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The Love Sonnets of
Abelard
and
Heloise

Ella Wheeler Wilcox



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The Love Sonnets of

**Anselm
and Heloise**

Ella Wheeler Wilcox



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FOREWORD

The story of **A**belard and **H**eloise has trailed across the centuries like a burning comet across the heavens. **S**even hundred years have not diminished its fiery splendor.

The tragic history contained in the five remarkable letters left by the lovers is as vivid a page in the world's literature as though **A**belard and **H**eloise had lived, loved and suffered only a decade ago.

In embodying these letters in sonnet form I have retained to a great degree their identical language.

In no instance has liberty been taken with the original meaning or purport. **T**he sonnets are therefore little more than a rhyming paraphrase of the immortal love-letters of **A**belard and **H**eloise.




Elia Wheeler Wilcox

Heloise in Dante's Paradise





HELOISE TO ABEIARD



I
y that vast love and pas-
sion which I bore you,
By these long years of
solitude and grief,
By all my vows, I pray
and I implore you,
Assuage my sorrows
with a sweet relief.

A
mong these holy women, sin abhorring,
W
hose snow-white thoughts fly ever to the C
ross,
I
am a sinner, with my passions warring,
A
ll unrepentant, grieving for my loss.
O
h, not through zeal, religion or devotion,
D
id I abandon those dear paths we trod;
I
followed only one supreme emotion,
I
took the veil for A
belard—not G
od!
O
vows, O
nvent, though you have estranged
M
y lover's heart, behold my own unchanged!





HELOISE TO ABEIARD

II

Within the breast these sacred garments cover,

There is no altar of celestial fire:

I am a woman weeping for my lover,

The victim of a hungering heart's desire.

Veiled as I am, behold in what disorder
Your will has plunged me; and in vain I try,
By prayer and rite, to reach some tranquil border,
Where virtues blossom and where passions die.
But when I think the conquest gained, some tender
And radiant memory rises from the past;
Again to those sweet transports I surrender;
Remembered kisses feed me while I fast.
Though lost my lover, still my love endures;
Though sworn to God, my life is wholly yours.



HELOISE TO ABELARD

III


efore the altar, even, un-
repenting,

I carry that lost dream
with all its charms;

Again to love's dear over-
tures consenting,


I hear your voice, I seek
your sheltering arms.

Again I know the rapture and the languor,
By fate forbidden and by vows debarred;
Nor can the thought of God in all His anger,
Drive from my heart the thought of Abelard.
My widowed nights, my days of rigorous duty,
My resignation of the world I knew,
My buried youth, my sacrifice of beauty,
Were all oblations offered up to you.
O Master, Husband, Father, let me move
With those fond names your heart to pitying love.



HELOISE TO ABELARD


IV



now then the anguish of
my sad condition,
And break the silence of
unending days;
Appease me with one sen-
tence of contrition,
For that command which
doomed me to these ways.

I am your wife. Despite my sacred calling,
Despite my vows, my consecrated life,
Despite the fate so tragic and appalling,
That wrecked two hearts, yet still I am your wife!
May you not, then, in pity for my sorrow,
Permit me once to look upon your face?
Or, that denied, may I not comfort borrow
By your discourses on the means of grace?
You cast your pearls before unheeding swine:
Would you save souls? Then, Abelard, save mine.





HELOISE TO ABEIARD



V

If in those hours when soul
and body mated

In that wild passion which
may not endure—

If in those hours so fer-
vent and so fated,

I loved you with emotions
not all pure,

Yet even then the mortal man was never

So dear as was the grandeur of his heart.

And now I love you, and shall love forever,

Though earthly joys no more may play their part.

Since in the cloister I am shut with reason,


Persuade me with devotion to remain.

In our communion there can lurk no treason;

You caused my sorrows, now relieve my pain.

At your command I chose this hated lot:

Console me sometimes with a spoken thought.





HELOISE TO ABELARD

VI

y all my chains, my bur-
dens and my fetters,

I plead with you to ease
their galling weight,

And with the soothing
solace of your letters,

To teach me resignation
to my fate.

Since you no more may breathe love's fervent story,

I would be bride of heaven. Oh, tell me how!

Awake in me an ardor for that glory,

The love divine, so lacking in me now!

As once your songs related all love's pleasures,


Relate to me the rapture of your faith.

Unlock the storehouse of your new-found treasures.

And lend a radiance to my living death.

Oh, think of me, and help me through the years!

Adieu!—I blot this message with my tears.



Abelard in Heloise



Abelard to Heloise

VII

knowing the years of our
delight were past,

And those seductive days
no more could lure,

I sought religion's fetters
to make fast

The sinful heart that
purposed to be pure.

In this seclusion, to conceal my shame:

In this asylum, to forget. Alas!

