

Eloisa's Sacrifice: Comparing Pope and Hughes

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Review of Tara Ghoshal Wallace, "'To One Thing Constant': The Passion of Pope's Eloisa." *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation (ECent)*, vol. 56, Winter, 2015, pp. 411-426, doi:10.1353/ecy.2015.0038.

Four years before Alexander Pope's poem "Eloisa to Abelard" was published, John Hughes released his poem *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. In the article "To One Thing Constant," Wallace delineates the vast differences between Pope's Eloisa and Hughes's Heloise. Wallace has previously published numerous works about female eighteenth-century authors, thus her insights about Pope and Hughes—two male poets writing poems with a female speaker—should be duly noted by readers. In this article, she argues that Eloisa's passionate language reconstructs Abelard's reputation, while placing the majority of criticism from the affair upon herself.

Hughes's depicts Heloise as a cynical woman amidst a sea of "unhappy women forced into a chastity they make every effort to renounce" (415). In contrast, Pope re-presents this heroine as passionate, determined, and sympathetic (418-421). Wallace continues to distinguish the differences between the two by explaining how Pope's poem focuses on Eloisa's desire, instead of reflecting on the vanity and predatory energy of Abelard. She quotes Elizabeth Carson, saying "Pope positions the autoerotic Eloisa as sexuality's best hope in a sterilized world of cruel celibacy" (qtd. 412) and creates an image of Eloisa as a crusader of passion. Wallace's use of ample and appropriate outside sources strengthens her claim about Eloisa's altruistic design.

Hughes portrays Abelard as a devil-type, while Pope compares Abelard to an angel through the words of Eloisa. With a "desiring gaze" (413), Eloisa willingly gives into the idea of

earthly pleasures over the divine. Wallace further explains that Eloisa faults herself as being the principal transgressor in the affair, and attributes causation to desire (414). By admitting her culpability, Eloisa “cast[s] herself outside the holy circle of innocent nuns and their immaculate pastor[;] Eloisa re-presents herself as the anomaly in a virtuous world” (415). Wallace develops interesting parallels in Eloisa’s narrative by connecting Abelard to the concept of the “innocent nun” (415), a concept arising from the sympathetic tendencies of readers resulting from his castration. This sympathy in turn rewrites Abelard’s character by “increas[ing] his moral stature at the expense of [Eloisa’s]” (416).

According to Wallace, the one element Eloisa and Heloise can agree on in their relationship with Abelard is their disapproval of marriage. Heloise states, “tho’ I know that the Name of wife was honourable in the World...yet the Name of your Mistress had greater Charms, because it was the more free” (qtd. 418); Eloisa “writes a stirring manifesto on the joys of free love, proclaiming her apostasy against laws and social customs and embracing the joys of illicit passion” (418). Where Hughes portrays marriage through Heloise as being a “restless and tormenting” social structure (qtd. 418), Pope instead uses Eloisa’s opposition to marriage as a platform for expressing “tragic love” (418, love containing free and untamed erotic exploration. Pope’s Eloisa concludes this idea by inviting future lovers to follow suit, forgoing holy rites for the sake of free love. Such advice positions her as a proponent of desire, the exact desire that appears to trump the wayward side of Abelard’s character.

Wallace concludes that “Pope’s Eloisa represents neither a lover enslaved by passion, nor a conflicted penitent caught between carnal desire and spiritual yearnings, but a particularly subtle hagiographer” (421), or writer of the life of a *saint*. Both Heloise and Eloisa are constant in their efforts to restore Abelard’s reputation, even at the cost of self-sacrifice. Only in Pope’s

version, with Eloisa at the helm, however, would Abelard be compared to a saint. As Wallace explains expressions of sympathy and desires within Pope's poem, she proves her argument that Eloisa has the power to redeem Abelard.

The subject matter, and the connections Wallace develops make for an interesting and engaging article. Though the repetition of major points throughout the piece may seem redundant, this continuous circling back to the main argument makes the focus of the article clear and easier to follow. Those more familiar with "Eloisa to Abelard" and with Pope's other works have more to gain from this article, because, as Wallace so handily demonstrates, an intertextual view of Eloisa and Abelard can yield interesting results. However, individuals with even a minor grasp of the subject still have much to learn from Wallace's insights and clear comparisons. Reading Wallace's elegant yet subtle prose prompts us to search out further information. Her article is an excellent source of supplementary material when studying the works of Alexander Pope, as well as being a worthy read on its own.



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