

### **Part III: Medieval Studies**

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## 6. The Ethics of Abelard and the Morals of Heloise

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### I

In his second letter to Heloise Abelard cites a text that is not found in the same form in any modern version of the Bible. Apparently Proverbs XVIII, 17 in his copy of the Vulgate read: "He who is first in accusing himself is just." In our text the same verse reads: "He that is first in his own cause seemeth just: but his neighbour cometh and searcheth him."

I think that, all too often, modern readers have approached the *Story of Calamities* as neighbors "searching" what they suppose to be an essay in self-justification; and it must be granted that the self-centered bias of one speaking in his own cause is by no means absent from Abelard's account. All the same, he was truly more anxious to *be* just than to seem so; and we shall only understand the record that he has left us correctly, if we study it in the light of his views about the *justification* of a sinner in the eyes of God. For in the *History of Calamities* Abelard is consciously his own accuser; he is seeking to show that God's disposition of his fate is just. He distinguishes sharply between the dispositions of God and the opinions and judgments of his neighbors, being confident (indeed rather overconfident) of the justice of his cause against all of *their* searching.

Outwardly his story is a letter of consolation to a friend. Heloise refers to it in this way twice in *her* first letter; and the best of the manuscripts is headed by this title. Abelard offers the "history of his misfortunes" (a title which likewise derives from his first sentence) as a written supplement to the oral consolation he gave his friend at some earlier time when they were together.

We do not know who the friend was, or what *his* tribulations were, but Abelard aims to "console" him by making him see that "In comparison with my trials . . . your own are nothing, or only slight" so that as a result he "will find them easier to bear" (Radice, 51).

Now what kind of *consolation* can this be, to be told to keep one's chin up because there are others who are much worse off than one is oneself? Children who are regaled with stories of the starving hordes in Africa when they turn up their noses at their dinners, soon recognize the hypocrisy of such talk; and when the example is brought closer home, and they are incited to emulate some more self-disciplined sibling, they are no less quick to search out the selfish aspect of *his* motives. Thus Heloise, in her first letter, remarks "You wrote your friend a long letter of consolation, prompted no doubt by *his* misfortunes, but really telling of your own. The detailed account you gave of these may have been intended for *his* comfort, but it also greatly increased *our own* feeling of desolation; in your desire to heal *his* wounds you have dealt *us* fresh wounds of grief as well as reopening the old" (110-11, my italics). The attempt to comfort someone else in this peculiar way, cannot but be an appeal for sympathy for oneself.

Nevertheless, Abelard's story does deserve the title of *epistula consolatoria*, for we can readily see what sort of prior verbal consolation it was designed to support. Consolation in Abelard's view comes from the reflective awareness that *we never* suffer unjustly. There is always a fully sufficient *moral* ground for what happens to us; and if we will only ask "Why me?" seriously (instead of as a rhetorical protest against the apparent unfairness of things) we shall not fail to find an answer — an answer that will itself be a comfort.

Comfort is something Abelard believes that he understands, because he has often been in need of it; and when he needed it most desperately he found it. So he knows where it should be sought. The truth that he now knows is that one man cannot comfort another, for comfort can only come from that Holy Spirit which Jesus — the incarnate Truth itself — promised that the Father would send us. It is not the fact that Abelard's tribulations are greater, but rather the way he has found comfort in them, that will guide his friend on the path toward consolation; and what Abelard must already have told him verbally, is precisely where comfort is to be looked for in time of tribulation. The tribulation comes from a just judge who is also a father. Because he is truly a father he will spare the rod, when the child is ready to kiss it. Justice gives place to mercy as soon as it is itself recognized and acknowledged.

This theory of *divine* consolation is quite distinct from the conception of a properly human consolation advanced by Heloise, who readily offers the sympathy that she feels Abelard is asking for, with the sensible comment — with which all who have ever received human comfort in trouble must agree — that "It is always some consolation in sorrow to feel that it is shared, and any burden laid on several is carried more lightly or removed" (110). The two

concepts of consolation are not irreconcilable; both avenues of comfort are available, and both should be kept open. But the human comfort must be subordinated to the divine; otherwise the “sharing of burdens” becomes the organization of mutiny against the Father’s authority in the human family, the lending of aid and comfort to rebellion. The last sentence of Abelard’s “story of calamities” is a warning against those who rebel in their secret hearts against the meaning of the words “Thy will be done,” and set their own will above the will of God (106).

In Abelard’s ethical theory there are two distinct kinds of moral justification that can be offered for the tribulations with which we are all afflicted. God’s Providence, his moral disposition of things, can always be justified in *both* ways. But the two ways are logically quite distinct, and so is the comfort that we derive from them. Hence we may be more comforted in one way than in the other at any given moment with respect to a specific misfortune.<sup>1</sup>

In the order of logic first place must be given to the *trial by ordeal* argument. Adam came from the hand of his Creator, perfect and unspotted by sin. But God gave him a commandment; and God did this because Adam could not know himself as the morally rational being that God made, he could not enjoy the self-knowledge that God created him *for*, unless there was a tension between God’s command and his own natural impulse. In this original context, the reason for the existence of tribulation is that it tests us. If the test is a harsh one, if it pushes us to the limit of our strength, we have only to reflect that as a result of the test we come to know ourselves properly, and to discover what we are capable of. That this self-knowledge is a good is self-evident, and needs no justification. Thus all that is required for the full justification of God in his testing capacity, is a demonstration that although we often fail, our failure is always our own fault, just as the failure of our first father was plainly his fault. God never tries us beyond the real limit of the natural capacities that he has given us. This was what Abelard believed that he had learned from God’s dealings with him in the matter of Heloise. In that instance, he himself attempted (with Heloise’s full support) to do something that was beyond their joint strength. Seen in this perspective his own castration could be recognized as an act of divine grace through which the humanly insuperable stone of stumbling had been removed from his path.

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<sup>1</sup>Abelard’s story illustrates this — though if he had turned back to complete it on his death-bed he would certainly have produced a remarkably well balanced casting of accounts on the two sides. (See further note 2 below.)

In the moral order, however — i.e. in the order of our actual self-knowledge in experience — it is not innocence but sin that is the primitive fact. Morally speaking, we bring tribulation upon ourselves as the just punishment for our presumption, our refusal to recognize our own limitations. Originally God gave Adam dominion over all creation, save for one tiny corner. The invasion of that one corner at once became Adam's project. For Abelard this is emblematic of the fact that the spontaneous form of human self-knowledge is a superb confidence in our ability to preserve the happiness secured for us by the untrammelled exercise of our proven capacities. Not many of us, perhaps, are as close to Adam, or to his Creator, as the young Abelard knew himself to be. Hence, even now, although we can examine the alleged "heresies" of his Trinitarian theology with a calmness which his contemporaries were quite unable to achieve, we still cannot get the hang of his theory of original sin. Abelard knew what Adam's sin was, because he had lived Adam's story; and if the story had a different outcome for Abelard and Heloise than it did for Adam and Eve, that was only because these latest children of the first sin had looked forward to a higher destiny even than that of our universal parents. In this context, the justification of suffering is that it teaches us to estimate our own misdeeds correctly.

Thus, Abelard writes his story at a time when he stands in daily peril of his life. He is abbot of a community of monks who have (so he believes and reports) made more than one attempt to poison him. In his letter of consolation he points to the evident parallel between himself and St. Benedict (which makes the testing aspect of the situation explicit by drawing attention to the glorious crown for which he is competing). Like St. Benedict he leaves the rebellious community to go back to his own place (there to establish Heloise and her group of homeless nuns in the new convent of the Paraclete). But then he does what Benedict did *not* do. He leaves the haven of that convent of the Divine Comforter, and returns to his rebellious monks. His story *ends* with a reminder of the sword of Damocles (which describes his actual situation) and an appeal to the precept and the example of Jesus (which explains his decision to accept this terrible trial). "Take comfort," he tells his correspondent,

from what the Lord told his followers about the followers of the Devil: "As they persecuted me, they will persecute you. If the world hates you, it hated me first, as you know well. If you belonged to the world the world would love his own" (John XV, 2, 18, 19) . . . each one of the faithful, when it comes to the test, must

take comfort at least from the knowledge that God's supreme goodness allows nothing to be done outside his plan, and whatever is started wrongly, God himself brings it to the best conclusion (104-5).

But the desire to take up his cross and follow Christ is not the *whole* truth about Abelard's return from the Paraclete to the natural and spiritual wilderness of his native Brittany. When Heloise argues that he ought not to desert herself and her nuns, and lays bare the moral wilderness of her own inner heart — explicitly charging him with being its only cause, and with having caused it wantonly out of simple selfish lust; when she backs up this interpretation of events, by arguing that if he had ever really loved her he could not now be so coldly indifferent to her suffering, he could not deny her the *human* comfort, the sympathy and fellow-feeling that she so vividly expresses in response to *his* story (111-18) — faced with this challenge Abelard gives her, at first, no answer at all. He simply denies that he was indifferent to her welfare, offers to send her the best spiritual counsel that he can on any question, and asks for her prayers. The rest of his letter is a short discourse on the power of prayer, a form of prayer for the nuns to use on his behalf, and a request that he may be buried at the convent when he dies. But when, in her second letter, Heloise turns her wrath upon *God* instead of Abelard, then he finally responds to her complaints. What he says now is that the cross we must bear is the one we have ourselves made, that *only* his acceptance of the Damocles situation can possibly atone for their pursuit of their own lust in a place sacred to the Virgin mother of God, or at a time sanctified by the memory of God's Passion. Precisely *because* he, Abelard, is as guilty as she says he is — and far more guilty than she — it is right that *he* should be the one who lives under the sword. But she, for her part, should set the perfect love of Christ for her against his own far from perfect love, and not repine against the fact of his mutilation, as if that were already an act of Divine injustice, when it was really not a punishment at all but an act of grace (145-54).

By his refusal to defend himself when he is accused, and his instant defense of God when God is accused, Abelard shows that he regards the differing trials of their lives in religion as a *just punishment* for the relations between himself and Heloise, before they entered the cloister *as well as* a moral challenge or test that is justly proportioned to the respective capacities and gifts that their Creator has endowed them with. Since the “story of calamities” and the personal letters contain between them *both* of these lines of interpretation fully worked out, we can say

that *taken together* these letters constitute a *complete* illustration of Abelard's conception of divine comfort, or of reconciliation with God through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

## II

I want now to go through the story of Abelard and Heloise as it emerges from these letters, interpreting everything that each of them says, in terms of the conception of consolation that each of them has already been shown to hold. If we look at the way they tell their story in this light we shall be preserved from quite a number of misreadings to which the record has been subjected in the past. Some of these mistakes I shall point out as we go along. Many of them are committed by medievalists far more learned than myself, from whose work I have plucked the few pearls of relevant empirical knowledge with which my effort at what Collingwood so rightly calls "historical *imagination*" is decked.

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When Abelard meets Heloise he is in the prime of life, and at the height of his powers. The year is about 1117. Abelard is about thirty-eight, and Heloise about eighteen. Abelard is like Adam in his academic Eden. For he had already swept the board clean of the old philosophy and made a new beginning from the foundations; and more recently he has turned to theology, and performed the like office there. In recording his triumphs (and even in recording his academic misfortunes later) he shows no sign of believing that he has made any significant errors in either field. God made him (like Adam) to be the monarch of all he surveys; and like Adam it is his privilege to call everything by its right name. His enemies have already begun to intrigue against him, and he has previously suffered sundry reverses in the material world. But he has so far faced all merely material trials successfully, and everything that his enemies have done against him has only increased the glory of his new gospel, and by making it more widely known has caused it to be more widely accepted: "through persecution my fame increased." At the moment when the real story opens he has been at peace in his Eden (as *magister scholarum* at the Cathedral School of Notre Dame) for several years; and his students both there and elsewhere

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<sup>2</sup>In the matter of his philosophical misfortunes, Abelard's record only shows us how he struggled to understand them in the same spirit. It is only in the resignation of his last months at a Cluniac monastery — long after these letters were written — that we can say that Abelard has finally decided what the will of God was about his career as a philosopher.

(for he speaks in the record of his *readers*) hold that his reputation “stands as high for the interpretation of the Scriptures as it had previously done for philosophy” (64-65).

The sin of pride is evident enough in all this — and it is plain that Abelard regards his earlier career difficulties as a divine warning that went unheeded: “But success always puffs up fools with pride, and worldly security weakens the spirit’s resolution, and easily destroys it through carnal temptations. I began to think myself the only philosopher in the world [i.e. as the philosophical Adam], with nothing to fear from anyone, and so I yielded to the lusts of the flesh” [just as Adam asked God for Eve] (65). Thus Abelard’s confession is that before he became established, his commitment to his academic vocation was absolute; but when he became an established master, he began to think of having fun. Because he had “nothing to fear from anyone,” he began to lust for what he was missing.

