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The Education of Heloise in Twelfth-Century France

by

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,
Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Theology.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
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June 24, 2006

The Education of Heloise in Twelfth-Century France

The question of how Heloise, the renowned twelfth-century abbess of the Benedictine women's monastery called the Paraclete, obtained a classical education in the twelfth century French culture is important and not adequately answered at present. The purpose of this paper is to discover a reasonable understanding of how she acquired her high quality education and what conditions made it possible for her to learn three languages, be highly literate, and successful in her role as a religious abbess. Heloise was acclaimed for her intelligence, but this paper shows that she was supported in her educational pursuits by the expectations and advantages of being in a family of power and nobility and by living within and active and well developed culture of female Latinity from which she could be educated and in which she could find meaningful, intellectual and spiritual expression. This paper helps to provide one with a view of the current scholarly opinion about the important issue of Heloise's education, and points to the need to continue to look for reliable historical understandings of women's history regarding the Middle Ages.

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The Education of Heloise in Twelfth-Century France

If one assumes that the possibility of a classical education and literacy was severely limited for women of the twelfth century in France, then the quality of Heloise's literary, philosophical and theological education does not make any sense what so ever. Heloise would have to be thought of as fictional,¹ at worst, or as completely unexplainable and rare,² which is not a very satisfactory conclusion for those involved in scholarly investigations. Recent scholarship and continued scholarly debate allow some reasonable and unexpected answers to this seeming enigma. This paper holds that Heloise had opportunity and one can demonstrate that other women, both secular and religious, while being located within the twelfth century of France, also had similar, if not more

¹ Peter Dronke, *Women Writers in the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Text from Perpetua (+203) to Marguerite Porete (+1310)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Preface, ix., where Dronke discusses that it was thought that Heloise had not written the letters to Abelard attributed to her, or when Dronke indicates that earlier scholarship on Hrotsvitha's works claimed they "were alleged to be a hoax perpetuated by the humanist Conrad Celtes."

² Bonnie Wheeler, "Introduction: Listening to Heloise," in *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth-Century Woman*, ed., Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), xvii, when Wheeler appears to emphasize the few number of women who had the "equivalent of a university education," and in this sense, perhaps unintentionally, adds to the history of diminishment of women's educational accomplishments. This is not in character with Wheeler's overall historical approach, but might indicate how easily a historian can acclaim the individual, while leaving the context out of the picture. This citation is used with great respect for the work that Wheeler does in relation to women's history and is used to make the point about how proclaiming the individual as exceptional distorts the historical reality. Patricia Ranft, *Women in Western Intellectual Culture, 600-1500* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 45, writes that Heloise was not rare in the literary world, but "Heloise was a very bright light in the intellectual world, but far from the only one or even the brightest,"; she therefore presents the new recognition of the backdrop of women's literacy, for which this paper argues.

opportunities in education, business, and other domains that were typically thought of as impossible for women of this era.³ It will be shown in this paper that there was a culture of Latin literacy active and available to women in the twelfth century,⁴ and that the medieval period in France between the eleventh century and the thirteenth century, was one of creative opportunity for women, especially for women that are of the nobility, either high or lower nobility. All the studies used in this paper to assess newer historiography of this era rely on records and documents, from secular and ecclesial sources, that record the lives and practices of the aristocratic women of the time. Heloise is certainly recorded in this history, and in understanding her education, one must be able to understand her position in medieval society, because women of non-aristocratic heritage are unlikely to have the advantage of a classical education. The factor of noble lineage was of almost incalculable importance in understanding women's educational opportunity in medieval France in this period.

The final factor assessed in this paper is the location of a school that would teach the advanced study required for a classical education and explain how a young woman in the twelfth century might gain access to such a school. In past historical scholarship about women's roles and education in this medieval period, it was assumed that women did not have significant societal roles, and were often relegated to minor and restricted roles

³ Theodore Evergates, "Chap. 3: Aristocratic Women in the County of Champagne," in *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France*, ed. Theodore Evergates (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 74-76, 109-110. He writes that noble women were far from being as marginalized as some assumed.

⁴ Laurie J. Churchill, Phyllis R. Brown and Jane E. Jeffrey, eds., "Women Writing Latin: An Introduction," in *Women Writing Latin From Roman Antiquity to Early Modern Europe - Volume 2: Medieval Women Writing Latin*, Three Volumes (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 2, where this group of authors writes about the unexpectedly "large" number of literate women in history, many who wrote in Latin.

within the family.⁵ Starting from a new and different perspective which has been gained by the more recent scholarship, that has access to texts and documents that were not available in the past,⁶ and which can build upon the larger body of recent scholarship and interest in women's issues, one can look for evidence to explain what was once thought of as exceptional or rare. Women have opportunity to live creative and literate lifestyles, and to exercise power within the medieval culture, and that will become apparent as Heloise herself, brilliant and extraordinary, is part of this lively French medieval period of history.

