

Love: A Suspect Form
Heloise and Abelard

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To my daughters
Nora, Gabriela, and Juliet

A Visit to The Paraclete

Driving from Paris we have passed through countryside that in the twelfth century belonged to Count Thibault of Champagne. Early fall has muted the slightly undulant fields to buff and soft green; crops are in, agribusiness lulled. I catch the outlines of the ancient fortress and the church tower that crown Provins, where Abelard surely visited the count. Further on, outside Nogent-sur-Seine stand the distant twin stacks of nuclear reactors, then appears the cut-off for A16 and a sign to Le Paraclete.

Eight kilometres later we turn onto a narrow country road that was laid with small cobblestones hundreds of years before Europeans dreamed of the New World. It leads us past the outer wall of a large stone barn. (How elegant these ancient barns, their picturesque weight bespeaking a narrative remote from the frame structures of my North Carolina farm childhood.) Fast beside the barn where I can glimpse an assortment of farm machinery stands a red brick Regency-style house behind tall, emphatically closed wrought iron gates. Beyond appears another structure by a stream. This must be a mill; yes, there is the grindstone leaning against the building. And this stream is a rivulet that becomes the River Ardusson. The car bumps over an old culvert guiding the water towards the woods. It's still, almost oppressive. No animals in the fields, no people to be seen. Not far from town, but seeming isolated. Not quite deserted, but not inviting.

After his first trial for heresy in 1121, Abelard came here and built an oratory of mud and thatch. At the time it was a somewhat primitive area, but not the wilderness Heloise called it. Even then Champagne was intensely cultivated; the villages and monasteries in the area used every plot of land available. The gloomy trees beneath which we rattle along would be the product of land returned to forest. Over a rise, and the cobblestones stop in a clearing marked with stubble from a recent harvest. We turn back towards the silent buildings.

For five years I have been imagining this place as it must have been in the twelfth century. Abelard was here first; then Heloise, his pupil, his lover, mother of his son, his wife, fellow religious, and the first Abbess of the Order of The Paraclete.

For nearly nine hundred years the story of Heloise and Abelard has endured. It is spectacular in its most famous elements — love letters between a nun and monk, a secret marriage, a child lost to history. In popular imagination this is the story's chronology, but the events were reversed. As is usual with people's lives, things were complex.

Around 1117, the philosopher Peter Abelard taught at the newly established university in Paris. He was famous throughout Europe and, he tells us in his autobiography, believed himself "Philosopher of the World." Heloise (no one knows her family name), niece of a canon at Notre Dame, was his pupil. Reared in a convent near Paris she was brilliant and uncommonly educated for a young woman, known for her mastery of Latin rhetoric and her familiarity with the Roman classics. Her uncle employed Abelard to give her lessons. "Need I say more?" asks Abelard. Their affair resulted in the birth of a son whom she named Astralabe. Later they wed in a secret ceremony, but never lived together. The church had new requirements of celibacy for its teachers, especially for so conspicuous a master as Peter Abelard. In the hope he might retain his status and his pupils, Abelard insisted the marriage remain secret. For reasons not entirely clear, perhaps even to himself, he soon sent Heloise back to the convent of Argenteuil. Her uncle considered this to be abandonment and, in a semi-legal act of revenge, paid to have Abelard drugged and castrated. Very soon thereafter, in 1118, the lovers took religious orders, she at her husband's bidding. Thereafter they saw each other but on a few occasions.

As we turn from the field and head back towards the house, I tell Alexandre, my driver for the day, that I'll walk. I want to get closer to the low wall that extends from the mill across the culvert and along the road. Maybe I will be able to glimpse the obelisk that, according to the guidebook, marks the place where the couple once were buried. An obelisk: strange, Napoleonic

tribute to medieval lovers and destroyed convent. Through a tangle of long-limbed ground vines, I reach the low wall topped by a wrought iron fence. I can hear the steady rush of water beneath the mill house. But I see only the red brick manse that is out of sync with any medieval expectations I had.

And what expectations can I have? What do I want to find here? Every poem, whatever the subject, is about the writer.

