



Marriage in Héloïse (1090–1164)

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We have two accounts of Héloïse's views on marriage. Peter Abelard recounts in his life narrative, the *Historia calamitatum*, how Héloïse argued against his offer of marriage. She depicted marriage as contrary to the life of a philosopher, because it takes a person whose life is destined for the world and binds them in servitude to an individual, disturbing philosophical contemplation with the cares of married life and parenthood (Luscombe 2013: Ep. 1, §§ 24–25).

Abelard says Héloïse claimed that her taking the title of (girl)friend (“amica”) rather than wife (“uxor”) would be more honourable for him, because love freely given is preserved through grace (“gratia”) rather than enforced by the “chain” of marriage (“uinculum nuptialis”, Ep. 1, §26). In her reply to Abelard, Héloïse clarifies these words. She notes that although marriage is a sacrament (a development of twelfth-century theology), she finds Abelard bound to her rather by her inordinate love for him (“immoderatus amor”, Ep. 2, § 8). Indeed, she contrasts love with marriage as the distinction between freedom (“libertas”) and a chain (“uinculum”). She entered into marriage, she declares, not because of the legal rights and goods it would bring her (“matrimonii federa [...] dotes aliquas”), but for Abelard himself alone (“te pure non tua”, Ep. 2, § 10). A person should look for merit, not material reward, in another, so that a woman who marries for money is effectively prostituting herself (Ep. 2, § 11). Héloïse repeats the earlier idea that she would rather be called Abelard's (girl)friend (“amica”) than his wife, but extends the conceit: she would even prefer the titles of concubine or whore (“concubine uel scorti”), since such roles would represent her freely chosen and independent sexual association with him. Indeed, because she wants Abelard only for his personal merits, not wealth or titles, she would find it more honourable for her to be his whore (“meretrix”) than an Empress (“imperatrix”, Ep. 2, § 10).

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