

On the Bridling of the Body and Soul of Héloïse, The ‘Chaste Whore’

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The Héloïse d’Argenteuil (1101–1164) of her ‘personal’ letters to estranged husband Abelard is a study in contradictions. As she seeks to re-establish the connection they have lost, she also reveals a private struggle of intellect, religion, morality, sexuality, and—above all—a crisis of identity. Changes of identity may become problematic when the new identity contrasts strongly with the original one, or the individual’s old and new traits conflict in a way that is difficult to resolve. This is certainly the case when it comes to Héloïse, an influential abbess whose private letters express distinctly unorthodox moral views and a yearning for the passionate relationship she shared with Abelard in her youth. These letters portray a conflict between her original self, before their transformative relationship, and the self that is exhibited at the time of writing; in order to obey Abelard’s wishes, Héloïse has created a new outward identity which belies the true desires of her body and soul.

We are thoroughly familiar with romances that threaten the social order, the lives of others, or the lives of the lovers themselves. However, the letters of Héloïse put higher and more complex stakes on the table of romance; she gives up her true identity, and the needs of her body and soul as she describes them, at her lover’s request. This raises the question not of the conflict between body and soul—the division which seems too crude to explain what seems to be happening in Héloïse’s mind—but of something altogether more complex, and more feminine; the type of conflict where body and soul are united in two diametrically opposed sets of needs which remain morally conflicted.

We know from the historical record, and her writing, that Héloïse was a highly educated individual of outstanding character (Mews 2005, p. 58). She had formulated deep personal convictions on the basis of philosophical influences such as Cicero, Plato and St. Augustine, as well as the guidance of Abelard. Foremost amongst these convictions is love, as a guiding principle, and the ethics of intention. However, her ideals are thrown into conflict by the end of her romance with Abelard, and

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the religious life he commands her to lead. She becomes paradoxically chaste and licentious, religious and blasphemous, sincere and hypocritical, self-denying and supremely self-asserting. Ultimately, she is both defined and destroyed by love, the ultimate among her values.

As is well known, the young Héloïse was entrusted into Abelard's tutelage by her uncle, a Parisian canon named Fulbert. Peter Abelard was considerably older, and a highly respected scholar. The two fell in love and embarked on a passionate affair, of which Abelard later wrote, 'We left no stage of love untried in our passion, and if love could find something novel... we tried [it]' (Abelard and Héloïse 2007, p. 12). When Héloïse fell pregnant, Abelard sent her away to give birth to the child in secret. To appease Fulbert, Abelard married Héloïse; nonetheless, he was punished by castration by an unknown member of her family shortly afterwards. Following his castration, Abelard apparently lost interest in his wife, coercing her into taking religious vows as a nun, before entering religious life himself. They had no further contact for a considerable amount of time¹, until she received a copy of his autobiographical letter *Historia Calamitatum* (History of My Calamities), which was addressed, not to her, but to an unnamed friend. Héloïse replies to his letter, beginning their personal correspondence after a long hiatus.

Héloïse's personal transformation can be gleaned from her first two letters to Abelard from this series, after she received his *Historia Calamitatum*, generally accepted as being by Héloïse. (I have excluded the early letters connected to the couple's love affair because, although they could provide valuable insight into Héloïse in the formative years of their relationship, their authorship is under debate. Constant Mews provides a compelling case for a young Héloïse and Abelard as the writers (Mews 1999), but their origins remain controversial.) The two letters Héloïse wrote immediately after she received *Historia Calamitatum* are particularly useful as they contain far more personal information than her later correspondence. Abelard does not respond favourably to her outpouring of emotion. He explains at the outset of his first reply that his lack of contact 'was not because of negligence on my part but because of your own wisdom, in which I have always had implicit trust. I did not believe you needed these things from me when God has given you all you need' (Abelard and Héloïse 2007, p. 63), and he urges Héloïse to turn her focus back to God. As a result, she announces her intention to stop writing of her feelings at the outset of her third letter. The wording of this intention is, however, highly ambiguous:

Since there must never be the slightest cause for you to find fault with my obedience, a bridle has been set upon my words, although my grief itself is still untamed... If only the heart that grieves were as ready to obey as the hand that writes. (Abelard and Héloïse 2007, pp. 105–106)

Brook Findley notes that, although what follows is not dishonest, this statement 'has the effect of cutting the reader off from an implied author who has, up to this point, seemed seductively present in the text' (2005, p. 289). In other words, with

¹ Historical sources differ as to the exact length of time between their separation and written correspondence, but the general consensus is 10–15 years.

these few passages Héloïse makes a point of validating the genuineness of what has already been said, while putting the reader on notice that what follows will be ‘bridled’, therefore not free, not honest and not heartfelt. The first two letters, as an outpouring of the unbridled truth of Héloïse’s otherwise suppressed feelings, are fertile ground for an investigation of this public figure’s true identity and the ways in which her relationship with Abelard transformed her.

In these two letters in particular, Héloïse presents herself as a person whose soul is deeply at odds with the self that she shows publicly. It is made clear that she has been significantly transformed by her relationship with Abelard; her values and desires have remained essentially the same, but she can no longer voice them as she used to. The false identity she has cultivated, in order to do what Abelard thinks she should, conflicts with her personally held values, creating acute moral discomfort. For instance, Héloïse values sincerity, but lives a hypocritical life in which her words are “bridled”; she believes in the ethic of intention, which both validates and condemns her choices. Above all, she believes in love, but love is denied her. The chasm between her internal and externally represented selves and the resulting struggle is a significant ethical problem, which she tries to make sense of in these letters.

It is significant that Héloïse speaks of having destroyed her true identity and denied the needs of her body and heart in taking religious vows at Abelard’s command:

...at your command, I changed my habit along with my heart, to show that my body along with my heart belonged only to you. (Abelard and Héloïse 2007, p. 55)
 ... you are the sole cause of my sorrow, and you alone... have the power to make me sad (or) bring me happiness or comfort; you alone have so great a debt to repay me, particularly now when I carried out all your orders so implicitly that when I was powerless to oppose you in anything, I found strength at your command to destroy myself.²

Héloïse’s emotional words about self-destruction do not refer to suicide and are not meant literally, for as Brooke Findley argues, ‘Héloïse, with her libidinous body and rebellious thoughts, is characterized by her refusal to give up and go away’ (2005, p. 287). In these first two letters, despite her protestations, Héloïse’s true self persists in showing itself, and is expressed strongly. But we must not take too much comfort in her outspokenness; the fact is that, when writing these lines, she is already very much a suppressed individual, having stripped herself of her former external identity of wife and mother in order to take on the role of nun as per Abelard’s command. What emerges from these two letters is a picture of the young, idealistic, opinionated and passionate Héloïse trapped in the body, clothing and expected ideological sphere of a nun.

Having established that Héloïse’s identity is the locus of conflict, and that this conflict troubles her, the natural question to ask is what led her to accept this difficult moral position. She makes it clear that she willingly put herself in this situation

² *The Letters of Abelard and Héloïse* (1974), p. 113. Hereafter, all quotes from the letters are from this translation unless otherwise stated.

for Abelard's sake; first, when it came to marriage, and later when it came to taking religious vows. Of both choices, she reminds him:

It was not my own pleasures and wishes I sought to gratify, as you well know, but yours.
(p. 113)

Héloïse acknowledges that she had full understanding of just what she had given up in taking religious vows at his command:

...my love rose to such heights of madness that it robbed itself of what it most desired beyond hope of recovery, when immediately at your bidding I changed my clothing along with my mind, in order to show you the sole possessor of my body and my will alike.
(p. 113)

In so doing, Héloïse committed herself to following Abelard into a life which would guarantee she would never have what she wanted; a life which would separate her from him and their son, and require a divorcing of her internal and external selves. Despite the immense amount of pain this had caused her, she notes:

I would have had no hesitation, God knows, in following you or going ahead at your bidding to the flames of Hell. (p. 117)

Héloïse's continued commitment to the unwanted life required by this decision is the ultimate proof of her dedication to love. In saying this, it is important to bear in mind that, to Héloïse, love is not simply an emotion, but a philosophical ideal and guiding principle; her ethics of true love are strongly related to Cicero's ideas on friendship. Cicero's *Laelius de Amicitia* defines true friendship as one that is 'not because we are attracted to it by the expectation of ulterior gain,' (p. 14) which is 'between good men,' (p. 20) and 'a complete accord on all subjects human and divine, joined with mutual goodwill and affection.' (p. 11) There is a clear connection between this definition of friendship and Plato's earlier representations of heavenly love in *Symposium*, both of which were originally applied only to men:

Our customs, then, provide for only one honourable way of taking a man as a lover. In addition to recognizing that the lover's total and willing subjugation to his beloved's wishes is neither servile nor reprehensible, we allow that there is one... further reason for willingly subjecting oneself to another which is equally above reproach: that is subjection for the sake of virtue... Both these principles... must be combined if a young man is to accept a lover in an honourable way. (Plato 1989, p. 18)

Héloïse abandons the homosocial aspect originally inherent in these theories, applying them directly to her relationship with Abelard. She draws on two major elements in developing her own ethical philosophy; first, as she repeatedly says, true love and her love for Abelard in particular is not selfish or for personal gain. The second is an aspect which both sources share and that Héloïse picks up in deed if not in word—the notion of “complete accord” and “total and willing subjugation” to the beloved.

Héloïse shared many of Abelard's values and beliefs originally; his values and his excellent teaching of those values were apparently, to a great extent, the reason she was attracted to him in the first place. However, when Abelard's values changed

following his castration, Héloïse found herself obligated to follow him through the change of beliefs that was not her own, joining an austere religious life for which she admittedly had no personal calling. That choice may confirm the quality of her love from Plato’s perspective, but it also leads to the moral dilemmas associated with a soul tormented by conflicting values.

An astute philosopher, Héloïse attempts to reconcile the duality of her moral stance, and resolve the resulting discomfort, through her belief in the ethic of intention. She surmises this stance in her first letter:

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. (p. 115)

Intriguingly, this belief of Héloïse’s—that one’s intentions rather than actions are the measure of morality—both confirms and condemns her choices. Elizabeth Zimmerman connects her belief in the ethics of intention to both Abelard and Augustine of Hippo (Zimmerman 2006, p. 252), and it seems that these two influences correspond to her conflicting judgements of her own intention. Héloïse writes with the understanding that Abelard will agree with her on the matter of intention; she states, ‘Wholly guilty that I am, I am also, as you know, wholly innocent’ (p. 115). This confidence on her part strongly suggests that the ethics of intention had been discussed between them during the time in which he was her teacher.

In fact, Abelard would go on to take this ideology even further than Héloïse does in the letters, and was tried for heresy based on his later writings in *Ethics* (1139),³ in which he insisted that ‘God... considers not so much what is done as in what mind it may be done [and] truly considers the guilt in our intention’ (p. 41). For Héloïse, their shared interpretation of this belief system validates her course of action, which is now, ironically, considered hypocritical. Having first loved Abelard, and resolved that her love for him must be unselfish and obedient, she was compelled to accept taking religious vows as a nun, despite feeling no divine calling. Her intention, to adhere to unselfish love as her highest good, affirms that decision. Nowhere in the letters does Héloïse question these choices; she can only lament their emotionally and ethically inadequate results. She believes that she could not have done otherwise, yet the outcome of moral wholeness is not forthcoming, and the feelings of personal hypocrisy torment her. This ethical discomfort is, in large part, due to the fact that Héloïse’s concept of the ethics of intention also condemns her actions. The chastity for which she is so lauded is morally worthless to her, given that her intent is to serve Abelard, rather than true religious piety. Zimmerman points out (2006, p. 262) that St Augustine also differentiates between chastity of the flesh and of the spirit in *De Bono Coniugali* in which he says, ‘Continenence is a virtue not of the body but of the mind’ (Augustine 1997, p. 47). Accordingly, Héloïse laments:

³ Who influenced who in this case is unclear; certainly, they were of a mutual understanding at the time of these letters. In *The Lost Love Letters of Héloïse and Abelard* (1999), Constant Mews argues that Héloïse made significant contributions to Abelard’s later writing on ethics, although her input is unacknowledged.

