

Pardon me for the seeming rudeness of this proposal, which goes upon a supposition that there is something amiss in you, which it is intended to amend. My design is not to expose, but to rectify your failures. To be exempt from mistakes is a privilege few can pretend to; the greatest is to be past conviction and too obstinate to reform. Even the men, as exact as they would seem, and as much as they divert¹ themselves with our miscarriages,² are very often guilty of greater faults; and considering the advantages they enjoy, are much more inexcusable. But I will not pretend to correct their errors, who either are or at least *think* themselves too wise to receive instruction from a woman's pen. My earnest desire is that you, ladies, would be as perfect and happy as it is possible to be in this imperfect state; for I love you too well to endure a spot upon your beauties, if I can by any means remove and wipe it off. I would have you live up to the dignity of your nature, and express your thankfulness to God for the benefits you enjoy by a due improvement of them: As I know very many of you do, who countenance that piety³ which the men decry, and are the brightest patterns of religion that the age affords; it's my grief that all the rest of our sex do not imitate such illustrious patterns, and therefore I would have them increased and rendered more conspicuous, that vice being put out of countenance, because virtue is the only thing in fashion may sneak out of the world, and its darkness be dispelled by the confluence of so many shining graces.

Some perhaps will cry out that I teach you false doctrine; for, because by their seductions, some amongst us become very mean and contemptible, they would fail to persuade the rest to be as despicable and forlorn as they. We are indeed obliged to them for their management in endeavouring⁴ to make us so, who use all the artifice they can to spoil⁵ and deny us the means of improvement. So that instead of inquiring why all women are not wise and good, we have reason to wonder that there are any so. Were the men as much neglected and as little care taken to cultivate and improve them, perhaps they would be so far from surpassing those whom they now despise that they themselves would sink into the greatest stupidity and brutality. The preposterous returns that most of them make, to all the care and pains that are bestowed on them, render this no uncharitable, nor improbable conjecture. One would therefore almost think that the wise disposer of all things, foreseeing how unjustly women are denied opportunities of improvement from *without*, has, therefore, by way of compensation, endowed them with greater propensions to virtue and a natural goodness of temper *within*, which, if duly managed, would raise them to the most eminent pitch of heroic virtue. Hither Ladies,⁶ I desire you would aspire, it's a noble and becoming ambition; and to remove such obstacles that lie in your way, is the design of this paper. We will therefore enquire what it is that stops your flight, that keeps you

¹ In this context, it's meant to amuse or entertain themselves often by mockery.

² Instead of the modern meaning of child loss, it refers to mistakes or failures.

³ A strong religious belief, or behavior that is religious or morally correct. Acts of piety involve reading the bible, or going to church.

⁴ In the bible its meaning is to make a determined effort or to be diligent in a spiritual sense.

⁵ In this context, it means to spoil morally or corrupt.

⁶ Another way to beckon women or to call forth.

groveling here below, like *Domitian*⁷ catching flies, when you should be busied in obtaining empires?

Whatever has been said by men of more wit than wisdom, and perhaps of more malice than either, that women are naturally incapable of acting prudently⁸, or that they are necessarily determined to folly, I must by no means grant it; that hypothesis would render my endeavours impertinent, for then it would be in vain to advise the one, or endeavour the reformation of the other. Besides, there are examples in all ages, which sufficiently confute the ignorance and malice of this assertion.

The incapacity, if there be any, is acquired not naturally, and none of their follies are so necessary but that they might avoid them if they pleased themselves. Some disadvantages indeed they labour under, & what these are we shall see by and by, and endeavour to surmount; but women need not take up with mean things, since (if they are not wanting to themselves) they are capable of the best. Neither God nor nature has excluded them from being ornaments to their families, and useful in their generation; there is therefore no reason they should be content to be cyphers⁹ in the world, useless at the best, and in a little time a burden and nuisance to all about them. And it's a very great pity that they who are so apt to over-rate themselves in smaller matters, should, where it most concerns them to know, and stand upon their value, be so insensible of their own worth.

The cause, therefore, of the defects we labour under, is, if not wholly, yet at least in the first place, to be ascribed to the mistakes of our education, which, like an error in the first concoction, spreads its ill influence through all our lives.

Women are, from their very infancy, debarred from those advantages, with the want of which, they are afterwards reproached, and nursed up in those vices which will hereafter be upbraided to them. So partial are men as to expect brick where they afford no straw; and so abundantly civil as to take care we should make good that obliging epithet of ignorance, which out of an excess of good manners, they are pleased to bestow on us!

