

## Castrating the Nun in Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard"

by Michelle L. Brown

If Pope's intent in writing an Ovidian heroic epistle is to show the entire range of his protagonist's emotions from meekness to violent passion, then he was wise to choose the twelfth-century story of Eloisa and Abelard as his subject. Eloisa and her teacher Abelard retired to different monasteries after her family discovered they were lovers and brutally castrated him. Years later, Eloisa by chance intercepted a letter from Abelard to a friend chronicling their love affair. The letter reawakened Eloisa's long repressed passion for Abelard, and she struggles to reconcile her sexual passion with her religious vows. As she has taken a vow of silence, the only mode of expression left to Eloisa is her emotion, which she often expresses by weeping. She tells Abelard in her mind:

Tears still are mine, and those I need not spare,  
Love but demands what else were shed in pray'r;  
No happier task these faded eyes pursue,  
To read and weep is all they now can do. (lines 45-48)

Eloisa thus lives in her mind, communicating mentally with God and now her former lover Abelard alternately. Pope's poem is his idea of what Eloisa would write to Abelard in a letter, albeit a letter whose writing would have spanned several years until her death. In his seminal 1969 article "The Escape from Body or the Embrace of Body," Murray Krieger states that "the poem represents at once a finished letter and a letter that, apparently finished, is actually in the stormy process of being written" (34). The richness of Pope's language juxtaposed with the rigidity of his couplet form have suggested to critics both the depth of Eloisa's emotion and the restraints placed on her by the Church and her vows. This juxtaposition has troubled some critics

(including Krieger) as a mismatch. These critics argue that a writer in Eloisa's emotional state would produce writing that is much less polished and constrained than Pope's perfect couplets. In fact, that Pope records Eloisa's emotional language in the confining couplet verse structure is precisely what Krieger calls the poem's failure. I propose that Pope intended Eloisa's emotional outbursts to strain against his own exacting poetic form. I believe Pope constricts Eloisa's florid language within the couplet in order to emphasize the severity of the imprisonment she suffers in the monastery. Further, I would argue that Eloisa's imprisonment in a monastery, combined with the vow of silence and marriage to the Church required of her as part of her religious confinement, is a symbolic act of castration that cuts her off from both the world and her sexuality. Eloisa's symbolic castration is evident in the three areas of her life in which a loss of freedom is imposed upon her: her freedom of movement, voice, and sexual choice. Each of these losses denies Eloisa an avenue of self control and expression. Without these freedoms, Eloisa is effectively imprisoned, silenced, and castrated. Although symbolic, Eloisa's castration parallels Abelard's physical castration prior to his own banishment into a different monastery, which separates him from the world and his own sexuality as well. Eloisa's interment and its accompanying religious constraints are imposed on Eloisa by her family, by Abelard and, at his insistence, by Eloisa herself, as an attempt to remove Eloisa's sexual impulses, to devote her life to religion, and thus to reclaim the redemption she lost with her virginity.

It is important to note that because Eloisa's castration is symbolic rather than physical, she is still capable of feeling sexual passion. "I have not yet forgot myself to stone" (24), she thinks. Eloisa's symbolic castration does, however, prevent her from acting on her sexual impulses with a lover, Abelard, who is both absent and, were he present, also impotent. When she intercepts Abelard's letter and remembers the passion they shared, she begins a cycle of

sexual arousal followed by remorse that causes her passion to chafe at the religious constraints of her vows. She thinks of her passion: “pray’rs nor fasts its stubborn pulse restrain,/Nor tears, for ages, taught to flow in vain” (25-26). Abelard’s physical castration produces in him the opposite effect. Now deprived of sexual arousal, Abelard is free to pursue his new religious lifestyle unhampered by the sexual distractions that continue to plague Eloisa. In his involuntary renunciation of sexuality, Abelard has thus regained the redemption he lost when he seduced Eloisa. Eloisa’s redemption remains lost to her, however, because her renunciation of sexuality is unsuccessful and at times insincere. She thinks: “All is not Heav’n’s while Abelard has part,/Still rebel nature holds out half my heart” (27-28).

