Pace University

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Religious Women Of the

Middle Ages

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Most people, especially those who have not had the opportunity to learn about Medieval history, have the common belief that historical writings from the Middle ages were written primarily by men, and that women were uneducated and could neither read nor write . These assumptions are not a result of prejudice, but understandable since women were held in low regard in the past, and only more recently have women’s rights even been an issue to discuss.[[1]](#footnote-1) Someone who has some background in history, however, would know that, though many women were illiterate, there were a handful of impressively educated and particularly astute women in the Middle Ages who have given us some idea of a woman’s perspective in that time period. Heloise, Hildegard of Bingen and Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim are three women of the Middle Ages who have left behind their views and knowledge of the time period and the issues within it.

These women’s perspectives of many different subjects, such as, love, God, marriage, chastity, weakness, and sexuality can give their readers a personal look into how a nun, a woman, of the Middle Ages saw the world, and the people in it. This not only gives insight into history in general, but also into the lives of women, which are usually assumed to have been courtly frivolities, or work in the home, but that seem to be truly much more complex.

Some of the most complex lives, were those of Heloise, the lover of Peter Abelard, and then esteemed abbess of the 12th century; Hildegard of Bingen, a nun from Germany who had a gift that helped her see visions and become a prophet for the church during the 12th century; and Hrotsvitha of Gandershein, a nun in the 10th century who was the first person to write dramatic theater after the end of classical theater. These women all had very different lives but all used a literary voice to show the world who they were. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Some authors write about women in the Middle Ages, but not commonly. A few books have been written about these women in the last twenty years, but most date to the early and mid 20th century. The writing about medieval women has been more prevalent in the 20th century than in the centuries following the medieval period, probably because of the women’s movement. Before the 20th century there are almost no books about medieval women or their lives because women were just part of men’s lives.[[3]](#footnote-3)

An encyclopedia of medieval women seems to be a good first step when learning about women’s lives in the Middle Ages, and Katharina Wilson and Nadia Margolis have edited two editions called, *Women in the Middle Ages.* The articles on each woman are informative, and it is easy to look up subjects that may apply to certain women. The information is predominately a history of the women’s lives, but there is some general insight into their personal lives by obvious inferences. To start out, this encyclopedia is a great reference and helps put each woman’s history together before reading and analyzing their writings.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Before going on to search each woman, it seemed to be in good interest to find out more about nunneries, since all three women were nuns. Eileen Power wrote a book, *Medieval Women,* which has a lot of great general information about women in all areas of life. Her chapter about women in nunneries discusses how convents were present at certain time periods, but also, more interestingly, she talks about the nuns’ daily life. For instance, seven times a day, including 2 a.m., a nun would have to say her monastic offices. Nuns were also supposed to be very quiet throughout the day and used quite comical hand gestures to communicate with one another. Frequently, bishops, the pope, the abbeys tried to keep secular people and visitors from the nuns and tried to keep them cooped up in the convent. Though it was futile effort, it’s obvious that the men of the church were worried about outside temptations affecting the nuns.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is possibly because they saw women as weaker as themselves, though the church tried to keep temptations away from the male monasteries, too.

Keeping outside temptations away from the convents was mostly significant because the nuns were chaste, and chastity, and even more so, virginity, were held in such high regard in the Middle Ages. Helen Jewell writes in her book *Women in Medieval England,* “…virginity had a tremendous hold over the medieval Christian imagination.”[[6]](#footnote-6) She writes of one woman who worked so arduously to make sure she stayed a virgin that certain men wanted to try and take it from her. Jewell’s book has a lot of general information on women’s lives in the Middle Ages, but she also gives some important examples that help put women’s lives, especially those in the convent, into perspective.

Another author, Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg wrote more on the topic of virginity of women of the church in her essay, “The Heroics of Virginity,” which appears in Mary Beth Roses’s, *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.* This issue of virginity seems to resonate in all the books and its importance cannot be undervalued. It is a huge part of the nun’s lives, and the obsession with chastity in the church is also fascinating. Schulenburg writes, “In the view of the churchmen, there was only one way in which women could transcend their shackles, and this was through a life of sexless perfection.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Schulenburg also writes about four examples of self mutilation by nuns who, during barbarian invasions, instead of waiting to be raped and pillaged, cut off their noses, and mutilated their faces to kill the lust of the barbarians.[[8]](#footnote-8) Though this only happened in very few cases, it shows the extreme lengths that women would go to preserve their virginity, and possibly even renewed chastity, as some women would come to the convent as widows.[[9]](#footnote-9) This importance comes forth in the writings of Hildegard and Hrotsvitha, most evidently.

