

Chapter 4:

“Absence”: The Embodied Identity of Heloise

*Tu mea presens leticia, et est michi meror tui absentia*¹

Introduction:

The concept of “absence” can also be considered yet another metaphorical theme with theological implications, which underscores both the context of, and expression within, the dramatic rhetoric of Heloise’s writings to Abelard. This theme is evident throughout most of the writings of Heloise that we have available to us today. It is particularly evident in her early love letters and the later correspondence, and can also be identified within the *Problemata Heloissae*,² and her monastic community’s statutes, *Institutiones nostrae*.³ In the Love Letter collection, Abelard is absent for Heloise in body and, as already noted, is the focus of her ardent and passionate longing and desire for his presence. In the later correspondence one can detect a fourfold framework to this theme, that is, an Abelard, absent in body as before, and absent in consolation; an absent monastic rule suitable for women; an absent

¹ “Your presence is my joy, your absence my sorrow.” See letter 21 and this theme is repeated in letters 45, 49, and 69. (Chiavaroli and Mews, 203, 225, 227, and 249).

² See PL 178: 677-750

³ See Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*.

motherhood due to the absence of Astrolabe, their son;⁴ and most importantly for this present chapter, the implicit sense of an absent, though not insignificant God. In the *Problemata*, this theme of absence is played out through Heloise's biblical inquiries to Abelard. All of these moments of "absence" culminate in the "absence", or metaphorical withdrawal, of the particular identity of Heloise as she takes on the more universal identity of the Christian subject, as noted previously. This "absence" is achieved through her withdrawal and transfiguration into the representative voice of the body of her community as Abbess of the Paraclete.

Other writers have identified this theme of absence, found within medieval love letter collections, as that which helps energise intimate relationships between individual lovers. For example, Ward and Chiavaroli summarise the practice of medieval love letter writing to which these letters conform as follows:

[T]here is a trace of the writer, the bed will reveal all, the exchanges are written on (wax) tablets and conveyed by messengers, *devotion matches absence*, from time to time some hesitation as to what to write is displayed and a measure of uncertainty as to the real attitude of the writer is expressed; responses are deemed inadequate and excuses for not writing are feigned; there is a perceived need for restraint, and threats from rumor, jealousy, and popular disclosure are ever-present.⁵

It is with this position, where "devotion matches absence", that this chapter is concerned. One only desires, be it God or others, when there is something missing, that is, when there is some degree of lack or absence.

Theologically, this aspect of human identity was acknowledged early in Christian history. Augustine articulated this sense of absence through his own search for meaning:

Late have I loved you, O Beauty, so ancient and so new, late have I loved you! And behold, you were within me and I was outside and there I sought for you and in my deformity I rushed headlong into the well-

⁴ Juantia Feros Ruys has identified this absence in the correspondence and *Problemata*. She makes the case for Heloise's persistent reference to and need for recognition of her unwilling maternal martyrdom. See Feros Ruys, "*Quae Maternae Immemor Naturae*: The Rhetorical Struggle over the Meaning of Motherhood in the Writings of Heloise and Abelard."

⁵ Ward and Chiavaroli, "The Young Heloise and Latin Rhetoric: Some Preliminary Comments on the 'Lost' Love Letters and Their Significance," 54. Emphasis added.

formed things that you have made. You were with me, and I was not with you.⁶

Benedict's fifth-century Rule for monks is driven by this same felt sense of something incomplete in life, that is, an absence of God, and is the basis for his teaching on humility. Through the recognition of the difference that exists between humanity and divinity: "he [the monk] should always repeat in his heart what the publican said in the gospel, his eyes cast down: 'Lord, I am a sinner and not worthy to raise my eyes to heaven'."⁷ And a monk is tested in his suitability for the life on the basis of his sincere desire to seek this God: "One must note whether he [the novice monk] really seeks God."⁸ One only seeks for something that is absent, missing, in a desire for its presence.

For Bernard, contemporary of Heloise, God's absence is only apparent through our own refusal to desire the ever-loving presence of God. The juxtaposition of absence and presence in this spirituality becomes explicit:

Joy will be fulfilled, but there will be no end to desire, and therefore no end to the search. Think, if you can, of the eagerness to see God as not caused by his absence, for he is always present; and think of the desire for God as without fear of failure, for grace is abundantly present.⁹

Indeed, for Bernard, it is only when a monk comes, in humility, to a full acknowledgement of his own identity, his true identity in the presence and knowledge of God, that this sense of absence is overcome. Commenting on Benedict's symbolism of the "Ladder of Humility" that the monk ascends in order to know himself and therefore God, Bernard explains:

This was the ladder shown to Jacob (Gen 28:12) – a figure of humility. Leaning on the top of the ladder the Lord looks on the sons of men with the eyes of truth that deceive not and cannot be deceived to see if there is any

⁶ "Sero te amavi, pulchritudo tam antiqua et tam nova, sero te amavi! Et ecce intus eras et ego foris, et ibi te quaerebam, et in ista formosa, quae fecisti, deformis inruebam, mecum eras, et tecum non eram." *Confessionum: Book 10, chapter 27*. CCSL XXVII: . English translation from *Augustine: Selected Writings*, trans. Mary T. Clark, The Classics of Western Spirituality. (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 144. It must be pointed out that this "lack", expressed theologically, is not to be equated with a Freudian understanding of woman, where woman is described as lacking in relation to men. From the theological perspective, all of us, male and female alike, experience a "lack" of the other.

⁷ "Dicens sibi in corde semper illud quod publicanus ille evangelicus fixis in terram oculis dixit: Domine, non sum dignus, ego peccator, levare oculos meos ad caelos." RB 7:65 (Kardong, 135).

⁸ "Et sollicitudo sit si revera Deum quaerit." RB 58:7 (Kardong, 463).

⁹ "Adimplebitur laetitia; sed desiderii non erit finis, ac per hoc nec quaerendi. Tu vero cogita, si potes, quaeritandi hoc studium sine indigentia, et desiderium sine anxietate: alterum profecto praesentia, alterum copia excludit." *Sermo 84*, SBO 2: 303, 15-18 (CF 40, 189).

who understands and seeks God. His place at the ladder top shows us that the knowledge of truth is to be found only at the summit of humility. Can you hear him from his lofty station and crying to those who seek him, for he knows his own: “Come to me all you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits?” (Sir 24:26)¹⁰

It is this oscillation between presence and absence or lack that drives desire for the other, in whatever form this desire may take, and thus identifies the monk in his desire for God. The desires of both Heloise and Abelard, described and analysed in the previous chapter, are initiated and maintained via this same felt sense of “absence”. I would suggest that it is this “absence” which establishes, for Heloise at least, a fuller subjectivity and identity and reveals a distinctive “voice” of Heloise when her writings are read as a coherent whole.

As already noted elsewhere, there has been much written over the years concerning Heloise’s passionate and unbridled desire for Abelard in his absence.¹¹ This focus has often led scholars to assume that Heloise was never able to come to any acceptance of the monastic vocation imposed upon her. Alternatively, it is understood as simply a stage in either her successful, or otherwise, process of conversion to the monastic state and submission to Abelard’s will.¹² I have established that these assumptions ignore interpretations of Heloise’s personal character attested to by her own contemporaries and also all too obvious in her success as the Abbess of a highly regarded and expanding monastic community. It also fails to read the written texts as a coherent whole and results in a highly questionable dual personality being assigned to Heloise, that is, a split between the Heloise who is the lover of Abelard and the Heloise who has the imaginative and creative intellect of this successful and innovative benedictine abbess.¹³ The distinctive “voice” of Heloise can only be heard in its fullness by reading the text as a whole and uncovering there the concepts and vocabulary of the language with which she attempts to express herself.

¹⁰ “Ilud quoque quod in scala illa, quae in typo humilitatis Iacob monstrata est, Dominus de super innixus apparuit, quid nobis aliud innuit, nisi quod in culmine humilitatis cognitio constituitur veritatis? Dominus quippe de summitate scalae prospiciebat super filios hominum tamquam Veritas, cuius oculi sicut fallere nolunt, ita falli non norunt, ut videret si sit intelligens aut requirens Deum . . . ‘Transite ad me omnes qui concupiscitis me, et a generationibus meis implemini?’” *De Gradibus Humilitatis et Superbiae II.3*. SBO 3: 18, 13-15. (CF 13, 31).

¹¹ See Chapter 1, n. 82.

¹² See Chapter 2, p. 51.

¹³ See Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage*, 101.

This position becomes particularly relevant if we appropriate Morgan Powell's thesis which insists that the correspondence of Heloise and Abelard can validly be considered as constitutive of a larger whole of formative material for Heloise's community as it grew and developed its own unique character. If we take this position as a given, then these letters should be read in the light of their intended audience, that is, the formative material for Heloise's own community of the Paraclete, and it must be remembered that this community is a monastic community, with a monastic aim at its heart. Assuming Powell's thesis to be the case, we must once again ask what might be the formative content of this corpus of writing for Heloise's monastic community, particularly through this theme of "absence"? What legacy is Heloise bequeathing to her community through the preservation of this collection of her writings that is, at first glance, seemingly so very personal at times?

Powell suggests that it is primarily for consolation and healing of the community that this material was kept as part of the founding documents of the Paraclete and which, thus, helped them to come to an understanding of their identity. He claims:

When assumptions stemming from misplaced identification with the voices of the text are erased and when strategies of audience identification modeled in the text are considered in their place, the abbess who so confidently wields the rhetorical shield of gender difference to take control of her future religious life is not only fully compatible with the passionate lover and her irrepressible desire, she is the lover's compelling fusion with the voice of a nascent spirituality that seeks the assimilation of human sexual desire to the love of God.¹⁴

In this chapter, I will again continue to explore Powell's suggestion of a unique "nascent spirituality" existing within Heloise's writings. If we now focus on "absence" as another hermeneutical tool for reading the correspondence, then what is the formative wisdom that Heloise is trying to convey to her community with this concept? Is there any theological or spiritual significance which compels this unique inclusion in her writings, and what, if any, is its significance for the spiritual life as lived today? I will maintain there is a "nascent spirituality" embedded within Heloise's writings which exposes not only a Trinitarian focus, as indicated previously, but also further anthropological insights that are inherently Christian and particularly

¹⁴ Powell, "Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete: Of Scholarly Diversion and a Woman's 'Conversion'," 278.

Benedictine, within a language that is uniquely feminine through its consideration of embodiment.

Christian anthropology takes as its starting point the Genesis explanation of the human person as made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). This personhood is fundamentally relational: “male and female, God created them” (Genesis 1:27). Human identity is established not through some sort of unconditional autonomy or rampant individualism, but rather through the recognition of interdependence with others:

Henceforth the idea of human unity is born. That image of God, the image of the Word, which the incarnate Word restores and gives back to its glory, is “I myself”; it is also the other, every other. It is that aspect of *me* in which I coincide with every other man [human] . . . It is our very unity in God.¹⁵

The understanding of *imago Dei* was a common theme of the spiritual life in Heloise’s own time reaching back to the teachings of Augustine on the Trinity. Although there has been a rather ambiguous understanding of what this meant, particularly in relation to bodies, and particularly women’s bodies throughout the history of theology, it is clear that the majority of Church Fathers wrote of this *imago Dei* in terms of symbolic language in relation to the human body, where the body of the male was considered capable of imaging God whereas that of the woman was not. Abelard himself conceived of woman as “likeness” but not “image” of God. In his *Expositio in Hexaemeron* he writes: “Therefore because man is more worthy and similar to God than the female [woman] he is said to be in God’s image; the woman is rightly then the likeness of God”.¹⁶ The ambiguity between “image” and “likeness” in theological discourse began with Irenaeus. At the “Fall”, humanity lost its “likeness” or similitude to God. It is only in the incarnation that this “likeness” is restored to humanity: “Why then did God not once again take mud, rather than work this fashioning from Mary? In order to avoid fashioning something new and different as the recipient of salvation, and so that the same thing should be recapitulated by

¹⁵ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: A Study of Dogma in Relation to the Corporate Destiny of Mankind* (New York: Longmans, 1950), 3.

¹⁶ “Quia ergo vir dignior quam femina est et per hoc Deo similior, imago ejus dicitur; femina vero similitudo.” PL 178: 760D-761A.

preserving the likeness.”¹⁷ However, following the theology of Augustine, medieval theology located the image of God not in the body, as implied in Irenaeus, but in the human mind, specifically in the reason. As already noted, Augustine’s theological language left no space for woman *qua* woman as created in “God’s image”.¹⁸

Heloise, like most religious women of her time, paid little attention to such speculations and had no difficulty identifying herself as the “image of God”,¹⁹ even if this was situated only in reason as was a common belief of the times. In her commentary on the Benedictine Rule she writes:

Moreover, what is so contrary to the religious life and peace of the monastery as the thing which most encourages sensuality and starts up disturbances, which destroys our reason, *the very image of God in us*, whereby we are raised above the rest of creation? That thing is wine, which Scriptures declare to be the most harmful of any form of nourishment, warning us to beware of it.²⁰

The Christian God, though one, is not a monad of sameness. This is a Trinitarian God, where difference/otherness is the ground of unity, not division. The result of sin is the disordering of the image of God within the human being. Medieval theology understood this as a distortion of the will, a loss of freedom or false self-love. Modern theology describes this rejection of the Trinitarian God as rejection of the “Other”, or the fear of this “otherness”:

The fact that the fear of the other is pathologically inherent in our existence results in the fear not only of the other but of all otherness . . . we are not afraid simply of certain others, but even if we accept them, it is on condition that they are somehow like ourselves. Radical otherness is an anathema. Difference itself is a threat . . . fear of the other is nothing more than fear of the different. We all want somehow to project into the other the model of our own selves.²¹

¹⁷ “Quare igitur non iterum sumpsit limum Deus, sed ex Maria operatus est, plasmationem fieri? Ut non alia plasmatio fieret neque alia esset plasmatio quae sluaretur, sed eadem ipsa recapitularetur, seruata similitudine.” *Adversus Hereses* III 21.10 SC 211:430. English translation from: Denis Minns, *Irenaeus*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers Series, ed. Brian Davies (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 88.

¹⁸ See Chapter 1, p. 6.

¹⁹ See Caroline Walker Bynum’s discussion in Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 155.

²⁰ “Quid etiam tam religioni quietique monastice contrarium est quam quod luxurie fomentum maxime prestat et tumultus excitat, atque ispan Dei in nobis ymaginem, qua prestamus ceteris – id est: rationem -, delet? Hoc autem vinum est, quod supra omnia victui pertinentia plurimum Scriptura damnosum asserit et caveri ammonet.” *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 96-97 (Radice, 101). My emphasis added.

²¹ de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 3.

The true Christian subject, male or female, therefore experiences a fundamental sense of incompleteness, a lack, an absence of the other and in particular, the ultimate Other, God. As such, the subject seeks out this missing other/Other, as Augustine so profoundly noted early in Christian history: “For you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless O Lord, until they rest in you.”²² The Christian identity then, is established only in relationship to the other. Without “the Other” and others, there can be no Christian subject. Bernard alludes to this characteristic when he comments on his own relationship to the members of his community: “I shall care for them as far as I am able, and *in* them, as long as I live, I shall serve my God in unfeigned love. I won’t seek what is mine. What I judge useful to me is not what is useful *to me*, but to many.”²³

However, the “Other” and others will, to some degree, always remain other, that is, there will always be a confrontation between the paradox of presence and absence in life. There will always be a sense of both presence and absence of the other to the Christian subject. Twentieth-century French philosopher, Michel de Certeau, maintains a sort of ontological necessity for this sense of absence in the human person, an absence which, he maintains, precedes the establishment of community or relationships.²⁴ It is, in fact, the ground of possibility for the human person, without which personhood in terms of integrated relationship to the “Other” and “others” eludes us. This absence is precisely where we come to recognise our own being as a being which in and of itself “lacks”, that is, we need the other to complete our identity as human persons, yet, paradoxically, we cannot have full access to this other. They will always remain “other”, absent, or “different”, and apart from us. It is not that we will ever overcome this “difference”, or that it is our purpose to resolve it. It is the ground of our human identity in relation to each other and to God. This project is at the very heart of the monastic endeavour in the Rule of Benedict, which is fundamentally a journey towards God *with* others. Benedict ends his monastic Rule

²² “quia fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te.” *Confessionum* 1.1 CCSL XXVII: 1:1, 6-7. English Translation from: *Saint Augustine: Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

²³ “Geram eis morem quoad potuero, et in ipsis serviam Deo meo, quamdiu fuero, in caritate non ficta. Non quaeram quae mea sunt, non quod mihi utile est, sed quod multis, id mihi utile iudicabo.” *Sermo* 52, SBO 2:95, 9-12 (CF 31, 56-57).

²⁴ Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 79-90.

thus: "Let them [the monks] prefer absolutely nothing to Christ and may he lead us *all together* to everlasting life."²⁵

I am proposing that Heloise's struggle for authentic identity in her human person, at one pole, a lover and mother, at the other pole, a Benedictine abbess, is intimately tied up with this "lack", this "absence". As such the concept of "absence" can be used as yet another effective hermeneutical tool through which we can interpret Heloise's writings theologically.

The spirituality of "absence" present within Heloise's writings helps to establish not only the identity of Heloise as a true Christian subject but also the monastic identity of her Benedictine community. "Absence" can be identified as a literary device purposefully used by Heloise, either implicitly or explicitly, to express both the deeply personal, and at the same time, broader and more general and theological dimensions of her longing.

Martin Irvine maintains that the letters of Heloise and Abelard demonstrate "a possibility for a woman to appropriate the power of Latin culture but resist its totalizing or essentializing force".²⁶ In contrast, and consistent with my previous arguments concerning Heloise's use of language, I want to suggest that this concept of "absence" may, in some sense, be a unique language tool of a feminine voice.

I will demonstrate that this spirituality supports, clarifies and even expands our own present understanding of Christianity, and Christian Anthropology in particular, as it has been handed down to us over the centuries. Heloise's is a spirituality that refuses to by-pass the significant contribution of the feminine in coming to understand our embodied humanity in relationship to each other and to God. It is my contention that it is within the symbolic use of language that we can uncover this emerging spirituality which Powell insists is present when we consider the letter collection of Heloise and Abelard as a formative whole. The present study focuses on the concept

²⁵ "Christo omnino nihil praeponant, qui nos pariter ad vitam aeternam perducant." RB 72:11-12 (Kardong, 588).

²⁶ See Irvine, "Heloise and the Gendering of the Literate Subject," 87.

of “absence” and the monastic endeavour which has as its aim and purpose the search for God, a missing or absent God.

The writings of Heloise reveal a human person, a woman, who struggles to find herself within the monastic environment to which she belongs precisely through this recognition of a fundamental “lack” or “difference”, an absence of the “other”. In this sense, Heloise’s spirituality and the spirituality of her community can be located in Certeau’s identification of the subject as described by Bauerschmidt:

a believer who must find a way to believe in a world from which God has become absent, one who seeks an excessive *modus loquendi* in order to reach beyond the limits imposed by a given language and society to speak of and to a God who is irreducibly – even cruelly – other.²⁷

I am suggesting that it is possible to consider Heloise’s letters, particularly her later letters, as an attempt at seeking this “excessive *modus loquendi*.” The excess in avenues of “absence” in Heloise’s rhetoric, absence of Abelard, of Astrolabe, of a rule for women, of God, marks this *modus loquendi*. It is a mode, as I maintain, that is a form of embodied or incarnational speech in Heloise’s writing and it is this feature that may be defined as especially feminine speech. It is also a mode that adheres unsurprisingly to a particularly embodied subject within a Benedictine context, identified as one who “seeks God.” (See RB 58:7)

How is this notion of “absence” particularly located in a “uniquely feminine” way of speaking as subject? Certeau makes the assertion that it is the “art of the weak” to speak in the form of “tactic” rather than “strategy”: “Just as a strategy is determined by the establishment of a place of power, a tactic is determined by the absence of power. But in this is the strength of the weak, for “power is bound by its very visibility.”²⁸ As the female participant in this twelfth-century dialogue of the letters, Heloise clearly identifies herself and her community as the “weak” subject, as do many other women writers of her era. In her request for a rule adapted to the needs of women, she entreats Abelard:

Do you then also, I beg you, who seek to imitate not only Christ but also this apostle, in discrimination as in name, modify your instructions for

²⁷ See F.C. Bauerschmidt, “The Abrahamic Voyage of Michel de Certeau and Theology,” *Modern Theology* 12.1 (1996): 3.

²⁸ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 37.

works to suit our weak nature, so that we can be free to devote ourselves to the offices of praising God.²⁹

Another renowned abbess and contemporary of Heloise, Hildegard of Bingen, also used this position of weakness, this tactic, in finding a voice with which to speak in the patriarchal world of the medieval era. Hildegard typically uses a humility *topos* in her writings such as, “but I - a poor woman, weak and frail,” or alternatively, “I, a poor little figure of a woman”³⁰ (*ego paupercula feminea forma*). By fulfilling the requirement for humility with the use of the formula, Hildegard demonstrates her political astuteness in attempting to speak as a woman within a society hostile to women’s voices. There is, of course, an excess of meaning within these formulae. One needs to recognise this when reading Hildegard in order to interpret how her “excessive *modus loquendi*” is operating to voice her position. As Newman explains, “she [Hildegard] also recognized that her gender had no small bearing on her vocation. When she identified herself as *ego paupercula feminea forma* – “a poor little figure of a woman” – she was appealing inversely to the same complex of ideas that led the Cistercians to compare her to the Virgin.”³¹ Hildegard’s high status was conditional on this maintenance of inferiority within the male milieu in which she lived and thus her language conforms, in some degree at least, to the conventions of the time, but also to a language of the spaces, a language with excess meaning. As Baird and Ehrman note, Hildegard’s excessive use of this *topos* can also be understood as a tactic that establishes her own unique voice:

A part of this attitude is owing, of course, to pure convention, to the omnipresent humility formula, but in this case it seems to be that *and much more*. The more the *paupercula*, “the poor little form of a woman”, stresses her wretchedness, her humility, her ignorance of earthy learning, the more credence is given to her otherworldly illumination.³²

²⁹ “Et tu ipse, obsecro, non solum Christi, verum etiam hujus imitator apostoli discretionem sicut et nomine, sic operum precepta moderare ut infirme convenit nature, et ut divine laudis plurimum vacare possimus officii.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 104 (Radice, 109).

³⁰ See Letter 2, Letter 102, Letter 109r and *Scivias* 2.1, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, vol 1. 32 and, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, vol. 2, 16-19, 48-49) and (*Scivias*, 150).

³¹ Barbara Newman, *Sister Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*, 3.

³² Ehrman, R. K and Baird, J.L. (trans.) “Introduction”, *Hildegard of Bingen, The Letters of Hildegard* vol 1, (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6.

This tactic creates a space through which women could speak in medieval times.³³ It is the excess of meaning contained within this space which reveals Heloise's understanding of love.

When Luce Irigaray asks the question, "Can women be subjects?"³⁴, her intention is to develop an approach for "listening for the silences, the lacunae, the sounds from the margins, listening not just to fathers and sons but to mothers and daughters."³⁵ One achieves this by focusing on the site of difference, which can be expressed in the present context as the site of "lack" or "absence". Irigaray maintains that this "lack" is related to the body. The female recognises her subjectivity in her "lack", her difference, and the absence that establishes this, not in the resolution of this difference not simply by playing by the rules of male discourse. It is also not in the resolution of this absence that Heloise humbly comes to terms with her true humanity in her identity. Rather it is in the faithful refusal to admit nothing other than the persistent presence of this absence, either from the perspective of the community's absent founder, their "lack" in terms of their "femaleness" in relation to the Rule of Benedict, or her own personal understanding of lack in terms of the absent Abelard, Astrolabe or God. Heloise's tactic reveals a spirituality which clarifies and extends what it means to be a Christian subject who struggles with, and yet longs for, a seemingly absent God in every aspect of her religious life.

An Absent God – "to rage against God":

In Etienne Gilson's book, *Heloise and Abelard*, he states unequivocally that God is absent in the letters of Heloise:

But reading her [Heloise's] letters, one is struck immediately by the omnipresence of Abelard and the total absence of God. Nor can this fact be passed off merely saying that God is absent from the letters. He is continually being expelled from them. How are we to explain an attitude like this?³⁶

³³ See my arguments regarding this tactic in Chapter 1 of this thesis, p. 15.

³⁴ Luce Irigaray, "The Way of the Feminine", 193

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Gilson, *Heloise and Abelard*, 88.

In spite of this claim by Gilson, there is little to substantiate it within Heloise's writings. Indeed, there is a sense that this claim runs counter to the whole project of Heloise's intentions in writing to Abelard. That Heloise desires Abelard's presence cannot be disputed, even if this presence is purely through the form of letters, however, in her later correspondence with Abelard at least, this desire for presence is for the expressed purpose of finding an authentic way to serve a God she seeks for herself and her community: "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.*"³⁷ As Waddell notes in his analysis of Heloise's purpose: "Clearly, Heloise is not reproaching Peter for not having let her have a good cry on his shoulder . . . It is not Abelard's pity that she wants, but encouragement and advice for the running of her abbey."³⁸ Indeed, there is, I would suggest, a pervasiveness of God-language that runs throughout her thoughts and words. In contrast to Gilson's claim, perhaps it is not exaggerating to suggest that God is at least as pervasively present, even in his absence, in Heloise's writing as her undoubtedly less famous yet extensively discussed emphasis on Abelard. Both modern scholarly and fictional writers tend either to shy away from this aspect of Heloise's life, or to emphasize her "rage" against God as indicative of a more irreligious bent on her part.³⁹ Heloise's is indeed a "love story" but one often not taken to its ultimate end, that of Divine Love.

Heloise was a monastic woman for the better part of her life, a fact that is often ignored or simply overlooked when interpreting her writings. Indeed, we know she was well educated as a girl in the Benedictine convent of Argenteuil and would have imbibed a great deal of monastic culture, spirituality and the biblical mode of thinking and writing in this time through the daily round of liturgy and discipline. Just how long she resided with her uncle in the precincts of the Cathedral cloister of Notre Dame, we do not know. However, the impact of the religiously oriented intellectual environment there and Abelard's influence on her education was undoubtedly

³⁷ "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." *Ep.* 2, Hicks, 53 (Radice, 54). My emphasis.

³⁸ Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*, 52.

³⁹ See Wilson and McLeod, "Textual Strategies in the Abelard/Heloise Correspondence," 129.

decisive in the development of her own critical and integrative approach in her writings. After her brief liaisons with Abelard, a period of less than three years, she found herself back in the familiar surroundings at the monastery of Argenteuil. Thus, Heloise spent the most of her life as a Benedictine nun, that is, from around 1120 – 1164. For thirty-five of these years she was the abbess of a highly respected, innovative, and expanding monastic community at the Paraclete and its subsequent foundations. It hardly seems credible that this life could have been merely a façade for her desire to maintain a relationship with Abelard alone and not contain some desire for a deep sense of God within the monastic project which she fostered and impressively developed.⁴⁰

Her intellectual prowess and spiritual esteem was well attested in her own day even if she does not admit this with her own pen. To suggest that God did not play at least as significant a role in her life and thinking as did Abelard is to ignore her context completely and to deny the fame she acquired throughout the religious world of twelfth-century Europe. This God, on whom she draws so readily and understood through the monastic framework, is a God who can only be truly understood as present when the embodied nature of humanity, be that of the male or the female, is not ignored, denied, overcome or transcended. Consequently, this is a God who is simultaneously absent and present in the formation of the identity of the Christian subject.

The Love Letter Collection:

Heloise is thoroughly conscious of the place of God in all aspects of her life in the early exchange of love letters. Of her forty-eight letters in this early love letter collection, twenty-eight make extensive use of biblical quotations or allusions,⁴¹ and twenty have explicit mention of God in some form or another.⁴² As Mews and Ward both note, Heloise's profound use of religious vocabulary throughout these early

⁴⁰ See Mary Martin McLaughlin, "Heloise the Abbess: The Expansion of the Paraclete."

⁴¹ letters 1, 5, 9, 11, 23, 25, 27, 29, 32, 45, 53, 58, 60, 62, 69, 71, 79, 84, 86, 88, 90, 92, 94, 95, 102, 104, 112, and 112a.

⁴² letters 3, 5, 7, 11, 23, 25, 27, 38b, 45, 49, 60, 71, 107, and 112.

letters is much more pronounced than that of Abelard's.⁴³ Indeed, one could claim this focus on God is consistent with the idea of an "excessive *modus loquendi*" in Heloise's speech. What is Heloise's relationship to God in each of these letters and how does this correspond to her relationship to Abelard?

God appears to be both absent and present in Heloise's letters. She expresses God's absence in a desire for his presence through her use of the subjunctive when referring to God.⁴⁴ For example, in letter 38b she expresses her hope that it will be God who is present to them, with them in their love for each other, and in protecting all aspects of Abelard's life: "May the Ruler of heaven mediate here between us. May he accompany our faith, which stands firm in mutual love . . . and may the nurturing right hand of God protect you within and without."⁴⁵ It is this desire in absence that drives her rhetoric and thus her relationship with Abelard is simultaneously a relationship with God. She stresses this fact in letter 62 when she claims that their love actually resides in God: "Beloved to Beloved: whatever there can be more blessed in God, whatever more honest and joyful among mortals."⁴⁶ There is no division between her love for Abelard, and for God. One is contained within the other. It is this position that Abelard will find impossible to sustain in the later letters, particularly in terms of any overt inclusion of the body.

Most notable and significant in regard to this fundamental absence of God is Heloise's use of the biblical metaphor and phrase from Psalm 63 in letter 112 where she comments on Abelard's own identity as one that longs for God. "To thirst for God and to cling to Him alone is necessary for every living creature."⁴⁷ It is this identity, one that longs for God, which Heloise clearly articulates throughout these letters as

⁴³ "The woman in the love letters employs religious vocabulary far more often than her teacher." Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 125. Ward and Chiavaroli also point out that the woman in the love letters emphasizes "a kind of profound religious friendship within the orbit of devotion to Christ." See Ward and Chiavaroli, "The Young Heloise and Latin Rhetoric: Some Preliminary Comments on the 'Lost' Love Letters and Their Significance," 83.

⁴⁴ Particularly in letters 3, 5, 25, 38, 49, 60 and 86.

⁴⁵ "Celi regnator sit nobis hic mediator. Sit socius fidei que constat amore duali . . . Alma dei dextra te protegat intus et extra." letter 38b (Chiavaroli and Mews, 219-21).

⁴⁶ "Dilecta dilecto: quicquid beatius apud deum, quicquid honestius atque jocundius apud homines esse potest." letter 62. (Chiavaroli and Mews, 243).

⁴⁷ "Sitire deum et illi adherere soli necessarium est omni viventi." (Chiavaroli and Mews, 287). See Ps 63:1: "Oh God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you: my flesh faints for you as a dry and weary land where there is no water." See also Psalms 42 and 143.

that which binds her in relationship to Abelard. This is shown in the example given above in letter 38, so also in her earlier letter 3: “May the ruler of Heaven mediate between us and may He accompany our faith. Farewell, and may Christ, King of Kings, save you my sweetest, for eternity. Farewell in Him who governs all things in the world.”⁴⁸

In these early love letters it is evident that for Heloise, God is all-pervasive in her context and thought. Her desire is that God mediates between them; God witnesses to her love on numerous occasions; God is their future; God governs everything; Well-being is in God’s survey; God is the bestower of gifts including philosophy; God accompanies their faith, nurtures them and provides for them; She sings “Glory to God” for their love; God is faithful to them even in their sinfulness; and ultimately, God has a primary position even in relation to Heloise’s love for Abelard: “Since you have become everything to me, except for the grace of God alone.”⁴⁹

Mews maintains that in these letters, “She [Heloise] goes beyond scripture . . . to emphasize that there is no discontinuity between the love which comes from her heart (*amor*) and selfless love (*dilectio*).”⁵⁰ However, the assumption made here from her use of vocabulary is that the biblical text exhibits this discontinuity. On the contrary, this is more a matter of interpretation than an inherent quality of the biblical text. Heloise’s inclusion of the “love that comes from the heart” is indicative of an embodied language and thoroughly consistent with the biblical message. The command to love God and neighbour in Deuteronomy and reiterated in the New Testament stresses the idea of love from the heart.⁵¹ The “heart” here certainly includes the intellectual functions, however, it also embraces the human person as a unity. Indeed, the “heart” operates as integral to the entire human person.⁵² In the New Testament times the “heart” continued to have this meaning but also with an emphasis

⁴⁸ “Celi regnator sit inter nos mediator, et sit socius fidei nostre. Vale, et Christus rex regum, te dulcissimum salvet in evum. Vale in illo qui cuncta gubernat in mundo.” letter 3. (Chiavaroli and Mews, 191).

⁴⁹ See letter 3, 5, 7, 11, 23, 25, 27, 32, 38b, 45, 49, 53, 55, 60, 84, and 86.

⁵⁰ Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 136.

⁵¹ See for example Deut. 6:5 and Deut 30:6; Song of Songs 3:1-4; Matt 22:37; Mark 12:30, 33; Luke 10:27, John 5:42; Rom. 5:5; 2 Thess 3:5; 1 Tim 1:5 and 1 Peter 1:22.

⁵² See John L. McKenzie, “Aspects of Old Testament Thought,” *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Joseph A. Fitzmeyer and Roland E. Murphy Raymond E. Brown (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), 1295.

on the affective involvement of the thoughts in action, that is, incarnate thoughts.⁵³ Any departure of love from its connection to the heart, from an embodied reality, is not consistent with the message contained within scripture.

Neither does the Rule of Benedict, a rule with which Heloise would have been familiar, make a distinction between the love of the heart, *amor*, and selfless love, *dilectio* or *caritas*. All three expressions of love are used interchangeably by Benedict as by Heloise.⁵⁴ The language of the “heart” is also markedly evident in this Rule.⁵⁵ Indeed, the whole Benedictine project aims to come to this love of God from the heart: “But as we progress in the monastic life and in faith, our hearts will swell with the unspeakable sweetness of love, enabling us to race along the way of God’s commandments.”⁵⁶ For Benedict, “the heart referred to the mind as much as the bodily center. It is the area where the person encounters God”,⁵⁷ and it again encompasses the total being of a person. The emphasis on the “heart” in the Rule is in harmony with the experiential spirituality that emerges from it, particularly in the Cistercian world that is contemporary with Heloise. Heloise’s uniqueness lies in the fact that she continually refuses to relinquish this connection between the body and the spirit and their ability to encounter God.

Heloise’s acute awareness of God, both present and absent, and her obvious biblical dexterity is indicative of a more monastic flavour within her writings and marks her identity and Christian subjectivity within this religious world view. This is an identity that does not bypass the reality of the body, a feature of her language that becomes more overt in her later writings particularly in relation to the Rule of Benedict and its adaptability to women’s bodies. Ward notes that “Heloise may have been different from Abelard in that her cultural ambitions were probably moral and behavioural

⁵³ Joseph Fitzmeyer, "Pauline Theology," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. 1407.

⁵⁴ Benedict uses *amor* eight times (See, RB 4:21; 4:72; 5:10; 7:34; 7:69; 63:13; 72:3; 72:9), *diligo* ten times (See RB Prol. 49; 4:1; 4:31; 4:71; 4:77; 5:16; 7:39; 63:10; 64:11 and 72:10), and *caritas* 16 times (R.B. Pro. 47; 2:22, 4:26; 7:67; 27:4; 35:2; 35:6; 53:3; 61:4; 64:14; 65:11; 66:4; 68:5; 71:4; 72:8 and 72:10).

