PARADOXES OF CONSCIENCE IN THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES

The autobiographical and confessional writings of Abelard, Heloise, and the Archpoet were concerned with religious authenticity, spiritual sincerity, and their opposite – *fictio*, a composite of hypocrisy and dissimulation, lying and irony. How and why moral identity could be feigned or falsified were seen as issues of primary importance, and Peter Godman here restores them to the prominence they once occupied in twelfth-century thought.

This is a new account of the relationship between ethics and literature in the work of the most famous authors of the Latin Middle Ages. Combining conceptual analysis with close attention to style and form, it offers a major contribution to the history of the medieval conscience.

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PARADOXES OF CONSCIENCE IN THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES

Abelard, Heloise, and the Archpoet

PETER GODMAN

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to
BILJANA

Je ne trouve aucune qualité si aysée à contrefaire que la devotion, si on n'y conforme les meurs et la vie; son essence est abstruse et occulte; les apparences, faciles et pompeuses.

Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* III. 2

Je mets Montaigne à la tête de ces faux sincères qui veulent tromper en disant vrai.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Confessions* (intro.; 1764)

Könnte Einer nicht, um zu zeigen, daß er versteht was 'Verstellung' ist, Geschichten erfinden, worin Verstellung vorkommt? Um nun den Begriff der Verstellung zu entwickeln, erfindet er immer kompliziertere Geschichten. Was z.B. wie ein Geständnis ausschaut, ist nur eine weitere Verstellung; was wie die Verstellung ausschaut, ist nur eine Front um die eigentliche Verstellung zu verbergen; etc. etc. etc.

Der Begriff ist also in einer Art von Geschichten niedergelegt. Und die Geschichten sind nach dem Prinzip konstituiert, daß *alles* Verstellung sein kann.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Letzte Schriften über die Philosophie der Psychologie* I, 268–9

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Preface and acknowledgements

Outside the Vatican, where much of the research for this book was done, there stood, on almost every occasion I visited the papal library, a gentleman whose behaviour and appearance suggested that he had seen better days. His occupation was, to admonish passers-by. 'Andate a confessarvi!' (Go and confess!) he would bellow to impassive monsignori, indifferent tourists, and curious me. My curiosity was aroused less by what he repeated than by what he did not say. He did not say, for example: 'Pentitevi!' (Repent!), as an evangelical Protestant might have done. Instead he alluded to the redemptive power of a sacrament administered by the Roman Catholic Church.

That he had chosen the right place to do so, no one denied. Nor did anyone appear to pay the slightest attention. If I did, the reason was not only fellow-feeling with one of those whom others regard as cranks. As I worked on the feigning and mockery of confession which he advocated so solemnly, I imagined a dialogue with him on that subject which I did not muster the pluck to conduct in reality. And now it is too late, for, when my research drew to a close, its companion deserted his post near the Porta Sant'Anna. If it would be too much to claim that I miss him, I still hear the echo of his admonition with melancholy gratitude.

The gratitude derives from the stimulus he provided to look at larger questions which the myopia of specialisation may not see. One of them is, how much can we know about the consciences of men and women who lived a millennium ago? Less than is knowable about the period nine hundred years previous to us. Why then, in the *longue durée* of the European conscience, does a single century make a difference? Because that century was the twelfth, during which new issues were perceived and forgotten problems recalled to memory. An example, novel in the intensity with which it was discussed during that period, is *fictio*.

Fictio does not mean 'fiction'. Rather theological than literary, this term signifies feigning and falsification of conscience, particularly in penance.

Penance was given the status of a sacrament during the twelfth century, and confession was regarded as a test of spiritual authenticity and religious sincerity. A travesty of both, at the moment when sinners were expected to be truest to God and to themselves, *fictio* challenged the ethical imagination of Latin Europe. That challenge found a response in the works of Abelard, Heloise, and the Archpoet. Usually considered separately from one another, in terms of such harmless but unhelpful anachronisms as 'individuality' or 'renaissance', all three of them reflected on issues of moral identity posed by feigning and falsification of conscience. Because the morality to which Abelard and Heloise subscribed was, or became, monastic, their reflection also led them to allied problems of lying, dissimulation, and hypocrisy in a religious context. In the very different context of a German schismatic's court, opposed to Rome and hostile to monks, the Archpoet took *fictio* to its limit. There the dividing-line between irony and blasphemy blurred. With a refined wit directed against ethical concerns of the previous generation, this feigned penitent, in his 'confession', created a new figure of spiritual sophistry.

Spiritual sophistry has no history. Nor does the medieval conscience before the thirteenth century. This book attempts to make a contribution to both. Tracing the development of *fictio* and its implications for concepts of sincerity, authenticity, and their opposites, it tries to show how, why, and when a change in the ethical imagination of the West occurred. This occurred earlier than was maintained by Lionel Trilling in a justly celebrated work quoted at the beginning of the first chapter, which introduces the phenomenon of *fictio* as it emerged and mutated during the second and third quarters of the twelfth century. The next two chapters outline the evolution of feigned penance and related ideas from late antiquity to the High Middle Ages. Attention is then paid to their presence in the writings of Abelard, Heloise, and the Archpoet. They raised questions which were not forgotten later, as an *envoi* indicates briefly.

