

# Abelard and heloise's love letters



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The letters sent between Abelard and Heloise discuss many controversial characteristics of their time period. They converse about sex, virginity, a woman's role in the society, and punishment which in turn shows the ethics, religious views, and morals of their time. In contrast to these topics it also portrays the problems the church and society had when faced with these ideas that did not follow along according to the Bible. The ethics and rules of living were heavily connected to the church in Abelard and Heloise's time unlike modern times. In this society the clergy was the most respected albeit feared power in the land. As such people were expected to follow and adhere to everything said in the Bible. They were supposed to live their lives accordingly to the Bible. Any knowledge was supposed to be used to further exemplify God and never to be used to refute God, his rules, or his teachings. If it were to be used as such then people were as saying heresy and excommunicated from the church and scorned by others. Every aspect of this time period and society were centered around the church. In this highly restricted society the letters sent between the two lovers allows us insight into the topics of the sanctity of virginity, sex once married, the penalties for sex without marriage, and the roles women were expected to play without any complaints or persuasion in the society of Abelard and Heloise.

The sanctity of virginity was a great prize during Abelard and Heloise's time, around the twelfth century. It was prized and held to high esteem but for the wrong reasons. Many believed the longer a woman held onto her virginity the closer she would become to God. Abelard reckons that, " The more God is pleased by the abstinence and continence which women have dedicated to

him, the more willing he will be to grant their prayers.”(123) Men of this society believe virginity should be in devotion to God but Abelard believed it was to please society that many women did it, not to please God. While Heloise does agree she says “ Men think being pure of flesh, a virgin, is a virtue.” She also believes that that virtue comes from the soul not from the body. Being a virgin was considered something we as humans do to please God when in fact it is actually more of a spiritual or religious trait. Society only placed a value upon outward appearances as a virgin but allowed lustful temptations to be thought as long as it was not acted upon. Abelard considered virgins not pure if they thought dirty because the body and soul are one and the same. Society respected the display of virginity but cared little if a person actually believed in what they were doing or if a person actually wanted to do what they were doing. Not only were people curious about virginity but they were also clueless about the relationship once sex is permitted after marriage. Many believed God has allowed sex once one is married to the one they have married. Even though Abelard does believe this he still feels animosity while having sex with his own wife especially “ during the days of Our Lord’s Passion” (147). Although sex is to be allowed after marriage the church did have rules as to when a couple could be together. Sex altogether is accepted during Abelard and Heloise’s era but it hinted at as being bad since the church must regulate it. Since the church can say when it alright and not alright to have sex then this associates that there must be some type of evil or ungodliness regarding sex. Abelard never admits that he agrees with what the rabble think of him and Heloise he does say that the people think “ it was desire, not affection which bound you to me, the flame of lust rather than of love” (116). Abelard does not know why

he has transgressed what he has, taking Heloise's virginity and having sex on holy days, so like any person he has to place the blame on someone or something else so he blames it on the emotion of lust which leads him to give up his love of Heloise though she still loves him.

Due to their society ingraining in them the ever powerful rule of God, Abelard and Heloise expect God to punish them for their sins. Abelard accepts God's punishment without any hassle and does not question it. Heloise on the other hand goes on to say that all the laws of being equal under the eye of God were reversed when it came to their judgment. Heloise is confused because God did not punish her and Abelard while they were committing the sins of sex before marriage but instead decided to punish them after they became married. She considers it reversed because while they did the bad deed no bad befell them but once they had obeyed God's rule the punishment fell upon them harshly. Heloise complains to Abelard about how harsh God's punishment is on them but Abelard believes it was all part of God's will. He believes that Heloise was sent to him by God to cause him to be castrated forcing him closer to God. This shows that in this society people were confused and had very different views on God's punishment but even so they did accept it.

Throughout their letters Abelard is quick to remind Heloise about her place in society reinforcing the role women played in this society. The most obvious role of women in this society was that women were secondary to men.

Heloise further reinforces this patriarchy upon herself when she notices Abelard places her name first on the letter before his own. Heloise tells him that it should not be so and that she is inferior to his since she is a woman

and as such his name should come before his (127). Abelard does agree and states that that is the natural order of the world. As common practice in this society women are underneath men and wives are expected to always, always serve their husbands. A women has many other expected roles too. Above all, and the most degrading of all she is expected to be good in bed. Another expected role from a women is to always make her husband happy. Many times Abelard says things like a good wife makes her husband a happy man. All in all society only want and believe a woman should make a man happy, love him, and serve him. Even with all of this women can still be viewed as evil or corruption in this society. Heloise says “ men are most easily brought to ruin through their wives” (131) Heloise never objects to the views Abelard projects onto her or other women in this society. Heloise perfectly shows way of thinking of a typical women in this society. She says that she will change her clothes, her mind, and her body all to prove Abelard as the one owner of her body and will. She even goes on to say she wants nothing but Abelard and that she “ looked for no marriage-bond, no marriage portion... I prefer love to wedlock and freedom to chains” (113). She would give up her life and everything she has for Abelard.

These letters above all else show the corruption and the influence of man upon the church of God. Heloise states that if man does not offend or deny the opinions of clergy men they will receive the highest of praise. Any form of thinking that disrupts or goes against what the church is preaching is branded as heresy and usually leads to the threats on the person’s life or even the death of the person. Many people decide which verses and tenets of the Bible to follow and ignore the ones that do not benefit them in the

short or long run. The clergymen in Abelard and Heloise's era and our era flaunt their wealth even though the Bible tells about modesty they choose to ignore it. Abelard thinks this is wrong in the churches of his time. Another fault that is prominent in this society but not thought upon as evidenced in the absence of Abelard's thoughts upon it is racism. Abelard says Ethiopian women are not as pretty as white women but they are better in bed. And he also says that the color of the Ethiopian women are a "disfigurement" (140).

The discussions had through letters between Abelard and Heloise about virginity, sex, marriage, God's punishment have allowed us sight into the twelfth century's morals, ethics, and it truly highlights the problems within the church that have continued on until this modern day. While virginity is cherished, sex after marriage is allowed by the Bible, the punishment of God is expected when a sin is committed, and the roles of women are enforced in this society there are many flaws. Virginity is prized only on the outside, sex is allowed after marriage but still regulated by the church, punishment is expected but viewed differently by each person, and society treat women second to men. Even though Heloise questions God's punishment and is confused about it she never once questions her role in society she accepts it. This goes to show how strong a society can impact a single person.