Heloise was able to learn Latin, Greek, and Hebrew,⁷ and was educated and literate in the classics,⁸ and participated in life-long dialogue with one of the leading philosophers and theologians of her day, Peter Abelard.⁹ This relationship was gained because Heloise was also, herself, a great moral theologian and thinker, and because she was so highly literate and motivated to refine her viewpoints and actualize them through their relationship.¹⁰ Together, they founded and offered spiritual leadership and guidance to

⁵ Kimberly A. LoPrete and Theodore Evergates, "Introduction," in *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France*, ed., Theodore Evergates (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), Introduction, 1.

⁶ Ranft, Introduction, ix.

⁷Constant J. Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, Great Medieval Thinkers Series (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162, where he discusses the reference that Abelard makes to Heloise being like Jerome and knowing three languages; Latin, Greek and Hebrew. *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. and intro. by Betty Radice (New York and Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, reprint, 1983), Introduction, 32, where she discusses Abelard's acknowledgement of Heloise's language ability.

⁸Phyllis R. Brown and John C. Peiffer II, "Chap. 6- Heloise, Dialectic and the *Heroides*" in *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth-Century Woman*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 143, citing Clanchy's discussion on Heloise's refined ability with Latin. Constant J. Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France*, trans. by Neville Chiavaroli and Constant J. Mews, The New Medieval Ages Series (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 169, states that Heloise's letters suggest "she was an accomplished writer of Latin verse." See *Letters*, Letter 5, 159, where Heloise uses her knowledge of the classics by relying on Boethius's translation of Aristotle in reference to the way one's heart's emotions flow "out of our control."

⁹ Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, series forward, vii.

¹⁰Constant J. Mews, "Chap. 3: Philosophical Themes in the *Epistolae duorum amantium*: The First Letters of Heloise and Abelard," in *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth-Century Woman*, ed. Bonnie

the nuns at the Paraclete, the Benedictine abbey in the diocese of Troyes, where Heloise was the respected abbess most of her life.¹¹ This paper will explore and elaborate upon the interacting components which produced this much accomplishment in Heloise's life.

Placing Heloise in French Society

Heloise was born, according to the argument of the well-studied medieval scholar Constant Mews, in circa 1094 and so is not likely to have been born in 1100 or 1101, as most scholars have estimated.¹² Mews discusses his reasoning for this earlier birth date by making reference to the section of Peter the Venerable's Letter 115, where Peter says that his love for Heloise came about when

I had not quite passed the bounds of youth and reached early manhood when I knew of your name and your reputation, not yet for religion but for your virtuous and praiseworthy studies. I used to hear at that time of the woman who although still caught up in the obligations of the world, devoted all her application to knowledge of letters, something which is very rare, and to the pursuit of secular learning, and that not even the pleasures of the world, with its frivolities and delights, could distract her from this worth determination to study the arts.¹³

Mews gives us Peter's historical dates as "(ca. 1094-1156),"¹⁴ and so if Heloise was herself a young woman as he was also a young man, then she would have been born in about the same year, or ca. 1094, as Mews has offered, and be about twenty-one when

Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 36, where Mews speaks of her as philosophical and teaching Abelard about the purity of love. She actualized love and remained consistent when he did not.

¹¹Bruce L. Venarde, *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England, 890-1215*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 120-121, where he discusses the foundation of the Paraclete. *The Paraclete Statutes. Institutiones Nostrae. Introduction, Edition, Commentary*, Chrysogonus Waddell, Introduction and Commentary, Cistercian Liturgy Series: 20 (Gethsemani Abbey: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 202, shows her use of Abelard's Rule and yet her independence from his thought.

¹² Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 59, where he elaborates his reasoning for arguing that Heloise was more mature than is usually stated when she began her affair with Abelard. See Mews, *Lost Letters*, 373, wherein Mews offers the possible dates of Heloise's life span as "(ca. 1094?-1164)."

¹³ "Peter the Venerable: Letter (115) to Heloise," in *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. and intro. Betty Radice (New York and Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, reprint. 1983), 277.

¹⁴ Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 59.

she went to Paris. For the purposes of this paper, this dating will be accepted as possible since it fits with the intellectual level of Heloise's ability to dialogue with Peter in the letters between them.

