

# Feminine Love in the Twelfth Century - A Case Study:

The *Mulier* in the *Lost Love Letters*  
and the Work of Female 'Mystics'

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In 1999 the historian Mews sparked a ferocious academic debate when he declared that a set of 'Lost Love Letters' (*LLL*), as he described them, had been penned by the fêted Abelard and Heloïse.<sup>1</sup> His controversial argument derived from an analysis of the linguistic and philosophical patterns in the letters. Since publication his work on the letters has generated 'articles from many well-known specialists in Medieval Latin; a lengthy answer by Mews to his critics; and fresh defences of the attribution' notably by Jaeger and Piron.<sup>2</sup> Mews was building on the relatively unknown work of Kongsén, who had previously translated a set of 113 love letters which had been abridged and copied by a Cistercian monk of Clairvaux in the late fifteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Kongsén had been encouraged by his editors to raise the tantalising possibility that the letters were a discovery of an earlier exchange between Abelard and Heloïse; although he remained sceptical. The debate over the ascription has however come to dominate work on the *LLL* and has impeded historians from analysing them outside of this paradigm. This case study seeks to break from the impasse and utilise the letters for their intrinsic value. It aims to use the woman's voice in the *LLL* and compare it with the writings of two contemporary female mystics in order to assess whether there was a distinctively feminine expression of love in the twelfth century.

This approach necessitates accepting only the basic conclusions that the *LLL* are a genuine exchange of early twelfth-century epistles that were written by two articulate individuals who resided in the Ile de France<sup>4</sup> and that the authors were very well-educated – in particular, it is

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1 C.J. Mews, *Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth Century France*, trans. N. Chiavaroli and C.J. Mews (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

2 J. Marenbon, 'Lost Love Letters? A Controversy in Retrospect', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, Vol. 15, No 2, (June 2008), 268.

3 E. Kongsén, *Epistolae Duorum Amantium: Briefe Abaelards und Heloises?* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

4 Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, x.

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likely that the female writer spent time in a cathedral school.<sup>5</sup> This experience contrasts with the monastic background of the German ‘mystics’ Hildegard of Bingen and Elizabeth of Schönau who both lacked an extensive formal education. It was a defining characteristic of Hildegard in particular that she was an autodidact who felt she had to justify this in her writings.<sup>6</sup> In the twelfth century however Western Europe was undergoing an intellectual renaissance which originated in, and initially spread through, Northern France and Germany via a network of religious institutions.<sup>7</sup> This meant that the woman in the *LLL* and the mystics would have shared experience of aspects of the contemporary intellectual culture. They were also some of the scant women in this century to produce notable writings; though the *LLL* constitute a secular expression of love whereas the mystics wrote in a religious context. Dreyer does assert however that mysticism is a ‘love affair, an intense relationship between a devout person and a transcendent’.<sup>8</sup> Taken together these similarities and differences between the women allow for a fruitful comparison of female articulations of love in this period.

During this case study the use of imagery, and its meaning, is analysed in the women’s writings in three main categories: fire, nature and protection. In these sections the work of Hildegard of Bingen, in particular *Scivias* and her *Book of Divine Work*,<sup>9</sup> is compared to the voice of the woman in the *LLL*. The case study then looks at a dominant discourse of debasement in the writings and at visions in particular as a revealing form of female expression. The historian Newman advises that visions should always be studied ‘through the cultural and psychological prism of gender’.<sup>10</sup> For these parts the work of Elisabeth of Schönau is also considered because of the significant contribution her writing can make to the conclusions drawn. This is particularly due to the manner in which Elisabeth experiences her visions and narrates her writing in the first person.<sup>11</sup> It is also worth noting that there are relevant research questions that are beyond the scope of this case study; in particular it would be beneficial to compare these female works on love to those written by males in order to come to a fuller conclusion. As partial counter to this problem there will be some references to the man in the *LLL*. As the man and woman corresponding in the *LLL* have never been conclusively identified the standard convention is adopted here of referring to them as the *vir* and *mulier*.

