

## RELIGION AND MONASTICISM IN POPULAR RETELLINGS OF THE HELOISE-ABELARD STORY

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### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine how religion and monasticism are treated in some literary retellings of the story of Heloise and Abelard. The paper will first look at an eighteenth century poem by Alexander Pope, thereafter concentrating on key twentieth century texts. It will consider the treatment of individual religious feeling, including Heloise's repentance and Abelard's monastic conversion. As these tellings treat Heloise's monastic experiences more comprehensively than Abelard's, this paper also focuses on female monasticism, considering how the texts portray the advantages and disadvantages of communal religious life. This paper then hopes to show how the social contexts of the authors shape their depictions of religion and monasticism.

### Brief Biography of Heloise and Abelard

Heloise and Abelard lived in the twelfth century. By 1117, he was the foremost teacher and philosopher in Paris while she, only seventeen years old, was already renowned throughout France for her learning. Abelard came to live with Heloise and her guardian, her uncle Fulbert, to tutor her. They were soon lovers and Heloise bore a son. Abelard married her, but only in secret, since custom demanded that teachers remain unmarried. Fulbert publicised the marriage, Heloise denied it and Fulbert attacked her. Abelard now sent Heloise to her childhood convent of Argenteuil where he had her put on a novice's habit. Fulbert, fearing an annulment of the marriage, in revenge had Abelard castrated. Abelard resolved to become a monk, but first insisted that Heloise become a nun.

In 1129 Heloise and her nuns were evicted from Argenteuil. Abelard gave Heloise a property which she developed into the Convent of the Paraclete where she became abbess. Around 1132 they exchanged a series of letters. Abelard wrote his autobiographical *Historia calamitatum* or 'Story of My Misfortunes', and Heloise wrote letters in which she declared that she had only ever acted out of love for Abelard, never love for God.<sup>1</sup> She cursed God for his ill-treatment of them, confessed that she still bore erotic thoughts for Abelard even during church and claimed that her public piety was hypocrisy. Abelard encouraged her religious vocation and their attention turned to monastic matters. Abelard also wrote sermons and hymns for the Paraclete. He died in 1142 a broken man, twice condemned for heresy, twice rehabilitated. Heloise lived another twenty years and died a respected and successful abbess.

### Alexander Pope - 'Eloisa to Abelard' (1717)<sup>2</sup>

Their correspondence was first published in Paris in 1616 in Latin. It drew great attention and was soon translated. Alexander Pope read a popular fabricated paraphrase of the *Letters* and, believing this to be the genuine correspondence, used it as a basis for his poem 'Eloisa to Abelard', published in 1717.<sup>3</sup> Pope depicts an Heloise who struggles with her lack of religious devotion. Instead, her boundless eroticism breaks forth and she impiously blames this upon God:

The jealous God, when we profane his fires,  
 Those restless passions in revenge inspires,  
 And bids them make mistaken mortals groan,  
 Who seek in love for aught but love alone. (ll 81-84).

She blasphemously implores Abelard to wrench her from her religious vocation:

Take back that grace, those sorrows, and those tears;  
 Take back my fruitless penitence and prayers;  
 Snatch me, just mounting, from the bless'd abode;  
 Assist the fiends and tear me from my God! (ll 285-288).

Finally, however, she is reconciled with God:

I come, I come! prepare your roseate bowers,  
 Celestial palms, and ever-blooming flowers.  
 Thither, where sinners may have rest, I go. (ll 317-319).

Despite his own Catholicism, Pope is uncomplimentary about monasticism. The confines of Heloise's convent, both edifice and nature, are dark and foreboding:

Relentless walls! whose darksome round contains  
 Repentant sighs, and voluntary pains:  
 Ye rugged rocks! which holy knees have worn;  
 Ye grotts and caverns shagg'd with horrid thorn! (ll 17-20).

Pope's poem was immensely popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, inspiring both imitative poems and artwork of the unwilling Heloise struggling with God.<sup>4</sup>

### George Moore — *Héloïse and Abélard* (1921)<sup>5</sup>

The British author George Moore used the novelistic genre to retell the story, publishing his *Héloïse and Abélard* in 1921. He most commonly describes female monasticism as 'drudgery' and 'weariness'. On the day she becomes a novice Heloise declares:

I know how small and mean is the life of nuns (p.327),

and as she contemplates the tyranny of the daily routine:

she remembered how dependent her life was once upon that bell, and how again she would become subject to it for all her life long, till it tolled for her funeral (p.302).

