

Sex and Submission: Heloise's Rhetoric of Coercion

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God knows I never sought anything in you except yourself; I wanted simply you, nothing of yours. I looked for no marriage bond, no marriage portion, and it was not my own pleasures and wishes that I sought to gratify, as you well know, but yours. The name of my wife may seem more sacred or more binding, but sweeter for me will always be the word friend [amica], or, if you will permit me, that of concubine or whore.

Heloise to Abelard, "Letter 2," p. 51¹

Concubine, *concubina*, and whore, *meretrix*, are not words that many would believe the Abbess of the Paraclete, Heloise D'Argenteuil, would use to describe herself. The strangeness of this description is further complicated by the immediate context in which it was written. This passage is taken from a letter Heloise wrote to Peter Abelard, her husband, who sent her to the cloister after the couple refused to admit they were married publicly—a peculiar stance due to their positions in the church as well as the relatively well-known conception of a child, Astralabe. The couple had had limited correspondence, the extent of which is not entirely known, after their entrance into monastic life, which came as the result of their marriage, or rather the denunciation thereof. Heloise was the tutee of Abelard, and after a relationship developed, the couple agreed to marry. Shortly afterward, Heloise's uncle sent men to castrate Abelard. In the aftermath, Abelard joins cloistered life in an attempt to preserve his own life and dignity, urging Heloise to do the same. Heloise donned the habit soon after Abelard, forsaking a future together as husband and wife. Heloise wrote the above passage from the Paraclete, responding to what her husband had written in the *Historia Calamitatum*, a public letter Abelard wrote that accounted for the trials and tribulations he had suffered in his life. One would not expect the abbess of a new convent to write about herself, preferring the name of concubine and whore to "bride of Christ", especially when these letters would be viewed and interpreted by all who came across them in their journey to their recipient, Abelard.

The sexual explicitness present in the first two letters Heloise writes in what is now known as *The Letters of Heloise and Abelard* is not a lapse in morality or a vulgar display from an abbess; instead, it is a deliberate, quietly orchestrated move to affirm female spirituality. The relationship between Abelard and Heloise was well known during their lives. Abelard's position as a controversial theologian meant many aspects of his life were subject to public scrutiny. Heloise uses the *Historia Calamitatum* as the beginning of a correspondence that would be widely read and circulated. These letters would offer nuns at the Paraclete and possibly other religious houses guidance on how to live out their vocations as women. In her letters, Heloise initially positions herself as the meek, submissive wife of Abelard, who has been betrayed and wronged by her husband. In submitting to her husband's (spiritual) authority, she forces Abelard to respond to her request by answering her questions about female monastic living. By utilizing the sexual, submissive figure with which Abelard has painted her in his *Historia Calamitatum* and the public forum of letter correspondence, she can establish her own spirituality and provide authoritative pastoral guidance to other women. Heloise's use of the public forum of the letters serves to create a new religious guide for cloistered women, making her a notable Bride of Christ while also fulfilling her role as the mortal bride of Abelard through helping him redeem himself through the *cura monialium*.

Letters

Monastic communities were the centers of literary exchange, and written correspondence provided these places with the opportunity for cultural and intellectual discourse; a crucial interaction for these otherwise isolated communities. Letter writing in the Medieval age functioned differently than the modern-day system, with collections functioning as a sort of public forum. Written correspondence could be utilized as a form of interaction within the monastic community—such as Abelard’s *Historia Calamitatum*. Within Abelard’s “autobiographical” text, he extensively portrays himself as the victim of the church, putting forth his miseries to restore public favour. Although Heloise’s letters lack the pertinent self-pity and victimization obvious in Abelard’s letters, she utilizes the letters as a public stage. Giles Constable acknowledges, albeit in reference to the *Epistolae Dourum Amantium*, the rarity of “sealing” letters and the key role of the messenger as the intermediary.² Abelard has invited the public into a discussion of his life, and Heloise is simply lengthening this conversation for her own purposes. Whilst Abelard’s letters delve into his political relationship with the Church, Heloise alternatively uses their correspondence to discuss the female monastic body.