One of the most frequent metaphors in both sets of texts analysed here is that of fire or flames. In his work on the *LLL* Jaeger dismisses the *mulier*’s idea of the ‘flames of love’ as a ‘trite metaphor’.<sup>12</sup> However fire is so prominent in the writings of Hildegard that O’Dell has seen fit to name her the ‘prophet of fire’.<sup>13</sup> In a rare use of the first person, when speaking of the path to true faith,

5 Jaeger, ‘*Epistolae Duorum Amantium* and the Ascription to Abelard’, in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, eds. L. Olsen, K. Kerby-Fulton, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 139-40.

6 Barbara Newman, ‘Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validations’, *Church History*, Vol. 54, No 2 (1985), 164.

7 Stephen Ferruolo, ‘The Twelfth Century Renaissance’, in *Renaissances before the Renaissance: Cultural Revivals of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Warren Treadgold, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 118-143.

8 E.A. Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality: Hildegard of Bingen and Hadewijch of Brabant* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), xiv.

9 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. C. Hart and J. Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990). Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Divine Works: With Letters and Songs*, trans. M. Fox (Santa Fe: Bear & Co, 1987).

10 Newman, ‘Visions and Validations’, 167.

11 Elisabeth of Schönau, *The Complete Works*, trans. A.L Clark, (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

12 C.S. Jaeger, ‘*Epistolae Duorum Amantium* and the Ascription to Abelard and Heloise’, *Voices in Dialogue*, 137.

13 M.C. O’Dell, ‘Elizabeth of Schönau and Hildegard of Bingen: Prophets of the Lord’, in *Medieval Religious Women II: Peaceweavers*, ed. J. Nichols, L. Shank, (Michigan: Kalamazoo - Cistercian Publications, 1987), 88.

Hildegard declared that ‘I become inflamed with the love of God in such longing that I can never have too much of it’.<sup>14</sup> She advanced her position on this more explicitly in a letter on love for God to Wibert and the monks at Villers.<sup>15</sup> She wrote ‘love is an unquenchable fire. It is from love that the sparks of true faith that burn in the hearts of the faithful have their fire’.<sup>16</sup> This use of fire imagery is especially notable because of the set of concepts related to ‘fire’ in the twelfth century. Hildegard herself wrote in her *Cause et Cure* that ‘when sexual pleasure surges in a human being it is brought about by *fire* in the marrow’ (emphasis added).<sup>17</sup> Moreover she related man’s sexual desire to a ‘blazing heat’, and a women’s desire to a ‘wood fire’.<sup>18</sup> Dreyer has argued that Hildegard’s use of thinly veiled erotic language was considered acceptable, by her and her contemporaries, because she was speaking of *spiritual* passion and love, not physical.<sup>19</sup> However in the *LLL* we see this metaphor being used in a secular context, directed towards a human, not divine, being. There are clear parallels between Hildegard’s first person declaration of love and the *mulier*’s that she is ‘afire with desire for you [the *vir*], I want to love you forever’<sup>20</sup>, or that she has a ‘fire of longing’<sup>21</sup> for the *vir*. As the letters progress this metaphor becomes even more urgent with the *mulier* insisting that the ‘fire of passion’ is ‘always growing’.<sup>22</sup> This passionate language appears to negate the assumption that women could only speak of love in a religious context. Or, this could be considered a demonstration that our *mulier* is thinking of the *vir* in the manner a female mystic thinks of God and thus this is akin to a religious context. This is strengthened by the passage in Letter 48 where the discussion of her love like fire is directly followed by the *mulier* addressing the *vir* as ‘my one salvation and all that I love in the world’.<sup>23</sup>

Mews has argued that Hildegard was unique in framing her thought in relation to the natural world and directing natural metaphors towards the Holy Spirit in particular.<sup>24</sup> However in the *LLL* we see the *mulier* was also prolific at directing natural metaphors towards (one we might consider) her figurative God: the *vir*. Moreover an analysis of the texts demonstrates that both women make use of natural metaphors in a very distinctive manner. Central to Hildegard’s focus on nature in her writing was her concept of *viriditas* or ‘greening’ which saw God as a form of nourishment for believers: one who does not love the holy spirit ‘dries up and dies completely’.<sup>25</sup> A recurrent metaphor in Hildegard’s work was the linkage of the ‘flow of water on the crops with the love of God that renews the face of the earth’, and by extension, the souls of believers.<sup>26</sup> When discussing the soul she writes ‘the Holy Spirit, like the rain, will water him, and so discernment, like the

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14 Hildegard, *Divine Works*, Vision 2:27, 43.

