

READING THE *LETTERS* OF HELOISE:  
A DEVOTIONAL CURRICULUM FOR MEDIEVAL NUNS

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In his letter to Heloise on the education of virgins and holy women, Abelard praises the holy Marcella, disciple of St. Jerome, and presents her as a model for Heloise and her nuns at the Paraclete to follow. Marcella asked questions of Jerome, critically considered his answers, committed her studies to heart through daily meditation, and became a teacher in her own right. By quoting Jerome's description of Marcella's zeal for scriptural study at length, Abelard endorses a program of female learning that emphasizes reader self-reflection rather than uncritical reliance on authority:

. . . [S]ince I [Jerome] was at that time esteemed above all names in the study of Holy Scripture it did not seem unfitting that she should ask me questions about Scripture. She was not satisfied immediately but presented other disputed points, not to quibble, but by questioning to learn the answers which she saw could be made to them. . . . [S]he tasted whatever we gathered by long study and made it her own by daily meditation; she learnt it and made it her own so that after our departure, if any dispute about the evidence of Scripture arose, recourse was had to her as judge. (Morton 129)

Not accidentally, Heloise recalls this very image of Marcella at the beginning of her *Problemata*, requesting Abelard to follow through on his part of the *imitatio*. If she and her nuns are like Marcella, he is their Jerome and must answer their scriptural questions. She writes,

These [Marcella and Asella] are not examples, but admonitions, so that because of these things you may remember what you should do, and not be sluggish in resolving your debt. You have gathered the handmaidens of

Christ and your spiritual daughters in their own oratory, and bound them to the divine service; you have accustomed us to turn our attention to the divine words, and to perform the work of sacred reading. . . . Therefore as disciples to our teacher, as daughters to our father we send certain small questions, praying and begging that you will not disdain to turn your attention to solving them at whose exhortation and command we have mainly undertaken this course of study. (McNamer 112)

Marcella's appearance in the correspondence of Abelard and Heloise as an exemplar of female Christian scholarship presents an opportunity to investigate how medieval practices of reading construct female religious subjects. The very fact that Abelard and Heloise use her as a model comments on the imitative processes of devotional reading in forming religious subjects. Indeed, Marcella seems a particularly apt avatar of Heloise. Her questioning of male authority and her own recognized expertise on scriptural matters illustrate the power of religious women and parallel Heloise's oft-cited opposition to Abelard in the letters as well as Heloise's authoritative position as abbess and her reputation for scholarship.<sup>1</sup> However, Marcella's course of study also calls attention to the alterity of medieval devotional reading with its seemingly contradictory impulses toward the imitation of authorized models and toward the more subjective "ma[king] the material [one's] own." If Marcella's example allows some access to understanding Heloise, we must also ask how this dynamic of medieval devotional reading works itself out in her correspondence with Abelard—especially because many critics see Heloise as a resistant reader of Abelard's letters.

Within the context of a feminist agenda that privileges resistance to patriarchy, Heloise stands out as much for her choice to argue with Abelard on certain topics as for her superior education and her clear leadership skills.<sup>2</sup> Although both Abelard and Heloise have been placed at the forefront of critical arguments about the status of individual subjectivity in the Middle Ages,<sup>3</sup> Heloise in particular has been celebrated as "a heroine of self-definition, self-realization, and self-expression. . . ." (Brown 27-28). Most interpretations of Heloise's letters assume her opposition to Abelard—her "resistance" to his arguments—seeing her rhetorical skills as "weapons in a high-stakes

struggle for erotic and intellectual power” (Brown 28). Martin Irvine outlines this position most clearly:

[S]he will not simply occupy the position constructed for her by Abelard, either in his narrative of their lives or as the kind of subject constructed as Abelard’s addressee in his subsequent letters. She rewrites his narrative of her position—both her philosophical and emotional stand on marriage and her subject position as agent and actor in the drama of their lives. . . . [S]he is marking off a space for her own self-representation, one that is not defined or contained by Abelard’s writing about her or to her. (99-100)

Scholarly investment in Heloise as a resistant reader of medieval patriarchal discourse is clear. From this perspective, Marcella’s appearance in Heloise’s writing as a model is also a confirmation of the power of strong women to resist male authority, as Anne Collins Smith notes:

Heloise’s choice of Marcella as her exemplar is informed by a medieval politics of gender. Marcella/Heloise, the seeker who questions both the scriptures and the authority who purports to explain them, is female; Jerome/Abelard, the scholar who both answers and approves of her questions, is male. Not only is it appropriate for the student to challenge authority; it is appropriate for a woman to challenge a man, and it is the male authority himself who has approved this procedure. Heloise tells Abelard, perhaps playfully, that the quotations from Jerome are “not examples, but warnings.” (175)

Here the figure of Marcella participates in the feminist hermeneutic that values Heloise’s opposition to Abelard—her “resistance” as both reader and author in her own right. However, it is also clear that Marcella models something other than simple resistance; she demonstrates the transmission of knowledge and authority through reading and meditative study. And this offers another important parallel with Heloise: as Abbess of the Paraclete, Heloise was herself an example to her nuns, who would have read and studied her letters to Abelard as authoritative texts.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Heloise’s status as a potential resistant

reader becomes more important to evaluate precisely because this shift in perspective from Heloise to her readers raises the question of how her “resistance” to Abelard would appear to the monastic audience.

