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*Specialiter:*
The Language of the Body and Bodies
in the
Letters of Heloise

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It is possible to read both the love letters and the later correspondence of Heloise and Abelard[1] from a theological and philosophical perspective of the body, particularly the "reasoning female body", and bodies as articulated by the psychoanalytic perspective of sexual difference and alterity in the writings of French feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray[2]. What becomes evident and highly significant, in this reading, could be referred to as Heloise's distinctively "incarnational form of language"[3]. This is a language that does not set up any false dichotomies between the material and spiritual realities of being. Heloise's is a language that refuses to erase the concepts of essential embodiment and sexual difference throughout her dialogue with Abelard. As such, Heloise's twelfth-century use of, and struggle with language could be said to be analogous, in many ways, to the modern philosophical critiques of Irigaray.

Tina Beattie points out that Irigaray recognises: " . . . that the production of language is in itself dependent upon the physical body of the speaker or writer"[4]. I am going to argue

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[1]Constant J. Mews, The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard : Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999). All English translation of the early love letters will be taken from this source. Mews suggests that the love letters found at Clairvaux in the fifteenth century by the monk, Johnnes de Vepria are the authentic early writings of Heloise and Abelard. I am presuming this position in this paper. All references to the Letters of Heloise and Abelard are taken from the Latin edition of the letters by Eric Hicks, ed., La vie et les epistres, Pierres Abaelart et Heloys sa fame, Traduction du XIIIe siècle attribuée à Jean de Meun, avec une nouvelle édition des textes latins d'aprés le ms. Troyes Bibl. Mun. 802.I Introduction, Texts,, vol. 16 (Paris: Champion, 1991), and the revised English translation by Betty Radice, The Letters of Abelard and Heloise., ed. Clanchy Michael ( London: Penguin, 2003).
[2] The works of Luce Irigaray are numerous. I will be drawing primarily on her work in, This Sex Which Is Not One, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), "Egales a Qui?," Critique 480. May (1987)translated in, Robert Mazzolo, "Equal to Whom," The Post Modern God: A Theological Reader, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), and her work as summarised by Elizabeth Grosz, Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists (North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989).
[3] Tina Beattie uses this phrase in relation to the writings Luce Irigaray in Tina Beattie, God's Mother, Eve's Advocate. A Marian Narrative of Women's Salvation (London: Continuum, 2002) 38.
[4]Ibid. 31.

that Heloise's language parallels this position of bodily dependency through her particular preference in terminology especially in her greetings to Abelard. I intend to make a case for suggesting that her consistent use of the term, *specialiter,* in both the early love letters and the later correspondence, is directly and deliberately connected to her unique position with regard to the significant role of the female body as subject, in contrast to object, in establishing one's relationship with and in, other bodies.

Irvine has posited the idea that the letters of Heloise and Abelard, " . . . opens up the question of gendered subjectivity in an unusually explicit way, and discloses the possibilities for a woman to appropriate the power of Latin culture but resist its totalizing or essentializing force."[5] However, his arguments involve the appropriation of the masculine subject, rather than the creation of a space specific to the female subject. Irvine maintains that: "Writing from the position of the literate subject, she [Heloise] both appropriates the authority of the masculine *litteratus* and resists the totalising force of this gendered position: she writes like an *amicus* but as a woman."[6] In contrast to this position, I want to suggest that Heloise creates a space for a form of working language for the female body that is more concrete, more representative, and more fundamentally Christian than has been acknowledged previously. As such, *specialiter* can be used as the Hermeneutic tool through which the letters of Heloise can be interpreted.

Heloise's dialogue with Abelard does battle with his more metaphoric emphasis on the body and his contrasting philosophical position as indicated in his own preferences in terminology. Irigaray maintains that male discourse is, "a language that is transcendent with respect to bodies . . ." and thus to retrieve a feminine discourse, one would have "to become incarnate, "so to speak" . . ."[7] In this respect, it is possible to expose a voice of Heloise whose rhetoric is implicitly consistent with an appreciation of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation and its significance, particularly its significance in relation to female bodies. This is a doctrine that not only stresses the inherent goodness of materiality and thus the fundamental embodiment of the human condition, but also

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[5] Martin Irvine, "Abelard and (Re)Writing the Male Body: Castration, Identity, and Remasculinization."" Becoming Male, ed. Cohen and Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1999) 87.
[6] Ibid. 92.
[7] Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One 89.

radically alters the perception of the nature of the body and bodies in their relationship to one another and to God. The incredulity of an incarnate God, "a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles"[8], still haunts our theological understanding of the body, and the female body in particular. Though not explicit in Heloise's letters, I will attempt to articulate the implications of the language she uses, a specifically embodied language, for this theological interpretation of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation.

