

## What We Might Learn from Women's Correspondence

Joan Ferrante

**F**IRST, LET ME say how happy I am to participate in this session. I feel honored that Joan has claimed me as a teacher though she was already a recognized scholar when she took the NEH seminar, and I have, over the years, learned a great deal from her and her work.

It is tempting to try to survey all the various things that medieval women's correspondence reveals they were thinking about: medical issues, family problems, legal and financial claims, [fighting] divorce, political negotiations, the conflicting claims of world and cloister, the need for moral support in a difficult job, pride in their heritage or in the accomplishments of other women, rebellion against religious authority, and these are all interesting, but there is not enough time for them.

I will focus mainly on religious issues, but I would like to remind you first of the influence women patrons had on the writing of secular texts, particularly histories. Women were guardians of history, sometimes in the works they commissioned, sometimes in their persons, often bringing the prestige of an older family to give legitimacy to their more parvenu husbands. It was to their advantage to press the claims of their families, but the same claims were pressed by women religious. In some cases, the interest seems to be mainly in preserving and asserting the prestige of the family, and presumably their own. Gerberga commissioned Hrotsvit's two epics; one the life of her uncle, Otto I, the *Gesta Ottonis*; the other, the history of the founding of their monastery by the women in the family, the *Primordia Coenobii Gandeshemensis*. Matilda, abbess of Essen, the last survivor of the line of Liudolf, Duke of Swabia and son of Otto I, and his first wife, the English princess Edith, granddaughter of Alfred, asked her English cousin Æthelward for a history of her English ancestors [*Chronicon Æthelwardi*]. Sometimes the histories

rather blatantly serve the patron's cause. Emma, queen first of Æthelred, then of Cnut, commissioned a revisionist history which managed to imply that she was a virgin when she married her second husband and that her sons by the first, Æthelred, were somehow younger than her son by the second, Cnut, Harthacnut [*Encomium Emmae Reginae*].

Propaganda could also be conveyed in fictional texts. Marie of France, daughter of Louis VII and Eleanor of Aquitaine, apparently insisted that Chretien de Troyes compose his Lancelot in a way that championed the release of her imprisoned mother. If Henderson and McCash are right, Marie had Evrat revise his Genesis translation replacing the “bitter misogyny” of the first version with praise for Eve, “de li tuit bien se derivent. Totes [dames] sunt par li honorees”<sup>1</sup>. Generally when women commissioned a romance, they seem to have had an agenda. It is certainly not coincidental that the heroines of such romances are usually highly educated, heirs to their own lands, and that they often manipulate the hero and the plot. This is presumably the way upper-class women wanted to see themselves or to be seen.

There is one other characteristic of some women in courtly literature that is relevant to this discussion because it is similar to a trait that appears in the more serious religious discussions; that is the tendency of courtly women who engage in dialogue or debate with men to cut through the male rhetoric of their would-be suitors and to home in on its weakest points. In the earliest vernacular debates, the Provençal pastorelas, the peasant (a courtly lady in disguise) is not taken in by the man's hyperbolic compliments. When Marcabru's knight tells the peasant her father must have been a knight and her mother a “corteza vilaina,” she answers that she sees her people coming and going with their plows and spades; she knows exactly what she is, and she never loses sight of the reality: “non voil jes mon pieuzelatge / chamjar per nom de putana ([I] do not wish to exchange my maidenhood for the title of whore).”<sup>2</sup> The dialogues in Andreas Capellanus's *De arte honeste amandi* show the same sharply critical approach to the suitor's excessive compliments.

I have indulged in these references because I think they reflect, however humorously, a reality in courtly exchanges that can also be seen in far more serious intellectual exchanges between men and women who

