection and it's content (Zingg, *Briefsammlungen*, pp. 109–152).

<sup>7</sup> Although it is dubious who arranged Lanfranc's letters in the form of a collection, it is due to it's content very probable that this was processed shortly after his death in 1089, c.f. Zingg, *Briefsammlungen*, pp. 113–117.

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represented<sup>8</sup>. Not only in this point there is a big difference between this letter collection and the one of his successor Anselm: Anselm is particularly famous for his letters of monastic friendship, his theological expertise and his communication with women. Even if I guess that these points have been stressed a little bit too much in the past I admit that all of this exists in his letters and makes a difference to other contemporary collections. But I really would like to insist on the point that a major part of the collection consists of letters due to his office and that we should not neglect that fact<sup>9</sup>. Anselm was clearly aware of his superb literary capacity and obviously proud of it. His huge collection of 475 letters – by the way the biggest one since the times of Alcuin<sup>10</sup> – as we know it today is an artificial product of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Editor Schmitt<sup>11</sup>, but Anselm organized at least three different collections of his letters during his lifetime and there was a fourth formed in the decade after his death. Theobald's 98 letters are something completely different. He never wanted to make a collection out of them and none of his letters preserved dates from before the mid 1150s<sup>12</sup>. That we know some of his letters is the result of some kind of literary vanity of his secretary John of Salisbury. The letters John wrote *ex persona* for his archbishop form nearly three fourth of his first letter collection. It is another remarkable fact that John didn't include any letters Theobald or he himself received although this was very common in these days. Last but not least, there is the correspondence of Theobald's successor Thomas Becket that has become so much easier accessible to us by the great Edition of Anne J. Duggan some years ago that contains 329

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<sup>8</sup> C.f. *The Letters of Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. Helen Clover and Margaret Gibson, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford 1979), pp. 14–15. Letters of this content may be considered n. 53, 54, 57, 58, 59 and 60.

<sup>9</sup> About 13% of Anselm's letters were addressed to monasteries respectively monks or nuns. This is not that much if we look at the collection as a whole but quite extraordinary if we compare it to the numbers of letters of this kind preserved in other collections, c.f. Zingg, *Briefsammlungen*, pp. 127–128 and 169–170. More or less the same is to say about Anselm's correspondence with women. Therefore I do not share some opinions about this subject recently given by Vaughn, Sally N. *St. Anselm and the Handmaidens of God. A Study of St. Anselm's Correspondence with Women*. Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy 7 (Turnhout 2002).

<sup>10</sup> "Alcuini sive Albini epistolae", ed. Ernst Dümmler, *Epistolae Karolini aevi* 3. MGH Epp. 5 (Berlin, 1898–1899) pp. 1–493.

<sup>11</sup> *S. Anselmi opera omnia*, ed. Franciscus Salesius Schmitt, 6 vols (Edinburgh, 1938–1961), letters vols 3–5.

<sup>12</sup> The earliest one might be Theobald's letter to the monks of Christchurch, written c. September 1153 or early in 1154, c.f. *The Letters of John of Salisbury*, vol. 1, *The Early Letters*, ed. and transl. William James Millor and Harold Edgeworth Butler, revised by Christopher Nugent Lawrence Brooke (Oxford, 1986), n. 1.

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letters<sup>13</sup>. Considered the manuscript tradition it is by far the most complicated of these four letter collections. We can be sure that there were at least two collections “published” for propaganda purposes during Becket’s exile in France that lasted from 1164 to autumn 1170<sup>14</sup>.

After Thomas had been slain and canonized only two years after his death there was more to come. The people all over Europe were more than willing to read about the deadly conflict of a saint with his king and his cult spread rapidly all over the continent. So it is no surprise that there was intensive work on Becket’s letters in the two decades following the murder and it even provoked other letter collections as a kind of answer or defense, the most important being probably the collection of Becket’s bitter enemy Gilbert Foliot, bishop of London<sup>15</sup>. The Becket-collections are diversified and in a way less comprehensible than the collections of his predecessors. The best short description I can give is that of a *summa causae*, a justification of Becket’s position in the quarrel with Henry II<sup>16</sup>. The letters and letter collections show a propagandistic pattern known from letters of the investiture controversies on the continent nearly one century earlier. The English investiture controversy was much shorter than the continental one. As Hanna Vollrath pointed out it lasted only for a few years from 1100 to 1106, driving Anselm into his second exile<sup>17</sup>. But even in this delicate situation Anselm is no good address for a historian seeking the pleasure of the unpleasant. To calm and polite a man he was. When Henry I made a proposition to resolve the conflict that must have been unacceptable for Anselm he just told the King “*I will not deny God’s law and I don’t care about the laws of your father’s and my predecessor’s. But you my Lord do what you please*”<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> *The Correspondence of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury 1162–1170*, ed. Anne J. Duggan, 2 vols, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford 2000).