**The Love Letters**

In the *Lost Love Letters,* Heloise's particular focus rests on the use of the term, *specialiter,* in contrast to Abelard's preference for *singulariter.*[9] This emphasis on specific philosophical terminology in her greetings and elsewhere appears to be deliberate. The question becomes: What is she trying to achieve with this contrast to Abelard's use of *singulariter*?

Heloise's position on the nature of true love becomes explicit in letter 25 of this correspondence. In this letter she uses *amor* and *dilectio* interchangeably, or rather, as a unit constituting together that particular or *specialis* (special) form of the general expression of *caritas*, love, which is the fundamental duty of every Christian: "Et nos licet omnibus integram ceritatem exhibeamus, non tamen omnes equaliter diligimus, et ita quod omnibus est generale quibusdam efficitur speciale" (And even if we show perfect kindness to everyone, we still do not love everyone equally; and what is general for everyone is made particular [or special] for certain people). Heloise, quite distinctively moves from the particular or special condition, to the general expression of love. Her love for Abelard is a special form of the general Christian *caritas*.

We see this same integration of *dilectio* and *amor* in Letter 79. Heloise's greeting addresses Abelard thus: "Merito specialis dilectionis amplectendo amore" (To one deserving to be embraced with the longing of a special love). *Amor,* the passion or desire

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[8] cf. St. Paul's claim in I Cor. 1:23.

[9] Mews point out that in these letters Heloise uses the term *specialiter* 4 times and *singulariter* only once and not in relation to Abelard. Abelard, on the other hand, uses *singulariter* 4 times and *specialiter* not at all, cf. Mews, The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard 120-24.

of love associated primarily with the body, and *dilectio,* the conscious intention to love, or self-less love associated with the soul or the heart, create the ideal of special/particular love for Heloise.[10] Passion and intention, body and soul, form a creative tension in loving for Heloise. Her language creates a space for an integrated and inherently Christian anthropology that refuses to deny the essential embodiment of human relationships. The later sundering of the relationship, particularly with the denial of body on Abelard's part, leaves her incomplete, that is, with a missing body. It is this tension in being that she recognises and acknowledges and which enables her to move into the communal dimension of her embodied self in the later letters. What we hear is Heloise's voice – an embodied voice - setting about the task of resolving this inherent tension.

Heloise's understanding of the nature of love develops directly from her philosophical ideas, which she expresses in her choice of the term *specialiter* in both her greetings where she experiments with words, and elsewhere in her letters where she attempts to interpret the nature of love ethically. Her experimentation with terms provides us with a *trope* with which to unravel her distinctive pattern or thought.

Unlike Abelard, Heloise rarely uses his favoured philosophical emphasis on unique separateness, with the use of the term *singulariter.* Abelard's reply to Heloise's first letter in the love letter collection clearly articulates the terminology that he prefers to use in relation to Heloise and that he continues to stress throughout his correspondence with her. His preference for *singulariter* indicates the language of separateness, which understands the fundamental distinctiveness of all individual objects, and by inference therefore, of separate bodies. In Letter *2* he asserts her uniqueness: "singulari gaudio et lassate mentis unico solamini ille" (To the singular joy and only solace of a tired mind).

