

NEGOTIATIONS AND LOVE SONGS:
HELOISE AND THE QUESTION OF RELIGIOUS AUTHENTICITY

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Abstract

The letters of Abelard and Heloise have mostly been analyzed and critiqued via the artificial dichotomy of “personal” and “instructional,” resulting in a static and monolithic account of Heloise’s so-called transgressive desires. This thesis argues, however, that the letters by Abelard and Heloise, together with their liturgical works for the Oratory of the Paraclete, constitute an ongoing negotiation for the redefinition of authenticity within the religious life. Heloise’s unflinching devotion to her ideal of love becomes her primary impetus for challenging the blind adherence to St. Benedict’s Rule that was pervasive in twelfth century religious devotion.

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Introduction

In his book *Ennobling Love*, Stephen Jaeger writes that the reconciliation between “sublime and passionate love” was a hallmark of the earlier love letters exchanged by Abelard and Heloise; both were convinced that their sexual attachment to one another was also a source of pleasure to God, whom they invoked as the protector of their sacred union.¹ For the younger Abelard and Heloise, sexuality was concomitant to the notion of an ideal, ennobling love.² This idealization of romantic love, however, only found tragedy as its fruition.

Upon their entry into a new reality, this idealization and valorization of the sublime with the passionate had to be reconfigured, with Abelard eventually abandoning the pursuit. Heloise, however, continued to cling tenaciously to this noble construction of love. Unlike Abelard, she did not see it as an obstruction to her role as nun and abbess; it was simply the skewed ideology of the Church that insinuated that such a love was base and ignoble, steeped in sin and error. The glorification of the union of body and soul--and one marked by heightened, carnal eroticism--within an order that forbade such was a sheer show of bravado. Heloise’s desire to uphold their love even after their entry into the religious life and the negotiation and evolution through their letters and their liturgical works is the subject of this thesis.

For Abelard and Heloise, the big question driving their letters pertains to the creation of the “authentic” religious subject. The negotiations that took place between

¹ Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 163.

² Ibid., 159.

them were, however, mostly overshadowed by Heloise's blatant display of sexuality. As such, their debate has oftentimes been reduced to a question of conversion from a life of past sexuality: did Heloise turn away from her past or not?

Scholars have long been divided along the conversion/non-conversion axis. The debate regarding Heloise's conversion revolves around the opening lines of her third letter to Abelard:

I would not want to give you cause for finding me disobedient in anything, so I have set the bridle of your injunction on the words which issue from my unbounded grief; thus in writing at least I may moderate what it is difficult or rather impossible to forestall in speech. For nothing is less under our control than our heart – having no power to command it we are forced to obey. And so when its impulses move us, none of us can stop their sudden promptings from easily breaking out, and even more easily overflowing into words which are the ever-ready indications of the heart's emotions: as it is written, 'A man's words are spoken from the overflowing of the heart.' I will therefore hold my hand from writing words which I cannot restrain my tongue from speaking; would that a grieving heart would be as ready to obey as a writer's hand!³

Proponents of conversion argue that Heloise's self-imposed censoring of her words is a sign that supposedly shows her full capitulation to Abelard's wishes and thus that she has suddenly and miraculously learned to love Christ singularly and wholeheartedly.

Opponents of this view, however, read this same passage as the triumph of male control over a female subject, indicating that Heloise was simply writing what Abelard wanted to hear in order to ensure his continued responses to her letters.⁴ In this case, the real problem does not lie in attempting to excavate a definitive answer from the limited

³ Heloise, "Letter 6," 94. Unless otherwise noted, Betty Radice's English translation of the letters is used. *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. and ed. Betty Radice, rev. M. T. Clanchy. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

⁴ For a brief history of this debate, see Barbara Newman, "Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloise," in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 46-75.

amount of written works by Heloise but whether such a question is a coherent and legitimate one in the first place.

Many commentators dealing with the question of Heloise's tumultuous "inner life" as an abbess have focused primarily on Heloise's refusal to relinquish her sexual desires for Abelard.⁵ In these cases, her desire has been construed as a form of subversion and transgression, thus relegating her to the position of the unruly female who must accept the "bridle of the [monastic] injunction."⁶ Instead of being used as a heuristic for dialogue, it places the female subject into a position that must be controlled and subjugated. Rather than desire being an agent of actualization for the female subject, it shuts down avenues for negotiations of subjectivity. Furthermore, the inordinate focus on Heloise as a romantic heroine obscures the fact that she is also acutely anguished by the uncertainty of her heavenly reward. Despite claiming that she has done everything for the love of Abelard, Heloise still expresses her anxiety about her spiritual salvation. She believes that in her struggle against her own body and subjectivity, God will grant her a little "corner of heaven."⁷

Thus, Heloise's sudden redirection in the third letter should be approached for what it simply is, as a well-calculated rhetorical move on her part, for she knows that Abelard will not confront the question of her continued desire directly. Heloise starts afresh on another subject which she knows he would be more amenable to discuss, the

⁵ See, for example, Linda Kaufmann, "The Irremediable: Heloise to Abelard," in *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 63-90, and Peggy Kamuf, "Marriage Contracts: The Letters of Abelard and Heloise," in *Fictions of Feminine Desire* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 1-43.

⁶ Heloise, "Letter 6," 93.

⁷ Ibid., "Letter 4," 71.

management of the Oratory of the Paraclete. As such, though Heloise's third letter to Abelard is submerged in mundane theological concerns, Robert Edwards argues that the third letter of Heloise continues an ongoing struggle and negotiation of and for desire.⁸ Desire here, however, is not only the overtly passionate eroticism that suffuses Heloise's first two letters to Abelard,⁹ but desire in the broader sense, encompassing her own longing to attain intellectual communion with him.

Prior to this letter, Heloise has already been sending a deluge of complaints to Abelard. She demands remuneration for the infinite debt he supposedly owes her; she pesters him to address her old perpetual complaint against God; she demands consolation for her emotional distress. In a sense, Heloise is seeking recognition from Abelard, asking him to realize that he has left her mired in their past, that he has forgotten about her after his castration. Abelard's conversion is a continued source of anxiety and despair for Heloise, as she can no longer request the same sort of idealized engagement with him she so treasured from their past. Her dilemma arises from a desire explicitly forbidden by traditional monastic profession: a desire to let her past shape and influence her present and future religious life and a desire to construct a new order that would allow her to continue upholding her cherished notions of secular love.

Giles Constable notes that in the twelfth century, the entry into the religious life was likened to a second baptism for the devotee. He cites Bernard of Clairvaux, whose

⁸ Robert Edwards, "Abelard and Heloise: Conversion and Irreducible Desire," in *The Flight from Desire: Augustine and Ovid to Chaucer* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 60.

⁹ Morgan Powell, "Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete," in *Listening to Heloise: the Voice of a Twelfth-century Woman*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 258.

treatise, “On precept and dispensation,” depicts the act of entry as one that “reformed the divine image in man, making [him] like Christ in the manner of baptism. And as if he has been baptized for a second time... [he] again [puts] on Christ.”¹⁰ Bernard of Clairvaux expounds this notion of a second baptism in a later sermon, “On double baptism,” claiming that in the rebaptism afforded by monastic profession, “it is not enough now to renounce the Devil and his works [as in first baptism]; it is necessary to renounce likewise the world and one’s own will.”¹¹ Heloise’s assumption of the nun’s habit together with her monastic professions should have served to sever her ties fully with her former life.¹²

Entry into the monastery was of course marked by periods of constant adjustment between the past secular life and the present strictly religious one, between the demand for conformity and the desire for individuality. What marks Heloise’s experience is not the seemingly protracted adjustment period but the sense of unwillingness to let go of her past. The struggle between the competing claims of the past and the present in order to

¹⁰ Bernard of Clairvaux, “*De praecepto et dispensatione*, XVII, 54,” *Sancti Bernardi opera*, ed. Jean Leclercq and Charles Talbot (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1963), 3:288-289, quoted in Giles Constable, “The Ceremonies and Symbolism of Entering the Religious Life and Taking the Monastic Habit, from the Fourth to the Twelfth Century,” in *Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi Sull’Alto Medioevo* 33, no. 2 (1987): 801-802.

¹¹ Bernard of Clairvaux, “*De diversis* XI,” *Sancti Bernardi opera*, ed. Jean Leclercq and Charles Talbot (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1977), 6.1:126, quoted in Giles Constable, “Ceremonies and Symbolism,” 802.

¹² One of the widely deployed arguments against Heloise’s authorship of the letters claims that as the righteous abbess of a revered oratory, she simply cannot have experienced, much less speak about, her sexual fantasies and tenacious clinging to the secular life. At its heart is a refusal to accept the sexuality and even the emotional lives of those within cloister walls, a notion that is compounded and extended by the hegemony of the medieval Church. Heloise’s assumption of the habit, however, is not without problem. As Abelard recounts, Heloise “sobs into Cornelia’s lament...[and] so saying she hurried to the altar, quickly took up the veil blessed by the bishop and publicly bound herself to the religious life.” “*Historia Calamitatum*,” 18.

preserve ideals and values culminates in tragedy, the most radical confrontation of the person with the ideal. Heloise's position as abbess has been likened by Jaeger as the position of the blind Oedipus; both are testimonies to the overwhelming force to which they have sacrificed their selves.¹³ Still, the anguish that arises from this tragedy is not an empty longing for what was lost, for Father Chrysogonus Waddell notes that "the mere fact that there is so much anguish for her is proof positive that she is already well along the path of conversion, which, in the monastic tradition, is an on-going process. There are degrees of humility, degrees of truth, degrees of love. The process of conversion is begun already with the very first step along the way of humility, truth, and love, but often enough remains something less than perfect up to the moment of one's final gasp."¹⁴ It indicates the noble quality of spiritual struggle more than the failure of conversion. Beyond this lies the transformative potential afforded by crisis, both for the individual and the surrounding ethos.

Father Chrysogonus Waddell argues that the personal letters were actually composed as a literary set-up for the Rule for the Nuns of the Paraclete.¹⁵ According to him, an epistolary approach gives the author of the Rule great latitude in crafting the "pre-history and early history of the Paraclete...as experienced 'from within' by the chief protagonists of the drama, the founder Abelard and the first abbess Heloise."¹⁶ Waddell also adduces that because of the highly personal encounters outlined within the prefatory

¹³ Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, 170.

¹⁴ Chrysogonus Waddell, "Nature and Sources of Institutiones," in *The Paraclete statutes Institutiones nostrae: Troyes, Bibliotheque municipale, Ms. 802, ff. 89r-90v* (Trappist: Gethsemani Abbey, 1987), 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁶ Chrysogonus Waddell, "Nature and Sources of Institutiones," 44.

letters, the future generations of nuns at the Paraclete “would be introduced to the way of life set forth in their unique Rule...by a series of ‘letters’ that not only details the historical facts, but also bares the souls of founder and foundress, and describes their spiritual evolution.”¹⁷

While the letters do portray a highly personal affair, they are “stamped by both a consciousness of the world’s attention and by exacting standards of literary expression.”¹⁸ The letters, discovered together with the foundational records of the oratory, were also meant to be texts read out aloud to the community.¹⁹ Morgan Powell notes that Heloise’s coalescence of the pronouns “we” and “I” cannot simply be attributed to proper decorum or a rhetorical ambivalence but an actual attempt by Heloise to establish a communal identity within the Oratory.²⁰ Because of this function, the nuns are encouraged to participate in the dialogue carried out in the letters between the two former lovers, now brothers and sisters in Christ.

Aside from the ritual of reading, there is also the consideration of spiritual direction for the nuns: spiritual direction within the Paraclete was deeply personal and emotional, and this was carried out in seeming opposition to the spirit of Abelard’s Rule, which drew heavily from a militaristic and impersonal notion of monastic life. The letters highlight the humanity of the abbess and the founder, a fact that could easily be obscured by their larger-than-life personas both within and without the monastery walls. More

¹⁷ Chrysogonus Waddell, “Nature and Sources of Institutiones,” 44.

¹⁸ Nicholas Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches, 1100-1300* (Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 60.

¹⁹ Morgan Powell, “Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete,” 259.

²⁰ Ibid.

importantly for the nuns, the spiritual struggle of their revered abbess is laid bare to them. Heloise, once a woman of the world, fought her demons daily. It was not only a matter of sexuality, though; Heloise had to fight her continued identification with the secular realm, especially in her claims of undying love for Abelard. As such, emotions are elevated as agents of pedagogy and are established as a fundamental part of the monastery's ritual of entry.²¹

This focus on the emotional aspect is also in line with the ethos of the twelfth century, with religious devotion increasingly drawing upon affect and emotional depth.²² This was a period when sincerity in monastic profession and living became a standard battle cry of reformers.²³ This "new spirituality" that was gaining purchase focused on spiritual liberty, inwardness, and the search for a life modeled on the gospels and on the human life of Christ.²⁴ The cultivation of a direct and personal relationship with God became one of the hallmarks of religious life, if not a primary condition for entering the monastery. This was a less prominent ideal during the early Middle Ages, as monks and nuns had been offered to the monasteries and cloisters at tender ages.²⁵ The move to

²¹ Eriugena (c.810-c.877), one of Charles the Bald's philosophers, also claims that emotions play a big role in human cognition. Stephen Nichols, "An Intellectual Anthropology of Marriage," in *The New Medievalism*, ed. Marina S. Brownlee, Kevin Brownlee, and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 83.

²² In "Liturgy and Identity at the Paraclete: Heloise, Abelard and the Evolution of Cistercian Reform," Constant J. Mews locates the establishment of the Paraclete within this current of change. See especially pp. 22-24. In *The Poetic and Musical Legacy of Heloise and Abelard*, ed. Marc Stewart and David Wulstan (Ottawa: Institute of Mediaeval Music, 2003), 19-33.

²³ Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 261.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 263.

interiorize and personalize worship and relationship to God lays the foundation for the so-called “rise of the individual” in the twelfth century.

The word “individual” as it is used today does not have any twelfth-century correlatives. The closest terms, *individuum*, *individualis*, and *singularis*, derive from logic and not from anthropology.²⁶ Despite this, logicians invariably drew from their own personal human experiences to elucidate and expound logical categories.²⁷ A similar idea is presented in the idea of the “self,” though this is divorced from the abstract connotations of the term. Instead, it is expressed through terms such as “knowing oneself,” “descending into oneself,” or “considering oneself.”²⁸ Abelard himself gave his *Ethics* the alternate title *scito te ipsum*, Know Yourself.

One of the areas of worship greatly affected by this sweeping reform was the liturgy, which was marred by fears of hypocrisy and gross misunderstanding.²⁹ The Rule of St. Benedict notes the importance of letting the mind conform to the voice whenever the Psalms and prayers are recited.³⁰ This, however, was not a license to change liturgical texts that one considered unfit; one had to adapt one’s mind to the texts rather than

²⁶ Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 64.

²⁷ According to Colin Morris, the “central problem of medieval philosophy was the relation of the individual object (*unum singulare*) with the general or universal class to which it belonged, and humanity was often taken as a test case in this argument.” *Discovery of the Individual*, 64.

²⁸ Colin Morris, *Discovery of the Individual*, 65.

²⁹ Several biblical passages were often cited to indicate the dichotomy that easily arose in communal worship. These included the Ps 61.5: “They blessed with their mouth but cursed with their heart;” Is 29:13: “The people with their lips glorify me, but their heart is far from me;” and Ez 33:31: “The Jews hear thy words and do them not: for they turn them into a song of their mouth, and their heart goeth after their covetousness.” Giles Constable, “The Concern for Sincerity and Understanding in Liturgical Prayer, Especially in the Twelfth Century,” in *Culture and Spirituality in Medieval Europe* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 17-30.

³⁰ The traditional dictum of “*Ut mens nostra concordat voci nostrae*” is from the Rule of Saint Benedict. Giles Constable, “Concern for Sincerity,” 27n4.

adapting the texts to suit the interests of authenticity.³¹ Such a tradition provoked Heloise to deplore both the texts and practice as “inauthentic,” leading her to request from Abelard a new hymnal to be used at the Paraclete. Heloise’s request for the Paraclete hymnal was based on her observations, quoted by Abelard in his preface to the hymns, that:

There is such great confusions in the hymns that we use that the superscribed title never or rarely distinguishes what or whose they are...the inequality of the syllables is frequently so great that they scarcely fit the melody of the songs, without which no hymns, described as ‘Praise of God with song,’ can exist. For several feasts, proper hymns are lacking, as for the Innocents, the Evangelists, or those holy women who were not at all virgins or martyrs.

There are not a few instances where it is necessary for the singers to lie, either because of the necessity of the season, or because of the inclusion of some falsehood... Not only does the non-observance of the appropriate season or time of day create a lie, but also the authors of certain hymns have in some things so exceeded due measure, either through proclaiming absurdities by some compunction of spirit or through an incautious desire to extol the saints in pious zeal, that we often proclaim some things in these hymns that are against our conscience, being quite foreign, as it were, to the truth.³²

Heloise’s request sits squarely within the ethos of the twelfth-century and in the general concern outlined in Abelard’s and Heloise’s letters regarding the creation of the authentic religious subject. Hymns, rather than sermons, are the perfect vehicle for this project as they combined emotions with pedagogy, paralleling the model exemplified in using the letters as texts for spiritual direction. Thus, more than being a preface to the Rule, the letters serve to elucidate the development of the type of monastic profession Abelard and Heloise wanted in the Paraclete. They, however, are not to be treated solely as monastic

³¹ Constant J. Mews, “Liturgy and Identity at the Paraclete,” 28.

³² Ibid., 30-31.

documents nor are they simply a means of delineating moral instruction for the nuns.³³ They are unique in that the concerns were not purely historical or pedagogical but exemplified the clash of two strong individual beings who were all too human. As such, it is simplistic to claim that these letters swerve in one direction or another, for they are neither simply personal letters nor are they simply religious ones.

Neither do they appear written for purely historical-literary ends as Waddell suggests, who goes on to claim that the letters were by a single author, most probably Abelard. He then attempts to salvage Heloise's role in the creation of the letters by asserting that while this might be the case, it "in no way excludes the participation of Heloise, since the presentation of themes and exchange of ideas set forth in the letters probably corresponds to actual discussions between the two."³⁴ In what ways Heloise could have "participated" is never made clear. Worse, it ironically serves to invalidate her contribution to the "project," for the assumption Waddell works with is that Heloise, the perpetual student of Abelard, can only speak as the learner, never as the teacher. This has been a common descriptor for Heloise, that she was acting only in the capacity of a smart student, never as an individual thinker.

Brooke Findley has argued for the differing uses of *habitus* in the letters of Abelard and Heloise, ultimately tying it in with their respective contributions to a shared ethics.³⁵ *Habitus* has considerably different connotations: as the usual garment or attire;

³³ Mews traces the historical precedence of such a view in "Liturgy and Identity at the Paraclete." See especially pp. 19-24.

³⁴ Chrysogonus Waddell, "Nature and Sources of *Institutiones*," 53.

³⁵ Brooke Findley, "Does a Habit Make a Nun? A Case Study of Heloise's Influence on Abelard's Ethical Philosophy," *Vivarium* 44 (2006): 248-275.

the quality, nature, innate character of a person, place, or thing; and an acquired or a perfect state or condition.³⁶ Both writers start by using *habitus* to signify the garment; they, however, diverge on its tropological use. Heloise uses *habitus* as the opposite of the *animus*, the interior self. She considers the *habitus*, located in the physical body, as the site of the hypocrisy and deceit.³⁷

Abelard on the other hand argues that the *habitus* as garment enables the wearer to acquire virtue by habit. Abelard offers himself as prime example of this conversion necessitated by the wearing of the *habitus*. Initially, he admits that “it was shame and confusion in [his] remorse and misery than any devout wish for conversion which brought [him] to seek shelter in a monastery cloister.”³⁸ His subsequent letters to Heloise, however, detail his gradual acceptance to his new way of life and his continued investment in it. Heloise, on the other hand, also insists that her manner of entry was not one undertaken due to a love for God but rather as a way to show her love for Abelard. Unlike him, however, she has yet to learn how to embrace fully her way of life, and while she may already have left the secular world, albeit by a forced choice, she has not renounced it fully. Such fine nuances in the use of *habitus* might perhaps be taken as the “internal discrepancies” Waddell claimed never existed in the letters. More importantly, however, the word usage reflects a divergence of philosophical approaches to the religious way of life; it highlights Heloise’s role as an independent thinker, one whose position is neither a derivative of nor an extension of Abelard’s.

³⁶ Ibid., 248.

³⁷ Brooke Findley, “Does a Habit Make a Nun?,” 255.

³⁸ Peter Abelard, “*Historia Calamitatum*,” in Radice, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 18.

This presupposition that Heloise never had a mind of her own extends into the often unchallenged assumption that she slavishly followed Abelard's Rule in governing the Paraclete.³⁹ In fact, as Waddell shows in his study of the *Institutiones Nostrae*, Abelard's Rule was only one of the sources for the actual Rule used in the abbey, and the redactor of the statutes used considerable freedom in drawing from it.⁴⁰ Constant J. Mews has argued that Heloise could very well have been the redactor of the *Institutiones nostrae*.⁴¹ More importantly, this document shows that the project undertaken by Abelard and Heloise at the Paraclete was the establishment of *religio* rather than of *vita monastica*: "With the Lord looking over us and bestowing certain places to us, we have sent some women in sufficient number from among ourselves to observe religion. We are adding however observances for our good plan so that what the mother has adhered to unchangeably, the daughters may adhere to uniformly."⁴² By the twelfth century, the term *religio* has taken on a very different connotation from its classical roots. Whereas it was initially used to mean conscientiousness or religious scruple, by the time of Abelard and Heloise it had evolved to mean an obligation that bound individuals to serve God.⁴³ *Religio* was a way of life rather than a system of beliefs. It was not only an adaptation of

³⁹ Chrysogonus Waddell, "Nature and Sources of *Institutiones*," 32.

⁴⁰ The other source that Chrysogonus Waddell identifies is the Cistercian *Instituta*. See pp. 40-56 of Waddell, "Nature and Sources of *Institutiones Nostrae*."

⁴¹ Constant J. Mews, *The Lost Love Letters: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 158.

⁴² The mothers and the daughters refer to the motherhouse of the Paraclete and its daughter houses, such as La Magdalen at Trainel and Notre Dame at La Pommeraye. Constant J. Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, 158.

⁴³ Giles Constable, *Reformation*, 7.

the same lifestyle that monks led; it was, rather, a way of living in and of itself, one dictated by a constellation of precepts that revolved around divine obligations.

A related concern for Heloise is the need for *cura monialium* to be administered by Abelard to the nuns of the Paraclete. The historical trajectory of how Abelard comes to accept the *cura* as a spiritual exercise rather than a burden can be traced from his *Historia*. Admittedly, Abelard's eventual assumption of the role of spiritual caregiver was prompted not by any remorse regarding his lack of concern for Heloise and the nuns of the Paraclete but by his desire to acquire benefits in return for giving them his care. His motives for administering the *cura* were undeniably self-centered. In the *Historia*, Abelard writes that his decision "to provide for the sisters of the Paraclete, to manage their affairs, to watch over them in person too, so that they would revere me the more" was prompted by his distressing persecution "at the hands of the monks who were my sons." In the Paraclete nuns he saw a chance to redeem his failures as an abbot: "I thought I could turn to the sisters as a haven of peace and safety from the raging storms, find repose there for a while, and at least achieve something amongst them though I had failed with the monks. Indeed, the more they needed me in their weakness, the more it would benefit me."⁴⁴ Despite such questionable incipience, the *cura* eventually becomes a fundamental tenet of his religious teachings; in his Rule, it is "men's duty to provide for women's needs" and it draws on scriptural and theological texts to give credence to this claim. Abelard takes his role as spiritual guide seriously, perhaps threatened by Heloise's warning that after Abelard, they "may perhaps have another to guide us...[who] may be

⁴⁴ Peter Abelard, "*Historia Calamitatum*," 40.

less likely to feel concern for [them], or be less readily heard by [them]; or indeed, he may be no less willing, but less able.”⁴⁵

Abelard responds to this challenge laid out by Heloise by writing the History of the Order of Nuns and the Rule of the Paraclete, coupled with a host of other written liturgical works in the form of sermons and hymns. By completing the symbolic world of the Paraclete, Abelard offers his consolation to Heloise in the best way he knew how. Within these works lies the development and evolution of the distinctive ways in which both Heloise and Abelard interpret religious life as set out in their letters, both in the *epistolae duorum amantium*, which is the set of anonymous letters that Constant Mews argues are the earliest letters exchanged between Abelard and Heloise, and the so-called “personal letters.” However, it is not only their differing notions of religious life that deserve examination, but also the development of their own personal relationship to each other many years after their separation. This thesis traces this evolution as it extended beyond their famous, extant letters, eventually informing the later ethical and theological works of Abelard and, consequently, the liturgical and poetic texts of the Paraclete.

