

from Barbara Newman, *Making Love in the Twelfth Century: "Letters of Two Lovers" in Context* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 237-239

Newman's translation:

A Religious Woman B. to her Friend G.

To G., sweeter than honey and the honeycomb, B. sends whatever love desires for love.

O my unique, my special one, why do you linger afar for so long? Why do you want your only one to perish—she who loves you with soul and body, as you yourself know, and sighs for you every hour, every moment, like a hungry little bird? Ever since I have had to do without your sweetest presence, I have not wanted to hear or see any other human being. But just as a turtledove, having lost her mate, always perches on a dry little branch, so I lament without end until I can enjoy your faithful love once more. I look around and do not find my lover, nor anyone to comfort me with a single word. When I consider within myself the sweetness of your most delightful words and looks, I am crushed with a grief too great, for I find nothing to compare to your love—which is sweeter than honey and the honeycomb. Set beside it, the gleam of gold and silver is worthless.

What more? In you are all gentleness and virtue; therefore my spirit always languishes in your absence. You have no gall of treachery; you are sweeter than milk and honey; you are chosen from thousands. I love you before all others; you alone are my love and desire; you are the sweet refreshment of my spirit; nothing in the whole wide world is pleasing to me without you. Everything that was sweet to me with you is burdensome and tedious without you. Hence I want to say truly: if it were possible, I would buy you at the price of my life without delay, for you alone are the one I have chosen according to my heart. Therefore I always pray to God: may bitter death not seize me before I have enjoyed the dear and longed-for sight of you.

Farewell—take from me all that belongs to fidelity and love. Accept the stylus I am sending, and with it, my constant spirit.

Selections from Newman's commentary¹:

This ardent letter may be a response to no. 5 [i.e., the first letter in the three-letter sapphic sequence], if the G. in the salutation of no. 5 denotes its sender. At the end of that letter the writer mentions a token gift, while this writer encloses a stylus—a charming plea to continue their correspondence. If G. in no. 5 denotes the recipient, however, we might have here a collection of three letters (nos. 5–7) all addressed to the same religious woman (G.) by two or three of her intimates.

¹ As with our use of her translation of the first letter in the three-letter sequence, Newman's comments that trace phrases shared between this letter and other letter collections included in her larger study are not included in this excerpt. However, readers are *strongly* encouraged to seek out Newman's complete book in their library (or, if their library does not have access to it, using ILL).

... Her [he writer's] exuberance and ardor exceed her rhetorical invention, for she calls her friend "sweeter than honey" three times, while forms of *dulcis* and *suavis* occur eight times. ... we can see that the language here is "hotter." *Amicitia* is not mentioned; the beloved is called *amantem* (lover) rather than *amica*, and love is not only *dilectio* but also *amor et desiderium*. The gender of the beloved seems immaterial to the theme—the unbearable pain of absence, which is also a frequent theme of the EDA [another medieval letter collection].

Sweeter than honey and the honeycomb (*super mel et favum dulciori*): Psalm 18:11 (*dulciora super mel et favum*); Ecclesiasticus 24:27 (*super mel dulcis*)

I look around and do not find my lover (*Circumspicio et non invenio amantem*): cf. Song 3:1 (*Quaesivi quem diligit anima mea . . . et non inveni*)

The gleam of gold and silver (*auri et argenti nitor*): Ovid, Ex Ponto 3.4.23 (*nitor argenti . . . et auri*)

My spirit always languishes (*meus semper languet spiritus*): cf. Song 2:5, 5:8 (*amore langueo*)

Milk and honey (*lacte et melle*): Deuteronomy 26:15 (*lacte et melle*)

Chosen from thousands (*electa es ex milibus*): Song 5:10 (*electus ex milibus*)