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Heloise and Discussion about Love

By late 1115, a major upheaval was beginning to shake Abelard's academic career. Having established himself as an authority on dialectical argument, he became obsessed with Heloise, whom he saw as living out philosophical principles in a way that he could only admire. At her instigation, they started to talk about the ethics of true friendship. In the process, he found himself abandoning traditional ideals of sexual purity to gratify his desire. In the *Historia calamitatum,* Abelard presents the story of his early relationship with Heloise and its dramatic conclusion as one of the catastrophes that changed the direction of his life but ultimately served a greater good. The story of their early liaison generated rumors that Abelard was still trying to quell in the early 1130s. We get some idea of the hostility Abelard's behavior generated from comments made by Roscelin of Compiègne in a letter written only a few years after the events it describes:

> I have seen indeed in Paris that a certain cleric called Fulbert welcomed you as a guest into his house, fed you as a close friend and member of the household, and also entrusted to you his niece, a very prudent young woman of outstanding disposition, for tuition. You, however, were not so much unmindful as contemptuous of that man, a noble and a cleric, a canon even of the church of Paris, your host and lord, who looked after you freely and honorably. Not sparing the virgin entrusted to you whom you should have taught as a student and whipped up by a spirit of unrestrained debauchery, you taught her not to argue but to fornicate. In one

> deed you are guilty of many crimes, namely, of betrayal and fornication, and a most foul destroyer of virginal modesty. But "God, the Lord of vengeance, the God of vengeance, has acted freely" [Ps. 93:1]; he has deprived you of that part by which you had sinned.[1]

Roscelin's account well illustrates the sense of outrage felt by those who considered that Abelard had taken advantage of a student under his care. In the *Historia calamitatum,* Abelard does not deny that his behavior was wrong or that his subsequent punishment was unjustified. He emphasizes that the entire episode was one of uncontrolled passion and a distraction from his philosophical career.

Heloise was the brilliant niece of Fulbert, a canon of the cathedral of Notre-Dame. She enjoyed a great reputation for her knowledge of letters, "making her very famous throughout the kingdom."[2] Peter the Venerable (ca. 1094–1156) confirms what Abelard has to say about the extent of her reputation in a letter that he wrote to her sometime after Abelard's death in 1142, although passing over the circumstances behind her entry into monastic life.[3] Peter implies that she must have been at least the same age as himself, if not slightly older. The tradition that she was born in 1100, and thus was only a teenager when she met Abelard, is a pious fabrication from the seventeenth century, without any firm foundation. In 1115, she is more likely to have been around twenty-one years old, while Abelard was then thirty-six.

Little is known for certain about her background other than that she was educated at the royal Abbey of Ste.-Marie, Argenteuil, and that Roscelin says her uncle was of noble birth.[4] The dowry required to maintain girls at old established abbeys such as Argenteuil was generally so large that it excluded those of more modest means from being educated there. Heloise, quite possibly of illegitimate birth, left no record of her father's name in the necrology of the Paraclete, only that of her mother. Perhaps in 1113, when she heard that Abelard was now teaching in Paris, she decided to move from Argenteuil so as to board with her uncle within the cathedral cloister of Notre-Dame. Fulbert was committed to furthering her studies, quite possibly with the expectation that she would subsequently rise to a high position within monastic life. Staying within the cathedral cloister provided her easy access to a wider range of books than would have been available to her at Argenteuil, as well as to a more exciting intellectual environment. She may also have heard about the presence there of Peter Abelard.

In the *Historia calamitatum,* Abelard gives the impression that their liaison was entirely the result of considered calculation on his part:

> Considering everything which customarily binds lovers, I thought I could more easily link her to me in love, and believed that I could do this very easily. I was then of such a name and so distinguished in youth and appearance that I did not fear being rejected by any woman whom I might deem to love. I thought that this girl would all the more willingly consent to me as I knew that she possessed and loved such knowledge of letters; and that while we were separated, we could be present to each other through mediating writings, and could write many things more boldly than speak them, and thus our conversations could always be delightful.[5]

There is much that Abelard glides over in this short paragraph. We gain no sense of Heloise's initiative in developing the relationship, or of the length of time taken up by this exchange of messages before he obtained lodgings within the house of Canon Fulbert in return for being her tutor. Instead, he dwells on what he presents as a selfish desire for sexual gratification that drove him to engage with her in conversation and correspondence. He gives no indication of any twists and turns in their relationship, but rather dwells on their physical debauchery. "We were joined as one, first in the house, and then in spirit." His account constructs a sexual fantasy, in which love *(amor)* caused all study to be forgotten.[6] He recalls his passion for Heloise as a distraction from philosophy, which started to become tedious to him, and that creativity turned instead to songs about love, "that are still, as you yourself know, known and sung in many regions, especially by those who enjoy a similar form of life."[7] The entire account is presented as a moral example, like that of Mars and Venus, of how debauched behavior will ultimately always be exposed. Abelard was obliged to leave his lodgings and find alternative accommodation. Soon after, however, Heloise wrote Abelard "in the greatest exaltation" to report that she had become pregnant, and to ask what should be done. Abelard's narrative steers away from his own reaction to these developments. All he says is that one night, when Fulbert was away, he spirited her out of the house and sent her to Brittany to stay with his sister, where she remained until she gave birth to a child, whom she called Astralabe. From a later letter, we learn that she made this escape disguised as a nun.

Abelard's account creates the impression that this was one long period of sexual indulgence. He gives little attention to what they talked about in their discussions and literary exchanges, emphasizing only that his behavior was one of foolish passion. After he had sent Heloise to Brittany, he confessed to her uncle that he had been betrayed by love *(amor)* and that he would make whatever amends he could. What had happened was not surprising "for anyone who had experienced the power of love and

who called to mind into what ruin women had pulled down the greatest men from the beginning of humankind."[8] He then offered to marry Heloise and thus legitimize their relationship.

