

THE CONVERSION OF ST. PELAGIA THE HARLOT
libretto for an opera in one act

David S. Cole
1962

- music by Ronald Perera
- produced by Lowell House Opera
at Agassiz Theatre, Harvard, May 1963

Characters

GERHARD, a desert monk

NONNUS, a desert monk

PELAGIA, his daughter

LOVER I

LOVER II

A Tavernkeeper

The opera is in four scenes

THE CONVERSION OF ST. PELAGIA THE HARLOT

Scene I. A desert shrine. NONNUS and
GERHARD at prayer.

NONNUS (taking up a wine-jar)
Gerhard, brother in Christ,
I want to show you a game -
A very popular game
In the world we have put behind.

GERHARD
Nonnus! Brother! Shame!
God's eremite must loose
The old snares of the world
From about his darkening mind.

NONNUS (sets down the wine-jar)
Your tune is still
"Foreswear the dying world!
Foreswear!" - but you forget
I have a daughter there.
No - no foreswearing yet:
How could I think of it?
Come, try the game. (indicating wine-jar)

GERHARD
Shame again and worse shame!

The all-perfect monk
Owns to no kin
But the spirit, wherein
Are root, branch and trunk.

NONNUS
What does a monk know
What do you, the monk, know
Of quiet family things,
Delight in fatherhood,
A girl's shame...?

The shame,
Daughter!

But what do you,
Being an old monk, know
Of this, of that?

GERHARD

Fear most
The treachery in the blood,
The cry of blood to blood:
It is the Devil's cry -
(Fear him! Fear his host!)
Fear the cry in the blood.

NONNUS

My wandering, foundering child; my younger self
And better blood -
She is upon the world, God help all souls!

GERHARD

God bring her to light
If among the elect;
If not, God protect
Her and set you right!

Look now: this girl of yours,
Had she been pious, chaste,
The jewel of young women
And perfect daughter - still,
You must have hated her
For a created thing.
And do you now,
Knowing the girl for what she is:
Curse, stain, corruption of kin -

NONNUS

No! Best of girls for Christ, she,
Once, and warm to attain
Grace, to attain crown
On crown, to attain union.
Fair after the flesh
And after the spirit fair,
Keeping her cell: the world -
What would there be to do there?

That was my girl for you!
What would there be to do there?
She took a cell for her world;
Insatiable prayer
For the business of her days;
And for society,
A mad wandering monk
To bear her company.

Why, Gerhard, from a child
The play she fancied most -
Shall I tell you what that was?

To bind a pair of reeds,
Animal bones or sticks
In a careless crucifix;
And then to croon devotion
All a summer's afternoon.

I have about me still
One of the old playthings
(See where her kiss on kiss
Has worn the matter smooth),
And other crosses...

Child!
Tormented soul that I am
And driven mad with loss,
A figment of old bone,
A child's toy of a cross,
Is not the only cross
I am left with and must bear!

This is a bitter thought.

Come, try the game.

(taking up the wine-jar)

GERHARD
The game? What game is that?
I have a thing to say -

NONNUS
Come, try the game.

GERHARD
I have good words for you -

NONNUS
Come, try. Come! Come, try!

GERHARD
I want to speak my words -

NONNUS
Come, try the game.

GERHARD
Well, I will try the game.

6
6
GERHARD

Do you hear?

NONNUS

A trick of the desert air.

LOVER I

Pelagia!

(offstage)

GERHARD

Do you hear?

NONNUS

I hear a lover sing
Into a lady's mind -
But what of that?
Voices confused with wind
Carry across time
And the indifferent sand.

LOVER I

(offstage)
Pelagia!

GERHARD

And yet again!

NONNUS

Lover, pray God that she
Be worth a passionate cry.
Not all are so.

GERHARD

And look.

(Enter PELAGIA, LOVER I,
and LOVER II. Each LOVER
tries to turn PELAGIA's
attention from his rival -
LOVER II by dancing around
PELAGIA, LOVER I by singing
this song:)

LOVER I

You, Pelagia
Water flower
Oh, Pelagia
Ah, Pelagia
Whither, lover?

