

# **The Letters of Abelard and Heloise Study Guide**

**The Letters of Abelard and Heloise by Peter Abelard**

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# Plot Summary

The Letters of Abelard and Heloise tells the story of one of history's great real-world romance. The eleventh and twelfth century French theologian, philosopher and logician, Peter Abelard, was a famous and controversial man. Abelard grew up the son of a minor noble family and declined to become a knight like his father, instead focusing on philosophy. His great talent and upstart personality led him to get in disputes with his teachers, and due to his abilities, he often bested them. Because he often embarrassed prominent thinkers, many came to despise him. He was chased across provinces and threats were made against his life.

At the height of his powers, Abelard fell in love with his young student Heloise while he was living with her uncle, Fulbert. Heloise was widely recognized for her intelligence and impressed Abelard. Their love affair threatened to embarrass Abelard, and when Fulbert discovered their affair, they separated and met secretly. But Heloise became pregnant with Astralabe, their son. Abelard married Heloise in secret with Fulbert's approval, although Heloise protested. Fulbert revealed the marriage but Heloise denied it and joined a convent at Abelard's urging. Fulbert was furious because he thought Abelard had abandoned Heloise and tragically had him castrated.

Abelard would then withdraw to the Abbey of Saint-Denis to become a monk, but he decided to return to studying and opened another school. Yet he still had many enemies, and he was charged with heresy at a Synod held in 1121 at Soissons. It was an infuriating and humiliating experience for Abelard. Afterward, monastery life continued to be difficult and. He withdrew to a hermitage, but when his students found him, he started a new school and monastery at Paraclete, which he ultimately had to leave and gave over to Heloise and her fellow nuns.

It was at this time that the letters of Abelard and Heloise are exchanged. In the first letter, Abelard writes of his struggles to a friend, but the letter is intercepted by Heloise, which she makes clear in the second letter where she accuses him of forcing her into the monastery and then ignoring her. In subsequent letters, Abelard rebuffs her accusations and Heloise continues to press them in response, all the while both making it clear that they still have deep feelings for one another. In their final exchange, Abelard advises Heloise on how to govern her and her fellow nuns' lives in accord with a Rule he set out for them on her request.

The last several letters are exchanged between Peter the Venerable, an abbot who is in possession of Abelard's remains and who has the authority to have Abelard absolved of his sins that anyone would publicly accuse him of, and Heloise. Heloise has pressed Peter to gain approval from the Pope to absolve Abelard and to send his remains to Paraclete. Peter happily obliges. Afterward, Abelard's official absolution is printed along with two of his hymns. Some contemporary records of these letters contain extensive commentary and notes on translations.



# Letter I, Historia Calamitatum, Abelard to a Friend, the Story of His Misfortunes

## Letter I, Historia Calamitatum, Abelard to a Friend, the Story of His Misfortunes Summary and Analysis

The first letter Abelard wrote is to a friend, describe his past trials and misfortunes. It functions as an appropriately introductory letter because it sets the stage for the remaining letters.

Abelard was born near Brittany, eight miles east of Nantes in a town called Le Pallet. He ascribes his "volatile" personality and his ability for learning to his native land and ancestry. His father had intended that his sons be educated and Abelard loved learning so much that he devoted his life to study and gave his inheritance to the eldest son of his brothers. Abelard's father was a knight but Abelard gave up weapons for argument and chose disputation instead of war. Abelard started to travel the land arguing with anyone interested.

Abelard eventually found himself in Paris where philosophy flourished and joined William of Champeaux, who was the great philosopher in Paris. While William initially welcomed him, he started to dislike him because Abelard set out to refute him and beat him in debate several times. Abelard founded a school of his own in response, initially aiming for Melun, but William did his best to stop him. Though, William had enemies who aided Abelard. Through the conflict, Abelard's reputation increased and his self-confidence did as well. He then transferred his school to Corbeil, but Abelard fell ill quickly thereafter.

When Abelard recovered, William had become bishop and Abelard quickly composed some arguments to compel William to reconsider his opinion on universals. Abelard's teaching quickly gained prestige and William's successor offered him his chair to become his pupil, though when Abelard accepted, William went after him again, and so Abelard returned to Melun. Abelard was able to return to Paris after William's anger undermined his reputation and set up camp to attack his attacker. When William heard of this, he tried to appeal to his own students but even they abandoned him. William became a monk to avoid his loss of worldly fame. Abelard was victorious.

Abelard's next enemy was Anselm of Laon, a great teacher of theology and Scripture (not to be confused with his contemporary, Anselm of Canterbury). Abelard started to attend his lectures irregularly, which insulted his pupils and they came to hate him. One day they challenged him to engage in Scriptural interpretation; they thought he would be poor at it since he had only studied philosophy. His lecture soon thereafter was well-received and his subsequent lectures were well-attended. Anselm became jealous and forbade him from teaching at his school. The students were furious and again sided with Abelard.



