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Hypocrisy in Héloïse (1090–1164)

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Abelard and Héloïse both excoriate hypocrisy, and in his poem of advice to their son, Abelard describes the double life of the hypocrite as “wretched above all things” (Ruys 2013: “miseram super omnia”, line 305). Héloïse personalizes this condemnation in her Ep. 4, using her situation as an unwilling convert to the monastic life as a standpoint for assessing the nature of hypocrisy. She rejects Abelard’s praise of her reputation in the monastic world with brutal self-honesty: “They call me chaste who do not comprehend that I am a hypocrite” (“Castam me predicant qui non deprehendunt ypocritam”, Luscombe 2013: Ep. 4, §14). She explains that chastity as a virtue of the body (that is, her physical abstinence from sex as a nun) is in no way commensurate with chastity as a virtue of the mind (“animi uirtus”), a thought she takes from Augustine’s *De bono coniugali* (Walsh). In her case, she confesses, she dwells upon the memories of her previous sexual relationship with Abelard, even at what should be moments of intense religious devotion (Ep. 4, § 12). This creates an intolerable internal conflict, disrupting the concord she desires between her inner and outer person. Expanding her horizon then from the personal to the institutional, Héloïse condemns the hypocrisy she sees as rife within contemporary religious practice, where not giving outward offence to people through one’s actions is more highly valued than not giving offence to God through one’s internal disposition.

Nevertheless, she also notes that living a life of hypocrisy is morally superior to setting a bad example, since it is better that the Church not be scandalized or the name of God laid open to blasphemy by the bad behaviour of one, regardless of their inner disposition (“quacumque intentione”, Ep. 4, § 14). Héloïse takes from Augustine (Hill, Sermon 355) this argument that hypocrites harm only themselves while a bad example can harm many, which is also articulated by Abelard in his *Historia calamitatum* and *Carmen ad Astralabium*.

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