



2014

# Historia Calamitatum Heloysae

Kaitlin Coats

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion>

---

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Coats, Kaitlin (2014) "Historia Calamitatum Heloysae," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol7/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# Historia Calamitatum Heloysae

## *Defensive Autobiography through Epistolography in Héloïse's Letters to Abélard*

Kaitlin Coats

Scholars have given much attention to the genesis of autobiography in Pierre Abélard's autobiographical epistle *Historia Calamitatum*. This letter has often been remarked upon for the suitability of the epistolary form to both publicize and defend the emotions of the writer. Mary M. McLaughlin notes, for example, that the letter's strength seems to lie in the externally-focused "habit of self-defense" (469). Yet Abélard's autobiography also serves an internalized, self-consoling function, which Chris D. Ferguson identifies as "therapy" driven by the "autobiographical impulse" (205). Abélard, in sum, is much praised for his contribution both to the increased sense of self arising in the twelfth century and to the impulse to formalize the publication of such concepts of self. Yet in writing the *Historia Calamitatum*, Abélard is not only representing himself, but also his lover-turned-chaste-wife Héloïse, whose dramatic contribution to his calamitatum inevitably plays a large part in his autobiography. Abélard himself notes that the story of his love affair has been popularized by love songs even before the writing of the *Historia Calamitatum* (Radice 68). It is only natural, therefore, for Héloïse to have felt a need to correct Abélard's public depiction of her via her own autobiographical writing in her letters. Glenda McLeod, Juanita Feros Ruys, and Sylvain Piron have encouraged a view of Héloïse's letters as autobiography or self-writing, but no one has yet provided a systematic account of precisely how Héloïse's letters contribute to the growing tendency of self-definition in

the twelfth century. Here, I intend to examine Héloïse's use of epistolography to contribute to the forging of a new genre: autobiography. Specifically, Héloïse uses her letters<sup>1</sup> to Abélard as a sort of defensive autobiography, alternating between public and personal modes in order to address and correct his representation of her in the *Historia Calamitatum*.

It will first be important to note the public situation Abélard creates for Héloïse, a clear justification of the self-defensive tone of her letters. In his autobiography, he exclaims, "What sorrow she suffered at the thought of my disgrace!" acting as if, firstly, he is privy to the interior Héloïse which only she herself can possibly access, and, secondly, her identity and emotions are first concerned with him (Radice 68-9)<sup>2</sup>. Abélard's explanation of his lover revolves solely around him, and does not, even despite her incredible education, consider her as a fully-fleshed being with thoughts separate from his own. He introduces Héloïse in his biography as "a young girl" who

in looks . . . did not rank the lowest, while in the extent of her learning she stood supreme. . . . I considered all the usual attractions for a lover and decided she was the one to bring to my bed, confident that I should have an easy success; for at that time I had youth and exceptional good looks as well as my great reputation to recommend me, and feared no rebuff from any woman I might choose to honour with my love. (Radice 66)

Abélard's characterization of Héloïse as less than beautiful was no doubt irksome to the woman, not only for its insulting nature, but also, and more importantly, because Abélard seems to feel he has an authorial power to describe her any way he chooses, positive and negative. The most disturbing part of this passage, however, is Abélard's insistent focus on himself, the bestower of the honor of celebrity upon anyone with whom he comes in contact, as the center of the story. Héloïse is merely incidental—"any woman"—to Abélard; she enters powerlessly, as one who is inevitably drawn to his "good looks and great reputation," and from whom he "fear[s] no rebuff." This characterization—partially a fiction—of Héloïse as merely orbiting her lover's indubitable magnetism actually mirrored and perhaps brought about Héloïse's reality: having been drawn into Abélard's

---

1 For the purposes of this paper, I will side with the majority of scholars in assuming that Héloïse, rather than Abélard or another anonymous writer, indeed wrote the letters that are now attributed to her. For an excellent bibliography citing scholarship on all angles of this debate, see note 2 in Glenda McLeod's "Wholly Guilty, Wholly Innocent" (82-3).

2 Betty Radice's English translation of Abélard and Héloïse's correspondence, which seems to be the most trusted translation by the critics I have encountered, will suffice for the purposes of this paper.

immense celebrity, she was no doubt known by the public exclusively in the way that her husband chose to characterize her.

