

# *Framing the Portrait*

**Finding the balance between imagination and  
research in the creation of an historical novel**

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# *Framing the Portrait*

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# INTRODUCTION

## **The Relationship between History and Fiction**

History and historical novels are linked by a common element, namely that events from the past are presented as a narrative within a literary form. The exact nature of that link is subject to lively, if not always amicable, debate between historians, writers, critics, scholars and readers. In writing a novel an author is subject to specific demands to create a fiction that meets the criteria of that form. In writing an historical novel there are additional demands upon the writer in as far as the text relies upon personalities and events that already exist independently of the novel. The information pertaining to these personalities or events is the province of historians who may jealously guard their territory and the integrity of their discipline. Despite differences of approach, however, and intent, history and literature have the potential to combine in a marriage that produces beautiful progeny.

Both history and fiction rely on a narrative text. Narration, as Hayden White reminds us, is ‘a manner of speaking as universal as language itself’.<sup>1</sup> The use of narration in writing history has its own considerations, one of the most important being that it should aspire to be truthful. Writers of fiction, using history or historical characters as the basis of their text, while also obliged to make more than a passing reference to the truth, are allowed the luxury of utilising their imagination and creativity to ‘fill in the gaps’ which inevitably remain even after the most thorough historical research. No historical record can be complete because it is impossible to know everything that happened, or tell a life in all its second-by-second completeness. Nor is there a record of all that people thought or said. In addition, those reporting or commenting on any period of history cannot be totally free of bias and this inevitably introduces a subjective element into any account of events and descriptions of personalities.

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<sup>1</sup>Hayden V White, *Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 26.

In examining the connection between history and the historical novel we can think of facts established by historical research as a series of stepping-stones across a stream. The moving water between the stones represents the 'other', or imagined incidents, dialogue, interpretation of character and local colour supplied by writers of fiction. This 'other' is not clearly measured nor contained between barriers. Notwithstanding this, there is a relationship between the water and the stepping-stones. If we view the stream crossing as a whole unit, there must be some degree of compatibility between the historical material and the creative text. This connection is established and maintained by respecting relevant historical research and drawing on other sources of knowledge. For example music, philosophy, natural medicine, and arts and crafts from the medieval period are being revived and enjoy a certain vogue. These studies and pursuits give valuable insights into the culture, mores, and daily life found in a specific historical period. Another way to gain knowledge of a period is to travel to historical sites, particularly to places that retain the architecture and some of the ambience of that period. Travel, when undertaken in a spirit of enquiry, can stimulate and enhance creativity.

An historical novel is more than an historical account. A novel includes plot, theme, narrative and character development, in varying degrees of relative importance. Some of these elements may also be present in the work of an historian who is writing a factual account, although the word 'factual' in this context needs clarification. As Barton Friedman explains:

What we construe as history, then, depends on the interactions that take place, first between the historian and his evidence, second between the narrative he builds from the evidence and ourselves, his readers.<sup>2</sup>

This narrative may provide ideas and stimulus for a novelist. One inspiration for my novel was the achievements and personalities of three medieval women, as recorded in history. The fact that they are still well known today indicated that they were extraordinary women and that further research into their lives would be rewarding.

Even before beginning the necessary historical research I decided to examine whether a fictional character had an identity that could be defined and could meet certain criteria. Such a defined identity would give me a frame of reference and

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<sup>2</sup> Barton Friedman, *Fabricating History: English Writers on the French Revolution* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988) p. 9.

allowed me to ascertain if there is any discernable difference between a totally fictional character and one based on a living person, as depicted in a work of fiction.

A second and equally important decision was to examine means and techniques that a writer may employ in interpreting historical research in a manner that makes the text available to modern readers. In attempting to judge to what extent a writer needs to be accurate to maintain integrity and faith with the reader I decided that, in an historical novel, character development, dialogue and imaginative leaps should still retain credibility, although this should not be adhered to so rigidly that the novel became dull or didactic. I was encouraged by the words of George MacDonald Fraser, whose reputation for diligent research is acknowledged, yet who advocated a degree of flexibility.

... because history is very much what you want it to be... this story begins in that other, happier England of fancy rooted in truth, where dates and places and the chronology of events and people may shift a little here and there in the mirror of imagination, and yet not be thought false on that account. For it's just a tale, and as Mark Twain pointed out, whether it happened or did not happen, it could have happened. And as all story-tellers know... it should have happened.<sup>3</sup>

It was helpful to read and appraise what other writers of historical novels have achieved. Robyn Annear, for example, chose to write an historical novel after having published five books of history. She speaks of 'the tyranny of facts', and this tyranny led her to use history in 'another way' that entails 'joining the dots and not letting the seams show'. In writing fiction she refers to truth as 'not an historical truth, but an essential truth'.<sup>4</sup> It may be that there is a necessary compromise between historical truth and essential truth in the writing of a novel. I would argue that in respecting the historical truth the writer has the best chance of arriving at the essential truth. To distort the former would jeopardise the latter.

Historical novels depict people and events from the past. At times it is the romance of the era that is the focus of the novel. One such novel is *Captain Alatriste*, a swashbuckling affair set in Madrid in the 1620s at a time when court intrigue is high and a man must live by his wits.<sup>5</sup> In other works, such as James Gaine's account

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<sup>3</sup>George MacDonald Fraser, *The Pyrates* (London: Collins, 1983), p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>Rosemary Sorenson, 'True Blue Tales', *Weekend Australian Review*, 26-27 January 2008, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup>Arturo Pérez-Reverte, *Captain Alatriste*, trans. by Margaret Sayers Peden (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2005).

of J S Bach's meeting with Frederick the Great in *Evening in the Palace of Reason*, the historical novel reflects more on pivotal ideas and philosophies.<sup>6</sup>

When a novel portrays people who have actually lived, there are a number of questions to be considered. How much can we actually know about these people? Does the responsibility to portray an historical person as authentically as possible compromise the dramatic thrust of the work? The answer to this question leads to another concern: if current research on the lives of these people is at variance with generally held ideas must the writer favour this research? Will a different version or representation strain reader credulity? On the other hand, will portraying the person dressed in the clothes of new research, rather than clinging dowdily to the costumes of past perceptions, lead to a more vivid portrayal of that person? Theories about cultural memory are relevant to these considerations, and future research into this field would be both interesting and valuable.<sup>7</sup> In fiction almost anything is possible. Does this allow a novelist to pick and choose amongst historians' theories and interpretations, rather than making an informed judgement as to which interpretation is the most convincing? The women who are the subject of my novel lived a long time ago, yet their identity and achievements are still familiar today. The place they hold in our knowledge of the past is pertinent to the way they are portrayed. These were among the questions I considered when I prepared to write my novel. My conclusions are contained within both the exegesis and the novel.

The initial idea for the novel grew from the realisation that Heloise, Hildegard of Bingen and Eleanor of Aquitaine were contemporaries. All three were exceptional women, famous during their lifetime, and remaining famous even to our own time. Did they ever meet? No such event is recorded. If they did not meet then, to paraphrase Mark Twain, they should have met, for their conversations would surely have been stimulating, innovative, reflective and entertaining. How would they have responded if they ever had to make common cause against a menace to their freedom and life-style, a threat that would impinge seriously on their futures? Could they have collaborated successfully?

The novel I chose to write differs from the historical novels and biographies that have already been written about them in that it brings the three women together. It is

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<sup>6</sup>James Gaines, *Evening in the Palace of Reason* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005).

<sup>7</sup>For example, the work of Pierre Nora and Maurice Halbwachs.



the interaction between them that allows for a unique perspective of their characters and personalities. Each woman was intelligent, and strong-minded. Each needed activities beyond the ordinary. Each had a different background and life experience that formed much of their thinking. The possibilities offered to me, as a writer, in bringing these women together, far outweighed any reservations I might have had about inventing such a meeting. Nor is there any attempt to present this novel as anything but fiction.

In writing the novel I have been led into the medieval world through researching primary and secondary sources, reading medieval philosophy, acquiring the rudiments of Latin to better appreciate Heloise's expertise, and travelling to the sites associated with these women during their lifetime. In seeking to use knowledge this gained I have also reflected on the relationship between history and fiction; the use of lives in fiction; the definition of fictional characters; the balance between the creative process; and the constraints of what is already known. During my research I was confronted with advances in knowledge that countered long accepted views, including my own, of the historical people and events. This created its own dilemma because I had to find a credible way to use this later research. It also meant that hopefully I was presenting a fresh interpretation of the three women, rather than just following what had gone before. While this exegesis will develop the paths of enquiry and reflections on the above, the novel demonstrates the final result of these deliberations.

### **Historical Novels**

As with most literary genres it is impossible to define an historical novel in a way that satisfies everybody. In preparing to write my thesis I considered the development of the historical novel from the early nineteenth century by reading widely among a large number of historical novels and biographies. As part of my study of historical characters portrayed in fiction I also read novels that may not be strictly defined as historical novels but in which one historical character may be depicted in a minor role.

A rule of thumb in defining an historical novel is that it meets three criteria; that: it includes real historical characters, the historical characters have a fictional identity and the novel has historical consciousness. The first two are self-explanatory. The third acknowledges the definition by George Lukács that the novel be ‘the derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age’.<sup>8</sup> Lukács means that the use of historical characters or details must permeate the text rather than be a convenient plot device. Historical consciousness implies that the writer does not write from personal experience. He or she is drawing on habits, ways of thinking, customs and beliefs, which are a product of a particular age. For a novel to be judged an historical novel, therefore, there needs to be an acceptable time gap, for example, two generations, between the age of the writer and the time in which the novel is set. Milda Dantyé states that Lukács’ focus is on two specific aspects:

However, at the same time, as Lukács shows, the fictional protagonists are caught up in major political events that disrupt the normal progression of their lives, often in irreversible ways... In addition, Lukács identifies a major thematic approach to the historical past of 19<sup>th</sup> century historical novels...ones that permit both historical and fictional characters to perform...human greatness.<sup>9</sup>

The evolution of historical novels is well documented and for the purposes of this exegesis I do not wish to explore it in depth.<sup>10</sup> I would, however, like to draw attention to two distinctions. There are historical novels that are predominantly plot driven, with the main emphasis on the narrative action. Both George MacDonald Fraser and Jean Plaidy are examples of writers who claim to have researched thoroughly but whose plots are designed to fully engage a reader who relishes action and adventure.<sup>11</sup> The term ‘plot-driven’ is not intended to denigrate such writing, which may provide pleasure to the most discerning of readers. In an article written at

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<sup>8</sup>George Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup>Milda Dantyé, ‘National past/Personal past: Recent Examples of the historical Novel by Umberto Eco and Antanas Sileika *Literatura* ,49 2007 pp.34-41, (p.34).

<sup>10</sup>While Lukács serves as an initial reference he has been followed by other writers, such as Russel B.Nye, James C.Simmons, Ann Curthoys, John Docker and Diana Wallace. Of interest are the controversies between Kate Grenville and Inga Clendennin, and Stella Clarke and Mark McKenna over the use of history in fiction. For discussion of postmodern historical novels see Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) and Mario J. Valdes and Linda Hutcheon, *Rethinking Literary History-Comparatively* (New York: American Learned Studies Occasional Paper 27, 1994).

<sup>11</sup>See George MacDonald Fraser, *The Flashman Papers 1839-1842* (London: Pan Books, 1970), and Jean Plaidy, *The Courts of Love* (London: Robert Hale, 1987).

the time of MacDonald Fraser's death, Christopher Hitchens paid tribute to the writer's skills. The Flashman series were, he states, far from the potboilers that John Updike 'wince-makingly' opined.

But his plots were far more credible than Fleming's [James Bond], because they were based on the scarcely believable facts about high-Victorian empire, and his characters were more authentic because, well, because they were authentic.

Earlier in the same article, while emphasizing the importance of character development and accuracy in an historical novel, Hitchens comments:

...almost all the characters are real-life historical ones, with only the chief protagonist being annexed from an earlier fiction... good historians found themselves praising his verisimilitude, and many people owe all their knowledge of, say, Afghanistan to the voluminous footnotes that accompany every adventure.<sup>12</sup>

While historical novels that focus on adventure or romance might be categorised as 'lighter' fiction, there are others with a more philosophical theme and content. They concentrate on the ideas and underlying ideologies that motivate historical figures. Examples of writers who have followed this approach are Paul Morgan and David Malouf.<sup>13</sup> Others again might use displacement of setting in order to reflect on contemporary life. This was common in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and probably the best-known example is *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, which is clearly a satire and also a travel book of the time. In her discussion of the English novel, Deborah Baker Wyrick writes of Swift that:

In order to conduct his work of cultural criticism, Swift resituates his narrator in remote lands, in a layered geography of actual and imagined places. Gulliver acts as a peripatetic centre for a series of ideological structures that reproduce parts or counterparts of English social and political practice.<sup>14</sup>

Setting a novel in a remote place or past era is not sufficient for it to be classified as an historical novel, and I would not place Swift's work in this genre. Using displacement as a device, however, can serve to highlight aspects of modern life within an historical novel. As such, the setting serves to compare and contrast, highlight and hide aspects of fundamental human existence. I became aware of both

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<sup>12</sup>Christopher Hitchens, 'How I fell for a sexist, racist, reactionary cad', in *The Weekend Australian*, (Inquiry Section), 12-13 January 2008, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup>Paul Morgan, *The Pelagius Book: A Novel* (Camberwell: Viking, 2005), and David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (London: Vintage, 1978).

<sup>14</sup>Deborah Baker Wyrick, 'The Early English Novel' in *Critical Approaches to Teaching Swift* ed. by Peter J. Schakel (New York: AMIS Press, 1992).

the similarities and differences in the lives and ways of thought that I attributed to Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor and contemporary times as I know them, when I wrote a short account of their reunion set in this century (Appendix C).

Danty  identifies a change in the historical novels written after World War II. ‘Far from producing narratives that celebrate human greatness, postmodern historical fiction is not nostalgic about the national past and aims to undermine the accepted images of national heroes.’<sup>15</sup> He later identifies ‘post postmodern’ novels as a new kind of historical fiction:

First the new historical novel does not celebrate the national myths or the national heroes as did the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, but, at the same time, it does not parody the past in postmodern fashion. Instead it prioritizes unofficial memory and celebrates popular culture in the broad sense. Furthermore, unlike the traditional historical novel... or the postmodern historical novels, in which the ideology of the past, though presented with irony, dominates the characters, in these post postmodern historical novels, the protagonists find an alternative set of values in popular culture.<sup>16</sup>

Further on he states that ‘the author’s personal past has real significance’ so that the ‘new versions of history and autobiography... bring together the national past and the personal past’.<sup>17</sup> This observation supports the work of Amie Thomasson, to be discussed later, concerning the part the author plays in the identity of a fictional character. Considering Danty ’s observations, I wondered if ‘The Paraclete Conundrum’ met the criteria of a post postmodern historical novel.

Two recent books proved particularly relevant to my search to find the best way to inscribe the lives of Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor. The authors, Andrea di Robilant and Liza Dalby rely heavily on letters and diary entries to find clues about the personalities of the main characters, as did I in my research. Both books weave a story about, in one instance a set of letters between lovers in Venice, written in the 1750s, and in the other the diary, poetry and other writings of Murasaki Shikubu who was born in Japan about 973.<sup>18</sup>

Andrea Di Robilant tells the story of his paternal ancestor, also named Andrea, whose love affair with Guistiniana Wynne was a far from secret one. There are

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<sup>15</sup>Milda Danty , p.36.

<sup>16</sup>Milda Danty , p. 40.

<sup>17</sup>Milda Danty , p. 40.

<sup>18</sup>Liza Dalby, *The Tale of Murasaki* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), and Andrea de Robilant, *A Venetian Affair: a true story of an impossible love in the eighteenth century* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005).

references to the couple in the public archives of Venice, Padua, Paris and London. Giacomo Casanova was a close friend to both, and writes about them in his memoirs. Di Robilant, who is a journalist, writes the story, not as a novel, but as the account of their relationship, using their letters as pointers and commentary on the progress of the affair, which did not run smoothly. Initially, I found this approach limiting, and wished for something closer to a novel form, but as the story unfolds the characters develop and tension as to the outcome is sustained. This is partly due to the extensive research Di Robilant has done about contemporaneous events and notable people.

The combination of historical accounts with the personal emotional journey, mainly of Guistiniana, because most of the available letters are from her, works well in a format that is neither a novel, nor a biography. Each chapter is footnoted. In addition his approach does allow him to make assumptions as to an individual's state of mind. In reference to the plan that Guistiniana marry the English consul, Mr Smith, in order to secure her future, and be freer to meet Andrea he writes:

The prospect of spending several days in the clutches of the consul did not particularly thrill Guistiniana. She told Andrea she wished the old man would 'just leave us in peace' and cursed 'the wretched Mogliano' a hundred times. But Andrea explained to her that Smith's invitation was good because it meant he was serious about marrying her... Guistiniana continued to dread the visit – and the role that, for once, both Andrea and her mother expected her to play.<sup>19</sup>

Part of his ability to recreate the period may be due to the fact that Di Robilant lived in Venice for a year while writing the book and became steeped in its atmosphere.

In Venice the past has remained alive in a vivid, disorienting way. It is with you all the time. It blends with the present. And sometimes, walking around the city, my head filled with Andrea and Guistiniana, I found myself slipping back in time so effortlessly that I didn't know what century I was living in any more.<sup>20</sup>

Liza Dalby's account of Murasaki's life follows the form of a novel. Apart from the frequent use of written dialogue in the form of *waka* (a precursor of *haiku*) Dalby has used the narrative of Murasaki's novel, *Tale of Genji* as a link to Murasaki's own thoughts and life. For example, Dalby shows Murasaki drawing inspiration from her own experiences in exile to describe those of her character Genji

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<sup>19</sup> di Robilant, p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> di Robilant, p. 289.

in a similar situation. ‘Unhappy in Suma, Genji performed a purification ceremony – like the one I myself had done back when I was plotting to escape to Echizen.’<sup>21</sup>

The focus of these two books is the main characters. In the same way my interest in writing my novel was predominantly in the three female protagonists. From the beginning I made the decision to be as historically accurate as possible to ensure that my understanding of the women and their era was based on a firm foundation. The novel is intended to go beyond the superficial facts of their lives, interesting and evocative as they are, to exploring the underlying philosophies of their time and understanding how these may have influenced and guided them in the choices that they made. This entailed discovering what might be termed the serious and fundamental aspects of their (and our) existence: the nature of love; reconciling free will and God’s will; why there is suffering in the world; and, for women, the need to find a satisfactory and satisfying role in either secular and religious society. In order to portray the women’s thoughts and motivations with any subtlety and finesse I needed to research their lives in depth. Apart from biographies I consulted the work of established academics in the field, including Peter Dronke, Etienne Gilson, Helen Waddell, Constant Mews, Sylvain Piron, Juanita Ruys, Barbara Newman and Sabine Flanagan. My task, as a novelist, was then to steer a course between this accumulated information and interpretation to create an historically accurate and plausible story, albeit one that ultimately must be judged as fiction, as the novel grows beyond the boundaries set by the historical research.

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<sup>21</sup> Dalby, p. 153.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE MAIN CHARACTERS

My main sources for the biographical details are: Constant Mews, *Abelard and Heloise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), Fiona Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age* (London: Review, 2002) and Alison Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God, Queen of England* (London: Pimlico, 2000) Other works, as cited, were consulted for further research.

#### **Heloise**

The date of Heloise's birth is not definite, being placed by historians between 1090 and 1100. Recent research suggests that Heloise was born in the Loire Valley region about 1095, and that her mother, Hersinde, later became the first prioress of the famous abbey at Fontevraud.<sup>22</sup>

Heloise was raised as a child in an abbey at Argenteuil, where her scholarly abilities were recognized. Her maternal uncle, Canon Fulbert, arranged for her to come to live with him in Paris and to be tutored by Abelard, a charismatic and erudite teacher of philosophy. They fell in love, and Heloise became pregnant. Abelard arranged to marry her on condition that the marriage remain a secret, to protect his career. Fulbert, while at first agreeing, came to feel that family honour was still besmirched, and to avenge this arranged for Abelard to be castrated.

Abelard and Heloise both entered religious life. Abelard's sister raised their son, Peter Astralabe. Heloise eventually became abbess of the Paraclete, which had earlier been founded by Abelard and that prospered under her administration. She died in

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<sup>22</sup>Constant Mews, 'Negotiating the Boundaries of Religion in Religious Life', *Viator*, 37 (2006) 113-148 (pp.125-129) and Werner Robl, *Heloisas Herkunft Hersindes Mater* (Munich: Olzog, 2001) summarised in his chapter 'Hersindis Mater, Neues zur Familiengeschichte Heoisas mit Ausblicken auf die Familie Peter Abaelards'.

1162, remembered for her piety and scholarship as well as her relationship with Abelard.

### **Hildegard of Bingen**

Hildegard's date of birth is also uncertain, but generally given as 1098. Her birthplace is Mermesheim, Germany. As a child of eight or ten she was promised to God by her parents, who arranged for her to enter the abbey of St Disibodenberg with Jutta, daughter of Count Stephen of Sponheim. They spent a period of time on the Count's estate at Sponheim being tutored by a widow, and formally entered religious life when Hildegard was fifteen and Jutta twenty.

As a child Hildegard had been aware that she could see visions and a light, which she called the living Light. Eventually she came to write down accounts of her visions, and these were published in a number of books, the first being *Scivias*, which was written between 1141 and 1151. In addition she wrote books on medicine and natural history, composed music, wrote letters to prominent leaders throughout Europe and toured parts of Germany on preaching missions. Hildegard died in 1179, famous for her piety, her writings and her leadership.

### **Eleanor of Aquitaine**

Eleanor was born about 1122, probably at Bordeaux. As the heiress to Aquitaine, a vast area of France, she was an attractive marriage prospect. A few weeks after her marriage to Louis, at the age of fifteen, she became the Queen of France. This marriage was annulled fifteen years and two daughters later, in March 1152. In May 1152 Eleanor married Henry of Anjou, who became Henry II of England in 1154. They had eight children. Her time as queen of England was not without incident, and in 1173 Henry had her closely confined in various castles, on the charge that she had incited their sons to rebel against him. She remained a virtual prisoner until 1189, when Henry died and their son Richard became King of England. Eleanor spent her remaining years protecting the interests of her family, and playing a role in the administration of England during the King's absence. In 1202, at the age of eighty,



she travelled to Spain to select one of her granddaughters to be the bride of the King of France. Then she retired to the abbey at Fontevraud, in France, and died there in 1204.

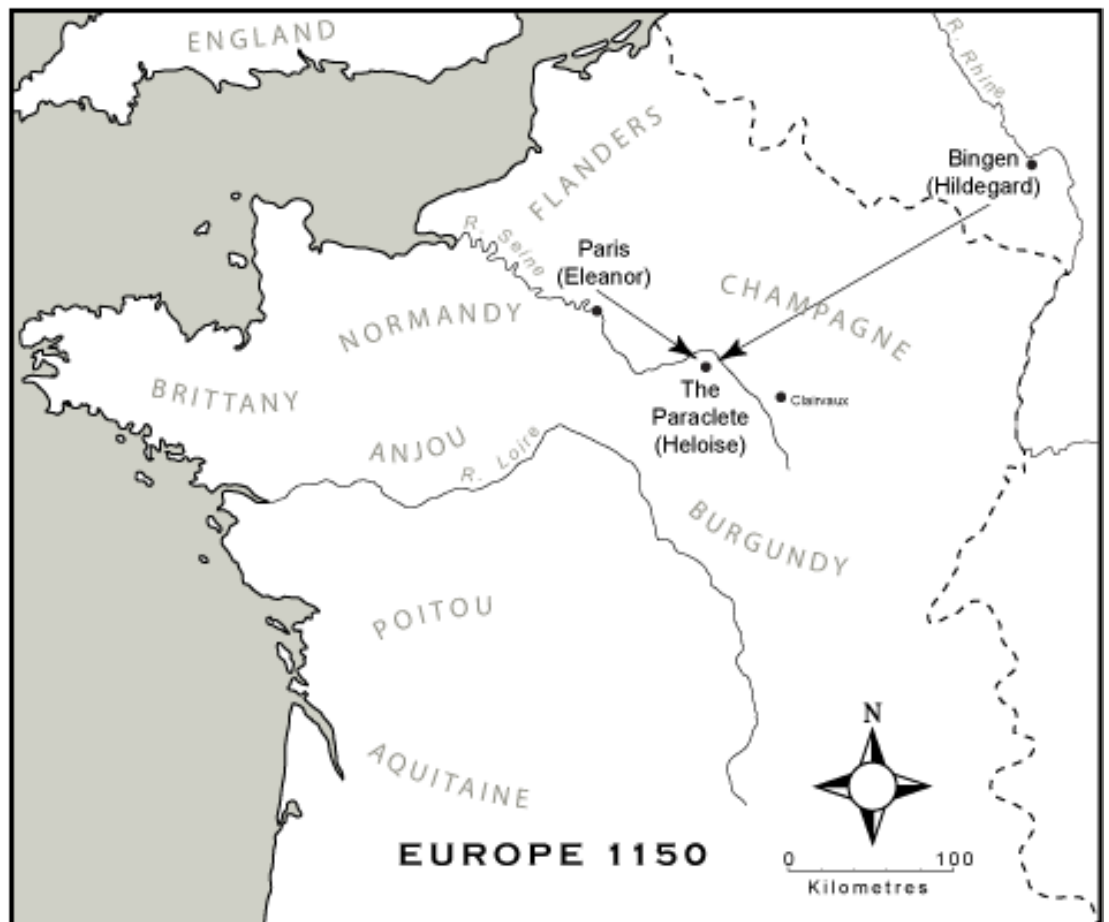


Diagram 1. Map of Europe showing where Eleanor and Hildegard lived in relation to the Paraclete. (Drawn by Kieron Amphlett)

### Could they have ever met?

Geographically, a meeting between Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor was possible. Eleanor had already travelled as far away as Jerusalem, and during her childhood she had moved about Aquitaine with her family. Hildegard, in her later life, travelled throughout Western Germany and, it is suggested, to Alsace and Lorraine. The further distance needed to travel to the Paraclete would not have seemed out of the question.

Within her social and religious environment, Eleanor, as queen, would not have been permitted to travel without official approval. Idle jaunts were not her prerogative. In much the same way, the Rule of St Benedict forbade Hildegard to leave her abbey. Monks and nuns did travel at times, but only at the express command or with the permission of their superior or the Bishop. As she was the head of her own monastery, by the time she undertook her preaching tours, presumably, permission to travel was granted by the Bishop.