The account of their physical debauchery is then matched by an equally lengthy presentation of her arguments against marriage, based on two main reasons: the danger and the disgrace it would cause for himself. Without making clear if he is quoting from a letter that she sent, or reconstructing from memory arguments that she had made, he reports her claim that if he would not heed the advice of Paul about avoiding the yoke of marriage, she should heed the teaching of the pagan philosophers about the burdens of the marital state, as reported by Jerome. Abelard presents Heloise as totally committed to a classical ethical ideal of philosophy as a way of life to which everything else should be sacrificed. Of particular significance for the subsequent evolution of his thought is her argument that for those who were truly monks, this commitment was motivated by love of God, just as the ancient philosophers were inspired by love of wisdom. He attributes to her the argument that among all peoples, pagan as much as Jewish or Christian, there were always some who outshone others either by their faith or by their way of life, whether they were called Nazarenes or philosophers. "If laypeople and pagans, not bound by any religious profession, could live in this way, how much the more should you, a cleric and canon, do the same, so that you do not prefer sordid pleasures to the divine office, so that you do not plunge headlong into this Charybidis, so that you do not drown disgracefully without hope of return in such debauchery."[9] She reminded him also that Socrates had been married. According to a story told by Jerome, after receiving a round of invective from his wife, Xanthippe, who poured water over his head, Socrates acknowledged, "After this thunderstorm, I knew rain would follow."

Because Abelard cites many (although not all) of the quotations he attributes to Heloise in his *Theologia Christiana*, written in the early 1120s, it has often been thought that her warnings about the incompatibility of marriage with philosophy must have been invented by Abelard long after the event. Yet there is much in his report that seems unnatural or incomplete and that suggests he was simply being selective in his recollection of what she had to say. He does mention one argument, without fully articulating its ethical foundation, that is certainly from Heloise, namely, that it would be dangerous for her to marry him and that "it would be dearer for her and more honorable for me to be called 'friend' rather than 'wife,' so that grace alone would keep me for her, not any tie of the bond of marriage."[10] The word *amica* that she uses here (sometimes translated

"mistress") evokes an ideal of friendship very different from the image of irrational passion evoked by Abelard in his account of their early relationship. In her initial response to this account, Heloise observes that he has not fully understood the ethical principles based on love underpinning her argument: "You did not disdain to expound several reasons by which I tried to persuade you away from marriage and an ill-starred union, but you kept quiet over much of what I said about preferring love to marriage, freedom to chains. As God is my witness, if Augustus, ruler of the whole world, deigned to honor me with marriage and conferred on me the whole world, to possess forever, it would seem worthier to me to be called your prostitute than his empress."[11] She rejects his implication that their early affair had been motivated solely by physical desire. She insists that her love was not motivated by any external reward or selfish lust, and quotes an argument attributed by Cicero in the *De inventione* to Aspasia, the philosopher, in which she tells Xenophon that he will always be looking for the best of wives, and his wife, the best of husbands. Heloise is aware that many had been uncertain about whether she had been driven by love or lust. She insists that she had always been selfless in her devotion to him. "When you sought me out for foul pleasures, you showered me with frequent letters, you placed 'Heloise' through frequent song on the lips of everyone; every marketplace, every house echoed my name. How much more rightly you should now arouse me to God, as then you aroused me in lust."[12] Heloise's ideal of *amor* as demanding true friendship, without concern for self-interest, is very different from Abelard's understanding of *amor* as irrational passion, at least as he presents it in the *Historia calamitatum*. She feels that he has betrayed the ethical ideals that she thought they had shared in the messages of love that they once exchanged.

The *Epistolae duorum amantium*

The love letters to which Heloise refers at the end of her first response to the *Historia calamitatum* are documents to which she attaches great importance for their declarations of love. Whereas Abelard dismisses his love songs as a distraction from philosophy, she is more positive in her attitude to the way she thought he could combine philosophical and literary gifts. Unlike most philosophers, he was endowed with gifts for composition and for singing: "As if for a kind of game, resting from philosophical exercise, you composed many verses in the meter and rhythm of love, which are recalled on the lips of everyone because of the great

sweetness of composition and melody, so that the sweetness of the melody does not allow even the uneducated to forget you."[13]

There has been much debate about the letters and poems referred to both by Abelard and by Heloise. A common tendency has been to assume that they were about worldly love and thus had little to do with broader philosophical concerns. Fascinating insight into the way in which love letters can be shaped by literary and philosophical themes, however, is provided by a collection of over one hundred anonymous love letters and poems that were copied out by a monk of Clairvaux in the late fifteenth century and known as the *Epistolae duorum amantium*. In his edition of these letters, Ewald Könsgen convincingly argued that the contrasting vocabulary and prose styles of the two voices in the exchange, one of a famous teacher and the other of a remarkably literate young woman, a student of philosophy, are so distinct that it seems highly unlikely that the collection could have been composed by a single author.[14] Unlike her teacher, the young woman employs a monastic style of rhyming prose, advised against by theorists of the *ars dictaminis* in the second half of the twelfth century but once very popular in the eleventh century and still practiced within the twelfth century in monastic circles. This young woman makes a conscious effort, however, to lace this older prose style with elaborate allusion to phrases from classical authors. This is evident in letter 49 when she professes, in a particularly extravagant and crafted sentence, her incapacity to respond adequately to someone for whom she has enormous respect:

> It is very rash of me to send studied phrases to you, because even someone learned right down to his fingertips, who has transformed every artistic arrangement into habit through long-established practice, would not be capable of painting a portrait of eloquence florid enough to justly deserve being seen by so great a teacher (a teacher so great, I declare, a teacher of virtue, a teacher of character, to whom French pigheadedness rightly yields and for whom at the same time the haughtiness of the whole world rises in respect, that anyone who considers himself even slightly learned would be rendered completely speechless and mute by his own judgment), much less myself, who hardly seems adept at trifles "which neither taste of nibbled nails nor bang the desk" [Persius, *Satires* 1. 106].