⁵⁵ See RB Prol 1, 10, 26, 28, 40, 49; 2:9, 12; 3:8; 4:1, 24, 28, 50; 5:17-18; 7:3,8,14,18,37,48,51,62,65; 9:10; 12:4; 20:3; 39:9; 49:4; 52:4.

⁵⁶ “Processu vero conversationis et fidei, dilatato corde inenarrabili dilectionis dulcedine curritur via mandatorum Dei.” RB Prol 49. (Kardong, 5).

⁵⁷ Kardong, *Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary*, 6.

rather than textual and procedural.”⁵⁸ I would like to extend and reword this thesis by noting that her “cultural ambitions” were markedly *monastic, implicitly theological and overtly embodied*, and therefore more noticeably “moral and behavioural rather than textual and procedural”.

Later Correspondence:

How is this picture of God set up in the early love letters consistent or otherwise with Heloise’s position vis-à-vis God in her later correspondence with Abelard? Ward suggests that Heloise starts out the more overtly religious in her writing than Abelard and that “To some extent their later career reverses these positions.”⁵⁹ I am questioning this assertion, as it becomes obvious when analysing her letters as a whole that God is no less prominent in her thinking here than in her previous letters, indeed, God remains central to her project.

Letter II

In this first letter, Heloise refers to God directly at least sixteen times.⁶⁰ Her project in replying to Abelard’s *Historia calamitatum* is, undoubtedly, to re-establish her relationship with him and to experience his presence in his absence, at least in the form of letters. However, this re-establishment is clearly within the context of a larger framework of monastic identity, an identity for which Abelard himself is responsible. Indeed, God is to be thanked for providing them with this means of communication and connection: “Thank God that here at least is a way of restoring your presence to us.”⁶¹

From the outset there is no denial of God’s importance for Heloise. She clearly identifies herself and her community as “handmaids of God”: “and so in the name of Christ, who is still giving you some protection for his service, we beseech you to

⁵⁸ Ward and Chiavaroli, "The Young Heloise and Latin Rhetoric: Some Preliminary Comments on the 'Lost' Love Letters and Their Significance," 58.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 85.

⁶⁰ See *Ep.* 2, Hicks, 46, 47, 48, 49, 52 and 53 (Radice, 48, 49, 50, 51, 54, and 55). I am including references to Christ, Lord and the Holy Spirit here.

⁶¹ “Deo autem gratias, quod hoc saltem modo presentiam tuam nobis reddere.” *Ep.* 2, Hicks, 47 (Radice, 48).

write as often as you think fit to us who are his handmaids and yours.”⁶² Importantly, this phrase of identity, “handmaids of God”, is repeated at the beginning of each of these later letters.

Heloise’s purpose in writing to Abelard is to draw him into his responsibility for helping her and the community properly direct themselves towards this identity. Drawing on scriptural images she claims: “And so it is yours, truly your own, this new plantation for God’s purpose, but it is sown with plants which are still very tender and need watering if they are to thrive.”⁶³ It is all very well for him to write a letter of consolation to his friend, but his primary responsibility is to her and the community as “For you, after God, are the sole founder of this place, the sole builder of this oratory, the sole creator of this community.”⁶⁴ Even here, God clearly takes the primary position in Heloise’s life, as in the earlier love letters. It is God who helps the community grow in its purpose, but it needs care from its earthly founder, Abelard who is just as integral to their identity.⁶⁵ The absence of God, then, is profoundly linked to the absence of Abelard and his neglect of his duty to both Heloise herself and to her community.

As in the early letters, there is no discontinuity between dedication to God and her love for Abelard and it is his refusal to recognise this aspect of her identity that disturbs Heloise. She writes: “And so in the precarious early days of our conversion long ago I was not a little surprised and troubled by your forgetfulness, when neither reverence for God nor our mutual love nor the example of the holy Fathers made you think of trying to comfort me.”⁶⁶ As in the early letters, it is even God who continues

⁶² “Per ipsum itaque qui te sibi adhuc quoquo modo protegit Christum obsecramus, quatinus ancillulas ipsius et tuas crebris litteris.” *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 46 (Radice, 48).

⁶³ “Tua itaque, vere tua hec est proprie in sancto proposito novella plantatio, cujus adhuc teneris maxime plantis frequens ut profitiant necessaria est irrigatio.” *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 47 (Radice, 49).

⁶⁴ “Hujus quippe loci tu post Deum solus es fundator, solus hujus oratorii constructor, solus hujus congregationis edificator.” *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 47 (Radice, 49).

⁶⁵ See, *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 48 (Radice, 49). Here she draws on 1 Cor 3: 6 to make her point “according to the words of the Apostle, ‘I planted the seed and Apollos watered it; but God made it grow.’” (juxta illud Apostoli: ‘Ego plantavi, Apollo rigavit; Deus autem incrementum dedit.’]

⁶⁶ “Unde non mediocri ammiratione nostre tenera conversacionis initia tua jam dudum oblivio movit, quod nec reverentia Dei nec amore nostri nec sanctorum Patrum exemplis . . . me . . . consolari temptaveris.” *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 48 (Radice, 50).

to witness this love she has for Abelard.⁶⁷ And she gives voice to the selfless nature of this love she has with blatant honesty before God:

I can expect no reward for this from God for it is certain that I have done nothing as yet for love of him. When you hurried towards God I followed you, indeed, I went first to take the veil – perhaps you were thinking how Lot’s wife turned back when you made me put on the religious habit and take my vows before you gave yourself to God.⁶⁸

Heloise’s rhetoric here, used to point an accusing finger at Abelard’s lack of trust in her devotion, but also to draw Abelard into his responsibility for both her and the community, has often been used to justify an irreligious dimension in her character.⁶⁹ However, she is simply admitting to the distance of God, that is, God’s absence, in relation to her entry into monastic life. This move was driven by Abelard alone, and her selfless obedience to him – be that misguided or otherwise. It does in no way indicate a corresponding total lack of love for God however. This would be to read well beyond her context and obvious religious sensibilities. She deals with the truth of this matter in order to then move from her devotion to Abelard, to his devotion to her and the community which longs to serve God – this is her project, faithfully to continue the work he began in establishing them as a monastic community devoted to God: “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.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ See *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 49 (Radice, 51): “God knows I never sought anything in you except yourself.” (Nichil umquam – Deus scit! – in te nisi te requisivi), and “God is my witness that if Augustus, Emperor of the whole world, thought fit to honour me with marriage and conferred all the earth” (Deum testem invoco, si me Augustus universo presidens mundo matrimonii honore dignaretur). See also *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 52 (Radice 54): “I would have had no hesitation, God knows, in following you or going ahead at your bidding to the flames of Hell.” (Eque autem – Deus scit! – ad Vulcania loca te properantem precedere vel sequi pro jussu tuo minime dubitarem.)

⁶⁸ “Nulla michi super hoc merces expectanda est a Deo, cujus adhuc amore nichil me constat egisse. Properantem te ad Deum sequuta sum habitu, immo precessi; quasi enim memor uxoris Loth retro converse, prius me sacris vestibus et professione monastica quam te ipsum Deo mancipasti.” *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 52 (Radice, 54).

⁶⁹ For example, Kamuf suggests that Heloise’s unconverted stance is even depraved: “The depravity which Heloise depicts for her correspondent – the “lewd visions” and the “wantonness” – contrives to call down the anger of the outraged master who discovers laxity in his pupil.” Kamuf, *Fictions of Feminine Desire: Disclosures of Heloise*, 26.

⁷⁰ “Per ipsum itaque cui te obtulisti Deum to obsecro ut quo modo potes tuam michi presentaim reddas, consolationem videlicet michi aliquam rescribendo, hoc saltem pacto ut sic recreate divino alacrior vacem obsequio.” *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 53 (Radice, 54).

It would create an unsustainable psychological split within Heloise's personality – at one minute determined to find devotion to God, at another minute devoid of any consideration of God – if we were to read this text piecemeal and not remember her overall aim and context which she reiterates to Abelard throughout these later letters. This bizarre personality is nowhere evident or reflected in the development of Heloise's monastic community.

As stated, God's presence is here intimately connected to the presence of Abelard. If Abelard is absent, God will also be absent. As we saw in the earlier love letters, Heloise understands her own identity not as an autonomous individual, but through her relationship with, and love for, Abelard as located "in" God. Without Abelard, she can have no identity, and particularly no identity in God. Heloise even pointedly aims her arguments at Abelard's limited focus on their love by deliberately calling his attention to the larger framework in which their love ought to reside: "Is it not far better now, to summon me to God than it was then to satisfy our lust?"⁷¹

God is absent to Heloise because Abelard's neglect of her and the community stands in the way of her holistic understanding of what it means to love as a Christian subject. This is a love that is not divided between heaven and earth, but one that is contained in all aspects of one's life, as Heloise's greeting indicates at the very beginning of this correspondence where she claims, with an "excessive *modus loquendi*", the integration of all aspects to her identity: "To her lord, or rather father; to her husband, or rather brother; from his handmaid, or rather daughter; from his wife, or rather sister: to Abelard from Heloise."⁷² There is no confusion in Heloise here. She is all these identities at once. This is a love that incorporates every aspect of life into its fulfillment. In contrast to Glenda McLeod's assertion that "Heloise's sense of individuality expresses itself as a conflict between competing networks of allegiance: one to God and one to Abelard, one public and one private,"⁷³ Heloise here links all allegiances together in a creative tension. Nevertheless, the priority of God is again affirmed in her appeal to Abelard.

⁷¹ "Quanto autem rectius me nunc in Deum, quam tunc in libidinem excitates!" *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 53 (Radice, 55).

⁷² "Domino suo, immo patri, conjugii suo, immo fratri; ancilla sua, immo filia; ipsius uxor, immo soror; Abaelardo Heloysa." *Ep. 2*, Hicks 45 (Radice, p. 47).

⁷³ McLeod, "Wholly Guilty, Wholly Innocent: Self-Definition in Heloise's Letters to Abelard," 81.

Letter III

Abelard's response to this letter is a complete misunderstanding of Heloise's project. He continues to absent God by absenting himself from Heloise's love, as he does not recognise himself as necessary to her devotion to God. "So if you still watch over your daughters as carefully as you did previously over your sisters, it is sufficient to make me believe that any teaching or exhortation from me would now be wholly superfluous."⁷⁴ Although he capitulates to her request, his focus in this letter becomes himself, not Heloise and her community. Indeed, in his words, it sounds as if the whole purpose of Heloise and the community is simply to pray for him, his salvation and protection, and nothing else.

He recognises their union in religious life as primary: "But in our case we are bound together by our faith and united in our profession of the same religious life."⁷⁵ Her role as wife is to pray for his wellbeing just as the biblical women did of old. He even provides Heloise and her community with a prayer for himself.⁷⁶ There is no sense in Abelard's writing that Heloise needs his presence in order to sense that of God.

Letter IV

In Heloise's next letter she extends her arguments to Abelard by bringing God back into the discussion with even more vigor and rhetorical force. Contrary to Gilson's claim that Heloise actively pushes God out of her rhetoric, in her greeting she acknowledges the primacy of Christ and she places their relationship firmly in Christ: "To her only one after Christ, from his only one in Christ."⁷⁷ God may well be absent from Heloise's life, however, for better or for worse, God's presence embraces their relationship with each other as it did in the early love letters.

Her purpose in these letters, through an "excessive *modus loquendi*", is to force Abelard again to recognise her genuine and honest struggle to admit God's presence without his own presence into her life and to own up to his role in helping her and her

⁷⁴ "Quod si nunc tanta diligentia tuis provideas filiabus quanta tunc sororibus, satis esse credimus ut jam omnino superfluum doctrinam vel exhortationem nostram arbitremur." *Ep. 3*, Hicks, 54 (Radice, 56).

⁷⁵ "Nos autem invicem non solum fidei colligat integritas, verum etiam ejusdem religionis professio sociat." *Ep. 3*, Hicks, 57 (Radice, 59).

⁷⁶ See *Ep. 3*, Hicks 58 and 59 (Radice, 60 and 61).

⁷⁷ "Unico suo post Christum, unica sua in Christo." *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 61 (Radice, 63).

community to live their search for God authentically through their own identity, from their inmost being, not simply by external appearances.

Heloise's letter is the antithesis of the entire tenor of Abelard's response to her in his previous letter. She argues that it is Abelard's role to commend them to God, not the reverse, as he had suggested:

Never may God be so forgetful of his humble handmaids as to let them outlive you; never may he grant us a life which would be harder to bear than any form of death. The proper course would be *for you* to perform our funeral rites, *for you* to commend our souls to God and to send ahead of you those whom you assembled for God's service.⁷⁸

Heloise and the community understand themselves and their identity as a monastic foundation as integrally related to their founder, Abelard: "If we lose our life in you, we shall not be able to go on living when you leave us."⁷⁹ Any consideration of danger to his person thus implies danger to them. Abelard has so filled them with grief with his emphasis on himself and his woes, that they are now distracted from their purpose:

Besides, what time will there be then which will be fitting for prayer, when extreme distress will allow us no peace, when the soul will lose its power of reason and the tongue its use of speech? Or when the frantic mind, far from being resigned, may even (if I may say so) rage against God himself, and provoke him with complaints instead of placating him with prayers?⁸⁰

Read in the light of her overall context, this is by no means an attempt to push God out of her rhetoric as Gilson claims, nor does it stem from any sense of a God who cannot be present to her, but on the contrary, it is a normal human response to grief, and a series of impassioned accusations against Abelard's self-centred attitude and irresponsibility in relation to the care he ought show them in their seeking of God.

⁷⁸ "Numquam ancillulas suas adeo Deus obliviscatur ut eas tibi superstites reservet; namquam nobis illam vitam concedat, que omni genere mortis sit gravior! Te nostras exequias celebrare, te nostras Deo animas convenit commendare, et quas Deo agregasti ad ipsum premittere ut nulla amplius de ipsis perturberis sollicitudine, . . ." etc. *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 61 (Radice, 63).

⁷⁹ "que cum in te nostram amiserimus vitam, vivere, te recedente, nequaquam poterimus." *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 62 (Radice, 63).

⁸⁰ "aut quod orationi tempus tunc erit commodum, quando summa perturbatio nichil permittet quietum, cum nec anima rationis sensum nec lingua sermonis retinebit usum, cum mens insana in ipsum – ut ita dicam – Deum magis irata quam paccata non tam orationibus ipsum placabit quam querimoniis irritabit?" *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 62 (Radice, 64).

Again, Heloise draws Abelard's attention to the fact that her devotion to God cannot be possible without his own intimate involvement in the direction of their lives. In seeking her absent God, an absence intimately linked to her absent Abelard, she implicitly cries for resolution: "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."⁸¹ This desire to seek God authentically provides the complete context for the reading of this letter with its otherwise shocking confessions and brutally honest self-assessment from Heloise.

The full force of Heloise's rhetorical skill attacks Abelard's misinterpretation of her own sense of religious vocation as she makes clear the contrasts between her inner disposition and his perceived persona of her. Wilson and McLeod rightly suggest that Heloise here claims a position of humility in her honest appraisal of her own sinfulness in contrast to Abelard's spiritual pride: "In *Ep 4*, then, Heloise challenges Abelard on the issue of pride, his most grievous sin, and to do so, she is willing to subject herself or the representation of herself to a scathing and dramatic analysis."⁸² However, they also assert that: "Abelard has presented himself as separated from his past arrogance: physically mutilated but spiritually whole. Now Heloise presents herself as inextricably involved with her past: physically whole but spiritually mutilated."⁸³ Contrary to this claim, this stance of humility, a very characteristic monastic virtue,⁸⁴ only affirms Heloise's spiritual superiority over Abelard. It is Abelard who remains both physically *and* spiritually mutilated in his pride through this lack of honest and humble assessment of his own life, and it is Heloise who maintains both physical and spiritual integrity throughout her letter as she never denies her sinfulness nor her body's fragility. Indeed, in the words of Wilson and McLeod's own conclusions: "In the game of one-upmanship, she trumps her opponent once again by assuming a more complete and abject posture of humility that reveals and attacks the arrogance characterizing Abelard's postures in the *Historia*

⁸¹ "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).

⁸² Wilson and McLeod, "Textual Strategies in the Abelard/Heloise Correspondence", 129.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ See RB 7 – *On Humility* (Kardong, 132-35).

*calamitatum.*⁸⁵ In the Rule of Benedict's chapter on humility, the twelfth and final step to spiritual perfection claims that:

The twelfth step of humility is achieved when a monk's humility is not only in his heart, but is apparent in his very body to those who see him. That is, whether he is at the Work of God, in the oratory, in the monastery, in the garden, on a journey, in the field or anywhere at all, whether sitting, walking or standing, let his head always be bowed and his gaze be fixed on the earth. *Constantly aware of his guilt for sins*, he should consider himself to be already standing before the terrifying judgment of God. He should always repeat in his heart what the publican said in the gospel, his eyes cast downward: "Lord, I am a sinner and not worthy to raise my eyes to heaven". And also with the prophet: "I am bowed down and totally humbled."⁸⁶

Heloise obviously reflects this final step in all but her struggle to find a God worthy for her repentance. We will see this argument transposed onto a larger canvas in relation to following the Rule of Benedict in her next letter.

Heloise then turns her accusations against a God whom she experiences as not so much absent but as unjust in his dealings with both herself and Abelard. In a series of excessive outpourings of her own woes and confusion over her description of an unjust God, a God who was absent in punishment when they deserved it and seemingly present, reaping revenge when they had atoned for their lust through their more than chaste marriage,⁸⁷ Heloise does not hesitate to present her complaints to a God who has been pitiless in his dealings with her: "O God – if it is lawful to say it – cruel to me in everything. O merciless mercy."⁸⁸

What is absent is not God *per se*, but a God of mercy and justice. This is clearly not the God Heloise expected to encounter and rightly, she can have no relationship with a God who is not a God of mercy. Similarly, Michael Clanchy argues that "Because Heloise would not – or could not – accept the justice of Abelard's castration, she

⁸⁵ Wilson and McLeod, "Textual Strategies in the Abelard/Heloise Correspondence," 129.

⁸⁶ "Duodecimus humilitatis gradus est si non solum corde monachus sed etiam ipso corpore humilitatem videntibus se semper indicet, id est in opere Dei, in oratorio, in monasterio, in horto, in via, in agro vel ubicumque sedens, ambulans vel stans, inclinatio sit semper capite, defixis in terram aspectibus, reum se omni hora de peccatis suis aestimans iam se tremendo iudicio repraesentari aestimet, dicens sibi in corde semper illud quod publicanus ille evangelicus fixis in terram oculis dixit: Domine, non sum dignus, ego peccator, levare oculos meos ad caelos. Et item cum propheta: Incurvatus sum et humiliatus sum usquequaque." RB 7:62-66 (Kardong, 134-35). Emphasis added.

⁸⁷ See *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 63-64 (Radice, 65-66).

⁸⁸ "O! – si fas sit dici – crudelem michi per omnia Deum!" *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 63 (Radice, 65).

could not turn to Christ for solace.”⁸⁹ Nevertheless, Heloise continues to probe for this God by humbly questioning the role of women in the general lot of humanity: “Is it the general lot of women to bring total ruin to great men?”⁹⁰ For her answer she calls on Scripture and the cursed history of women in the bible beginning with Genesis, recounting all those who had brought disaster to the lives of men, yet she is not like these models: “At least I can thank God for this: the tempter did not prevail on me to do wrong on my own consent, like the women I have mentioned, though in the outcome he made me the instrument of his malice.”⁹¹ Abelard will later acknowledge this wrongful positioning of women *qua* women vis-à-vis evil. In her analysis of Abelard’s *Planctus*, Ruys uncovers this change in Abelard’s understanding:

What is important in Abelard’s *Planctus*, by contrast, is his attempt to develop an understanding of human nature in which neither praise nor blame is ascribed on the basis of sex and gender, but only on the basis of the vice or virtue exhibited by the human person involved.⁹²

Heloise’s intentions are not evil even if her actions were sinful and the outcome was an injustice done to Abelard. For this she is prepared to pay the price and do penance so as to make reparation to Abelard but not to an unjust God:

For this offence, above all, may I have strength to do proper penance, so that at least by long contrition I can make some amends for your pain from the wound inflicted on you; 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.⁹³

However, none of what she says here implies that Heloise does not desire to make satisfaction to God. If she could sense the presence of a merciful God perhaps she would not feel a hypocrite about her life. She then proceeds to articulate the human condition and its frailty as she herself experiences it as a woman. In this honest appraisal of herself, Heloise comes to acknowledge her own need for a God of mercy, compassion and understanding, not one of punishment and injustice. It is this God who is absent to her and she cannot bring herself to find him as she admits: “I can

⁸⁹ Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life*, 170.

⁹⁰ “O summam in viros summos et consuetam feminarum perniciem! *Ep.* 4, Hicks, 64 (Radice, 66).

⁹¹ Deo saltem super hoc gratias, quod me ille ut suprapositas feminas in culpam ex consensu non traxit, quam tamen in causam commisse malicie ex effectu convertit.” *Ep.* 4, Hicks, 65 (Radice, 67).

⁹² Feros Ruys, “Ut Sexu Sic Animo”: The Resolution of Sex and Gender in the *Planctus* of Abelard,” 5.

⁹³ “Atque utinam hujus precipue commissi dignam agere valeam penitentiam, ut pene illi tue vulneris illati ex longa saltem penitentie contricione vicem quoquo modo recompensare queam; 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).

find no penitence whereby to appease God, whom I always accuse of the greatest cruelty in regard to this outrage. By rebelling against his ordinance, I offend him more by my indignation than I placate him by making amends through penitence.”⁹⁴ Her experience has left her righteously angry towards this unjust God.

Heloise refuses to deny the truthfulness of her own heart which still holds the love and desire she has always held for Abelard. This is who she is and to deny it in some pious outpouring of “bitterness of soul” would be hypocrisy for her as she still longs with every part of her memory for the intimacy which she shared with Abelard. Heloise is not simply confessing her lack of true repentance here, nor is she irreligious. Indeed, in a stance of true self-knowledge and awareness, she proves herself more in need of the presence of God than those who merely feign repentance, and using Paul’s letter to the Romans, she cries out her desire to be free of her own honest unhappiness: “In my utter wretchedness, that cry from a suffering soul could well be mine: ‘Miserable creature that I am, who is there to rescue me out of the body doomed to this death?’ Would that I could truthfully answer: ‘The grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord’.”⁹⁵ Though Abelard claims to have found this “grace of God” in his wound, she has no such wound. Indeed, she does not see Abelard’s castration as the justice of God with which he equates it.⁹⁶ God continues to punish her, and so she longs for that “love of God” by which her actions would lend authenticity to her life. As it is: “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. It was your command, not love of God, which made me take the veil.”⁹⁷ Abelard’s role is therefore not to praise her but to pray for her, not so that she might be considered holy but simply and humbly that: “In whatever corner of heaven God shall place me,

⁹⁴ “qua penitentia Deum placare valeam non invenio, quem super hac semper injuria summe crudelitatis arguo et, ejus dispensationi contraria, magis eum ex indignatione offendo quam ex penitentiae satisfactione mitigo.” *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 65-66 (Radice, 68).

⁹⁵ “O vere me miseram et illa conquestione ingemiscentis anime dignissimam: ‘Infelix ego homo! quis me liberabit de corpore mortis hujus?’ Utinam et quod sequitur veraciter addere queam: ‘Gratia Dei per Jhesum Christum Dominum nostrum.’” *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 67 (Radice, 69).

⁹⁶ Abelard writes of his castration: “how just a judgement of God had struck me in the parts of the body with which I had sinned.” (quam justo Dei judicio in illa corporis mei portione plecterer in qua deliqueram.) *HC*, Hicks, 18 (Radice, 17).

⁹⁷ “In omni autem – Deus scit! – vite mee statu, te magis adhuc offendere quam Deum vereor, tibi placere amplius quam ipsis appeto. Tua me ad religionis habitum jussio, non divina traxit dilectio.” *Ep. 4*, Hicks 67 (Radice, 69).

it will be enough for me.”⁹⁸ God’s seeming absence to Heloise enables her humble stance in her own authentic search for God and identifies her as more consistent with the Christian subject, and particularly with a monastic subject.

Georgiana writes of Heloise’s position in this letter as one of a lack of perfection:

Heloise judges herself to have lost her spiritual battle for perfection. But this does not mean that she capitulates to Abelard’s arguments; still less does she glorify her failure. On the contrary, here and especially in her third letter, Heloise begins, at first tentatively and then more surely, to break free from the very notion of absolute victory as a suitable spiritual ideal and to begin to seek “any corner whatever of heaven” reserved for herself and those like her who have quit the battle for perfection but who struggle on in weakness without any definitive victories or signs of spiritual progress.⁹⁹

What I am questioning is the definition of this so-called “spiritual progress” and “perfection” from within the perspective of the monasticism that Heloise was attempting to work out her own identity. Heloise is not “quitting the battle for perfection” at all, rather, she is entering right into it with her humble recognition of her need for a God who seems cruelly present and yet absent in mercy at the same time.

To understand God as “absent” is, as I have already stated, fundamental to the monastic project itself. Heloise’s felt sense of an absent God is thoroughly consonant with the monastic mind which searches constantly, humbly and truthfully for this God. Her so-called “rage against God” in Letters II and IV merely attest to her monastic sensibility, particularly in the light of the daily round of liturgy to which Heloise and all monastics were exposed. Here, she would have heard the psalmist’s own complaints and “rage against God” set in the context of prayer and praise,¹⁰⁰ and these psalms she would have made her own.

Letter V

This time, in Letter V, Abelard seems to have grasped what it is that Heloise requires, in terms of her overall project. However, his response to these impassioned arguments

⁹⁸ “Quocumque me angulo celi Deus collocet satis michi faciet.” *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 69 (Radice, 71).

⁹⁹ Georgianna, “In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise’s Critique of Monastic Life,” 204.

¹⁰⁰ For example, Psalms 10, 13, 22, 38, 102, 130 and 142, to name simply a few.

from her begins, as I have noted earlier, with an obvious generalizing of their relationship in God: “To the bride of Christ, from His servant.”¹⁰¹ In this letter he intends to provide Heloise with the encouragement she seeks and to set her straight on a number of issues concerning her rebuke of him. As Georgiana states: “Abelard has reasoned that Heloise ought to take what consolation the religious life has to offer, redirecting her heart and her desire to Christ. Nowhere in her letters does Heloise refuse; instead, she asks, in effect, *how?*”¹⁰² 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. He lists “the wrongs you suffer” and ignores her request for his love and care of her and the community.¹⁰³ He continues to absent God by absenting himself from Heloise’s love: as quoted earlier, he writes to her: “It was a fortunate trading of 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.”¹⁰⁴ Heloise, however, does not see the need for this exchange, but rather seeks to incorporate her wifely position into her monastic identity. McNamara claims that “Heloise clung fiercely to her insistence on being Abelard’s wife, not God’s”.¹⁰⁵ Yet what she really achieves is the subverting of the traditional imagery given to women as brides of Christ.

Abelard’s traditional allegorical reading of the Song of Songs, disposes of Heloise’s subjectivity and that of her community. As McCracken maintains: “Abelard describes an abstract body-as-metaphor” for the spiritual life, and thus, “effaces gender in the description of the Christian subject”.¹⁰⁶ In this letter he urges her to transcend the space that has been left in her and, through prayer, to spiritualize that space through a hunger for God alone, who is her true bridegroom. In other words, her search for God alone is to be disembodied.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ “Sponse Christi, servus ejusdem.” *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 70 (Radice, 72).

¹⁰² Georgiana, “In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise’s Critique of Monastic Life,” 202.

¹⁰³ See *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 70 (Radice, 72).

¹⁰⁴ “Felix talium commercium nuptiarum ut homunculi miseri prius uxor, nunc in summi regis thalamis sublimaris.” *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 71 (Radice, 73).

¹⁰⁵ Jo-Ann McNamara, “The Herrenfrage: The Reconstructing of the Gender System, 1050-1150,” *Medieval Masculinities*, ed. Clare A. Lees, vol. 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) 21.

¹⁰⁶ McCracken, “The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise’s Third Letter,” 218.

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter 2, p. 47.

Abelard refuses to draw the body, and thus its difference or “otherness”, into a discussion of longing for God in the monastic way; as such, he effectively erases any possibility of subjectivity for Heloise and her sisters, as well as any possibility of their encounter with God within the realms of their own humanity, a humanity as feminine.

Letter VI

For Heloise, any concept of a present or absent God is tied up with the presence or absence of Abelard – one without the other would be a move into hypocrisy, and ultimately a denial of her own embodied subjectivity. Her female body and the community’s female body and its desires are the “literal and inescapable site of identity”¹⁰⁸ and this identity is predicated on the presence and absence of Abelard and God. In the last analysis Heloise’s language will not allow her room to compromise the importance of this subjectivity in her search for a just God, a God of love, and it is in this next letter that this is evidenced in its fullest extent.

When we come to look at the thrust of this letter in the main correspondence, we find Heloise’s arguments transposed into a thoroughly communal voice, a larger framework for the full flowering of her rhetoric. From a stress on her own authentic search for God, now we find her speaking in the voice of her community’s own desire to seek after God in the best possible way, fitting to their difference as females within the monastic project. All of Heloise’s themes, as developed in her earlier letters, are not sacrificed, but transposed into a higher key, that of the community’s voice.

The problematic relationship of body and spirit that McCracken maintains marks the structure of this letter from the beginning,¹⁰⁹ 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 who searches for God in particular. This search is defined precisely by her sexual difference.

¹⁰⁸ McCracken, "The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter," 218.

¹⁰⁹ McCracken states: “Heloise introduces the problematic relationship of body and spirit that will implicitly structure the whole of her third 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.*

There is the same authentic desire to find God as expressed in the earlier letters, yet now we hear the voice, not of Heloise's individual self, but of her general expression as the head of a female monastic community. The particular Heloise is now absent in order that the general expression of Heloise may be made present. As such, this could be expressed as another example of Heloise's "excessive *modus loquendi*", that is, it is an expansion that incorporates rather than sacrifices or renounces the body and its difference in the Christian search for God.

Again, God is both absent and present in this letter. As previously, she begins by claiming her community's identity as "handmaids of God", and their need of Abelard's responsibility for the community: "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."¹¹⁰ The meaning of her two requests in this letter have been analysed thoroughly in previous chapters. In this context of the search for God, her desire for a history of monastic women is simply a history of the search for God by women, a history, interestingly enough, which is rich in male-female relationships. Heloise's second request for a Rule suitable for women is a consideration of the context for that search for God in her own time, a consideration of the need for the inclusion of the feminine body and its unique needs in this search. This body cannot be transcended in the monastic search for God. The request articulates a need to recognise hers and the community's *different* journey towards God, a feminine journey, unique from the journey made by the male.

Again, the overall purpose of the letter is the same as previously, to make Abelard understand that his presence and relationship with the community is intimately linked with their ability properly to live out their monastic vocation of seeking God. At the end of this letter she uses exactly the same words as Heloise used in Letter II when she appealed to him thus: "for after God you are the founder of this place, through God you are the creator of our community, with God you should be the director of our religious life."¹¹¹ In contrast to Clanchy's conclusion that "The Heloise of the love letters might be able to do without God, but never without Abelard. He, on the other

¹¹⁰ "Omnes itaque nos Christi ancille et in Christo, filie tue duo nunc a tua Paternitate supplices postulamus, que nobis admodum neccessaria providemus." *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 89 (Radice, 93).

¹¹¹ "Tu quippe post Deum hujus loci fundator, tu per Deum nostre congregationis es plantator: tu cum Deo nostre sis religionis institutori" *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 106 (Radice, 111).

hand, could get on without her, but never without his conception of Christ's love",¹¹² Heloise will not do away with either God or Abelard.

In this letter, Heloise's concern for the community centres around its desire to live authentic lives and the nuns cannot do this without positing their subjectivity, a subjectivity in difference. Without subjectivity there is no possibility of encounter with God for women. God will always remain absent without the inclusion of the body. In contrast to Abelard, Heloise is determined to harmonise the body's many desires and needs with the spiritual quest for God so as to allow for the possibility of God's presence.

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 the Gospel of love not rules. She is not proposing the indiscriminate disposal of the Rule of Benedict itself, but its transfiguration into the context of women's search for God.

In fact, Heloise goes so far as to set out an argument for the ridiculousness of rules, literally interpreted, in this monastic search for God. In this she is not counter to Benedict but precisely parallel to his arguments about the place of rules within his own Rule. Benedict himself understood the Rule as a mere beginning for following the Gospel: "Therefore, if you long to attain the heavenly homeland, with Christ's assistance carry out this modest Rule for beginners that we have sketched out. Only then will you arrive with God's protection at the higher peaks of doctrine and virtue that we have pointed out."¹¹³ Heloise argues this very point with such evident reasoned logic. I will discuss this further in a later Chapter 6.

In her commentary and critique of the Rule of Benedict, she seeks to find the God of justice, whom she so emotively articulated as absent in her previous letter. Heloise

¹¹² Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life*, 171.

¹¹³ "Quisquis ergo ad patriam caelestem festinas, hanc minimam inchoationis regulam descriptam, adiuvante Christo, perfice, et tunc demum ad maiora quae supra commemoravimus doctrinae virtutumque culmina, Deo protegente, pervenies." (Kardong, 603). See Heloise's summary in *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 96 (Radice, 101). See R.B. 73:8 (Kardong, 602-3).

desires this “justice” of Benedict and his Rule for her own female community as reflective of the injustice perpetrated against love in their personal lives. As before, this justice is expressed in the recognition of their sexual difference and the living out of a Gospel way of life.

The whole of this sixth letter, as in her previous letters, concentrates on the difference between men and women. Georgianna asserts that, “This extraordinary sensitivity to the particularity of life is a hallmark of Heloise’s thought and provides another strong link between her personal and institutional concerns.”¹¹⁴ Women are different in bodily, mental and spiritual strength.¹¹⁵ Their bodily functions are different and thus require different needs with regard to clothing.¹¹⁶ They are “protected by greater sobriety”¹¹⁷ with regard to food and drink.¹¹⁸ They are more vulnerable to their own bodily desires.¹¹⁹ They are less capable of the physical labour demanded by the Rule.¹²⁰ Of course, one may wish to dispute all these claims from our own modern perspective, however, in the light of Heloise’s purpose we should not be led away from her primary aim here.

Heloise’s search for God as a female is again imbued with a sense of Benedict’s humility at every moment of her commentary on the Rule with her emphasis on the weakness of women’s bodies; however, she is setting up a case for women’s unique search for God through their difference, not arguing their inferiority. Indeed, she claims, obliquely at least, a superiority of women’s search in the living out of the Benedictine life:

It should be sufficient for our infirmity, and indeed, a high tribute to it, if we live continently and without possessions, wholly occupied by service of God, and in doing so equal the leaders of the Church themselves in

¹¹⁴ Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," 196.

¹¹⁵ See *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 89 (Radice, 94) and elsewhere.

¹¹⁶ See *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 94 (Radice, 99). McCracken unpacks Heloise’s concentration on the menstruating body and claims that Heloise highlights this aspect in order to articulate sexual difference clearly. See McCracken, "The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter," 222.

¹¹⁷ See *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 94 (Radice, 99).

¹¹⁸ See *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 94 (Radice, 99).

¹¹⁹ See *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 89-90 (Radice, 94-95).