The works of these three figures have a claim to attention, not least because their concerns remain ours, in other shapes and forms. It is the thought of Abelard, Heloise, and the Archpoet that stands at the centre of this book; and an effort is made to link conceptual analysis with the study of style and form. My hope is that this approach may serve to answer questions which have vexed medieval scholarship, although I am sure that my way of going about them will be regarded, in some quarters, as old-fashioned. I have relied on my imperfect memory and made no use of databases, because I am sceptical of the mechanical methods of Latin-less ingenuity. Successive computations of *cursus*, which rarely

tally with one another and never illuminate a single thought, have not spared us prolonged and fruitless controversies about the authenticity of Abelard's and Heloise's epistolary exchange or the attribution to them of some thirteenth-century love-letters. If weariness and boredom at the first controversy appear to have produced a measure of agreement that their writings are indeed what they claim to be, ghosts of uncertainty continue to haunt us.

The most spectral, the least substantial of them is the notion – unsupported by textual history, reason, or common sense – that Abelard forged Heloise's letters. This book contends that the differences between their moral outlooks, directly but subtly reflected in the ways they wrote, were such as to make speculation about common authorship untenable. So too, by implication, is the attempt to foist on the famous couple works that are below their intellectual level, known by the title *epistolae duorum amantium* given them by their first and best editor, Ewald Könsgen. If I have refrained from labouring that implication for the second and no less sterile controversy that has attracted to the names of Abelard and Heloise, the ground is not only a wish to preserve the thematic unity of this book. Almost all that needs to be said about the date and character of the *epistolae duorum amantium* has been argued, with learning and lucidity, by Peter von Moos and others.

In the pages below, I often refer to the publications of Peter von Moos, whose collected studies on these and other subjects (cf. *Abaelard und Heloise: Gesammelte Studien zum Mittelalter* I, ed. G. Melville, Geschichte: Forschung und Wissenschaft 14 (Münster, 2005) deserve more attention than they receive in the English-speaking world. Nor does my debt to him stop there. Since we first met, thirty years ago, when I was a mere beginner and he an established expert, Peter von Moos has never ceased to give me advice and encouragement, from which this book too has benefited. The first study preliminary to it appeared in a *Festschrift* for him ('Cain at Soissons' in *Norm und Krise von Kommunikation: Inszenierungen literarischer und sozialer Interaktion im Mittelalter. Für Peter von Moos* ed. A. Hahn *et al.* (Berlin, 2006) 329–53). Other studies written for friends and colleagues that are related to the subjects I treat here are: 'The Paradoxes of Heloise, I: The First Letter', *Critica del Testo* 8 (2005) 29–53 (for Burghart Wachinger); 'The Paradoxes of Heloise II: Sincere Hypocrisy' in *Impulse und Resonanzen: Tübinger mediävistische Beiträge zum 80. Geburtstag von W. Haug*, ed. G. Vollmann-Profe *et al.* (Tübingen, 2007) 35–44; and

'The Moral Moment' in *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 34 (2008) 338–45 (for Andreas Speer). All of them have been expanded, modified, and corrected.

Because penance, as it was re-conceived in the twelfth century, appeals to what Martha Nussbaum calls 'the intelligence of the emotions', I should like to think that my subject has something in common with hers. Hers alone is the insight embodied in a splendid book (*Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001)), which is complemented by two excellent studies by Richard Sorabji (*Emotions and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford, 2002)) and Simo Knuuttila (*Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* (Oxford, 2004)). The approach represented, in different ways, by these historians of philosophy has made an impact on several branches of medieval studies, amply documented by Rüdiger Schnell (cf. 'Historische Emotionsforschung: Eine mediävistische Standortsbestimmung', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 38 (2006) 173–276). One of them is not the Latin philology of the Middle Ages. That classical Latin philology, in this respect as in others, fares better, has been demonstrated by Robert Kaster in his perceptive and stimulating *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 2005). It does not detract from Kaster's achievement to say that the texts with which he deals have been read closely for two thousand years. Such is the secondary literature on the classics of the twelfth century that one may wonder whether some of them have ever been read closely, and that is what I have tried to do in this book.

It could hardly have been written without the help of kind friends. In matters of divinity, I have followed the example of John Paul II, and turned to the former theologian of the papal household. His Eminence Georges Cardinal Cottier OP gave me expert advice at the beginning of my research. Knowing the many demands on his time, even in retirement, I have not inflicted successive drafts on him, nor does this book bear the *imprimatur* of authority. It is, however, indebted to the helpfulness of Father William Sheehan and Dr Paolo Vian at the Vatican Library, a *locus amoenus* which, at the time of writing, has become inaccessible. All the more appreciated, in these trying circumstances, is the hospitality which I have enjoyed at the Angelicum in Rome. To Alastair Minnis, the general editor of Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, and to Linda Bree, the commissioning editor at the Press, I am grateful for their understanding, encouragement, and unfailing courtesy.

Four personal debts are acknowledged warmly. Reviving a dormant but deep friendship, John Marenbon read the entire typescript, corrected errors, made valuable suggestions, and gave me heart. I recall our conversations about Abelard and much more with keen pleasure. To the generosity of Candi Rudmose I owe the freedom from less agreeable tasks to write. What I wrote by hand was not only typed with patient intelligence by Rodney Lokaj, but has also profited from his pertinent comments. And, finally, affectionate thanks to my Serbian family – Živka, Ivana, Vladimir, and, above all, Biljana, to whom this book is dedicated.

P. G., Umbria, March, 2008

Abbreviations

AHDLMA	*Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge*
BAV	Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Vatican Library)
BGPTMA	Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
HC	*Historia Calamitatum*
Landgraf, *Dogmengeschichte*	A. Landgraf, *Dogmengeschichte der Frühscholastik* 8 vols. (Regensburg, 1952–1955).
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
MlJb	*Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch*
PL	Patrologia Latina
RLAC	*Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*
RTAM	*Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*
SC	Sources chrétiennes