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"In the Process of Becoming": Constructing and Re-constructing Gender in Twelfth-Century Women's Texts

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"In the Process of Becoming"
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Abstract

In this project I set out to study gender, a topic so broad that it is almost useless to speak about it without some chronological and regional specificity. As a student of medieval history, I am particularly interested in the European twelfth century, during which a significant revival of and innovation in philosophical, medical, theological, architectural, and other thought occurred. Here, I address the question of medieval women's perspectives: how did they conceptualize their gender and their place in the social hierarchy of the Middle Ages? What do their experiences reveal about how men thought about gender? How did they resist the expectations put upon them, and at the same time, how did they participate in the perpetuation of gender inequality? What can women writers of the Middle Ages tell us about how to study gender in a time and culture very different from our own?

To answer these questions, I closely examined the writings of two twelfth-century woman writers and read secondary literature about their biographies, social milieux, and lasting legacies. The women I chose to study were Heloise d'Argenteuil, a French abbess, philosopher, and famous lover of theologian Peter Abelard, and Trota of Salerno, to whom the popular gynecological treatise *The Trotula* is attributed. Heloise's thoughts are preserved through her *Letters*, a series of correspondence between her and Abelard, in which she ponders sin, lust, obligation, religious life, hypocrisy, and the nature of ideal love. Trota provides insight into the medical conceptualization of the female body and indicates how the structures of gender inequality affected women's bodies and their experiences of pain. I argue that the writings of these two women show how medieval women navigated a world in which they were positioned subordinate to men, and that they actively participated in both the perpetuation and reformulation of gender inequality. I conclude that neither woman should be considered "feminist" simply because she was highly educated and dissented from the dominant opinions of men at a time when such things were rare. Rather, both women should be understood as women thoroughly imbricated in the structures of inequality. We should not equate "women's agency" with "resistance."

Executive Summary

This project investigates twelfth-century women's experiences of gender through two texts: the *Letters* of Heloise d'Argenteuil, written to her lover and teacher Peter Abelard, and the *Trotula*, a widely-used book of women's medicine attributed to healer Trota of Salerno. I argue that these texts reflect the medieval gender hierarchy which placed women subordinate to men, and that we may learn how both women and men conceptualized their gendered relationships. Heloise's *Letters* also include the replies written by Abelard, and the *Trotula* includes sections written by two anonymous men as well as those written by Trota. The tensions and coherences of these texts demonstrate how women and men navigated and perceived their highly gendered world.

My guiding theoretical perspective throughout this work is practice theory, first introduced by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. This theory focuses on and analyzes the politics of living ordinary days, reproducing traditions, and following routines. Precisely because these things are so quotidian, they contain some of the most crucial elements of a culture—the things that are so basic to social life, they are never even discussed or considered political. This is what Bourdieu calls "doxa." When someone calls attention to these elements, there emerge two positions: orthodoxy, which adheres to accepted practice, and heterodoxy, which rejects accepted practice and seeks to establish a new norm. But whichever position you espouse, you are now aware that your actions have meaning, in a way that you never used to do.

The same analytic process can be used to study gender, today and in the Middle Ages. Although we are often not aware of it, gender is a constant practice—even a performance. Sitting on the bus, I as a woman may cross my legs or ankles, whereas a man is more likely to sit with his legs planted much farther apart than I ever would. Through these everyday little things, to

which we rarely give any thought, we constantly *perform* our gender. If I sit with my legs far apart on the bus, especially if I am wearing a skirt, everyone can know that I am being *immodest*, taking a heterodoxic position. The politics of these interactions are significant, and they expose some of the deepest-rooted assumptions of our society.

For this reason, I use practice theory to study women in the twelfth century. I am interested in the ways medieval women performed their gender in the everyday, and the implications of these actions. Whether a woman adhered to gender roles or did not, she was making a statement: this is how *I* am a woman.

I start by considering some very ordinary things: medieval women's bodies, their labor, and the spaces in which they lived. I discuss how the archaeological evidence reveals many constraints acting upon women's lives, but I also acknowledge that these remains do not offer specific answers to the questions I ask. Except in very unusual circumstances, they cannot tell me what women *thought* about their bodies, their work, and their environments. To answer these questions, I turn to the writings left behind by women themselves. I do not mean to imply that archaeological evidence is inferior to textual evidence—indeed, as an archaeologist myself, I find artifacts and skeletal remains extremely telling—but for the purposes of this project, I am more interested in texts.

The first text I address is the correspondence initiated by Heloise d'Argenteuil with Peter Abelard. First student and teacher, then lovers, then wife and husband, and finally separated abbess and abbot, Heloise and Abelard are a famous pair of lovers whose tragic story has resonated through nine centuries. Heloise first writes to Abelard to express her sorrow over their separation and her continued longing for him, but when he repeatedly rebuffs her, she turns to asking him for theological advice. In her letters, she shows how and in what circumstances both

she and the men around her exercised control over her daily life. Her education was only made possible by the generosity of her uncle, and once married, Abelard had the right to dictate where she went and even how she dressed. She voices her discontent at some of these decisions, but obeyed; yet when she gained power over her own actions as a nun, she obeyed Abelard's wishes nevertheless to show him her devotion. We learn from Heloise that resistance to male domination was not always of paramount importance to women, and that agency can be found even in women's decisions to adhere to patriarchal strictures.

The second text I address is the *Trotula*, which was produced amid a revitalization of medicine in the city of Salerno following the influx of Arabic medical knowledge. In its earliest iterations, it was composed of three distinct gynecological texts, but soon was edited such that the three texts became one, disseminated under the name of Trota of Salerno. We do not know much about Trota's biography, but by extricating the three *Trotula* texts, we can see how men and women conceptualized female bodies differently. In many instances they agreed, such as on the importance of menstruation and fertility to female health, but disagreed on topics such as women's agency and relationships to men. For example, one of the male authors asserted that all women become sick when they do not have (hetero)sexual intercourse because their "corrupt" semen builds up in them. Trota agreed that women fall ill when they do not have sex, but said that the cause was women's unsated *desire* for sex, not the passive and harmful accumulation of semen. The former explanation posits that the processes of a woman's body control her, whereas the latter contends that women themselves are in control—a woman who does not want sex will have no problems, and only women who are frustrated by factors outside of her own body (i.e., a man refusing to have sex with her or a vow of chastity) will fall ill.

I then proceed to consider women's resistance to structures of gender inequality, seeking to understand how they wanted to express their womanhood. In Heloise's letters, we find a surprising allusion to female same-sex desire among nuns. Using patriarchal logic which stated that women were weak-minded, susceptible to vice, and prone to licentious flattery, she concluded that women are most likely to be seduced by other women when cloistered together. Likewise, Trota provided instructions for women who wished to deceive men into believing they were virgins. It is startling and remarkable to find these practices referred to by medieval women, and they provide invaluable insight into women's everyday lives.

However, I conclude with some cautionary advice: just because Heloise and Trota pushed back in some ways against structures of domination, we should not joyously label them feminists ahead of their time. That would be to ignore their very clear allegiances to gender inequality. Heloise explicitly states that she is inferior to Abelard because of her gender, and Trota promotes childbearing as the ultimate goal of women's health. They were not feminists, and they did not advocate for women's liberation from the power of men. To apply anachronistic labels and judge them by our standards is to deny them their complexity and strangeness. Perhaps it is disappointing to find that even highly educated women in the Middle Ages participated in and perpetuated gender inequality—but then again, when it comes down to everyday practice, how different are we?

Table of Contents

Preface

I have come to believe that studying women is a two-for-one deal. For most of Western history, when men wrote about the world, the stories and mere presence of women were ignored to the point of oblivion. But women? In the words of Simone de Beauvoir,

> If I want to define myself, I first have to say, 'I am a woman'; all other assertions will arise from this basic truth. A man never begins by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man is obvious. (1949 [2009]:25)

A woman must first define herself as a gendered subject—a woman, i.e., *not a man*. She has to illustrate her subjectivity, her relationships to men, but a man can claim objectivity with no such qualifications. So I believe that history written by men, about men, will never illuminate the whole picture. Men are both the "positive" and the "neutral," to borrow more from Beauvoir, whereas women are the "negative." A history of the Middle Ages that only addresses men can be called a "historical survey," but a history of medieval women is necessarily "women's" or "gender history." One day, I will write a history book that only talks about women and call it "The History of the Middle Ages." And why not?

In the present project, I study women writers of the Middle Ages to ask what their experiences can tell us about men, women, and all people of the time. I celebrate Heloise d'Argenteuil and Trota of Salerno as intelligent, extraordinary, and often outspoken women. But at the same time, I know that it is wildly anachronistic to proclaim them early "feminists." Not only would that imply that uneducated, ordinary women whose voices are not recorded were somehow traitors to their own gender, but it would deny the fact that Heloise and Trota were very much entrenched in structures of male dominance. Above all, I hope to illuminate the contradictions and cohesions of gender as practiced by both medieval women and men, and to do justice to the full complexity and beauty of the women whose words I have used to do so.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank Professor Herrick for her willingness to take me on as a History Distinction candidate and to spend hours sitting in her office discussing things that didn't even make it into the final thesis. One day I will write something about the Shrine of St. Frideswide—but Heloise and Trota are the stars of this show, and I am grateful to Professor Herrick for showing me how to get to know women who lived almost a millennia ago.

My thanks also go to Professors Novak and Diem, who were kind enough to dedicate their time and knowledge to my endless questions, and for giving me such thoughtful and encouraging feedback at my defense.

Finally, thank you to my family for encouraging me along the way, and for helping me bring my thoughts back down to earth.

Advice to Future Students

I began this project in the summer of 2019, intending to write *something* about women in the Middle Ages, but without any solid grasp on what that might be. It took about eight months of reading anything and everything I could get my hands on about gender, medieval or not, and still there were plenty of "dead ends." The most valuable piece of advice I can think to give comes straight from my advisor—there are no dead ends, so take good notes! You will not use everything you read in your Capstone, but one day you will wish you had written down what book or page that brilliant tidbit came from.

My second piece of advice comes from one of my readers: treat everything as a question, and don't take everything for granted. Of course, you will have to leave some things packed up in "black boxes" that you don't have time or space to explore (advice from another reader), but oftentimes the most interesting research is done by people who question the things we *think* we know. I've tried to take this advice in this project—ask anyone on the street, and they'll tell you that *of course* women in the Middle Ages were oppressed, they were inferior to men. I asked, well, were they? If we read texts written by actual medieval women, what do they have to say about it?

As a final piece of advice, I will give you this quote by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973:vii): "All of us imagine that anything our past self has done our present self could do better ... to weave, *post facto*, a figure in—"this is what I *meant* to say" —is an intense temptation." I presented this thesis in Spring 2020, and due to various departmental confusions I am just now submitting it in Spring 2021, a whole year of learning later. I am severely tempted to edit it, to rewrite those parts that I've learned more about and give it the nuance that I've gained since then. But that would be unfair to the student I was a year ago. Here is my advice: allow yourself imperfection, and allow yourself room to grow.

Introduction

Illustrated manuscripts reveal a birthing chamber full of women: the mother, lying in bed, the midwife, supervising the birth, and several other women attending. A male physician was sometimes included in the scene—illustrations of Julius Caesar's birth often depict a man performing the eponymous procedure—but for less unusual births, men were largely absent.[1] Indeed, a medieval child was surrounded and cared for by women for much of their childhood, especially during infancy. Women, usually relatives or neighbors of the mother, attended the birth and provided both medical and mystical assistance, combining therapeutic herbs and techniques with charms, Christian invocations, and other blessings to ensure safe delivery.[2] If the child survived, it would be nursed and cared for by its mother or a hired woman; if the child were the daughter of a rich family, she would stay in the company of women for much of her life.

Before any child could become a true member of the medieval community, however, he or she had to be baptized. By the early thirteenth century, baptism had become a Christian sacrament that could be performed by "anyone whatsoever," in order that all should have a chance at salvation.[3] This included midwives and birth attendants who suspected that a fetus

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The title of this thesis is drawn from Lee M. Panich, "Archaeologies of Persistence: Reconsidering the Legacies of Colonialism in Native North America," *American Antiquity* 78, no. 1 (January 2013): 105-122, at 109. I would furthermore like to extend my thanks to Professor Herrick for her support of this project and her encouragement along the way.

[1] London, British Library, Royal MS 16 G VIII, f. 32r depicts a man performing the original Caesarian section, surrounded and assisted by three other men; the only woman in the scene is Caesar's mother. Furthermore, she is lying on a bare wooden table that strongly resembles a workbench and is fully clothed. London, British Library, Royal MS 16 G VII, f. 219r, however, shows a female midwife performing the procedure, assisted by another woman. Caesar's mother is here completely naked and lying on a significantly more lavish and comfortable curtained bed; "Call the Medieval Midwife," Medieval Manuscripts Blog, British Library, last modified 20 March 2018, https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2018/03/call-the-medieval-midwife.html.

[2] The *Passio* of St. Margaret was commonly recommended for women entering labor; many manuscripts of this saint's *Life* include annotations directing the reader to bless the mother with the text ("Call the Medieval Midwife"). St. Margaret came to be the patron saint of women in childbirth because of her legendary emergence from the belly or womb of a dragon. Birthing girdles, amulets, amulet rolls, and magical charms were also common.

[3] "Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV 1215," Canon I, Internet Medieval Sourcebook. https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/lateran4.asp.

might be stillborn or that it would die before a man, clerical or lay, could arrive to perform the baptism himself.[4] The exclusion of women from clerical duties was suspended in these very limited circumstances, because access to salvation was of utmost importance. Most infants, however, were baptized at the local church—where the mother was traditionally absent, following the Old Testament custom that banned women from entering a holy space for six weeks after giving birth.[5] Anthropologist Anne McClintock presents Christian baptism as a socially superior counterpart to biological birth, in which men appropriate women's generative abilities.[6] Namely, they

> publicly disavow the creative agency of others [women] and arrogate to themselves the power of origins. The male ritual of baptism—with its bowls of holy water, its washing, its male midwives—is a surrogate birthing ritual, during which men collectively compensate themselves for their invisible role in the birth of the child and diminish women's agency. In Christianity, at least, baptism reenacts childbirth as a male ritual. During baptism, moreover, the child is named—after the father, not the mother. The mother's labors and creative powers (hidden in her 'confinement' and denied social recognition) are diminished, and women are publicly declared unfit to inaugurate the human soul into the body of Christ. In the eyes of Christianity, women are incomplete birthers: the child must be born again and named, by men.[7]

McClintock's interpretation of this Christian ritual is supported by the function of baptism during the Middle Ages. Though the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 assured Christians that "not only virgins and those practicing chastity, but also those united in marriage … can merit eternal

[4] Barbara Hanawalt, "Birth and Baptism: Membership in a Social and Spiritual Network," in *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History*, ed. B. Hanawalt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 41-54, at 44.

[5] Hanawalt, "Birth," 45. Rabbis Shai Held and Yitz Greenberg argue that this biblical law reflects anxiety surrounding death rather than antique misogyny, but this may not have been the sentiment espoused by medieval Christians. See Held and Greenberg, "Living on the Boundary: The Complexity and Anxiety of Childbirth," in *The Heart of Torah, Volume 2: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 37-41.

[6] Anne McClintock, "The Lay of the Land: Genealogies of Imperialism," in *Imperial Leather*, ed. A. McClintock (Routledge, 1995), 21-74, at 29.

[7] Ibid., 29.

salvation," many laypersons persisted in believing that children were "bigoten in synne."[8] Certainly, theologians agreed that all infants inherited original sin, but this is slightly different from the belief that intercourse itself was sinful or at least impure. In either event, it was necessary for children to be baptized in order to remove the sin contracted in their conception and to exorcise any demons; in other words, children were perceived to be born of women spiritually and socially half-formed. The male intervention, or second birth, served to correct these deficiencies and open the doors of Heaven for the child. According to McClintock, being born solely of a woman is insufficient for salvation.[9]

Baptism enabled children to enter the community of Heaven in a spiritual sense, but in the secular world, it inaugurated them into equally vital, secular social hierarchies and relationships. It was at the baptismal font that the infant received its name—one of its first and most fundamental social identifiers—from the priest.[10] Godparents confirmed their relationship to the child at the altar, where they answered the confession of faith on behalf of the child and agreed to serve as spiritual mentors. In fact, it seems that many godchildren enjoyed a close relationship with their godparents, though the documentation is sparse.[11] The parish community formed a tertiary social network, following blood relations and godparents, and thus completed the triad of communities that surrounded the newborn within its first hours.

If medieval Christian baptism was indeed a male appropriation of female biological childbirth, it made a powerful statement: without this ritual, one was impure, spiritually

[8] "Lateran IV," Canon I; Hanawalt, "Birth," 44. The latter quotation is taken from "The Mirror of the Periods of Man's Life," in *Hymns to the Virgin and Christ, The Parliament of Devils, and Other Religious Poetry*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, Early English Text Society, o.s., 24 (London, 1868; New York, 1969), 58-78, at 58.