7
(PELAGIA sinks to her knees,
raises her arms as if in
prayer. The two LOVERS
raise her by the arms and,
singing and dancing, lead
her off.)

GERHARD
The beauty of that woman!
The sight of it!

NONNUS
Eleison.

GERHARD
I confess my joy
In that woman's loveliness;
But surely lust
Makes no part of the joy.
No shame of blood
Bows me, but shame of spirit
Bows me.

NONNUS
Eleison. Eleison.

GERHARD
A shame of spirit bows me.
For look you:
To stir the exhausted sense
Of amorous shadows, she -
A worn out harlotry -
Lavishes all her care,
Her skill, her thought -
Upon that moldering flesh,
Till she has fashioned her
A body without flaw.

Now then, you Christian monk!
If a harlot take such pains
Only to pleasure men,
What pains ought not we,
Who would please a deity,
Take - but do not take -
To beautify the spirit and behavior?
Woman! Figure of glory!

NONNUS
Eleison.

GERHARD
I must affirm
The glory of that woman,

8

Who, for all her sin,
Shadows perfected man;
And to the unperfected,
Shadows such reprimand!

Praised be God
Who brings instruction
Out of corruption!

NONNUS

That was my daughter, Gerhard.
Having found her , I go to her.

CURTAIN

9 9

Scene II. A tavern. PELAGIA seated at a table, the two LOVERS at her feet. Behind the counter the TAVERNKEEPER polishes glasses and sings to herself:

TAVERNKEEPER

"Ain't you ashamed, O Sally Ann,
To open your legs like a Chinese fan
Where and whenever some brute of a man
Plunks down a coin to your overthrow?"
That's what the parson wanted to know.

"Father, I ain't no worse than you;
And what I'm doing - you do it, too.
Call it compassion, call it a screw -
I'd rather the pimp than the Devil to pay!"
That's what the trollop wanted to say.

PELAGIA

(to the LOVERS)

I don't want you.
Get away from me.
Later perhaps -
Now get away.

TAVERNKEEPER

Go on, get out; you heard
Pelagia.

LOVER I

Ah, Pelagia!

(The two LOVERS exit.)

TAVERNKEEPER

There were men here today,
Men who wanted you -
Not that that's anything new.

PELAGIA

Today I went wandering
As though a bird.

TAVERNKEEPER

First,
The fellow with blue ears.
I don't know how
They got that way. But they're blue.

PELAGIA

As though a bird,
I chose an expanse of sand -
The wildest desert - and wheeled
And wheeled about that expanse.

TAVERNKEEPER

Oh, you were on the desert?

The next one was the chap
Who whistles when he speaks
And reeks of crushed red pepper.
What would a man do
So's to reek of crushed red pepper?
That I don't know. But he reeks.

PELAGIA

I must be sometimes alone.
This was my thought as I trod smoldering sand:
I have had flesh enough
For one woman, flesh enough
To last me out a lifetime
And a lifetime after that.
I would be sometimes alone
But am not left.

TAVERNKEEPER

You're not,
And that's a fact.

Third was the sailorman.
(Don't you do well enough
To draw the line at sailormen?)
"Devil be damned," he said,
"I'll find meself a boy.
And it don't much matter when you're long at sea."
What they want with a boy
I couldn't say. But they do.

PELAGIA

The men! The men! The men!
There is no getting clear of them!
And they have hands and they have eyes
And there is no getting clear.
On the desert, you would think...
But no, not even there!

TAVERNKEEPER

Yes, them two spooney lovers
Keep at you everywhere.

PELAGIA

I wasn't thinking of those two.
They don't make themselves felt,
Those two. But there
Where all is waste - sand,
Wind, desolation, stone -
I yet did come upon
Men. Two men. Real men. Monks, they were.

TAVERNKEEPER

Well, dear, you can't expect
That sort of clientele
Will walk in off the street.

