PROVING WOMAN: FROM HELOISE TO HELOISIAN
AN EXAMINATION OF THE AUTHENTICITY DEBATE SURROUNDING
THE LETTERS OF HELOISE OF THE PARACLETE

by

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A Senior Honors Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The University of Utah
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Honors Degree in Bachelor of Arts

In

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November 2014
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines and resists the tendency for a total subsumption of the identity of Heloise of the Paraclete, the 12th century abbess perhaps best known today for her tempestuous affair with Peter Abelard, within and under his identity. The authenticity debate surrounding the three letters addressed to Abelard from Heloise dated around 1132/1133 erases both the historical woman and her writings. Forgery claims made by scholars from 1975 onward postulate that the letters were forged by either Abelard himself or anonymous male imposters. One the one hand, it is by subsuming the historical woman underneath the created literary fiction of the romantic heroine that anti-feminist scholars are able to argue for forgery. On the other hand, I resist the claims of scholars who wish to reclaim the historical woman for feminist discourse by purporting to reach the “real” inner life of Heloise, a move I view to be epistemologically unsound. Thus, after reviewing the process by which the historical woman came to be crowned *la grande amoureuse* of bourgeois literary imagination, I attempt to replace this problematically positivist conception of objectivity in historical research with a performative account of subject-object relations. This queer performative lens allows the radically affirming feminism of this remarkable 12th century woman to come into view.
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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to feel as a woman feels, to write as a woman writes, and to love as a woman loves? Is this the same as how a woman ought to feel, ought to write, and ought to love? Can a man write like a woman, and vice versa? Have women always been the same and are all women the same, with some essential and transcendent truth crystalized around the female gender, a sisterhood espoused as much by women of the 12th century as the 21st? What is a woman’s love? Does a woman love best when she loves innocently and selflessly? If a woman finds a way to “curb” her nature, does she become then like a man—ought she then be a man? Can a woman fail at being female or feminine? Is femininity reducible to sexuality? In a patriarchy, do men have more say than women on what womanliness is? In our patriarchy, can only a man create the perfect woman? Does feminism allow more truth to be revealed, or merely a different truth? Should feminism affirm desire in any form? Can there be a feminist sexuality? Is the expression of sexuality both an inherent good and a feminist good? Should feminism affirm transgression for its own sake? In a patriarchy, are feminine desire and its expression always transgressive? Is all sexuality queer?

These are some of the questions raised by the figure of Heloise, the 12th century woman who, perhaps beyond all the other and many peculiarities of her life, is characterized by the sheer expansiveness of her figure. In her youth, she was a young woman famed for her learning and mastery of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. As woman whose name will forever become associated with that of Peter Abelard, she was first the student seduced by her teacher, the lover whose name was on the lips of strangers by virtue of his love songs, the wife who caused the public sensation of his castration and
humble, and finally the mother of a curiously named son, Astrolabe. She had an astute and deeply ethical mind, her thinking on philosophical concepts such as consent and intention definitively informing the work of Abelard, one of the most influential intellectuals of the so-called “long 12th century,” or “the renaissance of the 12th century,” which saw the beginning of a new mysticism, and “the great age of women’s theology” (McGinn, *Flowering* 15). As a monastic thinker, religious leader, and theologian, she prompted Abelard for a reformation of the Benedictine Rule specifically for women, and then promptly discarded the more impractical and unreasonable portions of his rambling direction in favor of her own formulations and adaptations, resulting in the Paraclete’s *Institutiones nostrae*. An able manager, model, and teacher, she co-founded a new religious community, sustained it through her thirty-five-year abbacy, saw the founding of six daughter-houses, and formed, with Abelard, a coherent monastic program complete with its own hymns, sermons, and treatises. She is additionally the august abbess praised

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1 This Rule is found in, the famous Troyes 802 manuscript, which contains the only copy of Abelard’s Letter 8 of religious instruction in addition to sixteen brief sections of prescribed usages, most likely by Heloise’s pen. It was owned by Roberto de’ Bardi, a canon of Notre-Dame and chancellor of the University of Paris in the 1340s, who had contact with Petrarch at that time. This copy, one of the earliest we have, was most likely made in the early 14th century, or less likely but potentially in the late 13th century (Smet, Mingroot, and Verbeke 530). For the edited manuscript, see Waddell’s 1987 volume *The Paraclete Statutes “Institutiones Nostrae,”* with detailed notes and comments and interlinear English translations of the Latin.

2 Also an avid and able fundraiser, Heloise’s efforts are recorded in one of the papal letters addressed to her in 1147. She was responsible for acquiring for her community of women “goods and properties ranging in character and value from an annual gift of twenty hens to mills and ovens, tithes, and tolls, and extensive forests, fields, and vineyards scattered through more than sixty villages... [T]hese acquisitions were augmented by further donations during her later years, [which together] remained throughout the medieval centuries a most substantial portion of the Paraclete’s endowment” (McLaughlin 4). All this, furthermore, seems to have been a grassroots effort (to use an anachronistic term), because the Paraclete survived mainly on smaller donations from lower-rank aristocracies and tradespeople, unlike foundations of earlier centuries that relied on lavish grants of popes and kings. Heloise, however, did also manage to secure a royal exemption from customary taxes in 1135 (McLaughlin 12n20). Thus, though Abelard provided the initial land for the founding of the
by Peter the Venerable, commended by Pope Innocent II, and begrudgingly acknowledged by Bernard of Clairvaux, the archenemy of her husband. All this happened during the lifetime of this remarkable woman, and we know all this because she was “one of history’s most expressive writers,” her supple prose still able to find seemingly eternal echoes in us today, some nine hundred years after the fact (Wheeler xvii). Indeed, the paucity of writings by Heloise, be it supposedly personal or otherwise, would seem to stand in direct contrast to these documents’ sheer impact. Though we only have three letters from her addressed to her star-crossed Abelard in the series of eight correspondences and two more documents of monastic direction traditionally attributed to the monastic couple, her words, at least for me, have a far greater ability to stir the imagination than Abelard’s prodigious academic output as well as his letters on spiritual direction put together.3

In death, Heloise and her narrative has proven to be equally capable of traversing unlikely boundaries. Her body, along with that of Abelard’s, went through a series of eight translationes, moving from resting place to resting place over 653 years—exhausting years, surely—before finally being enthroned in the cemetery of Pere-Lachaise in 1817 amid an “English-style garden of sensibility” (Feilla, “Translating” 365—

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Paraclete, Heloise funded the Paraclete. Contrast her efforts, for example, with Abelard’s warnings on the burdens of monastic administration in Letter Eight, in which he also composed his long attempt at a religious rule for women, Institutio seu Regula Sanctimonialium (T. P. McLaughlin).

3 In my essay, I will also follow Muckle’s most recent numbering of the letters, with Abelard’s HC as Letter 1 and Heloise’s letters 2, 3, and 5. This collection does not include the Problemeta Heloissae, which is a series of 42 questions presented as being posed by Heloise and answered by Abelard. A discussion regarding the lack of an urtext of all eight correspondences in Latin and the edited nature of these manuscripts, most likely by Heloise herself after the death of Abelard, will follow.
368; Shepard 29). But the true katabasis of Heloise’s afterlife, as I will argue, would not be physical, but linguistic, literary, and ideological. Indeed, the bodies of Heloise, both physical and representational, would be disappeared so profoundly out of view that, in the last three decades, scholars have literally tried to take from the historical woman her most real and enduring inheritance: not that of her body, but that of her writings. As feminist scholars have contended in the past three decades, the figure of Heloise has undergone an ideological campaign of erasure at the hands of traditionally androcentric scholars whose misogyny, be it conscious or otherwise, is thinly veiled at best in the debate on whether the 12th century abbess could have truly written the letters attributed to her by manuscripts dated from the 14th century onward.

Indeed, as “the one and only person in Europe Abelard tolerated as an intellectual equal or superior,” Heloise is a remarkable woman whose her life, just as her writing, defies easy categorization (Brown and Peiffer 143). This ambiguity and capacity for interpretation, I will argue, is precisely what makes her so irresistible to scholars from a range of ideological perspectives, be it staunch positivism or literary poststructuralism, feminism or downright misogyny. It is between the yawning chasm of these seemingly irreconcilable interpretations—a text so fundamentally feminine, for example, that it is

4 Abelard’s body was buried one more time than that of Heloise’s. When he died in 1142, he was first buried at the Cluniac monastery of Saint Marcel until Peter the Venerable could bring his body, under clandestine conditions, to the Paraclete several months later. Heloise was buried next to him when she died in 1164 (Feilla, “Translating” 365). Peter the Venerable’s remarkable comment on a seemingly physical union of Heloise with Abelard in Heaven will be noted later in my essay. On the topic of the translationes of the bodies, it is further interesting to note that the seventh “burial” of the bodies of Heloise and Abelard were not really an official resting place in that they were kept at the private residence of Alexandre Lenoir, the founder of the Musée des Monuments Français, until the collector of curiosities transferred them to the museum in 1807 and finally to his masterpiece of bourgeois architecture at Père-Lachaise in 1817. Lenoir apparently gave out pieces of the pair’s remains to his friends as keepsakes, which travel far indeed as pieces from Heloise’s femur and tibia were apparently found in Hanoi (Charrier cited in Feilla, “Translating” 377n23).
impossible for a woman to have authored it, or one so fundamentally feminist that it has wrought centuries of patriarchal repression, both literal and literary?—it is from these differences that emerges a fundamentally queer Heloise. Our Heloise—Heloise as we have her today—is a figure difficult to “pin down” from a variety of perspectives. Our Heloise, emerging from 900 years of distorting and disorienting hagiography, is strange, porous, and “slippery”: queer in the sense of being between definitions, defiant to definitions, and demanding of new definitions. Indeed, even for scholars who want to claim Heloise as a proto-feminist, she resists easy categorization. This queerness, I will argue, even as the Heloisian figure has been appropriated into the realm of masculinist and masculinizing regulative fiction, is one of the major reasons I find Heloise to be so interesting.

Finally, another aspect of Heloise’s importance rises from her historical position on the cusp of the beginning of a great love tradition in female Christian writings. In the framework of the 12th century, Heloise fits into the flourishing of an age of monastic humanism that “enabled the fullest flowering of women’s Latinate culture,” yielding, by the end of the century, a model of the female author as “vernacular mystic and prophet” (Newman, “Liminalities” 354). At the advent and as a catalyst of what Bernard McGinn identifies as “the great age of women’s theology,” I believe in accordance with feminist medieval scholar Barbara Newman that the Heloisian canon can be fruitfully interpreted through framework of the love mysticism tradition that will rise up in her wake in Europe (McGinn, Flowering 15)

If the list of questions I believe to be raised by the figure of Heloise above does not reveal fully my own theoretical and ideological alliances, I will make myself clear
here in the beginning: starting from a feminist perspective, my goal in this essay is to propose a new way of approaching the Heloisian canon, which includes, in the historical realm, 1) the historical woman, 2) her writings, and, in the realm of literary fiction, 3) the created posthumous image of Heloise, and 4) texts of the image, the last of which are the results of 900 years’ worth of commentary that has built up around her, constituting a veritable hagiography. I will engage with past scholarship in order to address the paradox of Heloise, at once romantic heroine and austere abbess, attracting admirers from seemingly opposing ideological spectrums, be it feminists who see in Heloise an anachronistic proto-feminism, or traditional and (perhaps unconsciously) patriarchal scholars who argue that a woman could not have written the correspondence that we find attributed to Heloise from 14th century manuscripts. This second group of scholars propose instead that these letters are forgeries, either written by Abelard himself to construct a narrative of exemplary Christian conversion, or by some later forgers who wished to attribute these sensational words to the monastic couple either to ridicule them, or merely to portray them in the light in which the forger(s) wished posterity to see Heloise and Abelard. While it is certainly a possibility that the manuscripts are indeed forged, manipulated, incomplete, or merely not perfect copies of the historical personal correspondences of Heloise and Abelard as they sent them, the importance of these epistolary creations from Heloise has now moved, I believe, from being reflective only of their historical context to the larger, historiographical issue of how the historical figures’ afterlives, their katabasis through literary, linguistic, philosophical translations, mark the evolution (or lack thereof, in the case of misogynist commentary) of our ideologies as we continue to comment upon them.
Despite a long history of being admired and dissected, and the many katabasis through interpretation and reinvention, there is little consensus of how to read the life of Heloise. Particularly vexing to me is the impasse preventing feminist scholars like Newman from being able to definitively declare Heloise’s letter as authentic and therefore worthy of critical feminist attention. Thus, my argument in this project takes impetus from this impasse, this “long-standing controversy over the letters, which has become a kind of institution in medieval studies [and] has brought many historians to a point of settled agnosticism” (Newman, “Authority” 131). To augment and nudge forward a second-wave feminist approach such as Newman’s, I make the argument to read Heloise, whose revolutionary soul seems too liberated, too impassioned, and too modern for her own times, through the lens of queer performativity, which offers that regulative fiction such as the romantic and fragmented posthumous image of the 12th century abbess is an imitation without an original, and the very act of performing the imitation is constitutive of reference on which the imitation of based. This performative account of subject-object relations, I argue, is a much more theoretically sound and practically productive lens with which to approach the Heloisian canon, which includes the four levels of the historical woman, her writings, the posthumous and fictive images of the historical woman, as well as the texts of the image, the commentary and scholarship that has accrued around the entire edifice.

To frame my argument, I will first frame the impasse as presented in John Marenbon’s article “Authenticity Revisited,” one of the latest pieces of major scholarship to try, once again, to put to an end the question of whether or not Heloise wrote her own letters once and for all, yet thereby demonstrating modern scholars’ inability to prove the
matter definitely one way or another. Then, in the second section of this essay, I will provide an account of the basic structure of Heloise’s life, and two facts regarding this life that I believe to have not received enough critical attention from scholars—namely that Heloise was likely much older than popular tradition would allow, being in her mid-to late-twenties at the time of her affair with Abelard and that, despite this brief affair, the majority of Heloise’s life was spent in religious communities, a continuous tenure that was not altered by the tumultuous events surrounding Heloise’s official entry into religion. This second fact should dissuade scholars from approaching the ethos of Heloise’s life as being one of moral and religious conversion. In this section, I will also give an account of the process of *translationes* that Heloise undergoes, from the historical woman into “the Heloisian,” and of the permutations of this Heloisian figure through many literary *katabasis* that most certainly shape how contemporary scholars approach the study of this remarkable woman.