The question of how much freedom of movement women, particularly noble women, was allowed is important for this thesis. It is intrinsic to the role Church and State played in everyday lives. The cultural dictates and practical concerns, such as modes of travel, safety and custom during the Middle Ages, are also relevant. All these were considered although the novel is not intended to be a complete biographical account of their lives. Instead, this thesis is an attempt to place three remarkable women together for a period of time, in circumstances that would allow them to reflect on their lives up to that point, make conjectures as to their futures, exchange ideas on matters that were important to them and stimulate, inspire and come into conflict with each other. Because in my novel each woman's story is written in the first person, subsequent to their time together, each is able to evaluate that time with the benefit of hindsight.

Thematically, I also needed to present not just their three stories, but also that of Bernard of Clairvaux, in as far as he is included in the narrative. I wished to differentiate between him and the three women who are the chief focus of the novel. Being three, they make a trinity. They could be said to possess wisdom, although not manifested in identical ways. Wisdom is personified as female in the Old Testament as Sophia, which gives weight to the concept that one thing which united them was their wisdom. The maternal role is exclusive to women, so I also decided to examine this representative aspect of femininity as it related to Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor. Both Heloise and Eleanor were required to give up their children, and Hildegard lost the companionship of a woman she regarded in a special way as her spiritual daughter. In each case the women had little control over the events that led to their loss. These were not isolated instances in the Middle Ages, and it seemed to me that the attitude to maternity could be used as an important indication of the status of women in their communities and society.

The novel was written after a combination of historical and literary research. I began with an investigation. What could historians tell me? How could literary theorists guide me in the task of presenting the historical material in a style that would establish the characters and their milieu in depth? How can we define a fictional character, which is an abstract concept, and then apply that definition to the depiction, in fiction, of people who have lived, and therefore are concrete, not abstract? I hoped that this marriage between history and fiction would produce a popular, beautiful and unique offspring.

## CHAPTER TWO

# HISTORICAL CHARACTERS IN FICTION

### Identity of Fictional Characters

The main characters in my novel, Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor, have certain elements of their personalities and circumstances in common. As historical characters, do they, in a similar way, share an element of identity with totally fictional characters? In other words, should they be portrayed in any way that distinguishes them from completely fictional characters?

In examining the concept of the identity of characters portrayed in a written text I turned, not to literary criticism, but to philosophy. At least two branches of philosophy, ethics and metaphysics, have incorporated examples from literature.<sup>23</sup> As well, the reference to philosophy is particularly apt because one of the important characters in my novel, Abelard, is a philosopher, and the letters between him and Heloise could be considered a significant philosophical debate about the nature of love, friendship, morality and the place of women in religious life.

As a teacher of logic in the early twelfth century and a follower of Aristotle, Abelard was concerned with the nature and identity of individual things and universals. Constant Mews explains that:

Abelard's major theme is that all predicables are physical utterances of human imposition. Genus and species cannot be reduced to one very general being, as being (ens) is simply an ambiguous name, not a fixed category. A differentia is not a thing, but a word imposed to signify varying degrees of difference, whether making a species different from a genus or one individual of one species from another. When dealing with something that is whole (like a mortal, rational animal), these categories are words considered together, giving the reason why something is considered as a whole. A proprium [one's own

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<sup>23</sup>Two examples are: Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 2000) Chapter 14, and Michael Oakeshott 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind' in *Rationalism in Politics* (London: Methuen, 1962).

peculiar characteristic] is a word imposed to signify what is peculiar to one thing rather than another.<sup>24</sup>

Put into terms that may elucidate the definition of the identity of historical characters within a written text, Abelard's theme can be explained as follows: a person, who is alive, is a being; this being is unique and individual; all persons are classed as members of humankind. This means that all persons have a number of similar characteristics, which allow them to be classed within one classification, humankind. The identity of a person may be defined as his or her character. It is similar characteristics that allow all persons to be classified in the one group, but each person has an individual and recognizable character, which can be described by listing his or her particular characteristics. For example, Socrates is a man, with features in common with other men, but there is only one Socrates, the philosopher. An individual's characteristics include appearance, age, social background, temperament, personality, education, motivation, capabilities and tendencies.

Abelard was treating the nature of identity of real objects. Does his theme apply to the nature of the identity of the fictional world, which includes fictional characters? Is there a difference between totally fictional characters and characters in fiction based on historical people?

It is clear that in creating a fictional character a writer necessarily calls on and describes many of the characteristics that pertain to living people. The difference between the living character and the fictional character is, however, more than the fact that one is alive and the other is not. More importantly one has a material presence, the other does not. A fictional character, in that sense, is an abstract concept. In creating a fictional character a writer may choose to describe as little or as many of the characteristics of the fictional character as seem appropriate. E. M. Forster writes of 'flat' or 'round' characters.

The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is flat pretending to be round.<sup>25</sup>

Can these definitions apply to the portrayal in a novel of people who have once lived? Forster speculates on the difference between 'people in a novel and people like the novelist, or like you or like me, or Queen Victoria'. He continues:

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<sup>24</sup>Constant Mews, *Abelard and Heloise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 33-34.

<sup>25</sup>E.M.Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Edward Arnold, 1949) p. 75.

There is bound to be a difference. If a character in a novel is exactly like Queen Victoria – not rather but exactly like – then it actually is Queen Victoria, and the novel, or all of it that the character touches, becomes a memoir. A memoir is a history, it is based on evidence. A novel is based on evidence + or – x, the unknown quantity being the temperament of the novelist, and the unknown quantity always modifies the effect of the evidence, and sometimes transforms it entirely.<sup>26</sup>

Considering the difficulty of creating a narrative completely free of any personal bias it would be interesting to speculate, also, on the possibility of ever presenting someone ‘exactly like’ a real person. Given the complexities of human nature how can we ascertain what a real person is exactly like? But, leaving this aside, Forster appears to suggest that a writer, using a person who has lived as a character within a novel, employs the same techniques as a writer who is creating a completely fictional character. Where the novelist differs from the historian is, as Forster claims, in the novelist’s role to reveal the hidden life of the characters.

The hidden life is, by definition, hidden. The hidden life that appears in external signs is hidden no longer, has entered the realm of action. And it is the function of the novelist to reveal the hidden life at its source: to tell us more about Queen Victoria than could be known, and thus produce a character who is not the Queen Victoria of history.<sup>27</sup>

But can any abstract concept ever be said to have an identity? Clearly there is a need to differentiate between a fictional world and the material world. Stacie Friend has defined differences in the theories of fictional reference as being between fictional-object theories and make-believe theories:

The fictional-object theories take our talk about fictional characters to involve genuine reference to real, usually nonexistent, objects of one sort or another.... [The] make-believe theory denies that there is a genuine reference to fictional objects. We pretend that there are such people, and then within the context of this pretence, but not outside it, we refer to them.<sup>28</sup>

This means that we may either accept that fictional characters have no reality in the strictest meaning of the word ‘real’, but are creatures of our perceptions and imaginations in some sort of parallel world, or we may consider them as having a specific definable identity that relates in some way to our own world.

The extreme view is that fictional characters have no identity apart from empty names. A less extreme view allows them an abstract identity within the world of the

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<sup>26</sup>Forster, p. 44.

<sup>27</sup>Forster, p. 45.

<sup>28</sup>Stacie Friend, ‘Real People in Unreal Contexts’ in *Empty Names, Fiction and the Puzzles of Non-existence*, ed. by Anthony Everett and Thomas Hofweber (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2000), 183-203 (pp 183-184).

imagination and, although they exist outside the material world their identity is grounded in reality. A fictional character that has nothing in common with the characteristics of real people would not be credible. These characteristics need not include physical form, but the ‘humanness’ can still be recognized. Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* with a Cheshire cat and white rabbit is just one example of a story with characters that we think of as ‘human’ although they have animal forms.

Amie Thomasson, in *Fiction and Metaphysics* asks: if we postulated fictional objects, what would they be? Her answer is to propose the theory of Author Essentialism, which postulates an approach that allows for the identification of fictional characters as abstract cultural artefacts.<sup>29</sup> In this she is assuming that fictional characters do have an identity. A brief outline of her theory is as follows: Fictional characters are ordinary cultural abstract artefacts, not inhabitants of a different realm. They come into existence only through the mental and physical acts of an author. These acts result in the production of literary works, created by a particular individual or group, at a particular time, in a particular social and historical circumstance. The fictional character can exist only as long as there are some individuals who have the language capacities and the background assumptions they need to read the literary text. Many different readers, on reading the same work, access the same fictional object. This means that fictional characters are not created afresh with each person’s thinking of them. When the same character appears in different works, or is treated by different authors, the character is still the same cultural artefact, not separate or distinct. The identity of that character does not change with the individual reader’s perceptions, in the same way that a living person does not have a separate identity for each person who meets him or her. It is the difference between perceptions and identity, a constructed reality or an objective reality.

Those who do not accept that there is any objective reality, but only one that is an individual construction, would certainly wish to take exception to the idea that the character’s identity does not change with readers’ perceptions. An evaluation of

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<sup>29</sup>Amie L. Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) This provides a full account of her theory of Author Essentialism.

constructivism, relativism or reader response theory would range far beyond the focus of this exegesis, however, and so I wish to do no more than acknowledge them.

In Author Essentialism there are three elements that are necessary for the existence of a fictional character: the writer who creates the text, the actual text and the reader who has the capacity to understand that text. Remove any one of these elements and the fictional character ceases to exist. Thomasson explains the advantage of thus defining fictional characters:

By conceiving of fictional objects as abstract artefacts we can offer identity criteria for fictional objects both within and across literary works that not only are as clear and precise as those we have for ordinary objects but also correspond closely to our practices in treating fictional characters as the same or different. Moreover, the means employed to develop these identity conditions show the way for devising identity conditions for many other kinds of dependent objects, including the literary works on which the fictional objects depend.<sup>30</sup>

This statement affirms her premise that characters portrayed in a literary text have some form of identity. Unless this is accepted then judgement of and discussion about such characters becomes impossible. Thomasson's approach has special resonance for writers. She is looking at the identity of abstract concepts within a metaphysical context, using fictional characters as her model. Metaphysics is defined in both medieval and modern philosophy to mean 'the study of things transcending nature – that is existing separately from nature'.<sup>31</sup> Her conclusions give due weight to the creative role of the writer and the part played by the reader. Jeffery Goodman, in support of Thomasson, writes that:

The causal origins of stories are essential properties of the story, so the dependence of the story on the author, and accordingly, the dependence of the fictional individuals mentioned therein on the author, is in fact an ontological dependence.<sup>32</sup>

Thomasson has limited her discussion to fictional characters. Can her theory also be applied to historical characters in fiction? I put that question to her in an email, and received the following response.

I tend to think that we, in different contexts, want to speak about these cases in different ways. In some contexts (those I focus on in F&M) it is important

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<sup>30</sup>Thomasson, pp. 55-5.

<sup>31</sup>*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Vol 5 ed. by Paul Edwards (New York and London: Macmillan Company and The Free Press, 1972), p. 289.

<sup>32</sup>Jeffery Goodman, 'Defending Author Essentialism' in *Philosophy and Literature*, 29 iss.1 April 2005, 200-208, (p.207)



to note the author's reference back to the real world, to actual people, places and events, and we will speak about (the real) Nixon as appearing in (and re-characterized in certain ways in) a novel. In other contexts, though, e.g. if we are saying what a well-developed (or under-developed) character Nixon or Napoleon is in a novel, we seem to speak of it as we would of other purely fictional characters e.g. the Nixon-of-the-movie is sympathetically developed, etc. In those contexts of discussion, I think we can take ourselves to be referring to a created fictional character (the Nixon-of-the-movie; Napoleon-of-the-novel, etc.).<sup>33</sup>

For me, the significance of this reply is that it states that it is necessary to 'note the author's reference back to the real world', and that actual people may be thought of as 'appearing' in a novel. Their identity is not changed but the way they are presented will differ either slightly or significantly from the 'real' people. There is a finite degree of difference. There must be an identifiable link between the characters in the text and the real people. Although Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor are much further removed from our time than is Nixon, Thomasson's observations still apply. In my novel they are in the context of a 'well-developed character' rather than a passing reference. An historical character, featured in a novel, may be a 'created fictional character' but needs also to relate to his or her reality.

Jasper Fforde extends the question of the identity of fictional characters by portraying them in a fictional world inhabited by characters from fiction where they react and integrate with other characters. In a series of novels he portrays an Outlander (living person) Thursday Next as a literary detective inhabiting the world of fiction at various times.

In an attempt to rescue her eradicated husband, she [Thursday] finds a way to enter fiction itself – and discovers that not only is there a policing agency within the Book World, known as Jurisfiction, but that she has been apprenticed as a trainee agent to Miss Havisham of *Great Expectations*.<sup>34</sup>

Fforde moves in and out of the fictional world, using characters in particular, but also settings, genres and literary references. For his readers the divide between his portrayal of the real world and the fictional world is barely discernable. Therefore a character already created in a novel is presented alongside a new fictional character created by Fforde. The result is that characters already featured in previous novels do have a recognizable identity, comparable to the other characters created in Fforde's novels.

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<sup>33</sup>Amie Thomasson, personal communication, 5 December 2005.

<sup>34</sup>Jasper Fforde, *The Well of Lost Plots* (London: Hodder, 2003), unnumbered preface

## **The role of research**

While I followed the accepted historian's path, using historical resources and references, my goals differed from those of the historian. I wished to portray the characters and personalities of my three women as convincingly as I could in order to present them to readers who could appreciate their times and the way these influenced their thinking. In addition, I wanted the reader to imagine them as women who could take their place in the world of today. These goals provide an essential link to Thomasson's theory as outlined earlier. That is, the characters are the product of the writer's work, presented as text and able to be understood by a reader.

I wish to focus on my research in some detail to demonstrate the considerations that engaged me as a writer. Often I found that long held ideas about the characters, their motivations, or about important events are either now contested or actually refuted. It was important to decide where the weight of the evidence would lead as this strongly influenced the way the novel was to be written. Therefore my fictional portrayal of Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor relies heavily on research in the fields of medieval history, including aspects pertaining to the three women, which allowed me to draw on the work of historians. Further to this, I studied fictional treatment of their lives in books, plays, operas and films. In the various portrayals of Eleanor of Aquitaine in historical fiction there are a number of common characteristics, such as her unsatisfying relationship with Louis VII, her love of music and her strength of character. Thus readers of any of these novels recognize that she is a specific person, not just an example of a medieval queen. Similarly, any fictional representation of Heloise will refer to her relationship with Abelard and her scholarship. Hildegard of Bingen is not depicted in many books of fiction, but those that do refer to her visions, her love of nature, her life as a Benedictine nun and her music. Without at least some of these characteristics the character would bear scant resemblance to the historical Hildegard of Bingen. Outside of these known factors the portrayal of the three women is fiction, with the proviso that the fictional portrait must respect what is known of their lives and times.

Thomasson has defined fictional characters as abstract cultural artefacts and identified three elements upon which they depend. Even if some modification is required in applying her theory to historical characters in fiction, there is nothing in

those three elements that apply exclusively to purely fictional characters and exclude historical characters in fiction.

Firstly, the character depends on the creative act of a particular author writing at a particular time and in a social context. Thus in creating an historical character within a literary text, the person who is writing and the historical and social context in which he or she is writing are both extremely relevant to the way in which that character will be portrayed and developed. For example, achievements and identity of famous women have been reappraised in the light of feminist and gender studies. Over the centuries Heloise has been depicted as the ideal of a devoted lover, an intelligent woman who was dominated by Abelard, and a brilliant scholar whose literary works were received favourably while she lived, and which are now being rediscovered. In describing ways that biographers deal with Heloise's intellectual collaboration with Abelard, Juanita Ruys has identified four in particular:

The least flattering reading has Heloise as a flighty and attention-seeking woman, always anxious to engage the more serious Abelard in her frivolous requests... Second, Heloise is presented as Muse to Abelard; that is as a woman who might inspire philosophical or theological reflections through passion or devotion or need, but not by intellectual interaction with him. Third, there is the reading of Heloise as capable convent administrator, attentively considering her monastic situation and sending any resultant enquiries, problems or conclusions to Abelard, eliciting from him in return specific texts... Finally there is the reading of Heloise as profoundly influencing Abelard's thought across the whole range of his writings...<sup>35</sup>

Yet, within all these interpretations of Heloise, there is a common thread that acknowledges a close relationship with Abelard. It would be extraordinarily difficult to portray Heloise in fiction without including him. Depending on the particular writer, the emphasis and interpretation of the relationship between Heloise and Abelard will differ, such as, for example, on the influence Heloise had on Abelard's writing.

The second element of Thomasson's theory refers to the production of a literary text. This text uses written words, usually on paper, published in some form. These words provide descriptions that are meaningful to a reader. There is no difference, in the physical production of a literary text, between one that features fictional characters and one that features fictionalised historical characters.

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<sup>35</sup>Juanita Feros Ruys, 'Genre, gender and authenticity: Readings of Heloise in the Twentieth Century' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sydney, Department of English, 1999), p. 60.

In the third element, the individual reader will bring different experience, knowledge and personal responses to a fictional or an historical character, but in appraising either type of character the reader will still consider him or her as an identifiable person.

The three elements Thomasson requires for the identity of a fictional character as an abstract cultural artefact (writer's work, written text, reader's response) can also be applied, therefore, to historical characters in fiction. There are, however, other considerations in the portrayal of historical characters. Writers of historical fiction have the freedom to exercise imagination but within the confines of a credible scenario. For example, my particular challenges were: to bring the three women to life for modern readers; to find a way to reconcile what I discovered through research if it is at strong variance with accepted folk wisdom about these women; to decide how much freedom is allowed to fill in the gaps; and to work independently despite the sensation that historians are looking over my shoulder.

Given these constraints and limitations in writing historical characters into fiction, might it not be preferable to eschew the practice? Patricia Dunker, in asking why any writer would choose to write historical fiction, states that:

In the end all novels take on the mask of the historical novel as they step back from us into the past. So why do we write self-consciously historical fiction? ... What indeed is history, so far as historical fiction is concerned? For every writer who attempts the project of remaking history must have, whether they are aware of it or not, a quite concrete notion of what history is, what it means, and what its ultimate significance must be to us, the past's inheritors.<sup>36</sup>

What Dunker has to say about writing historical novels applies to the portrayal of historical characters within those novels. Her answer as to why we find pleasure in both writing and reading historical novels is that they are 'an ideal form for conveying information, the sense of the landscapes, customs, objects, interiors, carrying us into another country of imagined worlds.'<sup>37</sup>

This brings me back to an earlier question. If historical characters in fiction have a strong relationship to their known life story can the portrayal of them be judged as a creative act? In writing a novel based on Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor can it be argued that I am only imaginatively rewriting history? There is a difference between historical people portrayed by historians and biographers and those by fiction writers.

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<sup>36</sup>Patricia Dunker, *Writing on the Wall* (London: Pandora, 2002), pp. 36-3.

<sup>37</sup>Dunker, p. 39.

This difference is the subject of debate and contention between historians, biographers and novelists. Think of a spectrum. On the left are totally fictional characters (TFC). On the right are accounts of people written by historians (HA). Nearer the centre, but still on the right, are the subjects of biographies (B). Historical characters in fiction (HCF) are placed near centre left between biography and fiction.

TFC                      HCF                      B                      HA

#### Characters as Fiction

Those writing non-fiction regard fiction as having the potential to distort the facts, if not actually producing a total fabrication. Not all historians are as accommodating to the fiction writer as is Ruys, who sees a positive role for the novelist. In studying the representation of Heloise in the twentieth century she concluded that biographies have their limitations, which include focusing exclusively on the facts and eschewing speculation ‘in order to safeguard its place on the academic side of the fact/fiction divide.’ She suggests that the historical novel is one solution to the problems imposed by biography.

Novelists have a generically-sanctioned ability to pause and consider issues and to apply imagination to their subject’s life. If they also choose to write consonant with the demands of authenticity, they may do so with humour, insight and compassion. It may be that this combination of imagination and authenticity produces as nuanced and holistic a picture of a female figure as could be found in any genre.<sup>38</sup>

This supports the notion that, while historical characters are based on people who really lived, the writer’s imagination and creativity have a place in writing fiction that portrays them.

### **Creative interpretation of living people**

In considering the creation of a character in a literary text it can be valuable to consider the process of creation in other media. One artist paints a portrait of a living person, while a second artist paints a picture of a person whom he imagines. While they may differ in style or merit the subject matter would be regarded as the same in so far as they are both images of a person. The painter who portrays an imagined person may base that portrayal on a particular, but unnamed person, or may draw on

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<sup>38</sup>Ruys, p. 225.

a composite image of people he or she has seen. Consider Pieter Breughel for example, whose genre pictures of peasant life featured distinctive individual figures that may or may not have been based on actual people. In the same way writers creating characters very often draw on themselves, on specific people they have known or on their observations, even when portraying fictional characters.

One may also make a distinction between a photograph of a living person and a portrait. The art of photography may interpret the subject by highlighting facets and aspects of a face or figure, but the subject is still a real person. Models may dress up as famous people, but this becomes a representational/biographical portrait. No one would imagine that a man resembling Abraham Lincoln and dressed in the fashion of his era was the real Abraham Lincoln.

Let us return to my three wonderful women. To bring them to life for the modern reader I needed to portray them as believable people, reveal their personalities, give some idea of their appearance, and relate my narrative to events in their lives. For a reader, the historical characters I create may be no more or no less 'real' than a fictional character. Within the novel there are two completely fictional characters, Sister Elizabeth and Adele. The process of creating these characters did not differ in a significant way from the techniques and tools used for the historical characters. During the process they became as real to me as the three main protagonists.

In line with the analogy of artists painting portraits or human figures it is clear that personal appearance is a very important aspect of how an identity is perceived and recognised. For the three characters in my novel, born long before photographs were possible and never painted nor adequately described, I was forced to create my own picture of their physical appearance. Some biographers refer to Hildegard of Bingen as being beautiful, but there is nothing elsewhere to suggest physical beauty, nor is this particularly relevant when writing about a woman who is famous for her achievements, not her looks. In her writings she seemed to be a practical, sensible woman, intensely interested in natural science and how other people lived their daily lives. From this I came to imagine her as short and solidly built, with a wise and kindly face. Her writing and music also reveal reflection, wisdom and an awareness of beauty. It may not be totally fanciful to think that these qualities would make Hildegard an attractive person, whose goodness and intelligence were evident to all who met her.

Heloise also suffers from a lack of portrait or detailed description. Abelard describes her in one letter as being: ‘in looks not ranked the lowest.’<sup>39</sup> In an earlier letter he writes: ‘How fertile with delight is your breast, how you shine with untouched beauty, body so full of moisture.’<sup>40</sup> While these words express appreciation of her beauty they do not actually describe Heloise, and must also be considered in the light of their classical allusions. Abelard never thought to mention the colour of her eyes or hair, nor remark on the beauty of her complexion or a dimple in her left cheek. Most of the writers who tell her story within an historical novel describe her as being very beautiful, consistent with the stereotype of a romantic heroine. My own feeling, and this is a personal response, is that she had a face made attractive more by her intelligence and animation than physical features. As her personality comes through so clearly in her letters to Abelard, giving such a strong sense of her unique character, her physical beauty becomes of lesser importance.

Even Eleanor, an acknowledged beauty, left us no portrait. In fact the only known description of her is by Bernard of Clairvaux who was so incensed by her rich clothes and jewellery that he forgot to mention her features or colouring. He likened her to:

One of those daughters of Belial, who, got up in this way, put on airs, walk with heads high and mincing steps, their necks thrust forward, and, furnished and adorned as only temples should be, they drag after them trains of precious material that makes clouds of dust.<sup>41</sup>

A researcher would be inclined to judge that Bernard’s description is unnecessarily harsh and treat it with great caution. Writers’ imaginations are instructed and stimulated by their research, but it cannot then be assumed that all the accounts found in primary or secondary sources faithfully depict the person. Such descriptions may be coloured by politics, gender, malice or admiration. We do not even know the colour of Eleanor’s hair, nor her eyes. She wore a rich scarlet dress when she married

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<sup>39</sup>‘Historia Calamitatum’, in *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. by Betty Radice (London: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 66.

<sup>40</sup>Constant Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth Century France* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999), Letter 26, p. 209.

<sup>41</sup>Quoted from Alison Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 36.

Louis VII, which suggests to me that she was a strong and confident woman, although it might just have been the year for being married in scarlet.<sup>42</sup>

In the case of Heloise and Hildegard we can learn a great deal from their writings. Eleanor left only some official documents that reveal little and three personal letters that may or may not have been actually written by her. History tells us much about what she did, where she travelled, her conflicts with both husbands and her efforts to ensure that the children she had with Henry obtained their estates and kingdoms. Through all of this, her physical presence and personality can be imagined and used as the basis to create her character within my novel.

I can research the writings of my three women, read accounts by contemporaries, and subsequent academic papers, as well as biographies and historical novels and while from these I glean and reap, the final depiction of the women is my harvest. Would I approach it differently if I were writing about three fictional women? I would need to set them in an historical context, even if it were a contemporary one, the ‘imaginary world’ to which Dunker refers. I would need to describe their appearance, personalities and actions, and before I could do that I would have to reach some conclusions concerning all three aspects. I would need to show how they perceived themselves and how others reacted to them. I would have greater freedom in choosing certain details in this process of creation, but there would still be the need for research to ensure that the fictional world and characters that I created were credible. I maintain that the process of writing Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor is essentially the same as it would be were I creating three completely fictional women. What is different is the means of compiling the background and salient information about the characters. In writing an historical character in fiction we start with known facts, which provide a springboard for the imagination.

To strengthen the assertion that there is similarity between the identity of fictional and historical characters in a literary text, imagine a biography, complete with references, letters and reports of interviews with friends and family. The subject of this biography does not exist. The references, letters and accounts of interviews with friends and family are totally fabricated. In other words this ‘biography’ is a work of fiction. The subject of this biography, although ostensibly a person who once lived,

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<sup>42</sup>White was not the traditional colour for a bridal gown in medieval times. Eleanor would never have made such a provocative statement if her dress colour were to reflect adversely on her virginal state.



is a fictional character, as the term 'fictional biography' affirms. The information used to describe such a character resembles that which one would use to invent a fictional character: background, setting, physical form, personality and relationships with others. The writer has drawn on his or her imagination and inventiveness to create this character. The only difference is that the character is presented in a format normally used for biographical writing rather than in a novel. While this may be considered an argument about genre rather than historical fiction it also supports my point that the process of creating a character based on a person who lives, or has lived, is similar to that of planning, developing and writing a fictional character.

In using the lives of Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor there is a framework of the historical period and the circumstances of their lives. This framework is not negotiable unless one is prepared to sacrifice verisimilitude. History gives us only part of the picture. To complete it a writer uses imagination and insight, in order to reveal the way the character would react in any given situation, or to judge the motives that led to particular action. There will be significant aspects in the lives of historical characters that act as signposts for the novelist. For example, Hildegard's visions have been variously ascribed to a visitation from God, migraine or psychosis.<sup>43</sup> A writer's version of Hildegard's personality will be coloured by the acceptance of any of these interpretations. The writer is also free to reject all of them and interpret the visions in some other way.

