September 1985

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 21, no.3, September 1985, p.142-153

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Visionary Theater:

Pope’s Eloisa as Tragic Heroine

by DANIEL P. GUNN

Most essays on Pope’s Eloisa to Abelard assume that the poem is designed to provide some kind of resolution for its tormented heroine. Many, following Dr. Johnson, suggest that Eloisa’s meditation leads her away from Abelard and sensuality toward “quiet and consolation,” presumably in a renewed consciousness of the Divine. 1 Robert Kalmey finds that the structure of her thinking mirrors the structure of the sacrament of Penance: contrition, confession, absolution, and purgation. 2 Brendan O’Hehir sees a dialectical movement, through which Eloisa resolves the opposition between Abelard and God in an erotic/religious synthesis. 3 Other critics search for a resolution and then condemn the poem as confused when they fail to find one. Murray Krieger, for example, finds a troubling dissonance between the poem’s “would-be argumentative neatness,” which seems directed toward a religious consolation, and its “language,” which is so consistently erotic that it undermines the intended end. 4 Of all modern commentators, only C. R. Kropf has suggested that the search for such a coherent progression might be futile, and that “nothing ‘happens’ in Eloisa in the sense that the poem dramatizes or is even supposed to dramatize a decision making process.” 5 With this I wholeheartedly agree. Eloisa to Abelard dramatizes an extended dip into near madness, into tortured, incoherent visions and flights of fancy, precipitated by the discovery of a letter. By the end of the poem, the exhausted heroine has only succeeded in returning to the state we might imagine her to have been in before finding the letter. Eloisa is morally and philosophically static during the course of the poem, in that she displays a consistently confused perception of her erotic and religious desires and a consistent inability to choose between them.

This inability to choose is a crucial part of the poem’s structure, and a hint about its literary identity. As a dramatization of a single emotional

state, *Eloisa to Abelard* resembles a “big” scene from French neo-classical drama—from Racine’s *Phèdre*, for example. In both *Phèdre* and *Eloisa to Abelard*, the rhetoric is primarily dramatic or “theatrical,” in that it serves not to suggest that the heroine is moving toward a solution, but rather to intensify her confusion and the horror of her situation. It renders, in a vivid and formal way, emotion which has been consciously heightened and exaggerated. Such rhetoric calls attention to itself naturally. About *Eloisa*, Geoffrey Tillotson says: “The reader . . . expects not to be told the story and persuaded of the passions, but to see a use made of the known materials, to see as good a letter as possible made out of them. . . . What is not given is the skill, the quality of the manipulation. And it will be these that will justify the poem. . . . The rhetoric is necessary because the skill must be shown.”6 The same might be said about the rhetoric in *Phèdre*. The audience certainly knows the story: Racine’s heroine is, like Eloisa, faced with a forbidden yet seemingly irresistible love, and she is unable either to satisfy her desire or to renounce it. What is important is not that she should decide one way or the other, but that she should struggle eloquently, and out loud:

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Que fais-je? Où ma raison se va-t-elle égarer?
Moi jalouse! et Thésée est celui que j’implore!
Mon époux est vivant, et moi je brûle encore!
Pour qui? Quel est le coeur où prétendent mes voeux?
Chaque mot sur mon front fait dresser mes cheveux.
Mes crimes désormais ont comblé la mesure,
Je respire à la fois l’inceste et l’imposture. (ll. 1264-70; IV, vi)
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*Eloisa to Abelard*, I think, tries for a similar kind of dramatic eloquence. While the poem is not a philosophical argument, it is also not a monologue intérieur. “Dramatic” in this context suggests a kind of distance; it is as if we are viewing the action described in the poem not from Eloisa’s consciousness, but from a good seat in the audience. The language and gestures are externalized and formal, and because of the couplets, Eloisa seems graceful and measured even in her great distress. To the modern reader, accustomed to more fragmented treatments of consciousness, this can seem a little stiff. (So too can the plays of Racine and Corneille.) But if we accept the demands and limitations of the rhetoric, a poem like *Eloisa to Abelard* is capable of great emotional power—the kind of dramatic power we are not used to associating with Pope.

