Lost Faith: The Culmination of Common Thinking

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Fig. 1 Henrietta Rae, *Ellen Terry and Henry Irving in Abelard and Heloise, Lost Faith*, 1913. Oil on Canvas. 71 x 52". (Property from the Collection of Seymour Stein.)

INTRODUCTION

“For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.”

In 1929, Virginia Woolf published the essay *A Room of One’s Own*. Her words articulate timeless ideals that apply across generations of women in the arts. The late Victorian Era (1880-1901) was a male-dominated period of art history, particularly in the accessibility of equal educational experiences for women. Like the many eras before it, the cultural standard for a woman concerning art existed in a submissive role. Despite learning alongside their male counterparts, they were rarely accepted as artists themselves. In 1899, Henrietta Rae, the focus of this article, published an essay titled “How to Succeed as an Artist” in *Woman’s Life*. Her first point was, “never become an artist at all.”

Rae was one of the first women to exhibit nude subjects at the Royal Academy in London. Though a majority of her early work highlights the female nude through a feminine gaze, one of her most thought-provoking pieces is a double portrait completed late in her career. The painting, *Ellen Terry and Henry Irving in Abelard and Heloise, Lost Faith* (1913), depicts the medieval figures Heloise and Abelard, who are, on the surface, known for their sorrowful love story. To understand the complexities of *Lost Faith* we will first visually analyze the work through the elements of composition, expression, pose, gesture, and color. Then, we will discuss Rae’s career and the critical feedback she received. Next, we will discuss the sitters, and subjects of the work, and how their stories have culminated into “the single voice”.

HENRIETTA RA (THE ARTIST)

Rae was born in Hammersmith, London on December 30th, 1859. She began her studies at the Heatherley's School of Art, as their first female student. She then went on to study at the Royal Academy of Art, after applying 5 times. In 1884 her well-regarded version of *Ophelia* was purchased for the Walker Art Gallery from the Liverpool Autumn Exhibition of 1890, and she later went on to serve on the selection committee for the exhibition in 1893. With her input on the committee, women began to move into administrative positions for the exhibition and hang their work through the Society of Female Artists.

She met her husband Ernest Norman at the Royal Academy, who would later go on to help write her autobiography. Her artistic rivalry with her husband challenged both of them to further develop their skills: Rae commented that she had “a resolute will and laughable ambition… that

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4 Cherry, 93.
would not let her like to see even her husband get too far ahead of her in art.”6 The two worked in the same studio/home until 1893 when the couple moved to Norwood. Deborah Cherry, the author of Victorian Artists: Victorian Women Artists, explains that to continue an artistic career the woman needed to have some kind of designated workspace to sustain her practice.7 Woolf’s essay expands upon this idea, as she writes, “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”8 I believe this idea applies to the visual arts as well, as Rae’s work both politically and artistically expanded with the separation of space. It was in this separate studio that her style began to develop further, moving away from the female nude. Lost Faith is one example of her later work that would have been executed in this studio, though I am unaware if the piece was commissioned.

**VISUAL ANALYSIS**

First, let us examine the composition of the piece as a whole. The double portrait is full-length, and the vertical lines of the columns lead directly to the figures. Rae’s use of indirect lines creates a nearly circular pathway for the viewer to guide themself through the work. One could begin with Abelard’s portrait; his features are directly in the light, illuminating his expression of longing up to Heloise. Abelard’s figure is placed closer to the center of the piece and contains the brightest moment of value, as soft strokes of titanium white illuminate his features. Despite his central role in the image, we can see the use of hierarchical scale between the two. Heloise is placed higher, giving her character a sense of importance within the hierarchy.

From Heloise’s position of prayer, the eye cascades down her limbs. This motion is reinforced by the light flicking across the golden cincture around her waist. Below lies a broken rosary, the pearlescent beads of the religious adornment, now scattered at the foot of her chair. A stack of books that intrudes into the foreground functions as a visual pathway, guiding the viewer to the books, and then back up to the text in Abelard’s hand. From the gold-adorned religious text gripped in his hand, one follows the arch of his arm, directing the eye back to his portrait. The two are connected directionally, but they do not meet each other physically within the work. This nearly circular composition is intentionally used to guide the viewer’s eye through the story of the two figures and introduces us to the irrevocable fact that Heloise and Abelard are divided. The rosary is broken, in contrast to the vibrant text in Abelard’s hands. The two are tied together in this scene through the composition, yet where the figures are spiritually is disconnected.