Again, in letter *4*, Abelard focuses on this singular emphasis to express his own identity in relation to Heloise. He is "singularis eius" (her only one). This perspective is once more stressed by Abelard in letter *54* where he uses this same terminology to further

[10] As Mews notes: " . . . there is no discontinuity between the love which comes from her heart (*amor*) and selfless love (*dilectio*). *Amor* occurs fifty-two times and *dilectio* forty-one times in those extracts copied by Johannes deVepria. By contrast, *dilectio* occurs just ten times in his letters, whereas *amor* occurs forty-seven times." Ibid. 136.

describe the nature of their relationship, that is, he is her "singularis amici" (individual friend). In letter *56*, also, his preference in terminology is established when he offers Heloise, "quicquid boni singulariter amantibus" (whatever good that is reserved singularly for lovers). The separateness of this expression of love is spelt out here by Abelard. There is no clear sense here in Abelard's vocabulary of a universal reality to love within which they share a particular or special expression. This preference for *singulariter* by Abelard in attempting to describe his relationship with Heloise points directly to his struggle later to maintain intimate relationships with her following his castration and entry into monastic life.

Heloise's first use of *specialiter* is in letter 21: "Dilecto suo speciali, et ex ipsius experimento rei, esse quod est" (To her beloved, special from experience of the reality itself; the being which she is). As noted previously, Heloise, in this greeting, offers her "being", and it would not be inappropriate at this stage of the argument to suggest that by "being", Heloise understands her body and soul, that is, her incorporated self. This concept is also emphasised in the greeting of an earlier letter, letter 5: "locunde spei mee: fidem meam, et cum omni devocione meipsam quamdiu vivam" (To my joyful hope: my faith and my very self with all my devotion as long as I live), and again in letter 9: "Nihil unquam erit tam laboriosum corpori meo, nichil tam periculosum anime mee, quod tue non impendam caritati" (Nothing will ever be so laborious for my body, nothing so dangerous for my soul, that I would not expend out of care for you*).*

As I have already suggested, it is in her extended reflection on love's meaning in letter 25 that we find the key to Heloise's understanding of this connection between the general and the particular. To restate her position: "Et nos licet omnibus integram caritatem exhibeamus, no tamen omnes equaliter diligimus et ita quod omnibus est generale quibusdam efficitur speciale." (And even if we show perfect kindness to everyone, we still do not love everyone equally; and what is general for everyone is made particular for certain people). To reiterate my earlier point, universal charity, *caritas*, the general expression of the universal virtue of love, is compared to the particular expression, *speciale,* of that universal/general virtue, which is special between certain people. As Mews suggests: "The distinction that she draws is between a general love for everyone

and a special love that is shared with a close friend rather than between two unique individuals."[11]

For Heloise, the emphasis is on the particularisation of the universal love for all, in other words, a *type* of the general. Although Abelard indicates this also in letter *24*: " . . . quia licet res universalis sit amor, ita tamen in angustum contractus est, ut audacter affirmem eum in nobis solummodo regnare, in me scilicet et in te domicilium suum fecisse" ( . . . although love may be a universal thing, it has nevertheless been condensed into so confined a place that I would boldly assert that it reigns in us alone – that is, it has made its very home in me and you", Heloise's thinking is much larger and extended. Her thinking images a body expandable beyond considerations of *indifferenter*, and separateness in being.

**The Later Letters:**

The realisation of this pattern of thought comes to its climax in Heloise's three letters of the later correspondence. Again her preference moves freely between the particular and the general expression of relationship yet, understood from the perspective of the body, there is a distinctive movement towards a fullness, or more aptly, an excess of embodiment in these three letters.

Heloise understands herself as both especially related to Abelard, as wife, that is, her particular embodiment, and at the same time, as generally related through her monastic position, as daughter to the founder of her community. She makes this explicit in her first greeting of Letter II, her response to the narrative of the *Historia calamitatum*. She greets Abelard thus: "Domino suo, immo patri; conjugi suo, immo fratri; ancilla sua, immo filia; ipsius uxor, immo soror; Abaelardo Heloysa." (To her lord or rather father; to her husband or rather brother; his handmaid or rather daughter; from his wife, or rather sister; to Abelard, from Heloise).[12] When we focus our attention on the role of the body, this greeting is constructed so as to present a finely balanced analysis of how Heloise

[11] Ibid., 122.
[12] *Ep* 2, Hicks, 45. (Radice, 47).

understands her fully embodied female identity regardless of her particular context, whether that of the particular lover or the monastic lover. As before, in her earlier letters, she oscillates between expressions of the most particular and the more general. This thesis is in direct contrast to Mews who suggests that Letter VI's greeting, "is carefully constructed so that she begins with the most general and concludes with the most particular" [13]. However, if we take careful note, the opposite is evident. She moves from her particular understanding of her bodily relationship to Abelard as her lord and husband to the more general form of her newly incorporated monastic body where Abelard, as founder of the community of which she is head, is both her father and brother.[14] This is the tension that she continues to live under and refuses to deny or dissolve into some idealised and disembodied understanding of the human condition. It is precisely this tension that is creative of her humanity and her community, an especially female humanity and community, as she continues to articulate it. As the letters progress, this tension is subtly brought to a climax and fulfilment in Letter VI.

