

Chapter 3:

“Desire”: The Language of Desire in the Feminine

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

Introduction:

If Heloise’s own personal and “embodied” desire becomes the central theme of the community’s own search for their humanity and their God, as I have maintained,² then where does Heloise’s understanding of “desire” in the spiritual journey fit into the Christian tradition? The concept of “desire” elicits a variety of reactions when spoken of, particularly in relationship to theological principles of Christian living and spirituality. Desire can have both positive and negative connotations. In traditional Christian thinking one can legitimately focus one’s desire on God to be sure, however, worldly desires, particularly related to the body, are ultimately considered base and removed from the ultimate goal of human longing.

When we investigate the concept of “desire” in relation to Heloise and her writings we are faced with many puzzling and problematic questions and conclusions.³ Here

¹ “and what is general for everyone is made particular for certain people.” letter 25. (Chiavaroli and Mews, 211)

² See Chapter 2, p. 41

³ See Suzanne Wayne, "Desire in Language and Form: Heloise’s Challenge to Abelard," *Translating Desire in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, 294, eds. A. Berry and Heather R. Hayton, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* 294 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 89-107.

is a woman who seems to have let loose her desires with unbridled passion. Here is a Christian, whose desire seems to be clearly other than for God. Here is a renowned monastic leader whose desire seems no less than publicly scandalous and far from edifying. Here is a twelfth-century woman who does not fit comfortably into the traditional model of a redeemed and repentant “fallen woman”.⁴ Given such obvious ambiguity and seeming contradiction, is it worthwhile analysing Heloise’s writing a little more closely in terms of her position vis-à-vis desire? As Mews asserts in relation to her first letter, “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 I propose to read Heloise’s letters in a different way altogether, through the lens of embodiment, in order to see if the voice of this famed abbess of the twelfth century does contain a deeper clarity. Can we uncover the justification for her acclaim as an extraordinary woman, Christian and religious leader of history, whose voice still reveals to us a deeper understanding of the human person in our own day and age?⁶

Once again, I want to approach the reading of the correspondence of Heloise and Abelard by employing the perspective of the body as articulated by Luce Irigaray. In this chapter I will focus on Heloise’s distinctive use of language through her focus on the theme of “desire”. Heloise’s refusal to erase the concepts of essential embodiment and sexual difference⁷ throughout her dialogue with Abelard is maintained through the creation of a space for the language of desire in contrast to Abelard’s emphasis on the more traditional language of renunciation. I will argue

⁴ This tradition goes back to the gospel stories of Mary Magdalene which became increasingly popular in the Middle Ages, influenced by the writings of Gregory the Great who identified her as both saint and sinner: “She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears . . . For every delight, therefore, she had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance, for as much as she had wrongly held God in contempt.” See *Hom. XXXIII*. PL 76:1239, quoted in Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (Hammersmith, London: HarperCollins, 1993), 96. Abelard uses the theme in his letter to Heloise concerning the history of religious women. He calls Mary Magdalene the “blessed harlot” (*beate meretrici*) See *Ep 7*, Hicks, 146. (Radice, 128).

⁵ Constant Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 152.

⁶ Christopher Baswell, “Heloise,” *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, eds. Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 161-171.

⁷ By using the term “essential” embodiment and sexual difference, I am drawing on Irigaray’s position vis-à-vis the nature of the feminine body. Serene Jones has classified Irigaray’s philosophy as falling within a “strategic essentialism”, a position that takes account of both the constructivist and purely essentialist positions. See Serene Jones, “Divining Women: Irigaray and Feminist Theologies,” 42-48.

that space created by Heloise's language of desire is located in Heloise's understanding of her essential embodiment, an embodiment that is, and remains, undeniably female.

Irigaray asserts that, in Western culture at least, woman and femininity have been defined within the framework of masculine discourse: "Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks."⁸ This "master" discourse is structured on metaphoric symbolisation, a symbolisation that implies a sacrifice and repression of meaning and sets up the danger of a system of inherent dualities. Irigaray explains this from the perspective of the masculine understanding of the body throughout history:

In the system of production that we know, including sexual production, men have distanced themselves from their bodies. They have used their sex, their language, their technique, in order to go further and further in the construction of a world which is more and more distant from their relation to the corporeal. But they are corporeal. It is necessary therefore for them to reassure themselves that someone (a woman) is indeed the guardian of their body for them.⁹

The language of denial and renunciation in Christian spirituality is central to this thinking. In contrast to this perspective, feminine discourse is marked, as indicated in the previous chapter, by metonymy, a symbolisation process that both integrates and harmonises.¹⁰

Irigaray suggests that this feminine desire is to be found in a yet-to-be-claimed language that retrieves the body, a different body, the body of the female, autonomous in its own right, and not considered simply from the perspective of masculine discourse or even primarily from simply a biological perspective. As I have explained earlier, the body here refers to its articulation at every level: psychic, social, religious as well as biological.¹¹ In Irigaray's own very poetic mode of expression, feminine discourse must discover its own identity:

⁸ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 25.

⁹ Luce Irigaray, *Le Corps-à-Corps avec la Mère* (Montréal: Les Editions de la pleine lune, 1981), 83-4. quoted in Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 118.

¹⁰ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 24. See also my discussion in Chapter 2, p. 28.

¹¹ See Chapter One.

If we don't invent a language, if we don't find our body's language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story. We shall tire of the same ones, and leave our desires unexpressed, unrealized. Asleep again, unsatisfied, we shall fall back upon the words of men – who, for their part, have 'known' for a long time. But not our body. Seduced, attracted, fascinated, ecstatic without becoming, we shall remain paralyzed. Deprived of our movements. Rigid, whereas we are made for endless change. Without leaps or falls, and without repetition.¹²

From a feminist perspective, then, the language of desire, which has been assessed so often in the negative by patriarchal definitions and symbolisation in both philosophy and theology, can be freed from these masculine constraints:

Let us say that every dichotomising – and at the same time redoubling – break including the one between enunciation and utterance, has to be disrupted. Nothing is ever to be posited that is not also reversed and caught up again in the supplementarity of this reversal . . . Linear reading is no longer possible: that is, the retroactive impact of the end of each word, utterance or sentence upon its beginning must be taken into consideration in order to undo the power of its teleological effect, including its deferred action.¹³

Once this is achieved through the appreciation of the symbolic nature of feminine discourse, the concept of desire can be legitimately in-corporated into the story of women's subjectivity and women's spirituality in the Christian tradition. It is this in-corporation of desire that we discover in the re-reading of Heloise's letters.

I will argue that Heloise's language of desire is an attempt to speak from this position of her own body, a different body. It is a legitimate language of desire in the feminine, and parallels a position of bodily dependency through the creation of a space, and therefore a language for this integrative feminine desire. Heloise's "language of desire" is directly and deliberately connected to her unique position with regard to the significant role of the female body as subject, in contrast to object, in establishing one's authentic identity and relationship with, and in, other bodies. Though she rarely speaks concretely of the nature of "desire" itself with the traditional Latin term, *desiderium*, Heloise's writings are marked by the implicit desire that embraces every level of her longing.

¹² Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 214.

¹³ *Ibid.* 79-80.

Etienne Gilson asserts that, “[Eros] is a body-centred love marked by a yearning, a pushing and pulling toward erotic mutuality, a movement toward embodied justice.”¹⁴ Heloise’s body-centred language yearns for and pushes towards this same “erotic mutuality” in her dialogue with Abelard. This rhetorical push is played out in a movement of “embodied justice” which oscillates between Heloise’s individual identity and the identity of the community of which she is head. Heloise’s love develops in and through this desire for justice, not just for herself as subject, but for her female monastic community as subject.

This “body” of the community, and Heloise’s own body remain fundamentally female bodies throughout her discourse with Abelard. There is never any attempt to escape or transcend this difference in sexual identity on the part of Heloise.¹⁵ It is the stress on this essential “difference” that marks her writing and her desire. As a medieval woman, steeped in Christian principles, Heloise creates a space for the language of “desire” that is fundamentally a theological reading of the human person, and specifically, the female human person. Graham Ward describes this concept of difference and its relationship to desire in terms of its theological foundation:

Only where there is space, where there is distance, where there is *difference* can there be love, which *desires*, which draws, which incorporates . . . the doctrine of creation is founded upon a fundamental difference in which desire and love can operate . . . In the beginning God created a process of separation . . . Desire is built, then, into the substructure of creation; and, in that, creation is an image of *desire and difference* within the Trinity itself.¹⁶

¹⁴ Anne Bathurst Gilson, *Eros, Breaking Free: Interpreting Sexual Theo-Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1995), 110.

¹⁵ It should be noted that this idea of transcending sexual identity, particularly for women, has had a long history in the Christian monastic tradition. A good summary of the early tradition can be found in John Anson, "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif," *Viator* 5 (1974): 3-32. Hildegard of Bingen, a contemporary of Heloise, never suggests this position as, in a politically astute move, she ubiquitously uses a particular formula concerning herself, “*ego pauperula feminae forma*” (I a poor little form of a woman) as her signature humility motif and in a rather ironic twist, she claims that it is the men of her age who have become effeminate and it is this fact that has necessitated her speaking. Deirdre Stone suggests that Hildegard, “the mouthpiece of God, could have no concept of herself as an accessory to any earthly man.” See Stone, "Heloise: La très Sage Abbess of the Paraclete," 20. Peter the Venerable uses this language of transcending the female condition in his own praise of Heloise. He says of her: “You have surpassed all women in carrying out your purpose, and have gone further than almost every man.” (tu illo efferendo studio tuo, et mulieres omnes euiciti, et pene viros uniuersos superasti) *Ep.115*, Constable, 304. (Radice, 218).

¹⁶Graham Ward, "Divinity and Sexuality: Luce Irigaray and Christology," 228-29. Emphasis added.

In the light of this fundamental theological principle that posits a God who is relational by nature, it is possible to construct a theological understanding of women's desire in terms of an essential "difference" in the perception of the body. This perception focuses on embracing the body in the spiritual journey rather than its traditional denial or renunciation. It is precisely in longing, in desire, that the feminine finds her voice in order to speak of love which enables true and authentic subjectivity for women and as a consequence the possibility of fully entering into relationship with a God who is love. 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 Vocabulary of Desire and Renunciation in Christian Spirituality:

From Gregory the Great, dubbed the Doctor of Desire, and Benedict of Nursia, father of the monastic tradition that Heloise and all in her day inherited, to Heloise's contemporary, Bernard of Clairvaux, the theme of desire has had a somewhat ambiguous position in the development of Christian spirituality. As already indicated, desire is to be unbridled in relationship to God, yet eradicated with respect to all else other than God. As a consequence of this eradication, desire's focus has often lead to a separation of God's position vis-à-vis humanity with the desire for God so elevated that it becomes totally alienated, detached and unrelated from earthly desires. Earthly desires are considered base and distracting from our primary desire, which is the love of God. In desiring to love God alone, one must renounce all other earthly and bodily loves. Gregory the Great, the exponent *par excellence* of desire in the history of spirituality,¹⁷ spoke in terms of "spiritual desire", a desire that transcends the corporeal realm and exists entirely through the spirit (*animus/mens*), setting up a polarisation between the body and the spirit:

There is a great difference, dear brothers, between the pleasures of the body and those of the heart. Bodily pleasures set alight a strong desire when they are not possessed, but when he who has them partakes of them, he becomes satiated and tires of them. On the other hand, spiritual pleasures are tiresome when they are not possessed, when they are

¹⁷ Jean Leclercq dubbed Gregory, the "Doctor of Desire". See J. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993), 25.

possessed they cause greater desire. He who partakes of them hungers for more, and the more he eats the hungrier he becomes.¹⁸

This position of polarisation makes abundant use of the language of “renunciation” which is never more evident than in the early monastic texts where it becomes the language that identifies the primary task in the monk’s spiritual journey towards single-hearted love of God. The evolution of the word *monk* comes from the Greek *monache/monachos*, meaning single, and in its origins included men and women.¹⁹ The application of this word and its forms comes from the Greek *monos*. To spiritual seekers it implied a “single-focus” for life. All that distracts one from this “monastic” endeavour, including the body, is to be eliminated from the monk’s focus. John Cassian devotes an entire chapter of both his *Conferences* and *Institutes* to this theme. In Book III of the *Conferences*, entitled *De tribus abrenuntationibus (On the three renunciations)*, this concept is clearly articulated when he records Abba Paphnutius as saying:

Now something must be said about the renunciations which the tradition of the fathers and the authority of Holy Scripture show to be three and which each one of us ought to pursue with all our zeal. The first is that by which in bodily fashion we despise all the wealth and resources of the world. The second is that by which we reject the erstwhile behavior, vices and affections of soul and body. The third is that by which we call our mind away from everything that is present and visible and contemplate only what is to come and desire those things that are invisible.²⁰

¹⁸ “Hoc distare, fratres charissimi, inter delicias corporis et cordis solet, quod corporales deliciae cum non habentur grave in se desiderium accendunt, cum vero habitae eduntur comedentem protinus in fastidium per satietatem vertunt. At contra spirituales deliciae cum non habentur in fastidio sunt, cum vero habentur in desiderio; tantoque a comedente amplius esuriuntur, quanto et ab esuriente amplius comeduntur. In illis appetitus placet, experientia displicet: in istis appetitus vilis est, et experientia magis placet. In illis appetitus saturitatem, saturitas fastidium generat; in istis autem appetitus saturitatem, saturitas appetitum parit. Augent enim spirituales deliciae desiderium in mente, dum satiant, quia quanto magis earum sapor percipitur, eo amplius cognoscitur quod avidius ametur. Et idcirco non habitae amari non possunt, quia earum sapor ignoratur. Quis enim amare valeat quod ignorat.” *Homilia XXXVI*, PL 76, 1266A-B. The English translation is taken from Michael Casey, *The Undivided Heart: The Western Monastic Approach to Contemplation* (Petersham: St. Bede's Publications, 1994), 46.