Chapter one identifies Heloise’s contribution to Abelard’s thought and philosophy, arguing that she also served to influence the trajectory and shape they would take in his later years. The ideal of love that Heloise upheld becomes the motivating factor for her request for a new *religio* to be followed in the Paraclete and impacts Abelard’s later works in ethical philosophy and theology. Still, as Heloise was well aware, her demand cannot simply be due to her desire to accommodate her own personal

⁴⁵ Heloise, “Letter 6,” 111.

interests. She thus uses her own experience to generalize her critique of monastic life, the subject of Chapter Two, “Rhetoric of the Body.” Heloise uses the figure of the menstruating female body to break down traditional binaries that structured religious life, arguing that the disavowal of the body required upon entry into the cloister fails to realize an important truth of being human. As Heloise will not assume the conversion narrative Abelard wants from her, she negotiates with Abelard for a new way of becoming an authentic religious subject. Chapter three, “Negotiations and Love Songs,” argues that Heloise’s concern for religious “authenticity,” notably in the liturgical hymns used in the Paraclete, is due to the privileged role that music played in the early stages of their relationship. It uses Abelard’s Easter sequence for the Paraclete, the *Epithalamica*, to show how understanding music’s role in Abelard and Heloise’s relationship colors and reshapes the understanding of their joint musical project at the oratory. A rich, multi-layered sequence, its placement within the liturgy of the Paraclete and its expansive use of both biblical and bridal imageries is taken as a focal point for showing the evolution of Abelard and Heloise’s relationship after their entry into the religious life.

Chapter One: “Suckled on the breasts of the Muses:” Heloise and Philosophy

Abelard’s life, whether for good or bad, is intrinsically tied to the lives of the nuns of the Paraclete. He was not only the founder of the oratory but, more importantly, its religious director, a position that required him to expend great resources and energy to mold the symbolic world of the nuns. The letters exchanged between Abelard and Heloise, all of which form part of the Paraclete’s official record,¹ mark the attempts to structure the symbolic order of the oratory of the Paraclete with a view towards cultivating the “authentic religious self.” Their ideas of what exactly constitutes authenticity never fully converge, however, and their negotiation regarding this moved beyond the purview of the letters to the liturgical works Abelard wrote and composed for the Paraclete. This intellectual exchange, however, is obscured by the notion that Heloise had nothing to contribute to her former teacher’s ideas. Skepticisms about and outright disregard for Heloise’s role in shaping the eventual trajectory taken by Abelard’s thoughts are usually derivative from her status as “only” Abelard’s student and lover. Henry Adams, in his classic book, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, perfectly encapsulates Heloise’s traditionally marginalized role:

The twelfth century, with all its sparkle, would be dull without Abelard and Heloise. *With infinite regret, Heloise must be left out of the story, because she was not a philosopher or a poet or an artist, but only a Frenchwoman to the last millimeter of her shadow.* Even though one may suspect that her famous letters to Abelard are, for the most part, by no means above scepticism, she was, by French standards, worth at least a dozen Abelards, if only because she called St. Bernard a false prophet. *Unfortunately, French standards, by which she must be judged in*

¹ Elizabeth Freeman, “The public and private functions of Heloise’s letters,” *Pergamon* 23, no.1 (1997): 15.

our ignorance, take for granted that she philosophized only for the sake of Abelard, while Abelard taught philosophy to her not so much because he believed in philosophy or in her as because he believed in himself. To this day, Abelard remains a problem as perplexing as he must have been to Heloise, and almost as fascinating. As the west portal of Chartres is the door through which one must of necessity enter the Gothic architecture of the thirteenth century, so Abelard is the portal of approach to the Gothic thought and philosophy within. Neither art nor thought has a modern equivalent; only Heloise, like Isolde, unites the ages.²

Adams strikes a double blow against Heloise: she is *only* a Frenchwoman -- that she was “to the last millimeter of her shadow” signals that she could never have been anything else -- and she philosophized *only* because of Abelard. It deprives Heloise of her own intellectual achievements and her own individual subjectivity separate from her famous husband. It does not help, of course, that Heloise left very few written works, especially in comparison to Abelard’s own oeuvre. And since most of these were personal letters rather than outright philosophical or theological tracts, their value as evidence for her intellectual prowess is easily dismissed.

The evidence offered by the small dossier for the mutual influence of Abelard and Heloise to each other’s thoughts are best corroborated by the works Abelard published after this exchange. It is, obviously, an inexact science, resting mostly on intelligent speculation about the innermost thoughts and feelings of the two protagonists. Though recent scholarship has argued for a much bigger role played by Heloise in the development of Abelard’s philosophy, most notably in his *Ethics* (1135) and his *Theologia scholarium* (ca. 1139), the paucity of extant written work by Heloise creates

² Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913), 286-287. My emphasis.

great difficulty in isolating specific ideas that were uniquely hers.³ Her known works amount only to the three letters to Abelard, two letters to Peter the Venerable, and a collaborative work on moral philosophy with Abelard, the *Problemata Heloisae*.

Clanchy points to the differing scholastic backgrounds of Heloise and Abelard as a starting point for examining Heloise's influence on Abelard's ideas. While Abelard focused his energies into disputations and the study of logic, Heloise's education was one steeped greatly in literature and classical philosophers.⁴ As such, whether Abelard would agree to it or not, Heloise must have had a pervasive influence in his work, as evidenced, for example, by his defense of the pagan philosophers in his *Theologia scholarium*.

Still, Heloise's influence on and contribution to Abelard's thought does not lie in specific, discreet pieces of knowledge that he incorporated in and eventually built upon in his works, making it harder to attribute first instances of ideas with a high degree of certainty. Furthermore, even the philosophical and theological ideas presented by Heloise, such as her pleas against marriage, were not her own innovations. What she contributes to Abelard, as Clanchy points out, was "her imaginative understanding of the classics and, in particular, her passionate feelings about the pagan sages."⁵ In short, Heloise's contribution was the intellectual moves and approaches eventually appropriated by Abelard.

³ For a discussion of Heloise's contributions, see M. T. Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life* (Massachusetts: Blackwell 1997), especially pp. 169-173, 257-260, and 277-282.

⁴ M. T. Clanchy, *Abelard*, 169.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 277.

This chapter argues for Heloise's own achievements as a learned woman, if not a philosopher in her own right. External evidence buttresses this claim, most notably that of Peter the Venerable (ca. 1092-1156) and Hugh Metel (1080-1150), with both attesting to Heloise's own talents and intellectual passions separate from Abelard's. Because of the role she played in their relationship as well as her insistent philosophical idealization of their relationship, she prompted Abelard to address these challenges in his later works. Heloise's famous polemic against marriage can be seen as a means of protecting this ideal relationship with Abelard; the type of relationship she wanted with Abelard was a reflection of her own intellectual pursuits.

Heloise was already well known for her intellectual talents as attested to by Peter Abelard himself; she was not merely his student but his competent equal. This fact reorganizes the constellation of critical inquiry surrounding Heloise: she was not an "empty vessel" to be filled by his wisdom and learning. In fact, it was because of the libidinal attachment that Heloise shows towards the love of letters that Abelard is able to manipulate this to his advantage:

Knowing the girl's knowledge and love of letters I thought she would be all the more ready to consent, and that even when separated we could enjoy each other's presence by exchange of written messages in which we could write many things more audaciously than we could say them, and so need never lack the pleasures of conversation."⁶

Because of her reputation, Heloise is figured as a worthy intellectual adversary of Abelard, a fact that has often been obscured in the commentaries on Heloise. He construed Heloise as a worthy conquest, viewing her initially as another one of his

⁶ Peter Abelard, "*Historia Calamitatum*," 10.

intellectual opponents that needed to be vanquished. His narrative of seduction portrays it as cold and calculated, with the end result being that Heloise will submit willingly to him. His passion for vanquishing and publicly humiliating his opponents is well-known, such as his description of his entanglement with his former teacher, William of Compiegne. According to Abelard, during a session on logic, he produced “a sequence of clear logical arguments” against his teacher’s view of universals. This led to William abandoning “his previous attitude towards universals...Consequently, when [he] had modified or rather been forced to give up his original position, his lectures fell into such contempt that he was scarcely accepted on any other points of dialectic.”⁷ Heloise was not spared from this, whether as Abelard’s student, wife, or sister in Christ.

While Abelard glosses over Heloise’s intellectual prowess in favor of her physical attributes, Peter the Venerable’s assessment of Heloise exalted her talents. The abbot of Cluny at the time of Abelard’s death, he attests to Heloise’s achievements, both as abbess of the Paraclete and as a secular student:

I had not yet quite passed the bounds of youth and reached early manhood when I knew of your name and your reputation, not yet for religion but for your virtuous and praiseworthy studies. I used to hear at that time of the woman who although still caught up in the obligations of the world, devoted all her application to knowledge of letters, something which is very rare, and to the pursuit of secular learning, and that not even the pleasures of the world, with its frivolities and delights, could distract her from this worthy determination to study the arts. 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,

⁷ Peter Abelard, “*Historia Calamitatum*,” 5.

you have surpassed all women in carrying out your purpose, and have gone further than almost every man.⁸

Peter's glowing sentiments about Heloise greatly expand Abelard's initial sketch of Heloise: "In looks she did not rank lowest, while in the extent of her learning she stood supreme. A gift for letters is rare in women that it added greatly to her charm and had made her the most renowned through the realm."⁹ As Peter attests, Heloise did not merely have a "gift;" like Abelard, she also devoted herself to the pursuit of letters. The fact that "nothing could distract her from this worthy determination to study the arts" shows that her pursuit was a fundamental part of her life. It was not something superficial or merely a thing upon which her reputation rested; much like Abelard, she fashioned herself as a true philosopher, too.

Furthermore, in putting Heloise's name before his own, Peter the Venerable was deliberately placing himself in a position subordinate to her.¹⁰ According to *ars dictaminis*, the medieval document that lay out the proper rhetoric to be used in letter writing, the person in a higher rank or position should put their name before the person occupying a lower rank in the *salutatio*.¹¹ Heloise herself calls out Abelard for this lapse:

⁸ Peter the Venerable, "Letter (115) to Heloise," in Radice, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 217-218.

⁹ Peter Abelard, "*Historia Calamitatum*," 10.

¹⁰ Abelard uses this rhetorical technique in order to assert Heloise's role as the Bride of Christ, while Peter the Venerable addresses Heloise as his "venerable and greatly beloved sister in Christ," "the handmaid of God," and "guide and mistress of the handmaids of God." "Letter (115) to Heloise," 217 and "Letter (168) to Heloise," 226.

¹¹ "The Salutation is an expression of greeting conveying a friendly sentiment not inconsistent with the social rank of the persons involved...it should be noted in regard to salutations that the names of the recipients should always be placed before the names of the senders...unless – and only when – a more important man is writing to a less important man. For then the name of the sender should be placed first, so that his distinction is demonstrated by the very position of the names." Anonymous of Bologna, "The Principles of Letter Writing," in *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts*, tr. James J. Murphy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 3-4.

I am surprised, my only love that contrary to custom in letter-writing and, indeed, to the natural order, you have thought fit to put my name before yours in the greeting which heads your letter, so that we have the woman before the man, wife before husband, handmaid before lord, nun before monk, deaconess before priest and abbess before abbot. Surely the right and proper order is for those who write to their superiors or equals to put their names before their own, but in letters to inferiors, precedence in order of address follows precedence in rank.¹²

More importantly, Peter the Venerable's description of Heloise's pursuit of knowledge directly parallels the definition of a philosopher she invokes as part of her arguments against marriage. Ironically, she speaks it through Abelard in the *Historia*:

Consequently, the great philosophers of the past have despised the world, not renouncing it so much as escaping from it, and have denied themselves every pleasure so as to find peace in the arms of philosophy alone. The greatest of them, Seneca, gives 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.'¹³

A key feature of the philosophic way of life is highlighted here: it is mandatory for the philosopher to disengage from secular, mundane concerns in order to hold oneself up to a higher ideal offered by philosophy.

Another witness to Heloise's talents was Hugh Metel, an Augustinian canon of Toul in Lorraine (c. 1080-c.1150) who wrote two letters to Heloise, both of which were unanswered.¹⁴ Mews has pointed out that the letters by Hugh Metel were written around the first half of the 1130's, most probably after the time the Paraclete was granted papal

¹² Heloise, "Letter 4," 63.

¹³ Peter Abelard, "*Historia Calamitatum*," 16-17.

¹⁴ Constant J. Mews, "Hugh Metel, Heloise, and Peter Abelard: The Letters of an Augustinian Canon and the Challenge of Innovation in Twelfth-Century Lorraine," *Viator* 32 (2001): 59-91.

protection in November of 1131.¹⁵ This parallels Abelard's remark in the *Historia* that "the more rarely she [Heloise] allowed herself to be seen (so that she could devote herself without distraction to prayer and meditation on holy things in a closed cell), the more eagerly did those outside demand her presence and her spiritual conversation for guidance."¹⁶ Heloise's acumen as an abbess was beginning to bring her admirers who were very much eager to make contact with her. Clanchy writes that within twenty-five years of assuming leadership of the fledgling oratory, the Paraclete already owned so much property that it looks as if "it had colonized the whole area around the Seine between Troyes and Provins."¹⁷ The cartulary of the Paraclete, which records the endowments of the oratory, highlights both Heloise's achievement and administrative acumen.¹⁸ Hugh Metel, however, moves beyond merely praising her achievements as an abbess:

*To Heloise, venerable abbess of the Paraclete, Hugh Metel, a humble man: sing praise to the Lord on harp and cymbal. Your reputation, flying through the void, has resounded to us, what is worthy of resounding from you has made an impression on us. It has informed us that you have surpassed the female sex. How? By composing, by versifying, by renewing familiar words in new combination, and what is more excellent than everything, you have overcome womanly weakness and have hardened in manly strength.*¹⁹

¹⁵ Constant J. Mews, "Hugh Metel, Heloise, and Peter Abelard," 78.

¹⁶ Peter Abelard, *Historia Calamitatum*, 36.

¹⁷ M. T. Clanchy, *Abelard*, 238.

¹⁸ Mary Martin McLaughlin, "Heloise the Abbess," in *Listening to Heloise: the Voice of a Twelfth-century Woman*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 4. McLaughlin gives a sampling of the endowments acquired by Heloise in less than two decades of heading the abbey: "an annual gift of twenty hens to mills and ovens, tithes and tolls, extensive forests, fields, and vineyard scattered through more than sixty villages."

¹⁹ Constant J. Mews, "Hugh Metel, Heloise, and Peter Abelard," 77. Emphasis appears in the original text.

His focus on Heloise's skill in composing, versifying, and "renewing familiar words in new combination" sheds new light on Heloise's talents: she was not only greatly knowledgeable in secular learning and exceedingly competent as an abbess, she was also talented in poetics.

His second letter to Heloise is even more effusive and generous in its praise of Heloise's talents: "*To Heloise, abbess of great public fame, suckled on the breasts of the Muses, Hugh Metel, once a man, now a dwarf: may you now suckle on the words of true philosophy.*"²⁰ Breasts were the standard metaphor for spiritual wisdom, following the long exegetical tradition of the opening lines of the Song of Songs: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth: for thy breasts are better than wine."²¹ Here, Hugh Metel gives Heloise unsolicited advice, asking her to turn her allegiance from the pagan Muses and instead use her wisdom in the service of religion, the true philosophy.

Abelard, while acknowledging Heloise's "knowledge and great love of letters," still believes that she can never become a philosopher because she exhibits the "special weakness of the female sex for loose, undisciplined speech."²² He continues his impassioned diatribe against women in his Rule, casting women as invariably unable to become philosophers:

The tongue, as James says, is an intractable evil, and being smaller and more sensitive than all the other parts of the body, and it is the more mobile, so that whereas the others are wearied by movement, it does not tire when moving and finds inactivity a burden. The more sensitive it is in you, and the more flexible

²⁰ Constant J. Mews, "Hugh Metel, Heloise, and Peter Abelard," 78.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Andrea Nye, "A Woman's Thought or a Man's Discipline? The Letters of Abelard and Heloise," *Hypatia* 7, no. 3 (1992): 3.

from your softness of body, the more mobile and given to words it is, and can be seen to be the seedbed of all evil. The Apostle marks this vice especially in you when he absolutely forbids women to speak in church, and even on matters which concern God he permits them only to question their husbands at home...he particularly subjects them to silence, writing thus to Timothy on the point: 'A woman must be a learner, listening quietly and with due submission. I do not permit a woman to be a teacher, nor must a woman domineer over man; she should be quiet.'²³

Abelard is unclear about what the vice is in this case; is vice the act of gossiping or does vice equate to women's tongues? Ultimately, however, the blame is simply in being a woman. Abelard attempts to remedy this vice in his Rule for the Paraclete. He rewrites the Benedictine Rule, claiming that the three vows to be taken within the monastery were chastity, poverty, and silence, which replaces obedience. Unlike Hugh Metel who valued Heloise's speech act through her compositions, Abelard rejects the same talents as a vice.

Andrea Nye notes that the aggressive pedagogical method employed by Abelard paralleled his preferred field of philosophy, dialectic and logic.²⁴ This mode of discipline failed to turn her into a philosopher of his ilk. Indeed, by the time she wrote her first letter to Abelard a decade after their separation, Heloise makes it clear that she does not accept either his arguments or his methods of doing so.

Heloise's rejection of Abelard's manner of philosophizing is tied to her dissent from traditional religious worldviews as they pertained to love, marriage, and monastic profession.²⁵ Furthermore, she valued the intersection of the emotional and the rational in her approach to philosophy and theology, and she did not fear to appropriate works of the

²³ Peter Abelard, "Letter 8," 135.

²⁴ Abelard even describes his choice of vocation in militaristic terms, mirroring the life was supposed to inherit from his father, a knight. See page 3 of the *Historia* for Abelard's complete description. Nye, 4.

²⁵ Andrea Nye, "Woman's Thought or a Man's Discipline," 4.

pagan philosophers and to hoist them up to levels equal that of Christian thinkers. This influence is clearly evident in Abelard's *Theologia scholarium*, written in the late 1130's and about five years after their last extant letters to each other.²⁶

Heloise's influence also extends beyond the moral and religious credibility of Aristotle and his cohorts; she might have also inspired Abelard to refine his own moral philosophy. As with her influence in his theological works, Heloise's contribution was the place of an individual's feelings and emotions in actually living what one preaches. Both Clanchy and Luscombe point out that her paradigm of *nocens/innocens* becomes the cornerstone of Abelard's *Ethics*, written a year before he was condemned at the council of Sens in 1140.²⁷

Heloise's own achievements in moral philosophy take center stage in her collaboration with Abelard, the *Problemata Heloisae*.²⁸ This document, comprised of forty-two questions sent by Heloise and her nuns to Abelard, gathers together passages from the Old and New Testaments that pose textual difficulties to the Paraclete community. Interestingly, about half of the passages compiled directly concerned the questions of sin, judgment, and law. These are in fact the main purview of Abelard's

²⁶ See also David Luscombe's introduction to his book, *Peter Abelard's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), especially pp. xxiv-xxx, for a discussion on Abelard's use of pagan philosophers in his *Theologia* series.

²⁷ Heloise, referring to her supposed role in Abelard's downfall, writes that she was "wholly guilty" and "wholly innocent" (*plurimum nocens...plurimum innocens*) at the same time. She finds herself in such a paradoxical situation because "it is not the deed but the intention of the doer which makes the crime, and justice should weight not on what was done but the spirit in which it was done." See M. T. Clanchy, *Abelard*, 278.

²⁸ This work is datable between 1132 and 1135. See Peter Dronke, "Heloise's *Problemata* and Letters: Some Questions of Form and Content," in *Intellectuals and Poets in Medieval Europe*, (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1992) 297.

Ethics.²⁹ Heloise's last *problema* bucks the trend of the text when she poses a question that does not directly concern any biblical textual problem: "We inquire whether anyone can sin in doing what the Lord has permitted or even commanded (*Utrum aliquis in eo quod facit a Domino sibi concessum, vel etiam jussum, peccare possit quaerimus*)."³⁰ Heloise's last question finds a resonance in her second letter to Abelard: "It was not any sense of vocation which brought me to accept the austerities of the cloister, but your bidding alone (*Quam quidem iuvenulam ad monasticae conversationis asperitatem, non religionis devotio sed tua tantum pertraxit iussio*)."³¹ Abelard's response avoids the real implication of Heloise's inquiry: what is the moral standing of a person who lives a life she has not freely chosen, a life that has been forced upon her by her lord?³² This question is a clear and direct allusion to her life inside the monastery, a life that she does not freely choose but accepts under the command of Abelard. Abelard chooses not to engage her on this debate again, choosing instead to treat this from the point of view of sexual pleasure in marriage.

After his condemnation at the Council of Sens in 1140, Abelard issues a confession of faith directed neither to his prosecutors nor to the officials at Rome nor to his abbot at Cluny. Instead, Abelard addresses it to Heloise. That he performs such an act shows that his intention was not limited to "banish fearful anxiety from the heart within [Heloise's] breast" and to show her that he has "founded [his] conscience on the rock on

²⁹ M. T. Clanchy, *Abelard*, 279.

³⁰ Heloise, "*Problemata*," tr. Elizabeth McNamer, in Elizabeth McNamer, *The Education of Heloise: Methods, Content, and Purpose of Learning in the Twelfth Century*, 174. Latin text from *PL* 178:723A.

³¹ Heloise, "Letter 2," 54. Latin text from J. T. Muckle, "Personal Letters Between Abelard and Heloise," *Mediaeval Studies* 15 (1953): 72.

³² Peter Dronke, "Heloise's *Problemata*," 305.

which Christ built his Church.”³³ Such a highly theological and religious doctrine must be addressed by the confessor to one’s religious master -- in this case his abbot at Cluny and the Roman prelates -- and giving it to Heloise is a blatant show of his indebtedness to her.³⁴

In the *confessio*, he does not merely rehash the foundational doctrine of the Christian faith, but he also makes an emotional appeal to Heloise, as evidenced by the rhetorical moves he employs in the opening paragraph:

Heloise my sister, once dear to me in the world, now dearest to me in Christ, logic has made me hated by the world...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. I embrace in the arms of faith Him who acts divinely in the glorious flesh of a virgin which he assumed from the Paraclete.³⁵

This approach differs significantly from his *confession fidei universi*, which he addresses to the whole church and opens with no appeal to his audience, but instead jumps directly into a formal declamation against heresy.³⁶ This has prompted C. S. F. Burnett to hypothesize that this was probably the last letter Abelard wrote to Heloise.³⁷

Even more blasphemous than addressing this document to his former lover was his invocation of pagan literary elements in order to assure her of the strength of his faith: “This then is the faith on which I rest, from which I draw my strength in hope. Safely

³³ M. T. Clanchy, *Abelard*, 278.

³⁴ Abelard also issued another confession of faith, but it was also not addressed to any specific authority. Instead, the second *confessio* is addressed to the church in general. See C. S. F. Burnett, “Peter Abelard, *Confessio Fidei ‘Universis’*: A Critical Edition of Abelard’s Reply to Accusations of Heresy,” in *Mediaeval Studies* 48 (1986): 111-138.

³⁵ Peter Abelard, “Confession of Faith,” in Radice, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 211.

³⁶ C. S. F. Burnett, “*Confessio Fidei Universi*,” 112.

³⁷ Ibid., ““*Confessio Fidei ad Heloissam*”: Abelard’s Last Letter to Heloise?” in *Mittelaltinisches Jahrbuch* 21 (1986): 147-55.

anchored in it, I do not fear the barking of Scylla, I laugh at the whirlpool of Charybdis, and have no dread of the Sirens' deadly songs. The storm may rage but I am unshaken, though the winds may blow they leave me unmoved; for the rock of my foundation stands firm."³⁸ This is a clear allusion to Odysseus, who had to face the challenge presented by Scylla and Charybdis in order to reach his home, Ithaca. On one level, his appropriation of a pagan author for a religious goal seems to be a direct salute to Heloise's own valorization of the pagan thinkers as equal to religious ones.³⁹ For Heloise, however, this allusion might have had a far weightier emotional impact: she was still Penelope to Abelard's Odysseus.