In the third portion of this essay, I will give a full account of my rejection of the feminist commitment to a problematically positivist conception of objectivity in historical research, which I further divide into the reading of Heloise and the Heloisian with the goal of carry out both “objectivity in fact” and “objectivity in theory.” I propose to augment these theoretically unsound utilizations of the concept of objectivity in the debate surrounding both the authenticity question of Heloise’s letters and how to interpret the historical woman and her texts with a performative understanding of subject-object relation rooted in feminist successor science philosophy and poststructural standpoint feminism. On this basis, I suggest possibilities for further research on both Heloise and the Heloisian in the fourth and final section.
In the chapter titled "Authenticity Revisited" from the volume *Listening To Heloise* edited by Bonnie Wheeler from 2000, historian of philosophy John Marenbon attempts to put the final nail in the coffin, so to speak, in the controversy surrounding the correspondence of Abelard and Heloise. Marenbon belongs to the growing group that, supported by historical evidence, affirms Heloise’s authorship of the letters bearing her name that began to circulate in pieces in the 13th and 14th centuries. Furthermore, Marenbon sees his explicitly positivist project, defined by “scholarly neutrality,” as one that will demand agreement from any scholar who respected the force of evidence and argument (30). Interestingly, he also sees his project as ideologically neutral and in contrast with the recent flood of feminist scholars publishing on Heloise because their scholarship sought to “promote the cause of feminism through their work” by locating the remarkable twelfth century abbess and her work in a distinctly modern light (Marenbon 31). Implicit in this claim is Marenbon’s belief that his project, unlike the majority of scholars before him, is ideologically neutral in that its central ideology is positivism. This assumption of neutrality, the possibility of which literary historian Peter von Moos believes is merely a facade, is further demonstrated by Marenbon’s proposal for moving beyond the impasse regarding the authenticity of the letters of Heloise in particular, which in no small part is due to a lack of conclusive facts in the affirmative. On the other hand, no evidence also exists to overthrow the hypothesis of fraud once and for all either. Marenbon proposes to divide the existing scholarship on the authenticity issue along the line of those that respect evidence and those that do not, as opposed to along the “the more obvious division of the upholders and deniers” of authenticity (21). The very fact,
however, that these two categories do not align demonstrates to Marenbon that too many scholars have been blinded by their biased approaches to Heloise while, to me, it shows that the concept of objectivity is not a helpful one in the interpretation of a figure as complex and as “queer” as Heloise.

Thus, it is ironic that Marenbon, who published a reassessment of the thinking of Abelard by mapping his ideas in their intellectual and theological contexts a year before he penned this article on the authenticity of Heloise’s letters, also frames his arguments here in terms of a continuation of the call of von Moos, who, in 1974, urged medieval scholars to produce research that is more critically reflexive in being ideologically and philosophy self-aware with his seminal Mittelalterforschung und Ideologiekritik, Der Gelehrtenstreit um Héloïse, an unusual survey of 150 years’ worth of scholarship concerning the authenticity debate. In this work, von Moos reviews the landscape of the scholarship after making clear that he is not interested in entering into the debate himself, though, perhaps also ironically, he will go on to take the position in favor of forgery after the most recent and influential round of accusation of literary fraud was initiated in the 1970s by John F. Benton, whose work will be examined in the section following an overview of the historical Heloise and her afterlife in scholarly and literary hagiography. More important for von Moos, however, is his assertion of the larger point regarding the lack of theoretical self-awareness of scholars of the medieval period and of history in general.

Marenbon’s claim that his latest contribution to the authenticity debate “continues the task von Moos began,” and that “[he], too, hope[s] that a general moral emerges from [his] particular observations, although not the same moral as [von Moos’]” struck me on
two levels. On the more immediate level, as I have begun to illustrate above, though he
claims intellectual heredity from von Moos, Marenbon in fact undertakes an explicitly
positivist and staunchly modernist project with a philosophy that runs exactly counter to
von Moos’ postmodern approach. Von Moos is able to astutely point out that the kind of
cold, ahistorical, unified, and independent “objectivity” that has become the holy grail of
some scholars, instead of being some eternal and transcendental standard by which any
and all human phenomena can and should be judged, is indeed just another kind of
situated ideology. Von Moos’ call, in line with developments in the philosophy of social
science also in the past four decades, is informed by poststructural critique in general and,
more specifically, by post-positivist philosophers such as those who call for a “feminist
successor science” to positivism in light of the shattering of the Enlightenment dream of
objectivity. His proposal, however, is also sensibly moderated by von Moos’ pragmatic
recognition that, while there is no “purely objective, ideological standpoint” possible,
however conscientious the scholarship, historians should nevertheless “scrutinize their
own and others’ acknowledge or concealed ideologies” (quoted in Marenbon 19). Thus,
while von Moos goes back to that veritable institution of medieval scholarship—that of
the authorship of the twelfth-century correspondences attributed to Heloise and
Abelard—to make his point regarding the need for historians to be critically self-aware,
Marenbon also goes back to the same source in order to advance his own seemingly
theoretically opposed project.

On a grander scale, this misuse on Marenbon’s part of von Moos’ reading of
Heloise seems clearly to me to be only the latest manifestation of the critique’s difficulty
in dealing with the Heloisian figure’s queerness. Though I will go on to make the case
that there is, in fact, no way to read Heloise that is not queer, the queerness I refer to here hinges on a sense of strangeness—Heloise’s resistance of easy categorization, and the ambiguity and permeability of her narrative, which in turn allows her to be upheld as the exemplum of seemingly opposing arguments. In my reading, I will develop a queerly feminist lens through which I can address both the factual and ideological impasse that the authenticity debate surround the Heloisian letters has reached. I, like Marenbon, affirm the historical authenticity of the letters of Heloise and argue for a resolution to the matter, but from an entirely opposing ideology. For Marenbon, those who respect the burdens of argument and evidence are obligated to agree with his conclusion, that the letters of Heloise are conclusively authored by Heloise, on objective grounds. While I agree with Marenbon in that I believe existing evidence strongly suggests that Heloise both was capable of and indeed did author the letters bearing her name, I reject the positivist lens with which he frames the solution to this impasse in the authenticity debate and instead I approach this deadlock through the following three tenets.

First, I argue that forgery proponents’ insistence on questioning Heloise’s authorship of her own letters despite a total lack of textual and historical evidence demonstrates either an inexcusable a lack of awareness of the afterlife of the letters and figures of the historical Heloise, or an unconscious refusal to acknowledge the demarcations that theoretically separate the historical woman and her texts from the re-imaginations and interpretations of the woman and her text. In particular, those who doubt authenticity seem to ignore the almost immediate elevation of Heloise in the 13th century into the realm of literary fiction, which dramatizes one side of her story, that of la grande amoureuse, at the cost of complete obfuscation of any other aspect of this
woman’s incredibly full and complex life. This tradition of obfuscation and erasure had its seeds in Abelard’s own portrayal of Heloise in his *Historia Calamitatum*, which cannot be read as a simple autobiography, and began to quickly ramify in Heloise’s mythology with Jean de Meun’s *Le Roman de la Rose*.

Second, I agree with Marenbon that there is actually no textual or historical evidence that unequivocally proves forgery, and existing evidence strongly suggests authenticity. The crux of the impasse beyond which this authenticity debate cannot move, however, is twofold: the commitment to both “objectivity in fact” and “objectivity in theory,” both of which, I propose, is impossible. The effort to reach historical objectivity—objectivity in fact—is frustrated by the lack of proof that positively and definitively affirms the letters as Heloise’s, and the theoretical commitment to a positivist conception of objectivity—in theory—is, I believe, impossible and not useful in humanistic and historical research. Thus, while doubts regarding the authenticity of the letters persist under the guise of objectivity, they seem mostly to arise not from factual arguments, but instead from ideological undertakings of the sort against which von Moos warns: the unchallenged acceptance of the utility of objectivity in assuming to make interpretations of what the texts and their alleged author(s), be it Abelard or some third-party forger(s), were “actually saying.” This approach of the naive reader assumes it is possible to reach below the surface of the word as we have them today in order to get at the “real” meaning behind these texts, a position that is hardly tenable in light of previous developments in literary theory, such as the publication of Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” in 1967/1968.
And finally, I propose to move beyond the current impasse in the authenticity debate by fully rejecting the positivist dream of objectivity. By following to logical conclusion this poststructural and feminist critique, I read the Heloisian figure as regulative fiction and as a queer effect constantly in process and (re)constituted by the performative and reciprocal relationship between it as an object and the reader as a subject, and vice versa.

An examination of Heloise’s katabasis in myth and popular imagination, as I will argue, is a 900-year old and ongoing process in which the figure of a woman queered by her varied and many interpreters, imposing onto her worldviews specific to particular times and places of the interpreter rather than of the historical person. This continual evolution, perhaps most surprisingly, also produces a series of readings by medieval scholars that are unconsciously very queer indeed. Thus, to arrive at my reading, it is first important to understand what we know of the historical woman, and how we have come to know her through the eyes of both her admirers and detractors.

THE HISTORICAL HELOISE

The historical Heloise and Abelard met between 1116 and 1117, she a brilliant young woman famed for her exceptional learning and he the young dialectician and teacher who had already outshone both William of Champeaux and then Anselm of Laon by the time he went to Paris to take a coveted teaching position at the cathedral school of Notre-Dame in late 1113. The basic facts of Abelard’s early life and his encounter with Heloise are both fairly well-established through records, cross-references in secondary letters and writings, and his own *Historia calamitatum*, the authenticity of which is
largely considered beyond reproach by scholars. In the Historia, Abelard gives an episodic account of his life, from birth to his disastrous abbacy at Saint-Gildas during the composition of this document in 1131/1132, as modeled on a narrative of "sacred history, according to the contemporary idea of typology" (Bagge 327, 330). Even though it is incompatible with the modern genre of autobiography, but rather belongs to the medieval genre of a letter of consolation, where specific elements of suffering are emphasized in order to fashion a parable of sin and salvation out of his personal history, the Historia nevertheless serves as one of the major sources for the historical lives of Abelard and Heloise.

Born in 1079, Abelard was encouraged by his father to become educated rather than learn the family trade of warring. On even this early juncture in this life, Abelard frames his story in a mythical, though admitted pagan, fashion: "I fell so deeply in love with learning that I renounced the pomp of knighthood... and quit the court of Mars to be

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5 The only person who has objected to the authenticity of the Historia calamitatum has been John F. Benton, first at an international conference in 1972 and then in a series of publications proposing that a forger or multiple forgers first composed the Historia in the twelfth century and then the letters bearing Heloise’s name in the 13th century (Benton, “Fraud” 479-480; Benton and Ercoli “Style”). In 1972, he proposed that “the whole correspondence was the collaborative effort of two thirteenth century forgers, who eased their burden by incorporating the work of a third forger who had written the Historia Calamitatum a century earlier” (Newman, “Authority” 123). While Benton is neither the first nor the only scholar to question the Heloisian letters’ authenticity, he is certainly one of the worst offenders in terms of misogynist and essentialist commentary on the authorial figure of Heloise. By eliminating even Letter 1/Historia, however, he seemed to be cutting both Abelard and Heloise “down to size and mak[ing] them more like other monks and nuns of their time” (Radice 61). He is emblematic of the contemporary reader who so wants to historicize away anything outstanding—that is, queer—about both Abelard and Heloise, but the woman in particular, so much so that he must grind away at the entire narrative with the blunt tool of inauthenticity. By 1980, however, Benton withdrew his own hypothesis on part of Abelard’s writing being fraudulent (though this view will find two more champions in Hubert Silvestre and Deborah Fraioli), but nevertheless remained patronizingly agnostic about Heloise’s authorship (Benton “Reconsideration”).
raised at the bosom of Minerva” (2). This moralistic arch will carry through the entire text of the *Historia*, which can be more correctly understood as a publicity piece meant to restore his reputation in the eyes of public institutions like the nascent university system. This confession, written after the first of his two excommunications at the Council of Soissons, where his *Theology* was condemned and burned, is crafted to present a repentant Abelard, now humbled and ready to return to the privilege of public teaching.

His efforts were apparently successful, since, following the composition and circulation of this letter in 1132, Abelard was able to return to Paris for the final time in his life around 1135 to Paris, where he taught and wrote until the Council of Sens in 1140/1141, when Bernard of Clairvaux would launch a ferocious campaign that led to Innocent II’s censure of Abelard as a heretic and his sentencing to “perpetual silence” (Levitan xii).

Thus, in this document, Abelard is not interested in giving a fair portrayal of his affair with his former lover and now wife. His affair with Heloise is framed in a negative and trivializing light, as “merely” another calamity in his string of calamities, which, though momentous and momentarily devastating, had meaning only as a vehicle to bring about the workings of divine providence. The whole arc of this document constitutes a moralistic parable, in which divine grace has saved him from temptation and pride by

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6 Though I have partially performed my own translations, all English quotations from the works of Heloise and Abelard will be taken from William Levitan’s 2007 rendition, *Abelard & Heloise: The Letters and Other Writings*, for its poetic yet precise rendering of Heloise’s words in particular. Levitan works from J. T. Muckle’s excellent Latin editions of the *Historia calamitatum* and the second (Heloise’s first reply to the *Historia*) through seventh (Abelard’s discourse on the origin and authority of religious women) letters, and then T. P. McLaughlin’s edition of the eight letter (Abelard’s final and long letter of religious rule for nuns at the Paraclete).

means of humiliation and disgrace, and has led him into the light of Godly humility and repentance.

Furthermore, the genre of the parable of sin and consolation—the wretched soul’s consolation in the goodness of God, and the consolation of the reader in the calamities of the wretched soul—is one that trades in generalities instead of specifics. Thus, before we return to the historical lives of our to-be lovers, I believe it is important to point out that one can safely ignore those moments in which Abelard pretends to speak for Heloise’s psychology, and instead attempt to get at what facts we know about the life trajectory of the historical Heloise and Abelard through this valuable document. Despite its unreliability, however, the *Historia Calamitatum*, beyond being simply one of the main historical documents that record a portion of Heloise’s life, is also the lens through which the supposed inner workings during one of the defining moments of her life, that of her affair with Abelard, has been continually filtered.