He was about thirty-seven or thirty-eight, when (according to his own account) he began to think thus, *in general*, about finding a woman for himself. Someone in his position would not know very many possible candidates. The women who could be bought, he did not want; those who must be courted, he did not know, and had no time for. I assume that they would have wanted marriage too, and that was out of the question for him. *In fact*, I believe that although he is trying to be scrupulously honest, he is leaving something vital out. My own guess is that the very idea that he was missing something, and that there was now no reason to go without it, only occurred to his mind because of the presence of one quite exceptional young woman in his vicinity. From Abelard’s point of view as the man who accuses himself in order to be just, the important point is that he thought about the question in general, and formed the design of seducing Heloise, before he became her teacher; that he got himself into her uncle’s house as a lodger, and accepted the post of her tutor, with this project already formulated. But there is no need to suppose that he seriously considered any other actual candidates for Eve’s position just because he says that he “considered all the usual attractions for a lover and decided that she [Heloise] was the one to bring to my bed.” His acknowledged confidence in his own attractions — he says that he “feared no rebuff from any woman I might choose to honour with my love” (66) — can be explained from what Heloise says later about his “two special gifts whereby to win at once the heart of any woman — your gifts for composing verse and song” (115). In spite of his “constant application to his studies” he obviously took time off to exercise these gifts; so we can be sure that he sometimes went drinking with his students — or with his own fellow students when he was younger. In the light of *this* experience (which he is referring to when he says that he “held himself aloof from unclean association with prostitutes”) he would recognize



at once that this good-looking young girl had one great advantage that no other woman, known or unknown to him, could match: “in the extent of her learning she stood supreme. A gift for letters is so rare in women that it greatly added to her charm.” This was what turned the trick for him. He would not disgrace himself publicly by associating with this girl, and both of them would be able to enjoy their association even out of bed.

The whole subsequent development of the story suggests that Abelard’s talk of “considering” and “deciding” about Heloise as a target for his passion only reflects the fact that whenever he had been sexually attracted to anyone previously — and this must have happened to him even more than to most scholar-clerics — he had been inhibited from doing anything about it both by prudential considerations about his reputation, and by a genuinely felt conflict between any sort of sexual involvement, and the pursuit of his all-conquering vocation for the academic life. But this time when his pulse was stirred by the sight of the learned young virgin going about the Cathedral close, the prudential considerations were almost silenced by a whole series of rationalizations: by his confidence in his established position as a teacher “with nothing to fear from anyone”; by *her* respectability, and even by her suitability, her fitness for the scholarly world. And because of her evident fitness for the scholarly life he felt *no* conflict this time between sexual involvement with her and his vocation — she was precisely the Eve that God was giving to the philosophical Adam (created from his rib, though hardly in his sleep). He did *not* first coolly decide that he was now safely able to take a mistress, and then start looking round for the most suitable one. Rather he felt a strong sexual urge (certainly *not* for the first time) and found for the very first time that calm reflection upon this urge did not give rise to any countervailing rational inhibitions. Instead his reflections convinced him (a) that he could get away with it as far as his social position was concerned, (b) that he would not have any reason to regret it personally and (c) that the girl would almost certainly be amenable, because she would almost certainly see it in the same light as he did. This is the only interpretation that I can find which reconciles Abelard’s “considering and deciding” that Heloise “was the one to bring to his bed” with his explicit declaration that he was “all on fire for this girl” when he first sought an opportunity to get to know her. It was the spark of desire that set the “considering and deciding” in motion.

The plan worked perfectly. Abelard was not himself acquainted with her uncle Fulbert, but they had friends in common. Through their agency he was able to let Fulbert know that he would like to lodge in his house, and would be willing to instruct his niece. He already knew — apparently everyone knew — that Fulbert was both greedy for money, and ambitious for the

education of his ward. The story will reveal that Fulbert's ambition for Heloise was essentially a worldly desire for her social advancement. Abelard, now and always, rich or poor, was quite indifferent to worldly goods, and openly contemptuous of anyone whom he suspected of harboring worldly ambitions. This moral fastidiousness almost certainly helped to muffle his conscience in his shamefully cold-hearted manipulation of Fulbert. He himself expresses amazement over Fulbert's "simplicity" in handing over Heloise to him as if he were her father — freely giving him authority even for bodily chastisement if he thought it necessary. Knowing how worldly his own actual motives were with respect to Heloise, he does not seem to have reflected that his own unworldliness about possessions and social ambition might be as apparent to Fulbert as the latter's worldliness was to him. Fulbert admired (and hence relied too much upon) the evident vocation for spiritual things that he could not emulate.

About Heloise Abelard made no mistake. Their lessons soon turned to love-making, and all *scholastic* discipline became a pretense. It was her pious scruples about their relationship which had sometimes to be beaten into submission.<sup>3</sup> But even those scruples were mainly on Abelard's behalf; they reflected Heloise's understanding of *Abelard's* conscience, and of the temptation that she represented in his plan of life. She had no scruples, I fancy, in that halcyon period, when Abelard — of all people! — found it a bore to go to school, was too tired to study new books, and simply repeated "what had been said long ago" (68) (like William of Champeaux

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<sup>3</sup>Heloise's scruples about intercourse at times when it was canonically forbidden, would seem more natural after Abelard insisted on their marriage as required by the will of God. Since she herself used the argument of his canonical status *against* the marriage, she probably felt morally obligated (on *his* behalf) to resist his importunities during Lent, etc., even before they were married. Putting together what he says about Fulbert's folly in giving him physical authority over his pupil (67) with what he says about his use of force to overcome her conscientious resistance (147) I think we must assume that he was for the most part misusing the authority of a teacher, not that of a husband. (It seems to me highly unlikely that she resisted him at any of their infrequent opportunities for intercourse after marriage, any more than she did during their encounter in the refectory of the convent — a sacrilege of *place* which lay heavily upon his conscience afterwards (146). (Heloise's canonical scruples in a situation where all sexual intercourse was officially fornication, probably reflects her view that there was a *higher*, purely spiritual, sacramental bond of marriage between them — the bond that she sinned against, in her own eyes, by consenting to an ordinary "outward" solemnizing of the marriage.)

repeating the traditional doctrine about universal concepts, or Anselm of Laon laboring with untroubled faith to establish the “common gloss” on the Scriptures). But if Abelard’s calculations before he embarked on the affair were anything like my reconstruction of them, the discovery that his sexual obsession had completely undermined his vocation must have been painful for him. He allows this side of his consciousness — his remorse and self-torment — to appear only in what he says about the reaction of his students. For if, at a time when all he really cared about was the writing of love songs (and he is as certain of *their* superiority as he is about the superiority of his philosophy and theology!), if at such a time he could still see that “the grief and sorrow and laments of my students when they realized my preoccupation, or rather distraction, of mind, are hard to realize” (68), who can suppose that *he* was *himself* undisturbed? He says nothing of these feelings of his own, because his ethics is an ethics of intentional *decision*, and at this stage his fits of remorse and repining did not affect his settled intent. (We shall see later how the record reveals his own uncertainty as to his intentions when they do *become* uncertain.)

On my reading of the record Abelard means to tell us that Fulbert was the last to believe what Abelard’s love songs were proclaiming to everyone who listened to such things. But when Fulbert finally did believe it he naturally made Abelard leave the house, and forbade further contact between the lovers. After this they continued to have secret assignations until they were finally caught in bed together (presumably in Fulbert’s house). Then Heloise found she was pregnant, and Abelard got her away secretly to his own home in Brittany. From what he says in his second letter to Heloise herself, it was *she* who proposed at that time that she should travel as a nun (146). It is not clear that Abelard went with her; in fact it is more likely that he did not.

These are the bare facts about their discovery and separation. About feelings Abelard only tells us that in their crisis their laments were all for *one another*, that he “blushed with shame and contrition for the girl’s plight” and she “sorrowed at the thought of my distress.” Heloise is absolutely delighted to discover that she is pregnant; and Fulbert is *almost out of his mind* when he discovers that Abelard has stolen her away. The first thing to notice here is that a lustful relationship has definitely given place to what we call a loving one. The two of them each care more about what the other suffers now, than they do for anything else. This was already implicit in Abelard’s report of his indifference to his studies. It is impossible, as I said, to think he could be quite wholeheartedly indifferent; but the philosopher who was able to take a mistress because he had nothing to fear in his career, now fears nothing in his career because — at least when he is writing love songs! — the career has ceased to matter. It is the girl who

matters now; and when her plight becomes parlous enough, he is willing to make a real separation between them — for sending her to Brittany involved that. From the moment that he learns that she is *pregnant* he assumes full responsibility for her welfare; and when she is safely out of harm's way, he goes to her uncle and proposes marriage. Before that moment he is *ashamed* and *contrite* about her situation, but his active planning is directed toward getting to see her. What he was *sorry for* at first was the fact that she was subject to ill usage; we should note that it is *he*, not *she*, who is *disgraced*. We might suppose that it was only the fear of an increase of violence against her that caused him to send her away to his sister in Brittany. But I think Heloise's delight over her pregnancy arose partly from the fact that this changed their relationship by giving Abelard once more a *moral* responsibility for her, like that which he lost when he was deprived of his tutorship. When God sent the child, he was establishing a high sacramental bond of marriage between them (as they *both* saw it).

For Heloise, the dominant consideration throughout, is Abelard's career. When he was deprived of his tutorship and expelled from the house, she wept for his disgrace. He may have counted his world well lost for her when he wrote his songs, but the girl in the songs cared more for the philosopher than for the singer. The Eden in which her lover was the *first man* must *not* be lost. She was going to be the "helpmeet for him" that Eve was created to be. It is clear that Heloise tried desperately hard to avoid the role that Eve so readily assumed in the older story; Heloise did all that she could to resist Abelard's importunities, once it became plain to her that in his mind there was a question of choosing between her and Lady Philosophy. She did not *want* to be his lady in the spirit, only his woman in the flesh, his whore, while they served the same lady in the spirit together. She saw no reason why they should not do this; and when Abelard's misfortunes confirmed Abelard's view that a choice between Heloise and his vocation must be made, she hated God for forcing the role of Eve upon her against her will.

Things might have worked out her way if Abelard had not been moved by a sense of duty to her uncle. Fulbert was a worldly man, though not, as Abelard noted, a worldly-wise one. He had unwisely trusted in Abelard's unworldliness, and it is plain that in the early days he genuinely loved Abelard for being what he himself was not (68). Abelard's comments about his "supreme betrayal" of Fulbert express the consciousness that he came to have later when he had become reconciled to God's permitting Fulbert's hideous revenge. The man who conceived and executed the plan to seduce Fulbert's niece had nothing but contempt for Fulbert. But there was perhaps an element of compunction in his amazement that Fulbert was so ready to trust him; and the consciousness that that trust was sustained by real affection certainly worked upon his

conscience while he lived in Fulbert's house. After he was expelled, Fulbert only existed for him as the persecutor of his beloved. But once Heloise was in safety, the spectacle of Fulbert's misery became unbearable to him. Heloise was the focus of all Fulbert's worldly ambitions; and Fulbert was her legal guardian. There was reason enough for Abelard to fear Fulbert's vengeance, and he makes it clear that the removal of Heloise to Brittany was partly an act of insurance. Heloise in the bosom of Abelard's own family, was that typically medieval character, a *hostage* for Fulbert's good behavior towards Abelard. But with his rage and mortification thus muzzled, Fulbert's grief showed up all the more plainly; and with both himself and Heloise secured against revenge, Abelard could not endure the spectacle of what they had done to deserve it. Now for the first time he really felt like a traitor, at least in one half of his mind. He could see how it must look to Fulbert, and he acknowledged that within that perspective Fulbert's rage was just. "I went to him," he says, "accusing myself of the deceit love had made me commit *as if* it were the basest treachery . . . I protested that I had done nothing unusual in the eyes of anyone who had known the power of love, and recalled how since the beginning of the human race women had brought the noblest men to ruin." The treachery is only an *as if*, because even from the standpoint of the ordinary world, love deserves some license in the matter of deceit. But it deserves this license only if it is willing to offer amends. What Abelard offered was a secret marriage. The marriage was more than anyone would expect on the basis of worldly calculation, since it would bar Abelard from (shall we say) a *bishopric*; but its secrecy would destroy its worldly value. Fulbert accepted the proposal, "and sealed the reconciliation with a kiss. But his intention was to make it easier to betray me" (70).