Letter writing as the vehicle for religious guidance is common throughout history, dating, in the context of Christianity, back to Paul’s Epistles. Correspondences between spiritual leaders and students were at times meant just as individual guides but evolved spontaneously into community-wide materials. Oral guidance, although considered to be the best form of patriarchal leadership, is not always feasible, so letter writing, which also served to grant guidance permanence, was the next best thing. In letter writing the relationship and individuality of the recipient is still somewhat enclosed, marking the guidance as specific and intentionally curated for the benefit of the individual at hand. This spiritual closeness and community are still transmitted even when the audience is larger than a single participant. Letter writing, although originally quite popular between men, have been utilized by men and women alike. Although in the cases of St. Jerome, Paula, and Eustachium, letter writing served to communicate between individuals who were distanced from each other due to circumstance, cloistered men and women were able to grant each other guidance whilst being discouraged from physically encountering each other. Heloise’s use of letter writing between her and Abelard is far from novel, stemming from a long tradition within the church. Abelard himself references St. Jerome’s lamentation on his own accusations of impurity due to his relationship with Paula via the letters the saint had written to Asella.³ St. Jerome’s anguish serves as a means of consolation to Abelard, further demonstrating the essential use of letter writing to provide spiritual guidance and comfort to those who are not the originally intended audience. Using religious experience and one’s grappling with sin as a religious guide is present in the 12th century and is proven useful as a contextual guide.⁴ Heloise’s use of the letters is therefore conventional, especially due to the potential for violations of monastic discipline that would arise from a physical encounter, is quite possible in the history of the church.

Heloise uses her established educational background as well as her vast knowledge on both secular and religious texts to construct a conversation with Abelard that ensures a response. Heloise’s educational background is rather common knowledge when it comes to her personal life; she was lauded as an exceptionally talented pupil of Latin and allegedly held tutors during her youth, which cultivated a great knowledge of Latin and other scholarly areas such as classic texts. The exact extent of the literacy rates among individuals in monastic life is not officially known; only individuals who occupied positions of authority would have likely had a high standard of literacy. Heloise’s proficiency at Latin grants her a seriousness that would have been harder, or inaccessible, to reach if she had written in her area’s vernacular at the time, and would

have limited the scope and longevity of her letters. The use of Latin and the quantity of references to classical authors and theologians mark her letters as illustrious due to the learned quality of her rhetoric. Beyond the engagement of her husband, Heloise's learnedness grants her the opportunity to debate in a manner that demonstrates the dedication of a woman to the spiritual well-being of herself and her sisters, the agency of women to better establish and ritualize not just their own faiths but the faith of their communities.

The image constructed of Heloise in the *Historia Calamitatum* by Abelard is the basis for her letters; a woman desperately in need of guidance. Abelard portrays Heloise as his dutifully loyal partner, a woman who is willing to negate her own desires in order to placate him, his lawfully bound wife.⁵ Abelard explains how he heard of Heloise and her learnedness and decided he would have her—plotting to make his way into her house and become her tutor, allowing him unfiltered access to her.⁶ Abelard has created a seemingly submissive character, but has granted her a dynamic range. He tells of her intelligence throughout his letters, as well as recounts the complex arguments she made during his pursuit of marriage, albeit partially.⁷ Throughout the *Historia Calamitatum* the portrayal of Heloise is that of a young girl, well educated and stubborn, arguing desperately against marriage but still falling into its throes, as Abelard accounts because “she could not bear to offend me.”⁸ The very image that Heloise uses to her own advantage is the one that Abelard has created, for Abelard, as a man readily despised by the public, cannot afford the affront that denying his sacramentally bound wife would induce.

