
Abelard and Heloise's Love Story from the Perspective of their Son Astrolabe: Luise Rinser's Novel *Abelard's Love*

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The debate about the authenticity of Abelard and Heloise's correspondence has raged for many decades, if not centuries.¹ Traditionally, many critics have claimed that Heloise, as a woman, could not have composed such learned letters in Latin because they demonstrate outstanding literary and rhetorical skills, or that the highly famed Abelard would not have entered such a correspondence with his former student, then girl friend, and eventual wife, or that such a correspondence could have been only the invention and falsification of a later detractor of Abelard (Southern, Moos, Dronke). But recent research has finally put much of the doubts and disbelief to rest.² Constant Mews has been highly instrumental in providing new evidence in favor of Heloise as the actual writer of these letters addressed to Abelard and has cogently argued against the critics in the discussion pertaining to the authenticity of these texts. Moreover, he has demonstrated that Heloise not only composed the letters traditionally known as having been exchanged between herself and Abelard, but that she also can be identified as the author of another large collection of an epistolary dialogue with her husband, transcribed by the fifteenth-century Cistercian monk Johannes de Vepria, working in the library of Clairvaux. Summarizing his extensive investigations, Mews reaches the following conclusion:

These letters help confirm the authenticity of the famous correspondence of Abelard and Heloise. They also suggest that the *Historia calamitatum* cannot be relied upon as the final word on Abelard's early relationship with Heloise. Much more than Heloise, Abelard distances himself from his past in order to save his reputation. She, by contrast, was rigorously hostile to hypocrisy both in love and in the religious life. (176)

The history of medieval scholarship focused on the correspondence and its authenticity reaches far back and reflects as much, if not more, about itself as about the actual letters. Apart from many stylistic, historical, literary, philosophical, and

theological arguments which, in fact, allow us to attribute these epistolary documents to this outstanding twelfth-century female intellectual, feminism has taught us to comprehend the typical patriarchal perceptions of women's "proper" role in society, and also Heloise's, which was not supposed to break this stereotype (Marenbon, McLeod, Moos). Considering the author's surprising self-consciousness, sharp intellect, stunning rhetorical and aesthetic skills, but also Heloise's surprising stance on marriage and free love, it is easily understandable why older, particularly male scholarship, was vehemently opposed to Heloise's claim on the authorship of these letters.³

Whatever the status of this correspondence might be, however, it has certainly exerted a tremendous influence on western literature from the Middle Ages until the present.⁴ Many authors have referred to Abelard and Heloise in an attempt to fathom the enigma of human love, to explore the endless struggles between man and woman, and to comprehend the enormous influence of such classical couples as Abelard and Heloise, Tristan and Isolde, and Romeo and Juliet (Blake, Gingold, Meade, Frenzel 1-2). One particularly fascinating example—yet surprisingly little studied—proves to be Luise Rinser's 1991 novel *Abaelards Liebe* (translated as *Abelard's Love*) in which the German author retells the account of the two clerics' love from the point of view of Astrolabe, their son. Critical discussions of Rinser's writing have focused either on her literary accomplishments from a purely modernist perspective, or on her humanitarian, political, social, ethical, and religious activities (Gill, Lothar, Lee, Leheis). However, this profoundly intellectual and highly educated German woman writer also offers an intriguing and significantly innovative perspective on the two perhaps most famous medieval lovers, Abelard and Heloise, which makes her novel a major contribution to medievalism. Neither German nor international scholarship, however, has so far recognized the extraordinary literary and also historical value of her novel. In other words, we are faced with two types of challenges: on the one hand, from a historical point of view, that is, how does Rinser interpret the relationship between Abelard and Heloise, seen from their son's perspective, and, on the other, from a literary point of view, how is this novel to be evaluated within the context of contemporary German literature?

Although research in medievalism has considerably gained in momentum in recent years, especially as the Middle Ages receive more and more attention among the public (*Mittelalter-Rezeption III*; *Mittelalter-Rezeption V*; *Medievalism*), this novel still awaits its discovery both by the wider readership and the academic community.⁵ Jean M. Snook provided an English translation with a brief introduction, but this does not seem to have broken the ice among international Germanist

scholarship and the general audience. The last comprehensive studies focusing on Rinser's writings appeared in print in 1986 and 1988, several years before the publication of *Abelard's Love* in 1991 (Gill; Lothar; Rinser, *Materialien*; Falkenstein; Rinser, *Reinheit*). Historical sources hardly tell us anything about their son Astrolabe, but Rinser's novel illuminates an angle in the couple's life which also would deserve our critical examination. Although *Abelard's Love* falls in the category of historical novels, the author aims to focus on the power of love between husband and wife and, equally important, between parents and children. She closely examines the enormous tensions between the public demands on an individual and his personal situation, or, between an embattled professor of theology and philosophy and his love life as husband and father. But before we turn to the critical reading of Rinser's novel, it seems appropriate to provide a brief biography as Rinser has not been able to reach out to a non-German audience and has remained a rather unknown author on the international stage.

Luise Rinser was born on April 30, 1911 in Pitzlingen in Upper Bavaria as the only child of the elementary school principal and church organist Josef Rinser and his wife Luise, née Sailer. She married first the pianist and conductor Hans-Günther Schnell who died in the war on the Eastern front in 1943. She had two children with Schnell and raised them while staying at home. Her first book, the semi-autobiographical novel *Die gläsernen Ringe*, appeared in 1941 and earned her accolades by the famous novelist Hermann Hesse but also an immediate publication ban from the Nazis. She herself was denounced to the government in 1944 for having privately stated her conviction that the Second World War would shortly come to an end, implying the defeat of Nazi-Germany. She was incarcerated in the Traunstein prison (east of Munich) under very harsh conditions, and would probably have suffered the death penalty if the war had not ended in 1945.