Back in Paris, the number of Abelard's students increased substantially. Abelard began to grow arrogant and yielded to lust. In Paris at that time, there was a young girl named Heloise, the niece of Fulbert. She was pretty but her learning was profound for a woman of her day. Abelard made up his mind to seduce her and though it would be easy. He then was able to convince Fulbert to let him live with them so they could meet regularly for lessons, but they quickly fell in love and spent more time in physical intimacy than teaching. Abelard paid increasingly less attention to his school and found philosophy uninteresting. His lectures became repetitive. Several people tried to draw Fulbert's attention to Abelard and Heloise but Fulbert would not believe it.

Their passion became inflamed, and soon Heloise was pregnant. When Fulbert was away from home, Abelard took Heloise to his country to stay with his sister until she bore him a son, Astralabe. Fulbert went crazy when he returned and Abelard went to see him and offered to marry Heloise, asking only to marry her in secret to preserve his reputation. Fulbert agreed. Heloise was opposed, due to the risk of disgrace to Abelard. She also did not want to distract him from philosophy.

Nonetheless, they were married because of Abelard's stubborn nature, though after the marriage, Fulbert and his family revealed the secret. To avoid disgrace, Abelard sent Heloise away by making her a nun. Her family were furious and caught Abelard in the night and castrated him. The town was horrified at his humiliation. Abelard felt this was a just reprisal for the evil he had done. Abelard sought shelter in a monastery cloister in the abbey of St. Denis; Heloise was already in the convent of Argenteuil.

Abelard was to have no peace, however. His abbot was corrupt and Abelard spoke out against him; further, his students demanded that he continue to teach. Abelard started to study the Scriptures closely and avoided philosophy for a time. Again Abelard's rivals were jealous of his talent. He then composed a book on divine unity and trinity for his students; everyone liked it, save his rivals, who put together a Council against him in Soissons. Abelard presented his work and declared that he would correct himself if he contradicted the church. It was eventually found that there was no reason to reproach his work and so the leader of the Council declared that Abelard be taken back to his Abbey so that a larger council could be convened and render a decision.

In his absence, Abelard's rivals worked furiously to undermine him. When he was brought before the Council, Abelard was forced to burn his own book. While it was clear that he was falsely accused, Abelard was convicted and taken off to the abbey of St. Medard.

But Abelard was welcomed there, though he could not be comforted. Nonetheless, news of his mistreatment spread, and those who condemned him were embarrassed. Eventually, Abelard was released and returned to his own monastery. Unfortunately, Abelard made trouble for himself when he sided with a more authoritative church father on an issue which was contradicted by the church father that their abbey was devoted to. Abelard was severely denounced and imprisoned, though his friends broke him out and took him into asylum under Count Theobald. He lived in Provins with a community of monks.



One day his old abbot came to the province and Abelard asked for a public transfer to his current abbey. His old abbot refused but before Abelard could be returned, the abbot died and his successor changed his mind. Abelard then retreated and built a small hermitage on a plot of land in Troyes. Soon his students began to gather from all over and built their own huts around his. Abelard then opened a school and his students aided him; it was called Paraclete. Abelard's fame spread all the more widely. His rivals could do nothing, despite their efforts. Abelard was so depressed he considered leaving Christendom altogether. He was able to escape to become the Abbot of St. Gildas de Rhuys, though Abelard did not know the language and he found the people barbarous. Abelard despaired.

Meanwhile, the Abbey of St. Denis took possession of the Abbey of Argenteuil where Heloise was located. It then expelled the nuns where Heloise was prioress. Abelard returned and invited Heloise and some other nuns to come to Paraclete and handed it over to them. At first they endured hardship, but God brought them mercy from the locals. In their mercy, they attacked Abelard for not doing more to aid the nuns. To preserve his reputation, Abelard did all he could for the sisters of Paraclete.

Having recounted his past and now in the present, Abelard claims that Satan has made him a fugitive and wanderer. Some have even tried to poison him. Abelard has tried to make public the attacks on him and occasionally has gone into hiding. He has had to excommunicate some of the monks under him who rebelled, but even those remaining have tried to kill him.



# Letter 2, Heloise to Abelard

## Letter 2, Heloise to Abelard Summary and Analysis

Heloise opens the letter, noting that she ran across of a letter of Abelard's to a friend lamenting he and Heloise's plight (Letter I). Heloise notes that the story is moving and sad and that consolation shared is consolation eased. She admires the debt that Abelard has taken upon himself and is grateful that he built the sanctuary and shrine for the sisters.

However, despite this, Heloise maintains that Abelard is in greater debt to her than anyone else for the love she has given him; she notes her deep sorrow at losing him. Only Abelard can make her happy or sad and she will do whatever he asks. She only became a nun for him, not out of love for God. She only wanted his love and sought only his glory. Heloise reminds Abelard how much he resisted her requests not to be married and how gratefully she would now accept his answer one way or another. She argues that he should not have to be pulled away from philosophy on account of her, given his great ability.

That said, she still wants to know why he has completely neglected her with a word or letter. She wonders if it was mere desire rather than affection that drew him to her, lust rather than love. Heloise demands at least a letter, some part of himself. She pretends not to demand of him because she wants only what he will freely give, but she pursues it nonetheless. Heloise admonishes Abelard to think of all that he owes her, how much she has served him.

