Authority, authenticity, and the repression of Heloise

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In the annals of medieval scholarship, questions about the authenticity of sources are not rare. Few texts, however, have languished in the limbo of aporia as long as the letters of Heloise to Abelard. For two centuries now these three epistles have been subjected, not only to suspicion, but to the most persistent and stubborn assaults on their authenticity, as well as the most spirited defenses. Whole forests have been felled in the quarrel over Heloise’s writing, especially of the first two letters, which occupy a mere eleven pages in Muckle’s edition.¹ Yet still there is no consensus, for it is more than the solution of a textual crux, more even than entrenched academic pride, that is at stake. It is the very battle of the sexes, or what we are now pleased to call the “discourse of desire.” As Linda Kauffman has recently written, Heloise’s letters, like other epistolary texts that follow in their wake, “have aroused centuries of controversy concerning origins, authenticity, legitimacy, paternity,” for such texts raise a most dangerous question: “What does it mean to ‘write like a woman’?”²

In the unlikely event that my title has left any suspense, let me state my own parti pris at the outset. My intention in this article is twofold. First, I will try to dispatch once for all the old hypothesis that Abelard forged the letters of Heloise as part of a literary fiction. Then, after concluding this fervent but no doubt futile attempt, I will show how the same questions that have vexed the scholarly debate over Heloise—questions of authority, authenticity, and repression of the female voice—are precisely the questions that most vexed Heloise herself in her pious and amorous wars with Abelard. There is, in short, an uncanny resemblance between the debate about the text and the debate within the text.

What, Heloise asks herself as well as her beloved, is the authority for...

¹. For a history of earlier stages in the debate see Peter von Moos, Mittelalterforschung und Ideologiekritik: Der Gelehrtenstreit um Heloise (Munich: W. Fink, 1974).
her monastic conversatio, for the austere and undesired life that she chose "freely at his command"? What kind of authenticity, given her undisguised lack of vocation, could she possibly aspire to or attain in that life? And what yoke of repression could she bear to impose, more than a decade into the course, on all that still displeased Abelard and God—her desire and her anger, her memories, her words? To the chagrin of many readers, the answer to all of these questions seems to be "obedience to Abelard's will." Yet if Abelard's mastery appears complete when the correspondence ends—perhaps more complete than it ever was in fact—it has been yet more fully realized by certain latter-day interpreters. There are those for whom Heloise's letters are "authentic" only as part of Abelard's oeuvre; their authoritative word is Abelard's message of conversion; and the cost of this would-be redemption from the limbo of thirteenth-century forgery and eighteenth-century legend is not only the repression of Heloise's desire, but the complete obliteration of her voice.

I will try to show here that this "grotesque hypothesis" is grounded in a priori notions of what a medieval abbess could write, frank disapproval of what Heloise did write, and at times outright misogyny. Further, I want to demonstrate that the thesis of Heloise as Abelard's literary creature not only fails to resolve the textual problems it is invoked to explain, but creates new and ludicrous problems that have so far been neglected only because the proponents of this thesis have ruled whole realms of investigation out of court. Whatever the difficulties raised by Heloise as author, they are less troubling than the ones Abelard would pose if he were accepted as the fictive author of Heloise. Indeed, the sensual abbess who has proved unconvincing to some readers and scandalous to others should be far less repugnant than the priest/husband who could fraudulently paint such a portrait of his wife and spiritual daughter. Both Heloise and Abelard, I will argue, are historically as well as psychologically more plausible figures if we accept the least problematic hypothesis about them, namely that the letters we have are essentially theirs.

4. Evelyne Sullerot, Women on Love: Eight Centuries of Feminine Writing, trans. Helen Lane (London: Jill Norman, 1980), 42. The "grotesque hypothesis" is part of a widespread pattern, as Sullerot notes: "Evaluations of women's writings on love are subject to two very common biases: an indulgence that borders on infatuation, on the one hand, and on the other a thoroughly gothic skepticism, causing all texts attributed to women to be viewed as apocryphal, and in fact the handiwork of men" (41).
I. Refutatio hereticorum

Habitués of this debate will, of course, be quick to point out that not only Heloise’s letters but also those of Abelard have been challenged. In 1972, John Benton created a furor by positing that the whole correspondence was the collaborative effort of two thirteenth-century forgers, who eased their burden by incorporating the work of a third forger who had written the Historia calamitatum a century earlier, as well as some hypothetical lost writings of Abelard himself. But since Benton withdrew his own Ecovian hypothesis in 1980, it has found few takers, and the Historia calamitatum with Abelard’s letters is now almost universally accepted as genuine. The same cannot be said of Heloise’s, for reasons that are perhaps unwittingly suggested by Peter von Moos. A decade ago, von Moos expressed relief at the vindication of the Historia. He referred to Benton’s original forgery hypothesis as “ominous” because the loss of Abelard’s famed autobiography would have changed the whole intellectual profile of the twelfth century. In contrast, however, von Moos chose to remain agnostic about Heloise’s letters, calling their authenticity “a comparatively minor, if not exactly trivial question with respect to the history of women in the Middle Ages or, more generally, the ‘history of sensibility.’”

Now women are used to being minor, if not exactly trivial, but must we continue to accept this relegation to a realm of “sensibility” where


7. Two holoders are Hubert Silvestre, who thinks the whole dossier was forged by its eventual translator, Jean de Meun; and more recently Deborah Fraioli, who ascribes the letters to a contemporary enemy of Abelard and Heloise who forged the correspondence to ridicule them. Hubert Silvestre, “Die Liebesgeschichte zwischen Abelard und Heloise: der Anteil des Romans,” in Fälschungen im Mittelalter, Internationaler Kongress der Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Munich, 1986, Teil V: Fingierte Briefe, Frömmigkeit und Fälschung, Realienfälschungen, MGH Schriften, Bd. 33, V (Hannover: Hahnische Buchhandlung, 1988), 121–65; Deborah Fraioli, “The Importance of Satire in Jerome’s Adversus Joviammum as an Argument Against the Authenticity of the Historia calamitatum,” Fälschungen, 167–200.

it is impossible to ascertain the truth but where, in any case, it hardly matters? Less misogynist, but no more satisfying, is Paul Zumthor's claim that authenticity is a moot point, since the whole discourse unfolds in an airy realm of pure textuality, utopic spaces, and resonant echoes. Pure textuality is all very well unless we happen to be concerned with the actions of real men and women who lived in the past, that is, with history. For the historian, to accept Zumthor's ethereal resignation would be no more than a gesture of weariness at a controversy that has lasted too long and borne too little fruit.

Among scholars who believe the question does matter, attempts to reinforce male authority are surprisingly frequent and overt. J. T. Muckle, the evenhanded priest who edited the correspondence in the 1950s, patiently examined and dismissed all scruples previously raised about the letters, but raised one of his own when, unlike most subsequent readers, he found Abelard insufficiently stern with Heloise's passion: "One would expect that Abelard would have chided her and tried to set her right in regard to such extravagant and sinful dispositions." Because Muckle does not perceive such "chiding," he tentatively concludes that Abelard could not have seen the offending passages, and he doubts that such an esteemed abbess could have written them. Rather, it was some unknown redactor—albeit "a literary genius"—who rewrote the first two letters of Heloise and put the dossier into circulation after her death.

The male and specifically clerical attempt to "set [Heloise] right" is also the guiding thread that links all three of Benton's successive positions on the correspondence. In 1972, Benton argued that Heloise's letters were the work of "a thirteenth-century author who wanted to put women in their place" and thus made Heloise out to be a submissive, sensual creature, whereas the documents of the Paraclete show that the real abbess "must have been an outstanding person." In 1975, Benton again set the "sensual" woman of the letters against the holy abbess of history: "That Heloise loved Abelard was of course no secret, in the twelfth century or later. [What matters most is] the question of how she loved him. She may have loved Abelard as a dutiful wife and proper abbess who prayed for her husband after his

death, . . . sharing Abelard’s belief that the Christian calling of monk or nun was higher than the sensual life of lovers, whether married or not.” 12 By 1980, Benton had decided that the “author who wanted to put women in their place” was in fact Abelard. When the philosopher established Heloise at the Paraclete, “he was the man in control,” but as he became further removed from the abbey’s affairs, “he began to fear that Heloise and the nuns needed male control from outside the convent” and so forged the letters to illustrate “the carnal weakness of a woman without proper male direction.” 13 In his last published writing on the correspondence (1988), Benton extended his argument to other alleged “literary fictions” that Abelard ascribed to Heloise, most notably the Problemeta Heloisae—a set of forty-two exegetical questions posed by the abbess and answered by Abelard. Benton insists that even here “Abelard had the final say over what was written,” 14 although Heloise survived him by twenty-one years and presumably copied the manuscripts of these texts written for her edification. One may perhaps be pardoned for asking if this preoccupation with putting women in their place, establishing male control, and giving a man the final say is exclusively Abelard’s. 15

