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THE PERSONAL LETTERS OF HELOISE AND ABELARD –
MANIFESTATIONS OF CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON PATTERNS OF
LOVE, DESIRE AND GENDER INEQUALITY

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Chapter I. Introduction

According to a survey on medieval epistles, the four personal letters of Heloise and Abelard are by far the “most celebrated exchange of love-letters in the Middle Ages.”¹ Taking place in twelfth century France, their story has since transcended time and space to inspire countless adaptations, novels, poems, plays, operas and even a TV movie.² Scholars since Jean de Meun, Christine de Pisan and Francesco Petrarch have shown keen interests in the letters from both literary and humanist standpoints. Moreover, since the eighteenth century there has been an incessant debate among academics and historians over the authenticity and authorship of the letters. No other exchange of love letters has since achieved a comparable level of fame or generated as much controversy.³

Through the centuries, the images of Heloise (1101-1164) and Abelard (1079-1142) have evolved to symbolize love to those familiar with their story. Today, thousands of tourists flock to the couple’s final resting place in Paris’ Père-Lachaise cemetery to pay tribute and homage to their love. However, on close reading of the letters, it is “sheer paradox” that Heloise and Abelard have been regarded as “the

¹ Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter Collections* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1976), 34.

² Among the numerous works inspired by Heloise and Abelard’s story are Alexander Pope’s 1717 poem “Eloisa to Abelard;” Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s 1761 epistolary novel *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse*; the 1988 TV movie *Stealing Heaven*; and, most recently, a 2002 opera production by American composer Stephen Paulus, see <<http://www.frenchculture.org/music/events/02paulusheloise.html>>.

³ Some of the other celebrity love letters by renowned French writers include the exchange of letters between Evelina Hanska and Honoré de Balzac, Juliette Drouet and Victor Hugo, George Sand and Alfred de Musset, Louise Colet and Gustave Flaubert, as well as Simone de Beauvoir and Nelson Algren.

incarnation of the Couple, the Lover and his Mistress.”⁴ As Régine Pernoud points out, the couple was united for only a brief period of time and there was very little evidence of disinterested love on the part of Abelard, if such means the “capacity to reach beyond the self, to transcend the very pleasures on which love feeds.”⁵ Indeed, in both his letters to Heloise and in *Historia calamitatum*, an autobiographical account addressed to an anonymous friend,⁶ Abelard displays very little *gratia*—a love freely given and based on chastity of the spirit—towards Heloise.⁷ Moreover, contrary to popular belief, Heloise’s love for Abelard was not truly unconditional, despite her willingness to renounce the world at his command.

In my study, I shall attempt to analyze the love shared by Heloise and Abelard. They desired each other, yet in their own ways they attempted to manipulate each other, during and after their time together. In fact, the letters disclose a power struggle between the two, with Abelard attempting to dominate Heloise and Heloise staging a rebellion under feigned submission.

In order to understand what motivated Heloise and Abelard in their struggle for power and control, it is paramount to examine the models of desire available to them as well as prevalent attitudes toward love, sex, and marriage during the Middle Ages.

⁴ Régine Pernoud, *Heloise and Abelard*, trans. Peter Wiles (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), 81.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Betty Radice points out that the traditional title of *Historia calamitatum* found in the best of the early manuscripts is *Abaelardi ad amicum suum consolatoria <epistula>* (‘Abelard’s letter of consolation to his friend’). Despite the personal content, Abelard’s letter “falls into one of the categories recognized by the art of rhetoric.” The “friend” whom Abelard addresses appears to be fictitious and is a part of the convention. *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. Betty Radice (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974), 57, n 1.

⁷ The definition of *gratia* is from Glenda McLeod in “‘Wholly Guilty, Wholly Innocent’: Self Definition in Héloïse’s Letters to Abélard,” in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, ed. Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 68.

Indeed, classical, feudal as well as Christian values exerted profound influences on the way Heloise and Abelard desired and related to each other. By placing their attitudes and behaviors in the context of contemporary culture, I shall illustrate the extent to which Heloise and Abelard were influenced by culture. Moreover, the two were perhaps more indoctrinated by contemporary ideologies than were their less-educated peers.

Finally, I shall attempt to offer some theories as to why their story has not only remained the most celebrated medieval love story over the centuries, but also continues to fascinate us.

Chapter II. Fundamental Characteristics of Love and Desire

As all human beings, Heloise and Abelard were prone to the influences of culture, which dictates human behavior in all aspects of life, including love and desire. Although love may feel like a unique experience for the amorous individual, it actually follows a general pattern prescribed by culture. Using Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* as an example, Angelica Goodden writes:

As Mme de Tourvel would surely concede, human beings are fatally prone to take their own case as unique, and to spurn the counsel of those, like Mme de Rosemonde, who can see the overall pattern to which a lover's wooing will probably conform.⁸

While the story of Heloise and Abelard may be the most celebrated and fascinating medieval love story, it is by no means original. Like all love stories, the relationship between these two displays typical characteristics of love and desire. I shall discuss in particular three fundamental characteristics, namely the apprehension of love through language, desire by imitation, and fulfillment as the death of desire.

While sexual urges are dictated by nature and essential for the propagation of the human species, romantic love deals with emotional responses that are formulated and expressed through language. Roland Barthes describes language as a "skin" that allows an amorous subject to rub against the loved being as if there were "fingers at the tips of words."⁹ Perceptively aware of the role played by language in the game of seduction,

⁸ Angelica Goodden, *The Complete Lover: Eros, Nature and Artifice in the Eighteenth-Century French Novel* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989), 41.

⁹ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 73.

Abelard sought out Heloise partly because she was highly literate and thus could be easily inflamed with words. He writes:

Knowing [Heloise's] knowledge and love of letters I thought she would be all the more ready to consent. When separated we could enjoy each other's presence by exchange of written messages in which we could speak more openly than in person and so need never lack the pleasures of conversation.¹⁰ (66)

From Heloise we have ample proof that Abelard acted on these assumptions and took full advantage of linguistic power to seduce her. For example, in her letter complaining to Abelard about his neglect of her since their entry into religion and begging him to restore his presence to her by way of correspondence, Heloise reminds him of his once abundant letters:

... I beg you to restore your presence to me in the way you can — by writing me some word of comfort . . . When in the past you sought me out for sinful pleasures your letters came to me thick and fast, and your many songs put your Heloise on everyone's lips, so that every street and house echoed with my name." (117)

The fact that Heloise and Abelard availed themselves of their literary talents to arouse each other with skillfully crafted words of love is further implied by a passage in Abelard's second letter to Heloise. While imploring Heloise to join him in thanking God for his castration, an act of divine grace that saved their souls, Abelard writes that the Lord was indignant or grieved because their "knowledge of letters," the talents that the Lord had entrusted to them, "were not being used to glorify his name"(149).¹¹

¹⁰ This and all subsequent quotes from Abelard and Heloise's letters are from the translation by Radice. See n 6.

¹¹ Abelard describes his castration not as an act of divine justice, but of grace. He writes that the castration healed two souls by "a wholly justified wound in a single part of [his] body." Radice, 146-147.

Inseparably intertwined with love, language is not only the medium that enables lovers to declare and arouse desire, but also the channel through which culture dictates the discourse of desire. That is, lovers not only use words for amorous ends, they indeed “speak in a delirium conforming to literature.”¹² In a study on love stories in Western culture, Catherine Belsey notes the inherent cultural influence in various genres of love literature:

Lovers speak, and yet in doing so they are spoken by a language that precedes them, that is not at their disposal, under their control; this language is at the same time dispersed among banalities, poetry, the sacred, tragedy.¹³

This language that precedes lovers who speak it, I suggest, is precisely culture as represented in literature, which paradoxically dictates the very beings who create it. A more detailed discussion on how love literature influenced Heloise and Abelard will follow in the next chapter.

In addition to dictating lovers in their discourse, culture also influences them in their choice of partners. René Girard coined the term “mimetic desire” to show how desirability is determined by public consensus. In his triangular model of mimetic desire, Girard states that one desires by imitation, which depends on the existence of at least three individuals. For instance, A desires B because C also desires B. He further states that culture is formed whenever there are more than two individuals. Similar to Girard’s triangular model, Barthes’s idea of induction stipulates that “amorous desire is discovered by induction,” and that “the loved being is desired because another or others have shown

¹² Barthes, 171.

¹³ Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1994), 84.

the subject that such a being is desirable.”¹⁴ William Shakespeare calls this “love that stood upon the choice of friends,” “love by another’s eye,” and “love by hearsay.”¹⁵

The forces that drew Abelard and Heloise to each other clearly illustrate mimetic desire at work. Consider how Abelard introduces Heloise into his autobiographical account:

There was in Paris at the time a young girl named Heloise, . . . In looks she did not rank lowest, while in the extent of her learning she stood supreme. A gift for letters is so rare in women that it added greatly to her charm and had won her renown throughout the realm. I considered all the usual attractions for a lover and decided she was the one to bring to my bed . . . (66)

Abelard had heard of Heloise and consciously singled her out to be his lover, because of her literary talents and her looks. While Abelard may have employed litotes to describe Heloise’s appearance, Heloise’s assessment of Abelard is hyperbolic and leaves no doubt that public unanimity fueled her desire for Abelard. She writes to Abelard in Letter I:

What king or philosopher could match your fame? What district, town or village did not long to see you? When you appeared in public, who did not hurry to catch a glimpse of you, or crane his neck and strain his eyes to follow your departure? Every wife, every young girl desired you in absence and was on fire in your presence; queens and great ladies envied me my joys and my bed. (115)

So far I have identified in the story of Heloise and Abelard two typical characteristics of love, namely mimetic desire and the intertwining of love and language. Fulfillment as the death of desire is yet another common characteristic of love that manifests itself in their relationship. By definition, desire is a longing or craving for the

¹⁴ Barthes, 136.

¹⁵ René Girard, *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5.

absent. From the psychoanalytic point of view, fulfillment is incompatible with desire because desire only exists when the need remains unfulfilled. Once that need becomes fulfilled, the amorous subject no longer desires or loves the once-beloved object. As Jean-Paul Sartre explains, “. . . pleasure is the death and failure of desire. It is the death of desire because it is not only its fulfillment but its limit and its end.”¹⁶

If fulfillment brings death to desire, then the absence or lack of fulfillment serves only to heighten desire. This aspect of human psychology is clearly illustrated in the following passage from Abelard, who recounts that after being forced apart by Heloise’s uncle Fulbert, he and Heloise longed for each other even more fervently and that their ardor rose to such heights as to make them desert all sense of propriety:

Separation drew our hearts still closer while frustration inflamed our passion even more; then we became more abandoned as we lost all sense of shame and, indeed, shame diminished as we found more opportunities for love-making. And so we were caught in the act as the poet says happened to Mars and Venus.
(69)

The letters of Heloise demonstrate how the absence of pleasure kept her desire for Abelard burning even after years in the convent. Shortly after Abelard’s castration, Heloise took the veil at the command of Abelard, who had forced her to don the religious habit before he turned himself to God. While “a single wound of the body” freed Abelard from the torments of unfulfilled desire, Heloise continued to suffer from overwhelming longings evoked by delightful memories of the pleasures they once

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 367.

shared.¹⁷ However, the more Heloise renounced pleasure at Abelard's bidding, the more impassioned she became. By obeying Abelard's every wish and thus denying herself every pleasure, Heloise in fact fueled her desire with the lack of fulfillment. Consider how Heloise pleads to Abelard her case of absolute self-denial on his account:

. . . the end is proof of the beginning. I have finally denied myself every pleasure in obedience to your will, kept nothing for myself except to prove that now, even more, I am yours. (117)

Ironically, Abelard's attempt to restrain Heloise's desire backfires. Linda Kauffman concludes, "contrary to Abelard's design, renunciation keeps the circuit of desire open rather than closing it."¹⁸

Having illustrated how various aspects of Heloise and Abelard's story conform to the fundamental characteristics of love and desire, in the following chapter I shall explore the models of desire to which Heloise and Abelard were exposed, and demonstrate the extent to which such models shaped their attitudes concerning love and desire.