There are several good historical reasons for treating *Eloisa to Abelard* as a piece of tragic, dramatic poetry, despite the break this makes with the rest of Pope’s poems. In the first place, there is the naturally dramatic


character of the heroic epistle, a high mimetic form peopled by heroes and heroines of tragic stature and (as Reuben Brower points out) characterized by “tirades and remembered scenes.” There is certainly evidence that Pope had a just appreciation of “Exact Racine, and Corneille’s noble fire”; if we are to look for dramatic virtues in his poetry, we should, I think, consider French rather than English analogues. There is also evidence that *Eloisa* was viewed as a kind of set speech in the eighteenth century, and that it was often memorized and recited aloud. Finally, there is a bit of critical instruction in the text itself. At the end of the poem, Eloisa imagines “some future Bard”—clearly Pope—who will write about her suffering:

Let him our sad, our tender story tell;  
The well-sung woes will sooth my pensive ghost;  
He best can paint ’em, who shall feel ’em most. (ll. 364–66)

These are not “undeserved” or “instructive” woes; they are only “well-sung.” Eloisa’s brief foray into aesthetic theory emphasizes rhetorical heightening for its own sake, and gives us a hint about how we might read the poem.

If we are to examine *Eloisa to Abelard* as a piece of dramatic poetry, Eloisa, as heroine, must draw a good deal of our attention. Eloisa’s consciousness, which transforms the entire substance of the poem, does not at all resemble Pope’s. However, Pope does not encourage us to scrutinize Eloisa’s consciousness, or to view it ironically. Instead, he underscores the intensity of Eloisa’s suffering, inviting us to sympathize with his heroine in an amoral way.

One way that the poem neutralizes the reader’s judgment is by placing Eloisa in a pagan, fatalistic context, which seems to be inherited from classical (and neo-classical) literature. In the argument, Pope writes: “Abelard and Eloisa flourish’d in the twelfth Century; they were two of the most distinguish’d persons of their age in learning and beauty, but for nothing more famous than for their unfortunate passion. After a long course of Calamities, they retired each to a several Convent. . . .” Eloisa and Abelard didn’t just live, they “flourish’d”; they were worthy of our at-

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9. See *Imitations of Horace*, Ep. II, i, 274 ff. Emil Audra quotes the Abbé Prevost, reporting a conversation with Pope: “Il préférait Corneille à Shakesppear, estimait Racine, et admirait Molière. Il ajoutait, cependant, que si les Anglais pouvaient nous disputer quelque chose dans le genre dramatique, c’était dans celui de la comédie; mais que nos richesse à cet égard étaient beaucoup plus abondantes que les leurs” (E. Audra, *L’Influence Frangaise dans l’Oeuvre de Pope* [Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1931], p. 144). Tillotson suggests that “Ovid’s pointedness is enforced for Pope by the example of dramatic poetry, especially by the plays of Shakespeare, Corneille, and Dryden” (p. 289). The connection with Shakespeare is tenuous, however, and I think it is doubtful that Pope learned the art of neo-classical tragic drama from Dryden. It is more likely that he was directly influenced by his reading of Racine and Corneille.  
10. Tillotson, p. 281n.
ention because of their "distinguish'd" stature. More important, their passion is absolved here as merely "unfortunate"—as the beginning of a string of "Calamities." Eloisa’s references to Abelard’s name in the poem echo the same fatalistic theme: "Dear fatal name!" (l. 9), she cries, and later, "Oh name for ever sad! for ever dear!" (l. 31). At the end, she prays, "May one kind grave unite each hapless name" (l. 343). Eloisa manages to garner a sort of sympathy-by-epithet here; eighteenth-century readers of Eloisa to Abelard, familiar with the whole story, would undergo an almost Pavlovian reaction of pathos and pity at the mention of that "fatal name." Phèdre uses a similar phrase to name her forbidden love:

OENONE
Aimez-vous?

PHÈDRE
De l’amour j’ai toutes les fureurs.