One would be apt to think, indeed, that parents should take all possible care of their children's education, not only for *their* sake, but even for their *own*. And though the son conveys the name to posterity, yet certainly a great part of the honor of their families depends on their daughters. It's the kindness of education that binds our duty fastest on us: For the being instrumental to the bringing us into the world, is no matter of choice, and therefore less obliging. But to proclaim that we may live wisely and happily in it, and be capable of endless joys hereafter, is a benefit we can never sufficiently acknowledge. To introduce poor children into the world, and neglect to fence them against the temptations of it, and so leave them exposed to temporal and eternal miseries, is a wickedness, for which I want a name; it's beneath brutality, the beasts are better natured, for they take care of their offspring, till they are capable of caring for themselves. And,

⁷ Domitian was a Roman Emperor from 81 to 96 AD, known for his ruthless reign but effective methods, naming his ruling as the "Reign of Terror."

⁸ Women were taught not to show care for the or thought for the future as they were seen as only housewives and mothers.

⁹ A secret to the world.

if mothers had a due regard to their posterity, however *great* soever they are, they would not think themselves too *good* to perform what nature requires, nor through pride and delicacy remit the poor little one to the care of a foster parent. Or, if necessity forces them to depute another to perform their duty, they would be as choice at least in the manners and inclinations, as they are in the complexion of their nurses, lest with their milk they transfuse their vices, and form in the child such evil habits as will not easily be eradicated.

Nature as bad as it is, and as much as it is complained of, is so far improveable by the grace of God, upon our honest and hearty endeavours, that if we are not wanting to our selves, we may all in *some*, though not in an *equal* measure, be instruments of his glory, blessings to this world, and capable of eternal blessedness in that to come. But if our nature is spoiled, instead of being improved at first; if from our infancy, we are nursed up in ignorance and vanity; are taught to be proud and petulant, delicate and fantastick, humorous¹⁰ and inconstant, it's not strange that the ill effects of this conduct appear in all the future actions of our lives. And seeing it is ignorance, either habitual or actual, which is the cause of all sin. How are they to escape *this*, who are bred up in *that*? That therefore women are unprofitable to most, and a plague and dishonour to some men, is not much to be regretted on account of the *men*, because it's the product of their own folly, in denying them the benefits of an ingenuous and liberal education, the most effectual means to direct them into, and to secure their progress in the ways of virtue.

For that, ignorance is the cause of most feminine vices, may be instanced in that pride and vanity which is usually imputed to us, and which, I suppose, if thoroughly sifted, will appear to be some way or other, the rise and original of all the rest. These, though very bad weeds, are the product of a good soil; they are nothing else but generosity degenerated and corrupted. A desire to advance and perfect its being is planted by God in all rational natures, to excite them hereby to every worthy and becoming action; for certainly, next to the grace of God, nothing does so powerfully restrain people from evil, and stir them up to good, as a generous temper. And therefore to be ambitious of flawlessness is no fault; though to assume the glory of our excellencies to ourselves, or to glory in such as we really have not, is. And were women's arrogance expressed in disdaining to do a mean and evil thing; would they pride themselves in something truly perfective of a rational nature, there was no hurt in it. But then they ought not to be denied the means of examining and judging what is so; they should not be imposed on with tinsel ware. If by reason of a false light, or undue medium, they choose amiss¹¹; theirs is the loss, but the crime is the deceivers. She who rightly understands wherein the perfection of her nature consists, will lay out her thoughts and industry in the acquisition of such perfections. But she who is kept ignorant of the matter will take up with such objects as first offer themselves, and bear any plausible similarity to what she desires; a shew of advantage is sufficient to render them agreeable baits to her, who wants judgment and skill to discern between reality and make-believe. From whence it easily follows, that she who has nothing else to value herself upon, will be proud of her beauty, or money, and what that can purchase; and think herself mightily oblig'd to him, who tells her she has those perfections which she naturally longs for. Her inbred self-esteem, and desire of good, which are degenerated into pride, and mistaken self-love, will easily open her ears to whatever goes about to nourish and delight them; and when

¹⁰ In the early modern period, this refers to someone who acts on a whim without reason, someone with no self-control