[9] McClintock, "Lay," 29.

[10] Hanawalt, "Birth," 46.

[11] Ibid., 50. Hanawalt uses wills and other legal bequests made by godparents to their godchildren in the London Archdeaconry Court from 1393 to 1409, which constituted only 3% of the total cases.

irredeemable, and isolated from most social relationships. As McClintock notes, an unbaptized baby was incomplete; only through its second, male birth could it fully become a person.[12] As an indirect method of reinforcing female inferiority, it was particularly effective because of its fundamental, all-encompassing nature. Given that baptism signified the start of true, social life, medieval Christians learned from the very beginning that women and their labor were incomplete, inferior to men.

This awareness that women did and should occupy a lower social position was deeply ingrained in medieval society, such that it went largely unquestioned and unchallenged even by medieval women. Pierre Bourdieu describes such shared social knowledge as doxa, or knowledge that is so thoroughly and unconsciously accepted by a community that it is non-discursive, or unquestioned.[13] Consider grammar as used by a native speaker: it has been ingrained in us since birth and comes so naturally as to be forgotten. We rarely think about grammar when speaking, but it shapes everything we say. However, doxa may sometimes be questioned or challenged; it is at this point that heterodoxy and orthodoxy emerge. This phenomenon is clearly observable in the linguistic gap between generations, where younger people may find it acceptable to use "they" as a singular personal pronoun (a heterodoxic position), and older people may find this unacceptable (orthodoxic).[14]

The social knowledge that women were inferior to men in medieval communities operated in an analogous fashion. In the following chapters, I will argue that women's inferiority

[12] McClintock, "Lay," 29.

[13] Pierre Bourdieu, "Doxa, Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy," in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1977), 159-71, at 437-53.

[14] I considered using "they" as a singular personal pronoun throughout this thesis but decided against it since the political message that this heterodoxic position would convey is inappropriate to the topic. In some fields of study, such as postcolonial anthropology, it has been argued that "he or she" imposes a gender binary on indigenous or subaltern populations, for whom this paradigm is incongruous. However, since I will be discussing twelfth-century Europe, "he or she" would be entirely accurate.

was doxic, and that this inequality was perpetuated through everyday practice by both men and women. By practice, I refer to the theory of practice that was also postulated by Bourdieu, which explores how members of a society maintain tradition and follow routines through their everyday actions.[15] I will first examine the archaeological evidence concerning medieval women and the effects of social inferiority, then consider Bourdieu's theory and terms in more depth as I show that the archaeological evidence raises more questions than it answers. Using practice theory, I then turn to two written sources authored by women in the twelfth century: the *Letters* of Heloise d'Argenteuil, written to her lover Peter Abelard; and the *Trotula*, a gynecological compendium attributed to Trota of Salerno. These texts illustrate the everyday nature of medieval female inferiority, which was not simply imposed on women by a faceless authority but was organically created, re-created, and maintained by people across gender and class lines. I analyze each author's experience of her inferior status as well as the ways in which she supported the hierarchy that ultimately constrained her. However, given that everyday practice does not exactly replicate the doxic position, neither Heloise nor Trota upheld female inferiority in its "purest" form. Though they believed that women were subordinate to men, they included philosophical elements that did not reinforce this hierarchy. Nevertheless, I caution against labelling Heloise and Trota as proto-feminists or gender rebels, as their respective relationships to gender cannot be explained so simply.

[15] See Stephen Silliman, "Agency, practical politics and the archaeology of culture contact," *Journal of Social Anthropology* 1, vol. 2 (2001), 190-209, at 191.

Chapter One: Practice, Doxa, and Bodies

Whatever the reason for women's relative gender equality or inequality, their patriarchal value is still based on one biological trait: the capacity to conceive and give birth to children.[1] It seems that despite their differences, almost all theories of women's subordination revolve around the allowances and limitations of a woman's body, such as their strength relative to men, or their "genetic" reluctance to compete and be aggressive, resulting from an inherent desire to care for children. Furthermore, these theories all concern qualities that women lack—with the exception of childbirth, the one ability that men do not have. Yet even that lack, that "most intolerable deprivation," tends to men's advantage socially;[2] men are not expected to sacrifice their careers for the sake of their children, nor do they face workplace discrimination when they become fathers. While human males and females do differ biologically, the differences between them serve biological purposes and do not automatically constrain social action, or the non-biological behaviors we exhibit such as wearing clothes and doing work. Culture is fundamental to human survival, however, and it is therefore intertwined with our biology to such an extent that it shapes our bodies as much as our bodies create culture. If we wish to understand the consequences of gender hierarchy, we must first investigate how women's bodies were affected by their inferior position.

Using archaeological evidence, we are able to ask questions that documentary sources may be unable to answer, given that many contemporary authors thought such questions irrelevant or their answers obvious. Archaeological analysis is hardly objective, but

[1] See Yuval Noah Harari, "There is No Justice in History," in *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, 133-62, specifically at 161-78 (London: Vintage, 2011) for an excellent discussion of various theories that attempt to explain female subordination.

[2] Anne McClintock, "The Lay of the Land: Genealogies of Imperialism," in *Imperial Leather*, ed. A. McClintock (Routledge, 1995), 21-74, at 29.

archaeologists have the advantage of studying the actual objects that past people used and interacted with on a daily basis, which may be inaccessible to historians. While the sources studied by medieval historians may, like artifacts, disclose values that their authors did not intend to reveal, documents are most often produced with the intent that people will read and perhaps question them. The sources studied by archaeologists are often so quotidian that their makers, users, and discarders were not conscious of their informational value. An earthenware jug, for example, can reveal as much unintended information about medieval society as can a manuscript, yet the potter never thought that his or her product would be investigated in such a way. In this unselfconscious way, societal values are structurally and ideologically embedded in material culture, or the artifacts left behind by a past society. This is perhaps most true of human remains, which come under the purview of bioarchaeologists and osteologists. Ordinary medieval people were certainly conscious of the ways in which their bodies would be perceived by others during life, but not so much after death.[3] Yet, social values are as visible in the bones of a twelfth-century woman as they are in the conventions of her writing, the construction of her house, and the decorations on her drinking cup.

The aim of osteological archaeology is to learn about the "diet, lifecourse events, incidence of disease, physiological stress and injury" in past populations.[4] There are many techniques by which to obtain such data, from chemical or molecular means to the survey of entire skeletons, but all seek to identify the particular markers of life events in bone. The most

[3] The notable exceptions to this statement are saints, whose bodies were venerated and closely observed after death for proof of sanctity and miracles. Saint Antony, for example, was clearly conscious of the attention his body would receive after death. He ordered his disciples to bury his body in a secret place, wishing to avoid being preserved and venerated aboveground—but eventually his body was discovered and celebrated in just such a way (Athanasius of Alexandria, *Vita Antonii*, *Internet Medieval Sourcebooks*, sec. 90-91, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/vita-antony.asp).

[4] Roberta Gilchrist, "Gendered hierarchies? Labour, prestige, and production," in *Gender and Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 31-53, at 43.

basic osteological analysis produces data on age, sex (if the individual was post-pubertal), age at death, stature, pathology, trauma due to injury, suggestions as to ancestry, and any unusual but non-pathological skeletal traits.[5] Further analysis of these basic traits connects the individual to his or her larger historical community. Disease is both an individual and communal affliction, and those diseases that affect bone are particularly well studied in the field of paleopathology. In their later stages, for example, infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and venereal syphilis leave lesions on specific areas of the skeleton. Viewed across populations, the presence of infectious lesions and other diagnostic skeletal deformations can be used to assess the impact of a certain disease on communities. To continue an earlier example, the presence of advanced syphilis lesions on the skeleton of a relatively young individual may indicate congenital syphilis (which in some cases may look identical to venereal syphilis) or prostitution from a young age.[6]

In the period and region covered by this project, there is already a significant body of archaeological scholarship dedicated to studying gender through material culture and human remains. Several scholars have investigated the effects of gender hierarchy on medieval women's bodies, and I here follow their implications in several realms: labor, interpersonal violence, and space. To begin with, it has often been observed that gender correlates with a division of labor in most societies.[7] It is not so much that the ancient division of labor created gender; rather, social values are "embedded in the relations and processes of production" and guide which arenas are suitable for certain genders.[8] Thus, the valuation of nurturing in medieval women led to their

[5] "Human osteology method statement," *Museum of London*, last modified February 2012.

[6] Lewis Shapland and R. Watts, "The lives and deaths of young medieval women: The osteological evidence," *Medieval Archaeology* 59, no. 1: 12.

[7] Gilchrist, "Gendered," 31.

[8] Ibid., 31.

association with food preparation, including the labor of cooking for the household and the charitable distribution of food.[9] These labors undoubtedly affected women's bodies, and not just in terms of ordinary repetitive stress injuries such as sprains or early-onset arthritis. One study of young medieval women by Shapland and Watts found that female skeletons were more likely to show evidence of respiratory infections such as chronic maxillary sinusitis and tuberculosis.[10] Maxillary sinusitis is rarely a serious infection, but over time it can cause abnormal bone growth within the maxillary sinus, whereas tuberculosis can lead to the fusion and deformation of the vertebrae and eventual death.[11] The authors propose that women were more likely to contract these diseases because of their indoor occupations, where the smoke from the hearth fire would have increased their susceptibility to respiratory infections.[12] Therefore the ideology that valorized women's nurturing roles and centered their activities around the home may be linked to their higher rates of certain diseases compared to men.

Furthermore, Shapland and Watts characterized women's domestic labor as "literally backbreaking," given the various and extensive pathologies found especially in medieval women's spines.[13] In addition to fractures in other bones, vertebral fractures caused by falls and Schmorl's nodes, which are caused by excessive flexion and extension of the spine, suggest significant strain on medieval women's backs.[14] Spondylolysis, another type of vertebral pathology caused by repeated stress, emphasizes the severity of medieval women's labor. This

[9] Ibid., 45.

[10] Shapland and Watts, "Lives," 7-8.

[11] Ibid., 7. The maxillary sinus is a large facial sinus located in the maxilla, or cheekbone.

[12] Shapland and Watts, "Lives," 12.

[13] Ibid., 9.

[14] Ibid., 9.

condition occurs when part of the neural arch, which extends away from the body of the vertebra and encloses the spinal cord, fails to fuse together with the rest of the bone.[15] The prevalence of spondylolysis in medieval women indicates that they performed strenuous labor with their backs from a young age. Young girls, whose vertebrae had not yet completely ossified, were most vulnerable to spinal injury.

Medieval women evidently experienced significant osteological stress as a result of their labor, but this phenomenon was not unique to women. All classes of men also carried out demanding physical labor that is reflected in their bones, from peasant agriculturalists to urban craftsmen to noble knights.[16] Nor was women's labor automatically devalued, although in many cases its extent was limited to the domestic, non-professional sphere, and was compensated less than male labor, if at all.[17] The labor itself, however, was not fixed in its association with the female gender. Cloth production, for example, was performed mostly by women in a domestic setting until the eleventh century, when changes in loom technology moved this labor to an urban and male-dominated setting.[18] This example illustrates the changeable nature of gendered labor and emphasizes that gendered values regulate labor, not the other way around. There was no inherent feminine quality to cloth production that changed alongside technology; rather, the belief that women should remain in the private sphere remained constant as technology changed.

When bioarchaeologists observe trauma to certain parts of a female skeleton, it is often argued to be evidence for domestic violence. Injuries to the face and lower arms, which are used to block attacks, are commonly attributed to male partner or familial abuse. Perhaps it is assumed

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[15] Ibid., 9.

[16] See Veronica Fiorato et al, *Blood Red Roses* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007), especially the chapter on "Battle-related trauma" by Shannon Novak for an exploration of the osteological consequences of medieval battle.

[17] Gilchrist, "Gendered," 51.

[18] Ibid., 51.

that women's violent encounters were restricted to the domestic sphere, or that women's trauma must have been a "by-product" of male activity.[19] Either way, this assumption perpetuates gender stereotypes that disregard women's agency and reify men as the only people able to inflict injuries on women. This is not to say that men do not abuse women quite regularly: up to 70% of women in some countries currently experience domestic violence, and such abuse injures women more than rape, mugging, and car accidents combined.[20] However, the simple assumption that any or all violence evidenced by a skeleton is the product of male activity is problematic. If archaeologists are to explain the trauma in a skeleton, we must have some evidence to support the diagnosis of domestic violence.

Most osteological models are created using data gathered from individuals with a known medical history. Such models enable archaeologists to make conclusions about a skeleton's sex, age at death, stature, etc. based on its visible traits. The models allow researchers to assess the statistical validity of a statement and standardize their interpretations of traits. Bioarchaeologist Shannon Novak argues that this logic also applies to a determination of domestic violence and has created a model to differentiate between trauma due to intimate partner violence and accidents. This model is based on the patterns of osteological trauma shown by modern English women, who received treatment in hospital for domestic violence- or accident-related injury.[21] Novak ultimately concludes that injury to the face, chest, anterior lower limb, and the individual's age most effectively differentiated domestic violence cases from accidents, with the

[19] Shannon Novak, "On the Stories of Men and Substance of Women," in *Exploring Sex and Gender in Bioarchaeology*, ed. Sabrina Agarwal and Julie Wesp (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press), 129-64, at 131.

[20] Shannon Novak, "Beneath the Façade: A Skeletal Model of Domestic Violence," in *Social Archaeology of Funerary Remains*, ed. Rebecca Gowland and Christopher Knüsel, 238-52 (Oxford: Alden Press, 2006), 238-52, at 238.

[21] Novak, "Façade," 240.

face being the best indicator.[22] By submitting the pattern of injury found in a skeleton, a researcher may establish the likelihood that domestic abuse or accident caused the injuries. According to the patterns identified in the analysis, a younger individual with injury to the face and chest is likely to be the victim of domestic assault, whereas an older individual with injury to the lower limbs and no injury to the face or chest is likely to have suffered an accident.[23] When the model was applied in reverse to the data from which it was constructed, it correctly identified 91% of cases; when applied to an independent data set of domestic violence and accident victims, it was accurate for 94.6% of cases.[24]

Novak argues that her model is valid in prehistoric and medieval contexts as well as the modern one from which her data is drawn. If this is so, archaeologists can use it to statistically evaluate the prevalence of domestic violence in subject populations instead of making uncertain (if educated) guesses. It would be possible to study domestic assault directly rather than mentioning it as a possible explanation for trauma in female skeletons, as Shapland and Watts must.[25] However, Novak notes that, while age is a significant factor in determining the provenance of injury, it is often difficult to assess the age at which a deceased individual sustained the injury in question.[26] Osteological trauma, like outwardly visible injuries, becomes more indistinct as it heals, especially if the bone is set and allowed to heal correctly. Some fractures heal so seamlessly that they are only visible using X-rays. With well-healed trauma, it is also unknowable whether two injuries were sustained during one incident.

[22] Ibid., 245.

[23] Ibid., 245.

[24] Ibid., 246.

[25] Shapland and Watts, "Lives," 8-9.

[26] Novak, "Façade," 248.

One of the most relevant criticisms of this model is that skeletons do not reflect the social context in which they suffered injury. Even when the model concludes that one case is domestic assault, there are yet more unknowns. The assailant could have been someone other than an "intimate partner"—a father, brother, a non-familial male, or any woman—or it could not be an assailant at all.[27] Novak states that mourning activity,[28] herding large animals, and certain sports may produce injury patterns similar to that of domestic violence.[29] These criticisms do not entirely negate the value of the model, but they must be taken into consideration, especially in non-modern contexts.

If gendered violence is difficult to accurately assess, perhaps the archaeological study of space may help clarify the implications of medieval gender. In some ways, architectural space *is* social context, which was problematic for the domestic violence model. A room is precisely the context in which interpersonal relationships play out, but the characteristics of physical space also have a profound impact on the ways in which people interact. Gilchrist reconceptualizes the medieval castle as a space in which abstract values and discourse surrounding gender were, in the most literal sense of the word, materialized.[30] Space affected medieval women's bodies as forcefully as did labor and violence, since these actualized discourses shaped how others *perceived* their bodies—this, too, is a way of re-forming a body. Furthermore, the spaces in which women lived governed in large part the work they were able to do and the types of injuries they sustained. Fourteenth-century rural coroners' inquests for medieval England reveal that 61%

[27] Ibid., 249.

[28] Many cultures stipulate certain actions for mourners (often different across gender, age, and relationship to the deceased) that may be injurious. Such self-inflicted injuries may appear skeletally identical to Novak's model of domestic violence if they affect the face and chest.

[29] Novak, "Façade," 249.

