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“I shall read that you are my husband and you shall see me sign myself your wife”: Analyzing the Rhetorical Strategies of Heloise d’Argenteuil

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Peter Abelard and Heloise d'Argenteuil were twelfth century scholars who famously corresponded through a series of love letters sent from her nunnery to his monastery. Prior to their written relationship stood a lustful existence between the pair. Abelard, an intellectual scholar, began tutoring Heloise when she was a young adult. They soon became romantically involved and continued in this manner until Heloise discovered she was expecting Abelard's son. They did as was expected during this time and secretly wed, despite the disapproval of Heloise's uncle, Canon Fulbert. During the night, he sent men to humiliate and torture Abelard, leading to his castration, a horrific incident he refers to as 'the calamity'. This single event precipitated Abelard's personal downfall until he retired to a monastery, a conventional hiding place. Heloise was placed in a nunnery by her family, and the two separated for over a decade. Their romantic correspondence resumed twelve years later. Their bond then turned towards a more 'adult love,' a love that was mature. Abelard and Heloise continued this relationship until their deaths, only reuniting through burial.

The following pages examine the letters of Abelard and Heloise through several lenses. Heloise's epistolary style of writing seems to anticipate the *Querelle des Femmes* of later centuries in that she maintains multiple personas depending on Abelard's desire. The *Querelle des Femmes* "refers to 'the woman question' – a literary debate about the nature and status of women that took place during the late middle ages and into the Renaissance" (Grendler, "Querelle des Femmes"). Heloise plays the different roles required by Abelard in order to keep their communication active while still battling his defiance and the challenges of their relationship. While both components of the dyad should be considered together to evaluate the intensity of their relationship, each individual was intellectually renowned in his or her own right and deserves respectful consideration.

By the time Peter Abelard began teaching her, Heloise was already a reputed scholar. She was most distinguished in reading and writing but also had a gift for languages, such as Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Her later education under Abelard's teaching in medicine and other traditional subjects taught in higher-education of the era helped Heloise gain "quite a reputation as a physician in her role as abbess of Paraclete" (Nehring, "Heloise & Abelard: Love Hurts"). Examining the correspondence of Heloise and Abelard illuminates their intense bond and unwavering love for one another. Further, the work of Medieval scholar Sally Livingston and others makes it possible to investigate Heloise's rhetorical strategies in these letters, strategies that engender a conversation between husband and wife and enable her to retain an unbreakable connection with her husband. Once the relationship between the dyad is fully understood, discussion can advance to decouple Heloise from Abelard. Heloise's voice, "refuses to stay in the Middle Ages; it reaches through the centuries and catches us at the throat" (Nehring, "Heloise & Abelard: Love Hurts"), her message thus transcending beyond boundaries of societal roles and time alike.

The letters were composed between 1133 and 1138 AD; the first eight letters are the most significant and were first discovered in the thirteenth century. Later in 1980, 113 more documents were remarkably found, including both signed and unsigned letters. Many of these newly discovered letters were exchanged prior to Abelard's castration, adding an entirely new element to scholarly debate.

Letter writing allowed Heloise and Abelard to maintain a long-distance correspondence and helped preserve their marriage, as they were immovable from their confined establishments. It also enabled Heloise to discover herself as an independent person and to develop her personal views on their marriage. Livingston explains, "Language is bound up with material goods and

the right to those goods. Literature thus becomes the site for women to work out their views on marriage; through literature, they write their rights through authorship” (2). Heloise also saw the importance of her time apart from Abelard and their ability to correspond through letter writing. She writes, “If a picture, which is but a mute representation of an object, can give such pleasure, what cannot letters inspire. They have souls; they can speak” (Letter One). This quote overtly exemplifies Heloise’s desire to “speak” her “soul” through this correspondence. She continues,

[Letters] have in them all that force which expresses the transports of the heart; they have all the fire of our passions, they can raise them as much as if the persons themselves were present; they have all the tenderness and the delicacy of speech, and sometimes even a boldness of expression beyond it. (Letter One)

Heloise not only attempts to entice Abelard into conversation but also expresses her satisfaction with this means of communication. She rationalizes with her husband and tries to convince him that this method may even be better than seeing each other face to face, especially given the circumstances and their wantonness, so as to repent for their sins separately.

