

The Religious Conquest of the Feminine Body: A Case Study of Heloise and Princess Melaz

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Abstract: Female bodies and sexualities are inseparable from medieval Catholic Christianity. Female bodies function as contested sites of sanctity, temptation, and morality, through which religious values are negotiated and enforced. This paper examines two women from medieval Christian literature and their respective forms of rebellion against this constricting system—Heloise of *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* and Melaz of Orderic Vitalis's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Heloise and Melaz are separated by time, fate, and culture, yet are similarly shaped by the Christian structures around them. Both women are figuratively “conquered” by Christianity through expectations surrounding marriage, sexuality, and purity. By analyzing their experiences within Christendom, this study questions whether these women assert meaningful agency within the religious frameworks that define them, or whether these frameworks ultimately strip them of autonomy altogether.

The female body has been intertwined with Christianity since the beginning of secular time. A site of sanctity, temptation, or power, femininity is never neutral territory in medieval religious literature—it is the medium through which purity, power, and piety is negotiated. Transformed from a mere body into an instrument of the Christian faith, the female form becomes a moral guide and teacher to Christians, exemplifying the dualities of “sinner” and “saint.” The sex of women is simplified into Mary versus Eve, virgin versus temptress. Limited to this binary, a medieval Christian woman's being is bound to her sexualized body, and the success of her spiritual life is determined by,

and equated to, her bodily control over her own sexual desires. Despite coming from vastly different cultures and circumstances, Heloise—the female half of the famed couple from *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*—and Melaz, the apocryphal Muslim Princess in Orderic Vitalis’s retelling of Bohemond of Antioch’s Middle Eastern crusade, are both symbolically conquered by Christianity, and, by extension, the patriarchy. Sexuality, purity, and marriage shape central conflicts in both women’s narratives, but these struggles become obscured beneath layers of romanticized storytelling that overshadows their historical realities. Although medieval Christendom places femininity in a position of subordination, Heloise and Melaz negotiate their own complex forms of agency within these confines. This paper argues that although Christian ideologies may shape and restrict women, Heloise and Melaz continue to manipulate, redefine, and resist these structures in their own distinctive way, thus achieving agency over their sexualities and bodies.

In medieval Christian doctrine, the female body is a site of spiritual battle. As a source of temptation for men to conquer and shame for women to bear, femininity is turned into something to be ashamed of rather than celebrated. This idea is best exemplified by the Eve versus Mary dichotomy—Eve, the sinner, is “responsible for man’s fall ... the original cause of all evil” (Kraus 80), and Mary the saint, mother of Christ and “Woman-Without-Sin, the non-woman Woman” (Kraus 84). Common women of the twelfth century were associated with the latter and they were held steadfast to these standards. While a comparison to the Virgin Mary was certainly deemed better than being an accomplice of sinful Eve, women’s elevation into sainthood was dependent upon the complete rejection of their sexual identity. Virginal expectations were further complicated by the Vice of Unchastity (Kraus 81); *Luxuria*, or Lust (Uebersax 1), was regarded as a predominantly female failing (Kraus 81). Women may have been likened to Mary, but they were still daughters of Eve, whose shortcomings gave the female sex a predisposed “fondness for foul things” (Kraus 81).

The association between unchastity and femininity was especially popularized during the twelfth century through church facades that illustrated the Vice of Unchastity as a woman (Kraus 81). Depicted in compromising positions and often in the nude, she is accompanied either by Eve's serpents or the Devil himself in his numerous forms. In these portrayals, she embodies temptation, and her beauty is no longer a characteristic of femininity, but a seductress from Hell. In some cases, the woman is depicted as Eve, bringing further shame to her Christian daughters who view the image as a reminder of their shared Original Sin: desire. Per contra, the masculine sins Vice of Avarice, or *Avaritia*, and Vice of Vainglory, or *Vana Gloria* (Uebersax 1), were far less damning, with the emphasis on *Vana Gloria* shifting to *Avaritia* as Christian interests changed throughout the century (Uebersax 1; Kraus 81). The female Vice was not given the same opportunity to change. The Vice of Unchastity plagued narratives on women for the entirety of the twelfth century. No matter what status or piety a woman achieved, her Original Sin, and thus her corruption, would remain the same (Kraus 82).

