

The Presence of Pope in “Eloisa to Abelard”: A Combination of Drama and Realism

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“But we must not confuse the voice of the poet with the voice of the poem’s speaker.”

Barrett John Mandel, “Pope’s ‘Eloisa to Abelard’”

In Alexander Pope’s poem “Eloisa to Abelard” (1717), Eloisa laments to Abelard by expressing her anguish over their love. Eloisa is based on the historical figure Heloise, of *The Letters of Heloise to Abelard*. Pope adopts the persona of Eloisa, in an effort to make her appear to be the real author of the text. However, as genuine as her emotions may seem, Eloisa is merely a fictional character Pope creates. Her sorrows are saturated with realistic emotion and characteristics, but they are also dramatized and exaggerated. Pope introduces the 1717 *Works* edition and later editions of the poem with an “argument,” detailing the history of Eloisa and Abelard’s letters and explaining how the poem that follows is his subjective adaptation of their story. Eloisa is a realistic and complex character for most of the poem, as her deep sorrows come from her inner conflicts between her devotion to Christianity and her sensual love for Abelard. The majority of “Eloisa to Abelard” is Pope’s study of Eloisa, delving into her uncensored emotions; however, towards the end of the Pope reveals himself as the subject of the poem as a whole. He draws more sympathy for Eloisa by exaggerating her griefs while also making her character realistic, and ultimately equates his emotions with hers so the sympathy may be directed towards himself.

For most of the poem, Pope's presence is artfully obscured by Eloisa's voice, making her appear as the genuine author. However, towards the end, Pope refers to himself in Eloisa's voice stating:

And sure, if fate some future bard shall join
 In sad similitude of griefs to mine,
 Condemn'd whole years in absence to deplore,
 And image charms he must behold no more;
 Such if there be, who loves so long, so well;
 Let him our sad, our tender story tell;
 The well-sung woes will soothe my pensive ghost;
 He best can paint 'em, who shall feel 'em most. (ll. 359-366)

Through this passage, he validates his own writing through Eloisa's voice, mentioning himself as the "future bard" (l. 359) and breaking the illusion that the speaker is Eloisa. Specifically, he states that "He best can paint 'em, who shall feel 'em most" (l. 366) saying that he feels Eloisa's emotions and is able to present them the best. Nowhere else but in the ending does Pope explicitly insert his presence, and so it serves as a revelation that the entire poem is only Pope's imitation of Eloisa. When the voice of Eloisa refers to Pope in the final passage, her character seems less genuine because readers are reminded that she is merely a fictional character, but her emotions are in actuality, more authentic because they were experienced by Pope. The reintroduction of Pope's presence in the text changes the identity of Eloisa drastically because she acts a poetic expression of his emotions, rather than as a separate character.

Though Pope does not explicitly state it, he acknowledges that his ability to genuinely speak with Eloisa's voice is limited. In the argument where he provides a history of Eloisa and

Abelard, he writes with something close to his own voice, a voice of formal prose. As Eloisa, however, he speaks in dramatic verse. The contrast between the two speakers makes Eloisa's voice appear more believable as a lamenting lover, rather than a persona adopted by Pope. Rather than denying his own presence in the text, Pope displays it entirely in the introduction so that it appears to be removed from the verse. By acknowledging his own presence in the argument and subsequently switching voices, it creates a distinction from the rest of the poem, so it is more believable that the speaker and writer of the letter is Eloisa. The introduction to "Eloisa to Abelard" frames the poem by creating a contrast between prose and verse, and in turn, a contrast between Pope and Eloisa.

The poetic language breaks the realism of Eloisa because she is only a character, while Pope is the poet. In "The Vocation of Pope's Eloisa," Stephen J. Ackerman discusses the effect that the poeticism has on the text. He states that "In the light of [poeticism], we may recognize the couplets of the poem as Pope's comment upon, rather than his mere vehicle for, Eloisa's passions" (445). Pope is not merely delivering an objective study of Eloisa, but providing his own opinions on it. Ackerman states that "'Eloisa to Abelard' is a dramatized individuation By enclosing Eloisa's outbursts in the meter, as well as in her situation, Pope provides a framework of order within which her passions are contained, and to which they must be reconciled" (457). Though the verse may not be a completely genuine depiction of Eloisa, it allows for her emotions to be better expressed through a poetic narrative. This article picks out specific examples of poeticism in the text, such as the personification of "the 'Black Melancholy' (l. 165 ff.) which 'shades' the scene before her" (Ackerman 456). Through the dramatization, the character of Eloisa becomes fictionalized, but her emotions are expressly more

vividly. Considerations of poeticism in this poem should be a reminder that the text is a product of Pope, the poet, and not Eloisa, the speaker.

