

THE NEW MIDDLE AGES

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*The*  
LOST LOVE LETTERS *of*  
HELOISE *and* ABELARD,  
2ND EDITION

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PERCEPTIONS OF DIALOGUE  
IN TWELFTH-CENTURY FRANCE

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Constant J. Mews, *translated by*  
Neville Chiavaroli *and* Constant J. Mews



# THE NEW MIDDLE AGES

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SECOND EDITION

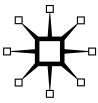
*Constant J. Mews*

*With a translation by*

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THE LOST LOVE LETTERS OF HELOISE AND ABELARD

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*For Maryna*



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### II

#### *From the Letters of Two Lovers*

*Edited by Ewald Könsgen*

*Translated by Neville Chiavaroli and Constant J. Mews*

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## INTRODUCTION

This book is the product of a journey that began in 1976 when I first came across Ewald Könsgen's edition, *Epistolae duorum amantium: Briefe Abaelards und Heloises?* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974) in Auckland University Library, New Zealand. I was attracted by the subtitle and was curious to find out how those letters related to the more well-known correspondence between Heloise and Abelard. As things turned out, the direction of my studies changed after I went to Oxford to pursue doctoral research. I heeded the suggestion of Sir Richard Southern that I turn my attention to Abelard's *Theologia*, a treatise which Abelard continued to revise for over twenty years. That research, guided by David Luscombe, brought me into direct contact with one of the most subtle minds of the twelfth century. Between 1980 and 1985, I was fortunate enough to attend the seminar of Jean Jolivet on medieval philosophy at the *École pratique des hautes études* (V<sup>e</sup> section), in Paris. Jolivet played a key role in helping me understand the evolution of Abelard's thinking about logic as well as about theology. I was able to complete a critical edition of Abelard's *Theologia Summi boni* and *Theologia Scholarium*, initiated by Fr. Eligius-Marie Buytaert, while working on a research project funded by the Leverhulme Foundation and directed by David Luscombe at the University of Sheffield. My research into the *Epistolae duorum amantium* is the fruit of these scholastic labors. To all my teachers, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude.

This book also draws on interaction with many colleagues, students, and friends here in Australia. They made me aware how important issues of gender are to understanding Latin tradition and to putting in perspective the skills that I had absorbed in the schools of Oxford and Paris. Becoming interested in the writing of Heloise's direct contemporary, Hildegard of Bingen, also enabled me to see more clearly how the ideas of both Abelard and Heloise were shaped by the deeper structures of the society in which they lived.

It was when reading afresh the *Epistolae duorum amantium* in 1993, this time with greater awareness of Abelard's vocabulary as a logician, that I encountered words and ideas that sent a shiver down my spine. Terms like "without difference" (*indifferenter*) and "knowability" (*scibilitas*) were words to which Abelard paid great attention in his logic. Could an incomplete copy have been made in the fifteenth century of the lost love letters of Heloise and Abelard? I put aside my research into Roscelin of Compiègne and his influence on Peter Abelard to explore the significance of these letters. Heloise demanded attention in her own right. The relatively recent capacity to search large quantities of Latin text on CD-ROM now makes it much easier to pursue such research. Comparing these love letters to a wide range of other Latin texts, literary, philosophical, and theological, I gradually became persuaded that, for all the limitations of the fifteenth-century transcription, they were indeed written by Heloise and Abelard. They made me consider the *Historia calamitatum* in a new light. Over the years I had identified a number of anonymous texts as written or inspired by Abelard in the domain of either logic or theology, but here I was dealing with texts that dealt with human relationships at a much more profound level.

At an initial reading, the love letters present such an idealized picture of a relationship, far removed from the details of everyday life, that it might seem impossible to identify their specific context. Könsgen made an important step in arguing that they were written by two articulate individuals who lived in the Île-de-France in the first half of the twelfth century and were fully conversant with the classical authors known at that time. I argue that while Könsgen's insights are fundamentally correct, they can be taken much further. I believe that this transcription has much to contribute to our understanding of the early relationship between Heloise and Abelard and the literary climate in which it evolved.