PELAGIA

What a thought! Those holy men
Took no more note of me
Than I had been
An old bone underfoot.
One kept his trance; the other
Veiled an austere face
For shame of the sight, and wept.
I think he wept...

TAVERNKEEPER

Blue Ears,
Red Pepper, Sailorman
And the lapdogs you sent away -
Those are the ones will weep.

PELAGIA

Perhaps or perhaps not.

That monk in tears...

I want to keep to myself
A little longer yet:
The trollop's luxury...

Keep people away,
Will you - this one night?

(PELAGIA exits hurriedly)

TAVERNKEEPER

Yes, I will do that.

(She looks around as she
speaks, but PELAGIA has
already left.)

Enter NONNUS, dis-
guised as a camel-driver.)

Good evening, friend.

NONNUS

Peace to all dwellers here and travellers here!

12 12
TAVERNKEEPER

That's a kind wish, friend.
Unbend a little, though.
I run a nice place.
Say what you want, and pay,
And it's yours.

NONNUS

Pelagia.

TAVERNKEEPER

Hey?

And what about Pelagia?

NONNUS

She works here.

TAVERNKEEPER

I didn't say so.

NONNUS

You didn't have to say so.
There's not a camel-man
Or sailorman I meet
But has a thing to say
Of this Pelagia: feet,
Hands, flanks and voice...
Desire seduced me here
Across three deserts. The words
Lured me. I want to set
The woman against the words.
Bring her.

TAVERNKEEPER

She don't work here.

Not here.

NONNUS

I know she does.
I have been at some pains
To get the name of the town right;
Which inn, what hours of the day...

TAVERNKEEPER

I don't say she's never here.
But not now. She's not here now.

NONNUS

I know she is.

13

A girl came off the desert
(The dress torn, the feet bare);
I said to myself,
"That could only be Pelagia."
(The face white, the locks blown)
Now I had never seen
Pelagia, but I knew
That girl to be Pelagia.
Young men played court to her:
One young man
Danced as he would ensnare;
Another carolled his fair
In the burning twilight there.
And I said to myself,
"Surely that is Pelagia."
(The eyes wild, the soul lost)

She walked in here.

TAVERNKEEPER

All right,

She's here. But she won't have you.
She won't see no men tonight.
She said so. Won't even see
Them boys you took her with -
Her favorites.

NONNUS

What business

Has a pair of boys like that
With flesh like that?
You bring her here. I have
A new kind of love for her,
A new thing
To do to her body.

TAVERNKEEPER

Now, look -

NONNUS

You get her out here, mistress!
Do you think I mean to wait
On a whore's good pleasure?

(Exit TAVERNKEEPER. Alone,
NONNUS prays.)

So that the Christ might be all creatures' joy,
You, Father, had to train Him up a whore:
The whole world takes its pleasure of Your Boy,
And so with my Pelagia. But what's more
Important and revealing, You were mild:
Knowing how much was being reconciled,
You had the sense to look the other way.
Help me. It's what I have to do today,
So as to get the profit of my child.

(Enter PELAGIA, reluctant and mistrustful.)

Will you sit down, young woman?
Will you speak with me, young woman?
Will you stay with me, young woman?

PELAGIA

I won't have to do with you.

NONNUS

You don't mean that, young woman.
Don't say it.
You won't have to do with me?
You? Pelagia?
The whole world's paramour?

PELAGIA

I don't have to do with a man
Who calls me the thing I am.
Make a dream of me,
An arrant sensual dream,
And then we'll see.

NONNUS

I have dreamt

Long upon one theme:
The getting you,
The getting you back...

PELAGIA

What makes the man say that?
Maybe you had me once?
I am sure you did not. No,
There's not one I forget;
Though I had given him
Only a quick hour
Upstairs, I don't forget.
You have never had me.

NONNUS

Child!

PELAGIA

Why do you call me child?
I don't like it. You're not
So old as that, nor I
So young. You call me child!
If I play with your hair
Or hold you against my dress -
Old-father will be child.