The need to assert Abelard’s authority by repressing Heloise’s authenticity is still clearer in the work of D. W. Robertson, whose Abelard and Heloise appeared in the same year as Benton’s first salvo. Robertson’s condescension toward Heloise is blatant. He refers to her twice as “poor Heloise” and once even as “little Heloise”; at least half a dozen times, he calls her discourse on marriage in the Historia calamitatum a “little sermon.” 16 In a display of stunning inconsistency, he manages to deny that “little Heloise actually said anything like” what Abelard records, and at the same time to ridicule her for saying

15. I hope I do not unduly disparage the late John Benton—a stimulating, careful, and versatile scholar—by pointing out what could be construed as an antifeminist slant in his work. For example, Benton devoted an earlier article to minimizing the influence of female patrons like Eleanor of Aquitaine and Marie of Champagne, and a later one to demonstrating (effectively in my view) that the physician Trotula could not have written the medical works ascribed to her. See “The Court of Champagne as a Literary Center,” Speculum 36 (1961): 551-91; “Trotula, Women’s Problems, and the Professionalization of Medicine in the Middle Ages,” Bulletin of the History of Medicine 59 (1985): 30-53.
it. Embodying all the negative stereotypes of the feminine, Robertson’s Heloise is both minx and shrew. In her “little sermon” she is guilty of “completely abandoning logic with a somewhat alarming feminine flair,” yet shows “distinct promise of becoming a very able Xanthippe.” 17 The “real” Heloise, Robertson concedes, had by the 1130s “grown from a vain and amusingly unreasonable young girl into a mature and respected abbess” 18 who may have actually written letters to Abelard—but not the literary ones that survive. His opinion of these letters as they are usually read is even lower than his view of the “little sermon.” The letters have indeed earned Heloise “a reputation for remarkable ‘enduring human passion,’ ” which is, in Robertson’s view, “a rather polite, if somewhat amusing way modern ecclesiastics have of referring to the persistence of lust centered on a single object.” 19

Robertson himself would read these letters, like all medieval texts that purport to celebrate erotic love, as witty and ironic; they form part of an exemplary conversion narrative authored by Abelard. If Heloise had anything to do with them at all, she perhaps “made useful suggestions” to her husband. 20 In this way we can still credit the “mature and respected abbess” with the lustful thoughts while denying her the dignity of writing. Yet we are told that Heloise deserves “some credit for nourishing Abelard’s literary ambitions”; 21 and as badly as he abused her, it is just as well that she succumbed to his seduction, for without Abelard “she would very probably have become just another matron, somewhat more learned than her gossips, . . . soon forgotten and lost to both history and legend.” 22 Robertson’s Heloise, whatever her status—the seductive and silly little minx, the proper but silent abbess, or even the hypothetical bourgeois wife—is well and truly repressed.

The notion that Heloise was somehow involved in constructing the dossier, without actually writing anything, is also shared by Chrysonorus Waddell. Without discussing the erotic letters, Father Waddell would extend to them the same argument he has made about Heloise’s

17. Ibid., 50–51, 53–54.
18. Ibid., 97.
20. Robertson, Abélard and Heloise, 121.
21. Ibid., xiii. The author likewise thanks his own wife for “shield[ing him] from those domestic difficulties so vividly described by Heloise” and “patiently endur[ing his] . . . general intransigence” (xvi).
22. Ibid., 224.
letter on religious life. He “wonders whether, though the voice is
Heloise’s, the ideas may be, in the first instance, Abelard’s—though
these are ideas which Heloise is glad to make her own.” Concerning
Abelard’s writings for the Paraclete, Waddell further asks “whether
Heloise would have asked Abelard to write them if Abelard had not
first wanted to do so?”23 The abbot may in fact have wanted to write
a rule for nuns; but the idea that a woman would not ask a man for
anything he did not already want to give her is wishful thinking of a
high degree. And the odd claim that Heloise consulted with Abelard
about personal letters that he then wrote in her name rests on nothing
more substantial than a sense that women did not write—in spite of
ample evidence to the contrary. As Peter Dronke has remarked, such
theories further betray “the notion that in all that Abelard and Heloise
shared intellectually, Abelard was exclusively the giver, the active
partner. And this is purest prejudice.”24

A final example of prejudice is supplied by Hubert Silvestre, the
sole critic to uphold Benton’s thesis of thirteenth-century forgery
after Benton himself repudiated it. Before Silvestre decided that the
thirteenth-century forger was Jean de Meun, he had described this
personage as a “vindictive and not very commendable” character who
forged the Historia calamitatum in order to mount attacks on his
own enemies via the screen figures of Anselm of Laon, William of
Champeaux, and others who had lived a century and a half before
him. As for Heloise, Silvestre offers an equally outlandish theory that
he himself terms a “venomous little hypothesis.” According to Sil-
vestre’s fantasy, the forger had personally seduced and abandoned “a
little Jeannie” who was demanding marriage, so in order to shake her
off, he inserted Heloise’s diatribe against matrimony in the Historia.
But this little Jeannie is assumed—unlike Heloise!—to be capable of
following a complex argument in Latin and objecting that her seducer
was no eunuch, so had no excuse not to marry her. Therefore the
forger made his fictional Abelard downplay the effects of his cas-
tration.25 In a later contribution, Silvestre speculates about Abelard’s
“loose lifestyle” and possible homosexuality, and he accuses the liter-

23. Chrysogonus Waddell, ed., The Paraclete Statutes Institutiones Nostrae: Intro-
24. Peter Dronke, Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts
from Perpetua († 203) to Marguerite Porete († 1310) (Cambridge: Cambridge Univer-
sity Press, 1984), 142.
25. Hubert Silvestre, “Réflexions sur la thèse de J. F. Benton relative au dossier
ary Heloise of “an unpardonable sin”—preferring the creature to the Creator.
Such arguments do not deserve serious refutation; they are cited here only to demonstrate the gratuitous sexual fantasy that has accompanied some of the more forceful repressions of Heloise.

Embarrassing as it is to expose these unwarranted, often misogynist assumptions, it is essential to do so. In some quarters there still lingers a nineteenth-century bias against the very idea that medieval women wrote, but the new wave of feminist scholarship leaves no excuse for this misconception. It is ironic that Heloise in particular should be subjected to such a prejudice, for in her own day she had a reputation as a distinguished literary scholar even in her teens. Abelard states that he was first attracted to her because “in the extent of her learning she was supreme” and had already become famous throughout the realm.

Peter the Venerable confirms this account in a letter he wrote to Heloise after Abelard’s death, remarking that even as a young man, he used to hear laudatory tales of her—“the woman who, although still caught up in the obligations of the world, devoted all her application to knowledge of letters . . . and to the pursuit of secular learning, [so] that not even the pleasures of the world . . . could distract her from this worthy determination to study the arts.” Even Abelard’s bitter enemy Roscelin refers to Heloise as a puella prudentissima who had the philosopher as her tutor—a fact that in itself testifies to the degree of her achievement, since not many teenaged girls in the 1110s were studying privately with renowned professors. From Heloise’s mature years, we have the witness of Hugh Métel, a canon who had not actually met her but knew by hearsay that she had “surpassed the feminine sex” in writing, specifically of verse.

Some scholars have objected not to the prospect of a woman writing

28. “Per habundiam litterarum erat suprema. Nam quo bonum hoc litteratorie scilicet scientiae in mulieribus est rarius, eo amplius puellam commendabat et in toto regno nominatissimam fecerat” (Historia calamitatum, 71).
30. Epistle of Roscelin to Abelard (Ep. 15), PL 178:360c.
per se, but to an abbess writing in praise of erotic love. Yet one of the most celebrated erotic writers of the twelfth century, Marie de France, may also have been an abbess. We have no firm evidence about her identity, but three of the four theories that remain in the field identify her with one or another Anglo-Norman abbess—Marie of Shaftesbury, of Reading, or of Ramsey.32 If one of these wealthy and prestigious houses was in fact headed by the poet, no scandal seems to have attached to her administration. Yet in Marie’s lai of *Le Fresne*, a convent-educated girl sleeps with her lover within the abbey walls, and later elopes with him, without incurring the slightest authorial reproach. And in *Yonec*, a fairy knight transforms himself into the shape of his lady, a married woman, and receives communion in that form in order to convince the lady that he is worthy to become her lover.33 In this story, too, the narrator is extremely sympathetic toward the couple. From a strict ecclesiastical point of view, these two lais are as shocking as anything in Heloise’s letters—and unlike the private writings of Heloise, Marie’s poems enjoyed a widespread and immediate vogue.34 Could she have been chosen for high religious office in spite of them? It may be that at least some twelfth-century audiences were less fastidious in these matters than their modern interpreters.

