

*Sex, Heresy and Academic Rivalry
in Abelard's Historia calamitatum*

By Per Bjørnar Grande

Bergen College

Contents

Confessional Literature

Christian Confession

Abelard, an Autobiography Concerning Conflict

Academic Rivalry

Abelard's Personality

Abelard Viewed by Modern Academics

Abelard's Rationalistic Spirit

War

Aristocratic Mentality

Economic Reasons for Academic Rivalry

The Rivalry with William of Champeaux

Abelard Breaks Down

Rivalry about the Universals

Change of Model

The Structure of Mimetic Rivalry

Doubling of Desire

The Rivalry with Anselm of Laon

Success as Lecturer

Success Leads to Scapegoating

Erotic Rivalry

Passionate Love

Delirium of Love

Abelard and Heloise are Sensual Lovers

The Love of Tristan and Iseult Compared with Heloise and Abelard's Love

Passionate Love as Courtly Love

Heloise, the Ideal Lover

Linear or Triangular Desire

The Shift from Academic Rivalry to Erotic Rivalry

Desire between Abelard, Heloise and Fulbert

Triangular Desire

Sensual Love

A Married Magister Scholarum

Marriage as an End to Erotic Desire

Marriage: Solution or Problem?

Conflict and Status

Risk of Revenge

Abelard's Hubris

Castration, a Result of Mimetic Contagion

Abelard, the God in the Eyes of Heloise

Agape or Eros

The End of Desire

Religious Life: an Escape from Desires

Change in Mimetic Models

Monastic Tribulations

Heresy and Rivalry

The History of Heresy

Entering Monastic Life in a Spirit of Rivalry

Heresy and Rivalry

Pride and Heresy

Imitating a Heretic

Heresy and Pagan Philosophy

Pagan and Christian Rationality

Christianity and Logic

Abelard and St. Bernard - Mimetic Doubles

Scapegoating at the Council of Soissons

The Council at Sens

A Radical Understanding of Sin

The Message

Rivalry and Textual Scapegoating

Peter Abelard is again teaching and writing novelties. His books cross the seas, leap over the Alps. His novel statements on the faith, his new dogmas are being broadcast over provinces and kingdoms, preached with solemnity and defended with impunity to such a point that they are said to enjoy authority in the Roman Curia.
(St Bernard of Clairvaux)

Confessional Literature

Historia calamitatum is closer to autobiography than to any other genre, despite its being structured as a letter. The drastically unhappy events and the first person perspective, however, resemble the picaresque novel (which was yet to be invented). The most striking thing about *Historia calamitatum*, which makes it fundamentally different from Abelard's philosophical writings, is its mimetic tendency, a tendency that is due both to the biographical genre and to Abelard's insights into the way mimetic desire works in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it would seem likely that René Girard's mimetic theory as well as his scapegoat theory might prove useful in understanding *Historia calamitatum*.

Christian Confession

Let's start by discussing the mimetic tendency in confessional literature. Confessional literature seems to contain a more mimetic understanding of reality than does philosophical literature. Philosophical literature, especially in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, was structured more according to symbolical concepts and allegories, and was somewhat distanced from desirous and interpersonal relationships. Confessional literature represents both a self-mimesis and a shift in mimetic models. In the Christian confession, the past is often presented as desirous, as imitating ideals other than Christian ideals. The confessional writer recaptures this period of living in sin. He relives it by representing his past, and sees his new life in the light of an *imitatio Christi* ideal. Confessional literature preserves a basic understanding of mimesis, both in late Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, thus paving the way for the first novels, in which mimesis plays such a central part. The mimetic tendency in confessional literature becomes obvious when we compare Abelard's *Historia calamitatum* with some of his other, more neo-Platonic inspired philosophical works. The tendency to ignore mimesis in his theological and philosophical works reveals, simultaneously, the mimetic tendency, the lack of symbolism and the more direct description typological of the biographical genre.

The structure of the Christian confession had an enormous impact on the mentality of the self, both in the way that man saw himself as a sinner and, at the same time, as a forgiven sinner, in a way that salvation was seen as an individual challenge; in other words, each individual life was shown to be of utmost importance. Not only did Christianity address the individual regarding salvation but regarding the ethical challenges of daily life. This understanding of one's life as a drama, not only with regard to eternal salvation, but also with regard to ethics, enhanced individuality and self-consciousness, especially among poorer people in the West. The focus on the importance of the individual gradually evolved into a secularized and worldly individuality - the Renaissance being an early synthesis of this kind of enhanced individuality, where subjectivity and personal expression suddenly reached unforeseen heights.

While Greek thought was about how to liberate oneself in order to incorporate the concept of the soul's common truth, the Christians focused more on the psychological and irrational powers within the individual soul.¹ This focus was not only important in one's individual relationship with God. It was, at the same time, an attitude towards Christian society. The fact that confession was public until the 5th century, underlines this.² Such enhanced self-consciousness can only arise when the collectivistic mentality of a check and balance system is replaced by less sacrificial mentalities.

St Augustine's Imitation of His Past

Confessional literature has a repetitive structure in that the past is recaptured through memory. The past is therefore, despite its repetitive structure, understood in a new way, often from a new ideological position. The new ideological position, as in the case of St Augustine's *Confessions*, is Christian conversion. St Augustine recreates and relives his past from the Christian point of view. The imitation of the past in writing is not a direct account, as Christian ideology mediates between the past and the present. Through his imitation of Christ in the present, St Augustine is able to make his past comprehensible. Mimesis is both the dynamic process behind the *Confessions* and the means by which St Augustine's past is (re)presented.

¹See Jonny Kondrup. *Levned og tolkninger* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1982), 33.

²Ibid., 34.

The *Confessions* are written from a mimetic-didactical point of view where the reader is meant to renounce St Augustine's wrongdoings and imitate his conversion. The *Confessions*, seen as part of this mimetic pattern, have more in common with a literary text than a theological or philosophical text, despite the rhetorical and platonic profile. St Augustine's approach towards Orthodox Christianity, however, seems more reasonable from a mimetic point of view, as both Ambrosius and his mother Monica become mimetic models whereby he is guided towards Christian belief.

Abelard, an Autobiography Concerning Conflict

A similar mimetic structure to that in *Confessions* may be found in *Historia calamitatum*. Abelard's mimetic-dynamic descriptions of his past give it an originality, rare among the more representative ideals of Medieval writing, and relying less on paraphrasing the Bible. Although the *Confessions* and *Historia calamitatum* are not works that profess individuality and subjectivity in the modern sense of the words, there are few works of Antiquity or the Middle Ages that have enhanced interest in the individual to such a degree.

Instead of focusing on the romantic love-theme between Abelard and Heloise, I shall attempt to emphasize the rivalistic elements, elements that eventually lead to the castration of Abelard. *Historia calamitatum* can be read as an interindividual study of imitation, rivalry and jealousy, which is resolved, in the end, due to Abelard's arrogance and academic brilliance, by means of scapegoating. Abelard's autobiography, however, is not as clearly structured according to the sinner-salvation scheme, as the *Confessions*. This scheme, however, is clearly inherent in the work. The reason for the less straightforward development towards salvation is that the central theme is *conflict*, and Abelard is always, despite becoming a monk, part of some serious conflict. *Historia calamitatum* is thus a work where desire continuously undermines the scheme of salvation.

Academic Rivalry

Historia Calamitatum is a story entirely coloured by Abelard's psyche and temperament.³ It was intended, by the author, to be a letter of consolation to a friend. Abelard starts by comparing his friend's miseries with his own, only to find his own much worse. This leads Abelard to become engrossed in his own troubles and not mention his friend's troubles until the very end of the book. The reader inevitably thinks that Abelard never contemplated comforting anyone. Writing to a fictitious person was an established genre in the Middle Ages. Perhaps he wanted to strengthen himself with regard to his own problems,⁴ as *Historia calamitatum* was written in the midst of extreme danger. The monks at St Gildas-de-Rhuys (in Brittany) had tried three times to kill him. So Abelard certainly needed consolation, and one of the great outlets is the written word.

Abelard was one of the few humanists of this period who believed in self-expression, who believed that a man could and should lay bare his suffering and emotions, as St Augustine had laid bare his own in the *Confessions*, or St. Jerome in his letters.⁵ In this respect he is a writer in the modern sense who could turn anything, however personal or shameful, into a literary happening.⁶

The astonishing degree of openness and self-revelation makes *Historia calamitatum* rather unique. But unlike St Augustine, who bemoans his sins and begs God's forgiveness, Abelard puts less emphasis on his own wrongdoings and more on the catalogue of wrongs allegedly done to him.⁷ The only wrongdoing he confesses to is his sexual liaison with Heloise. Despite all the extreme conflicts in which he gets involved, he feels no need to confess his sins. This tendency to overexpose his sexual sins is something very Augustinian. But one must remember, in Abelard's case, that the affair with Heloise led to castration, loss of manhood, which in turn led to loss of prestige, a severe religious life and vulnerability to heresy.

³ Pierre Abélard. *Mine trængslers historie* (København: Hans Reitzels Forlag, 1954, See Fr. Moth. Abelards personlighet, Chapter III), 43.

⁴ G. Verbrake. 'Peter Abelard and the Concept of Subjectivity,' in *Peter Abelard* (Louvain: Leuven U.P. 1974), 9

⁵ Christopher Brooke. *Europe in the Central Middle Ages 962-1154* (London: Longman, 2.ed., 1987), 23.

⁶ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 125.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

Abelard's Personality

Before interpreting Abelard's story of his misfortunes, where I shall delve primarily into the rivalistic scenes, it may be interesting to take a look at how Abelard was depicted by his contemporaries. Otto of Freising (presumed to be a student of Abelard in Paris about 1133) describes Abelard as stupid at anything that was not academic. He says that Abelard was arrogant and confident of his own genius, and that he enjoyed making jokes,⁸ even claiming that he excelled 'in moving men's minds to jokes'.⁹ Otto of Freising associates Abelard's character with the area where he was born and grew up, by saying that Brittany is a country fertile in clerics of acute intelligence and application to the arts, but quite stupid in any other business,¹⁰ indicating that Abelard was stupid, despite being so intelligent at the liberal arts.¹¹ Otto emphasizes that Abelard not only moved men in philosophy but by his jokes, claiming that Abelard's own master's lack of humour was the reason why Abelard could not bear them. When Abelard attended the school of Anselm of Laon, he and Otto of Freising used to joke together, which made Otto claim Abelard to be more a jester than a professor.¹²

The anonymous author of the *Vita Gosvini* gives a more negative portrait of Abelard, especially as an academic. When St Goswin (1086-1165) came to Paris as a student he found Abelard lecturing on Mont Ste Geneviève. No one dared attack him openly. His teaching aroused much criticism, and St Goswin was anxious to argue with him, but he was dissuaded from doing so by Joscelin, later bishop of Soissons, who declared that Abelard was not really a disputant but a quibbling scoffer, and that he more often played the part of a jester than that of a teacher, throwing away like Hercules the cudgel he had taken up in no spirit of levity.¹³ St Goswin emphasizes Abelard's tendency to fool around and having fun (when lecturing) by confirming that he acted more like a jester than a professor.¹⁴ He also introduces another

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Ibid., 18-19. (See also Otto of Freising, *Gesta Frederici*. Ed. F.J. Schmale, 226, lines 6-7.)

¹⁰ Ibid., 128. (See also Otto of Freising, *Gesta Frederici*. Ed. F.J. Schmale, 224, lines 21, 24.)

¹¹ Ibid., 75.

¹² Ibid., 132.

¹³ J.G. Sikes. *Peter Abailard* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1932), 6. (See also Bouquet. *Recueil des Histoire des Gaules*, XIV, 442-443).

¹⁴ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 18-19.

important trait in Abelard's character by claiming that he was 'an extremely bellicose man, accustomed to winning.'¹⁵

John of Salisbury (1115-1180) says that Abelard's lectures were remarkably clear, but so basic that they could be puerile.¹⁶ He would follow St Augustine's precept and dedicate himself to explaining things.¹⁷ He preferred, according to John, to instruct and stimulate his students by means of elementary points, rather than by being obscure like a grave philosopher.¹⁸ Peter the Venerable (1092-1158), one of Abelard's powerful protectors, wrote that Abelard was so clever, so diverse in genius that he could not be stereotyped and made to adopt a fixed role in life, as society normally requires. According to Peter the Venerable, Abelard was without equal, without superior.¹⁹

If we inquire about Abelard in the enemy camp, the greatest of all of Abelard's enemies, St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) proclaimed Abelard to be altogether ambiguous: a dangerously split personality.²⁰ St Bernard also emphasizes Abelard's lack of piety:

He is a man who goes beyond due measure, making the void the virtue of Christ's cross by the cleverness of his words. (Clanchy. Abelard. A Medieval Life, 328.)²¹

Outside the academic and theological world, we find few sources to Abelard's personality. There is one Hugh Métel who described Abelard as having 'elegance of manners.'²² An anecdote of Odo of Chenton recalls Abelard's fine clothes, fine horse and retinue of

¹⁵ Ibid., 130.

¹⁶ Ibid., 89. (See also John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon*, 1955, Book 3, Chapter 1, 103, line 5).

¹⁷ Ibid., 331. (See also John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon*, 1955, Book 3, Chapter 1, 103, line 10.

¹⁸ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 331. (See also John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon*, 1955, Book 3, Chapter 1, 103, lines 8-9.

¹⁹ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 335. (See also Peter the Venerable. *Epitaph*, 65.)

²⁰ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 18. (See St Bernard, *Letter 193*, vol.8, 44, line 17.)

²¹ Ibid., 328. (See also St. Bernard. *Letter 193*, vol 8, 45, lines 7-9.)

²² Helen Wadell. *The Wandering Scholars* (Garden City NY.: Doubleday & Co, 1955), 108.

servants.²³ We also know that Abelard was talented in music and poetry²⁴ and, according to Heloise, he was loved by many women. In appearance he is supposed to have been small and handsome.

If we were to summarize the portraits given by Abelard's contemporaries, we could say that he was learned but also a man of great wit and arrogance. He seems to have been an excellent pedagogue, but at the same time rivalistic and aggressive towards academic authorities.

Abelard Viewed by Modern Academics

Modern academics who have worked on Abelard, tend to focus on the conflictual side of his personality - which indeed appears to be a dominant trait in Abelard. According to Clanchy, Abelard was a great hater and presents himself as a complete egoist.²⁵ Christopher Brooks claims that Abelard was an egoist:²⁶ vain, proud, scornful and tactless.²⁷

According to Jean Jolivet, Abelard is somewhere between a giant in thought and a second rate author. He has a lively but limited mind, both helped and hindered by his character and historical circumstances.²⁸

Clanchy is the only author who says that Abelard was much of a pedant.²⁹ But Abelard could hardly have been a pedant in the sense of one who emphasizes minor details; his pedantry is the pedantry of conflict, of the drive to win over the *a priori* dogmatic, pious and wishful solutions made by his rivals. Clanchy clearly observes this kind of mimetic conflict in Abelard when he claims that he saw difficulties in the most straightforward statement, and

²³ D.E.Luscombe. *The School of Peter Abelard: The Influence of Abelard's Thought in the Early Scholastic period* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1969), 9.

²⁴ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 146-147.

²⁵ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 2.

²⁶ Christopher Brooks. *Europe in the Central Middle Ages 962-1154* (London: Longman, 2 ed., 1987), 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 409.

²⁸ J.Jolivet. *Abélard ou la philosophie dans le langage, 1969, 95.*, trans. J. Marenbon. *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1997), 2.

²⁹ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 38.

was incapable of saying anything simple.³⁰ In this respect Abelard can remind one of a Kierkegaard or a Derrida, or any truly modern academic spirit relishing in obscurities. Coping with theoretically advanced texts has always brought high prestige in the academic world. The great scope and existential themes in Abelard's writings, however, indicate that he was more creative than pedantic.

According to Clanchy, Abelard found books and theories easier to understand than people and action.³¹ This claim, however, does not take into consideration *Historia calamitatum*, as the interindividual observations in the autobiography exceed most works of the Middle Ages. But Abelard's strong point is not, in contrast to St Augustine, self-analysis. His strong point is the frank and realistic manner in which he depicts the desires surrounding him, making desire the true source and drive behind his story.

Abelard's Rationalistic Spirit

Another dominant trait in Abelard is his rationalistic approach to life. Although Abelard was a monk, he never claims any mystical experience or supernatural enlightenment. Abelard had argued in *Theologia Summi Boni* that knowledge of God is common to everybody, whether pagan or Christian, as reason educates each single person naturally about God.³² He even went as far as to say that 'in doubting we come to inquiry and by inquiry we perceive the truth.'³³ In *Theologia Scholarium*, Abelard expresses the idea that it is essential that faith should be understood before it is preached to others. He also emphasizes that doubts and questions should be given a rational solution.³⁴ Abelard remained a lifelong intellectual, with an extreme faith in logic, a faith that was partly the reason why he eventually became branded as a heretic. According to Clanchy, a flash of self-knowledge appeared at the end of his life when he acknowledged that logic had made him hate to the world.³⁵ In assessing such a statement, it would seem that it was just as much his spirit of rivalry as the emphasis he put on logic, that made him hate the world.

