

The Purposeful Rhetoric of the Letters of Abelard and Heloise

The letters of Abelard and Heloise have preserved one of the greatest love stories of the Middle Ages since they were written in the early twelfth century. Abelard and Heloise were two of the most remarkable minds in France at the time of their love affair: Peter Abelard was arguably one of the greatest thinkers and teachers of the time, while Heloise was an independent and greatly admired intellectual in a period when women were not usually known for such wisdom. The pair were a perfect match, equal in both spirit and intellect. Their letters immortalize not only the love that the two shared, but also a series of eloquent and intimate discussions grappling the passionate, fervent love the two still feel for each other and their vows to remain true to their present positions in monastic life. Quite a bit of time passed between Abelard and Heloise's last meeting and the sending of the first letter, in which Heloise notes how long it has been since she has heard from Abelard. She begs him to write back, her one desire only to hear from him. Her letters make her seem as though she is attempting to guilt him into writing her back, and she uses a few different methods to be successful in this endeavor; she focuses the discussion on the aspect of gender, especially the roles of women, and how drastically her life has changed since the two went their separate ways. The rhetoric Heloise uses is successful in representing the traditional role of women of her time, though she is an exception to this norm, and that the rhetoric is entirely deliberate in attempting to successfully garner a response from Abelard.

Several years have passed since Abelard's love affair, marriage, castration, disgrace, and entrance into religious life. The Letters of Abelard and Heloise opens with a letter entitled *Historia Calamitatum*, or "The Story of His Misfortunes," written by Abelard to a friend to tell him that his life is much less worse in comparison to Abelard's own life. This letter provides

readers with an introduction to Abelard and the life he has lived thus far. In the letter, Abelard recounts the details of his rise to fame in the academic world and his scandalous and passionate love affair with his student Heloise, which ultimately led to the degradation of his pristine reputation, his separation from her, and his start as a man of God. The exchange of letters between Heloise and her lost love begins when she is brought “The Story of His Misfortunes,” and while she had hoped that it would contain uplifting words from Abelard, she is saddened to find that “every line of this letter was filled...with gall and wormwood, as it told the pitiful story of our entry into religion and the cross of unending suffering which you, my only love, continue to bear” (The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, 47). Heloise notes that, though he has tried to console his friend, Abelard has only reopened the wound of her losing him so many years ago and begs him, “as you set about tending the wounds which others have dealt, heal the wounds you have yourself inflicted” (49). After years of silence from the love of her life, Heloise is imploring him to write back to her, since she has been “so neglected and forgotten by you that I have neither a word from you when you are here to give me strength nor the consolation of a letter in absence” (53). She closes her letter to him by asking once more that he “restore your presence to me in the way you can – by writing me some word of comfort, so that in this at least I may find increased strength and readiness to serve God” (54).

In order to attain a response from Abelard, Heloise taps into the existing stereotypes of the time that primarily paint women as the weaker, more reliant sex. In her very first letter to Abelard, she draws the image of a plantation that is sown with new plants that are in need of nurturing in order to thrive; she states that “through its feminine nature this plantation would be weak and frail even if it were not new” (49). She purposely plants the word “feminine” in this image as a synonym for “fragile,” emphasizing that women are delicate beings who need the care

of a man to survive. Heloise goes on to tell him that she lost everything when she lost him: “at one wretched stroke of fortune that supreme act of flagrant treachery robbed me of my very self in robbing me of you” (50). Even after all the years that have passed since their last interaction, Heloise is still attached to Abelard and the love they share, and she tells him that he is the only one who has the power to make her feel anything (51). Heloise makes use of this image of women to shame Abelard for not reaching out to her for so long, making it appear as though she is still totally reliant on him, and that he owes her for abandoning her for all these years; she uses this rhetoric to say:

Your superior wisdom knows better than our humble learning of the many serious treatises which the holy Fathers compiled for the instruction or exhortation or even the consolation of holy women....I was not a little surprised and troubled by your forgetfulness....Yet you must know that you are bound to me by an obligation which is all the greater for the further close tie of the marriage sacrament uniting us, and are the deeper in my debt because of the love I have always borne you. (50)

She ends her letter by reiterating this idea, stating that she only entered cloistered life because it was Abelard’s will for her to do so, and she begs Abelard to remember all that she has done to appease him, and to think about all that he owes her because of this (54). Heloise has “denied myself every pleasure in obedience to your will, kept nothing for myself except to prove that now, even more, I am yours” (54). Heloise is one of the greatest minds of her time, and this simple fact proves that she knows exactly what she is doing in writing in the compelling and conclusive way that she is. The last line of her letter repeats what she has already said, begging Abelard to think of all that he owes her (55) and to write back in order to repay the debt that he has not even thought to repay.

