



The Virtue of Moderation in Héloïse (1090-1164)

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When dealing in her Ep. 6 with the embodied experience of women in monasticism, Héloïse returns repeatedly to the virtue of moderation, which is closely connected in her thought with the distinction between external things and the interior person. Héloïse acknowledges that discretion is “the mother of all virtues” (“omnium uirtutum discretio sit mater”) and reason the moderator of all goods (“omnium bonorum moderatrix sit ratio”), so that anything—even a natural virtue or good—that exceeds its rightful measure (“mensuram”) can become a vice (Luscombe 2013: Ep. 6, § 9: an argument that Abelard builds into his subsequent thought). For this reason, Benedict built the discretion of moderation into his Rule, so that all things might be regulated according to needs and circumstances and be of the appropriate measure (“mensurate”, Ep. 6, § 10).

In particular, the Rule needs to be moderated to accommodate women’s natures so that they do not stumble under a burden that often overpowers men (Ep. 6, § 16). Héloïse is particularly concerned, given her own history, of the propensity of those entering the monastic life to vow too much, and she argues it is better to promise less yet achieve more than to set oneself up for failure (Ep. 6, §§ 15, 16), or worse, hypocrisy. Héloïse also sees moderation as significant in dealing with those aspects of the monastic life she calls “indifferent” (neither good nor evil). She suggests that indifferent things might be conceded to the monastic life, so long as they do not scandalize others (“mediisque omnibus sine scandalo concessis”), it being sufficient only to forbid what is actively sinful (“sola interdici peccata sufficeret”, Ep. 6, § 20). Sandrine Bergès (669) has argued for the innovation of Héloïse’s thought here, as it departs significantly from both the Augustinian and Stoic (Senecan) positions to form an early twelfth-century European articulation of the Aristotelian understanding of virtue as the mean between two extremes.

Primary Sources:

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Keywords:

monasticism, moderation, mean, indifferent, benedictine rule, discretion, virtue, Aristotle, stoic, Benedict