At the onset of his “calamity” via the *deus ex machina* that is Heloise, the third in a string of seven told in the *Historia*, Abelard is 36, at the height of his fame, and, according to his own description, confident to the point of arrogance before he is brought to divine grace by means of his extreme humiliation at the hands of Fulbert’s men. While it is important to take Abelard’s words from the *Historia* with a grain of salt when it comes to his descriptions of Heloise, the difficulties that result from Abelard’s trying deportment is backed up by both the writings of his peers and the very real results of the former teachers who turned sharply against Abelard.8 After being informed of his early

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8 St. Bernard of Clairvaux, of course, is famously Abelard’s greatest enemy. Otto of Freising, another Cistercian, considered Abelard “arrogant” and “almost stupid”: “Petrus literarum studiis alisque facetis ab ineunte aetate deditus fuit: sed tam arrogans, suoque tantum ingenio confidens, ut vix ad audiendos magistros ab altitudine mentis suae humilias
life of peripatetic learning in the *Historia*, for example, we learn of Abelard’s self-
described mental prowess, which he had considered “beyond [his] years,” and how his
“reputation in dialectic” grew to “eclips[e] the fame of all [his] old schoolmates and even
[his] master [William of Champeaux] himself” (3). When William’s hostility toward
Abelard came to a head, the still young logician struck out on his own by setting up his
own school, first at Melun, and then at Corbeil, where Abelard could better compete with
his first master for students. When Abelard almost succeeded in obtaining the coveted
position of master at the cathedral of Notre Dame around 1110, it was William’s work
behind the scenes that prevented Abelard’s wish from coming true. His second teacher
was Anselm of Laon, described by Abelard as “[an] old man who... had bought himself a
reputation more by long practice than by any capacity for learning or thought” (7). When
this teacher also turned against him, first forbidding him from teaching on certain topics
and then expelling him in 1113, Abelard returned to Paris from the northern city of Laon,
when he was finally granted the position of master of the schools at Notre-Dame.9 This
time, Abelard’s sojourn in Paris finally furnished him with the opportunity to contract
with the canon Fulbert to teach his niece Heloise.

descenderet”; “Ad alia negootia pene stolidourm ferax” (in Gesta Frederici Seu Rectius
Cronica, ed. G. Waiz, B. Simon, and F.-J. Schmale, 68-69 and 224). Roscelin of Compiègne,
another teacher jilted by Abelard, wrote to his former student that he was upset by Abelard’s
betrayal and ingratitude: “beneficiorum, quae tibi tot et tanta a puero usque ad juvenem sub
magistri nomine et actu exhibui, oblitos in verba malitiae meam adversus innocentiam adeo
prorupisses, ut fraternal pacem lingue gladio vulnerares” (Der Nominalismus in der
Frühscholastik, ed. Reiners 63). In the same letter, Roscelin accuses Abelard of not even
having mastered scripture (this was after Abelard’s entry into religion), describes his
castration as divine retribution, calls him a “quasi-monk” for teaching barbarians (“congregate
barbarorum multitudo”), and alleges that Abelard patronizes a prostitute, which could be a
reference to Heloise (ibid., 68, 78-80, cited in Luscombe’s Letter Collection 52).
9 Two of Anselm of Laon’s students, Alberic of Rheims and Lotulf of Lombardy, would go on to
charge Abelard of heresy at the Council of Soissons in 1121, when Abelard was forced to burn
his Theologia with his own hands (Radice 14).
Part of Heloise's mystique and malleability as a figure comes from our lack of definitive information on her. Even with all the resources we have on the historical life of Heloise combined, which includes church records, municipal archives, and letters by contemporaries that attest to facts of her life in addition to the Historia, we know very little about her background and early life beyond the fact that she was born near Paris and educated at the royal Abbey of Ste.-Marie, Argenteuil until she moved to board with her uncle Fulbert at the cathedral cloister of Notre-Dame around 1113/1114, when Abelard returned there to teach as master. It is while at Paris that Abelard was contracted by Fulbert to privately tutor Heloise outside of the official sanction of a cathedral school. Heloise's education before Abelard is thought to have consisted of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew languages and classical literature, the influence of which could be seen in the distinct humanism in her later correspondence and thinking, in additional to scriptural studies (Calabrese 3). Remarkably, the kind of education Heloise received, both from and before Abelard, would be all but regulated out of women's reach less than five decades after Heloise's death, during the formation of the modern Western university system. Indeed, the course of study that made Heloise so well-known, considered comparable to the university curriculum established by the early 13th century, will be denied women until "the modern moment" (Wheeler xvii).

Here, two facts are important to note about Heloise despite the paucity of historical records of her early life. First, the historical Heloise is most likely much older than the teenage ingénue of popular and romantic imagination. While Heloise's intellectual prowess is evidenced by her fame, which Abelard points out as being "supreme" and having "made her famous throughout the whole kingdom of France" in
his Historia, her emotional maturity at the time of the affair and at the time of composition of the letters attributed to her can be key to understanding her actions as a cohesive whole (11). Traditional/anti-feminist scholarship from the past three decades has made much hay out of the fact that, if the author grants that Heloise did write her own letters, she must have written these passionately embodied words because she did not know or respect the gravitas of her position as abbess, seeing as how the woman that comes through the letters was “still young, to be sure” (Gilson 88). And if the scholar does question Heloise’s authorship, they have done so based on the image of “little Heloise,” who could not have possibly penned these complex and deeply human sentiments (Robertson 51).10 Constant Mews notes that “[t]he tradition that she was born in 1100, and thus was only a teenager when she met Abelard, is a pious fabrication from the 17th century, without any firm foundation” (Abelard 59). Indeed, when we imagine a woman in her early to mid-forties writing passionately and affirmatively of an affair that she chose to have in her mid to late-twenties, the image thus engendered is vastly different from that of the teenage coquette with no self-determination—the Heloise of bourgeois, Romantic fantasy. And when we appraise Abelard’s vocabulary in reference to Heloise’s age against another historical source, that of the letters of the Cluniac monk Peter the Venerable, we can see that the infantilization of the figure of Heloise begins early and by the hand of Abelard himself.

10 Most misogynist scholarship in the authenticity debate, of course, make the argument that Heloise did not write the letters bearing her name. One particularly hilarious example is cited by Barbara Newman in her analysis of how this wave of misogynist scholarship is actually a continuation and doubling-down of the anti-woman repression of Heloise begun by Abelard himself: “In a display of stunning inconsistency, [D. W. Robertson] manages to deny that ‘little Heloise’ actually said anything like what Abelard records, and at the same time to ridicule her for saying it” (“Authority” 125-126).
Peter the Venerable, the famed abbot of Cluny, whose fulsome praise of Heloise proved too jarring to be reconciled with the so-called “sensual creature” of her first two “personal letters” for scholars such as Benton, corresponded with Heloise in 1143/1144 following the death of Abelard. In the first letter, he recalls the abbess’ fame even in his youth (“very young—still too young to be considered a young man”) by referring to her as a “woman, who... devoted all her energies to literature and the pursuit of secular wisdom” (emphasis mine, Levitan trans. 265-266; Latin text referenced in footnote). Peter the Venerable’s birth is dated to be around 1092 or 1094, and his particular word choice here makes it evident that he knew Heloise to be at least somewhat older. This would put the date of Heloise’s birth to be at least 1090/1091, if not earlier. Further, Levitan notes that, the time period that Peter the Venerable recalls in his letter here, when Heloise’s renown is already so pronounced, should be about “1115 or a year or two before Heloise’s affair with Abelard began,” and, for her name to have travelled to the ear of the respected abbot of Cluny when he was just beginning his tenure as prior at Vézelay in Burgundy, over 100 miles from Paris, Heloise’s “fame must have been widespread, indeed” (265).

Contrast this with Abelard’s description of Heloise. In the Historia, he describes Heloise using specifically the word that Peter the Venerable uses to contrast against Heloise to describe her age. While Peter the Venerable contrasts the womanhood of Heloise against his own youth and adolescence, Abelard, describing Heloise and her fame

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11 “Necdum plene metas adolescentiae excesseram, necdum in iuueniles annos euaseram, quano nomen non quidem adhuc religionis tuae, sed honestorum tamen et laudabilium studiorum tuorum, michi fama innotuit. Audiebam tuum temporis, mulierem licet necdum saeculi nexibum expeditam, litteratariae scientiae quod perrarum est, et studio licet saecularis sapientiae, summam operam dare, nec mundi uoluptatis nugis, uel delicios, ab hoc utili discendarum atrium proposito retrahi posse” (Peter the Venerable, “Letter 115” 303).
in the same time frame before their affair began, labels his soon-to-be lover an
“adolescent” and a “young girl.”

At the same time, it is important to note that the *adulenscentulus/adulenscentula*, like most other terms indicating age from the Middle Ages, “had no fixed meaning” and has been used to indicate ages ranging from eight to 36 (Dachowski 52n106). In fact, Abelard uses this term to refer to himself when he had just begun to teach on his own at Melun sometime between 1102 and 1105, when he was between 23 and 26 years old. Thus, while the usage of this term does not directly prove any intentions or underlying psychology about Abelard’s word choice, my point here is simply twofold: first, that Peter the Venerable, who, unlike Abelard, has no reason to play games with his handling of Heloise’s age, consciously elects to use a term that provides a strong contrast against Abelard’s word choice. Second, and more importantly, this way of placing Heloise, without any additional corroborating historical evidence, had led most modern scholars to pinpoint Heloise’s age at about 17 or 18 at the time of their liaison. Incredibly, even as critics have raced to claim Heloise as a twelfth century proto-feminist, the vast majority of modern authorities on every aspect of the story of our lovers, from Betty Radice, writing in 1974 to mark Heloise’s “keen critical intelligence,” to Mary Martin McLaughlin and Bonnie Wheeler, whose explicit goal in their 2009 translation was to “restore” Heloise as a “woman... [who] acted according to her own judgment,” still

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12 “Erat quipped in ipsa civitate Parisi adulescentula quedam nomine Heloysa, neptis canonici cujusdam qui Fulbertus vocabatur... Tanto autem facilius hanc michi puellam consensuram credidi, quanto amplius eam litterarum scientiam et habere et diligere noveram... In hujus itaque adulescentule amorem totus inflamatus...” (Peter Abelard, “Abaelardi ad Amicum Suum Consolatoria” in Hicks 10).

13 “Factum tandem est ut, supra vires etatis de ingenio meo presumens, ad scolarum regimem adulescentulus aspirarem, et locum in quo id agerem providerem, insigne videlicet tunc temporis Meliduni castrum et sedem regiam” (Abelard, “Abaelardi” in Hicks, 4).
follow Abelard’s lead in infantilizing Heloise by dating her birth to around 1101 (Radice 55; McLaughlin and Wheeler 2).\(^\text{14}\) In fact, language referencing the above-cited passage from the *Historia* naming Heloise an *adolescentula* has been directly employed by contemporary scholars as direct and unquestioned evidence that she must have been “about seventeen” during the affair (Radice 16). So far, only Constant Mews, the Australian scholar who has been publishing specialty research on both Abelard and Heloise for over twenty years, and William Levitan, one of the pair’s most recent translators, places Heloise’s age according to Peter the Venerable’s suggestion. I choose to follow their lead in my interpretation.

Heloise’s age and maturity at the time of the affair are key to understanding her figure as a whole. The primary fact of Heloise’s factual age at the time when she made the decision to become involved with Abelard does much to dispel the myth of the wide-eyed ingénue portrayed in the *Historia*, powerless to resist Abelard’s calculations to seduce her both physically and intellectually. Should one presume to accept the arguments both for the authenticity of Heloise’s authorship, and, near the end of her life, her deliberate collecting and editing of her own writings, which includes some of her correspondences with Abelard, her age the time of composition of her famed letters to Abelard and when she carefully curated her own legacy should be even more powerful affirmations of the figure of Heloise as a figure worthy of contemporary and especially feminist consideration. This maturity forms a stark contrast with the image of the frivolous coquette solidified in the coming centuries as layers upon layers of popular imagination accrued on top of the fact of the historical woman. The image of the ingénue,

\(^\text{14}\) Some prominent examples of this downplaying Heloise’s maturity include: Gilson (37), Radice (16), Kauffman (64), Wheeler (xi), McLaughlin and Wheeler (xi), and Hicks (xi).
which, as I will demonstrate below, is an invention that begins in the 17th century and peaks with the Romantic imagination of the 18th, and not only does this image enable Heloise’s agency to be subsumed within and under Abelard’s seemingly overpowering will and power in the authenticity debate. Most perniciously, however, the split between the historical woman and the mythic ingénue, naively selfless in love, also elevates the Heloisian figure to the realm of regulative fiction, a patriarchal fabrication by which the actions and inner beings of young women are controlled and standardized in the same way that gender, in Judith Butler’s queer thought, is a performative “fiction” of regulation. The signifier that names Heloise, so far removed from the historical woman, maps onto the concept of fiction both the sense of the intensely literary nature of the legacy of the historical Heloise, and, more importantly, of the Heloisian figure being created and “not real,” an effect created by copies without an original.

The second aspect we should note as we approach the historical woman, I believe, is that Heloise spent the majority of her life before her brief affair with Abelard in lay religious life, and her unusually comprehensive education was mostly likely aimed at eventually securing a high position within monastic life, a calculation on Fulbert’s part to provide for both her intellectual needs then in her youth and practical needs later on in her life (Mews, *Abelard* 59). Despite Heloise’s protestations in her letters to Abelard that she only took the veil to follow Abelard’s command and without any sense of profession, the fact of her life is that, despite the brief interruption of their admittedly turbulent affair, the majority of Heloise’s life has been spent in the religious community, both before and after her official entry into religion. Thus, it would seem that, though commentators are used to defining the arc of Heloise’s story as one of exemplary conversion, in which
Abelard’s powers in spiritual direction stopped Heloise’s flood of worldly passions and molded her into the respected abbess that she would become, it would seem that it is indeed Abelard's life that took the more drastic turn when he became a monk at St. Denis following his castration. While Abelard frames his life story of one of grace through divine providence and spiritual growth into harmony with the will of God, it is he who had no sense of religious calling before his dalliance with Heloise, not the other way around. Even after Abelard’s entry into religious life, it took many years for him to come to terms with his new disposition in life, quarrelling first with the fellow monks at Saint-Denis, the first abbey he entered after his profession, then being charged with heresy at the Council of Soissons in 1121, and finally fleeing for his life from the murderous Celtic monks—“far more savage than pagans”—at St. Gildas of Rhuys, where he became abbot and all but incited mutiny with his efforts to reform his unwilling charges, before chance united him and Heloise once again, who, as prioress, was expelled with her community of women from the abbey at Argenteuil in 1129 (Levitan 36).

Indeed, though twentieth century scholars have tended to see the overarching theme of the story of Heloise and Abelard as one of her conversion, Abelard himself actually describes his spiritual conversion and salvation in the Historia while mentioning no inner change on the part of Heloise. This would support feminist readings that relies on the sense of conviction and integrity of feeling—the sense that she did not capitulate so thoroughly and finally to Abelard by her pivot to final and eternal silence on the subject of their love in her third and last known letter to Abelard—that is central to Heloise’s feminist core. Contemporary feminist scholars are even noting the fact that,

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15 Abelard was so intensely disliked by his charges at the Breton St. Gildas that, evidently, they repeatedly tried to poison him during his years as their abbot (Levitan 44). This hostility, in turn, drove Abelard’s more frequent visits to the Paraclete as confessor and spiritual counselor.
when the eight letters between Heloise and Abelard “are viewed in the light of assumed
[moral and intellectual] parity,” the story they truly tell, unlike traditionally anti-feminist
commentaries would have one believe, is of the rhetorical conversion of Abelard as a
direct result of the series of rhetorical feminine *figurae* Heloise assumes in her series of
letters (Wilson and McLeod 121-122). Thus, despite Abelard’s many remarks about his
own mastery, and therefore Heloise’s lack thereof, in the range of events from the
initiation of their affair via her passive seduction to her passive entry into religion with
supposedly no sense of profession, we can perhaps come to understand the historical
figure of Heloise in a way unbiased by centuries of romantic and patriarchal fantasy-
making. That is, we can understand her as a mature woman in firm control of her own
agency and whose ability to say “yes” to both love and profession, firmly and repeatedly,
apparently proved as impossible to imagine for some scholars in the 19th century as in
the 21st.