NONNUS

Lovely, corrupt child!

PELAGIA

Now what is that to you?
You came to me with fire between your thighs;
The both of us
Know what you came here for.

Well, then,
What's this about a child?
I can do without your ~~treacherous~~ ^{treacherous} fatherhood!
Play the papa with me
And I drive you lusty mad.
Then who's the fool? Then who's the fool?

NONNUS

I want the desert again...

PELAGIA

You don't get what you want,
Not upon any terms!
Don't ask me why; I do
Well enough to flatter
My whim from time to time.

NONNUS

Listen, Pelagia, child...

PELAGIA

Child! and again child!
You know what I'll do? I'll tempt you.
I'll tempt you to throw off all kindness.
You came here wanting flesh:
Well, try and have it! Try!
Come, try!

NONNUS

Lost one! Lost one!

PELAGIA

Come, try - you don't get
What you want - but come, try!
Come, try!

NONNUS

I don't get what I want...

PELAGIA

No, you do not. Come now

And see what you can do
 When a trollop sets her mind
 To your old blood,
 Old, fatherly blood:
 Come see what you can do.
 You know what I can do?
 Make a poor fool of you.
 I mean to do it, too!
 You want to be one flesh?
 I have you by the flesh
 And you warm to it: Some more!
 Some more! We shall be one
 Flesh!

(embracing him)

(NONNUS emraces her.)

Hands away! Keep off!

(thrusting him from her)

NONNUS
 My daughter!

PELAGIA
 The daughter still?
 Let me take off your clothes:
 The shoes - keep away! - the robe,
 The camel-driver's scarf -

(beginning to undress him)

(She removes NONNUS' scarf;
 he is revealed. They stare
 at each other. PELAGIA
 averts her face. NONNUS
 reaches out to her; she
 shrinks away. The two
 LOVERS and the TAVERNKEEPER
 appear at the door quarrel-
 ing. NONNUS lowers his
 hand.)

TAVERNKEEPER
 No, you can't see her yet;
 She's working.

LOVER I
 She said no
 To the both of us - and now
 She's working? I don't believe it.
 You let me in. I know
 Pelagia. It's not like her
 To toy with us. Not us.

TAVERNKEEPER
 You see? She's got a man.

(indicating PELAGIA and NONNUS)

LOVER I
 That old one? Him? That one?
 What do you want with him, love?

(going to PELAGIA)

(PELAGIA brushes past
LOVER I and runs out of
the room. NONNUS tries
to go after her, but the
two LOVERS restrain him.)

LOVER I
Stay where you are, old one.
Don't try and get near her.
Love for the ones who can love.

(The two LOVERS hold
NONNUS' extended arms so
that he appears to be
straining upon a cross.)

CURTAIN

Scene III. The desert shrine of Scene I.
Gerhard alone.

GERHARD

What is the meaning here?
Nonnus has been away
Five nights, and not a night
Passes but this one dream
Dogs me, this dream of doves.

In my dream, I hold out cup
And flesh of the high mass;
A thousand celebrants
Are shaking with joy; we search
Heaven for signs. In my dream,
A sign is given -
The terrible sign given:

A black dove drops through the air.
Furious bird!
You shudder and twist upon the darkening air
As though no bird,
But angel dispossessed
Of heaven, from heaven hurled.

Evil and wild descent!
Where are the words
To give the sense of that careening bird?
The stench and dirt
Fly up against my face,
Soil the white robes.

The joy goes out of my mind;
The worshippers disband.
I am left alone
With the black dove. And now,
(In my dream, always the dream)
I take in hand
That much-tormented bird,
Sink her in holy water
And draw out
A washed-down, whitening bird
And free to soar. This is my constant dream.

(Enter PELAGIA, disheveled
and exhausted.)

That girl again! His child...
Much changed - or I am changed,
Being now of a mind
To see her Nonnus' way.
The thing she is stands forth, and not the thing
She shadows.

PELAGIA

Holy man!