Penelope is often invoked as the timeless embodiment of patience and marital fidelity. Weaving and unweaving the shroud of Laertes, she holds out for the promise of reunion with her lost beloved. Heloise, too, had long been exhorted by Abelard to practice the virtue of patience. In the prayer with which he closes his third letter to her, Abelard asks that "now, Lord, what thou hast mercifully begun, most mercifully end and those whom thou hast parted for a time on earth, unite forever to thyself in heaven."⁴⁰ Abelard thus acknowledges that God separated them on earth, if only that they might be together with Him in heaven. This promise of heavenly union, along with the requisite persevering on Earth, was the best consolation Abelard could offer Heloise.

Unlike Penelope, however, marital fidelity was not a concern of Heloise, who denigrated the institution of marriage as polluting her pure relationship with Abelard. As

³⁸ Peter Abelard, "Confession of Faith," 212.

³⁹ M. T. Clanchy, *Abelard*, 171-172.

⁴⁰ Peter Abelard, "Letter 5," 89.

she points out in her first letter to Abelard, marriage is the opposite of love.⁴¹ This is the corrective to Abelard's own redacted version in the *Historia*, where he claims that Heloise argued against their marriage based on two grounds alone: the hindrances marriage would present to his studies and to the dignified philosophic way of life.

Heloise uses both religious and pagan sources against marriage in order to safeguard Abelard's real calling as a philosopher. Heloise uses St. Paul as the cornerstone of her arguments: "Has your marriage been dissolved? Do not seek a wife. If, however, you do marry, there is nothing wrong in it; and if a virgin marries, she has done no wrong. But those who marry will have pain and grief in this bodily life (*tribulationem...carnis*), and my aim is to spare you."⁴² Cartlidge points out that the phrase "*tribulationem...carnis*" calls up God's punishment to Eve, cursing that He "will multiply [Eve's] sorrows, and [her] conceptions: in sorrow shalt [she] bring forth children..."⁴³ As such, both St. Paul's warnings against marriage and the curse of Eve became commonplace in medieval religious teachings recommending female virginity. However, Heloise here was not talking about her own fleshly tribulations; neither was she advocating for a life of virginity for both of them. Instead, according to Cartlidge, such admonitions owe their roots to philosophical schools that flourished during antiquity, many of which urged a wise man not to bind himself to a wife. The consensus amongst

⁴¹ "...there you thought fit to set out some of the reasons I gave in trying to dissuade you from binding us together in an ill-starred marriage. But you kept silent about most of my arguments for preferring love to wedlock and freedom to chains." Heloise, "Letter 2," 51.

⁴² Peter Abelard, "*Historia Calamitatum*," 13. Heloise takes this from 1 Cor 7:27-28.

⁴³ Nicholas Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches, 1100-1300* (Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 62. The "curse of Eve" appears in Gen 3:16.

these schools was the same: a person has the right to ensure his own spiritual integrity by avoiding mundane concerns and emotional entanglements.⁴⁴

Heloise's contempt for the chains enforced by marriage stems from its misogynistic structure that institutionalizes women's subordinate role in society, thereby disrupting the Edenic union of body and mind she shared with Abelard. The dominant view of marriage during the Middle Ages was one that valorized inequality between man and woman: while God decreed that the human race should be of two sexes, and that there should be a union between them, the sexes were created unequal. Man alone was created in the image of God, but woman, created from the rib of man, was only made in man's image. Therefore, she is twice removed from divinity. Still, these two bodies were designed to merge into one, into a unity, the traditional definition of marriage. But marriage did not do away with this inequality, for woman was inferior, weak; worse, it was because of her that man fell and was driven out of Paradise. Henceforth, husband and wife were doomed to imperfect couplings, to love that must be mingled with shame.⁴⁵ Because of such impositions, Heloise passionately acclaims that she would rather be called Abelard's whore than be his wife. As has been pointed out by Claire Nouvet, the term whore is not to be taken in a derogatory or literal way; Heloise did not want to be Abelard's sex slave, but what she wanted was to appropriate the position that was opposite to that of the wife, a position that would allow her to fully express her desire to

⁴⁴ Nicholas Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, 63.

⁴⁵ Stephen Nichols, "An Intellectual Anthropology of Marriage in the Middle Ages," in *The New Medievalism*, ed. Marina S. Brownlee, Kevin Brownlee, and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press), 71.

protect their respective individualities. Given that no such word exists for that, Heloise has no choice but to appropriate “whore.” Heloise knows that marriage, by dragging in all its legalistic set of obligations would pollute and redefine the idealized love she professed for Abelard. What she wants is to be on equal terms with him in all levels of their relationship. Marriage will skew their relationship by enforcing on it a system of obligations and debts. Entering into this arrangement casts a negative light into her relationship with Abelard. Societal conventions would relegate her position inside the home, to be nothing more than a “wife” and a distraction to her husband.

Her aversion to the position of wife parallels her attitude towards Abelard’s description of his attempt at propitiating Fulbert by offering to marry her. In this passage, Abelard refers to Heloise as an object of a crime he commits:

In the end I took pity on his 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 man to ruin. Moreover, to conciliate him further, I offered him satisfaction in a form he would never have hoped for: I would marry the girl I had wronged.⁴⁶

Abelard talks of Heloise here as if she did not have a mind of her own, as if she had been merely the object of corruption.⁴⁷ Yet, while he describes her as the wronged party, Abelard does not fully acquit her of wrongdoing: she is a woman and therefore, it is only to be expected that she would bring a great man like him to ruin. As Cartlidge points out,

⁴⁶ Peter Abelard, “*Historia Calamitatum*,” 13.

⁴⁷ Abelard uses the words “*dolus*,” “*proditio*,” “*me...accusans*,” *eam...quam corruperam*” as a means to appease Fulbert. For the Latin, see *PL* 178: 129 and Nicholas Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, 66.

Heloise is no longer an individual, but relegated to the same “demonic ideal of medieval misogyny, the eternal Eve.”⁴⁸ The dehumanization of their love, invariably demoted to the realm of the impure and shameful, was exactly what Heloise feared would happen.

What Heloise fears above all else was exactly this dehumanization of their love, which will invariably be compounded by the prescription of marriage as a corrective. Above all, she fears the deindividualization of a woman in marriage, as she can never be her husband’s lover, friend, or intellectual companion; she can only be a mother and domestic helper. What Cartlidge does not, however, is not merely this deindividualization of women or the dehumanization of love within marriage: Heloise’s own philosophical pursuits were also going to be affected. Despite initially arguing for the safeguard of Abelard’s status as a philosopher, Heloise appears to be trying to safeguard her own status, too. Hence, there is selfishness in her refusal to marry, a selfishness that is not to be taken in the derogatory sense of the word, but in the sense of safeguarding one’s own path to self-determination.

But Heloise’s pleas fell on deaf ears. Despite her protestations, she was forced to marry Abelard, leading to a chain of tragedy that culminated in their entry to different monasteries. Many attempted to dissuade Heloise from taking the veil became a spectacle:

Heloise had already agreed to take the veil in obedience to my wishes and entered a convent. So we both put on the religious habit, I in the abbey of Saint Denis, and she in convent of Argenteuil [...] There were many people, I remember, who in pity for her youth tried to dissuade her from submitting to the yoke of monastic

⁴⁸ Nicholas Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, 66.

rule as a penance too hard to bear, but all in vain; she broke out as best as she could through her tears and sobs into 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...
So saying she hurried to the altar, quickly took up the veil blessed by the bishop
and publicly bound herself to the religious life.⁴⁹

By taking the veil, Heloise commits a radical act of self-sacrifice. This is buttressed by the remark that she was “gladly paying” for bringing about her husband's downfall, an act of self-sacrifice in exchange for the presumed guilt of betraying Abelard. This is a curious line: why was the veil construed as the greatest act of self-sacrifice?

Half a millennium before Abelard and Heloise's time, St. Augustine of Hippo saw nuns “as souls whose affections are set on spiritual beauty, not as bondswomen under the law, but as free women established under grace.” St. Augustine grounded this view upon God's grace, before which sexual divisions are moot, and in that situation, women were no longer weighed down by imposed biological and societal disadvantages.⁵⁰ Heloise echoes this same sentiment in invoking the Gospel as the only proper foundation for the life of the religious person. When Heloise sets forth her argument for a new Rule to be followed at the Paraclete, she claims that the way of life of any religious, man or woman, needs only to be based upon the Gospel:

There are many, indeed, innumerable testimonies from the learned, both secular and ecclesiastic, to teach us that we should care little for what is performed outwardly and called indifferent, otherwise the works of the Law and the

⁴⁹ Peter Abelard, “*Historia Calamitatum*,” 18.

⁵⁰ Penelope Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 105.

insupportable yoke of its bondage, as Peter calls it, would be preferable to the freedom of the Gospel and the easy yoke and light burden of Christ. Christ himself invites us to this easy yoke and light burden and the words: 'Come to me, all you whose work is hard, whose load is heavy...' The apostle Peter also sharply rebuked certain people who were already converted to Christ but believed they should still keep to the works of the Law, as it is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles: 'My brothers...why do you provoke God by laying on the shoulders of these converts a yoke which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear? No, we believe that it is by the grace of the Lord Jesus that we are saved, and so are they.'

⁵¹

Heloise upholds this same view in her relationship with Abelard: before a greater power, the hierarchy between man and woman does not exist. While Heloise does not mince words in declaring her lost sexual pleasures with Abelard's castration, she also strongly asserts how she lost her intellectual partner due to marriage and their subsequent entry into the monastic life. Before the greater ideal that was their shared intellectual pursuit, their shared goals to achieve the highest ideals of philosophy, they were neither man nor woman, but equals.

In the famous salutation of her first letter, Heloise goes through the whole gamut of her relationship with Abelard, eventually settling on "to Abelard, from Heloise."⁵² In this final line, Heloise is addressing Abelard as one individual to another. Heloise puts behind them their past nominations, the nominations that have imposed upon them an inequality through its legal and social implications and emphasized most notably by their marriage. Heloise had always regarded their relationship and their bond to be one dictated not by external impositions of obligations but only a bond that stems out of their own

⁵¹ Heloise, "Letter 6," 109.

⁵² The complete salutation reads "To her lord, or rather father; to her husband, or rather brother; from his handmaid, or rather daughter; from his wife, or rather sister: to Abelard, from Heloise." Heloise, "Letter 2," 47.

interests in each other; it is a bond that is first and foremost an intellectual and emotional one.⁵³

This is the exact type of relationship that Heloise wanted to maintain with Abelard though they were already within monastic walls. Heloise still strongly believes that her relationship to and her love for Abelard are very fundamental parts of herself. It is not just her “heart” that she locates in Abelard, but her *animus*:

My heart (*animus*) was not in me but with you, and now, even more, if it is not with you, it is nowhere; truly, without you, it cannot exist.⁵⁴

*Non enim mecum animus sed tecum erat. Sed et nunc maxime si tecum non est, nusquam est. Esse vero sine te nequaquam potest.*⁵⁵

In choosing to use the word *animus*, Heloise points not only to its romantic connotations but also draws up a whole constellation of meanings, most notably those that refer directly to the rational faculties of the person: the mind as opposed to the body; the mind or soul as constituting with the body the whole person; mind as originator of intention; mind as seat of desire, volition; mind as the seat of feelings and emotions; moral and mental constitution of a person, disposition, character.⁵⁶ Captured here in this seemingly innocuous word is a gestalt of body, mind, and spirit – and in Heloise’s perspective, it is this experience of unity that she lost when she lost her relationship with Abelard. Abelard is her perfect complement. While she did love Abelard, the kind of relationship she wanted to have and continue having with him moved beyond the romantic. Her love for

⁵³ Nicholas Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, 69. See also Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 170-173.

⁵⁴ Heloise, “Letter 2,” 54.

⁵⁵ J. T. Muckle, “Personal Letters,” 73.

⁵⁶ *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *Animus*. Both Betty Radice and David Wulstan translate *animus* as heart in this passage.

him is clearly an engagement, too, with her intellectual and emotional faculties; it does include passion, as she will be quick to point out, but it moves beyond mere fixation on that. Heloise's lament that she lost everything including herself when she lost Abelard's love are not romanticizations of unfulfilled love but a deeper manifestation of the kind of bond she had with him.

Because she locates within Abelard a great part of herself, Heloise establishes a very demanding ideal of devotion for both of them. She was prepared to follow this man "to the very fires of hell" if he so commanded her to; she was ready and willing to put his desires and pleasures before hers, waiving any claims over him and his property.⁵⁷ Heloise cites Aspasia's advice to Xenophon and his wife to declare how most marriages are in fact more akin to wage-paying jobs than any meeting of the minds; for Heloise, the only way a marriage could work is through an unconditional faith in the worth of the other person: "Unless you come to believe that there is no better man nor worthier woman on earth you will always still be looking for what you judge the best thing of all – the be the husband of the best of wives and the wife of the best of husbands."⁵⁸ Heloise goes on to explain how these "saintly words which are more than philosophic" are, however, no more than "a holy error and a blessed delusion" amongst all other men and wives, who falsely believed that they are married to the best of the best. She puts herself above these couples, however, because all other women were in error, for she was married to the best of husbands: "But what error permitted other women, plain truth

⁵⁷ Nicholas Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, 72-73.

⁵⁸ Heloise, "Letter 2," 52.

permitted me, and what they thought of their husbands, the world in general believed, or rather, knew to be true of yourself [i.e., Abelard]; so that my love for you was the more genuine for being further removed from error.”⁵⁹ She calls on the whole world to witness Abelard’s greatness: no king or philosopher could match his fame; no district, town, or village did not long to see him; every wife and young girl desired him and burned with ardent desire for him; even queens and great ladies envied Heloise’s bed. In this list, Heloise attempts to represent Abelard’s singular greatness in specific circles: amongst the learned and the wise, amongst the common people, indicating his fame went beyond the scholastic arena, and amongst the ladies, signaling his prowess as a lover.

Hugh of St. Victor, Abelard’s rival, argued that the essence of marriage is not sexual intercourse in itself, but the bond of companionship and love that stems from it. Two people become one flesh and thence they become one mind. The bride and the bridegroom in the Song of Songs, who encapsulate love and prefigure the Church’s relationship with Christ, are destined to become one soul:

Henceforth and forever, each shall be to the other as a same self in all sincere love, all careful solicitude... Each shall assist the other as being one’s own self in every good and evil tiding, the companion and partner of consolation proving united in trial and tribulation... In this way they shall dwell in the peace of a holy society and the communion of a sweet repose, so that it is no longer the one who lives, but the other... Such are the good things of marriage and the happiness of the chaste society of those who love each other.⁶⁰

This unity of minds, mirroring the unity of bodies, is the same idealized notion of love that Heloise upholds. Her union with Abelard was both intellectual and erotic.

⁵⁹ Heloise, “Letter 2,” 52.

⁶⁰ M. T. Clanchy, *Abelard*, 259.

Despite her desire to be seen by Abelard as a separate individual, she constantly acquiesces to his demands, giving him total control over her life. In this self-imposed subjugation, she waives all her claims on him, thereby allowing him to retain his freedom. Such a position proves untenable in the long run. The only way Heloise can claim total and singular interest in Abelard's person is through renouncing her very self: Heloise transfers her own person under Abelard's control. This self-alienation in the other, however, blurs the distinction between Abelard's self and Heloise's self. As Claire Nouvet points out, "if only the dispossession of her self can prove that her love is not interested in the self but in the other, this gesture of self-dispossession threatens to turn the other into a mere figure of herself."⁶¹ In fact, though she claims that everything she did stems from her devotion to him, she cannot stop demanding that he pay his debt to her, a debt he incurred through marriage and through her great love for him: "Yet you must know that you are bound to me by an obligation which is all the greater for the further close time 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."⁶² The debt incurred through marriage has two different connotations and hence, two different forms of payments. These two debts are once again reflective of their former bond, a bond that enjoyed both sexual passion and intellectual fervor.

The first notion this term takes is the traditional concept of conjugal debt, a legal obligation that requires the spouse to have sexual intercourse whenever his or her partner

⁶¹ Claire Nouvet, "Discourse of the 'Whore': An Economy of Sacrifice," in *Modern Language Notes* 105 (1990): 762.

⁶² Heloise, "Letter 2," 50.

would require it. Conjugal debt is predicated on the notion of marriage as the cure for lust, mostly based on Saint Paul's exhortation: "*quod si non se continent nubant melius est enim nubere quam uri* [whereby if they cannot contain themselves, they should marry for it is better to marry than to be burnt]."⁶³ In her second letter, Heloise cautions Abelard, after he fails to give her the consolation she demands, "now particularly you should fear, now when I no longer have in you an outlet for my incontinence."⁶⁴ Her deploying of "incontinence" has sexual connotations, recalling the traditional church doctrine that prescribes "marriage" as an antidote to wanton female erotic desire. Furthermore, Alcuin Blamires posits that there is a dark undercurrent running through Heloise's urging: unless Abelard starts fearing for Heloise, compelling him to enforce Heloise's religious commitment strictly, she may be forced to seek physical solace to relieve her of sexual incontinence.⁶⁵

The second connotation of debt revolves around Abelard's need to repay Heloise for her selfless obedience to him, an obedience born out of love. She, however, constructs Abelard's debt to her as one that is virtually unable to be repaid, for his debt was due to her love "which is beyond all bounds." The boundless debt Abelard owed her ensured that no matter what Abelard did, he will always have to keep on paying her. This description of self-sacrifice – and the ensuing infinite debt – is modeled upon Christ's own sacrifice. Christ's passion is one that grew out of his sense of obedience to his Father

⁶³ 1 Cor 7:9. Latin text taken from Latin Vulgate Bible. My translation

⁶⁴ Heloise. "Letter 4," 70.

⁶⁵ Alcuin Blamires, "No Outlet for Incontinence: Heloise and the Question of Consolation," in Wheeler, *Listening to Heloise*, 293.

and their joint love for humanity. Christ's words on the cross just as he was about to die encapsulates Heloise's own model of her self-sacrifice: "Thy will be done." Abelard, perhaps seeing through her chicanery, uses this notion of theological debt and turns the tables on Heloise:

[Christ] bought you not with his wealth, but with himself. He bought and redeemed you with his own blood. See what right he has over you, and know how precious you are. This is the price which the Apostle has in mind when he considers how little he is worth for whom the price was paid, and what return he should make for such a gift... You are greater than heaven, greater than the world, for the Creator of the world himself became the price for you. 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?⁶⁶

Heloise was not in any position to demand remuneration, Abelard claims, if she cannot—would not—even repay her own debt to Christ through her own unwillingness to repent. He even appropriates Heloise's own words ("what...does he seek in you except yourself?") versus "God knows I sought nothing in you, except yourself") to depict the model of true love he wanted Heloise to aspire towards.

Throughout the letters, Heloise portrays human love as something that can also be eternal, unchanging, unflinching in the face of overwhelming odds – much like the divine love of God.⁶⁷ Furthermore, because it is her love for Abelard and the sense of obedience that flows from it that propels her to enter the monastery, her love cannot be inseparable from her religious life. This love then which knows no bounds explains the paradoxical nature of her pronouncement of love.

⁶⁶ Abelard, "Letter 5," 87.

⁶⁷ Christopher Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 101.

More importantly, Heloise's innovation lies in her idealization of passionate love as also an educational ideal.⁶⁸ An anonymous medieval poem, the "*Metamorphosis Goliae*," serves as a final testament and witness to Heloise's unflinching devotion to the ideal of love she has concocted. According to Dronke, this poem is most probably written by a student of Abelard in the 1140s, either before Abelard's condemnation at Sens in 1140 or after his death in 1142.⁶⁹ The "*Metamorphosis*" is a dream-sequence poem, wherein the protagonist wanders through the woods at springtime. Roman gods open the poem and they are followed by pagan philosophers and poets with their beloveds:

Hysopullus brought his lady Ceta with him. Propertius brings Cynthia, Tibullus Delia, Tullius Terencia, Catullus Lesbia. The poets convened here, each with his beloved. Each lady is fire and flame for her lover. The spark inflames Pliny for Calpurnia, Apuleius burns for his Prudentilla, everywhere the lover holds her beloved in her embraces.⁷⁰

Following these two stanzas, the dreamer invokes the students of Abelard, many of them contemporary poets and philosophers such as Ivo, Peter Helias, and Bernard, and "many who are devotees of Abelard." Stanza 54, however, introduces an irony:

The bride seeks where her Palatine is, whose divine spirit outshone all others; she seeks why he withdraws himself as a stranger, [he] whom she suckled at her breast and bosom.⁷¹

Whereas his students and his contemporaries were present, the Palatine was nowhere to be seen. The Palatine here is Abelard, who gets this nickname from the *Historia*, where he mentions that he was from a place called Pallet. John Benton denies that the bride is

⁶⁸ Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, 173.

⁶⁹ Peter Dronke, "Abelard and Heloise in Medieval Testimonies," in *Intellectuals and Poets in Medieval Europe*, 259.

⁷⁰ Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, 171-172.

⁷¹ My translation. "*Nupta quaerit ubi sit suus Palatinus, cujus totus extiti spiritus divinus, quaerit cur se subtrahat quasi peregrinus, quem ad sua ubera foverat et sinus.*" Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, 172.

Heloise, arguing instead that it can only be Philology who is longing for Abelard's return to her study.⁷² Jaeger, however, argues that by virtue of the poem's formal structure, the bride could only be Heloise, if only Heloise as the mythological-allegorical bride.⁷³ He further comments that "it is hard to imagine that this poem is not a tribute to the effects of the love of Heloise for Abelard."⁷⁴ Her love, more than being an exacting ideal to which she lived her life, proved also to be a source of instruction for Abelard; it is Heloise who is praised as the nurturer and teacher of the man from Pallet.

The image that Hugh Metel painted of Heloise suckling from the breasts of Muses has been transformed; it is Abelard who now suckles from the breast Heloise. The iconography is undeniably eroticized, too, for it is an act between the bride and her lover. As Jaeger notes, while "its frank approbation of passionate love is not without parallel in Goliardic poetry," the remarkable thing about the poem is its integration of passionate love into an intellectual ideal. Given the role played by Abelard and his bride in this poem, it is hard to believe that the "*Metamorphosis Goliae*" was not written partly as homage to Heloise.⁷⁵

⁷² John Benton, "Philology's Quest for Abelard in the *Metamorphosis Goliae*," *Speculum* 50, no.2 (1975): 199-217.

⁷³ Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, 172.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁷⁵ Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, 173.

Chapter Two: The Rhetoric of the Body

Aside from the intellectual challenge posed by Heloise to Abelard, she also provided another means of conquest, a conquest that prior to meeting Heloise, he had been careful to avoid. In the *Historia*, Abelard writes that he did not maintain associations with courtly women and prostitutes as his intellectual and scholarly pursuits monopolized his time. Yet he was more than willing to let his work slide for Heloise:

Her studies allowed us to withdraw in private, as love desired, and then with our books open before us, more words of love than our reading passed between us, and more kissing than teaching...Now the more I was taken up with these pleasures, the less time I could give to philosophy and the less attention I paid to my school. It was utterly boring for me to have to go to the school, and equally wearisome to remain there and to spend my days on study when my nights were sleepless with lovemaking. As my interest and concentration flagged, my lectures lacked all inspiration and were merely repetitive; I could do no more than repeat what had been said long ago, and when inspiration did come to me, it was for writing love songs, not the secrets of philosophy.¹

Heloise is depicted as providing the perfect challenge for Abelard. Furthermore, Abelard locates Heloise beyond courtly women and prostitutes, two extremes of sexualities and class. Thus she occupies her own sexual realm for Abelard, one that is not only defined by her body but also by her intellect.

It is also around their sexual relationship that the story of Abelard's misfortunes is organized. Abelard's narration, however, places the root of his sexual sin not in lust but in pride. In this he adheres closely to a traditional hierarchy of sin where pride becomes the source of all other sins. As he claims, "success always puffs up fools with pride, and worldly security weakens the spirit's resolution and easily destroys it through carnal

¹ Peter Abelard, "*Historia Calamitatum*," 11.

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 flesh.”² Pride led him to seduce Heloise, and what followed was a maelstrom of calamities: his physical castration, his entry into the monastery, charges of heresy and the burning of his book on theology, and constant threats on his life by his fellow monks.