Having established a possible birth date and age at which she began her intellectual and romantic relationship with Peter Abelard, it is important to understand and place Heloise within the family structure of Northern France, in the county of Champagne, where she was raised and lived all her life.¹⁵ It is reported by many sources, including Peter Abelard¹⁶ that she was raised and did attend school at the Argenteuil, near Paris, and therefore, one is left with the question of understanding, within the historical context of the twelfth century, how this could have occurred. Who would have told her about and provided for the tuition or dowry that this monastery would require? How would a non-aristocratic young girl be received at this royal abbey, or would she have at all? Wealth one can assume was necessary for the majority of students,¹⁷ and perhaps aristocratic social background was also a requirement for the schools of this type. We know that Heloise went there, and that she gained a classical education there. With this information in hand, we can now move on to look at further benefits associated with nobility which may have affected Heloise's ability to receive a high quality education.

¹⁵ Evergates, 106, where he cites the work of Robert-Henri Bautier (1981), which will be discussed in more depth in later part of this section of the paper.

¹⁶ Abelard, *Historia calamitatum* (Radice's edition), 74, where he says that Heloise returned to "a convent of nuns in the town near Paris called Argenteuil, where she had been brought up and educated as a small girl." See Radice, *Letters*, Intro., 16, where she says, "Every credit is due to the nuns at Argenteuil for her early education." Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 59, where he states "she was educated at the royal Abbey of Ste.-Marie, Argenteuil."

¹⁷ Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 59.

Nobility and Opportunity

Recent historical research, using documents from both secular and religious life in France during the time period of the eleventh to the thirteenth century, have given a good and concrete description of the diverse roles and significant social and economic power that goes with membership in noble or aristocratic families in France at this time. LoPrete and Evergates, in the introduction to the book titled *Aristocratic Women In Medieval France* (1999), describe secular roles open to noble women within conjugal relationships, which include: “supervising the rearing and marriage of children, dispensing patronage and gifts, receiving visiting dignitaries, assisting husbands with lordly responsibilities (as at court), performing lordly functions in their husbands’ absence, and serving as guardians and regents.”¹⁸

Further on in this interesting book, these authors hold that “aristocratic women frequently took the lead in monastic administration upon conversion to a fully religious life.”¹⁹ Women were able to hold and manage property, family inheritance, were feudal lords, and influenced church and religious organizations.²⁰ Evergates notes that many women of nobility “opted for a conventual life,”²¹ as has been also reported by other scholars, as a viable and frequently chosen possibility for an aristocratic women in the Middle Ages. It is speculated that Heloise herself may have been educated with the

¹⁸ LoPrete and Evergates, Intro., 4.

¹⁹ LoPrete and Evergates, Intro., 5.

²⁰ Evergates, 76, 109, where he discusses inheritance rights, which were significant for women of that time.

²¹ Evergates, 110.

possibility of this end result: that she would become a strong and influential abbess in a women's monastery.²²

It is noteworthy that records in the Champagne, and other regions in France which Evergates studied, are by necessity only reflective of the life patterns and characteristics of the nobility, since persons of lesser status were not recorded in the documents of the churches, monasteries and towns to the same degree, or at all, in comparison to those of the noble families. This, of course, creates its own biased picture of the society, and one needs to factor this data in when attempting to understand any historical period or group. LoPrete and Evergates make this clear from the beginning, and tell us that they are using records which reflect only the wealthy and privileged, the elite, in medieval French society.²³

Evergates' research deals directly with the county of Champagne and includes the time period of Heloise; it is therefore a useful tool to understand that, if Heloise was from an aristocratic background, at whatever level, old or new aristocracy, she would know that either within secular life, if she married well, or within religious life, there might be interesting and meaningful roles of power and leadership to play.²⁴ In medieval society, it

²² Mary Martin McLaughlin, "Chap. 1- Heloise the Abbess: The Expansion of the Paraclete," in *Listening to Heloise*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 2, when she postulates that Heloise may have had family intentions for her to become an abbess. Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 59, refers to Fulbert's possible expectation that "she would subsequently rise to a high position within monastic life."

²³ LoPrete and Evergates, Intro., 2.

²⁴ Penelope Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France*, Women in Culture and Society Series (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 205, discusses the range of duties of an abbess: judge, approver of loans and mortgages, and ruler over a variety of people, to name a few.

appears that being of noble birth or marriage allows one to enter a world where education and social power, and quality of life choices are more possible.