By the fifteenth century, there seemed to be some problems in certain convents. The nuns were turning out to be pregnant, and the convents had become neglected. In one case a clergy man was writing love letters to one of the nuns in the convent, and almost all the other nuns were pregnant.[[10]](#footnote-10) This shows that the idea of chastity didn’t hold out as long as the earlier nuns, Hildegard, Hrotsvitha, and even Heloise, had wanted it to. This may be an example to prove that sexual urges are so natural that it was too hard for the pious nuns to keep their fellow nuns chaste. This information is from the book by Sibylle Harksen, *Women in the Middle Ages,* has a lot of illustrations, but also a good amount of interesting information about medieval women of all different areas, and though it only discusses Heloise and Hildegard in some detail, it is still a good general book for amateurs to learn about the Middle Ages and women.

Some of the more recent books about Medieval Women are on very specific topics, such as the increase of convents during a certain time period. Bruce Venarde writes about how an increase of monasteries being built was before 1200, not after. He uses primary sources to deduct the reasons why more convents were built during the early middle ages. The reasons range from issues with the economy to marital problems, but he makes it clear he is not simply discussing the lives of nuns, but truly looking into an increase of convents, and why. [[11]](#footnote-11)

Another more recent book is by Constance Berman. She put together quite a lot of primary sources that show the nuns roles in the monasteries. Many are documents for property and to manage life around the convent, which quashes the idea that nuns weren’t good at managing their properties. She finds interesting bits in otherwise boring documents and comes up with a lot of important facts about how convents were run and how the nuns lived while in one.[[12]](#footnote-12) Her book would be very helpful for someone really digging into how lives were run in convents.

Some of the books are informative about specific women, but they describe their story, and may put in examples of their work, but did not analyze it. It’s good as background information, but then the thoughts and reactions of the woman must be looked at from all angles to reveal the ideas and lifestyle of that specific person. To analyze these women builds a connection with them, and helps modern women relate to women of the past.

The approaches of many of the authors were interesting, but not many had analysis of the women’s writings. There needs to be more analysis of individual medieval women, and a larger, even more psychological view into these women’s lives. The background information is interesting, but it’s the analysis of these women and their reactions that makes a true storyline. It is like music, the melody gets your attention, but the lyrics are what truly make people love a song. These women will make people feel something, will make people relate to their lives. Once you meet these women, it’s impossible to forget them.

Heloise was a girl in the 12th century living with her uncle, being tutored by the famed and very intelligent Peter Abelard. They fell in love, and soon their conversations were less philosophical and more about their desires for one another. Heloise became pregnant and Abelard married her. He sent her to a nunnery to hide her from her uncle and to keep her from shame. Her vengeful uncle castrated Abelard in his sleep, and so Heloise remained in the nunnery, with Abelard in a monastery for the remainder of their lives. They began correspondence through letters and this is where the world learned of Heloise and her strange, but profound ideas, while she hides her love for Abelard behind her love for God.

In contrast to Heloise’s insecurities about God and his love, another medieval woman, Hildegard of Bingen, was quite sure she understood God, not surprisingly, as he spoke to her through visions. Hildegard was the tenth child of a nobleman, born in 1098. Her parents gave her as a tithe to the church and so at the age of eight she went to live with a nun, Jutta.

Hildegard’s visions started earlier than that, and though she didn’t talk about them much, she always knew she wanted to devote her life to God. After taking over the abbess position at her monastery, she became much better recognized and the clergy soon accepted and believed her visions to be true. The pope saw her as a great teacher for the church and also as a person to help keep the church strong in times of conflict.[[13]](#footnote-13) Hildegard wrote about her visions and analyzed them. Her views of God and life are different than those of Heloise, and her intelligence and fame in the Middle Ages makes her one of a kind.

Last, but technically first, is Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim who was a nun in the 10th century who was born as a German noble, but on taking the veil, wrote amazing plays and was the first dramatist after the fall of Classical Theater. Her plays focused primarily on converting people to Christianity and becoming chaste, and/or God protecting his virgins. Hrotsvitha’s view of women was also a large part in her plays. Though she is of an earlier time than Hildegard and Heloise, her views coincide quite nicely, and the three women undoubtedly would have had much to discuss.

Heloise went to the abbey because Abelard wanted her to and she had become a wonderful abbess, but she could not stop herself from loving Abelard and this she hid with an undeniable strength. She writes, “I know what obligations this veil lays upon me, but I feel more strongly what power an old passion has over my heart.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Heloise put all her effort into showing the nuns how to behave and how to be a good woman of God, but in her heart she wished for Abelard and she spoke to no one about it, except in these letters. She was showing him that her love was so strong she couldn’t even let go for the love of God, which was what she had been brought up to love most powerfully.

Heloise believed she was only a woman of God for Abelard’s sake and She felt that she would never be able to repent her love for Abelard. Heloise writes, “…far from lamenting for having been seduced by pleasures, I sigh for having lost them.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Heloise knew the ways of God, she was a strong abbess and was a good woman of God, but she still couldn’t repent her love. If a woman who understood God so well couldn’t repent with her heart, then could it truly be the right thing to do? She seemed to think it was wrong, but her human desires suggested that she could love both God and Abelard together in peaceful co-existence.