Her allusion to *francigena cervicositas* and *tocius mundi superciliositas* yielding to recognize his greatness suggests that this teacher is both an outsider to France (in other words, the royal domain) and someone who has now attained great fame. In the letter that follows (50), he so admires her discussion of love that he describes her as "the only disciple of philosophy among all the young women of our age, the only one on whom fortune

has completely bestowed all the gifts of the manifold virtues. . . . I admire your talent, you who discuss the rules of friendship so subtly that you seem not to have read Tully but to have given those precepts to Tully himself!" Although the teacher is expert in the terminology of dialectic, which he uses to modify Cicero's definition of friendship (letter 24), her expertise lies more in rhetorical eloquence and ethical theory. The extensive literary allusions within this exchange are fully consistent with these letters being written in the early twelfth century. Könsgen found no literary allusions to any poet after Marbod of Rennes (d. 1123) and concluded simply that they were written in the first half of the twelfth century by a couple "like Abelard and Heloise." The absence of any allusion to Aristotle's *Ethics*, so influential in all ethical discussion in the thirteenth century and later, compared to the strong presence of Ciceronian ethics, argues strongly against the exchange having been composed after the twelfth century.[15] While individual love letters, written in Latin, were sometimes included as models of style by theorists of prose composition in the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the *Epistolae duorum amantium* testify to the practice of the art of composition *(ars dictaminis)*, already richly developed in the eleventh century before theorists of the art sought to impose precise Ciceronian rules in epistolary manuals, first widely influential in France after the mid-twelfth century.[16]

There are many features in the vocabulary and ideas raised within these love letters that are fully consistent with their being a record of the early exchange of messages between Abelard and Heloise. Analyzing them in terms of whether they are "genuine" or "artificial literary exercises" *(Stilübungen)* presents a false dichotomy. The two parties compete with each other to demonstrate their mastery of prose composition as much as to voice their thoughts. There is an internal evolution of style within these letters. While those of the young woman do not have the maturity of Heloise's famous letters, in which she reserves rhyming prose for moments of high intensity, they provide a fascinating insight into the literary capacity of an intelligent young woman who is still experimenting with her craft. As with all medieval letter collections, it is impossible to know for certain how much letters may have been edited by the person who transferred them from wax tablet to parchment. What matters is that these *Epistolae duorum amantium* enable us to hear the voice of an educated young woman without the distortion presented by the *Historia calamitatum*. The traces preserved in a fifteenth-century notebook provide an insight into a relationship between two literate individuals with greater depth than Abelard's more famous narrative.

As is standard in the genre, these love letters do not identify the sender

or recipient by name. Nonetheless, the two parties each reveal distinct intellectual and literary identities. The teacher is clearly very skillful in composing metrical verse along classical patterns. The woman only picks up this craft in the second part of the exchange. Her letters are often more carefully wrought in that they seek to knit together imagery and ideas that one might think were very difficult to combine. Thus she employs more religious imagery to express her feelings. No fewer than eight separate allusions to letters of Jerome have been detected in her correspondence, but none in his.[17] She is much more fond than her lover of appealing to God as her witness to the sincerity of her love, and adapts phrases from the liturgy and the Song of Songs to express her feelings. She combines classical and religious imagery with rhyming prose to create her distinct prose style.

A striking feature of this exchange is the contrast between the teacher's largely Ovidian understanding of *amor* as a passion that he subjectively experiences and her attempt to fuse Ovidian, Ciceronian, and religious imagery. She sees her love not just as passionate *amor* but as *dilectio*, love that actively cares for another, combing *eros* and *agape*. There is a religious idealism to her writing about love not present in the same way in his messages. She combines allusion to passionate love with reference to an eternal reward, understood in a physical way as the *viriditas* of eternal happiness:

> To her heart's love, more sweetly scented than any spice, she who is his in heart and body: the freshness of eternal happiness as the flowers fade of your youth. (letter 1)

By contrast, he employs philosophical terms, *singularis* and *unicus*, to emphasize her uniqueness and stresses his desire for physical union with his beloved:

> To the singular joy and only solace of a weary mind, that person whose life without you is death: what more than himself, insofar as he is able in body and soul. (letter 2)

This interplay between religious imagery in the woman's letters and the man's emphasis on her uniqueness continues in the brief extracts preserved from the first part of the exchange. She quotes from a hymn or prayer, "May the ruler of heaven mediate between us" (3), while he then describes her as "his only one to be loved above all things" (4). After she asks "the Giver of all art to endow her bosom with philosophical art . . . according the consent of my will" (5), he develops a favorite theme that she is his star, the light by which he lives, and that he is compelled to

write "by the burning flame of love" (6). Although they both call each other "beloved" *(dilecte)*, he does not employ the scriptural term *dilectio* (love that operates through an act of choice) at all in the first half of the exchange. In letter 18, she reverses the order of a standard greeting, "An equal to an equal . . ." and proclaims that "my breast burns with love" *(amoris fervore)*, but then bids him farewell as *omnis dilectio mea*, "my heart and body and all my love" *(Vale, cor et corpus meum et omnis dilectio mea)*. Throughout the dialogue, he pushes his passion at the same time as she seeks to preserve a spiritual dimension to her own love, in the process heightening its erotic power.

The man uses *dilectio* to describe his love for the first time only in letter 50, in response to a particularly elaborate letter (49) in which the woman protests that while people love others for various reasons, her love *(dilectio)* is not based on any pursuit of pleasure or wealth but only on true friendship. In his reply, praising her as "the only female disciple of philosophy among all the girls of our age," he rightly observes that she has gone beyond Cicero. Whereas Cicero had only spoken of love between men, she relates ideals of friendship to the true *amor* and *dilectio* that should prevail between a man and a woman.