This book focuses not just on the authorship of these letters, but on the broader issue of relationships between educated women and men in twelfth-century France. Heloise and Abelard have long occupied a key role in the collective mythology of European civilization as epitomizing values of love and reason respectively. The protracted debate over the authenticity of the famous letters of Abelard and Heloise is part of an ongoing process of re-interpretation of their legacy. By looking at the wider phenomenon in the twelfth century of men and women communicating with each other through the written word, always through the filter of the manuscript record, I hope to show how the relationship of Abelard and Heloise brings to a head many central tensions within French society in the twelfth century.

My argument is presented as a journey. I begin by inviting the reader to discover the letters that Johannes de Vepria copied at Clairvaux in the late fifteenth century and to gauge the context in which he did so. To answer the questions these letters raise, we need to go back in time. In a second chapter, I consider the more well-known exchange of letters between Abelard and Heloise discovered by Jean de Meun in the thirteenth century, and their role in shaping the way their relationship has been remembered. Debate about the authenticity of the famous letters of Heloise has often been influenced by assumptions that her professions of love for Abelard are incompatible with monastic tradition. Such claims, I argue, are based on a profound misunderstanding of Heloise's reflection on love. The third chapter considers the relationship of Heloise and Abelard from a range of historical records other than the *Historia calamitatum*. It cannot be understood outside the context of a volatile political environment, in which ecclesiastical authority was anxious to assert itself over the clerical community as a whole, and over women in particular. The love letters preserved at Clairvaux constitute perhaps the richest surviving example of educated women and men writing to each other. While there will always be debate about whether such women are invented by men, I argue in the fourth chapter that Heloise was not so unusual in reflecting in prose and verse on the demands of love. In a fifth chapter, I compare the vocabulary of the love letters to that of the known writings of Abelard and Heloise. Here I argue that these textual and stylistic parallels are so complex that it stretches plausibility to argue that the letters were written by anyone other than Abelard and Heloise. In a final chapter, I sketch out what this implies for our understanding of the subsequent evolution of their relationship and of their thought. Abelard so often commands attention by the sheer output of writings on logic and theology attributed to him by his disciples that those unseen voices to whom he responds are often concealed. These anonymous love letters enable us to listen more attentively to voices long hidden from view. They deserve far more critical attention than they have hitherto received. The translation offered of these letters in the second part of the book is not intended to be definitive, but rather is provided to waken interest in a remarkable set of texts from the twelfth century.

Heloise's concern that words should not mouth empty rhetoric echoes a wider interest among reforming circles in the twelfth century that meaning is more important than verbal convention. These shared concerns help explain why it may not be so extraordinary that a record which she kept of her early exchange with Abelard should surface in the abbey of Clairvaux, a community founded in 1115 in a wave of enthusiasm for living out



the true meaning of the monastic life. The conversations of Abelard and Heloise about love are part of a larger dialogue taking place among a literate elite in early twelfth-century France about the nature of authentic relationships. There have been no shortage of books written about Abelard this century. Two new studies of Abelard appeared too late for me to give them detailed attention: John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Michael T. Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). Only after this book was completed did I learn from C. Stephen Jaeger that he had suggested, quite independently of my own research, that the love letters were those of Abelard and Heloise in a forthcoming book, *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). It is a measure of the richness of this subject that so many good new studies can be written. I was delighted to discover that Marenbon and Clanchy argue that Heloise was a major intellectual influence on Abelard. I wish to take their arguments further, and consider Heloise as a major figure in her own right. At the same time, I have been anxious to show that both Abelard and Heloise need to be understood within the broader context of cultural change in twelfth-century France. It is only by penetrating the mythology which surrounds both Abelard and Heloise that we can begin to look at the deeper structures which shape their thought.

By training, I am a historian rather than a philologist or literary critic. In the course of this study, I have inevitably trespassed into a variety of disciplinary traditions that are not my own. I believe, however, that it is imperative for historical and literary disciplines to learn from each other and transcend the factionalism by which they have sometimes been divided. I acknowledge a particular debt to Ewald Könsgen for the painstaking attention that he has given to my arguments and to the translation of the letters, as well as for allowing me to reproduce his critical text. I also register a great debt to Peter Dronke for doing so much to demonstrate the ongoing vitality of Latin literature in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The translations of Latin texts offered here are often indebted to his readings. Inevitably, many nuances of meaning can still be debated, new sources discovered, and new questions posed. If, however, I can encourage readers to study the Latin language and engage in dialogue with neglected strands of Latin tradition, both secular and religious, it will have been worthwhile. At a time when the study of Latin is disappearing from many universities, it is imperative that literary and philosophical treasures jealously guarded by devoted scholars continue to revitalize cultural debate.

