

# **The birth of Heloise**

**New light on an old mystery**

**Brenda M. Cook**

**Institute of Historical Research  
University of London**

**September 2000**

## THE BIRTH OF HELOISE: NEW LIGHT ON AN OLD MYSTERY ?.

In 1129, Abbot Suger of St-Denys arranged for the eviction of the nuns of the Benedictine Abbey of Ste-Marie of Argenteuil in order that St-Denys might acquire the wealth of this ancient nunnery. He was supervising the rebuilding of the great royal monastery of St-Denys - the first, and some say the greatest, gothic church in France - and he needed funds. In consequence of this "reformation", Argenteuil became a daughter house of St-Denys and was down-graded to a Priory. In order to appropriate this ancient and prestigious women's house, Abbot Suger used a two-pronged attack: at a notorious meeting at the Council of Paris in 1129, he accused *some* of the nuns of immoral conduct and also all of them having no legal title to the property in the first place. Clearly the accusation of immorality was not enough on its own, and there is every reason to believe that Suger himself had forged the legal documents which "proved" that the nuns' occupation of Argenteuil was illegal.<sup>1</sup>

The nuns were evicted almost before they had time to realise what was happening: Suger was a sharp operator. The women divided into two groups, perhaps reflecting divisions already existing in the nunnery. The senior group, probably led by their Abbess whose name is now lost to us, retreated with some of her Sisters to the Benedictine Abbey of Ste Marie of Malnoué in Brie from where they spent the rest of the century bringing law-suit after unsuccessful lawsuit against St-Denys for the return of their property. This is hardly the conduct of the guilty; it is rather the conduct of those who have every reason to believe they are the legitimate community.<sup>2</sup>

The second group, led by Heloise who had only recently been elected Prioress (i.e. the Second-in-Command of the Abbey) wanted to live a stricter life in accordance with the new spirit of monastic reform that was at this time sweeping Christendom. It was fortunate that Heloise had a husband who owned a property that was in need of occupation. Peter Abelard offered Heloise and her nuns the house which a few years earlier had been the site of his unsuccessful attempt to found an independent place of learning and prayer. So in 1129, Heloise took over a derelict "oratory" dedicated to the Paraclete, a Greek name meaning The Comforter-and therefore one of the titles of the Third Person of the Trinity, God-the-Holy-Spirit. Thirty years later this had become one of the most famous monastic houses for women in all Europe.

It was an astonishing achievement - a spiritual, intellectual, educational and administrative success - and it was Heloise who had made it so. Yet she denied doing this for the glory of God. No, to her last recorded pronouncement she declared that she did all for the love of Peter Abelard, the controversial scholar who had seduced her, got her with child, married her and then, sinking under the horror of the vengeance exacted on him by her kinsfolk, ordered her to become a Religious like himself.

At the peak of her career she was known as *La belle et sage Heloise* (Heloise the Wise and Beautiful). Her reputation for wisdom and learning was second to none in Christendom and leaders of society consulted her. Her nearest equivalent these days would be Dame Mary Warnock, High Mistress of Girton, Chairman of Ethical Committees and TV personality. But Heloise flourished in a society where the majority of men - even men in high positions - could

---

<sup>1</sup> WALDMAN, Thomas G. "Abbot Suger and the nuns of Argenteuil." *Traditio*, vol. 41, (1985) pp239-272.

<sup>2</sup> *Gallia Christiana*. Vol 7, cols 507-511.

neither read nor write and where women's higher education consisted for the most part of household management, embroidery and playing a musical instrument.

So where did she come from, this extraordinary woman and what was the composition of genes that went into her inheritance? We know very little about her background. The accredited information comes from just two sources: Peter Abelard's autobiography, the *Historia Calamitatum*,<sup>3</sup> and the *Necrology*<sup>4</sup> of the Paraclete.

(1) The *Historia Calamitatum*. From this we learn that when Peter Abelard met Heloise she was a young woman, *adolescencia*, virtually any age between 14 and 30;<sup>5</sup> that she was living with her Uncle **Fulbert**, who was a **Canon of Notre Dame, Paris**; and that she had been brought up at the **Benedictine Abbey of Ste-Marie of Argenteuil** a short way down river from Paris - the same nunnery where she took refuge in 1118 and from which she and her Sisters were so summarily evicted in 1129.