¹⁷ Heloise uses the phrase "a single wound of the body" to refer to Abelard's castration. She writes to Abelard, "This grace, my dearest, came upon you unsought – a single wound of the body by freeing you from these torments has healed many wounds in your soul." Radice, 133.

¹⁸ Linda Kauffman, *Discourses Of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 78.

Chapter III. Ovidian and Other Classical Influences

As Belsey points out, lovers “are spoken by a language that precedes them,” a language that is at the same time dispersed among various genres of literature.¹⁹ Being of the literate elite, Heloise and Abelard had a much higher exposure to the cultural influences inherent in literature than were their less-educated contemporaries. Subsequently, their real-life relationship took on the fictional characteristics of love stories made legendary by great writers of love.

In terms of love literature, which works in particular provided the sentimental education for Heloise and Abelard? It appears that contemporary medieval literature during the time of Heloise and Abelard may have left something to be desired as far as love stories are concerned. In the medieval literary works that survived, romantic or passionate love rarely occurred as the central theme.²⁰ As noted by Paul Zumthor, “the passions of love remained at the margin of the conceptual universe” in the medieval world, until the emergence of the troubadours.²¹ Georges Duby points out that what most medieval works called love, was quite simply the desire of men and their sexual exploits.²²

In various genres of medieval literature such as the *chanson de geste*, *roman satirique* and *roman chevaleresque*, woman is a textual object employed by the author to

¹⁹ See n 13.

²⁰ As noted by Radice, no love poems existed in northern France at the time of Abelard and Heloise's affair. Radice, 68, n 1.

²¹ Paul Zumthor, “Héloïse et Abélard” in *Revue des Sciences humaines* 91 (July-September 1958), 316. Translation by Peggy Kamuf, as appeared in *Fictions of Feminine Desire: Disclosures of Heloise*. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), xv.

²² Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest* (Paris: Hachette, 1981), 221.

depict relationships between men or to signify a certain stage in the psychological or social development of the hero.²³ One may argue that in troubadour literature, woman is idealized and courtly love asserts itself as a worthy subject of literature. However, as suggested by Duby, love for the lady could be in fact loyalty for the lord in disguise.²⁴ That is, the function of the lady in the military society of the feudal age was primarily that of a disciplinarian, to instill a sense of self-restraint, perseverance and allegiance in the young knights, who ultimately made use of these qualities to serve their lord.²⁵ According to Duby, the “words and gestures of the rites of vassalage” could easily be “incorporated into the ritual of courtly love.”²⁶

The lack of medieval love literature seems to suggest that contemporary literary models of love were rare during the time of Heloise and Abelard. Thus, in their attempt to address the issues of love and desire, the two were obliged to turn to other literatures. The abundant citations of classical writers in their letters indicate that both were avid readers of classical authors such as Cicero, Seneca and the Latin love poet Ovid. According to Michael Calabrese, Ovid was the “great progenitor of the themes and conventions of medieval love literature,” whose writings provided “monologues, dialogues, rule books, and dramatic vignettes that explore power, authority, and the language of male and female desire.”²⁷ While Heloise and Abelard may not have studied

²³ For example, in the *Chanson de Roland*, Aude represents the bond between Olivier and Roland, while Bramidoine symbolizes with her religious conversion the triumph of Charlemagne over Marsile.

²⁴ Georges Duby, *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, trans. Jane Dunnett (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 61-63.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, 222.

²⁷ Michael Calabrese, “Ovid and the Female Voice in the *De Amore* and the *Letters* of Abelard and Heloise,” *Modern Philology* 95.1 (Aug. 1997: 1-26), 5.

Ovid for the express purpose of creating love literature, they nonetheless internalized Ovidian love stories in the process and reenacted the plots in their own relationship. Indeed, a close examination of Heloise and Abelard's story reveals that the two carried out their love affair in ways reminiscent of Ovidian heroes and heroines.

Like the Ovidian hero Aeneas, Abelard had a higher calling; love by no means occupied the center stage in his life.²⁸ Heloise was but a pleasurable diversion for Abelard, as he became complacent after achieving fame and fortune in the academic world.²⁹ Fancying himself the only philosopher in the world with nothing to fear from anyone, Abelard relaxed and allowed himself time and opportunity to yield to temptations of the flesh, which he claimed he had previously resisted.³⁰ In other words, it was the simple pursuit of carnal pleasure that prompted Abelard to seek out Heloise. A sublime physical, emotional and spiritual union with a woman was not his ambition in life.³¹

The fact that Abelard had a higher calling in life stemmed from his aspirations to become the greatest philosopher of his time. Eminent classical thinkers before him

²⁸ Ibid., 17.

²⁹ Abelard writes, "But success always puffs up fools with pride, and worldly security weakens the spirit's resolution and easily destroys it through carnal temptations. I began to think myself the only philosopher in the world, with nothing to fear from anyone, and so I yielded to the lusts of the flesh. Hitherto I had been entirely continent, but now the further I advanced in philosophy and theology, the further I fell behind the philosophers and holy Fathers in the impurity of my life." Radice, 65.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ According to Abelard, in his pursuit of carnal pleasures he deliberately sought out Heloise as the one to bring to his bed. See Radice, 66. Later, he proposed a clandestine marriage as he took pity on Fulbert's "boundless misery." See Radice, 69. He did not mention concern for Heloise's reputation as the reason behind his marriage proposal. The fact that he wanted to keep the marriage secret suggests his ambition to advance further in the academic world, at a time when schools were Church institutions. As Radice points out, "It would have been thought unworthy of anyone in Abelard's position not to remain celibate, and would have been a bar to his advancement in the Church, where alone he could find scope for his ambitions." Radice, 70, n 1.

considered love a distraction from philosophy—man’s true vocation in life. The study of philosophy demanded complete devotion and shunned all base entanglements and hindrances to intellectual enlightenment, such as love and matrimony. Seneca once gave this advice to Lucilius:

Philosophy is not a subject for idle moments. We must neglect everything else and concentrate on this, for no time is long enough for it. Put it aside for a moment, and you might as well give it up, for once interrupted it will not remain. We must resist all other occupations, not merely dispose of them but reject them.³²

Furthermore, the vision of Socrates “hectored” by his wife Xantippe conjured up an image of shame and horror for the medieval scholar, who strived at all costs to avoid the “ridicule invoked by the spectacle of a married philosopher, of a man devoted to study and the ‘higher verities’ subject to the whims of a wife and servitudes of domesticity.”³³

Abelard heeded the warnings of classical philosophers and was mindful of the incompatibility between philosophy and love. In his pursuit of Heloise he intended only to satiate his lust and not to involve himself in any emotional entanglements that would cause him to veer from philosophy. He even considered his fame as love poet of less value than his renown as the greatest logician and theologian of his time. This fact is made evident by Heloise, who states that Abelard’s gift for composing songs was for him no more than a diversion, a recreation from the labors of his philosophic work.³⁴ After all, most great thinkers gifted with literary skills before Abelard chose philosophy and not

³² According to Abelard, Heloise used this quote from Seneca in her argument against his marriage proposal. Radice, 72.

³³ Barry, 9. Heloise quoted the example of Socrates from St. Jerome’s *Against Jovinian*. A study by J. T. Muckle shows that Abelard included and expanded most of the anti-marriage arguments used by Heloise in some of his works written before the *Historia calamitatum*. Radice, 73, n 2.

³⁴ Radice, 115.

sentimentality as their claim to fame. Ovid the love poet was a rarity among classical philosophers as typified Socrates, Seneca and numerous other men of wisdom.

If philosophy topped Abelard's agenda before his castration, then religion became his higher calling after he withdrew from the secular world. In any event, Heloise never constituted the highest priority in Abelard's life. As noted by Calabrese, Abelard played "the role of the male lover engaged in other pursuits who refuses to recognize, validate, or satisfy female desire."³⁵ In sum, his higher calling made him unavailable for Heloise's life.

Heloise, on the other hand, played the role of Sappho and the other lamenting heroines in Ovid's *Heroides*. Unlike Ovid's heroes, the heroines had no other calling in life save their love for the lovers who seduced and abandoned them. The heroines never ceased to desire their absent lovers and engaged themselves in the activity of writing to keep the past alive. Unlike Abelard, Heloise's ambition in life was not to garner the title of the most learned. Abelard, not fame, was the purpose of her life and the center of her universe. Although she obeyed his every order, in the end she rebelled by refusing to be silenced in the cloister. Like the heroines in *Heroides*, Heloise demanded attention from the man who abandoned her in spite of the numerous sacrifices she made for him. Her epistle is "simultaneously a love letter and a legal challenge, a revolt staged in writing."³⁶ Calabrese summarizes the striking similarity between Heloise and the heroines in the *Heroides*:

³⁵ Calabrese, 16-17.

³⁶ Kauffman, 18.

Within the drama of the letters themselves, the stridency of Heloise's claims, the power of her memories, the details of her desires—the very fact that she confronts the lover who now scorns her—all reflect the influence of the *Heroides*. This swirling mass of conventional imperatives generates the voice that Heloise speaks.³⁷

Not only did Abelard and Heloise assume the roles of Ovidian hero and heroine in their relationship, their affair unfolded in a manner resembling an Ovidian love story. On fire with lust for Heloise, Abelard enacted an Ovidian seduction by insinuating himself into the household of Fulbert.³⁸ Dazzled by Abelard's reputation and blinded by his own greed, Fulbert was unable to foresee any impending betrayal or treachery.³⁹ Under the pretext of tutoring Heloise in exchange for room and board, Abelard strategically placed himself in close proximity to Heloise. The unsuspecting Fulbert even granted Abelard full charge of Heloise, so that Abelard could devote all his free time to teaching her by day and night.⁴⁰

Soon, under the pretense of studies, Heloise and Abelard retreated in private and abandoned themselves entirely to their passions. Abelard recalls their erotic interludes:

... with our books open before us, more words of love than of our reading passed between us, and more kissing than teaching. My hands strayed oftener to her bosom than to the pages; love drew our eyes to look on each other more than reading kept them on our texts... In short, our desires left no stage of love-making untried, and if love could devise something new, we welcomed it. (68)

The secret affair of Heloise and Abelard would soon become public knowledge as Abelard began composing love songs that circulated in the streets of Paris and placed the

³⁷ Calabrese, 24.

³⁸ Calabrese writes, "Abelard does not teach but rather enacts an Ovidian seduction, using subterfuge and pretext to insinuate himself into the household of Fulbert, Heloise's guardian." Calabrese, 16.

³⁹ Radice, 67.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

name of young Heloise on the lips of everyone.⁴¹ Exhausted from his sleepless nights with Heloise, Abelard faltered as a teacher by day; and his pupils noticed his lackluster lectures. Rumors of his torrid affair with Heloise ran rampant and eventually reached the ears of Fulbert, who in his rage threw Abelard out of his house. However, since the lack of fulfillment fuels desire, the separation forced by Fulbert caused the two lovers to become even more enamored and accomplished little in curbing further developments in their love affair.