OENONE
Pour qui?

PHÈDRE
Tu vas ouïr le comble des horreurs.
J’aime... A ce nom fatal, je tremble, je frissonne,
J’aime... (ll. 259–62; I, iii)

Shortly afterwards, she blames her passion on Venus:

Je sentis tout mon cœur et transir et brûler;
Je reconnus Vénus et ses feux redoutables,
D’un sang qu’elle poursuit tourments inévitables. (ll. 276–78; I, iii)

Eloisa never accounts for her passion in this way, but she displays the same pagan sensibility when she talks about God:

The jealous God, when we profane his fires,
Those restless passions in revenge inspires;
And bids them make mistaken mortals groan,
Who seek in love for ought but love alone. (ll. 81–84)

It is a given of the poem that Eloisa’s passion is stronger than she is—that it is “inévitable” in the sense suggested by this undercurrent of pagan theology. Hence, even the most devout reader can sympathize with Eloisa despite her unregenerate eroticism; it is simply, fatally, part of the story that she will always love Abelard.

Eloisa’s frenzied, semi-neurotic state also helps to ease her out of the context of moral choice. No one should be surprised that Eloisa is confused at the end of the poem; confusion is an essential part of her dramatized character. She continually contradicts herself, questions herself, and changes her mind as first one, then the other side of the irreconcilable an-

11. Brower points to Ovid’s similar use of the phrase illa dies in the epistle of Dido. The phrase is echoed in Eloisa at l. 107: “that sad, that solemn day." (See The Poetry of Allusion, pp. 73, 76.)
tithesis symbolized by Abelard and God rushes into her consciousness:

Come! with thy looks, thy words, relieve my woe....
Ah no! instruct me other joys to prize.... (ll. 119, 125)

Snatch me, just mounting, from the blest abode,
Assist the Fiends and tear me from my God!
No, fly me, fly me! far as Pole from Pole. (ll. 287–89)

As Patricia Meyer Spacks points out, Eloisa’s inability to make choices leads us to conceive of her as possessed by “a mental distress amounting to imbalance.” However, this does not, as Spacks implies, ruin the poem. On a dramatic level, neurosis creates a heroine who is too affected by her grief to be rational. Here, as in other heroic epistles, we know the source of the heroine’s grief, and we see the madness suggested by frantic bursts of contradictory feeling as its deepest expression. The only physical view we get of Eloisa during the time frame of the poem adds to our impression of her suffering:

While prostrate here in humble grief I lie,
Kind, virtuous drops just gath’ring in my eye,
While praying, trembling, in the dust I roll,
And dawning grace is opening on my soul. (ll. 277–80)

This is the same position in which we find Achilles after Patroclus’ death in Book XVIII of the Iliad, which Pope was translating during the period in which he wrote Eloisa to Abelard:

A sudden Horror shot thro’ all the Chief,
And wrapt his Senses in the Cloud of Grief;
Cast on the Ground, with furious Hands he spread
The scorching Ashes o’er his graceful Head;
His purple Garments, and his golden Hairs,
Those he deforms with Dust, and these he tears;
On the hard Soil his groaning Breast he threw,
And roll’d and grovel’d, as to Earth he grew. (Bk. XVIII, ll. 25–32)

It is a stock classical position, suggesting a temporary derangement caused

13. Notice “sudden Horror” here. There are a number of phrases, images, and metrical units reminiscent of Eloisa in the second half of Pope’s Iliad. Consider, for example, Achilles’ attempt to catch a ghost:

... with his longing Arms essay’d
In vain to grasp the visionary Shade;
Like a thin Smoke he sees the Spirit fly,
And hears a feeble, lamentable Cry.
Confused he wakes; Amazement breaks the Bands
Of golden Sleep, and starting from the Sands,
Pensive he muses with uplifted Hands. (XXIII, 115–21)

Or consider Andromache’s lamentations:

Too soon her Eyes the killing Object found,
The god-like Hector dragg’d along the Ground.
A sudden Darkness shades her swimming Eyes:
She faints, she falls; her Breath, her Colour flies. (XXII, 596–99)
by deep grief. Ultimately, Eloisa's madness, like Achilles', has a softening effect on the reader's judgment. For the time being, it is clear, we are meant to respond only on an emotional level.