Gender bias may have an insidious effect even on the choice of permissible methodologies. For many years, those who would write Heloise out of her letters have dismissed all arguments based on “psychology,” claiming to find such considerations incurably subjective, unpersuasive, and unmedieval. Benton states that convincing arguments must be based on “the most technical and indeed unemotional issues,” such as dating, *cursus* patterns, and computer-assisted word counts.35 Psychological realism, he says, is a “risky basis” for any


34. Marie was also keenly aware that her authorship might be denied by “clerics” and took steps to prevent them from taking credit for her work: “Me numerai pur remembrance; / Marie ai nun, si sui de France. / Pur cel estre que clerç plusur / prendrent sur eus mun labur, / ne voil que sur li le die.” Cited from the *Fables*, in *Lais*, ed. Hanning and Ferrante, 6.

claims of authenticity. According to Jean Jolivet, an agnostic on the letters, psychology is the weakest and least persuasive source of arguments. Von Moos, the skillful critic of ideologies, also rejects the use of “psychological criteria for plausibility,” although he allows that computerized studies can just as easily permit gross errors. Robertson is especially vigorous in his assault on such villainous modern obsessions as personality, psychology, sentiment, sensuality, and “human understanding,” which mar the appreciation of Abelard’s exemplary dialogue on conversion.

Now psychological arguments, like any others, can be used well or badly; they can be persuasive or unpersuasive. But two decades of argument over grammatical constructions, alleged anachronisms, and minute points of monastic observance have yielded no more consensus than the previous decades of argument over what Heloise or Abelard might have plausibly thought or felt. If our goal is to do justice to a text that offers, among other things, two of the most candid probings of conscience and consciousness that medieval sources preserve for us, we will hardly advance by renouncing any of the tools at our disposal. More insidiously, these scholars’ appeals to abjure psychology allow their own psychological assumptions to go unchallenged, especially on the subject of gender. Heloise’s writing seems doubtful to those who find her sentiments dubious, but this ground for offense is no longer set forth plainly as in Muckle’s account. It still lurks in the background, however, masked by more “objective” and respectable concerns, so that repugnance for the literary Heloise need not be directly confronted.

Finally, if psychological arguments are ruled out of court, Abelard as the imagined author of Heloise is allowed to shield the reader from

39. “Sentimental humanitarianism, of which there are no traces in medieval Christianity, smothers the laughter of God in the lugubrious pieties of something called ‘human understanding’” (Robertson, *Abelard and Heloise*, 111).
40. Cf. Nancy Partner’s recent defense of psychohistory: “The objection that we are making an unwarranted assumption in thinking that the human mind was essentially the same over centuries of changing culture is a counsel of utter despair. If the deep structure of human experience could change so rapidly and profoundly, altered by the comings and goings of institutions and beliefs, then there could be no discipline of history at all, and our human endowment of memory would be a cruel deception. . . . The idea that imputing passionate and complex inner lives to persons we know through historical sources is an insult to them seems astonishing to me” (“Reading *The Book of Margery Kempe,*” *Exemplaria* 3 [1991]: 61–62).
her blaze of recalcitrant passion, which is thereby reduced to the status of an edifying fiction, and we need not take the frightening spectacle of her struggles seriously. Yet by the same token, we need not imagine what kind of man, not otherwise known for his sensitive insight into other people’s feelings, could have mothered such a hot-blooded yet cool-headed, tender yet passionately angry discourse on his own former mistress and wife, whom he was now taking pains to call his “sister in Christ.” Significantly, the partisans of Abelard’s sole authorship have focused on the Historia calamitatum and the monastic writings, paying little attention to Heloise’s two erotic letters. No one has yet dared to read these epistles in detail as Abelard’s literary creations, and even Robertson chooses to call their narrator “‘Heloise’ for convenience.”

Excellent close readings of these letters have in fact been offered, but never on the supposition that Abelard wrote them.

The long-standing controversy over the letters, which has become a kind of institution in medieval studies, has brought many historians to a point of settled agnosticism. Yet we should bear in mind that, if the letters of Heloise are to be effectively challenged, the burden of proof rests squarely on the assailants, not the defenders. For, surprisingly, none of the usual grounds for contesting authenticity are in fact present in this case. Nothing in the letters contradicts any documented historical fact, and alleged internal discrepancies have all been satisfactorily explained. The manuscript tradition is late but solid and can

41. Robertson, Abelard and Heloise, 122.
43. The use of such methods as cursus analysis and word counts assumes the opposite, since these techniques would not be employed if the letters had not previously been held suspect on other grounds. In my own view these methods have not been sufficiently refined and tested on works of known authorship to be held reliable for use on doubtful texts. According to Benton, his own preliminary statistical analysis proved it more likely that Bernard of Clairvaux had written the Theologia christiana than that Abelard had composed the Historia calamitatum (“Reconsideration,” 44). For a defense of Heloise’s authorship on the ground of cursus patterns, see Peter Dronke, “Heloise’s Problemata and Letters: Some Questions of Form and Content,” in Petrus Abaelardus, 53–73.
be traced back squarely to the Paraclete. Given the scanty manuscript witness for Abelard’s works in general and the number that are entirely lost—e.g., his commentary on Ezekiel, an exhortation to the monks of St. Gildas, a Grammatica and Rhetorica, and a work on universals—the ten surviving manuscripts of the correspondence indicate that this text, once it was finally published, enjoyed a greater popularity than many of the master’s philosophical and theological works. For our purposes, three facts about the manuscript tradition are especially significant.

First, all the manuscripts ascribe the letters to Abelard and Heloise, never to anyone else or to Abelard alone, nor are they ever copied anonymously like letters in a model collection. Second, the tradition is strikingly uniform; the Historia calamitatum and the letters are always found together in the same order, without major variants (with the exception of Abelard’s Rule, which only survives in one complete copy). This uniform text strengthens the case against Abelard as the final redactor, for finishing and polishing a book was not his strong point. By his own admission, he was the kind of scholar who was better at teaching than at publishing. To illustrate, Abelard’s Theologia, a work that he valued highly, survives in eighteen manuscripts representing eleven redactions of three different versions, and his Sic et non is extant in ten manuscripts, every one of which preserves a different version. If Abelard had wished to revise his letters, it is most unlikely that he would have produced a single, definitive text. In any case, he was apparently not interested in pursuing fame for belles-lettres. Aside from his correspondence with Heloise, no other edited collection of Abelard’s letters, such as we have for so many famous twelfth-century


46. Contrast the Epistolae duorum amantium edited by Ewald Könsgen (Leiden: Brill, 1974). Könsgen speculated that these anonymous Latin love letters may have been those exchanged by Abelard and Heloise before the discovery of their affair, but this hypothesis has found little favor.

47. Cf. the prefatory epistle to the book of sermons he wrote for the Paraclete: “Libello quodam hymnorum ... nonnulla insuper opuscula sermonum, juxta petitionem tuam, ... scribere praeter consuetudinem nostram utcunque maturavi. Plus quippe lectioni quam sermoni deditus, expositionis insisto planitiem, non eloquentiae compositionem” (PL 178:379–80).

figures, has come down to us. Moreover, even if Abelard had wished to "have the final say" about the literary form of these letters, in his last years he was more peripatetic than ever and had no permanent home in which to assemble a library. The manuscript tradition shows no connection with Cluny, where he spent his final year; and it has often been pointed out that Peter the Venerable, who knew both Abelard and Héloïse, shows no acquaintance with the letters. They could only have been preserved at the Paraclete, where it was Héloïse and not Abelard who had leisure to copy and collect them.

The third salient point, however, is that Héloïse did not in fact publish the letters. It has been conclusively shown that, although the story of Abelard and Héloïse was well known to their contemporaries and inspired diverse responses among them, the letters themselves remained unknown until the mid-thirteenth century. Jean de Meun translated them into French around 1280 and included a version of Héloïse's diatribe against marriage in his *Romance of the Rose*. Thereafter the volume of letters became a favorite text of the French and Italian humanists, admired by Petrarch and perhaps by Dante. This long-delayed publication naturally gave rise to the suspicion of a late-thirteenth-century forgery; but that thesis had to be discarded when, despite diligent searching, the correspondence failed to reveal anachronisms or historical errors of the sort that normally betray medieval forgeries. It is, in any case, wildly improbable that any thirteenth-century writer would have possessed—or cared to possess—such a detailed and specific knowledge, either of ecclesiastical and academic controversies in the 1120s or of the early history of the Paraclete.