She occasionally tries to relate philosophical vocabulary to love, as we see in her unusual turn of phrase, *equipolenter te diligo* ("in either case, I love you"). In this particular letter (21) she attempts a philosophical greeting whose meaning is far from clear: "To her beloved, special from experience of the thing itself: the being which she is" *(Dilecto suo speciali, et ex ipsius experimento rei: esse quod est)*. She repeats the epithet "special beloved above everyone" *(pre cunctis specialis dilectus)* in letter 76. Her use of *specialis* contrasts with his preference for *singulus* to describe her uniqueness. The contrast suggests that he is a dialectician, for whom *specialis* has a specific meaning—namely, that which is distinct to a species rather than to an individual—while she uses *specialis* in the less technical sense of "special." This linguistic contrast is repeated in the greeting with which Heloise introduces her third letter to Abelard: "To him who is hers specially, she who is his singularly" *(Suo specialiter, sua singulariter)*.[18] In her initial response to the *Historia calamitatum*, Heloise prepares a salutation in which she moves from greeting Abelard in the most general terms possible to the most specific: "To her master, or rather her father, husband or rather brother, his maidservant or rather daughter, his wife or rather sister, to Abelard, Heloise." In her second letter, she attempts to be more specific in identifying him as an individual: "To her only one after Christ, his only one in Christ." The phrase *Suo specialiter, sua singulariter* succinctly recalls the contrast in the way that they address each other in the

love letters, their two different ways of making the same basic point, namely, that each of them was special or unique to the other. For Bernard of Clairvaux, *singularitas* (uniqueness) is a pejorative term, implying distance from an ideal of noble universality.[19] The male lover, like Abelard, considers uniqueness to be a positive rather than a negative attribute.

We get a clearer sense of the male lover's identity as someone attempting to combine dialectic with ethical concerns in letter 24, in which he responds to her frequent question: "What is love?" *(Quid amor sit)*. His solution is to connect a few phrases of Cicero about friendship with only very small modification to make it relate to *amor* rather than to *amicitia:*

> Love is therefore a particular force of the soul, existing not for itself nor content by itself, but always pouring itself into another with a certain hunger and desire, wanting to become one with the other, so that from two diverse wills one is produced without difference.

This notion of *amor* as a force of the soul that longs for its natural end modifies an idea that Augustine had used in the *De trinitate* to explain that *caritas,* the highest form of love, is embodied in the Holy Spirit. Letter 24 links this Augustinian idea of love as a force of the soul to Cicero's understanding of friendship as a longing for union in harmony of will. Cicero had raised the theme of harmony of the will both in his *De inventione* and in his *De officiis,* in which he comments that in friendship each person delights in equal measure in the other and that wills are so much the same that it makes one will out of many.[20] Cicero repeats this idea that friendship "makes one soul from many" in his *De amicitia*.[21] Cicero had spoken more of *amicitia* than *amor,* a concept that Ambrose and Augustine had tended to use to mean any kind of longing, as distinct from the purer kind of love, *dilectio,* a movement of the spirit, enjoined by Scripture.[22] In letter 24, however, the Ciceronian definition is modified to emphasize that love creates a single will *indifferenter.* The same phrase is used in letter 16: "as the well-being of each of us is made a shared concern without difference" *(quo in unius nostrum salute res communis indifferenter agitur)*. While Augustine had once used the word *indifferenter* to explain that the three persons of the Trinity were "not different, as distinct from being identical, Boethius employed the term more often in his commentary on the *Periermeneias* to explain complete similarity, without assuming identity.[23] In the *Historia calamitatum,* Abelard tells us that he had forced William of Champeaux to accept that two identical individuals are the same *indifferenter* rather than *essentialiter.* In the *Logica "Ingredientibus,"* Abelard goes further in rejecting William's position that a universal is a thing, predicated "not differently" of different individuals.[24]

This modification of Cicero with the vocabulary of dialectic is further evident in letter 24, in which the teacher uses a passage of the *De amicitia* to argue that while love may be a universal thing, it exists in reality only between himself and his beloved:

> Know that although love may be a universal thing, it has nevertheless been condensed into so confined a place that I would boldly assert that it reigns in us alone—that is, it has made its very home in me and you. For the two of us have a love that is pure, nurtured, and sincere, since nothing is sweet or carefree for the other unless it has mutual benefit. We say yes equally, we say no equally, we feel the same about everything. This can be easily shown by the way that you often anticipate my thoughts: what I think about writing you write first, and, if I remember well, you have said the same thing about yourself.[25]

Effectively, the lover implies that the only true universal thing shared between two identical individuals is their love for each other. He adapts the one passage of Cicero's *De amicitia* that Abelard includes alongside a host of patristic quotations in the *Sic et non* (*SN* 138.21) to discuss whether *caritas*, once acquired, can ever be lost. Here Abelard quotes the passage alongside Cicero's definition of friendship in the *De inventione* about friendship as a harmony of wills, a will toward another, desiring someone else's good, and reciprocated with an equal will, again alluded to in letter 24.[26] The inclusion of the phrase "universal thing" shows that this lover transforms a definition of Cicero with terminology of dialectic, in a distinct way. In his early writing, notably in the *Dialectica*, Abelard was not averse to using the phrase "universal thing" *(res universalis)*, although he would subsequently eliminate this terminology from the *Logica "Ingredientibus."*[27] In letter 24, the lover focuses not on Cicero's argument about the obligations of friendship but on the metaphysical character of a love already perceived to exist as a harmony of the minds of the two lovers. He implies that in a world of distinct individuals, only between himself and his beloved is there a true universal. The Ciceronian definition of love as goodwill to another is one that Abelard himself draws upon within his *Collationes* and expands on within the *Theologia "Scholarium"* to distinguish true love *(amor honestus)* from false love or lust *(cupiditas)*, which is shameful.[28]