Eloisa is sexually frustrated after Abelard’s letter reawakens her passion, and her frustration is compounded by the knowledge that the “cold” and “unmoved” (23), castrated Abelard can no longer feel sexual arousal for her. The depth of Eloisa’s sexual frustration is especially evident in the two lines Pope cut from the poem in 1720 when he edited the original 1717 version. Lines 258f read: “cut from the root my perish’d joys I see/And love’s warm tyde forever stopt in thee.” These lines are Eloisa’s most graphic description of the physicality she shared with Abelard and that she now misses. I agree with the suggestion made by Patricia Carr Brückmann in “The Process of ‘Eloisa to Abelard’” that Pope cut the lines for aesthetics rather than to alleviate allegations of “puriency” (159). The lines Pope cut are more graphic than any others in the poem, and their clinical specificity contrasts with Eloisa’s other romanticized characterizations in the poem of the physical intimacy she shared with Abelard. While the text does not tell us whether Abelard pines for Eloisa as she does for him, for all Eloisa knows, her physical passion for Abelard is not only unsatisfied but also unrequited. Yet she still wants to be physically close to him and will settle for whatever sexual fulfillment he can give her, either

physically in his diminished state or mentally. “Give all thou canst—and let me dream the rest” (124) she thinks. Unfortunately, because of the couple’s dual castration, Eloisa is doomed to remain unsatisfied. Not only can Abelard not be with her in the flesh but, even if he could, he could not satisfy her physically. Further, in the absence of a physically whole or diminished lover, Eloisa tries to fantasize a mental image of Abelard. In The Unbalanced Mind, Rebecca Ferguson writes that Eloisa’s consciousness is extremely active, heightened by her isolation in a nun’s cell. She recalls episodes from her past love affair with Abelard and fantasizes about Abelard just from seeing his name (15). But as she is prevented from being with a physical lover, Eloisa is also unable to retain a mental image of Abelard either. She thinks:

I hear thee, view thee, gaze o’er all thy charms,  
 And round thy phantom glue my clasping arms.  
 I wake—no more I hear, no more I view,  
 The phantom flies me, as unkind as you.  
 I call aloud; it hears not what I say;  
 I stretch my empty arms; it glides away. (233-38)

Because Eloisa cannot retain a mental image of Abelard and their lovemaking long enough to reach a sexual climax, she is never able to have an orgasm as a result of her fantasies of him. She is able to sustain the fantasy image as her sexual excitement builds: “Sudden you mount! you beckon from the skies;/Clouds interpose, waves roar, and the winds arise” (245-46). But just at the point that she is about to reach orgasm, “I shriek, start up” (247), Eloisa always awakens “to all the griefs I left behind” (248). Her awakening and the recognition that she remains separated from Abelard in her convent are anti-climactic and, indeed, she never does achieve a sexual

climax in the poem<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the castrating effect of the convent prevents not only sexual intercourse with another but self-induced climax as well. Eloisa's climactic castration is also evident earlier, as she thinks of Abelard and remembers her initiation into the convent. Eloisa becomes aroused and wills Abelard to "still on that breast enamour'd let me lie,/Still drink delicious poison from thy eye,/Pant on thy lip, and to thy heart be prest" (121-23). But as her fantasy crescendos her toward climax, "give all thou canst" (124), she suddenly wakes, unable to "dream the rest" (124). She loses her orgasmic momentum and remembers that Abelard is impotent and that she is a nun. The fantasy dissolved, she reverts to the pose of a virtuous Vestal seeking religious guidance: "Ah no! instruct me other joys to prize" (125). Instead of crying aloud in orgasm, the castrated Eloisa's mental cry of "ah no!" silently screams her sexual frustration.

