

Neither more than a Christian nor more than a woman
“nec plusquam christianae appetemus esse”

The Theology and Spirituality of the Body
in the Writings of
Heloise of the Paraclete

A thesis submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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This thesis is lovingly dedicated to my parents:

Josephine Posa

Without whom I would never have known a desire for wisdom

Mark James Posa

Without whom I would never have develop a thirst for knowledge

ABSTRACT:

The main aim of this thesis is to explore the theology and spirituality of the body embedded within the writings of the twelfth-century Benedictine abbess, Heloise of the Paraclete. Heloise is rarely considered a serious religious writer whose concerns might continue to challenge and contribute to the theological development of our own day. This thesis revisits Heloise's writings from the feminist perspective of the body and the nature of "bodies in Christ". What becomes evident and highly significant in this reading could be referred to as Heloise's distinctively "incarnational form of language".

Chapter One of this thesis posits Heloise as a religious writer of merit and legitimates the use of modern philosophical frameworks as dialogue partners for texts of the past. Chapter Two establishes Heloise's position vis-à-vis the body through a study of her specific use of Latin terminology, focusing on her unique and preferential use of *specialiter*. Chapter Three deals with the theme of "desire" in Heloise's writings, a desire that is understood only in association with all the relationships that make up her context. Chapter Four unearths the neglected divine love story within Heloise's writings through the metaphorical theme of "absence". Chapter Five discusses Heloise's use of the monastic theme of discretion (discernment) in her so-called critique of the Benedictine Rule. Chapter Six briefly notes how these themes extend into the monastic life of the community of the Paraclete.

Finally, the thesis concludes by asserting that this analysis of Heloise's writings restores her to her rightful place in the history of theological and spiritual thinking. Now she can also stand beside the other great female monastic women of the Middle ages in a way that accords her the same level of esteem with regard to religious fervor and holiness, prophetic wisdom and enduring theological and monastic insight.

Heloise desires to be neither "more than woman" nor "more than Christian".

Theologically, this position presses home the fundamental truths of Christianity and marks Heloise's writings as unique in the theological world of her times and also as a significant source of wisdom for our own times.

Declaration

This is to certify that

- (i) this thesis does not contain any material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university
- (ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used
- (iii) this thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, figures, references and appendices

signature

date

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS:

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| CCCM | Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis. Turnhout: Brepols, 1966 - . |
| CCSL | Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina. Turnhout: Brepols, 1954 - . |
| CF | Cistercian Fathers Series. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications. |
| Chiavaroli and Mews | The edition and translation of the Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard within: <i>The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth Century France</i> , trans. Neville Chiavaroli and Constant J. Mews. New York: St. Martin's Press 1999. |
| Conl. | Conferences of John Cassian |
| Constable | <i>The Letters of Peter the Venerable</i> , ed. Constable, Giles, 2 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967. |
| CS | Cistercian Studies Series. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications. |
| CSEL | Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum. Vienna-Leipzig: Teubner, 1866 - . |
| Feiss | <i>Hildegard of Bingen: Explanation of the Rule of Benedict</i> , trans. Hugh Feiss. Toronto, Ontario: Peregrina, 1997. |
| HC | <i>Historia calamitatum</i> |
| Hicks | <i>La Vie et les epistres Pierres Abaelart et Heloys sa fame</i> , ed. Eric Hicks (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1991). [HC, Epp. 2-7] |
| Inst. | Institutes of John Cassian. |
| Institutiones. | Paraclete Statutes: <i>Institutiones nostrae</i> |
| Kardong | <i>Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary</i> , trans. Terrence Kardong. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000. |
| NPNF | <i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> . |
| PG | <i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Graeca</i> . ed. Jacques-Paul Migne. Paris 1857 –1866. |
| PL | <i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina</i> , ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, Paris: Garnier, 1844 –1855. |
| Radice | <i>The Letters of Abelard and Heloise</i> , trans. Betty Radice, revised, Michael Clanchy. London: Penguin, 2003. |
| Ramsay | <i>John Cassian: The Conferences</i> , trans. Boniface Ramsey. New York: Newman Press, 1999, and <i>John Cassian: The Institutes</i> , trans. Boniface Ramsey. New York: Newman Press, 2000. |
| RB | The Rule of Benedict |

- SBO *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, ed. Jean Leclercq, 8 vols. Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957-77.
- SC *Sources chrétiennes*. Cerf: Paris, 1942 -.
- VH *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, ed. Monica Klaes, CCCM, 126. Turnhout: Brepols, 1993.
- Scivias* *Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias*, trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop. New York: Paulist Press, 1990.

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Chapter 1:

Introduction:

What would happen if one woman told the story of her life? The world would split open.

- Muriel Rukeyser¹

Prologue:

Heloise of the Paraclete (d. 1164) is perhaps best known for her brief yet passionate love affair with Peter Abelard, (1079-1142) – arguably the greatest intellectual mind of the twelfth century. However, Heloise lived the better part of her life as a monastic woman both before, and after, her fateful intersection with Abelard. Her early education took place in the Benedictine convent of Ste Marie de Argenteuil and after the tragic affair with Abelard, she returned to Argenteuil (ca. 1117/18), later becoming the abbess of the Paraclete Benedictine community founded by Abelard himself (ca. 1129).²

¹ Muriel Rukeyser, "Käthe Kollwitz," *Out of Silence: Selected Poems*, ed. Kate Daniels (Evanston, IL: TriQuarterly Books, 1992), 132.

² The details of this story can be found in Abelard's own account in his *Historia calamitatum* (HC). All references to the Latin text of the later correspondence of Heloise and Abelard, including the *Historia calamitatum* and *Ep. 2-7*, are taken from Eric Hicks, ed. *La vie et les epistres, Pierres Abaelart et Heloys sa fame, Traduction du XIIIe siècle attribuée à Jean de Meun, Avec une Nouvelle édition des textes latins d'après le ms. Troyes Bibl. Mun. 802. I Introduction, Texts*, Nouvelle Bibliothèque au Moyen Âge 16. (Paris and Geneva: Champion-Slatkine, 1991), Henceforth, Hicks. The English translations are from Betty Radice, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, ed. Clanchy Michael. (London: Penguin, 2003). Henceforth, Radice. These letters are indicated by the standard Roman notation within the text of this thesis and by their corresponding numerical notation in the footnotes.

As a Benedictine woman, I come to the study of Heloise's letters from a particular perspective. The lens through which I read her writings is formed by the monasticism that has shaped the contours of my own understanding of human existence and the search for God. As such, I recognise a "bond" or "community" with Heloise.³ I remember the effect that reading the letters of Heloise and Abelard first had upon me. I was a student of monastic history, theology and spirituality at the time, studying the text in the midst of a male monastic enclave at St John's University, Collegeville Minnesota, and fascinated by the rich diversity of relationships that this environment engendered in all who were privileged by the opportunity. My relationship with Heloise is thus formed and informed not so much from the perspective of medievalist scholarship as from the lived experience and study of monasticism and the theology associated with its development.

What made me curious and sparked my imagination in the letters of Heloise and Abelard was the fact that, of all the monastic women of the Middle Ages that I had studied, Heloise was the only one not presented in a theological or spiritual light. The effect of her monasticism on her religious and theological thought was never discussed or analysed. Yet this woman was clearly a renowned abbess of the twelfth century. Nevertheless, she was presented as an example of twelfth-century epistolary method of eminent literary value. Yet she is not considered a model of holiness to be esteemed in the history of the monastic endeavour. Overtly sensual, unconverted, and divided in heart and mind, Heloise was a figure of contrast to the other great medieval women of monasticism and of no theological value. Indeed, I was increasingly fascinated by the fact that we even included her in our curriculum at all.

In more recent years the writings of significant women of history have been rediscovered, for example, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, the Helfta mystics and an increasing number of other medieval women. These women, who were previously ignored by the theological world or, at best, only given scant attention in the study of Christian history and spirituality, have been read anew in light of the ecological, feminist, social and political concerns of our own times. This

³ Louise D'Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys speak of the bond or "desire for some kind of community with medieval women" by medieval scholars. See Louise D'Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys, eds., *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars*, vol. 7 Making the Middle Ages, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004), Preface, ix.

project gives believers and interested bystanders fresh insights into the feminine nature of God, the prophet's call from the margins, the wholeness of creation and women's contributions to understanding women's ways to God. However, Heloise of the Paraclete has largely been ignored in this project particularly with regard to the monastic and theological contribution that she might offer to the present day struggles of monastics and others in articulating their path to God or ultimate meaning.

Nevertheless, when I returned to investigate the context of Heloise's writings more thoroughly, I was faced with many puzzling and problematic questions and conclusions. Rather than a model of perfect holiness to be emulated, or an abbess who renounced everything in her singular desire for God, here was a woman who seemed to have let loose her desires with unbridled passion. Here was a Christian, whose desire seemed to be clearly other than for God. Here was a renowned monastic leader whose desire seemed no less than publicly scandalous and far from spiritually edifying. Brooke Heidenreich Findley aptly points out this difficulty when she notes that, "the basilisk facing readers of Heloise's letters turns out to be the paradoxical authorial persona of Heloise herself."⁴ Given such obvious ambiguity and inherent contradiction, I wondered if it might be worthwhile analysing Heloise's writings a little more closely. Surely, there must be some insights as yet uncovered, unperceived, something more theologically significant to her words and her struggle that might inform my own understanding of the esteem accorded her and her expression of the monastic endeavour in her own day. Of course, others have posed these sorts of questions also. As Constant Mews asserts in relation to her first letter, for example, "As with Abelard's account, reading her [Heloise's] letter simply as an outpouring of 'the heart' ignores the rhetorical skill with which she formulates her ethical argument."⁵ Perhaps I could even go further than this literary analysis and find a way to read her letters from a different perspective altogether in order to uncover what may be significant *lacunae* buried in her mode of speech. Perhaps there is a silence imposed on Heloise's words that has not been, as yet, possible to lift. I found myself beginning to ask a series of questions of Heloise's writings: Is it possible to discover if the voice of this famed abbess of the twelfth century contains a deeper clarity which

⁴ Brooke Heidenreich Findley, "Sincere Hypocrisy and the Authorial Persona in the Letters of Heloise," *Romance Notes* 45.3 (2005): 281.

⁵ Constant J. Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, Great Medieval Thinkers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 152.

uncovers the justification of her acclaim as an extraordinary woman, Christian and monastic leader of history? Can this voice of Heloise reveal a deeper understanding of the human person in our own day and age? What theological questions do we have today that Heloise might illuminate for us? Can there be that “dynamic of reciprocity and mutual transformation”⁶ that Louise D’Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys maintain exists between the scholar and the medieval women, for this monastic woman of the twenty-first century and Heloise of the Paraclete?

The Problem of the Body in Theology:

Christian theology and spirituality has a long history of the continuing re-imagining of the revealed God of Jesus Christ with language that intersects with each historically located community of faith. Historical context, the philosophical framework, and the particular social, political and cultural concerns of a specific era, bear heavily on the development of the Christian theological understanding of the mystery of God and humanity’s relationship to this God of mystery within the world. The dynamism of a faith in a “Living God” relies on this intersection with history. Thus, the theological questions that are posed by one era often differ markedly from those of another era. Nevertheless, the insights and wisdom of each era inform successive generations of believers in their own particular circumstances.

Mary Douglas, anthropologist of religion, claims that: “Just as it is true that everything symbolises the body, so it is equally true that the body symbolizes everything else.”⁷ This overarching assertion points to one of the major concerns of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and is certainly a recurring theme in theological writings throughout the ages. This concern surrounds the fundamental symbol and meaning of the bodies of women and men in relation to each other and to the God of Jesus Christ. As Tina Beattie argues, particularly in relation to Western culture: “Yet in a culture where we live longer, spend more and suffer less physical hardship than any generation in history, our bodies have become the focus of all our

⁶ D’Arcens and Feros Ruys, “Preface,” in *Maistresse of My Wit*, 2.

⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 122.

greatest anxieties, inadequacies and fears.”⁸ Indeed, this obsession with the body, and the nature of bodies, has been a major focus of theological reflection throughout the history of Christian thought.⁹

Christian anthropology understands the human person as fundamentally a being in relationship. To be born in the image of God (cf. Genesis 1:26) is to be born into difference, “male and female, he [God] created them” (Genesis 1:27). It is to be born into what Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas terms “Otherness in Community”.¹⁰ This belief is also expounded and confirmed in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church:

But God did not create man [the human person] as a solitary being. From the beginning “male and female he [God] created them” (Genesis 1:27). This partnership of man and woman constitutes the first form of communion between persons. For by his [their] innermost nature man [the human person] is a social being; and if he [they] does not enter into relations with others he [they] can neither live nor develop his [their] gifts.¹¹

However, there has been an unfortunate and ambiguous understanding of what this “image of God” has meant in relation to bodies, and particularly women’s bodies, throughout the history of theology.

From this theological perspective, one cannot deny the temptation to fall into the ever-present seductive Platonist and gnostic trap that denies human identity in the material. Sarah Coakley affirms this problem: “Despite the legion cries for *greater* ‘embodiedness’, for a notion of self *as* body, the spectres of religious and philosophical ‘dualism’ die hard.”¹² Yet the Christian subject is an embodied subject

⁸ Tina Beattie, “The Perfect Gift,” *Priests and People* 11.12 (1997): 457.

⁹ See Margaret Miles, *Augustine and the Body* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Lectures on the History of Religion, 13 (New York: Faber, 1991), Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), Sarah Coakley, ed., *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and Kim Power, *Heavenly Bodies? The Ambiguity of the Body in Religious Discourse and Practice* (Adelaide S.Aust: Charles Strong Memorial Trust, 1998).

¹⁰ John Zizioulas, “Communion and Otherness,” *Orthodox Peace Fellowship's Occasional Paper* 19. Summer (1994).

¹¹ Vatican II, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et Spes* #12) All citations from the Second Vatican Council are taken from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Ninth ed., vol. 1, Two vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992).

¹² Coakley, “Introduction,” in *Religion and the Body*, 4.

and one that the Christian tradition has struggled to maintain and admit throughout the centuries. The platonic temptation, pervasive throughout the history of Christian theology, is to abstract the body or allegorise it away in the discussion of the soul's journey towards God. This has been extremely detrimental to women's bodies and their "otherness" in relation to men, who are symbolically considered more capable of imaging God in their bodies than are the bodies of women.

This transcendent symbolic construction of the body used by theologians from the early Church Fathers onward favoured the superiority of the male body over the female body. For example, Augustine, who was so foundational in the development of Christian thought, exegetes Genesis 1:26 without reference to Genesis 1:27 and thereby leaves woman's body dependent on man's in her relationship to God's image:

In what sense, therefore, are we to understand the Apostle, that man is the image of God, and consequently is forbidden to cover his head, but the woman is not, and on this account is commanded to do so? The solution lies, I think, in what I have already said when discussing the nature of the human mind, namely, that the woman together with her husband is the image of God, so that the whole substance is one image. But when she is assigned the place of helpmate, a function that pertains to her alone, then she is not the image of God; but as far as the man is concerned, he is by himself alone the image of God, just as fully and completely as when he and the woman are joined together into one.¹³

The unchallenged and unchanging symbolic use of language in this manner throughout the history of theological thought has been all too obviously unfavourable to women's bodies and their significance in theological discourse. Gillian Cloke argues that much of the rhetoric of patristic writings left women *qua* women barred from achieving holiness altogether:

The paradigm of patristic thought on women was that women were not holy; they were creatures of error, of superstition, of carnal disposition – the Devil's gateway. This being so, anyone holy enough to be an

¹³ "Quomodo ergo per Apostolum audivimus virum esse imaginem Dei, unde caput velare prohibetur, mulierem autem non, et ideo ipsa hoc facere jubetur? Nisi, credo, illud quod jam dixi, cum de natura humanae mentis agerem, mulierem cum viro suo esse imaginem Dei, ut una imago sit tota illa substantia: cum autem ad adjutorium distribuitur, quod ad eam ipsam solam attinet, non est imago Dei; quod autem ad virum solum attinet, imago Dei est, tam plena atque integra, quam in unum conjuncta muliere." *De trinitate*, XV 12.7. 10. PL 42. 1003, English translation from Gareth B. Matthews, ed., *Augustine: On the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 89.

For a more complete discussion of Augustine's position concerning women see Penelope Deutscher, *Yielding Gender: Feminism, Deconstruction and the History of Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), and Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine's Writings on Women* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995).

exemplar of the faith could not be a woman: every one of the many who achieved fame through piety was held to ‘surpass her sex’ . . .”¹⁴

Ultimately the significance of the woman’s body in the redemptive plan of God is most at risk within this traditional symbolic articulation. In fact her body is not significant at all other than negatively, as a barrier to holiness and the divine. This emphasis, as Beattie asserts, “risks annihilating the potential of the body of experience or the experiencing body to challenge and modify symbolic meanings . . .”¹⁵ Without the inclusion of her own body in this theological conversation, it is not possible for women to have a space in the symbolic articulation of the Christian God through their own experience as embodied subjects.

