

THE TRAGEDY OF HELOISE

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The story of Heloise exemplifies the paradoxes and difficulties of the medieval period for women, especially those who wished to usurp conventional norms. Many have described the story of Heloise and her lover Peter Abelard as a tragic love story, and certainly the themes of lost love and sacrifice suggest this, but I would argue that Heloise's central tragedy was to be both modern and medieval, both forward thinking and traditional, in an era in which ambiguities were unacceptable. Heloise was, by all accounts, a brilliant mind; from her writing, we can acknowledge a writer of beautiful prose and form; from her arguments, we can recognize a grasp of logic and distaste for traditional thinking. However, she subsumed herself for love, submitting herself to a life she would only hate, growing to despise herself as a hypocrite as much as she continued to love Abelard. She steered her nunnery of the Paraclete to success and yet continued to speak of the innate weakness of women.

Heloise was born and lived in an era in which women had little voice, little position in society beyond that of wives and mothers. The only acceptable alternative to marriage was to become a nun, a rôle that the Church had steadily denuded since the time of powerful abbesses of the seventh and eighth centuries¹. Men could be husbands and fathers, monks and priests – all positions automatically assumed dominant over women – and they could choose other routes through life. They could be soldiers, merchants or, increasingly, scholars and teachers. Heloise rejected the traditional female roles. She did not want to become a wife or a mother, had no vocation to become a nun; she had the mind of the scholar and the heart to be a lover, and yet she ultimately became first mother, then wife, then nun.

¹ Richard Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin, 1990), 309–310.

Peter Abelard tells much of Heloise's early story in his *History of My Calamities*². She was the niece of Canon Fulbert, and had spent her childhood in the nunnery of Argenteuil where she received an education³. As a young woman, Fulbert brought her to Paris, where she would have been in the midst of the educational and intellectual revolution spurred in great part by Abelard and that led to the birth of the scholastic tradition⁴. Christopher Brooke notes that “nowhere was education more advanced and more effective than in Paris.”⁵ However, tradition excluded women from this movement. Philippe de Novare wrote, “Women should not be taught to read and write.”⁶ He was not alone in these sentiments. Saint Paul was among the earliest Christian misogynists, ordering women not to teach or to question in public.⁷ Women were too weak, too intemperate, too apt to allow loquacity to overwhelm the need to be chaste. Using Paul's words as a guide, the Church shut out women from the public sphere of education.⁸ For women, it would be centuries before they could gain an education in a university.⁹

There was a belief among many that women were not predisposed to scholarship. Abelard himself notes, “A

² *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 1974), 66.

³ Andrea Nye, “A Women's Thought or a Man's Discipline? The Letters of Abelard and Heloise,” *Hypatia* 7 (1992) 3.

⁴ For more information on medieval scholarship, see Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

⁵ Christopher N.L. Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 91.

⁶ Philippe de Novare, *Les Quatres Ages d'Homme*, ed. Marcel de Fréville (Paris: SATF, 1888), 16.

⁷ 1 Timothy 2: 12.

⁸ Carla Casagrande, “The Protected Woman” in *A History of Women in the West: II Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1992), 99.

⁹ Paulette L'Hermite-Leclercq, “The Feudal Order” in *A History of Women in the West: II Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1992), 213.

gift for letters is [...] rare in women.”¹⁰ Andrea Nye observes that Abelard chided Heloise for her “woman’s tongue” that hindered her ability to conduct philosophy and to reason.¹¹ Men were not alone in their assessment of female scholarship. Long indoctrination had so attuned women themselves to the belief in female weakness in this sphere that they were frequently dismissive of their own efforts and those of others of their gender. Noted philosopher Hildegard of Bingen downplayed her own scholarship as a woman, “poor as I am in womanly form” describing herself as a vessel of the Holy Spirit and thus the fruits of her labor as barely her own.¹²

It is thus unusual that Heloise was so well educated that Abelard describes her as “in the extent of her learning she stood supreme.”¹³ According to Abelard, this was due in part to the ambitions of Fulbert for his niece¹⁴. Given the tenor of the time, part of this ambition may have been to prepare her for a good marriage, in which her husband would expect her to administer his household.¹⁵ However, surrounded as Fulbert was by scholars, he may have been attempting to bolster his own reputation by showing such generosity to Heloise, and having such a renowned young woman as part of his family. The scholarship of Heloise certainly attracted Abelard to the young woman and Abelard soon persuaded her uncle to employ him as her tutor. Although Abelard states their lessons were “soon abandoned [...] entirely to love,”¹⁶ Heloise probably was able to learn something from the great teacher beyond carnal knowledge. Brooke argues that Heloise’s own arguments with Abelard over their potential marriage show a spirited use of dialectic.¹⁷ Indeed, scholars such as Muckle and Silvestre have used Heloise’s grasp of letters and logic as grounds to dispute that the letters were her

own.¹⁸ Abelard describes Heloise using arguments from St Jerome, St Paul and Seneca against the marriage, believing that it would ruin Abelard and bring risk to them both.¹⁹ Heloise acknowledges these arguments in her first personal letter to Abelard.²⁰ These letters of Heloise, both personal and those later requesting religious direction, she infused with passion, grace and scholarship. If we accept them as belonging to Heloise, they confirm her position as a woman apart from her time²¹.