Several years ago a friend shared with me a poem she had written after visiting the tomb of Abelard and Heloise in the Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris. Her poem led me to a line Abelard had written in one of his hymns: "Deep in thy grave with thee, happy to lie." I stood at a window in my favorite room of the home that I would soon leave forever. As I looked out on live oak trees and low mountains of the Texas Hill Country, I repeated to myself words of a twelfth-century French monk. That must have been the moment these poems began, cell by cell, word by many rejected word. What happens when two souls join, then part? Perhaps they can meet again, content with each other in some far spiritual hinterland. But what about the long interval of days, what shape might they take?

A life is about changing forms, Ovid tells us: metamorphosis. Ovid, author of scandalous love poetry and titillating myth narratives, was incongruously present in every scriptorium in the middle ages. Novices read him and copied out passages, supposedly for the fine examples of Latin usages. Sophisticated bishops quoted him at their tables. Surely they did not miss the parallel courses of myth and "real" life that they observed every day. After taking orders, Abelard and Heloise, teacher and student, lovers, husband and wife, parents, were changed into monk and nun, brother and sister, father and daughter, son and mother.

Loving souls severed from each other, willingly or reluctantly, must take up new identities. In some form they have to make their way in the world, working out their individual narratives. The reactions of Heloise and Abelard to their new roles were strikingly different.

As a monk Abelard was entirely committed to his vision

of God and Church, and he never ceased teaching and writing on the subject. For him, the use of one's rational faculties has a moral basis. Conscientious and informed reasoning leads to a more complete understanding of God: "By doubting", he wrote, "we come to inquiry and by inquiry we perceive the truth." Statements like this kept him in conflict with rival teachers and conservative elements in the Church. In 1121, three years after taking orders at the prestigious monastery of St. Denis, he was condemned as a heretic and his books were burned. Abelard himself could have been put to the flames. However, he had friends with influence, and soon he was granted permission to establish a small oratory in the region of Champagne. He named the chapel The Paraclete, a term which refers to the Holy Spirit as Comforter. Within a few years the oratory and its adjacent buildings were abandoned because Abelard was sent as Abbot to a remote and unruly monastery in Brittany. Ten years later he returned to Paris and was again a master at the university. Then in 1140 came his second trial and condemnation as a heretic. Once again he barely escaped execution. He was over sixty and weakened by an illness with symptoms that scholars speculate indicated Hodgkinson's disease; yet he was determined to appeal his case in Rome and he set out—walking. He never made it to Rome, but he did find refuge in the great Burgundian abbey of Cluny. He died there, perhaps within the year. Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, personally brought Abelard's body to The Paraclete for burial.

Heloise, on the other hand, entered the religious life with no vocation for it. Her heart remained in the hidden rooms of her romance. More than ten years after taking the veil, she revealed in letters to Abelard that daily she was consumed with longing for him and with resentment towards a God whom she held responsible for her husband's castration and her misery. Nonetheless, she was appointed Prioress of Argenteuil and held that post until the abbey was dissolved in 1129, when Abbot Suger claimed the land for St. Denis. The nuns at Argenteuil had to find other religious houses to take them in. At this point, with no family support and no one with influence to intercede for her,

Heloise was truly alone in the world. Apparently, no convent would accept her. Upon hearing of this, Abelard, who by then was in Brittany, asked for authority to establish Heloise and a few other nuns at the oratory of The Paraclete in Champagne. She was named Abbess of The Paraclete in 1131. Thirty-three years later on these grounds she died, having lived more than twenty years after Abelard's death.

At the time of her death she was universally respected for her administrative skills, her diplomacy, and her piety. What is not known is whether she ever ceased to think of herself as a hypocrite, someone wearing a habit of Christian submission over her true pagan Roman skin. If she was diligent in her duties, that virtue probably was derived as much from her readings of the Roman moralists such as Cicero as from her acceptance of monastic rule. No doubt, she also had a strong desire for personal accomplishment. We will never know if she considered The Paraclete, the shelter her husband deeded to her, as more than another form of on-going punishment.

And no one knows what Astralabe, the son left in Brittany, thought about his parents or what contact he might have had with them. It was not an age that valued the parent-child relationship, but it's hard to imagine that even in the middle ages abandoned children were not curious about their parents, and resentful. Even after he became a young man, it would have been difficult for him to overcome the barriers of church protocol and his parents' apparent self-absorption to initiate communication with them. What is known is scant: there exists a poem of advice attributed to Abelard which is dedicated to an Astralabe; and when Astralabe was about twenty, his mother wrote the kindly-disposed Peter the Venerable asking for a position as canon for her son. It is not known for certain what became of the request. Loose ends in a story.

