

LETTER 2

HELOISE TO ABELARD

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

The letter you wrote to comfort a friend, my beloved, has recently chanced to come into my hands. Recognizing at once from the heading that it was yours, I began to read it with eagerness as great as my love for its writer. For I hoped that I might be refreshed by the words, as if by a picture, of one whom in reality I have lost. Instead, I found almost every part of this letter filled with the bitterness of gall and wormwood, as you told the pitiable story of our conversion to the religious life and the endless torments you have suffered, my only love.

You have truly accomplished in this letter what you promised your friend when you began, that he should consider his own troubles as little or nothing compared with yours. After you describe your earlier persecutions by your teachers and that most treacherous outrage upon your body, you turn to the detestable jealousy and the ruthless attacks of those fellow-students of yours, Alberic of Reims and Lotulf the Lombard.¹ You do not fail to mention what was done at their instigation to your famous work of theology and what happened to you yourself, when you were, so to speak, condemned to prison. Then you go on to the plotting of your abbot and false brother-monks, the slanderous attacks on you by those so-called apostles whom your enemies aroused against you, and the scandal caused by the many charges concerning the name of the Paraclete which, contrary to custom, you gave to your oratory. At last, after describing your intolerable persecutions at the hands of that cruel tyrant and those wicked monks whom you call sons, you bring your melancholy story to an end.

No one could, I believe, read or hear this tale without being moved to tears. The more fully you have set down every detail, the more sharply you have renewed my own sorrows. They have, indeed, become greater. Since you say your dangers are still increasing, all of us here are driven to despair of your life and every day we wait with trembling hearts and throbbing breasts for the latest rumors of your death. In the name of Christ who still somehow protects you for

¹ For these rivals of Abelard, see: Explanatory Notes, "Alberic of Reims."

himself, as his servants and yours, we beg you to give us frequent news of you, and the storms that still buffet you. In this way, at least, you will still have us, who are your only friends, to share your grief or joy. Those who grieve with one in sorrow usually give him some comfort and any burden shared by several persons becomes lighter and may even be cast off. If this tempest should subside a little, you should write all the sooner because your letters will be so welcome. Whatever you write will comfort us, for by writing, at least you will prove that you are thinking of us.

Showing us by his own example how delightful are the letters of friends from whom we are separated, Seneca writes to his friend Lucilius:

Thank you for writing to me so often, because this is the only way in which you can give me back your presence. I never receive a letter from you without instantly feeling that we are together. If the pictures of our absent friends give us pleasure, refreshing our memory and relieving our longing for them by an unreal and lifeless solace, how much more satisfying are the letters bearing the true marks of the friend who is far away! I thank God that no malice prevents you from restoring your presence to us in this way at least, and that no obstacle stands in your path. Do not, I beg you, let your own negligence delay you.²

You have written your friend a long letter of consolation, ostensibly concerning his misfortunes, it is true, but really about your own. Although you evidently meant to comfort him by your detailed account of your troubles, you have inflicted fresh wounds of sorrow on us, and increased the pain of those we suffered earlier. Heal, I implore you, those wounds that you yourself have made, you who are so busy curing those caused by others. You have really done well by your friend and comrade; you have discharged the debt of friendship and comradeship. But you are bound by a larger debt to us, whom you may rightly call not merely your friends, but your dearest friends, not simply comrades but daughters, or whatever sweeter and holier name, if any, can be imagined.

There is no lack of evidence to show how great is the debt that binds you to us. To remove any doubt, and if all else were silent, the facts themselves speak loudly. After God, you are the sole founder of this place, the only architect of this oratory, the sole builder of this congregation. You have built nothing on foundations laid by another. Everything here is your creation. This wilderness, occupied only by wild beasts and robbers, had known no human dwellings; there were no houses here. In the very lairs of the animals, in the hiding places of thieves, where the name of God was not spoken, you built a divine tabernacle and dedicated a temple to the Holy Spirit himself. In building this temple you accepted nothing from the treasuries of kings and princes, though you could have obtained assistance from the greatest and most powerful men, so that whatever was accomplished might be attributed to you alone. The clerics and students who flocked here to be taught by you supplied all the essentials of life. Those who were living on ecclesiastical benefices and did not know how to make

² Seneca, *Ad Lucilium* 40 (initio).

offerings, but only how to receive them—who had their hands outstretched to take, not to give—became lavish and even prodigal in their offerings here.