One day, as Abelard recalls, they were “caught in the act as the poet says happened to Mars and Venus”(69). The poet Abelard refers to is none other than Ovid. The story of Mars and Venus being caught in bed by Vulcan was well known to Abelard through Ovid’s *Ars amatoria* and *Metamorphoses*. It is remarkable that Abelard draws a parallel between a classical reference and such an event in his personal life. It indicates that while reading Ovid, Abelard internalized classical models of desire, which subsequently led him to fictionalize himself and Heloise with a comparison to legendary Ovidian lovers. Such a comparison gives proof that classical love literature influenced Heloise and Abelard profoundly. Culture dictates the very beings who create it, forming an endless cycle where fiction and life become intertwined.

Indeed, Heloise and Abelard behaved in ways that conformed to the models of love available to them, as they had no other reference point outside these known frameworks. In other words, they were not free agents acting on their own volition, but beings suspended in a symbolic world constructed through language, beings

⁴¹ According to Radice, none of Abelard’s love lyrics survived. *Ibid.*, 68, n 1.

preconditioned by culture to move in ways that limit them within the boundaries of this constructed world.

Chapter IV. Feudal Values

However deeply influenced by classical love literature they might have been, Heloise and Abelard also had to reckon with forces stemming from prevalent feudal values. In this chapter I shall discuss how contemporary secular views toward women and marriage provide explanations for the way Heloise constructed her self-identity, and how such views may be the reasons why her relationship with Abelard displays the age-old pattern of male dominance and female submissiveness.

In the masculine world of the Middle Ages, a woman's place in the patriarchal order was defined largely by her ties to her male kin. Consequently, a woman who lost her ties to her male kin also relinquished her social status. Both *Tyolet* and *Perceval* furnish examples of the widow who, having lost her husband, withdraws from society and becomes a recluse in the forest. Consider also Pinthe in *Le Roman de Renart*, who desperately fears for her social status while believing that Renart killed her husband Chantecler. She laments:

Renart vous tient et vous emporte. Pauvre de moi, je n'ai plus
qu'à mourir! Car, en perdant mon seigneur et mon maître, j'ai à
jamais perdu mon rang!⁴²

While ties to male kin determined the medieval woman's social status, the state of her sexuality represented a common attribute used to define women in the medieval world. A medieval woman was a virgin, a wife, a whore, or a nun, which incidentally

⁴² *Le Roman de Renart*, (Librairie Générale Française, 1987), 28.

were all gender-based terms whose linguistic meaning partially depended on the corresponding masculine oppositions.⁴³

With her social status defined in relation to men and her identity characterized by her sexuality, it was next to impossible for a medieval woman to construct her self-identity in a manner that is independent of men. Subject to the influences of feudal views and hopelessly obsessed with Abelard, Heloise could not escape this mode of female self-identity. As Kauffman points out, Heloise adopts in her letters “the fundamental motif of amorous epistolary discourse by situating her identity absolutely in the absent beloved.”⁴⁴ Indeed, Heloise repeatedly claims that by losing Abelard, she lost her very self. Consider the following passages from her letters:

You know, beloved, as the whole world knows, how much I have lost in you, how at one wretched stroke of fortune that supreme act of flagrant treachery robbed me of my very self in robbing me of you.” (113)

If I lose you, what is left for me to hope for? . . . now that I am forbidden all other pleasures in you and denied even the joy of your presence which from time to time could restore me to myself? (129)

Incidentally, Heloise’s loss of self-identity would have been less traumatic if she had been loved by someone less worthy. Abelard not only enjoyed the reputation of being the greatest medieval philosopher, but also aroused the desire of countless women with his exceptional good looks. By composing love songs that publicized his love for

⁴³ Virginity is a state of sexuality as much as being a married woman or a whore. Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 186. The meaning of “nun” is also covertly sexual, as nuns are in fact considered the brides of Christ.

⁴⁴ Kauffman, 69.

Heloise, he simultaneously elevated her social status to a height equal to his own and made her the envy of all women. Consider the following passages from Heloise's letter:

Every wife, every young girl desired you in absence and was on fire in your presence; queens and great ladies envied me my joys and my bed.

You had besides, I admit, two special gifts whereby to win at once the heart of any woman — your gifts for composing verse and song, in which we know other philosophers have rarely been successful . . . The beauty of the airs ensured that even the unlettered did not forget you; more than anything this made women sigh for love of you. And as most of these songs told of our love, they soon made me widely known and roused the envy of many women against me. For your manhood was adorned by every grace of mind and body, and among the women who envied me then, could there be one now who does not feel compelled by my misfortune to sympathize with my loss of such joys? (115)

Indeed, Abelard's love glorified and blessed Heloise, who consequently situated her self-identity with him and took pride in being desired by a man who excelled both as a philosopher and as a love poet. The envy of other women only heightened Heloise's sense of self-worth derived from Abelard.⁴⁵ However, as fate would have it, Heloise was made the most blessed and the most wretched woman through her love affair with Abelard. In losing Abelard, she lost not only him but also her complete sense of self-worth. Heloise laments:

"Of all wretched women I am the most wretched, and amongst the unhappy I am unhappiest. The higher I was exalted when you preferred me to all other women, the greater my suffering over my own fall and yours, when I was flung down; for the higher the ascent, the heavier the fall. Has Fortune ever set any

⁴⁵ In his reading of the letters, Francesco Petrarch made several sensitive notations. Next to Heloise's claims that the love songs of Abelard composed for her made her both famous and envied by other women, Petrarch writes, "How like a woman!" Peter Dronke, *Abelard and Heloise in Medieval Testimonies* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1976), 57.

great or noble woman above me or made her my equal, only to be similarly cast down and crushed with grief? What glory she gave me in you, what ruin she brought upon me through you. Violent in either extreme, she showed no moderation in good or evil. To make me the saddest of all women she first made me blessed above all, so that when I thought how much I had lost, my consuming grief would match my crushing loss, and my sorrow for what was taken from me would be the greater for the fuller joy of possession which had gone before; and so that the happiness of supreme ecstasy would end in the supreme bitterness of sorrow.” (129-130)

If Heloise basked in her elevated social status as the lover of Abelard, why did she vehemently oppose his proposal of marriage as a way to appease Fulbert? To answer this question, it is necessary to explore the concept of marriage in the Middle Ages, which was anything but a union based on love. As Duby points out, medieval marriage was by secular definition “an institution, a legal system which unites, alienates and imposes obligations ensuring the continuity of social structures, particularly the stability of power and wealth.”⁴⁶ Aristocratic marriages, in particular, were matches of interest, aimed at joining political powers and family estates. The parents of the bride and groom drew up marriage contracts with the “care shown commercial or diplomatic treaties.”⁴⁷

Moreover, medieval marriage was not a contract between equal partners. Just as an unmarried woman was at the disposal of her male relatives, a married woman was subject to the dominion of her husband. Indeed, inequality characterized the medieval marriage. A wife’s adultery was punishable as a capital crime, while the husband publicly kept concubines and demanded the wife to raise his bastard children along with

⁴⁶ Duby, *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, 32.

⁴⁷ Barry, 39.

the legitimate. Conjugal duties applied to the wife and not to the husband, who used his wife's body for carnal pleasures.⁴⁸

Abelard's analogy of the black but lovely Ethiopian bride reflects the contemporary view of woman as an object for the enjoyment of her husband in private. By citing passages from the *Canticles*, in particular this verse, "I am black but lovely, . . . Therefore the king has loved me and brought me into his chamber,"⁴⁹ Abelard reduces the female body to an objective representation of male desire. Furthermore, by employing the black bride as an analogy to describe Heloise the nun, Abelard objectifies Heloise as the bride of Christ, whose beauty was to be enjoyed by the Lord only. As Peggy Kamuf points out, the "monastic seclusion" in which Heloise has been tucked away is "like that closed chamber where the king takes pleasure with the bride whose beauty is only revealed in this retreat."⁵⁰

Conditioned by culture, Heloise did not question the role imposed on women by the medieval masculine discourse. She willingly embraced her role as Abelard's object of desire. She writes:

God knows I never sought anything in you except yourself; I wanted simply you, nothing of yours. I looked for no marriage-bond, no marriage portion, and it was not my own pleasures and wishes I sought to gratify, as you well know, but yours. (113)

What Heloise wanted above all, was to be desired and loved by Abelard. She had no qualms about being Abelard's object of desire, for this desire originated from his own volition and set her above all other women. However, if they were to be bound by a

⁴⁸ Ideas presented in this entire paragraph are from Barry, 38-39.

⁴⁹ Radice, 140.

⁵⁰ Kamuf, 28

loveless, legal marriage, the nature of their relationship would turn into one based on contractual agreement, and her desirability to Abelard would subsequently diminish.

Abelard recalls Heloise's arguments against marriage as follows:

[Heloise] argued that the name of mistress instead of wife would be dearer to her and more honourable for me – only love freely given should keep me for her, not the constriction of a marriage tie, and if we had to be parted for a time, we should find the joy of being together all the sweeter the rarer our meetings were.
(74)

As Heloise's whole sense of self-worth was based on the fact that Abelard chose her and desired her out of his own free will, an act of matrimony between them would completely destroy her self-identity. McLeod notes:

[For Heloise,] the marriage substitutes a love obligated by external constraint for one born of internal volition. What Heloise loses thereby is more than simply Abelard. It is also her sense of dignity and self-worth, a sense that her relationship with him had conferred but that her marriage and entrance into orders had destroyed.⁵¹

Lastly, going back to the classical notion of the incompatibility between philosophy and marriage, Heloise was keenly aware that matrimony would prevent Abelard from further advancements in his academic career and thereby cause the decline of his reputation as the greatest medieval philosopher. Although it may have seemed as if Heloise had only Abelard's best interest in mind when she cited classical and scriptural examples to buttress her argument against marriage, one wonders if subconsciously she feared for his becoming mediocre for her own sake. After all, would Heloise retain her social status as the woman envied by all, if Abelard were to fall from grace as a result of the banality of matrimony?

⁵¹ McLeod, 68.

Chapter V. Christian Imperatives

Sentimentally educated with Ovidian sensuality and living in a patriarchal feudal age, Heloise and Abelard were also swept in the tide of Christian imperatives. In this chapter and the next, I shall explore the issue of how a Christian culture, “obsessed with the problems of love and power,” shaped the “gendered voices of desire and authority”⁵²

First of all, as part of the elite intelligentsia in the Middle Ages, how did Heloise and Abelard view religion as a whole? Passages in their letters and other writings indicate that while both believed in God, neither accepted all of the teachings and preaching of the Church unquestioningly. As Elisabeth Hamilton points out, Abelard did not aim to challenge the authority of the Church or to contradict Biblical revelations with his dialectic. He intended, however, to support the Church’s authority with the “buttresses of reason.”⁵³ Abelard in principal accepted the words of the scriptures and the testimony of the Church fathers as true, but believed that reason must be used to clarify vagueness and resolve contradictions within sacred texts, in order to solidify the texts’ claim to truth.

Some of Abelard’s works reflect his intention to support the Church’s authority with reason, while others proclaim his Christian faith to those suspicious of his true intentions. In *Sic et non*, he presented 158 instances of problematic texts and offered no conclusion. The work is in fact a “teaching manual” designed to “sharpen the wits of his

⁵² Calabrese, 1.