Men call me chaste; they do not know the hypocrite I am. They consider purity of the flesh a virtue, though virtue belongs not to the body but to the soul... I can earn praise before men but deserve none before God, who searches in our hearts and loins and sees in our darkness. (p. 133)

Therefore, although Héloïse can rationalise the choices which led to her “hypocritical” life, she cannot feel comfortable with them. The ethics of intention, along with her principle of love, have led her to a moral stalemate.

Héloïse’s moral difficulties are intimately bound up in her conflicting values of religious piety and pagan philosophy, as well as chastity and licentiousness. At the time of writing, she was a widely respected Abbess, a position of considerable power for a woman. J.T. Muckle notes that ‘Héloïse enjoyed a good reputation among the religious leaders of the time (of writing) from the Pope down’⁴, which likely could not have been the case had her opinions and feelings as expressed in the letters become publicly known. This reputation is corroborated by the letters of Peter the Venerable following his visit to the Paraclete after Abelard’s death. It is clear that Peter respects Héloïse precisely for the faith she has admitted to Abelard she does not have:

I am drawn to you by what many have told me about your religion. If only our Cluny possessed you... I would have preferred your wealth of religion and learning to the richest treasures of any kings, and would rejoice to see that noble community of sisters still further illuminated by your presence there. (Abelard and Héloïse 2007, pp. 280–281)

He also praises her lavishly for what he saw as a clean transition from a secular to Biblical scholar:

...you turned your zeal for learning in a far better direction... you left logic for the Gospel, Plato for Christ, the academy for the Cloister. (Abelard and Héloïse 2007, p. 278)

However, as we see from her letters to Abelard, this transition took place only publicly. The private Héloïse still yearns for physical love, subscribes to many classical theories, and expresses a disdain for religion:

I am judged religious at a time when there is little in religion which is not hypocrisy, when whoever does not offend the opinions of men receives the highest praise. (pp. 133–134)

In this Héloïse is clear about her true feelings about her faith, although she does respect the Bible and God. She quotes Scriptures to support her reasoning several times throughout the letters, and expresses discomfort with her own religious ‘hypocrisy,’ manifested by knowledge, but unsupported by true faith. She laments repeatedly that God knows, and would be displeased by, her lack of devotion to him.

However, her ideas on what constitutes good intention and bad intention—influenced by other philosophers, and even more so by her personal inclination to value love over all else—allow for some highly unconventional interpretations of the Biblical canon, incompatible with strict Catholicism. For example, Héloïse expresses clearly unorthodox views on the matter of sex. She writes of having tried to dissuade Abelard from legitimizing their relationship with marriage, noting that

⁴ J.T. Muckle, qtd. in Findley (2005), p. 283.

he ‘kept silent about most of my arguments for preferring love to wedlock and freedom to chains.’ (p. 114) Héloïse justifies her argument, in line with her adaptation of Cicero’s unselfish friendship, by her belief that remaining unmarried would be better for Abelard and his career in philosophy; yet her point is in conflict with the traditional Christian viewpoint that sex outside of marriage is a mortal sin. She invokes the example of Biblical men such as Adam, Sampson, Solomon and Job in her second letter, noting that ‘the easiest path to ruin for men is always through their wives’ (Abelard and Héloïse 2007, p. 77), but neglects to quote the scriptures she would surely be painfully aware of, condemning fornication (1 Corinthians 6:9–10). This cognitive dissonance, corresponding to the conflict between her earthly desires and heavenly commitment, forms part of the chasm between Héloïse’s internal and external selves.