By cross-referencing correspondences, both by Heloise and Abelard and other
with whom they communicated, historical records, and writings of the pair’s
contemporaries, such as Roscelin of Compiègne and Bernard of Clairvaux, we know that
the lovers met, became romantically and/or sexually involved, became pregnant, married,
had a child, suffered the fate of castration, and entered religious life all within the span of
about a year during the period between 1116 and 1118.16 Between their respective entry
into religion by 1117/1118 and the exchange of letters prompted by Abelard’s *Historia
calamitatum*, written around 1132/1133, Heloise had established herself enough as a

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16 Corroboration of the basic structure of the Abelard-Heloise affair and its awareness on part of
the couple’s contemporaries is excellently chronicled and elaborated on in Peter Dronke’s
*Abelard and Heloise in Medieval Testimonies*. This basic historical structure, and not some
pseudo-scientific estimation of the inner lives of the 12th century couple, is the one I am
outlining here in this project.
religious leader that, when her community was expelled by Abbot Suger of St. Denis from the abbey at Argenteuil, she was able to be uncontroversially installed as the head of the Paraclete, which quickly won support from its surrounding community. By November 1131, Heloise’s success was so prominent that Pope Innocent II wrote to confirm Heloise’s possession of the new foundation in an official letter. Through their collaboration, Heloise and Abelard together produced, at her request, a “voluminous amount of sermons, hymns, and versicles” for the Paraclete and its daughter-houses; that this monastic corpus adapted materials from Cistercian liturgies, the tradition of Abelard’s great enemy Bernard, has led some contemporary scholars to argue that the actual formation of this body owes more to Heloise than her humble letters would initially cause readers to believe (McLaughlin and Wheeler 5-6). This corpus includes the so-called letters of direction, letters 6-8 in the correspondence, and the *Hymnarius Paraclitensis, Sermons, Expositio in exaemeron, and the Problemata Heloissae*, all of which are completed by 1136/1137 (McLaughlin and Wheeler xii).

After the circulation of the *Historia*, Abelard returned as master to teach in Paris, on Mont-Sainte-Genevieve around 1134, and was denounced to Bernard of Clairvaux by William of St. Thierry in 1137. In June 1141, after Bernard waged a fierce campaign against Abelard behind the scenes, the aging scholar was condemned for the second time at the Council of Sens, which drove him to Rome to appeal to Innocent II. Before he reached Rome, however, Abelard, likely already ill, was offered hospitality and protection by Peter the Venerable first at his great monastery at Cluny and then at the Cluniac priory at Saint-Marcel-sur-Saône, where the wondering monk remained until his death in April of 1142. It is not known how Heloise was informed of Abelard’s death, but
Sainte-Madelien-de-Traïnel, the first dependent daughter-house of the Paraclete, was
founded in the same year in which Abelard died at St. Marcel. In 1143/1144, she received
a letter from Peter the Venerable offering her consolation for Abelard’s passing, which
occurred while he was on an extended trip to Spain. Remarkably, in this letter of
consolation to Heloise, which is the same one filled with fulsome praise of Heloise’s
fame and virtues, both as a young woman and as a respected religious leader, Peter the
Venerable discusses both his own son, Theobald, and Astrolabe, the son of Abelard and
Heloise. The Cluniac abbot also writes of the couple’s reunion in Heaven in a way that
suggests that the two maintained a widely-known relationship that, to the public, did not
seem to conflict with their religious lives, as Abelard’s admonitions of Heloise in the
letters would suggest. It would also seem that, at least in Peter the Venerable’s mind,
Heloise’s attachment to Abelard, physical in a way that seems beyond the role of spiritual
advisor and advisee, would offend God no more than it offended him, their peer in
religious life. In this regard, Peter writes:

And so, my revered, my dearest sister in the Lord, this man, to whom
you clung after your marriage in the flesh with the stronger, finer bonds
of divine love, your partner and your guide throughout your long service
to God, God now enfolds in His embrace in place of you, as another you,
and He keeps him there for you until the coming of the Lord... when
through grace he will be restored to you again (Levitan trans. 271).

In this same exchange of letters, we also learn of Peter the Venerable’s
extraordinary act of exhuming the body of Abelard in secrecy several months after
Abelard had been buried at St. Marcel, and how he personally transported the body to be
reburied in a crypt at the Paraclete.17 When Heloise passed away at the Paraclete after

17 We know of the clandestine nature of Peter the Venerable’s actions because he mentions it in
his absolution of Abelard, which he provided in writing at the request of Heloise. We have the
text of the absolution in addition to the verse epitaph Peter composed for Abelard. Research on
having founded a total of six daughter-houses for their foundation between the time of his
death in 1142 and hers in 1164, Abelard’s crypt was opened so that she could be buried
next to him. According to a legend first recorded in 1207, when the crypt was opened,
Abelard’s body extended his arms to embrace and receive his wife. Thus, even at the
beginning of the 13th century, it is easy to the context in which Jean de Meun will take on
the fictionalization of Heloise into popular imagination roughly a century after the death
of Heloise and how recalcitrant romantic myth-making would find so hospitable a habitat
in the canvass provided by the foundation of the historical woman.

During the interim between Heloise’s death and Jean de Meun’s first translation
of a portion of the letters between Abelard and Heloise, before the legends began to take
hold, however, the couple received little attention from 12th century chroniclers. The only
pertinent discussions mostly allude to Abelard’s double condemnations of heresy, a
legacy of Bernard of Clairvaux’s strong influence, and make no mention of Heloise
(Mews “Lost” 38). One commentator, however, William Godel, an Englishman and a
monk who not only visited the couple’s tomb at the Paraclete less than ten years after
Heloise’s death in 1164 but seem to have traveled Europe visiting women’s religious
communities, among them Hildegard of Bingen in 1172, when she was either finishing or
had just finished Liber Divinorum Operum, the last of her three works on visionary

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this history is all found in Charlotte Charrier’s authoritative (on historical research, at least)
Héloïse dans l’Histoire et dans la Légende.

18 “[L]orsqu’on ouvrit la tombe pour y déposer le corps d’Héloïse, Abélard lui rendit les bras pour
la recevoir, & qu’il l’embrassa étroitement” (Charrier’s research, quoted by Feilla,
“Translating” 376n16).

19 Following his death, Abelard’s scholarly work fell further from vogue due to the “recovery” of
the works of Aristotle, newly translated from Greek as a whole and much more reliable than
the Arabic versions to which Abelard had access before the translation Aristotelian works
from Greek into Latin between the mid-12th and early 13th centuries. Aristotle’s conception of
the nature of universals, for example, caused Abelard’s formulation of conceptualism to be
“no longer read” (Radice 45).
theology. Writing in 1173, Godel refers to Abelard’s founding of the Paraclete ex epistolary auctoritate, which suggests that, despite our lack of any 12th-century manuscripts, there was at least somewhat public knowledge of the Abelard-Heloise epistolary exchange during the period immediately following their death. (Radice, 32, Mews “Lost” 39). Godel’s text also corroborates Abelard’s reference to Heloise’s knowledge of Latin and Hebrew from the Historia, and praises Heloise as Abelard’s vera amica for her noble and enduring love, which had led her to an honorable life of “assiduous prayers” (Mews “Lost” 38). Even then for Godel, Heloise’s almost contemporary, her relationship to Abelard is framed within the archetype of the noble lovers, a prototype of the ennobling fins amans at the center of the developing tradition of courtly love. This is, of course, because the historical facts of Heloise do speak to a great love story that became the bedrock for a lifelong collaboration, whatever the eventual fate of that initial romantic and worldly passion, that which is so hotly debated by the lovers themselves in their correspondence. How Godel’s approach to the figure of Heloise, brief as it was, differs from the commentary that will make the authenticity debates of the abbess’ letters a veritable institution in medieval studies from the 19th century onward is that this 12th century monk seems to have felt no need to be scandalized by Heloise’s very public love for Abelard, as some 21st century scholars are wont to do. It is the 12th-century perspective that does not seem to see an incompatibility between Heloise’s multidimensional being as woman who loves nobly and passionately, and a woman who commands respect from her chargers, peers, and institutional superiors.

FROM HELOISE TO HELOISIAN: KATABASIS THROUGH TRANSLATIONES
The first known translation of part of the correspondences continues and expands the image of the noble Heloise, but also immediately and firmly establishes Heloise’s “primacy in fiction” (McLaughlin and Wheeler 12). Jean de Meun’s continuation of *Le Roman de la Rose*, written approximately in 1268, just over a hundred years after the death of Heloise, is a treatise on courtly love, in which the portrayal of Heloise in Old French was already being praised for using her unusual wisdom—unusual, that is, for her sex—which she demonstrates by “curbing” her wanton woman’s nature “because she knew both *les livres* and *les meurs feminins*, and was able to conquer the latter through the former” (Newman, “Authority” 147). To the mind of this 13th century author, who will go on to be accused of a certain kind of misogyny by Christine de Pizan in the debate that establishes her credibility as an intellectual, Heloise is noble and worthy of attention because she is so unlike the rest of her sex in her masculine erudition and clarity of

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20Jean de Meun’s comments (*Le Roman de la Rose*, lines 8759-8832) on how Abelard would have never married Heloise had he believe her outrageous claim that she would rather be a whore—his whore—is also the earliest seed which will come to fruition in the recent authenticity debate in the group who makes the case for forgery either in part or in its entirety due to Heloise’s rhetoric. Most recently, this view has been espoused by Deborah Fraioli, who argued that the letters must have been forgeries by enemies of Abelard who wanted to humiliate the couple by these supposedly salacious expressions (“Importance”). More recently in 2012, Fraioli has published another piece that is supposed to “remove [her]self from the moral debate” by arguing that “the strongest condemnation of the couple’s behavior and attitudes comes straight from the correspondence itself, and that those medieval censurers and satirists merely play on the ironies and laughable inconsistencies, the hyperbole, and self-contradiction, that they have already found in the letters” (“Assessing” 59). This argument is made all the while Fraioli calls Abelard and Heloise “protagonists” of the correspondence to refer to the “author-created literary personae [and] not the historical figures of the same names” (“Assessing” 57n4). It is not clear, however, why Fraioli refers to “the couple’s... correspondence itself” if she is operating on the belief that it is forged, unless she would have the chance to both condemn the historical couple for not writing the letters and condemn them for what they wrote in it. What is clear here, however, is that despite Fraioli’s explicit protestation to be otherwise, the author is nevertheless participating in a moralistic, and therefore subjective instead of academic and historical, enterprise because she does not wish to be “sedated... against the moral inquiry we might otherwise mount against the outrageous positions taken by the couple” by the their “claims to intellectual superiority, personal uniqueness, and the perfection of their love” (“Assessing” 56).
passion, Jean de Meun is not only the letters' first partial translator—he worked from a Latin copy lost to us—but also the first known commentator on specifically the rhetoric presented by Heloise against marriage both by Abelard’s pen in the *Historia* and in her own first two letters.\(^{21}\) While he translated letters 1-7 of the correspondence between Abelard and Heloise, which includes the sharp turn to monastic management and direction on part of both the letter-writers, Jean chooses to ignore the monastic dimension of the letters and Heloise’s role as abbess and instead focuses instead solely on her powerful declarations of love. This split will be maintained and magnified manifold by fantasies based loosely on the historical woman in later centuries, finally resulting in the recent academic theory that either Abelard, as “the godly ventriloquist behind the seductive feminine mask,” or the longer-standing proposal that some other male pretender must have forged the letters bearing Heloise’s name (Newman, *Virile* 9).\(^{22}\) Mews argues that it is through this editorial choice that Jean de Meun not only transformed Abelard’s 12\(^{th}\) century image of being a dangerous heretic following his death, but also conjured up the “enduring image of Abelard and Heloise, not as intellectuals but as lovers: one foolish enough to think that he could combine love and marriage, the other the embodiment of selfless love” (*Abelard* 4).

\(^{21}\) Jean de Meun’s translation of letters 1-7 survives solely via a copy made by humanist Gontier Col, with whom Christine the Pizan will verbally spar.

\(^{22}\) It has also been proposed that Jean de Meun, in his flagrant immorality, must have forged not only the explicit sexual parts of Heloise’s letters, but also made up the entire correspondence and, somehow, created himself the Latin manuscripts that we now have. Though this explanation is supposed to explain why we do not have any 12\(^{th}\) or even early 13\(^{th}\) century Latin manuscripts, it has not won any support on technical grounds, seeing how mistakes were made in Jean’s French translation that did not occur in the Latin, and he misinterprets certain Latin phrases, which would be ingenious indeed for the poet to manage to insert as a way of concealing his literary fraud (McLaughlin and Wheeler 10, Marenbon 20).
This kind of womanly foolishness, however, would stick to more firmly the figure of Heloise and be taken up by scholars of the twentieth century. This is also the Heloise that caught the eye of Petrarch, who, between 1337 and 1340, made marginalia in his copy of the correspondences noting that the abbess was acting, or, rather, writing “[m]uliebriter (just like a woman),” to which sex he attributed “gentleness and perfect sweetness” through his reading of Heloise’s first two letters (Petrarch in Levitan’s translation 58; 55). Here, in addition to Jean de Meun’s apparent misogyny—which, perhaps ironically, comes from his devotion to Ovid, so well known and loved by Heloise that she styles her own narrative on the archetypal Ovidian heroine, at last rhetorically—it is not difficult to detect the strain to essentialism that will provide ample fodder for feminist deconstruction by modern scholars.

23 Petrarch’s notes are written on one of the earliest manuscripts we have of the correspondence, dating from the mid- to late 14th century after Jean de Meun’s Roman. It also constitutes one of the nine good manuscripts from which Muckle constructs his critical editions, which are:

T: Bibliothèque de Troyes, Ms 802, fols. 18-35. (Letters 1-8, sole copy of 8, mid-14th century; also: Institutiones nostre, Panormia, canons and statues)


R: Bibliothèque de Reims, Ms 872, (J.751), fols. 125-137. (correspondence placed after Seneca’s letters to Lucilius)


It is important to note that the earliest of these manuscripts date from the end of the 14th century, some 150 years after the dates of composition (Muckle, “Abelard”; “Personal”). There is the question of why we have no earlier evidence of the correspondence when we do have manuscripts of Abelard’s other philosophical work from before the initiation of the correspondence. While some have taken to mean that either the entirety or a part of the eight letters are forgeries, but I believe it is convincing that the documents curated by Heloise were closely held in the Paraclete on the abbess’ own instructions until it appeared, in its current form, after her death (Newman, “Authority” 133). There is 12th century evidence, however, that contemporaries of the abbess knew of the existence of an Abelard-Heloise correspondence in the context of being a foundational text for the Paraclete, but we cannot know whether contemporaries read the Latin manuscripts as we have them today, nor if our manuscripts is the full edited version collected by Heloise, nor, of course, how much Heloise edited the letters herself unless radically revelatory new evidence emerges.
Reacting to Jean de Meun’s Ovidian portrayal of women in *Roman*, Christine de Pizan refers specifically to Heloise only in a passing and dismissive fashion at the end of the 14th century. Christine de Pizan finds Jean’s work anti-woman and immoral, through for reasons entirely different from modern feminists. Indeed, as another proto-feminist who proves irresistible to modern “reclaimings,” her exclusion of Heloise from her two treatises on feminine virtues, *Le Livre de la cité des dames* and *Le Livre des trois vertus*, both of which are finished by 1405, is deafening and enlightening in two sense. First, in a series of writings, from *Epistre au dieu d’amours* in 1399 to her participation in *la querelle du Roman de la Rose*, a collection of letters between her and Gontier Col that circulated circa 1401/1402, Christine demonstrates an awareness of the letters of Heloise in Latin, perhaps the lost manuscript from which Jean de Meun worked. In discussing Jean’s work, written in Old French, she writes in Middle French, her adopted tongue, yet cites Heloise’s use of the Latin term *meretrix* instead of Jean’s *putain*, implying a familiarity with the abbess’ first letter in response to Abelard’s *Historia* in its Latin form at the royal court of Charles VI (Desmond “Ovid’s” 105). Christine de Pizan’s terminology here corroborates the existence and public circulation of the Latin manuscripts of Heloise’s letters as attributed to herself against the allegations of fraud by

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24 So vast is this difference that Barbara Newman believe Christine’s reading is, in fact, misogynist itself all the while it accuses Jean de Meun of misogyny and immorality: “[U]nder the circumstances, Christine’s silence is eloquent, for it suggests that she was already reading Heloise through misogynist lenses. Although she did not shrink from feminist rewritings of Dido and Medea, she could not view the abbess of the Paraclete as either a good woman or a useful auctor for feminists. In short, Heloise could not be admitted to the City of Ladies because she had already been canonized in the Book of Wikked Wyves” (Newman, “Authority” 149). From this perspective, this particular split between the figure of Heloise as good wife and nun versus wicked and sensuous sinner predates the later, more romantic imaginations of the Heloisian figure as split between reason and love, rationality and passion. It is unfortunate that even the proto-feminist Christine de Pizan falls prey to the false dichotomy of either/or; my reading will argue that Heloise can be both good and wicked, serious and sensous, because she was both.
hand of Jean de Meun. Secondly, the way in which one of the few times the 14th century scholar refers to Heloise further suggests that tension experienced by contemporary feminist scholars, between Heloise's seemingly anti-woman remarks and the desire to claim her as an exemplar of feminine strength and learnedness, already exists by the time of Christine de Pizan. In mocking Pierre Col, brother of Gontier (the notable humanist and secretary to the king), both of whom were involved in debating the virtues of Jean de Meun's *Roman*, Christine writes: "Tu ressemblés Helouye du Paraclit qui dist que mieux ameroit ester *meretrix* appellee de maistre Pierre Abalart que ester roynce couronnee; si appert bien que les voulantes qui mieux plaisent nes sont pas toutes raisonables" (quoted by Desmond, "Ovid’s" 150-151). For Christine at the end of the 14th century, Heloise's seemingly thorough identification with feminist abjection is incompatible with the younger woman's "desire to vindicate marriage and the achievement of women who had been happily married" (Mews, "Interpreting" 723).