¹⁹ See “Monastic Terminology: Monk, Cenobite, Nun”, in Timothy Fry, ed., *RB 80: The Rule of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981), 301-321.

²⁰ “Nunc de abrenuntiationibus disserendum est, quas tres esse patrum traditio et scripturarum sanctarum demonstrat auctoritas, quasque unumquemque nostrum omni studio oportet implere. Prima est qua corporaliter uniuersas diuitias mundi facultatesque contemnimus, secunda qua mores ac vitia affectusque pristinos animi carnisque respicimus; tertia qua mentem nostram de praesentibus uniuersis ac uisibilibus euocantes futura tantummodo contemulamur, et ea quae sunt inuisibilia concupiscimus.” *Conl. 2. VI*, SC 42:149. The English translation is taken from: *John Cassian: The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Newman Press, 1999), 123. Henceforth, Ramsey. The translation of Cassian’s *Institutes* is taken from: *John Cassian: The Institutes*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Newman Press, 2000).

The visible material world is simply considered a distraction from this primary task of the monk. Again, in the fourth book of the *Institutes*, *De institutis renuntiantium* (The institutes of the renunciants), the rejection of the world and its delights is made manifest in the task set before the monk on the lips of Abba Pinufius:

Beware, then, lest you ever again take up any of those things that you have renounced and put aside, or, against the Lord's prohibition, be found to have turned away from the field of gospel labor and to have clothed yourself in the garment that you had stripped yourself of, or turn to the base and earthly lusts and pursuits of this world and, against Christ's command, descend from the heights of perfection and dare to take something of what you renounced and rejected.²¹

To be fair to Cassian, although he does use this language of renunciation, read carefully, his *Institutes* and *Conferences*, in the last analysis, are not in any way intended to bring about a polarisation of body and soul. On the contrary, for Cassian, everything matters in the monk's journey toward God, even his clothing,²² and that is precisely why everything interior and exterior to the monk must be directed towards this one goal. It is in this humble stance before everything that the monk discovers his true identity in relation to the other, indeed, his subjectivity before the Other, who is God.

However, the language Cassian uses still invites an emphasis on metaphors of sacrifice and repression over and above than that of integration and incorporation:

he [the monk] should also be aware that in this very piece of clothing – his belt – there is no small mystery impinging upon him. For girding his loins and encircling himself with dead skin means that he is bearing about the mortification of his members, which contain the seeds of wantonness and lasciviousness, and he always understands that the gospel precept which declares “Let your loins be girt” pertains to him by way of the apostolic interpretation, namely: “Put to death your members that are on earth – fornication, impurity, wantonness, evil desire.”²³

²¹ “Caue ergo ne quid aliquando eorum resumas, quae renuntians adiecisti, et contra interdictum domini de agro euangelicae operationis reuersus inueniaris tunica tua qua te spoliaueras reuestiri, neue ad humiles terrenasque mundi huius concupiscentias ac studia reuoluaris, et contra Christi mandatum de perfectionis tecto descendens tollere aliquid praesumas ex his quae renuntians abdicasti.” *Inst.* 4: XXXVI. CSEL 17:73 (Ramsey, 98).

²² The first book of the *Institutes* is titled: *De habitu monachorum* (The Garb of the Monks),

²³ “secundo cognoscat etiam in ipso habitu cinguli inesse non paruum quod a se expetitur sacramentum. accinctio enim lumborum et ambitus pellis emortuae significat eum mortificationem circumferre membrorum, in quibus libidinis atque luxuriae seminaria continentur, euangelicum illud mandatum quod dicitur sint lumbi uestri praecincti apostolica interpretatione ingeri sibi semper intellegens:

Benedict, in his little Rule for monks, also uses this language of renunciation and denial. The Prologue of the Rule states: “Now then I address my words to you: whoever is willing to renounce self-will, and take up the powerful and shining weapons of obedience to fight for the Lord Christ, the true King.”²⁴ Though using this language, Benedict, who was profoundly influenced by Cassian’s spirituality, is not rigidly focused on denial of the body. His program for monks is one of “seeking God”²⁵ and is primarily about the formation of loving relationships in community. In his chapter on humility, although it is filled with the language of sacrifice and denial, he uses the image of the monk as a ladder, the sides of which are composed of the body and the soul. When these are brought together with the rungs of humility, the monk’s ladder, his entire self, is formed and reaches to that “perfect love of God that casts out all fear.”²⁶ Benedict offers an integrative programme that helps the monk discover his true identity before God and honestly accepts his position vis-à-vis others. The body is not cast aside, rather, one cannot reach the love of God without body and soul integration.²⁷ This image of the body and soul as a ladder, conforms more to the model of metonymy than that of metaphor, that is, it incorporates symbols rather than replacing one with another. And Benedict’s final exhortation is one that sees the individual monk and the community coming to an all-embracing love of the Other:

They should bear each other’s weaknesses of both body and character with the utmost patience. They must compete with one another in obedience. No one should pursue what he judges advantageous to himself, but rather what benefits others. They must show selfless love to the brothers. Let them fear God out of love. They should love their abbot with sincere and humble charity. Let them prefer absolutely nothing to Christ, and may he lead us all together to everlasting life.²⁸

Benedict also uses the language of desire. Nevertheless, this desire is often placed in a negative light. Desire has to do with either our own wanton desires or

mortificate scilicet membra uestra quae sint super terram, fornicationem, inmunditiam, libidinem, concupiscentiam malam.” *Inst.* 1:XI. CSEL 17: 15-16 (Ramsey, 26).

²⁴ “Ad te ergo nunc mihi sermo dirigitur, quisquis abrenuntians propriis voluntatibus, Domino Christo vero regi militaturus, oboedientiae fortissima atque praeclara arma sumis.” RB Prol. 3 (Kardong, 3).

²⁵ See RB 58:7. Benedict’s position vis-à-vis the body will be discussed in Chapter Five.

²⁶ “ad caritatem Dei perveniet illam quae perfecta foris mittit timorem” RB 7:67 (Kardong, 135).

²⁷ This theme will be taken up in detail in the next chapter.

²⁸ “id est ut honore se invicem praeveniant, infirmitates suas sive corporum sive morum patientissime tolerant, oboedientiam sibi certatim impendant; nullus quod sibi utile iudicat sequatur, sed quod magis alio; caritatem fraternitatis caste impendant, amore Deum timeant, abbatem suum sincera et humili caritate diligant, Christo omnino nihil praeponant, qui nos pariter ad vitam aeternam perducatur.” RB 72:4-12 (Kardong, 588).

alternatively with our spiritual desires. In Benedict's Rule the weight is very much on desire as a negative term, particularly if it is not associated with spiritual longing. *Desiderium* is used negatively nine times in the rule (See RB 1:8; 4:46, 59; 5:12; 7:12, 23, 24 and 31; 43:19 and 49:7) and twice it is used with *concupiscere*. (See RB 4:46 and 7: 25) It is used positively only three times, twice in relation to spiritual desire (See RB 4:46 – here with *concupiscentia*; 49:7) and once in relation to a cleric's desire to join the monastery (See RB 60:8). In this language worldly desires are not seen to benefit the monk's desire for God in any overt way.

Bernard, a master of spiritual writing in the medieval era and who could aptly be given the title the "Doctor of Love" in Church tradition,²⁹ also writes about how one comes to love God through this language of desire. Again, in accordance with Benedict's vocabulary, the term is positive or negative depending on the object to which it refers.³⁰ Desire is not evil in and of itself, but if its object is "evil, illicit, carnal or worldly"³¹ it is an obstacle to spiritual growth, for only the soul is the privileged site for loving God. Bernard, in a language reminiscent of Platonic or Neoplatonic thought, claims that:

For the love by which one loves spiritually, whether its object is God, or an angel, or another soul, is truly and properly an attribute of the soul alone. Of this kind also is the love of justice, truth, goodness, wisdom, and the other virtues. But when a soul loves – or rather yearns for – anything of a material nature be it food, clothing, property, or anything else of a physical or earthly nature that love is said to pertain to the flesh rather than to the soul.³²

Though the body plays a functional part in this quest, the recognition of the body's intimate or essential involvement in the love of God is ambiguous in Bernard's

²⁹ Jean Leclercq notes that "In the twelfth century a whole new secular and religious literature developed, which was devoted to a study of human feelings, especially love. . . The greatest of these writers is Bernard of Clairvaux." See, Leclercq, "Introduction," *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Writings*, trans. G. R. Evans, The Classics of Western Spirituality. (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 14.

³⁰ See Michael Casey, *Athirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermon on the Song of Songs*, CS 77 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988), 65.

³¹ See Ibid.

³² "quod vere et proprie ad solam pertineat animam illa dilectio qua aliquid spiritualiter diligit, verbi gratia Deum, angelum, animam. Sed et diligere iustitiam, veritatem, pietatem, sapientiam virtutesque alias, eiusmodi est. Nam cum secundum carnem quippiam diligit, vel potius appetit, anima, verbi gratia cibum, vestimentum, dominium, et quae istiusmodi sunt corporalia sive terrena, carnis potius quam animae amor dicendus est." *Sermo 75*, SBO 2:252, 11-1(CF 40, 105).

thought. Disconnecting the role of the body from that of the soul, he states that, “It is not with the steps of the feet that God is sought but with the heart’s desires.”³³

Nevertheless, Bernard’s thought is still very much in harmony with Ward’s contention that desire is built into the fabric of creation itself by God’s very desire for us.³⁴ Bernard remarks that, “His desire gives rise to [creates] yours.”³⁵ However, in spite of the erotic language that marks the “Song of Songs” and Bernard’s equally erotic language in his commentary on it, this desire is on the whole still only encumbered and distracted by the body. That the desire of, and for the body or things of the world should be seen as an obstacle to desire for God is a product of an undeniable disdain and mistrust of created reality and particularly of the body’s ability to enter into divine activity in and of itself.

Nevertheless, it would be simplistic and a serious misreading of Bernard to suggest that he has a thoroughly negative view of the body or that his motif of desire results in a disembodied love of God. He does admit the body’s usefulness to the soul’s journey to God: “Therefore our souls have need of a body. Without it we cannot attain to that form of knowledge by which alone we are elevated toward the contemplation of truths essential to happiness.”³⁶ However, this purely utilitarian value that is placed on the body is hardly a celebration of the intrinsic value of our created and material being and by no means equivalent to the value Bernard places on the soul.³⁷ Body and soul are not the integrative unit that we discover when we listen carefully to the voice of Heloise. For Bernard, in spite of the fact that the “Word”, that is, Christ himself took on the body out of love for humanity, the priority of the soul over the body is always paramount: “If therefore this quality of life is the prerogative of the Word, by reason of the perfection of its nature, life is the prerogative of the soul because of its natural

³³ “Non pedum passibus, sed desideriiis quaeritur Deus.” *Sermo 84*, SBO 2:303, 12-16 (CF 40, 188).

³⁴ See n. 16.

³⁵ “Illius namque desiderium, tuum creat.” *Sermo 57*, SBO 2:123, 11 (CF 31, 101).

³⁶ “Habet igitur necessarium corpus spiritualis creatura quae nos sumus, sine quo nimirum nequaquam illam scientiam assequitur, quam solam accepit gradum ad ea de quorum sit cognitione beata.” *Sermo 5*, SBO 1:21, 21-22 (CF 4, 25).

³⁷ It is, of course, important to understand Bernard’s use of *anima* in this respect. See Michael Casey’s summary, in Casey, *Athirst for God*, 67 and his footnote 8.

affinity to the Word.”³⁸ The desire of the body, and the world must therefore be renounced for the greater end which is charity:

you will soon be able to guard your love against carnal desires which war against the soul and I think you will not find it a burden to share with those of your nature that which you have withheld from the enemy of your soul. Then your love will be sober and just if you do not refuse your brother that which he needs of what you have denied yourself in pleasure. Thus carnal love becomes social when it is extended to others.³⁹

It is true Christian *caritas* that Bernard envisages as the product of our desire for God. As Casey states, “He [Bernard] did not develop his doctrine as a private anthropological indulgence, but rather as a basis on which to build sound moral teaching.”⁴⁰ So it is that Bernard’s understanding of desire naturally finds expression through the practice of Christian charity: “If God is to be sought through good works, then while we have time let us do good to all men, all the more because the Lord says clearly that the night is coming when no-one can work.”⁴¹ Yet doubtless in this move the body is, at least linguistically, left behind and not incorporated into one’s love for others.