Héloïse concedes that her fornication with Abelard was sinful from a Biblical perspective, although disliking that term for what they shared, calling it an “ugly but expressive” (p. 130) word. However, she wonders why they remained unpunished by God in their unwed state, but experienced his wrath in the form of Abelard’s castration shortly following their marriage:

But when we amended our unlawful conduct by what was lawful, and atoned for the shame of fornication by an honourable marriage, then the Lord in his anger laid his hand heavily upon us, and would not permit a chaste union though he had long tolerated on which was unchaste. (p. 130)

This confusion is also expressed as anger:

O God—if I dare say it—cruel to me in everything! O merciless mercy! ...I can find no penitence whereby to appease God, whom I always accuse of the greatest cruelty in regard to this outrage. (p. 139)

This destruction of what to Héloïse was most sacred—her relationship with Abelard, indeed Abelard himself—caused her to mistrust God, and made her position as Abbess all the more uncomfortable. As a committed and high-ranking Christian, she deferred to God in all things; but as a young woman and philosopher for whom love is the ultimate truth, she raged against the God who she thought had unjustly punished them. The timing of this ‘punishment’ further confuses her private feelings about the morality of their love affair and marriage.

Héloïse’s anger towards God is further compounded by her feelings of guilt at being unable to atone for her sins, primarily those relating to her sexual relationship with Abelard. She does not deny that the Bible condemns her sexual past, but what is even more troubling to her is that she still cannot honestly repent. Despite having maintained her religious vows for over a decade, she rejects the idea that her ‘chastity of the flesh’ amounts to anything of moral value. Héloïse considers her chastity and religious devotion as worthless, because both are done for earthly love rather than piety. While acknowledging her hope that she may deserve *some* credit for her physical penitence (p. 134), she nevertheless cannot consider herself on good terms with God, as both abstaining from sin and doing good are “vain if not done for love of God,” (p. 134) whereas she has “done nothing yet for the love of him” (p. 117).

Her feelings toward God are dominated by an uncomfortable combination of anger, blame and guilt.

Closely interrelated with Héloïse's religious guilt is her internal conflict regarding questions of chastity and licentiousness. Héloïse has conflicted thoughts about her sexual relationship with Abelard—her body is chaste, or “continent”, but in her mind and heart she proudly remains Abelard's whore:

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. (p. 113)

Despite her passionate firmness on the subject of their love, Héloïse elsewhere admits to feelings of intense guilt over her inability to repent for their licentiousness. She laments:

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... even during the celebration of the Mass, when our prayers should be purer, lewd visions of those pleasures take such a hold on my unhappy soul... I should be groaning over the sins I have committed, but I can only sigh for what I have lost. (p. 133)

In line with her expressed belief in the ethics of intention, she reasons:

How can it be called repentance for sins, however great the mortification of the flesh, if the mind still retains the will to sin and is on fire with its old desires? (p. 132)

Again, these feelings of longing and guilt directly correspond to the conflict between Héloïse's identities; the internal, suppressed, authentic Héloïse and the external, pious fabrication.

The final result of these conflicting aspects of Héloïse's values is an opposition between sincerity and hypocrisy, an issue that is of the utmost ethical concern to her. Brooke Findley focuses on this issue in a 2005 article, stating that Héloïse ‘repeatedly examines her own sincerity and hypocrisy, ultimately refusing to decide between the two and embracing the identity of the “sincere hypocrite”’ (Findley 2005, p. 282). Findley goes on to assert that Héloïse considers herself sincere, or innocent of true hypocrisy, insofar as she destroyed herself for Abelard's sake. However, Findley argues, Héloïse evidently has not been destroyed; in the first two letters she expresses many thoughts, desires and values attributable to the scholar and lover—not the austere abbess. As such, Findley surmises, Héloïse is not a hypocrite because she leads a false life for love, but rather, because she has stopped short in the destruction of her original ‘self’. (2005, p. 291)

It should be noted, however, that Héloïse can only be considered a hypocrite in this regard if we accept her premise that the destruction of her original self was necessary to show the genuineness of her love. Héloïse's own view on this is not clear; at times she blames herself for her hypocrisy, but at other times she is more generous to herself, allowing that she may try and fail to suppress her inner self at times, yet still be sincere in her devotion.