Heloise uses their sexual relationship as the locus around which to make sense of her experience, whether as lover, as co-intellectual, or as abbess. For her, however, their sexual past was neither a source of sin nor of shame but an integral part of their relationship, which she sees as a combination of passionate erotics, a demanding model of love and devotion, and intense intellectual engagement. For Heloise, passion was not a base human desire but a fundamental truth of love. In this she insists on a unity of the body and the *animus*, rejecting the traditional model of hierarchy between these two. In rejecting this hierarchy, Heloise also rejects the basis of this distinction: woman, perennially identified with the body, is always subjugated to man, the seat of the *animus* or the rational spirit.

Conversion and authentic religious experience for Abelard are measured by turning away from sexuality and secular love, both of which he considers to be rooted in base, bodily appetites. The inner person, then, must be perpetually ready to confront these sources of sin, and his or her triumph upon these will be the measure of their victory in heaven. For Heloise, religious devotion was not as simple a construct. It was not a matter of turning away from sexuality because, as she claims, sexuality is a part of herself. The

² Peter Abelard, “*Historia Calamitatum*,” 9.

kind of conversion she wanted--if it can be called such--is first, a recognition that the person is a whole entity and not subdivided into base and noble parts and second, a religious practice that upholds this truth.

The fluidity of boundaries that characterizes Heloise's thought clashes with Abelard's own adherence to a strict "discipline of thought and language that originally constitutes universal concepts and that holds speech to a particular form."³ Her refusal to uphold and respect traditional binaries, such as those erected between the body and the spirit, man and woman, external life and internal self, appears illogical especially to Abelard, since she does not conform to any rigid, traditional, institutional scaffolding.⁴ This supposed failure, however, is what leads Heloise to construct and create new ideas of what it means to love and to live an upright, virtuous life. By breaking down these false barriers, she establishes a shifting, expansive, and inclusive framework within which she is able to make sense of her own situation.

This chapter focuses on Heloise's use of the female body as a way to negotiate for a new religious rule at the Paraclete. Underlying her thought is the question of the body's moral standard within the purview of religious devotion: is it, as tradition dictates, an entity that must be repressed and denied or should it occupy a more central role than what has been offered to it? Heloise draws from her own particularized embodied experience to issue a stark critique of twelfth-century monastic life by deconstructing traditional binary oppositions. In their correspondence, both Abelard and Heloise insist on the actual

³ Andrea Nye, "A Woman's Thought or a Man's Discipline? The Letters of Abelard and Heloise," *Hypatia* 7, no. 3 (1992): 13.

⁴ Ibid.

materiality of the body, though they do so for widely diverging reasons.⁵ Whereas Abelard allegorizes the materiality of the body to privilege the theological hierarchy between the spirit and the body, Heloise sticks to the body's concrete, particular, and corporeal nature to negotiate a redefinition of desire, sexuality, and authenticity in religious devotion. The centrality and importance Heloise gives to the physical body is remarkable, especially in light of the prevailing theology of her day that calls for the abjection of the body--more so the female one. Implicit in this is Heloise's own acceptance, recognition, and responsibility for her own female body, a body that is the site of erotic memory and pleasurable desire upon which Abelard has indelibly left his mark. In seeking to incorporate the corporeal into the privileged spiritual world of the monastery, Peggy McCracken argues that Heloise was not out to "seek heroic or extraordinary spiritual experiences. Rather, she seeks to integrate...individual experience into the definition of the religious subject"⁶ by adumbrating the inseparability of external physical experiences of the body and the internal subjectivity, of which sexuality is a part, that it gives rise to.

The experience of autoeroticism and sexuality is not consonant with what is expected of Heloise inside the monastery. She, however, claims that her sexual desires arise not simply because she refuses adamantly to excise them from herself but because it is a fundamental part of who she is. Hence, her love for Abelard, which includes sexually

⁵ Peggy McCracken, "'The Curse of Eve': Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter," in *Listening to Heloise: the Voice of a Twelfth-century Woman*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 217.

⁶ Peggy McCracken, "'The Curse of Eve'," 225.

desiring him, is not something easily overcome, if at all. Furthermore, Heloise points out here that her feminine frailty and her own memory are acting against her, thus compounding her own suffering: “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.”⁷

In her pleas to Abelard to recognize her hypocrisy rather than turn a blind eye to it – in effect, a plea to him to remember her as his beloved – Heloise asks for sharp words like nails, “nails which cannot touch wounds gently, but only pierce through them.”⁸ Despite overtones of crucifixion, the invocation of nails, wounds, and piercings invoke instead an Ovidian carnality.⁹ Heloise ties such injuries to her sexuality and her subjectivity, two aspects of self which have become linked for her. Though she still writes about explicitly sexually desiring Abelard, she does it not out of desire to “subvert” or “transgress” the religious order,¹⁰ but rather to drive home a point: the practice of monasticism fails to incorporate the actual, lived experience of its female adherents.¹¹

⁷ Heloise, “Letter 4,” 69.

⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁹ Glenda McLeod, “‘Wholly Guilty, Wholly Innocent’: Self-Definition in Heloise’s Letters to Abelard,” in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, ed. Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 72.

¹⁰ The debate surrounding the authenticity of the correspondence draws heavily from the notion of desire painted by Heloise in the letters. For an overview of the authenticity debate, see M. T. Clanchy’s “The Letters of Abelard and Heloise in Today’s Scholarship” in Radice, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, lviii-lxxxiv. See also Morgan Powell, “Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete,” in Wheeler, *Listening to Heloise*, 255-286.

¹¹ Sharon Jane Chua, “Remembrance of Sins Past: Heloise’s Embodied Memories and the Challenge to St. Benedict’s Rule,” (final paper, Medieval Sexualities, Department of English, Georgetown University, 1980).

For the post-castration Abelard, however, to accept the proposal that past experiences must become integral aspects of religious devotion is tantamount to being sucked down headlong into Charybdis. He feels that Heloise's sexuality, once a source of his own erotic pleasure, has now become a threat to his personal salvation. As such, Abelard feels that the only way he can continue to attend to Heloise is first, by denying her physicality, thus denying her sexuality, and second, by calling her the "bride of Christ," which ultimately divests him of any spousal commitment, most notably the "marital debt." His invocation of the black bride from the "Song of Songs" crystallizes these rhetorical moves and allows him to demonstrate to Heloise how sensual pleasure can be transmuted into spiritual desire for God.

Abelard draws a parallel between Heloise and the black bride by likening Heloise's rough, black Benedictine habit to the dark skin of the Ethiopian lady. And though the black bride "looks less lovely than other women" because of the color of her skin, Abelard claims that she is superior to those "other women" in other respects, since her teeth and bones are whiter and lovelier. The whiteness of her bones symbolizes that "her soul is strong in virtue [and] its whiteness or beauty is the sum of virtues which adorn it".¹² This inner "whiteness" that "can properly stand for the soul" is what makes the king choose her to take into his bedchamber:

because she is black, as we said, and lovely, she is chosen and taken into the king's bedchamber, that is, to that secret place of peace and contemplation, and into the bed...Indeed, the disfigurement of her blackness makes her love what is hidden rather than open, what is secret rather than public...Moreover, it often happens that the flesh of black women is all the softer to touch though it is less

¹² Peter Abelard, "Letter 5," 74.

attractive to look at, and for this reason the pleasure they give is greater and more suitable for private than for public gratification.¹³

Abelard neither diminishes the explicit eroticism nor shies away from evoking sensuality in his allegory. Sensual pleasure, however, can only be exalted if it is transmuted as spiritual pleasure, obtainable through virtuous deeds and clear abjection of the body. He separates the outer, corporeal blackness from the inner whiteness, and clearly identifies sensual pleasure with the “inner,” spiritual part, thus claiming that the only pleasure that can exist is one that is pure and free from bodily pollution. Through this, Abelard acknowledges Heloise’s lingering passion and desiring body, yet he wants to separate her away from that “pollution associated with women’s concerns.”¹⁴

By claiming that the groom chooses her not for her outer self but for her inner being, Abelard illustrates how sensual pleasure aimed towards spiritual ends is the most exalted and the only permissible expression of love within the religious experience. In this allegorical rendering of Heloise’s eroticism, the perfect Christian subject, symbolized by the black bride, can only come into being through abjection of the external self, rendered black and polluted. Furthermore, Abelard claims that the black bride, because of her outer appearance, is “more suitable for private than for public gratification.” Her black garb, therefore, must serve to sever Heloise’s ties with the external world, enabling her to withdraw into the cloister to attain spiritual communion with her true groom. Abelard succeeds in representing carnal desire and, having done that, allegorizing it as spiritual desire.

¹³ Peter Abelard, “Letter 5,” 75.

¹⁴ Peggy McCracken, “‘The Curse of Eve’,” 220.

Abelard insists that Heloise is already the bride of Christ by virtue of her taking up the habit. He tells her that while she once was “the wife of a poor mortal,” she was now “raised to the bed of the high king.”¹⁵ The bride of Christ model, however, does not allow for vicissitudes of human experience by virtue of its homogeneity. Every nun who enters into the monastery becomes Christ’s bride; there is nothing that individuates them from one another, no mark of difference that would speak to their own uniqueness. As such, for Heloise, her main concern was not simply the question of forgetting their past. It is also the rejection of the homogenizing effect of this conversion narrative, which forces her to reject her idealized relationship with Abelard, thus isolating an important part of subjectivity. As Penelope Johnson notes, the caricatures enforced upon Medieval nuns--either that they only feigned piety or that they fully achieved holiness--cause them to lose the real contours of three-dimensional people.¹⁶ Abelard’s insistence on Heloise undergoing the very same conversion he did, to fully achieve holiness, forces Heloise to give up her status as a three-dimensional person – and this was a non-negotiable thing for her. Heloise wants Abelard to treat her as different, as a singular entity in herself rather than simply being a part of the rabble.

As such, Heloise rejects the symbolism imposed by the habit, claiming instead that it merely propagates her hypocrisy as she still envisions herself as Abelard’s wife. Abelard in turn exhorts her to remember how they made a mockery of the habit when they used it to smuggle the pregnant Heloise across the country. What they were trying to

¹⁵ Peter Abelard, “Letter 5,” 73.

¹⁶ Penelope Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 2.

pass off under the guise of the habit was their sin of fornication, and by cloaking her with the habit, they attempted to deflect public cognition of their act; they feigned purity and chastity in order to cover up a sin and commit another one in turn. Abelard decries this blasphemous act and wants Heloise to make up for that perversion by accepting the injunction of the habit, claiming that her new position now as abbess places her in a privileged position to atone for their past sins. His insistence that the inner person will ultimately conform to the external symbolism embodied in the habit is precisely the very type of conversion he himself underwent.¹⁷

As a young student of philosophy, Abelard believed that those who enter the monastery did so when they were already deprived of any hope of achieving worldly fame.¹⁸ He even recounts that his own decision to enter the monastery did not spring from the love of God nor of any devotion to the religious vocation, but it was solely because of the “shame and confusion in [his] remorse and misery rather than any devout wish for conversion” that “brought [him] to seek shelter in a monastery cloister”.¹⁹ He comes to embrace this new calling, however, deeming it an act of God’s grace that saved him from the filth in which he was mired.

However, since this “heavenly grace” depends on the excision of an anatomical part, it is a grace that is denied Heloise; there is no female correlative/parallel to “cut” off sexuality. The medieval notion of sexuation, based primarily on the lack or presence of a phallus, meant that females cannot assume their sex in this traditionally prescribed

¹⁷ Sharon Jane Chua, “Remembrance of Sins Past.”

¹⁸ Peter Abelard, “*Historia Calamitatum*,” 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

symbolic manner, since what they lack cannot be obtained in any physical way. As there is no overt physical symbolism that represents women's sexual organs, then there is, in effect, no one organ that would come to signify her sexuality.

On the other hand, for Abelard, his sexuality is concentrated in his testicles, and thus, he was cured of this "sin" after castration. He locates the catalyst of his conversion on a bodily fact: the reason he sinned was because of his own body acting against him. He fails to control it, consenting to what it dictated rather than abjecting and controlling it. Though Abelard revels in this grace, he insists that it deprives him of a chance to battle with his own body. This ethics provides the underpinning of Abelard's representation of his castration as well as his eventual exaltation of Heloise's own sexual struggles. In his *Ethics*, Abelard defines vice as the refusal to withhold consent or control from the corporeal sources of sin. Underlying his philosophy is a duality between the body and spirit, the same duality that he insists Heloise acquiesce to in their letters. For Abelard, man is divided into two parts: a base part, which is the body, and a nobler or higher part, the *animus*. The body, by virtue of defects embedded into it, is the source of all appetites. Abelard argues, however, that without these "defects" that must be overcome, the person cannot exercise virtue, an act practiced in man's soul. The soul, however, can opt to either consent to these "base pleasures" or withhold that consent. As such, Abelard places the act of sinning in the intent of the person. The opposition set up between the body and the spirit is one of animosity. More importantly, it highlights the need to overcome the body, to use the *animus* to make up for whatever inborn defects are present in it. Without these vices or infirmities caused, one cannot be considered truly virtuous. As such,

vicious appetites are ironically encouraged to serve as the foil for the *animus*. Since he no longer has to battle with lust, Abelard believes that it will be harder for him to obtain any reward from Heaven. Heloise, on the other hand, will no doubt be granted a great reward, as she is still continually struggling against her body.

Heloise, however, refuses to relegate her own physical and corporeal impulses to unruly and disordered impulses. This is the challenge she poses to Abelard when she asks for a specific type of consolation from him: she does not want him to call her to battle with her own body but rather, she wants him to recognize her very weakness and create a new model for religious practice from within that weakness. She rejects this masculine model of religious devotion, claiming that if men constantly failed in this test, what more women, who were obviously of a frailer constitution? Finally, her attempt to place the body within the homogenized experience of the monastery is also an attempt at salvaging her unique individuality and at marking her as Abelard's own. Heloise rejects the Bride-of-Christ model as she aims to arrive at a more personal approach to religious devotion, one that denigrates neither her body nor her very subjectivity.

For Abelard, however, the position of Heloise-the-bride-of-Christ's servant is a sexually-sterile space, allowing him to continue rendering service to Heloise without the threat of their past making a return--or so he wants to think.²⁰ When Roscelin of Compiègne, Abelard's one-time teacher and perpetual adversary, got a whiff of Abelard's

²⁰ Sharon Jane Chua, "Remembrance of Sins Past." Heloise uses the *ancilla* position in order to reprise her role as Abelard's student, thereby allowing her to revel in their past eroticized performances. See Marilyn Desmond, "*Dominus/Ancilla*: Epistolary Rhetoric and Erotic Violence in the Letters of Abelard and Heloise," in *Ovid's Art and the Wife of Bath: The Ethics of Erotic Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 55-72.

continued association with Heloise, he derides him with a warning that “Divine Justice should be greatly feared by [him], lest--just as [his] tail, with which formerly... [he] pricked promiscuously was removed as [his] immorality deserved--now [his] tongue, with which [he is] now pricking away, be taken away as well”.²¹ No matter how much Abelard tries, his very proximity to Heloise eventually leads onlookers to come to the conclusion that he is still intent on pursuing her carnally. Abelard was caught in a double bind; when he was deemed to be inattentive to the needs of the nuns of the Paraclete, “all the people in the neighbourhood began attacking [him] violently for doing less than [he] could”.²² And yet, when his visits to them became more frequent:²³

This provoked malicious insinuations, and my detractors, with their usual perverseness, had the effrontery to accuse me of doing what genuine charity prompted because I was still a slave to the pleasures of carnal desire and could rarely or never bear the absence of the woman I had once loved [...] But now that I have been freed from such suspicion by God’s mercy, and the power to commit this sin is taken from me, how can the suspicion remain? What is the meaning of this latest monstrous accusation? 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 eunuchs, as sacred history tells us in the case of Esther and the other concubines of King Ahasuerus.²⁴

Yves Ferrouls points here to the oft-overlooked sexual status of eunuchs. Eunuchs, Ferrouls claims, are not necessarily the de-sexualized creatures they are generally thought

²¹ Bonnie Wheeler, “Origenary Fantasies: Abelard’s Castration and Confession,” in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 122.

²² Peter Abelard, “*Historia Calamitatum*,” 36.

²³ Despite the accusations, Abelard really did believe strongly in the role of men within women’s religious communities, writing in his Rule that “it is always men’s duty to provide for women’s needs.” See Fiona Griffiths, “Men’s Duty to Provide for Women’s Needs,” *Journal of Medieval History* 30 (2004): 1-24. For an overview of Heloise’s role in the Paraclete, see Mary McLaughlin, “Heloise the Abbess,” in Wheeler, *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth-Century Woman*, 1-19.

²⁴ Peter Abelard, “*Historia Calamitatum*,” 36-37.

to be, especially if they have already reached sexual maturity prior to their castration: “eunuchs whose testicles have been cut off but who kept their penis could still have erections, making them very attractive because of their unthreatening lack of consequence to such intercourse.”²⁵ As the total removal of the male genitalia--penis and testicles--prove to be almost a hundred percent lethal, Abelard’s case would only have been the ablation of the testicles. As such, rendering the marital debt as Heloise’s legal husband would neither have been a physical impossibility nor would he have been numb to sexual sensations and arousals, either.²⁶

Because of such physiological truths, the threat Abelard feels from Heloise’s sexuality is not merely imaginary. At the same time, it emphasizes the acuteness of the problem that male embodiment represents for Abelard, encapsulated in his uneasy relation with his genitals. Abelard considered the male genitalia, the most physical determinant of his male-ness, as “that part of [his] body which was the seat of lust and *sole reason* for those desires”.²⁷ In attributing to his genitals a volition independent of him, he is able to cast their violent ablation as fully freeing him from the clutches of lust. He claims, too, that when “those parts of shame” which “have no proper name of their own” have been removed, it removed “a foul imperfection in order to preserve perfect purity”.²⁸ Abelard’s anxiety regarding his testicles is palpable in the series of negative euphemisms he employs in discussing them. Perhaps it reflects his psychological trauma,

²⁵ Yves Ferrouls, “Abelard’s Blissful Castration,” in Cohen and Wheeler, *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, 137.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁷ Abelard, “Letter 5,” 82. My emphasis.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

wherein he seeks to erase the painful physical memory of castration and his genitals by abjecting them. More insidiously, though, it might point to the deep-seated fear that in naming them, he just might summon them back to life.

This fear of the return of the dead threatens Abelard's psychologized rendering of his castration: Abelard reads his castration as divine grace in violent trappings despite the treachery of the attack. Castration thus became an external sign for both his punishment and his moral catharsis.²⁹ Rather than be *Petrus imperfectus* as Roscelin mockingly labels him, he believed that the removal of his testicles actually perfected him.³⁰ He transmutes it from a mark of shame to a badge of honor, as the scar of castration locates Abelard in a parade of similarly disfigured men who have reached intellectual and moral superiority through disassociation from sexual activities.³¹ By claiming that it was through the grace of God effectively that his capacity for lasciviousness was neutralized, he strengthens the link to his supposedly God-granted gift for interpreting the Scriptures.³² It also links him corporeally to Origen, "the greatest of Christian philosophers." And, as Ferrouls notes,

²⁹ Jacqueline Murray, "'The Law of Sin that is in my Members': the Problem of Male Embodiment," in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women, and Saints in late medieval Europe*, ed. Samantha J.E. Riches and Sarah Salih (New York: Routledge, 2002), 18.

³⁰ Roscelin mocks Abelard as "imperfect" because of his castration: "If therefore you are neither a cleric nor a layman nor a monk, I am unable to discover what name I should apply to you. Perhaps you lie when you say you can be called Peter, as before I am quite certain that a name of the masculine gender will refuse to signify its accustomed object if that object is lacking in its gender...For names normally lose their proper meaning should the things they signify happen to lose their wholeness...Since therefore the part which makes you a man has been taken away, you should be called not 'Peter' but 'defective Peter' [i.e., *imperfectus Petrus*]." See Bonnie Wheeler, "Origenary Fantasies," 122.

³¹ Peter Abelard, "*Historia Calamitatum*," 37.

³² *Ibid.*, 19.

that is exactly what Abelard wants to achieve, to become the perfect Christian intellectual, free from polluting effects of the world.³³

That perhaps is one reason why Abelard is still palpably anxious when it comes to Heloise's erotic demands. The passion that Heloise has shown Abelard is too overwhelming that Abelard feels a not unreal threat to his chastity, both sexual and spiritual.³⁴ Indeed, Abelard depicts the post-castration maligning revolving around his sexuality as a "calumny [he] must endure [...]"³⁵ and that the agony he suffered was "less for the mutilation of [his] body than for the damage to [his] reputation".³⁶ In fashioning himself as the epitomic Christian philosopher, Abelard must be seen to adhere to the highest levels of physical asceticism.³⁷

Other signs, however, attest to Abelard's sexual possessiveness in forcing Heloise to take the veil, which formally sealed her entry into religious life. Heloise was not a true widow, as she herself points out in her third letter. According to Saint Paul, a woman becomes a "true widow" only when she lacks male family members upon whom she can rely for sustenance.³⁸ Heloise would still have her son, Astrolabe, even if Abelard would render himself dead to them by virtue of absence. Abelard, however, is uneasy about leaving Heloise alone in the world, and he does not mince any words in declaring his

³³ Ferrouls links Abelard's desire for perfect purity to his intellectual quest. See "Abelard's Blissful Castration," especially pp. 140-144.

³⁴ Yves Ferrouls, "Abelard's Blissful Castration," 140. Ferrouls also claims that Abelard could have chosen to live chastely with Heloise, since his castration was not grounds for legal separation. For the discussion of the laws that surround this, see pp. 129-149 of "Blissful Castration."

³⁵ Peter Abelard, "*Historia Calamitatum*," 37.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Sharon Jane Chua, "Remembrance of Sins Past."

³⁸ Juanita Feros Ruys, "*Quae maternae immemor naturae*: The Rhetorical Struggle over the Meaning of Motherhood in the Writings of Heloise and Abelard," in Wheeler, *Listening to Heloise*, 328.

intentions in commanding her to assume religious vows: “At that time I desired to keep you whom I loved beyond measure for myself alone for ever [...] Had you not been previously joined to me in wedlock, you might have easily clung to the world when I withdrew from it, either at the suggestion of your relatives or in enjoyment of carnal delights.”³⁹ While Juanita Feros Ruys reads the “enjoyment of carnal desire” as Heloise’s love for her son, it does not erase its other, more sexual connotation. Abelard sounds convinced of the addictive effects of such “carnal delights” and he fears that Heloise, having experienced it, might deign to pursue these delights with other men.

In order to turn away Heloise’s mind from their sexual past, he depicts their wanton sinful ways through the lens of sinning and depravity: “you know the depths of shame to which my unbridled lust had consigned our bodies, until no reverence for decency or for God even during the days of Our Lord’s Passion [...] so intense were the fires of lust which bound me to you that I set those wretched obscene pleasures, which we blush even to name, above God as above myself [...]”⁴⁰ Whereas the act of placing their passion above himself becomes a source of sin and shame, for Heloise, this very elevation of their sexual acts is a fundamental component of her relationship with Abelard, and thus not a source of sin. Thus, while Abelard focused on the spiritually redeeming aspect of his castration, Heloise described the mutilation as an act of thievery: “You know, beloved, how much I have lost in you, how at one wretched stroke of fortune

³⁹ Peter Abelard, “Letter 5,” 83.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

that supreme act of flagrant treachery robbed me of myself in robbing me of you”.⁴¹ It is not that Heloise mourns the literal loss of Abelard’s manhood; rather, Heloise reveals Abelard’s transformation from a passionate lover to an indifferent husband.⁴² At the same time, she points to the dynamic interplay between the body and the inner person, and how emotionally-charged corporeal experiences can irrevocably change a person’s psyche.

Heloise grounds her discussion of the body in its actual corporeality, a direct challenge to Abelard’s thrust towards the metaphoric. Whereas Abelard relegates the body to obscurity under the screen of the spiritual and the abstract, Heloise puts its concrete nature to the forefront. In her third letter to Abelard, Heloise perverts Abelard’s allegory of the black bride, in which he identifies the black skin of the bride with Heloise’s Benedictine habit. She now takes that same black habit, weaves it into her discourse, and spins it to expose its inadequacy for the female body: “Leaving aside for the moment the other articles of the Rule: how can women be concerned with what is written there about cowls, drawers, or scapulars? Or indeed, with tunics or woolen garments worn next to the skin when the monthly purging of their superfluous humours must avoid such things?”⁴³ Much like how Abelard’s exemplum of the black bride can never adequately contain, represent, and understand Heloise’s own erotic experience, so, too, the black habit can never contain a fundamental fact of the female body. The female body is not “unruly” for refusing to submit to the will of the garment; its own *regulae* are not accounted for in the rules of an unabashedly phallogentric religious life.