Ultimately, Bernard affirms the transformation and glorification of the body elevated in its participation in the Resurrection:

And if we shall have been found to be humble, we too shall blossom as the lily, and bloom for ever before the Lord. Will he not truly and in a special way reveal himself as the lily of the valley when “he will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into copies of his glorious body”?⁴²

³⁸ “Ergo si Verbi est illud propter sublimitatem, hoc animae propter similitudinem, salva quidem eminentia Verbi, palam est affinitas naturarum, palam animae praerogativa.” *Sermo 81*, SBO 2:285, 4-7 (CF 40, 158).

³⁹ “paulisper suspendere non gravaris amorem tuum a carnalibus desideriiis, quae militant adversus animam, sane quod subtrahis hosti animae tuae, consorti naturae puto non gravaberis impertiri. Tunc amor tuus et temperans erit, et iustus, si quod propriis subtrahitur voluptatibus, fratris necessitatibus non negetur. Sic amor carnalis efficitur et socialis, cum in commune protrahitur.” *de diligendo Deo*, SBO 3:139, 7-12. (CF: 13B, 26).

⁴⁰ Casey, *Athirst for God*, 84.

⁴¹ “Quod si per bona opera quaeritur Deus, ergo dum tempus habemus operemur bonum ad omnes, praesertim quia Dominus aperte praenuntiat venire noctem, quando nemo potest operari.” *Sermo 75*, SBO 2:249 (CF 40, 100-101).

⁴² “Et si humiles inventi fuerimus, germinabimus et nos sicut liliam, et florebimus in aeternum ante Dominum. Annon vere vel tunc maxime se “liliam convallium” comprobabit, cum reformabit corpus humilitatis nostrae, configuratum corpori claritatis suae?” *Sermo 47*, SBO 2:66, 28-67, 1-3 (CF 31, 9).

In the last analysis however, it is a disembodied mind or a spiritualised soul that desires and longs for God alone. The longing and urges of the body signify only base desires and must therefore be controlled and ordered, rather than read as the pathways that can lead to the same spiritual desire and discovery of God. Hence, the traditional language of renunciation marks the soul's desire in Bernard's quest for perfect love of God: "Rightly, then, does she [the soul] renounce all other affections and devote herself to love alone."⁴³ It is worth noting here that Bernard follows the traditional convention of identifying the soul as feminine. With such use of language one can be left wondering at the significance and radicality of this Christian God. Rather than renouncing the body and materiality, this God, in an act of love for the world, chose intimacy with humanity and the world through the incarnational event of Jesus Christ himself.⁴⁴

It is the language of "renunciation" and its inherent psychological dynamics that is at issue here, not so much the fundamental basis underlying the concept itself. Renunciation basically involves the denial of self in preference for the other/Other. It aims at the expansion of the heart and the capacity to love the other/Other. It is a renunciation that leaves the subject with only one object of desire, the desire for God, but it is a renunciation that symbolises "sacrifice and repression" rather than a language which might "integrate and harmonise". The questions remain: Is this the language of masculine discourse, a metaphorical discourse that excludes the subjectivity of women? Is it possible to escape that "linguistic dilemma" that exists between "both Godhead and the beloved, both the religious and the erotic experience"⁴⁵ as described by Albrecht Classen in his discussion of love in the Middle Ages? Is there another language that incorporates the metonymical dimensions of feminine discourse as yet undiscovered or unveiled? Can this "single-hearted" focus on the desire for God be expressed in language other than renunciation?

⁴³ "Merito cunctis renuntians affectionibus aliis soli et tota incumbit amori" *Sermo* 83, SBO 2:302,1 (CF 40, 185),

⁴⁴ See John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

⁴⁵ Albrecht Classen, ed., "Introduction", *Words of Love and Love of Words in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 12.

For Heloise, one does not have to renounce one's bodily and earthly desires to focus on God. On the contrary, one has to incorporate them, admit them honestly and direct them towards love of the other/Other. As I will demonstrate, Heloise cannot desire God apart from the incorporation of her earthly desires. Our attitude to theological desire can be creatively remodelled by Heloise's insights and attempts at feminine discourse. This insight into the connection between worldly and spiritual desire is asserted by moral theologian Peter Black, in his discussion on the nature of Eros:

“As if desire is our enemy, instead of the eradicable force that binds us to the world.” I am certain that the part of us that desires, that loves, that longs for encounter and connection – physical and psychic and every other way – is also the part of us that knows something about God.⁴⁶

It is my contention that the dichotomy between the so-called “worldly desires” and our innate desire for the divine, dangerously lurking in the language of renunciation, is exposed by the language that incorporates and harmonises desire and the body, the immanent and the transcendent, in the letters of Heloise of the Paraclete.

The Vocabulary of Desire in Heloise's Love Letters:

In the early love letter collection there is little doubt that the theme of desire permeates the motivation behind the writing. Indeed, the whole purpose of these letters is both to express the desire the writers have for each other, and to fuel that desire also.⁴⁷ Both Abelard and Heloise use the terms *desiderium* or *cupio* throughout their exchanges in this collection.⁴⁸ However, there is a distinctive contrast between them concerning just what is actually desired of each other and in what context.

Heloise's desire is expressed directly in Letter 9:

I wish and eagerly desire that by exchanging letters according to your bidding, the heartfelt friendship (*amicicia*) between us may be strengthened until that exceedingly happy day shines on me when I shall see your face, the desire of all my prayers. Just

⁴⁶ Peter Black, "The Broken Wings of Eros: Christian Ethics and the Denial of Desire," *Theological Studies* 64.1 (2003): 106.

⁴⁷ See John O. Ward and Neville Chiavaroli, "The Young Heloise and Latin Rhetoric: Some Preliminary Comments on the "Lost" Love Letters and Their Significance," *Listening to Heloise*, 57.

⁴⁸ Note: *Desiderium* can be found in letters, 9, 23, 24, 25, 39, 45, 46, 47, 49, 53, 56, 59, 69, 70, 79, 86, 88, 89, 98, 112. *Cupio* is used less often and found in letters, 12, 25, 64, 49, and 109.

as the weary desire shade and the thirsty long for water, so I desire to see you.⁴⁹

Heloise's use of *amicitia* has been fully discussed by Mews. He maintains that she translates the traditional Ciceronian understanding of the love and friendship (*amor* and *amicitia*) that can exist in an ideal relationship between men, to what she herself desires with Abelard. Mews concludes that: "Her desire is for a relationship of full equality, a goal that proves ultimately beyond his capacity."⁵⁰

Furthermore, and directly related to the task she has in her later letters, Heloise's desire is clearly set within the context of religious language. Her desire for Abelard is clearly God-given and expressed without any hint of inhibition. letter 23 is a good example of this:

For I often come with parched throat *desiring* to be refreshed by the nectar of your delightful mouth and to drink thirstily the riches scattered in your heart. What need is there for more words? With God as my witness I declare that there is no one in this world breathing life-giving air whom I desire to love more than you.⁵¹

There is no separation from God in Heloise's desire for Abelard. And yet, notably, the priority of God within this desire is made overt in letter 79:

Since you have become everything to me, except for the grace of God alone, it is not necessary for me to wish for anything more for the span of centuries to come; except that He who can just as easily grant one day as he can a thousand, increase the days of your life.⁵²

Heloise does not have to renounce God or Abelard in her desire. In her thinking desire for Abelard flows from God.

⁴⁹ "Volo et inhiante cupio ut litteris iuxta preceptum tuum intercurrentibus precordialis inter nos firmetur amicitia, donec illa michi nimium felix dies illucescat, qua votis omnibus desideratam tuam faciem videam. Sicut lassus umbram, et siciens desiderat undam, ita te desidero videre" (Chiavaroli and Mews, 195).

⁵⁰ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 116.

⁵¹ "Venio enim sepe aridis faucibus desiderans suavi oris tui refici nectare, diffusaque in corde tuo divitias sicienter haurire. Quid pluribus opus est verbis? Deo teste profietor, quia nemo in seculo vitali spirat aura quem te magis amare desiderem." (Chiavaroli and Mews, 207).

⁵² "Cum omnia factus sis michi excepta solius dei gracia, nil amplius desiderare michi necesse est per durantia seculi spacia, nisi ut vite tue dies augeat ille, qui ut unum eque facile prestare potest et mille." (Chiavaroli and Mews, 261).

As I have already pointed out, Abelard's religious vocabulary is not as explicit in his own expression of his desires. However, at this stage of his relationship with Heloise, God also witnesses to his desire for her as letter 24 demonstrates:

And yet I receive your letters so eagerly that for me they are always too brief, since they both satisfy and stimulate my desire: like someone who is suffering from fever – the more the drink relieves him, the hotter he feels. God is my witness that I am stirred in a new way when I look at them more carefully.⁵³

What is particularly disturbing, as we will discover, is that Abelard will in the later correspondence identify this desire as lust, not love.

In addition, Abelard's desire falls short of the union and equality that Heloise seeks.⁵⁴ When he explains to Heloise in this Letter 24 what he understands as 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."⁵⁵ Abelard's philosophical framework will only allow him to consider his "oneness" with Heloise as a union "without difference." (*indifferenter*).

The Vocabulary of Desire in Heloise's Later Correspondence:

Heloise's intentions in her later correspondence with Abelard have evoked a variety of scholarly reactions and conclusions. The older and more traditional positions insist that Heloise is a woman somewhat irrationally obsessed by her own carnal desire for Abelard and trying to draw his attention to these so-called less than virtuous desires.⁵⁶ The more contemporary positions point out Heloise's desire to draw Abelard into her

⁵³ "Ego autem litteras tuas ita avide suscipio, ut michi semper breves sint quia desiderium meum et saturant et accendunt, ad similitudinem in ardore laborantis, quem potus ipse quo plus reficit, plus accendit. Deum testor quod novo modo cum eas diligencius intueor, novo inquam modo commoveor." (Chiavaroli and Mews, 209).

⁵⁴ See Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 127-28.

⁵⁵ "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 indifferenter efficiatur." (Chiavaroli and Mews, 209).

⁵⁶ See R. Pernoud, *Heloise and Abelard* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), Etienne Gilson, *Heloise and Abelard* (Chicago: University of Michigan Press, 1982), D. W. Robertson, Jr., *Abelard and Heloise*.

path to conversion or alternatively stress his conversion and Heloise's healing.⁵⁷ Listening to Heloise's voice through the employment of the insights of post-modern feminist critiques, however, we can ask ourselves if there is something else operating here in her method of speaking in this way.⁵⁸ Is there what Irigaray identifies as "a language that concerns itself with the senses, a language which is porous to and supportive of sexual difference, despite a discourse that attempts to efface or reduce it"?⁵⁹ Can we understand Heloise's purpose here from the perspective of a different position? Perhaps she seeks to articulate a feminine language of love, a language that does not erase, but incorporates the desires of a woman both psychologically and theologically? Supported by Irigaray can we ask whether Heloise attempts to speak a language that is uniquely feminine and beyond the bounds of male speech with its dichotomies and metaphors of sacrifice and renunciation?

The Letters show that although the language of renunciation is not totally absent from Heloise's rhetoric (any more than the language of incorporation is totally absent in traditional writings), it is certainly overshadowed by her vocabulary of desire.

Letter II

In her first letter to Abelard, her response to his *Historia calamitatum*, Heloise seeks to establish a sense of wholeness for her identity. She understands this desire for wholeness from the standpoint of having something missing from her being, and the missing element for her is her husband and the founder of her community, Abelard. This is not an abstract absence but very much an embodied position.

Her desire is expressed in the vocabulary of hope, a hope that Abelard might in some way connect with her and the community, that is, a hope for the return of her lost relationship with Abelard. Heloise states: "I hoped for renewal of strength, at least

⁵⁷ See Wilson and McLeod, "Textual Strategies in the Abelard/Heloise Correspondence," McLeod, "Wholly Guilty, Wholly Innocent: Self-Definition in Heloise's Letters to Abelard," A. Blamires, "No Outlet for Incontinence," Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," and P. McGuire, "Heloise and the Consolation of Friendship".

⁵⁸ McCracken has attempted this task following the theme of the "abject body" as described in the work the feminist philosopher, Julia Kristeva. See Peggy McCracken, "The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter." See also Morgan Powell, "Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete: Of Scholarly Diversion and a Woman's 'Conversion'".

⁵⁹ Luce Irigaray, "The Way of the Feminine," 327.

from the writer's words which would picture for me the reality I have lost."⁶⁰ Heloise's use of the word *imago* (picture) here implies a picturing of Abelard to imagine his actual presence, and thus she clearly connects the embodied Abelard (*rem*/the reality of him) and the Abelard of words. And so she desires that Abelard write: "And so in the name of Christ, who is still giving you some protection for his service, we beseech you to write as often as you think fit to us who are his handmaids and yours."⁶¹ Her desire is not just hers singularly but also that of her female community. This desire does not demand that they should renounce Abelard, but that they should share in his struggles and he in theirs: "We are all that are left you, so at least you should together let us share your sorrow and your joy."⁶²

Here, for both Heloise and her community, a sense of their true identity is maintained. For Heloise, her life is intimately tied to Abelard through the bonds of marriage. For the community of which she is head, their very existence is due to his fatherhood. Oscillating as she does between her own personal voice and that of the representative communal voice, the purpose of Heloise's desire is to connect Abelard not only to herself, but to the community. She desires that he remembers not just her but the whole community, as she pleads: "that you have *us* in mind."⁶³ Her quote from Seneca reinforces this desire for physical connection or presence with Abelard: "Thank you for writing to me often, the one way in which you can make your presence felt, for I never have a letter from you without the immediate feeling that we are together."⁶⁴ If we think for a moment that Heloise's desire is simply for some disembodied concept of Abelard's self we are ignoring the significance of her focus on presence. The embodied understanding of relationship is clearly articulated by both Heloise as an individual, and through her voice as the community, in this desire for Abelard's consoling presence.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ "ut cuius rem perdidit verbis saltem tanquam ejus quadam imagine recreer." *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 45 (Radice, 47).