¹²⁰ See *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 104-105 (Radice, 109-10).

our way of life or religious layman or even those who are called Canons Regular and profess especially to follow the apostolic life.¹²¹

Heloise desires to find this just God, so absent to her in the past, not through rigid rules which not even men can follow to the letter, in spite of their claims, but by simply and humbly finding a way of being merely Christian. Without some justice there can be no search for God for women. She does not push towards some vague transcending of her humanity as Abelard suggested in his last letter by becoming “more than woman.”¹²² For Heloise this smacks of an arrogance that reaches towards “being more than Christian,”¹²³ and lacks the necessary humility of the authentic human condition, which is to know exactly who you are as a human person with all the limitations that entails. This is what drives her unique spirituality – to be authentic in her humanity. There is no spiritualising away of Heloise’s body or that of the community for her. In sharp contrast to Abelard’s position in Letter V, Heloise reinstates the primacy and inexorable presence of the body as it journeys towards finding an absent God in the monastic way.

What is the point of monastic life if not this search for God, a God who is not wholly present to her and her community, or any monastic community for that matter? This search is based on the Gospel. It is not assured through blind adherence to rules.

Heloise notes:

For things which do not prepare us for the Kingdom of God or commend us least to God call for no special attention . . . For nothing so divides Jew from Christian as the distinction between outward and inner works, especially since between the children of God and those of the devil love alone distinguishes: what the Apostle calls the sum of the law and the object of what is commanded.¹²⁴

¹²¹ “Satis nostre esse infirmitati et maximum imputari debet, si continenter ac sine proprietate viventes, et, officiis occupate divinis, ipsos Ecclesie duces vel religiosos laicos in victu adequemus, vel eos denique qui Regulares Canonici dicuntur et se precipue vitam apostolicam sequi profitentur.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 95 (Radice, 100).

¹²² “plus quam femina.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 93 (Radice, 98).

¹²³ See, *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 93 (Radice, 98).

¹²⁴ “Non enim magnopere sunt curanda que nos regno Dei non preparant, vel que nos minime Deo commendant . . . Nichil quippe inter Judeos et Christianos ita separat sicut exteriorum operum et interiorum discretio, presertim cum inter filios Dei et diaboli sola caritas discernat, quam plenitudinem legis et finem precepti Apostolus vocat.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 99 (Radice, 104). Disturbing as it is to our modern sensibilities, Heloise’s obviously anti-Semitic tone in this quote does not necessarily indicate any anti-Semitic attitude on her part, rather it reflects the cognitive boundaries of the Christian theological context of the twelfth-century.

Thus, it is love, the primary Christian virtue, not rules that distinguish the follower of God. If the intention behind the action is not directed towards love, then the action is not of God and does not lead to God: “From these words it is clear that virtues alone win merit in the eyes of God, and that those who are equal in virtue, however different in works, deserve equally of him.”¹²⁵ Accordingly, Heloise sets forth her “ethics of intention” in the seeking of God in the monastic life: “Consequently, those who are true Christians are wholly occupied with the inner man, so that they may adorn him with virtues and purify him of vices, but they have little or no concern for the outer man.”¹²⁶

For Heloise the aim of this life she is living is to “please God”. It is not simply about adhering to particular rules, and in explaining this point she again uses the language of the heart:

And so it is not so much what things are done as the spirit in which they are done that we must consider, if we wish to *please him* who tests the heart and the loins and sees in hidden places . . . Such devotion of the heart is valued the more highly by God the less it is concerned with outward things, and we serve him with greater humility and think more of our duty to him the less we put our trust in outward things.¹²⁷

This love springs from a longing for God that is not focused simply on outward form, human rules or sameness, but one that respects the whole person, body (the female body in particular), the heart (springing from this focus on love), and the mind (what is sensible and takes moderation into account). Rules may well be inherited into the bargain, but they are not the prime focus of the monastic task, as Benedict himself maintains throughout the Rule. It is “Love” itself that should be the focus of one’s search for God, particularly in a world where love is missing. “In the words of Truth”, say Heloise, “amongst many or indeed almost all men love itself has grown

¹²⁵ “Ex his liquide verbis colligitur solas apud Deum merita virtutes optinere, et quicumque virtutibus pares sunt, quantumcumque distent operibus, equaliter ab ipso promereri.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 102 (Radice, 107).

¹²⁶ “Unde quicumque sunt vere christiani, sic toti circa interiorem hominem sunt occupati ut eum scilicet virtutibus ornent et vitiis mundent, ut de exteriori nullam vel minimam assumant curam.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 102 (Radice, 107).

¹²⁷ “Non itaque magnopere que fiunt, sed quo animo fiant pensandum est, si illi placere studemus, qui cordis et renum probator est, et, in abscondito videt.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 103 (Radice, 108).

cold.”¹²⁸ Heloise, knows that only this search for God through a focus on the law of love will justify her.

Heloise’s spirituality humanizes the quest for God in line with Benedict’s ideals and in sharp contrast to Abelard’s understanding of spiritual perfection and the reform movements surrounding her in her own time.¹²⁹ She achieves this harmony via the integration of body and soul, that is, she does not dichotomise the body and the soul, the spiritual and the profane. All aspects of human life are required for the journey to God.

Heloise correctly understands the Rule as a mere beginning and guide to the ultimate purpose of monastic life. As I have already pointed out earlier, she notes that Benedict himself insists on this understanding: “Whoever you are, then, who hasten to the heavenly kingdom, observe, with Christ’s help, this minimum Rule as a beginning, and then you will come finally to the higher peaks of doctrine and virtue under the protection of God.”¹³⁰ (See RB 73:8) The purpose of monastic life and its rules is simply to enable the monk to come to the perfect love of God as expressed in the Gospel. All rules and regulations must therefore be set in this correct perspective for Heloise: “Would that our religion could rise to this height – to carry out the Gospel, not to go beyond it, lest we attempt to be more than Christians!”¹³¹

For a female, to find God is not so unquestionably dependent on rules but is thoroughly dependent on love and justice. After all, men with their Rules, rules, rules, fail in their attempts and their outward show with rules merely disguises the absence of God and the absence of love. Rules are simply there to aid the path to God, if they don’t aid this discovery of God, service of God and praise of God, then these rules are meaningless and unjust, and ought not be rigidly adhered to. As already noted,

¹²⁸ “et juxta illud Veritatis, ipsam karitatem non tam multorum quam fere omnium refriguisse.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 96 (Radice, 101).

¹²⁹ I will be discussing these reform movements in detail in Chapter 5.

¹³⁰ “Quisquis ergo ad celestem patriam festinas, hanc minimam inchoationis Regulam . . . adjuvante Christo perfice, et tunc demum ad majora . . . doctrine virtutumque culmina Deo protegente pervenies.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 96 (Radice, 101). See n. 113.

¹³¹ “Atque utinam ad hoc nostra religio conscendere posset ut Euvangelium impleret, non transcenderet, nec plusquam christiane appeteremus esse.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 93 (Radice, 98).

Heloise ends this final letter with her last Trinitarian appeal to Abelard.¹³² As such, God is intimately present to Heloise in her desire to find authentic subjectivity.

Women's bodies are not simply metaphorical representations of a more perfect body, they are, in and of themselves, capable of the experience of God and ought to be treated as such, not by-passed, transcended or ignored in the formulation of the monastic endeavour. In this letter there is no sense of Heloise "pushing" God out of her conversation with Abelard, or out of her life. Indeed, this letter is directly concerned with how best to serve God and seek after God as a monastic community of women.

Conclusion:

Contrary to Gilson's claim, there is a profound inclusion of God within Heloise's writings, be that an "absent God" or one accused of unjust presence. Consistent with the Benedictine spirituality which she had inherited, her whole life and love is situated within the embrace of the divine. Heloise's otherwise excessive, humble and shocking admissions serve to expose and include the embodied difference of the female in the journey to encounters with this God. This tactic of Heloise, through her focus on "absence", is the "disruption of the symbolic" that Irigaray identifies. It is this disruption which displaces a masculinist interpretation of her writings with "a new imaginary, new ways of conceiving and being which enable women to be subjects *as women*."¹³³ Heloise can no longer be read as simply a tragic lover, incurable romantic or as an abbess of doubtful integrity. Rather, Heloise's tactic reveals a spirituality which clarifies and extends what it means to be a Christian subject who struggles with, and yet longs for, a seemingly absent God in every aspect of life.

Heloise's spirituality reveals a radical re-asserting of the orthodox theological understanding of the human person which includes bodies and women's bodies in particular, and is a corrective to Abelard's metaphorical erasure of Heloise's and her

¹³² See Chapter 3, p. 104.

¹³³ Irigaray, "The way of the Feminine", 193-94.

community's female body. God, the "irreducible Other", is not found in abstraction or the symbolics of binary oppositions, but in and through loving relationships with other bodies who are also "other". As John's first letter maintains: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." (1 John 4:20) "Seeing" here implies a presence and relationship to others. Thus, as interpreted by Bauerschmidt: "One cannot be a Christian without the event of Jesus to whom one is related through faith, nor without the others of the community, to whom one is related through love. In the unity of faith and love, Christians live not only in the absence of Jesus, but in the presence of others".¹³⁴ Love, not some abstract idea of love, but love based on "seeing" the other, that is relationship to others, is central to the Christian identity.

Heloise conforms to this anthropological understanding but in what Certeau identifies as "a new 'style' of practice which resists the violence of conceptualisation by seeking to speak of the Other only through particular others."¹³⁵ Heloise will not speak of God without Abelard or, as in her later correspondence, without her monastic community of which she, as abbess, is the embodiment. Heloise certainly "claimed an identity of her own",¹³⁶ but one that is undeniably that of a Christian subject. It is an identity founded on her relationships as a female with others in all their many and varied expressions: lover to beloved, wife to husband, mother to son, sister to her religious sisters and abbess to her community. Thus, the absence and presence of God is contingent on the absence and presence of these other bodies. The absence of God in Heloise's life drives her determination to effect the presence of "others."

In her third letter of the later correspondence, Heloise speaks as the Body of the entire community, her own particular body now absent, as her incorporation into the community is complete. Here we see her most radical understanding of the authentic Christian subject, and one that is not "more than Christian" nor "more than woman". The "freedom of the Gospel" that she calls on is about love, not rules, and this love takes into account difference. Unless women's bodies in particular and bodies that are

¹³⁴ Bauerschmidt, "The Abrahamic Voyage of Michel De Certeau and Theology," 11.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³⁶ Bonnie Wheeler, "Introduction," *Listening to Heloise*, xviii.

different in general, are admitted to the spiritual journey to God, their subjectivity is negated and God will always remain absent. You cannot find God without a body and you cannot be that body without others. Nor does one find God merely in obeying rules or a Rule, even a good Rule, but through the gospel imperative to love others; that is, after all, what the rules themselves are meant to emulate! Christianity is not rules but the practice of authentic love of others in and through their difference. If rules hinder this task, or do not at least take difference into account, then they have no value.

Georgianna concludes that the spirituality that Heloise presents to the reader is “essentially nonheroic . . . she [Heloise] begins to move away from those definitions of spirituality that depend on an absolute break with the world and the past.”¹³⁷ However, Heloise’s sense of being fully incarnated in the world is a spirituality that is much more heroic than nonheroic as it includes rather than excludes. It deals with the reality of difference and bodies in a way that demands an authentic love of the other and thus the possibility of really loving the ultimate Other – God. Heloise’s spirituality is heroic because it demands a level of humility that the modern world, driven as it is by ideals of the autonomous free individual, finds very uncomfortable to admit. Autonomy, in and of itself will not bring human subjectivity, neither will the desire to make others the same as the self. To admit the other, one must admit to being, to some degree, incomplete and in need of the other who is different, but precisely because they are different.

Wheeler summarises Heloise’s story as “one of closure as well as possibility.”¹³⁸ In spite of the fact that Heloise cannot be expected to escape the confines of her own moment in history with its evident boundaries in cognitive appreciation of race, religion and sexual difference, I am claiming that, as a woman, with a woman’s desire for God, Heloise refuses the closure, particularly the closure and elitism that rules imply. Heloise’s story is rather one of absence and thus openness to others, and therefore endless possibility. In Heloise we have a redefining of spiritual perfection, one not marked by renunciation of the body and its difference, nor by abstraction. This is a spirituality not distinguished by erasure of this difference and otherness, but

¹³⁷ Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," 204.

¹³⁸ Wheeler, "Introduction," *Listening to Heloise*, xvii.

by a unity in difference, rather than a fear of difference. This is surely a more heroic a spirituality, particularly in our world today, marked as it is by fear of the other, the different, and radical disconnections between peoples. This is surely a spirituality worth further elucidation.

Chapter 5:

“Discretio”: An Embodied Reading of the Rule of Benedict

Hujus autem discretionis beatus non immemor Benedictus¹

Introduction:

In the previous chapters I have shown that there exists a continuity in language and argument between the three letters of Heloise which make up her later correspondence with Abelard, and which is also evident within the earlier love letter collection. I would now like to concentrate my analysis of Heloise’s language in her commentary on, and what has been described as her critique of, the Benedictine Rule, a Rule under which Heloise lived the major portion of her life. This critique is located wholly within her Letter VI of the later correspondence with Abelard.

Georgianna claims that Heloise’s Letter VI is, “a reasoned, learned critique of contemporary monastic life in light of her own history as well as her theology.”² More specifically, Southern observes that: “[This letter] contains a long, sharp-witted criticism

¹ *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 91 (Radice, 96). “St Benedict . . . has this discretion in mind”.

² Georgianna, “In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise’s Critique of Monastic Life,” 205.

of the Benedictine rule as it appeared to an intelligent and learned woman who for fifteen years had lived under it with a divided mind.”³ Even Brooke, who is one of the few to write a general text on monastic life in the Middle Ages that recognises Heloise as a monastic founder of some merit, suggests that she considered some of the prescriptions in the Rule of Benedict as “silly” in relation to the needs of women and their bodies.⁴ Mews also argues that this letter is clearly a critique of the Rule of Benedict.⁵ Although this “critique” is indeed an aspect in her rhetoric, I will argue that Heloise is more aptly described as a faithful interpreter of, and commentator on, the Rule of Benedict for her time. Her “critique” is an expression of her commitment to the key precept of adaptation required by the Rule.

The twelfth century was a period of great experimentation and innovation in monastic life. This is the era that saw the phenomenal rise of the Cistercian Order and the flowering of many other attempts at the reform of Benedictine monastic life expressed through customaries and statutes at various monasteries.⁶ As Frank explains: “Each monastery’s customary, which prescribed a particular monastic style, was intended to aid the right observance of the *Rule* and the faithful fulfilment of its precepts.”⁷ Also included in these experiments were new movements specifically for women notably Robert d’Arbrissel’s community at Fontevraud and the women of Prémontré.⁸ However, most of these reform movements were spear-headed by men and the material that guided the women in their living was, on the whole, written by men.⁹ Such writing demonstrates

³ R. W. Southern, *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 101.

⁴ C.N.L. Brooke, *The Age of the Cloister: The Story of Monastic Life in the Middle Ages* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2003), 210.

⁵ Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 145-75.

⁶ An example of these constitutions is the *Carta Caritatis* of the Cistercian Order and Heloise’s own *Institutiones Nostrae* of the Paraclete monastery. The strict enclosure at the Cluniac women’s house of Marcigny was part of the charter issued for the monastery by Pope Urban II in 1095, See J. Leclercq, “Le Cloître est-il une Prison?,” *Revue d’ascétique et de mystique* 47 (1971): 407-20.

⁷ Karl Suso Frank, *With Greater Liberty: A Short History of Christian Monasticism and Religious Orders*, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard, CS 144 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1993), 85.

⁸ Robert d’Arbrissel provided a constitution for the women of Fontevraud who followed the Rule of Benedict, see Berenice Kerr, *Religious Life for Women C. 1100-C.1350: Fontevraud in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹ Barbara Newman has examined forty-five texts from 1075-1225. See Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 21, 313-16. Included in this material and contemporary with Heloise is the *Speculum virginum*, described and analysed in: Constant. J. Mews, ed., *Listen, Daughter: The Speculum virginum and the Formation of Religious Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2001). Another example of

what Julie Hotchin identifies as “a contemporary historical phenomenon: the growing demand for men to provide pastoral care for religious women, or *cura monialium*.”¹⁰

Nevertheless, as Vera Morton observes: “women’s religious careers and aspirations are under-represented in the extant records.”¹¹ The only other woman writer to comment directly on the Rule of Benedict in the twelfth century besides Heloise was Hildegard of Bingen, and although she presents a woman’s understanding of the Rule, it seems clear that she was writing in reply to a request from a male monastic community and not specifically for women.¹² Hildegard’s context for commenting on the Rule is very different to Heloise’s, yet there is a distinctive emphasis in both which will become clear in the discussion below.¹³

Kelso points out that both Fontevraud and the Paraclete were exceptional in the twelfth century because they were both independent of attachment to a male monastery. They were autonomous houses whose Abbess ruled and managed all the affairs, both spiritual and corporeal, of the monastery. Both Abelard and Robert were advisers to their respective abbeys to be sure, but the effective control was in the hands of the abbess.¹⁴ Kelso even makes the suggestion that Heloise may have modelled her leadership on that of Fontevraud.¹⁵ Indeed, as McLaughlin maintains: “Among its [the twelfth century’s] greatest abbesses, Petronilla of Fontevraud, Hildegard of Bingen and Herrad of

the phenomenon is Aelred of Rievaulx’s advice to his reclusive sister, See Aelred, *De institutione inclusarum*, CCCM 1:653, translated into English in, “A Rule of Life for a Recluse,” *Aelred of Rievaulx: Treatises and the Pastoral Prayer*, trans. M. P. Macpherson (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1971). Abelard’s advice to Heloise in his Letter VII, VIII and IX also fits this category. The main focus of these documents is to provide spiritual guidance for nuns under the care of male monastic figures.

¹⁰ Julie Hotchin, “Female Religious Life and the *Cura Monialium* in Hirsau Monasticism, 1080 to 1150,” *Listen, Daughter*, 60.

¹¹ Vera Morton, *Guidance for Women in Twelfth-Century Convents* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), 6. See also Elizabeth Bos, “The Literature of Spiritual Formation,” *Listen Daughter*, 202.

¹² See PL 197: 1053-1066, and *Hildegard of Bingen: Explanation of the Rule of Benedict*, trans. Hugh Feiss (Toronto, Ontario: Peregrina, 1997).

¹³ See also Constant J. Mews, “Heloise and Hildegard: Re-Visioning Religious Life in the Twelfth Century,” 25. Mews makes the point that Heloise and Hildegard are both speaking out of the need to stress the Rule’s inherent adaptability in the light of criticism regarding modifications to the Rule at the time.

¹⁴ Carl Kelso, Jr., “Women in Power: Fontevrault and the Paraclete Compared,” *Comitatus* 22 (1991): 55-69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 61. Kelso notes the contrast between Heloise’s position regarding “monastic diet”: “he [Abelard] advocated strict diet and fasting, while Heloise preferred a varied diet, deemphasizing the importance of fasting. Her rule supports the varied diet.” 68, n. 48.

Hohenbourg, Heloise was alone in raising critical, often original, and even prescient questions concerning why and how women should live this life.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, as I will establish, during this period of monastic renewal and innovation, Heloise’s method of commenting on the Rule demonstrates that she is a faithful adherent to the Rule’s own description of the role of the Abbot/Abbess and to its own inner ethos. However, Heloise presents the reader with a unique theological reading of the Rule of Benedict, unparalleled in her own times and eminently relevant to our own understanding of monasticism today.

As in all her earlier letters to Abelard, it is the place of the body that figures largely in Heloise’s reading of the Rule: a Rule written by a man, primarily for men and thus, inherently for male bodies. I am not suggesting that the Rule of Benedict is a “masculine” rule in the “essentialist” sense, nor am I attempting a definitive essentialism by some sort of crude assumptive parallel between ‘men’ and ‘male bodies’. This would be to bypass any recognition of gender construction in medieval culture as outlined in the work of Bynum,¹⁷ and also to ignore the gender instability identifiable in the eleventh and twelfth centuries as articulated in McNamara’s analysis of the *herrenfrage*, the crisis of male identity in the twelfth century.¹⁸ The problem lies in setting up too sharp an opposition between embodiment and gender as if gender can exist without the particularity of the body, or the body exist apart from the social constructs by which it is expressed in a particular context. However, neither do I ascribe to a position where the “speaking body”, be that of a male body or a female body, has nothing to contribute to the voice of the speaker or literate subject, and therefore to issues of gender and gendered language. This position has had devastating effects on the status of women theologically throughout the centuries as I have already outlined.¹⁹ Thus the question remains: “Does the particular body of the subject, his/her embodied state, matter in relation to gender?”

¹⁶ McLaughlin, "Heloise the Abbess: The Expansion of the Paraclete," 2.

¹⁷ See Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*.

¹⁸ See Jo-Ann McNamara, "The *Herrenfrage*: The Reconstructing of the Gender System, 1050-1150," 3-29. Here McNamara identifies the fluid nature of masculine and feminine characteristics in what she terms the *herrenfrage*.

¹⁹ See Chapter One.

McNamara points out that in Heloise's own time: "the spiritual likeness of both women and men to God was not reflected in the biological differences of women."²⁰ However, this belief does not simply negate the position of the body in discourse. Somewhat paradoxically, McNamara goes on to insist that: "This [biological difference] anchored women to the animal functions of sex and reproduction, which proved that they could never hope to achieve the spiritual level that qualified men for the clergy and for fully human status."²¹ Indeed, it is clear from the writings of both Abelard and Heloise at least that the particularity of the body is consciously embedded in their thinking as I have already established. McCracken also acknowledges this characteristic of their writings: "Both use the female body to illustrate the relationship between body and spirit for the Christian subject; both use the female body in a definition of authentic religious identity; and both insist on the materiality of the body, although in crucially different terms."²² It is impossible to ignore that it was only by having the body of a man, both conceptually *and* materially, that made it possible to achieve this fully subjective identity, and one could argue that this is still the central struggle in much of the theological discourse operative to this day. From this fact it is clear that the bodies of females contributed significantly to their identity as women and as "speaking" subjects in the twelfth century as much as, I would suggest, they are integral to our identity as women today.

Bynum's study of gender in the medieval era posits the position of women vis-à-vis the body and embodiment in an examination of symbols. She notes that, "Women's symbols and myths tend to build from social and biological experiences; men's symbols and myths tend to invert them."²³ Certainly, "gender is not reducible to biological sex",²⁴ however, neither can one avoid the issue of the body. Speaking of this use of gendered symbols, Bynum concludes:

If we take as women's rituals and women's symbols the rituals and symbols women actually use, and ask how these symbols mean, we may discover that

²⁰ McNamara, "The *Herrenfrage*: The Reconstructing of the Gender System, 1050-1150," 20.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² McCracken, "The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter," *Listening to Heloise*, 217.

²³ Caroline Walker Bynum, Steven Harrell and Paula Richman, eds., *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

women have all along had certain modes of symbolic discourse different from those of men. Even where men and women have used the same symbols and rituals, they may have invested them with different meanings and different ways of meaning. To hear women's voices more clearly will be to see more fully the complexity of symbols.²⁵

If it is true that women in the twelfth century, "saw themselves less consciously as women than as religious people who happened to be female,"²⁶ this does not, of course, negate the fact that they did see themselves as different from men with their male bodies precisely because they were women with female bodies. Penelope Johnson claims that in their use of "feminised Latin" in their writings they were not interested in issues of gender in their day. However, it would not be inconsistent to suggest that this deliberate use of the Latin vocabulary is *precisely* a rhetorical device or tactic, used to emphasise their awareness of their difference. Women did not attempt to invert their language regarding the body, as their male counterparts did, rather they preferred to incorporate it. Women did indeed consider themselves different and they *did* know it.²⁷ Sexual difference does matter to the women of the medieval era and it is particularly evident in Heloise's letters, but this should not be a barrier to her gendered equality. Johnson's example from the letter of Abbess Marsilia of St Amand in Rouen, Normandy, to Abbot Bovon of St Amand-Elnone vividly attests to this position. Johnson quotes Marsilia as suggesting that her nuns are: "different as to their sex but equal in their monastic profession" in relationship to Abbot Bovon's monks of St Amand-Elnone.²⁸

Abelard's own discussion of the need for Heloise and her community to transcend their womanly form, that is, to "become more than women"²⁹, with his metaphorical erasing of the body in his exegesis of the Ethiopian Bride in the Song of Songs, attests to the lure of an ever-present seductive Platonist/gnostic trap.³⁰ In the medieval context, the body is

²⁵ Ibid. 16.

²⁶ Penelope Johnson, "Mulier et Monialis: the Medieval Nun's Self-Image," *Thought* 64 (1989): 242.

²⁷ See, Ibid., 251. I have paraphrased Johnson here to stress my own position vis-à-vis the body.

²⁸ Ibid., 252. See also the title Johnson chose to give her book on women's religious life in medieval France: *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

²⁹ "plus quam femina." *Ep.* 5, Hicks, 82 (Radice, 84).

³⁰ See my discussion on this issue in Chapter 1, p. 5.

intimately tied to one's identity as either male or female,³¹ and this is particularly evident in Heloise's struggle to establish her identity and her community's identity within the monastic world of the twelfth century.

Heloise's reaffirmation of the place of the body, and the female body in particular, subverts the *herrenfrage* crisis which McNamara illustrates as present in the twelfth century by reintroducing the *frauenfrage*, that is, the question of women, through an embodied discourse on the possibility of monasticism for women and their bodies.³² It is my contention that Heloise's unique voice is revealed in precisely this "in-corporation" of the body into the monastic endeavour rather than any attempt to "invert" it. In Letter VI, Heloise makes a case for the re-reading of the Rule in accordance with Benedict's own dictates by taking into account context, in this case the context of women and their bodies, their difference. Indeed, uninhibited by the nature of the woman's body, she begins her discussion of women and their difference using the example of women's menstruating bodies.³³

McLaughlin maintains that Heloise's Paraclete community produced a reform unparalleled by any other women's community of the time: "Embracing virtually every aspect of life at the Paraclete, from its daily routine to its scriptural studies, this extraordinary personal program gave shape to a 'feminized' version of the 'textual community'".³⁴ I am not intending here to analyse Heloise's particular monastic observances as they were practiced in her own time or at her monastery. This work has been researched by Luscombe, Georgianna, Waddell, and more thoroughly and most recently by McLaughlin.³⁵ Rather I will be concentrating solely on the language Heloise

³¹ See Caroline Walker Bynum, "Why All the Fuss About the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1995).

³² McNamara uses both *herrenfrage* and *frauenfrage* as the terms to describe what she understands as crisis of gender in the eleventh and twelfth-centuries. See McNamara, "The *Herrenfrage*: The Reconstructing of the Gender System, 1050-1150."

³³ See *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 89 (Radice, 94).

³⁴ McLaughlin, "Heloise the Abbess: The Expansion of the Paraclete," 2.

³⁵ Luscombe, "Monasticism in the Lives and Writings of Heloise and Abelard", Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*, Waddell, ed., *The Old French Paraclete Ordinary and the Paraclete Breviary: I Introduction and*

uses to construct her commentary of the Rule of Benedict. I will, however, include some cursory remarks concerning how this Rule was eventually adhered to in the next chapter.

According to Benedict, quoting Psalm 34, his Rule is established for those “who desire life and long to see good days”.³⁶ Heloise’s question to Abelard concerns how life and “good days” can be obtained by women, that is, how this Rule, written for men and their bodies can be lived by women, who have different bodies. It is through the language of *discretio*, (discretion or discernment) – yet another distinctively Benedictine virtue – that Heloise exhibits her uniquely feminine and embodied vocabulary in her reading of the Rule, as the discussion in my previous chapters has demonstrated. This is a vocabulary that is solidly grounded in the principles of the Rule of Benedict itself. It is also a vocabulary distinctive of other monastic writers of the twelfth century: however, it is Heloise’s consistent refusal to by-pass the participation of the body in this vocabulary that marks her uniqueness.

It is my contention that it is Benedict’s vocabulary of discretion which forms the heart of Heloise’s interpretation (rather than critique) of the Rule. This vocabulary of discretion is played out in the context of women’s bodies and Heloise’s emphasis on the central Christian virtue of love in the monastic endeavour. Heloise’s reading of the Rule provides a unique example of the possibility for women to discover their own subjectivity wholly within their embodied condition.

The Understanding of *discretio/discernere* in the Monastic Tradition:

The concept of “discernment” has a long tradition within Christian spirituality. I do not intend to trace here the entire history of its understanding and use as this has been amply

Commentary, McLaughlin, "Heloise the Abbess: The Expansion of the Paraclete", and Mary Martin McLaughlin, *Heloise and the Paraclete* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), forthcoming.

³⁶ “Which of you desires life and longs to see good days?” (Quis est homo qui vult vitam et cupit videre dies bonos?) RB Prol. 15 (Kardong, 3).

accomplished by the work of many other writers.³⁷ Rather I would like to concentrate briefly on its position within the monastic tradition to which Heloise belongs, particularly in relation to how it bears directly on her writings.

a. Pre-Benedict: *Discretio: Est enim non mediocris quaedam virtus*³⁸

Discretion, or discernment as it is often translated in the monastic tradition,³⁹ was considered a gift of the Holy Spirit, a grace, which enabled either a community or an individual to distinguish between good and bad behaviour, between what was of God and what was not of God. As such, for the monk it was the fundamental moderating and regulating virtue of all virtues in his journey towards union with God.

The quintessential monk in monastic history, Anthony the Great, confirms the priority of discretion in relation to even ascetic renunciations: “Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God.”⁴⁰ Anthony, renowned for his asceticism throughout the centuries of Christian spirituality, is here clearly an advocate of discretion’s role in moderating ascetic practices.

John Cassian, the precursor for much of Benedict’s Rule, describes the centrality of discretion in the life of a monk in an entire chapter of his *Conferences*.⁴¹ Here he uses an embodied vocabulary in his discussion of the virtue, using the Gospel of Matthew:

This, then, is discretion. According to the words of the Savior, it is called the eye and the light of the body in the Gospel: “Your eye is the light of

³⁷ For example Joseph T. Lienhard, "On 'Discernment of Spirits' in the Early Church." *Theological Studies* 41 (1980): 505-29, Augusta M. Raabe, "Discernment of Spirits in the Prologue to the Rule of Benedict," *American Benedictine Review* 23 (1972): 339-400, and Kerin Caldwell, "Discernment as a Way of Life," unpublished thesis, Doctor of Ministry, Catholic Theological Union, 1997.

³⁸ “the gift of discretion is no earthly or paltry matter” *Conlat.* 2. I, SC 42:104 (Ramsey, 84).

³⁹ The two terms *discretio* and *discernere* are used interchangeably by Benedict. Most modern monastic scholars of the Rule also use the words interchangeably. The English translation as “discernment” is the preferred term for the majority of spiritual writers today, particularly in relation to Jesuit spirituality. However, as I am endeavouring to place Heloise firmly in the monastic tradition, I also prefer to oscillate between the two terms.

⁴⁰ “Iterum dixit, esse quosdam qui sua corpora in austeritate contriverunt, et quod discretione carerent, longe a Deo facti sunt.” Anthony the Great #8, PG 65: 78, translated in Benedicta Ward, (trans.), *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, CS 59 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984). In this instance Ward has translated the Latin, *discretione*, as discernment.

⁴¹ *Conference 2 – On Discretion [De Discretione]* SC 42:108-137 (Ramsey, 83-104).

your body. If your eye is single, your whole body will be light. But if your eye is evil, your whole body will be darkness".⁴²

Cassian also uses the imagery of "scales" to further stress that all is to be judged or discerned with this balance of behaviour in mind. After citing the story of Abba John who learnt discretion through recognising his own dangerous excesses in asceticism, Cassian reminds the reader that when anything is to be done we must first discern:

This we must place in the scale of our heart and weigh with the most delicate balance to see whether it has the proper weight of common goodness, and whether it is sufficiently heavy with fear of God and integral in meaning, or whether it is too light because of human ostentation or some novel presumption, or whether the pride of empty vainglory has diminished or eroded the weight of its worth?⁴³

The virtue of discretion aims at revealing the true motivations behind one's thoughts and actions, testing them to see if they are from God. In this sense, discretion is about the acknowledgement of one's true self, one's identity before God, one's sinfulness before God. Kerin Caldwell summarises the place of discretion in relationship to sin thus: "one must know the nature of one's sins and the means of curing them, whether this be by tearing up, destroying, scattering or overthrowing the destructive forces."⁴⁴

Integral to discretion is its function as guide for the monk's path towards humility and this humility is manifest through revealing the truth of oneself to another, an elder: "True discretion is not obtained except by true humility. The first proof of this humility will be if not only everything that is to be done, but everything that is thought of is offered to the inspection of the elders."⁴⁵ Heloise, as we have already noted, understands that it is also

⁴² "Haec namque est discretio, quae oculus et lucerna corporis in euangelio nuncupatur secundum illam sententiam saluatoris: lucerna corporis tui est oculus tuus: quodsi oculus tuus fuerit simplex, totum corpus tuum lucidum erit; si autem oculus tuus nequam fuerit, totum corpus tuum tenebrosum erit." *Conlat.* 2. II, SC 42: 113 (Ramsey, 86). Ramsey's translation here is questionable given the overall theological emphasis of monasticism, that of singleness or purity of heart. Thus *simplex* would be better translated as pure or single-focused, and *nequam* as faulty or good for nothing rather than as intensely as evil.

⁴³ "atque in nostri pectoris trutina conlocantes, aequilibratione iustissima perpendamus, an plenum sit honestate communi, an timore dei sit graue, si integrum sensu, an humana ostentatione aut aliqua nouitatis praesumptione sit leue, an meriti eius pondus inanis cenodoxiae non imminuerit, uel adroserit gloria." *Conlat.* 1. XXI, SC 42, 105 (Ramsey, 62).

⁴⁴ Caldwell, "Discernment as a Way of Life," 97.

⁴⁵ "Vera, inquit, discretio non nisi uera humilitate conquiritur. Cuius humilitatis haec erit prima probatio, si uniuersa non solum quae agenda sunt, sed etiam quae cogitantur, seniorum reseruentur examini." *Conlat.* 2. X, SC 42:120 (Ramsey, 90).

through incorporation of one's sins, not simply their denial or elimination, that one arrives at humility. In all her letters Heloise humbly and unhesitatingly lays bare her inner thoughts to Abelard, considered by her as the father of the community. We will discover in this present study that it is this understanding that grounds her discretion or discernment in relation to her reading of the Rule of Benedict.

b. The Rule of Benedict: *Discretio: matris virtutum*.⁴⁶

The earliest commentator on the Rule of Benedict was Gregory the Great (d. 604). He praises Benedict's Rule for its remarkable "discretion and its clarity of language".⁴⁷ The word that Gregory uses for "discretion" comes from two Greek words: *diakrisis*, referring to discernment of spirits, good and bad, or the motivations that lead to good or bad behaviour; and *metron*, meaning "measure", that is, the avoidance of excess, or moderation. In Benedict's interchangeable use of both *discernere*, as the verb, and *discretio*, as the noun, we are given this full meaning of the virtue.⁴⁸

Benedict calls discretion, the "the mother of virtues" (*matris virtutum*) (RB 64:19), and he draws this idea implicitly from his source, John Cassian, who describes discretion as: "the begetter, guardian, and moderator of all things."⁴⁹ This virtue is particularly stressed in terms of the characteristics required of the abbot/abbess of a community. "Not only does the Abbot have to be a person who can discern the movements of the spirit of truth of his own heart, but he must be able to engage in discernment and adapt with flexibility and compassion when dealing with the different personalities of the monks."⁵⁰ Benedict uses this sense of discretion as equivalent to prudence. He uses as his authority the biblical story of Jacob's care of his flocks (see Gen 33:13). This discretion is the "sense

⁴⁶ "mother of virtues", see RB 64:19, (Kardong, 527).

