



Heloise: A Christian View on Ethics and Love

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Abstract

The writings of Heloise are examined for their philosophical content, with special reference to the notions of friendship and love. The work of Mews, Dronke, Clanchy and others is cited, and it is concluded that Heloise's gifts as a writer and thinker have been overlooked and merit more careful examination.

Keywords

Heloise, love, ethics, Abelard, marriage

Heloise, the twelfth-century thinker whose name is almost invariably linked with that of Abelard, has now been the recipient of enough critical attention that we might come to view her as a philosopher in her own right. The recent compendium of edited letters, alleged to be those of the couple during the early part of their relationship, yields a sufficiently new view of Heloise that Constant Mews notes, by way of contrast, that prior stands on their correspondence frequently did not mention her "except under the rubric 'Peter Abelard.'"¹ In our efforts to recover the histories of women thinkers, we need to be alert to matters of style, since it has been made obvious that many women wrote in ways that were not as straightforwardly argumentative as many male thinkers.

The author of the female portion of the "lost letters" has decided views on love and friendship, and hers is a new and prominent voice, especially for the given time period. If it is the case, as a number of scholars have claimed, that the courtly love analyses promulgated during this period were overwhelmingly the creation of men, it would seem to be a matter of interest to see whether or not a woman author might have an articulated view.² With the various takes on love, friendship and eroticism in general that not only reflected medieval

¹ Constant Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999, p. 7.

² Mews notes that Georges Duby has claimed that twelfth-century writing about love was "essentially a male invention." (*Ibid.*, pp. 7–8).

thinking but that recapitulated, at least to some extent, the thought of the ancients, the letters of Heloise, from whatever period of her life, promise new material on the nature of intimate human relationships and how those relationships might be seen in a broader context.

I

Commentators on the correspondence between Heloise and Abelard seem to be taken with the notion that, of the two of them, although Heloise left by far and away the smallest portion of written work, she was the strongest proponent of philosophically-oriented views on friendship and love. In addition, a secondary point that has been made is with respect to the degree of consistency shown by Heloise; there seems to be general agreement that she actually tried to live by precepts that were derived from her philosophical stance. As one critic has recently written:

From the *Epistulae* it is clear that Heloise based her views of love on Cicero's philosophy. The central principle both Heloise and Abelard derived from Cicero was that the fruit of true love was the love itself. That is to say, love is disinterested in anything but the giving of love. All the true friend or true lover wants in return is the experience of giving love to the beloved.³

In other words, as the trajectory of their relationship shows, Heloise repeatedly tried to refrain from a number of acts suggested by Abelard—both with respect to marriage, and in other guises—largely because she genuinely thought that it would be best for Abelard to maintain their involvement in another way. Although a great deal of evidence in this regard has been available for centuries, part of the difficulty is that, until recently, philosophically concerned readers have tended to read only Abelard's side of the correspondence as having conceptual merit.

On first perusal, what is quite striking about the new letters by Heloise (referred to in most of the scholarship as the “unsigned” letters, to distinguish them from the correspondence that was previously known) is that, for the most part, Heloise refers to her love in general terms, making it clear that she already had straightforward views on the place of erotic love in a life. For instance, in one of many such examples, she writes in unsigned letter 76:

To the chain of love, of all that binds the dearest, a friend of sure companionship: fulfillment of the most complete love.

³ Mary Ellen Waithe, “Heloise and Abelard,” in *Presenting Women Philosophers*, eds. Cecile T. Tougas and Sara Ebenreck, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 117–128. This citation p. 121.

Just how intimately dear you are to me, the hand of this writer is in no way able to reveal, because a feeling of inner sweetness urges me to make you my special beloved above everyone else.⁴

Although the wording makes it obvious that the feelings involved are those of intense erotic love, it is noteworthy that the opening of this letter contains the phrase “friend of sure companionship.” In other words, part of Heloise’s view is that intense interpersonal love is also, like *philia*, a form of friendship, and it is clear that there is an altruistic motive at work in these sorts of relationships. While one view might have it that the goal of such a love is some form of physical relations, there is an almost platonic streak to Heloise’s assertions, despite the fact that her relationship with Abelard was ultimately anything but platonic. As Waithe asserts in her analysis of Heloise’s stance, “Loving him disinterestedly would require that she love him in a way that was for his highest good, and that consisted in fulfilling the ideal of philosopher-cleric.”⁵

Dronke, in his important *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, notes that Heloise’s work is demonstrably her own not only in matters of thesis but also in matters of style. That is, as he is at pains to point out, Heloise has a sophisticated writing style that stands out in her era, and she shows herself well able to use the sorts of sources her intellectual training would have provided, and to use them in novel ways. He writes:

Her first two letters to Abelard reflect a heroine’s affective states . . . a range wider and deeper than the Epistles of Ovid, and incomparably more serious than in that of Constance . . . [T]exts that both he and she cite oftenest . . . [are] Ovid and Lucan, Horace and Persius, Cicero and Seneca, Augustine and Jerome . . . Not only the details of rhythm and rhyme, but also the structural aspects of Heloise’s first two letters to Abelard, were thought out with the utmost care.⁶

Dronke’s point, of course, which he takes great care to establish, is that Heloise deserves to be thought of less as an appendage to Abelard and more as a thinker in her own right.⁷

In one of her unsigned letters, Heloise writes “You yourself know that no one is happier than I that you are getting better. Know indeed that the midday sun has risen for you, that the chorus of birds is rejoicing over your health . . .”⁸ Heloise’s constant concern for Abelard is simply one of a number of foci that mark her as someone whose

⁴ Mews, *Lost*, p. 257.

⁵ Waithe, “Heloise,” p. 122.

⁶ Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 107, 112.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 112. He notes that their intellectual partnership was “not wholly one-sided.”

⁸ Mews, *Lost*, p. 217.

work cannot easily be categorized; indeed, as Dronke also says, “[D]o we really need to choose between an *exemplum* and a ‘Gothick’ nov-elettish fantasy?” The difficulty with the letters has been, historically, that the romance of the lovers has overshadowed anything of more substance that has been said by them, particularly in the case of Heloise. We need to look at the letters, both signed and unsigned, through new eyes.

II

Mews lets us know that we can glean a great deal of information about Heloise, her personality and her overall views by a careful reading of parts of the correspondence where she and Abelard discuss possible breakups. As Mews writes, “These final letters [among the unsigned ones] hint at complexities in the relationship between Abelard and Heloise never touched on in the *Historia calamitatum*. In that narrative, there is no suspicion of any emotional crisis in their relationship prior to the moment that she got pregnant.”⁹ Unsigned letter 60 tells of such a crisis: as Heloise writes, “Take your complaints away from me. I will not hear your words any more.”¹⁰

Heloise has certain general expectations of friendship and platonic love that she finds lacking in Abelard’s attitude toward her, and this is a point that she makes with a great emphasis and in a serious manner. Thus rather than simply taking the relationship for granted—or allowing Abelard to define it—Heloise tries to make it clear that a relationship ought to encompass a high degree of caring for the person as an individual. As Waithe notes “When, shortly after their marriage Abelard took Heloise to live at Argenteuil...[s]he might have hoped that his love for her would become as purely disinterested as hers continued to be for him.”¹¹

Throughout their correspondence, in both the “signed” and “unsigned” letters, Heloise delineates the necessities of genuine friendship and caring.¹² The document that is standardly referred to as Letter 2 of the previously translated letters is explicit about the ways in which Abelard’s version of the relationship has failed to adhere to what Heloise would think of as real caring. She mentions at least

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

¹¹ Waithe, “Heloise,” p. 123.

¹² The so-called “signed” letters—those from a later part of the relationship that have been available for centuries—come to us in various translations from the Latin. Those currently in greatest use are probably *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. Betty Radice, New York: Penguin Books, 1974, and *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, London: Guy Chapman, 1925. Except for citations taken from anthologies, we will here use Scott Moncrieff.

four desiderata and the lack that she finds with respect to them on his part: (1) a failure to maintain meaningful contact with her; (2) his insistence on marriage as opposed to keeping their relationship in some other form; (3) his failure to assist her after her entry into religion; and (4) his failure to adhere to what she sees as God's demands on their relationship. In all of these areas, Heloise is driven by a conception of disinterested friendship that is derived from the ancients, and that she consistently maintains over a period of time. For instance, with respect to the second item above, she famously notes:

[Y]ou thought fit to set out some of the reasons I gave in trying to dissuade you from binding us together in an ill-starred marriage. But you kept silent about most of my arguments for preferring love to wedlock and freedom to chains. God is my witness that if Augustine, Emperor of the whole world, thought fit to honor me with marriage and conferred all the earth on me to possess for ever, it would be dearer and more honorable to me to be called not his Empress but your whore.¹³

It is not, of course, that Heloise has no respect for the institution of marriage—rather, it is that she believes that Abelard has dishonored himself by entering into it, especially since both religious and philosophical reasons of the time would have argued against it. Here Heloise clearly opts for the sanctity of the relationship itself.