# Letter 3, Abelard to Heloise

## Letter 3, Abelard to Heloise Summary and Analysis

Abelard maintains that he has avoided contacting her not because he does not care, but rather to avoid causing them more suffering. He feels that the perils he faces are due to their sins and asks her to pray for forgiveness for them to free him from pain. He then encourages her to consider the great power of prayer and tries to prove it from Scripture. Abelard is particularly concerned to have Heloise and the nuns pray for him so that he will survive and not be killed.

Then focusing on Heloise, Abelard maintains that he is still totally bound to her in love and that his fear is all the more great in her absences and continues to beg her for prayer and asks that if he is killed that she and the nuns will find his body and take it to her burial-ground in Paraclete. He ends the prayer by encouraging her to focus on the salvation of his soul entirely.





# Letter 4, Heloise to Abelard

## Letter 4, Heloise to Abelard Summary and Analysis

Heloise is disappointed that Abelard has disregarded custom in his letter writing and only poured grief and worry on her and the nuns. Extreme distress will prevent them from praying for him and their souls will lose their powers of reason. She begs Abelard to spare them more grief. Heloise has no hope without Abelard and her only pleasure now is knowing that he is alive. She is the most wretched of all women.

Heloise is not only upset, however. She is indignant with God for punishing them after they atoned for their sins of fornication. Abelard is no longer an adulterer and had paid the penalty with castration and she cannot imagine why she is suffering. But she does thank God that the tempter did not succeed in getting her to do wrong. Heloise can find no penitence to please God and rebels against his ordinance. The pleasure she felt during their love making was so intense that she cannot bear to be without him. Men call her chaste but she is a hypocrite. She knows that she has always tried harder not to offend Abelard rather than God and it was Abelard's command rather than God's by which she became a nun.

Heloise ends begging Abelard not to praise her, for she is not holy. She wants to earn favor in God's eyes but she cannot. She still wants Abelard's praise, however.



# Letter 5, Abelard to Heloise

## Letter 5, Abelard to Heloise Summary and Analysis

Abelard decides to answer Heloise's accusations one by one to "enlighten" and encourage her. He writes her as a superior only because she became his superior when she became his wife. It was such a privilege that the honorific is what she deserves. Abelard then gives an example of such a case with an Ethiopian woman.

Abelard only filled Heloise with distress because she asked him to share his sorrow in her first letter. He shared his sorrow because he wants to share in suffering with her out of love. And he asks her to cease from such complaints in the future. Abelard does agree that she rejects praise because this shows she is only more praiseworthy and so he praises her again.

Abelard is surprised that Heloise is still bitter about entering the convent. The bitterness is a danger to her body and soul and makes her pitiful. It also distresses him and he asks, if she wishes his approval, to stop. He then encourages Heloise to accept God's will on the matter. The cause is good and so she should not grieve.

Abelard reminds her that God probably directed punishment at them because of their sins after they were married, such as when they had sex in the corner of the refectory at Argenteuil. They behaved shamelessly in an area dedicated to the most holy Virgin. And when Heloise was pregnant, Abelard disguised her as a nun to hide her. Therefore, they are fit for divine retribution. Abelard's lust filled him with shame and he lost his reverence for God during the Passion. He enjoins Heloise to thank God for being his partner in both guilt and grace. God only punishes those he loves.

Abelard also asks Heloise to have mercy on those who suffered for her redemption. It was God, in the end, who loved her most, not Abelard. His love, in his view, should be called lust. Abelard only hopes to avoid further punishment. He then ends the letter with a prayer he composed for her.

# Letter 6, Heloise to Abelard

## Letter 6, Heloise to Abelard Summary and Analysis

In response to Abelard, Heloise maintains that she cannot make her heart obey him. To console herself and the other nuns, she asks Abelard two things: first, to tell her about how the order of nuns began and the authority due her profession. Second, she asks Abelard to proscribe for them a Rule of life similar to the Rule of St. Benedict, though a Rule that women will be able to follow.

However, Heloise maintains, burdens can be too extreme; they can be placed on those who cannot bear them. She then argues that St. Benedict leaves open that his rule can be modified if circumstances require, say for children, the old or the weak. The same burden, she argues, should not be laid on the weak as on the strong. Heloise then backs up her words with the words of the Fathers. She notes that Canon law takes weakness into account.

Many people hurry into monastic life without properly considering what they will be able to bear. Therefore, it should not be imposed on a woman who will easily fall. She then cites the Church Fathers and the Bible on behalf of her argument. Again, burdens are always contextually applied. It is ultimately virtue alone that pleases God, but virtues can manifest in different persons in different ways. The weak can be as virtuous with fewer restraints.

Heloise presses on by maintaining that God cares only about virtue in the heart, not the outward manifestations of it, because these will vary among persons. To imitate Christ, she argues, Abelard must be sensitive to her weakness. Heloise ends by requesting a Rule again.



# Letter 7, Abelard to Heloise

## Letter 7, Abelard to Heloise Summary and Analysis

The long letter that follows responds to Heloise's initial quotes about the beginnings of nun-ish practices. The letter arranges examples of women favored in the church in a haphazard fashion.