³⁰ Ibid., 124.

³¹ Ibid., 128-129

³² Ibid., 218. (See also Abelard. *Theologia Summi Boni*, 201, line 1346-7.)

³³ Ibid., 107. (See also Abelard. *Sic et Non* (Ed. Boyer and McKeon), 1976, 103, lines 338-9).

³⁴ See Abelard. *Theologia Scholarium*, 56-58 (1054 A-D).

³⁵ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 125.

War

His bellicose mentality need not only be explained as a part of his temperament and personality. His background, and his times, must also be taken into consideration. The 12th century upper class was bred to war.³⁶ In *Historia calamitatum*, Abelard says that his father was distinguished by the military belt, meaning that his father was a knight (vassal). And this was also Abelard's upbringing until he decided 'to renounce the glories of a soldier's life.' He transferred his rights and inheritance to his brothers and 'withdrew from the court of Mars in order to kneel at the feet of Minerva.'³⁷

The interesting thing, in this context, is that Abelard understood his philosophical vocation exactly in the same manner as his vocation as a vassal. Both implied war and honour. Abelard himself dismisses the view that any of his sufferings have been provoked by his background. As a man of his times, he has a totally 'non-Freudian' approach to the fact that his background could explain his misfortunes.³⁸ But, despite his not considering biographical explanations for his misfortunes, he clearly acknowledges that his rivalistic mentality as a soldier is projected into his career as a dialectical philosopher.

I preferred the weapons of dialectic to all the other teachings of philosophy, and armed with these I chose the conflicts of disputation instead of the trophies of war. (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, 58.)

Abelard describes his own progress in military metaphors as a campaign where he starts at the periphery and then progressively moves closer to Paris until he finally conquers the city.³⁹ Similar military metaphors are scattered throughout *Historia calamitatum*, which indicates that Abelard understood his academic career as something very close to warfare.⁴⁰ He

³⁶ Christopher Brooke. *Europe in the Central Middle Ages 962-1154*, 440.

³⁷ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 58.

³⁸ Mary McLaughlin. 'Abelard as Autobiographer', *Speculum* 42, 470.

³⁹ Sverre Bagge. 'The autobiography of Abelard and medieval individualism,' *Journal of Medieval History* 19 (1993): 338.

⁴⁰ *Historia calamitatum* is full of war-metaphors such as 'I pitched camp' and 'I laid siege' etc. See Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, Chapter 7, 130-148.

presents himself as a knight, creating conflict and mock battles in the schools where he studied or lectured.

Abelard's rivalry is contagious; he arouses it in almost everyone around him, turning intellectual topics into mimetic rivalry, and every time the academic rivalry is stopped only by means of scapegoating, maiming him for life. Abelard's intellectual progress depended upon contest, discussion, not on sitting in a cell.⁴¹ There is a ruthless desire to be an intellectual Übermensch, both as a philosopher and as a monk.⁴² Even when he was writing *Historia calamitatum* in 1132, at the age of forty-three, Abelard had the same point of view, showing little regret for his rivalistic attitude, although he had been a monk for over a decade.⁴³ While he was very severe about his sexual sins, he had no regrets towards the verbal feuds that he had inspired. This was a very common syndrome among the religious authorities of the 12th century. According to Clanchy, the clergy's delight in verbal fights and military rhetoric compensated for their lack of physical weapons. Just as knights routinely committed physical atrocities, clerics considered gross verbal abuse permissible.⁴⁴ St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was also one of the greatest exponents of verbal abuse in Abelard's time.⁴⁵ St Bernard considered Abelard to be a dangerous intellect, an unredeemed Christian whose only indication of saintliness was the religious clothes which he wore. St Bernard magnified Abelard's reputation for belligerence, claiming he had been a man of war since his youth.⁴⁶ St Goswin confirms this by claiming that Abelard was 'an extremely bellicose man, accustomed to winning.'⁴⁷

Aristocratic Mentality

Abelard changed the sword for the pen, but he retained essentially the same attitude as the members of the feudal aristocracy to which he had once belonged. He seems to think that he

⁴¹ Weintraub. *The Value of the Individual: self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 85.

⁴² Weintraub. *The Value of the Individual: self and Circumstance in Autobiography*, 86.

⁴³ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁴ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 144.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 143.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 130.

has a natural talent that his adversaries lack, which must be a kind of aristocratic arrogance,⁴⁸ a mentality reminiscent of the aristocratic fighter.⁴⁹ Also, his agonistic attitude may partly have been a result of his aristocratic background and the competitive character of his milieu.⁵⁰ This means, according to Bagge, that he does not seek the truth for its own sake or develop his own personal approach to the intellectual problems of his age. He takes part in a competition, where the aims and criteria are already set and clearly defined.⁵¹

Abelard's artistic strength lies in the scrupulous way in which he peers into the mechanisms of intellectual feuds: even in fairly low-key disputes, Abelard sees some element of a learned colleague or master functioning as a mediator, unconsciously manipulating 'objective' results. While academics usually hide the role of the mediator, Abelard magnifies it, emphasizing differences between himself and his masters, revealing the most astonishing insights into academic rivalry, and at the same time revealing his own lack of ability to quench conflicts.

According to Misch, there is a tension between Abelard's rivalistic attitude and the overall message in *Historia calamitatum*, which stresses humility and submission to God's will. The former, according to Misch, is the expression of Abelard's strong personality and the latter is conventional piety.⁵² Bagge does not believe that the agonistic attitude reveals more about Abelard than the humility and submission to God's will.⁵³ And I see no reason to claim that his rivalistic attitude is more essential or profound than his ideal of imitating Christ. The dilemma in Abelard's life is no more than the dualism between religious ideals and the worldly ideals of knight and lover, between pride and humility. There is nothing more essential about his rivalistic personality than his religious ideals, even if modern critics focus on the negative elements. Abelard himself does not even hesitate to compare his life to the life of Christ. According to Clanchy, the overall message in *Historia calamitatum* is that, although

⁴⁸ Sverre Bagge. 'The autobiography of Abelard and medieval individualism' *Journal of Medieval History* 19, (1993): 339.

⁴⁹ See Weintraub. *The Value of the Individual Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*, 85.

⁵⁰ Sverre Bagge. 'The autobiography of Abelard and medieval individualism', 346.

⁵¹ Sverre Bagge. 'The autobiography of Abelard and medieval individualism,' 339. (See also footnotes 36 and 37).

⁵² See Sverre Bagge. 'The autobiography of Abelard and medieval individualism', 345.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 345.

wrong and violence was done to Abelard, he remains Christ-like and long-suffering.⁵⁴ If one looks beyond the Promethean element in this identification with Christ (the tendency that Abelard has to blame other people for his misfortunes), there are few biographical works that reveal pride and rivalry in such a straightforward, unsentimental and precise manner.

Abelard's honour was an expression of a life-style built upon the central importance of the agon, the contest with others.⁵⁵ Throughout his life he remained sensitive to attacks on himself and eager to preserve his good name. He could see nothing un-Christian in this transference of an arch-aristocratic habit.⁵⁶

Abelard's academic rivalry can also be interpreted as symbolic violence. Abelard may have been disgusted by violence in reality, which may explain why he chose to be an academic instead of partaking in the brutal life of a vassal, a brutality so severe that knights seem to be presented in such an idealistic fashion to counterbalance what they actually did.⁵⁷ But Abelard was in no way a pacifist. In *Sic et Non*, all his statements justify killing by soldiers or executioners because he regarded them as lawful officers of government.⁵⁸

Economical Reasons for Academical Rivalry

Rivalry among academics was especially acute in the 12th century as some of them now lived by their studies and teaching. This was in contrast to earlier generations of intellectuals, who had been monks or canons with teaching as only one of their tasks.⁵⁹ In the first half of the 12th century there was wide opportunity for individual enterprise and ruthless competition, which would never again be so uncontrolled.⁶⁰ For Abelard and his colleagues this meant

⁵⁴ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, 145.

⁵⁵ Weintraub. *The Value of the Individual: self and Circumstance in Autobiography*, 85.

⁵⁶ Weintraub. *The Value of the Individual: self and Circumstance in Autobiography*, 85.

⁵⁷ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 138.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁵⁹ Sverre Bagge. 'The autobiography of Abelard and medieval individualism' 349.

⁶⁰ See Richard Southern. 'The Schools in Renaissance and Renewal,' in R.L.Benson, G.Constable, Carol D. Lanham (Eds). *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, Oxford:

attracting as many pupils as possible. Consequently, there was intense competition between the teachers. With the establishment of the universities in the 13th century it became more usual for academics to have some kind of salaried position, though hardly in a way that suppressed competition.⁶¹

The seriousness of losing in a dispute becomes clearer when contrasted to academic life today. If a contemporary academic enters into a discussion and loses, meaning that the students' sympathies are with his rival, he risks fewer students attending his lectures. On the other hand, he returns to his snug little office, without any fear of losing his formal position or his salary. This illustrates the immense difference in social security between a 12th century academic and an academic of today, which also sheds light on the severity of 12th century rivalries. When a discussion was lost, the need to resort to brutality must have been a way to survive. The only way to keep one's position seems to have been to get rid of the rival, and as we shall see, one of the most efficient ways of doing this was to accuse him of heresy.

Abelard used dialectics as the bait with which to attract students.⁶² He had studied dialectics under Roscelin (1050-1125), one of the great dialectical philosophers of the day. Abelard never mentions Roscelin in his *Historia calamitatum*, probably because Roscelin had been accused of heresy,⁶³ and Abelard did not want to be associated with a heretic. Nor does Abelard say much about the content of Roscelin's lectures⁶⁴ In *Historia calamitatum* he solely concentrates on rivalry. He gives little information on the discussion of universals, concluding that this discussion is rather meaningless without the wider context.⁶⁵

The Rivalry with William of Champeaux

The first lance was broken in confrontation with William of Champeaux (1070-1122) in Paris. Abelard studied dialectics under William, and eagerly took part in discussions surrounding the universals. Abelard says that William of Champeaux took a violent dislike to him when he

Clarendon Press, 1982, 115.

⁶¹ Sverre Bagge. 'The autobiography of Abelard and medieval individualism,' 349.

⁶² J.P. Sikes. *Peter Abailard*, 14.

⁶³ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 75.

⁶⁴ See Pierre Abélard. *Mine trængslers historie*, 44.

⁶⁵ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 60.

refuted some of his arguments. His fellow students were also annoyed with Abelard, especially as he was the youngest and most recent pupil.⁶⁶ Being the youngest and the most recent, makes Abelard very vulnerable to scapegoating, especially when he confronts the master himself. But because of Abelard's great academic talent, he succeeded in becoming a serious rival. He first attracted, then annoyed William's students. According to Weintraub, Abelard applied the rules of warfare: manoeuvring for positions of strength, seeking the contest and the best opponent, preferably to chase William from the field; then insuring that he was not vanquished himself, and finally reaping the applause of the students.⁶⁷

In his introduction to his calamities, and his description of the rivalry with William, Abelard persistently uses war-metaphors.⁶⁸ Following the first rivalry, the language of war is considerably modified, as if to indicate that there is a development in his life, from being a warrior to a Christ-like figure. In this respect an element of the hagiographic structure appears in *Historia calamitatum*.

Abelard becomes a close rival. William is forced to expel Abelard in order to maintain his position. But the controversy leads Abelard to found a school of his own in Melun (probably in 1102).⁶⁹ Abelard is himself scapegoated after scapegoating William of Champeaux, and we see a development from an indirect scapegoating (students flocking around Abelard and taking away William's income) to a more direct and concrete scapegoating when William tries to destroy Abelard's school. Abelard allies himself with William's old enemies, thereby intensifying the spiral of conflict.

William's unconcealed jealousy leads people to support Abelard. In the world of rivalry, the person who conceals his jealousy stands the greater chance of victory. Exposing such intimate

⁶⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁶⁷ Weintraub. *The Value of the Individual Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*, 84.

⁶⁸ 'my volatile temperament' (*The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 57), 'withdrew from the court of Mars in order to kneel at the feet of Minerva' (ibid., 58), 'the glory of a soldier's life' (ibid., 58), 'violent dislike' (ibid., 58), 'the violence of his resentment' (ibid., 60), 'set up camp' (ibid., 61), 'to lay siege' (ibid., 61), 'to deliver from my siege the soldier' (ibid., 61), 'the issue of this fight' (ibid., 62), 'vanquished by my enemy' (ibid., 62)

⁶⁹ *The Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 59.

desires as jealousy and envy, will, in such a competitive situation, only bring out other people's scorn. Abelard is very open in revealing his rivalistic motives, but never mentions that he himself is jealous. And perhaps he was not jealous. As a 'warrior' he did not hate his enemy personally; it was only his duty to get rid of him. The collective mentality of the warrior is the driving force at the start of Abelard's career. Thus Abelard's rivalry is clearly external. He would have behaved in the same manner towards any master. He has nothing personally against William, but his knightly ideals require him to display rivalry and honour.

The result of this academic victory is that Abelard becomes famous, and the fame of William and his fellow students declines. From this success Abelard's confidence rises. He moves his school to Corbeil. His first motive is, like any ambitious French academic, to be nearer Paris. His second motive is, like any ambitious warrior, to confront his enemy, meaning here; to encounter William of Champeaux in disputation.

Abelard Breaks Down

After founding his school in Corbeil, something very interesting happens. Abelard claims that he fell ill from overwork. He leaves Corbeil and returns to his home in Le Pallet (Brittany). Like many ambitious young men from the provinces, he had wanted to succeed in Paris, and like so many ambitious men (also today), who aspire in their drab lives in the provinces towards the metaphysical successes of the metropolis, the struggle for success becomes too demanding and he returns home for solace and rest. The mimetic rivalry escalates to such a degree that he must take refuge at home, where love predominates over rivalry. According to Clanchy, Abelard stayed at home from 1105 to 1108.⁷⁰

His breakdown may have been caused by temporary exhaustion, compounded by intimidation from William of Champeaux's followers.⁷¹ Abelard never seems to have experienced a long-term mental breakdown again, despite the calamities of castration, condemnation as a heretic, accusations of treason, death threats at St Gildas and so on.⁷² But this first rivalry was the most metaphysical and therefore caused the most mental strain, because there was so little reality or substance behind the rivalry. In this first rivalry, there is a very clear rivalry for

⁷⁰ Clanchy, *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 70.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

rivalry's sake. Later in his life, when there is more at stake, there are less metaphysical desires engendering the conflicts.

Rivalry about the Universals

Following several years of illness Abelard returns, of course, to where rivalry is most acute; he becomes a student again under William. Being restored to his old self, he immediately begins criticizing William's views concerning the universals. I shall not discuss in detail the contents of the debate, as my emphasis in this article is on the interindividual and rivalistic elements in *Historia calamitatum*. Nevertheless, William held the Platonic ultra-realist view that universals exist both prior to and independently of their particulars, such as the Ideas of Plato, and that all differences within a single species or genus are caused by the presence of accidental forms.⁷³ William had taught that the essence of humanity was totally and essentially present in all human beings, who are differentiated only by 'accident' or local modifications outside their common nature.⁷⁴ According to Abelard, the only existing things are individual. He categorically dismisses the theory of Ideas. For Abelard, the universals are always related to a knowing subject.⁷⁵ Under pressure from Abelard, William of Champeaux modified 'essentially' to 'indifferentially' meaning that you and I are united in the human species by non-difference or absence of difference, not through essence.^{76 77}

Change of Model

William's fiasco in this disputation provokes the students to flock to Abelard's school, and the consequence is that William became, according to Abelard, 'eaten up with jealousy and consumed with anger.' He tries to banish Abelard and attacks the man (anonymous) who had put Abelard in his chair, in order to take the school from him and put it in the hands of one of Abelard's rivals. Abelard wins his first victory, forcing William of Champeaux to rethink his opinions concerning the universals. In the struggle with William of Champeaux Abelard quotes Ovid:

⁷³ J.G. Sikes. *Peter Abailard*, 5.

⁷⁴ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. See Radice. Introduction, 12.

⁷⁵ G.Verbreke. 'Peter Abelard and the Concept of Subjectivity,' in *Peter Abelard*, 7-8.

⁷⁶ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Introduction, 12.

⁷⁷ See *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 60.

To tell the outcome of this fight, I was not vanquished by the weight. (Ovid. Metamorphosis, Chapter 13, line 89.)

This sentence from Ovid refers to Ajax, a braggart who was driven mad and killed himself after he lost in contest with Ulysses. According to Clanchy, this shows that Abelard, like Ajax, was a desperate braggart.⁷⁸

William's surrender in the discussion on universals creates a mimetic crisis in William's school, which forces a change in mimetic models. The students who had been William's strongest supporters and Abelard's most violent attackers, are driven, by Abelard's superior logic and their desire for success, to abandon their master and flock around Abelard. Abelard won so great a victory that William was abandoned by his most loyal pupils, while the man who succeeded William as archdeacon in the school in Paris, was (according to Abelard) willing to give up his position to Abelard in order to become one of his students.⁷⁹

The Structure of Mimetic Rivalry

Mimetic rivalry functions in such a way that the more a person reveals his envy and jealousy, the more success his rival will attain. And the more William's jealousy pursued Abelard, the more Abelard's reputation spread. In this respect one could say that no-one contributed more to Abelard's career than his rivals – a feature common to rivalistic contexts. But this is only the first stage. In the long run rivalry is structured according to a kind of 'king-for-a-day' motif, scapegoating the person who has reached a privileged position.

