Inseparable Companion: The Consolation of Heloise

Carol Parsons Ciscel

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To the University Council:

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INSEPARABLE COMPANION:  
THE CONSOLATION OF HELOISE  

by  
Carol Parsons Ciscel  

A Dissertation  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Major: History  

The University of Memphis  
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ABSTRACT


The twelfth-century love story of Abelard and Heloise, which has been both an inspiration for poets and novelists and a challenge and boon to historians, has often suffered from misinterpretation. Abelard was master of the Paris schools and wrote many works which have survived, but Heloise is represented almost entirely through letter exchanges with him. This work focuses on Heloise, now established as a scholar in her own right and the author of her letters, but importantly, it turns some crucial aspects of the traditional picture of Heloise upside down. She has been painted as a woman of unusually robust sexual appetites, who was never converted from a focus on Abelard to a focus on Christ, who was utterly silenced at Abelard’s command, and whose roles as lover and abbess are fundamentally irreconcilable. Although the greater carnality of women was a given for her contemporaries, her efforts to explain how much she valued Abelard’s friendship are a challenge to twenty-first-century preconceptions as well. As for her lack of conversion, I propose that consolation is a more important question; her loyalty to her vow to Abelard fully explains why she had to wait for him to incite her to God. The crux of my argument is that Heloise was, in fact, consoled by Abelard’s second letter. This view calls into question the usual interpretation of her promise to him to put a bridle on her pen. Rather than crushed, she is light-hearted as she engages Abelard in the philosophical dialogue she loved, now turned to the founding of the Paraclete. Once we realize this, it becomes possible, even easy, to integrate Heloise the lover with Heloise the abbess. The picture that emerges shows Heloise to be a woman of her time, albeit an
exceptional one. In fact, what both lovers have to say about love closely reflects twelfth-century attitudes. The letters of Heloise rank among the great literary creations of any age and the view they give us of twelfth-century France is unusually personal, but they can be reliably viewed as an authentic woman’s voice from the twelfth century.
Finding a topic to which to devote years of your life is difficult and my graduate
career had not yet pointed me in a single direction at the time I took my comprehensive
examinations. Of the three major papers I had then written, one was on Akhenaton
(Pharaoh of Egypt in the second millennium B.C.E.), another on Peter Olivi (a Spiritual
Franciscan in the thirteenth century, C.E.), and the third on Isaac Newton (Cambridge
don, scientist, and sometime theologian in the seventeenth). About the only thing they
had in common was the focus on a single individual. So I began with that commonality
and cast about in the Middle Ages for someone to write about.

That semester I sat in on a class that my major professor, James. M. Blythe, was
offering on women in the Middle Ages. I had not expected to write about a woman
necessarily, in spite of my participation in the women’s movement myself in Memphis in
the 1970s, but my attention was caught one day when Dr. Blythe commented, rather
casually, that if he had a chance to meet any person from the Middle Ages, he would
choose Heloise. I began to read Betty Radice’s translation of the letters between Abelard
and Heloise with considerable interest, but it was Abelard, not Heloise, who convinced
me to take up this work. His second letter (Sponsae Christi) was so concentrated on the
one goal of consoling Heloise and turning her fixation from himself to what he saw as a
more suitable target, the risen Christ, I began to wonder what effect it must have had on
Heloise herself.

I knew that I was wading into a field already well-trodden by a number of
weighty scholars, but when I read their books and articles, I found the analyses contained
there somewhat less than satisfactory. I felt that a critical point had been missed, although
exactly what that was I didn’t yet fully understand. So I decided the best way to begin was to encounter the letters as directly as I could in their original language. At that point I had had two years of high school Latin back in the 1950s and four years during my just completed studies. I felt I needed a little help, so I arranged for two semesters of independent study during which I translated pertinent parts of Abelard’s *Historia*, the four personal letters, and all of Heloise’s third letter which is focused on the monastic life.

Gradually I saw more and more clearly what had been missed. Although several scholars were now viewing Heloise the way her contemporaries did, as an important scholar, rather than simply a love-struck girl, they had not followed that insight as far as it could lead. In some ways they remained as stuck in the love story as they imagined Heloise to have been. This led to overstating Heloise’s carnality, worrying whether or not she had ever been converted to God, and finally assuming that she had been silenced rather than liberated. However, although the traditional picture of Heloise had not yet been overturned, many of the building blocks were in place; what remained was to flip some of the blocks right side up and assemble the edifice.

Not surprisingly, when I sat down to write, I kept having to circle back to wider readings in order to gain a more thorough understanding of life in twelfth-century Paris and its environs. Whether I was reading about twelfth-century literature, twelfth-century philosophy, twelfth-century views on marriage, or twelfth-century monastic ferment, I kept encountering Heloise, and if not Heloise, then certainly, Abelard. It began to seem as if I was caught in an endless circle. I wanted to understand the twelfth century in order to understand Heloise and I was discovering that many scholars were interpreting the
twelfth century in smaller or larger part through the light cast by her letter exchange with Abelard. There was no way to extract Heloise from her time. She is a woman of the twelfth-century renaissance—exceptional, impressively learned, tormented, and thoroughly medieval.

My plan for this work is visible in the table of contents: first, two introductory chapters; then, three chapters delving into the questions I raise about carnality, conversion, and consolation, and finally, two concluding chapters. I start by looking at the setting, the story, and the sources and placing my work within the developing historiographical tradition. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are the heart of the work in which I propose new answers to those three crucial questions for understanding Heloise. My concluding chapters focus on Heloise’s character and life in the light of this new understanding, and on how Abelard and Heloise used twelfth-century materials to interpret and describe what they felt for one another.

The translations are my own, unless otherwise noted. All quotations in Latin come from J. T. Muckle’s Latin texts published in Mediaeval Studies in 1950, 1953, and 1955. Most readers, however, will have encountered these letters in the much more polished translation by Betty Radice, which was first published in 1974. For those of you who may wish to read or re-read the letters in English, however, I direct you to the more recent translation by William Levitan (2007). He renders Heloise’s letters in poetic form and Abelard’s in prose. The effect is stunning. In most cases, however, my translation follows the Latin grammar more closely than either Radice’s or Levitan’s, because my aim is different from theirs. I want readers to be able to see as direct a correspondence as possible between the Latin and the English.
I have many people to thank and I will begin with my dissertation committee: Dr. James M. Blythe, Dr. Stephen D. Benin, Dr. Walter R. Brown, and Dr. Margaret Caffrey. Dr. Blythe, as my major professor, spent considerable time responding to my often speculative work and redirecting my less defensible efforts. I would also like to mention the support group that my department chair, Dr. Janann Sherman, organized for students embarking on their dissertations. Inevitably, the interaction within the group helped me see my own way more clearly.

I am particularly indebted to Dr. Mischa Hooker for his unfailing patience and clear guidance through the thickets of Latin vocabulary and grammar. Dr. Whitney Huey Kennon, my fellow student, was a font of knowledge about process and format and always of good cheer. She was writing about Catherine of Sienna as I wrote about Heloise of the Paraclete and we had much to share. I met Dr. Barbara Newman when she was invited to speak at the University of Memphis in 2009. We talked, all too briefly, about Heloise and she very kindly shared with me a then unpublished paper on the liminality of women’s lives in the Middle Ages. And, of course, I must mention the considerable indulgence required from my husband, Dr. David H. Ciscel. He wrote his own dissertation in economics some decades ago and so he had first hand knowledge about the inevitable ups and downs of this daunting project.
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CHAPTER ONE: A STORY FOR THE AGES

Introduction

Almost one thousand years ago in Paris during a time of changes so great they almost rival those we are living through today, two scholars experienced the heights and depths of a remarkable love affair. The man was Peter Abelard, author of many innovative and seminal works on logic, philosophy, theology and ethics—in fact, one of the earliest of the medieval scholastics. The woman was Heloise. She was living in the cathedral close at Notre Dame in Paris with her uncle, a canon named Fulbert, when Abelard met her, and, in an age when few men and far fewer women were literate, she was already known for her scholarship.

Paris at the time was the seat of the royal demesne, and a nexus for scholarship, but most importantly for our story, it was a small world where everybody associated with the literate life of the court or the church knew each other. Everyone certainly knew Abelard. He had “laid siege to Paris,“¹ and become one of its foremost teachers with a large following of students for his lectures and enthusiastic readers for his commentaries. He also had another source of popularity which reached even those who were not literate. He composed popular songs which, as Heloise wrote later, “were on everyone’s lips.”² Such a man, talented, audacious, and ambitious, who lived his life in the public eye, was much talked about and suffered all the slings of popularity.


Like most celebrities, Abelard courted his fate. In middle age, in fact, he wrote an autobiographical letter which is called in its earliest extant editions “Consoling things of Abelard to his [male] friend.”3 Today it is known as Abelard’s Historia Calamitatum or History of my Calamities. It is a long letter detailing the vicissitudes of his career, but the section that interests readers most, presumably both then and now, is that describing his affair with Heloise. However, we must remember that just because this was written as a letter does not necessarily mean that it was meant for just one pair of eyes or even for a particular set of eyes. In fact, the friend to whom it is addressed may have been rhetorical. Epistolary writing was an important literary genre from classical times and Abelard most probably meant the Historia for wide distribution.4 In any event it reached Heloise in her cloister at the Paraclete and it has reached us in the halls of academia in the twenty-first century. The details Abelard gives us in this letter are just enough to flesh out the love story—almost. What he tells us is intriguing; what he leaves out, many have been willing to supply.

It was this autobiographical letter, not addressed to Heloise, that initiated a famous correspondence: a correspondence which emerged from its monastic hiding place in the late thirteenth century and has attracted attention ever since. Abelard tells us that he had chosen Heloise as a lover in part because her scholarship would make it possible to correspond so that they could “pleraque audacius scribere quam colloqui et sic semper

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jocundis interesse colloquiis”⁵ (write a good many things more daringly than we could speak them and thus always to be in the midst of light-hearted conversations). But after their affair ended, tragically as we shall see in about 1118, there had been no contact of any sort between them, written or otherwise, until Abelard installed Heloise as Abbess of his new monastery at the Paraclete in 1129. With the Historia the written dialogue between them was reignited, unintentionally by Abelard, very deliberately by Heloise, who when she had read this letter of consolation to a friend, wrote to remind the man who had been both lover and husband that if he owed consolation to anyone, he owed it to her:

Morem quidem amico et socio gessisti et tam amicitiae quam societatis debitum persolvisti. Sed maiori te debito nobis astrinxiti quas non tam amicas quam amicissimas non tam soicas quam fillias convenit nominari vel si quod dulcius et sanctius vacabulum potest excogitari.⁶

Indeed you have complied with the wishes of a friend and comrade and paid off a debt as much of friendship as of comradeship. But you have bound yourself by a greater debt to us, who it is fitting to be called not just friends but dearest friends not just comrades but daughters or whatever sweeter and more holy word can be devised.

Abelard does reply, but cautiously, still keeping things as impersonal as possible; she tries again, reminding him that her soul is in danger and this time he replies with a veritable landslide of Bible verses but also with all the passion still at his command. Heloise had won his attention once again and in her third letter she promises, as he had asked, not to go on complaining about the circumstances which led to their taking holy orders. In return he begins his outpouring of compositions for the Paraclete: a history of women in the religious life, a rule for the sisters, as well as prayers and liturgies complete


with musical notation. Where once he wrote songs which were on everyone’s lips, now he wrote sacred music for the religious sisters at his foundation, the Paraclete.

In all we have copies of eight letters which passed between them. The *Historia Calamitatum* and numbers two through five are called “the personal letters.” Although Abelard’s *Historia* may have been meant for general publication, none of these letters was widely disseminated until they were copied and translated by Jean de Meun, the second author of the *Roman de la Rose*, around the year 1280.⁷ Although only the first letter is always referred to by name and the others only by number, in these pages I refer to letters two through six by their opening words (following the medieval convention).

1. *Historia Calamitatum* (shortened to *Historia*) – Abelard
2. *Domino suo* – Heloise
3. *Delictissime sorori* – Abelard
4. *Unico suo* – Heloise
5. *Sponsae Christi* – Abelard
6. *Suo specialiter* – Heloise
7. *History of Women in Religious Life* – Abelard
8. *Rule for the Paraclete* – Abelard

Many letters have survived from the twelfth century, but this collection is rare because the writers are discussing a shared, personal past, and they include that rarest of rarities, a woman’s interpretation of her own life and feelings from her own pen. Although the letters are full of the literary quotations which were required in good prose writing of the day, they also include an unusually large amount of commentary on the actual lives of the writers. This commentary, however, can only be fully understood by keeping in mind how the twelfth century viewed relationships between men and women. First, twelfth-century marriage customs among the nobility were designed to maintain family fortunes.

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Second, this was the age when stories began to be told at court about love-sick knights and their beautiful, but often inaccessible, ladies. Third, the literate classes were beginning to experiment with extending the classical ideal of friendship to include women. These letters give us an opportunity to see how one highly literate and very individual pair of lovers navigated these often conflicting cross currents.

The customary reality of male/female relations in the twelfth century was certainly very different from our own, at least for those relationships that we know something about—those among people of noble birth. To begin with, surprisingly few men among the nobility married at all. Younger sons of noble families were discouraged from marrying and establishing families in order to maintain the patrimony intact for the eldest son and his offspring. Most younger sons remained knights in the employ of their elder brothers or uncles, forever doomed to a bachelor’s life unless their elder brother met an untimely death. Many men, whether eldest or younger sons, became monks, canons, priests, or masters (professors), none of whom by the high Middle Ages was supposed to marry at all. On the other hand, women, especially those who were heiresses and in line to inherit their father’s estate since they had no living brothers, were made to marry as soon as they reached puberty if not before, while many others entered nunneries, some to avoid marriage, others because no suitable husband was available, eldest sons being in short supply.


10 Eleanor of Aquitaine was the most famous heiress of her day.
The few marriages that were allowed were clearly not expected to be love matches, but contracts with an eye to the aggrandizement and continuation of family fortune and influence. There were more women than men in this marriage market and so men could aspire to marry into a family grander than their own family of origin. Thus, interestingly enough, since women married down and men married up, women brought not only their dowries to the marriage, but perhaps more importantly, their lineage. Duby points out that many of the genealogies written to impress contemporaries focus on the mother’s rather than the father’s family since that was often the more illustrious of the two.11 In addition, men often married women much younger than themselves because many men entered the marriage market in their late twenties or early thirties and most women in their early teens.12

Considering this picture of twelfth-century reality, it is not surprising that troubadours sang love songs about the attraction between an unmarried knight—most likely a younger son—and a married woman. By the time girls had become women, they were either already married or in convents. In this circumstance, the only available woman to fall in love with was a married woman, and there were many unmarried men to sigh after them. That was why marriage was seldom the goal; it was most often out of reach in any event. What the lover hoped for was the embrace, or at least the notice, of his beloved. And his beloved, at least in two of the most popular stories, was likely to be the wife of his liege lord as Iseult is the wife of Mark, Tristan’s uncle and lord, and Guinevere is the wife of Arthur, Lancelot’s liege lord.

11 Duby, *Medieval Marriage*, 11. In fact, it may be worth noting that many of the Grimm brother’s fairy stories of young, rather penniless men, often the third son, who win the hand of the princess and half her father’s kingdom, reflect this remembered reality in a rough sort of way.

12 Unless the groom as well as the bride was betrothed while still a child.
No satisfactory consensus has yet been reached about why troubadours began to compose these stories and why lords and ladies clamored for them. The ancient world could never have imagined privileging love between a man and a woman in that way. Temporary dalliances were certainly written about, like that of Aeneas with Dido, but like Aeneas, men quickly came to their senses and moved on to more important things\(^{13}\) and Mark Anthony was ridiculed for staying with Cleopatra. Now in the twelfth century sighing after a woman began to be seen as a necessary occupation for a knight. What produced this aberration? On the one hand, Duby proposes that the courtly love stories taught knights a kind of refinement which could serve as a social distinction essential in an age when the growth of trade and the money economy was giving some mere commoners more wealth than the holders of country estates.\(^{14}\) On the other hand, in his 1999 study of this phenomenon, C. Stephen Jaeger argues for a different genesis. He sees this celebration of deep feeling between a man and a woman as based on models from the classical world with one significant change. In the classical world, when the bonds of friendship were felt to be the highest and noblest of human feelings, friendship was reserved for men; in the twelfth century, for the first time in history, some of that nobility was proposed for feelings between a man and a woman.\(^{15}\) To argue his point, Jaeger spends considerable time on the revival of classical [male] friendship motifs, first in Charlemagne’s court, and then, after a two-centuries-long hiatus, within monasteries and cathedral schools. Jaeger does offer a compelling reason why women began to be


\(^{14}\) Duby, \textit{Love and Marriage}, 61.

included in the twelfth century and not before, but it is a bit circular. When he notes that “the immediately noticeable change produced by women’s emergence is the prominence of chastity and virginity as sources of that lovable excellence,”\textsuperscript{16} he is positing women’s chastity to be the result of women’s emergence. Some pages later, however, he reverses this cause and effect saying it was only when some women—either noble or religious or both—began to be celebrated as chaste, that loving them became ennobling.\textsuperscript{17} This is interesting. It begins to look as if the church’s admonitions to women on the religious importance of virginity and chastity contributed materially to the development of courtly love. In a climate where love was seen as ennobling only when sexual consummation had to be delayed, perhaps even indefinitely, the church provided reasons for forbearance even if the beloved was female. There is another possible explanation, however, which Jaeger explores at length but does not explicitly state. When friendship was revived in Europe, its language took on a decidedly erotic tone, a tone so closely associated with women, that it was an easy transition to bring them into the game. Whatever the cause, however, it was in twelfth-century Europe that a romance between a man and a woman was first seen as both important and interesting.

There are echoes both of twelfth-century marriage customs as well as of the romantic tales told at court in the love story of Abelard and Heloise. Abelard was living a celibate life, as it was customary for scholars to do, with no expectation of ever marrying and every reason to claim, as he did in the \textit{Historia}, that he did not pursue women at all—at least until he met Heloise. He was born to a minor knightly family in Brittany and had come to Paris to seek fame and glory. There at the height of his success he insinuated

\textsuperscript{16} Jaeger, 95.

\textsuperscript{17} Jaeger, 103-104.
himself into the house of Fulbert, a canon at the Cathedral of Notre Dame, in order, as he
says in his autobiography, to seduce Fulbert’s young niece. Just as Tristan and Iseult were
to do, the lovers are drawn together and fulfill their love, heedless of the constraints they
should obey—he betraying his profession, she betraying her virtue, both betraying
Fulbert. The drama of their passion and the violent manner of their separation would
make a very satisfactory courtly love story. Heloise, just like the heroes and heroines in
the stories, struggles with the problems posed by the effort to fuse noble and carnal
love. Courtly love stories are not all cut from the same mold: some read like warnings;
others have happy endings; some celebrate marital love; others celebrate gratification
forever deferred. What they tell us about the twelfth century is that was complex. One of
the most significant reasons why the story of Abelard and Heloise is so fascinating is that
it is drawn from life.

The prurient interest

At the dawning of the age of courtly love, Abelard and Heloise lived a story as
mesmerizing as any of the romances that might be sung at court. Part of the appeal of the
courtly love story was the peril presented by love, especially if it was consummated, even
if somewhere in the middle we see the lovers happily in each other’s arms. In this regard,
Abelard and Heloise do not disappoint. They have their idyll, but after Heloise had

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18 Radice does not see how their story followed the topos of courtly love, since Heloise was
anything but unattainable. Radice, xlix. But this objection does not take into account that the chastity of the
lady was often at odds with the unfolding of the story. Consider Iseult, for example. There the poet says
that their love was so unchaste “they abused their bodies” in order to satisfy it. Georges Duby, Women
of the Twelfth Century: Eleanor of Aquitaine and Six Others, trans. Jean Birrell (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press, 1997), 70. Other scholars also see a connection. “The scaffolding of the Tristan romance is
in place here.” Jaeger, 163.

19 Jaeger, 186.
delivered their son, Astrolabe, at Abelard’s family home in Brittany, things went very badly. At Abelard’s insistence they left the infant with Abelard’s sister, returned to Paris, and married in secret. However, even though he had agreed to it, a secret marriage did not satisfy Heloise’s uncle, and when Fulbert began to let his friends in on the secret, Heloise with great passion denied that the marriage had ever taken place. To protect her from her enraged uncle, Abelard sent Heloise to live at the convent of Argenteuil. It was then that Fulbert hired thugs to set upon Abelard and castrate him.

Here we have the first intimation of the enduring prurient interest this tale generates. Many people have affairs, of course, but most escape castration. Castration was a highly unusual punishment even in that violent age. Abelard tells us the whole town was set buzzing:

\[
\text{Mane autem facto, tota ad me civitas congregate, quanta stuperet admiratione, quanta se affligeret lamentatione, quanto me clamore vexarent, quanto planctu perturbarent, difficile immo impossibile est exprimi. Maxime vero clerici ac praecipue scholares nostri intolerabilibus me laments et eiulatibus cruciabant ut multo amplius ex eorum compassione quam ex vulneris laederer passione, affligerer. . . . Occurrebat animo . . . quanta dilatatione haec singularis infamia universum mundum esset occupatura.}^{20}
\]

Next morning the whole city gathered before my house, and the scene of horror and amazement, mingled with lamentations, cries, and groans which exasperated and distressed me, is difficult, no impossible, to describe. In particular, the clerks and, most of all, my pupils tormented me with their unbearable weeping and wailing until I suffered more from their sympathy than from the pain of my wound, and felt the misery of my mutilation less than my shame and humiliation. All sorts of thoughts filled my mind… how fast the news of this unheard-of disgrace would spread over the whole world.\(^{21}\)

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\(^{21}\) Translated by Radice, 17.
Castration was recognized as an appropriate punishment for adultery, and, since adultery was a transgression of one male against another\(^\text{22}\) a head of a noble household might well think it an appropriate punishment for sexual transgressions against any of the women in his household: sister, daughter, mother, or niece, as well as wife. Even though Abelard was at this point Heloise’s husband, he could still transgress his agreement with Fulbert by divorcing her. When Abelard removed Heloise once again from her uncle’s house and, instead of bringing her to live in his own household, sent her to Argenteuil, Fulbert could easily have drawn that conclusion. Abelard himself surmises that this must have been the case, when in the *Historia* he writes, “avunculus et consanquinei seu affines ejus opinati sunt me nunc sibi plurimum illusisse et ab ea moniali facta me sic facile velle expedire”\(^\text{23}\) (her uncle and his relations by blood and marriage supposed that I had now deceived them the most and by making her a nun I thus wished easily to free myself). Fulbert jumped to conclusions, but even in cases where the accusation was on firmer grounds, sentence was not pronounced or carried out by the king or by the church but by the aggrieved party himself. Thus it came under the rubric of a blood feud\(^\text{24}\) which both the king and the church were seeking to repress.

Not only was castration as punishment rare, but, in spite of the contemporary belief that sex was a very serious spiritual temptation, self-castration as an expression of disgust at and control over the seat of worldly temptation in the body was also rare. In fact there are only two known examples of the latter: the self-castration of Origen—


which discredited him because one was supposed to fight the temptations of the flesh lifelong for a reward in heaven—and the spiritual castration of St. Hugh.\textsuperscript{25} We should not imagine that Abelard is exaggerating the public interest in what had happened to him. It had everything to grip the human imagination: a famous man, a punishment for sexual transgressions focused on his sexual organs, a fall from a high place. It is probably safe to say that the memory of this lingered on in Paris even past this contemporary generation. For the first time in his life, Abelard shrank from publicity and, to escape the attention from his students which he could no longer bear, he entered the religious life, but not before insisting that Heloise precede him by taking the veil. Abelard the great teacher had been humbled and retired from public life, as it seemed, into the cloister.

There is yet another titillating detail in this story which helped keep it alive once the letters had been published in the late thirteenth century. In her first response to Abelard’s \textit{Historia}, Heloise wrote “\textit{dulcius mihi semper extitit amice vocabulum aut, si non indigneris, concubinae vel scorti}” (the word friend always stood out to me as sweeter [than wife] or, whether or not it might make you indignant to hear it, concubine, or whore) and somewhat further on, “\textit{carius mihi et dignius vederetur tua dici meretrix}”\textsuperscript{26} (it would seem dearer and more worthy to me to be called your harlot). In trying to describe their relationship—one which Abelard has described in his \textit{Historia} as nothing but lust—Heloise reaches past even concubine and harlot for the lowest word she can imagine: \textit{scorti} (whore, prostitute, or skin-boy). Not surprisingly this has caught the attention of even the most casual reader of these letters. By the nineteenth century some

\begin{footnotes}
\item[25] Clanchy, \textit{Abelard: A Life}, 223. St. Hugh was said to have lost all desire although physically he was still intact.

\end{footnotes}
scholars were even refusing to believe that such a respected abbess could have written such things and ascribed the composition of her letters to Abelard or to some other unknown, but definitely male, writer. Others fixate on the word *scorti*, which Heloise uses only once, rather than on the word Heloise uses often, *amice*, and seek to define her character by it. I will examine these issues in detail in Chapter Three. The point here is that these words clearly raise interest as well as eyebrows.

**From poets to scholars**

The story has come down to us in three overlapping modes: first in oral tradition; second as an influence on the poetic imagination; and third through historical/critical analysis. As far as we know the letters remained buried at the Paraclete for about 150 years, and during that time, if the story was remembered at all, and it must have been, it was largely through oral tradition.²⁷ We have already seen how popular Abelard was in Paris, how widely he was known, not just through his lectures, but through his songs and, as Duby reminds us, “songs were reservoirs of memory.”²⁸ Heloise too had a unique reputation as a woman scholar of Latin letters and her noble background to recommend her to the public imagination. Abelard has told us that “the whole city” gathered outside his house the morning after his castration. That tells us little about the actual number of Parisians standing beneath his window, but surely those who were there told all their acquaintances the arresting news that the Master of the Paris schools had been castrated by the uncle of his mistress/wife.

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²⁷ Duby, *Women*, vol. 1, 148-149.

We do not have to rely wholly on an intuitive belief that gossip was just as likely in the twelfth century as it is today. Oral memories do leave traces in written documents. There is significant contemporary corroboration that the story was heard beyond Paris in 1118 in letters of advice to Abelard from Fulk of Deuil and Abelard’s old teacher Roscelin who said “everyone knew what they had done.” Much later, after Abelard’s death, Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, wrote to Heloise praising her scholarship and her devotion to the religious life, and acknowledging and honoring her all-important relationship with Abelard. In fact, what the abbot says may echo what he had heard first hand while Abelard was taking refuge at Cluny at the end of his life, since it so clearly echoes the accommodation to which the lovers had come:

Him [Abelard] . . . to whom after your union in the flesh you are joined by the better, and therefore stronger, bond of divine love, with whom and under whom you have long served God: him, I say, in your place, or as another you, God cherishes in his bosom, and keeps him there to be restored to you through his grace at the coming of the Lord.

Another and very interesting contemporary reference is from the chronicler William Godel, a monk at St. Martins of Limoges, who writes that Heloise was formerly Abelard’s wife and “truly his friend.” He describes her as . . . a religious woman, educated in both Hebrew and Latin letters. . . . This true friend of his preserved great loyalty towards him after his death with assiduous prayers. They now rest in this place most honorably in tombs by the holy altar.

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31 Peter the Venerable, in Radice, 223.

32 Godel quoted in Radice, xivi.

That is just how Heloise wished to be remembered: as Abelard’s true friend, as we shall see. It is important to note that Godel, writing in 1173, would not have seen the letters and could not have read what Heloise wrote there about *amice* being one of the words sweeter than wife that she was reaching for. He must instead be reflecting a fairly common understanding of the time.

However, it was clearly the publication of the letters which made this love story known to the ages. Alone among them, the *Historia Calamitatum* may have been intended for a wider distribution. The intended recipient is not mentioned by name, but internal evidence in the correspondence indicates it was not Heloise, so we seem on safe ground believing that at least two people saw copies when it was newly written: the unnamed friend –unless he was rhetorical—and Heloise herself. However, it is interesting that the *Historia* survives solely in this letter collection. Thus we most likely have Heloise to thank for preserving not only one of the most interesting letter collections from the Middle Ages, but Abelard’s autobiography as well. Both are unusual. Medieval letter collections by a single author are common enough, but to have the responses included is much rarer. Autobiographies are equally rare. Those who were literate, and that was by and large those attached to the religious life, had the example set by Augustine before their eyes, but few followed it. Clanchy briefly discusses three others who produced autobiographical works in the twelfth century: Guibert of Nogent, who wrote about his childhood, Suger of St. Denis, who wrote about rebuilding his church, and Fulk of Anjou,

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34 In particular, Abelard describes their affair as if to a person who was not privy to it.

35 Radice, xlvii.

36 Radice, xlviii.

a secular lord, who wrote about his family history. An earlier example, this time from the eleventh century, is Otloh of St. Emmeram who wrote about the temptations which threatened his commitment to the monastic life and his interest in writing. Only Abelard wrote not only about a number of specific external circumstances of his adult life, but also about how he felt about them.

The first known literary figure who worked with the letters was Jean de Meun late in the thirteenth century. He was intrigued enough not only to incorporate the story into lines 8738 through 8802 of the Roman de la Rose, but to translate the whole corpus into the French vernacular. We do not know how the letters came into his possession, but several scholars have speculated about why he found them so intriguing. According to David F. Hult, Jean had a particular reason to be interested in Abelard’s story because he had an “unrelenting fascination with castration.” Hult sees Jean’s use of the myth about the engendering of the goddess of passionate love, Venus, from Jupiter’s castration of Saturn, as associating “passionate love with this archetypal dismemberment.” Other scholars offer less Freudian explanations. Mews feels that Jean “read the correspondence from the perspective of a very specific issue, namely, whether true love could ever be compatible with marriage.”

38 Clanchy, Abelard: A Life, 122-123. See also McLaughlin, “Abelard as Autobiographer,” 472.


41 Hult, 112.

that Jean never entertained any doubts about the radical incompatibility of love and marriage. He writes that Heloise “loved truly and was truly loved,” but what he admired most is that she . . .

admonished him [Abelard] not to marry, and proved to him with texts and arguments that the conditions of marriage are too hard, however dutiful the wife. For she had seen and studied and understood the books and she understood feminine ways, for she had them all in herself. She asked him to love her without claiming any rights over her except those that were freely and graciously given.

This seems to indicate it was Heloise who caught Jean de Meun’s attention even more than Abelard or his castration. Jean admired what he saw as her scholarship and her self-understanding. What matters most to us, however, is that Jean was “a marvelous popularizer” and it was he who gave the story back to the world some generations after it had ceased to be common currency in Paris.

In fact for many centuries the story was in the hands of poets, but we do not always know whether the echoes can be read as evidence of direct influence. For example, many have been intrigued with the description of the love story of Paolo and Francesca in Dante’s *Inferno*. As Gellrich notes in *The Idea of the Book*, the lovers do not merely mimic the story they are reading—that of Lancelot and Guinevere—but “Paolo desires her because of the presence of Lancelot. . . . Reading is vital to this dynamic of passion, for the book itself becomes the equivalent of the go-between.”

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44 Jean de Meun, 135.


mirror Abelard’s own description of how his relationship with Heloise moved from master and pupil to lovers.

\[\text{Apertis itaque libris, plura de amore quam delectione verba se ingerebant, plura errant oscula quam sentenie; saepius ad sinus quam ad libros reducebantur manus, crebrius oculos amor in se reflectebat quam lectio in scripturam dirigebat.}\]

Therefore with our books opened, words more about love than about instruction poured themselves out; there were more kisses than expositions; hands were led more often to our laps than to our books; love diverted our eyes more frequently upon each other than the lesson directed them toward scripture.

On the basis of textual evidence, Dante scholars have concluded that Dante was familiar with the \textit{Roman de la Rose}\textsuperscript{48} and thus with Heloise as a romantic heroine who was both learned and unrepentant, just as he imagined Francesca to be. The \textit{Rose}, however, does not mention the role books played in the seduction; that is found only in the \textit{Historia}.

We know that the letter collection itself made its way to Italy by at least the fourteenth century. Petrarch had a manuscript copy of the letters in Latin which he may have acquired in Paris during his sojourn there in 1340.\textsuperscript{50} More intriguingly it is just possible that it was Dante who brought the manuscript home from a visit to Paris which, if it occurred, would have been just about the time Jean was translating the letters in the late thirteenth century. If so, perhaps it was Dante who gave his copy to Petrarch.\textsuperscript{51} Petrarch has proved helpful to historians because he left interlinear comments as he read the manuscript, for example: \textit{“Valde predulciter ac blande per totum agis, Heloya.”} (You,


\textsuperscript{48} Peter Dronke, “Francesca and Heloise,” \textit{Comparative Literature} 27 no. 2 (1975) : 131.

\textsuperscript{49} Dronke, “Francesca and Heloise,” 132.

\textsuperscript{50} Mews, \textit{Lost Love Letters}, 41.

\textsuperscript{51} Dronke, “Francesca and Heloise,” 133.
Heloise, act with the utmost sweetness and gentleness in everything.) 52 These comments have convinced Mews that Petrarch had formed “an idealized image of Heloise.” 53 The Italian connection does not end here, however. Dronke suggests that Petrarch may have shared his copy with Boccaccio who in his Fiammetta puts these words in the mouth of his heroine: “I, more sinful than other women, aching for my dishonorable delights of love, because I veil them beneath honorable words, am thought a saint.” 54 Dronke notes that there is no parallel to this in any literature except the second letter of Heloise (Unico Suo). 55

Not everyone idealized Heloise as Petrarch had done. A half century later, around 1402, Christine de Pisan focused not on Heloise’s sweetness, but on Heloise’s supposed preference for being called a meretrix (harlot). 56 Fifteenth-century women were a long way from feeling anything like sisterly regard for other women; they saw each other through a male lens. Christine herself heaps scorn on merchant’s wives with as much asperity as Jean de Meun himself was capable of, 57 and Newman notes that Christine, in spite of their commonalities as women writers, did not give Heloise a place in The City of

52 Petrarch, quoted in Dronke, “Francesca and Heloise, 133. Jaeger finds this particular comment interesting as well. Jaeger, 168.

53 Mews, Lost Love Letters, 41.

54 Boccaccio, quoted in Peter Dronke, Abelard and Heloise in Medieval Testimonies, W. Ker Memorial Lecture no. 26 (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1976), 58.

55 Dronke, Medieval Testimonies, 59.

56 Mews, Lost Love Letters, 42.

Ladies. Mews speculates that Christine may never have seen the letters Heloise wrote, but was relying on the sketchy outline in the Roman de la Rose. Dronke, however, notes that Christine uses the Latin word *meretrix* rather than Jean’s French *putain* and thus may actually have seen the Latin originals.

Except for Jean de Meun, these treatments of Heloise and Abelard were far from extensive, however. Radice quotes François Villon writing about 1461:

\begin{quote}
Où est la très sage Hellois  
Pour qui fut chastré, puis moine  
Pierre Esbaillart à Saint-Denis ?  
Pour son amour eut cette essoyne...  
Mais où sont les netges d’antan ?
\end{quote}

Where is that learned lady Heloise,  
For whose sake Pierre Abelard was first castrated,  
Then became a monk at Saint-Denis?  
It was through love that he suffered such misfortune…  
But where are last year’s snows?  

The reference is poignant, but it is only a single verse in a poem on a variety of topics, and Villon, unlike de Meun, focuses here on Abelard’s misfortunes and expresses no regret for those Heloise suffered.

Heloise is briefly mentioned by the wife of Bath in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, but what she has to say about her is not laudatory. The wife of Bath, as Newman points out, is made by her male creator to list Heloise with misogynistic writers such as Jerome and Tertullian as one who writes about the wickedness of wives. More speculatively,

\begin{footnotes}
60 Dronke, *Medieval Testimonies*, 56.
61 Translation by Radice, xiviii.
\end{footnotes}
although Chaucer mentions Heloise by name and Shakespeare does not, it is just possible
that Abelard and Heloise might have been the models for Romeo and Juliet with the
Montmorancies and the Capetians translated into the Montaques and the Capulets.

Christopher Brooke points out that the betrothal of Romeo and Juliet was unconventional.
“When Romeo asks, What shall I swear by? Juliet answers . . . by thy gracious self which
is the god of my idolatry.”63 Shakespeare is accusing Juliet of substituting Romeo for
God, just as Heloise is assumed to have done to Abelard. If Chaucer knew about Heloise,
perhaps Shakespeare knew about her too. We do know he mined history for his plots.

There is no doubt, however, about Alexander Pope’s inspiration in his treatment
of the story in his poem of 1717 titled *Eloisa to Abelard*, which was translated into
French, German and Italian.64 In later centuries the love story “moved Rousseau, Diderot
and even Voltaire . . . [it] inflamed Rilke, then Roger Vailland and still inflames many
today.”65 Poets are far from finished re-working the story, but today we are more likely to
get historical novels and even films rather than poems.66 Surprisingly, the story surfaced
again in oral tradition in 1938 in New Jersey in a folk ballad called “The Unquiet Grave.”
The hero in the ballad is called Shakespeare, but in spite of confusions and changes, the
core of the story is so recognizable as that of Abelard and Heloise that it is worth quoting
here (as told by the folk singer):

246.

64 Radice, li.


66 Although a new book of poetry based on our story appeared just recently: Judith Infante, *Love: A
Suspect Form* (Exeter, United Kingdom: Shearsman Books Ltd., 2008). The most notable film, perhaps,
is *Stealing Heaven* (1988). It includes many of the later accretions to the story, but perhaps gets the
essential nature right in its unabashed eroticism.
Shakespeare was a great lover. He married this woman. After . . . two or three years, there was another man fell in love with his wife, but she didn’t care nothing about him. This man hired four or five men to kidnap Shakespeare. They took him up into a room and castrated him. Well, his wife said it didn’t make any difference to her, she wanted to live with him. He said no, it couldn’t be; he couldn’t live with her no longer because he wasn’t a man. He coaxed her to go into a convent, and after a while she consented. Two or three years afterward he died . . . and she got out of the convent. She used to go to his grave and pray for him to raise—she wanted to speak to him—see him. And this song was made up about that. This song is founded on fact.67

Perhaps it actually was. The fact that folk tradition remembers Heloise’s loyalty and her longing to see and speak with her lover is arresting.

The story has had a long claim on the imaginations of people, both learned and unschooled, but the church, which had always had some doubts about Abelard,68 eventually began having doubts about its stewardship of the bodies as well. The tomb was moved in the late fifteenth century when a new abbey church was built at the Paraclete, and then in the early seventeenth century, the bodies were removed again to a crypt and the unique liturgical customs of the Paraclete were replaced by more traditional forms.69 The Paraclete itself was one of the casualties of the French Revolution, but the bodies of Abelard and Heloise were saved and moved to Paris, first to a short-lived museum, and then to the cemetery of Père Lachaise where they lie to this day.70

As for the letters themselves, treatment of them began to diverge in the seventeenth century. Now, about 150 years after the printing press was established in


68 Bernard of Clairvaux convinced two church councils to condemn works by Abelard during his lifetime.

69 Mews, Abelard and Heloise, 13-14.

70 Radice, xiv.
Europe, the letters were printed and translated without poetic treatment. François d’Amboise and André Duchesne printed the letters and Abelard’s major works in Latin in 1616. However, once they were more widely available they began to be embellished with details found nowhere in the historical record. In 1643 François de Grenaille made “a rather free translation of Heloise’s letters for a collection of the writings of famous women.” And, in fact, many French versions from about 1675 actually rewrote the letters, rewording them and adding imagined details. These “imposter texts” were then translated into English in 1713 by John Hughes. In this form the letters became very popular in the English-speaking world; by 1901 the letters had become a travesty of themselves and had acquired a number of Victorian flourishes meant to give “the spirit of the original” rather than the original itself.

Thus it is hardly any wonder that historians were reluctant to deal with a source which had become so contaminated in the public sphere. Abelard himself was neglected until interest grew in the rise of the Paris schools and medieval scholasticism. When nineteenth-century historians noticed the letter collection at all it was to heap scorn on any possibility that it might have been authentic. In large part, it was beneath notice for them because of what Heloise wrote about preferring to be Abelard’s meretrix. Ignaz Fessler called the letters a fiction in 1806; J.C. Orelli in 1844; Ludovic Lalanne in 1855; Martin Deutsch in 1885. Henry Adams thought that the learned Heloise herself was a

71 Radice, xlix
74 Radice, 1.
This tradition continued into the twentieth century. In 1925 C.K. Scott Moncrief translated the letters but questioned their authenticity. Poets might have been interested in the love story, but clearly it was some time before historians were.

Little changed until the growth of social history in the first half and gender history in the last half of the twentieth century when suddenly the penetrating glimpse these letters afford into the private lives of both Abelard as a public man and Heloise as a twelfth-century woman initiated a florescence of interest. The story of Abelard and Heloise had finally passed to scholars who took it seriously.

