

## Abelard: a Medieval Life

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Christopher Holdsworth

This marvelous book about one of the most controversial and interesting of twelfth-century men deserves the warmest welcome. Since the appearance of Sike's *Peter Abailard* in 1932 the whole landscape in which Abelard lived, as well as our knowledge of his own writings, and those of Heloise, has been transformed through the work of many scholars all over the world so that a wide-ranging study is now exceptionally welcome. Michael Clanchy modestly calls his book 'introductory', and if by this he means something which can be enjoyed by someone without any previous knowledge of the period, it certainly fulfils his description. But he has also created a book whose full savour, to use a word much loved in Abelard's time by monks, will be relished by those who approach it with a much more experienced palate. This is because it tackles so many thorny problems with mastery, as well as wit, based as it is on thorough knowledge allied with a dazzling ability to create illuminating juxtapositions of sources, and so shed new light on old problems and reveal new ones for future scholars to pursue.

The book begins with a short chapter presenting an outline of the whole story which does not remove the tension from the following thirteen chapters since they gradually unpeel much deeper levels of argument. Clanchy keeps some cards up his sleeve for later play, among which many marked 'historiography' are only revealed in the final chapter. The book ends with a useful *Who's Who* of the main actors in the story, abbreviations, notes, suggestions for further reading, and a very well-constructed index.

One strategic decision, not to include a substantial discussion about whether or not Abelard and Heloise's letters, and his own *Historia Calamitatum*, are genuine, is a pity. All there is on this crucial problem is a

sentence in the Preface, a note to the first chapter ( p.15, note 55) and about two pages in the body of the book (pp.154-5, 327-8). Surely the reader who knows nothing of the subject will not be much helped by the preface's statement 'I am convinced (principally by the arguments of Peter Dronke and David Luscombe) that the letters of Abelard and Heloise are not forgeries' (p.xii), especially when no help is provided there to find those arguments among the six works listed by the two authors under 'Further Reading', and the note just mentioned does not include either of them. It would have been so very helpful if Clanchy had expressed his own convictions at greater length. I also regret that he has not consistently provided the reader without Latin with references to the available English translations of the correspondence, or of Bernard's Letters, alongside those to the scholarly editions. On the other hand his grasp of the considerable literature, even including the notable study of Abelard's Philosophy by John Marenbon which only appeared last year (Marenbon, 1997), fills one with confidence.

The book is, in so far as the sources allow, a biography and not a discussion of Abelard's philosophy or theology, although, they play a large part in the book since both were controversial and drastically affected what happened to him, notoriously bringing down upon his head accusations of heresy twice, in 1121 and 1140. What, then, is his new Abelard like ?

He is, in the first place, set much more firmly within the society of his time, from his birth into a knightly family on the southern border of Brittany until his death at a priory attached to the great Burgundian abbey of Cluny. One is given a sense of distances, of the ways in which power, whether secular or ecclesiastical , was limited in effectiveness, so that, on the one hand, Abelard could be confident that when he sent Heloise to Brittany she would be safe from pursuit from Paris, or, on the other hand, that he could not be sure he would not be lynched at the Council of Sens. At every point the circumstances around Abelard's life are brought richly to our attention.

This is especially crucial with the picture created of the life of the schools in which Abelard spent so much of his career. This should not surprise us coming from the author of *From Memory to Written Record*, who provides valuable discussions about how learning took place, and especially about the influence of verbal teaching rather than writing. He also reveals the peculiar power and prestige then accorded to the study of logic, which he calls the 'the medieval equivalent of management training', and its practitioners the 'language therapists' of the time (pp. 100,108). Such words may, perhaps, seem dated in a few years, but his demonstration that logic was taught by the use of examples which were themselves often facetious, surely helps to explain just what it was about his intellectual approach which horrified some of his contemporaries, particularly Bernard of Clairvaux, when he interested himself in theology. The precarious and competitive situation of a teacher, whether in Paris or Laon, also come across clearly, and, more surprising, perhaps, the fact that someone like Abelard may not have had 'unlimited access to a great library' until he became a monk at St Denis (p.227).