Naturally, then, Héloïse would want to gain control over her own image, and, since authorial power is what fashioned her public image in Abélard's writing, what better way to reclaim her identity than through her own oppositional authorial power? Epistolography provides the perfect opportunity for Héloïse to defend herself, for several reasons. Firstly, what Giles Constable describes as the "epistolary situation" (13), in which two friends are forced to use writing as a means of remedying their distance from each other, is all too dismally true for her: Héloïse has reluctantly moved many miles away to take up the habit, having been spurned by her former tutor-turned-lover-turned-husband Abélard after he was castrated at the hands of her uncle upon the disclosure of their extramarital affair. Secondly, Abélard has set a precedent for letter-writing, both by carrying on correspondence with his wife prior to the *Historia Calamitatum* and by penning that widely-circulated letter to his friend, which Héloïse may now crack open by writing more elegantly and citing more classical and scriptural authorities than Abélard himself does. Thirdly, as Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus note, letters are a prime genre for women "because of the directness with which they convey ideas and emotions and because of their immediate availability of audience," as well as because of the opportunity they afforded women to "bypass the need for formal education, literary patronage, editors, and publishers," all of which were governed by patriarchal medieval culture (1). Importantly, women were even considered preferable letter-writers to men (1). Finally, letters offered a unique opportunity to interject a relatively public literary genre with the private thoughts and emotions of the author.

The fourth point deserves some elaboration, as it is the major point of exploration in this essay. Constable remarks on the importance of viewing medieval letters as a public matter: "Whereas intimacy, spontaneity, and privacy are now considered the essence of the epistolary genre, in the Middle Ages letters were for the most part self-conscious, quasi-public literary documents, often written with an eye to future collection and publication." In fact, he continues, "it is doubtful whether there were any private letters in the modern sense of the term" (11). Medieval letters are difficult to separate from a variety of other genres from official public documents to love poems—except by their characteristic features of a salutation and subscription (Constable 12, 18). The one and only distinguishing feature of this public genre is of a very personal nature, reaffirmed by the facts that epistolography seems to have arisen out of an increased interest in friendship

in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Constable 16) and that, as Constable notes, letters “served no legal or administrative purpose and expressed ‘only the intention of the sender and recipient’” (21). While epistolography was therefore a decidedly public, rather than private, act, it was nevertheless personal and at least afforded letter-writers the opportunity to communicate matters of a more private interest than those usually taken up by public literature.

Héloïse repeatedly shows her awareness of this public-private binary in both the genre she is using and in her roles and responsibilities as a woman. In the opening address of letter one<sup>3</sup> she conflates these roles in order to express her confusion: “To her master, or rather her father, husband, or rather brother; his handmaid, or rather his daughter, wife, or rather sister; to Abélard, Héloïse” (Radice 109). As McLeod notes, Héloïse here “moves from a public relationship where she is clearly the underling (master-handmaiden) to relationships progressively more familial and equitable (brother-sister)” (65)—relationships in which she can more easily defend herself, in which she precludes herself from being considered merely “any woman.” To McLeod, this salutation indicates that Héloïse links her relationships together in a “continuum” and that the connections between public and private are important to her (65-6). Héloïse figures herself in both types of roles, and, as I will explain, uses both modes to her advantage in addressing her grievances to Abélard.

I would add to Dr. McLeod’s thought that Héloïse views Abélard’s treatment of her as an inversion of public and private. For example, Héloïse writes, “But whatever you write about will bring us no small relief in the mere proof that you have us in mind” (110), which suggests Abélard has replaced the “reality [Héloïse has] lost” (109) with a lack of personal communication, thereby allowing his public, monastic duty to chastity (manifested here in the extreme through his reluctance even to communicate) to replace their private relationship. At the same time, Héloïse seems to realize he has publicized their private relationship as lovers through the writing of his letter and through forcing their romance into the mold of the public institution of marriage, which, Héloïse thinks, does not suit the distinctness of their love—hence her infamous statement that “The name of wife may seem more sacred or more binding, but sweeter for me will always be the word mistress, or, if you will permit me, that of concubine or

<sup>3</sup> I will not include *Historia Calamitatum* in the collection of numbered letters; rather, I will count Héloïse’s first letter to Abélard as “letter one” of the exchange in order to distinguish the correspondence between the couple from the correspondence between Abélard and his unspecified friend. Additionally, I will focus only on letters one and three, both of which Radice classifies as “personal letters,” and exclude letter five, which falls under the “letters of direction” (107, 157).

whore" (113). In other words, Héloïse sees external, public categories as irrelevant to her private relationship with her lover.