This new plantation in the Lord's field is truly yours and yours alone, and it needs frequent watering to make its tender plants grow. Even if it were not new, it would be frail enough, simply because of the weakness of the female sex. So it needs more careful and more constant tending, as the Apostle says (1 Cor. 3:6): "It was for me to plant the seed, for Apollo to water it, but it was God who gave the increase." By his preaching the Apostle planted and established in the faith the Corinthians to whom he wrote. Afterward his disciple, Apollo, watered them with holy preaching and so their virtues were increased by divine grace bestowed on them.

But you, with those wasted admonitions of yours and those holy sermons preached in vain, are now tending a vineyard not of your planting, and one that has turned bitter against you. While you are lavishing your care on what belongs to another, think of your debt to what is yours. You teach and admonish the rebellious, and accomplish nothing by it. You fruitlessly cast the pearls of divine eloquence before swine. While you are wasting so much on those who resist you, think of your debt to those who obey you. As you are lavishing so much on your enemies, consider what you owe to your daughters. Putting all else aside, think of the great debt that binds you to me, so that what you owe in general to these devout women, you may pay with deeper devotion to her who is yours alone.

You in your excellent learning know better than my poor self how many important treatises were written by the Holy Fathers for the instruction, encouragement, and consolation of holy women, and how carefully these works were composed. For this reason your forgetfulness of me in the frail beginnings of our religious life troubled and amazed me. For when I was wavering and crushed by lasting grief, you were not moved by reverence for God, or love of me, or by the examples of the Holy Fathers, to try to comfort me either by words when I was with you or by a letter when we were apart. Yet you know how you are bound to me by a debt that is the greater because you are tied to me so closely by the sacramental bonds of marriage, and how you are joined to me still more closely because, as everyone knows, I have always loved you with a boundless love.

You know, my dearest, as everyone knows, what I have lost in you, and how calamitous for me was that supreme and notorious betrayal which robbed me of myself as well as you, so that my sorrow is immeasurably deeper for the way in which I lost you than for the loss itself. Truly the greater the cause of sorrow, the greater must be the remedies of consolation applied to it, not by someone else, however, but by you yourself. For you were the sole cause of my grief and you alone can bring me the balm of comfort. You alone can make me sad, and only you can make me happy and console me. You alone owe me this great debt, now above all, when I have done all that you demanded, even to the point where, unable to refuse you anything, I found the strength to give up my own life at your command. What is more, and stranger still, my love reached such a pitch of madness that it sacrificed without hope of recovery the sole object of its desires,

when, at your command and without hesitating, I changed my habit and my mind, to show that you alone possessed my body and my soul.

God knows, I have never asked anything of you but only you yourself. I wanted you alone, not what was yours. You know that I did not hope for marriage or for any dowry. I did not seek to gratify my own pleasures or desires, but only yours. If the name of wife seems holier and more impressive, to my ears the name of mistress always sounded sweeter or, if you are not ashamed of it, the name of concubine or whore. For I thought that the more I humbled myself for you, the more completely I might win your love, and that in this way I might do less damage to your great fame. You had not completely forgotten this love in the letter you wrote to console your friend, since you did not consider it beneath you to report the various arguments by which I tried to dissuade you from our marriage, to keep you from an ill-starred bed. But you neglected to mention the many reasons that made me prefer love to marriage, liberty to bondage. As God is my witness, if Augustus, who ruled over the whole earth, should have thought me worthy of the honor of marriage and made me ruler of all the world forever, it would have seemed sweeter and more honorable to me to be called your mistress than his empress.