The practices of nuns and monks sought to imitate Jesus Christ and the institution existed in basic from the time of Christ's ministry. Women were a part of the practice of imitating Jesus early on as well, such as Mary Magdalene, who anointed Jesus with oil. Today, when priests are anointed, bishops strut in their vestments, but a humble woman conferred the sacrament of kingship on Jesus. In fact, women were devoted to Jesus from the very start and they were first to rejoice in His resurrection.

After Christ's resurrection, the nascent Church began to see women nuns multiply. Many women sang hymns to God. In fact, Abelard even argues that the daughters of Aaron held priestly office equally with their brothers. Widowhood was honored by St. Paul and St. Jerome as a profession. Deaconesses and Abbesses have taken their place. The virtue of women is more pleasing to God and more perfect. Virgins have special honor as well.

Women were honored greatly among the Gentiles as well, such as Sibyl's prophecies and how she embraces all of Christian belief. The Samaritan woman Jesus spoke to was also shown great honor. Divine grace is showered on women throughout the Old Testament. Jesus even honored prostitutes. Abelard then returns to analyze the honor accorded to virgins. God honors virtue always, even in pagans.

Abelard does not proscribe a rule in the letter, however. Instead, he focuses only on Heloise's early question about the authority of her order and has argued that it has a special dignity. He finally asks by asking for the support of her prayers and merits.



# Letter 8, Abelard to Heloise

## Letter 8, Abelard to Heloise Summary and Analysis

Abelard's second letter aims to answer the question of a Rule for the lives of the nuns of Paraclete. He relies on the practices and testimony of Scriptures along with reason to put together a Rule for them. The Rule is divided into three parts, the life of continence, the life of poverty, and the life of silence. Continence is practicing chastity. Poverty means giving up possessions of the earth to focus on divine possessions. We focus on submitting ourselves to God. Only in voluntary poverty does life become a common store as it was by the Apostles, where things are distributed in accord with need.

Idle and superfluous words are similar things. Talking too much leads to sin and holding the tongue is wise. Practicing silence also involves intensely concentrating the mind, not just being silent. Passing from idle words to harmful words is easy. Abelard prescribes silence in prayer, the cloister, dorm, refectory, eating, cooking, and so on. Excess of words should be corrected. Abelard then illustrates with examples. Solitude is particularly important for the frailty of women, who will often in this way stray towards sensual pleasures.

When setting up a monastery, things should be set up such that the grounds can contain a garden, water, a mill, and a bakery. Someone must be in authority over others like an army. All institutions need authorities. One sister should rule all and be obeyed in everything. Seven nuns are needed to run the affairs of a monastery—a portress, cellaress, wardrobe, infirmarian, chantress, sacristan and deaconess or abbess. Abbesses must be of particularly high virtue and leadership abilities, along with learning and teaching capacity. She must also be astute in watching for evil and caring for the souls of those under her. Abbesses are not allowed to live in more luxury or comfort than those under her.

Monasteries of nuns are also well-advised to take on shepherding from male monks and should be ruled by them, particularly by an Abbot. Abbots must swear to bishops to care for the Abbess and her monastery. They must also impose nothing without the Abbess's approval. Abelard then prescribes duties for the other six offices within the monastery, which involve keeping track of money, leading the choir, caring for the sick, taking care of clothing, taking care of food and receiving guests. All nuns must attend Canonical Hours.

Abelard next prescribes how the worship times of the day are to be run.

Correction for error must be rigorous and discipline must be imposed. Anyone should be able to offer opinions, though the decision of the abbess must not be swayed. Custom must also fall to truth every time. Matters of importance should involve the voices of the whole convent.



No superfluous items should be sought for the monasteries or the sisters in general, though nothing should be regarded as unclean. The only unclean food is that which is not needed, such as wine outside of communion and the sickroom. However, others, like monks and the laity, are permitted wine. Abstaining from meat need only be done periodically. Discretion should be used to only place on each nun what she can bear.

It is crucial to think primarily of the inner life and less of the outer life. The appetites defile a man and must be brought into submission. Wine, again, must be forbidden and fine wheat flour as well. Too much meat is to be avoided, though Abelard only regulates meat eating so that nuns can show more abstinence than monks. Using condiments is also routinely restricted.

Nuns must avoid costly clothes altogether. Abelard next proscribes what the nuns are allowed to wear, including undergarments. Excess in buildings and possessions, such as sculpture and painting, must also be observed. Watching closely over expenditures is important, particularly to ensure that enough is left over to give alms. Nuns should have narrow and not wide beds.

Abelard argues that nuns must study the Scriptures and not merely engage in singing and worshipful praise. The study of Scripture nourishes the soul. Knowing the Word of God will avoid being filled with the gossip of the world. In fact, understanding how to read the Scriptures helps the nuns to give witness. The love of learning helps to avoid loving the vices of the flesh.

The letter ends with a short confession of faith by Abelard. Abelard proclaims to Heloise that despite his supremacy as a logician, he understands Paul too little. He does not want to let his intellect detract from his faith. He confesses the Creed and maintains that his hope is safely anchored on it.