⁴⁷ "Nam scripsit monachorum regulam discretione praecipuam, sermone luculentam." *Dialog*. Book II, XXXVI, SC 260: 242, 6-7. See *Gregory the Great: The Life of Saint Benedict*, trans. Hilary Costello and Eoin de Bhaldraithe, ed. (commentary) Adalbert de Vogüé (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1993), 147.

⁴⁸ Benedict uses *discretio* (the noun) three times, twice in relationship to the characteristics required of the Abbot (64:18, 19) and once in relation to the behaviour of monks (70:6). He uses *discernere* (the verb) five times (2:16, 21; 63:1, 5 and 64:17), all of which are in relation to the Abbot.

⁴⁹ "Omnium namque uirtutum generatrix, custos moderatrixque discretio est." *Conlat.* 2. IV, (SC 42. 116) (Ramsey, 87).

⁵⁰ Caldwell, "Discernment as a Way of Life," 99.

or intuition of what people can be expected to bear.”⁵¹ According to Benedict, the abbot: “should meditate on the prudence of holy Jacob . . . Taking heed of these and other passages that extol discretion . . . he should arrange everything so that the strong are challenged and the feeble are not overwhelmed.”⁵²

It is the virtue of discretion, that monastic virtue which enables one to discern the will of God, to make decisions both from the perspective of the particular individual, and in terms of the community’s life, which are played out in the context of the particular bodies that make up the whole body of the monastic community. In relation to the abbot or abbess, different bodies are treated differently. There are some who are strong; there are others who are weak. Indeed, Benedict’s Rule takes account of individual differences in the living out of a journey towards God in love. In directing the monks behaviour,

[H]e [the abbot] should vary his approach according to the situation, mixing threats and enticements, now showing the sternness of a taskmaster, and now the tender affection of a father. Thus he should discipline the unruly and restless rather sharply, but entreat the obedient, mild and patient to make more progress.⁵³

Who are these different bodies, the strong and the weak, whom Benedict takes such care to consider in his monastic project? In the Rule, Benedict mentions a number of them, and all of them in relation to other bodies: the abbot, in relationship to God, particular monks, guests and the community (RB 2, 27 and 63); the deans in relationship to the monks and the abbot (RB 21); the cellarer in relationship to the monks, the community in general, the abbot and God (RB 31); the porter in relationship to the guests, the abbot and God (RB 66); the prior in relationship to the monks, the abbot and God (RB 65); the seniors and the juniors in relationship to each other, the community and the abbot (RB 63 and 71); the sick in relationship to all the community and God (RB 36); the visitor in relationship to the monks and the abbot (RB 53); the artisans in relationship to outsiders,

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² “cogitans discretionem sancti Iacob . . . Haec ergo aliaque testimonia discretionis . . . sic omnia temperet ut sit et fortes quod cupiant et infirmi non refugiant.” RB 64:18-19 (Kardong, 527).

⁵³ “id est, miscens temporibus tempora, terroribus blandimenta, dirum magistri, pium patris ostendat affectum, id est indisciplinatos et inquietos debet durius arguere, oboedientes autem et mites et patientes ut in melius proficiant obsecrare, negligentes et contemnentes ut increpat et corripit admonemus.” RB 2:24-25 (Kardong, 48).

the community, the abbot and God (RB 57); the elderly and children in relationship to the entire community (RB 37); monk to monk – all the monks are in relationship to each other, to the abbot and ultimately to God. (see particularly RB 71, 72).

Adalbert de Vogüé states Benedict's intention here succinctly: "Benedict studies the problem of fraternal relations in its universality. "[The RB] envisages the relationship of any one brother with any other member of the community."⁵⁴ All of these bodies are given particular consideration through this virtue of discretion. Even the working out of the communal structures in the Rule remain firmly fixed in bodies who relate to other bodies. For example, the requirements for sleep, food, digestion, ablutions, punishments, and even timetables for different seasons and the recitation of the liturgy of the hours, etc., are all discerned by the abbot in relation to the different times and seasons and the needs of the various bodies concerned, be they old or young, sick or well, strong or weak.⁵⁵ Heloise's question in Letter VI simply desires to discern how the particular women who have given themselves bodily to the Rule in her community might be taken into account in this list of prescriptions.

However, lest there be any confusion here, discretion ensures that the abbot is not simply an autocrat making decisions as an isolated body. In Chapter Three – On Calling the Brothers for Counsel,⁵⁶ the Rule clearly sets forth the position of the larger body, the community, in relation to this overarching virtue of discretion. Kardong notes that: "Although the word *discretio* does not appear in RB 3, it is clear that this Christian virtue lies at the heart of the consultation of the monks by the abbot."⁵⁷ The abbot, in his role as abbot, is not simply a particular individual, but the embodiment of the community. The abbot is to represent all that the community desires to be, that is, Christ, the Christian body *par excellence*. As Benedict explains: "He [the abbot] is to represent Christ in the

⁵⁴ Adalbert de Vogüé, *Community and Abbot in the Rule of Saint Benedict*. CS 5/2. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988), 430-322.

⁵⁵ See RB 22; RB 39, 40 and 41; RB 8:4; RB 23-30; RB 8-20.

⁵⁶ "De adhibendis ad consilium fratribus" (Kardong, 69).

⁵⁷ Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary*, 78.

monastery for he is called by his name.”⁵⁸ Thus, the abbot’s discretion is informed by the voices of the bodies that make up the community, even and especially the youngest of them. (See RB 3:3)

The path to discretion in Benedict is “listening”. “Listen”, *Obsculta*, begins Benedict’s Rule and permeates every facet of it. To listen occurs in some form or other thirty-nine times.⁵⁹ Everything is to be listened to: The master’s instructions (RB Prol. 1); the abbot (RB 64:2); spiritual guides (RB 4:44); the Word (RB Prol. 22); others in community/ to each other in mutual obedience (RB 27:2 and 72:6); holy reading (RB 38:5); oneself (RB Prol. 20); God (RB Prol. 24); and Christ in the sick, the guests, the world (RB Prol. 11, 36:1, 53:7).⁶⁰

The driving force behind this virtue of discretion, the practice of listening, and indeed, all other virtues, is therefore the Gospel imperative to “love”, the *telos* of monastic life. The establishment of “love” must be the focus, the intention, the interior orientation of the monk, and the purpose motivating the entire structure of decision-making in the monastic endeavour, as love *is* the will of God, however it might be expressed and understood. As Casey insists: “Whatever course of action a monk seeks to follow, whatever plan a community adopts, must be submitted to the test of whether the proposition is likely to contribute to the realization of the fundamental purpose of monastic life.”⁶¹ As I am insisting, this purpose is simply the Gospel’s imperative to love. It is this virtue that unites the monk to God, and the beginning and end of Benedict’s Rule is couched in terms of this Gospel imperative. At the end of his Prologue Benedict assures the monastic:

In a given case we may have to arrange things a bit strictly to correct vice or preserve charity. When that happens, do not immediately take fright and flee the path of salvation, which can only be narrow at its outset. But as we progress in the monastic life and in faith, our hearts will swell with the

⁵⁸ “Christi enim agere vices in monasterio creditur, quando ipsius vocatur pronomine.” RB 2:2 (Kardong, 47).

⁵⁹ Raabe, “Discernment of Spirits in the Prologue to the Rule of Benedict,” 415.

⁶⁰ See, Caldwell, “Discernment as a Way of Life,” 103-04.

⁶¹ Michael Casey, *Strangers to the City: Reflections on the Beliefs and Values of the Rule of Saint Benedict* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2005), 20.

unspeakable sweetness of love, enabling us to race along the way of God's commandments.⁶²

Everything that is done, all decisions that are made in arranging life in the monastery, are to conform to love, that is, all is done for the sake of love and for the sake of achieving love. The prescriptions of the Rule mean nothing without it. The commandments that Benedict refers to here in Prologue 49 are nothing more than the commandments to love God and neighbour.⁶³

At the end of the Rule, originally Chapter 72,⁶⁴ Benedict again outlines the criteria by which the monastic discerns or makes judgements. For Benedict, the particular body is fundamentally taken up into the communal body, losing itself in fraternal love. All bodies are incorporated into the communal body in their desire for "The Body", that is, the body who is Christ. The monk's subjectivity is accomplished in this *telos* of monastic life.

Benedict summarises the task of the monastic:

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.⁶⁵

Discretion, both at the beginning and end of the rule, is thus framed in a language that concerns love for other bodies. Between this beginning and end of the Rule is a programme for monastic living where love is expressed not through any abstract intellectual ideas, not simply through purely rational thought, but through prescriptive rules that refer directly to particular bodies that make up the monastic community. In Benedict's context, these bodies were male bodies.

⁶² "sed et si quid paululum restrictius, dictante aequitatis ratione, propter emendationem vitiorum vel conservationem caritatis processerit, non ilico pavore perterritus refugias viam salutis quae non est nisi angusto initio incipienda. Processu vero conversationis et fidei, dilatato corde inenarrabili dilectionis dulcedine curritur via mandatorum Dei." RB Prol. 47-49 (Kardong, 5).

⁶³ See RB 4:1– quoting Mark 12:30 – "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

⁶⁴ See Kardong's summary of the complexity of Chapter 73 of the Rule of Benedict, Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary*, 612.

⁶⁵ "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 perducat." RB 72:7-12 (Kardong, 588).

c. Bernard and Hildegard: *Virtus quidem discretionis absque caritatis fervore iacet*⁶⁶

Before considering Heloise's commentary on the Rule of Benedict in relation to women's bodies, I would first like to take into account the position of just two of her own contemporaries: Bernard of Clairvaux, who we know influenced her communal life, and Hildegard of Bingen, the only other monastic woman of the twelfth century to write directly on the Rule of Benedict. This analysis will help to situate better Heloise's own unique mode of speaking within the intellectual climate of her times.

According to Francis Kline, the nearest Bernard comes to a commentary on the Rule of Benedict is in his *De gradibus humilitatis*, which is a direct commentary on just one of the chapters in the Rule of Benedict, Chapter 7, *On humility*.⁶⁷ However, all of Bernard's writings are permeated with the spirituality of the Rule just as they are marked by Scripture.⁶⁸ In accord with the tradition as outlined above, Bernard understands the essential role of discretion particularly in relation to the abbot. In his sermons on the Song of Songs he writes:

Those who exercise authority for the welfare of others are comparatively few and fewer still those whose power rests in humility. These both are achieved easily by the man of perfect discretion, the mother of the virtues, the man who is drunk with the wine of charity even to contempt of his own good name, to forgetfulness of self and indifference to self-interest.⁶⁹

Bernard's understanding of discretion, as for Benedict, is also intimately connected with love: "Without the fervor of love the virtue of discretion is lifeless, and intense fervor goes headlong without the curb of discretion. Praiseworthy the man, then who possesses

⁶⁶ *Sermo 23 SBO 1:144 (CF 7:32).*

⁶⁷ See Francis Kline, "Saint Bernard and the Rule of Saint Benedict: An Introduction," *Bernardus Magister*, ed. J.P. Sommerfeldt, CS 135, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 169-86.

⁶⁸ Casey notes that: "An important source which is often underestimated is the *Rule* of St Benedict. Apart from overt references to Benedict and his *Rule* whenever Bernard dealt with monastic matters, there is often a clear kinship with the text of Benedict's *Rule* elsewhere." See Michael Casey, *Athirst for God*, 28.

⁶⁹ "At pauci profecto qui utiliter, pauciores qui et humiliter praesint. Facile tamen utrumque adimplet qui matrem virtutum discretionem perfecte adeptus, vino nihilominus caritatis usque ad contemptum propriae gloriae, usque ad sui ipsius oblivionem, et ad non quaerenda quae sua sunt debriatur." *Sermo 23 SBO 1:144 CF 7:32).*

both: the fervor that enlivens discretion, the discretion that regulates fervor.”⁷⁰ To act with true discretion for Bernard, as for Benedict, is therefore to act with love.

Drawing on the monastic tradition inherited through Cassian, Bernard notes that discretion is not so much a virtue as a moderator and controller of virtue, that which orders the affects and gives instruction in right behaviour: “Take away discretion and virtue becomes vice and the very inclination of nature is changed to disturbance and thus becomes the destroyer of nature.”⁷¹ To act with discretion then is to protect the activity of love, and thus, to act with love itself.

Hildegard’s commentary on the Rule of Benedict, *Regulae S. Benedicti Explanatio*, is also infused with this value of discretion on nearly every page. She sets the tone for this emphasis from the beginning:

Furthermore, he [Benedict] was a closed fountain who poured forth his doctrine in the discretion of God. For he drove in the sharp nail of his doctrine neither too high nor too low, but in the middle of the wheel, so that each one, whether strong or weak or sick, would be able to drink from his according to his capacity.⁷²

Hildegard has drawn directly from Benedict’s teaching on the qualities of the abbot here to explain the need to temper the Rule to context humanely and wisely. Feiss suggests that Hildegard is carefully justifying her own flexible approach to the Rule and responding to the issue of literal interpretation of the Rule circulating in her times.⁷³

However, Hildegard is writing this commentary for her male monastic contemporaries.

We will note that Heloise also stresses the inherent flexible and adaptable character of the Rule in her commentary, but in her case she is writing specifically for women.

⁷⁰ “Virtus quidem discretionis absque caritatis fervore iacet, et fervor vehemens absque discretionis temperamento praecipitat. Ideoque laudabilis cui neutrum deest, quatenus et fervor discretionem erigat, et discretio fervorem regat.” *Sermo 23* SBO 1:144 (CF 7:32).

⁷¹ “Tolle hanc, et virtus vitium erit, ipsaque affectio naturalis in perturbationem magis convertetur exterminiumque naturae.” *Sermo 49* SBO 2:76 (CF 31:25).

⁷² “Fons quoque clausus fuit, qui in discretionem Dei doctrinam suam effudit, cum acutum clavum doctrinae nec nimis in altum nec nimis in profundum, sed in medium rotae fixit, ita ut unusquisque, sive fortis, sive imbecillis sit, ex ea secundum possibilitatem suam bibere competenter possit.” *Regulae S. Benedicti Explanatio 2*, PL 197: 1055A-B (Feiss, 18).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 45.

As evident in both Benedict's and Bernard's writings, Hildegard links discretion with the quality of charity so central to the Rule. She notes that. "he [Benedict] constructed the wall of the holiness in charity of the Rule."⁷⁴ Hildegard then proceeds to comment on the prescriptions of the Rule in the light of this discretion, exercised in love, so that the adherence to the Rule is tempered by moderation and consideration for circumstances: "The things he will not permit to happen, he openly forbids. He makes clear what things he urges to be done. But the things about which he is silent in this way, he leaves to the judgement and discretion of the abbot and the brethren."⁷⁵ What Benedict remains silent about is thus left to the wise judgement of the community.

The Context of Heloise's Interpretation of the Rule of Benedict

To begin this discussion, which focuses primarily on Heloise's Letter VI, we cannot simply ignore the letters that precede it. Heloise's previous letters, as I have argued, are in continuity with this final letter. The letters therefore must be read as a coherent and formative whole.⁷⁶ The theme of discretion, although not specifically mentioned by Heloise in Letters II and IV, is nevertheless not absent within them, particularly with regard to the specific identity of Heloise which comes to light. I have previously established the underlying humility of Heloise in her writings.⁷⁷ In this stance of humility she presents the reader with a woman who is discerning her own thoughts and actions by disclosing them to her superior, Abelard. The monastic tradition described above clearly identifies the humility required of the monk as marked by this transparency before an elder. This humility is one of the hallmarks of discretion throughout the monastic

⁷⁴ "et in charitate murum sanctitatis Regulae constituit." *Regulae S. Benedicti Explanatio* 3, PL 197:1055B-C, (Feiss, 18).

⁷⁵ "Quae enim fieri rescusat, ea aperte interdicat; et quae fieri exhortatur, illa aperte manifestat. Haec autem de quibus tali modo reticet, arbitrio et discretioni abbatis et fratrum dimittit." *Regulae S. Benedicti Explanatio* 12, PL 197: 1057D-1058A, (Feiss, 23).

⁷⁶Both Georgianna and Powell argue for this position also. In particular, Georgianna notes: "My aim is to show that Heloise's concerns in this letter follow from and develop ideas expressed in her earlier letters and that we can understand better both Heloise and those aspects of twelfth-century spirituality that she epitomizes if we treat her works as an intellectual and imaginative whole rather than as a disjointed series of documents." See Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," 189, and see also throughout Morgan Powell, "Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete: Of Scholarly Diversion and a Woman's 'Conversion'".

⁷⁷ See my discussion in Chapter 2 and 3 of this thesis, particularly pp. 49, 59 and 70.

tradition. Benedict extols his monks to this evident transparency in his Rule: “When bad thoughts arrive in your heart, smash them against Christ and manifest them to a spiritual elder.”⁷⁸ Heloise’s honest admissions in these letters enable her humbly to identify and scrutinise her own motivations. Findley identifies this aspect of Heloise’s rhetoric in terms of a contrast between hypocrisy and sincerity:

If we admit Heloise’s overt claim that she is a hypocrite, we have also, necessarily, admitted her covert claim that, despite her hypocrisy, she is now speaking the truth: that, by admitting to the vast and shameful difference that exists between her virtuous outer self and her lustful inner self, she is allowing that inner, purportedly sincere, self to speak out at last . . . In this way, her self-accusation of hypocrisy functions subversively, even insidiously, as proof of her own sincerity.⁷⁹

It is through this very Benedictine process of coming to self-knowledge, or truthfulness, that the possibility of union with God, love itself, the aim of monastic life, becomes a reality for Heloise and her community. Thus, these are not simply personal letters as they have been often categorised.⁸⁰ They are rather the record and formative example of discernment between disciple and master,⁸¹ and yet a disciple who is fast overtaking the master in the spiritual craft. Perhaps one may wish to query Heloise’s wisdom in her choice of spiritual advisor, given Abelard’s questionable success as a monk and abbot, however, it remains clear that she revealed her innermost thoughts to the one she considered her monastic superior and intended to “listen” attentively to him as her spiritual master.⁸²

Heloise’s commentary on the Rule of Benedict in Letter VI, and the spirituality that emanates from it, must also be assessed in the light of various reform movements in

⁷⁸ “Cogitationes malas cordi suo advenientes mox ad Christum allidere et seniori spiritali patefacere.” RB 4:50 (Kardong, 81).

⁷⁹ Findley, “Sincere Hypocrisy and the Authorial Persona in the Letters of Heloise,” 285.

⁸⁰ Note for example the categories given to the letters by Radice, following those of Muckle. i.e., *Personal Letters* and *Letters of Direction*. See Betty Radice, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, rev. Michael Clanchy (London: Penguin, 2003) and J. T. (ed.) Muckle, “The Personal Letters between Abelard and Heloise.”

⁸¹ Stone has also identified Abelard as Heloise’s spiritual director. See Stone, “Heloise: La très Sage Abbess of the Paraclete,” 24. This thesis conforms to Morgan Powell’s assertion that the letters function as a formative whole for their monastic readership, as I have alluded to previously. See Powell, “Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete: Of Scholarly Diversion and a Woman’s ‘Conversion’.”

⁸² See RB Prol. 1. (Kardong, 3).

monasticism which were in full swing around her at the time.⁸³ In particular, she stands within the midst of the endless controversies between the spiritual interpretation of the Rule by the “Black monks”, the Benedictines of Cluny,⁸⁴ and the “White monks”, the Cistercians’ demand for strict, literal adherence to the Rule.⁸⁵ Mews describes Heloise’s position at this time as, “a subtle critique of those Cistercian reformers who considered that failing to observe the Benedictine rule to the letter was to permit corruption of monastic ideals.”⁸⁶ However, as I will claim, she is also calling into question the Cluniac position on several points.

At the forefront of these reforming voices are Peter the Venerable, famed abbot of Cluny, the largest and most prestigious monastery of Europe in the twelfth century, and Bernard, the Cistercian abbot of Clairvaux, whose spiritual prowess was broadly acclaimed. We know that Heloise was in conversation with both these spiritual giants of her age and that both men had a high regard for her and her monastic project. Bernard had visited her abbey personally, as evidenced in a letter addressed to him by Abelard.⁸⁷ Bernard was himself also an advocate for Heloise and her community in helping them gain papal

⁸³ Reforms in monasticism had been the mark of the eleventh century and included figures such as Romuald and the Camaldolese movement, Peter Damian with his tireless emphasis on the eremitical lifestyle, Bruno and the Chartreuse charterhouse, Robert of Molesme and Stephen Harding with the beginnings of the Cistercian reform, and the developments undertaken by the great abbots of Cluny. These movements continued into the twelfth century and witnessed the breakneck expansion of the Cistercian Order under Bernard of Clairvaux, as well as the attempts of Robert of Arbrissel and Gilbert of Sempringham to establish viable Orders for men and women. For a summary of these movements see Peter King, *Western Monasticism: A History of the Monastic Movement in the Latin Church*, CS185 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1999), 131-228. Both Mews and Georgianna also allude to the importance of these reform movements as part of the context for Heloise’s writing. See Mews, *Abelard and Heloise* 158-9, and throughout Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life."

⁸⁴ Benedictine monastic practice was moderated through the use of customaries. As Leclercq notes: “a long process of development had brought about a situation in which the life of the monks was moderated, not only by the Rule, but also by a set of customs based on the ecclesiastical, liturgical, economic, sociological and psychological conditions of a former age.” See J. Leclercq, "Introduction," trans. Michael Casey, *Cistercians and Cluniacs: St. Bernard's Apologia to Abbot William* CS 1 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1970), 3.

⁸⁵ There are a number of documents from this era that record the polemical debates between Cistercians and Cluniacs. Arguably the best examples of these are the *Apologia* written by Bernard of Clairvaux around 1125, (see SBO 3: 63-108) and Peter the Venerable’s Letter 28 (Giles Constable, ed., *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, 52-101).

⁸⁶ Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 59.

⁸⁷ See Chapter 3, n. 104.

recognition.⁸⁸ Peter the Venerable's letters to Heloise, as already noted elsewhere, amply attest to his regard for her monastic endeavours.⁸⁹

It is also within this era that women were exerting their rights to live a variety of forms of monastic life.⁹⁰ Within this milieu, Heloise attempts to make a case for adapting, and even rewriting, the Holy Rule for women. Dronke asserts that, "even though she had been forced into taking the veil, [she] had also developed a willing concern with every aspect of womanly monastic life."⁹¹ In this unique project, Heloise is presenting us with a woman's voice, with a woman's desire to live authentic religious life as it was understood at the time, within the sea of voices from the male monastic world. Heloise's stance in these letters presents the reader with that "striking move to invent a feminine position" which Irvine also identifies within her writings.⁹²

Rarely does anyone note Heloise's familiarity with the Rule of Benedict, although it is often stressed that Heloise is supremely well versed in ancient pagan Latin classics.⁹³ Yet this familiarity with the Rule is to be expected considering the proportion of her life

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 112, n. 105. For Bernard's advocacy on behalf of the Paraclete, see *Ep.* 278, SBO 8:190. (*The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, 428).

⁸⁹ I have referred to these letters previously also – note particularly Chapter 2, p. 54.

⁹⁰ Of particular note here are the nuns of Fontevraud. Although the community was initially the inspiration of Robert Arbrissel, he insisted on the authority being invested in the abbess of the community: "Petronilla, chosen by master Robert and constituted abbess by the common will and by the devoted request of the nuns as well of the brothers religious, is to have and maintain the power of ruling the church of Fontevrault and all the places belonging to that church, and they are to obey her. They are to revere her as their spiritual mother, and all the affairs of the church, spiritual as well as secular, are to remain in her hands, or be given to whomever she assigns, just as she decides." (Ut Petronilla electa a magistro Roberto et constituta abbatissa communi voluntate, et devota petitione tam sanctimonialium quam religiosorum fratrum habeat, obtineatque potestatem regendi ecclesiam Fontis Ebraldi, et omnium locorum eidem ecclesiae pertinentium, et obediant ei; veneretur eam ut suam matrem spiritualem, in ejusque prudentia omnia ecclesiae negotia tam spiritualia quam saecularia permaneant, aut quibuscunque attribuerit, et prout constituerit.) *Praecepta recte vivendi*. PL 162: 1083D-84D. English translation from: Penny Schine Gold, "Male/Female Cooperation: The Example of Fontevrault," *Distant Echoes: Medieval Religious Women*, eds. John A. Nicols and Lillian Shank, CS 71 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 154. Hildegard of Bingen, after intense arguments with the monks of Disibodenberg, managed to secure the right to move her monastery and elect her own provost. See, *Vitae Sanctae Hildegardis*, ed. Monika Klaes, CCCM, 126 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1993). English translation by Anna Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, Brepols (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998) 134-210. See Barbara Newman, *Sister Wisdom*, 9-10.

⁹¹ Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 130.

⁹² Irvine, "Heloise and the Gendering of the Literate Subject," 90.

⁹³ Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life*, 171.

which had been influenced by it. Neither should this be of any surprise if we are to believe, as Werner Robl's argument contends, that Heloise's mother, Hersende was indeed, the first prioress of Fontevraud.⁹⁴ I have already established Heloise's overt desire to seek God, which permeates all of her letters. To "seek God" is the primary motivation required for identifying a genuine monk in the Rule of Benedict.⁹⁵ Heloise clearly demonstrates both humility, that central virtue of a monk and a sign of growth in God,⁹⁶ and an overt awareness of the need to reveal her thoughts honestly and humbly to a spiritual elder. Although Heloise only refers to the Rule directly four times in Letter VI, she nevertheless draws on, and refers to, Benedict's Rule either overtly or implicitly, up to twenty-three times.⁹⁷ Indeed, she can hardly be accused of "going beyond the Rule"⁹⁸ in her fundamental stance since her principal focus in this letter is her desire to know how to live this Rule authentically as a woman.

Heloise desires two things of Abelard's direction and these requests I have already discussed elsewhere.⁹⁹ Briefly, she first requires a history of religious women: "how the order of nuns began and what authority there is for our profession."¹⁰⁰ In asking for "the authority" for women's profession, her primary aim is to draw Abelard into the subjectivity of women in their search for God, paralleling her desire to draw Abelard into her own subjectivity in their personal history, the focus of much of Letters II and IV.

Secondly, she desires a prescriptive rule of the monastic life specifically for women. However, it seems evident that Heloise is not proposing the indiscriminate disposal of the

⁹⁴ Werner Robl, "Hersindis Mater. Neues Zur Familiengeschichte Heloisas Mit Ausblicken Auf Die Familie Peter Abaelards," *Abaelard. Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. Ursula Niggli (Freiburg im Breisgau: 2003). Cited in Constant J. Mews, "Negotiating the Boundaries of Gender in Religious Life: Robert of Arbrissel and Hersende, Abelard and Heloise," *Viator* 37 (2006): 113-48.

⁹⁵ "One must know whether he [the one wanting to be a monk] really seeks God." (Et sollicitudo sit si revera Deum quaerit). See RB 58:7 (Kardong, 463).

⁹⁶ See RB 7. Wilson and McLeod have also demonstrated Heloise's humble stance in their own analysis, See Wilson and McLeod, "Textual Strategies in the Abelard/Heloise Correspondence."

⁹⁷ RB 64:19 is cited in *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 91 (Radice, 96); RB2 and 64, in *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 92 (Radice, 96-7) and RB 73, in *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 96 (Radice, 101). See Appendix 3 for a full outline of Heloise's use of the Rule of Benedict.

⁹⁸ See Mews, *Heloise and Abelard*, 158-159.

⁹⁹ See Chapters 2, pp. 55 and Chapter 3, p. 101.

¹⁰⁰ "unde sanctimonialium ordo ceperit, et que nostre sit professionis auctoritas." *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 89 (Radice, 94).

Holy Rule itself. She unmistakably adheres to the spiritual core of the Rule in her own person.¹⁰¹ Rather it is the Rule's transfiguration into the context of women that concerns her, particularly in its prescriptive instructions. Her complaint is that in this regard, the Rule is not inherently a literalist universal Rule and should not be understood as such.

Heloise's attitude is in direct contrast to the often scandalously derogatory male voices circulating between the Cistercians and Cluniac monastics of her day. As such she is effectively "speaking from a position in the middle of the binaries"¹⁰² as seems to be typical of her speech thus far analysed. The dialogues between the Cluniacs and the Cistercians were full of the practice of satire and irony. While aimed at deeper truths regarding the pursuit of monastic perfection, particularly the value of love, could nevertheless still distract the reader from the fundamental purpose of monastic life by its rhetorical flourish.¹⁰³

Heloise's commentary is not systematic in any sense. It is more like the development of a symphony. There are a number of what appear to be separate and dissonant themes running through her commentary, some of which even seem randomly chosen. However, played together they produce a unique interweaving melody building to a harmonising climax. Heloise's spiritual musicianship plays through all the conversations to reveal both Cluny and Cîteaux as the discordant male voices. These voices can appear to be somewhat contrary to the Christianity they profess even if their rhetorical content is not intentionally directed to such an end.

¹⁰¹ As I have pointed out in the beginning of this section, Heloise adheres to the fundamental spiritual orientation of monastic life as outlined in the first seven chapters of the Rule and in Chapter 72 and 73.

¹⁰² Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 132. See also my discussion in Chapter 1.

¹⁰³ For example, it is clear that Hugh of Reading took offence at Bernard's *Apologia* by the way he vigorously defended the Cluniac position. Jean Leclercq notes that Hugh of Reading "thought that Bernard should have put a curb on his talent." Leclercq, "Introduction," 20. Bernard even admits he finds the task does not really appeal to him. Writing in response to William of St Thierry's request, he states: "At the same time you should be aware that I find this sort of writing rather distasteful. It means a great loss of devotion and an interruption of prayer, especially when one has neither the skill nor the leisure for writing." (Scito tamen non modico me in huiusmodi scriptitationibus feriri detrimento, quia multum hinc mihi devotionis subtrahitur, dum studium orationis intermittitur, praesertim cum nec usus suppetat dictandi, nec otium). *Ep. 84b*, SBO: 7, 219, 16-18. (CF 1, 6).

Heloise's tactic is to build her argument up piece by piece with a probing cacophony of questions as she goes: Can women live under a Rule written for men? Aren't our bodies fundamentally different? Are different bodies important in the interpretation of the Rule? Is living the Rule primarily about its prescriptions? What is it to live under a Rule? Is it literal interpretation of its prescriptions? Can men live under such a Rule? What is the actual "tenor of the Rule"? Isn't it discretion? Isn't it interior life? Surely it is love? Finally, at the end of this searching *crescendo* she challenges the reader to move to the harmonising heart of one's adherence to rules.

Heloise bases her commentary on the fact that women have different bodies and so to use a "logic of the same" in reading the Rule contains some obvious and inherent contradictions that cannot be sustained in the faithful living out of the Rule particularly in relation to women's subjectivity. The narrative section of Heloise's Letter VI proceeds with this detailed elaboration of the inappropriateness of many of the prescriptions of the Rule of Benedict for women, covering historical criticism and arguments of theology and scripture, wherein Heloise very clearly reveals her intellectual training as Abelard's student. She does not argue in any type of meditative approach. There is none of the allegorical exegesis more typical of monastic writers of her era here. Her arguments, set within a dialectical framework, are logical, moralistic and uncompromising, even if they may seem somewhat ambiguous at times.

Heloise is supremely the product of the twelfth century's sophisticated theology which she had learnt well from her education at the Convent of Argenteuil, from her intersection with the scholastic schools in Paris, and from her continuing education with Abelard in her uncle's house within the cloister in the cathedral close of Notre Dame.¹⁰⁴ As noted by Georgianna, "in her education, dialectical style and habit of mind, indeed, in her self-

¹⁰⁴ Stone discusses the nature of Heloise's education at Argenteuil and the extraordinary nature of it for the times. It is surely here that she discovered the monastic virtue of the love of learning. See Stone, "Heloise: La très Sage Abbess of the Paraclete." John O. Ward discusses the opportunities available to Heloise during her life in Paris and maintains that it was highly likely that Heloise attended classes in the cloister school of Notre Dame while she was living with her uncle in the cathedral close. See Ward and Chiavaroli, "The Young Heloise and Latin Rhetoric: Some Preliminary Comments on the "Lost" Love Letters and Their Significance," 58-62.

image as a whole, she has far more in common with academics or schoolmen than with monks.¹⁰⁵ However, I want to suggest that Heloise's task as she sees it is to bring the two streams together in a creative synthesis for the sake of women's subjectivity within the monastic tradition. Heloise is no "less" monastic than scholastic in her thinking. Indeed, one could suggest that her intellectual vocation is intimately tied to the monastic vocation that had been thrust upon her. Her voice in the letters is resolute with what I have argued throughout this thesis is her "in-corporative" focus. The choice is not between one mode of speaking and another, monastic or scholastic, but the recognition of the expression of a distinctively new voice, that of a particular woman with a particular woman's perspective.

Heloise's Discretion: *Quid, inquam, de feminis provideret, si eis quoque pariter ut viris regulam institueret?*¹⁰⁶

Having requested a rule from Abelard, Heloise then proceeds to justify this request with her own commentary on monastic life as she experiences it for women, outlining herself what she expects to hear in response from Abelard.¹⁰⁷ Sexual difference is a clear motive behind all her arguments and never more obvious than in this letter. She begins with pointing out her dilemma. Both sexes are required to live under the one rule: "although, as it was clearly written for men alone, it can only be fully obeyed by men".¹⁰⁸ Thus, for Heloise at least, there is obviously something contrary to logic in this practice, given that men and women are unquestionably different.

Heloise then proceeds to analyse the prescriptions within the Rule for this inherent contradiction given the nature and experience of women. The one way to make her point about the need to consider difference is to start with the patently obvious, the biological differences between women and men. As direct and honest as always, she attacks the

¹⁰⁵ Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," 194.

¹⁰⁶ *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 92 (Radice, 97). "What provision would he make for women if he laid down a Rule for them like that for men?"

¹⁰⁷ See Luscombe, "Monasticism in the Lives and Writings of Heloise and Abelard", Chrysogonus Waddell, "St. Bernard and the Cistercian Office at the Abbey of the Paraclete," *Studies in Medieval Cistercian History* 5 (1980): 76-121.

¹⁰⁸ "Quam sicut viris solummodo constat scriptam esse." *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 89 (Radice, 94).

prescriptions for clothing in RB 58: “The Procedure for Accepting Brothers”,¹⁰⁹ in the light of women’s uniqueness as menstruating bodies:

Leaving aside for the moment other articles of the Rule: how can women be concerned with what is written there about cowls, drawers or scapulars? Or indeed, with tunics of woollen garments worn next to the skin when the monthly purging of their superfluous humours must avoid such things?¹¹⁰

Heloise is clearly conscious of her biological difference and is self-conscious of the fact in her desire to live an authentic monastic life. McCracken notes that Heloise here subverts the acceptable notions of women’s menstruation and the fear of pollution more typical of her cultural milieu.¹¹¹ This singular character of the woman’s body is not the “curse of Eve” with which Abelard identifies it.¹¹² Rather, as the site of women’s unique identity it cannot be avoided or denied and so, as McCracken insists: “Heloise cites menstruation as a privileged example of sexual difference: Heloise transforms a ‘degrading women’s concern’ into a strength of women’s bodies.”¹¹³ Heloise here exceeds the boundaries of opposition between body and soul, and speaking as a woman, establishes herself and her community as dependent on the body.¹¹⁴

Having stated the obvious, Heloise then extends her examination into the religious and social mores of her own times, pointing out the evident contradictions along the way. Referring to Benedict’s prescriptions for the performance of liturgical prayer in RB11:8-9, she notes: “How are they affected by the ruling for the abbot, that he shall read aloud the Gospel himself and afterwards start the hymn?”¹¹⁵ This had not been a consideration for Benedict as he was not considering women’s communities when he wrote his Rule for monks. Clearly the abbess, a woman, should not be permitted to read the Gospel aloud. Here Heloise is commenting on the traditional male clerical roles in liturgical practice in

¹⁰⁹ “De disciplina suscipiendorum fratrum.” (Kardong, 463).