While in prison she wrote a diary which was published in 1946. In 1953 she married the famous composer Carl Orff, but divorced him in 1959. Since the 1940s, Rinser has been a prolific author of fictional prose, essays, and short stories, but she also became active in politics and represented the Green Party in the German parliament, once even being nominated as candidate for the position of the President of the Federal Republic of Germany (Frederiksen). For a long time she worked as a journalist and reported, for example, about the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council and the historical launch of the first American rocket into space at Cape Canaveral. Always well informed about current events and an excellent researcher and journalist, she was repeatedly invited to give lectures throughout the United States and both Koreas (Snook vii-ix).

Rinser's major success as a novelist was her novel *Mitte des Lebens* (1951; *The Middle of Life*), but she received a number of literary awards mostly for her other works, such as the short story "Bruder Feuer" (1975, "Brother Fire") and "Silberschuld" (1987, "The Silvery Guilt"). One of her last novels was *Abelard's Love* (1991), but she had composed several other narratives in which a historical figure assumes a prominent position, such as St. Francis of Assisi in "Bruder Feuer" and Mary Magdalene in *Mirjam* (Imbach, Shafi).

Abelard's Love retells the story of these two famous lovers from the perspective of their son, Astrolabe, who is profoundly puzzled and disturbed about the history of his parents' relationship and tries to understand their love and philosophy. Abelard had married his former student Heloise after she had become pregnant by him and delivered their son Astrolabe. Her uncle Fulbert arranged Abelard's castration as a punishment for keeping their marriage a secret, marriage not being considered appropriate for a teacher of the Church. Subsequently Abelard made Heloise join a newly-founded convent and communicated with her only much later through letters. The novel is based on this highly curious correspondence and on the information contained in Abelard's autobiography, *Historia calamitatum*, but the focus rests on Astrolabe's struggle to understand his parents' love for each other and their son whom they had had raised by relatives without revealing their identity to him.

Rinser also gained a reputation for her intense interest in other cultures and religions, reflected both by her extensive world travels and subsequent diaries and essays (Grollman). In her latest novel, *Aeterna* (2000), which Rinser wrote together with Hans Christian Meiser, she develops a utopian perspective about a human community on a Mediterranean island, based on memory, experiences, and dreams.

Betty Radice points out that hardly anything is known about Astrolabe (Astrolabius), except that Peter the Venerable secured him a benefice upon Heloise's urging: "This is the only time Heloise mentions him, and nothing definite is known about the young man who had played so small a part in his parents' lives" (43). Peter responded to Heloise: "I will gladly do my best to obtain a prebend in one of the great churches for your Astralabe, who is also ours for your sake" (Radice 287). The meager historical records reveal that Astrolabe died in Paraclete on October 29 or 30 (year unknown), where he is mentioned in the necrology as "Petrus Astralabius magistri nostri Petri filius." The same name appears in some records of the Cathedral of Nantes in the year 1150, and of the Cistercian abbey at Hauterive in the Swiss canton of Fribourg, but we do not know for certain whether this was the same person (Radice 287; McLeod, *Héloise* 253, 283-84).

It is very likely that Luise Rinser had learned about these remarkable medieval lovers already during her school years, first at the Benedictine women's convent in Wessobrunn, later at the University in Munich; but she turned to Abelard and Heloise as subjects of her fictional writing only very late in her life. In a correspondence with Hans Christian Meise, who had inquired about the meaning of love in her novel *Abelard's Love*, she responds with a detailed biographical outline of Abelard's life and demonstrates how well she is informed about this philosopher (Rinser and Meiser, *Reinheit* 25-26). Although she expresses great unease and trouble which she had experienced in her feminist study of this man, she still admits her profound admiration for him:

Mußte ich ihn nicht eher hassen? Als Frau den Mann verurteilen? Dieser Abaelard behielt über 800 Jahre seine männliche Faszination auch für eine feministische Frau. Wer kann's erklären? Niemand. Denn Liebe gehört zu den Phänomenen, die ein Geheimnis sind. (*Reinheit und Ekstase* 26)

[Should I not rather hate him? As a woman condemn this man? This Abelard continued to exert his fascination as a man over 800 years even for a woman with feminist ideals. Who can explain it? Nobody. After all, love belongs to those phenomena which remain a secret.] (Translation mine)

From the outset the novel reveals a deep-seated sense of frustration, even hatred which Astrolabe feels for both of his parents, because he seemingly did not count in their lives: "Neben Euch Großen und Euern hohen Aufgaben verschwand ich ins Nichts" (7) ["Overshadowed by you two great figures and your important tasks I disappeared into nothingness" (1)]. Despite his many attempts at rebellion, the young man has come out of his struggles admitting his love, coupled with hatred, and yet also worship. Astrolabe had tried to straighten out his relationship with his parents, and also—and in this the author reveals her own interest—to understand the relationship between the two lovers, hence to understand the secret of love.

Astrolabe reflects upon his life after Abelard's death and transforms his personal experiences with his parents, who always were extremely removed from him, into a narrative mirror of the profound love that connected husband and wife. This does not mean, however, that the son confuses his own emotions, as he clearly states at the beginning: "Ich habe Euch gehaßt, verehrt, bewundert, verachtet, verwünscht, beneidet, geliebt, und all das in wildem Wechsel" (7) ["I've hated you, worshipped you, admired you, despised you, cursed you, envied you, loved you, and all in wild alternation" (1)]. Although his father stayed aloof from him, entirely dedicated to his studies and teaching, Astrolabe openly admits his deep fascination with his intellectual accomplishments: "Was er geleistet hat, gehört der