For any teacher the patronage and protection of a great man could be extremely significant, and here the role of one, Stephen of Garlande, emerges in a way which would have surprised an earlier generation of scholars. For Sikes Stephen deserved less than a paragraph, devoted to his role in persuading the abbot of St Denis, Suger, to allow Abelard to withdraw from that monastery to live in relative isolation at the site best known as the Paraclete, where later Heloise was to be abbess (Sikes, 20). That role Abelard himself mentions in his *Historia Calamitatum* . But now he emerges as a very powerful canon at Notre-Dame, chancellor successively to Philip I and Louis VI, taking an interest in Abelard from his arrival in Paris around 1100 until his own withdrawal to the abbey of St Victor about forty years later. His power had its fairly drastic ups and downs, but it may have been crucial for Abelard. Here Clanchy follows suggestions first made by Bautier in 1981 (Bautier, 1981, 58-77). The evidence is nearly all circumstantial, but the argument has won wide acceptance because it gives a new and effective explanation for some of the hostility which Abelard evoked. On one side, William of Champeaux, another canon at Notre-Dame, who was Abelard's master in his early days in Paris, but with whom he fell out spectacularly, belonged to a faction at the cathedral opposed to Garlande. On the other, Garlande evoked the distaste of Bernard of Clairvaux, who once described him memorably as 'a bad smell' in a letter to Suger, abbot of St Denis, because he acted as seneschal to Louis VI from 1120 to 1127, and as such had military responsibilities whilst being a cleric. But

Bernard almost certainly was also moved by the fact that William of Champeaux, who was Bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne from 1113 to his death in 1121, was one of his own closest friends and supporters from the time when he became abbot in 1115. Clanchy is extremely convincing in his restatement of Bautier's ideas, and in his evocation of the networks of friendship, and hostility, which criss-crossed not only the French schools and monasteries, but stretched across the Alps to affect reputations in the papal curia.

Another great achievement of this book is to show us a man who changed his mind about a number of issues during his lifetime, most significantly about the place of 'pagan' philosophers in the history of salvation and the place of women in the Church. For Abelard they both came to play an extremely significant role, and in both cases he seems to have been much influenced by Heloise. The plausibility of this is undoubtedly affected by Clanchy's argument that she was very much older than scholars have previously believed. He takes his stand on some words of Peter the Venerable's in a letter to Heloise confessing that he was still an adolescent when he heard of her reputation as a 'woman who, although not yet disentangled from the bonds of the world, devoted the highest zeal to literary science.' (p.173). For Peter to call her a woman when he was still adolescent suggests that he must have been younger than she; so, since there are good reasons for holding that he was born in 1092 or 1094, he suggests that she must have been born earlier. This puts her in the late twenties when she and Abelard met around 1117. This is certainly a startling change from the 'teenage bride' of most earlier scholars (but see Mews, 1995, p.12 note 14: 'It seems unlikely that she was much younger than Peter the Venerable.') This older Heloise certainly helps explain the intellectual influence which she seems to have had over him, something which began to emerge in Dronke's work in 1984. An earlier birth around 1090 also removes a contradiction between her own, and Abelard's, views and her own career: a point which Clanchy does not mention .

In the letter which Heloise wrote to Abelard asking him to provide the community with a Rule suitable for women, she referred to the fact that canon law laid down that deaconesses should not be ordained before they were forty (Muckle, 1955, p. 245: Radice, 1974, p.165). His reply makes clear that he equated the offices of deaconess and abbess, and believed that she should be 'advanced in age', even that she might be sixty, by quoting some advice which St Paul gave to Timothy (I Tim 5, 9-11) about the enrolment of widows (McLaughlin, 1956, p.252: Radice, p.199-200). So they both seem to have thought maturity in years was necessary for an abbess. The old view which would make her about twenty-nine when she took charge at the Paraclete in 1130 clearly suggests that she actually did something of which both of them disapproved (e.g. Dronke, 1984, p.131), but the new chronology, making her forty, if not older, removes that problem.