GERHARD

Is it you calling me that?
What do I do? Get down
On knees for the grace infused?
Would it be wise to trust
The shows of penitent lust?

PELAGIA

You see me for what I am; you cannot know
The grief I've come to.

GERHARD

Get back

Yes, I am old - but did
Not trust the flesh when young,
And now I have lived through years
And years of sensuous life,
Shall flesh command more trust?

PELAGIA

You think what I want is flesh.
Seductress - is that it?
Believe me, that's not it.

GERHARD

Intense desert noons
Wither and char the breast
And the affections of the breast;
But still I must be sure.
You I must somewhat doubt;
Myself greatly; and flesh,
That follows its own ways,
The most of all.

PELAGIA

I know.
I cannot hope for trust.
The trust is all with me.

GERHARD

Woman, I hope not!

PELAGIA

Then take me into your hands,
Into your church. I am not
A stranger, I am an exile.

GERHARD

The truth is, I don't dare
Stay here alone with you.
I will call in presbyters,

Deacons and theologues...

PELAGIA

You fear men; but God - no.

GERHARD

And do you tell me so?

PELAGIA

Pardon that willfulness,
The last flare of the flame...
But this is between us two:
The two of us, and one -
Well, he is not here,
Why speak of him? But you,
You saw me, what I was:
See what I have become.

GERHARD

A soul is never won
But somehow other souls
Come near to loss. Well, then,
Rejoice me with a tale
Of conversion. I will know
When grace speaks, and when not.

PELAGIA

I am Pelagia the Harlot.
(Being no more the thing
I speak, I dare to speak.)
I am Pelagia the Harlot,
But was not born to shame.
I was born a Christian girl
And reared for a saint.
My father saw no bound
To the grace upon his child.
It was always "little saint"
And "angel-daughter".

Oh,
Bless the man for his trust!
And yet, better for me
Not to have lived, than lived in such a trust.

I was no saint. A girl
Is what I was, bound up
In the cares of a girl's life.
Surely, I was observant
As women are who have not
Attained the twentieth year or first sweetheart.

Meanwhile the father talked:
Oh, what a child is this!
What grace is here! he cried,
My father, from street to street.

As we in the other life
Shall be, so is she now.
 And many heard;
 And most smiled at the dotage.
 But one,
 A monk, and a false monk -
 So false a monk as would
 Attain to grace through overmastery -
 Believed it all, and vowed
 To smirch this saint.

Well, I
 Was no saint, but was not
 Then what I am now.
 I was not to be taken
 In snares of praise or lust.
 That monk came to my cell
 Each dusk, at the red hour,
 Sang me some dawdling tune
 And spoke his passion out.
 The songs and the words slipped through
 My grate to my overthrow.
 I went back to beads and prayer,
 But all that while
 A woman's passion mounted through my bones.
 I took it for zeal. One night
 It took me, and drove out
 All thought of saintliness:
 I went to the false monk.

What could have brought me to it?
 What was I thinking of?
 I don't know. But I saw
 My child's-play saintliness
 For the dream it was, and saw
 How much was lost to me.
 My father - lost to me;
 My passion - misunderstood
 And lost to me, and shame
 Alone not lost to me.

In fear of the father's face,
 I got away; I turned
 My hand to what I could,
 A girl alone in cities...

The abyss becomes the abode.
 Much sin restores the mind
 To innocence of a kind;
 Much sin and no sin
 Keep unaware of sin -
 Or that's how it was with me.
 But when I passed you monks,
 The other veiled his face
 And I seemed to see
 Old images of shame behind that veil.
 My father too was veiled.
 I would have taken him
 But he took me. I have fled
 From veil to veil. I am here.

Father! Father! Father!

What do I do now?

GERHARD

Now you go back to him.

PELAGIA

I have to see that monk.
There is nowhere in the world
To get a look at my sin
If not in that monk's face.

GERHARD

That monk
Has a trouble of his own.
You go back to your father!

PELAGIA

Back to my father!
Think what it means to say that!

GERHARD

Yes, back there all is shame.
I know; I send you to shame.
And this is penance.

