The “I” in Faith: Peter Abelard and Medieval Self-Identification

William Johnson

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Florida

The intent of the project is to analyze the various identities that Peter Abelard presents in his memoir. 12th century memoirs almost exclusively followed the conventions established by St. Augustine’s Confessions in the 5th century. Although the overall narrative is modeled as a tale of conversion akin to that of Augustine, Abelard transitions through various class- and gender-based identities as the story progresses. Throughout the course of the narrative, Abelard presents himself as a reluctant heir, a wandering philosopher, a master scholar, a humiliated celebrity, and a repentant monk. Analyzing these identities in the context of the medieval world helps reveal the extent to which individuality developed during the period. In turn, this greater understanding of medieval individuality will qualify the extent to which the theorized “12th Century Renaissance” affected the development of Western European society.

INTRODUCTION

P
eter Abelard (1079-1142) was a 12th century French philosopher, known today for his theological treatises and scandalous personal life. Around 1132 Abelard wrote a memoir, formatted as an extended letter to a grieving friend. It was one of the first autobiographical documents produced in Europe in over 700 years. St. Augustine’s Confessions, a spiritual autobiography written in the 5th century, was well known by the scholars of the post-Roman world. The genre was known, but not imitated until the 12th century. Peter Abelard was one of the first medieval scholars to express the narrative of his own life.

At a time in which societal, cultural, and theological developments occurred rapidly enough to lead modern historians to label the period a “12th Century Renaissance,” Abelard’s narrative provides a rare opportunity to uncover the extent to which individual identity existed in the middle ages. The medieval world was one of rigid social division. Western European society was divided into three distinct orders: those who fought (the nobility, centered around the knights), those who prayed (the clergy), and those who worked (the peasants that tilled the lands of the nobility). Abelard was an oddity to this formula. As a philosopher, he rejected the material demands and rewards of knighthood while simultaneously accepting its spirit and values. As a monk, he refused to abandon the worldly field of philosophy. His memoir stands almost alone in the medieval world, yet his story has roots in traditional narratives and tropes.

I have organized this paper in four parts: first, I offer a brief narrative of Abelard’s life, then I discuss his position as a member of the nobility, as a castrated masculine figure, and as a controversial theologian. While previous historians have analyzed Abelard’s life in detail, many have conflicting perspectives on the identity he attempted to convey. I believe that the self-narrative Abelard constructed in his memoir was an attempt to define his turbulent and unique life in the context of his traditionally rigid medieval society.

THE LIFE OF PETER ABELARD

Abelard was the first-born son of a minor Frankish nobleman. Abelard rejected his father’s inheritance at a young age by refusing to become a knight and instead pursuing a career as a philosopher. He traveled across France, quickly rising up to be one of the most respected scholars in the Parisian area. At times, he attracted thousands of students to his lectures. Abelard’s downfall came in his mid-30s when he entered a scandalous sexual relationship with the teenaged noblewoman Heloise. This scandal was eventually exposed, but only after Heloise became pregnant with Abelard’s child. Abelard married Heloise against her uncle’s wishes. The conflict over Heloise prompted her uncle to take violent action against Abelard: men hired by the uncle snuck onto Abelard’s estate in the dead of night and surgically castrated him.

Humiliated, Abelard fled to monastic life. He continued teaching both secular and theological topics, culminating with the publication of his book Theologia Summi Boni (Theology of the Supreme Good). Abelard’s misfortunes continued, as his book was condemned as heretical at the Council of Soissons by his own students. With the help of friends among the French nobility, Abelard spent the next decade rebuilding his reputation, eventually acquiring his own abbot and regaining contact with Heloise, who had become a nun. Abelard, now a 53-year-old castrated abbot, wrote his memoir (Historia Calamitatum) at this time. The autobiography, although originally a letter of consultation to a friend, was made public to serve as a means of legitimizing Abelard’s controversial actions (namely his conflicts with other respected medieval scholars) in the eyes of the public. In the final chapter of his memoir, Abelard concluded that although life wasn’t always fair, adversity could purify the soul and bring one closer to God.
ABELARD THE KNIGHT

Abelard’s narrative provides a unique perspective on masculine expectations among Western European nobles in the High Middle Ages. As the first-born son of a Frankish knight, Abelard should have become a knight training for war and protecting his father’s household until the time that he inherited it. Instead, Abelard left home and became a wandering philosopher. Abelard never mentions any resistance to his abdication, and never at any point is he branded a coward for his actions. The chronology of his life, however, reveals that Abelard came of age at the same time Pope Urban II convened the nobility of France at Clermont to call for the First Crusade to retake Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Urban II’s tour, passing through much of southern France, stopped at the town of Angers (about 90 kilometers from Abelard’s home in Le Pallet). Although Abelard does not recount these events in his memoir, it would have been unlikely for him not to observe these events as they transpired.

