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Barbara Newman, *Making Love in the Twelfth Century: Letters of Two Lovers in Context*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Pp. xvii + 365. Appendices, notes, bibliography, general index, index of Latin terms. \$59.95. (hardback). ISBN: 978-0-8122-4809-8 (hb.) 978-0-8122-9272-5 (ebook).

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In the admittedly recondite world of twelfth-century studies, few topics have provoked as much controversy as the dispute over the authorship of the so-called lost love letters of Abelard and Heloise. Barbara Newman, an acclaimed scholar of medieval literature and a voice in that debate (although hitherto not one of the loudest), here makes a major intervention with a learned new translation of this anonymous correspondence, accompanied by translations of various other letters from the twelfth century. She offers a new context for approaching the epistolary discourse of love, one that is grounded in the conceptually rich (if now somewhat fashionable) notion of “emotional communities,” and provides commentaries on the stylistic and literary dimensions of each individual letter as well as on the collection as a whole. Her scrupulous analysis takes us deeper than ever before into the complex web of postures and allusions that lace these enigmatic exchanges together, making this volume required reading for any future discussion on the topic.

Newman’s formal position is stated on the final page of her introduction, where she concludes that while the attribution to Abelard and Heloise “remains unprovable,” it is nevertheless “highly probable” (p. 78). Considerable space is devoted to explaining how she arrives at this conclusion, but her contribution in fact extends well beyond any unresolvable game of probability theory. In order to evaluate the full scope of this important intervention it is well to first summarize the historiographical backstory.

In 1471 a young humanist monk (Johannes de Vepria was his name) at the Cistercian abbey of Clairvaux copied into a manuscript a series of Latin exchanges. In his capacity as librarian he was compiling an anthology of Latin correspondences from antiquity to his time. Among the selections were a series of 113 exchanges, plus 3 fragmentary ones, that he simply designated *Epistolae duorum amantium* (hereafter EDA). No attribution was given to these “Letters of Two Lovers,” who are merely identified as “V” (for Man) and “M” (for Woman), and no one seems to have paid much notice to them until 1974 when Ewald Könsgen published a German edition with the subtitle “Briefe Abaelards und Heloises?”<sup>[1]</sup> It was Könsgen who first raised the possibility (the question mark was only intended to be suggestive) as to whether these letters might in fact constitute an early correspondence between Peter Abelard and his student

Heloise, or another couple “like” them. Even still, his edition garnered surprisingly little attention, largely because scholars in the 1970s were grappling with the more critical question of whether the known letters purporting to be from Heloise were in fact her own or the forged correspondence of Abelard (or someone else). A wave of critical as well as feminist scholarship eventually restored the attribution to Heloise, and in the process helped to pave the path for scholars (including Newman) to study the literary and intellectual contributions of medieval women on their own terms, and not simply as the inferior acolytes of more distinguished male personalities.

A decisive turn came in 1999 when Constant Mews, a leading authority on Abelard’s theological writings, published with Neville Chiavaroli a full translation of those letters under the title *The Lost Love Letters of Abelard and Heloise*.<sup>[2]</sup> Dropping Könsgen’s question mark, Mews boldly endeavored to establish the attribution of the correspondence once and for all. In particular, Mews drew on the contemporary vocabulary of love and philosophy in order to demonstrate the parallels between Abelard and the “Man” and Heloise and the “Woman.” That same year, C. Stephen Jaeger reached a similar conclusion in the context of a study of the public and aristocratic dimensions of “ennobling love,” a self-described social constructivist approach that informs Newman’s treatment of emotions.<sup>[3]</sup>

The scholarly excitement that erupted in the wake of these findings seemed fitting for a personality as controversial as Abelard’s. The medieval community was abuzz at the revelations of a “lost” discovery, countless conference panels were devoted to it, and a long list of important scholars of the twelfth century weighed in on the matter. But while many were highly enthusiastic about the attribution, a number of experts expressed serious doubts as to whether we could ever know the identity of the authors, filtered as they are through a humanist’s editorial hand. A few questioned whether the letters even date to the twelfth century at all, much less to medieval Paris’s most famous (but surely not only) paramours, while still other suggested that the entire correspondence is a literary fiction, a rhetorical model designed to teach the art of letter writing.<sup>[4]</sup> Here it is worth pointing out that in an early review of the Mews/Chiavaroli volume Newman herself proclaimed that the attribution had indeed been demonstrated “beyond a reasonable doubt.”<sup>[5]</sup> That she is now slightly less emphatic (i.e., “highly probable”) in her acceptance of their authenticity is a function of her detailed and vigorous response to the arguments of the skeptics.