In fact, our view of Heloise’s “resistance” alters radically when seen through the lens of devotional reading and the demands it places on individual readers. A key element in Heloise’s “resistance” to Abelard is her particular insistence on the importance of the body. This emphasis parallels one of the central paradoxes of devotional reading and subject formation—the relationship of the individual Christian to the community. This relationship is often facilitated or accomplished by the imitation of an authorized, exemplary model—the performance of an *imitatio* that also testifies to an individual conversion. The individual reader cannot escape her body but must signal through that body both her unique state of conversion and her imitation of authorized models. Heloise’s letters illustrate a relationship between the individual and the Christian community that insists on both an individual identity and a communal identity simultaneously, thereby collapsing the apparent dichotomy. Her letters also suggest the importance of textual engagement (reading, interpreting, and responding) in the devotional processes that construct individual subjectivities. This emphasis on active consumption and production of texts brings Heloise’s writing right into line with other descriptions of the process of medieval devotional reading.

The first half of this essay will give a brief overview of scholarship on medieval devotional reading, analyzing the roles of imitation and individual subjective responses in medieval devotional reading to illustrate how they leave their marks on the individual reader’s body. The second half will focus on a re-examination of Heloise’s *Letters*, arguing that she guides her readers through this process and provides them with an opportunity to witness to their individual responses to her text.

### **Medieval Devotional Reading and the Christian Subject**

Although much studied in recent years, medieval reading is not transparent and poses challenges for modern readers. Mary Carruthers provides one of the best descriptions of meditational reading in her *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, and she highlights the alterity of this process:

Perhaps no advice is as common in medieval writing on the subject, and yet so foreign, when one thinks about it, to the habits of modern scholarship as this notion of “making one’s own” what one reads in someone else’s work. . . . This adaptation process allows for a tampering with the original text that a modern scholar would (and does) find quite intolerable, for it violates most of our notions concerning “accuracy,” “objective scholarship,” and “the integrity of the text.” (164)<sup>5</sup>

The medieval notion of making the reading “one’s own” requires scholars to reconsider how these devotional texts made meaning for and through their medieval readers. If readers remake the text according to their individual ends, this does seem to raise questions about the “integrity of the text,” but if medieval readers also seek to imitate the Christian models provided for them, how do they both imitate and make the text their own? Rather than reading a text to understand it, medieval readers appear to have had different goals—to transform both themselves and the texts they read in ways that modern critics do not anticipate. For example, the *Letters* of Abelard and Heloise have been particularly subjected to analyses that identify with the voices in the text, revealing expectations for individual subjectivity and self-expression. Yet Carruthers makes clear that “[s]elf-expression is a meaningless term in a medieval context. . . . There was no concept of an autonomous, though largely inarticulate ‘individual self,’ to be defined against social norms” (182). Rather, the notion of *imitatio* is more culturally significant to any understanding of the medieval self. Caroline Walker Bynum’s formulation of the importance of imitation is particularly clear:

The twelfth-century person affiliated with a group, converted to a Christian life, by adopting a model that simultaneously shaped both “outer man” (behavior) and “inner man” (soul). A pattern of behavior that was the same for all in the group defined the Christian life. . . . The twelfth-century discovery of self or assertion of the individual is therefore not our twentieth-century awareness of personality or our stress on uniqueness; the twelfth-century emphasis on models is not the modern sense of lifestyle as expression of personality nor the modern

assumption of a great gulf between role or model or exterior behavior and an inner core of the individual. The twelfth-century person did not “find himself” by casting off inhibiting patterns but by adopting appropriate ones. Moreover, because to convert was to find a stricter pattern and because Christians learned what it was to be Christian from models, an individual who put off the “old man” for “the new” became himself a model available to others. (90)

Bynum’s discussion illustrates not only that imitation was the dominant practice but also that it is recursive in the sense that one’s performance of an *imitatio* becomes a model itself for someone else. Just as Marcella provides a model for Heloise, Heloise is the model for her nuns, who then in turn perform their imitations for others to see. This notion of recursion plays an important role in devotional reading—in bringing together individual subjects/readers and the models they imitate.