¹¹⁰ “Ut enim cetera nunc omittam Regule capitula, quid ad feminas quod de cucullis, femoralibus et scapularibus ibi scriptum est? Quid denique ad ipsas de tunicis aut de laneis ad carnem indumentis, cum earum humoris superflui menstroe purgationes hec omnino refugiant?” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 89 (Radice, 94).

¹¹¹ McCracken, “The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise’s Third Letter,” 223.

¹¹² “maladictionem Eve.” *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 82 (Radice, 84).

¹¹³ McCracken, “The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise’s Third Letter,” 223.

¹¹⁴ See Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* 132 and above, Chapter 1, p. 22.

¹¹⁵ “Quid ad ipsas etiam quod de abbate statuitur, ut ipse lectionem dicat Euvangelicam [*sic*]et post ipsam hymnum incipiat?” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 89 (Radice, 94).

her times. In fact, the right to read the Gospel has been the preserve of the male clergy throughout most of Christian history. As Kardong notes: “Probably the idea is based on the liturgical tradition that Christ himself speaks in the Gospel, so the priest or deacon should read that lesson.”¹¹⁶ It was the abbot’s role to take the place of Christ in the community according to Benedict (See RB 2.2). Here it would not be inconsistent with Heloise’s previous arguments to suggest that she is again focused on Abelard’s absence as abbot of the community. This being the case, she would again be accusing him of not fulfilling his responsibilities to her and the community just as she has done in her previous letters, but now her arguments are framed in the larger context of monastic reform.

Alternatively, as I will maintain is the case, in all her arguments throughout this letter, Heloise is deliberately exerting the role of the abbot as described by Benedict in his Rule. On this question of liturgical practice she is directly confronting the issue of a “woman” taking the place of Christ in the community in their role as abbess. In medieval women’s monasteries it is not clear what the liturgical practice was in this regard, although the role may well have been assumed by the resident priest or deacon assigned to the monasteries from nearby male communities. In 1210, Innocent III made a point of condemning abbesses usurping any clerical role at all. This is testimony to the fact that it was probably a practice occurring in a number of abbeys throughout Europe before this time.¹¹⁷

Hildegard of Bingen also remarked on this issue in her own commentary on the Rule of Benedict. She notes that: “he [Benedict] also intended that if anyone, because of scarcity of priests or because of the hindrance of some occupation, was not able to have Mass that

¹¹⁶ Kardong, *Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary*, 182.

¹¹⁷ “News of certain things recently has reached our ears, about which we are not a little amazed, that abbesses, namely those constituted in the diocese of Burgos and Palencia, bless their own nuns, and hear the confessions of sins of these same, and reading the Gospel presume to preach publicly. Since then this is equally incongruous and absurd (not supported by you to any degree), we order through the apostolic writing at your discernment so that, lest this be done by others, you take care by the apostolic authority firmly to present [these actions]” *Corpus Iuris Canonici, Decretales* 1.25, t. 38, c. 10, E. Friedberg, ed. (Graz: Akademische Druck-U. Verlagsanstalt, 1959), 2:886-87, quoted in, Bernard Cooke and Gary Macy, eds., *A History of Women and Ordination: The Ordination of Women in a Medieval Context*, vol. 1 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2002), 11.

day or to be present at it, it will be enough that he has read and heard the Gospel.”¹¹⁸ However, it seems most probable, as I have already pointed out, that Hildegard’s commentary is specifically addressed to a community of men not women in this regard.

Considering what follows in Heloise’s analysis concerning the issue of hospitality given to men in women’s communities, this liturgical problem is also one of scandal and distraction for those who profess to be focused on God alone. The presence of men within the monastic confines of women was of such concern at this time that in 1139 at Lateran II, Innocent II condemned the practice of nuns and monks singing together in choir,¹¹⁹ again indicating that it was probably occurring at the time. This position is all the more interesting given the history of temptations between Heloise and Abelard themselves, and the gossip and accusations which, in his *Historia calamitatum*, Abelard tells us were levelled against him when he did visit the Paraclete.¹²⁰

Directly related to this liturgical issue in Heloise’s arguments, are Benedict’s injunctions concerning the hospitality of the abbot: “What about the abbots’ table, set apart for him with pilgrims and guests? Which is more fitting for our religious life: for an abbess never to offer hospitality to men, or for her to eat with men she has allowed in?”¹²¹ The dilemma faced by a woman obeying Benedict’s injunction for the abbot are unravelled here for, as Heloise suggests: “if we exclude men from our hospitality and admit women

¹¹⁸ “et etiam hoc intendi, ut si quis pro raritate sacerdotum seu prae occupatione alicujus impedimenti, eo die missam habere, vel missae interesse non poterit, lectum et auditum Evangelium sibi sufficiat.” *Regulae S. Benedicti Explanatio* 23, PL 197: 1057D, (Feiss, 23).

¹¹⁹ Canon 27: “Simili modo prohibemus, ne sanctimonialia simul cum canonicis vel monachis in ecclesia in uno choro convenient ad psallendum.” (In the same way, we prohibit nuns to come together with canons or monks in choir for the singing of the office). Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Nicea I to Lateran V*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 203.

¹²⁰ See *HC*, Hicks, 37 (Radice, 36), “Cum autem omnes earum vicini vehementer me culparent quod earum inopie minus quam possem et deberem consulerem, et facile id nostra saltem predictione valerem, cepi sepius ad eas reverti, ut eis quoquo modo subvenirem. In quo nec invidie michi murmur defuit, et quod me facere sincera karitas compellebat, solita derogantium pravitas impudentissime accusabat, dicens me adhuc quadam carnalis concupiscentiae oblectatione teneri.” (But then all the people in the neighbourhood began attacking me violently for doing less than I could and should to minister to the needs of the women, as (they said) I was certainly well able to do, if only through my preaching; so I started to visit them more often to see how I could help them. This provoked malicious insinuations, . . . etc.).

¹²¹ “Quid de mensa abbatis seorsum cum peregrinis et hospitibus constituenda? Numquid nostre convenit religioni, ut vel numquam hospitium viris prebeat, aut cum his quos susceperit viris abbatissa comedat?” *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 89 (Radice, 94). See RB 53.

only, it is obvious that we shall offend and annoy the men whose services are needed by a convent of the weaker sex.”¹²² To offend against hospitality relation to men alone, would be to hamper women’s ability to sustain their lives, as it is the service of men that helps sustain women’s monastic lives. Indeed, it appears that the life of women monastics is in danger both with men and without them. This situation is obviously untenable and Heloise points out the contradiction and inconsistency in the thinking of her own day as she scrutinises the inherent danger of sharing table with outsiders, be they men or women, drawing on both Christian sources, that is Jerome’s writings, and the pagan literature of Ovid to support her rather extreme rhetoric.

Heloise continues to utilise the perceived weak nature of women when she notes: “Surely nothing is so conducive to a woman’s seduction as woman’s flattery, nor does a woman pass on the foulness of a corrupted mind so readily to any but another woman.”¹²³ Heloise seems no more able to escape the misogyny of her sources than is Abelard, however, she uses it to her advantage. Her denigration of women here, drawn as it is from the tradition, serves only to highlight her construction of women as “different”, not to posit them as inferior or particularly recalcitrant. Indeed, Bernard of Clairvaux, in his own literary polemic against the Cluniac observance of the Rule, accuses men of a similar weakness: “At table, while the mouth is filled with food the ears are nourished with gossip so absorbing that all moderation in eating is forgotten.”¹²⁴ It seems clear that Heloise is directly playing with this genre of writing but now with the ludicrous idea that women, as they are depicted in her day, can follow the Rule literally.

She is also commenting on the development of “double” monasteries during her time, particularly those like Fontevraud which did, of course, have men and women living together in one place. The arrangements at Fontevraud maintained strict separation of the

¹²² “Denique is viris ab hospitalitate nostra exclusis solas admittamus feminas, quis non videat quanta exasperatione viros offendamus, quorum beneficiis monasteria sexus infirmi egent.” *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 90 (Radice, 95).

¹²³ “Certe in seducenda muliere nullum est eque facile ut lenocinium muliebre, nec corrupte mentis turpitudinem ita prompte cuiquam mulier committit sicut mulieri. *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 90 (Radice, 95).

¹²⁴ “Inter prandendum quantum fauces dapibus, tantum aures pascuntur rumoribus, quibus totus intentus, modum nescias in edendo.” *Apologia IX, 19*: SBO III, 97, *Cistercians and Cluniacs: St. Bernard's Apologia to Abbot William*, trans. Michael Casey (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1970), 55.

sexes as attested by the number of rules legislating for restriction of contact between the sexes.¹²⁵ Hotchin notes that: “The prohibitions of II Lateran in 1139 against co-celebration of the liturgy provided justification for abbots, troubled by the proximity of the sexes, to relocate the female community of a double house in a dependent priory at a distance from the men.”¹²⁶ Nevertheless, Fontevraud’s strong legislative foundation enabled the nuns to maintain their distinctive structure. Heloise certainly had direct experience of the dangers of mixed sex arrangements herself from the time when Abelard was living under her uncle’s roof with her with the temptations that this created for them. Her experience makes her a realist about the human condition and the challenges of the body. It is not Heloise’s task to denigrate women or their vulnerable bodies here. She simply refuses to deny the reality of the body and gender difference. Her rhetoric is part of a deliberate prelude to her explication of one of Benedict’s major themes in his Rule, that of the abbot’s role of discretion.

Heloise’s task seems to be to critique those who believe the Rule of Benedict can be lived through some crude literal interpretation, and she boldly draws on Scripture to give further substance to her arguments: “But if we cannot observe the *tenor of this Rule*, I am afraid that the words of the apostle James may be quoted to condemn us also: ‘For if a man keeps the whole law but for one single point, he is guilty of breaking all of it.’”¹²⁷ Thus, basing her argument solidly in Scripture, her primary question to Abelard at this point is: If this is what keeping the Rule is really all about, that is, rigid adherence to its prescriptions, then is it possible for women to keep this “tenor of the Rule”? Clearly this is not possible. Indeed, Heloise will later extend this to the case of men in her time: “We must therefore be careful not to impose on a woman a burden under which we see nearly all men stagger and even fall.”¹²⁸ When we come to look at the over all context of this letter, Heloise’s question here is really concerned with what is the actual “tenor of the

¹²⁵ See PL 169: 1079-1086. Penny Schine Gold summarizes the nature of these Rules in: Schine Gold, "Male/Female Cooperation: The Example of Fontevrault."

¹²⁶ Hotchin, "Female Religious Life and the *Cura Monialium* in Hirsau Monasticism, 1080 to 1150," 70.

¹²⁷ “Quod si predictae Regule tenor a nobis impleri non potest, vereor ne illud apostoli Jacobi in nostram quoque damnationem dictum sit: ‘Quicumque totam Legem observaverit, offendat autem in uno, factus est omnium reus.’” *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 90 (Radice, 95). My emphasis

¹²⁸ “Providendum itaque nobis est ne id oneris femine presumamus, in quo viros fere jam universos succumbere videmus – immo et deficere!” *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 96 (Radice, 100).

Rule”. It is not only the literal reading of the Rule that she is questioning, but that of Scripture also. To read the letter of James literally, as she suggests, is to condemn everyone as James insists that to break one of God’s commandments is to break all of them.¹²⁹ Once again, Heloise is directly entering into the Cluniac and Cistercian debate of the time and pointing a finger at the Cistercian claim to strict adherence to the Rule. Peter the Venerable’s critique of the Cistercian practice follows a similar argument, only more directly and yet not with less irony:

You saints, you singular men, you only true monks in the whole world, since all others are false and corrupt, you set yourselves alone among all according to the interpretation of the name, whence you also arrogate a habit of unaccustomed colour, and in distinction from all the monks of almost the entire world, you present yourselves in white among those who are in black.¹³⁰

In relation to Benedict’s injunction that monks ought to live by the labour of their own hands (see RB 48:7-8), an injunction the Cistercian reform was particularly intent on reviving,¹³¹ Heloise asks: “has it ever been the custom for convents of nuns to go out to do this, or to tackle the work of the fields?”¹³² The implication here is, of course, if it has not, then have nuns ever lived their lives by the letter of the Rule, not to mention the Cluniac monks who do not attend to this manual labour either. Thus it is that Heloise begins to mount her argument for the consideration of context, an argument that may at times seem denigrating to women, however, as a literary tactic, she is submitting herself to the masculine logic of her own time, so as to give voice to the hypocrisy of men who

¹²⁹ See *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 90 (Radice, 95). This questioning of Scripture is given full flowering in the questions Heloise puts to Abelard in her *Problemata Heloissae*.

¹³⁰ “At uos sancti, uos singulares, uos in uniuerso orbe uere monachi, aliis omnibus falsis et perditis, secundum nominis interpretationem solos uos inter omnes constituitis, unde et habitum insoliti coloris praetenditis, et ad distinctionem cunctorum totius fere mundi monachorum inter nigros uos candidos ostentatis.” *Ep. 28*, Constable, 57.

¹³¹ However, it should be noted that the Cistercian innovation here was to allow profession of lay monks whose task it was to attend to the manual labour required by the monastery. These monks were not given the same status as “choir monks” however, who were not required to work in the fields. See *Exordium Paruum*, 15: 12 “Et cum alicubi curtes ad agriculturas exercendas instituissent, decreverunt ut praedicti conversi domos illas regerent, non monachi; quia habitatio monachorum secundum Regulam debet esse in claustrum ipsorum.” (And since they had set up farmsteads for agricultural development in a number of different places, they decreed that the aforesaid laybrothers, and not monks should be in charge of those dwellings, because, according to the Rule, monks should reside in their own cloister.) Chrysogonus Waddell, ed., *Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux*, vol. IX (Cîteaux: Commentarii cistercienses, 1999), 435.

¹³² “Ubi umquam ad colligendas messes conventus monialium exire vel labores agrorum habere consuevit?” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 90-91 (Radice, 95).

claim rigid adherence to rules. Heloise is simply recasting the argument by “unveiling” the position of women living the monastic life, something not considered by any of the other proponents of religious reform at the time.

Heloise squarely admits to the frailty of the feminine physique in the living out of monastic ideals. Those ideals, such as living off the labour of one’s own hands, may be well and good in theory, however, for women they simply may not be possible in practice. Her *Institutiones nostrae*, her community’s statutes, confirm her position on this point:

It would be truly monastic for us to live off farming and our own work – if only we were able to do so. But since we cannot manage because of our weakness, we admit lay-brothers and lay-sisters, so that those things which the rigor of monastic observance does not allow to be administered through us may be carried out through them.¹³³

In a rural economy, the Cistercian ideal with its emphasis on manual labour was certainly the aim to which one aspired. Nevertheless, Abelard’s own directives do not enter into this debate of the time. He barely mentions manual labour other than by referring to Benedict’s injunction concerning work: “Benedict in fact says nothing about the teaching and study of chanting, though he gives many instructions about reading, and expressly assigns times for this as he does for manual work.”¹³⁴

Heloise’s criticism of the literal reading on the requirement for a year-long training in monastic life, and a mere thrice reading of the Rule (see RB 58) as set out in Benedict’s Rule, further attacks both the Cistercian strict adherence to the Rule’s prescription and the Cluniac position which allowed an even shorter novitiate training. Idung of Prüfening, though a later writer, states the Cistercian position succinctly in his dialogue with a Cluniac:

¹³³ “Religionis erat de cultu terrarum et labore proprio uiuere si possemus. Sed quia ex debilitate non sufficimus, admittimus conuersos et conuersas, ut que per nos administrari rigor non permittit religionis per eos adimplea[n]tur.) *Institutiones*, VII, 3-4. (Waddell, 11).

¹³⁴ “Nihil quippe de doctrina vel studio cantus admonet Benedictus, cum ipse plurimum de lectione praecipiat et ipsa legendi tempora sicut et laborandi, diligenter assignet.” *Ep.* 8, McLaughlin, 288 (Radice, 204). See RB 48.

There is no legitimate profession, however, unless it is preceded by a legitimate novitiate, and that time of testing cannot be of less duration than one year . . . Just as fools promise away what they do not possess so also they think they have the capability of doing what they cannot do until they have tested themselves, and a whole year is scarcely enough time in which to be tested.¹³⁵

In contrast, Peter the Venerable justified the Cluniac practice of a much shorter admission period through an emphasis on the primacy of love, that is, for the sake of charity:

Since you hear that the fathers are able to moderate the Law for the sake of benefit or necessity, will you deny that a man might be received as a monk in less than one year? What is of greater necessity or benefit than that to be found in the salvation of the soul? By this necessity, by this benefit, lest they perish for having been cast away, we receive those coming to us without delay. And because now I say that it is by this manner we procure, with the eye of love, the salvation of our neighbour, we neither go against the Rule, which seeks after the salvation of men, nor any book of the holy scriptures, on the contrary, having accomplished what they wish [namely] we are in agreement with all of them.¹³⁶

Heloise takes the study of the Rule seriously and is therefore able to critique it intelligently, and specifically from the perspective of a woman. Georgianna suggests that: “she brings to her task all the objectivity and detachment that Abelard’s dialectical training had evidently taught her. Consistently, she treats the rule as a historical document, distanced in time and circumstances from her own age.”¹³⁷ In contrast, I am suggesting that her treatment of the Rule is anything but detached. It intimately concerns her identity as a woman and the identity of her community as female. In fact, Heloise considers this knowledge of the Rule vital to their commitment to the monastic life as women. But mimicking the same arguments as the male voices of her era, she is putting

¹³⁵ “Nulla autem est legitima professio nisi quam precessit legitima probatio, legitima probatio non potest fieri infra annum . . . Sicut stulti promittunt quod non habent, sic et putant se posse quod non possunt antequam experimentum sui capiant, quod vix integro anno capi postest.” *Dialogus duorum monachorum*, R.B.C. Huygens, “Le moine Idung et ses deux ouvrages: “Argumentum super quatuor questionibus” et “Dialogus duorum monachorum”,” *Studi Medievali* 3a. 13,1 (1972): 412:264-66, 80-82. English translation from *Idung of Prüfening: Cistercians and Cluniacs. The Case for Cîteaux. A Dialogue between Two Monks*. trans. J. O’Sullivan. CF 33 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 70-71.

¹³⁶ “Cum enim audiatis, necessitatis sive utilitatis gratia posse patres mandata moderari, negabitis hominem ad monachatum nisi post annum posse suscipi? Et quae maior necessitas aut utilitas, animarum salute potest inveniri? Illa necessitate, illa utilitate, ne dilati pereant, ad nos venientes aliquando sine mora suscipimus. Et quia iam dicto caritatis oculo salutem proximi sic agendo procuramus, nec regulae quae tantum salutem hominum requirit, nec alicui diuinae scripturae contraimus, immo implendo quod volunt, eis in omnibus concordamus.” *Ep.* 28, Constable, 62.

¹³⁷ Linda Georgianna, “Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise’s Critique of Monasticism”, 234.

out a challenge to all those commenting on the Rule to consider this different perspective, a different voice. She insists that those who are to be vowed to the monastic way of life must understand their commitment fully, be they male or female. It is a mature intention, both intellectual and spiritual, in taking on the way of life that is central to Heloise. In her times and in her context the thrice reading of the Rule before profession prescribed in the Rule is not adequate, for she writes: “What could be so foolish as to set out on an unknown path, not yet defined, or so presumptuous as to choose and profess a way of life of which you know nothing, or to take a vow you are not capable of keeping?”¹³⁸ This is somewhat ironic when one considers her own and Abelard’s no less than unorthodox entry into monastic life. However, Heloise, for one, would have been familiar with the Rule, given her years at Argenteuil as a young girl and thus would have known from experience what she was taking on. Nevertheless, her criticism was fully in line with the monastic reformers of her age who were against abbreviated novitiates. It was the Cistercians who were innovative for the time with their year-long novitiate in strict adherence to the Rule of Benedict (see RB 58:9-14).

In the debates that ensued, both the Cluniac and the Cistercian arguments align closely with Heloise’s position. She balances and embraces both arguments with an emphasis on the heart of the Rule, love, as Peter the Venerable does, combined with Benedict’s requirement for knowing the Rule. Interestingly, Abelard does not reply to Heloise with any advice on this point and in her own statutes, *Institutiones Nostrae*. Indeed, it is not clear that she lived out the convictions she expressed in Letter VI on this point of the length of the novitiate period.¹³⁹

Heloise commentary on the rashness of women who take vows is particularly fascinating in the light of her previous argument with Abelard surrounding her own hypocrisy in

¹³⁸ “Quid rursus stultius quam viam ignotam nec adhuc demonstratam aggredi? Quid presumptuosius quam eligere ac profiteri vitam quam nescias, aut votum facere quod implere non queas?” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 91 (Radice, 95-96).

¹³⁹ Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae* 9-15. In Chapter X of her Institutes, Heloise talks about the issue of sisters coming from other communities only. See Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae* 122.

relation to her entry into monastic life and her own questionable commitment to it.¹⁴⁰ Here she begins a series of what seems to be accusations against both herself and Abelard. She accuses herself for her own rash taking of vows and Abelard for not entering wholeheartedly into the vow of matrimony. Hence, one has to conclude that what Heloise is really trying to achieve here is to enter into the rhetorical debates of the time concerning hypocrisy in the living out of the Rule.

The centrepiece of Heloise's vocabulary is her focus on the monastic virtue of discretion which she boldly combines with reason, perhaps as a way of drawing Abelard more thoroughly into her argument. Quoting directly from Benedict's Rule, and extending his position, she notes: "And since discretion is the mother of all the virtues [see RB 65:19] and reason the mediator of all that is good, who will judge anything virtuous or good which is seen to conflict with discretion and reason?"¹⁴¹ Heloise, revealing her intellectual training, includes reason in her understanding of discretion, however, she is also thoroughly steeped in the monastic tradition and quotes Jerome to confirm the moderation she is attempting to discern for her community: "For the virtues which exceed all bounds and measure are, as Jerome says, to be counted among vices."¹⁴² Further, drawing on Abelard's own emphasis on reason, she notes that: "It is clearly contrary to reason and discretion if burdens are imposed without previous investigation into the strength of those who are to bear them."¹⁴³ It is clearly prudence that she seeks in this statement, and context bears heavily on the practice of this virtue. She confirms her position by drawing on Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Rule*: "Therefore men are to be admonished in one way, women in another; for the heavy burdens may be laid on men and great matters exercise them, but lighter burdens on women, who should be gently

¹⁴⁰ See *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 67-68 (Radice, 69-70).

¹⁴¹ "Sed et cum omnium virtutum discretio sit mater, et omnium bonorum moderatrix sit ratio, quis aut virtutem aut bonum censeat quod ab istis dissentire videat?" *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 91 (Radice, 96). Heloise's inclusion of reason here seems to be unique as far as I can ascertain, confirming the dual (scholastic and monastic) and integrative nature of thinking.

¹⁴² "Ipsas quippe virtutes excedentes modum atque mensuram, sicut Jeronimus asserit, inter vitia reputari convenit." *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 91 (Radice, 96).

¹⁴³ "Quis autem ab omni ratione ac discretione sejunctum non videat, si ad imponenda onera, eorum quibus imponuntur valitudines prius non discutiantur." *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 91 (Radice, 96).

converted by less exacting means.”¹⁴⁴ Here Heloise yields once more to masculine discourse in an attempt to articulate women’s difference.

She thus concludes that the Rule is a product of its own time and that the audience it was originally meant to serve in its prescriptive detail was that of men. The times have changed and, in her case, so has the audience. The Rule must therefore be adapted to meet the demands of the times and the needs of women, and most importantly in relation to its prescriptions. Indeed, even Benedict himself, she argues, allows those in his own context to dictate the degree to which he can expect the discipline of his monks to be effective: “St Benedict, who is imbued with the spirit of justice in everything, has this discretion in mind when he moderates everything in the rule according to the quality of men or the times so that, as he says himself at one point, all may be done in moderation.”¹⁴⁵ Peter the Venerable will use precisely this argument in his defence of Cluniac monasticism in his long letter to Bernard of Clairvaux.¹⁴⁶

Perhaps it is not such an exaggeration to suggest that Heloise knows this inner flexibility of the Rule better than anyone in her own times. She is clearly not disposing of Benedict’s Rule but rather adhering to its inner ethos, its *tenor*. The virtue of “discretion” is central to Benedict’s attitude concerning the setting of prescriptive rules, and Heloise remains totally within this central dictum of the Rule itself in her critique of its regulatory disciplines. To live under the same “interpretation” of these rules as made by men, is to miss the inner ethos of the Rule itself, and this is clearly unreasonable and unjust. Difference must always be considered when reading the prescriptions of the Rule. This is precisely what it is to be faithful to the knowledge of the Rule which Heloise is so insistent upon. She wishes to establish her community’s need for a “rule” or customary, or institute or simply advice from the master, in order to allow them to live the monastic life in the light of their particular condition as women, and this is faithful to the

¹⁴⁴ “Aliter igitur ammonendi sunt viri, atque aliter femine, quia illis gravia, istis vero sunt injungenda leviora, et illos magna exerceant, istas vero levia demulcendo convertant.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 91 (Radice, 96).

¹⁴⁵ “Hujus autem discretionis beatus non immemor Benedictus, tanquam omnium justorum spiritu plenus, pro qualitate hominum aut temporum cuncta sic moderatur in Regula ut omnia, sicut ipsemet uno concludit loco, mensurate fiant.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 91 (Radice, 96). See RB 48.

¹⁴⁶ See *Ep. 28*. Constable, 52-101.

Benedictine Rule that adapts to the context in which it finds itself. In seeking this advice from Abelard, she actually gives it herself.

It is not simply a matter of the ‘spirit’ of the Rule, nor is it the ‘letter’ of the Rule that concerns her, but the Rule’s inherent adaptability to different times and circumstances and different bodies. How is this discretion, so central to the “tenor of the Rule”, to be exercised in adjusting the Rule’s discipline to the context of women? On this point she refers to the authority which Benedict invests in the abbot, the model of discretion in the community, a model she herself exemplifies. Quoting Benedict’s Rule directly, she points out that the role of the abbot is precisely the role that she interprets for herself and she calls Abelard to note:

[H]e will accommodate and adapt himself to them all in accordance with the disposition and intelligence of each individual. In this way he will suffer no loss in the flock entrusted to him but will even rejoice to see a good flock increase . . . at the same time he must always be conscious of his own frailty and remember that the bruised reed must not be broken . . . He must also be prudent and considerate, bearing in mind the good sense of holy Jacob when he said: “If I drive my herds too hard on the road they will all die in a single day.” Acting on this, and on other examples of discretion, the mother of the virtues, he must arrange everything so that there is always what the strong desire and the weak do not shrink from.¹⁴⁷

Benedict’s abbot must have this quality of discretion. It is this which gives him the responsibility to adjust the discipline of monastic life to all manner of contexts as we noted above. Heloise establishes all her arguments for the adjustment of the monastic practices to the lives and bodies of women on the practice of this virtue: “What, I wonder, when he adapts everything to the quality of men and seasons, so that all his regulations can be carried out by everyone without complaint – what provision would he make for

¹⁴⁷ “secundum unius (inquit) cujusque qualitatem vel intelligentiam ita se omnibus conformet et aptet, ut non solum detrimenta gregis sibi commissi non patiat, verum in augmentatione boni gregis gaudeat . . . Suamque fragilitatem semper suspectus sit, memineritque calamum quassatum non conterendum . . . Discernat et tempora, cogitans discretionem sancti Jacob, dicentis: ‘Si greges meos plus in ambulando fecero laborare, morientur cuncti una die.’ Hec ergo aliaque testimonia discretionis, matris virtutum, sumens sic omnino temperet, ut et fortes sit quod cupiant et infirmi non refugiant.” *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 92 (Radice, 96-7). See RB 2, 64.

women if he laid down a Rule for them like that for men?”¹⁴⁸ She scrupulously examines the Rule for its inherent adaptability in all its manifestations and then, as a faithful Benedictine abbess, applies it to her own context.

Her motive of “sexual difference” is again clearly evident here with her concerns for adaptation and discretion. “Consider then how far removed it is from all reason and good sense if both women and men are bound by profession of a common Rule, and the same burden is laid on the weak as on the strong.”¹⁴⁹ Here Heloise is directly referring to the Rule of Benedict where in Chapter 64 he describes that quality of discretion in the abbot that obliges him to be just in dealing with difference. (See RB 64:19) By acknowledging the patriarchal rhetoric concerning women in her times, Heloise allows women to remain different. She notes that women in her own day are considered the “weaker sex whose frailty and infirmity is generally known.”¹⁵⁰ Thus, not to consider this “difference” is totally unreasonable and unjust for Heloise and her times, as it was for Benedict in his times. Heloise’s rhetoric unmasks the “masculine logic” of her day by refusing to remain invisible in her difference. Equality, particularly equality of virtue, for Heloise, should not be judged simply by rigid adherence to the same set of rules. This is not faithful to discretion and hence it is not what Benedict intended. This is not justice! It is not love!

The next section of her commentary overtly points out the hypocrisy of those who claim to live the Rule without adhering to the actual “tenor of the Rule”. Her critique is not against the Rule itself. It is against a misreading of the inner ethos of the Rule. She achieves this by reversing the sexual polarity of the time, setting up the spiritual superiority of women, considered the “weaker sex”, who manage to undertake living the

¹⁴⁸ “Quid, obsecro – ubi iste qui sic ad hominum et temporum qualitatem omnia moderatur, ut ab omnibus sine murmuratione perferri queant que instituuntur – quid, inquam, de feminis provideret, si eis quoque pariter ut viris regulam institueret?” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 92, (Radice, 97).

¹⁴⁹ “Perpende itaque quam longe absistat ab omni rationis discretione ejusdem Regule professione tam feminas quam viros obligari, eademque sarcina tam debiles quam fortes onerari.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 92 (Radice, 97).

¹⁵⁰ “cuius maxime debilis et infirma natura congoscitur?” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 92 (Radice, 97).

monastic life given the constraints of their nature: “I think it should be sufficient for our infirmity if the virtue of continence and also of abstinence makes us the equal of the rulers of the Church themselves and of the clergy who are confirmed in holy orders, especially when the Truth says: ‘Everyone will be fully trained if he reaches his teacher’s level’.”¹⁵¹ All this emphasis on “women’s weakness” may seem absurd to us today and counter to a promotion of women’s subjectivity; however, as I have stressed, Heloise is deliberately setting up a case for women and their difference, not arguing their inferiority. Her tactical approach is to play with the acceptable position of women in her context and, as an abbess faithful to the “tenor of the Rule”, she insists that women be given the opportunity for full subjectivity by not being given anything to be “overwhelmed” by in the prescriptions of the Rule. Indeed, as I have already pointed out,¹⁵² she claims, obliquely at least, a superiority of women living the Benedictine life. Emphasizing the point she has already stressed at the start of this section of her argument, she again claims that:

It should be sufficient for our infirmity, and indeed, a high tribute to it, if we live continently and without possessions, wholly occupied by service of God, and in doing so equal the leaders of the church themselves in our way of life or religious layman or even those who are called Canons Regular and profess especially to follow the apostolic life.¹⁵³

This is not a view particularly unique to just Heloise. Penelope Johnson states that, “Nuns inspired an inflated esteem because they were believed to be overcoming greater natural odds than were their male counterparts. Since women were seen as lesser than men in the order of nature, female monastic profession made nuns better than men in the order of grace.”¹⁵⁴ The basis for this claim lay in the fact that woman, considered the “weaker sex”, fell conveniently into the scriptural claim made in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

¹⁵¹ “Satis esse nostre arbitror infirmitati, si nos ipsis Ecclesie rectoribus et qui in sacris ordinibus constituti sunt clericis tam continentie quam abstinentie virtus equaverit, maxime cum Veritas dicat: ‘Perfectus omnis erit, si sit sicut magister ejus.’” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 92-93 (Radice, 97).

¹⁵² See Chapter 4, p. 141.

¹⁵³ “Satis nostre esse infirmitati et maximum imputari debet, si continenter ac sine proprietate viventes, et, officii occupate divinis, ipsos Ecclesie duces vel religiosos laicos in victu adequemus, vel eos denique qui Regulares Canonici dicuntur et se precipue vitam apostolicam sequi profitentur.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 95 (Radice, 100).

¹⁵⁴ Johnson, “*Mulier et monialis: the Medieval Nun's Self-Image*,” 245.

Abelard writes of this esteem given to women when he praises Heloise's holiness: "Nor would you have been more than a woman, whereas now you rise even above men, and have turned the curse of Eve into the blessing of Mary."¹⁵⁵ Heloise rightly accuses men as deserving of less admiration when she states that: "We must therefore be careful not to impose on a woman a burden under which we see nearly all men stagger and even fall."¹⁵⁶ In fact, by entering into the male rhetoric of the age, Heloise "jams"¹⁵⁷ the master discourse with its own assumptions and what she seems to achieve is a reinforcement of the positive pole in twelfth-century understanding of "women's weakness".¹⁵⁸

Within this discussion Heloise directs a number of oblique yet deliberate allusions to Abelard's own hypocrisy in choosing monastic life above married life in the pursuit of holiness. She draws on John Chrysostom's teaching on marriage, reminding Abelard that holiness is not the preserve of clerics alone. The call to holiness is for all, the married and the monk alike.¹⁵⁹ Perhaps her most cutting remark to Abelard in all this discussion in relation to his own treatment of their marriage vow is when she quotes Jerome's letter to Eustochium:

But if those who are virgins are still not saved, because of other faults, what will become of those who have prostituted the members of Christ and turned the temple of the Holy Spirit into a brothel? It were better for a man to have entered matrimony and walked on the level than to strain after the height and fall into the depths of hell.¹⁶⁰

It is to the primacy of the Gospel that Heloise ultimately defers, not to any particular Rule or rules. All rules and regulations must therefore be set in their correct perspective for

¹⁵⁵ "nec esses plus quam femina, que nunc etiam viros transcendis et que maledictionem Eve in benedictionem vertisti Marie." *Ep. 5*, Hicks, 82 (Radice, 84).

¹⁵⁶ "Providendum itaque nobis est ne id oneris femine presumamus, in quo viros fere jam universos succumbere videmus – immo et deficere!" *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 96 (Radice, 100).

¹⁵⁷ "Jam" is used here not as jargon, but in the philosophical sense. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 78. "In other words, the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of *jamming* the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that excessively univocal."

¹⁵⁸ Heloise uses the word *infirmitas*, "weakness", rhetorically in many of her references to women's position vis-à-vis the Rule of Benedict throughout Letter VI of her correspondence.

¹⁵⁹ See *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 73 (Radice, 98).

¹⁶⁰ "Si autem et ille que virgines sunt ob alias tamen culpas non salvantur, quid fiet illis que prostituerunt membra Christi, et mutaverunt templum Spiritus Sancti in lupanar? . . . Rectius fuerat homini subisse conjugium, ambulasse per plana, quam per altiora tendentem, in profundum inferni cadere." *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 94 (Radice, 99).