As for the course of their passionate relationship, Clanchy is a sensitive and moving guide, making at one point one of his astonishingly effective conjunctions of texts: he uses some words of Bernard about the Bride in the Song of Songs to elucidate how Heloise may have felt about her lover (p.163) He makes clear, in a manner I have never seen before, just why marriage was such a drastic and complicated step for someone who wanted to remain attached to the community of canons at Notre-Dame as master in their school. Clanchy is more certain than most earlier writers that Abelard was in some sense a canon of Notre-Dame (see pp.46, 188-89, 213-14 ), resting his case on Heloise's words, as reported by Abelard, in the *Historia Calamitatum*, when she was trying to dissuade him from marriage: 'is there not a greater obligation on you, as clerk and canon, not to put pleasures before your sacred duties...' (Muckle, 1950, p.188: Radice, 1974, p. 73). Perhaps one still needs some caution about his precise status, since, as far as I know, Abelard never witnessed any document relating to Notre-Dame, but Clanchy is surely right in arguing that his position as master in the cathedral school would have been compromised when news of his marriage got out.

Clanchy also makes abundantly clear how much literature Abelard provided for the Paraclete once his initial hesitation to be in touch with Heloise had broken down. Hymns, homilies, a commentary on the Hexaemeron, and answers to the nuns questions establish him as 'the greatest provider of devotional literature for nuns in the twelfth century.' (p. 153). Undoubtedly some of his contemporaries, especially perhaps Bernard, might have been surprised at this judgement, as I suspect many of us are now, but it seems extremely well founded. More could have been said about the commentary and the answers. The former shows, beyond any doubt that Abelard, just like Bernard, approached the Bible as a text with different levels of meaning, and did so much dependent on Origen. Clanchy states that he was interested in Origen because

each man had suffered castration; this is surely not the whole story ( p. 243). The commentary also shows an interest in *Hebraica veritas*, while the answers refer to an occasion on which he actually listened to a Jewish scholar ( eg. *Expositio*, Migne, PL 178, 731 [Origen], 735 [Jewish version]: *Problemata Heloissae*, PL 178, 717[hearing a Jew] ).

Clanchy's portrait of Bernard and his relationship with Abelard forms one of the finest sides of this remarkable book. His characterisation is subtle and acute. At times what Bernard did is conveyed in very sharp terms: for example, 'Exchanging insults was an admired part of classical Latin rhetoric; its greatest practitioner in Abelard's time was St Bernard.' (p.293), or, 'Bernard persisted in repeating slanders and exaggerating insults because he found it worked, especially at Rome.' (p. 316). There is justification for such language, which gains its subtlest support from the abbot of Cluny's recommendation that Bernard should have looked into 'evil reports' before firing off protests to popes and bishops (p. 316). But may be what seemed easy for the abbot of an ancient and prestigious monastery was not so simple for a contemporary abbot of a much younger house who was in some senses throughout his life a 'young man in a hurry', to adopt a phrase of F.M. Cornford's . We may suspect too that neither would have found it easy to establish the truth of rumours in a world lacking newspapers or telephones, and both would have known that events which they might wish to influence often moved faster than their messengers. Bernard emerges as no 'anti-intellectual' (though Courtney, 1998 suggests so), but as someone whose training and whole experience made it hard for him to react positively to Abelard. But how and when did their hostility develop?