Newman confronts those naysayers directly in the second part of her prolegomena, entitled “Abelard and Heloise: Some Frequently Asked Questions” (pp. 42-78). In the model of a good scholastic quodlibet, she first poses the question, then presents the available evidence (including the opposing evidence), and then finally states her interpretative position, which invariably favors the case for attribution. Such an inquisitorial approach is designed to expose the most pressing questions about the letters: who, what, where, when, and how they pertain both to Abelard and Heloise and to other twelfth-century letters. For students or newcomers to the debate this section is an especially good place to begin as she generally does an excellent job summarizing the last twenty years of scholarship on this vexed topic.<sup>[6]</sup> Given that a good deal of her case lies in pointing out the lack of alternative explanations, it is perhaps not surprising that Newman proves a tenacious advocate of the oft-repeated slogan that absence of evidence (or in this case absence of “proof”) is not evidence of its absence.

Newman is equally adept at turning the evidence of the skeptics against them: the lack of reference to any authors after the early twelfth century makes a post-1300 date seem less plausible than a pre-1150 date; the dissimilarities in writing style is counterbalanced by their similarities in epistolary and emotional conventions; the lack of locutionary overlap with the known letters by Abelard and Heloise is explained by the nascent (and still private) circumstances of their relationship, and so on. In support of these claims Newman has compiled seven appendices that tabulate the linguistic similarities, parallel citations, keywords, and various rhyming patterns across the EDA and other texts. Some of these figures come off as little more than number crunching (I failed to see any great revelation in the ratios of accusatives, infinitives, and finite verbs in the salutations of the two lovers), but others are genuinely insightful and help to underscore the similarities and dissimilarities between the Man and the Woman. Thus by stacking the arguments *pro* attribution high and rendering the arguments *contra* attribution weak (or weaker), one cannot help but feel compelled to agree with Newman that there really is no better explanation than to ascribe the EDA to the best-known candidates for an early twelfth-century love affair: Abelard and Heloise.

The most novel component of Newman's analysis is her thorough reevaluation of the literary dimensions of the letters. Where skeptics have seen significant disparities between the EDA and Abelard and Heloise, Newman teases out subtle similarities (most especially through the voice of the Woman). Where others have claimed that the authors lack talent or originality, Newman argues for literary merit (with a focus on the poetic and rhyming structures). Where others have dismissed the letters as banal and formulaic, Newman stresses a deceptive ambiguity between the public (Latinate) and private (intimate) spheres.

The centerpiece of Newman's revisionist reading is a broader exploration of the theme of emotions, not just within the EDA but also within twelfth-century literary discourse more generally. The title of the first part of her introductory prolegomena, "Making Love in the Twelfth Century: An Essay in the History of Emotions," is a salute both to the declaratory (as opposed to physical) meaning of the English expression "to make love" that predominated until the 1920s, as well as to the affective qualities of the letters that occupy the forefront of her analysis.[7] She identifies three distinct but overlapping communities: the masculine community of the cathedral school (characterized by an "Ovidian ethos" that was shared with the Troubadour poets, the Loire Valley poets, and twelfth-century France's most well-known love doctor, Andreas Capellanus), the feminine community of the convent school (a less flirtatious but more sentimental spirit of loyalty and longing), and the private, indeed secretive, community that was shared exclusively by the two lovers. Circumscribing these overlapping communities provides the rationale for connecting the EDA to the wider "context" of epistolary discourse announced in the title, and it is here that she hones in on two other letter collections from the twelfth century: the Tegernsee letters (1160-1186), a mainly female-authored collection tinged with the vocabulary of erudite but amorous affection, and the Regensburg Songs (c. 1106), a schoolmaster's miscellany that includes loving exchanges and verses between a teacher (or teachers) and a cohort of convent pupils. Extending her literary reevaluations one step further, Newman finds more parallels (or "emotional dynamics" as she calls them) between the EDA and these two collections than previously believed, ranging from the eroticization of student-teacher relationships to the rhetorical art of *ethopoeia* or character impersonation. These parallels are explained both in the general prolegomena and especially in the comments on the individual letters, which in some instances run longer than the letters themselves. Finally, Newman suggests that the unnamed and comparatively understudied "Letter to a

Fugitive Lover,” a prime example of this exercise in *ethopoeia*, may also date from the early twelfth century and may have been read by the women of the other letters, including the Woman of the EDA, “as a warning against the blandishments of seducers” (p. 39).