Heloise uses the image that Abelard has painted of her, a dutiful wife desperate only for her husband's return, to coerce him into a continued correspondence. Heloise begins her letter, thus setting the tone for the correspondence as one that is not simply built upon the marriage between the two but additionally the sacred marriage between Christ and the women of the Paraclete. Heloise, in her letters, plays the role of the subservient, ever attentive wife, beginning her first letter with, “All of us here are driven to despair, and every day we await in fear and trembling the final word of your death”⁹. Not only is Heloise distressed over the news from Abelard, but the entirety of the Paraclete—which as Abbess, Heloise speaks for. Heloise establishes both herself and the Paraclete, as intimately concerned with Abelard's well being, placing him as a significant figure in the Paraclete, an acknowledgement of Abelard's own claims in the *Historia Calamitatum*.¹⁰ Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum*, with its rather aggrandizing self pity, is made to appeal to the emotions of the viewers and that is precisely what Heloise is playing by demonstrating the deep grievances that his letter has caused. In the next sentence Heloise goes on to write in desperate terms “we beseech [obsecramus] you to write as often as you think fit to us who are his handmaids and yours.”¹¹ Throughout Heloise's first letters she reinforces the plurality behind her voice; not only speak as the lawful wife of Abelard but as the entirety of the sisterhood that he has neglected. By “beseeching” Abelard through the voice of the women of the Paraclete, Heloise's plea is of a rather different tone than that of a wife calling to her husband; she is engaging in the religious relationship between them.

A crucial element of female monastic life is the *cura monialium*, or care of nuns, referring to the required guidance of women via the religious authority of men. Abelard, as a man in cloistered life, and more specifically as the founder and spiritual father of the Paraclete, is responsible for the religious centre. The plea that Heloise is putting forth on behalf of the entirety of the Paraclete is not one he can simply ignore. Heloise appeals to his ego, a rather crucial aspect of Abelard's character, speaking of the oratory he had gifted them in rather gracious terms, “For you after God are the sole founder of this place, the sole builder of this oratory, the sole creator of this community.”¹² Importantly, this praise is accompanied by the pronouns we and us,

signifying it is not just Heloise that is forever grateful to Abelard's deeds but the entire sisterhood of the Paraclete. These are not just empty lauds; instead, they are loaded in order to reinforce the ties of debt between Abelard and not only Heloise, his wife, but the entirety of the Paraclete. Closely following the quotes is "And so it is yours... but it is sown with plants which are still very tender and need watering if they are to thrive."¹³ By first acknowledging Abelard's part in creating the Paraclete she is now needling his responsibility in ensuring the spiritual growth and guidance of the community. The essentially female body of the Paraclete is weak and susceptible to failure without the guidance of Abelard, a matter that he himself has argued previously, and further on in the letter's recounts at length.¹⁴ His portrayal of her as a subservient wife has led her to utilize this position as a subservient bride of Christ, needing the guidance of her husband and religious leader. Heloise is relying upon the fundamental pillar of female monastic life, *cura monialium*, to establish his indebtedness to care for her, not as his wife but as a woman of his convent. Fiona Griffiths work on Heloise's advocacy for spiritual guidance within the *Letters* argues that she establishes the reality of women's advocacy in creating agency for themselves within monastic life.¹⁵ The woman's dependence upon Abelard while cloistered could be easily remedied by what Heloise proposes at the end of her letters, a religious guide for women. The *cura monialium* is the fundamental core of the abbess's letter and it is evident even from the very beginning that it is this argumentation that Heloise is binding her plea to. The reminders of pain in Heloise's letters serves to urge Abelard to create an ongoing correspondence but additionally serves to demonstrate how lost she feels within monastic life.

Heloise, however, is not unfeeling in her personal letters; rather, the way the letters are composed and the staunch change when moving to the *Letters of Direction* demonstrate that the use of active emotional voice was intentional. Abelard's own *Historia Calamitatum* intentionally evokes sympathy from its readers, who likely would have been powerful figures in the Church who could come to his aid. Abelard's *Historia* draws a rather pitiful and gaunt picture of his own life, recounting his castration and his current living situation with the, supposedly, murderous monks, further providing support for Heloise's own hyperbole in expressing her emotional state to play the public. Unlike Abelard, Heloise is not portraying herself in an unfavorable manner to curry favour, instead she is playing deliberately into the prescribed notions the monastic community might hold of her due to her association with Abelard.