<sup>14</sup> C.f. *The Correspondence of Thomas Becket*, ed. and transl. Duggan, pp. lxx–lxxi. Duggan characterizes these collections as “*libelli de lite*”.

<sup>15</sup> *The Letters and Charters of Gilbert Foliot, Abbot of Gloucester (1139–48), Bishop of Hereford (1148–63) and London (1163–87)*, ed. Zachary Nugent Lawrence Brooke (Cambridge, 1967). For a short description of the conflict between Thomas Becket and Gilbert Foliot c.f. Vollrath, Hanna. *Thomas Becket. Höfling und Heiliger. Persönlichkeit und Geschichte* 164 (Göttingen and Zurich, 2004), pp. 90–95.

<sup>16</sup> C.f. Zingg, *Briefsammlungen*, p. 149.

<sup>17</sup> Vollrath, Hanna. “Der Investiturstreit begann im Jahr 1100. England und die Päpste in der späten Salierzeit,” *Salisches Kaisertum und neues Europa. Die Zeit Heinrichs IV. und Heinrichs V.*, ed. Bernd Schneidmüller und Stefan Weinfurter (Darmstadt, 2007), pp. 217–244.

<sup>18</sup> S. Anselmi opera omnia, epistola 319: *De amicitia et de bona voluntate gratias ago. Ad hoc quod dicitis de patre vestro et archiepiscopo LANFRANCO, respondeo quia neque in baptismo neque in aliqua ordinatione mea promisi me servaturum legem vel consuetudinem patris vestri aut LANFRANCI archiepiscopi, sed legem dei et*

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Even in a situation as uncomfortable as his second exile Anselm stayed nearly stoic and showed no kind of harshness in his words. He was surely the right man for God, but maybe the wrong one for a historian looking for a pleasurable reading.

So let's turn back to Thomas Becket who seems to be more auspicious! Thomas was in exile as well. I'm sure you all know the main points of how the friendship of king Henry II and his former chancellor that he promoted to the archbishopric decayed gradually until it turned into bitterness and hatred – deadly hatred in the very end. Many of Thomas' letters that he sent from his French exile to nearly all the western Christendom are elongate, full of repetitive complaints that can be quite boring. Surprisingly he sent only very few letters to the King<sup>19</sup>. But these ones are of an exquisite composition, especially if you look at them as a series of letters. It begins with the letter number 68 of April 1166. The introducing words show us how important the subject must have been:

*Loqui de Deo ualde quiete et libere mentis est. Inde est quia loquar ad dominum meum, et utinam ad omnes pacificum*<sup>20</sup>.

*“To speak about God requires a serene and quiet mind. Therefore I would speak to you, my lord, and I wish he were peaceable to all.” And he continues: “I entreat you, my lord, to bear with serene mind this small hint of admonition, bestowed by God's grace, which is never in vain, for the salvation of your soul and my delivery.”*

That is the beginning of Thomas' first admonition by letter to his King and former friend. To speak about God is not bad for a starting point. Could there be any issue of more importance? Well, it obviously didn't have the effect Thomas had intended. As a man who had lost all of his worldly power and did for political reasons not have much support from Rome<sup>21</sup>, he tried it another time a few weeks later with a letter that's just brilliant in its beginning:

*Desiderio desideravi videre faciem vestram et loqui vobiscum; multum quidem propter me, sed maxime propter vos*<sup>22</sup>.

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*omnium ordinum quos suscepi.*

<sup>19</sup> *The Correspondence of Thomas Becket*, ed. and transl. Duggan, n. 68, 74, 82, 186, 241 and 320.

<sup>20</sup> *The Correspondence of Thomas Becket*, ed. and transl. Duggan, n. 68.

<sup>21</sup> Pope Alexander III supported most of Becket's views, but he had to be cautious not to lose another ruler's goodwill for there still was an anti-pope. So even if a majority of the cardinals was in favour of Becket he could not expect much aid from the Curia.

<sup>22</sup> *The Correspondence of Thomas Becket*, ed. and transl. Duggan, n. 74.