The woman's response to her question in letter 25 is much less dependent than that of her teacher on the words of Cicero, although she does pick up on the Ciceronian argument that true friendship is not concerned with personal gain. Rather than saying that love exists between them, she distinguishes between true love that is lasting and false love

that is fickle and does not endure. She does not concern herself with the love of God; she sees love not as something they possess but as a debt perpetually owed, which neither of them has as yet fully implemented: "You know, my heart's love, that the services of true love are properly fulfilled only when they are continually owed, in such a way that we act for a friend according to our strength and not stop wishing to go beyond our strength." She is also more aware than he is of the range of possible vocabulary about love: "And even if we show perfect kindness *[integram caritatem]* to everyone, we still do not love everyone equally; and what is general for everyone is made particular for certain people. It is one thing to sit at the table of a prince, another to be there in order to advise him, and a greater thing to be drawn out of love *[ad amorem trahi],* rather than just being invited to a gathering." She develops this theme that true love is based not on riches or pleasure at length in letter 49: "You know, greatest part of my soul, that many people love each other for many reasons, but no friendship of theirs will be as constant as that which stems from integrity and virtue and from deep love. For I do not consider the friendship of those who seem to love each other for riches and pleasures to be durable at all." This rejection of wealth is a running ethical theme throughout her letters. In a poem (82), she invokes the idea: "If I could have all that Caesar ever owned / Such wealth would be of no use to me." The notion of true love rejecting the wealth of Caesar occurs in a poem attributed to a young woman that circulated in the early twelfth century alongside love poetry by Marbod of Rennes.[29] We see in this poem a simpler version of the consistent theme of Heloise that true love does not seek material reward. She is more aware than Abelard of this teaching about the selflessness of true love, derived from ideals of both Scripture and Cicero.

The response of the articulate young woman to her own question about the nature of *amor* deserves to be compared to other debates about the nature of love that were taking place in the early twelfth century. Augustine had often viewed *amor* as potentially base or depraved, and preferred the term *caritas,* or "an affect of the spirit to enjoy God for his own sake." In giving a more positive evaluation to *amor,* she shares an attitude in a number of poets in the early twelfth century. Her theme that God attests and supports her love, rather than condemns sensual love, is not unlike that of Baudri, abbot of Bourgueil, a Loire Valley poet who had argued that the love spoken about by Ovid in his *Heroides* was divine in origin.[30] There is a similar fascination with Ovidian ideas of *amor* in the verse of Baudri's friend and fellow poet Godfrey of Reims (active ca. 1070–1095), celebrated by his contemporaries as the greatest poet of his gen-

eration.[31] Writing probably around 1121–1124, William of St.-Thierry (who came to study in Reims in 1091 and would have known Godfrey's interest in Ovid) was moved to correct the teaching of the *Ars amatoria* by writing a treatise, *De natura et dignitate amoris,* in which he distinguishes carnal love from spiritual love, which is of divine origin although corrupted in humanity through Adam's fall. He argues that the goal of the spiritual life is to grow from *amor* to the fullness of *caritas,* and thus into wisdom.[32] William is critical not just of Ovid but of those who abuse the tools of reason without appreciating the divine origin of *amor*.[33] William makes no attempt, however, to relate Cicero's ideas of friendship to a Christian ideal, the project attempted later in the twelfth century by Aelred of Rievaulx and Peter of Blois.

Unlike her lover, the young woman in these love letters is interested in adapting the religious image of the obligation of love, the *debitum dilectionis,* based on Romans 13:8: "Do not owe anything to anyone, except that you love each other." This is not a theme used by William of St.-Thierry in the *De natura et dignitate amoris,* but it is present in the writing of Bernard of Clairvaux in his letter to the Carthusians, written around 1124–1125.[34] In his *De diligendo Deo,* written in response to a question of Cardinal Haimeric about the nature of loving God, Bernard develops the idea that *amor* is a natural affection and that there are four grades of love: loving oneself for one's own sake, loving God for one's own sake, loving God for his sake, and loving oneself because of God. Whereas in his early writing William of St.-Thierry contrasts spiritual and worldly love, Bernard connects *amor* to *dilectio* through his reading of the Song of Songs (a text that he expounded to William only in the mid-1120s).[35] Bernard thus develops his very original idea that love for God grows out of love of self and of one's neighbor, and thus transforms into true *dilectio,* which strives for God.[36]

Like Bernard, the young woman is fascinated by reflecting on the experience of love; she, however, relates these themes of longing not to the love of God but to the man she loves. To describe how she would like only a small portion of his intellectual brilliance, she fuses an unusual philosophical concept, knowability *(scibilitas),* with the image of a droplet from a honeycomb, an image adapted from the Song of Songs:

> If a droplet of knowability trickled down to me from the honeycomb of wisdom, I would try with every effort of my mind to portray in the jottings of my letter various things with a fragrant nectar for your nourishing love. But throughout all Latinity, no phrase has yet been found that speaks clearly about how intent on you is my spirit, for God is my witness that I love you with a sublime and exceptional love. And so there is not nor ever will be

> any event or circumstance, except only death, that will separate me from your love.

This is no banal cliché of love literature. The phrase *guttula scibilitatis* transforms a distinctive philosophical neologism, devised by Abelard in his *Dialectica* to signify knowability or the power to know (a concept he invented to explain how something may be knowable by knowability), to a more sensual and poetic image, that of a droplet falling from the honeycomb of the teacher's wisdom.[37] In this case, it is to say that even with a droplet of this insight she cannot find words (*sermo)* to describe her *dilectio* for her teacher. It seems far-fetched to imagine that some lover other than Heloise could have independently coined this distinctive neologism, otherwise rarely attested in the twelfth century. Letter 53 provides a particularly brilliant example of a philosophical concept being fused with imagery drawn from the Song of Songs to express the notion that true love is beyond definition in Latin. This is the kind of fascination with *amor* that prompted both William of St.-Thierry and Bernard of Clairvaux to develop a theological system based not so much on *ratio*, as for St. Anselm, but on the experience of love.