⁶¹ "Per ipsum itaque qui te sibi adhuc quoquo modo protegit Christum obsecramus, quatinus ancillulas ipsius et tuas crebris litteris de his in quibus adhuc fluctuas naufragiis certificare digneris." *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 46 (Radice, 48).

⁶² "que tibi sole remansimus, doloris vel gaudii participes habeas." *Ibid.*

⁶³ "quod te nostri memorem esse monstrabis." *Ibid.* My emphases.

⁶⁴ "Quod frequenter michi scribis, gratias ego: nam quo uno modo potes, te michi ostendis. Numquam epistolam tuam accipio, quin protinus una simus." *Ibid.*, quoted from Seneca, *Epistulae ad Lucilium*, 40.1.

⁶⁵ I will analyse this theme of "presence" and "absence" in the next chapter.

Abelard has been remiss in his duty to Heloise and the community, or more accurately, he has been remiss in his love for them. Heloise believes that his disconnection from the community has caused a wound that needs healing. Abelard's neglect has caused a rupture in the community's identity and also in Heloise's identity due to his absence and she insists that he now has a duty to heal these wounds. His desire, were he true to his own identity as husband to Heloise and father to the community, should be for her well being and the well-being community: "For you after God are the sole founder of this place, the sole builder of this oratory, the sole creator of this community."⁶⁶ This deliberately created triple formula will be repeated to even greater effect in her last letter of this correspondence.

Heloise, a woman of her own times, points out to Abelard that the more fragile feminine condition is vastly different from that of the masculine and thus its desires are more deserving of attention: "Through its feminine nature this plantation would be weak and frail even if it were not new."⁶⁷ And thus, her desire for Abelard simply symbolises and encapsulates the desires and needs of the whole feminine community and therefore we see that justice is embedded into her desire and that of the community: "Apart from anything else, consider the close tie by which you have bound yourself to me, and repay the debt you owe a whole community of devoted women by discharging it the more dutifully to her who is yours alone."⁶⁸ Here Heloise draws Abelard's attention to his own language in earlier letters concerning their relationship with the use of his term *unice*. She maintains the position of the "particular" expression of the "general" case of the community here.⁶⁹ Powell also focuses on this idea of Heloise as a *type* or exemplar for her community's desires when he suggests that these letters are part of the formative material of the Paraclete community.⁷⁰ As such, Heloise embodies the desires of the entire community.

⁶⁶ "Hujus quippe loci tu post Deum solus es fundator, solus hujus oratorii constructor, solus hujus congregationis edificator." *Ep. 2*, Hicks 47 (Radice, 49).

⁶⁷ "*Satis ex ipsa feminei sexus natura debilis est hec plantatio et infirma, etiamsi non esset nova.* Ibid.

⁶⁸ ". . . ut ceteras omittam, quanto erga me te obligaveris debito pensa, ut quod devotis communiter debes feminis, unice tue devotius solvas" *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 48 (Radice, 50).

⁶⁹ See my arguments concerning the particular and the general in the previous chapter.

⁷⁰ See Powell, "Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete: Of Scholarly Diversion and a Woman's 'Conversion'."

Heloise puts her argument surrounding her desire for Abelard's presence, in at least his provision of letters, in the context of the desire for God of the holy women of old and the care given them by the Church Fathers, using in particular the example of Jerome and his care for Paula and Eustochium.⁷¹ Why, then, should her desire and that of her community be left unacknowledged given the tradition of this wholesome love between holy women of old and the great Church men of old, the holy Fathers? Furthermore, Heloise has recourse to not just this one holy precedent from Church history, she is also lawfully married to Abelard. Heloise's love and her desire thus, legitimately, can know no bounds,⁷² and hence each state, her marriage bond and her monastic vows, is incorporated into the other and she draws his attention to this when she remarks: "Yet you must know that you are bound to me by an obligation which is all the greater for the further close tie of the marriage sacrament uniting us, and are deeper in my debt because of the love I have always borne you, as everyone knows, a love which is beyond all bounds."⁷³ Clearly, she does not identify with any renunciation of her marriage vows and neither do they appear as in any way in conflict with her monastic vows to God and the community.

Numerous scholars have researched various aspects of marriage and concubinage in the medieval world.⁷⁴ What is important to note is that even though it was understood that marriage vows were less superior to the vows made by religious and that religious vows superseded previous vows, Heloise's position is supported with great eloquence and emotion by Peter the Venerable of Cluny, one of the foremost respected Black Benedictines of the age and head of the Abbey of Cluny. After Abelard's death he writes to console her:

Him, therefore, venerable and dearest sister in the Lord, him to whom after your union in the flesh you are joined by the better, and therefore

⁷¹See *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 48 (Radice, 50). Though Heloise does not mention Jerome explicitly in this letter, she does so in subsequent letters – see below.

⁷² See *Ibid.*

⁷³"cui quidem tanto te majore debito noveris obligatum quanto te amplius nuptialis federe sacramenti constat esse astrictum et eo te magis michi obnoxium quo te semper, ut omnibus patet, immoderato amore complexa sum" *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 48 (Radice, 50).

⁷⁴ See C.N.L. Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), David L. d'Avray, *Medieval Marriage; Symbolism and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), and Albrecht Classen, ed., *The Discourse of Love, Marriage, and Transgression in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 278 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004). See also Albrecht Classen, *Der Liebes – und Ehediskurs vom hohen Mittelalter bis zum frühen 17. Jahrhundert*, *Volksliedstudie*, 5 (Münster, New York, et al: Waxmann, 2005).

stronger, bond of divine love, with whom and under whom you have long served God: him, I say, in your place, or as another you, God cherishes in his bosom, and keeps him there to be restored to you through his grace at the coming of the Lord, at the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet-note of God descending from heaven.⁷⁵

Peter the Venerable eloquently confirms the final validity of Heloise's integrated view of her marriage and monastic vows, with God sealing their love at the end of the ages.

Heloise's conflict rests in Abelard's inability to recognise and enter into a dialogue concerning the truth of this incorporation. She castigates Abelard for his forgetfulness of this integrated interpretation when she remarks: "I was not a little surprised and troubled by your forgetfulness when neither reverence of God nor our mutual love nor the example of the holy Fathers made you think of trying to comfort me."⁷⁶

Heloise even admits that much that pertains to her desire for Abelard is lost to her because of his castration. However, this loss intensifies her desire for Abelard. She writes evocatively of her longing in a language that seeks the only means of that consolidation of her connection with Abelard, his coming to understand fully her present circumstances: "Surely the greater the cause for grief the greater the need for the help of consolation, and this no one can bring but you; you are the sole cause of my sorrow, and you alone can grant me the grace of consolation. You alone have the power to make me sad, to bring me happiness or comfort."⁷⁷ It is only in Abelard that Heloise's identity can justly be established.

Heloise in no way here considers the necessity of renouncing or transcending the desire for Abelard in hers and the community's desire for God. She is arguing that the severing of ties does not leave one free to pursue a more purely motivated desire. It

⁷⁵ "Hunc ergo uenerabilis et carissima in domino soror, cui post carnalem copulam tanto ualidiore, quanto meliore diuinae caritatis uinculo adhesisti, cum quo et sub quo diu domino deseruisti, hunc inquam loco tui, uel ut te alteram in gremio suo confouet, et in aduentu domini, in uoce archangeli, et in tuba dei descendentis de caelo, tibi per ipsius gratiam restituendum reseruat." *Ep. 115*, Constable, 307-8 (Radice, 223).

⁷⁶ "quod nec reverentia Dei nec amore nostri nec sanctorum Patrum exemplis . . . me . . . consolari temptaueris." *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 48 (Radice, 50).

⁷⁷ "Quo uero maior est dolendi causa, maiora sunt consolationis adhibenda remedia; non utique ab alio, sed a te ipso, ut, qui solus es in causa dolendi, solus sis in gratia consolandi. Solus quippe es qui me contristare, qui me letificare seu consolari ualeas" *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 48-9 (Radice, 50-1).

ruptures the identity and falsifies the endeavour. This search and desire for God in her language occurs authentically only when one accepts the whole of one's incorporated reality. What we must be aware of is that Heloise recognises her love and desire for Abelard as an integral part of this desire for God and not a step to be overcome in the ascent to God. Her final humble admission of the reality that brought her to her monastic vocation is far from the acknowledgement of questionable motives and problematic to the present arguments. Rather it is an honest confession of her unconditional and obedient love for her husband, which was at the time her immediate and particular focus. "It was not any sense of vocation which brought me as a young girl to accept the austerities of the cloister, but your bidding alone . . . I can expect no reward for this from God, for it is certain that I have done nothing as yet for love of him."⁷⁸ Within this admission, Heloise maintains an authentic desire for God above all other desire, and yet it is still a desire that will not bypass the reality of the longing she also has for Abelard. While admitting that their relationship before their entry into monasticism included an element of lust for one and another, her desire for both Abelard and God are not incompatible in her thinking, indeed, they are fundamentally necessary to each other: "And so, in the name of God to whom you have dedicated yourself, I beg you to restore your presence to me in the way you can by writing me some word of comfort, so that in this at least I may find increased strength and readiness to serve God . . . Is it not far better now to summon me to God than it was then to satisfy our lust?"⁷⁹

Heloise's desire is expressed as pure, disinterested love, not worldly lust or self-centred desire at all. She indicates this by her particular combination of *concupiscens* with *pure*, which elevates lust beyond self-interest.⁸⁰ She states: "God knows I never sought anything in you except yourself; I wanted simply you nothing of yours [te pure, non tua concupiscens]."⁸¹ As such she creates a language of desire that

⁷⁸ "quam quidem juvenulam ad monastice conversationis asperitatem, non religionis devotio, sed tua tantum pertraxit jussio . . . Nulla michi super hoc merces expectanda est a Deo, cujus adhuc amore nichil me constat egisse." *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 52 (Radice, 54).

⁷⁹ "Per ipsum itaque cui te obtulisti Deum te obsecro ut quo modo potes tuam michi presentiam reddas, consolationem videlicet michi aliquam rescribendo, hoc saltem pacto ut sic recreata divino alacrior vacem obsequio. . . Quanto autem rectius me nunc in Deum, quam tunc in libidinem excitares!" *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 53 (Radice, 54-55).

⁸⁰ In this context it would be better in fact to translate this word as lust rather than desire.

⁸¹ "Nichil umquam – Deus scit! – in te requisivi; te pure, non tua concupiscens." *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 49 (Radice, 51).

metonymically marries embodied and spiritual love. In her arguments against marriage, she clearly sets out the contrast between her embodied desire (pure lust) and worldly desire:

“And a woman should realize that if she marries a rich man more readily than a poor one, and desires her husband more for his possessions than for himself, she is offering herself for sale. Certainly any woman who comes to marry through desire of this kind deserves wages, not gratitude, for clearly her mind is on the man’s property, not himself, and she would be ready to prostitute herself to a richer man, if she could.”⁸²

Heloise sets her barb against Abelard’s position using this more negative sense of worldly desire [lust] (*concupiscentia*): “It was [lust] desire, not affection which bound you to me, the flame of lust rather than love.”⁸³ This is desire based on lust, not love. It is worldly (fleshly) desire for the self, not embodied desire for the other. The confusion lies here. Heloise desires to know that this accusation she is hurling at Abelard is a fiction and that his desire is as pure and as embodied as hers.

Nevertheless, Heloise’s desire for Abelard is in the context of her desire to serve God. These desires are not dichotomous or incompatible; they are not separate or separated themes. As already indicated, she does not simply ignore God in her total desire for Abelard: “And so, in the name of that God to whom you have dedicated yourself, I beg you to restore your presence to me in the way you can – by writing me some word of comfort, so that in this at least I may find increased strength and readiness to serve God.”⁸⁴ It is in and through her desire for Abelard, an Abelard who is intimately connected to both her individual identity and her corporate identity in her religious community, that Heloise can ultimately locate her relationship to God.⁸⁵

As far as renunciation is concerned, by her entry into monastic life itself, Heloise has, in her own words, renounced everything in her particular love of Abelard that called for her humble obedience to him: “I have finally denied myself every pleasure in

⁸² “Non enim quo quisque ditior sive potentior, ideo et melior; fortune illud est, hoc virtutis. Nec se minime venalem estimet esse que libentius ditiori quam pauperi nubit et plus in marito sua quam ipsum concupiscit. Certe quamcunque ad nuptias hec concupiscentia ducit, merces ei potius quam gratia debetur.” *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 50 (Radice, 52).

⁸³ “Dicam: concupiscentia te michi potius quam amicitia sociavit; libidinis ardor potius quam amor.” *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 51 (Radice, 53).

⁸⁴ “Per ipsum itaque cui te obtulisti Deum te obsecro ut quo modo potes quam michi presentiam reddas, consolationem videlicet michi aliquem rescribendo, hoc saltem pacto ut sic recreata divino alacrior vacem obsequio.” *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 53 (Radice, 54).