Talking Sex

The argument presented here is plainly that the sexual language present in Heloise's letters are intentionally used to further draw attention to the letters between Heloise and Abelard and remind him of their conjugal debt to one another.¹⁶ In the *Historia Calamitatum*, Abelard openly admits that marriage was not something that Heloise ever asked of him, but rather something he convinced her to do, as well as taking the veil.¹⁷ Abelard's admittance of these means that the debt between husband and wife is greater than simply that of conjugal debt. Heloise's reminders to Abelard of what she lost are viscerally present in her letters: "Even during the celebration of Mass, when our prayers should be purer, lewd visions of those pleasures take such a hold upon my unhappy soul that my thoughts are on their wantonness instead of on prayers."¹⁸ Heloise's reminder to both the audience and Abelard of her status as not only a woman with a sexual past but as a woman who is still sexually wanting of her husband challenges the typical understanding of women in cloistered life.¹⁹ Heloise in presenting herself as succumbing to her internal desires presents a case that demonstrates a need for guidance from Abelard, one he cannot ignore. The seriousness of Heloise affliction is noted by her letters

repeatedly, presenting her sexual grievances as plaguing her, even in states of unconsciousness “Even in sleep I know no respite. Sometimes my thoughts are betrayed in a movement of my body, or they break out in an unguarded word.”²⁰ Abelard is the root cause of her sexual want, as both her husband and as the spiritual leader of the Paraclete he is responsible for “fixing the situation”, and therefore it is required of him to respond to her letters. Heloise sacrifices her own image to ensure a response from Abelard, putting her own reputation at risk to attain a spiritual guide for not only her, but her women.

Heloise's ability to “admit” her own sexual incontinence is made available due to her position as Abelard's wife and sister in Christ—she is uniquely protected to bring forth the discussion of the female body. By speaking of her own sexuality, although somewhat controversial even in modernity, Heloise can breach that subject of the female body. As a cloistered woman, Heloise can discuss her sexual wants without fear of suspicion of acting upon them. Juanita Ruys has set forth the argument that Heloise, in speaking so intimately of her sexuality and its direct connection to her spirituality, does so in order to access the subject and “subvert its phallocentrism.”²¹ Men's sexuality, in particular nocturnal emissions, is a patristic area of thought and pastoral guidance, due to the conditions which plagued otherwise chaste men in monastic, or more specifically hermetic life.²² Abelard talked about his own sexual vices in the *Historia Calamitatum*, and due to the rather public knowledge of his castration, and religious position he was a safe figure for Heloise to confess her sexual feelings. Not only was he her husband, with which sex would have been considered acceptable, he was incapable of having sexual relations due to his castration and the significant trauma associated with it. Heloise brings forth her own sexuality into discussion to place the female monastic body into global religious intellectual conversation. Heloise's evocative descriptions of her yearning for Abelard both as a partner in marriage but additionally as her carnal partner are intentionally done so to bring forth the female body, both in religion and in marriage to a theological discussion, an area of discussion rather limitedly explored prior.

The greatest divide between men and women within cloistered life first and foremost comes from their physical bodies, wherein the need for a religious guide for the female body is deeply needed. Although this point may seem exceedingly obvious the female body was a little thought upon object especially in female monastic governance. The physicality of the female body and religious spirituality were indivisible in the Church during this period. The function of women was largely regulated to their biological markers, their ability to grow and nurture.²³ The vice of women was also their bodies, the sexuality of women and their giving to sin, especially their power in leading men to temptation as well. Due to Heloise's unique position as a woman married to both Christ and her mortal husband Abelard she can profess her sexual misgivings. With Abelard still living Heloise is given the opportunity to call upon their marriage bond, specifically that of conjugal debt. Heloise's character portrayal is an intentional ploy used to bring into conversation the sexuality of cloistered women and the sacramental bond that ties Heloise to Abelard, not unlike the *cura monialium* that ties clergymen to their cloistered sisters.

A woman's role within religious institutions is exceedingly tied to her sexual status, whether that be as a virgin, wife or widow. Virgins are typically lauded as the holiest brides of Christ, the purest handmaidens. Monastic life focuses on how sexual experience affects the role a woman might play within the church.²⁴ Heloise clearly is not a virgin nun as her body has borne a child, which has likely directly influenced her perception of monastic life. The language Heloise uses in Letter 6 conveys that presence of sex in her depiction of monastic life. When referring to the need for guidance of women, she states “That the necks of bullock(*tauri*) and