On the supposition that the letters are authentic, does their non-publication in Héloïse's lifetime constitute a problem? I think not. In her second letter Héloïse urgently pleads with Abelard not to praise her, attributing her untarnished reputation to "hypocrisy" and claim-

53. See Benton, "Reconsideration."
ing that this “pretence” has deceived many, including Abelard himself. In a celebrated passage of the *Historia*, Abelard indeed says that “bishops loved [Heloise] as a daughter, abbots as a sister, the laity as a mother; while all alike admired her piety and wisdom, and her unequalled gentleness and patience in every situation.” If Heloise had earned and maintained such a reputation, to which Peter the Venerable also bears witness, over so many years and at the cost of such anguish as she describes, she would certainly not have been fool enough to destroy it by publishing her intimate confessions to the world. Scrupulous honesty before her own conscience and before Abelard, whom she now viewed as her spiritual father, was one thing; but the wanton destruction of her own reputation, which would have endangered the Paraclete and all its priories, would have been quite another. Recent history shows that the dossier of letters can be read as an edifying narrative, but it has been more often read as witness to a scandal, and even the possibility of provoking such a response would have been enough to restrain a prudent abbess from publishing the confessions she was too candid and too desperate not to write.

Why, then, if they were not intended for publication, are Heloise’s letters so “literary”? One might as well ask why Abelard was a teacher or Bernard of Clairvaux a monk. Literature was Heloise’s first vocation, well before pregnancy, marriage, and their sequel had put such a sudden end to her studies. As prioress and later abbess she no doubt had many occasions for writing, but perhaps little chance to practice the vivid, stylized *ars dictaminis* she had learned as a girl. Is it any wonder that, when the opportunity to renew a correspondence with Abelard arose, she should have given her learning and artistry free play? If Heloise used every rhetorical device at her disposal, the hope of moving and winning consolation from Abelard alone fully justified her best efforts.

It is worth noting that in this regard there is a marked difference between Abelard’s letters and those of Heloise. Abelard’s *Historia* is a

54. “Diu te, sicut et multos, simulatio mea fefellit ut religioni deputares hypocrisim; et ideo nostris te maxime commendans orationibus, quod a te exspecto a me postulas” (“Personal Letters,” 81).
quasi-public document, perhaps written to prepare the way for his departure from St. Gildas and return to a teaching career in Paris, although we have no evidence in fact that it ever circulated apart from the letters. The Rule along with Abelard’s epistle on the history of nuns, and to a lesser extent even his two personal letters to Heloise, which include prayers for the Paraclete, are intended to edify the whole community as well as its abbess. But Heloise’s letters are relentlessly private; they are addressed “to her only one,” unico suo, “to him who is especially hers, from her who is uniquely his.” The famous salutations underline Heloise’s theme of exclusive mutual belonging—of the marriage debt, in fact, which she transmogrifies into a demand that Abelard take full responsibility for her emotional and spiritual welfare in the life he has imposed upon her. While Heloise, like an Ovidian heroine, gestures toward the whole world as witness to her woes, she addresses her appeal to Abelard alone. There was no need for her to imagine a wider public—although it is just possible that, with her fine histrionic sense, she might have hoped for the appreciation of posterity once she had passed “where, beyond these voices, there is peace.”

The simplest hypothesis concerning the letters, then, is that Heloise preserved them at the Paraclete, where the last three at least would have furnished useful reading for the nuns; but she did not publish them, nor was their existence suspected for more than a century to come. Some unsolved mysteries remain: we do not know, for example, how or if Heloise came upon Abelard’s Historia “by chance,” or how Jean de Meun stumbled on his great literary find. Such questions, however, are no more than the inevitable lacunae we confront in tracing the transmission of any medieval text. They are in no way comparable to the enormous, not to say insuperable, problems raised by the specter of Abelard as sole author of the letters.

Let us return now to this unlikely prospect and confront these problems head-on. Doubt about Heloise’s authorship arose in the first place from reluctance to believe that she could have felt, or at any rate set in writing, the sentiments expressed in her first two letters. Let us suppose then, for the sake of argument, that she did not find such follies in her

60. “Suo [or Domino] specialiter, sua singulariter” (Letter V, in “Personal Letters,” 94).
61. Mary McLaughlin has kindly informed me that she plans to publish new evidence on this point in her forthcoming book, Heloise and the Paraclete: A Missing Dimension (Toronto: Peregrina Papers Series).
heart or inscribe them on her parchment. With Robertson, let us imagine that she “devoted herself energetically, with only occasional uncomfortable lapses, to the settled routine of her new career.” With Muckle, let us assume that Heloise was inwardly all that she appeared to be outwardly: “a person of sincerity, zeal and holiness and not a self-confessed hypocrite whose heart has all the while been possessed of a spirit of sensuality.” Let us recall the exemplary abbess whose virtue, as Peter the Venerable wrote, crushed the head of the serpent and made “a laughing-stock of the proud prince of the world.” This is the abbess who told Abelard “with the highest exultation” how Bernard of Clairvaux had paid her a long-desired visit and preached to her nuns “not as a man, but as an angel.” This is she whose administration was so effective that under her rule her abbey’s “worldly goods were multiplied more in a single year than [Abelard’s] would have been in a hundred.”

Heloise as abbess must indeed have been a remarkable figure. Her monastic foundation had begun beneath the shadow of a double scandal—first the long-remembered love affair, and then Suger’s eviction of the nuns from Argenteuil on the pretext of their gross misconduct. When Heloise and her daughters first moved to the Paraclete, they had little more than an abandoned oratory and a few huts that had been hastily erected on the site by Abelard’s students. In her thirty-five-year reign, however, Heloise not only won the personal esteem that is so well attested, but attracted enough gifts and vocations to the Paraclete to attach five new priories and an abbey, La Pommeraye. Her popularity is further suggested by the number of nuns and noblewomen who were named after her in the next generation. These facts are uncontested, whatever one’s position on the correspondence.

Assuming that Heloise was not the “hypocrite” that she claimed to be and that she did not write her letters, what kind of man must Abelard have been to forge them? He had already wronged Heloise at least

62. Robertson, Abelard and Heloise, 60.
64. Letter X: Abelard to Bernard of Clairvaux, in Abelard: Letters, ed. Smits, 239.
65. Historia calamitatum, 100.
three times—when he seduced her, when he forced her into a marriage she opposed, and when he compelled her to precede him into monastic life because of sexual jealousy. If we believe Heloise’s first letter (even on the theory that Abelard wrote it), he had wronged her yet a fourth time by ten years of studied neglect during her sojourn at Argenteuil. In 1129, however, Providence and Suger’s greed gave him a chance to make amends, and he was able to provide for Heloise in her need with the gift of the Paraclete. Only at this point did Abelard renew his bond with her in the new guise of brother and sister in Christ, or father and spiritual daughter; but he took the new relationship seriously and began visiting the Paraclete often to preach and assist the nuns as best he could. His visits, in fact, were frequent enough to set scandal-loving tongues in motion yet again. Abelard’s subsequent devotion to the Paraclete is beyond question, not only as founder and patron but also as spiritual father. The extensive works he prepared for Heloise and her nuns include not only Epistles 7 and 8 (the Rule and tract on the history of nuns), but also a treatise on the study of Scripture (Epistle 9), the Problemata, a volume of hymns and sequences, a sermon cycle, and an unfinished commentary on Genesis. Mary McLaughlin has shown plainly that in his last years, Abelard envisaged the Paraclete as a refuge and salvation not only for Heloise, but for himself.

By 1132, the earliest likely date for the Historia, Heloise had been abess of the Paraclete for at least three years. The new foundation had already turned the corner from abject poverty to the beginnings of prosperity and high esteem, and Abelard had already shown his willingness to cooperate with the nuns, although it seems that rumor had temporarily driven him to withdraw and return to his wretched life at St. Gildas. As for Heloise, however, no breath of scandal had touched her at least since the move from Argenteuil. What demon, then, could have possessed Abelard to forge letters so compromising that they would jeopardize his own new foundation, which had begun to display such promise, by fueling the very rumors he deplored? In what demoned frenzy would he defile the hitherto spotless reputation of Heloise as abbess, violating the honor of his “beloved sister in Christ” more grievously than he had done when he seduced her? What de-

70. Historia calamitatum, 101.
structive and self-destructive madness could prompt him to heap ill fame on the cherished oratory that he had twice been forced to abandon, and now hoped to endow as his lasting monument to the God of all comfort? Finally, if Heloise was as far above reproach as he himself maintained in the Historia, what made him think that she could be driven to cooperate in such a peculiar fraud, much less that he could carry it off without her involvement or knowledge?