Or take Eleanor: how did she feel as a young woman coming to the stricter Royal Court in Paris after the freedom of her household in Aquitaine? How was she affected by the deaths and carnage she witnessed during the Crusades? Did she choose to marry Henry because he was a lusty, attractive man, even if he was some years her junior, or was she influenced by his prospects and estates? The answer to this latter question may be both. Would a hard-headed practical woman (such as Eleanor must have been to survive the intrigues and machinations of court life in both France and England) have been concerned with Courts of Love at Poitiers?

Finally consider Heloise: did her feelings towards Abelard change after she read his letter, *Historia Calamitatum*, in which he attributed their earlier love relationship, one which had remained the focus of her thoughts for many years, to his yielding to

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<sup>43</sup>There is a discussion of these theories in Fiona Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of her Age* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2002), pp. 61-64.

lustful and sinful desires? We know what she wrote in reply as we have copies of the correspondence between these two, but letters were a more public matter in the Middle Ages, written with the expectation that others might read them. Is it possible to look beyond this official correspondence to imagine how a woman might really react in such circumstances? It is in such considerations, which are both a challenge and a delight for any writer, that the creative process is stimulated and nurtured.

A definition of the identity of fictional characters, such as in Thomasson's theory of Author Essentialism, provides a basis for literary criticism and textual analysis. To extend that definition to include historical characters is justified. The requirements of good novel writing, which could be loosely classified as: a theme, satisfying narrative, character development, and a text that is thought-provoking and stimulating, apply in both literary and historical novels.<sup>44</sup> While the writer of historical fiction has a responsibility to respect the truth as far as it is known, it is in taking the story beyond what is known that creativity is called into play. Part of that creative process is the identification, development and depiction of the historical character in the novel.

Writers of historical fiction need to be able to connect with people who lived some time ago, in order to then connect these people to modern readers. A firm base of historical knowledge and judgement is essential to negotiate modern perceptions of societies and interpret past cultures. Within these considerations the identity of an historical character in fiction or a fictional character can be defined in a similar way. The same process, using knowledge, imagination, word pictures, and evocative language, is required to create either of these categories. If the historical character in a fictional text is to relate credibly to the person on whom it is based, however, the writer is constrained in particular ways in the use of knowledge and imagination. Accepting that the historical character does share many of the characteristics of a fictional character is a helpful step in the creative process. There is also a responsibility to fully research so that the historical imagination is rigorously grounded.

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<sup>44</sup>This list refers to the conventional novel form, being relevant to my own novel. Other criteria could be relevant for postmodern, post postmodern or other approaches to novel writing.

## CHAPTER THREE

# CHERCHEZ LES FEMMES

### **Balance between history and imagination**

No matter what means we use to appreciate the life and essential character of an historical person, the method will include some form of historical research. The work of historians is an integral and central component in both the plotting and the creation of character in an historical novel. There is a need to establish a balance, however, between the knowledge gained through historical research and the degree to which the writer's imagination, personal experience and perceptions can be exercised.

Writers may draw on people they have known personally or by reputation as their inspiration when developing a fictional character. Using such models has difficulties. If the character is based on family, friend or acquaintance and the portrait is too clearly drawn, the consequences may be the ruination of a relationship, or, worse, a lawsuit. These are not normally problems when basing a character in fiction on an historical person, unless one needs to consider the feelings of descendants. There are, however, other considerations. Both notable and notorious people, through their reputation and fame, have become part of our culture; a form of public property, and the writer must give more than word-service to this communal ownership. However, a writer's individual perceptions and understanding of particular historical lives, as well as human nature in general, grow through learning and reflection. Each advance in knowledge stimulates the writer's response, which is the foundation for the individuality of the character in the text. The portrayal of an historical person must limit the imagination to some degree, but there will always be an element within such a portrayal that reflects the writer rather than the historical person.

Let us imagine that the representation (as distinct from the identity) of the historical character is a framed mosaic. The border is solid and settled. It contains names, the period when the person lived (even birth and death dates), marriage/s,

children and significant events. These have been established beyond reasonable doubt by historians. The mosaic tiles, which are pieced together to complete the picture inside this frame, represent that which is surmised rather than known. They are not smoothly fashioned. Some of the pieces may be round, presenting one point of view. They might be triangles in a different, but plausible, interpretation. Certain tiles will be discarded, others fitted as closely as possible, and the gaps then filled in with the mortar of imagination. The finished mosaic may vary according to the shapes, representing different interpretations, which are used, although all versions should bear some defining relationship to each other. The centre, or surmised area must also fit sufficiently within the established border. Otherwise the mosaic is not a unified piece of work.

Is it ever possible to know exactly what happened in the past, and is this, in reality, what historians seek to achieve? In response to the second question Ann Curthoys and John Docker cite the ‘famous manifesto-like influential phrase’ coined by Leopold Ranke, that historians may ‘seek to show the past as it actually/essentially was’.<sup>45</sup> The writer, guided by imagination, may seek to also show the essential past, even if it is not the exact past, but even more the creative writer sets out to create an impression, an essence, and an original image within the framework of historical reality.

Another way of explaining this is to think of a writer looking at the people who lived in an earlier time through a window of the twenty-first century. Because the glass is clear, one can see the figures, but because they are so far away, there is some distortion and uncertainty. The historian may attempt to describe these figures and their surroundings, their actions and their achievements as exactly as is possible. The writer will draw impressions and perceptions from what can be seen to create a new picture in which the figures are more clearly delineated. As I examine Heloise, Hildegard of Bingen and Eleanor of Aquitaine through a modern window, what can I see and what do I choose to describe?

There are three women standing at the arched gateway that frames the pathway to the Paraclete. Two are middle aged, and are dressed soberly in the brown Benedictine habit. The third, a woman who is young enough to be a daughter, is dressed more colourfully, flamboyantly even. What can we know of their lives? To

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<sup>45</sup>Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is History Fiction?* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006), p. 3.

understand them from a modern perspective it is necessary to understand something of the times in which they lived.

### **Women of the Middle Ages**

Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor are still remembered as notable women who lived in medieval times. In judging just how remarkable they were, I would like to spend some time on examining the position of women of the Middle Ages. Understanding their status within their society throws light on both the value placed on the maternal role (which will be discussed more fully) and the power which women had to make decisions about their own lives.

Mary Beard in her study of women in the Middle Ages reaches conclusions that contrast sharply and unfashionably with the idea that women at that time were dominated, downtrodden and uneducated. Unlike Fiona Harris Stoertz,<sup>46</sup> whose work will be discussed later, she did not confine her research to 'elite' women, but looked to those of the lower classes. Beard points out that all the activities of households and fields could be handled by women as well as men, and often without the help of men. Women needed to be able to administer estates and businesses during the times when their men were absent, either on business or at war. For this they needed to have some degree of education and learning. Beard asserts that:

Just as women took part and carried full loads of work in agriculture, domestic industries and trading, just as they participated in the activities of craft, trade and social guilds or corporations, so they shared and expressed themselves in all forms of social life in town and country. In everything human their qualities and force were expressed – from religious and secular festivities, sports, games, and riots to discussion of religious and moral questions and the management of charitable undertakings. In castles and cottages, fields and in gild halls, on village greens and in churchyards, in towns and on city streets, in taverns and at market fairs they sought release from the rigors of earning a livelihood, from burdens of domesticity, or responsibilities belonging to the status of their class, whatever it was.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Fiona Harris Stoertz, 'Young Women in France and England 1050-1300', *Journal of Women's History* 12.4 (Winter 2001)

<sup>47</sup> Mary Beard, *Woman as Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1946), pp. 235-236.

Beard shows that women played a more important role in medieval society than is often acknowledged. Pernoud also claims that some women in the Church had ‘extraordinary power during the Middle Ages’, and the place of women in the Church reflected their place in secular society.

If one examines the facts, the conclusion is inescapable: during the whole feudal period, the place of women in the Church was certainly different from that of men (and is this not precisely a proof of the wisdom of allowances for what equal but different creatures men and women are), but it was an eminent place, which, moreover, symbolized perfectly the cult, which was likewise eminent, rendered to the virgin among all the saints.<sup>48</sup>

This may seem to present a biased picture, concentrating on the prestige of some of the more powerful women in the monastic system, but Pernoud does not confine her research to any one group of women. She insists that it is in the examination of collections of customs, notarial acts, cartularies and legal documents of the time that we obtain a truer picture of the position of women, especially ‘peasants and townswomen, mothers of families and women practising a trade’.<sup>49</sup>

It is through documents of this kind that one can, piece by piece, reconstruct, as in a mosaic, the real story. There is no point in saying that this story is in appearance something very different from that provided by the chansons de geste, the chivalric novels, and the literary sources that have so often been taken as historical sources!<sup>50</sup>

The ‘real story’ of women in the Middle Ages as presented by Beard and Pernoud reveals women who voted in urban assemblies and worked in a number of capacities, such as seamstresses, doctors, apothecaries, plasterers and copyists.

There still remained, however, certain important areas where women were disadvantaged. They could not be knighted and lead soldiers into battle. (Joan of Arc was an exception, and paid dearly.) They were unable to be ordained as priests, which meant they always held an inferior position to men within the Church for they could never aspire to positions of significance or power within the hierarchy, despite the prestige enjoyed by the abbesses of great monasteries. They were denied access to the cathedral schools and later, to universities, so that while women might attain a high level of education privately, this was the exception rather than the rule.

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<sup>48</sup>Régine Pernoud, *Those Terrible Middle Ages!* trans. by Anne Englund Nash ( San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000) p. 107.

<sup>49</sup>Pernoud, *Those Terrible Middle Ages!* p. 109.

<sup>50</sup>Pernoud, *Those Terrible Middle Ages!* p. 110.

Does Hildegard's frequent description of herself as 'a poor little woman' convey the status of women in her own time. Is it honest or her self-appraisal, or an ironic comment? The fact that such a phrase is echoed throughout the writing of her contemporaries does lead to the conclusion that women could not safely claim excellence in any field of endeavour. Elizabeth Petroff tells us that 'women's mystical writings are often characterized by a peculiar and troubling double voice' which combines self-doubt with reference to divine inspiration.<sup>51</sup>

The two major female images presented in clerical writings were Eve and Mary. Eve was the one who, in the Garden of Eden, committed the Original Sin, and then led Adam to disobey God. Hence she is the source of sin and suffering in the world. She is also the first woman, and thus the ancestor of all people. Frances and Joseph Gies explain:

Much has been written of the medieval ambivalence that simultaneously placed women on a pedestal and reviled her as the incarnation of evil. Preachers tirelessly repeated the tale of Eve's beguiling Adam, while elevating the Virgin Mary to the status of a cult.<sup>52</sup>

St. Bernard of Clairvaux addresses Eve in the following words.

You, too Eve. You were placed in paradise to work there and look after it with your husband and if you had done what you were told you were to have passed to a better life in which you would not have to work or be concerned about guarding.<sup>53</sup>

Hildegard's approach to Eve is far less simplistic than this idea that if Eve had only done as she was told then all would have been well. Hildegard adopted Augustine's view that Original Sin had more to do with lust than disobedience. Barbara Newman points out that Hildegard makes reference to Satan who 'opening [Eve's] womb, belched all his filth into her body, to set his mark on all the children of man, for they are venomously sown in the fire of lust'. Newman then draws attention to a more 'surprising passage' where:

She [Hildegard] even forgot about the fall long enough to compare the three causes of Adam's creation – namely the will, power and goodness of God – with the three causes of procreation – the male's desire, potency and affection. This Trinitarian analogy,

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<sup>51</sup>*Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, ed. by Elizabeth Petroff (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 23.

<sup>52</sup>Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1978), p. 39.

<sup>53</sup>*Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Writings*, trans. by Gillian Evans (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 124.

which seems to be original with Hildegard, is at best anomalous in a writer who normally branded concupiscence as a devilish vice.<sup>54</sup>

At the very least this alerts us to the danger of oversimplifying the association of Eve with sin, lust and temptation in the medieval mind. More pertinently it illustrates the manner in which Hildegard could present a provocative and novel interpretation of biblical texts, and therefore we should be constantly vigilant against the temptation to limit our understanding of the Middle Ages to stereotypes.

Abelard, who may seem to accept the traditional view of women as the weaker sex, in fact considers that weakness as strength. Joan Ferrante, in summarising Abelard's sermons on women, explains that 'he points out that it is Mary who reverses the order of creation'. He continues:

A woman alone, out of her own substance, without the mixing of virile seed, furnished the body with which divinity clothed itself, taking the form of man in her.<sup>55</sup>

This statement pithily summarises the paradox concerning the attitude to women where the Christian faith was accepted. How could a woman who dragged mankind into the misery of original sin and mortality be considered in the same light as a woman who played an essential role in the redemption of mankind? Did not the excellence of the latter negate the weakness of the former? Which one – Eve or Mary – most represents womankind? Ferrante also points out that Heloise, far from expressing a sense of inferiority in the requests she makes of Abelard, claims that 'women can also hold their own intellectually' and that the 'letter that accompanies the questions shows intellectual sophistication that she and perhaps some of her nuns brought to their studies'. There is 'no humility topos here'.<sup>56</sup>

Mary is sinless, the Mother of God and the spiritual mother of the Church and all Christian people. The place she held in medieval life cannot be exaggerated. Adams summarises her position:

Saint Bernard was emotional and to a certain degree mystical, like Adam de Saint-Victor, whose hymns were equally famous, but the emotional saints and mystical poets were not by any means allowed to establish exclusive rights to the Virgin's favour... The guilds were, if possible, more devoted to her than the monks; the

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<sup>54</sup>Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p. 125.

<sup>55</sup>Joan M Ferrante, *To the Glory of her Sex* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 64.

<sup>56</sup>Ferrante, p. 59.



bourgeoisie of Paris, Rouen, Amiens, Laon spent money by millions to gain her favour. Most surprising of all, the great military class was perhaps the most vociferous...the greatest French warriors insisted on her leading them into battle, and in the actual mêlée when men were killing each other on every battlefield in Europe, for at least five hundred years, Mary was present, leading both sides.<sup>57</sup>

As such, Mary acted as a strong antidote to the view that all women would lead men into temptation; or that women were weak and incapable of reasoning and even that they may not have possessed souls. The teaching of the Church concerning women must have influenced Hildegard. As did so many others of that time, she also accepted Aristotle's dictum that the male represented the active form and the female the passive form. But where she was allowed freedom of thought, her ideas developed beyond the accepted wisdom. Barbara Newman tells us that:

Hildegard accepted the analogy comparing man and woman to soul and body, and she also agreed that the female nature was colder than the male. At her most conventional she noted that woman is 'weak and fragile and a vessel for man,' and because of her delicate constitution she needs less exercise and should spend more time sitting than walking or standing. However Hildegard soon diverged from the norm by ascribing the earthy complexion to the man, on account of Adam's formation from earth, and the airy temperament to woman. Such anomalies alert us to the fact that, where the heavenly voice and the Church were silent, Hildegard recognized no authority beyond her own.<sup>58</sup>

Heloise, seems to accept the idea that women lead men from the path of virtue when, after they had both entered religious life, she asks Abelard:

Was it my sorry birthright to become the cause of evil?  
The well known curse of womankind.  
To lead the greatest men to greatest ruin?

She then identifies with Eve in feeling that she was responsible for his downfall.

The first action by a woman lured man from paradise  
became his undoing when the Lord created her to be his helpmeet.  
Oh yes, the great Seducer in his cunning knew one thing well, and  
that from long experience  
the easiest path to ruin for men  
is always through their wives.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Adams, p. 65.

<sup>58</sup>Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p. 128.

<sup>59</sup>*Abelard and Heloise: Their Letters and other Writings*, trans. by William Levitan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2007), pp. 76-77.

Thus she gives credence to the view that men were vulnerable to the evil of women, and that this had been the situation since Creation. It is in sad contrast to the joyful letter written by her in the first few years of their love: 'The most precious thing I have I give to you, namely myself, firm in faith and love, stable in desire for you and never changeable.'<sup>60</sup>

Apart from the Eve/Mary divide, women were depicted in a very particular way in spiritual literature, although it might be more accurate to say that 'feminine' represented particular characteristics that could be exhibited in either gender. Newman explores the implications of Hildegard's 'effeminate age' explaining that it has nothing to do with female weakness as such, but a number of undesirable and destructive characteristics.

In her vehement denunciations of the effeminate age, Hildegard condemned a Church whose vain, pleasure-loving prelates had lost all manly fortitude and zeal for the Word of God in their craving for worldly honour, soft living, and wealth. Ironically, these effeminate priests are the very same she attacked elsewhere for their lack of motherly care... In short they possess the virtues of neither sex and the vices of both.<sup>61</sup>

Both Newman and Caroline Bynum have written extensively on the subject of the feminine within monastic literature.<sup>62</sup> It is probably fair to say that the overwhelming view of women was that they were inferior to men, with the exception of a few who became 'honorary' males. Grace Jantzen, in examining the subordination of women during the patristic era, concludes:

Although a few women were able to break out of the cultural expectations of marriage and childbearing, the net result was that by doing it in this way the stereotypes became even more rigid and less susceptible to challenge. Women as a sex were looked down upon by men: and women to a large extent internalised the misogyny of their culture, increasingly reinforced by the development of Christian doctrine and practice.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Mews, *Lost Love Letters* p. 275, Letter 102.

<sup>61</sup>Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 239-240.

<sup>62</sup>Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to Women Christ: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) and Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

<sup>63</sup>Grace Jantzen, *Power Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1995), p. 58.

No matter how women, either individually or generically, were regarded within medieval society, under both Church law and secular law they most certainly did not have equal status or rights with men. This was the reality, which the three women in my novel had to work with.

Did Heloise, Hildegard or Eleanor really regard themselves as inferior to men? After studying the life and writings of all three I felt that they were well aware of their strengths and abilities and were able to judge that there were many men who lacked their intellect, learning and acuity. This does not alter the fact that, to be accepted, they needed to present themselves in a more submissive role, and at times they may have seen that role as fitting. Certainly in pivotal times in their lives they did not have full freedom of action. It is too easy to assume, with hindsight, that they chafed under the bondage of masculine perceptions, but they could not have been entirely free of the underlying view that women were inferior in some way to men.

## **HELOISE**

What I know of Heloise is based largely on letters, of which only copies remain. The letters between her and Abelard are in two groups: Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum*, the Personal Letters and the Letters of Direction, copies of which were discovered in the thirteenth century; and the Lost Love Letters, excerpts from which were discovered among other letters in the library at Clairvaux Abbey in 1471 by a monk, and recognized as possible correspondence between Abelard and Heloise in 1974 by Ewald Könsgen.<sup>64</sup> In the early 1990s Constant Mews re-examined these letters in detail and came to the conclusion that they were, indeed, fragments of letters which Heloise and Abelard wrote to each other. His claim was hotly debated, but scholarly opinion now seems to be weighted in his favour.

The authenticity of both groups of letters has been strongly questioned, although a literary industry has been based on the first group, particularly Abelard's biographical *Historia Calamitatum*. With regard to these letters doubts are cast, not so much on Abelard's contribution to the correspondence, as on Heloise's, with the claim that a pious nun would never have written in such a vein. This debate

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<sup>64</sup>Ewald Könsgen, *Epistolae Duorum Armantium, Briefe Abaelards und Heloises?*, *Mittelateinisches Studeiend und Texte* 8 (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1974), cited by Mews, in *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, n1.p.278, as cited by Gilson.

continues to this day. Glenda Mcleod, taking a neutral stance, states that: ‘The authenticity of the correspondence has never been conclusively established, but neither has its forgery, despite frequent, often fierce debate’.<sup>65</sup>

Étienne Gilson examined and rebutted many of the arguments against these letters being genuine, basing his conclusions on careful examination of the text and translation. In response to the arguments put forward by Charlotte Charrier, based on apparent discrepancies in the letters, which suggests that they are forgeries or have been reworked, he wrote:

Thus one after the other these arguments collapse, like a house of cards, as soon as they are examined in the light of the original text of the Correspondence...our task is not at all to rewrite H el oise’s letters as Miss Charrier would have written them, but to understand them as H el oise wrote them.<sup>66</sup>

Gilson also cites Schmeidler who bases his doubts on the authenticity of the letters on the fact that there is a similarity in style, which leads him to conclude that Abelard wrote all the letters.<sup>67</sup> Gilson refutes this by pointing out that a similarity in style and use of expressions is not surprising. Heloise would have read all that Abelard wrote, and discussed much of it with him in depth. ‘The simplest hypothesis is that she spontaneously assumed certain of Ab elard’s mannerisms.’<sup>68</sup>

Peter Dronke accepts that we can never be sure that the letters were not edited or altered in any way, but they may still be read, perhaps not as historical source-material, but ‘principally as works of imagination, shaped in a literary way.’

It is not possible to demonstrate definitively that such acceptance is well-founded, yet it is based on what is still the simplest and soberest hypothesis regarding the texts and transmission. By contrast, every attempt so far to attribute Heloise’s letters to someone else has revealed itself full of fantastications – whether misreadings of the Latin, a priori assumptions about what an abbess could or could not have written, or additional postulates multiplied beyond necessity.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Glenda Mcleod, ‘Wholly Guilty, Wholly Innocent: Self definition in H el oise’s Letters to Abelard’ in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, ed. by Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 82.

<sup>66</sup>Gilson, p. 159.

<sup>67</sup>Bernhard Schmeidler, ‘Der Briefwechsel zwischen Abaelard und Heloise dennoch eine literarische Fiction Abaelards’, *Revue B enedictine* 52 (1940) 85-95 (as cited by Gilson)

<sup>68</sup>Gilson, p. 161.

<sup>69</sup>Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 109.

In a particularly insightful examination of Heloise's letters Newman points out the absurdity of assuming that Abelard would have written such letters in the name of Heloise, blackening her reputation as a sage and pious abbess, or that Heloise would have ever agreed to such an action.

In short, Abelard could have had no sane or morally acceptable motive for forging letters in which Heloise is made to acknowledge sustained hypocrisy, luxuriate in self-pity, revel in erotic nostalgia, glory to be called a whore, belabour ancient grudges, accuse God of the harshest cruelty, avow an idolatrous devotion to her lover, declare her willingness to follow him even unto hell, and express grave doubts about her own salvation.<sup>70</sup>

In the introduction to his translation of the letters and other writings of Heloise and Abelard, William Levitan does not admit to any doubt as to the authenticity of the later letters, although he is unable to accept that the earlier Lost Love Letters are authentic. In appraising the letters written after their years in religious life, as integral in understanding the lives of Heloise and Abelard, Levitan states:

The letters became events in a continuing story, intentional acts of serious consequence with a public as well as a private function. Abelard and Heloise wrote from the justified conviction that their writing mattered and to more than themselves alone; Heloise in particular often wrote as if the world depended on each sentence.<sup>71</sup>

This recognition of the public/private nature of the letters is one that affects the interpretation of their text, and our understanding of the writers' intentions.

The other group of letters, written earlier, but discovered much later have also been examined for their authenticity. In his dissection of these letters, Mews has made a detailed analysis of their content and expression, as well as philosophical concepts, which correspond, with other writings of Heloise and Abelard, and the poets and classical writers whom Heloise studied and admired.<sup>72</sup> Mews's publication caused somewhat of a stir amongst historians, creating a division of opinions between those, such as Newman and Michael Clanchy who accepted his conclusions, through varying degrees of scepticism, to outright rejection by John Marenbon and Giovanni Orlandi. The letters have also been closely studied and translated into

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<sup>70</sup>Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. 59.

<sup>71</sup>William Levitan, *Abelard and Heloise: The Letters and Other Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2007), p. xii.

<sup>72</sup>Constant Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: the perceptions of dialogue in twelfth-century France* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999).

French by Sylvain Piron. He makes it clear in his introduction that he has no doubt that the letters are genuine, and in his presentation he draws on the work of Mews while offering fresh insights.<sup>73</sup>

Dronke expressed some scepticism when he stated that:

It seems to me unlikely that we shall ever be able convincingly to ascribe any anonymous love-songs – or love-letters – to Abelard or Heloise. If anything, their legendary fame might have led one to expect that later twelfth or thirteenth-century copyists would, rightly or wrongly, ascribe love-songs or love-letters to them – yet of such ascriptions there is no trace.<sup>74</sup>

On the other hand Levitan has difficulty accepting the authenticity of these letters on the grounds that over the centuries there have been many attempts to produce writings falsely attributed to Abelard and Heloise:

Other scholars have been decidedly more sceptical, however, pointing to the existence of other medieval letter collections that proceed from similar premises, to what are at least apparent inconsistencies between the circumstances described in *The Letters of Two Lovers* and Abelard's *Calamities*, to difficulties of preserving and transmitting such a collection, and to wide stylistic differences in the literary habits of the fragment and the accepted letters of Abelard and Heloise, differences that are unlikely to be accounted for by the passage of time alone.<sup>75</sup>

Given that the letters are undated and unsigned the debate regarding their authenticity may never be completely resolved. The arguments put forward by both Mews and Piron are based on very close analysis of the texts. Even so Piron, accepts that his conclusions are open to further investigation:

Many detailed studies of different types are required to reduce, step by step, the uncertainties surrounding these letters. Some have already been carried out, much more are needed before an undebatable conclusion can be reached and shared by the whole scientific community of historians and philologists.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>Sylvain Piron, *Lettres des deux Amants attribuées à Héloïse et Abélard* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

<sup>74</sup>Peter Dronke, 'New Works by Abelard and Heloise. Filologia Mediolatina Studies in Medieval Latin Texts and their Transmission', *Rivista della Fondazione Ezio Franceschini* XII (2005), 123-146 (p. 142).

<sup>75</sup>William Levitan, p. 315.

<sup>76</sup>Sylvain Piron and Réka Forrai *The debate on the Epistolae duorum amantium. Current status quaestiones and further research*, 9 March 2007, pp.1-2.

[www.monnalisgarden.com/tdtc/personale/materiale\\_didattico/stella/Piron-status%20quaestionis.pdf](http://www.monnalisgarden.com/tdtc/personale/materiale_didattico/stella/Piron-status%20quaestionis.pdf) [accessed 2 March 2008]

If the letters are not by Heloise and Abelard, they have nevertheless been accepted as such by a number of medieval historians because of their content, style and references. This surely allows a fiction writer to draw on them with some confidence, where an historian may argue for greater caution. A writer of fiction should be vigilant against straying outside the bound of possibilities, but within these boundaries there are a number of positions that might be denied the historian seeking academic rigour. The freedom allowed the fiction writer is not a total licence, but is an acknowledgement that imagination and guesswork have their place. Considering this, the fact that the lost love letters have been accepted as authentic by a number of medievalists allows me to draw on them, on the grounds that if Heloise and Abelard did not write them, they could have written them, and the contents are compatible with my understanding of both their personalities and relationship.

