

from Barbara Newman, *Making Love in the Twelfth Century: "Letters of Two Lovers" in Context* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 235-237

Newman's translation:

A Religious Woman to Another Young Woman

[To?] G., a dear one to her dearest, a sweetheart to her sweetest: I wish you everything that excels all that is and that shall be.

Although great distances divide us in space, yet the goodwill of our spirits unites us—along with true friendship, which is not feigned but firmly fixed in my heart. For you stand before me in dreams like Lady Philosophy, uttering gracious and comforting words. If only it were permitted to wish for death, so that no one would ever see me again by the light of day—because I must live without the longed-for sight of you, full of loyalty and love. Who will give me wings like a bird, so that I might fly like an eagle and come to you and snatch some joy for my heart? For I have received you into a place set apart in my spirit, above all our sex, if you will never depart from it at anyone's urging. I wish to establish this firmly if you will meet me with the same loyalty. What more? I want to love you until the moon falls from the sky, for before all others in the world, you are fixed in the depth of my heart.

Farewell—sleeping or waking, I never cease to wish you good. May you fare well and be as blessed as Io! O my sweetness, may the fullness of joy come upon you. I send a gift that is not worthy, just a token of loyalty to you. The convent of young girls also greets you, precious pearl.

Selections from Newman's commentary¹:

This passionate letter of friendship sounds so "lesbian-like" that its last sentence comes as a surprise. Not only the writer but her whole convent, or at least its younger inhabitants (*conventus iuvenularum*), send greetings to her "precious pearl." The recipient may have been a fellow novice or convent pupil who had professed her final vows elsewhere, or finished her studies and returned to the world.

The familiar topoi of *amicitia* are all present. True friends remain united in spirit, despite physical distance; their friendship, rooted deep in the heart, is unfeigned and eternal. It is also unique and exclusive, setting the cherished friend apart from all others—even though the same writer might address multiple correspondents in the same terms. The many stylistic parallels with the EDA, especially the Woman's letters, testify to nuns' shared epistolary culture.

A dear one to her dearest, a sweetheart to her sweetest (*cara karissime dulcissime dulcis*): *Karissime* and *dulcissime* are datives of address, not adverbs. The salutation is unusual because

¹ 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).

its terms for sender and recipient are chiastically intertwined, a token of their intimacy. It is not clear which is denoted by the initial G.

You stand before me . . . like Lady Philosophy (*astas quasi philosophia*): Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* I, pr. 1 (*adstitisse mihi supra verticem visa est mulier . . .*)

Comforting words (*verba consolatoria*): Zechariah 1:13 (*verba consolatoria*)

Who will give me wings like a bird (*Quis dabit mihi genus volatile?*): Psalm 54:7 (*Quis dabit mihi pennas sicut columbae?*)

Be as blessed as Io (*prosis velut Io*): Io was one of the more fortunate maidens raped by Jove in that she eventually regained human form (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.568–667, 722–46). The name is chosen more to rhyme with *cupio* than for any thematic significance.

The convent of young girls also greets you, precious pearl (*Salutat te dulcis margarita et conventus iuvenularum*): Kühnel and Wolff both take *dulcis margarita* as nominative, but it makes better sense as a vocative. The passionate writer would not use such an endearment for a third party, nor would she denote herself in the third person.