

# How peter abelard began individualism in his young age

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**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

What is meant when it is said that someone is an individual? Are not all people individuals, each being perfectly capable of free will and of choosing his or her own path? Does this ability for choice create the individual, or are individuals those who have a more keen understanding of their ability for choice and differentiate themselves from others through its employment? In The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, the two title characters reveal much about themselves through their writings. Both Abelard and Heloise show themselves to be individuals, expressing their beliefs even when these beliefs run contrary to social norms. Yet while both begin their lives with individualism, later in life Abelard becomes more of a religious conformist, while Heloise continues to question her place in life.

Abelard starts his individualism at a very young age by choosing the life of a philosopher, and continues to question established norms throughout his schooling. Abelard's father was a soldier who wished Abelard to carry on his tradition. Instead, Abelard becomes enamored with schooling and knowledge, giving up a life of warfare to follow a life searching for wisdom. I was so carried away by my love of learning, he writes, that I renounced the glory of a soldier's life, made over my inheritance and rights, ... and withdrew from the court of Mars in order to kneel at the feet of Minerva (58). Abelard soaks up knowledge, and finds his calling in the field of dialectic, or the reasoning of truth by logical arguments. He roams the countryside, looking for places where his interest is shared, and eventually ends up studying in Paris, under William of Champeaux, who Abelard says was the supreme master of the subject (58). Yet William's reputation means nothing to Abelard. In the first of several instances where he refuses to accept

teachings merely on the basis of their teachers, Abelard [sets] out to refute some of his arguments and frequently [reasons] against him (58). Later Abelard does the same with another universally respected teacher, Anselm, saying that he owed his reputation more to long practice than to intelligence or memory, and that Anselm could win the admiration of an audience, but he was useless when put to the question (62). Abelard is continually seeking a teacher who can live up to his expectations, but find none that can match his abilities to reason and debate. When Abelard is put on trial his foes refuse to let him plead his case, saying that they could never compete with the ready tongue of a man whose arguments and sophistries could triumph over the whole world (82).

As in his education, Abelard's propensity for questioning the norm again comes out in his views on religion. Abelard found Anselm's glosses of the Scriptures and authorities superfluous, saying that he found it most surprising that for educated men the writings or glosses of the Fathers themselves were not sufficient for interpreting their commentaries without further instruction (63). On a bet of sorts he agrees to prove his point by providing his own interpretation of a commentary on an obscure passage, and those who heard it commended the lecture warmly (64). Once he enters monastic life Abelard still has no qualm with pointing out the problems he finds. At his first monastery, the Abbey of St. Denis, Abelard is appalled by the behavior of the monks, saying that the abbey was completely worldly and depraved, with an abbot whose pre-eminent position was matched by his evil living and notorious reputation (77). Abelard unabashedly spoke out

against their behavior, a practice which made him few friends in the monastery.

Unabashed in all things, Abelard exhibited strong individualism through his self-confidence. Early in his schooling Abelard decides that he must set up a school of his own It ended by my setting my heart on founding a school of my own, young as I was and estimating my capacities too high - and takes no small view of where his school must lie, picking Melun, an important town at that time and a royal residence (59). This high view of his abilities carries over to other aspects of life. While teaching in Paris, Abelard [yields] to the lusts of the flesh (65). Never one to leave his world of the rational, Abelard chooses to pursue Heloise after having considered all the usual attractions for a lover and decided she was the one to bring to my bed (66). Abelard is utterly confident in his youth and exceptional good looks and feared no rebuff from any woman [he] might choose to honour with [his] love (66).

Heloise is in no way just a normal girl. Her uncle, Fulbert, highly valued learning, and was committed to Heloise's education in letters (67). Heloise's inclination for learning set her apart from other girls, causing Abelard to write that a gift for letters is so rare in a girl that it added greatly to her charm and had won her renown throughout the land (66). Indeed, even Peter the Venerable applauds Heloise's learning, saying that I had not quite passed the bounds of youth and reached early manhood when I knew of your name and your reputation (277). Peter goes on to say that I used to hear at that time of the woman who although still caught up in the obligations of the

world, devoted all her application to knowledge of letters, something which is very rare (277).

When Abelard wants to marry, Heloise goes against established norms by arguing against the proposed union. While Abelard is concerned with rectifying the sins they have committed in their fornication, Heloise is more concerned with the detrimental effects a marriage would have on Abelard's reputation. What honour could she win, she protested, from a marriage that would dishonour me and humiliate us both ... Think of the curses, the loss to the Church and grief of philosophers which would greet such a marriage! (70). In a letter to Abelard, Heloise defends her position, saying that

The name of wife may seem more sacred or more binding, but sweeter for me will always be the word mistress, or, if you will permit me, that of concubine or whore. I believed that the more I humbled myself on your account, ... the less damage I should do to the brightness of your reputation (113).

Heloise also eschews the formality of marriage, preferring the purity of love only love freely given should keep me for her, not the constriction of a marriage tie (74).

Abelard and Heloise both show their individualism by espousing what has been called the ethic of pure intention. Heloise says that 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 (115). Abelard, in his Letters of Direction, echoes this sentiment, saying that It is not so much

what things are done as the spirit in which they are done that we must consider (175). In this belief they reject the traditional holding that it is the act itself that is what is important, but instead look to the intent of the heart. For unless the spirit be first corrupted by evil intention, whatever is done outwardly in the body cannot be a sin (174).

It is following their entrance into religious life that Abelard and Heloise seem to differ in their individualism. After conversion Abelard looks back on his previous transgressions with shame, regarding them as a crime for which he is being justly punished -

After our marriage, when you were living in the cloister with the nuns at Argenteuil and I came one day to visit you privately, you know what my uncontrollable desire did with you there ... Even if our other shameful behavior had ended, this alone would deserve far heavier punishment (146).

Abelard has abandoned completely the relationship they had, pouring himself entirely into his work. Looking back, he says that what he felt for Heloise was unbridled lust, not love (147). Abelard regards his mutilation as a gift, rescuing him from the slough of filth in which I had been wholly immersed in mind as in body (148). Abelard no longer thinks of Heloise as a wife, but instead as a sister in Christ.

The thoughts of Heloise are quite the opposite of the man who was once her husband. Heloise bemoans how at one wretched stroke of fortune, that supreme act of flagrant treachery robbed me of my very self in robbing me of you (113). Heloise looks back on the acts they committed not with regret,

but with longing In my case, the pleasures of lovers which we shared have been too sweet - they can never displease me, and can scarcely be banished from my thoughts (133). She realizes the sinfulness of what they did I should be groaning over the sins I have committed, - but instead wants them back but I can only sigh for what I have lost (133). She bemoans the hypocrisy of her current situation; she is a respected member of the religious community, and yet she can find no penitence whereby to appease God, whom I always accuse of the greatest cruelty in regard to this outrage (132).

Through their letters Abelard and Heloise leave us a highly personal record of two very remarkable lives. Both are clearly among the brightest minds of their time, and *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* gives a fascinating glimpse into their thoughts and desires. Individualism, defined earlier as the use of choice to follow belief regardless of the social norm, is something clearly evident throughout. Both rise above the rest of their generation, pursuing their ideals with drive and passion. It is only late in life that we see some separation, as Heloise continues to hold to what she held so dear in the past, while Abelard becomes immersed in his religion and focuses on that alone, to the exclusion of all they had before.