⁴¹ Heloise, “Letter 2,” 50.

⁴² Marilyn Desmond, “*Dominus/Ancilla*,” 64.

⁴³ Heloise, “Letter 6,” 94.

The experience of menstruation crystallizes an irreducible difference between male and female: women bleed by virtue of their biology and physiology; men do not. Sexual difference is an unassailable physical truth despite the male hegemony and sexual homogeneity imposed by traditional Church doctrine. Heloise is thus issuing a call for the reconception of the body “in specifically sexed terms [for] bodies are never simply human bodies or social bodies”.⁴⁴ She wants Abelard to acknowledge the specificity of her own body and of the female body in general. She is clamoring for the recognition of “a radical and irreducible difference” not only in terms of biology but as the basis of the experience of subjectivity. As Grosz notes, “sexual differences [...] are bodily differences, but in order to acknowledge the fundamentally social and cultural “nature” [of sexual differences], the body must be reconceived, not in opposition to the culture but as it preeminent object”.⁴⁵ The body in all its particularities must attain a privileged status in constructions of subjectivity, for it is what organizes and ensures the experiences that make up the sum total of the person.⁴⁶

The menstruating female body represents the potential for fertility, signifying that the performance of heteronormative sexuality bears reproductive consequences for females.⁴⁷ For Heloise, heterosexuality becomes a trap: the private sexuality that she shared with Abelard was rendered public when she was impregnated. It is her body that betrays them, not Abelard’s amatory songs that “were on everyone’s lips” nor the

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, “Space, Time, and Bodies,” in *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 84.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, “Bodies and Knowledges: Feminism and the Crisis of Reason,” in *Space, Time, and Perversion*, 32.

⁴⁶ Sharon Jane Chua, “Remembrance of Sins Past.”

⁴⁷ Marilyn Desmond, “*Dominus/Ancilla*,” 60.

childish philosophical games in his classes. And while the songs and the games show that their amatory relations were not purely private, it was held private from the person to whom it would matter the most, Heloise's uncle, Fulbert.

The once-pregnant mother is different from the one which has never had to bear a child. Pregnancy, as such, becomes a form of bodily and psychic inscription for woman. Thus, "bodies speak without necessarily talking"⁴⁸--more so the pregnant body, which attests to its sexual activity. This "reproductive repercussion of heterosexuality" once again traces a dividing line between man and woman.⁴⁹ As Joan Cadden notes, from the late eleventh to the fourteenth century, male and female reproductive roles provided the foundation for the definition of male and female natures.⁵⁰

Still, even without getting pregnant, the effects of sexual pleasure inscribe irreversible effects upon a person's subjectivity. Thus, in summoning the menstruating body, Heloise points to the irrevocable transformation she underwent, not only by bearing a child but also by being involved in such a highly sexual liaison with Abelard. That sexual memory for Heloise has been scripted--and is continually played out--upon her body is clearly evident in her second letter to Abelard:

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 celebrations of 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 [...] Everything we did and also the times and places where we did it are stamped on my heart along with your image, so that I

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, "Bodies and Knowledge," 35.

⁴⁹ Marilyn Desmond, "*Dominus/Ancilla*," 42.

⁵⁰ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 167.

live through them 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.⁵¹

Marilyn Desmond argues that Heloise's remembrances are not simply "fantasies" but actual erotic experiences felt bodily.⁵² Heloise's repeated conviction that her experiences were "desires of the greatest pleasures" suggest an actual erotic performance on her part.⁵³ In this most sexualized of her letters, Heloise not only links the performance of autoeroticism with the painful memory of her lost pleasures but, more importantly, she fashions it as a sufficient substitute for past carnal deeds. Despite the intervening years, Heloise is still able to resurrect the experience of sensuality in the body.⁵⁴

All the same, Heloise's experience of autoeroticism depicted in her letters signals a form of "corporeal captivity."⁵⁵ Such captivity takes on two meanings in this particular instance. Her body, the site of her eroticism and carnal memories, traps her; as the figurehead for her monastery, Heloise must cultivate an effusive aura of holiness. Conversely, Heloise is cloistered in the monastery, wearing a nun's habit that she did not even want to put on in the first place. Heloise laments these multi-layered feelings of entrapment: "Miserable creature that I am, who is there to rescue me out of the body doomed to this death?"⁵⁶ Thus, while she exultantly rejoices in her bodily pleasures, her sense of spiritual obligation force her at the same time to become despondent over that prurient self-indulgence. Heloise stands at the liminal threshold of both accepted and

⁵¹ Heloise, "Letter 4," 68-69.

⁵² Marilyn Desmond, "*Dominus/Ancilla*," 67.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁴ Sharon Jane Chua, "Remembrance of Sins Past."

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁶ Heloise, "Letter 4," 69.

rejected sexuality: she is a heterosexually reproductive mother, channeling her libido for regeneration, but, at the same time relishes the wantonness of her own sexuality.

While Heloise shows the power of the body in affecting an interior subjectivity, she also shows the failure of the inscription process. According to Elizabeth Grosz, the inscription of sociocultural meanings upon the external body gives rise to an inner subjectivity.⁵⁷ Sociocultural inscriptions create a sense of fixity, if provisional and merely visual, amid the ever-changing flux of experience.⁵⁸ Yet, in the case of Heloise, the inscription of the religious habit fails to impart a congruent inner subjectivity. While her identifying garment demands that she cast off her sexuality, she tenaciously clings to it. It was not simply a matter of still being hopelessly devoted to Abelard and to their sexualized past but points to a more fundamental belief held by Heloise: that her sexuality is part and parcel of who she is and who she will be.

For Heloise, then, the regulating effects that were supposedly conferred by taking up the habit and the veil prove useless; sexual longing arises from within her subjectivity and she consents willingly to it. Thus, in claiming that she is “wholly guilty” and “wholly innocent” at the same time, Heloise reads her actions through their shared ethics of pure intentions.⁵⁹ She admits that, as a nun, she is guilty of harboring such sensuality. Yet, she

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, “Bodies and Knowledge,” 32.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁹ For Heloise and Abelard, true moral judgment must be done according to the intention with which the act has been committed. In his *Sententie*, Abelard declares that God “does not care for actions, which are indifferent in themselves, but demands purity of intention.” For Abelard’s philosophy of ethics, see John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, especially pp. 251-264. Heloise seems to echo the same philosophy in her second letter: “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 not before God, who searches in our hearts and loins and sees in our darkness. I

absolves herself from any guilt because she is simply being true to her own person: she realizes that these sexual promptings arise because they are part and parcel of who she is. As with the menstruating body that cannot be contained with the habit, so, too can Heloise's sexuality not be regulated by monastic dictate. An intrinsic link is established between the bleeding body and the sexualized body: in Heloise's particular case, both are fundamental truths of her irreducibly female body. The unruly body, in all that term might suggest, will not bend to mere external mechanisms of constraint. Thus, how can she, like Abelard, eventually conform to the symbolism of the habit if the habit does not respect her very body?⁶⁰

Abelard addresses the question of clothing for nuns in his Rule for the Paraclete. In his eighth letter, he condemns the wearing of "costly clothes" as they symbolize the pride of the "rich man who was damned".⁶¹ He figures clothing as exciting desire and extravagance, especially for women, "for their weak minds desire more strongly what enables extravagance to find fuller expression in them and through them".⁶² This extravagance and pride he also links to the loss of chastity: "their fashion in dress is that they have no fashion and, whoever wants fashion, or does not refuse it if offered, loses the proof of her chastity" because "any such person would be thought preparing herself

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 deserve the highest praise. And yet perhaps there is some merit and it seems somehow acceptable to God, if a person whatever her intention gives no offence to the Church in her outward behavior, if the name of the Lord is not blasphemed among the infidel because of her nor if she does not disgrace the Order of her profession amongst the worldly." In Letter 4, 69.

⁶⁰ Sharon Jane Chua, "Remembrance of Sins Past."

⁶¹ Peter Abelard, "Letter 8," 190.

⁶² Ibid., 191.

for fornication, and be judged not a nun but a whore.”⁶³ Abelard draws a direct link from the outward display of clothing, to vanity and pride, and ultimately, to whorishness. In this he echoes the teachings of Orderic Vitalis (1075– ca.1142), Maurice de Sully (ca.1100–1196), and John of Salisbury (ca.1115–76) who claim that fashion was “sign of pride or sexual licentiousness because it communicates the individual’s investment in worldly goods”.⁶⁴ The type of clothing that Abelard prescribes for the nuns of the Paraclete is one that, for him, would not stir up images of the outside world. Clothing, like cloistering, would serve to physically restrain and dissociate the wearer from desire.

Clothing, too, serves as a deterrent against external threats to the purity and chastity of the nuns:

The veil should not be made of silk, but of dyed linen cloth, and we should have two sorts of veil, one for the virgins already consecrated by the bishop, the other for those not to be consecrated. The veils of the former should have the sign of the Cross marked on them, so that their wearers shall be shown by this to belong particularly to Christ in the integrity of their virginity, and as they are set apart from the others by their consecration, they should also be distinguished by this marking on their habit which shall act as deterrent to any of the faithful against burning with desire for them. This sign of virginal purity the nun shall wear on the top of her head, marked in white thread and she shall not presume to wear it before she is consecrated by the bishop. No other veils shall bear this mark.⁶⁵

Abelard believes that by cloistering nuns, they will be free from desire and temptations, that they will be free from carnal wants. The veil here is construed as something to suppress or stave off desire, to calm the effects of the libido. Together with the habit, it covers the woman’s body and it both affirms and denies female sexuality. Both the habit

⁶³ Peter Abelard, “Letter 8,” 192.

⁶⁴ Nicole D. Smith, “*Estreitement Bende*: Marie de France’s *Guigemar* and the Erotics of Tight Dress,” in *Medium Aevum* 77 (2008): 96.

⁶⁵ Peter Abelard, “Letter 8,” 92.

and the veils of the nuns mark off the physical body of the women and signify that they have consecrated their bodies to God, thereby marking them off as prohibited to humans.

Furthermore, Abelard is very specific about the type of material used to make the habits of the nuns. He decrees that only lambskin must be used, both as a sign of poverty and as a perpetual reminder that they are the property of the sacrificial lamb, Christ. It is this excessive fetishization of the external image that Heloise abhors – and the main point of her divergence from Abelard’s notion of religious devotion. For her, the true Christians are those who are “wholly occupied with the inner man, so that they may adorn him with virtues and purify him of vices, but they have little or no concern for the outer man.”⁶⁶

Many clerical works that abounded during this time consider fashionable women’s dresses as both “conceal[ing] the body’s sinful nature” and “broadcast[ing] its immoral tendencies,”⁶⁷ but Heloise, drawing on the symbolism of the nun’s habit, erases this easy categorization. For her, it is the black habit of the religious that conceals her “body’s sinful nature and immoral tendencies,” forcing her to lay claim to the role of the hypocrite: “men may call me chaste; they do not know the hypocrite that I am [...] 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.”⁶⁸ And so while Abelard addresses Heloise’s literal concern regarding the purging of “monthly humours,” he misses her crucial underlying point. The fetishization of the external image to which Abelard himself is suspect is not

⁶⁶ Heloise, “Letter 6,” 107.

⁶⁷ Nicole D. Smith, “*Estreitement Bende*,” 99.

⁶⁸ Heloise, “Letter 4,” 69.

necessarily substantive of the interior life of the person; according to Heloise, it even serves to isolate the religious from their own inner selves. She insists that the inscription of numerous external trappings upon the religious will fail to enforce a concomitant change of heart if the person retains their sense of volition to hold on to the past. All the same, she also claims that holding on to the past is simply being truthful and sincere. Heloise upholds the primacy of the person's own internal moral compass in determining their own path for worship, noting that a more internalized and personalized form of worship, one that does not bend to external laws is more attuned with the message of the Gospel.⁶⁹ Abelard's guidance in this purview is the type of consolation Heloise wants, and she herself sets out the groundwork for this:

I do not wish you to exhort me to virtue or summon me to battle. You say: '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 victory; it is sufficient for me to avoid danger, and this is safer than engaging in war. In whatever corner of heaven God shall place me, it will be enough for me. No one will envy one another there, and what each one has will suffice. So that I might add the strength of authority to this our counsel, let us hear St. Jerome: 'I confess my weakness, I do not wish to fight in hope of victory, lest the day comes when I lose the battle. What need is there to forsake what is certain and pursue uncertainty?'⁷⁰

What she wants is to work within her own weaknesses and attain her own form of salvation from within that place. Her desire for a new form of *religio* reflects these concerns. She demands a practice that moves beyond mere adherence to external laws and instead focuses on the cultivation of interior sincerity. For her, the *animus* does not

⁶⁹ "And so it is not so much what things are done as the spirit in which they are done that we must consider, if we wish to please him who tests the heart and the loins and sees in hidden places, 'who will judge the secrets of men,' says Paul, 'in accordance with my gospel,' that is, according to the doctrine of his preaching." Heloise, "Letter 6," 108.

⁷⁰ Heloise, "Letter 4," 70-71.

conform to what the externally-imposed *habitus* dictates. Rather, the inner self stands independent of the external image.

Truth and sincerity in devotion does not stem from the assumption of any external clothing nor by conformity to imposed laws but only from the *regulae* of one's subjectivity. In her first two letters, Heloise claims how the habit of the nun could not prevent her from recollecting her erotic past with Abelard. She develops the trope of the body that cannot be bound by the habit that envelops it by claiming in her first letter that: "I did more, strange to say – my love rose to such heights of madness that it robbed itself of what it most desired beyond hope of recovery, when immediately at your bidding I changed my clothing along with my mind, in order to prove you the sole possessor of my body and my will alike".⁷¹ Heloise depicts her entry into the convent as one prompted not by any spiritual conversion but rather, by her desire to show Abelard that he was the "sole possessor of [her] body and [her] will." Yet, at the same time, Heloise folds within the account of her entry into the monastery the assurance that her desire for Abelard will continue. By claiming that her entry robbed her love of the thing "it most desired beyond hope of recovery," the condition for desiring and longing is assured as the object desired can never be attained.⁷² As with his figuration of Heloise's physical erotic desire for him through the neat separation of interior/exterior, Abelard continues to believe that barring external temptations would be enough to guarantee that unwanted desire will be non-existent in monastic life. Heloise, however, believes that such a division of the internal

⁷¹ Heloise, "Letter 2," 51.

⁷² Sharon Jane Chua, "Remembrance of Sins Past."

and external is naïve at best. For Heloise, sexuality has become part of her subjectivity and as such, it is not subject to her conscious volition.⁷³ Therefore, absconding from the external world does not guarantee that she will no longer experience stirrings of sexuality.

Heloise depicts the body as a multiply-determining entity, not simply the static, oft-maligned vessel of the soul. By accepting the body and giving recognition to its role as the material basis for subjectivity, the body becomes an active polemical site; rather than simply be a passive material structure that allows her to carry out her abbatical duties or engage in sexual couplings, her body becomes the locus upon which she wages the war for monastic reform. She subjects the very category of patriarchy into question by placing the figure of the woman within the text that most encapsulate the foundations of the religious order. Through that, she roots out the inherent inconsistencies and fissures that arise. She thus uses the very structures of the symbolic against itself. Hence, her purported undermining and transgressions of the patriarchal monastic orders is really not an attack as much as a radical rethinking of what continues to exist unquestioned even in light of its blatant inadequacy.⁷⁴

Ultimately, however, her plea for a new religious rule to be established at the Paraclete is not a “comforting or liberating thought for her.”⁷⁵ Such a rule, which focuses squarely on the inner life of the person, only serves to highlight the cause of Heloise’s

⁷³ Robert Edwards, “Abelard and Heloise: Conversion and Irreducible Desire,” in *The Flight from Desire*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 83.

⁷⁴ Sharon Jane Chua, “Remembrance of Sins Past.”

⁷⁵ Linda Georgianna, “‘In Any Corner of Heaven’: Heloise’s Critique of Monastic Life,” in Wheeler, *Listening to Heloise*, 203.

own grief and suffering, as it is her own inner life that has caused her unspeakable anguish. By arguing that the only real basis for religious life is one based on the biblical exhortation to do good and abstain from evil “for the love of God,” Heloise explicitly sets forth requirements that entail a continuous struggle with one’s motives, memories, and desires.⁷⁶ Unlike Abelard’s heroic spirituality which neither recognizes nor accounts for the complexities of her experience, her version of religious authenticity is not so much an aspiration towards perfection but dogged persistence in light of spiritual weakness.

⁷⁶ Linda Georgianna, “‘In Any Corner of Heaven,’” 205.

Chapter Three: Negotiations and Love Songs

A related expression of desire within the religious circle is Heloise's acknowledgement, according to Marilyn Desmond, that "the performance of desire is textual as much as physical, and letters as a transcription of language appear to be one option for her erotic experience."¹ As she writes in her first letter to Abelard, "while I am denied your presence, give me at least through your words – of which you have enough and to spare – some sweet semblance of yourself [...] I beg you to restore your presence to me in the at you can – by writing me some word of comfort, so that in this at least I may find increased strength and readiness to serve God."² Her appeal to Abelard to write her "some word of comfort" to give her the "strength and readiness to serve God" appears to be a thinly-veiled guise to ensure the continuance of their correspondence.³ What belies this is her contradictory rhetoric: she wants Abelard to lead her to God, but encourages him to do this by reminding him of their erotic past. Heloise continues this appeal: "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 resounded with my name. Is it not far better now to summon me to God than it was then to satisfy our lust?"⁴ For Heloise, the written word not only summons up

¹ Marilyn Desmond, "Dominus/Ancilla: Rhetorical Subjectivity and Sexual Violence in the Letters of Heloise," in *Ovid's art and the Wife of Bath: the Ethics of Erotic Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 63.

² Heloise, "Letter 2," 54.

³ This is not to imply that they have not corresponded prior to this point. Rather, Heloise is probably insisting on a deeper and more personal level of communication, moving beyond matters revolving strictly around the Paraclete.

⁴ Heloise, "Letter 2," 54-55.

the absent Abelard. At the same time, it serves to juxtapose the experience of “sinful pleasures” with the experience of God. Eroticism is thus invoked in two ways: the written language becomes the stand-in for her lost lover while it intertwines the present experience of the divine with the past experience of the carnal.

An important sub-category of the written word is highlighted here by Heloise. Songs are placed in a privileged space for the performance and realization of desire. Abelard himself acknowledges this: “when inspiration did come to me, it was for writing love songs, not the secrets of philosophy. A lot of these songs, as you know, are still popular and sung in many places, particularly by those who enjoy the kind of life I led.”⁵ Heloise buttresses this claim:

In you I readily admit there are two things especially, with which you could immediately win the heart of any woman – the gift of composing and the gift of singing. We know that the other philosophers achieved no success in these things, whereas for you they served as a kind of game, as a recreation from the labor and exertion of philosophy. You have left many songs composed in amatory verse or rhyme [...] 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.⁶

While many of these early love songs are no longer extant, the value of this discursive evidence lies in the function of songs within their relationship. It served to mark Abelard as somebody who is considered to be greater than most philosophers, for he is not only skilled in matters of philosophy but also in matters of music. Heloise values these compositions because it served to differentiate her from the rest of the women; it marked her as Abelard’s own.

⁵ Peter Abelard, “*Historia Calamitatum*,” 11.

⁶ Heloise, “Letter 2,” 53.

Thus, the fact that Heloise turns to music in both her earlier and later relationship with Abelard signals the special role that music played in their lives, whether as lovers or as spiritual co-directors. This does not mean, however, that the status of music in their relationship does not undergo a change in symbolic meaning. Whereas it was initially used by Abelard as a means to extol his love for Heloise, music, in its liturgical incarnation, was now used as a way to offer the type of spiritual guidance Heloise desires while allowing for the memorial of their shared past. The liturgical songs that Abelard wrote for the Paraclete are the epitome of the kind of consolation Heloise wanted from him.

Abelard was initially puzzled over Heloise's request for new hymns to be used at the oratory, telling her that "I thought it superfluous for me to compose new hymns when you had plenty of existing ones, and it seemed almost sacrilegious for new hymns by sinners to rank as high or higher than the ancient hymns of the saints."⁷ What Heloise wanted was not only several new hymns to expand and correct the Paraclete repertory but a totally new set to replace the old ones in place. Lorenz Weinrich contextualizes Abelard's concern within the realm of existing medieval sacred music:

commissioned compositions were on the whole a sorry substitute for the variety found in the traditional hymns. Compared with this *Thesaurus musicae sacrae* collected over the centuries, Abelard's hymns signified a monstrous impoverishment. In fact, only the nuns at the convent of the Paraclete were denied the tradition by Heloise, for only there were all of Abelard's hymns used; other

⁷ Peter Abelard, "Preface," in *The Hymns of Abelard in English Verse*, trans. Sister Jane Patricia (Lanham, 1986), 31-34.

cloisters selected what they deemed worthy and thus enriched their liturgical repertoire.⁸

Through these cracks, we can get a glimpse as to how Heloise manages to create a space for the performance of her desire within the bounded limits imposed by both the monastic order and Abelard's own design for her.⁹ Her assumption into the abbacy indicated a rejection of worldly trappings and a repudiation of her past.

As the spiritual advisor to the Paraclete, Abelard strove to propagate the ideology of the *sponsa Christi* by weaving around Heloise and the nuns a tapestry of signifiers in the form not only of his sermons but, more effectively, in his musical productions. Thomas Bell writes that the musical hymns were Abelard's way of "sequencing" Heloise's thoughts away from being his earthly wife to becoming the perfect bride of Christ. Dronke, however, cautions against such textual readings that assume "that the [poetic] climax is no more than an insensitive application of traditional moral dogma."¹⁰ Indeed, such a reading elides that behind the name Heloise that is continuously dragged as an appendage to Abelard's own is another desiring and feeling subject. What is masked by an inordinate fixation on the "moral dogma" is the imposition of an aesthetic structure that serves not merely to suppress so much as to elide, overlook, and relegate to obscurity the threat of unbridled desire. It fails to grasp the underlying realization by

⁸ Lorenz Weinrich, "Peter Abaelard as Musician – I," *The Musical Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (1969): 301.

⁹ In Abelard's letter accompanying the book of hymns sent to Heloise, he recounts that the "most reasoned argument" he received for the rationale of the commissioned works was that most extant hymns they used were following custom rather than authority; there was widespread confusion regarding the titles and authors of the texts; the incongruity of the melody with the words; the lack of appropriate hymns for feasts.

¹⁰ Peter Dronke, "Peter Abelard: *Planctus* and Satire," in *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry 1000-1150* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 137.

Abelard of Heloise's overpowering desire, a desire that he fears would make a mockery of the Paraclete and threaten his own chance at spiritual redemption.

More importantly, this assumption fails to grapple with a very pressing theological concern brought up by Heloise. Though Heloise's letter requesting for new hymns is no longer extant, her reasons can be reconstructed, however, from Abelard's Preface to the first hymnal. Abelard appears to quote verbatim Heloise's letter of request:

There is such great confusion in the hymns that we use that the superscribed title never or rarely distinguishes what or whose they are; although some seem to boast certain authors...the inequality of the syllables is frequently so great that they scarcely fit the melody of the song, without which no hymn, described as 'Praise of God with song,' can exist. For several feasts (you added) proper hymns are lacking, as for the Innocents, the Evangelists, or those holy women who were not at all virgins or martyrs.

There are not a few instances (you declared) where it is necessary for the singers to lie, either because of the necessity of the season, or because of the inclusion of some falsehood. The faithful, often hindered by some circumstance or convenient dispensation, either anticipate the established times for the hours of prayer, or are anticipated by them, so that they are forced to lie at least about the time of day...

It is often not so much negligence that destroys this observance as that some necessity or dispensation prevents it...Not only does the non-observance of the appropriate season or time of day create a lie, but also the authors of certain hymns have in some things exceeded due measure, either through proclaiming absurdities by some compunction of spirit, or through an incautious desire to extol the saints in pious zeal, that we often proclaim some things in these hymns that are against our conscience, being quite foreign, as it were, to the truth. There are very few people who, weeping and sighing either through a desire for contemplation or through compunction for their sins, are really able to sing: 'Our plaintive prayers we pour before thee, Release us from chains of sin, and again, 'In weeping prayer and contrite song, We ask thine intercession, Lord,' and similar things. As they suit only the elect, they suit very few people...¹¹

¹¹ Peter Abelard, "Preface to Book I [The Daily Round]," in Constant J. Mews, "Liturgy and Identity at the Paraclete: Heloise, Abelard, and the Evolution of Cistercian Reform," in *The Poetic and Musical*

Abelard suggests three areas of concern for Heloise: the inadequate fit of the hymnal melody to the words; the lack of proper hymns for lesser known saints; and the necessity for singers to lie, either about the time of day or, more seriously, about their own inner lives. All of these concerns, in one way or another, point back to similar concerns that Heloise raised in her letters to Abelard. The general theme that unites these three is that of sincerity and authenticity in religious profession, most especially in the celebration of the daily liturgy.