[30] Roberta Gilchrist, "The Contested Garden," in *Gender and Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 109-145, at 110.

of women's fatal accidents occurred in the home or village, compared to men's 36%.[31] A further 37% of those women's accidents were related to gendered activities such as "maintaining and provisioning the household, including food preparation, laundry, brewing, getting water, starting fires, collecting fruits, and working with domestic animals."[32] We have come full circle, which is not surprising given that labor and violence must all necessarily happen in a space. But what is significant here is that physical space contains and materializes all, or at least the vast majority, of values that subordinate women to men.

Barbara Hanawalt rightly notes that a medieval woman's reputation hinged on her placement, and ability to remain, in the "correct" space.[33] Blemishes on that reputation, which may have been a woman's most powerful asset, could be contracted by entering spaces that were either male or of poor moral character. In rural areas, the most dangerous space for a woman to enter was the agricultural field; in urban areas, it was the tavern.[34] Both spaces could cast doubt on a woman's reputation—namely, her chastity. Men could sexually assault women with relative impunity in the fields, where the notice and aid of other people could be more easily evaded, and taverns were (often correctly) suspect as places of violence and sexual promiscuity.[35] These dangers to a woman's reputation gave power to men, who controlled the spaces forbidden to women and experienced considerably fewer, if any, repercussions for entering them.[36] The imperative for a woman to preserve her reputation extended beyond controlling where she could

[31] Barbara Hanawalt, "Medieval English Women in Rural and Urban Domestic Space," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* vol. 52 (1998), 20.

[32] Hanawalt, "Medieval," 20.

[33] Ibid., 19.

[34] Ibid., 19.

[35] Ibid., 21; 24-25.

[36] Ibid., 19.

properly be. Modest clothing, manners of walking and speaking, and averting one's eyes were also methods of preserving and regulating who may enter women's personal space.[37]

Gilchrist explores this moral imperative through her discussion of medieval castle space. She qualifies her discussion of space and gender roles by noting that the extent of gender segregation varied by age and social class; peasant women were, in theory, more free to move around than noble women, and older women, especially widows, were monitored less stringently than young women.[38] These differences were due to the importance of lineage and sexual purity, where noble men generally had more to lose if their wives were sexually unfaithful and produced illegitimate children unbeknownst to them. A woman's body was therefore a "contested resource" on which competing parties based their claims to property and inheritance.[39] Liutprand of Cremonia, subtly arguing for the legitimacy of Otto I's claims to the throne of the Holy Roman Empire, attacked the legitimacy of Otto's enemies by exaggerating the promiscuity of their wives and mothers.[40] If a woman were thought to be promiscuous, then the paternity and legitimacy of her children—and thus, their ability to inherit property and titles—could be challenged. The physical enclosure of a woman in the castle or house was an attempt to regulate her sexuality and purity, thereby ensuring the legitimacy of inheriting lineages.[41] Space, according to Gilchrist's argument, is a medium through which gendered social values are brought into physical being. It is also a potent medium, because it is inescapable. Medieval women lived and worked in spaces that were designed to preserve the integrity of their

[37] Ibid., 22.

[38] Gilchrist, "Contested," 116-117.

[39] Ibid., 112.

[40] Philippe Buc, "Italian Hussies and German Matrons," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* vol. 29 (1995), 207-25, at 220.

[41] Gilchrist, "Contested," 144.

reputations—in other words, the integrity and credibility of male lineages. Thus their lives were structured to control their sexual expression for the benefit of men.

From the foregoing discussion of labor, violence, and space, it is clear that social context is essential to understanding the impact of gender hierarchy on medieval women's bodies. Labor itself cannot be understood as gendered; rather, gendered values govern what is considered appropriate work for various people. Osteological trauma also cannot be considered in isolation, as it presents to us only the evidence of injury and not the social context in which the injury occurred. Space, on the other hand, presents to us the physical context of events, but not necessarily the social context; this part must be wrung out of the evidence and interpreted by archaeologists and historians.

Most crucially, what is missing from all of these research angles is the perspective of the medieval women themselves. What did they think of the gender hierarchy, and how did they situate their bodies within these relationships? As valuable as all of the aforementioned evidence is, it rarely contains this personal perspective. We can excavate and analyze the products of women's labor, see the evidence of their physical pain in their bones, and explore the spaces where they lived, but we do not know what they thought about all this. For this, we must read what they wrote, but the vast majority of medieval women could neither read nor write. Archaeology is extremely valuable and productive for recovering their histories, which would otherwise remain unknown. It can also allow researchers to investigate subjects that were irrelevant to or unknown by any medieval people. In those relatively few cases where we have women's writings, however, it would be a disservice not to listen.

The anthropological and historical literature has so far been unable to provide a satisfactory explanation for women's almost-universal subordination, but this is neither a failing

nor a great lacuna in our knowledge. Women's inferior social status, as intriguing as it is troubling, continually promotes new scholarship on the "female condition." Our inability to state definitively why this condition initially arose is less important than our ability to explain its obdurate persistence. We are not able to travel back in time and somehow prevent the rise of global patriarchy—in any event, if we could, we would also need to be in a thousand places at once—but we are better able to understand its influence today and promote a more nuanced interaction with female historical figures.

Anthropologists and other social scientists have had far more success in describing the persistence of gender hierarchy, in addition to other forms of domination such as slavery, colonialism, and economic exploitation. Even as the dynamics of oppression, submission, resistance, and persistence continue to be thoroughly studied and debated, many anthropologists productively employ practice theory to explore social relationships, power, identity, and everyday life.[42] Introduced and popularized by Pierre Bourdieu, practice theory focuses on the ways in which people live ordinary days, reproduce traditions, and follow routines.[43] Archaeologists favor this theory for its emphasis on lived experience and the effects of political and social power.[44] In short, as Sherry Ortner succinctly defines it, practice is "almost unlimited: anything people do."[45] Practice theory, with such a vast and all-encompassing scope, nevertheless manages to avoid being simply another definition of culture because it centers around specifically political action. Thus "anything people do" can be political, or intended to

[42] See Stephen Silliman, "Agency, practical politics and the archaeology of culture contact," *Journal of Social Anthropology* 1, vol. 2 (2001), 190-209, at 190.

[43] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[44] Silliman, "Agency," 191.

[45] Sherry Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 1 (January 1984): 126-66, at 149.

allow the actor to maneuver within a socially hierarchical world, but politics are not necessarily present in all actions. In the course of a day, an individual will conduct his or her affairs according to his or her interests—in intentional and strategic ways that will, at least as far as the actor judges, advance his or her objectives—but also in nondiscursive ways according to routine.[46]

This theory therefore addresses a schism between structure and agency, which raises the question of whether human action is more heavily shaped by the dictates of social structure or by the individual's own agential decisions. The relative significance of structure versus agency has been debated by some of the most influential figures in anthropology and sociology.[47] There is no reason, however, that structure and agency cannot coexist, or more precisely, that human agents cannot intentionally maneuver within the structure of society while simultaneously conforming to other aspects of that structure. For example, Western women are expected to wear makeup in public—that is, they will experience social censure if they do not, and may even face repercussions in the workplace—which demonstrates the constraints of structure. Yet many women deliberately choose to wear makeup not because they must, but because they wish to; they may do so to feel beautiful for themselves, to practice an art form, or other reasons that arise from personal choice. This is one of the advantages of practice theory: it delineates the "array of rules and resources that precede [individuals] but that give them opportunity," at once constraining and enabling activity.[48] Thus Western women are born into a society that requires them to wear makeup, but this requirement also unintentionally gives women the opportunity for

[46] Silliman, "Agency," 192.

[47] See Max Weber, "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority," 1922, for an agency-centered approach, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Structuralism and Ecology," 1984, for a discussion of the unconscious binary oppositions supposed to dictate the structure of human society.

[48] Silliman, "Agency," 192.

aesthetic self-expression. The acknowledgment of social structures or rules allows individuals to choose a path that best serves their interests or desires, yet at the same time, their desires or "tastes" are in large part instilled through their (class-specific) upbringing and education. This is what causes much of the feminist debate surrounding makeup: can a woman truly say that she wears makeup because she likes it, when she has been conditioned to like it since birth? But the answer to this question is evasive precisely because the woman's obligations (structure) and desires (agency) are almost inextricable. Bourdieu refers to these tastes as one's *habitus*, or accustomed sense of what is desirable or good, which is shaped by everyday practice first in the family unit and secondarily through educational instruction.[49] Individuals navigate social structure using their *habitus*, yet they are not always aware of the precise structures they inhabit; these "unquestioned and often unacknowledged" notions form an unconscious cloud of social knowledge that informs decisions, discourse, and social interactions.[50] Bourdieu calls this knowledge *doxa*, as opposed to orthodoxy and heterodoxy, since it is so thoroughly accepted that it does not even reach the level of discourse:

> In a determinate social formation, the stabler the objective structures and the more fully they reproduce themselves in the agents' dispositions, the greater the extent of the field of doxa, of that which is taken for granted. When, owing to the quasi-perfect fit between the objective structures and the internalized structures which results from the logic of simple reproduction, the established cosmological and political order is perceived not as arbitrary, i.e. as one possible order among others, but as a self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned, the agents' aspirations have the same limits as the objective conditions of which they are the product.[51]

[49] Pierre Bourdieu, "The dialectic of objectification and embodiment," in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977): 87-95, at 87.

[50] Silliman, "Agency," 193.

[51] Bourdieu, "Doxa, Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy," in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1977): 159-71, at 165-6.

Doxic structures or ideas, therefore, are not questioned because they have almost seamlessly assumed the guise of "natural" phenomena. The awareness of alternatives is nonexistent or extremely limited, sometimes due to the occluding social power of an institution benefited by this particular doxic set.[52] Furthermore, although social actors do not lose all agency, their behavior is constrained by the limits of their knowledge, of which they are not even aware.

Practice theory and the principles of doxa can help historians to understand the problems of both female social inferiority and gender hierarchy in the twelfth century. Practice theory, with its focus on the routine, is suited to a discussion of historical female inferiority since this subordination affected women and men on an everyday basis, in almost all of their interactions, just as it does today. According to this theory, tradition and routine are not natural and unchanging; rather, they are "always being negotiated and modified as they are reproduced."[53] Every act that perpetuates the subordination of women, whether done by men or women, slightly adjusts the parameters of the hierarchy, because some members of society understand aspects of gender performance differently. American society now generally accepts that it is appropriate for women to wear pants; yet whether women should wear leggings, and under what circumstances, is still debated and will likely evolve as younger generations with different concepts of gender become dominant. Change, after all, originates from within societies as well as from contact with foreign entities, and the agents of change are both those individuals who intend to disrupt the structure of society and those who wish to reproduce tradition. The social inferiority of women

[52] Silliman, "Agency," 194.

[53] Lee M. Panich, "Archaeologies of Persistence: Reconsidering the Legacies of Colonialism in Native North America," *American Antiquity* 78, no. 1 (January 2013): 105-122, at 108.

endures even as its meaning fluctuates. What it means to be a woman—and what it means to be a man—is constantly "in the process of becoming."[54]

In the following chapters, I not only argue that the inferiority of women in the twelfth century was doxic, but also show how the practices of individual female authors reproduced the gender hierarchy and offered a slightly different interpretation of what it meant to be a woman. Although the ideas concerning how women should be subordinated, and how their bodies and characters should be conceptualized, were not monolithic across the twelfth century, there was no conceptual alternative to female inferiority. Orthodoxy and heterodoxy lay in the particulars, not in the basic tenet of women's subordination to men. No medieval philosopher or theologian, to my knowledge, ever proposed a world in which women ruled over men, or even one in which they were equal to men.[55] Although according to some Late Antique Christian traditions such as Gnosticism, women's souls were theoretically equal to men's, medieval Christians inhabited a secular world with physical bodies that were assigned different values. Thus the inferiority of women was doxic in the twelfth century, yet the consequences of this disparity were constantly evolving through everyday practice.

Before I continue on to the medieval sources, I wish to note that, by focusing on women and their experiences with gender, I am not implying that medieval men did not experience or perform gender, or that the study of their gender(s) is not valuable. It is true that "to study women in isolation perpetuates the fiction that one sphere, the experience of one sex, has little or nothing to do with the other," so in this light, I study women and their views on gender

[54] Panich, "Archaeologies," 109.

[55] Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* comes close, but not quite; while she extols the virtues and abilities of women, she does not posit absolute equality. For example, although she supports women's leadership and intellectual capabilities, she discouraged women from attending law school as it would be "immodest" to speak in court, and believed that women could deliver a university lecture only if they were separated from the (male) audience by a screen.

hierarchies in relation to men and their respective views.[56] I acknowledge that medieval men also suffered bodily stress and injury, but they were privileged since they were positioned above the women within their respective classes. While a noblewoman lived more comfortably and enjoyed more respect than a male serf, she was subordinate to noblemen, as the serf was superior to the women of his own class. My work centers around the gendered relationships between men and women of one class in an attempt to show how both parties constructed gender, but I do this mainly using women's written accounts, which show both male-dominated structures and women's responses to them.

[56] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather* (Routledge, 1995), 7.

Chapter Two: Heloise d'Argenteuil and the *Letters*

The twelfth century was marked by momentous societal change and scholarly accomplishments, yet it was also a period of increasing intolerance. R. I. Moore notes that the "apparatus" for the persecution of various marginalized groups, such as Jews, lepers, heretics, and homosexuals, was formalized around the end of the twelfth century.[1] However, Moore did not consider the treatment of women as a marginalized, if not persecuted, group. Though it is true that women were not excluded from society as were the other groups Moore addresses, they were otherwise treated similarly: denied what we now call civil rights, access to public courts and office, and management of property.[2] Furthermore, the category of "women" is, like Moore's persecuted groups, a social construct that is defined and created by people who do not belong to that group. I would expand Moore's theory to consider the active role of the persecuted group. Women—and presumably, Jews, lepers, heretics, and homosexuals as well—contributed to the social creation of their identity as a discrete group. It is difficult to assess the creation of the category of "women," since this occurred before recorded history, but other categories can provide useful analogies. Jewish identity was created among self-identified Jews, but it was also encountered and stereotyped by non-Jews, and this inaccurate portrayal became the dominant culture's "knowledge" about Jews. Students of Edward Said should be in familiar territory—knowledge produced by a dominant group about a cultural "Other" is not reflective of the Other, but rather of the dominant group.[3] In other words, what medieval Christians "knew" about Jews did not reflect Jewish reality—for example, Jews did not desire to kill Christians or desecrate the

[1] Robert Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 62.

[2] Moore, *Formation*, 62. Though women could and did occasionally own and manage property, they could only do so in the absence of any male relatives who could do so in her stead. Female management of property was restricted to legal necessity, not an all-inclusive right.

[3] See Edward Said, "Introduction," in *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 1-28.

Eucharist—but it did reflect Christian fears and anxieties. Moore's analysis is insightful in pointing out that persecuted groups only existed insofar as the persecutors decided to recognize them, and that, therefore, persecution is not a reaction to some objective characteristic of the marginalized group, but to a stereotype generated by the persecutor's own imagination. However, Moore's theory fails to consider how the persecuted groups developed their identity in response or in contrast to their portrayal by dominant groups.

The value of practice theory is that it fills in this conceptual gap. Using this theory as a lens, the interactions between dominant and suppressed groups become clearer. Instead of solely considering the creative agency of the dominant group, we also study the ways in which marginalized groups accept, modify, and reject the identities created to describe them. This process varies depending on an almost unlimited number of factors, but the cultural division between men and women is perhaps unique due to its remote roots, virtually universal presence, and obdurate persistence. This is not to say that the definitions of "men" and "women" have remained stable throughout several hundred thousand years, only that their existence and specific hierarchy has done so. It is this need for temporal and regional specificity that restricts my analysis of women's subjugation to Europe in the twelfth century. The scholarly efflorescence of the twelfth century produced an abundance of novel philosophy and literature, from which I will draw to illustrate the ways in which women were described and described themselves.

Although there is plenty of informative material written by men, those texts cannot adequately speak to the ways in which women reacted to their social inferiority. For this reason, I have chosen two medieval women's texts to analyze, since any one woman's account encapsulates her own perspective as a subjugated member of society as well as the dominant perspective under which all members of society live. Certainly, many medieval men were

subjugated and considered socially inferior to many women, but this was never due to their gender. Most commonly, it was the result of the man's lower class, heretical or non-Christian beliefs, or criminal history. Therefore, it is only in texts written by women that we may see the dominant construction of women entwined with a woman's own reaction.