For the dyad, letter writing became the only possibility for intimacy—and for honesty. This epistolary style of writing was their last chance to maintain their relationship. The letters allowed Heloise to say what she may not have been able to convey directly to Abelard in person. She is not to be viewed as a woman being dominated, but rather over time, their letter writing defines her and mitigates the idea of a long distance relationship of Abelard with his wife.

The critical reception of the pair has changed throughout history. The letters between Heloise and Abelard are said to have been the most popular during the eighteenth century, nearly six centuries after their deaths. Although during that time the letters were rarely studied, they were, however, often a part of popular culture. Unfortunately, as time passes, many specific details of the letters and of the actual events have been lost. For instance, literary scholar Cecilia A. Feilla cites, “as Geoffrey Tillotson has noted, in the Latin originals there is one reference to tears, and one to sighs; in de Bussy’s translations, there are four references to tears and crying, one to sighs; in the DuBois-Hughes edition, there are five references to tears, three to sighs; and in Pope’s poem, there is a veritable deluge: eighteen mentions of tears and crying, three of sighs” (Feilla 4). Fortunately, the proof from these textual studies detect and uncover textual discrepancies, leading writers, such as Feilla, to implore scholars to stop trying to explain the letters and simply let them speak for themselves.

To further complicate matters aside from the textual discrepancies, information about Heloise is limited. There is a great need to investigate Heloise and the letters, centering on issues relating to a woman’s voice engaging with a powerful man’s.

An examination of the letters exhibits not only the intensity of the dyad’s relationship, but also Heloise’s high level of individual intelligence. Selected by the well-known Peter Abelard to be tutored, pairing this selection with the fact that she was a female during the twelfth century, clearly exemplifies that she was intellectually gifted. Heloise was a figure conversant with the academy through Peter Abelard’s tutoring but also on her own. She was both a lover and a scholar. Even more so than Abelard, Heloise was very confident in her scholarly work and in her relationship. She was completely elevated and held all of the power in both situations. The letters illuminate just how keen her intelligence was, as well as, showing her independence.

For many years Heloise’s reputation suffered, largely by not being understood as a significant thinker in her own right. Decoupling Heloise from Abelard is critically important because through it she establishes her individuality and achieves equality and at times even transcendence over Abelard. Scholars have disputed Heloise’s individual prominence, claiming

that Heloise's name was generally not mentioned unless it was being paired with her husband's scholarly work. Jane Duran explains, "Prior stands on their correspondence frequently did not mention her except under the rubric Peter Abelard" (35). Generally, this attitude changed when the new letters were discovered. Duran elaborates, "Heloise deserves to be thought of less as an appendage to Abelard and more as a thinker in her own right" (37). Although they are frequently linked due to their love story, Heloise and Abelard should each be considered for their impeccable work as individual scholars as well as for their personal choices. Their names should only be associated when analyzing their romantic relationship.

Even though the task may seem worrying to be compared to a man as institutionally famous as Abelard was during the twelfth century, Heloise elevated herself to Abelard's level, regardless of the circumstances. However, this is as high in esteem that Heloise wanted to rise. She never intended to become eminent above her husband, but rather to be taken seriously by him and have her own voice be heard within their relationship. Abelard, not Heloise, attempts to elevate his wife above him, both morally and scholarly. He says, "And when I spoke it should be to lift you up when you should fall, to strengthen you in your weaknesses, to enlighten you in that darkness and obscurity which might at any time surprise you" (Letter Five). Elevating one another became a game for them to play. However, they were able to show their support for each other and even challenge each other further. Heloise reacts to Abelard's attempts to magnify her strengths, saying,

The higher you raised me above other women, who envied me your love, the more sensible am I now of the loss of your heart. I was exalted to the top of happiness only that I might have the more terrible fall. Nothing could be compared to my pleasures, and now nothing can equal misery. (Letter Three)

Heloise finds a way to bring the conversation back to Abelard's fame and popularity, a comfortable topic. However, she does bring forth the notion that the higher she becomes elevated, the further she has to "fall." This back-and-forth conversation between the couple illustrates Heloise's anxiety about her role within the dyad.