Heloise's love story with her teacher-turned-husband, Peter Abelard, is regarded culturally as an epic romance, yet the power imbalance that existed between them is far from desirable. Their relationship has been reimagined across cultures and time periods in the form of novels, plays, films, and music, and has been subjected to romanticization in each genre. While their story has inspired the popular yet problematic amorous trope of the teacher and the student, such interpretations fail to recognize the predatory nature of Peter Abelard. The pair met in 1115 when Abelard was in his mid-thirties, Heloise a mere fifteen to seventeen. Their initial meeting was preordained by Abelard out of his romantic interest for Heloise, which he admits in his *Historia Calamitatum*, "History of My Calamities." Hearing of her academic prowess as an acclaimed scholar, or *nominatissimam* (Edwards 64), he deemed her a match for his own brilliance, thus, a suitable love match (Edwards 64; Abelard 10). Heloise

stood no chance against Abelard's advances, him being a famed philosopher and logician across France, her a young academic who would have aspired to learn from him. Abelard's advantage over Heloise in age, gender, and status would be deepened further when Canon Fulbert, Heloise's uncle, appointed him to be her tutor in exchange for free residence at Notre-Dame (Abelard 10). Abelard alludes to this power imbalance within *Historia Calamitatum*, likening himself to a "ravening wolf" entrusted with "a tender lamb" (10). He takes Fulbert's "handing over" of Heloise as consent to do as he pleases to her: "what else was he doing but giving me complete freedom to realize my desires ... for me to bend her to my will by threats and blows if persuasion failed?" (11). Once lessons began, Heloise and Abelard's relationship did not remain of an academic nature for long; their "obscene pleasures" (81) propelled them into parenthood, marriage, and subsequent demise (Abelard 81). Though Heloise is undoubtedly a victim of Abelard's exploitative "desires"—from the relationship he initiates to the marriage and cloistering he imposes—she is anything but powerless (Abelard 10).

Heloise is a rarity amongst medieval women in her maintenance of agency within, against, and beyond the patriarchal structures of her time. While her "ill-starred marriage" may invite pity, Heloise makes it clear that she exercised her power during the duration of their sexual escapades, even going so far as to label herself a "concubine or whore," stating that she preferred such labels over being subordinated to his "wife" (Abelard 51). She is unapologetically sensual, securing a sense of bodily autonomy and agency through her sexuality. Despite her role as abbess, she openly admits to having "lewd visions" of her and Abelard together, experiencing "longings of desire" which distract her from prayer, even at Mass (Abelard 68). Her emotional discourse over the matter is a calculated form of agency—Heloise uses her feelings of desire, grief, and resentment openly to confront the moral and relational failures she perceives in Abelard. She holds him responsible for their entry into ecclesiastical life and the confines of

church, citing the decision as his alone (Abelard 53). Within the same letter, she demands his acknowledgement, stating “[w]hy ... have I been so neglected and forgotten by you that I have neither a word from you when you are here to give me strength, nor the consolation of a letter in absence?” (Abelard 53). Heloise may seek comfort or acknowledgment from Abelard in her letters, but she is certainly not asking him for permission to address her thoughts or emotions. In writing to him about her “torments of the flesh,” she torments him too, insisting on the validity of her emotional truth and forcing him to consider the philosophical implications of said truths; sexuality and *amor*, “love,” are natural desires, only through a pious or patriarchal view could they be sins (Mews 60, 69; Abelard 54). Rather than being overwhelmed with guilt for indulging in *Luxuria*, she believes love and sexuality can coexist with virtue, and that coerced virtue is no virtue at all (Uebersax 1).

Heloise’s beliefs contrast Abelard’s perception of sexual desire as “the fruit of an uncontrolled will,” despite having once claimed to share similar ideals to Heloise on the nature of love (Mews 73, 78). He does acknowledge his sexual relationship with Heloise positively in his following letters when he refers to her as his *inseparabilis comes*, meaning “inseparable companion” (Abelard 81). His use of this term suggests he has become susceptible to Heloise’s philosophies on love as a positive venture, as he uses the same phrase in pious contexts to “define the relation of body and soul” (Edwards 72). It becomes apparent now that the roles of teacher and student have reversed—Heloise has begun to teach Abelard. She asserts her agency intellectually by continually presenting herself as her former teacher’s equal in rhetorical skill and reason. Rather than passively accepting Abelard’s authority over her as her former teacher and husband, Heloise reclaims interpretive power through defining their shared past to her own liking, demanding that he acknowledge their lived realities that his pious reasonings often attempt to obscure (Abelard 53). Abelard is receptive to this change of power, going so far as to put her name before his in the greeting which

heads Letter 3, which Heloise acknowledges with pleasant surprise in Letter 4 (Abelard 56, 63). She slyly reaffirms herself as his equal in pointing out his improper greeting, stating that “those who write to their superiors or equals ... put their names before their own” (63).