The liturgy is, arguably, the highlight of daily devotional practice. It served to coalesce into a singular temporal and spatial point the impervious past with the present and the future.¹² Though liturgy was celebrated daily, its content changed with the passing seasons and years. This cyclical nature also demanded that elements of worship that were no longer self-evident or appropriate were changed, re-examined, or re-contextualized. As such, liturgies usually reflected the evolution of theological concepts that were contemporaneous with them. The historical past, preserved within the individual liturgies, however, was an important source of identity for these religious communities.¹³ These reenactments and reliving of the past, however symbolic, helped to establish a sense of unity both within the community and with the greater ecclesiastic community. For the Paraclete, it was Abelard, put to task by Heloise, who created the liturgical tapestry that portrayed and structured the symbolic world of the nuns.

Legacy of Heloise and Abelard, ed. Marc Stewart and David Wulstan. (Ottawa: The Institute of Medieval Music, 2003), 31-32.

¹² Margot Fassler, *Gothic Song: Victorine Sequences and Augustinian Reform in Twelfth-Century France*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

Embodied in these works are not only the ideological beliefs and practices that Abelard wanted the nuns to emulate but also their intersection with and development from his own personal past.

Within the performance of the Divine Office, liturgical songs were an indispensable part of worship. For eight different times during the course of the day, a service consisting of prayers and worship is held in the following order: Matins, which were held before sunrise; Lauds, occurring right at sunrise; Prime (*ad primam horam*); Terce (*ad tertiam horam*); Sext (*ad sextam horam*); None (*ad nonam horam*); Vespers, occurring at sunset; and the Compline, which is held just before retiring for the night.¹⁴ The main point of each day's ritual, however, was the celebration of the mass. The musical compositions used for these rituals have all been subsumed under the medieval liturgical genre, which refers to the prose and poetry "that formed the spectrum of liturgical lyric that audiences clearly perceived as distinct in some important way or ways from other groups of poems."¹⁵ Under this genre, sequences, a special type of liturgical song, were first construed in the twelfth century as a means for God to speak to mortals.¹⁶

Numerous examples of medieval sequences are extant and have gained considerable critical and scholarly attention. However, despite their relative popularity, sequences are still something of an oddity. As Nancy van Deusen notes, many aspects of

¹⁴ John Stevens, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance, And Drama, 1050-1350* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 269.

¹⁵ Patrick Diehl, *The Medieval European Religious Lyric: an ars poetica* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 52.

¹⁶ Margot Fassler, *Gothic Song*, 58.

this musical form are still unclear.¹⁷ Its liturgical function, spiritual content, and its intrinsic significance remain enigmatic. Part of the reason for such lacunae in the history and function of sequences is the sheer amount of extant work, as the volume makes it hard to extract general, overarching characteristics from disparate examples.

Nevertheless, its link with the Psalms is very explicit: close inspection of sequence texts shows that the link between the Old and the New Testaments – the same link made by the Psalms – is refashioned musically by the sequence within the Mass. In fact, the central themes that constantly recur across various sequence texts are those which have their inception in the Old Testament but have their resolution in the New Testament.¹⁸

Margot Fassler notes that sequences composed during the twelfth century often communicated using the Old Testament typology often found in sermons and exegesis of the church fathers. Here, however, they have been adapted and appropriated for the purposes of praise.¹⁹ Formally, within the liturgy, the sequence was joined to the Alleluia on one side and was connected to the Gospel on the other side. Thus, sequences had to mix together elements from both the Old and the New Testaments, thereby providing copulation between the two disparate but parallel theological worlds. Because of its distinct nature – it was the only liturgical song or text that was marked by hybridization of the past and the present – it was considered a transitional song.²⁰ In the medieval church, sequences normally adorned the liturgy as its mixing of the old and the new, as

¹⁷ Nancy van Deusen, "The Use and Significance of the Sequence," *Musica Disciplina* 40 (1986):5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹ Margot Fassler, *Gothic Song*, 58.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22-24.

well as the literary and the musical genres allowed it flexibility and uniqueness in performing the transition between the two temporally-distinct parts of the mass, the Psalm and the Gospel.²¹

By the twelfth century, it was clear from commentaries on liturgical music that the sequence had attained a lofty and noble status amongst all other forms of song.²² In the *Speculum ecclesiae*, an anonymous work from the second half of the twelfth century, this significant change of attitude toward sequences is exposed:

Therefore since this joy is neither fully to be expressed with words, nor is fully able to be still, the church, as if jubilating with suppressed words, bursts forth in admiration, as who should say, 'What voice, what tongue will be able to tell...' For her words do not suffice nor the intellect, but neither does love permit silence. Therefore the church, wondrous to say, by making pneumas, somehow indicates more expressly and better without words than through words, how great may be the joy of God where words will cease. For through the pneuma, though it is not described how great eternal joy may be, at least it is shown that this joy is indescribable. And when the sequence follows, the later Alleluia does not have a pneuma, but the choir sings the sequence in its places which signifies the same thing, that is the joy and delights of eternal life. Whence it generally has new and unusual words, since the joy of heaven is hidden and unknown to mortals. And the sequence mysteriously represents the praise of eternal life...the sequence has praiseful words and a sweet-sounding song, because there all will be full of praise and the melody of the celestial *organum* will abound with sweet happiness...And because the praise of eternal life will not resonate with human words, certain churches pneumatize the sequence mystically without words. For no significance of words will be necessary where the hearts of each lie open to each gazing upon the book of life.²³

The sequence has here been elevated to a privileged position, as it is seen now as a distinct liturgical song in its own right. Furthermore, the sequence is deemed to be the

²¹ Thomas J. Bell, *Peter Abelard after Marriage: The Spiritual Direction of Heloise and Her Nuns Through Liturgical Song*. (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 34.

²² Margot Fassler, *Gothic Song*, 61.

²³ From *Speculum ecclesiae*, quoted in Margot Fassler, *Gothic Song*, 62.

form most suitable for the job of rendering praise to God, perhaps because it boasts of new and unusual words,” which mimic the fact that the “joy of heaven is hidden and unknown to mortals.”²⁴ While this description of the sequence borders on the gratuitous and seems apt to describe any form of liturgical praise music, it does highlight the shift in religious worship espoused during the twelfth-century – one that gave pride of place to emotions. Sequences, then, became the emphatic resonance of the act of ritual condensed in musical form. More than any other liturgical hymn, they became the obvious vehicle for the expression of emotions within the liturgy.

For the Paraclete, Abelard himself composed numerous sequences, of which two, the *Epithalamica* and *Virgines castae*, are the most representative of the ideology that Abelard strove to impart to Heloise and the nuns at the Paraclete. The *Epithalamica* was performed during Masses celebrated throughout Easter Week, while *Virgines castae* was performed more often during the Feast Days of Saints Lucy (December 13), Agnes (January 21), Agatha (February 5), Margaret (July 20), Faith (October 6), and the Feast of the 11,000 Virgins (October 21). The import of these two sequences in the liturgy of the Paraclete draws in large part from the unique history of the establishment; the references speak both to the letters of Abelard and Heloise and to the liturgy that Abelard wrote for the Paraclete.

As such, sequences, while still performing the same functions they did in any other mass, took on an extended meaning within the Paraclete. It does not only, as Thomas Bell argues, trace “a sequence from the Old Testament to the Gospel message of

²⁴ Margot Fassler, *Gothic Song*, 62.

Christ (New Testament), passing through the Church Fathers and arriving at the world of the Paraclete Abbey and its abbess, Heloise.”²⁵ Rather, it also follows a trajectory from the joint, personal pasts of the Paraclete founders, continuing through the present, symbolic world of the oratory, with a view to arriving towards that “corner of Heaven.” Instead of presenting a linear and progressive view of the relationship of Abelard and Heloise, the sequence within the liturgy of the Paraclete becomes a wide web of meaning, interlacing together the Biblical, the Divine, and the mundane.

While the music and text of Abelard’s two sequences for the Paraclete, “*Virgines Castas*” and the “*Epithalamica*,” do not survive in any extant Paraclete hymnal or liturgical book, they are easily obtained from the Paraclete Ordinary, where they are identifiable by their respective *incipits*.²⁶ However, these sequences, together with several other works, are found complete in a late twelfth-century manuscript from Nevers. Margot Fassler notes that even if this group of works were not arranged in liturgical order, they appeared to have been considered for the permanent canon of the monastery.²⁷

Between these two sequences, the *Epithalamica* perfectly encapsulates the development of their shared ideology for the Paraclete, as it highlights moments in Abelard and Heloise’s negotiations for the authentic religious subject. At the center of this Easter sequence is the figure of Mary Magdalene, depicted here through the multi-determined figure of the bride. Mary Magdalene began to occupy a central role in

²⁵ Thomas J. Bell, *Peter Abelard After Marriage: The Spiritual Direction of Heloise and Her Nuns Through Liturgical Song* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 35.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁷ Margot Fassler, *Gothic Song and Victorine Sequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 104. According to Thomas Bell, there is, however, no substantial evidence to suggest that these sequences were used widely outside the Paraclete. See *Peter Abelard After Marriage*, 14.

Abelard's sermons for the Paraclete and Constant Mews argues that this development is likely due to Heloise's influence, who, in her request for new hymns, urges Abelard to compose songs for women who were neither virgins nor martyrs.²⁸ At the same time, this also reflects the growing popularity of the Cult of the Magdalene in the twelfth century, which rose to prominence together with other cults that centered on a female figure.

The sequences, despite their important place within the liturgy, are not simply a musical transcription of Abelard's conversion narrative, as Thomas Bell and Chrysogonus Waddell make it out to be. Indeed, what Peter Dronke notes about Abelard's laments also holds true for the "*Epithalamica*" and "*Virgines castae*": "it seems...undeniable that the griefs and longings which here emerge with the greatest intensity, and which move furthest beyond the Old Testament narratives that the songs take as points of departure, have true, and disconcerting, counterparts in the autobiographical *Historia Calamitatum*, and in the correspondence of Abelard with Heloise."²⁹ Both sequences, too, are populated by the same affective details that appear in their letters, recaptured in the images, allegorical figurations, and overarching theme of ardent desire. Thus, in order to understand its place within both the public and personal aspects of Heloise's devotion – two aspects, which, in her case, are not unified, this experiential background must be taken into account. Because of such considerations, this

²⁸ Constant J. Mews, "Heloise, the Paraclete Liturgy, and Mary Magdalene," in *The Poetic and Musical Legacy of Heloise and Abelard*, ed. Marc Stewart and David Wulstan (Ottawa: The Institute of Medieval Music, 2003), 107.

²⁹ Peter Dronke, "Peter Abelard: *Planctus* and Satire," in *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry 1000-1150* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 117-118.

sequence escapes its confines within the strict bounds imposed by liturgical music and becomes a love song if only for unfulfilled love.

This chapter explores the messages embedded within the “*Epithalamica*” that intersect, expound, and comment on Abelard and Heloise’s negotiation for the meaning of authenticity in religious vocation. This sequence also shows the development of Abelard’s model for conversion and salvation within the Paraclete. While his initial approach to the question of conversion was simple rejection of the carnal past, a model he tried to impose upon Heloise, in this sequence, Abelard actively courts eroticism through the use of both music and imagery in order to channel these emotions towards devotion to Christ.

Abelard’s sequences draws heavily from the Song of Songs, with his interpretation of Songs 3:1-8 forming the core of “*Epithalamica*.”³⁰ The third-century exegesis of the Song of Songs by Origen is the tradition received by Abelard. In this treatise, Origen identified the bridegroom in the Song of Songs as Christ, while the bride was both the Church and the person’s individual soul. Origen’s allegorical reading of the *canticum* parallels his view of the human person: the rational mind is to the body what the allegory is to the literal level of the Song. Though Abelard was strongly influenced by Origen, especially in his identification of the bridegroom with Christ and the bride with the Church and the soul, he differed from his third-century predecessor in that he gave “prominence to the soul’s lower, affective powers, which are intimately connected with

³⁰ Thomas J. Bell, *Peter Abelard after Marriage*, 41.

the bodily senses and volition.”³¹ As such, Abelard’s interpretation of the Song of Songs, seen both in the “*Epithalamica*” and in his invocation of the Black Bride in his third letter to Heloise, embraces the carnality of this text with the aim of redirecting the emotions stirred up by the imagery towards Christ.

This divergence from Origen’s exegetical approach to the Songs mirrors in part the burgeoning realization by Church leaders in the twelfth century that the rise in adult recruitment into the monasteries increased the danger posed by sensual desire.³² Talad Asad writes that during this time, the call for mere rejection of eroticism became less of a viable option, and that an “authoritative redescription of pleasurable memory was necessary” in order to reprogram the hearts and minds of those coming within the cloister walls.³³ The “*Epithalamica*,” then, on a personal level, could be seen as part of Abelard’s effort to create a new vocabulary and a channel through which Heloise could “redescribe, and therefore in effect construct, their memories in relation to the demands of a new way of life.”³⁴ By creating a new moral space in which old desires and feelings were welcomed and even indulged in, Abelard sought to channel these strong emotions towards a willing surrender to Christ the eternal bridegroom.

The “*Epithalamica*” is a miniaturized Easter play with four distinct actors: the Bride, the Bride’s companions, the Bridegroom, and the narrator/spectators who address

³¹ Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 8.

³² Thomas J. Bell, *Peter Abelard after Marriage*, 51.

³³ Asad, Talad. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 145.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

both the bride and her companions.³⁵ According to Waddell, Abelard was one of the first to use this adjective which derives from the Latin *epithalamium*, bridal hymn.³⁶ Its narrative is an allegory of Christ's resurrection depicted as an erotic romance, moving from the first fleeting visit to the Bride by her Groom, who urges his bride to "Arise, make haste and come fly to me"; the groom's sudden disappearance; the bride's wild and anxious search for him by night; the culmination in their jubilant reunion. Its imageries draw heavily from the Song of Songs, from the Exodus scene in the Old Testament, and, of course, from the Paschal mystery highlighted in the New Testament.

Rhetorically, Abelard has structured the "*Epithalamica*" in the epideictic tradition, thus revealing in its structure a heightened oratorical gesture of praise.³⁷ Its aim, then, is "to [increase] the intensity of adherence to certain values, which might not be contested when considered on their own but may nevertheless not prevail against other values that may come into conflict with them."³⁸ The speaker tries to establish a sense of communion around particular values important to the life of the community and to this end he uses the whole range of means available to the rhetorician for the purposes of amplification and argument.³⁹

³⁵ See Appendix I for the Latin and English text of "*Epithalamica*."

³⁶ Chrysogonus Waddell, "*Epithalamica*: An Easter sequence by Peter Abelard," in *The Musical Quarterly* 72 no. 2 (1986), 254.

³⁷ Thomas J. Bell, *Peter Abelard after Marriage*, 101; Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 51, quoted in Thomas J. Bell, *Peter Abelard after Marriage*, 101.

The milieu of performance also serves to amplify the message embedded in the sequence. Easter is considered the highlight of the liturgical year as it is the fulfillment of the Paschal mystery, the promise of Life overcoming Death. Its liturgical celebrations are much more elaborate and complex than any other feast, including that for Christmas. According to the Paraclete Ordinal, the “*Epithalamica*” was performed at the main mass of Easter by Heloise and her nuns, allowing her once more to celebrate her absent bridegroom in a manner consistent with her public image.⁴⁰ This sequence, together with Abelard’s Easter sermon, *In die paschae*, serves to drive home the ideology of the *sponsa Christi* that Abelard has been foisting upon Heloise. His recourse via the sequence seems to be a way to address Heloise’s concern regarding her hypocrisy. In her second letter to Abelard, she urges him to withdraw his praises for her, in the guise of protecting his reputation.⁴¹ In response, Abelard praises Heloise for realizing her failures and admitting to her insincerities, but cautions her at the same time to “be careful...lest you seek praise when you appear to shun it, and not to reject with your lips what you desire in your heart.”⁴² He requests that she stop dwelling on their past, lest they be separated in eternity: “Can you bear me to come to [Heavenly bliss] without you – I whom you declare yourself ready to follow to the very fires of hell? Seek piety in this at least, lest you cut yourself off from me who am hastening, you believe, towards God.”⁴³ In her third letter, Heloise takes one final stab in their debate surrounding the ethics of intention

⁴⁰ David Wulstan, “*Novi modulaminis melos*: the music and Heloise and Abelard,” in *Plainsong and Medieval Music*, 16.

⁴¹ Heloise, “Letter 4,” 70.

⁴² Peter Abelard, “Letter 5,” 78.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 79.

before shifting both tone and content of the letter to matters directly concerning the management of the Paraclete:

I would not want to give you cause for finding me disobedient in anything, so I have set the bridle of your injunction on the words which issue from my unbounded grief...And yet you have it in your power to remedy my grief, even if you cannot entirely remove it. As one nail drives out another hammered in, a new thought expels an old, when the mind is intent on other things and forced to dismiss or interrupt its recollection of the past. But the more fully any thought occupies the mind and distracts it from other things, the more worthy should be the subject of such a thought and the more important it is where we direct our minds.⁴⁴

Though many scholars have long used these lines as final proof of Heloise's conversion--and thus of her success as abbess of the Paraclete--Eileen Sweeney interprets it in light of the ethics of intentions that they shared. Both Abelard and Heloise believe that the true dimension of ethics is in the discernment of true motives and intentions that motivate one's outward acts, underscoring the absolute separability of "true morality from external act and conscious desire."⁴⁵ The aim of true spiritual and ethical growth, then, according to Sweeney is to mine the superficial surface for the "elusive and often impenetrable depth," not with the hopes of overturning or exposing the contradictions but rather to show how, more often than not, "surface and depth cannot be made to match."⁴⁶ As such, Sweeney interprets Heloise's acquiescence to Abelard's request as a "critique [of] their own actions in accord with that ideal and [to] live very self-consciously in that gap

⁴⁴ Heloise, "Letter 6," 93.

⁴⁵ Eileen Sweeney, "Abelard: A Twelfth-Century Hermeneutics of Suspicion," in *Logic, Theology, and Poetry in Boethius, Abelard, and Alan of Lille: Words in the Absence of Things* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan and St. Martin's Press, 2006), 66.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

between the model of authenticity and their imperfect matching of surface and depth.”⁴⁷

What Abelard wants from Heloise, then, is neither pure conversion nor forced matching of her inner being with her outer self but persistence in her duties and devotions in spite of the conflict, to “recognize and live in the gap, orienting [themselves] toward, without tasting, future union.”⁴⁸ It is around this theme of “future union” that the “*Epithalamica*” revolves. On the one hand, it allegorizes the promise of divine marriage, the final union of the bride with her true Bridegroom, Christ. On the other hand, it is also the promise that Heloise holds dearer in her heart: the promise of attaining once more her true beloved, Abelard. Thus, it could be said that Abelard and Heloise diverge when it comes to interpreting the imagery of “*Epithalamica*.” Whereas Bell argues that for Abelard this sequence serves as a symbolic world for Heloise to ease her acceptance of her role as the bride of Christ, these very same imageries recall, too, the carnality Abelard and Heloise once shared.⁴⁹

The drama of “*Epithalamica*” revolves around the figure of the bride and Abelard in no uncertain terms has already cast Heloise in this role. Aside from the bride, there are two other key figures that populate the “*Epithalamica*”: the bridegroom and the young maidens. The first stanza of the sequence opens with a call to the Bride to celebrate the “inward happiness” she feels for her upcoming nuptials through a bridal canticle:

Tell forth, O bride, your bridal canticle!
Tell outwardly the joys you gaze upon within,

⁴⁷ Eileen Sweeney, “Abelard,” 120.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 125.

⁴⁹ Sharon Jane Chua, “Performance of Desire in Peter Abelard’s ‘Epithalamica,’” (final paper, Medieval Emotion, Department of English, Georgetown University, 2008).

And, gladdening us, give tidings of the Bridegroom,
Whose presence means new life for you – forever!

Like Abelard's Easter sermon, this sequence provides the context for reading this opening stanza while also setting the major theme of the Easter celebration: the Hebrews' passage through the Red Sea.

Stanza two encapsulates the images' connections with the rest of Abelard's writings – his theological treatises, Church sermons, and letters to Heloise:

Young maidens, sing! dance!
When she, the Bride, begins her song, join in!
The Bridegroom's friends have called you to the nuptials,
And we wait to hear the songs sung by the new liege Lady.⁵⁰

The bride of "Epithalamica," cast in the role of song leader, sublimates in one figure several biblical *personae*. Through her, the Old and New Testaments coalesce, mimicking the traditional function of the liturgical sequence. The lines "Young maidens, sing! dance! / When she, the Bride, begins her song, join in!" connects this with both the opening biblical citation in Abelard's Easter Homily, *In die paschae*,⁵¹ and the Crossing of the Red Sea scene in Exodus.⁵² "Miriam" here refers to the woman who led the people of Israel in a celebratory song after their passage through the Red Sea.⁵³ Furthermore, this

⁵⁰ "Adulescentulae, vos chorum ducite; / cum haec praecinerit, vos sucinite. / Amici Sponsi vos vocarunt nuptiae, / et novae modulos optamus Dominae." Latin text from Chrysogonus Waddell, "Epithalamica," 248.

⁵¹ Chrysogonus Waddell, "Epithalamica," 259. In this sermon, Abelard quotes directly from the Ex 15:20-21: "Sumpsit ergo Maria prophetissa, soror Aaron, tympanum in manu. Egressaeque sunt omnes mulieres post eam, cum tympanis et choris, quibus praecinebat, dicens: Cantemus Domino, gloriose enim, etc." PL 178: 484C. "Therefore, the Prophetess Maria, sister of Aaron, takes up the tympana in her hand. And all the women with tympanas and choral dances are marching out after her, who plays before them, saying: 'We sing, indeed, of the Lord's glory, etc.'" My translation.

⁵² See n. 51 for the text of Ex 15:20-21.

⁵³ Chrysogonus Waddell, "Epithalamica," 259.

line also recalls Abelard's Easter hymn, *Da Mariae tympanum*, with Mary Magdalene cast in the role of troupe leader, singing the news of the Resurrection to the apostles: "Let the timbrel player give the tidings [...] worthy to be first to behold the Risen One [...]"⁵⁴ Needless to say, both Marys invoked by Abelard are prefigured as brides of Christ in his teachings, though the place of the "perfect *sponsa Christi*" has been reserved for Heloise.⁵⁵

For medieval church writers, Miriam was considered to be the Old Testament prefiguration of Mary Magdalene. The sequence's placement within the liturgy, serving as the chiasmic center around which the Old Testament transitions into its parallel narrative in the New Testament, is also echoed here by the use of the Miriam-Mary Magdalene figure embodied by the Bride. The devotion to Mary Magdalene in the Paraclete, which is implicitly noted in this sequence and explicitly acknowledged in Abelard's sermons, foreshadows the increasing interest in her that would unfold in the next century.⁵⁶ In fact, the first sister oratory of the Paraclete at Trainel was dedicated by Heloise to Mary Magdalene.⁵⁷

The first instance of Abelard's advocacy for Mary Magdalene occurs in his reply to Heloise's request for a History of the Order of Nuns. He reminds Heloise in this

⁵⁴ Chrysogonus Waddell, "*Epithalamica*," 259.

⁵⁵ Thomas J. Bell, *Peter Abelard after Marriage*, 221. The figure of the Old Testament Miriam is especially relevant to Heloise, as it was not a representation limited to Abelard. Even Peter the Venerable figures her as Miriam in his consolation letter to her following the death of Abelard: "With Miriam you sang a hymn of praise as Pharaoh sank beneath the waves, like her in days of old, you took up the tambourine of blessed mortification, so that your skill with it sent the strain of new harmonies to the very ears of God." "Letter (115) to Heloise," in Radice, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 218.