In short, Abelard could have had no possible sane or morally acceptable motive for forging letters in which Heloise is made to acknowledge sustained hypocrisy, luxuriate in self-pity, revel in erotic nostalgia, glory to be called a whore, belabor ancient grudges, accuse God of the harshest cruelty, avow an idolatrous devotion to her lover, declare her willingness to follow him even into hell, and express the gravest doubts about her own salvation. If she did not in fact harbor and give voice to such thoughts, anyone who made her to confess them falsely would be committing an unforgivable calumny; and Abelard, in his newly chastened frame of mind and with his reviving hopes for the Paraclete, would have been the last person in the world to wish such a thing. It does not help the case to argue that the first two letters of Heloise are parts of a larger whole, which is meant to be didactic and edifying. If the entire dossier is supposed to bear witness to Abelard’s pastoral skill in “converting” Heloise from her sinful thoughts, what should be the most important element of all is missing—namely a convincing proof of her conversion. 73 Moreover, although Abelard’s replies to Heloise are effective enough in their way, no reader until Robertson ever pretended to find them nearly as memorable or moving as Heloise’s “unconverted” letters.

We must ask finally, if we are to take the thesis of a conversion narrative seriously, whom Abelard could possibly have meant to instruct by it. Certainly not the monastic or clerical world at large, for he never published the letters; and in any case his own career as a monk had been so fraught with scandal that he was hardly the man to be taken seriously as a pastoral genius, even if his “exemplary” text had been less ambiguous and conflict-ridden than it is. Nor would the nuns of the Paraclete be edified by a public disclosure of the imagined mortal sins of their abbess, who had taken such pains to model an exemplary religious life for them in every way she could. Such a fabrication could only have been an act of the most irresponsible cruelty and folly on

73. Dronke, Abelard and Heloise, 11.
Abelard’s part, wholly out of keeping with the concern and labor he was beginning to lavish on the nuns.

If anyone remains unconvinced, however, let us go a step further. Let us take the theory of Abelard’s authorship more seriously than its own proponents have done, and try to read Heloise’s first two letters as if Abelard had actually composed them. We must begin with the *Historia calamitatum*, assuming that when Abelard wrote his account of the quarrel he and Heloise had had about marriage more than twelve years before, and when he described the events surrounding their monastic profession, he was already intending to correct this narrative with the subtle but significant alterations that “Heloise” would later make. This deliberately planned repetition-with-variation would suggest that it was Abelard, not Heloise, who assigned such deep significance to the question whether she had wished to be called *amica* or *scortum*, and whether she preceded or followed him into vows. Surely these would be strange memories for him to revive and nuance so precisely when she had been a nun for more than a decade! But no matter. We must also suppose that when Abelard penned his flattering and idealized portrait of Heloise’s piety, which comes near the end of the *Historia*, he was already planning to give it the lie by publishing her false confessions. The gracious tribute is thereby transformed into an artfully constructed façade that is worthy of Chaucer’s Pardoner.

Turning to “Heloise’s” first letter, what sentiments do we find Abelard expressing therein? First a lengthy and, under the circumstances, pointless summary of his own previous epistle. He then covers himself with rebukes for not writing to Heloise—an odd maneuver for one who is writing to himself in her name—and proceeds to remind himself of serious obligations he had hitherto seemed to forget. Interspersed with these reproaches, however, are signs of a monumental vanity, for Abelard says of his own role at the Paraclete: “You after God are the sole founder of this place, the sole builder of this oratory, the sole creator of this community. You have built nothing here upon another man’s foundation. Everything here is your own creation... whatever was done, the credit was to be yours alone.”74 Coming from Heloise, these remarks would be an eloquent testimony of devotion and gratitude; from Abelard, they can testify to nothing but an alarming monomania. Yet while taking such exorbitant credit for his venture at the Paraclete, Abelard then returns straightway to self-reproach on behalf of Heloise,

berating himself for neglecting her "long ago" when she was newly converted.  

In this ambivalent mood, he begins to profess Heloise's undying love for himself. Monk and eunuch that he is, he makes his mistress of fourteen years earlier delight in calling herself his whore; in her person, he remembers and boasts of his own former attractions, praising the love songs he once wrote and making Heloise ask, "What matron, what virgin did not lust for you in your absence and flame with desire in your presence? What queen or powerful lady did not envy my joys and my bed?" It is just possible that Abelard's sexual vanity was once so great—but fourteen years after his castration? Everything he wrote under his own name suggests that he had come to accept his mutilation as an act not merely of divine justice, but of mercy, and he claimed to have no regrets for his deliverance from the sins of the flesh. Even assuming that he could still savor these past pleasures—which in his own letters, he recalls only as base and shameful obscenities—would he have dared to attribute such feelings for his once-virile but now much-altered self to the venerable abbess? If Abelard had known that Heloise still cherished such passions, could he have written of her piety in such glowing terms as he did, not only in the Historia but also in his subsequent letter? And if he did not suspect that she still felt this way, what response could he have expected this forgery to arouse in her except rage at his new betrayal?

Yet while making Heloise express this continued admiration and longing for him, and while making her profess unbounded submissiveness to his will, Abelard also lets her accuse him of being shallow and manipulative: "It was desire, not affection which bound you to me, the flame of lust rather than love. So when the end came to what you

75. "Unde non mediocri admiratione nostrae tenera conversationis [or conversionis]
initia tua iam dudum oblivio movit quod, nec reverentia Dei nec amore nostri nec
sanctorum patrum exemplis admonitus, fluctuans me et iam diutino moerore con-
fectam vel sermone praesentem vel epistola absentem consolari tentaveris" ("Personal
Letters," 70). This passage was among those that first cast doubt on the authenticity
of the letter, since Heloise's charge of neglect seems to contradict our knowledge of
Abelard's fairly recent comings and goings at the Paraclete. But she must rather have
been recalling her early years at Argenteuil: "Your forgetfulness long ago caused [me]
no little amazement at the tender beginning of our religious life." Even if she had been
referring to her first years at the Paraclete, however, it would hardly have made sense
for Abelard to describe his own activities there, and then turn around and make Heloise
accuse him of neglect when both knew the reproach was unfounded.


77. On the contrast between the sexual sublimations of Abelard and Heloise, see
Jean Leclercq, "Modern Psychology and the Interpretation of Medieval Texts,"
desired, any show of feeling you used to make went with it.” Now it would be one thing for a man to exult in imagining a woman’s boundless desire for him, although as I have suggested, nothing indicates that this was Abelard’s frame of mind at the time of the letters. But even if it were, would he be able in the same breath to imagine the same woman’s vehement anger? In the Historia and the first letter written under his own name, Abelard expresses remorse for his past sexual indulgence, but never for the wrongs done to Heloise. The lament he utters over his castration contains no mention of her, or even of regret for their lost pleasures, nor does he betray any sense that he sinned in making her take the veil. What is more, in his reply to this letter he brushes off “Heloise’s” reproach so lightly, eulogizing her as the “good wife” whose prayers will be his salvation, that one would think he had not even yet suspected the depth of her anger, much less invented it himself and penned these bitter words.

To gain perspective on the unwonted sensitivity that Abelard is supposed to have shown in representing the thoughts of a wronged woman—one wronged, moreover, by himself—let us contrast the planctus he wrote for Dinah, daughter of Jacob, whose rape is recounted in Genesis 34. Abelard cannot conceive of Dinah feeling any anger at all; rather, he has her blame herself for the rape, excuse her violator, and grieve that he has been so harshly punished.

Vae mihi miseræ
Per memet perditæ!
. . . . . . . . . . . .
Coactus me rapere,
Mea raptus specie,
Quovis expers veniae
Non fuisses judice.
. . . . . . . . . . . .
Levis aetas juvenilis
Minusque discreta,
Ferre minus a discretis
Debuit in pena.

Woe to my wretched self
Destroyed by my own fault!
. . . . . . . . . . . .

Compelled to ravish me,
Ravished by my beauty,
You would not have gone unpardoned,
Whoever the judge might be.

... . . . . . . . .
Your light-hearted
And indiscreet youth
Should have borne a lighter penalty
From those who were discreet.

Could the poet who portrayed a rape victim so forgiving have conceived Heloise, who loved him, to be so angry? More plausibly, it is the generous spirit of Heloise—but with all the rage carefully excised—that has inspired Abelard’s portrait of Dinah.

Let us turn to “Heloise’s” second letter. Aside from making her mouth the most profoundly ambivalent feelings toward himself, Abelard had already compromised the abbess’s religion by letting her claim that she would blithely follow him to hell. But after inventing this scandalous protestation for her he compounded the mockery, in his reply, by commending himself devoutly to her prayers. Now, however, he gives her a powerful dramatic monologue filled with such anguish, such bitter lamentation, and such deeply divided yearnings that, if it is truly his, we must place him in the company of Ovid and Shakespeare among the great female impersonators of Western literature. It would be hard to find another twelfth- or thirteenth-century author who belongs in that company, for dramatic monologue was not a genre much cultivated at the time. The speeches given to their characters by such accomplished poets as Chrétien de Troyes and Jean de Meun are not at all like the monologues that Abelard ostensibly wrote for Heloise; they are much more allegorical and, oddly, more analytic and dialectical than these two letters ascribed to the prince of dialectic. Moreover, it is hard to think what Abelard could have hoped to gain from such a virtuoso performance, even had he been capable of it. As the work of Heloise, this second letter could only be the fruit of an urgent and impassioned need for confession. As Abelard’s fiction it could be nothing of the sort; it is hardly monastic or edifying; and, written under a pseudonym, it could not even earn him the literary fame that its brilliance deserves.

