

From her forced transition to religious life to his torturous castration, Abelard and Heloise's intense relationship was one entrenched in regret and sadness. With such misfortunes, numerous scholars have repeatedly questioned and explored the basis for which the two chose to stay together, first as an informal union, and later as a marriage. Scholars exploring Abelard's motivations posit a relationship based on intellectual desire to deepen philosophical understandings, while others claim a union solely charged by lust. However, these claims often overlook certain arguments, such as Abelard's writings frequently disapproving of Heloise's philosophical ideas, and the eventual reduction of sexual capability Abelard's emasculation would cause. It is hence evident that Abelard's motivations stem beyond these claims and could be explained through his well-documented egotistical and hypermasculine characteristics. This essay, using Abelard's writings in the Historia, his letters to Heloise, and additional scholarly sources instead posits a motivation driven by hyper masculine desires of control, power, and possessiveness, exhibited through sexual and religious contexts.

Before exploring Abelard's intentions, it proves imperative to analyze normative beliefs surrounding masculinity. Referred to as "A Man's World"¹, twelfth century Europe was rife with gendered expectations. Men, unlike women, were permitted to hold military/political positions, as well as gain a university education². This left women to operate within the confines of an oppressive, patriarchal society, placing them in a subordinate societal position to men. Hence, even though men themselves were not equal in status and position³, they still exerted power over

¹ Ruth Mazo Karras, "Masculinities, Youth, and the Late Middle Ages," in *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 1.

² Karras, "Masculinities, Youth, and the Late Middle Ages," 1.

³ Karras, "Masculinities, Youth, and the Late Middle Ages," 1.

the opposite sex. In addition to power imbalances in societal positioning, twelfth century Europe also professed strict behavioral expectations based on one's gender. Entrenched in concepts surrounding "courtly love", the medieval model of masculinity encompassed chivalry, physical strength⁴, and sexual prowess⁵, amongst other elements. Resembling tales of knighthood, men often attempted to prove themselves in competition with other men through the use of women. Pursuing women while simultaneously oppressing them through violence and other forms of control⁶ served to prove to other men one's prowess. Indeed, pervasive literature such as Ovidian verses frequently focused on concepts such as the "subjugation" and "domination" of women when describing ideal masculine men.⁷

Abelard's relationship with Heloise bears similar undertones to the hypermasculine expectations of twelfth century Europe. For instance, his writings describing sexual interaction bear frequent resemblance to sadomasochism, a term used to define situations in which a dominant individual derives pleasure from inflicting pain on their submissive subject during sexual interactions⁹. Such dominant-submissive power dynamics, as established by scholarship, were common techniques used by men to reinforce patriarchal norms of oppression, violence, and to exhibit control by subjugating women to positions of vulnerability and weakness during

⁴ Karras, "Masculinities, Youth, and the Late Middle Ages," 2.

⁵ Karras, "Masculinities, Youth, and the Late Middle Ages," 25.

⁶ Karras, "Masculinities, Youth, and the Late Middle Ages," 11.

⁷ Note that this contextualization draws primarily from Ruth Mazo Karras' (professor at Trinity College Dublin) literature. Nevertheless, this source can be considered trustworthy due to the author's credentials and international recognition, but also due to other corroborating evidence from the Middle Ages itself, such as Capellanus' "The Art of Courtly Love", which delves on the pervasiveness of knightly and ideas of masculine competition, as well as other scholarly sources such as "Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: an Encyclopedia" by Margaret Schaus.

⁸ Jessica Wise, "Subaltern Women, Sexual Violence, and Trauma in Ovid's Amores." In *Emotional Trauma in Greece and Rome Representations and Reactions*, (London: Routledge, 2019), 71.

⁹ Stephen Hucker, "Sexual Masochism, Psychopathology and Theory" in *Sexual Deviance: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment* eds. D. Richard Laws and William T. O'Donohue (New York: The Guilford Press, 2008), 250.

sexual intercourse¹⁰¹¹. Consider the *Historia Calamitatum*, in which Abelard attributes his union to Heloise to a “tender lamb” being entrusted to a “ravenous wolf” and states his desire to “bend her” to his will by threats and blows¹². Such language uses sadomasochistic concepts of violence and oppression to exemplify the imbalanced gendered power dynamic between the two. Heloise is portrayed as helpless, vulnerable, and weak, and at the mercy of Abelard, a “wolf” hungry for power and control, even if attained through injury and violence. This evidence can be considered trustworthy, for it is written in response to a close friend, incentivizing Abelard to be truthful and vulnerable in his writing. Furthermore, considering this letter would be publicly available and Abelard was famously known, he would not possess any capacity to distort the truth, for it could be effortlessly countered¹³. Lastly, Abelard’s claims of non-consensual sexual interaction are seen in his letters to Heloise as well when he confesses his wrongdoings, indicating that he is being truthful and not simply performative as he would have no incentive to lie to her. It is hence evident that Abelard’s sexual motivation for Heloise was not one based solely on lust, but rather to exert control, in which he used sadomasochism as a medium through which he could exert dominance over Heloise and thus conform to masculine norms.