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*“With longing have I desired to see your face and speak to you, much indeed on my account, but more particularly on yours.”*

But what seems to be a warm and friendly letter at first sharply turns into a bitter complaint about the King’s behavior that didn’t change the archbishop’s uncomfortable situation. Consequently he wrote another letter to Henry II which is a sharp rebuke and makes very clear how big the distance between the former friends had become:

*Domino suo et amico Henrico, Dei gratia illustri regi Anglorum, duci Normannie, comiti Andegauorum, et duci Aquitanie, Thomas, eadem gratia ecclesie Cantuariensis humilis minister, suus olim temporaliter, nunc autem magis in Domino, salutem et ueram cum emendatione penitentiam*<sup>23</sup>.

*“To his lord and friend Henry, by God’s grace illustrious king of the English, duke of Normandy, count of the Angevins, and duke of Aquitaine, Thomas, by the same grace humble minister of the church of Canterbury, formerly his temporal friend, now much more his in the Lord, greeting, and true repentance and reparation.”*

After this *salutatio* that was more than unfriendly Thomas continued in the same way alluding to the excellent stylistic figure of his last letter to the King:

*Expectans expectaui ut intenderet vobis Dominus, et conuersas ageretis penitentiam, recedens a via peruersa, et abscederetis a vobis latera uestra praua, quorum, ut creditur, instinctu et consilio iam fere lapsus estis in profundum, quod absit, ne in profundum illud de qua dicitur, ‘peccator, cum uenerit in profundum, contempnit’*<sup>24</sup>.

*“Expectantly I have waited for the Lord to look down upon you so that you might change your ways and do penance, turn back from the wrong path, and cut away from your side the evil ones by whose incitement, as we believe, and counsel you have already almost fallen into the pit – God forbid that you fall into that pit of which it is said ‘When the sinner comes to the abyss, he fears it not.’”*

If we see all these three letters together *Loqui de deo*, *Desiderio desiderauit* and *Expectans expectaui*, there is a growing intensity – already starting on a high level. This is typical for Thomas, a man who had mainly words as his weapons and who was gradually losing many

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<sup>23</sup> *The Correspondence of Thomas Becket*, ed. and transl. Duggan, n. 82.

<sup>24</sup> *The Correspondence of Thomas Becket*, ed. and transl. Duggan, n. 82.

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of his worldly supporters<sup>25</sup>. However, we must suggest that he himself really lived in fear of God's punishment if he would not rebuke the sinner and that God certainly would claim the sinner's blood from his hands, as he repeatedly cited the bible<sup>26</sup>. This was not a new kind of rhetoric but one yet used by Gregory VII. Gregory VII and Thomas Becket both loved to make allusions to the Old Testament, which is quite uncommon – normally the Popes and bishops were much more in favour of the New Testament<sup>27</sup>.

But let's have a look at some other pleasurable examples of rebuke: At the end of his pontificate, Theobald had to decide a case of polygamy that was brought before him by Alfred, bishop of Worcester. An unnamed clerk in his diocese had left his wife without permission. While he resided abroad, he was promoted to the priesthood – a step surely unacceptable according to the canon law. During the absence of her husband, the wife or imagined widow decided to marry again and lived a happy live together with her new husband and the children she had born to him. But one day, we do not know why, her former husband came back to his old home. Now there were several problems. Point one: a married priest. Point two: a woman with two husbands, and, point three, a case of adultery if one of the husbands was not her lawful husband what we strongly suggest. But how did Theobald decide in this case? Well, he did it in a very pragmatic way: First the clerk had left his wife without her permission, so he had to go back to her because they were still husband and wife. Second, the one who had become priest abroad should lose his priesthood since he was married and should never have become a priest if he had said so. But let's listen to Theobald's own words<sup>28</sup>:

*“As the blessed Augustine says in his book on adulterous unions: ‘if you abstain without your wife's consent, you give her leave to commit fornication, and that sin will be attributed to your abstinence.’ [...] Almost the entire blame, then, rests with the priest. The woman's blame is correspondingly light, save in so far as she consented to the second husband, after she had learned that the first was alive. The guilt of her second husband amounts to little or nothing,*

<sup>25</sup> C.f. for example Vollrath, Thomas Becket, pp. 112–115.

<sup>26</sup> Becket cited Ez 3,18 resp. Ez 3,19 in several letters: *The Correspondence of Thomas Becket*, ed. and transl. Duggan, n. 68, 197, 203, 234, 235, 290, 291, 292 and 295.

<sup>27</sup> C.f. Robinson, Ian Stuart. „The Friendship Network of Gregory VII“, *History* 63 (1978), pp. 1–22, here p. 7f.

<sup>28</sup> *The Letters of John of Salisbury*, ed. and transl. Millor and Butler, n. 99.

