Rewriting for *Vraisemblance*: Grenaille's Versions of Héloïse

by
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In his famous essay, "Vraisemblance et Motivation," Genette identifies *Le Cid* and *La Princesse de Clèves* as the two texts inciting the major theoretical battles fought over *vraisemblance* during the 17th century. Genette recalls that it is Chimène's behavior toward Rodrigue and the Princesse de Clèves's *aveu* to her husband that launched the heated debates over *vraisemblance*, decoded in Genette's analysis as the double notion of *bienséance* and *probabilité*: a *devant-être* constructed on the level of representation by and as 17th-century ideology. (Genette 72-75) This *devant-être* contrasts with *le vrai* as found in real life or history. What Genette leaves implicit in his elucidation of *vraisemblance* as ideology, however, is that it is specifically the actions of *women* that provoked the passionate conflicts over what is "appropriate" and "probable" in representation. We might wonder, then, why and how the figure of woman constituted such an insistent locus for men's theorizing on the powers of representation and its difference from historical reality or "truth." Where in the ideological spectrum from the *vrai* to the *vraisemblable* do we situate Woman and women in 17th-century France?

I would like to pursue this last question in a 1642-letter collection featuring the first translation of what would become one of the canonical examples of female passion, Héloïse's letters to Abélard. *Nouveau Recueil de Lettres des Dames Tant Anciennes que Modernes*,[1] edited, translated, and in part written, by François de Grenaille, like most 17th-century letter collections and manuals, had a social function. Throughout the century, collections and manuals were published for the aristocrat who found in them model letters in various genres to be adopted for or adapted to individual

situations. While many genres are offered for the private aristocratic male letter writer, the aristocratic woman finds herself with predominantly one kind of letter for emulation: the love letter. In his preface to the love letters of Isabelle Andréini, an Italian actress, Grenaille makes the imitative goal of his collection explicit: "J'en offre un recueil aux Dames qui leur doit être d'autant plus agréable que je prends de leur cabinet même de quoi leur donner une pièce de Cabinet" (II, 20). We see that it is the "authentic" or "true" nature of the love-letter model, written by a real woman, that is calculated to draw other real women into amorous epistolary repetition. Thus the love letter, published under the auspices of a male editor, is offered as a mirror of feminine emotional expression.

Whereas Grenaille classifies Andréini's letters as amorous, he places the love letters of another historically real woman, Héloïse, under the rubric "Lettres chrétiennes." As already noted, these were the first French translations of the 12th-century correspondence between Abélard and Héloïse. Grenaille, however, did more than translate Héloïse's letters. Where originally it seems she wrote two personal letters to Abélard, in Grenaille's version she writes four, one of which he admits having entirely fabricated. He remarks in his "Argument" to the fourth letter, "J'ai supposé cette lettre pour rendre Eloise aussi sérieuse qu'elle paraît libre dans les autres" (I, 364). In this explanation for his fictive addition, Grenaille reiterates a concern expressed in the prefaces to his preceding "translations" of Héloïse: a concern that his female redership recognize the moral and penitent character of this female epistolary model. In his prefaces, he consistently attributes the representation of Héloïse's virtue and restraint to his revisions. Thus preceding the first letter, we read, "Les Dames ne s'offenseront pas que je leur fasse lire les Lettres de cette Magdalene Française vu que je ne la leur représente pas comme débauchée, mais seulement comme pénitente"(274); and in the preface to the third, "On observera encore que je n'ai pas offensé Eloise en la faisant parler plus honnêtement en français

qu'elle ne parlait en Latin" (334). Grenaille implies, then, that he is motivated in his translation and rewriting by a desire to render the real Héloïse "vraisemblable" in the sense of "bienséante." In his view, her original letters of indomitable passion for Abélard leave something to be desired from the standpoint of (17th-century) ideals of feminine "honnêteté," virtue, and restraint.