From the work of Bautier<sup>6</sup> and others we can estimate that the affair between Abelard and Heloise reached its climax in about 1116/7. Thus we may calculate that Heloise was probably born between **1090 and 1100**. (Modern reference books which give 1101 as her date of birth are far too late.) It is most likely that she was born in about 1095 which would make her 22 or 23 when she bore Abelard's child and, more significantly, in her mid-thirties when she became the Abbess of the Paraclete.

(2) **The Necrology of the Paraclete**. This was the death commemorations diary of the abbey - a working document in daily use. Each day at Mass, the name of the saint whose feast day it was, and the names of patrons of the Abbey and members of the Community who were entered in the Necrology for that day, would be formally commemorated in prayer. The days recorded in necrologies are frequently taken to be the date of the death of the person commemorated, and this is probably the case with the nuns and other members of the Community, but since members of the same family are often found grouped on a particular day, sometimes another significant day was chosen.

Two members of Heloise' family are commemorated in the Paraclete.: Her mother, **Hersendis** (Hersint) who is commemorated on 1 December, the Feast of **Saint Eloi**, and her maternal uncle, **Hubertus**(Hubert)<sup>7</sup> a **canon**, who is commemorated on 26 December, the Feast of **Saint Stephen**.

<sup>3</sup> ABÉLARD: *Historia calamitatum -I; texte critique avec une introduction* publié par J. Monfrin. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1959. 125p.

<sup>4</sup> "Abbaye du Paraclet" *OBITUAIRES de la province de Sens. tome iv (Diocèses de Meaux et de Troyes)* ; publié par Boutillier du Retail et Piétrisson de Saint-Aubin sous la direction et avec une préface de Auguste Longnon. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, MDCCCXXIII [1923]. pp387-429

<sup>5</sup> CLANCHY, Michael T. *Abelard: a medieval life*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. Page 173.

<sup>6</sup> BAUTIER, Robert-Henri. "Paris au Temps d'Abélard". *ABELARD EN SON TEMPS: acts du colloque international organisé a l'occasion du 9e centenaire de la naissance de Pierre Abélard (14-19 mai 1979)*; [edited by Jean Jolivet]. Paris: Les belles lettres, 1981. Pp21-77.

<sup>7</sup> Every biographer and editor I have read assumes that HUBERTUS is an error for FULBERTUS. Enid McLeod (1971) puts forward the widely held opinion that Heloise is unlikely to have had two uncles, both canons, with such similar names. I disagree. There are plenty of instances to be found in charters and necrologies of siblings with similar names and where two or more have entered religious Orders.

The first thing to notice is that the saint on whose day **Hersint** is commemorated is the saint who might also be her daughter's name saint. In the vernacular, "Heloï" sounds very like "Heloise" although modern scholars consider the etymology of the two names is in fact different. One interpretation of this might be that **Hersint** died in childbirth and the baby was given a feminine name sounding similar to that of the saint on whose day she was born. This could be a perfectly valid interpretation.

What we do NOT have is any reference to Heloise's **father**. and since her guardian is a *maternal* uncle, this leads to a strong suspicion that Heloise was **illegitimate**, and illegitimate under particularly scandalous circumstances. The 'ordinary' bastard children of the nobility were openly acknowledged. Sons were given manors or left money in wills; daughters were dowered for a husband or a nunnery. The silence suggests real scandal.

There are also certain **traditions** concerning Heloise's birth.

In 1616 an edition of Abelard's works, compiled by François d'Amboise and André Duchesne declared Heloise to be a member of the **Montmorency** family. In 16 or 17 century one Papire Masson claimed that Heloise was the daughter of "A **Canon of Paris called John**", although he also claimed that Canon John and Canon Fulbert were the same person. Turlot, writing in 1812 said that **Hersint** was an **abbess** of Ste-Marie au Bois near Sézanne who had been the mistress of a member of the **Montmorency** family.