After the abovementioned three authors, while there did appear in the 15th century three copies of the correspondence containing an abbreviated version of the eight letter, Abelard's lengthy rule, demonstrating an certain attention paid to the couple as monastic figures during the "culture of monastic humanism" of the time, this point of view does not gain nearly the kind of popularity that Abelard and Heloise as noble lovers enjoy beginning in the 17th century (Mews, *Lost* 43). Save for a line from Chaucer in his "Wife of Bath’s Prologue" from *The Canterbury Tales* in the last decade of the 14th century, where Heloise constitutes "one of an oddly assorted company in a satire on matrimony," the couple generated little interest among humanists of the Middle Ages until 1616, when the Latin text of the letters is published for the first time in Paris will begin great a wave
at the end of the 17th century where many fictitious passages suitable to contemporary sensibilities were inserted into latest editions of the letters masquerading as authentic (Radice 48). Published in two nearly identical editions by André Duchesne and his mentee François d'Amboise, *Petri Abaelardi filosofi et theologia, abbatis Ruyensis, et Heloisae coniugis eius primae Paracletesis abbatissae Opera* includes a fairly comprehensive collection of Abelard's works following the entire eight-letter sequence that we have today. But even this edition, which clearly attempts to present an image of couple in their religious roles in its inclusion of the full correspondence and remains standard for over two centuries, did not gather popular interest at the time of its publication because its Latin was inaccessible to readers of the 17th century and the book itself was costly. Thus, it is key here to note that Latin manuscripts of the correspondence, especially compared to its early availability as a French translation, is very late indeed. D'Amboise most likely obtained from various monasteries different copies that contained different parts of the correspondence, and together with Duchesne, shaped a common corpus that was presented to the counsellor of the royal privilege under Charles IX (Oberson 298-300). Beyond d'Amboise’s best intention to rescue the calamitous life of his fellow Breton Abelard from obscurity and restore to him his reputation as a philosopher, it is Heloise whose fame as “the embodiment of tragic love” was reignited (Mews, *Lost* 44).

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25 Even in the passing reference by Chaucer, which is no doubt inspired by Jean de Meun's depiction of Heloise, an “misogynist appropriation and repression of Heloise” has been detected by Barbara Newman: “When we meet [Heloise] in these lines she is already enmeshed in a textual net subtler than the one Vulcan used to ensnare Mars and Venus. An ironic male poet impersonating an angry feminist impersonating a jealous husband gives him an authoritative book on female evil starring Jerome, the famous misogynist...” (“Authority” 145).
From the mid-17th century onward, despite the availability the nuanced Latin texts produced in 1616, it is the image of Heloise put forward by Jean de Meun that catches fire. The Heloisian figure’s *cap-à-pie* transformation into the patron goddess of love is well on its way with the free insertion of fictitious passages into “translations” of the correspondence, almost always partial instead of containing the full eight letters, near the end of the 17th century, and culminates in 18th century Romanticism’s complete distortion of the historical woman from the Latin texts. In 1642, François de Grenaille included the first two letters of Heloise in a collection of letters, collected together as a “how-to” manual on feminine love, by both fictive and historical women in his commercially successful *Nouveau recueil de lettres de dames tant anciennes que modernes* (Mews, *Lost* 44). Here, “Heloise,” now firmly translated from historical woman to mythic figure, is kept in the company of the imagined correspondences of “mythical queens of antiquity” in the tradition of Ovid’s *Heroidum Epistulae*. De Granaille sees the Heloisian figure as “a French Magdalen, a true penitent converted to the path of virtue,” the implication of which, of course, is that she was a sinner who needed the grace of conversion (Mews, *Lost* 44). In this same collection, de Grenaille also inserts before the “relatively free paraphrases of the first two letters of Heloise as published in 1616” with his on fictitious letter that enacts Heloise’s arguments against marriage. From here onward, the Heloisian figure’s primacy in fiction is firmly established in the evolving sensibilities of Europe, where, to tastemakers, “Heloise,” this remarkable 12th century woman who loved so intensely, became an exemplar of the nostalgic heroines of *fine amour*. 
Censorship during the reign of Louis XIV meant that the letters of Heloise and Abelard, often banned from around 1685 until the end of this king’s reign in 1715, also became emblems of subversion, both against tradition and religious life and also against “the establishment” (Mews Lost 45). In 1687, Roger de Rabutin, having been influenced by the appearance of Lettres portugaises in France in 1669, sent his own version of Heloise’s first two letters and Abelard’s first response to Mme de Sévigné, into which he inserted “fictitious incidents and reduced the whole story to a contemporary flirtatious intrigue” (Radice 50). This particularly unreliable translation, however, would also prove to be particularly influential well into the 18th century as Heloise became a veritable regulative fiction for the ideal of bourgeois femininity and feminine love—that is, her figure is used to demonstrate what “should be” most attractive in women and a women’s love, such as innocence (by way of her supposed youth) and selflessness.

In the English-speaking part of European, Heloise made her first appear as an exemplar of the “husbandry of husbands” in the anonymously translated and perhaps humorously descriptive titled A Continuation of the Dialogue between Two Young Ladies Concerning the Management of Husbands. Part the Second. Wherein is a most Passionate Letter Full of Wit and Affection, written by Eloisa (a Young French Lady,) to her Husband, Abelard, who was Emasculated by the Malice of her Uncle, published in 1693 and in which Heloise is described as being “about Sixteen Years” and “of exemplary wisdom in managing a difficult husband (Mews, Lost 45). A more influential translation appeared in 1714, when John Hughes produced a “travesty” of a translation, one of the “wilder flights of fancy” loosely based on Abelard’s autobiographical narrative from the Historia, which not only continued being quoted as genuine long after a more
authoritative English translation was made by John Berington in 1787. Alarmingly, Hughes’s influential paraphrase of the letters, which is still read today and widely available online as the true writings of Abelard and Heloise, was apparently made from a French translation because he “could have had no access to the Latin originals” since the 1616 edition “was unavailable to him and the second edition [was] not published until 1718” (Levitan 347). What is alarming here is that the Hughes edition in turn inspired Alexander Pope’s wildly popular *Eloisa to Abelard*, which first appeared in 1717, three years after the publication of Hughes’ first edition (Radice 52-53). Based on an English paraphrase of a French translation of a compilation of Latin manuscripts, then, and written following his translation of Ovid’s *Sappho to Phaon*, which no doubt colored his approach to Heloise, Pope’s Eloisa was a “Racinian Phère torn between reason and love,” at once neoclassical heroine and transcendent “emblem of enlightenment” (Levitan 305; Mews, *Lost* 46). This is the Heloise painted by Angelica Kauffmann and other neoclassical artists, who depicted the 12th century abbess in a magnificent flowing Rococo-era gown and petticoat, faint from her farewell with Abelard after his death, supported by and contrasted against the three nuns in full black-and-white habit coming to her aid. It is also during the same era in the 18th century that depictions appeared of

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26 In Hughes' somewhat impressively and comically inventive edition of the correspondence, if it can be called that, Abelard is given an entirely made-up friend, *Philinthe* or Philintus, to whom he was supposed to have written the *Historia Calamitatum* (an invention that first appeared in an anonymous French translation in 1695, and then pick up and popularized by Hughes in English), and a sister named Lucilla (also nonexistent, Abelard's sister was named Denyse, with whom the historical Heloise stayed when she gave birth) who not only agreed with Heloise's arguments against marriage but also had much to say on Stoic philosophy. Here, Heloise is given a maidservant named Agaton ("brown, well-shaped, and a person superior to her rank") who is also wildly in love with Abelard even though she is being courted by a rich abbot and a courtier at the same time, and a singing master who aided in conveying letters between teacher and student (Levitan 303-304; Radice 51-52). Hughes' Heloise also writes wistfully to Abelard of a young nun who escaped the convent into England with a gentleman with whom she was in love (Hughes in edition by Pierre Bayle, 159).
contemporary women reading the love letters of the couple in privacy, their exposed bosoms visibly heaving as they gaze rapturously into the distance, faint from the intensity of the couple’s passion even on the page and in translation.\textsuperscript{27}

The Enlightenment’s affinity for the Heloisian figure crowns with the publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s \textit{Julie, ou la Nouvelle Heloise: Lettres de deux Amans} in 1761, bringing to new generations of audiences the 12\textsuperscript{th} century abbess’ now very much distorted image. This image splits Heloise between Romantic heroine and respected abbess, and embodies \textit{du jour} dichotomies such as reason-versus-passion, science-against-sensibility. This completes Heloise’s transformation from paragon of monastic ethical thinking and management to a “fictional \textit{grande amoureuse},” the fictional account of which was, in turn, transformed from “selfless lover into self-absorbed coquette” in the 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} centuries (Kauffman 85-86). And so it is during the 18\textsuperscript{th} century that Heloise’s letters “had acquired canonical status as models of good style” and earned the problematic praise of “not [being] art, but nature which expresses itself” (Mews, \textit{Lost} 45). By the 19th century, Heloise is finally ordained “the saint of love,” a title that is the fitting accumulation off a long tradition of masculine colonization and fabrication of literary fiction at once based upon and obscuring the historical woman. Thus continues Heloise’s queer growth and katabasis, accruing layers upon layers of interpretation that contributes to her queer capacity for encompassing previously impossible paradoxes and becoming ever more “slippery” a figure for the modern scholar to easily categorize.

\textsuperscript{27} This is the image painted by Auguste Bernard d’Agesci circa 1780, titled \textit{Lady Reading the Letters of Heloise and Abelard}. Angelica Kauffman’s portrayals of the couple include \textit{Farewell of Abelard and Heloise}, also completed in 1780, \textit{Abelard soliciting the hand of Heloise} (date unknown), and \textit{Abelard presenting Hymen to Heloise} (date also unknown). A popular series of engravings designed by Jean-Michel Moreau le Jeune in 1796 for Rousseau’s \textit{Julie, ou la Nouvelle Heloise} also depict the couple’s lives in full 18\textsuperscript{th} century regalia.
The comment above by Mews about the stylization of the Heloisian figure—that is, as a model of good style—and the assimilation of the aesthetic into what is considered natural is important as it foreshadows the positivist onslaught in scholarship, fraught with problematic Enlightenment assumptions, that will come to attempt a defrocking of Heloise, both literally of the achievements of her life-long religious profession and figuratively by dispossessing her of her literary legacy, by making the intensely misogynist argument that the historical Heloise “in fact” neither did nor could compose the letters bearing her name. This transmutation of woman-to-aesthetic is the process of the metamorphosis, dislocation, and elevation of what posterity has made of the historical Heloise, her texts, and her images. In this Enlightenment context, the making of style—that is, what Heloise has been “styled” to be—into what is “natural” and supposedly true stems from the resonance that this cultural and intellectual movement finds in the figure of Heloise, though, ironically, the naturalization that occurs here is of the fictionalized image of the historical woman, and not the woman herself and her truly outsized life. The aestheticization of Heloise also maps onto poststructural analysis, which argues that the text—in this case, Heloise’s texts and the “text” of her life—can be seen as an effect of its audience’s act of witnessing. The Heloisian ideal of love and femininity as regulative fiction, furthermore, speaks to Judith Butler’s conception of gender as an “imitation for which there is no original,” the appearance of which is merely “an effect and consequence of imitation itself” (“Imitation” 21). Thus, it is based on these 17th and 18th century popular interpretations and reimagines that Heloise would undergo another kind of katabasis, this time, it seems, through the hell of uncertainty at the hands of 21st century scholarship.
To say nothing here of the remarkable number of times that the bodies of the historical couple have gone through in the series of displacements from tomb to tomb, the varied and countless “katabasis” in literary translations—and I call it a “going-under” because these are “bad” translations that will not begin to be identified as such until well into the 20th century through the critical lens of academia—is itself the subject of a lengthy book, which Charlotte Charrier has already taken up in 1933 in her assiduously comprehensive _Héloïse dans l'Histoire et dans la Légende_. Charrier compiled long lists of “traductions fidèles, traductions fantaisistes, traductions françaises, allemandes, anglaises, espagnoles, italiennes, and portugaises” of the figure of Heloise in particular up until the beginning of the 20th century into the genres of “biographies, essays, novels, plays, poems, parodies, and works of art of many kinds” (Charrier 601-644, cited by Luscombe’s _Letter Collection_, xvii).

Indeed, throughout this katabasis into literary invention and queer transformations, the figures of Heloise and Abelard not only undergo blatant embellishments, as is in the case on John Hughes, but, more perniciously, also the more subtle transformations that have so thoroughly framed and shaped the figures that come down to us today. While I have only given a very abridged version of the transformation and fictionalization of the figure of Heloise after the death of the historical woman, we can nevertheless discern the kind of naturalization of the fictionalized Heloisian figure as an almost mythic embodiment of love, a tradition that will be inherited by the first modern scholar to question the authenticity of the letters specifically attributed to Heloise toward the end of the 19th century. Interestingly, by this time, popular interest in the 12th century couple, save for continued attentiveness to Abelard by scholars of medieval
philosophy, would focus mainly on Heloise in her role as a so-called patron saint of love. This can be seen in Mark Twain’s seemingly facetious remarks in his 1869 The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrims Progress, the best-selling work of the American author during his lifetime. In this book, Twain describes being in Paris and visiting the Père-Lachaise tomb of the couple, whose story is usually told, the satirist thinks, with “nauseous sentimentality,” as well as how “all Parisian youths and maidens who are disappointed in love come [here] to bail out when they are full of tears” (135). “Go when you will,” Twain writes, “you find somebody snuffling over that tomb” (135-136). After giving a brief history of the legendary lovers—humorously, of course—Twain adds his own thoughts:

“I have not a single word to say against the misused, faithful girl, and would not withhold from her grave a single one of those simple tributes which blighted youths and maidens offer to her memory, but I am sorry enough that I have not time and opportunity to write four or five volumes of my opinion of her friend the founder of the Parachute, or the Paraclete, or whatever it was... He died a nobody” (146-147).

