

The Convoluted Trope of Confession in Alexander Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard"

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Abstract

As the early eighteenth century witnessed the gradual waning of Classical themes in English literature in favor of the growing appeal of Romanticism, the well-known medieval story of Eloisa and Abelard transformed into an epitome of the sentiments carried by the Enlightenment era in the hands of the legendary poet, Alexander Pope. A verse epistle in form, "Eloisa to Abelard," is individually a rendition of pure emotion on the one hand and an intellectually discursive verse on the other. Written from the perspective of Eloisa, an abbess deeply in love with Abelard, the poem builds on her confusion between sensual and spiritual love and her consequent frustration while tracing the complexities of virtue and passion – all expressed through the trope of "confession."

Keywords: Christianity, Sexuality, Confession, Penance, Spiritual and Sensual Love

"Eloisa's poem is confessional in rhetorical mode, archetypal in its image of personal history congruent with a sacred history of all men, and sacramental in the analogy it constructs with the act of penance Eloisa everywhere in the poem struggles to perfect." – Robert Kalmey.

At first glance, "Eloisa to Abelard" (1717) reads as Eloisa's struggle to establish and maintain a sincere penance for her submission to temptation in her persistent love of Abelard. The work successfully portrays an act of "confession," composed of four traditional parts of Penance – contrition, confession, absolution, and purgation. However, the conventions of the genre in which Alexander Pope establishes this poem justify its reading as a study of a state of mind. As an Ovidian heroic epistle, the poem uses the trope of confession to depict Eloisa's inability to choose between alternatives and the agony that the inability causes her. Thus, this article attempts to account for the complex nature of the trope of confession in Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard."

The poem begins with Eloisa struggling to commit an act of sacrilege - the sacrilegious adoration of Abelard's name, which she resists speaking but fails to suppress (Pope, lines 13 to 16). As a result, she experiences remorse, and because of

her remorse, she begins her Penance with tears, even though she believes that they are shed "in vain" (Pope, line 15). Here, Pope firmly establishes the penitential context and character of her tears. While the "Still rebel nature holds out half [her] heart" (Pope, line 26) and her Penance of tears appears to her again "in vain" (Pope, line 28), the poem continues to describe her struggle to achieve a contrite heart before God. Moreover, Kalmey indicates that her weeping is not entirely an act of sacramental Penance but also partly an act of secular regret for a lost eroticism:

"Tears still are mine, and those I need not spare,

Love but demands what else were shed in pray'r" (Pope, lines 45-46)

Eloise, thus, is aware that her Penance is imperfect, that weeping "in pray'r" contradicts the weeping in carnal love, and that her secular tears now are devoid of meaning:

"No happier task these faded eyes pursue;

To read and weep is all they now can do." (Pope, lines 47-48)

However, the consciousness of her imperfection in the act of contrition brings Eloisa to the resolute and agonized conviction of her own sin. Kalmey notes: "Eloisa confesses when she descends spiritually and morally in her awareness from her guiltless state of innocence to a nadir of her soul plunged into the punishing flames of Hell (reference to lines 275-6 in "Eloisa to Abelard")" (Kalmey 54). In the fiery "hell," her tears no more appear sensual, but as illustrative evidence of her weakness "prostrate" in her cell. She finds and experiences "humble grief" (Pope, line 277) and as outward expressions of this inner spiritual state, her tears are appropriately "virtuous" and "kind."

When she perceives the "dawning grace... opening on [her] soul" (Pope, line 282), Eloisa desires Abelard and "friends" to force her away from God. Eloisa dramatizes the violent action here, which strongly argues for the intensely animal nature of her sexual love for Abelard. Her subsequent repudiation of her violent vision of "tearing" "friends" and her ultimate ecstatic submission to the embrace of "grace serene" declare vividly her profound capacity for passionate love of God. She begins her absolution by converting her desire for Abelard to a desire for God. The grace she receives is the spiritual strength of contrition and humility that enables her to pray. Eloisa envisions her death with the Cross before her and Abelard's death "In trance ecstatic" – Kalmey deduces that if she endures a purgation as a "pensive ghost" with this hope, her suffering will not be pointless or endless and will realize "opening skies" and "streaming glories" of Heaven. As Eloisa sees her "pensive ghost" (Pope, line 365) at the end of her writing, she becomes aware of the moral and spiritual need for purgation before final absolution by God in Heaven.