Heloise’s willingness to articulate emotion and be honest with her sexuality grants her freedom even within the confines of the Paraclete—the convent Abelard founded and placed under Heloise’s authority as Abbess. Abelard may have forced her to “take the veil” (Abelard, 54) and follow him into monastic life, but Heloise is the one who truly benefits under Christendom, as she actively reconfigures the religious life imposed upon her. Despite initial resistance to vocation, Heloise strategically embraces her leadership as abbess and negotiates the terms of monastic practice to better serve the women of her Paraclete (94). External obligation becomes internal purpose, allowing Heloise to reclaim control and achieve further agency within her spiritual and secular life. Whether in marriage to Abelard or cloistered life as a nun, Heloise seeks and reclaims control through sexuality and feminine power. Her letters to Abelard are not the writings of a victim, but of a victor, and are a true testament to female self-determination within extreme confines. Ultimately, Heloise’s agency arises from her refusal to allow societal constraints determine the terms of her identity.

Melaz of Antioch, the mysterious Muslim princess of Orderic Vitalis’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, “Ecclesiastical History,” is best recognized as a symbol of religious and cultural conquest, but she is far from a passive one. The brief lover of famed crusader Bohemond I and daughter of his sworn enemy, the Dānishmend, Melaz is the archetypal exotic princess—beautiful, wise, rich, and most crucially, a willing convert to Western society (Vitalis 359). Such romanticization has long invited scrutiny over the authenticity of Melaz’s story and very existence. Apart from Orderic’s account of the *saracen*, or pagan, princess, Melaz ceases to exist from Christian accounts of Bohemond’s crusade (Yarrow 140). It is worthwhile to note

that accredited Muslim historian Ibn al-Athir mentions the princess namelessly as a “prisoner of Bohemond” in his first book of the *al-Kāmil fit-Tārīkh*, “The Complete History” (al-Athir 60). Albeit brief, the “Account of Frankish Deeds” provides a non-Western, non-Christian account of Melaz that often goes unnoticed by scholars, limiting her existence and subjecting it to a strictly Western narrative (al-Athir 60, 61). Bohemond is said to have negotiated his own release from the Dānishmend within this account, giving his captor “100,000 dinars and the promise that he would free the daughter of Yaghī Siyān who had been lord of Antioch” (al-Athir 60). All historical accounts of Melaz align her with Yaghī Siyān, the ruler of Antioch from 1086 to 1098 (Birk 470). While heavy romanticization and fantastical elements have plagued her depiction, Melaz must be recognized as a lived figure in order to understand her exertion of agency. Her femininity and sexuality may have been placed under Christian rule, but they are not to be limited to elements of Christian fantasy.

Melaz’s conversion to Christianity reinforces the link between feminine bodies and mechanisms of religious and cultural control. She embodies the Christian ideal of female obedience and service to men; she is constantly aiding Bohemond and his men out of “love,” even going so far as to risk her own life for them, yet asks for little in return (Vitalis 363, 367). Upon her introduction in Book X of *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Orderic Vitalis depicts Melaz as the perfect subject for conversion, noting how she “loved the Franks passionately” and eagerly learned about “the Christian faith and true religion” from them during their captivity (359, 361). Her romanticization continues in Vitalis’s portrayal of her appearance and behaviour; she is “beautiful,” as one would expect of a princess, but also “pale,” “prudent,” and “sweet” (Vitalis 359–379). If her willingness to convert was not enough, Melaz’s notable paleness would certainly convince Western Christians of her piety, as dark skin was typically associated by medieval commonfolk with *saracens*—a Crusader term for people of Arab and Muslim origin—and “prosperity is marked by white” (Abelard