Hildegard, in one of her books, Cause and Cure, writes specifically about human sexuality. One of her most important points is that people should not have sex before they are mature enough, and not give in to their impulses. “The same is true for humans who refuse to take into consideration the time of maturity in their lives and the time of the moon, but want to procreate according to their impulses.”[[16]](#footnote-16) She says that their children will be physically disabled because of their impulses. Hildegard sees that the impulses are impossible to stop, but that people are giving in to them. It seems more like a warning to those who give in to their impulses, to scare them into thinking their children will be debilitated. This shows how important procreation was in the church, but also and, possibly more importantly, how sinful lust was seen to be. When Hildegard discusses lust it is hard to tell if these are her beliefs or if she needed to make these things known as part of her books because the church would be reading them and she knew that is what they believed. Whether Hildegard wrote for her audience or herself, it may never be known, but her understanding suggests that she was not exempt from the feelings of desire that were naturally human.

Hildegard writes about conception and in that about sex. She seems to have the right words for the act, which seems as though she was not as naïve about it as she should have been. “But man’s flesh is concocted, inside and out, by woman’s warmth and sweat and thus is draws into itself some of the foam and the sweat of the woman.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Her words are not as one would expect when it comes to the act of sex, but they are warmer words, in contrast to cold, condemning words. She speaks of warmth and foam and sweat which are all things that don’t seem to be talked about in the Middle Ages, so had she known these feelings because she had not been chaste or had she spoken frankly to someone not of the church? The latter seems less likely, but it would not be proper to accuse Hildegard of breaking her vow of chastity.

Hrotsvitha also frequently makes mention of temptation in her plays. She seems to be very aware of sexual temptations and that they are very hard to resist. For example, in *Gallicanus*, Constantine invites Gallicanus and his daughters to live in the palace as royalty since they have all converted to Christianity, then Hrotsvitha writes,

“GALLICANUS: What temptation is to be feared more than the lust of the eyes?

CONSTANTINE: None, I know.

GALLICANUS: Then is it right that I should see her too often? As you know, I love her more than my own kin, more than my life, more than my soul!

CONSTANTINE: You must do what you think best.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Hrotsvitha doesn’t ignore the fact that sexual temptation is a part of humanity. As a nun, someone who is expected to be chaste and is usually trying to be kept away from worldly temptation, Hrotsvitha is very aware of sexuality. Her opinions make it seem as though she would not have broken her vow of chastity, but it is obvious she understood the ideas of temptation as being a very natural human feeling.

Another of Hrotsvitha’s character’s feared temptation. Paphnutius, from the play with the same name, was off to find Thais, a harlot who he believed needed his help to be saved. Hrotsvitha writes,

“PAPHNUTIUS: I will set out immediately. I shall need your best prayers. Pray that I may not be overcome by the wiles of the serpent. Pray that I may be able to show this soul the beauty of divine love.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Even the most chaste of hermits, Paphnutius, fears the temptations of such a beautiful woman as Thais. Hrotsvitha is not only showing that human nature is to lust, but also that only prayer and God’s help can get a person through situations without falling into temptations. She seems to suggest that temptation is not the sin, and that to feel the lust is not a sin, but to succumb to it is.

Men were not the only ones with sexual temptations. In Hrotsvitha’s play, *Abraham,* Abraham’s adopted daughter takes the virgin road, but eventually succumbs to temptation. Hrotsvitha writes of Abraham telling his friend Ephrem of Mary’s loss of virginity,

“ABRAHAM: Oh God! She is lost!

EPHREM: Lost? What do you mean?

ABRAHAM: Most miserably. Afterwards she ran away.

EPHREM: But by what wiles did the ancient enemy bring about her undoing?

ABRAHAM: By the wiles of false love. Dressed in a monk’s habit, the hypocrite went to see her often. He succeeded in making the poor ignorant child love him. She leapt from the window of her cell for an evil deed.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

Hrotsvitha saw the temptations being held up to young women who had chosen a life of chastity. She also is showing how evil and unacceptable sex was seen out of marriage and especially for one who was devoted to God.

Devotion to God seemed to be an interesting subject amongst these women. Hrotsvitha seemed to see devotion as celibacy while Hildegard’s visions made her feel automatically devoted to God at a young age. Heloise, though, had trouble with her devotion. Unsure of the boundaries between earthly love and heavenly love, Heloise always seemed to be battling her heart. However, she did her best to be a good leader among her fellow nuns, which seems to suggest that if she could help them be devoted to God, then she herself, must also be devoted, whether she recognized it or not.

