



Virtue in Françoise d'Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon (1635–1719)

John J. Conley

Loyola University of Maryland

In her writings for the school for impoverished aristocratic women she founded at Saint-Cyr, Françoise d'Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon emphasizes that the principal purpose of education is the formation of pupils in the moral virtues. Temperance holds pride of place in the ensemble of the cardinal virtues since the other virtues can easily deteriorate if not softened by the moderation of temperance. Fortitude can harden into foolhardiness, prudence into fearfulness, justice into vengeance. Given the aristocratic background of her pupils, Madame de Maintenon emphasizes the importance of class-specific virtues such as politeness and civility. She also defends a gendered version of virtue. Against theorists who claim that certain virtues, such as courage and glory, can only be cultivated by men (since only men could occupy military and political offices), Maintenon demonstrates how women can manifest such virtues in their then-typical work as mothers, homemakers, and lay volunteers devoted to the works of justice and charity.

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