The young woman emerges from these letters as fascinated above all by the experience and the ethics of true love. Her lover, by contrast, is a dialectician, fascinated by individuality, expert in crafting original images, but less comfortable at fusing secular and religious notions of true love. Although the young woman initially is troubled that she does not have the teacher's technical brilliance, the teacher becomes fascinated not just by her capacity to talk about ethical questions but by the way she seems to live out the principles to which she is committed.[38] As he puts it in letter 22:

> What then shall I offer in return to equal your innumerable benefits? Nothing, actually, because you transcend your sweetest words with the number of your actions and you have so surpassed them by the demonstration of your love that you seem to me poorer in words than in actions. Among other things that you possess in infinite number compared with other people, you have this distinction too, that, poor in words, but rich in actions, you do more for a friend than you say; this is all the more to your glory since it is more difficult to act than to speak.

Just as in the *Dialectica* Abelard had taught that one had to attend to the intention behind words, so he finds that his own intention is now directed totally to Heloise. At the end of letter 22, the lover makes a remark that parallels Abelard's comment in the *Historia calamitatum* that his lectures became uninspired while his mind was thinking about love:

> To others I address my words, to you my intention. I often stumble over words, because my thought is far from them. Who then will be able to deny that you are truly buried in me? . . . Envious time looms over our love, and yet you delay as if we were at leisure.

He repeats this phrase in letter 72: "I will tenaciously persist with the same intention toward you."

While the male lover is familiar with the notion of the intention behind words, the young woman explores the idea of intention behind behavior. In letter 23, she expands on the Augustinian phrase "intention of the mind" to reflect on her internal conflict between an uncontrolled desire to write and fear that she does not have the technical capacity to do so appropriately. Her teacher never engages in this kind of internal debate but rather is impatient for sexual fulfillment. She is frequently unsure of her own capacity to respond to a lover with whom there seem to have been many disagreements (letter 76): "My intention has decided this: that further conflict between us should cease." She employs the term twice in letter 79: "If through reflection a person's inner intention conceives anything great, it is often not brought to fruition without a certain external force. . . . For a long time, and with a blazing struggle of heart and body, I have considered how I should address you, my graceful jewel, but the difficulty of expected failure has so far defied the intention of my feeling." She expands upon his notion that love is through intention (letter 88): "And even if you are not seen by me with corporeal eyes as often as I wish, hope, and desire, nevertheless you do not slip from the intention of my mind." Unlike her lover, she uses intention as a rhetorical device to reinforce her identity, as in letters 102, "I hope with the greatest intention of my heart that you may always fare well," and 104, "Rightly I grieve for him whom I love so tenderly and so deeply *[quem tam tenere, tam interne diligo],* who never slips from the intention of the mind."

The lover is not insincere in his protestations of passionate love, but he is more openly erotic, in turn provoking her to counsel caution. In letter 26, he greets her as "a body full of moisture" and urges, "reveal what you have hidden." She replies in letter 27 with a brief but carefully crafted series of scriptural allusions to convey the moral values that she wants him to emulate: "the spirit of Bezalel, the strength of the three locks of hair, the beauty of the father of peace, the depth of Ididia." Only someone with good scriptural knowledge would understand that she is urging him to control his sexual passion by absorbing the skill of a great craftsman of Israel, the strength of Samson, the beauty of Absalom, and the wisdom of Solomon. The lover's impulsiveness, presumably in forcing her into a sexual relationship, leads him to proclaim in letter 59, "I am guilty, I who

have forced you to sin." The comment reveals the same ambiguity in attitude toward a sexual relationship as characterizes Abelard in the *Historia calamitatum*. While he is fascinated by her ethical seriousness, he has not shaken off a traditional Augustinian perception of sexual desire as the fruit of an uncontrolled will. His talk of sin makes her very angry in letter 60, in which she is appalled that the sincerity of her love should be abused in this way. She invokes the liturgy of Good Friday, about God loving sinners "above paternal love" *(supra paternum amorem)*, and then urges that they should stop writing to each other. This does not stop him from continuing to protest his love for her.

Whatever the lover's motivation in cultivating this correspondence with the young woman, these letters provided her with an unparalleled opportunity to develop as a writer, and to draw together Ciceronian, Ovidian, and scriptural imagery about love and friendship with all the brilliance of the *ars dictaminis* before theoretical treatises began to circulate, specifying rhetorical guidelines about how letters ought to be written. The art of composing letters, with particular attention to developing elaborate greetings, had begun to develop in the eleventh century both inside and outside a monastic context. The woman's letters show how a traditional style of rhyming prose could be harnessed to original effect. Early in the correspondence, she makes only occasional attempts to match the man's skill in metrical verse, as in letter 38, in which she tries to match his five-line stanza, each with a distinctive rhyme. While he shows technical versatility as a poet from early in the exchange, she starts to write metrical poetry in a serious way only after the crisis marked by letters 59 and 60. Letter 66 is her first major poem, an appeal to the Muses that draws on Fulgentius, perhaps modeled on Serlo of Bayeux, Baudri of Bourgueil, or Godfrey of Reims. This effort is written in leonine distichs (two rhyming parts to each line), a style of verse dismissed as juvenile by Marbod of Rennes in the early twelfth century but much used by Godfrey of Reims and his imitators in the late eleventh century.[39]

Letter 69, which asks whether the man was really sincere in his tears, is more personal in expression. The woman attaches great importance to these verses because they express her inner feelings of sorrow and love:

> Why does he come so rarely? Why does he break my heart?
> Ah! I did not deserve to be so deceived.
> Let not jealous eyes read these verses, I ask:
> I do not want hearts full of guile to know them.

After a more optimistic poem (73), she offers a verse composition (82) that begins with a declaration that Heloise would develop much further in her response to the *Historia calamitatum:*

I send you the salutation that I would like sent to me.
I know of nothing more salutary than this.
If I could have all that Caesar ever owned,
Such wealth would be of no use to me.

. . . . . .

I will never have joys except those given by you,
And grief and sorrow follow us through every season.
Unless you give it, nothing will be salutary to me.
Of all things which the entire world contains,
You will in the end be my only glory forever.
As stones placed on the ground dissolve in fire,
When the pyre set over them dissolves in fire too,
So our body completely vanishes in love.

