

Heloise Haunted by The Ghosts of Romantic and Christian Love

In the letters between Abelard and Heloise, we see the ghost of romantic love haunting the two lovers in monastic life. Heloise, in her address to Abelard, reveals a relation between the ghost of romantic love and the holy ghost. There is a binary opposition presented between romantic love and God where there is an implicit social understanding that God should be privileged. However, the opposition becomes problematic when both present and conflicting in Heloise. Romantic love and love of God serve as the object of relationships, with Heloise as the subject. These two forms of love are combined in the communications via prayer and writing between the married monk and nun. In Heloise's address to Abelard, she reveals how upholding this binary between romantic love and God is the ultimate cause of her suffering. In defining herself as caught between this binary of the ghost of love and the ghost of Christ, she legitimizes the binary and denies herself the comfort of God, romantic love, and herself.

The primary relationship that I will examine is the relationship between Heloise and Abelard. First, we must understand how romantic and divine love are defined within the context of this binary and how Heloise privileges romantic love over God's love. She clarifies that Abelard is the sole motivator of her actions. Addressing Abelard, Heloise writes that she has "feared to offend you rather than God and tried to please you more than him." Here, God and Abelard are pitted against each other. One must take priority and be the sole motivator of her actions, which is the position God "should" have. The subversion of the traditional loyalties of a nun is emphasized by the language Heloise uses. "Fear" and "offend" are words often associated with God. The word used for fear is "vereor" which means fear but can carry the meaning of awe or reverence. This language places Abelard above her where God should be; in her eyes, he is more awe-worthy than God. Her almost religious language contrasts with the word choice "to

please,” which often describes aspects of a sexual relationship between lovers. The original Latin “placere” does not tend to carry a sensual sense. However, “appeto,” which is translated as “try,” can also mean to be desirous of, to long for, or to court in a sexual sense. From the very beginning, we get the sense that the beloved has replaced the expected or “proper” position of God for Heloise. We understand that there is a binary where either Abelard or God, romantic love or divine love, must assume the place of Heloise’s only motivator. They are at odds, as though they cannot coexist or be the same thing.

Heloise has prioritized Abelard and romantic love. However, because romantic love encompasses the position that divine love “should” occupy, romantic love is transformed, taking on key attributes and signs of religious love. Her description of her circumstances reveals this transformation: “It was your command, not love of God, which made me take the veil.” As a nun, Heloise is obliged more explicitly than any other class of person to follow the “command” of God. Instead, ironically, the “command” of the beloved places her in the position where she is required to prioritize the “love of God.” Language like “command” and “made me” are important here because they are applied to romantic love, but “love of God” does not carry any sense of obligation for Heloise. She can no longer be with him but is burdened by obligation. This is a reversal of what we would expect from romantic versus religious love and how we would expect Heloise to characterize romantic love. Previously, she didn’t want to get married because it would take away the freedom of love, but her love with Abelard has transformed into a ghost haunting her with obligations and commands. This is further exemplified if we look at the original Latin “religionis habitum,” which is translated as “the veil” but could be translated as “religious habit”. The word habitum has the sense of habit as in dress or attire but also can mean habit as in disposition or condition. Abelard has caused Heloise to take up religious attire and become a nun in the literal sense, but he has also caused her to take up a religious disposition of

devotion towards himself, perhaps not intentionally. We are beginning to see traits associated with strict monastic life being mapped onto romantic love. Because romantic love forces monastic life, it takes on the traits of strict divine love and obligation. Her condition caught between this binary reveals the fragility of the binary in mixing the traits and defining characteristics of each side.

Despite prioritizing romantic love, Heloise still has a unique relationship with God that takes on attributes of romance. As a nun, she is the bride of God. From the beginning of this quote, we understand that Heloise is closer to God than she is to Abelard. She tells Abelard, "At every stage of my life up to now, as God knows, I have feared to offend you rather than God." The interjection of "as God Knows" shows that God completely understands Heloise and what drives her. It is no secret that God has an intimate relationship with all his creations. Still, Heloise reveals how traits often associated with romantic love, like intimacy and knowledge of the beloved's true self, are stronger with divine love. When she tells us God has known her at "every stage of my life," it emphasizes the permanence of God's knowledge of her. It is also important to note how this is a seemingly unnecessary interjection within the sentence. Heloise is making a point of emphasizing God's intimate knowledge of her. This intimate knowledge shows that God understands Heloise's love for Abelard better than Abelard does. This closeness with God is contrasted with the discrepancy between the authentic Heloise and Abelard's perception of her: "For a long time my pretense deceived you, as it did many so that you mistook hypocrisy for piety." Heloise has actively deceived Abelard. This stems from her internal "hypocrisy." This contradiction within her of being a nun but a devout lover of Abelard rather than God is ironically something only God can make sense of. In truth, Heloise behaves rather piously but only through Abelard's command to follow God's command; due to the direct, intimate

connection a nun should have with God, Heloise believes that she is unfulfilled in all her love of God and Abelard.