Abelard's letters allow the reader an insight into the way that he, and presumably men of the time, views women, which only furthers the significance of the rhetoric that Heloise uses regarding her role as a woman in their society. When the reader is first introduced to Heloise, it is in Abelard's description of her in "The Story of His Misfortunes." Abelard says of Heloise, "In looks she did not rank the lowest, while in the extent of her learning she stood supreme" (10), noting first how physically attractive she was, and second how intelligent she was, as it was rare to truly find a woman anywhere near the same intellectual level as a man. He goes on, confident that he should have no trouble in seducing her; thanks to his looks and his reputation, he "feared no rebuff from any woman I might choose to honour with my love" (10). Later in the letter, Abelard is recounting the displacement and relocation of Heloise and her sisters, and he says, "I fancy that their worldly goods were multiplied more in a single year than mine would have been in a hundred...for a woman, being the weaker sex, is the more pitiable in a state of need, easily rousing human sympathy" (36). Abelard clearly believes women to be the simpler, duller sex, and he has no problem relaying that to his friend. When discussing the nature of women with Heloise in the fifth letter, Abelard states that, while both he and Heloise are guilty of sin, only he is paying the price for it, and this punishment is "granted by divine mercy to your weaker nature and, in a way, with justice, for you were naturally weaker in sex and stronger in continence, and so the less deserving of punishment" (87). Earlier in the same letter, Abelard is describing to Heloise how the power of love made him so unable to resist "the fires of lust" that bound him to her that, even when Heloise was unwilling to submit to him and "resisted to the utmost of your power and tried to dissuade me, as yours was the weaker nature I often forced you to consent with threats and blows" (81). What is most disturbing about reading this line in the modern age is that not only was this an incredibly abusive power move on Abelard's part, it was an acceptable

thing to do to the woman you loved, even “often.” This treatment may have been the norm of the time, but it only further proves that a woman was not respected nor considered much more than a sexual being solely contingent upon a man.

As both Abelard and Heloise are writing from their respective roles in monastic religious life, they have much to say on the subject of women and their role in society through the lens of Christianity. Towards the end of “The Story of His Misfortunes,” Abelard discusses the weak nature of femininity and the fact that “the weaker sex needs the help of the stronger, so much so that the Apostle lays down that the man must always be over the woman, as her head, and as a sign of this he orders her always to have her head covered” (39). This statement is another example of the way women were viewed, and gives the reader insight as to why women were considered the lesser sex – because this idea was taught even in religion. Heloise writes to Abelard of the guilt she feels for his downfall, asking, “Is it the general lot of women to bring total ruin on great men?” (66). In support of this question, she cites a warning from the book of Proverbs, in which a man is advised to not fall for a woman because she has been the ruin of many men before him, and a line from Ecclesiastes that states, “I find a woman more bitter than death; she is a snare, her heart a net, her arms are chains” (66). She continues on to reference several other biblical stories, most notably the story of Creation and the fact that it was “the first woman in the beginning who lured man from Paradise, and she who had been created by the Lord as his helpmate became the instrument of his total downfall” (67). Heloise also mentions Delilah’s driving Samson to destruction and Job’s wife tempting Job to curse God (67). She states that “men are most easily brought to ruin through their wives, and so he directed his usual malice against us too, and tempted you through marriage when he could not destroy you through fornication” (67). While regular women seem to be a point of contempt in the eyes of

Christianity, Abelard writes that Heloise's entrance into religious life, though forced, has made her more than she ever could be as a regular woman; he writes to Heloise that "now you rise even above men, and have turned the curse of Eve into the blessing of Mary. How unseemly for those holy hands which now turn the pages of sacred books to have to do the obscene degradations of women's work" (84). In speaking of Heloise and her role as an abbess, Abelard writes that "bishops loved her as a daughter, abbots as a sister, the laity as a mother; while all alike admired her piety and wisdom, and her unequalled gentleness and patience in every situation" (36). It is not ideal to be a woman in the time of Abelard and Heloise, but a woman in religious life is just as respectable, if not more, than a man in the eyes of Abelard and the church.