# **Letter 9, Peter the Venerable: Letter (98) to Pope Innocent I**

## **Letter 9, Peter the Venerable: Letter (98) to Pope Innocent I Summary and Analysis**

In this letter, Peter the Venerable, the Abbot of Cluny, writes to the pope, then Innocent II. He notes that Abelard traveled through Cluny recently and complained of being burdened by accusations of heresy. He sought refuge from the Pope and the Abbot decided to write the Pope on his behalf. The Abbot and others advised Abelard to seek the judgment of the Abbot of Citeaux and to remove offensive language from his writings if the Abbot said so. He did this. Afterward, Abelard retreated to Cluny as the Abbot thought appropriate, due to his calling and age. The Abbot ends by asking the people to let Abelard live in the house of Cluny so that Abelard might find sanctuary.



# **Letter 10, Peter the Venerable to Heloise, Letter 11, Heloise, Letter to Peter the Venerable, Letter 12, Peter the Venerable, Letter to Heloise, The Absolution for Peter Abelard, Two Hymns**

## **Letter 10, Peter the Venerable to Heloise, Letter 11, Heloise, Letter to Peter the Venerable, Letter 12, Peter the Venerable, Letter to Heloise, The Absolution for Peter Abelard, Two Hymns Summary and Analysis**

Peter the Venerable now writes to Abbess Heloise, first noting how happy he is to hear from her and how much he admires her piety and reputation. He is particularly impressed at how learned she is and how she has weathered the difficulties in her life. Peter compliments her in order to lift her up. Next Peter cites the great women in history who led other women. HE wishes that the monastery at Cluny possessed her with Marcigny and the other nuns.

While Peter has been denied Heloise's presence, he informs her that Abelard was with him in the last years of his life and praises him as a great and pious intellect. He lived with nothing but the barest necessity and always took the sacraments. His last days were dedicated to God. Eventually Peter sent Abelard to Chalon to rest due to illness and he continued his studies there. It was here that he died, just after having professed his faith and confessed his sins. Peter maintains that Abelard was truly a great man.

In Letter 11, Heloise writes back to Peter the Venerable. She is honored that he has sent her a letter and notes that the nuns are filled with pride as a result. Heloise asks only for a sealed document containing the absolution of Abelard to be hung on his tomb.

In Letter 12, Peter the Venerable thanks Heloise for her letter and was happy to hear from her. After praising her, he notes that he achieved Abelard's absolution and has sent it along on parchment and sealed and promises to find a position of favor for Astralabe. The absolution declares Abelard's sins forgiven by Peter's authority and notes that Abelard's body was given to Heloise and the nuns of Paraclete. Two of Abelard's hymns are then reprinted, one for Vespers on Saturday Evening and the other for Good Friday service in the evening.





# Characters

## Peter Abelard

Peter Abelard (1079-1142) is one of the great historical philosophers and ranks among the top five philosophers of the medieval period. A Christian philosopher, theologian and logician, Abelard quickly gained fame as a great mind in the late eleventh century in France. His intellect, combined with his appetite for argument, led him to public disputes with many of his teachers. He was particularly concerned to refute the philosophical doctrine of realism and replace it with his own conceptualist doctrine.

As Abelard's fame rose, he acquired a great reputation and hundreds of students. But at the height of his powers, he seduced and fell in love with Heloise d'Argenteuil, one of his students. Abelard received permission from Heloise's uncle Fulbert to share their home so that he could give Heloise private lessons. But their private lessons quickly became sessions of private love-making. This ultimately led to their being caught by Fulbert, forced to marry and when Fulbert's family revealed the secret marriage, Abelard forced Heloise into a convent against her will. This in turn led Fulbert's family to castrate Abelard, which only began the many persecutions he would suffer in the future.

Abelard's exchange with Heloise began after he left Paraclete and brought the nuns of Argenteuil (including Heloise) to Paraclete in his place. He expressed a deep agony over his condition of persecution and rejection by the Church which he could barely endure. Consequently, he seemed largely indifferent by Heloise's pleas for love and a justification for his actions.

## Heloise d'Argenteuil

Heloise d'Argenteuil (1101-1164) served as a nun in medieval France. She became a well-known writer and woman of letters who later served as Abbess of the Abbey at Paraclete. She was renowned for knowing Latin, Greek and Hebrew and became Peter Abelard's student. Abelard's first letter explains how he seduced Heloise and formed an illicit union with her. This relationship continued through marriage and the birth of their child, Astrolabe. Abelard eventually placed Heloise in the convent at Argenteuil.

Heloise resented being forced into a nunnery. She told Abelard in her letters that she resented him for forcing her decision and maintained that she did not become a nun for the right reasons, which were only to serve Abelard, not to serve God. Throughout her letters she expressed a profound love for Abelard and intense suffering at his trials. She also expressed anger that he had not contacted her and that he did not have a genuine love for her. Abelard encouraged her to simply accept her lot in life. She responded by asking Abelard to prescribe her and her fellow nuns a Rule of Life, which Abelard did at great length.



Heloise would eventually become Prioress and then Abbess at the Oratory of the Paraclete. When Abelard died, Heloise petitioned Peter the Venerable to have his body furtively transferred to her so that he might be buried at Paraclete, his original hermitage. She also requested that Peter the Venerable absolve him of sin. Peter obliged.

