Heloise's letters, Abelard throws himself into a frenzy of literary activity on her behalf: in addition to the famous, if painfully diffident letters, to understand "'the full record of what Abelard did for Heloise, we must add about a hundred hymns, thirty-five sermons, and a substantial series of solutions of Heloise's theological problems'. One should not forget either the half-dozen *Planctus* which Abelard wrote, and which touch very closely on the state of mind of Heloise and himself." Through these works, "Abelard had found an acceptable medium in which to express his love for Heloise."[49] On top of all of this, it is evident that Abelard's heart remained with Heloise when he asked if she would bury him: "by whatever cause I go the way of all flesh, proceeding absent from you, I pray you to bring my body, whether it lie buried or exposed, to your cemetary."[50] Years later, Abelard's request was granted, as "Peter the Venerable […] made sure to return the body to Heloise" and when Heloise herself died, she "was laid to rest next to Abelard."[51] Her jealous uncle, his hired thugs, and the society in which they lived, may have separated the lovers physically, but they could not extinguish their love. Their words and cries of desire and suffering echo yet another poem by Bernart de Ventadorn, *Can vei la lauzeta mover*:

Ai, las! Tan cuidava saber	Alas! So much, I believed I knew
d'amor, e tan petit en sai,	about love, and how little I really know
car eu d'amor no·m posc tener	because I cannot hold back from loving
celeis don ja pro non aurai.	her, the lady I will not ever have.
Tout m'a mo cor, e tout m'a me	All my heart, and all of me,
e se mezeis e tot lo mon;	myself and the whole world,
e can se.m tolc, no·m laisset re	she has taken, and left behind nothing
mas desirer e cor volon.[52]	except desire and a yearning heart.

And yet, as is by now becoming a familiar pattern, literary critics devoted to a "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" authoritarian style of interpretation insist that these letters are not about love, with some going to the extent of arguing that the letters are not even genuine. Barbara Newman argues strenuously against those critics who deny the authenticity of Heloise's letters, identifying their aim as "not only the repression of Heloise's desire, but the complete obliteration of her voice," and identifying the urge to obliterate that voice "in a priori notions of what a medieval abbess could write, frank disapproval of what Heloise did

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[49] W. G. East. "This Body of Death: Abelard, Heloise and the Religious Life." In *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body*. Edited by Peter Biller and Alastair J. Minnis. (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 1997), 51. In the first sentence, East is quoting Richard Southern (*Medieval Humanism and Other Studies*. [London: Basil Blackwell, 1984], 101).

[50] "quocunque casu viam universae carnis absens a vobis ingrediar, cadaver obsecro nostrum, ubicunque vel sepultum vel expositum iacuerit, ad cimiterium vestrum deferri faciatis" (Peter Abelard and Heloise d'Argenteuil, 39).

[51] Charles J. Reid. *Power Over the Body, Equality in the Family: Rights and Domestic Relations in Medieval Canon Law*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 130.

[52] Bernart de Ventadorn, pp. 250-54, ll.9-16.

write, and at times outright misogyny."[53] Newman takes D.W. Robertson as her prime example of such a critic:

> Robertson's condescension toward Heloise is blatant. He refers to her twice as 'poor Heloise' and once even as 'little Heloise'; at least a half dozen times, he calls her discourse on marriage in the *Historia calamitatum* a 'little sermon.' In a display of stunning inconsistency, he manages to deny that 'little Heloise actually said anything like' what Abelard records, and at the same time to ridicule her for saying it. Embodying all the negative stereotypes of the feminine, Robertson's Heloise is both minx and shrew.[54]

As Newman observes, "Robertson himself would read these letters, like all medieval texts that purport to celebrate erotic love, as witty and ironic; they form part of an exemplary conversion narrative authored by Abelard."[55] Robertson is a wonderful example of the kind of authoritarian reader that Longxi refers to when he observes that critics both Western and Eastern attempt to transform literature into "a model of propriety and good conduct, something that carries a peculiar ethico-political import," before wryly noting that we can see the same technique of readerly coercion at work "in Mao's commentary."[56] In pointing out that the writings of Marie de France, "one of the most celebrated erotic writers of the twelfth century," enjoyed a widespread popularity in their day, Newman remarks that "[i]t may be that at least some twelfth-century audiences were less fastidious in these matters than their modern interpreters."[57]

The tradition Newman opposes, the tradition of those scholars and critics who have argued that the love story of Abelard and Heloise is not what it seems to be, has been active since Ignaz Fessler in 1806, who first suggested that the letters between Abelard and Heloise were a fraud.[58] In 1972, John Benton argued that the letters were the result of a collaborative forgery between two men, a "'twelfth-century epistolary 'novelist' and a 'thirteenth-century institutional scoundrel.'"[59] Though Benton later abandoned this theory, Hubert Silvestre (there is, one should note, a gender pattern at work at the highest levels of the Abelard-and-Heloise-denial industry) persisted, arguing in 1985 that