engage in the same studies, the women constantly pushing the men to explain, define, clear up discrepancies and contradictions. This at any rate is what the men imply, and in at least one case, what the woman's own letters show. Jerome's correspondence with Marcella and with Paula and Eustochium, of which we have only his part, reveals not only that they had requested commentaries and translations from him, but also that they were reading biblical texts and commentaries with a very critical eye and that he expected them to look at what he wrote with the same critical eye. Jerome's exchanges with these women would be cited through succeeding centuries by men and women defending their own working relationships: Gisla and Rotrud asking Alcuin for a commentary on John, just as Jerome dedicated so many works to women; Azecho writing to a nun as he claimed Jerome wrote things to women he did not want to write to men; Guibert of Gembloux defending his friendship with various nuns in Hildegard's convent; Goscelin writing to Eve; and, of course, Abelard and Heloise, both of whom cite Jerome's praise of Marcella. Heloise, quoting Jerome (prologue to *Comm. in Ep ad Galatas*): "she did not simply accept everything I said but examine[d] it with a perceptive mind so I felt myself to have not so much a disciple as a judge" (*Problemata*).<sup>3</sup> Abelard, still quoting Jerome, even stronger: "she never met me without asking me questions about [Scripture]. Nor would she ever rest content at once, but would bring forward points on the other side. This was not for the sake of argument, however, but rather so that by questioning she might learn an answer to any objection that, in her view, might be raised" (Ep. 9).

"You challenge us with large questions and numbing our mind with ease/inactivity, you teach as you ask," Jerome says to Marcella in response to a letter she had sent with five heavy questions (Ep. 59): "Your first inquiry was 'what are those things which the eye has not seen, the ear has not heard, what has not come into the heart of man, things which god prepared for those who love him' [1. Cor. 2:9], and how again that apostle says 'god revealed [them] however to us through his spirit' [1. Cor. 2:10], and if it is revealed to the apostle we ought to understand how he might have revealed them to others?" The second question calls him [Jerome] to task about something he said. "I do not remember ever saying this but if I said it I would not be stubborn in the error."

The third is about those who will be taken up into the clouds, does that happen in the body? “The fourth is that you asked how it is in the gospel of John, after the resurrection, that it is said to Mary Magdalene: ‘do not touch me because I have not yet ascended to my father’ [20:17] and again in Matthew it is written that the women ran to the feet of the saviour, when surely it is not the same to touch his feet after the resurrection and not to touch them. . . . The last leaf contained the fifth question, whether the lord conversed with the disciples for forty days after the resurrection and was never elsewhere, or secretly ascended to heaven and descended, but nonetheless did not deny his presence to the apostles.” (Cf Augustine who, in the same period, answered questions about whether God can be seen with the physical eye in long letters to women that are considered preliminary studies towards the City of God; to Italice [Ep. 92]; to Paulina [Ep. 147].)

Jerome calls Marcella his “ergodiokten” [slave driver]. She keeps pushing him with questions, asking why certain words are not translated from Hebrew, what the exact meaning of others is, what Origen said about a psalm (which he can’t find either [Ep. 34]), about distinctions of blasphemy (Ep. 42). There are times when he wishes for a less demanding communication.

The function of letters is to write something about domestic things and daily conversation, to make the absent present, so they can tell each other what they want or what has happened, a banquet of conversation sometimes seasoned with the salt of learning. But you are so engrossed in your research that you write nothing but what tortures me and compels me to read scriptures. Again yesterday you put a very famous question to me, and you want me to write back what I think immediately, as if I held the chair of the Pharisees so that I should decide whatever disagreement about Hebrew words and expound as mediator of the argument (Ep. 29).

Paula and Eustochium, who followed Jerome to Jerusalem and devoted themselves entirely to biblical studies, also plague him with questions and requests, and they push him to do his major commentaries. If Marcella is a slave driver, Paula, and later Eustochium, is a “workaholic” [philoponotate] (*Comm. in Isaiah*). She lets nothing pass: “when I was

trying to make you aware of the full meaning of the 118th psalm . . . you zealously sought out what the Hebrew letters which seemed inserted in the psalm we were reading mean (Ep. 30).”

They read commentaries with a very critical eye. “A few days ago you said you read some commentaries on Matthew and Luke, in which one was dull in sense and words, another played in words but slept in meanings. So you asked me, scorning such trifles, to translate at least 39 homilies of our Adamantus [Origen] from Greek.” Jerome recognizes her and Eustochium’s proficiency in Hebrew and expects them to check his translation for accuracy:

You, however, o Paula and Eustochium, since you have been zealous to enter into Hebrew libraries and acknowledge the struggles of interpreters, when you hold the Hebrew book of Esther look at our translation of separate words so that you can recognize that I have increased nothing by adding but transmitted the Hebrew history to the Latin language with faithful testimony simply as it is in Hebrew (*Praefatio in Librum Esther*).