The fact that a man is rich and powerful does not make him therefore better; the one depends on fortune, the other on character. The woman who marries a rich man rather than a poor one, and desires her husband's possessions more than the man himself, should realize that she is only putting herself up for sale. Surely anyone who is led to marry by this kind of greed deserves to be paid rather than loved by her husband. It is obvious that what she is seeking is not a man but what he owns, and that if she could, she would prostitute herself to a richer man. This point is made in the argument by which, as Aeschines Socraticus tells us, the wise Aspasia tried to convince Xenophon and his wife. After she had explained the reasons why this pair should become reconciled with one another, she concluded her argument with these words: "It is only when both of you have come to realize that there is not a better man or a more desirable woman in the world that you will always seek above all what seems best to each of you: one to be the husband of the best of women, and the other to be the wife of the best of men."³ This is surely a holy saying, and more than philosophic; it may, indeed, be said to spring from wisdom rather than philosophy. For it is a pious error and a blessed fallacy in those who are married to think that a perfect love can keep the bonds of matrimony unbroken, not so much by the continence of their bodies as by the purity of their hearts.

But what other women have deceived themselves into thinking was in my case nothing less than the truth. What they believed to be true of their husbands, I, and everyone else as well, not merely believed, but knew to be true of you, since the more truly I loved you, the less I could be in error about you. What kings or philosophers could rival you in fame? What kingdom or city or village did not yearn with eagerness to see you? Who did not rush to look at you when you appeared in public, and crane his neck and strain his eyes after you as you

departed? What girl or woman did not long for you when you were gone and burn with desire in your presence? What queen or great lady did not envy me my joys and my bed?

You had, I admit, two special gifts by which you could instantly captivate the heart of every woman: the gifts of composing and singing songs, gifts that other philosophers, as we know, have rarely possessed. In these arts, as in a kind of play, you found recreation from the labor of your philosophical studies, and the many love songs you composed have been sung repeatedly because of the great sweetness of their words and melodies, and they have kept your name constantly on everyone's lips. For the charm of your tunes would not let even the unlettered forget you. It was for this reason, above all, that women sighed for love of you. Since most of these songs told the story of our love, they quickly spread my fame in many lands and made other women envious of me.

What grace of mind or body did not adorn your youth? What woman who envied me then is not now compelled by my disaster to pity one who has been robbed of such delights? What man or woman, even though at first unfriendly to me, is not now softened by the compassion I deserve? Although I am exceedingly guilty, you know that I am also most innocent. For it is not the deed itself but the intention of the doer that makes the sin. Equity weighs not what is done, but the spirit in which it is done.⁴ Only you, who have known them, can judge my intentions toward you. I submit everything to your scrutiny. I yield to your decision.

Tell me just one thing, if you can: why it is that ever since we entered the religious life, which you alone decided we should do, you have so neglected and forgotten me that I am not refreshed in spirit by words when I am with you, or comforted by a letter when we are apart? Tell me if you can, I beg you, or let me say what I feel or, rather, what everyone suspects. Lust, not love, inspired the ardor of your desire for me. Then after what you desired came to an end, whatever feelings you had shown for this reason vanished at the same time.

This, my dearest love, is not simply my conjecture, but everyone's suspicion. It is not peculiar to me, but common to all. It is not a personal, but a public opinion. I wish that this seemed true only to me and that your love might find someone to make excuses for it, which might comfort me a little in my sorrow. If only I could invent excuses by which to acquit you and so, to some extent, conceal my own baseness! Please pay attention, I beg you, to what I am asking of you and you will see what a small thing it is, and how very easy it would be for you, when I am cheated of your presence, at least to make your sweet image

⁴ The basic doctrine of intentionality is that one is ethically responsible only for what one intends to do. Hence, in Abelard's view, for example, Jews were not guilty of causing God-murder since they presumed Jesus to be an imposter, a lawless provocateur. Abelard and Heloise maintain distinctions between exterior and interior acts, so that "we are to consider not so much what is done as the intention with which it is done." This is one of Abelard's most striking and durably influential ethical doctrines, developed, we think, in tandem with Heloise and reinforced by her adherence to its substance. See Luscombe's edition and translation of *Peter Abelard's Ethics* (1971), esp. p. 48, and particularly, Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, on Abelard's primary significance not as logician but as expositor of ethical thought. Here Heloise turns this doctrine against him.

³ Cf. Cicero, *De inventione rhetorica* I.31, 52 in *De inventione*, ed. Hubbell.

present to me in words, of which you have plenty at your command. I must hope in vain for you to be generous in deeds if I am forced to endure your miserliness in words.

