"Concealing little, giving much, finding most in their close communion one with another": An Exploration of Sex and Marriage in the Writings of Heloïse, the Beguines, and Christine de Pisan

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“Concealing little, giving much, finding most in their close communion one with another”:
An Exploration of Sex and Marriage in the Writings of Heloïse, the Beguines, and Christine de Pisan

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English Department Honors Thesis
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Submitted: April 14, 2008
Dedicated to Robert Stanton
And Erin Henry
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Introduction

Until relatively recently, the bulk of works written by women during the Middle Ages have been, if not altogether ignored, dismissed as unimportant to literary history. A stigma has existed against the capabilities of a woman living during a period that has (somewhat unfairly) been characterized as backward, uncultured and “Dark.” Indeed, why during a period of which the art and literature has become so undervalued in relation to human history, should the writings of a woman, who was afforded so many less opportunities than men, even be taken into consideration? It is my belief, as well as the belief of many in the scholastic community over the past forty or fifty years, that the rarity of such a composition is precisely why it is invaluable. Far beyond simply worthy of study, these precious texts provide us with the rare opportunity of insight into the (educated) medieval female’s mind, an insight that could inform or even change the conventional understanding of women’s history.

The Middle Ages, perhaps because of the pervasiveness of the Catholic Church, have also been generally thought of as an era of sexual repression. So as surprising as it may be to discover that women wrote during the Middle Ages, it is even more so to learn that many of these texts had sexual elements. Yet, many of them did. When women wrote during the Middle Ages, their purposes varied, but many of the writings inevitably became vehicles for self-expression at a time when little opportunity for self-expression was afforded to them. Thus, sex would manifest itself in writing, as it was not a topic they were generally able to discuss, explore, or come to terms with in any other way. Very often, the exploration of the sexual and marital went hand in hand, as most laywomen of the Middle Ages were either married or widowed.
The women whose writings I chose to explore, Heloïse of France, the beguines Mechthild, Marguerite Porete, and Hadewijch, and Christine de Pisan were not the only medieval women whose writings contained sexual and marital themes, nor were they selected at random. I chose these subjects because I wanted to explore the works of very different writers, and also very different women: Heloïse, the scholar-lover turned jaded abbess, the beguines, feminine paradoxes of submission and strength, and Christine, the widowed, solitary intellectual. Each woman, or set of women in terms of the beguines, is also from a different century during the Middle Ages. I wanted to find if in the writings of such different women from separate centuries, their few commonalities, being their gender, their education, and their discussions of sex and marriage, might perhaps point to some greater understanding of female sexual history.

I understand that these writings cannot be used to make any generalizations regarding the collective unconscious of the medieval woman’s mind, partly because my sample is relatively small when compared to the greater body of medieval women’s literature, and partly because all the writings are not the product of just any medieval female mind, but the outpourings of an educated medieval female mind. Thus I mean to also explore the sexual and marital themes of these texts in terms of education and intellectuality.

I also want to examine the intellect and sexuality of these women in relation to empowerment, not necessarily female empowerment as the term is understood today, but rather how these rare qualities affected these women’s positions and level of authority, both in their societies as well as in their personal relationships.

Finally, I hope to investigate feminine sexuality, marital relationships, and how they, if at all, inform the overall understanding of the female identity, in terms of both reader and writer.
These women who had the ability and courage to put their thoughts on a page, though from very different backgrounds and situations, each felt it was important to incorporate the issues of sex and marriage in their writings. Why?
As one may imagine, there were very few women in twelfth century Europe who possessed the education to engage in philosophical debate or express themselves through complex rhetoric; very few women could claim the mere ability to read and write. If they could write, it was usually in the form of prayers or hymns, as convents were, for the most part, the only places women could hope to attain some level of learning. From this intellectually stifling period for the female sex, a precious set of writings remains from which a well-educated, articulate, feminine voice emerges. This voice belongs to Heloïse of France, lover of the most renowned philosopher of his time, Peter Abelard, and a great mind in her own right. Endowed with knowledge of letters and philosophy, versed in Latin, Hebrew and Greek, her scholastic capabilities could rival those of most men of her time. Though she has left little evidence of her capabilities behind, the few writings that do remain attest to her brilliance. Through her education, she was able to rise above the traditional, limiting role intended for a woman to a role which had hitherto been restricted to men: that of a scholar, and one might even say, a philosopher. In this unorthodox role, liberated from the constraints of expression suffered by the typical medieval woman, Heloïse discussed not only Scripture and the Classics, but also her personal experiences and struggles, which were often linked to her sexual experiences. Heloïse’s frequent discussions of sex and sexual desire have acquired her a status of infamy in the world of women’s literature. It has been argued that Heloïse ought to be seen as a beacon of protofeminist empowerment, a woman unashamed to acknowledge and own her sexuality. Yet to many academics, the transcendence of intellect and the base carnality of sexual desire and sexual intercourse are mutually exclusive, thus making it difficult to take her seriously as an intellectual
when her sexual needs are given such precedence throughout her writings. They appear to govern the thrust of much of her writing, so much so that they present the possibility of robbing her arguments of a rational basis. Furthermore, Heloïse’s need for sexual gratification translates into the need for a man, specifically Abelard, thus making her seem anything but empowered.

Indeed, this elevated status of Heloïse as a premier female intellectual of the secular eleventh century European world demands questioning after examining the content of her writings. In her letters to Abelard, written ten years after the cessation of their sexual relationship, she sexually objectifies herself and shamelessly expresses an intense dependence on Abelard, sexually, emotionally, and psychologically. On the one hand, these writings could be a prime example of a capable, intelligent, and empowered woman who is brave enough to own her sexuality while still remaining faithful to her philosophical ideals. On the other, they can be read as the work of a woman who has been sexually manipulated and even abused, knowing nothing beyond a perpetual need for her former lover, this need creating a mentality in which she may know nothing of love or humanity besides that which is sexual in nature, and is desperately trying to reclaim the only kind of human connection she has ever known. In a way, she can actually be used as an example, by those who may want to not only discredit her but also discredit other women as well, of the medieval stereotype that woman are irrational, emotional, lustful, disorderly, and more subject to their bodies than devoted to their minds (Bynum, “‘…And Woman’” 151). There, in fact, are points in her writings in which her immediate sexual and emotional needs cause her to betray many of her philosophical opinions.

I must confess that in my first readings of Heloïse, I was extremely confused, both in how to approach her writings and in how to form my opinion of Heloïse herself. Should I simply
appreciate her academic skill in spite of its being riddled with somewhat disturbing passages regarding sex and her attitude towards Abelard? Should I dismiss her altogether because she is not the beacon of proto-feminism I had expected her to be? Most importantly, should I take a writer seriously who allows sexual needs to compromise her intellectual and philosophical integrity? In the end, I felt it was best to find some way to reconcile Heloïse’s intellectual self and undeniable skills regarding study of philosophy, letters and rhetoric, and her sexual self, a part of herself she makes a point to reveal as much as the former. I believe, whether or not it is intentional, that there is a link between the two, which could provide an insight into Heloïse as both a writer and a woman.

Most of the scholastic community’s knowledge of Heloïse’s life and history has come from Peter Abelard’s, autobiographical work, the Historia Calamitatum, and an exchange of letters between Heloïse and Abelard provoked by her reading of this work. The Historia is now widely recognized as the first letter in the exchange because it prompted the preceding material, although it was not addressed specifically to Heloïse from Abelard.

As Peggy Kamuf explains, the details of Heloïse’s life are rather “sketchy” (1), especially those that occurred sans Abelard. As the Historia Calamitatum is the only solid account in print of her life, and she has produced “no analogous story” (Levitan xviii), we can only determine the details of her life through conjecture and the filter of Peter Abelard. Nevertheless, a thorough examination of the works deserves a preceding brief about the woman.

There is some contention over the year of Heloïse’s birth. Traditionally, she is thought to have been born around 1100, making her around seventeen when she began instruction under Abelard, but more recently, scholars have dated her birth year to 1090, making her “a mature and
formidable woman, in her mid- or late twenties at the time [she became Abelard’s student] and famous throughout France for her learning” (Levitan xix). There is no record of her parents essentially; she was brought up by her uncle, Fulbert. She began her studies under the nuns at the convent at Argenteuil, and her academic development was apparently very important to her uncle, despite how unseemly it appeared for a woman to pursue education to such high levels. How Heloïse and Abelard actually met and began to study together is unclear, but Abelard does relate in his Historia that it did not take long for him to decide to take Heloïse as his lover, and he thus contrived his way into residence at Fulbert’s home, under the pretext of need to be near the Cloister Schools of Paris, where he was the premier instructor, and having little time for household cares. In return for Fulbert’s generosity, Abelard offered to be Heloïse’s private tutor, the thought of which delighted Fulbert, as Heloïse was “so much loved by him that he had done everything in his power to advance her education in letters” (Abelard, Historia 10).

Heloïse’s daily meetings with Abelard quickly changed their nature from educational to sexual, as Abelard describes:

We were united, first under one roof, then in heart; and so with our lessons as a pretext we abandoned ourselves entirely to love…with our books open before us, more words of love than our reading passed between us, and more kissing than teaching. My hands strayed oftener to her bosom than to the pages; love drew our eyes to look on each other more than reading kept them on our texts…In short, our desires left no stage of lovemaking untried, and if love could devise something new, we welcomed it (Historia 11).

This behavior apparently went on for some time, escaping the notice of Heloïse’s adoring uncle.
Yet in his pride and recklessness, Abelard managed to finally alert Fulbert to the true nature of his relationship with Heloïse. Composing and performing in public love songs in which he used Heloïse’s name, Abelard flaunted his betrayal of his benefactor throughout Paris. With the whole city buzzing about the scandal, Fulbert could not remain ignorant for long. He forced Abelard to leave his home and forbid him access to Heloïse.

Of course love will always find a way, and the two remained in contact through letters and secret meetings, until Heloïse eventually became pregnant. Under the circumstances, Abelard thought it best to reconcile with Fulbert, and offered to make amends. The agreement was made that he would marry Heloïse, but the marriage would remain secret in order to protect Abelard’s reputation as a philosopher. When Abelard related the news to Heloïse, she responded with a vehement argument against marriage, as it was unsuited to the philosopher’s lifestyle, and with an assertion that a marriage in secrecy would not appease her uncle. Though she sensed impending doom regarding the matter, she gave in to Abelard’s wishes and became his wife, later giving birth to a son. After this, Heloïse remained at Fulbert’s home, and they continued to meet in secret as before, except now, the situation being in reverse, they were making Fulbert privy to the secret that they were keeping from the public.

As Heloïse predicted, the secrecy of the marriage left did not give Fulbert’s honor the vindication of its being public knowledge. Though he tried to make it known himself, Heloïse would follow up with repeated denials, making every effort to protect her husband’s reputation. In his frustration, Fulbert resorted to beating Heloïse, at which point Abelard felt obligated to remove her from his home.
Abelard brought Heloïse to the sanctuary of the convent at Argenteuil, where she had studied years before. For whatever reason, perhaps to maintain the charade of their not being married, he had her wear a nun’s habit, though it was one without a veil. Regardless of this religious garb, he would still visit the convent for the occasion of conjugal visits. However, Fulbert felt Heloïse’s placement at the convent was Abelard’s effort to rid himself of his wife, forcing her to “join an order, thereby annulling, in effect, their marriage vows” (Kamuf 6) and determined to exact his revenge. He thus sent thugs in the night to Abelard’s chambers, where they castrated him.

Ashamed at his deformity, which quickly became public, Abelard lost the will to “resume the position which had gained him such prestige in the world. He had decided from secular life into a monastic order, but not before he made Heloïse promise to do the same” (Kamuf 6). This time, she truly did join the nuns at Argenteuil. Thus their marriage became a chaste one, a state not uncommon in the Middle Ages.

It is unclear how much contact they retained during the years between their taking religious vows and the point where the nuns at Argenteuil, Heloïse now their prioress, were evicted from their convent. At this point, Abelard was able to aid by providing his abandoned former monastery, the Paraclete, where Heloïse was made abbess. He settled there himself for a few months, presumably to aid Heloïse in situating herself, but as scandal arose regarding his living in the same establishment as his former lover, he left to return to his own monastery in Brittany, where he composed the autobiographical account of his misfortunes, the Historia Calamitatum. If any contact remained after that, it presumably pertained only to the well being of the Paraclete and other religious matters.
That is, until Heloïse received a copy of the *Historia*, her perusal of which compelled her to write a response. Thus began the famous correspondence in which Heloïse dazzled Abelard and readers for ages to come with her rhetoric, as well as shocked both parties with the disclosure of her still potent sexual desire.

From reading the letters, it is easy to see Heloïse as little more than a dejected woman, unhealthily overindulgent in sexual fantasies and with “perpetual complaints” (Abelard, Letter 5, 79) regarding the loss of Abelard and her current unhappy situation. Charged with emotion, some of her arguments may strike the reader as erratic, irrational, and even hypocritical. Additionally, her gratuitous language, accompanied by a complete sexual and emotional submission to Abelard calls into question her validity as a scholar, as a scholar is expected to be able to express thoughts in a rational, disinterested manner. Finding this kind of weakness in Heloïse is rather disheartening; one would hope that as one of the first women to be known for her writing in European history, she would do more justice to the rational, intellectual capabilities of the female.

As Heloïse’s first letter begins, after expressing disappointment upon encountering Abelard’s self-pitying *Historia Calamitatum*, she invokes his obligation to the nuns of the Paraclete over that to his friend to whom this letter of consolation was addressed. Referring to herself and her nuns as his “daughters” (Heloïse, Letter 2, 49), she already conveys the degree to which she needs Abelard, not only as her husband and lover, but really also as her father. As her former teacher, he is the only father figure she has known aside from her uncle, Fulbert, toward whom she must feel a great deal of animosity and with whom she has appears not to have kept contact. Abelard has been the only man in her life, as well as her only family at this point, and
she continues to rely on him very much. As the letter progresses, she pares down his obligation to all of the nuns of the Paraclete to his personal obligation to her: “Apart from everything else, consider the close tie by which you have bound yourself to me, and repay the debt you owe a whole community of women dedicated to God by discharging it the more dutifully to her who is yours alone” (Letter 2, 50). She goes on to remind him, “you are bound to me by an obligation which is all the greater for the further close tie of the marriage sacrament uniting us” (Letter 2, 50). It is rather ironic that a woman who is so vehemently philosophically opposed to marriage, as indicated in the Historia and later in this letter, would call upon her spouse to respect the binding nature of an institution she apparently despises. Her fixation on her former lover is so powerful that it seems to have caused her to betray her former ideals, in essence making her a philosophical hypocrite. Desperate to regain Abelard’s notice, she is prepared to use any means at her disposal, however contradictory.

After calling his attention to his duties to her as her husband, she delves further into issues of their personal relationship. She appears to have lost concern for the well being of all of the nuns at the Paraclete, for “the pretext of the collective response is dropped and Heloïse proceeds to represent her own particular desolation” (Kamuf 11). Here is Heloïse at her most shameful. She is not only extremely needy, but seems to possess no self-worth. She again invokes his obligations to her, blames him for all her woes, and confesses to what extent her world still revolves around his person:

Surely the greater the cause for grief the greater the need for the help of consolation, and this no one can bring but you; you are the sole cause of my sorrow, and you alone can grant me the grace of consolation. You alone have the power to make me sad, to bring
me happiness or comfort; you alone have so great a debt to repay me, particularly now when I have carried out all your orders so implicitly that when I was powerless to oppose you in anything, I found strength at your command to destroy myself (Letter 2, 51).

It seems ludicrous that a person of all of Heloïse’s talents and accomplishments should have this kind of warped perspective, especially Heloïse, since she has previously expressed a deep respect for the philosophic lifestyle, which does not allow itself to be weighed down by ties to this world.

In the next part of the letter, Heloïse then famously, or rather infamously, declares her desire to be his whore rather than his wife. It appears that she would rather be thought of as a sexual object than a companion, a complete and willful self-degradation. Afterwards, she utters a continuance of her diatribe against marriage as it was presented in the Historia, claiming that Abelard “kept silent about most of [her] arguments for preferring love to wedlock and freedom to chains” (Letter 2, 51). This passage somewhat loses its credibility as she has already invoked his marital duties to her, and later still insists on how much she deserves from him because of her unceasing devotion. It serves only to make her pathos all the more tangible. She has in effect made a man her God, the center of her universe, as she herself admits later in her second letter: “At every stage of my life up to now, as God knows, I have feared to offend you rather than God, and tried to please you more than him” (Letter 2, 51). Heloïse discredits all the great religious work she has done independently of Abelard, that work for which she could be most admired, by admitting that it is simply insignificant when compared to her love for him.