Heloise. If these rules do not serve the Gospel, and they do not do so in every prescriptive detail for women, then they should be altered or simply ignored as they hinder rather than help the desire for God which is the Christian's true endeavour. Evoking Jerome's own exhortation above, Heloise cries out: "Would that our religion could rise to this height – to carry out the Gospel, not to go beyond it, lest we attempt to be more than Christians!"¹⁶¹ It is not a question then of whether one is a Cistercian or a Cluniac. It is not about which way is better. The Gospel is the only way, and this is the very premise of the Rule after all. The fundamental question is simply: "Are you a Christian or something else?" It is a question of authentic human identity within the Christian context. Indeed, this is the manner in which Heloise chose to begin her community's *Institutes*: "We take the origin of our Institutes from the doctrine of the preaching of Christ and the holding of poverty, humility and obedience."¹⁶²

She justifies her argument for change by drawing on the Gospel's primary focus on love. To lend weight to her argument here, she exegetes Paul's letter to the Romans on the position of law vis-à-vis the gospel. As Georgianna asserts: "Pitting what she calls 'the freedom of the Gospel' . . . against the burdening constraints of the Law, Heloise mounts an argument that love, not the law, is the object of the spiritual life; thus rules regulating outward behavior are inadequate and perhaps irrelevant to the ideal of personal spiritual perfection."¹⁶³ Heloise is in harmony with other voices in this claim. The Cistercian's founding document, *Carta Caritatis*, states from the outset: "They [the monks of Cîteaux] considered that this decree should be called the *Charter of Charity*, because, averting the burdensome levying of all exactions, its statute pursues only charity and the advantage of souls in things human and divine."¹⁶⁴ As I have already pointed out, Peter the Venerable similarly declares love as central to the Benedictine endeavour.¹⁶⁵ What is unique here is

¹⁶¹ "Atque utinam ad hoc nostra religio conscendere posset ut Euvangelium impleret, non transcenderet, nec plusquam christiane appetere esse." *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 93 (Radice, 98).

¹⁶² "Institutiones nostre sumunt exordium a doctrina christi predicantis et tenentis paupertatem, humilitatem et obedientiam." *Institutiones. I*, (Waddell, 9).

¹⁶³ Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," 199.

¹⁶⁴ "Hoc etiam decretum Cartam caritatis vocari censebant, quia eius statutum omnis exactionis gravamen propulsans solam caritatem et animarum utilitatem in divinis et humanis exsequitur." *Carta Caritatis*, Prol. 12-15. See Waddell, ed., *Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux*, 262.

¹⁶⁵ See n. 136.

the fact that it is the voice of a woman in a man's world who is claiming this discretion specifically for women's bodies.

The problem in Heloise's day, as she understands it, is that there is a fundamental ignorance of, and absolute lack of focus on the actual "tenor of the Rule", primarily because of the lack of discretion both on the part of those entering monastic life, and of monastic leaders who fail to guide them: "As things are, they all hurry almost equally indiscriminately [without discretion] to enter monastic life: they are received without proper discipline and live with even less, profess a Rule they do not know and set up as law the customs they prefer"¹⁶⁶. One cannot fail to read the Abbess of the Paraclete as directly entering into the debate with her male counterparts, that is, the abbots of Clairvaux with their ideal of rigid adherence to the Rule, and the abbots of Cluny with their elaborate customaries.¹⁶⁷

To live merely by the prescriptive letter of the Rule is to surely miss the "tenor of the Rule", however, to live without any knowledge of the "tenor of the Rule" is to have no wise discerning guide for life at all. It appears that Heloise is directly judging the monastic reformers and calling into question their claim to humility in relation to their arguments regarding a position of superiority of the living out of the Rule. She is also calling into question Abelard's own authority vis-à-vis the Rule, considering his outright failure in securing a place as abbot within his own monastic endeavours.¹⁶⁸

To miss the "tenor of the Rule" for Heloise is patently obvious in the monastic world of her day in that she notes a lack of Christian love in the world: "We see that the world has now grown old, and that with all other living creatures men too have lost their former natural vigour: and, in the words of the Truth, amongst many or indeed almost all men

¹⁶⁶ "Nunc vero, indiscrete omnes fere pariter ad monasticam conversionem currentes, inordinate suscepti, inordinatius vivunt, et eadem facilitate qua ignotam Regulam profitentur eam contempnentes, consuetudines quas volunt pro lege statuunt." *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 96 (Radice, 100).

¹⁶⁷ See for example, *The Monastic Constitutions of Lanfranc*, ed. David Knowles (London: Nelson 1951).

¹⁶⁸ Abelard amply attests to this failure himself in his *Historia calamitatum*. See *HC*, Hicks, 3-44 (Radice, 3-43).

love itself has grown cold.”¹⁶⁹ A “world grown cold” was a familiar *topos* for social commentary in medieval times, drawing as it did on the apocalyptic prophecies of Matthew’s Gospel: “And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold.” (Matt. 24:12) Hildegard of Bingen, commenting on the loss of male “virility” in the her era, writes: “But, alas, this present time is neither cold nor hot; it is squalid.”¹⁷⁰ Like Hildegard raging out at her age for its lack of adherence to the gospel virtues of charity, justice and wisdom, so Heloise, in a completely different way, is raging out against the same hypocrisy of the age. Thus Heloise is not critiquing the Rule so much as the age in which men are clearly focused on rules and not the heart of the Gospel.

Heloise’s desire is for more than the adherence to the Rule. The Rule is after all only a guide for beginners and Heloise herself has noted this in the words of Benedict himself when she directly quotes RB 73:8: “Whoever you are, then, who hasten to the heavenly kingdom, observe, with Christ’s help, this minimum Rule as a beginning, and then you will come finally to the higher peaks of doctrine and virtue under the protection of God.”¹⁷¹ The Rule, as Heloise rightly interprets it, it is not an end in itself, but only a beginning. This is the very argument of the Cistercian’s “return to the desert” in their strict observance to the letter of the Rule. The *Exordium parvum* for example claims this “desert” ideal from their beginnings: “and thus escorted by so goodly a company they eagerly headed for the desert-place called Cîteaux.”¹⁷²

The end, the *telos*, of monastic life is, as it has always been, Love and it is this love that has “grown cold” in the world of men. It is discretion which protects this love, this *telos*. Benedict’s discretion needs to be understood and put into practice in view of this primary

¹⁶⁹ “Senuisse jam mundum conspicimus, hominesque ipsos cum ceteris que mundi sunt pristinum nature vigorem amisisse, et juxta illud Veritatis, ipsam karitatem non tam multorum quam fere omnium refriguisse.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 96 (Radice, 101).

¹⁷⁰ “He, tempus hoc nec frigidum, nec calidum est, sed squalidum.” PL. 197: 107. (*The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Letter 26r*, 88).

¹⁷¹ “Quisquis ergo ad celestem patriam festinas, hanc minimam inchoationis Regulam . . . adjuvante Christo perface, et tunc demum ad majora . . . doctrine virutumque culmina Deo protegente pervenies.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 96 (Radice, 101).

¹⁷² “talique stipati comitatu ad heremum quae Cistercium dicebatur, alacriter tetenderunt.” *Exordium parvum* 3:7-8 (Waddell, ed., *Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux* 421). See also Leclerq, *Love of Learning*, 112, and Constance H. Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution: the Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-century Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia 2000), 5 and 14-16.

aim according to Heloise. Discretion sheds light on the flexibility of those prescriptive elements of the Rule that can be changed or modified in the light of the present times in order that the Gospel precept of love might be a possibility in her times. Heloise is “reading the signs of the times”. Thus, in referring to RB 73, she notes Benedict’s own discretionary contextualising of monastic observances:

St Benedict himself was also well aware of this need to discriminate (*discretionis*), and admits that he has so tempered the rigour of monastic strictness that he regards the Rule he has set out, in comparison with earlier institutes, as no more than a basis of virtuous living and the beginning of a monastic life.¹⁷³

These prescriptions are not so much at the heart of the Rule’s aim anyway. Contextual modifications that help in the achievement of the goal are an expectation that Benedict anticipates in his own traditional vocabulary of discretion. Thus, Heloise insists: “I would like to see the same dispensation granted in our own times, with a similar modification regarding matters which fall between good and evil and are called indifferent.”¹⁷⁴ Heloise may be drawing on Abelard’s own philosophical use of the term *indifferenter* here. Abelard used the term to describe two things which can be considered as not different in quality, yet at the same time, not possessing the same essence.¹⁷⁵ As a particular example, Heloise draws on the principles of RB 33: Whether monks should consider anything their own, and RB 34: Whether all should receive necessities in equal measure¹⁷⁶ in announcing that the focus in modifying these prescriptions is “necessity not superfluity.”¹⁷⁷ In her community’s *Institutiones nostrae*, this discretion is particularly noteworthy from the beginning. The Abbess does not hesitate to use her discretion for interpreting even the scriptural injunction of Acts 4:35, quoted in the Rule, which states that, “distribution is made to everyone according as one has need.”¹⁷⁸ In these

¹⁷³ “Cujus quidem discretionis ipse quoque beatus non immemor Benedictus ita se monastice districtiois rigorem temperasse fatetur, ut descriptam a se Regulam comparatione priorum institutorum nonnisi quandam honestatis institutionem et quandam conversationis inchoationem reputet.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 96 (Radice, 101).

¹⁷⁴ “Utinam eadem dispensatione et in hoc tempore ageretur, ut videlicet in his que media boni et mali atque indifferentia dicuntur.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 98 (Radice, 102).

¹⁷⁵ See Constant. J. Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 126.

¹⁷⁶ XXXIII: Si quid debeant monachi proprium habere, and XXXIV: Si omnes aequaliter debeant necessaria accipere.

¹⁷⁷ “necessitati, non superfluitati.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 99 (Radice, 104).

¹⁷⁸ “Dividebatur singulis prout cuique opus erat.” RB 34:1 (Kardong, 278).

Institutiones nostrae, Heloise sensibly restates this scriptural text as: “Distribution is made to each according to what is possible.”¹⁷⁹ Furthermore, as Waddell explains, “it is the neediest who receives preferential treatment in the distribution of necessities.”¹⁸⁰

This section reflects not only Heloise’s freedom in approaching the Rule and the Gospel text, but also the harsh conditions under which the early foundation endured. Abelard himself attested to this fact in the *Historia calamitatum* when he noted: “Their life there was full of hardship at first and for a while they suffered the greatest deprivation.”¹⁸¹

The immediate purpose of any prescription is not law for law’s sake but for “preparation for the Kingdom of Heaven”.¹⁸² Prescriptions do not do this inherently. Even evil people and hypocrites can follow laws. It is only the heart of the law that is binding for those who are of God. “Love alone distinguishes” those who seek God. Drawing directly from scripture Heloise points out that “love” is “the sum of the law and the object of what is commanded.”¹⁸³ Having established the primacy of love, Heloise then goes on to list all that was allowed in the Gospel that was not implicitly against love. Quoting Paul once more, she observes: “Everything is pure in itself”.¹⁸⁴ These laws, then, do not create what is good in and of themselves alone.

In all this argument Heloise is leading up to her *crescendo*. The climax of all this discussion focuses on the concept of interior motivation. The law cannot save. Rules do not inherently bring one to God. This does not mean that Heloise is against the Rule, but that her focus is on its inherent goodness, which is Gospel love, not laws. This is why she mounts her argument that “those who are true Christians are wholly occupied with the

¹⁷⁹ “dividitur singulis prout potest.” *Institutiones*, I,8 (Waddell, 9).

¹⁸⁰ Waddell, *Commentary*, 74. See *Institutiones*, I,8. (Waddell, 9), “si non habundat omnibus, maxime datur magis indigentibus.” “if something cannot be given to all, more should be given to the needy.”

¹⁸¹ “Quas ibi quidem primo inopem sustinentes vitam et ad tempus plurimum desolatas.” *HC*, Hicks, 37 (Radice, 35).

¹⁸² See *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 99 (Radice, 104).

¹⁸³ “sola caritas discernat, quam plenitudinem legis et finem precepti Apostolus vocat.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 99 (Radice, 104).

¹⁸⁴ “Omnia quidem munda sunt.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 99 (Radice, 104). See Titus 1:15, “To the pure all things are pure.” (omnia munda mundis).

inner man . . . [having] little or no concern for the outer man.”¹⁸⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux’s rhetorical critique of Cluniac monasticism also makes this same point: “But look at God’s rule, with which St Benedict’s regulations agree. It says that ‘the kingdom of God is within you,’ it does not consist in outward things like bodily clothing and food, but in man’s interior virtues.”¹⁸⁶ The interior motivations are clearly the focus of Bernard’s arguments. Similarly, Heloise’s corresponding focus on interior motivations is not simply a reversal of what she had previously argued in relation to the importance of considering the body. Rather, having posited the centrality of the body in consideration of the prescriptive nature of the Rule, she now attempts a move towards the actual “tenor of the Rule”, to which all prescriptions of the Rule, all care of the body, are guided. She is not dispensing with outward adherence, but “incorporating” it into the spiritual heart of the Rule, the place where all prescriptions belong. It is not a case of either/or for Heloise. Having established her embodied condition as not to be bypassed, she now turns to the role of virtue within this embodied consideration of monastic rules.

Some writers have identified this section of her critique of the Rule as primarily focused on “the ethics of intention” and suggest that this comes about from Abelard’s direct influence on her thoughts.¹⁸⁷ Others have suggested that it is here that Heloise has a profound influence on the development of Abelard’s own ethical concepts.¹⁸⁸ Compelling as these positions are, Brooke Heidenreich Findley has also pointed out a pronounced and profound uniqueness to Heloise’s ethical stance: “Heloise never uses the word ‘intention’ (*intentio*), a term typical of Abelardian ethics; instead, she speaks about the soul or inner self and the emotions or state of mind (*animus, affectus*). Her focus is not on the intention that leads one to perform a specific deed, but on a certain state of being.”¹⁸⁹ In this

¹⁸⁵ “Unde quicumque sunt vere christiani, sic toti circa interiorem hominem sunt occupati. . . ut de exteriori nullam vel minimam assumant curam.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 102 (Radice, 107).

¹⁸⁶ “sed attendite in regulam Dei, cui utique non dissonat institutio sancti Benedicti. Regnum, inquit, Dei intra vos est, hoc est non exterius in vestimentis aut alimentis corporis, sed in virtutibus interioris hominis.” *Apologia*, VI:12:17-20. SBO III:91 (Casey, 47-48)

¹⁸⁷ See Mews, *Abelard and Heloise* 179. For a comprehensive analysis of the sense of Abelard’s use of *intentio* see Margaret Cameron, “Abelard, (Heloise) and Intention,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* (2007): 323-338.

¹⁸⁸ Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life*, 277-282, and Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 154-55.

¹⁸⁹ Brooke Heidenreich Findley, “Does the Habit Make the Nun? A Case Study of Heloise’s Influence on Abelard’s Ethical Philosophy,” *Vivarium* 44.2.3 (2006): 271.

respect, it is equally true, though rarely acknowledged, that Heloise's integrative approach to intention was drawing once again on the rich monastic tradition that she knew so well. Though she does not use the vocabulary of *intentio* which is also more typical of a monastic writer,¹⁹⁰ her understanding of the importance of interior motivation is thoroughly consistent with a monastic mind of the twelfth century, particularly given my previous analysis of Heloise's monastic search for God.¹⁹¹

According to Casey: "It [*intentio*] is a difficult word to translate sensitively since . . . contemporary English restricts the meaning of 'intention' to the narrow ethical sense which *intentio* came to assume in the moral theology of the scholastic era."¹⁹² It would, likewise, be simplistic to restrict Heloise's discussion of inner motivations to a narrow ethical sense without also considering the influence of the monastic context of Heloise's thinking. In this section of her commentary on the Rule, intention becomes everything.

Heloise's concern with interior motivations is similar to what we have noted in her Letter IV where she presses him not to praise her for any outward appearance of virtue when her interior motivations are clearly questionable: "What is common to the damned and the elect can win no favour in the eyes of God: of such a kind are the outward actions which are performed more eagerly by hypocrites than by saints."¹⁹³ Here, in Letter VI, as abbess of a community of women, she justifies her position in her previous letters: "For unless the spirit (*animus*) be first corrupted by evil intention (*voluntate*), whatever is done outwardly in the body cannot be a sin."¹⁹⁴ The essence of one's being (*animus*) is at the core of Heloise's argument, here not simply one's actions.

¹⁹⁰ It is interesting that Heloise does use the term repeatedly in the early love letters. See letters: 23 ("inconsiderate intencio" – inconsiderate intention), 76 ("mea intencio" – my intention), 79 ("interioris intencio" – inner intention; "intencionem mei affectus" – the intention of my feeling), 88 ("intencione mentis" – intention of mind), 102 ("cordis intencione" – intention of heart) and 104 ("ab intencione mentis" – intention of mind).

¹⁹¹ See, Casey, *Athirst for God*, 114-20, and Michael Casey, "Intentio Cordis (RB 52.4)," *Regulae Benedicti Studia* 6/7 (1980): 1-5-20.

¹⁹² Casey, *Athirst for God*, 114-15.

¹⁹³ "Nulla quicquid meriti apud Deum optinent, que reprobis eque ut electis communia sunt. Hec autem ea sunt que exterius aguntur, que nulli sanctorum tam studiose peragunt quantum ypochrite." *Ep.* 4, Hicks, 68 (Radice, 70). See also my arguments on this issue in Chapter 2, p. 55-6.

¹⁹⁴ "Nisi enim prius prava voluntate animus corrumpatur, peccatum esse non poterit, quicquid exterius agatur in corpore." *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 102 (Radice 108).

Bernard of Clairvaux, though using the more typical monastic terminology of the day, weaves a similar argument in his own discussion of intention when he says: “If he [the devil] fails to prevent the action, he attacks the intention (*intentionem*).”¹⁹⁵ Indeed, as John R. Sommerfeldt notes, Bernard also “insists on the primacy of intention in the practice of virtue.”¹⁹⁶ In several of his letters, Bernard presses this point further, for example: “Listen to the voice of your conscience, examine your intentions, draw upon truth for counsel.”¹⁹⁷ Peter the Venerable will also draw on this idea of inner intentions in his own defence of the Cluniac practice: “If [your] intentions were good, all [your] works will appear righteous.”¹⁹⁸ Again, what is unique in Heloise’s writings, is that we are hearing this same argument from the voice of a woman. Her choice of vocabulary, though atypical, more thoroughly establishes her as a monastic thinker and thus gives further grounds to Findley’s claim for her influence on Abelard’s developing ethics.¹⁹⁹

Drawing again from the heart of Benedict’s teaching on humility, Heloise enlarges her argument still further: “and so it is not so much what things are done as the spirit in which they are done that we must consider, if we wish to please him who test the heart and loins and sees in hidden places”.²⁰⁰ Yet again, Bernard uses a parallel argument when he notes that: “It is not the cause of the events nor what is involved nor the outcome of actions which can decide whether something is worthy of praise or blame, but only motivation or the intention.”²⁰¹ Heloise’s and Bernard’s monastic thought is entirely congruent on this issue.

¹⁹⁵ “Nam si impedire non praevallet actionem, tentat intentionem, suggerens et suadens quatenus effectum gratiae arroges tibi.” *Sermo* 54. SBO 2:109, 8-9. (CF 31, 79)

¹⁹⁶ John R. Sommerfeldt, *The Spiritual Teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux*, CF 125 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 183.

¹⁹⁷ *Ep* 1,9. 7,7, 22-23.

¹⁹⁸ “si intentio bona fuerit, et cuncta opera recta existent.” *Ep*. 28, Constable, 60.

¹⁹⁹ See Findley, “Does the Habit Make the Nun? A Case Study of Heloise’s Influence on Abelard’s Ethical Philosophy.”

²⁰⁰ “Non itaque magnopere que fiunt, sed quo animo fiant pensandum est, si illi placere studemus, qui cordis et renum probator est.” *Ep*. 6, Hicks, 103 (Radice, 108). See RB 7:14 – “The Prophet demonstrates this to us when he shows that God is always privy to our thoughts: God examines hearts and minds.” (Demonstrans nobis hoc propheta, cum in cogitationibus nostris ita Deum semper praesentem ostendit dicens: Scrutans corda et renes Deus.) (Kardong, 132).

²⁰¹ “Nunc vero, quia rerum causa, non materia, nec exitus actuum, sed intentionis propositum culpas discernit et merita.” *Ep*. 69.1 SBO 7: 169, 14-16. (Casey, *A Thirst for God*, 116).

Understood in the light of Heloise's focus on "love" as the primary Gospel goal of monastic life, her concentration here on interior motivation aligns with what Casey defines as: "the basic direction which a person allows his [her] life to assume. The intention is not merely one's purpose in doing a particular act, it is also one's fundamental direction in life."²⁰² For Heloise, this basic orientation ought to be love, the love exhorted by Christ in the Gospel. Heloise is not concerned with mere ethical behaviour but with the authentic identity of a person searching for God. As such, Heloise's reading of Benedict is theological, not merely ethical. In contrast to Mews' assertion that the content of this letter is "a profound reflection on the ethical demands of true religious life",²⁰³ I am suggesting that to read this letter merely from the perspective of ethical demands is to miss the primary principle of Christianity itself. Christianity and, as a consequence, the Rule, is more than behaviour. It is not simply a set of practices for living a good life. Rather it is grounded on the Christian understanding of one's state of being in the world, and that state is fundamentally based on the biblical imperative to "love". This sense of being is not merely about intention, it is about love and only the full use of the virtue of discretion in the living out of the Christian life can bring one to this love which knows no bounds, no limits, no rules. Peter the Venerable adheres to this principle also, quoting Augustine, he writes in a letter to Bernard: "Have love and do what you will."²⁰⁴

Thus, Heloise's main purpose is focused on more than adherence to the Rule or ethical norms. She longs for integrity for herself and for her community, her religious daughters, as female bodies. This integrity cannot be merely an outward show of virtue, it must have some grounding in their hearts. Heloise's main premise is that it is not merely the nature of the discipline that is important, but the spirit, that is, the interiority that one brings to the discipline.²⁰⁵

²⁰² Casey, *Athirst for God*, 117.

²⁰³ Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 157.

²⁰⁴ "Habe caritatem, et fac quicquid uis." *Ep.* 112, Constable, 281.

²⁰⁵ Interiority or intentionality is a major focus in Heloise's thinking. Everything hinges on motivation as far as she is concerned. We see this emphasis most clearly in Letter IV of her correspondence with Abelard where she struggles with her own less than pure motivations in religious life: "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

Yet again, Heloise is thoroughly aligned with the monastic reformers of her day particularly in relation to her articulation of what Ineke van't Spijker identifies as the “the ‘inward turn’ of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.”²⁰⁶ In pressing her idea of the primacy of the interior life to the extreme, over and above external regulations, Heloise is doing no more than is achieved in the extreme satirical rhetoric of Bernard in his treatise against the Cluniac practice, where his aim is not the denigration of the black monks, but the extolling to virtue of his own grey monks.²⁰⁷

In Heloise’s critique of the Rule and her stress on interior motivations, the feminine voice of a woman’s monastic search for God can be heard. She is thus still faithful to Benedict, as Benedict places the interior life at the centre of his rule when he says that, “nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God [the *opus Dei*].”²⁰⁸ Heloise is simply taking this directive to its logical extreme in order to press home her point, as Georgianna asserts: “[H]er rejection of bodily regulations is meant to foster increased attention to the *Opus Dei*, or divine office.”²⁰⁹ However, Heloise is not simply “rejecting” prescriptive regulations *per se*, she is placing them in an order of priority.

The final section of Heloise’s long letter is what could be called a *decrecendo* from her climactic focus on interior motivations. She now returns to the issue of the Divine Office, adapted to the feminine context. In doing so, she first confronts again the demand for “manual labour” in the Rule of Benedict, which was, as I have already explained, so much at the forefront of the arguments between the Cluniacs and Cistercians of the day. Well versed in Benedict’s Rule as always, she draws the reader to the heart of the issue. Benedict intended manual labour as a safeguard against idleness (see RB 48). This work does not, however, take precedence over the “Work of God.” On this point, Heloise, like

body but to the soul. I can win praise in the eyes of men but deserve none before God, who searches our hearts and loins and sees in our darkness.” (Castam me predicant, qui non deprehendunt ypocritam; munditiam carnis conferunt in virtutem: cum non sit corporis sed animi virtus, aliquid laudis apud homines habens, nichil apud Deum mereor, qui cordis et renum probator est et in abscondito videt.) *Ep.* 4, Hicks, 67 (Radice, 69).

²⁰⁶ van't Spijker, *Fictions of the Inner Life*, 5.

²⁰⁷ See *Apologia*, SBO 3:63-108. (CF 1, 33-69)

²⁰⁸ “Ergo nihil operi Dei praeponatur.” RB 43:3 (Kardong, 351).

²⁰⁹ Georgianna, “In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise’s Critique of Monastic Life.” 201.

most monastic writers of her day, exegetes the Martha and Mary story from the Gospel to ground her position vis-à-vis the superiority of intentions: “But was not Mary sitting idle in order to listen to the words of Christ, while Martha was working for her as much as for the Lord and grumbling rather enviously about her sister’s repose, as if she had to bear the burden and heat of the day alone?”²¹⁰ Here she is thoroughly traditional in her use of scripture. Mary was traditionally identified with the contemplative religious life and Martha as the active expression of the life.²¹¹ Constable identifies three principle interpretations of the biblical sisters operative in the Middle Ages:

First was the traditional stress on the combination and interaction of contemplation and action in this life; second was the tendency to separate the two types of life and to identify each with different groups of people and social functions on earth; third was the emerging view, of which the beginnings have already been seen in the eleventh century, which exalted Martha’s role of action in the world and depreciated Mary’s part of withdrawal and contemplation and at the same time endowed each sister with distinctive qualities.²¹²

By using these types Heloise is entering into the debate concerning the superiority of the contemplative life over the active life raging at the time. Bernard, for example, suggests that neither position is superior, they are simply different, otherwise, “we would have to affirm that either Mary or Martha or both failed to please the Lord, since their efforts to do this were so very unlike.”²¹³ Peter the Venerable argued that the Cistercians were more like Martha than Mary, with their strict requirement of manual labour, implying that one was superior over the other:

If bodily works are to be preferred to spiritual exercises, by no means would Mary have chosen to sit at the feet of the Lord and constantly to hear his words rather than other works; by no means would she have permitted only her sister to minister; by no means would the Lord have said that she had chosen the better part.²¹⁴

²¹⁰ “Sed numquid Maria otiose sedebat ut verba Christi audiret, Martha tam ei quam Domino laborante, et de quiete sororis tanquam invida murmurante, quasi que sola, ‘pondus diei et estus portaverit’?” *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 105 (Radice, 110).

²¹¹ See Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3-43.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 44.

²¹³ “Mariam denique et Martham necesse sit aut utramque, aut alteram Salvatori displicere, cui nimirum tam dissimili studio devotionis contendunt ambae placere.” *Apologia*, SBO III: III.5, 26-28, 85 (Casey, 38-39).

²¹⁴ “Si sane corporalia opera spiritualibus exercitiis praeferrentur, nequaquam Maria ad pedes domini sedere, et uerba eius indesinenter audire a ceteris operibus ociosa elegisset, nequaquam sororem suam

In Heloise's stress on her community's liturgical functions she is not discounting the importance of the body and manual labour. As she states: "We do not speak like this with the intention of rejecting physical labour when necessity demands it, but so as not to attach importance to things which serve bodily needs and obstruct the celebration of the divine office."²¹⁵ Heloise is simply making a distinction between the emphasis one puts on unimportant things that can be altered within one's context, particularly the context of the female body and those fundamentals of the Christian life, the motivations of the heart.

Discretion also applies to the prescriptions surrounding this *opus Dei*, the Divine Office, itself: "When St Benedict divided up the week according to his view, he left instructions that others could order the psalms differently, if it seemed better to do so, for he expected that with passage of time the ceremonies of the Church would become more elaborate, and from a rough foundation would arise a splendid edifice."²¹⁶ In referring to RB 18:22, Heloise is directly commenting on Cluniac liturgical elaboration in her time. We know from her own community's liturgical documents, however, that the Paraclete often adopted the liturgical reforms of the Cistercians.²¹⁷ Nevertheless, it is also apparent that Heloise made many unique adaptations to the Divine Office for her community, the details of which are analysed elsewhere and beyond the scope of this thesis.²¹⁸ Pertinent to the present discussion, however, is her consistent focus on the importance of the context of women. In her request to Abelard for a new hymnal for her community she

solam ministrare permisisset, nequaquam dominus eam optimam partem elegisse dixisset." *Ep.* 28, Constable, 70-71.

²¹⁵ "Nec id quidem ita loquimur ut laborem operum corporalium respuamus cum necessitas postulaverit, sed ne ista magna putemus que corpori serviunt et officii divini celebrationem prepediunt." *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 104. (Radice, 110).

²¹⁶ "Quam beatus Benedictus, cum eam pro visu suo distribuisset, in aliorum quoque optione sua id reliquit ammonitio, ut si cui melius videretur, aliter ipsos ordinaret, attendens videlicet quod per temporum successionem Ecclesie decor creverit, et que prius rude susceperat fundamentum, postmodum edificii nacta est ornamentum." *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 105-6 (Radice, 111). See RB 18:22 – "We want to make this perfectly clear: if this distribution of the psalms displeases anyone, they should arrange them as they see fit." (Hoc praecipue commonentes ut, si cui forte haec distributio psalmorum displicuerit, ordinet si melius aliter iudicaverit) (Kardong, 199).

²¹⁷ See, Waddell, ed., *The Old French Paraclete Ordinary and the Paraclete Breviary: I Introduction and Commentary*.

²¹⁸ For example, Joseph Szövérfy, "'False' Use of 'Unfitting' Hymns: Some Ideas Shared by Peter the Venerable, Peter Abelard and Heloise," *Revue Bénédictine* 89.1-2 (1979), Waddell, "St. Bernard and the Cistercian Office at the Abbey of the Paraclete," Wulstan, *Novi Modulaminis Melos*, Stewart and Wulstan, eds., *The Poetic and Musical Legacy of Heloise and Abelard*.

called for hymns for women saints which would embrace the full experience of women, not just virgins and martyrs.²¹⁹ In the Paraclete liturgical calendar she also made provision for many new woman saints.²²⁰ Once again Heloise made adaptations to her community's monastic practice in the light of Benedict's own discernment of, and provisions for difference.

And so it is that Heloise ends her letter on the note with which she began. She returns again to Abelard's practical responsibility for the community: Picking up the theme with which she began, the Night Office and the involvement of men, she repeats: "It seems to us hazardous if priests and deacons, who should perform the reading, are allowed among us at such hours, when we should be especially segregated from the approach and sight of men in order to devote ourselves more sincerely to God and to be safer from temptation."²²¹

Returning to the desire to "hear the Master's voice",²²² Heloise ends her letter with her doxological plea to Abelard: "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 creator of our community, with God you should be the director

²¹⁹ See Constant. J. Mews, "Liturgy and Identity at the Paraclete: Heloise, Abelard and the Evolution of Cistercian Reform," *The Poetic and Musical Legacy of Heloise and Abelard*, 31.

²²⁰ Constant. J. Mews, "Heloise, the Paraclete Liturgy and Mary Magdalen," *The Poetic and Musical Legacy of Heloise and Abelard*, 100. Mews also notes that "while Heloise sympathized with Cistercian anxiety that too many hymns of uncertain authorship had become widely known, her solution of asking Abelard to compose a new set of hymns was contrary to Cistercian practice. Her comments about the absence of any hymns in honor of women who were neither virgins nor martyrs is of particular interest, given that there were no special Cistercian hymns to Mary Magdalene until the mid-twelfth century. Heloise shared in a popular movement to broaden the image of a female saint away from the monopoly of virgin, and may even have helped promote devotion to Mary Magdalene within a monastic order that originally had not preserved any special hymn in her honor." See, Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 164.

²²¹ "Periculosum quippe nobis videtur eo tempore ad nos sacerdotes aut diaconos admitti, per quos hec lectio recitetur, quas precipue ab omni hominum accessu atque aspectu segregatas esse convenit, tum ut sincerius Deo vacare possimus tum etiam ut a temptatione tutiores simus." *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 106 (Radice, 111).

²²² See RB Prol 1. "Listen, O my son, to the teachings of your master" (*Obsculta, o fili, praecepta magistri*) (Kardong, 3).

of our religious life.”²²³ This formula completes and also contains the coherent argument she has consistently applied throughout all her letters.²²⁴

Conclusion:

Far from merely “dwindling into virtue” as Newman suggests,²²⁵ Heloise continues passionately to engage issues surrounding women’s subjectivity within the monastic context in Letter VI of her correspondence with Abelard. As abbess of the Paraclete, she achieves this through her faithful application of the monastic virtue of discretion in the practical living out of the Rule of Benedict. Her language is an attempt to enter into the debates raging around her with a vocabulary that is uniquely feminine. In this letter Heloise demonstrates that she is thoroughly Benedictine in her orchestration of monastic life. Contrary to many previous assertions, Heloise’s Letter VI is not so much a critique of the Rule of Benedict as a carefully reasoned commentary on the application of the Rule to a female context as she perceived it.

This final letter of the later correspondence reveals a woman of the twelfth century attempting to enter into the central and defining monastic arguments of her times, arguments that were primarily the preserve of male discourse. Nevertheless, Heloise’s “tactic” in this letter is not simply to set up an opposition to men’s speech but to enter fully into it, mimicking its pretensions and thereby subverting its veiled assumptions, particularly with her overt focus on the weakness and concerns of women’s bodies. Heloise’s language adheres to what Irigaray describes as a playful mimesis:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to submit herself inasmuch as she is on the side of the “perceptible,”

²²³ “Tibi nunc, domine, dum vivis, incombit instituire de nobis quid in perpetuum tenendum sit nobis. Tu quippe post Deum hujus loci fundator, tu per Deum nostre congregationis es plantator, tu cum Deo nostre religionis institutor.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 106 (Radice, 111).

²²⁴ See *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 47 (Radice, 49) “For you after God are the sole founder of this place, the sole builder of this oratory, the sole creator of this community.” (Hujus quippe loci tu post Deum solus es fundator, solus hujus oratorii constructor, solus hujus congregationis edificator.) Also see my discussion of this quote in Chapter 3, p. 104.

²²⁵ See Barbara Newman, “Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloise,” 74.

of “matter” – to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what is supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means “to unveil” the fact, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply re[ab]sorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere. . .*²²⁶

Heloise “makes visible” a voice of the “other” within this environment precisely in order to highlight what is missing, what is “elsewhere”. Did anyone expect a woman to enter into this debate so vigorously? Was such animation and erudition about the female condition imagined? Certainly we do not see Heloise’s contribution to the debates on the nature of religious life recognised or included in the major texts dealing with this period of “reformation” in the twelfth century in modern history books for example.²²⁷ Indeed, Heloise’s distinctive voice, the voice of a woman, has been silenced in the recording of many of the significant aspects of this period of history.

By recovering Heloise’s voice as one which makes a significant contribution to the religious arguments of her time, we can recognise her reading of the Rule as providing a unique example of the possibility for women to discover their own subjectivity wholly within their embodied condition and within a Rule originally written for male bodies. Rather than simply setting up a need for a completely different and particular “Rule” for women in opposition to the Rule of Benedict, as many have suggested, Heloise incorporates women’s difference and thus their subjectivity into the very heart of the Rule itself without any erasure of their embodied difference. There is no distinctive gender opposition set forth here, but an integration of experience into her interpretation that insists on the recognition of embodiment and sexual difference.