⁸⁵ I will discuss the place of God in Heloise’s thinking more thoroughly in the next chapter.

obedience to your will, kept nothing for myself except to prove that now, even more I am yours.”⁸⁶ Renunciation thus, remains a consequence of her love rather than the motivating force for it.

Letter III

In contrast, Abelard presumes that Heloise’s present desires do not include any need of for him, as it is obvious to him that all her desires and needs have been supplied by God alone:

If since our conversion from the world to God I have not yet written you any word of comfort or advice, it must not be attributed to indifference on my part but to your own good sense, in which I have always had such confidence that I did not think anything was needed; God’s grace has bestowed on you all essential to enable you to instruct the erring, comfort the weak and encourage the faint-hearted, both by word and example, as, indeed, you have been doing since your first held office of prioress under your abness.⁸⁷

Although Abelard admits that Heloise’s requests may simply stem from her humility he still does not seem to grasp the Heloise integrative desires for both God. Rather, his somewhat self-absorbed language of Letter III proceeds to ignore this particular stance from Heloise, and focuses primarily on his own precarious existence.

Anxious for divine aid in his insecure predicament, Abelard uses the traditional language of renunciation of desires: “The more God is pleased by the abstinence and continence which women have dedicated to him, the more willing he will be to grant their prayers.”⁸⁸ Here Abelard’s advice to Heloise and her community centres around his own need for prayers rather than their own particular needs as women.

Letter IV

Having made little impression on Abelard through the expression of her desires, Heloise intensifies her rhetoric of desire in her second letter to him, Letter IV. Her

⁸⁶ “Omnes michi denique voluptates interdixi ut tue parerem voluntati; nichil michi reservavi, nisi sic tuam nunc precipue fieri.” *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 52 (Radice, 54).

⁸⁷ “Quod post nostram a seculo ad Deum conversionem nondum tibi aliquid consolationis vel exhortationis scripserim, non negligentie mee, sed tue – de qua semper plurimum confido – prudentie imputandum est. Non enim eam his indigere credidi, cui abundanter quecumque necessaria sunt divina gratia impertivit, ut tam verbis scilicet quam exemplis errantes valeas docere, pusillanimes consolari, tepidos exhortari, sicut et facere jam dudum consuevisti cum sub abbatissa prioratum obtineres. *Ep. 3*, Hicks, 54 (Radice, 56).

⁸⁸ “Quarum tam abstinencia quam continentia Deo sacrata, quanto ipsi gratior habetur, tanto ipsum propitiorem inveniet.” *Ep. 3*, Hicks, 57 (Radice, 59).

language now involves the rich and emotive vocabulary of grief, anguish, suffering, contrition and memory through the experience of both the absence and loss of Abelard to herself and to her community, moving again freely between her own particular voice, her “I”, and the general voice of her community, that is, her “we”.

Responding to Abelard’s overt focus on himself, and the dangers that he says beset his person in his reply to her in Letter III, she maintains that he is only compounding her dilemma and in no way answering hers, or her community’s desire for some sort of embodied comfort from him. She entreats him: “A heart which is exhausted with grief cannot find peace, nor can a mind preoccupied with anxieties genuinely devote itself to God. I beseech you not to hinder God’s service to which you specially committed us.”⁸⁹ She desires an authentic love of God that can only be justly sought with, not without, the integral involvement of Abelard, and his absence from her fuels her desire through her expressions of anguish.

Every aspect of Heloise’s life and identity and that of her community’s life finds its inspiration and justification in the relationship they have with Abelard, a relationship that is only made manifest to them in his living engagement with them. Any talk of his death, therefore, is talk of their death: “If we lose our life in you, we shall not be able to go on living when you leave us. I would not even have us live to see that day, for if the mere mention of your death is death for us, what will the reality be if it finds us still alive?”⁹⁰: Any consideration of the renunciation of her own desire for Abelard, or the community’s desire for their founder, is beyond the possibility of their embodied authenticity.

Heloise’s desire is expressed in the vocabulary of “suffering” and penitence: “and what you suffered in the body for a time, I may suffer, as is right, throughout my life in contrition of mind, and thus make reparation to you at least, if not to God.”⁹¹ What

⁸⁹ “Confectus merore animus quietus non est, nec Deo sincere potest vaccare mens perturbationibus occupata. Noli, obsecro, divinum impedire servitium, cui nos maxime mancipasti.” *Ep. 4* Hicks, 62 (Radice, 64).

⁹⁰ “que cum in te nostram amiserimus vitam, vivere, te recedente, nequaquam poterimus. Atque utinam nec tunc usque possimus! Mortis tue mentio mors quedam nobis est; ipsa autem mortis hujus veritas quid, si nos invenerit, futura est?” *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 62 (Radice, 64).

⁹¹ “et quod tu ad horam in corpore pertulisti, ego in omni vita – ut justum est – in contritione mentis suscipiam, et hoc tibi saltem modo, si non Deo, satisfaciam.” *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 65 (Radice, 67).

Abelard suffers in his castration is temporary and in fact ultimately healing for his sins. Heloise has not undergone the loss of the site of bodily desire, and thus, her thinking remains completely embodied. From this perspective her suffering continues. She argues that what she suffers through this unrelenting desire for Abelard in her body is the path by which she can atone for his suffering and her own sins. Because of the absence of Abelard's comfort however, Heloise's desire to make reparation to God is unfulfilled: "I can find no penitence whereby to appease God whom, I always accuse of the greatest cruelty in regard to this outrage."⁹² It is because of the unfulfilled nature of desire that Heloise can so freely rage against God, against herself and against Abelard.

Heloise's position here rests once more on the understanding of her integrity. There is no point in repentance when there is no integrity between body and the soul or mind: "How can it be called repentance for sins, however great the mortification of the flesh, if the mind still retains the will to sin and is on fire with the old desires."⁹³ At this juncture, Heloise uses *desiderium*, not *concupiscentia*, as her term for desire. Can this be because this desire she has for Abelard is not something that she considers sinful? In contrast, Abelard uses *desiderium* only in relation to God's love: "He [Jesus Christ] is the true friend who desires (*desiderat*) yourself and nothing that is yours."⁹⁴ He speaks of his desire, or more correctly, his lust, for Heloise in these letters, only in terms of *libido* and *concupiscentia*.⁹⁵

What Heloise has set up previously is both hers and the community's intimate and embodied connection with Abelard, a connection that Abelard avoids entering into. To deny this connection, and the desire for it, would be to deny their own identity and it is this denial, this renunciation, that causes their grief and suffering and for which they cannot find satisfactory repentance. In fact, Abelard's language of renunciation is

⁹² "qua penitentia Deum placare valeam non inuenio, quem super hac semper injuria summe crudelitatis arguo et, ejus dispensationi contraria" *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 65-66. (Radice, 68).

⁹³ "Quomodo etiam penitentia peccatorum dicitur, quantacumque sit corporis afflictio, si mens adhuc ipsam peccandi retinet voluntatem et pristinis estuat desideriis?" *Ep. 4* Hicks, 66 (Radice, 68).

⁹⁴ "Verus est amicus qui teipsum, non tua, desiderat." *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 84 (Radice, 86).

⁹⁵ For example, when speaking of his castration he writes: "and so it was wholly just and merciful, although by means of supreme treachery of your uncle, for me to be reduced in that part of my body which was the seat of lust (*libidinis*) and sole reason for those desires (*concupiscentia*) . . . (Unde justissime et clementissime – licet cum summa tui avunculi prodicione –, ut in multis crescerem, parte illa corporis mei sum imminutus in qua libidinis regnum erat et tota hujus concupiscentie causa consistebat. See *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 80 (Radice 81-82).

not the language with which Heloise or her community can imagine their monastic endeavour. And so begins what is considered Heloise's shocking and "un-Abbess-like" confession of her overtly embodied desire for Abelard, a desire that she cannot bring herself to either deny or condemn: "Even in sleep I know no respite. Sometimes my thoughts are betrayed in the movement of my body, or they break out in an unguarded word."⁹⁶

Here is a vocabulary infused with memory and it is memory that fuels desire: "In my case, the pleasures of lovers which we shared have been too sweet – they cannot displease me, and can scarcely shift from my memory. Wherever I turn they are always there before my eyes, bringing with them awakened longings [desires] and fantasies which will not even let me sleep."⁹⁷ Heloise can find no way to repent of this desire, and she struggles to find a way to incorporate it into her present identity because of her conviction that incorporation is required for wholeness. It is this incorporation that drives Heloise's desire and it can only be achieved through Abelard's acknowledgment and appreciation of this desire. As Powell also maintains, in the hermeneutic of these letters there is "the voice of a nascent spirituality that seeks the assimilation of human sexual desire to the love of God."⁹⁸

As indicated, what Heloise is left with in this letter is "unfulfilled" desire and it is this which makes her life a sham: "Men call me chaste; they do not know the hypocrite I am. They consider purity of the flesh a virtue, though virtue belongs not to the body but to the soul."⁹⁹ Yet she upends her own condemnation of herself when she questions the nature of this very hypocrisy:

I can win praise in the eyes of men but deserve none before God, who searches our hearts and loins and sees in our darkness. I am judged religious at a time when there is little in religion which is not hypocrisy,

⁹⁶ "Nonumquam etiam ipso motu corporis animi mei cogitationes deprehenduntur, nec a verbis temperant improvisis." *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 66-67 (Radice, 68-69).

⁹⁷ "In tantum vero ille quas pariter exercuimus amantium voluptates dulces michi fuerunt ut nec displicere michi nec vix a memoria labi possint. Quocumque loco me vertam, semper se a oculis meis cum suis ingerunt desideriiis, nec etiam dormienti suis illusionibus parcunt." *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 66 (Radice, 68).

⁹⁸ Powell, "Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete: Of Scholarly Diversion and a Woman's 'Conversion'," 278.

⁹⁹ "Castam me predicant, qui non deprehendunt ypocritam; munditiam carnis conferunt in virtutem: cum non sit corporis sed animi virtus" *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 67 (Radice, 69).

when whoever does not offend the opinions of men receives the highest praise.¹⁰⁰

Here she obliquely critiques the society in which she lives just as her contemporary, Hildegard of Bingen, does more openly and directly in her many letters to various ecclesiastical leaders of her day. Hildegard reveals to us a woman profoundly disillusioned with the institutional Church to the extent that in her major work, *Scivias*, she even envisages the Antichrist coming forth from the womb of the Church, *Ecclesia*, herself.¹⁰¹ Heloise proceeds to put forth a summary of her position vis-à-vis acceptable behaviour in the eyes of God, which is, to do none harm. Yet even so, all behaviour must have at its foundation the fundamental intention of “love of God”: “as it is written: ‘Turn from evil and do good.’ Both are vain if not done for love of God.”¹⁰² This must be the fundamental orientation for Heloise, the interior intention, if one is to find integrity in one’s behaviour.

Hildegard’s position on these issue is much more strident. She is outraged by the established hierarchy’s seeming refusal to live up to their roles and its deliberate flaunting of its positions of power and authority. To Heinrich, Archbishop of Mainz, she writes,

He Who Is says: You have been found wanting, and I say to you: The heaven of the Lord’s vengeance has been opened, and now the ropes have been lowered against His enemies. Rise up, however, because your days are short, and remember that Nebuchadnezzar fell and that his crown perished. And there have been many others who have fallen when they rashly exalted themselves to heaven. Ach! you piece of dust, why are you not ashamed at exalting yourself to the heights when you ought to be in the muck?¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ “aliquid laudis apud homines habens, nichil apud Deum mereor, qui cordis et renum probator est et in abscondito videt. Religiosa hoc tempore judicor in quo jam parva pars religionis non est ypochrisis, ubi ille maximis extollitur laudibus qui humanum non offendit iudicium.” *Ep. 4*, Hicks 67 (Radice, 6).

¹⁰¹ See Carmel Posa, “Keeping Vigil on the Edge,” 88.

¹⁰² “sicut scriptum est: “Declina a malo, et fac bona.” Et frustra utrumque geritur quod amore Dei non agitur.” *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 67 (Radice, 69).

¹⁰³ “Ille qui est, dicit: Tibi dico, qui negligis in multis scrutiniis: Celum apertum est de ultione Domini, et nunc dimisi sunt funes inimicis. Tu autem surge, quia dies tui breues sunt, et reminiscere quod Nabuchodonosor cecidit et quod corona ipsius periit. Et alii multi ceciderunt, qui se temere in celum exaltauerunt. Ach tu cinis, quare non erubescis in altum te spargere, cum debeas esse in putredine?” *Ep. 19*. See *Letter 19*, Lieven Van Acker, (ed.) *Hildegardis Bingenensis Epistolarium: Prima Pars*. In *CCCM*, 91. (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991), 55. The English translation is from *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, trans. R. K. Ehrman and J. L. Baird, 3 vols. (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, 1998, 2004) vol. 1, 71. Henceforth, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*.