Eloisa's imprisonment in the monastery represents a loss of freedom of movement because she is not allowed to leave the monastery. She complies but is not happy about the grim finality of her confinement: "Yet here for ever, ever must I stay;/Sad proof how well a lover can obey!/Death, only death, can break the lasting chain" (171-73). She also can not mingle with other people "in these deep solitudes" (1), especially Abelard. Instead, she is trapped in the monastery she considers a prison:

Relentless walls! Whose darksome round contains  
 Repentant sighs, and voluntary pains:  
 Ye rugged rocks! Which holy knees have worn;  
 Ye grotts and caverns shagg'd with horrid thorn!  
 Shrines! Where their vigils pale-ey'd virgins keep,

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<sup>1</sup> In "Portrait of a Rebel," Nancy McNeal asserts that Eloisa's repeated exclamatory use of the word "come" throughout the poem indicates that she does indeed reach sexual climax several times (148, 149).

And pitying saints, whose statues learn to weep! (17-22)

Eloisa's description of her convent sounds eerily like that of an ancient haunted castle in which beautiful maidens are held prisoner in turrets and dungeons. Even her description of the statues of the saints is reminiscent of frightening stone monsters staring down from the high castle walls. Eloisa applies this type of gothic description to her monastery and its grounds several more times in the poem. In line 38 ("lost in a convent's solitary gloom!"), lines 141-44 ("moss-grown domes with spiry turrets crown'd"), lines 163-71 ("twilight groves, and dusky caves, long-sounding isles, and intermingled graves") and, finally, in lines 241-44 ("round some mould'ring tow'r pale ivy creeps"). Eloisa's use of the gothic also emphasizes the dramatic element of her descriptions. The dark, dramatic imagery heightens the emotion of each of these lines by contrasting the convent's confining nature with Eloisa's passionate outbursts. In "A 'Strange Itch in the Flesh of a Nun'," David K. Jeffrey notices Eloisa's "unusual specificity" in describing her surroundings (30). Such specificity shows the reader the magnitude of the negative impact her surroundings have on Eloisa. That she uses such specific language to describe her surroundings is clearly a negative reaction to their constraints.

Eloisa's vow of silence represents a loss of her voice. Instead, Eloisa is instructed to recite prayers written centuries ago by the Church fathers as part of her religious instruction. Although she makes an effort to comply, "the force of others' pray'rs I try," she is not convinced that the "pious fraud" of reciting "others' pray'rs" is useful to her (149-50). Eloisa clearly would prefer to pray in her own voice, and to the recipient of her own choosing. Unable to speak, however, her loss of voice is keenest in that she can not articulate her passion for Abelard: "Dear fatal name! Rest ever unreveal'd,/Nor pass these lips in holy silence seal'd" (9-10). Nor can she voice aloud any opposition to her imprisonment. She is forced instead to merely think her

gloomy characterizations of the monastery. As part of her loss of voice, Eloisa has lost her intellectual freedom. Indeed, “some emanations of th’ all-beauteous Mind” (62) of Abelard were what attracted Eloisa to him in the first place. But she could not know that Abelard would orchestrate her downfall. “Guiltless I gaz’d; heav’n listen’d while you sung” (65) Eloisa thinks. She realizes now that “truths divine came mended from that tongue” (66) so that “too soon [Abelard] taught me ‘twas no sin to love” (68). Eloisa lost her intellectual freedom when her teacher, Abelard, convinced her to trade it to him for sexual pleasure. Of course, this is the crime for which Eloisa’s family persecuted him, and for which Eloisa is now imprisoned in the name of protection. While Eloisa appears to recognize that Abelard took unfair advantage (“truths divine came mended”) of his position in seducing her (“taught me ‘twas no sin to love”), Eloisa now forgives Abelard and wants only to remember the love she felt for him, as well as the physical pleasure. Ironically, while Eloisa once valued Abelard’s intellect and instead received his passion, she now wishes for his passion and is instead limited to her own intellect.