As her second letter begins, she makes sure to convey to him clearly how greatly his desire for death as a release from the trials of life distresses her, and how unfair it is for him to
write about such things to her, since he is indeed her life. She then proceeds to do something rather similar to that for which she has just chastised him, namely, enumerating sufferings. The abbess recalls when she and Abelard “enjoyed the pleasures of an uneasy love and abandoned ourselves to fornication” (Letter 4, 65-66). Not only does she speak of her former yielding to the temptations of lust, but she also confesses that “the mind still retains the will to sin and is on fire with its old desires” (Letter 4, 66). She also remarks that Abelard, having been castrated, has kindly been freed from the burden of sexual needs, whereas she continues to battle it daily:

Where God may seem to you an adversary he has in fact proved himself kind: like an honest doctor who does not shrink from giving pain if it will bring about a cure. But for me, youth and passion and experience of pleasures which were so delightful intensify the torments of the flesh and longings of desire, and the assault is the more overwhelming as the nature they attack is the weaker (Letter 4, 69).

After ten years of living chastely, Heloïse appears to still yearn very actively for sexual gratification, so much so that she claims it interferes in her daily life and her duties as an abbess. Not only has she demonstrated weakness, but unfairly attributes it to a general characteristic of her sex. She then confesses to the very man she obsesses about just how beholden she still is to him, how much power he still wields over her even in his absence, thus further emphasizing her weakness. The biting tone in which she mentions Abelard’s castration only adds to the effect, as she snugly fits herself into the stereotype of the weak, embittered woman, helpless without a man. She does herself a disservice in the wording of the petulant and somewhat cruel observation that it is easy for him to overcome temptations of the flesh, for he is no longer able to feel them. It is discouraging to behold such an intellectually gifted woman relinquish her
dignity, self-respect and complete will to a husband who has so greatly neglected her, not only in
never seeing her, but also in never writing.

Why is Heloïse not only so sexually charged but also unashamed about fully and
explicitly disclosing that she is so in her writing? It may be because for Abelard, according to
Heloïse, their romance was little more than lust, and as it was likely the only serious involvement
with a man she had experienced, she has unfortunately been taught no other way to express her
love than through sex. She is thus, in a way, Abelard’s creation, only able to feel and express
these feelings in ways that he taught her, and helpless without her Creator. This hypothesis may
serve to explain Heloïse’s desire to please Abelard above God. Abelard has assumed the roles
that God is meant to play: creator, father, judge and redeemer. As she has learned to express
love predominantly through physical intimacy, it is very difficult for her to transfer her affections
from a flesh and blood man to an incorporeal deity. Abelard has made her fit for no vocation
other than his lover and follower. It appears that she is completely in his power.

It is true that Heloïse has come under intense scrutiny because of her blunt manner of
discussing her private sexual desires. Not surprisingly, the value of her writings have been
disparaged and dismissed by misogynists. They cite her focus on sexuality as evidence of the
weakness and sinfulness of women, and thus use this evaluation as grounds for dismissal of her
writings as literature worthy of academic study altogether. Though some feminist thinkers
would laud Heloïse’s openness about her sexuality, another feminist reading of Heloïse can be
equally damning as a misogynist one and cite Heloïse’s seemingly desperate sexual need for
Abelard as evidence of a woman who has be unable to break free from the confines of a male
dictated society. Heloïse is then a poor example of a strong-minded woman, demoted from the status that her intellectuality alone would have achieved for her.

A reexamination of her first two letters, however, paints a very different picture of the scholar-turned-abbess. Though her pain and desperation are genuine, her address to Abelard employs all her intellect and gift for rhetoric. It would appear through her intellectual discourse with Abelard, as well as his descriptions of her in his *Historia Calamitatum*, that she is able to hold her own with a man on a plane that few women could. As Abelard writes, “In looks she did not rank lowest, while in the extent of her learning she stood supreme. A gift for letters is so rare in women that it had added greatly to her charm and had made her most renowned throughout the realm” (10). However much he compliments her in his description, Abelard’s removed portrayal of Heloïse in his *Historia Calamitatum* did little justice to her trials, as he was particularly concerned with indulging in his own. Heloïse’s displeasure at reading the *Historia* is greatly because of his refusal to acknowledge her pain and the role he played in bringing it about, which, in turn, contributes to her present dissatisfaction at the neglect he has shown her, partly as her spiritual leader, but mostly as her husband. Though Heloïse’s discourse could be viewed as full of lewdness and pathos, destroying any image of a strong, capable, intellectual woman, her sexual expression is used rhetorically to facilitate the achievement of her goals: making known her own pain, as it was disregarded in the *Historia*, having Abelard acknowledge this pain and take some responsibility for it, and once again experiencing his presence in her life.

Though she expresses herself as a sexual being, Heloïse never subverts her identity as a philosopher. She remains grounded in philosophy throughout her discourse, and relies on it as a touchstone for her bold statements and arguments. Although when she tells Abelard, “You are
the sole cause of my sorrow, and you alone can grant me the grace of consolation” (Letter 2, 51), it seems as though she is a forlorn, jaded woman, pitifully throwing herself at the feet of her ex-lover, in truth, as Peter Dronke observes, she is simply adhering to the Ovidian ideal that “love is an inflicted wound that only the beloved can heal” (115). She is, in essence, following the beliefs that she has always held. The idea that a former lover must be reconciled with in order to stop further pain is actually a philosophical commonplace. In putting Abelard before God she could be called hypocritical, but what must be kept in mind is that Heloïse took her vows at Abelard’s behest. In not betraying her original loyalties, she safeguards rather than sacrifices her integrity. As for Heloïse’s intense sexuality, by discussing it, she still remains genuine, acknowledging the truth regarding her wants, needs, and beliefs. In addition, in her recognizing that both she and Abelard are sexual creatures, though he is no longer beholden to his sexual needs because of his castration, she emphasizes not their differences as man and woman, but their similarities as human beings. Hers is not a feminine weakness, but a human weakness. She forces Abelard to acknowledge that both men and women have the same needs and desires. She has also brought back to his attention a fact he knew since knowing her, that both men and women have the same intellectual capabilities. By trying to point out hers and Abelard’s equality, she effectively argues the equality of men and women.

Interestingly, many male scholars have not only condemned Heloïse for the contents of her writings, but have also been anxious to rob her of her authorial credit. Examples, cited in Barbara Newman’s “Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloïse,” include John Benton, who at one point argued that the Heloïse of the correspondence was a fictional creation written in order to “put women in their place,” and the Heloïse of history, abbess of the
Paraclete, was a holy, upright woman (49). D. W. Robertson holds a similar point of view, who “in a stunning display of inconsistency” simultaneously mocks Heloïse for her theories on marriage while denying her authorial credit over the letters, asserting that by the time Heloïse had become an abbess, she had put her disreputable past behind her (49-50). Peter von Moos interestingly posits that whether or not the letters are authentic is a moot point, since, according to him, her letters contribute nothing to the canon of women’s literature or literary history in general (48). The running theme of all this criticism is that a woman simply cannot be both sexual and intellectual.

The overwhelming negative male response to Heloïse’s writings signifies that she has definitely struck a nerve. The need to excuse, belittle and silence her is a testament to the great power her writing has given her. Her writings about sex and her desire for it, though they may be an expression of personal weakness, give her strength enough to pose a threat to centuries of male academics. All of this categorization and manipulation exemplifies just how unwilling a male-dominated academic society is to accept that a woman can possess intellectual prowess and a comprehensive education, can proficiently act as a leader of a religious society, and can not only be subject to sexual desire, but bold enough to plainly say so. As Heloïse herself points out, sex has always been the one tried and true weapon at a woman’s disposal; Eve, Delilah, and Solomon’s lover each used it to bring down a great man. Heloïse clearly shows consciousness of her sexual identity. She is aware of the power that comes with this knowledge, as she implies when she enumerates herself among the women of history who have brought down great men. Having already a mind that can rival any man’s, if her sexual power is added to the equation, the
scale tips in her favor. She has more tools at her disposal to outdo any man than they do to overcome her.

Yet Heloïse seems to relinquish this power as soon as she dubs herself Abelard’s “whore.” As she tries to explain the nature of her love, as well as her aversion to marriage, she tells her former lover:

The name of wife may seem more sacred or more binding, but sweeter for me will always be the word mistress, or, if you will permit me, that of concubine or whore…God is my witness that if Augustus, emperor of the whole world, thought fit to honor me with marriage and conferred all the earth on me to possess for ever, it would be dearer and more honorable to me to be called not his Empress but your whore (Letter 2, 51).

This passage is very troubling, and seems to negate any prior notions regarding Heloïse’s strength and power in her sexual identity. It would appear that she willingly demeans herself for the sake of winning Abelard’s affection and attention in return. However, in taking on this role of submission, she is still adhering to a classical philosophical ideal, that of amicitia, or “disinterested love,” a Ciceronian concept. Dronke explains this ideal to be that of “perfect friendship” which is “wholly disinterested;…each friend loves the other for no gain or advantage but for themselves alone” (117). Heloïse is a strong critic of marriage. However, she does not oppose a bond with a woman that has not this formal title. There is a clear distinction between the two to her. For example, her most serious concern about marriage is the lifestyle that accompanies it, and how unsuited this lifestyle is to a philosopher. As Abelard explains her arguments in the Historia, she asks him, “What harmony can there be between pupils and nursemaids, desks and cradles, books or tablets and distaffs, pen or stylus and spindles?”
Historia 14). Although when Cicero was describing amicitia he was referring solely to a friendship between two men, Heloïse allows herself to take his ideas as the basis for a new interpretation of her own, which applies to her unique situation: “Heloïse reverts to, or better extends, the arguments of Cicero…In marriage, she argues—with profound originality—love must play precisely the role that friendship can in other relationships” (Dronke 117). Heloïse did not see the roles of lover and philosopher as mutually exclusive. Her own philosophy is actually a “perversion” (Nouvet 753) of Cicero, but a brilliant one at that, as Claire Nouvet explains:

As Heloïse understands them, the citations borrowed from both classical and scriptural authorities do not forbid the parallel love of philosophy and women, but only a love of women which would bind the philosopher to the base concerns and desires of a worldly life, marriage constituting the primary example of such a bond and its consequent downfall into the “Charybdis” of worldly concerns (753).

As degrading as Heloïse’s sexual self-abasement has appeared, she has yet to compromise her philosophical integrity. Heloïse wanting to give herself completely may not truly be submissive, but rather a part of amicitia—that one love gives to the other and then exists in the other—thus explaining her need for Abelard’s survival and constant contact. In fact, Heloïse’s whole perception of amicitia can actually be looked at as a bolstering of the self, rather than degradation. She makes herself out to be indispensable to Abelard in this philosophical friendship. In her insistence that a philosopher must be free of a marriage bond in order to fully engage in philosophical pursuits, she implies that any relationships formed and kept of the philosopher’s own free will are those which aid him in his vocation. In this way, Heloïse not only reforms the concept of amicitia, but also adds to it. It is not just a relationship free of
formal restriction, but one that in fact fosters a philosophical lifestyle including two partners who share the same beliefs. According to Heloïse, a disinterested love can make the mind of a philosopher more fertile. In her gift for letters and debate, she “substitutes a relation of complementarity for a relation of opposition. Far from being opposed to the love of philosophy, the unbinding love of women can be used to strengthen the philosophical bond: by not binding her lover to worldly life, Heloïse binds him all the more to his very being, to his very name of ‘philosopher’” (Nouvet 754). She may freely give over her will, but in her concept of amicitia, he relinquishes his as well. They both do, in the pursuit of a higher state of being, a higher state of purpose. They become a unit thus unbound from the ties of the world, yet with a philosophical capacity greater than any single being’s, which continues to grow richer. As Betty Radice observes in the introduction to her edition of Heloïse and Abelard’s works, “Conventional morality would speak of a young woman who is willing to ‘live in sin’ with a man, so as to not stand in his path, as sacrificing herself, but for her living wholly for Abelard is self-realization” (xxii). Her sexual honesty has allowed for this self-realization, for it allowed her to unite with Abelard, her philosophical complement, on every level: intellectually, physically and emotionally. In addition, it is her sexual self that fueled further intellectual analysis of Cicero’s philosophy, which allowed her to create a new, coherent philosophical standard to suit both herself and all women seeking both intellectual and emotional fulfillment. Far from opposing her intellect, Heloïse’s sexuality has motivated its growth.

The enigmatic “whore” passage, however, begs to be probed further. Why has she elected to call herself a whore (scortum) rather than a lover or a friend (amica)? After all, amicitia calls for a partnership between two equals with mutual respect for each other. In calling
herself a whore, Heloïse robs herself of that potential respect. Yet, the word “whore” does not mean for Heloïse what it means for us: “Although this word usually refers to a woman who puts sexual relations on the most overtly economic basis possible” (Nouvet 750-751), Heloïse, through a rhetorical argument, is able to invest much more meaning in the word than its normal connotations of base sexuality and detached economic transactions. Like she did with Cicero’s concept of *amicitia*, Heloïse changes a word’s understood meaning in order to effectively make herself better understood.

We already know that to Heloïse, marriage is the ultimate transgression against the life and pursuits of the philosopher. We also know that in her arguments against marriage, she is not arguing for a celibate life of philosophy. She reinterprets the works that have formed the backbone of her education to posit that a philosopher is, in fact, better for having a disinterested lover. Therefore, her argument is explicitly not

continence versus incontinence, but wives versus mistresses—that is, conjugal bond versus unbinding love; and it is this dichotomy that her own version of her past argumentation explores in greater detail. When she reproaches Abelard for having kept silent about most of her arguments, she is indeed accusing him of having discarded as inessential what was precisely the core of the matter: the opposition of wife/mistress, an opposition on which her own version will insist (Nouvet 754).

The bipolarity of the Wife and the Whore is exactly why Heloïse made such a specific and dramatic word choice. If she were to call herself “friend” or “mistress,” she would simply be restating Cicero’s argument in which he uses the word *amica* (translated as friend or mistress depending on context). As I have already pointed out, Heloïse is not solely relying on Cicero’s
arguments; she has substantially expanded and specified his philosophy, and must therefore use a specific word to accurately convey her own meaning, independent of Cicero’s or any other male philosopher’s. A wife hinders a philosopher’s enlightenment, whereas a woman who is the exact opposite of a wife performs the exact opposite operation: she kindles and aids a philosopher on his quest for higher truth. According to Claire Nouvet, it therefore follows that Heloïse needed to use a word that conveyed, in essence, “the opposite of wife.” Indeed, there is likely no word other than “whore” that can so accurately suggest this opposition. Yet, as Nouvet goes on to explain, where most believed that a wife was the most honorable position a non-virgin woman could hold (aside from that of a widow), Heloïse believes it is the most disreputable when speaking of a woman sexually engaged with a philosopher. In a way, Heloïse understands a wife to be the conventionally understood whore. On an obvious level, a wife benefits from her husband’s wealth. More subtly,

marriage unavoidably introduces a suspicion from which the wife cannot clear herself: the suspicion of a possessive desire…Marriage is therefore inextricably tied to a possessive desire addressed either to the man’s goods or the man himself as a good. Because it is inherently linked to the notion of property, marriage is also bound to the notion of obligation (Nouvet 756).

It follows that since a “whore” has been established as the exact opposite of a “wife,” she holds the most venerable position that a lover can hold, that of a disinterested love.

Yet as Nouvet points out, in the tradition of courtly love, a husband elevates the woman he elects to be his wife in a chivalric fashion, so much so that she is inevitably in his debt. In courtly love lyrics, the lady love is idealized to a level that she could not have achieved on her
own, in spite of how good she may be. Thus she is in debt to he who conferred on her this status of perfection. Conversely, as Heloïse takes the name of whore, she elevates Abelard to the point where he is unduly indebted to her (761). In fact, he is more indebted to Heloïse than a wife is usually indebted to her husband, for as a whore, Heloïse sacrifices not only goods, or freedom, but also her entire self, psychologically, emotionally, and sexually:

   I found strength at your command to destroy myself. I did more, strange to say—my love rose to such heights of madness that it robbed itself of what it most desired beyond hope of recovery, when immediately at your bidding I changed my clothing along with my mind, in order to prove you the sole possessor of my body and will alike (Letter 2, 51).

Ironically, in becoming a nun, Heloïse has completed her transformation into the whore, as it is the final proof of the sacrifice of her will to the will of he whom she loves. In this way, “she wages impassioned war with Abelard under the guise of submission” (Newman 74). She explicitly tells him, “You alone have so great a debt to repay me” (Letter 2, 51), and, “I believed that the more I humbled myself on your account, the more gratitude I should win from you” (Letter 2, 51). In calling herself a whore, she reminds Abelard that she has sacrificed all that a person could hold dear: honor, freedom, and her very self. Yet, her humility and self-erasure are the only things that give Abelard his mastery. Thus, Heloïse is the true master, since she is the one who chose to endow him with this power, and who can revoke it by relinquishing her position of submission. (Nouvet 761). As the word “whore” is used to convey the opposite of its commonly understood meaning, so Heloïse’s submission is used to obtain an opposite result.

