

Dearer to Me and More

sorrow equal to the love
- *Héloïse d'Argenteuil du Paraclet*

Dearer to me and more honorable to you
for me to be your lover than your wife
and all authorities she cited agreed
scholars and marriage are incompatible.

What could there be in common between bookmen
and wetnurses or books and distaffs?
Or sacred or philosophical reflection
and squalling babies? And besides she said

they both knew getting married would never
satisfy her outraged uncle. Yet he
in his folly persevered and she
in hers acquiesced so that her kinsmen

despite having given him the kiss of peace
severed from him what had most given offense;
and she after giving birth to a daughter she consigned
to convent herself took the habit and vows.

After the separation they exchanged epistles
in which she declared her love for him and for God
(his wife, the Father's bridesmaid) beseeching
him to recognize her and her desire

as real and one, to admit again their love
for each other, to not deny his own feelings
but confess his love no more mere lust than hers
or God's (of which they and theirs were but signatures),

to acknowledge that human needs and desires enliven
both body and soul and in no wise conflict
with the immaterial perfection of reason
he in his intellectual pride seeks —

spiritualizing motherhood and human
birth as abstraction, metaphorizing the body
away as his had in part been excised —
but are embodiment, figures of the quest.

In one she wrote: What king or philosopher
could match your fame? What district, village or town
did not long to see you? Every wife,
every young girl desired you

in your absence and was on fire in your presence.
In another: you left many love songs
which won you worldwide popularity
for the charm of their words and tunes

that kept your name on everyone's lips,
airs of such beauty that even the unlettered
did not forget you or our love
for which many women envied me.

And again (with her usual precise Latin):
I was ever more pleased with possessing your heart
than with any other happiness,
the man is what I least valued in you.

It's said (though to this day some disagree)
that for the rest of their lives living apart
they never touched again save with their minds
and in exercise of the holy offices

of their respective orders. She was renowned
throughout the West even before the scandal
as a learned polymath and brilliant author
of subtle theological treatises.

An *adolescent* he had called her, half his age
when they met; *Reverend Abbess* forty-some years later
when he died. It's also said (and likewise disputed)
that she had him dug up from his first grave,

had his remains boiled, boned and dried
had the skeleton entombed in the oratory
of the Paraclete Abbey he had given her years before
where she when she died was lain next to him.