One of the most eloquent and well-known female writers of the twelfth century is Heloise d'Argenteuil, whose works continue to fascinate historians and other readers nine centuries after they were written. Some of their appeal is due to her intensely emotional personal life and the drama of her ill-fated love affair, but equally engaging is her articulate philosophy. Few other women of the time had access to the level of education Heloise attained; in fact, if her lover is to be believed, "in the extent of her learning she stood supreme."[4] In this respect, Heloise enjoyed educational privilege that was denied to most other women, and indeed most other men. However, her learnedness did not erase the fact that she was a woman or the social disadvantages that accompanied that reality. Despite the fact that her writing was enabled by a privileged education, it can still provide an account of subordination, or what modern readers might call oppression. In fact, the structures of subordination surrounding Heloise were in some regards even more remarkable, given that they applied to a woman of such learning. Women's inferiority was so deeply ingrained that all of Heloise's exceptional qualities were not enough to trump the fact of her gender.

Our knowledge of Heloise's life derives largely from the letters she wrote to various men throughout her adulthood.[5] Not much is known about her early life—we are not even certain of

[4] Peter Abelard to unknown, *Letter 1* (*Historia calamitatum*), in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, ed. and trans. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin Press, 2003), 4-43, at 10.
[5] Betty Radice, ed. and trans., "Chronology," in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (New York: Penguin Press, 2003), ix. It is noted that Heloise may have been born in 1090, if it is assumed that she is older than Peter the Venerable, who was born in 1092 or 1094.

when she was born; although most scholars place her birth in 1100 or 1101, other historians propose the year 1090. However, it is known that she lived at the French convent of Argenteuil as a young girl, before being taken in by her uncle at an unknown date to live with his household.[6] She was "so much loved" by her uncle Fulbert that he avidly promoted her education, and she excelled to such an extent that she attracted the attention of Peter Abelard, a brilliant philosopher and logician who had a school in Paris at the time.[7] Abelard later claimed that he had offered Fulbert his services as Heloise's personal tutor in exchange for lodging in Fulbert's house, where he planned to seduce Heloise. Whether or not this was truly Abelard's aim, Fulbert gladly accepted the arrangement in the hope that his niece would benefit from his instruction.[8] Indeed she did, but she was also drawn into an affair with him, which although avowedly pleasurable and intoxicating for both of them, eventually led to their calamitous separation.[9]

After several months, Fulbert discovered the affair and separated the lovers, though this only served to inflame their passion and foster shamelessness in their meetings. Heloise soon found herself pregnant, to her apparent joy, and escaped her uncle's care to give birth in distant Brittany in the company of Abelard's sister.[10] After the birth, she returned to Paris to marry

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[6] Radice, "Chronology," x.

[7] Abelard, *Letter 1* (*Historia calamitatum*), 10.

[8] Ibid., 10.

[9] Heloise not only learned from Abelard, but likely also influenced his philosophy. While defending herself for having had an affair with Abelard, she states that "it is not the deed but the intention of the doer that makes the crime." This same philosophy of intention is reiterated in Abelard's *Scito te ipsum* (*Know Thyself* or Abelard's *Ethics*), which was published not long after Heloise sent the letter containing her expression of that philosophy. This would seem to indicate that Heloise originally articulated these ideas, which Abelard then appropriated and disseminated under his own name. Such a scenario is plausible but not definite; for example, Abelard could have discussed the philosophy of intention with Heloise while they were still master and student. Either way, it is likely that Heloise had some influence on the content of *Scito te ipsum*.

[10] Ibid., 12. Heloise's joy (and all her other sentiments) are suspect since it was reported solely by Abelard in a semi-public epistolary autobiography, and she does not comment on the topic of their child in her own letters. Her elation upon finding that she was pregnant should be especially suspect since she later left the child in someone else's care

Abelard, leaving her son in the care of Abelard's sister. Heloise was much opposed to the marriage, but Abelard had promised Fulbert that they would wed in order to redress the wrongs done to both Fulbert and Heloise's honor.[11] Heloise eventually capitulated and agreed to the marriage, though she reputedly said, "We shall both be destroyed. All that is left us is suffering as great as our love has been."[12] Although this quotation comes to us through Abelard, Heloise's later letters confirm these sentiments. Abelard's observation that "she showed herself a true prophet" is also validated by later events. Following their marriage, Abelard was castrated by Heloise's relatives over a misunderstanding, and both of them abandoned their secular scholarly pursuits to take up the monastic life.

We have two contrasting versions of Heloise's protests against marriage: one recorded by Abelard in the *Historia calamitatum*, and another written by Heloise in response to that account. The *Historia calamitatum,* or *History of His Misfortunes,* is an autobiographical letter, purportedly written to one of Abelard's friends, but which circulated widely throughout twelfth-century literate and scholarly society. Abelard's self-portrait in this letter is decidedly flattering and characteristically arrogant, yet he clearly acknowledges his wrongdoing in seducing Heloise, as well as the virtues of her arguments against marriage. Among other objections, he says that

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and rarely mentioned him after his birth. However, she made no comment pertaining to Abelard's misrepresentation of her feelings. Heloise gave birth to a son, whom she named Astralabe after the navigational instrument. It is almost certain that she, not Abelard, named their son since women had the privilege to name their illegitimate offspring. Very little is known about Astralabe, except that Heloise later asked Peter the Venerable to obtain a prebend, or low-ranking ecclesiastical office, for him. Astralabe died as the abbot of a Cistercian monastery and may have participated in the assassination of Geoffrey Plantagenet the Elder as a younger man. See Brenda M Cook, "One Astralabe or Two? The Mystery of Abelard's Son," paper dated June 1999.

[11] Abelard, *Letter 1* (*Historia calamitatum*), 16. Abelard makes much of his promise to Fulbert, stating that he did so out of pity for Fulbert's misery and shame, though Fulbert had no way to injure or punish Abelard for his affair. Having established this leverage, Abelard then states that he was able to stipulate that the marriage remain secret so as not to damage his professional reputation. Abelard was a canon at the time, and although marriage had previously been permissible for these lower clerical orders, the ecclesiastical reform of the twelfth century was beginning to discourage marriage for all clerical orders.

[12] Abelard, *Letter 1* (*Historia calamitatum*), 16.

she claimed the marriage would not satisfy her uncle's wrath—correctly, "as [they] subsequently found out."[13] Abelard also reports and elaborates favorably on her argument that marriage would be detrimental to his reputation and career as a philosopher and theologian:

> What honour could she win, she protested, from a marriage which would dishonour me [Abelard] and humiliate us both? The world would justly exact punishment from her if she removed such a light from its midst. Think of the curses, the loss to the Church and grief of philosophers which would greet such a marriage! Nature had created me for all mankind—it would be a sorry scandal if I should bind myself to a single woman and submit to such base servitude.[14]

He continues to list Heloise's other protests against marriage, including the incompatibility of mundane household management with philosophical contemplation and the apostle Paul's exhortations against marriage.[15] Heloise also apparently cited classical philosophers such as Theophrastus, Cicero, and Seneca, all of whom found the true pursuit of philosophy to be impossible in the distracted and busy environment of marriage.[16] Finally, he relates her argument that they should be bound only by "love freely given … not the constriction of a marriage tie," in accordance with her classically-influenced philosophy on friendship and love.[17]

This last argument was perhaps the most important one to Heloise herself, if not to Abelard, who spends comparatively little time on it—only one sentence, as opposed to two and a half pages on the incompatibility of philosophy and married life.[18] In her response to the *Historia calamitatum*, Heloise acknowledges that Abelard had accurately presented her arguments, but

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[13] Ibid., 13.

[14] Ibid., 13.

[15] Ibid., 13.

[16] Abelard, *Letter 1* (*Historia calamitatum*), 14.

[17] Ibid., 16.

[18] On philosophy and marriage: lines from "But if I would accept … 'would lead to rain.'" Abelard, *Letter 1* (*Historia calamitatum*), pages 13-16; on Heloise's last argument: "Heloise went on to the risks...the rarer our meetings were." ibid., page 16.

takes issue with his lack of attention to this last one. She objects to his dismissiveness and restates her argument in her letter:

> …you [Abelard] kept silent about most of my arguments for preferring love to wedlock and freedom to chains. God is my witness that if Augustus, Emperor of the whole world, thought fit to honour me with marriage and conferred all the earth on me to possess for ever, it would be dearer and more honourable to me to be called not his Empress but your whore.[19]

She is clearly passionate about this issue and adamant that she desired not marriage, but freely given love. Her comparison of marriage to chains illustrates her sentiment poignantly, but she elaborates further by saying that a woman who binds herself to a man while thinking of the material benefits he can offer—the financial and social stability of marriage, the marriage portion or dowry, and property, among others—is "offering herself for sale … ready to prostitute herself to a richer man, if she could."[20] Her preference for the position of Abelard's "concubine or whore" rather than that of his wife was meant to illustrate her dedication to him for his own sake, not for the advantages of marriage.[21] If she married him, she could be accused of loving him only for his fame or wealth, whereas her devotion to him would be unquestionable if she remained with him without receiving any benefit other than his love.

The high level and quality of Heloise's education is evident in her arguments against marriage. Not only is her writing clear and logical, but it is also in eloquent Latin, the language of medieval scholars. She demonstrates a familiarity with the *ars dictandi*, or proper rules for composing letters, by objecting to Abelard's own compositional address.[22] As he should have

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[19] Heloise to Abelard, *Letter 2*, in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, ed. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin Press, 2003), 47-55, at 51.

[20] Heloise to Abelard, *Letter 2*, 51-52.

[21] Ibid., 51.

[22] Betty Radice, ed. and trans., "Notes," in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (New York: Penguin Press, 2003), 249-288, at 266.

mentioned his own name first, due to his higher rank, she chastises him for putting her name before his, "contrary to custom in letter-writing and, indeed, to the natural order."[23] Beyond these basic compositional skills, she makes extensive use of classical, biblical, and patristic quotations: she cites seven classical authors, twenty-eight books of the Bible, six patristic texts, the Rule of St. Benedict, and the *Lives of the Desert Fathers* in only three relatively short letters.[24] Furthermore, her classical mindset is revealed by her use of the Latin "*vulcania loca* [Vulcan's regions, or Tartarus]" to refer to Hell instead of a more Christian term such as *infernus*.[25] Again, in the famous lament she made before becoming a nun, Heloise is said to have quoted Lucan's *Pharsalia*.[26] At this very emotional moment, the words that most closely resonated with her feelings were drawn from a classical text.

Heloise's education is characteristic of the twelfth-century Renaissance in content and comparable to other male scholars' instruction, yet she was not considered the equal of male intellectuals. Abelard and other men praised her intelligence and skill with letters, but this esteem did not exempt her from the effects of her inferior female status. Abelard may have celebrated her abilities in the *Historia calamitatum* as "most renowned throughout the realm," but ultimately he thought fit to overrule her "supreme" and prophetic judgment in their disagreement on marriage.[27] Since Abelard generally considered his judgment superior to everyone's, however, his disregard of her arguments may not be due solely to Heloise's gender. It is clear, however, that gender was directly relevant to the circumstances of her education. She received

[23] Heloise to Abelard, *Letter 4*, in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, ed. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin Press, 2003), 63-71, at 63.

[24] Classical references glossed by Radice, "Notes," 263-288.

[25] Radice, "Notes," 264.

[26] Abelard, *Letter 1* (*Historia calamitatum*), 18.

[27] Ibid., 10.

some basic education from the nuns at Argenteuil where she spent her childhood, which may have been carried out according to Fulbert's wishes, but once she moved into her uncle's household, the continuation of her instruction was definitely dependent on his will. It is also curious that Abelard names love as the reason that Fulbert wished to promote Heloise's education.[28] If Fulbert had not loved her so much, Abelard implies, she would not have been permitted to develop her skills further. Heloise's education resulted from Fulbert's generosity and love, which did not necessarily have to manifest in encouraging her to learn. Most other medieval women, even if they had loving and sufficiently affluent guardians, were not permitted the freedom and extent of learning that Heloise enjoyed. Furthermore, Heloise's education was regulated by and comprised of male authorities. In Paris, there were no female masters who could instruct her, nor were any texts written by women studied in scholarly circles. Female figures appeared in this male-dominated literature, but since their words were composed by men, they served to reinforce the dominant discourse surrounding women's characteristics and proper roles. Literary women's words and actions, when written by men, were not likely to reflect how women genuinely experienced their social inferiority; rather, male authors could use these female characters to support the subordination of real women and to promote the belief that women did indeed possess inferior character traits.

As Abelard gained control of Heloise's education, he also gained control over Heloise's body and movements. According to Abelard, his arrangement with Fulbert explicitly

> gave me [Abelard] complete charge over the girl [Heloise], so that I could devote all the leisure time left me by my school to teaching her by day and night, and if I found her idle I was to punish her severely. I was amazed by [Fulbert's] simplicity—if he had entrusted a tender lamb to a ravening wolf it would not have surprised me more. In handing her over to me to punish as well as to teach, what else was he doing but giving me complete freedom to realize my desires, and

[28] Ibid., 11.

> providing an opportunity, even if I did not make use of it, for me to bend her to my will by threats and blows if persuasion failed?[29]

Abelard's wording makes it clear that Heloise was transferred like property, as indeed she was, from one man to another. As a result of this transaction, Abelard was empowered to use Heloise's body as he saw fit, whether for his pleasure or at his displeasure. Although Fulbert certainly did not intend for Abelard and Heloise to become sexually involved, the powers he gave to Abelard nevertheless enabled this outcome. Neither was this disciplinary power given in name only; Abelard did in fact strike Heloise whenever he thought it was necessary. He maintained, however, that he did so only to cover up their true affections, and that the "blows were prompted by love and tender feeling … and were sweeter than any balm could be."[30] Whether Heloise also thought that his blows were sweeter than any balm, she does not say.

Furthermore, Abelard dictated Heloise's movements during and after their affair, and she went where he wished with no recorded protest. Upon discovering her pregnancy, Heloise "immediately" asked for Abelard's opinion as to what she ought to do, and he alone decided that she should go to live with his sister in Brittany.[31] There she stayed until he decided that they should return to Paris for their marriage; although Heloise argued against the marriage itself, she made no protests against their return to Paris or his authority to decide whether they would wed. She ultimately capitulated and went with Abelard to be married in Paris, though he soon decided that she should go to the convent of Argenteuil in order to be safe from the reprisal of her relatives, who, Abelard believed, would abuse her. In addition to this order, he mandated that she wear a nun's habit, "with the exception of the veil," despite remaining a laywoman.[32] If Heloise

[29] Ibid., 10-11.

[30] Ibid., 11.

[31] Ibid., 12.

[32] Ibid., 17.

had any say in these relocations, Abelard gave no indication, and in any event his will was done. She complied with his orders even before they were married and she legally and socially became his to command.[33]

It is not a revelation to discover that Heloise, like most other twelfth-century women, lived much of her life under the control of a man. That this was the general condition of women at the time is a well-known fact, but this fact does not advance our understanding of medieval gender relations, especially not from a woman's point of view. However, practice theory makes possible a more nuanced interpretation of the evidence and provides a lens through which to view women's perpetuation of their own subordination. The above illustration of Heloise's education and marriage demonstrates both that the medieval gender hierarchy was embedded in everyday acts, not simply imposed on women from above, and that women actively supported the structures and concepts that subordinated them. The everyday practice of gender in the twelfth century, as today, involved the exercise of power. Abelard gained such power over Heloise's body and movements, first as her teacher and later as her husband. Abelard's social superiority, and therefore his control over her actions, was effective as soon as he met her: the power differential between Heloise, a young woman of considerable talents but little social power, and Abelard, a famous and arrogant philosopher about twenty years older than she, was enormous.[34] It is difficult to imagine that Heloise had very much choice in becoming Abelard's

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[33] This custom is exemplified in the *feme sole* and *feme covert* system developed in High and Late Middle Age England, where a married woman's legal rights, property, and person were subsumed into the husband's (See the introduction to *Married Women and the Law in Premodern Northwestern Europe*, ed. Cordelia Beattie and Matthew F. Stevens, 2013).

[34] If we take the earlier date for Heloise's birth (1090 instead of 1100 or 1101), this gap shortens to about eleven years instead of twenty-one. It would also make Heloise about twenty-five years old at the time of her affair instead of fifteen, which is to our standards considerably more acceptable. Archaeological records indicate that women may have only become fertile around twenty years old, which would fit better with the earlier date of Heloise's birth (since she conceived not long after her affair started). However, since the year in which Heloise and Abelard met is not exactly known, she may have been closer to seventeen years old at this time. Her privileged social class also

lover; indeed, Abelard himself admits that he could have raped Heloise if she had been unwilling.[35] The love affair was later to have dramatic consequences, but it began in the everyday social dynamics between a woman and a man.