Zukunft an. Er hat mit seiner Dialektik eine neue Epoche des Denkens und Lehrens eingeleitet" (10f) ["What he achieved belongs to the future. With his dialectics he introduced a new epoch of thought and teaching" (3)] (Jolivet; Marenbon, *Philosophy*; Jacobi). Curiously, but very much to the point, Astrolabe observes that these dialectics also apply to Abelard's inner life, as he was dedicated to God and yet also to his love for Heloise: "sich fromm zu Christus zu bekennen (und das war ihm sicher ernst) und doch seiner (Eurer) Liebe zur unchristlichen griechischen Antike nicht abzuschwören" (12) ["to profess piously his faith in Christ (and he certainly meant that seriously) and yet not to renounce his love—the love of both of you—for the unchristian Greek antiquity" (5)]. Whereas his parents demonstrated such an ardent love for each other, the young man feels exasperated about their neglect of him, and so he turns over Heloise's letters addressing Abelard to Peter the Venerable to make sure that they would not be destroyed by him in one of his rages of anger against his parents. Obviously, Abelard and Heloise's love impresses him to a point of infuriating him against them for the exclusivity and absoluteness of their feelings for each other. His account serves both as a documentation of his experiences and as an indictment: "Aber schon dieser harmlose Anfang ist überlagert von den Schatten früher Ahnungen und Ängste.... Im Laufe der Jahre wurde aus dem Bericht eine Anklageschrift oder eher der verzweifelte Versuch, das Schicksal zu begreifen und meinem Leben einen Sinn zu geben" (15) ["It was intended as a simple account of my journey. But even this harmless beginning is overlaid with the shadows of early suspicions and fears.... In the course of the years, the account turned into an indictment, or rather a desperate attempt to understand fate and to give meaning to my life" (7)].

But Astrolabe accepts his own failure in the face of the incomprehensibility of his parents' love: "Es ist mir nicht gelungen" (15) ["I did not succeed in that" (7)]. In fact, his whole life appears as a function of his parents, beginning with his name, Astrolabe (Astrolabius). His foster father explains the origin of this name, pointing out that the astronomical instrument with the following words: one could "den Standort der Sterne feststellen" (18) ["determine the position of the stars" (9)], but it remains uncertain what the correlation might have been. What are the stars, and what is the astrolabe in this context? Considering the son's relationship to his father, the text implies that Abelard represents the stars, the future, the guiding principle in philosophy and theology, whereas Astrolabe surfaces as the gauge, the measuring apparatus allowing the student and reader—that is us—to follow the star, as the dying man tells his son at the end: "Ich habe in Tausende meiner Studenten den Samen des Neuen gesät" (223) ["In thousands of my students I've sown the seeds of the new" (150)]. But they are intimately connected with each

other, both intellectually and emotionally, and even through their names, as Astrolabe's foster-father explains, which are more or less the same, though written with rearranged letters, forming an anagram (67; 43). Not surprisingly, Abelard poses to his student and son one of the fundamental questions pertaining to epistemology: "[w]as war zuerst: das Reale oder sein Name?" (57) ["what came first: the real thing or its name" (36)],⁶ an issue which medieval philosophy explored to a considerable length, and which has continued to haunt modern linguistics as well (e.g., de Saussure; see Vance, Eric Jager, Cogley). But Astrolabe asks not only about his name; he also asks about his identity, as he increasingly becomes aware of the daunting dominance of both his parents, joined in love for each other.

Rinser, through her mouthpiece Astrolabe, raises a number of interesting speculative questions which cannot find answers in the historical sources, but which the modern writer is justified in formulating. Astrolabe wonders, for instance, why Heloise's uncle Fulbert was so furious about Abelard's behavior and secrecy regarding the marriage, leading to the awful crime of forceful castration. Only a father, Astrolabe observes, would react in such a way: "Nur Väter sind zu solch höllisch giftiger Eifersucht fähig" (25) ["Only fathers are capable of such infernally poisonous jealousy" (15)]. In other words, he suspects Fulbert of having secretly fathered Heloise. As an alternative, he suggests that Fulbert might have loved his niece and "daß er nichts heftiger wünschte, als sie zu berühren, aber daß er es nicht wagte, auch des Altersunterschieds wegen" (25) ["that he wished nothing more intensely than to touch her. But he didn't dare to on account of the difference in age" (15)]. Both claims remain speculative, but they are powerful in their psychological insightfulness, especially as Astrolabe then accuses Fulbert of impotence and yet also possessiveness, whereas his own father emerges as an absolute lover who plunged into the world of eroticism with the energy with which he also pursued his university studies: "Er besaß dich und ließ nie von dir ab, er änderte nur die Konstellation" (27) ["He possessed you and never left you alone, he just changed the constellation" (15f)]. Having sent Heloise to a convent was tantamount to securing her for himself like a falcon keeping his prey (27; 16). Heloise, on the other hand, whose own letter to Abelard is quoted here at length, is said to have worshipped her lover as her own God: "Es gab nur einen Gott für dich: Abaelard, Abaelard, Abaelard" (45) ["There was only one God for you: Abelard, Abelard, Abelard" (28)].

Luise Rinser develops a highly fascinating concept of love which goes far beyond the traditional bonds between husband and wife, reaches out beyond the limits of physical experiences, and aims for a spiritual dimension. Moreover, Abelard is not identified as the perfect, accomplished lover; instead Rinser argues

in favor of Heloise whose inner strength and absolute dedication to her love for Abelard gained a catalytic function in that relationship. This comes surprisingly close to recent findings about the actual love relationship between Abelard and Heloise. As Constant Mews has observed, "It is Heloise who raises the purity of her intentions towards Abelard. She also raises the theme of purity of intention in relation to the religious life ... when reflecting on the impulses which drive human nature" (132). Whereas Rinser describes Abelard as being caught up in his intellectual vanity and self-confidence, Heloise is praised for having torn the curtain of his true self asunder and having brought him back into reality by means of her love: "Die größere Liebende warst du gewiß" (46) ["You were certainly the greater in love" (29)]. Most recent discussions by scholars on these famous eleventh-century lovers imply that the novelist Rinser might have correctly anticipated some of their findings already through her fictional account of *Abelard's Love* in 1991 (Ward and Chiavaroli).