As noted earlier, Mews maintains that Heloise wants Abelard "to address her not just in general terms but as an individual"[15], and this is particularly notable in her use of *unicus,* which mimics Abelard's earlier use of the term in his love letters to her. Certainly, she does pick up on Abelard's use of *unicus.* She ends this first letter with "*vale unice"*. But in the light of what she is doing with *specialiter* throughout all her letters, and her particular avoidance of *singulariter,* would it not be more consistent to understand what she is doing as pointing to her desire to be considered, as always, particularly, not simply uniquely, as he had once recognised her? The male friend addressed in the *Historia calamitatum* is related to in a "special way", that is, a particular way, the particularity of male body, which poses no threat to Abelard's own particularity as they are the same.

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[13] Mews, ed., The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard 122.

[14] Mews suggests some ambiguity here when he says: " . . . the ambiguities in their relationship, moving towards an ever more intimate address in, Ibid. 123. Although it would appear that this is to read the greeting as a whole rather than in its particular movements from one expression to another. I am suggesting the relationship expressed is not at all ambiguous to Heloise, but rather intentional in her quest to honestly identity herself and her relationship to Abelard.

[15] Ibid.

Heloise wants this equality, this particularity with him in her difference as a female body and this is reflected in the movements within her greeting.[16]

In Abelard's Letter III, he indicates to Heloise what he understands as his proper relationship to her when he greets her thus: "Heloise, dilectissme sorori sue in Christo, Abaelardus, frater ejus in ipso*."* (To Heloise, his dearly beloved sister in Christ, from Abelard, her brother in Him).[17] His love for her can now only be situated in Christ, the universal love, but within this love he can no longer enter into what he once understood as an embodied uniqueness and it is here that his own philosophical position with respect to universals seems to fall apart. This universal form of love, which he focuses on here, has no particular expression and certainly cannot have a unique dimension. As such, he will not, indeed cannot enter into any discussion that focuses on the special nature of their love, that is, the embodied expression of their relationship. Once Abelard understands himself as having no sexed body, no particular body, that is metaphorically at least, due to his is castration, it appears that he thinks he can ignore or at least negate the validity of embodied love for himself and those whom he believes should transcend this materiality of the body. His concern seems to be now with the soul alone: " . . . postulo ut que nunc de corporis mei periculo nimia sollicitudine laboratis, tunc precipue de salute anime" (. . . at present you are over-anxious about the danger to my body, but then your chief concern must be for the salvation of my soul*).*[18] Their bodies are now, or at least should be, wholly in Christ (and an immaterial Christ at that) and their particular relationship dissolved forever into this over-riding reality.

With his focus totally on this spiritual embodiment, particular incorporation can only be considered sinful. His is a "conversion" from the world to God, from the body to the spirit, a position that is dangerously dualistic in its implications and theologically puts into question the significance and scandal and "stumbling block" of an incarnate God. He considers her particular needs as not pertaining to God and identifies her as: ". . . soror in

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[16] Mews indicates this when he says: "Her emphasis on *unicus* has a particular significance in the light of the love letters. This was a favorite term of the man to describe his beloved's uniqueness . . ." in letter 110, " he addresses her as *Unice sue.* By repeating *unice* at the beginning and end of her first response to the *Historia calamitatum*, Heloise was signalling her desire to return to the intimate dialogue that Abelard had once lavished on her in the past." Cf. Ibid.

[17] *Ep*. 3*,* Hicks, 54. (Radice, 56).