Moore also contrasts male and female models of monastic enclosure when he has Sister Angela complain:

monks go back and forth from their monastery, they follow the Crusaders to Palestine, but we are here always, and life is harder upon women in religion than on men (p.336).

The nuns in Moore's story are earnest but unable to achieve the monastic ideal. They brood endlessly, not on God, but on the human

loves which preceded their religious vows. Yet they do this not in the scandalous manner beloved of the eighteenth-century poets, but with a sense of human lives as fallible and wasted. Moore has Heloise observe:

Angela ... is now thinking of Sister Agnes with the same passion and the same folly as I am thinking of Abélard. Mother Hilda is dreaming of her husband ... the dying Prioress sits in her chair dreaming of her husband ... We are always remembering what has been ... how else should we live, we who have left life behind? (p.389).

### Helen Waddell — *Peter Abelard* (1933)<sup>6</sup>

Helen Waddell's 1933 novel *Peter Abelard* was in popularity the 'Eloisa to Abelard' of its day. Waddell pays more attention to the personal religious feelings of Heloise and Abelard than to their monastic circumstances, perhaps indicating in the 1930s a Western suspicion of communal arrangements and a favouring of the individual over the community. Heloise is depicted as innately irreligious:

the curious oppression ... crept over her again ... a bodily memory of restraint along with a mental embarrassment, a kind of hollowness in herself, a struggle to feel something ... (p.42).

With this spiritual coldness is contrasted Abelard's journey from anger at God following his castration to reconciliation:

he felt the grey breath of dissolution, the falling as under of body and soul ... then his spirit leapt toward heaven in naked adoration ... with every power of his mind, with every pulse of his body, he worshipped God (p.194).

Like Pope, Waddell uses the gloomy convent interior to symbolise the dimness of the nuns' lives:

Weary and over-watched ... they sat ... forgetting while they might that dread awakening at dawn, and the vigils that still lay before them (p.137).

Female monasticism is characterised in Heloise's cry:

O God, this spider's web of woman's life, with its small panic fears and caution and obsequiousness! (p.141).

Nicolas Monjo — *The Edge of Perfect: The Tragedy of Abelard and Heloise* (1956); James Forsyth — *Heloise* (1956); Ronald Duncan — *Abelard and Heloise: A Correspondence for the Stage in Two Acts* (1961); Ronald Millar — *Abelard and Heloise: A Play* (1970)<sup>7</sup>

In the plays of the middle years of the century, religion and monasticism do not figure highly. Instead, Fulbert's discovery of Heloise and Abelard's affair becomes a key scene. This replacement of religious betrayal with human betrayal increases in the twentieth century, reflecting the secularisation of society. Even so, these plays are sympathetic to Christian and monastic ideals. The need for fictionalisations to coerce Heloise into repentance continues in these plays which end with Heloise and Abelard united in love for God. However, Heloise's repentance is not dramatically developed but brought about through a melodramatic gesture such as Heloise falling to her knees in prayer or flinging herself cruciform upon the stage. It remains for the genre of the novel to examine critically issues of religion and monasticism.

Margaret Trouncer — *The Passion of Peter Abélard* (1965)<sup>8</sup>

Until the 1960s, depictions of religion are traditional. This changes with Margaret Trouncer's novel *The Passion of Peter Abélard*, published in 1965. Here the more pagan Heloise of Pope's poem returns, this time with twentieth century pop psychology. To explain why Heloise is not devout, Fulbert's housekeeper says:

I suppose if you have never had a mother's or a father's love in your life, and if you are very lonely, the love of God means little to you. Perhaps in her own mind she creates a god rather like her uncle ... always criticizing, totally devoid of generosity (p.13).

Trouncer gives the sexual relationship between Heloise and Abelard religious overtones and develops a sacred sex motif:

she had twined herself around the innermost fibre of his being, now that she had filled every cranny of his life, spiritual union was emerging from their passion. She was the soul of his soul ... (p.97).

Trouncer represents Heloise throughout her monastic career as essentially pagan:

at Argenteuil, Héloïse, instead of taking refuge in God, was slowly freezing into the rigid pose, the Stoic grief of classical antiquity. Instead of reading the Gospels for comfort, she turned the pages of her Lucan and almost nurtured her pain ... (p.123).