Heloise was aware that her job and her faith were contradicting, she writes, “Among those who are wedded to God I am wedded to a man; among the heroic supporters of the Cross I am the slave of a human desire; at the head of the religious community I am devoted to Abelard alone.”[[21]](#footnote-21) She knew that this was seen to be wrong, but she didn’t understand why she felt that way. What she had been taught was that earthly love is sinful, but that was not what she felt. Her confusion in her feelings brought up a flaw in the structure of the Medieval Church. The church most likely wouldn’t have revered Heloise for living as a nun and having those feelings, but the Bible shows God as such a kind, loving God. Heloise started to see this, but had trouble accepting it with what she’d been taught. She was working so hard to hide her feelings, but she felt like she had received the power from God. She writes, “I have just enough strength enough to conceal from them my longings, and I look upon that as a great effect of grace.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Heloise seemed to suggest that God, by helping her through her longings, seems to want His people to love and care for one another. Heloise could obviously feel this, for she knew and understood the love of God, and she loved and cared for Abelard. She felt that she must battle between the two because the Church would see her love of Abelard, as a nun, sinful.

Soon after she wrote of her inability to repent, she wrote how she led the women in the nunnery, but she couldn’t lead herself. She knew that she had a responsibility over these other women and she followed through with it. She writes, “…it means great effort to me merely to maintain the appearance of virtue, so surely this troublesome hypocrisy is in some sort commendable… I do not shake the virtue of those feeble ones who are under my rule. With my heart full of the love of man, I teach them at least to only love God.”[[23]](#footnote-23) She felt that her efforts, though not virtuous in the eyes of the world, may be commendable because she taught others the love of God. But she didn’t realize that she could only teach that kind of love if she could also feel it. Her love of Abelard made her a good abbess, because love is holy and she had so much love for Abelard that her heart was truly a heavenly place.

Even without verbally recognizing it, Heloise saw God differently than how the Church perceived Him. Heloise’s feelings that not everything about her so-called sinful feelings was wrong showed her subconscious recognition that her love for Abelard did not spoil her faith. Her passion for Abelard was evident throughout, but her love of God was also, though more subtly, evident in her letters. She writes, “…let us lift up our hearts to God and have no transports but for His glory!”[[24]](#footnote-24) She was showing that she had a passion for God, between the passages of passion for Abelard, though she wrote as if it could only be one or the other. In reality, her heart was clearly in both and she proved to truly be a woman of God, with her pure love for a man and her strong love for God.

Her love for man led her to a love for God, but Abelard did not just bring her to the nunnery, he also married her. As aforementioned, women wanted to or were forced to marry in the Middle Ages to improve their standard of living and to move up the social ladder. Also, marriage was the only guarantee that a woman would have someone to take care of her, it was the only respectable way for a woman to live other than in a convent. To Heloise marriage was not agreeable, and she had not wanted to marry Abelard. “…yet the name of your mistress had greater charms because it was more free.”[[25]](#footnote-25) She knew that she would have freedom if she didn’t have to be a wife. Though the title was more honorable to those around her, she didn’t care what they thought. She saw that women married not for love, but for title, and money, and that, “Ambition, and not affection, form such marriages.”[[26]](#footnote-26) She saw that this kind of marriage would only cause conflict later and she mentioned how the couple would eventually feel regret, which she said causes hate. She refused to have regrets in life, especially when it came to love.

Heloise was hoping for true love, and didn’t want to open up too much to men in her time period where women could be used for their family or worse, just for their body. Heloise also wrote of marriage, “… I was very unwilling to be necessitated to love always a man who would perhaps not always love me.”[[27]](#footnote-27) She was showing her free spirit here. She wanted to love someone forever, but she didn’t want to be forced into it, or bound to it, if it wasn’t working. Heloise also had her guard up; she didn’t want to be hurt by a man who may not always love her. She would rather not marry at all and let them love one another forever than to get married and have no choice but to stay with someone she does not love. Heloise had the strength to be different from society even though they would have called her shameful. Heloise was a woman who enjoyed the pleasures of love, but didn’t feel obligated to be bound to a man forever.

One of the topics Hildegard discusses in her book, Scivias, is marriage. She writes,

“But the first woman’s being formed from man means the joining of wife to husband. And thus is to be understood: This union must not be vain or done in forgetfulness of God, because He Who brought forth the woman from the man instituted this union honorably and virtuously, forming flesh from flesh. Wherefore, as Adam and Eve were one flesh, so now also a man and woman become one flesh in a union of holy love… And therefore, there should be perfect love in these two as there was in those first two.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

Hildegard obviously sees marriage to be a divine gift from God, something He made to happen, so it must be held in His regard. Hildegard doesn’t see marriage as a way to better ones status, as many of her time may have seen it. If Hildegard had not been given to the church and had needed to marry, she may have a different perception of marriage, since her parents probably would have expected her to marry someone of high status, or at least an advantageous match. Hildegard’s life in the church, however, has given her a view of marriage that is beautiful and part of divine love. It’s unfortunate that women like Hildegard, who saw marriage as God’s gift, did not get to experience it.