[18] *Ep*. 3*,* Hicks, 60. (Radice, 62).

saeculo quondam cara, nunc in Christo karissima." (. . . my sister once dear in the world and now dearest in Christ).[19]

In his earlier letter *24,* Abelard had greeted Heloise with: "Anime qua nec candidius, nec michi carius terra protulit, caro quam eadem anima spirare facit et moveri: quicquid ei debeo per quem spiro et moveor" (To a soul brighter and dearer to me than anything the earth has produced, the flesh which that same soul causes to breathe and move: what ever I owe her through whom I breathe and move). Here, body and soul still form, to some degree at least, a considered whole. The priority of soul over body, however, in his later letters becomes more obvious. When there is no problematic flesh to speak of, no flesh that is not within the control of the will (that is in the effect of Abelard's castration) there is no need or desire/passion in his understanding of himself and thus, no desire for Heloise's enfleshed being, whose soul had previously caused his "flesh to breathe and move". Metaphorically, his body no longer breathes and moves at all, he is alive only in Christ. As Mews states: "The model of friendship that he puts forward in that narrative [*Historia calamitatum*] is predicated on an assumption that he had transcended his sexual identity."[20] – a position that continues in his subsequent letters. By implication, Abelard has, thus, transcended his body wherein sexuality resides. It would seem that, at least in Abelard's thinking, to be alive in Christ, necessarily requires one to be dead to the world of the body and its desires, that is, to renounce the body.

There is not this dichotomy in Heloise's thinking between her relationship to God and her relationship to Abelard. Her body is always included, even if it is negatively, in her considerations of her relationship with both Abelard and God. Her problem, or rather her uniqueness, lies in the fact that she cannot, and will not, perceive of one without the other.

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[19] *Ep.* 3, Hicks, 54-55. *(*Radice, 56).

[20] Constant J. Mews, "Philosophical Themes in the *Epistolae Duorum Amantium:* The First Letters of Heloise and Abelard," Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth Century Woman, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000) 36.

Heloise's response to this letter calls Abelard's attention to that "rhetoric of individuality"[21] in which he was once able to indulge: "Unico suo post Christum, unica sua in Christo" (To her only one after Christ, from his only one in Christ).[22] Yet she does not suggest any contradiction between her identity in Christ and her unique relationship to Abelard. By bringing into a creative harmony his own concept of singularity and being in Christ, Heloise does not avoid the issue of their essential embodiment. In the recognition of the tension that exists between one's being in Christ, the universal dimension of human existence which clearly takes priority, and her particular and unique relationship to Abelard within this universal – his "alone in Christ" – Heloise does not have to deny, transcend or spiritualise away her embodied self. "She accepts that her relationship with him is in Christ, [the universal for love] but she wants to communicate with him as an individual, [in a special way but within the orbit of this greater love] the way he used to speak to her."[23]

It is in this fourth letter that Heloise most vividly locates the importance of her body in their relationship a position that is often viewed as scandalous in the light of her role as a renowned and loved Benedictine Abbess of the day.[24] But it is important that this material be read in the light of the principle that she has set up in the greeting that begins the letter. Heloise sets forth an honest admission of her body with its desires and struggles to come to terms with the absent body of Abelard and within her present context as a monastic woman. In her laments and bold assertions of her desires, her arguments against marriage, her disparaging analysis of women through salvation history and castigation of herself as conforming to this history and living a life of hypocrisy, what appears to be most important is that she means to establish the central place of the female body in her

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[21] This is Mews' label for the quality of their rhetoric. Cf. The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard 120-21.

[22] *Ep*. 4, Hicks, 61. (Radice, 63).

[23] Mews, The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard 123. The inserts are mine own. Mews maintains that: "Heloise brought more than her memories with her when she came to the Paraclete in 1129. She brought with her a recorded of the intense exchange of messages that they had shared in the past . . . she was forcing Abelard to remember a collection of texts which he had effectively erased from his conscience when writing the *Historia calamitatum* . . . she is reminding Abelard that he was once fascinated by the rhetoric of individuality, and that he has an obligation to consider Heloise not just as spiritual daughter but as a separate person" Cf. The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard 124.

[24] Cf. J. T. (ed.) Muckle, "The Personal Letters between Abelard and Heloise," C.S.B. Mediaeval Studies 15 (1953): 59.

authentic identity as both lover of Abelard and lover of Christ as articulated in her greeting.