While this is evident, numerous opponents to such an argument may question why Abelard chose Heloise to engage in a relationship with in particular. If his sole motivation was to find sexual prowess, opponents may ask why Abelard did not choose any other woman. This can, however, also be explained through his writings, in which he mentions Heloise’s increased

¹⁰ Marilynn Desmond, “Rhetorical Subjectivity and Sexual Violence in the Letters of Heloise.” In *The Tongue of the Fathers: Gender and Ideology in Twelfth-Century Latin*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 37.

¹¹ Note that while this definition may appear to be anachronistic in nature since the term “sadomasochism” was coined in the late 19th century, widespread scholarly agreement posits that the behavior defined by the term existed back to medieval stories of courtly love, as seen in writings of historian Professor Christopher Vaccaro.

¹² Peter Abelard. Translated by Betty Radice and M. T. Clanchy. “*Historia Calamitatum*.” In “The Letters of Abelard and Heloise”, (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 11.

¹³ While he does not distort the truth, he certainly chooses to abstain from addressing certain points, such as Heloise’s main reasons for not engaging in a relationship. Regardless, this would not take away from the trustworthiness of this particular piece of evidence being used.

likelihood of consenting due to her “knowledge and love of letters”¹⁴¹⁵. Indeed, Abelard considered Heloise’s erudition not to be a barrier to her subjugation, but rather a catalyst¹⁶. This is perhaps due to the existing mentor-mentee power dynamic between them, in which Heloise, under a desire to learn, would be more willing to listen to Abelard’s desires. Furthermore, such desires for control and domination do not exist in a vacuum. Abelard was certainly intellectually attracted to Heloise, in which her knowledge “greatly added to her charm”. However, it can be posited that this was not the main reason for Abelard wishing to seduce Heloise, for he frequently did critique Heloise’s writings, citing a “lack of rationality”¹⁷ and considered them unphilosophical. Hence, while intellectual attraction was certainly a factor, what was more important in Abelard’s motivations to choose Heloise was his ability to seduce her easily.

Abelard’s desires to constrain Heloise’s interactions was not exhibited only through his position as his teacher, but also through religion following his emasculation, in which he exerted power over both, her sexual and non-sexual actions. This is evident in Heloise’s correspondence in the second letter, where after undertaking religious obligations, she states “I have finally denied myself every pleasure in obedience to your will”. Heloise’s statement serves as a continuance from when she previously writes “I enjoyed with you the pleasures of the flesh”. Heloise’s consistent use of “pleasure”, while implying an overall restriction on her actions, also serves to focus on sexual gratification, in which, at Abelard’s insistence on having her enter religion, she has had to abstain from engaging in due to emphases on sexual chastity. Apart from sexual gratification, the use of “every” implies how Heloise has prevented herself from taking any independent action. Heloise’s writing can be considered trustworthy, for she is heartbroken

¹⁴ Peter Abelard, “Historia Calamitatum”, 10.

¹⁵ Reasons for why this evidence is trustworthy are similar to as in the paragraph above, for this evidence stems from the same piece of literature

¹⁶ Desmond, “Rhetorical Subjectivity and Sexual Violence in the Letters of Heloise,” 38.

¹⁷ Andrea Nye, “A Woman’s Thought or a Man’s Discipline? The Letters of Abelard and Heloise,” *Hypatia* 7, no. 3 (1992): 3.

and hence more likely to reveal her true emotions, unguarded by concerns relating to rationality and reputation. Furthermore, she uses this letter as an attempt to establish her perspective on their relationship and is hence not likely to represent opinions she may not believe in herself. Abelard's desire to exert control to prevent Heloise from engaging in sexual activity and other independent desires can be seen as a normative trend, in which men competed with each other through exerting exclusive possession of women, often oppressing them in the process. Abelard bears similar behavior, indicating not a genuine urge to protect Heloise by shifting her to religion. Instead, his inability to dictate her decisions as well as monopolize her sexual desires due to his emasculation leads him to use religion as an intermediary to continue overriding her autonomy.

Abelard's desires of possession and control are also exhibited through biblical references. Letter two, for instance, states "I went first to take the veil – perhaps you were thinking how Lot's wife turned back"¹⁸, referencing the story of Lot and his wife, in which she turned back to see the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and turned to a pillar of salt for doing so. The use of this biblical reference serves to enhance Heloise's distress and Abelard's mistrust of her, for she, by him, is considered to be similar to Lot's wife, and not likely to follow Abelard in his footsteps, instead looking back at the life she was leaving. In doing so, Heloise reveals Abelard's insecurities, as well as shows how Abelard considered religion to be a medium through which Heloise could be restricted and controlled. This essentially shows a relationship between them to be based on male possessiveness and control.