⁵³ Elisabeth Hamilton, *Héloïse* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967), 27.

young readers and incite them to seek for the truth.”⁵⁴ In his *Confession of Faith*,

Abelard defends his faith against those accusing him of heresy:

... logic has made me hated by the world. For the perverted, who seek to pervert and whose wisdom is only for destruction, say that I am supreme as a logician, but am found wanting in my understanding of Paul. They proclaim the brilliance of my intellect but detract from the purity of my Christian faith. . . I do not wish to be a philosopher if it means conflicting with Paul, nor to be an Aristotle if it cuts me off from Christ. For there is no other name under heaven whereby I must be saved. I adore Christ who sits on the right hand of the Father.⁵⁵

While Abelard strived to brace scriptural truth with reason, Heloise questioned the sincerity of many who claimed to be the followers of God. By pointing out the inconsistency between her outward display of piety and her inner lack of repentance, she brings attention to the prevalent hypocrisy among many contemporary Christians.

She writes in her polemic to Abelard:

Men call me chaste; they do not know the hypocrite I am. They consider purity of the flesh a virtue, though virtue belongs not to the body but to the soul. I can win praise in the eyes of men but deserve none before God, who searches our hearts and loins and sees in our darkness. I am judged religious at a time when there is little in religion which is not hypocrisy, when whoever does not offend the opinions of men receives the highest praise. (133-134)

Heloise accuses herself of being a hypocrite to expose the hypocrisy of religion, to show how misleading appearances can be. Throughout her letters, she frankly confesses her weakness of the flesh and her inability or even reluctance to appease the Lord. Unlike

⁵⁴ Radice, 37.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 270.

those who disguise sinful intentions under outward display of piousness, she willingly exposes her true intentions to show her disdain for false repentance.⁵⁶

Moreover, passages from Heloise's letters suggest that she may not have believed in the Christian God as the sole higher power that exercised control over her destiny. Her admission of wanting to please Abelard and not God borders on pagan idolatry, while her personification of "Fortune" as a vengeful woman invokes the classic notion of polytheism.⁵⁷ Consider the following passages:

At every stage of my life up to now, as God knows, I have feared to offend you rather than God, and tried to please you more than him. (134)

O Fortune who is only ill-fortune, who has already spent on me so many of the shafts she uses in her battle against mankind that she has none left with which to vent her anger on others. She has emptied a full quiver on me, so that henceforth no one else need fear her onslaughts, and if she still had a single arrow she could find no place in me to take a wound. (129)

Christian or pagan in spirit, one thing stands supreme for Heloise—substance takes precedence over form, and one who honestly admits his or her weakness is holier than one who disguises impure intentions with a semblance of devotion. She refused to become a hypocrite who offers untruthful penitence, and willingly accepted any

⁵⁶ Heloise quotes scriptural references to justify her disdain for feigned repentance. She writes, "... when the saintly Job said 'I will speak out against myself,' that is, 'I will loose my tongue and open my mouth in confession to accuse myself of my sins,' he added at once 'I will speak out in bitterness of soul.' St Gregory comments on this: 'There are some who confess their faults aloud but in doing so do not know how to groan over them – they speak cheerfully of what should be lamented. And so whoever hates his faults and confesses them must still confess them in bitterness of spirit, so that this bitterness may punish him for what his tongue, at his mind's bidding, accuses him.' " Radice, 132.

⁵⁷ Like Heloise, Abelard also blamed "fortune" for his fate. He writes in *Historia calamitatum*, "Perverse Fortune flattered me, as the saying goes, and found an easy way to bring me toppling down from my pedestal, . . ." Radice, 66.

consequence stemming from her refusal. Moreover, she believed that God would eventually reward her honesty by granting her a place in heaven. She writes:

I do not want you to exhort me to virtue and summon me to the fight, saying 'Power comes to its full strength in weakness' and 'He cannot win a crown unless he has kept the rules.' I do not seek a crown of glory. . . In whatever corner of heaven God shall place me, I shall be satisfied. (135-136)

Curiously, in his attempt to buttress holy texts with reason and her contempt for the artificiality of religion, both Abelard and Heloise nonetheless accepted without question the Church's view that intercourse is for procreation and not for pleasure.⁵⁸ This does not mean that they embraced the ascetic teachings of the Church fathers and succeeded in renouncing carnal relations, as their love affair proves to the contrary. However, they internalized the Christian guilt associated with carnal pleasure, and to varying degrees acquiesced to their fate as just punishment for their "unlawful" affair—fornication and therefore not sanctioned by God. In recalling his physical relationship with Heloise, Abelard uses the morally judgmental phrases "wretched pleasures," and "wanton vileness of our former ways" to depict their past (153). Heloise displays some ambivalence and uses both positive terms such as "sweet" and "delightful," as well as negative ones such as "wanton" and "lewd" to describe the sexual pleasures they once shared (133).⁵⁹

⁵⁸ The Church forbids intercourse even between married couples during Lent, the Passion, and on the vigils of the major feasts. Radice, 147, n 2.

⁵⁹ Unlike the castrated Abelard who repents for his past sins, Heloise does not repent and longs for the pleasures they once shared. Curiously, at times she describes her past with Abelard using negative terms. Her ambivalence suggests the entrenchment of her Christian upbringing. That is, she may openly refuse to repent, but deep down she is ingrained to feel guilty for their fornication.

In my readings, I found no evidence of Heloise and Abelard's having questioned the Church's authority on how one should regard sexuality. Neither of them asked why sexual pleasure was sinful. Neither hinted at the possibility that the Church condemned sexual pleasure in order to control its subjects—human beings programmed by nature to seek pleasure. Obsessed with power, the Church set out to bring one of the most basic human drives under its command. By condemning pleasure as sin and associating it with the devil, the Church instilled in its followers a fear of damnation, which manifested itself in the form of guilt during pleasurable sexual acts.

However, as sexual urges are dictated by nature, the Church in all its might could not stamp out human desire entirely. Doing so would be unwise as copulation is essential for the propagation of the human species. Thus, the Church sanctioned the institution of marriage to legitimize human sexuality and, in the process, ostensibly succeeded in bringing human sexual activities under its surveillance. In other words, one needed to register with the Church and obtain a marriage license in order to practice “lawful” copulation. Once this most primal human behavior was under its control, the Church could then proceed to regulate other aspects of human behavior.

I am not arguing that all medieval Christians heeded the Church's authority and engaged only in marital sex. In fact, illicit affairs abounded and even Popes kept concubines. However, the Church was successful in making all Christians aware of its stand against fornication. Those who knowingly transgressed Christian laws regarding fornication may have disregarded the Church's authority in this matter, but they knew without a doubt that they had sinned in the eyes of the Church. In this sense, they

recognized the Church's authority on sexuality regardless of their actual behavior.

Moreover, where laws failed as a regulating force on carnal desires, guilt would often function as the Church's primary means of keeping this basic human instinct in check.

Even in its legitimized form, intercourse was for the purpose of procreation only and married couples who took pleasure in their physical union transgressed the laws of marriage. The Church forbade its followers to wallow in "the filth inherent in carnal pleasure" or to develop "the frenzy of the impassioned soul."⁶⁰ A wife must not develop emotional attachments to her husband, for her soul belonged to God. She had indeed two husbands, one on earth and one in heaven. Her body was at the disposal of her earthly husband, but she must not take pleasure in copulation. The husband, on the other hand, had only one wife whose body he possessed but whose soul belonged to God and not to him.⁶¹ Duby states:

Thus the self was divided in two in marriage, but only for the female partner. It was forbidden to imagine that, in the heavenly sphere, a man might have another companion to whom he remained . . . spiritually attached during the sexual act. For a man only ever has one wife. He had to take her as she was, frigid in the acquittal of her debt, and he was forbidden to arouse her.⁶²

The imposition of female dichotomy in marriage and prohibition of emotional bonds between husband and wife indicate that the Church sanctioned marriage only to legitimize intercourse and not to promote marital bliss. In fact, the Church fathers warned of the perils of marriage and depicted the yoke of matrimony as a burden. As quoted by Abelard, St. Paul states, "...those who marry will have pain and grief in this

⁶⁰ Duby, *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, 11.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶² *Ibid.*

bodily life, and my aim is to spare you,” and “I want you to be free from anxious care.”⁶³

Duby suggests that Christian asceticism and Roman heritage both led the Church to condemn marriage, even if it was a necessary institution in the legitimization of the weakness of the flesh. He comments:

The whole ascetic, monastic side of the Christian Church, everything that led it to disdain and reject the world, as well as everything that, in the cultural baggage which it inherited from Rome, related its thinking to the philosophies of antiquity, led the Church to condemn marriage. It was criticized as a blemish, a source of disturbance for the soul, an obstacle to contemplation. . .⁶⁴

As Barry points out, marriage as a religious institution was a relatively new concept during the time of Heloise and Abelard. Elisabeth Freeman concurs on this by stating that the Church had not yet “succeeded in bringing all of the marriages within its purview.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, although a Paulian celibacy was preached for the clergy and marriage was forbidden by Pope Gregory VII shortly before Abelard arrived in Paris, the practice of marriage among clergy nonetheless lingered in France until well into the thirteenth century.⁶⁶

Scholars express divided opinions on whether Abelard was already ordained as a priest at the time of his affair with Heloise. Barry states that Abelard was only a clerk or *clericus*, while Betty Radice and other scholars cast doubts on Abelard’s true status at this time. A clerk was allowed to marry, while the regular clergy was technically forbidden to take wives. However, as mentioned above, marriage was still in practice

⁶³ Corinthians vii, 27, 28, 32. Radice, 71, n 1.

⁶⁴ Duby, *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, 10.

⁶⁵ Elisabeth Freeman, “The Public and Private Functions of Heloise’s Letters,” *Journal of Medieval History*, 23:1 (1997: 15-28), 16.

⁶⁶ Barry, 6.

among priests and even a few bishops. Regardless of Abelard's exact status in the religious order, marriage would have certainly impeded his further advancement in Church circles, which provided the only venue for a scholastic career in the Middle Ages. Moreover, celibacy was expected of someone in Abelard's position and he would be deemed unworthy by marrying.⁶⁷

Concerned with his "higher calling," Abelard proposed to Fulbert a clandestine marriage with Heloise, as reparation for having seduced her and thus betrayed Fulbert under his roof. However, as marriage was becoming a religious institution in addition to being a feudal contract, Abelard's plan was ill-conceived. Both the religious and secular models of marriage demanded openness and public ceremony, so as to demonstrate the regulating forces of Christian authority and feudal code at work. In other words, public ceremonies served as models of proper Christian marriages to those yet unmarried, and reminded them of the Church's authority in this matter. All of this helped the Church in its endeavor to bring all marriages within its purview, and to impose on its followers the notion of marriage as the only legitimization of sexual intercourse.

⁶⁷ Radice, 70.