Eloisa is aware of her relationship with God at all junctures of her life, as painted in the poem. Even in her rejection of Him, she is aware of Him, and the narrative of her rejection of Him often substantiates what she calls in the poem her confession:

"Ah, wretch! Believ'd the spouse of God in vain,

Confess'd within the slave of love and man." (Pope, lines 177-178)

According to Kalmey, much of "Eloisa to Abelard" is "confess'd within": "Eloisa conceives and realizes her participation in the history of man from innocence, to fall, toward redemption only within the introspective awareness she achieves as a result of her confession." Thus, the poem as confession constitutes the main act in the sacramental tradition of Penance, with its four main parts being contrition, confession, absolution, and purgation.

On the contrary, Pope's familiarity with the genre of heroic epistles compelled Joseph Warton to write that the poem is "no other than a passionate soliloquy; in which the mind gives vent to the distresses and emotions under which it labours." As Ovid never depicts his epistoler making any moral or rational choice, so does "Eloise to Abelard" only explore the conduct of a mind caught up in an emotional turmoil from which there can be no escape because Eloisa, like other Ovidian heroines, cannot be torn between two poles – spiritual love and sensual love – as they are the same. The letters in John Hughes's *The Letters of Heloise and Abelard* (Pope's source) depict Heloise's alternately embracing passion and virtue, leaving it unclear if she ever finally chooses one. In the penultimate sentence of the final letter in John Hughes' translation, she writes: "I am sensible of the Motions both of Grace and Passion and by turns yield to each" (Kropf 106), a line Pope echoes in the last sentence of "The Argument" of his poem. Thus, her only confession in the letters is that her problem cannot be solved because the physical and spiritual loves between which she is torn interpenetrate and coexist: "It is vain to endeavor to separate these two things" (Kropf 94).

She laments that "Death, only death, can break the lasting Chain," yet suicide is not available as an alternative in Pope's poem (a usual path taken by Ovidian heroines), and she must depend on natural death for her release. Thus, the poem ends with her embrace of death, not virtue. Furthermore, certain recurring words and ideas in the poem are indiscriminately and often inappropriately applied to both Abelard and God or passion and virtue: the terms "flame" and "fire" are sometimes referenced in the context of passion (lines 39, 54, 59, 261) and at other times, in the context of religion (line 320), where it becomes the refined flame that glows in "breasts seraphic." At still other times, its meaning becomes ambiguous:

"Before true passion, all those views remove,
Fame, wealth, and honor! What are you to Love?
The jealous God, when we profane his fires,
Those restless passions in revenge inspire;
And bids them make mistaken mortals groan,
Who seek in love for aught but love alone." (Pope, lines 79-84)

Where lovers are set to occasionally "profane...fires" of "The jealous God," it is unclear if they refer to fires of passion inspired by Cupid or the altar fires of the jealous Christian God. The language of approximately the last hundred lines is deliberately loaded with double entendres; "to mount" and "to die," for instance, appear sexual in use. C.R. Kropf claims that although it may be saints who do the embracing, Eloisa is capable of viewing it only as a passionate physical embrace when, in actuality, the ecstatic trance after death could be as suggestive of sexual as

spiritual matters. For Eloisa, the two halves of the metaphor (spiritual love and sexual love) are inseparable. Pope's choice of language shows that she cannot contemplate one without implying the other. In short, the double entendres embody and symbolize Eloisa's plight in the language of the narrative itself.

Therefore, the trope of confession, in the hands of the Pope, not only fulfills Eloisa's development of Christian spirituality but also expresses her inability to separate Abelard from God: she wanders between life and death, hell and Heaven, remembering and forgetting, reality and dream, truth and hypocrisy, "sensation and aestheticism," "grace and nature," "virtue and passion," nature and religion, sincere feeling and dramatic behavior – the unresolved antithetical alternatives that only elevate her suffering to art.

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