Although Bynum does not explicitly touch upon the topic of reading in the cited passage, the emphasis on imitation has led critics to describe medieval readers, especially readers of Christian devotional texts, as participating in a kind of generic or communal subject position which denies any individual subjectivity:

But in medieval religious and didactic literature . . . the ‘I’ [is not] the particularized voice of another. Rather than serving as a peephole for curious onlookers onto someone else’s exclusive experience, it *comprehends* the reader, and all possible readers, expressing that which is potential in us all. (Greenspan 233)

Although we do not have a precise description of the process of reading through such a communal or “Everyreader” subject position, this impulse toward imitation clearly pulls the reader away from an individual reading and toward an authorized Christian reading. However, if the reader of a devotional text is participating in a textual subject position that highlights the authorized model to be imitated, how does this fit with the idea of making the reading one’s own as Marcella’s example suggests—how did devotional reading make sense of this paradox?

Descriptions of meditative reading point to a process that is transformative to an extreme degree, where the text is ingested and

becomes the body of the reader. William of Saint Thierry's formulation from his *Meditations* is representative of the metaphors of ingestion surrounding devotional reading: "As your clean beasts, we there regurgitate the sweet things stored within our memory, and chew them in our mouths like cud for the renewed and ceaseless work of our salvation" (142). Likewise, Gregory the Great highlights this process of highly embodied reading with his suggestion that "we ought to transform what we read into our very selves, so that when our mind is stirred by what it hears, our life may concur by practicing what has been heard" (qtd. in Carruthers 164). Carruthers synthesizes the medieval evidence of this kind of internalized reading, outlining the active role of the reader by describing reading as a process moving the subject from an objective reading of the text to an individually and ethically relevant one:

All exegesis emphasized that understanding was grounded in a thorough knowledge of the *littera*, and for this one had to know grammar, rhetoric, history, and all the other disciplines that give information, the work of *lectio*. But one takes all of that and builds upon it during meditation; this phase of reading is ethical in its nature, or "tropological" (turning the text onto and into one's self) as Hugh defines it. I think one might best begin to understand the concept of "levels" in exegesis as "stages" of a continuous action, and the "four-fold way" (or three-fold, as the case may be) as a useful mnemonic for readers, reminding them of how to complete the entire reading process. "Littera" and "allegoria" (grammar and typological history) are the work of *lectio* and are essentially informative about a text; tropology and anagogy are the activities of digestive meditation and constitute the ethical activity of making one's reading one's own. (165)

This idea of making the text being studied one's own hints at the extreme participatory reading demanded of devotional meditation wherein the reader makes the experience of the text part of her own experience in a way that impacts the physical body—a way that can be described only by metaphors of ingestion or self-transformation. According to Carruthers, the medieval reader made no distinction between what she read and her own experience—they became one and

the same (169). Consequently, reading in this way produces a physical and emotional impact. Citing Petrarch's reading of Virgil, Carruthers emphasizes this physiological fact of medieval reading:

The active agency of the reader, "discutiens," "breaking up" or "shattering" (one could even translate "deconstructing") each single word as he recreates the scene in his memory, is emphasized. . . . He re-hears, re-sees, re-feels, experiences and re-experiences. In this way, Virgil's words are embodied in Petrarch's recollection as an experience of tumult and calm that is more physiological (emotional, passionate) than "mental," in our sense. . . . The re-created reading becomes useful precisely because in the heat of passion Petrarch's emotions replay that process of change, for he can remember what right action *feels* like. (169)

Carruthers makes clear here not only the physical changes in the body brought about through meditative reading but also the purpose of such reading—to support right action, to set off an ethical response in the reader. Without such a response, devotional reading is meaningless. Thus, the reader's individual ethical responses assimilate to the model in the text that has been read, memorized, and meditated upon. Here we start to see how the two sides of devotional reading come together: readers must imitate a model but use that model to form their own responses.

Linda Olson notes that medieval nuns reading Augustine's *Confessiones* went through exactly this process; they used Augustine's model to construct an individual interior self:

Each day . . . should be a stage in the long internal journey of return to God through critical self-reflection and the "sacrifice" of emotional confession which is narrated as autobiography in the *Confessiones*. Indeed, given that the goal of both male and female recluses was "to control the inner life, based on extensive self-scrutiny and self-knowledge," and ultimately to progress through asceticism, self-knowledge, meditation and devotion to a final union with the Christian God, it should come as little surprise that Augustine's *Confessiones* would be considered by the monastic men who used them to fashion their own



developing spiritual interiorities as a perfect text for the use of those women whose religious choices forced them to focus upon themselves alone. (87)