Perhaps even more revealing than the situations in which Heloise had no power are those in which she did. In those circumstances, she actively chose to follow Abelard's wishes instead of her own. She says in her letters that she did so to prove herself wholly obedient to him, as a demonstration of her unfettered devotion.[36] The most significant example of her devotion is her entry into the monastic life, which came about after her return to Paris following the birth of her son. The news of her secret marriage to Abelard began to circulate publicly, though Abelard says she vehemently denied the rumor in order to preserve his reputation.[37] Abelard states that the rumor was the work of Fulbert and his household, seeking to damage Abelard's reputation out of vengeance, and that Fulbert "heaped abuse" on Heloise when she denied that she had been married.[38] Seeking to protect his wife from her uncle's retaliation, Abelard moved her to the convent at Argenteuil, where she was made to wear a nun's habit. This move prompted Fulbert and his followers, furious in the belief that Abelard had deposited Heloise at the convent in order to be rid of her, to attack Abelard in the night and castrate him.[39] Ashamed of his condition,

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likely afforded her better nutrition than many of the individuals whose remains were studied to produce this fertility estimate, so she may have been able to conceive at a younger age.

[35] Abelard, *Letter 1* (*Historia calamitatum*), 10-11. Indeed, Mary Ellen Waithe argues that Abelard did rape Heloise, based on a statement Abelard made in the fifth letter (in Radice's translation, page 81) about forcing Heloise to have intercourse with him against her will. She also notes that Heloise, despite finding pleasure in the affair, always considered it to be immoral. See Waithe, "Heloise," in *A History of Women Philosophers*, ed. M.E. Waithe (Dordrecht: Springer, 1989), 67-83.

[36] Heloise to Abelard, *Letter 2*, 51.

[37] Abelard, *Letter 1* (*Historia calamitatum*), 17.

[38] Ibid., 17.

[39] Fulbert's reaction, though cruel, is not entirely unreasonable; it would have undoubtedly appeared to anyone outside Abelard's circle of confidence that he was indeed disposing of Heloise. Abelard's order that Heloise should wear a novice's outfit during her stay at the convent is also strange; if he was so concerned for her safety, it would have made more sense to send her back to Brittany and his sister, where their son already was being raised.

Abelard retreated to the monastic life, as did Heloise, who officially became a nun at the convent that had previously sheltered her as a laywoman "in obedience to [Abelard's] wishes."[40] Unlike her previous displacements, this time Heloise was under no social obligation to obey Abelard's wishes. He had become a monk, renouncing his marriage ties to her, and could not force her to become a nun as he deemed fit. In fact, many onlookers objected to Heloise's conversion, urging her to remain in the secular world because of her youth.[41] She evidently grieved to enter the convent, but did not hesitate:

> … when I [Heloise] was powerless to oppose you [Abelard] in anything, 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 my will alike.[42]

Though she considered conversion to the monastic life equal to destroying herself, she would not be dissuaded from doing it out of love for Abelard. Not surprisingly, she experienced crushing misery as a nun, begging Abelard to see that her life was "pitiable beyond any other," but asked only that he write to her to alleviate her unhappiness.[43] She deferred to Abelard's wishes even when they were contrary to her own, desiring above all other things to demonstrate her unconditional dedication to him—the sole possessor of her person.

By following Abelard's advice and directives even when she was free to choose a more preferable alternative, Heloise gave him even more authority over herself than he already had as

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[40] Abelard, *Letter 1* (*Historia calamitatum*), 18.

[41] Ibid., 18.

[42] Heloise to Abelard, *Letter 2*, 51.

[43] Heloise to Abelard, *Letter 4*, 69. Unfortunately, Abelard declined to reciprocate her continued affections, saying instead that she should love God instead. Eventually, Heloise stopped asking him for personal comfort and requested spiritual advice instead.

a socially privileged man. She believed that she was subject to his will and stated her sex's inferiority quite explicitly: she refers to herself as the lower-ranking partner in her relationship with Abelard, citing "the natural order" of the world wherein not just she, but all women are subordinate to men, wives to husbands, and abbesses to abbots.[44] In addition, she ponders her role in Abelard's downfall and castration in terms of universal female faults:

> You [Abelard] alone were punished though we were both to blame … What misery for me—born as I was to be the cause of such a crime! Is it the general lot of women to bring total ruin on great men? Hence the warning about women in Proverbs … and in Ecclesiastes … It was the first woman in the beginning who lured man from Paradise, and she who had been created by the Lord as his helpmate became the instrument of his total downfall … For this offence, above all, may I have strength to do proper penance, so that at least by long contrition I can make some amends for your pain from the wound inflicted on you; and what you suffered in the body for a time, I may suffer, as is right, throughout my life in contrition of mind, and thus make reparation to you at least, if not to God.[45]

Here she compares herself to biblical women, such as Eve, Delilah, and Job's wife, all of whom were the cause of their husband or lover's disgrace and ruin.[46] Excusing Abelard's role in initiating and maintaining their illicit affair, Heloise assigns the blame to herself as a member of this seductive sex. She actually emphasizes women's inferiority more than Abelard does, despite being negatively affected by this depiction. Her statements were supported by the perceived infallibility and truthfulness of scripture, which attributed these characteristics not just to individual women but to the entire female sex. By explicitly supporting and justifying the dominance of men over women, Heloise perpetuated the concept of women as an inferior group defined by certain characteristics—in this case, sinful, seductive, tempting, and instruments of the Devil's work.

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[44] Ibid., 63.

[45] Ibid., 66-67.

[46] Ibid., 67.

Heloise implicitly acknowledged that women had a degree of power over men because of their wicked traits, but she explicitly argued for women's weakness, helplessness, and frailty. She later requested Abelard's intervention in her convent's affairs, which she said was warranted due to the "feminine nature" of the community.[47] She praised Abelard lavishly for his part in founding the convent, which he had started as a personal hermitage and had gifted to her and her nuns upon their political expulsion from Argenteuil, and requested his "superior wisdom" to advise the nuns in their "humble learning."[48] Taking none of the credit for the care and supervision of the convent, which she had overseen for years in his absence, she attributed all of the convent's successes to his work.[49] It was apparently her belief that she could not effectively manage the convent without his aid; indeed, the purpose of her first letter is to solicit his advice. Her desire to renew close contact with her husband is intertwined with her desire for his spiritual assistance:

> You wrote your friend a long letter of consolation [the *Historia calamitatum*], prompted no doubt by his misfortunes, but really telling of your own … I beg you, then, as you set about tending the wounds which others have dealt, heal the wounds you yourself inflicted. You have done your duty to a friend and comrade, discharged your debt to a friendship and comradeship, but you have bound yourself by a greater debt to us who can properly be called not friends so much as dearest friends, not comrades but daughters, or any other conceivable name more tender and holy.[50]

She elides the spiritual help her convent needs with the emotional help Abelard could provide as her husband. Abelard's letters, despite lacking the amorous and comforting content Heloise desired, offered her "some sweet semblance" of her lost lover through the words alone.[51] But

[47] Heloise to Abelard, *Letter 2*, 49.

[48] Ibid., 50.

[49] Ibid., 49.

[50] Ibid., 49.

[51] Ibid., 53.

they also offered knowledge of a less personal value: how women came to organize in monastic communities, what scriptural justification there is for female monasticism, in addition to some hymns he composed for her convent's use.[52] Most importantly, though, Heloise asked for a monastic rule to guide her nuns, so that they might have some "instructions for works to suit our weak nature."[53] This request was prompted by her belief that the commonly used Benedictine Rule, written by St. Benedict of Nursia in 516, could not be properly followed by women.[54] In two lengthy letters, Abelard gladly rendered this service, but Heloise could have written her own rule given that she intimately knew the difficulties women encountered in following the Benedictine Rule, as well as the specific audience of nuns that would receive it. It might seem obvious that Heloise, a woman, was better positioned to write a Rule for women than Abelard, but Heloise apparently thought otherwise. She sought Abelard's advice, deferring to what she perceived as his greater wisdom, rather than presuming that her wisdom was sufficient.

Although Heloise defied many twelfth-century stereotypes concerning women, it would be inaccurate as well as anachronistic to call her a feminist figure. She actively and consistently argued against the equality of men and women, believing firmly in the justice of the medieval gender hierarchy. Modern scholars may use practice theory to explain and analyze her experiences, but she neither knew of these theories nor would have explained the events of her life in those terms. Her body and movements were under the control of men, whose decisions she was unable and, at times, unwilling to influence. The most important factor in her life, in her own view, was not the men who had power over it but rather the passion and love she bore them.

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[52] Heloise to Abelard, *Letter 6*, in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, ed. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin Press, 2003), 93-111, at 93-94; Radice, "Introduction," xxxv.

[53] Heloise to Abelard, *Letter 6*, 109.

[54] Ibid., 94.

Chapter Three: Trota and the *Trotula*

The twelfth century also witnessed the flourishing of medical knowledge, especially in the city of Salerno, where it is most likely that the texts of the *Summa que dicitur "Trotula"* (The Compendium Which is Called the *Trotula*) were composed. The name was bestowed by an anonymous compiler in the late twelfth century, who assembled three separate texts into one ensemble that quickly rose to prominence as the most influential book on women's medicine from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries.[1] In addition to this fame, the transformation of three works into one—and the elision of three authors—makes the *Trotula* noteworthy. Medieval readers were most likely to encounter the text in its edited format, where its multiple authorship was obscured, not least in part due to its title.[2] Contemporary thought held that "Trotula" was a name, not a title, and this name was specifically a woman's name. Modern historians do not know the names of the authors, except for that of the middle text: this work is attributed to Trota of Salerno, a well-known female healer of the twelfth century.

Even less is known about Trota than Heloise, although three extant works are attributed to her. She is known to have written *Practical Medicine According to Trota* (*Practica secundum Trotam*), a compendium of treatments that shares more than twenty-four passages with *On the Treatment of Illnesses* (*De egritudinum curatione*), another compendium of remedies from seven of the most influential Salernitan physicians, naming Trota among them.[3] Trota's name constituted the basis for the *Trotula*'s title, which translates to "little Trota," or less literally,

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[1] Monica Green, "Preface," in *The Trotula: An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*, ed. and trans. Monica Green (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), xi-xvii, at xi. I have used this translation throughout this chapter and following ones to refer to *Liber de sinthomatibus mulierum* (Book on the Conditions of Women), 65-87; *De curis mulierum* (On Treatments for Women), 89-112; and *De ornatu mulierum* (On Women's Cosmetics), 113-124.

[2] Green, "Introduction," xii.

[3] Green, "Introduction," 49.

"abridged Trota." The *Trotula* is indeed shorter than the more comprehensive *Practical Medicine* or *Treatment of Illnesses,* but it may also have been named after Trota in absence of the names of the other authors, who remain anonymous. It is also a testament to the recognition and legitimacy that Trota's name bestowed on a new compilation of medical works.

The three texts of the *Trotula* are quite disparate in content and theoretical approach, once the editorial revisions that meld them are removed. The first text, called *On the Conditions of Women,* reflects the reception of Arabic medicine by Western practitioners and the blurring of boundaries between these two contexts. This text incorporates interest in theoretical, physiological explanations for disease and many of the treatments laid out by Arabic physicians such as Abū Ja far Ahmad b. Ibrāhim b. Abī Khālid al-Jazzār.[4] Ibn al-Jazzār wrote the "Provision for the Traveler and Sustenance for the Settled," a summary of medical practice that was translated into Latin, renamed the *Viaticum,* and significantly influenced the *Conditions of Women*.[5] The second text, Trota's *Treatments for Women,* retains some of the theoretical interest but is otherwise a "quite chaotic" assemblage of both women's and general medicine.[6] Although it adheres to an internally coherent set of principles, these theories are not generally explicitly stated in its discussion of disease.[7] Trota's prescribed remedies assume that men and women have different humoral and elemental qualities, in accordance with ancient Greek and Roman physiological theories, but she makes no concrete reference to these theories. The third and final text, named *On Women's Cosmetics*, is even less theoretical than the previous, and contains no

[4] Ibid., 11.

[5] Ibid., 10-11; 25.

[6] Ibid., 37.

[7] Ibid., 37.

such philosophical explanations of female physiology. Rather, it is an instructional manual for the preparation and application of various beautifying remedies.

I have chosen to analyze the *Trotula* over Trota's other two works for its convoluted relationship to gender. Whereas early modern historians and medieval readers were confident that Trota, a woman, wrote *Practical Medicine* and the excerpts attributed to her in *Treatment of Illnesses,* our understanding of who wrote the *Trotula* has evolved over the past nine centuries. As noted above, it was commonly thought after the late twelfth century that "Trotula" was the name of the author, and this ascription was significant to the reception of the text. Despite the text's female authorship—as medieval and early modern readers believed—it was received quite favorably and considered to be the authority on women's medicine until the fifteenth century. It may seem obvious to a modern reader that a female healer would (and perhaps should) be considered an expert on women's medicine, but male physicians dominated the theoretical medical sphere in both general and gynecological medicine.[8] Nevertheless, we know that other women healers practiced in Salerno, and so we might expect them to have gained similar notoriety in written texts, but Trota is the only one of them to have done so.[9] Indeed, she is the only woman among the three *Trotula* authors: one of the two anonymous authors explicitly identifies himself as male, and the other one is most likely male as well.[10] These male authors

[8] The two most influential male medical traditions in western Europe at the time of the twelfth century renaissance were the Hippocratic and Soranic traditions. The Hippocratic corpus is named after Hippocrates of Cos, although he was not the sole author, and is therefore sometimes internally inconsistent. In general, the Hippocratic gynecological tradition considered menstruation, pregnancy, and (hetero)sexual intercourse to be crucial to women's health (Green, "Introduction," 16). In contrast, the Soranic tradition found these functions to be detrimental to female health, although the particulars of Soranus' theory and method were usually edited out in subsequent transcriptions.

[9] Green, "Introduction," 51. Trotula is not the only Salernitan woman to be recorded for her medical expertise, but none of these other women produced their own texts. We rely on other forms of evidence, most often created by men, to learn about such women (ibid., 48): the necrology of Salerno's cathedral refers to a *medica* named Berdefolia; the mother of a male physician is credited with curing a noblewoman of uterine suffocation; and the medical texts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries include more than sixty other references to the medical practices of Salernitan women.

[10] Green, "Introduction," 47.

had different views on women's bodies, and therefore their ability to occupy certain roles in society, as well as different sources and goals.

This composite text, which contains both male and female views yet was believed to be solely female in origin, offers insight into the medical practices that reinforced women's inferiority. As a medical compilation, the *Trotula* focuses far more specifically on the physiology of women's bodies than do Heloise's letters. In many ways, medical theory and practice reinforced the theological and social gender hierarchy evident in Heloise and Abelard's letters. To qualify statements about the "natural" inferiority of women, medieval medical writers situated inferiority in female bodies, such that women were inescapably and fundamentally imperfect. Much of this discussion centered around women's reproductive organs, functions, and capabilities, which were considered the primary difference between men and women and, to some, the proof of their inferiority. For Galen of Pergamon (c. 130–c. 215 C.E.), whose work built on the traditions left by both Hippocrates and Soranus and was still ubiquitous in the twelfth century, women were physiologically "colder" than men, who were characterized by an abundance of essential "heat."[11] Due to women's lack of heat, they were unable to process—literally, to "cook"—the nutrients received through food properly and therefore required menstruation to eliminate the excess.[12] When women became pregnant or were lactating after birth, they did not menstruate because this excess, now diverted into a "productive" channel, was used to nourish the child.[13] Menstruation was therefore a sign of health in women, indicating that

[11] Green, "Introduction," 19. The cold versus hot dichotomy was part of Hippocratic and Galenic elemental medicine, in which any person might be characterized by a combination of heat or frigidity and moisture or aridity. Men were hot and dry, whereas women were cold and wet, and any deviation from these assigned elements caused illness. The distribution of humors—blood, phlegm, yellow or red bile, and black bile—was more egalitarian, and an imbalance of any of these four also caused illness.

[12] Green, "Introduction," 20.

[13] Ibid., 20.

their "waste matter" was being regularly purged. It also followed that the absence of the menses denoted illness due to the buildup of harmful waste matter in the body.

The first text of the *Trotula*, *On the Conditions of Women*, is illustrative of such bodily theories of inferiority. In its initial paragraph, the author justifies the gender hierarchy as the result of divine will:

> And wishing to sustain [humanity's] generation in perpetuity, [God] created the male and the female … for the propagation of future offspring. And … he endowed their complexions with a certain pleasing commixtion, constituting the nature of the male hot and dry. But lest the male overflow with either one of these qualities, He wished by the opposing frigidity and humidity of the woman to rein him in from too much excess, so that the stronger qualities, that is the heat and the dryness, should rule the man, who is the stronger and more worthy person, while the weaker ones, that is to say the coldness and humidity, should rule the weaker [person], that is the woman.[14]

Here the author not only situates the inequality of men and women at the beginning of human creation, but also in their bodies. Blending Christian and non-Christian sources, he adheres to the Galenic and Hippocratic system of the four physiological elements but ascribes this phenomenon to the work of God. Furthermore, the woman's frigidity and humidity are, paradoxically, supposed to restrain the qualities of the man despite being the weaker characteristics. From this description of sexual difference, medieval readers may have come to the conclusion that women, while definitely weaker than and subordinate to men, served the rational purpose of checking the exorbitant heat of men. Given that women's inferiority was already well-established by the twelfth century, it is likely that medieval readers already subscribed to this paradigm; in other words, the author is not so much explaining why women are inferior as reiterating a common assessment of women's physiological character. The introduction further states that the pitiable

[14] "Book on the Conditions of Women," in *The Trotula: An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*, ed. and trans. Monica Green (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 65-87, at 65. I use the masculine pronouns for the author of this text, given that it is most likely to be correct.

weakness of women, as well as the urging of "a certain woman stirring [the author's] heart," compelled him to write a treatise on women's medicine.[15] The subordination of women was not the principal goal of the author, but it was a convenient backdrop for an enumeration of gynecological and obstetrical conditions.

