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Gender Issues in the Benedictine Rule

The Rule of Benedict was originally written as a source of guidance for medieval Christian monasteries in Italy by Benedict of Nursia. Since its composition in 540 CE, this text has taken on a variety of meanings and has spread beyond Europe's boundaries. Throughout the centuries, conflicting issues within the rules have appeared, initiating a need to revisit the book and reinterpret Benedict's rules. One of the main sources of contention is the multiple interpretations of the rules to include both male and female monasteries. These issues were raised mostly by educated and religious women, such as Heloise of Paraclete and Hildegard of Bingen, in an attempt to reform Benedictine thought in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. As the presence of female monasteries grew more prevalent, the need to revisit *The Rule* became more urgent so that the text would be rescued from "antiquated legalism and oblivion" (Kiely 1998, 115). With the necessity to question the traditional understanding of the text so its use could be more widespread, important questions arise: Why was a book written for male monks such a crucial issue for females in Benedictine monasteries and how did *The Rule of Benedict* evolve to make the rules suitable for females?

Perhaps one of the largest disputes between the male and female monastery controversy was the gender roles of both sexes. Raverty argues that men who entered into the monastery early in the sixth century had to restructure their "monastic masculine identity" in order to adjust to their new home under the Benedictine rule (Raverty 2006, 272). Though it is widely known that men would have to radically change their lifestyle in order to live among other monks, it is interesting that the additional restructuring of gender roles is suggested. Monks were expected to complete all tasks the monastery required, because when they "live by the work of their hands...they are truly monks" (Benedict 2008, 72). Though these tasks included intensive labor,

they also included cleaning and cooking, which is where the alteration of typical gender roles is addressed. Did Benedict intend for there to be gender specifications under his rule if males would have to alter their existing gender roles? If Raverty's argument of coinciding gender roles were true, Benedict would have written his book of guidelines for no specific gender, leaving no specific obligations to the rules. Benedict states that the monks "do not live according to their own wishes" but to the orders of their abbot (Benedict 2008, 19). Should this be true, then nuns, or women in monasteries, should not have questioned living under *The Rule* and would have accepted the rules as they were written. Due to the basic anatomical differences between men and women, complete obedience of Benedictine rule by nuns became a difficult task.

Benedictine nuns wished to follow *The Rule* as devotedly as they could, which is why alternative interpretations on some topics became necessary. Firstly, Benedictine monks were expected to never be idle and engage daily in physical manual labor, but the brothers who were too weak to complete a task were given lesser tasks by the abbot (Benedict 2008, 72-3). In the nun's defense for reformation, Heloise of the Paraclete argues that a task which makes "nearly all men stagger and even fall" should not be given to a woman (Posa 2011, 171). The nuns would have been reluctant to work under such harsh conditions prescribed by *The Rule* because at the time, women were not usually expected to labor in the fields as men did. Though Benedict's rule uses masculine pronouns and appears to contain the male gender role of a laborer, this particular concept of the weaker brothers can actually transcend genders by giving the weak (or the women, in this interpretation) less demanding tasks. Heloise argues this point by saying that women should be given lesser tasks in the monastery because they are the weaker sex; if the men were staggering under the labor, then women would really be unable to complete the tasks. This could have been her true belief or it could have been a clever, exaggerated claim made to

convince the patriarchal abbots of larger monasteries to reform the way female monasteries operated. This was an evolution of one thought, but was not the only difference that nuns sought to reform.

The second issue which needed to be readdressed was the strict clothing rules under *The Rule*. There was one particularly evident aspect that would be unsuitable for nuns. Any monks who traveled outside of the monastery would receive a pair of underpants for their journey and hand them back upon their return (Benedict 2008, 81). This meant that for all the time spent within the monastery, the monks were not wearing any undergarments beneath their cowls. Not only did this rule raise issues of possible sexual arousal from exposed flesh for the Benedictine monks (Kiely 1998, 112), it also presented a serious issue for Benedictine nuns. Because of the biological differences between males and females, Heloise of the Paraclete states that Benedict's rule can only "be fully obeyed by men" because of women's menstrual cycles and their need to wear undergarments at least on a monthly basis (Posa 2011, 168). While Heloise might have exaggerated that only men could completely obey *The Rule* – because technically, women could follow every rule in the book – this issue would have been important for nuns who wished to follow Benedictine monasticism in a newly reformed way. The majority of Benedict's rules simply needed to be altered to protect a female's spirituality as opposed to a male's. However, making sure a nun's spirituality would not become tainted was difficult to achieve because of the rules for hosting male visitors in the monastery.