> The *Historia* and the correspondence are [...] the work of a late thirteenth-century forger, working on the basis of some authentic material, who wished to

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[53] Newman, 47.
[54] Ibid., 49.
[55] Ibid., 50.
[56] Longxi 205-06. The Mao referred to here is not the modern political figure, but a figure known as Máo Hēng, usually dated to the second or third centuries BCE (Martin Kern. "Early Chinese Literature, Beginnings through Western Han." In *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature Volume 1: To 1375*. Edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 21).
[57] Newman, 52.
[58] Ignas Fessler. *Abälard und Heloise*. Vol. II. (Berlin, 1806), 352.
[59] John Marenbon. *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1997), 83.

> uphold the right of clerics to have a concubine, and who found a powerful way of doing so by putting the arguments for clerical concubinage not into the mouth of a man, as might be expected, but of an outstanding woman. This forger was none other than the famous poet Jean de Meun, whose vast completion of Guillaume de Lorris' *Roman de la Rose*, one of the most widely read French works of the later Middle Ages, contains a passage recounting the romance of Abelard and Heloise, and who translated the *Historia* and the correspondence into French.[60]

But as John Marenbon points out, this theory fails logically at a crucial point:

> Peter Dronke has recently provided a very powerful argument against this thesis. There are, he shows, a number of instances in the Old French translation, not explicable by variants in the Latin text or defects in the manuscript of the French, where Jean de Meun, failing to grasp the meaning of a phrase in the correspondence, mistranslates it. How could Jean de Meun misunderstand a text which he himself had forged? Silvestre might reply that the passages in question belonged to the authentic material which Jean did not compose but incorporated into his forgery. But at least one of the passages signalled by Dronke concerns precisely the subject—Heloise's reasons for not wanting to marry—which Silvestre believes the forger himself introduced into his material. And if Jean were really so accomplished a Latinist that he could imitate Abelard's style perfectly—as the hypothesis of forgery demands—how could he be capable of such errors?[61]

As we have seen, and as we will continue to see, the compulsion that all too many critics seem to have to channel, reformulate, and control poetry and prose that treats of human love, says more about the critics than it does about the literature being subjected to analyses determined to erase any hint of human passion. This impulse is reminiscent of what Marenbon calls "the wish, among some literary theorists, to treat texts as if they were not the products of their authors, but independent signifiers, awaiting the reader to interpret them in one of the unlimited ways in which they can be understood."[62] That this wish drives the Bentons and Silvestres of the world to spin elaborate (and ultimately unsupportable) theories of fraud and conspiracy is at once sad and instructive. But such an impulse needn't drive us. In fact, as Marenbon argues, it shouldn't: "Silvestre's thesis must be regarded, then, not simply as unproven, but rather as demonstrably false."[63] As for those who contend that the letters are a fraud because they were composed by Abelard himself, Marenbon dismisses their arguments as entirely free of any actual evidence: "To suggest that Abelard (perhaps aided by Heloise) composed the collection as a literary fiction is to attribute to him a method of writing, and indeed a way of thought, which neither

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., 83-84.
[62] Ibid., 93.
[63] Ibid., 85.

he nor any of his contemporaries displayed elsewhere. There is nothing intrinsically impossible about the suggestion, but it requires strong evidence. This its supporters signally fail to provide."[64]

Despite the critics, the passionate love of Abelard and Heloise, with all its struggles and complications, is not a fraud perpetrated by "novelists," "scoundrels" or by Abelard himself. The sheer energy that has gone into constructing and defending such arguments (primarily by *male* critics) speaks eloquently of the determination to, as Newman observes, achieve "not only the repression of Heloise's desire, but the complete obliteration of her voice."[65] What is it about the idea of a powerfully intellectual and passionately eros-driven Heloise that so disturbs such academic "men"? It is, as Marenbron argues, "neither improbable nor anachronistic to attribute to Heloise the sentiments expressed in her letters: they do not need to be explained away as exaggerations concocted so as to dramatize the story of a religious conversion. [Medieval] readers such as Jean de Meun and Petrarch had no inclination to interpret the correspondence in the religious and moralizing sense favoured by twentieth-century medievalists such as Robertson."[66] Nor does the love of Abelard and Heloise *in any way, shape, or form* fit the bloodless and library-bound scholarly idea of "courtly love," a passionless construct that as Radice notes:

> amounts to so little, especially at a time when romances like that of Tristan and Iseut or Aucassin and Nicolette were highly popular, that it seems likely that Abelard and Heloise could not be fitted into the current ideal of courtly love, with its emphasis on the lover's devotion to the chaste and unattainable lady. Abelard and Heloise speak a different language of sensuous frankness, of pagan realism in love and classical Stoic fortitude in adversity. Their relationship found physical expression, and Heloise is neither cold nor remote but loving and generous, eager to give service and not to demand it.[67]

Far from being something so bloodless as Robertson's "exemplary conversion narrative authored by Abelard,"[68] the story of Abelard and Heloise is defined by passion and desire and loss. As Newman notes, "although Abelard's replies to Heloise are effective enough in their way, no reader until Robertson ever pretended to find them nearly as memorable or moving as Heloise's 'unconverted" letters.'"[69]

Abelard's and Heloise's love cannot be confined to an academic's tale, the kind of somnolent morality play that fits comfortably within the paradigm of "courtly love," with its emphasis on love as a flawed if necessary path to Heaven. Theirs is a story of the delights and dangers of *fin'amor* in a world determined to

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[64] Ibid., 90.
[65] Newman, 47.
[66] Marenbron, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, 89.
[67] Radice, 49.
[68] Newman, 50.
[69] Ibid., 59.

control the whos, whats, wheres, whens, and whys of human love and sexuality—a world in which all-too-many seem determined to write such a story out of existence by insisting that it does not really mean what it says. But as Zang Longxi reminds us, in response to those critics who would torture texts into "saying" *what they do not say*, while vigorously denying *what they do say*:

> the plain literal sense of the text must always act as a restraint to keep interpretation from going wild, providing a basis on which we may judge the relative validity of particular readings and exegeses. To put it simply, one reading is better than another if it accounts for more details of the text, bringing the letter into harmony with the spirit, rather than into opposition to it.[70]

Finally, Abelard's and Heloise's is a story of joy and suffering—*real* suffering, not the stylized variety of the courtly stories—and just perhaps, it is also a story of new joy at being reunited, if only in the form of words on a page (one can only imagine how many times Abelard read and read again those words Heloise had given him, and as for Heloise, she leaves us in no doubt). For beside the sensual delight each took in the other, what else more than their words, their intellects, their thoughts, brought Abelard and Heloise together as two sighted lovers amidst the eyeless and obedient crowds? Those who would condemn Heloise's passions, or argue that her words were really not her own, or adopt any tactic at hand that might serve to allow them to allegorize the love of Heloise for Abelard out of existence, will always be with us. But they need no longer have any claim on our attention, much less our readerly *obedience* to their insistent demands that we read as they do. Abelard and Heloise loved as few ever will, and Heloise in particular stands above the mean and base denunciations of the library-bound, passionless, and perversely sanctimonious critics who would silence her or "slut-shame" her across the centuries. As Newman characterizes her, Heloise was a woman of strength, substance, and character who would merely laugh at her modern detractors, for her focus was always on love: "[m]ore than any ancient Roman, perhaps, Heloise fulfilled to perfection the classical ideal

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[70] Longxi, 215. The response to this position, of course, is both predictable and telling. As David Dawson argues, "athough the 'literal sense' has often been thought of as an inherent quality of a literary text that gives it a specific and invariant character (often, a 'realistic' character), the phrase is simply an honorific title given to a kind of meaning that is culturally expected and automatically recognized by readers. It is the 'normal', 'commonsensical' meaning, the product of a conventional, customary reading. The 'literal sense' thus stems from a community's generally unself-conscious decision to adopt and promote a certain kind of meaning, rather than from its recognition of a text's inherent and self-evident sense" (*Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria.* [Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992], 7-8). Note how often the critic resorts to condescending language that insists on the naïveté and "conventional" quality of readings that attempt to recover a literal sense of a text. Such readings are "unself-conscious," "conventional," "customary," and otherwise to be revealed, unmasked, and debunked by the clear-eyed, self-conscious, and most definitely *un*conventional critic. One is finally tempted to ask the old question: *cui bono*? Who benefits from such relentless and widely-shared (in some sense also "conventional" and "customary") interpretive stances by critics?

of the *univim*, the woman who belonged solely and wholly to a single man. Whatever the role she played, Abelard was always her *solus*, her *unicus*, he alone could grieve her, comfort her, instruct her, command her, destroy her, or save her."[71]

In the end, love found a way to thrive (despite the moralists of their day and ours), even if only through the lovers' passionate and painful lines, even if only through our own open and honest reading of those lines nearly a thousand years later. The love of Abelard and Heloise was not irony, as Robertson would claim—such a claim says more about the critic than about the words of two twelfth-century lovers who, even now, face the condemnation of the moral scolds among us who seemingly never miss a chance to drain the joy out of life, love, and poetry.

[71] Newman, 70.