Chapter VI. Medieval Misogyny

In an attempt to control human sexuality, the Church denounced carnal pleasure as sinful, in order to instill fear in the Church's followers and to foster obedience to Church rules regarding intercourse and marriage. The denouncement of carnal pleasure as sin subsequently led the Church fathers to view women as temptresses and agents of the devil, who bring about the downfall of men. Patriarchal Western society has traditionally associated the female body with carnal pleasures. With pleasures being condemned by the Church, the objective representation of male desire was thus made responsible for arousing this desire and guilty for the transgressions of men. As Eve who tempted Adam and precipitated his fall from grace, all of the daughters of Eve are born guilty of this original sin and therefore capable of leading men astray. Consider the following scriptural warnings regarding women, as quoted by Abelard and Heloise in their letters:

Women make even the wise forsake their faith.⁶⁸

. . . my son, listen to me, attend to what I say: do not let your heart entice you into her ways, do not stray down her paths; she has wounded and laid low so many, and the strongest have all been her victims. Her house is the way to hell, and leads down to the halls of death.⁶⁹

I put all to the test . . . I find woman more bitter than death; she is a snare, her heart a net, her arms are chains. He who is pleasing to God eludes her, but the sinner is her captive.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ecclesiasticus xix, 2. Radice, 150, n 1.

⁶⁹ Proverbs vii, 24-7. Ibid., 131, n 1.

⁷⁰ Ecclesiastes vii, 26. Ibid., 130, n 1.

In addition to being the incarnation of sinful pleasures and agents of devil, women were also considered the weaker sex in terms of moral strength and the control of one's sexual desires. That is, the Church fathers not only held women guilty for the transgressions of men, they also regarded women as naturally depraved beings governed by voracious sexual appetites. The Christian cleric Andreas Capellanus depicts women as irrational, envious, fickle, deceitful and lustful in his book 3 of *De Amore*:

The female sex is likewise disposed to every evil. Every woman fearlessly commits every major sin in the world on a slender pretext, and her mind readily bends to every evil under slight pressure from anyone.⁷¹

Other medieval works of literature reflect this Christian view on women as well. In *Perceval*, Chrétien de Troyes depicts woman as the weaker sex, lacking the ability to restrain her libido:

Seule, enfermée dans sa chambre, [Blanchefleur] ne peut dormir. Que le garçon repose à l'aise! Elle, faible femme, songe, livrée au combat qui se fait en elle: elle en sursaute et tourne et vire et se démène. Soudain elle jette sur sa chemise un mantelet de soie écarlate, court hardiment à l'aventure.⁷²

In *Les Continuations de Perceval*, Blanchefleur's uncontrollable desires lead her to offer herself to Perceval:

Elle soulève la couverture et elle se met tout contre lui. « Mon doux ami, mon doux ami, ne tenez à folie ni à vilenie que je vous offre mon amour. Je vous désire trop vivement et vous devez savoir que je n'aurai jamais d'époux afin de vous appartenir. »⁷³

⁷¹ Andreas Capellanus, *Andreas Capellanus on Love*, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh (London, 1982), 318-319.

⁷² Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval ou le Roman du Graal*, trans. et notes, Jean-Pierre Foucner et André Ortais (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 69.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 241.

Such view on women as beings governed by sexual desires persisted well into the late twelfth century and beyond. For example, in *Aucassin and Nicolette*, the author portrays men as spiritual beings who love with their hearts and women as earthly beings who love with their bodies. Aucassin tells Nicolette:

La femme ne peut aimer l'homme autant que l'homme aime la femme; car l'amour de la femme réside dans son oeil et tout au bout de son sein et tout au bout de son orteil, mais l'amour de l'homme est planté au fond de son cœur d'où il ne peut s'en aller.⁷⁴

Some may argue that courtly love, which emerged in the mid-twelfth century, elevated woman's status and placed her on the pedestal. However, I see the whole concept of courtly love as the male author's solution to strip woman of her supposedly "excessive" sexual desires. Similar to female characters in other genres of medieval literature, the lady in courtly love literature remains an object of desire defined by her relationship to man and by gender-specific attributes. Moreover, she is still very much a textual object constructed by the masculine discourse, a stereotype that shows essentially the same qualities from poem to poem. Referring to Bernart de Ventadour's "*Can vei la lauzeta mover*," Gaunt writes:

"Can vei' . . .," though a love song, is less about a relationship between a man and a woman than a man's attempt to elaborate his own subjectivity through his relation to a construction of femininity within a fiction of his own creation.⁷⁵

Consider also the following commentary from Germaine Greer's book entitled *The Female Eunuch*, which aptly describes the lady in courtly love literature:

⁷⁴ *Aucassin et Nicolette*, ed. Jean Dufournet (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1984), 85-86.

⁷⁵ Gaunt, 131.

The stereotype is the Eternal Feminine. She is the Sexual Object sought by all men, and by all women. She is of neither sex, for she has herself no sex at all. Her value is solely attested by the demand she excites in others. All she must contribute is her existence . . . virtue is assumed from her loveliness, and her passivity . . . There are stringent limits to the variations on the stereotype, for nothing must interfere with her function as sex object.⁷⁶

Moreover, a close reading of Bernart de Ventadour's famous poem reveals the same mistrust toward women and the misogynistic overtone present in Andreas Capellanus' writings. The troubadour poet writes:

Je ne me fierai plus aux femmes;
Et je désespère de toutes :
Si je les exaltais, naguère,
Ores, je les rabaisserai.
Je vois bien qu'aucune ne m'aide ;
Quand l'une me détruit et tue
Je m'en défie et le crains toutes
Car je les sais toutes pareilles.
Sur ce point ma Dame est bien femme
Et c'est ce que je lui reproche :
Ce qu'on doit vouloir, ne le veut
Ne fait que ce qu'on lui défend . . .

Recall that Capellanus depicts women as irrational, envious, fickle, deceitful and lustful in book 3 of *De Amore*. Here Bernart de Ventadour describes them as fickle, unsympathetic, destructive, irrational and rebellious. He may have begun the poem by placing his lady on the pedestal, but by the end of the poem his songs of exaltation degenerate into rants of misogyny.

It must be noted, however, that the medieval attitude toward women originated with the Church fathers and not with Christ. In fact, Christ declared both sexes equal in dignity, and gave both sexes authority for a monastic calling. Moreover, He granted

⁷⁶ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Paladin, 1993), 67-68.

women, who had been among the favored of His followers, equality with men in the religious order. St. Paul, however, declared women equal to men in the order of God's grace, where there is no sex; but subordinate to men in the order of nature, which included the visible Church and society. In other words, men and women according to St. Paul are "equal in heaven but not on earth."⁷⁷

To understand why St. Paul disregarded the evangelical egalitarianism of Christ, it is necessary to examine the differences between Christ and St. Paul. As depicted in scriptural references, Christ the Son of God did not have sexual relations with women, despite his being surrounded by a considerable number of female followers. Without desires, Christ did not seek pleasure and therefore was not subject to temptation. He regarded women with compassion for they were harmless to him. St. Paul, on the other hand, was an earthly man with libido, who was subject to temptation even if he preached abstinence. For him to resist temptation, he had to alienate himself both physically and mentally from women, whose power of temptation threatened his ability to stay chaste. In his attempt to resist women, he associated them with the devil, and the association in turn allowed him to develop feelings of repugnance. My question is, how could the same women be harmless to Christ and threatening to St. Paul? Would St. Paul have looked upon women as agents of the devil if he experienced no desires and was not subject to temptation? I would argue that the answer is "no." Therefore, St. Paul's misogynistic attitude had nothing to do with whether women were evil temptresses. It developed purely out of his fear and his need for self-preservation.

⁷⁷ Barry, 24. This entire paragraph is a paraphrase of Barry's text on the page cited.

According to the Church, even in marriages men are subject to the evils of women, who bring their husbands to ruin. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Christian asceticism and Roman heritage both led the Church to condemn marriage. St. Paul warned his apostles of the perils of marriage and urged them to remain celibate. The Bible provides ample examples of wise and holy men destroyed by their wives, including Adam, Samson, Solomon, David and Job.

To what extent did Christian antifeminism influence the gendered attitudes and voices of Abelard and Heloise? Abelard's writings reveal that he subscribed to St. Paul's doctrine of the two sexes being equal in heaven but not on earth. He urges Heloise to forsake her earthly desires and to be thankful for the fact that as a woman in the sacred order, she is given the chance to rise above her earthly sisters and to rise even above men in the eyes of God:

How great an interest the talent of your own wisdom pays daily to the Lord in the many spiritual daughters you have borne for him . . . What a hateful loss and grievous misfortune if you had given yourself to the degradation of carnal pleasure only to give birth in pain to a few children for the world when now you foster so many offspring in exultation for heaven! Nor would you have been anything more than a woman, you who now rise even above men and have transformed the curse of Eve into the blessing of Mary. (150)

In line with the Church's view that women are not only inferior to men but also bring about their downfall, Abelard claimed that he too had been brought to ruin by a woman. In the following passage, Abelard describes his making amends with Fulbert. Although he begs forgiveness for his betrayal, he assumes no responsibility for his treachery and maintains that his conduct is indeed nothing unusual for a man in love:

In the end I took pity on [Fulbert's] boundless misery and went to him, accusing myself of the deceit love had made me commit as if it were the basest treachery. I begged his forgiveness and promised to make any amends he might think fit. I protested that I had done nothing unusual in the eyes of anyone who had known the power of love, and recalled how since the beginning of the human race women had brought the noblest men to ruin.
(70)

Abelard's words seem to suggest that the power of love applied to men and not to women. According to the passage above, Abelard believes that women bring the noblest men to ruin. Notice he makes no statement on how the power of love may also enable men to bring the noblest women to ruin.

It is ironic that as a woman, Heloise shows no objection to the Church's harsh views on women. In fact, she accepts what she had been schooled to be, and in the process becomes an "eloquent advocate of the system denigrating the female sex."⁷⁸ Her writings reveal her belief that she was born guilty, simply because of her gender. Indeed, Heloise was very much indoctrinated by both her classical education and her Christian heritage. In her protests against Abelard's marriage proposal, she quoted both classical and scriptural references and advocated celibacy as the ideal for the man devoted to learning and to religion. Even though she married Abelard against her will, she nevertheless blamed herself for his castration, which occurred after their marriage.

Consider the following passage from her letter to Abelard:

It was the first woman in the beginning who lured man from Paradise, and she who had been created by the Lord as his

⁷⁸ Ibid., 10. Barry asks, ". . . were less educated women less indoctrinated, less impressed, despite the great reach of the Church?" As Noam Chomsky points out in *Chronicles of Dissent*, since education is a form of indoctrination, the educated class is subject to a constant flow of propaganda and becomes the instrument of propaganda. The basic principles of the ideological system in any society are therefore most deeply entrenched in and least critically examined by the educated elite.

helpmate became the instrument of his total downfall...What misery for me – born as I was to be the cause of such a crime! Is it the general lot of women to bring total ruin on great men? (131)

On her way to the altar to receive her veil, Heloise quoted Cornelia's famous lament:

O noble husband,
Too great for me to wed, was it my fate
To bend that lofty head? What prompted me
To marry you and bring about your fall?
Now claim your due, and see me gladly pay. . . (77)

Not only did Heloise deem herself guilty of Abelard's downfall by going through with the marriage, she also looked upon other women with suspicion. Her studies of scriptural texts indeed turned her against her own kind and made her an advocate of the Church's misogynistic views. For instance, in one of her letters to Abelard, she asks him for directions on whether nuns should dine with visitors to the convent. As gluttony and drunkenness provide opportunities for fornication and lechery, nuns should therefore never entertain their male guests at the table, Heloise argues while quoting St. Jerome and Ovid.⁷⁹ But how about the female visitors? Remark how Heloise poses this question to Abelard:

And even if [the nuns] admit to their table only women to whom they have given hospitality, is there no lurking danger there? Surely nothing is so conducive to a woman's seduction as woman's flattery, nor does a woman pass on the foulness of a corrupted mind so readily to any but another woman; which is why St. Jerome particularly exhorts women of a sacred calling to avoid contact with women of the world. (161)

In spite of herself being a woman, Heloise mistrusted women as did the Church fathers. She not only accepted without objection the misogynistic views of the Church, she even

⁷⁹ Radice, 160.

sided with her adversaries in applying these views upon her fellow women. Barry sums up the indoctrination of Abelard and Heloise as follows:

Despite [Christ's] egalitarian point of view, this "evangelical feminism," traced to the most impeccable of sources, Abelard did not escape the enduring ambivalence of Christian practice (any more than Heloise) – that is, the inconsistency verging on contradiction between the teaching and behavior of Christ regarding women and the denigrating antifeminism of the Church fathers.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Barry, 24.