As a reaction to her loss of voice, Eloisa uses her emotional tears in what is very likely a radical act of self assertion. In the first fifty lines of the poem, in which Eloisa describes her receipt of Abelard’s letter and her emotional reaction upon reading it, she mentions her tears or crying nine times. Clearly, crying is an outlet for Eloisa, whose permissible expressive forms as a nun are limited. Indeed, she says “to read and weep is all [her eyes] now can do” (48). The nun is allowed to express “tears that delight, and sighs” (207, 214) as long as they are directed toward heaven. It is likely, however, that the “blameless Vestal” has no other destination toward which to direct them because she has encountered no temptation to do otherwise. Eloisa, in contrast, faces a radical choice: she alternately directs her “tears” and “sighs” toward either Abelard or God, depending on whether she feels passionate or repentant. As some unavoidable sound is

apparently acceptable for a silenced nun in cases of weeping and praying, Eloisa certainly takes advantage of this permission to use weeping for all her self expression needs.

The final aspect of Eloisa's symbolic castration is her marriage to the Church, which is implicit upon her entrance into the monastery. One could read Eloisa's entrance into the convent in two ways: "Heav'n scarce believ'd the conquest it survey'd" (113). The line could read that Eloisa represents a grand conversion for the church: from an unmarried sexually active young woman to a nun. The other interpretation is that Eloisa and Abelard had just finished making love in the church prior to their discovery and Eloisa's entrance ceremony. If this reading is true, then the "conquest" Heaven surveys is the sexual conquest of the couple on the floor. McNeal and Krieger support this reading, although some other critics interpret the scene with a strict religious perspective. The lines Eloisa thinks preceding the "conquest" surveyed suggest this reading:

Canst thou forget that sad, that solemn day,  
 When victims at yon' altar's foot we lay?  
 Can'st thou forget what tears that moment fell,  
 When, warm in youth, I bade the world farewell? (107-110)

In this reading, Eloisa's symbolic castration is severe because it follows so closely upon her last sexual encounter. The absence of lovemaking will be more apparent to her later if its memory is still fresh. Another reading suggested by the above lines is that the couple's activities have already been discovered, that Abelard has already been castrated, and that Eloisa is preparing for her initiation ceremony into the convent. In this reading, the couple lies as a pair of "victims" whose love is being sacrificed at "yon' altar's foot" (108). Abelard's genitals are already gone,

and Eloisa's passion is about to be renounced as well. Her symbolic castration takes place when the "saints with wonder heard the vows I made" a few lines later (114).

Eloisa's avowed marriage to the Church further denies her the sexual choice of a lover, a mate, or celibacy (although Eloisa clearly shows she would not make this choice). As a nun Eloisa has a mate pre-chosen for her, and that mate is Christ. But Eloisa rejects any mate she has not chosen and therefore does not love:

How oft', when press'd to marriage, have I said,  
 Curse on all laws but those which love has made!  
 ...  
 Should at my feet the world's great master fall,  
 Himself, his throne, his world, I'd scorn 'em all:  
 Not Caesar's empress wou'd I deign to prove;  
 No, make me mistress to the man I love;  
 If there be yet another name more free,  
 More fond than mistress, make me that to thee! (73-74, 85-90).

Eloisa aspires not to be wife but mistress to Abelard ("the man I love"). Or, if not mistress, then "another name more free, more fond" than that. Eloisa may believe that a man adores his mistress more than his wife, and she thus aspires to the more favored title in reference to Abelard. Or Eloisa may want to be Abelard's mistress because to do so would flout the Church's constricting rules. Regardless, Eloisa will ally herself with no mate, including Caesar and the "world's great master," but the one she chooses. This statement is a direct refutation of the Church's claim that, as a nun, she is married to Christ. While the "world's great master" is generally considered by critics to refer to Alexander the Great, in "An Augustan's Metaphysical

Poem,” Marilyn Francus reads Eloisa’s claim as vague enough to apply also to God as well (487). I believe Eloisa would like to choose Abelard over God at this point, but her continued floundering in the poem suggests that she is still afraid enough of God’s wrath at this point to limit her refusal to the earthly greats.