**Thinking Historically**

History has rightly been called the dialogue of the present with the past. “History” is also a word in which two meanings are conflated: both the past and our study of it. Clearly history as study involves dialogue, but I think history as past also plays an active role in the dialogue in quite a real sense. The past lives through the gaze of the present. Obviously it is the changing present which initiates new directions in the dialogue, but even a well-known past is able to yield new information when it is queried in a different way. Every succeeding age brings to the table a different point of view, and it is a relatively simple task to map how the study of history changes as topics of interest change. However, it is extremely difficult to map out a new line of inquiry when basic perceptions have changed little or not at all. For example, this is the problem confronted by gender studies which, by their nature, attempt to forge a new understanding of the past.

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75 Levitan, xix.

76 Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 16 and Radice, lii.

while simultaneously engaging the same often unconscious perceptions still active in the present. In gender studies, just as in the studies of colonized peoples, the historiographical dialogue itself becomes an actor pushing present perceptions toward change. Whenever this happens, a change in an historical understanding often elicits the cry that it is introducing anachronisms, when the accepted view itself is anachronistic. The nineteenth century understanding of Heloise, for example, was just that: a nineteenth-century view of the twelfth century. A twenty-first century view is at least informed by a more developed philosophical understanding of the significance of point of view. From that self-conscious place I launch my own inquiry into Heloise.

My over-riding question is a simple one: who was Heloise? The answer is not simple, however, and these pages compound the problem to no little degree by inviting my readers to view Heloise as an individual separate not only from her lover but also from the love she bore him precisely by looking in detail at the letters she wrote to him detailing that love. There is no other way to approach Heloise because those remarkable letters are the bulk of what has survived from her pen.\textsuperscript{78} Accepting that conundrum is rewarding, however, because it helps us understand that the young girl she was, the lover she became, and the renowned abbess she was when she died are part and parcel of the same individual who transcended each of these parts while encompassing them all.

By the second half of the twentieth century, scholars had addressed two problems: the first decisively, the authenticity of the letters attributed to Heloise, but the second somewhat less so, the clouds of mythology surrounding the author herself. The doubts about authenticity that were raised as long ago as the nineteenth century were raised

\footnote{\textsuperscript{78} Both Dronke and Mews have identified some other works which might be by Heloise. I look at these in chapter 6.}
again in the twentieth to good effect. Currently there is a near consensus among both historians and literary scholars that Heloise’s letters are authentically hers. Not every scholar has been convinced—Duby, whom I admire very much, went to his grave in 1996 still believing the letters were written by a third party—and it is always possible that new evidence will change the consensus.\footnote{John Marenbon, “Authenticity Revisited” in \textit{Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth-Century Woman}, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 30. However, Jaeger notes that “it will take a shrewd scholar to disprove their authenticity after 150 years of failure arguing that position.” Jaeger, \textit{Ennobling Love}, 277.} Nevertheless, late twentieth century scholarship has made an authoritative case for what Jean de Meun never says he doubted: the letters attributed to Heloise were written by Heloise. Since this first question is the foundation for every other consideration of the letters, I have supplied a review of the issues involved in Chapter Two.

The work of clearing away the clouds of mythology began with the French historian, Étienne Gilson, in the 1930s, and is now being carried on in earnest. However, Heloise has been so thoroughly mythologized it may yet take some decades more for us to be able to “listen to Heloise,” to use Bonnie Wheeler’s phrase,\footnote{Bonnie Wheeler, \textit{Listening to Heloise}.} relatively free of interfering preconceptions, either those of centuries past or those we may newly introduce. Before we can understand the import of her words, we must first understand the nature of the blinders we have worn. The first blinder to be identified was the model of the Middle Ages bequeathed to us by Renaissance humanists and the way historians subsequently reified the break the humanists had posited: a break which refused to allow any semblance of individualism to exist before the fourteenth century. In the 1930s and 1940s Gilson was warning his colleagues that periodization was blinding them to
continuity and causing them to reject facts that didn’t fit their model.81 One very salient fact rejected by nineteenth-century historians and some in the twentieth as well was that a twelfth-century abbess could have been capable of writing letters as personal and as frankly sexual as those Heloise wrote. This rejection speaks to her importance. Gilson asserts that “before attempting to define the Middle Ages we should first have to define Heloise.”82 If this is true, and I think it is, Heloise is not merely an entertaining sideline; she is central to understanding the twelfth century.

The second important blinder is gender bias. Mews notes that the mythologizing of Heloise began with Jean de Meun,83 which is true, as far as that goes. But our new understanding of how constructs of gender constrain our view has made it clear that the basic problem is much deeper and has persisted much longer. Century after century Heloise has been viewed through the filtering lens of preconceptions about the nature of women and how to interpret their experience of sexuality. As Bloch argues in his excellent book, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, the view of women in the twelfth century was over-determined: that is, she was at one and the same time “the devil’s gateway and the bride of Christ.”84 What she never could be was simply human. Although these beliefs have finally begun to change under challenge, sexism is still operative even in our own so-called enlightened times, and some still make what they think of as light-hearted sport of Heloise as a slut. The problem seems to arise

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82 Gilson, 143.


from the way modern sensibilities distort our understanding of the language Heloise uses. When she says she prefers love to marriage and freedom to fetters, it is essential to remember that she is speaking in twelfth-century terms. The kind of freedom she is talking about, as we shall see, was not incompatible for her with life-long devotion and even life-long obedience to Abelard. Far from arguing that her nature was essentially carnal, I argue that she is better understood as a scholar who loved than as a lover who was incidentally literate.

A third blinder, however, remains the overwhelming attraction of the love story. The tendency is to assume that the Heloise of the love story is the only Heloise we need to know. In fact, the letters that mesmerize us were written long after the affair was over and represent a very brief, although certainly pivotal, chapter in her life. I propose in these pages that both the timing of this exchange and the nature of the turning point it represents are crucial to historicizing Heloise. Importantly, her move from Argenteuil to the Paraclete is more significant than is usually noted. After all, the Paraclete, unlike Argenteuil, was Abelard’s foundation. Heloise could toil there not just for the glory of God but also to enhance Abelard’s monastic reputation.

A fourth blinder has been the scholarly fixation on whether or not Heloise was ever converted to a devotion to God. In part, this has been because believing Christians inside or outside of the religious life have been genuinely concerned about the ultimate destination of her soul. Although there is a tension between Christian theology and ancient rationalism present in this pair of lovers, we need to be careful not to assign the first solely to Abelard and the second solely to Heloise. Unfortunately, she, and only she,
has come to be seen as one who “speaks with the voice of a pagan.” This blinds us to the fact that both lovers came to their life of scholarship with a love of classical literature; both were converted, if that is the right word, to a study of Christian sources; and finally neither was ever viewed as a pagan in their own times, although Abelard’s views on the trinity were twice condemned as heretical. Rather than focusing on Heloise’s need for conversion, I focus on her own concern, that is her need for consolation, and ask whether she found it in Abelard’s letters. Historically this is the more important question of the two and I attempt to show that his letters did console her just as she predicted they would and it is this that accounts for the fact that her first two letters are so markedly different in tone from the third.

My analysis begins in Chapter Two with a look at some of the questions raised in recent scholarship, but importantly, I suggest some additional questions of my own which have either not yet received any systematic treatment or have never been asked at all. These new questions, I think, contain keys to understanding Heloise: why was she in Paris, why was she still unmarried, and why did she wait nearly fifteen years to write to Abelard after they entered the religious life. To the extent that my close reading of the personal letters in Chapters Three, Four, and Five is successful in pushing the envelope here, it is because it was done in the full light of those questions. This is meticulous work which I began by encountering the letters in their original language. It was the considerable time I spent thinking about what she wrote—Latin sentence by Latin sentence—that finally allowed me to see Heloise emerging from the myth which has been so tightly spun around her. This is the reason I have used my own translations rather than the more polished ones of Levitan. I want the reader to see as exactly as possible how the

Latin says what it says. Next, in Chapter Six, I present Heloise in all her complexities as a magistra in all but name, and finally, in Chapter Seven, I look at how Abelard and Heloise understood their love both inside and outside of the paradigms available to them.

However far they may have transcended the ordinary, Abelard and Heloise are twelfth-century people and they viewed their own lives through a twelfth-century lens. Abelard found a model in theology which explained what had happened to him: God had rescued him from lust with a single wound to his body. Most scholars agree, however, that Heloise never accepted that view in spite of the fact that, as I will show, she very clearly contributed to its full formulation. There is also general agreement that Heloise alone wished to see her relationship with Abelard as one of true, life-long, even eternal, friendship (eternal since it would still be operative in heaven). Here again the conclusion is premature. By his second reply Abelard had agreed that he and Heloise were linked through the sacrament of marriage for eternity. Thus he accepts the bond as much as she does, although he recognizes a different source: not idealized friendship but Christian marriage.

The love story of Abelard and Heloise has been told and retold many times over the centuries, but real life seldom fits very neatly into any imagined narrative. The difference in how each lover made sense of their affair long after it was over creates a tension in these letters that lifts the story out of the customary and out of the romance. In this real love story we see a development barely imagined in the romances; the lovers forge a new relationship based on shared work both literary and administrative. The letters of Abelard and Heloise have already proved very fruitful in understanding many things about the twelfth century: women’s lives, monastic innovations, the debate about
marriage, and the new approaches to love explored in twelfth-century literature.

Nevertheless, the scholarship has left unresolved how to reconcile the Heloise of the first two letters with the Heloise of the third. I hope this dissertation will fill that gap.
CHAPTER TWO: DOUBTS AND INQUIRIES

Establishing Authenticity

We have already seen that nineteenth-century scholars raised doubts about the authenticity of the letters, but it was only in the twentieth century that historians began to deal with the question systematically, basing their cases on evidence both historic and literary. The history of this endeavor can be seen, ironically, as a vindication of that famous maxim in the introduction to Abelard’s *Sic et Non* that “by doubting we come to inquiry, and by inquiry we perceive the truth.” The doubts about authenticity came first, then the inquiry making a case first against and then for authenticity, and finally a near consensus that the letters are, in fact, from the pen of Abelard and, more significantly since most of the doubt had always been cast on her authorship, from the pen of Heloise.

There has never been much controversy over whether the *Historia Calamitatum* was written by Abelard; two of the earliest copies of the manuscript attribute it directly to him and no copy attributes it to anyone else. Thus the fact that the authenticity of the personal letters which are part of the same corpus elicited doubts almost as soon as the letters began to receive scholarly attention needs some explanation. That the doubts weren’t raised until the nineteenth century is significant. It was in the nineteenth century that the idea arose that it should be possible to study history “objectively” and to make it a thoroughly scientific discipline. We can applaud our predecessors for establishing the

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1 *Sic et non* is always translated as *Yes and No*, but since Latin does not have a word for yes and *non* means *not* rather than *no*, I think it is better understood as *Thus and Not Thus*.


need for proof, but, since their doubts were fixed on Heloise and only rarely included Abelard, we can also feel safe in assuming that they fell a good bit short of the scientific objectivity they so valued.

It is perhaps not surprising that the first systematic treatment was one which attempted to make the case that the letters were fictional, since at the time it was nearly universal for historians to doubt their authenticity. It was made by a German historian, Bernhard Schmeidler, in the year 1913. Schmeidler defended his position with what he saw as a major factual discrepancy: Heloise’s complaint that she had not the comfort of Abelard’s presence or a letter from him since their entry into the religious life when clearly she had seen him at the founding of the Paraclete. There the matter stood until the late 1930s when the first properly scientific case was made in support of authenticity, this time by a French historian, Étienne Gilson. Gilson addressed this discrepancy, as well as others complained of by Schmeidler, by pointing out that the misperception arose from two errors: first, improper translations and, second, willfully misunderstanding what the text actually says. Heloise does not say she hasn’t seen Abelard; she says that Abelard did not try to console her by word when they were together or by letters when they were apart. Gilson points out that Abelard clearly admits in Delictissime sorori that he never wrote Heloise a letter of consolation, but never denies they had seen each other.

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7 Heloise, Domino suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 70.
Thus early in the twentieth century a serious case had been made both for and against
authenticity, and although neither side had won a consensus, for the first time prominent
historians like Sir Richard Southern had been convinced that Heloise had written her
letters.8

Then in 1972, John F. Benton touched off a renewed storm of speculation by
proposing at a conference at Cluny that neither Heloise nor Abelard had written the
letters; that they were all forgeries including the Historia.9 This was new; most doubters
accepted that Abelard wrote the Historia and assumed he was the sole author of the
letters. Now two possibilities seemed to be on the table: either Abelard wrote the whole
corpus or it was someone else entirely. Interestingly, in spite of Heloise’s reputation in
her own time as a woman of letters, no one has seriously considered the possibility that
she herself might have been the sole author. Gilson had sketched out reasons why Heloise
might plausibly have written all of them herself, but only to show that Abelard as sole
author was just as unlikely.10 In 2003 Clanchy, Abelard’s biographer, made a very brief
mention of this possibility in his essay in Radice’s book.11 However, when looked at in
an objective light, turning the debate on its head like this makes some sense. Heloise was
an accomplished writer and it was Heloise who continued to value her connection with
Abelard so many years after the affair was over, while for Abelard the affair had only
been one, and perhaps not the most important, of his numerous calamities. His theology,


10 Gilson, 162 and 165.

his attackers, and his career occupied him for the rest of his life. Only a rather serious
form of gender bias could lead someone to imagine that if a single author composed this
whole corpus, it was he, rather than she.

The French medieval historian, Georges Duby, adheres to the second school of
thought. He remained convinced to the end of his life that the letters were “a meticulous
literary construction”\(^\text{12}\) and that the romance of Abelard and Heloise has little more
reality than that of Tristan and Isolde. Duby admits that the letters must have been written
in the twelfth century, because the detail about the time is so compelling, but he
speculates that it was some decades after Abelard’s death by some unknown monastic
author.\(^\text{13}\) He reminds us that this age of reform—ecclesiastical in the twelfth century—
like so many others—the French Revolution comes to mind—was eager to define women
out of whatever reform was going on. Here, he says, Heloise’s insistence on obedience to
Abelard is the central point and is used to show that women should be subordinate to men
in any new recasting of monastic life.\(^\text{14}\) According to Duby the letters are best understood
as a polemic both to further the church’s struggle to shape monastic reform and its
concomitant effort to gain control over marriage.

It is true that Heloise insists on the completeness of her obedience to Abelard, but
there are better ways to understand why this is so than to propose that the letters are

\(^{12}\) Georges Duby, Women of the Twelfth Century: Volume One: Eleanor of Aquitaine and Six
Others, trans. Jean Birrell (Dames du XIIe Siécle, I: Héloïse, Aliénor, Iseut et quelques autres. Editions

\(^{13}\) Georges Duby, Women of the Twelfth Century: Eleanor of Aquitaine and Six Others, trans. Jean

\(^{14}\) Many contemporaries considered double monasteries of men and women scandalous and they
were the origin of many a licentious story then and in subsequent ages. For a brief and even-handed
treatment see R. Howard Bloch, Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love (Chicago
polemics written by another hand. Dronke points out that internal evidence argues against a polemic in any case: Heloise’s conversion is never made explicit in the letters.\(^{15}\) It seems to me that another point also argues persuasively against the letters being accepted as polemics: they were hidden away in the Paraclete for nearly 150 years before they entered the written record in 1280 when Jean de Meun translated them into French. The next earliest date certain is 1347 when the Troyes manuscript was purchased from the cathedral chapter of Notre Dame by Robert de Bardi.\(^{16}\) No twelfth-century writer comments on the letters, not even those who commented on the affair, and that argues that they were not in circulation. If the author was the twelfth-century monk that Duby postulates, it is difficult to explain why the letters were not disseminated. Anyone who claims that they were written didactically to persuade must also explain why they were hidden away for so long when to achieve their supposed purpose they should have been broadcast. Even if Abelard is posited as the sole author writing for didactic purposes we might well wonder with Newman just “whom Abelard could possibly have meant to instruct by” his literary creation.\(^{17}\)

However, it is true that Benton’s challenge concentrated the minds of many scholars: Dronke, Newman, Clanchy, Marenbon, and Mews among them. Even without the testimony of contemporary comment on the letters, there are two steps which can be used to establish their authenticity. First, those letters attributed to Abelard must be compared to writings which are indubitably his on several different levels: their style,

\(^{15}\) Peter Dronke, *Abelard and Heloise in Medieval Testimonies*, W. Ker Memorial Lecture no. 26 (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1976), 11.


their vocabulary (Abelard invented several words over his career\(^{18}\)), and the ideas and themes contained in them. Then once it is shown that Abelard wrote the letters attributed to him, the letters attributed to Heloise must be examined to determine whether or not they were written by the same hand. This takes a scholar who has long experience with twelfth-century literary forms and a very deep familiarity with Abelard’s opus. Both Peter Dronke and Constant Mews have done significant work along these lines. Abelard was multi-talented, but, as Marenbon points out, he was not a literary writer,\(^{19}\) and Constant Mews has demonstrated that the differences in style between the letters attributed to Heloise and the letters attributed to Abelard are too great to allow both to have been written by one hand.\(^{20}\)

Doubters over the years have made much of the supposed discrepancy between Heloise’s public persona as a chaste and successful abbess and what is revealed in these personal letters.\(^{21}\) I am somewhat incredulous as to why this should have confounded so many. Surely the chasm between private thoughts and public lives is often wide. Rather than letting preconceptions about medieval abbesses tell us what Heloise could not have written, perhaps we should let the letters reveal what a medieval abbess was in fact capable of writing.

Jean de Meun does not tell us where he found the letters and, just as speculation on authorship centered for decades on Abelard, for centuries scholars had just assumed

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that it was Abelard who copied and kept them. It was not until the late twentieth century that the realization dawned that the person who had carefully preserved them had to have been Heloise. One reason is simply a practical one: she was in a better position to preserve mementoes. Abelard led a peripatetic life, moving from one monastery to another, never settling down for long; Heloise, once she was installed at the Paraclete, remained there for the rest of her life. In addition, it is likely that Heloise valued this record of their correspondence more than he. Abelard had many other works to guard that he may well have thought more important: his many treatises on dialectic, theology, and ethics. For Heloise these letters were her only tie to Abelard and to the life of the mind he represented for her. They were quite simply the record of her triumph in adversity—her successful recapturing of Abelard’s attention—and a vitally important link to the man she adored. Is it any wonder she might treasure them?

In 1974, two years after Benton had re-awakened the authenticity debate, another body of letters surfaced which Mews has convincingly argued are lost love letters exchanged between Abelard and Heloise during their affair. They emerged, surprisingly enough, from the library of the monastery that Bernard of Clairvaux founded in 1115. Although Bernard visited Heloise at the Paraclete at least once, he also led the persecutions of Abelard’s writings at the Councils of Soissons in 1121 and of Sens in 1141. Still it was in the library of Clairvaux that a scribe, who identified himself as Johannes de Vepria, came across a body of love letters in 1471 and copied out much of what was there. Thus Johannes did for these lost love letters what Jean de Meun did for

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22 Mews *Abelard and Heloise*, 13.

the more famous exchange; he copied and preserved them, but unlike Jean, he did not identify the authors; it is possible he didn’t know.

This second set of letters are between a teacher and a female pupil who are engaged in a physical affair. (An affair conducted by letters would more likely have been platonic at the time, thus the physicality of this affair helps identify these letters as written by Abelard and Heloise.)\textsuperscript{24} Johannes was, at least at first, mostly interested in the elaborate salutations and valedictions, but he included much of the contents as well, with ellipses indicated by special marks. The letters do not include much biographical data and what is there is open to interpretation, but Mews argues that the neologisms found in the letters correspond with those Abelard and Heloise use in their latter letters: words like \textit{unicus} (unique), \textit{singularis} (singular), \textit{specialis} (individual), and, most significantly, \textit{scibilitas} (knowability). The word \textit{scibilitas} was used by Abelard in his \textit{Dialectica}, the only other instance of its use before the thirteenth century according to Mews.\textsuperscript{25} Like Mews I am convinced that these letters were also written by Abelard and Heloise, and I have found them very useful, especially because they so often lend support to the arguments I am making based on the more well-known and well-accepted letters.

\textbf{Current Scholarship}

In the late twentieth century, even before the authenticity question was satisfactorily resolved, several important medieval scholars began to treat the letters (those written in about 1132) as an invaluable resource for understanding the twelfth


century. Among the first was R. W. Southern who, in a chapter in *Medieval Humanism and other Studies* (1970), places the letters of Abelard and Heloise within an epistolary tradition which followed a strict set of rules. For example, he points out that Abelard’s *Historia* draws from the three models available for a letter of consolation (*epistola consolatoria*): worse troubles have happened to others, troubles are a blessing in disguise, and troubles are the result of sin. Likewise, Heloise’s first reply follows the form of a letter of request (*epistola deprecatoria*); it had to show the request was reasonable, granting it was possible, and the writer was deserving. However, Southern admits that Heloise’s next letter “can be fitted into no rhetorical category” since there was none for radical self-disclosure. He concludes that “it is the transition from the first mood of literary showmanship to the last phase on monastic instruction—a transition made necessary by the persistence of Heloise’s self-disclosure—that gives the collection as a whole its human dignity.”

Peter Dronke, a literary scholar, has revisited Abelard and Heloise several times over his career. In 1976 he delivered a lecture at the University of Glasgow which was subsequently published as *Abelard and Heloise in Medieval Testimonies*. Here he began to lay the ground work for taking the letters seriously by examining the corroborating documents which tell us how the story was received among their contemporaries. Then in 1984 he published *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* in which he analyzes the letters of Heloise as literary creations. He seems to have been the first to point out how easily her letters can be parsed as poetry and how unusual her style was for northern France.

“Technically, Heloise’s prose, with its rhymes, rhythmic symmetries and cadences, was

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modern, not ancient; its movement . . . belongs with the Italian mode of letter-writing."27

Since then he has continued working to identify more examples of Heloise’s writings and in 2005 contributed an article to *Filologia mediolatina* entitled “New Works by Abelard and Heloise.”

Barbara Newman’s extended essay, “Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloise,” was first published in the *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* in 1992 and then included in her book, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, in 1995. Newman places the controversy over authenticity squarely in the middle of the battle of the sexes arguing that Heloise was repressed by men beginning with Abelard himself and continuing through all the ages since. Newman passionately refutes the notion that Abelard could be the sole author of the letters. First, he had no conceivable reason to write them, and, second, he would hardly have had the necessary literary imagination. Newman is also scathing about a number of scholars whom she accuses of gender bias: von Moos who sees Heloise as trivial, Benton who sees Abelard as in control, Robertson who sees Heloise as both minx and shrew, and Waddell who ascribes all of Heloise’s ideas to Abelard. Newman’s own reading of the letters, however, does not exempt even Heloise from a misogynistic reading of her own life. Taught by the authors she read to see womanly love as self-abnegation, Heloise did her best to achieve it, only to be asked by Abelard to sacrifice not only her self-will, but her very love for him. Newman sees a parallel with what Marguerite Porete (d. 1310) in her *Mirror of Simple Souls* calls the martyrdom of her will and her love. Heloise gave up her will to Abelard out of love for him and in return he asked her to love Christ instead. Newman expresses the hope that

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Heloise may also have achieved the “complete authenticity that Marguerite reached at the end of her trials.”

Georges Duby wonders whether it has “been appreciated to what extent the . . . [letters are] misogynist? Is it not primarily a discourse on the functional superiority of man?” In fact, that was the major reason why, as late as 1995, he was still willing to argue that the letters—all of them including the Historia Calamitatum—were written by neither Abelard or Heloise but were the work of a single, unknown, but still twelfth-century author. Recall that Duby sees the letters as a polemic whose purpose was to support the subordination of women specifically within the monastic life. Even though he was wrong about that, it is useful to be reminded that the misogyny of the age was so pervasive that it was able to influence even such subtle thinkers as Abelard and Heloise.

In her book To the Glory of Her Sex: Women’s Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts (1997), Joan Ferrante presents Heloise very differently. She sees her as a much more active partner and a woman confident about her own dignity. In fact, Ferrante interprets Heloise’s personal letters in a very unusual way: like the Historia they are nothing less than an effort to offer Abelard consolation in the way he did for his friend by showing him that her own troubles are even worse. “She wants to shock him into a concern for her soul so he will stop feeling sorry for himself.” Ferrante is also very interested in the letters of direction which she calls the “only collaboration between a man and a woman on religious texts that comes close to Jerome’s with his friends.”

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28 Newman, Virile Woman, 74.
29 Duby, Women, vol. 1, 59.
Heloise’s protestations of womanly weakness, she asserts, only served “to provoke Abelard to strong affirmations of women’s strengths.”

The thesis of Stephen C. Jaeger’s 1999 book, *Ennobling Love*, is contained in one sentence: “The conceptual tour de force of twelfth-century learned culture, courtly and clerical, was the incorporation of the *opus amoris* into the idealism of love.” He writes this in a chapter on Heloise whose letters contribute crucial evidence, but here he relies not on the later, but on the earlier letters, the *Epistolae duorum amantium*, the lost love letters. Jaeger calls these “a founding moment in the idealizing of romantic love in the West.” Read this way the lost love letters take on new life and illuminate with full force the ideal of love to which Heloise remained devoted all of her life. Jaeger celebrates Heloise as a woman of amazing boldness who glorified this way of loving with no models to show the way.

In that same year, Constant J. Mews also looked at these letters in *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France*. This contains the full text of these letters in both Latin and English, as well as six chapters outlining the manuscript tradition and analyzing the milieu and meaning of the letters. Like Jaeger, Mews accepts them as those of Abelard and Heloise in the throes of their affair and he offers compelling arguments, as we have seen, why others should so accept them as well. Then in 2005 Mews published *Abelard and Heloise*, a volume in the Great Medieval Thinkers series from Oxford University Press. Mews takes Heloise seriously as a thinker and a scholar, seeing Heloise both as a committed Christian and a continuing

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31 Jaeger, 158, 163-65.
influence on Abelard’s developing thought. Mews, like Dronke, feels that it may yet be possible to identify many anonymous manuscripts that have survived in France from the twelfth century as having been written by Heloise.

Another scholar I often quote in these pages is M. T. Clanchy who in 1999 published an important biography of Abelard. One can not write about Abelard without paying attention to Heloise, less if the book focuses on philosophy, much more when the man’s life is the subject of inquiry. However, because his focus is on Abelard, Clanchy’s comments about Heloise sometimes have an off-the-cuff feel that I am pleased to think conveys some of the prevailing assumptions about her. Thus Clanchy has sometimes served as a kind of foil for a number of my arguments in addition to the wealth of information he makes available about Abelard’s life and works.

A literary scholar, Bonnie Wheeler, edited a collection of essays on Heloise in 2000 with the title *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth-century Woman*. Mews contributed a chapter as did several scholars who have worked extensively on Abelard like John Marenbon. Perhaps the most useful essay here for this work is the one by Mary McLaughlin who fills in for us the story of Heloise’s success as abbess of the Paraclete for more than three decades. The usefulness and interest of this story goes a long way to balance the usual intense focus on her love affair.

Finally, William Levitan has recently produced a wholly new translation of the letters: *Abelard and Heloise: The Letters and Other Writings* (2007). The other writings referred to include Abelard’s letters of instruction and his confession of faith, the introductory letter to Heloise’s *Problemata*, selected songs and poems by Abelard, a selection from the lost love letters, as well as the extant letter exchange, small but
significant, between Heloise and Peter the Venerable. Levitan emphasizes at the very
beginning of his introduction that the story is one not only of sexual, but of intellectual
passion, a story so ripe with meanings it is fodder for every kind of ego projection.
Levitan sees the letters themselves as events, that is acts with consequences, in the lives
of the writers.\textsuperscript{32} It is a very readable and literary translation, not least because Levitan
follows Dronke’s method of transcribing Heloise’s letters in poetic form.

In addition, it is instructive to note that among recent works on the twelfth century
the name Abelard rarely fails to appear and although Heloise is less often included, she
can scarcely be overlooked any longer in any book on medieval women, woman’s
monasticism, or even courtly love. However, I am using the insights of these scholars not
to illuminate the twelfth century, but to reflect them back on Heloise herself to show how
our view of her must change when we emphasize how significant her scholarship was and
how thoroughly she was embedded in her times. I extend those insights still further by
arguing that she was, in fact, well and truly consoled and that the consolation she found
in Abelard’s letters freed her for the great achievement of her life, one that lasted seven
centuries, the Paraclete.

\textbf{Asking new questions}

We have learned most of the few biographical details that we know about
Heloise’s life from Abelard’s \textit{Historia Calamitatum}. From that source we know she was
educated at Argenteuil; her maternal uncle, Fulbert, was a canon at the cathedral of Notre
Dame in Paris; and that, as a young woman, she had removed or had been removed from
Argenteuil and was living with him in Paris. Apparently it had not been unusual for

\textsuperscript{32} Levitan, “Introduction,” \textit{Abelard & Heloise: The Letters}, xi-xii.
canons to have family members, even wives, living with them, but in the early twelfth century that was already beginning to change. We also know Heloise and Abelard had a son who was born at Abelard’s family home in La Palet, Brittany, where he was brought up by Abelard’s sister, but we do not know what relationship, if any, Heloise had with this son subsequently other than a letter from Peter the Venerable answering one of her own looking for a post for the grown Astrolabe. Heloise and Abelard were married after Astrolabe’s birth, but instead of establishing a household together, she remained with her uncle until Abelard sent her to Argenteuil, and that after Abelard’s castration both took holy orders and entered the sister monasteries of St. Denis and Argenteuil. She stayed there a little over a decade until Abbot Suger expelled the nuns from Argenteuil in 1129. At this juncture Abelard installed Heloise and some of the other nuns at the Paraclete, about 120 kilometers southeast of Paris, where she remained as abbess for the rest of her life—nearly thirty-five years. Some further details we learn from other sources. The records of the Paraclete tell us that Heloise died in 1164 and that her mother’s Christian name was Hersind, but we do not know the year she was born or who her father was. Peter the Venerable tells us that she was respected as a successful abbess and that the Paraclete grew and thrived during her tenure.

About this smallish collection of facts all we can do to enlarge our understanding is to ask the right questions. Some questions have been raised in recent decades and

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33 Constable, 54-58.

34 It is worth noting that both these establishments were favored by the patronage of the Royal family of France.


examined in some depth, but, as I will point out, others, perhaps just as interesting, have been rather surprisingly and very unfortunately neglected. Before asking these new questions, however, let us look at one point which has aroused quite a bit of speculation: to wit, when was Heloise born? This is interesting because it makes a difference for the way we understand this love story whether she was still in her teens or whether she was already a mature woman in her mid-twenties. Here Abelard does not help us much. He refers to Heloise merely as an *adolescentula*, a Latin word of less precise meaning than its English derivative. Its simplest meaning is *a very young girl*, but Cicero applied its masculine correlative, *adolescentulus*, to himself when he was twenty-seven; Sallust used it to describe Caesar when he was about thirty-three; and Abelard used it to describe himself when he was twenty-three. And, in fact, in her first letter to Abelard after she had read the *Historia*, Heloise uses the same term *adolescentiam*, but without the diminutive ending, to refer, not to her own, but to Abelard’s age at the time of their affair when he was about thirty-six. She uses still another word that refers to age, but alas, just as imprecisely. In that same letter, Heloise refers to herself as *iuvenculam* from *iuvenca*, a young woman. Note that here she does add the diminutive. However, a related word *iventus* meant youth or the prime of life between the ages of twenty and forty-five in classical times.

Thus this line of investigation, although it looks promising enough, is not fruitful. All we really learn is that reference to time of life was less precise in the twelfth century

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than it is today. Youth seems to have been synonymous with the prime of life, and one was in the prime of life until one was clearly old. Neither Abelard nor Heloise was old, by their standards or ours, during their affair in 1117 and 1118. In the case of the diminutive form which Abelard used, he might have been thinking not simply of Heloise’s age but of her sex. Heloise might have chosen her word to show that in relation to Abelard she herself was very young when she took religious vows. The fact that both lovers agree that the diminutive applies appropriately to Heloise, but not to Abelard, does not mean that she was in her teens at the time of the affair. Mews calls this idea a “pious fiction” and suggests that instead Heloise was about twenty-one. \(^{40}\)

In fact, assuming Heloise was nearly as young as Juliet—not more than seventeen or so—raises troubling questions. Both Abelard and Peter the Venerable write that her scholarship had already won renown and as unlikely as that was for a mature woman, it would have been even more unlikely for a girl still in her teens. Clanchy also argues that Heloise must have been in her twenties. He bases his argument on Peter the Venerable’s letter to Heloise after Abelard’s death in which Peter says “I had not yet fully gone beyond the bounds of adolescence, nor had I passed into youthful years, when the fame of your name first reached me. I used to hear at the time of the woman who, although not yet disentangled from the bonds of the world, devoted the highest zeal to literary science.” \(^{41}\) From the fact that Peter refers to himself as an adolescent and to Heloise as a woman, Clanchy infers that Heloise must have been older than Peter who was born in


1092 or 1094 and that puts her in her twenties at the time of the affair. Levitan concurs, saying she was a mature woman in her mid-to-late twenties.42

The case for Heloise being older than has usually been supposed is a good one, but accepting the revision, as I do, raises another very important consideration which has so far been left out of this speculation: Heloise was unmarried when Abelard discovered her. The point seems so banal to us today that remembering how very unusual that would have been in her time is quite difficult. But remember it we must. Girls from noble families were married very young throughout the Middle Ages.43 We need to note that this love story, unlike the ones in the romances, is between two unmarried people, not between a bachelor knight and a married lady. That this is more modern than medieval may be preventing us from wondering why Heloise was not yet married. If Heloise was indeed in her twenties and still unmarried that would have been highly unusual and demands explanation.

Even if her unmarried state was seen as temporary, it could not have escaped her uncle’s notice that the older she grew the fewer her potential husbands would be. We should not suppose that the problem was illegitimacy. It is true that speculation has arisen on that point from the fact that her mother’s, but not her father’s, name was recorded at the Paraclete when she died. However, being illegitimate would not have been an insuperable impediment for a woman from a noble family. In fact, according to Duby, Heloise was from one of the most illustrious families in France: the Montmorancy family,


a traditional rival of the Capetians who held the crown.\textsuperscript{44} In addition being one of the canons of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in the royal demesne of Paris should have meant her uncle could easily have been able to find a husband willing to marry her.

But even if Fulbert wanted to find a suitable husband for his niece, it was clearly not her own idea of the best possible future for herself. In fact, it is critical to ask whether or not she ever imagined being married at all, not just to Abelard, but to anyone. This has not been given the scrutiny it deserves, not because it is unanswerable—there is both circumstantial as well as textual evidence available—but because Heloise has seldom been considered separately from Abelard. Marriages at the time were arranged by the male head of household, yet Fulbert was arranging tutors for Heloise instead. We have evidence from Abelard in his \textit{Historia Calamitatum} that when he asked her to marry him, Heloise had at the ready an impressive number of objections and she supported them with appeals to history and to literature. It seems clear she had given the matter no little thought.

Heloise had not always lived with her uncle Fulbert. She had been raised in the royal monastery of Argenteuil outside of Paris.\textsuperscript{45} Although I can not find that this has received much attention either, it may also be fruitful to ask why she was in Paris by 1117. Nobly-born women usually left the home in which they had been raised either at or soon after puberty either to marry or to enter a convent. The mature Heloise had not yet

\textsuperscript{44} Georges Duby, \textit{Women: Volume One}, p. 42. This was also the tradition, in spite of the fact that Heloise’s principle biographer, Enid McLeod, maintained that she was humbly-born. Like the notion of her tender age, this is likely to be an embellishment. Humbly-born girls were not educated in Latin classics. Clanchy also accepts the Montmorancy connection. Clanchy, \textit{Abelard: A Life}, 185.

\textsuperscript{45} Argenteuil has an interesting history. It was founded in the seventh century, destroyed by Vikings, and restored about the year 1000 by Hugh Capet’s wife, Adelaide. Bruce L. Venarde, \textit{Women’s Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England, 890-1215} (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 44.
married when Abelard began lodging at Fulbert’s house, but if we take her at her word, and we should, neither had she come to Paris to prepare for a religious vocation as an abbess, although McLaughlin suggests just that.\textsuperscript{46} We have written confirmation directly from Heloise that she did not have a vocation for the religious life. \textit{“Quam quidem iuvenculam ad monasticae conversationis asperitatem, non religionis devotio sed tua tantum pertraxit iussio.”} (Me, indeed, whom as a young woman not religious devotion but your order only dragged to the difficulty of monastic life.)\textsuperscript{47} In addition, there are two other pieces of evidence that argue against the possibility that the young Heloise had come to Paris to prepare herself to be an abbess. First, abbesses received private educations usually within, not outside, the nunnery, and instead of remaining at Argenteuil Heloise had positioned herself as close to the cathedral school at Notre Dame as she could. Second, we have ample evidence, confirmed by Peter the Venerable, that Heloise was studying the classics, rather than theology, at this point.\textsuperscript{48}

But if Heloise did not want to be a wife and she did not want to be a nun, what did she want? Could she even imagine what she wanted when she had rejected the only two roles open to noble women in her time? The answer may have something to do with her presence in Paris. Surely the woman recognized as the greatest female scholar of her age was hungry for the life of the mind. That she was a scholar is now receiving gratifying attention from historians. Levitan asserts that viewing Heloise as an “intellectual, moral,

\textsuperscript{46} McLaughlin, “Heloise the Abbess,” in Wheeler, 2.


\textsuperscript{48} Peter the Venerable, “Letter to Heloise”, in Levitan, 265-66.
and social being” is more revealing than viewing her as a woman who loved.49 Newman says that “she saw the life of contemplative leisure—which absolutely excluded marriage, though not lovemaking—as a real possibility for herself.”50 Note that Newman shies away from saying that Heloise wanted to be a philosopher, but Bonnie Wheeler suggests exactly that: “When Heloise was young, a woman might hope to be taught by the great masters of philosophy, and she might even dream of being counted in their number.”51

Thus, however improbable, we cannot discount the possibility that Heloise had come to Paris eager for the excitement that being near the Paris schools could afford her. She would have known that she could not possibly join the classes there, but her fondest wish came true when her uncle invited the greatest teacher in Paris, Peter Abelard himself, into his house and arranged for him to give her lessons. If we may venture so far as to assume female agency, then securing such a teacher may have been Heloise’s idea and she had importuned her uncle on that point. Can we go that far? I think we must because seeing Heloise as an active participant in her own life story clears up a good many mysteries, not the least of which is why Fulbert so readily turned his “lamb” over to a “hungry wolf” as Abelard characterizes what happened in his autobiography: Fulbert was accommodating a beloved niece.52

Her status then as a mature, but unmarried, woman in her uncle’s household is as unusual as her scholarship. There has been some speculation that Canon Fulbert was her

50 Newman, Virile Woman, 69.
father and not merely her maternal uncle, but it was customary in the twelfth-century for male children to be members in an uncle’s household even with a father still living, and although it was a bit less likely for female children, it was not unknown. It was common for brothers to take in their dead siblings’ orphans and death rates were high, not least for knights. Whichever he was, Fulbert was standing in the position of father to her when Abelard came on the scene. Since the story is now so well-known, what happened next has taken on an air of inevitability. In fact it was not uncommon in the twelfth century for members of a knightly family—as Abelard was, although he himself had left behind the sword for the pen and the tournament for the lectern—to fall in love with one of the highly placed young women in their patron’s household. In this Abelard was not even slightly original; he was quite simply following the topos of the times. What he did that was unexpected, because it was so dangerous, was to follow through on his feelings by seducing her, but perhaps we should also wonder why she allowed herself to be seduced.

Although there is not a great deal of scholarly speculation about what Abelard saw in Heloise and Heloise in him, these questions too are worth a second look. In the *Historia Calamitatum*, Abelard tells us that in the full flush of his philosophical triumphs he decided to indulge in a love affair and looked around Paris for a suitable woman. This was not necessarily an easy task. “He had a horror of prostitutes, yet his life as a professor kept him at a distance from the daughters of the nobility and the bourgeoisie.” But he knew about Heloise; her reputation had preceded her. Deciding then on Heloise, he says, he laid siege to her uncle and won both admission to his house and permission to

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53 McLeod, 11.

54 Gilson, 5.
teach her by day and night.\textsuperscript{55} Whether that was really the way things began or not, we can not say. We only know that this was the way Abelard chose to characterize it many years later.\textsuperscript{56}

Thus many years after the fact, Abelard wants us to believe that he decided independently on indulging in an affair and looked about for a suitable woman. Although we can not know definitively, it is unlikely that Abelard is being scrupulously accurate about this sequence of events. Levitan has suggested that he may have wanted to exonerate Heloise from any blame.\textsuperscript{57} If so, giving all agency to himself and emphasizing his own lust was an effective way of doing that. If he had said instead that a bewitching young woman had distracted him from his studies, he would be casting her in the familiar role of temptress, but, whether out of ego or gallantry, he was careful not do that. In any event, we can be certain he was aware that the subject had to be approached carefully since Heloise, at the time he wrote the \textit{Historia}, had important standing as Abbess of the Paraclete and the admiration of many of the most influential men of her day. He could not cast her as Bathsheba to his David and ascribe his downfall into lust by the \textit{oculorum illecebra} (enticement of the eyes).\textsuperscript{58}

Instead he tells us that it was not her beauty, but her scholarship that caught his attention: \textit{"Quae cum per faciem non esset infirma, per habundantiam litterarum erat}

\textsuperscript{55} Abelard, \textit{Historia}, in Muckle, \textit{“Letter of Consolation,”} 183

\textsuperscript{56} Constant Mews also doubts the strict veracity of Abelard’s account. Mews, \textit{Abelard and Heloise}, 59-61.