heifer(*iuvencae*) should in no sense be dried under the same yoke of a common Rule, since those whom nature created unequal cannot properly be made equal in labour.”²⁵ The husbandry terms used for men and women in cloistered life are noted by their sexuality, the term *tauri* denotes a reproductively sound male bovine capable of breeding, not a castrated steer which is typical for agricultural work. *Iuvencae* specifically refers to a young cow, or alternatively a heifer, meaning one who has not yet calved. The use of the word heifer here appears to be deliberately chosen to drive home the point of human sexuality and perhaps give reference to Heloise’s own sexual impurity as her body has delivered a child, a piece of knowledge that Abelard revealed, if not already commonly known, in the *Historia Calamitatum*. Furthermore, Heloise is bringing forth the idealized vision of women in monastic life, virgins, which Heloise is not due to the relationship between her and Abelard. Heloise is drawing attention to her own sexuality as well as Abelard’s, subtly reminding him of once again the marriage bond that lies between them and perhaps the redemption that will accompany him by directing the women of the Paraclete.

A Rule of One’s Own

The third and last letters that Heloise writes in the correspondence, shifts the narrative from a conversation about unmet emotional needs and her and Abelard’s tumultuous relationship to a conversation regarding the female body of the church, both as a collective and the corporeality of the female gender. Heloise’s drastic shift is noted by scholars, with Betty Radice dividing the couple’s correspondence into two collections, the Personal Letters and the Letters of Direction. Heloise has only one letter belonging to the latter; however, this letter is compelling, setting the tone for the entirety of the correspondence thereafter. Heloise has set up the conversation thus far to establish that Abelard owes her—and her sisters—spiritual guidance; in this last letter she asks him to deliver. The transition in the latter collection of letters reveals Heloise as a deeply practical, spiritual and well-educated women who is clearly well versed in the many rules governing monastic life and how their failure to pertain to her lived experience as not only a woman in monastic life.

Heloise’s final letter delves into the rationality behind needing a guide explicitly developed for women, as well as generally needing a rule that covers the entirety of cloistered life. The Rule of St. Benedict, as the governing guide for monastic life, is frequently invoked and then debated due to its explicit appeal to men, with little discretion or guide provided for women. Spiritual guides within cloisters are necessary to fully focus on the spiritual health of the monastic community, a feat which needed intense guidance and regulation. By acquiring instructions from Abelard that would guide women in leading their religious life at the Paraclete, Heloise’s community would be able to fulfill the original intentions of traditional monastic life while, at the same time, authorize their own virtue and authority. In short, additional written guidance from such an authority would allow the Paraclete to become an ideal monastic community with a lasting rule, allowing for the ensured continued spiritual growth of the community.

Heloise begins this letter requesting that he may not find her disobedient in anything and giving up her pledges of consuming love to focus to in turn demand he answer her this:

And so all we handmaids of Christ, who are your daughters in Christ, come as supplicants to demand of your paternal interest two things which we see to be very necessary for ourselves. One is that you teach us how the order of nuns began and what authority there is for our profession. The other, that you will prescribe some Rule for us

and write it down, a Rule which shall be suitable for women, and also describe fully the manner and habit of our way of life, which we find was never done by the holy Fathers.²⁶ Heloise's supplicatory language positions Abelard as the religious leader of the Paraclete, emphasizing his responsibility to the community. Heloise has appealed previously to Abelard's ego, and she does so once again, by granting him the opportunity to do something that has not been done by any predecessors. Abelard who currently is a controversial figure, could have his favour within the Church curried if he attends to the spiritual needs of the Brides of Christ.

Heloise further pushes the agenda of subverting the phallogentric nature of monastic discussion by questioning the Rule of St. Benedict and its applicability to women, particularly due to their menstrual cycle which would impede the wearing of woolen tunics and garments close to the skin.²⁷ In starting Letter 6 with describing the physical difference between the bodies of men and women, Heloise draws out the stark binary that exists between the sexes.²⁸ Menstruation is a fundamental part of femininity and additionally spirituality as it signals the female body's ability to create life. Menstruation is mentioned explicitly in the Bible,²⁹ and motherhood is often depicted by theologians as the spiritual role of women. The discussion of menstruation brings forth the reminder of the staunch difference between the male and female body, specifically the roles they play within the Church.