The narrative flow does not pursue a linear path, as Astrolabe reflects upon his own life with its many vicissitudes and twists. Hence the many breaks in the account, which alternately pays attention to Abelard, then to Heloise, then to Astrolabe's encounters with his father in the role of a teacher, without knowing that he was his father: "Meinen Vater, nicht als Vater erkannt, sah ich fast täglich" (53) ["I saw my father almost every day without recognizing him as my father" (33)]. The intellectual similarities, the secret relationship, and the fascination that the older exerted on the younger, however, eventually bear fruit and reveal to both their identity, though Abelard never seems to have acknowledged him fully, except as one of his favorite students who will carry the torch of his father's philosophy into the future. In the exams, for instance, he asks Astrolabe about heresy, the conflict between nominalists and universalists, the character of pure existence, the essence of God and man's means of understanding the ineffable or apophatic, and finally about the freedom of will. These were all key aspects of medieval philosophy, but here they are discussed by the student Astrolabe with a foresightedness which makes Abelard look at him in astonishment. It seems as if the latter recognized in Astrolabe his own intellectual heir, hence his true son who builds, intriguingly, the bridge to his distant wife, walled into the Paraclete, the convent called after the Holy Spirit: "Dieses Wort 'Paraclet' wurde zum Messer, mit welchem das Schicksal immer wieder auf mich einstach. Vater, Sohn, ja, und der Paraclet.... Die andre Trinität: Abaelard, Pierre Astrolabius, Heloise" (59) ["The word 'Paraclete' became a knife with which fate stabbed me again and again. Father, Son, and yes, the Paraclete.... The other Trinity: Abelard, Peter Astrolabe, Heloise" (37)]. This trinity is connected through secret but profound love, a tri-

angle of love, although Abelard apparently is afraid of recognizing his own son in public and shuns him after the exam in which he suddenly realizes the young man's startling brilliance in the discussion of human epistemology in the face of God: "Abaelard schaute mich auf eine Weise an, die mich fürchten ließ, Törichtes oder gar (in seinem Sinn) Ketzerisches gesagt zu haben" (57) ["Abelard looked at me in a way that made me fear I had said something foolish or even (in his sense) heretical" (36)].⁷ The next day, after the lecture, the teacher continues with the questioning, and this time Astrolabe develops the image of the three candles, each creating light by itself but sharing the essence of light: "Die eine Flamme ist gleicherweise in allen dreien, und doch ist jede etwas für sich" (62) ["The one flame is in all three in like manner, and yet each is something in itself" (39)]. Nevertheless, at this point in Rinser's novel, all candles—Abelard, Heloise, and Astrolabe—are sharply separated from each other, although Abelard immediately realizes the son's poetic ability to create visual metaphors for philosophical and psychological issues, an ability which he had inherited from him, as Astrolabe later realized: "Auch du, Abaelard, warst einmal ein Poet, ein Troubadour sogar" (62) ["You too, Abelard, were once a poet, a troubadour indeed" (39)]. Subsequently, when the young man reflects upon the relationship between his parents before their marriage, that is to say, when Abelard was teaching Heloise in her uncle's house, he first reiterates what people tended to say about Heloise as a prey to Abelard's ravaging, but then changes his evaluation entirely because, once again, this female student proved to be by far superior to her male teacher. Instead of being a lamb in a wolf's paws, Heloise proved to be "eine Tigerin an Kraft. Das sollte sich zeigen" (71) ["the power of a tigress. That would become evident" (46)].

Wherever we turn, Astrolabe as the narrator does not simply relate to us the history of these two lovers but explores in greatest detail and with a surprising sensitivity the interaction between the genders, without falling into the traditional trap of categorizing men as violent abusers and women as weak victims. The tables are, in fact, turned, and Heloise proves to be the dominant character in this relationship, which at first infuriates her son who complains: "Schwer bist du zu verstehen, Mutter. Was für eine ehrgeizige Frau du warst. Ehrgeizig für deinen Geliebten und auf raffinierte Weise für dich selbst—oder sagen wir, für eine Idee" (76) ["You are difficult to understand, Mother. What an ambitious woman you were. Ambitious for your lover and in a clever way for yourself—or shall we say for an idea" (50)]. At an earlier time, Astrolabe had also expressed his confusion with regard to his father's decisions and behavior, particularly as he had great difficulties reaching an understanding of why he had decided to take a mistress: "Hatte dieser seltsame bretonische Ritter je eine Liebesgeschichte gehabt? Ging er

zu Huren? Hatte er insgeheim eine Geliebte?" (26) ["Had this strange Breton knight ever had a love affair? Did he go to whores? Did he have a secret mistress?" (15)]. The difference between Abelard's asceticism and philosophy, on the one hand, and his love and passion for Heloise, on the other, strangely seems to be almost nil as there are moments when sensuous love and philosophy merge: "Einmal gab er sich nach, einmal wollte er die Erfahrung der Leidenschaft und der Geschlechtsliebe machen. Wie alles, was er tat, tat er auch dies unbedingt" (27) ["Just once he gave in to himself, just once he wanted to experience passion and sexual love. Like everything he did, he did this also completely" (15)]. Astrolabe's puzzlement grows, however, because not only did Abelard seemingly imprison his wife in a convent "[u]nter dem Mantel der Frömmigkeit und geistlichen Verantwortung" (27) ["[u]nder the mantle of piety and religious responsibility" (16)], but Heloise obviously accepted this "imprisonment" and bondage by her own free will. With a strong tone of reproach, the young man questions his mother's position: "du wolltest sie selbst, mit allen Fasern deines Leibes und Geistes wolltest du sie" (27) ["you yourself wanted it, with all the fibers of your body and spirit you wanted it [her status as Abelard's wife]" (16)], obviously totally oblivious to the true meaning of love connecting his parents.