The letters enlighten many aspects that were puzzling about Heloise and Abelard's relationship and their personality. In a review of Mew's translation and commentary Susan Kramer notes that it raises the provocative issue of the 'different understanding of love presented by Abelard and Heloise in both sets of letters.' This was the aspect that led many to judge the later letters not to be genuine, as it was felt that Heloise would not have written so frankly and honestly about love and physical passion. If this were a valid objection they would have even more reason to distrust the first set of letters unless we accept that, as Kramer states:

Mews demonstrates that Heloise values true love as combining passion and selfless obligation, amor and dilectio. Heloise's seemingly libertine declaration that she would rather be Abelard's whore than Augustus' wife is not an invitation to sexual favours but an extension of the Ciceronian precept that true friendship has no end but itself. While Abelard and other clerical writers of the period perpetuate a distinction between love as lust and spiritual love, Heloise does not see desire as incompatible with Christian ideals of love.<sup>77</sup>

Kramer does allow that we can never be sure that the letters were not edited or altered in any way, but they may still be read, perhaps not as historical source-material, but 'principally as works of imagination, shaped in a literary way.' In this she appears to agree with Dronke's judgement of the later letters.

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<sup>77</sup>Susan Kramer, 'The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions in Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France' *Church History*, 71, (Sep.2002), pp. 646-647, (p.646).

What do these letters tell us about Heloise? She may well have been searching for the concept of a love relationship, which was not constrained and regulated, as were the contracted marriages of those times. Her writing foreshadows something of the expressions of Courtly Love literature, allegedly espoused by Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter, Marie of Champagne, through the writings of Chrétien de Troyes and the songs of troubadours such as Bernart de Ventadour. Heloise wrote:

Ever since we first met and spoke to each other only you have pleased me above all God's creatures and only you have I loved. Through loving you, I searched for you; searching for you, I found you; finding you, I placed you above everyone else in my heart, and picked you alone out of thousands, in order to make a pledge with you.<sup>78</sup>

While the expressions of love are finely wrought, extreme even, Heloise is not expressing any sense of unworthiness or inequality. In Courtly Love the lover worshipped from afar, and made no claims on the beloved apart from being allowed to worship her and suffer for her. Take, for example these lines from a troubadour's song: 'Therefore I want to praise and adore you and fear you, suffer everything, endure everything more than I desire any reward.'<sup>79</sup>

Thus we can come to some appreciation of the woman, Heloise, by reflecting on the facets of her personality we glimpse in reading what she has written. Her family background is another important factor in understanding her position in a hierarchical and feudal society.

### **Who were Heloise's parents?**

In a feudal society, the family into which you were born played a highly significant part in determining the sort of life you would lead. It ordained your place in society, and it was unusual to move from one group to another or one class to another. For example, in the twelfth century, only women from noble families were normally accepted into abbeys and monasteries as choir sisters.

Apart from her mother's name (Hersinde, sometimes written as Hersint or Hersindis) mystery still surrounds the circumstances of Heloise's birth, and her

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<sup>78</sup>Mews, *The Lost love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, p. 259, Letter 84.

<sup>79</sup>Guillaume de Mauchaut, *Foy Porter* [www. wsu.edu.8080/~brians/love-in-the-arts/medieval.html](http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/love-in-the-arts/medieval.html) [accessed 21 August,2008]



parents. We can, however, safely assume that she was of noble birth. Brenda Cook gives us some idea concerning the level of nobility of Heloise's family while outlining some of the traditions concerning her birth:

In 1616 an edition of Abelard's works, compiled by François d'Ambroise and André Duchesne declared Heloise to be a member of the Montmorency family. In the sixteenth or seventeenth century one Papire Masson claimed that Heloise was the daughter of "a Canon of Paris called John". Turlot, writing in 1812 said that Hersint was an abbess of Ste-Marie au Bois near Sézanne, and had been the mistress of a member of the Montmorency family.<sup>80</sup>

Cook's paper gives further references to theories concerning Heloise's birth, in which most agree on the name, if not the identity of her mother. There is a paucity of information concerning her father, except to suggest that because his name is never mentioned Heloise was probably illegitimate. Cook suggests that her father was a Canon John of Saint Germain l'Auxerrois in Paris.

Neither Mews nor Werner Robl, who have both published on the subject of Heloise's parents, agrees with Cook's choice of father for Heloise. They do agree that Hersinde was connected to the Montmorency family, and further, that she lived in the Loire Valley and that she was the first prioress of Fontevraud, having become a disciple of Robert d'Arbrissel. Neither of these scholars makes the claim that Robert d'Arbrissel was the father of Heloise, although they admit that it is possible. Is this a possibility to be taken seriously? Were it so, a comparison between Hersinde and Robert and Heloise and Abelard as famous couples would be inevitable. It would also open up a number of potential narrative pathways.

Briefly, Robl's findings include linking Hersinde, whose death is recorded by Heloise, identified as her mother, in the necrology at the Paraclete, to Hersind (or Hersindis) of Champagne.

Even if it is accepted that there was a comprehensively larger number of women of that name living in France at that time, the number is reduced considerably if you restrict it to high ranking noble women of the Loire region. In no chronicle or genealogy is there [any other] Hersindis to be found, whose life situation corresponded with that of Heloise's mother in such a way.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>Brenda Cook, 'The Birth of Heloise: new light on an old mystery?' (*Genealogists' Magazine*, June 1999), [www.abaelard.de/abaelard/070102newlight.htm](http://www.abaelard.de/abaelard/070102newlight.htm) [accessed 28 June 2005]

<sup>81</sup>Werner Robl, 'Neues zur Familiengeschichte Heloisas mit Ausblicken auf die Familie Peter Abaelards', in Ursula Niggli, *Peter Abaelard, Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, (Munich: Olzog: 2003) p.53.

[Selbst wenn man annimmt, dass Frauen namens Hersindis in unüberschaubar grosser Anzahl im damaligen Frankreich lebten, reduziert sich ihre Zahl doch erheblich, wenn man sie auf die adeligen bzw, hochadeligen Frauen der Loire-Region beshchränkte. In keiner Chronik, keiner Genealogie hatte sich eine Hersindis aus hohem Haus gefunden, deren Lebenssituation Eloisas Mutter derartig entsprochen hätte.]<sup>82</sup>

Ignoring the possibility of Canon John, Robl suggests two other possibilities for Heloise's father. It may have been one of the followers of Robert d'Arbrissel, who called themselves the Paupers of Christ, an insignificant nobleman or the lecherous Fulk IV, Duke of Anjou, who may have forced his attentions on Hersinde after the death of her husband, William. Even so, Robl does not exclude Robert d'Arbrissel as the father of Heloise:

...his [Robert's] "sleeping with women" had aroused public anger, as the censure of Marbodd of Rennes, who was a personal acquaintance from his time in Angers, proves. Robert has to have exerted a certain attraction on Hersindis, otherwise she would not have sought contact with him: Robert on his part had chosen Hersindis out of hundreds of women as his closest confidante.<sup>83</sup> [...hatte doch sein „Beischlafen unter Frauen“ öffentliches Ärgernis erregt, wie die Rüge Marbods von Rennes, eines persönlichen Bekannten aus der Zeit in Angers, belegt. Robert muss auf Hersindis eine gewisse Attraktion ausgeübt haben, sonst hätte sie nicht Anschluss bei ihm gesucht; Robert hatte seinerseits Hersindis aus Hunderten von Frauen als seine engste Vertraute erwählt.]

While agreeing with Robl concerning the identity of Hersinde, Mews takes exception to his conclusion that Heloise was illegitimate. He suggests that Hersinde may have remarried, and borne a child before becoming a follower of Robert D'Arbrissel:

Another possibility is that Hersende remarried after the death of William [of Montsoreau,], gave birth to Heloise, but then lost her second husband in around 1096, perhaps on the first Crusade. Ménage, a seventeenth century historian, mentions a marriage of Hersende to an otherwise unknown Fulk, without indicating why this should have occurred before, rather than after her marriage to William of Montsoreau. The silence of the charters of Fontevraud about any subsequent marriage of Hersende... should not be taken as conclusive...<sup>84</sup>

<sup>82</sup>All excerpts cited are translated by Margaret Gordon. Translations, by Gordon, of certain sections of the text are available on Werner Robl's website.

<sup>83</sup>Robl, p. 55.

<sup>84</sup>Constant Mews, 'Negotiating the Boundaries of gender in Religious Life', *Viator*, 37 (2006), 113-148, (p.127.).

This certainly puts Heloise's date of birth closer to 1095, making her older than fifteen when she first encounters Abelard. The possibility that Robert d'Arbrissel may have been Heloise's father rests on a number of events which, when connected, gain potential significance. Robert was in Angers in 1093 until 1095 when 'for unexplained reasons he fled the city to set up a hermitage at La Roë in the forest of Craon.'<sup>85</sup> Could there be any connection between Robert's withdrawal into a forest as a hermit and the need to do penance for a sinful act? Could that sin have been a sexual relationship with Hersinde? Mews cites Baudri who emphasizes that Robert 'never indulged in the lasciviousness of youth but "embraced radiant chastity in as far as he was able"'.<sup>86</sup> Could 'as far as he was able' indicate a momentary lapse, which did not negate an overall chaste life? It was after this time that Robert established Fontevraud, and appointed Hersinde as prioress, some time before 1104. Hersinde died sometime before 1113, but not before she had negotiated the transfer of considerable property to Fontevraud. How significant is it that Robert d'Arbrissel, on his deathbed, asked to be buried at Fontevraud 'with my good assistant, who gave counsel and labour in the construction of Fontevraud'.<sup>87</sup>

Mews concedes that it is possible that Robert d'Arbrissel was Heloise's father but feels that there is not enough strong evidence for an historian to claim this.

As a scholar I do not want to go down that path. I think it is best to leave it as an open question, but I would leave it to you as a novelist, to use your imagination about how to handle it.<sup>88</sup>

A novelist does have more freedom, but, in my case, I chose only to make a reference to the rumour about Robert d'Arbrissel being Heloise's father rather than assume that it was true. Partly because I did not feel the evidence was conclusive enough, but also because this would have opened up a new narrative line, which I did not wish to pursue.

If Heloise had a connection with the Montmorency family, who were an important family in the Loire valley, this gave her social status above that of Abelard. If she were born around 1095, this would make her a contemporary of Peter the Venerable, and their families would have been closely acquainted. Robl certainly

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<sup>85</sup>Mews, 'Negotiating the Boundaries of Gender in Religious Life', p. 122.

<sup>86</sup>Mews, p. 122.

<sup>87</sup>Bruce L. Venarde, 'Praesidentes Negotiis: Abbesses as Managers in Twelfth-Century France', in *Portraits in Medieval and Renaissance Living: Essays in Memory of David Herlihy*, ed. by Samuel K. Cohen Jr and Steven A. Epstein (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 195

<sup>88</sup>Constant Mews, personal email dated 4 December 2006.

suggests this. He also outlines similarities between Hersinde's administration of Fontevraud and Heloise's at the Paraclete. Given that Abelard was acquainted with Robert d'Arbrissel and Fontevraud, and that Peter the Venerable, who grew up in the Loire Valley, writes of a young man, who was a brilliant scholar by the name of Peter, it is plausible to accept the comment as being a reference to Abelard and place him in the Loire Valley while Heloise was there. This raises the question as to whether Heloise had at least known of Abelard long before she went to Paris. Could the motivation for the move to Paris from Argenteuil have been her desire to study with Abelard? As a woman she could not have been a formal scholar but she would have been able to attend his lectures, especially when they were held in the open air. As we know, her uncle arranged for her to be tutored by Abelard. Was this at her request?

The theory that Heloise was born in the Loire Valley, but sent to Argenteuil to be educated, away from her mother, is further supported by Robl's research, as there were connections between Bertrada of Montfort, who also had connections at Argenteuil, and Hersinde:

It seems plausible that Bertrada participated in Heloise's transfer to Argenteuil, if the latter was the biological daughter of Hersindis. ...Heloise would accordingly have spent time in this rich convent, which was also renowned for the educational possibilities it offered, because Bertrada had connections there.<sup>89</sup>

[Es erscheint plausibel, dass Bertrada von Montfort an Hela Heloisas Transfer nach Argenteuil beteiligt war, wenn diese wirklich Hersindeis'liebliche Tochter war...Heloisa wäre demnach in diesen reichen und wegen seiner Ausbildungsmöglichkeiten auch anerkannten Nonnenkonvent verbracht worden.]

This version of Heloise's beginnings, based on the most recent research, differs greatly from earlier theories, which depicted her as the illegitimate child of a disgraced nun, with little standing in the world, and nothing to her credit but her brilliance. Neither was she, by this version of events, an immature naive girl, just reaching puberty, when she first met Abelard, grist to the mill of his seductive and manipulative personality. Instead Heloise now presents as a well connected young woman of some significant status. She has a mother whose later life had been somewhat unconventional, and this, with Heloise's reputation as a scholar, would have meant that from an early age she was noticed and noteworthy. It is quite

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<sup>89</sup>Robl, pp. 58-59.

probable that Heloise was being educated to become an abbess at one of the great abbeys in France, even Fontevraud. The argument against this idea is the opposition that her friends and family offered when she announced that she would enter Argenteuil as a nun. Abelard wrote: 'There were many people, I remember, who in pity for her youth tried to dissuade her from submitting to the yoke of monastic rule as a penance too hard to bear, but all in vain...'<sup>90</sup> By the standards of the day Heloise would not have been thought too young, if she were in her twenties, to enter an abbey. Even had she been younger this would not normally have been perceived as an impediment. Once a child had reached the age of twelve he or she was considered old enough to consent to a marriage or to being offered as an oblate to a monastery.

Certainly the later research gives new dimensions and potential to the portrayal of Heloise, whether in a biography or historical fiction. As mentioned earlier Heloise has been portrayed over the centuries in a number of ways, either as a wronged woman, an adolescent victim of a rapacious professor, a woman who sacrificed all for her lover, a brilliant scholar, or the harbinger of changing attitudes towards romantic love. One of the keys to our interpretation of her personality and motivations is the age when she first met Abelard. There is a vast difference between a young girl, just out of childhood, and a more mature woman, even allowing for the perceptions of age prevalent in the Middle Ages. Another key is her social position. If, as is now suggested, she was of a more noble family than Abelard's, this would reflect on the nature of their relationship. If she had known of Peter Abelard's brilliance even when she was a child, how strongly would this have motivated her to wish to have him teach her? If her relationship with Peter the Venerable had been established through their families since childhood, how much did this influence later events, when Peter befriended and protected Abelard in the final years of his life? The early contacts, friendships even, could help explain why Peter sent Abelard's body from Cluny, where he died, to the Paraclete, returning it, as he said, to Heloise.

Historical research thus allows a writer of fiction to present Heloise in a new way' giving her a status and autonomy not previously considered possible.

### **Heloise and Abelard after they had both entered religious life**

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<sup>90</sup>*Historia calamitatum*, in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* trans. by Betty Radice (London: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 76.

How much contact was there between Heloise and Abelard immediately after they both entered religious life? The answer to this question is extremely important. It has been accepted over the centuries, based on Heloise's own letter, that she and Abelard had no close personal contact after they both entered monasteries, until Heloise responded to his *Historia Calamitatum*. If this were so this reflects very strongly on their relationship, and what would appear to be Abelard's emotional cruelty.

After I visited St Denis and Argenteuil I was surprised to realise how close the two sites were. I noted this in my travel diary:

*Looking at the map you can see that here is a relatively short distance between St Denis and Argenteuil along the river. Heloise may well have expected some contact with Abelard in those early years after she had entered. (5 October 2007)*

The following day I had the opportunity to speak about this to Dr. Silvain Piron.

After that meeting I wrote:

*I asked Silvain Piron why Abelard had chosen to enter St Denis. 'To be near Paris and to Heloise. He was a family man, they were married – so they could keep in touch. He loved her' was his response. (6 October 2007)*

This view of Abelard's sentiments after the trauma of his castration and separation from Heloise is at variance with what many have believed was the situation, and what Heloise herself wrote in a letter to Abelard.

That is why, in the tender early time of my convent long ago, your oblivion came as no small surprise to me when, unpersuaded by any reverence for God, or any love for me, or any other example set by these same Fathers, you did not try to console me as I foundered, overwhelmed in sorrow day after day – never once, neither by a word when we were together nor a letter when we were apart.<sup>91</sup>

Did Abelard abandon Heloise once he had ordered her to enter the abbey at Argenteuil, to free himself to follow his own career as a monk at St Denis? The letters written subsequent to *Historia Calamitatum* suggest that this is so, and Heloise's accusation that he offered her no consolation stands as testimony to his self-absorption and callousness.

The accusation that there had been no contact between them in the years following their entry into religious life can not be taken literally as there must have

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<sup>91</sup>*Abelard and Heloise: The Letters and Other Writings*, trans. by William Levitan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), p. 54.

been some communication regarding Heloise moving to the Paraclete in 1129, although this was twelve years later. More likely it was the quality of the contact that distressed Heloise, together with the infrequency. In reference to this seeming discrepancy it is worth examining another translation of Heloise's reproach.

And so in the precarious early days of our conversion long ago I was not a little surprised and troubled by your forgetfulness, when neither reverence for God nor our mutual love nor the example of the holy Fathers made you think of trying to comfort me, wavering and exhausted as I was by prolonged grief, either by word when I was with you or by letter when we had parted.

The footnote is of special relevance:

This sentence is often mistranslated as if it refers to the present and so suggesting that Abelard has never visited nor written to her at the Paraclete... But the tense (movit) is past, translated here as 'I was troubled', and Heloise must be referring to his failure to help her by word before they separated and by letter after she had entered the convent.<sup>92</sup>

Radice's translation and footnote make it clear that Heloise is referring to the time when she and Abelard first entered religious life.

There are a number of explanations as to why Abelard may have distanced himself: depressed and humiliated, he may have felt unable to offer any consolation to Heloise. He may have considered Heloise unintentionally responsible for his castration, and have had no wish to see her at all. We should not discount the enormous effect that castration would have had on Abelard's self-esteem and sense of manliness, especially as he would have been suffering from extreme embarrassment in knowing that the matter was public knowledge when his students had gathered outside his room to offer moral support. Alternatively, we can regard Abelard as a proud and ambitious man whose one thought was to salvage what he could of his reputation and carve a new career for himself within the Church. Heloise would have no place there. Accepting this, a writer could make much of Heloise's desolation and potential disillusionment, as well as, possibly, Abelard's depression, loss of sexuality, and a desperate desire to re-establish his reputation, this time as a monk, teacher and theologian. He could not afford any further taint to his moral reputation, so he acted very cautiously, severing any association with Heloise.

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<sup>92</sup>*The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. by Betty Radice (London: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 112.

We could, however, also consider that given the very close emotional ties between them, the sacramental bond of marriage and their son, Heloise and Abelard would have stayed in close contact. For the reasons given above they may have chosen to keep this contact secret, and to protect both their reputations they may have continued the deceit in the later letters which were not totally private. The argument against this view is the strength of Heloise's reproaches, which read as totally sincere.

Within the later letters there are hints that Abelard's neglect is not a new discourse. For instance Abelard reproaches her in these terms:

I come now to the last remaining point – what I call your old, continual complaint, in which you dare to lay charges against God for how we came to religious life when in justice you ought to glorify his name. I had thought that your bitterness of heart at such a clear example of God's mercy had vanished long ago – as dangerous as it is to you, eating away at your body and soul, it is sad and disturbing to me.<sup>93</sup>

The reference to 'your old, continual complaint' suggests that Heloise's laments were not new to Abelard, and he must have had some contact with her to be aware of them. In an earlier letter to Heloise, Abelard begins by stating:

If I have written you no consolation or encouragement in the time since we turned our lives toward God, it was not because of negligence on my part but because of your own wisdom, in which I have always had implicit trust. I did not believe you needed these things from me when the grace of God has given you all you need to instruct the wayward, console the weak, and hearten the lukewarm through word and example.<sup>94</sup>

To date, writers have accepted as fact the long separation between Abelard and Heloise, beginning with their taking religious vows, and lasting to the time when Heloise responded to *Historia Calamitatum*, although it is generally assumed that there must have been some contact, albeit impersonal, in making the arrangements for Heloise to take over the Paraclete. Etienne Gilson differentiates Abelard's 'total submission to God's judgement' from Heloise's 'stubborn religion'. Once Abelard became a monk, Gilson explains:

He was more a monk than any other monk. He was a monk in the only manner he could be anything – without compromise, without

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<sup>93</sup>Levitan, p. 93.

<sup>94</sup>Levitan, p. 63.



measure, with the fierce energy of a will struggling against despair.<sup>95</sup>

This description places Abelard in a slightly better light, as a man striving for religious perfection, than the alternative of a man motivated by fear for his reputation, but would have been of little comfort to Heloise who had not accepted her role in religion so wholeheartedly.

Fiction writers have made much of this period of neglect and estrangement. Helen Waddell accentuates Abelard's neglect of Heloise in the final pages of her novel:

Her [Heloise's] eyes widened, her lips parted. Gilles turned away his eyes. It was a glory, but the glory of the woman hearing praise of her lover.

'Gilles, you have a letter?'

He nodded. Then silently...he handed it to her.

Suddenly she thrust the letter from her into Gilles' hand.

'Tell me Gilles. It will be quicker. I cannot bear to read it. Does he speak of me?'

He looked down at the letter, twisting it in his hands.

'Not yet,' he said, very low.<sup>96</sup>

Marion Meade's life of Heloise is written with great freedom and imaginative embellishment. She describes a scene where Heloise, who has had no word or letter from Abelard since she entered the abbey, is sent from Argenteuil to St Denis on an errand. She hopes to encounter Abelard who has not responded to her letters.

Stalking towards her was a tall monk surrounded by a cluster of chattering novices. Something about the set of his shoulders made her tense up. A smile began to form at the corners of her mouth.

Abelard's eyes met hers and slid past the side of her head.

Suddenly he was behind her and she could hear him saying, 'St Augustine, you know, was of two minds on that point.'

... He had pretended not to know her; he had looked at her as if she were a stranger.<sup>97</sup>

Apart from the evidence of the later letters what can we consider in trying to ascertain both the level of contact and the nature of that contact in the early post conversion period? There is the evidence of the early love letters. It is hard to imagine that such strength of feeling could be totally extinguished with the cut of a knife. Then there is the choice of monasteries and the fact that there was an easy

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<sup>95</sup>Gilson, p. 68.

<sup>96</sup>Helen Waddell, *Peter Abelard* (London: Constable & Co, 1933), p. 210.

<sup>97</sup>Marion Meade, *Stealing Heaven: The Love Story of Heloise and Abelard* (New York: William Morrow, 1979), p. 229.

distance between them. We need to consider that letters written in the Middle Ages were not always private. When they were written it could be assumed that others might gain access to them, so discretion was necessary.

Even more importantly, I think we can judge a state of mind or situation by subsequent events. How people act at one time in their lives reflects what has gone before. Heloise may have been totally spurned and neglected by Abelard. If this is the case, after all they had just experienced in their relationship, she would have been emotionally devastated. She must also have been as pious as her reputation avers, to have accepted Abelard once more as a focus in her life, and to have collaborated with him, in those final years, so generously and to such good outcome. The other explanation is that she still loved him.

## **HILDEGARD**

The only controversy about who wrote Hildegard's books and letters derive from her claim that the words she wrote were directly dictated to her by God. Was Hildegard's writing divinely inspired or the fruits of her own thoughts, meditations and subconscious ruminations? Her writing, as a whole, presents a problem for any novelist, not that of having too little material, but too much. Her activities were so diverse and her achievements so noteworthy that it is very difficult to cover all the facets of her character and interests in a novel without making it unwieldy and overly verbose. To include everything is impossible. Do I concentrate on Hildegard the mystical writer, the musician, the scientist or the mover and shaker within both her secular and religious world? Do we interpret her work solely within a religious context or choose a secular context? Both are possible as Mews explains:

Developing suggestions of the historian of science Charles Singer and the neurologist Oliver Sacks, Sabina Flanagan has argued that Hildegard's visions were provoked by a fusion of physical and psychological factors... Hans Liebeschütz considered her as a literary genius whose claims to mystical experience masked a sophisticated familiarity with literary traditions – a line of enquiry taken much further by Peter Dronke... Matthew Fox has presented Hildegard as an exponent of “creation spirituality” in which emphasis is placed...on the way God works through creation as a whole. Barbara Newman has offered a rather different interpretation of Hildegard's thought as a “theology of the

feminine” structured around a series of feminine images. While all these interpretations offer valuable insights into Hildegard’s creative output, they are all necessarily selective in their focus.<sup>98</sup>

Therefore, a writer wishing to portray Hildegard of Bingen is faced with an embarrassment of riches. Those who have already done so have decided to concentrate on one period of her life, or one aspect of her work. Barbara Lachman has chosen to write in the form of a diary that Hildegard might have kept for one year. To this purpose she has taken the care to follow the readings in the Office of that year, and to spend the year living as closely as she could to the way Hildegard would have done.<sup>99</sup> Ingeborg Ulrich has concentrated more on Hildegard’s affinity for nature and science than her mystical experiences, although these are not totally ignored. She links Hildegard’s thoughts and emotions with dreams that introduce an element of psychological analysis and Hildegard’s imagined childhood.<sup>100</sup> More recently, Mary O’Connell has set Hildegard against a detailed picture of the world outside her abbey and the ways in which this impinged on her life.<sup>101</sup>

Thus I am influenced by the fact that those who have gone before me have chosen to limit the focus. Given that Hildegard is one of three women protagonists I wish to portray, the choice of material is limited even further, as I wish to balance their narratives. While not wishing to detract from any of her achievements I have tried to portray Hildegard as a spiritual woman with exceptional gifts. I decided to concentrate on two important areas of Hildegard’s life. One is her age at the time she entered St Disbodenberg as a recluse; the second is the nature of her mystical experiences and source of her writing.

### **Hildegard as juvenile anchoress**

How old was she when she first entered the small stone cell at the abbey, with only Jutta and one other young servant girl as companions? Further, were they totally

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<sup>98</sup>Constant Mews, ‘Religious Thinker: “A frail human being” on Fiery Life’, in *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and her world*, ed. by Barbara Newman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 52-69, (pp. 52-53.)

<sup>99</sup>Barbara Lachman, *The Journal of Hildegard of Bingen* (New York: Belltower, 1993).

<sup>100</sup>Ingeborg Ulrich, *Hildegard of Bingen: Mystic, Healer, Companion of the Angels* trans. by Linda Maloney (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993).