Now it is very well for *Jesus*, the Incarnate Truth, to say to his betrayer unerringly, "Judas, betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?" But how can Abelard — who insisted that God alone can "try the heart and the reins" — presume to know Fulbert's secret heart at that moment? We can be sure that he is not doing this. So he is simply speaking about how Fulbert actually behaved. We should be careful not to make what he says here refer to Fulbert's later revenge. Abelard is only referring to Fulbert's *immediate* betrayal of his pledge. From the moment that the marriage was solemnized, Fulbert and his friends began to publish it abroad. Abelard takes *that* as sufficient evidence of Fulbert's real *intention* when he "agreed, pledged his word and that of his supporters, and sealed the reconciliation with a kiss." As usual, he is both economic and precise in his use of language. The *agreement* is for the marriage, the *pledge* is for the secrecy (and it ought therefore to bind whichever of Fulbert's friends are witnesses to the marriage) and the kiss is a *seal of intent*. It is revealed as a Judas kiss when the *pledge* is

immediately broken, but no one attempts to maintain that the breach of secrecy was unintentional, or sees any need to excuse it.

The *secret* marriage was the nearest thing to Heloise's conception of a *higher* bond that Abelard's conscience could allow. He had always been convinced that he was the best of living philosophers, because he was the clearest-headed. If there is one thing that a philosopher *must* know, on Abelard's view, it is *his own mind*, i.e. he must know what he really means and intends. To Heloise he confessed later his motive for marrying her: "At the time I desired to keep you, whom I loved beyond measure, for myself alone" (149). In other words he was afraid that if he did not marry her she would eventually marry someone else. The idea of marrying her was perhaps born in his mind from the knowledge that Fulbert's ambitions were focused on the project of her making a good marriage. Her eventual career as a great abbess shows that she had the managerial capacity to handle a great household if she could have married a lord. Her education — including that very capacity for letter-writing which Abelard noted when he was first attracted to her — would perhaps have been even more valuable in a great merchant household. I suspect that this last was more the kind of marriage that the miserly Fulbert could reasonably have aspired to for her; but I am not enough of a social historian to be able to judge with any confidence. I am sure, however, that even the existence of an illegitimate child was not a bar to his ambitions in this direction. What Abelard says about Heloise's conversion later on in the *Story of Calamities* ("There were many people, I remember, who in pity for her youth tried to dissuade her from submitting to the yoke of monastic rule as a penance too hard to bear" [76]) can be read along with his comment to Heloise herself ("Had you not been previously joined to me in wedlock, you might easily have clung to the world when I withdrew from it, either at the suggestion of your relatives or in enjoyment of carnal delights") so as to throw some light on the situation at the time of the marriage. At that time it was not the "many friends" that Abelard was afraid of, but rather the relative whose authority might prevail even against Heloise's own will in the absence of a marriage tie. *This* fear must have come upon him *no later* than his ejection from the house, and marriage was the only answer for it.

In that case we can be sure that Abelard began to consider marrying Heloise long before the pregnancy. The philosopher in love could not afford to heed the laments of his students, because Fulbert's naive revelation of his hopes for Heloise was forcing Abelard to recognize that the thought of Heloise married to anyone else was quite intolerable.

The record shows, then, that it was a conjunction of selfish and moral motives together, that led Abelard to make his covenant with Fulbert. The selfish motive came first, but it was the

moral one that turned the trick. We can understand Heloise's reaction much better if we realize that Abelard had certainly discussed marriage with her as the only way to establish an overriding *legal* bond between them, long before the pregnancy made it necessary for him to act to protect them both from Fulbert's wrath. The learned discussion that Abelard reports as ensuing between them only after they were found out, did not have its beginnings in the wilds of Brittany, or in the last months of Heloise's pregnancy. The record itself will prove this. Like all noteworthy medieval clerics, both Heloise and Abelard had remarkable memories. But no one could string together the authorities for her case in the way that Heloise is depicted as doing, without studying the question carefully and at length beforehand; and by the same token, Abelard still remembers what she said because they had gone over the ground many times. Once we see what the record itself so strongly implies, we need no longer be troubled (as Muckle is) by doubts about its "historicity."

As far as I know, Gilson was the first to understand what the argument between them was about. Abelard's position as "cleric and canon" was a higher spiritual status than that of matrimony; and it was a status that they both held to be necessary and appropriate for one with the high calling of a philosopher. No one has hitherto noticed, however, that Heloise laid claim to that same status, and to a share in that high calling for herself. For when she argues the case against matrimony it is *her* burdens that she cites first not *his*: "What harmony can there be between pupils and *nursemaids*, desks and *cradles*, books or tablets and *distaffs*, pen or stylus and *spindles*" (my italics).

She does go on, it is true, to list things that do make it difficult for the family *man* to be a philosopher: the baby crying and needing to be sung to, servants coming and going, "the constant muddle and squalor which small children bring into the home" (71). But — given that the philosopher has his own sanctum — even these things are much more likely to distract *her* than him. What she is afraid of (in effect) is not that Abelard will fail to be Socrates, but that she herself will become Xanthippe. He is afraid that he will lose her, if he does not marry her. She is afraid that if she does marry him, she will lose both him and herself. We should note that none of the arguments that Abelard records is of any real weight against the formal and secret marriage that Abelard actually proposed to her in Brittany. Heloise's basic position is stated in her rhetorical question: "is there not a greater obligation on you, as clerk and canon, not to put base pleasures before your sacred duties, and to guard against being sucked down headlong into this Charybdis, there to lose all sense of shame and be plunged forever into a whirlpool of impurity?" But she did not want to avoid the whirlpool by breaking off their association

altogether. Without the willingness to do *that*, even this high-minded appeal is not a valid moral argument against the kind of “compromise” marriage that Abelard is now proposing. Since her own letters show clearly that Heloise knew how to argue very cogently indeed, I infer that these arguments were *not* offered in Brittany at all. They were not arguments directed against a *secret* marriage but against an *open* one. They were developed and rehearsed in Paris, before the lovers ever parted. Another indication of this, is the curious way in which Heloise stops to consider how the distractions of wedded life can be overcome, if one is rich enough. This part of her argument appears to be totally *irrelevant* to any argument about marriage between her and Abelard, until we remember that she *also* had to deal with Abelard’s fears that she might one day accept the rich husband of Fulbert’s hopes.

None of that part of the argument took place in Brittany. It belongs to a general debate between them about *ordinary* marriage along with a normal acceptance of its responsibilities. All that was repeated in Brittany was Heloise’s version of the *appropriate* compromise between duty and inclination. Heloise rejects marriage as degrading and burdensome to both of them. Against Abelard’s fears she urges that such suspicions are unworthy of them both: “the name of mistress instead of wife would be dearer to her and more honorable for me [says Abelard speaking for her] — only love freely given should keep me for her, not the constriction of a marriage tie.” *This* argument Heloise certainly *did* put forward in Brittany. For although it is certainly as old as the discussion itself, it is just as valid against a secret marriage as it is against a normal one. Heloise does not want to bind Abelard, and he ought not to want to bind her. Trust in love itself should be for both of them the proof that they are not “putting their base pleasures above their sacred duties”; for if they will only *trust* one another, their love need never *conflict* with their vocation, and so they need never fear the angel with the fiery sword coming to drive them from their Eden. (But Abelard’s fear probably rested on the fact that she, being a woman, was under authority, and the time would come when she *ought* to consent to the marriage that Fulbert desired for her.)

Did Heloise confess that she was afraid that Abelard would eventually cease to love her, if he married her, and so wrecked his career? Surely she did, for in Abelard’s account she begins from the position that everyone in the world would blame her if she took him from his vocation: “The world would justly exact punishment from her if she removed such a light from its midst” (70). And she herself says that by sacrificing her own reputation she would bind him to her: “I believed that the more I humbled myself on your account, the more gratitude I should win from you” (113). This is the weakness, the selfish motive, in all of Heloise’s unselfishness. Like



Abelard she only wants to do what makes her feel safe; and when she criticizes Abelard's account, complaining that "you kept silence about most of my arguments for preferring love to wedlock and freedom to chains," she gives us a very clear view of how she sought to have her cake and eat it too. She quotes from Cicero a story of Aspasia (the mistress of Perikles) who sought to reconcile Xenophon with his wife, by telling them that they could only be happy as man and wife if each believed that the other was perfect. "It [the belief that one has the *best* of spouses] is a holy error and a blessed delusion between man and wife, when perfect love can keep the ties of marriage unbroken not so much through bodily continence as chastity of spirit" (114). In Heloise's view this "chastity of spirit," this trust in love; and willingness to do without the public legal bond of matrimony, would justify the two of them in their joint vocation even though "bodily continence" was quite beyond them. She regarded herself as married to Abelard already in a purely spiritual sacrament; and what hurt her most of all (both before and after the disaster) was that Abelard would not trust to that ideal bond against the pressures either of nature or of the community.

The *secret* marriage had this advantage: that it equalized the sacrifices. Each of them could feel that they were giving up worldly recognition. But the time for a secret marriage was *before* Abelard sent Heloise away, not afterwards as part of a bargain with Fulbert. Heloise knew her uncle; and she also understood her own role as a hostage. She warned Abelard of the risks he would run in bringing her back. If the marriage was not acknowledged, she could not live with Abelard; and she foresaw clearly the tug-of-war that there must be between herself and Fulbert, if she lived with *him*. The prophecy that Abelard quotes as her last word proved more accurate than she herself can ever have expected: "We shall both be destroyed. All that is left us is suffering as great as our love has been" (74). At the moment of utterance, this speech only means that Heloise saw Fulbert's Judas kiss for what it was as soon as she heard of it.

They had to be married in Paris (in the presence of Fulbert and his witnesses) so they had to wait for the baby to be born before they could make the journey. Heloise had the child christened Peter Astralabe. The astrolabe is a "star-taker." If Heloise thought of the word in that active sense, she was thinking more of Peter the father's destiny than of Peter the son's. But, blue-stocking as she was, it probably pleased her to think of it *passively*, and of the child as "taken from the stars." For according to Plato's myth in the *Timaeus* the Demiourgos created our human souls last of all, and sowed them in the stars before he left the created gods to generate the sublunar order of generation and decay. Upon this interpretation the name is a neo-pagan way of saying not that the child is *given by* God, but rather that he is *taken from* God — he

is, as it were, a brand snatched from the burning. Heloise understood Abelard's doctrine of God's Will well enough, and she could hardly dispute the fact that while intercourse is a subject of human choice, conception is a matter of divine disposition. She had thought of her pregnancy as a sign of divine favor. Giving her child the name Astralabe at a moment when she was about to go on a journey that filled her with foreboding is another sign that she expected to receive nothing further from God that she would be able to take so gladly.

The marriage was celebrated, the lovers parted once more, and the clash of wills began. From the passionate conviction of Heloise's many assertions that free love between herself and Abelard would be higher and more truly sacramental than formal marriage, that she would rather be Abelard's light-o'love than Caesar's wife, etc., we may surmise that her whole-hearted lies in defense of the pledge sounded altogether more plausible than Fulbert's truth in defiance of it, even though Fulbert could call on his friends to witness for him. It is not fair to blame Abelard for this, as Gilson does (p. 39). Abelard was appalled by the way in which Fulbert deliberately violated the pledge, and dishonored the kiss. But there is no sign in his self-accusatory record that he really believed that the secret *could* be kept. It was Heloise who took advantage of the terms of the compromise to defend *her* conception of what their relation ought to be. Even she might have been persuaded to stop short of outright "oaths that the story was utterly false," if it had not been Fulbert himself who was *openly proclaiming* the truth. But she must have foreseen and foretold how things would go in Brittany; and when she gave in to Abelard "because she could not bear to offend me" she already knew just what she would do. Fulbert retaliated by ill-treating her.<sup>4</sup>

Now the lovers took a more drastic step; and Abelard takes full responsibility for it. He put her in the convent of Argenteuil (where she had been brought up); and he himself put the habit of a nun upon her (except for the veil which she would assume only when she formally took her vows). Fulbert believed that Heloise was about to enter the cloister on Abelard's instructions; and whatever Abelard's actual intentions may have been about *that*, it is certain that he intended Fulbert to *believe* this. (The best defense against an indignant uncle demanding that the nuns should send Heloise home, was the pretense that she was ready to make her profession.) That *she* did not wish to do any such thing is also certain.

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<sup>4</sup>Abelard's expression, "frequent contumelies" (*contumelia*), *could* cover physical violence here, and whatever the world can embrace, it probably does.