But Abelard in his response, rhetorically experienced as he is, does not take Heloïse’s bait. He refuses to acknowledge Heloïse’s “vulgarity,…shocking regardless of its context”
(Kamuf 15), or even that he ever had an intensely erotic attachment to this woman. He claims not perceive his lack of writing as neglect, but rather as faith in Heloïse and her ability to carry on with her life at the Paraclete without instruction. He then offers to amend this unintended transgression: “If...you feel that you have need of my instruction and writings in matters pertaining to God, write to me what you want, so that I may answer as God permits me” (Letter 3, 56, my emphasis), the thinly veiled subtext of which is, “I refuse to acknowledge our former sexual relationship, your references to it, your pain on behalf of it, or that I am in any way to blame for this pain.” From this point on, he turns the focus of the correspondence back to his own troubles, addressing Heloïse only as a nun and friend whose prayers may serve him in his times of trial.

In her next letter, rather than desisting, Heloïse more explicitly explains her suffering on account of still active and potent sexual desires:

In my case, the pleasures of lovers which we shared have been too sweet—they can never displease me, and can scarcely be banished from my thoughts. Wherever I turn, they are always there before my eyes, bringing with them awakened longings and fantasies which will not even let me sleep. Even during the celebration of the Mass, when our prayers should be purer, lewd visions of those pleasures take such a hold upon my unhappy soul that my thoughts are on their wantonness instead of on prayers. I should be groaning over the sins I have committed, but I can only sigh for what I have lost. Everything we did and also the times and places are stamped on my heart along with your image, so that I live through it all again with you. Even in sleep I know no respite. Sometimes my thoughts are betrayed in a movement of my body, or they break
out in an unguarded word…for me, youth and passion and experience of pleasures which were so delightful intensify the torments of the flesh and longings of desire (Letter 4, 68-69).

In this passage, Heloïse exemplifies not only her identity as a sexual creature, but also as a master of rhetoric, equal to Abelard in her capabilities. She overcomes Abelard’s restriction on the correspondence to matters only pertaining to God, by making her intense sexual desire a God-related matter. By doing this, she “makes it far more difficult for Abelard to respond without acknowledging the intimate reference” (Kamuf 21). He cannot ignore so scandalous a statement as that she is possessed by “lewd visions” during the Mass, the most important experience in Catholicism. To not acknowledge that his wife and sister in Christ is in the grips of such sinful thoughts during such a sacred time would be to shirk his responsibility not so much as a husband or lover, but as a priest.

As Heloïse tells Abelard how her inability to suppress invasive erotic images hinders a close relationship with God, she enables herself to disclose even more explicitly her ever-present desire for him. In a new way, sex has both empowered her and informed her intellectual argument. It is only her explicit expression of her sexuality that forces him to acknowledge her in the terms she demands: not daughter, not sister, but wife and lover. She does not see herself as Abbess of the Paraclete; while outwardly she goes through the motions of a pious woman, inwardly she is still the pupil and the adoring lover. Others may believe in her piety, but she cannot bear for the one she loves beyond all bounds, the one in whom she has immersed her entire self, not to understand and acknowledge who that self is. It is only her graphic expression of this self that prompts an engaged and sincere response from Abelard, and in its sincerity, a
reciprocation of the self she has offered. In it, he first indignantly defends himself from a few accusations in her letters, namely, that he was wrong in his address to put her name before his own, because the superior person’s name should always come first, and that he distressed her by implying that he may be killed by his enemies. He explains to her that his address was appropriate, for as the bride of Christ she is now his superior, and points out that she had particularly asked him to address his anxieties to her rather than the intended recipient of the Historia, as she ought to be his dearest relation on earth and able to offer him comfort. He then proceeds to address the greater issue at hand, that of her “old perpetual complaint” (Letter 5, 79) which has caused her morality crisis. He offers her spiritual advice and comfort, and reminds her that her former life was one of sin. He acknowledges his participation in this sinful lifestyle as well. Then he poses the rather paradoxical request that out of love for him, “whom [she] declares [her]self ready to follow to the very fires of hell” (Letter 5, 79), transfer her ardent affection from him to God. His sincerity is evident in that, unlike the previous letter, he addresses her complaints directly, and he has not maintained the detached calm of his former letter, but appears to have actually lost his temper a little. He also displays genuine concern, if not for Heloïse’s emotional gratification, then for her spiritual well being.

It may seem base, even whorish (in the word’s conventional understanding), for a woman to so blatantly use sex as a tool to achieve her ends. In present day society, we still question a woman’s use of sex as manipulation. Does she empower herself by doing so, or assist in her ultimate degradation? The answers vary from those of esteem to those of disparagement. However one way to view this specific case is with an understanding of Heloïse’s own sense of morality, based somewhat in Christianity, but mostly in philosophy. Both Heloïse and Abelard
were firm believers in the philosophy of the Ethic of Intention, a philosophy fully explained in Abelard’s *Ethics*. This philosophy postulates that the morality of an act lies in the intention with which the act is committed, not the results of such an act. Though a person’s action may have a negative outcome, if their intention was rooted in the desire to do good, they are free from blame, regardless of any errors in judgment. Heloïse confirms her belief in the Ethic of Intention in her first letter: “Wholly guilty though I am, I am also, as you know, wholly innocent. It is not the deed but the intention of the doer which makes the crime, and justice should weigh not what was done but the spirit in which it was done” (Letter 2, 53). We must then, examine Heloïse’s motives. What was she hoping for? Clearly, it could not be sex, since it had become physically impossible for Abelard. It was not simply a response, for she was dissatisfied with the nature of Abelard’s first response. She certainly wants her pain to be acknowledged by the one with whom she credits it. Yet, what she seems to really want is his presence. She establishes this as her goal in her first letter:

Letters from absent friends are welcome indeed, as Seneca himself shows us by his own example when he writes these words in a passage of a letter to his friend Lucilius:

Thank you for writing to me often, the one way in which you can make your presence felt, for I have never a letter from you without the immediate feeling that we are together. If pictures of absent friends give us pleasure, renewing our memories and relieving the pain of separation even if they cheat us with empty comfort, how much more welcome is a letter which comes to us in the very handwriting of an absent friend.
Thank God that here at least is a way of restoring your presence to use which no malice can prevent, nor obstacle can hinder; then do not, I beseech you, allow any negligence to hold you back (Letter 2, 48).

Her loneliness in this passage is tangible. Though surrounded by women, by her own words, she has no one to confide in about her emotional distress, for it would reveal her hypocritical piety. As abbess, she must always provide a good example. So, though she cannot achieve his actual presence, she wants to feel the presence of Abelard, the Abelard she once knew, in his writing, as well as still have the same emotional connection with Abelard that she felt she had during the period when they were sexually involved. As pointed out earlier, in becoming Abelard’s whore, Heloïse “has yet to renounce Abelard’s mastery over her” (Kamuf 17). The result of this withheld renunciation is that she is able to “maintain the fiction of this mastery…to keep alive the possibility of the erotic subtext in which neither is master” (Kamuf 17). As she has wholly given herself in her writing, intellectually, emotionally and sexually, so she hopes to achieve his presence as wholly as he can present it in his writing. She wants to reinstate that Ciceronian connection of *amicitia*, in which both lovers give their all, expecting nothing in return, thus creating a profound connection of disinterested love. If she cannot, she at least wants him to offer her the assurance that it once existed:

Tell me one thing, if you can. Why, after our entry into religion…have I been so neglected and forgotten by you that I have neither a word from you when you are here to give me strength nor the consolation of a letter in absence? Tell me, I say, if you can—or I will tell you what I think and indeed the world suspects. It was desire, not affection, which bound you to me, the flame of lust rather than love…This is not merely my own
opinion, beloved, it is everyone’s…I only wish that it were mine alone, and that the love you professed could find someone to defend it and so comfort me in my grief for a while. I wish I could think of some explanation which would excuse you and somehow cover up the way you hold me cheap (Letter 2, 53).

For Heloïse, sexual and emotional attachments always were and still are inextricably linked. They are both aspects of the same self, and in truly disinterested love, all aspects of the self are offered. Seen in this light, her focus on sex throughout her discourse is not an example of feminine weakness or predisposition of being beholden to pleasures of the flesh, but a comprehensive examination of herself, as well as a total expression of her love. Sex was an important aspect of that love, but as she herself points out, her unconditional love continues on without it: “While I enjoyed with you the pleasures of the flesh, many were uncertain whether I was prompted by love or lust; but now the end is proof of the beginning” (Letter 2, 54). Though her writings may appear to be lewd, her intention is always pure.

What also must be recognized about the ever-presence of sex in Heloïse’s writings is that, far from detracting from her scholastic capabilities, as one might believe, it actually seems to heighten them. Her sexual and intellectual potency are linked. In a practical sense, she is able to use eroticism as a powerful element of her overall argument, and it is precisely that eroticism that forces Abelard to finally respond in a sincere matter. For Heloïse, sex is more than physical gratification. Rather, it is a physical connection that accompanies an emotional one. As Heloïse argues that her relationship with Abelard enhanced his philosophical life, so did that relationship enhance her philosophical life as well. As the relationship was an offering of the complete self it enabled her to identify this complete self, emotionally, sexually, and intellectually. She gained
access to higher levels of understanding both the human self in general and herself specifically, which in turn enriched her intellectual life.

Heloïse does finally achieve from Abelard the acknowledgment of her plight that she sought after. In this acknowledgment, she also receives the presence of an honest and sincere Abelard, the one from whom she was denied access for so long. She is able to engage him in a philosophical debate by acknowledging her moral quandary, allowing her to feel his presence and interact with him all the more. He may chide her in his writing, or be annoyed by her persistence, but he is there.

Yet, no matter how brilliant her rhetorical skills or how clever her understanding of sex as a powerful, albeit manipulative, element of her argument, Heloïse cannot elicit from her former lover that solid assurance that she was ever loved. Though he addresses her distress, and offers his aid, this consolation for which she was hoping he withholds, sadly confirming that during their affair, while she was motivated by love, he was driven by lust. In her third letter, after having received acknowledgment of her “old perpetual complaint” (Letter 5, 79), but no confirmation of his love from Abelard, Heloïse basically gives up. She claims to “have set the bridle of [his] injunction on the words which issue from [her] unbounded grief” (Letter 6, 93). This “silence of Heloïse” (Newman 73), is perhaps to be more criticized than her scandalous words. However, though Heloïse was an extraordinary woman, she was still very human, one who can only take so much. Because of this humanity, she has proven a disappointment to many, as she fails to live up to the all of the standards of a morally perfect abbess or a brilliant, independent female. Because she is so unique, an intelligent, extremely well-educated woman from the Middle Ages who wrote, as well as a woman who was able to run a convent and by then
was known for her piety, we want to impose upon her all our own ideals. We hope to make her an example, solid proof that a woman is strong enough to hold her own against any man, even during a period where women suffered from inequality and lack of opportunity. As a woman writer, more is expected from her than that which is expected of any man. Yet, we do her a great disservice in this effort to pigeonhole her into this mold of perfection. As is the case in tales of courtly love where the knight places his lady on a pedestal, we try to elevate Heloïse to a level from which she will inevitably fall short.

If we allow ourselves to see Heloïse as a great woman as well as a fallible human, we could perhaps learn much more from her than if she fit the mode of the perfect role model. After all, her writings disprove the misogynist prejudice that a woman cannot be emotionally and sexually charged as well as a worthy adversary in a rhetorical debate. She may not be the poster-child for female empowerment, but her writing offers rare insight into the female heart, which is perhaps a better way of eliciting a respectful understanding of the female sex. She acknowledges her femininity, as well as embraces her humanity. She was brutally scarred by her experience, and in truth, this may have warped her judgment, or injure her sense of self-worth. Nevertheless, she survived. She survived abuse, she survived neglect, and she survived the devastation of a lost love. In her heartfelt letters, she continues to survive today. We can read her writing and feel her presence, for on those pages, she offered her complete self, a sexual, intelligent, alive and complex creature. Abelard could not fully appreciate this self, and kept trying to make her something she was not. We must not do her the same disservice.
Almost a century after Heloïse divulged her sexual frustrations in writing to her estranged husband, a women’s movement began that fostered writings exploring a different kind of sexual longing and separation from a beloved. The women involved in this movement came to be known as beguines, possibly named for St. Begga, credited by some as their patroness. Also known as *mulieres sanctae* (“holy women”), the beguines sought to live a virtuous existence without the restrictions of vows or any hierarchical rule or order. Fiona Bowie uses the writings of John Malderus, Bishop of Antwerp (1563-1633) to explain the virtue of such a lifestyle:

…it was a common capacity of many pious women in Belgium to rejoice in excellence rather than promise it. They preferred to remain chaste perpetually than to vow perpetual chastity. Likewise they were more eager to obey than to vow obedience, to cultivate poverty by frugal use of their fortunes than to abandon everything at once: they might be the kinder to the poor if something were left. They preferred to submit daily, as it were, to obedience within the enclosure than to be confined once and for all (Bowie 12).

The beguines’ choice not to take vows shows a perceptive recognition of their own humanity and capacity for error. This acknowledgement rather than denial of humanness will play an integral role in the beguines’ spirituality.

Though the bishop refers to “enclosure,” beguines were still active participants in society. In fact, when the beguine movement began towards the end of the twelfth century, these holy women were most often simply laywomen living on their own or perhaps with a family. Communities known as beguinages did not begin to form until the middle of the thirteenth century. However, even when these communities were formed, the beguines were intent on
remaining contributing members of society, and treated the beguinages more as a household than as a cloister. Mendicancy, which had become practice for many religious who had taken vows of poverty, was discouraged. The beguines believed that beggars were detrimental to society, draining it of its resources rather than bolstering it. One if the missions of the beguines was aid God’s people by improving society, both socially and economically.

In a world where a woman’s options were limited to marriage or life as a nun under the jurisdiction of the Church (as seen in Heloïse’s situation), life as a beguine offered an appealing alternative to women who did not wish to live under the constraint of vows or male-dominated institutions. Beguines created for themselves self-sufficient societies, owning their own property and working to provide their own daily needs. In a community, beguines enjoyed a “more fluid structure for their spirituality” where they shared in “common spiritual practices, access to books and ideas, and opportunities for leadership” (Petroff, “Women” 7). It was a place where women could comfortably confide in each other, learn from each other, and offer each other spiritual support in an environment less restrictive than a convent. Though it is remarkable that this kind of subculture could exist in such a socially rigid era, it is not their self-sufficiency alone that earned the beguines the attention they received from their contemporaries and scholars for ages to come. Among the beguines were mystics, women who on many occasions experienced visions of a religious nature. Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, in her collection of essays, *Body & Soul*, describes mysticism as “the direct experience of the real, an unmediated experience of God…mysticism is not just one event but a succession of insights and revelations about God that gradually transforms the recipient” (Petroff, “Women” 4). During a mystical encounter, a woman would often feel passion and joy so strongly that it could only be described as ecstasy.
Although there were male mystics at the time, female mystics seemed to be more prevalent. Evidently, women experienced encounters with God that were of a far more sensual nature than the more intellectual and abstract male experience (Petroff “Women” 8). The way a woman would explain a mystical encounter with God most often included descriptions of sights and sounds, even smells, tastes and touch. We have access to such descriptions today because some female mystics, many of them beguines, felt compelled to record these ecstatic experiences, for reasons of self-exploration, or because they believed it was the wish of God that they do so, in the hopes of mediating a close relationship between their readers and God or Christ.

Although the writings of beguine mystics were designed to facilitate a better relationship with the divine, they often confounded their readers. Imagery used by the beguine mystics in their writings evokes violence, drunkenness, and, in some opinions, sexual encounters often resulting in orgasm. The writings appear to directly contradict the temperate, restrained style of Christianity prescribed by St. Paul and St. Augustine, which was extremely popular throughout the Middle Ages. The discomfort caused by the frankness of these writings becomes evident in the efforts of beguine admirers to evade the seemingly sexually charged mystical accounts, which were “as disconcerting as [they were] seductive” (Newman 137). Jacques de Vitry, friend to the beguine Marie D’Oignies and admirer of the beguines in general, “wrote at length in their defense” (Petroff, “New Feminine” 54). When describing their holiness and enumerating their virtues, he tells of their devotion, exemplified by incessant prayer, remaining in bed for days, enduring illness, experiencing seizure by ecstasy and languishing for love of God. However, as Petroff observes,
De Vitry is utilizing this rhetoric for specific ends. In this passage he does not speak of the contents of the visions these women were experiencing; he is describing them as credible ecstacies, primarily on the basis of their physical behavior. He is, in fact, making them seem traditional or by assimilating them to a medieval stereotype, the holy nun. You would not expect, reading this passage, that such women were experiencing visions of violence and dismemberment as well as erotic love (“New Feminine” 54).