Although Abelard makes no mention of the birth of the Crusades in his memoir, he does not fully detach himself from the martial world. Instead he describes his chosen field of learning by using metaphors of the battlefield. He is supplied by “the armory of logical reasoning” and charges headlong into “the battle of minds in disputation.” The next several chapters recount how he went about “laying siege” to various teachers and holding firm when they “attacked [his] doctrines.” For a medieval nobleman, it was paramount to their existence that they had the means to fight for the defense of their home and kingdom in war. That ability was not simply a product of their birth; they had to earn their knighthood through lengthy training. Abelard conveys in his account that he is not any less of a warrior following the banner of Christ to new battlefields. Christ’s model led him to challenge what he perceived as the sinful monastic communities of France. Parallel between the story of Abelard and Christ go beyond basic Biblical allegory: they were written at a time when Christ was evolving into a military figure for knights on crusade. Abelard as a Christ figure adds several new layers to the understanding of his identity. Like Christ, Abelard faced heavy criticism and oppression for his teachings. Despite his enemies, he could still attract huge crowds to hear his lessons. Christ’s final punishment led to his resurrection and ascension into heaven; comparisons could be drawn from Abelard’s adoption of monasticism and the role of “holy eunuch” in the face of his castration. Parallels between the story of Abelard and Christ go beyond basic Biblical allegory: they were written at a time when Christ was evolving into a military figure for knights on crusade. Tyreman describes the cross as a “military banner… part relic, part totem, part uniform.” Abelard’s literary use of imitatio christi (imitation of Christ) ties back to his overall rhetoric of this newfound genre.

Clanchy concludes that Abelard sought to portray himself as “Christ-like in his sufferings” but without the “mystical experience or supernatural enlightenment.” Abelard as a Christ figure adds several new layers to the understanding of his identity. Like Christ, Abelard faced heavy criticism and oppression for his teachings. Despite his enemies, he could still attract huge crowds to hear his lessons. Christ’s final punishment led to his resurrection and ascension into heaven; comparisons could be drawn from Abelard’s adoption of monasticism and the role of “holy eunuch” in the face of his castration. Parallels between the story of Abelard and Christ go beyond basic Biblical allegory: they were written at a time when Christ was evolving into a military figure for knights on crusade. Abelard as a Christ figure adds several new layers to the understanding of his identity. Like Christ, Abelard faced heavy criticism and oppression for his teachings. Despite his enemies, he could still attract huge crowds to hear his lessons. Christ’s final punishment led to his resurrection and ascension into heaven; comparisons could be drawn from Abelard’s adoption of monasticism and the role of “holy eunuch” in the face of his castration. Parallels between the story of Abelard and Christ go beyond basic Biblical allegory: they were written at a time when Christ was evolving into a military figure for knights on crusade. Abelard’s use of militant language is not a reflective glance back on an adventurous youth in the secular world. Philosopher or monk, Abelard saw himself as a warrior. Although he lived in a world where those who prayed (monks, priests) were distinctly separate from those who fought (knights), Abelard’s memoir mimics the Crusading movement by blurring societal divides.
ABELARD THE MAN

When Abelard was castrated, he fled the secular world to take the vows of a monk. In his memoir, he theorized that he would not have been welcome in the secular world any longer, as “according to the dread letter of the law, God holds eunuchs in such abomination…” that to enter a church again would be impossible. He cited passages from Leviticus and Deuteronomy that discriminate against eunuchs as unclean to explain his exodus from society. Yet, it was his own choice, not the discrimination of others, that led Abelard to a monastic life. Sean Eisen Murphy has cross-analyzed Abelard’s statements and found that, in fact, contemporary canon law did not discriminate against eunuchs who had been castrated by others. Abelard’s choice to go into a monastery was just that: his own choice. Abelard’s castration was irrefutably a life-changing embarrassment, one he was forced to come to terms with in the years that followed. He developed into a person whose station and circumstances put him above gender.