As far as Abelard was concerned, the intention to make a nun of Heloise was nothing shameful. Quite the reverse in fact. Of course, it would be shameful to make a nun of her against her will — though that happened often enough in more worldly circles. But Heloise had already given her will — as distinct from her wishes — into Abelard's keeping. So Abelard's silence about his real intention here is puzzling. If Fulbert's interpretation was right, why should Abelard not say so? Or, since he is accusing himself, why does he not confess that he was merely using the religious habit as a blind if that was indeed what he was doing? From what he says later to Heloise about her adoption of the religious habit as a disguise for her journey to Brittany when she was pregnant (146), we know how deeply he felt at the time of writing about this sort of sacrilege. If he himself had misused the religious habit even more flagrantly we should expect him to say so *there*, if not here; and what he does go on to say *there* explains his silence here. The awkward truth is that when he sent Heloise to the convent he *wanted* to give her up; but he found that he *could not* do it. When he visited her in the convent they made love in a quiet corner. So he cannot say *anything* here about his own conscious intention without going into matters which he does not at this moment want to put down in black and white. This, more than any other, is the moment when he found by experience that he was trying himself beyond his strength. The castration was God's confirmation of that.

For Heloise, the masquerade of an impending profession was all of a piece with her passionate oaths in defense of a lie. The fact that this girl, in whom Fulbert's hopes and dreams were all invested, was now successfully defying him, goes a long way to explain the melodramatic violence of his revenge. But Heloise and Abelard knew what Fulbert was capable of — as Abelard shows by telling us that Heloise was his hostage in Brittany, and Heloise by arguing with him that for very safety's sake he ought not to bring her back. Her return to Paris only revealed to Fulbert how absolutely she was lost to him.

So Fulbert took his revenge. Abelard's own traitorous servant and one of the actual culprits were caught, castrated and blinded by order of the court. Fulbert — who denied all knowledge of the plot — had his property confiscated. This shows that Heloise was not wholly deceiving herself in believing that everyone admired Abelard and envied her (115). But it also makes us see how neurotic Abelard's instant conviction was, that with the loss of his manhood his very reputation as scholar and poet had been blotted out. Abelard himself consistently makes light of his physical suffering and concentrates all attention on the wound to his pride.

At this point his thoughts have two foci. First the evident fitness of the revenge, and its permanence, seems to make any attempt on his part to defend and extol the philosophic life into a mockery. The very ideal of the scholarly life, which made Heloise so determined not to marry him, was one that he had himself formulated, and no one ever cared more than Abelard about practicing what he preached. Now he had been shown up finally for *not* practicing what he preached, and he felt that he could not continue to preach what he had no longer any occasion to practice.

Secondly, even if he now retired to the cloister — which he immediately thought of doing, and very soon did — he was no longer properly fit for the divine service. Later, when he is reconciled, he will think of other passages (in Isaiah for example) about God's special love for eunuchs and the special place that they have in his service. Someone — I like to believe it was Geoffrey Bishop of Chartres who supported him stoutly in the first heresy inquiry at Soissons — will ordain him as a priest at some time during the next few years. But for the moment his mind dwells on the divine condemnation and rejection of eunuchs (and even of gelded beasts) in the Mosaic Law.

To the cloister he went, pretty rapidly, for he was there before his wounds were healed. But, before he became a monk himself he insisted that Heloise must make her profession. Even in his highly neurotic misery it is hard to see why he attached so much importance to her going first, for the marriage could not be dissolved, nor could the profession of *either* of them be valid, unless they *both* entered religion. Heloise implies that he feared she would turn back like Lot's wife (117); and Abelard records that there were many who tried to dissuade her "in pity for her youth." The basic facts are two: *First* that Abelard could only enter religion if Heloise did; and *secondly* that far from feeling any vocation, Heloise was deeply and absolutely alienated from God, because of what He had done to them. Abelard's concern probably arose from his fear that if Heloise were not professed quickly, while every public sympathy was on his side, her profession might be refused (for lack of any genuine vocation), even at Argenteuil where she was known and loved. The "many who sought to dissuade her" must have included her friends among the nuns at Argenteuil itself.

Heloise herself deliberately made her profession into an act of contrition for the terrible sin of causing Abelard's fall, by consenting to marry him. As she went to take the veil she repeated the words of the bereaved Cornelia in Lucan: "O noble husband,/ Too great for me to wed, was it my fate/ To bend that lofty head? What prompted me/ To marry you and bring about

your fall?/ Now claim your due and see me gladly pay . . .” (76). “It was your command,” she writes later, “not love of God which made me take the veil” (134). She well knew (and so did all her spiritual friends) that in going to take the veil in this spirit, she was in mortal sin. When she upbraids Abelard for his failure to trust her at this juncture she says: “I would have had no hesitation, God knows, in following you or going ahead at your bidding, to Vulcan’s regions” (i.e. to Hell) (117). She means — and Abelard knows it — that that is where they *were* both going at the moment of their official conversion. When she agreed to marry him at his behest, she had destroyed herself by violating what she held to be most sacred. By agreeing to enter the cloister she went even further, since she now surrendered what she had “destroyed herself” to save: “My love rose to such heights of madness that it robbed itself of what it most desired beyond hope of recovery, when immediately at your bidding I changed my clothing along with my mind, in order to prove you the sole possessor of my body and my will alike” (113). It was not the life of the world she regretted but the withdrawal of Abelard from it — the very thing that her own withdrawal made possible. To speak, as some writers do, of Abelard forcing her to give up her “freedom,” is foolish. If it were not for her love of Abelard, she would have been gaining what she herself regarded as a higher freedom. The society of Cicero, Seneca, Lucan and Jerome mattered more to this young woman than that of any *other* living person. What she really wanted, even now, was that both of them should remain in the world, joined by a holy bond like that between Jerome and his Roman ladies Paula, Marcella, Eustochium and the rest. What she calls a “madness that goes beyond destruction itself” is her surrender of that hope.

If Abelard is not *mistaken* in accusing himself, when he says that he entered religion in shame and confusion rather than from any devout wish for conversion, then perhaps Heloise ought to have held out for her own way. For Abelard began teaching again in the monastery as soon as he had physically recovered. But I think she knew him then, better than he knows himself in memory at this later time. His will for conversion appears to have been ironclad (and quite unconfused) from the moment that he got his emotional balance back. Others were soon clamoring that God’s finger had touched him to free him from the chains of the flesh in order that he might become God’s own philosopher. But he did not need to hear it from them. It was only his own moral theology spouted at him by his students, coming to the aid of his ideal of the philosophic life — which Heloise had spouted at him till he finally set his mind on the marriage.

His will for Heloise’s conversion was equally devout from the beginning. Once Heloise was in the cloister, Abelard left her severely alone. He could not go to her, of course, but he could have written. In her first letter (about twelve years after the catastrophe perhaps) she asks

piteously, “Why, after our entry into religion, which was your decision alone, have I been so neglected and forgotten by you that I have neither a word from you when you are here to give me strength, nor the consolation of a letter in absence?” (116). She affects to take this as *proof* that he never really loved her at all, that he was only sexually obsessed with her. And she tells him that she only wishes she could find some way of not agreeing with what everyone else thinks. At this stage it was not too long since Abelard was himself there at the new abbey of the Paraclete helping the abbess and nuns to establish themselves. So it is absurd to suppose that Heloise means that Abelard has refused to talk to her privately, or to discuss the past. Abelard himself contradicts this by implication, when he speaks in *his* second letter of “your old perpetual complaint against God concerning the manner of our entry into religious life” (137, 145). This is exaggerated language (of which Abelard is not apt to be guilty) if he has heard nothing of the complaint since it was first voiced about a dozen years earlier (except in two recent letters). Hence Gilson tries to argue that just as Heloise does not mean to imply that there has been no verbal communication, so she does not mean that there has been no previous exchange of letters, either. She only means (says Gilson) that Abelard has never written letters of consolation, like those of Jerome to his holy women. But the way Heloise’s challenge is worded, the way she interprets it, and most of all her closing contrast with the days “when in the past you sought me out for sinful pleasures, your letters came to me thick and fast” (117), all seem to me to show that with regard to *letters* she means just what she says. Abelard never wrote to her at all after she took the veil. And I think this was part of a policy he explained to her at the time — probably it was also required of him by her spiritual superiors then. For in her first letter she anticipates the answer that her question actually receives; and although this only definitely implies that she has already received it from Abelard’s own mouth in these conversations of a few months earlier that gave her no strength, the way she echoes the answer now suggests that it was already an echo in her ears then: “If only your love had less confidence in me,” she writes, “so that you would be more concerned on my behalf! But as it is, the more I have made you feel secure in me, the more I have to bear with your neglect” (117). And *in spite of that pitiful remark* which seems to hark back at least to their joint entry into the cloister, Abelard’s reply begins: “If since our conversion from the world to God I have not yet written you any word of comfort or advice, it must not be attributed to indifference on my part but to your own good sense, in which I have *always* had such confidence that I did not think anything was needed; God’s grace has bestowed on you all essentials, etc.” (119). His continuation is a recital of what Heloise has achieved since she became a nun. She became prioress (i.e. the mistress of studies) very soon. Now she is an abbess. She went on to a quite notable career in that role. What

Abelard is repeating from the old days is: "There must be no personal communication between us, because we must belong to God now, and not to each other."

The separation took place about 1119. We know how stormy Abelard's career as a monk was to prove. Condemned for heresy at Soissons in 1121, and execrated by his brethren as a sceptic about the most precious traditions of his own monastery, he ran off to another monastery, and finally settled in a solitary place where Count Thibaut of Troyes gave him a tract of land. It is clear that the Abbey of St. Denis, though they did not want him back, were at this time steadily determined that no other community should have him.

He was always aided by his former students, and once he was settled in his wilderness, old and new students began to come to him. To teach was his one means of livelihood. But his success aroused jealousy, and his doctrine of the Trinity was already viewed with grave suspicion. *Now* he was attacked for giving too much prominence and independence to the Holy Spirit as Comforter (Paraclete) in his Trinitarian theology. He himself says that he founded and dedicated his Oratory "in the name of the *Holy Trinity*, but because I had come there as a fugitive and in the depths of my despair had been granted some comfort by the grace of God, I named it the Paraclete, in memory of this gift" (90). The name stuck. The students built a small community there. But theological critics attacked the new school in popular preaching, and the students were as undisciplined as usual; perhaps they were even a bit worse than usual. So Abelard soon found that he was losing the support of the secular and religious authorities who had befriended him. At this stage he began to have fantasies about

quitting the realm of Christendom and going over to the heathen, there to live a quiet Christian life amongst the enemies of Christ, at the cost of what tribute was asked. I told myself they would receive me more kindly for having no suspicion that I was a Christian on account of the charges against me, and they would therefore believe I could more easily be won over to their pagan beliefs (194).

At this point he was invited to become Abbot of a remote community in Brittany. It is an index of the bad odor he was now in, that St. Denis was now very willing to let him go. He came from the borders of Brittany himself, as we know, but he explicitly tells us that he did not speak the language of the area, and his relations with the monks were stormy in the extreme. He paints

a close parallel between himself and St. Benedict, claiming that his monks tried, among other things, to poison him through his Communion chalice.

Heloise's life in this period was also not without drama. She became Prioress quite soon — a position for which she was naturally fitted. But apparently the scandalous behavior of Abelard and herself in a corner of the convent refectory at Argenteuil was by no means unique. For the new Abbott of St. Denis (the great Suger) was finally able to convince the relevant authorities that the convent property should be returned to St. Denis, and the community of nuns should be broken up and sent elsewhere; he was able to get this decision taken and executed rapidly because at a council on monastic reform in 1129 “there was an outcry against the scandal and infamy prevailing at a nunnery called Argenteuil, where a small number of nuns were bringing disgrace upon their order and had *long since* polluted the entire neighborhood with their lewd and shameful conduct” (Pernoud, p. 139; citing Matthew of Albano, the papal legate).

According to the Papal Bull that followed, Abbott Suger was obligated to ensure that the evicted nuns were placed in convents of good repute “lest any of them should go astray and perish through her misconduct.” Abelard promptly took an important part of this burden off of Suger's shoulders. The news will have come to him rapidly both from St. Denis and from Argenteuil itself; and he saw at once what he could do for Heloise and the group of nuns who wished to stay with her as their Abbess. He established them as fast as he could as a new community in the buildings of his abortive school, which now became a convent of the Holy Trinity, but was known (as before) as the “Abbey of the Paraclete.” The local people made them welcome and gave the new convent a lot more support than they had given to Abelard's school.

All this happened in 1130 or early 1131 (the new foundation received Papal approval in November 1131). Abelard's account of his relations with the new foundation is rambling and unclear. He claims that he was much criticized locally for not doing all he could for the nuns; but that when he began to visit them more often, there were malicious insinuations about his reasons. His brief portrait of Heloise at this period is well calculated to silence these insinuations:

and such favour in the eyes of all did God bestow on that sister of mine who was in charge of the other nuns, that bishops loved her as a daughter, abbots as a sister, the laity as a mother; while all alike admired her piety and wisdom, and her unequalled gentleness and patience in every situation. The more rarely she allowed



herself to be seen (so that she could devote herself without distraction to prayer and meditation on holy things in a closed cell) the more eagerly did those outside demand her presence and her spiritual conversation for their guidance (97).