Until now, I really believed that I deserved better from you, since I have done everything for you and am still persevering in obedience to you. It was not religious devotion but your command alone that drove me in my youth to the harshness of the monastic life. But if I am to have no reward from you, you may judge that my efforts have been futile. I can expect no reward from God, since it is evident that I have not yet done anything for love of him.

I followed you when you hastened to God, or rather, I preceded you in taking the monastic habit. Before you gave yourself to God, you delivered me over to the sacred habit and the monastic calling, as if you were thinking of Lot's wife, who looked back. I confess that I was greatly saddened and ashamed that in this one thing you showed so little faith in me. God knows, I would not have hesitated for a moment to precede or follow you into the fires of hell, if you had given the word. For my heart is not mine but yours. Now, more than ever, if it is not with you, it belongs nowhere. Without you, it can find no place. But I beg you to behave in such a way that my heart may be happy with you, and it will be happy with you if it finds you kind, if you return love for love, little for much, words for deeds.

I wish, my love, that your love were less sure of me, so that you would be more anxious. But the more reason I have given you for confidence in the past, the more you neglect me now. Remember, I entreat you, what I have done and consider what you owe me. While I was enjoying the delights of the flesh with you, many people were not certain whether I was moved by love or by lust. But now the outcome shows clearly the spirit in which I began. In obedience to your will, I have forbidden myself every pleasure. I have kept nothing for myself but only this, to become more than ever yours alone. Think how unjust you would be if you gave back less—indeed, nothing at all—to one who deserves so much more, especially when what I ask of you is such a small thing and so very easy for you to do.

So in the name of God to whom you have offered yourself, I beg you to restore your presence in the way that lies open to you, I mean, by giving me the consolation of writing to me. Then at least I may be renewed in spirit and may take part more gladly in the divine service. When long ago you wanted me for shameful pleasures, you used to besiege me with letters and with your songs you put your Heloise's name on every lip. Every street rang with it; it echoed in every house. Should you not excite me toward God now, as you excited me then to desire for you? Think, I implore you, what you owe me! Listen to what I ask you, and I shall end this long letter with a brief word,

Farewell, my only love.

LETTER 3

ABELARD TO HELOISE

To Heloise, his dearly beloved sister in Christ, from Abelard, her brother in the same.

If, since our conversion from the world to God, I have never written you a letter to comfort or encourage you, this should not be attributed to my negligence but to your prudence. I did not consider my help necessary for one upon whom the divine grace has so lavishly bestowed all that she needs. By your words and your example you are able to teach those who are in error, to strengthen the fainthearted, to exhort the lukewarm, as you have long been accustomed to do since you became prioress under the abbess.¹ If you watch over your daughters as carefully now as you watched over your sisters then, I consider it sufficient and I regard any teaching or encouragement on my part as superfluous. But if to you in your humility it seems otherwise, and you need me to instruct you and write to you concerning matters that pertain to God, tell me what you want, so that I may write to you again, according as the Lord may grant me.

I give thanks to God, who has inspired your hearts with anxiety for me in my most grave and constant dangers and thus made you partners in my afflictions, so that with the help of your prayers the divine mercy may protect me and swiftly crush Satan under my feet. For this reason, above all, I have hastened to send you the *Psalter* that you have earnestly requested, my sister once dear in the world, now most dear in Christ.² With it, I hope that you may offer a perpetual sacrifice of prayers to the Lord for our many and great transgressions and for the perils that daily threaten me.

There are many proofs and examples showing the great influence the prayers of the faithful may have with God and his saints, especially the prayers of women for their dear ones and of wives of their husbands. With this particularly in mind, the Apostle admonishes us to pray without ceasing. We read that the Lord said to Moses (Exod. 32:10): "Spare me your importunacy, let me vent my anger and destroy them." And he said to Jeremiah (7:16): "Nor do you . . . think to plead for this people of mine, or . . . thwart my will." By these words the Lord makes it

¹ That is, at Argenteuil.

² Probably not a *Psalter* in the usual sense, but the versicles, responses, and prayer ending.