Héloïse, then, is painfully aware of the distinction between public and private, and it is this distinction that she calls upon in the writing of her letters, using a public voice to convey private emotion and invoking features of letter-writing and autobiography as fits her case. Glenda McLeod marks the grammatical distinction between these roles in Héloïse's letters: "First person singular indicates her private role as Abélard's wife; first person plural speaks as the more public abbess" (65). In her public voice, then, Héloïse, as prioress, shows her consciousness of the public nature of epistolography and her expectation that her letter will be read by a wide audience, especially considering the fame she has no doubt acquired because of her scandalous relationship with Abélard.

This public voice provides a public locale for Héloïse's emotion, identifying her with her fellow nuns and, implicitly, with others, thus exonerating her from the potential accusation of irrationality that was so quickly used against women in the Middle Ages. Héloïse speaks for her entire abbey upon receipt of the *Historia Calamitatum*, saying, "All of us here are driven to despair of your life, and every day we await in fear and trembling the final word of your death. And so . . . we beseech you to write as often as you think fit to us" (Radice 110). Later, in letter three, Héloïse characterizes her fellow nuns as increasingly despairing, having heard him speak of his imminent death, and wondering how he could "suppose that our memory of you could ever fade" (128). Héloïse could indeed be practically representing the emotions of her sisters, but her third-person plural writing also serves a metaphysical function. For Héloïse does not implicate her readers, other than Abélard, in the "you" of the letter, as might be assumed of the usual nature of public letters. Rather, she gives her audience the opportunity to identify with the "we." Virtually every time Héloïse uses the third-person plural, her words may easily apply to a much broader readership of the *Historia Calamitatum* than just the nuns in her abbey; thus the above quotation from letter one bespeaks an audience captured by the cliffhanger in the events of Abélard's misfortunes, and that from letter three appeals to the literary immortality of a written autobiography.

McLeod's distinction between the singular/private and the plural/public first-person voices of Héloïse is certainly helpful in identifying the shifts of discourse in Héloïse's letters, however, it is incomplete without the introduction of a third category, which is located in third-, rather than first-, person verbs. This voice is even more public than that of the prioress; it is that of the woman in general.

Héloïse becomes a voice for her gender in her letters to Abélard, identifying her cause with that of half of the human population.

In this third, most public voice, Héloïse says, “Every wife, every young girl desired you in absence and was on fire in your presence” (115), framing her love for Abélard, which he has so flippantly discarded, as common among her public audience. She thus builds solidarity with her readers, identifying herself with them so that they come to understand her not in terms of Abélard’s mediocre description of her in the *Historia Calamitatum*, but in terms of her definition of herself as an understandably lovelorn woman. So after she frames loving Abélard as public, she locates that problem within herself. In a sense, she is here showing the flip side of the “any woman” coin: every woman. When she asks, then, “among the women who envied me then, could there be one now who does not feel compelled by my misfortune to sympathize with my loss of such joys?”, she can be confident that the answer among her audience will be negatory and that there is power to be claimed in numbers (115). Thus, Héloïse refashions her identity with an attention to her audience, recasting her love for her husband as rational and relatable and reclaiming the general medieval readership as her own.