Olson here argues that monastic women, like monastic men, used authoritative texts, such as Augustine's *Confessiones*, in a sophisticated melding of personal experience and authorized imitation. Devotional meditation or affective piety following the traditions of St. Bernard and St. Anselm emphasizes the utility of the text—the prayer or exegesis upon which the reader is meditating—in launching the reader on her own affective transformation.<sup>6</sup> Bernard, in his third sermon on the Song of Songs writes: “We read today in the book of experience. Convert to yourselves, and let each one attend to his conscience concerning those things which are to be said” (qtd. in Olson 83). Anselm, writing to Matilda of Tuscany, hopes that the prayers he sends her will “excite the mind” and “excite the affection” to love of God and to prayer, further stating that she should use them as exemplary in composing her own prayers (qtd. in Olson 90-91). The general process that emerges from this discourse of reading offers a way to follow a textual model, such as the life of Christ or Augustine, but then to fashion an individual “spiritual interiority.”

All these descriptions of reading are already organized around the devotional/didactic agenda of constructing and maintaining Christian subjects. The relationship of the individual to a communal Christian identity, like the relationship of the individual reader to the experience of the text, is continually investigated. Clare A. Lees provides a good description of that relationship:

Didactic teaching, in short, is aimed at an intellectual apprehension of a preexisting system of knowledge, which is maintained by action and defines identity. Although these actions are performed by individuals, their meaning and validity as authentic and true Christian actions are conferred on the individual only in relation to the congregation or community. (128)

Although the community validates the individual's performance of Christianity, the individual Christian does not lose her personal subjectivity or ethical responsibility to a group or generic identity: “. . . the individual, though subsumed into the Christian community, remains

a moral agent, whose mental discipline is entailed by these continual reenactments of belief. The Christian is always in performance, in the act of becoming" (Lees 130). The practices of meditative reading, of devotional reading, and of monastic communal reading all participate in this identifying relation between the individual and her Christian identity, which depends on a tension between imitation of an authorized model—the "continual reenactment of belief"—and the necessity of the embodied experience of the individual Christian to signify her own personal conversion.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham, writing of confessional conversion in Augustine's autobiography, the *Confessiones*, articulates this same dilemma of testifying to individual conversion through the imitation of the model of others: "Oddly enough, the act of conversion, requiring as it does an assent to imitation, contains a resistance to conversion: the term designates not only a principle of radical change in life but also a principle of recalcitrance and unchangeability" (46). Harpham sees a resolution to this tension in the impulse to Christian autobiography—in the response of the individual publicly acknowledged through the creation of text: "The autobiographical act consequently provides a means both of confirming the subject's faithful imitation of models and of renouncing imitation altogether by transposing the self into the key of textuality" (46). For Harpham, the act of producing an autobiography—of testifying to one's conversion by inscribing it into a public text—allows the individual to escape imitation and give an authentic response, which will then give its readers something to think about and respond to. The necessity for readers to imitate an authorized model but then to respond individually enriches the recursion of imitation noted above by Bynum by incorporating the reader's subjective response.

Medieval descriptions also highlight this need to respond to the text in oneself. Hugh of St. Victor's *Chronica* discusses how the reader is governed both by her reading of the text and by her ethical judgments that allow her to "conform" her living to the textual example:

Tropology is when in that action which we hear was done, we recognize what we should be doing. Whence it rightly receives the name tropology, that is, speech that has changed direction or discourse folded-back on itself. . . . [F]or without a doubt we turn [convertimus] the word of a story about others to our own instruction when, having read of the

deeds of others, we conform our living to their example.  
(qtd. in Carruthers 264-65)

Thus, tropological reading participates in the process of imitation—"we conform our living to their example"—with the addition of the reader's own ethical judgment on the reading and her own testimony to how the text has become part of her experience. Carruthers aptly cites the example of Heloise herself to illustrate this point. Speaking of Heloise's performance of the words of Cornelia when taking her vows, Carruthers explains:

She [Heloise] is "expressing her character," a function of *memoria*. So instead of the word "self" or even "individual," we might better speak of a "subject-who-remembers," and in remembering also feels and thinks and judges. . . . Her subjectivity is located in Heloise's memory, including her whole florilegium of texts, one of which she "invents" (in the ancient sense) for this occasion, thereby investing it, the occasion, and her own action with "common" ethical value, and giving her audience "something to think about." (182)

Even on the level of the individual's performance of self, there is a strong sense of the communal and the public in a recursive cycle asserting the subject's relationship to a public identity. Thus, the demands of devotional reading that emerge from these various critical discussions require the reader to imitate the model provided by the text, but that imitation must take the form of a personally embodied and somehow publicly inscribed ethical response on the part of the reader. This model of reading and constructing subjectivity through a public performance that is meant to occasion audience response reinforces the move from considering Heloise in isolation to contextualizing her audience and its response. In fact, Heloise's letters "perform" the very relation between individually embodied self and Christian community that we see in descriptions of medieval reading. Perhaps the term "resistance" applied to Heloise as a reader is not accurate; perhaps we are reading as "resistance" what the nuns of the Paraclete experienced as living the personally ethical Christian life.