Paradoxically, incarnational theology, the belief that God loved humanity so much as to become enfleshed as one of us stresses the innate goodness of materiality and its elevation to the divine. Yet, at the same time, as Janette Gray emphasises, “Theology that rejects the body and sexuality sees the material as inferior to the spiritual and negatively associates woman, matter, earth, nature and sexuality.”¹⁶ This negative association bypasses the scandal of an embodied God who brings into sharp focus the inherent goodness of the material realm. In this respect, it is the place of materiality, embodiment and the female body in particular that is of ultimate concern to the development of modern theology and specifically the theology of the incarnation. This doctrine of the incarnation not only stresses the inherent goodness of materiality and thus the embodiment of the human condition, but also radically alters the perception of the nature of the body and bodies in their relationship to one another and to God. However, in the early debate over the nature of the incarnation, Gregory of Nazianzus’s classical formulation: “For that which He [Christ] has not assumed He has not healed”¹⁷, became the catch phrase in incarnational theology and is so even to the present day. The maleness of Jesus thus became normative of humanity. However, the incredulity of an incarnate God, “a stumbling block to the Jews and

¹⁴ Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 6.

¹⁵ Tina Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: A Marian Narrative of Women's Salvation* (London: Continuum, 2002), 2.

¹⁶ Janette Gray, "Celibacy These Days," in *Sex These Days: Essays on Theology, Sexuality and Society*, ed. John Davies and Gerald O'Loughlin (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 146.

¹⁷ “Nam quod assumptum non est, non est curationis est experts.” *Ep 101.32*, PG 37:182 (NPNF 2-07, 440).

folly to the Gentiles”¹⁸, still haunts our theological understanding of the body, and the female body in particular, and hence, precisely as Antonia Lacey suggests: “the exact form and meaning of the Christ, who was made flesh, has yet to be fully explored and discovered.”¹⁹

Feminist philosophy and theology has been acutely aware of this fragile existence of the body within theological discourse. Raoul Mortley points to the task that this situation calls for in our times: “Women are committed to two gigantic tasks: assuming consciousness of order of language and of one’s tongue as sexualized, and also of creating a new symbolic morphology in which she can say: I, sexual being, woman, assert such and such.”²⁰ Beattie maintains that this project is central to the very nature of theology in the Catholic tradition and cannot be bypassed without a loss of coherence to that theological tradition: She insists that it is, “the theological vocation to dwell in the aporia between language and the body as the true locus of Christian reflection on the nature of God.”²¹ In this respect, my question is: What would happen if we used a symbolics that “privileged the female body” in contrast with, or more aptly, alongside and together with, the symbolics that emphasize the male body? What, if anything, can Heloise, with what seems to be her overt refusal to bypass her body’s specificity, contribute to our desire to know our bodies and their place in the journey of faith?

A Method of Dialogue:

It is with this task in mind that I intend to revisit Heloise’s writings from the feminist perspective of the body, and the nature of “bodies in Christ”. I propose to do this using the critical approach from the philosophical framework articulated by Michel de Certeau, Luce Irigaray, and those associated with the theological development of their thought. Of particular interest in this respect is the work of Graham Ward in

¹⁸ See Paul’s claim in I Cor. 1:23 – “but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”

¹⁹ Antonia Lacey, “Gendered Language and the Mystic Voice: Reading from Luce Irigaray to Catherine of Siena,” in *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liège and Their Impact*, eds. Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts*, 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 330.

²⁰ Raoul Mortley, *French Philosophers in Conversation* (London: Routledge, 1991), 72.

²¹ Tina Beattie, *Woman*, *New Century Theology* (London: Continuum, 2003), 79.

developing the understanding of the absent body and its significance vis-à-vis the concepts of identity and relationship,²² and also Tina Beattie with her theses regarding the nature of the feminine body in Christ.²³

At this point, one may wish to ask if it is possible to read Heloise with the aid of a twentieth and twenty-first century philosopher without doing violence to her words, words situated in a era with different philosophical, sociological and political concerns to our own. Peter Von Moos' point is that ideologies are always at play in the reading of history and should, thus, be clearly and honestly acknowledged by every writer attempting to dialogue with the past.²⁴ Nevertheless, the patriarchal or masculinist world of scholarship has rarely questioned its own ideologies and categories of analysing texts, rather it is considered the normative reading of history. Indeed, it is undeniable that the reading of female texts has often been approached from this masculinist or patriarchal framework without any overt acknowledgement of the limited parameters that it imposes. Rarely do you hear a scholar admit to reading a text from a "masculinist" position. This is precisely the point in relation to the interpretative reading of the letters of Heloise and Abelard. For example, Morgan Powell asserts that this interpretative reading is ultimately a question of textual hermeneutics:

The debate over Heloise as the romantic heroine, a voice extinguished in a tragic abyss between irrepressible desire and inexpressible fulfillment and Heloise as the able and respected abbess is not, finally, a question of textual interpretation but one of textual hermeneutics, a decision as to the way the text makes meaning that is preliminary to any interpretative act, as it was no doubt preliminary to the compositional act that caused the text to be delivered to us as it is.²⁵

²² See Graham Ward, "Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward and John Milbank (London: Routledge, 1999), 163-81.

²³ See Tina Beattie, "Carnal Love and Spiritual Imagination: Can Luce Irigaray and John Paul II Come Together?" in *Sex These Days*, and Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 160-83.

²⁴ Peter von Moos, *Mittelalterforschung und Ideologiekritik: Der Gelehrtenstreit um Heloise*, Kritische Information, 15 (Munich: W. Fink, 1974), 18.

²⁵ Morgan Powell, "Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete: Of Scholarly Diversion and a Woman's 'Conversion'," in *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth Century Woman*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 278.

The use of a feminist hermeneutic with medieval women's writings has flourished in recent scholarship, as have the critiques of such works.²⁶ This employment of a "new" hermeneutical approach has also been the case with respect to the interpretation of Heloise's writings. John Marenbon explains this shift to feminist readings of the text:

When over the last two decades, scholars began to look at the Middle Ages from feminist perspectives, the figure of Heloise could not but loom large. If Heloise wrote the Letters in her name, then – however interpreted – they are not merely one of the most remarkable pieces of writing by a medieval woman but a rich source for investigating many of the central themes in feminist scholarship: women and the body, women and language, women's use (and subversion) of male rhetoric.²⁷

Heloise of the Paraclete was undoubtedly a woman of her time, that is, of twelfth-century Europe. The religious, philosophical, and social context of the world of Heloise was therefore that of the twelfth century. However it would be naïve and narrow-minded to presume that we cannot, and indeed, should not read or access her writings now in ways that shed light on our own concerns or that the way we now understand our world cannot shed its own light back into an earlier text.

In the written form, as von Moos asserts, "the reality of the author loses its brute autonomy and takes on the value of a sign"²⁸ for any who approach their writings in the present. A good example of this idea of "sign" value is the feminist use of Paul's description of life in Christ in his letter to the Galatians: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). When writing this to the Christian community of Galatia, Paul obviously never anticipated advancing a feminist agenda for the twentieth and twenty-first century, nevertheless, the "sign" value of his words are powerfully interpreted by feminist scholars for this new context.

Employing the language of Certeau, and many other modern feminist scholars of both philosophy and theology, one can acknowledge that undeniable reality of one's lack

²⁶ Barbara Newman, Caroline Bynum-Walker, Nancy Partner and Jo-Ann McNamara are among the many scholars who have taken up this task and whose views will be represented in this thesis.

²⁷ John Marenbon, "Authenticity Revisited," in *Listening to Heloise*, 27.

²⁸ Peter von Moos, "Le silence d'Heloise et les ideologies modernes," in *Pierre Abelard - Pierre le Vénérable*, eds. René Louis, Jean Jolivet and Jean Châtillon (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la Recherche Scientifique, 1975), 433-35.

of control of the impact of the past on the present and declare one's reading of the text in terms of this "sign" value. It is here, in this context of uncertainty, that the voice of Heloise can find its deeper meaning for us today by taking on this "value of a sign" in the perspective of the present.

Nevertheless, it would be a further naïvety and unwise for any reader of historical sources to attempt simply to impose the philosophical methods and theories of the present age onto the writings of the past. To claim Heloise with the feminism of a post-modern philosophical framework would be to push the limits of historical analysis beyond acceptable and credible scholarly boundaries. As suggested by Lacey, "the gap . . . is too great, covering huge cultural, sociological and philosophical changes"²⁹ which cannot simply be ignored. However, set into the appropriate perspective, the philosophical framework of both Irigaray and Certeau can illuminate the writings of Heloise in a dynamic dialogue which can enable the letters of Heloise, the voice of Heloise, to be heard with new theological significance for the present. I am proposing that this "value of sign" can be unearthed by freeing the voice of Heloise from the silence imposed upon it by philosophical systems of the past via illumination with frameworks of the present, and in particular, by bringing her writings into dialogue with the critical approach of Certeau and the critique of the patriarchal meta-discourse that Irigaray identifies in her feminist philosophy.

There have, of course, been severe criticisms of this attempt at dialogue between texts of the past and the feminist agenda of today. Again, Marenbon, for instance, is particularly adverse to some approaches using this method. He attacks some varieties of feminism which do violence to the text:

They [some feminists] would argue that what counts as acceptable methods of argument and choices of evidence reflect the preconceptions and interests of particular groups and that therefore the views I have stated about the burdens of argument and evidence and truth about the past are fanciful. An attitude of scholarly neutrality in the search for truth is deceptive, they would say, and some might add, feminist scholars do better to promote the cause of feminism through their work

²⁹ Lacey, "Gendered Language and the Mystic Voice: Reading from Luce Irigaray to Catherine of Siena," 329.

than to pursue an objectivity toward evidence that, even if it were attainable, could serve no good purpose.³⁰

- a view which he rejects categorically. Marenbon's analysis sees little room for any post-modern development in historical critique of texts with their consequent alternate layers of meaning and significance to the texts. He sees this task as too fraught with ideological bias. In fact, the proponents of the feminist position also use this same argument of "ideological bias" against their opponents. Barbara Newman, for example, points out the lingering bias operative in modern scholarship:

In some quarters there still lingers a nineteenth-century bias against the very idea that medieval women wrote [particularly in their own right], but the scholarship of the last two decades leaves no excuse for this misconception. It is ironic that Heloise in particular should be subjected to such a prejudice, for in her own day she had a reputation as a distinguished literary scholar even in her teens.³¹

Furthermore, Philip Sheldrake maintains that: "Human events can only be understood by means of a dialogue between our contemporary horizons and values, and the intentions, feelings and mentality of the historical protagonists."³² Thus, as the reader, we will always bring to our reading of the text our own agenda and concerns of the present times in our attempts to understand the past. Without intending to ignore what Sharon Welch describes as "the complexity of charting out the relationship between textual coherence – what would seem logically to be the political impact of a text – *and* the actual political and cultural impact of any given text or textual strategy",³³ I want to employ feminist theological and philosophical writers simply as dialogue partners in conversation with Heloise's writings.

Keeping this "ideological bias" as a legitimate concern when taking up the writings of Heloise, one can still note that what we are dealing with is undeniably "women's discourse". I will make a case for acknowledging that Heloise, though a twelfth-century woman, manifests a "gendered language difference" that is theologically

³⁰ Marenbon, "Authenticity Revisited," 30-31.

³¹ Barbara Newman, "Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloise," in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 51.

³² Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (London: SPCK, 1995), 28-29.

³³ Sharon D. Welch, "Sporting Power: American Feminism, French Feminisms, and an Ethic of Conflict," in *Transfigurations: Theology and the French Feminists*, eds. C. V. Maggie Kim, S.M. St. Ville and S. M. Simonaitis (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 174.

significant within her own context. It is only when read with the illumination of the feminist critique of today that the “silenced voice” of Heloise can be adequately appreciated theologically.

My contention is that the narrative which Heloise presents in her search for her authentic Christian identity breaks from this subordination and reclaims the right to speak from her own body, from the body of her community, and from the feminine experience of both. It is only when we creatively re-imagine Heloise’s story, that is, when we read Heloise with the lens of “textual excess” that we can appreciate this dimension to her thought. This reading, I will maintain, refuses to reject the silent, “substratum of women’s bodies . . . that have remained without value in the specular economy of Western thought”,³⁴ and particularly in Western theological thought.

Of course, gendered readings of Heloise’s writings have already been undertaken from a variety of perspectives. Peggy Kamuf, Linda Kauffman and Claire Nouvet for example, suggest that Heloise’s language transgresses the philosophical categories concerning sexual constraint and desire in her times, yet neither the gendered specificity nor theological or monastic context of these issues is discussed.³⁵ Others have suggested that Heloise is more than merely transgressive in her language. Andrea Nye, for example, suggests the emergence of a new body of philosophy from Heloise’s voice, one which: “might be informed by Heloise’s and Aspasia’s wisdom, their subtle, sensitive, mobile, flexible women’s tongues?”³⁶ Valuable to this present project is the study of Peggy McCracken,³⁷ who employs the philosophy of abjection in the writings of another French feminist philosopher, Julia Kristeva, in analysing aspects of the female body particularly the abject female body, difference and gender. The gendered voice of Heloise, said to have been silenced by the past domination of masculine agenda, has now been awoken in numerous studies which stress her

³⁴ Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 29.

³⁵ See Peggy Kamuf, *Fictions of Feminine Desire: Disclosures of Heloise* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 5, Linda Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), and Claire Nouvet, "The 'Discourse of the Whore': An Economy of Sacrifice," *Modern Language Notes* 105 (1990): 75-73.

³⁶ Andrea Nye, "A Woman's Thought or a Man's Discipline? The Letters of Abelard and Heloise," *Hypatia* 7.3 (1992): 41.

³⁷ Peggy McCracken, "The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter," in *Listening to Heloise*, 217-232.

rhetorical skill, superior intellect and feminine context.³⁸ Nevertheless, Heloise is rarely considered a serious religious writer with concerns which might continue to challenge and contribute to, the theological development our own day. It is this theological stance and the monastic spirituality within Heloise's writings that I wish to explore by employing the modern feminist perspective of the body. Antonia Lacey is the only other writer I am aware of who has attempted to employ Luce Irigaray's theses in this way. In her study of Catherine of Siena she maintains that Irigaray offers a method for accessing the mystical and religious writings of Catherine, particularly through the symbolic use of her body in her speech.³⁹ The position that I am presenting is directly related to the feminist theological agenda surrounding the nature of the body.

Feminist analysis has much to offer a theological approach to Heloise, particularly through the "subjective claiming of the body and experience"⁴⁰. This seems to me to be precisely the task that Heloise has before her in her letters and possibly her other writings, and which she refuses to sacrifice even as she is confronted by Abelard's inability to enter into a discussion of this issue. This claim has implications for a contemporary re-writing of theology and monastic spirituality not just for women, but also for the whole body of humanity. Indeed, as Beattie insists, "The task for the feminist theologians then is not to discard the theological tradition but to break it open to voices of difference."⁴¹ In my thesis, I will argue that Heloise is precisely one of these voices of difference which needs to be "broken open", particularly when one comes to consider the intersection of monastic and feminist theology.

³⁸ The many studies include the following: Catherine Brown, "Muliebriter: Doing Gender in the Letters of Heloise," in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. J. Chance (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1996), Linda Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," in *Listening to Heloise*, 187-216, Mary Grey, "The Challenge of Heloise: Language, Truth and Logic Revisited," *New Blackfriars* 73 (1992): 84-89, 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, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1993), 64-86, Barbara Newman, "Flaws in the Golden Bowl: Gender and Spiritual Formation in the Twelfth Century," *Traditio* 45 (1989-90): 111-46, Juanita Feros Ruys, "*Quae Maternae Immemor Naturae*: The Rhetorical Struggle over the Meaning of Motherhood in the Writings of Heloise and Abelard," in *Listening to Heloise*, 323-340, and Juanita Feros Ruys, "'Ut Sexu Sic Animo': The Resolution of Sex and Gender in the *Planctus* of Abelard," *Medium Aevum* 75.1 (2006): 1-23.

³⁹ See Lacey, "Gendered Language and the Mystic Voice: Reading from Luce Irigaray to Catherine of Siena."

⁴⁰ See Gray, "Celibacy These Days," 153.

⁴¹ Beattie, *Woman*, 71.

Using the feminist critique as a dialogue partner to Heloise's letters then, we can begin to embark on the theological task of re-imagining Divine categories for the present period of history. We can begin to break free from the yoke of past philosophical systems in order to find what Serene Jones identifies as, "a map for uncovering and critiquing patriarchal assumptions buried in classical and Enlightenment accounts of Christian doctrines"⁴². The doctrines that I am particularly concerned with in this thesis are the theology of the body within the doctrine of the Incarnation and the understanding of Christian anthropology, both of which it may be possible to uncover in Heloise's writings.