Abelard’s first remarks in the person of Heloise are flattering enough
to his ego. He lets her insist that his name and rank should take precedence over hers, and he imagines her falling into despair at the prospect of his death, proclaiming that she could never live without him. But then he goes on to her famous Boethian *planctus*, inveighing against God and Fortune:

O God—if I dare say it—cruel to me in everything! O merciless mercy! 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 onsloughs. . . . 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. 80

These are strange sentiments for a priest-husband to place in the mouth of his abbess-wife. Heloise is made to reverse the expected Boethian progression, turning not from Fortune toward Providence, but from God back to Fortune; and her Lady Fortune has a quiver full of the arrows that belong more properly to Cupid. A *topos* often used to warn consecrated virgins of their precarious stature—the higher the ascent, the heavier the fall—is also turned on its head in this discourse. 81 “Heloise” represents herself as “exalted” when she was Abelard’s mistress, but “flung down” and “fallen” into sacred chastity. She is made to continue in this vein at length, in passages that are yet more celebrated: venting her rage against God’s injustice, avowing her lack of repentance, acknowledging the pleasure she still takes in erotic memories, and scorning her monastic life as a futile charade that cannot possibly earn merit in heaven. If critics have blanched at the idea of a Heloise who actually entertained such thoughts, even as abbess of the Paraclete, is it not twice as monstrous to imagine her spiritual father attributing them to her without warrant?

Scholars have occasionally proposed a compromise theory, namely that Abelard did not invent Heloise’s confessions out of whole cloth but used remembered conversations and “actual fragments of authentic letters” to compose the epistles that we now have in her name. These fragments are said to have been written much earlier, when Heloise was still at Argenteuil, so that we need not imagine her maintaining a stoic silence for twelve years and then bursting suddenly into speech. But this theory leaves the problem of Abelard’s motivation untouched, and also fails to recognize the tightly unified structure of the sequence. Heloise’s first letter is a detailed response to the Historia calamitatum—her own autobiography in return for Abelard’s—complete with enhancements and corrections of the story he has already told; and her second letter responds just as directly to Abelard’s first reply. The complaint that Heloise’s letters are too long and full of quotations to be hers can only stem from a failure to acknowledge the depth of her learning or from an ignorance of twelfth-century style.

I have chosen not to analyze Heloise’s epistle on religious life in this context, since it has been drawn only incidentally into the authenticity debate and has been fully discussed and defended elsewhere. But I hope I have shown that any attempt to read her first two letters as a fiction by Abelard, far from saving her reputation or enhancing his, would only make her the victim of an incomprehensible fraud and betrayal. To posit such an act we would need not only to credit Abelard with a degree and type of dramatic skill that is otherwise unattested in his era, let alone his works, but also to entangle him in a web of psychological absurdities, including the sabotage of his own and Heloise’s best interests at a time when the “history of their calamities” was just taking a turn for the better. By the same token, we would deprive Heloise herself of due credit for her learning, her unforgettable prose, and her devastating honesty in the service of truth. So, having laid the ghost of pseudo-Abelard at last, we can now reread these same letters as the work of a much more interesting author, namely Heloise, who was neither fiction nor legend, but the writer whose ambiguous glory inspired more than her share of each.

82. This is the position of Charrier, Héloïse; quoted passage, p. 189.
II. *Accessus ad auctores*

Not a few students of English literature first encounter Heloise in those puzzling lines written by a real “female impersonator,” Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath*. The *Wife* is reminiscing about her husband Jankyn’s Book of Wikked Wyves—the book she would later make him cast with his own hand into the fire, as Abelard had been forced to burn his own book at Soissons—and she rehearses its contents for her hearers:

He cleped it Valerie and Theofraste,
At which book he lough alway ful faste.
And eek ther was somtyme a clerk at Rome,
A cardinal, that highte Seint Jerome,
That made a book agayn Jovinian;
In which book eek ther was Tertulan,
Crisippus, Trotula, and Helowys,
That was abbesse nat fer fro Parys,
And eek the Parables of Salomon,
Ovides Art, and booke many on,
And alle thise were bounden in o volume.  

It seems that the misogynist appropriation and repression of Heloise began early. When we meet her in these lines she is already enmeshed in a textual net subtler than the one Vulcan used to ensnare Mars and Venus. An ironic male poet impersonating an angry feminist impersonating a jealous husband gives him an authoritative book on female evil starring Jerome, the famous misogynist whose best friends were women, and whose “book agayn Jovinian” was a favorite text of both Abelard and Heloise. Behind Jerome stand a few of his own *auctores*—the Stoic woman-haters Chrysippus and “Theophrastus,” the Jew Solomon, and the Christian Tertullian. There are also two women in the list of antifeminist authors—Trotula, whom Chaucer probably knew only through the title of the book ascribed to her, *De passionibus mulierum*, and Heloise, an avowed expert on the same subject. Strangely but fittingly, Heloise finds herself canonized midway between Jerome, the master of asceticism, and Ovid, master of the art of love—the two *auctores* who also left the deepest traces in her own writing. In this context, however, her authentic voice is overwhelmed by

Bien entendans et bien lettree,
Et bien amans et bien amee . . .
Car les livres avoit veüs
Et estudiés et seüs,
Et les meurs feminins savoir . . .
Mes je ne croi mie, par m’ame,
C’onques puis fust une tel fame;
Si croi je que la lettreüre
La mist a ce que la nature
Que des meurs feminins avoir
Vaincre et donter miex en savoir.87

Wise and well-educated
And most loving and beloved, . . .

86. For a persuasive reading of this episode see Emmanuèle Baumgartner, “De Lucrèce à Héloïse: Remarques sur deux exemples du Roman de la Rose de Jean de Meun,” Romania 95 (1974): 433–42.
Newman · The repression of Heloise

For she had looked at books
And studied them and knew them well,
And understood a woman’s ways . . .
But I don’t believe, by my soul,
That such another woman ever lived;
Indeed, I suspect that learning
Taught her how best to vanquish and subdue
The woman’s ways she knew by nature.

Jean’s Heloise had both authority and experience on her side, as the Wife of Bath would have said. Her wisdom was supreme in Jean’s eyes because she knew both les livres and les meurs feminins, and was able to conquer the latter through the former. In the headings sprinkled through his translation of the letters, Jean calls her la belle Heloys, la bonne Heloys, and (four times) la saige Heloys—epithets worth contrasting with those of Robertson.88 In the Romance, however, Jean gives her wisdom a peculiar twist. Her stated reasons for opposing marriage are hardly the ones a Jealous Husband would be expected to endorse; they look ahead not to the Wife’s Prologue but to the Franklin’s Tale. Heloise wants a union based on freedom and equality, “sans seignorie et sans mestrise.”89 Jean ignores the historical Heloise’s ecstasy of submission to Abelard’s will and suppresses everything Abelard wrote in the Historia about her concern for his own reputation. On the other hand, he picks up one of her arguments that is obscured by modern translations. In the Romance Heloise is made to abjure marriage:

Si qu’il peüst estudier
Touz siens, touz frans, sanz soi lier,
Et qu’el rentendist a l’estuide,
Qui de science n’iert pas vuide.90

So that he could give himself to study,
Wholly hers yet wholly free, without binding himself,
And she too could resume her studies,
For she was not devoid of learning.

These lines draw on a plea that, according to the Historia, Heloise actually made:

89. Roman de la Rose, line 8780.
90. Ibid., lines 8781–84.
What harmony can there be between students and nursemaids, writing desks and cradles...? What man bent on sacred or philosophical thoughts could endure the crying of children, the nursery rhymes of nannies trying to calm them, the bustling throng of male and female servants in the household? And what woman will be able to bear the constant filth and squalor of babies? 91

Although this text is Abelard’s, the discourse may indeed have been Heloise’s. A year before this argument took place, she had been the private student of the most distinguished philosopher in France, as she believed; now she was the teenage mother of an illegitimate son to whom she had just given birth on a remote provincial farm, where books were undoubtedly few. There is every reason to believe that Heloise, the precocious convent scholar, did prefer books to “feminine ways” and agreed with Abelard when he later wrote, “How unseemly for those holy hands which now turn the pages of sacred books to have to perform degrading services in women’s concerns!” 92 No auctor—neither Ovid nor Jerome nor her beloved Stoics—would have taught Heloise to value the joys of motherhood. And as a good medieval scholar, she could scarcely conceive of an authentic life beyond the ken of auctoris.

