

---

H-France Review Vol. 5 (September 2005), No. 102

Constant J. Mews, *Abelard and Heloise. Great Medieval Thinkers*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. xviii + 308 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$74.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-19-515688-9; \$24.95 U.S. (pb). 0-19-515689-7.

Review by Barbara Newman, Northwestern University.

---

Studies of Peter Abelard, a controversial figure for the past nine centuries, have tended to concentrate on either Abelard the logician, Abelard the theologian, or Abelard the lover, almost as if they were three separate persons—in a parody of the philosopher’s much-misunderstood doctrine of the Trinity. Constant Mews has done more than any other medievalist to bridge these gaps. In the present volume, he offers an account of Abelard’s intellectual development through concise and careful summaries of his works, including both phases of his contested correspondence with Heloise: the so-called “lost love letters” and the later monastic letters. Following the lead of Étienne Gilson and Peter Dronke, Mews aims to demonstrate that Heloise was not merely Abelard’s disciple and mistress, but an important thinker in her own right and a lifelong influence on her teacher’s thought.[1]

Readers approaching this volume should take note of the series title. This is not a biography of the famous pair, nor is it the place to seek lively vignettes of Parisian university life or poignant evocations of tragic love.[2] It is, however, an excellent resource for the student or historian of philosophy who wants to know exactly how Abelard’s ideas about language influenced his rethinking of the Trinity, how his emphases shifted through successive revisions of his *Theologia*, how his approach to revelation differed from that of his famous contemporary Hugh of Saint-Victor, or how his ethical writings responded to the challenges and concerns of Heloise. Some readers may peruse the volume from cover to cover, but others will use it as a convenient reference guide to the master’s writings.

After an introductory chapter on the modern reception of Abelard and Heloise, the book’s structure is chronological (insofar as the uncertain dating of Abelard’s works allows). But a thematic approach may be more useful for this review. One of Mews’ key insights is the importance of language to Abelard’s thought, for dialectic and grammar were intimately linked in the late eleventh-century schools where he began his career. Abelard’s concern with the exact meanings of words and the logic of predication had a profound impact on his theology, from his early disputes over universals to his later predilection for Greek terms (such as *theologia* itself) as a way of distancing himself from Augustinian thought. As any reader of Abelard’s Latin is aware, he was neither a consummate rhetorical stylist like Bernard of Clairvaux or Heloise, nor a measured, contemplative writer like Hugh, but one who oscillated between extreme precision and heated excursions into polemic. Although he was hardly alone in these vituperative flights, which led to so many accusations of heresy among the early schoolmen, this taste for invective (and the counter-invective it provoked) constantly threatened the generous impulses that underlie his theological system.

Yet Abelard was above all the theologian of divine goodness, or more specifically of the Holy Spirit. The earliest version of his great Trinitarian work, labeled the *Theologia “Summi boni”* by its editors, centers on the Trinity as the supreme good. *Benignitas* or *caritas*, not power, is the defining attribute of God. Like Hugh, Abelard linked the Father with *potentia*, the Son with *sapientia*, and the Holy Spirit with *benignitas*, but he understood *potentia* in the sense of unlimited potentiality rather than absolute power. Breaking with the Augustinian psychological analogy of memory, understanding, and will, Abelard also de-emphasized the notion of the Spirit as the personified love between the Father and the Son to stress

instead its character as “the love of God for creation” (p. 114). This emphasis became more pronounced in subsequent revisions of the work. At the time he was preparing the *Theologia christiana*, Abelard also rededicated his chapel of the Holy Trinity to the Spirit alone, the Paraclete—a controversial name it retained when it became the convent of Heloise. In this revision of his *Theologia* Abelard commented more favorably on the Christian Platonist interpretation of the *anima mundi*, or world soul, as the Holy Spirit. Having earlier criticized this idea of William of Conches as a mere *figmentum* (fiction), he now validated it as an *involucrum* or allegorical veil for divine truth. A thorough philhellene, Abelard even maintained in the *Theologia* “*Summi boni*” that Plato had spoken more explicitly than the Hebrew prophets about the Son of God as the divine Mind (p. 113).