To match the reevaluation of these letters, Newman has endeavored to provide a new translation with “greater literary ambitions” (p. xiv). Filling more than half the volume, this includes the 116 letters and letter-fragments of the EDA, 10 letters from the Tegernsee letters, 39 letters from the Regensburg Songs, and the intriguingly anonymous “Letter to a Fugitive Lover” (we don’t know if the poet was a man or a woman). She does not reproduce the Latin texts, which in the case of the EDA have been published several times and are available on the Internet, but each letter is followed by a comment on its substance and style, and there Newman frequently (and illuminatingly) invokes the Latin phrasing. The quality of all the translations is excellent, but especially noteworthy are the thirteen poems embedded in the prose letters of the EDA, which now resonate with all the emotions and allusions that Newman has gone to great length to reveal. More controversial, however, is the decision to place the final two letters at the beginning of the collection (though she retains the original numbering). This is justified by the “compelling narrative logic” (p. 58) that the man’s Ovidian seduction poem (Letter 113) should be the opening gambit in their affair and that the woman’s apparent jubilation at his entreaty (Letter 112) her initial reply, although, as Constant Mews has already noted, this reordering leaves some contextual gaps.[8]

*Making Love in the Twelfth Century* is a major scholarly achievement and the fruits of one of the closest re-readings of a set of primary sources I have ever seen. The letters and poems are sensitively, imaginatively, and, dare I say, lovingly handled. Whether this is a game changer in the debate over attribution remains to be seen, but there is no doubt that this volume contributes to a much broader appreciation of twelfth-century ideas and ideals of amatory relationships. Newman’s elegant translations are certain to be the standard for some time to come.

## NOTES

[1] Ewald Könsgen, *Epistolae duorum amantium: Briefe Abaelards und Heloises?* Mittellateinische Studien und Text, 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

[2] Constant Mews and Neville Chiavaroli, *The Lost Love Letters of Abelard and Heloise: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).

[3] C. Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 157-173, with original translations of several of those letters at 226-229.

[4] The suggestion of their fictionality bears a certain resemblance to the controversy over another enigmatic document from the twelfth-century: the autobiographical *Opusculum de conversione sua* (c. 1150) purportedly written by a certain Jewish convert named Herman, and framed as a letter of instruction. For an equally in-depth reevaluation of the historicity of this work, which from a pedagogical perspective would pair nicely with Newman’s book, see Jean-

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Claude Schmitt, *The Conversion of Herman the Jew: Autobiography, History, and Fiction in the Twelfth Century*, trans. Alex J. Novikoff (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

[5] See her review in *The Medieval Review*:

<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/article/view/14861/20979>

[6] The one skeptic to whom Newman gives disappointingly short shrift is John Marenbon (addressed only in passing in the endnotes). His arguments against attribution are generally considered to be some of the strongest. Moreover, he also presents his arguments via the question-and-answer format, so Newman in this section would seem to be responding to him by countering with the same strategy. See Marenbon, "Lost Love Letters? A Controversy in Retrospect," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 15 (2008): 267-280.

[7] One could object that Newman is being excessively coy with her title, for this is neither the meaning of the expression "to make love" today nor was it the dominant meaning in the twelfth century. She informs us that the expression was current "from about 1600 to the 1920s," which seems somewhat irrelevant to the matter at hand. Anyone picking up the book and expecting a sort of Kama Sutra for the twelfth century will be disappointed. But of course, titles are often teases. No doubt the alluring expression was chosen to "arouse" the reader's interest.

[8] See Mew's review in *The Medieval Review*:

<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/article/view/23351/29134>

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