<sup>101</sup>Mary O’Connell, *The King’s Daughter: Hildegard of Bingen* (Sydney: Handmaid Press, 2003).

isolated, or was there frequent contact with people from the outside world as well as the monks? The answers to these questions are significant because they allow me to surmise what her childhood experiences were, and how these may have affected her development into adulthood. They permit me to make assumptions and test these against any analysis of what we know today about psychology and significant phases of development. What, for example, would have been the effect on a young girl who is offered by her family as an oblate and left to live in what can only be thought of today as abusive conditions? This was not the intention of her family nor of the monks at St Disibodenberg, but if she lived for years in a closely confined environment, deprived of physical and emotional contact with her family or any friends during her formative years, would this have been a deprivation, or alternatively, a strengthening spiritual experience? How would her knowledge of nature, her social development, her ability to react with the outside world and the people within her own sphere of contacts have been reduced by having contact with only two other people in a very confined space? We know nothing of the other young girl, but there is some suggestion that the relationship with Jutta was not a close personal friendship. Fiona Maddocks observes:

A surprising silence hangs over Hildegard's reaction to Jutta's death. Could the very absence of verbal outpouring from one who articulated her views so copiously on all other aspects of life imply a coolness towards her companion and magistra?<sup>102</sup>

If we assume that such an emotionally and socially deprived childhood would have a deleterious effect on Hildegard then we need to explain the evidence of her confident dealing with abbots, emperors, popes and ordinary people; evidence which is revealed in her numerous letters and reports of her preaching tours. Such accounts support the idea that a life of seclusion and isolation was not imposed upon her as a child.

There appear to be three possibilities concerning the age when Hildegard was 'given to God'. She may have entered the abbey as an oblate at the age of eight or at ten, or she may have begun her life within the abbey as a nun at the age of fifteen after she and Jutta had spent some years being educated and prepared for religious life at the home of Uda, who was a widow.

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<sup>102</sup> Fiona Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age* (London: Review, 2002), p. 54.

The main sources for these possibilities are: Hildegard's biography, written by Gottfried and Theodoric, Hildegard's own references to her childhood in *Scivias*, and the *Vita Juttae* (*Life of Jutta*). These do not give a clear or unified account of her entry into religious life. While there have been a number of scholars who investigated the circumstances in which Hildegard entered St Disibodenberg, it is not possible, in this exegesis, to outline them all. I will refer to the work of Sabina Flanagan who first wrote on Hildegard's entry into religion<sup>103</sup> in 1994, and then revised her conclusions on learning about the discovery of the text of *Vitae dominae Juttae inclusae*,<sup>104</sup> which indicated that Hildegard and Jutta were enclosed in 1112, when Hildegard would have been about fifteen years of age.

In the earlier paper Flanagan presents two possible scenarios. The first depicts Hildegard at the age of seven entering a small stone building with Jutta and one other girl. The doorway to the building is blocked and those who had escorted the three to this living entombment leave them in darkness. The second scene has Hildegard welcomed into the community in a ceremony of oblation, offering her to God and the religious life. The difference would be that in the first instance she was being committed to a life as a virtual hermit, cut off from the outside world; the second, to the life of a monastic nun, part of the community. In both situations Hildegard is described as being about eight years old. The difference was not her age at entering the abbey but the intention of her parents and the abbey as to her situation.

The picture of Hildegard, as a child of eight, being enclosed in a very restricted environment was reappraised when the *Life of Jutta* was published. Mews accepted on its authority that Hildegard was about fifteen.

My understanding of Hildegard's early years, and thus her debt to tradition, deepened when I came across a recently published edition of the *Life of Jutta*, discovered in a late medieval legendary by Franz Staab, but written in the mid-twelfth century, before Hildegard had become famous. This text, unknown to Barbara Newman and Sabina Flanagan when they produced their monographs of Hildegard in the late 1980s, presented the image of a traditional, world-denying recluse, very different from that given

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<sup>103</sup>Sabina Flanagan, 'Oblation or Enclosure: Reflections into Hildegard of Bingen's entry into Religion' in *Wisdom Which Encircles Circles*, ed. by Audrey E. Davidson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996)

<sup>104</sup>*Vita dominae Juttae inclusae*, ed. by F. Staab in Weinfurter, 1992, 172-87 and 'Reform und Reformgruppen im Erzbistum Mainz' in Weinfurter, 1992, 119-187 as cited by Flanagan in 'Hildegard's Reentry into Religion Reconsidered', *Mystic Quarterly*, 25 #3 (September 1999), 77-97. (p. 78).

of Hildegard by her twelfth century biographers. It had not been realized that Jutta was only six years older than Hildegard when both were formally enclosed as recluses at Disibodenberg in 1112.<sup>105</sup>

If the new information is accepted, as it has been by Mews, then we need to be aware that there are two separate accounts of Hildegard's childhood, and that our view of her formative years will vary depending on which version we accept. Flanagan revisited the question of Hildegard's age when she was first enclosed, as opposed to when she took her religious vows at St Disibodenberg. In doing so Flanagan acknowledges that:

The actual age at which Hildegard left home and was dedicated to the religious life is vitally important for our understanding of her – indeed, that the question of whether she was around eight years of age or fifteen has profound psychological, if not spiritual, implications for her subsequent career.<sup>106</sup>

One of the arguments supporting the authenticity of the *Life of Jutta* is that much of the detail matches that found in the Disibodenberg Annals. In examining these two documents, rather than accepting that the *Vitae Juttae* influenced the entries in the *Annals*, Flanagan concluded that it was the other way around.

Yet, tempting as it may be to conclude that the Annals depend for their information on the Vita Juttae, I believe that closer examination of the two texts points in the other direction, namely that the Vita Juttae has, when it comes to dating of Jutta's life events, taken a hint from the Annals and worked it into the comprehensive account we now have.<sup>107</sup>

This conclusion is based on the 'spirit of the text' as well as similarities between stories and terminology. It is not possible here to analyse Flanagan's examination of the two texts in close detail. Instead I will give at least one instance where I would disagree with her conclusions. She quotes from two stories, one in the Annals and the other in the *Vita Juttae*, recounting a miracle involving a monk who was suffering from 'temptations of the flesh'. It is because of the repetition of this term in both stories that Flanagan concludes that one was copied from the other. Flanagan fails to acknowledge that 'temptations of the flesh' was common terminology in monastic literature. Just one example among many can be found in Book Two of the

<sup>105</sup>Constant Mews, 'Encountering Hildegard: Between Apocalypse and The New Age' in *Maitresse of My Wit* ed. by L. D'Arcens and Juanita Ruys (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 75-92, (p. 87).

<sup>106</sup>Sabina Flanagan, 'Hildegard's Entry into Religion Reconsidered', p. 79.

<sup>107</sup>Sabina Flanagan, 'Hildegard's Entry into Religion Reconsidered', p. 79.

*Dialogues: Life of St Benedict*.<sup>108</sup> The heading is ‘How he overcame a great temptation of the flesh’, and then we find the term is subsequently used twice: ‘and forthwith the holy man was assaulted with such a terrible temptation of the flesh, as he never felt the like in all his life’ and ‘it is plain, Peter, that in youth the temptation of the flesh is hot’. The appearance of such a common term in two different stories is no indication that one imitated the other. To do Flanagan justice, this is just one example and she does deal with the *Vita Juttae* in some detail ‘in order to dispel the notion that it provides evidence for rejecting the long-accepted chronology for Hildegard’s life.’<sup>109</sup> There are other scholars who are not so convinced that the earlier version of Hildegard’s entry into religion, at the age of eight, is accurate.

John Van Engen, writing in 1998, concluded that Hildegard’s parents offered her up at the age of eight, but that she entered the monastery, with Jutta, at the age of fifteen. He recognises the significance of the years from the age of eight to fifteen, when Hildegard was living with Jutta at the home of a widow.

This crucial span of six years, often conflated in later reports, has confused historians. Much is at stake here. As a noble girl Hildegard remained connected to her familial household in some way until they could locate a fitting situation... At adolescence they then found for her a holy refuge and social alliance. They asked that she be joined to the daughter of the ascendant Count Stephen of Spondheim, to become a recluse at St Disibod. These years at home made a difference, even if she was early set apart in some way. Through her fourteenth year Hildegard experienced the life of a court and a village and ever after possessed an uncommon knowledge of court, and family as well as of nature, agriculture and sexuality.<sup>110</sup>

Van Engen also makes the point that once the young women were received into St Disibod, although their lives were ‘withdrawn and meditative’ they were exposed to a steady stream of visitors due to Jutta’s fame as a holy woman. The monastery was still being restored throughout that period and there would have been workmen and activity around them. By 1136, because they had been joined by seven more young women, the area in which they lived and prayed was enlarged. This was the year when Jutta died and Hildegard became Magistra.

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<sup>108</sup>St Benedict, *Dialogues*, <http://www.osb.org/gen/greg/> [accessed 25 May 2007, Book 2]

<sup>109</sup>Sabina Flanagan, ‘Hildegard’s Entry into Religion Reconsidered’, p. 91.

<sup>110</sup> John Van Engen, ‘Abbess’, in *Voice of the Living Light*, ed. by Barbara Newman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 32-33.

One of the most telling arguments against Hildegard having been enclosed at the age of eight is the fact that until 1108 Augustinian canons resided at what became the abbey at St Disibodenberg. The Chronicles of Disbodenberg state that: ‘This year, that is 1108, construction began of the new monastery at Disbodenberg’.<sup>111</sup> Anna Silvas is doubtful that Hildegard and Jutta would have been entrusted to Augustinian canons, and if she is right then this would rule out the idea that the young woman and the child were there any time before 1108. She suggests that if the women were there before 1108 ‘they were living in a somewhat informal, not quite canonical situation’ although she feels that ‘this scenario is fraught with difficulties’. She suggests an alternative: ‘Another [possibility] is that Uda and Jutta actually remained at the family seat at Sponheim.’<sup>112</sup> And she later asks: ‘Where would this leave the child-oblite Hildegard? It would appear, at Sponheim.’<sup>113</sup>

It is reasonable to think that the Benedictine monks would need some time to put their house in some sort of order before they could accommodate anchoresses attached to their chapel. This makes 1112 as the date when Hildegard first went to actually live at the abbey more likely. Mews also refers to the transfer of the abbey site to the Benedictines and its effect on the date when Hildegard went to live there.

Given that Hildegard always remembered that she had become an oblate at Disibodenberg, it is just possible that Uda was living alongside the canons of St Disibod (perhaps not mentioned by Jutta’s biographer, because of the longstanding animosity between the monks and the canons they ousted). In any case, Godfrey and Guibert are clearly mistaken in having Hildegard formally enclosed at St Disibod in her eighth year (1105), as Archbishop Ruthard did not succeed in replacing the canons by monks until after he had come back from exile in 1106. Burchard, appointed abbot of St James (Mainz) in 1107, was not installed into a parallel position as abbot of St Disibod until 1108. Since it was Otto of Bamberg rather than the archbishop who persuaded Jutta to join the monks of St Disibod, this could have been after Ruthard’s death in 1109...It was Otto of Bamberg who formally enclosed Jutta and Hildegard as recluses.<sup>114</sup>

The points raised by both Mews and Silvas demonstrate how difficult it is to reach a firm conclusion as to the position of Hildegard and Jutta in 1108. This difficulty is

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<sup>111</sup>Anna Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: Biographical Sources* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p. 19.

<sup>112</sup>Silvas, p. 52.

<sup>113</sup>Silvas, p. 54.

<sup>114</sup>Constant Mews, ‘Seeing is Believing: Hildegard of Bingen and the Life of Jutta’ in *tjrunga* no.51, (November, 1996), 9-40, (pp.15-16).



exacerbated when we look at Flanagan who does not see the foundation date of 1108 as ‘an insuperable difficulty, since often monasteries were settled by a contingent of monks before the official date of their foundation’.<sup>115</sup> She also suggests that we take two years from Hildegard’s given date of birth (1100), making it 1098.

Adding two years... brings it into accord with the account in the *Scivias*. Similarly, the claim in the *Vita* that she was three years old when she had her first visionary experience can be brought into correspondence with the statement in the prologue of the *Scivias* that she was five at the time of her first vision by the addition of two years. By the same token, allowing for such a two-year shift would mean that she was actually sixteen or seventeen when she became circumspect about announcing her visions, rather than fourteen or fifteen as claimed in the *Vita* account. This is important since linking her silence to the significant age of fourteen has sometimes been taken as alluding to her enclosure at this age.<sup>116</sup>

The above discussion concerning the age when Hildegard was enclosed, rather than merely being an interesting piece of research, or even an academic exercise, is extremely important in considering how to depict Hildegard of Bingen in a work of fiction. On balance, I am inclined to believe the evidence supports the view that the account in the *Vita Juttae* is the more accurate one, and that Hildegard was either fifteen or seventeen when she became a recluse at the abbey. In either case she would not have been a young child.

My first drafts of the novel were written before I found the new information and included accounts of Hildegard expressing claustrophobic alarm at the thought of once again being enclosed behind walls because of her experiences as a young child. After accepting that this probably never happened I was faced with the question of whether I could persist with this view, given its dramatic narrative potential, or work with what I now accepted was closer to the actual events. If I was writing fiction, did it matter? Most people who knew about Hildegard would have accepted the enclosed child-oblate view in any case as this had been the story up to the early 1990s. Because I wanted my novel to be as historically accurate as possible, it did matter. To do otherwise would make a mockery of the years spent researching. This particular problem was solved to my satisfaction when I suddenly realised that the threat of something may be even more traumatic than its eventuating. Galileo did not need to be tortured, only shown the torture chamber, before he recanted his theory

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<sup>115</sup>Sabina Flanagan, ‘Hildegard’s Entry into Religion Reconsidered’, p. 89.

<sup>116</sup>Sabina Flanagan, ‘Hildegard’s Entry into Religion reconsidered’, pp. 89-91.

about the solar system. Jutta, yearning for martyrdom, or to be a pilgrim, or anything that would extravagantly evidence her love for God, may have proposed that both she and Hildegard become anchoresses at the very earliest opportunity. Family influence and common sense would have prevailed, but not until Hildegard, knowing of the plan, had spent some time contemplating life in what amounted to a prison cell. As an imaginative child of eight, or ten, she would have been filled with horror at the idea, yet felt helpless to do anything but submit to her parents and the Sponheim family. The memory of this time of fear would explain her reaction to the threat posed by her reading a letter by Bernard of Clairvaux recommending complete enclosure of all nuns (as described in the novel).

### **Hildegard as a Mystic and Visionary**

Hildegard's visionary experiences are pivotal to understanding her as a person. June Boyce-Tillman makes this point with some force.

The visionary experiences are central to an understanding of Hildegard's authority and thought. They were her main source of Wisdom. Although difficult to read and sometimes strikingly unusual, the verbal 'text' of the visions presents a powerful way of assessing truth. This valuing is reflected in other aspects of Hildegard's life and work. Her trust in the visionary experience as the main source of her theology shows her clear trust of the intuitive and non-verbal.<sup>117</sup>

Before embarking on an exploration of the many ramifications of mysticism I looked for a definition, a search which was stimulating and fruitful in many ways but which yielded, at best, a working definition. According to the Penguin English Dictionary mysticism is 'a belief in the attainment through contemplation of truths inaccessible to the understanding; a system of prayer etc designed to achieve this'. This definition may serve as a beginning, but does little to help us understand such phenomena as stigmata, visions of God, saints and angels or voices from heaven.

In relation to Hildegard, one of the most interesting studies is by Grace Jantzen who examines mysticism from the point of view, not only of gender, but historical period.<sup>118</sup> Having received my education from Irish nuns I had been led to

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<sup>117</sup>June Boyce-Tillman, *A Woman of Her Time* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2000), p. 82.

<sup>118</sup>Grace M Jantzen, *Power Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

understand that only Catholics could be mystics. This notion is at total variance with post-Reformation scholars, who demonstrated a comparable bias by ignoring medieval Catholic mystics. Their examples included George Fox (1624-1691) founder of the Quakers, or the poet William Blake (1757-1827). To introduce some balance, this seeming denial of even the existence of early mystics has been criticised by Richard Kieckhefer. He writes, when discussing the theories of Ernst Troeltsch<sup>119</sup> on mysticism:

Had he paid more attention to medieval Catholic mysticism, Troeltsch might have found parallel evidence for its combination with the church-type... His sociological types might have gained both in nuance and in clarity had he examined mysticism where it did not take on such sectarian elements as it did among the Dissenters and enthusiasts.<sup>120</sup>

In understanding mysticism we need to ignore sectarianism and look to a wider definition than one confined to any faith. In fact, my search to find an adequate definition revealed that mysticism had retreated from theology and expanded into the realm of philosophy as seen, for example, in the writing of William James. In the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, under the entry: 'Mysticism, Nature and Assessment of', I read:

Attempts to define mystical experience have been as diversified and as conflicting as attempts to interpret and assess its significance. This is not surprising, for the language used to express and describe mystical experience is richly paradoxical, figurative and poetical.<sup>121</sup>

Jantzen presents another perspective, one that allows an understanding of a mystic within a cultural, social and religious context.

What I am suggesting... is that the idea of 'mysticism' is a social construction, and that it has been constructed in different ways at different times. Although... medieval mystics and ecclesiastics did not work with a concept of 'mysticism', they did have strong views about who should count as mystic, views which changed over the course of time. Furthermore, those changes were linked to changes in patterns of authority, and gender relations.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. by Olive Wyon (New York: Macmillan, 1931).

<sup>120</sup>Richard Kieckhefer, 'Convention and Conversion: Patterns in Late Medieval Piety', *Church History*, Vol.67, No.1. (Mar., 1998), 32-51 (p.33).

<sup>121</sup>Ronald W Hepburn, 'Mysticism, History of' in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Crowell Collier & Macmillan, 1967), 419-434 (p. 429).

<sup>122</sup>Jantzen, p. 12.

Her later comments bear special relevance to an understanding of the nature of Hildegard's mystical experiences; the effect they may have had on her, and the way in which the acceptance of these experiences by others would have played a major part in both her self-awareness and the choices she made. Jantzen states:

It is manifestly not the case that the tradition of Christian spirituality is one which uniformly nurtures wholeness and justice, let alone sexual egalitarianism! There is racism and classism, sexism and homophobia, as deep in the hearts of many of the paradigm mystics of western Christianity as it is deep in the heart of the Christian church itself. And yet, while oppression runs deep, it is also true that from within the mystical tradition, especially (but not only) from some of the women mystics, came creative and courageous efforts at pushing back the boundaries of thought and action so that liberation could be achieved. None of them were unambiguous: often we find the tensions within a single individual, as strength and integrity struggle with deeply internalised misogyny and suspicion of body and sexuality.<sup>123</sup>

Certainly, much of what Jantzen describes can be seen in the writing of Hildegard, not only in the description of herself as a 'poor weak woman', a description which does not always ring with sincerity, but also in her decisions to accept only women of noble birth as choir nuns in her abbey, for reasons which can only be described nowadays as elitist. On the other hand, she made a strong stand on a number of justice issues, berating the clergy who looked to their own comfort and prestige rather than being true shepherds to their people. The fact that she was accepted as a mystic and prophet gave her utterances an authority that would not have been possible otherwise. When she claimed to be speaking, not from her own thoughts and ideas, but directly from God, people took her seriously.

Finally, given the broad definitions and various aspects relevant to mysticism it seemed to me that, for my purpose, it would be a more valuable approach to examine the nature of Hildegard's experiences and work from her specific writing rather than seeking to understand her experiences by studying that of many others. In *The Life of Hildegard* Theodoric writes: 'The nature of her vision, or the mode of her seeing, [it] is known to have been very rare, and even unique among even the greatest saints while in the shadow of this mortal life.'<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup>Jantzen, p. 23.

<sup>124</sup>Silvas, p. 149.

He quotes Hildegard's own description of her visions in the letter to the monk, Guibert.

Still, I have always seen this vision in my soul, even from my infancy, when my bones and nerves and veins had not yet grown strong, up to the present time, although I am now more than seventy years of age. And in this vision my soul, as God wills it, ascends to the height of the vault and the shifting patterns of the variable air, and spreads itself out over the various peoples, though they are in distant regions and places far away from me. And because I see these things in my soul in such a way, I survey them according to the changing form of the clouds and other created things. Moreover I do not see these things with my outward eyes or hear them with my outward ears or perceive them with the thoughts of my heart or through any contribution of the five senses, but only in my soul, for my outward eyes remain open, and I do not undergo the unconsciousness of ecstasy, but see them wide awake, by day and by night.<sup>125</sup>

It may be possible to explain Hildegard's vision in her soul as a physical or psychological phenomenon. It may be that she did receive spiritual communication from God. A writer of fiction does not need to make the final judgement on the visionary experiences of Hildegard. It is more important to understand that Hildegard did not doubt the heavenly nature of her vision, and that others who were important in her life, accepted this. It is her self-understanding and the opinions and actions of others that influenced the course of her life, and which are the key to portraying her within the text of a novel.

## **ELEANOR**

Eleanor is reputed to have been a beautiful, forceful, fascinating, energetic and determined personality. Henry Adams says of her that:

About no figure in the Middle Ages, man or woman, did so many legends grow, and with such freedom, as about Eleanor, whose strength appealed to French sympathies and whose adventures appealed to their imagination. They never forgave Louis for letting her go.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup>Silvas, p. 150.

<sup>126</sup>Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (London: Bison Books, 1980), p. 123.

Richard Barber, confirming that her allure has endured, writes:

Royal scandals have been meat and drink to the media since classical times...And, despite the passage of time, Eleanor of Aquitaine is remembered today outside the dusty covers of the chronicles that record her doings, as a subject for romantic biographers, playwrights and television serials.<sup>127</sup>

Amy Kelly quotes the chroniclers as portraying Eleanor as ‘charming’, ‘welcoming’ and ‘lively’.<sup>128</sup> That she has continued to fascinate over the centuries is obvious by the number of books, and at least one play and film that have been based on her character and life.<sup>129</sup>

The basic facts of her life are well documented. We know her ancestry, where she was raised, whom she married, how many children she had, what journeys she took, when and where she died. This is the mosaic border. What remains of personal accounts either by Eleanor herself, or others chronicling her times? Eleanor left only a few writs and charters, routine documents that are for the most part as impersonal as government orders of any period, as well as three letters that may be genuine, although this is not universally accepted. But there is no personal account, according to one of her biographers, Marion Meade, who writes that: ‘The unfortunate fact is that Eleanor, a highly literate woman, left no intimate record of herself, no letters, diaries or poetry that might provide insights into her inner life.’<sup>130</sup>

Alison Weir, whose biography of Eleanor was published some twenty years later than that of Meade, was more encouraged by the material she found.

The twelfth century in general is readily accessible to us today because it was an age of burgeoning scholarship that is now regarded as the first Renaissance, an age that gave birth to a succession of outstanding and perceptive chroniclers.

She goes on to say that:

It is true that there is a lot we still do not know about her – for example, no description of her appearance survives – and that monkish chroniclers in general did not consider women, even queens, sufficiently important to merit much space in their works,

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<sup>127</sup>Richard Barber, ‘Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Media’ in *The World of Eleanor of Aquitaine: literature and society in southern France between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries*, ed. by Marcus Bull and Catherine Léglu (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), p. 13.

<sup>128</sup>Amy Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), p. 10.

<sup>129</sup>*The Lion in Winter* by James Goldman, which was performed as a play in 1966 and released as a film in 1968 is just one example.

<sup>130</sup>Marion Meade, *Eleanor of Aquitaine* (London: Phoenix Press, 1977), p. ix.

but her deeds speak for themselves, as do her surviving charters and letters.<sup>131</sup>

Meade, however, finds ambiguity in the accounts of Eleanor:

Her admiring contemporary Richard of Devizes may have called her ‘an incomparable woman’ but for the most part history has not agreed on how to deal with her.<sup>132</sup>

Weir points out, also, that there are contradictions in the official attitudes towards Eleanor during events in her lifetime:

There are discrepancies between accounts of real events in the works of different chroniclers, which oblige the historian to seek corroboration from as many sources as possible, where they exist.’<sup>133</sup>

The available primary sources include three letters, said to have been written by Eleanor to Pope Celestine III, imploring his intervention on behalf of her son Richard I, then a prisoner of Henry VI. Their authenticity has been questioned, by Beatrice Lees who wrote that:

Not only has their authenticity been accepted without question, but bibliographers have derived from them Eleanor’s title to a place in the company of royal and noble authors, while historians have built up on them a theory of the part played by the queen mother in the release of the captive king.<sup>134</sup>

She goes on to argue that these letters, rather than having been personally written or authorised by Eleanor’s secretary, are a ‘rhetorical exercise masquerading in the guise of an historical letter’ and that this ‘supports the suggestion of M. Charles Bémont that the three letters from Eleanor of Aquitaine to Pope Celestine III, printed by Rymer in the *Foedera*, are rhetorical studies of this nature.’<sup>135</sup> She notes that the three letters were published by Rymer in the first edition of *Foedera* in 1704 without indication of source, and that previously they had been printed among the letters of Peter of Blois. Her conclusions, on studying the letters, are that they bear the mark of his style. The notion that they were written by him at the instigation of Eleanor is,

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<sup>131</sup> Alison Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God, Queen of England* (London: Pimlico, 2000), pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>132</sup> Meade, p.viii.

<sup>133</sup> Weir, p. xvi.

<sup>134</sup> Beatrice E. Lees ‘The Letters of Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine to Pope Celestine III’, *The English Historical Review*, 21 (1906), 78-93 (p. 78).

<sup>135</sup> Lees, p. 78.

she says, questionable, as it is never clearly established that he was ever her secretary.<sup>136</sup>

While both Meade and Weir quote the letter to Pope Celestine III concerning Richard's captivity in their biographies of Eleanor, Meade follows Lees in concluding that these letters are 'so improbable that it is surprising that many modern historians have accepted them as authentic,' adding that no contemporary of Eleanor's mentioned that she wrote to the pope.<sup>137</sup> Weir, on the same evidence, comes to a different conclusion about the letters.

Copies of the letters she [Eleanor] sent were preserved amongst the papers of her secretary, Peter of Blois, who almost certainly had a hand in their composition, since his style is evident in parts, and it is unlikely – although not impossible – that Eleanor was sufficiently erudite to include so many citations from scripture. Some modern historians believe that Peter composed the letters himself as an exercise in Latin rhetoric. There is no record of their dispatch, nor of their receipt in Rome. Yet this does not mean to say that the Pope never received them, since most letters of the period were lost. It is true that these remarkable letters were not attributed to Eleanor until the seventeenth century, yet why the connection was not made earlier remains a mystery, given the salutations, the authenticity of the detail and the passionate sentiments expressed, which are in keeping with what we know from other sources of the period of Eleanor's feelings, actions and character. Moreover there is some evidence of a papal response to the second letter. The conclusion must be, therefore, that Eleanor not only initiated this correspondence but was also its co-author.<sup>138</sup>

This argument relies on Peter of Blois being Eleanor's secretary, which Lees denies. It also ignores the fact that while many letters and documents were lost from this period, the Vatican had the facilities to archive material. Letters to the Pope from the Queen of England would surely have been considered of sufficient interest to preserve. More compelling is Weir's argument that the third letter Eleanor wrote to the Pope, humble and conciliatory, would not have been written if she felt no need to apologize for the first two.