Rinser utilizes this astounding love story from the early twelfth century for her own sake, and not to bring historical events or figures back to life through fiction, though she stays very close to the actual sources, often quoting from them at length. Abelard and Heloise represent a puzzle first for Astrolabe, then for the twelfth-century contemporaries, and finally for us as the modern audience. The author focuses on them because they lived a life of love which was very much the opposite to all expectations, both then and today, perhaps because they pursued love in all its exorbitance and glory, transcending human measures and rationality.

Yet their son lingers on the problem whether or why his mother had been a victim of his father's actions—probably a misinterpretation on his part—both before and after their marriage, not realizing how little he succeeds in comprehending the motivation resulting from her profound love for Abelard. Intriguingly, she is compared with Isaac in the Old Testament who was supposed to be sacrificed by Abraham, until God intervened and replaced him with a sheep. But Heloise "wußte, daß es kein anderes Opfertier gab als sie selbst. Und sie ging. Und kein Engel des Herrn kam, um diese Opferung zu verhindern" (87) ["knew that there was no other sacrificial animal but she. And she went. And no angel of the Lord came to prevent that sacrifice" (57)]. For Astrolabe this seems to be a contradiction and will remain so for a very long time, as he questions her sincerity and voluntariness: "Bist du wirklich freiwillig Nonne geworden, Mutter Heloise?" (87)

["Did you really voluntarily become a nun, Mother Heloise?" (57)]. This perplexity results from Astrolabe's inability to comprehend his mother's love, that is, the true power and extent of love, and the meaning of love. He repeatedly voices his criticism and questions the honesty of her feelings for Abelard. After a lengthy quotation from her letter to him, for instance, the son comments, severely blaming his mother for her blindness: "Sahst du seine Fehler nicht, Fehler, die alle sahen: seine Streitsucht, seinen Größenwahn, seine Eitelkeit, seine Undankbarkeit, seinen luziferischen Hochmut?" (100) ["Didn't you see his shortcomings, shortcomings that everyone saw: his cantankerousness, his megalomania, his vanity, his ingratitude, his diabolic arrogance?" (66)]. At an earlier point in the narrative, Heloise's son questions his mother's religious orientation and goes so far as to accuse her of blasphemy as she should not have taken the veil: "Deine Briefe aus dem Kloster sind so, daß, hätte eine deiner Nonnen sie geschrieben, du, als Priorin, sie aus dem Kloster hättest jagen müssen" (45) ["Your letters from the convent are such that had one of your nuns written them, you as prioress would have had to expel her from the convent" (28)]. This blasphemy consisted of her absolute love for Abelard, that is, in loving to the utmost possible for a human being: "Es gab nur einen Gott für dich: Abaelard, Abaelard, Abaelard" (45) ["There was only one God for you: Abelard, Abelard, Abelard" (28)].

Astrolabe harbors a love-hatred relationship with both his parents, and he, as Rinser's mouthpiece, pursues a modern feminist agenda which makes it additionally difficult for him to comprehend how his mother could have fallen for this enormously charismatic philosopher who, curiously, exerts the same fascination on him as on his mother. On the other hand, there is a strong sense of pity for the two lovers who could not live out their sensual desires because of society's constraints and the domineering role played by the Church. Apparently, Rinser's personal perception of this love relationship gains the upper hand here, as she has the young man speak for her: "Ich glaube dir das, Mutter Heloise. Du hast Abaelard geliebt mit Haut und Haar, mit Leib und Seele, in vollkommener Hingabe. Ich glaube, nur eine Frau liebt so" (107) ["I believe you, Mother Heloise. You have loved Abelard wholeheartedly, with body and soul, in complete devotion. I think only a woman loves like that" (71)]. Then, however, Astrolabe also reveals his murderous jealousy of his parents who seemed to have had love only for themselves, as he dreams of killing his father on his way to Heloise: "Nicht aus Haß habe ich dich getötet, sondern aus Liebe; aus wilder eifersüchtiger Liebe zu dir und zu meiner Mutter" (109) ["Not out of hate did I kill you, but out of love; out of wild, jealous love for you and for my mother" (72)].

In his memoirs, Astrolabe repeatedly turns to the intellectual conflicts his father had to go through, and here we are suddenly confronted with a young man and student who is an ardent defender of his teacher and also the devout son of the same person. Abelard's struggle against the Synod of Soisson is recounted in considerable detail, because the narrator—obviously reflecting Rinser's own thoughts—increasingly reveals his profound sympathy and pity for this great teacher who was far ahead of his time and was condemned to humiliating acts of submission under the orthodox doctrines of the church. He himself would have, in Abelard's position, protested, would have rallied friends and students, would have appealed to the pope, but nothing of this sort took place, and Astrolabe observed in great disappointment that his idol consigned, and then abandoned his theological struggle: "Was war nur geschehen mit dir, Abaelard? Warum diese deine Schwäche?" (118) ["What happened to you, Abelard? Why this weakness?" (79)]. But Abelard's struggle against the orthodox church was not over yet, as he kept writing defending his position as a teacher and cleric, and Astrolabe reports with amazement that his father continued his studies, and that one of his books, banned by the Church, already circulated widely because it had been copied by students before it had been burned. Abelard and his thoughts, apart from his passionate love for Heloise, assume the fundamental function of fighting for intellectual freedom, of struggling against dictatorship, and of resisting the inquisition: "Bücher kann man verbrennen, nicht aber den Geist. Der lebt, geliebt oder gefürchtet, von der Kirche verketzert oder kanonisiert" (121) ["Books can be burned, but not the spirit. It lives, loved or feared, denounced or canonized by the church" (81)].