In reading *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, it becomes clear to the reader that Heloise was not the average woman of the time. The traditional roles of women in the period in which Heloise lived have been discussed, and though some of these generalizations do apply to her, there are several more instances throughout the letters that argue that Heloise is a great exception to many of these stereotypes. Her relationship with Abelard, for instance, is anything but traditional; on the contrary, the news of the affair caused quite an uproar once public. Though their love may have been true, the relationship between teacher and student was much too scandalous for the pious and traditional standards of society at the time. Once Abelard recommended marriage to Heloise, however, "she was strongly opposed to the proposal, and argued hotly against it" (13) for she knew that nothing they could do would mollify her uncle or save Abelard's reputation. In her attempts to convince Abelard that marriage was not the answer, Abelard stated that Heloise believed "the name of friend instead of wife would be dearer to her" (16), and though her attempt at resisting failed, she knew that the marriage is what would ultimately ruin them: "We shall both be destroyed. All that is left us is suffering as great as our

love has been” (16). Heloise drives this point home in her letter to Abelard, saying, “God knows I never sought anything in you except yourself; I wanted simply you, nothing of yours” (51). She even draws on the idea that Abelard presented in his letter about the name “friend” being more sacred than the name “wife,” stating, “sweeter for me will always be the word friend, or, if you will permit me, that of concubine or whore” (51). Throughout the letters, women have been fixed as reliant and needy in their relationships with men. When Heloise draws on this in her first letter, saying that a word from Abelard has been her greatest desire since they parted, Abelard responds by pointing out that she is outstanding enough to not need his teachings anymore: “So if you still watch over your daughters as carefully as you did previously over your sisters, it is sufficient to make me believe that any teaching or exhortation from me would now be wholly superfluous” (56). When Heloise gives the examples of Eve, Delilah and Job’s wife in her letter to Abelard discussing the idea that women tend to be the cause of the downfall of men, she refutes her own examples regarding her and Abelard’s particular situation. She states that, luckily, “the tempter did not prevail on me to do wrong of my own consent, like the women I have mentioned, though in the outcome he made me the instrument of his malice...my conscience is clear through innocence, and no consent of mine makes me guilty of this crime” (67). In one letter, Heloise comments on the fact that Abelard greeted her in an unnatural order, putting himself second to her; this is clearly unusual because, in earlier letters, women were regarded as inferior to men. Abelard writes back and tells her that “in writing to superiors one puts their name first, and you must realize that you became my superior from the day when you began to be my lady on becoming the bride of my Lord” (73). Abelard, once greatly admired and then fallen from grace, has now risen back to fame and great repute and holds Heloise in the highest standing. She is not only admired so greatly by him, but another deeply respected man of

God in France at the time: Peter the Venerable, the abbot of Cluny. He writes to Heloise to tell her “how large a place in my heart is reserved for my love for you in the Lord” (217). He goes on to say that he was still a fairly young man when he first learned of Heloise and her reputation, “not yet for religion but for your virtuous and praiseworthy studies” (217). Even before her entrance into religious life, she was known for her wisdom, and he praises her for her impressive and ceaseless devotion to her secular education. Later in the letter, he says that “even in the minds of men, you have surpassed all women in carrying out your purpose, and have gone further than almost every man” (218). This statement is an incredibly radical one for the time, especially spoken by such an upstanding and highly acclaimed man in the church, and it only furthers the point that Heloise was an exceptional and extraordinary member of society.

Throughout *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, in Heloise’s desire for a response from her love, two of the greatest minds of the Middle Ages have presented intelligent and inspired arguments regarding the issues of faith, love, and gender in their time. Heloise’s brilliant, purposeful writing incited an exchange that has lasted centuries, and it provides a phenomenal example of a successful rhetoric as she draws on the standards of her time and uses these adverse standards to her advantage. Heloise’s extraordinary mind and exceptional spirit worked in tandem to be successful in both capturing the traditional role of women in her society and in her original, simple goal of a word from the love of her life.

Works Cited

Radice, Betty. *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. Penguin, 2003.