There is evidence that Abelard’s castration was used as ammunition by rival scholars as they refuted his work. Roscelin, a former teacher, savagely mocked Abelard’s Latin name “Petrus.” In Latin grammar, the second declension ending “-us” implies a masculine singular subject. Roscelin argued that because Abelard was no longer fully male, the name Petrus was no longer accurate, and therefore he must refer to himself as “imperfectus Petrus” (incomplete Peter). Although public knowledge of Abelard’s injury was used to slander his work, the taunting did not cripple Abelard. In fact, its presence in monastic correspondence serves as evidence that Abelard remained active in the fields of theology and philosophy almost immediately following the incident. Monastic life was not meant to be a haven from his enemies but rather a tactical retreat; he was able to rebuild his respectability, gain new students, publish new works (the Theologia Summi Boni), and face new enemies.

Historian Martin Irvine considers Abelard’s autobiography to be a narrative of his battle to maintain his masculine identity. Irvine describes Abelard’s castration and, more significantly, his trial at the Council of Soissons as incidents where he was “emasculated, victimized, and feminized by enemies who worked to remove his masculine identity.” Therefore the presence of militarized metaphors in his early writing contrasts with his defeats. Abelard’s later career was a long-term campaign to “reinvent himself and demonstrate his inner masculinity.” While Abelard used his castration as proof of his chastity and obedience to God, Irvine argues that his overall objective was to reenter the masculine world rather than stand apart from it. The fields of scholasticism and theology were overwhelmingly worlds of men, and Abelard could not hope to regain what he had lost if he didn’t reassert himself as a full man.

It is important to note that, despite the taunting from Roscelin, Abelard was facing criticism for his proximity to nuns of the Paraclete. Abelard described his relationship with the nuns as “a haven of peace and safety from the raging storms,” the storms being the persecution from his fellow monks. As a direct result of these accusations, Abelard was motivated to closely consider the spiritual significance of his castration in his writing. In both his Historia Calamitatum and his letters to Heloise, Abelard draws a contrast between his own story and that of Origen, a 3rd century monk who was condemned by the Church for self-castrating to avoid sin. Abelard considered his own condition to be one of sexual liberation; “God’s compassion” allowed Abelard to “escape” criminal intent for self-mutilation.

The narrative of sexuality that Abelard presents in his autobiographical writing is one of self-control. By demonstrating that his castration allowed him to gain mastery over his sexual desires, Abelard legitimized himself as a monk. A key part of proving his divine chastity involved redefining his complex relationship with Heloise. Near the end of the Historia Calamitatum Abelard describes Heloise as “now my sister in Christ rather than my wife.” This distinction was not well received by the abbes, who still addressed him as “my beloved” and continued to reminisce about their happy days together before his castration. Specifically, she referenced the beautiful poetry that Abelard wrote for her. Clanchy notes that Abelard, although a prolific poet before his castration, condemned the art after his castration to show his successful adjustment to monastic life. The breaking of both sexual and romantic connections to Heloise reaffirmed Abelard’s commitment to chastity and monastic life.

While Abelard cut all sexual and romantic ties with Heloise, his continued correspondence with her indicated to his contemporaries that he was not at risk of returning to his sexually deviant lifestyle. Clanchy interprets Heloise’s language as an underlying message to Abelard demanding that he distinguish his love for her from his love for Christ. Clanchy also theorizes that Abelard’s claim of never loving and only lusting after Heloise could reflect the mental side effects of his castration. He suspects that the trauma may have “disgusted him with sexuality and distorted his memories.” Regardless of his true feelings towards sex, Abelard’s ability to represent himself as celibate hinged on refuting Heloise’s advancements. The letters between Abelard and Heloise were not private documents. The letters were a public discourse, and their debate allowed Abelard to confirm his dominion over sexual desire.

Abelard’s sexual identity is a complex topic, one about which scholars have yet to come to a consensus. Historians continue to stand divided as to whether Abelard’s post-castration writing shows him as a masculine figure (with rhetorical ability substituting his physical deformity) or a
sexless figure (gifted by god to be the perfect monastic scholar). These conflicting identities highlight the fact that medieval notions of gender are fluid. Abelard was not trapped in a rigid masculine or neutered order; instead he defined himself with his narrative. With the autobiographical genre, Abelard exerted control over his public identity. Although Abelard conformed to the typical monastic standards of chastity, he defined his sexual abstinence in relation to his career and his conversion. The ability of 12th century writers to take ownership of their identities, even identities conforming to what was considered “normal,” was vital in allowing the development of individualism.