The existence of this third letter is good evidence for the authenticity of this correspondence: if Eleanor's first two letters had been merely literary exercises, why would she need to have composed a letter of apology?<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup>Lees, p. 80.

<sup>137</sup>Meade, p. 395.

<sup>138</sup>Weir, p. 291.

<sup>139</sup>Weir, p. 301.



Régine Pernoud takes the middle line in asserting that there are three letters signed by Eleanor and addressed to Pope Celestine III, which may have been written by her chancellor Peter de Blois but which express her [Eleanor's] indignation.<sup>140</sup>

Ralph V. Turner, in a paper published in 1988 notes that:

Lees questioned these letters' authenticity...Most authorities, however, accept them now as genuine letters from Eleanor to the pope.<sup>141</sup>

He does not, however, name any of the authorities. Even as recently as 2006 Thomas Cahill, accepting them as being by Eleanor, refers to them as 'masterpieces of canoodling, threat and innuendo'.<sup>142</sup> Richard Barber, while analysing writings by her contemporary or near contemporaries refers to one of the letters.

In 1191 she wrote a letter to the pope, whom she knew personally, pleading for his assistance in obtaining the release of Richard from captivity. It begins with the extraordinarily striking phrase, much beloved of romantic biographers of Eleanor, but never, as far as I know, closely analysed by scholars. Instead of the usual preamble, 'Eleanor, by the grace of God, queen of England,' she begins 'Eleanor, in the wrath of God, queen of England'<sup>143</sup>

Barber acknowledges that the letters may have been written for her by 'one of the great letter writers of the age, Peter Blois', but concludes certain things about Eleanor from these letters.

This is Eleanor manipulating the media, presenting herself as a forlorn figure worthy of the utmost sympathy, whether she is doing so directly or indirectly. For we need to ask what the relationship between the queen and the writer of her letter might have been. Was it that between a modern president and his speechwriter, coining a soundbite that echoes around the world within hours? Perhaps; but no president will deliver a speech that does not reflect something of his own feelings, and in the *ira dei* [wrath of God] I like to think that we have either Eleanor's own words or the words of someone capturing her feelings exactly.<sup>144</sup>

Despite all the scrutiny, the question of who wrote those letters does not appear to have been decisively settled.

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<sup>140</sup>Régine Pernoud, *Aliénor d'Aquitaine* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1965), p. 254.

<sup>141</sup>Ralph V. Turner, 'Eleanor of Aquitaine and her children: an inquiry into medieval family attachment', *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1988), 321-335, (p. 333:n.3).

<sup>142</sup>Thomas Cahill, *Mysteries of the Middle Ages: The Rise of Feminism, Science, and Art from the Cults of Catholic Europe* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 2006), p. 146.

<sup>143</sup>Richard Barber, 'Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Media', in *The World of Eleanor of Aquitaine*, ed. by Marcus Bull and Catherine Léglu (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 13-36, (p. 27).

<sup>144</sup>Barber, p. 27

Meade, Weir and Pérnoud did not set out to write fiction. They, instead, wrote biographies of Eleanor of Aquitaine, based on considerable research, and were committed to confining themselves to what they believe are the facts. In her preface, Weir hopes ‘that what emerges in the following pages is a credible and balanced account, stripped of the myths, suppositions and misunderstandings that have obscured the real Eleanor of Aquitaine, both in the distant and recent past.’<sup>145</sup>

Meade, in her preface, tells the reader that: ‘none of the dialogue in this biography is invented – all of it comes from the chronicles – nor did I find it necessary to fictionalise Eleanor’s life. Her history, what little is known of it, is novel enough.’<sup>146</sup>

Leaving aside the question of whether conversations reported in chronicles are what was actually said, or how an account based on history of which ‘little is known’ can be written without some fictionalisation, both writers claim that their accounts of the life of Eleanor are authentic. For them the question of whether she composed or commissioned the letters to Pope Celestine III is a very important one, for if they were simply rhetorical exercises by a third person they have no value as a reference to Eleanor’s personality and can be used only with extreme caution, if at all. Yet, they have made different judgements as to whether the letters were written by Eleanor. Meade does not accept them; Weir does.

While there is such disagreement among scholars and biographers about whether such an important primary source is genuine, does a writer, using Eleanor’s life in a fictional context, need to exercise excessive caution? Those who accept the three letters as genuine refer to them as showing depth of emotion and forcefulness as shown by this paragraph cited by Weir.

Oh wretched me, yet pitied by no one. Why have I, the Lady of two kingdoms, the mother of two kings, reached the ignominy of this abominable old age? My bowels are torn, my very race is destroyed and passing away from me. The young King and the Count of Brittany sleep in the dust, and their most unhappy mother is compelled to live, that without cure she may ever be tortured with the memory of the dead.<sup>147</sup>

These are strong emotions. The letter also speaks as forcefully about the evils within the kingdom and the Church as do letters by Hildegard of Bingen who was writing to kings, bishops and popes at the same time, and mirror those earlier ones of

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<sup>145</sup> Weir, p.xvii.

<sup>146</sup> Meade, p. xi.

<sup>147</sup> Weir, p.292.

Bernard of Clairvaux in strength of feeling if not in eloquence. These letters give a strong impression of the calibre of the writer.

The letters may or may not be genuine, but there are strong arguments to suggest that they are not. For this reason I did not refer to them in the novel. While their content is compatible with what we know of Eleanor at that stage of her life, it has not been established, to my satisfaction, that she would have written in that style or expressed her feelings in that way.

What other ways can we learn about Eleanor? In his introduction to the life of Eleanor, Owen comments on the serene effigy of Eleanor that lies at Fontevraud:

One can imagine, masked behind those calm features, Eleanor's last thoughts as she looked back over her life and saw it as the lustrous end of a golden strand of history such as might have been woven by a poet of her time into an inspiring ancestral romance...The idea is appealing: more so than the thought of her dying a disillusioned woman, saddened by a sense of ultimate failure. And it is a view encouraged as much by her life's whole context as by its bald facts.<sup>148</sup>

So he seeks to 'attempt to sift fact from fiction'. What did she really look like?

Eleanor is reputed to have been beautiful, although we do not have any description of her appearance. Her reputation was established early in her lifetime and continues, in much the same way as that of Helen of Troy who, as Bettany Hughes recounts, has many images, yet none.

We have no lifelike representation of Helen from antiquity. Museum storerooms around the world have shelves crammed with vases showing Helen at various points in her life-story and in her evolution as an idol – Helen as a girl, Helen as queen, Helen as a demi-goddess, Helen as whore – but these images, without exception, are all made up: they reveal not who Helen was, but who men have wanted her to be.<sup>149</sup>

Much the same could be said of Eleanor. Her image and reputation have varied at different periods of time, in keeping with current thinking. Today she is seen as both a romantic heroine and strong woman. Looking back to earlier references, how was Eleanor viewed by her contemporaries? A chorus from *Carmina Burana* by an anonymous German writer is said to refer to Eleanor.

If all the world were mine  
from the sea to the Rhine

<sup>148</sup>D.D.R.Owen, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: queen and legend* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>149</sup>Bettany Hughes, *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), p. 4.

I would do without it  
if the Queen of England  
would lie in my arms. Hey!

The chronicler, Gerald of Wales, has little respect for the morals of either King Henry II or Eleanor.

When the two-year war was over (1174) and the fighting and persecution had stopped, the king, attributing his success like another Pharaoh not to divine mercy but to his own strength, hardened his heart and returned incorrigibly to his usual abyss of vice, or rather, to an even worse one, since going downhill things can only deteriorate. And to mention only one thing, omitting the rest, he imprisoned Queen Eleanor his wife as punishment for the destruction of their marriage; his adultery previously hidden, now became open and blatant, not with a 'pure rose' (Latin *rosa munda*) falsely and frivolously named, but rather an impure one.

And, in case we had forgotten the other side of the story and place too much blame on Henry:

How Eleanor, queen of France, behaved when she was across the sea in Palestine, and how she conducted herself on return, towards her first husband and her second; and how her children aroused such hopes when young but withered away; all these things are well enough known.<sup>150</sup>

Adams may have believed that the French never forgave Louis for permitting Eleanor go because of her romantic and feisty character, but there is evidence that the English appreciated her for different qualities. She proved to be a just and able administrator and regent at times when both Henry and Richard required. Ralph of Diceto in his chronicles reports that after Richard had ascended the throne of England he 'issued instructions to the princes of the realm, almost in the style of a general edict, that the queen's word would be law in all matters' when he was absent. That she carried out these duties responsibly was certainly the opinion of Hallam as can be seen in the following account:

Queen Eleanor the king's mother and Walter of Coutances archbishop of Rouen, chief justiciar of England, and other barons, did their utmost to conserve peace in the kingdom, seeking to join together hearts which were permanently at loggerheads with each other.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> *The Plantagenet Chronicles*, ed. by Elizabeth Hallam (London: Salamander Books, 2002), p. 101.

<sup>151</sup> Hallam, p. 226.

In her role as Queen of England she had sometimes acted for Henry. Meade tells us that:

The second year of the reign opened with the queen in full command... For the first time Eleanor had the opportunity to travel about on her own... Although the English tended to be suspicious of foreigners, especially a foreigner with a reputation such as Eleanor's, they discovered that the eagle was more than a glamorous personality.<sup>152</sup>

The style of her justice can be seen in the following writ.

Eleanor, queen of the English, etc. to John fitz Ralf, sherrif of London, greeting. The monks of Reading have complained to me that they have been unjustly disseised of certain lands in London... I therefore order that you enquire without delay whether this is so and if you find out it is true, reseise the monks. Unless you do this the king's justice shall do it for we will in no way suffer that the monks lose unjustly anything that belongs to them. Farewell.<sup>153</sup>

Chronicles have the advantage of having been written close to the event, and give a unique insight into the period. Such accounts make up some of the sources that help a writer to build the picture of Eleanor. They are not the only pieces, but they are valuable, even if, according to Sophia Menache, they may not be considered 'a reliable source of historical analysis'. She concludes:

... they still contain a precious store of information on the expectations and fears, emotions in general and prejudices in particular, at a given time and in a given space. In this regard, one must oppose any attempt to sterilise chronicles – that is to glean only the historical facts they may provide – for then a precious source of information may be lost.<sup>154</sup>

### **Assessing the evidence**

In researching all three women I have come to see that, although much may have been written about all of them, there is a wide margin for error. Little is certain. This leads me back to my earlier questions. Does the novelist need to adhere to the known facts, only embellishing what is not known with as plausible an interpretation as possible? May the novelist use the persona of an historical person and period to launch an imaginative and provocative portrayal that allows for a freer interpretation

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<sup>152</sup> Meade, p. 220.

<sup>153</sup> Meade, p. 220.

<sup>154</sup> Sophia Menache, 'Chronicles and historiography: the interrelationship of fact and fiction', *Journal of Medieval History*, 32 (2006), 333-345 (p. 343).

of history? Should the novelist adhere to generally held beliefs about the life of a famous person or the interpretation of that person's personality, even if this later turns out to be incorrect or unjustified? In other words, do novelists have the same obligation as biographers to seek assiduously for the truth, or are they allowed some literary licence? If the latter, how much licence?

There is no clear set of rules to follow. The final judgement may depend on the type of novel one wishes to produce. If an accurate portrayal of historical figures and events is intrinsic to the theme of the novel then the writer does need to adhere as closely as possible to what has already been established by historians, or by personal research. If the novelist is using the romance and excitement of a period in history, such as the Middle Ages, or the mystique of a person such as Eleanor of Aquitaine as the springboard for the narrative, then more licence is acceptable because the main focus is on writing an interesting story.

This may make the 'accurate' historical novel sound dull and boring, but this need not follow. I set out to write an accurate account, without feeling that I had to sacrifice any of the colour or essence of their lives. It is an approach that seeks not only to recreate the period as closely as possible, and to satisfy the reader who looks for authenticity, but at the same time holds the readers' interest in the narrative flow and character development.

Nor should we say one approach to the historical novel is better than the other. An historical novel, which provides an entertaining and satisfying read, but which does so without making exaggerated claims about the depth of research or the reliability of its 'facts', has a valid place in our libraries.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### LADY WISDOM

#### Layers within layers

An artefact created in any branch of the arts may be interpreted in different ways. Creative writing is no exception. As readers delve into a text, peeling back subject, theme, symbolism, word-pictures, portrayal of character and character development, they may perceive insights and significance beyond those consciously intended by the writer. Such layers develop from the creator's original idea or stimulus, which initiated the creative process, and are developed through that process.

My initial inspiration for the novel grew not so much from my interest in the lives of Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor, but from the sudden realization, while reading a biography of Abelard, that they had lived at the same time. In researching their biographies and their writing I became aware that they had more than time and location in common. Searching for a way in which I could encapsulate what I termed their 'collective spirit' I considered the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as a metaphor to indicate that the links between the women were so strong that, although they were three individuals, together they formed a unity. This may seem to be treating a religious truth in a frivolous manner, but the shared religion of the women, plus the attempts to explain the mystery of the Holy Trinity in the Middle Ages, especially by Abelard and Hildegard of Bingen, added some force to the metaphor.

Their 'oneness' could be symbolised as Wisdom, who appears as a woman in the Old Testament as well as Celtic tradition. The wisdom they demonstrate represents different facets of their society. Heloise is a philosopher, Hildegard a prophet and Eleanor a queen whose influence is felt throughout Europe. Those attributes, when combined, make a formidable force and energy. Wisdom is more than intelligence or knowledge. James Gibbons, in discussing the nature of wisdom writes:

Wisdom is a practical thing. Aristotle called it ‘practical wisdom’. And practical wisdom is exercised in confronting not the situations you have confronted before and, with your developed foresight, can handle prudently and with fortitude, justice and temperance, but in confronting situations that are, to some extent, novel... The need to exercise wisdom arises in perplexing situations where it is difficult to predict and difficult to apply previous knowledge and experience.<sup>155</sup>

I strove to suggest this overriding force in the narrative and dialogue, so that the qualities these women displayed would be obvious. In the novel my three women form a microcosm in which they can act completely independently of male influence or power. To emphasize this I made the tone of their conversation amongst themselves more open and recognizably different to the way they spoke to Bernard of Clairvaux.

This microcosm, the situation they create for themselves when alone, might be considered one of the layers of meaning within the text. Could this be taken further? Could these three women not only represent women of the Middle Ages, but different women at different times in similar circumstances; women who had striven to establish an identity and independence of action? I do not wish to claim that they represent ‘universal woman’. Personifying Wisdom is sufficient. However it might be claimed the narrative thread of the novel does support something of the female struggle for gender equality. In the novel the women plan how to prevent their lives from being severely restricted by an ecclesiastical decree. While the situation I describe is fictional their fears were not unrealistic. Strict claustration was enforced some three hundred years later, at the Council of Trent in 1563, under Pius IV. Among the dictates were instructions to bishops to take charge of all female monasteries, and which forbade any women who had taken her vows to leave her monastery, for any reason, unless she had the written permission of her bishop. Those who disobeyed could be punished both by excommunication or the secular arm of the law. Within the Orders there were strict rules about how nuns should use their time, with them needing permission to write or paint and never being allowed to work alone, but always within sight of other members of the community. Such rules

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<sup>155</sup> James Gibbons, *Reflection, Science and the Virtues* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers: in press), p. 170.



demoted women religious into an underclass, stripping them of any opportunities for self-expression, intellectual development, or initiative.<sup>156</sup>

### **Unifying Elements**

Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor have a number of things in common: they lived in the same era; they were from noble families; they achieved justified fame during their lives and that fame continues through the following centuries; they suffered the loss of a child, in the case of Hildegard, this being a spiritual daughter. These similarities are important because they form a basis upon which to unite their stories and experiences. The historical period in which they lived is also important.

The Middle Ages was a time, not of intellectual stultification, which is the popular stereotype, but of new ideas, the flowering of philosophy and theology, renewal of interest in the Greek philosophers, introduction to Islamic scientific research and a time when music and art reflected not just religious subjects but also secular ideas.<sup>157</sup> The three women took part in these developments, as either writers, scholars or rulers of states and kingdoms, but their contribution was nullified to a certain degree. In reality, as women in the twelfth century they had little personal freedom. There were times, in the lives of all of them, when they were forced to accept changes, which came about because of decisions made by others. One both significant and symbolic example of this loss of freedom is the fact that they all suffered the loss of a child, not through death but through decisions made by others. This loss came about through circumstances over which they had little power. Did this diminution of their maternal role have a permanent effect upon any or all of them, and would they have chosen it to be otherwise had they had the power to do so?

When we choose to write about women today it is, ideally, with an awareness of the purpose of gender-accented language, modern psychology and feminist theories. In our child-centred society the idea of children being forcibly separated from their

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<sup>156</sup> See Jeffrey Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: the visual culture of a medieval convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>157</sup> Régine Pernoud, *Those terrible Middle Ages! Debunking the Myths* trans. by Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), and Thomas Cahill, *Mysteries of the Middle Ages: The Rise of Feminism, Science and Art from the Cults of Catholic Europe* (New York: Nan A Talese, Doubleday: 2006).

parents, particularly their mothers, is abhorrent, and leads to terms such as, in Australia, 'the stolen generation'. Writing about women who lived in the twelfth century may command the same sensitivity and judgement. Nevertheless the portrayal of women must also be against the background of the times in which they lived. Is it possible to make any assertions about their feelings in terms of contemporary ideas, or is it more reasonable to consider that as the twelfth century was very different to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the people who lived in those times must be judged differently?

### **Motherhood**

The three women had all endured separation from a child, although in the case of Hildegard this was a spiritual relationship, not a biological one. Even before Heloise made the decision to enter a monastery she had to leave her baby son with Abelard's sister, and we know little about what contact, if any, there was between them during his childhood. Without the support of her uncle Canon Fulbert, Heloise had few life choices, apart from entering a monastery, once Abelard had made his decision to enter the monastery of St Denis. Hildegard grew to regard a young nun, Richardis, as her spiritual daughter, and her feelings for her were deeper than those she felt for all her other spiritual daughters. Hildegard had been her mentor from the time she entered the abbey, and Richardis, for her part, had worked closely with Hildegard, helping with her writing. Therefore Hildegard suffered a great sense of loss when Richardis left the monastery at Bingen to become an abbess elsewhere. The senior members of Richardis' family had decided that the young woman should be sent to a more prestigious position, and Hildegard could not prevail against the combination of influence, simony and possibly the ambition of Richardis herself, even though she appealed to as high an authority as the Pope. When Eleanor went to the Crusade her young daughter Marie did not see her mother for about two years. Later, after her first marriage was annulled, Eleanor left both Marie and Alix with Louis.

Stoertz, in studying young women of that time, concluded:

While certain biological and even psychological aspects of human development may be universal – although sociologists, psychologists and historians debate this – the significance attached to developmental phases, the activities considered appropriate to different ages, and the manner in which life

stages are defined are culturally determined by such factors as time, place, social class, or vocation, and, most important, gender.<sup>158</sup>

Stoertz acknowledges that practices in childrearing and the treatment of adolescents in the twelfth century differ from those today. Lloyd de Mause, in categorising the evolution of childhood, refers to the period covering the twelfth century as the Abandonment Mode:

Once parents began to accept the child as having a soul, the only way they could escape the dangers of their own projections was abandonment, whether to a wet nurse, to the monastery or nunnery, to foster families, to the homes of other nobles as servants or hostages, or by severe emotional abandonment at home.<sup>159</sup>

If this means that parents feared that they would be held responsible for their child's salvation, separating themselves from the child would not, logically, have abrogated that obligation, but it may have been the motivation for choosing other, more acceptable nurturers, mentors or guardians. The 'abandonment' need not have indicated lack of caring.

The removal of children from their families may have also served political or family ambitions. In the twelfth century, children in noble families were often separated from their family at an early age. Heloise was raised in a monastery, while her mother spent her energies and time helping to establish Fontevraud Abbey. Eleanor and Henry's children spent much of their childhood being raised in other households, or monasteries. Hildegard was still a child when her parents sent her to live with Jutta in the house of the widow Uda, to prepare for her entry into the monastery at Disibodenberg. Children as young as six were given in marriage, and the girls sent to the household of their new family. Others were offered as oblates to monasteries. Can we deduce from these examples that parents felt differently about their children to the way parents do today? Perhaps the only difference was in parents' perceptions as to what was the best way to raise children, to give them the best chances in the afterlife. Given this, there is no reason to suppose that parents in the twelfth century did not genuinely care for their children.

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<sup>158</sup> Stoertz, p. 22.

<sup>159</sup> Lloyd deMause, 'The Evolution of Childhood' in *The History of Childhood* ed. by Lloyd deMause (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 1-74, (p. 51).

Primary sources and study of the literature of the twelfth century give some further insight into this question. Stoertz found that the rites of passage for young women varied:

The process of achieving full social adulthood was a gradual and often ambiguous one, involving a complex nexus of such factors as regular sexual relations, motherhood, freedom from supervision, control over the household, and participation in government. The timing of these factors was not necessarily tied to a specific biological age, but was dependent on individual circumstances, including early training, personality and the status of the husband.<sup>160</sup>

This suggests that there was some sensitivity concerning the development of young women, and those who were given in an early marriage were not automatically expected to assume full adult responsibilities until they were prepared and ready to do so.

It should be remembered that Stoertz's studies concentrate on noble or royal families. If child-rearing practices in medieval times, in royal and noble households, are different to those accepted today there are a number of other reasons, apart from those cited by de Mause. Ralph Turner suggests other possibilities:

Did medieval parents share the same affection toward their children that parents today supposedly experience? Or did the high infant mortality rate put them on guard against becoming too attached to their children? Did they simply regard young children as creatures without feelings and unworthy of too much attention?<sup>161</sup>

The questions Turner poses are legitimate. They may be answered in ways that do not indicate lack of parental concern, such as seeking safety from warfare or the difficulties in travelling with young children. Turner also points out that under feudal custom the 'military aristocracy did not consider child care to be an exclusive parental responsibility'. Medieval noble women were often called upon to administer the family estates so that Turner considers 'they did not regard the rearing of children as one of their more important responsibilities'.<sup>162</sup>

Consistent with the view that we cannot automatically equate the twelfth with the twenty-first century Turner warns in the conclusion of his study of Eleanor as a mother:

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<sup>160</sup>Stoertz, p. 32.

<sup>161</sup>Ralph V. Turner, 'Eleanor of Aquitaine and her children: an inquiry into medieval family attachment', *Journal of Medieval History*, 14 (1988), 321-355, (p. 324).

<sup>162</sup>Turner, p. 325.

Our preoccupation with childhood – inspired by Freud – should not make us view this as a universal, present in all societies. Medieval men and women had no notion that one’s character is indelibly shaped in earliest childhood, and aristocratic ladies saw no need to give much personal attention to their offspring. But how much personal involvement have great ladies ever had in their children’s upbringing? ... Great ladies in all ages have had wet-nurses, nannies, governesses, tutors, boarding schools to relieve them of the burdens of child care. If Prince John experienced loneliness and rejection as a child, so did the future King Edward VIII and Gloria Vanderbilt centuries later.<sup>163</sup>

Underlying my thinking, therefore, about how I would write the novel was my opinion that people have not changed very much over the centuries. This was my justification for judging that people of the Middle Ages felt the same range emotions as people do today. On the other hand I did not wish to draw an exact parallel between people who live today and those who lived in the twelfth century because it was a different time and culture.

### **Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor as Mothers**

Women *qua* mothers can be considered independently. They alone bear children. Men cannot. Because of this exclusive faculty the status of mothers in any given society may be an indication of that society’s attitude to women. In medieval literature motherhood was not as highly valued as the celibate spiritual role. Women who abandoned their children in order to enter a monastery were held up as examples of women who showed strength in their devotion to God. Newman quotes Jerome, who supports this view:

As long as a woman is for birth and children she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman, and will be called a man.<sup>164</sup>

Newman also tells the story of Micchelina of Pesaro (1300-1356) who was honoured for her saintly life. Michelina, when widowed, prayed in a church that her young son

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<sup>163</sup>Turner, p. 333.

<sup>164</sup>Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ* (Philadelphia: PENN, 1995), p. 81.

would die so that she would be free to serve God. On returning home she found that God had answered her prayers and the angels had carried his soul to heaven.<sup>165</sup>

Heloise is often described as having no maternal feelings because throughout her correspondence there is scant reference to her son, and no mention of the sorrow she felt at being apart from him, although she is extravagant in her claims to suffering while separated from Abelard. Certainly there is no suggestion that she abandoned the world and her child to seek sanctity. Newman attributes it to other motives:

There is every reason to believe that Heloise, the precocious convent scholar, did prefer books to ‘feminine ways’ and agreed with Abelard when he later wrote, ‘How unseemly for those holy hands which now turn the pages of sacred books to have to perform degrading services in women’s concerns!’ No auctor – neither Ovid nor Jerome nor her beloved Stoics – would have taught Heloise to value the joys of motherhood. And as a good medieval scholar, she could scarcely conceive of an authentic life beyond the ken of auctoritas.<sup>166</sup>

This opinion about Heloise hints at the idea that she was not only precocious but also somewhat ‘precious’. Could she have chosen to act differently, refusing to enter the monastery at Argenteuil and remaining in Paris in some intellectual role? Could she and Abelard have remained together with their son? Michael Clanchy writes that it would have been perfectly feasible for Abelard to have resigned his office as master of Notre-Dame and, as he suggests, ‘accepted a job at the royal court or a benefice in some part of France where the rules of celibacy were less demanding’. Thus he and Heloise could have stayed together. Clanchy concludes that neither Abelard nor Heloise would have considered such a course of action because this would have diminished Abelard’s reputation as, in Abelard’s own words ‘the only philosopher in the world’. Heloise, Clanchy tells us, ‘believed in his [Abelard’s] role of superman as much as he did’.<sup>167</sup>

Juanita Ruys disagrees with this interpretation, considering that Heloise renounced her child only because there were no alternatives available to her:

What I would like to suggest... is that Heloise did not foster her child out because she was a bad mother, because she had formed no maternal bond with him, because she was in thrall to her overwhelming love for Abelard, or because there was no concept of motherhood in the Middle Ages – all reasons that have been

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<sup>165</sup>Newman, p.88.

<sup>166</sup>Newman, pp. 67-68.