Rinser demonstrates detailed knowledge about Abelard's philosophy and theology, and powerfully integrates this knowledge into the personal reflections by his son. Astrolabe proves to be the critical voice and the critical listener of modern times, but he also introduces us to the emotional reactions to the genius role played by his father:

Die Gemäßigten unter den Klerikern fanden es nur höchst anstößig, daß da ein einzelner Mann Hunderte von Studenten vom regulären, kontrollierten, zensierten Universitätsstudium abzog und die Pariser Hörsäle leerte. Sollte man diese ganze verdächtige Angelegenheit nicht unterbinden, ehe es zu spät war? Diese Jugend war ja schon angesteckt vom Fieber des Denkens und murrte gegen die Forderung des blinden Glaubens. (135)

[The moderate among the clergy only found it highly offensive that a single man was taking hundreds of students away from regular, controlled, censored university training and was emptying the Paris lecture halls. Shouldn't this whole suspicious business be stopped before it was too late? After all, the young people

were already infected with the sickness of thinking and were grumbling about the dictates of blind faith. (90)]

These medieval conflicts provide the backdrop for the implied modern situation, especially for the student revolution in 1968 against the old authorities, or, for that matter, for any protest against traditions and conservative power institutions. Astrolabe loves and hates the older man, and he explicitly admits his incestuous jealousy of this man who was a rival for him in every sense of the word, a rival in matters of love, a rival in matters of intellect, and a rival in matters of politics. To answer his own question how he could have been a rival to Abelard when he was not yet even born, he responds: "Von Ewigkeit her war ich's, bin ich's, bleibe ich's" (140) ["From time immemorial I was, I am, I remain one" (93)]. The true rivalry pertains to the love between father and mother whose love has transcended all times and cultures and continues to stay with us today as the most memorable example of a passionate relationship between man and woman that survived all trials and tribulations. In this sense, Astrolabe's jealousy is all our jealousy, as it represents our desire to experience the same kind of profound love as Abelard and Heloise were privileged to enjoy, and yet we seem, like Astrolabe, just too earth-bound to achieve this goal.

Like a red thread, Rinser weaves Astrolabe's furious disappointment about being ignored by his parents throughout the entire novel. The young man reflects a deep sense of "Zerrissenheit," because he loves his parents, and yet also feels rejected by them as their love for each other was so absolute that there was no room for another person, not even their own child. Nevertheless, in the many debates with the other students, Astrolabe soon gains a new status tantamount to that of Abelard, as observed by his fellow students: "Du wirst ein zweiter Abaelard, du wirst gefährlich" (148) ["You're becoming a second Abelard, you're getting dangerous" (99)], but his real wish, to be recognized by his father and to be acknowledged by his mother, is never fulfilled.

Curiously, Astrolabe feels coerced to defend his father against himself, as Abelard wrote in his *Historia calamitatum* of the filth in which he and Heloise had wallowed. Astrolabe rejects prostitution and is full of disdain for those women who offer themselves to him, exposing their bodies and private parts, but in the case of Abelard and Heloise he can only speak of pure love: "Aber Heloise, sie war keine Hure, sie war ein reines Mädchen, eine bräutliche Frau. Was immer die beiden taten, es geschah aus Liebe" (158) ["But Heloise was no whore; she was a pure girl, like a bride. Whatever the two of them did, it happened out of love" (105)]. Through Astrolabe, Rinser challenges the medieval philosopher in his teachings about human sexuality as sin, and she turns his arguments upside down,

suggesting that everything that happens is God's will, human love and sexuality as well: "Abaelard, deine Philosophie, die so klar scheint, hat unklare, schlimme Winkel" (159) ["Abelard, your philosophy that seems so clear has some dim and nasty corners" (106)]. For Astrolabe, the idealized teacher proves to be more human, hence more prone to personal shortcomings than he had thought before, especially as he recognizes him as his father. Moreover, Astrolabe tries to understand Heloise's position and portrays her lover and later husband Abelard as a violent man who forced himself upon her: "Sie gehorchte. Sie fügte sich, denn sie liebte ihn" (161) ["She obeyed. She yielded because she loved him" (108)]. For Astrolabe, Abelard appears as an egoist who wanted to be seen as the one who suffered the most among them and could not see that Heloise's taking the veil meant "daß ihre Strafe der lebenslängliche Kerker war und die Opferung ihrer Jugend und Weiblichkeit" (166) ["jail for life and the sacrifice of her youth and femininity" (111)]. Yet, Astrolabe is a man as well, and he feels ashamed of his father's actions that led to Heloise's 'imprisonment.' Whereas Abelard was castrated physically, Astrolabe considers himself castrated in his soul: "Darum verstehe ich Frauen, auch wenn sie mir verbotene Früchte sind" (166) ["That's why I understand women, even if they are a forbidden fruit to me" (111)]. Abelard, however, withdrew from the world, especially from Heloise, after his castration, which arouses further ire in his son. Nevertheless, Rinser has him say that love can find its fulfillment in more ways than just physical union: "Ich wüßte schon, was ich, wäre ich Eunuch, mit einer Frau tun könnte. Es gibt ja wohl nicht nur eine einzige Art, Liebe und Zärtlichkeit zu zeigen" (168f) ["I would know what I could do with a woman if I were a eunuch. After all, there's more than just one way of showing love and affection" (113)].