74). Rather than being an “exotic Eastern woman,” Melaz is portrayed more closely to “a conventional Frankish aristocratic woman” (Yarrow 142). Yet, Vitalis still does not grant her full proximity to “whiteness” in his account of the princess (Abelard 74). Her name, “Melaz”—Greek variant “Melas” and Arabic variant “Malaz”—is a racial marker, and it is unlikely her true name (Strong 3189). Both variants are traditionally masculine, and would not have been used for a noblewoman such as Melaz. Orderic Vitalis would not have been familiar with Arabic names as an English monk, so the form he references is certainly the Greek “Melas,” meaning “black” or “dark”—the root word for “melanin.” This name was used for individuals with dark hair or a darker complexion, traits Melaz would plausibly have, given her Turkish-Arab descent (Strong 3189). She is an accepted convert to Christianity, but Vitalis’s name choice ensures that she is an anomaly within it. His reductive account shapes Melaz into the quintessential “enamoured Moslem princess,” using her as a narrative device in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* to affirm Christian superiority and humanize the crusaders (Warren 346). Melaz’s story was noted as the earliest known example of her archetype: the beautiful oriental princess who becomes enamoured with Christianity and a Christian man (345). The defining elements of the oriental princess archetype fashioned after Melaz are simplistic and stereotypical: “the release of a prisoner by the daughter of his captor; her conversion to his faith; her return with him to his native land” (346). While the narrative’s romanticization and simplification limits the princess’s autonomy, Melaz still exercises agency within the patriarchal confines of *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

In Melaz and Bohemond’s perceived romance, the princess does not await her prince—rather, she is the pursuer of Bohemond. Even within the constraints of a hyper-masculine crusader account, Melaz shows evident signs of female self-determination by choosing Bohemond as her lover. Vitalis depicts Melaz as the initiator of their relationship and desires, with her falling for Bohemond first and seeking contact with him (359, 361). Through

Bohemond's rescue of Melaz from her father, Vitalis attempts to emphasize the chivalric stereotypes expected within their relationship, yet Bohemond never satisfies this trope. It is he who is subjected to Melaz's desires, and he who is pursued. Her desires actively shape the outcome of Bohemond's chapter in Antioch, with her romantic emotions fuelling her urge to convert to Christianity and aid in the crusaders victory. Melaz's open pursuit of Bohemond positions her as a director in the narrative rather than a mere object of exchange. Even when she was transferred from Bohemond to his cousin, Roger, it was Melaz's choice to pick whom she wed; Roger was merely Bohemond's suggestion (379). Vitalis intentionally avoids portraying Melaz's desire as sexual. Rather, "her love and admiration" for the Christian men give way to "deep sighs over discussions of their religion," depicting her as emotionally and spiritually interested as opposed to sexually (Yarrow 149). Melaz's choice to marry an enemy of her father, specifically a Western Christian man, is also a radical act of agency. Breaking away from familial expectations and political alliances with her conversion, Melaz destroys cultural boundaries by choosing a life outside the constraints of her birth (Vitalis 370). It becomes clear throughout Bohemond's Antioch chapter that Melaz yields a surprising amount of narrative power, with Vitalis's text relying on her character to make its ideological point and emphasize the theme of Christian superiority. Melaz exists to crusader ideology as both a tool of conversion and a figure essential to sustaining it, demonstrating agency while playing within the confines of the very structures made to imprison her.

Both Heloise and Melaz are women shaped by male authors within Christian moral frameworks. Their bodies function less as autonomous agents and more as instruments: mediums through which moral lessons are taught, or objects that serve to define. Despite their restrictive circumstances and narratives, both women achieve agency within their stories, creating pathways to their own self-assertion within the constraints placed upon them. Gender hierarchies, religious frameworks, and

social structures attempt to hold both women steadfast to what is expected of them. Heloise speaks for herself, as seen in her famed letters to Abelard. She cultivates textual and intellectual agency as she shapes the outcome of their correspondence to her own liking, reversing the teacher-student power dynamic between her and Abelard while doing so. She refuses to be a quiet wife or an obedient nun for a man's sake and she embraces her womanhood as an act of defiance. Melaz is subject to external narrative control in being voiced by author Orderic Vitalis, yet she maintains a high level of agency within her importance to the text's progression and the victorious outcome of Bohemond's crusader story. She resists religious conquest, instead choosing her own path towards Christianity. Vitalis may try to skew her story for his audience's pleasure, but he cannot deny her lived experience. Both women navigate and resist the patriarchal Christian frameworks they reside in, rejecting the ideals of the Original Sin and claiming agency wherever possible. Despite their differing paths towards agency and the cultural contrasts between them, Heloise and Melaz equally assert themselves within restrictive environments, disrupting medieval notions of a woman's place in Christendom and demonstrating that the female body cannot, in fact, be conquered.

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