Once we have been guided away from a moral or philosophical response to Eloisa, we are free to admire her extraordinary sensitivity; she seems to feel the attractions of both the spiritual and the sensual with equal force, and to be incapable of denying either. In his excellent essay on *Eloisa to Abelard*, Henry Pettit argues that Pope's allusion to the conflict between "virtue and passion" can be overemphasized, since passion seems to have won quite convincingly before the poem opens.\(^\text{14}\) Certainly, the poem is not about Eloisa's choice between the two, since she is incapable of such a choice. However, the antithesis suggested by "virtue and passion" is still central to the dramatic tension in *Eloisa to Abelard*, because it suggests the courageous duality of Eloisa's perception. Eloisa may confuse Christ and Abelard, but she sees the difference between the concepts they represent all too clearly. In fact, she sees sharp contrasts everywhere in the poem—virtue and passion, spirit and body, angels and fiends—but, in each case, she strives heroically to embrace both sides—to be at once erotic and religious, physical and spiritual.

No one would deny, for example, that Eloisa feels an attraction for the physical side of love. A strong current of sensuality runs through the whole poem, a current almost painfully present in her references to Abelard's castration:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Still on that breast enamour'd let me lie,} \\
\text{Still drink delicious poison from thy eye,} \\
\text{Pant on thy lip, and to thy heart be prest;} \\
\text{Give all thou canst—and let me dream the rest. (ll. 121–24)}
\end{align*}
\]

But she can also idealize love in a Platonic way, as in

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Yet write, or write me all, that I may join} \\
\text{Griefs to thy griefs, and echo sighs to thine (ll. 41–42)}
\end{align*}
\]

or

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Oh happy state! when souls each other draw,} \\
\text{When love is liberty, and nature, law. (ll. 91–92)}
\end{align*}
\]

Eloisa's passion, like that of the lovers in Donne's "The Ecstasy," is both airy and physical. Her view of the religious life is similarly skewed. Early in the poem, she seems to be satisfied that, though sinful, she is at least vibrant and alive:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Shrines! where their vigils pale-ey'd virgins keep,} \\
\text{And pitying saints, whose statues learn to weep!} \\
\text{Tho' cold like you, unmov'd, and silent grown,} \\
\text{I have not yet forgot my self to stone. (ll. 21–24)}
\end{align*}
\]

Later on, however, she seems almost wistfully aware of the other side of the question:

How happy is the blameless Vestal's lot!
The world forgetting, by the world forgot.
Eternal sun-shine of the spotless mind!
Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd;
Labour and rest, that equal periods keep;
'Obedient slumbers that can wake and weep';
Desires compos'd, affections ever ev'n,
Tears that delight, and sighs that waft to heav'n. (ll. 207-14)

There is a sense of harmony here, in "compos'd" and "ev'n," and later, a number of images link the "blameless Vestal" to light and air, so that she seems simply to blend into the "eternal day" by lines 221-22. All of this reflects Eloisa's genuine sensitivity to the Vestal's ethereal, "spotless" existence. She seems sad and a little envious as she returns to her own situation at the beginning of the next verse paragraph. Eloisa, then, can sincerely feel the attractions of the religious life, yet she still remains vigorous and passionate in love. This nobility of perception is what wins our sympathy.

Much of *Eloisa to Abelard* works subtly to ensure that the reader will not judge Eloisa on any terms other than those chosen by Pope, and by the essentially dramatic tradition within which he is working. The poem tries to set off Eloisa's sensitive and "visionary" nature, and to make something of it as a tragedy makes something of an important scene. Only our modern prejudice in favor of character change teaches us to look for psychological development here, or for resolution of the conflict between Abelard and God. For Pope, the fact that Eloisa lives—that she displays sufficient "Breathings of the Heart"—is enough to justify the poem.