The masterful use of composition is reinforced by the gaze and expression of the portraits. Starting with Heloise, she is shown with a 3/4th’s view, head slightly turned away from the viewer. Her eyes are averted upwards, directly away from both Abelard and the interior of the church that details the background. Her gaze is a direct rejection of the setting around her, instead looking internally. Her expression gives a sense of shock and near anxiety as her eyebrows raise, eyes widen, and her mouth remains neutral. On the contrary, Abelard is directly facing the light, in profile view. I would argue his expression reads as yearning, inquisitive to the scene in front of him. His eyes are still relaxed, but his brows are slightly tense. Reinforcing the idea of disconnection, his gaze rests solely on her. I think the difference in expression could

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6 Cherry, 37.
7 Cherry, 38.
8 Woolf, 6.
be interpreted as Heloise questioning her faith, while Abelard contently faces the light, accepting his faith in God.

The pose of the two sitters is another vital point to understanding the characters. Abelard is physically leaning on the chair, which shows lions on the legs support. The symbol of lions is often used to reinforce spirituality, and strength.9 He is directly leaning on the symbol of spirituality for support, even gripping the arm gently. In contrast, Heloise is austere seated on the chair, her back seems straight, with only a slight roll to her shoulders. Her arms are lifted away from the chair and pulled into herself. Her pose could be seen as closed, while he is openly turned to her. Again, I see this as a sign of Heloise depending on herself for inner reflection, while Abelard is physically using the symbol of faith to support his ideals, and looking to Heloise for reinforcement.

Finally, the use of color within this piece creates a feeling of division as well. Heloise is clothed in a cool, kaleidoscope-like ray of pastel hues. The clothing she is wearing directly echoes the hues of the stained glass in the background, giving her a sense of holiness, most notably in her legs, where the light catches the fabric as if it were reflecting off of purple, cool blue, and pink stained glass. Again, Abelard is placed as her direct opposite, dressed in a deep, desaturated violet and navy blue. I believe the visual components of this piece support the idea that Heloise is living through an entirely different experience than her male counterpart. An interpretation of the female experience and power dynamic between the two individuals can be seen through Rae’s hand.

CRITICAL FEEDBACK

Due to *Lost Faith*, and Rae herself, being somewhat unknown, the work has no widely accessible critiques or scholarly analysis. Rae’s early work received more critical feedback, and because of this fact, we will be looking at the stylistic feedback surrounding her “piece de resistance”, *Psyche at the Throne of Venus* (1894).10 The work was created to rival that of her male mentors, such as Frederic Leighton, Laurence Alma-Tadema, and Edward Poynter. Based on the text *The Earthly Paradise* by William Morris, the painting is considered a mythological/historical painting. History painting is considered the “highest” category of painting, which would historically be seen as unsuitable for a woman to attempt because of the rigorous skill set and comprehension needed for such subjects. Featuring over a dozen draped female figures, the feedback was dismissive. Critics focused on the “charm”, “pleasant color”, “little emotion” and “prettiness”11 of the painting. One commentator for the *Athenaeum* described it as, “a sort of confectionary piece…”. Her work was critiqued for having a “stiffness” to the figures, likely because women were not allowed to study live partially nude draped models until 1893.12 Elements of “prettiness” and “stiffness” can still be seen in *Lost Faith*, but I would argue these elements are strengths of Rae’s work. The stillness of the scene and the careful treatment of color envelops the viewer in the image.

11 Orr, 201.
COMPARISONS

The subject of Heloise and Abelard’s relationship has been depicted only a few times throughout history. The depictions are vastly different from Rae’s image, primarily in the physical connection between the figures. The first work I’d like to highlight is a painting featured in the “Golden Book of Famous Women”, written and illustrated by Elenor Fortescue Brickdale, and published in 1919.13 Brickdale illustrates a vastly different scene of the two. Shown in a passionate kiss, Heloise is outfitted in a shade of crimson red. The scene revolves around their passion as lovers, in this scene Abelard is gripping her wrist, and tilting her head towards him. Next, Edmund Blair Leighton painted the pair in 1882, titled Abelard and his Pupil Heloise. The work may have been a visual inspiration for Rae, as the two characters are seated beside each other, Heloise in the chair and Abelard at her side. In Leighton’s piece, Abelard has his hand placed over Heloise’s. I think the fact that Rae separated the two physically from one another is the key distinction from the previous renditions. This is yet another reason that I believe Rae is trying to communicate a deeper layer to the love story.