## **Astrolabius/Astrolabe**

The illegitimate child of Abelard and Heloise.

## **Peter the Venerable**

The Abbot of the Benedictine Abbey of Cluny in France who was responsible for Abelard's absolution and the transport of his body to Paraclete on Heloise's request.

## **Fulbert**

Heloise's uncle who allowed Abelard to live with him and Heloise, discovered their affair, enforced their marriage and had Abelard castrated.

## **William of Champeaux**

Abelard's first teacher and his first major opponent who would later persecute him.

## **Anselm of Laon**

William of Champeaux's teacher and Abelard's second teacher who also became an opponent after Peter initiated criticism against him.

## **The Nuns of Argenteuil/Paraclete**

Heloise's fellow nuns who cared deeply for Abelard's well-being.

## **The Monks of St. Denis**

Abelard's fellow monks who largely supported him against his adversaries.

## **Pope Innocent II**

Pope at the time of Abelard's death, he gives Peter the Venerable permission to absolve Abelard's sins.



## **The Council of Soissons**

The members of the Soissons council who hastily decided to condemn Peter's work as heretical.

## **Abelard's Students**

Abelard had literally hundreds of students who followed and found him wherever he would go.

## **Students of Abelard's Enemies**

Abelard's enemies had students as well, many of whom continued the persecution of Abelard initiated by their masters.



# Objects/Places

## Medieval France

Eleventh and twelfth century France was the general setting of Abelard and Heloise's lives.

## Paris, France

Abelard's traveled to France to receive his education.

## The Cathedral School of Notre-Dame de Paris

Abelard's school in his youth.

## Conceptualism

Abelard's philosophical doctrine that says that universals exist, though only in the mind that he opposed to the then dominant realism.

## The Melun School

The school that Abelard began in Melun when he was forced to leave Paris.

## The Abbey of St. Denis

The abbey Abelard entered after his castration.

## The Abbey of Argenteuil

The abbey Abelard placed Heloise in.

## Fulbert's Home

Where Abelard seduced Heloise before giving her private lessons.



## **The Oratory at Paraclete**

Originally Abelard's hermitage, his students transformed it by building their own huts around his that they could learn from him.

## **Cluny**

The French city where Peter the Venerable was located and where Abelard was initially buried.

## **Castration**

Abelard's testicles were removed by the process of castration initiated by Fulbert's family members.

## **A Rule of Life**

A set of rules for governing day-to-day practices like eating, wearing clothes, prayer rituals and the like. Benedictine nuns like Heloise could not follow St. Benedict's original Rule as it was designed for men. Consequently, Heloise asked Abelard to design a Rule for her and her fellow nuns.

## **Prayer**

Prayer is a constant subject in the Letters. Abelard always asked for the prayers of Heloise and her fellow nuns.

## **Shame**

Abelard felt profound shame over his illicit affair with Heloise.

## **Disputation**

A formal process of argumentation, Abelard preferred it to fighting with physical weapons.

## **Abelard's Philosophical Writings**

Abelard's writings were composed from many of his lectures and continue to this day as some of the great works of philosophy.



## **Conceptualism and the Trinity**

Abelard had unique views on the nature of concepts that were tied to his doctrine of the Trinity, which later got him condemned as a heretic.

## **Heresy**

Abelard was convicted of heresy for his work on the metaphysical nature of the Trinity.

## **Letters and Secrets**

Abelard and Heloise had many secrets they wished to hide from public view that they often discussed in letters.



# Themes

## Forbidden Romance

The Letters of Abelard and Heloise concern, centrally, a forbidden romance and its consequences. Peter Abelard quickly rose to prominence due to his extraordinary intellectual abilities and his innovative teachings. He won a number of disputations with older and putatively more accomplished scholars. Riding the wave of fame and the inevitable confidence it can bring, Abelard set his sights on seducing Heloise, a young girl who was widely renowned for her learning. Offering his skills as a private tutor, Abelard convinced Fulbert, Heloise's uncle, to let him live with them in order to teach Heloise directly.

Yet they were not engaged in learning for long, as a romance developed between them and passion broke out. While engaged in sexual romance, Abelard impregnated Heloise, and when Fulbert discovered this, Abelard married Heloise in secret so as not to harm his reputation. Fulbert revealed the marriage, which he had agreed to keep silent, and Abelard quickly sent Heloise off to a convent, against her will, to give the public the impression that they were indeed not married. This caused such a furor among Fulbert's family that they castrated Abelard.

The consequences of forbidden romance were therefore severe. Abelard was castrated, humiliated and would be subject to constant persecution from there on out. Heloise was trapped in a convent far away from her former lover and father of her child. The Letters concern all these matters and their feelings about their circumstances.

## Tragedy

The Letters of Abelard and Heloise describe what is, in essence, a romantic tragedy. Due to the social circumstances of eleventh and twelfth century France, Abelard and Heloise's romance was doomed from the start. First, it began outside of wedlock and in the house of the man who was graciously putting Abelard up while he taught his niece. Not only were Abelard and Heloise engaged in an affair, they were actively engaged in intercourse and eventually became pregnant, threatening to have a child outside of wedlock. Abelard quickly married Heloise and the rest of the story is told in the rest of the guide.