De Vitry’s need to justify the holiness of the beguines is a very telling example of how much he feared the nature of beguine visions would be viewed as offensive, and how he himself was unable to fully grasp the content of a beguine mystical experience.

Like De Vitry, scholars and theologians since the medieval period have struggled to account for the appearance of eroticism in religious texts written by unmarried women who, under the Christian doctrine they claimed to be following, were expected to live chastely. Thus, the erotic language has often been glossed over in the study of these texts. Yet I believe that since this theme runs through so many beguine writings, determining its intent by probing it is integral to understanding the overall purpose of the texts. In this chapter, I plan to explore the writings of the three most widely known beguines: Mechthild of Magdeburg, author of The Flowing Light of the Godhead, Hadewijch of Brabant (also known as Hadewijch of Antwerp) who wrote Visions as well as stanzaic poetry, and Marguerite Porete, author of The Mirror of Simple Souls. Each employed erotic and marital themes in an attempt to accurately convey the intensity of their experience along with the depth of their longing for God. Though each woman wrote apart from the others, they evidently all felt their experiences were best expressed by erotic imagery. This likeness in their choice of language suggests that such language is an integral part
of relating the essence of each of their respective mystical experiences. The literary and poetic choices of Mechthild, Hadewijch and Marguerite create a frustratingly paradoxical dilemma: why are presumably chaste women compelled to use erotic imagery to accurately convey the experience of direct interaction with God?

A concept that demands some explanation before proceeding further is the frequent personification of Love in the texts of all three writers. Called “Frau Minne” or simply “Minne” by Mechthild and Hadewijch and “Dame Amour” or “Amour” by Marguerite, this “Lady Love” is a potent force that takes a prominent role in the soul’s interaction with God. Sometimes Lady Love is involved in a tête-à-tête with the soul, the nature of which can range from a courtly wooing to a violent struggle. Other times, Minne is a kind mediator between the soul and God, often a co-conspirator with one in an effort to win over the other. She is mercurial in temperament, gently adoring one moment and fiercely possessive the next. She can be “as coercive and adamant a force as the goddess Venus. Lady Minne demands compliance, service, and feudal allegiance. She plants her triumphant banners in the human heart, and there she reigns, causing much suffering and elation” (Thiebaux 389). Frau Minne or Dame Amour can also take on the role of an abstract, omnipotent force; sometimes one with God and the soul, or at other times a force that dominates both God and the soul. Truly, she evades any straightforward definition. As Barbara Newman explains, “To the perennial frustration of critics, this potent figure resists the straitjacket of consistency, even in the writings of a single author” (152). In reading the beguines, Minne will be frequently encountered and often in paradoxical roles. At one moment she may be struggling to obtain mastery over the soul, while the very next she protests that she is the soul’s humble servant. She is sought by both Christ and the soul, yet
Christ and the soul exist in her. Sometimes she will be a platonic companion while at other
times she herself appears to be the soul’s voracious lover. Thus, encounters with the force of
Love within the analysis of these texts must be regarded with an open mind that allows her to
take on her varied roles.

Analyzing the erotic imagery in beguine mystical writings can be a difficult task. This is
partially because it is often difficult to determine what language is essentially “erotic” in nature.
Interpreting much of the language of Mechthild, Hadewijch and Marguerite as sexually charged
could be condemned as conjecture simply because the text is often vague. Furthermore, such
conjecture may be interpreted as a malicious effort to besmirch the holiness of the beguines.
This is perhaps part of the reason why some theologians and scholars often choose to accept
these passages at face value and not search for subtext. Yet, whether or not these writings
deserve to be called sexual or erotic, they certainly discuss a relationship between God and the
soul that is of a romantic nature. This type of relationship is decidedly different from the more
common interpretation of God as a father with paternal love felt equally for all his children.
Deriving both from the traditions of bridal mysticism and courtly romance and lyric, the
marriage or courtship is described in terms of a tender, affectionate, and deeply personal bond
which presumes that God or Christ is beholden to the power of romantic attraction. This view of
God, even without the explicit presence of sex, feels almost a little blasphemous. To insinuate
that God is subject to some other power negates his objectivity and equanimity. It detracts from
our notion of his pure holiness and thus challenges his supremacy. Yet, the relationship
described may be intended purely as a metaphor. Whether or not it is simply a result of poetic
license, its presence in the texts is undeniable.
Using bridal imagery in prayer or mystical experience was actually not unique to the beguines. Its tradition began when Bernard of Clairvaux interpreted The Old Testament’s *Song of Songs*, a tale of Israelite lovers, to be an allegory for God’s relationship with the Church. Seemingly secular and highly erotic, the *Song of Songs* (also called *Song of Solomon* or *Canticles*) does not fit neatly into a Christian tradition that is so deeply appreciates ascetic restraint from indulgence in carnal pleasure. Rather, it appears to be an “ancient Hebrew text that medieval exegetes preserved in spite of themselves” (Newman 144), perhaps out of appreciation for its literary beauty. Regardless, it found its place in orthodox Christian canon, safely perceived in metaphorical terms. It “had long been central to formative literature for nuns and virgins” (Newman 138), who often referred to their vocation as “brides of Christ,” and became a convention of feminine prayer “devised by male authors for a female protagonist” (Newman 138). This somewhat more traditional portrayal of God’s love for the soul appears most prevalently in the writings of Mechthild who “identifies chiefly with the bridal self” (Newman 145). In her mystical text, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, upon reflection of the incarnation of Christ as man, she joyfully exclaims that Jesus is “an immortal God and a mortal man and a living comfort of everlasting love; our Redeemer is become our Bridegroom! The bride is intoxicated by his glorious countenance” (Menzies 216). Hadewijch tells a similar story in Vision 10 of her *Visions*, which make up the body of her mystical work along with her poetry, entitled, “The Bride in the City” (Hadowijch196). It tells of God’s joy in exclaiming to the kingdom of heaven that he has found his bride and all should rejoice. Christ tells Hadewijch, “Your blessed soul is the bride in the city. Here is that highest society which wholly lives in love and in the spirit of the highest virtue” (Hadowijch 197).
Though many of Hadewijch’s and Mechthild’s references to this mystical marriage tell of a rapturous romance, in some passages, such as these, they present Christ as not only a husband, but a friend and protector, even a father figure. In his assumption of all these roles, it is easier to accept the idea of Christ as a husband, for he is simply fulfilling the needs the soul has for various kinds of love and care, as only a divine being can, albeit in human form. With Christ in all these roles, in this and certain other passages, the reader may choose to believe that this union is a chaste marriage, a marriage free of sexual intercourse, which was a popular trend in the Middle Ages. Couples would marry for the sake of companionship, but abstain from sex in order to preserve their virtue. The prevalence of this lifestyle during this period may have made the idea of marriage with the divine easier for theologians and religious to swallow.

Yet, regardless of whether or not these writings follow a tradition previously established by males, the bridal imagery of Mechthild and Hadewijch is still rather singular. Unlike most concepts of marriage during the medieval period, the marriage of God and the soul is full of warmth and passion, forged based on mutual need for love rather than economic convenience: “The emotional fulfillment that may have been lacking in the medieval notion of marriage and motherhood was found by beguine women in their relationship with the divine” (Bowie 173). Taking the very abstract idea that the Holy Church (a concept rather vague in and of itself) is Christ’s bride and slightly changing it to accommodate their own theology, the individual souls of both Mechthild and Hadewijch claim Christ as their own bridegroom. Many references are made to the “marriage bed,” connoting that this is indeed a consummated marriage, as is the relationship in the Song of Songs. God is not a remote deity, but a lonely man in search of a companion, which Mechthild’s and Hadewijch’s souls provide. They may refer to Christ’s love
as one for the human soul in general, but unlike the above passages cited, many of their
descriptions of Christ’s interaction with the soul are so specifically and sensually described that
it is evident that each beguine is recounting her own soul’s intensely personal experience. This
makes an abstract image more tangible, less allegorical, and in some ways more disturbing. The
marital and, arguably by extension, sexual union is now understood as taking place between two
actual beings, not two ideas. The tenor and the vehicle of the metaphor have thus become too
similar, and make the reader question just in what way the mystic’s desire for God resembles
sexual desire. Like Heloïse’s assessment of Cicero’s concept of platonic love, Mechthild and
Hadewijch have taken a male-created concept and adapted it to be able to express their own
uniquely feminine sensibility.

Though beguine writings have their fair share of bridal imagery, they do not belong to the
bridal mysticism genre that preceded them. During this time, courtly love lyrics and romances
were popular literature, usually written in the vernacular, that dealt with the secular love between
a man and a woman, and the obstacles that they must overcome to consummate their love.
Usually this consummation was adulterous, or at the very least extra-marital. As Barbara
Newman explains, “Troubadour lyric, Minnesang [German and Low Countries’ version of
courtly love poetry], and romance had forged a language that glorified the lover’s endlessly
desiring, exquisitely self-conscious and recalcitrant subjectivity, but also celebrated the ecstatic
fusion and dissolution of boundaries in consummated love” (164). Newman uses the term, “la
mystique courtoise” to refer to the unique writing style of the beguines, and points out that it
“was a distinctive creation of the thirteenth century beguines” (137). She goes on to explain that
“the originality of the beguines’ self-understanding is missed if it is treated solely as a version of
Brautmystik, the eroticized contemplative practice based on allegorical reading of the *Song of Songs*” (138). Rather, the beguines also incorporate “the language of fine amour, the prevailing ethos in courtly lyric and romance” which, unlike the conventional medieval idea of marriage, “allowed them a wider emotional range” (138).

This more expansive mode of expression is in part provided by many conventions of courtly romances and lyrics. Newman tells us that there a few recurring archetypes within courtly literature. These are the lady love, the fin amant, and the amie (144). The fin amant is a masculine role, the knight who doggedly pursues the object of his affection, the lady love, whom he holds on a pedestal. Performing difficult services on her behalf and submitting to her will, he hopes to eventually consummate his love. However, the lady love is “inclined to be haughty, emotionally distant and capricious. Hence the return of his love is often doubted” (144). This doubt causes a pain that must be endured as a further means for ultimately achieving his love. The amie is a feminine figure, though different from the lady love. Like the fin amant, she is below the object of her love in social status, and must perform difficult tasks in order to earn his love and a place in high society. However, her lover is encouraging, wanting her to succeed so that they may share in love as equals. A positive outcome is more greatly assured to her than to the fin amant. The beguines make use of all these archetypes, sometimes casting themselves in unlikely roles, such as Hadewijch taking on the persona of the fin amant in her stanzaic poetry. However, as seen before, she does not neglect the bridal persona, which is also the preference of Mechthild. Marguerite appears to have an affinity for the role of the amie, but also makes use of the fin amant and even bridal personas (Newman 145).
While use of courtly love literary conventions gave the writings of the beguines their unique flavor, it also made their writings more difficult to negotiate with *caritas*, or charity, the traditional, desexualized adoration of God and Christ: “A broad stream of opinion, shared by ascetic and worldly writers, held love to be incompatible with fine amour in any form” (Newman 140). In addition, the Church strongly condemned “not only sexual love but…the courtly affectations and pastimes that glamorized it” (Newman 140). In the writings of Mechthild, Hadewijch, and to an extent, Marguerite, the bridal and courtly sometimes blend to present a marriage not only based on devotion, but passion and desire. If they do indeed refer to sexual interaction within a marriage, it is certainly motivated by the potent desire found in courtly lyrics and romances; the eroticism of the *Song of Songs* is incorporated as well, and it is the combination of the usage of both sexually charged literary traditions that creates such ambiguity when attempting to understand exactly when the beguines meant when they spoke of their interaction with the divine.

Much of the beguines’ writings are difficult to evaluate. Its level of “eroticism” is certainly debatable. Words such as “close,” “passion,” “desire,” and “burning” or “heat” offer different shades of meaning, confusing the reader as to their exact purpose within the context of their respective writings. Hadewijch discusses a kind of closeness, explaining that she was “so closely…bound to him [Christ] in the bonds of true Love” (*Visions* 194). Yet, what exactly does she mean by “the bonds of true Love?” Does it include a sexual aspect? In the same passage, she “desired that God give himself to [her], so that [she] might content him” (*Visions* 195). It cannot be said for sure what kind of desire it is that she is feeling, whether it be a sexual need or simply wishing for his presence. Likewise, it is difficult to determine how she means to “content
him.” God speaks to Mechthild in this same vague manner: “That I love you passionately comes from my nature, for I am love itself. That I love you often comes from my desire, for I desire to be loved passionately” (Tobin 52). Passionate desire is most readily associated with sexual or carnal longing, even though there is no concrete evidence that this is what God means when speaking in Mechthild’s vision. Additionally, in the writings of all three women, God or Christ is specifically referred to as the soul’s “lover.” However this word cannot strictly be defined as one that always refers to a sexual partner, and yet, a predisposition for writing about the sensual and bodily experience strengthens a suspicion that this lover is indeed a sexual partner.

The beguines’ writings about divine interface often focus so strongly on the body and the senses, that though they may not blatantly describe physical interaction, they cannot help but suggest it. Marguerite brings attention to the body when she speaks of the state of the soul enraptured in visions, which she claims “make her [the soul] always naked, All and Nothing, as long as they hold in their embrace” (130). Though referring to the soul, the customary understanding of nakedness is an undressed body. This “naked embrace” of these spiritual visions, like Hadewijch’s language, suggests a complete experience in these visions, one that fulfills spiritual, physical, and perhaps by extension, sexual needs. Hadewijch refers to the meeting of God and the soul as one in which the partners enjoy each other’s presence through sensual experience: “…each one as it were tasting all, drinking all, consuming all the other” (Visions 194). She goes on to say that she “desired to have full fruition of my Beloved, and to understand and taste him to the full… In this sense I desired that God give himself to me, so that I might content him” (Visions 195). What she means by “full fruition” cannot be definitely determined, but she does explain that to have full fruition of her lover, she must completely both
understand and taste him. It connotes that she wants her lover to give himself to her completely in a spiritual sense as well as a physical sense, or perhaps even that one sense is indistinguishable from the other. She herself seems to have a desire for physical interaction, explaining that her “heart and [her] veins and all [her] limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire” (Visions 195). It is her physical being that is desirous in this instance, not her spiritual self. She goes on to say, “After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported” (Visions 196). Here, she again makes reference to both spiritual and physical needs, those of both her heart and her humanity, being fulfilled by her lover.

Often, there is explicit descriptions of physical interaction, as well as other expressions of affection that occur only between lovers as Hadewijch describes: “And in all these tokens of love which I felt between Him and me, according to the usages of love, just as lovers use between themselves, concealing little, giving much, finding most in their close communion one with another…” (Visions 194). All three women call God or Christ their “lover.” Marguerite specifically calls Him “my Lover” (200), emphasizing how individuated the interaction of her soul with the Lord is. In Vision 7, Hadewijch tells of God and the soul exchanging “sweet love, embraces, and kisses” (Visions 195) in the manner of lovers. Throughout her poetry as well, she refers to the kisses and caresses of love. Further evidence of physical interaction comes from recurring references to a bed or bedroom, where presumably the consummation of the lovers takes place. Marguerite receives this explanation from Lady Love: “But you live, beloved, says Love, in His will completely which is His chamber, and there He is pleased to remain” (129),
insinuating that she and God share a mystical bedroom. Mechthild is even more fixated on the idea of sharing a bed with Christ. She straightforwardly requests that Lady Minne “tell my friend his couch is ready, and I am lovesick for him” (Thiébaux 397). She describes the wedding night of God and the soul: “The more her desire grows, the greater the wedding feast, the more enclosed the minne-bed. The tighter the embrace, the sweeter the kisses of their mouths” (Thiébaux 399). Making many references to “the narrow bridal bed” (Tobin 118), Mechthild wants to make clear that this bed is indeed one that God and the soul share and consummate their love in the same way human beings do.

This focus on God’s humanity, or sometimes more specifically, manhood, is another recurring theme in the writings of the beguines. Mechthild, Hadewijch and Marguerite not only explain their own sensual experience, but Christ’s as well. To make clear how greatly she values Christ’s humanity, Mechthild “names ‘Humanity’ (rather than Son or Word) as the second person of the Godhead” (Newman 150). Yet it is not only his humanity, but also his existence as a male that seems to be important to Mechthild, whom Barbara Newman playfully accuses of being “infatuated with the masculine Christ” (145). Newman also observes that in Mechthild’s version of creation, God has a very human need for something to love, and he thus creates the soul as his companion (151). These human needs extend further:

God caresses the soul in six things:

You are my pillow, my minne-bed, my secret resting place, my deepest desire, my highest honor. You are a delight of my godhood, a solace of my manhood, a brook for my burning heat (Thiébaux 399).
Mechthild’s depiction of God as man connotes that one of the aspects of manhood is the need for fulfillment of sexual desire, which Mechthild’s soul willingly provides, thus creating “a solace for [his] manhood” that would have grown more desperate had it not been fulfilled. Though this solace could be understood as providing a kind of platonic, desexualized love, the usage of words such as “minne-bed” and “desire” imply otherwise.