When Heloise resists Abelard's attempts to put her before himself, he tries a more furtive approach. When addressing his wife in his letter, he simply writes her name before his own. Though this approach is subtle, both Heloise and Abelard were aware that the order of the names became critically important in determining the importance of each individual. The importance of the order of names may extend beyond just a game. Both Abelard and Heloise were individually prioritizing within their own lives and deciding whether their allegiances resided with one another or with a higher power. Heloise's response to Abelard reordering their names is blunt: "Why did you place the name of Heloise before that of Abelard?" (Letter Three). His attempts at subtlety prove unsuccessful. She will not stand for him to disregard his own fame and scholarship in order to please her, and she demands immediately for their rightful order to be restored. Yet again, her goal is not to be elevated above her husband but rather to be placed beside him. This notion of keeping Abelard in conversation embodies her exemplary medieval woman's method.

Although she plays differing roles depending on her husband's longings, she never succumbs to his exasperated lifestyle, nor does she fall prey to his unwanted desires. In many of their letters, Heloise argues that she is being mistreated by Abelard, which highlights the concept of treatment in general, but more specifically treatment of a woman by a man. In letter 60, Heloise declares, "Take your complaints away from me. I will not hear your words any more"

(qtd. Duran 38). She does not care about the title of their marriage or his name as a scholar. The only concern she has is about their dwindling relationship. Duran explains that,

Heloise has certain general expectations of friendship and platonic love that she finds lacking in Abelard's attitude towards 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. (38)

These two statements make evident the existence of hardships in the relationship. What began as an intense romance may have somewhat diminished after Abelard's castration. Heloise challenges herself by attempting to play both sides. She alters her persona, a necessity required by Abelard in order to keep their communication active, while still occasionally battling his insolence and mistreatment of their relationship.

The letters particularly reveal a game in which, over time, Heloise constantly tries to fulfill a role that Abelard prescribes. Heloise's first letter famously begins with her addressing Abelard: "To her Lord, her Father, her Husband, her Brother; his Servant, his Child, his Wife, his Sister, and to express all that is humble, respectful and loving to her Abelard, Heloise writes this" (Letter One). Each of these roles becomes a different character for Heloise, although she prefers them in their given order.

Heloise desires to view Abelard as her master (Lord), since she views herself as his loyal servant. Secondly, she is his wife. This designation is significant, because it is the role that is recognized by the church and builds on the biblical idea that a husband and wife become one; Heloise furthers this concept through her desire to be seen as Abelard's equal and counterpart. She adopts handmaid and daughter graciously but constantly refutes the role of sister: her refusal makes him push that role more intensely. She continues this pattern even after Abelard's death, remaining as she does intoxicated with the idea of having numerous roles that bind her to her husband on several different levels.

The most prominent role that Heloise plays is that of Abelard's wife. Heloise pleads with Abelard: "Yet you must know that you are bound to me by an obligation which is all the greater for the further close tie of marriage sacrament uniting us" (qtd. Ruys 57). Again, she portrays marriage as both an obligation and sacrament in her ploy to remind and correct Abelard in writing, not of their love for one another, but of their marriage vows and their duty to God that they remain bound to each other.

Heloise also adopts and privileges the persona of a whore, a term different in meaning today than in the twelfth century. "Ruth Mazo Karras [also a Medieval scholar] explains, "priests' concubines were often referred to as whores, which would simply have meant a sexually active woman" (qtd. Livingston, *Women and Wealth* 56). Heloise greets this role with open arms, declaring, "The name of wife may seem more sacred or more binding, but sweeter for me will always be the word mistress" (Ruys 58). She adds that at times she would rather be considered Abelard's whore than his wife because she does not need to be labeled his spouse to know that their intimate feelings truly exist. "Clare Nouvet argues, 'By preferring to be Abelard's whore, she is demonstrating a disinterested love which attempts to 'unbind' itself from the conjugal notions of possession and contractual obligations'" (qtd. Livingston, *Women and Wealth* 55). Heloise wants the emphasis of their marriage to be on their love and commitment for each other, not on what can be gained from it.