Another issue in marriage that God brought to Hildegard’s attention was that blood relatives should not be married. He told her that people of the same bloodline may still have familial love for one another and it will only result in more lust than if they had not been family. Hildegard use’s milk as an example as to why blood relatives should not marry. She writes, “Milk that is cooked once or twice has not yet lost its flavor, but by the time it is coagulated and cooked the seventh or eighth time, it loses its qualities and does not have a pleasant taste except in case of necessity.”[[29]](#footnote-29) The metaphor here shows that when marrying someone with close blood ties, like a brother, the blood “has not yet lost its flavor,” so it is too similar to be married. However, when the blood ties are farther out, as in third or fourth cousins, the blood has, “coagulated” and “it loses its qualities,” so the blood is not similar and it is more acceptable to be married.

She also addresses the issue of blood relatives being married in the Old Testament of the Bible, but not the New. She discusses that people did not want to breed with pagans and wanted to keep their tribes strong. A few hundred years after the death of Jesus, the change from pagans to Christianity became so widespread that there was no need to worry about marrying blood relatives anymore. Before then, the best way to meet someone who was Christian was for them to be a part of your family. She also address that she seems to think that people were more sexual before the birth of Jesus and that after his birth there needed to be a level of modesty in marriage.

Heloise frequently made mention of women being the lesser sex, but subtly she points out her strength, and also the strength of women. She writes of her uncle, “…he measured my virtue by the frailty of my sex, and thought it was the man and not the person I loved.”[[30]](#footnote-30) She was writing that her sex was frail, but she was showing that she was not. She was showing her strength by pointing out that it was not the sexual pleasure of Abelard, but instead the person he was that she truly loved. She was so used to being inferior to men, with no question, that she immediately assumed the weakness of her sex, but she was writing of her strength and contradicting it by downplaying women.

Hildegard writes specifically of women’s subordination: “As woman represents the subjection to man until they become one, so too woman represents the union of man’s semen with her blood so that they become one flesh.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Hildegard sees woman as subject to men until they become one, which seems to mean that after marriage and consummation that a woman is no longer subordinate to a man. Her point of women representing the union of man and woman makes it seem like the woman is what holds a marriage together, and keeps things running smoothly.

Hildegard also writes about why men are hairier than women. This topic seems strange, but she leads it into an interesting deduction. “But the male has a beard and more hair on his body than a woman because the male is formed from earth and has greater strength and warmth and is everywhere more active than woman. Likewise the earth, steeped in rain and the heat of the sun, produces plants and grasses and nourishes on its surface hair and feathered animals. But woman is without a beard because she is formed from the flesh of man and is subordinate to man and lives in greater quiet.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Her statement about women being subordinate is brought up in the idea of men being hairier than women, which suggests sarcasm. She also mentions that the earth makes lots of animals which are covered in fur. Since animals are subordinate to humans, it would seem the hairier the animals, the lesser they are; men being hairier than women. Her strange metaphors are an interesting way to make a different point than what she writes. Hildegard, who is so intelligent and useful, most likely didn’t see herself as very subordinate to men.

Heloise, however, felt subordinate to Abelard and also felt responsible for ruining him, from his reputation, to his plan to be a bishop. She wrote of the ruin of men by women, and in doing so wrote of the power women have over men. She writes, “It was a woman who threw down the first man from the glorious position in which Heaven had placed him;” And she spoke of Samson and Delilah when she wrote, “A woman had disarmed and betrayed him who had been a conqueror of armies.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Heloise saw this power that women have, but she was so upset that it had ruined the love her life that she could not rejoice in it. Heloise wanted so badly to be purely virtuous but it was obvious by her soul’s inability to do this that her sexuality as a woman was a strong and purposeful entity.

In Hrotsvitha’s play, *Gallicanus,* a general of that name wants to marry Emperor Constantine’s daughter, Constance, who is a consecrated virgin. Emperor Constantine is worried and doesn’t know what to tell his very loyal general. Constance seems to have the answer. Hrotsvitha writes,

“CONSTANCE: My lord, if you will deign to listen to my advice, I can show you how to escape this double danger.

CONSTANTINE: Oh, that you could!

CONSTANCE: You must pretend that you are willing to grant Gallicanus what he asks when the war has been won. Make him believe that I agree. Persuade him to leave with me during his absence at the war his two daughters, Attica and Artemia, as pledges of the bond of love which is to unite us. Tell him that in return I will send with him on his expedition my two Almoners, John and Paul.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

Constance is setting in place a plan to ease her father’s anxiety and save her virginity.

“JOHN: You send for us, Highness. We are here.

CONSTANCE: Go at once to Gallicanus and attach yourself to his person. Instruct him little by little in the mysteries of our faith. Perhaps God means to make us the instruments of winning him to His service.