The paradoxical character of scapegoating thus engenders its development. First William of Champeaux's successor is scapegoated and replaced by one of Abelard's rivals, and then Abelard himself is scapegoated (forced back to open up his school in Melun again).⁸⁰ But William's jealousy creates a violent desire among the students to follow Abelard; the logic being: since this young man is able to make William so jealous, he must be something very special.

⁷⁸ Clanchy, *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 145. (See also D.W. Robertson. *Abelard and Heloise*, 112-113.)

⁷⁹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 60.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

William of Champeaux had become bishop of Châlons on 20th May 1113.⁸¹ Abelard mentions sarcastically that ambition was the main motive that led Wilhelm to forsake the world. Rivalry makes Abelard extremely naive in assessing his own role, as he claims he did nothing to justify William's actions.⁸² While Abelard seldom, except when courting Heloise, reveals his own bad motives; desire causes him to focus assiduously on the hidden motives of his rivals. And in William's case, his conversion to a religious life did not mean an end to the rivalry. Despite William's retirement to St Victor's, William was still influential in the academic world. Within a few days he was able to remove Abelard and reinstate his own successor in the chair from which he had resigned, moving his school away from Paris; this makes Abelard move to Paris, which, making the logic of desire complete, forces William of Champeaux to move back to Paris once more. Abelard's claim to victory over William is very dubious. According to Clanchy, Abelard only pretended to have won the contest. His failure to subvert William of Champeaux made it impossible for Abelard to return to Paris as a master in 1113.⁸³

The Doubling of Desire

Abelard and William are driven by similar desires and therefore end up in similar situations. Their desires have developed from external rivalry into a more internal rivalry; they have gradually become doubles, meaning that their whole lives revolve around the other's moves. Their desires are still external in the sense that rivalry is not hidden (the opposite of modern rivalry); but the intensity of their rivalry makes them blind towards the other. Abelard starts by claiming that he was very much a part of the scapegoating process, but ends up by claiming that William was the sole cause of his expulsions. The more Abelard's and William's rivalry intensifies, the greater the need Abelard seems to have to distance himself from William - which shows what marvellous models they provide for illustrating the psychology of everyday rivalry. The more intensely they hate each other, the more Abelard emphasizes his difference. While Abelard and William become identical twins through rivalry, Abelard becomes more eager to emphasize his difference and innocence.

⁸¹ Sikes. *Peter Abailard*, 7.

⁸² *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 61.

⁸³ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 145.

It is on this basis that Mary McLaughlin accuses Abelard of having neither much reflectiveness, nor profound spiritual or psychological insight, referring to St Augustine as a model for these qualities. Abelard is sharp at discerning the faults of others, yet lacks a deeper insight into his own responsibility for his own misfortunes, she claims.⁸⁴ Whilst one might agree with McLaughlin that Abelard is not very confessional about his academic hubris (only his sexual hubris is mentioned as hubris), he nevertheless has a wonderful insight into academic hubris. Even if he was not disposed to introspection and self-analysis, his openness and frankness and, sometimes also, his self-criticism is startling. McLaughlin's point is relevant with reference to Abelard's self-legitimizing approach to philosophic discourse, but misleading concerning Abelard's erotic relationships, which are described in a confessional manner. A superficial reading of *Historia calamitatum* might conclude that he is confessional with respect to Heloise, but lacks the confessional aspect when dealing with his rivals.

The duality of the text, where Abelard, due to his genuine honesty as a writer, reveals the hidden motives, or, should one say, the interindividual play of hiding and revealing desires, can be seen to be a breakthrough in depicting the psychology of rivalry. Even if the text is not confessional in the manner of St Augustine, the *Historia calamitatum* is a more dynamic biography: it reveals that all moves, all actions are motivated by conflict. Abelard's emphasis on the conflictual creates an anthropology in accordance with the Catholic Church's concept of original sin, far distanced from the concept of non-mimetic ideas and human autonomy.

The Rivalry with Anselm of Laon

After staying some time in Brittany, Abelard returns to Paris in 1113 or 1114 to study under Anselm of Laon (1055-1117), a renowned theologian of his time. Abelard is about thirty-four years of age when he begins studying theology. His father and mother had by now entered monasteries, and it may have been Abelard's mother (Lucia) who persuaded Abelard to study theology, as Abelard mentions her entering a monastery just before he leaves for France to

⁸⁴ Mary McLaughlin. 'Abelard as Autobiographer: The Motives and Meaning of his 'Story of Calamities' ', Cambridge, Mass: Medieval Academy of America: *Speculum: a journal of medieval studies* (1967): 470-471.

attend Anselm's lectures. According to Sikes, however, it could have been motivated by the possibility of attaining a spiritual career.⁸⁵

The fact that William of Champeaux had studied under Anselm, probably did not make Abelard's zest for rivalry any less acute. Abelard starts by conceding that Anselm was the greatest theological authority of his time. The reason for this authority, however, is old age.⁸⁶ Abelard claims that Anselm's reputation was due more to long practice than intelligence or memory.⁸⁷ He admits, though, that Anselm had a remarkable command of words, before going on to describe, in his rivalistic manner, using advanced images, similes and metaphors (thus demonstrating his own command of words) the emptiness of Anselm's thought.⁸⁸

Abelard portrays himself as starting off in the same arrogant manner, and attending Anselm of Laon's lectures irregularly. The students interpret this as contempt towards Anselm. Their insinuations arouse Anselm's jealousy. Again we see that Abelard never admits his own jealousy, only his knightly rivalry. Abelard did not agree with Anselm on the method of glossae, that is using the Church Fathers to explain sentences from Scripture. As a dialectician, Abelard cannot be satisfied by interpreting texts through texts by the Church Fathers. Abelard believed that one could interpret Scripture without any authority. He even goes so far as to say that he relies on his own intelligence.⁸⁹

Abelard is very modern in the way he stresses rationality and logic as methods of uncovering truth. Bagge argues there is nothing particularly original in Abelard's attitude to knowledge and intellectual investigation when seen against a modern background.⁹⁰ But clearly his attitude of rationality and freethinking spirit is highly original and daring when seen against the background of the 12th century. Abelard's attitude to academic research is so modern that interpreters have seen him as one of the few individualists or pre-Renaissance men of the Middle Ages. Abelard, however, does not describe himself as a unique genius who is misunderstood by his contemporaries - as a modern biographer might well do. On the

⁸⁵ Sikes. *Peter Abailard*, 7.

⁸⁶ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 62.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 63.

⁹⁰ Bagge. 'The autobiography of Abelard and medieval individualism,' 341.

contrary, Abelard presents himself as the star pupil of the class, who finds the solution where others fail. His criterion is always external success.⁹¹ Bagge claims that Abelard is wholly a man of his time, driven by what Girard calls external mediation or external desires.⁹² He cannot, therefore, be seen as a representative of a pre-modern, individualistic attitude, even if his academic approach seems in some ways contemporary.

Success as Lecturer

At the very beginning of his studying theology under Anselm, Abelard gives a lecture on an obscure prophecy from Ezekiel, after only one day of preparation. The success of the first lecture gives rise to academic desires, and the students flock to Abelard's second and third lectures. Again rivalry is unavoidable. Anselm of Laon becomes wildly jealous and attacks Abelard, much in the same way as William of Champeaux had done.⁹³ And what is even worse, against the background of academic pride, is that it took him only a day to prepare the lecture. Abelard indicates that it is through talent, not through laborious study one grasps the truth.⁹⁴ Again there is something of the aristocratic mentality, a sense of being born to privilege in Abelard's approach to learning. Abelard's emphasis on his genius similarly introduces a pre-renaissance mentality.

There seems to have been less direct rivalry between Anselm and Abelard than there had been between William and Abelard, which could have something to do with age, as difference in age renders rivalry less acute. There is also some rationality in Anselm stopping the lectures, claiming that any mistake that Abelard might make as a result of his lack of training would be attributed to him, his teacher.⁹⁵ The fact is that Abelard was not yet trained in theology and was using dialectics or logics on theological texts. Of course, this thin stream of rationality conceals the jealousy, but thanks to Anselm's jealousy Abelard becomes even more renowned and famous.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Ibid., 340.

⁹² René Girard. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1966), See chapter 1 (Triangular Desire), 1-52.

⁹³ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 64.

⁹⁴ See Bagge. 'The autobiography of Abelard and medieval individualism,' 340.

⁹⁵ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 64

⁹⁶ See *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 64

Success Leads to Scapegoating

In the realm of scapegoating there is an element in attempted victimizing that turns the victim's life into a success. This does not mean that scapegoating is good, but, in the right circumstances, it can be transformed into success for the persecuted (just as extremely cruel reviews can make people want to buy a book.) In the rivalry-scenes with Anselm, the foundation for a much worse scapegoating is laid. As I have mentioned, the rivalry between Anselm and Abelard does not appear to be acute, but the rivalry between Abelard and some of Anselm's students/followers has disastrous effects. Two of Anselm's students, Alberic of Rheims (later Archdeacon of Rheims and headmaster of the cathedral school) and Lotulf (nothing is known of Lotulf)⁹⁷ became Abelard's main opponents at the Council of Soissons, claiming that Abelard's book *Theologia Summi Boni* was heretical and forcing him to burn it.

Abelard claims that Alberic and Lotulf's hostility towards him is caused by their high esteem for themselves, which reveals something of Abelard's blindness towards his own role in rivalry. If we turn this around, claiming that it was Abelard's high esteem for himself that caused their hostility, we can see the reciprocity of the conflict. But when Abelard is writing *Historia calamitatum*, nearly twenty years later, he is not able to see, or, better, to confess, his own role in the rivalry between himself and Anselm's followers. But his self-legitimizing attitude is not firmer than that the reader clearly sees the doubleness of desire and reciprocal conceit.

Abelard is finally expelled from Anselm's school. This expulsion makes Abelard move to Paris, which marks the summit of Abelard's success as an academic. He becomes Magister Scholarum at Notre Dame. The anecdote by Odo of Chenton recalling Abelard's fine clothes, fine horse and retinue of servants⁹⁸ must come from these magnificent years. In the years 1114-1117, when Abelard was famous, thinking himself the only philosopher in the world, he was the bishop's man and the King's Chancellor's man. It was during this period that he

⁹⁷ Sikes. *Peter Abailard*, 9.

⁹⁸ D.E. Luscombe. *The School of Peter Abelard: The Influence of Abelard's Thought in the Early Scholastic period*, 9.

gained reputation as a great philosopher and, according to Clanchy, became the first in a line of great French intellectuals, extending through Voltaire to Sartre and Foucault.⁹⁹

Erotic Rivalry

According to Weintraub, Abelard and Heloise lived their lives by following models.¹⁰⁰ But the lack of differentiated erotic models made it impossible to unite the model of the Christian philosopher with that of an unmarried lover.¹⁰¹ Abelard found certain mimetic models in philosophy (Seneca, Cicero) and especially when he became a monk, he found Christian models such as St Jerome, Origen and St Athanasius. But as a lover, it seems that Abelard was devoid of models. At first sight it appears that he, in the field of Eros, was alone with his desires, without any social legitimation, and he therefore does not hesitate in calling his erotic liaison a sin. By the time of writing *Historia calamitatum*, the author was full of remorse for his wrongdoings. He clearly describes his role in the affair as something that should not be imitated. This is the Catholic and confessional author's point of view, written thirteen or fourteen years after the events. There is little doubt that this view is the fruit of a monastic conversion. Perhaps Ovid was, as both Gilson and Grane indicate, Abelard's guide in experimenting erotically with his pretty pupil.¹⁰² Abelard alludes to Ovid when describing how they were caught out in their sexual liaison.¹⁰³

There is, however, an indication that Abelard could have been acquainted with the troubadour tradition, as he mentions that at the time when he was totally engrossed with Heloise, he lost academic inspiration, and his only inspiration was writing love-songs. He also says that these

⁹⁹ Clanchy, *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 74.

¹⁰⁰ Weintraub regards models as a hindrance to individuality. In this sequence one receives the notion that Weintraub thinks individuality is autonomy, something totally independent of mimesis, which is the phenomenal and ideological point where I depart from him. (Weintraub. *The Value of the Individual Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*, 8.)

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰² Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages* (London: Allen & Union, 1970), 50. See also Étienne Gilson. *Heloise and Abelard* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 7.

¹⁰³ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 69.

songs are still popular (1131) and sung in many places.¹⁰⁴ Heloise says in her first letter to Abelard that the songs he had composed about his love for her were widely sung.¹⁰⁵ The troubadour tradition flourished in France from the end of the 11th century to the end of the 13th century. Abelard living in the area, and his father being a Poitevin,¹⁰⁶ along with his avant-garde attitude, meant that he clearly might well have mingled with the troubadours,¹⁰⁷ even though this was still in the early, formative years of the troubadour tradition. The troubadour tradition was according to Rougemont, in mentality and ideas (especially concerning love) very close to the Cathars. France, at the time of Abelard and Heloise, was invaded by dualist religion. This gave rise to a cult of love.¹⁰⁸ The Provençal poetry in the 12th century magnified unhappy love.¹⁰⁹ The earliest known troubadour was William, sixth Count of Poitiers and ninth Duke of Aquitaine, who died in 1127.¹¹⁰ It is therefore quite possible that Abelard was imitating the troubadour's ideal of love when he became Heloise's lover.

Passionate Love

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 68.

¹⁰⁵ 'You had besides, I admit, two special gifts whereby to win at once the heart of any woman - your gifts for composing verse and song, in which we know other philosophers have rarely been successful. This was for you no more than a diversion, a recreation from the labours of your philosophic work, but you left many love-songs and verses which won wide popularity for the charm of their words and tunes and kept your name continually on everyone's lips.' (*The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 115.)

¹⁰⁶ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 133.

¹⁰⁷ A letter from Fulk of Deuil gives an indication of the troubadour spirit of Abelard. In a mocking letter of advice to Abelard he writes that when his women friends learned that Abelard had been castrated, they wept and wailed 'for you their knight, as if each one of them had lost a lover in battle.' (Fulk of Deuil *Letters to Abelard*, ed. V. Cousin, *In Opera Petri Abelardi* (1859), Vol. I.706. See also Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 131) This shows the very special position Abelard must have had in medieval Paris, reminding us of romantic heroes or the modern cult of desiring famous young people.

¹⁰⁸ Denis De Rougemont. *Love in the Western World* New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 112.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 75.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 117.

According to Denis de Rougemont, the earliest passionate lovers, whose story has reached us, are Abelard and Heloise.¹¹¹ He calls *Historia calamitatum* and the letters between Abelard and Heloise the first great novel of passionate love in our history.¹¹² But passionate love for De Rougemont is a love in search of obstacles. The lovers do not love each other; they love only the concept of love. The lovers do not desire each other and they are always searching for obstacles to keep their lack of love alive. But this does not quite fit into the scheme of Abelard's and Heloise's love-relationship, as described by the lovers themselves. Their obstacles are other people and the medieval moral code.

De Rougemont claims that the concept of passionate love began with Abelard and Heloise.¹¹³

The earliest passionate lovers whose story has reached us are Abelard and Heloise, who met for the first time in 1118. And it is in the middle of this same century that love was first recognized and encouraged as a passion worth cultivating. Passionate love was then given a name which since became familiar. It was called courtly love. (Love of the Western World, 74.)

But because Abelard's description of their love-relationship is not described as a desire for obstacles, De Rougemont's theory of passionate love (as stemming from a search for obstacles and ultimately leading to death) does not, initially, correspond with the love between Abelard and Heloise. Also, if Heloise and Abelard are to be described as the first passionate lovers, then De Rougemont undermines his own theory that passionate love in Europe began as a reaction to Christianity by people whose spirit, whether naturally or by inheritance, was still pagan.¹¹⁴ Abelard and Heloise, in spite of being schooled in Greek and Roman philosophy, were neither naturally or by inheritance pagan.

The Delirium of Love

De Rougemont's point is more relevant when depicts the sources of passionate love¹¹⁵ which he finds in Iranian religion, Platonism, Manicheism, Celtic religion and the Cathar religion.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Ibid., 74.

¹¹² Ibid., 110.

¹¹³ Ibid., 74.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Surprisingly little of the Greek and Roman epics and other poetic works is located, in Rougemont's work, as sources for the Western concept of passionate love.

¹¹⁶ De Rougemont. *Love in the Western World*, 151-166.