\textsuperscript{57} Levitan, \textit{“Introduction,”} \textit{Abelard &Heloise: The Letters}, xiv.

suprema."\(^{59}\) (Although in regard to her face she was not the lowest, when it came to the abundance of letters, she was the highest.) His choice of words is unambiguous about her scholarship, but significantly less so about her looks. It is possible to interpret “not the lowest” to mean something like “far from the lowest” i.e. beautiful, or equally plausibly as “not quite the lowest” i.e. plain, but perhaps not actually homely.\(^{60}\) However in another section of the *Historia* where Abelard offers to make amends to Fulbert by marrying his niece he describes his actions in more conventional terms. He says, “I pleaded the great power of love and what women had done from the beginning of the human race to bring even the greatest men to ruin.”\(^{61}\) What women had done, of course, was to entice with their beauty. Here Heloise is Bathsheba to his David. But however little his choice of words tells us about how fair Heloise might or might not have been as a young woman in face and body, we can deduce something from it with certainty. It tells us that Abelard wished to deemphasize the first and emphasize the second aspect of his lover’s charms. We should note that in an age when every noble lady was routinely described as beautiful in direct proportion to the power and wealth of her family connections, Abelard does not use the conventional forms. That is not likely because he is more honest than most about the plainness of the lady, or even because she was plain, but because he wishes to emphasize something other than her face and form.\(^{62}\)


\(^{60}\) Dronke quotes an anonymous poem from c. 1118 that describes Heloise nearly as Abelard did fifteen years later: “*Quam facies multis, quam philosophia puellis pretulerat cunctis.*” (she whose face had set her above many, whose philosophy had set her above all other girls.) *Medieval Testimonies*, 19.


\(^{62}\) In the *Lost Love Letters*, however, the man does extol the beauty of his beloved, letters 107 and 113. If this is Abelard praising Heloise, it argues for my point.
In fact, he extols her scholarship. However ambiguous Abelard might have been about Heloise’s looks, we must take him at his word about how very attractive her literary scholarship was for him. Clanchy tells us that Abelard had fallen in love with letters as a boy63 and here was the most learned woman of her age, nearby, unmarried, and still young. Abelard tells us quite clearly that because she was highly literate, he hoped she would be more sympathetic to him and he could enjoy corresponding with her when they were apart.

*Tanto autem facilius hanc mihi puellam consensuram credidi quanto amplius eam litterarum scientiam et habere et diligere noveram; nosque etiam absentes scriptis internuntiis invicem liceret presentare et pleraque audacious scribere quam colloquie et sic semper jocundis interesse colloquis.*64

The more I knew that she both had and loved knowledge of letters, the more easily I believed that this woman would be in sympathy with me; and likewise it would be possible even when we were apart to show ourselves in turn through written intermediaries and to write more boldly than to speak a good many things and thus always to be in the midst of pleasant conversations.

Note that he also implies here that the correspondence might be deliciously indelicate.

There are letter exchanges contemporary with Abelard and Heloise between other teachers and pupils, some heterosexual pairs, others homosexual, but although they employ passionate and even erotic language, they are clearly between people who did not necessarily expect to be lovers in fact.65 Abelard wants both: erotic correspondence and erotic encounters.

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There was something else attractive about Heloise: she was nobly born. This information does not come to us from Abelard; he mentions only that Heloise lived in the household of Canon Fulbert, but makes no comment on the nobility of the family. We should certainly not assume on that account, however, that Abelard was immune to the attractions of a connection to high nobility. Remember that one of the prizes a young knight was taught to hope for was a woman from a family nobler than his own and, it is probably safe to say, Abelard always assumed that he deserved the best. In addition, he had no reason to belabor the point. He could be certain that any contemporary reader of the Historia Calamitatum who knew the Montmorancy family would not find his choice surprising or unduly self-serving.66

A further point can be made here as well. Abelard was one who enjoyed besting rivals and the most renowned woman scholar of her age presented a challenge that proved to be irresistible.67 Heloise, as we have seen, had also devoted her life to letters, and, just as he was doing, it is possible that she was living a celibate life, not for the usual reason that women had to safeguard their virginity until marriage to uphold the honor of their families, but because a celibate life was the accepted and admired life of a scholar and she wanted to prove herself to be a scholar. Abelard both seduced this paragon and married her. Was seduction the tool he used to best her as he had used disputation to best rival male scholars? Duby notes that in the courtly love stories the woman was set up to

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66 Duby is very clear on this point. Men courted up and married up. Women of the Twelfth Century, volume II, 34.

be conquered. Abelard laid siege to Heloise and boasted of his conquest through the songs he wrote and made public. “Like the lady of the tournament, Heloise becomes the token that reinforces the homosocial bond of the scholarly comitatus.” This element of interest for Abelard is certainly possible, and it does not obviate the fact that he enjoyed the seduction and subsequently felt himself to be in love with Heloise.

For Abelard, Heloise was both noble and learned; in addition she certainly had the bloom of youth and, lest we forget the importance of this, the charm of proximity. But what can we say about Heloise’s interest in Abelard? Since she was a woman, her age naturally assumed her to have the more carnal nature and to be the more easily swayed by sexual temptation. Our own age, surprisingly, would like to see her as unabashedly sexual as well. The only difference is that while the twelfth century deplored it, the twenty-first hopes to celebrate it and would like to see Heloise as an assertive woman looking out for her own robust sexual appetites. Either view, however, is somewhat difficult to square with Heloise’s willingness to live acelibate life at Abelard’s command. I think we need to look deeper. If any woman was a one-man woman, Heloise was. Her devotion was to Abelard and not to a determination to satisfy her own carnal desires, however robust they might have been. She was focused on Abelard, not on her carnal desires, which—as her age and ours agree—must logically lead to a certain fungibility among the available men. Heloise found no such thing. What then did she find so irresistible about Abelard?

68 Duby, Love and Marriage, 58.


It is true that Abelard seems to have held attractions for her that are, perhaps, less than lofty. Interestingly, a reluctance to dwell on physical characteristics is a point of symmetry between the lovers: Abelard does not tell us what Heloise looked like and Heloise does not directly describe Abelard’s physical attractions. It is Abelard, not Heloise, who tells us straightforwardly that he was handsome!

*Tanti quippe tunc nominis eram et juventutis et forme gratia preminebam ut quamcunque feminarum nostro dignarer amore nullam vererer repulsam.*

To be sure at that time I was of such a name and I stood out with respect to the grace of youth and form, that whoever among women I might think worthy of my love, I feared no rebuff.

Heloise tells us of his fame, his beautiful voice, and his gift for writing songs and she says all the women of Paris, even the very highest, envied her. Everyone knew about the affair apparently—everyone except Fulbert—and that made Heloise a celebrity among the very people she cared most about: the masters and students of Paris.

Heloise admits to Abelard that his celebrity status swayed her not a little: his songs on everyone’s lips, how people craned their necks to get a glimpse of him, how virgins and married women alike envied “*gaudiis meis . . . vel thalamis*” (my joys and my bed). Clanchy asks us to consider whether, despite her protestations of pure love, she may really have cared about Abelard’s fame rather than him. To support an answer in the affirmative, Clanchy notes that fortune “is a prominent theme in her first letter.” True she did lament that fortune had raised her up only to cast her down, but these few words

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of hers can not prove that Heloise was merely mesmerized by celebrity. As she herself points out just a bit further on in her first letter, “the end proves the beginning.”

\textit{Dum tecum carnali fruerer voluptate, utrum id amore vel libidine agerem incertum pluribus habebatur. Nunc autem finis indicat quo id inchoaverim principio. Onmes denique mihi voluptates interdixi ut tuae parerem voluntati.}^{74}

While I enjoyed carnal delight with you, it was thought by many to be uncertain whether I was doing it from love or lust. Now, however, the end reveals with what a beginning I began it. In the end I have forbidden all delights to myself so that I might obey your wish.

She is inviting Abelard and the world to look to her actions, her willingness to take on the austerities of a monastic life at his command, to understand just how selfless her love was. This does not mean Heloise was not delighted with Abelard’s fame—she clearly was—but it does challenge us to see that the pull of fame was only one component of her interest in him. It is an interesting component, though. We so easily assume passivity on the part of women in the twelfth century, it is instructive to imagine that they may actually have thought like this about their lovers—as a prize for whom they had bested other ladies. We can scarcely determine how typical that might have been—Heloise’s is one of the few women’s voices we still hear from so far away—but we may be able to agree that her interest in Abelard’s fame shows her to be an active agent in this particular affair, subject as well as object.

In order to understand something of the reasons Heloise found Abelard so irresistible, we need to put her words into the context of her life. Heloise was a scholar; her prose was admired in her day and it is admired in ours. One does not learn to write as well as that and in a scholarly language so different from the everyday vernacular of her time without reading a great deal. And one does not read so assiduously unless to feed an

\footnote{Heloise, \textit{Domino suo}, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 73.}
active and subtle mind. We are on firm ground, then, in assuming that Heloise lived and loved the life of the mind and that Abelard was a kind of living embodiment of that love for her. When she came to Paris and discovered the greatest—by his own account, as well as that of others—scholar of the age under the same roof . . . well, what would you have done?

The timing of the letters

The story sketched so far brings Abelard and Heloise to their entry into the monastic life in 1118. Almost fifteen years elapsed before the beginning of their famous correspondence and during that time much had happened. Abelard did not stay long at St. Denis. He was summoned to the Council of Soissons in 1121 for the trial of his book on the Trinity, suffered the ignominy of being forced to place it on the fire and was briefly incarcerated at St. Médard. After returning to St. Denis and managing to insult his community and even his king by raising doubts about the identity of their founding saint, he retreated to the country of Champagne where he established an oratory and was joined by several of his students. Within just a few years, however, he accepted an abbacy at St. Gildas on the wild Atlantic coast hoping to escape further persecutions but finding only more. Through all these perambulations, in spite of his new status as monk and priest, he had continued to write and, more sporadically, to teach.

Things had not remained static for Heloise either. At Argenteuil she had been made prioress and there is evidence she continued her interest in literature. Then in April 1129, Abbot Suger of St. Denis expelled the nuns from Argenteuil. When Abelard heard what had happened, he invited Heloise to gather up any of the sisters who were willing and move to his oratory, the Paraclete, to establish there a house for religious women.
Life in a new foundation would be leagues harder than life in an established abbey, but Heloise did not hesitate to accept this new directive. She tells us that it was out of her absolute obedience to him, and, although she must have enjoyed having a new opportunity to demonstrate her obedience, she may also have relished the thought of being an abbess rather than a prioress. Heloise had always valued her independence.

Abelard and Heloise had separated and entered the monastic life in 1118; Suger expelled the nuns from Argenteuil in 1129; Abelard wrote his Historia about 1132 and it was only then that the famous letter exchange occurred. It is unwise to take this sequence for granted, since the very timing of these letters has a lot to tell us. To begin with it is highly unusual for love letters to be written so long after an affair is over, whether or not the pair ever married. Heloise did not write her letters in the first throes of thwarted love as another nun in the seventeenth century did. That unfortunate woman wrote letters from her Portuguese convent with a very different tone: “I loved you like a mad woman. . . . You must have had for me some natural aversion not to love me madly, and I let myself be charmed by very mediocre qualities indeed”75 and other cries of pain of that ilk. Heloise, however, did not write to Abelard for consolation in 1118 but only in 1132. To understand the timing, we need to think about what was different by 1132. Quite simply it was the Paraclete and the opportunity it gave Heloise for renewing contact with Abelard. The founding of the Paraclete as a nunnery changed things for Abelard as well. McLaughlin notes that he writes of the Paraclete as his only solace; a solace that had been interrupted for the second time when he left the nuns on their own and returned to St. Gildas. The contrast between the devotion of the nuns and the murderous intent of the monks was cruel. It is very likely, as McLaughlin surmises, that Abelard wrote the

Historia as a relief for his own emotions. Nor was it mere happenstance that a copy found its way to Heloise. The Paraclete had placed their relationship on a new footing: he as founder, she as Abbess. It was only that that allowed them room to discuss their old relationship. The founding of the Paraclete as a home for religious women had made this letter exchange possible, and the letters in turn nourished the growth of the Paraclete. Let us then look closely at the letters themselves in the light of this background.

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CHAPTER THREE: HELOISE’S OPENING GAMBIT

Domino suo immo patri

The letter collection begins with Abelard’s *Historia Calamitatum* and, although he did not address it to Heloise, she was clearly on his mind when he wrote it. It is scarcely possible to overestimate just how significant the timing of the *Historia* is. It and the ensuing letter collection followed hard on the heels of the founding of the Paraclete and Abelard’s forced retreat once again to St. Gildas when his care of the sisters opened him to ridicule once again.

*In quo nec invidiae mihi murmur defuit, et quod me facere sincera caritas compellebat, solita derogantium pravitas impudentissime accusabat, dicens me adhuc quadam carnalis concupiscientiae oblectione teneri qua pristinai dilectai sustinere absentiam vix aut numquam paterer. . . . Nunc vero mihi divina misericordia ab hac suspicione liberato, auomodo huius perpetrandae turpitudinis facultate ablata, suspicio remanet?. . .  Sed quod tunc forte minus pertuli ex vulnere, nunc ex detractione diutius plector, et plus ex detrimento famae quam ex corporis crucior diminutione.*

Even in this I met slander and spite, and this blameless act of charity was now twisted—as they twisted everything in their foul, perverted way—into a lust they said still enslaved me to the woman I once loved and could never bear to be without. . . . But now that God’s mercy has freed me from that suspicion and my power to commit those acts is gone, how could there be suspicion left at all? . . . But if perhaps there was little pain from the wound at the time, there is more now from this protracted slander, and I suffer more from the cost to my reputation than the loss to my body.

Perhaps it was his renewed contact with Heloise and this second separation that set him ruminating on a life filled, as he saw it, with calamities. And perhaps it was Abelard’s

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2 Translation by Levitan, 39-40.

3 McLaughlin agrees that he had lost the solace of the Paraclete but argues he was looking forward, as well as back, toward his return to Paris. “Abelard as Autobiographer,” 466-468.
frank discussion of their affair and its denouement that prompted Heloise to write about their affair herself, not as Abelard had done in a letter intended for a wider audience, but in a very personal letter addressed specifically to him by name. The man who had been keeping things between them as impersonal as possible since their entry into religious life had finally broken his long silence about their affair. So, when she had read Abelard’s letter of consolation to an unnamed friend, Heloise picked up her pen and answered him.

This was her opening gambit in what can be seen as a game of chess.\(^4\) Heloise takes the white pieces and opens the game since it is she who wishes to change the status quo. Abelard counters, but he seems to join the game reluctantly and with some surprise. He had not noticed she was struggling. This first letter to him must have been a difficult letter to write. It was risky and it was played for high stakes. First, Heloise risked failing. If he never answered at all or if he simply rebuked her for writing, she might never have another such chance again. Second, she risked her reputation and perhaps even her livelihood by being so candid.\(^5\) What if the letter fell into the wrong hands? Did she even know how to direct it? Scholars believe Abelard was still at St. Gildas when he wrote the \textit{Historia}, but that soon after he was back in Paris.

In his biography of Abelard, Clanchy refers to their marriage as a kind of divorce.\(^6\) It was at least an unusual marriage; after the ceremony they parted at the church door. As in most divorces, difficulties, hurts and disappointments had followed. Whether it was due to his castration or something else, Abelard seems to have walked through a

\footnote{4 Other scholars have used the chess analogy as well. See Katharina Wilson and Glenda McLeod, “Textual Strategies in the Abelard/Heloise Correspondence,” Wheeler, 123.}

\footnote{5 Clanchy, \textit{Abelard: A Life}, 191. Also Newman, \textit{Virile Woman}, 58.}

\footnote{6 Clanchy, \textit{Abelard: A Life}, 191.}
door and closed it behind him, but Heloise had continued to ruminate on all that had
happened and her feelings had remained pent up, unexpressed for nearly fifteen years.
When he installed her and her nuns at the Paraclete, all at once they were in each other’s
company again, perhaps on a more regular basis than at any time since Fulbert had come
upon them making love and thrown Abelard out of the house. Nevertheless it is clear
from the letters that Abelard had kept his visits to the Paraclete on a professional basis.\footnote{Clanchy thinks that by writing the \textit{Historia} Abelard \textog{grievously offended Heloise
because he had written about her to a stranger, as if she had no feelings of her own.}}\footnote{Clanchy, \textit{Abelard: A Life}, 251.} It is
possible that she was offended, but it is unlikely that she wrote to Abelard so candidly
because she was angry with distortions in the \textit{Historia}. Her letters are full of anguish, not
anger, and she takes Abelard to task for misrepresenting her only once as we shall see.
What galvanized her, I think, is that Abelard had written about what connected them and
that had opened a door.

Now she marshaled all her resources because, after years of neglect, this was
perhaps her one best chance to persuade Abelard to write to her, not just once, but on a
regular basis, not just as the founder of the Paraclete and her superior, but as the man who
had once been her lover and was in some sense still her husband. (When both had taken
holy orders, they agreed to live separately, but they were not divorced, and an agreement
to live separately did not invalidate the marital bond.)\footnote{Men who had been married could take holy orders, but only if “their wives or concubines had
died or agreed to a separation.” James A. Brundage, \textit{Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe}
(Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987; paperback edition 1990), 252.} The structure of this first letter is
three-fold: first, Heloise sympathizes with Abelard’s difficulties and reminds him how

\footnote{Gilson clears up the notion that Heloise’s complaint that Abelard had offered her no consolation
does not mean that they had never seen each other. 158.}
much they affect her; then she describes the nature of the multiple debts he owes her; and finally she suggests that repaying those debts through writing letters of consolation to her would be both easy for him who writes so prolifically and more fruitful than laboring among ingrates and foreigners at St. Gildas.

Her first problem was the salutation. According to the epistolary conventions of the day, this was freighted with significance. For example, the superior’s titles or the terms describing the superior always came first whether that superior was the writer or the recipient of the letter. So Heloise begins with two descriptors for Abelard’s relationship with herself, and she qualifies each of them: “domino suo immo patri, coniugi suo immo fratri . . .”10 (to her lord or rather father, to her husband or rather brother). In the secular world Abelard had been her lord and husband, now he was a spiritual father, as an abbot, or her brother in their mutual religious life. Thus she uses the very salutation to emphasize both their earlier relationship and the overwhelming nature of the change that has ensued.

And what was she to him? She calls herself ancilla sua immo filia, ipsius uxor immor sorror . . . (his handmaiden or rather daughter, his very own wife or rather sister). These pairings mirror those she addresses to Abelard but she makes one subtle exception to her crafted parallelism; she uses the intensifier ipsius before the freighted word uxor (wife). I am your wife, she tells him many times in the passages which follow, a unique relationship which binds us in very significant ways. Abelard has told us that once she had hotly denied that they ever married:

Avunculus autem ipsius atque domestici ignomine sue solatium querentes, initum matrimonium divulgare et fidem mihi super hoc datam violare

10 Heloise, Domino Suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 68.
Moreover, her uncle and his household seeking solace for his dishonor began to make public the marriage that had been entered into and to violate his promise to me about this; in contrast she (Heloise) also (began) from the opposite side to curse and to swear that it was most false.

Now she insists on the marriage. But let us not blame her for her change of heart; circumstances had changed very dramatically. There was no more need for secrecy and there was every reason to remind Abelard about their marital bond. Finally she concludes her salutation with their names—not surprising to modern eyes, but not mandatory or even particularly usual in the twelfth century—*Abaelardo Heloisa*: Abelard in the dative, i.e. “to Abelard,” Heloise in the nominative, i.e. it is she who is composing the letter. Including both their names is another clear signal that she wants this to be a personal exchange.

She begins by calling him *dilectissime*, most beloved, in her opening sentence, but lest we read too much into this, we should remember that language like this was also used as religious language in the twelfth century. It is her insistence on their conjugal bond throughout the letter which tell us that *dilectissime* may be read as a personal term of endearment. However her next comment is remarkably imprecise. His letter, she tells him fell into her hands quite accidentally, “*forte quidam nuper attulit*” (by chance someone brought it not long ago). How did that happen? We might well wonder whether Abelard gave a thought to the possibility it might reach her while he was composing it, but is it possible that he actually took care to send her a copy? Jean de Meun’s translation

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12 *Dilectissime* was the woman’s favorite epithet for the man. Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, 129.
13 Clanchy notes, “Monks were literary exponents of love as much as the troubadours.” Clanchy, *Abelard: A Life*, 160.
of this same passage indicates that Abelard may have done just that: “Dearest one, your man has recently shown me your letter, which you sent to our friend for consolation.”\(^{15}\) Although this alternate wording is not susceptible of proof—we have de Meun’s French translation, but not the Latin copy he was working from and other Latin copies use the \textit{forte} phrase—it would, in fact, clear up that other mystery already alluded to above. If she could entrust her reply to Abelard’s own man she would be able to rest assured that it would reach Abelard and only Abelard.

By whatever route the letter arrived at the Paraclete, if Abelard had thought about it at all, he should have been able to guess how eager Heloise would be to read it.\(^{16}\) She makes that much quite clear at the outset. She tells him that she realized immediately on seeing the inscription that the letter was his: “\textit{ex ipsa statim tituli fronte vestram esse considerans, tanto ardentius eam coepi legere}”\(^{17}\) (assuming at once that it was yours from the very title page, I began to read it the more ardently). Seeing the handwriting of her beloved, she expects refreshment, but the letter is “\textit{fere omnia felle et absinthio plena}”\(^{18}\) (nearly all full with gall and wormwood). His troubles may have comforted one friend, she tells him, but they only added to her own sorrows:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Quae cum siccis oculis neminem vel legere vel audire posse aestimem. Tanto doleres meos amplius renovarunt, quanto diligentius singula expresserunt et eo magis auxerunt, quo in te adhuc pericula crescere retulisti ut omnes pariter de}
\end{quote}

\(^{15}\) Quoted in Peter Dronke, \textit{Women Writers}, 113. In his 2007 translation of the letters Levitan follows Dronke’s lead in assuming that de Meun was working from an older manuscript and therefore had the more accurate translation. Mews suggests we may even know the name of Abelard’s man: Berenger of Poitiers. Mews, \textit{Lost Love Letters}, 41.

\(^{16}\) There is an indication in her letter that Heloise read whatever he wrote. She had seen a copy of his \textit{Theologica summa boni}, his tract on the trinity which was condemned at the council of Soissons in 1121-22. She refers to it as “\textit{de glioso illo theologiae tuae opere}” (that glorious work of your theology).

\(^{17}\) Heloise, \textit{Domino suo}, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 68.

\(^{18}\) Heloise, \textit{Domino suo} in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 68.
vita tua desperare cogamur et quotidie ultimos illos de nece tua rumores
trepidantia nostra corda et palpitantia pectora expectent.\textsuperscript{19}

No one I think could read or hear these things with dry eyes. My sorrows
revived the more, the more accurately the details described [those events] and
they were increased most by the fact that you reported that the dangers are still
increasing so that we are all driven equally to despair for your life, and daily our
trembling hearts and beating breasts expect final word of your death.

Notice that she claims that the nuns under her care in the Paraclete are one with her
in heart and mind. Equally with her they are driven to despair for Abelard’s life; their
hearts tremble as hers does; their breasts beat. It is hard to know what to make of this.
Sometimes when she uses the first person plural, rather than the singular, it is clear she
still means only her self. In other cases, as the paragraph cited just above, it is clear—
here from the adverb \textit{pariter}, equally—that she is including all the sisters at the Paraclete.
This may have been a nod to convention or it may have been cover for the audacious
enterprise of writing the way she did to the man who had been her lover. In any event it is
typical. She is the head of the nuns under her care and they think as she does.\textsuperscript{20}

It is also important to remember that when she wrote these letters she had already
been prioress at Argenteuil for a decade and then abbess at the Paraclete for at least two
years. Heloise had grown in experience and confidence. Things had not remained static
since their early days together when, as the \textit{Lost Love Letters} show, she was initially
somewhat timid about writing to a philosopher with so formidable a reputation as
Abelard’s.\textsuperscript{21} There is little timidity about her now. She had spent the intervening years
not only as prioress and abbess, but also reading and researching her questions and

\textsuperscript{19} Heloise, \textit{Domino suo}, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 68.

\textsuperscript{20} Morgan Powell proposes that Heloise read these letters aloud to the sisters. “Listening to
Heloise at the Paraclete: Of Scholarly Diversion and a Woman’s ‘Conversion,’” in Wheeler, 258-259.

\textsuperscript{21} Mews, \textit{Lost Love Letters}, 17.
concerns. One wonders what kind of library the Paraclete managed to amass. With Heloise as abbess building the library must certainly have been a priority. Perhaps she had brought her own books with her to the convent when she joined the sisters at Argenteuil and had carried both those and whatever books from Argenteuil she was allowed to take with her when she moved to the Paraclete. Unfortunately “little is known of the books possessed at the Paraclete during the twelfth century.” No library catalog has come to light. The Paraclete had to be rebuilt after the 100 Years War and was destroyed completely at the time of the French Revolution.

Heloise initiates her classical quotations in this letter, the first, remember, of their mature correspondence, with a quote from Seneca about the value of letters from absent friends. No reasoned argument was complete without calling on the authority of ancient authors and Heloise does not leave this stone unturned. When Heloise tells Abelard “non parvum nobis remedium conferes hoc saltem uno quod te nostri memorem isse monstrabis” (you will bestow no small remedy on us by this one thing at least: that you will show yourself to be mindful of us), she is telling him how much she would appreciate some indication from him that she and her nuns are sometimes in his thoughts. Seneca, she reminds him, tells his friend that, “I never receive your letter but that we are not at once together.” Here she mentions lightly in passing that, although Abelard is prohibited from visiting too often by the malice of the world, only negligence could prevent him from writing to her. Abelard’s debts to her are many in Heloise’s eyes. She was his wife; she is still obedient to him in everything; she is abbess of his foundation; and now he has inflicted fresh wounds by describing the dangers and difficulties of his

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present life. “*Nova quaedam nobis vulnera doloris inflixisti.*”24 (You inflicted certain new wounds of pain on us.) These new wounds, she tells him, have incurred new debts which he can discharge by writing to her.

**The conundrum**

This is the letter in which Heloise presents historians with a significant conundrum. It is here that she uses the three very belittling words to describe her relationship with Abelard which have caught the attention of every subsequent reader: *concubinae, scorti*, and *meretrix*. They are used in two different passages, first:

*Et si uxoris nomen sanctius ac validius vederetur, dulcius mihi semper extitit amice vocabulum aut, si non indigneris, concubinae vel scorti.*25

And if the name of wife seemed more sacred or stronger, the word friend has always stood out to me as sweeter or, whether or not it might make you indignant [to hear this], concubine or whore.

and second:

*Deum testem invovo, si me Agustus universo presidens mundo matrimonii honore dignaretur, totunque mihi orbem confirmaret in perpetuo possidendum, carius mihi et dignius videretur tua dici meretrix quam illius imperatrix.*26

I call upon God to be a witness, if Augustus, presiding over the whole world were deeming me worthy of the honor of matrimony and declaring that the whole universe should be owned by me forever, it would seem dearer and more worthy to me to be called your harlot than his empress.

*Concubinus* or *concubina* refers to a man or woman who lies with someone to whom they are not married. *Meretrix* means harlot, but in the twelfth century it had an even more specific meaning: it was the preferred word to refer to the woman who lived


with a priest. A *meretrix* then was almost certainly not simply a harlot or a whore in our understanding of the word because a *meretrix* was devoted to one man; we would call her a common-law wife. Thus *meretrix* comes closest to being accurate of any of the three perjorative words Heloise uses, since Heloise would not consider any man other than Abelard. *Scortum*, the most perjorative of the three, means “a skin or a rent-boy, in the sense of a prostitute of either sex.” These words get our attention, but other word choices Heloise makes are also worth a look. The qualifier “*si non indigneris*” that she uses before invoking the first two sordid words, for example, is usually translated as “if you do not object” implying that Abelard may indeed object, but she will use them anyway. However, the deponent verb *indigneo* means *take as an indignity, or be offended* so a better translation may be something like “whether or not it might make you indignant [to hear this].” In addition, her choice of the word *aut* rather than *vel* to introduce the alternatives she proposes is also freighted. Used to introduce an alternative, *aut* has a rather strong meaning. It forces a choice between the alternatives: this or that, but not both, either a friend or a whore.

Coming across words like these in a letter written by a respected abbess is a shock, even today, and it is crucial to our understanding of Heloise to figure out why she uses such sordid words in her search for a way to describe her love for Abelard. These three words had perhaps never before and never since been used to describe such heartfelt love. Not only is it a puzzle, it is a stunning testimony to her originality and we are hard-pressed to understand her. Rather surprisingly no one has yet attempted a systematic analysis to help us do that. It is not enough to assume that she employs them because her

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27 Karras, 104.

libido was particularly strong; she is invoking these words for reasons which have little to do with carnality.

In fact, there are at least six different approaches which are necessary to consider in teasing out what Heloise is trying to say. First, her words must be put in perspective. These are far from the only descriptive words she uses about her relationship with Abelard and she uses each of them only once. Second, her words must be understood in the context of her time. Although they were extremely damning, they were not particularly unusual. Third, her words reflect her own horror that Abelard was castrated at the bidding of her uncle and her lingering guilt about her complicity. Fourth, she is using these words to drive home the point that her love for Abelard was entirely selfless. Fifth, she is pointing out that as a nun, as a bride of Christ, she does not have the husband she herself prefers. Sixth, it is just possible that if marriage was inappropriate for Abelard because he was a philosopher, she felt it was inappropriate for herself as well because she was also a philosopher. It is important to note that none of these approaches includes any suggestion that she herself was somehow titilated by these words. With that in mind, let us take these points one at a time, although no one of them is sufficient by itself.

(1) To put her word choices in perspective we need to remember that Heloise is constantly searching for the best, sweetest, or most holy word to describe what she feels for Abelard and what their relationship means to her. In the very sentence in which she uses the first two of these three sexually damning words, she is, in fact, searching for a sweeter word than wife: “si uxoris nomen sanctius ac validius vederetur, dulcius mihi
semper extitit amice vocabulum"²⁹ (if the name of wife seemed more sacred or stronger, the word friend has always stood out to me as sweeter). Nevertheless, in the very phrase in which Heloise declares her preference for the word friend over that of wife, readers tend to fixate—such is the power of the word—on whore instead. In fact, except in these three instances of a single use of each of these perjorative words, she refers to herself in very positive words repeatedly: ancilla (handmaid),³⁰ filia (daughter), uxor (wife), soror (sister); as well as amicissima (dearest friend) and in subsequent letters: unica sua (his only one), sua singulariter (the one who is his singularly). It is also worth noting that somewhat earlier in this same letter she also reminds Abelard that it is she and her nuns “quas non tam amicas quam amicissimas non tam soicas quam fillias convenit nominari vel si quod dulcius et sanctius vocabulum potest excogitari”³¹ (who are fit to be called not just friends but dearest friends, not just comrades but daughters or whatever sweeter and more holy word can be devised). It is quite simply the case that Heloise saw her relationship with Abelard as both sweet and holy.

(2) The context of her time is also crucial for understanding what she says. This was an age of opposites. Just when the church was beginning to assert that marriage could appropriately be defined as a sacrament since marriage was necessary to produce souls for heaven, it was also stepping up its enforcement of celibacy for clerics. Marriage, however, was not only deemed acceptable for the laity, it was encouraged because

²⁹ Heloise, Domino suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 71. I have followed the advice Mews gives to translate amice as friend whenever Heloise uses it to refer to her relationship to Abelard. Mews, “Philosophical Themes,” 36.

³⁰ Although ancilla could mean a female slave, it was used as praise for religious women who were the handmaids of the Lord. In that use there can be no hint of degradation.

³¹ Heloise, Domino suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 69.
marriage “promoted and, indeed, made possible the virtue of conjugal fidelity.” It was also expected that lust would play a subordinate role as a spur to sexual union for married couples. Nevertheless, Christians were exhorted and expected to reject sexual temptation and “intercourse, whether in marriage or not, also produced ritual pollution” because it led to orgasm. Marriage was, therefore, at the same time a sacrament and a concession to weakness. Within this framework, anyone who aspired to a truly praiseworthy way of life had to eschew both fornication and marriage. That included first monks and bishops, then canons, and finally all clergy no matter how minor their office.

In a cathedral close at the beginning of the twelfth century, concubines of priests and canons were still commonplace but under attack. Peter Damian had been instrumental some decades before in popularizing the use of terms like *meretrix* and *concubinae* to refer, not only to the concubines of priests, but to wives they had legally married as well. It was part of the campaign of invective against clerical marriage, but it is possible that common usage, while it may not have reduced the sting, had allowed the terms to come more readily to the tongue and to sound less surprising to the ear. Therefore it is likely that words like *meretrix* or *concubinae* are more shocking to twenty-first than to twelfth-century sensibilities. In this context, Heloise herself would not have viewed the word *meretrix* or even *concubinae* as inappropriate for an abbess to use. She

32 Brundage, 235.
33 Brundage, 240.
34 Brundage, 246.
36 Brundage, 216.
37 Karras, 67.
was naming a reality that was known and accepted among her contemporaries. What was unusual was applying these epithets to herself.

When she reaches even lower, however, and employs the word *scorti* it seems clear that in reaching for a word not in common usage for the consorts of priests, she does mean to shock. Does Heloise here knowingly speak the stereotype of women’s sexuality—defying it by speaking it—unflinchingly naming what everyone knows? This is what it means to be the receptacle of lust: a whore, a rent-boy. If that is what I was, she is saying, I claim it. Heloise knew how the world viewed what she and Abelard had done—a view so at odds with her own experience and yet so inextricably part of it—a view she could only embrace because she could not escape it. How hopeless it has proven for her to try to declare her innocence by accepting the framing; when she names the frame, the world says, “see, we were right all along!”38

Her use of these perjorative terms has a more personal meaning as well. It was a response to Abelard’s own characterization of their affair. Abelard had accepted the cultural framing that viewed any sexual congress outside of marriage as the sin of lust and he had been unable to imagine, at least since his castration, if not before, that there might be another way to explain how he felt about Heloise. When he comes to the years 1115-1118 in the *Historia*, he frames his narrative as a confession, saying “*frena libidini coepi laxare*”39 (I began to loosen the reign on my lust). Thus Heloise is only following Abelard’s own logic when she characterizes herself as his concubine or whore. Recall also her use of the word *aut* to pose the contrast: either friendship or whoredom, not both.

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She seems to be aware that that is the choice facing both her and Abelard. If he thinks of her as his whore, he will not think of her as his friend; if he thinks of her as his friend, he will not think of her as his whore. She prefers the word friend, but she does not flinch from calling herself his whore, since the fact of their relationship is more important than the way it is characterized. She does upbraid Abelard about it though. She says the whole world suspects that “concupiscientia te mihi potius quam amicitia sociavit, libidinis ardo potius quam amor” (desire joined you to me rather than friendship, the fire of lust rather than love).

Her profoundly disinterested, spiritual, and, yes, sexual love is still confused with lust and sin and whoredom, but in the twelfth century, in spite of this cultural framing of her affair, Heloise was greatly admired by many of her contemporaries. They were able to see her clearly because they knew the actual woman; they knew what she had accomplished in her life and how she conducted herself. We can only arrive at a similar clarity by acknowledging the cultural frame in which she lived and loved, still so close to our own framing of the affair that we exclaim with the ages, “what carnality this abbess is invoking!"

(3) The possibility that she might have felt guilt about Abelard’s castration at the hands of her own family cannot be overlooked, as Clanchy also points out. It surfaces in this correspondence many times. Abelard tells us that when she finally agreed to marry him she prophesied their ensuing unhappiness. “Unum ad ultimum restat ut in perditione

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40 Heloise, Domino suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 72.

41 Clanchy, 162.
duorum minor non succedat dolor quam praecessit amor.”42 (There is only one thing left for us that in our utter ruin the pain to come will be no less than the love that has gone before.)43 When she did marry him and it did harm him, what must her feelings have been? Abelard was aware of them to some degree because in the Historia he says she took the veil sobbing and quoting Cornelia’s lament from Lucan:

O maxime coniunx!
O thalamis indigne meis! hoc iuris habebat
In tantum fortuna caput? cur impia nupsi,
Si miserum factura fui? Nunc accipe poenas,
Sed quas sponte luam.44

Oh greatest husband!
Oh my unworthy bed! Did fortune have this by right
Over so great a head? Why did I impious marry
If I was about to make you miserable? Now receive the penalties,
But ones I will pay freely.

Immediately following her invocation of the words concubinae or scorti, in this letter, Heloise adds that “pro te amplius humiliarem, ampliorem apud te consequerer gratiam et sic etiam excellentiae tue gloriam minus lederem”45 (the more I humbled myself for you, the greater favor I obtained with you and thus also the less I hurt the fame of your excellence). It was certainly humbling to accept the status of concubine and she had certainly hoped an affair would not damage his reputation in the way a marriage could and did. It was a forlorn hope and doomed to failure, but it is important to recall that humility was a positive virtue in their Christian world where even the pope styled

42 Abelard, Historia, in Muckle, 189.
43 Translation by Levitan, 18.
45 Heloise, Domino suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 71.
himself the servant of the servants of God and Bernard called himself “the servant of the poor of Christ of Clairvaux.”46

(4) Heloise is trying to say that her love for Abelard was entirely selfless, but it is a surprisingly difficult point to make. In the Historia Calamitatum Abelard had described at some length the objections Heloise made to their marrying. The fact that she objected at all is a bit mysterious to modern readers who instinctively feel that loving him as she did and having just given birth to his child she could not possibly object to marrying him when he offers. The objections Abelard lists are the ones, however, that historians who study twelfth-century Europe will find convincing: “tam pro periculo quam pro dedecore meo”47 (as much because of the danger as because of the disgrace to me). He does not elaborate on the risk that Heloise warned him about, although Clanchy speculates that she did not trust Fulbert to negotiate their marriage in good faith,48 but he does dwell on her arguments about the disgrace it would mean for a philosopher, who from classical times was assumed to be devoted to his studies and to have no time for marriage. Perhaps the learned Heloise quoted Paul, Jerome, Seneca, and Augustine to him then; in any event Abelard quotes them in the Historia to bolster her remembered arguments: Paul on the anxious care that marriage brings, Jerome about Cicero’s claim that a new wife would keep him from philosophy, Seneca that philosophy requires all of a philosopher’s time, and Augustine on the praiseworthy nature of a philosopher’s [celibate] way of life.

Heloise also asked him, Abelard reports, “quae etiam inhonestas illas parvulorum sordes


48 Clanchy, Abelard: A Life, 186-87.
assiduas tolerare valebit?"⁴⁹ (Indeed who is able to tolerate that constant disgraceful filth of small children?) On this last point we may well wonder whether Heloise is speaking as much for herself as for Abelard.

Heloise, however, is not satisfied with this summary of her objections to their marriage. She tells Abelard that he has left unspoken some reasons “quibus amorem conjugio, libertatem vinculo preferebam”⁵⁰ (by which I preferred love to marriage, liberty to fetters). Note that in true twelfth-century fashion she does not equate marriage with love; quite the contrary: she assumes that they are opposites just as liberty and fetters are opposites. We should not imagine, however, that she is anything but typical here. It was commonly agreed in her day that marriage had little to do with love. Husbands were even laughed at by their friends or counseled by their priests if they fell in love with their wives.⁵¹ However, since she has just said that Abelard has left something out, the reader is primed for explanations that will directly fill in that gap. Instead, Heloise makes that arresting, but also remarkably opaque, pronouncement that has engaged readers of her letter for centuries, the very passage Jean de Meun quotes verbatim:⁵²

_Deum testem invovo, si me Agustus universo presidens mundo matrimonii honore dignaretur, totumque mihi orbem confirmaret in perpetuo possidendum, carius mihi et dignius videretur tua dici meretrix quam illius imperatrix._⁵³

⁵¹ Duby, _Love and Marriage_, 24.
⁵² Jean de Meun, _The Romance of the Rose_, 134-35.
I call upon God to be a witness, if Augustus, presiding over the whole world were deeming me worthy of the honor of matrimony and declaring that the whole universe should be owned by me forever, it would seem dearer and more worthy to me to be called your harlot than his empress.