Though Twain’s passage is tongue-in-cheek, it nevertheless captures a kernel of truth, as humor is wont to do. Twain pinpoints the intellectual climate in which the proposition of the correspondence as forgery was first proposed in the 19th century, when the popular, romantic approach to the 12th century couple far overshadowed a critical and historical one. It is the apparent inconsistency between this romantic image of the “misused, faithful girl,” notable only for her disappointment in love, as contrasted with and assumed to be separate from Abelard’s role as the sole founder the Paraclete. While, I hope, my historical overview has helped dispel the notion that the insidious split in Heloise’s dichotomous roles is founded in the truth of the respected, serious, and capable
abbess and religious thinker’s life, this image, rooted in late-coming fantasy-making, has nevertheless led a number of critics, from late 19th century to now, to question in particular the authorship of the three letters ascribed to the historical Heloise. There is a blatant though oftentimes implicit sexism in the authenticity debate that proposes, at its root, a woman could not have penned “a human document of such wealth and beauty that it may be duly ranked among the most moving pieces in all literature” (Gilson xii). For me, the tension stemming from the Heloisian figure’s status at once as innocence embodied and the carefree ingénue, versus the patron saint of love, la grande amoureuse, also speaks to the parodic and patronizing nature of the patriarchal fantasy of Heloise. But for now, we are well positioned to approach the contemporary authenticity debate began by Martin Deutsch in 1883 and Bernhard Schmeidler in 1913, both of whom were at the vanguard of the proposal that Abelard alone composed all eight letters in the correspondence despite the traditional attribution of three to Heloise, a theory given new life in 1972 by scholar John Benton, whose particular anti-feminist slant, in turn, will ignite a wave of scholarship rising up to claim our 12th century abbess as being a proto-feminist “in fact” (Mews, Lost 48; McLaughlin and Wheeler, 9).

QUEERLY FEMINIST: FROM OBJECTIVITY TO PERFORMATIVITY

The philosophy behind the construction of the current (and, let us hope, final) resting place of the historical lovers at the Père-Lachaise cemetery is a surprisingly apt allegory for the edifice of criticism rising out of the body of the historical Heloise. Alexandre Lenoir, an eccentric collector, museum-keeper, and amateur historian trained as a history painter, constructed Abelard and Heloise’s current resting place in 1817
The artist understood that it was not enough to merely preserve as best he could the integrity of pair's remains, however much (or little) there was left of it, but also to enthrone the bits and pieces of history in a contemporary context that would be legible for the intended audience or reader. For Lenoir, this intelligible context was an English-style Elysium garden, populated by bourgeois sensibility and Gothic architecture that spoke more to what 19th century admirers thought the medieval couple's tomb ought to look like as a monument to passionate and free love than a faithful recreation of the couple's historical tomb. Indeed, which tomb would that have been, given that the couple was not initially buried together, then brought into the same crypt, then separated and reunited again, and then moved, now together, a total of seven times? "A mix of attempted historical accuracy and medieval fantasy," Lenoir's invocation in architecture of his artistic and particularly 19th-century understanding of the couple's bodies must be recognized as such—that is, a mix of fact and fiction—just as, I believe, contemporary participants in the authenticity debate cannot unproblematically build their supposedly critical arguments on Romantic and fictitious understandings of the couple's writings and what the critique thinks that the couple were thinking or meant to write (Shepard 29).

Lenoir's critically self-reflexive methodology in art helps us understand that the key to producing a powerful interpretation of any story, any urtext, be it in the form of translations from the 17th and 18th centuries that deserved more the name of dramatization, or of scholarly criticism in the last three decades, is not so much to "acquire" some objective "Truth" in order to be enthroned in the cold air of finality and

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28 Mary Shepard notes that "the fundamental break with history provided by the Revolution allowed Lenoir to fashion his own idiosyncratic visualizations of the past" (31).
reality. Rather, the edifice must, to the readers of books and visitors of tombs for whom
the work is produced, edify some truth of their current reality, radically contingent and
idiosyncratic. Thus, while Lenoir has been criticized for his "complete lack of scruples"
and seeming disregard for the "notion of historical authenticity," he was in fact very
much aware of his creation as artful fabrication and how it references the historical 12th
century couple and their lives more than it is an accurate, historically correspondent
description (Alain Erlande-Brandenburg and Stephen Bann quoted in Shepard, 31).

Instead of being guilty of the methodological naïveté of which Lenoir was accused by
historians who, thinking the tomb-builder wanted to pass his monument off as an
authentic medieval work, "itemized the origin of various medieval components on the
tomb in order to prove their disassociation with the fabled pair," Lenoir was critically
aware of the significance of his creation of the tomb as art and his role as artificer
(Shepard 29). And art, "[i]n his view... could be reconfigured; its original meaning and
function could be ignored" to make way for more relevant and meaningful interpretations
(Shepard 29, 31). By recognizing his "Heloise" as art, Lenoir is indeed making an
editorial choice that is more theoretically and ideologically self-aware than the scholars
who argue for the forgery of the Heloisian letters. The need for scholars to be critically
self-aware in recognizing that scholarship is not ideologically neutral simply by virtue of
being scholarship, but indeed how one's own ideological biases not only steer a scholar's
efforts, but also fundamentally determines and constitutes whether or not it is possible to
conceive of a scholarly project and how it is conceived, is hinted at by Peter von Moo's
ideological critique of the study of Heloise up until 1974, just at the onset of the most
egregiously misogynist contestations of the authenticity of the abbess’ letters, and made explicit by poststructural standpoint feminism.

In contrast with Lenoir, then, the millennia of “bad” translators of the texts of Heloise and Abelard and modern commentators, particularly those who question the Heloisian letters’ authenticity due to the supposedly irreconcilable images of the Romantic heroine and the abbess reputed for learning and piety, are naive scholars of history who do not recognize as interpretive and creative their own participation in a long tradition of creating, bolstering, and interpreting Romantic mythology that has less to do with the historical woman’s life and more with the accumulation of creative re­imaginations particular to certain times and philosophies. Indeed, Lenoir’s work was a fundamentally creative one, one meant to locate the artist himself “alongside not only the illustrious patrons who had built earlier tombs for the fabled couple, but—more importantly—among the great artistic interpreters” of their romance (Shepard 29). This is the performative lens through which I choose to see the contemporary authenticity debate that most seeks to put into question the historical Heloise’s authorship of her own letters. I propose that, by locating subject (Heloisian figure) and observer (scholars) on the same causal plane via a performative understanding of objectivity and rejecting the possibility of objectivism traditionally conceived, I come to see this most recent round of scholarship as lodging one’s place, be it as an artist or a scholar, in the long history of interpreting the Heloisian figure.29 It is important to note that, by using term “Heloisian

29 Standpoint feminism developed from feminist standpoint theory, which was initially a feminist project that engaged Marxist materialism to critique the epistemology hegemony of the ruling class. This theory, as part of second-wave feminist thought, developed a “feminist standpoint” as a “technical theoretical device that can allow for the creation of better (more objective, more laboratory) accounts of the world” (Hartsock, Feminist 236). This perspective, focused on how “material life... not only structures but set limits on the understandings of social
figure,” I am trying to emphasize the artful distance, slowly pushed outward by some 900 years’ worth of accumulated human imagination, between the historical woman and her image. In this 900-year process, we have four layers of “Heloise”: 1) the historical woman who lived, 2) her texts, 3) the queerly expansive image based on the historical woman, and 4) the texts of these images, which is commentary and scholarship on the 12th century abbess. With each image and reiteration that is made and re-made by continual discussion, we are indeed marking our place in the Heloisian body, and any commentary is as much a reference back to the ideologies of commentator as it purports to speak some truth about this remarkable 12th century woman.

It is with this critical awareness in mind that I would remind the reader of John Marenbon’s attempt to settle the authenticity debate in favor of the historical Heloise’s authorship of her own three letters and my understanding of the difficulties in a positivist approach such as his and that of the majority of feminist scholarship that seek to “claim” or rescue Heloise. I propose that this kind of positivist—and therefore tied to Enlightenment ideas of subjectivity/objectivity and inherently problematic—finds it impossible to pin down the queerness of the Heloisian figure with a traditional and positivist conception of both “objectivity in fact” and “objectivity in theory” in historical relations,” was clearly still a staunchly Enlightenment project. Standpoint feminism, begun explicitly as a successor project to Enlightenment positivist science, was much more postmodern in its orientation. Its central claim, that knowledge is a product of social interaction and therefore socially situated, allowed philosophers such as Sandra Harding, Alison Jaggar, Patricia Hill Collins, and Donna Haraway to perform a comprehensive examination and rejection of positivist epistemology’s reliance on the concept of objectivity, which assumes a God-like subject that is unitary, cohesive, and rational at the center of knowledge-production. These scholars further argued that knowledge about so-called “facts” is not permanent, ahistorical, transcendental, and neutral, but that “observer and the observed are in the same causal scientific plane,” giving an account of subject-object relations that is very much performative in nature. For pieces consulted on this topic, please see articles cited under Nancy Hartsock, Heidi Hartmann, Sandra Harding, Nancy Hirschman, Cassandra Pinnick, and Linda Zerilli.
research. By "objectivity in fact," I refer to fact-based historical scholarship that seeks to do nothing more than ascertain facts and catalogue said facts having been established without attempting to explain what these facts mean, either for the historical context from which these facts arise or any other contexts, such as a modern one. This would include statistical methods such as *cursus* analysis and word counts, or efforts to historicize the 12th century abbess' life or words in her various contexts, be it matrimonial, monastic, academic, philosophic, etc. In the study of Heloise and the Heloisian figure in particular, this is the approach that modern participants in the authenticity debates have often asserted to be carrying out in examining the historical Heloise, her texts, and her posthumous images. The problem with this kind of approach, of course, is that scholars often wish to maintain or even believe that they are employing this kind of approach is in fact unable to resist doing more than sticking to "objectivity in fact" would allow. These supposedly objective methods have been questioned on both on the grounds of utility and ideology, and I agree with both critiques. Should scholars come upon more historical facts regarding the historical Heloise and her texts than we have now, a positivist approach to these facts still incorrectly assumes the ability to interpret them with an "objectivity in theory" that I reject by using a performative account of object-subject relations developed from feminist successor science philosophy/standpoint feminism and queer theory. As such, I propose that both kinds of objectivity, both "in fact" and "in theory" is inappropriate in the study of Heloise.

Returning now to the contribution of Marenbon, as well as other authors who wish to affirm the Heloisian letters as Heloise's, I would point out that my reasons for affirming the historical Heloise's authorship of her own letters and the importance of
both Heloise and the Heloisian figure, is by no means tantamount to an agreement with Marenbon’s traditional positivism on the grounds of why it is important to put the authenticity debate to rest. Though by no means original, the three tenets guiding my approach to both Heloise the historical woman and her writings, as well as the Heloisian figure that has become and becomes literary fiction and its commentary in the authenticity debate, are as following.

First, as I hope to have demonstrated above, a split between the historical woman Heloise and how that woman’s image came to be both so far removed from its source and so deeply rooted in its public’s popular and critical psyche occurred early and have remained. For scholars today to base any argument on the late-coming and artificial dichotomy between the romantic conception of la grande amoureuse versus the historically revered abbess, it is necessary for the scholar to recognize that an argument critiquing a literary and philosophical fiction is not the same as one critique the real words, actions, and supposed feelings of the historical woman. The argument that the 18th century coquette, for example, could not have written these documents of grand passions and struggles, composed in the 12th century and come down to us in 14th century manuscripts, is a meaningless exercise in delusion that no scholar would consciously propose, and has no bearing on the historical 12th century abbess who did write these documents.

Second, as documented by feminist scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s, no historical or textual evidence has nor can refute definitively Heloise’s authorship, but no evidence squarely proves authenticity either. Existing evidence only strongly supports the robust theory of authenticity, and this lack of definitive proof in either direction, I
believe, is at the root of the impasse of the authenticity debate. As for my own position, I believe the historical woman of Heloise as we have her today—that is, even without definitive proof of authorship—is remarkable enough to be worthy of modern attention, explicitly feminist or otherwise. The other three layers of Heloise, her text, image, and texts of this image, are further worthy of critical attention due to their development into regulative fiction, the historiography of which development, I believe, can help us learn much about our own positionalities as scholars.

Finally and most importantly, I hope to move the feminist project of unearthing, affirming, and reclaiming the historical Heloise and the Heloisian figure so that they reach their fullest potential beyond its current impasse in the authenticity debate, which, I argue, results from an unnecessary and theoretically unsound commitment to the positivist dream of objectivity. In this effort, I follow through on Peter von Moos’ original critique of pseudo-scientific objectivity as an unexamined ideological bias in historical research in general, and in the scholarly commentary and interpretation of our feminist heroine in particular by abandoning the traditionally positivist approach to both the historical and interpretive approaches to Heloise and the Heloisian. By following to logical conclusion this poststructural and feminist critique, I read the Heloisian figure as regulative fiction and as a queer effect constantly in process and (re)constituted by the performative and reciprocal relationship between it as an object and the reader as a subject, and vice versa.

For me, the most salient point of Peter von Moos’ 1974 *Mittelalterforschung und Ideologiekritik, Der Gelehrtenstreit um Héloise* is that the kind of “objective, demythologized account of the past” pursued by many modern scholars of history is “an
illusion... behind which there is played out a conflict between views of the world” (Marenbon 19-20). Von Moos found in the authenticity debate surrounding Heloise’s letters a particularly clear manifestation of this illusory pursuit, because, despite some doubt regarding the overall authenticity of the correspondences of Abelard and Heloise during the nineteenth century, readers have always mostly enjoyed and commented on their writing based on its literary and humanistic merits. And it wasn’t until the 1970s, after this body of work has had an eight-and-half millennia history of being read, translated, imitated, and commented upon, that some scholars thought to “make history a properly scientific discipline... by going back to the sources and scrutinizing them” and questioning the authenticity of the correspondences (Marenbon 19).

Von Moos’ point about the fallibility of objectivity in humanistic research is an overarching philosophical critique that many scholars seem to have difficulty putting into practice. We can see this in Marenbon’s example of an unexplained though undoubtedly not unconscious pivot from this criticism to affirming Heloise’s authorship on objective grounds in an article that is supposed to take as impetus von Moos’ critique of ideological determination in historical scholarship. Even von Moos himself seems to abandon the idea when, in 1980, “overimpressed by Benton’s arguments in favor of forgery,” he began to profess agnosticism about Heloise’s authorship of her letters after having expressed relief that the “ominous” hypothesis—which Benton had proposed and then newly abandoned—regarding the entire Heloise-Abelard correspondence, including the Historia Calamitatum, being forgeries created through an elaborate scheme spanning both the 12th and 13th centuries (Newman, “Authority” 123; Marenbon 26). Von Moos is relieved because, while rejecting the authenticity of Abelard’s words would have
“changed the whole intellectual profile of the twelfth century,” allowing Heloise’s writings be held in abeyance by doubt is “a comparatively minor, if not exactly trivial question with respect to the history of women in the Middle Ages, or, more generally, the ‘history of sensibility’” (Newman, “Authority” 123).