Regardless of where Héloïse ultimately stood on this issue, for her reader to judge her insincere one would have to accept that Héloïse really thought and was right in thinking that the absolute destruction of her ‘self’ was necessary for genuine

love. I believe that most readers would find Héloïse sincere and extremely wholehearted in her love. She may simply have held unrealistic expectations. Rather than the continued existence of her original self being proof of her insincerity in love, it might be seen simply as evidence of her humanity, and the impossibility of willing away one’s deeply held beliefs and desires. Findley also seems to abandon the conclusion of *Sincere Hypocrisy* in a later article, returning to the idea of Héloïse as a self-identified ‘sincere hypocrite’ (2006, p. 250).

Héloïse remains a woman whose primary value of unselfish love compelled her to act against secondary values, such as honesty and personal integrity. She suffered acutely at the conflict of values and identity traits that this choice brought about, but persisted in her philosophical ideal of unselfish love, and the false persona that she took on with genuine intention. Upon taking up the veil, it became necessary to suppress her inner desires and to project, instead, the wise and pious woman of religion that was so universally admired; she reminds Abelard that ‘For a long time my pretence deceived you, as it did many, so that you mistook my hypocrisy for piety’ (p. 134). She willingly and consciously sacrificed her true identity, as well as her future, to love.

This knowing and wilful abrogation of self is disturbing to many readers of Héloïse’s letters, especially given that Abelard ended any possibility of a real relationship between them when he commanded her to take religious vows. Héloïse expresses a great deal of clarity and realism about this situation in the letters; she rationalises that Abelard never truly loved her, but that his passion was only lust (p. 116), and acknowledges the hopeless misery of her life:

Of all wretched women I am the most wretched, and amongst the unhappy I am unhappiest. (p. 129)

Look at the unhappy life I lead, pitiable beyond any other, if in this world I must endure so much in vain, with no hope of future reward. (p. 134)

On top of this painful reality, Abelard then confirms his indifference, persisting in addressing her with religious rather than romantic endearments in his replies⁵, and expressing discomfort with her emotional words. This response, following more than ten years of silence, would be enough to convince any intelligent woman—as Héloïse certainly was—that their romantic relationship was over. As discussed at the outset of this chapter, however, Héloïse concludes her ‘personal’ correspondence by declaring her continued obedience, with a determination bordering on the perverse:

Since there must never be the slightest cause for you to find fault with my obedience, a bridle has been set upon my words, although my grief itself is still untamed. (Abelard and Héloïse 2007, p. 105)

Marilynn Desmond offers an explanation of Héloïse’s continually self-destructive choices as symptomatic of her masochistic nature. Desmond builds upon Abelard’s references to physical violence in *Historia Calamitatum*, claiming that the text

⁵ For example, Abelard greets Héloïse in his first letter as his “dearly beloved sister in Christ,” (p. 199) in contrast to the closing words of her first letter, “farewell, my only love.” (p. 118)

establishes Héloïse as a ‘submissive [...] and masochistic lover, roles [she] later performs in their letters’ (Desmond 1998, p. 38). Héloïse continues her extreme submission to Abelard, according to Desmond, because his ‘rhetorical violence... textually re-enacts’ their initial erotic relationship of “*magister* and *discipula*,” or master and female disciple (Desmond, p. 37); in other words, she continues to engage with their sexual relationship in the only way she can, through extreme submissiveness. Héloïse’s final act of submission to Abelard, in silencing her bodily and emotional needs, is perhaps the most tragic of all.

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