She is clearly not invoking any living king here, but either a mythical or historical one. No contemporary ruler could serve her purpose. In 1132 Louis VII of France directly ruled only a small kingdom; Henry I of England was in his dotage without a male heir. It is true there were two who claimed the actual title, but Lothair III was on his way to Rome to win the support of Innocent II as Roman Emperor (called Holy Roman Emperor only after the sixteenth century) and John Comneni, John II, the emperor in Constantinople, was contending with Normans as well as Saracens for control of the Levant. Instead she is playing with the rhyming words *meretrix* and *imperatrix*, the one so low and the other so lofty. Consciously or unconsciously, she is blunting the audacious fact that what she is actually doing here is claiming agency. The *object* of desire is describing how *she* feels and what she wants above all is for the world to understand just what that is. In an age where sex was not seen as the glue for a relationship, but instead something one person, always male, does to another,54 this is extraordinary. Perhaps, even for Heloise, it seemed dangerous. There must be some reason why, having announced that Abelard left out something important, she is suddenly so coy. Instead of a list, the reader gets a stunning conundrum. What can she mean?

To clear up her meaning it is necessary to turn our attention carefully and fully to the far less arresting lines immediately following. She begins by denigrating marriage, stating that most people enter matrimony only because they hope it will increase their own wealth and power. In the teeth of the fact that these were the most powerful

54 This is the theme of Karras’s whole book.
inducements for matrimony in her day (and still operative in our own), she declares such motives to be shabby ones. She joins two interrelated points here, both having to do with the *meretrix/imperatrix* pairing, but it is a bit difficult to see how her first point—the woman who marries for wealth and position is the true prostitute—relates to her second—Abelard *is* the best possible husband, better even than Augustus. Can Abelard’s very worth be the reason she does not want to marry him? The answer is yes. Marrying someone so worthy could only be seen by the world as self-aggrandizement.

She goes on to say that the wife who marries her husband for anything other than himself has prostituted herself and does not deserve his gratitude. That seems clear enough, but she adds that such a wife would be willing to leave her husband the moment a richer or more powerful man was available. In fact, it was a rare wife who was even in a position to even try such a thing—Eleanor of Aquitaine is perhaps the only example—and even highly-placed husbands in Christian Europe had difficulty divorcing one wife to marry another. Nevertheless Heloise quotes Aspasia, the famous concubine of Pericles, who is reported to have said that married people stay together only as long as both believe a fiction: “ut neque vir melior neque femina in terris electior sit” (that there be neither a better man nor a more choice woman in the world). Heloise asserts that she herself is in no danger of discovering a better husband because “quod error ceteris,

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55 In other words the wife is the debtor. Claire Nouvet notes that a woman who refuses to marry turns this on its head: she puts him in her debt by her willingness to be his whore. “The Discourse of the ‘Whore’: An Economy of Sacrifice,” *Modern Language Notes* 105, no. 4, French Issue (1990) : 763.

56 As Philip I of France had done when he repudiated his first wife and married Bertrada, the wife of the Count of Anjou, in 1092, but even the mighty had problems with this kind of behavior. In 1095 Philip was excommunicated by Urban II.

veritas mihi manifesta contulerat”\(^{58}\) (what error bestowed on others, plain truth had bestowed on me). For her it was simply not a fiction; Abelard was, in fact, the best possible husband, better even than a man who could claim the title of Augustus. It is easy to lose the thread of her argument here since the proofs she provides next of Abelard’s worth are so diverting. It is here that she talks of his fame, his public following, and especially his gift of song “quibus feminarum quarumlibet animos statim allicere poteras”\(^{59}\) (with which you were at once able to entice the hearts of whatever woman you please). When at the end of this long section she simply says her intentions were pure—she did not want wealth or position—we may be forgiven for forgetting that this was the most important reason why she did not wish to marry Abelard.

The solution to the conundrum turns on her desire to prove her love for him as the noblest, most disinterested kind of love possible. The point here, and it is a subtle one, is that she can not provide that proof by marrying, but only by refusing to marry. This is the key to her assertion that *concubinae* or *meretrix* are sweeter words than wife. The woman who is simply a lover has no claim on her lover’s property and has humbled herself for his sake rather than receiving a boost in status from the position of wife. Thus, Heloise is arguing that her love is nobler because it is as selfless and self-sacrificing as it is possible for a love to be. Willing as she was to give up the world for Abelard and unwilling as she was to accept anything at all from him—not his property, not even the status of wife—then her love, being more self-sacrificing, even if it was given the name *meretrix* or worse, shows itself to be nobler than that of a wife.


In his retelling of their affair, Abelard overlooked, then, the very arguments Heloise made against marriage that gave agency to her, to the female half of the pair: how much she values him and her desire to be seen as feeling and acting from the loftiest of motives. Abelard is not a conventional thinker on many topics, but his summary of her objections to marriage are the ones that place Heloise in the accepted role of passive participant and privilege his own position: “the danger and disgrace to me” that is, to Abelard. However, like Heloise and Abelard, we also find these waters deep and the challenge to conventional thinking difficult. Without a meaning she can count on sharing even with so subtle a thinker as Abelard, Heloise finds it difficult to make her point since it goes against the accepted understanding that marriage is an honorable estate. It is also possible that she herself is not quite clear about what it might mean to want him for himself only. But Heloise, we can never forget, was wholly focused on Abelard. Her earlier statement about preferring love to marriage, freedom to fetters is a general one and seems to indicate that in any circumstance love is preferable to marriage, but here she takes it a step further and makes the specific assertion that she prefers any relationship with Abelard no matter how lowly to the status of wife with any other man no matter how lofty. However, she leaves somewhat ambiguous the point that in the end she did marry him but only because her obedience in this too proved her love.

(5) When Heloise says that she would rather be Abelard’s concubine than Augustus’s wife, she is also saying that she does not have the husband she herself prefers, and she did, in fact, have another husband. As a nun, Heloise was lawfully the bride of Christ in the eyes of the church and indeed in the eyes of twelfth-century jurisprudence. However, as a classical scholar, when Heloise read the words Ovid puts in Briseis’
mouth in his *Heroides*, “I was so soon handed over to the king”60 (Briseis was passed from Achilles to Agamemnon) it could only have been natural for her to think of her own situation when she had taken her vows against her will and was in effect passed from Abelard to Christ only months after her own wedding. However, since she was legally the bride of the King of Kings, Heloise had to disguise her complaint. It would be sacrilege to write that she disdained Christ as a husband and so she substitutes a hypothetical husband here, and since he had to be sufficient for her purpose, she chooses Augustus for his iconic status as the ruler of the mighty Roman Empire.

In support of this, Dronke notes other parallels between what Ovid has Briseis say and what Heloise writes in these letters. When Briseis addresses Achilles, “you were my lord, my husband, and my brother too,” Dronke sees Heloise’s salutation in the letter we are discussing “to her lord or rather father, to her husband or rather brother.” When Briseis says to Achilles, it’s “not your fault—yet it is also your fault,” Dronke sees Heloise’s play on the words nocens/innocens when she declares that she, Heloise, was both guilty and not guilty. But most significantly for Dronke’s argument, Briseis is a heroine who “longs to submit totally to the lord whom she admires and loves” and Heloise insists throughout her letters on her complete and continuing obedience to Abelard.61

60 Quoted in Dronke, *Women Writers*, 126.
61 Dronke, *Women Writers*, 126
what was admirable about those studies in his eyes might well have been, at least in part, her commitment to the celibate life demonstrated by her refusal to marry for at least a decade before Abelard made his offer. It was unusual in those days for a woman in her mid-twenties who was not a nun to be unmarried. To avoid both marriage and the convent, a woman would need to have a purpose and pursue it with determination.

Nevertheless, when the opportunity for an affair with Abelard was in the offing, there is no indication that Heloise hesitated. In this regard, it is helpful to remember that she invoked Aspasia when she filled in those things Abelard had left unsaid about why she didn’t want to marry. Aspasia had been famous for her learning and she was the consort, but not the wife, of Pericles. It is likely that this is the model Heloise would have chosen for herself: a philosopher/consort to an exceptional man. Levitan notes that choosing Aspasia as a model is significant. Heloise is saying that not only can a woman be a philosopher, but a concubine can be one as well.63

In summary, it is clear that the reasons why Heloise insists that she would rather be Abelard’s friend than his wife, or even his whore or concubine, are complex, but each of the pejorative words are used not to emphasize the carnality of her love but to show how completely disinterested it is. It would be an egregious mistake to imagine that she wants to be a whore, but in fact enough people have made that mistake that Mews finds it necessary to state categorically that “She did not want to be a prostitute.”64 In fact when she invokes these words it says nothing about her pleasure in her sexual congress with Abelard. She tells us about her sweet memories of the affair later in different places and

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62 Peter the Venerable, letter to Heloise, in Levitan, 265.

63 Levitan, *Abelard and Heloise*, xxiii.

with different images. In her misogynistic age, as in all the misogynistic ages that have followed, it was little realized that a woman’s interest in a man was not the mirror image of that man’s interest in her. Abelard may have come to believe he desired Heloise for carnal purposes alone; she always knew she desired him for that and much more. She tells us that she finds friend a sweeter word than wife. What she had in mind was an idealized and total friendship on the Ciceronian model, but one in which a woman could participate.

**Memories of love**

Having established to her satisfaction that the whole world knows that Abelard, alone among husbands, was the best in the world, Heloise describes the stunning reputation of the man she loved. He is nothing short of a celebrity:

*Quis etenim regum aut philsosophorum tuam famam exaequare poterat? Quae te regio aut civitas seu villa videre non aeuabat? Quis te rogo in publicum procedentem conspicere non festinabat ac discedentem collo erecto oculis directis non insectabatur? Quae coniugata, quae virgo non consupiscebat absentem et non exarabat in praesentem? Quae regina vel praepotens femina gaudiis meis non invidebat vel thalamis? Duo autem fateor tibi specialiter inerrant . . . dictandi videlicet et cantandi gratia . . . pleraque amatorio metro vel rhythmno composita reliniquisti carmina quae prae nimia suavitate tam dictaminis quam cantus saepius frequentata tuum in ore ominum nomen incessanter tenebant . . . Et cum horum pars maxima carminum nostros decantaret amores . . . multarum in me feminarum accendit invidiam.*

For indeed, who among kings and other philosophers was able to equal your fame? What region or town or village was not on fire to see you? Who, I ask, did not hurry to catch sight of you appearing in public or did not follow your departure with craned neck and riveted eyes? What wife, what maiden did not desire you when absent and burn towards you when present? What queen or noble woman did not envy my joys or bed? Moreover, two things, I admit, belonged to you especially . . . to wit the gift of composing and singing. . . . You have left many songs composed

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with amatory meter or rhythm which repeated quite often because of great sweetness as much in poetry as in melody, kept your name incessantly on the lips of all. And since the greatest part of these songs sang about our love . . . [that part] aroused the envy of many women towards me.

Thus Heloise fills in for us the picture of the affair carried out under the nose of her uncle with all of Paris singing about it. It is quite remarkable and it gives us a fuller insight into Abelard the man behind the philosopher. He did indeed have something of the mystique of a troubadour. If only these songs had survived! The tantalizing thought is that some of them may have done so; perhaps among the opus of the Carmina Burana.

One of the songs in the collection, number 57, although without musical notation, is often attributed to Abelard. However, a number of his liturgical compositions are known. Among them his Easter sequence *Epithalamica* has been called “one of the most remarkable texts and melodies in the whole of the medieval repertory.”

Her next point is not only philosophical; it plows new ground. She tells him next that her intention was pure.


I who am wholly criminal am wholly innocent, as you know. For not the execution of the deed, but the disposition of the one who does it puts it into the category of crime. Justice judges not what things are done but with what spirit they are done. . . . While I enjoyed carnal delight with you, it was thought by many to be uncertain whether I was doing it from love or lust. Now however the end reveals with what a beginning I began it.

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The idea that intention defined the deed was much discussed at the time. It is not original with Heloise, but she takes the idea a step further and supplies the test by which intention can be determined. One must wait for the full unfolding of the story. Obviously, if her interest was simply carnal, she could easily have found another man with whom to indulge. Instead, she followed Abelard’s instruction to enter the religious life; a life, of course, which includes the vow of life-long chastity. Thus she says it can not have been lust which drew her to him; it must have been love. Readers today would not necessarily agree that lust must exclude love or the other way round, but in the twelfth century, the distinction was clear.

However, if she feels certain her intention was pure, she is not so certain about his. She wants so much to believe that Abelard felt what she felt; that it really was love which motivated him as well. He, of course, has remembered it as lust and that is what the world tells her. “Ego quod sentio immo quod omnes suspicantur dicam. Concupiscencia te mihi potius quam amicitia sociavit, libidinis ardor potius quam amor.” (I will tell what I feel or rather what everyone suspects. Desire joined you to me rather than friendship, the fire of lust rather than love.) She reminds him that it was “quam iuvenculam ad monasticae conversationis asperitatem non religionis devotio sed tua tantum pertraxit iussio” (not religious devotion but your order only dragged me as a young woman to the difficulties of monastic life). One of the concerns of twelfth-century reformation of monastic life was whether or not vows were taken sincerely. Heloise is

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72 Constable, 15-18.
very well aware that her vows do not meet this test. “*Nulla mihi super hoc merces exspectanda est a Deo suius adhuc amore nihil me constat egisse.*”73 (No reward should be expected by me concerning this from God for the love of whom it is certain that I have done nothing yet.) She continues…

> Non enim mecum animus sed tecum erat. Sed et nunc maxime si tecum non est, nusquam est. Esse vero sine te nequaquam potest. Sed ut tecum bene sit age, obsecro.74

Indeed my heart was not with me, but with you. But even now especially if it is not with you, it is nowhere. In truth it is by no means able to exist without you. So see that it fares well with you, I beg.

Note the steps of her argument here. (1) My heart when I took my vows was with you not with myself. (2) Even now if it is not with you, it is nowhere. (3) It can not exist without you. Thus it either exists with you or it does not exist. So, (4) please take care for me.

Abelard’s obligation is on-going, but that is an advantage because his end can still redeem his beginning, just as Heloise’s has. But to do so, she says, he must pay some attention to her now. If she is to find God, it must be with his help. She implies that if he helps her find God, his interest in her is more than lust. She concludes by saying:

> Cum me ad turpes olim voluptates expeteres, crebris me epistolis visitabas, frequenti carmine tuam in ore omnium Heloisam ponebas. . . . Quanto autem rectius me nunc in Deum quam tunc in libidinem excitares? Perpends, obsecro, quae debeas, attende quae postulo, et longam epistolam brevi fine concludo: Vale unice.75

When you desired me formerly for shameful pleasures, you used to call upon me with letters, with frequent song you placed your Heloise on the lips of everyone. . . . How much more properly you might incite me now towards God than you excited me then into lust? Pay, I beg, what you

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75 Heloise, *Domino suo*, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 73.
owe, pay attention to what I ask, and I conclude a long letter with a brief ending. Farewell, my one and only.

It is an astonishing letter. The words “I would rather be your meretrix than Caesar’s imperetrix” ring in our ears and the picture she draws of Abelard’s popularity arrests our attention. Further, as Newman points out, her position was already somewhat fragile since “her monastic foundation had begun beneath the shadow of a double scandal—first the long-remembered love affair, and then Suger’s eviction of the nuns from Argenteuil on the pretext of their gross misconduct.” What a daring gambit! Heloise was risking her vocation and her livelihood in order to find the consolation she longed for in letters from Abelard.

76 Newman, Virile Woman, 58.
CHAPTER 4: THE MIDDLE GAME

The order of salutation

Heloise’s letter elicited a direct response from Abelard—and perhaps we should pause here a moment to imagine with what great joy and anticipation it must have been received—but, alas, it was not quite up to the mark. It is less than half the length of her letter to him and worst of all Abelard tells her he never imagined she needed comforting because his faith in her had been so abundantly attested by her success first as a prioress, now as an abbess. Finally, rather than trying to offer any consolation, he reminds her of the power of prayer, especially of the power of women’s prayers, and asks her once again to pray for *him*. Still she had gotten a reply; Abelard had taken up the challenge and entered the chess match. Now she has to hold his attention in order to achieve her goal, which, if we listen to her carefully, was more likely the consolation of frequent letters, than one definitive letter.

The first topic she addresses when she writes him back this second time must, if we think about it at all, strike us as puzzling. It is the order of the salutation in Abelard’s letter Heloise objects to first. Only a well-trained modern eye will spot the inversion of correct form—Abelard has named her before himself—the woman before the man, the abbot before the abbess—the inferior, as Heloise insists, before the superior:

*Heloisea, dilectissimae sorori in Christo, Abaelardus, frater eius in ipso*.

To Heloise, most beloved sister in Christ, from Abelard her brother in the same.

It is true that the medieval world was very concerned with correct form and hierarchy was accepted as the natural order of things. Thus it was assumed that any pair of

\[\text{1 Abelard, Heloisea, dilectissimae sorori, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 73.}\]
correspondents could be rank ordered and, according to the rules of composition in the writing handbooks of the time, the superior’s name should be placed first even if he or she was the writer. Nevertheless, many writers departed from that advice perhaps to flatter their recipients or even to claim a more humble position for him or her self. In fact, two other extant letters addressed to Heloise from Peter the Venerable following Abelard’s death, also name Heloise first although she was abbess of a small foundation and Peter was abbot of a vast network of religious houses.

To the abbess Heloise, his revered sister, most beloved in Christ
From Peter, abbot of Cluny, her humble brother;
The salvation God has promised those who love Him.

She makes no objection to this inversion—putting the abbess before the abbot—and the woman never objected in the lost love letters when the man named her first in his salutation. Thus it is hardly likely that Heloise was unaware that departures from the rule were rather common. To understand what is going on we need to tease out the import of what Heloise is objecting to. Is it really the supposed inversion or is it something else; something the inversion stands for? Her objection needs an explanation, but only one scholar has ventured one. Mews says she wanted Abelard to use the formal salutation if he wasn’t going to write a personal letter. There is some merit to this. Abelard’s first letter to her was certainly studied in its impersonality and we can imagine that because his second letter was so very personal, Heloise did not object again when, for a second

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2 Levitan, 71, n.1.

3 Peter the Venerable, To the abbess Heloise, in Levitan, 265.

4 Mews, Abelard and Heloise, 154.
time, he names her first: *Sponsae Christi, servus eiusdem* (to the bride of Christ from the servant of the same). Nevertheless, I think we can dig still deeper.

Let us look again at the salutation in her first letter to Abelard, the one discussed in Chapter Three. One thing is immediately obvious: her salutation is nearly twice as long as his—Abelard has used just ten words to Heloise’s eighteen—and Heloise qualifies each of the descriptors she uses.

*Domino suo immo patri, coniugi suo immo fratri*  
To her lord or rather father, to her husband or rather brother  
*ancilla sua immo filia, ipsius uxor immo soror, Abaelardo Heloisa.*  
from his handmaiden or rather daughter, his very own wife or rather sister, to Abelard from Heloise.

The order of her descriptors within each pair may help us solve the mystery. The words *lord, husband, handmaiden, wife* all describe their relationship when they were lovers nearly fifteen years before. These are the words to which she gives first place, the place she describes as marking the superior. On the other hand, the words *father, brother, daughter, sister* which describe their present relationship in the religious life are listed second, that is in what she calls the inferior position. The word *immo* can be translated in a number of ways—*or rather, on the contrary, no indeed*—but here it might be better understood as something like *or I should say* and translated as *to her lord or I should say father,* etc. In any event it is clear that Heloise has decided that using just the descriptors for their present relationship is inadequate to capture the entirety of what Abelard means to her. She remembers and cherishes their old relationship; she is still honoring it through her absolute obedience to Abelard; and, in fact, for many years now this obedience has been all that is left of her ties to him. Thus it is possible that what she is objecting to is

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that Abelard has taken exception to her privileging of the past and marked it strongly by departing from correct form. Accepting her new designation as Abelard’s superior is a very real challenge to the narrative she had constructed after the tragedy and which alone has sustained her: the narrative that she is living a life of obedience to Abelard.

Abelard seems to understand that Heloise has fingered something significant because he answers her at some length on this point in his next letter (*Sponsae Christi*). More than likely they are battling with weapons of correct form over something important to them both. The order of salutation is in fact correct, he tells her, because she has become his superior through her marriage to Jesus Christ. No doubt Abelard believes this, since he takes great pains in this letter to convince Heloise of just that point, but he has addressed this first reply, not to the bride of Christ, which would have underscored his point, but to his sister in Christ, whose superiority to a brother in Christ can not have been quite as obvious. A nun was not usually considered superior to a monk, although in her role as bride of Christ her mythic superiority had to be acknowledged because that was a closer relationship with Christ than any man could achieve.\(^7\)

Abelard wants to emphasize that by entering the religious life both of them had changed not only their relationship to the world but also their relationship to one another. He has work to do to convince her: for him the past is prelude, but for her the past still has enormous force. It is necessary, however, to explore why Heloise feels so strongly about this. It is so easy to assume it is because she misses the passion of their affair, but that is too dismissive of everything else she tells us. She finds *amice* a “sweeter word

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than wife” and by *amice* she does not mean “girlfriend” as Clanchy has translated it.⁸

There was no such concept in the twelfth century in any event. She is using *amice* in the Ciceronian sense with all that implies. She misses his presence, his intellectual company, his whole self. Perhaps she could make peace with the present if she found Abelard there.

**Her calamities**

What Heloise says next has always been understood as complaining, which, unfortunately, tends to dismiss its importance. She is not just complaining, she is writing her own *Historia Calamitatum*. She tells Abelard that he has increased her misery by writing that his death is imminent and then she goes on to decry once more the injustice of Abelard’s wounding and their forced entry into the religious life. It is easy to miss the parallel since Abelard had so many calamities to relate and Heloise has just one: losing Abelard. In fact, the very shortness of her list of calamities makes it sound like the same complaint over and over again even though she divides the loss into two parts: her pending loss and her earlier one. She begins with Abelard’s alarming words that he may soon be murdered.

*Quod si me Dominus in manus inimicorum tradiderit, scilicet, ut ipsi praevalentes me interficient aut quocumque casu viam universae carnis absens vobis ingrediar cadaver, obsecro, nostrum ubicumque vel sepultum vel expositum iacuerit, ad coemeterium vestrum deferri faciatis ubi filiae vestrae, immo in Christo sorores, sepulcrum nostrum saepius videntes, ad preces pro me Domino fundendas amplius invitentur.*⁹

But if the Lord shall deliver me into the hands of my enemies, namely, so that overcoming they kill me, or I enter by whatever chance the way of all flesh while I am absent from you, I beg you to cause my body wherever it will have lain either buried or exposed, to be carried to your burial ground

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where your daughters, or rather sisters in Christ, seeing my tomb more often may be more inclined towards pouring out prayers to the Lord for me.

This brings a real cry of pain from Heloise and she accuses him of increasing her desolation rather than bringing her the consolation she sought. He can not die before her, she cries, because she lives in him. Life without him would be worse than death. She has just remonstrated with him for putting her first, now she insists it is she who must die first.

Te nostras exsequias celebrare, te nostras Deo animas convenit commendare, et quas Deo aggregasti ad ipsum praemittere ut nulla amplius de ipsis perturberis sollicitudine et tanto laetior nos subsequaris quanto securior de nostra salute iam fueris.\(^{10}\)

It is proper for you to celebrate our funeral rites, for you to commend our souls to God, and to send ahead to him those whom you have gathered together for God so that you may not be troubled any longer with concern, and you may follow us the happier the more secure you are now about our salvation.

She admits he may precede her in death—most likely she remembers that he is considerably older than she and has suffered many trials—but she asks him not to remind her about it and prays that news of his death may come to her suddenly so that she can be spared the anguish of long anticipation, quoting a prayer of Lucan’s, “Let it be sudden, whatever it is you plan/And let the mind of man be blind to fate:/Allow our fears some hope.”\(^{11}\) Clanchy faults her about this, pointing out that a sudden death would mean Abelard could not receive the last rites of the church.\(^{12}\) Clanchy mistakes her meaning, however. Heloise has not quoted Lucan because she wishes Abelard a sudden death, but

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\(^{10}\) Heloise, *Unico suo*, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 77.

\(^{11}\) Heloise, *Unico suo*, in Levitan, 73.

because she does not wish to live in daily expectation of hearing the dread news; she wants the news of his death to come to her without forewarning.

If Abelard is the much mistreated hero of his own story, Heloise is the tragic heroine of hers. Fate has not treated her with any moderation either, she reminds him, and here “she goes to elaborate lengths in stylizing language and imagery” as she raises her voice in keen lamentation:

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O \text{ inclementem clementiam! O infortunatam, fortunam . . . O me miserarum miserram, infelicium infelicissimam, quae quanto universis in te feminis praelata, sublimiorem obtinui gradum, tanto hinc prostarta graviorem in te et in me partier perpsessa sum casum!}^{14}
\]

Oh, merciless mercy! On, unfortunate fortune . . . Oh me, the most miserable of the miserable, the most unhappy of the unhappy, who having been placed before all women by you, the higher the step I occupied, when laid low from that place, the more painful the fall I have endured—both yours and mine!

The reason for the drama is to give her own suffering something of the gravitas of his.

And just as his calamities have resulted from the malice of others, so have hers. The goad that drives her sorrows most is the goad of unfairness. Abelard was not punished while they indulged in fornication, but only after they were married.

\[
Dum enim solliciti amoris gaudiis frueremur et, ut turpiore, sed expressiore vocabulo utar, fornicationi vacaremus, divina nobis severitas pepercit. Ut autem illicita licitis correximus, et honore coniugii turpitudinem fornicationis operuimus, ira Domini manum suam suam super nos vehementer aggravavit.^{15}
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For while we enjoyed the joys of troubled love and, to use an uglier but more expressive word, we were devoted to fornication, divine severity spared us. However when we corrected the forbidden with the lawful, and

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13 Dronke, *Women Writers*, 122. Dronke treats her prose as poetry and Levitan does as well.


covered the shame of fornication with the honor of matrimony, the wrath of God laid its hand on us heavily.

The punishment arrived, moreover, while they were living apart and chaste: she with the sisters at Argenteuil, he devoting himself to his studies. She reminds him that he alone suffered although they were both guilty.

_Solus in corpere luisti quod duo partier commiseramus. Solus in peona fuisti, duo in culpa; et qui minus debueras, totum pertulisti. Quanto enim amplius te pro me humilando satisfeceras, et me partier et totum genus meum sublimaveras, tanto te minus tam apud Deum quam apud illos proditores obnoxium poenae reddideras. O me miseram in tanti sceleris causa progenitam!_16

You alone paid in the body what we two had committed together. You were alone in punishment; [we were] two in guilt; and you who had owed less, suffered everything. For the more you had made amends by humbling yourself for me, and had raised me together with all my kind, the less liable you had rendered yourself to punishment both in the eyes of God and in the eyes of those traitors. Oh, miserable me born as a cause of such a crime!

That last cry echoes the lament of Cornelia which, if we are to believe what Abelard says in the _Historia_, was on Heloise’s lips as she took the veil.17 She elaborates at some length on this theme that women are the ruination of men. We are not likely to be as sympathetic to this as her contemporaries would have been, but we should remember that when she turned to the books she so loved she would not find much to dissuade her; she would not find much comfort. All the texts agreed that she was at fault; that it was she who had brought him to this. She quotes Proverbs that a woman’s house is a path to hell and Ecclesiastes that a woman is more bitter than death. She reminds Abelard that Eve caused Adam’s destruction, that Delilah brought down Samson, that Solomon was

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16 Heloise, _Unico suo_, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 79.

17 The lament is quoted in chapter 3.
bewitched into idolatry by a woman, that Job’s wife urged him to curse God for his misfortunes. The litany is overwhelming.

She ends this section by returning to her earlier theme of unfairness.

Qui denique etiam usque ad nos consuetam extendens malitiam, quem de fornicatione sternere non potuit, de coniugio tentavit; et bono male est usus, qui malo male uti non est permissus.\(^{18}\)

In addition, the tempter finally extending [his] usual malice as far as us, the one whom he could not overthrow through fornication, he tempted through marriage; and he used a good thing in a bad way, who was not permitted to use a bad thing in a bad way.

Here she has the devil in mind as actor, not God. God punishes, but he does not tempt. But then she remembers that she herself had not consented freely to marrying; she had realized it would lead to no good. The devil had not tempted her to want marriage! Still she admits she must suffer because of the fornication. That temptation she agreed to, that she embraced, and she ends by saying that “\textit{malis initis perversus imputandus est exitus}”\(^{19}\) (a perverse end must be expected to an evil beginning). What is less clear is whether the evil beginning was the start of their affair or the marriage which followed. Gilson says, “Heloise felt that in marrying Abelard she was guilty of a crime—indeed of the only crime for which she could never forgive herself.”\(^{20}\)

A recitation of personal calamities, however, reads like a list of complaints so, perhaps like me, by this point you are beginning to feel sorry for Abelard. Heloise may have been an impressive scholar and a beautiful young woman, but her complaints seem endless and the obsessive nature of her protests almost undermines her point. In fact, if


\(^{20}\) Gilson, 58.
she had done nothing other than iterate her calamities, the outcome might have been quite different. But at this point in her second letter she takes a very different tack and one that we can easily imagine was ultimately responsible for convincing Abelard that he did need to do something for her. She confesses to him the state of her soul.

Her confession

In her first letter Heloise describes her memories of the affair: how everyone craned their necks for a look at Abelard, how women envied her joys and her bed. It is poignant, but it describes distant memories. In this letter, she brings this home to the present describing how she is still tormented by the longing for physical intimacy. Few of her readers are priests who understand from experience what it is to hear a confession; nevertheless, some scholars have recognized that Heloise concludes this letter with a full confession.21 The nature of that confession, however surprising it may be coming from the pen of an abbess, should not be viewed as particularly scurrilous given its context. It is well to remember here that medieval religiosity was focused on Christ’s humanity, his fleshiness. “For it was human beings as human (not as symbol of the divine) whom Christ saved in the Incarnation . . . Religious women in the later Middle Ages saw in their own female bodies not only a symbol of the humanness of both genders but also a symbol of—and a means to approach to—the humanity of God.”22 Thus when Heloise gives such graphic details of her struggles with desire, it does not mean that she is heedless of her vows or her position. People were quick to define sex as sinful in the twelfth century, but they were not prudish. In fact, priests were taught to ask detailed, probing questions

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22 Bynum, 296.
during a confession in order to determine the exact gradation of the penance for the sin.\footnote{For example, Karras, 20. Brundage, 152, 168.} Heloise would have had intimate knowledge of how confessions were conducted, and Abelard must have become accustomed to hearing confessions since he was a priest by the time he was Abbot at St. Gildas.\footnote{Gilson, 67. Also Van Engen notes that the ordination of monks begun in the Carolingian era had become more common in the twelfth century. John Van Engen, “The ‘Crisis of Cenobitism’ reconsidered: Benedictine Monasticism in the Years 1050-1150,” Speculum 61, no. 2 (1986) : 293.} Because Heloise knew that priests probe for particulars, she gives them: what her sinful thoughts are, the variety of times and places in which they intrude on her consciousness, and what the results of that are for her daily devotion and for her state of mind.

This is perhaps the most eloquent of any of the passages in Heloise’s letters: it so beautifully illustrates the dilemma in which she has been placed and the difficulties she experiences trying to find a way out. It is not, however, a normal confession. To begin with she is making it to her partner in sin rather than to an impartial third party, but then it is still Abelard whom she feels holds the key, if not to her salvation, then to her consolation, which she clearly feels must come first. She begins by praying that she can find the strength to pay the penance she owes, not to God, but to Abelard. If it is she who is responsible for his wounding, then it is she who must find some way to make recompense to him for that. She blames herself, but she also blames God and so repentance eludes her.

\begin{quote}

\textit{Si enim vere miserrimi mei animi profitear infirmitatem, qua poenitentia Deum placare valeam non invenio, quem super hac semper iniuria summae crudelitatis arguo, et eius dispensationi contraria magis eum ex indignatione offendo, quam ex poenitentiae satisfactione mitigo.}\footnote{Heloise, \textit{Unico suo}, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 80.}

\end{quote}
For if I may truthfully profess the weakness of my most wretched mind, I find no repentance by which I have the strength to placate God, whom I always accuse of the greatest cruelty over this injury and I offend him more through indignation being contrary to his disposition, than I make him mild through the satisfaction of penance.

My body is afflicted, she tells him, but her mind still burns with her former desires. “Difficillimum vero est a desideriis maximarum voluptatum avellere animum.” (Truly it is difficult to wrench the heart away from longings for its greatest pleasure.) Her sin is so wrapped up in what delights her most that she can not repent of it and gain peace and if repentance is denied her so is absolution. And here her confession is so heartfelt, so personal that it wrenches the heart of the remote reader of subsequent ages; how must it have wrenched Abelard’s heart? But it is also titillating as confessions of sexual longing necessarily are. Thus it is crucial to remember that she is confessing her soul’s dilemma as we read what she has to say:

In tantum, vero illae, quas partier exercuimus, amantium voluptates, dulces mihi fuerunt ut nec dispricere mihi, nec vix a memoria labi possint. Quocumque loco me vertam, semper se oculis meis cum suis ingerunt desideriis. Nec etiam dormienti suis illusionibus parcunt. Inter ipsa missarum solemnna, ubi purior esse debet oratio, obscura earum voluptatum phantasmata ita sibi pentus miserrimam captivant animam ut turpitudinis illis magis quam orationi vacem. Quae cum ingemiscere debeam de commissis, suspiro potius de amissis. Nec solum quae egimus, sed loca pariter et tempora in quibus haec egimus, ita tecum nostro infixa sunt animo, ut in ipsis omnia tecum agam, nec dormiens etiam ab his quiescam. Nonumquam etiam ipso motu corporis animi mei cogitations deprehenduntur, nec a verbis temperant improvises.

In truth those pleasures of lovers which we did together have been so sweet to me that they are able neither to displease me nor scarcely to slip from memory. Toward whatever place I turn myself, they always thrust themselves upon my eyes with desires. Nor do they spare me sleeping

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from their illusions. During the very solemnities of the mass, when prayers should be purer, lewd visions of those pleasures so fully capture my miserable mind to themselves that I am occupied with these wanton things more than with prayer. When I should groan over things I committed, I sigh more for the things I have lost. Not only what we did, but equally the places and times in which we did them, are so fixed in my mind with you, that I do everything with you in regard to them, nor do I rest from them even sleeping. In addition, sometimes the thoughts of my mind are betrayed by an actual movement of the body nor do they refrain from unexpected words.

It is just here, almost as a throw away line, that Heloise says something very interesting and significant. Earlier she had noted that Abelard was “alone in punishment” now she notes that he is also alone in the gift of grace through that wound: freedom from sexual temptation.

*Haec te gratia, carissime, praevenit, et ab his tibi stimulis una corporis plaga medendo multas in anima sanavit, et in quo tibi amplius adversare Deus creditur, propitior invenitur, more quidem fidelissimi medici qui non parcit dolori ut consulat saluti.*28

This grace, dearest, came first to you and by curing you from these stings, one wound of the body has healed many in the spirit, and in this thing in which God seems to be adverse to you, he is found more gracious indeed according to the custom of a most dependable doctor who does not spare the pain that looks out for health.

In the *Historia* Abelard says he was freed from concupiscence through God’s mercy. Here Heloise takes this a step further by recasting his castration as God’s grace, but she adds it came only to him, not to her. She did not receive a healing wound to the body and she still suffers torments. Heloise was young when she took the veil and she notes that not only is she fully aware of what she is missing, she is still in the stage of life which naturally has youthful ardor, and in addition, she is quick to add, she is a woman and therefore naturally weaker. Women, it was widely believed at the time, felt the

temptation of sex more than men did. Heloise accepts this cultural reality or, at least, exploits it to her advantage. Bloch points out that in “the new religion of the meek” where the last shall be first, few shrank from the piety of such an admission.\textsuperscript{29} However, she is very troubled; she worries that rather than placating, she is offending God because she can not recast her love for Abelard as sinful. She can not see her way to repudiating their affair without repudiating Abelard himself and that she will not do. The twelfth century offered only one route forward from an interrupted love affair, the route Abelard took: redefine the affair as sinful and repent. But to define it as sinful belied Heloise’s felt experience. Her connection to Abelard was glorious; it uplifted her; it was, in a word, sweet.

Her confession continues by detailing the split in her psyche between her outer chaste reputation and her inner struggle with sexual longing. The world saw her as devout, but she knows God knows the truth. She is a hypocrite. She hopes that there may be some small merit in her outward show of piety since it is all she can manage.

\textit{Et hoc fortasses aliquot modo laudibile, et Deo acceptabile quoquo modo videtur, si quis videlicet exterioris operas exemplo quacumque intentione non sit Ecclesiae scandalo, nec iam per ipsum apud infidels nomen Domini blasphemetur, nec apud carnales professionis suae ordo infametur. Atque hoc quoque nonnullum est divinae gratiae donum, ex suis videlicet munere venit non solum bona facere, sed etiam a malis abstinere.}\textsuperscript{30}

And yet, perhaps there is some merit in this way and it may seem acceptable to God if, as an example of exterior works, something, whatever the intention, may not be a scandal to the church, nor blaspheme the name of God through her in the eyes of infidels, nor disgrace the order of her profession in the eyes of the carnal. And this likewise is a considerable gift of divine grace and comes from his bounty; not only to do good, but also to refrain from evil.

\textsuperscript{29} Bloch, 67.
\textsuperscript{30} Heloise, \textit{Unico suo}, in Muckle, 1943, 81.
She is refraining from evil in exterior things, but what matters most to her philosophical mind is interior things and she herself knows her hypocrisy and it haunts her. She knows she took her vows not from love of God but because Abelard commanded her to take them.

Heloise has split herself in two, just as the clerics of her day advised any married woman to do, but she turned the usual prescription on its head. A married woman was supposed to save her caritas, her caring love, for God, but yield her body to her husband.\(^{31}\) As a woman who had taken religious vows, however, Heloise was not supposed to devote her soul to one and her body to another; she was supposed to devote herself body and soul to God, but she did not. It was her body that was God’s: dressed in its habit, going about the daily tasks of running the Paraclete and the daily rituals of prayers and she was doing it so well she had earned the praise of contemporaries. All the while, however, she remained devoted to Abelard and to the memory of their days together. A married woman was supposed to think of God while she was in bed with her husband; Heloise thought of being in bed with Abelard while she was in the chapel saying her prayers.

She asks Abelard not to over-estimate her; she needs his prayers, she needs his support, she needs his medicine.

*Multis ficta sui laus nocuit et praesidium quo indigebant abstulit. . . . Quiesce, obsecro, a laude mea ne turpem adulationis notam et mindasii crimen incurras; . . . Nemo medicinae peritus interiorem morbum exexterioris habitus inspectione diiudicat.*\(^{32}\)

False praise has harmed many and taken away the protection which they needed; . . . Desist, I beg, from praising me lest you incur the ugly mark of


flattery or charge of lying. . . . No one skilled in medicine diagnoses an interior malady from the inspection of exterior conditions.

And she asks him to fear for her especially now “ubi nullum incontinentiae meae superset in te remedium”33 (when no remedy for my incontinence remains in you).34 She has talked about his wound as an injustice, as something she feels responsible for, even as a gift from God, but now she says it hurts her too. She points out that the struggle for chastity was not one she chose for herself.

Non quaero coronam victoriae. Satis est mihi periculum vitare. Tutius evitatur periculum, quam committitur bellum. Quocumque me angulo coeli Deus collocet, satis mihi faciet.35

I do not seek a crown of victory. It is enough to me to avoid danger. Danger avoided is safer than war engaged. In whatever corner of heaven God may place me, it will be enough for me.

Finally she quotes Jerome, “Fateor imbecillitatem meam; nolo spe victoriae pugnare ne perdam aliquando vistoriam” (I confess my weakness; I do not wish to fight for hope of victory lest I lose victory sometime or other) and ends with the words, “Quid necesse est certa dimittere, et incerta sectari?”36 (Why is it necessary to lose certainty and pursue uncertainty?) She leaves off with this provocative question and with the words, “I confess,” on her lips without so much as a word of valediction.

Heloise, of course, is stuck. She cannot go back—although she wishes to—but she can not go forward either because repentance eludes her. She is suspended in time

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33 Heloise, Unico suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 82.
34 It was a typical twelfth-century conceit that husbands had to be ever mindful of keeping their wives sexually satisfied. Karras, 13. This is the marriage debt which both husband and wife assumed when they married.
35 Heloise, Unico suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 82.
36 Heloise, Unico Suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 82.
like the souls in Dante’s Inferno, but with one important difference. There is no hope for
the souls in hell, but there is for a person still living. She begs Abelard for consolation,
but what would consolation mean for her? Does she want Abelard to heal the split in her
soul or just to recognize her sufferings? If he does not notice that she is doing her best to
please him, if he does not tell her he notices, where is her reward? The poem by Villon
quoted in chapter one expresses her dilemma quite well, once I rewrite it in such a way
that the focus is turned from Abelard to Heloise:

Where is that paladin, Abelard
For whose sake Heloise took the veil
And toiled a lifetime expecting no reward in heaven.
It was through love that she suffered such misfortune
But where are yesteryear’s snows?