Jerome emended his translation of the psalter and Job from the Septuagint, correcting it according to the Hebrew at their request: “Which since, o Paula and Eustochium, you see again that it was corrupted by the faults of scribes and that ancient error prevailed over new emendation, you compel me to go over the field which has been ploughed but not sown and root out the thorns” (*Praefatio in Librum Psalmorum*). At times he complains it would be better to keep silent, but they don’t allow it: “to spare evil, it would be better to cut off their rage with my silence than daily to provoke the madness of the envious by writing something new” (*Praefatio in Librum Jeremiam*). When Paula asks him for a bibliography of Origen’s work, he sends it, written by his own hand swiftly by the fire of a small lantern considering it too dangerous to dictate (Ep. 33).

After Paula dies, Eustochium continues to push Jerome for promised works: “Having finished not long ago twenty books of exposition on the twelve prophets and the commentaries on Daniel, you compel me, virgin of Christ Eustochium, to go on to Isaiah” (Prologus, *Commentarius in Esaiam*). She seems to have read the commentary as he wrote it and raised piercing questions.

How fortunate it is that you, daughter Eustochium, are my participant; for when you read the little preface of the previous book, . . . you put a not small question to me. Namely about the eight verses of the 13th psalm which are read in the churches and are not in Hebrew, which the apostle used writing to Romans. . . . ‘[T]hey use their tongues to deceive. . . . Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. . . . There is no fear of God before their eyes’ [Rom.3:13-18]. When I heard that, I was struck as if by a powerful fist, I began silently to burn, and my face showed the stupor of my mind with its pallor. . . . At length, having come back to myself, I asked for one day so that my answer would not be an argument of human wit, but the fruit of careful reading. And examining the whole scripture with my mind, I observed that almost all the epistle to the Romans is constructed from the old document, so the witness from psalms and Isaiah is woven together. . . . I think your question is answered and our rule about translation of the old document is shaken rather than moved. And it was not so much that the apostle took from the 13th psalm what is not in Hebrew, as that those who did not know the apostle’s art of weaving scriptures together, sought an appropriate place to put the testimony taken from him, which they did not think could be without scriptural authority (prologue to Book XVI, *Commentarius in Esaiam*) . . .

Many centuries later, and well aware of the Jerome/Marcella precedent, Heloise pressed Abelard for a series of works for the Paraclete; hymns, sermons, a commentary on Genesis, a history of monasticism, and a Rule specifically for women. In her case we have some of the letters of request for the Rule and the history and the questions she posed in the *Problemata*. Her requests seem to have structured his responses, as Linda Georgianna and Eileen Kearney have argued for the Rule, her very detailed and scholarly comments focusing his regulations, her attacks on women evoking a strong and indeed feminist response in the history of womens monasticism.<sup>4</sup> “Behold that a woman anoints the holy of holies and believes him to be such; . . . What is this prerogative of the weaker sex, I beseech, that a woman should anoint the highest Christ anointed from his conception with all the unguents of the Holy Spirit

and as if consecrating him with bodily sacraments as king and priest, that is making him bodily the anointed Christ?” (Abelard to Heloise). Citing Jerome at some length, Abelard encourages Heloise’s nuns in their studies, telling them they also have a teacher who seeks the sources, who is skilled in the three biblical languages—how much of an exaggeration this is we don’t know, but he makes a big point of it—and tells the nuns to take advantage of it. Language and textual authenticity are at the core of her request for hymns, and she persuaded him to do them with this “reasoned argument,” as he calls it.

We know, you [Heloise] said, that the Latin Church in general and the French Church in particular follows customary usage rather than authority as regards both psalms and hymns. We still do not know for certain who was the author of the translation of the Psalter which our own French Church uses. If we want to reach a decision on the basis of the words of the variant translations, we shall still be a long way from a universally accepted interpretation and, in my opinion, this will carry no weight of authority. Customary practice has so long prevailed that although we have St. Jerome’s corrected text for the rest of the Scriptures, the translation of the Psalter, which we use so much, is of doubtful authority. Moreover, the hymns we use now are in considerable confusion; they are never or rarely distinguished by titles or names of the authors, and even when they appear to have definite authors, of whom Hilary and Ambrose are considered the best, and next to them Prudentius and several others, the words are often so irregular in scansion that it is hardly possible to fit them to the music; and without this there is no hymn at all, according to the definition that it is “praise of God with song” (Abelard, *Hymnarius Paraclitensis*).