Chapter VII. The Self-Defense of Heloise

One of the reasons why the letters of Heloise and Abelard have generated so much controversy has to do with Heloise's declaration that she would rather be Abelard's whore than his wife. Scholars such as Father Joseph Muckle and Durant Robertson have long chided Heloise for openly defying the sanctity of marriage. Moreover, they view her opting for the role of whore over wife as evidence of moral defect. Too absorbed in passing moral judgments, those who "disapprove" of Heloise's choices fail to see that she opposed matrimony partly in self-defense against misogyny.⁸¹ Heloise might not have challenged the belief that women brought great men to ruin through marriage. However, she did not wait passively for the antifeminists' condemnation to befall her. Indeed, her opposition to Abelard's marriage proposal provided the only escape from her fate as the "daughter of Eve."⁸²

Well-versed in classics and scriptural texts, Heloise was mindful that both the eminent philosophers of antiquity and the early Church fathers shunned marriage, for they believed that the emotional entanglements and the base servitude of married life detracted the man of learning and the man of God from his true calling. While classical texts furnished examples of the wise made a spectacle by his wife, scriptural references

⁸¹ As I have discussed previously, Heloise rejected Abelard's marriage proposal on several grounds, which included her preference for a love born of free will and her concern for the future of Abelard's academic career within Church circles.

⁸² As I have stated in the beginning of Chapter VI, like Eve who tempted Adam and precipitated his fall from grace, all of the daughters of Eve are presumably born guilty of this original sin and therefore capable of leading men astray. I use the term "daughter of Eve" to refer to Heloise's fate as predestined by her gender. That is, she is presumed to be born with the capability to seduce men and makethem err. See page 34 for Heloise's self-comparison to Eve.

provided a whole catalog of wicked wives who brought their husbands to ruin. Heloise deftly cites these references in her letters to demonstrate her awareness of the imperatives that shaped medieval attitudes toward women. She knew that by marrying Abelard, she would become yet another wicked wife who stands between a great man and his true vocation. Even though she eventually went along with Abelard's marriage proposal, the fact that she did so against her will set her apart from the other wives, and in her mind, exonerated her from the original sin associated with her gender. Consider the following passages from her letters:

Wholly guilty though I am, I am also, as you know, wholly innocent. It is not the deed but the intention of the doer which makes the crime, and justice should weigh not what was done but the spirit in which it is done. (115)

The cunning arch-tempter well knew from repeated experience that men are most easily brought to ruin through their wives, and so he directed his usual malice against us too, and attacked you by means of marriage when he could not destroy you through fornication. Denied the power to do evil through evil, he effected evil through good.

At least I thank God for this; the tempter did not prevail on me to do wrong of my own consent, like the women I have mentioned, though in the outcome he made me the instrument of his malice. (131)

Heloise was not the feminist fighting to vindicate all womankind. Indoctrinated by her Christian education, she even regarded her fellow women with the same suspicions as did the Church fathers. Her purpose was to extract herself from the guilty lot and to reclaim for herself that innocence robbed of all women by misogynists. Knowing that antifeminists blamed wives for ruining their great husbands, how could Heloise possibly allow herself to follow the footsteps of those who became evil wives? Therefore, she would rather be Abelard's whore than his wife, and willingly took second

place to his studies so as not to jeopardize his career. What Heloise envisioned was a relationship with Abelard based on love and not wedlock. They were to see each other occasionally, thus allowing Abelard time for his studies. Their carnal pleasures would be all the more delightful, as their desires would be intensified by the infrequency of their erotic encounters. In Robertson's words, what Heloise envisioned was for Abelard's sake a situation analogous to "having one's cake and eating it too."⁸³

Recall also that Heloise detested hypocrisy and was more concerned with true intentions. With medieval marriages being contractual agreements, a man and a woman entered into matrimony rarely for love. In her letters, Heloise argues that a wife who marries a husband for his riches is in reality a prostitute, whose hypocrisy makes her even more dishonorable than a whore. She writes:

God is my witness that if Augustus, Emperor of the whole world, thought fit to honour me with marriage and conferred all the earth on me to possess for ever, it would be dearer and more honourable to me to be called not his Empress but your whore.

For a man's worth does not rest on his wealth or power; these depend on fortune, but worth on his merits. And a woman should realize that if she marries a rich man more readily than a poor one, and desires her husband more for his possessions than for himself, she is offering herself for sale. Certainly any woman who comes to marry through desires of this kind deserves wages, not gratitude, for clearly her mind is on the man's property, not himself, and she would be ready to prostitute herself to a richer man, if she could. (114)

Indeed, the terms "wife" and "whore" are merely linguistic signs whose meanings are artificial and slippery. The connotations of "honor" and "dishonor" traditionally

⁸³ Durant W. Roberson, *Abelard and Heloise* (New York: Dial Press, 1972), 53.

associated with “wife” and “whore” meant little to Heloise, who believed in inner intentions over outward appearances. Freeman comments:

Traditional binary opposites were of little importance to Heloise, as demonstrated by her rejection of the standard hierarchy of married woman over whore. This rejection is evidence that Heloise formulated her own beliefs concerning the relative merits of public approval and private integrity.⁸⁴

Despite her opposition to Abelard’s proposal, Heloise did enter into the ill-fated marriage and to a certain extent held herself accountable for Abelard’s disgrace. It is curious that Heloise considered herself both “wholly guilty” and “wholly innocent” with regard to Abelard’s castration. On the one hand, she blamed herself for unwittingly becoming an instrument through which the devil effected malice on Abelard. On the other hand, she maintained her innocence by pointing out that Abelard was the one who forced her into wedlock. Heloise’s mixed feelings about her responsibility reflect two forces at work against each other, that of her deeply entrenched indoctrination and that of her determined resolve to rise above the guilty lot and to escape her destiny. Moreover, Heloise cites the Biblical catalog of guilty wives not to incriminate herself but to prove her innocence. After all, she did consciously steer away from the footsteps of the Biblical wives. It was Abelard who seduced her and forced her into matrimony. She did not tempt him nor consent to the marriage. McLeod makes the following comment concerning the function of the wicked wives in Heloise’s rhetoric:

Heloise’s catalog of wicked wives suggests an interesting interweaving of innocence and guilt in her self-concept... Ostensibly, the catalog responds to Abelard’s Biblical citations by aligning Heloise with infamous Biblical wives. Her situation, however, often seems closer to the husbands’, as her wording

⁸⁴ Freeman, 24.

suggests. Like Adam, she was lured from paradise by her helpmate. Like Samson, she was led to self-destruction. Wise like Solomon, she was also driven “to ... a pitch of madness” ... that ended in a sort of idolatry, the substitution of Abelard for God as the object of her worship. Finally, like Job with whom she later equates herself in this letter, she is fighting her “last and hardest battle”... against her spouse who continually distracts her from God. In this marriage, Heloise claims, she too was destroyed.⁸⁵

One might ask then, how effective was Heloise’s strategy for self-defense against the onslaught of medieval misogyny? While she herself believed in her innocence, how did her contemporaries view her role in the downfall of Abelard? Consider this poem written by an anonymous contemporary of Heloise and Abelard:

... 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.⁸⁶

The poet appears sympathetic toward Heloise and pleads her case in much the same way Heloise proclaimed the absence of her wrongdoing. The reference to great men destroyed by women, however, reflects the poet’s Christian indoctrination and the prevalent medieval misogyny at work. That is, the poet’s sympathy is directed toward Heloise only and not meant for the entire female population. This further shows that Heloise’s strategy for self-defense against medieval misogyny proved effective. Moreover, extracting herself from the guilty lot seemed her only option, as challenging the Church’s misogynistic views on behalf of all womankind would have been indeed a formidable task, given the prevalence and entrenchment of such views at her time.

⁸⁵ McLeod, 73.

⁸⁶ This poetic testimony to Abelard and Heloise is from the final pages of a medieval exegetic manuscript at Orléans, copied by a hand of the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Dronke, 19.

Even if Heloise managed to eschew her fate as “Eve’s daughter” by differentiating herself from other women, her gender remained a fundamental part of her identity. While many of Heloise’s contemporaries praised her for her high degree of literary skills and her pursuit of knowledge, Heloise was always a woman first, then a scholar. Regarding Heloise’s devotion to learning, Peter the Venerable writes:

At a time when nearly the whole world is indifferent and deplorably apathetic towards such occupations, and wisdom can scarcely find a foothold not only, I may say, among women who have banished her completely, but even in the minds of men, you [Heloise] have surpassed all women in carrying out your purpose, and have gone further than almost every man.⁸⁷

From this letter, we know that Heloise’s contemporaries considered her intelligent but in the sense that she was an intelligent woman, who “even” surpassed men. In other words, those who praised Heloise believed that women were normally inferior to men, and patronized Heloise as a rare exception. Regardless of Heloise’s high reputation as a scholar, she remained nonetheless “intelligent for a woman.” She could never quite be like Abelard, who was simply a great philosopher and not a great “male” philosopher. No matter how hard Heloise tried to disassociate herself from the stereotypical traits associated with being a woman, her gender remained an integral part of her persona.

While scholars such as Muckle and Robertson reprimand Heloise for defying the sanctity of Christian marriage and for preferring to be a whore than a wife, other scholars lavishly praise Heloise for sacrificing or even annihilating herself out of love for Abelard. Jean de Meun, for instance, expresses admiration for Heloise in the *Roman de la Rose*, “I

⁸⁷ *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, ed. Giles Constable, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1967), vol. 1, 303-304 (Ep. 115 to Heloise).

do not believe, by my soul, that there's ever been such a woman since."⁸⁸ Like many scholars, Jean de Meun lauds Heloise for her willingness to self-destruct for love of Abelard. In comparison with Robertson, who flatly calls Heloise and Abelard's relationship a "sordid affair,"⁸⁹ Jean de Meun appears sympathetic and compassionate towards Heloise. However, scholars like Jean de Meun unwittingly perpetuate the inequality between men and women by exulting Heloise's self-sacrifice as a virtue that made her worthy of praise.

Indeed, neither Heloise's critics nor her admirers do her justice. Heloise did not do herself justice. Conditioned by culture to place the needs of her lover before her own and to play the role of martyr like a good Christian, Heloise destroyed herself for love of Abelard. My question is, why is her disregard for self-preservation worthy of praise? Why does no one think it foolish for Heloise to renounce the world at Abelard's command? If the situation had been reversed and Abelard destroyed himself for love of Heloise, would Jean de Meun have praised Abelard the same way he exulted Heloise, or would Abelard be considered a foolish man emasculated by a woman, another victim of the wicked wife so to speak?