However, despite her grasp of scholarship and logic, Heloise was consumed by love for Abelard, a love that drove her and ultimately sentenced her to a lifetime of regret. In her first personal letter to Abelard, she reminds him that from the first time he suggested marriage, she wanted nothing from him but to be his lover, his mistress, his “whore”.²² She utterly rejected the notion a connection between love and marriage, rather connecting love to freedom, marriage to slavery.²³ It is not entirely surprising for a young woman of Heloise’s spirit to think such thoughts, and her arguments are logical and passionate. Marriage in the 12th century, especially among the elite of society of which she and Abelard were a part was rarely a matter of love, but rather of convenience, property and propriety. Love in marriage was a duty like the many other obligations of the unequal union;²⁴ and as a sacrament, it was indissoluble²⁵. Heloise argues that virtue is more important than wealth or power and that a woman who subjects herself to a marriage for the latter is little better than a prostitute, making herself an “object for sale.”²⁶ Yet, despite her misgivings, Heloise did surrender to Abelard’s wishes. She allowed her love for him to persuade her to marry and, after his castration, to take the veil as a nun. To

¹⁰ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 66.

¹¹ Andrea Nye, “A Women’s Thought or a Man’s Discipline?”, 3

¹² Hildegard of Bingen, *Selected Writings*, trans Mark Atherton, (New York: Penguin, 2001).

¹³ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 66.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁵ Silvia Vecchio, “The Good Wife,” in *A History of Women in the West: II Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1992), 119.

¹⁶ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 67.

¹⁷ Christopher Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage*, 91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 91 and J.T. Muckle, ed., “The Personal Letters of Abelard and Heloise,” *Mediaeval Studies* 15 (1953), 62–64.

¹⁹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 70–72.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

²¹ Etienne Gilson, *Heloise and Abelard* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960) discusses the controversy over the authenticity of the letters at length as well as more general information about the lives of both Abelard and Heloise.

²² *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 113.

²³ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁴ Silvia Vecchio, “The Good Wife,” 109.

²⁵ Paulette L’Hermite-Leclercq, “The Feudal Order”, 214

²⁶ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 114.

the modern reader, this seems utterly at odds with common sense. Heloise had previously seemed to be attempting to break the bonds of gender, becoming a scholar and proposing to live as Abelard's mistress, yet now she was acquiescing to a man's wishes to her own detriment. Jane Keller however notes that despite her previous actions, Heloise was still a woman of her time, and "profoundly conservative in her acceptance of received social precepts, including [...] the "natural order" of male/female relations."²⁷ Heloise's own letters to Abelard confirm this view, for example at the beginning of her second letter when she admonishes him for putting her name before his, contrary to concepts of subservience.²⁸ Nancy Partner argues that Heloise had little option to accept such beliefs, that the overwhelming and unequivocal view of Paris society forced her to "pursue all her aims, sexual, intellectual, her exalted ego ideal, through Him."²⁹

For love, Heloise took the veil of a nun at a young age and with "tears and sobs", despite the exhortations of many to wait.³⁰ Despite the difficulties of being a nun in the period, she was very good at what she did, and after the foundation of the Paraclete nunnery, steered it to success.³¹ According to Leclercq, Heloise sublimated herself totally, and this sublimation had both negative and positive effects.³² Heloise considers herself a hypocrite: she is a

nun without a vocation; others consider her chaste while she is thinking sensual, erotic thoughts of Abelard; she proclaims her love for Abelard to be more intense, more meaningful than her love for God. In particular, her second personal letter to Abelard is heartbreaking, her love is so intense, her pain so complete.³³ However, she still manages to find meaning in her life at the Paraclete. If she cannot please God, then she can succeed for Abelard.³⁴ Ultimately, she may never have found happiness after fate separated them, but she was able to reach some measure of balance, of acceptance.

Heloise was a woman who attempted to achieve more than her society was prepared to allow. Despite the absence of women from higher education and the assumptions of many in society that women could not be true scholars, Heloise managed to become one of Abelard's most brilliant students. Despite the emphasis of society upon the importance of marriage, Heloise rejected marriage, and found instead the passion of true and free love. In these aspects, she might very much seem a modern woman. Yet, her own passion and her crucial acceptance of social norms of Medieval France doomed her. She became a nun despite having no vocation, and while she succeeded as an abbess and came to accept her fate, her early promise and hopes had come to naught.

²⁷ Jane Eblen Keller, "Three Orders, Three Women," *Peace Review* 11.2, (June 1999), 253.

²⁸ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 127.

²⁹ Nancy Partner, "No Sex, No Gender," *Speculum* 68.2 (April 1993)

³⁰ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 76.

³¹ Andrea Nye, "A Women's Thought or a Man's Discipline?" 6

³² Jean Leclercq, "Modern Psychology and the Interpretation of Medieval Texts," *Speculum* 48.3 (July 1973) 483.

³³ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 132.

³⁴ Jean Leclercq, "Modern Psychology and the Interpretation of Medieval Texts," 483.

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