If we view *Eloisa to Abelard* as a long soliloquy spoken by an actress who alternately writes, cries, prays, and rolls in the dust, we will be less tempted to analyze Eloisa's moral and philosophical ideas. We will also be in a better position to notice Pope's use of dramatic situations in the internal structure of the poem. *Eloisa to Abelard* builds up to and draws away from a series of powerful scenes or visions created by Eloisa's theatrical imagination. In one sense, these scenes give the poem a linear narrative structure, moving from Abelard's mutilation, in the past, to Eloisa's death, in the future. However, the rising and falling level of intensity created by Eloisa's visions also suggests a cyclical structure for the poem, with the cycle running not between Abelard and God but between tension and relative calm. Unable to make a choice between Abelard and God, Eloisa is left with the question of how deeply she will feel the tragedy.

15. "The Epistle of Eloise grows warm, and begins to have some Breathings of the Heart in it, which may make posterity think I was in love." Pope to Martha Blount, in *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. George Sherburn, I (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956), 338.
of her situation—of how mad she will become. The dramatized scenes, in their wild intensity, stand out against the background of the rest of the poem just as Eloisa stands out against her cold, still, “stone” environment, or as we might expect the writing of the letter-poem to stand out against the background of Eloisa’s convent life. Each vision is a fully realized dramatic segment, a microcosm of the whole, in which Eloisa appears as a self-consciously tragic actress; she immerses herself in the context of the scene, using the present tense, speaking her lines, seeing and feeling the world around her, until she jars herself back into the time frame of the poem. Actually, this kind of hallucination occurs almost constantly in the poem; Eloisa is more or less affected, entranced, by every image that comes up. However, it is most evident in the four central visions I will examine here.

Early in the poem, after a passage of abstractions about love, Eloisa suddenly changes the mood:

This sure is bliss (if bliss on earth there be)
And once the lot of Abelard and me.
Alas how chang’d! what sudden horrors rise!
A naked Lover bound and bleeding lies!
Where, where was Eloise? her voice, her hand,
Her ponyard, had oppos’d the dire command.
Barbarian stay! that bloody stroke restrain;
The crime was common, common be the pain.
I can no more; by shame, by rage supprest,
Let tears, and burning blushes speak the rest. (ll. 97-106)

I have included lines 97–98 because I think it is important to hear the rhythmic calm of line 98 to understand how sharp the metrical break is at line 99, where the vision starts. In line 98, the unstressed syllables are all (aside from the middle syllable of “Abelard”) insignificant function words—“and,” “the,” “of,” “and”—and the line bounces along in neat iambics as a result. In line 99, the distinction between stressed and unstressed syllables is not nearly so clear; the more democratic distribution of stress prevents the line from fitting so neatly into the iambic pattern, and creates a metrical tension. Only one syllable is really distinguished—“chang’d”—and the combination of this strong accent and the exclamation point makes for an exceedingly sharp caesura.

This increase in metrical tension mirrors the increase in Eloisa’s intensity. The same sudden heightening can be sensed at the beginnings of other visions (ll. 241, 289, 317). In each case, the vision bursts into present-tense existence, apparition-like, before Eloisa’s eyes. Here the “sudden horror” is Abelard’s castration: “A naked Lover bound and bleeding lies” (l. 100). This single visual image, juxtaposing nakedness and blood, surely contains one of Eloisa’s confusions of Christ and Abelard, especially in such proximity to “common crime.” More important, it recreates the scene of Abelard’s castration in a stark and vivid manner. Presumably, Eloisa was not present at the actual scene, but she gives herself an important part
here, striking a classical pose between her lover and his enemies. In fact, she has a speaking role: "Barbarian stay! that bloody stroke restrain" (l. 103). By this point, Eloisa has slipped so completely into the context of the remembered scene that she speaks as if she were there; by doing so, she brings the scene into vivid dramatic existence for us as well. Finally, the last line of the verse paragraph recedes from the intensity of the vision and reasserts the frame of the letter-poem; it also returns to a more even, rhythmic meter.