Hadewijch shares a similarity with Mechthild in her interpretation of the manhood of Christ. As she encounters Christ, she describes him as “looking like a Human Being and a Man, wonderful, and beautiful, and with glorious face, he came to me as humbly as anyone who wholly belongs to another” (Visions 196). She goes on to tell how Christ tells the inhabitants of heaven that for him, she fulfills “all needs, heavenly and earthly!” (Visions 196). Heavenly needs presumably deal with the spiritual needs, whereas earthly needs probably translate into human needs, both those of companionship and a sexual relationship.

Some of the metaphorical language of the beguines is even more questionable. It is difficult to distinguish whether it is simply flowery or evocative language. Yet, if it is meant to be sexual, the imagery can be quite graphic. Mechthild often writes in this style, which sometimes appears to be simply poetic euphemisms for sexual encounters. In The Flowing Light of the Godhead, Mechthild’s soul addresses God thus: “You clothe yourself with my soul, and you are her most intimate garment” (Tobin 76). The notes of Tobin’s edition of The Flowing Light make clear than an intimate garment is indeed “a garment worn next to the skin” (Tobin 345). She recounts to Lady Minne: “You struggled a long time with the high holy ghost, and you conquered him so that he gushed all at once into Mary’s humble maidenhead” (Thiébaux
It seems to be implied that desire for union with the soul overcame God so strongly that he actually somehow consummated this desire with Mary, which brought about the birth of Christ.

This idea of union with the Godhead is prevalent throughout the writings of Hadewijch, Mechthild, and Marguerite. Mechthild’s idea of union uses a lot of imagery having to do with melting or flowing together (as the title of her manuscript indicates). As she compares her soul to a maiden who comes to the court of her lord, she explains how “the high prince and the little maidservant embrace and are made one like water and wine” (Thiébaux 397). She has her soul praise God, saying, “O you melting God in the union of your love!” (Thiébaux 398). God tells her soul:

When I shine, you shall glow.
When I flow, you shall become wet.
When you sigh, you draw my divine heart into you.
When you weep in longing for me, I take you in my arms.
But when you love, we two become one being

(Tobin 76).

Explaining the way this union comes about she tells how “she cannot hold herself in check until he brings her within himself. She would like to speak but cannot, so utterly had she been enmeshed in sublime union with the awe-inspiring Trinity” (Tobin 44). Hadewijch also makes use of images of melting and flowing to achieve union with the divine. She speaks of how God will “unite [his] oneness in the manner of union with full possession” (Visions 196). When this union occurs, “beloved and beloved shall flow wholly through one another” (Poetry 4.7.47).
Marguerite’s writings focus most intensely on union with God. For her, it is the ultimate goal of her visions and meditations. The soul must learn to relinquish its free will in a willingness to become “annihilated” so that it may become one with God in a “union of Divine Love” (137). The imagery of melting, flowing and dissolving appears in her writings as well: “This Soul, says love, is dissolved, melted and drawn, joined and united to the most high Trinity” (143). She tells “The Ravishing Most High who overtakes me and joins me to the center of the marrow of divine Love in whom I am melted” (155), and repeats, “I am dissolved in Him” (156). Exactly what Marguerite is trying to say may not be clear, but keeping in mind that the beguines adapted some of their ideas from the courtly love tradition throws some light on the subject.

Thiébaux explains that in a courtly love lyric, a languishing lover seeks the love of a noble lady, and that the ultimate “object was the fulfillment of desire through union with the beloved” (Thiébaux, “Brides” 390). She states more specifically that what “the lover hopes for in his lyric stance is sexual union and rapture” (Thiébaux, “Brides” 389, my emphasis). Thus when union is mentioned in courtly love lyric, it is understood that this union is one of a sexual nature. It then follows that the beguines, in imitation of the courtly lyric style, might also use the term “union” to mean sexual unity along with spiritual unity.

There is further evidence that this union has a sexual element. The ecstasy that these women reach at the height of their visions of union is described as so potent, tangible, and overtaking, that it often resembles sexually climaxing. Bynum believes that “Hadewijch, in a Eucharistic vision of great beauty, described mystical union with images that evoke female orgasm” (Bynum, “…And Woman” 169). Marguerite also describes an orgasmic experience. To Marguerite, as for many of the beguines, there are stages in achieving union with the Divine
Beloved. It appears that when the soul reaches the higher stages, the experience is strangely similar to a sexual climax: “…she is in the depths of the fifth stage with her Lover. There is nothing lacking to her, and so she is often carried up to the sixth, but this is of little duration. For it is an aperture, like a spark, which quickly closes, in which one cannot long remain” (135).

Another sensitive subject to be discussed is imagery within the beguine texts that appears to be filled with violence and debauchery. Drunkenness is a state that the beguines experience frequently through their mysticism. Marguerite’s soul becomes “inebriated by understanding” and “very intoxicated” (105). Mechthild claims to “become drunk with the sight of [Christ’s] noble face” (Thiébaux 399). She also describes a scenario in which a male version of Minne invites her soul to drink from the heavenly wine cellar, yet warning her that the expense of the wine will leave her destitute. After drinking, she laments:

I’ve become so drunk with wine
That I am truly thrall to all creatures,
And it seems to me in my human disgrace
And my newfound wantonness
That no man ever treated me so badly before—
He can do any kind of sin with me, unblessed woman that I am (Thiébaux 404).

It seems like rather than leading her towards holiness, love has led her astray.

One form in which violence appears in the texts is through ravishment. This term “originally meant ‘rape’ but could refer at this period to both spiritual exaltation and sexual pleasure” (Newman 141). Hadewijch speaks of being “ravished by Love” (Visions 198), while Marguerite refers to God as the “Ravishing Farnessness” (135) and the “Ravishing Most High”
Both God and Love have the capacity and apparent desire to ravish the soul. Regardless of whether ravishment is meant as rape, the word stills connotes forceful, or at the very least passionate, possession.

There are instances when the violence is more explicit, and it usually occurs at the hand of Minne, such as in Mechthild’s text, in which Minne declares to the soul:

I hunted you for my delight;
I seized you for my desire;
I bound you tightly for my joy;
When I wounded you, you became one with me.
When I beat you with a club, I became your strong ravisher.
It was I who drove the Almighty from heaven’s kingdom
And deprived him of his human life,
Then gave him gloriously back to his father.
How could you, vile worm, think you could recover from me?

(Thiébaux 396).

Hadewijch experiences the violence of love as well, saying that “in striving for this I have never experienced Love in any sort of way as repose; on the contrary, I found Love a heavy burden and disgrace. For I was a human creature, and Love is terrible and implacable, devouring and burning without regard for anything. The soul is contained in one little rivulet; her depth is quickly filled up; her dikes quickly burst” (Visions 199). Love’s sadism is sometimes complemented by masochistic impulses of the beguine:

Ah, Lady Love, throw me beneath you.
I would gladly suffer defeat.

If you would only take my life,

That would be, Lady, all my solace (Tobin 211).

Appearing to demean the tender affection between God and the soul into a manifestation of carnal desire, the violence and drunkenness associated with “love” seem inappropriate. It is tricky to negotiate, even in terms of metaphor, and is perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the beguine writings.

After a close reading of the writings of each of these prolific women, a person would have to be a little ignorant to not acknowledge that sexuality and eroticism play an integral role in the beguines’ literary relation of their spirituality to their readers. The task now is to understand why.

One diplomatic explanation is the idea that a mystical experience “may be so abstract as to elude any verbal formulation” (Petroff, “Women” 5). While Mechthild, Hadewijch and Marguerite felt it was their duty to communicate their mystical experiences with the masses, God is so vast and incomprehensible that they found it difficult to actually convey what it is to interact with him in human terms. Each of the women actually points out this difficulty of translation to her reader. Marguerite, perhaps the most elitist of the three, contests that when recalling the height of a mystical experience, “one cannot say anything about it” (156). Mechthild elaborates a little further: “Thus God and the soul soar further to a blissful place of which I neither can nor will say much. It is too great and I dare not speak of it for I am a sinful creature” (Menzies 214). Though she makes her reader a little more privy to her mystical raptures, like Marguerite she has an air of exclusivity in her relation. It is as if she is telling her
reader, “Because you cannot understand it, you have no right to question the means by which I relate this experience.” Perhaps this is why theologians and scholars feel compelled to tiptoe around the sex question. Having not had the same experience, they are intimidated by Mechthild’s words into not questioning the validity or sacredness of her often erotically conveyed encounters. As Nancy Partner observes in her essay, “Did Mystics Have Sex?”:

> Once the ‘ineffableness of the event is established as the premise, the event may be lingeringly and minutely described in metaphor…This language is regarded as a metaphorical code for the supernatural by doctrinal fiat: a scheme of linked metaphor whose ultimate referent is outside the range of human perception and understanding, and thus can be approached only through figuration, paraphrase, comparison and displacement (301-302).

Perhaps Hadewijch says it best when she tells her reader, “The longing in which I then was cannot be expressed by any language or any person I know; and everything I could say about it would be unheard-of to all those who never apprehended Love as something to work for with desire, and whom love has never acknowledged as hers” (“Letters” 195). She is elite, chosen, and allowed to explain as much or as little of her experience as she chooses, in whatever manner she sees fit. If we are to understand the writings in this manner, then we are to view anything that seems sexual as purely metaphorical or the result of a best effort to describe what cannot be described.

Another way to account for eroticism in these texts without having to navigate or compromise the beguines’ spiritual integrity is to explain them as purely literary. As scripture and popular texts written in the vernacular were the main texts to which beguines were most
likely to have access, it is only natural that having learned to read and write from these texts that they should adopt their style and subject matter. Barbara Newman stresses the importance of addressing these texts with this information in mind: “In reading these mystics, therefore, we must recognize that their new brand of eroticism was far from being a spontaneous manifestation of female desire. Rather, it grew out of a unique and specialized literary culture” (142).

A more skeptical view is to explain the eroticism as a product of sublimated sexual desire in a sexually restricted society. Although cynical, this theory is still plausible and ought not to be discounted, for

the pressures of the unconscious mind, however thoroughly repressed, cannot be erased, and will, under certain conditions, demand some form of expression. And although that expression will run through culturally characteristic channels, and use the vocabulary and social forms available to the personality living in its historically local moment, it will still speak of the psychic unity of our kind (Partner 306).

It certainly makes sense that an unmarried woman in a society where extra-marital sex is not socially acceptable would have repressed sexual energy. If said woman spends much of her time meditating on the love of a masculine God, it follows that this would be a probable direction to release this sexual energy.

Carolyn Walker Bynum offers a very interesting explanation for the eroticism and sensuality of the beguines’ mysticism. In the medieval period, “women were…told that, allegorically speaking, woman was to man what matter is to spirit—that is, that they symbolized the physical, lustful, material, appetitive part of human nature, whereas man symbolized the spiritual or mental” ( “Fragmentation” 147). Although this belief carried such negative
connotations, Bynum says that women took this prejudice and suited it to their situation. “If anything, women drew from the traditional notion of the female as physical a special emphasis on their own redemption by a Christ who was supremely physical because supremely human” (“Fragmentation 147).

Though these all serve as adequate explanations, the degree to which the writings focus on sexuality, the frequency at which it appears, and the sophistication of the theology of Mechthild, Hadewijch and Marguerite compels me to probe further for a more comprehensive understanding of the reasons for using erotic material in religious texts. When referring to human love, sex is deeply personal, arguably the most intimate act that can take place between two people. Ideally, it occurs as an expression of the highest level of love that can be felt between two people, the closest one human being can feel to another. I made an effort to point out how frequently the beguines make their interaction with God sound both spiritual and physical to make an argument for the presence of sexuality in the texts. However, it must not be forgotten that the bodily interaction always accompanies a spiritual one. If we are to assume the divine colloquy to have a sexual aspect, we must realize that this does not negate the spiritual aspect, but accompanies it. Sexuality then, is not a hindrance to achieving spiritual perfection, but an integral aspect of it. As Bynum puts it, “Although scholars have, of course, suggested that such reactions are sublimated sexual desire, it seems inappropriate to speak of ‘sublimation.’ In the eucharist and in ecstasy, a male Christ was handled and loved: sexual feelings were…not so much translated into another medium as simply set free” (“Fragmentation” 134). Perhaps it was the influence of male opinion that caused female mystics to express their spirituality in such a sensual manner that involved the body. Regardless, the fact that society so often identified
women with the body forced women who were striving for spiritual perfection to address the body, come to terms with it, and realize that like Christ, they were both spiritual and human beings. They felt most intensely when the body and the spirit were involved. For “physicality as sexual experience is the vehicle for emotional experiences—love, yearning, pain—and cannot be separated from emotional meaning. From this perspective, sexuality appears as the medium, the imagistic container into which intensely felt psychic and religious reality spills” (Wiethaus 45). As sex is the highest expression of human love, the pinnacle of our understanding of how to give and receive love, it absolutely cannot be eliminated from the experience of offering and receiving love from God. There must be no way in which love between two human beings may be felt or expressed in a way that cannot be felt when a human offers love to God. She must express her love in every way that she knows how, for her love for God must triumph over her love for any earthly things. Mystical union is a complete experience of love, and the beguine mystics cannot eliminate any possible expression of love if they are to truly love God more than any other.

The total mystical experience allows for the beguine to become one with God. As I explained earlier, union with the divine is crucial to the mystical experience. This sexual, spiritual unity with God or Love (often interchangeable entities), allows the beguine to actually become God or Love at that moment of spiritual height, the “aperture” to which Marguerite refers, within the vision. At this moment, God and the soul do not recognize each other as separate entities, but rather the soul “is so dissolved in Him that she sees neither herself more Him, and thus He sees completely Himself alone, by His divine goodness” (167). Hadewijch and Mechthild describe a similar experience. For Hadewijch:
Love touches the beloved,
And with unifying will unites her to herself
In one being, without revoking.
The depth of desire draws from love continually,
And what is drawn, love drinks all.
The debt love demands the beloved to pay
Is above human sense

(Poetry 12.3.24-30).

Similarly, “For Mechthild, the abjectly loving soul no longer seeks her Beloved because she is identified with him, imitating Christ’s passion so perfectly that she herself becomes a womanChrist” (Newman 162). The women literally become “God by right of love” (Newman 152).

The knowledge that the beguines acquire through mystical union is inherently linked to sexuality. To obtain this knowledge, they must become God by sexual and spiritual union. Through this union, they not only unlock the secrets of God’s mind, but also the chambers of their own. As mystical union allows the beguine access to the sexual part of herself that is expected to be repressed in any other facet of society, she establishes a maturity and familiarity with herself that few other religious women were able to achieve. They learn to embrace all aspects of their humanity and femininity, rather than trying to repress them. In other words, delicious scenarios of the imagination allowed for the return of the repressed or unattainable, that is, freely expressed sexuality and, especially for women, self-determination. Because they remained in the realm of the imagination and in the minds
of a minority, the spiritual fantasies could criticize and challenge, but not change the larger mechanisms that repressed sexual expressiveness and self-determination (Wiethaus 143).

As we explore the experiences of the beguine mystics, we find evidence of this self-awareness. For example, “through her experience of desire for Minne, Hadewijch acquires knowledge of Love’s ways and knowledge of the divine, as well as self-knowledge” (“Women” 7). Newman elaborates:

…the Visions on the whole tell a story of joy and triumph. In the most fulfilling moments of her life, Hadewijch identifies with the exalted bride. Yet for her this experience is not the end of spiritual life; it is only the successful completion of adolescence. Hadewijch’s bridal mysticism is a narrative about ‘growing up’ in every sense: discovering her ‘true self,’ exploring sexuality, learning to delay gratification, subjecting romantic dreams to the reality principle, acquiring confidence, preparing for leadership (147).

Mechthild straightforwardly tells us how divine and self-knowledge spring from intimacy:

Then our heart becomes full of love, our senses are opened, and our soul so resplendent that we look into divine knowledge like someone who sees his own countenance in a bright mirror. Thus we can know God’s will in all our actions, so that we glorify God’s will and love it whether it brings suffering or comfort (Tobin 281).

The total experience brings a total knowing, an “artful knowing” (Newman 137) to which only the female mystic has access. Her newly obtained self-assurance, as well as her unmediated union with God gives her power and authority without intervention from the Church. She did
not need the mediation of the Church to communicate with God, nor did she need it to communicate God’s message to others. The sexual and intellectual potency of the beguine mystical experience allowed her to live and teach without men having a hand in any aspect of her life (except perhaps as pupils).