While aspects of Irigaray's work raise difficulties for theological analysis, particularly her conception of a feminine ideal and an essential divine for women,⁴³ her philosophical position overall is most helpful. Through her psychoanalytic critique of patriarchal culture, she identifies the problematic within phallogocentric language and its dominance in Western culture: "If our tradition is dominated by one mode of speech, how are we to reconstruct the puzzle of the discourse of the other? This is no easy matter."⁴⁴ In contrast to being simply captive to the dominant mode of speech, it appears to me that Heloise struggles with language in a uniquely feminine manner in the expression of her own wisdom. I am suggesting that Heloise, a woman of the twelfth century, attempted a reconstruction of language in a feminine voice and it is only today, in dialogue with our own developments in feminist philosophy and theology, that we can recognise and interpret her attempts in a manner that informs our own understanding of Christian identity.

A Tactic of "Weakness":

How is it possible to locate Heloise's writings as a "uniquely feminine" way of speaking as subject? Certeau makes the assertion that it is the "art of the weak" to

⁴² Serene Jones, "Divining Women: Irigaray and Feminist Theologies," *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995):47. See also Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*.

⁴³ See for example, Morny Joy's critical analysis of Irigaray's work is especially useful in this respect. See Morny Joy, *Divine Love: Luce Irigaray, Women, Gender and Religion*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 7-35.

⁴⁴ Luce Irigaray, "The Way of the Feminine," in *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liège and Their Impact*, 320.

speak in the form of “tactic” rather than “strategy”: “Just as a strategy is determined by the establishment of a place of power, a tactic is determined by the absence of power. But in this is the strength of the weak, for power is bound by its very visibility.”⁴⁵ As the female in this twelfth-century dialogue of the Letters of Heloise and Abelard, Heloise clearly identifies herself and her community as the “weak” subject as do many other women writers of her era. In her request for a rule adapting to the needs of women, she entreats Abelard:

Do you then also, I beg you, who seek to imitate not only Christ but also this apostle, in discrimination as in name, modify your instructions for works to suit our weak nature, so that we can be free to devote ourselves to the offices of praising God.⁴⁶

Heloise can also be identified as the one who employs this art of tactic as it is from the space of “no place” through which she speaks. Grace Jantzen has pointed out that one of the primary struggles within the medieval Church was to clarify by what authority women speak.⁴⁷ Medieval women had “no place” from which to speak, particularly as theologians, in the medieval ages, unless it was through “gendered tactics”. Newman maintains that in order to be heard, a woman claimed one or the other of two models acceptable in her age, either “the mode of the *femina virilis* or *virago*”⁴⁸. Alternatively, she could employ, “the possibility that women, *qua* women, could practice some form of the *imitatio Christi* with specifically feminine inflections and thereby attain a particularly exalted status in the realm of the Spirit.”⁴⁹ This second model was often achieved by women claiming their social inferiority to their own advantage: “Because the power of God is perfected in weakness, because the humblest shall be the most exalted, human impotence could become the sign and prelude of divine empowerment.”⁵⁰ Though it is possible to fit Heloise into the first model, particularly from the comments made about her by her contemporaries,⁵¹ the

⁴⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 37.

⁴⁶ “Et tu ipse, obsecro, non solum Christi, verum etiam hujus imitator apostoli discretionem sicut et nomine, sic operum precepta moderare ut infirme convenit nature, et ut divine laudis plurimum vacare possimus officiiis.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 104 (Radice, 109).

⁴⁷ See Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 157-92.

⁴⁸ Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Barbara Newman, *Sister Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 35.

⁵¹ I will be drawing from these comments in the body of this thesis. See for example, the comments of Peter the Venerable and Hugh Metel in Chapter 2, p. 54.

uniqueness of Heloise's style, her use of Latin terms and the recurring themes in her writing, fit comfortably into Certeau's concept of "tactic", that of employing her own social status in order to be heard. As Irvine insists, "She [Heloise] is marking off a space for her own self-representation, one that is not defined or contained by Abelard's writing about her or to her."⁵² This space contains an excess of meaning that needs careful attention in order to be interpreted.

In contrast, Abelard's identity as male is correspondingly marked by a mode of speaking which conforms to a strategy, as it is from a place of power that he utters his words. In spite of the fact that Abelard was twice convicted of heresy for his writings, he still had a legitimate space from which to utter those words simply through his identity as male. In an era when women could only discover a space for their own distinctive voice by playing into the hands of patriarchal rules of speech, I am suggesting, using the categories which Certeau and Irigaray articulate, that Heloise's mode of speech attempts something more distinctive, surprisingly unique and perhaps characteristically feminine.

This tactic of Heloise can be equated with the "disruption of the symbolic" that Irigaray identifies. It is this disruption which displaces a masculinist interpretation of her writings with, " a new imaginary, new ways of conceiving and being which enable women to be subjects *as women*."⁵³ An acknowledgement of this feminist philosophical position means that Heloise can no longer be read as simply a tragic lover, incurable romantic or as an abbess of doubtful integrity. This would be to continue to deny the voices of women any serious consideration in Christian history. Heloise emerges instead as an important subversive voice for women's subjectivity within historical theology. As far as I am aware, this perspective has never been attempted with respect to the writings of Heloise.

⁵² Martin Irvine, "Heloise and the Gendering of the Literate Subject," *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages*, ed. Rita Copeland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 100.

⁵³ Irigaray, "The Way of the Feminine," 193-4.

The Text as a Coherent Whole:

For the purposes of this thesis I will be restricting my study to the early Love Letter collection⁵⁴ and the later correspondence between Heloise and Abelard. There have been numerous studies into this correspondence over the past century covering a variety of perspectives. Many have focussed on the question of authenticity.⁵⁵ That a woman of the twelfth century could lay claim to such erudition as demonstrated in the correspondence attributed to Heloise and Abelard, was, and in some quarters is still considered incredible in spite of the evidence supporting her intellectual prowess by her own contemporaries. This question has been largely put to rest due mainly to the work of Dronke and, in a more feminist framework, the analysis of Barbara Newman.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the scepticism continues to be particularly evident in relation to Mews' more recent claim that a set of love letters between two lovers from the twelfth century are in literary continuity with the later correspondence between Heloise and Abelard and are a genuine exchange between them.⁵⁷ This assertion remains controversial. von Moos, for example, is especially scathing of Mews' assertions.⁵⁸ I will be assuming the authenticity of both these collections, relying on the authority of scholars such as Mews, Dronke, Luscombe and Newman.⁵⁹ I will also

⁵⁴ Mews makes a convincing case for the authenticity of these letters in his commentary in the work. See Constant J. Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

⁵⁵ The following are but a sample of the many studies undertaken: Bernhard Schmeidler, "Der Briefwechsel zwischen Abaelard und Heloise dennoch eine literarische Fiktion Abaelards," *Revue Bénédictine* 52 (1940): 85-95, D. W. Robertson, Jr., *Abelard and Heloise* (London: Millington, 1974), John. E. Benton, "A Reconsideration of the Authenticity of the Correspondence of Abelard and Heloise," in *Petrus Abaelardus (1079-1142): Person, Werk und Wirkung: Proceedings of the International Colloquium*, ed. Rudolf Thomas, Trierer theologische Studien 38 (Trier: Paulinus-Verlag, 1980), 41-52, and David Luscombe, "From Paris to the Paraclete: The Correspondence of Abelard and Heloise," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 74 (1988): 247-83. See also the more recent study of John Marenbon, "Authenticity Revisited."

⁵⁶ See Peter Dronke, *Abelard and Heloise in Medieval Testimonies* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1976), Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages. A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (d. 203) to Marguerite Porete (d. 1310)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and Newman, "Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloise."

⁵⁷ See Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*.

⁵⁸ Peter von Moos, "Die epistolae duorum amantium und die säkulare Religion der Liebe. Methodenkritische Vorüberlegungen zu einem einmaligen Werk mittellateinischer Briefliteratur," *Studi Medievali* 44 (2003). See also Jan Ziolkowski, "Lost and Not yet Found: Heloise, Abelard and the *Epistolae duorum amantium*," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 14 (2004): 171-202.

⁵⁹ See Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 3-177, Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, David Luscombe, "The Letters of Heloise and Abelard since 'Cluny 1972'," in *Petrus Abaelardus (1079-1142): Person, Werk und Wirkung*, 23-31, Luscombe, "From Paris to the Paraclete: The Correspond of Abelard and Heloise," Marenbon, "Authenticity Revisited", and Newman, "Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloise."

refer to other writings of Heloise, notably, the *Problemata Heloissae*,⁶⁰ and her monastic community's statutes, *Institutiones nostrae*,⁶¹ when they directly relate to the arguments that I am presenting.

The question of particular interest to this thesis is whether or not one can detect a consistency in the development of Heloise's thought in relation to her position of the body, monastic spirituality and the underlying theological principles. In Mews' most recent work on Abelard and Heloise as great medieval thinkers, he extends his initial analysis to these questions.⁶² However, I intend to critically examine Mews' contention that Heloise's thinking transcends both scriptural and monastic categories as understood within the Benedictine tradition.⁶³

The distinctive "voice" of Heloise can only be heard in its fullness by reading the text as a whole and uncovering there the concepts and vocabulary of the language with which she attempts to express herself. As Irvine notes: "if we miss the presuppositions of genre and form when reading the letters of Abelard and Heloise, we risk gross errors of misreading, chief of which can be misinterpreting personal agency or intention in the expectations and conventions of genre."⁶⁴ I want to suggest that if we miss the gender and sexuality of the speaker, the body of the speaker, we misread the text also.

Morgan Powell also insists on the monastic context for Heloise's rhetoric – she is after all, a renowned Benedictine abbess. Without a clear reference to this context, any analysis can be easily led astray also. This position becomes particularly relevant if we appropriate Powell's thesis, which insists that the correspondence of Heloise and Abelard probably formed part of a larger whole of formative material for Heloise's community as it grew and developed its own unique character. Powell

⁶⁰ Any translations of the *Problemata Heloissae* are my own and taken from PL 178: 677-728, in consultation with the English translation of E.M. McNamer, *The Education of Heloise* (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 1991), 111-83.

⁶¹ All translations of the Paraclete Statutes are my own. The Latin text is taken from Chrysogonus Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae. Introduction, Edition, Commentary*, CLS 20. (Gethsemani Abbey, Trappist: Cistercian Publications, 1987). Henceforth, *Institutiones*.

⁶² Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*.

⁶³ See Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 136, and Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 158-59.

⁶⁴ Irvine, "Heloise and the Gendering of the Literate Subject," 91.

asserts that: “As we have them, Heloise’s letters are part of a composed whole, compiled for, and doubtless adapted to, a new communicative function.”⁶⁵ Within this discussion he takes up the theme of conversion in terms of renunciation versus desire, a theme to be further analysed theologically in this thesis. The central question in this respect is: What legacy is Heloise bequeathing to her community through the preservation of this collection of her writings that is, at first glance, seemingly so very personal at times?

Heloise and the “reclaiming” of the Body:

As I have already suggested, it is my contention that it is possible to read both the love letters and the later correspondence of Heloise and Abelard from a theological and philosophical perspective of the body, particularly the “reasoning female body”, and bodies as articulated by the psychoanalytic perspective of sexual difference and alterity in the writings of French feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray.⁶⁶ What becomes evident and highly significant in this reading could be referred to as Heloise’s distinctively “incarnational form of language”.⁶⁷ Heloise’s writings reveal a unique position with regard to the significant role of the female body as subject, in contrast to object, in establishing one’s authentic Christian identity and relationship with, and in other bodies within the monastic context.

⁶⁵ Powell, "Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete," 256. Irvine also suggests that this material should be read as whole piece rather than as separate letters: “Heloise’s letters to Abelard need to be placed in the larger context of letters written from their early years in Paris (now lost) to letters that recorded their collaboration on monastic education and liturgy at the Paraclete.” See Irvine, "Heloise and the Gendering of the Literate Subject," 88-89.

⁶⁶ The works of Luce Irigaray are numerous. I will be drawing primarily on her work as summarised in Margaret Whitford, ed., *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford and Cambridge MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994 (1991)), Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985 (1974)), Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: Athlone Press, 1993), and Irigaray, "Egales a Qui?," *Critique* 480. May (1987): 420-37.

⁶⁷ Tina Beattie uses this phrase in relation to the writings of Luce Irigaray. See Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 38.

My thesis is that Heloise is not, in any sense of the word, moving towards an overcoming of her “innate feminine sensuality” as suggested by Duby,⁶⁸ but is rather, embracing it to its fullest and most embodied extent. The letters have often been read mainly from the perspective of a love story, and on one level at least, this is obviously appropriate. However, this theme of a “love story” has rarely, if ever, been taken to its end point, what I believe is its intended direction, that of a deeper understanding of Divine Love and the place of human subjectivity within this understanding. This theological import of the letters and of Heloise herself has thus been fundamentally overlooked or at best, underplayed.

Heloise’s is a language that does not set up any emphasis on dichotomies between the material and spiritual realities of being. Rather, the flesh gives rise to the word. Here is a language that refuses to erase the concepts of fundamental embodiment and sexual difference throughout her dialogue with Abelard. As such, Heloise’s twelfth-century use of, and struggle with, language could be said to be analogous, in many ways, to the modern philosophical critiques of Irigaray. Referring to Irigaray’s critique of Derrida and Lacan, Beattie notes the dismissal of the body and its significance in the masculine language:

Irigaray suggests that these are the conceits and pretensions of a phallogocentric understanding of language, which preserves androcentric privilege through perpetuating the non-representability of the body, instead of recognizing that the production of language is in itself dependent upon the physical body of the speaker or writer.⁶⁹

I am going to argue that Heloise’s language parallels this position of bodily dependency through the persistent use of specific identifying terminology and themes, all of which can be used as hermeneutical tools for reading the letters of Heloise in order to discover their particularly monastic and theological import. Indeed, I want to posit what Irvine characterises as “unifying themes” within Heloise’s writings.⁷⁰

These unifying themes, in Irvine’s study, are directly related to her theological and monastic project. They are themes of desire and love, of absence and presence, of

⁶⁸ See George Duby. *Dames du XIIIe siècle*. 3 vols. I: *Héloïse, Aliénor, Iseut et quelques autres*. Collection Folio/histoire 84. (Paris: Gallimard, 1995,1997), 91. Cited in Marenbon, "Authenticity Revisited," 25.

⁶⁹ Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 31.

⁷⁰ Irvine, "Heloise and the Gendering of the Literate Subject," 89.

discretion and virtue and they all relate to her position vis-à-vis the body and bodies in Christ. Thus, it is conceivable that Heloise's remarkable success as a spiritual guide, monastic leader and reformer is intimately linked to her own confrontation with the reality of this concept of the "body" in her context and perhaps more implicitly, the meaning that Incarnation, an embodied God, has for her as a female body in a female community.

Irigaray maintains that male discourse is, "a language that is transcendent with respect to bodies" and thus to retrieve a feminine discourse, one would have "to become incarnate, 'so to speak'"⁷¹ It is in this struggle to become "incarnate" that Heloise creates a space for a form of working language for the female body that is more concrete, more representative and in the last analysis, more Christian than has been previously acknowledged. This language is one of excess and fluidity. It does not conform to, indeed, it disrupts, the more conventional dimensions of language within Abelard's discourse. By "excess and fluidity", I am not suggesting, as do Nouvet and Kamuf, that Heloise's excess is due simply to her overflow of emotion in "speaking as she must".⁷² Rather, using the definition of Irigaray as posited by Elizabeth Grosz, I will assert that, for Heloise:

[T]o speak as a woman. . . means to evoke rather than designate, to overflow and exceed all boundaries and oppositions. It involves speaking from a position in the middle of the binaries (the so-called position of the 'excluded middle'), affirming both poles while undoing their polarisation. To speak with meanings that resonate, that are tactile and corporeal as well as conceptual, that reverberate in their plurality and polyvocality.⁷³

In this respect, it is possible to expose a voice of Heloise whose rhetoric is implicitly consistent with an appreciation of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation and its significance, particularly its significance in relation to female bodies. Though not explicit in Heloise's letters, I will attempt to articulate the implications of the language she uses, a specifically embodied language, for this theological interpretation of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Indeed, Heloise's struggle

⁷¹ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 89.

⁷² See Kamuf, *Fictions of Feminine Desire*, Nouvet, "The 'Discourse of the Whore': An Economy of Sacrifice," and Nouvet, "La castration d'Abélard: impasse et substitution," *Poétique* 83 (1990): 259-80.

⁷³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), 132.

with language reveals a unique theological perspective which sometimes corrects, and sometimes supports, explains and extends Abelard's own theological understandings.

The body here refers to its articulation at every level, psychic, social, religious as well as biological. The problem lies in setting up too sharp an opposition between embodiment and gender as if gender can exist without the particularity of the body or body exist apart from the social contrasts by which it is expressed in a given context. However, neither do I ascribe to a position where the "speaking body", be it a male body or a female body, has nothing to contribute to the voice of the speaker or literate subject, and therefore to issues of gender and gendered language. This position has had devastating effects on the status of women theologically throughout the centuries as I have already outlined. From a theological perspective at least, as Beattie insists:

[P]rivileging the symbolic female body as a locus of interpretation, as one whose authorial voice is that of a woman, while seeking to avoid an essentialist understanding of 'woman' that would posit an ontological difference between the sexes . . . it is perhaps impossible to avoid a form of discourse that is in some sense essentialist, if one wants to uphold sexual difference as a significant factor in the construction of identity and in the relationship between the reader and the text, or between the believer and the narrative of belief. . .⁷⁴

As yet, I have not discovered anyone who has directly related Heloise's task in the letters to that of the more specific philosophy and theology of the "privileging of the body".⁷⁵ This privileging sees the body as fundamental to the task of authentic identity, particularly in Christian theology and monastic spirituality.