Heloise appears willing to adopt nearly any persona within her correspondence with Abelard except that of sister, because "Heloise has been able to show both that she is in a dependent relationship with Abelard and that he owes her either his presence or a letter. As *soror* ('sister') she would be positioning herself as the monastic equal of Abelard and her bargaining powers would be lessened" (Ruys 59). This notion becomes a source of discord that continues throughout the entirety of their relationship. Though sometimes using more subtlety than at other times, Abelard continuously tries to place this title on her while she stubbornly refuses it.

Heloise plays the role of wife, lover, handmaid, and friend, but never the role of sister. She embodies the different personas required by Abelard in order to keep their communication thriving, while still battling his misogyny. This is yet another example of Heloise establishing her power, since she becomes malleable in order to entice Abelard into continuing their conversation. Although she is willing to fulfill any of these roles, his most prominent grasp on her will always be as his wife. She says, "When you write to me you will write to your wife" (Letter One). She reminds Abelard that despite her willingness to change according to his needs, her primary role is that of his spouse.

Heloise does not attempt to hide her role playing from her husband and even tells him her plan. She writes, "I am only weak when I am alone and unsupported by you, and therefore it depends on you alone to make me such as you desire" (Letter One). She wants Abelard to write to her and tell her what he seeks from his wife. He is lonely and weak within his monastery, and she knows that the only way to keep him in conversation is to fulfill whichever persona he longs for however frequently these longings may fluctuate. She also invites Abelard to play this game alongside her, adding, "You may be what you please in your letter. Letters were first invented for consoling such solitary wretches as myself" (Letter One). She entices him to fulfill any persona she needs in exchange for her allowance for him to do the same. Her goal is for their communication to continue in any way possible while also comforting one another from their 300 miles apart.

Unfortunately, Abelard's response to her request of roles leads him to take credit for every sin he has committed on his journey with Heloise. He retorts,

I have been indeed your master, but it was only to teach sin. You call me your father; before I had any claim to the title, I deserved that of parricide. I am your brother, but it is the affinity of sin that brings me that distinction. I am called your husband, but it is after a public scandal...Blot them out and replace them with those of murderer, villain and enemy, who has conspired against your honour, troubled your quiet, and betrayed your innocence. (Letter Two)

Abelard's guilt becomes overwhelming, especially with his claim that his sinful actions "cost you your innocence and me my liberty" (Letter Two). His dejected words quiet Heloise for some time, until Abelard finally agrees to partake in her game some three letters later. He offers delights: "I would be your master and father, and by a marvelous talent I would become lively or slow, gentle or severe, according to the different characters of those I should guide in the painful path to Christian perfection" (Letter Five). Abelard agrees as long as the game admits his terms of leading them closer to their religion.

Heloise's prominent grasp on scholarly work as well as her ability to foresee and play certain roles for her husband brings her motivation into question. Heloise found a way to assert power in a circumscribed way like all women of her era. It is important to remember that it was a completely different world in the twelfth century. The rights of women and the goals of early feminists may have appeared dissimilar while they were combating the forms of misogyny that

they faced. Livingston adds, “These women writers, as marginalized individuals within their economic contexts, ‘unsilence’ themselves, on the one hand, by starkly laying out the reality of their positions, and, on the other, by envisioning alternatives” (Livingston, "Medieval Women Reject Marriage" 5). Heloise is not combating her own prejudices in the same ways as does, for example, the medieval author Christine de Pizan. Rather, Heloise is demanding her voice be on the record and her recounting of the story of her relationship with Abelard be understood. For example, Heloise articulates her resentment at Abelard for his omitting her side of their story from the original letter that she intercepted. Livingston recounts, "He omitted from the *Historia Calamitatum* the reasons for her refusal to marry, or in her words, 'for preferring love to wedlock and freedom to chains' (*sed plerisque tacitis quibus amorem coniugio libertatem vinculo praefereram*)” (Livingston, "Medieval Women Reject Marriage" 39). Again, she is setting the record straight. Heloise explains, “The bonds of matrimony, however honourable, still bear with them a necessary engagement, and I was very unwilling to be necessitated to love always a man who would perhaps not always love me. I despised the name of wife that I might live happy with that of mistress” (Letter One). Although the intercepted letter was intended for a friend and not meant to be read by Heloise, Abelard only shares his side of the story and does not say that Heloise consistently refused to marry him.