PAUL: God give us success! We shall do all we can.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

It seems that Constance had a plan all along to convert not only Gallicanus, but his daughters and her plan does work. Hrotsvitha has the young woman hatch the brilliant plan instead of her father, or one of her other male companions. Hrotsvitha sees the power of women, and their intelligence, and does not make them seem lesser than men. Hrotsvitha acknowledges women’s charm and power, instead of discussing how weak and gentle they are, as the church would have probably have done.

Hrotsvitha made all of the women she wrote about seem quite strong and intimidating. None seemed meek and gentle, but all seemed assertive and calm in the strength of God. For instance, in the play, *Dulcitius,* three women are held prisoner and the Emperor is trying to make them praise idols, but they will not so they are to be executed. In the beginning of the play Hrotsvitha writes,

“DIOCLETIAN: Is it not madness to give up practicing an ancient religion and run after this silly new Christian superstition?

AGAPE: You are bold to slander the majesty of Almighty God. It is dangerous.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

Agape and her two sisters, Chionia, and Irena, do not back down even from the emperor and they certainly will not bow to idols for him or his lords. Hrotsvitha is showing these women as without fear. Her powerful female characters are a little surprising for the time period since women were seen to be weaker than men. Her view, however, of women being powerful and strong suggests that is how she sees women, and especially those who have power from God. Another example of these powerful women is in *Sapientia,* which is named for the mother of three daughters, Faith, Hope, and Charity. Emperor Hadrian wants them all to submit to his gods, but they will not. He addresses them through Hrotsvitha’s writing,

“HADRIAN: Noble matron, if you desire to enjoy my friendship, I ask you in all gentleness to join me in an act of worship to the gods.

SAPIENTIA: We have no desire for your friendship. And we refuse to worship your gods.

HADRIAN: You will try in vain to rouse my anger. I feel no indignation against you. I appeal to you and your daughters as lovingly as if I were their own father.

SAPIENTIA: My children are not to be cozened by such diabolical flattery. They scorn it as I do.

FAITH: Yes, and laugh at it in our hearts.” [[37]](#footnote-37)

Hrotsvitha shows these women as almost aggressive against those who do not believe in Christ. The women’s power is only strengthened during the play as Hadrian tortures Sapientia’s daughters and they feel no pain and go peacefully to heaven. Hrotsvitha seems to be using these women to attract women to Christianity. Their strength would have seemed appealing to women with nothing to count on. Charity, the youngest daughter of Sapientia, says it best in response to denying Hadrian’s wish for her to worship his gods,

“CHARITY: Although I am small, my reason is big enough to put you to shame.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Heloise’s sexuality was also quite different than the women around her and she made a clear point to show that her ways were not that of the Church or society. She writes, “I made no use of those defenses of disdain and honor; those enemies of pleasure which tyrannise over our sex made in me but a weak and unprofitable resistance.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Heloise had not worried about honor, the way other women of her time did. She wanted to love Abelard and she wasn’t going to let the ways of the world get into her way. She saw honor and disdain as “enemies of pleasure;” things that kept her from enjoying the passion and desire of men, most specifically Abelard. She said that those things that try and keep away pleasure “tyrannise over” women, and her use of the word tyrannize truly shows her discontent with keeping pleasures from women. She wanted women to enjoy the passion and desires that come with loving another the way she had.

In one of Hildegard’s visions, God was telling her that men who have sex with pregnant women are murders. She writes, “I do not want that work of men and women to take place from the time when the root of a little child has already been placed in the woman, lest the development of that child is polluted by excessive and wasted semen, until her purification after childbirth. After that it may be done again, in rectitude and not in wantonness, for the love of children.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Hildegard obviously sees semen that does not reach an egg as useless, and semen that is not even meant for an egg seems to be worse! Hildegard doesn’t want anyone to satiate their lust; sex is meant for making children only, and anyone who does it without that intent is sinning. Hildegard does not give any hints that she is in disagreement to these statements.

She then writes about how virgins and chaste people have more of a struggle, but are better looked upon by God; “But now I will turn to My most loving sheep who are securely placed in My heart, the seed of chastity.” The reason for this loving view towards the chaste is explained by Hildegard, “But though you will endure in your seed flowing rivulets from the conflagration of lust, since you cannot be so chaste a to prevent human weakness from appearing in you secretly, you should in that labor imitate the Passion of My Son and resist yourselves; that is, extinguish within yourselves the burning flame of lust and other things of this world, casting out anger, pride, wantonness and other vices of that sort and attaining this victory by a great struggle.” This suggests that she sees that lust and human urges are natural, but that they must be suppressed, except for procreation, and especially for those who have taken the chaste path. The suppression of sexual feelings is discussed very frequently in writings from the Middle Ages. The point that the church people had to frequently keep expressing the extreme importance of chastity shows that they were having trouble keeping people from their sexual urges. This suggests that sexual urges are more natural even than the fear of damnation that went along with sex outside of marriage and sexuality in general.