And there are certainly elements of Platonism¹¹⁷ and Cathar anti-marriage sentiments in the Letters between Abelard and Heloise. One must remember that Eros for Plato is a state of being possessed, a state that differs from rationality and natural sensual life, whereas sensuality in *Historia calamitatum* and the letters between Abelard and Heloise reveals a great attraction towards carnal desires. Eros for Plato is divine delirium, a transport of the soul, both madness and supreme sanity. At the same time, Platonic Eros is of divine origin and culminates in attaining the divine.¹¹⁸ For Heloise and Abelard, Eros can also mean delirium, and Heloise actually mentions love rising to the heights of madness,¹¹⁹ but Eros is no god; on the contrary, their erotic liaison in *Historia calamitatum* is labelled as sinful. Eros is for Plato an infinite transcendence, man's ascendance into godlikeness.¹²⁰ Eros in the *Historia calamitatum* is primarily viewed as natural desires in need of control.

Abelard and Heloise are Sensual Lovers

Abelard and Heloise's sensual views also differ from the Cathar view, which turns courtliness and love without really loving into an ideal, and claims that to yield to a purely physical sensuality is the supreme and original sin.¹²¹ This ideal may, however, have some external similarities with the view held by Abelard and Heloise after entering monastic life. But courtly love is based on sentimental passions, on passions somewhat devoid of sensual pleasure. It therefore differs dramatically from the love between Abelard and Heloise by the very act of sublimating or substituting sensual pleasures into a desire for symbolic obstacles.

The Love of Tristan and Iseult Compared to that of Heloise and Abelard

In order to show that the love affair between Abelard and Heloise differs from De Rougemont's concept of passionate love, one may compare it with the love affair between Tristan and Iseult, which for De Rougemont is the archetype of passionate love, as it is a love which only can survive through the mediation of obstacles. In the story of Tristan and Iseult there is a magical love-potion which turns them into lovers obsessed with each other. In

¹¹⁷ There is for example a dualistic tendency between the body and the soul in the letters between Abelard and Heloise.

¹¹⁸ De Rougemont. *Love in the Western World*, 61.

¹¹⁹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 113.

¹²⁰ De Rougemont. *Love in the Western World*, 62.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

Historia calamitatum there is no love-potion or other magical elements to enhance the love, only mutual attraction. Tristan and Iseult imagine that they have been transported 'beyond good and evil' into a kind of transcendental state outside ordinary human experience.¹²² In the relationship between Abelard and Heloise there exists no idea of any transcendental power in their love making. There is a strong intellectual bond between Abelard and Heloise, while Tristan and Iseult have no intellectual friendship. Heloise and Abelard describe their love as something carnal and sensual, without adding any religious or transcendental connotations. Erotic love for Abelard and Heloise has no divine origin. Tristan makes love to another man's wife. Heloise is unmarried. Tristan loves the awareness that he is loving. This awareness is more passionate than the real love for Iseult. Tristan and Iseult love the concept of love, not each other. The love between Abelard and Heloise is born out of a spontaneous attraction for each other. Tristan must perform some heroic deed in order to postpone passion. Abelard is hindered from any great deeds because of their nightly lovemaking, and they long for each other's company; Tristan and Iseult constantly need each other's absence. The more Tristan is separated from Iseult, the more his love grows. He is constantly in search of what hinders love, the desire for obstruction. Abelard and Heloise cannot keep away from each other. Abelard does not have to commit heroic actions in order to be accepted as a lover. Abelard's obstruction is not the result of lack of love, but the concrete fact of his being a canon in the Church. Thus the love between Abelard and Heloise cannot be labelled, either as De Rougemont's passionate love or as Girard's metaphysical desire,¹²³ terms that try to fathom an egoistical and unfulfilled kind of love, where the main motivation are the obstacles to love. There are, however, also certain similarities: Both Abelard and Tristan have relationships outside marriage, and both liaisons provoke family conflicts. Both couples have something to gain from separation, and both stories reveal a negative attitude to marriage. Also, both stories end tragically.

Passionate Love as Courtly Love

According to Betty Radice, Abelard and Heloise cannot be fitted into the current ideal of courtly love, with its emphasis on the lover's devotion to the chaste and unattainable lady,

¹²² Ibid., 39.

¹²³ Girard uses metaphysical desire in a very similar way to that in which Rougemont uses the word passion. And where Rougemont uses desire Girard uses spontaneous desire.

claiming that Abelard and Heloise speak a different language of sensuous frankness, of pagan realism in love, and of classical Stoic fortitude in adversity.¹²⁴

The *calamitatum* text does not emphasize its literariness, which might explain the more straightforward and less artificial language, giving the reader the feeling that it is very close to actual reality. This straightforwardness could actually be the result of the story's content. While the emphasis in courtly love is on being in love or loving to be in love,¹²⁵ the emphasis in *Historia calamitatum* is on how external envy and rivalry creates tragic love. But the structure of *Historia calamitatum* could also, however, be influenced by Provençal poetry in the 12th century as, in a similar way to this poetry, *Historia calamitatum* magnifies unhappy love.

Betty Radice also emphasizes that their love differed from courtly love because of its natural sensuality:

Their relationship found physical expression, and Heloise is neither cold nor remote but loving, eager to give service and not demand to it. By contrast with the cruel reality of their tragedy, courtly love as depicted in the romances of chivalry appears mannered and artificial. (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise. Radice's introduction, 49.)

Heloise, the Ideal Lover

Nothing is known of Heloise's parentage, though much has been conjured.¹²⁶ Heloise's mother was called Hersindis. There is no record of her father. Possibly both her parents died when she was a child.¹²⁷ It is also possible that she was an illegitimate child, while twice in her second letter to Abelard¹²⁸ she implies that her social status is lower than Abelard's.¹²⁹ Fulbert's possessiveness has suggested to some that she was his daughter.¹³⁰

¹²⁴ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. Radice's introduction, 49.

¹²⁵ De Rougemont. *Love in the Western World*, 41.

¹²⁶ Enid McLeod. *Heloise. A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971), 8-10.

¹²⁷ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 12.

¹²⁸ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 129-130.

¹²⁹ See Radice's footnote I page 66 in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*.

¹³⁰ Radice. *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Introduction, 16.

Heloise becomes Abelard's object of desire because of her beauty¹³¹ and breeding.¹³² But it was not only youth and good looks that made her the ideal lover.¹³³ In addition she had a reputation as a philosopher, and could therefore appreciate his learning. As Abelard comments: 'a gift for letters is so rare in women that it added greatly to her charm.'¹³⁴ Before Abelard taught her, she was reputed to have been the most learned lady in France.¹³⁵ ¹³⁶ Abelard's initial attraction to her may therefore have been as a personification of the goddess of learning, with whom he had already long been in love.¹³⁷

In *Historia calamitatum* Abelard gives a description of the mimetic power Heloise held over other people: bishops loved her as a daughter, abbots loved her as a sister, the laity loved her as a mother and everyone admired her piety and wisdom.¹³⁸ This clearly indicates her personal qualities, ten years after their marriage and the forced conversion to monastic life. The many-layered description of Heloise, according to Brooke, is the best evidence that the Letters are real. One did not generally depict women in such a way in the 12th century.¹³⁹

Linear or Triangular Desire

¹³¹ Abelard's negative description of Heloise as 'not ugly' (literally 'not the lowest') suggests, according to Clanchy, that he had not been strongly attracted to her physically. (Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 151). I find this a highly unrealistic interpretation, as *Historia calamitatum* emphasizes his sensual attraction, an attraction so acute he was unable to keep his hands off her, having sex even in the refectory in Argenteuil.

¹³² Leif Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 48

¹³³ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 66.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 12.

¹³⁶ After the affair, Heloise became the most famous woman in France, and Abelard the most famous - or notorious- master in Christendom. Everybody knew what they had done, Roscelin said, 'from Dan even to Beersheba'. (Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 155.)

¹³⁷ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 151.

¹³⁸ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 97.

¹³⁹ Christopher Brooke. *Europe in the Central Middle Ages 962-1154*, 457.

The biographical knowledge we have of Abelard and Heloise serves as a marvellous tableau for depicting the various desires evoked by their affair. Both were supremely talented at creating mimetic effects and were, therefore, able to arouse admiration, envy and jealousy both between and around themselves. Heloise mentions that Abelard's poetry made other women envious,¹⁴⁰ which indicates that envy towards Abelard and Heloise involved both sexes. When interpreted through the prism of desire, one can see the popular desire for a unique couple, a desire directed towards those who are brilliant and well-known.

The height of Abelard's worldly fame was the period immediately before the affair. He had made his way to Paris, he had become canon at Notre Dame, and students were flocking to him. Abelard was the prime academic model, the most imitative of all models. And as the prime model Abelard would copy the desires of others and project them onto a desirable object.

The Shift from Academic Rivalry to Erotic Rivalry

Until his great success in Paris, Abelard claims that his desires had mostly been restricted to academic rivalry.

I had always held myself aloof from unclean association with prostitutes, and constant application to my studies had prevented me from frequenting the society of gentlewomen: indeed, I knew little of the secular way of life. (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, 66.)

Therefore Abelard's cunning strategy seems all the more remarkable than if he had been a notorious womanizer. Abelard's strategy was to live in the same house as Heloise. His reason given to Fulbert was the expense of where he lived and that his household cares were hindering his studies. Grane points out the cynical side to Abelard's manner of fulfilling his desires.

In the first place there was lust, and thereafter the problem was to find a suitable subject who Heloise was with her beauty and her intellect. (Grane. Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages, 48.)

The Calamitatum-texts actually reveals this cynicism as Abelard, on the one hand, says he could not afford to live at his previous place while, at the same time, telling Fulbert that he

¹⁴⁰ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 115.

could claim from him whatever sum he liked.¹⁴¹ Radice claims that Abelard presents the seduction as calculated, adding that his attitude to sexual love never becomes romantic or idealistic.¹⁴² Otherwise, the text gives no indication that Abelard was a cynic with regard to women; on the contrary, his chastity seemed to be admirable until he met Heloise. The text can also be deceptive in its methodological process, revealing the stages of success and misfortune, which also gives the feeling of calculation.¹⁴³ Grane says that Abelard himself denies his calculation and cynicism when claiming:

Completely alight with love for this young maiden, I therefore sought an opportunity to win her confidence. (Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages, 48.)

Grane emphasizes here that calculation first entered once Heloise had aroused his desire, not from any general calculating desire.¹⁴⁴

Desire between Abelard, Heloise and Fulbert

In *Historia calamitatum* Fulbert is described as being governed by avarice and burning love for his niece, and in giving Abelard lodging, he saw an opportunity to take advantage of Abelard's learning. Here Abelard appears modest, as he clearly would enhance Fulbert's prestige by living in his house. On the other hand, *Historia calamitatum* has a more narrow focus, revealing only the rivalistic encounters. De Rougemont's theory of passionate love as searching for obstacles seems, in the case of Abelard and Heloise, to have relevance only towards external obstacles. The lovers are only too happy to be able to cultivate their love, and the story gives no indication of love gradually weakening or the need to stimulate it with triangular desire. But Abelard's seduction of Heloise creates external obstacles. The Church becomes an obstacle, as a canon could not marry. Learning also becomes an obstacle, as the philosopher-ideal, taken from Antiquity, saw the ideal in living only for learning. In the practical situation, living in his colleague's house, Fulbert is clearly the main obstacle.

¹⁴¹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 67.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴³ There is also the tendency in writing a confession to magnify and exaggerate the different stages.

¹⁴⁴ Leif Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 48-49.

Triangular Desire

Could there possibly be the classic syndrome of triangular desire? Fulbert loves his niece. In order to enhance the love of his niece, he acquires the most attractive and learned man in Paris. The desire to achieve his niece's desire can be realized only by a third person capable of creating desire. And through the desire of the desirable, he himself hopes to satisfy a portion of the desire. This variant reveals Fulbert's anthropological emptiness of being, the experienced emptiness of the I. To compensate for this emptiness and lack of confidence with regard to gaining love, Fulbert mediates his love through Abelard. This explains why Fulbert is so reluctant to acknowledge the liaison and the last to find out about it. He needed Abelard to kindle the flame of his own love towards his niece.

Fulbert's possessiveness has suggested to some commentators that she was his daughter. If she was his daughter, external reasons such as desire for his daughter's education and his own wealth might explain why he willingly let Abelard live in his house. This might also provide a more rational explanation to his reaction of shame and the restoration of honour through the castration of Abelard. But one should remember that codes of honour in the Middle Ages encompassed a wide range of family bonds. There remains the fact that there is no rational reason why Abelard should have claimed that Heloise was Fulbert's niece, if she was actually his daughter.

Another triangular possibility is a more external variant. Fulbert uses his niece to create desire with the aim of earning money, thereby behaving according to the desires of a pimp, although in a less brutal and more subtle way. This is the version chosen by the author of *Historia calamitatum*, claiming greed to be Fulbert's core motivation. But, at the same time, the story (like most great stories) reveals a many-layered mosaic of motives, and Abelard's explicit understanding of the origin of Fulbert's motive as greed features only as one among many. The greed-motive seems too weak to explain the violence done against Abelard. Desires such as shame, honour and rivalry seem more relevant in this context. Betty Radice's rather Freudian remark that Fulbert's brutal treatment of Abelard seems to have a strong but unconscious sexual element,¹⁴⁵ fits into the triangular analysis, especially if we interpret Abelard from the place of the mediator.

¹⁴⁵ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. See Radice's.

To interpret triangular desire with Abelard as the desiring subject, would minimize the mediator or the obstacle. There is a certain indication that Abelard notices Fulbert's desires towards his niece, which in turn ignites his own desires towards Heloise. The imitation of Fulbert's desires, combined with the rivalry between the two canons, makes Abelard 'completely alight with love' for Heloise. The text, however, gives few indications of Abelard imitating Fulbert's desires towards Heloise, but there is a clear observation of Fulbert's possessive love for Heloise – an observation capable of igniting Abelard's competitive spirit, not only in learning, but also in love. If there were no greed, only a desire to enhance his niece's learning, Fulbert would surely have acted more as an obstacle. As he was possessed primarily by the desire for money, he had no interest in knowing what was actually at stake. Therefore he was the last to find out about the affair.

The typical Girardian triangular version is based on a desire which is transferred from the object to the mediator.¹⁴⁶ There does not seem to be any transformation in Abelard's desire for Heloise. The triangle does not transform into metaphysical desire, as Abelard desires Heloise directly, without becoming involved in Fulbert's desires. In this respect, as previously mentioned, De Rougemont's theory on the European notion of passionate love as a love in search of obstacles, does not quite fit into the scheme – even though he himself claims that the Abelard and Heloise-affair does fit.¹⁴⁷ If, on the other hand, desire is interpreted from Fulbert's point of view, there is clearly a desire for both Heloise and Abelard, but the text does not reveal any transformation in his desiring either. Both De Rougemont and Girard's historical interpretation of a development from external to internal desire would appear to be correct as regards the *calamitatum*-text, where desires are clearly external. The three most obvious triangles in *Historia calamitatum* would be:

1. Fulbert uses Abelard's desire for Heloise in order to earn money.
2. Fulbert uses Abelard's desire for Heloise in order to enhance his own desires towards Heloise.
3. Fulbert uses Abelard's desire for Heloise in order to enhance his own academic prestige.

introduction, 16.

¹⁴⁶ Girard. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*.

¹⁴⁷ See De Rougemont. *Love in the Western World*, 74

Sensual Love

The affair between Abelard and Heloise was a rather direct and sensual love. As Abelard confesses:

Our desires left no stage of lovemaking untried. (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, 67.)

Abelard reminds Heloise with horror that he was unable, even in his awe of God, to restrain himself even during the festivals of the Church.¹⁴⁸ Grane points out that Heloise had misgivings, but gave in to his threats and lashings,¹⁴⁹ an indication that Abelard too incorporated the brutality of his time. The great obstacle in their sensual lovemaking was obviously the Catholic Church or the ethics of the Church; as Grane is surely right when he claims that Abelard was certain he was staking his eternal salvation.¹⁵⁰ But the strong sensual bond made Abelard unable to act in a different way.

Abelard claims that desire in love creates laziness in philosophy,¹⁵¹ and his strenuous efforts to succeed academically, which had taken him fifteen years, were lost through his love for Heloise. The sexual activity which took place under the pretence of home teaching, made it impossible for him to do justice to his other students when he was lecturing. As he himself quite rightly says, it takes great effort to stay awake at night to cultivate love and then to attend studies during the day. It was impossible for him to drum up any special interest in philosophical theology.¹⁵² And he became nothing more than 'a reciter of old ideas'.¹⁵³ Abelard's erotic desires made him indifferent to the loss of intellectual prestige; the consequences being that he neglected his pupils, abandoned serious teaching, paid no attention to gossip and allowed his love-songs to be sung publicly.

A Married Magister Scholarum

¹⁴⁸ Leif Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 50.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Leif Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 50.

¹⁵¹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 68.

¹⁵² Leif Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, London, 1970, 50.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 51.