Using Certeau's approach, I am ascribing a "tactical essentialism" to Heloise's writing in contrast to what Serene Jones identifies as the "strategic essentialism" operative in the varieties of feminism today.⁷⁶ Thus the question remains: Does the particular body of the subject, their embodied state, matter in relation to gender and gendered voices? Or as Kauffmann articulates it: "What does it mean to 'write [or speak] like a woman'?"⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 6.

⁷⁵ Gray, "Celibacy These Days," 149.

⁷⁶ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 45.

⁷⁷ Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire*, 18.

Irvine has posited the idea that the letters of Heloise and Abelard, “open up the question of gendered subjectivity in an unusually explicit way, and disclose the possibilities for a woman to appropriate the power of Latin culture but resist its totalizing or essentializing force.”⁷⁸ However, his arguments still involve the appropriation of the masculine subjective space, rather than the creation of a space specific to the female subject. Irvine maintains that: “Writing from the position of the literate subject, she both appropriates the authority of the masculine *litteratus* and resists the totalising force of this gendered position: she writes like an *amicus* but as a woman.”⁷⁹ The referent here remains the male subject from which the female subject establishes her subjectivity. In contrast to this position I want to suggest that Heloise establishes her own unique and feminine space for the production of language. She writes like an *amica* and as a woman. What I am attempting to demonstrate, in contradistinction to Irvine’s proposition, is the, “momentary emergence of a feminine subject position in Latin prose, a fully empowered feminine *litterata*.”⁸⁰

Considering this analysis, I intend to examine and propose the implications Heloise’s position has for present day understandings of bodies, women, and Christianity’s approach to theology and spirituality. I will attempt this particularly in relationship to the radical Christian doctrine of the Incarnation and the struggle of women against the dominant phallocentrism of language and the conceptions of the Trinitarian Divine that issue forth from this language. In this examination I will explore the theology of body: body which struggles to come to terms with its essential incompleteness through the recognition of alterity; body that is essentially sexual; body that understands itself as in-corporated; body that finds itself in withdrawal, finds its greater “Otherness” in “in-corporate-ness” precisely through the recognition of difference, particularly in relation to sexuality, not the denial of it. This theological reading of the body argues that to be incorporated is to be expanded as body, to be a social body, to be the Body of Christ and not to be disembodied. This disembodiment would be, in fact, a denial of the centrality of the Incarnation in the Christian tradition and counter to the aims of the monastic endeavour as articulated by the Rule of St

⁷⁸ Irvine, "Heloise and the Gendering of the Literate Subject," 87.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 92.

⁸⁰ Irvine writes: “What we see emerging . . . is a momentary emergence of a feminine subject position in Latin prose, a fully empowered feminine *litteratus*”, a phrase he admits is “grammatically impossible” in medieval discourse. See Ibid., 107.

Benedict. As far as I am aware this theological reading of Heloise's writings has not been attempted elsewhere.

In Chapter Two I will establish Heloise's position vis-à-vis the body through a study of her specific use of Latin terminology, focusing on her unique and preferential use of *specialiter* in contrast to Abelard's preference for *singulariter*. Mews has made a thorough study of Heloise's philosophical and religious language, however, the theological implications of this language are not discussed.⁸¹ Chapter Three will deal with the theme of "desire" in Heloise's writings, a desire that is not understood apart from the relationships that make up her context. Desire has been a theme in previous studies in relation to Heloise's life and letters but chiefly in terms of her unbridled desire for Abelard.⁸² However, the religious and particularly the monastic context for this desire has not been thoroughly analysed. Following this analysis, I will attempt to unearth the neglected Divine love story within the correspondence of Heloise and Abelard in Chapter Four, a discussion rarely considered.

Many recent studies have focused on Heloise as an outstanding abbess of the community of the Paraclete, stressing her achievements in both the administrative and pastoral effectiveness of her leadership and her critique of the Benedictine Rule in her role as a reformer of the age.⁸³ Mews, Luscombe and Michael Clanchy are among those who openly recognise Heloise's significant standing in the monastic world of her times.⁸⁴ Her contribution as a significant Benedictine monastic reformer has nevertheless been rarely acknowledged. Mary Martin McLaughlin's work is extensive in this regard.⁸⁵ Chrysogonus Waddell has also opened up the study of the monastic

⁸¹ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 113-44, and Constant J. Mews, "Philosophical Themes in the *Epistolae duorum amantium*: The First Letters of Heloise and Abelard," *Listening to Heloise*, 35-52.

⁸² See Kamuf, *Fictions of Feminine Desire*, 1-44, and Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire*.

⁸³ For example, Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," Carmel Posa, "Keeping Vigil on the Edge," *Tjurunga: An Australasian Benedictine Review* 62 (2002): 69-91, and Mary Martin McLaughlin, "Heloise the Abbess: The Expansion of the Paraclete," *Listening to Heloise*, 1-17.

⁸⁴ David Luscombe, "Monasticism in the Lives and Writings of Heloise and Abelard," in *Monastic Studies II: The Continuity of Tradition*, ed. Judith Loades (Bangor, Gwynedd: Headstart History, 1991), 1-11, Constant J. Mews, "Heloise and Hildegard: Re-Visioning Religious Life in the Twelfth Century," *Tjurunga*, 44 (1993): 20-29, and Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 145-73.

⁸⁵ Mary Martin McLaughlin, *Heloise and the Paraclete* (New York: Palgrave, 2009) Forthcoming.

regime and liturgy of the Paraclete community.⁸⁶ Studies that explore the structure and significance of the Paraclete liturgy, hymnody and psalmody of Abelard are presently exploding with the work of David Wulstan and others.⁸⁷ In Chapter Five, I enter into this discussion of Heloise's monasticism by dealing specifically with Heloise's interpretation of monastic life and "so-called" critique of the Rule of Benedict using the theme of discretion. Finally, in Chapter Six, I will briefly discuss how this theme extends into the monastic life of the community of the Paraclete.

I will argue that Heloise's language is an attempt to speak from this position of her own body, a different body. It is from a re-reading of Heloise's letters in this way that we are able to unveil this relationship that has too long been kept constrained in the reading and writing of Christian history. The writings of Heloise, read theologically through this lens of the body, reveal a human person, a woman, who struggles to find herself within the monastic environment and theological world to which she belongs precisely through this recognition of her fundamental embodied nature as a Christian subject.

⁸⁶ Particularly, Chrysogonus Waddell, ed., *The Old French Paraclete Ordinary and the Paraclete Breviary: I Introduction and Commentary*, vol. CLS 3. (Gethsemani Abbey, Trappist: Cistercian Publications, 1985), Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*, Bruce L. Venarde, *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), and Deirdre Stone, "Heloise: La très Sage Abbess of the Paraclete," *Tjurunga*, 37 (1989): 20-31.

⁸⁷ David Wulstan, "Novi Modulaminis Melos: The Music of Heloise and Abelard," in *Plainsong and Medieval Music*, ed. David Wulstan, vol. 11.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 1-25, and Marc Stewart and David Wulstan, eds., *The Poetic and Musical Legacy of Heloise and Abelard: An Anthology of Essay by Various Authors* (Ottawa, Canada: The Institute of Mediaeval Music, 2003).

Chapter 2:

Specialiter: Heloise's Vocabulary of the Body.

“ . . .et ita quod omnibus est generale quibusdam efficitur speciale.”¹

Introduction:

If, as I have suggested, it is possible to read Heloise's writings from a theological and philosophical perspective of the “reasoning female body”, and that Heloise herself uses a distinctively “incarnational form of language”² which contrasts with dichotomous thought, it should be possible to identify this language first and foremost in her use of specific vocabulary. In this chapter, I am going to argue that Heloise's language parallels this position of bodily dependency through the persistent use of specific identifying terminology which she appears to highlight especially in her greetings to Abelard. I intend to make a case for suggesting that, in particular, her consistent use of the term *specialiter* in both the early love letters and the later correspondence is directly and deliberately connected to what will be shown to be her unique position with regard to the significant role of the female body as subject, in

¹ “ . . . and what is general for everyone is made particular for certain people.” *letter 25*. (Chiavaroli and Mews, 211). The Latin text and English translation of the early love letters will be taken from: *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth Century France*, trans. Neville Chiavaroli and Constant J. Mews (New York: St. Martin's Press 1999). These letters are indicated within the text of this thesis using standard numerical notation used by Mews.

² Tina Beattie uses this phrase in relation to the writings Luce Irigaray. See Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 38.

contrast to object, in establishing one's authentic identity and relationship with, and in, other bodies. As such, the term *specialiter* can be used as one of the hermeneutic tools through which the letters of Heloise can be further analysed and interpreted.

Heloise's dialogue with Abelard does battle with his more metaphoric emphasis on the body and his contrasting philosophical position as indicated by his own preferences in terminology. It would appear that Heloise prefers not to concentrate so much on metaphorical terms for her religious life. Rather, she maintains a speech that is "incarnate", with a focus on the body, and in this she can be identified as an example of Irigaray's retrieval of feminine discourse.³

Earlier scholars of the letters had traditionally set forth a case for either a process of conversion for Heloise or for Abelard within the dialogue of the later letters.⁴ It is my contention that Heloise undergoes not so much a traditional religious conversion as a textual transfiguration.⁵ This transfiguration is indicated through the consistency of terminology used in her letters and the excess of meaning contained in her use of this terminology. As such the textual signification of her body alters, yet in the process, she maintains her essential sexual difference. She focuses first on her own female body in articulating her relationship to Abelard and then expands this body, becoming transfigured as it were, into the body of her female monastic community, so as to further her articulation of this relationship and her own embodied identity.

This transfiguration can be explained further through the use of Irigaray's philosophical understanding of the place of "metonymy" in feminine sexuality and symbolisation. This understanding is in contrast to the "metaphoric" expression found widely within masculine discourse. Metonymy refers to the process of displacement

³ See Chapter 1, n. 67.

⁴ For example, D. W. Robertson, Jr., *Abelard and Heloise*, 134-35, and Linda Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," in *Listening to Heloise*, 173. Morgan Powell suggests that the letters of the later correspondence need to be read from the standpoint of their intended audience, that is, as the formative material of Heloise's female monastic community. In this sense, Heloise becomes the exemplar of conversion for a female community. See Morgan Powell, "Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete: Of Scholarly Diversion and a Woman's 'Conversion'," in *Listening to Heloise*, 255-286. Katharina Wilson and Glenda McLeod make a convincing case for Abelard's, rather than Heloise's, conversion in these letters. See Katharina Wilson and Glenda McLeod, "Textual Strategies in the Abelard/Heloise Correspondence," *Listening to Heloise*, 121-142.

⁵ Graham Ward's work with the writings of Certeau outlines the theological concepts of "transcorporeality" and the transfigured body and its significance theologically. See Graham Ward, "Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ".

which functions synchronically. Tina Beattie explains the linguistic use of these technical terms more fully:

[M]etaphor suggests a vertical process of substitution and repression, while metonymy suggests a horizontal process of combination and contiguity . . . metonymic expression does not repress but implies the latent meaning that it seeks to disguise . . . While metaphor implies a sacrifice of meaning – the original signifier is sacrificed in the process of substitution – metonymy implies a fertile proliferation of meaning.⁶

This concept of metonymy becomes important when attempting to understand and analyse Heloise's language as feminine. Metonymy implies that her body becomes something other than what it already is, that is, her body does not become identified with a submissive body, an idealised female body, a spiritualised body, nor even a converted body. This is precisely the position that is created with the use of metaphor. Rather, in withdrawing from a focus on the specific body, Heloise's language of the body, especially through her use of the term, *specialiter*, extends from itself in transfiguration. She moves from the particular female body as typified in her relationship with Abelard to the more general or universal expression of this body as represented by her female monastic community and its relationship to Abelard. This transfiguration is not articulated as the traditional spiritualised transformation through renunciation of the body with which Abelard is concerned,⁷ that is a renunciation which demands of Heloise that she be "more than woman" (*plus quam femina*)⁸ in a conversion that negates sexual difference. Transfiguration refers to the radical "incorporation" of the believing subject who will not be, in Heloise's own words, "more than Christian" (*nec plusquam Christianae*).⁹ In this respect, Heloise's voice exposes a particularly feminine appreciation of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Though this doctrine is not explicitly described in Heloise's letters, I will attempt to articulate the implications of the language she uses, a specifically embodied language, for her own unique theological interpretation of this central doctrine of Christianity.

⁶ Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 32-33.

⁷ McCracken identifies this renunciation using the language of abjection. See Peggy McCracken, "The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter," *Listening to Heloise*, 217-232. I will be extending the discussion of renunciation and its place in Heloise's rhetoric in the next chapter.

⁸ See *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 82, (Radice, 84).

⁹ See *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 93, (Radice, 98).

In his study and commentary on the early correspondence between Heloise and Abelard,¹⁰ Constant Mews points to Heloise's unique use of language in asserting her own distinctive philosophical position with regard to her relationship to Abelard. He suggests that in her later letters:

She [Heloise] wants Abelard to address her not just in general terms, but as an individual . . . She is reminding Abelard that he was once fascinated by the rhetoric of individuality and that he has an obligation to consider Heloise not just as a spiritual daughter but as a separate person.¹¹

However, I wish to claim that it is Heloise's theological stance which marks her Christian anthropological perspective on the nature of the body and bodies, and not simply her philosophical position. It is this theological position which also informs her particular understanding of human and divine relationships. This perspective integrates into a harmonised whole, the particular (*specialis*) and the universal (*generalis*) understanding and expression of embodied love. Unlike Abelard's philosophical rejection of shared essences and his emphasis on the separateness of individuals in his expressions of love as articulated in his early love letters to her,¹² Heloise's more concrete focus on ethical concerns in her constant emphasis on the body, allows her more linguistic freedom and fluidity to explore the tensions between the universal and particular expressions of love from her own gendered position, rather than having any particular urgency for dissolving one into the other.¹³ In Heloise's case, employing the categories enunciated by Certeau, the individual body, her female body, eventually withdraws so as to become the significant expression or particular form of the larger or excessive universal form of her body. In Heloise's

¹⁰ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*. See also, Mews, "Philosophical Themes in the *Epistolae duorum amantium*: The First Letters of Heloise and Abelard," *Listening to Heloise*, 35-52. Both these studies, though mainly concerned with the lost love letter collection, also comment on the later letters.

¹¹ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 123-4.

¹² See letter 24.

¹³ Both Clanchy and Marenbon acknowledge the fact that Abelard's own ethical thinking develops with time and that this is, in part, due to the influences of Heloise's ideas articulated within her three letters to him. See John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 304-23, and Michael T. Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 164-72. Abelard's ethical position as articulated in his *Ethics* or *Scito teipsum* was written after the letters under study in this thesis, and his position vis-à-vis the body in these later writings should not be projected back onto these letters. See, *Scito teipsum*, ed. Rainer M. Ilgner, CCCM 190 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001) and for the English translation see David Luscombe, ed. and trans. *Peter Abelard's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

articulation, this more universal body is the body of her female monastic community.¹⁴

Certeau examines this symbolic aspect of “withdrawal” in his analysis of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mystics. While Heloise is clearly not a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century mystic, some application of Certeau’s position vis-à-vis the mystic can aid in the interpretation of Heloise’s purpose here. As Andrew Louth suggests, Certeau’s assertions can legitimately be used to analyse the spirituality of the twelfth century as it “sheds a great deal of light on the late middle medieval church, with its combination of greatly enhanced sacerdotal authority and a proliferation of ‘physical phenomena of mysticism’.”¹⁵ Heloise is ill-at-ease with her situation, neither belonging wholly to Abelard, motherhood, the monastic community, nor God. In this situation she is like Certeau’s “spiritual traveller”,¹⁶ the one who belongs nowhere, particularly in her withdrawal from self in order that she may find her authentic Christian identity.

Contrary to the traditional identification concerning the mysticism of the later twelfth and thirteenth century, Heloise does not exhibit the visionary activity we associate with her noted contemporaries such as Hildegard of Bingen or Elizabeth of Schönau, for instance. Neither is there a more typical conversation between the soul and God in her writings, as articulated in Bernard of Clairvaux (1090/91-1153), and other monastic writers of that time. Nevertheless, in the light of Certeau’s definition of a mystic which states that, “He or she is a mystic who cannot stop walking and, with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of every place and object that it is *not that*; one cannot stay *there* nor be content with *that*”,¹⁷ Heloise’s refusal to stop walking, that is, to be content with Abelard’s articulation of her, situates her within this mystic arena. Barbara Newman makes a compelling case for asserting that Heloise can be considered a precursor to the later age of great women mystics. Heloise prefigures

¹⁴ See Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael Smith, vol. 1 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 31-47.