When we look beyond Grenaille's prefaces, however, we find that far from being lost in his translation and fabrication, Héloïse's passion remains in these letters and is, in fact, *re*-emphasized. What does it mean for Grenaille to assert one ideology of femininity in his prefaces—as "honnête" ideal of moral restraint—only to contradict it with another in the letters, where femininity means emotional and sexual excess? Is one of these constructions of femininity to be understood as "vraisemblable" while the other is "vraie"? With which version of Woman are Grenaille's female readers supposed to identify? Finally, what might it mean for Grenaille himself to choose Woman as the site for his own writing?

The first letter in Grenaille's Héloïse series may provide insight into some of these questions. Before asserting that his version of this letter will portray the "Magdalene Française" only as penitent, Grenaille briefly recalls the plot of the love story between the philosopher Abélard and his beautiful and brilliant student:

> ...comme la familiarité ôte peu à peu la pudeur, ces deux Amants, sous prétexte d'étudier, s'amusaient à cajoler les jours et les nuits. ...Enfin, des amourettes ils passèrent à l'impudence et Abélard perdit sa réputation celle qu'il devait former à la vertu aussi bien qu'aux lettres. On le voulut contraindre à l'épouser pour couvrir sa faute, mais elle y résista, pour n'être qu'à Dieu. Elle lui écrivit cette lettre sur ce sujet...(274)

If we compare this version to Abélard's account in *Historia Calimatatum*, the letter he wrote to a male friend recounting his beleagured life, we realize that the "constraint" put upon Abélard to marry resulted from Héloïse's pregnancy and the birth of a son (59). Knowing that this illegitimate birth would enrage Fulbert, Héloïse's uncle and guardian, who was already furious at Abélard's sexual treachery, the seducer-philosopher seeks to make amends: "Pour achever d'adoucir [Fulbert], je lui offris une satisfaction qui dépassait tous ses espoirs: j'épouserais celle que j'avais séduite..." (60). Grenaille's suppression of the detail of pregnancy would correspond to his concern for "bienséance" and his desire to represent Héloïse as a purified and penitent woman, a reborn "honnête femme."

Yet while Grenaille elides the "malséant" physical consequences of passion for woman in his account of the plot, he has Héloïse recover the force of feminine passion in "her" letter and transfer its painful physical repercussions onto the male. Although Grenaille has prepared us to read in Héloïse's letter her refusal of love and marriage on the grounds of a religious conversion, the very first lines of the letter establish Abélard as the reason she refuses to marry:

> Tout Paris s'étonnera, sans doute, aussi bien que vous, mon cher Abélard, de ce que vous aimant plus que tous les hommes du monde, je vous exhorte à ne me pas prendre à femme...Croyez pourtant que c'est plutôt par un *excès* d'affection que par quelque refroidissement d'amour que je procède de la sorte (275; emphasis added).

It is Héloïse's *excessive* emotional attachment to Abélard which prompts her to turn from marriage, and as she goes on to make clear, such attachment has both selfless and selfish motivations. First, it leads her to put Abélard's welfare ahead of her own desires. Were the great philosopher to bind himself to a mere woman, he would run the most pernicious of risks: "Les

dangers que vous pouvez encourir me font oublier mes contentements, et quand je considère le déshonneur que vous recevriez de cette alliance, je n'ai plus de passion pour l'honneur que j'en recevrais" (276). In having Héloïse invoke the *danger* and *dishonor* attendant upon the thinking man who would marry, Grenaille retrieves the very terms Abélard uses in his *Historia* to reconstruct Héloïse's refusal of marriage: "Elle alléguait deux raisons pour me détourner d'un tel mariage: le danger que je courrais, et le déshonneur que je ne manquerais pas de m'attirer" (60). Abélard then proceeds to re-present Héloïse's lengthy illustration of her argument against the danger and dishonor of him marrying her based on writings of the Church fathers, Saint Paul, Saint Jerome, and Saint Augustine, and of the philosophers, Cicero and Seneca. This argument asserts the incompatibility of man's mind and woman's body. The great man, whether saint or sage, must remain free from all "attachement féminin" (61). The patriarchal "truth" of Woman, in other words, is man's disempowerment; to be bound to her signals mental and spiritual castration.

