

### Excerpts from the Personal Letters

*(The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, translated and with an introduction by Betty Radice, Penguin Books, 1974, pages 116-119, 130, 146-147.)*

Following his castration, Abelard decided that Heloise would become a nun (for real this time) and that he would become a monk. About ten years later, the two of them exchanged four personal letters.

#### Letter 1: Heloise to Abelard

...Tell me one thing, if you can. Why, after our entry into religion [becoming a monk and a nun], which was your decision alone, have I been so neglected and forgotten by you that I have neither a word from you when you are here to give me strength nor the consolation of a letter in absence? Tell me, I say, if you can—or I will tell you what I think and indeed the world suspects. It was desire, not affection that bound you to me, the flame of lust rather than love. So when the end came to what you desired, any show of feeling you used to make went with it. This is not merely my own opinion, beloved, it is everyone's. There is nothing personal or private about it; it is the general view that is widely held. I only wish that it were mine alone, and that the love you professed could find someone to defend it and so comfort me in my grief for a while. I wish I could think of some explanation that would excuse you and somehow cover up the way you hold me cheap.

...It was not any sense of vocation that brought me as a young woman to accept the austerities of the cloister [convent], but your bidding alone, and if I deserve no gratitude from you, you may judge for yourself how my labors are in vain. I can expect no reward for this from God, for it is certain that I have done nothing as yet for the love of him. When you hurried toward God [becoming a monk] I followed you [becoming a nun], indeed, I went first to take the veil—perhaps you were thinking how Lot's wife turned back when you made me put on the religious habit and take my vows before you gave yourself to God. Your lack of trust in me over this one thing, I confess, overwhelmed me with grief and shame. [Heloise is not referring here to the first time Abelard put her in the convent, which was not meant to be permanent but to keep her safe; the second time, however, which occurred after his castration, was when he truly intended for her to become a nun.]

...I denied myself every pleasure in obedience to your will [by becoming a nun], kept nothing for myself except to prove that now, even more, I am yours. Consider then your injustice, if when I deserve more you give me less, or rather, nothing at all, especially when it is a small thing I ask of you and one you could so easily grant. And so, in the name of God to whom you have dedicated yourself, I beg you to restore your presence to me in the way you can—by writing me some word of comfort, so that in this at least I may find increased strength and readiness to serve God. When in the past you sought me out for sinful pleasures your letters came to me thick and fast, and your many songs put your Heloise on everyone's lips, so that every street and house echoed with my name. Is it not far better now to summon me to God than it was then to satisfy our lust? I beg you, think what you owe me, give ear to my pleas, and I will finish a long letter with a brief ending: farewell, my only love.

## Letter 2: Abelard to Heloise

If since our conversion from the world to God [by becoming a monk and a nun] I have not yet written you any word of comfort or advice, it must not be attributed to indifference on my part but to your own good sense, in which I have always had such confidence that I did not think anything was needed; God's grace has bestowed on you all essentials to enable to instruct the erring, comfort the weak and encourage the fainthearted, both by word and example, as, indeed, you have been doing since you first held the office of prioress under your abbess. So if you still watch over your daughters as carefully as you did previously over your sisters, it is sufficient to make me believe that any teaching or exhortation from me would now be wholly superfluous...

## Letter 3: Heloise to Abelard

...Moreover, to add to my indignation at the outrage you suffered, all the laws of equity in our case were reversed. For while we enjoyed the pleasures of an uneasy love and abandoned ourselves to fornication (if I may use an ugly but expressive word) we were spared God's severity. But when we amended our unlawful conduct by what was lawful, and atoned for the shame of fornication by an honorable 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 one that was unchaste. The punishment you suffered would have been proper vengeance for men caught in open adultery. But what others deserve for adultery came upon you through a marriage that you believed had made amends for all previous wrongdoing; what adulterous women have brought upon their lovers, your own wife brought on you. ...You alone were punished though we were both to blame, and you paid all, though you had deserved less, for you had made more than necessary reparations by humbling yourself on my account and had raised me and all my kind to your own level—so much less then, in the eyes of God and your betrayers, should you have been thought deserving of such punishment...

## Letter 4: Abelard to Heloise

...Need I recall our previous fornication and the wanton impurities that preceded our marriage, or my supreme act of betrayal, when I deceived your uncle about you so gracefully, at a time when I was continuously living with him in his own house? Who would not judge me justly betrayed by the man whom I had first shamelessly betrayed? Do you think the momentary pain of that wound is sufficient punishment for such crimes?

...Consider the magnanimous design of God's mercy for us, the compassion with which the Lord directed his judgment toward our chastisement, the wisdom whereby he made use of evil itself and mercifully set aside our impiety, so that by a wholly justified wound in a single part of my body he might heal two souls. ...Examine the cause, our deserts, and marvel at the effect, his pity.