### Reading Heloise's Resistance

Most critics agree that Heloise's writings persistently assert the importance of the body—its desires, its porous boundaries, its messiness, its flaws, its need for discipline. As Peggy McCracken has argued,

Abelard describes an abstract body-as-metaphor; Heloise counters with a concrete image of the menstruating body. Both use the female body to describe the Christian subject. Yet while Abelard subsumes gender into the figural meaning of the body, Heloise insists on gender as part of the body's experience; while Abelard effaces gender in the description of the Christian subject, Heloise describes the female body as a literal inescapable site of identity. (218)

This focus on embodied experience has been viewed as part of Heloise's resistance to being positioned by Abelard as an ideal "Bride of Christ." Many of the specific points of Heloise's "resistance" in the *Letters* will be familiar: where Abelard wants to paint Heloise as the holy abbess, she insists on her sinful nature and hypocrisy (Radice 69); where Abelard presents his castration as the hand of God converting him from the sins of the body and healing him, Heloise insists on the open wound of her bodily desires (Radice 68); where Abelard constructs Heloise and her community as ideal Brides of Christ who have turned away from the "obscene degradations of women's work" and "rise[n] even above men, and have turned the curse of Eve into the blessings of Mary" (Radice 84), Heloise asserts the weakness of women and especially women's bodies, reminding Abelard graphically of the "monthly purging of their superfluous humours" (Radice 94). Heloise's insistence on the experience of the body is here set in opposition to Abelard's attempts to idealize and transcend the body. However, claiming the body as an irreducible site of Christian identity re-inscribes the central paradox of devotional reading's construction of Christian subjects: the participation of the body is necessary both to the reading process itself and to producing the ethical response of the reader. Yet it is clear from how Heloise constructs the body (as weak, messy, demanding), as well as from critical response to Heloise's rhetoric on the body, that it is not easy to produce an ethical subject from that body.

The passages in which Heloise speaks so intimately about her bodily desires have often raised critical eyebrows: the letters could not really be by Heloise because no monastic woman would write such a thing. Throughout her first two letters, Heloise begs Abelard to write to her, to offer her some compassion and consolation: "I beg you then to listen to what I ask—you will see that it is a small favour which you can easily grant. While I am denied your presence, give me at least through your words—of which you have enough and to spare—some sweet semblance of yourself" (Radice 53). These requests for attention, at least in written form, combined with her detailed memories of their physical relationship have given the impression that "Heloise, supposedly, seeks some resumption of the lovers' erotic adventures" (Powell 258). This problem is only compounded when one considers the nuns of the Paraclete reading these letters: ". . . Heloise's confessions of hidden sexual desire, her rhetoric espousing whoredom, her panegyric despair over the thought of her lover's death, or her *planctus* against God could not have been fitting reading for devout nuns" (Powell 259). Thus, interpretations about Heloise and her audience have been shaped by assumptions about the culture of devotional reading: that the reader ought to passively imitate the piety and orthodoxy presented in the text.

In his "Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete: Of Scholarly Diversion and a Woman's 'Conversion,'" Morgan Powell attempts to describe how the nuns would have read Heloise's letters through the metaphor of witnessing: "Each and every nun who hears these letters becomes a new witness to their articulation of desire as her own" (263-64). Because Powell sees the correspondence as a staged illustration of the problem of "human sexual desire in relationship to a life devoted to God" (258), he sidesteps the critical unease that the nuns might have participated in Heloise's carnal desires by reading about them:

For the monastic audience, however, these texts do not represent a lover's dispute unknowingly overheard but a performance that stages the foundation of their monastic lives. The motive [resumption of the love affair] so eagerly attributed to Heloise by latter-day readers never even enters their horizon of expectations. Her advocacy of her community's needs, on the other hand, offers an immediate opportunity for identification. (258)

Thus, Powell suggests that any conflict in the text—such as Heloise’s “resistance”—may actually increase reader participation:

But the monastic “reader,” too, was aware of an open-ended conclusion, differently conceived, because it assumes her participative reading act. At the junctures in the text that place Heloise’s dilemma in irreducible opposition to the resolution posed as her dialogic obverse, when the voices of woman’s desire and that of male monastic renunciation sound hopelessly dissonant chords, this reader recognizes a hermeneutic task; that is, these very moments define and implement her presence. Her life completes the open-ended meaning, speaks the resolution, even as the compilation speaks resolution only as the definition and prescription of this life. (278)