Numerous opponents to this argument may, just as question why Abelard would specifically choose Heloise, also ask why Abelard chose religion to continue exerting influence

¹⁸ Peter Abelard, "Letter 2", 54.

over Heloise and not necessarily other mediums, such as simply strengthening the existing mentor-mentee power dynamic. They may also contest that religion was not restrictive, but rather highly liberating for women. However, it is important to note that while liberating in some ways, religion still restricted spiritual and sexual chastity¹⁹²⁰, which were Abelard's prime concern. Heloise's writings, as well, contradicted the idea of the Church being a liberatory environment, where she calls religion "hypocritical", in which "whoever does not offend the opinions of men receives the highest praise". In doing so, Heloise admits to being constrained in religion by the ideals and motivations of powerful men, perhaps including Abelard²¹.

In addition to using religion to control her physical²² actions and desires, Abelard used it to indirectly increase her emotional and spiritual commitment to him through manipulative language and prayers. This is evident in letter three where Abelard uses phrases such as "show me how truly your charity extends"²³. The use of "truly" hints at Heloise's previous writings in which she professes commitment to him²⁴, and serves to indirectly imply his disbelief at this²⁵. With this statement, Abelard indirectly places pressure on Heloise to showcase her commitment to a greater extent in order to satisfy him. Abelard then uses this manipulative dynamic to request prayers on his behalf from Heloise. In doing so, he exploits Heloise's desire to appease him and injects himself into her daily religious obligations, essentially imprinting himself into her thoughts and beliefs. Hence, Abelard is able to effectively use manipulative rhetoric to

¹⁹ Vera Morton and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "Introduction," in *Guidance for Women in Twelfth-Century Convents* (Boydell & Brewer, 2003), 2.

²⁰ While this sentence points to a secondary source, it includes primary correspondence which instructs women on certain behavioral expectations, including the maintaining of virginity and chastity. This statement can hence be considered reliable.

²¹ Heloise d'Argenteuil. Translated by Betty Radice and M. T. Clanchy. "Letter 4." In *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 69.

²² By "physical", the author of this essay implies relationships involving interactions with other men (sexual and non-sexual), as well as the idea of being geographically constrained by being anchored by the convent.

²³ Peter Abelard. Translated by Betty Radice and M. T. Clanchy. "Letter 3." In *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 61.

²⁴ Heloise d'Argenteuil. Translated by Betty Radice and M. T. Clanchy. "Letter 2." In *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 54.

²⁵ This piece of evidence can be considered trustworthy as it serves to increase Heloise's commitment to Abelard, hence requiring him to employ certain manipulative language in order to emphasize his desires.

pressure Heloise into adhering to his demands and, coupled with his already indirect control of her physical actions, he satisfies his desire to exert power over her.

It is hence evident that what lies beneath claims of lust and love are indeed hypermasculine desires of power, desire, and control. Abelard, throughout the duration of his relationship with Heloise, used manipulative and sadomasochistic language to override her autonomy and relegate her to an environment rife with oppression, in which her physical interactions as well as spiritual beliefs were constricted. In doing so, he was able to satisfy patriarchal expectations and conform to societal norms. In exploring a new approach to describing Abelard's motivations, this essay sheds new light on scholarly desires to research the relationship with Heloise and Abelard. It allows scholars to question whether Heloise's inability to respond to Abelard's description of sexual dominance and oppression was indeed because she enjoyed such a dynamic, as some scholars posit, or because she feared retribution from Abelard, considering his manipulative behavior. In doing so, this essay implores scholars to examine the realm of accountability and see Heloise as a victim of an imbalanced power dynamic, rather than hold her to the same level of responsibility as Abelard, increasing accuracy in discourse and research surrounding imbalanced gender dynamics in the twelfth century.

Bibliography

Desmond, Marilynn. "Rhetorical Subjectivity and Sexual Violence in the Letters of Heloise." In *The Tongue of the Fathers: Gender and Ideology in Twelfth-Century Latin*, 36-41. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.

Heloise d'Argenteuil and Peter Abelard. Translated by Betty Radice and M. T. Clanchy. The Letters of Abelard and Heloise. New York: Penguin Books, 1978 [2003].

Hucker, Stephen. "Sexual Masochism, Psychopathology and Theory" in *Sexual Deviance: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment*, edited by D. Richard Laws and William T. O'Donohue, 250-264. New York: The Guilford Press, 2008 .

Karras, Ruth Mazo. "Mail Bonding: Knights, Ladies, and the Proving of Manhood." In *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, 1-24. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

Karras, Ruth Mazo. "Masculinities, Youth, and the Late Middle Ages." In *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, 1-24. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

Morton, Vera. *Guidance for Women in Twelfth-Century Convents*. NED-New edition. Boydell & Brewer, 2003.

Nye, Andrea. "A Woman's Thought or a Man's Discipline? The Letters of Abelard and Heloise." *Hypatia* 7, no. 3 (1992): 1–22.

Wise, Jessica. "Subaltern Women, Sexual Violence, and Trauma in Ovid's *Amores*." In *Emotional Trauma in Greece and Rome Representations and Reactions*, 71-88. London: Routledge, 2019.