Abelard finds himself in a terrible dilemma: having to give up his career or his love. The norm of his times would have been to give up his love. In our modern society, Bagge claims, the norm would tend to encourage the lover to assert himself at the expense of the philosopher.¹⁵⁴ But today this is just as conformist as the medieval person who chooses philosophy in favour of erotic love. Ivo of Chartres had ruled that a canon who married should lose his benefice even though his marriage was valid.¹⁵⁵ He also claimed that a married cleric was a violator of the institution of canons. Ivo's views are in accordance with the Council of Beavais 1114 and Rheims 1119,¹⁵⁶ and indicate that it would be impossible to marry and still be a canon at Notre Dame.¹⁵⁷ According to Grane, it is difficult to ascertain whether Abelard could have remained a canon. A married *magister scholarum* at Notre Dame would have been quite exceptional, he claims.¹⁵⁸ Clanchy says that Abelard and Heloise could have lived openly as man and wife, if Abelard had resigned his office as master of Notre Dame. If he was Stephen de Garlande's protégé he might have found a job at the royal court, Clanchy says.¹⁵⁹ Étienne Gilson, who has done detailed research on Abelard's marriage, claims that he could have continued both as a cleric and canon.¹⁶⁰ This last possibility weakens the interpretation of Abelard as being most interested in his own career as an academic. But even if Abelard could have remained a canon and cleric, a marriage would still have meant loss of fame and glory.

¹⁵⁴ Sverre Bagge. 'The autobiography of Abelard and medieval individualism,' 347.

¹⁵⁵ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 188. (See Clanchy's reference to Letter 218, Migne, PL162, Cols 221-222).

¹⁵⁶ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 188-189.

¹⁵⁷ The application of celibacy to masters was enforced more rigorously in the northern schools than in the Italian ones (Bologna and Salerno). In France pressure was put on married or otherwise domesticated clergy in the major churches to give up either their benefices and offices or their female households. (Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 46). Other reasons why Abelard could not naturally marry Heloise and still continue teaching, was that as a cleric and canon he was to set an example to his students and fellow canons by being exclusively dedicated to his clerical vocation. (Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 46). Also the funding given to Notre-Dame might be withdrawn from patrons if Abelard were to live so scandalously. (Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 46)

¹⁵⁸ Leif Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 55.

¹⁵⁹ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 193-194.

¹⁶⁰ Étienne Gilson. *Heloise and Abelard*, 9-19.

Marriage as an End to Erotic Desire

In marrying Heloise, Abelard seeks an unsurmountable obstacle. His career is at stake, and Heloise is firmly against marrying. She is convinced that marriage and philosophy do not go together.¹⁶¹ Heloise's great desire is desire for Abelard's success as a philosopher. In the *Historia calamitatum*, Abelard constructs a scene where Heloise gives a long speech on the necessity of not being married.¹⁶² The arguments are inspired by St Paul, St Jerome, Seneca and St Augustine. Like in her letters to Abelard she speaks in a very literary and allusive manner. The message is clear: she wants to be Abelard's mistress in order for him to continue his career. Perhaps there also is a hidden motive. By remaining as Abelard's mistress she herself could also continue to study. However, it is not a major motive (perhaps not even a motive at all). In her first letter to Abelard she confirms the statements from the *Historia calamitatum* (which she then had read) by emphasizing the superior role of the lover.

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 I sought to gratify, as you well know, but yours. The name of wife may seem more sacred or more binding, but sweeter for me will always be the word mistress, or, if you permit me, that of concubine or whore. (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, Letter 1 (Heloise to Abelard), 113.)

According to Tanner, the basic problem with marriage (as described in novels) is that its security depends on repetition and that repetition and habit diminishes the feelings, the erotic intensity.¹⁶³ Heloise's frank and daring statement of being rather Abelard's whore¹⁶⁴ than his wife hardly fits, however, into Tanner's analysis. Heloise has a critical view of marriage because it is based on desires other than the lover. She holds love up against wedlock,¹⁶⁵ and thereby indicates that marriage is, if not love, then a degradation of pure love. According to Grane, it is obvious that her conception of love as 'disinterested' presupposes that all marriages in which one of the parties wishes to obtain 'something', that is to say where something other than the actual marriage partner is of importance, must be considered as no

¹⁶¹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 71.

¹⁶² *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 70-74.

¹⁶³ Tony Tanner. *Adultery in the Novel. Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P.), 375.

¹⁶⁴ She continues: 'God is my witness that if Augustus, Emperor of the whole world, thought fit to honour me with marriage and conferred all the earth on me to possess for ever, it would be dearer and more honourable to be called not his Empress but your whore.' *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Letter 1 (Heloise to Abelard), 114.

¹⁶⁵ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 114.

more than prostitution.¹⁶⁶ In marriage there was the danger that prostituting desire for something other than the other person himself or herself, would violate the perfection of love.¹⁶⁷ This contempt for marriage seems, superficially, to correspond to Cathar resentment towards marriage, although the reasons are different.

Marriage for Heloise becomes something metaphysical because it is focused on objects other than the lover himself. De Rougemont is correct when he claims that Abelard and Heloise are among the first lovers to see love as a passion worth cultivating for its own sake,¹⁶⁸ even if that view seems to stem from Heloise. According to Grane, Heloise's views on marriage originally came from Abelard.¹⁶⁹ I cannot find any textual evidence for this view. It seems to me that such views are taken mainly from philosophers of Antiquity – especially the Stoics – and to a lesser degree from the Church Fathers. On the other hand, Abelard had been her teacher, so it was partly through him she had come to know these ideas. Heloise does not have anything against marriage so long as there is nothing else other than the husband himself motivating the marriage. Like Denis De Rougemont,¹⁷⁰ she claims that marriage must be a *decision*, a decision which is not based on wealth or power,¹⁷¹ but her emphasis on the worth of the husband weakens her argument, as the argument of looking upon one's husband as the best¹⁷² indicates that worth and ability are the criteria for love. So this view actually undermines unconditional love.

Heloise emphasizes St Paul's views on the difficulties of marriage (1 Corinthians 7.28-32) together with the philosophical ideal of asceticism for the sake of philosophy. Marriage is not something negative in itself, but a hindrance to Abelard's academic career. It is from the viewpoint of philosophy and theology that marriage becomes something negative. It is therefore something different from the Cathar view on marriage as something negative per se. De Rougemont has claimed that there was a certain critique of the institution of marriage in the 12th century which he mainly interprets as an influence from the Cathar religion. But the

¹⁶⁶ Leif Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 61.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

¹⁶⁸ De Rougemont. *Love in the Western World*, 74.

¹⁶⁹ Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 62.

¹⁷⁰ See De Rougemont. *Love in the Western World*, 303-305.

¹⁷¹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 114.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

Historia calamitatum does not allude to any Cathar background. This does not mean, however, that Heloise is not writing according to the Cathars anti-marriage concept of love; from the textual allusions, however, it seems as if the background is Greek philosophy, mainly Cicero and Seneca, as well as the Catholic Church.

According to Brooke, Heloise does not have a low view of marriage. Marriage is a sacrament, but it cannot in itself incorporate selfless love. Heloise's intuitive, idealistic, romantic view of Christian love gives it a quality quite apart from the accidents of human life, of marriage ceremonies and death.¹⁷³ The most probable answer is that her contempt for marriage as shown in *Historia calamitatum* was based on Greek and Roman idealism, especially Stoic philosophy.

When Abelard and Heloise later in life, after their conversion to monastic life, display a negative view of marriage, it is derived from St Paul and St Jerome. From a monastic point of view marriage is seen as a weakness of the flesh.¹⁷⁴ But even if Abelard regards his affair with Heloise as a sin, he does not view sensual pleasures as something negative in principle. In his *Ethical Writings* he writes that '*All sins belong to the soul alone, not to the flesh (...)*'.¹⁷⁵ In another passage he says '*it is clear that no natural pleasure of the flesh should be attributed to sin, nor should it be considered a fault for us to take pleasure in it.*'¹⁷⁶ This was contrary to contemporary Christian thinking,¹⁷⁷ especially monastic Christianity. But his radical views on sensuality do not indicate that he advocated the view that sex outside marriage was permissible, which is confirmed by his dealings with the rebellious monks at St Gildas de Rhuys.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³ Christopher Brooke. *Europe in the Central Middle Ages 962-1154*, 457.

¹⁷⁴ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. See Radice's. Introduction, 16.

¹⁷⁵ Peter Abelard. *Ethical Writings: His Ethics or 'Know Yourself' and His Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew and a Christian* (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1995), 18.

¹⁷⁶ *Peter Abelard's Ethics* (Translated by D.E. Luscombe) (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 20, lines 12-14.

¹⁷⁷ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 226

¹⁷⁸ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 95.

Marriage: Solution or Problem?

In the *Historia calamitatum* Abelard reveals that his main motive for marrying Heloise was to compensate Heloise's family, the norm in traditional societies being to restore honour. Heloise thinks she knows better,¹⁷⁹ claiming that no satisfaction could appease her uncle.¹⁸⁰ Heloise is against marrying because of the risk (Fulbert's revenge) and the disgrace it would bring upon Abelard. Fulbert's first revenge is to break his promise to keep the marriage secret, the only condition Abelard had set¹⁸¹ - Fulbert of course knowing that Abelard could be expelled as a canon at Notre Dame. The family rivalry becomes projected into a career rivalry. Revealing the secret of their marriage would mean ruining Abelard's career, and, at the same time, escalate conflict within the family. Fulbert would know that Heloise's greatest concern was Abelard's career as a philosopher, and by ruining Abelard's career, he would also be able to hurt the most vital part of their relationship: their intellectual friendship. Heloise's ambition of furthering Abelard's career and attaining the philosophical ideals are threatened, and she curses Fulbert. Fulbert in turn abuses Heloise.¹⁸² Both show the kind of hate common when family relationships break up.

Abelard removes Heloise to the convent in Argenteuil, where she was raised as a child,¹⁸³ which turns out to be the great mistake, the central cause of the tragedy. Heloise's relatives think that Abelard has sent Heloise to a convent in order to get rid of her. Abelard never admits this motive, but, given the circumstances, it would be difficult to dismiss the charge: Abelard would then be free to continue as a canon at Notre Dame. According to Clanchy, Abelard could have had no intention of entering a monastery at this time, as that would have endangered his career in the schools.¹⁸⁴ This is the main reason, the motive for the family's revenge, which leads to Abelard's castration. The mimetic rivalry between Abelard and Fulbert reaches a crisis, and, due to the time and situation, reaches a violent solution. Fulbert needs to restore his family's honour. This could be avenged by castrating Abelard. Behind the motive of shame and honour lies triangular desire, where Fulbert, is not only robbed of the

¹⁷⁹ See Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 53.

¹⁸⁰ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. See Radice's. Introduction, 70.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid., 74.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 75.

¹⁸⁴ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 192.

care of his beloved niece, but ends up being cursed by her. Abelard, being Fulbert's mediator with respect to money and learning, has suddenly acted as the mediator of shame and disgrace. This expresses in a nutshell how desire develops.

Conflict and Status

Clanchy claims that Fulbert might have thought that Abelard was not good enough to marry her,¹⁸⁵ as Fulbert and Heloise perhaps belonged to the Montmorency family, one of the noblest in France.¹⁸⁶ (Canons at Notre Dame were usually recruited from the nobility.) Heloise's statements, on the other hand, suggests that she and Fulbert may not have been Abelard's equals.¹⁸⁷ But the difference in status is not essential to the interpretation of this particular mimetic conflict, as insignificant differences in status do not upset the regulation of shame and honour.

Risk of Revenge

Rivalry reached its culmination with the castration of Abelard. But this incident shows that the rivalry must have been exceptionally heated. Fulbert had no legal right to punish Abelard so severely. Heloise claims that the punishment Abelard suffered would only have been acceptable had they been caught in open adultery.¹⁸⁸ The blindness of rivalry makes Fulbert put his own career at stake. By ordering the castration, Fulbert was acting illegally, and, after the castration-affair the bishop and canons of Notre-Dame expelled Fulbert and confiscated all his goods and possessions.¹⁸⁹ But his canonry was restored 1 April 1119,¹⁹⁰ only a year or two later, indicating the sympathy he may have enjoyed among his colleagues at Notre Dame. This becomes even more probable since Abelard tried unsuccessfully to sue the bishop and canons of Paris in the papal curia in Rome for showing leniency towards Fulbert.¹⁹¹ But

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 186.

¹⁸⁶ Enid McLeod. *Heloise. A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971), 9.

¹⁸⁷ See *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (Letter 3. Heloise to Abelard), 129-130.

¹⁸⁸ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (Letter 3. Heloise to Abelard), 130.

¹⁸⁹ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 199.

¹⁹⁰ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 199.

¹⁹¹ (Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 201). (Fulk of Deuil, p.706, lines 27-31; p. 707, lines 19-21.)

according to the Laws of Emperor Henry I, Fulbert would have had to have seen the offenders' genitalia joined in intercourse, in order to be permitted to have Abelard castrated. These Laws were designed to limit the revenge of the aggrieved man. He must also have discovered and warned the fornicator three times before proceedings (after he had seen the couple's genitalia actually joined in sexual intercourse). Even then castration was prescribed only for persistent offenders.¹⁹²

Abelard's Hybris

According to Leif Grane, Heloise enters the picture only as the object of Abelard's aspirations. Abelard wishes to live up to the philosophical ideal, but his jealous attitude makes him also wish to secure Heloise for himself.¹⁹³ From this perspective one can clearly see the hubris in Abelard's desires. He himself explains that pride was the main motive behind his relationship with Heloise.¹⁹⁴ Abelard wants to attain everything: both wife and career. In this respect, one can speak of obstacles, not in the way De Rougemont describes obstacles in passionate love, but rather in the way one desire obstructs or collides with another. The same jealousy appears when Abelard forces Heloise to take the veil first, jealous as he is that she will fall in love with someone else,¹⁹⁵ while he ends up as a castrated monk.

I went first to take the veil – perhaps you were thinking how Lot's wife turned back when you made me put on the religious habit and take my vows before you gave yourself to God. Your lack of trust in me over this one thing, I confess, overwhelmed me with grief and shame. (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, 117.)

Because of the sensuous bonds he still feels towards Heloise, he becomes a traitor to her love.¹⁹⁶ Abelard's mistrust must have been offensive,¹⁹⁷ especially when she experienced how

¹⁹² Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 198.

¹⁹³ Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, London, 1970, 57.

¹⁹⁴ G.Verbreke. 'Peter Abelard and the Concept of Subjectivity,' in *Peter Abelard*, 10.

¹⁹⁵ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, (Letter 2. Abelard to Heloise), 149.

¹⁹⁶ Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 57.

¹⁹⁷ He hurt her deeply by letting her be the first to take vows. She saw in this – probably correct – an expression of distrust. (...) Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 65.

he brought dishonour and shame upon her.¹⁹⁸ His jealousy makes him try to stop Heloise desiring others,¹⁹⁹ while her love towards Abelard persists in spite of the castration. Grane claims that it was jealousy that made Abelard marry Heloise.²⁰⁰ After being the undisputed winner in the triangular game with Fulbert, the castration turns him into an erotic looser in the eyes of the world, but, by withholding the same rivalry in love and the same jealous mentality, he tries to dissolve the desire around him. Keeping the marriage a secret from the public²⁰¹ would maintain Abelard's reputation as a lover and, at the same time, make it possible to continue as a canon. These desires are rather external, but when he forces Heloise to take the veil, Abelard reveals a stronger and more metaphysical desire, the conflict being not so much between love of philosophy and love of Heloise, as between love of the image of himself as the greatest philosopher of the period and love of himself as the possessor of Heloise.²⁰² The strength and intensity of the desire which was clearly enhanced by the castration, makes Abelard try to ensure that no one will be able to rival him as Heloise's lover.

Castration, the Result of Mimetic Contagion

Abelard claims that he suffered more from the sympathetic wailing of his friends than from the actual castration,²⁰³ thus indicating the mental strain caused by mimetic rivalry. The shame-honour code of the period would undoubtedly have put Abelard in a different position after the castration. In describing the states of melancholy and deep depression following his castration, Abelard repeatedly uses the words 'despair', 'grief', and 'shame'.²⁰⁴ Bagge

¹⁹⁸ See Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 62.

¹⁹⁹ Abelard writes: At the time I desired to keep you whom I loved beyond measure for myself alone, but he was already planning to use the opportunity for our joint conversion to himself. Had you not been previously joined to me in wedlock, you might easily have clung to the world when I withdrew from it, either at the suggestion of your relatives or in enjoyment of carnal delights. *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Letter 4, 149.

²⁰⁰ Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 55.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

²⁰² See Leif Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 62.

²⁰³ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 75.

²⁰⁴ Mary McLaughlin. 'Abelard as Autobiographer: the Motives and Meanings of his "Story of Calamities," ' *Speculum*: a

emphasizes the fact that Abelard is extremely concerned about what other people may think about him. The shame of the castration is worse than the physical pain and loss. His reaction when his work, is burned, is similar to his reaction to his castration,²⁰⁵ which shows that mental pain, for Abelard, was worse than physical pain. Abelard's mimetic ideals of being the greatest philosopher and lover, are suddenly inverted into the shameful roles of heretic and eunuch; from being the most attractive and desirable model, he becomes one of the less attractive figures of the Middle Ages. Desire is the motivator of these drastic changes, which turn Abelard into a scapegoat.

