

Background to Abelard and Heloise

Peter Abelard (1079-1142) lived a tumultuous life with more than his share of “calamities,” as he put it in his autobiography. As an early scholastic philosopher and theologian in France, Abelard believed that human reason could explain and make sense out of the things of God and the Christian faith. Some admired him for attempting to do exactly that, including the many students who flocked to him from all over Europe, while others found him and his efforts to be nothing short of heretical. Then and now, Abelard is most famous for his love affair and marriage to Heloise (c. 1090-1164), reputed to be the most learned lady in France. Their closeness, however, lasted no more than a year or two and came to an abrupt end with Abelard’s castration.

Abelard was the eldest son of a knight in southern Brittany. As such, Abelard could have anticipated becoming the head of the family and possibly the holder of significant lands. Abelard, however, chose a different path. Abelard’s father made sure the upbringing of his several sons had included a rudimentary education in Latin, the only form of writing in Western Europe at the time; but whereas Abelard’s brothers were satisfied with Latin basics and wished to pursue knighthood, Abelard discovered that he really enjoyed Latin and wanted to press on as a student. In the European Middle Ages, life as a scholar automatically implied a religious vocation, so Abelard’s career would also be as a cleric within the Catholic Church.

Abelard’s main goal was to be appointed master of a cathedral school. (In the following century, some masters would turn their cathedral schools into the world’s first universities in Bologna, Oxford, and Paris.) Peter Abelard was a tremendous intellect and teacher of logic (or dialectic, as they called it) who spent many years in and out of the best schools before becoming a full-fledged master himself. By the age of thirty-seven or thirty-eight, he was finally at the pinnacle of his career, having been appointed master at Notre-Dame in Paris. But just when he reached this high point, he threw it all away in 1117 by seducing Heloise, who was probably in her mid-twenties at the time. (After reading this article, you will examine documents by Abelard and Heloise to find out more about their relationship.)

Beginning with his castration in 1118, the remainder of his life was, as he put it, a “history of calamities.” Aside from the castration and other troubles, the two lowest points in his life were when the Catholic Church condemned him twice as a heretic, once in 1121 and again around 1140. Why did he have such difficulties with the church he claimed to serve? Abelard not only had complete confidence in Christian truth but also in the capacity of human reason (especially his own) to explain such truth. To his opponents, this contention was both ridiculous and dangerous. Since God is God, there may be things about Him that are far too high for frail human beings to grasp. The prime example of this would be the Trinity, the Christian doctrine of God. Christians believe that God is one but that this one God exists in three distinct persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is no way in human terms to untangle the mystery of the Trinity, but that didn’t prevent Abelard from trying, and this was one of the issues that got him into repeated trouble with the Church. While the Church did force Abelard to burn his books, his punishment both times stopped well short of death, and he died at age sixty-three from natural causes.