None of these early writers give their sources for this allegations, but it must be remembered that until the Paraclete was closed down at the French Revolution (1789), there would have been documents *and oral traditions* that have not have survived: François d'Amboise was cousin to the then Abbess of the Paraclete, Marie II de la Rochefoucauld. Oral traditions must be treated with caution: they often contain an element of the truth, even if in a garbled and misunderstood form.

Various theories about Heloise's parentage have been put forward by modern scholars. Brooke concludes that "Canon John" must have been a cleric who lived "en menage" and that she was thus a child of clerical concubinage;<sup>8</sup> Bautier claims that she was a member of the notorious de Garlande family<sup>9</sup> and Evergates enlarges on this to make her the half-sister of Manasses, Bishop of Orleans.<sup>10</sup>

A new look at a major clerical scandal in the heart of Paris which erupted in 1107 but which had been simmering for many years, has opened up a new range of possibilities. The following hypothesis is by no means water-tight, but it has the advantage of fitting almost all the know points, both factual and traditional, about Heloise's background, and it has the supreme advantage of offering a plausible identity for the elusive Canon John.

While **Saint Eligius** (Eloi) was Bishop of Noyon (641-660AD) he was renowned for founding nunneries, and one of these was in the very heart of Paris, right on the Île-de-la-Cité between the Royal castle and the Cloister of Notre-Dame. A church dedicated to St-Eloi was still there until

---

<sup>8</sup> BROOKE, Christopher N. L. *The medieval idea of marriage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989

<sup>9</sup> BAUTIER (1981)

<sup>10</sup> EVERGATES, Theodore. "Nobles and knights in twelfth-century France". *Cultures of power: lordship, status, and process in twelfth-century Europe*; edited by Thomas N. Bisson. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995. pp11-35.

the after the French Revolution,<sup>11</sup> but during the 12<sup>th</sup> century it had been a "reformed", that is, like Argenteuil, it had been changed from being an Abbey for women to being a Priory for men. This "reformation" of St-Eloi took place in 1107 amid rather more convincing charges of widespread and long established sexual misconduct by the nuns.

The end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century saw a great reform movement in the church, called the Gregorian Reforms after Pope Gregory VII (1073-85) but continuing long after his death. These aimed at stamping out financial and sexual abuses among the clergy. Obviously the date when reform began in any particular diocese depended on a number of factors, but in 1105 Galo of Beauvais was elected Bishop of Paris. Elected as a reformer, he naturally wanted to demonstrate the new moral climate, and right under his eyes was a notorious scandal. It took him well over a year to carry out this reform but a charter from the Pope<sup>12</sup> backed by a charter from the King of France<sup>13</sup> deprived the nuns St-Eloi of their Abbey and made it a Priory of the Abbey of St Peter Fossa. While the original charter was more concerned with confirming the monks newly acquired rights to the property rather than with what the nuns had been doing, the preamble to the charter reveals most eloquently the state of corruption in the Abbey of St-Eloi:

*"... we want it to be known to all that the convent of St Eloi of Paris was anciently assigned to an order of nuns; but never-the-less by diabolic instinct that weaker sex fell to such great misery of turpitude that arrogantly adhering to open secularism, their vows of chastity broken, the message of the Rule [of St Benedict] thoroughly rejected, they made the temple of God a cavern of fornication and did not hear the voice of our admonition and correction at all. Therefore I Galo by the grace of God Bishop of Paris and William [of Champeaux] the [arch]deacon, finding such great scandal and plague unbearable, from the precept of Pope Pascal [II], from the advice of our King Philip [I] and his son Louis [the future Louis VI], from the encouragement also of our canons, we have eliminated these infamous and incorrigible people from the aforesaid monastery, for the foulness of their lives and have altogether driven them away. And with the help of God have adorned this holy place with a higher order of religious"<sup>14</sup>*

Now to even the most partisan feminist it is obvious that more than one silly mistake by one silly nun is being described here. Not to put too fine a point on it, the nuns of St-Eloi must have been treating their nunnery as *bordello* for a good many years. As Johnson points out,<sup>15</sup> the most likely men to be involved with sexual scandals concerning nuns were the priests who were obliged by the male sacerdotal monopoly to visit the nunneries for the purpose of hearing confessions, celebrating Mass and giving the blessing. It would not be surprising if some Parisian clerics were also implicated in this scandal.