This attention to the public is loosely connected to the ideal love letter. Medieval epistolography closely modeled itself on its parent in the classical era, and, according to Constable, “there was a high degree of continuity in letter-writing, and it may be difficult to tell a letter, apart from its contents, written in one period from that written in another” (26). In the twelfth century there was strict attention paid to classical models of epistolography. The model for love letters by women, the sub-genre under which Héloïse’s letters fall, was Ovid’s *Heroides*, a series of fictional love letters from mythical women to their absent lovers (actually written, notably, by a man). Héloïse conforms closely to these letters in many respects, not the least of which is the heroine’s tendency to “[gesture] toward the whole as witness to her woes”—the aforementioned public appeal (Barbara Newman, qtd. in Brown and Peiffer 144). Yet Héloïse also diverts from the usual epistle, making her letters both more intimate and more concerned with self-definition. This personalization is in line with the general trend in the twelfth century of “both individual letters and collections of letters [taking] on a more personal and self-revelatory tone,” as well as with the re-introduction of love letters as a sub-genre in the same century (Constable 33-4). A brief comparison with the first of the *Heroides*, the letter from Penelope to Hector—the “any woman’s”

letter, so to speak—will illuminate the way in which Héloïse’s writing infuses self-revelation and proto-autobiographical elements into her epistolography.<sup>4</sup>

Firstly, the female author of a love letter should be in quite a specific situation of separation from her lover (Brown and Peiffer 144-5), as is quite famously the case with Penelope, because of which she feels abandoned and alone. This feeling of isolation is the newly human element that Ovid brings to Penelope’s story. Penelope longs for her husband’s return—“writing back is pointless: come yourself!” (Ovid 11)—and her letter centers around her faithful wish to see him again—“the gods grant, I pray, that our fated ends may come in due succession” (Ovid 19). Héloïse is in a different predicament altogether. She does, indeed, find herself separated from and missing her lover, but that issue is complicated by the facts that her lover cannot love her in the same way now that he is castrated, and that it seems he will not love her in any fashion now that they are parted. Most importantly, Héloïse faces a problem of self-definition and public image that Penelope does not touch, and which she cannot console by the Christianized analogue of Penelope’s faith, for Héloïse “can expect no reward [...] from God, for it is certain that [she has] done nothing as yet for love of him” (117).

As Penelope’s conventional problem is to Héloïse’s unconventional problem, so are Penelope’s conventional emotions to Héloïse’s unconventional emotions. Penelope suffers much as one would expect her to: she wishes she had never been born to suffer this problem (Ovid 11)<sup>5</sup>, longs to have “only war to fear” (15), and “[lives] on in foolish fear of things like these, you may be captive to a stranger love” (17). These emotions are clinical compared to those of Héloïse, whose writing is rife with sexual imagery conveying the tension his castration has caused her in no longer being able to “[enjoy] the pleasures of an uneasy love and [abandon] ourselves to fornication (if I may use an ugly but expressive word)” (Radice 130). With such “ugly but expressive” words, Héloïse steps beyond the formal bounds of letter-writing to touch the personal nature of her complaint to Abélard. She is not interested in depicting herself as a confidently faithful woman, but one full of difficult questions for God and her lover: “How can it be

---

4 I have chosen Penelope’s letter to Ulysses because, according to Phyllis D. Brown and John C. Peiffer II, “medieval commentaries suggest that it was usual for medieval readers to read the *Heroides* ‘intertextually,’ with Penelope not only figuring as the first of the letter writers but also as the ideal against whom all the other women were evaluated” (146-7). I will discuss Héloïse’s letters relative to this ideal model of female love-epistolographic perfection.

5 Again, because this paper is not concerned with philological details, I will refer to an English translation: Grant Showerman’s in the Loeb edition.



called repentance for sins, however great the mortification of the flesh, if the mind still retains its old desires” (Radice 312)?

Héloïse introduces honesty and vulnerability into her letters, calling upon the distinction between public and private. In an un-Penelope-like accusation, she remarks that Abélard’s love seems disingenuous:

Why, after our entry into religion, which was your decision alone, have I been so neglected and forgotten by you . . . ? Tell me, I say, if you can, or I will tell you what I think and indeed the world suspects. It was desire, not affection which bound you to me, the flame of lust rather than love. . . . This is not merely my own opinion, beloved, it is everyone’s. There is nothing personal or private about it; it is the general view which is widely held. (Radice 116)

The public serves as a scapegoat: “there is nothing personal or private” about this accusation, but Héloïse points to the public as the holders of the opinion. Yet buried in the letter is her identification of herself as one who believes it (“This is not merely my own opinion”). Here, then, Héloïse is able to express her emotions more honestly than an Ovidian heroine without coming across as overly brash or shrewish: the public is her vehicle for the expression of private thought.