Rewards from fellow humans come in this lifetime, not the next. She would like the
reward in heaven promised to Christians, but she needs to have it mediated through
Abelard here on earth. That is why Heloise asks Abelard to incite her to God through
letters. “She wanted the kind of letters or treatises of instruction, exhortation, and
consolation which some of the Church Fathers had upon occasion written for holy
women.”37 Perhaps she really hoped and believed that they would help her.38

Her consolation

If Abelard’s first reply was less than satisfactory, this time his reply is thunderous:
over twice as long as Heloise’s letter and passionate as he picks up on the themes she has
introduced and applies all his rhetorical skill in an effort to reconcile her to what has

37 Gilson, 71. Alcuin Blamires explores this in detail in “No Outlet for Incontinence: Heloise and
the Question of Consolation,” in Wheeler, 287-301.

38 Ferante thinks Heloise hoped they would help Abelard as well by focusing his efforts on the
Paraclete where they would be received with gratitude. Joan M. Ferante, To the Glory of her Sex: Women’s
Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 57.
happened and, perhaps not incidentally, to stop her complaints. True, he starts off in a dry, academic way summarizing her letter thus: first she bewails the inverted order of the salutation; second she claims her desolation has increased because he had mentioned the imminent possibility of his death; third she raises that “old constant complaint” about the manner of their conversion; and finally she insists that he should not praise her because she is a hypocrite. Is this a disputation? Is he, at least, enjoying the fray, wielding the weapons of logic against a worthy opponent or does it cut even closer to the bone? His prose here is as erotic as any found in the religious literature of the twelfth century.39

How is it possible to imagine that all this passion and beauty created just for her did not move Heloise? In fact, it must have done so. There is abundant evidence in this remarkable letter of the consolation she had hoped for.

Abelard’s salutation foreshadows his main theme: he is Heloise’s servant because she is the bride of his Lord: “Sponsae Christi servus eiusdem” (To the bride of Christ from the servant of the same). Both Radice and Levitan translate this to mean that Abelard is identifying himself as “his servant,” i.e. the servant of Christ, but eius in the genitive singular can mean either “his” or “her” and eiusdem means simply “of the same,” thus Mews suggests that the wording could also be construed to mean that Abelard is referring to himself here as “her servant,” i.e. the servant of the bride of Christ, that is Heloise.40 It is not altogether impossible that Abelard may have intended this second meaning, or perhaps have at least crafted the ambiguity, since the whole thrust of his argument immediately following is that he has, in fact, become Heloise’s servant.

39 See Jaeger for an interesting exposition of the erotic as religious, particularly 131.

40 Mews, Lost Love Letters,124.
Heloise was subsequently able to take advantage of Abelard’s new role vis à vis herself, but it is unlikely she was happy about his reason for accepting it. She has already told him she would rather be his concubine than anyone’s bride.\(^{41}\)

As a part of this passage on the change in her circumstance, Abelard develops at length the imagery of the Ethiopian woman, black but beautiful.

*Habet autem Aethiopissa exteriorem in carne nigredinem, et quantum ad exteriora pertinet, ceteris appareat feminis deformior; cum non sit tamen in interioribus dispar sed in plerisque etiam formosior atque condidior, sicut in ossibus seu dentibus.*\(^{42}\)

Moreover the Ethiopian woman has outward blackness with regard to the body, and as much as pertains to exterior things, she appears deformed compared to other women; although nevertheless she is not unequal in internal things but even more beautiful and whiter in most things, as for example in bone or tooth.

He goes on in this vein for some time. A woman in a black robe is a bride, but also a widow; black symbolizes humility and submissiveness; the bridegroom leads her into a secret bedchamber because she is black but beautiful and there they share secret joys.

Can he mean that Heloise’s black habit—the only guise in which she now appeared to the world—was concealing beauty underneath, beauty of which he had intimate knowledge? Here Abelard is employing an interior/exterior dichotomy similar to that which Heloise invoked, but where she says she is repentant on the outside and unrepentant on the inside, he says she is ugly on the outside, but beautiful on the inside.

Abelard spends so much time developing the meaning of her black habit that a reader may be forgiven for wondering if Heloise had found it unusually difficult to give

\(^{41}\) Bloch notes that the motif of the Bride of Christ had a double purpose: “to appeal to women and control them at the same time.” 91.

up her pretty dresses. There is a better explanation, however. Three centuries earlier
Alcuin had written to Charlemagne’s sister Gisla in a similar fashion:

Always remember the husband whose bride you have become. Your
bridegroom is most glorious, and seeks no other adornment in you than
that of the spirit—no twisted hair-dos, but straight conduct, no empty
outward show of clothes, but a noble inward splendor of purity.43

In the twelfth century “St Bernard told one nun not to envy the jewels of worldly women,
for no Queen’s earrings ever equaled the blush on the face of a virgin.”44 Guibert de
Nogent invokes this theme in his memories of his own mother, who, he says, was not like
those women who by “the enlargement of their sleeves, the straitness of their skirts, the
distortion of their shoes” showed their wantonness.45 These writers and many others were
doing little more than following the example of early Christian writers like Tertullian and
Jerome who “were obsessed by the relation of woman to decoration”46 and saw woman
as “a creature who above all else and by nature covets ornamentation.”47 It was hardly
possible for a man to write to a woman in the Middle Ages without discoursing on the
vanity of fancy dress not just because she herself might need correction or deserve praise,
but because of unexamined cultural assumptions about the nature of woman.

One wonders if Abelard’s use of this traditional theme impressed Heloise much.
In her reply, she makes the rather acerbic remark that woolen habits are not well-suited
for women because of their monthly flux. Nevertheless, she may actually have been

44 Quoted in Newman, Virile Woman, 31.
46 Bloch, 39.
47 Bloch, 40.
happy with some of the novel ways in which Abelard develops it. In particular, his iterations throughout this section of the words *private, secret, and hidden* are noteworthy. The Ethiopian woman is introduced into the king’s private bedchamber, not his table in the public hall. The bedroom of the king is a secret place. The wife who loves hidden things desires the secret joy of her husband. Finally he cautions Heloise herself to be silent. “*Tanto est silere honesties quanto loqui turpius.*”48 (It is all the more honorable to be silent as it is the more disgraceful to speak.) Heloise may have felt that this secret bedchamber of the most high king did not have much reality, since she had so little of the mystic about her, but it is possible that she took some pleasure from the assertion that things not talked about, secret things, do have reality. Perhaps Abelard has a sub-text here of which he himself may not have been entirely aware. Perhaps he is invoking not just the obvious Christian understanding of the secret and personal relationship with God, but also the secret and personal relationship the two of them once shared that he too remembers. It is no longer manifest, but it once was, and perhaps even still is, very real. Bloch notes that in the mores of the twelfth century love was a paradox: “love only exists to the degree that it is secret; that secret love only exists to the degree that it is revealed; and revealed, it is no longer love.”49 Their secret love was revealed long ago. Is it possible now to put the genie back in the bottle and to resurrect their love, at least in memory, by keeping silent about it now?

When he moves on to her second request, the cry that her desolation is increased by mention of the dangers he faces, he surely gave Heloise more consternation than

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49 Bloch, 123.
consolation. He upbraids her sharply about being a fair-weather friend. His words may seem unfair until we remember that she had earlier warned him not to praise her lest he incur the ugly mark of flattery or the charge of lying. However, there are aspects even to this rebuke that might have pleased her. Again he says he was only responding to her own request and he quotes, not from her most recent letter but from her first, verbatim and at length. Also, and I think importantly, he reminds her that with these letters “vos anxietatis meae participes feci”⁵⁰ (I made you sharers in my anxieties). The renewed contact has given her something new to think about and that is not trivial for solving her predicament as we will see. Further, when he tells her that if she loved him truly she would not deny him the comfort of dying, it is an admission that he knows she loves him.

Next reversing the order of topics in her letter, he addresses what he calls her rejection of praise (and I have called her confession) before dealing with her complaint about the manner in which they entered the religious life. He tells her that her protestations do her credit but to beware of false modesty. Is he being deliberately obtuse here? Since Heloise emphasizes almost in the same breath that his over-confidence in her puts her in danger, she can not have written her confession for the purpose of winning additional, and as she saw it, unwarranted, praise for her modesty. Perhaps he is betraying his own anxiety that she may tell others as well as him about her secret pre-occupations. Perhaps that’s why he was so insistent on the secret bedchamber. However, when we consider the whole thrust of his letter, I do not think he had completely missed the confessional nature of what she wrote. He certainly did not miss the point that she is suspended by grief. He uses every argument at his disposal to get her to see what happened in a different light and cease grieving.

In fact, he has saved the crux of the problem until last: Heloise’s old constant complaint that Fulbert’s revenge was unfair. She complains that not only had it happened after the marriage which sanctified their union, but although both of them had engaged in fornication, only he was punished. “Solus in corpore luisti quod duo partier commiseramus.”51 (You alone paid in the body for what we two had committed together.) But she has said something else as well and he has a request to make. “Memento quae dixeris. Recordare quae scripseris in hoc videlicet nostrae conversionis modo . . . propriiorem mihi . . . extitisse.”52 (Remember what you said. Think over what you wrote namely that in the manner of our conversion . . . [God] has stood out as more favorable to me.) Heloise had also suggested that he was alone in grace since the punishment freed him, but not her, from sexual longing; he counters that the two of them are one and so what happens to one happens to the other. She has lamented that she caused such great harm; he implores her to think of it as great good instead. “Nec te tanti boni causam esse doleas, ad quod te a Deo maxime creatam esse non dubites.”53 (Do not grieve that you are the cause of so great a good, do not doubt that you were created by God especially for this.)

There are two places in the Historia where Abelard mentions his castration. One, of course, is when he is describing what happened following his marriage, and the second when he is defending himself from the malicious gossip attendant on his care of the sisters at the Paraclete. In the first instance, he characterizes it as God’s judgment. Lying in his bed the morning after his castration, listening to the lamentations of his students

51 Heloise, Unico suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 79.
52 Abelard, Sponsae Christi, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 88-89.
under his window, he reflected on “the judgment of a God who struck where I most had sinned.” In the second, God’s judgment has become God’s mercy. “God’s mercy has freed me from that suspicion”—meaning he can not be suspected of fornicating because he doesn’t have the power. But it is only now in Sponsae Christi, after having read what Heloise had to say that he rethinks his characterization of what happened and moves from judgment to God’s grace repeating back to Heloise her own argument, but developing it even further. For the first time he argues that she was also a partaker in that grace.

*Quod si divinae in nobis iustitiae nostrum veils utilitatem adiungere, non tam iustitiam quam gratiam Dei quod tunc egit in nobis poteris appellare. . . . Perpende altissimum in nobis divinae consilium pietatis, et quam nisericorditer iudicium suum Dominus in correptionem verterit et quam prudenter malis quoque ipsis usus sit et impietatem pie deposuerit ut unius parties corporis mei iustissima plaga duabus mederetur animbus.*

But if you are willing to join utility to divine justice in our case, you will be able to call what it did to us then not so much the justice as the grace of God. . . . Weigh carefully the highest plan of divine kindness in our lives, and how mercifully God turned his judgment into correction and how wisely he made use of the evil things themselves as well and put aside impiety righteously so that with a most just wound to a single part of my body he might heal two souls.

Over and over again he asks her to put her scholar’s mind to the task.

*Confer periculum et liberationis modum. Confer languorem et medicinam. Meritorum causas inspice et miserationis affectus admirare.*

Compare the danger and the manner of deliverance. Compare the sickness and the remedy. Examine the causes for the things which were merited and admire the dispositions of his mercy.

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56 Clanchy notes that “once Abelard got hold of a novel idea, he tended to pick it up and run.” 255.


Compare and examine, in other words, be analytical. Think about this rationally without your emotions engaged and you will see it differently. Although it is not necessary to be a scholar to think rationally, he was clearly hoping that her scholar’s mind would help her accept his argument. Abelard has always respected her learning. Now, in this letter, he comes closer than ever before to accepting their deep connection and more than physical friendship. It looks as if it was on the strength of these two letters from Heloise that he has finally agreed that he and she are joined for eternity, but not by their deep and loving friendship as Heloise believed so steadfastly, but so hopelessly, against custom, against tradition, against religious instruction, and, as it turns out, against Abelard’s need to believe that he had sinned, but by the very thing she had fought so hard to avoid and had regretted so long: their marriage.

Abelard was never able to follow Heloise’s lead and view their sexual joy as anything other than lust and temptation. He reminds her that they were lustful even in marriage, not only coupling in the refectory at Argenteuil, but during Holy Week, and when she objected, he coerced her. That was lust, he points out, not love. In fact his lust was so overwhelming, God had to forbid his pleasure.

_Tanto enim tibi concupiscentiae ardore copulatus eram ut miserabilius et obscenissimas voluptates, quas etiam nominare confundimur, tam Deo quam mihi ipsi praeponerem, nec iam aliter consulere posse divina videretur clementia, nisi has mihi voluptates sine spe ulla omnino interdiceret._59

Indeed so much had I been bound to you by the fire of carnal desire that I placed those miserable and most obscene pleasures in front not only of God but also of my very self, nor would divine mercy seem to be able now to take care of us otherwise, unless it forbade this pleasure to me entirely beyond hope.

59 Abelard, _Sponsae Christi_, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 89.
In her first letter, Heloise says she had lost her very self by taking the veil and loosing Abelard, now Abelard says he lost his very self through his concupiscence. Did he mean he had lost the nobility of his purpose: to be a philosopher and to be true to that profession? In two places in this letter he seems to indicate he means just that. First:

\[Vide \ ergo \ quantum \ sollicitus \ nostri \ fuerit \ dominus, \ quasi \ ad \ magnos \ aliquos \ nos \ reservaret \ usus, \ et \ quasi \ indignaretur \ aut \ doleret \ illa \ litteralis \ scientiae \ talenta, \ quae \ utrigue \ nostrum \ commiserate, \ ad \ sui \ nominis \ honorem \ non \ dispensari.\]

See therefore how greatly the Lord was solicitous of us, as if he reserved us for some great uses, and as if he was angry or resented that those talents of literary skill, which he had entrusted to both of us, were not being used for the honor of his name.

And second:

\[Immo \ ad \ omnia, \ quae \ honeste \ geruntur, \ tanto \ me \ promptiorem \ efficeret, \ quanto \ ab \ huius \ concupiscentiae \ iugo \ maximo \ amplius \ liberaret.\]

Indeed the more it [the wound] freed me from the very great yoke of this desire, the more it made me ready for all things which are carried on honorably.

Indeed, this is what Abelard remembers in the *Historia* as Heloise’s final attempt to persuade him not to marry: her imploring him to “defend the dignity of a philosopher and control this shamelessness with selfrespect.” Heloise wants Abelard for her special friend, but she also wants him to devote himself to philosophy too. However, when Abelard says now “*ab his me spurcitis . . . tam mente quam corpore circumcideret*” (he further cut me off *as much in mind* [emphasis mine] as in body from these filthy things),

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it must have caused Heloise no little distress. He tells her he married her because,
“cuperem te mihi supra modum dilectam in perpetuum retinere”⁶⁴ (I desired to keep you
whom I loved beyond measure for me forever). He loved her because he desired her; she
owes her relationship with him to his lust, the very lust for which he now has such a
horror. That is what has been keeping them apart: his horror of what had connected them.
For Heloise their relationship was never wholly, or perhaps even primarily, about lust. On
that point her conscience is clear. Strange then, that every age since has imposed the
same framing of sex as sin and chosen to see Heloise as an unrepentant sinner and to
question whether she was ever converted to God. Perhaps that is because even our own
age, which no longer sees sexual congress as automatically sinful, has, like all other ages,
accepted Abelard’s point of view rather than hers.

In two different places in this section, instead of reminding her to exercise that
supreme women’s virtue and be quiet, as he had earlier in this same letter and will again
in subsequent letters,⁶⁵ Abelard urges her to tell their story.

*Narra semper cum summa gratiarum actione quanta fecit Dominus
animae nostrae et quoslibet iniquos de bonitate Domini desperantes
nostro consolare example.*⁶⁶
Tell always along with the greatest giving of thanks what great things God
did for our souls and console whatever unjust people who are despairing
of the goodness of God by our example.

He himself will do the same. “*Vadem igitur et narrabo quanta fecit Dominus animae
meae.*”⁶⁷ (I will go then and tell what great things God did for my soul.) In order to do

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⁶⁵ In the rule he writes for Heloise, Abelard emphasizes that nuns should be silent. See Levitan,
173-174.


that, of course, Heloise would have had to accept Abelard’s view of their relationship as sinful in its essence. We have no evidence that Heloise ever carried out this request.

Heloise is very clear that letters from Abelard will bring her consolation. She has gotten two; should we doubt that they helped? Especially with this second reply, Abelard has exerted himself. He rises to the heights of his powers and he does it for her. Further, it is supremely significant that he has broken his long silence about their shared past. She needed to hear his point of view and how he made sense of what had happened to him; she needed to hear that he understood that what had happened to her was a tragedy as well. Now, finally, she has. He has written her a personal letter at last. In addition, he has given her something of utmost importance to do for him. Since she still suffers from sexual longings, she can win the martyr’s crown he can no longer win and, because they are linked, her continuing struggle against sexual temptation can help him too. Finally he has called her, “inseparabilis comes” (inseparable companion) and “culpae particeps . . . et gratiae” (sharer of both guilt and grace).68

Where Heloise had ended her letter with a confession, Abelard ends his with a prayer, but a prayer written for her lips, a prayer which links him with her for eternity.


You have joined us, Lord, and parted us when it was pleasing to you and in what manner it was pleasing to you. Now, Lord, most mercifully end what you mercifully began. Also those who you once separated from each other on earth, join to yourself in heaven everlastingly, our hope, our

68 Abelard, Sponsae Christi, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 90.
69 Abelard, Sponsae Christi, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 94.

What has Abelard offered that consoled her? He could not offer his own presence, but something else proved just as effective. After his castration, Abelard had commanded her to live the life of a nun. For Heloise to decide that she is living it for God instead would be disobedient to that command. It is crucial for us to understand that she is steadfast not because she wishes to deny God, but because she wishes to be loyal to Abelard. She realizes that she does this at some danger to her soul because it forces her to be a hypocrite. However, she herself finds the solution to the dilemma; she asks Abelard for new instructions; she asks him to excite her to God. In Sponsae Christi he has exerted all his powers to do that, but he goes even further and asks her for something else as well, something supremely important. He asks her to help him attain heaven and to follow him there. “What more total, more intimate union, what union higher and more worthy of Heloise’s great soul could Abelard have offered her? . . . He is giving her his soul to be ransomed by her sufferings.”70 It is enough. I think we can rest assured that Heloise has received the consolation she craved and is finally able to move on. Her third letter with its remarkably different tone offers corroborating evidence, but we will look at that in the next chapter.

70 Gilson, 83.
CHAPTER FIVE: CHECK AND CHECKMATE

The Bridle of Your Command

According to most scholars, Heloise lost the match. Checkmate went to Abelard. He had succeeded in checking the flow of her unusually personal and heart-felt words. Not only does she promise, in Suo specialiter (her third letter), to obey his command and monitor what she writes in future, she makes good on her promise with many pages on another and more general topic: the monastic life. Let’s look at how several scholars have characterized this dramatic change:

Urged by Abelard to adopt an attitude towards God more in conformity with her state, she prefers to change the topic; for as long as Abelard was there, it would be quite impossible for her not to start in all over again. Thus Heloise is reduced to silence, but for the same motives that ruled all her other acts—obedience.¹

Abelard killed Heloise and she willingly made the sacrifice of her life.² For many readers, however, Heloise’s last letter is precisely the one where her spirit dies, or at least goes underground forever. While she wages impassioned war with Abelard under the guise of submission, she never ceases to fascinate; but when she actually submits, she dwindles into virtue as a heroine of romance might dwindle into marriage.³

The drama briskly concludes at the beginning of the next letter, the last from Heloise. She complies. . . . She will force herself to keep silent. . . . she locks up her love, her bitterness and the torments of her desire. . . . What she now seeks . . . is . . . a new rule for . . . the Paraclete. This question occupies the rest of this interminable and, for us, tedious, Correspondence.⁴

¹ Gilson, 101-102.
² Southern, Medieval Humanism, 94.
³ Newman, Virile Woman, 74.
⁴ Duby, Women, 1: 53.
Heloise fades into silence with the insistent conviction that her love is worth her destruction.⁵

Abelard’s pious farewell succeeded in silencing Heloise to the extent that she recorded nothing more about her love for him. She maintained contact at a formal level by allowing him in some respects to act as her religious superior.⁶

Objections to this framing of her third letter are remarkably few. Mews does not directly contradict it, although he treats the letter as a continuation of the conversation and notes no sharp break.⁷ Ferrante is a voice in opposition, but for an unusual reason; she proposes that Heloise moves on, not because she was silenced, but because she had achieved her purpose—saving Abelard from despair.⁸ Blamires suggests that both Heloise and Abelard found consolation in their renewed correspondence, but does not speculate that it may have accounted for Heloise’s change of tone at this point.⁹ The prevailing view remains that Heloise was silenced by Abelard’s second letter, or more accurately, once again silenced. After all, she had written Abelard no letters for the first fifteen years of their religious life, then two remarkable letters, and then, a third but with a decidedly different tone.

In at least one sense, Heloise does maintain the silence she seems to promise. After this, no further letters from Heloise survive with the exception of the *Probamata*, her questions concerning religion addressed to Abelard with his answers, and a short letter to Peter the Venerable thanking him for bringing Abelard’s body to her for burial at

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⁵ Jaeger, 170.


⁸ Ferrante, *To the Glory of her Sex*, 57.

the Paraclete. Clanchy wonders whether “she deliberately failed to respond, so as to show him what it was like to receive ‘not a word of consolation nor a letter.’”\textsuperscript{10} But Clanchy, Mews, and Marenbon all accept the fact that Heloise remained an important influence on Abelard’s writing, especially the works of ethics he wrote in his later life.\textsuperscript{11} If that is true, and all three argue persuasively that it is, we should be permitted to wonder how her influence was wielded.

Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Her duties as abbess would have included correspondence as a matter of course and, in fact, we even have persuasive evidence of further letters she wrote to Abelard himself in the introductory paragraphs to the material he subsequently sent to her for the Paraclete. In his letter accompanying the first batch of hymns, for example, Abelard refers directly to a letter of hers whose text has been lost.\textsuperscript{12} We know that Abelard began an outpouring of materials for the Paraclete after receiving this third letter from Heloise. Should we imagine that he suddenly became a self-starter in this regard when he had never been so before or that in his later works of ethics he suddenly remembered conversations they had had in Paris so many years before? I think we have to accept the fact that Heloise wrote more letters, especially to him, and that they are lost to the vicissitudes of time—not an unusual circumstance in the historical record. That is less of a stretch than to posit Heloise as a muse, like those of the ancient world, wielding her influence in a mystical way. It is far more prosaic, but far

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Clanchy, \textit{Abelard: A Life}, 171.
\item \textsuperscript{11} For example, Mews, \textit{Abelard and Heloise}, 58-80; Marenbon, 75-81; Clanchy, \textit{Abelard: A Life}, 272-282.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Radice, xxxv.
\end{itemize}
more likely, that she continued to be engaged in correspondence with Abelard perhaps right up until his death in 1142.

However that might be, there are no letters extant like the two she wrote to Abelard after reading his *Historia*. We know that the *Historia* itself had something to do at least with the timing of their appearance, but it is a mistake to think that they stand alone simply because Abelard ordered her to be silent. Of the three possible motives for her change of tone—conversion, capitulation, or consolation—every scholar rejects the first, almost every scholar accepts the second, but the third has received almost no attention at all. In fact, it is quite astonishing that no scholar has yet made the case that Heloise was consoled. Is it beyond consideration that Abelard, when he had marshaled all of his considerable resources for the task, was able to console her? If his mere command was all it took to silence her, he had gone to considerable trouble writing that letter which has won so much praise. Clanchy acknowledges that McLeod raises the possibility that Heloise was consoled, but adds that it is impossible to say anything definitively since “evidence is lacking.” This is peculiar because the evidence is, in fact, clearly there in the text. All that is necessary in order to find it is to read Abelard’s passionate letter looking for the consolation it offered, as I have just done in Chapter 4. In addition there is further corroborative evidence directly from Heloise in her third letter as

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14 Georgianna and McLaughlin are alone in arguing that she did not capitulate.


16 Gilson, in particular, has high praise for it. Gilson, 82-83.

well that I will examine shortly. It is quite possible she never again wrote letters detailing her dilemma for the simple and straightforward reason that she never again felt the need so pressingly.

One problem for us is that the enchantment of her love story has led to an unthinking assumption that, just as if she were a literary heroine, it defines her when, in fact, it neither does nor can. Heloise was flesh and blood and she lived a long life. What we see in this third letter is the beginning of the rest of her life. It is true that the tone has changed, but in quite a different way than the quotations with which I opened this chapter would indicate. The tone is not so much formal as it is light-hearted, even playful in spots, and she is obviously showing off her erudition with multiple quotations from the Bible, classical philosophers, and church fathers. In fact she seems to be so enjoying having her favorite audience and sounding board back that the length of this letter outdoes even Abelard’s lengthy missive. It is impossible to imagine that a letter like this could have been written by the tormented soul who wrote those earlier angst-filled letters. Heloise shows herself in her most audacious persona, teasing Abelard about his assumptions and tweaking his jealousy to her advantage. Poor Abelard! He has just told Heloise that if they had not been married when he entered the monastery she might have been tempted to stay in the world by the “carnalium oblectatione voluptatum” (delight of the pleasures of the flesh). In response, Heloise reminds Abelard that the world penetrates even the cloister.

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18 Brooke mentions something similar. “The letters show that she thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity of dialogue with him.” Brooke, Medieval Idea of Marriage, 97.

19 Clanchy has also noticed this teasing tone. Clanchy, Abelard: A Life, 156.

To begin with, her obedience does not extend quite so far as to follow Abelard’s lead by placing her own name first in the salutation, but even more significantly, this time her salutation does not make the slightest nod to the religious life they are now leading. When she opened her second letter with the words “Unico suo post Christum unica sua in Christo” (to her only one after Christ from his only one in Christ) she was echoing Abelard’s first salutation to his sister in Christ. Now she begins with the heartfelt words “Suo specialiter, sua singulariter” (to the one who is hers specially, from the one who is his singularly). These are the unique terms that the man and the woman in the lost love letters use for each other. It is a philosophical distinction that seems to have pleased them both. “Heloise seems to draw a deliberate contrast between the fact that she saw him as ‘specially hers,’ while in his eyes she was ‘singularly his.’”\(^2\) Some may assume she was being oppositional; I think she was simply happy. We can only fully feel the surprise of her old salutation after we have read the letter that follows. However, if it caused Abelard any trepidation, she soon allays his fears with her promise to “put a bridle on her pen.” It is important to take careful note of the precise words she chooses.

\[\textit{Verbis etiam immoderati doloris tuae frenum impositum est iussionnis ut ab his mihi saltem in scribendo temperem a quibus in sermone non tam difficile quam impossibile est providere.}\]\(^2\)

The bridle of your command has been imposed on the words of even my immoderate sorrow so that I may restrain myself in writing at least from those things from which it is not only difficult but impossible to keep away from in speaking.


The first thing we should notice is that she has promised to put a bridle, not a gag, on her pen. The bridle will guide, but not stop, her flow of words. She also promises to restrain herself in writing, but not necessarily in speaking.

_Nihil enim minus in nostra est potestate quam animus . . . Revocabo itaque manum a scripto in quibus linguam a verbis temperare non valeo._”23

For nothing is less in our power than feeling . . . Therefore I will call back my hand from what has been composed whereas I am not able to restrain my tongue after the words have been spoken.

What might she have written that she rubbed out again? What might she have still been eager to say when he visited again? Spoken words, as she says, hang in the air unrecoverable by the one who uttered them.24

Heloise is anxious, however, to remind Abelard that the consolation she needs is ongoing—just one letter can not discharge his debt—but she suddenly seems much more reasonable when she says, “_aliquod tamen dolori remedium vales conferre, si non nunc omnino possis auferre_”25 (yet you are able to bestow some remedy on my grief, even if you could not remove it entirely in these circumstances). One way to read this is with the emphasis I have added and it becomes a straight-forward statement that he has in fact already lessened her grief, but of course it is also a reminder to him of his debt to her. Unfortunately her insistence on this point is problematic for us since it does not suit our notions of disinterested love.26 However, debt has a different and more pejorative ring in


24 Mews points out that Marbod of Rennes made a similar remark about the impossibility of withdrawing what had been uttered. Mews, _Lost Love Letters_, 94.


26 Clanchy in particular takes her to task for her insistence on Abelard’s debt to her. Clanchy, _Abelard: A Life_, 164-68.
the twenty-first century than it did in the twelfth which was so familiar with debts of honor—debts we should remember that did bestow honor on those who discharged them. She had no reason to shrink from reminding him of his debt to her and surely we can see how anxious she was to hold his attention once she had re-engaged him. In addition, it is likely that his second letter allowed her to realize what was probably true all along: she could be reconciled to the present if she could count on finding Abelard there even if it was just through his letters. She must have judged the passionate letter Abelard had just written her as both honorable and urgent because she says it has turned her from her obsessive thoughts.

As another drives out a nail hammered in, so a new thought shuts out a previous one when the mind, intent on other things, is forced to dismiss or interrupt the memory of former times. Truly any particular thought occupies the mind more and leads it away from other things, the more what is thought is judged honorable and the more urgent it seems whither we direct our mind.

Every scholar who has looked at this letter has assumed that these new thoughts must be about monastic rule because that is her next topic. However, Heloise has been thinking about the monastic life for quite some time without that effect. I would like to propose that her memories have been interrupted by something much more powerful. For the first time since she and Abelard entered religious life she is privy to his thoughts about their shared past as well as in direct communication with him about his current struggles. Only this could have had enough force to interrupt the memories she has been

obsessing over for so many years like a cat chasing its own tail and getting nowhere. This is the nail that drives out another which she refers to in her next letter. The only thing that can replace the old thoughts about Abelard are new thoughts from Abelard. Now, finally, she has heard from the one person whose viewpoint has enough weight to change the way she characterizes their shared past. However, she mentions this so briefly and with so little elaboration that its import has been missed. But, in fact, this is the very pivot upon which she was able to turn. She, who has been grieving for so many years over his wound, has finally heard directly from him about how he has made his peace with it. More than that, through these letters they have developed a new understanding together—God’s grace has saved them both with a single wound. It is this and only this that could have had the power to turn her thoughts in new directions and give her a measure of peace as well. Finally she can view their shared past through his eyes as well as her own. Finally she has some hope that she can count on hearing from him in the future.

With the crisis passed, Heloise reverts easily and naturally to a conversation that must have already begun with the founding of the Paraclete and which had so recently been interrupted when Abelard left for St. Gildas. When she asks him to write a history of women in the religious life and to devise a rule specifically for the Paraclete, she now has a real hope that he will indulge her request, but she knows he will not write without a compelling reason and she finds one. No one, she tells him, has ever written a rule that is truly appropriate for the weaker sex. She might have felt that this would be a sufficient spur for Abelard who likes to be first, but her confidence in him is new and in order to make sure he will undertake what will be, after all, a considerable body of work, she also
plays on his jealousy, reminding him, subtly but teasingly, that there is temptation even within a monastery—an abbess may read love poetry; she may sit at table with men; and still more as we shall see.

To drive her point home she cites several instances where women are simply not able to follow the rule meant for men. For example, should an abbess offer the hospitality of her table to male visitors? And she exclaims, “O quam facilis ad ruinam animarum virorum ac mulierum in unum cohabitatio!”28 (Oh how easy living together in one place is to the ruination of the souls of men and women!) The casual reader might easily miss the implication; she does not specifically mention the time when the two of them lived together under her uncle’s roof—she has put a bridle on her pen, after all—but Abelard was not a casual reader and it is hard to imagine that he did not squirm.29 Abelard may think he has placed her out of the reach of temptation, but she gives him example after example to show that he ignores her even in her cloister at some peril—not just her peril but his if he wants her hidden away safe from other men.

She introduces this topic in a way that is neither prosaic nor tedious and she raises the point at the outset. Just a few lines into the letter we find her quoting from Ovid—Ovid, who, she pointedly reminds Abelard, is called the poet of dissipation and the doctor of indecency—Ovid who demonstrates the opportunity dinner parties provide especially for fornication.30 What could Heloise possibly have in mind? What she has in mind is a rather scandalous quotation from Ovid, and she prefaces it, not simply because Ovid is a

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29 Dronke, *Women Writers*, 130.

30 Newman notes, however, that Heloise’s use of Ovid “helped to lay the foundations of that misogynist prison that constrained her life and letters as well as the terms of her reception.” This is not to fault Heloise, but those who have misinterpreted her. Newman, *Virile Woman*, 69.
pagan poet, with a more Christian one from St. Jerome: “difficile inter epulas servatur pudicitia” (modesty is preserved with difficulty at banquets). Ovid is not as circumspect as Jerome, however, and Heloise quotes him at greater length.

Vinaque cum bibulas sparsere Cupidinis alas
Permanet et coepto stat gravis ille loco.
Tunc veniant risus, tunc pauper cornua sumit.
Tunc dolor et curae rugaque frontis abiit.
Illic saepe animos juvenum rapuere puellae
Et Venus in vinia ignis in igne fuit.31

When wine has sprinkled Cupid’s ever-thirsty wings,
He stays on, and having inaugurated the situation, stands heavy.
Then laughter comes, then the poor man grows horns.
Then sorrow and care and the wrinkle in the brow go away.
There often girls seize the hearts of young men
And Venus in the wine is fire within fire.

Heloise warms to her topic: drinking wine at table is not safe even if the visitors are only women. Here she employs what was then a common assumption: worldly women are particularly dangerous because women are in the habit of conversing so freely with one another.32 But in case worldly women do not frighten him, she concludes that often the visitors are men and necessarily so because she can not exclude men upon whose help she depends.

To reinforce the point that a convent remains in the world, she has two more nails to drive home. The first is another example of how the world intrudes into the convent: how a woman’s cloister is porous to males. She notes that a priest or a deacon—necessarily male—must be present at night vigils to provide the required reading from the Gospels. An abbess led the sisters under her care in prayer and in the recitation of the


32 Bloch, 100.
Psalms, but she was proscribed from preaching, hearing confessions, and, of course, celebrating the mass and so “without a priest there could be no confession and no mass.”\textsuperscript{33} That this proscription extended to the reading of the gospels seems a bit strange, but we don’t have to take Heloise’s word for it, although we probably should. It goes back to Caesarius of Arles whose sixth-century rule for virgins allowed the admission of two [male] lectors to read the epistle and the gospel.\textsuperscript{34} Having priests present at the night vigils conjures up a vivid picture of female faces bathed in flickering candlelight gazing, perhaps even adoringly, at what may very well be young, handsome priests, for whom the women are expected to have enormous respect.

\textit{Periculosum quippe nobis videtur eo tempore ad nos sacerdotes aut diaconos admitti, per quos haec lectio recitetur, quas precipue ab omni hominum accessu atque aspectu segregates esse convenit, tum ut sincerius Deo vacare possimus, tum etiam ut a temptatione tutiores simus.}\textsuperscript{35}

Indeed it seems dangerous to us that priests or deacons by whom this reading is to be recited be admitted at this time among us for whom it is especially fitting to be segregated from all approach and sight of men, first so that we may be able to be free for God more sincerely, and then also so that we may be safer from temptation.

In fact, Heloise tells Abelard she wants him to deal with this problem before anything else! Think about this first, she tells him. Think about all the men who are here while you are not—especially at night.

And finally, the \textit{coup de grâce}: she asks him to imagine the teacher who may replace him. She will never have another lover, but she might yet have another teacher.


She is quite clear that this hypothetical teacher will not come up to the lofty standards set by her first, the founder of the Paraclete—that is Abelard—but he will be there when Abelard is gone.

Praeceptorem alium post te fortassis habiture sumus et qui super alienum aliquid aedificet fundamentum, ideoque veremur de nobis minus futurus sollicitus vel a novis minus audiendus, et qui denique, si aeque velit, non aeque posit.36

Perhaps we are going to have another teacher after you and one who will build something on another’s foundation, therefore we fear, one who will be less concerned about us or who will be less listened to by us, and who finally even if he is equally willing, may not be equally able.

There is no indication whatsoever that Heloise ever invited another man to supervise the Paraclete.37 In fact, we can imagine that she relished having the job to herself when she got the chance. So she has raised a specter which is not real, but perhaps uniquely useful for her purpose. She softens the thought by adding that the new teacher will not be equally as able and she ends with the words, “Loquere tu nobis et audiendus. Vale.”38 (Speak, thou, to us and we will hear. Farewell.)

Heloise’s Treatise on the Monastic Life

There is no denying that Heloise does not refer to their shared story in this third letter in the way she does in the first two. However, it strikes us as more impersonal than it actually is because where we expect a letter we find a treatise. Only if we stop reading once Heloise is no longer writing as a lover but as an abbess and scholar, will it escape our notice that it is she, not Abelard, who writes the first of the treatises on women’s


monastic life which are among the fruits of this correspondence. McLaughlin refers to “the larger aims of her collaboration with Abelard at the Paraclete,”39 and in this letter those larger aims are evident. In an age when “morality was complex, discussable, and impermanent,”40 surely we should want to pay attention when a woman’s voice joins the conversation. Recall that Gilson cautions us that without understanding Heloise we cannot understand the twelfth century. There were many great abbesses in her day, but “Heloise was alone in raising critical, often original, and even prescient questions concerning why and how women should live this life.”41

The twelfth century was one of enormous religious ferment and growth. The rise of a money economy had given power and substance to a new class of people comprised of “merchants, bankers, industrial entrepreneurs, and the professionals”42 who ipso facto challenged the traditional division represented by those who fight, those who pray, and those who work (in the fields). However, monks as well as knights were still being recruited almost exclusively from the nobility. In addition, to ensure their entry into heaven, it was not unusual for knights to take the tonsure just before dying. In the twelfth century, when the best and truest way to be a Christian was still to be a monk, the word religious was used as a collective and/or a singular noun to denote those in holy orders more often than it was used as an adjective—its more common usage today. Thus a large part of what was driving the religious ferment of the times was the difficulty that the emerging bourgeoisie had with following this traditional Christian paradigm, although at


42 Little, 24.
first they certainly tried. The twelfth century witnessed an impressive spike in the number
of new monastic foundations and the rise of new religious orders. In addition, there was
considerable experimentation with double monasteries of men and women and even
nascent associations of lay persons attempting to live a communal life in the towns and
cities without retreating to a monastery.43

There was also a precedent for Heloise’s “larger aims” which was very close to
her own experience. In the eleventh century, communities of canons associated with
urban cathedrals had sought to legitimize their own role in the church by establishing
their historical authority and writing a rule which suited their specific circumstances.44
Heloise, who spent much of her early youth in the cathedral close of Notre Dame in Paris
with her uncle, was now asking Abelard to follow a similar path to place the role of
women in religious life on a firmer footing at just the moment when the number of
foundations for women was exploding right along with the new foundations for men.45

We might well pause to ask why Heloise herself did not undertake this endeavor. She
certainly had the skills, as her treatise shows.46 However, there are at least three reasons
why she might have wanted Abelard to undertake it instead. First, he could lend the
project his male, and not just for that reason considerably greater, prestige. Second, he
likely had access to a wider variety of sources, especially since he had returned to Paris.
Finally, and this was likely the most important reason for Heloise, it would keep his
attention on the Paraclete and engaged with her for the duration of the project.

44 Little, 104.

45 Bruce L. Venarde, Women’s Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and
Nevertheless, Heloise took “the precaution of telling him with some vigor what to say.”\footnote{Brooke, *Medieval Idea of Marriage*, 116.} It is clear from her treatise that she had pondered at length on questions about the calibration of vows to the strength of those making them, the difference between external and internal observance, due deliberation before choosing the monastic life, and whether or not ascetic practice had been carried too far beyond both the Gospel and the early church fathers. To all of these she applies the criteria of intention, reason, and moderation.\footnote{Jaeger notes that Aelred of Rievaulx applied these same three criteria to friendship. Jaeger, 112.} The Christian sources she uses are wide-ranging: Paul, Jerome, Pope Gregory the Great, Benedict, Jesus, Chrysostom, Augustine, Macrobius, the Apostle James, and several books of the Bible: Proverbs, Psalms, Job, Genesis, Acts. Heloise, the lover of classical literature, has been pouring over a lot of Christian works. It may not have been simply her taking the veil which led Peter the Venerable to praise her for turning from secular wisdom to Christ: “Where there had been logic now there was the Gospel; where there had been metaphysics, now there was Saint Paul.”\footnote{Peter the Venerable, *Letter to Heloise*, in Levitan, 266.} Peter’s praise is significant evidence that her scholarship continued to be known and admired, but it also indicates that there really had been a change in the focus of her studies.

As if to disguise her presumption in writing a treatise, she begins with some minor complaints about how the Benedictine rule creates problems for women. First, she mentions the unsuitability of wool habits for women who must deal with a monthly flux. Second, she wonders how the expectation that the head of the monastery reads from the gospel and starts the hymn can apply if the head is a woman. And third, as we have just seen, she takes up the question of who, if anyone, should be invited to dine at the
abbess’s table. These are small things, she admits, but she points out that the Apostle James says on the crucial importance of small things, “quicumque totam Legem observaverit, offendat autem in uno, factus est omnium reus”\(^{50}\) (whosoever observed the whole law, but offends in one, is made an offender of all). She adds a quotation from Paul on this point to underline its terrifying force.