Certainly the story suggested on the present grounds of The Paraclete is discontinuous and seems closed off to me. Though no fierce dogs run out at us, as had been predicted by another writer who had recently tried to visit, neither is there a clear view of the landmarks. I can see the back of a vaguely

Romanesque-style stucco chapel, but no obelisk, no evidence of a crypt. At this point Alexandre parks the car and walks through the arched gateway to the courtyard in front of the barn. After all, the tall iron gates are open here and, from the look of them, have been for centuries. I think, too, he has had enough of this woman who has come from Texas to such an odd place, then merely hovers around the edges.

He knocks at the door of what we presume is the caretaker's house; he is going to ask permission to see the obelisk. A youngish woman answers the door. She fits my image of unaffected French elegance—medium height, medium dark hair in a simple cut, her skin perfect without makeup. Her shirt and Bermudas are classic and her loafers slightly scuffed, as befits life in the country. Alexandre must be very well spoken because she becomes liltily animated. I understand that she gives tours only in July and August, *Je regrette*. Now Alexandre earns his tip: But Madame has come all the way from Texas for research. She asks if I teach philosophy. Oh, no, Alexandre exclaims, Madame is a Poet! Writing about Heloise and Abelard! She exclaims in turn, *Ah! Une poète! Un moment*. She opens the door to her house, and out bursts Oliver, a black and white spaniel puppy ready for action. He adores everyone's shoes and wants to pee on them all; in fact he adores us so much he gets severely stepped upon at least twenty times in the next twenty minutes. We head to the grounds, Madame of the Farm explaining the ages of the various buildings, the difficulty of keeping just the right number of doves in the ancient dovecote, the play that was performed on the grounds two years ago.

She is the daughter-in-law of the owners of the manor and the land around it. She loves the farm life, and she loves the story of Abelard and Heloise. Her husband's family has lived here since shortly after the Revolution, when the Order of the Paraclete was dissolved and the convent vandalized, then sold. (A member of the Comédie-Française built the Regency mansion over the shell of the convent's priory.) By the time of the Revolution, the Paraclete was a large, prosperous enterprise with an aristocratic membership. Monks from nearby Benedictine monasteries

were hired as laborers. It could not have been more unlike what Heloise found when she first came here.

There were a few crumbling buildings and nothing else. In his autobiography Abelard concedes that the first years were difficult for the nuns. There was hard physical labour to be performed, and the nuns had to do most of it themselves. This meant no time for Heloise, the high-born scholar, to read. However, as she swept floors or worked in the fields she might have been reminded of any number of ancient stories in which characters find themselves turned into beings alien from what they know of themselves. There was Io, the maiden turned into a white cow after being raped by Jove. And Heloise's story resonates with that of Atalanta: abandoned at birth and brought up in a sacred cave, she became famous for her swiftness in the races. However, she and her husband offended the goddess Cybele with their passion and were turned into lions, condemned eternally to pull her cart across the sky. There is little evidence left now of what Heloise's daily life would have been like in the twelfth century. The present chapel is a small replacement for the one destroyed in the Revolution. The obelisk beside it, like most obelisks, is unremarkable. It's supposed to stand on the spot where Heloise and Abelard were buried when their coffins were removed from the original crypt to drier ground. Ah, the crypt.

We walk down a slope to what looks like the mouth of a cave. The floor is paved with stone slabs, as are the walls. It's a dank, empty space where two coffins, encased in outer vaults, once lay side by side. The truth is, the bones of Heloise and Abelard have travelled. Four times they were moved within the precinct of The Paraclete itself. Just prior to the Revolution they were transferred for safety to a church in Nogent-sur-Seine, perhaps moved twice there. In 1800 they were taken to Paris and entombed in a museum, but finally came to rest in the company of other notables and celebrities, including Jim Morrison, at Père-Lachaise cemetery. Even today there always are bouquets and love poems tucked in the low wrought iron fence surrounding their elaborate marble tomb. Ironically, there

commonly are mix-ups when remains are moved from tomb to tomb. No one knows for certain that the bones in Paris are actually theirs.