15 *Ibid.*, 351-4.

16 *Ibid.*, 352.

17 Hildegard of Bingen, *On Natural Philosophy and Medicine: Selections from Cause et Cure*, trans. M. Berger (Rochester NY: Cambridge, 1999), Section 104b, 54.

18 *Ibid.*, 53.

19 Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, xvi.

20 Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, No. 48, 227.

21 *Ibid.*, No.79, 259.

22 *Ibid.*, No.78, 259.

23 *Ibid.*, No.48, 227.

24 C.J. Mews, ‘Religious Thinker: “A Frail Human Being” on Fiery Life’, in *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, ed. B. Newman, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 56.

25 Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, 82.

26 *Ibid.*, 81.

tempering of the air, will lead to the perfection of good fruits'.<sup>27</sup> This concept of a nourishing form of love is paralleled by the *mulier* in the *LLL*. In letter 23, where the *mulier* is at her most urgent about the love affair, she declared 'I often come with parched throat longing to be refreshed by the nectar of your delightful mouth and to drink thirstily the riches scattered in your heart'.<sup>28</sup> This analogy of love like refreshing water was reinforced in a later letter where the *mulier* insisted that 'just as the thirsty land of Syria longs during summer for rain from the sky, so does my mind, grieving and troubled desire you'.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, although the *vir* did also engage in natural imagery (to a much lesser extent), he never expressed the love of his *mulier* as nourishing, or refreshing.<sup>30</sup> It can be argued that this type of metaphor represents the particular kind of fulfilment that love and their 'lover' brings to both women; that is to say in an especially *physical* way.

Both Hildegard and the *mulier* used a form of imagery which it is possible to subsume under the category 'protection' and the expectation of it from the one they love. It is notable that protection is not a form of expression that was ever engaged in by the *vir*. In the *LLL*, following the *vir*'s discussion of the 'malicious attention' the couple have been receiving,<sup>31</sup> the *mulier* declared that 'having given up everything, I take refuge under your [the *vir*'s] wings'.<sup>32</sup> This is reminiscent of Hildegard's assertion that pure believers will be 'protected by the extended and overshadowing wings of the Holy Spirit'.<sup>33</sup> This form of imagery is strengthened by the use of tower metaphors in both women's works, perhaps invoking, consciously or subconsciously, a phallic symbol. In the *LLL* the *mulier* portrays the *vir* directly as an 'invincible tower'.<sup>34</sup> During book 3 of *Scivias*, which concerns the pillars of faith, Hildegard declared that there is a tower 'in front of the pillar of the humanity of the saviour that represents the Church'.<sup>35</sup> It is 'newly built out of all good works and the lofty strength of heavenly deeds; it is a strong and fortified tower, standing against the devil and resisting'.<sup>36</sup> This type of imagery is consonant with Bouchard's discussion of women and gender.<sup>37</sup> She has argued that women were seen both as inferior in worship and inferior to the man.<sup>38</sup> Her work points to a twelfth-century gloss on Corinthians which states 'as Christ leads and rules the Church and the Church is subject to Him, so the man *protects* the woman, and thus this is not a sign of subjection but liberty' (emphasis added).<sup>39</sup> The *mulier* in the letters was adopting the idea that the relationship between man and woman mimics that between Christ and Church by addressing the *vir* in the manner of a worshipper. She declared to the *vir*, 'how purely, how sincerely and with how much *faith*' she loved him (emphasis added).<sup>40</sup> Thus in the work of both

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27 Hildegard, *Scivias*, Book one, Vision 4:25, 124.

28 Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, No.23, 205.

29 Ibid., No.45, 225.

30 See for example Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, No.52, 235.

31 Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, No.28, 215.

32 Ibid., No.29, 215.

33 Hildegard, *Scivias*, Book 3, Vision 8:24, 446.

34 Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, No.60, 241.

35 Hildegard, *Scivias*, Book 3, Vision 9:7, 455.

36 Ibid.

37 C.B. Bouchard, "Every Valley Shall be Exalted": *The Discourse of Opposites in Twelfth Century Thought* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), 113-44.

38 Ibid., 126-7.

39 Ibid., 127.

40 Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, 197.