Both Chaucer and Jean de Meun point, in their different ways, to a side of Heloise that more recent interpreters have neglected. Theirs was a Heloise fully immersed in the world of books and learning, herself an auctor whose authority could be cited in complex and ambiguous ways. More tellingly, they both introduce Heloise at one of the weakest yet most tenacious points of the learned tradition: its appeal to misogyny. It is interesting in this regard that the feminist Christine de Pizan did not mention Heloise in her comprehensive encyclopedia of good women, the Book of the City of Ladies, where she could have been included among the learned writers, the nuns, or even the heroines of love. We know that Christine was familiar with Heloise’s story;

91. “Quae enim conventio scolarium ad pedissequas, scriptoriorum ad cunabula...? Quis demique sacris vel philosophicis meditationibus intentus, pueriles vagitus, nutricum que hos mittitant nenas, tumultuosam familie tam in viris quam in feminis turbam sustinere poterit? Que etiam inhonestas illas parvulorum sordes assiduas tolerare valebit?” (Historia calamitatum, 76 [emphasis added]; contrast Radice, 71).

in a letter she cited the abbess’s celebrated claim that she would rather be Abelard’s whore than Augustus’s queen. Christine may have known that text only through Jean de Meun, given that she had engaged in a pamphlet war over the Romance of the Rose with two of Jean’s partisans, Gontier Col and Jean de Montreuil. Yet both of these French humanists were also noted admirers of Abelard and Heloise and knew their correspondence firsthand. Under the circumstances, Christine’s silence is eloquent, for it suggests that she was already reading Heloise through misogynist lenses. Although she did not shrink from feminist rewritings of Dido and Medea, she could not view the abbess of the Paraclete as either a good woman or a useful auctor for feminists. In short, Heloise could not be admitted to the City of Ladies because she had already been canonized in the Book of Wikked Wyves. Her letters had become fit reading only for the likes of Jankyn and the Jealous Husband.

III. Expositio in Heloissam

The issue of authority vis-à-vis misogyny has been central to the reception of Heloise, whether medieval or modern, because it was in the first place central to Heloise herself. If she does not belong in the antifeminist canon where Chaucer placed her, she does belong in that uneasy realm where Ovid makes common cause with Jerome. Most readers have been inclined to favor either Ovid’s Heloise or Jerome’s, valorizing the one and suppressing the other: either we accept the tragic and impenitent grande amoureuse, or else the practical abbess with her zeal for authentic religious life. But if Heloise’s letters are genuine, we cannot exclude either persona, nor can we divide her career neatly into an “Ovidian phase” and a “Jeromian phase.” In her youthful diatribe against marriage she is already citing Against Jo-vinian, and in her letter on monastic life, no sooner has she “set the bridle of [Abelard’s] command on [her] words of unbounded grief” than she is quoting a choice passage from the Ars amatoria. Both auctores helped to lay the foundations of that misogynist prison that

constrained her life and letters, as well as the terms of her reception.

It is likely that Heloise had read both Ovid and Jerome, as well as Seneca, Lucan, Cicero, and probably other ecclesiastical authors, before she ever laid eyes on Abelard. In addition to the convent library at Argenteuil, she would have had access through her doting uncle to even richer resources at Notre Dame of Paris. What imaginative possibilities could such voracious early reading have opened before the young Heloise? On the evidence of her later writings, the question is not hard to answer. The path of virgin martyrs evidently held no appeal for her, although in time she was to prove that a determined Stoic could make a better abbess than many a pious Christian. But the classical *otium philosophicum* exerted a strong attraction, and she saw the life of contemplative leisure—which absolutely excluded marriage, though not lovemaking—as a real possibility for herself as well as Abelard. From the letters of Jerome, she had learned that such a life allowed Christian men and women to form close spiritual bonds, transcending the pull of mundane life. Yet this was not the only option, for she knew also of the pious Roman matrons, the Lucretias and Cornelias, with their endless willingness to sacrifice for the husbands they adored. And she knew of the passionate women in love, seduced and abandoned yet eternally ardent—Dido, Sappho, Medea, Oenone. These utterly committed lovers of the *Heroides*, rather than the playful and manipulative coquettes of the *Ars amatoria*, powerfully appealed to her. Further, she knew and endorsed Cicero’s ideal of pure, disinterested friendship that asked nothing of the beloved save himself, “te pure non tua concupiscens.”

But finally, Heloise could not escape the tradition of “wikked wyves” that virtually any author, pagan or Christian, was all too ready to invoke, and in moments of despair she was not beyond adding her own name to the annals of infamy. There is indeed a strong anti-feminist streak in her writing, and her medieval readers were not slow to identify it. This tendency may explain why modern feminist scholars have been none too eager to insist on the authenticity of her letters, for there are passages in them that one would be only too glad to father on Abelard or some other male. Even if we discount the *Historia*, Heloise’s second letter contains a misogynist set piece in which she compares herself to Eve, Delilah, Solomon’s consort, and the wife of Job, saying

96. Ibid., 70.
that women have always been the downfall of great men;\textsuperscript{97} and in her third letter she refers often (though not consistently) to the weakness and corruptibility of the female.\textsuperscript{98} The roles of weak woman and temptress, like those of world-renouncing philosopher, tragic lover, heroic wife, and spiritual friend, were sanctioned by the full authority of the ancient texts.

Heloise, I submit, came to Abelard with not only her mind but her imagination already well stocked. Her studies with him were doubtless intense, but they were brief and, as we know, interrupted by potent distractions. What Abelard enabled Heloise to accomplish, through the course of their lifelong relationship, was to actualize one after another—at least in writing—every one of the models that her splendid and thorough education had laid before her receptive spirit. Remarkably, she enacted each of these roles vis-à-vis a single beloved other who became in turn her Ovidian seducer, her Pompey, her Aeneas, her Jerome; she could be his Corinna or Cornelia, his Dido, or his Paula. More than any ancient Roman, perhaps, Heloise fulfilled to perfection the classical ideal of the univira, the woman who belonged solely and wholly to a single man. Whatever the role she played, Abelard was always her solus, her unicus; he alone could grieve her, comfort her, instruct her, command her, destroy her, or save her.\textsuperscript{99}

The greater the variety of positions she could take over and against her beloved, the more total and perfect the relationship;\textsuperscript{100} hence the exultant multiplicity of that greeting with which her literary record begins. “To her master, or rather her father, husband, or rather brother; his handmaid, or rather his daughter, wife, or rather sister; to Abelard, Heloise.”\textsuperscript{101} Still more roles are added to her repertoire at the beginning of her second letter, where she objects to Abelard’s prior salutation, in which he had set “woman before man, wife before husband, handmaid

\textsuperscript{99} “Qui solus es in causa dolendi solus sis in gratia consolandi. Solus quippe es qui me contristare, qui me laetificare seu consolari valeas. Et solus es qui plurimum id mihi debeat et nunc maxime cum universa quae iusseri in tantum impleverim ut cum te in aliquo offendere non possem me ipsam pro iussu tuo perdere sustinerem” (“Personal Letters,” 70).
\textsuperscript{100} For the \textit{sensus litteralis} see Historia calamitatum, 73: “Nullus a cupidis immittus est gradus amoris, et si quid insolitum amor exccigitare potuit, est additum.”
before master, nun before monk, deaconess before priest and abbess before abbot."\textsuperscript{102} Aside from the contest in courtesy here and the show of monastic (and perhaps erotic) submission, Heloise once again revels in the manifold bonds that bind her to Abelard: no identity she can possibly claim lacks its counterpart in a title of his. Without him she is nothing, but with him she can be all things. Her self-abasement is thus also a self-enrichment, a multiple enhancement and proliferation of the roles that constitute her feminine self.

One is reminded here of the Marian piety that was so swiftly developing in the liturgy and the Song of Songs tradition during Heloise’s lifetime, a piety that celebrated the Virgin as at once God’s mother and his daughter, Christ’s exuberant bride and desolate widow, self-effacing handmaid and all-powerful consort. For twelfth-century writers Mary was becoming, in Ann Matter’s suggestive phrase, “the woman who is the All”\textsuperscript{103} through her totally fulfilled relation to the allness of God. The female mystics of subsequent generations would delight in imitating every aspect of her endlessly rich, varied, and all-absorbing union with him. Heloise is, in this respect, a precursor of Mechthild of Magdeburg and even Margery Kempe, finding a rich and full selfhood in the adoption of multiple imaginative roles. But the opposite number in Heloise’s totalizing relationship was an earthly man, and for her, classical models would do just as well as Christian. Authenticity, for Heloise, lay in the wholehearted embodiment of the feminine exempla that authority supplied her—even at times the exempla of evil—so long as they could be played out vis-à-vis the one man whom she had constituted as her sole living authority, in the things of heaven as in those on earth.