It was common for monasteries to receive visitors who either wished to learn more about the devotion of the community or who came to teach and aid the community. Benedict states in his chapter about the reception of guests that the monks should "meet him [the visitor] and treat him with all courtesy and love" (Benedict 2008, 78). This assumption that the visitor who

traveled a far distance to a secluded place – like Benedict’s monastery, Monte Cassino – would be male gives insight to the ideology of gender roles around the sixth century. When any visitors arrived, they were seen as a distraction to the goals of the monastic community and would be situated in a guesthouse away from the monastery (Kerr 2009, 92). From a female perspective, even though the male guests were separated, an issue of administering acceptable levels of love and hospitality to men arises. Heloise argues that nuns are “in danger both with men and without them” (Posa 2011, 170). What Heloise means is that the nuns need men to support the monastery, but cannot show them the same hospitality a monk could because of their female sex. She also is making a statement about double monasteries, where monks and nuns lived together in one place, as was seen at the monastery of Fontevraud in France around the eleventh century (Posa 2011, 170). Though the sleeping quarters were separate at Fontevraud, many of the temptations that often occurred at night, like sinful thoughts or licentious behavior with others (Kerr 2009, 104), might be apt to happen secretly between the sexes. Having this temptation within reach by a male’s visit might have been viewed as hazardous to a nun’s spirituality. For nuns to live in a purely all-female monastery and to show respectful, yet controlled hospitality to male visitors was a progression in the reformation of Benedict’s rule. This begs the question, did Benedict intend for there to be any reformation of his rule?

Benedict writes the entirety of his book for what seems to be a male audience by using terms such as “brother” and “abbot.” What is not clear, however, is whether he intended for only a male audience to adhere by his rule. In the last chapter, entitled “This rule is only a start on the path of justice,” Benedict speaks to his third-party audience, saying, “observe this little rule for beginners...[and] you will at last reach the greater heights of wisdom and virtue” (Benedict 2008, 104). By the title of this particular rule, Benedict seems to be openly observing his own

work as simply a starting point. Also by this statement, he seems to think of his work as a very beneficial beginning for those who wish to enjoy a spiritual monastic life. Though he uses male pronouns in this rule, his openness could be seen as a type of discretion. If he wishes for his rule to help whoever is “hurrying towards the heavenly country” (Benedict 2008, 104), then the rule could possibly extend beyond the male sex. In a demand to have *The Rule* adapted to fit female monasteries, Heloise argues that Benedict had a “spirit of justice in everything” and had discretion in mind as he wrote the book (Posa 2011, 174). Should Benedict really have had a spirit of justice, then he would have been open to the idea of expanding his rule to include women. His desire to lead beginners on a spiritual journey could justifiably be interpreted as such. With these speculations, Benedict could have been quite welcoming to the evolution of his rule in favor of a more gender neutral approach.

In conclusion, monastic women wanted *The Rule of Benedict* to be altered so they could be given the chance to lead the same spiritual lives as males in a way that was suitable for them. Because the text was written for men, nuns faced difficulties in adherently obeying Benedictine rule and practicing under circumstances inappropriate for women and their customary gender roles, i.e. physical labor and different clothing standards (undergarments). Other issues in the text addressed by nuns simply needed to be revisited for their spiritual well-being, as in the case of male visitors staying in the monastery. The main reformations of the text were made possible by recontextualizing Benedict’s rule. Nuns were able to create a kind of canon within a canon and develop beliefs and practices out of rules written originally for monks. Nuns who were trying to modify the Benedictine rule were using the guidelines set for monks by putting them in their own context. By reanalyzing and recontextualizing the book’s intended audience and

Benedict's implied discretion, nuns were able to reestablish *The Rule of Benedict* to suit their gender roles and could begin their monastic spiritual journey under Benedictine rule.

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