As Barbara Newman points out in her historiographical affirmation of the authenticity of Heloise’s letters from a feminist perspective, by relegating the question of authenticity of the Heloisian letters to the realm of sensibility, von Moos implies that the whole affair is impossible to ascertain “in fact” or objectively, and “in any case, it hardly matters” (“Authority” 124). Newman, whose 1992 article “Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloise,” reprinted in 1995 in her powerful From Virile Woman to WomanChrist, is considered something of a definitive last word on the authenticity question on part of Heloise’s letters, though, as we can see from Marenbon’s effort to yet again “finally” put to an end the same question in 2000, the matter is still unresolved despite more converts to the side of authenticity. However conclusive, Newman’s analysis is definitive of a second-wave feminist, staunchly materialist approach to the

30 In 2000, Newman authored a review of Constant Mews’ The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France, which was published in 1999. In it, Newman describes the academic context that produced the body of misogynist scholarship against which her article on the double repression of Heloise pushes off. She describes the period after 1972, when John Benton made the first of his series of accusations of literary fraud, as the “worst time” for the authenticity debate because Benton’s proposal had, “after remaining at a simmer for decades... [brought the debate to] the boiling point.” She also describes von Moos’ Mittelalterforschung as “skeptical” and “deflection away from the contested letters to the ideological stakes of the argument,” hinting at his so-be-be turn to explicit agnosticism on the matter. In 2000, however, Newman believes that “the tables have turned... thanks to... broader transformations wrought by feminist scholarship.” Where I believe Newman does not go far enough in service of the authenticity debate is her lack of identification with von Moos’ sweeping project of ideological criticism. In fact, Newman is making an ideological critique in her deconstruction of misogynist scholarship, but she does not go far enough, I believe, to do what would truly move the debate beyond its impasse: to critique and finally abandon altogether the flawed conception of objectivity used by proponents of forgery.

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authenticity debate that finds unsatisfying and disempowering the relegation of the discussion on Heloise “in an airy realm of pure textuality,” a mindset that also describes much of the outpouring of feminist work in humanistic research in general and medieval scholarship in particular in the 1980s and 1990s (“Authority” 124). From her feminist perspective, Newman finds the decades of misogynistic scholarship and centuries of misogynistic popular portrayal to be not only offensive, but logically indefensible. I very much agree with Newman’s starting point here; indeed, as a woman, reviewing the worst anti-feminist/misogynist scholarship from the past decades on how Heloise supposedly could not have written her own letters gives one the operose feeling that, instead of reading research on a medieval abbess respected by her peers and honored by her Pope in 2014, I feel I am being patronizingly instructed that a woman must choose either demure social respectability or affirmative sexual vivacity. Indeed, such is the function and power of regulative fiction: by shaping, or rather demanding our desires to be a certain way, the effects of its subjectivation forms the very foundations of our beings and our most intimate desires. And so, even in the advent of the 21st century, after who-knows-how-many waves of “feminist takeovers” of this in society and that in academia, even in the rarified context of intellectual discourse, “women,” itself by no means an unproblematic category, must still not be allowed to refuse to renounce sexual desire, or to speak of marriage as not the highest honor with which a woman can be crowned, lest 15th-century slurs of being “disordered” from lust is rooted up and hurled at her again.31

31 This comment on Heloise from Jean Molinet’s Le Roman de la Rose Moralise is quoted by Deborah Fraioli in her 2012 “Assessing Medieval Moral Outrage”: “[Heloise] peut este aco(m)paree a lame pecheresse esprize de concupiscence pour saouler ses voluntez desordonnees et a ceste cause ne se vouloit marier” (“[Heloise] can be compared to a sinful soul infatuated with concupiscence in order to sate her disordered desires and for that reason did not want to marry.” (English translation Fraioli’s, 58n11). To be fair to Fraioli, the scholar
Thus, after presenting the embarrassingly recent and embarrassingly ideologically backward scholarship that defends the “grotesque hypothesis” that Heloise did not write the letters bearing her name, Newman demonstrates that such a hypothesis is “grounded in a priori notions of what a medieval abbess could write, frank disapproval of what Heloise did write, and at times outright misogyny” (“Authority” 122). Newman further shows that, beyond starting from an ideologically indefensible position, proponents of the forgery hypothesis makes a faulty argument from two different perspectives: that of ascertainable facts, and that of psychology. 1) Newman lists the solid historical evidence in favor of Heloise’s authorship and the lack of definitive proofs otherwise. 32 And 2) by elucidating the necessary and unmatched ethical and psychological perversity that would be demanded of Abelard if the “priest/husband... [was supposed to have] fraudulently paint[ed] such a portrait of his wife and spiritual daughter (“Authority” 122).

32 The historical evidence that Newman gives in support of the authenticity of the letters are based on both corroborating historical facts and evidences from the manuscript tradition:

1) “Two decades of argument over grammatical constructions, alleged anachronisms, and minute points of monastic observance have yielded no more consensus than the previous decades of argument over what Heloise or Abelard might have plausibly thought or felt” (“Authority” 130).

2) “Nothing in the letters contradicts any documented historical fact, and alleged internal discrepancies have all been satisfactorily explained” (“Authority” 131). And

3) “The manuscript tradition is late but solid” on three further counts:

a. “[A]ll the manuscripts ascribe the letters to Abelard and Heloise, never to anyone else or to Abelard alone, nor are they ever copied anonymously like letters in a model collection”

b. “[T]he tradition is strikingly uniform; the Historia Calamitatum and the letters are always found together in the same order, without major variants,” and

c. “Heloise did not in fact publish the letters,” which explains why “the letters themselves remained unknown until the mid-thirteenth century” (“Authority” 131-133).
Yet, as cuttlingly illuminating as Newman’s critique of why the question of authenticity of Heloise’s letters arose in the first place and the psychological impossibility of Abelard as forger is, the feminist medieval scholar must still admit that hers is a “fervent but no doubt futile attempt” (“Authority” 121). Indeed, wish as she might to settle the “long-standing controversy over the letters, which has become a kind of institution in medieval studies [and] has brought many historians to a point of settled agnosticism,” even Newman can only say that “if the letters of Heloise are to be effectively challenged, the burden of proof rests squarely on the assailants, not the defenders” by claiming once and for all Heloise for feminists today (Newman, “Authority” 131). This wearisome evasion is, I believe, due to Newman’s unnecessary and theoretically unsound commitment to the positivist dream of objectivity. It is because of this commitment that Newman can only corroborate, not state “definitively” or “objectivity”—both of which, as I will explicate further in a moment, exists neither factually nor theoretically—her theory in the affirmative.

Of course, Newman’s belief is well-supported, but while this small mountain of evidence would perhaps suffice for scholars dissecting any other historical figure, the question of authenticity has nevertheless remained after the publication of Newman’s piece in the 1990s. As I have discussed before, proponents of authenticity is an ever-growing group, but attempts to affirm Heloise’s authorship can only do so by talking around a definitive confirmation and disproving counterarguments as opposed to providing a positive account. Beyond the lack of evidence, I believe, the power and importance of the historical woman that is Heloise and her writings demand that we go further. While I have demonstrated my first point that scholars who critique the writing of
Heloise as forgery cannot do so based on a split between Heloise and the Heloisian, my second point hopes to explain why, despite her Herculean effort, Newman’s feminist affirmation of Heloise’s authorship is ultimately confounded. The cause is twofold.

First, as proponents of literary fraud are fond of pointing out, there is no Latin urtext of the correspondence that is dated to the time of composition in the mid-12th century. The earliest manuscript containing the first eight letters of the correspondence is also the most complete we have. Now famously known as the Troyes 802, it is dated to the late-13th century at the earliest, but more commonly to the 14th century, and missing Abelard’s letter to the nuns of the Paraclete, which includes his profession of faith, perhaps intended to ameliorate his double reputation for heresy, as well Heloise’s long and incisive list of theological questions in the Problemata Heloissae (McLaughlin and Wheeler 317). In 1938, Étienne Gilson, who wished to defend Heloise’s authorship of her own letters but, unfortunately, deploys another late-coming image-making of Heloise as “a heroine of pagan grandeur” in doing so, notes that “we lack almost everything which might permit us to discuss [the story of Abelard and Heloise] objectively” since, “first of all, we are without a good text” (Mews, Abelard 17; Gilson vi). After Gilson’s book first came out, first in French and then in translation in the 1930s, the Basilian monk Joseph Muckle did put out a series of critical editions of the correspondence in Latin according to nine medieval manuscripts containing portions of the epistolary exchange in the 1950s. The same problem regarding the lack of any urtext in Latin persists, however, since none of the nine manuscripts from which Muckle works dates from the times of composition and none contains the entire cannon. Furthermore, despite Muckle’s work, I believe that Gilson’s point from 1938 persists when he noted that, even if we should finally come
upon an authoritative edition of the correspondence, a proper reading would demand the
would-be critique to possess thorough knowledge of

"[h]istory of facts, history of ecclesiastical institutions, canon law, history of classical literature and of medieval literature, history of philosophy, history of patristic and medieval theology... Indeed, everything has as place in it. The worst of it is, everything dovetails. A mistake in Latin or ignorance of a fact can at any moment entangle the historian who is guild of them in a series of arbitrary interpretations" (vii-viii).

Hindered by the lack of both an authentic urtext and the tools to perform an "authentic" or "objective" reading of the urtext that does not exist, the impossibility of the pursuit of the debate "in fact" is further demonstrated by Marenbon, who so fetishizes his own muscular adherence to objectivity that he turns on von Moos' initial proposal. Despite Marenbon's abandonment of von Moos' 1974 project, he goes on nevertheless to offer an enlightening way to divide the scholarship published in the 25 years following von Moos' *Mittelalterforschung*, from about 1975 to 2000. What Marenbon enlightens, however, is not what he thinks, when he offers the surprisingly simple evaluative demarcation of separating recent scholarship into "those [scholars] who respect evidence and the burdens of argument based on it and those who do not," which, Marenbon admits, "cuts right across the more obvious division between upholders and deniers of the Letters' authenticity (21). The very fact that these two groups do not align is because the evidence is inconclusive, and demonstrates my point regarding the impossibility of "objectivity in fact"—that is, definitive designation by historical evidence—in a context where evidence does not prove, but only suggests. This inconclusiveness is rooted in the lack of a contemporary and complete urtext of Heloise's letters, yet a literal, primary, and original urtext is the only evidence on which staunchly materialist and positivist
arguments can rely. For these types of arguments, the words that come down to us as Heloise’s are meaningless unless they are authentic.\footnote{Marenbon, in his positivism, belongs to this group. For any author to make use of this body of text by Abelard and Heloise—or any other historical text, for that matter—Marenbon demands that the scholar first make a profession of faith of sorts, declaring whether or not he or she believes the text is authentic, because he believes that “agnosticism should not be an option for those who are proposing to interpret the Letters in a way that deserves to engage our interests”; the failure or refusal to stake a claim on authenticity amounts to “a failure of respect for evidence and argument” (24). Marenbon’s attitude toward the value of interpreting literary fiction, which indeed is the genre to which the so-called personal letters of Heloise are often relegated, is particularly dismissive:

\textbf{“[W]hy should we be interested in an exercise that can claim to be no more than a display of the modern critic’s ingenuity, since it renounces any claim to illuminate what someone, or more than one person, wrote at some time or times.... But as soon as the critic engages in interpretation... the question of authenticity becomes important. There is a world of difference in how we understand a real game and a game that has been stage, which is what [the Letters] would be, were the Letters not authentic” (27-28)}

I strongly disagree with this position, because “Heloise,” on the level of interpretation, precisely literary fiction, her various manifestations are effects of how different philosophies in certain times chose to see her, and the analysis of these effects is important beyond the validity of the referent. We can affirm the historical woman and her powerful presence in her letters and history, which in itself is “enough,” but also recognize that her importance for us, now, as regulative fiction.
and the life this correspondence portrays warrants, for me, Heloise’s rank among
history’s remarkable human beings who, be they male or female, deserve contemporary
feminist attention. On the current impasse on the debate on the authenticity of the literal urtext, however, I believe that the passive wait for new evidence must not be where the
importance of the Heloisian texts and figure stops, and the lack thereof can be
transcended by reading both the texts and the Heloisian figure that arises as literary
fiction through a poststructural lens.

Beyond the lack of a literal literary urtext, and on the second level of my point
regarding the impossibility of “historical objectivity” regarding the Heloisian letters, it is
also necessary to point out that we also have no access to a “psychological urtext” of
correspondences that would enable us to somehow speak for the inner life of the 12th
century author. Confirm as we might the historical Heloise’s authorship of the critical
Latin edition now produced for our benefit by Muckle throughout the 1950s, a composite
work cross-referenced from nine manuscripts from the 14th century onward, a “correct”
psychological reading of the Heloisian texts, which is unable to be proven conclusive as
authentic, is impossible. Here, I would point out that the Heloisian texts is distinct not
only from the Heloisian figure, but also from the historical woman by virtue of being a
literary creation. Thus, to produce a “psychologically true” reading of the text would
supposed that a modern reader can give a correct reading of how Heloise indeed felt in
the 12th century and through a text that accurately transcribes her feelings without the
distortion of human subjectivity—a feat, as far as I know, has not been achieved either
before or after the time of Heloise. Further, this text, perfectly correspondent to Heloise’s
inner psyche, in order to have reached us without distortion, needs to have been
transmitted to us through the following chain of events: the letters, which may or may not have been composed as private epistolary documents in the way we conceive of personal letters now, were collected by Heloise through the latter half of her life; the collection was then edited to an unknown extent for an unknown purpose by Heloise; then this edited collection disappeared from view until it reappeared, first in a dubious translation in French 150 years after the date of composition, then in many more dubious translations and editions, until, over 800 years after the date of composition, it is finally cobbled back together in the 1950s from nine pieces of manuscripts that do not date from the time of composition. Putting aside the biases of each of our own ideological proclivities and ignoring even the 900 years' worth of image-making, as I have outlined above, it would a stretch indeed for anyone to claim to reach through the millennia of obfuscation and reach the mind of the historical Heloise.

Thus, persuaded am I am by the power of feminist scholarship from the 1980s onward to claim Heloise as a proto-feminist, I must point out that a great portion of this body of scholarship also draws its power by purporting to reaching a “psychological urtext” I believe to be impossible to reach. Coming back to Barbara Newman’s powerful analysis in favor of Heloise’s authenticity, we can see that Newman makes the case for Heloise’s authenticity both in terms of text and evidence, and in terms of being, or, in other words, Heloise integrity of feeling, both authentically experienced and expressed. Newman argues that both Heloise and Abelard are “psychologically more plausible figures if we accept… that the letters we have are essentially theirs” even though, she admits, many have dismissed arguments based on psychology because it is supposed to be “incurably subjective, unpersuasive, and unmedieval” (“Authority” 122, 129). But she
nevertheless chooses to hold on to this method simply because she is loathe to
“renounce[e] any of the tools at our disposal” in her pursuit to “do justice” to the texts
(“Authority” 130). Further, Newman believes that, behind the call to renounce
psychohistory as a tool for historical research, it is merely more of the more of the same:
thinly veiled behind the so-called “more ‘objective’ and respectable concerns” is the
attempt to not directly confront the misogynist “repugnance for the literary Heloise”
(“Authority” 129).