But while this mode of authentic living might satisfy Heloise the lover and the woman of letters, it could not meet the needs of her religious life, nor could it satisfy Abelard, whom she desired above all things to please. There is thus, running throughout the correspondence, a double movement of renunciation and repression. In the first place, there is Heloise’s voluntary repression of her own desires, undertaken as a sacrifice of obedience to Abelard’s will. Romantic readers are not mistaken in seeing a kind of mystical surrender, an ecstasy of abnegation about this sacrifice, which we can read as an anticipation of the female piety that would become widespread a century later. Mech-

\textsuperscript{102} “Personal Letters,” 77; Letters, trans. Radice, 127. It has been left for modern scholarship to add even the relation of creator and creature to the complementary pairs.

thild of Magdeburg, for example, was to pray that God would send her to hell if he might through her torment “be praised to excess by all creatures.”

104 Hadewijch, to flaunt the utter disinterestedness of God’s lovers, declared hell to be the highest name of Love, and Marguerite Porete asserted that heaven and hell are as one to the simple, annihilated soul. Heloise prefigures such adepts of abnegation in her boast that she would follow Abelard without hesitation to the depths of hell, finding strength at his bidding to destroy her very self. Her love, she claims, “rose to such heights of madness that it robbed itself of what it most desired beyond hope of recovery.” The fact that her sensual desires continue unabated supplies the proof that she is truly in hell and not in some celestial calm of mind, all passion spent.

I have been arguing for Heloise as a kind of mystic manquée. Yet, however great her spiritual virtuosity, as long as Abelard remains the object of her love, that love is, in Abelard’s own terms, no more than idolatry. Perhaps the most telling of his reproaches is the one that reiterates her own boast, only to cast it back in her face inverted: “You who strive to please me in all things, as you claim, ... that you may please me supremely, you must put aside this [bitterness against God]; for with it, you can neither please me nor come with me to bliss. You who claim you would follow me even to hell—will you suffer me to go to heaven without you?”

106 With this challenge Abelard demands that Heloise renounce the motive of her own renunciation. In the name of love, he asks her finally to surrender him, along with her love for him, into the hands of Christ—to abandon her misplaced mysticism for an ordinary monastic life.

This second movement of renunciation, with its dizzying emotional gymnastics, recalls nothing so much as the climactic meditation of Marguerite Porete’s Mirror of Simple, Annihilated Souls. Seeking the ultimate sacrifice of self-will, the mystic has professed her willingness


109. “Quae cum mihi per omnia placere, sicut profiteris, studeas, ... ut mihi sum-mopere placent, hane depone, cum qua mihi non potes placere neque mecum ad beati-tudinem pervenire. Sustinebis illic me sine te peregere, quem etiam ad Vulcana profiteris te sequi velle?” (“Personal Letters,” 87).
to suffer eternal torments and see the whole creation destroyed, rather than offend against Christ's will; she offers to forego God's grace forever for the sake of God's love; but then she confronts three renunciations that she dare not make.

—Suppose you wanted me to love someone else more than you (words fail me, but I must go on)—I cannot say that I would, this is something I must think about;
—Suppose you wanted to love someone else more than you love me (words fail me again at the thought)—I have no answer because I know I can't wish for this;
—Suppose you wanted someone else to love me more than you do (words fail me again)—again I have no answer; I shall have to think about it.

And so I did, and I told him that these last three were very hard, far harder to conceive and consent to than all the others, and I did not see how I could possibly want any of these things. And he still pushed me to answer, and because I still loved myself as well as him, I could not see clearly and this caused me great distress. No one who has not been put to the test in this way can understand this. And I was to know no peace until I could find an answer to these things.\textsuperscript{110}

This is precisely the test to which Abelard now puts Heloise's love. If she truly desires to please him, he commands, she must desire to please Another more than him; if she loves him, she must let him love Another more than her; and to prove that he truly loves her, he admits that Another loves her more.

Think of him always, sister, as your true spouse. . . . What has he seen in you, I ask you, when he lacks nothing, to make him seek even the agonies of a fearful and inglorious death in order to purchase you? What, I repeat, does he seek in you except yourself? He is the true friend who desires yourself and nothing that is yours. . . . It was he who truly loved you, not I. . . . I took my fill of my wretched pleasures in you, and this was the sum total of my love. . . . To him, I beseech you, not to me, should be directed all your devotion, all your compassion, all your remorse.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{110} Marguerite Porete, \textit{Mirror}, 143–44.
Newman • The repression of Heloise

The cruel pathos of Abelard’s ultimatum lies in his transference of Heloise’s own terms of love to the surrogate Beloved. Does she boast that she would suffer torments gladly? Christ has actually done so. Does she profess the Ciceronian ideal of pure friendship? Christ alone has loved her truly and not what is hers. Was she willing to atone with her own life for Abelard’s fall? Christ has already atoned for them both. Where Heloise exults in the multiple bonds that bind her to Abelard, he insists on replacing her binary pairs with triads that include the Other, the new beloved that he would have her embrace in his stead. He writes as the servant of Christ to Christ’s bride, for Abelard is but the eunuch who guards the King’s harem in which Heloise is queen.\(^\text{112}\) Or again, she is to be Martha, beseeching Christ to raise her brother Lazarus from the dead, or the wife of Nabal the Carmelite, interceding with King David to save her husband’s life.\(^\text{113}\) Abelard will even remove himself from the scenario entirely: she who would be but the reflection of his glory, taking her whole identity from him, is now to take her very name from Another, Heloissa from Helom (Elohim).\(^\text{114}\)

We do not know, of course, whether or how far Heloise succeeded in this second repression. In the first she sacrificed her desire; in the second she was asked to sacrifice her love, the consuming fire that had motivated her first immolation. Like Marguerite Porete, she found the final demands of her beloved too difficult for words and expressed her will to obey them only by renouncing words. Hence the famous “silence of Heloise”—which is not really a silence so much as the turning of a page, the end of one discourse and the beginning of another. Henceforth her frame of reference shifts into alignment with accepted monastic auctoritas—Scripture and tradition, Benedict and Jerome, Augustine and Gregory. The classics slip quietly into the background, Ovid remaining only to supply an exemplum in malo. Authenticity becomes a question of proper monastic observance under an appropriate rule, with fitting worship in which the Spirit is not killed by the letter.


\(^\text{113}\) “Personal Letters,” 74–75.

\(^\text{114}\) “Nam et tuae Dominus non immemor salutis, . . . te videlicet Heloissam id est divinam ex proprio nomine suo quod est Heloim insignivit” (ibid., 90).
For many readers, however, Heloise’s last letter is precisely the one where her spirit dies, or at least goes underground forever. While she wages impassioned war with Abelard under the guise of submission, she never ceases to fascinate; but when she actually submits, she dwindles into virtue as a heroine of romance might dwindle into marriage. The second repression of Heloise does entail a silencing, not only of her desire and her rebellion, but of all that is most “literary” about her. It is, from one point of view, the ultimate victory of the masculine over the feminine voice: not only a personal triumph of Abelard over Heloise, but a victory for the poetics of castration over the discourse of desire. Heloise’s erotic discourse has in fact been repressed ever since it was uttered: by Abelard within the text itself, by Jean de Meun and Chaucer in their ambiguous appropriations of it, and by those modern scholars who have made Abelard its author so as to negate it all the more powerfully.

Heloise’s monastic discourse has provoked fewer and less fervent responses. But its first reader, Abelard, was at least generous enough to consolidate his moral victory with a treatise that renewed and amplified the themes of Christian feminism, after a silence of centuries. His radical exaltation of women in general, and nuns in particular, was his own way of celebrating the “nouvelle Héloïse”—the loving Bride of God that he had tried so hard to forge from the ruins of his former love. Having humbled herself to the limit in the realm of desire, Heloise was now fit to be exalted in the new realm that she had consented at last to enter. Had she actually become the woman that Abelard henceforth addressed, the exemplary abbess whose historical record we have already traced? We shall never know. But we can only hope that her double repression, in response to Abelard’s double authority, led her finally to that moment of complete authenticity that Marguerite reached at the end of her trials:

I hereby surrender my will and my love; you have brought them to the point of surrender. I had thought that my calling was always to live in love through the promptings of my will. But now both love and will—which brought me out of my spiritual childhood—are dead in me, and in this death I find my freedom.

Then Love came to me full of goodness, Love who had so

often forced me out of my mind and consumed me in her fires, and
told me that she held all things that have been and are to come in
her goodness; that I could take what I wanted from her and that if
I wanted all of her, then that was what she wanted too.\textsuperscript{116}

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\textsuperscript{116} Marguerite Porete, \textit{Mirror}, 145.