He comforts *himself* against all such suspicions with the memory that the same things had been said against Jerome. But the essential moral that he wishes to draw is that his emasculation is now shown to be a blessing, not a curse. He is now one of the Lord's eunuchs, and like the eunuchs in an oriental palace he is peculiarly fitted to minister to the needs of holy women.

He further seeks to show that there is nothing wrong or uncanonical in a religious community of both sexes. The community of Jesus himself had women ministering to them; and *no* community of religious women is possible without some male support staff. This sometimes leads to an overthrow of the natural order, for an abbess must have authority even over the male clergy that her community needs. The implication of this argument seems to be clear. Abelard thought that he ought to be officially established as the abbot of this new community. No doubt Heloise thought so too. He was determined to do all that he could for the new community, and he flew to the aid of the sisters (like Benedict returning to Monte Cassino) "as a haven of peace and safety from the raging storms, to find repose there for a while, and at least achieve something amongst them though I had failed with the monks." It is the difference of sex that prevents him from making a permanent return to his own place. He does not tell us precisely when or why he returned to Brittany. He does not even say that he has returned thither permanently. But when we remember the scandalous background to the breakup of the Argenteuil convent, and the fact that Abelard has critics as well as friends even in the region of Troyes, it is obvious why a clear conscience, guaranteed by his physical incapacity, was not enough. The new community would be broken up, and its property would revert to Count Thibaut, if the breath of scandal touched it. There is a bitter but appropriate irony in the quotation from Augustine with which Abelard makes this point: "He who relies on his conscience to the neglect of his reputation is cruel to himself" (99). For Abelard, himself a philosopher of the pure conscience, has already experienced the cruelty that arises from relying on one's *reputation* alone, and neglecting one's conscience.

Back in Brittany Abelard now writes this "story of his misfortunes." Whoever it was officially addressed to, he certainly meant Heloise to read it. My own belief is that he wrote it for *her*. The final address to a "dearly beloved *brother* in Christ, close friend and longstanding

companion” I take to be part of his attempt to distance himself from the situation, to make his offering of comfort as impersonal and spiritual as possible. The way the letter ends simply by setting the situation he would like to be in alongside the one he is in, his own desire being supported by careful arguments, and his acceptance of his situation only by a reference to the will of God, is easy to understand if the reference at the beginning to “the words of consolation I gave you in person” covers long and agonized colloquies with Heloise in that closed cell, about the reasons why he could not follow the example of Benedict and return to his own place.

It would scarcely be natural to write this account in a letter explicitly directed to Heloise herself. For there cannot be *anything* factual in it that she does not already know, since Abelard has recently been with her. In the summary of it that she gives at the beginning of her first letter Heloise concentrates on the parts of Abelard’s story in which she was not personally involved. It is hard not to feel that she is drawing a balance sheet between her suffering and his, and so establishing that “you did indeed carry out the promise you made your friend at the beginning that he would think his own troubles insignificant or nothing in comparison with your own” (109). By what right does she presume to decide this so categorically, unless she knows perfectly well that she is the friend who is to be consoled?

In any case she is *not* consoled. “Nearly every line of this letter was filled, I remember, with gall and wormwood, as it told the pitiful story of our entry into religion and the cross of unending suffering which you, my only love, continue to bear” (109). But letters between them are a mode of consolation (according to *her* conception of consolation) which will not harm the reputation, either of the convent, or of the writers themselves. Abelard cannot be present with them as much as Jerome was with his holy women, but he can write to them as Jerome did; and since he has declared that he means to do everything he can for the new community, Heloise first sets out to show how his letters can be helpful. On this point she convinces him, and she eventually receives, as Abbess, two long letters (or short treatises), one on the history of female religious conventual foundations; and one on the most appropriate discipline of life for such a foundation. (This is the part of their correspondence that only specialists now read.)

Her main concern, however, is to convince him that he owes her a kind of personal spiritual consolation and comfort which the impersonal mode of statement in the “consolatory letter to a friend” implicitly denies. Her argument here is *first* that he (together with God’s treatment of him) is the only author of her present state of misery and incipient damnation:

You are the sole cause of my sorrow, and you alone can grant me the grace of consolation . . . you alone have so great a debt to repay me, particularly now when I have carried out all your orders so implicitly that when I was powerless to oppose you in anything, I found strength at your command to destroy myself [sc. by consenting to the marriage]. I did more, strange to say — my love rose to such heights of madness that it robbed itself of what it most desired [Abelard's company] beyond hope of recovery [compare my hypothesis about the vow of silence between them], when immediately at your bidding I changed my clothing along with my mind, in order to prove you the sole possessor of my body and my will alike (113).

We can judge the sacrilege involved in this “proof” when we consider that the “change of clothing” was a formal “marriage to Christ.” The only complaint that Heloise makes about the “story of calamities” is that it did not make clear enough why marriage was from her point of view *self-destruction*. What she sees in the story is how she came, through her submission to Abelard's will, to assume the temptress role of Eve, and so cause Abelard's downfall. It is to *this* crime that she applies the standard of Abelard's ethics, and about *this* crime she claims:

Wholly guilty though I am [since I both caused and desired you to love me best], I am also, as you know, wholly innocent. It is not the deed, but the intention of the doer which makes the crime, and justice should weigh not what was done but the spirit in which it was done. What my intention toward you has always been, you alone who have known it can judge (115-16).

Abelard, on the other hand, in the process of justifying God by accusing himself, has plainly declared that the original motive of his dealings with her was *lust*. When that lust turned to love, the love itself appeared to them both as a temptation to abandon the philosophic life, because the way was proving too hard. In marrying they gave way to that temptation; and Heloise is well aware that Abelard gave way partly because he wanted to be sure of her by owning her. This is a *selfish* motive. For years she has brooded on it, while her spiritual advisers were reinforcing the view that the outwardly unsanctified relationship that she dreamed of as a *higher* sacrament, could never be *anything* but lust. Now she tests Abelard. If he *ever* really loved her, she says, he will now do this little thing that she asks: “give me at least through your words . . . some sweet semblance of yourself” (116). By her own earlier citation from Seneca's letters to his friend Lucilius she has established that she is asking as a *friend*. She is

ready enough to be repentant for any carnal feelings that she has (and we shall soon learn that she has some). But she wants Abelard to admit that the ideal of “spiritual chastity” which she had wanted to substitute for the sacrament of marriage is not in itself sinful. But she knows — she certainly *cannot help* knowing! — that Abelard was not just content to say that the moral worth of an action was determined entirely by the intention of the agent. He first defined sinful intention as “contempt of God,” and virtuous intention as *voluntary obedience to God*. Heloise, on the other hand, appeals to the older classical ethics, according to which the foundation of virtue is “giving to each his due.” Her morality properly deserves the name *ethics*, just as his ethics is the severest ideal of pure *morality* formulated before Kant. Like the aged Cephalus at the beginning of the *Republic*, she holds that “telling the truth and paying one’s debts” is the minimum of moral common sense. Abelard has told the truth, and so has she. What emerges from that truth-telling is that he owes her an enormous debt. Now, therefore, let him pay it. The intention, of course, is all that matters. That much she accepts from Abelard. But upon her view of the matter no reference to the will of God is necessary for the definition of good and bad intention. We know what is good by a rational examination of our own needs and desires. We can, for example, define a kind of friendship that is strictly good — and that is what Heloise has accepted from her Stoic sources. Since she is a pupil of Abelard, she probably leans heavily on the revealed truth of the New Testament that “God is love,” as the regulative ideal of “the Spirit.” But she cannot accept Abelard’s essentially Judaic God, who is a law unto Himself, knowing us better than we know ourselves, and setting up all the conditions of our lives to provide the exactly appropriate moral proving ground for our real capacities. In Stoic terms, she cannot *set the love of fate above the love of her neighbor*. (Some of us might feel that *she* is here the Christian, and he the Stoic. But in orthodox terms, the priority of the first commandment is clear.)

The “love of fate” is what Abelard’s ethics — in combination with his conception of Divine Providence — requires. he was perhaps unequaled in his time for his loving appreciation of classical learning. But he (supposedly) wrote to Heloise at the end of his life that he did not “wish to be a philosopher if it means conflicting with Paul, nor to be an Aristotle if it cuts me off from Christ” (270). Never did a man earn his right to say that by passing a more terrible test. Abelard has himself said that although he was selfishly determined to get Heloise into his bed at the beginning, they were properly in love (i.e., they were *true friends* in Heloise’s sense) when they were separated. But by Abelard’s standards, this only means that they were then *united together in contempt of God*, instead of being in sin singly. From the time of Heloise’s pregnancy onwards, it is clear that Abelard was trying to reconcile their communal selfishness

with their duty to God. He clearly took his own mutilation as a sign that their desire must be *renounced*. How little he himself *wanted* to renounce it, we can see from his instant response, over ten years later, when the Almighty presented him with a situation where Heloise needed help, and he was in a position to give it. If Gilson can see this so clearly, we cannot suppose that Heloise did not recognize it. She *knows* perfectly well that Abelard loves her, even when she is accusing him of never having done so. But she also knows that by entering religion in the spirit that she did, she was (by his standards) going before him on the road to Hell. She is asking him now to prove that for love of her he is willing in his turn to follow her on that road. He has confessed freely how selfish and confused the course that led to his entry into religion was. She has shown how her course was determined strictly by *obedience to him*. She has done *nothing* for the love of God, *everything* for love of Abelard. Let him now do *something* for her, and not for God.

Seen in this light, Abelard's answer is worthy of a Christian martyr. He does not attempt to reason with her (as one of her noble Romans might). He simply points to what she has achieved in the religious life during their separation; and he asks for her prayers. *Nothing* that she asks for does he send her, though he promises to send the best counsel that he can "in matters pertaining to God" if she will ask again, properly, in God's name. But his little homily on the power of prayer is telling her in every line that comfort must come from reconciliation with God. It is *also* telling her that he is a man on the rack. The texts he cites, and the examples he offers, are full of dialectical ironies which arise from the fact that she became first his wife and then a bride of Christ; and she entered both marriages only because she set his will above her conception of God's will.

He has sinned and he has drawn her into sin. But *her* prayers must now save him. That is his *basic* position. Thus he uses the second commandment (which she accepts) in order to bring her back to a proper consciousness of the first (which she has consistently rejected). God can be turned from His wrath (even in the terrible form in which it has appeared to Heloise) "if we pray as we are bidden." The "lords of the earth" should take a lesson from the way God turns His justice itself into mercy, says Abelard. But why does he bring the "lords of the earth" into the letter at all? What have *they* to do with God's dealings with himself and Heloise? And how can he compare human princes abiding by their judgments, with Jephtha's making an irrational vow to God, and then sacrificing his daughter in his "moral" obedience to it? This seeming absurdity is the key to the earlier one. For it is plainly *Heloise* who is Jephtha, obstinately persisting in a vow of absolute obedience to Abelard which she ought never to have made; and

thus it is Heloise who is compared with the princes of this world setting up her own reason as the standard of justice, and obstinately refusing to recognize the way divine justice and mercy really work. But then, too, Heloise is of one flesh with Abelard, they have made their vow of love together. So it is Abelard who is Jephtha, and because Heloise insists that the vow is inviolable, she is the daughter who must be sacrificed, and he must see her damned as the price of his own salvation.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the quotations from the Psalms and the Epistle of James which follow are, at one and the same time, texts to support Abelard's theory of the divine justice and mercy, and appeals to Heloise to show mercy to him for his sin against her in order that she may deserve mercy at the hands of that God of Love — the God whom she herself does not deny.<sup>6</sup>

The final example in this sequence draws the whole series together. It is the case of David ("the Psalmist" but *also* a "lord of the earth") who asked Nabal the rich man of Carmel for supplies — the equivalent of taxes — and was denied (Nabal says: "Who is David? . . . there be many servants nowadays that break away every man from his master"). So David gathers the army that needs the supplies to deal with this rebel. But one of Nabal's men warns Abigail (Nabal's wife) of what is coming — for Nabal is "such a son of Belial that a man cannot speak to him." Abigail then gets together the required supplies (*without* speaking to Nabal) and goes out to meet David — who has decided that he will deserve this sort of defiance from everyone if he

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<sup>5</sup>I don't suppose we know just *when* Abelard wrote his moving "Lament" for Jephtha's daughter; but remembering that he was old enough to be Heloise's father, and that he was indeed her academic father, I think we can safely say that we know *why* he wrote it.