However, even Trouncer does not wish to leave Heloise eternally unrepentant and she employs mysticism to effect Heloise's eventual reconciliation. When Abelard dies, Heloise at the Paraclete feels a strange sensation:

it was more in the nature of a mysterious spiritual experience. It was as if she had achieved, all of a sudden ... spiritual union with Abélard ... Héloïse closed her eyes and began to pray most fervently and sincerely ... (p.221).

Writing at the height of the Cold War, Trouncer consistently criticises the enforced communal nature of convent life. Before she becomes a nun, Heloise declares:

How terrible to be packed off into a nunnery ... when you've got no vocation, and to know that till you draw your last breath you'll be doing the same thing ... (p.94).

Leonard Melling — *Abelard and Heloise* (1970)<sup>9</sup>

Leonard Melling's novelised biography *Abelard and Heloise*, published in 1970, takes a mystical view of religion, perhaps influenced by the Western appropriation of meditation and eastern

religions of the late 1960s. The title page states that one of his previous publications is *The Logical Aspects and Processes of Reincarnation*, and Melling uses the Heloise-Abelard story to advance his theory:

Héloise seemed to go back in time, where all she was experiencing ... seemed already to have happened somewhere before ... (p.28).

Again the physical love between Heloise and Abelard is presented as sacred sex, bringing higher understanding of God:

They had drained the delirious cup of physical love to its empty absolute, to an extremity where love was engraved for all eternity on their souls and they had reached the ultimate of human experiences. They had unified their conceptions of God, of the celestial worlds and of the universal nature of all life ... (p.63).

For Melling, humans are naturally 'Spiritual', and both Heloise and Abelard are inherently devout. Melling stresses that Heloise is never unwilling in her religious vocation:

She had slowly found peace within herself along with a state of calm self resignation. The deep suffering of heart ... had slowly brought her closer to God, the one supreme and great consolation left in her life ... (p.115).

At a time when communal life was undergoing a resurgence in Western society as an antidote to conservative religious and social models, Melling writes scathingly about the corruption of established monastic houses, but approvingly of vocational monasticism. Thus for Heloise, establishing the convent of the Paraclete provides:

a long sought after opportunity to find her real Spiritual purpose (p.116).

However, by the late 1970s even this alternative view of religion is too positive, and first we find a disinterest in and later an antagonism towards religion.

Marion Meade — *Stealing Heaven: The Love Story of Heloise and Abelard* (1979)<sup>10</sup>

Marion Meade's 1979 novel *Stealing Heaven: The Love Story of Heloise and Abelard* devotes little attention to personal religious belief since Meade, as the novel's subtitle suggests, is more interested in love than religion. Meade's protagonists are neither pagan nor particularly devout. However, Heloise's casual devotion to God changes after Abelard's castration. She becomes bitter, but Meade does not present an Heloise of the abandoned blasphemy beloved by Pope. Instead, her Heloise tries to pray but fails:

... the prayer was hollow, mechanical, and she knew that God did not listen anyway (p.203).

Meade pays even less attention to Abelard's religious development, merely having Heloise note many years later:

he had been truly converted to God in a way that she had not dreamed possible ... Abelard the sensualist had vanished; Abelard the property of God stood in his place (p.299).

However, time heals Heloise's anger against God. Without great dramas of conversion, Meade portrays an Heloise who clearly dies a Christian death:

She had done her duty ... It would soon be finished. Absolved, shriven, unblemished as the moment she had come into the world (p.411).

About monasticism Meade is more scathing:

Some of the best nuns were widows, but only those who had lived out the span of wife and mother and wished to withdraw from a life they had sucked the juice out of (p.351).

Nevertheless, Meade recognises that whatever her twentieth century horrors of enforced religion, monasticism must to some have provided an acceptable life:



Throughout the morning, she [Heloise] watched the nuns passing in and out of the cloister, whispering, arguing, carrying piles of linen and manuscripts. Busy with their duties, they seemed happy. Or at least content (p.218).