In her critique of both the Cistercian position and the Cluniac practice, Heloise calls all monastics to face their failure to attend to the body which is so central in Benedict’s Rule and the living out of the life of Gospel love. This is after all, the actual “tenor of the Rule” itself. Such a disdain for the concerns of the body stems from a lack of knowledge

²²⁶ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 76.

²²⁷ See G. Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

of the Rule. As Georgianna asserts: “such carelessness, she argues, leads to a growing “disorder” in place of the *ordo* of the monastic life.”²²⁸ Heloise is clearly for both the *ordo* of the *regula* and the *ordo* of the body. Heloise “knows” her body and “the body” of the community in the same light. Thus to “know” the Rule is the issue for this body of the community rather than the “loose readings” that the men of the Cluniac and Cistercian Orders have of both their bodies and the Rule.

Integration with the body and spirit is Heloise’s concern. She suggests that the male monastic leaders of her time tend to confuse “spirit” with “matter”, inner virtue with mere “show of virtue”.²²⁹ She brings both the arguments of the Cluniacs and the Cistercians into a synthesised whole that incorporates rather than rejects, harmonises rather than renounces. Indeed, Heloise does not need to choose an extreme, or exclusive position in this debate. Thus, this tactic presents the reader with a contrast between the thinking of a “reasoning female body” and that of the dominant masculine voice. In this manner she creates a space for a subversive voice within the Cluniac and Cistercian controversy. As such Heloise conforms precisely to Benedict’s directions to a monastic leader who demonstrates his own concern for difference in his discretionary approach to prescriptive elements within the Rule.

Heloise’s Letter VI is the only monastic literature written by a woman of her era to acknowledge, let alone claim, female subjectivity. All other monastic literature assumed a male subject from which the female subject attempted to claim her own subjectivity. Irigaray would suggest that this continues to be the case right up to our times. Extending Irvine’s assessment of Heloise’s rhetoric, I have attempted to demonstrate the “momentary emergence of a feminine subject position in Latin prose, a fully empowered feminine *litterata*.”²³⁰ I am suggesting that Heloise establishes her own unique and feminine space for the production of language.

²²⁸ Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," 195.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

²³⁰ As I have indicated in the Introduction to this thesis, Irvine leaves the referent as masculine in his arguments. (See p. 23) By using *litterata* as opposed to *litteratus* I am attempting to challenge the underlying assumptions in his assessment. See Irvine, "Heloise and the Gendering of the Literate Subject," 107.

That Heloise's discretionary leadership was held in such great esteem by the monastics of her own day is evident from the letters that Peter the Venerable wrote to her.²³¹ In one such letter he compares her with many of the great women of the Bible. He says of her: "You have surpassed all women in carrying out your purpose, and have gone further than almost every man."²³² Peter describes Heloise as above himself in the rank of holiness and sought-after her wisdom for the monastic world of his time:

If only our Cluny possessed you, or you were confined in the delightful prison of Marcigny with the other handmaids of Christ who are awaiting their freedom in heaven! I would have preferred your wealth of religion and learning to the richest treasures of any kings, and would rejoice to see that noble community of sisters still further illuminated by your presence there.²³³

However, as a unique monastic leader in her own right, Heloise may well have illuminated that community with her "freedom of the Gospel" rather than with the imagery of spiritual prisons with which Peter exhorted the nuns at Marcigny. Peter's terminology of "spiritual prisons" is a symbolic language that Heloise would have surely found counter to her own focus on the Gospel imperative of love.

Benedict designed his Rule to be understood in terms of this inner ethos, the "tenor of the Rule". To miss this "tenor of the Rule" is to leave it inaccessible to context, hopelessly time-bound and gender-restricted. Heloise claims the Rule of Benedict for women's context through its own inner dynamism located in the language of "discretion". Discretion, then, is not about rules; it is about bringing about this freedom of love as proclaimed in the Gospel. In a key example in this letter, she claims that rules about fasts only make sense in relation to achieving this freedom by avoiding vice: "As regards fasts, which Christians hold to be abstinence from vices rather than from food, you must consider whether anything should be added to what the Church has instituted, and order

²³¹ See Chapter 2, p. 54.

²³² "tu illo efferendo studio tuo et mulieres omnes evicisti, et pene viros universos superasti." *Ep. 115*, Hicks, 157 (Radice, 218).

²³³ "Utinam te Cluniacus nostra habuisset! utiam te jocundus Marciniaci carcer cum ceteris Christi ancillis libertatem inde celestem expectantibus inclusisset! Pretulisset opes religionis ac scientie maximis quorumlibet regum thesauris, et illarum sororum illud preclarum collegium cohabitatione tua clarius rutilare gauderem." *Ep. 115*, Hicks, 159 (Radice, 220).

what is suitable for us.”²³⁴ If the particular rules contribute to the Gospel precept of love, then they are useful, otherwise why continually harp on about them.

As in all her letters Heloise insists on not attempting to be more than Christian. She claims the central reality of love in the Gospel, not outward rules. Indeed, without love there can be no vigour, no warmth and no identity for either women or men. Without love rules can have no meaning, and monasticism can have no purpose. Therefore the nature of “rule” in Heloise’s commentary adheres to the nature of “rule” as proclaimed by Scripture. In Mark’s Gospel, for example, within the context of human hunger, Jesus proclaims that rules are for human bodies, not the other way round: “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). For Benedict himself this Gospel principle also formed the inner ethos of his “little Rule for beginners”.²³⁵ The “unspeakable sweetness of love” was the aim of all its prescriptions,²³⁶ and these prescriptions were only to serve this aim. Monasticism is not primarily about obeying rules or a Rule, even a good Rule as esteemed as the Rule of Benedict. It is primarily and fundamentally about love, and without discretion one cannot find a way to love authentically.

Heloise is not caught in “the wide gap between her turbulent spiritual life and the seemingly static, external religious rule that she professes and teaches as abbess of the Paraclete,”²³⁷ as Georgianna suggests. On the contrary, she recognises the innate vitality of the Rule through its emphasis on the importance of discretion. In fact, she is an advocate for the Rule’s inner dynamism. Benedict’s Rule is not a static Rule which ignores context and Heloise knows this. It is a Rule markedly insistent on the consideration of difference so that all, including women, may find the possibility of living out this Gospel imperative to love.

²³⁴ “De abstinentia quoque jejuniorum, quam magis vitiorum quam ciborum Christiani appetunt, si quid Ecclesie institutioni superaddi decreveris, deliberandum est, et quod nobis expedit instituendum.” *Ep. 6*, Hicks, 105 (Radice, 111).

²³⁵ “hanc minimam inchoationis regulam.” RB 73:8 (Kardong, 603).

²³⁶ “inenarrabili dilectionis dulcedine.” RB Prol. 49 (Kardong, 3).

²³⁷ Georgianna, “In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise’s Critique of Monastic Life,” 189.

It seems probable that Heloise's remarkable success as a monastic leader and reformer is intimately linked with her "subjective claiming of the body and experience".²³⁸ Her "tactic" creates a space specific to the female subject within the masculine world of her day. It is also this aspect of her commentary on the Rule that is pertinent to women's claim to subjectivity in our own times, within the monastic environment in particular, and also within the wider arena of theological dialogue today.

As throughout monastic history, many women still live under the principles of the Rule of Benedict. The actual "tenor of the Rule", based as it is on the central Gospel precept of Love, rather than a set of static prescriptions or moral imperatives, has kept the Rule alive and attractive to women through the ages. Nevertheless, many authors have attempted a re-reading of the Rule from a variety of feminist perspectives. Shawn Carruth and Margaret Mary Funk suggest a "recovery" rather than a "rewriting" of the Rule of Benedict in the light of the experience of women particularly in relation to the virtues of obedience, silence and humility.²³⁹ At the heart of these arguments is discernment of context. Joan Chittister has produced numerous commentaries on the Rule of Benedict with women's experience specifically in mind.²⁴⁰ Like Heloise, steeped in Benedict's own principles of discernment, her focus is the Gospel, not rules. Drawing on Benedict's opening words of his Rule, she interprets his call to listen with her own subversive intent: "Listen with a critical ear for the sound of the gospel in everything you do. And don't do what isn't a gospel act, no matter who says so, no matter who orders it, no matter how sacred the institution that demands it."²⁴¹ For these writers, the Rule of Benedict remains foundational to their Gospel agenda and the feminist task provides the context and tools for their radical interpretation of this Rule from the perspective of difference.

²³⁸ See Janette Gray, "Celibacy These Days," 153.

²³⁹ Shawn Carruth, "The Monastic Virtues of Obedience, Silence and Humility: A Feminist Perspective," *American Benedictine Review* 51.June (2000), and Margaret Mary Funk, "What is the Work of the Monastery? A Case for Silence, Humility, and Obedience," *Proceedings of The American Benedictine Academy Convention*, ed. Renée Branigan (The American Benedictine Academy, August 1992), 91-108.

²⁴⁰ For example: Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St Benedict Today* (New York: Harper, 1990), and Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroads, 1992).

²⁴¹ Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St Benedict Today*, 146. (See RB Prol.1)

In contrast, some writers suggest that the Rule is more inherently a masculine rule, written essentially for men, and thus, correspondingly, needs to be “rewritten” if it is to liberate women who choose the monastic path to God. This is the parallel argument posited by some feminist biblical scholars who consider many sections of the biblical text irretrievable from its patriarchal bias.²⁴² Consistent with this view, Patricia Fawkner has suggested that, “a hermeneutics of creative imagination” can be used “to reshape and rewrite” material that is hopelessly entangled in the language of patriarchy.²⁴³ So, for example, not only does the abbot become the abbess, the brother becomes the sister, and so forth, humility, silence and obedience, key monastic values, are also understood as enslaving tools of patriarchal power to be cast off and re-written in a new feminine voice, not of Benedict, but as a fiction in the form of Scholastica, his sister.²⁴⁴ Admirable as these attempts may seem to be, particularly in the light of today’s pressing feminist agenda, there is a danger that such readings simply fall into the trap of the “logic of the same” which they themselves purport to critique. They actually end up replicating what they oppose by affirming the feminine only through a corresponding negation of the masculine. The feminist position of Irigaray opposes the creation of this opposite “sameness”. Matriarchy as the twin of patriarchy has identical limitations. Philosophers and theologians who take up Irigaray’s work are focused on theological justice in the face of the physical reality of difference. As Grosz notes, for example: “Irigaray does not, by contrast, advocate the creation of a women-centred religion, a kind of female self-worship which is a counter-part to masculine religious ideals. This is simply the reversal of received religions, and not a transformation to accommodate *two* sexes.”²⁴⁵ This position is not so much about ontology, that is, simply shifting the ontological basis for understanding God from that of patriarchy to matriarchy. Indeed, it seems rather to ignore ontological arguments altogether and move more towards the experiential dimension of human existence. Irigaray expresses this as the “practice of difference”:

²⁴² See the writings of scholars such as Phyllis Bird, Mary Daly, and Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza.

²⁴³ Patricia Fawkner, "A Contemporary Reading of the Rule of Benedict," *Tjurunga*, 64. May (2003): 61.

²⁴⁴ For example, Fawkner imagines a “Scholastica’s Spiral of Humility” to replace Benedict’s “Ladder of Humility” from RB 7. See Patricia Fawkner, "The Spiral of Humility," *Tjurunga*, 65. Nov. (2003): 101-104.

²⁴⁵ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 152.

So for woman it is not a matter of installing herself within this lack, this negative, even by denouncing it, nor of reversing the economy of sameness by turning the feminine into the *standard for "sexual difference"*; It is rather a matter of trying to practice that difference.²⁴⁶

Difference then, grounds identity; for example, Irigaray looks at a bowl of peaches and pears and refuses merely to name one in terms of the other or to call them all fruit. They are not different *from* one another.²⁴⁷ This would set up a possibility of a hierarchy of comparisons. *Different from* creates a distance rather than a face to face recognition of difference. Rather they are different *to* one another, grammatically incorrect as this may seem. They are different *in relation to* one another. Without this subversive practice of difference there can be no true subjectivity.

Can Heloise's approach also inform a modern re-reading of the Rule of Benedict for monastic women today, one that also takes into account the embodied experience of women? Heloise's interpretation of the Rule of Benedict is also utterly concerned with the experiential, that is, the practice of difference. It is the experience of women's bodies and their entry into the Gospel's principle command to love that is at the heart of her critique of the Rule of Benedict. All Heloise's arguments deal with the human experience of embodiment and as such, she presents a subversive gendered position in order to include the subject of embodied difference, forcing attention on the experience of women. Uninhibited by the female body and its particular needs, Heloise's discretionary approach to the Rule of Benedict is a subversive tactic which enables her to enter into male discourse with a different voice.

Heloise's radical understanding of authentic monasticism will not ask of the Christian subject that they be "more than Christian" or "more than woman", and it is the monastic virtue of discretion that is at the heart of Heloise's arguments in this regard. Without this virtue there can be no monasticism for women. Religious identity is possible for women only when their bodies are acknowledged. Rather than accepting a metaphorical erasure of the body in order to achieve Christian identity, Heloise exemplifies a monastic woman

²⁴⁶ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 159.

²⁴⁷ I am grateful to Katharine Massam for suggesting this analogy to me.

who refuses to be sexless; who refuses to transcend her body, a different body, the body of a woman. When she is recognised as a “quintessential monastic” of her age, perhaps Heloise’s reading of the Rule of Benedict could be viewed as a source of solidarity for women who continue to desire to seek God in the monastic way. Heloise can enhance this search, contributing a powerful voice of struggle from the past which presents both an inspirational and subversive re-reading of the Rule of Benedict. Perhaps Heloise can indeed, “unite the ages”²⁴⁸ not simply via her place “as a modern romantic heroine, defiant, candid, courageous, tragic, and above all unyielding in her passionate attachment to Abelard”,²⁴⁹ or as a model of religious conversion or even as an extraordinary critic of the monastic life, but more significantly as a faithful Benedictine abbess in her distinctive use of embodied language and sexual difference in her focus on Benedict’s virtue of discretion.

Heloise’s spirituality speaks directly to religious institutions that claim exclusive right to Christian identity through rules and regulations without the practice of *discretio*, and thus without Gospel love in relation to context. Her commentary on the Rule is not blindly dependent on institutions with their doctrines, rules and outward expressions of holiness. In her discernment of monastic life for women, she resists not institutions and Rules *per se*, but both the urge to universalise rules for their own sake and the false freedom of individualism.

Both are temptations to exist without others: the former seeking refuge within institutions, the latter seeking it in his or her own interior. The first fears the other which announces the future, the second fears the other which remembers the past.²⁵⁰

Heloise fears neither her male counterparts nor her own difference as she experiences it. She fears neither the memory of the past nor the possibilities for the future. Today with the rise of prescriptive adherence to “rules” and “fundamentals” as the touchstone of faith, Heloise’s position offers another challenge to the reading of rules in relation to the freedom of the Gospel in our own times.

²⁴⁸ Henry Adams, *Mont-St.-Michel and Chartres* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1936), 284. Although Adams’ is romantic reading of Heloise in this text, his phrase is still apt for my more theological reading.

²⁴⁹ Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," 188.

²⁵⁰ Bauerschmidt, "The Abrahamic Voyage of Michel De Certeau and Theology," 12.

Chapter 6:

The Statutes of the Paraclete and Abelard's Rule

Institutiones nostre sumunt exordium a doctrina Christi¹

Introduction:

It is impossible, or at the least inappropriate, to end this discussion on Heloise's final letter to Abelard in this later correspondence without at least some brief reference to Abelard's response to her requests and to what Heloise made of this response in the construction of her community's customaries. What follows is by no means a comprehensive study of these texts. Other scholars, as I have indicated above, have ably undertaken this task. Rather, I am concerned here with the continuity between these documents and Heloise's monastic endeavour as articulated in Letter VI of her main correspondence.

Heloise and her community's monastic life cannot be examined without the consideration of both the Rule of Benedict, the foundational Rule for their religious life, and Statutes of the Paraclete community, that is, the particular manner of following that Rule in their own context. Berenice Kerr expresses a similar insistence in her study of Fontevraud's

¹ "The starting point of our Institutes (statutes) are the teachings of Christ." *Institutiones, I.* (Waddell, 9).

life and customs: “The principles which governed the life of the Fontevraud order are expressed in its Rule and statutes. Any analysis of the Rule of Fontevraud must begin from the understanding that the fundamental rule of life for a nun of this order was the Rule of Saint Benedict.”² *Institutiones nostrae*, the Institutes of the Paraclete community, represent Heloise’s monastic customary for not only her community of the Paraclete, but also for the foundations which emerged from her community.³ In concert with Kerr’s findings then, these customs need to be read in the light of the monastic Rule followed by the community. What was this Rule?

Abelard’s “rule”⁴ or the Rule of Benedict?

Abelard’s reply to Heloise’s commentary on the Rule of Benedict can be found in Letters VII and VIII of the later correspondence.⁵ These letters present the history and rule for women that Heloise had requested from Abelard. The history of religious women in Letter VII is distinctive in that it places the community of the Paraclete in continuity with a solid tradition of women’s monasticism throughout Christian history. In some ways Abelard’s rule is intended to follow as the maturing plant of that tradition.⁶ His rule also sets out the theological principles underpinning monastic life in terms of the ascetical practices of continence or chastity, silence, and renunciation which essentially concentrates on the virtue of obedience. These practices are not peculiar to Abelard’s rule of course, but rather draw heavily from monastic tradition and attempt to bear in mind the context of women. Indeed, Abelard draws on many sources from the ancient monastic tradition, including the Rule of Benedict.⁷ Much of what Abelard writes concerning

² Kerr, *Religious Life for Women C. 1100-C.1350*, 52.

³ Chrysogonus Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes*, 34-36. Waddell here summarises the arguments of Charrier, Benton, Luscombe and Dronke in formulating his own position.

⁴ I have deliberately designated Abelard’s rule with a lower case “r” in order to distinguish it from the status given to the Rule of Benedict in my arguments that follow.

⁵ See Hicks, 107-147 (Radice 112-129) for Letter VI. The Latin text of the Abelard’s rule, designated Letter VIII (*Ep.* 8) in this thesis, is taken from: McLaughlin, T.P. “Abelard’s Rule for Religious Women.” *Mediaeval Studies* 18 (1956): 241-92. Henceforth, McLaughlin. The English translation is found in Radice, 130-216.

⁶ See Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*, 44.

⁷ Abelard draws on the Rule explicitly, over fourteen times and there are many oblique allusions to the Rule also. See Appendix 5.

obedience, for instance, is no more than a commentary on Benedict's own chapter on obedience in the Rule.⁸ Julie Ann Smith also analyses Abelard's teaching on silence and clearly establishes his monastic and Benedictine heritage behind his instructions. She notes that, "His focus was simple; it was Benedictine, and was based in scriptural and eremitic ideals."⁹ Apart from these identifying features, Abelard's rule makes no striking innovations from the other Cistercian or Cluniac reform movements of the time. Nevertheless, his rule is markedly stamped by his own unique philosophical emphases, for example, when stressing the need for simplicity he quotes the principle as set out by Seneca: "Philosophy calls for simple living, not a penance, and a simple way of life need not be a rough one."¹⁰ As such he incorporates his philosophical dexterity into this commentary on, and advice for, monastic life.

The rule that Abelard proposed for Heloise's community was not overly ascetical. In truth, this rule could be considered as distinctly moderate for the most part, particularly with regard to meeting the needs of women, which Heloise had so eloquently articulated for him. For instance, drawing directly on Benedict's Rule (See RB 64:19), Abelard incorporates an air of moderation in his instructions concerning the use of food:

But if we abstain from meat, what a reproach it is to us if we eat everything else to excess, if we procured varied dishes of fish at vast expense, . . . as if the quality rather than excess of food were to blame. . . Let *discretion*, the mother of all the virtues, preside over zeal and look carefully to see on whom she may lay which burdens, that is, on each according to his capacity, following nature rather than putting pressure on it, and removing not the habit of sufficiency but the abuse of excess, so that vices are rooted out but nature is unharmed.¹¹

⁸ See RB 5 (Kardong, 103-4) and Radice, 132-133. Abelard's section on silence also draws on RB 6 – On Silence, while contextualising this teaching to what he understands as the condition of women. See Radice, 134-37.

⁹ Julie Ann Smith, "The Virtue of Stillness: Abelard and Monastic Silence," *American Benedictine Review*, 59:3, 2008, 302.

¹⁰ "Frugalitatem exigit philosophia, non poenam. Potest tamen esse non incomposita frugalitas, hic mihi modus placet." *Ep.* 8, McLaughlin, 278 (Radice, 186). See Seneca, *Epistulae ad Lucilium*, 5.4.

¹¹ "Ecce si a carnibus abstinenceamus, magnum quid nobis imputatur quantacumque superfluitate ceteris vescamur. Si multis expensis diversa piscium fercula comparemus . . . quasi ciborum qualitas magis quam superfluitas in culpa sit . . . Huic vero diligentiae sic omnium virtutum mater discretio praesit, ut quae quibus imponat onera sollicite videat, unicuique scilicet secundum propriam virtutem, et naturam sequens potius quam trahens, nequaquam usum saturitatis, sed abusum auferat superfluitatis; et sic extirpentur vitia ne laedatur natura." *Ep.* 8, McLaughlin, 273-74 (Radice, 180-81). Emphasis added.

It is clear in this section of his instruction that Abelard has, to a large extent, obviously responded to Heloise's call for the practice and acquiring of the virtue of discretion in the setting out of a rule for religious women just as Benedict had intended. Indeed, Abelard's rule could be usefully employed as a commentary on the Rule of Benedict, as I have suggested is also the case with Heloise's Letter VI. The nature of this commentary would be a fruitful study for future research. Abelard also seems to have read Bernard's *Apologia* as he is also enters into that debate between Cistercians and Cluniacs of the time regarding the "nature of excess" in monastic life, just as Heloise had done.¹²

That Abelard provided the community of the Paraclete with not only this rule, but also hymns, biblical commentaries and sermons, plus a programme of study,¹³ suggests that, consistent with his philosophical ideals, he wanted its monasticism to be imbued with what Luscombe describes as "a carefully reasoned programme of prayer and study and also with a choral or sung office."¹⁴ Luscombe notes that this provision by a patron was particularly unusual for that period of the flowering of monastic renewal: "I can think of no other monastic foundation of those times of numerous beginnings that was accompanied by so much new writing by a single friend or patron."¹⁵ However, it was also precisely what Heloise had asked Abelard to undertake for her in her emphasis on the liturgy in both the beginning and end of her Letter VI. It is also a significant element reflected in much of the Paraclete Institutes.¹⁶

How did all this advice and questioning and provision find itself played out in the reality of life at the Paraclete? Was the Rule of Abelard *the* Rule followed in Heloise's community as some scholars maintain?¹⁷ In what ways did Heloise continue to be faithful to her husband and patron? Brooke's assertion of Heloise's own agency is pertinent and

¹² See my discussion of this debate in Chapter 5.

¹³ See *Ep. 9*. Smits, ed., *Peter Abelard. Letters IX-XIV* (Groningen: privately published, 1983), 219-37. In this letter, Abelard even suggests that the nuns study Greek, Latin and Hebrew as a way to improve their Bible study and he informs them that he intends to send the requested sermons.

¹⁴ David Luscombe, "Monasticism in the Lives and Writings of Heloise and Abelard," 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Note my analysis of Letter VI and *Institutiones Nostrae* in Chapter 5 above.

¹⁷ See Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life*, 249-63, Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 163ff, and Stone, "Heloise: La très Sage Abbess of the Paraclete."

worth quoting in full here as it reveals a little of the character of this strong and often underestimated woman of history:

Heloise sets Abelard to work to give her useful advice about the example of holy women from the past, and to provide a rule for her community; but being a strong-minded woman with a clear view of her own, she takes the precaution of telling him with some rigor what to say . . . It is fascinating to observe the way in which he picked up every hint in her letter and solemnly carried her own arguments to their logical conclusion . . . Heloise was undoubtedly a very masterful woman . . . Abelard she would obey, in her own way, to the end; but it was not in her nature to place herself at the disposal of any other man.¹⁸

Indeed, Heloise wields her own authority as abbess of her community with her own commentary on the Rule of Benedict for women as I have demonstrated, and in directing Abelard in his commentary as well.

It seems quite clear that the Rule of Abelard was, in fact, never adopted in full at the Paraclete. Mews suggests both the *Institutiones* and Abelard's Rule, "emphasize that the nuns of the community based their life, not on the Rule of Benedict, but directly on the example of the early followers of Christ."¹⁹ However, this is to suggest that Benedict's Rule does not intend to lead one to "the example of the early followers of Christ". In reality, the implicit purpose of the Rule of Benedict, with its heavy dependence on the biblical text, is to provide a commentary on, and guide for, living the life of the early followers of Christ. The *Prologue* of the Rule amply attests to this purpose and aim: "Let us set out on this path with the Gospel as our guide so that we may be worthy to see him who called us into his kingdom."²⁰ Furthermore, Waddell maintains that for all that scholars may conjecture concerning the adherence of Heloise's community to the rule that Abelard wrote in response to her request, there is simply no evidence that they professed anything other than the Benedictine Rule.²¹

¹⁸ Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage*, 116-18.

¹⁹ Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 163.

²⁰ "per ducatum evangelii pergamus iterina eius, ut mereamur eum qui nos vocavit in regnum suum videre." RB Prol. 21 (Kardong, 4).

²¹ Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*, 33.

The presumption that the Paraclete community followed a “Rule of Abelard” as its foundational Rule is also patently “naïve”.²² In reality the Paraclete had no choice in what Rule it was to follow, as in 1139 the Second Lateran Council, as part of the general Gregorian reform, had decreed that “the pernicious and detestable custom which has spread among some women who, although they live neither according to the rule of the blessed Benedict, nor of Basil, nor Augustine, yet wish to be thought of by everyone as nuns is to be abolished.”²³ It is highly improbable that the Paraclete would have ignored this decree. In addition, both papal protection and a papal privilege were conferred on the Paraclete community in 1131 and 1135 respectively.²⁴ As Waddell asserts: “It is sheer fantasy to imagine a papal privilege conferred upon the community of the Paraclete, and beginning with a reference to Paraclete monastic observance lived *secundum Deum et beati Petri Abaelardi Regulam*”.²⁵ Surely this is unlikely given the political and religious climate surrounding the person of Peter Abelard at the time – Abelard’s writings were twice condemned, once at Soissons in 1121, and again at Sens in 1140.

Nevertheless, even should one argue or imagine that Abelard, or Heloise for that matter, may not have found it inconceivable to place his own name alongside other originators of monastic Rules, for example: the Rule of Augustine; the Rule of Blessed Benedict; the Rule of Blessed Peter Abelard, to suggest as well that Abelard’s rule was not dependent, to some extent, on the Rule of Benedict seems equally naïve. Abelard refers explicitly to the Rule of Benedict or Benedict himself fourteen times, not to mention his many allusions to the Rule.²⁶ Indeed, he defers to the Rule on numerous occasions in such a manner as would, in itself, suggest that he knew this to be the primary Rule followed at the Paraclete; for example he notes that: “Finally, if the sisters have no understanding of Scripture, how will they be able to instruct each other by word or even to explain or

²² Ibid., 35.

²³ “Ad haec perniciosam et detestabilem consuetudinem quarundam mulierum, quae licet neque secundum regulam beati Benedicti neque Basilii aut Augustini vivant, sanctimoniales tamen vulgo censi desiderant, aboleri decernimus.” Canon 26, Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Nicea I to Lateran V*, vol. 1 (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 203.

²⁴ See ‘Cartulaire de l’abbaye du Paraclet,’ ed. C. Lalore, *Collection des Principaux cartulaires de Troyes* (1875-90), vol. 2, 103, quoted in Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life*, 249.

²⁵ Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*, 35.

²⁶ See Appendix 5.

understand the Rule, or correct false citation from it?”²⁷ What Rule would he be referring to here other than the Rule of Benedict? His emphasis on the Holy Fathers of the monastic tradition is also consistent with Benedict’s final injunction in his Rule for monks: “But for someone who is in a hurry to reach the fullness of monastic life, there are the teachings of the Holy Fathers.”²⁸ Indeed, Abelard’s rule should be more realistically considered as an extended commentary and advice on monastic practice. As Waddell maintains: “It would not be unrealistic then, to entertain the possibility that, at the Paraclete, the Rule of Benedict may have been interpreted in the light of Abelard’s Rule,”²⁹ and as such, be itself an important inclusion in the customary dossier of the Paraclete or at least in the formative material for the Paraclete community. Clearly, the rule of Abelard is part of that literature of the twelfth century designated, *cura monialium*.³⁰ As Fiona Griffiths claims, this rule “marks the culmination – emotional as well as intellectual and spiritual – of his relationship with Heloise: their shared involvement in the project of monastic foundation and reform.”³¹ Abelard provided much more than simply this rule and history of monastic women for Heloise’s community as part of this *cura monialium* material of course, notably, the answers to Heloise’s biblical inquiries in *Problemata Heloissae*, his commentary on the book of Genesis, *Expositio in Hexaemeron*, the numerous sermons, hymns and sequences along with six *planctus* or laments that he wrote specifically for the community.³² In relation to this present study, further work on the influence of Benedict’s Rule on Abelard’s advice to Heloise would also be helpful to the analysis of his role in caring for the nuns of the Paraclete.

²⁷ “Denique qui scripturae non habent intelligentiam, quomodo sermonis aedificationem sibi ministrabant, aut etiam regulam exponere vel intelligere, aut vitiose prolata corrigere valebunt?” McLaughlin, 287 (Radice, 201).

²⁸ “Ceterum ad perfectionem conversationis qui festinat, sunt doctrinae sanctorum patrum.” RB 73:2 (Kardong, 603).

²⁹ Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*, 36.

³⁰ See my discussion in the previous chapter – p. 151.

³¹ Fiona J. Griffiths, “Men's Duty to Provide for Women's Needs!: Abelard, Heloise, and Their Negotiation of the *Cura monialium*,” *Journal of Medieval History* 30 (2004): 2.

³² See Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 145-73.

The Paraclete Statutes: A Unique Synthesis:

The Rule followed at the Paraclete was undoubtedly the Rule of Benedict and the evidence amply attests to this fact. Waddell points out that: "We find clear reference to the observance described by *Institutiones nostrae* in a papal privilege issued under Alexander III, 21st March, 1164."³³ That this document was issued on the feast of Benedict's death is hardly an insignificant factor in this argument, indeed, it attests to the primary Rule being the Rule of Benedict at the Paraclete Abbey.

The Paraclete statutes, *Institutiones nostrae*, are thought possibly to have been written by Abbess Heloise herself,³⁴ and from the information that we can glean from them it appears that she did not have any difficulty with the disparity between the theory, which Abelard provided her in his rule, and the practical application of it as she saw fit. Indeed, perhaps it was as Clanchy suggests, "she [Heloise] did not consider the rule comprised of 'commands' as much as advice."³⁵ Indeed, always imbued with Benedict's virtue of discretion, Heloise drew from a variety of other sources that she had available to her in creating what she considered a workable document for the context of her community.³⁶ Heloise achieved this without any hint of Abelard's rule claiming a monopoly in their pattern of Benedictine life:

Abelard's rule was indeed one of the sources from which the author drew (though with considerable freedom). But this does not suggest that Abelard's rule was therefore the rule of the abbey – any more than does the fact that the author draws from Cistercian sources suggests that the Paraclete customary was the Cistercian one. Not one document from the Paraclete cartulary or from any other contemporary source refers explicitly to the Rule of Abelard.³⁷

In contrast to Stone's identification of Heloise as "the dependent" Heloise who submitted her ideas for consideration to her lover, husband and spiritual adviser",³⁸ Heloise acts quite independently of the mind of Abelard in this venture. Her focus is

³³ Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*, 38.

³⁴ See Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 163.

³⁵ Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life*, 258.

³⁶ Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*, and Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 156-64.

³⁷ Waddell, ed., *The Old French Paraclete Ordinary and the Paraclete Breviary*, 32.

³⁸ Stone, "Heloise: La très Sage Abbess of the Paraclete," 20.

again discretionary, drawing from all the sources available to her in setting down the practical living out of their monastic life as women.

Institutiones nostrae provides us with a look into the distinctive expression of the Rule of Benedict that was Heloise's own vision for her congregation particularly through her commentary on the Rule in Letter VI. *Institutiones nostrae* themselves attest to their success:

Because the Lord was setting his gaze upon us, and bestowing upon us some places (= monastic sites) we sent off in sufficient number certain of our own to keep monastic observance. Now we are noting down the customs of our fine program so that what the mother holds unchangeably, the daughters too may hold uniformly.³⁹

Nevertheless, these concepts, so thoroughly grounded in the biblical narrative and Heloise's own experience of living the monastic life, have been "invested with a theological dimension and transformed in a manner wholly proper to the Paraclete" as Waddell points out.⁴⁰ For example, in the beginning of *Institutiones nostrae*, Heloise writes of the foundation of their monasticism flowing from the example of the apostles: "We follow also the footsteps of the apostles in community of life. In our life-style we preserve poverty and humility; in submissiveness, obedience; in our manner of life, because we live communally, we follow the apostles."⁴¹ This theological element is most certainly the result of Abelard's influence through his rule with its corresponding application of the scriptural and monastic sources for the interpretation of religious life in the twelfth-century context.

In the medieval monastic customary, the arrangement of material followed a pattern that was practical and logical. The theological basis for the monasticism found in the *Institutiones nostrae* is wholly unique except for the rule of Peter Abelard which sets

³⁹ "Domino super nos prospiciente, et aliqua loca nobis largiente, misimus quasdam ex nostris ad religionem tenendam numero sufficiente. Annotamus autem boni propositi nostri consuetudines, ut quod tenuit mater incommutabiliter, teneant et filie uniformiter." *Institutiones II* (Waddell, 37).

⁴⁰ Waddell, ed., *The Old French Paraclete Ordinary and the Paraclete Breviary*, 67.

⁴¹ "Sequimur autem uestigia apostolorum in commune uiuentium. In habitu nostro conseruamus paupertatem et humilitatem; in subiectione, obedientiam; in conuersatione nostra, quia communiter uiuimus, sequimur apostolos." *Institutiones, I* (Waddell, 9)

forth the principles of the traditional monastic endeavour, namely, poverty, chastity, obedience and silence as noted above and these Heloise incorporates into her *Institutes*.⁴²

Heloise is no legalist, slavishly imitating her sources, be they the Cistercians or her Master Abelard. True to what she had written in Letter VI of her correspondence to Abelard, she is eminently practical, and adapts her interpretation to the needs of her own local situation and conditions through the value she places on discretion. The following description from Waddell, quoted in full here, creatively imagines the attitude she may have had as an abbess well practiced in Benedict's *discretio*:

One can almost see the Paraclete author "correcting" the Cistercian text, so to speak and adapting it point by point to serve the purposes of a Congregation whose aims and spirit were not those of the White Monks. "No monasteries in towns and villages? That won't do for us. We'll settle for *loca* in general. An abbot and twelve monks sent off to observe the Rule with such utter strictness? 'A sufficient' number will do for us; and best not to harp so much on the Rule, the Rule, the Rule. But we've got to have some sort of expression of a common observance if we and our daughter-houses are going to form a congregation or order recognizable as such in court, civil or ecclesiastical. So we can settle for a shared observance of a few practical and, for the most part, time-honored points of monastic polity."⁴³

Examples of Heloise's practicality and discretionary approach in her application of the Rule and use of her sources abound throughout *Institutiones nostrae*. In the case of the use of bread, for instance, it is not simply asceticism that marks Heloise's ideas about monasticism. For the Cistercians and Abelard only coarse flour was permitted: "Fine wheat flour we absolutely forbid; . . . And they must never enjoy bread hot from the oven, but eat only what has been baked at least one day before."⁴⁴ In contrast, Heloise remains eminently practical: whatever is available will suffice: "We eat bread of whatever sort there is: of wheat grain if this is to be had; if not, then bread of whatever grain is available."⁴⁵ In this sense the Paraclete seems to be less stringent and more

⁴² See *Institutes I*, and *VI*. (Waddell, 9-10).