<sup>167</sup>Clanchy, pp. 187-194.

advanced in scholarship on the subject – but for the rather less romantic reason that there were no alternatives available to her.<sup>168</sup>

Further, Ruys argues that Heloise and Abelard's letters are full of allusions to only children and first-born sons, by which she believes that Heloise continued to suggest to Abelard that she missed her child.<sup>169</sup> There is further evidence that Heloise was not indifferent to her son, when she asked Peter the Venerable, in a letter, to find a prebend for Astralabe either in Paris or another diocese.<sup>170</sup> Finally, the reference to 'our Heloise's constant complaint', which Abelard makes in the poem, *To Astralabe, my son*, conjures up a picture of a family whose members were affectionate and familiar with each other's foibles.<sup>171</sup>

Ruys in a scripted dialogue entitled *Interrogating Heloise* outlines the difficulties that Heloise faced had she wished to raise her son herself. Ruys states that the scenario is not entirely fictitious in that it draws on her research:

Clearly the setting for my dialogue is fictitious, but for all that, it is not entirely fictional, since there is evidence of medieval mothers petitioning the courts for custody of their children. Nor is the plea for custody made by my fictional Heloise on the basis of her maternal love an anachronistic romanticism on my part. Alison I. Beach<sup>172</sup> has recently uncovered letters from claustrated mothers that express their pain at their separation from their children.<sup>173</sup>

Historians demonstrate a similar concern about Eleanor of Aquitaine's maternal role. There is more attention given to her relationship with the children she bore Henry II, and this is understandable because Eleanor had little to do with the two daughters, Marie and Alix, who were both born while she was still married to Louis VII. During the annulment ceremony in 1152, which invalidated this marriage, certain legal matters were settled, including the custody of the children being given to their father. Marion Meade suggests that Louis might have allowed the girls to go with their mother, but this does not necessarily mean that Eleanor had any real choice in the matter.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>168</sup>Juanita Ruys, 'Playing Alterity: Heloise Rhetoric, and Memoria', in *Maitresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars* ed. by Louise D'Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), pp. 230-231.

<sup>169</sup>Juanita Ruys, personal communication (1 August, 2005)

<sup>170</sup>Levitan, p. 273.

<sup>171</sup>Levitan, p. 298.

<sup>172</sup>Alison Beach, 'Voices from a Distant Land' *Speculum*, 77 (2002), 34-54.

<sup>173</sup>Ruys, *Maitresse of my Wit*, p. 231.

<sup>174</sup>Meade, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, p. 180.

Alison Weir considers that on the day of the annulment of her marriage Eleanor would have already said goodbye to her two children in Paris the previous September:

It was unlikely she was close to them. Royal mothers normally lived their lives at some distance from their children, and Eleanor had seemingly suffered no qualms at leaving Marie for two and a half years to go on crusade. She seems, at the time, to have been more preoccupied with her immediate future than with the children she was leaving behind in France.<sup>175</sup>

Amy Kelly, in her biography of Eleanor of Aquitaine, makes no reference to Eleanor leaving her children beyond the fact that ‘the Princesses of France were declared legitimate and awarded to the king.’<sup>176</sup> There is still no clear indication that Eleanor would have been permitted to keep her daughters with her had she so desired, but neither is there any suggestion that she felt their loss keenly.

We might expect that she was anxious about her childless state during the first years of her marriage to Louis. A queen who did not produce an heir was a queen who had failed in her duty to the Crown. Weir in depicting a scene between Bernard of Clairvaux and Eleanor describes her bursting into tears and stating that ‘she despaired of ever having the longed-for child although she had prayed many times to the Virgin to grant her wish’.<sup>177</sup> Meade, commenting on this reported scene, suggests that it may never have happened, as there were no witnesses present, and if Eleanor had made such a speech it may not have been sincere.<sup>178</sup> If Eleanor had taken measures to keep some contact with her two elder daughters, or sought them out when they were adults, this would suggest that she had felt a mother’s love for them. Did they meet later? Kelly certainly accepts a meeting and significant collaboration between Eleanor and Marie of Champagne at Poitiers:

Whether when she journeyed down from Troyes or Paris to assume her place in the court of Poitiers, she [Marie] confronted her mother as a dear familiar child or as an apparition from a previous existence cannot with certainty be said... However, the character of the milieu which Marie appears to have set up in Poitiers suggests a genuine sympathy between the queen and her daughter who had so long been sundered by the bleak fortuities of life. Something

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<sup>175</sup>Weir, p. 91.

<sup>176</sup>Amy Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), p. 103.

<sup>177</sup>Weir, p. 45.

<sup>178</sup>Meade, p. 79.



native blossomed in the countess, who shone with a special luster in her mother's court.<sup>179</sup>

Kelly also puts Alix in the court at Poitiers in 1170.<sup>180</sup>

The collaboration between Marie de Champagne and her mother Eleanor of Aquitaine is depicted in their reputed Courts of Love, where the actions of the knights towards the women they loved were supposedly judged according to rules which had been set down by Andreas Cappellanus.<sup>181</sup>

Both Eleanor and Marie are described as presiding as judges.

Evocative as this scene may be of mother and daughter working in concert, John F. Benton warns that the identity of Andreas Cappellanus and his association with the court of Marie of Champagne is far from established, stating that: 'at no time in the period between 1150 and 1250, however, has a chaplain named Andreas been identified at the royal court [of Champagne].'<sup>182</sup> Benton states that the use of the names of certain noble ladies, including those of Marie and Eleanor, is not proof that they were assembled in a court, and he suggests that the problems which were said to be judged by Eleanor were an 'ironic comment on her own behaviour as they cited circumstances which could relate to her'.<sup>183</sup>

Michael Cherniss notes that there have been important refutations of the codification of the 'system of courtly love' as set out by Andreas. In particular he makes reference to the work of Paul Remy who showed 'that they are a legend, perpetuated by the misunderstandings of a long succession of writers and based upon literary, not social, sources'.<sup>184</sup> Taking this work even further from the realm of historical social comment is a paper by R J Shoek who argues that Andreas, in conscious irony, is basing the format of his book on the Twelve Rules of Love and the Twelve Steps of Humility enumerated by Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>179</sup>Kelly, p. 203.

<sup>180</sup>Kelly, p. 201.

<sup>181</sup>Andreas Cappellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love* trans. by John Jay Parry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960). See in particular pp. 167-176 where he makes reference to Queen Eleanor and Marie of Champagne passing judgements on specific cases.

<sup>182</sup>John F. Benton, 'The Court of Champagne as a Literary Center,' *Speculum* 36 (1961), 551-591 (p. 579).

<sup>183</sup>Benton, p. 581.

<sup>184</sup>Michael D. Cherniss, 'The Literary Comedy of Andreas Capellanus', *Modern Philology* 72 (1975), 223-237 (p. 233).

<sup>185</sup>R.J.Shoeck, 'Andreas Capellanus and St. Bernard of Clairvaux', *Modern Language Notes* 66 (May, 1951), pp. 295-300.

If we cannot rely on the accounts of proceedings in the now discredited Courts of Love at Troyes or Poitiers, are we left with any evidence of contact between Eleanor and Marie and Alix? Benton thinks not:

There is no evidence to show that Marie ever saw her mother or communicated with her after Eleanor left the court of France, when Marie was seven, and it is quite possible that at the royal court Marie was brought up to despise her mother.<sup>186</sup>

To conclude, as Benton does, that there was no contact suggests an absence of either maternal or daughterly feeling. Access would not have been geographically difficult. Other scholars do not agree with Benton's conclusion.

June Hall Martin McCash, while acknowledging the work of Benton, considers that he is overstating the case, although there is no documentary evidence that the mother and daughters ever met in later life. She writes that: 'there is, however, a good deal of circumstantial evidence that points toward a friendly relationship and exchange between Marie de Champagne and her mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine.'<sup>187</sup> Apart from the circumstantial evidence, McCash makes the final argument that: 'they were, after all, mother and daughter. If there were no other reason for them to have sought out one another... there is the knowledge of blood relationship and natural curiosity.'<sup>188</sup>

On the other hand, in her discussion of Eleanor as a parent, Elizabeth Brown points out that Eleanor has not been regarded by historians as a model mother, as her interests were centred more on power and the realities of political life, a judgement she does not agree with entirely.<sup>189</sup> Perhaps we can best judge Eleanor as a mother by her actions, especially her determined efforts on behalf of Richard the Lionheart, when he was imprisoned on the way home from Jerusalem. Eleanor also protected his kingdom in her careful administration during his absence. She may have been absent from her children at various times during their lives, but she kept in contact, and they certainly spent time with her at Poitiers when she took up residence there. The fact that she was blamed for inciting her sons to rebel against Henry also

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<sup>186</sup>Benton, p. 589.

<sup>187</sup>June Hall Martin McCash, 'Marie de Champagne and Eleanor of Aquitaine: A Relationship Reexamined' *Speculum* 54. (1979), 698-711, (p. 699).

<sup>188</sup>McCash, p. 710.

<sup>189</sup>Elizabeth A.R.Brown, 'Eleanor of Aquitaine: Parent, Queen and Duchess', in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Patron and Politician*, ed. by William W Kibler (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), 1-34, (p. 10).

suggests a close relationship with them. Cahill believes that while Eleanor had ‘long given up all her rights to her daughters by Louis she seems to have tried mightily to be a proper mother to her children by Henry’.<sup>190</sup>

Turner passes a balanced judgement on Eleanor when he writes: ‘When we place Eleanor’s role as mother in context, we do not find it noticeably different from other English queens’ relations with their children’.<sup>191</sup> If we substitute the word ‘French’ for ‘English’ this would apply, also, to Eleanor’s relationship with her first two daughters. The evidence suggests that Eleanor was no different to many other royal mothers at that time. It must be remembered that the father had the final say in where the children were educated, whom they married or where they resided.

Hildegard, a spiritual mother to her daughters in religion, made no secret of the sorrow that she felt when Richardis left the monastery at Bingen to become an abbess at Bissum. Her efforts to prevent this move were extraordinary, far above what one would have expected, as Fiona Maddocks describes:

Once again, we must ask what dark obsessive force had driven Hildegard to these extremes of behaviour. Nowhere else does her tongue run away with her quite so rashly, her heart reveal itself in all its nakedness... Nothing compares with the strength of feeling mixed with a palpable tone of panic and petulance in the correspondence concerning Richardis.<sup>192</sup>

Given the strength of Hildegard’s feelings the question of whether the love she felt for Richardis, rather than being maternal, was an erotic one, must be considered. Hildegard herself writes in reference to Richardis that she ‘bore a deep love for a certain noble young woman... just as Paul loved Timothy’.<sup>193</sup> Newman does not go so far as to suggest a lesbian relationship but she does say that the friendship was intense.

Her [Hildegard’s] overpowering love for Richardis contrasts tellingly with the proper but much cooler sentiment she expressed in her commendation of Jutta. In thus revealing the depths of her soul Hildegard shows for once the human face behind the ‘trumpet of the Living Light’. At the same time she affords an early glimpse into the kind of chaste but troubled, intensely erotic bond between

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<sup>190</sup>Cahill, p. 148.

<sup>191</sup>Turner, p. 332.

<sup>192</sup>Fiona Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2002), p. 113.

<sup>193</sup> *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources* trans. by Anna Silvas (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1998), p. 165.

nuns that later spiritual directors would call ‘particular friendship’ – and sternly forbid.<sup>194</sup>

It is important in the context of examining Hildegard’s expressions of her feelings to consider the time in which she lived. The expression of her feelings both to and about Richardis are similar to those found in letters by Bernard of Clairvaux and follow the tradition, as Maddocks points out, of spiritual friendship.

By writing in this style, Hildegard was following in the tradition of her contemporary Aelred of Rievaulx’s *De Spirituali Amicitia* (On Spiritual Friendship, 1150-65), or the letters of St Anselm and Bernard of Clairvaux. Their passionate correspondence with other men has been misinterpreted as a sign of their homosexuality, latent or overt, even though the language is manifestly scriptural, the evidence scant.<sup>195</sup>

The language in Hildegard’s letters concerning Richardis is more personal than scriptural, although she does claim the authority of acting under direction from God, and therefore being on the side of right. She writes to her archbishop:

The Bright Fountain, truthful and just, say these legal pretexts brought forward to establish authority over this girl have no weight in God’s eyes, for I – high, deep, all-encompassing, a descending light – neither initiated nor wanted them. Rather they have been manufactured in the conniving audacity of ignorant hearts... You have raised up your rods of punishment arrogantly, not to serve God, but to gratify your own perverted will.<sup>196</sup>

Interestingly Flanagan does not see Hildegard’s struggle against those who wished Richardis to leave Bingen as being in the spirit of monastic friendship. Instead Flanagan sees it as following the pattern of behaviour that Hildegard employed in all her important battles.<sup>197</sup> In her campaigns she claimed to speak not on her own behalf, but as God directed her, thus those who opposed her were guilty of trying to prevent God’s will from being carried out.

Whatever the true nature of the feelings Hildegard had for Richardis, those of a mother for a daughter were included. Richardis was probably about twenty years younger than Hildegard, so of an age to be considered as her child. Despite the

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<sup>194</sup>*Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World* ed. by Barbara Newman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), p. 13.

<sup>195</sup>Maddocks, p. 115.

<sup>196</sup>Baird and Ehrman, trans. *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, 1998), Letter 18r, Vol II, p. 70.

<sup>197</sup>Sabina Flanagan, ‘Spiritualis Amicitia in a twelfth century convent: Hildegard of Bingen and Richardis of Stade’, *Parergon* 29 (April 1981), 15-21.

strength of her emotions or her desire to keep Richardis by her side Hildegard had no power to prevent the young woman leaving, even though it is in the Rule of St Benedict that monks or nuns should remain at the monastery where they first took their religious vows. Under pressure from the bishop, the abbot and the von Stade family, Hildegard was forced to release Richardis so that she could take up the position to which she had been elected.

In attempting to assess the effect of a loss of their child or children on all three women it is important to consider it against the thinking of the time. It is also valuable to reflect on the fact that in many other periods of history the parental role has not always involved personally being concerned with the raising of children. Even today the practice of sending very young children to boarding school continues in certain countries and among some social classes. In wealthier and professional households parents may employ nannies. In poverty stricken communities, as found in some parts of the Third World, children may be sent to more prosperous households, sent out to work, or even sold as child labourers. While we can accept that it is natural for parents to love and nurture their children, on even a superficial examination it is clear that children are not inevitably raised by their biological parents.

How, then, may a novelist assess the effect on a medieval woman of being separated from her child? An historian draws on a number of resources and information before coming to any conclusion, which may be, even then, problematical. There will be a degree of subjective judgement. As Weir, in the introduction to her biography of Eleanor of Aquitaine points out:

There are discrepancies between accounts of real events in the works of different chroniclers, which oblige the historian to seek corroboration from as many sources as possible, where they exist. Often, they do not, and a writer must then use his or her own judgement as to which, on balance, is the more reliable account – never an easy decision, and one that must also judge what can be inferred from circumstantial evidence.<sup>198</sup>

For the novelist this ‘judgement’ as to what is the more reliable account may also involve asking the question: how can we judge this person’s motives and actions in the light of what we know of human nature? The answer is not found through psychological or sociological studies. That would simply add more scholarship, with

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<sup>198</sup>Weir, p.xvi.

its inherent discrepancies found in historical research. Rather, the answer draws on the writer's own knowledge of people, his or her 'gut' instinct, the understanding of the character's inner life. Fortunately writers of fiction do not have to justify every assertion or detail of character in a footnote.

Moving from historical research to the stage where creativity and imagination are allowed a certain freedom from its rigours, I can examine Heloise's actions and come to conclusions as to her reasons for so acting. By the end of this process I may not feel confident that my final conclusion, which colours the way I depict Heloise, is correct, but it is one of which I feel convinced, and of which I must convince the reader.

In an historical novel there are a number ways Heloise can be portrayed as a mother. Perhaps she did not have a strong maternal feeling and therefore had little concern for her baby son. Leaving him in the good care of Abelard's sister fulfilled her maternal obligation. Perhaps, in spite of her desire to raise her son, she had little choice but to enter Argenteuil, and this meant that she had to sacrifice not only her secular life but also her child, causing her much anguish. Again, she might have felt that she was required to make a meaningful sacrifice to match, in some way, the physical and psychological suffering inflicted on Abelard, and giving up her son and her life in the world was the greatest sacrifice she could imagine.

Heloise achieved much in her life and, from what we know, she did exceptionally well in all she undertook. My feeling is that if she had really wanted to keep Astralabe with her at the time she became a nun, she would have found a way to do so. If he could not live with her at Argenteuil, and she persisted with the idea of taking religious vows, she could have found another monastery where this was possible. She came from a noble family, so that, even if her parents were dead, there may have been others to offer her protection and shelter. She makes reference to those who tried to persuade her not to enter a monastery because of her youth. Were they friends who were offering an alternative? She may not have been permitted to teach in any of the cathedral schools, but could she have been usefully employed teaching young noblewomen? As she was from a noble family she may not have even needed to earn a living.

What would she have done if Abelard had not been castrated? The implications raised by this question give some clues as to her actions immediately after that event. Although she was not responsible for the crime and had no intention to injure

Abelard in any way, Heloise must have felt indirectly responsible because it was her uncle who perpetrated the deed, and it was because of the damage to her reputation that he did so. The recognition of this could well have motivated her to, in some way, inflict suffering upon herself.

Beyond all that, if we look at how her life had evolved over the few years before she entered religious life we can see that she experienced emotional turmoil. Having begun studying with Abelard as her tutor, she soon became his lover, and their letters attest to the intensity of that relationship. He was a man known throughout Paris, if not all of France, as a brilliant and exciting philosopher, teacher and musician. Therefore, as his mistress, she had, at least in her own estimation, a position other women envied. After Fulbert discovered their relationship, Heloise and Abelard were forced to separate, meeting only clandestinely, while still writing passionate letters to each other. Heloise became pregnant, and, in one possible interpretation of the last of the 'lost love letters', she was at first happy about this, while Abelard was not. It may be reading too much into the last letter to assume, as Mews does, that it refers to her pregnancy and Abelard's negative reaction to this fact. In this letter she writes: 'Now I am tired, I cannot reply to you, because you are taking sweet things as burdensome, and in doing so you sadden my spirit.'<sup>199</sup> Mews writes that 'the implication of her letter is that she is disappointed her teacher does not share her joy in expecting a child'.<sup>200</sup> On the other hand Piron feels there is not enough evidence to support this hypothesis.<sup>201</sup> One must wonder about her joyful acceptance, for surely, if she thought marriage was an impediment to their relationship and Abelard's life as a philosopher, would not a child have been more so?

Whatever the meaning of this letter there is no ambivalence about the fact that Heloise became pregnant. Did she, in those first months of her pregnancy, have the idea that she could raise the child by herself? Was she so impractical that she did not see the difficulties? Was she confident, at that stage, of some family support? Was she so sure of her own abilities that she believed she could overcome the problem of raising a bastard child with or without the presence of its father?

Once Abelard's life was irretrievably changed hers was as well. In the immediate aftermath of the attack on Abelard it must have been almost impossible for her to

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<sup>199</sup> Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, p. 283, Letter 112a.

<sup>200</sup> Mews, *The Lost Love Letters*, p. 142.

<sup>201</sup> Sylvain Piron, *Lettres des Deux Amants* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 26.

think rationally and dispassionately. Maybe in hindsight she wished that she had acted differently. Deprived of significant comfort from Abelard, living the monastic life for which she did not believe that she had a vocation, her thoughts may well have turned many times to, what if...? It is to her credit that despite the reproaches and extreme sentiments in her later letters, Heloise did not become catatonic with self-pity, as the progress made at the Paraclete under her administration demonstrates.

Was the separation from her child forced upon her by the dictates of the society in which she lived? Was this separation a wound that troubled her continually? Was she so taken up with her love for Abelard that nothing else mattered? The answers to these questions go to the very core of understanding Heloise, and a writer wishing to portray her should not gloss over or avoid them because there are no clear-cut answers. They allow certain conclusions about Heloise, which play a significant part in deciding how these characters are depicted in the novel

At the time Heloise entered Argenteuil it was possible that she was not capable of thinking clearly and objectively. Later she may well have wished that she had more contact with her son, but even then she would not have thought that she had neglected or abandoned him, as the fostering of children, especially to other members of the family, was accepted within her society. Considering all this, within my novel, I feel able to portray Heloise both as being very conscious of all that Abelard suffered and her desire to make up for his injuries in some very significant way at the time of the event. Yet, I can portray her as looking back with longing for her son and experiencing sorrow because of her inability to play a more active role in his life, as the years pass. Hildegard acknowledged a strong and deep love for her spiritual daughter. The relationship between them was close. When Richardis left her she expressed her sorrow with violence. Whatever the true nature of her feelings for Richardis, and it is difficult to make a final judgement on this, there can be no doubting the sense of grief and desolation she experienced. Such grieving is not quickly nor easily forgotten, and this is reflected in my novel. Eleanor's situation was very different to that of Heloise in that she was part of a royal household where even daughters were valued. Is there any reason to think her indifferent to her first two children when she appears to have been so involved with the children of her second marriage? Perhaps it was her sense of loss of those first daughters that led her to show stronger feelings for her later children. We can also consider that her interest in these children was as concerned with politics and power as it was with maternal



love, which led her to support, encourage and educate her children as future rulers, or wives of rulers. Had that been her only reason it is unlikely that she would have involved herself so personally with her children, who often travelled with her, or stayed with her at Poitiers. It is reasonable to think that she felt a natural mother's love for all her children and the separation from her two daughters was a source of sorrow to her.

Each of these women was compelled to give up a spiritual or biological child. Men in positions of authority made the decision. Such a lack of power over something so fundamental epitomises the position of women in the Middle Ages. Women may have been given some degree of responsibility in their household or religious community, but ultimate responsibility over their lives was denied them.

### **What does history tell us about Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor?**

Once we have unpeeled the layers that encase these women like a cultural, historical and psychological cocoon, what has been discovered? Their gender impacted significantly on their lives. In almost every culture and society women have their separate part to play. How this role is perceived by women, and by the men in their society, is crucial to the women's daily lives. Europe in the Middle Ages functioned under a strict hierarchy of Church and State. This class structure affected both men and women, but in different ways. Gender governed choice of occupation, access to education, inheritance and marriage laws and control over one's children. It is impossible to overestimate these aspects of life in prescribing the choices a person was able to make.

The Church hierarchy, allowing only men to be ordained, ensured that women played an inferior role, even though the abbesses of great monasteries were considered to be among the elite of society. Apart from spiritual considerations the inability to say mass or dispense the sacraments affected the economic viability of women religious because they could not accept donations in payment for saying

masses for the dead – a source of revenue for male abbeys where most of the monks were ordained as priests.<sup>202</sup>

The prevailing Christian teaching had cast women into two roles. One of these is of temptress, following Eve's behaviour in the Garden of Eden. In contrast, a woman might, instead, be meek and saintly as was Mary, the mother of Jesus. This dichotomy presents an oversimplification of the attitude towards women but there is enough truth in it to be taken seriously. In spiritual teaching being 'feminine' meant being weak, superficial and easily led into moral laxity. In this sense men could be feminine, and women masculine, but even the branding favoured the male gender. A mother in the Middle Ages had no control over the education and upbringing of her children unless permitted to do so by their father or male guardian. Children could be sent away from their homes at an early age, even if this meant permanent separation from their mothers. There is no evidence to suggest that those mothers felt less love for their children than mothers do today.

Heloise, Hildegard and Eleanor were exceptional women, living within a society where many considered women as inferior to men. It was difficult for them to step outside this perception and to demand the opportunities given, without demur, to men. Therefore, in my portrayal of each of these women, I needed to convey that they could only act within certain constraints. Feisty, intelligent and independent minded women they may have been, but at certain times in their lives they were forced to accept the decisions, made by other people, which significantly affected their lives. In my novel I strove to show the juxtaposition of their desires and ambitions, being aware of their own talents and the strictures of society and church. Their success in finding the solution to their difficulties is attributed to their wisdom, discretion and ingenuity.

In studying their lives it is possible to glean certain common threads. All had a position of some importance. It is possible that Heloise, as abbess of the Paraclete, had more actual power than Eleanor who was the consort of a king, or Hildegard, who, at the time the story is set, was a magistra of a small community of nuns attached to a male monastery. However, in terms of influence, Hildegard, through her writing, reputation for prophecy and holiness gave her great prestige in her own

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<sup>202</sup>Penelope Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

country. For this reason the monks opposed her leaving the Abbey of St Disibodenberg to set up an abbey of her own. Eleanor was Duchess of Aquitaine and commanded the loyalty of her people even though both her husbands respectively assumed the position of power over her lands. When she was given the opportunity to administer either Aquitaine or England she proved to be very capable. Heloise had already established her reputation for scholarly excellence before she met Abelard. Her relationship with him, and her subsequent life as a nun, still involved scholarly activities, ensuring that her name would not be forgotten.

Recognizing that each had strengths we can examine how these three women used those strengths to deal with the limitations and vicissitudes of their lives. Many of these limitations were imposed upon them by their society. It might be said that other limits are attributable to their own defects. Eleanor found it difficult to accept that she had so little influence over events; Heloise was too willing to sacrifice herself to an ideal of love; Hildegard persisted in getting her own way, either through the power of her writing or her illnesses, in her attempts to force those in authority to agree to her requests. Yet, these same defects could be seen as strengths. None of these women was prepared to easily forgo that which she believed to be right. As importantly, each woman had firm ideas as to what course of action should be taken. Even Heloise, depicted by some as dominated by Abelard, can also be described as a woman who chose to sacrifice herself out of the depth of her love, thus living out the ideals she had espoused in her early letters.

How all these elements are conveyed in a novel is the task of the writer. The aim, after the research and study, is to create a novel which brings the characters to life, seen against the background of their own era, but which also allows them to be appreciated within a modern framework. They are women of our time as much as they belonged to theirs, for their lives resonate across the centuries.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### OTHER MEANS TO DISCOVERY

#### **Marrying creative expression to research**

In this section I intend to appraise the information gained through means other than reading. As part of the preparation to write the novel I travelled to Germany and France, seeking further appreciation of the lives of the three women. I will refer, in particular, to the travel diary that I kept during my journey, together with photographs.

A writer draws on his or her imagination to create a fictional world but that imagination is stimulated and informed by the writer's experiences, observations and knowledge. It is difficult to imagine that a person, born in a dungeon, deprived of any outside stimulus, and remaining there for his or her entire life would ever be able to write a novel. The converse does not apply. People who have lived rich, exciting and varied lives are not automatically brilliant writers. So, while there is not a direct correlation between wealth of experience and the ability to write brilliant novels, poems or plays there is a case to be made for the value of all activities which add to our experience and knowledge. These activities include travel.

The value of travel to stimulate creative thinking, albeit within a science discipline, has been examined.<sup>203</sup> The literature contains conclusions and observations that may also be applied to the creative arts, including writing. Penny Hanley described how her understanding of her theme and thesis, which includes a creative writing element, had benefited through travel:

The Blaskets [islands] captured my imagination. By asking local people, exploring the museum and by reading I found out everything I could about them... In short, The Great Blasket Island

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<sup>203</sup>In particular in the work of Martin Rudwick, 'Geological Travel and Theoretical Innovation: The Role of 'Liminal' Experience' *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 26, No 1 (Feb., 1996), pp.143-159, and Fiewel Kupferberg, 'Models of creativity abroad: migrants, strangers and travellers' in *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* Tome XXXIX 1998 No.1 179-206.

inspired my novel in ways I could never have imagined before going there.