*Ideo quilibet reus fit de transgressione uniuscujuslibet precepti, quia ipse Dominus, qui precipit unum, precipit et aliud.*\(^{51}\)

Therefore whoever it may be is made a transgressor by the violation of any sort of rule, because the Lord himself, who commands the one, teaches the other.

She displays some real concern about this point here. I think we can assume that it might actually have troubled her.

Heloise moves on next to what must have been another personal concern: taking vows without sufficient preparation, knowledge, and vocation. Interestingly she combines it with another point about how unsuitable it would be for the sisters to do heavy field work. One wonders whether she is juxtaposing these two seemingly disparate points because both were concerns of the Cistercians who initially put brothers into the fields—although later they used lay *conversi* as the Cluniacs did\(^{52}\)—and, refusing to accept oblates, originally “set the age of admission at sixteen, which was raised to eighteen by 1157.”\(^{53}\) In any event she bundles the two concerns together almost as if addressing inadequate preparation for taking vows was too delicate a point to raise by itself when she herself had taken her own vows only at Abelard’s insistence.


\(^{52}\) Constable, 53 and 218-219.

\(^{53}\) Constable, 100.
Where has a convent of nuns ever been accustomed to go out for the purpose of collecting the harvest or to manage the work in the fields? Or tested the constancy of the women who are to be received for one year, and instructed them by reading the rule thrice, as it is ordered in that place? Who in turn is so foolish as to advance on an unknown path not yet revealed? What is more rash than to choose and profess a mode of life of which you know nothing, or to make a vow which you are not capable of fulfilling?

It is difficult to imagine that Heloise herself was entirely ignorant of monastic life at the time she took her vows since she had been raised and educated at the convent of Argenteuil. On the other hand, perhaps she is not thinking of herself at all but of other sisters who might have been placed hurriedly in the Paraclete without sufficient preparation. Georgianna sees Heloise moving away from the personal toward a more general view, so it may well have been a concern for the sisters under her care. It was a significant concern in the twelfth century that monastic vows be made with full knowledge and clear intention, but, in fact, many made their vows as hastily as Heloise had.

Heloise also raises another and wider reaching preoccupation of twelfth-century scholastics. It was the twelfth century which established as a point of faith that reason had a role in religion and that properly applied it would support faith, but the discussions in the schools always seemed to be on such a lofty level that they scarcely touched

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56 Constable, 27.
ground. Heloise makes it practical by suggesting that a monastic rule can not be judged to
be a good thing if it is against reason.

*Sed et cum omnium virtutum discretion sit mater, et omnium bonorum
moderatrix sit ratio, quis aut virtutum aut bonum censeat quod ab istis
dissentire videat?*

However, since discretion is the mother of all virtues and reason is the
mediator of all good things, who would judge that which he sees to differ
from these either as a virtue or as a good thing?

The first thing she names as against reason is an excess of virtue and she quotes Jerome
as her authority. “*Ipsas quippe virtutes excedentes modum atque mensuram, sicut
Jeronimus asserit, inter vitia reputari convenit.*”57 (For it is appropriate that virtues
themselves exceeding limit and measure be counted among vices as Jerome asserts.) The
impulse for asceticism has been found in many cultures, and where it becomes a focus of
competition, as it was in medieval Christianity, its practice was often raised to heights so
extreme that we see astonishing feats of self-mortification by hermits (mostly male) and
recluses (mostly female) as well as mystics (both male and female). In fact, no new
monastic order was ever founded on the premise of making the monastic life less
arduous, but instead to outdo their predecessors in ascetic practice.

Heloise is more interested in what is humanly possible, than in life-threatening
feats of asceticism, and she applies her criterion of what is reasonable by arguing that
women, who are weaker than men, should not be held to the same vows:

*Quis asinum sarcina tanta qua dignum iudicat elephantem?*
*Quis tanta pueris aut senibus quanta viris iniungat?*
*Tanta debilibus scilicet quanta fortibus;*
*Tanta infirmis quanta sanis;*

Who judges an ass worthy of as great a load as an elephant? Who would enjoin as much on youth or age as on men? As much on the weak, if you please, as the strong; As much on the sick as on the healthy; As much on the woman as on her husband, On the weaker sex, namely, as on the strong.

In addition to appealing to common sense, she also cites two important authorities of the church: Pope Gregory suggesting that women should be admonished differently than men and Benedict urging moderation according to the strength of each individual. If the head of a religious house follows this advice, Heloise adds, his flock will increase and the monastery will thrive. She must have taken a care for this, when we consider how well the Paraclete did thrive.

Although, on the one hand, Heloise feels it is against reason to require the same vows from men and women, on the other hand, she questions the deepening chasm between the laity and the religious. She notes that revered biblical figures like Abraham, David, and Job were all married, and therefore, according to the twelfth-century view, could be counted among the laity, and she quotes Chrysostom.

Ask Paul, when he says: do not take care of the body in its appetites. He wrote these things not only for monks, but for all who were in the cities.

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She is swimming against the current here because, since the Pontificate of Gregory VII (1073–1085), the church had been intent on drawing the distinction between laity and religious as clearly as possible.\textsuperscript{61} True, there was a shift coming. It was just four decades later, that Waldes made his conversion public without joining any religious order.\textsuperscript{62} The “growing emphasis on monasticism”\textsuperscript{63} of the mid-twelfth century had begun to give way by the early thirteenth century to a chorus of voices rising to defend the religiosity of ordinary people with the idea that “the entire body of the faithful was a gigantic religious community under God the abbot.”\textsuperscript{64} Heloise was writing well before that chorus grew loud enough to be heard, however. Clanchy wonders if it was her experience as a woman that led her to differ so much “from ecclesiastical reformers . . . in concluding . . . that the laity too were religious.”\textsuperscript{65} I think it more likely that it was her experience of living a monastic life she herself did not choose.

One thing Heloise clearly did choose for herself was celibacy. It is perhaps the one monastic stricture she never complains about. However, her view of celibacy is somewhat complicated. On the one hand she keenly regrets loosing Abelard’s physical companionship, but, on the other, since Abelard is unavailable, her celibacy is critical for demonstrating her loyalty to him. In fact, I think she regrets not being allowed to remain outside the cloister where her renunciation would more clearly have served that purpose. This regret is likely to have been on her mind when she writes, “\textit{quisquis euvangelicis}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{61} Venarde, 86.
  \item \textsuperscript{62} Little, 122.
  \item \textsuperscript{63} Constable, 4-5.
  \item \textsuperscript{64} Constable, 293.
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Clanchy, \textit{Abelard: A Life}, 256.
\end{itemize}
praeceptis continentiae virtutem addiderit, monasticam perfectionem implebit”66

(whoever adds the virtue of continence to the precepts of the Gospel, will fulfill monastic perfection). She has formulated this in such a way that it easily encompasses any lay person who vows celibacy without entering a cloister, but it is also a statement that celibacy could be seen as sufficient for living an exemplary life even within the cloister. There is no indication, however, that she saw celibacy as a necessary prerequisite for entering heaven. As it happens, neither did the church, which was even then moving toward including marriage as one of its acknowledged sacraments—made official at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.

By raising these caveats about the distinction between laity and religious, Heloise is extending her argument that concessions are appropriate for cloistered women. She seems to realize, however, that this line of reasoning by itself can not be entirely persuasive in the present climate, and so she raises another point which one might think should have been more persuasive, although it proves just as futile. She invokes the fact that the church accepts the religious status of canons even though they have never followed a rule as strict as the Benedictine.67 She points out that in spite of their more lenient rule, canons “se inferiores monachis nullatenus arbitrantur, licet eos et vesci

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67 They followed the Carolingian Rule of Aix which settled a part of the cathedral’s resources on individual canons as prebends. By the eleventh century there was a movement to return canons to the common life and institute the Rule of Augustine, but that was still brief enough to allow considerable laxity. Little, 100-105. Dairmaid MacCulloch also comments on the evolution of the rule for canons noting that a certain Chrodegang, who was Bishop of Metz during the reign of Pippin, “set out a system which made the community life [of the clergy of the cathedral church at Metz] much more disciplined, like that of a monastery, but still left them free to exercise pastoral care in cathedral and diocese—a model much imitated later.” MacCullough, *Christianity*, 347.
carnibus et lineis uti vedeamus”68 (think themselves in no way inferior to monks, although we see that they both eat meat and wear linen). These clerics who served the great urban cathedrals of northern Europe, had, at least since the time of Charlemagne, enjoyed a degree of autonomy in their personal lives undreamed of by monastics. Not only did they eat meat and wear linen, as Heloise says, but they were allowed to have personal possessions, to receive a prebend (a kind of salary) and to live in their own homes.69 All of this Heloise had experienced first hand while she lived with her uncle in the cathedral close of Notre Dame in Paris. In this regard it is interesting that “some of the strongest critics of monasticism in the twelfth century came from the ranks of the regular canons.”70 Heloise is one of them in spirit.

Next she moves on to a more theoretical objection to the intrusiveness of the many rules that burden monastic life. Strictures against wearing linen or eating meat are what she would call small things because they are merely physical, but, she adds, the stricter Benedictine rule has a more serious fault: it allows nothing to be added out of love for Christ.

Magnae postremo providentiae est his qui Deo se per votum obligant ut minus voveant et plus exequantur, ut aliquid semper debitis gratia superaddant.”71

Finally it is a great foresight for those who obligate themselves through a vow to God, that they may vow less and attain more, so that they may always add something to the debt by grace.

69 Little, 100.
70 Constable, 55.
How can you earn glory, she is asking, if nothing you do is done for love, but simply to follow a vow? This is the Heloise who prefers freedom to fetters and values love freely given and debts freely paid chafing as well at the vows and rules of monastic life. Heloise wants Abelard to understand that she is celibate out of love and loyalty to him, not because of the vow she was required to recite upon entering the cloister.

Some little way further Heloise includes a long diatribe against wine, which does look at first like a strange digression, so strange, indeed, that Dronke thinks it must have been inserted by some later copyist.\(^2\) It can easily be read, however, as entirely consistent with her argument. What Heloise is doing here is driving home the strongest possible precedent for moderation in the application of the Benedictine rule. First, she lists at considerable length all of the reasons why wine is dangerous to the spiritual life and then she points out that in spite of that danger no less an authority than Benedict himself allowed his monks to drink wine. It is important to realize that she is not simply arguing here for permission to drink more wine, although she adds that wine is less dangerous for women whose bodies are moister;\(^3\) her aim is much larger. When a concession as significant as this one has been made to men, simpler and less dangerous concessions can be made to women. What matters, she says, is distinguishing between what is good, what is bad, and what is indifferent and making no fuss over indifferent things, so that “\textit{sola interdici peccata sufficeret}”\(^4\) (it might suffice that only sin be forbidden).

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\(^2\) Dronke, \textit{Women Writers}, 132-133.

\(^3\) This reasoning sounds bizarre to us, but it was the twelfth-century view of women based on classical understandings of biology.

By using Abelard’s own philosophical language about *indifferent* things she shows herself to be his pupil. What is more important, she asks, external or internal things? By this time it was an accepted tenet of the church that Jewish practice was focused on external things whereas Christians focused solely on things of the Spirit. Using food as an example, Heloise argues that this was not necessarily the case: Christ and his disciples walking through fields of ripening wheat, “*spicas vollere fricare et comedere more puerorum non erubescerent*” (did not blush to pick, rub, and eat of the wheat according to the habits of children). Questioned about this Christ replied that “*ex nullus exterioribus animam inquinari*”75 (the soul is not polluted from any exterior things). Heloise is pointing out that what was indifferent to Jesus had become an issue of great concern within monasteries. Nevertheless, she is following precedent; reform of the church was always presented as a return to the purity of earlier practices right up to and including the Protestant Reformation; but she pushes on into more dangerous waters by quoting from Timothy 1:4 that in the end times some will depart from the Christian faith by forbidding people to marry and requiring abstinence from some of the foods that God created: both things the church had been insisting on for some time. True Christians she says “*de exteriori nullam vel minimam assumant curam*”76 (take little or no care about exterior things). Here Heloise is clearly departing from conventional understanding. For Heloise taking little or no care about the exterior meant not making a fuss about what you eat or wear. For most Christians of her time, however, taking little or no care meant turning ones back on worldly things and eating very little or sometimes nearly nothing at all and wearing the coarsest of cloth.

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Philosophers and theologians of the time, Abelard prominent among them, were exploring the idea that intention alone is the proof of sin or innocence. Heloise raised this many times about her own complicity in the story of their love affair. Here she raises it about sin generally. “Nisi enim prius prava voluntate animus corrumpatur, peccatum esse non poterit quicquid exterious agatur in copore.”\(^{77}\) (For unless the mind is first corrupted by evil intention, whatever is done outwardly in the body can not be a sin.) In a certain light this can look a bit like what came to be called the Free Spirit heresy of later centuries. Heloise, however, does not use the language, for example, that Marguerite Porete (d. 1310) did in her book *The Mirror of Simple Souls*: “the soul neither desires nor despises poverty, tribulation, masses, sermons, fasts, or prayers and gives to nature, without remorse, all that it asks.”\(^{78}\) Heloise would not have found any comfort or grandeur in the “annihilation of the soul” as Marguerite did. Nevertheless, the ground she is treading is treacherous. Although Marguerite’s book was read as orthodox by people who did not know who wrote it, she herself was executed as a heretic. Perhaps Abelard was not simply following convention by counseling Heloise so often to be silent. He knew first hand from his trial at Soissons (with Sens yet to follow) the dangers of going public with private ruminations. Heloise, too, seems to be aware of the need for secrecy:

*Non itaque magnopere quae fiunt, sed quo animo fiant pensandum est, si illi placere studemes, qui “cordis et renum probator est,” et “in abscondito videt quie iudicabit occulta hominum.”*\(^{79}\)

And so one must not consider so much those things which are done, but with what mind they are done, if we study to please that one who “is the

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\(^{78}\) Quoted in Robert Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), 76

tester of heart and loins,” and “sees in secret places, who will judge the
secrets of men.”

Heloise had indeed found the key to keeping the dialogue going. Abelard was
both a jealous man as he tells us himself in the Historia and he was one who could easily
be engaged in philosophical conversations. Rather than being checkmated, Heloise has
captured his queen, or rather become his queen. In Sponsae Christi Abelard described
himself as Heloise’s servant and he proves the point. From this point forward he is
obedient to her wishes, although she keeps those wishes focused on the care of the
Paraclete. He wrote the history of religious women; he wrote both a rule and liturgies,
including hymns, for the Paraclete; and he went further: he wrote his final confession of
faith to her alone and he asked Peter the Venerable at Cluny, his benefactor in his last
months, to return his bones to the Paraclete when he died. Would any of this have
happened, if Heloise had not written to him as she did?

Abelard’s Rule

Although Abelard had once told Heloise she could instruct Cicero, he does not
tell her now that she could instruct Benedict. But he does begin where she asked him to
begin with a history of women in the religious life. She may have ordered her questions
thinking chronologically—first the history, then the rule for the present day—but, as
Clanchy points out, by following the order she suggests, Abelard, who in his Historia had
objected to abbesses having the authority of abbots, “could no longer deny the legitimacy
of female authority, as he had already argued that the holy women of the New Testament

80 Letter #50: “I admire your talent, you who discuss the rules of friendship so subtly that you
seem not to have read Tully but to have given those precepts to Tully himself?” Mews, Lost Love Letters,
233.
had been superior to the male apostles.”81 In his history of religious women, his third letter to Heloise, Abelard opens on a note that she must have appreciated: he calls her carissima soror, dearest sister, and he tells her that Christ “thought it best to unite both sexes in the true monkhood of his community,”82 perhaps inviting Heloise to consider the two of them united, rather than separated, by their vows. He does not, however, propose equality so much as a hierarchy stood on its head, in which women are “superior to men in their response to grace and their capacity for the religious life.”83 Thus, he is not challenging hierarchy so much as inverting it, at least in a conceptual sense, as he had already inverted his relationship with Heloise.

The rule that he wrote for the Paraclete and sent to her in his next letter “is a document of intrinsic interest for convent life at this time”84 as it is one of our few glimpses into the life of religious women in the twelfth century, but it is also interesting to read it in order to see just how closely Abelard follows the suggestions Heloise has made. In that regard, he begins somewhat inauspiciously, considering Heloise’s major point that nuns should be treated differently from monks, by saying “Nearly everything that has applied to monks will also be applicable to you.”85 Nevertheless, some pages into his rule he does agree with her on this point: “For the weak to bear the same burdens as the strong, for women to be bound to the same standards of abstinence as men, is at

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81 Clanchy, Abelard: A Life, 256.
82 Abelard, History of Women, in Levitan, 128.
84 Radice, xxxiii.
85 Abelard, Rule for the Paraclete, in Levitan, 171.
odds with the principle of discretion. If someone needs an authority beyond the teaching of nature, let him consult Saint Gregory,”86 which, of course, Heloise had done.

He opens his rule with encomiums to the monastic values of chastity, poverty, and silence, but interestingly he emphasizes silence more than the other two. Although it was commonplace to enjoin silence on women,87 Abelard may have had more personal reasons for his emphasis. He begins by telling Heloise she should practice silence both because “monks should study silence at all times”88 and also because women who “are talkative by nature, prone to speaking when they should not . . . should discipline the tongue with complete silence at least at certain times and in certain places.”89 (Heloise has just told him how difficult it is to discipline the tongue!) Silence, he says, requires solitude and he develops at length the reasons why women especially need solitude, not just to practice silence, but in order to avoid all men. Apparently Heloise has reawakened his jealousy with her teasing because he seems more anxious than ever to keep her separate from the world: “Women’s weakness requires isolation from the world all the more, a place where the temptations of the flesh are less severe and the senses less distracted toward bodily things.”90 It is instructive to note that when we read the word weakness today we are likely to think of physical strength, but when Abelard uses the word he is referring to the twelfth-century understanding that women are more susceptible to sexual temptation.

86 Abelard, Rule, in Levitan, 232.
87 Bloch discusses the topos of the talkative woman who can never be shut up. Bloch, 17-22.
88 Abelard, Rule, in Levitan, 173.
89 Abelard, Rule, in Levitan, 175.
90 Abelard, Rule, in Levitan, 182.
It is well to remember that he is writing the rule not just for Heloise to follow, but for all the sisters at the Paraclete then and in the future. Thus we do not know from this discussion of the womanly susceptibility to sexual temptation that his age took for granted whether he has still missed the point Heloise had tried so desperately to make: that she would be true to him anywhere. We can, however, surmise that unlike desire, jealousy has not deserted him. Heloise had noted the temptation of dining in mixed company; Abelard responds, “Yes, it is easy to sin at table and discipline should be enforced especially during meals,”¹⁹¹ but, he claims that is not the chief reason why he is opposed to abbesses entertaining male guests. The chief reason, he says, is that “many people use hospitality as an opportunity to cater to themselves more than the guests.”¹⁹² As remedy he first recommends that she delegate someone else to entertain for her. Second, he recommends that an elderly woman be appointed as portress and that she admit no men, but only women to the convent. As for the other danger from men in the convent, he recommends celebrating mass after terce, that is, in the morning, and appointing the priests for very short terms, just a week at a time. In addition “the sisters must not be able to see their coming in or going out.”¹⁹³ Further, any priest conducting communion must be elderly! He makes no specific mention of the night offices, but moving the daily mass from compline to terce, from the evening office to mid-morning, does mean that men will no longer be invited into the nunnery after dark.

Heloise had mentioned that moderating the rule might well be a way to increase the flock. Abelard seems to take considerable alarm at this and urges Heloise to consider

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¹⁹¹ Abelard, Rule, in Levitan, 193.
¹⁹² Abelard, Rule, in Levitan, 193.
¹⁹³ Abelard, Rule, in Levitan, 211.
how hypocritical those monks are who glory in the size of their monasteries. “For
women, there is even more shame in this scurrying through the world, more shame, to be
sure, and considerably more risk.”⁹⁴ He wants her to stay at home and not go knocking
“at the gates of worldly courts”⁹⁵ as those who seek to increase their flock must do. “We
should never then assemble a great number in our monasteries and use its maintenance as
a reason—or an excuse—to go out into the world.”⁹⁶ McLaughlin has found evidence in
the *Cartulaire of the Paraclete* (no. 49) that Heloise ignored these strictures when she felt
it was necessary. The occasion was the settlement of a dispute with the nearby Cistercian
abbey of Vauluisant. “The settlement . . . took place at Trainel, in the presence of Lord
Anseau, the mediator and a principal donor to both abbeys, and members of his family as
well as Heloise herself and the abbot of Vauluisant.”⁹⁷ We know Heloise took care to
consolidate her properties because “with one exception, all of the Paraclete properties in
1147 were within twenty miles of the mother house.”⁹⁸ Perhaps that was her concession
to Abelard’s wish that she never venture out; she never ventured out very far. She
certainly proved unwilling or perhaps unable to prevent the increase in her flock. It was
during the twenty years that elapsed between Abelard’s death and Heloise’s death that the
Paraclete established its six daughter houses.⁹⁹ By the late twelfth century the Paraclete
itself probably had about sixty sisters in residence, a relatively large number.¹⁰⁰

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⁹⁹ McLaughlin, “Heloise the Abbess,” in Wheeler, 8.
As for food, Abelard writes that it is reasonable to be concerned about it since it comes under the vow of poverty, but any food is permissible as long as it is cheap. Meat, however, should be eaten sparingly and never on holy days. The problem is excess and appetite rather than a specific food. He agrees with her that wine is uniquely problematic, but that it is unreasonable to expect more of women than men, so if men are allowed to have wine, so should women, but they should cut it by adding one-fourth volume of water. These kinds of issues constitute what Heloise has called “small things,” but those, of course, are exactly what are most amenable to rule-making. However, Abelard does address her more philosophical issues as well. He tells her that, yes, it is enough to find a corner of heaven. “There is no risk in making only modest vows, in order to add something of your own accord beyond what you are already bound to do.”101 And further on, “Likewise, whoever makes the law must not create a multitude of sins by laying down a multitude of strictures.”102 Heloise has said that the yoke of Christ is meant to be sweet and he echoes that here: “Christ’s words on ethical conduct and the holy life were few, and yet he taught perfection. Eliminating the harsh and onerous, he commanded what was sweet and light, and thereby brought religious practice to its full consummation.”103

Heloise paid no attention at all to another point. Abelard insisted that women’s houses should be overseen by a male house, but until his death the only male oversight

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100 Venarde, 123.
was that which he provided, and after his death the Paraclete remained unaffiliated.104

This was undoubtedly Heloise’s wish. She was loyal to one man her life long: one man as lover, teacher, antagonist, and collaborator. When she raised the specter of another teacher at the end of *Suo specialiter*, she did so only to provoke Abelard into accepting responsibility for his foundation. Abelard was the only man and the only monk to whom she vouchsafed this privilege. Clanchy suggests that she had a healthy scepticism about monkish motives towards nuns after her expulsion from Argenteuil and preferred to deal directly with her lay sponsors herself.105 I think the only man she ever found worthy of having authority over her was Ableard.

The statutes of the Paraclete as they existed at the end of Heloise’s tenure are extant. Whether she ever instituted Abelard’s rule in its entirety we do not know, but the Paraclete was following a more conventional and somewhat stricter rule in 1162. Abelard’s work was not entirely lost, however. The Paraclete still celebrated female saints and two-thirds of Abelard’s hymns were still sung, as well as some of his writings for the offices, antiphons, and responses. We do not know why they were used so sparingly, but Wadell speculates that “a steady diet of Abelard’s astonishing feats of composition would be a bit like dining on chocolate mousse six times a week.”106 More likely as the years went on, the Paraclete conformed more and more to the common practice. Even so, for the last twenty years of her life, and likely even before, the true “spiritual guide and teacher” of the Paraclete was Heloise.107 These are not the

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106 Chrysogonus Wadell quoted by McLaughlin, “Heloise the Abbess,” 11.
accomplishments of one who did nothing but relive the memories of lost days. Although
the letters from the Historia to Suo specialiter span a rather short period, there is ample
indication that both protagonists had changed significantly over that time. Abelard had
found his lodestar and Heloise had found consolation.
CHAPTER SIX: HELOISE IN PERSPECTIVE

The Trajectory of her Life

Most people see Heloise primarily as the woman in Abelard’s love story. In an effort to broaden that understanding, Bonnie Wheeler calls her “a literary prodigy, passionate lover, reluctant bride, submissive wife, adept abbess.”1 Except for the first, however, each of these roles has reference to Abelard and they are all sequential. The one abiding characteristic, what she remained in every period of her life, was a lover of letters. Nevertheless she is remembered for being “a paragon of selfless love for Abelard, rather than as a student of philosophy.”2 However, as much as I wish to emphasize the natural predilection of her mind for philosophy, it is probably true that she wouldn’t be remembered at all if it weren’t for her love affair. The problem is the surviving sources. Identifying the works on which her contemporary reputation rested is difficult and mostly speculative.3 The personal letters present only a very partial picture and their publication, which gave Heloise to the ages, also “turned Heloise into a mythic heroine and the letters into a work of fiction.”4 As we have seen, the letters were too explicit in their sexuality to comfortably fit the picture of a twelfth-century abbess, but the difficulty in making sense of them lies just as much with the fact that they were also too crafted and too scholarly to fit the picture of the heroine of a love story. The first problem prevented


3 Mews posits that much that is anonymous from twelfth-century France might be by Heloise. Dronke continues to do work along these lines also. His newest contribution is ‘New Works by Abelard and Heloise,’ Filologia mediolatina 12 (2005) 123-77.

nineteenth-century historians from even considering her achievements; the second problem is still leading some historians to quibble about her character.

In order to see how her sequential roles could fit one personality, it is instructive to look at the trajectory of her life as a whole, not in a biographical way, but in a summary and abstract fashion in order to see its overall shape. She was raised at Argenteuil, moved to Paris, then to Le Pallet, back to Paris, back to Argenteuil and then to the Paraclete. In this sense she was remarkably peripatetic for a woman. Women typically made a single move in their lives: from their birth family to their husband’s family or into a nunnery and there they stayed. This many moves should alert us to look for agency. Mews suggests that Heloise may have made at least one for the same reason male scholars did, to find the opportunity to study with a renowned master.\(^5\) We do not know when she moved back to Paris; we only know she was living there with her uncle in 1117. However, it is likely that her fame as a scholar had spread after, rather than before, she came to Paris and that may indicate she had been there for some little while. Later moves she made at Abelard’s request, but in each case the choice to obey him was hers, as she clearly tells him in her letters. So let us then take a look at each of these translocations in turn to see what they can tell us.

First, we have no idea how old she was when she first came to Argenteuil.\(^6\) Perhaps it was after her parents, or at least her mother, had died, and she may have been as young as five or as old as ten. Almost certainly, those who placed her at Argenteuil expected that she would be educated there in the company of religious women. We do

\(^5\) “Perhaps in 1113, when she heard that Abelard was now teaching in Paris, she decided to move from Argenteuil so as to board with her uncle.” Mews, _Abelard & Heloise_, 59.

\(^6\) McLeod, Heloise’s principal biographer, does not speculate on her age when she first went to Argenteuil.
know from the testimony of Abelard that her uncle, at least later, was proud of her accomplishments and looked to further her education. Whether he had noticed any signs of early genius is impossible to know. Learning to read and write in those days meant reading and writing in Latin:7 thus it was unlikely that a young girl could be an autodidact even if she was lucky enough to find books in her father’s house. Once she had been instructed in Latin letters, however, self-instruction would become possible, but only with access to books. Both these things—instruction and books—were made available to Heloise because she was raised in a nunnery and a fortunate one at that, but it was Heloise herself who took advantage of the opportunity and devoted herself to study.8

The move to Paris was even more momentous and it is worth some little thought why it was that Abelard found her there in 1117. It does not settle the question to assume that her uncle Fulbert had summoned her, because then we have to ask for what purpose. As I have already mentioned in Chapter Two, Fulbert does not seem to have been looking for a husband for her; he hired a tutor instead. Even if Fulbert thought he was educating a future abbess, Heloise clearly did not share that expectation. She is emphatic in her letters that she never had any intention of taking religious vows. This makes it altogether likely that Heloise moved from Argenteuil to Paris on her own volition because Argenteuil had become too small a world for the scholar she was becoming and the philosopher she hoped to be.9 Students often lived with canons in those days10 and she had an uncle who was a canon at Notre Dame. Fortune seemed to have been smiling on the young Heloise.

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7 The reality of this barrier to literacy is beautifully expressed by Clanchy, _Abelard: A Life_, 50-54.
8 Her biographer says she “set her own course.” McLeod, 15
9 Both Wheeler and Mews agree that that was actually her ambition: to be a philosopher. Wheeler, xvii. Mews, _Abelard and Heloise_, 59.
10 Mews, _Lost Love Letters_, 57.
She found it possible to be in the cathedral close at Notre Dame just at the time when it was acquiring a European-wide reputation for the study of philosophy. Given the renown she earned as a scholar, we should not assume this was a mere coincidence. It speaks loudly of intention, a subject, in fact, that the mature Heloise wrote about convincingly and, in fact, it would have taken a great deal of conscious intention for a young girl of the twelfth century to shape her life as Heloise did in a way so unexpected in her time.\textsuperscript{11}

Many girls escaped marriage in the Middle Ages by embracing a religious vocation, but the young Heloise managed to escape both, that is, until she met Abelard.

Fortune, however, is fickle. Even if Heloise herself had engineered the opportunity to study with Abelard, we can not know whether she premeditated having an affair with him. Although it is true that no objection on her part to their affair was ever recorded either by Heloise or by Abelard—and both bear witness to her objections to marriage—in an age when male scholars were expected to be celibate, we should at least consider the possibility that Heloise expected to maintain the same status for herself in order to establish her own scholarly credentials. Peter the Venerable wrote to her in 1143 remembering her reputation as a young woman who “devoted all her energies to literature and the pursuit of secular wisdom . . . and none of the world’s pleasures with its trifles and delights could distract her from her commitment to these good and useful arts.”\textsuperscript{12} We should be safe in assuming that love affairs were among the world’s pleasures that were, at least at that time, not distracting Heloise. Whether or not Fulk of Deuil is correct when

\textsuperscript{11} Mews, \textit{Lost Love Letters}, 55.

\textsuperscript{12} Peter the Venerable, \textit{Letter to Heloise}, in Levitan, 266.
he says that Abelard’s downfall was the love of prostitutes, there is no hint of that kind about Heloise. Thus her affair with Abelard does not necessarily reveal her youthful intention about her own chastity. I think it is reasonable to assume that she intended to remain celibate and made an exception only for Abelard.

In any event, her next translocation was definitely not one motivated by scholarship. Abelard took her to his family home in Le Pallet for her confinement at the birth of their son, Astrolabe. Her brief stay there is nevertheless interesting. In the *Historia* Abelard seems to indicate that Heloise actually contemplated staying in Brittany. Whatever she might have imagined her next step to be, it is abundantly clear from the surviving sources that she did not want to marry Abelard even if it was her only route back to Paris. In fact, although Abelard tells us she saw such a move as dangerous for him, she may have seen it as dangerous for herself as well. In her protestations to Abelard, she asks desperately whether having him visit her at Le Pallet, even if it had to be infrequently, wouldn’t be best for the two of them.

*Addebat denique ipsa et quam periculosum mihi esset eam reducere, et quam sibi carius existeret mihique honesties amicam dici quam uxorem ut me ei sola gratia conservaret, non vis aliqua vinculi nuptialis constringeret, tantoque nos ipsos ad tempus separatos gratiora de conventu nostro percipere guadia, quanto rariora.*

She went on to point out that it would be dangerous for me to bring her back, and added in the end that it would be dearer to her—and more honorable to me—for her to be called my lover than my wife. I would be hers through a love freely offered, not forced and constrained by some marital tie, and the time we spent apart could only increase the sweetness of our reunion, our joys together as precious as they were rare.

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Perhaps there were compelling reasons for Heloise to contemplate staying indefinitely at Le Pallet. Receiving visits from Abelard in the safe haven of his family home while watching her son grow up may have seemed attractive. We actually have a few hints that Heloise did indeed feel mother-love. In letter 112a of the Lost Love Letters, the woman complains to the man that he is “taking sweet things as burdensome.” Mews speculates that she may have conceived a child and was expressing disappointment that Abelard did not share her excitement.16 Abelard confirms her initial feelings, writing in the Historia that she wrote him the news in a “delirium of joy.”17 Much later she wrote to Peter the Venerable to secure a prebend for the grown-up Astralabe.18 In any event, she faced significant impediments to finding her way back to Paris. Women did not set up housekeeping on their own in the twelfth century. Unless she married Abelard, the only way to return to Paris was to ask for the forgiveness of her uncle and return to his house. Staying in a remote corner of Brittany might have seemed preferable to that ignominy. She may even have imagined she could continue her scholarly career through contact with Abelard. (He could bring her books, for example.) Whether or not she felt the pull of Paris, which, after all, was both her home and the center of scholarship in philosophy, it is clear she would forego Paris to save Abelard for philosophy.19 When she finally did acquiesce to marrying him, however, moving back to her uncle’s house became not only

16 Mews, Lost Love Letters, 141.

17 Abelard, Historia, in Levitan, 13.

18 Heloise to Peter, in Levitan, 273.

19 Southern states her objections very succinctly, “first, that her uncle would not thereby be placated as Abelard supposed; secondly, that marriage was no life for a philosopher.” Southern, Medieval Humanism, 92.
possible, but even necessary. Since their marriage was to be a secret, she could not set up housekeeping with Abelard or bring their son with her.

Her pregnancy had derailed her life and severely reduced her room for maneuvering, but she never makes a murmur of protest about it in the sources. The marriage was something else, however. *Unam, dixit, ad ultimum restat ut in perditione duorum minor non succedat dolor quam praecessit amor.*\(^{20}\) (There is only one thing left for us, she said, that in our utter ruin the pain to come will be no less than the love that has gone before.\(^{21}\)) And so, admits Abelard, it proved. The move back to Paris was anything but a happy one. “Whatever the great project was that drew her to the intellectual foyer of Paris in the early twelfth century, it came unstuck.”\(^{22}\) She was placed back in her uncle’s house, constrained by a secret marriage she did not want, living with Fulbert whom she had come to see as Abelard’s enemy and thus her own, with no way clear to resume her career or any intellectual collaboration with Abelard, and without her baby. It was not tenable and it did not last. Fulbert found that keeping the secret was against his interests and he began to tell those closest to him. Heloise denied the marriage with all the pent-up anger, disappointment, fear, and frustration she was then feeling; Fulbert berated and perhaps beat her; and Abelard sent her back to Argenteuil.

However, it is just possible that finding herself once again free of her uncle and back in her childhood home was not altogether unwelcome. She was to take vows reluctantly and only out of obedience to Abelard, but the sources record no objection


\(^{21}\) Translation by Levitan, 18.

from Heloise about this move to Argenteuil. Here is how she describes it in her second letter (Unico Suo):

_Cum iam ad tempus segregati castius viveremus, te quidem Parisuius scholis praesidente et me ad imperium tuum Argenteoli cum sanctimonialibus conversante. Divisis itaque sic nobis adinvicem ut tu studiosius scholis, ego liberius orationi sive sacrae lectionis meditationi vacarem._

When for the time being we lived separated, more chastely, in fact, you presiding over the Parisian schools, and me living by your order with the nuns at Argenteuil. Therefore with us divided thus for our mutual benefit so that you might devote yourself more assiduously to the schools and I might devote myself more freely to prayer or to meditation on the holy writ.

There were clearly some advantages for them both in the new arrangement. Considering how little happiness Heloise expected to come of her marriage, to have the wishes she expressed to Abelard in her arguments against marriage come so close to fulfillment must have been an unexpected relief. Heloise had said they should live separately and he, and by implication she, should pursue their studies as before. But not quite as before. Note that she describes her own purposes at this early point, even before Abelard had asked her to take holy orders, as prayer and meditation on the holy writ. Thus she had already begun to make the change that, much later, Peter the Venerable praises saying, “where there had been logic, now there was gospel.”

Her turn to holy writ at this juncture has been little commented on, but it is interesting. It is not impossible that the recent upheavals in her life, even before the final tragedy, had caused her to look for meaning in the place where it was always assumed meaning could be found. Whether or not she imagined it was possible to have conjugal visits at Argenteuil is another matter. Abelard

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23 Heloise, _Unico Suo_, in Muckle “Personal Letters,” 79.

24 Peter the Venerable, _To the Abbess Heloise_, in Levitan, 266.
says they did have sexual congress there, at least once, and, in spite of the fact that they were then husband and wife, it was perhaps their greatest sin.25

In the event, continuing her relationship with Abelard was a forlorn hope. It was at this juncture that Fulbert, feeling betrayed a second time, hired men to come upon Abelard in his sleep and castrate him. Abelard tells us that most likely Fulbert had interpreted Heloise’s move to Argenteuil as proof that Abelard planned to abjure his marriage.

Avunculus et consanquinei seu affines eius opinati sunt me nunc sibi plurimum illusisse, et ab ea moniali facta me sic facile velle expedire.26

Her uncle and his relations by blood and marriage supposed that I had now practiced the highest deceit and from her having been made a nun, I wished to free myself easily in this way [from the marriage].

Heloise was finding that it was no longer possible to exercise her own intention. In fact, since her pregnancy had become known, she had been a pawn in a struggle between Abelard and Fulbert.27 When Abelard, feeling he could not continue his public career so disgraced, decided to take vows at the monastery of St. Denis, he persuaded Heloise to take the veil at Argenteuil. He defends his reasons for imposing on her in this way in his second letter. There he says that he had asked her to take the veil because he wanted her safe from the temptations of the world and that she obeyed him because they were married:


Si enim mihi antea matrimonio non esses copulata, facile in discessu meo a saeculo vel suggestione parentum vel carnalium oblectatione voluptatum saeculo inhaesisses.  

Indeed if you had not been joined to me previously by marriage, at the time of my departure from the world, you might easily have clung to the world either at the suggestion of kinfolk or by the delight of carnal pleasures.

There is little that causes as much distress as having the one you love misunderstand you so profoundly. Heloise wants Abelard to understand both that she obeyed him out of love, not because she was his wife, and that she would have found no one else to tempt her in the world. However, his mention of her kinfolk suggests that perhaps Abelard realized, even if Heloise may not have, that only this decisive step could put her beyond the power of Fulbert. Abelard seems to have been keenly aware that Fulbert might have pressured Heloise to take a second husband if she hadn’t taken religious vows; what Heloise imagined was still possible for herself at this juncture is impossible to determine.

Even though her entry into the religious life felt to her like the most drastic change she had yet undergone according to her own testimony, it did not entail a translocation. She was already living at Argenteuil, but she makes it clear that she had wanted to stay in the world both in her first and in her second letter to Abelard:

Ad tuam statim iussionem tam habitum ipsa quam animum immutarem, ut te tam corporis mei quam animi unicum possessorem ostenderem.  

At your command I myself immediately changed not only just my garment, but my mind, so that I might reveal you as the sole owner of my mind as much as my body.

28 Abelard, Sponsae Christi, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 90.

29 Clanchy, Abelard: A Life, 201.

30 Heloise, Domino suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 70.
Tua me ad religionis habitum iussio, non divina traxit dilectio.\textsuperscript{31}
Your command, not divinely inspired love, drew me to the habit of the religious.

Her resolution not to take holy orders had obviously long been a part of her self-image. Only such a resolve could explain why living at Argenteuil was one thing, but taking vows was quite another. Those of us who may never have contemplated taking religious vows and who live in an age where vows are seldom made and often broken—I’m thinking of marriage vows here, the only vows most of us may have occasion to make—need a bit of effort to realize what a permanent change this represents. Her dream of living the life of a philosopher looks quixotic enough to us, but she had put a lot of effort into it, and, we must remember, she had met with no little success. Whether or not she could actually have returned to the life she had been living before her pregnancy, that may have been just what she hoped for. When she emphasizes, not the loss of her dreams, but her loss of Abelard in the letters she wrote to him nearly fifteen years later, we should remember that he represented the life of the mind for her and losing him was tantamount to losing her dreams for an intellectual life. Marenbon notes that Heloise was Abelard’s “most important intellectual associate,”\textsuperscript{32} but it is essential not to forget that he was also hers.

Thus when Heloise says she changed her mind for Abelard, she quite clearly means that she was abandoning a long held intention never to take religious vows. Strangely, apropos of this transition, Clanchy muses that “what Heloise meant by saying that she had changed her mind when she became a nun is unfathomable, as on her own

\textsuperscript{31} Heloise, \textit{Unico Suo}, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 81.

\textsuperscript{32} Marenbon, \textit{Philosophy of Peter Abelard}, 72.
admission she only changed her external appearance.” 33 It is true that in one important way, she had not changed her mind—she never repented of her love for Abelard—and certainly she had not changed her abode. Nevertheless, since she had never intended to take religious vows, doing so represented a change as significant and as interior as if she had done so out of a religious conviction. In fact, this was not the first time she had changed her intentions for Abelard. She had also done that by marrying him when she was so certain that philosophers, male or female, should not marry; and now, by taking the veil at his insistence, what had been a mere sojourn at Argenteuil became a life-long commitment.