Bernard of Clairvaux, the towering spiritual figure of Heloise's time, also speaks of intention in relation to one's desires. He draws on the traditional understanding of *intentio cordis*. Casey maintains that Bernard understands intention as, "not merely one's purpose in doing a particular act, it is also one's fundamental direction in life."¹⁰⁴ Yet again, this "intention" is distracted from its primary goal, God/heaven, by carnal and secular desires.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps one can even dare to posit the question: Could Bernard's thoughts on this topic have been influenced somewhat by his contact with Heloise? We know that Bernard visited Heloise's monastery of the Paraclete while she was Abbess from a letter of Peter Abelard to Bernard himself:

When recently I had come from the Paraclete where I was engaged with matters that needed to be attended to, your daughter in Christ and our sister, who is the abbess of that place, having desired a reason for a holy visitation, told me about your arrival with high praise, and not as if you were a man but as though you were an angel, so much so that her sisters were strengthened by your holy exhortations to them.¹⁰⁶

Mews suggests that this relationship with Bernard must have been somewhat close for Abelard to have used the expression "your daughter in Christ" and suggests previous such visits made by Bernard.¹⁰⁷ Bernard himself also wrote a letter to Pope Eugenius on Heloise's behalf: "As for the petition of the Abbess of the Paraclete, if you so wish you can find out about it from the same man, (the Bishop of Beauvais), and grant it if you see fit."¹⁰⁸ In this unusual twist of history we discover that Bernard of Clairvaux, who was relentlessly vicious in his attacks on both Abelard's monastic calling and theological innovations, clearly had some level of esteem for Heloise and her monastery. Perhaps it is not too extraordinary to suggest that, being such a great

¹⁰⁴ SBO 2:26, 1-2. See Casey, *Athirst for God*, 1 17.

¹⁰⁵ "In this way the Bridegrooms' left hand is rightly under the bride's head, so that, as she leans back her head is supported on it, meaning the intention of her mind, lest bending down it should be enticed by carnal and worldly desires. Because 'the corruptible body weighs down the soul and the earthly dwelling preoccupies the mind busy with many thoughts' (Merito ergo laeva sponsi sub capite sponsae, super quam videlicet caput suum reclinata sustinat, hoc est mentis suae intentionem, ne incurvetur et inclinetur in carnalia et saecularia desideria, qua corpus quod corrumpitur, aggravat animam, et de primit terrena inhabitatio sensum multa cogitantem). *de diligendo Dei* 12, SBO 3: 129, 21-23. (CF 13, 105).

¹⁰⁶ "Cum nuper Paraclitum uenisset quibusdam compulsus negotiis ibi peragendis, filia uestra in Christo et soror nostra, quae illius loci abbatissa dicitur, cum summa exultatione mihi retulit uos illuc diu desideratum causa sanctae uisitationis aduenisse et non tanquam hominem, sed quasi angelum tam eam quam sorores suas sacris exhortationibus corroborasse." *Ep. 10*, Edmé Renno Smits, ed., *Peter Abelard. Letters IX-XIV* (Groningen: [privately published], 1983), 239. My translation

¹⁰⁷ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 160.

¹⁰⁸ "Sed et quod petit Abbatissa de Paraclito, per ipsum, si dignamini scire potestas, et facere, si dignum iudicatis." *Ep. 278*, SBO 8:190. English Translation in: Bernard of Clairvaux: *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*. trans. B.S. James. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1993), 428.

comfort to Heloise, as indicated by Abelard himself, one of hers and Bernard's conversations may well have embraced her own struggle with her intentions and that it was from these conversations that Bernard found his own focus on and understanding of "intention". As Casey summarises: "It [*intentio*] is the essential personal content of behavior, containing elements of deliberateness, motivation, and decision. An *intentio* bridges the gap between spiritual aspiration and concrete behavior; it gives external embodiment to the inner dynamics of personal choice."¹⁰⁹ Is this not precisely the position that Heloise is advocating in her discussion on interior intentions?

Heloise's desire is double-barrelled; her desire for Abelard is linked to her need to desire God. There cannot be one without the other. Abelard has asked for Heloise's and the community's prayers, but she now tells him that it is her desire that they have his prayers: "I beg you, do not feel so sure of me that you cease to help me by your own prayers."¹¹⁰ She insists that Abelard must recognise her desires as real and substantial and that her holiness lies not in some vainly sought perfection and unlooked-for praise, but in her humility, her honest desire to be known for what she really is:

To me your praise is the more dangerous because I welcome it. The more anxious I am to please you in everything, the more I am won over and delighted by it. I beg you, be fearful for me always, instead of feeling confidence in me, so that I may always find help in your solicitude.¹¹¹

As in her previous letter, Heloise's vocabulary in this letter is that of humble confession: "At every stage of my life up to now, as God knows, I have feared to offend you rather than God, and tried to please you more than him."¹¹² Yet, her underlying desire is a resolution to her conflict, and a resolution that desires a God who will not ask of her the denial of her desire for Abelard but one who will accept mercifully the longings of a very ordinary human heart: "I do not wish you to exhort

¹⁰⁹ Casey, *The Undivided Heart*, 49.

¹¹⁰ "Noli, obsecro, de me tanta presumere, ne michi cesses orando subvenire." *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 68 (Radice, 70).

¹¹¹ "Tanto autem michi tua laus in me periculosior est quanto gratior, et tanto amplius ea capior et delector quanto amplius tibi per omnia placere studeo. Time, obsecro, semper de me potius quam confidas, ut tua semper sollicitudine adjuver." *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 68-69 (Radice, 70).

¹¹² "In omni autem – Deus scit! – vite mee statu, te magis adhuc offendere quam Deum vereor, tibi placere amplius quam ipsi appeto." *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 67 (Radice, 69).

me to virtue or summon me to battle . . . I do not seek a crown of victory; it is sufficient for me to avoid danger, and this is safer than engaging in war. In whatever corner of heaven God shall place me, it will be enough for me.”¹¹³

This attitude of humility assumed by Heloise highlights Abelard’s position of spiritual pride, as has already been attested to elsewhere. Wilson and McLeod explain this position of humility that is Heloise’s:

“Where Abelard had argued in the *Historia calamitatum*, “I am great, innocent and unjustly maligned,” she argues in the letters, “I am sinful, low, unjustly elevated and praised.” Heloise thus assumes a more humble stance than Abelard does, but she also adopts a brazenly feminine role that risks – and often has excited – misinterpretation.¹¹⁴

This misinterpretation has led some to believe that Heloise never achieved true conversion to her religious vocation. However, the issue of the conversion of Heloise is rarely considered within the monastic framework to which she belongs. Waddell challenges the reader to consider more thoroughly this context of Heloise’s confession:

But for the monk or nun who still lives within the monastic tradition of which Abelard and Heloise were a part, this problem is a non-problem. No one this side of the beatific vision is ever perfectly “converted”. There is always something of a gap between sincerely expressed and sincerely held ideals and one’s inward conformity to and transformation by those ideals; and, to some extent, Heloise’s lament is the lament of even the most exemplary monk or nun.¹¹⁵

In fact, Heloise’s lament is probably a more honest, humble and thus saintly lament – this is what shocks us. This is what we fear to emulate. Conversion in the monastic life is “on-going”. To fail to admit this is to fail in the prime monastic virtue of humility.

Rather than the shocking admission of base motivations and obsessive and un-spiritual desires, in this reading, one is reminded here of a story from Gregory’s “Life of Benedict” in his *Dialogues*. This is a text that Heloise would surely have known well. In this famous hagiographical presentation of the saint, the desires of

¹¹³ “Nolo me ad virtutem exhortans et ad pugnam provocans . . . Non quero coronam victoriae; satis est michi periculum vitare. Tutius evitatur periculum quam committitur bellum. Quocumque me angulo celi Deus collocet satis michi faciet.” *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 69 (Radice, 71).

¹¹⁴ Wilson and McLeod, “Textual Strategies in the Abelard/Heloise Correspondence,” 122.

¹¹⁵ Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*, 48-49.

Scholastica, Benedict's sister, are depicted as more worthy of God's attention than those of Benedict himself because her love was of greater breadth than his.¹¹⁶ Heloise's position becomes like Scholastica in that the more humble posture of the woman is indicative of a greater and more spiritual love and thus of greater integrity

Abelard's inability to console Heloise stems from his failure to recognise his love for her because it seems to him incompatible with his quest for spiritual perfection, a quest that focuses on an obvious self-absorbed and proud assertion of renunciation in contrast to the incorporation of desire which Heloise humbly seeks in the recognition of the inner truth of her identity.

Letter V

Abelard's response to these impassioned pleas from Heloise begins with an even more intensified and generalised positioning of her: "To the bride of Christ, from His servant."¹¹⁷ In this letter he intends to provide Heloise with the encouragement she seeks and to set Heloise straight on a number of issues concerning her rebuke of him. Though he states that he does not intend the letter to be a justification of himself, this is precisely the tone of much of it.

Abelard continues to elevate Heloise's status as this "bride of Christ", but in the process totally leaves behind her status as his wife and mother to their own son. Though he does not entirely deny this aspect of her identity as we discover in the later sections of the letter,¹¹⁸ he is still unable to incorporate any inclusion of Heloise's embodied desire for him into an understanding of her identity as a monastic woman. Abelard uses an enduring strand of Christian thinking on the Song of Songs to exhort Heloise to the higher calling of contemplative desire for

¹¹⁶ See "Nor is it any surprise that the woman who wished to see her brother for a longer time was on this occasion stronger than he, for according to the words of John, 'God is love,' and by an altogether fair judgment, she was able to do more because she loved more." (Nec mirum quod plus illo femina, quae diu fratrem uidere cupiebat, in eodem tempore ualuit. Quia enim iuxta Iohannis uocem Deus caritas est, iusto ualde iudicio illa plus potuit, quae amplius amauit.) *Dialogues*: Book 2: XXXIII.5. SC 260:234. English translation from: Gregory the Great, *The Life of Saint Benedict*. trans. Hilary Costello and Eoin de Bhaldraithe, ed. and commentary, Adalbert de Vogüé. (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1993) 155.

¹¹⁷ "Sponse Christi, servus ejusdem." *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 70 (Radice, 72).

¹¹⁸ See *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 86 (Radice, 87-88).

God: "It was fortunate trading your married state: as you were previously the wife of a poor mortal and now you are raised to the bed of the high king."¹¹⁹ Here Abelard stands firmly in the allegorical interpretative tradition of the Song of Songs stretching back to the commentaries of Origen.¹²⁰ The idea of nuns being equated with the Bride in the Song of Songs is pervasive throughout the twelfth century: for example, Hildegard of Bingen writes with the same bridal imagery:

And a maiden who of her own will is betrothed in holiness to My son is becomingly received by Him, for He wishes to have her united with Him in companionship. How? That she may embrace Him with chaste love, and he may love her in secret; for to Him she is always lovable, since she seeks Him rather than an earthly bridegroom.¹²¹

Abelard then proceeds to allegorise away the particular body of Heloise with its carnal desires, using the metaphor of the Ethiopian bride in his exegesis of the Song of Songs. As McCracken maintains: "Abelard describes an abstract body-as-metaphor", and thus, "effaces gender in the description of the Christian subject."¹²² In this letter he urges her to transcend the space that has been left in her and, through prayer, to spiritualise that space through a hunger for God alone, her true bridegroom. Irigaray identifies this type of language usage as typical of male discourse. Abelard symbolically reduces "the other to the Other of the Same"¹²³ by exhorting Heloise to be "more than woman."¹²⁴ For Abelard the woman's body is cursed by Eve with the "filth and mire" of child-bearing.¹²⁵ Abelard's letter again embraces the traditional language of renunciation and spiritual perfection so that, "the Christian subject comes into being through the abjection of a body defined as black and female."¹²⁶ In this, all desire is transformed into disembodied desire for God alone. Heloise is now a widow, counted among the holy widows of the Church,

¹¹⁹ "Felix talium commercium nuptiarum ut homunculi miseri prius uxor, nunc in summi regis thalamis sublimeris." *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 71 (Radice, 73).

¹²⁰ See E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

¹²¹ "Sed et puella quae ex voluntate sua in sanctissima desponsatione filio meo offertur; ab eodem decentissime suscipitur, qui eam hoc modo sibi conjunctam vult habere in consortio suo. Quomodo? Ut illum casta dilectione amplectatur, sicut et ipse eam in secreto suo diligit, quoniam illi semper amabilis est, quia magis cum quam terrenum sponsum quaerit." *Scivias Book 2, Vision 5, Chapter 10*. PL 197, 482 (*Scivias*. 207).

¹²² McCracken, "The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter," 218.

¹²³ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 98-99.

¹²⁴ "plus quam femina" *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 82 (Radice, 84).

¹²⁵ See *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 82 (Radice, 84).

¹²⁶ McCracken, "The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter," 217.

clothed in the black habit of her sinful and abject body, yet more importantly, a white lily of virtue and humility within. As Irvine explains: “As Jerome de-eroticized his relationship with Paula and Eustochium . . . Abelard attempted to de-eroticize his relationship with Heloise by addressing her as sister, abbess, and bride of Christ in the context of their shared monastic vocation.”¹²⁷ And thus, in this spiritualised reading of the Song of Songs, the desires of the body are renounced and replaced by the soul’s desire for God.