The fact that Heloise garnered respect for her self-denial reflects the contemporary conflicting expectations placed on women. On the one hand, the Church viewed women as depraved beings and temptresses who bring men to ruin. Believed to be driven by voracious sexual appetites, women were considered the weaker sex who

⁸⁸ Jean de Meun, *Roman de la Rose*, ed. Felix Lecoy, 3 vols. (Paris: H. Champion, 1965), lines 8795-8796. The original text states, "Mes je ne croi mie, par m'ame, c'onques puis fus nule tel fame." Translation as appeared in Dronke, 28.

⁸⁹ Robertson, 54.

needed to be kept in place by men. Ironically, the Church also expected women to be the stronger sex when it comes to resisting temptations. As Calabrese points out, “Men seek pleasure; thus, by default, the burden of reason and temperance must fall on women.”⁹⁰ Women were thus guilty for tempting men, and equally culpable if they did not actively resist male seduction. Heloise clearly subscribed to this view as she held herself accountable for giving in to Abelard’s sexual advances. She writes:

But even if my conscience is clear through innocence, and no consent of mine makes me guilty of this crime, too many earlier sins were committed to allow me to be wholly free from guilt. I yielded long before to the pleasures of carnal desires, and merited then what I weep for now. (131-132)

Heloise apparently had no clue how futile her attempts would have been, had she indeed tried to resist Abelard. From Abelard we know that the situation was under his control and not hers. He recalls his glee upon realization of Fulbert’s gullibility:

[Fulbert] even gave me complete charge over the girl, so that I could devote all the leisure time left me by my school to teaching her by day and night, and if I found her idle I was to punish her severely. I was amazed by his simplicity – if he had entrusted a tender lamb to a ravening wolf it would not have surprised me more. In handing her over to me to punish as well as to teach, what else was he doing but giving me complete freedom to realize my desires, and providing an opportunity, even if I did not make use of it, for me to bend her to my will by threats and blows if persuasion failed? (67)

Even though Heloise did not resist Abelard in the beginning, there were times later on during their affair where she refused to have physical relations with him. Abelard apparently resorted to violence in order to have his way. He writes:

⁹⁰ Calabrese, 13.

Even when you were unwilling, resisted to the utmost of your power and tried to dissuade me, as yours was the weaker nature I often forced you to consent with threats and blows. (147)

In spite of her self-sacrifice and willingness to accuse herself of her sins, Heloise maintained that she was wholly guilty and wholly innocent. Having proven her innocence by differentiating herself from the wicked wives, she demanded reparations from Abelard, the man who seduced her, forced her into a marriage against her will, and then abandoned her to the cloister.

Chapter VIII. The Power Struggle

Even though Heloise readily renounced the world at Abelard's command, her self-sacrificing love was not unconditional. For all the tribulations she endured on his account, she demanded acknowledgement from Abelard and ultimately his love as compensation. Throughout her letters, she reminds him that she sacrificed for him and that he owes her as a result. Consider the following passages:

It was your command, not love of God which made me take the veil. Look at the unhappy life I lead, pitiable beyond any other, if in this world I must endure so much in vain, with no hope of future reward. (134)

. . . you must know that you are bound to me by an obligation which is all the greater for the further close tie of the marriage sacrament uniting us, and are the deeper in my debt because of the love I have always borne you, as everyone knows, a love which is beyond all bounds. (112-113)

Remember, I implore you, what I have done, and think how much you owe me. (117)

By depicting her love for Abelard as one beyond all bounds, Heloise skillfully augments his indebtedness to her by removing its limit.⁹¹ After all, how does one repay a debt if the debt is without limits? One may further argue that Heloise's motives for self-sacrifice were not exactly pure. She herself writes that she expected gratitude from Abelard for her sacrifices:

I believe that the more I humbled myself on your account, the more gratitude I should win from you, and also the less damage I should do to the brightness of your reputation. (113)

⁹¹ Kamuf, 12.

As discussed earlier, Heloise treasured her social status as the woman desired by Abelard, considered by many to be the greatest philosopher and poet of their time. After all, to be loved by Abelard was for Heloise priceless. In order to win his priceless love, she needed to shower him with a boundless love, proven by limitless self-sacrifice on her part.

In addition to her highly coveted status as the woman desired by the greatest man, Heloise also sought Abelard's love in order to be his equal, if not to exercise control over him. From the psychoanalytic point of view, love and power have always been inseparable, since being loved empowers the beloved. As lovers feed on the euphoria of being loved, to have power over one's partner in love is essential in ensuring the continuation of such pleasurable feelings. Thus, in every love affair exists a power struggle between the lovers to appropriate each other, however subtle or overt the struggle may be. Yet the appropriation cannot be forced, for an involuntary love does not empower nor render the beloved worthy. Sartre explains it as follows:

The lover does not desire to possess the beloved as one possesses a thing; he demands a special type of appropriation. He wants to possess a freedom as freedom. . . He wants to be loved by a freedom but demands that this freedom should no longer be free. . . He wants this freedom to be captured by itself, to turn back upon itself, as in madness, as in a dream, so as to will its own captivity. This captivity must be a resignation that is both free and yet chained in our hands.⁹²

Abelard's pre-eminence made him clearly Heloise's master in the public sphere. Only in the private erotic realm of love and desire could Heloise possibly exercise power over him. However, in the case of Abelard and Heloise, his public mastery was an essential part of their affair. Abelard writes:

⁹² Sartre, 77.

To avert suspicion I sometimes struck [Heloise], but these blows were prompted by love and tender feeling rather than anger and irritation, and were sweeter than any balm could be. (67-68)

Abelard's violence signaled and confirmed his public mastery over Heloise. At the same time, it provided the guise needed to shield their secret affair from public knowledge. For Heloise, it was necessary to feign submission to this public mastery in order to engage Abelard in the erotic sphere, where this mastery was temporarily interrupted. Moreover, violence also served as prelude to their erotic encounters and indeed functioned as an aphrodisiac.

In her letters to Abelard, Heloise endeavors to revive the past by recreating her feigned submission to Abelard's mastery. Her ultimate goal is to draw Abelard back into the erotic sphere, where the momentary interruption of his mastery allows her to gain control over him. Abelard, on the other hand, wants to sever their unstable erotic past and focus on the present. His program is "to dissociate Heloise's submission from its function as mask for the erotic scene and to reinsert it in a stabilized relation to another's will."⁹³

The salutations in their letters clearly reveal two agendas at work against each other. Consider how Heloise addresses Abelard in her first letter:

To her master, or rather her father, husband or rather brother;
handmaid, or rather his daughter, wife or rather sister; to
Abelard, Heloise. (109)

⁹³ Kamuf, 37.

For Heloise, her present situation as the sister of Abelard the monk is but a part of their multi-faceted relationship.⁹⁴ She experiences time as a continuum and her past is interwoven with her present. By placing Abelard's name before hers in so many different ways, Heloise attempts to keep the fiction of his mastery alive, thereby "to create a backstage for her desire within the public theater of its denial or subjection."⁹⁵

Medieval epistolary conventions stipulate that the precedence in order of address follows precedence in rank.⁹⁶ Abelard, however, purposely breaks this rule and places Heloise's name before his in his letters. Here is how he addresses her in letter II:

To the bride of Christ, Christ's servant (137)

Unlike Heloise, who experiences time as a continuum, Abelard ignores their past and acknowledges only the current aspect of their relationship. He argues that Heloise, as bride of Christ, should precede him, who is lower in rank as Christ's servant. Heloise counters his deliberate reversal of their ranks with the following in letter III:

To her only one after Christ, she who is his alone in Christ.
(127)

Again, Heloise tries to reestablish his public mastery over her. Abelard responds in letter IV by repeating his same salutation, despite Heloise's protests that he breaks the rules by placing her name before his.

While Heloise attempts to revive their unstable erotic past by superficially insisting on his public mastery over her, Abelard deftly retains his mastery over her by

⁹⁴ McLeod writes, "[Heloise's salutation] embraces the whole history of their acquaintance... The rapid changes in terms indicate her difficulties in defining their connection and her need to include all its aspects." McLeod, 65.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁹⁶ Radice, 127, n 1.

ostensibly asserting that she is superior to him in the religious order. Abelard's mutilation makes him a eunuch, by tradition a servant set to watch over another man's wives and concubines.⁹⁷ As a castrated monk, Abelard regards himself as the eunuch of Christ, who keeps His brides under surveillance. Even though Heloise enjoys a seemingly superior status as the bride of Christ, Abelard the servant of Christ still has the phallus and exercises control over her. Kamuf remarks:

[The eunuch servant] is the factor of order and the only man in the house whose power remains intact and "above suspicion" when brought into proximity with women. The masculine prerogative is thus best represented by the man without a sex, for the power conferred by the phallus is in its absence represented by the impotent delegate.⁹⁸

Abelard's objective has always been to possess Heloise. He forced her into marriage and again into the convent out of pure jealous possessiveness, as the thought of her being with another man was to him unbearable.⁹⁹ After his castration rendered him impotent to perform as a husband, Abelard did not relinquish his rights as husband to appropriate Heloise. The only way for him to continue his dominance over her was to force her to become the bride of Christ, and then to keep her locked up in the house of God. In other words, Abelard seeks to metamorphize Heloise's human desires into a spiritual love for the Christ.¹⁰⁰ By projecting the erotic encounter to a divine context and therefore out of the mundane world, Abelard manages to contain Heloise's desires and

⁹⁷ Abelard writes, "My present condition removes suspicion of evil-doing so completely from everyone's mind that men who wish to keep close watch on their wives employ eunuch, as sacred history tell us in the case of Esther and the other concubines of King Ahasuerus." Radice, 98.

⁹⁸ Kamuf, 43.

⁹⁹ Radice, 149.

¹⁰⁰ Abelard writes to Heloise, "To him, I beseech you, not to me, should be directed all your devotion, all your compassion, all your remorse...Mourn for your Savior and Redeemer, not for the seducer who defiled you, for the Master who died for you, not for the servant who lives and, indeed, for the first time is truly freed from death." Radice, 153.

can therefore proceed to assume his new role as God's eunuch servant.¹⁰¹ If Abelard can no longer be the greatest philosopher on earth, at least he is the trusted man of God. Either way he retains mastery over Heloise and keeps her out of reach of all other mortal males. Kauffman remarks:

. . . Abelard's motive was the same before and after his castration, for whether he wants Heloise to submit to him or to God, his desire is to appropriate her freedom and her consciousness.¹⁰²

...Abelard demanded Heloise's absolute subjection. He robs her of her youth, innocence, and freedom, but what he seems most to desire is something far more extreme: her self-willed enslavement. Of the many forms of tyranny encoded in the letters, this is perhaps the subtlest.¹⁰³

As Abelard himself admits in *Historia calamitatum*, it was "shame and confusion" in his remorse and misery rather than any "devout wish for conversion" that prompted him to seek shelter in the monastery, after his mutilation by Fulbert's men.¹⁰⁴ However, in his letters to Heloise, he rejoiced over his castration and embraced with exuberance his new role as God's eunuch servant. He writes:

By a wound [God] prevents death, he does not heal it; he thrusts in the steel to cut out the disease. He wounds the body and heals the soul; he makes to live what he should have destroyed, cuts out impurity to leave what is pure.