The author took female subordination for granted and premised his entire work on its existence, although he was not entirely unsympathetic to their position. In fact, despite subordinating women to men in no uncertain terms, his opening composition implicitly refutes the Galenic model of women as malformed men.[16] Galen posited that male fetuses developed under normal conditions in the womb, but female fetuses resulted from an embryological failure to maintain heat. On the contrary, the author of *Conditions of Women* stated that women's lack of heat was an intentional and purposeful choice made by God, as much as he had decided to bestow heat on men. Although women got the short end of the stick, so to speak, they are at least complete and whole unto themselves according to this model.

The author evidently considered menstruation essential to women's health, as more than a third of this text is dedicated to ensuring the presence and proper extent of the menses.[17] For "many sicknesses thus arise" when menstrual blood is too meager or too abundant, and the premature cessation of menstruation portends "grave illness."[18] The woman whose menses were absent or too paltry—and this threshold was never quantified—could invest in any of the potions, fumigations, bloodlettings (but not from the hand), herbal baths, or powders

[15] "Conditions of Women," 65.

[16] Green, "Introduction," 36.

[17] Ibid., 21.

[18] "Conditions of Women," 66-67.

recommended by the author, but she could also simply have intercourse with her husband.[19] Another option was to insert medicine by means of a "pessary in the shape of the male member," which was apparently equally effective.[20] Women who were celibate, such as widows and virgins, suffered especially because they did not have recourse to sexual intercourse, which balanced the humidity and frigidity of the female womb. Such women were especially susceptible to a curious disease known as uterine suffocation:

> Sometimes the womb is suffocated, that is to say, when it is drawn upward, whence there occurs [stomach] upset and loss of appetite … Sometimes [the women] suffer syncope [fainting], and the pulse vanishes so that from the same cause it is barely perceptible. Sometimes the woman is contracted so that the head is joined to the knees, and she lacks vision, and she looses [sic] the function of the voice, the nose is distorted, the lips are contracted and she grits her teeth, and the chest is elevated upward beyond what is normal … This [condition] happens to those women who do not use men, especially to widows who were accustomed to carnal commerce. It regularly comes upon virgins, too, when they reach the age of marriage and are not able to use men and when the semen abounds in them a lot, which Nature wishes to draw out by means of the male.[21]

The wandering womb is said to "suffocate" since its displacement puts pressure on other organs, such as the lungs or heart, and disrupts their normal functions. The author recommends that women suffering from uterine suffocation should have foul odors, such as burnt wool or leather, applied to their noses and sweet odors, such as chamomile oil and nard, applied to their pubic area.[22] This remedy was based on the Hippocratic theory that the wayward uterus could "smell" or distinguish odors, and that it would move away from foul ones at the head of the body towards sweet ones around the pubis, where it belonged.[23]

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[19] Ibid., 69.

[20] Ibid., 68. A pessary is a tampon-like object, soaked or covered in medicine, which was used to treat conditions ranging from uterine prolapse, menstrual issues, menstrual cramps, and infertility, among many others.

[21] Ibid., 71.

[22] Ibid., 72.

[23] Green, "Introduction," 23.

The theories and remedies found in *Conditions of Women* may sound absurd to modern readers, who know that the uterus can neither smell odors nor migrate to the upper body. Yet twelfth-century physicians knew with equal certainty that the womb could do both, and indeed that these movements could mean serious illness or even death for their female patients. The author of this text subscribed to medical theories that, since at least the fifth or fourth century B.C.E., had been cited as the definitive explanations for female physiology and diseases.[24] They were also largely, but not entirely, perpetuated by male physicians, whose gynecological treatises structurally created and reinforced existing knowledge about the female body as the basis for women's subordination to men. As evidenced by *Conditions of Women*, theological tradition provided a background of sorts on which medical writers could build, where the biblical genesis of men and women as unequal partners took a physiological tack. The author positions God as the actor who conferred heat and aridity on men, making them "stronger and more worthy," and frigidity and humidity on women, who are weaker and "made subject to the function of the man."[25] However, it is really the author who assigned these characteristics to men and women's bodies, and it is he who evaluated the worth of each gender based on their elemental properties.

The author's introduction belies the medical conceptualization of the female body as intrinsically inferior, which further validated other forms of structural violence against women. His attention to the proper functioning of the menses, in particular, demonstrates a desire to promote female fertility. Women cannot readily conceive if their menstrual cycles are irregular or absent, and thus the author devotes a significant portion of his work to regulating the menses. Virgins and celibate widows too, despite their sexual abstinence, needed to be concerned about

[24] Ibid., 15.

[25] "Conditions of Women," 65.

their menses, as irregular menstruation was taken as a sure sign of impending illness. A healthy female body was one that was capable of reproduction—its purpose was the production of children, and it could not function properly unless conception was at least physiologically possible, regardless of whether the woman actually conceived or not. The uterus itself, similarly, was "avid to conceive" and imbued with a certain agency or will as it roamed about the body.[26] Its desires ruled the woman, who was subordinate not only to men but also the tendencies of her own reproductive organs. Thus twelfth-century medical texts such as *On the Conditions of Women* discussed women's bodies in terms of their reproductive capacity—or more accurately, their reproductive need—in a way that men's bodies never were.

While male physicians produced theories on women's bodies, women themselves were not entirely absent from the medical discourse. In fact, there is substantial evidence for women practicing medicine in twelfth-century Salerno.[27] Trota was not the only woman of her time to offer medical treatment, but she was one of the few to whom we can ascribe written texts; this is in part due to the division of Salernitan medicine into two categories: theoretical and practical. *Conditions of Women* is a theoretical text, with attention paid to the physiological and philosophical explanations for women's diseases, and it is part of a largely male tradition of gynecological writing. The following text, *Treatments for Women,* is attributed to Trota and reflects a blend of the theoretical and practical sectors of medicine found in the twelfth century. The structural constraints acting on women, as illustrated above, not only promoted their roles as childbearers, but also prevented them from attaining the same level of education and literacy available to men. Women were therefore less likely to participate in the theoretical medical

[26] Jean-Baptise Bonnard, "Male and Female Bodies According to Ancient Greek Physicians," *Clio* 37 (2013): 1-19, at 12.

[27] Green, "Introduction," 48.

circles accessible to men, but since twelfth-century Salerno had not yet required physicians to be licensed, they could still practice medicine without the theoretical background.[28] In this way, women had one advantage over male physicians who dealt with gynecology: as women, they could more easily interact with female patients and assist with diseases of the genitalia or reproductive organs. The male-dominated, theoretical literature on gynecology and obstetrics saw relatively little development in the centuries of its existence, perhaps because "it is doubtful that [male physicians] ever directly touched the genitalia of their female patients."[29] Therefore, female medical practitioners inhabited the gynecological niche alongside male physicians, although their general exclusion from education caused female healers to undertake practical more than theoretical medicine.

Trota's *Treatments for Women* is both theoretical and practical, although the practical elements are more prominent. It appears to be a disorganized text, nominally gynecological and obstetrical, but with treatments for pediatric, general, and even andrological conditions as well. Arabic and Galenic medicine figure very marginally, but Trota's theoretical notions are still present and "rational if unarticulated."[30] She simply did not elaborate on the physiology of disease, even if she implicitly adhered to the elemental and (to a lesser extent) humoral theories of the body.[31] Like the author of *Conditions of Women*, Trota was greatly concerned with menstruation, the promotion of female fertility, and safe childbirth. Her emphasis on the maintenance of women's reproductive capabilities is further strengthened by the absence of any contraceptive recipes; perhaps surprisingly, it is the probably-male author of *Conditions of*

[28] Ibid., 13.

[29] Ibid., 13-14.

[30] Ibid., 38.

[31] Ibid., 38-39.

*Wome*n who offers contraceptive options to his readers.[32] The desire to encourage and aid women in becoming fertile or pregnant is common to both authors, but though I have argued above that the author of *Conditions of Women* did so due to his conceptualization of women as basically reproductive vessels, Trota's motivation remains ambiguous. Her text contains basic elemental and humoral theory, but very little other theoretical material with which we can judge her conceptualization of the female body. However, considering that she was a practical healer in close contact with her female patients, it is possible that her textual concern with fertility reflects the desires of her clients in a way that *Conditions of Women* does not. Twelfth-century Salernitan women were no more free of social misogyny than were other medieval European women; they too were constrained to domestic and especially childbearing roles, with perhaps even lower rates of literacy than elsewhere.[33] Trota may have been responding to the medical demands created by such constraints. To a twelfth-century woman whose worth was determined by her competence as a wife and mother, aids to conception and birth would be invaluable.

Trota's sensitivity to the desires of her female clients is also demonstrated by her attention to the needs of women caused by celibacy, intercourse, birth, and everyday life. Of those women who abstain from intercourse as virgins, nuns, or widows, Trota asserts:

> These women, when they have desire to copulate and do not do so, incur grave illness. For such women, therefore, let there be made this remedy. Take some cotton and musk or pennyroyal oil and anoint it and put it in the vagina. And if you do not have such an oil, take *trifera magna* and dissolve it in a little warm wine, and with cotton or damp wool place it in the vagina. This both dissipates the desire and dulls the pain.[34]

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[32] Ibid., 40.

[33] Ibid., 8.

[34] Trota of Salerno, "Treatments for Women," in *The Trotula: An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*, ed. and trans. Monica Green (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 89-112, at 91.

She retains the Hippocratic and Galenic conviction that (hetero)sexual intercourse is beneficial to women's health and alleviates illness that arises in its absence. However, she deviates from other theories about illness deriving from the lack of sexual activity in that women are here agential. Trota claims that only women who desire intercourse and do not get it are afflicted, not all women regardless of their feelings. Women's emotional or physical desires are the cause of disease, instead of a passive buildup of their own "corrupt semen."[35] In fact, favoring the explanation of poisonous female seed, Galenic theory ignores women's feelings completely, whereas desire is the center of Trota's diagnosis. Furthermore, the remedy quoted above addresses the pain of frustrated desire rather than the pathology of an organ; in other words, Trota was offering an emotional as well as physical solution to the constraints of women's lives.

For those women who did have sexual intercourse, Trota was cognizant of other pains that went unacknowledged by male medical writers. While intercourse was, overall, a beneficial and curative activity, it was sometimes accompanied by discomfort and risk on behalf of the woman.[36] Women could incur pain "from the use of Venus," because of which the genitals swell and require treatment, or after which the womb itself is dried out and excessively heated.[37] According to the "hot" nature of these conditions, Trota recommended that the woman sit in a bath of "cold" or constrictive herbs, such as marsh mallow, which reduced swelling and cooled the burning sensation.[38] Here, the essential heat of men is detrimental to women, rather than restorative. Furthermore, she provided a remedy for vaginal prolapse caused by the excessive

[35] "Conditions of Women," 85.

[36] Green, "Introduction," 40-41.

[37] Trota, "Treatments for Women," 104; 109.

[38] Ibid., 104; 109.

size of the man's penis.[39] Notably, she did not phrase this in terms of the narrowness of the woman's vagina but placed the blame on the male partner. She also provided context for the woman's experience: although women were in acute pain, "having been forced all the same, they [endured] it."[40] They were not in a position to protest or stop painful intercourse; indeed, they were forced despite it, and suffered the consequences afterward. Trota's statement acknowledges that men's sexual pleasure was prioritized over the physical health of women and offers no indication that this hierarchy should be reversed.

Several other passages in *Treatments for Women* also acknowledge the social constraints acting on women's sexual activity. Although Trota prescribed nothing for contraceptive purposes, she recorded five recipes for women who wished to "appear as if they were virgins."[41] In twelfth-century Salerno as well as the broader medieval European context, a woman's honor was almost entirely dependent on her sexual purity, yet Trota recognized that women who were not married may nevertheless have experienced intense physical desire. These constrictive medicines could be used to "restore" virginity, or they may have been intended to increase the pleasure of intercourse within marriage.[42] The prescriptions could certainly be used for both purposes, but Trota explicitly states that her last recipe is meant to imitate the bleeding of a virgin on her wedding night:

> What is better [than the previous recipes] is if the following is done one night before she is married: let her place leeches in the vagina (but take care that they do not go in too far) so that blood comes out and is converted into a little clot. And thus the man will be deceived by the effusion of blood.[43]

[39] Ibid., 94.

[40] Ibid., 94.

[41] Ibid., 103.

[42] Green, "Introduction," 42.

[43] Trota, "Treatments for Women," 104.

The willingness of some women to put leeches in their genitals reveals their dire need to appear virginal at marriage, especially if they were not. A woman whose virginity was in doubt could be refused as a bride in a society where marriage was a woman's means of achieving social acceptance and financial security.[44] Without the support of a natal or affinal family, a woman was vulnerable to poverty and exploitation as a prostitute. Trota appears to have been sympathetic to this plight, but she condemns other uses of her medicines:

> Likewise, there are some dirty and corrupt prostitutes who desire to seem to be more than virgins and they make a constrictive for this purpose, but they are ill counseled, for they render themselves bloody and they wound the penis of the man. They take powdered natron and place it in the vagina.[45]

Women entering marriage may deceive their future husbands, but prostitutes may not similarly deceive their clients. Perhaps Trota intended to validate the concerns of "honorable" women who were potentially able to conceive in marriage, but not those of "dishonorable" prostitutes who were already socially denigrated and not engaging in intercourse for procreative purposes. Regardless of her authorial intent, she unabashedly disseminated techniques for "restoring" virginity, and publicized the illicit method used by prostitutes even while criticizing it.[46]

Trota also responded to the practical needs of female clients in her sections on difficult childbirth and its associated risks. Although her text is not unusual in most of its recommendations for difficult or abnormal labor, it does expand on some aspects of childbirth that were overlooked by or unknown to other male medical writers. Notably, *Treatments for Women* contains two remedies for tears in the perineum during birth, which are echoed by only

[44] Green, "Introduction," 42.

[45] Trota, "Treatments for Women," 104.

[46] Green, "Introduction,"42.

one other Salernitan writer.[47] Trota situated one of these remedies in a section titled "On the Dangerous Things Happening to Women Giving Birth," an accurate title given the seriousness of blood loss and the frequency of death in childbirth. Yet for all this danger, she recorded very few guidelines for normal births, perhaps indicating that women without any medical experience would know how to safely deliver a child without the guidance of a physician.[48] If this is so, *Treatments for Women* demonstrates that the practical medical knowledge of women extended beyond female healers to women with no medical association at all.

Trota operated within both the male-dominated, theoretical medical sphere as well as the female-dominated, necessarily practical one. Her educational level is ambiguous, as she has a clear understanding of Hippocratic and Galenic gynecological theory, yet she does not explicitly reference or quote these or any other texts. In contrast to the author of *Conditions of Women*, who recounted a case handled by Galen, Trota recounted a case in which she herself intervened, valuing her practical experience over the theoretical explanations found in other texts.[49] Her text is therefore well positioned to demonstrate how female practitioners reacted to the theories about their own bodies as men conceptualized them, as well as how they created their own informal theories to inform their practice. Trota's text perpetuates the inferiority of women despite her own inclusion in that marginalized group, but it does not conform in all respects. Trota was familiar with the medical theories that postulated female inferiority and subordination to their reproductive organs, and in some cases she agreed:

[47] Ibid., 43.

[48] Ibid., 43.

[49] "Conditions of Women," 67; Trota, "Treatments for Women," 94.

> For pain of the womb after birth, make a remedy like this. The womb, as though it were a wild beast of the forest, because of the sudden evacuation falls this way and that, as if it were wandering. Whence vehement pain is caused.[50]

Trota likened the womb to a wild animal, as did the Hippocratic tradition, and referenced the wandering of the uterus that is found in commentaries on uterine suffocation.[51] Yet she simultaneously differed from these treatises by attributing such motion of the womb to the strain of childbirth, instead of the organ's own tendencies as an inherently "gluttonous *zôon*."[52] As a female healer in a medical culture that overwhelmingly advocated the inferiority of women, Trota accepted some theories while making adjustments to others, which may have been unintentional. Her inclusion of vaginal constrictives for the express purpose of deceiving men is fairly unambiguous, but she also subtly rejected some conceptualizations of the female body as ruled by its reproductive organs. Most significantly, she acknowledged women's competence as healers or physicians as well as the needs of female clients, providing an insight into the medieval female body as women themselves saw it.