Pope achieves the same effects on a larger scale in Eloisa's description of her dream:

I wake—no more I hear, no more I view,
The phantom flies me, as unkind as you,
I call aloud; it hears not what I say;
I stretch my empty arms; it glides away:
To dream once more I close my willing eyes;
Ye soft illusions, dear deceits, arise!
Alas no more!—methinks we wandering go
Thro' dreary wastes, and weep each other's woe;
Where round some mould'ring tow'r pale ivy creeps,
And low-brow'd rocks hang nodding o'er the deeps.
Sudden you mount! you becken from the skies;
Clouds interpose, waves roar, and winds arise.
I shriek, start up, the same sad prospect find,
And wake to all the griefs I left behind. (H. 235-48)

At the beginning of the passage, the use of the present tense and the halting, frenzied rhythm reflect Eloisa's excitement, and draw our attention into the frame of the dramatic segment. In fact, there are two framed scenes here, one inside the other: in the first, Eloisa gives us a conventional picture of troubled, dream-filled sleep; in the second, she moves into the dream itself. In the first scene, as in the passage above, Eloisa places herself in a stock pose from the tragic drama, stretching her arms around a disappearing hallucination. And she again becomes so involved in what she is describing that she speaks as if it were a present reality: "Ye soft illusions, dear deceits, arise!" (l. 240). Inside of the second frame, the dream/vision reaches a delirious pitch of intensity; I think this is the heart of the poem. "Alas no more!" and "Sudden you mount!" provide the same sort of metrical heightening as "Alas how chang'd," preparing us for the almost suffocating imagery of the next eight lines. First, a series of stark, Gothic images creates an atmosphere of foreboding: "dreary wastes," "mould'ring tow'r," "pale ivy," "low-brow'd rocks." Next, Abelard suddenly "mounts" into the sky, much as he had simply appeared "bound and bloody" in the previous scene. Then nature goes berserk in a brief apocalypse: "Clouds interpose, waves roar, and winds arise" (l. 246). Finally, Eloisa awakes and returns to the first time frame, in an even, measured release of tension: "And wake to all the griefs I left behind" (l. 248).

Clearly, nature and Eloisa are both out of control in the second part of
this passage. Despite Brendan O’Hehir’s ingenious “realistic” explanations, the pathetic fallacy seems to me to be central to *Eloisa to Abelard*. Nature mirrors Eloisa in a way that is integrated into the structure of the poem’s imagery as a whole. On one hand, the poem defines Eloisa in terms of movement and blood, warmth and life, with references, for example, to her heart’s “stubborn pulse” (l. 27) and “this tumult in a Vestal’s veins” (l. 4). On the other hand, we see Abelard, religious life, and nearly everything else in *Eloisa to Abelard* depicted as cold and still, with “No pulse that riots, and no blood that glows” (l. 252). Nature is sympathetic to Eloisa in this contrast:

Still rebel nature holds out half my heart... (l. 26)
Oh come! oh teach me nature to subdue... (l. 203)
Nature stands check’d; Religion disapproves... (l. 259)
Then conscience sleeps, and leaving nature free,
All my loose soul unbounded springs to thee. (ll. 227-28)

We can begin to understand the role nature plays in the poem by noting the terms to which it is opposed—“Religion” and “conscience”—and by realizing that it must be “check’d” and “subdue[d].” Pope often exploits this rebellious, stormy conception of nature in order to make comments about Eloisa:

No, fly me, fly me! far as Pole from Pole;
Rise Alps between us! and whole oceans roll! (ll. 289-90)

These two lines work like the natural images at the end of the dream sequence; the startling image of a mountain range bursting forth from the ground externalizes the disturbance in Eloisa’s soul.

