

Abelard and Eloisa

ABELARD, so famous for his writings and his amours with Eloisa, ranks among the heretics for opinions concerning the Trinity! His superior genius probably made him appear so culpable in the eyes of his enemies. The cabal formed against him disturbed the earlier part of his life with a thousand persecutions, till at length they persuaded Bernard, his old *friend*, but who had now turned *saint*, that poor Abelard was what their malice described him to be. Bernard, inflamed against him, condemned unheard the unfortunate scholar. But it is remarkable that the book which was burnt as unorthodox, and as the composition of Abelard, was in fact written by Peter Lombard, bishop of Paris: a work which has since been *canonized* in the Sorbonne, and on which the scholastic theology is founded. The objectionable passage is an illustration of the *Trinity* by the nature of a *syllogism!*—"As," says he, "the three propositions of a syllogism form but one truth, so the *Father and Son* constitute but *one essence*.—The *major* represents the *Father*, the *minor* the *Son*, and the *conclusion* the *Holy Ghost!*" It is curious to add that Bernard himself has explained this mystical union precisely in the same manner, and equally clear. "The understanding," says this saint, "is the image of God. We find it con-

sists of three parts:—memory, intelligence, and will. To *memory*, we attribute all which we know, without cogitation; to *intelligence*, all truths we discover which have not been deposited by *memory*. By *memory*, we resemble the *Father*; by *intelligence* the *Son*; and by *will* the *Holy Ghost*." Bernard's Lib. de Anima, Cap. I. Num. 6, quoted in the "Mem. Secrètes de la République des Lettres." We may add, also, that because Abelard, in the warmth of honest indignation, had reproved the monks of St. Denis, in France, and St. Gildas de Ruys, in Bretagne, for the horrid incontinence of their lives, they joined his enemies, and assisted to embitter the life of this ingenious scholar; who perhaps was guilty of no other crime than that of feeling too sensibly an attachment to one who not only possessed the enchanting attractions of the softer sex, but, what indeed is very unusual, a congeniality of disposition, and all enthusiasm of imagination.

"Is it, in heaven, a crime to love too well?"

It appears by a letter of Peter de Cluny to Eloisa that she had solicited for Abelard's absolution. The abbot gave it to her. It runs thus: "Ego Petrus Cluniacensis Abbas, qui Petrum Abælardum in monachum Clunia-

censum recepi, et corpus ejus furtim delatum Heloissæ abbatissæ et moniaii Paracleti concessi, autoritate omnipotentis Dei et omnium sanctorum absolvo cum pro officio ob omnibus peccatis suis.”

An ancient chronicle of Tours records that when they deposited the body of the Abbess Eloisa in the tomb of her lover Peter Abelard, who had been there interred twenty years, this faithful husband raised his arms, stretched them, and closely embraced his beloved Eloisa. This poetic fiction was invented to sanctify, by a miracle, the frailties of their youthful days. This is not wonderful:—but it is strange that Du Chesne, the father of French history, not only relates this legendary tale of the ancient chroniclers, but gives it as an incident well authenticated, and maintains its possibility by various other examples. Such fanciful incidents once not only embellished poetry, but enlivened history.

Bayle tells us that *billets doux* and *amorous verses* are two powerful machines to employ in the assaults of love; particularly when the passionate songs the poetical lover composes are sung by himself. This secret was well known to the elegant Abelard. Abelard so touched the sensible heart of Eloisa, and infused such fire into her frame, by employing his *fine pen* and his *fine voice*, that the poor woman never recovered from the attack.

She herself informs us that he displayed two qualities which are rarely found in philosophers, and by which he could instantly win the affections of the female;—he *wrote* and *sung* finely. He composed *love-verses* so beautiful, and *songs* so agreeable, as well for the *words* as the *airs*, that all the world got them by heart, and the name of his mistress was spread from province to province.

What a gratification to the enthusiastic, the amorous, the vain Eloisa! of whom Lord Lyttleton in his curious life of Henry II. observes, that had she not been compelled to read the fathers and the legends in a nunnery, and had been suffered to improve her genius by a continued application to polite literature, from what appears in her letters, she would have excelled any man of that age.

Eloisa, I suspect, however, would have proved but a very indifferent polemic. She seems to have had a certain delicacy in her manners which rather belongs to the *fine lady*. We cannot but smile at an observation of hers on the *apostles* which we find in her letters. “We read that the *apostles*, even in the company of their Master, were so *rustic* and *ill-bred* that, regardless of common decorum, as they passed through the corn-fields they plucked the ears and ate them like children. Nor did they wash their hands before they sat down to ta-

ble. To eat with unwashed hands, said our Saviour to those who were offended, doth not defile a man.”

It is on the misconception of the mild apologetical reply of Jesus, indeed, that religious fanatics have really considered that to be careless of their dress, and not to free themselves from filth and slovenliness, is an act of piety, just as the late political fanatics, who thought that republicanism consisted in the most offensive filthiness. On this principle, that it is saint-like to go dirty, ragged, and slovenly, says Bishop Lavington, “Enthusiasm of the Methodists and Papists,” how *piously* did Whitefield take care of the outward man, who in his journals writes, “My apparel was mean—thought it unbecoming a penitent to have *powdered hair*—I wore *woollen gloves, a patched gown, and dirty shoes!*”

After an injury, not less cruel than humiliating, Abelard raises the school of the Paraclete; with what enthusiasm is he followed to that desert! His scholars in crowds hasten to their adored master. They cover their mud-sheds with the branches of trees. They care not to sleep under better roofs, provided they remain by the side of their unfortunate master. How lively must have been their taste for study! It formed their solitary passion, and the love of glory was gratified even in that desert.

The two reprehensible lines in Pope’s Eloisa, too celebrated among certain of its readers,

“Not Cæsar’s empress would I deign to prove;
No,—make me mistress to the man I love!”

are, however, found in her original letters. The author of that ancient work, “The Romaunt of the Rose,” has given it thus *naïvely*; a specimen of the *natural* style in those days.

Se l’empereur, qui est a Rome
Soubz qui doyvent estre tout homme
Me daignoit prendre pour sa femme,
Et me faire du monde dame;
Si vouldroye-je mieux, dist-elle
Et Dieu en tesmoing en appelle
Estre sa Putaine appellée
Qu’etre emperiere couronnée.