Grenailles's Héloïse, we find, several pages after her selfless relinquishment of "[ses] contentements" to protect Abélard from danger and dishonor takes up this exact argument in its exact religious and philosophical terms. What Grenaille has done in his translation, we therefore discover, is attribute to Héloïse the portion of Abélard's *Historia* which Abélard himself attributes to her. But where Abélard implicitly recontains Héloïse's story within his own interpretation by shifting between direct and indirect discourse, Grenaille directly, also implicitly, grafts onto Héloïse the other man's re-membering of woman's story. As a way to consider what it might mean for this 17th-century translator to displace the 12th-century male writer-philosopher with a woman's "own" voice, let us turn to the portions of Grenaille's version of Héloïse that supplement Abélard's account of her in the *Historia.*

We recall that Grenaille's Héloïse began her letter by claiming her excessive emotional attachment to the

man she loves. If, on the one hand, via the *Historia*, she makes selfless use of her attachment to *detach* Abélard from the sordid bonds of desire and body, on the other, via Grenaille's additions to the *Historia*, she remains distinctly attached to her passion as the very means to bind him to her as well as to continue to be bound to him. Early in her argument against marriage, she claims: "J'aime bien mieux n'être qu'Amante pour vous conserver que d'être Epouse pour vous perdre" (278).[2] The signifiers "conserver" and "perdre" carry double meaning, one metaphoric, one literal. On the metaphoric level, Héloïse, advocating free love, sees marriage as the death of desire: "Après tout, mon cher Abélard, l'amour est plus agréable quand il est toujours volontaire. C'est lui qui nous donne des liens, mais il veut voler sans empêchement" (279). By refusing marriage, then, Héloïse preserves the possibility that the "liens" of passion will continually unite her lover to her, emotionally if not physically. At the very least, in setting Abélard free from the emotional constrictions of a legal tie, she preserves her own identity as his lover. Yet as she indicates at the end of her letter, this identity is in fact unalterable. Whether married or not, Héloïse will conserve her passion: "En tout cas, je serai toujours à vous en quelque état que je sois, et *ce que je souffrirai pour vous me semblera fort délicieux*, mais ce que vous souffrirez pour moi ne me saurait être qu'insupportable" (300; emphasis added). In her economy of desire, suffering—whether from the threatening constrictions of marriage or from the relinquishment of physical passion—transforms metonymically into sexual pleasure, into a remnant of what was "delicious." In having Héloïse assert the excessive, transcendent nature of her desire, Grenaille in effect inserts into this first letter the central thematics of a second, which is a more or less faithful translation of Héloïse's response to the *Historia*[3] Such as insertion functions thus as a narrative foreshadowing or link between letters.

We witness a similar foreshadowing when we turn to the literal significance of Héloïse's desire to preserve ("conserver") Abélard by remaining his lover rather

than to imperil ("perdre") him by turning into his wife. Should Abélard seek to bind himself legally to Héloïse, he will live out the consequences of this bond in his body. Grenaille, that is, has Héloïse foreshadow Abélard's castration at the hands of Fulbert's henchmen. Marriage, she declares, will not repair the damage of seduction and soiled goods in Fulbert's system of justice:

> ...il a été blessé en un point trop délicat pour ne pas songer à vous faire blesser à mort et puisque vous avez touché à son coeur, il voudra toucher au vôtre. ...A Dieu ne plaise, cher Abélard, qu'étant le glorieux sujet de votre amour, *je sois l'instrument fatal* de votre ruine. ...Considérez encore quel plaisir je pourrais avoir au monde si vous receviez quelque *sanglant déplaisir* (277; emphasis added).

While continuing to suppress the very, and very literal, reason for which Abélard contemplates marriage to Héloïse at all—her pregnancy and its product—Grenaille has Héloïse foreground the male body as the place where attachment to woman wreaks incontrovertible violence. It is, nonetheless, what *she* represents as body, as woman in man's economy of exchange and appropriation, that implicates the male body in the "bloody displeasure" of sexual disempowerment. By having Héloïse act as "Prophetess" (300) of her own key role in the mutilation which Grenaille will make explicit in his preface to the next letter, he has her take on the literal "truth" of the phantasmatic Castrating Woman.