God is important but less explicit in Abelard and Heloise's relationship. This is evident as we witness them both hoping to find solace from their sufferings. Heloise describes the nature of her sufferings: "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." This unhappiness is directly because of her prioritization and desire for romantic love, which is now unfulfillable and contradicts her life as a nun, ultimately leading to neither joy in this world nor the next. She describes the "unhappy life I lead" as one in which her authority or decisions have driven her to unhappiness. She has subscribed willfully to the oppressive and demanding authority of romantic love. However, she has been deprived of its pleasures, so now she worships the ghost of romantic love. Here, romantic love is contrasted with divine love again. She is devout, but her efforts are "in vain, with no hope of future reward." Love of God may be strict and demanding, but it promises an afterlife. However, romantic love for Heloise is a strict doctrine with no salvation. There is no traditional eternal happy ending with Abelard or with God.

One of the two primary ways Heloise seeks relief from her suffering is through Abelard's writing to her. From the perspective of Heloise, we can see this as an attempt to interact with the ghost of romantic love, although it is mutilated and dead. The contents of these letters are essentially romantic prayers. On the one hand, Heloise just wants to hear how Abelard is doing. She wants to know what he's up to and simply hear from him. On the other hand, she is asking him for guidance and ultimately wants some kind of comfort or solace from him. If we read the death of Christ as the tragic death of God, then Abelard represents a Christ or Godlike figure. He has lost his sexuality and now exists for Heloise not corporally but rather as a force or ghost to be venerated. Heloise does not think they will have a sexual or even romantic relationship again.

She is praying to the ghost of who he used to be to her, just as one could say Christians pray to the ghost of Christ. Both romantic love and God are things that historically used to exist for Heloise in a corporeal sense through sex and Christ, and now they are mourned through requests for solace through prayer rather than hope for the future. She begs: "Do not believe I want nothing and delay helping me in my hour of need." This desperate request for help forces the question of what she wants from Abelard. Why is his writing and prayers so important to helping her? The language of "Delay helping me in my hour of need" is in a letter to her beloved but would also fit in a prayer to God. What can he do to help but write to guide her and inform her about his circumstances? She believes there is no hope for her salvation in love or in heaven. On a meta-level, the written letters serve a purpose that a spoken conversation could not have. Ironically, Abelard and Heloise's romance has existed in a literary afterlife. The act of writing implies a desire to make the language last or permanent, no matter how futile. I believe Heloise's drive to write and be written to is partly derived from her belief that she will have no salvation in the afterlife. The desire to capture something positive and make it last is embodied in the writing. Writing as a synthesis for expression of religious and romantic love is one way she seeks permanence or salvation through an archive or corpse of romantic love. Writing as a prayer to Abelard and a display of love to Abelard allows the form and permanence of religion to exist within a romantic relationship.

The other way both Abelard and Heloise find solace is by requesting the other to pray for them. Heloise writes: "You commend yourself to our prayers and ask me what I expect from you. I beg you, do not feel so sure of me that you cease to help me by your prayers." Prayer is a religious practice and addresses God, but Abelard and Heloise request that it be passed through the beloved. They must both "ask" or "beg" the other to beg God through their prayers to help themselves. The word used for "beg" here is "obsecro" which can also be translated as "pray."

Here, each lover is an intermediary between the other lover and God. Heloise explicitly says that Abelard praying for her is a form of “help.” The help Heloise seeks is from her suffering, which is caused by the unwilful prioritization of Abelard over God. She does not choose to love Abelard, but she is obliged by something prior to her will. Yet she asks Abelard to pray for her because God may provide more comfort through Abelard. The prayers Heloise requests from Abelard are religious devotion in the form of asking the beloved for a favor. Heloise’s prayers to God are for her former beloved. Again, Heloise is trying to find solace through reconciling these two forms of love.

Heloise’s suffering is caused by being caught between the binary of the ghost of romantic love and the ghost of Christian love and devotion. She prioritizes romantic love, but her circumstances prioritize devotion to God. She struggles between these forces because she believes that only one can fill the role of the object of her devotion. This is the “hypocrisy” she mentions. To comfort herself, she requests a synthesis of these devotions through writing and prayer. However, her suffering is not cured and possibly not even soothed. If it is being caught between this binary that causes her suffering, why does attempting to reconcile and synthesize the binary not fix or mend her suffering? It is because rather than reconciling this relationship, Heloise either maps attributes of religious devotion onto writing addressed to the beloved or attributes of romantic love onto prayer directed towards God. Heloise does not have an authentic relationship with God because it is only through Abelard that she attempts strict devotion to God. She does not have a wholly authentic relationship with Abelard because God will always know her better and more intimately, whereas Abelard is vulnerable to being deceived. In the passage analyzed, Heloise reveals her unhappiness by describing her construction of these binaries and synthesizing them, which kills her initial liberal conception of romantic love and transcendent impression of

the love of God. Ultimately, she is left grasping to find meaning in the conflicting ghost of her relationship with Abelard and God.