In “Pope’s ‘Eloisa to Abelard,’” Barrett John Mandel studies the relationship between Pope and the character of Eloisa. He states that “Pope sings through Eloisa, and Eloisa's song is finally one of nature and passion. The poem captures Eloisa's inner struggle” (68). Mandel’s article reminds us that “we must not confuse the voice of the poet with the voice of the poem’s speaker” (68). Eloisa and Pope share their emotions, but the only speaker in the verse is Eloisa. Even when referring to himself at the end and breaking the immersion, he still speaks through Eloisa’s voice. By expressing himself solely through Eloisa, his sorrows become more authoritative and externalized as a part of a poem, rather than a part of his internal emotions. Though the genuine author of the poem is Pope, “The voice is Eloisa's, and we must listen to it – what it says and what it unconsciously hints at – in order to find out about her” (68).

Although Pope sacrifices realism for poetic purpose, Eloisa’s character is made more sympathetic by the tangible emotions Pope manufactures. Readers can understand Eloisa because she explains her turmoil with depth, such as her love for Abelard which conflicts with her devotion to God. In an early passage, she begs her former beloved to “make my soul quit Abelard for God” (l. 128), and, in a later one, “Assist the fiends, and tear me from my God” (l. 298). Her devotion to God and love for Abelard are equal opposing forces—so much so that it forces her to rapidly change her mind between the two. She describes herself “the slave of love and man” (l. 178). Her word choice of “slave” specifies her sorrows and expresses her sense of helplessness. Eloisa also describes herself in the moment of writing the letter, furthering the readers’ conviction that she is also the real writer of the text. Eloisa narrates her process of writing Abelard’s name: “O write it not my hand—the name that appears / Already written—

wash it out, my tears” (ll. 14-15). Even in this moment early in the poem, she struggles with her inner conflicts; she does not wish to write Abelard’s name, but realizes she has already written it. The mention of her tears also adds realism to the text because as she commands them to wash the letter. The letter both turns the poem into a work of metafiction and creates a sense of realism, because by describing the physical act of writing the letter, the fictional character of Eloisa acts as the writer of the poem, shrouding the presence of Pope in the text. The text is no longer presented as a poem by Pope, but a letter by Eloisa. Though Eloisa is the speaker and Pope is the author of the letter, he creates the illusion that Eloisa is the real writer through his visualizations of Eloisa’s outward and inner experience as she wrote the original letters.

“Eloisa to Abelard” presents Eloisa’s struggles entirely through her perspective, yet she shifts between third-person and first-person perspectives while addressing herself. Ronald K. Giles in “Pope’s ‘Eloisa’ and the Third-Person Style” states Eloisa “is both the first-person narrator of a present love story, and the third-person actress in a past and future drama” (272). Despite making the letter more emotional and dramatic, Eloisa’s use of the third person adds realism. Giles mentions the traditional use of the third person in Early English heroic epistles as “a practice likewise evident in the Hughes translation of *The Letters of Heloise to Abelard*, Pope’s immediate source” (273). When Eloisa sees her own name, it may appear to be Pope’s dramatization, but it alludes to the physicality of writing letters. Giles quotes Henry Pettit: “instead of positing a conflict personified in two characters, as pure drama would demand, [it posits] the conflict within the single character” (qtd. in Giles 274). The use of third-person narration dramatizes the text by allowing Eloisa to express her inner conflict. In one example of her switches between first-person and third-person dialogue, she weeps “Ev’n thou art cold—yet Eloisa loves” (260). She refers to Abelard in second person and to herself in third person,

expressing the duality of her character as a nun and a lover. The conflict between her emotions and religious beliefs is expressed through the inconsistency of her perspective. The use of third person allows Pope to dramatize Eloisa's inner conflict whilst adhering to the style of heroic epistles. The drama and realism help to make Eloisa more tragic and, in turn, easier to sympathize with.