In other words, Heloise’s opposition to Abelard opens up a space for the reader to make individual meaning. Powell’s use of the witnessing metaphor to describe this participatory reading process is particularly apt because witnessing splits the self in the same way that writing an autobiography divides the experiencing self from the narrating self. This division creates a tension between embodied experience and the act of bearing witness, which results in a narrative of the embodied experience in a public arena.<sup>7</sup> However, Powell moves quickly to shift this witnessing experience into the communal sphere, which may signal some residual discomfort with the individual reader’s embodied response to Heloise’s desire:

It is the function of such texts to construct gaps in which continual reactivation of their meaning could take shape, to juxtapose antithetical arguments and manipulate their positioning such that resolution, the completion of meaning, occurs outside the text in a communally determined reading experience. (259)

Powell’s analogy here is to the classroom setting:

Segments or chapters as well as whole Letters excerpted from this text may have served as the stuff of such communal sessions, during which texts were read aloud and

then commented upon, possibly discussed. The experience and the interpretation of the text is the locus and result of something like a classroom experience in the presence of an authority. (259)

Shifting the hermeneutic moment from the commonly imagined silent, solitary female reader to the “communally determined reading experience” helpfully reminds us that communal reading was a monastic norm; however, Marcella’s example also reminds us that reading and discussing in the presence of an authority, even one of such stature as Jerome, do not exempt the reader from his or her own ethical response—from making the reading one’s own and creating an individual “spiritual interiority.” A communal reading experience does not dictate that the nuns reading Heloise’s sexual desire or her rage against God will respond in authorized ways; rather, readers have responsibility for their own embodied responses to Heloise’s discourse, which will be witnessed and validated by the community. Thus, the recursive performance of Christian identity continues simultaneously through each individual reader and the community.

A closer look at one instance of Heloise’s “resistance” to Abelard reveals Heloise’s own struggle to perform her individual and her communal identities as a reader of Abelard’s letters and as a Christian, while also shedding light on how Heloise modeled a response for her female monastic readers. Appropriately, this particular example deals with how both writers envision the community of the Paraclete—the very nuns who may have read these letters. Heloise’s resistance seems to be over something small and, indeed, hypothetical: whether the nuns will outlive Abelard to weep and pray at his grave or whether he will perform their burial rites. Although it seems insignificant and has not been previously analyzed, this instance of opposition is particularly fitting to examine in the context of subject formation because it clearly illustrates Heloise’s “resistance,” it deals with the themes of witnessing and imitation, and it focuses directly on constructing an identity for the Paraclete’s nuns.

Abelard and Heloise both perform other roles so often in their writings that such *imitatio* is a commonplace in critical discourse on them.<sup>8</sup> For example, Abelard’s use of Marcella as a model for Heloise is doubly fitting since both Jerome and Abelard suffered “from scandalous comment on their association with learned women”

(Morton 121). Unsurprisingly, Abelard's characterizations of the Paraclete are directed at how the community conforms to his staged self-presentation. Many critics have noted how Abelard constructs the Paraclete as an ideal community of female philosophers. Mary Martin McLaughlin has argued eloquently that the Paraclete embodied Abelard's hopes for the monastic reform that had eluded him at St. Gildas and for building a legacy after his disgrace in the academic arena and the burning of his books. Based on Abelard's own words, it is easy to believe McLaughlin when she suggests that the Paraclete came "more and more, it seems, to embody his highest hopes and dreams" ("Abelard" 332).

By design, therefore, the women of the Paraclete have an active role to play in Abelard's imitation of Christ, performing the important duty of weeping at his grave just as women wept for the body of Christ. Abelard describes this role at length in Letter 3:

But if the Lord shall deliver me into the hands of my enemies so that they overcome and kill me, or by whatever chance I enter upon the way of all flesh while absent from you, wherever my body may lie, buried or unburied, I beg you to have it brought to your burial-ground, where our daughters, or rather, our sisters in Christ may see my tomb more often and thereby be encouraged to pour out their prayers more fully to the Lord on my behalf. There is no place, I think, so safe and salutary for a soul grieving for its sins and desolated by its transgressions than that which is specially consecrated to the true Paraclete, the Comforter, and which is particularly designated by his name. Nor do I believe that there is any place more fitting for Christian burial among the faithful than one amongst women dedicated to Christ. Women were concerned for the tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ, they came ahead and followed after, bringing precious ointments, keeping close watch around this tomb, weeping for the death of the Bridegroom, as it is written: "The women sitting at the tomb wept and lamented for the Lord." And there they were first reassured about his resurrection by the appearance of an angel and the words he spoke to them; later on they were found worthy both to taste the joy of his resurrection when he twice appeared to them, and also to touch him with their hands. (Radice 61-62)