Drawing as he does on the letters of Jerome to Paula and Eustochium, Abelard undoubtedly pictures himself in a similar relationship as spiritual counsellor to Heloise. As such his spiritual interpretation of the Song of Songs conforms to Jerome’s own position. Jerome flees the pornographic physical body through his metaphorical interpretation of the female body in the Scriptural text. This body, a female virginal body, becomes his ideal in his articulation of the desire for God.¹²⁸ Jerome had remarked to Eustochium that the virginal body of the female was as Eve before the fall. He extols Eustochium: “Eve was a virgin in Paradise. After the garments of skin her married life began. Paradise is where you belong.”¹²⁹ The female body becomes the metaphor for fleshly humanity in this thinking and it is only in denial of the body, through chastity and other ascetical practices, that one transcends the body in spiritual desire for God.¹³⁰

For Abelard there is no room for any consideration of justice for the body and its desires, and he later continues this metaphorical erasing of Heloise’s feminine body through the spiritualising of female motherhood and thus the maternal body, a moment that must have proved particularly painful for Heloise. Combining this position with an overt disdain for all women’s bodily functions and activities, Abelard successfully negates all trace of women’s innate bodily dignity:

¹²⁷ Irvine, "Heloise and the Gendering of the Literate Subject," 102.

¹²⁸ Patrica Cox Miller explores Jerome’s position vis-à-vis desire and body in Patricia Cox Miller, "The Blazing Body: Ascetic Desire in Jerome's Letter to Eustochium," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1. Spring (1993): 21-45.

¹²⁹ “Eva in paradiso virgo fuit: post pelliceas tunicas, initium sumpsit nuptiarum. Tua regio paradisus est.” *Ep. 22*, PL 22:405. English translations are taken from, *The Letters of St. Jerome*, trans. Charles Christopher Mierow, Ancient Christian Writers, 1 (New York: Newman Press, 1963), 151.

¹³⁰ Bynum discusses these ascetical principles in detail. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

How great an interest the talent of your own wisdom pays daily to the Lord in the many spiritual daughters you have born for him . . . Nor would you have been more than a woman whereas now you rise even above men, and have turned the curse of Eve in to the blessing of Mary. How unseemly for those holy hands which now turn the pages of sacred books to have to do the obscene degradations of women's work!¹³¹

Abelard's use of this "curse of Eve", the "obscene degradations of women's work", is again drawn from his focus on Jerome's writings. Jerome has identified the "curse of Eve" as childbirth and all that was associated with the consequences of Eve's fall from virginity:

So then, as we have said . . . Eve continuously bore children in sorrow. But after a virgin conceived in the womb and bore for us a Son upon whose shoulders is the government, God the mighty, the Father of the world to come, the curse has been abrogated. Death came through Eve, life through Mary. And therefore a richer gift of virginity has flowed upon women, because it began with a woman.¹³²

Heloise will respond to this erasure in her next letter with a vivid focus on, and restatement of, the inescapable reality of these so-called degrading aspects of women's work in a monastic woman's journey to love of God. Indeed, she is explicit about women's menstruation and the particularity of this function to women's monastic life. Heloise rhetorically uses this explicit discussion of a woman's bodily functions in an attempt to bring to the fore a discussion of woman's embodied reality.¹³³

Abelard does affirm the humility of Heloise which she had so poignantly articulated in her previous letter. However, he does so only to warn her, and rather sharply, of

¹³¹ "Tuo vero prudentie talentum quantas cotidie Domino refert usuras, que multas Domino jam spirituales filias peperisti . . . nec esses plus quam femina, que nunc etiam viros transcendis et que maledictionem Eve in benedictionem vertisti Marie. O quam indecenter manus ille sacre, que nunc etiam divina revolvunt volumina cure muliebris obscenitatibus deservirent." *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 82 (Radice, 83-84).

¹³² "Et in doloribus jugiter Eva parturiebat. Postquam vero Virgo concepit in utero, et peperit nobis puerum, cujus principatus in humeros ejus, Deum, fortem, patrem futuri saeculi, soluta maledictio est. Mors per Evam: vita per Mariam. Ideoque et ditius virginitatis donum fluxit in feminas, quia coepit a femina" *Ep. 22*, PL 22: 408. (*The Letters of St. Jerome*, 154).

¹³³ Bynum discusses the ambiguous position of woman's menstruating bodies in both the medical and theological world of the Middle Ages. See Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 100, 140, and 215-27. See also Susan K. Roll, "The Old Rite of Churching of Women after Childbirth," *Wholly Woman Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity*, ed. Judith A. Herbert Kristin de Troyer, Judith Ann Johnson, Anne-Marie Korte, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

the dangers of manipulating her position to display false humility: “May your written words be reflected in your heart! If they are, yours is true humility and will not vanish with anything I say. But be careful, I beg you, not to seek praise when you appear to shun it and not to reject with your lips what you desire in your heart.”¹³⁴

It is important to note Abelard’s rebuke of Heloise’s love and desire for him in this letter. He questions the integrity of a love which desires such unrealistic consolation from him: “Every unhappy life is happy in its ending, and those who feel true sympathy and pain for the anxieties of others want to see these ended, even to their own loss, if they really love those they see suffer and think more of their friend’s advantage than of their own.”¹³⁵ However, this love he speaks of does not embrace that of lovers who are husband and wife, but the love that binds them together in religious life only, a love separate from marital love for Abelard. The two are incompatible. Though Abelard admits their relationship as husband and wife and the bond that this implies, “for we are one in Christ, one flesh according to the law of matrimony”¹³⁶, he will not entertain any confession of love to Heloise with regard to this relationship, this he has renounced and so should she. The fiction that Heloise desires to be relieved from is proved a reality by Abelard in his cruel attempts to drag Heloise into this spiritualised focus on God’s love through his own denial of love: “It was he who truly loved you, not I. My love, which brought us both to sin, should be called lust, not love. I took my fill of my wretched pleasure in you, and this was the sum total of my love.”¹³⁷

Heloise’s desires are surely so very different from Abelard’s. His are now focused on a disembodied desire for God, and any recognition of Heloise’s or his own more overtly sensual desires is not possible and even unthinkable for Abelard, and in a reversal of Benedict’s summit of humility he reveals his own “fear which casts out

¹³⁴ “Quod si fuerit, vera est humilitas tua, nec pro nostris evanuerit verbis. Sed vide, obsecro, ne hoc ipso laudem queras quo laudem fugere videris et reprobos illud ore quod appetas corde.” *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 76 (Radice, 78).

¹³⁵ “Omnis vita misera jocundum exitum habet, et quicumque aliorum anxietatibus vere compatiuntur et condolent, eas finiri desiderant – et cum dampnis etiam suis – si quos anxios vident vere diligunt, nec tam commoda propria quam illorum in ipsis attendunt.” *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 76 (Radice, 77-78).

¹³⁶ “unum quippe sumus in Christo, una per legem matrimonii caro.” *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 86 (Radice, 87-88).

¹³⁷ “Amabat te ille veraciter, non ego. Amor meus qui utrumque nostrum peccatis involvebat, concupiscentia, non amor, dicendus est.” *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 84 (Radice, 86).

love”.¹³⁸ As Joan Timmerman summarises in her study on desire in the spiritual life: “those who deny their bodies and their feelings, thinking that the real self is the mental subject, are never wholly available. Some part, the vital, spontaneous part, is always under constraint. Touch is always feared.”¹³⁹ For Abelard, the body is about lust and thus to be feared.

Paradoxically, Abelard’s fully detailed confession of their ungodly lust for one another and his subsequent justification of his sufferings is meant to draw Heloise into a wholehearted and humble acceptance of the religious life that is their destiny and salvation. This is the purpose of his extended meditation on the passion of Christ.¹⁴⁰ Abelard’s letter embraces the traditional language of renunciation and spiritual perfection that discounts the material goodness of the body.

In all this Abelard has misread the desires of Heloise. Hers is not a rage against the injustice done to them for their lust and their deception, for these she is prepared to accept the consequences. Rather it is the injustice done to their love that leaves Heloise unreconciled with God, yet in this letter Abelard, unwittingly perhaps, unjustly makes a mockery of their love by situating it entirely within the vocabulary of disordered passions.

For Heloise, any desire for God is tied up with her desire for Abelard – one without the other would be a move into hypocrisy, a denial of her true self and thus her subjectivity – and an embodied subjectivity at that. Her female body and the community’s female body and its desires are the “literal and inescapable site of identity.”¹⁴¹ In the last analysis, Heloise’s language will not allow her room to compromise the importance of this subjectivity and it is in her next letter that this is evinced in its fullest extent.

¹³⁸ See RB 7:67 “ad caritatem Dei . . . quae perfecta foris mittit timorem” (the perfect love of God which casts out all fear.) (Kardong, 135).

¹³⁹ Joan Timmerman, *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 37.

¹⁴⁰ See, *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 82-84 (Radice, 84-86).

¹⁴¹ McCracken, "The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter," 218.

Letter VI

The problematic relationship of body and spirit that McCracken maintains marks the structure of this letter from the beginning,¹⁴² could be better described as Heloise's attempt linguistically to present the legitimacy of claiming the body as integral to the identity of a Christian, and a Christian woman in particular, defined precisely by her sexual difference.

This third letter from Heloise has been interpreted as the moment when she "abandons the passionate speech of desire that characterizes her first two letters."¹⁴³ Yet, on the contrary, the desires of Heloise in Letter VI simply shift from a mostly particular mood to that of the inherently general or communal mood, as I have already demonstrated in Chapter 1. These same desires as expressed in the earlier letters are now in the voice not of Heloise's individual self, but of her general identity as the head of a female monastic community. It is the general desires of the female community that Heloise articulates. This "metonymic expansion"¹⁴⁴ of context, an expansion that incorporates rather than sacrifices or renounces the body, enables the voice of Heloise and the voice of the Abbess of the Paraclete to speak out as one.¹⁴⁵ As Irigaray maintains, feminine speech: "mixes with bodies of like state, sometimes dilutes itself in them in an almost homogenous manner, which makes the distinction between the one and the other problematical."¹⁴⁶ This is precisely the manner of speech of Heloise in her oscillation between her own particular voice and the transfigured voice as abbess, the communal embodiment of the female voice.

In this fourth letter of the later exchange, Heloise asks for two things of Abelard, as I have already indicated.¹⁴⁷ Viewed within the context of desire, both of these requests are again the expanded communal form of the requests she had previously made to him in a more personal voice in her Letters II and IV. As the communal body, the abbess, she again desires a "paternal interest" from Abelard in her desire for a history

¹⁴² McCracken states: "Heloise introduces the problematic relationship of body and spirit that will implicitly structure the whole of her their letter. Does the heart rule the body or is the heart to be ruled by the contrite, chaste body, a body whose excesses are contained by a religious rule?" See, *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ See Chapter 2, p. 28-29.

¹⁴⁵ See J. T. Muckle, ed. "The Personal Letters between Abelard and Heloise," *Mediaeval Studies* 15 (1953): 59, and Robertson, *Abelard and Heloise*, 54.

¹⁴⁶ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 111.

¹⁴⁷ See Chapter 2, p. 55.

of monastic women: “And so all we handmaids of Christ, who are your daughters in Christ, come as suppliants to demand of your paternal interest two things which we see to be very necessary for ourselves. One is that you will teach us how the order of nuns began and what authority there is for our profession.”¹⁴⁸ Her desire includes the consideration of women’s bodies as her community’s context for living monastic life. Hence she desires a Rule that refuses to bypass the specificity of the context of women. Just as the context of the feminine body and its desires in her earlier letters cannot be side-stepped, neither can they be refused when transposed into the context of the larger feminine communal body, the body of the community.

As the communal body, Heloise, rather than denying herself and her desires, expands both and in so doing concretely highlights the nature and difference of the feminine body:

. . . that you will prescribe some Rule for us and write it down, a Rule which shall be suitable for women, and also describe fully the manner and habit of our way of life, which we find was never done by the holy Fathers. Through lack and need of this it is the practice today for men and women alike to be received into monasteries to profess the same Rule, and the same yoke of monastic ordinance is laid on the weaker sex as on the strong.¹⁴⁹

Heloise clearly articulates their “difference” in this desire and she goes on in detail to describe that difference in relation to the living out of the Benedictine Rule. In her articulation of her desires here she does not sacrifice any intensity or passion in her arguments, as Dronke has demonstrated in his stylistic analysis of this letter.¹⁵⁰

Heloise’s desire is multi-layered. She desires to live an authentic female life, an authentic monastic life, an authentic wifely life and an authentic motherly life; however, these identities are not divided up for Heloise. How this is possible

¹⁴⁸ “Omnes itaque nos Christi ancille et in Christo filie tue duo nunc a tua Paternitate supplices postulamus, que nobis admodum necessaria providemus. Quorum quidem alterum est ut nos instruere velis unde sanctimonialium ordo ceperit, et que nostre sit professionis auctoritas.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 89 (Radice, 94).

¹⁴⁹ “ut aliquam nobis regulam instituas, et scriptam dirigas que feminarum sit propria et ex integro nostre conversionis statum habitumque describat, quod nondum a Patribus sanctis actum esse conspeximus. Cujus quidem rei defectu et indigentia nunc agitur ut ad ejusdem regule professionem tam mares quam femine in monasteriis suscipiantur, et idem institutionis monastice jugum imponitur infirmo sexui eque ut forti.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 89 (Radice, 94).