Clanchy claims that Heloise suffers more than Abelard from his castration, as she felt she had caused it.²⁰⁶ She knows that she was the centre of his desire, and interprets her role as that of a woman of the Old Testament leading a man to his fall.²⁰⁷ Her grief for Abelard was profound, her greatest ambition having been Abelard's career as a philosopher. But it was also Heloise's own ambitions projected onto Abelard that created sorrow. She was envied by everyone. That Abelard was humiliated meant that her reputation as a great woman of the world was also destroyed.²⁰⁸ After the castration Abelard acts first according to his knightly ideals: Deeply enraged he seeks revenge through the ecclesiastical courts.²⁰⁹ Fifteen to twenty years later, in his letters to Heloise, he has a totally different approach to his castration.

(...) it was wholly just and merciful, although by means of the supreme treachery of your uncle, for me to be reduced in that part of my body which was the seat of lust and sole reason for those desires so that I could increase in many ways (...) The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, (Letter 4), 147-148.

But this was a result of a long process. In *Historia calamitatum*, Abelard claims that it was shame and confusion more than a devout wish for conversion which brought him to the monastery of St. Denis. The castration-scene in *Historia calamitatum* does not only function as the peripety; it is also the concrete symbol of the work's message: suffering is a blessing because it brings a person closer to God. Suffering makes Abelard change his worldly models (knight and philosopher) to the model of imitating the life of Christ.

Journal of Medieval Studies, Medieval Academy of America, 474.

²⁰⁵ Bagge. 'The autobiography of Abelard and medieval individualism,' 340-341.

²⁰⁶ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 166.

²⁰⁷ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, (Letter 3), 130-131.

²⁰⁸ See Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 167.

²⁰⁹ This is known through a letter by Fulk of Deuil. (See Weintraub. *The Value of the Individual Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*, 77.)

How mercifully did he want me to suffer so much only in that member, the privation of which would also further the salvation of my soul without defiling my body nor preventing any performance of my duties! (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, (Letter 4), 148.)

Abelard, the God in the Eyes of Heloise

While Abelard interprets what happened within a Christian setting, Heloise is not so willing to see it in such a way. Heloise has only one goal: the fulfilment of Abelard's glory.²¹⁰ Abelard is the only person upon whom her life rests, and she would rather have been his whore than Augustus' empress.²¹¹ This extreme loyalty and determination to look upon one's lover as the best, is a consequence of her intentional ethics.²¹² That marriage is the beginning of her misery, makes her feel bitter towards God. In all her calamities Abelard is her only comfort,²¹³ and if one defines God as the force in which one puts one's trust, Abelard performs something of a godlike function in her life. Grane goes further and claims that Abelard really is her God,²¹⁴ which is partly true existentially, but has little substance phenomenally, since Heloise's God, her reference to ultimate reality, is the Christian Trinity.

According to Grane, Heloise is concerned about Abelard's honour because only in this is her own love consummated.²¹⁵ But if it is Abelard's honour, especially his honour as a philosopher, she would seem to have a motive of seeking something other than his person. Abelard's honour as a philosopher is a desire developed from the imitation of the philosophers of Antiquity, and his honour also befalls his lover. Although Grane's interpretation of Heloise's loyalty towards Abelard and his career seems accurate, he has a somewhat one-dimensional view of Heloise. No doubt her love was strong and profound, but it was hardly completely selfless. Abelard was her mediator and model in learning, and despite being known as the most learned woman in France, there was great prestige in being the lover of the greatest philosopher. In her first letter to Abelard she says that his love songs

²¹⁰ Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 57.

²¹¹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 117.

²¹² Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 61.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 68

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

made her widely known and envied by many women.²¹⁶ There is also an economic element in Heloise's letters to Abelard. Heloise mentions in a few places that Abelard is in debt to her, using the language of money lending.²¹⁷ Her pure love for Abelard is mingled with concerns about legal rights (being married). But to pursue this suspicion of Heloise's motives would be to opt out into general psychology, as the texts give few hints of her selfish motives. On the contrary, there is an element of deification in her love for Abelard. Abelard is the one person upon whom her life depends. In her letters she praises Abelard, showing no regret or remorse for the affair, though regretting that she has been the ruin of his career. There are statements in Heloise's letters that magnify Abelard. If one were not aware that these statements were written about fifteen years after their liaison, fifteen years of suffering, they would sound like strips from today's popular and contemporary lyrics:

I always loved you with a love which is beyond all bonds (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, 1 Letter, 113.)
You alone have the power to make me sad, to bring me happiness or comfort. (113.)
My love rose to such heights of madness. (113)
God knows I never sought anything in you except yourself (113)
I wanted simply you, nothing of yours. (113)
I believed the more I humbled myself on your account, the more gratitude I should win from you. (113)

But given the context, these statements reflect anything but the easygoing feelings of a person being in love; these are the statements of one sacrificing her life for the beloved. Grane has cleverly seen that Heloise commits a double sacrifice for Abelard's sake:

Heloise can only be true to herself by sacrificing herself to Abelard's glory as a philosopher. When he demands that she should marry him she does so in spite of all her objections, and in so doing she as it were withdraws herself on to a new plane for his sake. She now sacrifices her sacrifice because it is impossible for her to act against him. (Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages, 57-58.)

This double sacrifice is an anthropological version of humbling oneself before God. One does not ask questions, but acts in obedience. Even if Heloise lives and imitates according to the philosophical ideals of Antiquity, her imitation of Abelard goes beyond the philosophical

²¹⁶ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 115.

²¹⁷ 'Yet you must have known that you are bound to me by an obligation which is all the greater for the further close tie of the marriage sacrament uniting us, and are deeper in my debt because of the love I have always borne you, as everyone knows, a love which is beyond all bonds.' (*The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, (Letter 1), 113.)
'Remember, I implore you, what I have done, and think how much you owe me.' (*The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, (Letter 1), 117.)

ideals. In this way Heloise's sacrifice becomes not a sacrifice of philosophy for the sake of Christianity, but for the sake of Abelard. The reason for calling it a sacrifice is that both the act of marrying and of taking the veil, involved doing something against her will. The sacrifice was not a saving sacrifice, it was a sacrifice demanded because of Abelard's mistrust and jealousy, which thus made bad turn into worse. *It was your command and not divine love that made me put on a sacred habit*, she confesses, thereby illustrating her total loyalty to Abelard's will. The best evidence of Heloise's deification of Abelard is that she was more afraid of going against him than God.

At every stage of my life up to now, as God knows, I have feared to offend you rather than God, and tried to please you more than him. It was your command, not love of God which made me take the veil. (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, (Letter 3), 134.)

Agape or Eros

Both Heloise and Abelard agree that Heloise, because of Abelard's sensual desires, sought his pleasure, not her own.²¹⁸ That she later found it difficult to forget the pleasures she had herself enjoyed is quite another matter! This is Grane's view.²¹⁹ I do not agree. The fact that she could not forget the sensual pleasures which he had given her, shows that she, even if she did not deliberately seek physical pleasures, found satisfaction in them. This rather daring erotic confession reveals the sensual side of Heloise.²²⁰ As semi-orthodox Freudians, we take this sensuality for granted, but the text, we must remember, is one of the very few texts of the 12th

²¹⁸ 'It was desire, not affection which bound you to me, the flame of lust rather than love. So when the end came to what you desired, any show of feeling you used to make went with it.' (*The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 116.)

²¹⁹ Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 58.

²²⁰ 'While I enjoyed with you the pleasures of the flesh.' (...)
(*The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Letter 1, 117.)

'I yielded long before to the pleasures of carnal desires, and merited then what I weep for now.' (*The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Letter 3, 132.)

'In my case, the pleasures of lovers which we shared have been too sweet - they never can displease me, and can scarcely be banished before my eyes, bringing with them awakened longings and fantasies which will not even let me sleep. Even during the celebration of the Mass, when our prayers should be purer, lewd visions of those pleasures take such hold upon my unhappy soul that my thoughts are on their wantonness instead of on prayers.' (*The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Letter 3, 133.)

century, which reveals a woman's sexual pleasure, and do so in a most frank and realistic language. When they correspond later about what happened in those impassioned years, they are only agreed on one thing: the miserable quality of Abelard's love. They both conclude that it consisted only of sensual desires, and also agree that it does not deserve the name of love.²²¹ This suggests that they, after entering their monasteries, consider sensual love as something selfish.

Passion was transformed into such a madness that it deprived itself of the only thing it yearned for, with no hope of recovering it; for, following your command, I myself immediately changed both clothing and mind in order to demonstrate that you alone possessed both my body and my soul. (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, Letter 1, 113.)

In this extract from her first letter to Abelard, Heloise shows a clear understanding of the metamorphosis of desire, describing how the most intense desires, due to rivalry and obstructions, can dry up and turn into a life of asceticism. This transformation of desire is not, in their case, the result of a romantic desire where the actual encounter with the beloved cools the desire. In the case of Abelard and Heloise real external obstacles transform their spontaneous desire into a life of asceticism. Thus, the cause is not any substantial lack of love between the lovers, but envy and revenge from outside.

Many years later we find the same feeling of dependence in Heloise when writing: 'For you are the only one capable of bringing me sorrow and joy, or of rendering me consolation,' showing that her love had a much deeper foundation than the joys of sexual pleasure. The patterns of romantic love, the search for obstacles, the hiding of emotions, are tools that are too limited for interpreting her love for Abelard. The deification or the tendency to turn men into gods,²²² has a certain relevance as regards her love for Abelard, but her deification is not based on the conflictual, which is often the pattern in romantic deification. Therefore, it is difficult not to interpret Heloise's love as a love transcending mere erotic love.

Could there be agape in the love between Heloise and Abelard? A catholic thinker like Girard, who considers marriage to be a sacrament, seems to dismiss the notion of agape in the erotic love between man and women,²²³ while De Rougemont (protestant) claims that agape saves

²²¹ Grane. Peter Abelard. *Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 65.

²²² Girard. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Chapter II (Men become Gods in the Eyes of Each Other) 53-82.

²²³ Girard. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*

erotic life in that it prevents desire from becoming separated from love. Agape reveals the selfishness of Eros and makes people treat the desired partner as a complete human person, not as a legend, a goddess or as a compound of dreams and sex, De Rougemont writes.²²⁴

Abelard makes a distinct contrast between his love and the love of Christ:

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. (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, Letter 4, 152.)

The End of Desire

Abelard's later letters to Heloise reveal a view of erotic love that is wholly negative. He concludes that their relationship was sinful, and that the castration really was a saving act,²²⁵ clearly emphasizing the difference between agape and eros. Abelard is completely attuned to a claim such as De Rougemont's where carnal love has no aspect of deification²²⁶ and where outside the realm of marriage, sex is sinful. In her letters Heloise accuses Abelard of feeling only lust for her, not love, claiming this was not only her view but one that was widely held,²²⁷ and Abelard admits this.²²⁸ This is also demonstrated by the fact that when his desires were brutally extinguished, he did not meet or keep in touch with Heloise for many years. Abelard wrote no letter to Heloise before she wrote to him, in response to the *Historia calamitatum*. The fact that he made no contact after entering monastic life reveals his relationship with Helois was governed by eros. After the erotic attraction had vanished, he felt no inclination to maintain contact with his wife. Heloise's profound love reveals an insight into the dynamics of erotic love:

When in the past you sought me out for sinful pleasures your letters came to me thick and fast, and your songs put your Heloise on everyone's lips, so that every street and house echoed with my name. (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, Letter 1, 117-118.)

According to Betty Radice, Heloise had been forced to conclude that what he had felt for her was no more than lust. (...) 'when physical desire had gone, any warmth of affection had

(London: Athlon Press, 1987), 277.

²²⁴ De Rougemont. *Love in the Western World*, 312-313.

²²⁵ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Letter 4, 147-148.

²²⁶ Denis De Rougemont. *Love in the Western World*, 314.

²²⁷ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Letter 1, 116.

²²⁸ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, see Betty Radice's Introduction, 15

gone with it.²²⁹ To me it seems that Heloise draws this conclusion from her own experience, an experience of Abelard's neglect, and also from reading the *Historia calamitatum*. She had experienced, very painfully, that when his desires had ended, his love had ended too. When confronted by the accusation of lust, Abelard responds by using very harsh words about their relationship before and during their marriage.²³⁰ According to Grane, he does not spare himself, but, at the same time, stresses that they were both guilty. He therefore gives no sanction to Heloise's reference to her pure intentions. For him the whole relationship was sinful, and the tragic interruption of it he sees as proof that it pleased the divine mercy to deliver them and give them – although involuntarily – an opportunity to win salvation in a life of pious submission.²³¹

There seems to be a gradual coming together between Abelard and Heloise during the 1130s. The tribulations at St Gildas de Rhuys force Abelard to make frequent visits to the Paraclete,²³² which is clearly a solace for Abelard. By imitating the role of St Jerome towards women²³³ he functions as spiritual adviser for the nuns at the Paraclete. As envy and rivalry is still at stake, Abelard is criticized for his relationship with women, especially with his wife.²³⁴ This shows that the root of envy is metaphysical more than physical, as the envy towards Abelard as a womanizer is still heated despite his having been castrated. Abelard, however, during the 1130s gradually comes to believe that he and Heloise are tied to one another. He shows this in his plea to Heloise to arrange for his body to be taken to her convent after his death. It is a different bond than before. There is, Grane says, for Abelard, a far more intense and firm bond than that which had bound them together before their conversion.²³⁵ I am not sure about the intensity, but there does seem to have been a transformation from erotic love to friendship, and perhaps even agape. The love which Abelard now shows towards Heloise has no disastrous effects on her life, it is a love which recognizes one's neighbour, which De Rougemont claims is a trait of agape.²³⁶

²²⁹ Ibid., 27.

²³⁰ Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 68.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 97-99.

²³³ Ibid., 98.

²³⁴ Ibid. 98.

²³⁵ See Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 69

²³⁶ Denis De Rougemont. *Love of the Western World*, 71

Religious Life: an Escape from Desires

Entering monastic life meant, for Heloise, only that outward appearances changed, whereas for Abelard entry into the monastery was a conversion in the medieval sense of the word: meaning a new life of penance and humility.²³⁷ According to Grane, Abelard was changed through monastic life, while Heloise changed in a lesser degree.²³⁸ Radice writes that Abelard was a changed man physically and spiritually, but not Heloise. Heloise was tormented by frustrated sexual love.²³⁹ There is of course the fact that monastic life was easier to enter after one had been castrated, but Heloise's own, rather rebellious statements on entering monastic life can also be misleading. Firstly, Heloise would never have become a prioress in 1123 if she had not possessed spiritual qualities which surpassed those of the others.²⁴⁰ Secondly, Abelard gives a portrait of Heloise (in contrast to himself) as being highly successful within monastic life.

How great an interest the talent of your own wisdoms pays daily to the Lord in many spiritual daughters you have born before him, while I remain totally barren and labour in vain amongst the sons of perdition! (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, Letter 4, Abelard to Heloise, 150.)

Change in Mimetic Models

Heloise's rebellion against her new, monastic life, is her reproach to Abelard. Her main reproach is that her entering was motivated by his will. On the basis of this fact alone we should be suspicious of Abelard's motives in encouraging her. He is the person responsible for her entry into monastic life. Her critique of monastic life is, at the same time, a critique of Abelard, who had forced her to take the veil. Therefore, in response, Abelard's letters are flattering about her new life and extremely harsh about her old life. Abelard tries to persuade Heloise to change mimetic models, from him to Christ, his argument being the difference between Christ's self-giving love and his selfish love.

²³⁷ Grane. *Peter Abelard. Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, 65.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

²³⁹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Betty Radice's Introduction, 23.

²⁴⁰ Heloise probably became prioress in 1123. See *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Betty Radice. Introduction, 23.

It was he who truly loved you, not I. My love, which brought us to sin, should be called lust, not love. (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, 153.)

Abelard's arguments are based upon the qualitative difference between erotic love and God's love (agape): Christ sought in Heloise nothing other than herself,²⁴¹ while Abelard sought Heloise for pleasure. Christ suffered for her, while he had made her suffer. Christ died for her, while he had defiled her.²⁴² Abelard tries to convince Heloise that the love she had tried to obtain through him, she can only obtain in Christ.

Monastic Tribulations

Abelard tries to make Heloise see their past relationship from the Christian monastic point of view,²⁴³ and his responses are very different from what she had been hoping for. The first two letters from Heloise are rebellious and full of reproach. The reproach is so intense that Clanchy claims that Heloise uses the description of her lust to humiliate the castrated Abelard.²⁴⁴ I find this statement highly likely, especially when seen from a Freudian understanding of the unconscious. Also her extreme frankness²⁴⁵ reveals traits of a hidden resentment. Why depict the sensual past in such a crude manner when Abelard no longer has any sensuality left to offer? Her memories of sex during the Mass might also be interpreted as Heloise's not too successful attempt to sublimate.

Heloise has to live a life where she must totally forsake her sexuality, and believes that monastic life means only a change in her lifestyle, not of mind. For Abelard it meant a new life in every way.²⁴⁶ Heloise had taken vows with no sense of vocation, and felt her life had ended when Abelard forced her to join the monastery. Abelard killed Heloise, and she made the sacrifice of her life, Clanchy claims.²⁴⁷ This sacrifice should have meant that her previous god (Abelard) would be replaced by the real God. It was Abelard's force, not divine love that

²⁴¹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 153.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁴⁴ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 154.