So, to sum up, two Irish women in love with art, the sublime art in Dublin's National Gallery, and a wild Irish island that fired my imagination had a huge impact on my research and it seemed at the time that these instances of research being not writing were more significant than any number of notes I had taken and books I had summarised.<sup>204</sup>

Hanley's description of her discoveries through meeting people and impressions and stimuli gained through travel mirrored my own experience. My research also involved travel and while I did spend time in the National Library in Paris perusing old documents and maps, my aim in travelling to Europe went beyond formal research. I wanted to find as much of what remained of the twelfth century as I could and to experience the way of living in those times. The former proved to be easier than I expected and the latter, understandably, quite difficult. I could not limit my transport to walking, riding a horse, or sitting in a riverboat, as would have been the mode of travel in the twelfth century. Neither time nor today's traffic would have allowed that. One can never return completely to a past way of living although I did make an effort by avoiding modern media. I deemed live music in cafes and buskers on the street to be the equivalent of the wandering minstrels, able to be enjoyed without compromising the research aims.

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<sup>204</sup> Penny Hanley, 'Wild Things: Embracing the Unexpected', *the and is papers: proceedings of the 12<sup>th</sup> conference of the AAWP*, (2007) [aawp.org.au/and-papers-proceedings-12<sup>th</sup> conference-aawp](http://aawp.org.au/and-papers-proceedings-12th-conference-aawp) [accessed 7 February 2008] (paras. 2 and 4 of p. 4).

## Hildegard's Abbey

*This morning as I walked about the grounds of the abbey of Hildegard, at Eibingen I thought I had found heaven. The fruit trees were still covered in leaves, if not fruit, except for the apple trees, on which apples hung like little red balls. The grape vines were bursting, ready for the harvest, grass green and long, flowers in full bloom. The sun shone warmly but not enough to burn and the sky was clear, cloudless and blue. The whole feeling was of peace, warmth and rich fertility. I saw a nun instructing a workman – just as she would have in the twelfth century.*

(Personal travel diary, 21 September 2006)



### 2. Garden behind the Abbey of St Hildegard (Author's photo)

My journey of discovery began at the Abbey of St Hildegard at Rupertsheim, where Hildegard had established a priory. Here there was a definite sense of having stepped back in time into a monastic routine. My room was simply furnished, and provided a wonderful view over the town and river. The meal times were the same as those of

the nuns although guests ate separately. This is in keeping with the Benedictine Rule. The food was simple, healthy and quite adequate. Bells summonsed us to the chanting of the Office. I chose to follow the nuns' way of life as much as I could, so rose each morning for Lauds at 5.30am and finished my day at Vigils at 7.40pm. Pilgrims, in the form of tourists, came to the abbey, not on foot but by coach, and after praying in the chapel they would taste and buy wine from the winery, select books, CDs of Hildegard's music and candles. Living there for just a few days gave me a very personal insight into the Benedictine way of life, one that I did not achieve from my reading of St Benedict's Rule. On the other hand, without that earlier reading I would not have appreciated my time at the abbey in the same way. In my travel diary I wrote:

*Finally arrived. First impressions did not disappoint. The building, almost stark in its simplicity, is set high on a hill surrounded by vineyards. Inside there is the traditional style of arched doorways and ceilings. Sister Agatha, not the wizened old nun I had imagined, but young and cheerful, welcomed me, apologizing for her more than adequate English... Sitting in the chapel brought many things to mind: what a beautiful way to begin each day; how singing or chanting the office gives them [the nuns] such a sense of community; it is a time to reflect on God's truths, a calming and contemplative experience.*

(Personal travel diary, 21 September 2006)

Attending the chapel for the Office also made me appreciate Hildegard's music and the importance she placed on that method of prayer. Without music the recitation could easily become stale and meaningless. The nuns came together several times a day, following a set liturgy, which focused their daily lives on community and prayer. Heloise, also, although claiming that she did not have a true vocation to the religious life, sought to find the best way for her sisters and herself to live that life. The music composed for the Paraclete by Abelard, with her own contribution, and the hymns chosen from those used by the Cistercian order (founded by Bernard of Clairvaux), were part of her establishment of a monastic rule more suitable for women.

Cathedrals built in the twelfth century were built to last. Many of them have survived wars and the destruction of time, even if the building has been renewed over the years. For the people living in the Middle Ages these cathedrals must have been a source of joy and wonderment. I experienced something of this at Chartres, entering the cathedral at 8.30am, finding it free of tourists except for a travelling choir that

was practising Taizé chants. The morning light shone through the stained glass windows. At the time I wrote that it was ‘indescribable’ and it is still impossible to find the words to convey the atmosphere and impression that it made upon me. How much more would such an experience have affected people who had never had access to films, television, or art galleries? The cathedral still serves the local community. At the conclusion of morning Mass the monks, who are attached to the Cathedral, went to the choir stalls to chant the Office and the small local congregation took up the responses. The cathedrals are tourist attractions but they also serve the local people as their parish church, just as they did when they were first built.

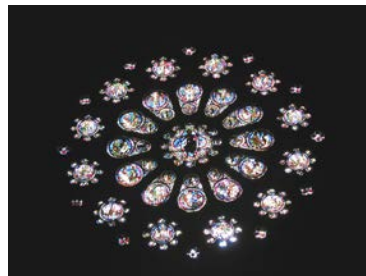
Chartres cathedral was built later than the period I set my novel, but the crypt was actually the older church on which the newer one was constructed. I found being there particularly moving.

*The crypt was marvellous. It dates back to the time I am writing about and is the way the cathedral was then. Chartres was also the main centre of learning and Fulbert, a great scholar, taught here; John of Salisbury became Bishop and Abelard’s teachers studied here The crypt still has small altar niches, one of which is used to celebrate Mass.*  
(Personal travel diary, 26 September 2006)

### 3. Crypt, Chartres cathedral (Author’s photo)



### 4. Rose Window Chartres Cathedral (Author’s photo)





## Fontevraud Abbey

*The organisation of Fontevraud was set according to the Benedictine Rule with separation between the Abbess, Choir nuns and monks. Within the gender group there were further divisions. Women who had been married were not in the same league as the virgins, and reformed 'fallen women' had their own area. There was also a hospital for lepers and the nuns nursed the patients. The founder, Robert d'Arbrissel, had a high regard for women and their value. He often referred to the fact that it was the women who stood at the foot of the Cross and heard Jesus' last words.  
(Personal travel diary, 29 September 2007)*



5. Fontevraud Abbey (Author's photo)

Continuing the search for the twelfth century I travelled to Fontevraud abbey. Fontevraud was established by Robert d'Arbrissel in 1101 and was controversial in its time because it housed both men and women religious. It was of particular interest to me because the first prioress was Hersinde, Heloise's mother. Fontevraud Abbey suffered some destruction over the centuries, including being used as a prison in the time of Napoleon Bonaparte, but the reconstruction of the abbey began as early as 1830. No religious order was able to return to the abbey and maintain it so it became the Cultural Centre of the West in 1975. The result is a complex that has

the buildings restored to the way they were originally. A significant part relates to the twelfth century. It differs from the Abbey of St Hildegard because it does not house a group of Benedictine men or women now. It is steeped in history, but also caters to modern times in the performance of concerts, art exhibitions and conferences.



6. Well near the vegetable garden



7. The apple orchard

Both at Fontevraud abbey. (Author's photos)

I stayed for two nights in the abbey complex. The part of the abbey that had been the lepers' hospital is now set up as a hotel, and my room overlooked the apple orchard and Eleanor's Garden. This garden was established eight hundred years after her death, and each plant in it had some reference to her life and travels. These references were explained on the notice board next to Eleanor's garden. Another part of the garden was set out with herbs and vegetables as it had been in the time of Heloise's mother, Hersinde and, a little later, Eleanor in her final years. In my diary I recorded:

*Flowers everywhere; under a group of trees, little purple flowers. Still some roses in bloom. The trees are loaded with apples and a type of blue berry. There would have been fowls, geese and pigeons to eat. The forest surrounds part of the abbey grounds. Birds sing in the trees, starting at first light.*

(Personal travel diary, 29 September 2006)



*Des palissades dossier tressé, comme ce devait être la mode, protégeraient cet endroit et des plantées fleuries, plantées dans de petites banquettes, viendraient égayer chaque saison. A sa demande, des plantes particulières viendraient symboliquement, lui rappeler divers événements ou étapes de sa vie. (Notice board next to Le Jardin d'Aliénor, Fontevraud)<sup>205</sup>*

8. Eleanor's Garden, Fontevraud (Author's photo)

A village grew up around the abbey, and walking around those parts near the walls of the abbey it is easy to mentally reconstruct earlier times. In the centre of the village is St Michael's church, endowed by Henry II, built between 1150 and 1162.

Visiting such places is important for a writer, because the senses of sight, smell and touch teach us so much. The task is then to take those bundles of impressions and knowledge and convert them into words that invite readers to share the same experiences. Experiencing the geography of a place may also bring revelation, and ruminations. Looking at maps and even working out distances using the map legend does not have same impact as being in a place. On the day I travelled there I was surprised to realise just how close St Denis and Argenteuil are. From this revelation other thoughts flowed:

*Many thoughts about Abelard and Heloise. It makes sense that they entered abbeys which were close to each other. This suggests they did keep in touch although the accepted wisdom is that Abelard neglected Heloise and she*

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<sup>205</sup> The wickerwork fence, as it would have been the fashion then, would protect this place and the flowering plants, planted in small beds, would brighten up each season. When she thought about them, these particular plants would come symbolically to remind her of different events or phases of her life. Author's translation.

*pined for years. The idea that she first expressed our accepted view of romantic love needs exploring. Compare this to Eleanor and Courtly Love. The river must have been a place where Abelard and Heloise walked and talked. How much of what is written in the their later letters can we reject?*  
(Personal travel diary, 7 October 2006)

Again, walking about Cologne Cathedral, where Hildegard once preached.

*If the general population did not know the stories of the Bible or the saints' lives how could they learn from the stained glass windows? If only educated people knew these stories who designed the windows? Did the artisans undergo religious education? I think the cathedral guide was wrong.*  
(Personal travel diary, 13 October 2006)

Activities growing from my research led to a greater emphasis on interpretation of the material. This was manifested in a number of ways. The travel, production of a performance of the love letters, and writing other versions of the novel helped to sharpen and freshen what I had learned from researching through books and academic papers. One set of activities could not replace the other. Without studying the lives and period in which the three women lived in depth, the travel through Germany and France would not have yielded such riches. My introduction to the lost love letters of Heloise and Abelard came through reading both them and the introduction to the letters written by Constant Mews, plus other critical essays and commentaries. This gave me the requisite knowledge to edit and produce a performance of the letters. Through this experience I gained new insights into the text of the letters and Heloise and Abelard's personalities. Casting the story in a different medium or time frame also highlighted different points of view. I concluded that it is wise to explore and research from as many angles as possible.

### **Theatrical presentation of the writing of Abelard and Heloise**

While in France I attended a presentation by two actors of the early love letters of Abelard and Heloise at Clairvaux Abbey, together with music of the period performed by the Early Music group Discantus. In that setting the performance was very effective, and I decided to produce a similar event in my own city of Adelaide. This was performed as part of the Adelaide Festival Fringe in February and March 2008 under the title *Abelard and Heloise: Their Lost Love Letters and the Music they Inspired*. While I had the example of the French performance the one I produced was

different in many aspects. For example, I commissioned a composer to set two of the poems contained in the text of the letters to music, and the Adelaide performance included readings from the later letters.

An unexpected result of producing this event was the insights into the music of that period and new perceptions resulting from detailed discussions of each letter with the actors who were presenting Heloise and Abelard.

I chose music that was as close to the period as possible. Music by Hildegard of Bingen and Abelard was both of the time, and relevant. To lighten the program I chose courtly dances and troubadour songs, although these latter also tended to be sombre. Love was a serious business in those days. The choice was also limited by the availability of manuscripts, but the final program did represent music of the time of Heloise and Abelard. I commissioned two pieces for this performance. The composer, Carl Crossin, set one poem by Heloise (letter 36b) and the final poem by Abelard (letter 113) to music. His settings were in the spirit and style of medieval music, while he used some modern instruments and harmonies. In this he combined medieval and modern, in a way that complemented and highlighted the pieces that had been composed in the twelfth century. I was attempting to do this by editing and producing a presentation of the letters by actors. He had succeeded in musical terms.

Choosing and editing the letters to be read was difficult. There were so many lovely passages with depth of meaning and vivid word pictures. It was impossible to read them all, and I wanted to create some type of narrative in the choice and order of the letters. The actors approached them as they would any script. When they researched the story of Abelard and Heloise they went to established sources, which represented Heloise as a fifteen year old, and Abelard as a man lacking in feeling for Heloise after his castration. After lively debate, as this view of Heloise and Abelard no longer matched mine, we decided just to work from the text of the letters. It was the oral presentation of the letters that the audience would experience. As such they would receive them quite differently to a person who read the letters in a book, which also contained critical analysis of the text. In the same way readers of my novel would encounter Heloise in a different way to a biography or academic discussion.

Other questions arose. For instance was Abelard sincere in his religious faith? I had never doubted this. The actors were not convinced that he was. The discussion that followed touched on medieval religion, Abelard's ambitions and the testimony

of Peter the Venerable who protected Abelard in his last months on earth. I questioned some of Heloise's references to God. Was she sometimes cynical or sarcastic? For example, after she has accused Abelard of deceiving her by claiming that he has compelled her to sin (Letter 59) Heloise writes:

May Almighty God, who wants no one to perish and who loves sinners with more than a paternal love, illuminate your heart with the splendour of His grace and bring you back to the road to salvation so that you may understand His will is favourable and perfect. (Letter 60)

I interpreted this as Heloise, still angry, insisting that she knew more of God's will and purpose than did Abelard. She understood more fully the nature of their love. The actor who read the letters saw it as a softening in attitude, and delivered the lines accordingly. As either interpretation could be accepted, I did not insist on mine.

In an effort to provide some sort of a narrative thread for the audience we twisted nuances and references in the letters as far as we could, and certainly further than a serious scholar would. For instance, when, in Letter 24, Abelard writes: 'Love is therefore a particular force of the soul, existing not for itself nor content by itself, but always pouring itself into another with a certain hunger and desire, wanting to become one with the other, so that from two diverse wills one is produced without difference,' is he expressing a desire for physical expression of their love? Can many of the sentiments expressed in his letters be seen as seductive? Many erotic expressions found in letters of that time were not indications of a physical relationship, but deep friendship. When Heloise finally writes: 'To a lover, from a lover', does this indicate a change in their relationship? Even if it did not, is this how the audience would understand it? Certainly this was how the actors came to interpret it.

Within the letters, which, unfortunately, are excerpts rather than a complete set, I found echoes of ideas and expressions from one to the other, like mirror images. I had missed these throughout my earlier readings, but came to recognize them through studying the letters in a different way. In one letter Abelard writes: 'What more? Just as I often wish with many sighs, may almighty God keep you safe for me for a long time.' (Letter 17) Heloise responds in her next letter: 'What else? God is my witness that I love you with a true and sincere love.' (Letter 18) Finally, the last in the letter, written as a poem by Abelard (Letter 113) gives interesting clues as to how he really viewed their love affair.

But fortune and shame, and that which I fear, sweetest,  
the murmuring of people, obstruct my desires.

It would seem that Abelard was always conscious of his reputation and chances for advancement, even in the first throes of passion, and why wouldn't he be? Because he was the most charismatic teacher in Paris he was not immune to the disapproval of others, and he was always quick to perceive jealousy in others. In the same poem he tells Heloise:

You are like no one else, you in whom nature has placed.  
Whatever excellence the world can have: Beauty, noble birth,  
character – through which honour is begotten.  
All make you outstanding in the city.'

His reference to Heloise's noble birth gives further credence to the theory that she was born into a very noble family as Robl has claimed. Earlier in this final poem Abelard, confesses to being conquered by Heloise, something which has never happened to him before: 'If ever there was love before, I was only lukewarm.' Does this suggest that there had been other women earlier in his life and that he was not indifferent to women as Canon Fulbert, Heloise's uncle, believed? These insights and perceptions came late in my research, but not too late to allow revision of the text novel. I had also to consider my conversation with historian Sylvain Piron.

*Dr Sylvain Piron, who translated the lost love letters from Latin into French told me that he thinks Heloise wanted a non-sexual relationship with Abelard. This idea needs teasing out and exploring in the novel.  
(Personal travel diary, 7 September 2007)*

### **A Wise Trinity in the Twenty-first Century**

In keeping with the idea that people who lived in the twelfth century could be equated with people who live today I decided to write a section of the novel set in the twenty-first century. Although I decided not to use it in the final version it was a valuable exercise, as it gave me a new insight into the characters which I had created. In this setting I portrayed Heloise as the Managing Director of an industrial company with headquarters in Paris, Hildegard as a New Age guru who ran natural health and therapy clinics as well as writing self-help books and Eleanor as the Foreign Minister in the British Government.

In these positions they were clearly women of some power and influence. They espoused feminist ideas. None of them belonged to an established religion, nor were

overtly influenced by Christian teachings. They were all able to travel about freely. In changing the times in which they lived I found that their personalities also changed. To me they seemed more confident and sure of themselves, but less reflective, almost superficial. It is not just that the language is modern and more casual. The incipient rivalry for dominance between Hildegard and Eleanor is underlined by a tinge of malice, which was much less overt in a twelfth-century abbey.

While Heloise still tries to soften the tension between Hildegard and Eleanor they are not restrained by the concept of Christian charity or courtesy. Eleanor makes no secret of the fact that she enjoys alcohol. Hildegard, in pretending concern for her health, is anxious to point this out to her. The idea of living in penance and silence is not even considered. This is more than a difference in their way of life. It affects their entire view of themselves and the world around them. By eliminating the 'heaven and hell fairy story' and, therefore, presumably the whole concept of a God as represented in Christianity, the motives of the women and their rationale for their life choices are entirely secular. While I have picked up on their interests and activities, there is a very different feel to Hildegard's prophecies and Eleanor's machinations. They discuss sex as they did in the twelfth century, but with different perceptions of what is acceptable. Eleanor still questions Hildegard in a way which Heloise feels is intrusive, but Hildegard does not become angry at Eleanor's seeming lack of reverence. This is because the modern Hildegard does not claim that her writing and utterances are direct revelation.

To set the entire novel in the twenty-first century would change the personalities of the three women significantly even if the events of their lives were still used as the basis for their stories. It was valuable to write some of the story in a modern setting to reinforce how the women's characters had been formed by the time in which they lived. What struck me was that the element which made the most difference to their lives and personalities was not acceptance of the Christian faith, as I had expected, but their ability to be educated, travel about and have economic and social equality with men.



### **Developing the characters in drama in a dramatic form**

Dialogue is an effective way to establish character within a text. The way people speak is distinctive. Attitudes and emotions are clearly revealed, especially if the tone of voice is also indicated. My novel uses a great deal of dialogue, so, in an attempt to sharpen the characters, I also wrote a radio play using the plot and themes of the novel. The lessons I learned from this exercise were twofold. If I wanted the novel to differ from the play I needed to create a stronger sense of place in the novel. In a radio play this is created by sound effects or commentary. In a novel this is created by word pictures, whether describing a castle or a hovel. Another lesson was that, unless I was very careful, the way the story ended could become a farce. This was not in the spirit of what I wanted to write, and did little justice to the women. So, while I retained the badly cooked fish and Eleanor appearing dressed like a picture of the Madonna, I balanced them with the more serious conversations with Bernard, and with Heloise's letter defending the position of women. Writing the play also enabled me to structure the time sequence more effectively, and following that I worked out how the meetings were scheduled. Without that structure there was the danger of losing track of the sequence.

In all these different activities I found new ways to consider both the characters in my novel and the times in which they lived.

## CONCLUSION

An historical novel differs from an historical account. While both provide a narrative a novel places greater emphasis on plot, theme and character development, in varying degrees of relative importance, and is not limited to historical accuracy. At the beginning of this project I began an exploration of the lives of three women, Heloise, Hildegard of Bingen and Eleanor of Aquitaine. Learning about them involved discovering much more than the events of their lives. They needed to be placed within their historical context, to ascertain their underlying attitudes to religion, art, music, and relationships between people. Their experience of maternity, either biological or spiritual was emblematic of the position of women in the Middle Ages. I intended the novel to be imprinted with the unmistakable seal of each woman and to do this I needed to have learned all that I possibly could about them and their milieu. In describing an imaginary meeting between the three women I set out to reveal their characters by both portraying them individually, but also highlighting the way they perceived each other and reacted to each other. In musical terms, I created a sonata, not three separate pieces, with Bernard's account providing the coda.

There were other characters who were important to them, and thus needed to be included. In the case of Heloise it was Abelard, and their son Peter Astrolabe. I was to discover, through research, that Heloise's mother Hersinde was an important and controversial woman as well. Hildegard of Bingen relied heavily on the support of the monk Volmer, who acted as her spiritual guide, secretary and close friend. There is no suggestion that their relationship was ever a romantic one. Hildegard was very close to the young nun, Richardis, who also helped in her work. One of the most difficult times in Hildegard's life was when Richardis left her monastery to become an abbess elsewhere. Eleanor had strong family ties to her grandfather, father and sister. At the time the novel is set she would have met Henry of Anjou, who became her second husband. Bernard of Clairvaux was of importance to all three women, and his influence affected all their lives in different ways. His initial approval gave Hildegard the right to publish her writing. Bernard acted as a close adviser to the throne of France at the time Eleanor was queen, as well as advising the Pope. The actions he took against Abelard led to the teacher and philosopher being condemned

as a heretic. In later years Bernard had some contact with Heloise at the Paraclete. It would have been impossible to tell the story of any of the women and have ignored Bernard.

I chose to set the time of the story in 1149. In that year Abelard had been dead for seven years and Heloise was no longer looking to him for guidance. Instead she was becoming increasingly recognized for her writing and achievements as an abbess. Hildegard had just had her writing approved by the Church, and was hoping to move her nuns into their own monastery. Eleanor had recently returned from the Crusade, and was hoping to have her marriage to Louis VII annulled, probably with Henry of Anjou already in mind for her next husband.<sup>206</sup> That year was a pivotal time in all their lives. They were three individual women but I sought to find any elements they shared; not just their gender or their opposition to being closely cloistered, but in their abilities and circumstances. I considered the Trinity as a model to represent this identity, equality and unity, without in any way attributing them with divinity.

Before beginning to write the novel, I wished to appreciate the exact nature of a fictional character based on an historical person. To what extent can we claim that the character is fictional at all? If a person has once lived he or she has an identity. How can a writer come to 'know' that identity? How far can a writer move away from that identity without distorting or negating the portrait? Other writers give some frame of reference to these considerations and I read many historical novels set in the Middle Ages as well as later and earlier periods. I wanted to see how historical characters were described; if their characterization was convincing, and, if so, what made it convincing.

Whether the character is convincing or not depends to some extent on the readers' reaction as much as the writer's ability. An historical character portrayed in a text may be convincing, but not authentic. To judge the accuracy of a portrayal is difficult unless the reader has done sufficient research. Without prior knowledge a reader will accept the author's depiction. This does give a writer of fiction a freedom to tweak, to manufacture or distort history. Should a writer stray too far from the work of the historians there will always be some readers who recognize this, and feel cheated or even outraged. Apart from the sensibilities of the cognoscenti it may not seem

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<sup>206</sup>I am indebted to Constant Mews for suggesting the year and the reasons why 1149 was important to all three women.

important if liberties are taken with the truth to create an interesting narrative or to round out a character. There is, on the other hand, a pact with the reader who expects that an historical novel, while containing certain embellishments and imaginative leaps, will tell a story which is as close to the facts as possible. When new research uncovers previously unknown facts the writer must then decide how to make the new interpretations plausible.

The work of philosophers, especially Amie Thomasson, provided analysis of the identity of a fictional character. Thomasson used fictional characters as an example of an abstract concept, and set out criteria that defined the fictional character as an artefact. Giving fictional characters an identity is a start, because it provides a basis for judgement, discussion and comparison. Ascertaining the nature of that identity becomes more involved. Once you add the fact that the fictional character is based on a real person who once lived it becomes even more complex. The person who lived is not an abstract concept, but a material reality. The degree to which one may recognize an historical character as a fictional character depends on a number of considerations. How long ago did the person live? How closely is the person portrayed? How far does the plot deviate from established historical events?

There is a difference between a biography and an historical novel, even when they feature the same person. While considering these factors I came to the realisation that the process of creating a character, either totally fictional or based on a real person is the same. Where the background of the fictional character is completely fabricated, that of the historical person is provided. The difference comes in deciding how much embellishment to allow in the portrayal of an historical person. Most dialogue will be made up, although I did draw on the writings of Heloise and Hildegard for some of their dialogue, and this is a device open to writers of historical fiction. Events are fleshed out, emotions expressed and motives given for the characters' actions. As such the historical character is closer to a fictional character than a biographical portrait, although the work of historians and biographers plays an important part in providing the information used in developing the character.

For this reason historical research formed the basis of my early preparation and the results of this research have been outlined. Through that research I came to a much deeper understanding of France during the Middle Ages, especially the power and wealth of the Church and monastic orders. In today's world where religion and politics are separated it is difficult to really appreciate the full extent of the medieval

Church's influence in most people's everyday life. Travelling to Europe, particularly seeing the cathedrals and abbeys of that time, added a further dimension to my sense of the twelfth century, and an understanding of the place which religion would have held in the lives of the people then.

There is tension between the history narrative and the demands of the novel. If the novel is to gain precedence there comes a time when the reference books have to be put back on the shelf, and the writer's imagination and story telling are given full control. In her acknowledgements to those who had helped her, Mary O'Connell, after thanking historians, her explains it like this:

Thanks indeed to all the historians... I tried very hard to both consider and ignore them as I worked with their knowledge and ways of telling a story. I have tried to honour their truths and I love them all, characters and historians, real and imagined. But of course I have imagined the 'real' as well.<sup>207</sup>

So while due credit must be given to the work of historians the story should not be swamped in so much detail that it becomes didactic. Once I had the courage to abandon my reference books the writing flowed, as though through a different set of fingers, as I guided the narrative without constant fear that I had omitted some vital or interesting detail, or had not given the complete picture. The further I distanced myself, through subsequent drafts, the nearer I felt to writing a novel rather than an historical account. There is no such thing as a complete picture. There is only the world created by a writer based on the achievements and personalities of historical people who seem worthy of such an endeavour, and whose lives are developed, for readers of the twenty-first century, through the imagination and abilities of the writer.

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<sup>207</sup>Mary O'Connell, *The King's Daughter: Hildegard of Bingen a medieval romance* (Sydney:Handmaid Press, 2003), p. 413.