¹⁵ Andrew Louth, "The Body in Western Catholic Christianity," *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley, Cambridge Studies in Religious Tradition, 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 124.

¹⁶ Paul Gallagher provides a summary of this aspect of Certeau’s thought in "Seeking the European Self: Three 'Other Selves' of Michel de Certeau," *The Way* (2001): 102-12.

¹⁷ Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 299.

the language of abnegation in mystics such as Hadewijch of Brabant and Marguerite Porète, and anticipates the devotional piety of female desire that we find in mystics such as Mechthild of Magdeburg. As Newman asserts: “Romantic readers [of Heloise] are not mistaken in seeing a kind of mystical surrender, an ecstasy of abnegation about this sacrifice, which we can read as an anticipation of the female piety that would become widespread a century later.”¹⁸ Newman argues for Heloise as “a kind of mystic manqué”¹⁹, a suggestion that would be worth further investigation and debate.

Heloise refuses to leave the particularity of her body out of her conversations in her correspondence with Abelard concerning the nature and significance of their relationship. As such, the particular, namely her special love for Abelard which is essentially linked with her body, a specifically female body, is transfigured in her withdrawal into the universal or general form, the communal Body of love which is her own monastic community, a corporate female body.

In other words, this theological positioning of the body, as expressed in what I will show is her specifically female voice, shapes Heloise’s relationship with Abelard on both the personal level and on the level of the community of which she is the head. Heloise stands at a juncture in time between the early medieval era with its primary emphasis on corporate awareness and the subsequent discovery of the self or the individual as articulated in twelfth-century literature.²⁰ Her focus on the body, both personal and communal, brings together these two emphases, the communal and the personal, confirming Bynum’s analysis by locating the self and community within the context of each other.²¹

¹⁸ Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 71.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 72.

²⁰ See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 82-109, Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual: 1050-1200* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), and Morris, "Individualism in Twelfth-Century Religion : Some Further Reflections," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31 (1980): 195-206. These studies discuss in some detail the scholarship surrounding this claim for the discovery of the individual in the twelfth century.

²¹ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 107.

The Early Love Letters: *Dilecto suo speciali, et ex ipsius experimento rei, esse quod est.*²²

In Heloise's first extant letter in the love letter collection, letter 1, she expresses the place of her body in her relationship with Abelard alongside that of her core being, that is, her heart. She greets Abelard as: "she who is his in heart and body".²³ This "psychosomatic unity of body and soul" is typical in the thought of later medieval women writers as Bynum explains: "theorists in the high Middle Ages did not see body primarily as the enemy of soul, the container of soul, or the servant of soul; rather they saw the person as a psychosomatic unity, as body and soul together."²⁴ Heloise is, of course, an earlier writer than those referred to by Bynum. However, if she is a precursor to the ideas running through these latter women writers as Newman suggests, then here we find this unity of soul and body running consistently through Heloise's letters marking her Christian anthropological stance and her philosophical emphasis on the integration of the body into her self-definition. In her later letters this unity continues to be her focus, as McCracken points out:

she [Heloise] seeks to integrate the body as a site of individual experience into the definition of the religious subject; she seeks to show that the experiences of outside and inside cannot be neatly separated into an abjected exterior and a cherished interior. She reclaims the material body that Abelard has effaced through metaphor.²⁵

Hildegard of Bingen, a contemporary of Heloise, also understood this unity of body and soul. In her fourth vision in Book One of the *Scivias*, she writes: "But the body is the tabernacle and support of all the powers of the soul, since the soul resides in the body and works with the body, and the body with it, whether for good or for evil."²⁶ However, Hildegard's language, oscillating as it does between the mystical and the speculative, is firmly based in Platonic categories that easily undervalue the creative goodness of the body. In this articulation Hildegard is more typical of her time. Heloise's language is unique in this regard in that she does not simply argue from the traditional mystical linguistic framework but is attempting to use her own categories

²² letter 21: "To her beloved, special from experience of the reality itself; the being which she is." (Chiavaroli and Mews, 203).

²³ "corde et corpore sua". (Chiavaroli and Mews, 191).

²⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 222-23.

²⁵ McCracken, "The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter," 225.

²⁶ "Corpus autem omnium virium animae tabernaculum et sublevamen est, quoniam anima in corpore manens, cum corpore operatur, et corpus cum illa sive bonum sive malum sit." *Scivias, Bk I, Vision IV*. PL 197, 127C. The English translation is taken from: *Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias*. trans. Columba Hart, and Bishop, Jane. (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 132. Henceforth, *Scivias*.

of thought firmly based in her concrete experience as a woman. Indeed, one could go so far as to suggest that in this use of language, Heloise reclaims the body for both women and men, but particularly through the experience of women.

In his commentary on the *Lost Love Letters*, Mews maintains that, “In this exchange, they [Heloise and Abelard] single out the other person as unlike any other”²⁷. This position is consistent with Abelard’s developing nominalism, a logic which posits that “there is no thing which is not a particular”.²⁸ Yet there is in Heloise’s attempts to define and analyse the nature of their love a manner that suggests she is extending her exploration of their relationship beyond the confines of his theses and is doing so in her own unique style. Heloise’s particular focus rests on the use of the term *specialiter* in contrast to Abelard’s preference for *singulariter*.²⁹ Mews points out that in these letters Heloise uses the term *specialiter* four times and *singulariter* only once and not in relation to Abelard. Abelard, on the other hand, uses *singulariter* four times and *specialiter* not at all. These figures may not initially be considered significant, yet viewed in the light of the overall structure of Heloise’s and Abelard’s arguments, they indicate their differing modes of thinking. Heloise’s emphasis on specific philosophical terminology in her greetings and elsewhere appears to be deliberate. In this fact, the question becomes: What is she trying to achieve with this contrast to Abelard’s use of *singulariter*?

In letter 24, Abelard is prompted by Heloise to analyse their love. He writes:

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 . . . 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.³⁰

²⁷ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 15.

²⁸ See Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, 117.

²⁹ See Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 120-24.

³⁰ “Est igitur amor, vis quedam anime non per se existens nec seipsa contenta, sed semper cum quodam appetitu et desiderio, se in alterum transfundens, et cum altero idem effici volens ut de duabus diversis voluntatibus unum quid indifferentur efficiatur . . . Scias quia licet res universalis sit amor, ita tamen in angustum contractus est, ut audacter affirmem eum in nobis solummodo regnare, in me scilicet et in te domicilium suum fecisse.” (Chiavaroli and Mews, 209).

Confirming his earlier position, Abelard has shifted the universal nature of love as “a thing” into the singular expression of their love, without difference. Mews discusses this issue when he points out that:

He [Abelard] argues that *amor* is a “universal thing” that exists only among themselves. The teacher’s argument that love makes two souls the same “without difference” recalls that which Peter Abelard early in his career forced William of Champeaux to concede in a public debate and which Abelard adopted in his early writing on dialectic.³¹

This philosophical point will later consume Abelard’s thinking in his rejection of universals as things,³² and affect his ability to enter into any sort of meaningful dialogue with Heloise in the context of their shared and embodied love in the later letters. For Abelard, love remains a verbal term, a word, *in voce*. This contrasts with Heloise’s understanding, where the word, love, finds its true being in embodiment, that is, *in re*.

Heloise’s own position on the nature of true love becomes explicit in her reply in letter 25, which as Mews notes, draws on both Scripture and the ideas of Cicero.³³ In this letter Heloise uses *amor* and *dilectio* interchangeably, or more correctly, as a unit, constituting together that particular or special, *specialis*, form of the general expression of love, *caritas*, which is the fundamental duty of every Christian: “And even if we show perfect kindness to everyone, we still do not love everyone equally; and what is general for everyone is made particular for certain people.”³⁴

It appears that Heloise’s preferred use of the term *specialis* is in order to claim a particular form of the general or universal expression of love (*caritas*), which we all partake of as part of our shared essence. Thus, *dilectio* is combined with *amor*, intention and passion, body and soul are thoroughly integrated in her writings as articulated above and explained further below. Heloise quite distinctively moves from the particular or special condition to the general expression of love. Her love for Abelard is a special form of the general Christian *caritas*.

³¹ See Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 17.

³² See Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, 174-5.

³³ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 17.

³⁴ “Et nos licet omnibus integram caritatem exhibeamus, non tamen omnes equaliter diligimus, et ita quod omnibus est generale quibusdam efficitur speciale.” (Chiavaroli and Mews, 211).

We see this same integration of *dilectio* and *amor* in her understanding of the nature of love, in letter 79. Heloise's greeting addresses Abelard thus: "To one deserving to be embraced with the longing of a special love" (*Merito specialis dilectionis amplectendo amore*).³⁵ The passion or desire of love, *amor*, associated primarily with the body, and the conscious intention to love, or self-less love, *dilectio*, associated with the soul or the heart, create the ideal of special or particular love for Heloise.³⁶ Passion and intention, body and soul, form a whole action in loving for Heloise. Her language creates a space for an integrated and inherently Christian anthropology that refuses to deny the essential embodiment of human relationships. The later sundering of her relationship with Abelard, particularly with the denial of body on his part, leaves her incomplete, that is, with a missing body. It is this tension in being that she recognises and so shockingly acknowledges. It also enables her to move into the communal dimension of her embodied self. What we hear is Heloise's voice – an embodied voice – setting about the task of resolving this inherent tension.

Mews explains that, "From a dialectician's perspective, "special" means "of a species," and thus embraces a plurality of individuals, as Abelard explains in glossing Prophecy."³⁷ For Heloise, the word appears to have a much broader meaning. "Special", "of the species" in relation to her understanding of her love for Abelard, appears as the specific expression of the universal reality of Christian love. She is using the word without the explicit appeal to the uniqueness or separateness of their love, which is Abelard's emphasis in describing his love for her. Heloise obviously views their relationship differently and, I would suggest, on a much larger and theological stage and with a broader understanding of the Christian body. This becomes even more obvious when we look closely at the later correspondence.

Commenting on the greetings in these early love letters, Mews notes that, "Literary experimentation was a mark of intimacy, showing the extent to which one was prepared to break with convention."³⁸ Consistent with this creativity, Heloise's

³⁵ Chiavaroli and Mews, 259.

³⁶ As Mews notes: "there is no discontinuity between the love which comes from her heart (*amor*) and selfless love (*dilectio*). *Amor* occurs fifty-two times and *dilectio* forty-one times in those extracts copied by Johannes de Vepria. By contrast, *dilectio* occurs just ten times in his letters, whereas *amor* occurs forty-seven times." See Mews *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 136.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 120-21.

understanding of the nature of love develops directly from her philosophical ideas, which she expresses in her choice of the term *specialiter* in both her greetings. Here she continues to experiment with words, and does so elsewhere in her letters where she attempts to interpret the nature of love ethically. These ideas run counter to, and I would suggest, even beyond the thinking of Abelard and indeed, clearly demonstrate this break with convention mentioned above. Her “experimentation” with terms provides us with a *trope* with which to unravel her own distinctive pattern of thought.

Heloise rarely uses Abelard’s favoured philosophical emphasis on unique separateness, with the use of the term *singulariter*. Abelard’s reply to Heloise’s first letter in the love letter collection clearly articulates this terminology which he prefers to use in relation to Heloise and which he continues to stress throughout his correspondence with her. Abelard’s preference for *singulariter* highlights the language of separateness which indicates an understanding which stresses the fundamental distinctiveness of all individual objects, and by inference therefore, of separate bodies. In letter 2 he asserts her uniqueness thus, “To the singular joy and only solace of a tired mind” (*Singulari gaudio, et lassate mentis unico solamini*).³⁹

Again, in letter 4, Abelard focuses on this singular emphasis to express his own identity in relation to Heloise. He is “her only one” (*singularis eius*).⁴⁰ This perspective is once more stressed by Abelard in letter 54 where he uses this same terminology to further describe the nature of their relationship, that is, he is her “individual friend” (*singularis amici*).⁴¹ In letter 56 also, his preference in terminology is increasingly established when he offers Heloise, “whatever good that is reserved singularly for lovers” (*singulariter amantibus*).⁴² The “separateness” of this expression of love is spelt out here by Abelard. There is no indication in his thinking of a universal reality to love within which they share a particular or special expression.

Abelard emphasises Heloise’s uniqueness using the language of separateness rather than particularity. Elsewhere, he uses the word *unicus* to describe her uniqueness, for

³⁹ Chiavaroli and Mews, 191.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁴² *Ibid.*

example, in letters 2, 31, 37, 47, 63, 75, 89, 99 and 110. In letter 31, for instance, he identifies Heloise as his “only remedy” (*unico remedio*).⁴³ In contrast, Heloise is not interested in this term other than in referring back to his own usage in letter 48,⁴⁴ and in the later correspondence where she is probably reminding him of his own earlier position in relation to her.⁴⁵

This preference for *singulariter* by Abelard in attempting to describe his relationship with Heloise points directly to his struggle later to maintain intimate relationships with her following his castration and entry into monastic life. Considering her as his individually, he is incapable of incorporating her into a larger, more universal frame of reference, which points to a universal understanding of love. This universal dimension is fundamentally embodied and as such expands beyond his own unique positing of it between his separate self and Heloise. For Abelard, Heloise cannot be conceived of as both particular in relationship to him and at the same time, an expression of his universal understanding of love. The two things remain incompatible to him. Any other position would involve his recognition of their equality as embodied beings. Heloise is not a “particular” body/relationship in a “universal” body/relationship, since for Abelard there are no universal “things”, only universal “words”.

Heloise’s first use of *specialiter* is in letter 21: “To her beloved, special from experience of the reality itself; the being which she is.” (*Dilecto suo speciali, et ex ipsius experimento rei, esse quod est*).⁴⁶ As noted previously, in this greeting, Heloise offers her “being” and it would not be inappropriate at this stage of the argument to suggest that by “being”, Heloise understands her body and soul, that is, her incorporated self. This concept is also emphasised in the greeting of an earlier letter, letter 5: “To my joyful hope: my faith and my very self with all my devotion as long

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁴⁴ Mews notes that Heloise, “deliberately picks up his [Abelard’s] conclusion to letter 47: “Farewell . . . my one peace” (Vale . . . unica quies mea)” when she ends with “Farewell my one salvation”, (Vale unica salus mea). (Chiavaroli and Mews, 227). See Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 121.

⁴⁵ In Letter IV she begins: “To her only one after Christ, she who is his alone in Christ.” (Unico suo post Christum, unica sua in Christo). *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 61 (Radice, 63).

⁴⁶ Chiavaroli and Mews, 203.

as I live”,⁴⁷ and again in letter 9: “Nothing will ever be so laborious for my body, nothing so dangerous for my soul, that I would not expend out of care for you.”⁴⁸

As I have already suggested, it is in her extended reflection on love’s meaning in letter 25 that we find the key to her understanding of this connection between the general and the particular. It is worthwhile restating her position at this point. She suggests: “And even if we show perfect kindness to everyone, we still do not love everyone equally; and what is general for everyone is made particular for certain people.”⁴⁹ To reiterate and emphasise my earlier point universal charity, *caritas*, the general expression of the universal virtue of love, is compared to the particular expression, *speciale*, of that universal or general virtue, which is special for certain people.

In letter 76 Heloise uses the two phrases, “the complete love” (*dilectionis summam*) and “to make you my special beloved above everyone else” (*ut sis michi pre cunctis specialis dilectus*).⁵⁰ Here, as previously, she apparently understands her “particular” love within the realm of the general. As Mews suggests: “The distinction that she draws is between a general love for everyone, and a special love that is shared with a close friend rather than between two unique individuals.”⁵¹

Abelard notes that love is, indeed, “a universal thing” which makes two wills one thing, “without difference” (*indifferenter*).⁵² As already stressed, Abelard conceives of their love as two unique individuals loving. For Heloise, the emphasis is on the particularisation of the universal love for all, in other words, a *type* of the general. As we have already observed, at this stage of their relationship, Abelard also exhibits this same understanding of love in letter 24: “Know that although love may be a universal thing, it has nevertheless been condensed into so confined a place that I would boldly

⁴⁷ “Iocunde spei mee: fidem meam, et cum omni devocione meipsam quamdiu vivam”. (Chiavaroli and Mews, 193).

⁴⁸ “Nihil unquam erit tam laborisum corpori meo, nihil tam periculosum anime mee, quod tue non impendam caritati.” (Chiavaroli and Mews, 195).

⁴⁹ “Et nos licet omnibus integram caritatem exhibeamus, non tamen omnes equaliter diligimus, et ita quod omnibus est generale quibusdam efficitur speciale.” (Chiavaroli and Mews, 211). See n. 34.

⁵⁰ Chiavaroli and Mews, 257.

⁵¹ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 122.

⁵² See letter 24.

assert that it reigns in us alone – that is, it has made its very home in me and you.”⁵³ Heloise’s thinking is much larger and extended however. Her thinking images a body, expandable beyond considerations of *indifferenter*, and separateness in being.