This passage shows Abelard setting aside any potential scandal of being buried at Heloise's convent and arguing that women should be considered the proper caregivers for his body; he also conflates the women of the Paraclete with the women weeping for Christ. Although this image seems positive, Heloise describes how distressed she and the other nuns are at the thought of his death and rejects Abelard's plan:

Never may God be so forgetful of his humble handmaids as to let them outlive you; never may he grant us a life which would be harder to bear than any form of death. The proper course would be for you to perform our funeral rites, for you to commend our souls to God, and to send ahead of you those whom you assembled for God's service.... (Radice 63)

She goes on at length about how Abelard's image of his death and their mourning of him have "intensif[ied] our existing unhappiness" (Radice 64), and she repeats her denial of Abelard's vision for the Paraclete community of weeping at his grave:

We shall be hurrying to follow, not to bury you, so that we may share your grave instead of laying you in it. If we lose our life in you, we shall not be able to go on living when you leave us. I would not even have us live to see that day, for if the mere mention of your death is death for us, what will the reality be if it finds us still alive? God grant that we may never live on to perform this duty, to render you the service which we look for from you alone; in this may we go before, not after you! (Radice 64)

Abelard and Heloise can be seen to struggle throughout their letters over whether the nuns will pray for Abelard or simply follow him into the grave. Abelard in Letter 5, for example, presses Heloise to conform herself to this group image of mourning for Christ: "... be one of the crowd, one of the women who wept and lamented over him" (Radice 84) and again "... be always present at his tomb, weep and wail with the faithful women. . . ." (Radice 85). Although Heloise asserts a different performance for herself and her community, the role of the Paraclete women in Abelard's imitation of Christ is obvious.

Abelard's image of the nuns weeping at his grave urges the nuns as a community to perform a direct imitation of the women who were the first witnesses to Christ's resurrection. Although Heloise insists on the distressing aspects of the image, Abelard's passage actually ends joyfully with the women touching Christ's body with their hands—a communal witnessing to truth through the body. Significantly, Heloise's response is not a private response but a communal one. She asserts that Abelard's words have intensified the unhappiness of the whole group. Her letter, in fact, testifies to the responses of the other nuns: "And so, I beg you, spare us—spare her at least, who is your only one—by refraining from words like these. They pierce our hearts. . . ." (Radice 64). The nuns reading this letter are reading their own responses already inscribed in the text. The self-reflexivity of the nuns' reading their own responses as Heloise has recorded them heightens the theme of witnessing: witnessing itself becomes the topic of the text which is being read and must be responded to both on the individual level and on the communal. They also read how Heloise's response witnesses to their response as well as to her own separate reaction. They read her identification with them and her separation from them—a dual identity (individual and communal) that is necessary for each reader to articulate.

Heloise presents herself in her first letter as unquestionably part of the community of the Paraclete: "All of us here are driven to despair of your life. . . . We are all that are left you" (Radice 48). But, as critics have often noticed, she seems to separate herself from them at key moments to reassert her singular status in relation to Abelard: the implication being that she can have it only one way—either she is his alone or she speaks as a voice of the community. However, one of Heloise's early statements suggests how we might read the relation she sets up between the individual and the community: "Apart from everything else, consider the close tie by which you have bound yourself to me, and repay the debt you owe a whole community of devoted women by discharging it the more dutifully to her who is yours alone" (Radice 50). It is clear here that Abelard's relationship with Heloise is intimately connected to his interactions with the whole community. He is bound by a duty to Heloise but also has a duty to the whole community, and discharging his duty to Heloise will repay the debt to the whole community. This statement illustrates the undisputed right of the individual to be part of the community and to be separate too. Thus, Heloise's switching "between her roles as abbess and

lover,” because “her position as the abbess of the Paraclete makes a discordant background” (McLeod 65) for the sexual desire she expresses, does not really create the either-or proposition it appears to; rather, it represents a complexity of subjectivity and identity—even a contingency of subject construction—that the lover and abbess are simultaneously the same subject. It is, in fact, Heloise’s particular drama of bodily desire and spiritual leadership that leads her in her letters to problematize the relation between embodied experience and the will to discipline or regulate that body. And it is fitting that her monastic readers likewise have to confront their own physical separateness from her experience while they try to imitate or respond to her example because medieval processes of tropological reading demand a continuing response—a “making one’s reading one’s own.”