In another dramatic scene, at a religious service, Pope externalizes Eloisa’s consciousness in a different way:

I waste the Matin lamp in sighs for thee,
Thy image steals between my God and me,
Thy voice I seem in ev’ry hymn to hear,
With ev’ry bead I drop too soft a tear.
When from the Censer clouds of fragrance roll,
And swelling organs lift the rising soul;
One thought of thee puts all the pomp to flight,
Priests, Tapers, Temples, swim before my sight:
In seas of flames my plunging soul is drown’d,
While Altars blaze, and Angels tremble round. (ll. 267-76)

There is an analogue to this scene in *Phèdre*. Phèdre, too, tries to pray when confronted by her “unfortunate passion,” but she confuses Venus and Hippolyte:

16. O’Hehir (pp. 220-22) suggests natural, physical causes for the pathetic fallacies in the poem. For example at l. 276, he argues that Eloisa’s veil and her tears blur her vision of the altar candles, until the altar *seems* to be on fire.
The similarities are striking: burning incense, an inability to distinguish the beloved from God, and just below the surface, a suggestion that the heroine's passion is involuntary. However, the apocalyptic and distorted imagery at the end of Pope's scene sets it apart. The separate components of the external tableau merge and blend into a cataclysm of fire and water, which provides a fit element for Eloisa's "plunging soul." Like the wild natural imagery elsewhere in the poem, the elements of the religious scene here provide an external representation of Eloisa's consciousness.

The process of making things external and visible is an important one for the poem; *Eloisa to Abelard* is not really a meditative poem but a series of realized scenes. By the last of these scenes, Eloisa's imagination has carried her into the future, to her own death:

\[\text{Thou, } \text{Abelard! the last sad office pay,}
\text{And smooth my passage to the realms of day:}
\text{See my lips tremble, and my eye-balls roll,}
\text{Suck my last breath, and catch my flying soul!}
\text{Ah no—in sacred vestments may'st thou stand,}
\text{The hallow'd taper trembling in thy hand,}
\text{Present the Cross before my lifted eye,}
\text{Teach me at once, and learn of me to die.}
\text{Ah then, thy once-lov'd Eloisa see!}
\text{It will be then no crime to gaze on me.}
\text{See from my cheek the transient roses fly!}
\text{See the last sparkle languish in my eye!}
\text{Till ev'ry motion, pulse, and breath, be o'er;}
\text{And ev'n my Abelard be lov'd no more. (ll. 321-34)}\]

As Eloisa adjusts her vision here, she creates a more theatrical situation. At first, she assumes that Abelard will come as her lover, and she imagines an erotic death: "Suck my last breath, and catch my flying soul!" (l. 324). The last part of this image is hard to visualize, and the scene begins to dissolve. But as Eloisa shifts to a more realistic vision of Abelard, the passage takes shape along familiar lines. Again, Pope uses the present tense to give the scene immediacy. Although the imperative "see" in lines 331-32 is technically related to "then" in line 329, the connection does not hold, and it sounds like a command issued at the time of Eloisa's death. Now we see Abelard, foreboding, holding a cross in front of Eloisa's eyes as she dies. The basic contrast of the poem is clear in this scene. Abelard is lifeless to the last, while Eloisa, even at her death, is pictured in terms of the life and movement she is giving up: there are "transient roses" in her cheeks; her eyes "sparkle." Finally, as Eloisa dies, all movement stops. Not only Eloisa's love for Abelard, but all of the images of blood and tur-
moil, all of the explosive natural phenomena, and the sense of tension so crucial to all the dramatic scenes, come to a halt with this death:

Till ev'ry motion, pulse, and breath, be o'er;
And ev'n my Abelard be lov'd no more. (ll. 333–34)

_Eloisa to Abelard_ strikes me as more dramatic than anything in Pope’s poetry, with the exception of the great Homeric scenes. In each of the individual visions and in the poem as a whole, Eloisa strikes a formal tragic pose, and there is an air of nobility and power about her distress which Pope doubtless learned from the tragic drama. An emphasis on the theatrical dimensions of the poem is useful in working against the tendency to read _Eloisa_ as a piece of failed moral instruction—a reading which at best blunts the poem’s emotional power, and at worst distorts its meaning. We are on firmer ground, I think, if we attend to Reuben Brower’s casual suggestion that _Eloisa to Abelard_ gives English readers “more than a glimpse of the poetry of Racine.”

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