¹¹ “awry” or “wrong,” it's not really right or inappropriate

a cunning designing enemy from without, has drawn over to his party these back-stabbers within, he has the poor unhappy person at his mercy, who now very glibly swallows down his poysen, because 'tis presented in a golden cup; and naive to listen hearkens to the most disadvantageous proposals, because they come attended with a seeming esteem. She whose vanity makes her swallow praises by wholesale, without examining whether she deserves them, or from what hand they come, will reckon it but gratitude to think well of him who values her so much; and think she must needs be merciful to the poor despairing lover whom her charms have reduc'd to die at her feet. Love and Honour are what every one of us naturally esteem/[Gap in transcription—*I character*] they are excellent things in themselves, and very worthy our regard; and by how much the readier we are to embrace whatever resembles them, by so much the more dangerous, it is that these venerable names should be wretchedly abus'd, and stick to their direct contraries, yet this is the custom of the world. And how can she possibly detect the fallacy, who has no better notion of either but what she derives from plays and romances? How can she be furnished with any solid principles whose very instructors are froth and emptiness? Whereas women were rightly educated, had they secured a well-informed and discerning mind, they would be proof against all these batteries, see through and scorn those little silly tricks which are us'd to ensnare and deceive them. Such a one would value herself only on her virtue, and consequently be most chary of what she esteems so much. She would know, that not what others say, but what she herself does, is the true commendation, and the only thing that exalts her; the loudest encomiums being not half so satisfactory as the calm and secret plaudit¹² of her own mind; which moving on true principles of honour and vertue, wou'd not fail on a review of itself to anticipate that delightful eulogy¹³ she shall one day hear.

Whence it is but from ignorance, from a want of understanding to compare and judge of things, to chuse a right end, to proportion the means to the end, and to rate ev'ry thing according to its proper value; that we quit the substance for the shadow, reality for looks, and embrace those very things, which if we understood, we shou'd hate and fly, but now are reconcil'd to, merely because they usurp¹⁴ the name, though they have nothing of the nature of those respected objects we desire and seek? Were it not for this false belief, is it probable a lady who passionately desires to be admired, shou'd ever consent to such actions as render her base and contemptible? Would she be so absurd as to think either to get love, or to keep it, by those methods which occasion detestation, and consequently end in hatred? Would she reckon it a piece of her grandeur¹⁵, or hope to gain esteem by such excesses as really lessen her in the eyes of all considerate and judicious persons? Would she be so silly as to look big, and think herself the better person, because she has more money to give profusely, or the good luck to have a more ingenious Taylor or Milliner than her neighbour? Would she, who by the regard she pays to wit,¹⁶ seem to make some pretences to it, undervalue her judgment so much as to admit the scurrility and profane noisy nonsense of men, whose foreheads are better than their brains to pass under that character? Would she be so weak as to imagine that a few airy fancies, joyn'd with a great deal of impudence¹⁷ (the right definition of modern wit) can indicate him as a man of sense, who runs

¹² In the text it means an expression of approval

¹³ “tribute” or “encomium,” a piece of writing that applauds someone or something highly

¹⁴ In the text it means taken by force or unlawfully

¹⁵ “magnificence” or “glory,” it’s impressive, especially for appearance or style

¹⁶ In the text it means mental sharpness and inventiveness

¹⁷ “insolence” or “audacity,” the quality of being impertinence

counter to all the sense and reason that ever appeared in the world? Than which nothing can be an argument of greater shallowness, unless it be to regard and esteem him for it. Would a woman, if she truly understood herself, be affected either with the praises or slander of those worthless persons, whose lives are a direct contradiction to reason, a very sink of corruption; by whom one would blush to be commended, lest they should be mistaken for partners or connivers at their crimes? Will she, who has insight and perception, think to satisfy her greedy desire of pleasure, with those promising nothings that have again & again deluded her? Or, will she obtain such bubbles, run the risk of forfeiting¹⁸ joys, infinitely satisfying and eternal? In sum, did not ignorance impose on us, we would never lavish out the greatest part of our time and care, on the decoration of a tenement, in which our lease is so very short, and which for all our industry, may lose its beauty e're that lease be out, and in the mean while neglect a more glorious and durable mansion! We would never be so curious of the house, and so careless of the inhabitant, whose beauty is capable of great improvement, and will endure forever without diminution or decay!

Add to this the hurry and noise of the world, which is generally so busy and pre-engages us, that we have little time, and less inclination to stand still and reflect on our own minds. Those impertinent amusements which have seiz'd us, keep their hold so well, and so constantly buzz about our ears, that we cannot attend to the dictates of our reason, nor to the whispers and winning persuasives of the godlike spirit, by whose assistance were we dispos'd to make use of it, we might shake off these follies, and regain our freedom. But alas! To complete our misfortunes, by an endless application to vanity and Folly,¹⁹ we quite spoil the contexture and frame of our minds; so loosen and dissipate, that nothing solid will stay in it. By habitual inadvertence, we render ourselves incapable of any serious & improving thought, till our minds themselves become as light and frothy as those things they are conversant about. To all which, if we further add the great industry that bad people use to corrupt the good, and that unaccountable backwardness that appears in too many good persons, to stand up for, and propagate the piety they profess; (so strangely are things transposed, that vertu²⁰ puts on the blushes, which belong to sinfulness, and vice insults with the authority of vertu!) and we have a pretty fair account of the causes of our non-improvement.