ELLEN TERRY AND HENRY IRVING (THE SITTERS)

Ellen Terry was born in 1848, and after a tumultuous early career, she established herself as one of the Victorian period’s most notable actresses. Artist Gram Robertson referred to Terry as “the painter’s actress”.14 Off of the stage, Terry posed for photographers such as Julia Margret Cameron and soon built a career in capturing characters for both the stage and the visual arts. Terry is posed as Heloise within Lost Faith, alongside her professional partner/manager Henry Irving. I would argue that the portrait is a somewhat idealized version of both Terry and Irving, as they would have been 65 and 75 at the time, but the facial features are congruent with photos of the two in their early 30s. The manipulation of their age is most likely to capture the essence of Heloise and Alebard, rather than represent the actors themselves. Rachael Zeleny, author of the essay “Painting an Ethos: The Actress, the Angel in the House, and Pre-Raphaelite Ellen Terry”, argues that she used her painterly image to combat stereotypes of women in the arts. I believe Terry both played into and rejected stereotypes to achieve success in her career, keeping an adaptable image to please the masses (and earn her income). Zeleny notes that she captured an aura of femininity that both embraced womanhood and rejected domesticity.15

The relationship between Terry and Irving has long been the topic of discussion. The two joined forces in 1878 when Terry took on the role of leading lady for the Lyceum Theater. Scholars have long debated the romantic relationship between the two, with conflicting accounts from Terry herself.16 The most concrete visualization of their relationship is a series of annotations made by Terry in Irving’s self-published autobiography. Within the text, Irving incorrectly states Terry’s birthdate and falsely reports an anecdote about her collaboration with Irving. In response,  

16 Melville, 56.
Terry annotated the text with “no- 1848” and “This is not a fact- E. T.”. After the edits, Terry graciously gifted the book back to Irving.

Regardless of their relationship, Irving controlled the theatrical roles that Terry took on. She was limited to the feminine roles that would support Irving as the leading role. The two left the Lyceum in 1902, and Terry’s roles and public influence began to expand wildly. During this late period of her career, the two posed for Lost Faith, though it appears that they never represented the characters on stage. The relationship between the two has an ironic connection to both Rae and Heloise. They were women who worked both with and against their male counterparts, who attempted to dictate their careers through the misogynistic view of women as artists and scholars.

HELOISE AND ABELARD (THE SUBJECT)

Heloise was 16 years old when her uncle realized her intellectual prowess and hired Peter Abelard (late 30s) as her tutor. Abelard was at the height of his fame, already well-known as a philosopher and dialectician. Faced with the proposal, Abelard graciously agreed to tutor the young woman. What Heloise and her uncle were unaware of, was Abelard’s intention to seduce, groom, and exploit her young mind. He writes, “In giving her to me not only to teach but to punish with force, what else was [her uncle] doing but offering me complete license, and providing opportunity, whether I wished it or not, for me to make her manageable with threats and blows if persuasion did not work.” Abelard accomplished his goals through physical and psychological punishment, abusing the power dynamic between the two. They quickly became “lovers”, resulting in Heloise’s pregnancy. The two joined in a secret marriage, but when her uncle insists on making the marriage public, Abelard’s image is threatened. He moves Heloise back to the convent where she was raised, arguably as an attempt to hide their relationship. Her uncle is enraged and sends men to castrate Abelard in the dead of night.

The story of the two lovers has historically been framed as a forbidden romance, but the factual context of Heloise's writing recontextualizes the story. When she is moved away from his physical intimacy, into a space free from men’s control, she begins to question his teachings and morals. She writes, “God knows I require nothing from you but yourself… no dowry, nor did I study how to gratify my own desires, but rather you, as you know. … but you remained silent about my preferences for a love that is free over a marriage that is chains.”

With the separation, Heloise quickly rose to the position of Abbess. The two continued to write to each other, discussing religious philosophy informed by their own life. Nye summarizes Heloise’s view on virtue as “not willpower, but a change of heart… in which a man might learn to love, seeing a woman not as an object on which to gratify his lust but as a person with whom

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18 Melville, 55.
19 Andrea Nye, “A Woman’s Thought or a Man’s Discipline? The Letters of Abelard and Heloise.”, Hypatia 7, no. 3 (1992): 3.
20 Nye, 4.
21 Nye, 5.
he has a relation involving mutual responsibilities."²² Heloise’s philosophy can be seen visually within Lost Faith; it is my opinion that her loss of faith is not in God, but a loss of faith in which she had been raised, and groomed to believe. I see Lost Faith as the moment of realization that her prior faith was a construct not of God, but man.

²² Nye, 11.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