Thus, Newman’s argument in favor of using a this approach is a negative of a
negative, defined by the inadequacies of those who renounce the psychological approach
as inadequate yet without providing a better positive reason for it save for the fact that it
provides “the least problematic hypothesis” (“Authority” 122). For this feminist analysis,
what recommends Heloise as a proto-feminist heroine is predicated upon the figure’s
psychological integrity. If Heloise’s depth of passion and its unbridled expression proved
too compromising for traditional readers to reconcile with her also very real reputation
for piety and austerity as an abbess respected by the religious establishment, then, in
order for feminists to be able to claim her full-heartedly without any logical obstacles,
Heloise had to be found to be uncompromising in her passions, the supreme and inherent
good that made her so compelling to feminist readers in the first place. This is why
Newman cannot claim Heloise full-heartedly, citing “a strong anti-feminist streak in her
writing” in addition to her being twice silenced by Abelard, when “first she sacrificed her
desire,” and then she was “asked to sacrifice her love” (“Authority” 149, 155). Beyond
the impasse resulting from the lack of a literal, literary urtext, this second impasse faced
by Newman’s feminist reading is the psychological one in which Heloise’s “spirit dies, or
at least goes underground forever” when she “actually submits... dwindle[ing] into virtue as a heroine of romance might dwindle into marriage” (“Authority” 156). My proposal to augment this feminist approach to both the historical Heloise and the Heloisian figures, which can now be united by her text, inadequate as it might be when we demand it to be a perfectly correspondence literary representation of the inner life of the 12th century abbess, is to reject once and for all the concept of “objectivity in theory” as traditionally conceived in historical research, and adopt instead a performative understanding of our relationship—as readers, admirers, critics—to the text itself.

This criticism of “objectivity in theory,” by which I refer to both the sense of objectivity as being a conjured-up, impossible goal, and of its place as guiding ideology for scholars who has not shaken off its shackles of course, has been more than subtly critiqued by scholars such as von Moos and Newman. Neither scholar, however, goes far enough by taking their initial critique to its logical conclusion. Von Moos, for example, seems to return to accepting objectivity as possible again with his turn to agnosticism on Heloise’s authorship. As for Newman, despite her infinitely intriguing interpretation of Heloise as a “mystic manquée” through her expressions of love “in the language of disinterested passion and absolute self-surrender,” arrives back at wearisome resignation after her impassioned defense of Heloise on all fronts, historically, psychologically, and literally, she closes nevertheless with a wistful but perhaps even more frustrated (and frustrating) capitulation to impasse: “We shall never know. But we can only hope that her double repression... led her finally to that moment of complete authenticity that Marguerite [Porete in Mirror] reached at the end of her trials” (Virile 9; “Authority” 156).
Thus, to move Newman’s criticism forward, which I find particularly valuable both by the power of her argument and by a seeming lack of scholarship that carries on Newman’s sort of large-scale ideological and historiographical critique of the Heloisian debate after the mid-1990s, despite continued interest in the 12th century abbess from many younger scholars who subscribe to a less second-wave and materialist feminist philosophy, I propose to do away with “objectivity in theory” in a new reading of the Heloisian figure, which encompasses the trajectory of the historical woman in life, in literature, and in criticism. The enterprise of pinning the psychological truth of Heloise, be it supposedly stemming from the inaccessible historical woman or the creative work of later fantasy-making on part of the abbess’ posterity, is nary a possibility when we are supposed to approach the urtext we do not have with an ideological commitment to “objectivity” in historical research to which we cannot unproblematically cling. In any case, the lack of access to such a “psychological urtext” of the historical person does not matter, though it does matter what Heloise means. When I speak of “what Heloise means,” I refer to the significance of what we make of the Heloise that reaches us today. I do not refer to what Heloise historically “meant,” which, I hope I have argued convincingly, does not matter in any case. I believe this is a logical conclusion of von Moos’ ideological and historiographical critique of the state of modern scholarship on the Heloisian texts and figure because while he does not directly cite Barthes’s thesis regarding the death of the literal author in his 1974 work on Heloise, he is clearly familiar with the body of poststructural critique to which the literary theorist belongs, and proposes to study the text “as the visible effect of an unknown cause,” since “the reality of the author... loses its brute autonomy and takes on the value of a sign” (von Moos
Having abandoned objectivity both in fact and in theory, and in pursuit of a text that is now allowed to be admitted as being in flux as it always has been, my reading would not be one that replaces an old theory or approach, but accrues on top of the work that came before like Newman’s. This view of my new reading echoes the process that the Heloisian figure has experienced through the centuries, accumulating more and larger queerness as she permeates from reading to reading, philosophy to philosophy. And the admission of addition instead of renunciation, parallel possibilities instead of dichotomy and binary, I believe, is the crux of the fundamental change from the previous scholarly approach that demanded Heloise be one thing or something else entirely and perfect opposite, such as serious nun pitched against the sensuous sinner.

And so, I would argue that the effect of centuries of ideologically-driven scholarly interests—that is, interests and biases highly situated in specific historical times, places, and other contexts—is a canon of work that, though it might profess to do the work of historicizing toward a more objective reading, instead has recorded our own relationship to the story of Abelard and Heloise. In this sense, they can be more accurately called the signified, or the referents by which our own gaze is reflected back to us in spectrum of ideological persuasions. As we have seen from the impasse modern scholarship has reached regarding her from a variety of angles, the Heloisian figure is a slippery one, its elusiveness stemming from an inherent lack—the lack of a good text, the lack of a way to approach a good text—which, in turn, has enabled this figure to be used to sustain and record the varied and many interpretations that posterity has attempted to make of it. This

34 In fact, von Moos cites Barthes’ work elsewhere, such as in his research on the signification of medieval clothing, where he cites Barthes’ work on the history and sociology of clothing.
capacity to be interpreted in seemingly opposing ways—this largeness—is queer; Heloise and the Heloisian is strange, and no less remarkable today as she was in life.

BEYOND IMPASSE: HELOISE’S “SIC ET SIC FEMINISM”

From a queered perspective, I read the Heloisian figure as an effect, constantly in process and continually reconstituting its readers and in turn being (re)constituted by them via the performative relationship between it as an object and the reader as a subject, though, of course, these positionalities are now constantly in flux. And so, too, is the figure of Heloise, perpetually in motion by the process of interpretation, its mobile queerness denying and defying the possibility of an “objective,” final, and best reading. The signifier that names Heloise, so far removed from the historical woman, maps onto the concept of fiction both the sense of the intensely literary nature of the legacy of the historical Heloise, and, more importantly, of the Heloisian figure being created and “not real,” an effect created by copies without an original.

Using my augmented feminist lens, then, I propose that we can now move beyond the psychological impasse by which Newman seemed to be flummoxed into resignation. Whatever the inner workings of Heloise when she wrote her letters and lived the acts both described and performed by her writing, I re-read her today as a queerly-aware feminist who rejects at once the staunchly positivist ideal of objectivity, the misogynist protestation that a woman respected cannot also be a woman in love and lust, and, finally, the second-wave feminist dismissal that Heloise cannot be submissive, be it literal or literary, and maintain the integrity of her would-be feminist sexuality.
From a poststructural approach, I have proposed (though only briefly outlined) a performative understanding of subject-object relations in historical research. From a queerly-aware feminist perspective, I would put forth Heloise as embodying a "sic et sic" feminism that, instead of disputation, enlarges itself as it accrues positionalities, experiences, and authenticities. This queerly feminist way of understanding of what is possible, instead of being characterized by an imperative of renunciation, operates by harmonizing previously seeming incompatible choices and by bringing into being a previously impossible life. It is Heloise's queer ability to harmonize in herself, her life and its expressions, the seemingly opposites that draw admirers and critics of all stripes, including my latest queered interpretation.

I am not the first, of course, to point out that Heloise cuts a queer figure across medieval research because she is defined, at least for me, mainly by her embodiment of paradoxes and dichotomies, especially considering her historical context. At once lover, wife, student, mother, spiritual daughter and sister in her relationships with Abelard, and at once teacher, administrator, nun, religious leader, theologian, whore, degenerate, hypocrite, saint, and legend to the world, Heloise is a woman whose spectrum of life choices rivals any modern woman. Textually, there is, of course, her famous juxtapositions of epithets in the beginning of her first letter in response to Abelard’s Historia Calamitatum. Claire Nouvet’s 1990 article, “The Discourse of the ‘whore’: an Economy of Sacrifice,” documents the extensive list of rhetorical reversals by which Heloise queer and unbind traditional concepts such as sacrifice, gift-giving, marriage, etc. Heloise has also been described as offering modern scholars “a queer entry into female sexuality in a prenormative Middle Ages - queer because her subject is chastity and her
aim, a new kind of spirituality, but queer too because of her very understanding of female
desire as polymorphous and perverse but not abject.... [and because of] an asceticism that is
neither heterosexual nor counter-heterosexual, neither sexual nor asexual, but that
grapples with desire, imperfection, and impurity” (Lochrie 46). Heloise has also been
proposed as a hospitable text through which scholars can explore and explode “the
tensions between history and its uses for life, especially queer life” by claiming for her
the new categorization as a “premodern queer formation” (McCallum and Tuhkanen 4).

My addition to this trend is that I believe it is important to “queer” the figure of
Heloise precisely because she has, in her afterlife, been made an (perhaps unwilling,
though surely unconsulted) archetype of femininity and bourgeois romance. With a queer
awareness, we can now also understand afresh the “question of the lack of fit, the
difficulties of interpretation, the moments of textual resistance or of unintelligibility”
with which Heloise’s text and figure forces readers to wrestle (McCallum and Tuhkanen
10). Heloise as a kind of process in unbecoming, instead of static existence, maps directly
onto the field of vision of contemporary queer theory. With a queer awareness in mind,
we can see that the roles unable to be reconciled inside the view of feminist scholarship
from the 1990s can now instead be seen as all fitting together perfectly simply because
Heloise chooses to embody it all. Performatively conceived, this queer largeness, this
ambiguity and capacity, I do not pretend to give a final reading, lest we fall prey to the
seductive veneer of objectivity again, but merely the opening up of the Heloisian figure
to more.

PROPOSALS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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Based on what I hope is a solid historical and theoretical grounding for the continued employment of the Heloisian canon (again: the woman, her texts, her image, and its critics) for future research, I would suggest a project that follows out the logic developed here of how the Heloisian figure has in fact been queered by the existing authenticity debate. While inspired by misogyny, as Newman has demonstrated, and based on problematic conceptions of what this, or any medieval woman could and did feel and write, the proposal that a man/men forged this document of ultimate femininity (be it Abelard, Jean de Meun, or other nameless but resolutely male literary forgers) in fact, I believe, maps this whole correspondence onto queer grounds, both as “camp,” that is, femininity in excess, and via the “troubadour effect.” In the first instance, by arguing that the Heloisian texts cannot be by a woman because it is *too feminine*, this androcentric approach is in fact unknowingly pushing Heloisian figure into the realm of camp. In her masculine wisdom and erudition, the forger behind the texts bearing Heloise’s name is, according to the meta-logic of proponents of forgery, identifiable by his failure to imitate femininity and its expressions by performing either *too much* of it or *too well*. To question authenticity on these grounds is to propose that, in its excessive femininity, which is capitalized by 17th and 18th century distorted attempt to crown the 12th century abbess with the title of saint of love, the Heloisian figure has paradoxically become too feminine to be believed it is by a woman.

The troubadour effect, on the other hand, is the concept of “male femininity”—that which “constitutes sexual difference in heterosexual fictions”—and how the model of normalized heterosexual romantic love in Western tradition, beginning with medieval courtly love literature, is actually “a perverse impersonation of heterosexuality”
This tradition is excellently chronicled by Anne Callahan’s *Writing the Voice of Pleasure: Heterosexuality without Women*, in which the author points out the ideologically central concept of the heterosexual couple, though it seems to be the norm in romantic literary narratives, is in fact only an effect in writing, created by a male writer. Callahan, who is not a medievalist by training but a professor of French literature, records the tenacious exclusion of female subjectivity and the role of women as “nonpresence” in medieval and particularly French narratives of heterosexual romance by tracing the history of woman-as-effect beginning in the medieval tradition of troubadour love songs of the 12th and 13th centuries in the south of France (9). We can locate, of course, Heloise in this tradition as the feminine object of desire in Abelard’s popular love songs. Yet even though Heloise and her texts would seem not directly to belong to the tradition that Callahan describes, which is “the way in which the poet assumes femininity as a source of both subjectivity and subjection,” I would propose that the way in which Abelard’s role as one auctor of Heloise’s argument against marriage is amplified infinitely by modern scholarship that would make Abelard the sole aucttor of Heloise, thereby coming from a misogynist ideology, and yet arriving at a queer conclusion.

Further, I would love to carry on Newman’s appellation of Heloise as a “mystic manqué” and analyze the Heloisian texts as going beyond simple and rhetorical inversions (*Virile* 9). The Heloisian figure encompasses, through the historical woman’s life, her writing, and her posthumous images, multiple sites excess that, I would argue, is Bataillean by speaking at the register of desire, and by pushing the “schema of desire and its scarcity” beyond “an epistemology of utility and teleology” (Winnubst 6).
It is the Heloisian figure’s “opening up of a field of pleasures irreducible to the logics of either utility or transgression issued by restricted economies” that makes her so difficult to categorize by anything but an approach that seeks to unbind and multiply. Heloise’s expression of mystical rapture, when set in context of her relationship to Abelard as lover and to her son Astrolabe as mother, narrates a search for lost intimacy from the divine and unreality of her ephemeral affair. In casting away her individuality in favor of a boundless union with Abelard, Heloise sounds indeed more like the tide of love mystics that is to rise up in her wake. This understanding Heloise’s sexuality in a queer and mystical context, I believe, allows the queery-aware modern feminist to move beyond second-wave feminism’s attempt to construct a defined feminist sexuality to a more complex, fluid, and open notion. Here, I quote the words of Sister Alma Egger, a Benedictine nun who, earlier this year in March, made her Final Profession of Vows to God at the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Connecticut to Mother Alma. In the film God is the Bigger Elvis, Mother Alma discusses her understanding of a new kind of monastic sexuality:

We are very sexual women here at the abbey. Our sexuality is not denied us in any way. It’s getting beyond the very narrow dimension of sex that’s the physical, genital-based sex. To sing is a physical act. I get a great amount of pleasure, and I want to give pleasure to other people. My voice goes out, my acolyte partner’s voice goes out, and it blends together. It’s really an act of physical union, and it transcend into something that is much higher and deeper (29:31).

Thus, with this modern Benedictine nun’s words in mind, it is perhaps not so hard to believe that Heloise, our 12th century Benedictine abbess and theologian, was not denied her sexuality after all, finding instead a fully feminist fulfillment of her mystical and rapturous desires as she sang hymns that she composed, with all her literary gifts, for
the sisters of the Paraclete, together at last with both Abelard and her community of learned women.
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