

The birth of Heloise

New light on an old mystery

Brenda M. Cook

**Institute of Historical Research
University of London**

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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.¹

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.²

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

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

² *Gallia Christiana*. Vol 7, cols 507-511.