In contrast Abelard can only reluctantly and hesitantly, include his corporeal self in the love letter correspondence. Responding to her first letter he replies in letter 2 with an affirmation of her uniqueness, “To the singular joy and only solace of a tired mind”,⁵⁴ yet he is only able to offer himself, body and soul, “so far as he is able”.⁵⁵ The subtle difference in language is notable here: she *is* his in “heart and body”; he is hers, only “*in so far as he is able.*” Although this could, of course, be interpreted as a statement of excess, it can equally, and I would suggest more consistently be interpreted as a qualification on Abelard’s part. Whereas Heloise needs no qualification in expressing her relationship to Abelard, I am suggesting that there is a more cautious and guarded modification in his own articulation of the relationship.

Mews notes that in the ending to her greeting in letter 21, “being which she is”, (*esse quod est*), Heloise is “offering her own being”.⁵⁶ Abelard, on the other hand, in his reply of letter 22, addresses his “intention”. Mews argues that Heloise uses the language of “intention” in her letters also, but in a manner which embraces one’s entire “inner identity”.⁵⁷ Heloise’s language is thus incorporative. Abelard’s position vis-à-vis intention, on the other hand, is related to his use of words. He says nothing of his being: “To others I address my words, to you my intention.”⁵⁸ Heloise’s understanding of the ethics of pure, disinterested or selfless love, and her positioning of the body, stands in stark contrast to the somewhat incomplete embodiment in Abelard’s articulation. The aspect of the body signals the very possibility of the experience of true love for Heloise. For Abelard it would appear to remain “a stumbling block”.⁵⁹

⁵³ “Scias quia licet res universalis sit amor, ita tamen in angustum contractus est, ut audacter affirmem eum in nobis solummodo regnare, in me scilicet et in te domicilium suum fecisse.” (Chiavaroli and Mews, 209). See n. 30.

⁵⁴ “Singulari gaudio et lassate mentis unico solamini.” (Chiavaroli and Mews, 191).

⁵⁵ “quid amplius quam seipsum quantum corpore et anima valet.” (Chiavaroli and Mews, 191).

⁵⁶ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 121.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 132. Heloise uses the more typically traditional monastic terms *intentio mentalis* and *intentio cordis* to describe her inner disposition. See letters 88, 102 and 104.

⁵⁸ “Ad alios verba, ad te intencionem dirigo.” (Chiavaroli and Mews, 205).

⁵⁹ See I Corinthians 1:23.

This reality becomes even more marked after Abelard's castration, his symbolic disembodiment as it were, where in the later correspondence, he seems to be simply incapable of entering into a conversation with Heloise which includes a discussion of love and the body at the same time – as if the two were incongruous terms to him. As Irvine claims: “For Abelard, the male body is only a shell for the masculine intellect and the wholeness of one's mind and soul transcends the physical state of the body.”⁶⁰ *Amor* and *dilectio*, bodily passion or desire and the intention of true love, are not and probably never were compatible expressions in Abelard's mode of thinking as they were for Heloise.

The Later Letters: *Suo specialiter, sua singulariter.*⁶¹

This theme of the integrated self as essentially embodied also runs throughout the later correspondence where Heloise refuses to leave her bodily reality, her feminine body, out of any of her discussions on the nature of her relationship with Abelard. This is evident on both the personal level, as vividly and explicitly expressed in Letters II⁶² and IV⁶³, and communally as is evidenced, in what has been previously understood by many writers as a change of topic, in Letter VI.⁶⁴ Here, following the theme of sexual difference, it is the body of the community, a feminine body, on which Heloise now focuses in her extended commentary on the suitability of the Rule of Benedict for a women's community, a rule written by a male to a male community.

⁶⁰ Martin Irvine, "Abelard and (Re)Writing the Male Body: Castration, Identity, and Remasculinization," *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, The New Middle Ages 4 (New York: Garland, 1997), 101-102.

⁶¹ “To him who is especially hers, she who is uniquely his.” *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 88 (Radice, 93).

⁶² For example: “you [Abelard] the sole possessor of my body and my will alike” (*te tam corporis mei quam animi unicum possessorem*). *Ep.* 2, Hicks, 49. (Radice, 51).

⁶³ For example, “Sometimes my thoughts are betrayed in a movement of my body.” (*Nonnumquam etiam ipso motu corporis animi mei cogitationesprehenduntur*) *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 66. (Radice, 68).

⁶⁴ For example, Radice's division of the letters, following that of Muckle, that is, *Personal Letters* and *Letters of Direction*, implies a change in topic. See Betty Radice, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* ed. Clanchy Michael (London: Penguin, 2003). Gilson makes the point that, “Urged by Abelard to adopt an attitude towards God more in conformity with her state, she [Heloise] prefers to *change the topic*; for as long as Abelard was there, it would be quite impossible for her not to start in all over again.” See Etienne Gilson, *Heloise and Abelard* (Chicago: University of Michigan Press, 1982 (1960)), 101-2. (My emphasis) More recently, McCracken suggests that, “Heloise abandons the passionate speech of desire that characterizes her first two letters.” She states that this letter marks a discontinuation in the tone of the previous exchange, “one unrelated to the love story and its aftermath.” Although she also notes that there is relationship in these letters that indicates a continuation, she suggests that the tone differs. See McCracken, "The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter," 217. I am suggesting that it is not so much the tone that has shifted, as the breadth of body incorporated into her rhetoric in this third letter.

As Georgianna asserts: “she [Heloise] seems to be speaking specifically of those who fail to attend to the original text of the Rule”⁶⁵, just as Abelard fails to attend to the body. The realisation of this pattern of thought comes to its climax in Heloise’s more mature writings, that is, in these three letters of the later correspondence.

In her first two letters, Heloise continually moves back and forth through the psychological dimensions of her own personal body to that of the needs of the community, the communal body, in her search for an adequate symbolisation of an integrated and authentic sense of the self. Even the nature of Heloise’s greetings to Abelard, which begin each of her letters, as I will demonstrate, establishes the various bodies through which she identifies herself personally in relationship to Abelard and to God.

Heloise’s understanding of the communal body remains singularly feminine and, as such, embodies both its weakness and its possibility as frankly articulated in Letter VI. This fundamental weakness of the communal body is exemplified in its leader, its abbess, who holds the place of Christ in the community: “He [the abbot/abbess] is believed to represent Christ in the monastery, for he [she] is called by his name.”⁶⁶ Heloise’s own personal and “embodied” desire becomes the central theme of the community’s own search for its humanity and its God. Her obsession with the body, understood within a post-modern framework, unmasks a profound eschatological longing.⁶⁷

Again her preference in vocabulary moves freely between the particular and the general expression of relationship yet, understood from the perspective of the body, there is a distinctive movement towards a fullness, or more aptly, an excess of embodiment in these three letters.

⁶⁵ Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," 194.

⁶⁶ “Christi enim agere vices in monasterio creditur, quando ipsius vocatur pronomine.” RB 2:2 (Kardong,

⁶⁷ On this issue, note the work of Sarah Coakley, "The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God," *Modern Theology* 16.1 (2000): 61-73.

Letter II

Heloise understands herself as both especially related to Abelard, as wife, that is, her particular embodiment, and at the same time, as generally related through her monastic position, as daughter to the founder of her community. She makes this explicit in her first greeting in Letter II, her response to the narrative of his *Historia calamitatum*. She greets Abelard thus: “To her lord or rather father, to her husband or rather brother, his servant or rather daughter, his wife or rather sister, to Abelard Heloise.”⁶⁸ When we focus our attention on the role of the body, this greeting is constructed so as to present a finely balanced analysis of how Heloise understands her fully embodied female identity regardless of the particular context in which she may find herself, whether that of the particular lover or the monastic lover. As before, in her earlier letters, she oscillates between expressions of the most particular and the more general. This thesis is in direct contrast to Mews who suggests that Letter VI’s greeting, “is carefully constructed so that she begins with the most general and concludes with the most particular”⁶⁹. However, if we take careful note of the position of the body, the opposite is evident, for example, she moves from her particular understanding of her bodily relationship to Abelard as her lord and husband to the more general form of her newly incorporated monastic body where Abelard, as founder of the community of which she is head, is both her father and brother.⁷⁰ This is the tension that she continues to live under and refuses to deny or dissolve into some idealised and disembodied understanding of the human condition. It is precisely this tension that is creative of her humanity and her community, an especially female humanity and community, as she continues to articulate it. As Ruys asserts, what scholars have previously assumed is that: “Heloise is first a scholar, then a mother, then wife, nun and finally abbess – without acknowledging that a woman can be several, if not all, of these at once and, more importantly, can continue to hold

⁶⁸ “Domino suo, immo patri; conjugii suo, immo fratri, ancilla sua, immo filia; ipsius uxor, immo soror, Abaelardo Heloysa.” *Ep.* 2, Hicks, 45 (Radice, 47).

⁶⁹ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 122.

⁷⁰ Mews suggests some indistinctness here when he points out “the ambiguities in their relationship, moving towards an ever more intimate address.” See *Ibid.*, 123. As indicated above, this appears to be reading the greeting as a whole rather than in its particular movements from one expression of being to another. I am suggesting the relationship expressed here is not at all ambiguous to Heloise, but rather intentional in her quest to honestly identify herself and her relationship to Abelard.

multiple roles through her life.”⁷¹ As the letters progress, this tension, as we will discover, is subtly brought to a climax and fulfilment in Letter VI.

As noted earlier, Mews maintains that Heloise wants Abelard “to address her not just in general terms, but as an individual”,⁷² and this is particularly notable in her use of *unicus*, which mimics Abelard’s earlier use of the term in his love letters to her. Certainly, she does pick up on Abelard’s use of *unicus*. She ends this first letter with “*vale unice*” (Farewell my only one)⁷³. But in the light of what she is doing with *specialiter* throughout all her letters, and her particular avoidance of *singulariter*, would it not be more consistent to understand what she is doing as pointing to her desire to be considered, as always, particularly, not simply uniquely, as he had once recognised her? The male friend addressed in the *Historia calamitatum* is related to in a “special way”, that is, a particular way, the particularity of the male body, which poses no threat to Abelard’s own particularity as they share a “logic of the same”.⁷⁴ Heloise wants this same sense of equality, this particularity with him in her difference as a female body not in sameness, and this is reflected in the movements within her greeting.⁷⁵

Letter III

In Abelard’s Letter III, he indicates to Heloise what he understands as his proper relationship to her when he greets her thus: “To Heloise, his beloved sister in Christ, Abelard, her brother in the same.”⁷⁶ His love for her can now only be situated in Christ, the universal love, but within this love he can no longer enter into what he once understood as an embodied uniqueness and it is here that his own philosophical

⁷¹ Juanita Feros Ruys, "Genre, Gender and Authenticity: Readings of Heloise in the Twentieth Century," unpublished doctoral thesis, (University of Sydney, 1999), 73.

⁷² Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 123.

⁷³ See, *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 53 (Radice, 55).

⁷⁴ Luce Irigaray discusses this concept in detail in relation to women’s subjectivity and male discourse in Chapter 1 of Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Irigaray notes that in human speech there is an identifiable history of “the moment to speak of the ‘other’ in a language already systematized by/for the same.” 139.

⁷⁵ Mews indicates this when he says: “Her emphasis on *unicus* has a particular significance in the light of the love letters. This was a favorite term of the man to describe his beloved’s uniqueness . . .” In letter *110*, “he addresses her as *Unice sue*. By repeating *unice* at the beginning and end of her first response to the *Historia calamitatum*, Heloise was signaling her desire to return to the intimate dialogue that Abelard had once lavished on her in the past.” See Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 123.

⁷⁶ “Heloise, dilectissime sorori sue in Christo, Abaelardus, frater ejus in ipso.” *Ep. 3*, Hicks, 54 (Radice, 56).

position with respect to universals seems to fall apart. Now her role as wife can only be in the context of prayer and disconnected from her bodily concerns. Extending Benedict's command at the beginning of his monastic Rule,⁷⁷ Abelard disconnects the body from the heart, he pleads: "Listen, I beg you, with the ear of your heart to what you have so often heard with your bodily ear."⁷⁸ This universal form of love, which he focuses on here, has no particular expression and cannot therefore have a unique dimension. As such, he will not, indeed cannot, enter into any discussion that focuses on the special nature of their love, that is, the embodied expression of their relationship. Once Abelard understands himself as having no sexed body, no particular body, that is metaphorically at least, due to his castration, it appears that he thinks he can ignore or at least negate the validity of embodied love for himself and those whom he believes should also transcend this materiality of the body. His concern seems to be now with the soul alone: "at present you are over-anxious about the danger to my body, but then your chief concern must be for the salvation of my soul".⁷⁹ Their bodies are now, or at least should be, wholly in Christ (and an immaterial Christ at that) and their particular relationship dissolved into this over-riding reality.

With Abelard's focus totally on this spiritual embodiment, particular incorporation can only be considered sinful. His is a "conversion" from the world to God, from the body to the spirit, a position that is dangerously dualistic in its implications and theologially puts into question the significance of the scandal and "stumbling block" of the God who chose to become incarnate. He considers Heloise particular needs as not pertaining to God and identifies her as: "my sister once dear in the world and now dearest in Christ".⁸⁰

In his earlier love letter 24, Abelard greets Heloise with: "To a soul brighter and dearer to me than anything the earth has produced, the flesh which that same soul

⁷⁷ See RB Prol. 1: "Listen, O my son, to the teachings of your master's, and turn to them with the ear of your heart" (Obsculta, o fili, praecepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui.) Both the critical Latin text and English translation of the Rule of Benedict are taken from Terrence Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 3. Henceforth, Kardong.

⁷⁸ "Exaudi, obsecro, aure cordis, quod sepius audisti aure corporis." *Ep.* 3, Hicks, 57 (Radice, 59).

⁷⁹ "que nunc de corporis mei periculo nimia sollicitudine laboratis, tunc precipue de salute anime" *Ep.* 3, Hicks, 60 (Radice, 62).

⁸⁰ "soror in seculo quondam cara, nunc in Christo karissima." *Ep.* 3, Hicks, 54-55 (Radice, 56).

causes to breathe and move: what ever I owe her through whom I breathe and move".⁸¹ Here at this early stage of their relationship, body and soul still form, to some degree at least, a considered whole.⁸² The priority of soul over body, however, becomes more obvious in his later letters. When there is no problematic flesh to speak of, no flesh that is not within the control of the will, as is the case through Abelard's castration, there is no need or desire or passion in his understanding of himself and thus, no desire for Heloise's enfleshed being, whose soul had previously caused his "flesh to breathe and move". Metaphorically, his body no longer breathes and moves at all, he is alive only in Christ. As Mews states: "The model of friendship that he puts forward in that narrative [*Historia calamitatum*] is predicated on an assumption that he had transcended his sexual identity"⁸³ – a position that continues in his subsequent letters. By implication, Abelard has, thus, transcended his body which is integral to sexual identity. His identity now lies in "using superior intellect, the power of dialectic, and written discourse as the ultimate tools of masculine power and self-definition."⁸⁴ Theologically, it would seem that, at least in Abelard's thinking that to be alive in Christ necessarily requires one to be dead to the world of the body and its desires, that is, to renounce the body.

There is not this inherent dichotomy in Heloise's thinking between her relationship with God and her relationship with Abelard. Indeed, there is little overt sense of any operative dualism. Her body is always included, even if negatively, in her considerations of her relationship with both Abelard and God. Her problem, or rather her uniqueness, lies in the fact that she cannot, and will not, perceive of one without the other.

Letter IV

Heloise's response to this letter calls Abelard's attention to that "rhetoric of individuality"⁸⁵ in which he was once able to indulge: "To her only one after Christ,

⁸¹ "Anime qua nec candidius, nec michi carius terra protulit, caro quam eadem anima spirare facit et moveri: quicquid ei debeo per quem spiro et moveor." (Chiavaroli and Mews, 209)

⁸² Of note is the use of the passive, "moveri" and "moveor" by Abelard in this letter, indicating that such is the connection between body and soul that Abelard's flesh is the object of Heloise's force. I am grateful to Juanita Feros Ruys for this insight.

⁸³ Mews, "Philosophical Themes in the *Epistolae duorum amantium*," 36.

⁸⁴ Irvine, "Abelard and (Re)Writing the Male Body." 102.

⁸⁵ This is Mews' label for the quality of their rhetoric. See Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 120-21.

she who is his alone in Christ”.⁸⁶ Yet she does not suggest any contradiction between her identity in Christ and her unique relationship to Abelard. By bringing into a creative harmony his own concept of singularity and being in Christ, Heloise does not avoid the issue of their essential embodiment. In the recognition of the tension that exists between one’s being in Christ, the universal dimension of human existence which clearly takes priority, and her particular and unique relationship to Abelard within this universal – his “alone in Christ”, Heloise does not have to deny, transcend or spiritualise away her embodied self. Mews confirms this analysis when he notes: “She [Heloise] accepts that her relationship with him is in Christ, [the universal for love] but she wants to communicate with him as an individual, [in a special way, yet within the orbit of this greater love] the way he used to speak to her.”⁸⁷

It is in this fourth letter that Heloise most vividly locates the importance of her body in their relationship, a position that is often viewed as scandalous in the light of her role as a renowned and loved Benedictine abbess of the day.⁸⁸ But it is important that this material be read in the light of the principle that she has set up in the greeting that begins the letter, as expounded above. Heloise sets forth an honest admission of her body with its desires and struggles to come to terms with the absent body of Abelard and within her present context as a monastic woman. In her laments and desires, her arguments against marriage, her disparaging analysis of women through salvation history and castigation of herself as conforming to this history and consequently, living a life of hypocrisy, what appears to be most important is that she means to establish the central place of the body in her authentic identity as both lover of Abelard and lover of Christ as articulated in her greeting.⁸⁹

Heloise admits to recognising Abelard’s own disembodiment, but not her own: “This grace, my dearest, came upon you unsought – a single wound of the body by freeing

⁸⁶ “Unico suo post Christum, unica sua in Christo.” *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 61 (Radice, 63).