Another aspect of Eloisa’s monastic castration is the nun’s vow to eschew sexual activity. Because of its sexual nature, Eloisa’s forced repudiation of her sexual self is the most obvious example of her symbolic castration upon entering the convent. For Eloisa, this castration is also the most severe. The imposition of a monastic lifestyle on Eloisa as punishment for her past sexual activity tells her that a dichotomy exists between her sexual passion for Abelard and the extended bid for redemption she is now being forced to make as a nun. She thus sees these two important aspects of her present life, her passion and her religious study, as oppositional. She believes she must embrace either her vows or her passion; she sees no way to embrace both. She continually wavers between the two polar opposites as she battles both her heart and her duty to try to gain control over herself. This vacillation is troubling to Eloisa because she never feels in control of her thoughts. She is never sure that she is thinking the correct thing. In fact, she questions the first appearance of her passion when she reads Abelard’s letter:

In these deep solitudes and awful cells,  
Where heav’nly-pensive, contemplation dwells,  
And ever-musing melancholy reigns;  
What means this tumult in a Vestal’s veins?  
Why rove my thoughts beyond this last retreat?  
Why feels my heart its long-forgotten heat? (1-6)

These feelings of intense passion confuse Eloisa at first. She has grown used to the isolated “heav’nly pensive, contemplation” that is her lot as a nun. Her feelings for Abelard “long-forgotten,” their intensity surprises her because “this tumult” seems to her incongruent in her “Vestal’s veins.” The passionate sexual life Eloisa once enjoyed and now misses contradicts the virtuous life of the nun. Francus states that while Eloisa’s current state:

is passionless relative to the past, it is passionate in comparison to the lives of her peers. To choose the past over the present is to submit to a dead present and future: to choose the present dichotomy of religion versus passion is to choose perpetual frustration. Eloisa cannot consider the Church as a temple of grace; rather, she sees it as the holding pen of a discontented woman. (479)

Thus, while in a state of frustration, Eloisa recalls that when she entered the convent “stern religion quench’d th’ unwilling flame, there dy’d the best of passions” (39-40). For Eloisa, since the vow of celibacy is involuntary, and since she enters the convent only at the urging of others, her “flame” was “quench’d” unwillingly. She would therefore not choose to return to the past and its “dead present and future.” Her resultant present “perpetual frustration” leads her to envy the easy “lot” of the “blameless Vestal” (207) who has never experienced sexual pleasure and thus does not miss it as Eloisa does. Eloisa knows a virgin nun is not tortured by her own “present dichotomy” of religion and passion. But she realizes the converse as well: the “passionless” virgin has never experienced the world as she has and, as a result, is “by the world forgot” (208).

That Eloisa sees sexual and religious passions as opposing is understandable because Pope sets the poem up as a dichotomy in its preceding “Argument.” There Pope claims that both Eloisa and Abelard were “two of the most distinguish’d persons of their age in learning and

beauty” (602). This distinction between intellect and physical appearance begs an opposition between the two, and that opposition could represent a parallel opposition between the religious meditation and sexual passion that war for dominance within Eloisa. Pope encourages such an oppositional distinction by characterizing the historical Eloisa’s “celebrated letters,” which are his source for the poem, as a “lively a picture of the struggles of grace and nature, virtue and passion” (602).

Eloisa eventually comes to see Death as a solution to end her conflict. Faced with the dilemma of renouncing either Abelard or her vows, Eloisa chooses death to avoid renouncing either. Indeed, in “Virtue and Passion,” Brendan O’Hehir calls Christ and Abelard “mystical” rivals for Eloisa’s attention (338). To renounce Abelard is to renounce her Eloisa’s source, but to embrace her passion for Abelard is to break her vows. While Johnson claimed that the end of the poem reconciles “divine and worldly ideas,” I agree with Robert James Merrett that this reconciliation is questionable (40). I propose that in choosing death as her solution, Eloisa tries to spurn her religious vows and align herself with her passion. According to Francus, Eloisa does not want to be forgiven as evidenced by the weakness of her acts of contrition (480). Eloisa says:

I ought to grieve, but cannot what I ought;  
 I mourn the lover, not lament the fault;  
 I view my crime, but kindle at the view,  
 Repent old pleasures, and sollicit new:  
 Now turn’d to heav’n, I weep my past offence,  
 Now think of thee, and curse my innocence. (183-88).