Thus Heloise’s frequent appeals to Abelard to produce more texts for the Paraclete and her own production of texts model this continuing need to respond subjectively in one’s own body and publicly to the didactic and devotional texts that constitute the documents of the Paraclete.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Heloise’s *Problemata*, as her recording of questions raised by the nuns during their communal study of Scripture, bears witness to those individual responses. Several scholars have noted that the questions posed in the *Problemata* reveal traces of other voices. The widely variable level of sophistication, for example, has led Smith to note that the *Problemata* comments on Heloise’s pedagogy:

While the degree of difficulty of some of the questions reflects well on the sophistication of Heloise’s teaching, her decision to include the simpler ones is particularly impressive. . . . The fact that she included questions from these newest or least able students suggests a pedagogical style that is generous, patient, and inclusive. (177)

But this clear inclusion of students’ voices, the voices of the very nuns whose responses we are interested in, also highlights how Heloise’s text witnesses to ways in which individual responses, even shaped by communal reading experiences, find their ways to exist. Given this possibility, Heloise’s reference to Marcella, which comes here at the beginning of the *Problemata*, reinforces the point that ethical and individual response was required even in monastic communal reading:

Nor indeed . . . did she [Marcella] consider whatever I [Jerome] might respond as correct, nor did prejudged authority without reason hold any weight for her, but she questioned everything, and with a sagacious mind considered widely, so that I felt myself to have not a disciple but rather a judge. (McNamer 111)

Marcella's "resistance" to authority and reliance on her own reasoning are praised by Jerome as the very pinnacle of textual study not because she realigns the gender politics of patriarchy but because she correctly balances her own judgment and authority to become herself a model of ethical reading.

Heloise's *imitatio* of Marcella, as the *Problemata* demonstrates, includes the nuns of the Paraclete, opening a space for them to contemplate their own lives and potential responses—not as "resistance" to patriarchy but as ethical readers. The nuns' reading requires both embodied conversion and public testimony—that autobiographical impulse to "transpos[e] the self into the key of textuality" (Harpham 46). Their questions about scriptural interpretation that Heloise sends to Abelard in the *Problemata* are the traces of their public responses—their tropological reading, their witnessing. By participating in their communal Christian identity through testifying to their inescapably individual conversions, they resolve those two opposing images of the Paraclete—as a community that weeps and touches Christ, but also follows him into the grave as witnesses to individual embodied experience.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Peter the Venerable makes clear Heloise's reputation for learning: "I had yet not quite passed the bounds of youth and reached early manhood when I knew of your name and your reputation, not yet for religion but for your virtuous and praiseworthy studies. I used to hear at that time of the woman who although still caught up in the obligations of the world, devoted all her application to knowledge of letters. . . ." (Radice 217). Of Heloise's role as abbess, he also writes: ". . . [A]ll the goodness you have gathered here and there in different ways, by your example, word, and every possible means, you will pour out for the sisters in your house and for all other women. In this brief span of our mortal life you will satisfy yourself with the hidden sweetness of the Holy Scriptures, as also your fortunate sisters by your public instruction. . . ." (Radice 220).

<sup>2</sup> Mary Martin McLaughlin's "Heloise the Abbess: The Expansion of the Paraclete" well illustrates Heloise's successes as abbess.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter one of R. W. Hanning's *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance*; for more on this topic see Colin Morris's *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200*; Peter Dronke's *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages*; W. Ullman's *Individual and Society in the Middle Ages*; and Charles Homer Haskins's *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*.

<sup>4</sup> Morgan Powell makes the argument in his "Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete: Of Scholarly Diversion and a Woman's 'Conversion'" that the monastic context for the correspondence has been neglected by scholars and, indeed, that critics have received a skewed view of Abelard and Heloise by responding primarily to an apparent individuality in the *Letters* (255-56) and not historicizing the text to the original audience.

<sup>5</sup> Much of this discussion of medieval reading is indebted to Carruthers's work—specifically chapter five, "Memory and the Ethics of Reading"—and to Linda Olson's "Did Medieval English Women Read Augustine's *Confessiones*? Constructing Feminine Interiority and Literacy in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries."

<sup>6</sup> See Benedicta Ward, *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm: With the Proslogion*. Denis Renevey's "Enclosed Desires: A Study of the Wooing Group" is an excellent illustration of how the affective tradition of meditative reading appears in thirteenth-century English texts written for female recluses.

<sup>7</sup> For discussions of how witnessing, especially to traumatic events, involves the witness in an experience that must be known and responded to, see Dori Laub's "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening." Rosetta E. Ross's *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* also illustrates how religious witnessing moves into the public sphere.

<sup>8</sup> Heloise's dramatization of the words of Cornelia while taking her vows is one of the most famous instances, but see also C. S. Jaeger, "Peter Abelard's Silence at the Council of Sens," and Donald K. Frank, "Abelard as Imitator of Christ."

<sup>9</sup> As McLaughlin notes, Abelard and Heloise produced a collection of texts for the Paraclete that was "an achievement unparalleled in the monastic literature of the twelfth century. . . . Their talents produced not only an 'institute' or 'rule' for nuns, along with the letters that preceded it, but also the hymns, sermons, treatises, and a second dialogue, the *Problemata*, which completed a distinctive and coherent monastic program" ("Heloise" 2).

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