Whether the monks of St Peter Fossa were actually any more chaste than the nuns they replaced cannot be known, but the difference between sexual misconduct in men and women is obvious: men do not give birth to illegitimate children. If flagrant sexual misconduct had been going on

<sup>11</sup> *Plan routier de la ville et faubourg de Paris*. 1776. Che's Latté, rue St Jacques, à la Ville de Bordeaux.

<sup>12</sup> *CARTULAIRE GENERAL DE PARIS; ou, recueil de documents relatifs à l'histoire et à la topographie de Paris*; formé et publié par Robert de Lasteyrie. t.1.: 528-1180. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, M DCCC LXXXVII [1887]. No. 143)

<sup>13</sup> LASTEYRIE no. 144)

<sup>14</sup> LASTEYRIE. No. 143. *Translation: S. Bernard)*

<sup>15</sup> JOHNSON, Penelope. *Equal in monastic profession: religious women in medieval France*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991)

among the nuns of St-Eloi for a good many years, then some of the nuns must have given birth. Might not Heloise have been the daughter of one of these nuns? Could this be why Heloise commemorated her mother on the Feast of St-Eloi? Also, the Abbess of St-Eloi in 1102 was called "Hadvisa" which is a variant of the name "Heloise". Could Heloise have been named after one of her mother's colleagues?

When the nuns were "reformed", they would not have been released from their vows. Had they run away, they would have been social outcasts. After being ritually humiliated - the abbess being obliged to surrender her ring and staff - the penitents would have been dispatched to another Benedictine nunnery. Could Heloise's mother have gone to Ste-Marie-au-Bois near Sézanne, as Turlot claimed, and later risen to be abbess? Unfortunately this is out of the question. This Abbess Hersint was the widow of a Count of Broyes, and Ste-Marie-au-Bois was founded *by her* on land close to the family seat at Sézanne. While it has not been possible to identify *which* Count of Broyes was her husband (she may have been a young, second wife), the second abbess of this abbey was ruling there in 1196, which is too late for her to be the successor of Heloise's mother.<sup>16</sup> However, this is another example of how a tradition can be useful. The memory existed that Hersint had been a nun; Turlot - or Turlot's source - just identified her with the wrong Hersint.

Argenteuil was an ancient Benedictine foundation for women only a few miles down river from the Île de la Cité. It would be reasonable to suppose that at least some of the penitents from St-Eloi would have gone there. At the time of the "reformation" of St-Eloi, 1107, Heloise would have been between 7 and 17 years of age. Heloise could therefore either have gone with her mother to Argenteuil in 1107, or, since it is clear that it took Bishop Galo over a year to effect the eviction of these nuns, Hersint might well have arranged for her daughter to be sent to Argenteuil. It was far enough away to be safe, but close enough for her mother to visit her, and for her mother's brother, the recently appointed Canon Fulbert of Notre-Dame, to act as her guardian and supervise her education.

When the monks of St-Peter-Fossa had established themselves in St-Eloi, they probably cleared out the archives and reused the parchments. At any rate only one solitary charter for the nuns of St-Eloi seems to have survived. It dates from 1102, and concerns the sale by the nuns of an estate (which had been over-run by brigands) to the monks of Morigny, near Étampes, who would be better able to exploit it. The deed was drawn up in the nunnery at St-Eloi and while Renaud the Abbot of Morigny and Bruno his Provost (lay-administrator) signed it, the rest of the witnesses were a motley collection of laymen and clerics who were neither the members of a religious house nor of a nobleman's household. So who were these men who acted on behalf of the nuns who - being women - did not have full legal identity? They must have been the nuns' trustees, or nearest male kinsmen who lived within reach of the nunnery and could act as witnesses to this legal document.