There is still the uncomfortable issue of the violence that is so prevalent in the texts. Ravishment, drunkenness, and actual beating do not seem to find a snug fit into this image of a union of perfect love with God. Yet, both Christian and literary tradition can provide some explanation for this. Bynum has pointed out that women used their association with the body to associate with Christ’s humanity, and what better way to do that than to attempt to experience “Christ’s humanity at the moment of his most insistent and terrifying humanness—the moment of his dying” (“Women” 131). Bynum goes on to explain that “women’s efforts to imitate the Christ involved becoming the crucified, not just patterning themselves after or expanding their compassion toward, but fusing with, the body on the cross. Both in fact and in imagery the imitatio, the fusion, was achieved in two ways: through asceticism and eroticism” (“Women” 131). The violence with which Minne treats the soul is actually allowing the soul part of that essential completeness in this experience of love. Christ suffered and died out of his eternal love for the soul. It is thus the soul’s desire and privilege to be able to do the same for Christ. Becoming one with God is to share in all his experiences, painful and joyous, human and divine.

It is also part of the human condition that with great love and passion comes great pain. Newman cites the philosophies on love of “the twelfth century contemplative Richard of St. Victor” (Newman 159):
According to Richard, all lovers experience the same maelstrom of painful feelings as they progress from ‘wounding love’ through the degrees of obsession he labeled ‘binding,’ ‘languishing,’ and ‘fainting love’. Beginning in desire, love increasingly paralyzes thought and action until the lover is totally incapacitated and can no longer be appeased even by the presence of the beloved. Desire becomes infinite, spurning all finite gratifications and turning perforce into its opposite (Newman 159-160).

He goes on to explain that this is why lovers so often grow to hate each other as passionately as they love each other, since love has become too great to be fulfilled.

The literary conventions of courtly love must also be taken into account. One aspect of courtly romance is the pain experienced by the fin amant when he cannot reach his love, or the similar pain felt by the amie when her love goes away. “Built into the lyrics of love are concepts of grief and inadequacy, the lover’s fear that his efforts may prove insufficient, and his anxiety over abandonment” (Thiébaux, “Brides” 389). These trials of separation must be undergone within these romances and lyrics, first to prove the fin amant or the amie is worthy of the love they seek, and also to appreciate love’s presence more by experiencing the agony of its absence. The fin amant may bemoan his fate and the painful situation in which Minne or Love has put him, but in his heart, he understands it is a part of the process he must undergo to achieve the greatest love. His own love for his lady must be great enough to suffice and sustain him without reciprocation. “Since a lover can take no joy except in her Beloved, the supreme sacrifice must lie in the willed choice of absence over presence” (Newman 162). Only when the beguine has reached the unselfish level of love in which loving is enough, is the reward itself, is she worthy to receive unselfish love in return. Suffering is also part of the elitist element of courtly
romance; those who can suffer have shown they have the great noble strength that makes them worthy of union with God.

Within the beguine body of works, pain and pleasure are linked. In fact, sometimes it seems that pleasure come from the pain. This is not the only example of the holy women’s use of paradox. It is a frequent literary theme throughout the mystical texts: The soul is a humble maidservant and yet a noble princess. The only way to gain love is to no longer ask for it. God is an entity that is both completely human and inescapably divine. Since the beguines so often rely on paradox to express their spiritual experience, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the discussion of sexual encounters with the divine is a paradox as well. Through this spiritual sexual intercourse, the beguine mystic confirms her state of purity. Only God can take an act wrought with carnal desire and convert it to the purest expression of love.

There is evidence in the texts that erotic union with the divine brings about the highest form of chastity, rather than sullying it. Marguerite explains that union is a passionate as well as a sacramental experience, as “humanity is glorified in paradise, joined to the person of the Son as well as to the Sacrament of the Altar” (96). Emphasizing Christ’s person as well as his existence as a sacrament shows that union with God is a holy, purifying act. As Mechthild speaks to Love, she states:

Love, your most refined purity
Standing like a lovely reflection
Of the chaste soul in God’s presence
Creates in the breast of virgins
Hot pangs of desire
For Jesus their Love.

Those who love intensely and are virgins,

These are the maidens of the seraphim (Tobin 212).

“Hot pangs of desire” and virginity would seem to work in opposition to each other, yet in the presence of God, the chaste soul is not only allowed but expected to “love intensely,” and still granted the blessed state of virginity. Directing erotic impulses to God rather than to man is what preserves virginity.

Mechthild goes even more in depth to explain how a seemingly impossible act, purity achieved through sexual union, is possible with the participation of God. She explains that humanity was once completely pure in both body and soul, “given a noble nature according to the eternal Son” (Tobin 115). God created the soul to love as his “goddess” (Tobin 115), essentially his equal. In creating Adam and Eve, “their bodies were to be pure, for God created for them no shameful members” (Tobin 115). However, when Adam and Eve “ate the forbidden food, they became shamefully deformed in their bodies, as is still evident in us” (Tobin 115). God then convened the beings in heaven, explaining that humanity has become “ugly and hideously deformed” and asks, “Who might accept this filth?” (Tobin 116). Christ is the one who responds:

Dear Father, I shall be the one. If you will give me your blessing, I will take bloody humanity upon myself. I shall anoint man’s wounds with the blood of my innocence and shall bind all man’s sores with the cloth of wretched disgrace until my end; and I shall, dearest Father, atone to you for human guilt by means of a human death (Tobin 116).
By taking humanity onto himself and by unifying with humanity, Christ purifies humanity. As Mechthild explains, humanity was originally created with “no shameful members.” I do not believe this is meant to imply that the human body possessed no sexual organs until Adam and Eve sinned, but rather that every part that existed on the human body existed for purely good purposes. When Adam and Eve abused that body to sin, each part of the body became prone to sin. In eating the forbidden fruit, in a way Adam and Eve let their bodily impulses govern them over the dictates of their soul. Yet, eating was not originally a shameful act, nor was sex. Only when the body became “filthy,” when it took dominance over the soul to fulfill its own immediate interests, did sexual intercourse become a shameful, sinful act. Yet when the divine Christ takes on the human body, his soul takes dominance over the human body, once again unifying the wills of the soul and the body and using the body for good. As Christ can only use his body in a purely good way, sexual union with the Christ is an inherently purifying act. It is only offered to those who have struggled and achieved spiritual dominance the way Christ did, understanding that the body can be used to aid the spirit as well as harm it, but that it was created by God to be a purely good instrument of the soul. When the beguine mystic has reached the height of this understanding, only using her body for pure purposes, she is allowed complete union with the pure body and spirit of Christ, thus completing her transformation from sinful creature back to the glorious “goddess” that she originally was.

This union and hence state of equality comes only at great sacrifice, the same level of sacrifice as Christ: He gave his whole self in love without expecting love in return; so the beguine must love wholeheartedly without the expectation of the reward of reciprocation. Loving in itself must be the reward. Only when the soul can love God for the sake of loving
God, will God reveal his boundless love for the soul. Complete submission, in the form denial of the self is required. As Marguerite explains, the soul must be annihilated. Mechthild shows agreement in her statement that “no one is able or is permitted to receive this greeting unless one has gone beyond oneself and become nothing. In this greeting I want to die living” (Tobin 42). If the lover submits and allows herself to be dominated, she achieves equal status (Petroff 188): “For if I owe You as much as You are worth, You owe me as much as You have, for such is the largesse of divine nature” (Porete 155). Yet, if the beguine gives her whole self, and God responds by giving his whole self, it seems that their will always be an inescapable inequality, for God is vaster than any human soul. However, God solves this dilemma by making the soul one with his vast self, thus vanquishing the issue of inequality. As Petroff explains through her examination of Hadewijch: “In Hadewijch’s treatment of the lover relationship, we also begin with what seems to be a role reversal, but it soon becomes clear that in their mutual conquest and surrender, Love and the lover are in not a hierarchical relationship, but one characterized by specularity” (“Gender” 191). Like Heloïse, the beguines surrender to their lover, body and soul, expecting nothing in return. The great difference is that the beguines are fulfilled enough just by simply making that sacrifice, and they receive a full reciprocation.

Through examination of the works of Marguerite, Hadewijch and Mechthild, it becomes apparent that for these women, communion with God is a total experience. They identify and offer up every aspect of their spirits: their faith, their love, their struggles, as well as every aspect of their bodies: its weaknesses, strengths, its physicality as well as its sexuality. To ignore this sexuality would be to lessen their devotion, for they would be keeping a real, existing part of themselves withheld from God. Yet, they know they must give themselves completely in love,
as He did and continues to do. Sexuality is not the central focus of union with God, but it is an extremely necessary aspect of it. Only in recognizing and offering it, can the soul become one with God. In achieving this oneness, they achieve love as well as knowledge: knowledge of God, of the world, and of themselves, giving them power outside of the male dominated Church, and to them, a power greater than it.
At the turn of the fifteenth century, another singular woman was publicizing her ideas on sex and marriage through the written word. However, unlike the women I have hitherto discussed, it was an exercise for which she was paid, and from which she earned her living. Being “the first European woman in history to make a living by writing” (Vigier xxiv) acquired her a fair amount of social and scholastic attention, both in her own time and in years to come. At first only a court poet, Christine grew into a sophisticated writer, capable of social and political treatises and allegories. She was employed by some of the most powerful men of her day, and engaged in intellectual debates with some of the most learned. The most famous of these debates, *Le Debat Sur La Roman de la Rose*, also called *La Querelle de la Rose*, launched Christine’s reputation as a defender of women as she railed against the defamation of women through pre-marital sex and supported wives against what she interpreted to a be a vicious attack launched against them in Jean de Meun’s *Romance of the Rose*. From this point on, Christine took it upon herself to speak on behalf of her sex through her writing.

Yet in examining her issues with *The Romance of the Rose*, it becomes clear that her most important concern is to uphold morality, specifically morality as prescribed by the Catholic Church. As Christine was employed by both royalty and aristocracy, she felt an extreme loyalty to the ruling institutions of her day, those institutions being the monarchy and the Church. Though the thrust of many of her works was to defend women, it is precisely because she sees their mistreatment, whether by word or deed, as immoral. She often defended marriage against disparagement, somewhat because these attacks on marriage were often by extension attacks on women, but more so because marriage was “a holy estate, worthy and ordained by God” (Pizan,
Her problems with respect to the sexual aspects of the Rose, while aiming to protect women’s reputations, enforces the Catholic idea that sex absolutely ruins a woman’s reputation. Thus, unlike Heloise and the Beguines, Christine’s discussion of sex and marriage was not a deeply personal exploration, but a public explanation, both on behalf of the Catholic Church and her gender. Yet even though her treatment of sex and marriage was designed to work in women’s defense, it may be argued that because of Christine’s conservative point of view, her arguments, however well-intentioned, do little to advance the female cause.

Although she adopted France as her native land, Christine de Pisan was born in Venice, Italy, in 1364, to Tommaso da Pizzano, chair of astrology at the University of Bologna, and later “an official in the Republic of Venice, a post which he obtained through the help of an older friend, a scholar called Tommaso di Mondini, who was himself a councilor of the Republic. Tommaso da Pizzano subsequently married his friend’s daughter” (Vigier 38).

When her father was offered a position at the court of Charles V of France in 1368, he moved his family to the French court. He was given “a house and all the means to keep up a comfortable life” (Vigier 39). Living comfortably in high society “in the company of books and educated men” (McLeod xii), Christine, with the aid of her father, was motivated to self-study, though she condemns herself as a distracted child who only wished to play. From her writings we know that she was familiar with the king, his sons, and other royals and members of the aristocracy. At the age of fifteen, she married an educated French man by the name of Etienne de Castel.

In 1381, Christine gave birth to a daughter, whose name is not on record, and in 1385, her son, Jean (Vigier 53). At this point, her husband, an official at the court of the new king, Charles
VI, had taken on the affairs of the Pisan household, as Tommaso had fallen out of favor after the king’s death and passed on shortly thereafter (Vigier 53). Christine seemed to have a happy marriage and family despite her father’s passing. Yet, after a ten-year marriage, Christine was left alone when Etienne died traveling to Beauvais. Unfortunately for Christine, her husband had never made her privy to his financial affairs; she spent the next fourteen years in and out of courts, dealing with lawsuits and defending her property.

Over the years, Christine not only continued the self-study that had characterized her life, but also began some minor compositions: “By 1394, she had...begun to write verse, both as a distraction and as a source of extra income” (McLeod xiii). Her writing began to attract the attention of the French royalty and aristocracy, an interest she self-deprecatingly attributes to the sheer novelty of a female writer. Nevertheless, Christine’s verses and other compositions became popular enough that she was able to do what no European woman had done before: earn her living by writing. Having solidified her reputation as a writer, Christine shifted her focus from what she considered to be frivolous tales that would please her aristocratic audience, such as her ballads, The Debate of the Two Lovers, and The Book of the Duke of True Lovers, to treatises and allegorical works that were designed to make social and political commentary. These later works include The Letter from the God of Love, her letters regarding the debate of The Romance of the Rose, The Transformation of Fortune, Christine’s Vision, The Book of the City of Ladies and its companion, The Treasure of the City of Ladies, also known as The Book of the Three Virtues. In these works, Christine discussed marriage at length, as well as explored the sexual aspect of male-female relationships, but in a socially appropriate, non-gratuitous manner, and only when she deemed it necessary.
Because Christine’s loyalty to marriage was a direct result of her loyalty to the Church, her opinions on it were carefully constructed to never be at odds with the Medieval Catholic view of marriage. During her time, “the jurisdiction over this quintessentially lay institution [marriage] was firmly in the hands of the clergy, who were, by definition, male. This clerical/masculine primacy corresponds to the official ideology of marriage” (Elliott 40). Though Christine’s hope is to defend wives, interestingly, she is ultimately defending a male-dominated institution. Devotion to this traditional Church hierarchy will influence Christine’s defense of women, as will be demonstrated later.

Christine first took up defense of women and marriage in 1399 with her work, *The Letter from the God of Love*. This is also the first work in which Christine brings up her contention with a well-known work of that time, *The Romance of the Rose*, authored conjointly between Guillame de Lorris and Jean de Meun. As I believe Christine’s crusade on behalf of women and marriage originated in her involvement with the famous debate on *The Romance of the Rose*, some background on both the book and Christine’s role in the debate on it in order to properly explore her arguments regarding marriage and the role women play in it.

As mentioned, *The Romance of the Rose* had two authors. The first of these was Guillame de Lorris, who composed his section in the middle of the thirteenth century. His intent was to compose an allegorical tale based on the principles of courtly love. In it, a young man finds himself in a beautiful, mythological garden, occupied by personifications of Love and Beauty as well as Cupid himself, in which he comes upon and falls in love with a rose. The tale tells of his
attempts to get close to the rosebud, which is guarded by a further set of personifications antithetical to the love quest: Jealousy, Evil Tongue, Shame, and Fear. The latter build a formidable castle to protect the rosebud and the pining lover is left outside. The fragmentary narrative ends in mid-sentence, leaving the fictional dream unresolved (Hult 185).

In 1270, Jean de Meun finished the work, but changed its intent. Instead, he turned it into a cynical examination of the trials and tribulations of love and courtship, loaded with misogynistic attacks and lewd language, and culminating in an allegorical consummation between the young man and the rose. *The Romance of the Rose* became “one of the most notorious compendia of misogynist lore available in the vernacular, branding women with the vices of unfaithfulness, deceptive behavior, vanity, loquaciousness, and lubricity” (Hult 186). Furthermore, “at the turn of the fourteenth century, the *Rose* was quite simply the most admired and the most sought-after work composed in French” (Hult 185).

The debate’s primary participants were, on the side of the *Rose*, Jean de Montreuil, the Provost of Lille, and the brothers Gontier and Pierre Col, First Secretary and Notary to the King and Canon of Paris and Tournay respectively, and against, Christine herself and Jean Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris. It began, according to Christine, “in what appear to have been informal literary discussions between Christine de Pisan and Jean de Montreuil” (Baird 11). However, the debate was not confined to these two individuals, nor was it a debate of little significance. In fact, “the evidence seems to indicate that the debate was quite a live issue of real and earnest moral interest to a large number of people” (Baird 11-12). It was this debate that seems to have informed Christine’s *Letter from the God of Love*, as well as a number of letters in
correspondence to Montreuil, the brothers Col, Gerson, and public authority figures asking for support, and even later works such as her famous *Book of the City of Ladies*.

With respect to *The Romance of the Rose*:

Christine took issue with essentially three interrelated aspects of the work: its verbal obscenity and the indecency of the concluding allegorical description of sexual intercourse; the negative portrayals of women, which tended to treat them as a group and not as individuals, thereby making their ‘vices’ natural and universal; the work’s ambiguity, the absence of a clear authorial voice and intention which would serve as a moral guide to susceptible or ignorant readers (Hult 186).