Thus, Heloise’s letters to Abelard seem to anticipate the *querelle des femmes* or “the presence of educated, opinionated women in these circles giving a fresh immediacy to the arguments, and the nature of these venues permitted women to join in the debates that arose” (Campbell 11). Although credit for the inauguration of this movement is given to Christine de Pizan during the 1400s, it can be argued that Heloise was well before her time in displaying some of the same principles of the *querelle des femmes*. Joan Kelly explains, “The struggle of the *querelle* was carried on by women of the higher ranks or, more often, by the female members of a distinctly modern, literate class that served the upper reaches of a ranked society” (Kelly 7). This definition embraces Heloise and her intellectual ascent during the twelfth century. Not only was she a part of the literate class but her intelligence was proven when Abelard chose her for private tutoring. She was sophisticated and well read, especially for a woman during this time. If she herself was not a member of the upper ranked society, Abelard was, and his esteemed position guided her into this societal classification. This cultural formation not only showed that women were writing back to men, but also that they were correcting the male author. A cultural formation is regarded as a process, both moral and intellectual, that involves teaching the formation of virtues to those who were unknowing. These female writers had special strategies; their positions were perilous. In Heloise’s case, she writes to Abelard, corrects him, and sets the record straight in terms of the truth underlying their relationship. By analyzing her voice within this framework, Heloise shows her struggle against similar instances of misogyny within her own life and how she was forced to establish her voice as an individual.

It appears that an infatuation with the relationship between Heloise and Abelard resurfaces every few centuries. Every time their burial site is relocated, the general public rediscovers an enthusiasm for the pair and their triumphant love story. A record of the relocations has been documented, showing “these modern translations of the bodies - in 1620, 1768, 1780, and 1817- were performed to satisfy the curiosity of romantic pilgrims sparked by new publications of the letters” (Feilla 2). The relocations are crucial to consider in determining the analysis and popularity of the relationship.

Recently, a *New York Times* article adds to the popular focus on Abelard and Heloise. In the article, author Nehring remarks,

If Heloise didn't get what she most wanted from Abelard, she got the very best he had to give. His reflections, his confidences and his final, all-important confession were addressed to her; his most urgent worldly plea was to be buried where she would be near him. ("Heloise & Abelard: Love Hurts")

Abelard begs his wife, saying, "I hope you will be willing, when you have finished this mortal life, to be buried near me" (Letter Two), expressing his longing to reunite with her someday even if it is after death. Heloise, appalled with his well-intended comment, replies in her next letter,

Heaven, severe as it has been to me, is not so insensible as to permit me to live one moment after you. Life without Abelard were an insupportable punishment, and death a most exquisite happiness if by that means I could be united to him. If Heaven but hearken to my continual cry, your days will be prolonged and you will bury me. (Letter Three)

Heloise despises the thought of living in a world where her lover is absent. And so Abelard's final wish was fulfilled. Heloise and Abelard, though their burial site has changed several times, were reunited after death and will reside beside each other for eternity in Cimetière du Père Lachaise, in Paris, France.

While married, Heloise d'Argenteuil and Peter Abelard corresponded though 300 miles apart. During the day, the dyad accepted that they were forever separated. At night, however, their dreams could not be controlled. By analyzing the letters, one observes the couple's devotion to each another. Heloise heartbreakingly writes, "I dream I am still with my dear Abelard. I see him, I speak to him and hear him answer. Charmed with each other we forsake our studies and give ourselves up to love" (Letter Three), illustrating their unmistakable adoration. Heloise's style of writing seems to anticipate the *querelle des femmes*, which was later credited to Christine de Pizan in the fourteenth century. Throughout the entirety of their relationship, Heloise succeeds in adopting as many personas as Abelard sees fit, including wife, lover, handmaid, and friend.

Heloise laments, "I awake and open my eyes to find no Abelard: I stretch out my arms to embrace him and he is not there; I cry, and he hears me not" (Letter Four). These lines exemplify their timeless bond. Their devotion to each other is undeniable. They felt intense pain due to the absence of the other. Heloise, despite the intense devotion, remains an independent person. She should be viewed not as a woman succumbing to a man, but rather as a woman devoting her mind, body, and future to her husband. She acts only to keep their communication active and their intense love alive.

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