Our hostess, Alexandre, Oliver, and I peer into the dark little chamber. She repeats the famous legend: The lovers are buried together. When the lid of Abelard's coffin is lifted, he extends his arms to receive his true love. "Deep in thy grave with thee, happy to lie." I'm sure Heloise would not like this story. She was too much a child of Latin classics to be sentimental or morbid, and she wanted a life in the here and now.

Obligations are calling the charming Madame of the Farm. There's not a lot to see after all, in the way of buildings. But I really came to The Paraclete to learn what the water is like here, its colors, what creatures live on its banks. Tibault gave Abelard refuge on some boggy land; Heloise turned it into a prestigious institution that endured for six hundred years. Here was the home and the project for her life, both of which her husband gave to her. It was not the romanticized, high-minded life of the mind that she wanted. But, given her scholarly nature, her intelligence, and the time in which she lived, it was the best life available to her.

And the land was always here for her, waiting to give. At this point the Ardusson is a stream becoming a river, and above the mill, more of a pond. Quiet water, even as it falls over the small stone dam to the mill. Where we are standing, tall reeds form a buffer between the water and the crypt. Perfect duck habitat. On cue, a clutch of young mallards swims into the open. Across the water, a heron lifts. Ah!

Characters

Peter Abelard [Pierre Abélard]: c.1079–1142. Born at Le Pallet, near Nantes in Brittany. His parents apparently were minor nobility. His skill at teaching and argumentation made him one of the most famous thinkers of his day; but he also was a controversial figure, both for his philosophy/ theology and for the conduct of his personal life. His writings influenced the thought of later philosophers, including Thomas Aquinas.

Heloise [Héloïse]: c.1090–1163. Only her mother's name, Hersinde, is known. She was educated at the convent of Argenteuil and perhaps at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. When she met Abelard, probably when she was in her mid-twenties, she was considered the most educated woman in France. In his autobiography Abelard refers to her as *adolescentia*, a term referring to an unmarried female between the ages of 14 and 30.

Peter Astralabe: c.1118. Sometimes spelled Astrolabe or Astrolabius. Son of Abelard and Heloise, he was left after his birth to be reared by Abelard's sister in Le Pallet. Nothing else definite is known about him. It is possible he is the same Canon Astralabe at the Nantes Cathedral in 1150 and/or the Abbot Astralabe of Hauterive in Fribourg in 1162.

Hersinde: Variouslly spelled Hersendis, or Hersint. Mother of Heloise. Nothing else definite is known about her. She is commemorated in the Necrology of The Paraclete on December 1, the Feast of Saint Eloi.

Fulbert: died c.1127. Uncle and guardian of Heloise. Apparently of a well-connected family, he was Canon of Notre-Dame in Paris. He was responsible for Abelard's castration. At the time castration was not an entirely illegal revenge upon a man who had dishonored a woman and her family.

(St.) Bernard of Clairvaux: c.1090–1153. An aristocrat from Burgundy, he was Abbot of the Cistercian monastery of

Clairvaux. An immensely influential churchman, writer, and preacher, he promoted the Second Crusade. At Abelard's trial for heresy at Sens in 1140, Bernard was the prosecutor.

Peter the Venerable: c.1092–1156. Also from Burgundy, Peter was said to be the most powerful figure in the church after the Pope. He was Abbot at the great monastery of Cluny, and often in dispute with Bernard of Clairvaux. After the Council of Sens, Peter gave Abelard shelter, professed him a monk of Cluny, and readmitted him to “apostolic grace.”

Ovid: 43 BCE–17 CE. Publius Ovidius Naso, a Roman poet. His work was widely read in the middle ages, especially his interpretations of classical myths. Despite his sophisticated treatment of sexuality, Ovid's work was used as a standard for Latin composition in church schools. In 08 CE he was banished to a remote corner of the Roman Empire, and he died there nine years later.

Atalanta: A figure from classical mythology. She was abandoned by her father, King Iasus, but the goddess Artemis in the guise of a bear rescued Atalanta, and raised her in the wild. When she became famous as a hunter and runner, her father reclaimed her. Her great beauty inspired men to race against her for her hand, but she always won. Hippomenes appealed to Aphrodite, who distracted Atalanta by tossing golden apples in her path during their race. Later the couple offended both Aphrodite and Cybele and were turned into lions.

The cause is hidden, but the power known.

Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, IV

*Now I shall tell of things that change, new being
Out of old . . .*

Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, Book I

I will gladly do my best to obtain a prebend in one of the great churches for your [son] Astralabe, who is also ours for your sake.

Letter 168, Peter the Venerable, to Heloise

O Atalanta . . . yet alive, you shall lose all that is yours, and never get away.

Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, Book X

Astralabe: Master of Script

(An abbey school on the coast of Brittany, around 1140)

These adolescents accept they have missed The Age of Gold, when no beast, no man was base. What's more, they suspect our abbey cowers at the edge of the world in a late, dark time. (The roar you hear is the ocean flinging salt and grit against our walls.)

Gifts to God and obedient, the boys wrap chilblained fingers round their quills and copy phrases from Ovid. The poet of love suffers a new exile, to church scriptorium all over Christendom.

Feigning deafness to love meter and chill to Atalanta who wears but ankle ribbons as she races down the vellum page, they hold square-nib pens at sharp angles. In Carolingian letters they shape the oracle's warning:

Lay not with man! Ascender, descender, ligature of characters, plot demands monition be forgot.

A student clears his nose in his soured sleeve; others snigger at the temple coupling. They have theories why I often assign this tale. One grins, his stained finger taps *amor's* urgent beat. (Ink pot falls, ocean pummels its own rhythm.)

Young ignorance moves me, simple minds eager to writhe on
sacred floors, spell-struck and naked. As if sex is the point.

O what Powers—lusty gifts and sudden offense! A maiden's
skin erupts in laurel runnels, gentle twigs like fingers snap when
They send a godly wind. A youth fondling his sister's white arm
is rebuffed by a raven's wing. Claws bedded in coarse pelt stroke
a lover's face.

Atalanta was turned to lion, my mother made nun.
Cybele, one ancient conjurer was called.
I'm loathe to name the other.

. . . indeed, [the Lord] has you much in mind, for by a kind of holy presage of his name, he marked you out to be especially his when he named you Heloise, after his own name Elohim.

Letter 4, Abelard to Heloise

Mother House

(Abbey of Ste. Marie of Argenteuil)

Heloise—derived from Elohim—therefore,
dedicated to God, therefore,
an offering

In the shaft of afternoon Heloise,
a child upon her pallet, curves
into a bell. As insects drone,
light glides along the wall and lures

her with arms warm and entwining.
Dust motes spiral and rise along
a ladder lit to heaven. And they sing.
She thinks she remembers this song

which calls to another. Under her tongue
the response quivers. She wants to touch
the phantom voice. Sing with it. But not one
thing can she hold. To clutch

afternoon light leaves you cold. Night will come
and time beats a loud, empty drum.

Here is the story from Arkadia about Atalanta. At birth her father exposed her. The child was under sentence of death, but shortly afterwards arrived a bear . . . breasts bulging and weighed down with milk.

Aelian, Historical Miscellany, 13.1

Ordinary Affair

(Parthenian Hill, Archaic time)

No god holds Iasus accountable. And the infants,
debris of inopportune couplings, after-thoughts

and fragments scattered about in the rich spring grasses,
what does he owe them? He's not accountable

if some whimper. Not accountable for small skulls
like rocks under his feet, for dirty strings of flesh,

the vultures overhead. Not accountable for this
inconvenient daughter, though he tugs a corner

of the swaddling cloth to cover her perfect reddened
face. (The noon sun is hard.) Not accountable

if a slave trader loiters nearby hoping
for viable goods. Iasus thinks to make

an offering. But who gathers up the abandoned,
who carries them through the dark to eternal

chambers? He lays the infant Atalanta near
a vertebrae necklace and newly blossoming

wild flowers (he's high born and doesn't bother with their names). The sun beats down exactly as it did

yesterday and as it will long after this child drops from his memory's horizon. There's

flesh smell and hunting in the air. On a whim he makes invocation to Artemis, goddess

of hunt and midwives. (A day like others.)
As Iasus turns away his daughter soundlessly

rolls down the hill's slight incline. As if some hand guides her, she misses any stone or cadaver

that might stop her or snag the slow unwinding cloths. Her father doesn't turn to see his child

lying at the bottom of the hill naked, limbs flailing, unfortunate gender exposed. And why

should he look back—it's an ordinary affair, an ordinary day. Careless man. He should know

every time is a remarkable time. A Presence watches, and today She wears the pelt of a bear.