At times, the cures found in *Treatments for Women* sound as absurd to modern readers as those of *Conditions of Women*, but again, these prescriptions were useful enough to medieval audiences to become the most widely read compendium on women's medicine for several centuries. Reading Trota's work can be as humorous as it is strange—the medicinal value of boiled old shoes and sandals remains elusive—yet what we find amusing points us to the very real and sometimes serious conditions faced by twelfth-century women.[53] The boiling of

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[50] Trota, "Treatments for Women," 90.

[51] Green, "Introduction," 23.

[52] See Bonnard, "Male and Female," 12.

[53] Trota, "Treatments for Women," 90; 110. Trota recommends a fumigation of old shoe soles, pennyroyal, and laurel leaves boiled together to cure excessive menstrual flow: *Eis autem sunt alie contrarie que habent menstrua inmoderate, quibus subuenimus sic. Accipe soleas ueteres et pulegium et folia lauri et fac decoqui. Hiis coctis, fiat*

footwear was occasioned by either excessive menstrual flow or hemorrhoids following a strenuous birth, and indeed, menstruation and childbirth were two of medieval women's most pressing concerns. It would be easy to dismiss the *Trotula* ensemble as the product of a highly unscientific and superstitious society, but under such a view, our understanding of what it may have been like to be female in the twelfth century would be severely impoverished.

fumigium. And a wine bath with stewed pine herb and old sandals to cure hemorrhoids after birth: *Accipe sotulares ueteres et pineam herbama et coque eas in uino, et intus fac sedere quamdiu pati poterit.*

Chapter Four: Practice and Resistance

Women did not create the doxic gender hierarchy of the twelfth century, but they did to some extent embrace these structures. Women's inferiority gained its doxic status precisely because it was accepted unquestioningly, not just by men but by women as well. This unquestioning acceptance did not necessarily mean that medieval people were passive, perfect replicators of the gender hierarchy, however. Although it persisted throughout the Middle Ages and into the modern era, its form was subject to constant revision by the very individuals who constituted and perpetuated it. A social structure can only continue to exist through the actions of people in a given society who live under it; if people ceased to act according to this structure's dictates, it would no longer exist. Yet because people are imperfect and have disparate personal agendas and interests, their actions subtly introduce novel elements into doxic practices. In this way, the practices of medieval men and women fundamentally shaped and reshaped the gender hierarchy they took for granted. The doxa of female inferiority informed their decisions and contextualized their actions, but it did not control them; then as now, individual agents may act in ways that subvert doxa without rebelling overtly or even intending to disrupt social norms.

In the context of an oppressive system, it might be appropriate to call such subtle subversions acts of resistance. A focus on marginalized or subordinated populations is not just intellectually productive, but also necessary in order to correct the historical narrative that has, until relatively recently, concentrated almost exclusively on privileged groups. This focus acknowledges the existence of power differentials between groups, but it does not concede that the socially inferior group has no agency to act in defiance of power. Observing that their fellow anthropologists have recently become occupied with resistance to an almost obsessive degree, Matthew Liebmann and Melissa Murphy state:

> Building upon the works of Michel Foucault (1975, 1978, 1980) and James C. Scott (1985, 1990, 1998), anthropologists have found resistance seemingly everywhere in recent years, from white-collar bloggers (Schoneboom 2007) to fur-clad hunter-gatherers (Sassaman 2001). Indeed, in the landscape of twenty-first-century anthropology, resistance dominates. Nowhere is this domination more conspicuous than in contemporary archaeology, where the prominence of practice theory (and the concomitant emphasis on the role of agency in social life), the rise of household/ domestic archaeology, and interest in the archaeology of enslaved and colonized peoples have combined to focus heretofore unprecedented attention on resistance among subaltern peoples.[1]

Practice theory as applied to the resistance of subordinate (or subaltern) groups allows anthropologists and historians to appreciate the diversity of thought and activity, as well as the micropolitics, found in daily life.[2] This is a valuable perspective from which to view medieval gender hierarchy, since my discussion so far has concerned the ways in which women upheld the structures of their own inferiority. Although the recent surge of interest in resistance has been criticized as having become merely "trendy," such considerations still describe vital aspects of subaltern life. Resistance of this kind occupied a noteworthy position in the work of Heloise and Trota. While it was not central in either woman's writing, it should be kept in mind that most members of a subordinated group are not the sort of glorified revolutionary that is commonly associated with resistance.[3] Most socially disadvantaged people seek to "organize their daily lives not around taking over a place but around forging residence in it," which is exactly the strategy employed by Heloise and Trota.[4] So though we may not find a modern feminist icon in

[1] Matthew Liebmann and Melissa Murphy, "Rethinking the Archaeology of 'Rebels, Backsliders, and Idolaters'," in *Enduring Conquests: Rethinking the Archaeology of Resistance to Spanish Colonialism in the Americas*, ed. Liebmann and Murphy (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2011), 3-18, at 7-8.

[2] Liebmann and Murphy, "Rethinking," 5; 8.

[3] Silliman, "Archaeologies of Indigenous Survivance and Residence," in *Rethinking Colonial Pasts through Archaeology*, ed. Neal Ferris, Rodney Harrison, and Michael V. Wilcox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 57-75, at 62.

[4] Silliman, "Archaeologies," 62.

either of these women, we may find more subtle acts of resistance, which are no less important to study than those on the grand stages of history.

For Heloise, I argue that resistance was largely unintentional, or at least that her intent was not to challenge female inferiority in the way that modern scholars wish she had done. To a twenty-first-century eye, Heloise's frank and unapologetic discussion of her sexual thoughts and desires may seem ahead of her time:

> In my case, the pleasures of lovers which we shared have been too sweet—they cannot displease me, and can scarcely shift from my memory. 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 … Sometimes my thoughts are betrayed in a movement of my body, or they break out in an unguarded word … Men call me chaste; they do not know the hypocrite I am.[5]

But although her confession is explicit, it is unusual only in the fact that Heloise is referring to lust for Abelard (we assume) instead of for Christ. Mystical marriages between a female religious devotee and Jesus were widely known, and spiritual encounters between these two parties were often termed in intense physical and sexual language.[6] Yet Heloise's dilemma is that she cannot transfer her worldly, sexual love to Christ and burns instead with desires she is forbidden to fulfill.

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[5] Heloise to Abelard, *Letter 4*, in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, ed. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin Press, 2003), 63-71, at 68-69.

[6] See the dictated works of Catherine of Siena and Andrea of Foligno, and Judith Brown's *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) about Benedetta Carlini, for mystic marriages and sexual/physical encounters with Christ. Benedetta Carlini provides a particularly interesting and complex situation in which she, claiming to be possessed by Jesus or a male angel named Splendidiello, performed sexual acts with another female nun. See Henry of Suso's *Horologium Sapientiae* for a marriage between Christ (portrayed as the female entity Wisdom) and a male mystic. On the feminine depiction of Jesus, see Carolyn Muir, "Lay Bridegrooms of a Female Christ in Two Fifteenth-Century French Miniatures

Heloise's resistance to the gendered constraints placed upon her takes place in this environment of sexual desire, chastity, and monastic seclusion. In her third letter to Abelard, which begins the so-called Letters of Direction, she explains to him the insufficiency of the Benedictine Rule for nuns, given that it "was clearly written for men alone" and "can only be fully obeyed by men."[7] Not only did it inadequately address women's physical bodies—the Rule's mandates on clothing were impossible for menstruating women to uphold, and likewise its direction that the monastery's inhabitants should work in the fields was untenable for nuns—but it also failed to consider their different mental dispositions.[8] For Heloise adamantly and consistently held that females were the weaker and morally inferior sex, and she characterized a woman's mind as fragile, inconstant, and easily corrupted. Therefore, she asks Abelard, should an abbess offer hospitality to male visitors, or should only women be allowed in? She seems to favor the prohibition of male visitors, given that "it is all too easy for the souls of men and women to be destroyed if they live together in one place, and especially at table," then later acknowledges that a convent could not survive without the aid of male outsiders such as priests, laborers, and noble patrons.[9] But she also takes issue with female visitors:

> And even if [the nuns] admit to their table only women to whom they have given hospitality, is there no lurking danger there? Surely nothing is so conducive to a woman's seduction as woman's flattery, nor does a woman pass on the foulness of a corrupted mind so readily to any but another woman; which is why St. Jerome particularly exhorts women of a sacred calling to avoid contact with women of the world.[10]

[7] Heloise to Abelard, *Letter 6*, in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, ed. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin Press, 2003), 93-111, at 94.

[8] Ibid., 94-95.

[9] Ibid., 94-95.

[10] Ibid., 95.

Female visitors are, according to this passage, even more dangerous than men. This conclusion troubled the accepted discourse on sexuality despite technically adhering to its tenets. Namely, she takes the statement that women are easily seduced because they are easily flattered and concludes, in opposition to the medieval denial of female same-sex attraction, that they are most vulnerable to seduction by other women.[11] By identifying this particular problem with the Benedictine Rule as it applied to religious women, Heloise was able to formulate a "reverse discourse" of female sexual desire.[12]

We know that Heloise intended a sexual connotation in this passage because she uses words that both she and other writers previously used in clearly sexual circumstances. *Lenocinium muliebre*, which has been translated as "women's flattery," could also be rendered as "allurement," "pandering," or even "enticement."[13] Furthermore, the *turpitudo* used to describe the "foulness" of the women's minds appears in Heloise's second letter to Abelard, in which she relates her "lewd" thoughts during Mass, and Thomas of Chobham used it to classify unnatural sexual acts in his early thirteenth-century *Summa confessorum*.[14] Heloise is clearly referring to the danger of sexual attraction and seduction between women in a monastic context, using the avowed tenets of a patriarchal and heterosexual society to make this subversive statement.

Although Heloise established that the Benedictine Rule was in some ways unsuitable for governing a female monastic community, she was not necessarily interested in pursuing more

[11] Karma Lochrie, "Untold Pleasures: Heloise's Theory of Female Desire and Religious Practice," in *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 26-46, at 32.

[12] Lochrie, "Pleasures," 42.

[13] Ibid., 33, and Whitaker's Words, University of Notre Dame Archives. http://archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/wordz.pl?keyword=lenocinium.

[14] Lochrie, "Pleasures," 33, and Heloise to Abelard, *Letter 4*, 68.

stringent regulations concerning the preservation of chastity.[15] Rather, she indicated that the capacity for same-sex desire, like menstruation, is an innate female characteristic and cannot be ignored or overcome by a monastic rule.[16] Menstruation is a biological female trait, but for Heloise, the cultural trait of mental weakness and its consequences were equally irrepressible. Neither was same-sex desire purely the result of accepting secular women as visitors; all women no matter their religious calling were susceptible to the persuasions of an inferior mind, including the tendency to succumb to flattery, the vulnerability to seduction, and a lack of spiritual and physical self-control. As Heloise well knew, conversion to the monastic life did not automatically erase a woman's worldliness and moral blemishes, so even nuns could fall prey to the charms of both secular and religious women. Therefore same-sex desire was an inescapable part of female monastic life, precisely because of the "natural" and unquestioned infirmity of female minds.

Heloise's theory of female monastic desire was a form of resistance against a system of social structures that relegated her to an inferior status. She used the doxa and logic of a male-dominated society to argue for the existence of a female eroticism that was not affected by the unavailability of men as sexual partners.[17] Yet Karma Lochrie's description of this strategy as "troublingly couched in an all too legible medieval misogyny" allows historians to dismiss Heloise's rhetoric out of hand without first examining her interactions with the structures of female inferiority. It ends the conversation on medieval gender relations as simply misogynistic rather than promoting further investigation into women's experience of and participation in the gender hierarchy. It is more productive, I argue, to approach Heloise and her work without

[15] Lochrie, "Pleasures," 45.

[16] Ibid., 44.

[17] Ibid., 43.

anachronistic value judgments already in mind. We cannot rightfully call her work misogynist when there was no other philosophical, theological, or social alternative.

For this reason, it would also be unjustified to say that she was intentionally resisting the social inferiority of women. She very clearly refutes this interpretation of her work:

> I am surprised, my only love [Abelard], that contrary to custom in letter-writing and, indeed, to the natural order, you have thought fit to put my name before yours in the greeting which heads your letter [letter 3], so that we have the woman before the man, wife before husband, handmaid before lord, nun before monk, deaconess before priest and abbess before abbot. Surely the right and proper order is for those who write to their superiors or equals to put their names before their own, but in letters to inferiors, precedence in order of address follows precedence in rank.[18]

It is Abelard who contravenes "the natural order" by giving Heloise pride of place, and Heloise who objects to being exalted. She also implies that she is not even Abelard's equal, since she suggests that he conform to the style of writing addressed only to inferiors. It is nevertheless appropriate to characterize her theory of female desire as resistance, because her intent was to expose the inadequacies and inconsistencies of a monastic system that catered only to men.

Trota similarly did not intend to challenge the "natural" inferiority of women, but she did resist the negative view of women's bodies promoted by male medical writers. Whereas late medieval writers, especially beginning in the thirteenth century, characterized menstruation as "thoroughly poisonous or noxious," the authors of the two gynecological (as opposed to the third, which is cosmetic) *Trotula* texts adopted a more positive view.[19] Both authors dedicated the majority of their texts to the stimulation of menstruation, which was considered to be beneficial to the woman's health and enabled her to conceive. This stands in contrast to other

[18] Heloise to Abelard, *Letter 4*, 63.

[19] Monica Green, ed. and trans., "Introduction," in *The Trotula: An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 22.

medical writers, who still encouraged menstruation for the purposes of conception, but thought it harmful to women's health. The probably-male author of *Conditions of Women* referred instead to the colloquial term for menstruation and saw it as a salubrious process:

> The common people call the menses "the flowers," because just as trees do not bring forth fruit without flowers, so women without their flowers are cheated of the ability to conceive. This purgation occurs in women just as nocturnal emission happens to men. For Nature, if burdened by certain humors, either in men or in women, always tries to expel or set aside its yoke and reduce its labor.[20]

It is only when the menses are too sparse or too heavy that women incur illness; otherwise, it is not a matter of concern. The floral metaphor is also a positive one, since it conjures images of vitality and new life echoed in Hildegard of Bingen's description of the menses as a woman's "generative greenness and floridity."[21] Trota does not mention "the flowers" as a commonly used term in *Treatments for Women*, but she does subscribe to the associated philosophy that menstruation is beneficial to a woman's health. Her attention to proper menstruation was largely motivated by the desire—both her own desire as a healer and that of her female clients—to promote conception. The sparsely theoretical nature of *Treatments for Women* does not indicate an intellectual or educational failing on Trota's part, but rather her recognition of the practical, everyday concerns of twelfth-century women, who cared more for relief of their symptoms than for a philosophical explanation of their cause. Thus Trota does not explicitly state why she thinks

[20] "Conditions of Women," 66. It is interesting that the author likens menstruation to nocturnal emissions, which are notorious among theologians and other religious writers for their detrimental spiritual effects. John Cassian, for example, explained nocturnal emissions as the result of either too much food or drink, spiritual neglect, or Satan's attempts to humiliate and discourage a monk (John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 761-782. But such theologians consider only the negative spiritual consequences, not the bodily. The *Trotula* offers a complementary view on the physical side of this concern.

[21] Green "Introduction," 22. Hildegard also states that women menstruate as a result of Eve's original sin, but this does not seem to affect its overall good nature.

menstruation is beneficial, as the author of *Conditions of Women* does, but she implicitly resists the male-centric structure of medicine by prioritizing the interests of women.

In addition to menstruation, Trota addresses sex and sexual desire in women in ways that adhere to patriarchal social structures, yet do not exactly replicate them. As discussed in the previous chapter, she agreed with contemporary male authors that heterosexual intercourse was healthful and restorative, perhaps even necessary, for women.[22] Yet she also conceded that it was not entirely beneficial, since it could cause pain or give rise to illnesses as easily as it could give pleasure.[23] In this context, Trota maintained women's dependence on men for the preservation of their basic health, but she focused on the experiences and feelings of women despite their reliance on men. She acknowledged that sexual intercourse was often painful for women, and that sometimes their male partners forced them to have sex despite their discomfort.[24] Trota's recommendation was not that women should abstain from sex or that their male partners should be more considerate during intercourse, the first of which would be impractical for most married women, and the second of which would upset notions about whose pleasure is more important. Instead, she prescribed ointments of warm pennyroyal oil to soften and soothe the vagina and baths infused with marsh mallow and other herbs to relieve painful swelling.[25] These reactive measures relieved women's pain without rearranging the social politics of medieval sexual relations.