Twelve nuns including the Abbess Hadvisa also signed this charter, together with a lay-woman and a novice. One of these nuns is called **Hermensendis** who signs third in the list and is therefore a senior member of the community, and among the list of male witnesses is this odd pair: **Albertus et Fulbertus, Canonici**. It has always been accepted that this **Canon Fulbert** is

---

<sup>16</sup> *Gallia Christiana* vol. 12 column 578

Heloise's uncle, and that this is the first "sighting" of him in Paris. But why is he linked so closely to a **Canon Albert**, who does not seem to be his colleague at Notre-Dame ? Could this be because they are "brothers after the flesh" and are also the next-of-kin to of one of the nuns - **Hermensendis** ?

"**Hermensendis**" and "**Hersendis**" are variants on the same name; so could "**Canon Albertus**" be the same as the "**Canon Hubertus**" who is commemorated on December 26 in the **Necrology of the Paraclete** ? It must be remembered that these names were written down in that necrology, they were more likely to have been taken from the spoken word than copied from a document. I would suggest that "Hubertus" is a more likely variant of, or mistake for "Albertus" than "Fulbertus" which begins with a consonant, not a vowel or the aspirant.

The document expelling the nuns of St-Eloi and replacing them with the more acceptable monks is signed by what appears to be the whole Chapter of Notre-Dame: the Bishop, the Dean, the Precentor, three archdeacons, three priests, three deacons, of whom one is a **John** and who is a *possible* candidate to be Heloise's father, and three sub-deacons (at that date men in Minor not Major Orders although equally forbidden to marry if they held prebendial appointments) the most junior of whom is **Fulbert**, Heloise's uncle. There is no "Canon Albert" or anyone with a name that might be mistaken for Albert among the canons of Notre-Dame Cathedral.

However, a **Canon Albert** *is* to be found in Paris five years earlier in a charter drawn up between the then Bishop William [de Montfort] of Paris and the Canons of St-Germain l'Auxerrois.<sup>17</sup> **Canon Albert** is the youngest of nine Canons Regular who presumably comprise the collegiate church of **Saint Germain l'Auxerrois**. This year (1097) is very close to the year of Heloise's birth so it is very interesting to note that of the three canons who are also priests, the third in seniority is a *Johannis* - **John**.

The church of St-Germain l'Auxerrois was, like the nunnery of St-Eloi, a very ancient foundation. It is believed that the first "Oratory" was founded in c. 570AD<sup>18</sup> and it enjoyed royal patronage. Indeed, if St-Eloi was situated between the Cloister of Notre Dame and the Royal castle, St-Germain l'Auxerrois was next door to the hunting lodge of the Louvre which later became the royal palace. Such a College of Canons would have housed members or protégés of the noblest families of the Île de France.

Among the witnesses to the charter of the nuns of St-Eloi,<sup>19</sup> there is no chaplain. This would suggest that the nuns did not have a resident chaplain but had to rely on the services of priests living locally. The most obvious source of priests would be the Cathedral: Notre-Dame was virtually next door to St-Eloi, and indeed there were strong traditional links between the two institutions. The Bishop of Paris had the legal oversight of St-Eloi and the community of St-Eloi were entitled to walk in public procession with the canons of Notre-Dame on Ascension Day, on Rogation days and at the funerals of Canons. They were also entitled to sit in the Choir of Notre-Dame on the Feast of St-Eloi (1 December) and lead the singing. Finally, they were expected to provide the food for a great feast for both communities on the Feast of Saint Eloi and on the

---

<sup>17</sup> LASTEYRIE. No. 120

<sup>18</sup> André Devéche: *L'Eglise Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois de Paris: paroisse royale.* (1975)

<sup>19</sup> LASTEYRIE. No 130)

Feast of Saint Paul (29 June). These privileges were transferred to the monks who took over both the buildings and the obligations.

However, the Chapter of Notre-Dame would have been busy with diocesan duties as well as the demands of being a teaching institution. The Canons of St Germain l'Auxerrois were only 15 minutes walk away from St-Eloi.<sup>20</sup> Unlike monks, Augustinian canons - Canons Regular - although they lived a monastic "common life" were expected to undertake pastoral responsibilities in the neighbourhood of their church. So it would make sense for the Canons of St-Germain l'Auxerrois to have shared the responsibility for providing St-Eloi with its rôta of priests. It would have been perfectly feasible for **Canon John of St-Germain** to have had legitimate business at St-Eloi on a regular basis, especially if among the nuns was the sister of one of his brethren. And this (as many writers including Heloise herself have pointed out<sup>21</sup>) can give rise to a morally dangerous situation.