Abelard and Heloise ended up in respective convents when neither intended to enter monastic life. They were divided from one another, Abelard subject to constant attacks and Heloise brutally deprived of contact with and from her lover. Both believed that their sufferings are due to the hand of God punishing them for their sins. But Heloise resented God for this because she continued to suffer, despite repentance. Abelard, on the other hand, was still so ashamed and wracked with guilt that he argued to Heloise



that they merited even more punishment than they had already received, not only for their original indiscretions but later ones.

Abelard died a sick man, and while he had fame he had paid a dear price for it. He was separated from his wife and child. Heloise was not able to be close to Abelard and was only just able to procure his body to have buried near her.

## Persecution

Abelard loved an intellectual conflict. His father was a knight and Abelard was initially to follow in his father's footsteps and become a warrior. Abelard was determined to become a warrior, but with words and not swords. Due to his incredible intellect, Abelard fought and bested his teacher, William, and his teacher's teacher, Anselm, in intellectual warfare, which gained him, along with his work, hundreds of students who were deeply devoted to him.

Abelard's new enemies were not interested in letting Abelard off easily, however. Instead, they deeply resented him for being disrespectful and not deferring to elders. They were also likely embarrassed by the fact that they were embarrassed by a man only in his twenties and that they were losing students to him en masse. Persecution of Abelard began with running him out of the institutions of higher learning where he had come to study, such as the school in Paris. Abelard would quickly form institutions elsewhere, but his enemies would still plot against him, particularly the students of those who he had humiliated.

Eventually Abelard was brought up on charges of heresy to the Council of Soissons. He was unjustly convicted based on a rudimentary misunderstanding of his teachings, and this condemnation bitterly hurt him. He was also persecuted for his teachings at the Abbey of St. Denis and later in other places where he stayed. At one point he became an Abbot, and the monks under him would often try to kill him.





# Style

## Perspective

The Letters of Abelard and Heloise have three perspectives. The first perspective is that of the editor and translators, though these perspectives vary from book to book. Typically, editors and translators give the relevant historical background on what historians know about Abelard and Heloise's circumstances whenever the book was published. They will also discuss issues concerning translation and recent historical discoveries. By and large, the perspective is one of impartial scholarship.

The primary perspective of the Letters is that of Peter Abelard. Abelard is a man a bit full of himself, growing up as an upstart, a trait he never quite lost. He is aware of his arrogance, but due to his extraordinary intellect he has trouble handling it. His arrogance comes forward particularly in his clear refusal to take responsibility for the harms he perpetrated on Heloise and daring to advise Heloise after she expressed hurt to him. Abelard is also a deeply pious and ashamed man. Abelard has always interested in theological topics and drawn to God, but due to his persecution and suffering he grew closer to God and believes that God punished him to purge his soul of sin. He also expresses great fear in his letters.

Heloise's perspective is somewhat more tragic. As a young girl, a brilliant man took an interest in her, loved her, taught her and complimented her. He married her and gave her a child. Yet when their love was brought to light, he abandoned her and effectively trapped her in a convent that she hated. The bitterness of her circumstances is on full display in her complaints to Abelard, with whom she is still deeply and madly in love. She is torn between resentment due to Abelard's treatment of her, particularly his recent lack of communication and her admiration for him.

## Tone

The tone of the Letters mimics the perspectives of the book. The introductions to various versions of the books have an impartial tone full of scholarly details about the lives and personalities of Abelard and Heloise, along with information about their historical setting, writings and the like.

Abelard's tone is a mixture of philosophical focus, shame, reproof, piety and arrogance. Abelard is clearly still concerned with scholarly matters, which comes through in his constant citations of texts from the Church Fathers and Classical Antiquity. Thus, the more emotional parts of his letters are interspersed with more airy and intellectual tones.

The primary emotion that comes through in Abelard's tone is his sense of shame not only—partly—his shame of what occurred with Heloise, but of the constant insults he received and (though this is not explicit) his having been humiliated through castration.



Reproof runs through the text when he continues to treat Heloise as if she had no complaints against him, and he sometimes becomes defensive in a seemingly unemotional way. Abelard expresses his piety on numerous occasions, so this is reflected in his tone, but he also expresses arrogance in, say, his audacity of advising Heloise on how to live after having refused to accept responsibility for hurting her.

Heloise's tone is full of admiration, sarcasm, bitterness, pain, anger and love. She admires Abelard still due to his intellect and deeply cares for him, which routinely comes out in her letters. She is sometimes sarcastic with Abelard as an expression of her bitterness, both of which come out in her letters as well. She is generally angry in tone in the first few letters but this moderates as the letters go on.

## Structure

The structure of the Letters of Abelard and Heloise is primarily determined in accord with the organization of the Letters. There are eight letters in all. The first letter is often called Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum*, or a history of his sufferings. The letter is lengthy, as it is largely an autobiography which explains the history of his rise to prominence, the tawdry affair with Heloise and his subsequent humiliations and narrow escapes of attack and death.