Evergates reports there is no evidence that women of this time period, twelfth and thirteenth century, are severely limited or “marginalized by a familial obsession with the patriline nor excluded from inheritance by male primogeniture.”²⁵ Women could inherit, and did, and could keep their inheritances, even if they were in convents, or marriages.²⁶ This gave aristocratic women the role or right to dispose or bequeath property, contract marriages within families, and have rights, tenants and feudal lords which gave them social and political power in twelfth-century France.²⁷ Women had “fundamental rights as daughters, wives and widows.”²⁸

Penelope Johnson, in her excellent work using texts and documents from this medieval period, also verifies Evergates’ analysis: that women had “clout” in the twelfth century; Johnson provides a story about the establishment of the Abbey of Pommeraye, by the Countess Herlesende, who successfully paid for and conducted this project with Heloise, whereby the Pommeraye became the Paraclete’s last foundation.²⁹

Going on to show the diversity and opportunity in the lives of aristocratic women, and challenging the idea that this era was restrictively oppressive, Evergates says that even with the fact that first marriages were arranged for women, they received appropriate

²⁵ Evergates, 109.

²⁶ Evergates, 106-107.

²⁷ Evergates, 76, 109.

²⁸ Evergates, 76.

²⁹ Johnson, 199.

dowries and “they expected in turn comparable dowers from their husbands.”³⁰ Upon divorce or widowhood, a women could remarry according to her own choice, or not, and Evergates tells us that according to the documents of Champagne in this period “they often did.” These women show independence of choice, even with some limits.

Attributions of Her Background: Finding Heloise’s Family

On Her Mother’s Side

There are some scholars who understand Heloise’s family background based on the attribution of nobility to her maternal uncle Fulbert, who is said to be of noble birth, an opinion which can be acquired from many sources.³¹ Mews, in his recent book *Abelard and Heloise* (2005) states, “Roscelin says her uncle was of noble birth.”³² There is often combined with this pivotal finding of Fulbert’s heritage, material presented about Heloise’s mother, whose name is recorded in the necrology of the Paraclete as Hersinde.³³ Now the scholarly discussions begin to become more seemingly tenuous and complex, since there appears to be varied reports about Heloise’s mother and her role and family heritage. Mews cites German scholarship by Werner Robl³⁴ that Heloise’s mother

³⁰ Evergates, 109.

³¹ Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 59, where Mews quotes Roscelin. Robert-Henri Bautier, “Paris au temps d’Abélard,” in *Abélard en son temps*. Actes du colloque international organisé a l’occasion du 9^e centenaire de la naissance de Pierre Abélard (14-19 mai 1979), ed. Jean Jolivet (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1981), 75-76, where he speculates that Fulbert and Heloise were from a noble family.

³² Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 59.

³³ Radice, *Letters*, Intro., 66, fn. 1 cites that Hersinde is listed in the Paraclete necrology as Heloise’s mother’s name; Mews, *Lost Letters*, 58. Here he spells her name as Hersende.

³⁴ Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 59, citing in fn. 4 the work by Werner Robl, *Heloisas Herkunft: Hersindis mater* (Munich: Olzog, 2001).

was once the prioress of Fontevrault, who was the daughter of Hubert III of Champagne, but does not comment on Robl's opinion.

On Her Father's Side

In another scholarly opinion, Duby, who is a French scholar who taught at the Collège de France, wrote: "Meticulous research in the archives has enabled us to locate her among the high aristocracy of the Île-de-France. Descended through her father from the Montmorency and the counts of Beaumont, and through her mother from the *vidames* of Chartres, she belonged, as did Abelard, to one of the two clans that were vying for power in the entourage of King Louis VI at the beginning of the twelfth century."³⁵ Duby does not give a description of this research, or how he knows this.

Evergates, who is known for his detailed research of the history of Paris, in an article entitled "Aristocratic Women in the County of Champagne" (1999),³⁶ wrote without hesitation, "As a natural daughter of the powerful Garlande family, Heloise entered Argenteuil as prioress in the wake of Abelard's misadventures and stayed there until 1129, when the nuns were expelled by the monks of Saint-Denis under abbot Suger, who had purged the Garlande brothers from high offices in the royal government."³⁷

³⁵ Georges Duby, *Women of the Twelfth Century – Volume One: Eleanor of Aquitaine and Six Others*, trans. Jean Birrell (Great Britain: University of Chicago Press and Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers, Ltd. 1997), 42.

³⁶ Evergates, 74-110.

³⁷ Evergates, 106, cites the important research efforts of Robert-Henri Bautier which will be cited in the next footnote.

