Abelard’s and Heloise’s love correspondence dating from the late twelfth century constitutes one of the earliest epistolary texts in French literature. However, the first Latin manuscript was not published until 1616 in France. In fact, Barbara Newman’s article on Heloise points out that the letters remained relatively unknown until the middle of the thirteenth century.¹ The couple’s love story unfolds in the *Historia Calamitatum*, which is an autobiographical epistle by Abelard describing in great detail the trials and tribulations of his career. This opening text is important to analyze as a preface to the overall love correspondence because the reader is introduced to the characters, and the predominant themes that will reappear in the main body of the letters. For instance, Abelard’s victimization within the political structure of the Church, his manipulative nature of Heloise’s will, and a veiled, but passionate desire that eventually tore the lovers apart. According to the *Historia*, the couple’s love story ended abruptly after they exchanged marriage vows and then retreated to separate cloisters. This descriptive account leading up to their inevitable isolation is highly significant as a preface to the epistolary text, grounded on

this fundamental sense of distance and loss. For the study of the medieval text, Zumthor’s 1979 translation will be analyzed. This version is considered to be a faithful and reliable rendition of the original text in Latin.

Abelard’s Historia Calamitatum consists of the initial letter of consolation directly preceding the epistolary correspondence to his wife and sister in God, Heloise. The text was written about 1132 when Abelard was 53 years old and was residing at the monastery of St. Gildas de Rhuys. The famous scholar was approaching the end of his career as a theologian and philosopher, and thus elected to share his own story. At St. Gildas, he feared for his safety and had already survived several attempts on his life. This opening letter addressed to an anonymous friend is particularly noteworthy as it is one of the earliest autobiographical texts known to exist in the history of French literature. It is however intriguing that the role of the receiver is relatively insignificant as Abelard chooses the literary guise of consoling a friend, but proceeds to recount his own tale of misfortunes in order to minimize the plight of his friend’s adversities. In essence, he indulges in a form of self-consolation. The style of the text reveals some fundamental autobiographical characteristics underlying the “consolatio” epistle based on Seneca’s model. According to Chris Ferguson, Seneca’s was the “archetype” for the letter of consolation followed throughout the Middle Ages. In this type of missive, the writer was supposed to compare his/her adversities to the receiver’s tribulations so as to console the recipient. Abelard’s text adheres to the epistolary guidelines governing the letter of consolation, but the Historia is also of a confessional nature as the author seeks to justify the fact that he sees himself as a victim of several philosophers and theologians who set out to ruin his career in the

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