### *Stealing Heaven* (1988)<sup>11</sup>

This reasonable depiction of both individual and communal religion is very different from the film which was made in 1988 and, being based on Marion Meade's book, also entitled *Stealing Heaven*. Here the writer surpasses even the blasphemy of Pope's Heloise and begins with Heloise as a rebellious schoolgirl asking naughty questions. Meanwhile, Abelard is portrayed as pious. He is celibate for the sake of God, but according to an individual contract with a punishment sanction which little reflects medieval theology:

Abelard: 'For me it is much more personal. God has entrusted me with a great gift. He has ordained that teaching is my life. For my part I must carry my side of the bargain. If I were to take a woman, I would be — flying in the face of my Maker, spitting in the face of God. Don't you understand? He would take away his gift and damn me for all eternity. And he would be right'.

Heloise may be naturally irreligious:

Heloise: 'I hate this place, I hate those clothes. Thank God I'm not a nun'.

But this hardly compares with her twentieth-century blasphemy after she learns of Abelard's castration:

Mother Superior: 'We must accept the will of God and his justice.'

Heloise: 'The will of God? There is no *God*.'

Mother Superior: 'Child, I shall pray for you.'

Heloise: 'Pray until your knees are raw. No-one will hear but the spiders.'

Heloise to Abelard: 'I spit on God and all his saints. When I heard of this thing, God died.'

By contrast, Abelard humbly accepts God's will:

Abelard to Heloise: 'This thing may have shaken your faith in God, but it has confirmed mine. He is just, and I must make amends.'

The writer ends Heloise's life with an unlikely repudiation of God, having her smash a crucifix against the wall with her dying gesture. This film thus becomes the first fictionalisation to suggest that Heloise never reconciles is never reconciled with God.

As for convent life, despite its cloistered drudgery, it is also presented as a haven for women in a society which offers them little choice:

Abelard to Heloise: 'You are without family or friends. You must be somewhere safe where you can use your learning.'

## Conclusion

Thus the twentieth century negotiates issues of religion and monasticism in retelling the story of Heloise and Abelard. With the secularisation of society, interest in personal religion has waned, moving from sympathy with to disinterest in and finally repudiation of individual piety and established religion. By contrast, treatment of monasticism remains relatively consistent. All writers, perhaps reflecting contemporary political concerns, are critical of enforced communal life, particularly perpetual enclosure and coerced devotion to an ideal. However, later works are prepared both to admit that monasticism does hold some advantages for those with a vocation and to recognise the positive role of monastic piety in medieval women's lives.

Attitudes towards personal religion and monasticism correspond noticeably with developments in the mores and politics of the twentieth century. The story of Heloise and Abelard is then not only a medieval love story, but also a means of reflecting our own changing society.

## REFERENCES

1. For a contemporary English edition of this autobiography and letters plus a fuller biography, see *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, translated with an introduction by Betty Radice, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974).
2. *Alexander Pope: Collected Poems*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée, introd. Clive T Probyn. Everyman's Library, (London and Melbourne: Dent, 1924, reprint 1985).
3. Regarding these inauthentic letters see Robert P Kalmey, 'Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard* and "Those Celebrated Letters"', *Philological Quarterly*, 47 (1968) 164-78, especially pp. 166-9.
4. For a comprehensive list of eighteenth and nineteenth century (mainly French) representations of Heloise and Abelard, plus reproductions of some artwork, see Charlotte Charrier, *Héloïse dans l'histoire et dans la légende*, Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion: Paris, 1933, especially pp. 640-55. The facsimile edition published by Slatkine Reprints: Geneva, 1977, contains only five of the original thirty-nine plates.
5. First published in two volumes in 1921. Quotations taken from the New Edition published in one volume by William Heinemann Ltd (London, 1925, reprint 1926).
6. London: Constable and Company Ltd, first published 1933, popular edition 1939, reprint 1957.
7. Monjo (New York: Grove Press, 1956); Forsyth — *Three Plays — The Other Heart, Héloïse & Adelaïse* (Melbourne, London, Toronto: William Heinemann Ltd, 1956); Duncan (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1961); Millar (London, New York, Sydney, Toronto, Hollywood: French's Acting Edition, Samuel French, 1970).
8. London, Melbourne, Toronto, Cape Town, Auckland: William Heinemann Ltd, 1965.
9. Manchester: Torch Publishing Co. Ltd, 1970.
10. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1979.
11. New World International, an Amy International/Jadran Film, directed by Clive Donner, screenplay by Chris Bryant from the novel by Marion Meade, 1988. Released on video by Roadshow Home Video.