In continuing to trace reasons for possibly believing that Heloise was in the powerful noble genealogy, Robert-Henri Bautier's article also draws the following conclusion about the maternal family and paternal side of Heloise's possible genealogy:

Du côté de sa mère, le cercle familial, d'après les noms de Hersent, de Fulbert et aussi d'Héloïse, paraît se limiter étroitement autour de la grande famille des vidames de Chartres et de ses alliés, en union intime avec les églises chartraines et les familles du Vexin et de Pontoise. Celui d'Héloïse lui-même se retrouve dans la famille des Garlande, alliée aux précédentes. Est-ce là encore un hasard? L'hypothèse mériterait d'être approfondie.³⁸

This reference to the vidames points to minor nobility, according to *Cassell's French Dictionary* (1981)³⁹ and in *Le Petit Robert Dictionnaire* (1989),⁴⁰ refers to an officer who takes the place of ecclesiastical lords in juridical or military functions. Stephen of Garlande is known to be a leader of the king's military,⁴¹ called the seneschal of France, and therefore in a position of power, but not necessarily of a very old line of heritage. In the French scholarly genealogies, Heloise is traced to this Garlande family and its power. This is not conclusive evidence that Heloise is only of the lower nobility because an analysis of her entire family history is not currently available, or may not yet be fully known. The vidames reference leads one to place her in the direction of strong, newer nobility, over the older nobility, however.

³⁸ Bautier, 76-77. Translated this means: On her mother's side, the family circle, according to the names Hersent, Fulbert and also Heloise, seems to be narrowly limited to the great family of the vice-lords of Chartres and is found in the allied aforementioned families. Is that still another coincidence? The hypothesis would warrant further consideration.

³⁹ *Cassell's French Dictionary: French-English English-French*, revised by Denis Girard, et al. (London: Cassell Ltd./New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1962), s.v. "vidame."

⁴⁰ *Le Petit Robert Dictionnaire*, revised by Paul Robert (Paris: Le Robert, 1989), s.v. "vidame."

⁴¹ Mews, *Lost Letters*, 62, where Mews discusses that Stephen was made senior military advisor to Louis VI, from 1210 to 1127. Mews discusses the great power that the Garlande brothers had at this time in France.

Thomas Waldman, in his scholarly and well reasoned article on Abbot Suger and the Argenteuil uses Bautier's article to discuss the possibility of a feud between Suger and "the families related to Heloise: the Montmorency, the vidâmes of Chartres, and the viscounts of Châteaudun."⁴² In the reporting of his research, Waldman uses the citation of the heritage of Heloise which Bautier proposes. Here is the direct quotation from Henri-Robert Bautier which is used in the Waldman article on Suger and the Argenteuil:

Sans qu'on puisse tirer de ces faits une conclusion formelle, il ne serait nullement invraisemblable que la famille paternelle d'Héloïse soit à rechercher du côté des Montmorency-Bantelu ou Beaumont, familles étroitement liées, ce qui expliquerait à la fois l'intérêt que lui porta Étienne de Garlande et la persécution dont elle fut l'objet de la part de l'abbé de Saint-Denis, en lutte permanente contre les Montmorency.⁴³

In the works of Duby, Waldman and Evergates, there appears to be a concrete conclusion regarding Heloise's heritage that is not present in other writers, such as Constant Mews. Mews says "Little is known for certain about her background."⁴⁴ According to Evergates, Heloise is definitely an aristocratic daughter, and she is even associated with powerful men of the Garlande family.⁴⁵ Not conceding Heloise's membership in the Garlande family, Mews notes, "By 1116 Stephen of Garlande and his brothers dominate all major positions of power within the French kingdom."⁴⁶ Duby writes that Heloise was able to enter into a powerful role of prioress at the Argenteuil due

⁴²Thomas G. Waldman, "Abbot Suger and the Nuns of Argenteuil," *Traditio* 41 (1985), 246.

⁴³Waldman, 264 citing in fn. 132, the research of R.H. Bautier, who writes in "Paris au temps d' Abélard" in *Abélard en son temps* (Paris: 1981), 76. Translated this says: Without being able to draw any formal conclusion from these facts, it would be in no way unlikely that the paternal family of Heloise could be found among the Montmorency-Bantelu's or Beaumont's, families with close ties; this would explain both the interest of Stephen of Garlande in her and the persecution brought against her by the Abbot of Saint-Denis, who was ever at odds with the Montmorency family.

⁴⁴ Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 59.

⁴⁵ Evergates, 106. Stephen Garlande will be mentioned in other historical accounts in this paper.