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*unless perhaps he was aware of the previous marriage. The second marriage (for such it seemed to be) was no marriage at all; the second husband, if he cannot or will not observe continence, may marry whom he pleases—which would perhaps be best for the sake of the children—provided he marries in the Lord”<sup>29</sup>.*

This solution is not the one of an unworldly monk! It shows quite well how Theobald tried to administer his archdiocese: finding legally correct ways to resolve problems without creating unnecessary trouble for himself and the people concerned.

And now let’s have a look at a last example, the rebuke to the abbess Adelidis of Barking. It seems she was a person not easy to deal with, making use of any juridical trick she could find to enforce her interests, regardless if her case was just or not. That’s at least what one might suspect looking at Theobald’s explanatory letter to Alexander III in late 1160<sup>30</sup>. But the letter we shall have a closer look at is another one shedding light on a scandal that obviously had become a serious problem for the archbishop’s reputation:

*“We cannot any longer shut our eyes to the manifold and grave excesses arising from your negligence—to give it for the time being no worse name—since your offences have reached the ears of the Pope and are provoking the indignation of the holy Roman Church against our innocent self. We have often warned you to abstain from your notorious familiarity and cohabitation with Hugh your officer, who is an offence and scandal to all religion since according to the Lord’s commandment even a foot or eye must be cast away for such a cause. [...] we have received commands and chidings from the Apostolic See, indicating that we shall not be spared, if any longer we spare you and your errors. On the virtue of your obedience we charge you to remove the said Hugh from the intimacy of your house [...]”<sup>31</sup>.*

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<sup>29</sup> *The Letters of John of Salisbury*, ed. and transl. Millor and Butler, n. 99. *Vt enim ait beatus Aug(ustinus) in libro de Adulteris Coniugiis, ‘Si tu abstines sine uxoris uoluntate tribuis ei fornicandi licentiam, et peccatum illius tuae imputabitur abstinentiae.’ [...] Proinde tota fere culpa uidetur esse presbiteri; mulieris aequae leuis, nisi quatenus consensit secundo ex quo primum uirum superesse cognouit; secundi uiri quidem aut omnino nulla aut certe minima, nisi et ipse forte prioris matrimonii conscius fuerit. Quia ergo secundae quae uisae sunt, on fuerunt nuptiae, maritus posterior, si continere non potest aut non uult, quod forte magis expediret propter liberos, quam uoluerit ducat, tantum in Domino.*

<sup>30</sup> *The Letters of John of Salisbury*, ed. and transl. Millor and Butler, n. 132.

<sup>31</sup> *The Letters of John of Salisbury*, ed. and transl. Millor and Butler, n. 69. *Negligentiae tuae, ut interim sic dicatur, multiplices et graues excessus ulterius dissimulare non possumus, cum ad aures Romani pontificis delicta tua peruenerint, et aduersus innocentiam nostrum sanctae Rom(anae) ecclesiae prouocent indignationem. Te quidem saepe monuimus ut a famosa familiaritate et cohabitatione Hug(onis) officialis tui, qui toti religioni est in offensionem et scandalum, modis omnibus abstereres, cum ex mandato Domini etiam pes*

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We do not know how the pontifex learned about the case but one could suggest that there was a connection to other (legal) affairs of the abbess and that one of her opponents had appealed to the pope and told him as well of the notorious misconduct of the abbess. Funny enough, Osbert of Clare dedicated his “Armour of chastity” to Adelidis<sup>32</sup>! We do not know how it came, but chastity seems not to have belonged to her arsenal. But we can learn two important lessons from this example: First, Theobald’s position cannot have been very powerful if he was not able to prohibit the impure life of an abbess by his own authority. Second, Thomas Becket’s fear of eternal damnation was not his fear alone. Theobald was a man of principles who was ready to suffer exile if necessary but he was no dogmatist. But we must keep in mind the fear of divine punishment as a *movens* of medieval history even (or especially) if some episodes seem to be quite funny or “enjoyable” today. Many other cases or examples of unpleasant affairs can be found in the letter collections of the archbishops of Canterbury, but that would be too much for this short paper that doesn’t claim to be more than an appetiser.

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*uel oculus sit ob huiusmodi causam proiciendus. [...] Apostolicum [...] mandatum et increpationes suscepimus, quae nobis indicunt non esse parcendum, si tibi ulterius pepercerimus in erroribus tuis. Proinde in uirtute obedientiae tibi praecipiendo mandamus, ut praefatum H(ugonem) a familiaritate et conuersatione domus tuae amoueas [...].*

<sup>32</sup> *The Letters of John of Salisbury*, ed. and transl. Millor and Butler, n. 69, p. 111 with note 1.