Even Abelard's biographers grant that not enough attention has been paid to Heloise's own stands on various topics, or to the significance that they undoubtedly had for Abelard, even if that influence was not originally acknowledged. M.T. Clanchy, writing in his *Abelard: a Medieval Life*, notes:

At the beginning of her first letter to Abelard . . . Heloise drew attention to her doubts . . . How should she address him, now that he was a monk and she a nun? . . . For Heloise, putting together these diversities of status was her *Sic et Non*, her way of coming to inquiry by doubting. She concluded them with their own names: 'To Abelard from Heloise.'¹⁴

Clanchy recapitulates the point made by many commentators: the relationship with Abelard was so important to Heloise that it tended to trump other matters, but in remaining faithful to the ideal of the relationship Heloise showed that she had a good grasp of what the ancient ideals of friendship involved. That the same

¹³ Heloise, Letter 2, cited in Mary Ellen Waithe, "Heloise and Abelard: Love, Sex and Morality," in *An Unconventional History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Karen Warren, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009, pp. 127–157. This citation p. 141.

¹⁴ M.T. Clanchy, *Abelard: a Medieval Life*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997, pp. 11–12.

cannot be said of Abelard himself is a recurring point in the overall commentary.

The extent to which Heloise strives for an ideal in a strong friendship or love affair may have something to do with the limited role of women at this time, but it also had something to do, we can be assured, with the various levels of learning to which Heloise had been exposed before she met Abelard, and the effect that these studies had on her. Indeed, part of what must be remembered is that it is precisely because Heloise was so well known for her learning that she began to study with Abelard in the first place.¹⁵ Some of the flavor of what Heloise might have been exposed to—resulting in her decided opinions—is captured even by contemporary scholarship on the ancients, as certain themes seem to recur. One citation to Cicero, for example, notes that:

Cicero points out that Latin only has a single word for love, *amor*, whereas Greek has a plurality of terms; and yet he expects his readers to be familiar with the different types of love identified by the Greek discussions: they are just different subtypes of *amor*, to be marked off by further qualifying words.¹⁶

In other words, Heloise would have been more than familiar with a range of discussion about the types of *amor* and *philia*, and what might be deemed to be constitutive of each. In characterizing Heloise's thought, it has been noted that she relied strongly on notions of intent, and that consistency of intent seemed to be a hallmark, for her, of certain emotional states. Again in Letter 2 she asserts: "It is not the deed but the intention of the doer which makes the crime, and justice should weigh not what was done but the spirit in which it is done."¹⁷ Intent obviously means a carrying over of that which would result from *philia*, or even some conception of *eros*, and Heloise wants to make the case that, at least in some instances, intent can almost be more important than result. The fact that Abelard is unable to match her concerns about their relationship in the later, signed letters with parallel concerns of his own speaks to the importance of Heloise's thought in this regard.

If altruism and concern for the other are indeed the hallmarks of any sort of caring relationship, Heloise more than demonstrates the force of these traits in her first letter. As she remarks, of Abelard's *Calamitatum*, he has written to another but fails to take into account her cares:

¹⁵ Clanchy asserts that "Even before Abelard taught her, she was reputed to be the most learned lady in France." (*Ibid.*, p. 12)

¹⁶ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, IV, cited in Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 156.

¹⁷ Heloise, Letter 2, in *op. cit.*, p. 141.

Thou hast written to thy friend the comfort of a long letter, considering his difficulties, no doubt, but treating of thine own. Which diligently recording, thou hast added greatly to our desolation, and while thou wert anxious to heal his wounds hast inflicted fresh wounds of grief on us and made our former wounds to ache again . . . [B]ut by a greater debt thou hast bound thyself to us, whom it behoves thee to call not friends but dearest friends . . .¹⁸

The tradition of caring to which Heloise adverts is found throughout the ancients, and might also in a sense be related to themes taken from *Phaedrus*, for example, even though it is clear that parts of that dialogue refer to erotic love. But what Plato's account wants to make clear is that as aspects of the personality struggle for control over the appetites in a relationship, concern for the beloved heightens and acquires new meaning. It is for these reasons that various works by the ancients are so often cited in this context, even if the citations speak to a variety of construals of the relationship.¹⁹

Heloise's view is clearly articulated, and relies for its force on the very stamp of her personality.²⁰ But we need to develop a contrast with the work of Abelard in order to make clear why it is that more attention needs to be paid to the specificity of her views. Fortunately, there is a great deal of commentary both on the scope of Abelard's own work, and on the accounts that he gives of human relations.