⁴⁶ Mews, *Lost Letters*, 62. In this section Mews says he views Stephen as a "reformer" who desired to strengthen the king's government by better administrative procedures.

to the fact of her nobility.⁴⁷ If this history is accurate as presented by Bautier and others, Heloise would be placed within the aristocratic heritage of the Champagne county of early twelfth century France, near Paris, in one of the two families who were “vying for power.”⁴⁸ Abelard is regarded as being in the same extended and close knit family group as Heloise in Waldman’s and Bautier’s opinion,⁴⁹ the Montmorency family, in which Etienne de Garlande was an influential participant in Abelard’s life, due to these postulated family ties.⁵⁰

Problems with Sources in This Matter of Genealogy

Bautier’s work is used as a basic reference by a number of scholars⁵¹ as they attempt to locate Heloise in the culture of twelfth century of France. It is compelling research but might be based on a critical weakness in relation to the use of the opinion of François d’Amboise, upon which Bautier’s analysis appears to depend.⁵² Basically, the problem is that d’Amboise made reference to Heloise being related to the Montmorency family in his preface to the 1616 edition of Roscelin’s work on Peter Abelard,⁵³ but did not give his reason for this conclusion. André Duchesne made no claim to this while writing about the *Historia calamitatum*, Abelard’s autobiography, nor within a history of the Montmorency family which Duchesne also wrote. Some scholars are concerned about the uncertainty of

⁴⁷ Duby, 42.

⁴⁸ Duby, 42.

⁴⁹ Waldman, 246. See Bautier, 76-77, where he gives a description of all possible family lines that might relate Heloise and Abelard, including the Montmorency family and its branches.

⁵⁰ Waldman, 246, where he uses the genealogy from Bautier as mentioned in fn. 38 and in fn. 43. Mews, *Lost Letters*, 61, where he discusses how Stephen Garlande’s political influence was at the same time of Abelard.

⁵¹ Evergates, 106, see fn. 164 for citation to Bautier’s work. Mews, *Lost Letters*, 58 end 318, fn. 12 where he cites Bautier’s opinion regarding the question of Heloise’s illegitimacy.

⁵² Mews, *Lost Letters*, 318, fn. 11.

⁵³ Mews, *Lost Letters*, 318, fn. 11, where we are led to fn. 15 for the work of Roscelin entitled *Ep. ad Abaelardum*, ed. Reiners (Munster: Aschendorff, 1910).

locating sources for placing Heloise in this powerful family, the Montmorency. It is possible that scholars such as Bautier and Evergates, who are French and also well-studied in the documents of Champagne and Paris, might have more reason to believe in this strongly held opinion of Heloise's relationship to this family, which eventually leads to the Garlande branch, but have not shared that in cited research. Continued exchange of scholarly resources and research is needed in this important dispute, and more historical evidence for more reliable documentation of her heritage.

Perhaps, ending this rather confusing but important section, one can perhaps agree on this basic statement of Bautier's about Heloise's heritage: "Elle était sans nul doute d'une famille noble de la région parisienne."⁵⁴ [She is without a doubt of a noble family in the region of Paris].

The Issue of a Culture of Literacy and Latinity

Having raised the issue of Heloise's heritage, next it is important to discuss the two rather opposite views regarding the ability of women to be educated in the classics in twelfth-century France. Recent scholarship, of the past thirty years, appears to reveal that scholars of high regard view this question from slightly different points of view. One group tends to discuss Heloise as an exceptional and unique in relation to her education; while another group of scholars regards Heloise as being one of many secular or religious women who acquired and benefited from a classical and well developed education in this medieval period of France. Wheeler, in her much admired analysis of Heloise in

⁵⁴ Bautier, 75.

Listening to Heloise (2000), writes in the introduction that “Heloise is a model of the French public female intellectual, the first and one of a very few such figures before modern times.”⁵⁵ Innocuous and inspiring as this statement might seem at first glance, there is an important and subtle difference between Wheeler’s acclamation of Heloise as rare and the one by Patricia Ranft, a historian, who argues for the acknowledgment of the existence of a backdrop or culture of highly educated medieval women which educates outstanding members, such as Heloise. Ranft offers this example from Peter the Venerable for her important argument: “Heloise’s natural genius ‘surpassed all women in carrying out your purpose and have gone further than almost every man,’ as Peter the Venerable said; so did Hrotsvitha’s.”⁵⁶ This concise retort strikingly makes the point that there are others, just as outstanding in education and literacy, as Heloise was.