According to Francus, Eloisa would live her affair with Abelard over again if given the chance (480). Death affords an opportunity for a more intensely sexual experience with Abelard. As she

is having “soul to soul” (57) intercourse with Abelard in her thoughts now, death represents the opportunity for her to reunite in the spirit with him.

As death is also a metaphor for sexual climax, Ferguson argues that Eloisa’s death is climactic (27). Krieger concurs: “Nowhere is the use of the language of love to describe the leap of religion more telling than in the transposing of the nun’s death into a consummation, the ultimate meeting of the bride with her spouse” (40). As death equals the nun’s consummation of her marriage to Christ, Eloisa’s death consummates a figurative union for her as well. I would argue that Eloisa’s death consummates her figurative union not with Christ but with Abelard who has become both a lover and a Christ figure for her. For while he began as “Angelick” (61) to her, she soon sees Abelard as both a lover and a Christ figure whose face is, in her mind, “mix’d with God’s” (12). On her deathbed, Eloisa realizes that thoughts of Abelard infuse even her religious devotions: “thy image steals between my God and me” (268). By the time of her death, it is not clear with whom Eloisa consummates, Abelard or Christ. Each is merely a “lov’d Idea” (12) to her, and neither is more physically real to her than the other. Krieger argues that at this point Eloisa’s “ardor for Abelard... becomes submerged in her ardor for God” (31) such that she synthesizes the two images into one. I agree with Ferguson and Krieger that Eloisa’s death can be read as a consummation. And while I would agree that Eloisa has by this point synthesized her “lov’d Ideas” of Abelard and God into one, I think she still refers to them collectively as Abelard, as in her final sexual fantasy. On her deathbed, “while prostrate here in humble grief I lie... While praying, trembling, in the dust I roll” (277, 279), she begins to feel physical arousal and wills Abelard to make love to her:

Come, if thou dar’st, all charming as thou art!

Oppose thy self to heav’n; dispute my heart;

Come, with one glance of those deluding eyes,  
 Blot out each bright Idea of the skies. (281-84)

Eloisa's wish for Abelard to "blot out" the "skies" indicates that she wishes he were on top of her in a sexual position, blocking her view of the sky. As expected, however, Eloisa's sexual fantasy ends in disappointment again. At the moment she approaches climax, as she wills Abelard to "assist the Fiends and tear me from my God!" (288), she instead resists her orgasm: "No, fly me, fly me! Far as Pole from Pole;/Rise Alps between us! and whole oceans roll!" (289-90). Eloisa thus orders the fantasy Abelard to "fly" away, forget her, and to "share" not "one pang" (292) of love for her. This anti-climax is the final active evidence of Eloisa's symbolic castration.

Eloisa's castration is then Pope's statement on the fate eighteenth-century women could expect if they acted on their desire: the loss of their freedom of movement, voice, and sexual choice. In "Portrait of a Rebel," Nancy McNeal calls Eloisa "a medieval free spirit who rebels against religion and the societal conventions of her era" (145). And Eloisa's physical confinement is an expression of her punishment for breaking those taboos. Eloisa's forced religious vows are not only a symbolic attempt to castrate her sexual impulses, but also an attempt to castrate her self control. While Eloisa entered willingly into her affair with Abelard, she entered the Church against her will, but with her eyes "fix'd" (116) on Abelard instead of on the Cross. Thus, Eloisa begins her rebellion at the moment of her symbolic castration. This rebellion forms the basis of the suffering Eloisa endures as she tries to choose between her lover and her God. Francus is careful to point out that Pope would likely not have intended Eloisa's death as a reward for her suffering because to do so would promote "sexual promiscuity and theological rebellion" (482, note 10). It is more likely that Pope intended to leave the poem's

ending unresolved so the reader, like Eloisa, continues to struggle for a solution. Francus and other critics argue that thus the poem “may stop, but it does not end” (482, note 10).

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