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Women and the Monastic Life in Héloïse (1090–1164)

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As the founding leader (first deaconess and later abbess) of the convent of the Paraclete and its six subsequent daughter houses, Héloïse was deeply concerned with both the ideal and practice of female monasticism. In her Ep. 6, she requests from Abelard, the Paraclete's founder, a Rule suitable for women and a history of women in monasticism (now known as Abelard's Eps 7 and 8). Because Héloïse takes seriously the New Testament injunction that whoever fails the Law in one thing effectively fails it in all (James: 2.10; Luscombe 2013: Ep. 6, § 7, a point to which she reverts in Problem 2 of her *Problemata Heloissae*; McLaughlin & Wheeler 2009), she is concerned that female monastics should profess a Rule they are able to follow in all particulars.

She notes that the current Benedictine Rule is designed solely for men ("uiris solummodo") and does not account for the physical and moral parameters of female embodied experience. For example, an abbess cannot entertain travelling guests at her table as abbots do, nor can nuns bring in the harvest as the Rule enjoins upon monks. In particular, the Rule's guidelines on monastic dress do not allow for nuns dealing with their menstrual cycle (Ep. 6, §§ 4, 8). For Héloïse, the regulation of female monastic practice is associated with her ideal of moderation. She argues that just as Benedict moderated his Rule to account for the elderly and weak, so it should now be moderated to account for female materiality (Ep. 6, § 11). It is important that people aim at an attainable ideal, rather than struggle and fail to achieve one beyond their capabilities. For female monastics, Héloïse suggests it should be sufficient to add the virtue of continence to moral secular life, so that her nuns would look to fulfil the Gospel, not go beyond it and attempt to become "more than Christian [women]" ("nec plusquam Christiane appetemus esse", Ep. 6, §§ 12–13).

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