The very silence shouts aloud your name:

Through every sunbeam does your radiance pass.

I fled, to leave your image far behind,

I pictured you the enemy of hope,

Yet still I seek you, seek you in my mind,

And down the aisles of memory I grope.

I hate, I love, I pray, and I despair,


I blame myself, and grief is everywhere.





Anelard to Heloise

VIII



Religion bids me hold my
thoughts in check,

Since love in me can have
no further part;

But as wild billows dash
upon a wreck,

So passions rise and beat
upon my heart.

The habit of the penitent I wear,

The altars where I grovel bring no peace;

God gives not heed nor answer to my prayer,

Because the flames within me do not cease:

They are but hid with ashes, and I lack


The strength to flood them with a grace divine,

For memory forever drags me back

And bids me worship at the olden shrine.

Your image rises, shrouded in its veil,

And all my resolutions droop and fail.





Anelard to Heloise

IX

looked into the heaven
of your eyes,

And dared the flames of
hell: I heard you speak,

And strove no longer to
be strong and wise—

Earth's rapture lay in be-
ing fond and weak.

Oh, paradox! that virtue like your own,

To guilty shame transformed a holy life,

And the entrancing music of your tone

Changed peaceful harmonies to jarring strife.

I would forget, and think that you forgot,


Our wild abandon and the sinful thrall

Of stolen hours of bliss. Oh, bid me not

The memory of those vanished days recall!

While you remember, how can I forget?

Or hope's star dawn, till passion's sun has set?



Anelard to Heloise



X

ay not for me those sacred
vows you took,

And your vocation ruth-
lessly profane:

Such blasphemies God
will not o'erlook,

Nor grant salvation till
your passions wane.

Your constancy gives food to vain desires

And your affection adds to my offense;

You do but pour on recollection's fires

Destructive fuel, of tumultuous sense.

Convinced of sin, of sin I am not cured;

The mind repels it, but the heart invites.

Oh, give not then fresh woes to be endured,

By new recitals of our old delights!

I faint beneath the burdens that I bear,

Without the increased weight of your despair.





Anelard to Heloise

XI

his mortal love, when
dwelt upon with joy,

The love of God may not
annihilate.

Oh, would you with old
memories destroy

My piety, in its incipient
state?

My vows to God grow feeble, in the war
With thoughts of you, and Duty's voices die,
Unanswered, down my soul's dark corridor,
While in my heart is passion's desperate cry.
And can you hear confessions such as these,
And thrust your love between my God and me?
Withdraw yourself, unhappy Heloise,
Be Heaven's alone, and let my life go free.
Drain sorrow's chalice, bravely take your cross;
To win back God, lies through the creature's loss.





Abelard to Heloise

XII

ou call me **F**ather; **I** was
parricide:

You call me **M**aster; it
was sin **I** taught:

You call me **H**usband,
yet you were my bride

But after blight and ruin
had been wrought.

Blot out those words, and substitute instead,

The darkest titles wounded pride can name.

Through me your honor and your peace lie dead;

I took your virtue, and **I** gave you shame.

Not we alone in passion's pit were hurled;


Because we failed, shall other lives be weak?

Our follies have set standards for the world;

Of our wild amours shall the centuries speak.

For my salvation let your tears be spent;

Advance in virtue, and repent! repent!



Heloise to Abelard





HELOISE TO AVELARD

XIII

My fortune has been always
in extremes.

Fate loaded me with fa-
vors, and with woe;

She lulled me in the lap
of tender dreams,

Then woke me with the
anguish of a blow.

She flung her choicest blessings at my feet,

Then took them all, in taking you away:

And in proportion as the past was sweet.

So is the bitter of my life to-day.

The envied of all women, through your love

My sorrows claim compassion from them all;

I was but lifted to fair heights above,

That men and angels might behold my fall.

Now comes the last affliction from fate's store—

I shall behold my Avelard no more!



HELOISE TO ABELARD

XIV



Not mine the right to mur-
mur or complain,

For I alone am your mis-
fortune's cause.

I am the portal to your
house of pain;

For Heloise you broke
God's holy laws.

I meshed your greatness in my beauty's snare;

You found destruction, gazing in my face;

And Samson's fall and Solomon's despair

Are lived again in Abelard's disgrace.

Yet grant me this poor comfort, for my dole—

I sought not, like Delilah, to destroy;

Mine was the passion-blinded woman's role

Who gave her virtue for her lover's joy.

Convinced of love, I hastened to pour out

Life's dearest treasures, that you might not doubt.





HELOISE TO ABELARD


XV

made no use of pretext or
defense;

I valued virtue, only to
bestow;

Like white, high noon-
tide, glaring and intense,

Love drowned the world
of reason in its glow.