Heloise admits to recognising Abelard's own disembodiment, but not her own: "Hec te gratia, karissime, prevenit, et ab his tibi stimulis una corporis plaga medendo, multas in anima sanavit" (This grace, my dearest, came upon you unsought – a single wound of the body by freeing you from these torments has healed many wounds in your soul).[25] To admit the same conversion process for herself would be a denial of the very essence of her reality, a denial, as it were, of her difference and her body.

Abelard's inability and refusal to enter into, or understand Heloise's position, her difference, becomes even more evident in Letter V. He greets her now as before in Letter III, in pointedly general terms, "Sponse Christi, servus ejusdem" (To the Bride of Christ, from His servant).[26] In this letter he exegetes the black woman in the Song of Songs positing her not as a female body but as a feminine ideal. As such he successfully articulates a spiritualising of Heloise's body through metaphorical use of language, demanding her submission to disembodiment, and in so doing effectively dissolves the significance of her body.[27]

In Letter VI, the climax of Heloise's arguments, she further uncovers the understanding of her relationship to Abelard in comparison with how he perceives it, or more properly, does not perceive it. She achieves this with her deliberate and continuing preference for this specific terminology which focuses on the particularity of her relationship with Abelard. Her greeting, is as follows: "Suo specialiter, sua singulariter" (To him who is especially hers, she who is singularly his).[28] This preference and this contrast is simply a reminder to Abelard that there is a difference in the understanding they have for one another.[29]

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[25] *Ep.* 4, Hicks, 69. (Radice, 69).
[26] *Ep.* 5, Hicks, 76. (Radice, 72).
[27] Cf. A. Blamires, "No Outlet for Incontinence," Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth Century Woman, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).
[28] *Ep.* 6. Hicks, 86. (Radice, 93).
[29] Cf. Mews, The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard 122.

When we read the context of the rest of this letter, however, we are able, in the light of this greeting, to appreciate the extent of the contrast she is trying to express. By the time Heloise writes Letter VI, her focus on her body's involvement in their relationship has been transfigured. In her rhetoric, the boundaries of her body are now extended as she metonymically, rather than metaphorically, expands her being into that of the body of the community leaving nothing of herself behind.[30]. This communal body is the whole focus of her dialogue with Abelard in this letter. Far from capitulating to Abelard's demands that she no longer try to dialogue with him on the level of intimacy which she had been desiring in her previous two letters[31], Heloise again refuses to leave her understanding of the importance of the body out of her continuing dialogue with him. She doesn't concede any ground to Abelard's limited perspective on the level of their bodily relationships, so vividly and honestly expressed in her earlier letters. This is not even a shift in topic on the part of Heloise, or the moment of her conversion, as has been suggested previously[32], rather it is a metonymic expansion of context. Instead of changing voice or shifting topic, Heloise exerts an even greater force behind her arguments,[33] which constitute the universal view of the body in her textual transfiguration[34] into the body of her female monastic community.

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[30] Tina Beattie explains: " . . . metaphor suggests a vertical process of substitution and repression, while metonymy suggests a horizontal process of combination and contiguity . . . metonymic expression does not repress but implies the latent meaning that it seeks to disguise . . . While metaphor implies a sacrifice of meaning – the original signifier is sacrificed in the process of substitution – metonymy implies a fertile proliferation of meaning." Beattie, God's Mother, Eve's Advocate. 332-33.

[31] Many writers has suggested that this letter reveals an Heloise who has failed to draw Abelard into a discussion of their previous relationship, that she has given in to his demands to shut up about it all. Cf. Barbara Newman, "Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloise," Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies 22 (1992): 74.

[32] For example, D. W. Robertson, Jr., Abelard and Heloise. (London: Millington, 1974) 134-35, more recently, Linda Georgianna, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life," Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth-Century Women, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 2000 172). Morgan Powell suggests that Heloise becomes the exemplar of conversion for a female, community. Cf. Morgan Powell, "Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete: Of Scholarly Diversion and a Woman's 'Conversion'," Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth Century Woman, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000). Katarina Wilson and Glenda McLeod make a convincing case for Abelard's, rather than Heloise's, conversion in these letters in "Textual Strategies in the Abelard/Heloise Correspondence," Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth Century Woman, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

[33] A position also held by Georgianna in, "In Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise's Critique of Monastic Life.", although she also suggests that this is a shift in topic on Heloise's part.