Heloise's repeatedly requests that Abelard continue their correspondence, throughout the Personal Letters her *modus operandi* is through emotional rhetoric but in the Letters of Directions this changes to directly inquiring for him to "write it down."³⁰ Heloise has battled with Abelard in the field of penmanship and latinity and this ground has been intentionally selected. Heloise's first request is that he recount how the order of nuns began and the authority their position holds, pertaining to both in the eyes of Christ but additionally in their relation to the general hierarchy of authority that is intrinsic in all church matters. In committing the importance of the female order to the permanence of paper, Abelard would be reminding not only himself as he responds to Heloise of the hierarchical placement of women within the church but additionally would create a written model of that would exist in permanence for other women to access and make use of.³¹ Heloise then asks for the Abelard to prescribe a Rule, meaning a guide for spiritual life that is uniquely and solely made for women. Within Heloise's letter the ground of the argument has been fully revealed in "And write it down."³² As argued previously by using the language of the Church Heloise is granting authority and importance to her claims. By asking Abelard to "write it down" she committed this rule in the language of the Church and thus making it a work of authority, and therefore in the orientation of letters, a work that can go forth. Heloise has intimately witnessed the power that is beholden within the traveling of written works, such as through the deliverance of the *Historia Calamitatum* to herself, and she is now ready for Abelard to once again to send his written work into circulation. Heloise is no fool to the power of a written work and in being written in Abelard's hand, the Paraclete will be given an indisputable form of guidance.

Conclusion

Christianity has a significant focus on the connection between the physicality of the body and women's spirituality. The creation of life is seen as a uniquely feminine task; it is women who are responsible for the development of children both in utero and in the world. Men's spirituality is separated from their physical body in Christianity. The concept of castration and its debatable virtue within religious theology serves to demonstrate that the mind is meant to overcome the body, not live with it in harmony, with origins of the debate having routes in the

first Council of Nicaea.³³ The argument against castration is largely that by mutilating the body to prevent sexual incontinence is seen as a weak submission of the will, for virtue is given through overcoming via will, not by physical action. Abelard's own castration is the event which begins to sever the tie between him and Heloise. After his castration Abelard no longer feels a sexual desire toward Heloise, which is not mutual as demonstrated in her own letters.³⁴ The correspondence between the two reveals again the stark contrast between the male and female body, Abelard has been freed suddenly from venereal want without having to overcome, a matter that Heloise is leashing extricable to her argument.

The beginning of Heloise's letters showcases the practical intelligence and rhetoric of a woman well taught and dedicated to her religious growth, not merely a woman writing to her husband in hopes of gathering a response. After reminding Abelard of the exact differential difference between the male and female body and monastic life she proceeds to stretch apart the Rule of St. Benedict exposing its fumbles and failures when it comes to the lifestyle of women in monastic life, particularly on their companionship with men. She explicitly mentions the Rule of St. Benedict that clearly states that guests shall be seated with the abbot. She further examines this rule, "What is more fitting for our religious life: for an abbess never to offer hospitality to men, or for her to eat with the man she has allowed in?"³⁵ Heloise answers her own rhetorical question with a reference to Ephesians 5:18, acknowledging that the souls of men and women are easily corrupted if they are together in one place "where gluttony and drunkenness are rife."³⁶ She follows this line of argument up with a reference to St. Jerome, "It is difficult to preserve modesty at the table."³⁷ Heloise expertly supports herself with evidence built directly from canon itself and the mouths of saints. A step further, she references a poem by Ovid which discusses Cupid's nocked arrow that's ever present at the banquet table, "when girls bewitch men's hearts."³⁸ The drawing upon of a secular work by Heloise is a testimony of her great wealth of knowledge, the poem laden with less than Christian ideals provide a neutral view of the goings on between men and women at banquets. The pagans, although not necessarily opposed, are intimately aware of the sexual promiscuity at banquets. Heloise combattingly combines theologians and secular classists, displaying her education, reminding Abelard of their relationship, once which was student and teacher and now is brother and sister. Fundamentally crucial to Heloise's argument is the sexual connotation that underlies the idea of men and women dining together, and that is the ease that drink and food slip chaste bodies into temptation. The beginning of her letter is delivered first with the reminder of the tempestuous nature of women and the falling into sexual incontinence, a matter that Abelard knows all too well.