¹⁵⁰ Peter Dronke, “Heloise's *Problemata* and *Letters*: Some Questions of Form and Content,” *Petrus Abaelardus, (1079-1142): Person Werk und Wirkung*, 53-73.

perplexes readers to such an extent that some have claimed an unresolved “split” in Heloise’s identity. Robertson for example, argues for an historical Heloise, holy and wise; and a passionate Heloise of fiction.¹⁵¹ Newman suggests that the sensuous Heloise fades into the virtuous Heloise as the letter progresses.¹⁵² However these conclusions do not do justice to Heloise’s rhetorical skill. The complexity of Heloise’s writing is reflective of the difficult task of reconciling all these authentic desires into her desire for wholeness. She accomplishes this through expanding the literary context of her speech. Now it is her community’s desire to live authentic lives and they cannot do this without positing their subjectivity, that is, a subjectivity in difference. In contrast to Abelard, Heloise achieves this authentication by avoiding any meditation on metaphorical interpretations of the individual soul in the religious endeavour. Metaphorical readings invariably abstract the body and eliminate its essential place in authentic identity and thus, its subjectivity as I have explained.¹⁵³ By contrast, Heloise is determined to harmonise the body’s many desires and needs with the spiritual quest for God.

A full analysis of Heloise’s critique of the Rule is the subject of subsequent chapters in this thesis;¹⁵⁴ however, in the present context, her primary desire for the “justice” of Benedict and his Rule for her own female community is reflective of the injustice perpetrated against her desires in her personal lives. As Abbess, just as lover, her desire for justice is expressed in the recognition of their sexual difference. Her desires, consistent with what had previously been the basis of her arguments, are expressed not in terms of Rules or even in terms of interpretation of Rules, but rather in terms of one’s interior motivations or intentions, intentions that are primarily concerned with the adherence to love, not Rules.

Heloise is not concerned with being innovative or outstanding in her desire for consideration of women, rather her desire for modification of the Rule to the needs of women is grounded in her desire to attain a Christian life via not only just but also sensible and practical means:

¹⁵¹ See Robertson, *Abelard and Heloise*. 120-24.

¹⁵² See Barbara Newman, "Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloise," 74.

¹⁵³ See Chapter 2, p. 48.

¹⁵⁴ See Chapter 5 and 6.

If concession were made without scandal on neutral points, it would be enough to forbid only what is sinful. Thus the same dispensation could be made for food as for clothing, so that provision could be made of what can be purchased more cheaply, and, in everything, necessity not superfluity could be our consideration.¹⁵⁵

Even Heloise's desire for an appropriate prescription vis-à-vis the recitation of the Hours takes into account the particular needs of women: "But it is chiefly in connection with the offices of the Church and the ordering of the psalms that provision is needed, so that here at least, if you think fit, you may allow some concession to our weakness, and when we recite the psalter in full within a week it shall not be necessary to repeat the same psalms."¹⁵⁶ Context bears heavily on this judgement as she points out that even the men of the past, with their wives in tow, reached esteemed and model degrees of virtue.¹⁵⁷ This is surely a barb aimed at Abelard's disposal of his own wife. She quotes Chrysostom who claims that a married man has the duty to be as a monk also: "For he [Paul] wrote these things not only for monks but for all who were in the cities, and the layman should not have greater freedom than the monk, apart from sleeping with his wife. He has permission for this, but not for other things; and in everything he must conduct himself like a monk."¹⁵⁸ Abelard can not conceive of being both husband to Heloise and monk at the same time, one must be renounced, sacrificed, for the other. Yet this is clearly her desire and she seems to see no inherent contradiction in its possible integration into her life as an Abbess. In this letter, by drawing on an esteemed Church Father, she suggests that her position is more in keeping with Christian tradition.

Heloise's desire, which drives her unique spirituality, is the desire to be simply Christian and not "more than Christian"¹⁵⁹ – to be authentic in her humanity, not pretending to rise above it in some ethereal saintly manner that Abelard sets forth for

¹⁵⁵ "mediisque omnibus sine scandalo concessis, sola interdicti peccata sufficeret; et sic quoque in cibis sicut in vestimentis dispensaretur, ut quod vilius comparari posset ministraretur, et per omnia necessitati, non superfluitati, consuleretur." *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 98-99 (Radice, 103-4).

¹⁵⁶ "Maxime vero de officiis ecclesiasticis et de ordinatione psalmodum providendum est, ut in hoc saltem, si placet, nostram exoneret infirmitatem, ne cum psalterium per ebdomadam expleamus eosdem necesse sit psalmos repeti." *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 105 (Radice, 111).

¹⁵⁷ See *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 93 (Radice, 98).

¹⁵⁸ "Non enim hec monachis scribebat tantum, sed omnibus qui erant in civitatibus." *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 93 (Radice, 98).

¹⁵⁹ See *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 93 (Radice, 98).

her in his Letter V, where, as already stated, he expects her to transcend her physical condition and be “more than woman.”¹⁶⁰

“Love” itself should be the focus of one’s desire and this is precisely what Heloise identifies as missing in the world. In a pointed remark Heloise claims universally what she had previously accused Abelard of personally¹⁶¹ when she states, “in the words of Truth, amongst many or indeed almost all men love itself has grown cold.”¹⁶² Love alone is what justifies for Heloise and she draws on Paul to validate her point: “what the Apostle calls the sum of the law and the object of what is commanded.”¹⁶³

Heloise longs for integrity for herself and for her community, her daughters. This integrity cannot be merely outward show of virtue. Virtue must have some grounding in their hearts. In her critique of the Rule and her stress on intention or the interior person, love is the focus of one’s desire in the spiritual life, not renunciation or sacrifice. These may well be inherited into the bargain, but they are not the prime focus. Here the feminine voice of desire can be heard as envisaged by Irigaray: “‘Love’ has been her only recourse, and for that reason she has elevated it to the rank of sole and absolute value.”¹⁶⁴ This is surely what it means to be “not more than Christian.”

Heloise ends this final letter with her last appeal to Abelard, an appeal that very astutely draws on Abelard’s own theological concern and one that aptly draws together her desire for love in its ultimate and most Christian expression. In her final words, Heloise unashamedly inserts her desires into a Trinitarian formula in order to exhort Abelard to embrace these same desires and the desires of the community: “It is for you then, master, while you live, to lay down for us what Rule we are to follow for all time, for after God you are the founder of this place, through God, you are the

¹⁶⁰ “plus quam femina” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 93 (Radice, 98).

¹⁶¹ See *Ep. 2*, Hicks 51 (Radice, 53). “It was desire, not affection which bound you to me, the flame of lust rather than love.” (Dicam: concupiscentia te michi potius quam amicitia sociavit; libidinis ardor potius quam amor).

¹⁶² “et juxta illud Veritatis, ipsam karitatem non tam multorum quam fere omnium refriguisse.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 96 (Radice, 101).

¹⁶³ “quam plenitudinem legis et finem precepti Apostolus vocat.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 99 (Radice, 104).

¹⁶⁴ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 51.

creator of our community, with God you should be the director of our religious life.”¹⁶⁵ As indicated in the introduction to this paper, “Desire is built, then, into the substructure of creation; and, in that, creation is an image of *desire and difference* within the Trinity itself.”¹⁶⁶

Heloise’s desire is deeply embedded in her created embodiment, an embodiment marked by both its innate sense of desire and its uniqueness in difference. Heloise’s love is the very love that the Trinity, God herself, has built into the fabric of creation, and Heloise implicitly indicates this in her final appeal to Abelard.

Conclusion:

If what Ward posits above is true, that “desire is built into creation” through the love of God, who is a trinity of love, then to deny desire is part of the essence of human sinfulness, it is a denial of what is essentially of God. In his article on the retrieval of a new and fuller understanding of desire, Peter Black maintains that embarrassment or denial of even our so-called lower order desires, as it would seem is the case for Abelard, is part of the legacy of original sin. He insists that “the task before us is not to keep curbing desire, but rather to keep growing and deepening desire. The task before us is not to subject sexual passion to the will, but to restore it to desire.”¹⁶⁷ In this task, the body, that is, materiality, plays not a secondary role, but a vital one on the journey to incorporated love of God:

In this sense desire seems to have a life of its own, for one might start with desiring the beautiful body of another, but the body alone will not satisfy and so the spirit of the person is desired and loved also, and in turn this desire for the other leads to the desire of Beauty itself.¹⁶⁸

In Heloise’s letters to Abelard, we are confronted by a startling re-orientation of the place of both love and desire in monastic and Christian spirituality, a re-orientation that takes stock of the human condition from the feminine perspective and develops a language that enables women to insert themselves into a desire for God through their

¹⁶⁵ “Tibi nunc, domine, dum vivis, incombit instituere de nobis quid in perpetuum tenendum sit nobis. Tu quippe post Deum hujus loci fundator, tu per Deum nostre congregationis es plantor, tu cum Deo nostre sis religionis institutor.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 106 (Radice, 111).

¹⁶⁶ Ward, “Divinity and Sexuality: Luce Irigaray and Christology,” 228-29. Emphasis added.

¹⁶⁷ Black, “The Broken Wings of Eros,” 119.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

own unique subjectivity, a subjectivity which does not need to bypass or transcend the body and its desires.

First and foremost, it is Heloise's desire to have Abelard connect with her and the community in a relationship founded and built on love, as it is his duty to be both a faithful husband and likewise, a faithful Father to the community. This love is not to be sacrificed but incorporated into their desire for God. This incorporation is achieved via their desire to have Abelard's recognition of their difference. The community's desire is to be truly human and thus, truly itself before a God who is love, and this it cannot do without the recognition of its feminine context and without the love that brought it into being, that is, the love of its founder and guide.

In these letters, Heloise obliquely justifies her own personal position vis-à-vis her desire for Abelard. It does not consist in conforming to conventional images and regulations of desire, desire that renounces and sacrifices all others in its movement towards God. Shifting the traditional language of renunciation from its "position of mastery",¹⁶⁹ Heloise presents an alternative and equally valid vocabulary by which one can achieve true "desire for God".

In this alternative position, Heloise moves from a spirituality that focuses on "liberation from desire" to that which values the "liberation of desire".¹⁷⁰ As Black's analysis of desires suggests: "The former is insatiable self [promoting ego], compulsive, addictive, and gives desire a bad name. The latter gives one's story a chance to move on. Risk, in fact, is the refusal to forget desire."¹⁷¹ Heloise risks this freedom of desire, which is nothing more than the freedom to love, the "freedom of the Gospel", and in so doing expands her desires through her own personal issues to those of the larger female body, that of the community. To restate Black's conclusions: Heloise's recognition of desire brought life to both her and her

¹⁶⁹ A phrase used throughout Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*.

¹⁷⁰ I have borrowed the naming of these two positions from Sebastian Moore, *Jesus the Liberator of Desire* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 92.

¹⁷¹ Black, "The Broken Wings of Eros," 118.

community, whereas in running away in denial of the love born of desire, Abelard bred only strife for himself in his failed attempts to be a monastic leader of his age.¹⁷²

Thus this desire which Heloise positions as primary is not achieved through the repression of other desires but through their incorporation into “Love” itself. This is a love that Heloise has shown to be humble in its honest expression, embodied in its context, selfless and disinterested in its orientation, and finally, stubbornly refuses to be denied. Here is a spirituality that finds integrity in the human person’s desire to love, in and through our essential embodiment. It is a spirituality that Timmermann appeals to when she states:

It is not the renunciatory lifestyle that produces grace, but the response to grace that takes forms sometimes of detachment and sometimes of attachment. In the history of spirituality, perhaps because it was largely written or censored by men, perhaps because of the exegetical tradition, letting go, detachment, has been interpreted to have greater intrinsic value. But the movements of the Spirit toward embodiment, engagement, or taking hold are fruit equally of grace.¹⁷³

This voice of a monastic woman from the twelfth century is not one that should shock, shame or confuse our understanding of the spiritual quest. Contrary to Brooke’s assessment that, “The successful foundation of a [Heloise’s] religious order . . . is incompatible with a persistently secular, sensual outlook”,¹⁷⁴ Heloise’s position frees us from that “master discourse” that is so pervasive of our expression and all too obvious in the unhealthy and dangerous results of sexual repression that plague the religious world in particular and the wider world in general to this day. Heloise enables the re-imagining of human desires in a feminine key, a key that does not repress, but harmonises the spiritual and the material dimensions of human love in the pursuit of Christian integrity.

Irigaray makes the claim that “Feminine pleasure has to remain inarticulate in language, in its own language, if it is not to threaten the underpinnings of logical operations [that is, male speech]. And so what is most strictly forbidden to women

¹⁷² Ibid., 126. For an interesting modern perspective on this relationship, see the fictional text by Luise Rinser, *Abelard’s Love* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991). For a critical study of this novel, see Albrecht Classen, “Abelard and Heloise’s Love Story from the Perspective of Their Son Astrolabe: Luise Rinser’s Novel *Abelard’s Love*,” *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 57.1 (2003): 9-31.

¹⁷³ Timmerman, *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth*, 33.

¹⁷⁴ Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage*, 101.

today is that they should attempt to express their own pleasure.”¹⁷⁵ That Heloise should dare to attempt to express her own pleasure, her desires and those of her female community, or that we should dare to interpret those pleasures and desires as constitutive of her Christian identity, is to dare to have a different voice, a feminine voice. It is to dare to speak in different words, words that are the “love of God”, in, through and with our bodies. It is to this theme of “love of God” that I will now turn.

¹⁷⁵ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 77.