Trota was also cognizant of the suffering incurred by women who desired to have intercourse but were prevented from doing so. *Treatments for Women* includes remedies for

[22] Green, "Introduction," 40.

[23] See Trota, "Treatments for Women," 104 and 109 for pain, and 91 for pleasure (although this is in the context of women who do not have intercourse when they want it, implying that they would be gratified by doing so).

[24] Ibid., 109; 94.

[25] Ibid., 94; 104; 109.

women who "incur grave illness" as a result of celibacy, but Trota attributes their condition to the repression of emotions and desire, not the physiological buildup of semen in their wombs.[26] This explanation recognized women's agency and sexuality instead of reinforcing the tradition that a woman was ruled by the actions of her reproductive organs, which were beyond her control. But alongside this resistance to the passive conceptualization of frustrated desire, Trota again did not suggest that the structure of society should be reorganized. Her solution to the illnesses caused by female celibacy was not that the women should break free from social custom or vows and have intercourse as they wished. She only offered medicinal herbs and oils that would alleviate the desires and enable the women to remain celibate.

Finally, Trota's work supported the competence of ordinary women in caring for their own bodies and those of others, specifically during childbirth, bypassing the need for a male physician. Surprisingly, for a gynecological text, *Treatments for Women* deals sparingly with normal childbirth and refers mainly to abnormal or difficult births and the injuries associated with them. This may reflect the sentiment that normal births do not require the intervention of a physician, and that the women already present such as neighbors and relatives would be capable of handling the birth unassisted.[27] If this inference is correct, Trota would not only be asserting that the average woman is already quite competent in obstetric matters, but also that childbirth is not inherently pathological.[28] The composite translation of the *Trotula*, however, seems to blame women for their incompetence:

[26] Trota, "Treatments for Women," 91, and Green, "Introduction," 40.

[27] Green, "Introduction," 43.

[28] Ibid., 43.

> There are some women for whom things go wrong in giving birth, and this is because of the failure of those assisting them: that is to say, this is kept hidden by the women.[29]

But in the earliest manuscript of *Treatments for Women* [DCM1], this had been written as

> "But let this thing of ours [this observation of ours?] be a secret/be hidden with women" or even "But let this be our secret with women" *(Sed istud nostrum cum mulieribus sit secretum)*. This apparent *entre nous* of female author and audience was immediately altered in *DCM 2* [the second manuscript iteration, predating the composite translation quoted above]: "But this thing, you know, is hidden with women" *(Sed istud nosti quod cum mulieribus sit secretum)*.[30]

This alteration changes a great deal, especially considering the content that follows. Trota begins a discussion of how the perineum is sometimes torn during birth, what should be done to heal the wound, and how to prevent this injury from reoccurring in subsequent births. Understandably, this might be an embarrassing condition for some women, so Trota may have suggested that "this observation" of the women attending the birth should be kept secret. But when the wording is changed, in both the composite version and DCM2, the text then indicates that the women who attend the birth keep their failures secret, perhaps for selfish reasons. The original manuscript text, under Trota's direction, admitted that female attendants made mistakes, but recommended measures to protect the woman's dignity, whereas the subsequent manuscripts accused women of both malpractice and attempting to hide their mistakes from men. For in the later manuscripts, the women are grammatically separate from the author instead of *including* the author.

The reader is thus faced with questions of authorship and authority: which version is the authentic one, and to what extent is Trota still the author of the later manuscripts? It is certainly tempting to select the earliest manuscript of *Treatments for Women* as the authoritative version,

[29] Trota, "Treatments for Women," 93.

[30] Green, "Notes," 198.

since it predates all the others, likely has the fewest transcription errors, and presumably adheres most closely to the author's intended message. Yet the subsequent manuscripts were accepted by readers as equally authoritative, if they were even aware of other copies. Therefore, historians must also give the same weight to these later versions. Furthermore, medieval scribal practice was very different from modern ideas about textual transmission. In most cases, scribes did not believe that the author's original text was the only "pure" version of a work.[31] A scribe was usually entirely justified in changing a text as he or she saw fit, since accepted knowledge was likely to have changed since the text was last copied, and later readers would have approached the text with different concerns and questions.[32] Not including simple transcription errors due to poor handwriting, parchment damage, rushed copying, or a misreading of the many medieval abbreviations, the reader should expect textual inconsistencies within the manuscript tradition of a particular work as virtually a matter of course.

The question of authority plagues female medieval authors in particular; due to our lingering modern biases, historians are still predisposed to be suspicious of female authorship. Whether Trota and Heloise really did write the texts attributed to them has been the subject of debate, whereas nobody has questioned whether Abelard really wrote the *Historia calamitatum* or Muscio the *Gynaecia*. While the debate over Heloise's authorship has largely been laid to rest, scholars have more evidence to argue over in Trota's case.[33] Trota is referred to in the third

[31] Some notable exceptions are the Bible and patristic texts such as those of Augustine or Gregory the Great. The Bible, as the literal Word of God, could not be changed by a mere scribe, and patristic texts were revered to a lesser, but still considerable, extent.

[32] See Elizabeth J. Bryan, *Collaborative Meaning in Medieval Scribal Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999) for a discussion of scribal practice, authority, and authorship.

[33] Historians now generally agree that Heloise is the author of the letters ascribed to her in Radice's translation. However, Constant Mews has argued in *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999) that the *Epistolae duorum amantium*, an extensive collection of letters between an unknown medieval man and woman, is the lost correspondence of Heloise and Abelard's early relationship. This argument has now been taken up by medieval scholars; for a review of the most pertinent arguments, see John Marenbon, "Lost

person in *Treatments for Women*, and even the earliest versions of the text include vernacular English words for diseases or herbs, which Trota is unlikely to have known.[34] All of this indicates that Trota herself did not write *Treatments for Women*, but by no means does it suggest that she is not the author. Fifteen remedies from *Treatments for Women* are also found directly in *Practical Medicine According to Trota*, as well as similarities in other remedies, recommended herbs, and underlying theoretical structures.[35] It is possible that *Treatments for Women* is the result of Trota's dictation to a scribe, or it might be a compilation of her work drawn from her other, more extensive texts. Whatever the circumstances, it is appropriate to call her the author of this text, reflecting her "reputation and her 'maternity' of the collected wisdom on women's diseases and other cures."[36]

Trota should neither be dismissed as the author of *Treatments for Women* nor condemned for her adherence to and support of patriarchal structures. Heloise likewise should not be labeled a misogynist for upholding the inferiority of women, as the complexity of her interactions with medieval social reality is obscured by doing so. Both authors resisted some aspect of women's inferiority and attained great literary legacies, even while affirming the subordination of women. However, historians should take care when searching for resistance in the works of medieval women. In the first place, resistance is a very broad and vague subject that does not tell us much about the experiences of subaltern groups without refinement and an awareness of context. It also assumes that resistance is the natural reaction to domination, which can obscure the

Love Letters? A Controversy in Retrospect," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 15, no. 2 (2008): 267-80.

[34] Green, "Introduction," 49-50.

[35] Ibid., 49.

[36] Ibid., 50.

collaboration, participation, and reciprocity that are equally plausible outcomes.[37] This is particularly true of female subordination, because women and men must live and work together if society is to maintain itself. The nuances of Heloise and Trota's relationship to the structures that subjugated them would be missed if historians were attentive solely to resistance or conformity. And perhaps the most difficult challenge is to counter our subconscious desire, as Westerners accustomed to the ideals of freedom and self-determination, to "live vicariously through the would-be resisters of the past, celebrating the underdogs who valiantly defied oppression…yearning for the triumph of the human spirit over domination."[38]

[37] Liebmann and Murphy, "Rethinking," 9.

[38] Ibid., 9.

Conclusion

The continual shaping and re-shaping of tradition and routine is highly political, because heterodoxy challenges the validity of everyday truths.[1] This can be done on "the grand stages of political performance" or in the privacy of one's own home, but either way, the unquestioned and sometimes fundamental aspects of society become uncertain and discursive.[2] The existence of heterodoxy implies that social actors have become aware of other ways to conduct their daily affairs. They make the choice to pursue any of the now-heterodoxical alternatives, or to remain with the orthodox position, is to some extent political. Yet most people maneuvering among doxa, orthodoxy, and heterodoxy are not avowed revolutionaries. They do not seek to bring down the established order or to reinstate the integrity of a degraded one. Instead, they are residents navigating a complicated social terrain, staking claims in order to "go on" in the world, not necessarily to disrupt it.[3] If some authority seeks to control others' bodies and actions through the institution or prohibition of certain practices, social actors may then choose whether or not to obey the oppressor's stipulations.[4] As quotidian and insignificant as this choice may seem—for example, whether or not I decide to jaywalk today—it is still an expression of agency amid social structure.

This is especially true where heterodoxy and orthodoxy co-exist, as opposed to unquestioned doxa. Individuals who may choose from a range of practices, even unconsciously, have the ability to challenge orthodoxy in their everyday lives. There is, certainly, often a great

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[1] Stephen Silliman, "Agency, practical politics and the archaeology of culture contact," *Journal of Social Anthropology* 1, vol. 2 (2001), 190-209, at 194.

[2] Silliman, "Agency," 194.

[3] Stephen Silliman, "Archaeologies of Indigenous Survivance and Residence," in *Rethinking Colonial Pasts through Archaeology*, ed. Neal Ferris, Rodney Harrison, and Michael V. Wilcox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 57-75, at 61.

[4] Silliman, "Agency," 195.

deal of censorship exercised by authorities and institutions that are benefited by the orthodox position, and this symbolic power over subordinate or heterodox bodies is considerable.[5] In the twelfth century, as Trota's recipes for appearing virginal imply, a woman who engaged in premarital sex was subject to intense social reproach and could even be rejected by her family or husband's family. Furthermore, the censorship of orthodoxy sometimes functions to focus dissenters' attention on the censored issue, diverting attention from the deeper foundations of the issue, which may remain doxic.[6] Orthodox authorities may, in other words, choose to combat heterodoxy openly on a superficial issue in order to conceal the fact that greater and more troublesome issues lie hidden underneath. Such is the case with the medieval gender hierarchy, in which the particulars of what is appropriate for women to be or do were sometimes open for debate, but the ultimate fact that women were inferior was not debated. Both parties in debate, no matter how they differed on appropriate female practices, remained within the doxic "universe of possible discourse" of female inferiority, which limited that which was conceivable to dispute and that which was beyond disputation.[7] Yet the existence of doxa does not altogether eliminate social agency; in the cases where doxa is acknowledged but still unquestioned, individuals may still decide to follow, or "consent" to it because it serves their interests or is supported by shared life histories.[8] This brings doxa back to Bourdieu's *habitus*, the set of "durable dispositions" that shape individual taste and behavior.[9] Cultivated in such a way, an individual may readily accept doxa because it is convenient to do so.

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[5] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Peculiar History of Scientific Reason," in *Readings for a History of Anthropological Theory*, ed. Paul A. Erickson and Liam D. Murphy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 437-53, at 441.

[6] Pierre Bourdieu, "Doxa, Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy," in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1977): 159-71, at 169.

[7] Bourdieu, "Doxa," 169.

[8] Silliman, "Agency," 193.

[9] Ibid., 193.

When considered in light of the interactions between doxa, heterodoxy, and orthodoxy, the medieval gender hierarchy can be seen to have persisted through both structure and social agency. The inferiority of women was doxic, existing without a valid alternative, yet the practices surrounding this assumed inferiority were constantly in flux according to the actions of individuals. Twelfth-century texts, especially those authored by women, participated in this everyday negotiation of gendered practice. They both address the traditions and routines of their authors' daily lives and contribute to the reproduction of doxic structures surrounding gender. It is particularly fruitful to consider female authors, since their works represent some of the ways that women responded to their inferior status, despite being shaped by the structures that benefited men. As Silliman reminds us, social agents are rarely true revolutionaries, even if they want to be; the female authors of the twelfth century were not "out to usurp the powers that [oppressed] them," but rather to establish a residence, or viable way of life, among the various and entangled particulars of society.[10] It was, in fact, in their interest to integrate with a male-dominated paradigm:

> As we have seen … social categories disadvantaged by the symbolic order, such as women and the young, cannot but recognize the legitimacy of the dominant classification in the very fact that their only chance of neutralizing those of its effects most contrary to their own interests lies in submitting to them in order to make use of them …[11]

Under the physical, structural, and symbolic power of men, medieval women were best served by adhering to the system that subjugated them. Although the gender hierarchy favored the endeavors of men, women could also manage their affairs advantageously by playing according to the rules of another's game. Thus, women lived in, supported, and reproduced the gender

[10] Ibid., 195.

[11] Bourdieu, "Doxa," 164-165.

hierarchy alongside men, and the texts they produced show this complex interaction between structure and agency. After all, no interaction between two people is ever strictly between individuals; they are representatives of an entire society through their respective *habitūs*.[12] A woman's text, like a conversation, draws from a vast corpus of social knowledge that remains implicit but not invisible.

We may pride ourselves on the facts that women no longer have to accept and support their own social inferiority, that we now have a valid alternative to male superiority, and that women now have "a voice" with which to denounce sexism. But this would be false reassurance, in addition to assuming that all women equally enjoy, or even desire, the benefits of Western feminism.[13] Even if we were to consider only Western women, we would be faced with our intellectual inheritance of medieval conceptualizations of gender. Heloise and Trota's writings tell us not just about the twelfth century, but also about our own social dynamics of power and gender relations. They also force us to ask difficult questions about female historical figures and our modern interactions with them. How might we be unwittingly perpetuating the devaluation of medieval women as historians and consumers of medieval literature? What does it say that historians are more ready to question women's "genuine" authorship than that of men? Women certainly had more restricted access to literacy and education than men during the Middle Ages, but both Heloise and Trota were verifiably well-educated and capable of producing erudite work. Why do historians then devote so much time to debating their authorship instead of analyzing their philosophy?

[12] Bourdieu, "Structures, habitus, and practices," in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1977), 159-97, at 81.

[13] See Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review*, no. 30 (1988), 61-88, for an analysis of Western feminism and the "Third World Woman."

Furthermore, we are encouraged to reflect upon our interactions with and evaluations of female historical figures. The modern feminist magazine *The Lily*, a revitalization of the first U.S. newspaper published by and for women, poses this question to its readers in regard to Christine de Pizan, a well-known female professional author in fourteenth-century France. Pizan is most famous for *The Book of the City of Ladies*, a work in which the author audaciously challenges negative medieval characterizations of women and builds a metaphorical "city of ladies" to house the famous, brilliant, and exemplary women of history. In an article for *The Lily* discussing Pizan's legacy, Whitney Mannies asks, "Should she really have a seat in the feminist canon? Is she an empowering figure? Is there anything to be gained from reading her?"[14] Undoubtedly, the author notes, Pizan espoused some radical ideas about gender, but she also promoted an understanding of gender roles that does not accord with modern feminist perspectives. Pizan believed strongly in women's upright moral character and intellectual abilities, stating that male authors who wrote unfavorably about women were disseminating "lies" and "wicked insults."[15] Yet at the same time, she discouraged women from attempting to usurp what she considered to be men's God-given duties; for example, legal office:

> … God gives men strong and hardy bodies for coming and going as well as for speaking boldly. And for this reason, men with this nature learn the laws—and … are required to make [people] obey with physical constraint and force of arms, a task which women could never accomplish. Nevertheless, though God has given women great understanding—and there are many such women—because of the integrity to which women are inclined, it would not be at all appropriate for them to go and appear so brazenly in the court like men, for there are enough men who do so.[16]

[14] Whitney Mannies, "Christine de Pizan was not a 'good feminist.' Can we still learn from her?" Perspective, The Lily, last modified March 9 (year not specified). https://www.thelily.com/christine-de-pizan-was-not-a-good-feminist-can-we-still-learn-from-her/.

[15] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1982), 3-4.

[16] Christine de Pizan, *City*, 31.

Mannies concludes that this tension between Pizan's opinions and ours is productive, since it allows us to go beyond "superficial celebratory vignettes" in order to engage with real, complicated female figures, many of whom may not live up to our standards.[17] As I have argued in regard to Heloise and Trota, Christine de Pizan must also be understood as a woman whose desires, interests, and philosophy do not always agree with our own. The same may even be said of modern women, who are hardly a homogenous global sisterhood with the same prerogatives. Gender today, as in twelfth-century Europe, is diversely understood and practiced. Historians and feminists must learn to tread the thin and, at times, uneven line "between hagiography and excommunication."[18] To praise medieval women—and indeed medieval men—uncritically or condemn them absolutely based solely on their faithful adherence to our own views does not just disregard their historical context, but also hinders our exploration of gender from the twelfth century to today.

[17] Mannies, "Christine."

[18] Mannies, "Christine."

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