This "truth" is demonstrated metaphorically in Grenaille's appropriation of Abélard's *Historia* through Héloïse's rehearsal of the religious and philosophical arguments against "attachement féminin." We might therefore wonder why Grenaille also chose to literalize woman's castrating power. If he assigns Héloïse "in her own words" the responsibility for the literal castration of Abélard, Grenaille himself has already operated a primary metaphoric dismembering of the philosopher-

writer. He has, after all, taken a large portion of Abélard's *Historia* to present it as the supposed writings of Héloïse. He suppresses Abélard as origin, authority, and Father to give space to a certain "feminine" textual production. It is then in the space of this "feminine" textuality that Grenaille finds his own space for writing. While one of his forays into fiction concerns woman's disempowering effect on physical man, the other concerns the self-empowering force of feminine desire. Through her excessive emotional attachment to Abélard, Héloïse will remain whole both in body and in desire whether in or outside wedlock. Abélard, meanwhile, once married and castrated, will incontrovertibly forfeit his sensual self and his relationship to desire as he would equally forfeit them, though by choice, once fully consecrated to Philosophy or Religion. If Grenaille in this fictional addition to the translated *Historia* portrays the excessive and enduring—uncastratable—nature of feminine desire, then what is his relationship *as a writer* to the surplus he has femininity represent?

He establishes himself as a writer precisely to the extent that he adds a surplus to the text he translates. Indeed, in his preface to the entire collection of letters by women whom he serves simply as "Secretary," he maintains, Grenaille states in what we might read as a contradictory acknowledgement of writerly ambition, "...si j'ai supposé quelques Lettres, ce n'est pas pour mieux faire que celles que je sers, mais pour tâcher de les imiter" (n.p.). Now, on the contrary, in Héloïse's case, according to his prefaces, he is concerned to rewrite this "Magdalene's" passion to bring it within appropriate, moral, "vraisemblable-bienséant" bounds. In fact, he violates his own intentions the better to "imitate," that is, embroider upon her "true" excessive emotional attachment to Abélard. What is at stake in this violation?

In an article which deals in part with another 17th-century male writer's imitation or impersonation in the love-letter genre of female emotional excess—Guilleragues's construction of the Portuguese

nun—Nancy K. Miller suggests that historically the vulnerability implicit in speaking/writing "the lover's discourse" "is too painful, too threatening to be assumed in a masculine identity."[4] (57) In other words, to write through the feminine allows a Grenaille or Guilleragues to explore his own "femininity," an exploration which, were it taken on "as a man," would be tantamount to admitting effeminacy. There is a personal, "androgynous" profit gained for the man who covers over in the space of narration his ideologically discreet masculine identity. At the same time, Miller argues, when female impersonation also occurs in conjunction with a textual translation from one language to another, the male "translator"-writer is covering over not only an anxiety of gender identity but of genre. Where the epistolary novel is concerned, that is, the fiction that a real woman wrote it "authenticates" it as text and "disculpates" the (male) author from whatever aspersions the critical establishment may cast against it as literature (49, n. 5).

For Grenaille, who is not presenting his letters *as* a novel, the anxiety that his status as "translator" covers over would seem to concern, simply, his identity as author, his right to write. If, on the one hand, writing through Héloïse allows him—safely—to explore his own emotional vulnerabilities, on the other, writing through her allows him to elaborate his own narrative potential. His fabricated insertions of Héloïse's undying desire and of Abélard's castration constitute at the very least an augmentation of narrative interest; the reader is invited to anticipate events which Grenaille's subsequent prefaces, translations, and insertions will corroborate. Because the very premise of Grenaille's fictional forays is his obfuscation of Abélard as the source of his translation, what the philosopher-writer represents as male authority would seem too threatening for a would-be writer to confront. Only by obliterating the "father" can the "son" find sufficient authorization for his writerly identity. From this standpoint, to have Héloïse assume responsibility for Abélard's literal castration—based on the "truth" of

femininity—may be the "translation" of Grenaille's own anxiety about supressing the author of the *Historia.*