III

Part of Abelard's reputation for not having engaged in behavior that spoke well of his intentions, or his general beliefs, stems from the level of commentary about his relationship with Heloise in which he indulged in the *Calamitatum*. His tendency to refer to the relationship in somewhat facetious terms has not helped matters any, and, as Clanchy observes, "This . . . brings out the profoundest differences between Abelard and Heloise."²¹

In general, Abelard seems to think of male-female relations as not having any particular aspect other than the sexual, and, in any case, this is the mode that is highlighted when he comments on how he came to know Heloise and in what their time together consisted. In characterizing his first intentions to seduce her, he writes:

¹⁸ Heloise, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, p. 44. Scott Moncrieff refers to this as "The Second Letter".

¹⁹ For one such account, see the work of Julius Evola, *Eros and the Mysteries of Love*, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1991.

²⁰ Dronke is adamant about the sheer level of literary skill exhibited by Heloise. Dronke, *Women*, p. 107.

²¹ Clanchy, *Abelard*, p. 149.

For such renown had I then, and so excelled in grace and of youth and form, that I feared no refusal from whatever woman I might deem worthy of my love. All the more easily did I believe that this girl would consent to me that I knew her both to consent and delight in the knowledge of letters; even in absence it would be possible for us to reach one another's presence by written intermediaries. . . .²²

As most of the critical writing has attested, at every opportunity to indulge in comment on the nature of their relations Heloise chooses to foreground the actual feelings that she had for Abelard, whereas Abelard, in general, makes little or no advertence to such feelings.

Abelard seems to want to cloak a good deal of what he has to say in terms of either his status as a known philosopher and thinker, or his status within the Church. While Heloise is obviously consistently driven by passion, it is unclear precisely what Abelard's motives in the relationship ever were, since, even if we assume some disingenuousness, it is not at all the case that one can follow how he became involved with Heloise. He seems to indicate, at least in the *Calamitatum*, that the involvement fell out naturally from the near presence of a desirable female. As Waithe notes in her commentary on the length of the relationship with Heloise, and Abelard's distancing of himself from it, "it is clear that Heloise understands, but Abelard does not, how to apply Ciceronian principles to the living of one's own life."²³

Clanchy presents us with a parallel line of argument about the importance of the ancient notion of friendship to Heloise, and its reverberations for Abelard. In addition, he asserts that it is likely that the influence of Heloise on Abelard's literary style was greater than has previously been credited. Clanchy writes:

In other words, it may have been Heloise who gave Abelard's writing its distinctive character. She may have shown him that the canon of classical literature embodied an ideal of how to live, rather than merely being 'letters' learned at school.²⁴

One assertion that can certainly be made is that each of the two was more or less consistent within her or his framework of intellectualizing: it is simply the case that Abelard's had comparatively little to do with anything other than an egocentric account of himself and his values.

Commentary on Abelard seems to focus on his commitment to an account of intention, and on the disparity between his own version of the importance of intent and anything that might accrue to his knowing Heloise. As Karen Warren remarks in a recent set of comments on Heloise and Abelard, the notion of intent is crucial

²² Abelard, "Calamitatum" in *Letters*, trans. Scott Moncrieff, pp. 9–10.

²³ Waithe, "Heloise," p. 121.

²⁴ Clanchy, *Abelard*, p. 169.

in his work and is the critical focus through which he is, in general, known.²⁵ But what we see of intent in Abelard's writings—and this is especially true of *Calamitatum* and the signed letters—is that his intent was to seduce Heloise. Thus the correspondence moves back and forth between a more idealized version of male-female relations, as articulated here by the woman, and a less idealized, more overtly eroticized take, as articulated by the male. For example, in the unsigned letter 50, Abelard seems to want to flatter Heloise at the same time that he is careful to point out the differences between them in what they see in their future. He writes “What you say is true, sweetest of all women . . . Truly we have been joined—I would not say by fortune but rather by God—under a different agreement.”²⁶

Finally, small portions of the text in *Calamitatum* shed great light on Abelard's overall mindset, and speak to his own aims. Remarkably, the section in which he tries to explain how Heloise attempted to dissuade him from marriage is replete with citations to the damage done to male philosophers by households and their attendant duties. This part of the commentary is quite lengthy—it is as if Abelard is impressed by his own erudition in this regard. As he says, “We must resist other occupations, and not extend them but put them away. What now among us they endure who rightly are called monks, those endured also from desire for philosophy who stood out among the Gentiles as noble philosophers.”²⁷

Clanchy seems to believe that a portion of Abelard's work on ethics may actually have been inspired by Heloise's obviously strongly felt pronouncements on the subject. In any case, it is clear that Heloise tried to work out what an ethical commitment to another might require, and that Abelard, although he from time to time moved in that direction, did not respond in ways that were strongly similar. His work indicates that he is concerned to give a general overview of what sort of life a philosopher might need to live in order to think and write, but the place of caring for another in this life is not given much explication. Clanchy's take on this particular set of problems in the letters of Abelard and Heloise is succinctly expressed as follows:

Dilemmas of this sort [the paradox between intent and action] are the subject of Abelard's treatise on ethics, which Heloise may have inspired through her relentless analysis of her own misery. What were largely theoretical questions of moral philosophy for Abelard were

²⁵ *Unconventional*, ed. Warren, pp. 129–130. Warren notes “His special area of philosophical expertise is ethics, focusing on the relationship between intention and moral character . . .”