Heloise intercepts the first letter, however, and notes in her first letter to Abelard that he has found the time to write a friend but not the time to write her. She resents him for this and many other things. Therefore, the first letter from Abelard to Heloise begins a series of four very personal letters. Heloise's first letter repeats accusations against Abelard, which Abelard answers with excuses in his third letter. He also describes his tribulations which, in Heloise's third letter, she expresses resentment that he placed the burdens of worrying about him on Heloise and her sister nuns. In the fourth letter, Abelard again rebuffs Heloise's accusations despite expressing love and care for her, along with fear for his own life.

The next three letters are letters of direction. The fifth letter Heloise sends to Abelard, asking him for information on the origination of the office of the nun and for him to create a Rule of Life they can use to grow closer to God. In the next two letters, Abelard responds to both requests. Thus, the sixth letter explains how the office of nun came about and the seventh letter, which is quite long, lays down Abelard's preferred Rule of Life for the nuns of Paraclete. Finally included is Abelard's confession of faith.

The third section is a series of brief exchanges between Peter the Venerable, an Abbot in Cluny, and Heloise, concerning Abelard's absolution after his death and the transfer of his body to Paraclete from Cluny in order for Heloise to give Abelard a proper burial. This section also includes the official parchment proclaiming Abelard's absolution from Peter the Venerable. The book ends with two of Abelard's hymns reprinted.



## Quotes

"I preferred the weapons of dialectic to all the other teachings of philosophy, and armed with these I chose the conflicts of disputation instead of the trophies of war."

Letter 1, p. 3

"I began to think myself the only philosopher in the world, with nothing to fear from anyone, and so I yielded to the lusts of the flesh."

Letter 1, p. 9

"Dearly beloved brother in Christ, close friend and long-standing companion, this is the story of my misfortunes which have dogged me almost since I left my cradle."

Letter 1, p. 42

"To her lord, or rather father; to her husband, or rather brother; from his handmaid, or rather daughter; from his wife, or rather sister: to Abelard, from Heloise."

Letter 2, p. 47

"God knows I never sought anything in you except yourself; I wanted simply you, nothing of yours."

Letter 2, p. 51

"For a person's worth does not rest on wealth or power; these depend on fortune, but worth on its merits."

Letter 2, p. 51

"Tell me, I say, if you can - or I will tell you what I think and indeed everyone suspects. It was desire, not affection which bound you to me, the flame of lust rather than love."

Letter 2, p. 53

"At present you are over-anxious about the danger of my body, but then your chief concern must be for the salvation of my soul, and you must show the dead man how much you loved the living by the special support of prayers chosen for him."

Letter 3, p. 62

"In my case, the pleasures of lovers which we shared have been too sweet - they cannot displease me, and can scarcely shift from my memory."

Letter 4, p. 68

"And if you would allow consideration of our advantage to be an element in divine justice, you would be able to call what God did to us then an act not of justice, but of grace."

Letter 5, p. 81

"It is for you then, master, while you live, to lay down for us what Rule we are to follow for all time, for after God you are the founder of this place, through God you are the



creator of our community, with God you should be the director of our religious life."  
Letter 6, p. 111

"Look at how he received the sacrament of kingship from a woman, although he refused to accept the kingdom offered to him by men and he fled from those who wanted to force him to be a king. The woman conferred the sacrament of a heavenly kingdom and not an earthly one."  
Letter 7, p. 113

"I do not wish to be a philosophy if it means conflicting with Paul, nor to be an Aristotle if it cuts me off from Christ. For there is no other name under heaven whereby I must be saved."  
Letter 8, p. 211

"Permit him to spend the remaining days of his life and old age, which perhaps will not be many, in your house of Cluny, so that no one's intervention shall be able to disturb or remove him"  
Letter 9, p. 216

"Thus did Master Peter end his days. He who was known nearly all over the world for his unique mastery of knowledge and who won fame everywhere as a disciple of one who said 'Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble-hearted,' steadfast in his own gentleness and humility, thus passed over to him, as we must believe."  
Letter 10, p. 223

"I, Peter, Abbot of Cluny, who received Peter Abelard as a monk of Cluny, and gave his body, removed in secret, to the Abbess Heloise and the nuns of Paraclete, by the authority of Almighty God and of all the saints, in virtue of my office, absolve him from all his sins."  
The Absolution for Peter Abelard, p. 228

"So may our hearts have pity on thee, Lord,  
That they may sharers of thy glory be:  
Heavy with weeping may the three days pass,  
To win the laughter of thine Easter Day."  
Good Friday, The Third Nocturn, p. 235

## Topics for Discussion

How did Abelard first become famous?

How did Abelard earn so many enemies? To what extent was this Abelard's fault?

Why was Abelard castrated? How did he react to it? Did he blame himself? If so, why? If not, why not?

How did Heloise feel about being a nun?

To what extent were Abelard's feelings for Heloise based on lust rather than love?

Heloise had trouble understanding why she and Abelard were continually punished for their sins. What was Abelard's reply?

Explain Abelard's Rule of Life for the nuns of Paraclete.

What are the primary emotions being expressed by Heloise in the letters? What about Abelard? How do the emotions intermingle?