"John" is not a common name<sup>22</sup> among the upper classes *at this period*, although by the end of the twelfth century it had become very popular indeed, and since even among the clergy, full priesthood was *at this date* only conferred on a minority, any other reference at this period and in this geographical area to a **priest called John** would be worth considering.

The previous year, 1096, a vassal of **Bouchard IV of Montmorency**, **Walter Pagan**, and his wife the Countess Hodierna<sup>23</sup> made a substantial gift to the Cluniac priory in Paris called **St-Martin - in-the-Fields**. Not only was this gift approved by Count Bouchard himself, but nineteen members of his household witnessed the deed as well. The last two names are of special interest: **Robert, father of John the Priest and Guiard his son.**

Everyone else in the witness list is identified either by his occupation, or by his land or by his father. It is *most unusual* for a man to be identified by his son unless there is some very special reason for it. From his position at the end of the list of witnesses, it would seem that this Robert is a man of quite humble status, whose son has risen to a much higher social position through the patronage of the **Montmorencies**. If **John the Priest** whose father is a member of the household of a vassal of the Montmorencies is the same man as the priest who is **Canon John, Sacerdos, of St-Germain l'Auxerrois**, and if that man is also the **Canon John** who fathered **Heloise**, then here is the Montmorency connection although in a somewhat attenuated form. Yet this is exactly how an oral tradition abrids. It would be quite typical that a man originally described as a *member of a household of a vassal* of the Montmorencies became in time described as a *member of the family* of the Montmorencies.

This hypothesis has the great advantage of touching the facts and the traditions at all points. It suggests a birth scandal which is the aftermath of the Gregorian reforms would be a matter for concealment; it explains how Heloise was sent to be reared at Argenteuil; it accounts for her having *two* uncles who are canons and makes sense of the entry in the Necrology of the Paraclete. (However, this hypothesis is not dependent on this identification. Canon Fulbertus

<sup>20</sup> In the Spring of 1998 the author attended Mass on a Sunday morning at St-Germain l'Auxerrois and then walked to the front entrance of the Prefecture of Police on the Île de la Cité, which is as close as it is now possible to get to the site of the demolished church of St Eloi. It took precisely 15 minutes.

<sup>21</sup> At the end of Letter 5, page 178 in the Penguin translation. (Radice, 1974.)

<sup>22</sup> In the 1090s names such as William, Geoffrey and even Fulbert are more common than John.

<sup>23</sup> This lady is Hodierna of Gometz-La-Ferté, the widow of Bouchard's cousin Count Guy I of Montlhéry who had died the previous year. Although marrying a man lower than herself in rank, she kept her title.



died on 23 December; Canon Hubertus is commemorated on 26 December which is almost exactly the right length of time for the news to travel along the river vallies from Paris to the Paraclete. What is difficult to understand is how Abelard and Heloise would want to commemorate Canon Fulbert (who did them both so much harm) as benefactor of the Paraclete when he died in c.1124, five years before the Paraclete was founded.) This hypothesis also helps to explain the extremity of Canon Fulbert's response to Abelard's seduction of Heloise: he would have seen it as history repeating itself "like mother, like daughter." This hypothesis also explains one possible connection with the Montmorency family: that her father was a cleric who was a son of a servant of a vassal of the Montmorencies who had been sponsored by them in his clerical career. This, incidentally, suggests that he was a man of very considerable intelligence and ability, for he would not have been sponsored in this way unless he had been considered worthy of the honour.

What this hypothesis does not do is suggest to which family the siblings Fulbert, Hubert/Albert and Hersint belonged. A cursory examination of genealogies and the witness lists of charters suggest that these names occur more frequently in the area of south Normandy, Maine, Anjou and the lower Loire valley. It is perhaps among the noble families of the *comtés* there that their parentage should be sought.

Brenda M. Cook  
Institute of Historical Research,  
University of London  
© September 2000