To be beloved by **A**belard—that thought
Absorbed all other purposes like flame,
Such havoc passion in my bosom wrought,
I banished honor, and invited shame.
I thrust out duty, and installed desire;
I aimed at nothing but possessing you.
Oh, **G**od, could **I** but quench with tears the fire
Of memory of those delights we knew!
Could **I** forget, or grieve for what was done,
Divine forgiveness might be sought, and won.



HELOISE TO ABELARD

XVI

give but lip-repentance for
my sins,

And no contrition to my
soul is known;

Each day my lawless
memory begins

Recounting pleasures that
were once our own.

Each night I see my Abelard in dreams.

Entranced with love, we turn away from books;

And all of wisdom in your utterance seems,

And all of rapture in your words and looks.

And I remember that dear place and spot

Where first your passion spoke and kindled mine.

What tide of time can wash away, or blot

Such mem'ries from the heart? Has love divine,

And your misfortune, brought you into peace,

While I still strive with storms that never cease?

Heloise to Abelard

XVII



o you, in slumber, some-
times stretch your arms

To clasp the yielding
form of Heloise?

Do you recall my kisses
and my charms?

Or have those pleasures
lost their power to please?

Within these walls, I weep and ever weep.

This cloister echoes my rebellious cries:

Worn out with sorrow I relive in sleep

The unabating grief that never dies.

Shall Abelard, the all-entrancing theme,

Consume the soul that ought to seek God's throne?

How can I hope the Power I so blaspheme,

Will grant me pardon, or my sins condone?

Oh, you whose face I never more may see,

Have pity on my plight, and pray for me!



Abelard ¹⁰ - Abeloise





Anelard to Heloise


XVIII

rite me no more. Let all
communion end.

We left the world, to
purify our thought.

But prayer is vain, and
penance comes to nought,

When human passions
with our hearts contend.



No alchemist within the heart can blend
Desire and faith; the peace which we have sought,
By crucifixion of the flesh is bought.
Let rites redouble, and let prayers ascend.
Your letters prove my foes. When I would gird
God's armor on, and pinion to the dust
Regrets that bar my path to Paradise,
I fall inert, before each burning word;
Resolve is slain, as by a dagger-thrust;
And Christ is hidden by your ardent eyes.



Anelard to Heloise

XIX

rite me no more. Be-
stow yourself on God.

Your letters stir me with
a deep unrest,

Old half-healed wounds
reopen in my breast,

And blood-drops stain the
young unsullied sod

Where walked the feet of Faith, repentance-shod.

My prayerful tho'ts swerve in their upward quest,

And carnal love is once again their guest—

Again, in dreams, is pleasure's pathway trod.

Write me no more; you draw me back to earth.

Moved by your words, I lose the better way,

My purpose falters, and my courage faints.

Oh, crush each lawless impulse at its birth,

Learn the large meaning of the word "obey,"

And drain the bitter chalice of the saints.



Abelard to Heloise

XX

rite me no more. **G**row
diligent in prayer;

Let **G**od, not **A**belard, be
your concern.

When mem'ries torture,
and when passions burn,

Look to the **C**ross, that
refuge of despair;

Its outstretched arms are ever waiting there.

Immortal life is something we must earn

By conquest of the baser self. **O**h, turn

Your thoughts from earth, to worlds divinely fair.

Let silence give our sorrowing love true worth.


To love you, means to leave you with no sign:

To love me, means to let my life go free.

But when death calls our purged souls from earth,

Oh, may your senseless clay rest close to mine!

Adieu! adieu! and write no more to me.



Beloise in Dalmatian





HELOISE TO ABELARD

XXI

t last **G**od shows me proof
of **H**is regard,

And tranquil joys replace
grief's uncontrol.

Desire no longer riots in
my soul;

Gone are the dreams of
love and **A**belard.

My holy meditations are not scarred

By scalding tears from memory's brimming bowl;

My thoughts fly unimpeded to the goal

Dethroned your image and forever barred.

Oh, let my infidelity proclaim

To all the world how fickle love can change!

A rival rules the heart once deemed so true.

Yet, ere you think me sunk in utter shame,

Hear my disclosure of what seems so strange—

'**T**is **G**od alone takes **H**eloise from you.



HELOISE TO ABELARD

XXII



o more will I endeavor to
arouse,

By recollection's soft, se-
ductive art,

The guilty fondness of
your suffering heart;

To fate's decree my bro-
ken spirit bows.

I think of you no longer as the spouse,

But as the father, set from men apart,

Insensible to passion's poison dart,

The holy steward in God's sacred house.

My peace was born of anguish, but it lives,

A phenix risen from love's funeral pyre.

The path to Duty is the path to Bliss:

There is no pleasure save what virtue gives.

And yet—again to touch that mouth of fire,

To lose the world, and find it, in your kiss!



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