<sup>6</sup>Abelard quotes only the *incipit* of Psalm 101: "I will sing of mercy and justice unto thee, O Lord . . ." But we must read the whole psalm, for we may be sure that Heloise could recite it by heart, and every word of it is relevant either to Abelard's sin in the old days or to Heloise's persistence now (or to both). His second quotation is from James, ii, 12: "For he shall have judgement without mercy that hath shown no mercy; but mercy exalteth judgement" ("exalteth" is Abelard's reading). This second text tells us how we should construe the opening reference to "mercy" in a Psalm that is all about the strict separation of sheep from goats. Abelard expects his students to *use their own minds* on the texts that he offers them. Heloise knew this, and she knew how she was supposed to do it. Most modern readers, even medievalists, know neither.

leaves one man alive in Nabal's household. Abigail talks David round nevertheless. Nabal meanwhile is on a binge, and when she tells *him* about it all, he suffers a paralytic stroke and dies within a few days. David congratulates himself upon leaving vengeance to the Lord, and marries Abigail.

In the explicit analogy that Abelard draws here, Christ replaces David, Abelard is the man of Belial, and Heloise, formerly his wife and now the bride of Christ, is Abigail. What he *emphasizes* is that God is bound to be more merciful than David, and Heloise as a nun is better placed than a lay petitioner like Abigail. But God "breaking his oath" is, of course, a peculiar concept which Abelard's theology of divine justice *turning into* mercy is meant to explicate. The more *direct* analogy here is twofold (the alternative outcomes being thus made fully explicit). On the one hand (in Heloise's human terms as integrated into the divine truth by Abelard) Heloise is like David who has sworn to destroy Nabal and all his house in pursuit of her own concept of justice; and Abelard is like Abigail striving to save all her menfolk. On the other hand (in Abelard's divine terms) Heloise's resolute contempt of God is like the obstinacy of the son of Belial to whom a man cannot speak; and if she does not (in her own terms) follow the example of David and renounce the taking of her own justice, then Abelard will be like Abigail bringing the news of reconciliation to her husband only to see him fall lifeless before her. Finally, one thing that a fanatical student of Seneca, Cicero and Lucan will not miss is the overthrow of the natural order involved in the reversal of sex-roles. For Heloise, who claims to have done *everything* in *obedience* to Abelard, to assume the role either of David or of Nabal, is the act of a veritable daughter of Belial.

"Here you have an example, sister," says the abbot Abelard to the abbess Heloise, "and an assurance how much your prayers for me may prevail on God" (121). But Heloise is the superscription of her first letter deliberately played on the multiplicity of role-relations that now exist between them. The "example" reveals quite other meanings when we look at it in terms of those other roles.

Abelard now turns from considering the efficacy of Heloise's prayers to considering the prayers of her nuns. I dare say that several levels of meaning could be found in the story from the thirty-eighth homily of St. Gregory, if one knew the text. But of course I do not, and I have not tried to remedy my deficiency. Abelard is surely giving Heloise the hint to look for more than one significance when he tells her that "all the *details* set out there *cannot* have escaped your understanding." Even without the details we can see that the role of a monk who was

supported by the prayers of his brethren “although he was unwilling and resisted” fits Heloise more perfectly than it does Abelard at the present time (though of course *he* would much rather be in the Abbey of the Paraclete than in that of St. Gildas). “Depth of misery and fear of peril” apply to them both — though the misery and peril are of different kinds — but it is certainly Heloise whose “utter despair and weariness of life” is causing her, like that brother in the story, to “try to call his brethren from their prayers.” Heloise wants Abelard to leave his prayers and join her in eternal death. But it is only if she will take to her prayers that the promise of Paul will be fulfilled and she will “receive her dead raised back to life.” Outwardly Abelard is asking that the community pray for his *preservation* in this life. But the scriptural references to the *raising of the dead* which he gives, again direct Heloise to look for quite another meaning; and again the sacramental significance of marriage is crucial. Heloise wants Abelard’s assurance that he will go to Hell with her; he wants her prayers for their joint resurrection. It is of that (and *imprimis* of the resurrection of their Abbess) that the community must be mindful when they pray for him in his bodily perils. Otherwise why does Abelard pick “resurrection from death” out of Paul’s catalogue of the wonders wrought by faith? For death is the one *physical* disaster here which has not yet literally come to pass in his own case.<sup>7</sup>

Taken literally, Abelard’s careful catalogue of men raised from the dead at the instance of women gives an extreme impression of unnecessary exaggeration and rhetorical excess. We are asked to pass from the premise that in each case one or two parents or siblings received this miracle in answer to prayer, to the conclusion that the prayers of a whole convent of holy women “should easily win the preservation of my own life [in *this* world].” The unexpressed meaning is that it is the resurrection of Heloise (and of Abelard whose authority as husband has brought her

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<sup>7</sup>This is the chapter of Hebrews that begins with the celebrated definition of faith. Faith is what Heloise needs and what all must pray for on her behalf. My eye falls here on the faithfulness of Moses who “refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.” In the old days it was Heloise who resisted the pleasures of sin; now she is Pharaoh’s daughter claiming Abelard as her son. *Then* the reversal of the tutorial relation between them was noble, *now* it is not. This is ten verses before Abelard’s quotation, but surely Heloise will notice it too? Certainly she will see the relevance to her own case of that part of verse 35 which Abelard does *not* quote: Women received their dead raised to life again: *and others were tortured not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection.*”



to the verge of damnation) that is to be prayed for. There is even a response to Heloise's not yet explicit confession that she has *lost* her faith (no doubt she has *said* that to Abelard in their conversations, but it is only implied in the first *written* version of her "perpetual complaint"). For Abelard forces the evidence somewhat in order to maintain "that the majority of those raised from the dead were not of the faith" (and St. Paul's whole chapter is about the faithfulness of those who "received not the promise"). Heloise, in her obstinately rational refusal to be reconciled with God's mercy, is like a Jew rather than a Christian. But she can still be saved, as all of them were, from Abel to the harlot Rahab.<sup>8</sup>

Finally Abelard recalls her to the proper conception of her wifely role. She does not *need* to be told to "remember always him who is especially yours." But she does need telling *how* to remember him. At first the quotations are now straightforward — the only *implicit* significance being the fact that the good wife is obedient (Heloise is proud of her obedience to a bad husband; now let her be obedient to a good one, for she is the bride of Christ). But when we come back to "the unbelieving husband who now belongs to God through his wife," and the story of the conversion of Clovis through his wife's influence, we have once more a riddling discourse. I can only suppose that what makes this relevant is Heloise's conviction (the conviction which led her to regard marriage as betrayal) that Abelard was (like King Clovis) a divinely appointed missionary for the conversion of France. Certainly she agreed that the conventional religion and morality of clerics and laity alike was a sham (and this was confirmed both at St. Denis and at Argenteuil); they both believed that a conversion was necessary and that Abelard's ethics and theology provided the ground plan for it; and they both call Abelard's active enemies "pseudo-apostles" — which strongly suggests that he is the *true* apostle. He is saying, then, that Heloise must go back to the role of Clovis' wife, and not play out the tragedy of Eve which she always rejected in the old days (when Abelard really *was* an "unbelieving husband"). It may be

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<sup>8</sup>We should note in passing that the prayer formulas that Abelard sends for convent use, are not at all specific to his *physical* perils, and are more obviously appropriate to the *spiritual* peril of Heloise. The masculine pronouns all refer to a "servant" who could equally well be man or woman. Even when we come to the final supplication: "O God who through thy servant hast been pleased to gather together thy handmaidens in thy name, we beseech thee to protect him in all adversity and restore him in safety to thy handmaidens," the story quoted earlier from Gregory's thirty-eighth homily makes clear that although the nuns are asked to pray for "thy servant Peter," they could equally well pray for "thy servant Heloise."

straining things a bit to see here evidence that Abelard's own conversion experience was precipitated by his moral struggle when he had to get Heloise to accept their separation, in order that both of them might enter religion. But it accords with Abelard's own theology of justice and mercy that the bitter recriminations of Heloise at that time should finally appear to him to have served the same function (under divine Providence) that the loving entreaties of the wife of Clovis had for the French King. If ever a man consciously and deliberately took the burden of another's potential damnation upon his conscience, it was Abelard when he drove Heloise into the cloister. If it was indeed that responsibility that finally caused *him* to turn back from the path to perdition, we can imagine what Heloise's renewal of the "old perpetual complaint" must *now* be doing to him.

The final lesson that he reads Heloise in this letter, and the one that she finds most terrible, is his providential remedy for this terrible evil. He is twenty, or almost twenty, years older than Heloise; and in the course of nature (her own rational deity) he must die before her. When he asks her to take care for his funeral, he is speaking of something which she cannot regard as divine *injustice* (in the way that she views the mutilation, and their consequent entry into religion).

Here Abelard shows great insight, and demonstrates the genuine rationality of his apparently quixotic fideism. Nature itself has decreed that Heloise *cannot* live her whole life "in obedience to Abelard." Those crucial decisions which she took at Abelard's command — to marry him, and then (like Cato's Marcia) to put him away at his own behest, and marry Christ — only shaped a life that was rough-hewn to her own will. These disastrous and unwilling marriages were both preferable to the sort of worldly marriage that Fulbert may have hoped for. Yet she was obviously a born manager, as well as a born student. However true it may be that she entered religion at Abelard's behest, and in inward rebellion against God, we cannot suppose that the career she has already achieved as Prioress was every step of it achieved in a spirit of conscious self-suppression. It is not credible that she ever wanted to be one of the scandal-makers of Argenteuil. Before that scandal broke up the convent, we can be sure that she was as happy there as she could be anywhere in the absence of Abelard. If she accepted the total break between them loyally, simply because Abelard had decreed it, we cannot suppose that she was not (fairly cheerfully) resigned to her lot before Abbot Suger brought disaster upon her rather checkered peace. (She will say that it was all a living lie. But Abelard himself will show that this is not credible.)

But Abelard's dramatic reappearance as her savior, brought all of the old misery to life. This can scarcely have been easier for Abelard to bear, than it was for her. His Heaven-sent opportunity to do something for his sister in God, decisively turned her away from God again. Thus God had shown them conclusively why they must be dead to one another in this world. The best way to get Heloise to see this, and to accept it with proper resignation, was to make her reflect on the approaching time when they would be *literally* dead to one another. For my part I am sure — as I think Peter the Venerable was sure — that Abelard was right. Heloise could *never* be perfectly reconciled with God while Abelard was alive; but she could *move* toward reconciliation, by thinking upon his death. And once his time of trial was over, she would truly want to be saved, as surely as she believed that he was. We must admit, of course, that only God can “search the heart and the reins”; but from the point of view of a human jury the issue is beyond reasonable doubt, and Gilson is wrong to suggest that any real reason for doubt exists.

Gilson is wrong, for exactly the reason that makes him think he is right: the agonized response of Heloise to this short sermon on prayer. In the address of her first letter she played on the multiplicity of role relations by which she and Abelard were linked. She does this again in the first paragraph of her second letter; but now the address shows her almost perfect submission to Abelard's views. The letter goes “to her only one after Christ” from “she who is his alone in Christ.” She prefers to take Abelard's homily on the good wife to refer to her earthly marriage; and her first paragraph takes Abelard to task for not assuming, in his address to her, the position of seniority and authority that properly belongs to him.

This is only the flimsiest mask for the misery that breaks out as soon as the ink is flowing properly. She fastens immediately on the one thing that could confirm her rebellion against God. How could she forgive God if in spite of the prayers of the sisters, God were to allow the unruly monks to kill their Abbot? She is angry with Abelard for talking like this, but it is plain that her real anger is directed at his folly in putting himself at risk. In the present context her quote from Seneca, “Why is it necessary to summon evil and to destroy life before death comes?” does not *merely* mean the same as “Sufficient unto the day” (which she quotes first).

Thinking of his death only drives her frantic at this moment. But we have only to compare her wild prophecies of her speechlessness or of open raging against God when Abelard dies, with her actual fulfilment of Abelard's wishes in 1142 (documented in her correspondence with Peter the Venerable) to see why Gilson's artificial “mystery of Heloise” must be declared to be a wind-egg. After this one short outburst, she becomes quite rational. First she argues

sensibly enough that thinking of Abelard's death does not bring her peace, or allow of devotion (she no longer speaks as if she desired neither). Then, sadly, she accepts Abelard's terms for the discussion. God, she says, is "cruel to me in all things! O merciless mercy!" She cannot speak of divine *justice* at all, because she cannot see it. In terms of God's law, it was she who deserved to suffer for the adultery; for it was she who opposed the marriage, and drove Fulbert to madness by denying that it existed. God spared them while they followed her view of God's will, and punished Abelard when she gave in to his view of it. The only way she can now read the evidence is that Abelard's very temptation was wrong. If the mutilation is a blessing, that is its meaning. So Heloise is Eve, Delilah, and the wife who led Solomon into idolatry. But most revealing of all, she is the wife of Job (who urged him to "Curse God and die"). This is her confession and recantation for her first letter. She admits that she has given Abelard his "last and hardest battle" (131).