[34] Graham Ward outlines the theological concepts of "transcorporeality" and the transfigured body and its theological significance in his article, "Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ," Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology, ed. Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward John Milbank (London: Routledge, 1999).

This transfiguration is not articulated as the traditional spiritualised transformation through renunciation of the body[35] with which Abelard concerns himself, a renunciation which demands of Heloise that she be "plus quam feminina" (more than woman)[36] in a conversion that negates sexual difference. Transfiguration refers to the radical "in-corporation" of the believing subject who will not be, in Heloise's own words, "nec plusquam Christianae" (more than Christian)[37]

Heloise has never left this communal dimension out of any of her later letters, and it is particularly obvious in Letters II and IV where the universal aspect of her feminine body in the context of her community is never absent.[38] But now it is wholly to the fore in her arguments with Abelard in the light of this perspective. Her oft quoted phrase taken from Cicero: "Ut enim inertum clavum alius expellit . . ." (As one nail drives out another hammered in . . .) [39], is not an indication of her submission but directly related to this enlarged understanding of the self and the body. The "withdrawal" of one body, her particular body, incorporates her into her universal expression of body. In other words, she moves prophetically towards an expanded and more general "Body", of which she is the special *type.*

Though Heloise has not been able to make Abelard acknowledge her individuality, which he once admitted in the context of his embodied being, this has actually not been her task. What she has failed to do in fact, is to persuade Abelard to come to understand the principles of her fundamental philosophical and theological stance concerning the nature of the body, a body that cannot be, and will not be left out of what she understands as her defining relationship, and her authentic identity, in the context of her love for him and for God.

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[35] Peggy McCraken identifies this renunciation using the language of adjection, in "The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter," Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth Century Woman, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).
[36] cf. *Ep.* 5, cf. Hicks, 82. (Radice, 84).
[37] cf. *Ep.* 6, cf. Hicks, 93. (Radice, 98).
[38] Morgan Powell also notes this simultaneous use of voices, "we" and the "I" with Heloise's letters in "Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete: Of Scholarly Diversion and a Woman's 'Conversion'," 259).
[39] *Ep.* 6, Hicks, 88. (Radice, 94).

Abelard's position concerning the concept of separate individuals without difference, as expressed in his earlier letters with the term *singulariter*, is incompatible with his concept of being in Christ. His recognition of the body in his Letter *V* is, as McCracken suggests, an acknowledgment of the material body, only for the purpose of its abjection:

> Abelard would suggest that Heloise renounce her body and its desire . . . Abelard *does* acknowledge and respond to Heloise's discourse of desire. Through the metaphor of the bride's body, he implicitly transforms the material body - Heloise's body – as a body to be adjected in order to find pleasure in the soul.[40]

Because of Heloise's subtle use of the term *specialiter,* in preference to *singulariter* she is able continually to maintain the creative harmony of the particular and the universal so as never to by-pass the inclusion of her body and bodies in her rhetoric. To restate Mews conclusion with this point in mind, " . . . he [Abelard] has an obligation to consider Heloise not just as a spiritual daughter (in general), but as a separate person (or special one within this broader category.)"[41]

Heloise finds it essential to hold both general and specific dimensions of being together at the same time, that is, as an integrated whole, in order to maintain her authentic identity in both her personal being and her communal identity. Abelard does not seem able to live with the tension which this involves for him and thus works at avoiding a discussion of the issue. The tension Heloise lives with is creative – Abelard's tension, because it is conceived of as disembodied, is unthinkable and must be resolved.

In her transfiguration into the body of the community, Heloise uses exactly the same arguments as she had in her previous letters, concerning the ethics of intention, the struggle with the body, its feminine specificity and the need to recognise this body's relationship to Abelard, on the level of *speciale*, but now her arguments are in the voice of *generale*. She *is* the communal body.