PELAGIA

Some other penance!

GERHARD

Willful, you want your pick
Of expiations. The penance
You hurry to perform
Is no penance.

PELAGIA

Bear with me.
There is some other way.
There must be.

GERHARD

And there is.
Contrition - the one way;
The other - rigor: to flourish
In God's face
The banner of your pain;
And the one pain
Which purges - fly from it.

You have been fleeing it;
You flee it still.
That monk you want to see
Is just the same; and where
Is the penance in all that?

PELAGIA
I fled toward lust, but now
Flee to the other burning.

GERHARD
It is always flight.

PELAGIA
It is.
When I am cleansed or burnt
Or better than I am,
Then is the time to think of truer penance.

Now I must purge
In preparation
For purgation.

What do I do now?

GERHARD
You want a dirty hole
Somewhere - but not "somewhere" -
I'll tell you where: Jerusalem.
That is the place for you,
Our faith's and the world's center.
You get yourself a cell,
D'you see? And you live there
And never leave, and you think,
"Well, things are getting worse
And better, and worse and better..."

PELAGIA
To you, this is sad or mean.
But I can do it, and will.

GERHARD
Do it, by all means.
But don't ever get to thinking
Your sin is clear. Your sin
Is not clear while the father
Keeps on in grief for you.

PELAGIA
I don't forget this, not
For a minute. And you, monk,
If I have not been patient

Or penitent enough,
Remember, please,
I have lost the way of it.
I pray my God
For a burnt-out will...

Again my God! my God!

(Exit PELAGIA)

GERHARD

Can blessing come of that?

(Enter NONNUS)

NONNUS

Gerhard! Brother in Christ!
The child is found and lost again.
What do I do now?

GERHARD

How found? And then, how lost?

NONNUS

My daughter came to me
At an inn. She did not know me
With a rag across my face.
She thought me one of her men-friends.
She would have brought me to -
Oh, shame of it! - you know
What she would have brought me to!

GERHARD

Say that it ended well.

NONNUS

Brother, the end is worst.
She fled me. God saw fit
To cross our paths a moment,
But what was the use of it?

GERHARD

What is the use
Of raveling out God's will?
Did you go after her?

NONNUS

The lovers held me down,
I would have saved my child,
But was held down, and she fled.
Why did she do that?

GERHARD

Shame.

NONNUS

Gerhard,
I wouldn't have said a word;
I would have been -
Think what I would have been
And now
Have not the chance to be!

GERHARD

You have lost one chance -

NONNUS

All chances!
There is so much of the world!
Where do I find her the second time, if ever?

GERHARD

Take scrip and staff, and try
The circuit of the lands.
Begin far to the east
And make your way in grace
To the world's center.

NONNUS

Rome?
Would that be Rome?

GERHARD

What! Rome?
Jerusalem is world's center!
When the grace is full upon you
The quest is done.

NONNUS

You know,
Gerhard, she was a nice child...

GERHARD

Why are you not gone?

NONNUS

Gerhard -

GERHARD

Why do you stay?

NONNUS
I thought she might have come here.

GERHARD
Why should she come here?

NONNUS
She was moved the other day....

GERHARD
She couldn't face her father: is she like
To seek out stranger-monks?

NONNUS
Well, that is so...

GERHARD
God with you!

(Exit NONNUS)

Pelagia, my black dove,
Go whiten. I have done
What I could. Now, Nonnus,
Do what you can. I put
The thread into your hands.

CURTAIN

Scene IV. A remote section of Jerusalem.
Before PELAGIA's hovel.

(A veiled figure - PELAGIA - sits cross-kneed on the ground, center.)

LOVER I and LOVER II pass across the stage, old dirty and in rags. Both are blind. LOVER II is crippled, but with every step tries to execute his Scene I dance-turn. LOVER I sings:)

LOVER I

What was the name, again?
The names I hear on the wind
Are soon swept out of ken:
How have I sinned,
That I forget the name and face of love?