Another example to point out the important differences amongst scholars on women’s learning is taken from a recent book by medieval historian Christopher Brooke. In his *The Age of the Cloister* (2003), Brooke states, “Heloise was in every way an exceptional figure; and we shall not be surprised to find more evidence of an intellectual tradition among nuns in Germany.”⁵⁷ Brooke also writes that nuns could read Latin in the tenth century, but “instructions for nuns in the twelfth and later centuries were commonly in the vernacular.”⁵⁸ Brooke appears to be trying to make the point that nuns in the age of

⁵⁵Wheeler, Intro., xvii. Wheeler does acknowledge that there are great women, but sets Heloise apart from them in terms of the quality of her education. Ranft says that Heloise reflects a culture of such outstandingly educated women, and there is a subtle and important difference in this.

⁵⁶ Ranft, 45, where in fn.69 Ranft cites Radice, *Letters*, 278, for the quotation from Peter the Venerable.

⁵⁷ Christopher Brooke, *The Age of the Cloister: The Story of Monastic Life in the Middle Ages* (Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Spring, 2003), 211.

⁵⁸ Brooke, 209.

chivalry did not write much, and had “an inferior education.”⁵⁹ He interprets history differently than does Mews, who writes that “the study of classical letters, vividly exemplified by Abelard and Heloise, had flourished in the twelfth century.”⁶⁰ Mews says that the tradition of letters in the twelfth century builds on “an existing tradition of literary dialogue between men and women belonging to an educated elite.”⁶¹ Mews points out that after Heloise died, since no one in her monastery had the level of Latin training that she had, documents start to be written in the vernacular.⁶² Since Heloise died in 1164, this leaves much of the twelfth century, at least in reference to the activity of the Paraclete, to have participated in the use of Latin as their primary language. Johnson says that the movement to the vernacular in the twelfth century affected both men and women, and that even Abelard complains of it in his letters in relation to the monks whom he lives with. Johnson points out that even with the drop in Latin usage for both sexes, “towards the end of our period, however, there still were schools, books and Latin literacy in some convents.”⁶³

There is ample evidence in the texts and documents of the medieval period to support the idea that literacy, and Latin literacy at that, was available to women, usually of the nobility, in the twelfth century in France. Several scholars report that there was a culture or tradition of literacy.⁶⁴ For instance, Venarde states that the twelfth century was a time when female monasticism grew rapidly and reflected “the great creative era in a large

⁵⁹ Brooke, 209.

⁶⁰ Mews, *Lost Letters*, 41.

⁶¹ Mews, *Lost Letters*, 113.

⁶² Mews, *Lost Letters*, 40.

⁶³ Johnson, 147.

⁶⁴ Mews, *Lost Letters*, 8; Johnson, 144, cites that literacy already developed in the eleventh century.

part of the West.”⁶⁵ This creativeness was, in part, about literacy and learning. Churchill, Brown, and Jeffrey, in *Women Writing Latin* (2002) indicate that there were roles for women in developing Latin literacy and that Latin was a “language of women as well as men.”⁶⁶ These authors go on to confirm what others in this paper are presenting, that is, “Latin literacy was less exclusive than has generally been believed.”⁶⁷ C.H. Lawrence, a professor of Medieval History in London, has noted that schools developed within monasteries, and that they were provided mainly for young people (oblates) who were planning to join the monastery, or in the case of the nobility, where “an exception might be made for children of patrons or noble families.”⁶⁸ Ward and Chiavaroli interestingly discuss the culture of learning that attracted Heloise and Abelard in Paris, and these authors risk picturing Heloise within the “foyer of schools, teachers and clashing ideas” that were part and parcel of the intellectual attraction of Paris in the early twelfth century.⁶⁹ Evidence of Latin literacy abounds.

The Argenteuil

It is known that noble families frequently called upon monasteries for the education of

⁶⁵ Venarde, Preface, xii.

⁶⁶ Churchill, Brown and Jeffrey, Intro., 1, 2.

⁶⁷ Churchill, Brown and Jeffrey, Intro., 2.

⁶⁸ C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, Third Ed. (London: Longman, 1984), 137.