In this Letter VI, Heloise makes two requests from Abelard, both of which are simply the general form of the demands she had previously made to him in a particular context of

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[40] McCracken, "The Curse of Eve: Female Bodies and Christian Bodies in Heloise's Third Letter," 220.
[41] Mews, The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard 124. The inserts are my own.

her own bodily desire in Letters II and IV. Heloise had previously asked Abelard for some recognition of the history of their relationship, that is, the particular or special dimension of their embodiment held within their memory, their personal history. Now, as the communal body she again asks for this same recognition in her request for a history of monastic women. Similarly, Heloise asks for recognition of the female body with her request for a Rule specifically engendered, that is, for the needs of women's bodies, the details of which she then proceeds to describe herself. This request is no more than the general form of the request that Heloise made previously for the inclusion of her particular feminine body and its needs within their own dialogue.

Heloise's demand for a feminine reading of the Rule of Benedict is simply a demand to be recognised for what she is, a feminine body in both its particularity and its general communal dimension. This body cannot be transcended and remains central to Heloise's "incarnational" speech. In this sixth letter, the withdrawal of her own body, her *speciale*, becomes complete. In this withdrawal, Heloise, rather than denying herself and her desires, expands both and in so doing concretely highlights the nature and difference of the feminine body.

**Conclusion**:

How, then, is Heloise's "incarnational language" of significance in our continual quest to understand ourselves in relation to each other and to our God? Can Heloise speak to us still as a subversive voice, which puts into question the inhospitable atmosphere that can surround Christianity with its latent dualisms and repressive attitudes towards sexuality in particular and women in general? Can Heloise's language help us to renew our interpretation of the Christian faith so as to reinvigorate its original transformative message so that we no longer fear one another, male and female in our difference? Or has Christianity, as Irigaray claims, " . . . repressed the transformative potential of the story of the incarnation by denying its central message about the fertile marriage between word and flesh, man and woman, nature and divinity."[42]

[42] Cited in, Beattie, God's Mother, Eve's Advocate. 38.

The event of the Incarnation, God's in-corporation into the human condition in the person of Jesus Christ, marks the fundamental intimacy of God's relationship to humanity. In this event of the word becoming flesh, our essential embodiment is not sidestepped, but entered into fully by the divine. As Heloise refuses to leave her body out of her dialogues with Abelard, God refuses to leave our embodiment behind in God's ultimate and definitive communication with us in the person of Jesus Christ. There is no refusal, on God's part, in this act of pure love, to relate to us as embodied beings. This radical Christian doctrine of the incarnation demands an end to dualistic thinking and a recognition of the divine within all aspects of being, spirit and body, man and woman, nature and God without the negation of difference.[43]

In her distinctive use of *specialiter*, Heloise constructs a language for understanding the place of the female body in a manner that questions the traditional dichotomising of matter and spirit and the spiritualising of love, which can so often negate women's bodies and the place of sexuality in our spiritual endeavours. In her privileging of the body, Heloise does not need to overcome her sexual identity to maintain her desire for union with Abelard or God. It is precisely within her sexual identity, that is, as particularly herself, that Heloise's existence and meaning resides. She then moves to extend this difference by focusing on the sexed nature of her communal body. As such, Heloise draws us more thoroughly into the unique subjectivity of women.

Heloise's position is a theological re-reading of the body, which argues that to be in-corporated is to be expanded as body, to be a social body, to be the Body of Christ, not simply a separated or singular individual. To speak of oneself as if disembodied would be, in fact, a denial of the centrality of the Incarnation in the Christian endeavour.[44] As Gregory of Nyssa asserted early in Christian history: " . . . that body to which immortality has been given by God, when it is in ours, translates and transmutes the whole into itself."[45] Heloise's textual transfiguration into the body of her community symbolises and reclaims this radical understanding of the nature of Christian bodies and women's

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[43] cf. Paul's position on the body and dualism in both I Corinthians12 and Galatians 3:28.
[44] Cf. 1 Corthinians 10-13 which is a theological exposition on the nature of the Christian body.
[45] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, 37, quoted from Ward, "Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ," 179.

Christian bodies in particular. Heloise, a woman of the twelfth century, continues to offer an apt theological challenge to the fact that the female body still remains a "stumbling block" to the Church and "folly" to men in our own times.[46]

[46] cf. St. Paul's assertion concerning the crucified body of the Christ: " . . . a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles." (ICor. 1:23).