What was the song, again?
I fashioned tunes *and a rhyme,*
But soon flung down my pen,
Thinking it time
That I forget the shakes and turns of love.

I shall not now love again.
Passion, go run your race,
Through the days of other men;
Leave me in peace.
I have forgot the how and why of love.

(Exit LOVER I and LOVER II.)

PELAGIA

What can I do to the body?
What have I left out?

(stirring, as if from sleep)

(Enter NONNUS. PELAGIA sinks back)

NONNUS

The years and the lands go by
And bring me here: Jerusalem!
Throw down a thousand grains
Of sand on the world-map:
Where each grain comes to rest,
I have been there: and where none
Falls, I have been there, too.
I have queried the world through.
One question filled my mouth;
No answer filled my ears.
The daughter is lost still,
And now the most of life
Is also lost.

She's either here or dead.
There's nowhere else. If here,
What shall I say of the Faith?
Oh, hard! But rich with blessing.
If dead, what do I say?
I say, The Faith is leaves
And folds without a core.

For promises were made,
Word given, and lifetimes staked
And spent; and if the words,
Lifetimes and promises
Should come to nothing - then
No light was in with the shadows,
Only a want of light.

(NONNUS impatiently paces
around the stage, describing
a circle around PELAGIA.)

Time that she came to me!
Enough of steps! Enough!
Enough of it! If here,
She finds me; if not here,
Death finds me. But no more steps!

PELAGIA

You wanderer for God!
Will you eat with me, and drink,
And speak to me of the world,
Which kings rule, and what lands?

(beginning to give NONNUS
her attention)

NONNUS

How is it possible
To live at the world's center
And lose the gist of the world?

PELAGIA

There are worlds and worlds.

NONNUS

Who are you?

PELAGIA

A nun at the verge of death,
You wanderer for God.
Break bread.

NONNUS

It is not God
Who drives me across the globe;
Not God whom I have sought
In every land, and now
Seek here. I follow the track
Of a woman lost to God

And lost to me: my child,
A harlot once, and now -
Now God knows what. Pelagia!
You are here if anywhere.

PELAGIA
I... - What! Your daughter here?
Is that what you say?

NONNUS
She's here
If anywhere. Good sister,
Would you have heard of her?

PELAGIA
Who do you ask? Who do you ask? (wildly)

NONNUS
Is it offense that stops
Your tongue? Do I do wrong
And shamefully to ask
For the whereabouts of sin?

PELAGIA
God avert proud thoughts
From breasts like mine! Your daughter,
You say you have a daughter?
It could be that daughter's fame
Has reached me. It could be,
What with this woman and that woman,
Her fame has reached me here.

NONNUS
What a devil's-joy is this daughter!
Even to your cell -
The one place in the world
I would believe outside
The rush of evil and time -
Her evil fame finds the way.

PELAGIA
I said her fame had reached me;
I did not call the fame
A fame for evil or good.

NONNUS
For good! My Pelagia?
My daughter is Pelagia the Harlot.

PELAGIA You
Say you have searched - how long?

NONNUS
Forty years!

PELAGIA
Forty years. In the meantime,
Your child, too, may have been searching
And found a thing
Worth all that search. Conversion
Has come upon her, perhaps.

NONNUS
She fled my sight!

PELAGIA
 For shame,
Perhaps, and perhaps for shame
She fled God's sight; but now
It's a lifetime later, and shame
Is not the word you want.

NONNUS
You speak as if -

PELAGIA
 The things
I say may be as I say.
That's all I mean.

What would you do if you found her?

NONNUS
Forgive -

PELAGIA
 You say forgive.
What if she had
No need of that?

NONNUS
 No need!

PELAGIA
No need,
But as the last rung
Of ascent to blessedness -

What then? What if your child,
 By ecstatic penitence,
 Has scoured her flesh and scoured
 Even her filthy spirit -
 What then? What if the girl
 Has given her days to prayer,
 Her nights to sleeplessness
 Through forty years, and thereby
 Shattered the flesh,
 Set loose the soul - What then?