Heloise's final letter makes use of the ever-present argument, the weakness of the female sex, to compel Abelard to write a new rule for women that pertains precisely to the image of women in the church in matters besides sexual and genital. Heloise particularly discusses the burden that women are to bear under the current Rule of St. Benedict, arguing that by asking the women to do things they are certain to fail, no matter their attempts they will not be judged at virtues. Particularly, she questions the commonality of nuns in the field and whether the treatment of women as men is fair or righteous considering the strain upon their lives.³⁹ The expectation of women to do as men do without the inherited knowledge that men have about these tasks is simply foolish. Heloise states that any effort undertaken by the women conflicts with basic reasoning and mediation, thus under the statement of Jerome makes these acts to be counted among vices.⁴⁰ Heloise reasons that women by following a rule made for men are not only not serving Christ in a way fit for their gender but are actively sinning by taking upon these deeds which are not intended for them. Specifically, Heloise's line compels Abelard to create a

new guide due to his own relational sin. As Abelard is the creator of the Paraclete and due to not only the *cura monialium*, but the insistence of Heloise for a new Rule for women, he would be sacrificing his own virtue by allowing the woman under his care to perpetually sin whilst he could have remedied their own issues.

It is for you then, master, while you live, to lay down for us what Rule we are to follow for all time, for after God you are the founder of this place, through God you are the creator of our community, with God you should be the director of our religious life. After you we may perhaps have another to guide us, one who will build something upon another's foundation, and so, we fear, he may be less likely to feel concern for us or be less readily heard by us; or indeed, he may be no less willing, but less able. Speak to us then, and we shall hear. Farewell.⁴¹

Heloise ends her letter with a final passage that appeals directly to Abelard's own emotional state. She compels him to write, placing him as perhaps the only person, or man, able to write such a rule. Heloise utilizes the usage of plural pronouns to convey the message as coming from the mouths and hearts of the entirety of the Paraclete, not just a woman scorned. The woman evident in the earlier letters, one who has been emotionally neglected and scorned by her husband has vanished now that she has set out directly what she needs, this final list of aliments does not come from Abelard's wife but from the women of the Paraclete who through God he is indebted.

Heloise utilizes her public relationship with Abelard to deliver a religious guide to women during a period wherein monastic rules were not implemented, or made, with woman in mind. Heloise's portrayal as a woman overcome with sexual need is done to use her own body as a guide for other women, to bring the female body into the conversation surrounding religious guidance. The explicit sexual notes of Heloise's first two letters are purposefully done to demonstrate her as a woman returned to grace, redeemed, through the context of the last letters she writes, Letter 6, wherein she is asking for guidance. Through Heloise's letters she renders herself as not only gaining independence through Christ but additionally the opportunity to guide her husband and adhere to the scarcity of the marriage bond that exists between her and Abelard. The male dominated world of literary and theological scholarship is made the tool of Heloise; to allow her to ascertain her needs. Needs that the nature of Abelard's forcing her into cloistered life would wish to be repressed. Heloise utilizes the public forum of letters to condemn Abelard for his actions against her and force his hand to provide a relationship that fulfills the sacred bond of marriage owed to her. Heloise's letters demonstrate her as exemplar Christian, modelling her into the allegorical perfect wife, to her bridegroom Christ and her corporal husband Abelard. Heloise subverts traditional understandings of ecclesiastical and clerical marriage through prioritizing her individual self and relationship with Christ whilst additionally offering a route to redemption for her disgraced husband.

¹ Betty Radice, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (Penguin Books, 2003), 51.

² Giles Constable, "The Authorship of the *Epistolae Dourum Amantium*: A Reconsideration," *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Medieval Ages*, (2005): 173.

³ Radice, *Letters*, 36.

⁴ Radice, *Letters*, 210.

⁵ Radice, *Letters*, 6.

⁶ Radice, *Letters*, 10.

⁷ Radice, *Letters*, 10, 14-16.

⁸ Radice, *Letters*, 17.

⁹ Radice, *Letters*, 48.

¹⁰ Radice, *Letters*, 35.

¹¹ Radice, *Letters*, 48.