Clanchy explores their early contacts but, rather strangely, does not refer to the sermon 'Adtendite', which, since its first publication by Engels in 1975, has been accepted as a genuine work (see Smits, 1983, pp. 127-8: Mews, 1995, p. 59). It vigorously attacks cistercians who play a part in worldly affairs, and, if Bernard knew of it, must have offended him and predisposed him against the Parisian master. But I think myself that it is more significant that when William of Saint-Thierry drew his attention to Abelard's theology around 1140, Bernard was still deeply affected by the only recently ended Schism. Then he had come to feel that God and he were on the same side because Innocent had finally won recognition , but he realised in his own bones, so to say, for he had been on the road against Anacletus for many months, that it had been extremely hard to overcome the forces unleashed in the Schism. Almost inevitably he had personified those forces as evil, and it was in some senses Abelard's bad luck that his theology was brought to Bernard's attention so soon after the Schism ended. So, in his letter written after the Council of Sens to Innocent Abelard is the dragon following in the wake of the lion, i.e. Peter Leonis, the dead Anacletus ( Ep. 189 par 2: Leclercq and Rochais, 1977, p. 13: James, 1952, p. 318). For Bernard the fact that Abelard was supported by Hyacinth Boboni who had chosen, and stayed on, the 'wrong side' in the Schism ( p. 313) must have damned him still more. But other deep feelings may have been involved too.

Early in his book Clanchy notes some of the similar ideas and ideals held by Abelard and Bernard: they were both monks, reformers, clever with words, and people who 'expressed a passionate commitment to Christ crucified'. He then makes the brilliant suggestion that Abelard was almost Bernard's *alter ego*: the great master, fascinator of women, attractor of young men that he himself might have been (p. 9: though one might object that Bernard was in fact one of the greatest recruiter of monks, many of them young, ever known). His fundamental point, however, seems to me very convincing. It gains when one notices the similarity between words that Bernard used to stigmatise Abelard in 1140 and those he used ten years later about himself, both cited in the book, but separately (pp. 143 and 220). In 1140 Bernard jeered that Abelard 'has nothing of the monk about him except the name and the habit' (Ep. 193: Leclercq and Rochais, 1977, pp. 44-5: James, p. 321), and later lamented to a Carthusian, the group of religious above all other which he venerated, that 'I retain the habit of a monk, but I long ago abandoned the life.' (Ep.250, para 4, Leclercq and Rochais, p. 147: James, p. 402). Something very basic was stirred in Bernard when he felt that external behaviour did not accord with inner disposition: an attitude we may recognise as very close to Abelard's concern with intention.

On the points at issue at Sens in 1140, Clanchy is clear that on the whole Bernard did not misrepresent what Abelard had written and taught, and brings out clearly how Abelard himself was no tolerator of heretics. He has some especially warm pages about the years after the condemnation during which the two men were

reconciled. The source here is Peter the Venerable who says that the abbot of Cîteaux was the one who brought the two men together (Constable, 1967, I, p. 259), a person upon whom Clanchy does not comment. This made me wonder whether that abbot, Rainard de Bar, could have had a particular link both with Abelard and Heloise. He was a son of Miles count of Bar-sur-Seine who held his estates from Theobald of Blois, Bernard's great patron, and also Abelard's protector at his hermitage near Nogent, not far downstream from Bar. Miles founded the monastery of Jully for wives of people who had been drawn into Molesme (Evergates, 1975, 160; Leclercq, 1993, 458-63). So might Rainard have inherited from his father an interest in Abelard when he first settled, and in the female community which later followed him there? Such a link might help to explain something else which otherwise seems somewhat surprising, unremarked here, namely that after Abelard's death Heloise reformed the liturgy followed at the Paraclete on cistercian lines (Waddell, 1980: for his later editions see Mews, 1995, pp.67-8).

The fact that this is a book which raises questions is a mark of its rare quality: it is altogether absorbing and enriching. It will surely establish itself and maintain a place for many years, as an accessible and balanced assessment of Abelard himself and of the many people who affected him and whom he influenced, especially of Heloise, as well as the society in which they lived.

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