Finally, to return to our point of departure, Grenaille's version of Héloïse seems to locate Woman on the side of 17th-century "vraisemblance-bienséance" all the better to align her with the "truth" of essential femininity. While Grenaille's premise of representing feminine "honnêteté" and moral restraint corresponds to the ideals elaborated in the gynecocentric salons throughout the early part of the century, this premise founders against his fascination with the figure of emotional excess. That this figure had currency throughout the century as the essence of femininity is strongly evident in the genre of the love letter. Besides the famous example of the Portuguese nun, letter collections like Grenaille's featured translations of Ovid's *Heroides* and anonymously "female"-authored contemporary versions of this same seduced and abandoned thematics.[5] La Bruyère at the end of the century capitalizes on the passionate examples of the Portuguese nun and of the Présidente Ferrand to claim that because of their unself-conscious emotional *nature*, women are particularly suited to write (only) love letters and, necessarily, *more* suited than men, whose intrinsic self-consciousness gets in the way of spontaneous outpourings (32).[6] Grenaille, we know, subverts this gender categorization by writing himself through Héloïse. If we can postulate, as I have, that by appropriating the figure of essential Woman for himself, Grenaille gains double access to his own emotional and writerly identity, we are still left to wonder what his female readers gained—or lost—in imitating his imitations of "true" femininity.[7]

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Notes

[1]Paris: Toussaint Quinet. Further references are included parenthetically in the text. In all quotations from Grenaille, I have modernized the orthography.

[2]As an afterthought to his lengthy presentation of Héloïse's religious and philosophical argument against marriage, Abélard recalls, "De façon plus personnelle, Héloïse ajoutait qu'...elle préférait, quant à elle, le titre de maîtresse qu'à celui d'épouse...elle me serait attachée par la seule tendresse, non par la force du lien nuptial" (66). In contrast to Abélard, Grenaille privileges this personal theme by introducing it *before* choosing semantically laden signifiers which he will embroider upon in further supplements in this first "translation."

[3]For detailed and compelling analyses of Héloïse's refusal to relinquish her desire in contrast to Abélard's call for religious conversion in the *Correspondance*, see Dronke, Huchet, and Kamuf.

[4]Miller's use of the term "lover's discourse" comes from Barthes's *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. Barthes's eloquent articulation of Western culture's (dominant) trope of feminintiy is worth quoting here since it problematizes feminintiy precisely *as a figure* and therefore makes it accessible to male imitation: "Historically, the discourse of absence is carried on by the Woman: Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, journeys; Woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises). It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so...It follows that in any man who utters the other's absence *something feminine* is declared: this man who waits and who suffers from his waiting is miraculously femininized. A man is not feminized because he is inverted but because he is in love. (13-14)"

[5]See, for example, Deimier, Crosilles, Des Rues, Vanmorière.

[6]In his 1684 *Les Caractères*, we read, "Je ne sais si l'on pourra jamais mettre dans les lettres plus d'esprit,

plus de tour, plus d'argrément et plus de style que l'on en voit dan celles de Balzac et de Voiture; elles sont vides de sentiments qui n'ont régné que depuis leur temps, et qui doivent aux femmes leur naissance. Ce sexe va plus loin que le nôtre dans ce genre d'écrire. Elles trouvent sous leur plume des tours et des expressions qui souvent en nous ne sont l'effet que d'un long travail et d'une pénible recherche". In a key he provided to this passage, La Bruyère cites the Portuguese nun, Mme de Ferrand, and Mme Delemet as the basis for his theorizing.

[7]For an analysis of the woman reader/writer's self-positioning around male theories and models of feminine love letters, see my unpublished dissertation, "The Love Letter and the Woman Writer in Seventeenth-Century France: Questions of Genre and Identity," Columbia University, 1988.

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