²⁶ Abelard, unsigned letter 50, in *Unconventional*, ed. Warren, p. 133.

²⁷ Abelard, “*Calamitatum*,” in *Letters*, trans. Scott Moncrieff, p. 14.

desperate realities for her. She felt that through no fault of her own she had done an irretrievable wrong . . .²⁸

The fact that Clanchy is inspired to note Heloise's influence, as he sees it, on Abelard's thought is noteworthy in and of itself, and is an indicator of the intensity of their relationship as read through their letters alone. The history of philosophy is such that, inevitably, we tend to think of the theoretical side of this relationship as being one articulated by Abelard, but it is patent on careful reading that Heloise has much to say and that previous readings probably have not done justice to her. In the current attempt at the recovery of women thinkers, Heloise's name must stand out.

IV

Thought on the nature of friendship has encompassed a wide variety of points of view, and at least one twentieth-century thinker, C.D. Broad, has been cited as noting that some relationships "prompt egoistic desires."²⁹ The use of this phrase by Broad reminds us of the extent to which it can be argued—and has been contended by many—that there is no such thing as altruism, and that any apparently altruistic act in a relationship is at bottom motivated by a concern for self.

Whatever the outcomes of such debates, the correspondence between Heloise and Abelard tends to underscore the nature of the conflict, and asks us to examine our own beliefs about friendship, platonic love and erotic love. For Heloise's stand on her feelings for Abelard and the motivations for her acts tends to form a consistent whole such that the strong threads of *philia* and personal concern still, according to Heloise, motivate the acts of erotic love. In a fashion that contemporary feminists will come to dub androcentric, Abelard objectifies Heloise, sees her as an object of conquest, and then subsumes their relationship under a very straightforwardly stated egoistic set of concerns. If, as another thinker has written, the gifts of our friends create duties of gratitude, there is a genuine sense in which Abelard has failed his duty.³⁰

But it might very well be objected that, however much Abelard's name is associated with the history of philosophy, and however intriguing at least some of the writing, we read the correspondence of Heloise and Abelard not for its philosophical content, but because it

²⁸ Clanchy, *Abelard*, p. 162.

²⁹ C.D. Broad, "Egoism as a Theory of Human Motives," in his *Ethics and the History of Philosophy*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1952, pp. 218–231. Cited in Tom L. Beauchamp, *Philosophical Ethics*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982, p. 56.

³⁰ Stance of W.D. Ross, as outlined in Beauchamp, *Ethics*, p. 125.

represents the culmination of a celebrated love story. On this construal, neither thinker is given much credit as a philosopher.

The counter to this line of argument is probably, once again, gender related. Our response to the tale of the two lovers is rooted in a conception of romantic love that often denies much agency to the woman (not without reason), and that foregrounds the activity of the male. Hence Abelard's comment that he had such renown that he did not fear refusal is simply one detail that helps to promulgate, as Dronke had it, a Gothic response to the overall story.³¹

A stronger assertion is that both thinkers have ideas of philosophical import, and in roughly speaking equal proportions. It is simply the case that, since almost all of what we have from Heloise is in the letters, the significance of what she had to say becomes lost. Because Abelard did author more works that were standardly philosophical within the framework of the time, we tend to see him as the philosopher, and the tendency to discount Heloise as a thinker and to fail to examine her work is great. But Dronke, again, insofar as he simply characterizes Heloise as a stylist, already asserts that her writing bears examination as the work of a literate person of her age who was a noted writer. He claims that her letters might be thought of as "works of high art"; in so claiming, he leaves it up to us to examine the works, see what their collective import is, and to try to come to grips with why the thought of such a well-known stylist has all too seldom been examined in its own right.

The correspondence of Heloise and Abelard is one that has come down to us in a more or less legendary form over centuries. The tale of the lovers and their respective ends is cited today, and has been the source of much literature and other artistic endeavors. We owe it to the memories of the authors to examine each respective body of work composed by them with as much care as they wrote it.

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³¹ Dronke, *Women*, p. 129.