Hrotsvitha also wrote about how everyone and anyone can be forgiven and live in God’s grace. In the story of *Paphnutius,* Thais has slept with and ruined many men, but Paphnutius reassures her she can repent and live in grace.

“THAIS: Oh voice that promises mercy! Do you believe, can you hope that one so vile as I, soiled by thousands and thousands of impurities, can make reparation, can ever by any manner of penance obtain pardon?

PAPHNUTIUS: Thais, no sin is so great, no crime so black, that it cannot be expiated by tears and penitence, provided they are followed up by deeds.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

Hrotsvitha suggests that no matter how bad it gets, it can always be forgiven. Her belief in such an amazing forgiveness is a true sign of a strong faith. She also in presenting these ideas in a play is making sure that others feel as though they can convert to Christianity no matter what their life has been like. She is making it less intimidating to become a Christian, and in this way, encouraging others to become a Christian. Similarly in, *Abraham*, after Mary runs away and is found, Abraham assures her she can be saved. Hrotsvitha writes,

“MARY: It is the thought of my sins which crushes me. I dare not look at you; I am not fit to speak to you.

ABRAHAM: My little one, have no fear. Oh, do not despair! Rise from this abyss of desperation and grapple God to your soul!

MARY: No, no! My sins are too great. They weigh me down.

ABRAHAM: The mercy of heaven is greater than you or your sins. Let your sadness be dispersed by its glorious beams. Oh, Mary, do not let apathy prevent your seizing the moment for repentance. It matters not how wickedness has flourished. Divine grace can flourish still more abundantly.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

This idea of ever forgiving God is very attractive for those who have already sinned. Hrotsvitha puts this idea in her plays to help people see how forgiving and loving the Christian religion is.

Most significantly, Heloise had a love for Abelard that had remained throughout many hardships. She tried to fight her love for him, and she denied him for a few lines, but she could not deny him even for a full letter. Her love and passion were so strong, that it was most amazing that Abelard could stay away. (Abelard’s castration would have changed his hormones. He may have become completely asexual by the time Heloise wrote her letters.) She wrote of the beginning of their relationship, “As soon as I was persuaded of your love I delayed scarce a moment in yielding to your protestations; to be beloved by Abelard was in my esteem so great a glory, and I so impatiently desired it…”[[43]](#footnote-43) It was not only that Abelard was so famous and intelligent, but also that he loved her. She felt his love was a glory! What a word to use for love! Glory, as if she had won a great battle, and was looked at by all as the best conqueror of all. This was precisely how she felt. All the women loved and admired Abelard, but she had taken his heart. Her impatience in desiring him goes back to her freedom in sexuality. Her freedom was not without morals, as she waited until she knew of his love, but she was not so prudish to want to marry him.

Heloise battled her soul because she wanted so badly to be good and virtuous in the eyes of God, but she could not regret her sins, or repent them. She loved Abelard and no matter if she verbally repented, it would have been a lie in her heart. She didn’t see that in her faith it seem that God would appreciate the purity of her love to Abelard, and know her love of Him was still great. Heloise stated, “I, who have experienced so many pleasures in loving you, feel, in spite of myself, that I cannot repent them, nor forbear through memory to enjoy them over again.”[[44]](#footnote-44) She would never forget her love of him, and the memories that brought her so much happiness. If love was made to be forgotten then what kind of love could the people have in God? She had felt so much happiness with Abelard, so many pleasures in loving him that to not look back on the memories would have been impossible.

Heloise was strong with her love even after Abelard had acted as though he would only talk of their relationship through God, as Sister and Father, nun and monk. Abelard really didn’t show any true love back to Heloise through his letters, but Heloise still wrote passionately for him. She remembered his oath of love, “Your words, your oaths, are deeply graven in my heart.”[[45]](#footnote-45) She remembered how he once loved her so deeply, but even though he did not seem to any longer, she could not let go as she felt that his words were *graven* in her heart. Graven, meaning carved deeply into her heart. She felt as though his love was permanently on her heart and no matter how much she tried she could not remove it. It was carved into her heart like taking a knife to stone, leaving an indent, cutting pieces of her heart out to proclaim his love.

Heloise had a very tender affection for Abelard, one that could be shown by her memories of consoling him. “I dried your tears with kisses, and because you were less powerful, I became less reserved. Ah! If you had loved with delicacy, the oaths I made, the transports I indulged, the caresses I gave, would surely have comforted you.”[[46]](#footnote-46) In his worst hour she supported him, loved him, and cared for him. She did not run from the fact that her sensual pleasures would be no more. She was young and could have left him, but she stayed and she entered a nunnery for him, and supported his every decision. Her love for him must have been very strong for a woman with such obvious sensual desires and memories to stay chaste for the remainder of her life.