NONNUS

How do I answer this?
 I cannot answer this.
 You speak as if you know
 My child and her life - if so,
 Get me to her. The words
 Will follow, as words do.
 At very least,
 You give a sense to my life -
 My life and the long search
 Which has become one with it.

PELAGIA

Break bread with me, old father. (holding out bread)

NONNUS

Why do you call me father?

PELAGIA

Break bread and drink wine, Father. (holding out bread and wine)

NONNUS

Why "father"? Why are you saying it?
 (as he accepts the bread
 and wine)

PELAGIA

Where is the veil this time?
 Across my face - but across (unveiling)
 Whose eyes?

NONNUS

Ah! Ah!

PELAGIA

I am Pelagia the Harlot.
 Being no more the thing
 I speak, I dare to speak.

NONNUS
Where are words?
Where are the words?

PELAGIA
That day,
Father, ages ago,
You had a thing to say.
You never said it.

NONNUS
Then
I had questions, I had reproaches. Now -
Darling! Darling!

PELAGIA
Yes, father.
I am changed from what I was
That day. And yet this change
Is not the first: The monk!
Remember the false monk!
You would be bragging; the monk
Came to see for himself,
And corrupted me.

NONNUS
I know
All the disgrace is mine
Or my own doing. Child,
Forgive me the false monk,
Forgive me everything,
You saint, my dearest.

PELAGIA
Nonnus,
My father Nonnus, your child
Is not what you thought to find,
But no saint! Not again!
Not that error again!
You loosed temptation upon me,
But that was not what you meant
To do, and it was I
Who sinned; and to this day I can't say why.
And yet,
If no saint, neither am I
The thing you thought to find.

NONNUS
You fled me - how could I know?
You fled me.

PELAGIA

It was shame.

But now,
It's a lifetime later, and shame
Is not the word you want.
A false monk corrupted me,
A true monk righted me:
Gerhard, father in Christ,
Who sent me here.

NONNUS

Why, daughter,

It was this same Gerhard
Who sent me the pilgrim's way.
"Make circuit of the lands,"
He said -

PELAGIA

"Find a dank hole,"

Were his words to me -

NONNUS

"Proceed

In grace, and when the grace
Is full upon you, then - "

PELAGIA

He said, "Jerusalem
Is the place you want."

NONNUS

And I

Was told to end my quest
Here in Jerusalem!

PELAGIA

"Faith's and the world's center."

NONNUS

Those were his words to me!
So it was Gerhard
Devised trials, quest and conversion.
The both of us have been
Pawns in the holy game
Which that man plays. Bless Gerhard!

But in that time of shame
Your heart was surely a brass heart;
Now how was such a heart won to receive
Gerhard's holy teaching?

PELAGIA

Some have required that stars
Should gleam at noon, and some
That hills rise up and dance.
The means to my conversion
Was simpler; was a monk
I saw at Gerhard's side,
A veiled, tormented monk.
Thinking on the despair
That veil kept back, I thought
On my own sins and the veil
I threw across them.

Dearest,

The finding you is all
I ever ask for - and yet,
If I could ask a joy
Past joy, that joy would be
A sight of my veiled monk
Unveiled; because conversion
Was behind that veil.

NONNUS

My child,

Your father's face was the face
Behind that veil.

PELAGIA

Thank God,

I have seen what I need to see.
All I can do is call down
Blessings on head after head.

NONNUS

The words are going again.-

PELAGIA

It is not a thing for words,
It is lifetimes.

NONNUS

I have found

The daughter and so much more!

Where once was only shadow
A light is in with the shadows,
And the shadows gleam with light of the shadowed-forth.

PELAGIA

Now I have found
A father, and he has found
A father.

Praise! Praise!

Where once was only shadow,
A light is in with the shadows,
And the shadows gleam with light of the shadowed-forth.

NONNUS and PELAGIA

Where once was only shadow,
A light is in with the shadows,
And the shadows gleam with light of the shadowed-forth.

CURTAIN