It is still the marriage that is for her the great sin against Abelard's vocation (for which the mutilation was the necessary cure). Since Heloise *never* consented to it in her heart, she cannot conscientiously accuse herself for it now. But she accuses herself freely for her enjoyment of carnal desire. The root of the problem is that she is only sorry for this because of the suffering it brought upon Abelard. Toward him she feels contrite, but not toward God. She shows clearly that she knows what this means. "By rebelling against his ordinance, I offend him more by my indignation than I placate him by making amends through penitence." But, she asks piteously, "How can it be called repentance for sins, however great the mortification of the flesh, if the mind still retains the will to sin and is on fire with its old desires?" We must be careful here, first, to understand what the difficulty is. She has now admitted that her early love-making with Abelard was sinful; that she knew that, and at times truly repented of it (in Abelard's sense — as she showed by her resistance to his importunities). But her resistance, like her present contrition, was entirely for Abelard's sake. She does not know *how* to be sorry on her own account; and the reason she cannot be sorry is that whenever she remembers the sin she remembers Abelard.

Even during the celebration of the Mass . . . lewd visions of those pleasures take such a hold upon my unhappy soul that my thoughts are on their wantonness instead of on prayers. I should be groaning over the sins I have committed, but I can only sigh for what I have lost. *Everything we did and also the times and places are stamped on my heart along with your image, so that I live through it all again with you* (133).

When Heloise seeks to explain the contrast between Abelard's repentance and her own apparent enslavement to desire, by pleading her "youth and passion and experience of pleasures which were so delightful," we ought not to suppose that she seriously regrets anything lost to her in the cloister, except the society of Abelard. But she still wishes for that in its fullness, and she cannot repent of that wish.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that Heloise has genuinely misunderstood Abelard's doctrine of repentance. For she wilfully resisted that wish, even when she could gratify it; and Abelard is so far from holding that we can "tear the heart away from hankering after its dearest pleasures" (as Heloise thinks she is supposed to do) that he would regard the desire to do this as an impious criticism of God who gave us those desires. We *must* be tempted by desire, in order to be wilfully obedient. Nor is there anything to repent for in the enjoyment of a pleasure, even a sinful one. For pleasure is in itself a good, and the enjoyment of it is a ground for praising God. I am inclined to think that the way Heloise argues, shows that no written version of Abelard's *Ethics* yet existed. For if she had studied and copied it, she would not speak as she does in some places. All the same (and in spite of appearances) her misunderstanding is not genuine. She knows (as her position about the marriage and her lying denial of it show) that it is not desire, but *consent to desire*, that is essential to sin; and although she speaks of her mind "retaining the will to sin," she knows that she did not always have that will even in the old days. *Now* she would *never* have it, if by her resistance to desire she could restore Abelard's manhood. She knows exactly what contrition *is*; and she feels it towards Abelard. But she is determined to make the conditions of true contrition towards God unsatisfiable, because while she is ready enough to side with Abelard against herself, she *cannot* bring herself to side with God against Abelard. This she has *always* felt to be impossible. So she resolutely declares that her supposed chastity and piety is really hypocrisy. Abelard himself may have been taken in by the record she has made (she says). But he must be deceived no longer, and he should cease from praising her. Rather he should pray for her and help her. Let him not tell her (as his ethics requires) that only a hard-fought battle can deserve a crown. She does not *want* a crown. But she does finally confess that she wants a place in Heaven. She herself rejects his praises, by arguing that only a Christian *death* can merit Christian praise. So in spite of her frantic outburst at the beginning, she has accepted his point about meditating upon death. Agonized and unwilling as it is, this letter represents her first hesitant step towards reconciliation with God.

Abelard's reply begins in a calmly objective and magisterial way, as if he were engaged in a formal *disputatio*. But it is at least a straightforward answer to Heloise's indictment. Now that she has admitted that they stand in God's court, not in their own, he does not have to speak in riddles. Even now he is anxious not to engage in anything like self-justification. Self-accusation, and the consequent justification of God, are the only road to comfort. So when one person seeks to help another to find true solace, he must of necessity accuse and find fault. As we have seen, Abelard's suggestive analogies in his first letter were a covert criticism of Heloise's position. Now that he can advance to a plain statement of the case, he wants her to know that he is not doing so in self-defense.

His address is already a clear answer to Heloise's first ground of complaint: "To the bride of Christ (the nun), Christ's servant (the monk)." Heloise must accept the dissolution of their marriage, and the existence in her case of a higher spiritual marriage. For this world, her black habit already shows that she is a widow. Here Abelard is making explicit the riddling significance of his request that Heloise and her nuns will attend to the burial of his mortal remains at the due time.

But also he now wants the mourning habit to symbolize the sinful consciousness which Heloise despairingly believes that she cannot put off. He speaks first of its symbolizing *physical* adversity, but his contrast between the lily of the valley (Heloise), and the lily of the heights which "withers in the fire of temptation," shows his full meaning. Heloise cannot be called a hypocrite, because she is perfectly sincere in her humility; and her abjectness is true contrition, not a mask assumed to make a pious impression. The very act of *honest* self-accusation, is the justice that turns itself into mercy; for while it must necessarily blacken us *without*, it is "all glorious within." The glory is, of course, not ours, but the grace of God.

It is obviously because of Heloise's confession about her tormenting memories of their love affair that Abelard focuses on the sexual imagery of the Song of Solomon as an expression of the spiritual marriage of the nun to Christ. Whether it was wise to fight fire with fire, to fill Heloise's mind with sexual imagery for her vocation — even the white man's fantasy that a black man is better in bed — I cannot presume to decide. But it is obvious that the conventual religious must at times have sensual fantasies. Abelard was almost certainly more violently sensual than Heloise. So he knew what the problem was, and his mutilation certainly could not remove it, but only make it more tormenting because he had no longer any possibility of realizing his dreams. It accords with his general view of nature as *disposed* by God that we

should not try to deny or abolish our nature, although we are meant to struggle against it. Only in Heaven will the bride of Christ be truly free from the garment of sin. Therefore, since in this world she *must* wear it, she should make it a mode of imagery, a means of contemplating her true heavenly joys. How different this is from ordinary sensuality is made evident by the monastic seclusion, the rough cloth, etc. (How far Abelard is from the aggressive sado-masochism of much monastic thinking about the asceticism of monastic life, we can see by looking at the practice of St. Bernard; and Bernard's truly obsessive concern with the Song of Songs will teach us to estimate correctly the moderation even of Abelard's use of the symbolic techniques of sublimation.)

There may be a glancing reference to the scandalous life of Argenteuil in what Abelard says about the conventuals who practice no asceticism at all (and no symbolic sublimation either, one supposes). Certainly he is remembering the monks of St. Denis; and certainly the aim of this part of his discussion is to demonstrate to Heloise that her religious vocation and intent is far from hypocritical. (Nor can she say that she has adopted this way of life simply to please Abelard, since the rule of life that she wants him to help her formulate for her nuns has its origin in a devotion that antedated her entry into religion.)

His little tract on the true life of the nun is Abelard's way of driving home the fact that Heloise is the bride of Christ, not the wife of Abelard. This was one of the *explicit* positions of his first letter (addressed to sister nun from brother monk) which Heloise had not ignored, but succeeded in reducing to a subordinate position in her reply. Having placed it firmly in the limelight, Abelard proceeds to his unavoidable task of reproof. We hear now the voice, not of the lecturer, but of a mildly irate husband. Abelard quotes her own first letter at her, in order to show up the rhetorical character of her protests that he ought not to torment her with talk of his own dangers. You asked for it, he says, and what is more we both know that you wanted a truthful answer, and I owed you one. He also makes a side-swipe at her rebellion against God. If she *really* thinks God is afflicting him beyond his strength, she ought to regard his death as a happy release: "had you any hope of divine mercy being shown me, you would be all the more anxious for me to be freed from the troubles of this life as you see them to be intolerable" (143).

His treatment of Heloise's rejection of his praise is interesting, because he is here in something of a dilemma. He must approve of the self-accusatory consciousness, but at the same time Heloise has gone too far, in accusing herself of hypocrisy. So he has to show her that there can be hypocrisy even in self-accusation. Anyone who denies a plain fact about themselves,

because the denial itself is praiseworthy, must be suspected of desiring praise. Abelard denies that he suspects Heloise of this, and I think we must believe him, since the desire to be flattered was *not* Heloise's motive. I have argued that she wanted to justify her rebellion against God by showing herself to be in an impossible situation. I think that Abelard saw it this way also. He points out that his praise was intended to summon her to even greater efforts; and she understood that, for in rejecting his praise she also rejected his conception of the moral life as the struggle for a crown (135). But since she acknowledged at the same time that she wanted to achieve a place in Heaven, there is no real disagreement between them; and he can therefore concede that "we ought not in fact to believe in our friend's approval any more than in our enemies' abuse" (145).

The tone of Abelard's response has here modulated from mildly indignant remonstrance, to entirely amicable explanation and discussion. As he comes finally to the nub of the problem — "your old perpetual complaint in which you presume to blame God for the manner of our entry into religion instead of wishing to glorify him as you justly should" — his tone runs the whole gamut from authoritative rebuke ("*presume* to blame God," "glorify him as you *justly* should") to the agonized entreaty of a fellow sinner, and ends with the call to arms of a fighting comrade. It is absurd, he says, for her to feel indignation against God on his behalf, for what he himself has come to see as an act of grace. And since it is deeply distressing to him, she must try to get over it, if she really wants to please him. She *cannot* be both obedient to Abelard, and wilfully rebellious against God. (We should note that he did not say this hotly, when she was boasting of her obedience, and at the same time *trying* to distress him. He says it now gently, when she is really trying to be obedient, and is herself distressed by her failure.) She must will as hard as she can to follow him to Heaven, because he does not want to go without her, and certainly he does not want to go to Hell. Much of what I have claimed to read between the lines of his response to her first letter is here made explicit, and his reference to her first letter here is unmistakable. If she is Eve, he says, it is because like Eve she was the cause of salvation. As for her *human* notions of equity and justice, would she prefer him to be suffering *justly* at the hands of men? He does not deny, of course, that there was injustice on the part of those who have injured him. But one must not blame God for *that*. And he now proceeds to show that it was indeed *justice* that has turned to mercy in his treatment at the hands of God. Heloise made one flagrant misstatement in her attempt to prove that God had treated them unjustly. She claimed that disaster only fell on them when their marriage had become *chaste* because she had already gone to Argenteuil (130). Abelard nails the falsity of that claim by reminding her of what they did — and we cannot suppose she had forgotten! — in a corner of the convent refectory. As



between himself and Fulbert it was one betrayal for another — not human justice but divine equity.<sup>9</sup> How his poetic imagination — long accustomed to the allegorical reading of Scriptural history with its portents and prophecies — operates to give emblematic significance to the key moments of one's personal history is strikingly illustrated by the way in which he connects Heloise's voluntary adoption of the nun's habit as a cover for her journey to Brittany, with her voluntary acceptance of it when she made her vows. The former was a sin; the latter was a moral act. For although she took the veil against her own wish, she professed the religion she had formerly mocked.

Abelard's tone now becomes agonized, for he has come to the point where the last extreme of self-accusation is required of him. He must now expose Heloise's claim that their marriage was lawful, honorable and chaste. Heloise, as we have seen, regarded it as a sin on her part, and is willing to blame herself for allowing it. But she regards it as a moral act on Abelard's part, and her quarrel with God's justice is in his cause, not her own. So he reminds her of how *he* forced her, even when *her* intentions were honorable and chaste; and of how they together profaned Holy Week. His final act of self-abnegation — the declaration that his motive for the secret marriage was selfish — he holds back until the moment when agony gives way to the call to arms. To me, this indicates that he cannot make the affirmation in good conscience, strictly on his own account. There is truth in it, but even his awareness of that truth sprang from Heloise's opposition to the marriage. The desire to do what was right was his *first* conscious motive for marriage, when he found his lust was uncontrollable, and when he saw Heloise suffering for it, and Fulbert wronged by it. His selfishness was the weakness that Heloise saw, and hence the sin (on *his* part) that she *cannot* deny. Thus it provides his final crushing refutation of her claim that God has been unjust to him; and he uses it for his final proof of God's *mercy*. He has already shown how the outrage of the castration became a blessing. Now he claims that without the marriage Heloise might never have entered religion with him.