There was one more move in store for Heloise. In 1129, Suger, Abbot of St. Denis, claiming he had jurisdiction over its sister monastery, evicted the nuns from Argenteuil. 34 His pretext was the levity of life at the convent, but his motive was more likely to have been Argenteuil’s choice location on the banks of the Seine which would be of material help to him with the great project of his life, rebuilding the royal abbey church of St. Denis. 35 Although Argenteuil had enjoyed royal protection since its original founding in the seventh century, 36 Suger, the biographer of Louis VI, was also well connected with the royal family and most likely had won the king’s backing before making this bold step. 37 In the event, the abbess found a new home further away from

33 Clanchy, Abelard: A Life, 163.

34 This was not particularly unusual. Another royal abbey, Saint-Jean in Laon was also disbanded and handed over to monks in the reign of Louis VI. This process actually became more frequent over the next few centuries. Johnson, 101-102.

35 Mews, Abelard and Heloise, 145-46.

36 McLeod, 12.

37 Levitan, 38, #89.
Paris at the abbey of Ste. Marie de Footel on the upper reaches of the Marne. Heloise did not join them there only because news of the sisters’ plight reached Abelard at St. Gildas and he took advantage of the opportunity to establish a convent for women at the Paraclete. Whether or not Abelard also intended to “rescue” Heloise, he takes pains in his *Historia* to represent his actions as a way to resurrect his oratory instead:

> Quae cum diversis locis exules dispergerentur, oblatam mihi a Domino intellexi occasionem qua nostro consulerem oratoris. Illuc itaque reversus, eam cum quibusdam aliis de easem congregacione ipsi adhaerentibus ad praedictum orationem invitavi.  

They [the nuns] were now scattered through the world like exiles. I saw this as an opportunity from God for the future of my oratory. So I returned to the Paraclete and invited her to come, bringing any of the women who wished to stay with her. Then, when I had gathered them together, I turned the oratory over to them with all its properties and land, by deed of gift.

The Paraclete consisted of only a few rough buildings which had stood empty since Abelard had left for St. Gildas. It was certainly a primitive place and thus Heloise was being asked for yet another sacrifice, but she obeyed willingly. Perhaps she also realized that here she could toil not only for Abelard’s approbation but for his reputation as well. Indeed, this move was momentous: it established their relationship on a new and this time church-sanctioned footing: he as founder, she as abbess of the Paraclete. Heloise had every reason to hope for a new and close collaboration. Their past history, however, still stood in the way. Abelard was torn between doing too little and doing too much for his spiritual daughters:

> Cum autem omnes earum vicini vehementer me culparent, quod earum inopiae minus quam possem et deberem, consulerem, et facile id nostra

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Now, the people in the neighborhood started taking me to task for not doing as much for the women as I should or could, even by the preaching which would be easy to do. So I began to visit them more often and provide for them with any means in my power, but even in this I met slander and spite, and this blameless act of charity was now twisted—as they twisted everything in their foul, perverted way—into a lust that they said still enslaved me to the woman I once loved and could never bear to be without.

The tension proved unsustainable and Abelard returned to his duties as abbot of St. Gildas hoping things had improved but finding instead that the dangers had worsened. It was just at this point that Abelard wrote the *Historia Calamitatum* and made certain that Heloise got a copy. McLaughlin raises the possibility that Abelard was actually consoling not just his unnamed friend, but also himself. In addition to the danger from his murderous monks, he was experiencing a second exile not only from his refuge, the Paraclete, but also from Heloise when the wagging tongues of public opinion had interrupted their new, and this time blameless, collaboration. Perhaps it was the stress of accumulating calamities that led Abelard to finally break his long silence about the way his love affair and marriage had ended.

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43 Abelard, *Historia*, in Levitan, p. 44.

44 In his *Historia* Abelard tells the friend he is writing to that “I returned to the abbey only recently.” See Levitan, 44.

45 McLaughlin, “Abelard as Autobiographer,” 469.
Heloise’s response to reading the Historia was to write to Abelard. As far as we know this was the first time she had done so since they entered religious life. What made her so bold was the change in her circumstances. Her relationship with Abelard was now on an entirely different footing. No longer just the young woman for whose love he had come to grief, she was now the abbess of his new foundation. An abbess, in fact, has a duty to write on behalf of her convent and one of those to whom she might be expected to address her letters would be its founder. She asks him to write to her because “quod hoc saltem modo praesentiam tuam nobis reddere nulla invidia prohiberis”\(^{46}\) (in this way at least you are not prohibited by any malice from restoring your presence to us). However, we should not assume that the presence she wishes to have restored is what they enjoyed in Paris so many years before. Instead she is asking that he restore something of the recent companionship they had just enjoyed during the founding of the Paraclete. Thus the proximate memory is the founding of the Paraclete, while the love affair is distant, but important, background. Without being mindful of the timing of these letters, it is easy to miss that point.

The letters themselves thus represent a crucial turning point in their lives when they established that their connection this time was going to last. In fact, the renewed connection brought to fruition the intellectual collaboration that Heloise had hoped for so long ago in Paris, but with an entirely different focus than she had imagined: the Paraclete. Once Heloise had recaptured Abelard’s attention and grounded it thus, he began an outpouring of writings that included prayers, sermons, liturgies, and, at her request, both a rule and a history of women in the religious life that culminated a few

\(^{46}\) Heloise, Domino suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 69.
years before his death with his confession of faith written to “My sister Heloise, once dear to me in the world, now dearest to me in Christ.”47

Thus Heloise’s life has three main segments punctuated by two periods of crisis: her early success as a student of letters, the crisis of her love affair, the anguished first decade at Argenteuil, the crisis occasioned by the founding of the Paraclete and the ensuing letter exchange, and then three decades as a very successful abbess. They are not entirely distinct, of course, but this more nuanced view is more historical than a single-minded focus on her love affair. Only by viewing her life in its totality like this can we see Heloise whole, negotiating her way through the constraints of her time and the vicissitudes of her life. How, in fact, could a twelfth-century woman like Heloise have exercised her talent? Even a contemporary as highly placed as Eleanor of Aquitaine had only a few years as regent first of Poitou and then of England. The great polymath, Hildegard of Bingen, emerged from her anchoress cell to found a monastery, publish books and preach, but she relied on prophecy for her authority; Heloise had only her intellect. Within the still fluid world of the early twelfth century, an extraordinarily motivated woman could be a student even though she was not welcome in the classroom, but—and this is the important distinction—no matter how well motivated or how successful she was as a student, she could never become a master lecturing to such a class. It was not until Christine de Pizan over 250 years later that a woman was able to make her living, not teaching, but writing, which, significantly, is more private in its execution. Thus there was a crisis looming in Heloise’s life from the moment she

47 Abelard, Confession of Faith, in Levitan, 260. Levitan notes that Abelard wrote 34 sermons and 90 hymns for the Paraclete. 39.
discovered philosophy. It did not have to take the form it did, but she was dancing toward a precipice and she inevitably had to slip.

**The Tenor of her Mind**

Heloise had fallen in love with letters as much as Abelard had; that is clear. She read, memorized, and quoted from the revered books of her time, both Roman classics and Christian writings. According to Abelard she was acquainted with Greek and even Hebrew, but it was Latin that was her forte. Her prose style was admired in her own day and in ours. It was Master Abelard of the Paris schools that she chose as her intellectual associate. That is to say Heloise wanted the kind of intellectual conversation that was only available in the highest reaches of scholarship in her day. Although she recognizes a difference between her achievements and Abelard’s, it is one of degree rather than kind: “*tua melius excellentia quam nostra parvis*” (your better than our smaller excellence). Abelard places her excellence more closely on a par with his own: “*illa litteralis scientiae talenta quae utrique nostrum commiserate*” (those talents of literary skill which he had entrusted to both of us). In letter #50 of the lost love letters the man addresses the woman as “the only disciple of philosophy among all the young women of our age, the only one on whom fortune has completely bestowed all the gifts of the manifold virtues . . .” In the same letter he goes on to say:

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48 Abelard, epistle IX, in *Letters of Peter Abelard: Beyond the Personal*, trans. Jan M. Ziolkowski (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 25. Letter IX was written to the sisters at the Paraclete urging them to study, not just Latin, but Greek and Hebrew, because those were the languages in which the holy texts were written and translations are often suspect.


Tuum admiror ingenium, que tam subtiliter de amicicie legibus argumentaris ut non Tullium legisse, sed ipsi Tullio precepta dedisse videarís. . . . Tibi multis modis impar sum, et ut verius dicam omnibus modis impar sum, quía in hoc eciam me excedis, ubi ego videbar excedere. Ingenium tuum, facundia tua, ultra etatem et sexum tuum iam virile in robur se incipit extendere.

I admire your talent, you who discuss the rules of friendship so subtly that you seem not to have read Tully but to have given those precepts to Tully himself! . . . I am inferior to you in many ways, or to speak more truthfully, I am inferior in every way, because you surpass me even where I seemed to surpass you. Your talent, your command of language, beyond your years and sex, is now beginning to extend itself into manly strength.51

Abelard’s admiration for Heloise’s talent was profound,52 but to understand Heloise’s yearning for him it is necessary to realize how attractive his learning was for her as well. As a woman scholar in the twelfth century she was largely shut outside the culture of intellectual debate in which she yearned to participate.53 Abelard could engage in philosophy with any number of people, but Heloise was dependent primarily on him. In letter #5 of the lost love letters, the woman asks her lover to “fill me with philosophy”54 and in letter #23 she tells him she would like still more.

Scio quidem et fateor ex philosophie tue diviciis maximam michi fluxisse et fluere copiam guadiorum, sed ut inoffense loquar, minorem tamen quam que me faciat in ea re perfecte beatam.

Indeed I know and admit that from the treasures of your philosophy the greatest amount of joys have flown and still flow over me, but, if I may speak freely, still less than what would make me perfectly happy in this regard.55

52 “Her initial attraction for him may therefore have been as a personification of the goddess of learning, with whom he had already long been in love.” Clanchy, Abelard: A Life, 151.
53 Mews, Lost Love Letters, 83
54 Letter #5, in Mews, Lost Love Letters, 78.
Literature was her passion and so it should not be too risky to imagine that when she entered Argenteuil as a nun she turned back to literature, not just as a reader but also as a writer, to help her through her days. In fact, there might even be evidence to support this notion in a poem added to the mortuary roll by one of the nuns of Argenteuil for Vital of Savigny who died in 1122.\textsuperscript{56} It was just four years after Heloise took the veil and it is perhaps significant that Vital had “a reputation for spurning wealth and attracting ‘fallen women’ to the communities he founded.”\textsuperscript{57}

\begin{verbatim}
Ergo quid lacrime? Quid tot tantique dolores
Prosunt? Nil prodest hic dolor, immo nocet.
Sed licet utilitas ex fletu nulla sequator,
Est tamen humanum morte dolere patris.
Est etiam gaudere pium, si vis rationis
Tristitie vires adnichilare queat.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{verbatim}

So why the tears? Is so much sorrow for so many
Of any use? This sorrow benefits no one, nay it harms.
Although no advantage can accompany tears,
It is so human to grieve for a father who dies.
It is also pious to rejoice, if the force of reason
Is able to overcome the power of sorrow.\textsuperscript{59}

The poem is certainly consistent with what we know about Heloise from the personal letters. It eschews the usual platitudes in favor of exploring the complexities of the human condition. The second line in particular seems to be an acerbic comment on her own situation at Argenteuil where she must have found that sorrow only brought her

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{56} Mews, \textit{Abelard & Heloise}, 146. A photo of the poem as it appears in the mortuary roll is used as a frontispiece in McLeod’s biography of Heloise, thus we may have an actual example of her hand.
\textsuperscript{57} Mews, \textit{Abelard & Heloise}, 146.
\textsuperscript{58} McLeod, 88.
\textsuperscript{59} This is also quoted in a slightly different translation in Mews, \textit{Abelard & Heloise}, 146.
\end{footnotesize}
harm. It is also easy enough to imagine Heloise pointing out that if we expect the dead to find relief and reward in heaven, we should rejoice rather than weep. The last two lines are particularly interesting implying as they do that she herself has tried the force of reason to annihilate the powers of sadness and found it wanting.

It is also possible that two Easter plays from the early twelfth century may have been written by Heloise. They have ties to the Paraclete since “a section of one of their dialogues, known as Epithalamica was certainly preserved within the Paraclete liturgy.”

Both focus on Mary Magdalene in the quem quaeritis (whom do you seek) format that was well-developed in Christian Europe. Mews notes that the rhyming prose is consistent with Heloise’s style, that the focus on the humanity of the Magdalen is also typical, and that the reflections on love and devotion are “fully resonant with the concerns of Heloise.”

A few passages seem to dramatize not only the gospel story, but also the story of Abelard and Heloise:

*De fletu, viso vulnere,*  
*dilicto mango federe*  
*cor mostratur in opera.*  

*Regis perhempti previum*  
*plus valet quam vivencium,*  
*Cuius amor solacium,*  
*iuvamen et presidium*  
*Et per homne subsidium*  
*sit nunc et in perpetuum.*

In weeping as you see the wound to the loved one, in a great love-bond, by your action, your heart is shown.  
What remains of the slain king is worth more than the life of the living; May his love bring solace, help and protection and support in everything, now and in perpetuity.

Her concern with Abelard’s wound and her entreaty for consolation (solace) seem to be echoed here, but the assertion that “what remains of the slain king is worth more than the

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60 Mews, *Ableard & Heloise*, 146.


life of the living” reminds us of Heloise who gave up her life to make amends for what had happened to Abelard.

Perhaps even more interesting is a lament “written in the voice of an unusually learned woman who is interested in both philosophy and poetry.”63 In it the poet complains, “we have been driven from the new world because our concern is with letters.”64 This is the thrust of Abelard’s complaint in the Historia; here we see the possibility that Heloise explored that theme in writing as well. Who influenced whom is a moot point without knowing the date of this lament, but it is probably true, as Mews asserts, that Abelard and Heloise influenced each other throughout their lives.

Another very intriguing twelfth-century poem is the Metamorphosis Goliae. It is a long poem, with many classical allusions: Pallas Athena, Mercury, the muses, Venus and Cupid, and many others, notably, Philology. A king and queen are present, but they are not identified as Zeus and Hera. In the 43rd verse, out of 59, human philosophers are introduced, first those from ancient Greece and Rome and finally those of contemporary Chartres and Paris. What captures the attention of Abelard and Heloise scholars is the last two of the four verses I quote here.

Secum suam duxerat Getam Naso pullus,
Cynthiam Propercius, Delyam Tibullus,
Tullius Terenciam, Lesbiam Catullus,
vates huc convererant, sine sua nullus.

Mournful Ovid brought with him his Gothic lass,
Propertius brought his Cynthis, Tibullus Delia,
Cicero brought Terentia, Catullus Lesbia –
The sages had assembled here, none without her who was his own.

63 Mews, Abelard & Heloise, 147.
64 Quoted in Mews, Abelard & Heloise, 147.
Each beloved is a flame and spark for her man –
the glow of Calpurnia sets Pliny ablaze,
Prudentilla makes Apuleius flame with love,
each girl holds her man in her embrace.

The bride then asks, where is her Palatine,
he whose spirit showed itself totally divine?
She asks why, like an exile, he has now withdrawn,
he whom she had cherished at her breasts.

Against this philosopher many learned men cry out:
the cowled chief of the cowled populace –
all like onions sheathed in their triple tunics –
it was he who enforced silence on so great a sage.65

The poem is unusual and there are some common misapprehensions about it. First, the
date may have been misidentified. Most scholars agree that it was written after Abelard’s
death in 1142 or 1143.66 Jaeger thinks that although that might be the case, it could also
have been written before Abelard’s death, but after Pope Innocent II sentenced him to
perpetual silence following the Council of Sens in 1140.67 Since there is nothing in the
poem that speaks of death or mourning, I think that Abelard’s intention to leave France to

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66 Dronke, Testimonies, 17.
67 Jaeger, 171.
appeal his case in Rome is more likely to have been the withdrawal the poet speaks of. Abelard was old, sick, and dispirited and got only as far as Cluny, but that removed him far from the scene of his intellectual activities. Second, cucullatus Primas is often identified as Bernard of Clairvaux. A simpler explanation is that the cowled chief is none other than the pope who actually passed sentence. A third misapprehension is the meaning of the word nupta. Benton argues that it is naïve to think “the bride” is meant to be Heloise, rather than philosophy, because the significance of the poem is Abelard’s loss to philosophy. Nevertheless the implied parallelism within the poem itself encourages the reader to identify the bride as an actual woman since, as Dronke points out, all of the assembled sages mentioned have brought their flesh and blood partners. Jaeger takes this point of view as well saying that “the structure of the poem requires that the bride be Heloise in the persona of the mythological-allegorical bride.” But why must one interpretation be chosen over the other? If the bride is in one sense philosophy and in another sense Heloise, the poem is only doing what good poems do.

Although no one has yet argued the point, it is worth serious consideration that the poet is Heloise herself: she who was so enamored of classical literature; she who thought Abelard was divine; she who fought so hard to persuade Abelard to be true to himself as a philosopher; she whom Abelard insisted upon calling “the bride of Christ.” We should admit that Heloise is capable of surprising us. The poem is artful, although the overall effect is artless. For example, each line within each quatrain above rhymes. That

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69 Dronke, Medieval Testimonies, 18.

70 Jaeger, 172.
does not look unusual to anyone reared on English poetry, but poems written in Latin with its case and tense endings relied on stressed and unstressed syllables instead. Dronke tells us that Heloise was one of the first to use rhyme by design in her Latin compositions. One line in particular stands out here: *cucullatus populi Primas cucullati.* Where an English speaker would expect *cucullatus Primas cucullati populi,* the poet inserts the word *populi* into the middle of the first phrase instead so that the line begins and ends with the word “cowled.” The two phrases are thus intertwined—nominative adjective, genitive noun; nominative noun, genitive adjective—and they rhyme. Stylistically it is written in the very fine classical Latin which Heloise knew so well how to write and it employs the internal rhyme she enjoyed using. There is common agreement that the author may have been one of Abelard’s students. Surely, as the process of identifying the work of his most famous student continues, this poem too deserves re-evaluation.

Two other anonymous poems found in a manuscript at Orleans comment on aspects of our story. The first was certainly written by someone who admired Heloise, rather than by Heloise herself, since it focuses on the grave injustice Abelard committed by forcing Heloise to take the veil, a focus very different from what we see in Heloise’s letters.

*Parisius Petrus est velata matre proiectus,*  
*Nec nisi velata crudelis a [mica] reditit;*  
*Sponte parens, invita quidem velatur amica.*  
*Conveniens erat hoc anui que corpore friget,*  
*Damnosum tenere nimus orrendeque puellae,*  
*Quam facis nulis, quam philosophia puellae*  
*Pretulerat cunctis, qua sola Gallia pollet,*  
*Deseruisse tamen tuit hanc crudelis amicus—*  
*Siquis non quod amet sed ametur dicat “amicus”:*

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Desertam iussit veleri. Paruit illa,  
Nec quid amor posit non implevisse marito.

Peter set out for Paris when his mother had taken the veil,  
Nor will the cruel man’s beloved come back other than veiled.  
The mother spontaneously takes the veil, the beloved friend unwillingly.  
It was appropriate for an old woman who is cold in body,  
It is destructive for a tender, not at all venerable girl,  
She whose face set her above many, whose philosophy had set her above all other girls,  
She through whom alone Gaul has worth.  
Yet her cruel friend endured abandoning her—  
If anyone calls him ‘friend’ not because he loves but because he is loved;  
He ordered her whom he had abandoned to be veiled. She obeyed,  
Nor could she have left unfulfilled for her husband whatever love can fulfill.

This is the point of view of those friends who, as Heloise tells us in Unico suo,  
told her that Abelard had never truly loved her. Stylistically it is also much more primitive than the Metamorphosis Goliae. In addition, the extremely high praise for Heloise—“she through whom alone Gaul has worth”—would never have come from Heloise’s pen. However, another poem at the end of the same manuscript just might have been written by Heloise since it focuses not on her own misery, but on the injustice to Abelard, and concludes with the very same philosophical argument Heloise used to comfort herself.

Ornavere due te quondam, Gallia, gemme:  
Mathias consul philoxophusque Petrus.  
Milicie decus hic, cleri lux extitit ille,  
Plaga tibi gemmas abstulit una duas.  
Invida sors summos privat genitalibus ambo,  
dispar causa pares vulnere fecit eos.  
Consul adulterii damnatur crimine iusto,  
Philosophus summa prodicione ruit.  
Philosophum monachis adiunctit plaga pudenda  
Et stadium demsit, philosophia, tibi.  
Adam, Samsonem, Salomonem perdidit usor:  
Additus i o Petrus—clade ruit simili.  
Publica summorum clades fuit ista virorum,
Sola tamen Petri coniux est criminis expers,
Consensus nullus quam facit esse ream.

Two jewels, Gaul, adorned you once:
Mathias the consul and Peter the philosopher.
The one was the glory of chivalry, the other, the light of the clergy;
a single wound bereft you of both jewels.
Envious fate deprived both these exalted men of their genital parts;
an unlike cause made them alike in the wound.
The consul was undone by a just charge of adultery;
the philosopher fell by a supreme betrayal.
The shameful wound attached the philosopher to monks,
and took study away from you, Philosophy.
A woman destroyed Adam, Samson, Solomon –
Peter, alas, has been added, destroyed by a like fall.
This was the public downfall of the highest men…

Only the wife of Peter is free of guilt;
there was no consent on her part to make her culpable.72

Clanchy feels that this could not have been written by Heloise because she had
reproached herself in her letters.73 He forgets for a moment that she also denied any guilt.
“Deo saltem super hoc gratias, quod me ille ut suprapositas feminas in culpam ex
consensus non traxit.”74 (Thanks to God at least for this, that that one did not drag me, as
the women mentioned above, into guilt through consent.) It seems to me that the poem
beautifully encapsulates Heloise’s full position on the unfairness of Abelard’s castration
and her conflicted feelings about her own culpability. In addition, it echoes the theme in
the Metamorphosis Goliae of Abelard’s loss to philosophy. Dronke argues that it had to
have been written by someone very familiar with her point of view. Indeed.

72 Both poems are quoted in Dronke, Testimonies, 19. The Latin is found on pages 45-46.
73 Clanchy, Abelard: A Life, 197.
74 Heloise, Unico suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 80.
The Temper of her Faith

Heloise entered the religious life in her twenties and spent over forty years laboring in those vineyards where she met with uncommon success. True she had connections—it was Abelard, after all, who elevated her to the position of abbess in his new foundation—but she had already become prioress at Argenteuil. The Paraclete grew and prospered under her care and in the period from Abelard’s death in 1142 until her own in 1163, she founded six daughter houses. Peter the Venerable calls her “a true philosopher” and a “Deborah in the army of the Lord.” Abelard refers to the love and renown she won among her spiritual daughters and among the landed families in the countryside around the Paraclete.

Success like this might be expected to indicate that Heloise took her Christian faith seriously and, although she accuses herself of hypocrisy, that seriousness of faith can be found in her letters. For example, a careful reading shows why her conscience was clear about her love for Abelard. There are two issues to address here and she deals with them in two distinctly different ways: sin and guilt. First, she acknowledges that fornication was a sin, but she proposes that it can be propitiated. Second, she attaches serious, soul-wrenching guilt only to the outrage to Abelard’s body occasioned by his castration.

While acknowledging that she did indeed commit the sin of fornication, Heloise exonerates herself by invoking first intention, then marriage, and finally due penance. The philosophical concept of intention was one which occupied both Heloise and Abelard

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75 McLaughlin, “Heloise the Abbess” 1-17.

76 Peter the Venerable, Letter to Heloise, in Levitan, 267.

throughout their lives, but only Heloise uses it to defend herself against the charge of lust.

She points out that it was love, not lust, that drew her to Abelard; love, not lust, which made “quas partier exercuimus . . . dulces mihi fuerunt”\(^{78}\) (what we did together . . . so sweet to me).

\[
\text{Dum tecum carnali fruerer voluptate, utrum id amore vel libidine agerem incertum pluribus habebatur. Nunc autem finis indicat quo id inchoaverim principio. Omnes denique mihi voluptates interdixi ut tuae parerem voluntati.}^{79}\]

While I enjoyed carnal delight with you, it was thought by many to be uncertain whether I was doing it from love or lust. Now, however, the end reveals with what a beginning I began it. In the end I have forbidden all delights to myself so that I might obey your wish.

She views her relationship with Abelard as one of lifelong friendship, thus what she felt then and still feels now is love rather than lust. She is aware, however, that the world sees things differently and so she adds the further argument that if the sin of fornication was not mitigated by the intention of sincere love, it was made right by their marriage—

“\text{honore coniugii turpitudinem fornicationis operuimus}” (we covered the shame of fornication with the honor of matrimony) —a marriage which should have saved Abelard from punishment as well:

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\text{Quanto enim amplius te pro me humilando satisfeceras, et me partier et totum genus meum sublimaveras, tanto te minus tam apud Deum quam apud illos proditores obnoxium peonae reddideras.}^{80}\]

For the more you had made amends by humbling yourself for me and had raised me together with all my kind, the less liable you had rendered yourself to punishment both in the eyes of God and in the eyes of those traitors.


Nevertheless, she still feels she owes penance for this sin even though first the purity of her intention and then the sacrament of marriage have wiped it out:

Peccata tamen multa praecesserunt, quae me penitus immunem ab huius reatu sceleris esse non sinunt. Quod vide licet dius ante carnalium illecebrarum voluptatibus serviens, ipsa tunc merui quod nunc plector, et praecedentium in me peccatorum sequential merito facta sunt poena.\(^8\)

Yet many sins went before, which do not allow me to be wholly immune from accusation of this sin. Namely because serving earlier for a long time the pleasures of carnal allurements, I merited these things then with which I am punished now and the things following for me were rightly done as punishment of former sins.

The sin of fornication is a light burden, however, compared to her anguish over Abelard’s wounding:

Atque utinam huius praecipue commissi dignam agere valeam peonitentiam ut poenae illi tuae vulneris illati ex longa saltem peonitentiae contritione vicem quoquo mdo recompensare queam; et quod tu ad horam in corpore pertulisti, ego in omni vita ut iustum est in contritione metis suscipiam.\(^8\)

Moreover if only I may have the strength to carry out proper penance especially for this crime so that I may be able to repay to you in some way a recompense at least from long contrition of penance for that punishment of yours consisting of the wound inflicted on you.

The crime she talks about here is his castration and she is anguished to think she may have had a causal role. After all she herself had figured in the final chain of events leading up to that fateful event. When Fulbert broke his agreement with Abelard and began to disclose the marriage, it was her own intemperate foreswearing of the marriage that led to her mistreatment at her uncle’s hands and persuaded Abelard to place her out of Fulbert’s reach at Argenteuil and it was that move that led Fulbert to take revenge. Her


anguish over what she can not help but see as her culpability led her to mine classical and biblical literature for examples of women who were the downfall of men and identify with them: “O me miseram in tanti sceleris causa progenitam!”

(Oh, miserable me born as a cause of such a crime!)

Nevertheless, she finds consolation in a philosophical understanding of what comprises sin and guilt. “Deo saltem super hoc gratias, quod me ille ut suprapositas feminas in culpam ex consensus non traxit.” (Thanks to God at least about this, that that one did not drag me, as the women mentioned above, into guilt through consent.) The key here is the word ‘consent’ which has a precise philosophical meaning for Heloise. Abelard explains it in his Ethics written sometime in the late 1130s. “Sin lies neither in being tempted to do nor in doing what is wrong; it lies between these two moments, in consenting to the initial temptation. . . . Sin itself is yielding to what the mind knows to be wrong.” According to this understanding, Heloise is exonerated; the crucial link of consent is missing from her actions. When she denied the marriage, she was not consenting to the events which followed, but remaining faithful to her vow of secrecy. Since she did not know the consequences, she could not have known that doing so was wrong and thus she is innocent. However, even though her intention was pure—she meant to follow Abelard’s wishes and to save his career—her actions misfired and thus in spite of her brave words she can not altogether shake off a deep worry about her own

83 Heloise, Unico suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 79.
84 Heloise, Unico suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 80.
complicity. This is the tension that leads her to call herself both guilty and innocent
“nocens et innocens.”

Her conscience remained troubled, as well, about the sincerity of her vows. She
reminds Abelard both in Domino suo and in Unico suo that she had taken her vows not
out of obedience to God as she should, but out of obedience to him. She raises this again
in her third letter where, as we have seen in Chapter Five, she enumerates a number of
ways in which vows to enter the religious life are made without proper preparation or
forethought. Then at the end of the Problemata, her series of questions for Abelard on
matters of faith, she asks a bit more pointedly if something done with the permission or
even at the command of a lord could be a sin. Abelard chooses to interpret her meaning
“as a question about the lawfulness of sexual intercourse within marriage.” She never
seems to have gotten a direct answer on this point from Abelard. Perhaps that is because
the whole question implicates Abelard who urged her to her insincere vows.

How then did she reconcile her insistence that she was living the religious life
only out of obedience to Abelard with her expressed hope that she would find a “little
corner of heaven?” To begin with, it does not seem reasonable to approach what her
faith meant to her by doubting her essential Christianity. Her own century never did so; it
is modern scholars who have made the charge that she “speaks with the voice of a
pagan.” The evidence presented for this characterization is of two kinds: first, her love
for classical literature and, second, her own words of anger and intransigence. As for the
first, there is little reason to distinguish a yawning gulf between Heloise and Abelard;

86 Clanchy, Abelard: A Life, 280.
87 Heloise, Unico Suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 82.
88 Clanchy, Abelard: A Life, 170. Southern, Medieval Humanism, 94.
both loved Cicero and both were drawn in later life to a more exclusive focus on Christian texts.\(^8^9\) Peter the Venerable was not mistaken about this; it is clear from her letters that Heloise had made a careful study of the bible as well as the church fathers and several important later Christian thinkers. We should also be careful not to make the mistake of Abelard’s critics who, as he says in his confession of faith, by praising the brilliance of his intellect, slandered the purity of his faith.\(^9^0\)

As for the second, although it is true that Heloise says she has done nothing yet for God, it is not necessary to suppose that what motivated her was a pagan sensibility. There is a much simpler explanation, even if it has escaped every commentator to date. She was motivated by her desire to be true to the vow she did take: the vow to be obedient to Abelard in everything. If, of her own volition, she subsequently substituted God as the reason for the life she was living, she would have rendered Abelard irrelevant and traduced her vow. To remain true to her vow which was her one remaining connection to Abelard, she simply could not allow herself to be converted. Nevertheless she is fully aware of her dilemma and she herself finally finds the solution when in *Unico suo* she asks Abelard to “excite me now to God.” What she needs to resolve the dilemma is new orders from Abelard and he issues them. We can sense her relief in the marked change in tone of her third letter, *Suo specialiter*.

That she thought about her own salvation should therefore be very clear. In her second letter, where she tells Abelard that she does not want a martyr’s crown, she also expresses the hope that her faithfulness and diligence may count for something.

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\(^{9^0}\) Abelard, *Confession of Faith*, in Levitan, 260.
And yet, perhaps, there is some merit in this mode [of life] and it may be in some way acceptable to God, namely if this sort of example of exterior works, whatever the intention is, may be no scandal to the Church, nor the name of God be blasphemed by her before the infidels, nor the order of her profession be disgraced in the eyes of the carnal. For, and this is a considerable gift of divine grace and comes from His bounty, not only to do good, but also to refrain from evil.

If she can not do a positive good—perhaps by this she does mean contrition and penance—she can at least refrain from evil—not a small task when it is daily and lifelong.

In summary, we need to accept that Heloise was a Christian, albeit, a lawyerly-like one. In her own time her belief in the doctrines of the church was never doubted, but neither was she ever celebrated as a saint. What she endured seems to have been recognized, and whole-heartedly lamented by her friends, but trials such as the loss of a love or the loss of a child were never among the criteria for sainthood. In any event, none of her male admirers, and it is clear that she had a number—Abelard himself, Peter the Venerable, Hugh Metel, and perhaps even Bernard of Clairvaux—took it upon himself to write a hagiography of her life. There were no visions; no miracles to recount; no athletic deeds of aestheticism to hold up as exempla. Abelard suggests she might win a martyr’s crown in Heaven, but she demurred. Nevertheless she won many hearts on earth. Peter the Venerable writes that he wishes she were at Cluny,

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If only you lived here with us at Cluny . . . I would rather have had the riches of your knowledge and devotion than the greatest treasures of any king, and would rejoice to see that brilliant college of our sisters shine even brighter for your presence.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{92} Peter the Venerable, \textit{Letter to Heloise}, in Levitan, 268.
CHAPTER 7: LOVE IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY

The discourse of love

The twelfth century was certainly a remarkable one for western Europe. Among its many achievements were the rise of universities, the building of the first Gothic cathedrals, the growing wealth of towns, the beginning of the hegemony of kings over barons in England and France and, perhaps most important for the human heart, a newfound interest in stories about love: stories which featured a woman as the object of longing but also as a subject who herself felt desire. As intriguing as these stories are, however, they do not describe how relationships between the sexes were actually expected to work. There were three other extant models which were, in fact, the dominant ones: the church’s view that love was too closely associated with the sin of sex and thus required rigid control even within a church-sanctioned marriage;\(^1\) the nobility’s view that love was a disruptive force when marriage was the essential institution for consolidating and preserving all-important family power;\(^2\) and the misogynistic view that loving a woman was both a trivial distraction and an existential threat for men.\(^3\)

A robust discourse on love hardly seems possible in this setting and yet it found a home within those stories historians have called courtly love. Both the church’s and the nobility’s views of marriage had the weight of tradition to bolster their claims—as did misogyny for that matter—but stories of courtly love were a new intrusion into the public

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\(^1\) Brundgae discusses the centuries-long effort of the church to bring marriage under its control, both for the laity and for clergy. Marriage was officially declared a sacrament of the church at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.

\(^2\) Georges Duby does an excellent job elucidating both these two views. Duby, *Love and Marriage*.

\(^3\) R. Howard Bloch explores this view in *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*. 

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sphere, airing feelings and ideals which had not belonged there and interpreting them in novel ways. If courtly love stories are understood wholly as a creation of the fictive imagination bearing little resemblance to reality, it is difficult to understand why they arose just at this point and just in the courts of twelfth-century France, Aquitaine, and Champagne. What was it about them that captured the public imagination?

One way to understand them is to focus on their idealization of service rather than their idealization of love. In this view it was service which harnessed a knight’s selfish interests so that they would serve the social good.4 However, only a lady who was truly good—and she was shown to be truly good by desiring only what was best for her lover—was able to do that for him.5 Such a lady would have to be noble and, by that fact, difficult to obtain.6 Her inaccessibility reflected reality, but it also imposed an interiority of intention on the knight, who, by redirecting his sexual interest from his inferiors to a superior, was forced to refine his approach through love service. What gave the stories dramatic interest were the many possible missteps along the way, for example, a knight who raises the level of service to self-destruction or a lady who tests her lover too long.7 The greatest pitfall, however, was always the danger of the lovers falling into each other’s arms before the discipline of refinement had taken hold. “Once he possesses his

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6 What is gendered here is that she is either good or she is not; he must become refined.

lady, the moral value of his love is lost."\(^8\) Love turned to lust was no longer seen as able to serve the social good.

In fact, courtly love stories are very likely misunderstood if they are seen as simply providing a model for knightly behavior. Sometimes they had a proscriptive, rather than a prescriptive intent. For example, Georges Duby sees the story of Tristan and Isuelt as one which emphasizes the terrible consequences of falling in love with a liege lord’s lady, seducing her, and thereby traducing what was a sacred oath to serve, not the lady, but the lord.\(^9\) Although Chrétien de Troyes presents the conventions of knightly love-service, he also points out their absurdity and misplaced values. Lancelot and Guinevere, for example, are shamed by the wrong things: Lancelot’s hesitancy to step into the ignominious cart rather than the disloyalty of their adulterous behavior.\(^10\)

Similarly the lais of Marie de France challenge convention by presenting the adulterous behavior of a young wife as justified by the selfish possessiveness of her much older husband. Marie, however, does present a model of unselfish love in the story of Eludic, and it is an interesting one. Eludic’s wife gives him up so he can be with his mistress and is rewarded by becoming abbess of a nunnery he founds for her.\(^11\)

Courtly love stories actually had an uneasy reception, both rapturous interest and biting satire. By the late twelfth century Andreas Capellanus had extracted and elaborated a series of instructions telling knights, if not how to love, at least how to seduce. By the

\(^8\) Ferrante, “Lyric and Romance,” in Pursuit, 158.
\(^9\) Duby, Women, 1:66-78.
end of the thirteenth century, Jean de Meun had satirized these instructions for winning the hearts of fair ladies in his completion of *The Romance of the Rose* by exposing just to what violent and unloving end they tended—his last chapter is a vivid description of a rape. Both treatments, in fact, called into question the supposed idealism of the stories, but satire could not lay a glove on the essential mythology which had first gripped the public imagination so strongly in the twelfth century. As late as 1605 when Cervantes published the first book of *Don Quixote*, the convention that a knight would serve a ladylove as much as, or perhaps instead of, serving a lord was still lively enough that the spoof was immediately understood and enjoyed.

The story of Abelard and Heloise, however, is not likely to have been a case of life imitating art; courtly love stories did not appear in manuscript form until much later in the twelfth century. What we may be looking at instead is a case of art imitating life. Abelard had composed many love songs for Heloise; they were, as Heloise tells us, on everyone’s lips in Paris. Their story was widely known in Paris where it took place, and probably in Champagne too, where the Paraclete was located—just the places where the courtly love stories gained such appreciative audiences. Heloise may not have been unattainable, but she was noble, lovely, and learned, and she was as loyal as a good woman was supposed to be. Although the letters had not yet entered the public record, the story was well-known and, it is just possible, at least, that when Eludic installed his wife as abbess of the nunnery he founded for her, Marie de France was thinking of Heloise.

But if it is only speculative to think that the story of Abelard and Heloise influenced Marie de France or Chrétien de Troyes, there is one part of the discourse of
love in which our story is comfortably at home. The twelfth century was innovative not
just in creating the stories we call courtly love, but also in embracing and elaborating an
epistolary form in which a pair of friends, sometimes a man and a man, but often a
woman and a man, wrote to each other in playful, ecstatic, and frankly erotic language to
forge a relationship that was surprisingly platonic.\textsuperscript{12} In fact, it was quite common for the
newly expanded literacy to be employed in the service of romantic love.\textsuperscript{13} However, in
spite of this playing with literary fire, the friendships remained platonic for the most part
for two compelling reasons: first, the correspondents lived apart and travel was difficult
and, second, since most who were literate in the twelfth century were associated with the
religious life, they were constrained not only by the physical circumstances of their lives
but also by the vows they had taken to remain celibate. It is possible that these literate
men and women actually took some of their inspiration from the courtly love stories of
the troubadours—both regular and secular clergy were drawn from the noble classes after
all. In addition, it is notable that the epistolary exchanges which began in the later
eleventh century and the published stories which followed in the late twelfth had one very
significant thing in common: both included women.

It is also significant that friendship, which in classical times was considered to be
the noblest emotion of the human heart and always assumed to be between grown men of
equal status, was the model for the way Heloise thought of her relationship with
Abelard.\textsuperscript{14} A relationship between a man and a woman, however, was always inherently

\textsuperscript{12} Jaeger elucidates this correspondence admirably in \textit{Ennobling Love} and Mews looks at a
number of letter-writing pairs in \textit{Lost Love Letters}.

\textsuperscript{13} Beginning in the 1980s men and women discovered similar possibilities afforded by email to the
consternation of more than a few.

\textsuperscript{14} Jaegar devotes a large section of his book to Heloise, which well he should.
unequal, although not necessarily in the direction one might think. The woman in the courtly love stories, in fact, had a higher social status than the man, not only because she was often the wife of his lord, but also because she was likely from a more illustrious family even than her husband. For the men and women who were writing each other erotic letters, relative status was quite fluid. Abelard was Heloise’s tutor and naturally had the higher status, but he also recognized something more like equality between them and, in some instances, even her superiority. In the throes of the affair he wrote to her to say . . .

_Tuum admirer ingenium. . . . Tibi multis modis impar sum. . . . Ingenium tuum, facundia tua, ultra etatem et sexum tuum iam virile in robur se incipit entendere._

I admire your talent. . . . I am inferior to you in many ways. . . . Your talent, your command of language, beyond your years and sex, is now beginning to extend itself into manly strength.

It is clear that literacy was an important component of the relationship of Abelard and Heloise: he said she could write well and so he initiated the affair; she said he could write easily and so she initiated their mature collaboration. However, although courtly love was in the air, whatever motivated Abelard to look about for a suitable woman, the way he characterizes what happened in his _Historia_ lacks the courtly ideal of service. In fact, it seems closer to Jean de Meun’s satire than to any ideal. Although Heloise held the position of lady in her uncle’s household, Abelard mentions no service to her at this point nor any chivalrous restraint; his acknowledgement of his debt of service to Heloise came

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15 Duby, _Love and Marriage_, 15.