⁴³ Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*, 85.

⁴⁴ "Triticeae quoque medullae similaginem omnino prohibemus . . . Nec calidis umquam oblectentur panibus, sed qui ad minus uno die ante cocti fuerint." *Ep. 8*, McLaughlin, 277 (Radice, 186).

⁴⁵ "Pane quolibet uescimur. Si fuerit triticum, triticeo; is defuerit, pane cuiuslibet annone." *Institutiones*, V. (Waddell, 10).

sensibly balanced in its attitudes than either Abelard's directory or Cistercian austerity. Though this may well reflect the harsh conditions under which the Paraclete community first existed, it is consistent not only with the virtue of *discretio* which I have analysed, but also with Heloise's focus on charity in the monastic life. Asceticism is not simply for asceticism's sake, it is for the fostering of Gospel love only.

What is particularly interesting from these statutes however, is the fact that nowhere is there mention of that male superior on whom Abelard was so intent in his rule. Mews also notes this fact that Heloise was in no way dependent on Abelard's authority:

There is also no mention of an external abbot or a community of monks, only of certain lay brothers who could be summoned for correction by the abbess, the title used in place of Abelard's preferred term, *diaconissa*. Women of proven age (although not the veiled nuns) were able to leave the community to conduct necessary business. Only for a few details, such as mention of mattresses and pillows, have elements of Abelard's Rule been employed.⁴⁶

Yet Abelard was insistent that convents have a male authority figure:

[W]e believe that convents then maintain that religion of their calling more firmly, if they are ruled by the guidance of spiritual men, and the same shepherd is set over the ewes as well as the rams: that is, that women shall come under the same authority as men, and always, as the Apostle ruled, 'Woman's head is man, as man's head is Christ and Christ's is God.'⁴⁷

Had Abelard assumed this position himself, if even from afar? It is doubtful, knowing Heloise's mind and as already noted, that she would have countenanced any other man over her apart from Abelard. Nevertheless, from what we observe of her application of his advice in *Institutiones nostrae*, even his authority over her was not a bar to her freedom to exercise her own rights, as she understood them, as abbess.⁴⁸

Heloise discerns the needs of the community in the light of the signs of the times and its present audience, that is, females. In the Paraclete Statutes we do not find a dismissal of

⁴⁶ Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 163.

⁴⁷ "Et tunc profecto monasteria feminarum firmiter propositi sui religionem observare credimus, si spiritalium virorum providentia gubernentur et idem tam ovium quam arietum pastor constituatur, ut qui videlicet viris ipse quoque praesit feminis, et semper juxta institutionem Apostolicam: caput mulieris sit vir sicut viri Christus et Christi Deus." *Ep.* 8, McLaughlin, 258 (Radice, 155).

⁴⁸ See Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life*, 258.

the Rule of Benedict because of Abelard's advice to her, rather we discover there the Rule's faithful adaptation to their context.

Conclusion:

What distinguished one monastic community from another was the Rule it followed together with its monastic customs. The Rule of Benedict was followed by many medieval monastic foundations, as is still the case today. What gives each its distinctive identity is the interpretation of that Rule as expressed in its unique set of constitutions or institutes and statutes. This is also the case when we come to look at the Paraclete community. Waddell points out that these "Medieval monastic customs are frequently introduced by prefatory material which provide information about the nature and origin of the customary or collection of usages which follows."⁴⁹ The founding and formative material for a community could consist of a number of documents and again of various genres: hagiographical, historical, legislative, theological and spiritual. This understanding of the nature of founding material for religious communities is still operative to this day as indicated in the table below:

Monastic Dossiers:

Twelfth Century		Twentieth Century
Cistercians	Paraclete	Good Samaritan Sister Of the Order of St Benedict⁵⁰
RB	RB	RB
<i>Carta Caritatis</i>	Heloise's Commentary (<i>Ep. 6</i>)	
<i>Exordium Parvum</i>	History of monastic women (<i>Ep. 7</i>)	<i>The Annals</i>
	rules of Abelard (<i>Ep. 8</i>)	rules of John Bede Polding
Constitution	<i>Institutiones Nostrae</i>	Constitutions and Statutes

⁴⁹ Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*, 42.

⁵⁰ I have used the example of my own Benedictine Order here to indicate the parallels with twelfth century documents. See Sisters of the Good Samaritan of the Order of St. Benedict, *Constitutions*, (Bulleen, Vic: unpublished, 2008), and Sisters of the Good Samaritan of the Order of St. Benedict, *Statutes*, (Bulleen, Vic: unpublished, 2008).

Admittedly, this survey of both Abelard's rule and *Institutiones nostrae*, written for Heloise's community, has been simply a sketch in order to demonstrate the continuity of this material with her correspondence. More detailed work, however, has been attempted and I have drawn on some of this to create my argument. Chrysogonus Waddell has opened up further research of the Paraclete Statutes and Liturgical practice with a number of studies.⁵¹ Here too the deliberate theological basis for the community is exposed. As Waddell notes: "The Paraclete liturgy was not only interesting for the range of influences it absorbed but also for its articulation of a distinct theological identity . . . the nuns of the Paraclete placed themselves under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."⁵² David Wulstan, Constant Mews, Juanita Feros Ruys and others, have continued this work with studies into the hymnody and other liturgical and formative texts of Heloise's monastery.⁵³ What is remarkable and unique in the Paraclete dossier of monastic instructions is the experiential nature of the material and its specificity to women's embodied condition, particularly as found in Letters II, IV and VI. This material is not simply "a series of 'letters' that not only details the historical facts, but bares the souls of founder and foundress, and describes their spiritual evolution."⁵⁴ It is a series of founding documents which are thoroughly imbued with the experience of the monastic journey, the spiritual journey as understood from the perspective of women. In this context, these documents are in continuity with the perspective of the correspondence of Heloise as I have outlined it in the previous chapter. This is the unique contribution which the writings of Heloise offers to the monastic world.

Heloise's introductory material is especially distinctive as it exposes the influence of embodied experience on the monastic life of a community, including that of revelation of thoughts, the role of a spiritual elder, humility, discretion and the primacy of love – all

⁵¹ Notably Chrysogonus Waddell, "St. Bernard and the Cistercian Office at the Abbey of the Paraclete," *Studies in Medieval Cistercian History* 5 (1980): 76-121, Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*, and Waddell, ed., *The Old French Paraclete Ordinary and the Paraclete Breviary: I Introduction and Commentary*.

⁵² Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, 165.

⁵³ See Wulstan, "Novi Modulaminis Melos: The Music of Heloise and Abelard," 1-23, Stewart and Wulstan, eds., *The Poetic and Musical Legacy of Heloise and Abelard*, Constant. J. Mews, "Heloise and Liturgical Experience at the Paraclete," *Plainsong and Medieval Music* 11.1 (2002): 19-33, and Juanita Feros Ruys, "'Ut Sexu Sic Animo': The Resolution of Sex and Gender in the *Planctus* of Abelard."

⁵⁴ Waddell, ed., *The Old French Paraclete Ordinary and the Paraclete Breviary*, 43.

themes fundamental to the monastic endeavour. Waddell points only to Abelard's rule as the directory of spiritual values for the community. However, I am suggesting that Heloise's Letter VI is also this directory and even more so, as Abelard's rule appears to have not been preserved as consistently as Heloise's Letter.⁵⁵

In Heloise's writings for her community there is none of the hagiographical idealism we find in the founding documents from Fontevraud or Cîteaux for instance. Fontevraud's founding documents include two lives of Robert of Arbrissel, *Vita B. Roberti de Arbrissello auctore Dalddrico episcopo Dolensi* and *Vita Altera B. Roberti de Abrissello auctore monacho Fontis Ebraudi*.⁵⁶ In the Cistercian document *Exordium Parvum*, contains there is an account of Robert of Molesme's founding of Cîteaux.⁵⁷ Rather, Heloise concentrates primarily on human experience, raw, grounded in human frailty and without avoiding the issue of sexual difference. Whether it involved her personal outpourings to the one she considered her spiritual elder, her desire for spiritual guidance, her discretionary approach to the living out of the Rule of Benedict, her need for an authentic liturgical expression, or her questioning of Scripture, human experience marks Heloise's speech. Through love and lust to desire for God, from lover and wife, to mother and abbess, from intellectual pursuit to spiritual struggle, every facet of life is embraced by Heloise in her monastic search for God. Indeed, Heloise presents the reader with an eminently human and embodied vision of the Christian life rather than an emphasis on a struggle for some vague, remote and unobtainable divine nature.

⁵⁵ See Waddell, ed., *The Paraclete Statutes, Institutiones Nostrae*, 43ff.

⁵⁶ See PL 162, 1043-1078.

⁵⁷ See *Exordium Parvum* III, Waddell, ed., *Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux*, 421.

Chapter 7:

Conclusion:

The silences imposed on Heloise through the centuries, though manifold, have been and continue to be unmasked in our own times. Her unique voice has been slowly liberated as new methods in historical, psychological, philosophical and literary analysis are applied to her writings. Her own unique literary genius, intellectual acclaim, ethical influence on Abelard's thought, liturgical initiatives and innovative monastic instincts have all been finally acknowledged and applauded. Nonetheless, the seriousness with which she immerses herself in the theological task of the Christian life itself has rarely been thoroughly investigated.

Silenced by both her own gender and the enormous weight of Abelard's intellectual significance and the theological controversies surrounding him, Heloise's own theological contributions have been largely ignored by a world entrenched in patriarchal discourse. This thesis has attempted to redress this issue of Heloise's theological silencing.

Feminist philosophical and theological hermeneutics have been central to this task as they expose the patriarchal assumptions buried within our reading of a text. By employing the perspective of the "reasoning female body" as articulated through these modern feminist

agendum, Heloise's penetrating theological insights can be elucidated. This alternative reading, a theological reading, is firmly established within the lived experience of Heloise's monastic context.

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

Theologically, this position presses home the fundamental truths of Christianity. Holding unswervingly to both the incarnate nature of the human person and the centrality of the Gospel in the living out of the Christian life, Heloise presents the reader with a direct challenge to any elusive idea that holiness is to be found outside our embodied experience. The God of Jesus Christ is not found in abstraction and neither can the Christian life be lived in abstraction. Thus, Heloise's positioning of the body as primary in any discussion of Christian living confounds a too limited theological reading of the human person by drawing us back to human experience and in particular, the experience of a woman. In concert with the modern feminist task, Heloise is implicitly "negotiating the inscrutable terrain that constitutes the gap between language and the body, in a way that allows the female body to occupy that sacramental space for the first time as a person made in the image of God, fully equal to and different from the male body."¹ It is this theological position that marks Heloise's writings as unique in the theological world of her times and in our own times as well.

Abstract concepts, metaphysical musings and the employment of metaphorical symbolization, useful as they may be, invariably erase the embodied reality of human existence, sexual difference and thus subjective relationships with both God and others. In contrast, just as God denied nothing of what was human in the event of Jesus Christ, neither does Heloise sidestep any confrontation with her own flawed human existence as she attempts to ground her theological discourse with Abelard. In this discourse, she is not simply an adjunct of Abelard, dependent on his influence and philosophical framework or merely adding to his philosophical and theological thinking, "colluding

¹ Beattie, *Woman*, 81.

with him” in his project as Wheeler implies.² She has her own theological agency. She speaks with a different authoritative voice, the voice of a woman with a woman’s experience.

By restoring this embodied aspect of Heloise’s humanity, this thesis is an attempt to allow Heloise a rightful place in the history of theological and spiritual thinking. Now she can stand beside the other great female monastic women of the Middle Ages and be accorded the same level of esteem for her religious fervor and holiness, prophetic wisdom and enduring theological and monastic insight.

Thus, the curriculum for a study of monastic women of the twelfth century can no longer include Heloise as a mere literary curiosity, a unique female intellect, a fascinating study for psychological analysis or simply an extraordinary character of the twelfth century. To truly hear Heloise’s voice we must also listen to her theological contributions, both implicit and explicit in her writings. Just as modern scholarship has revived the wisdom and insights of medieval women such as Hildegard of Bingen, Gertrude of Helfta, Julian of Norwich, and many others, the recuperation of Heloise’s wisdom can no longer be ignored, glossed over or denied. Her writings must be appropriated for insights that inform our own struggles for meaning in our times. As such Heloise’s identity is coherent and no longer fragmented. Indeed, I have argued that Heloise ought to be presented as a quintessential monastic reformer of the twelfth century, whose spiritual insights are as significant as the other great monastic characters of her times, men and women alike.

The task of Christian anthropology, confronted by the philosophical systems of each age, has been to uphold, in its use of language and practice, the mystery of the incarnation, a mystery which insists that our bodies, both male and female bodies, are “good enough for God”. Only then are we able to develop a Christian ethic that is consistent with this belief. We can be indebted to Heloise for her refusal to bypass this most central belief in her writings. It is this focus on her thought that enables us to posit Heloise as a model to

² Bonnie Wheeler, "Origenary Fantasies: Abelard's Castration and Confession," *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, 107.

be emulated in today's world. Indeed, it can be argued that Heloise's theological insights have direct bearing on the way we understand ourselves as human persons in relation to our search for God. The possibility arises for women to desire and love God and discern God's will for them, with, in and through their bodies. Although it is true that reading Heloise in this way particularly enables women to discover their subjectivity, her insights are not simply of benefit to women in their quest for God. It has potential for a powerful understanding of our relationships with one another in our difference. Grosz articulates this potential for relationship between the sexes:

Not only can the sexes exchange bodily fluids, sexual passions, desire, producing a child as a consequence; perhaps more interestingly, they can exchange points of view, positions, words, knowledges, making a different kind of production possible . . . Each must recognise the specific place the other occupies, be attentive to what the other says, yet receive it only from his or her own position. Neither can subsume the other, neither is master of the dialogue circulating between them.³

This is precisely the reconciling action of the incarnation, that is, that all may be one in Christ Jesus (See John 17:16). As Beattie insists, the incarnation is: "the message of reconciliation between word and flesh, creator and creation, God and humankind, and woman and man,"⁴ and reconciliation occurs in and through difference, not sameness. Only then can men be liberated from their own logic of the same. Only then can a Christian anthropology, which includes difference, and therefore includes women, be born into our theological reflection with any credibility.⁵ Hence, it is to our own peril that we ignore these insights of Heloise and those of the other great women of history, as to do so leaves us open to misinterpreting the full meaning of God's saving action in humanity, our humanity that is both male and female.

One can detect a determined struggle to preserve this original reconciling task of the incarnation in the writings of women throughout Christian history; for example, Julian of Norwich with her spirituality of Jesus as Mother in her *Showings*, Hildegard of Bingen's

³ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 182.

⁴ Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 52.

⁵ See Graham Ward, "In the Name of the Father and of the Mother," *Literature and Theology* 8 (1994): 322. Ward notes that: "Men in that speaking would be released from their own narcissism, that imperialism of their own phallogentrism. A new relation, a new anthropology is born."

use of explicitly feminine imagery in her *Scivias*, Gertrude of Helfta and her incarnational mysticism of the heart in her *Spiritual Exercises*. Another such attempt can be unearthed with a careful re-reading of the Letters of Heloise, particularly when one focuses attention on the position of the body and bodies in her writings as has been attempted in this thesis. If Hildegard of Bingen could accord herself the prophetic title: “Voice of the Living Light”, then Heloise of the Paraclete can rightly claim the “Voice of Love’s Longing”, for in her writings we are called to embrace love as the touchstone of all our actions, of all our meaning.

How might Heloise react to this alternative reading of her writings? Would she consider it fanciful? How might one who is located in “any corner of heaven” respond to the attempt to showcase her voice as bearing theological significance to a world 800 years removed from her earthly existence? How might she consider the exposure of her words to such scrutiny? Would she approve of this “incarnational” reading of her words? Would she herself feel uncomfortable, placed in the presence of such an esteem figure as Hildegard?

As a woman of the twenty-first century, a Benedictine woman as Heloise was, I have formed a “bond” of community with Heloise in the writing of this thesis, one that I understand to be that “dynamic of reciprocity and mutual transformation”⁶ which D’Arcens and Ruys identify as existing between the scholar and the medieval woman they investigate. Thus, perhaps the best way to answer these questions is to transcend the assumptions and boundaries of time and place which we place around our discourse and to imagine the writings of Heloise had they been written in a more explicitly theological key. Given the analysis in this thesis, how might she discuss theological issues put to her? By way of summary and to conclude this thesis, I would like creatively to imagine such a dialogue.⁷

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

⁷ I am indebted to Juanita Feros Ruys for this idea of creative imagination in relation to the writings of Heloise. See Juanita Feros Ruys, “Playing Alterity: Heloise, Rhetoric and *Memoria*/Interrogating Heloise,” *Maistresse of My Wit*, 236-43.

A Dialogue with Heloise:

Carmel: Mother Heloise, it seems to me that you use the term *specialiter* to describe the particular way in which we express the general Gospel command to love and that this particular way we express love is achieved only in and through our bodies. I have called your use of such vocabulary “incarnational language”.

Heloise: Well of course. We are all one in the Body of Christ and therefore we are all sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, daughters and sons. Nevertheless, we also experience life as particular bodies, do we not? And with these bodies we have many identities also. We live as “handmaids” to each other in our particular service to one another: we are special friends, wives, husbands, siblings.⁸ This is how we love. You cannot become a part of the Body of Christ, who *is* the Incarnation, without this special body within which you live and breathe and move. That would be to do violence to both. I am particularly me, precisely with my particular body. In my case, this body is a female body. It is with this female body, in all its special relationships, that I expand beyond myself to become the Body of Christ for others. I love here and now with this particular body, and I love particular others in their bodies. This is how I am able to love all. You cannot love your neighbour without expressing this love and that means loving particular bodies, as I have said in my early letters to Father Abelard: “And even if we show perfect kindness to everyone, we still do not love everyone equally; and what is general for everyone is made particular for certain people.”⁹

Carmel: In your letters I have suggested that you seem to move from a spirituality that focuses on “liberation from desire” to that which values the “liberation of desire”.¹⁰ Doesn’t your rhetoric on desire fly in the face of the tradition of renunciation so richly

⁸ See Letter II: To her lord, or rather father; to her husband, or rather brother; from his handmaid, or rather daughter; from his wife, or rather sister; to Abelard, from Heloise (Domino suo, immo patri; conjugii suo, immo fratri, ancilla sua, immo filia; ipsius uxor, immo soror, Abaelardo Heloysa.) *Ep.* 2, Hicks, 45. (Radice, 47).

⁹ Et nos licet omnibus integram caritatem exhibeamus, non tamen omnes equaliter diligimus, et ita quod omnibus est generale quibusdam efficitur speciale. Letter 25, (Chiavaroli and Mews, 211)

¹⁰ See Moore, *Jesus the Liberator of Desire*, 92.

embedded in Church history? Isn't desire for anything other than God considered a misdirected desire? Shouldn't we renounce all but this desire for God?

Heloise: Certainly, but what exactly is this desire for God? Is it some vague abstract idea or is it something we experience? The fact is, we cannot desire God outside of our embodied experience. That is, after all, how we experience and therefore you cannot simply renounce that experience. Obviously, when one chooses one path in life, we experience the renunciation of other directions in life. However, it seems to me that the first step is to choose the path. There is only one path to choose in Christianity, be that in the form of monasticism, clerical life, other forms of religious life, married life or single life. In choosing, or being brought to the path of monastic life, for example, one obviously renounces the option of married life. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean renouncing the desire to love others for their own sake. There is only the path of Love and this love is love for the sake of the other, not for the self. Love comes first, not renunciation when I desire God, for choosing God is choosing Love alone, is it not? This is what Cassian says when he states: "Then that perfect love of God, by which 'he loved us first,' will have also passed into our heart's disposition . . . This will be the case when every love, every desire, every effort, every undertaking, every thought of ours, everything that we live, that we speak, that we breathe, will be God."¹¹ What he means here, of course, is that every breath we take will be Love. Benedict also insists on love as primary when he says: "Prefer nothing to the love of Christ."¹² Now if this is our desire, how can it be renounced? This would be to renounce Christ. Of course, we all know that we cannot desire to love God without desiring to love our neighbour. You cannot desire God detached from desiring to love others. Indeed, you "find increased strength and readiness to serve God"¹³ in your desires for love in and for others. There is no shame in loving others. This is simply how we experience a desire for God in our embodied reality.

¹¹ "quando illa dei perfecta dilectio, qua prior nos ille dilexit, in nostri quoque transierit cordis affectum . . . Quod ita fiet, cum omnis amor, omne desiderium, omne studium, omnis conatus, omnis cogitatio nostra, omne quod uiuimus quod loquimur, quod spiramus, deus erit." *Conl. X. vii.* SC. 54.81 (Ramsey, 375-6).

¹² "Nihil amori Christi praepone." RB 4:21 (Kardong, 80).

¹³ See "Per ipsum itaque cui te obtulisti Deum te obsecro ut quo modo potes tuam michi presentiam reddas, consolationem uidelicet michi aliquam rescribendo, hoc saltem pacto ut sic recreata divino alacrior vacem obsequio." *Ep. 2*, Hicks, 53 (Radice, 54).

Carmel: This Gospel command to love God and neighbour sounds so simple yet often God seems so distant in ordinary everyday life and so distant in our world, marked as it is by so much conflict, injustice and division. Yet Benedictine life is meant to be a continual seeking after this absent God is it not?

Heloise: Ah yes, but the danger lies in divorcing love of God from love of others. Love, not some abstract idea of love, but love based on “seeing” the other who is different, always different, never the same. The Body of Christ is made up of different bodies, not bodies that are the same. We are male and female, black and white, Jew and Christian, rich and poor, etc. This is how we experience each other – as different. We find God only in relationship to others who are different from us. Spiritual perfection is one not marked by renunciation of the body and its difference, nor by abstraction, but by a unity in difference, rather than a fear of difference. This unity in difference is central to the Christian identity. This is why Benedict says at the end of the Rule: “Let them prefer absolutely nothing to Christ, and may he lead us *all together* to everlasting life.”¹⁴

Just as John says in his first letter: “for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20), I cannot speak of the love of God without speaking of the particular others that I love. Our identity is founded on our relationships as women, with others in all the many and varied expressions that this implies: family, friends, lovers, husbands, religious sisters, children, superiors, etc. For God to be present in your life, others must be present for you to love. Nothing else will make that presence of God a reality in your life: not Rules, not prayers, practices or structures. Thus, the absence and presence of God is contingent on the absence and presence of these other bodies. The absence of God should make you more determined to affect the presence of “others” who are also absent in your life.

¹⁴ “Christo omnino nihil praeponant, qui nos pariter ad vitam aeternam perducat.” RB 72:11-12 (Kardong, 588).

Carmel: Benedict's Rule has proved to be a classic guide to living the Gospel for both men and women through the ages. Doesn't it appear that women seem to be forever compelled to follow the rules as set down by men?

Heloise: Let us be honest here – we are females – not males. There is a difference. And we don't want to be males, do we? Nevertheless, Benedict's Rule simply provides us with a guide to living the Gospel, that is, a guide to finding the freedom to love. I do not follow Benedict, but Christ. This is why discretion is so central to his Rule. Rules are not the touchstone of faith, love is. So let us get this straight. There is nothing sacred in Benedict's Rule other than the fact that it focuses on the Gospel. In this Rule we are asked to be human persons together – that is our task – to find our true humanity, not someone else's. This is the humanity that God entered into after all – our humanity, yours and mine.

Discretion in the Rule of Benedict means that women can listen to the Rule's wisdom. But to listen as women means to listen differently, to listen to our context and find our particular path to love. Benedict's call to listen at the beginning of the Rule is precisely about this discretion. As women, not men, we need to listen “with another ear, as if hearing an ‘other meaning’ always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them.”¹⁵ We need to find women's meaning within these words and this is where Benedict's discretion is so central.

The important thing is not to be deterred by those who do not see your point of view. The point is to continue to love them. And you do not love them by merely acquiescing to their position. That would be to do an injustice to the God within you. The important thing is to love them, while remaining authentic in yourself, true to your own experience, not theirs. Now this is not dogged arrogance. Dogged arrogance would simply ignore the words of the other, throw out Benedict completely. This can never be love. For there to be love between us, our difference must be maintained and, hopefully some day,

¹⁵ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 29.

acknowledged and embraced. This is the community Benedict is calling us to in that “unspeakable sweetness of love.”¹⁶ This is spiritual perfection, not following rules for rules’ sake.

Carmel: And your final word to me?¹⁷

Heloise: As you “”set out on Love’s path with the Gospel as your guide” (See RB Prol. 21),¹⁸ remember that it is “only in ‘speaking as woman’ that women can then ‘speak to men.’”¹⁹ I have been no more than woman in speaking my words and I pray that in my fragile attempts to love, in my need for mercy, justice and forgiveness, I have been no more than Christian. Do this and you too will find a “corner of heaven”²⁰ in which to be satisfied in this life and the next.

¹⁶ “inenarrabili dilectionis dulcedine.” RB Prol. 49 (Kardong, 9).

¹⁷ Since the time of the desert fathers it has been traditional in the monastic culture to ask the wise elder for a “word”. Douglas Burton-Christie notes that “The request for a ‘word’ on the part of the monk, the sometimes gentle, the sometimes sharp, often ironic responses from the elder, the subsequent questions and complaints from the monks – these “conversations” comprise the stuff of the *Sayings*.” See, Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 76.

¹⁸ “Let us set out on his path with the Gospel as our guide” (per ducatum evangelii pergamus itinera eius)

¹⁹ See Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 136. Irigaray reads: “For only in that ‘speaking (as) woman’ can women then ‘speak to men’.”

²⁰ See “In whatever corner of heaven God shall place me, it will be enough for me.” (Quocumque me angulo celi Deus collocet satis michi faciet) *Ep. 4*, Hicks, 69 (Radice, 71).

APPENDICES:

1. The Use of *regula* in Heloise's Letter VI

2. Discretion in Heloise

3. Rule of Benedict and Heloise' Letter VI

4. *Discretio/Discernere* in the Rule of Benedict

5. The Rule of Benedict in Abelard's rule

1. The Use of *regula* in Heloise's Letter VI

(from Hicks):

Line:	29 – <i>regulam</i>	Referring to Abelard instituting a rule for them
	33 – <i>regule</i>	professed under the same rule
	36 – <i>Regulam</i>	Rule of Benedict
	39 – <i>Regule</i>	articles of the Rule
	75 – <i>Regule</i>	tenor of the Rule
	89 – <i>Regule</i>	provisions of the Rule that cannot be observed
	93 – <i>Regula</i>	three readings of the Rule
	115 – <i>regulas</i>	those who laid down rules for monks
	118 – <i>regule</i>	the same yoke of a common rule
	123 – <i>Regula</i>	discretion in Benedict's Rule
	148 – <i>regulam</i>	if Benedict wrote a rule like that for men
	148 – <i>Regule</i>	strictness of the Rule
	154 – <i>Regule</i>	common Rule
	185 – <i>regulam</i>	a general rule for us as for men
	210 – <i>regulam</i>	certain rule – Augustine's rule here
	253 – <i>Regule</i>	tenor of the Rule
	257 – <i>Regulam</i>	they profess a Rule they do not know
	265 – <i>regulas</i>	change or to modify those Rules that were written for men
	268 – <i>Regulam</i>	Rule as the basis for virtuous living
	351 – <i>Regulam</i>	Benedict modifies the Rule concerning meat

* Radice translates line 613, “Tibi nunc, domine, dum vivis, incombis institutere de nobis quid in perpetuum tenendum sit nobis” as “It is for you then, master, while you live, to lay down for us what rule we are to follow for all time”. However, the word *regula* does not appear in the Latin here. The translation could well read: “It is for you then, master, while you live to set down for us what we are to follow for all time.”

2. Discretion in Heloise

Letter VI

Hicks (page/line)	Latin	Radice (page)	English
91/98	omnium virtutum <i>discretio</i> sit mater	96	<i>Discretion</i> is the mother of all the virtues
91/99	Quis aut virtutem	96	(Indirect reference) – this virtue (of <i>discretion</i>)
91/102	Quis autem . . . <i>discretione</i> sejunctum	96	what is contrary to <i>discretion</i>
91/120	Hujus autem <i>discretionis</i> beatus non immemor Benedictus	96	St. Benedict . . . has this <i>discretion</i> in mind
92/134	Haec ergo aliaque testimonia <i>discretionis</i>	97	quoting Benedict RB 64:19
92/152	Quam longe absistat ab omni rationis <i>discretione</i>	97	what is far removed from all <i>discretion</i> of reason (literally)
96/255	<i>indiscrete</i> omnes fere pariter ad monasticam conversionem currentes	100	they all hurry almost equally indiscriminately (<i>indiscreetly</i>) to enter monastic life.
96/266	Cujus quidem <i>discretionis</i> ipse quoque beatus non immemor Benedictus	101	St. Benedict himself was also well aware of this need to discriminate (<i>to be discrete</i>)
99/361	Nichil quippe inter Judeos et Christianos ita separat sicut exteriorum operum et interiorum <i>discretio</i>	104	For nothing so divides Jew and Christian as the distinction (<i>discerning</i>) between outward and inner works
99/363	sola caritas <i>discernat</i>	104	love alone distinguishes (<i>discerns</i>)
104/544	Et tu ipse, obsecro, non solum Christi, verum etiam hujus imitator apostoli <i>discretione</i> sicut et nomine, sic operum precepta moderare ut infirme convenit nature	109	Do you then, also, I beg you, who seek to imitate not only Christ but also this apostle, in discrimination (<i>discernment</i>) as in name, modify your instruction for works to suit our weak nature

3. The Rule of Benedict and Heloise' Letter VI

Rule of Benedict	Subject matter of citation.	Radice (page)
RB 55	Clothing	94
RB 11	Gospel at the liturgy	94
RB 53	Guests at the Abbot's table (hospitality)	95
RB 48	Harvest and work in the fields	95
RB 58	One year novitiate and thrice reading of the Rule	95
RB 64:19	The mother of all virtues	96
RB 37	Care for children and the elderly	96
RB 64: 19	The strong and the weak	96
RB 36	The sick	96
RB 48:9, 24	All in moderation and abbot is to take infirmities into account	96
RB 2, 64	The abbot's accommodation	96-97
RB 35-41, 36	The weak, the elderly, children – the lector, Kitchen server – provision of food and drink	97
? RB 7	Humility	100
RB 73: 1-3 and 8-9	The Rule just a beginning anyway, not to be rigidly adhered to	101
RB 18	Fathers of old were stricter with liturgy	101
RB 40	Wine in concession for weakness	103
RB 39	Meat	103
RB 7	Serving God in humility	108
RB 48	Purpose of manual labour	110
RB 18	Ordering of the Psalms	111
RB 11	Reading the Gospel in the Night Office	111
Pro1 1	Listening to a master's instructions	111

Summary of Chapters of the Rule of Benedict referred to in Heloise's Letter VI:
 RB Pro1.1, 2, 3, 7, 11, 18, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 48, 49, 53, 55, 58, 64, 73

4. *Discretio/Discernere* in the Rule of Benedict

(Citations from Kardong)

2:16 – He [the abbot] must not play favourites in the monastery. (Non ab eo persona in monasterio <i>discernatur</i> .)
2:21 – The only way we count more with God is if we are found superior to others in good works and to be humble. (Solummodo in hac parte apud ipsum <i>discernimur</i> , si meliores ab aliis in operibus bonis et humiles inveniamur.)
63:1 – In the monastery, they should keep to their ranks as established by the time of entry, merit of life or the abbot’s arrangement. (Ordines suos in monasterio ita conservent ut conversationis tempus ut vitae meritum <i>discernit</i> utque abbas constituerit.)
63:5 – In no situation at all shall chronological age have any part in determining or influencing the ordering of the community. (et in omnibus omnino locis aetas non <i>discernat</i> ordines nec praedudicet)
64:18 – He should meditate on the prudence of holy Jacob, who said: If I make my flock walk too far, they will all die in one day (Gen 33:13) (cogitans <i>discretionem</i> sancti Iacob dicantis: Si greges meos plus in ambulando fecero laborare, morientur cuncti una die.)
64:19 – Taking heed of these and other passages that extol discretion, the mother of virtues, he should arrange everything so that the strong are challenged and the feeble are not overwhelmed. (Haec ergo aliaque testimonia <i>discretionis</i> matris virtutum sumens, sic omnia temperet ut sit et fortes quod cupiant et infirmi non refugiant.)
70:6 – So therefore whoever presumes to punish any adult in any way whatsoever without the abbot’s order, or flares up wildly at the children, must undergo the regular discipline. (Nam in fortiori aetate qui presumit aliquatenus sine praecepto abbatis vel in ipsis infantibus sine <i>discretionem</i> exarserit, disciplinae regulari subiaceat.)

Summary: *discretio* – 3 times

discernere – 4 times

5. The Rule of Benedict in Abelard's rule

RB	Radice	Context/Quote
General Reference	130	good practice (of the Rule?)
Prol. 3	132	so that we may not live by our own will
RB 2:3	132	our superior . . . <i>who presides over us in the place of Christ.</i>
Prol. 3	132	<i>renounce one's own will</i>
RB 5	132	let everything be done under obedience
Prol. 2	133	renunciation of his own will
RB 42:1	134	St Benedict provides for this when he says that ' <i>At all times monks ought to practice silence.</i> '
General Reference	142	in accordance with Benedict's Rule
General Reference	146	and through practising the Rule rather than hearing it she [the abbess] she should have learned it and know it well
RB 3:3	147	For, as St. Benedict also remarks, <i>the Lord often reveals what is better to the lesser man.</i>
RB 64:15	152	[The abbot] <i>loved rather than feared</i>
RB 56: 1	153	St. Benedict was greatly concerned about pilgrims and guests and set a table apart for the abbot to entertain them.
RB 36	159	Care of the sick
RB 66:1	162	The Portress: should be discreet in years and mind
RB 31	162	The Cellress
RB 16	164	The practice of Office
RB 8:3	165	Learning the Psalms
RB 42:3	170	Reading of the <i>Conferences</i>
RB 40:6	177	<i>Although we read that wine is never for monks, in our times it is impossible to persuade monks of this</i>
RB 64:19	181	<i>discretion, the mother of all the virtues</i>
RB 39 and 40	185	Benedict on food and drink
RB 40	188	Benedict on food
RB 33 and 34	193-4	Necessity and sufficiency
RB 67	196	Brothers sent outside the monastery
RB 11:9	196	The abbot reads the Gospel at Vigils
RB 19:7	200	<i>Let us sing psalms so that mind and voice may be in harmony</i>
RB 6 and 48:1	202	Idleness and learning
RB 48 and 55	204	Reading and study
RB 6	208	Idle talk
RB Prol. 1	209	<i>ear of the heart</i>

NOTE: Italics indicates a direct quote from RB.

Summary of the chapters from the Rule of Benedict referred to by Abelard:

RB Prol, 2, 3, 5 6, 8, 11, 16, 31, 33, 34, 36, 39, 40, 42, 48, 55, 56, 64, 66, and 67.

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