²⁴⁵ The frankness of the descriptions has made the critic Muckle claim that the 'extravagant and sinful' parts of their letters were forgeries. (See Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 154).

²⁴⁶ See Grane. *Abelard. Filosofi og kristendom i middelalderen* (København: Gyldendal, 1964), 72.

²⁴⁷ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 10.

made her enter monastic life. And she condemns herself in her new role.²⁴⁸ As she felt no vocation for convent life, she had had only one motive – to obey Abelard. Because monastic life had been forced on her, she had questioned God’s goodness, and felt opposed to God and His rules. She could neither accept the goodness of God, nor share in His love.

But the great paradox is of course the fact that Heloise was a great success as a nun, while Abelard went, in his monastic career, from one fiasco to another. Heloise actually became prioress only a few years after entering monastic life. This could be an indication that she succeeded in overcoming her resentment. According to Clanchy, it was Heloise who became dead to the world, while Abelard retained all his worldly ambitions.²⁴⁹ Heloise’s success is modified, however, by the fact that in 1129 Suger (Abbot of St. Denis) claimed possession of the convent of Argenteuil. The nuns were accused of immorality and driven from the convent.²⁵⁰ This fact is extremely interesting as it confirms to Heloise’s own resentments and moral assessment of herself as a nun. The incident could be interpreted as a consequence of her bitterness during her first years of monastic life.

Whereas Abelard, in his later letters, is very supportive of monastic life, *Historia calamitatum* describes his entering the Benedictine monastery of St. Denis as though it were some kind of hiding-place. In *Historia calamitatum*, Abelard gives a much more crude and frank picture of monastic life than in his later letters, without any ideological superstructure. Here monastic life is depicted as conflictual, rivalistic and violent, giving the reader a sense of crude, medieval realism. Perhaps it is this which makes *Historia calamitatum* a literary masterpiece, while the letters, despite their immense biographical and historical importance, do not have the same literary value. *Historia calamitatum* depicts and reveals the structures of mimetic desire. The letters do also depict the mimetic relationship between Abelard and Heloise, but they are letters based more on ideas than on mimesis.

The letters show a development from a position where Abelard voices anti-feminist prejudices to one where he gives a much deeper understanding of women’s lives. Clanchy claims that there is a progression in the letters, whereby Abelard is converted from his anti-feminism, in

²⁴⁸ See also Grane. *Abelard. Filosofi og kristendom i middelalderen*, 73.

²⁴⁹ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 10.

²⁵⁰ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 151.

response to Heloise. Abandoning his former satirizing, he becomes a champion of women's equality.²⁵¹ His desires as a lover are gradually transformed into friendship and compassion. One could claim, if not in a strict sense, that there is an element of feminism in his letters, a feminism which he imitates in response to Heloise and the nuns at the Paraclete. Also Abelard, and his highly developed sense of rationality, and independent mind combined with his frankness, honesty and self-revealing attitude, must be seen as a writer enhancing equality between the sexes.

Heresy and Rivalry

The History of Heresy

In the year 1000 heretics were virtually unknown in Western Europe²⁵² and, according to Brooke, we know very little of what garbled versions of orthodox doctrine many lay folk held.²⁵³ But gradually the distinction between heresy and orthodoxy became more acute.²⁵⁴ Most of the heresies were dualist heresies. The Petrobrusians (heretics) made a stir in the south of France in the opening decades of the twelfth century, and Abelard's friend, Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, was moved to write a book against them.²⁵⁵ In the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries the view that only the monks could escape the pains of hell, gradually subsided. The married were not condemned, but those belonging to a religious order were believed to be more easily saved. As heaven now appeared more attainable, we might expect the monastic life to lose some of its attraction; nonetheless, it is a striking fact that as the numbers of lay folk expected to reach heaven increased,²⁵⁶ so too the number of

²⁵¹ Ibid., 254.

²⁵² Christopher Brooke. *Europe in the Central Middle Ages 962-1154*, 435.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Weintraub. *The Value of the Individual: self and Circumstance in Autobiography*, 59.

²⁵⁵ Christopher Brooke. *Europe in the Central Middle Ages 962-1154*, 438.

²⁵⁶ Between 1066 and 1154 the number of monasteries for men in England rose from just under fifty to about five hundred. The numbers of monks and nuns rose seven or eight fold or perhaps even more over the same period. (See Christopher Brooke. *The Monastic World, 1000-1300* (London: Elek., 1974), 90.)

monasteries and their population increased with equal rapidity,²⁵⁷ indicating that it was not necessarily the fear of hell that motivated people to join monasteries.

Entering Monastic Life in a Spirit of Rivalry

Abelard entered the monastic *mêlée* with the same self-righteous over-confidence with which he had confronted William of Champeaux and Anselm of Laon. Entering into monastic life with the same competitive and critical attitude, meant that he regarded his fellow monks as fools, or worse, and their abbot as a scoundrel. Just as he had thought himself the only philosopher in the world, so now he was the only true monk.²⁵⁸ Abelard does not hide his real motives for joining the monastic life, saying that it was shame, confusion and misery, rather than a devout wish for conversion that had made him enter into a monastery.²⁵⁹ But he quickly adapts to the norms of cloistered-life, living according to the strict monastic rules, eager to criticize anyone who did not keep to them, thereby indicating that monastic life meant for him a different form of rivalry, a rivalry of ascetism. The fact that the monks at St. Gildas made three attempts to kill Abelard, would seem to indicate that the rivalry was acute. Abelard explains these abortive attempts as stemming from his criticism of their immoral life, a criticism which he was entitled to, being their abbot.

On the other hand, there is an element of toning down the rivalistic elements following his conversion to religious life. This certainly does not mean that Abelard's life becomes less conflictual; it means rather that the *Historia calamitatum* text never indicates his new life as a monk was driven by the same war-like mentality. On the other hand, Abelard is too honest to claim any instant transformation. Abelard mentions that he was urged to continue his studies out of love for God, admitting that earlier on he had been driven by the desire for wealth and fame. He was also urged to stop addressing himself to the rich and devote himself to the education of the poor.²⁶⁰ Abelard says nothing about agreeing to these changes, nor does he give any sympathizing comments regarding these new ideals. On the contrary, he claims that the monks and abbots were pestering him with these new ideals.²⁶¹

²⁵⁷ Christopher Brooke. *The Monastic World, 1000-1300*, 89.

²⁵⁸ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 201.

²⁵⁹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 77.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 77.

Heresy and Rivalry

Abelard was not accused of heresy for the life he led, even if the Heloise-affair must have made him vulnerable to criticism. It was his theology, especially his theology surrounding the Trinity that formally led to his heresy. But thanks to the *Historia calamitatum*, we receive an insight into the interindividual elements present in heresy-making. Abelard was twice condemned for heretical writings regarding the Trinity. His *Theologia Summi Boni* was burned at Soissons in 1121, and he was declared a heretic at Sens in 1140. The Sens-affair is not mentioned in *Historia calamitatum* as it was completed in 1132. In both these trials Abelard was not given a hearing.²⁶² According to Clanchy, the extreme method of rivalry was to accuse a master of heresy,²⁶³ and in the *Historia calamitatum* Abelard shows how accusations of heresy function as a way of ridding oneself of one's rivals. The development of the heresy-making follows a similar system to rivalry, both of which lead to scapegoating.

Pride and Heresy

It is important to remember, though, that Abelard never rebelled against the authority of the Church, and even if he claims rationality to be important in matters of faith, he was never a rationalist in the modern sense.²⁶⁴ According to Abelard, it is pride that makes a heretic.²⁶⁵ And if pride can be defined as the competition to win over, or, try to be superior to other people, the young, ambitious Abelard clearly is a proud person. The prior Fulk of Deuil went as far as to say:

Inanely exalting yourself over everybody, you thought even the saints inferior to you. (Clanchy. Abelard. A Medieval Life, 327.)

Imitating a Heretic

When dealing with the problem of heresy, it is of utmost importance to realize that Abelard's first teacher, Roscelin, was condemned for heresy. Roscelin was a nominalist logician, who

²⁶² Clanchy, *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 288.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 327.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 302.

was condemned for tritheism at the Council of Soissons (1092).²⁶⁶ Abelard was taught by Roscelin in the years 1093-1099. This shows that Abelard had been associated with heresy throughout his career.^{267 268}

Roscelin is not mentioned in *Historia calamitatum*, probably because Abelard did not want to be associated with a heretic who held views he later attacked.²⁶⁹ A letter Roscelin wrote to Abelard is full of scorn, accusing Abelard for loss of manhood and for sending money to his whore (Heloise).²⁷⁰ The harsh letter gives an indication as to where Abelard had picked up part of his rivalistic attitude. The fact that Abelard and Roscelin had so many similarities, suggests the idea of a mimetic doubleness. Both were accused of heresy more than once. Both used secular logic on the Trinity. Both were accused by the most powerful thinkers of the day. Both were expelled from the kingdom of France. Both were champions of celibacy and reformers of ecclesiastical discipline. Both denied that they had ever been heretics. Both were teachers of logic, and both were able to attract students.²⁷¹

Roscelin claimed that his influence over Abelard had been great: 'I showed you so many things and so much.'²⁷² And Abelard's academic success was perhaps partly due to his training by Roscelin.²⁷³ But, at the same time, there seems to be a direct line between studying under a heretic and becoming a heretic. Even if Abelard refuted Roscelin's views, the mimetic contagion between the pupil and master would have been so strong (especially as Roscelin was his first master) that it determined Abelard's train of thought forever. In the Abelard-Roscelin relationship there seems to have been much unconscious identification on Abelard's part, and, at a later stage in life, a great need to hide these influences.

²⁶⁶ Sikes. *Peter Abailard*, 2. (See also F. Picavet. *Roscelin, philosophe et théologien* (Paris, 1911), 55.

²⁶⁷ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 288.

²⁶⁸ A twelfth century source says Abelard grew bored with Roscelin, because he ordered him to attend his lectures for a year. See C.J. Mews. 'In search of a Name and it's Significance', *Traditio* 44 (1998): 172-173.

²⁶⁹ Sikes, *Peter Abailard*, 2.

²⁷⁰ See Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 230.

²⁷¹ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 294-295.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 294

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 295.

Heresy and Pagan Philosophy

Abelard was severely criticized for promoting the philosophers of Antiquity as pre-Christians, and for finding their thought to correspond with the Church Fathers. While he seems to have been devoid of models as a lover, he had quite a few mimetic models in philosophy and theology, such as Seneca, Aristotle, Origen, St Jerome, St Augustine and Cicero. In *Theologia Christiana* (1122-26) Abelard claims that heathen philosophers are worth studying for their own sakes, and that they are models as regards their lifestyle.²⁷⁴ His view was not uncommon in the Middle Ages. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Seneca were considered giants of wisdom in the Middle Ages. But at the same time, they were assigned a secondary place in the hierarchy of knowledge, because they were pagans.²⁷⁵ Abelard seems to have laid such an emphasis on the Christian elements in Greek philosophy, that he was very vulnerable to being perceived as a heretic. In his *Dialectics* and *Theologica* he had discussed whether the Platonist notion of the World Soul was identical with the Trinity. This was one of the accusations against him at Sens in 1140, where he was condemned as a heretic.²⁷⁶

Pagan and Christian Rationality

In the first version of his *Theologia* Abelard had argued that knowledge of God is common to everybody, whether pagan or Christian. According to Abelard, reason educates each single person naturally about God.²⁷⁷ This view is confirmed in his second version of *Theologia* where he claims that ‘the way of life of the pagan philosophers, as much as their teaching, expresses evangelical and apostolic perfection very strongly indeed; they differ from the Christian religion very little.’²⁷⁸ Even if Abelard saw Greek thought as a Christian legacy²⁷⁹ he does not claim that Christianity and Greek philosophy are the same. His point is that rationality is a common tool in understanding the great religious truths. However, he claims

²⁷⁴ Constant Mews. *The Development of the Theologia of Peter Abelard* (Trierer Theologische Studien, band 38: Paulinus Verlag, 1980), 187.

²⁷⁵ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 27

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 218.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 276. (From *Theologia Christiana*, 149, lines 159-60.)

²⁷⁹ ‘All people who have thought and acted rationally and rightly have participated in Christ, the universal Logos,’ St Justin. *Apologetia*. See G. Verbrake. ‘Peter Abelard and the Concept of Subjectivity,’ in *Peter Abelard*, 5-6.

that both the Jews and Gentiles had known the Catholic faith and salvation, since reason educates everyone. This adds a radical nuance to St Augustine's universal approach to the divinity of the Word. But according to Abelard, St Augustine does not claim that the Incarnation is universally known in other religions.²⁸⁰ Abelard probably supported this view. In Book Three of the *Theologia Summi Boni*, he claims that the knowledge of the Jews and Gentiles was insufficient.²⁸¹ Even if the pagan philosophers had reached certain parts of the truth,²⁸² they lacked an understanding of the Incarnation. In *Logica Ingredientibus*, Abelard says that logic cannot grasp God.²⁸³ One might conclude that even if Abelard went a long way in emphasizing natural religion, he still claimed that the Incarnation was revelatory. By going so far in emphasizing rationality and natural religion, however, it is understandable why he was in danger of being branded a heretic. According to R.L. Poole, it was Abelard's determination to win fame by publicizing his views that landed him in trouble, along with his indiscriminate enthusiasm for whatever novelty he took up: in this case his 'joyful recognition of a world of divine teaching of old outside the Bible.'²⁸⁴

Christianity and Logic

Abelard began as a dialectician, and dialectics was the tool he used to interpret Scripture. In *Historia calamitatum* he tells of how he astonished his fellow students by using his dialectical faculties on an obscure passage of Ezekiel. Abelard did not believe in the *glossae* method (interpreting Scripture through the Church Fathers), and he appears to believe that Scripture can be interpreted without interpreters, that it is self-explanatory.²⁸⁵

According to Abelard, theology is based on verisimilitude.²⁸⁶ In *Theologia Summi Boni* (1119) Abelard claims that his theological contribution comes through human reasoning about God.²⁸⁷ He repeatedly insists on the priority of understanding over faith. In doubting we come

²⁸⁰ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 272.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² G. Verbreke. 'Peter Abelard and the Concept of Subjectivity,' in *Peter Abelard*, 6.

²⁸³ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 106.

²⁸⁴ R.L. Poole. *Illustrations of the History of Medieval Thought and Learning* (New York: Dover, 1960), 24-25.

²⁸⁵ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 87.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 116.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 107.

to inquiry and by inquiry we perceive the truth, he writes in *Sic et non*.²⁸⁸ According to Clanchy, Abelard's view is a reversal of St Anselm's: 'I believe so that I may understand.'²⁸⁹ Abelard does not begin with faith. Like Descartes he starts with the tools of rationality, and ends up with faith. It seems that Abelard distinguishes between the central theological doctrines, and a more general understanding of religious phenomena. For example, he emphasizes the difference between applying dialectics to the nature of God Himself, and applying dialectics to different statements about God.²⁹⁰ The same nuance may be seen in his statements on the Trinity, where he uses the secular method of logic to define the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. The logic of the Trinity evolves by using dialectics to distinguish names from realities, and abstraction from substance. In this way one can eliminate the contradiction of three persons in one.²⁹¹

There is nothing especially new in Abelard's logical approach to Christianity. Christianity had been a religion of logic since the discussions at Nicea in 325. But what makes Abelard more a Renaissance man than Medieval, is that his arguments are based more on rationality than authority. In *Theologia Scholarium*, the last of his theological works (written in the 1130s), he expresses the idea that it is essential that faith is understood before it is preached to others. Also, he emphasizes, doubts and questions should be given a rational solution.²⁹² The astonishing thing about Abelard is that he puts the study of religion above religious practice. He claims that no-one who knows about Holy Scripture is ignorant, and that spiritual men have better progress in sacred doctrine by the study of 'letters' than through the merits of religion.²⁹³

Abelard and St. Bernard - Mimetic Doubles

St. Bernard wholeheartedly criticized Abelard's rationalistic understanding of faith. He regarded the synthesis of philosophy and theology as a step backwards, meaning that Abelard

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 107.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 36.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 106.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 108.

²⁹² See C.J. Mews. *The Development of the Theologia of Peter Abelard*, *Trierer Theologisches studien*, band 38 (Paulinus Verlag, 1980, 191) Mews refers to *Theologia Scholarium*, 56-58 (1054 A-D)

²⁹³ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 57.

and his likes were not modern, but ancient, like the Greek philosophers engrossed in their books, not looking up at the light.²⁹⁴ According to St Bernard, Abelard's character and way of life as well as his writings proved him to be a persecutor of the Catholic Faith, an enemy of the Cross of Christ. St Bernard claimed him to be a monk on the outside but a heretic on the inside, having nothing to make him a monk except the name and the garb.²⁹⁵

St Bernard is not mentioned in the *Historia calamitatum*, but in the 1130s Bernard becomes one of Abelard's fiercest enemies. The hostility between them is so intense that elements of violent, internal desires becomes apparent. This only makes sense when we compare the symmetry of their lives, a symmetry which clearly turns them into mimetic doubles: both came from an aristocratic background, both were monks, both were reformers, both were poets and both expressed a passionate commitment to Christ crucified. And finally, both focused on the human Christ. St Bernard's vehement attitude towards Abelard suggests that he may have been confronting his alter ego.²⁹⁶ Like Abelard, St Bernard demonstrated his own righteousness by attacking others, the difference being that St. Bernard was more successful at it.²⁹⁷ It seems there was a mutual aristocratic arrogance between the two great men, while the rivalry between them escalated into scapegoating, making St Bernard the winner, as his views were more moderate and he enjoyed more sympathy with the Pope and the Curia.