When a poor young lady is taught to value herself only for her appearance, and to think she's very fine when well accoutred.²¹ When she hears say that it is wisdom enough for her to know how to dress herself, that she may become amiable in his eyes, to whom it appertains to be knowing and learned; who can blame her if she lays out her Industry²² and money on such accomplishments, sometimes going even further than the person who misinformed her intended? When she sees the vain and the gay,²³ making a parade in the world, and attended with the courtship and admiration of all about them, no wonder that her tender eyes are dazzled with the pageantry; and wanting judgment to pass a due estimate on them and their admirers, longs to be such a fine and celebrated thing as they! Although she is sometimes told of another world, she feels this one more vividly, and might reasonably think that if her Instructors were in earnest

¹⁸ In the text it means mental sharpness and inventiveness

¹⁹ "idiocy" or "foolishness," a foolish act, idea, or practice

²⁰ In the text it means good qualities inherent in a person or thing

²¹ Highlights how early modern women were taught to value outward appearance

²² In this context, it means hard work and diligence

²³ In this context, it describes people who are dressed fashionably

when they tell her of the hereafter, they would not be so busy and concerned about what happens *here*. She is, it may be, taught the principles and duties of religion, but not acquainted with the reasons and grounds of them; being told, it is enough for her to believe, and asking questions or seeking understanding is unnecessary.

And therefore, though her Piety may be tall and spreading, yet because it wants foundation²⁴ and root, the first rude temptation overthrows and blasts it; or perhaps the short-lived gourd decays and withers of its own accord. But why should she be blamed for leaving no great value on her soul, whose noblest faculty, her understanding, is rendered useless to her? Or censured for relinquishing a course of life, whose prerogatives she was never acquainted with, and though highly reasonable in itself, was put upon embracing it, with as little reason as she now forsakes it? For if her religion itself be taken up as the mode of the country, it is no strange thing that she lays it down again, in conformity to the Fashion. Whereas she whose reason is suffered to display it self, to inquire into the grounds and rotives of religion, to make a disquisition of its graces, and search out its hidden beauties; who is a Christian out of choice, not in conformity to those about her; and cleaves to piety, because it is her wisdom, her interest, her joy, not because she has been accustomed to it; she who is not only eminently and unmoveably good, but able to give a Reason *why* she is so; is too firm and stable to be moved by the pitiful allurements of sin, too wise and too well bottomed to be undermined and supplanted²⁵ by the strongest efforts of temptation. Doubtless, a truly Christian life requires a clear understanding, as well as regular affections, that both together may move the will to a direct choice of good, and a steadfast adherence to it. For though the heart may be honest, it is but by chance that the will is right, if the understanding is ignorant and cloudy. And what's the reason we sometimes sadly see people drifting away from their piety, except that it was their feelings, not their judgment, that led them to be religious? Reason and truth are firm and unchanging, and the woman who builds her faith on them stands on solid ground. Emotion and personal inclination are shaky foundations, and the woman who is guided more by emotion than judgment bases the state of her soul largely on her physical moods. Her piety may burn brightly for a moment, but it will not endure. For the affections are various and changeable, moved by every object, and the last comer easily undoes whatever its predecessor had done before it. Such people are always in extremes; they are either violently good, or quite cold and indifferent, a perpetual trouble to themselves & others, by indecent Raptures, or unnecessary scruples; there is no beauty and order in their lives, all is rapid and unaccountable; they are now very furious in such a course, but they cannot well tell why, & anon as violent in the other extreme. Having more "Heat than Light", their zeal outruns their knowledge. Instead of representing piety as it is in itself, the most lovely and inviting thing imaginable, they expose it to the contempt and ridicule of the censorious World. Their devotion being ricketed, starved and contracted in some of its vital parts, and disproportioned and over grown in less material instances; whilst one duty is over done, to commute for the neglect of another, and the mistaken person thinks the being often on her knees, attones for all the miscarriages of her conversation: Not considering that it is in vain to petition for those graces which we take no care to practice, and a mockery to adore those perfections we run counter to: and that the true end of all our prayers and external observances, is to work our minds into a truly Christian temper, to obtain for us the empire of our passions, and to reduce all irregular

²⁴ In this context, it means that there is a lack of true commitment to their professed beliefs.