Susan Manning, in "Eloisa's Abandonment," analyses how Eloisa's torment stems from the unending conflict between God and Abelard she faces, as well as her sense of abandonment. Eloisa's dichotomy between her religion and emotion creates internal chaos because "love for Abelard and for God are at one moment opposed, at the next aligned; 'virtue' seems to be claimed for everything from free love to total renunciation, while passion is all over the place – and at the end of the poem the outcome of the war is far from certain" (232). The source of Eloisa's torment is her own internal conflict between desire and faith. Despite her attachments to God and Abelard that add to her suffering, she also feels abandoned and distant from them. Manning describes Eloisa's situation as "abandoned by the man who was 'Father, brother, husband, friend' (l.152) to her" (243). Manning's in-depth look into Eloisa's suffering is significant to the analysis of Pope because Eloisa's emotions represent Pope's own. Pope depicts Eloisa as a character caught in difficult internal conflicts and feelings of abandonment, and though Pope may not be Eloisa per se, he suggests through the final passage that his own griefs are similar to hers in that they are both heartbroken and abandoned.

"Melancholy as Despair: Pope's 'Eloisa to Abelard'" by John F. Sena studies the way that Eloisa's sadness is externalized as a separate character in the poem for dramatic effect. She is described as a gloomy figure sitting in front of Eloisa that darkens the entire scene with her presence:

But o'er the twilight groves and dusky caves,
 Long-sounding aisles, and intermingled graves,
 Black Melancholy sits, and round her throws
 A death-like silence, and a dread repose:
 Her gloomy presence saddens all the scene,
 Shades ev'ry flow'r, and darkens ev'ry green,
 Deepens the murmur of the falling floods,
 And breathes a browner horror on the woods. (ll. 163-170)

The character of “Black Melancholy” is both a “traditional personification of accidie or sloth” and a symbol of Eloisa’s internal torment (Sena, 443). Sena continues to describe how sloth and melancholy would have been considered the same in Pope’s time: “[sloth] was more than simply a sin but was, like melancholy itself, a psychological condition, a state of mind” (449). “Black Melancholy” is only mentioned in one passage, though she is not simply a character created by Pope, but a traditional concept that carries the implication of emotional torment. This passage is indicative of Pope and Eloisa’s presence in equal measure, as despite the character’s voice being that of Eloisa she is nonetheless a highly poetic symbol reminiscent of Pope. Though the character “Black Melancholy” is merely symbolic of Eloisa’s emotion, she is highly affective, and spreads despair all around herself. She is a device that allows Eloisa to better express her emotions in a tangible way. The presence of “Black Melancholy” is “A death-like silence, and a dread repose: / Her gloomy presence saddens all the scene, / Shades ev'ry flow'r, and darkens ev'ry green” (ll. 176-178). By illustrating the gloomy effect that “Black Melancholy” has on her surroundings, Eloisa’s despair becomes empirical. Readers can sympathize with Eloisa’s sadness, personified in “Black Melancholy,” because it darkens everything. “Black Melancholy”

is “an iconic ancient literary and pictorial heritage which embodies and personifies Eloisa's mental, emotional, and spiritual state” (Sena 454). Though Pope voices his presence at the end, he brings no attention to himself in prior parts of the poem. His use of third-person perspective disassociates himself from the text – as if to remind readers that the speaker is Eloisa. Though the emotions experienced by readers are ostensibly those of Eloisa, they are, in reality, a reflection of Pope’s own, and he makes the effort to hide this fact until the end. Pope laments through Eloisa’s voice and poeticism like the character of “Black Melancholy” and the constant conflict between religious faith and human emotion, to express an emotional torment and demand sympathy from readers.

Through the use of dramatization and realism, Pope expresses his own emotions in Eloisa’s voice. The poem is a device for him to express himself and draw sympathy from readers, yet he chooses to do it through a voice not his own. Pope creates Eloisa based on Heloise because he can (he says) sympathize with her pain, and Eloisa functions as a self-portrait of Pope despite their dissimilar circumstances because she possesses “[a] sad similitude of griefs to mine” (l. 360). Pope places his own emotions in the poetic verse of Eloisa’s struggles, dramatizing and exaggerating them in order to draw more sympathy from readers for Eloisa, and in turn, for himself.

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