The same “grandly optimistic and rational vision” (pp. 201-202) can be traced in Abelard’s ethics. Believing that human beings should be motivated more by love of virtue than by fear of sin or damnation, he posited *caritas* as the sum of all virtues, the ultimate moral good. Although Abelard shared the conviction of virtually all literate contemporaries (except Heloise) that sex was intrinsically sinful, he dissented from Augustine’s position that original sin, like a kind of sexually transmitted disease, condemns all the unbaptized to hell. Instead, he boldly argued in his commentary on Romans that “anyone who loves God sincerely and purely is predestined to life” (p. 190), even if he has no access to Christian preaching or baptism. This proviso applied not only to unbaptized infants, but also to virtuous pagans like Job and the ancient philosophers. To believe otherwise, Abelard held, “would be to attribute to God an act of appalling cruelty” (p. 191). This trust that the sacraments are beneficial, but not necessary for salvation, is the corollary of his famous view of Christ’s Passion: it is a supreme example of divine love, not a transaction meant either to ransom us from the devil or to placate the Father’s wrath. A third, often neglected corollary is Abelard’s affective devotion to Jesus, which he movingly recommended to Heloise in order to prove that it was Christ, not he, who truly loved her for herself alone.

Mews’ treatment of Heloise in this book cannot be appreciated without reference to his intensely controversial 1999 volume, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, which presents, translates, and analyzes a collection of anonymous Latin love letters from the early twelfth century.[3] Johannes de Vepria, a fifteenth-century Humanist monk of Clairvaux, had excerpted and transcribed these letters from a now-lost exemplar as specimens of good epistolary style, but he did not record and presumably did not know who wrote them. The epistles were first published in 1974 by Ewald Könsgen, who dated them and represented them as the correspondence of an amorous pair “like” Abelard and Heloise.[4] But Mews removed the question mark from Könsgen’s title and, as I claimed in my review of his earlier book, “demonstrat[ed] beyond a reasonable doubt that the authors of these letters were indeed Heloise and Abelard.”[5]

Since that time, a veritable firestorm has erupted around Mews’ thesis and the “lost letters” themselves. In his *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility*, C. Stephen Jaeger concluded independently of Mews that the Könsgen letters were those of the famous couple. [6] Since then he has published a fuller vindication of these attributions—with a dissenting response from Giles Constable.[7] In an updated edition of Betty Radice’s widely read translation, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Michael Clanchy has added a new preface cautiously endorsing Mews’ thesis and appended a few of the “lost love letters” to the canonical monastic set.[8] The essay collection *Listening to Heloise*, edited by Bonnie Wheeler, presents a wide range of views on both the “old” and the “new” correspondence.[9] Meanwhile, the skeptical position has been argued by Jan Ziolkowski in North America and Peter von Moos in Germany, the latter with a polemical fervor rivaling that of Abelard and his enemies.[10] I do not wish to reenter the fray in this review, for Ziolkowski’s arguments in particular deserve a thoughtful and careful response. But in what follows I will adopt Mews’ usage and refer to the anonymous letter-writers as if they were in fact Abelard and Heloise.

Mews' chapter on the *Epistolae duorum amantium* recapitulates his previous arguments, with an emphasis on the stylistic and philosophical differences between the two anonymous lovers as well as the affinities between their letters and the signed works of Abelard and Heloise. Neither here nor elsewhere does Mews engage in polemics of his own. His broader strategy, however, is to integrate the *Epistolae* into his narrative of both authors' intellectual development as "great medieval thinkers." Crucial here is Heloise's formulation, in both the love letters and the monastic correspondence, of a complex idea of love which fuses passionate desire (*amor*) with elements of disinterested Ciceronian friendship (*amicitia*), attentive devotion of the will (*dilectio*), and universal Christian charity (*caritas*). Abelard did not share this difficult ideal, although he may at times have admired it. Rather, he expresses far more guilt about his sexual relationship with Heloise during their affair, and far less erotic nostalgia afterwards (although his castration may have made this a moot point). Nor does he present anything resembling Heloise's erotic idealism in his theological writings. More characteristic are his choice of jocular examples like *Petrus diligit suam puellam* ("Peter loves his girl") in his early dialectical works, and his representation of sexual desire as a paradigmatic temptation in his ethical treatise, *Scito teipsum*.