Heloise had also noted that several feasts had no hymns, that the hymns for some did not suit the occasion because false material had been inserted, that people were “lying” because they sang “nocturnal hymns in the day or diurnal hymns at night.” So Abelard does his best to clear up the liturgical mess by preparing three books of hymns.

Finally, the *Problemata*, the series of forty-two difficult questions

that came out of the nuns' biblical studies, testify to their (or Heloise's) very close readings and alertness to discrepancies and contradictions as well as to the desire to understand every word. Abelard labors to answer them in detail, often relying on allegorical interpretation where the contradictions cannot be explained away. Citing Jerome, not from a personal letter, but from Jerome's commentary on Paul to the Galatians, which suggests that she knew much of his corpus, Heloise casts herself as Abelard's Marcella and reminds him that he has put her in charge of her nuns' education, that they can't love Scripture properly unless they understand it, but that their study keeps raising perplexing questions, many on sin and the law.

"What is the meaning of this statement in the epistle of James (2:10–11): 'Whoever keeps the law as a whole, but falls short in one particular, has become guilty with respect to all of it'?" (*Prob. 2*).

"What is the meaning of the Lord's saying . . . (Luke 15:7): 'I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent?' For it is much better and more perfect to avoid sin than to make amends for the one sin committed and doing many things well pleases God more than doing only one. What does it mean, then, if God approves the penitence of a single sinner more than the perseverance of many righteous people?" (*Prob. 11*).

"There is no doubt that the Lord, in behalf of the adulteress who was to be set free, replied to the Jews (John 8:7): 'Let him among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her,' and so rescued her. Now since he did not permit her to be stoned except by someone without sin, he would seem to forbid anyone from using the rod of punishment, since no one is without sin, not even an infant having a single day of life upon the earth" (*Prob. 8*).

"We ask whether anyone can sin in doing what the Lord has permitted or even commanded" (*Prob. 42*). Abelard answers this question in terms of procreation and continence (presumably what she had in mind).

Sometimes she seems to question motivation. "Why is it that when the Lord was offering and commending the sacrament of his Body and Blood to the disciples, he did not say of the Body, 'This is my Body of the New Covenant' (Matt. 26:26–28), when he would say of the Blood,



’This is my Blood of the New Covenant,’ as if he were recommending the Blood more than the Body?’ (*Prob. 6*).

“What does this mean (Matt. 7:1-2): ‘Stop judging, that you may not be judged. For as you judge, so will you be judged.’ Does it mean that if we make an unjust judgment, we will be judged unjustly in return?” (*Prob. 19*).

“It seems to me that we ought to ask by what mystery or for what reason the Lord looked for fruit on the fig-tree when, as Mark says (11:12): ‘It was not the season for figs.’ Then, striking the tree with his curse, he made it dry, so from that time it remained withered, as if by this blow he had imposed his curse upon it” (*Prob. 26*).

Some pinpoint apparent discrepancies or contradictions. She does not question the authenticity of the texts, but she does not take them at face value either:

“How are we to understand what the Lord replied to the Jews who were seeking signs concerning the time of his burial (Matt. 12:40): ‘Just as Jonah was in the whale’s belly three days and three nights, so will the son of man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights’? It is agreed that the Lord was taken down from the Cross and buried on Friday, and lay in the tomb on Saturday, and on Saturday night, in the last darkness of Sunday morning, rose again. Therefore it is certain that for one whole night preceding the Saturday, and for one whole day of Saturday itself he was in the tomb” (*Prob. 4*).

“We ask who added at the end of the book of Deuteronomy (33:34), which is the last of the five books of Moses, that part speaking of the death of Moses and what followed. We wonder, that is, whether Moses himself also announced this in a prophetic spirit, so that this, too, could be added to his books, or whether this was added later by someone else” (*Prob. 41*).