17 “Because of her knowledge and love of letters . . . through the written messages we could send to one another we could be together even when we were apart.” Abelard, _Historia_, in Levitan, 11. “It is so small a thing I ask and so easy for you to do . . . writing me some word of comfort.” Heloise, _First Letter (Domino suo)_ , in Levitan, 62.
some fifteen years later, well after the fruits of love had been tasted. On the other hand, Heloise did develop a very idealized view of their relationship early on, and, whether or not there is a connection, she strove to achieve what was later idealized in the stories as the qualities of a good woman who desires only what is best for her lover.

However, what must interest us is not how closely their affair did or did not mirror those of the protagonists in the stories of the troubadours, but what materials their time and place provided with which they could make sense of their feelings. It is instructive to peruse their letters to discover what each of them actually thought about love. The lost love letters show both lovers to have been fervent and sincere during the affair, however much their interpretations of what happened were to differ subsequently. By the time of their famous letter exchange the differences between them were significant and unmistakable. While Heloise found a way of thinking about her love for Abelard early in their relationship that served her throughout her life, Abelard’s view clearly changed from one period of his life to another. We need to keep in mind that it was within the twelfth-century maelstrom of views about love and marriage, sometimes competing with and sometimes reinforcing each other, that Abelard and Heloise remembered and interpreted their feelings for one another.

Abelard defines love

In 1869 Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens) visited the Père La Chaise cemetery in Paris and stopped at the grave of Abelard and Heloise. Whether he read the letters before or after this visit, he was intrigued enough to include an eight-page summary of their love affair in his book *Innocents Abroad*. Twain was thoroughly unimpressed with Abelard;  

he calls him a “vile seducer” and feels that any homage paid at the grave of the lovers is appropriate only for Heloise and terribly misplaced for Abelard. “She showered upon him the tenderest epithets that love could devise, he addressed her from the North Pole of his frozen heart.”

It was only Heloise, Twain concludes, who burned with the fires of love. Twain’s account is entertaining, but off the mark. The words of Abelard’s second letter to Heloise, *Sponsae Christi*, thunder off the pages. It is anything but cold. It is as passionate a letter as ever was written. Étienne Gilson has this to say about it:

> There is nothing in all the works of Abelard quite comparable with the burning, urgent pages in which the Abbot of Saint-Gildas tries desperately to get Heloise to renounce her self-will. . . . Nothing can substitute for the actual reading of these remarkable pages. They are as compressed as living tissues. It is impossible to analyze them without sacrificing most of their beauty.

Certainly, we can safely assume that Abelard was passionate enough when the affair was new. In lost love letter #24, the man defines love at the request of the woman in the romantic language of soul mates:

> Soles a me querere dulcis anima mea quid amor sit, nec per ignoranciam excusare me possum quasi scilicet de re incognita sim consultus, cum ita me idem amor imperio suo subiecerit, ut non extranea res sed multum familiaris et domestica, immo intestina videatur. Est igitur amor, vis quedam anime non per se existens nec seipsa contenta, sed semper cum quodam appetitu et desiderio, se in alterum transfundens, et cum altero idem effici volens ut de duabus diversis voluntatibus unum quid indifferentur efficiatur. . . . eque annuimus, eque negamus, idem per omnia sapimus.

You often ask me, my sweet, what love is—and I cannot excuse myself on grounds of ignorance, as if I had been asked about a subject unfamiliar to me. For that very love has brought me under its own command in such a way that it seems not to be external but very familiar and personal, even visceral. Love is therefore a particular force of the soul, existing not for

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20 Gilson, 82-83.
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. . . . For the two of us have a love that is pure, nurtured, and sincere, since nothing is sweet or carefree for the other unless it has mutual benefit. We say yes equally, we say no equally, we feel the same about everything.21

Love here does not arise from what he later calls the “vilest member,”22 but is centered in the soul, that is in the highest and best part of man or woman, in a soul which yearns for companionship so complete that the lovers “feel the same about everything.” The personal experience of love, however, seems to have occasioned the writer no little surprise because it felt so interior; it felt as if it arose from the viscera.23 He does not seem to have anticipated that love would touch his inmost self.

When circumstances changed, however, Abelard began to think about his feelings for Heloise differently and a full understanding of those changes requires looking at his actions as well as his words. Heloise’s pregnancy was a monumental spur to action because it placed him in such a dangerous position. Although the affair was already known to Fulbert, as well as to much of Paris, the pregnancy confirmed the betrayal publicly. If Fulbert were to take revenge for this humiliation, Abelard might face both blinding and castration.24 The dilemma was acute but the solution was not obvious. Not even the lay nobility could reliably resort to marriage in these circumstances since, if a man were allowed to marry a woman he had seduced, he could use seduction to

21 Abelard, in Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, 209. It is interesting that about the same time Hugh of St. Victor was writing very similar words but about love within, rather than outside of, marriage. “Each shall be to the other as a same self in all sincere love, all careful solicitude, every kindness of affection, in constant compassion, faithful devotedness.” Quoted in Brooke, *Medieval Idea of Marriage*, 278.


23 In the nineteenth century the organ that would have come to mind was the heart, but for a twelfth-century lover, it was the viscera.

circumvent the all-important negotiations between families.\textsuperscript{25} For clerics, canons, and school masters things had become more complicated since the reforms of the late eleventh century requiring celibacy not only for monks but for the secular clergy as well were beginning to take hold. Navigating these waters was dangerous.\textsuperscript{26} In fact, for those vowed to celibacy, marriage was even worse than casual fornication because it would make permanent a lapse that might otherwise only be temporary.\textsuperscript{27} Marriage had the effect of turning sexual union into a life-long obligation and, although there was some experimentation with celibate marriage at the time, it would be difficult to convince anyone that a marriage which began with a pregnancy could subsequently be celibate.

Nevertheless, Abelard decided to marry. It was just possible for him to make that choice because the majority of clergy in minor orders still married.\textsuperscript{28} However, the reformers were active; “only a few years earlier, Ivo of Chartres had ruled that a cannon who married should lose his benefice, even though the marriage was valid.”\textsuperscript{29} Clearly the step would compromise him. In addition, whatever marriage would do to his present status, from the fourth century it had been established that higher clergy must not be married.\textsuperscript{30} Thus if Abelard ever wanted to rise in the church, a wife would be a difficult impediment. It is almost certainly this which Heloise had in mind when she said he had

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Clanchy, \textit{Abelard: A Life}, 188. Brundage, 209.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Brundage, 184, 210.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Clanchy, \textit{Abelard: A Life}, 191; Gilson, 30-31.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Brundage, 315.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Clanchy, \textit{Abelard: A Life}, 188.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Diarmaid MacCulloch, \textit{Christianity: the first three thousand years} (New York: The Penguin Group, 2009), 378.
\end{itemize}
humbled himself by marrying her.\textsuperscript{31} It was not the relative social status of their respective families to which she is referring—as Clanchy surmises\textsuperscript{32}—but this hard fact. Marrying would hurt his career and his chances for advancement.

In these difficult circumstances, Abelard’s first step was to act as high-placed nobles were wont to do; that is to mold events as best he could to suit himself. In the event he found an opportunity to remove Heloise from Fulbert’s home and take her to his family seat far away in Brittany. This would be seen as an abduction, not because Heloise objected—she clearly did not—but because Fulbert did. Marriage by abduction was not unknown in Europe at the time, but it was increasingly frowned upon. In addition, behaving like a noble was one thing if you had a family estate as a source of independent power, but Abelard had chosen a different livelihood. Schoolmen and clerics were dependent upon others: their students, their colleagues, their patrons, and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, Abelard took this risky course. Clanchy says that the abduction, although it compounded the affront to Fulbert “was also [Abelard’s] best move, as it enabled him to use Heloise as a hostage.”\textsuperscript{33} Once Heloise was firmly within his own family’s power, Abelard returned to Paris to face difficult negotiations with Fulbert for an accommodation that would simultaneously allow him to stay on at the Paris schools and to bring Heloise back to the city.\textsuperscript{34}

Abelard, however, complicated the negotiations by insisting that the marriage be kept secret. Marriage, after all, then and now, was solemnized through the public

\textsuperscript{31} “…inasmuch as you had made full restitution by humbling yourself for me,” Levitan, 76.

\textsuperscript{32} Clanchy, \textit{Abelard: A Life}, 186.

\textsuperscript{33} Clanchy, \textit{Abelard: A Life}, 185.

\textsuperscript{34} Clanchy, \textit{Abelard: A Life}, 184-85; Gilson, 33.
acknowledgement of the marital bond. This was especially significant in the land-based economy of the twelfth century where marriage played such a major role in the transfer of property from one family and from one generation to another and it had to be public to have its force. In addition, the church, although it was at the time beginning to promote the doctrine that the consent of the parties was sufficient to establish a valid marriage, was also uneasy about secret marriages. A particularly influential bishop at the time, the afore-mentioned Ivo of Chartres, felt that marrying in secret should be considered unlawful. In fact, secret marriages could and did lead to disputes about whether they had happened at all, not least in the case of Abelard and Heloise. Certainly if Fulbert’s reputation needed to be saved, a public marriage was necessary, and perhaps he was persuaded to agree with Abelard’s plan because the arrangements Abelard proposed gave Fulbert sufficient hope either that the secret would come out eventually or that it could be discreetly disclosed to people who mattered to him. Abelard and Heloise were married at dawn in a church after a night-long vigil, which, as Clanchy points out, could not have been all that secret involving as it did the chanting of prayers, the lighting of candles, and the presence of a priest as well as several witnesses. Being married in a church was still unusual at the time when most marriage contracts were celebrated at the home of the bridegroom’s father with perhaps a quick stop at the church door to receive that blessing of a priest. Perhaps, since Heloise could be freed from her uncle Fulbert only through

pleading herself to a husband or a nunnery, Abelard wanted to make sure that the marriage ceremony itself would have no hint of impropriety.

It is worth pausing here to ask why Abelard worked so hard and risked so much to make this marriage happen. He himself explains his motives to Heloise in *Sponsae Christi* thus:

*Paululum enim antequam hoc accideret, nos indissolubili lege sacramenti nuptialis invicem astrinxerat, cum cuperem te mihi supra modum dilectam in perpetuum retinere. . . . Si enim mihi antea matrimonia non esses copulata, facile in discessu meo a saeculo vel suggestione parentum vel carnalium oblecture vouluptatum saeculo inhaesisses.*

In fact a little before this happened (the castration), he had bound us to each other by the indissoluble bond of the nuptial sacrament, since I desired to keep you whom I loved beyond measure for me forever. . . . Indeed if you had not been joined to me previously by marriage, at the time of my departure from the world, you might easily have clung to the world either at the suggestion of kinfolk or by the delight of carnal pleasures.

“One of the deepest of medieval prejudices was the view that women were incapable of conducting their own affairs and must be protected from the dangers and temptations of the world.”

The wish to protect easily led to the need to possess. Was it the desire to possess or, if that was not possible, the desire to keep the loved one from being possessed by any one else that led Abelard to overrule the objections Heloise made to marrying? A secret marriage might not serve the first purpose as well as a public marriage could, but it might, nevertheless, accomplish the second. In fact, it is clear from this passage that it was his jealousy that led not only to his insistence that Heloise take the veil when he himself entered the religious life, but also to this earlier insistence that Heloise marry.

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him. In the passage quoted above he is clearly linking both requests to the same motive. In fact, preventing Heloise from making any other marriage may have been upper most in his mind when he married her in secret.  

Mews suggests that we consider the possibility that Abelard may actually have been looking for a way to resume at least the appearance of a celibate life even before Heloise told him she was pregnant. The man in the lost love letters was already feeling ashamed of his actions well before the events that led to his castration. In letter #59 the man says, “I am guilty, I who compelled you to sin.” In letter #93 he laments, “no one is unhappier than we who are simultaneously pulled in different directions by love and shame.” In letter #101 he says “I am now speaking to you more cautiously. . . . shame tempers love.” Note that now shame is mentioned first, but in the next instance shame is no longer even linked with love, but with fear. In letter #108 he says, “I often wished to follow my lady but shame and fear blocked the way” and in letter #113, “fortune and shame . . . obstruct my desires.” (Ellipses mine.) When her uncle found out about the affair, fortune and shame becomes shame and disgrace: “What can I say about my shame and remorse, how I suffered at what she suffered, or the waves of anguish she endured at

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41 Gilson, 33.
42 Mews, Lost Love Letters, 140.
45 Letter #101 in Mews, Lost Love Letters, 279.
47 Letter # 113 in Mews, Lost Love Letters, 289.
the thought of my disgrace? In fact, it is altogether possible that what kept him from taking steps to save his reputation, if not his soul, by walking away from Heloise was the tormenting thought that she might marry or, even, find happiness with another man.

Considering what happened next, perhaps Abelard expected too much from a marriage made without the usual public acknowledgement. It gave Fulbert too much room to maneuver: first, by having Heloise back under his roof and, second, by allowing the public to think he still had grounds for grievance against Abelard. Fulbert’s revenge brought to horrifying heights what Abelard had hoped to avoid: his shame was now made public and open to ridicule:

Qua mihi ulterius via pateret, qua fronte in publicum prodirem omnium digitis demonstrandus, omnium linguis corrodendus, omnibus monstruosum spectaculum futurus. Nec me etiam parum confundebat quod secundum occidentem legis letteram tanta sit apud Deum eunuchorum abominatio ut homines amputates vel attritis testiculis eunuchizati intrare ecclesiam tamquam olentes et immundi prohibeantur, et in sacrificio quoque talia penitus animalia respuantur.49

No road was now left open to me,
no face I could show to the world,
when every finger would point,
every tongue would mock
the monstrous spectacle I would become.
An abomination before God,
according to the deadly letter of the law,
forbidden to enter a church, as if stinking and unclean –
that is what a eunuch is,
his testicles broken or cut away.
Even such an animal is despised for sacrifice.50

We can not overestimate the shame he felt. In the Historia he admits that, “it was my shame, my guilt and my confusion rather than my commitment to the religious life that

50 Translation by Levitan, 19.
brought me to the refuge of the cloister.”\textsuperscript{51} Just as Heloise had done, Abelard entered the religious life without having a calling. But even before his marriage took this disastrous turn, it may have proved disappointing since it had only made worse his sense of shame. When he had sent Heloise to Argenteuil and devoted himself once again to his duties at the schools “living more chastely” as she says in \textit{Unico Suo}, it was just then, married and apart, that he felt they had committed their greatest sin:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Cum Argenteoli cum sanctimonialibus in claustro conversareris, me die quadam privatim ad te visitandam venisse, et quid ibi tecum meae libidinis egerit intemperantia in quadam etiam parte ipsius rectorii, cum quo alias videlicet deverteremus, non haberemus. Nosti, inquam, id impudentissime tunc actum esse in tam reverendo loco et summae Virginis consecratu. Quod, et si alia cessent flagitia, multo graviore dignum sit ultione.}\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

When you were living at Argenteuil with the nuns in the cloister I came to visit you one day privately, and [you know] what the excess of my lust did with you there even in a certain part of the refectory itself, clearly since we did not have somewhere else to turn. You know, I’m telling you, that it was done most shamefully then in so venerated a place consecrated to the most high Virgin. Which, even if other shameful acts were to be left out, would be worthy of a much more serious punishment.

This unreserved acceptance of the sinfulness of the relationship had a salutary effect for Abelard; it saved him from raging at the injustice of the punishment. His guilt and shame was a disaster for Heloise, however, because it erected the formidable barrier which kept him at a distance from her for so many years. He only ventured to re-establish contact when the nuns were evicted from Argenteuil. In view of his shame and his concern for public opinion this act of charity is surprising. It must have meant he had

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Abelard, \textit{Historia}, in Levitan, 20.}
\footnote{Abelard, \textit{Sponsae Christi}, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 87.}
\end{footnotes}
regained some measure of his old interior confidence to risk public censure in this way; indeed it might have been beyond the realm of possibility if the eviction had happened very many years earlier. Nevertheless, Abelard passes over this pivotal decision in a couple of short sentences in the Historia. “They were now scattered through the world like exiles. I saw this as an opportunity from God for the future of my oratory.”53 It hardly seems probable that he was thinking solely of his abandoned Paraclete and not at all of his abandoned wife, whom he describes here as an exile. Whichever of these considerations might have been paramount, installing Heloise at the Paraclete as abbess opened up an avenue for renewed contact between them. We have Heloise’s testimony that they did not take advantage of it to discuss their shared past while they were both living at the Paraclete. However, it is significant that after Abelard returned to St. Gildas, he unburdened himself by writing his autobiographical Historia Calamitatum and, significantly, sending a copy to Heloise.

It was this renewed contact that helped him formulate a further refinement in the way he understood his castration. Heloise had reminded him in her second letter that “Haec te gratia, carissime, praevenit” 54 (This grace, dearest, came first to you). Only he, she points out, entered the religious life free of the sting of desire. Not only did he accept this recasting, he gave her credit for proposing it in his next letter to her:

Memento quae dixeris. Recordare quae scripseris in hoc videlicet nostrae conversionis modo, quo mihi Deus amplius adversari creditur, propitiorem mihi sicut manifestum est exstitisse.55

53 Abelard, Historia, in Levitan, 39.
54 Heloise, Unico Suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 80.
Remember what you said. Think over what you wrote: namely, that in this manner of our conversion, by which God is believed to be more opposed to me, he has stood out as more favorable to me as is now clear.

He did not stop there, however. Later in this same letter he links the two of them in God’s saving mercy:

Perpende altissimum in nobis divinae consilium pietatis, et quam misericorditer iudicium suum Dominus in correptionem vererit et quam prudenter malis quoque ipsis usus sit et impietatem pie deposuerit ut unius partis corporis mei iustissima plaga duabus mederetur animabus.56

Weigh carefully the highest plan of divine kindness active in our lives and how mercifully God turned his judgment into correction and likewise how wisely he made use of the evil things themselves also and put aside impiety righteously so that with a most just wound of a single part of my body he might heal two souls.

This is why he now refers to Heloise as his inseparable companion. In spite of the fact that they had been separated in this world, they were forever bound together in a great religious drama. God had not only joined them in the bond of matrimony, he had also bestowed salvation, a gift of grace, on both of them at once with a single stroke.

Notwithstanding Abelard’s acceptance of this God-given bond with Heloise, his most mature written analysis of love flatly denies that love experienced between human beings here on this earth can be anything other than false; the only love that is true is that of God for his children demonstrated in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. No other love is worthy of the name. Thus he admonishes Heloise to look to Jesus for love, not to him. Jesus is her true friend, not he.

Verus est amicus qui teipsam non tua desiderat… Amabat te ille veraciter, non ego. Amor meus, qui utrumque nostrum peccatis involvebat, concupiscentia, non amor dicendus est. . . . Plange tuum reparatorem,

56 Abelard, Sponsae Christi, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 89.
He [Jesus] is the true friend who desires you yourself not what is yours… He loved you truly, not I. My love, which involved both of us in sins, should be called lust, not love. . . . Bewail your renewer, not your corruptor, your redeemer, not your fornicator, the lord who died for you, not your living servant.

Gilson says that, by denying that he himself is capable of the kind of love Jesus can bear, Abelard “outstrips Heloise in divine love.”58 Perhaps so, but there may well have been another, much more personal, motive for his renewed attentions to Heloise. It was only when Abelard had finally and fully accepted their divine bond that he was able to accept Heloise back into his life, but in a new way, as his sister in Christ, joined both through marriage and, more significantly, through the wonder of a gift of grace. Significantly, Abelard praises marriage in the prayer composed for Heloise with which he ends this last of his personal letters to her:

Deus qui ab ipso humanae creationis exordio femina de costa viri formata nuptialis copulae sacramentum maximum sanxisti, quique immensis honoribus vel de desponsata nascendo, vel miracula inchoando nuptias sublimasti. . . . Coniunxisti nos, Domine, et divisisti quando placuit tibi et quo modo placuit. Nunc quod, Domine, miericorditer coepisti, misericordissime comple et quos semel a se divisisti in mundo, perenniter tibi coniungas in coelo.59

Lord, who at the very beginning of human creation, the woman having been formed from the rib of the man, sanctioned the greatest sacrament of the marriage bond, and who raised up marriage with boundless honors both by being born of a betrothed woman and by the inauguration of your miracles (at Cena). . . . You have joined us, Lord, and parted us when it was pleasing to you and in what manner it was pleasing to you. Now, Lord, most mercifully end what you mercifully began and those whom

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58 Gilson, 70.
you once separated from each other on earth, everlastingly join together
with you in heaven.

However elegantly Abelard denied the reality of earthly love, by the time his life
closed at Cluny, he clearly saw Heloise once again as his refuge here on earth. Once he
had reconnected with her, his life of wandering, although it continued, finally found a
focus. It was not particularly unusual to be peripatetic as a student and teacher, but it was
more surprising for him to continue to be peripatetic when as a monk, he had four homes,
five if you count his brief incarceration at St. Médard following the Council of Soissons:
St. Denis, the Paraclete, St. Gildas, Cluny. It seems he could not rest fully anywhere. It
is no small part of the triumph of the love between them that he finally focused on the
Paraclete as his lodestar and at the end of his life wrote his confession of faith to Heloise,
his “inseparable companion.”

Heloise defines love

Abelard’s view of love may have changed in response to changes in his
circumstances, but Heloise never wavered. She thought of herself as Abelard’s greatest
friend from the time they fell in love until she died. She hoped, although she sometimes
doubted, that he saw himself as her greatest friend as well. The word she uses, of course,
is a Latin one, amicus/amica, which is reliably translated as friend in its masculine form,
but sometimes as mistress or lover in its feminine. That we should follow the masculine
usage is indicated by the fact that she uses amicus/amica in a much more expansive sense

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60 Sarah Spence, *Texts and the Self in the Twelfth Century.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University
than the meaning encompassed by the word *lover*.\textsuperscript{61} What she meant was not limited to sexual or conjugal love. Although her friendship with Abelard included sexual congress, if we focus too narrowly on that we will misunderstand her.\textsuperscript{62} Her meaning transcends carnal delights, which after all had been lost irrevocably, but it also transcends the vicissitudes of life and even death itself. She viewed her relationship with Abelard as nothing less than a lifelong friendship which would be renewed in heaven. In fact, there is evidence to show that she thought of their relationship as one of friendship from its very inception. In lost love letter #25, the woman writes to the man thus:

\textit{Quid sit amor, vel quid posit naturali intuitu ego quoque perspiciens morum nostrorum studiorumque similitudine que maxime contrahit amicicias, et conciliat perspecta vicissitudinem amandi tibi rependere et in omnibus obedire. . . . Si amor moster tam facili propulsione discedit verus amor non fuit; verba molia et plana que inter nos hactenus contulimus, non fuerent vera sed amorem simularunt. Amor enim cui semal aculeum infigit, non facile deserit. Nosti o mi amor precordialis, quod tunc, veri amoris official bene persolvuntur quando sine intermissione debentur, ita ut pro amico secundum vires faciamus et super viers velle non desinamus.}

I too have been considering with innate reflection what love is or what it can be by analogy with our behavior and concerns, that which above all forms friendships, and, once considered, leads to repaying you with the exchange of love and obeying you in everything. . . . If our love deserted us with so slight a force, then it was not true love. The plain and tender words which to date we have exchanged with each other were not real, but only feigned love. For love does not easily forsake those whom it has once stung. You know, my heart’s love, that the services of true love are properly fulfilled only when they are continually owed. In such a way that we act for a friend according to our strength and never stop wishing to go beyond our strength.\textsuperscript{63}

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\textsuperscript{61} Levitan, in his otherwise excellent translation, succumbs to the temptation to see a female friend only as a lover. See for example the crucial passage in Heloise’s first letter. Levitan, 55.

\textsuperscript{62} In this I agree with Mews. See *Lost Love Letters*, 35 and *Abelard and Heloise*, 62.

\textsuperscript{63} Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, 211.
Our behavior and concerns, she says, are those which form friendships. This focus on friendship as the model for their relationship is also stated in Heloise’s more well-known letters where it is clear that what she has in mind is the classical model of a friendship between two men. The borrowing was not unmixed, however; the friendship she imagines with Abelard was gendered in conformity with her own times. In the classical model, two male friends owed loyalty to one another, but not obedience; Heloise insisted that her obedience to Abelard was, in fact, the touchstone of their friendship. She had grafted onto the classical ideal of friendship a twelfth-century sense of what a wife owed to a husband, a daughter to a father.

Nevertheless, she clearly had the classical model in mind. When she tells Abelard that the least he can do is write to her, she reminds him of what Seneca wrote to his friend, Lucilius, “how much more pleasant are letters which convey the true mark of an absent friend.” Note that Abelard is Lucilius to her Seneca while they are absent from each other. In the same letter she insists that she and Abelard are “non tam amicas quam amicissimas” (not just friends, but dearest friends) and later she asserts that “dulcius mihi semper extitit amice vocabulum” (the word friend has always stood out as sweeter to me). When Heloise expressed her own doubts about the sincerity of his love in Domino suo it is also clear that for her the highest love is one in which the lovers are joined first in friendship.

*Dic, inquam, si vals aut ego quod sentio imo quod omnes suspicantur dicam. Concupiscientia te mihi potius quam amicitia sociavit, libinis ardor*

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64 Heloise, *Domino Suo*, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 68.

65 Heloise, *Domino Suo*, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 72

potius quam amor. Ubi igitur quod desiderabas cessavit quicquid propter hoc exhibebas partier evanuit.⁶⁷

Tell, I ask, if you can or I will tell you what I feel or rather what everyone suspects. Desire joined you to me rather than friendship, the fire of lust rather than love. When therefore what you desired ceased, whatever you were exhibiting because of this vanished equally.

From what we know of the twelfth century and its precedents, this positing of an all-important friendship between herself and Abelard represents a new way of thinking about male/female relationships. It could well have been her scholarship that allowed her to be so bold. The very heights of literacy Heloise attained could have inspired her in two complementary ways. First, classical literature provided her with the model for rarified friendship and, second, her own standing as a scholar might have been the source of the confidence she needed to aspire to it. In addition, she may have had another motive although, admittedly, it may have been an unconscious one. A relationship based on friendship might just have made it possible for her to be Abelard’s colleague as well as his lover. Since she could never be taken seriously in Abelard’s intellectual world as either a mistress or a wife, Heloise had a lot at stake in claiming friendship. “The original equality of the sexes . . . can only exist outside marriage.”⁶⁸ As a woman it was difficult, if not impossible, to enjoy the philosophical conversations she longed for. An acknowledged friendship with Abelard was her one best hope.

Unhappily for Heloise, her life-long insistence that true love required devoted friendship did not find much support in her time and place. Its very originality presented her with a problem since there was no accepted precedent on which she could rely. This

⁶⁷ Heloise, Domino suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 71.

⁶⁸ Bloch, 93.
must have been a driving motive behind her anxiety to prove that such a friendship was even possible. Paradoxically to effect this proof she asserted little that was original, but relied heavily on traditional virtues admired by her contemporaries: to wit, she took pains to demonstrate her obedience, her humility, and her steadfastness. Since these virtues are no longer viewed with quite the degree of approbation they had in the twelfth century—today flexibility competes with steadfastness, self-esteem trumps humility, and self-reliance has largely replaced obedience—it is difficult for us to agree that this bundle of virtues is in fact the hallmark of true love and friendship. Nevertheless they resonated with her contemporaries and there is evidence that at least some of them came to share her view. Recall that the contemporary chronicler William Godel calls Heloise a true friend to Abelard. Further, it is important to remember that it was her own efforts, not Abelard’s, which had produced this result. Abelard does not call Heloise his friend at any point in his late letters and only once in the earlier ones. In the lost love letters the man preferred to call his beloved a star or a jewel; in the later Abelard calls Heloise his sister in Christ or his inseparable companion, but not amicissime. The closest he comes is societas, partnership, companionship, fellowship, conjugal union. In Unico suo Heloise cries out to Abelard that if he takes no notice of her efforts on his behalf they must be in vain, but we know better. They were in fact noticed and their import was acknowledged even by a man as highly placed as Peter the Venerable.

There were two other ways in which Heloise was an original thinker about love; insisting that love must be understood, above all, as friendship was not her only

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69 Mews, Lost Love Letters, 38.

70 In letter #2, the man writes, “To a noble and very lovable friend.” Mews, Lost Love Letters, 221.

71 Heloise, Unico suo, in Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 81.
contribution. First, she saw love as a life-long debt and, second, in spite of the accepted views of her time, she actually viewed love and sexuality as mutually compatible. Her insistence that love is debt requires some explanation. In that earlier letter quoted above the woman says that “the services of true love are properly fulfilled only when they are continually owed.” Her contemporaries would have understood the debt incurred by marriage, but not necessarily by love. This too is interesting and it clears up a puzzle from her later letters. In *Domino suo* she pounds away at what Abelard owes to her.

*Sed maiori te debito nobis astrinxisti. . . . Quid tuae debeas attende qui sic curam impendis alienate. . . . Qui obstinatis tanta impendis quid obedientibus debeas considera. Qui tanta hostibus largiris quid filiabus debeas meditare. Atque ut ceteras immittam quanto erga me te obligaveris debito pensa. . . . Cui quidem tanto te maiore debito noveris obligatum, quanto te amplius nuptialis foedere sacramenti constat esse astrictum et eo te magis mihi obnoxium quo te semper ut omnibus patet immoderato amore complexa sum.*

But you have bound yourself by a greater debt to us. . . . Think what you owe to yours, you who expend care in such a way on another’s. . . . You who spend so much on the obstinate, consider what you owe to the obedient. You who lavish so much on enemies reflect upon what you owe to your daughters. Moreover, to lay aside the others, think with how great a debt you have bound yourself towards me. . . . Me to whom indeed the more you accept as valid that you are obligated with a greater debt the more it is evident that you are bound by the covenant of the marriage sacrament and for that reason you are more liable to me the more I have embraced you always as is well known to all with immoderate love.

There is much more, but this makes the point. To love is to incur a debt. This insistence on a deep and unpaid debt may look quite unloving—Clanchy says it is the language of the money-lender—until you realize that Heloise herself had accepted just such an unpayable debt to Abelard and she is trying to pay it back through life-long obedience.

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To give just a few examples, in *Domino suo* she writes, “*Omnes denique mihi volutates interdixi ut tuae parerem voluntat.*”74 (In the end I have forbidden all delights to myself so that I might obey your wish) and in *Unico suo*, “*utinam huius praecipue commissi dignam agree*”75 (if only I may have the strength to carry out proper penance) and in *Suo specialiter* she begins “*Ne me forte in aliquot de inobedientia causare queas*”76 (So that you may not be able by chance to accuse me as a cause for disobedience in anything). For his part, when Abelard signaled that he had accepted his own debt to her by proposing that he was now her servant, she must have felt that it showed that he loved her.

And finally, although she accepted the sinfulness of fornication, nothing in what she wrote indicates that she ever accepted the prevailing view that love and sexuality are polar opposites. Jaeger points out that the lost love letters show two lovers who actually invoke God as “the protecting spirit of their love” in spite of the fact that it is straightforwardly carnal.77 Heloise remained true to that view. She is unusually candid, especially in her confession to Abelard in *Unico suo*, about how sweet her memories of their carnal intercourse still are to her so many years later and she is eloquent on the sheer overwhelming physicality of the emotional pain of losing that happiness. Without voices like Heloise’s the possibility that a twelfth-century woman could have felt this way would have been unknown and undreamed of because the object of lust had no assumed agency.78 However, because a culture does not notice or acknowledge female agency

77 Jaeger, 163.
78 Karras, 79.
does not mean that women never practice it. Of course they do, but it takes an unusual woman to write about it and let us in on the secret.

It is interesting that it was Heloise, not Abelard, who was most able to step outside a culture that denigrated love between a man and a woman as a fall from grace if it was expressed sexually. Jaeger calls their love “a founding moment in the idealizing of romantic love in the West: passion is idealized against logic and in blindness of the destruction it can cause.”79 However, even though fifteen years later we find her writing about how sweet her memories are, her view of love transcends sexual longing or sexual fulfillment. It was as strong and vital to her when they were living apart and declining into old age as it had been in their youth. For her there was no circumstance that could lessen the debt of love they owed each other. Little wonder then that Heloise has been beatified in public opinion as a saint of love.

Abelard wrote a history of his many calamities, but for Heloise there was ever only one: losing Abelard. She never complained in her letters about losing her son or about being turned out of Argenteuil. As for the first, she does not seem to have been a woman who found motherhood to hold much interest and as for the second, it had, after all, resulted in her being established at the Paraclete, Abelard’s foundation. It is likely that this new collaboration around the Paraclete was the closest approximation they ever achieved to what Heloise may have wanted all along: a collegial relationship and a joint project adding philosophical delights to carnal ones. In fact, the correspondence which initiated this joint project is what has made them known to history as individuals. We know about Heloise because of Abelard, but we also know more about Abelard the man.

79 Jaeger, 163-64.
because of Heloise and it is altogether possible that we are more interested in his professional writings than we otherwise might be.80

This recognition as partners is what they gave to each other in life. Ultimately it wasn’t lust and it wasn’t just a mutual recognition of the divinely selfless love of Christ for humanity in general and the religious in particular. This partnership encompassed virtues to which men and women were encouraged to aspire in the twelfth century—humility, obedience, service, and steadfastness. The lovers in the grave at Père La Chaise had been as united in life as they are now in death. Heloise may have had to beg Abelard to pay her the attention she merited, but he responded with generosity of heart.

80 Clanchy, Abelard: A Life, 170.
Figure 1: The tomb of Abelard and Heloise at Père La Chaise
CONCLUSION

Whether or not it is true today that “there are no second acts,” Heloise and Abelard clearly experienced a fruitful second act for a long-dead love affair. What is amazing is how this material engages modern scholars. When we argue over the authenticity of the letters or what Heloise was really like or what her words really meant, we are engaged in something that still matters to us. Of course Heloise was not a modern woman trapped in the twelfth century, but her story is remarkably contemporary. Women are still struggling over self-definition. One of the reasons for studying history is to see how culture constrains human action and to catch a glimpse of how human action might impact culture. These letters give us an unusually good way to do that because they give us such a personal glimpse into what two people actually thought about their own lives. Both Abelard and Heloise used the materials at hand in the culture around them to interpret what they felt for each other and Heloise, in particular, combined those materials in novel ways.

A significant portion of the scholarship currently being published about the twelfth century has recourse to the letters of Abelard and Heloise. The effort to understand Heloise has hardly been inconsequential. The work of establishing the authenticity of the personal letters and of examining anonymous twelfth-century sources for evidence of Heloise’s pen is paying historical dividends. Gilson was right when, back in the 1930s, he noted that understanding Heloise is key to understanding the twelfth

81 F. Scott Fitzgerald is supposed to have said this, and his editor, Edmund Wilson, is said to have found it written in the notes for his unfinished novel, The Last Tycoon. In spite of its shaky provenance, however, the aphorism found its way into popular culture in the United States in the twentieth century.

century. The letter collection is a rich source that illuminates many questions and scholars are pleased to make use of them. For example, Heloise is pivotal to Jaeger’s thesis that the twelfth century extended exalted feelings about love to a man/woman pair, a status that had been reserved for friendships between men. Brook’s study of marriage in the Middle Ages owes a huge debt of gratitude to Abelard and Heloise as well, especially because, as he says, they were witnesses to the paradox of marriage in their times. “The ascetic ideal and the ideal of marriage marched hand in hand, often in conflict, often in harmony.”

Thanks to Heloise, scholars of Abelard have the fullest extant account of the life of a medieval philosopher. Yes, he wrote the *Historia*, but she preserved it along with their subsequent correspondence. It remains for those who study medieval monasticism to notice the full import of the fact that in Heloise’s third letter they have something like an objective report on the religious life from the inside. In addition, the whole of the correspondence between Abelard and Heloise—not just his autobiographical work—is significant for tracing what has been called “the discovery of the individual.”

Although we can not reconstruct the living woman, there are some important things we can say about Heloise with surety. First, and most significant, she was as complex as her era and reflected its contradictory views. Second, her natural talents allowed her to excel in literary scholarship. It would be difficult to find a man, let alone another woman, who had such a comprehensive grasp of the available literature of her day. Third, she had a skeptical and inventive mind. This is demonstrated particularly well in her third letter to Abelard which raises questions about the religious life which we may

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not have expected from a twelfth-century abbess. Fourth—and this is as much about us as
it is about her—her meanings are a challenge to tease out without a sufficient grasp of her
time and place not least because she works with these materials in such novel ways. We
must also admit that our response to Heloise continues to be a gendered one. For
example, her insistence that she is living the religious life only out of obedience to
Abelard is still seen as stubborn, a word not usually employed to explain male action.

In fact, historians have always to battle not only their own pre-conceptions, but
also the accepted truths of their predecessors and colleagues. When historians began to
take notice of this body of letters, they froze Heloise first in her role as abbess and then,
next, in her Juliet-like role—forever young, forever in love, and forever grieving its loss.
A third picture has arisen in our own sex-obsessed times of a woman who reveled in
words like *meretrix* or *scorti* and who would actually have preferred to have been
Abelard’s whore. How else, people ask on reading her words for the first time, can we
understand those shocking things she wrote? I hope I have demonstrated in Chapter
Three how very differently she meant them to be understood—not as a declaration of her
essential carnality, but as a declaration of the absolute sincerity of her love. Clearly
Heloise used novel arguments: it is up to us to try to understand them.

Heloise’s devotion to philosophy may, in fact, have outstripped Abelard’s own.
She saw herself as his true friend, but philosophy as his true bride. Perhaps she had
wished to see herself as married to philosophy as well. How else can we fully understand
her protest against marrying Abelard or why she said she had to change her mind—at his
command—in order to enter the religious life? This was the young woman who in the
midst of her passionate love affair with Abelard notes that there was too little
philosophical conversation between them. This devotion to philosophy is also the likely explanation for the strange anomaly that the amorous Heloise sometimes had to be forced to consent to sexual congress. And, finally, whoever it was who composed the *Metamorphosis Golye*, in that poem Heloise herself is conflated with philosophy as the bride who searches in vain for her lost Palatine.

Nevertheless Heloise found her life’s work in what she thought of as an unlikely role, as Abbess of the Paraclete. We may wonder what other role her time and place could have offered which would allow so much scope for her talents and note that, in spite of her lack of vocation, Heloise took full advantage of it. Mary McLaughlin has produced the most complete work on Heloise’s career at the Paraclete. It is in McLaughlin’s chapter in Wheeler’s book, *Listening to Heloise*, that we see Heloise’s administrative skills demonstrated. Not only did the Paraclete thrive—right down to the French Revolution—^85^ but Heloise founded six daughter houses all closely tied to the mother abbey and all founded after Abelard’s death and in opposition to his express advice. Heloise was quite simply one of the most successful abbesses of the twelfth century, a century noted for the number of new foundations for women. None of this would have been possible if Heloise had not found consolation in the letters she received from Abelard. If we stop reading when Heloise says she will “put a bridle on her pen” we will miss the significance of her change in tone: she had found not only consolation, but a new connection with Abelard.

Although Heloise carried on for twenty years after Abelard died, during the first decade of her tenure at the Paraclete, nurturing its growth was a joint project. It was not

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^85^ For a description of what it is like to visit the site of the Paraclete today see Judith Infante, *Love: A suspect form*, (Exeter, United Kingdom: Shearsman Books Ltd, 2008), 9.
however, the only joint project in which Abelard and Heloise were engaged. There is growing evidence that she helped nurture Abelard’s philosophical work as well. Mews, Marenbon, and Clanchy have begun to document her considerable influence on Abelard’s later writings, especially his turn to ethics. In fact, what Heloise seems to have aspired to—even though we may have thought it was past imagining for the twelfth century—was likely an intellectual and creative collaboration which only became fully possible in the twentieth century with couples like Will and Ariel Durant or Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Surprisingly, Abelard and Heloise came closer to that ideal than we have heretofore imagined.

That all this was possible in the remote twelfth century still occasions disbelief. Nevertheless what we are learning is just how fluid a time it was. For example, just as the papal see moved to standardize religious beliefs and practices throughout Europe, an amazing degree of experimentation in religious life sprang up. Recent explorations of the phenomenon of courtly love have deepened our understanding of how these stories both arose from and challenged the prevailing customs of courtship and marriage. At the same time the burgeoning trade and crafts of the cities were challenging the nobility on their landed estates and influencing popular religious practices. Students of the monastic life have brought to light the bubbling tensions between the abbeys of the countryside and the cathedrals in the growing cities. The picture of the century that is emerging is broad enough and innovative enough to encompass even Heloise. As


87 See Duby, *Women of the twelfth century, volume one.*

88 See Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe.*

unlikely a medieval figure as she may have seemed, once she is allowed to emerge from
the meshes of her love affair, she stands as a figure as iconic for her time as Eleanor of
Aquitaine or Hildegard of Bingen and as important to the history of love as Marie de
France. It is time to give her her due in her personal life as well. She was not crushed, but
triumphant. It was her success in bringing Abelard back into her orbit that solidified the
long held public understanding of the two of them as inseparable companions.
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