What Abelard did share was Heloise's Ciceronian ideal of a pure love that seeks nothing for itself, but focuses exclusively on the beloved—an ideal that is easily reconciled with Paul's eulogy of *caritas* in 1 Corinthians 13, though hardly with erotic desire. Mews points out that one of the traits Abelard most admired in Heloise was her ability to live out her ethical ideals (p. 173). In this context he finds it interesting "that Abelard writes so much about the loving-kindness of God so soon after the collapse of his early relationship to Heloise," and speculates that "he may be projecting his idealization of Heloise as ultimate goodness onto his image of God" (p. 118). This psychologically convincing argument stands in the broad tradition of Étienne Gilson, but gains added force from the evidence of the *Epistolae duorum amantium*. On Mews' showing, if these letters are accepted as authentic, they reveal that Abelard and Heloise's early "debate about love" (p. 78) set the terms for their continuing engagement both with each other and with the grand theme itself—which is, after all, a central idea of Christian theology as of twelfth-century literature.

In a final chapter Mews gives his version of the events surrounding Abelard's condemnation for heresy in 1141, after Bernard succeeded in persuading both the bishops at Sens and Pope Innocent II to condemn the master without hearing his self-defense. Although the pope's sentence of imprisonment and perpetual silence was never imposed, the Cistercians had a highly effective propaganda machine. Thus it was their portrayal of an arrogant, pernicious heretic that dominated Abelard's later medieval reputation, rather than his final confession of faith or the reconciliation effected by Peter the Venerable. Mews offers succinct, even-handed accounts of all the principal players, with their strengths and weaknesses, and situates Abelard helpfully among the other masters then teaching in Paris. He is particularly good at clarifying the turbulent political situation and the sense of crisis, manufactured or real, that tended as it always does to obscure the intellectual subtleties at issue.

---

## NOTES

[1] Étienne Gilson, *Héloïse et Abélard* (Paris: Vrin, 1930); Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua († 203) to Marguerite Porete († 1310)* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 107–43.

[2] A good recent biography is M. T. Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

[3] Constant J. Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France*, with a translation by Neville Chiavaroli and Constant J. Mews (New York:

[4] Ewald Könsgen, ed. and trans., *Epistolae duorum amantium: Briefe Abaelards und Heloises?* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

[5] Barbara Newman, review of Constant J. Mews, *The Lost Love Letters*, in *The Medieval Review*, 2000. <http://www.hti.umich.edu/t/tmr/>

[6] C. Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 157-73. See also the review by Mews in *The Medieval Review* and Jaeger's reply (2000). <http://www.hti.umich.edu/t/tmr/>

[7] C. Stephen Jaeger, "Epistolae duorum amantium and the Ascription to Heloise and Abelard"; Giles Constable, "The Authorship of the Epistolae duorum amantium: A Reconsideration"; and C. Stephen Jaeger, "A Reply to Giles Constable," in Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, eds., *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 125-86. Constable's essay has also appeared in French: "Sur l'attribution des Epistolae duorum amantium," *Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres: comptes rendus des séances de l'année 2001, novembre-décembre, fasc. IV* (Paris: De Boccard, 2001), pp. 1679-93.

[8] M. T. Clanchy, "The Letters of Abelard and Heloise in Today's Scholarship," in Betty Radice, trans., *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Penguin, 2003), pp. lviii-lxxxiv, and Appendix, pp. 237-44.

[9] Bonnie Wheeler, ed., *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth-Century Woman* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000). See especially John O. Ward and Neville Chiavaroli, "The Young Heloise and Latin Rhetoric: Some Preliminary Comments on the 'Lost' Love Letters and Their Significance," pp. 53-119.

[10] Jan Ziolkowski, "Lost and Not Yet Found: Heloise, Abelard, and the *Epistolae duorum amantium*," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 14 (2004): 171-202; Peter von Moos, "Die *Epistolae duorum amantium* und die 'säkulare Religion der Liebe': Methodenkritische Vorüberlegungen zu einem einmaligen Werk mittellateinischer Briefliteratur," *Studi Medievali* 44 (2003): 1-115; idem, "Abaelard, Heloise und ihr Paraklet: Ein Kloster nach Mass, zugleich eine Streitschrift gegen die ewige Wiederkehr hermeneutischer Naivität," in Gert Melville and Markus Schürer, eds., *Das Eigene und das Ganze: Zum Individuellen im mittelalterlichen Religiösentum* (Münster: Lit, 2002), pp. 563-619.

Barbara Newman  
Northwestern University  
[bjnewman@northwestern.edu](mailto:bjnewman@northwestern.edu)

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172