At the center of Héloïse’s increased penchant for autobiography is the need to define herself defensively. Letter one constantly begs Abélard to “remember . . . what I have done, and think how much you owe me” (Radice 117). Quite often the language of debt appears, as here, next to requests that Abélard “remember,” as if Héloïse views his accurate memory of her as necessary—he is obligated, by his relationship to her, to represent her truthfully in his writing. Unusually for a love epistle like the Penelope Herois, Héloïse’s third letter takes a hortatory tone:

For a long time my pretence deceived you, as it did many, so that you mistook hypocrisy for piety; and therefore you commend yourself to my prayers and ask me for what I expect from you. I beg you, do not feel so sure of me [...] Do not suppose me healthy [...] Do not think me strong, lest I fall before you can sustain me. (Radice 134)

Héloïse takes issue with the events of Abélard’s last letter, for she knows that his confidence in her faith, enough to commend himself to her prayers, betrays his lack of understanding of her character. She calls upon her private relationship with Abélard, asking him not to behave as the rest of the world does toward

her, assuming her, as a prioress, chaste and sure in her convictions. Rather, she commands him simply to view her as she is. The public readership of this letter implicitly participates in this new definition of Héloïse, and thus in the formation of autobiography as a genre.

By infusing her personal details into the formulaic publicness of the epistolographic genre, Héloïse creates a form-breaking response to Abélard's autobiography that in turn contributes to paving the way for future writers of the genre. Through the parallel between her desire to publicize her innermost thoughts and her self-conscious mingling of private and public voices, Héloïse initiates a shift in literature toward increased publicization of the self, an honest approach to the common problems of humanity that were subsumed under literary formulae. This approach to self allows Héloïse to paint herself as surpassing Abélard in both public and private roles—as a spouse but also a lover, as an ascetic but also a moralist, as a thinker but also a feeler.

# Endnotes

- 1 For further discussion of trauma as a literal, veridical representation of the originary traumatic event as well as the stakes of this view within literary criticism see Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, *Trauma: the Unclaimed Experience*, and Rachel Ley's *Trauma: a Genealogy*.
- 2 For a detailed discussion of the propensity for trauma to be mythologized as an originary cultural event see Dominick LeCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*.

# Works Cited

- Abélard, Peirre, and Héloïse d'Argenteuil. *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. Ed. and trans.
- Betty Radice. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974. Print.
- Brown, Phyllis R. "Heloise, Dialectic, and the Heroides." *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth-Century Woman*. Ed. Bonnie Wheeler. New York: St. Martin's, 2000. 143-160. Print.
- Cherewatuk, Karen, and Ulrike Wiethaus. "Introduction: Women Writing Letters in the Middle Ages." *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1993. 1-19. Print.
- Constable, Giles. *Letters and Letter-Collections*. Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental, fasc. 17. Turnhout: Brepols, 1976. Print.
- Ferguson, Chris D. "Autobiography as Therapy: Guibert de Nogent, Peter Abelard, and the Making of Medieval Autobiography." *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 13.2 (1983): 187-212. Print.
- McLaughlin, Mary M. "Abelard as Autobiographer: The Motives and Meaning of His 'Story of Calamities.'" *Speculum* 42.3 (1967): 463-488. MLA International Bibliography. Web. 20 May 2013.
- McLeod, Glenda. "'Wholly guilty, wholly innocent': Self-Definition in Heloise's Letters to Abelard." *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*. Ed. Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1993. 64-86. Print.
- Ovid. *Heroides*. Ed. G. P. Goold. Trans. Grant Showerman. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1977. Print.

- Piron, Sylvain. "Heloise's Literary Self-Fashioning and the *Epistolae Duorum Amantium*." *Strategies of Remembrance: From Pindar to Hölderlin*. Ed. Tamás Visi. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009. 103-162. Print.
- Ruys, Juanita Feros. "Heloise, Monastic Temptation, and Memoria: Rethinking Autobiography, Sexual Experience, and Ethics." *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age: New Approaches to a Fundamental Cultural-Historical and Literary-Anthropological Theme*. Ed. Albrecht Classen. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008. 383-404. Print.