ABELARD THE CHRISTIAN

Abelard wrote his autobiography at a time when the act of recording life events was becoming increasingly common. The laity (nobles) wrote or dictated memoirs as a means of recording their triumphs and legitimizing their claims to property, such as the justification of William I’s conquest of England recorded in the Doomsday Book. Monks, in comparison, recorded life events based on the conventions of conversion established by St. Augustine of Hippo’s Confessions around 400 AD. Abelard’s contemporary Guibert of Nogent wrote a memoir of his sinful youth and his eventual conversion to God. In the first chapter of the first book, Guibert declares “I confess to Thy Majesty, O God, my endless wanderings from Thy paths, and my turning back so often to the bosom of Thy Mercy, directed by Thee in spite of all.” Abelard, in contrast, begins his memoir by lamenting his misfortunes and regaling the reader with his fateful decision to become a philosopher.

Abelard’s narrative, although mimicking a confession story, channels most of the blame for his misfortune not on his own sins, but on the wickedness of others. Regarding Abelard’s narrative of a scholastic knight at war, the “enemies” that beset him are not his own sins, but the nefarious intentions of his fellow philosophers and monks. Even as he wrote his memoir, Abelard was looking over his shoulder at his fellow monks. “Nay, the persecution carried on by my sons rages against me more perilously and continuously than that of my open enemies, for my sons I have always with me, and I am ever exposed to their treacheries.” Abelard presented himself as a victim in his memoir, playing the role of a hero under siege by wicked forces.

Despite his tendency to dramatize his writing with a colorful and militant language, Abelard did have real enemies. At the time of the writing, Abelard was one of the most controversial figures in Europe. St. Bernard of Clairvaux especially despised Abelard and his work. St. Bernard’s fame was twofold: firstly, he reformed the Cistercian Order of monks and spread its teachings across Western Europe. Secondly, with his famous letter “In Praise of the New Knighthood,” Bernard convinced the Papacy to endorse the formation of the Templars, Christianity’s first monastic fighting order. Bernard publicly denounced Abelard’s work as a blemish to the study of theology. He even went so far as to accuse Abelard of writing a new Gospel, mockingly labeling him “a fifth Evangelist.” Bernard’s animosity stemmed from Abelard’s emphasis on logical reasoning over established doctrine. Abelard’s famous book Sic et Non compiled the contradictory quotes of various saints throughout history. The intent of the book was to allow students to analyze these contradictions and deduce the true faith for themselves. To this end, Abelard’s autobiography served the dual purpose of recounting his conversion while at the same time legitimizing his academic career.

CONCLUSIONS

The full effect of Abelard’s castration in relation to his narrative was more than a climax in a simple story of conversion; it was a gateway into new opportunities for self-expression. Abelard transcended the rigid gender and class roles of the medieval world, recreating himself as an impoverished but brave knight always ready to do battle against the enemies of the Lord. His identity crisis initiated by the castration caused Abelard to develop a level of self-awareness unique to the medieval world. Through this awareness, he was able to create a self-narrative of desperate combat against unyielding foes and abysmal misfortune. Abelard effectively rewrote his role in society; he was the hero that triumphed through the tough times to do God’s work and teach mankind about the world they inhabited. Abelard’s memoir serves as evidence that a medieval conversion story did not have to conclude with the conventional ending of a sinful confessor fading into a quiet and humble monastic life; rather the circumstances of conversion could serve as a focal point for redefining the individual. For Peter Abelard, this meant recreating himself to allow for new adventures and new battles in the name of the Lord.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Advisor: Professor Nina Caputo of the UF History Department.

ENDNOTES

1 For more information on the current theories surrounding the 12th Century Renaissance, see R.N. Swanson, The Twelfth-Century Renaissance (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999).


3 Abelard, Letters, ix.
5 Abelard, Letters, 3.
6 Ibid., 2.
8 Tyreman, God’s War, 43-44.
9 Ibid., 67.
11 Abelard, Letters, 47. Although Abelard was technically the abbot of the Oratory of the Paraclete, he rarely visited. Most of that part of his life was spent either at St. Gildas (where he was also the abbot) or Paris (where he occasionally taught).
12 Clanchy, Abelard, 145.
13 Tyreman, God’s War, 70.
14 Abelard, Letters, 18.
15 Ibid.
19 Irvine, “Abelard and (Re)Writing,” 95.
20 Ibid., 99.
21 Abelard, Letters, 36.
22 Ibid., 40.
23 Ibid., 83.
24 Ibid., 35.
25 Ibid., 47, 52.
26 Clanchy, Abelard, 134.
27 Ibid., 149.
28 Ibid., 151.
29 Ibid., 123.
31 Clanchy, Abelard, 124.
32 Abelard, 21.
33 Ibid., 40.
34 Clanchy, Abelard, 6.