⁸⁷ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*. 123. The inserts are my own. Mews also maintains that: “Heloise brought more than her memories with her when she came to the Paraclete in 1129. She brought with her a record of the intense exchange of messages that they had shared in the past . . . she was forcing Abelard to remember a collection of texts which he had effectively erased from his conscience when writing the *Historia calamitatum* . . . she is reminding Abelard that he was once fascinated by the rhetoric of individuality, and that he has an obligation to consider Heloise not just as spiritual daughter, but as a separate person.” 124.

⁸⁸ Newman discusses these positions thoroughly. See Barbara Newman, “Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloise.”

⁸⁹ I will analyse this important aspect of Heloise’s thinking more fully in a Chapter Four.

you from these torments has healed many wounds in your soul.”⁹⁰ To admit the same conversion process for herself would be a denial of the very essence of her reality, a denial, as it were, of her difference and her body.

Letter V

Abelard’s inability and refusal to enter into, or understand Heloise’s position, her difference, becomes even more evident in Letter V. For Abelard there is *no* body to speak about other than the total renunciation of the body following traditional arguments. Talk of the body is only undertaken metaphorically. He understands the body as Augustine did, that is, as something to be brought under the control of the will. As Augustine explains:

[M]an himself also may have once received from his lower members an obedience which he lost by his own disobedience. It would not have been difficult for God to fashion him in such a way that even what is now set in motion in his flesh only by lust should have moved only by his will.⁹¹

Hence, Abelard’s reply to Heloise fails to come to terms with the embodied nature of humanity.

In this letter he greets her now as before in Letter III, in pointedly general terms, “To the Bride of Christ, the servant of the same”.⁹² In this letter he exegetes the black woman in the Song of Songs, positing her not as a female body but as a feminine ideal. As such he successfully articulates a spiritualising of Heloise’s body through metaphorical use of language, demanding her submission to disembodiment, and in so doing effectively dissolves the significance of her body.⁹³ His own physical description of the Ethiopian bride in the Song of Songs functions more to support his metaphorical use of the physical rather than to provide any sort of support for material reality. As McCracken explains: “the black monastic habit that she [Heloise] wears, like the bride’s black body, identifies the soul that renounces the world and seeks a

⁹⁰ “Hec te gratia, karissime, prevenit, et ab his tibi stimulis una corporis plaga medendo, multas in anima sanavit.” *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 67 (Radice, 69).

⁹¹ “Sic ergo et ipse homo potuit oboedientiam etiam inferiorum habere membrorum, quam sua inoboedientia perdidit. Neque enim Deo difficile fuit sic illum condere, ut in eius carne etiam illud non nisi eius uoluntate moueretur, quod nunc nisi libidine non mouetur.” *De Civitate Dei, XIV 24, 20-24*, *CCSL*, 48. The English translation is from *Augustine: City of God*, trans. H. Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 588.

⁹² “Sponse Christi, servus ejusdem.” *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 76 (Radice, 72).

⁹³ McCracken, “The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise’s Third Letter,” 218-20.

contemplative life.”⁹⁴ The importance of transcendence of the body rather than any recognition of its integration into the spiritual life is again to the fore in Abelard’s thinking.

Letter VI

Letter VI of the main correspondence contains the climax of Heloise’s arguments. Here she further unveils her understanding of her relationship to Abelard in comparison with how he perceives it, or more properly, does not perceive it. She achieves this with her deliberate and continuing preference for this specific terminology which focuses on the particularity of her relationship with Abelard and which is in continuity with the terminology of the earlier love letters. Her greeting, as previously noted, is as follows: “To him who is especially (*specialiter*) hers, she who is uniquely (*singulariter*) his”.⁹⁵

As Mews points out, “While both St. Bernard and Hato of Troyes (Heloise’s bishop and a good friend of Peter the Venerable) use *specialis* and *singularis* effectively as synonyms”⁹⁶, nevertheless, *singularitas* was particularly understood in a pejorative sense in the monastic environment at this time. To be “singular” was an indication that the vice of pride was lurking in behaviour of the monastic. As Ineke van’t Spijker points out: “Bernard of Clairvaux’s *De gradibus humilitatis*, a comment on the steps of humility of the Rule of Benedict which treats the steps of pride as well, makes this abundantly clear: *singularitas* is the fifth step on a downward way.”⁹⁷

In terms of Heloise’s preference for *specialiter*, Mews notes that, “Heloise seems to draw a deliberate contrast between how she saw Abelard as “specially hers,” while in his eyes she was “singularly his.”⁹⁸ Accordingly, her preference and her contrasting usage is simply a reminder to Abelard that there is a difference in the understanding

⁹⁴ Ibid., 219.

⁹⁵ “Suo specialiter, sua singulariter.” *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 88 (Radice, 93).

⁹⁶ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 122.

⁹⁷ Ineke van’t Spijker, *Fictions of the Inner Life: Religious Literature and Formation of the Self in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Disputatio, 4 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004), 12.

⁹⁸ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 122. It must be remembered here that Peter the Venerable will later recognise the significance of Heloise’s embodied arguments when he returns the body of Abelard to her on his death and acknowledges their relationship in the particular, as husband and wife. See *Letter 115 of The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, ed. Constable, Giles, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 203ff. Henceforth, Constable. (Radice, 277).

they have of one another.⁹⁹ Heloise has conceded no ground to Abelard in this greeting, maintaining her insistence on her particular relationship with Abelard in her use of *specialiter*, while reminding him of his own earlier vocabulary for identifying her.

When we read the context of the rest of this letter, however, we are able, in the light of this greeting, to appreciate the extent of the contrast she is trying to express. By the time Heloise writes Letter VI, her focus on her body's involvement in their relationship has been transfigured. In her rhetoric, the boundaries of her body are now extended as she metonymically, rather than metaphorically, expands her being into that of the body of the community, sacrificing nothing of herself but incorporating a plethora of meaning into her own self-understanding and that of her community.¹⁰⁰ This communal body is the whole focus of her dialogue with Abelard in this letter. Far from capitulating to Abelard's demands that she no longer try to dialogue with him on the level of intimacy which she had been desiring in her previous two letters,¹⁰¹ Heloise again refuses to leave her understanding of the importance of the body, the basis of this intimacy in her relationship with Abelard, out of her continuing dialogue with him. She does not concede any ground to Abelard's limited perspective on the level of their bodily relationships, so vividly and honestly expressed in her earlier letters. This is not a shift in topic on the part of Heloise as has been noted previously,¹⁰² rather it is a *metonymic* expansion of context. Instead of changing voice or shifting topic, Heloise exerts an even greater force and emphasis to her previous rhetoric so as to create an enlarged meaning behind her arguments.¹⁰³ In this Letter VI, she present an argument which constitutes the universal view of the body in her textual transfiguration into the body of her female monastic community.¹⁰⁴ Although McCracken claims that: "She [Heloise] describes her submission to Abelard's

⁹⁹ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 122.

¹⁰⁰ Note my explanation of this term metonymy on p. 28-29.

¹⁰¹ Many writers has suggested that this letter reveals an Heloise who has failed to draw Abelard into a discussion of their previous relationship, that she has given in to his demands to remain silent on all her personal angst regarding their relationship. See Newman, "Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloise," 74, and Peggy Kamuf, *Fictions of Feminine Desire*.

¹⁰² See n. 64.

¹⁰³ Although Georgianna also holds this position she suggests that this is a shift in topic on Heloise's part. See Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life." Glenda McLeod maintains that Heloise changes voice from that of a "wife" to that of a "spiritual daughter or disciple." See McLeod, "Wholly Guilty, Wholly Innocent," 75.

¹⁰⁴ See Ward, "Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ."

instruction with a metaphoric division of her body, opposing the voice of the heart to the writing of the hand”,¹⁰⁵ it is evident that Heloise continues to write with the heart of the communal body in this metonymic shift.

This transfiguration is not articulated as the traditional spiritualised transformation through renunciation of the body with which Abelard concerns himself,¹⁰⁶ a renunciation which demands of Heloise that she be “*plus quam femina*” (more than woman),¹⁰⁷ in a conversion that negates sexual difference. Transfiguration refers to the radical “in-corporation” of the believing subject who will not be, in Heloise’s own words, “*nec plusquam Christianae*” (more than Christian).¹⁰⁸

Heloise has never left this dimension out of any of her later letters, and it is particularly obvious in Letters II and IV where the universal dimension of her feminine body in the context of her community is never absent.¹⁰⁹ But now it is wholly to the fore in her arguments with Abelard in the light of this perspective. Her oft-quoted phrase taken from Cicero: “As one nail drives out another hammered in”,¹¹⁰ is not an indication of her submission but directly related to this enlarged understanding of the self and the body. The “withdrawal” of one body, her particular body, incorporates her into her universal expression of body. In other words, she moves prophetically towards an expanded and more general “Body”, of which she is the special *type*. Heloise is not merely the voice of the individual, but that of the body, the female body together with the body of her community.

Though Heloise has not been able to make Abelard acknowledge her individuality, which he once admitted in the context of his embodied being, this has actually not been her task. What she has failed to do, in fact, is to persuade Abelard to come to understand the principles of her fundamental philosophical, and more particularly, her

¹⁰⁵ McCracken, “The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise’s Third Letter,” 218.

¹⁰⁶ Peggy McCracken identifies this renunciation using the language of abjection. See Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ See *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 82 (Radice, 84).

¹⁰⁸ See *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 93 (Radice, 98).

¹⁰⁹ Powell also notes this simultaneous use of voices, “we” and “I” in Heloise’s letters. See Powell, “Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete: Of Scholarly Diversion and a Woman’s ‘Conversion,’” 259.

¹¹⁰ “Ut enim insertum clavum alius expellit.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 88 (Radice, 93). See Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes*, IV.75. Cicero, *Cicero on the Emotions: Tusculanae Disputationes 3 and 4*, trans. Margaret Graver (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

theological stance concerning the nature of the body. For Heloise, her body and the body of the her community are bodies that cannot be, and will not be left out of what she understands as her defining relationship, and her authentic identity, in the context of her love for him and for God.

Abelard's position concerning the concept of separate individuals without difference, as expressed in his earlier letters with the term *singulariter*, is incompatible with his concept of being in Christ. His recognition of the body in his Letter V is, as McCracken suggests, an acknowledgment of the material body only for the purpose of its abjection:

Abelard would suggest that Heloise renounce her body and its desire . . . Abelard *does* acknowledge and respond to Heloise's discourse of desire. Through the metaphor of the bride's body, he implicitly transforms the material body – Heloise's body – as a body to be abjected in order to find pleasure in the soul.¹¹¹

Because of Heloise's subtle use of the term *specialiter* in preference to *singulariter*, she is able continually to maintain the creative harmony of the particular and the universal so as never to by-pass the inclusion of her body and bodies in her rhetoric. To restate Mews' conclusion with this point in mind, "he [Abelard] has an obligation to consider Heloise not just as a spiritual daughter (in general), but as a separate person [or special one within this broader category.]"¹¹²

Heloise and Abelard seem always to be at cross-purposes in their use of language. Ultimately one has to question whether they in fact understood one another in this respect at least, or more to the point, whether or not Abelard grasped the complexity and subtlety of Heloise's theological stance vis-à-vis the body through her philosophical arguments in her use of terminology. I am attempting to posit this terminology as specifically located in women's speech.

Heloise finds it essential to hold both general and specific dimensions of being together at the same time, that is, as an integrated whole, in order to maintain her authentic identity in both her personal being and her communal identity. Abelard does

¹¹¹ McCracken, "The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter," 220.

¹¹² Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 124. The inserts are my own.

not seem able to live with the tension which this involves for him and thus works at avoiding a discussion of the issue. The tension Heloise lives with is the difference she perceives between herself and Abelard. It is a creative tension. His tension, because it is conceived of as disembodied, is unthinkable in its difference and must be resolved. It must be made into similarity, the mirror image of the self, that is, the mirror image of *his* self.

It is interesting at this point to reflect on how Heloise and Abelard came to be recognised in their positions by the monastic world of their time. Abelard was without doubt a failed monastic leader in nearly every respect. He admits all this himself in the *Historia calamitatum*.¹¹³ Indeed, Abelard never found his identity within the communal body – the social body, either that of the monastic world or the Church. As Irvine explains: “Abelard spent nearly two decades fashioning new images of wholeness, new substitutes for the social body he was never invited to rejoin.”¹¹⁴

Heloise, on the other hand, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the tension she held within her body and her relationship with Abelard, is recorded as a successful administrator of her monastic community. Not only this, but also six new foundations were accomplished under her direction; the Priory of St Madeleine of Trainel (c. 1142); the Abbey of La Pommeraye (c. 1147); The Priory of Lavel (c. 1154); the Priory of Noéfort (c. 1157); the Priory of St Flavit (c. 1157) and the Priory of Boran (c. 1163).¹¹⁵ Her community’s own documents, the *Institutiones nostrae*, also attest to this success:

Because the Lord was setting his gaze upon us, and bestowing upon us some places (= monastic sites) we sent off in sufficient number certain of our own to keep monastic observance. Now we are noting down the

¹¹³ Abelard was initially such a disruptive presence in his first community of St Denis, that the abbot isolated him in his studies. After further insulting the abbey by disputing the authenticity of its relics, he fled. Later he founded a community of scholars along monastic lines which had a dubious reputation in the wider religious world. He was made Abbot of St Gildas de Rhuys, where he tried to institute reforms which ended in the monks trying to poison him. He finally ended his days as a monk under the care of Peter the Venerable and his theological works were roundly condemned by the official Church. See Abelard’s own account in his *Historia Calamitatum*.

¹¹⁴ Irvine, "Abelard and (Re)Writing the Male Body," 102.

¹¹⁵ See Waddell, ed., *The Old French Paraclete Ordinary and the Paraclete Breviary*, 78.

customs of our fine program so that what the mother holds
unchangeably, the daughters too may hold uniformly.¹¹⁶

She was also a loved and admired abbess if we are to take seriously both what Abelard himself says in his *Historia calamitatum* and Peter the Venerable's comments about her in his letters to her. Abelard claims that: "And such favour in the eyes of all did God bestow on that sister of mine who was in charge of the other nuns, that bishops loved her as a daughter, abbots as a sister, the laity as a mother; while all alike admired her piety and wisdom and her unequalled gentleness and patience in every situation."¹¹⁷

To add to this, Peter the Venerable writes to her: "You have surpassed all women in carrying out your purpose, and have gone further than almost every man."¹¹⁸ Hugh Matel (ca.1080-ca.1150) extols the virtue of Heloise also: "the more she hid herself away in her enclosed cell to give herself more fully to holy prayers and meditations, the more ardently did outsiders seek out the advice of her spiritual conversation."¹¹⁹ And as Mews points out, her own community also left us evidence of her esteem in their epitaph to her:

In this tomb lies the prudent abbess Heloise;
She established the Paraclete, she rests with the Paraclete.
The joys of the saints are hers, beyond the height of the pole star.
May she raise us from the depths by her merits and prayers.¹²⁰

In her transfiguration into the body of the community, Heloise uses exactly the same arguments as she had done in her previous letters, concerning the ethics of intention, the struggle with the body, its feminine specificity and the need to recognise this

¹¹⁶ "Domino super nos prospiciente, et aliqua loca nobis largiente, misimus quasdam ex nostris ad religionem tenendam numero sufficiente. Annotamus autem boni propositi nostri consuetudines, ut quod tenuit mater incommutabiliter, teneant et filie uniformiter." *Institutiones II*. (Waddell, 9).

¹¹⁷ "Tantum autem gratiam in oculis omnium illi sorori nostre, que ceteris preerat, Dominus annuit, ut eam episcopi quasi filiam, abbates quasi sororem, laici quasi matrem diligerent; et omnes pariter ejus religionem, prudentiam, et in omnibus incomparabilem patientie mansuetudinem ammirabantur." *HC*, Hicks, 37 (Radice, 37).

¹¹⁸ "et mulieres omnes euicisti, et pene uiros uniuersos superasti." *Ep. 115* (Constable, 304). (Radice, 218).

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Constant. J. Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 12.

¹²⁰ "Hoc tumulo abbatissa
Paracletum statuit, cum Paraclito requiescit.
Gaudia sactorum sua sunt super alta polorum.
Nos meritis precibusque suis exaltet ab imis." See *Ibid.* 249.

body's relationship to Abelard on the level of *speciale*, but now her arguments are in the voice of *generale*. She *is* the communal body.