So when divine grace cleansed rather than deprived me of those vile members which from their practice of utmost indecency are called "the parts of shame" and *have no proper name of their own*, what else did it do but remove a foul imperfection in order to preserve perfect purity? (153)

¹⁰¹ Kamuf, 43.

¹⁰² Kauffman, 77.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 76.

¹⁰⁴ Radice, 76.

And so it was wholly just and merciful . . . for me to be reduced in that part of my body which was the seat of lust and the sole reason for those desires, so that I could increase in many ways; in order that this member should justly be punished for all its wrongdoings in us, expiate in suffering the sins committed for its amusements, and cut me off from the slough of filth in which I had been wholly immersed in mind as in body. Only thus could I become more fit to approach the holy altars, now that no contagion of carnal impurity would ever again call me from them. How mercifully did he want me to suffer so much only in that member, the privation of which would also further the salvation of my soul without defiling my body nor preventing any performance of my duties! (147-148)

Regarding his sex as the diseased, impure part of him that God mercifully removed to save his soul, Abelard is all too eager to sever whatever that was formerly connected with his “vile members.” As his mutilation rendered it impossible for him to continue living in the secular world, the monastic life becomes his only recourse. Abelard cannot afford to lose this recourse by contaminating his newfound purity with recollections of his “sinful” past with Heloise. Therefore, he condemns his own past in order to make a clean severance. Consider how he recalls the pleasures they once shared:

My love, which brought us both to sin, should be called lust, not love. I took my fill of my wretched pleasures in you, and this was the sum total of my love. (153)

After our marriage, when you were living in the cloister with the nuns at Argenteuil and I came one day to visit you privately, you know what my uncontrollable desire did with you there, actually in a corner of the refectory, since we had nowhere else to go. I repeat, you know how shamelessly we behaved on that occasion in so hallowed a place, dedicated to the most holy Virgin. (146)

Compare and contrast Abelard’s recollections with Heloise’s memories:

In my case the pleasures of lovers which we shared have been too sweet—they can never displease me, and can scarcely be banished from my thoughts. Wherever I turn they are always there before my eyes, bringing with them awakened longings and fantasies which will not even let me sleep. Even during the celebration of the Mass, when our prayers should be purer, lewd

visions of those pleasures take such a hold upon my unhappy soul that my thoughts are on their wantonness instead of on prayers. I should be groaning over the sins I have committed, but I can only sigh for what I have lost.

Everything we did and also the times and places are stamped on my heart along with your image, so that I live through it all again with you. Even in sleep I know no respite. Sometimes my thoughts are betrayed in a movement of my body, or they break out in an unguarded word. (131)

With regard to Abelard's castration, Heloise displays ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, she pities Abelard for the physical pain he suffered, and sighs for what she herself has lost through his mutilation. Due to her Christian indoctrination, she holds herself partially accountable for what he suffered. She writes:

You alone were punished though we were both to blame, and you paid all, though you had deserved less. . . (130)

. . . may I have strength to do proper penance, so that at least by long contrition I can make some amends for your pain from the wound inflicted on you, and what you suffered in the body for a time, I may suffer, as is right, throughout my life in contrition of mind, and thus make reparation to you at least, if not to God. (132)

On the other hand, Heloise agrees with Abelard that, though pitiable, his mutilation was in fact an act of mercy by God. After all, asks Heloise, which form of suffering is greater? A swift blow or a lingering agony? Although Heloise willingly took the veil at Abelard's bidding, she is miserable in the convent and blames him for the torments of her ceaseless desire:

Miserable creature that I am, who is there to rescue me out of the body doomed to this death? Would that in truth I could go on: 'The grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.' This grace, my dearest, came upon you unsought – a single wound of the body by freeing you from these torments and has healed many wounds in your soul. Where God may seem to you an adversary he has in fact proved himself kind: like an honest doctor who does not shrink from giving pain if it will bring about a cure. But for me,

youth and passion and experience of pleasures which were so delightful intensify the torments of the flesh and longings of desire, and the assault is the more overwhelming as the nature they attack is the weaker. (133)

In the early stages of their affair, letters functioned as the masked erotic scene for Heloise and Abelard, who skillfully crafted words of love to inflame and arouse each other. The two lovers also used written correspondence to keep their desires burning during their times of separation. Playing the role of the abandoned Ovidian heroine, Heloise turned the letter into a stage for her lamentation and revolt against the monastic life forced upon her by Abelard. In her discourse of desire, she attempts to lead Abelard back into the instability of their erotic past. She reminds him of how much he is indebted to her for all the sacrifices she made out of her boundless love. Abelard, however, counters Heloise's "discourse of desire" with his "poetics of castration."¹⁰⁵ Fearful of losing the only recourse left in life, the protected shelter offered by a monastic life, Abelard rejoices over his castration as a divine act of grace and embraces his new role as God's eunuch servant. Meanwhile, Abelard continues his dominance over Heloise the bride of Christ and keeps her under his surveillance, out of the reach of all mortal men.

¹⁰⁵ Barbara Newman, "Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloise," in *Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 9.

Chapter IX. Conclusion

François de La Rochefoucauld once said that “some people would never have been in love, had they never heard love talked about.”¹⁰⁶ Formulated, expressed and experienced through language, romantic love is indeed a “rational enterprise,”¹⁰⁷ even if it once existed as a natural instinct such as sex drive. Inseparably intertwined with love, language enables lovers to declare and arouse desire, in addition to serving as the channel through which culture, particularly in the form of love literature, dictates the “discourse of desire.”¹⁰⁸ Paradoxically, culture shapes the patterns of desire of the very beings who create it, thus forming an endless cycle where fiction and life mirror each other.

As human beings, Heloise and Abelard were products of culture and subject to its dictates. Their personal letters clearly manifest cultural influences on love, desire and gender inequality. While the unfolding of their love story exhibits fundamental characteristics of love and desire, the way they loved and related to each other conforms to the models of desire depicted in Ovid’s love stories, which the two lovers internalized through their readings. Furthermore, the age-old pattern of male dominance and female submissiveness in their relationship reflects classical, feudal and Christian attitudes toward gender relations and women in particular. Finally, Heloise’s construction of self-identity and her strategy of self-defense against misogyny show the ways in which, as a product of culture, Heloise both submitted to her indoctrination and attempted to rise

¹⁰⁶ Barthes, 136.

¹⁰⁷ Goodden, 5.

¹⁰⁸ See n 100.

above her fate by differentiating herself from other members of her gender. Abelard, on the other hand, in spite of being a brilliant logician who endeavored to buttress the Church's authority with reason, did not question the logic behind Christian misogyny as he assumed the dominant role in his relationship with Heloise.

Unlike textual characters constructed by an omniscient author, Heloise and Abelard were human beings whose genuine motives remain known only to themselves. Some of the contradictions or paradoxes in their letters can be attributed not only to the complexity of human emotions, but also to the sometimes conflicting ideologies of their generation. Neither the *Historia calamitatum* nor their personal letters provide unmediated access to their story. We can only attempt to understand their relationship by deciphering what is presented in their formalized epistles. In addition, by examining prevalent values of the twelfth century, we gain an understanding of the cultural background that shaped Heloise and Abelard, which provides probable explanations as to why they behaved as they did.

Being human beings ourselves, we are also subject to cultural influences, which affect the way we read and analyze texts.¹⁰⁹ No matter how objective we try to be, our perception is always filtered through subjectivity, which is basically a select subset of cultural values that matter the most to each one of us. Thus, the story of Heloise and Abelard takes on different meanings depending on the orientation of the reader. For

¹⁰⁹ Duby writes, "The position of medievalists is far less assured than that of ethnologists analyzing exotic societies, and even of writers on ancient history, since the culture which they are studying is to a large extent their own; it is hard for them to distance themselves sufficiently from this culture; despite themselves they remain prisoners of a ritual and of a value system which are not fundamentally different from those which they are studying and would like to demythologize; but they can easily discern only the exterior, its outer, public, formal appearance. Everything, or almost everything contained within this shell, all the private, lived experience, escapes them." *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, 4.

instance, moralists focus on Heloise's preference for being Abelard's whore rather than wife, feminists concentrate on gender inequality, and historians pay special attention to the events that served as a backdrop to the love story. Yet despite its varied significance, the love story of Heloise and Abelard has remained intriguing to readers throughout the centuries and continues to fascinate.

In my opinion, the timeless appeal of this love story stems from its ability to satisfy an interminable human curiosity for the dreadful and the private. Many men fear castration, as it signifies the end of one's sexuality and the loss of the full capacity to experience erotic pleasures. Paradoxically, human beings are drawn to what they fear and purge their anxiety by watching others experience what they dread the most. Reading about the castration of Abelard, therefore, provides an experience of catharsis analogous to that of watching a Greek tragedy. Due to the inherently intimate nature of love letters, the reader other than the addressee inevitably becomes a voyeur by reading the private thoughts of the others. In addition to satisfying human curiosity for the private, voyeurism—reading the love letters of others—also transforms the letters into fiction. As Homer Brown points out, “. . . to become Novel . . . letters must be read by someone other than the one to whom they are addressed. They must be Purloined.”¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Homer O. Brown, “The Errant Letter and the Whispering Gallery,” *Genre* 10 (1977), 583. Thomas Beebee also comments on the relationship between letters and the outside reader. He writes, “Epistolary fiction is a function rather than a thing; it arises when an outside, ‘real’ reader takes up the position of the fictional addressee: ‘A letter within a novel presupposes that the reader be on the outside.’ On the outside, and yet at the same time drawn into the fiction, made part of its events, by this process of displacement: ‘what I as a reader have before me . . . is a text addressed to someone else. It is the existence of the second person, whom I displace, that distinguishes my position as reader in epistolary fiction.’ ” Thomas Beebee, *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 8.

Once fictionalized, the historical personages of Heloise and Abelard become legends whose fame reaches mythical proportions, which generate further interest in their tale.

Finally, as suggested by Kamuf, we as readers have very little to work with in terms of reconstructing the story of Heloise and Abelard. Most of what we know about their relationship comes from *Historia calamitatum* and the transcribed and translated versions of their personal letters, whose authenticity remains debatable, since the original manuscripts have yet to be discovered. In the meantime, our ceaseless attempt to retrieve what is lost parallels the uncastratable feminine desire of Heloise. Kamuf writes:

What one can read today in order to re-member Heloise – to put back together her various parts – is, therefore, as dubiously authentic as the tomb at Père-Lachaise. All that survives for sure is the process of *translation*, that is, both “the removal of remains from one place to another” and the “turning from one language into another.” The name “Heloise” – in the epitaph on a grave, in the address of a letter – designates with certainty only this scattering and recuperation, uncovering and reburial of a remainder. In this process, no last word, no final resting place which does not leave something still to be said and exhumed. “Heloise,” thus, names both our desire to retrieve what is lost in translation, to construct a more complete monument to the remains, and the inevitable persistence, all the same, of that construction’s excess.¹¹¹

Thus, two open circuits of desire exist within and outside the letters. Within the letters, Heloise’s renunciation of pleasure fuels her desire with the lack of fulfillment. Beyond the letters, what has become lost through the extended process of transcription and translation blocks the readers’ access to what originally transpired between Heloise and Abelard. Like the lack of fulfillment that keeps Heloise’s circuit of desire open, the

¹¹¹ Kamuf, xiii-xiv.

inability to retrieve what is lost denies closure and consequently perpetuates the readers' desire to reconstruct the story.

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