Heloise was so enraptured by Abelard, and her sensuality towards him was so evident. She proclaims, “My stammering speech betrays to all the disorder of my mind; my sighs discover me, and your name is ever on my lips.”[[47]](#footnote-47) She was like a school girl, enamored with an older boy. She could not forget his love and her use of the imagery of her lips, sets such a sensual tone. She used this sensual tone and immediately stopped herself and asked God to help her when she thinks like that. Her immediate reproach of the subject shows that she wass trying so hard to live the life Abelard gave her, but it just didn’t feel right to her. She felt like a free bird, which had become trapped in a cage, her owner far, far away.

In one of Heloise’s denials, which lasted about a page and half, she made it clear that though she will never think of him again, she could only feel this way for God, and no one else. She writes, “Just Heaven! Could you imagine it possible for a mere human to blot you from my heart? Could you think my guilty of sacrificing the virtuous and learned Abelard to any other but God?”[[48]](#footnote-48) She, though angry that he did not write her, knew that only God could come close to making her forget Abelard, but even then she repented and realized that he would never be out of her head. Her quick change of heart seemed that if God wanted her denial of Abelard’s love he would have accepted it and let her forget Abelard.

When she gave up on her denial she was frustrated because she tried so hard, but she could not let go of his memory. She pleads, “Just Heaven! Have I not triumphed over my love? Unhappy Heloise! As long as thou drawest a breath it is decreed thou must love Abelard. Weep, unfortunate wretch, for thou never hadst a more just occasion.”[[49]](#footnote-49) It seemed Heloise’s subconscious refused to let go of Abelard. It’s as almost if her soul needed to feel something, even if it was pain for the loss of love, or sorrow for not being able to overcome it; it didn’t want to feel nothing at all. Heloise was so grief stricken that she could not overcome this love, but at least grief is a feeling. She refused to accept that her heart would never let go of Abelard, but then at least she had a reason to live, a reason to keep fighting. Heloise stayed strong and did not condemn herself to a life of nothingness.

Heloise seemed to think that her pain was because she couldn’t repent, and give up her love for Abelard, but her sorrow truly lay in missing him and the happiness they shared. This was evident with the happiness in her memories, and the sadness that came after them. She writes that, “…there is no pleasure upon earth but that what virtue gives.”[[50]](#footnote-50) She thought that virtue would make her happy, but she knew she was saying whatever it was she thought Abelard would want to hear. Heloise was trapped between relaying her sorrows to Abelard and trying to tell him what he needed to hear to be happy with where she stood with God. Her love for him forced her to try and make him happy, but her desperate sorrows made her hope that he would pine for her and come back, or at least write of his love.

Heloise goes back to speaking of virtue and it being the only way for them to live, and then talks of his intelligence and how she loved the way he saw the world, and without introduction she goes straight back to her love for him. She feared she will never see him again and told him of her dreams and how he loves her so fervently in them. “But O! delightful dreams and tender illusions, how soon do you vanish away! I awake and open my eyes to find no Abelard; I stretch out my arms to embrace him and he is not there; I cry, and he hears me not.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Heloise had lived her entire life in what seemed to be a never ending heartbreak. She lived a lie, smiling and pretending to be alright, but when she was behind closed doors she was miserable, and when she slept, her dreams teased and tortured her. Poor Heloise! How sad it must have been to cry and have had no one to express your sadness to. She had made it clear that she did not teach the Sisters love of man, so she must not share with them her sadness over Abelard. To be always alone in your feelings, with no one to share them or comfort you, must take a strong person indeed.

In the end, Heloise recognized her love of both Abelard and God, and writes, “I am sensible of waves both of grace and passion, and by turns yield to each.”[[52]](#footnote-52) She seems to have seen that she could now have both. Her heart was with Abelard, but she also loved God and wished to be virtuous for him. She assumed that her love for Abelard made her not virtuous, but she was not even breaking a law of chastity, and who is to say that to love so purely would be corrupt?

Heloise worked so hard to fight her revelations that came up in her writing. She did not acknowledge the beauty of her love, or the equality of her sex. Though, inspired by the words of Abelard, Heloise seemed to be too interested in his love to listen fully. Heloise may have taken some things from his teachings, but had over time tried to repent them, and been unsuccessful; therein lays her subtle realizations, but never full out opinions.

Overall, the ideas of Heloise, Hildegard, and Hrotsvitha have been truly eye opening into the Middle Ages. Each woman has her own personal topics that she concentrates on, but each touched upon similar topics, showing that they all had similar ideas, without ever meeting one another. Their ideas may be the beginning of women having different ideas of them, making the convent a place to learn and broaden ones ideas, to discover new thoughts that otherwise wouldn’t be possible. These women show revolutionary ideas for their sex, influence reformers and historians for centuries to come, and best of all, make women of all eras truly proud.

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