⁵⁶ Constant J. Mews, "Heloise, the Paraclete Liturgy, and Mary Magdalene," 107.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

passage that it was not the Jews who would enter the kingdom of God first, but rather, this privilege would be granted to prostitutes:

Finally, to return to the faithful of Christian women, it is pleasing to preach with amazement about, and to be amazed while preaching about, divine pity for the abject condition of common whores. For what was lower than Mary Magdalen or Mary of Egypt in their former status? Yet truly, a little time later heavenly grace raised them to honour and to divine favour. As we have commemorated above, one, indeed, remained in the society of the apostles, the other, as it is written, strove in the suffering of anchorites beyond human courage, so that, in the pattern of life of either kind of coenobite, the virtue of holy women surpasses all. What the Lord said to unbelievers, ‘prostitutes will go before you into the kingdom’ seems unacceptable to people of good repute, and yet, according to the differences of sex and way of life, the last shall be first and the first last. Finally, who does not know that the women seized upon the teaching of Christ and the counsel of the apostles with such fervor for chastity that, in order to preserve their purity of body as well as mind, they offered themselves as a total sacrifice to God through martyrdom, and, triumphing with a twofold crown, were zealous to follow the Lamb, Bridegroom of Virgins, wherever he went.⁵⁸

Mews notes that the scriptural basis of this passage, Matthew 21:31, was never granted much attention by patristic fathers.⁵⁹ Abelard’s invocation and extended commentary upon this passage refashions the archetypal virginal Bride of Christ in the Paraclete, moving away from a focus on the pure and chaste Virgin towards the reformed Magdalene.

Abelard’s use of whores to depict the divine favor granted to vilified women appropriates one of Heloise’s oft-cited but misread pronouncements in her first letter to Abelard: “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 forever, it would

⁵⁸ Peter Abelard, “Letter 7,” in *La Vie et les epistres: Pierres Abaelart et Heloys sa fame*, trans. Jean de Meun, ed. Eric Hicks (Paris: Champion-Slatkine, 1991), in 138-139, translated by Constant J. Mews, quoted in “Heloise, the Paraclete Liturgy and Mary Magdalene,” 106-107.

⁵⁹ Constant J. Mews, “Heloise, the Paraclete Liturgy and Mary Magdalene,” 107.

be dearer and more honourable to me to be called not his Empress but your whore.”⁶⁰

While this, however, is part of the bigger movement towards Abelard’s increasing devotion to Mary Magdalene, it nevertheless incorporates significant elements from their personal correspondence, a sign of both his recognition of Heloise and his acknowledgement of her influence upon his works. By constructing an alternative model for salvation in the Paraclete through Mary Magdalene, Abelard implicitly accepts Heloise’s claim to the title of whore and from this, attempts to channel her emotions and desires towards Christ. At the same time, he also gives Heloise the kind of spiritual consolation she has been seeking from him and a way to address her fears about her own spiritual salvation.

Both Heloise and Abelard latch onto this idea of Mary Magdalene as the model of salvation in the Paraclete. In Abelard’s preface to the first book of hymns he sent to the Paraclete, he writes that the hymns he composed for the Paraclete served to remedy a lacuna pointed out by Heloise: “And indeed, for very many festivals you adduced to be without proper hymns, namely, the Innocents and the Evangelists, or of those holy women who appear lesser than virgins or martyrs.”⁶¹ The resulting hymns and sequences that Abelard composed shows the development of his own Magdalene theology. Unlike his letter, which focused on the sinful past of Mary Magdalene, his new compositions glorified and celebrated the zealous faith she showed in seeking out the Risen Christ.

⁶⁰ Heloise, “Letter 2,” 51.

⁶¹ “*Plerisque etiam sollemnitatibus addebas deesse proprios ymnos, utpote Innocentum et Evangelistarum, seu illarum sanctarum quae virgines vel martires minime exstiterunt.*” Peter Abelard, in *PL* 178: 1772.

By the twelfth century, Mary Magdalene had become the favorite female saint,⁶² and she served as the alternative model for redemption for women who did not fulfill the role of virgins, widows, martyrs. More importantly, her appeal was universal; she was not only a figure which appealed to women, but to sinners in general. Still, she is specially identified with women sinners, as she combined in her figure the triple fault of women: beauty, sexuality, and sin.⁶³ During the mass celebrating her feast day on July 22, the Creed was recited, an honor reserved for very important Church festivals. She was the only female saint accorded this honor apart from the Virgin Mary.⁶⁴

Her story is not a straightforward one, and it appears that she is the conflation of three different women in the Bible rather than a singular, imposing figure. It was Pope Gregory the Great (ca. 540-604) in the sixth century who declared that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and the anonymous female sinner mentioned in Luke's Gospel were one and the same, and that all three were different nominations of Mary Magdalene.⁶⁵ From that century onwards, she gained notoriety for her archetypal feminine sins, most especially her past life as a prostitute. Nowhere in the bible does it state, however, that her sin was sexual in nature or that she was ever a prostitute. Indeed, in both Luke's and Mark's Gospels, they only mention that Mary Magdalene was that lady from whom Christ drove out seven demons.⁶⁶ Such a description of her "sins" could simply have been

⁶² Mary Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1994), 131.

⁶³ Ibid., 1.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 132.

⁶⁵ Mary Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 14.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 12. The Gospels passages are from Mt 9:22 ("at *Iesus conversus et videns eam dixit confide filia fides tua te salvam fecit et salva facta est mulier ex illa hora* [But Jesus, turning and seeing her, said:

psychological rather than explicitly sexual in nature. The unfortunate disadvantage of her birthplace, Magdalene, perhaps catalyzed this ascription, as that fishing village was infamous for the supposed licentiousness of its inhabitants.⁶⁷

By the time she gained prominence in the twelfth century, Mary Magdalene had already been considered the *apostolorum apostola*, or the apostle of the apostles. While the first instance of this appellation is unknown, Katherine Ludwig Jansen believes that it might have evolved from the *via apostolica* from Vezelay that outlined the apostolic acts of Mary Magdalene in Gaul.⁶⁸ Jansen also notes that many users of the term *apostolorum apostola* were connected in some way to Cluny, the mother house of Vezelay, where Peter Abelard lived until his death. In fact, he directly uses this term in his Easter sermon: “*Illa quippe prophetes memoratur, haec apostolorum apostola dicitur* [As one might expect, she is remembered as a prophetess, she is called the apostle to the apostles.]”⁶⁹ Mary Magdalene gained this privilege and honor because of her repentance for her past sins and her dedication to the Christ’s ministry. And so, however apocryphal her reputed sins might be, it turned her into a cult figure, a sign of God’s forgiveness and mercy for those who repent wholeheartedly.

From the outset, Heloise made it very clear that she does not fit into any of the “traditional modes” of salvation for women; neither does she accept Abelard’s

‘Be assured, daughter, your faith saved you (lit.: made you safe)’ and the woman was saved from that hour.]” and Lk 8:48 (“*at ipse dixit illi filia fides tua te salvam fecit vade in pace* [But he himself said to that one: ‘Daughter, your faith saved you. Go in peace.’]”). My translations. Emphasis appears in the text. Both text taken from the Latin Vulgate Bible.

⁶⁷ Mary Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 13.

⁶⁸ Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Middle Ages*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 62.

⁶⁹ *PL* 178:485. My translation.

conversion narrative. As Mary Haskins laments, women have tended to be seen more as abstractions than as actual entities and this sad state of affairs is explicitly demonstrated by the sermons specifically written for them, based only on the value of chastity.⁷⁰ The growing cult of the Magdalene served as a slight corrective to the artificial duality implicit in women's salvation model, in that it gave allowances for less than chaste women to gain the grace necessary to attain salvation. The model presented by Magdalene, too, presented Abelard with the perfect Biblical foundation for his developing own evolving model of salvation. Whereas in his earlier letters to Heloise he insisted that the assumption of the *sponsa Christi* ideology via chasteness of body and spirit was the only conversion model suited for Heloise, his later embrace of Mary Magdalene not as an alternative model but *the* model for salvation in the Paraclete shows his redefinition and refinement of this ideology.

The salvation model created by Abelard for the Paraclete was not created solely for Heloise but also for the nuns under her care. The group of young maidens in the "Epithalamica" stands simultaneously for the group of women who join Miriam in her celebratory song and dance as it appears in the passage from Exodus; for the chorus of women who are a constant fixture in the *Song of Songs*; for the daughters of Sion; and for the women guarding the tomb of Christ. The "daughters of Sion" is explicitly indicated in the ninth stanza, while again, we find in Abelard's letters the important role he assigns

⁷⁰ Mary Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 141. For a similar view regarding women in troubadour lyrics, see R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), especially ch. 5.

the women gathered at the tomb of Christ.⁷¹ These maidens who gather in song around the bride are no doubt the nuns of the Paraclete, whose education in the life of devotion and preparation as brides of Christ rested solely on Heloise.

Abelard dedicates another sequence for especially for the nuns of the Paraclete, the “*Virgines castae*.” This sequence was sung more often than the “*Epithalamica*” at the Paraclete, as it served as the liturgical sequence for six different feast days: Saints Lucy (December 13), Agnes (January 21), Agatha (February 5), Margaret (July 20), Faith (October 6), and the Feast of the 11,000 Virgins (October 21). “*Virgines castae*,” like “*Epithalamica*,” uses the Song of Songs as its Biblical core. The bride of Christ ideology is still the controlling theme of the sequence, since for women religious, this was perhaps the only acceptable end of their vocation. However, stanza six of this sequence encapsulates how the ideology of the *sponsa Christi*, the model of salvation prescribed by Abelard has already been modified:

As a burnt-offering virgins offer to the Lord
The integrity of their flesh and mind
Choosing Christ as their immortal bridegroom

Abelard figures the virgins’ bodies as *holocaustum* for the eternal bridegroom recalls the representation of Christ as the sacrificial Lamb of God. More importantly, he describes these offerings of the virgins as consisting of intact flesh *and* minds, standing in direct contrast to his predecessors who have identified chastity and purity solely as a corporeal

⁷¹ In Letter 3, Peter Abelard writes that in all three instances of the dead rising from the dead recounted in the Bible, all “were shown to women only” (59). In Letter 5, “In your mind be always present at his tomb, weep and wail with the faithful women, of whom it is written, as I said ‘The women sitting at the tomb wept and lamented for the Lord’” (85).

fact. Abelard insists here on the conformity of the external body to the internal mind, of the outer appearance to the inner person, and calls to mind Heloise's own critique of her situation: "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."⁷²

Abelard ends this sequence with a final exhortation to the nuns that they "attend to this song [...] whereby [their] devotion may with greater zeal adorn the temple of the Lord." The notion of temple here stands not only for the literal temple that the monastery, churches, and cloisters stand for; it also pertains to a person's body, as is noted in the often cited passage by Saint Paul in Corinthians: "*an nescitis quoniam membra vestra templum est Spiritus Sancti qui in vobis est quem habetis a Deo et non estis vestri. empti enim estis pretio magno glorificate et portate Deum in corpore vestro.* [Or are you all ignorant that your members are the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you all have from God, and that you are not for yourselves? Indeed, you are purchased with a great price. Glorify and carry God in your body.]"⁷³ The nuns, by following the prescription of Abelard and the earlier writers who wrote on virginity, would adorn their own temples with the virtues outlined in "*Virgines castae.*" In turn, the nuns themselves would become the literal adornments of God's temple, the Paraclete.

⁷² Heloise, "Letter 4," 69.

⁷³ 1 Cor 6:19-20 (Latin Vulgate Bible). My translation.

It is through this inculcation of values that their spirits, which are thought to reside in their corporeal bodies, are also made pure. In the fifth stanza of the “*Epithalamica*,” Abelard invokes the bride’s “redolent spikenard [that] had breathed forth its fragrance,” the full import of which can be seen in conjunction with his third letter to Heloise. As he mentions in the letter: these are “better perfumes, which are of the spirit, not of the body, for this is the fragrance [Christ] needs though he rejected the other.”⁷⁴ The “redolent spikenard” is thus the fragrant spirit of Heloise to be offered to the dead Christ who “suffered willingly for [her] redemption”⁷⁵ and who will be resurrected to be joined with her in divine matrimony. As with numerous other instances in their letters, Abelard has appropriated and rehashed one of Heloise’s statements; in this case, he returns to the notion of debt for which Heloise has been demanding payment.

In this same letter, too, Abelard advises Heloise to think of herself as the “bride of the only son who is dead.” Sweeney reads this figuration as a means for Heloise to “preserve her love for Abelard, now lost, and her love for God, not yet consummated, but gives her neither the happiness of marriage nor even the joyful anticipation of the young bride.”⁷⁶ The figure of the Bridegroom, then, does not create an either/or situation for Heloise which forces her to choose one of her “husbands.”⁷⁷ Rather, the Bridegroom of the “*Epithalamica*” becomes the sublimation of Abelard and Christ in one figure,

⁷⁴ Peter Abelard, “Letter 5,” 85. “*Para cum illis sepulturae eius unguenta, sed meliora, spiritualia quidem, non corporalia; haec enim requirit aromata qui non suscepit illa*” Latin text taken from J. T. Muckle, “The Personal Letters,” *Mediaeval Studies* 15 (1953): 91.

⁷⁵ Peter Abelard, “Letter 5,” 85.

⁷⁶ Eileen Sweeney, “Abelard: A Twelfth-Century Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” in *Logic, Theology, and Poetry in Boethius, Abelard, and Alan of Lille: Words in the Absence of Things* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 120.

⁷⁷ Sharon Jane Chua, “Performance of Desire in Peter Abelard’s ‘Epithalamica.’”

allowing Heloise a chance to relive the former joys she experienced with her human husband with her Heavenly one.

Stanzas 1, 2, and 9, are all invocations of the narrator for the bride and the maidens respectively. Abelard sets them apart from the narrative of the sequence through their melodic structure. Each of these stanzas is self-contained using the technique of fourfold repetition, wherein “a single melodic phrase is repeated four times in succession.”⁷⁸

Moving away from the style of fourfold repetition, the melody of stanzas 3, 4, 7, and 8 is employed to parallel the poetry, serving as the musical equivalent of the verbal stanzas. Stanza 3 is emblematic of this style. Unlike the two previous stanzas, the three musical phrases (with 3a = 3c 3b=3d, and 3e being the three phrases) in stanza 3 are populated with multi-note neumes, simulating the leaping and skipping of the bridegroom to see his bride.⁷⁹ Phrase 3e, relating to the bridegroom’s exhortations to the bride to “Arise, my love, make haste / My snow-white dove, come fly to me!”, mimics this through a succession of changes: three three-note neumes corresponding to the whispered calls to his betrothed; three punctums indicating urgency to fly and leave; and finally ending on another three-note neume and a punctum that amplifies his sense of urgency and, at the same time, as the punctum suggests, turns it into a demand. Theorizing in the melodic register allows us to apprehend that extra layer of nuance allowed by music.

⁷⁸ Chrysogonus Waddell, “*Epithalamica*,” 255.

⁷⁹ These three melodic phrases are also used by Abelard for the fourth stanza, albeit underscoring a different message: the bursting forth of spring that drives away winter. In this case, the melody evokes the same effect: the “bounding” arrival of something long awaited.

Delicate interweaving of the melody with the text induces mutability, thus allowing for the music to produce polyvalent meanings that eventually undermines the “moral dogma” intended.⁸⁰

The climax of the drama occurs in stanzas seven and eight. It is also the richest part of the sequence in terms of both its poetic and musical – hence aural – imageries, creating the perfect sample in which to unravel the synergistic interaction of the poetic and melodic registers of the “*Epithalamica*.”

Now I see what I had hoped for,
Now I clasp what I had loved;
Now I laugh at what I had so wept for:
I joy more than I had ever grieved.
 At morn I laughed, I wept at night;
 I laughed by morn, by night I wept.

Grief had brought on a sleepless night,
A grief made overpowering by love;
Desire had grown the more for this delaying,
Till Lover comes to visit the Beloved.
 Joy comes with day, lamentation with night;
 Rejoicing by day, lamenting by night.

⁸⁰ Sharon Jane Chua, “Performance of Desire in Peter Abelard’s ‘Epithalamica’.”

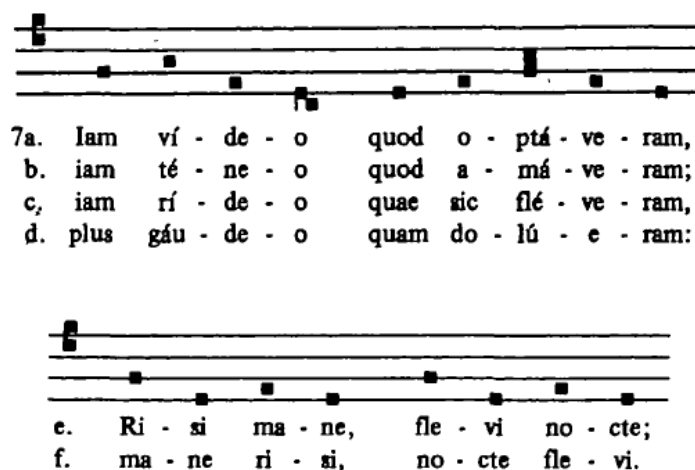


Figure 1: Neumes for Stanza 7



Figure 2: Neumes for Stanza 8

These two strophes stand at the center of the “*Epithalamica*,” where the bride has escaped from the strict watch of the city’s watchmen and is finally reunited with her bridegroom. The figure of the bride here calls forth the image of St. Agnes, especially in the lines: “Now I see what I had hoped for / Now I clasp what I had loved.” These same lines predominate her own “antiphons and responsories, [which] form a poem in celebration of the mystical union between Bridegroom and Bride,” the very same union

that Abelard wants to see enacted between Heloise and Christ.⁸¹ Finally, the couplets of “laughing/weeping” and “rejoicing/lamenting,” written in a chiasmic pattern, encapsulate the message of Abelard’s Easter sermon: “What wonder, therefore, if we pass those two days of the Lord’s suffering and burial chiefly in the grieving of compassion, so that after the weeping, laughter may be all the more dear?”⁸² The chiasmus, a rhetorical technique pervasively used in medieval texts, arranges ideas symmetrically in order to emphasize their parallelism. The Bible’s text is arranged in such a manner; Biblical events are seen as parallels of one another, with the event in the Old Testament prefiguring event happening in the New Testament. In Abelard’s text, the chiasmus formed by the couplets of “weeping/laughing” evoke the cyclical and complementary nature of these two emotional acts; sadness can be seen as prefiguring joy and vice-versa.

The melody of this part, however, almost seems to belie that this is the climax of the whole drama. As the neumes show, the melody is repeated in *diminuendo*, reducing the performance of this part to hushed murmurs. Despite the jubilation indicated by the poetic, there is no delirium of exultation in the melody, only the silent stirrings of satisfaction. Waddell reads this melodic contraction as the “semicoherent expressions of a lover in excess of emotion,” or, what I would like to think of as the failure of language in the face of overwhelming feelings ultimately salvaged by music, with the eroticism of the reunion highlighted by the whispered words. The active interplay of text and melody, two

⁸¹ Chrysogonus Waddell, “*Epithalamica*,” 263.

⁸² Ibid., 265. “*Quid igitur mirum, si et biduum illud Dominicae passionis ac sepulturae in luctu compassionis praecipue ducimus, ut post fletum gravior habeatur risus, nec jam Dominicae pressurae recordemur, resurrectionis gloria superveniente?*” PL 178:487.

registers which carry antipodal expressions of the same emotion, opens another space for emotional meaning that is quite different from what either register implies. Contrast this with stanza three, wherein tonal painting mimics the textual movement and thus, despite amplifying the emotional evocation, no further musical “space” is opened up. The music thus serves to complicate the scene instead of merely commenting on it.⁸³

This is the challenge of music, in that its text and melody would allow for the emergence of a meaning that differs from its constituent parts. It is within such “spaces,” where contradictory notions are expressed in union with one another, that metaphoric sublimations can occur. The theme should have been one of jubilation of triumphant rejoicing at the finding of the beloved. Yet, the expression verges on the wordless. As the anonymous author of the *speculum ecclesiae* wrote, words are not needed in the performance of the sequence because the joy expressed is indescribable.⁸⁴ Hence, the melody depicts the emotion while the text contextualizes it. This summarizes the longing of Heloise and Abelard, two things moving in opposite directions. But it also points Abelard’s own desire for reunion with Heloise, even if only in Heaven.

The theme of “desire growing with delaying” is particularly poignant for Heloise as it directly parallels her own experience with Abelard. Their story is one marked by separation, where there was never any certainty whether they would be reunited again. But like Heloise’s desire, however, it was not solely physical: the separation that Heloise decries in her letters, written as abbess of the Paraclete, was an emotional one. In all these

⁸³ Sharon Jane Chua, “Performance of Desire in Peter Abelard’s ‘Epithalamica.’”

⁸⁴ Margot Fassler, *Gothic Song*, 60.

cases, as Heloise makes clear, her desire for Abelard only grew. Performance of the “Epithalamica,” however, does not merely transport Heloise back to her past so much as allows her desire to become a physically palpable experience, the embodied rendering of the past in the present oriented towards the future: the musical performance becomes the message. Such interpretations are not without precedence: the ability of music to stimulate illicitly the senses had long contributed to its ambivalent status in the medieval theological canons.⁸⁵

In the prefatory note in the Paraclete hymnal, Abelard writes that music is “an indispensable part of the hymn: *melodia sine qua nullatenus hymnus consistere potest*.”⁸⁶ According to Lorenz Weinrich, this remark is important because it provides sound basis that Abelard was indeed the one who composed the melodies of his hymns.⁸⁷ This, however, is important, too, on another level: more than buttressing claims for Abelard’s authorship of the songs, Abelard’s privileging of the synergism inherent in the composition is highlighted.⁸⁸

In truth, medieval philosophers and thinkers often never bothered to distinguish between these two parts of the composition.⁸⁹ Guido of Arezzo writes in his treatise of

⁸⁵ Sharon Jane Chua, “Performance of Desire in Peter Abelard’s ‘Epithalamica.’” Bruce Holsinger tackles the different manifestations and implications “illicit stimulation” takes on during the Middle Ages. *Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁸⁶ “The hymn, without the melody, by which it is by no means able to stand...” Lorenz Weinrich, “Peter Abelard as Musician-I,” *The Musical Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (1969): 301.

⁸⁷ Lorenz Weinrich, “Peter Abelard as Musician – I,” 301.

⁸⁸ As such, the separation between poetry and melody is an artificial one and only done to highlight the necessary facets inherent in, and unique to, each portion of the sequence.

⁸⁹ John Stevens, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance, And Drama, 1050-1350* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 384.

music, *Micrologus*: “thus in verse we often see such concordant and mutually congruous lines that you wonder, as it were, at a certain harmony of language. And if music were added to this, with a similar internal congruity, *you would probably be charmed by a twofold melody*.”⁹⁰ Speech, then, in the hands of the master were musical in themselves, and the addition of music serves only to amplify the aural pleasures of the listener.

That the experience of music, both sacred and mundane, is predominantly a sensual experience is not lost to the medieval philosopher, or for that matter, the common medieval man. It is an experience that is “powerful and often unsettling,” generating two “extremes in responses” to it, with those who found themselves ‘caught in this sensual music’ fearing the consequences.”⁹¹ This “fear of consequences” is precisely the “widespread medieval anxiety” of having “sex in holy places.”⁹² The idea of sexual transgression within holy places, as Bruce Holsinger notes, “is most often a musical one,” given that music “effectively erase[s] sensual and epistemological boundaries between sexual and other modes of experience in the flesh. The histories of sexuality and musicality in the West are hopelessly imbricated and at times indistinguishable.”⁹³

To say, however, that music itself allows this erosion of cherished boundaries is to disembody it, casting it in the role of a freely-floating signifier that lacks rootedness, hollowly echoing nothing but itself. Inasmuch as the experience of burning desire and pleasure predicate the existence of the subject, so, too, does music’s ability to stir such

⁹⁰ Quoted in John Stevens, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages*, 385.

⁹¹ John Stevens, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages*, 388.