The vagueness with which Meun’s portrayals of sex and marriage were related especially troubled Christine. Even if Meun meant the depictions as satire, as many readers have argued and as Christine herself acknowledged as a possibility, she feared that greater audiences would not have the discernment to pick up on it and thus take the statements at face value. Furthermore, insulting the institution of marriage and proposing the allowance of extra-marital sex directly contradicts Church doctrine. As the work was extremely popular, these immoral messages might become widespread and ultimately pose a threat to the Church and the popular image of women.

Christine’s first written contention with *The Romance of the Rose* is actually not found in the debate proper, but in a poem entitled, *The Letter from the God of Love*. She first attacks the idea that wives in general are deceitful and disobedient. Springing to the defense of wives, she asserts first that men, such as Ovid, who make such sweeping claims, are driven by lust and not reason in regard to relationships. Thus, they are prone to make the wrong choice of a wife, “for
there can be no doubt that when a man plunges into such vileness, he certainly does not seek out well-bred ladies or reputable women: he neither knows them nor has anything to do with them” (L’Epistre 36). Thus, it is a man’s own fault when his marriage is unsatisfactory, and he has no right to blame all wives for the evil deeds of one woman, a woman he knowingly selected as his companion. Christine stipulates, “If someone attacked only evil women, and…advised against pursuing them, then some good could come of it” (L’Epistre 36). Her problem lies with the unfair generalization. She also expresses resentment at the idea, expressed by Meun specifically, that women are deceitful towards men in order to trap them in the unhappy situation of marriage. She explains that she

simply cannot comprehend how a woman can deceive a man. She never pursues him, begging after him at his house; she doesn’t give a thought to him, nor even remember him; whereas men come to deceive and trap women. How does he tempt her? In truth, there is nothing he will not endure gladly, no burden that he will not bear in order to have her. (L’Epistre 36)

Indeed, she makes a point that in a society where women are denied agency, they cannot be blamed. Though it is an unfortunate truth, men are the members of society with the means to control the destinies of their own lives. Women are most often along for the ride.

Christine continues to defend marriage and women in her letter to Jean de Montreuil, which signifies the beginning of her active participation in The Debate of the Romance of the Rose. Greatly angered at Meun for what his character of a disgruntled husband propounds within the work, she sarcastically observes that “he could not have rendered worse or abased the condition of women more! Ha! When I remember the deceits, the hypocrisies, and the conduct
dissembled within marriage and outside it, which one can find in this book—certainly I consider these to be beautiful and edifying tales to hear!” (“Letter” 50). In the continuation of her defense, she asks for examples of these deceitful women referred to by the *Rose*: “What do they do? How do they deceive you?...if you say they have made a fool of you, don’t let them” (“Letter” 52). Again, Christine uses the inferiority of women in society to her advantage. By pointing out the lack of power and agency women have in society, she reclaims power for them in her argument. Arguing for specificity, she expresses her resentment at Meun’s generalizations. She follows this point with an equally strong argument, claiming that Jean de Meun “speaks superficially and wrongly about married women who deceive their husbands in this way, for he could know nothing of the married state by experience, and therefore he only spoke of it in generalities” (“Letter” 52). Not only does she discredit Meun with this argument, but she also gives authority over the matter to herself, as she has been married and can attest to marriage’s merits through experience. It would appear through these arguments that Christine’s primary concerns in her argument against the *Rose* are not only to defend the institute of marriage, but also to afford women the right to be thought of as individuals. Although she is trying to protect an ecclesiastical institution, she still seems to want to allow women to express themselves and their individuality, free from restraint.

Yet within the same letter, Christine actually fights in favor of restraint as she expresses her disgust at the sexual elements of *The Romance of the Rose*. One of her complaints is that Meun has the audacity to “name the secret members plainly by name” (“Letter” 48). To the argument that “such frankness is perfectly reasonable, maintaining that in the things God has made there is no ugliness, and consequently no need to eschew their names” (“Letter” 48), she
retorts “that truly God created all things pure and clean coming from himself and that in the State of Innocence it would not have been wrong to name them; but by the pollution of sin man became impure, and his original sin has remained with us, as Holy Scripture testifies” (“Letter” 48). She later postulates that “one should speak about such matters soberly and only when necessary, as in certain particular cases, such as sickness or other genuine need. Just as our first parents hid their private parts instinctively, so we ought to in deed and in word” (“Letter” 49). Clearly, as the Church has exhorted her to, Christine feels a great deal of shame regarding sex and the body, so much so that she cannot even tolerate that it be spoken of except if in direst need.

Christine shows even more discomfort with the “excessively horrible and shameful conclusion” (“Letter” 53) of The Romance of the Rose, that conclusion being “the thinly veiled sexual act which concludes” (Baird 53) the poem, and she protests that “certainly it could have been done more pleasantly, far more agreeably, and by means of more courteous terms, a method which would have been more pleasing to handsome and decent lovers and to every other virtuous person” (“Letter” 54). Christine’s discomfort with the consummation at the end of The Romance of the Rose is another example of Catholicism’s hold on her. Obviously, from her Scriptural quotations and catechistic references, it is safe to say that her distaste with regards to the sexual act is its reprehensibility in the eyes of the Church. During this period, “sexual activity, even within the context of marriage, was fraught with ambivalence” (Elliott 50). The Church allowed it for procreative purposes, but beyond that was rather questionable.

In her essay, “Mothers to Think Back Through: The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pisan,” Sheila Delany points out that The Romance of the Rose actually “denounces numerous
social ills, among them clerical hypocrisy and the perversion of justice by wealth. It propounds a rationalistic—though by no means unorthodox—Christianity threatening to conservative churchmen” (190). In addition, the *Rose*:

Offers a fictional representation of fornication—that is, sex without the benefit of the marriage sacrament—which implicitly removes sexuality from the ecclesiastical control to which it had been subjected in the ecclesiastical reforms of the eleventh and twelfth centuries: a campaign that also established clerical celibacy, persecuted homosexuality, and intensified clerical misogyny (Delany 191).

It would seem that the *Rose* supports the main tenants of Christianity but rejects how it has been corrupted by the Catholic Church, in contrast to Christine’s rather blind acceptance of the authority of the institution of the Catholic Church, a patriarchal institution that is clearly restrictive and misogynistic.

Christine’s response to the *Rose* and misogynist writings in general extended even to her later works. Possibly because of her discomfort regarding sex, she more often uses marriage to make her points. In her most famous work, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, an allegorical tale written to exemplify the worth of women, Christine the narrator anxiously asks Lady Rectitude if “life within the institution of marriage is filled and occupied with such great unhappiness for men because of women’s faults and impetuosity, and because of their rancorous ill-humor, as is written in so many books?” (*City* 118). Lady Rectitude assures Christine “that women have never done what these books say” (*City* 118). Interestingly, by using the word “never,” Christine here commits the very crime of which she accuses Meun, that crime being unfairly generalizing women. Claiming that women are never impetuous or get into bad moods is almost as damning
as saying they always do, for it sets a rather impossible standard. Christine expressed worry that Meun’s readers would develop an unfair view of women, but it is just as possible that her readers may as well. If a reader were to take Christine’s comment at face value, he would come to believe that women are always steady and of a perfect temperament, or at least they ought to be. Christine gives the women she is trying to defend little margin for error.

However, Christine did make a great effort to make the proponents of misogyny understand how much the female and male genders have in common as members of the same human race, endowed by God with the same blessed souls. Her “strategy” in this matter “was to show that the sexes were distinguished from each other purely by external bodily differences” (Brown-Grant 84). In *Christine’s Vision*, she explains how she was attributed the female sex by a personified version of Fortune:

> When she had put all the molded material into the oven, she took my spirit and exactly as she was accustomed to do to give human bodies form, mixed it all together and left me to cook for a certain period of time until a small human shape was made for me. I was given the feminine sex, however, because she who had cast it wished it to be so rather than because of the mold (13).

She explains here how her gender was a whim of Fortune, who made her body, not a determination of God, who made her soul. Thus, since God takes no part in deciding gender, he makes all souls alike, whether or not they will ultimately become a member of the “weaker sex.”

In *The Book of the City of Ladies*, this argument resurfaces, this time using women in general as an example, rather than just herself:
Some men are foolish enough to think, when they hear that God made man in His image, that this refers to the material body. This was not the case, for God had not yet taken a human body. The soul is meant, the intellectual spirit which lasts eternally just like the Deity. God created the soul and placed wholly similar souls, equally good and noble in the feminine and in the masculine bodies (23).

According to these to these passages, it would appear that Christine’s belief was that “what divided the sexes in biological terms was far less important than what united them in spiritual terms: their common rationality and capacity for virtue” (Brown-Grant 85). As pro-woman as these arguments may be, they are made via Church teaching. Though it could be argued that this is may not the way this particular Church teaching has been conventionally understood, Christine takes special care to point out that hers is not a reinterpretation, but rather a correction of a misinterpretation.

Another claim made by misogynists with regards to marriage that Christine found especially irksome was the idea that “the sexes were fundamentally incompatible and that the relations between them were necessarily antagonistic” (Brown-Grant 88). This belief is often exemplified in The Romance of the Rose, where wives are portrayed as both nags and adulteresses, never satisfied with the deeds of their husbands. Christine’s hope is to convince her readers that the sexes cannot live in discord, because they were designed by God to be companions, to complement one another. She returns to the scriptural story of creation and notes that Eve was neither created from the ground he walked upon, nor from his foot, but from his own side. She therefore was designed to be both his companion and his equal, loved by him as he loved himself, for she was his own flesh (City 23). To Christine, then, scripture provides
irrefutable proof that marriage is “ennobling rather than corrupting, and is harmonious rather than acrimonious, because it is based on mutual respect and profound compatibility” (Brown-Grant 90), and of course, since scripture is the ultimate authority, this argument is irrefutable. It is natural for the male sex to love the female sex and vice-versa, as Christine explains: “This behavior [attacking women] certainly does not come from Nature, but rather is contrary to Nature, for no connection in the world is as great or as strong as the great love which, through the will of God, Nature places between a man and a woman” (City 16).

As marriage is natural, it is also necessary, for as a wife needs a husband to provide for her in certain ways, so husband needs a wife to provide for him in certain other ways. Christine subscribes to the medieval idea that women are relegated to specific roles in society, but makes efforts to stress that those roles are as important as those performed by men. As Reason explains to Christine:

Just as a wise and well ordered lord organizes his domain so that one servant accomplishes one task another servant another task, and that what the one does the other does not do, God has similarly ordained man and woman to serve him in different offices and also to aid, comfort, and accompany one another, each in their ordained task, and to each sex has given a fitting and appropriate nature and inclination to fulfill their offices (City 31).

Yet, even though men and women fulfill different roles in society, women are in no way spiritually or intellectual inferior to men. Reason explains that while they are endowed with the same level of spiritual and intellectual faculties (both spirits being made in God’s image), women and men are simply designed for different roles (City 31). As Reason tells Christine, it
pleased God “to place such great understanding in women’s brains that they are intelligent
enough not only to learn and retain the sciences but also to discover new sciences themselves”
(*City* 61). In fact, since men are stronger in body than women, women have “freer and sharper”
minds to compensate, putting them back on a level of equality, or at least equivalency with men
(*City* 63). Thus, when Christine questions when women may not serve in a court of law, the
answer is not that they are not smart enough, but more that it is a profession destined for men, for
whom it is appropriate to be “brazen” in public, as litigation may require them to be. (*City* 31).
Furthermore, the reason that women do not know as much as men is because they are not
educated, as for their designated roles in life, they need not be, for “it is enough for them to run
the household” (*City* 63). Running a household is understood to be just as noble an achievement
as receiving a formal education.

Yet, her earlier argument that men and women are only different in body and spiritually
the same is completely undermined by this new argument that each sex was designed by God to
have a specific inclination for the roles they were meant to fill in society. It certainly is not a
woman’s body that inclines her to housework, nor can it be her mind, which Christine says can
be as sharp as a man’s, so the inclination must lie in her spirit, which Christine has already
explained to be the same as a man’s. Moreover, this inclination seems to be a flimsy excuse for
why women, who are apparently as capable as men, are not allowed to take on leadership roles.
Besides this “inclination,” there seems to be no reason for why a woman should not study the
law while the man takes care of the household affairs, excepting the traditional, patriarchal
organization of society. It is a flimsy excuse for restricting women from intellectual pursuits or
work outside the household. As much as Christine seems to want to argue on women’s behalf,
she cannot bring herself to challenge the established societal structure, especially since she personally has found a comfortable place in it.

Additionally, even though men and women are supposed to be spiritually the same, aside from this vague “inclination,” they are apparently predisposed to possess different, albeit complementary, sets of virtues. The virtues that a woman possesses, which complement the male virtues of boldness, leadership and strength, are the capacity to sacrifice, sobriety, piety, charity, tenderness, gentleness, and a general “sweetness of character” (City 26), as well as humility (City 27), and three important virtues expressed many times within the book: obedience, constancy, and chastity. In this way can wives “can bring comfort and support to their husbands and so ensure both solidarity between the sexes and cohesion within society” (Brown-Grant 90). That is to say, these virtues are not only essential to the welfare of the marriage and household, but the welfare of the greater society as well. If a wife were not to provide her husband with the emotional support that comes from virtues such as constancy, obedience, tenderness and charity, he might be less able to perform his needed active participation in society. If Christine cannot within the confines of her position in society argue for the equality of women to men, she at least makes an effort to show their necessity to men, whom the world, of course, could not go on without. Thus, by the transitive property, Christine gives women the right to an important purpose.

Christine provides numerous examples in the City of wives whose contributions to their husbands ultimately contributed to greater society. One of these was Queen Hypsicratea, who would accompany her husband on his war campaigns because he could not “go anywhere without her constant and loyal companionship” (City 121). Thus, a king became great due to the
great emotional support of his queen. Empress Triaria is credited with affording to her husband the same devotional support (City 122). Rosalind Brown-Grant observes even more examples of wives whose love for their husbands made great contributions to society:

For instance, she praises Tertia Emilia for her husband’s adultery so as to not damage his exalted status as military leader of Rome, the wife of Alexander the Great for persuading her husband to make plans for his succession to avoid plunging the country into chaos, and Queen Clotilde for converting her husband King Clovis and so bringing the Christian faith to the people of France (Brown-Grant 91).

For Christine, then, marriage was a contract that bound its participants to utilize their respective natures, to aid both each other’s survival and the welfare of society. In fact, Christine’s ideal marriage is more of a supportive friendship than a romantic or sexual bond. She believed it to be the only way to safeguard against the incompatibility of the sexes as Meun presents in his Romance of the Rose, for

to Christine’s mind, Jean’s text offered an impossible choice between marriage, which he depicts as a hellish institution in which men and women destroy each other, and passionate love outside marriage (synonymous with courtly love), which he shows as leading not only to the physical and moral degradation of women but also to the spiritual perdition of both sexes…She thus counsels women against passionate love on that ground that it leads them to losing their self-control and makes them vulnerable to trickery at the hands of men (Brown-Grant 88).

In addition, the Church, Christine’s touchstone of morality, through its tradition of saints such as Paul and Augustine, had a special reverence for celibacy, even within marriage. For “while
Augustine acknowledged that offspring was marriage’s main end and chief good, he particularly commended the marriage of Mary and Joseph for its chaste fecundity” (Elliott 50). This opinion is reflected in her personal experience, for when speaking of her own marriage, she prefers to refer to her spouse as either a husband or a friend (Vigier 43), but rarely uses an epithet that conveys a romantic connection. It appears from the arguments that Christine has a fervent belief in if not the equality of the sexes, she sees marriage as a partnership that must exist in order to have a thriving society.

In The Treasure of the City of Ladies, or The Book of the Three Virtues, the sequel to The Book of the City of Ladies, Christine takes this idea of companionship one step further. The intent of this volume is slightly different than that of its predecessor. Unlike The City of Ladies, The Treasure is not an allegory, but rather a guide. Though the City of Ladies contains many heroic women who wished to preserve their virginity throughout the course of their life, The Treasure focuses exclusively on women who are involved in marriage, whether they are presently married, maidens who intend to marry, or widows.

Christine attempts to continue to adhere to her philosophy of complementarity in marriage, the idea that a man should fulfill his role and a woman hers in order to make a marriage work. She advises women to adopt the same virtues that she laid out in the City, those of constancy, patience, obedience, and so on. In The Book of the City of Ladies, these virtues were prescribed with the expectation that wives would receive the benefit of their husbands’ “male” virtues in turn, creating reciprocity that produced a productive partnership. Yet in the Treasure of the City of Ladies, she seems to believe that a marriage must remain peaceful at any
cost (*Treasure* 62). Wives are not only to “obey without complaint” (*Treasure* 62), but to “hold her peace to the best of her ability” (*Treasure* 63), as well as feign happiness even if they are unhappy (*Treasure* 63), and ignore their husbands’ infidelities, as its discussion will only bring discord to the marriage (*Treasure* 65).