Her allusion to their bodies as bound in love and burning on a funeral pyre hints at a sense of impending disaster, although it builds on the verse from the Song of Songs (8:6) about love as strong as death. He is technically versatile in his prose and verse but tends to draw more on strictly Ovidian models to express his feelings rather than to fuse secular and sacred imagery in the way that she does. In letter 84, she draws on the Song of Songs and Paul to express her sense of longing for a goal that has not yet been reached, as well as of a connection to nature:

> Ever since we first met and spoke to each other, only you have pleased me above all God's creatures and only you have I loved. Through loving you, I searched for you; searching for you, I found you; finding you, I desired you; desiring you, I chose you; choosing you, I placed you before everyone else in my heart, and picked you alone out of thousands, in order to make a pledge with you. . . . Birds love the shady parts of the woods, fish hide in streams of water, stags climb mountains, I love you with a steadfast and whole mind. Thus far you have remained with me, you have manfully fought the good fight with me, but you have not yet received the prize.

Whether or not the prize to which she alludes in this letter is sexual intercourse or a heavenly reward, the significant feature of her writing is precisely the fusion of sexual and religious imagery. She also makes an intriguing reference to a literary composition that he has prepared in her honor:

> Farewell and remember our love hour after hour. I shall repay you for your Prologue, which you composed for me, with an act of thanks and the obedience of love. Let your heart be glad; be gone whatever may be called sad.

This enigmatic reference suggests that at the time, her lover did see his relationship as having an intellectual dimension. Is this an allusion to the prologue of Abelard's commentary on Ezekiel, dedicated to Heloise just like the prologue to Abelard's later commentary on the Hexaemeron, the first chapters of Genesis?

Not as many poems from the teacher are preserved among these letters as from his student. Early in the exchange he composes a technically accomplished poem (20), celebrating her as his star, in which each line employs a distinct internal rhyme with its own vowel:

> The star turns around the pole, and the moon colors the night.
> But that star is fading that should be my guide.

This second line echoes a poem in the *Carmina burana* that has often been attributed to Abelard:

> The bright star of my joyful countenance
> Is dulled by my heart's cloud.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> In Cupid's dance she excels all others.
> Her name brightly reflects the light of Phoebus,
> And she serves the earth as mirror. I worship her, long for her,
> Acknowledging her alone in this world.[40]

The allusion to her name may be a pun on Heloise as based on *helios*, the word for "sun." The poem has a more complex rhyme scheme than present in letter 20, and seems more likely to have been set to music.

Only after her four poems (66, 69, 73, 82) does he attempt a reflective poem, this time in elegiac distichs (without internal rhyme), in letter 87. It suggests that a whole year has gone by since the relationship first began. Again it picks up his preferred image of her as his sun, and of her eyes as his stars. He picks up the theme of his own impulsiveness and again begs forgiveness:

> Forgive me, fair lady, if something I wrote
> Ever made you justly angry with me:
> I did not do deliberately or with reason.
> It was Impulse itself that counseled badly.
> If one could recall an uttered remark,
> Such words, I confess, I would wish to recall.
> When I bring back to mind your tears,
> Beloved, I cannot hold back tears of my own.
> So receive one who confesses his own faults,
> Receive him, and remember his guilt no more.

This theme of guilt and remorse is quite absent from her writings. She replies with a letter (88) protesting the constancy of her devotion. Aware of the great hurt that he has inflicted, she is prepared to forget this, as her *dilectio* is a selfless love:

> There does not exist nor will there ever be a firm love that is turned away by deceit so quickly. Whatever injuries you inflicted on me have not yet gone from the memory of my heart, but I shall now genuinely and sincerely and fully forgive you for everything connected with them, so that I shall not be upset by such injuries from you again. I shall remain faithful to you, stable, unchangeable and unwavering, and, even if I knew all men as individuals, I would never leave you unless compelled to by force and completely expelled. I am not a reed shaken by the wind, nor shall any severity or weakness of any kind take me from you.

She becomes more critical of his lack of constancy by letter 95: "You are not being fair to me but have changed your ways; and so trust is not secure anywhere." This does not stop him from professing his devotion to her, or from reflecting on the obligations of love, as in letter 103:

> Love cannot remain idle. It always rises for a friend, always strives for new ways to be of service, never sleeps, never falls into laziness. These maxims are clearly confirmed in you, my spirit; firmly persisting in the course of the love that has begun, you always indicate to your friend with new signs how you feel about him.

He implies that he is devoted to her because she embodies moral standards that he does not live up to himself.

By letter 106, the relationship is being shaken by severe difficulties. He expresses regret for behavior that is not specified in these letters:

> Now for the first time I realize the good fortune I previously enjoyed, now I have the opportunity to look back on happy times, because hope is fading, I do not know whether ever to be recovered. I am paying the price for stupidity, because I am losing that good thing of which I have been completely unworthy, that good thing which I have not known how to keep as I ought.

This provokes a crisis, as the young woman in letter 107 (unfortunately copied only in fragments) is riddled by self-doubt. She reports a vision of an elderly woman advising her that wealth and wisdom and knowledge are as nothing without the grace of the Holy Spirit. After a calmer letter (109), she sends the first letter (112) in which she greets her lover in very formal fashion as her teacher: "To her most noble and most learned teacher: well-being in Him who is both salvation and blessing." She re-

views their relationship and acknowledges that she has been taken into "the third heaven" (2 Cor. 12:2) by his letters. He is someone who is both nourished by philosophy and by poetic inspiration, and before whom in God's providence "the mountaintops will bow down." "But no manner of speech nor way with words can sufficiently express how happy I am, that, secure yet not ungrateful, I am reaching the haven of your love." She now just wishes to devote herself tirelessly to him.

The reader is left unsure what this great joy refers to. Is it her way of saying that she has become pregnant and that she now wants to put the relationship onto a new footing? Unfortunately the scribe copied only a few fragments from this important letter, which is followed by a note, with just an enigmatic fragment (112a), which parodies the Maundy Thursday hymn *Ubi caritas et amor, deus ibi est* ("Where charity and love are, God abides").