Thus his letter comes full circle, and he returns to the glory of her spiritual marriage. By God's grace she has "turned the curse of Eve into the blessing of Mary." Heloise's own arguments against her carnal marriage echo back at us when we read "How unseemly for those holy hands which now turn the pages of sacred books to have to perform degrading offices in

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<sup>9</sup>But Abelard is here ignoring the secret marriage and the Judas kiss. That would be a more interesting problem for his peculiar casuistry of personal histories!

women's concerns" (150). Their story is, finally, a great moral emblem for the world, to demonstrate the truth of all her arguments against matrimony for a true cleric. "God himself has thought fit . . . to draw us to him by force — the same force whereby he chose to strike and convert Paul — and by our example perhaps to deter from our audacity others who are also trained in letters" (150).<sup>10</sup>

Abelard now does what Heloise besought him not to do. She has asked him not to challenge her weakness, but to give her strength. "I do not want you to exhort me to virtue and summon me to the fight saying 'Power comes to its full strength in weakness' [2 Corinthians XII, 9]" (135). But Abelard can do no other, since for him, as for St. Paul, this is what the Crucifixion means; and it contradicts his view of the way spiritual strength comes, and where it comes from, to suppose that one *man* can give it to another. The compassion Heloise wants to share with a fellow sinner *she must give to Christ on the Cross* if she would draw strength from the sharing.

"it was he who truly loved you, not I." This much we can accept, but the denigration of his own love which follows is justified only the peculiar standpoint of the saved Christian which Abelard has now assumed. As a comment on Heloise's remorseful "contrition" for the supposed "wrong" that she has done Abelard, it is quite correct for him to say: "You say I suffered for you, and perhaps that is true, but it was really through you, and even this unwilling; not for love of you but under compulsion, and to bring you not salvation but sorrow" (153). But the blanket declaration: "I took my fill of my wretched pleasures in you, and this was the sum total of my love" is, humanly speaking, false. Heloise knew it was false when she said it angrily in her first letter; and she certainly knows it is false, when Abelard freely concedes it now that her wrath has turned into a real plea for compassion. Abelard says it, only because this free acknowledgment of the worst the other can think of you, is the only contribution one brother can make to the spiritual strengthening of another by God's grace. It is *itself* the final proof of love — and it is also the perfect illustration of how the blackness of the sinful consciousness can be "all glorious within."

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<sup>10</sup>Notice how the comparison with Paul confirms our interpretation of Abelard's use of the story of Clovis in his first letter. Notice, too, that we have here a clear statement of why Abelard thought the letters should be preserved and published for the community to which God gave him a mission.

This is no merely conventional piety. But it is, of course, based on the commonplaces of Christian devotion. Abelard's final touch is vividly personal; and for that reason, though it cannot move me more, I love it better. He urges Heloise not to cherish the ideal Abelard who lives still in the Eden of her memory, more than the poor sinner who now knows himself so much better. And he does it by quoting Lucan at her! Lucan's Pompey reproaches his wife Cornelia, for loving his "greatness," not himself. This, Abelard thinks, is the real root of Heloise's rebellion against God on his behalf. What I like about it, is the way it brings the *real* Heloise before us. Heloise has an ideal of *herself* as well as an ideal of Abelard; and the more we see the folly of her Abelard ideal, the more we tend to be enchanted by the ideal Heloise, who is so complete in her self-surrender to love, so gentle in her quiet endurance of lust, and above all, so perfect in her obedience to Abelard, and her acceptance of his vision. The real Heloise does indeed have all these qualities; but she is no patient Grizelda. The attitudes that are directed only towards God in her letters, were very much part of her personality in relation to those who crossed her in the world. And just as she does not only hate God, so she does not only love Abelard. It was no patiently submissive, wholly loving, girl who defied Fulbert, and did all she could to make a lie of his truth; yet it is plain that Fulbert loved her, and he surely deserved her compassion at that juncture, if he obtained Abelard's. And the girl who hurled Seneca at Abelard in opposing the marriage, and declaimed Cornelia's lament for Pompey at her friends among the nuns, when she "hurried to take the veil," is something of a self-dramatizing tragedy queen. Nor should we forget the aggressive young blue-stocking who calls her baby Astralabe, but regards the tasks of motherhood with abhorrence, and leaves the child behind, not without regret and suffering I imagine, but certainly without thinking of that as a major sacrifice.<sup>11</sup> This *real* girl whom Abelard fell in love with, is rather different from the ideal one who is wholly absorbed in her love for Abelard. The ideal girl may remain a "mystery" to Gilson, but I think we can recognize Abelard's real one in the successful Abbess. Like Abelard, I love her better than the one who is in love with her own ideal of loving; and nowhere does she come to life more vividly than in her fierce commitment to the Roman Stoic virtues. Abelard knew her well, and he knew well what chord to touch in order to make her mindful of herself when her romantic commitment threatened to overwhelm her.

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<sup>11</sup>Though we may reasonably suspect from the way Abelard compares the family she never had, with the convent of nuns that she now rules (150), that the academic Eden of Heloise's earlier dreams included the children of the Adam that Fulbert's vengeance took from her.

He needed to strike that chord firmly, for he has to make her see, finally, that it is because of the “punishment” he took for both of them that she must now bear a burden that he does not carry; and her reward is a crown he can no longer win. Sure enough, he quotes the very text she told him she did not want to hear: “For the one who must always strive there is also a crown and the athlete cannot win his crown unless he has kept to the rules” (154, cf. 138).<sup>12</sup> But in regard to the world and its trials they two are one flesh. So she must think of herself as striving for both of them. Here earthly ties of affection and duty (which he would not allow to determine any spiritual claim between them) are to be harnessed to the service of her spiritual vocation, just as her sexual fantasies are. Closing the circle of his discourse, Abelard returns finally to the image of the Ethiopian queen — but this time it is the one in the Acts of the Apostles, because that one had a faithful eunuch as her steward. Thus at the end he lets himself into the picture as the humble steward to the dark bride of the King of Kings.

The letter ends with a prayer which, unlike the formula in his first letter, belongs strictly to their personal situation. Since it is specifically a prayer for the two of them Heloise can say it whenever her mind dwells on those memories of their sin which she says she cannot feel contrite for. Since it is said for him too, it will help to stabilize her intentional *resistance* to sensual desires. We should notice, first, that it is a prayer in praise of marriage — which she rejected as a betrayal of their ideal, but which is the true means of grace through which those desires that now haunt her are legitimated; and secondly, it clearly affirms the conception of sinful desire as a moral proving ground; finally, it states Abelard’s faith that the test imposed is always tempered and proportioned to our real strength.

I do not think Abelard’s belief that circumstances are always proportioned to capacities can be accepted as a valid, or even as a plausible, empirical generalization. Still less am I inclined to accept it as a necessary axiom of moral reason leading us to faith in a divine Providence that adjusts individual circumstances to individual powers. This was how Abelard regarded it. But I do think that his confidence that Providence had not asked too much of Heloise was justified. Her answer to this letter shows her taking a second painful step on the path of moral discipline that he has marked out for her. She does not allow her sense of inner despair to break out in writing — though she herself comments that she would be unable to

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<sup>12</sup>2 Timothy, ii, 5 — as so often, the context of the quote is highly relevant to the case at hand.

restrain her feelings in direct conversation. It is hard for her to accept the alienation of volition from feeling that Abelard's doctrine of moral struggle imposes. But she accepts it nonetheless; and the letters of instruction that she asks for and receives in her capacity as Abbess are a logical development, and a psychological progress on the same road. I confess that I do not feel certain *what* the superscription of her third letter means. I note that Muckle has preferred *Suo* to *Domino* as the first word. If this reading is accepted, then Heloise has completely come round to Abelard's view of their personal relationship. She writes "to him who is specially hers" (as Abelard reminded her in his first letter) and she claims to be *singularly* his because of their bond in this world. But even if the traditional *Domino* is kept, I do not think that it can bear the interpretation that Charles Rémusat, followed by Gilson, put on it. It must, I think, still refer to Abelard, for Heloise would not violate all rules of epistolary salutation. But the one thing I am certain of, is that it does not signify any intentional defiance of the program of moral struggle that Abelard has put before her. There I shall leave the matter, and there my attempt to retell the story ends. The details of their joint attempt to emulate St. Benedict by devising a new monastic rule for nuns need not concern us.<sup>13</sup>

### III

I want finally to point to two conclusions that seem to me to emerge from the proper comprehension of the documents. The first is a hypothesis about what might have been, which seems to me to be warranted by the evidence, but which I can only advance very tentatively, for consideration by others who know the social and academic world of the twelfth century better than I do. I believe that any historian who does not share Abelard's faith in the providential disposition of all that happens, must disagree with the moral that Abelard himself draws from the story. The real tragedy of Abelard's concern for his reputation, and Heloise's sinfully innocent defense of a celibate ideal of the academic life, is that it was not necessary. The enormous personal influence of Abelard as a teacher would not have been destroyed by *frank and honest* acceptance of marriage (just as Heloise's vocation as a scholar would not have been seriously compromised by a more normal family life). I think that one who could draw students after him into the wilderness to the point where his enemies were seriously alarmed, and his friends

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<sup>13</sup>Even in the documents of these later labors, however, confirmation of the picture I have drawn, and of Heloise's further progress on the path Abelard has marked out for her, can be found.

seriously embarrassed by the threat of social upheaval that he posed, could quite certainly have overcome the handicap of having to confess openly that he could not himself live up to his own ideal of academic perfection. His dream of becoming a new “apostle to the French” would not have been compromised even as much as it actually was; but a frank acceptance of his limitations would have forced Abelard into a conscious reorientation and transformation of his own self-image. His ultimate influence might have been greater, precisely because as a declared layman he would have appeared less dangerous to the established order. The whole problem of the heretical tendencies in his theology could have been argued more calmly; and Abelard’s readiness to look for an acceptable mode for the restatement of his views would have been admitted less grudgingly.

But perhaps I am wrong about the tenor of the time. Perhaps a married master with real influence and authority in theology was an impossibility in the twelfth century. In that case, I must agree with Abelard’s view that his mutilation was a mercy. God (or the near-psychotic fury of Fulbert) did then indeed preserve for us a mighty spirit, and a great gift, in the only way possible. For I am as sure that Abelard finally read his own nature rightly in this respect, as I am certain that he did not *intend* to be a heretic. He was someone who quite simply *could not* live in canonical continence as a whole man. His own case illustrates one of the most difficult problems of an ethics of right intention. One can only morally intend to do what one has good reason to believe to be possible. A single failure does not prove that one’s evaluation of duty was wrong — that would be absurd! — but there is a point at which one must recognize failure as an indication that a moral reassessment of duty itself is necessary. “He who accuses himself is just” because our desires always enter into the definition of our duties; and if we persistently fail at something, then we ought to be hunting out the harder duty of surrendering the ambition that is bound up in our belief that we have a duty to do what we can only fail at. If we regard life as a moral battleground, we must also take seriously the verdict of defeat that the battle sometimes delivers.

This is one illustration of my final conclusion. Abelard’s *Ethics or Know Thyself* has come down to us in an incomplete form. We have the first book (on sin); and it is quite probable that he never wrote any more of the second book (on grace) than we now possess. The correspondence with Heloise, however, will enable us to reconstruct his theory fairly completely, since it is largely concerned with the way in which justice (for sin) is transformed into the mercy of grace, by our moral understanding of it. There is no need to bring God, or any doctrine of special Providence, into this. What Abelard’s ethics illustrates — when shorn of its theological

assumptions — is the fact that self-knowledge is the really important (and difficult) aspect of the analysis of moral intention. Problems about the formal universalizability of duties, etc. are in fact not just futile, but dangerously misleading, because it is always *my* duty that is to be defined, and no one else can really be in *my* place. Of course *objectivity*, the law-like aspect of duty, is vitally important; and Abelard's other works contain much valuable speculation about the real basis of that. But naturally it is not that which his own self-examination illustrates.

Self-examination, however, is not a theoretical undertaking. If we want to draw all of the many lessons out of Abelard's correspondence with Heloise that they contain for the student of his ethics, we must understand that the perfect honesty of the confessional is not the same as the objective truth of the moralist's analysis in the lecture-hall. Historians have almost uniformly fallen down here. Recognizing the vivid sincerity of these documents they have vilified Abelard (because his moral concern obliges him to vilify himself) and idealized Heloise (because her moral desperation forced her into idealizing herself). The reintegration of Abelard's ethics — which often appears to be Mosaic in its inspiration, but is really Pauline — is a necessary task for philosophers not only because Abelard's ethics is so valuable and interesting in itself, but because until we philosophers have performed this task properly, historians guided only by their ordinary common sense must inevitably fail to do the historical justice which is *their* bounden duty to two of the most marvelous self-portrayals that the record of Western Christian culture has to offer.

**Notes**