In this Letter VI, Heloise makes two requests from Abelard, both of which are simply the general form of the demands she had previously made to him in a particular context of her own bodily desire in Letters II and IV. Heloise had previously asked Abelard for some recognition of the history of their relationship, that is, the particular or special dimension of their embodiment held within their memory, their personal history. Now, as the communal body, she again asks for this same recognition in her request for a history of monastic women. Similarly, Heloise asks for recognition of the female body with her request for a Rule specifically engendered, that is, for the needs of women's bodies, the details of which she then proceeds to describe herself. This request is no more than the general form of the request that Heloise made previously for the inclusion of her particular feminine body and its needs within their own personal dialogue.

Heloise's demand for a feminine reading of the Rule of Benedict is simply a demand to be recognised for what she is, a feminine body in both its particularity and its general communal dimension. This body cannot be transcended and remains central to Heloise's "incarnational" speech. There is no giving way here to Abelard's disembodied and spiritualised focus. Heloise's body had been to the fore in the previous Letters II and IV although that of the community had never been insignificant. In this sixth letter, the withdrawal of her own body, her *speciale*, becomes complete. In this withdrawal, Heloise's body expands in order to emphasize the inherent difference in this body.

Heloise's main task in critiquing the Rule of Benedict in this context is a method for exploring the place of the body, the female body in particular, in relationship to other bodies, the monastic body and the body of its founder, Abelard. In this so-called critique of the Rule, Heloise again integrates intention with love as she had previously argued, but again, this time she uses her more universal voice. Love and intention are the object of the spiritual life, not mere law. In achieving this, spirit and matter

cannot be divided. The embodied condition, and in Heloise's case, the embodied female condition, must not be overlooked in the reading of the Rule:

We must therefore be careful not to impose on a woman a burden under which we see nearly all men stagger and even fall. We see that the world has now grown old, and that with all other living creatures men too have lost their former natural vigour: and, in the words of Truth, amongst many or indeed almost all men love itself has grown cold. And so it would seem necessary today to change or to modify those Rules according which were written for men in accordance with men's present nature.¹²¹

My analysis of her attitude towards this Benedictine Rule in relation to her position vis-à-vis the female body will be the subject of Chapter 5 of this thesis.

Conclusion:

What seems to be going on in all these letters between Heloise and Abelard is a contrast between the thinking of a "reasoning female body" and that of the traditional and dominant masculine voice of Abelard. By uncovering the voice of Heloise using the psycholinguistic philosophy of Luce Irigaray, the issue of "sexual difference" comes to the fore through the recognition of engendered language. Abelard's metaphorical approach to reading the body contrasts sharply with what can be identified as Heloise's move towards metonymy in her consistent use of the term *specialiter*. Metaphor suggests a sacrifice of meaning, and for Abelard the specificity of the body and its desires are to be sacrificed and substituted by a spiritualised being in Christ. For him, the universal form and the particular expression cannot exist together. There can be no "other", no unification for Abelard – he is castrated – he has lost the ability to move from the imaginary to the symbolic as the symbol is missing.¹²² Roscelin's own sharp-witted and cruel critique of Abelard and comment on his identity is worth quoting in full as it points to Abelard's position as it was perceived in his own time:

¹²¹ "Providendum itaque nobis est ne id oneris femine presumamus in quo viros fere jam universos succumbere videmus, immo et deficere! Senuisse jam mundum conspicimus, hominesque ipsos cum ceteris que mundi sunt pristinum nature vigorem amisisse, et juxta illud Veritatis, ipsam karitatem non tam multorum quam fere omnium refriguisse, ut jam videlicet pro qualitate hominum ipsas propter homines scriptas vel mutari vel temperari necesse sit regulas." *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 96 (Radice, 100-101).

¹²² Compare the Freudian/Lacanian view in Graham Ward, "Divinity and Sexuality: Luce Irigaray and Christology," *Modern Theology* 12.2 (1996): 222.

But, to be sure, you are lying that you can be called "Petrus" from conventional usage. I'm certain that a noun (*nomen*) of masculine gender, if it falls away from its own gender, will refuse to signify its usual thing. For proper nouns usually lose their signification when the things signified fall back from their own completion. A house is not called a house but an imperfect house when its walls and roof are removed. Therefore since the part that makes a man has been removed, you are to be called not "Petrus" but "imperfect Petrus". It is relevant to this heap of human disgrace because in the seal by which you seal your stinking letters you form an image having two heads, one a man and the other a woman . . . I have decided to say many true and obvious things against your attack, but since I am writing against an imperfect man, I will leave the work that I began incomplete.¹²³

Roscelin's rhetoric, philosophically drawing on the nominalism to which both he and Abelard adhere, points to the inadequacy of metaphorical symbolisation of a theological understanding of the body and its incorporation into the Body of Christ.

Abelard would later come to understand the position of Heloise's embodied stance. Though the development of Abelard's later thought is beyond the scope of this present study, it is worth noting that it is particularly in his series of six *Planctus*, the biblical laments which he wrote for Heloise's community, that we can detect the influence of Heloise on his thinking in this regard. As Ruys has pointed out in her study of these laments, Abelard comes to, "a striking, and surprisingly modern, resolution of the relationship between biological sex, social gender, and human sexuality."¹²⁴

For Heloise, the fact of the body and its symbolic reality remains in all its frailty, its struggle and desire. Nothing can be sacrificed if identity is to remain authentic and subjectivity achieved. It is in the specificity of the body, be that a male body, a female

¹²³ "Si igitur neque clericus neque laicus neque monachus es, quo nomine te censeam, reperire non valeo. Sed forte Petrum te appellari posse ex consuetudine mentieris. Certus sum autem, quod masculini generis nomen, si a suo genere deciderit, rem solitam significare recusabit. Solent enim nomina propria significationem amittere, cum eorum significata contigerit a sua perfectione recedere. Neque enim ablato tecto vel pariete domus, sed imperfecta domus vocabitur. Sublata igitur parte, quae hominem facit, non Petrus, sed imperfectus Petrus appellandus es. Ad huius etiam imperfecti hominis ignominiae cumulum pertinet, quod in sigillo, quo foetidas illas litteras sigillavit, imaginem duo capita habentem, unum viri, alterum mulieris, ipse formavit. Unde quis dubitet, quanto adhuc in eam ardeat amore, qui tali eam capitum coniunctione non erubuit honorare? Plura quidem in tuam contumeliam vera ac manifesta dictare decreveram, sed quia contra hominem imperfectum ago, opus quod coeperam imperfectum relinquo." *Ep.* 10, PL 178:371-372. English translation: Irvine, "Abelard and (Re)Writing the Male Body," 91-61.

¹²⁴ Juanita Feros Ruys, "Ut Sexu Sic Animo," 1.

body or even a castrated body, that one comes to the authentic expression of full humanity, that is, the general or universal form. Metonymy suggests “a fertile proliferation of meaning”¹²⁵ rather than sacrifice, where desire can continue to be expressed through the body and in relation to other bodies. It is in her use of *specialiter* that this desire is implicitly verbalised.

In the monastic tradition to which Heloise belongs, far from there being an outright denial of the body, there was an understanding that the body played a vital role in bringing the spirit to a single-hearted focus on God. I intend to discuss this aspect of the body in the monastic tradition in detail throughout this thesis.

The belief of the earliest desert monastics was that under the harsh discipline of the desert the body returned to its primordial pureness, that is, the condition in which Adam and Eve first existed. Brown describes this position as follows:

... the body had acted like a finely tuned engine, capable of “idling” indefinitely. It was only the twisted will of fallen men that had crammed the body with unnecessary food, thereby generating in it the dire surplus of energy that showed itself in physical appetite, in anger, and in the sexual urge. In reducing the intake to which he had become accustomed, the ascetic slowly remade his body.¹²⁶

This “remade body”, or transfigured body, was identified as a body renewed in conformity with the resurrected body of Christ.¹²⁷ Yet in the prototype of the solitary monk of monasticism, Antony of Egypt (251-356CE), we find that this remaking of the body was not apart from other bodies. In the *Apothegmata Patrum* Antony insists that: “Our life and our death is with our neighbour,”¹²⁸ that is, with other bodies. The Body of Christ is a corporate body, not an individual body, even for the Christian hermit.

¹²⁵ Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 33.

¹²⁶ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Lectures on the History of Religion, vol. 13 (New York: Faber, 1991), 223. The record of this transformation of the body is pervasive in the desert literature, for example, “They said of Abba Pambo that he was like Moses, who received the image of the glory of Adam when his face shone. His face shone like lightning and he was like a king sitting on his throne” (Dicebant de abbate Pambo: Sicut Moyses accepti imaginem gloriae in Adamo refulgentis, quando facies ejus gloriosa reddita est; ita et abbatis Pambo facies velut fulgur relucebat, eratque tanquam rex sedens super thronum suum). *Abba Pambo*, #12, PG 65. (CS 59, 197).

¹²⁷ See Brown, *The Body and Society*, 224.

¹²⁸ “A proximo pendet vita et mors.” *Abba Antoni*, # 9, PG, (CS 59, 3).

The Rule of Benedict moves from a focus on the ascetic training of the individual body in virtue in chapters 1-7, beginning with an address to the individual monk: “Listen, O my son to the teaching of your master, and turn to them with the ear of your heart”,¹²⁹ and ending with the description of the monk who is perfectly integrated, body and soul: “The twelfth step of humility is achieved when a monk’s humility is not only in his heart, but is apparent in his very body to those who see him.”¹³⁰ The Rule then turns our attention to the incorporated body in the working out of the details of the communal pattern of life (See RB 8-70). Finally the concern is for the corporate eschatological body journeying towards its final destiny who is Christ: “Let them prefer absolutely nothing to Christ, and may he lead us all together to everlasting life.”¹³¹ We recognise here, “a body longing for transformation (or more aptly, transfiguration) into the divine”¹³², that is, a body yearning for completion in the “Other” and attaining this completion with others.

Read so often from the perspective of only the individual male body, this incarnational theology has come to be understood as requiring a resistance to the body in the language of sacrifice, or renunciation of the body and its desires.¹³³ Shaped by some of the more negative anthropology of Augustine, for example, the emphasis on the symbolism of the “male body” of Christ has done violence to the graced nature of the female body. In traditional teaching, as Penelope Deutscher explains: “to the extent that a woman identifies with her body, she identifies herself with non-godliness, and only by transcending her own physical being can she attain to the image of God . . . Godliness would involve women keeping distance from themselves.”¹³⁴ As such, the perspective and voice of women and their distinctive bodies are often still barred from dialogue concerning the practical and structural working out of the faith in our times.

¹²⁹ “Obsculta, o fili, praecepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui” RB Prol. 1 (Kardong, 3).

¹³⁰ Duodecimus humilitatis gradus est si non solum corde monachus sed etiam ipso corpore humilitatem videntibus se semper indicet.” RB 7:62 (Kardong, 134).

¹³¹ “Christo omnino nihil praeponant, qui nos pariter ad vitam aeternam perducat.” RB 72:11-12 (Kardong, 588).

¹³² Coakley, “The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God,” 64.

¹³³ I will further analyse this tradition in the next chapter.

¹³⁴ Deutscher, *Yielding Gender*, 145.

How, then, is Heloise's "incarnational language" of significance in our continual quest to understand ourselves in relation to each other and to our God? Can Heloise still speak to us as a subversive voice which puts into question the inhospitable atmosphere that can surround Christianity with its latent dualisms and repressive attitudes towards sexuality in particular and women in general? Can Heloise's language help us to renew our interpretation of the Christian faith so as to reinvigorate its original transformative message in order that we no longer fear one another, male and female, in our difference? Or has Christianity, as Irigaray claims, "repressed the transformative potential of the story of the incarnation by denying its central message about the fertile marriage between word and flesh, man and woman, nature and divinity"?¹³⁵

The event of the Incarnation, God's in-corporation into the human condition in the person of Jesus Christ, marks the fundamental intimacy of God's relationship to humanity. In this event of the word becoming flesh, our essential embodiment is not sidestepped but entered into fully by the divine. As Heloise refuses to leave her body out of her dialogues with Abelard, God refuses to leave our embodiment behind in God's ultimate and definitive communication with us in the person of Jesus Christ. There is no refusal, on God's part, in this act of self-giving love, to relate to us as embodied beings. This radical Christian doctrine of the incarnation demands an end to dualistic thinking and a recognition of the divine within all aspects of our particular being, spirit and body, man and woman, nature and God, without the negation of difference.¹³⁶

For Heloise, *specialiter* identifies the specific or particular nature of one's love. All Christians are commanded to love all, *caritas*. (See John 13:34) But we do not leave the body behind when we love. We love with and in our bodies, just as God loved us with and in a body, the body of Christ: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" John 1:14 (See John 3:16). Heloise implicitly articulates this necessity, this scandal of the incarnation, when she uses the term *specialiter* to describe the particular way in which we express this general command to love, and when she does this, she combines the language of embodied love, *amor*, with the pure intention to

¹³⁵ See Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 38.

¹³⁶ See Paul's position on the body and dualism in both I Cor. 12 and Gal. 3:28.

love, *dilectio*. This is the function of her “engendered” language, a language that combines rather than substitutes or represses. Of note is the fact that in Abelard’s later writings for Heloise’s community, he seems to have picked up her vocabulary to some extent. In a hymn purported to be by Abelard, *Lux orientalis*,¹³⁷ he describes Mary as “*amica Dei specialis*” (the special friend of God).¹³⁸ As Stone notes: “The interaction between the writings of Abelard and Heloise is an outcome of their continuing relationship and their reflection on each other’s words.”¹³⁹ Indeed, it appears that subtly, Heloise is correcting Abelard’s theological position through her own unique use of Latin vocabulary.

In her distinctive use of *specialiter*, Heloise constructs a language for understanding the place of the female body in a manner that questions the traditional dichotomising of matter and spirit and the spiritualising of love, which can so often negate women’s bodies and the place of sexuality in our spiritual endeavours. In her privileging of the body, Heloise does not need to overcome her sexual identity to maintain her desire for union with Abelard or God. This aspect of desire will be discussed further in the next two chapters. It is precisely within her sexual identity, that is, as particularly herself, that Heloise’s existence and meaning resides. She then moves to extend this difference by focusing on the sexed nature of her communal body.

Bynum discusses the position of women vis-à-vis their sexed nature in the spirituality of the high Middle Ages. She notes that the literature of the patristic era, through the early Middle Ages, reveals stories and images of women attempting to transcend their “weak nature” and metaphorically claiming a male identity. The Middle Ages however, claimed the “weak nature of women” as a positive metaphor through which the human person, male or female, comes into relationship with God.¹⁴⁰ Heloise does not simply enter into this rhetoric, but insists on maintaining her distinctive female

¹³⁷ *Lux Orientalis* attribution to Abelard is disputed by some scholars. See for example, Julie Barrow, Charles Burnett, & David Luscombe, "A Checklist of the Manuscripts Containing the Writings of Peter Abelard and Heloise and Other Works Closely Associated with Abelard and His School", *Revue d'histoire des textes* 14/15 (1984/1983), 183-302.

¹³⁸ Quoted in Deirdre Stone, "Heloise: La très Sage Abbess of the Paraclete," 21. See also D. Luscombe, "Peter Abelard and the Poets," *Poetry and Philosophy in the Middle Ages: A Festschrift for Peter Dronke (Mittellateinische Studien und Texte 29)*, ed. John Marenbon (Leiden/Boston/Cologne: Brill Academic Publishers, 2001), 156.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ See Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 138.

status, and that of her community, throughout her letters refusing to be “more than woman”.

Heloise’s position is a theological reading of the body which argues that to be incorporated is to be expanded as body, to be a social body, to be the Body of Christ, and not to be disembodied, simply a separated or singular individual. In fact, to speak of oneself as if disembodied would be a denial of the centrality of the Incarnation in the Christian endeavour.¹⁴¹ As Gregory of Nyssa asserted early in Christian history: “that body to which immortality has been given by God, when it is in ours, translates and transmutes the whole into itself.”¹⁴² Heloise’s textual transfiguration into the body of her community symbolises and reclaims this radical understanding of the nature of Christian bodies and female bodies in particular. Heloise offers an apt theological challenge to the fact that the female body still remains a “stumbling block” to the Church and a “scandal” to men in our times.¹⁴³

Read and heard so often through the meta-narrative of patriarchal dominance, the gendered voice of Heloise can be obscured. Read differently, that is, in dialogue with modern feminist analyses which enable us to see the “language of the gaps”, this voice of Heloise helps us recognise a different path to understanding our humanity in Christ, one in which the female body can now remain authentically itself, one that is specifically inclusive of the body, be that body male or female.

¹⁴¹ See 1 Cor. 10-13 which is a theological exposition on the nature of the Christian body.

¹⁴² Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, 37, quoted from Ward, "Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ," 179.

¹⁴³ Paul’s insistence on the crucified body of the Christ as, “a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles” (I Cor. 1:23) still calls out to a world that cannot see the significance of the body of a woman, “a stumbling block to the Church and foolishness to the men”.