Even though the letters exchanged between Abelard and Heloise do not indicate any trace of the latter having been violated in her physical and spiritual self, Astrolabe assumes the role of his mother's attorney. But he has to accuse her, "daß du deine eigene Person vergewaltigt hast. Ich beschuldige dich, Abaelard zu deinem Gott erhoben zu haben" (170) ["I accuse you of having violated your own person. I accuse you of having raised Abelard to be your God" (114)]. Astrolabe finds the idea despicable that his mother accepted her relationship with Abelard as it was, and sharply rebukes her for having admired her lover and later husband with such an exorbitant passion: "Du hättest ihn nicht auf einen Thron erheben sollen, der keinem Irdischen zusteht" (170) ["You shouldn't have elevated him to a throne to which no mortal is entitled" (114)]. This criticism also extends to the Church that practically made it impossible for the two lovers to join in marriage without Abelard losing his public reputation as a teacher. The whole notion of

celibacy appears as a perversity in light of human conditions that always involve sexuality as well: "Was für eine Kirche. Oder: Was für ein Gott? Was für einen Sinn hat denn dieses Nein zum Leben, das uns doch gegeben ist zu unsrer Lust und Freude?" (171) ["What kind of church is that? Or, what kind of God is that? What sense is there in saying no to life, which after all is given to us for our joy and pleasure?" (114)].⁸

Astrolabe's struggle, and by the same token Rinser's struggle, with the phenomenon of this famous couple, is directed against the clerical denial of the human body with all its senses, desires, needs, and feelings. His protest against a God who is pleased with the renunciation of "life, of love, of lust, of children" is actually not directed against God, but against the Church that has instituted these values. After his return to Brittany, the young man suddenly realizes what everybody in Paris, Abelard and Heloise included, are missing. In nature, among animals and plants, away from the dusty lecture halls, true life resurfaces: "Philosophie und Theologie: nichts als dämonische Hoffart und vergebliche Mühe zu wissen, was man nur dann weiß, wenn man's mit den Sinnen begreift und liebt. Das war's: Lieben!" (174) ["Philosophy and theology: nothing but demoniacal pride and vain pains to know what one can only know when one grasps it with the senses and loves it. That's what it was: to love!" (116)]. Astrolabe's problem, however, rests in his resistance to perceive the spiritual dimension of his parents' love for each other and how their physical sensuality had girded this spirituality. Their suffering and pain resulting from his castration and her removal into a cloister served as forces to transform their bodily attraction into a deeper form of love which Astrolabe does not fully understand until the very end when Abelard reveals the secret of love to him: "Liebe aber will Wandlung. Liebe ist ein geistiger Weg und kein behagliches Haus" (216f) ["But love wants change. Love is a spiritual path and not a comfortable house" (145)]. The young man's struggle against both his parents thus proves to be a struggle really to understand the meaning of love both in its exhilarating and devastating consequences for the individual.

Nevertheless, Abelard continues to assume a patriarchal position vis-à-vis Heloise and is severely criticized for this by his son when he asks his father point blank: "Ich möchte nur wissen, ob du wirklich glaubst, du seist stärker als Heloise, weil du ein Mann bist und es fertigbrachtest, eine Frau zu verführen, zu schwängern und sie ins Kloster zu schicken" (219) ["I would only like to know if you really believe that you are stronger than Heloise because you are a man and succeeded in seducing a woman, getting her pregnant, and sending her into the convent" (147)]. Just before Abelard's death, when he has finally publicly acknowledged his son, Astrolabe begs him for forgiveness and pleads with him to preserve

his life: “für uns, deine Schüler, für die Theologie, für Heloise, für mich, ich bitte dich!” (223) [“for us, your students, for theology, for Heloise, for me, I beg of you!” (150)]. All this to no avail, because love is not bound to material objects and property laws, and parental love cannot be forced upon someone. Abelard is accused of having abused his wife, but he is also admired as the brilliant philosopher that he was. Astrolabe rushes to his defense, yet is not able to rescue his teacher and father from his own destiny awaiting him in old age. The last lines scribbled on a piece of paper—an anachronistic element in this context—reveal Abelard’s preparedness for death: “Mich schmerzen die Hände vom Schlagen der Saiten, [sic] Die Stimme wurde mir rauh vor Klagen, [sic] Der Geist ist mir erstorben...” (222) [“With hands injured by strumming / And voice hoarse from wailing: / My spirit now fails” (149)]. And in this moment he requests Astrolabe’s help in getting the last message to Heloise so as to reach out to her just before his final retirement in the Saint-Marcel Priory (223f; 150f)—there was love, after all, the unifying bond among all people. Obviously Rinser develops her novel with the unequivocal aim in mind to provide hope even at times of utter despair, that is, love even in the face of hatred and rejection (Alt). By turning to the famous couple Abelard and Heloise in her novel, Rinser outlines a model of human society in which love gains the highest priority because it is no longer equated with simple sweetness and delight, but identified as a fundamental force of terrifying but glorious consequences.

There is no easy solution, no clear-cut interpretation of Abelard’s or Heloise’s work, as it reflects the discursive element of both erotic and parental love. Rinser does not make an attempt to identify the prophetic teachings, nor to examine the authenticity of Heloise’s letters. The focus remains the puzzle of their love for each other, and Astrolabe’s struggles to be part of this love without ever being able to see through the physical and spiritual veil separating the two lovers from the rest of the world. Abelard’s last few words to Heloise are not disclosed to us, and we do not know whether Astrolabe ever delivered the sheet to his mother, because Abelard disappeared behind the cloister walls of Cluny and soon thereafter passed away, leaving behind a forlorn son who had barely known the father behind the teacher. Abelard’s final words are those of a teacher, not of a father: “Ich habe in Tausende meiner Studenten den Samen des Neuen gesät. Wenn drei von ihnen meine Theologie weiterführen, habe ich nicht vergeblich gelebt. Jetzt aber bin ich müde” (223) [“In thousands of my students I’ve sown the seeds of the new. If three of them carry on my theology, I have not lived in vain. But now I am tired” (150)]. But these are words of love meant for the entire world, speaking about truth and God.⁹

Does Rinser formulate a condemnation of Abelard's relationship with Heloise? Is she critical of the latter? And does she actually portray an ideal image of the young man, Astrolabe? If we take the latter's often voiced opinion seriously, there was a lot of anger, even hatred, because the parents were lost in their love for each other and disregarded their only child. But there is also the unshakable admiration for the far-sighted philosopher and the brilliant mother, even though both are so removed from their child. Denise, Astrolabe's aunt, reminds him, however, that there is more than just plain hatred or glorification of Abelard in him, as she points out that the latter certainly was in need of his son's help back in Paris (188; 125). And when she asks him to identify what Astrolabe "möchtest du ihm sein?" (188) ["would ... want to be to him" (126)], he revealingly responds: "Was ich bin: sein Sohn. Nein: Heloises Geschenk an ihn" (188) ["What I am: his son. No: Heloise's present to him" (126)]. In other words, Astrolabe finally accepts the fact that he is the product of Abelard and Heloise's love, and therefore he can no longer harbor hatred against them because he is as much part of them as they are part of him.