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Hildegard and the *mulier* we see them complicit in, and assuming their expected place in, the prevalent contemporary discourse.

Above all else, the discourse that pervades both the *mulier's* writing in the *LLL* and the works of female mystics was the idea that these women are unworthy of the being toward which they are focusing their adoration. In the *LLL* this outlook has been noted by Jaeger who stated that the *mulier* had 'a tendency to abase herself before the man, mainly in the context of studies, but not only'.<sup>41</sup> O'Dell expressed a similar sentiment in her work on Hildegard when she argued that 'she herself often expressed her own inferiority, with a persistence that leaves no doubt as to her sincerity in this belief'.<sup>42</sup> The context of the *LLL* means that, as in Jaeger's argument referred to above, the *mulier* often humbled herself in terms of her learning. In Letter 45 she wrote 'it is very rash of me to send studied phrases to you ... anyone who considers himself even slightly learned would be rendered completely speechless and mute by his own judgement, much less myself, who hardly seems adept at trifles'.<sup>43</sup> In the *LLL* the *vir* did not hesitate to praise the *mulier*; for example in letter 46 he signed off by describing the *mulier* as 'my beautiful one, my every joy, than whom in my opinion no woman is more beautiful, no woman better'.<sup>44</sup> However this did not lead to him consequentially debasing himself; thus he deviates from the pattern established by the women. Elisabeth of Schönau epitomizes this discourse of abasement in her writings and therefore reinforces the idea that this is a distinctively female characteristic of loving. Whilst praying to God before Assumption she declared 'to you lord I commit all my distresses, because my spirit has been sorely troubled by these things that you have done to me, for I know that I am *totally unworthy* of so great a grace'(emphasis added).<sup>45</sup> Moreover both Hildegard and the *mulier* consistently debased themselves in terms of their body. For example consider these two analogous laments; 'I-wretched and fragile creature that I am'<sup>46</sup> and 'there was nothing left ... except my stupid and useless body'<sup>47</sup>. This relates to Walker Bynum's work on women's concern with physicality and by extension the more base needs of human beings. She argues that in twelfth-century theology '*male* and *female* were contrasted and asymmetrically valued as soul and body'.<sup>48</sup> This led women to express themselves in terms of the physical; a phenomenon evident earlier in the discussion of natural metaphors. Walker Bynum has given an example of this in that 'eating' was a much more central image to medieval women than men;<sup>49</sup> this can be seen in the *LLL* when the *mulier* tells the *vir* that he has 'aroused' her 'hunger' for his letters and that he has 'not yet fully satisfied it'.<sup>50</sup>

The three women studied here all experienced and wrote about what can be termed 'visions'; in these visions two recurrent, interrelated themes can be detected. Firstly, they were used by these women as a vehicle for the discourse of debasement discussed above. Secondly, the visions were

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41 Jaeger, '*Epistolae*', 133.

42 O'Dell, '*Prophets*', 99.

43 Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, No.45, 225.

44 *Ibid.*

45 Elisabeth, *Complete Works*, First Book of Visions, 57.

46 Hildegard, *Divine Works*, Foreword, 6.

47 Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, No.45, 225.

48 C. Walker Bynum, "...And Woman His Humanity": Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages', in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (Cambridge MA: Zone Books, 1992), 177-8.

49 *Ibid.*, 173.

50 Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, No.49, 231.

connected explicitly to the physicality of the women. Hildegard was a sickly woman and has been diagnosed retrospectively by historians of science with a medical disorder: 'scintillating scotoma'.<sup>51</sup> She herself made the link between her ill health and her visions; at the start of the *Book of Divine Works* she stated that she began to write down what she saw 'with a trembling hand' and 'shaken by countless illnesses'.<sup>52</sup> In the *LLL* the *mulier* engaged in the use of visions in order to show abjection, and moreover these visions also manifested themselves physically. These themes are evident in letter 23 where she speaks of an episode in which her desire to write a worthy response to her lover's letter overwhelms her: 'indeed I wanted to but could not, I began then grew weak, I persisted but collapsed, my shoulders buckling under the weight. The burning feeling of my spirit longed to but the weakness of my dried up talent refused'.<sup>53</sup> This account is especially revealing because the *mulier* experiences actual physical symptoms but *also* returns to the physical metaphors of fire and refreshment. In the letter this was followed by a tussle between herself and her spirit. The spirit berated 'what are you doing, ungrateful woman? ... Does not the generous kindness and kind generosity of your beloved stir you? Compose a letter full of thanks; give the thanks which you owe for his abounding integrity'.<sup>54</sup> But another voice reminded the *mulier* that she is 'no match for such matter so distinguished' and that she is a 'cold and brutish beast, utterly lacking the salt of learning'.<sup>55</sup> In a later letter when the *mulier* felt weak and lacking in strength, a woman 'advanced in years, graceful in appearance and in every part of her body elegant beyond human measure'<sup>56</sup> appears to reproach and restore her. The visions of the *mulier* are remarkably similar to those experienced by Elisabeth, who writes for example in her first book of visions that:

I fell into a very serious languor and for two days before the feast [of annunciation] day I lay in weakness. On the morning of that feast, my languor was so aggravated that the sisters came to my bed to say the litany over me ... Then an angel of the Lord came and stood by me, placed his hand on my head and said, "Rise and stand on your feet; you have been freed from your infirmities" ... At these words ... I was most sweetly relieved throughout my whole body ... He also added this "Indeed it was possible for the Lord to have alleviated the passions that you have endured so far, but He willed for you to be afflicted in this way so that you would believe it better"<sup>57</sup>

This extract makes explicit the connection between a woman *weak* and *suffering* who is rejuvenated by the love and attention of the focus of her affections. Furthermore the extract demonstrates that the bodily suffering experienced should be valued as it enabled the woman to love *better*. Thus the visions represent a physical manifestation of the love and passion these women feel for their 'lover'. This can be seen as interweaving into both the contemporary discourse of woman as 'humanity' or the 'body', and furthermore into a phenomenon of the later middle ages which saw women embracing their own 'irrationality and disorder' as part of a positive image of 'mercy and meekness'.<sup>58</sup> It is notable that the *vir* in the *LLL* never spoke of this type of experience. It is

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51 Newman, 'Visions and Validation', 167: scintillating scotoma: 'a form of migraine characterized by hallucinations of flashing, circling, or fermenting points of light'.

52 Hildegard, *Divine Works*, 6.

53 Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, No.23, 205.

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*, No.107, 283.

57 Elisabeth, *Complete Works*, 84-5.

58 Walker Bynum, "Woman His Humanity", 178.

therefore possible to argue that to express love in the form of visions was a distinctively feminine phenomenon. Newman has concluded visions were a way for female 'mystics', consciously or subconsciously, to gain validation for experiences or ideas;<sup>59</sup> they may have served this function most emphatically in the expression of love, both religious and secular.

There are a number of strands in the work of these women that can therefore be drawn together into a nascent theory of a feminine, twelfth-century expression of love. This seems to be an expression of love that transcends the religious-secular divide between the writers. It is evident that the *mulier* is taking on characteristics of religious women and religious female discourse in expressing her devotion to the *vir*. For example she makes use of the theological discourse of women as 'body', which fed significantly into her choice of imagery. This idea of the body and the physical is an important element of the expression of love, which manifests itself not only in this imagery, but in the discourse of abasement and the experience of visions. Moreover the expression of love was conditioned by the fact that all the women in this case study were writing from the inferior position in their relationship and thus deemed it necessary to demonstrate their vulnerability and unworthiness. Despite this, we have pointed to the ability of the women to express sexual desire for their 'lover' by use of metaphor, in particular that of fire. This feminine expression of love can thus be tentatively characterised as vivid, filled with longing and pertaining especially to the *physical*. However, the conclusions of this case study open up some important historical questions. For example, it could now be considered further whether the *mulier* in the *LLL* often made use of religious discourse in order to legitimate her feelings towards the *vir*? It could also be investigated if there is more of a two-way flow of influence which identifies the religious women making use of any distinctly lay elements or conventions when expressing love. Or, more generally, the possibility that there is a distinctively feminine expression of love might lead us to question that which is always predicated of Hildegard; namely that she is 'exceptional' and 'unique'.<sup>60</sup>

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59 Newman, 'Visions and Validation', 175.

60 Newman, *Living Light*, 1.

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