“Comparing the statements of the evangelists, therefore, we ask first, how, according to John, Mary Magdalen came to the tomb early in the morning while it was still dark, and saw the stone rolled away, and afterwards, as Mark says (16:3), Mary Magdalen and Mary the mother of James and Salome came to the tomb when the sun had just risen, saying to one another: ‘Who has moved the stone for us?’ If Mary Magdalen had already seen the stone moved when it was still dark, how

now, when the sun had risen, could she ask with the others about the moving of the stone, which she had earlier seen moved away? Secondly, it seems that we must ask how, according to Mark, the women are said to have told no one about the resurrection because they were afraid, while the other evangelists assert the contrary? Finally, John says that Mary Magdalen, unaccompanied by anyone, before she had seen Jesus, announced to Peter and John that he had been removed from the tomb, and they had run there at once. Luke, however, reports that the same Mary Magdalen, and many other women with her, after learning that the Lord had risen, announced this to the disciples, and then Peter had run to the tomb”(*Prob. 5*).

There is a series of questions about Anna in 1 Kings and 1 Samuel, perhaps suggesting that the nuns pored particularly over the stories of women. If you’re interested I suggest you look at Mary McLaughlin’s translation of the *Problemata* which her editor, Bonnie Wheeler, has generously allowed me to use in the database *Epistolae*.<sup>5</sup> “What is the meaning of Anna’s reply to the priest when she said (1 Kings 1:15-16): ‘It isn’t that, my lord; I am an unhappy woman. I have neither wine nor liquor; I was only pouring out my troubles to the Lord. Do not think your handmaid a daughter of Belial’” (*Prob. 31*).

“Also, what is the meaning of this saying about Anna: ‘And she no longer appeared downcast’ (1 Sam. 1:18)” (*Prob. 32*).

“And what does this mean (1 Kings 2:1): ‘Anna prayed and said, “My heart exults in the Lord, etc.”? For this canticle speaks the words of thanksgiving or prophecy more than those of prayer” (*Prob. 33*).

“This saying also raises a question (1 Kings 2:5): ‘The barren wife bears many sons.’ For even though Scripture afterwards refers to the fact that, after Samuel, Anna had gone on to give birth to three sons and two daughters, nevertheless, while she was singing this canticle, she cannot be said to have had Samuel yet. Also, how can it be said about her children that they were ‘very many,’ and about the children of her friend, Phenenna, that they were only ‘many,’ as if Anna had more children than Phenenna. Though Scripture does not say how many children Phenenna had, many commentators suggest that she had more than Anna, which would mean at least seven”(*Prob. 34*).

This last and the next are examples of discrepancies. “We also ask

about the meaning of this passage (I Kings 18–19): ‘Meanwhile the boy Samuel ministered before the face of the Lord, as a child girded with a linen ephod. And his mother made him a little coat, which she brought to him on the appointed days, when she went up with her husband to offer the solemn sacrifice.’ If Samuel was a Levite, which is very likely, or a priest, being only a boy he would hardly be able to comply with the Law in his ministry, so that at his tender age he could minister girt with the ephod as a Levite or a priest. We wonder also what garment the mother brought to the boy and on what appointed days” (*Prob.* 35).

Columbia University

## END NOTES

1. June Hall McCash, “The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women: An Overview, in *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, ed. June Hall McCash (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 1996, 19.

2. Marcabru, “L’autrer jost’ una sebissa.” Translation from *Marcabru: A Critical Edition*, Simon Gaunt, Ruth Harvey and Linda Paterson (D. S. Brewer, 2000), 381.

3. Quotations from correspondence are from *Epistolae: Medieval Women’s Letters*, <http://epistolae.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/>.

4. Linda Georgianna, “Any Corner of Heaven: Heloise’s Critique of Monasticism,” *Mediaeval Studies* 49 (1987): 221–53; Eileen Kearney, “Heloise: Inquiry and the Sacra Pagina,” in *Ambiguous Realities: Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Carole Levin and Jeanne Watson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 66–81.

5. Now published, *The Letters of Heloise and Abelard: A Translation of Their Collected Correspondence and Related Writings*, trans. and ed. Mary Martin McLaughlin with Bonnie Wheeler, New Middle Ages (Palgrave Macmillan), 2009.