Despite the novel's one-sided title, *Abelard's Love*, Rinser composed a powerful text about the love between him and Heloise, and their son's desperate struggle to find his place within the very narrow circle of these two people's lives. Once Abelard has passed away, for instance, Astrolabe admits to be nothing but his father's shadow: "Mit ihm lebte ich einen kurzen heftigen und in seiner Art großartigen Abschnitt meines Lebens. Vorbei" (15) ["With him I lived a short, intense, and, in its own way, magnificent part of my life. It is over" (7)]. In fact, once the biographically identifiable Abelard had died, the concrete figure Heloise also disappeared in the dust of history until recently, though the myth of their love has survived until today.¹⁰ The image of their love remains alive, and Rinser provides her readers with a highly insightful image of its meaning throughout time by means of Astrolabe's personal ruminations which specifically address fundamental issues of human life, such as a son's struggle for his parents' love, the problems between husband and wife, and, ultimately, the question of the meaning of love framed by pain, anger, and passion (Reinhold). *Abelard's Love* is not a historical novel in the traditional sense of the word, as it primarily emphasizes Astrolabe's emotional problems and his efforts to understand the phenomenal love between his parents, instead of outlining in great detail the actual conflicts between Abelard and the Church, and then also between the teacher Abelard and his student Heloise. Rinser's novel provides unique perspectives toward love in its universal dimensions, even though here examined through the lense of a historical novel. Moreover, by taking the son's side, the author succeeds in illuminating the everlasting myth surrounding these two lovers, Abelard and Heloise. His struggles

against his parents, his hatred, jealousy, and envy, but finally his true love for both of them shed significant light not only on the philosophical issues connected with Abelard's innovative teaching, but also provide important insight into the fascination that the famous teacher Abelard and his student, his later wife, have exerted on posterity. In her reflections about *Abelard's Love*, addressed to Hans Christian Meiser, Rinser quotes one of Hölderlin's poems and suggests replacing the word "life" with the word "love." Indeed, as Rinser's text illustrates, love in its myriad manifestations proves to be life itself. The lines in German read:

Des Lebens Woge
schäumte nicht so schön,
wenn nicht der alte Fels,
das Schicksal, ihr entgegenstände.

When translated, but with the substitution of "Leben" ("life") with "love", the stanza reads:

Love's waves
would not froth so beautifully
if not the old rock,
destiny, would stand in their ways.¹¹ ✽

Notes

¹ An early version of this paper was presented at the Fifty-Fifth Annual Convention of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association in Vancouver, B.C., October 2001. I would like to thank the anonymous readers of my article for very helpful suggestions and corrections.

² For a critical discussion of Heloise's role, see Ferrante (28-30, 44-46, 56-60); how much distrust there is against Heloise's authorship is indirectly but most poignantly documented by Thiébaux, who obviously chose not to include any letters written by her.

³ Quoted from *Lettere di Abelardo e Eloisa*; for an English translation, see *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*.

⁴ An early example of medieval reception appears to have been Gottfried von Straßburg with his *Tristan* (1210), see Classen; Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) included an article on Heloise in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697), see Fraioli; in 1921, George Moore published a novel *Héloïse and Abélard*. For a bibliography, see Charrier.

⁵ Since its first publication in 1991, *Abaelards Liebe* also appeared as a paperback in 1993. The present study appears to be the first attempt to investigate the novel from a medievalist point of view.

⁶ This pertains to one of the key questions that people are talking about when discussing Abelard's famous exams, and Astrolabe is prepared for it by his tutor (50; 31).

⁷ Astrolabe's answer to Abelard's question, "Was war zuerst: das Reale oder sein Name?" (57) ["What came first, the real thing or its name?" (36)], indeed proves to be highly challenging, but also profoundly insightful: "Im Anfang war das Wort, heißt es. Aber was ist das: der Anfang. Wenn man von einem Anfang spricht, so setzt man die Behauptung, es gebe die Zeit und als habe die Zeit für Gott einen Anfang und eine Zeit vor, während und nach der Schöpfung. Aber die Schöpfung war ohne Anfang als Idee in Gott, und jedes Ding war schon benannt von Gott" (57) ["In the beginning was the Word, it says. But what is that, the beginning? When one speaks of a beginning, one makes the assumption that there is time, as if time for God had a beginning, and as if there were a time before, during, and after the creation. But the creation was in God without beginning as an idea, and every thing was already named by God" (36)].

⁸ This was an issue already hotly debated in the Middle Ages; see Sheehan. Cartlidge rightly points out: "For them [Abelard and Heloise], the value and nature of marriage were burning issues, not only before they entered it, but also afterwards when Abelard's castration and their withdrawal into separate cloisters made the definition of their relationship particularly problematic" (59). See also the insightful discussion by Jaeger (157-173).

⁹ Weigel observes Rinser's fascination with charismatic figures from the past; for further references, see the bibliography following Weigel's article, assembled by Jürgen Kopp and Heike Schupetta (#172-185).

¹⁰ As Mews was able to demonstrate, Heloise's fame did not simply fade with her husband's passing away. She apparently enjoyed a considerable reputation as a poetess and a highly learned abbess.

¹¹ Quoted from *Reinheit und Ekstase* (28); the translation is mine.

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