⁹² Bruce W. Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire*, 88.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

emotions demands recognition of the creative body, for the singing voice, emanating from the feeling subject, ultimately becomes an immaterial extension of the body itself. Emotions are lived out in the performance of the song, scripted on the body, felt by the whole being: it is the return of the emotional raptures Heloise once enjoyed with Abelard. And yet, because it has been metaphorized through song--regulated and purified through its transmission in the sacred hymns--Heloise's desire cannot undermine her role as abbess of the Paraclete.⁹⁴

This metaphoric sublimation that music precipitates is a historicizing act for Heloise, the continuation of who she was and still wants to be melding with who she must now become. By recapturing the past that continually reinserts itself into the present, it allows, at the same time, her projection for the future. Thus, the movement towards sublimation of Abelard and Christ into the formalized image of the future Bridegroom, culminating in the jubilant performance of matrimony through the "Epithalamica," does not demand any form of conversion inasmuch as a "let it be – for now."⁹⁵

Such attitude is best captured by Peter the Venerable when he writes to Heloise regarding the final days of Peter Abelard's life:

Him, therefore, venerable and dearest sister in the Lord, him to whom after your union in the flesh you are joined by the better, and therefore stronger, bond of divine love, with whom and under whom you have long served God: him, I say, in your place, or as another you, God cherishes in his bosom, and keeps him there to

⁹⁴ Sharon Jane Chua, "Performance of Desire in Peter Abelard's 'Epithalamica'."

⁹⁵ Ibid.

be restored to you through his grace at the coming of the Lord, at the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet-note of God descending from heaven.⁹⁶

Peter the Venerable does not shy away from using erotic language; more importantly, there is no outright disparaging of sexual love in favor of spiritual love.⁹⁷ He prophesies a divine and optimistic future where the former lovers are once again restored to each other, and there is no hint or implication whatsoever that the restoration of this bond will be “washed clean of the foulness of earthly lust” in heaven. In this he has strong affinities to Heloise’s own idealized notion of human love as a union of the intellectual and affective faculties. God is envisioned as simply standing in for Heloise; his role as the mediator, through whom the correspondence and negotiations of Abelard and Heloise had to pass through, disappears, as He awaits Heloise to claim her Peter. Abelard, while moving closer to this idealization of earthly love, still holds himself one step removed from fully acquiescing to this standard. Though he allows that the means to the Bridegroom Christ can involve the arousal of passion, he does not see eroticism as a valid end in itself, unlike Heloise. This is evidenced by his allegorizations of carnal pleasure, either by subsuming it under divine love or by channeling it towards the praise of Christ.

The imagery employed in the “*Epithalamica*” ties together various figures and scenes from the past to the present as depicted both in the bible and the letters of Abelard and Heloise. At the same time, Abelard’s affective approach, as well as his employment of very specific figures that resonate in his earlier correspondence with Heloise, traces the

⁹⁶ Peter the Venerable, “Letter (115) to Heloise,” 223.

⁹⁷ Peter Dronke, “Abelard and Heloise in Medieval testimonies,” in *Intellectuals and Poets in Medieval Europe* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1992), 267.

evolution of Abelard's own theology as influenced by Heloise. Because of such considerations, this sequence can be seen as providing an alternative language for the relationship of Abelard and Heloise many years after their entry into separate religious orders. However, by using imagery with deep emotional meanings reminiscent of their erotic past, the "*Epithalamica*" might have been seen by Heloise not so much a representation of her sacred calling as a performative resurrection of what she has lost. Coupled with the uncanny ability of music to amplify emotions, it animates the memories of the flesh painfully inscribed upon the longing and desiring psychic body.

Conclusion

In the last years of his life, Abelard wrote a poem of advice to his estranged son, Astrolabe. This poem, *Carmen Ad Astralabium* (ca. 1133), reads like a collection of *sententiae* or didactic verses meant to be taken as advice for proper conduct. Interspersed throughout are some very personal vignettes, which illuminate his ethics and philosophy and inarguably draws from his relationship with Heloise:

Religious worship varies with so many disparate sects
That the true path of life is hardly clear.
Because the world believes so many conflicting doctrines,
Each makes his own, by his own background.
In the last resort, no one dares rely on reason in this,
Since *what he longs to achieve is some kind of inner peace.*
A man can only sin through contempt for God –
Only contempt can here make culpable.
It isn't contempt if one doesn't know how to act,
Unless such ignorance is due to one's own fault.
Sins can leave you easily than you them,
If, when the power to do wrong is past, you repent.
Yet there are those whose past sins still so allure them
That they can never feel truly penitent.
Rather, the sweetness of that bliss remains so great
That no sense of atoning for it has force.
This is the burden of complaint of our Heloise,
Whereby she often says to me, as to herself,
"If I cannot be saved without repenting
Of what I used to commit, there is no hope for me.
The joys of what we did are still so sweet
That, after delight beyond measure, even remembering brings relief."
For one who tells the truth, there is no strain in telling –
It is feigning that's the effort, before one speaks.¹

¹ Peter Dronke, "Abelard and Heloise in Medieval Testimonies," in *Intellectuals and Poets in Medieval Europe*, (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1992), 257. My emphasis.

According to Peter Dronke, the movement of thought in these lines is distinctly Abelardian: it starts off with an exposition of rational relativism in religion, seen especially in his notion that it is up to the individual to sift through volumes of religious doctrine in order to create their own notion of “religion”; it then moves on to the conviction that intention alone determines the moral quality of actions, to the intention of repentance, and finally ends with the very personal example of Heloise’s intention, in words that are very close to those she wrote in her second letter.²

Abelard’s assertion that it is up to the individual to decide which path to take hints at his desire to place the power--and responsibility--of knowing with the individual person. It echoes his own ethics, which could be neatly summarized as *scito te ipsum*, know yourself, to know something by your own initiative, or as self-realization and self-knowledge. Constant J. Mews, however, argues that Abelard’s reliance on this sort of practical wisdom as a way of searching for inner peace silences Heloise’s insight into her

² Peter Dronke, “Abelard and Heloise in Medieval Testimonies,” 258. If Abelard did indeed compose this poem--as Peter Dronke is convinced it is--it illuminates that fact that Abelard believed that he failed in his spiritual ministry to Heloise. He quotes Heloise’s words in her second letter very closely. Compare the following lines from the *carmen* with Heloise’s letter:

*Sunt quos delectant adeo peccata
 Ut nunquam vere peniteant super his,
 Ymo voluptatis dulcedo tanta sit huius,
 Ne gravet ulla satisfactio propter eam.
 Est nostre super hoc Heloyse crebra querela,
 Qua mihi que secum dicere sepe solet:
 “Si, nisi peniteat me commisisse priora,
 Salvare nequeam, spes mihi nulla manet.
 Dulcia sunt adeocommisi gaudia nostril
 Ut memorata iuvent que placere nimis.*

The lines in the letter:

Quomodo etiam penitenta peccatorum dicitur, quantacumque sit corporis affliction, si mens adhuc ipsam peccandi retinet voluntatem et pristinis estuat desideriis?...In tantum vero ille quas partier exercuimus amantium voluptates ulces mihi fuerunt ut nec displicere mihi nec vix a memoria.

dilemma.³ For someone so tortured by her lack of inner peace, no amount of rational rumination can mollify the situation. However, it could be argued that rather than being a direct acknowledgement of Heloise's influence on his thought, Abelard's interpolation of Heloise's anguished words signal his own acceptance, albeit only implied, that it was Heloise who forced him to take a long, hard look at his own ethics.

More importantly, Abelard incorporates in the *Carmen* the importance of one's personal background in creating his or her own religious doctrine to follow. No matter how rational or irrational the doctrines we create might seem to be, what counts, in the end, is the inner peace achieved by following them. This is the same concern that Heloise had been forcing Abelard to acknowledge in her letters; his determined refusal to acknowledge that their shared erotic past has irrevocably shaped and changed Heloise's subjectivity and his dogged persistence that she revoke this past and take up her new role as the Bride of Christ became key points of contention. Here, these concerns are finally incorporated within the later development of his ethics.

Finally, the last lines of this highly personal excerpt indicate, at least by implication, that Abelard believed Heloise was being brutally honest in depicting her situation, for lying is harder, he says, than telling the truth. At the same time, it exhibits Abelard's lingering doubts over Heloise's "true" and final conversion, at least using the standards he insists on her. The conversion narrative that Abelard wanted delineates a simplistic view of both the human subject and the constitution of desire: a desiring human

³ Constant J. Mews, "Peter Abelard and the Enigma of Dialogue," in *Beyond the Persecuting Society: Religious Toleration before the Enlightenment*, ed. John Christian Laursen and Cary J. Nederman, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 44.

being “progresses” from a state of depravity, marred by lust, into a state of holiness, where this baseness is overcome. This commits violence to Heloise as it demands excessive pruning of her memory and her past, two components she sees as substantiating her very self. What she cannot excise she must attempt to metamorphose into an ideal far removed from its initial incarnations. Desire must necessarily be articulated in the interstices of what is permitted by the Other as the symbolic order. In this case it is “God” who legitimizes the exchange of texts under the guise of spiritual guidance. As Heloise claims: “Thank God that here at least is a way of restoring your presence to us which no malice can prevent, nor any obstacle hinder; then do not, I beseech you, allow any negligence to hold you back.”⁴ Through the Law of God that structures the symbolic world of the monastery and allows and insists that men look after women’s needs, Heloise finds a way to extort from Abelard a constant flurry of literary activity.

A key point in their debate is the status of human and secular love with respect to divine love. For Heloise, the reconciliation of divine and passionate, “secular” love was not in itself problematic; the transcendent experience of passion irrevocably fuses together both the body and soul of two lovers.⁵ Without directly acknowledging it, Abelard himself was perhaps swayed by Heloise’s unwavering devotion to her ideal of love. His Easter sequence for the Paraclete, the *Epithalamica*, allows Heloise to celebrate, if briefly, the unity of what has long been considered two opposing forms of “love.” As

⁴ Heloise, “Letter 2,” 48.

⁵ Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 163.

such, this sequence provides an allegorical language to interpret the evolution of Abelard and Heloise's relationship years after their entry into the religious orders.

By internalizing Abelard's ethical imperative to know oneself, Heloise manages to influence and to force Abelard to look at the real life implications of his philosophy and to take it down from its lofty idealizations. Her fervent sense of responsibility to her nuns forced Heloise to live in the gap between the ideal she held herself to and the demands imposed on her by her social standing. It was by persisting in this disjunction that she strove to attain the level of authenticity she desired. Her influence on Abelard has been overshadowed by her fetishized role as his lover. Yet, for Heloise, it was precisely this fact that enabled her to contribute so much to Abelard's work and to the history of monastic reform.

Appendix I: Epithalamica*

Epithalamica, dic Sponsa cantica
Intus quae conspicis dic foris gaudia
Et nos laetificans
De Sponso nuntia
Cuius te refovet semper praesentia

Sing, O bride, your bridal canticle
Sing outwardly the joys you gaze upon
within
And gladdening us give tidings of the
bridegroom
Whose presence renews you forevermore

Aduluscentulae vos chorum ducite
Cum haec praecinerit et succinite
Amici Sponsi vos vocarunt nuptiae
Et novae modulos
Optamus Dominae

O young maidens form your choir
When she [the bride] begins singing, join
in
The bridegrooms's friends have call you to
the nuptials
Let us welcome the songs sung by the lady

In montibus his ecce saliens
Ecce venit colles transilens
Per fenestras ad me respiciens
Per cancellos dicit prospiciens

Behold he comes leaping upon the
mountains
Behold he comes skipping over the hills
Gazing upon me through the windows
Peering through the lattices he says

Amica surge propera
Columba nitens advola

Arise, my love, make haste
My beautiful dove come to me

Horrens enim hiems iam transit
Gravis imber recedens abiit
Ver amoenum terras aperuit
Parent flores et turtur cecinit

For the bristly winter is now past
The heavy rains have receded and gone
Lovely springtime has opened earth
Flowers are appearing, the turtle-dove has
begun singing

Amica surge propera
Columba nitens advola

Arise, my love, make haste
My beautiful dove come to me

Rex in accumbitum iam se contulerat
Et mea redolens nardus spiraverat

The king had already betaken himself to his
chamber

* English and Latin texts taken from Thomas J. Bell, *Peter Abelard after Marriage: The Spiritual Direction of Heloise and Her Nuns through Liturgical Song*, (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 21-23. Translation by Thomas J. Bell. Musical score taken from Chrysogonus Waddell, "Epithalamica – An Easter Sequence by Peter Abelard," *The Musical Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (1986): 239-271.

*In hortum veneram in quem descenderat
At ille transiens iam declinaverat*

And my redolent ointment has breathed
forth
I had come into the garden into which he
had descended-
But he passing through had already gone
away

*Per noctem igitur hunc quaerens exeo
Huc illuc anxius quaerendo cursito
Occurrunt vigiles ardenti studio
Quos cum transierim
Sponsum invenio*

And so by night I go forth from here
seeking him
Anxious hither and thither I run in my
seeking
The watchmen come upon me in my
burning zeal
When I pass them I find my bridegroom

*Iam video quod optaveram
Iam teneo quod amaveram
Iam redo quae sic fleveram
Plus gaudio quam dolueram*

Now I see what I had hoped for
Now I clasp what I had loved
Now I laugh at what I had so wept for
I rejoice more than ever I had grieved

*Risi mane flevi nocte
Mane risi nocte flevi*

I laughed at morn, I wept at night
At morn I laughed, at night I wept

*Noctem insomnem dolor duxerat
Quem vehementem amor fecerat
Dilatione votum creverat
Donec amantem aman vistat*

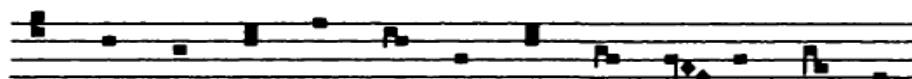
Grief made the night sleepless, which my
love made overpowering
Desire intensified through delay
Until lover visited his beloved

*Plausus die planctus nocte
Die plausus nocte planctus*

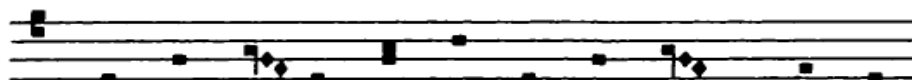
Joy comes by day, lamentations by night
By day rejoicing, by night lamentation

*Eia nunc comites et Sion filiae
Ad Sponsae cantica psalmum adnectite
Quo oestis reddita Sponsi praesentia
Convertit elegos nostros in cantica*

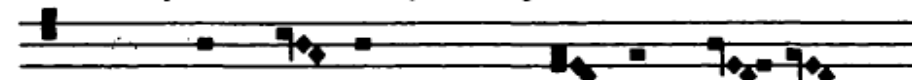
So come now companions and daughters of
Zion
To the canticles of the bride add your
psalm
Wherein the presence of the Bridegroom
restored to those in grief
Turns our mournful elegies into canticles.



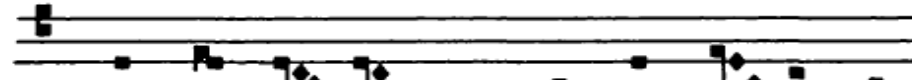
- 1a. E - pi - tha - lá - mi - ca dic, Spon - sa, cán - ti - ca,
b. In - tus quae cón - spi - cis dic for - ris gáu - di - a,
c. et nos lae - tí - fi - cans, de Spon - so nún - ti - a,
d. cu - ius te ré - fo - vet sem - per prae - sén - ti - a.



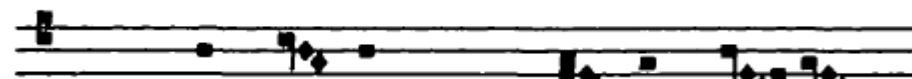
- 2a. A - du - le - scén - tu - lae, vos cho - rum dú - ci - te;
b. cum haec prae - cí - ne - rit, et vos suc - cí - ni - te.
c. A - mí - ci Spon - si vos vo - cá - runt nú - pti - ae,
d. et no - vae mó - du - los o - ptá - mus Dó - mi - nae.



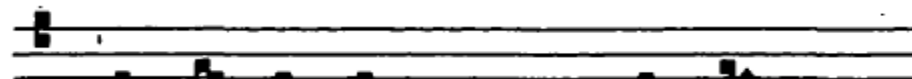
- 3a. In món - ti - bus hic ec - ce sá - li - ens
4a. Hor - reus e - nim hi - ems iam tráns - i - it.



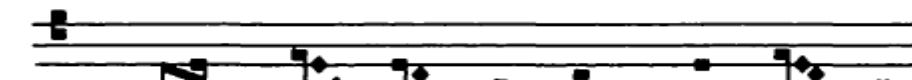
- 3b. ec - ce ve - nit, col - les trans - í - li - ens;
4b. gra - vis im - ber re - cé - dens áb - i - it;



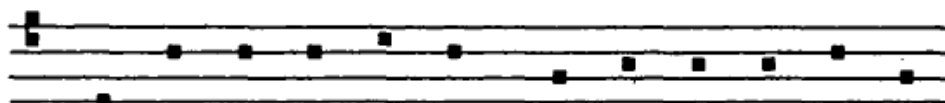
- 3c. per fe - né - stras ad me re - spí - ci - ens,



- 3d. per can - cél - los di - cit, pro - spí - ci - ens:
4d. pa - rent flo - res, et tur - tur cé - ci - nit:



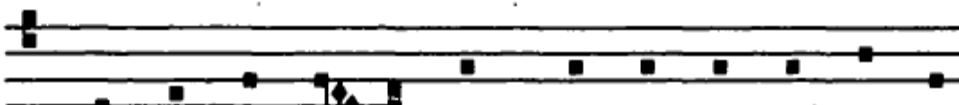
- 3e. "A - mí - ca, sur - ge, pró - pe - ra!
4f. co - lúm - ba ni - tens, ád - vo - la!



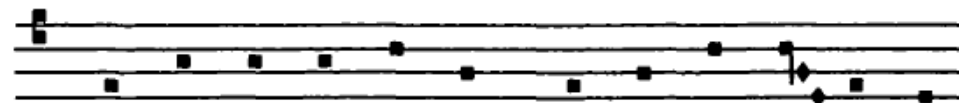
5a. Rex in ac - cú - bi - tum iam se con - tú - le - rat,
6a. Per no - ctem í - gi - tur hunc quae-rens éx - e - o;



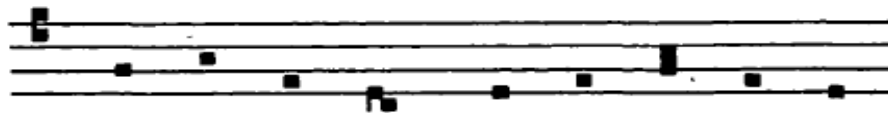
5b. et me - a réd - o - lens nar - dus spi - rá - ve - rat;
6b. huc, il - luc, án - xi - a quae-rén - do cúr - si - to;



5c. in hor - tum vé - ne - ram, in quem de - scén - de - rat,
6c. oc - cúr - runt ví - gi - les; ar - dén - ti stú - di - o,



5d. at il - le tráns - i - ens iam de - cli - ná - ve - rat.
6d. quos cum trans - í - e - rim, Spon - sum in - vé - ni - o.



Appendix II: Virgines Castae*

<i>Virgines castae, virginis summae decus praecinentes Ceteras quoque condignas laude post hanc venerantes</i>	Chaste virgins sing of the beauty of the supreme virgin And venerate after her the other worthy virgins by their praise
<i>Psalmis et hymnis canticis dignis sibi colloquentes Solvant in istis debitae laudis hostias sollemnes</i>	Speaking to one another in fitting Psalms and hymns and canticles Let them pay by these [songs] solemn sacrifices of due praise
<i>Haec est adextris assistens Regis illa regina Iuncta latere sola cum rege praecedit ipsa Aurata veste varietate circumamicta Tamquam dominam Sequitur ipsam queque beata</i>	This one [the supreme virgin] is that queen serving at the right hand of the king United beside him she alone with the king proceeds In golden array clothed round about with variety Every blessed virgin follows her as her lady
<i>Post eam adductae virgines devotae Regi sunt oblatae Christo consecratae Tales errant Thecla Agnes et Lucia Agathes et multa virginum caterva</i>	Led after her devoted virgins Have been offered to the king [and] consecrated to Christ Such virgins were Thecla, Agnes, and Lucia Agathes and many a great throng of virgins
<i>Filiae Tyri munera ferentes Et in his Regis vultum deprecantes Hostias cunctis habent puriores Corpore munde Corde sanctiores</i>	The daughters of Tyre bearing gifts And entreating the favor of the king by means of them Have offerings purer than all (other offerings) (They are) clean in body, holier in heart
<i>Holocaustum Domino Offerent ex integro Virgines carne, integrae mente</i>	As a burnt-offering, virgins offer to the Lord

* Latin and English texts taken from Thomas J. Bell, *Peter Abelard after Marriage: The Spiritual Direction of Heloise and Her Nuns through Liturgical Song*, (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 16-20.
Translation by Thomas J. Bell.

*Immortalem sponsum
Eligentes Christum*

The integrity of their flesh and mind
Choosing Christ as the immortal
bridegroom

*O felices nuptiae
Quibus nullae maculae
Nulli Dolores
Partus sunt graves
Nec pelex timenda
Nec nutrix molesta*

Oh happy nuptials where there are no
impurities
No grievous pains of childbirth,
No rival mistress to be feared, no nurse
who harasses

*Lectulos harum
Christo vacantes
Angeli vallant custodientes
Ne quis incestus temeret illos
Ensibus strictis
Arcent immundos*

Their [virgins'] beds which are left open
for Christ
Guardian angels protect
Lest any one impure defile them
They ward off the impure with their drawn
swords

*Dormit in istis
Christus cum illis
Felix hic somnus requires dulcis
Quo cum fovetur virgo fidelis
Inter amplexus sponsi caelestis*

In these (beds) Christ sleeps with them (the
virgins)
Happy the slumber [and] sweet the repose
In which the faithful virgin is caressed
In the embraces of the heavenly
bridegroom

*Dextera sponsi
Sponsa complexa
Capiti laeva, dormit submissa
Pervigil corde, corpore dormit
Et sponsi grato sinu quiescit*

The right hand of the bridegroom clasps his
bride
His left hand cradles her head
While wakeful in heart, she sleeps in body
And she quietly slumbers on the loving
breast of her bridegroom

*Approbans somnum, sponsus beatam
Inquietari prohibet illam
Ne suscitetur inquit, dilectam
Dum ipsa volet in quietam*

Favoring her sleep, the Bridegroom
Does not let her be disquieted
He says: do not awake my beloved
Thus quiet as long as she wishes

*Hic ecclesiastici flos est ille germinis
Tam rosis quam liliis
Multiplex innumeris
Quorum est fragrantis
Ager sponsi nobilis
Naribus et oculis, Aequae delectabilis*

Here the flower of the church is budding
As many roses as lilies multiply beyond
counting
Through their fragrance the bridegroom's
field
Is equally delectable to scent and sight

*Ornatae tam byssina quam veste purpurea
Laeva tenent lilia rosas habent dextera
Et corona gemmea redimitae capita
Agni sine macula percurrunt itinera*

*His quoque floribus semper recentibus
Sanctorum intexta, capitum sunt serta
His agnus pascitur atque reficitur
Hi flores electa sunt illius esca*

*Hinc choro talium vallatus agminum
Hortorum amena discurrit hac illac
Qui nunc comprehensus ab his nunc
elapsus quasi quadam fuga petulans
exsultat*

*Crebros saltus dat hic agnus inter illas
discurrendo
Et cum ipsis requiescit fervore meridiano*

*In earum pectore cubat in meridie
Inter mammas virginum
Collocat cubiculum*

*Virgo quippe cum sit ipse
Virgineque matre natus
Virginales super omnes amat et quaerit
recessus*

*Somnus illi placidus in castis est sinibus
Ne qua forte macula sua foedet vellera*

*Hoc attende canticum devotarum virginum
insigne collegium, Quo nostra devotio
maiore se studio templum ornet Domine.*

Adorned in linen and in purple robes
They hold lilies in their left hand, roses in
their right
And with their heads crowned as with a set
of jewels
They hasten along the paths of the Lamb
without blemish

Also from these flowers forever fresh
The garlands on their holy heads are woven
Among these the lamb pastures and is
thereby refreshed
These flowers are his food of choice

Surrounded by this choir of such
companies
He races this way and that in the lovely
gardens
Now caught by them, now slipping away
He petulantly leaps about as if escaping

This lamb leaps and bounds, repeatedly
prancing about among them
And he rests among them [the virgins] in
the noonday heat
In the middle of the day, he lies upon their
breasts
He makes his sleeping place among
virgins' breasts

Since he himself is a virgin, and born of a
virgin mother
He loves and longs for virginal embraces
above all others

His sleep is serene when take upon chaste
laps, Lest otherwise perhaps a spot might
soil his fleece

Attend to this song of the illustrious college
of devoted virgins, whereby our devotion
may with greater zeal and adorn the temple
of the Lord.

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