> Where there is passion and love, there always rages effort. Now I am tired, I cannot reply to you, because you are taking sweet things as burdensome, and in doing so you sadden my spirit. Farewell.

The note implies that he is receiving her cause for rejoicing as troublesome in the extreme. The task to which she has devoted so much of her writing, a synthesis of ideals of *amor* and *dilectio*, is difficult.

The final piece in the exchange is an elegy (113) in which the lover effectively distances himself from *amor*, by which he thinks he has been seduced. Paraphrasing Ovid, he begs forgiveness: "Forgive me, for I admit that I do not love patiently." He still admires her greatly:

> You alone make me eloquent; such glory has happened to
> No one, that she be worthy of my song.
> You are like no one else, you in whom nature has placed
> Whatever excellence the world can have:
> Beauty, noble birth, character—through which honor is begotten—
> All make you outstanding in our city.
> So is it then surprising if I am lured by their brilliance,
> If I succumb to you, conquered by your love?

This attitude to *amor* as a passion by which an individual is conquered, and which makes a thoughtful person fall from reason, is precisely the same as the reasoning that Abelard reports he gave to Fulbert to explain his behavior. The closeness of the parallel confirms our sense that these letters record the voices of Abelard and Heloise. For all his fascination with Heloise's capacity to reflect on love as the highest form of friendship, Abelard ultimately reverts to a very traditional view of love as an ailment

from which a man suffers. Abelard's presentation of their relationship in the *Historia calamitatum* as one of misguided erotic passion disguises its true complexity.

Heloise's frustration in her initial response to his attempt in the *Historia calamitatum* to provide a spiritual justification of their past relationship continues a pattern of response that is evident even within the early love letters. She is forever frustrated by his lack of consistency within their relationship. He continuously vacillates between passionate enthusiasm and regret that he has been too impulsive. They are both gifted writers who feed off each other in their messages and poems. Poetry enables them to structure their emotions through crafted metrical verse. The exchange is much more, however, than an opportunity to display skill in the art of composition. It records a debate about love that is subtly different from the classical models available to the two lovers. She is more consciously spiritual in her ideal of love in seeking to combine religious imagery with the values of Cicero and the poetic eloquence of Ovid. The final lament (113) fits into the tradition of the *Remedium amoris*, in which love is presented as passionate emotion by which the individual is afflicted. It provides an elegiac coda to an exchange that has effectively been preserved and remembered as a literary artifact.

The *Epistolae duorum amantium* present a relationship very differently from the *Historia calamitatum*. Rather than simply recounting carnal passion, they transmit a complex literary debate about love between two very different people. Copied incompletely in the late fifteenth century, these letters will always provoke debate about whether they are authentic copies, or whether they have been edited, rearranged, or even totally invented by an imaginative individual. Yet they betray so many ideas and images about love parallel to those employed by Abelard and Heloise in their other writings that they deepen our understanding of one of the most well-known friendships of the twelfth century. The final lament on *amor* also throws light on Abelard's attitude to sexual love in the *Historia calamitatum* as a folly by which he was snared.

When he wrote that narrative, Abelard was wanting to distance himself from the memory of love songs that he composed, which were still in general circulation. A number of them (and perhaps also those of Heloise) are likely to be preserved within the *Carmina burana*.[41] There can be little doubt, however, that their early relationship was as much literary and intellectual as physical. Heloise sets a high store on their discussions about the nature of love, and would later accuse Abelard of not being true to those ideals of hers that he had once claimed to share. Her interest in *amor* was shared by many of her contemporaries, whether

poets who wrote about love, such as Baudri of Bourgueil, or monks and scholars, such as William of St.-Thierry, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Walter of Mortagne, who theorized about the nature of ideal love. Abelard's protestations of love, innovative in their own way, are technically accomplished, but they do not try (after an early attempt in letter 24) to place love within a philosophical or theological framework. He admires her not just for going beyond Cicero in her thinking about love but for living out the ethical values in which she believes. For all the originality of his thinking about dialectic, he had not yet developed in those early years his own response to those profound questions that the young Heloise was putting to him, questions that he could not easily answer.

The Ending of the Affair

In the *Historia calamitatum,* Abelard glides swiftly over the emotional twists and turns of his relationship with Heloise. His concern is to show how he gradually learned that disasters can ultimately serve a higher end, not to present his inner life in the fashion of a modern autobiography. It is apparent, however, that even before the rupture of their physical relationship, Abelard was distancing himself from Heloise. When she wrote to him of her great happiness about becoming pregnant, he sent her to Brittany so that she could give birth in the care of his sister Denise. His language implies that he did not accompany her on a journey that he later recalls was a travesty of religion, as she was simply disguised in a habit.[42] She names the child Astralabe, for reasons that are unclear. One ingenious suggestion has been that she devised the name *Astralabius puer dei* (Astralabe, child of God) as an anagram of *Petrus Abaelardus II*.[43] Did she see the child not just as re-embodying Abelard but as an instrument through which they could acquire knowledge of the heavens—a symbol of scientific curiosity? In their love letters, they frequently identified each other as the sun, moon, and stars. Her initial idea seems to have been that they simply live apart but continue to enjoy each other's company whenever possible. Whatever the case, her hopes were disrupted by Abelard's insistence that they marry in secret for the sake of satisfying her uncle, Fulbert, and then live apart, as if reverting to their normal way of life. She had to leave the child to the care of her sister-in-law and return with Abelard to Paris for a secret ceremony. Even after the marriage, Fulbert continued to abuse his niece, prompting Abelard to send her to the Abbey of Argenteuil, where she had been raised, to take a religious habit, although without the veil. For all the sophistication of her literary

gift, she was effectively powerless to resist the efforts of both Fulbert and Abelard to control where she would live. As Abelard later recalls, he continued to enjoy sexual relations with her, even once in the refectory of Argenteuil during Holy Week.[44] This in turn prompted Fulbert and certain of his relatives to take justice into their own hands and have Abelard castrated. His relationship to Heloise would never be the same.