Most revealing is a letter St Bernard's sent to the Pope, where, in certain passages, Bernard addresses Abelard as if he were actually present before him, instead of describing him in third person:

Tell us what it is that has been revealed to you. Are you writing a new Gospel for us? You cannot give thanks to the redeemed because you have not been redeemed. (Clanchy. Abelard. A Medieval Life, 311.)

Such language is symptomatic of intense rivalry. There is no distance, as both are fixated on the rival. In this clash between the two greatest theologians of the 12th century, external desire

²⁹⁴ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 38.

²⁹⁵ Nikolas M. Häring. 'Abelard Yesterday and Today', 345, in *Pierre Abelard, Pierre le Venerable*, Colloques internationaux. Du centre national de la recherche Scientifique (Paris : Abbay de Cluny, 1975).

²⁹⁶ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 9.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 303.

evolves into internal desire through the doubling of desires. The symmetry of their desire, makes St Bernard postulate a maximum of difference, assiduously claiming Abelard's theological views to be heretical.

Scapegoating at the Council of Soissons

When they arrive at the Council of Soissons, Abelard and his pupils were attacked, almost stoned to death for having preached and written that there were three Gods.²⁹⁸ Abelard's accusers were his former colleagues at the school of Laon, Alberic and Lotulf.²⁹⁹ The dispute between Alberic and Abelard on the Trinity focused on the following topic: Did God beget himself?³⁰⁰ The rivalry at the school of Laon had ripened into a scapegoating scenario, where Abelard's innovative theology was considered heretical, on exactly the same grounds as Roscelin's, namely tritheism. Abelard himself had no hesitations of branding Roscelin a heretic, and in *Theologia Christiana* Abelard attacked Anselm of Canterbury for heresy.³⁰¹ Abelard had declared that no-one becomes a heretic unless his estimate of his own self-esteem exceeds that of other people.³⁰² According to such a harsh standard, Abelard himself would also clearly be a heretic (as would probably St Bernard of Clairvaux). Another more formal reason for turning Abelard into a heretic, was that he continued to hold the same beliefs after his 'errors' had been pointed out.³⁰³ Whether or not they really were errors, is not the theme of this article,³⁰⁴ but most of his views would, in theological debates today, be safely within the bounds of orthodoxy. There is, however, one exception. The claim that Greek philosophers were pre-Christian would also, today, be regarded as false according to the doctrines of the main churches. The accusation regarding his tritheism was mainly that he had divided the

²⁹⁸ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 79.

²⁹⁹ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 290.

³⁰⁰ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 80.

³⁰¹ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 283. (*Theologia Christiana*, 304, line 1230.)

³⁰² R.I. Moore. *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Diviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 68.

³⁰³ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 301.

³⁰⁴ 'The distinction of the three personæ is one of property not number. Abelard is meticulous in his care to preserve the unity of God, showing that there must be no confusion of the persons. Each person has his special function or property; yet the Godhead operates as a unity through each of them.' J. Ramsay McCallum. *Abelard's Christian theology*, Merrick N.Y. Richwood Pub. Co, 1976, 19.

Godhead into three distinct qualities: power (God), wisdom (Christ) and goodness (The Holy Spirit), and tried to show that these qualities were universal. This emphasis on natural theology diminished the exclusivity of the Christian religion and, as a result, his reflections on the Trinity could function as a critique of the Church's authority.

Abelard tries to undermine the importance of the assembly at Soissons, yet we know that Cono of Praeste, the most senior and formidable of all papal legates attended the Council.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁶ Abelard had opened a debate on an issue that was beyond dispute,³⁰⁷ and his most assiduous enemies evidently became his most assiduous accusers. But scapegoating also has the paradoxical effect of enhancing success, as Geoffrey, bishop of Chartres (1115-49), foresaw. According to Geoffrey, injuring Abelard through prejudice, would offend many people. Many would defend Abelard, and violent action would bring him even more renown.³⁰⁸ There is a structure in Abelard's life, where his successes create enemies, who in turn scapegoat him into greater success, and, in due course, are able to destroy his successes again, leaving him with nothing more than a rather remarkable insight into the anthropology of scapegoating. Having Abelard condemned as a heretic, was the most serious and the most efficient way of removing him.

Abelard was condemned at the Council of Soissons, and he was forced to throw his *Theologia summi Boni* onto the flames while reciting the Athanasian Creed, a version of the creed chosen because of its emphasis on the Trinity. Abelard later described the incident as 'manifest violence.'³⁰⁹ After Soissons, Abelard experienced despair in a religious sense; according to McLaughlin, he even experienced loss of faith in God's mercy and loss of hope in salvation.³¹⁰ McLaughlin's interpretation seems somewhat drastic, but it should be remembered that Abelard himself regarded the castration as a minor blow compared to the judgement at Soissons.³¹¹ On the other hand, it does not seem as though this incident made Abelard feel as if he had fallen from grace. On the contrary, he compares his persecution to

³⁰⁵ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 295.

³⁰⁶ The supervision by papal legates was something new in the 12th century. See Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 298.

³⁰⁷ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 301.

³⁰⁸ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 81.

³⁰⁹ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 304.

³¹⁰ Mary McLaughlin. 'Abelard as Autobiographer: The Motives and Meaning of his 'Story of Calamities' ', 474.

³¹¹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 84.

the persecution of Christ, who is, together with St Jerome, his great model finding himself scapegoated. Even if it does not look like Abelard suffered religiously, he surely suffered psychologically. After the heresy-affair Abelard describes himself being in despair and insane,³¹² while the biography of St Goswin records that Abelard was delirious and savaging himself.³¹³

Bagge claims that after Soissons, Abelard found no consolation in believing that he was right,³¹⁴ as a modern intellectual probably would. Today the evaluation made by society is more modified according to one's own inner criteria. This is perhaps a positive aspect of individual consciousness. By contrast, Abelard dissolves into tears and despair, but finds consolation in the fact that his honour will soon be restored. The emphasis on shame and honour in medieval society, as in other traditional societies, indicates how deeply a man's self-evaluation depended on that of his surroundings, in contrast to the modern ideal of the independent 'character' who feels confident of his own worth.³¹⁵ Bagge is surely right concerning his psychological reaction to shame and honour, but, on the other hand, it clearly looks as though Abelard was consoled religiously, and even compared his own destiny to Christ's. If Abelard could not be consoled by any individual truth or righteousness, he is comforted by the models with which he chooses to identify.

The Council at Sens

The same identification with Christ takes place when Abelard is condemned for heresy at the Council of Sens in 1140. (This incident is not mentioned in the *Historia calamitatum* as it was written in 1132.) At the Council of Sens Abelard compared himself to Christ before Pilate.³¹⁶

³¹² *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 84.

³¹³ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 331. (See footnote 37.)

³¹⁴ Bagge. 'The autobiography of Abelard and medieval individualism', 339.

³¹⁴ See Weintraub. *The Value of the Individual Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*, 341.

³¹⁵ Weintraub. *The Value of the Individual Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*, 341.

³¹⁶ One of Abelard's sermons praises the incomparable fortitude of Christ in refusing to answer Pontius Pilate, and in another Abelard mentions Susanna's refusal (in the Book of Daniel) to answer the false accusations of the elders. See Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 312-313.

And like Christ, Abelard kept quiet. His failure to answer his accusers could have been caused, according to Clanchy, by illness or the stress of the occasion.³¹⁷ This could have been a motive along with Abelard's imitation of Christ. Clanchy stresses the parallel with Christ by saying that Abelard's silence at Sens cried out with a loud voice for justice, and God saved him through the intervention of Peter the Venerable.³¹⁸

In *Historia calamitatum* the roles relating to scapegoating and heresy are dramatically reversed: Abelard makes the heretic Christ-like and the defenders of the Church become persecutors. And he does this through a daring identification with Christ, who was also accused of heresy (blasphemy). The great difference, which Abelard is slow to recognize, is that unlike in the case of Christ, it is also his rivalistic attitude that causes persecution. Abelard is no innocent victim, but, on the other hand, there are few formal reasons for persecuting Abelard. Only the scapegoat-mechanism can give a rational explanation for Abelard's continual miseries. Abelard's tendency to scapegoat his teachers, makes him extremely vulnerable to becoming scapegoated himself; but, on the other hand, there is no evidence to suggest that Abelard actively tried to scapegoat anyone by having them branded as a heretic.

A Radical Understanding of Sin

There seems to be a theological understanding of sin in Abelard's thinking which questions scapegoating. Abelard appears to have a similar anthropological understanding as the author of the *Gospel of St Mark*. According to Mark, the disciples are consequently presented as people who do not understand Christ. Whereas the disciples in Matthew are presented as superior to the rest of mankind, gradually coming to grips with Christ's message, Mark presents the disciples as hardened to the Gospel. Instead of showing a development in their warming towards the Gospel, he lets a Roman soldier be the first to confess a belief in Jesus as the Son of God.³¹⁹ Abelard presents humanity in a similar way, giving no-one any privileged position, especially not the theological authorities. For Abelard all mankind is infected by sin, but at the same time, all mankind can participate in the same rationality, the same universal Logos.

³¹⁷ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 312-313.

³¹⁸ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 313.

³¹⁹ Mark 15.39.

Abelard's work on atonement emphasizes Christ's love. In his *Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, he sees redemption as a one-sided act of love. He does not agree with Anselm of Canterbury that Christ's sacrifice was a juridical way of restoring righteousness. Abelard dismisses the thought that Christ's sacrifice was a substitute for man's sins, since that would diminish the concept of a loving God.³²⁰ According to Southern, Abelard left out the whole idea of making compensation to God for human sin and threw the whole emphasis of the Incarnation onto its capacity to revive man's love for God.³²¹ In this respect, the good in the world is not something produced by men, but is something given by God. This rather negative anthropology is the basis of Abelard's daring description of the human condition as totally rivalistic. At the same time, his emphasis on God's love is the basis of his theological *tour de force*. There are no privileged positions in his thought, not even being a Christian gives any definitive privileges compared to the Jew or the Greek philosopher. The only privilege is the identification with Christ's love, a love which can inspire love in man.³²²

The Message

This leads us on to the message of the *Historia calamitatum*. According to Clanchy, one could read *Historia calamitatum* as the story of a provincial boy who wanted to succeed in Paris.³²³ And the desire to succeed is certainly the driving force of the story. But *Historia calamitatum* claims a message far greater than merely describing Abelard's desire to succeed. At the end of *Historia calamitatum* Abelard returns to his friend's misfortunes. And he daringly compares himself to Christ (when 'comforting' his friend) by quoting St. John (15.20):

If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you. (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, 104.)

³²⁰ Grane. *Abelard. Filosofi og kristendom i middelalderen*, 116.

³²¹ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 286.

³²² Grane. *Abelard. Filosofi og kristendom i middelalderen*, 114-115.

³²³ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 248.

According to Abelard, being a Christian means being persecuted.³²⁴ Suffering is the Christian's lot in the world, and the world hates the just. Christ was persecuted, and so too his disciples will be persecuted. This suffering happens to be God's will, and, ultimately, it will benefit the believer.³²⁵ This is the message, a message which sees beyond failures and successes. According to Abelard, the meaning of his miseries is that they have brought him nearer to Christ. The *Historia calamitatum* is not, primarily, thought to be a description of Abelard's life, but more a story about how suffering leads to God. Success is the real danger. Too much success makes weak human nature grow arrogant and leads to its fall.³²⁶ This insight seems to have been provoked by Abelard's becoming a victim.

But the message is not a pious appendix at the end of the story. It is the message that enables Abelard to write in such an explicit and revealing way about his failures, and, furthermore, it is this message which distinguishes his story from numerous other stories about 'how I became so successful' - either in financial or spiritual terms. It is also the message which enables Abelard to delve into the great truths of human nature. The honesty with which Abelard describes his misfortunes, is the fruit of humility. Without humility the history would have been only about Abelard's successes, and the evilness of other men. The self-revealing point of view is the hard-earned reward of humbleness. Abelard's Christology, which is based upon revealing violence through the act of imitating Christ, ignites the message in *Historia calamitatum*. This work, inspired by Abelard's gradual shift of model from a rivalistic academic to that of a devout monk, seems to have been the fruit of religious imitation. Despite the fact that Abelard deals mainly with the violence created by jealousy and rivalry, the revelation of these negative forces seems to have been provoked by his identification of his life with the life of Jesus. In this way the *Historia calamitatum* text illustrates, in the most life-like manner, the basic transference contained in conversion.

A modern reader will tend to read the story of Abelard's life as one pointing towards the turning-point in his life, as a reflection on how it has changed him from the arrogant intellectual to the afflicted abbot, who, cleansed through suffering, has come closer to God, and grown in humility and self-knowledge. This interpretation seems sound, even from a

³²⁴ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 104-105.

³²⁵ Bagge. 'The autobiography of Abelard and medieval individualism,' 333.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 334.

medieval perspective. However, according to Bagge, Abelard does not draw this conclusion, but regards his life as an illustration of the general truth that God chastens the pious in order to keep them on the narrow path.³²⁷ Bagge is also right when he states that Abelard never indicates that he has learned anything from anybody, that he has changed his opinions, or that he has achieved a deeper understanding during his years of struggle with theological and philosophical problems.³²⁸ But, on the other hand, this is what makes *Historia calamitatum* something different from either a morality tale or a traditional conversion story. Abelard is more interested in the interindividual processes than in his own individual and psychological development.

Rivalry and Textual Scapegoating

In the same way as Abelard's life was determined by desire, desire has been hot around Abelard's destiny. An investigation undertaken in German libraries, onto texts from the 12th century, shows that Anselm of Laon, Wilhelm of Champeaux and Hugo St Victor were read because they were imprinted by the Church Fathers. Abelard, on the other hand, was regarded more critically.³²⁹

Within less than a generation after Abelard's death, his books were forgotten. This fate also befell other scholars of Abelard's day. But in observing the meteoric and dazzling flash of Abelard's genius, and seeing how modern scholarship hails him as an intellectual pioneer, students are bound to wonder why Abelard's contemporaries displayed so little interest in his writings and hardly bothered to copy his works.³³⁰ The reason, most likely, is that the Church authorities dismissed Abelard, and, in an age loyal to authority and ridden with fear of heresy, Abelard had no chance until his work resurfaced in an age more dominated by rationality and individuality, and less dominated by fear of heresy. The outward desire to be orthodox could be enough to put many theologians off reading a writer condemned as a heretic. According to Häring, this assumption (that his theological writings were dominated and controlled by the Church) is weakened by the fact that Abelard's philosophical writings suffered a similar, if not

³²⁷ Ibid., 336.

³²⁸ Ibid., 338.

³²⁹ Grane. *Abelard. Filosofi og kristendom i middelalderen*, 32.

³³⁰ Nikolas M. Häring. 'Abelard Yesterday and Today', 347, in *Pierre Abelard, Pierre le Venerable*.

worse, fate.³³¹ Häring's own argument, though, is weakened by the fact that Abelard's philosophical writings lost their importance following the rediscovery of Aristotle.³³² But the fact that Abelard was branded a heretic surely influenced people's approach to his less theological works, at least until the 19th century.

The desire to be in accordance with Church orthodoxy became less acute after the Middle Ages. Abelard was resurrected in the Renaissance. He and Heloise were seen as inspirators to the Renaissance humanists, from Petrarch and on. They became extremely popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, right up to the 1960's.³³³ Today Abelard is not forgotten, but during the last thirty years he has lost his position as a by-name in cultural life. This is partly due to the theory of John F. Benton, claiming the letters of Abelard and Heloise to be forgeries - a theory he later dismissed. Another reason is that 20th century historians have reacted against the 18th and 19th century portrayals of him as a romantic hero, who stood out against the alleged dark forces of the Medieval Church.³³⁴ The romantic praise of Abelard is based on a notion of individuality and love which, in fact, is somewhat absent in *Historia calamitatum*. On the other hand, the revelations of desire are so forceful that it is understandable, in times that allow desires to flow more freely, that people announce what Abelard himself denounced. This, however, means drawing the opposite conclusion to that which Abelard himself seems to conclude.

³³¹ Ibid., 347.

³³² Another reason for why Abelard was so easily forgotten, was the fact that he did not complete his work. (Nikolas M. Häring. 'Abelard Yesterday and Today', 347, in *Pierre Abelard, Pierre le Venerable*.)

³³³ Clanchy. *Abelard. A Medieval Life*, 326.

³³⁴ Ibid.