The practical process of engaging in detailed research into the twelfth century from an Australian standpoint has been much assisted by many institutions and individuals. Invitations from the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, in 1990 and the École pratique des hautes études, Paris, in 1993 enabled me to pursue research into Abelard's scholastic milieu, the basis for my subsequent inquiry into the love letters. This book has also benefited from the financial support of Monash University and the Australian Research Council, sponsors of a larger project on gender and religious life in the twelfth century. My special thanks go to the graduate students with whom I have discussed many aspects of this study, in particular to Neville Chiavaroli, to whom I proposed the project of translating the letters in 1993. Many ideas germinated in our discussions of how to translate the letters. The chance to present a reading of these love letters at a Melbourne restaurant in 1994 enabled us to appreciate their impact in the public domain at an early stage in the project. I am immensely grateful to Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, John O. Ward, Julie Hotchin, Juanita Ruys, Jeremy du Quesnay Adams, and John Lewis for their comments on drafts of this book, Marjorie Mitchell for typing the Latin text, Kathryn Mews for discussing the translation, and to Hilary Davies and Sebastian Barker for sharing ideas about Abelard and Heloise, while benefiting from their hospitality to me in London. I am grateful to the many librarians who have made their collections available to me. Bonnie Wheeler has played a particularly important role in this book's development, offering advice and guidance throughout. Rick Delaney of St. Martin's Press has been ever patient with the process of its production. Responsibility for error is of course entirely my own. I am grateful to Oxford University Press for giving permission to reproduce Frances Horgan's translation of part of *The Romance of the Rose* (1994), and to University of Pennsylvania Press for reproducing Gerald Bond's translation of the poem by a scholar-nun in *The Loving Subject. Desire, Eloquence, and Power in Romanesque France* (1995). I also thank Michel Lemoine for introducing me to the vast lexicographic resources of the Comité Du Cange, available to medievalists at the Institut de France, Paris and the staff of the Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes (Section latine) for their unstinting assistance over the years. Many other friends and spiritual guides, too numerous to name, have shaped my thoughts about Heloise, Abelard, and the schools of Paris. I must conclude by singling out my debt to the one person who has contributed more than anyone else to understanding the issues of dialogue and communication that lie at the heart of this book: Maryna. Only she can know what it is really about.



## ABBREVIATIONS

BNF	Bibliothèque nationale de France.
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis (Turnhout: Brepols, 1966–).
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954–).
Checklist	Julia Barrow, Charles S. F. Burnett, and David Edward Luscombe, “A Checklist of the Manuscripts Containing the Writings of Peter Abelard and Heloise and Other Works Closely Associated with Abelard and his School,” <i>Revue d’Histoire des Textes</i> 14–15 (1984–85): 183–302.
Constable	Peter the Venerable, <i>The Letters of Peter the Venerable</i> , ed. Giles Constable (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (Vienna–Leipzig: Teubner, 1866–).
CSS	Cistercian Studies Series.
DHGE	<i>Dictionnaire d’histoire et de géographie ecclésiastique</i> , ed. A. Baudrillart et al. (Paris: Le Touzey et Ané, 1912–).
Dronke, <i>ML</i>	Peter Dronke, <i>Medieval Latin and the Rise of the European Love Lyric</i> , 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).
Dronke, <i>WW</i>	Peter Dronke, <i>Women Writers of the Middle Ages. A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (†203) to Marguerite Porete (†1310)</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
Dufour	<i>Recueil des Actes de Louis VI roi de France (1108–1137)</i> , ed. Jean Dufour, 4 vols. (Paris: Diffusion de Boccard, 1992–94).
HC	<i>Historia calamitatum</i> , ed. Jacques Monfrin (Paris: Vrin, 1959).