¹² Radice, *Letters*, 49.

¹³ Radice, *Letters*, 49.

¹⁴ Radice, *Letters*, 39, 49, 177.

¹⁵ Fiona Griffiths, "'Men's Duty to Provide for Women's Needs': Abelard, Heloise, and Their Negotiation of the Cura Monialium," *Journal of Medieval History* 30, (2012).

¹⁶ Conjugal debt would not in all cases be annulled between couples once they entered monastic life. Conjugal debt within marriage harkens to 1 Corinthians 7:3-6. Furthermore, the exact distinction under which Heloise and Abelard enter monastic is unknown, the possibility for conjugal debt between Heloise and Abelard is a matter of mystery to the extent to which Abelard would owe considering his castration. The monk Walfred cast his wife into monastic life in order to free himself of martial duties, particularly conjugal debt, to achieve the position of Abbot. Jacqueline Murray, "Battle for Chastity: Miraculous Castration and the Quelling of Desire in the Middle Ages," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 27, no.1 (2019):103-104

¹⁷ Radice, *Letters*, 13 and 18.

¹⁸ Radice, *Letters*, 68.

¹⁹ A pillar of monastic life, regardless of gender, is that of chastity. Beyond simply maintaining physical celibacy, the vow of chastity taken when entering monastic life calls for chaste thoughts. Chastity is considered a fundamental tenant and is deeply emphasized in both the Rule of St. Benedict and St. Augustine, marking abstinence of both the body and mind to be the core of religious vocation.

²⁰ Radice, *Letters*, 69.

²¹ Juanita Feros Ruys, "Heloise, Monastic Temptation, and Memoria: Rethinking Autobiography, Sexual Experience, and Ethics," *Sexuality in The Middle Ages*, (2008):11.

²² Jacqueline Murray, entirety of that work.

²³ Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women as Body and Food," *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (University of California Press, 1988), 260-276.

²⁴ Abelard in Letter 7, when he discusses the virtue of women, praises above all the sanctity of virgins. Radice, *Letters*, 120. Furthermore, he goes on to discuss the chastity of pagans and references St. Jerome's account of pagan virgins and their exaltation by God, lead—Abelard believed—to the understanding that God granted miraculous powers to those due to their love of continence, despite their own pagan ideology. William Flynn suggests through analysis of Abelard's use of the Sponsa Christi that he challenged the dominant ideology of the virgin over that of the widow, which case Heloise could perhaps fall under, in order to solidify and maintain Heloise's authority in the Paraclete. William Flynn, *Abelard and Rhetoric: Widows and Virgins at the Paraclete* (Brill, 2014), 161-162.

²⁵ Radice, *Letters*, 96.

²⁶ Radice, *Letters*, 93 and 94.

²⁷ Radice, *Letters*, 94.

²⁸ Jacqueline Murray 62

²⁹ Leviticus 15:19-30, Genesis 31:35

³⁰ Radice, *Letters*, 94

³¹ Throughout Letter 7 Abelard recounts the apostolic role of women within the Church, particularly fixating on Mary Magdalene and her status as the "female apostles of the apostles." In this letter Abelard recounts that John writes that it was Martha and her sister who were loved by God, and it is them who are given the privileged of being loved by God. Although Lazarus is mentioned in conjunction to Martha and her sister, Abelard refers to the order of the sentence placing significance on the women, as "they took precedence in love." Radice, *Letters*, 120 and 122.

³² Radice, *Letters*, 94.

³³ Jacqueline Murray, *The Battle for Chastity: Miraculous Castration and the Quelling of Desire in the Middle Ages* (*Journal of History of Sexuality*, 2019), 100.

³⁴ It was he who truly loved you not I. My love, which brought us both to sin, should be called lust, not love. I took my fill of my wretched pleasures in you, and this was the sum total of my love." Radice, *Letters*, 86.

³⁵ Radice, *Letters*, 94.

³⁶ Radice, *Letters*, 94.

³⁷ Radice, *Letters*, 94.

³⁸ Radice, *Letters*, 94.

³⁹ Radice, *Letters*, 95.

⁴⁰ Radice, *Letters*, 96.

⁴¹ Radice, *Letters*, 111.