The Letter Collection of Abelard and Heloise, edited by David Luscombe, translated by Betty Radice and revised by David Luscombe

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Référence


1 David Luscombe’s new book becomes the first critical edition of the correspondence of Abelard and Heloise to draw on all twelve of the extant manuscripts. It is also – at long last – the first Latin edition with facing page English translation. The translation used is the familiar 1974 Penguin translation by Betty Radice, revised in 2003 by Michael Clanchy, and now again by Luscombe. This career-capping accomplishment has been many years in the works, possibly since the early 1970s when the authenticity controversy, with scholar John Benton at its center, directed readers of the correspondence to much closer readings of the letters, which made re-editing the collection seem desirable to Luscombe. To date, the nearest equivalent to the bounties of Luscombe’s multifaceted volume is Ileana Pagani, Abelardo ed Eloisa: Epistolario (Torino, 1974, rpt. 2008), accompanied by an essay on the textual transmission written by Giovanni Orlandi. But the facing page translation is of course in Italian and despite very extensive footnotes the volume lacks an apparatus criticus. Luscombe in fact commends Pagani for her valuable notes and indexes (p. 537). The two editions, each in its own ways unique, need to be viewed as complementary. Naturally, Luscombe’s
bibliography is important for titles published after the reprinting of Pagani’s edition in 2008.

2 What Luscombe adds of a technical nature to the editing tradition of the correspondence of Abelard and Heloise is the incorporation into his *apparatus criticus* of two new manuscripts, H (Paris, BnF n. acq. fr. 20001, dated 1361) and S (The Schøyen collection, Oslo and London, 2085, c. 1330-60). He describes his stemma as “largely similar to that provided by Orandi” (p. cxxviii), but includes H, S, and V (a lost manuscript from Saint Victor). Orandi had thought the passages from H too short to include and made no mention of S, all but unknown before Colette Jeudy described it in 1991. The impact of manuscript H on the tradition of the correspondence seems relatively minor. Manuscript H begins transcribing the correspondence at Letter 7 near the end of the letter and continues only through the short Letter 8 (without the Rule). The most striking variant appears to be a simple expansion by one extra line of a quotation from Horace (p. 340).

3 Manuscript S begins transcription with paragraphs 23-26 of the *Historia Calamitatum*, comprising Abelard’s offer to Fulbert to marry his niece and Heloise’s famous exhortation against marriage. Such a noteworthy starting point must be considered fortuitous, as the early part of the manuscript has been lost. Transcription of the *Historia* resumes again with the start of Abelard’s trial at Soissons, and continues straight through the letters until ending one third of the way through Letter 7. No particular view of Letter 7’s content seems to govern the cessation of copying.

4 Luscombe’s volume provides almost one hundred pages of detailed manuscript information to create the fullest descriptions we have. Prior grounding in the earlier descriptions of Muckle, Monfrin, and Orandi (references in Luscombe) is also helpful. Jacques Monfrin, for one, was much more frustrated than Luscombe by the lack of certainty that even a deep study of the manuscript tradition provides. In fact, no firm conclusions can be drawn about the reception of the correspondence from the manuscripts. The Oxford manuscript (Y) brings together apologetical-polemical, and satirical pieces, and the Rheims manuscript (R) sets the correspondence alongside the apocryphal letters of Seneca to St Paul as well as Seneca’s letters to Lucilius. A manuscript of the Roman de la Rose, from which the letters have been lost (the table of contents lists les Epistres Pierre Abiabelart et de Heloyse, qui fu s’amie et puis sa feme, et sont en latin ...), has been described as “an anthology built on the Rose” (p. lxxxii), thus linking the letters themselves to the Rose tradition, rather than only the excerpts of the letters contained in the romance itself. By contrast, the Troyes manuscript (T), presumed to be the oldest of the extant manuscripts, clearly accents the religious life of women, both history and Rule. It is this manuscript especially that supports the reading of the correspondence as a narrative of conversion and the monastic life, a view held by Luscombe.

5 Accordingly, in his introduction Luscombe accentuates all aspects of the unity of the correspondence, treating it as an intentional collection of eight letters and the Rule, thereby making it evident that the volume’s title is deliberate. Such a quest seeks to place the personal or love letters (Letters 1-5) within an edifying broader context: “The collection as a whole has something of the character of a documentary record and narrative of the foundation of the abbey of the Paraclete, keenly showing first the earlier lives and troubles of the founder and the first abbess” (p. xx). Some readers may wonder, then, why the personal letters, which Christine de Pizan and Jean Gerson
found so repellent and libertines and humanists so delighted in, needed airing in the abbey’s foundation narrative. Moreover, the Rule, which buttresses such an understanding of the letters, and was apparently never adopted at the Paraclete (p. 359, n.1), only exists in full in a single manuscript (T). It is missing from nine other manuscripts, including the French translation attributed to Jean de Meun. In fact, Luscombe’s summary specifying the extent of the letters’ transcription in each manuscript of the correspondence (p. cxxxiv) shows that the monastic material was far less likely to be copied in full than the more scandalous letters written by Heloise.

6 The argument that the entire contents of the correspondence demonstrate an overall cohesion, culminating in the monastic focus of Letters 7, 8, and the Rule, is not new. But it can be used either to make a case for authenticity, as Luscombe does here, or to argue the opposite. Georges Duby (Dames du XIIe siècle, vol. 1, Gallimard, 1997, pp. 90-91), saw this very “cohésion de l’ensemble” as self-serving evidence of “falsification” by the principals. Although the gap between Luscombe and Duby can partially be bridged, inasmuch as Luscombe believes that the collection was brought together “under the very eyes of” its composers, there is room for more debate. As for the authenticity question itself, Luscombe believes the collection to be “genuine, that is, that the letters were written by Abelard and Heloise,” but he raises the question of whether the letters were redacted and whether all letters were meant to be sent (p. xxviii).

7 This new edition draws on all eleven Latin manuscripts (p. cxxix), without giving “too ready a preference to any one MS such as T” (p. cxxxi). When there were conflicting readings, Luscombe made the most meaningful decision he could, but an opportunity to question or disagree is afforded through the variants. Not so, however, with the changes he has made to the warmly regarded, if not always literally accurate, Radice translation. “Where I have thought it good to do so,” he writes, “I have ‘silently’ made some alterations” (p. cxxxiii). His alterations tend toward a more accurate and literal translation, but come at the cost sometimes of Radice’s aesthetically pleasing diction. Translators’ interpretations of a text can also clash. When Radice writes “mistress” (amica) Luscombe writes “friend.” When Radice writes “whore” (meretrix), Luscombe writes “mistress.” A crosscheck with the oldest known translation (the French translation attributed to Jean de Meun), which sometimes itself shows an unexpected reserve, agrees with Radice in its selection of “putain” for “meretrix.” Despite differences, Luscombe states that Radice prepared the translation of Letter 7 for this volume after excluding it from her own volume as too “prolix and not very logical.”

8 If Luscombe wished to make close readings of the edited texts more possible, he has more than met his goal. Here is a better all-in-one volume than we have ever had. His ‘Index of Parallels with Other Writings of Abelard and Heloise,’ alone, is filled with food for thought and continuing research, and his ear for repetitions and parallels within the letters is amply documented in his footnotes. A ‘restrained’ bibliography of 61 pages, which does not even include all his own related articles, and additional resources round out this valuable volume.