Christine actually seems to be very much in favor of this kind of blind submission to one’s husband. Besides the grin-and-bear-it attitude she advocates in the *Treasury*, there are other instances in her work that also lend support to this point of view. Even in the *City of Ladies*, she exhorts her fellow females to “not scorn being subject to your husbands, for sometimes it is not the best thing for a creature to be independent” (*City* 255). Yet, for the most part, Christine has strongly stressed that a marriage is about compatibility, complementarity, and equal companionship. However, in the *Treasure of the City of Ladies*, she implicitly accepts the idea that men will not remain faithful to these precepts, and so the wife will inevitably have to pick up the slack. If the type of marriage she describes in *The City of Ladies* is a reciprocal contract, of which adherence is necessary not only for the well being of both parties but of society, why does she not advise women to speak up and demand that their husbands adhere to their half of the contract? It would seem that Christine contradicts herself, and actually does wives a disservice in the manner she portrays them. In truth, she is again trying to negotiate defense of women with Church precepts regarding marriage, for it is the Church’s precept that within a marriage, a wife must always bend to her husband’s will. His authority takes primacy over any other aspect of the marriage contract (Elliott 41).

There are many other incongruities between Christine’s advice to women within a marriage, and her perception of the ideal marriage, not only in the *Treasure*, but in the *City* and
other works as well. The virtues she praises in women are either undercut by other statements Christine makes within her body of work, or by the submissive position in which these virtues place women in relation to their husband’s. For example, in the story of Griselda in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Griselda was a poor maiden who caught the eye of the Marquis of her town. He thus told her father of his preference for his daughter, and they were married. After marrying the Marquis, Griselda bore him two children, each of whom he took from her to be killed on account of the supposed displeasure of his people. She bore this without betraying any emotion. He then after years of marriage told her he planned to marry a younger woman after having an annulment approved by the pope, and asked her to make the preparations. The story ends with the younger woman actually being Griselda’s daughter, accompanied by her son, neither of whom were killed, but kept in hiding in order to test Griselda’s devotion. The Marquis declares Griselda to be his only love, and they live on happily with their children.

Though Griselda’s constancy is admirable and is rewarded, there are many elements of the story that make it inappropriate for Christine’s cause. For example, as much as Griselda’s love for her husband may aid him and contribute to society, is that worth the expense of the lives of her children? Christine so frequently uses the argument that men and women should be inclined to love and virtue because it is “natural,” yet the most unnatural thing for a woman to do would be to give up her children to death without a fight, even at the behest of her husband.

Furthermore, Christine tells a slightly different version of the Griselda tale than the original. In Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, one of the key points made in this story is that when the Marquis asked to marry Griselda, he asked her, not her father, and he stipulated that if she agreed, she would have to obey him in everything. She knowingly and willingly entered into
that contract. Thus, the story is not only one of constancy but one of a woman who will not compromise her integrity by breaking a promise that she made of her own free will, and knowing the implications. For whatever reason, Christine robs Griselda of this agency, making her more a victim of fate who patiently bears the unfair misfortune that has befallen her. She had no choice in the matter of marrying the Marquis, nor did she promise when she entered into the marriage contract that she would obey him in everything. She simply becomes his wife, not of her own free will, and never utilizes this free will again. Additionally, a popular reading of Chaucer’s Griselda tale is that it is meant to be understood as ironic; in his seeming support of blind obedience, he actually criticizes it. This is certainly not the case with Christine rendition of the tale, especially in light of the fact that she condemns the use of irony in The Romance of the Rose as confusing and misleading. She certainly would not want to mislead her audience with a tale that is meant to be didactic.

Although Christine often prescribes this submissive attitude in marriage, she spends a great deal of The City of Ladies lauding certain women for their independence and ability to perform tasks traditionally relegated to the male in society. Yet this ability, for the most part, appears only in virgins and widows. She is actually once again subscribing to a stereotype of the Medieval Church, which held a “traditional bias in favor of celibacy, which assigned to marriage a less estimable position in the hierarchy of salvation that either virginity or chaste widowhood” (Elliott 40). Indeed, Christine seems to have a special admiration for unmarried women, whether they are so by choice or misfortune. When telling of the great deeds of the Ethiopian Empress Nicaula, she explains that the empress “had so lofty a heart that she did not deign to marry, nor did she desire that any man be at her side” (Pisan 33), indicating that it is nobler not to marry
than to depend on a man. Christine also mentions the Amazons, warlike virgin females who lived together in a self-sufficient community, as paragons of virtue and physical prowess, as well as the prototype for the city she is hoping to build. She specifically praises their legendary Queen Penthesilea, who “was so high-minded that she never condescended to couple with a man, remaining a virgin her whole life (City 48). It can be argued that Christine is as misogynous as the men she is attempting to combat. Yet, as Glenda McLeod and Katharina Wilson point out, “While misogynous propaganda often made use of misogynistic arguments…the tradition itself was not ipso facto misogynistic” (67). They go on to explain that there are three kinds of misogamy: philosophic, the kind that Heloise prescribed to Abelard, general, that which was found in popular literature containing “worldliness, secularism and careerism” (McLeod Wilson 69), and ascetic misogamy, the Christian ideal propounded by St. Paul, St. Augustine, and St. Jerome that “emphasized transcendence, advocated distrust of all the appetites, and encouraged the mortification of the flesh as Christ-like conditioning for a life devoted to prayer and contemplation” (McLeod Wilson 68). Christine fought against general and philosophical misogamy, both of which treated women as inferior to men, and used ascetic misogamy to suit her own purposes. When a woman is ascetically misogynous, she is not only more virtuous in her celibate state, but able to live without the aid of a man. Thus, her writing can be viewed as “not so much a subversion as a dislocation of the learned tradition [misogamy]” (McLeod Wilson 71). Christine can thus have it both ways in this instance, arguing on behalf of both women and the Church.

So, why the adamant defense of wives? First, Christine’s writing is meant to be a defense for all women, and she cannot ignore the fact that most women at that period of time were
married. Furthermore, much of her writing was written as a reply to Meun and other misogynist writers, all of whom directed a substantial amount of their attacks specifically to wives. Thus, Christine made her response direct and defended wives. Yet, she also felt that she had to point out the women who did great things without men, either as virgins or widows, so as to prove that while women make good companions, they can also do all that a man can without a man’s help. What she is basically insinuating is that besides physical strength, women possess all the faculties necessary to govern, study, or do anything traditionally thought of as male, as well as the capacity to sacrifice and submit in humility to one’s husband out of love. In a way, this is an argument for women’s superiority to men, for whereas women can take command like men, men have not the will or humility to submit as women do. In their ability to do both, women appear to actually transcend their male counterparts.

However, those women who take leadership roles or make intellectual strides have to make a different kind of sacrifice. As aforementioned, these women are almost always virgins or widows, thus without the companionship that Christine extols when defending the virtues of marriage. However, the sacrifice goes deeper. These women must not only give up this companionship, but their femininity, and in the absence of a man, in essence become a man. This aspect of Christine’s ideology is symbolically exemplified in a tale in which a group of wives must don their husbands’ garb in order to save them from prison (City 134). They must become men in the absence of men. The situation is seen in reverse in Christine’s version of the tale of Theseus and Hippolyta. Hippolyta is an Amazon, described as having “supreme strength and valor, bold and brave over all others” (City 45). She fights against Theseus and Hercules with another Amazon maiden, only to be captured after a long struggle. After she removes her
armor, it is revealed to Theseus that she “was so beautiful and comely” (*City* 46) and “he loved her with a great devotion” (*City* 47), so much so that they married and she left the Amazons. When Hippolyta shed her armor and was revealed to be beautiful, she symbolically shed her “manhood” to become feminine, a viable wife. She could not possess both independence and femininity at once; it took being paired with Theseus to bring out the “woman” in her.

Perhaps the best evidence of Christine’s belief that a woman must become a man in order to be powerful or independent is found in her writings about her own life. In *Christine’s Vision*, she explains to her audience, “Although I was naturally inclined to scholarship from birth, my occupation with the tasks common to married women and the burden of frequent child-bear

had deprived me of it to employ me there” (117). Later in her *Vision*, the Lady Philosophy reasserts this point by saying that

> if your husband had survived until the present, you would undoubtedly have spent less time on your studies; for the household chores would not have allowed you this benefit of scholarship, to which you set yourself as to the thing you judged the noblest after the life that is in all respects for the perfect, or contemplative life (129).

What can plainly be seen from this passage, besides Christine’s rather high opinion of herself, is that she believes a woman cannot be both a wife and a scholar, or a wife and any other traditionally masculine profession, for that matter. *The Book of Fortune’s Transformation* reveals even more. When describing her ill fortune, which she says began when she was twenty-five, the age she was when her husband died, she discloses, “I who was formerly a woman, am now a man…I shall describe by means of fiction the fact of my transformation, how from being a woman I became a man” (*Transformation* 91). This “transformation from female to male
betokens the overwhelming importance that the social symbolism of masculinity held for her” (Hult 190).

To truly become remarkable, to be able to perform great feats or influence history, it appears a woman must take on two states: celibacy and manhood, de facto sacrificing both sexuality and femininity. The perfect woman is asexual and desexualized. Though if a woman has not the strength or virtue to exist on her own in this manner, marriage is certainly an acceptable alternative. Thus, a woman may have the company of and live in submission to a man through a Church-sanctioned contract, or become a man herself. What is absolutely not acceptable for a woman is to try to pursue love outside the contractual bonds of marriage, whether she means to love but not marry, or if she means to behave adulterously.

The pitfalls of such a choice are shown in The Book of the Duke of True Lovers, a “complex tale of a love affair between the young Duke of the title and a Lady who is his beautiful, but married, cousin” (Fenster 15). Commissioned by the Duke D’Orleans, it appears to be a charming tale of courtly love based on his own experience. Christine even makes him the narrator of the tale, thus appearing to remove her own bias. However, Christine’s voice is heard through the advisor of the Lady, the Dame de la Tour, also called Sebille, who counsels her lady in writing to end the affair and save her reputation. Thus, “once the Dame de la Tour’s moral treatise intrudes upon the courtly romance, The Book of the Duke of True Lovers becomes Christine’s explicitly anti-courtly courtly romance” (Fenster 16). The conclusion of the poem leaves the lovers in a dissatisfied limbo rather than the state of joyous elation such lovers typically find themselves in at the end of a courtly romance. The Lady’s Complaint at the conclusion of the poem clearly shows how imperfect the relationship has become, and her regrets
about how she has conducted herself throughout the affair. According to Christine, in courtly
romance, the subject of which is always passionate, sometimes adulterous love,

both the male and female protagonists have suffered the various pains of love, [yet] it is
only the lady whose reputation or life has been lost. By contrast, the male lover in each
of these texts carries on much as before: he may be brokenhearted but his respected
position in society is left intact (Brown-Grant 89).

Christine may see herself as advancing the women’s cause by warning them not to taint
their reputations in this manner, but in truth she is simply propounding the Church prescribed
male stereotype of a woman in the Middle Ages, that she was either “a combination of all that
was pure and unattainable” or “the root of all evil” (Vigier xxi). Furthermore, virtue appears to
rest solely on a woman’s chastity. In the City of Ladies, not only does Christine have greater
admiration for her virago virgins and widows, but she also plainly states that “chastity is the
supreme virtue in women” (City 155). It is the ultimate and only determination of true goodness,
as exemplified in The Book of the Duke of True Lovers, where “the defenseless and anxious Lady
of the poem’s end contrasts disturbingly with the balanced, intelligent, gracious woman who was
once (in the garden scene) better able than the Duke to converse about foreign courts and
governments” (Fenster 22). To lose her state of purity is to lose all her faculties. This
Madonna/Whore concept of women was not only propagated by the Church, but could be found
in the very misogynist texts she was attempting to discredit.

When I read Christine’s opinions on sex and marriage, I blatantly see the influences of patriarchical institutions. Men are still depicted as superior to women, for within a marriage a wife must submit to her husband’s wish, and to be able to handle life without a mate, a woman must
become a man. In accordance with the moral code of Medieval society, Christine expects women to be absolutely pure, or they are a lost cause, unwelcome in this city that “has been built and established for every honorable lady” (*City* 254). In her efforts to defend women against misogynist attacks, she idealizes them to an impossibly high standard, expecting them to deny their femininity, their sexuality, and ultimately, their identity.

Thus, in her attempt to navigate a pro-woman argument around her loyalty to the institutions that provided her livelihood, she actually gives more credence to the misogynist argument than if she were not worried about receiving income from her writing. Yet, were she not to write for an income, her works would never have circulated. As critical as I have been of Christine’s attempt at defending women, I can appreciate that in her situation she could do little more than what she did. As much as I have accused Christine of not allowing for women to fully be themselves, femininely, sexually, and intellectually, I do recognize that such an allowance was not afforded to her. Though she prescribes such extremes, perhaps she does so because she recognizes that if a woman is to succeed in a man’s world, she will inevitably have to make both concessions and sacrifices. Near the conclusion of *Fortune’s Transformation*, though she cloaks it in her favorite literary device, allegory, her grief at the sacrifices she has had to make of her self due to her transformation from woman to man is palpable:

> I awakened and things were such that, immediately and with certainty, I felt myself completely transformed…Then I touched myself all over my body, like one completely bewildered…Then I felt myself much lighter than usual and I felt that my flesh was changed and strengthened, and my voice much lowered, and my body harder and faster. However, the ring that Hymen had given me had fallen from my finger, which troubled
me, as well it should have, for I loved it dearly…I felt that I had become a true man…I am still a man and have been for more than a total of thirteen full years, but it would please me much more to be a woman (Transformation 106-107).
Conclusion

It is apparent to me from these texts that for these women, sexuality is inevitable a part of their entire self. It is not separate from their intellects or emotions but firmly linked. Thus, if they acknowledge their sexuality freely, they can reach levels of expression in their writings that transcend beyond cold, intellectual arguments and postulations. It seems to me that the women who were able to not only come to terms with their sexuality but embrace it were able to reach a profound and comprehensive understanding of themselves, what it means to be a woman, as well as what it means to be a human. However, with the stigmas placed on women during the Middle Ages, along their limited options within society, this healthy identification with their sexuality was very difficult, if not impossible to achieve. Furthermore, sexuality cannot be truly explored or understood if internalized. To understand their sexual selves in order to open their whole selves to higher understanding, the sexuality needs to be able to be externalized, in a safe environment, and onto an object worthy of the love that comes with this gift that is capable of full reciprocation.

In Heloïse’s case, she was definitely very aware that in being able to express herself sexually, she would be able to reach new emotional and philosophical heights. She made it very clear that she believed this to be possible in her interpretation of *amicitia*, where two intellectually superior, philosophically minded, and emotionally and sexually charged partners could help bring each other to this higher understanding through a reciprocal, disinterested, yet passionate love. As she was sexually passionate, she was also intellectually and emotionally passionate, and she felt the ideal state of being would be to offer this total self in a passionate
manner, and receive a total self in return. While Heloïse had the right idea, she unfortunately had the wrong partner. Ironically, in the first part of their relationship, he was only driven by lust, only able to give himself sexually, and in the second part of their relationship, he was only able to offer himself philosophically, or rather religiously. For him there was a disconnect between the intellectual and the sexual, while for her one poured into the other so fluidly that they became almost impossible to distinguish. When Heloïse came to the devastating realization that her partner had never given himself to her completely, nor was he ever going to, she was forced to painfully dichotomize these two parts of herself which she had hitherto considered one, and bury one part, while simultaneously attempting to keep the other part alive without it. She unfortunately failed at this, and the “young girl named Heloïse” was buried forever.

The Beguines and Christine de Pisan seemed to have completely opposite experiences with their sexuality. The beguines, within the safety of the beguinage, amongst a community of like-minded women, were able to escape a society which would unfairly expect them to suppress their sexuality. In the comfort of their community, where they were given time and opportunity to reflect, pray, and understand every aspect of themselves, they were able not just to get acquainted with or come to terms with their sexuality, but love it, revel in it, and use it to direct a supreme love, a complete surrender of the total self, to an adoring bridegroom, both God and man, who, unlike Abelard, reciprocated a total self in return.

Christine, on the other hand, in the position she found herself as a widow and a writer, enmeshed in society, was forced to not only follow the precepts set out for women that told them that they must deny their sexuality, but to exhort other women to do the same as well. That is not to say that she wrote what she did not actually believe. I think she believed the concepts she
prescribed with all the self of her that remained. Yet I would suggest that because she was forced to bury her sexual and feminine self, she was robbed of the kind of understanding it would take to really assess the implications of what she preached, and that is why her material ends up being so contradictory. It would seem that when women started being paid by men to express themselves on the page, they were deprived of anything worthy to express.

I must conclude that sexual and intellectual potency are linked, but simply in the sense that true self-awareness facilitates intellectual achievement, and this self-awareness cannot be achieved without addressing every aspect of the feminine self.
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