⁶⁹ Ward, and Chiavaroli, 58. As with this interesting article, there are so many good pieces of scholarship to read and to ponder, that it is a delight to study Heloise within the context of the research that has been done in the past recent years.

their daughters.⁷⁰ Penelope Johnson reports that there were “schools, books and Latin literacy in convents.”⁷¹ Most importantly, Constant Mews says that women of nobility could receive a classical education at aristocratic monasteries such as the Argenteuil or Le Ronceray at Angers.⁷² Waldman gives a helpful description of the Argenteuil before the Suger takeover. What is known about the Argenteuil from Waldman has to do more with the wealth and property of the Argenteuil than with anything about the educational curriculum or student or oblate population of this monastery. Waldman reports that Argenteuil was known for its vineyards, which supplied wine for the abbey of Saint-Denis, and for its port located on the Seine River.⁷³ Apparently, the priory itself was very valuable.⁷⁴ More research will need to be done on this and other aristocratic women’s monasteries. An interesting finding given by Ward and Chiavaroli, in their article titled “The Young Heloise and Latin Rhetoric” (2000),⁷⁵ is the idea that after about 1100 to 1175 in France, monasteries had a rapid growth and accepted “sub-aristocratic” daughters, and that Heloise might have been one of these as an oblate to the Argenteuil. This point of view, as with other scholarly ideas about Heloise’s background, needs further deliberation.

Heloise, it has been established, was raised at the Argenteuil, possibly placed there by her wealthy parents who were training her for one of the powerful roles for women which have been discussed in the last section of this paper. If Mews is correct in placing Heloise

⁷⁰ Ward and Chiavaroli, 61. Here they discuss the various reasons for taking a daughter to a monastery including increasing social status, education, preserving inheritance. Evergates’ research takes issue with some of these conclusions, such as avoiding a dowry or preserving inheritances.

⁷¹ Johnson, 147.

⁷² Mews, *Lost Letters*, 113.

⁷³ Waldman, 257.

⁷⁴ Waldman, 257.

⁷⁵ Ward and Chiavaroli, 60-61.

at about the age of twenty-one when she left the Argenteuil, it is possible to imagine that Heloise was fully educated and maturing in the classics before she left to go to Paris. It is most likely that the Argenteuil was in fact the primary place of her education in the classics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Heloise was gifted with sufficient nobility, probably the newer nobility within the Garlande family. The possibly even of higher, older nobility, through another branch of the Montmorency family line or through more exploration of the families on her mother's side, should not yet be ruled out. There needs to be more research in the area of her genealogy before firm statements can be made. Her family was able to direct her and pay for the excellent education offered at the Abbey of the Argenteuil. Her mother could have been the source of that direction, but at one point, Abelard could even have been thinking of her education when he asked her to go there. These of course, are just personal speculations at present, but could lead to worthwhile investigations of Heloise's mother and of the source of her important placement at the Argenteuil.

Being able to be accepted as a student at this monastery, and then to have the means to afford this education, is strong evidence that Heloise would be classified in the noble or aristocratic strata of society in twelfth-century France. It would be possible, but unlikely for non-noble women to be admitted, but information is not historically available to allow a reasoned opinion. It would be considered an unusual occurrence, one can hypothesize,

for someone without means to enter the Argenteuil. Her life, both in the acquisition of her education and in Heloise's election as prioress at the Argenteuil and later as abbess of the Paraclete, indicates that she was of sufficient nobility to obtain privileged and powerful experiences and positions within her society. It is likely that both she and her family knew that a high quality life was possible, since diverse opportunities existed for women of nobility in medieval France, and these positions were promoted in the family for Heloise, a daughter of a heritage of wealth and power.

Heloise was able to be educated classically and to live within a life of the literate elite because of the tradition of education and Latinity that existed in her time. Recent scholarship, as this paper has demonstrated, confirms this fully. It was clearly an option in medieval France that an aristocratic young woman could obtain a classical education such as was offered at a monastery like the Argenteuil. There is no question that more research needs to be done in order to better understand Heloise's own process and the nature of Latinity and literacy in this period. Areas of genealogy are not fully understood. Important primary documents, such as Heloise's *Institutions Nostrae*⁷⁶ and Abelard's 9th Letter to Heloise, titled "On Educating Virgins,"⁷⁷ are revealing sources that are not as yet fully explored, and in some cases are barely known. French language sources need to be translated and available for scholarly review to English-speaking scholars and students so that important information may be critically reviewed by more scholars. An area that might lead to important insights might be found in the study of the interlocking and close

⁷⁶ Waddell, 202.

⁷⁷ "Abelard to Heloise: On Educating Virgins (Letter 9)," in *Guidance for Women in Twelfth-Century Convents*, trans. by Vera Morton with Interpretive Essay by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Library of Medieval Women Series (Cambridge: D. W. Brewer, 2003), 121-138.

family networks at this time in French history. The discovery of a reasonable identity for Heloise's family name and the name of her father would add weight and significance to the historical reality of this important life of Heloise. This study is designed to contribute to the better understanding of women's literacy, and its reflection in the brilliant life of Heloise, and we await further research findings in this important medieval scholarship.

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