²⁵ Used to describe how emotion-based piety can be destroyed

inclinations, that so we may be as like god in purity, charity, and all his imitable excellencies, as is consistent with the imperfection of a creature.

And now, having discovered the disease and its cause, it is proper to apply a remedy; single medicines are too weak to cure such complicated distempers, they require a full dispensatory; and what would a good woman refuse to do, could she hope by that to advantage the greatest part of the world, and improve her sex in knowledge and true religion? I doubt not, ladies, but that the age, as bad as it is, affords very many of you who will readily embrace whatever has a true tendency to the glory of god, and your mutual edification, to revive the ancient spirit of piety in the world, and to transmit it to succeeding generations. I know there are many of you who so ardently love god as to think no time too much to spend in his service, nor any thing too difficult to do for his sake; and bear such a hearty good-will to your neighbours, as to grudge no prayers or Pains to reclaim and improve them. I have therefore no more to do but to make the proposal, to prove that it will answer these great and good Ends, and then 'twill be easy to obviate the objections that persons of more wit than virtue may happen to raise against it.

Now as to the Proposal, it is to erect a *Monastery*, or if you will to avoid offending to the scrupulous²⁶ and injudicious, by names which though innocent in themselves, have been abused by superstitious we will call it a Religious Retirement, and such as shall have a double aspect, being not only a Retreat from the world for those who desire that advantage; but likewise, an institution and previous discipline, to fit us to do the greatest good in it; such an institution as this (if I do not mightily deceive my self, would be the most probable method to amend to present, and improve the future age. For here, those who are convinced of the emptiness of earthly Enjoyments, who are sick of the vanity of the world, and its impertinencies, may find more substantial and satisfying entertainments, and need not be confined to what they justly loathe. Those who are desirous to know and fortify their weak side, first do good to themselves, that hereafter they may be capable of doing more good to others; or for their greater security are willing to avoid temptation, may get out of that danger which a continual stay in view of the enemy, and the familiarity and unwearied application of the temptation may expose them to; and gain an opportunity to look into themselves, to be acquainted at home, and no longer the greatest strangers to their own hearts. Such as are willing in a more peculiar and undisturbed manner to attend the great business they came into the world about, the service of god, and improvement of their own minds, may find a convenient and blissful recess from the noise and hurry of the world. A world so cumbersome²⁷, so infectious, that although through the grace of God, and their own strict watchfulness, they are kept from sinking into its corruptions, 'twill however damp their flight to heaven, hinder them from attaining any eminent pitch of Virtue. You are therefore Ladies, invited into a place, where you shall suffer no other confinement, but to be kept out of the road of sin: You shall not be deprived of your grandeur, but only exchange the vain pomps and pageantry²⁸ of the world, empty titles and forms of state, for the true and solid Greatness of being able to despise *them*. You will only quit the chat of insignificant people for an ingenious Conversation; the froth of flashy wit for real wisdom; idle tales for instructive discourses. The deceitful Flatteries of those who, under the pretence of loving and admiring you, really served

²⁶ Meant to reassure Protestant uncomfortable with Catholic practices

²⁷ Refers to the world's constant distractions from religious growth

²⁸ Showy display and looks impressive, but it has no substance

their *own* base ends, for the seasonable Reproofs and wholesome counsels of your hearty well-wishers and affectionate friends, which will procure you those perfections your feigned lovers pretended you had, and kept you from obtaining. No uneasy task will be enjoined on you, all your labour being only to prepare for the highest degrees of that glory, the very lowest of which is more than at present you can conceive, and the prospect of it sufficient to outweigh all the pains of religion, were there any in it, as really there is none. All that is required of you is only to be as happy as possibly you can, and to make sure of a felicity that will fill all the capacities of your Souls! A happiness, which when once you have tasted, you'll be fully convinced, you could never do too much to obtain it; nor be too solicitous to adorn your souls, with such tempers²⁹ and dispositions, as will at present make you in some measure such holy and heavenly creatures, as you one day hope to be in a more perfect manner; without which Qualifications you can neither reasonably expect, nor are capable of enjoying the Happiness of the Life to come. Happy Retreat! which will be the introducing you into such a *Paradise* as your Mother *Eve* forfeited, where you shall feast on Pleasures, that do not, like those of the World, disappoint your expectations, pall your Appetites, and by the disgust they give you, put you on the fruitless search after new delights, which when obtained are as empty as the former; but such as will make you truly happy *now*, and prepare you to be perfectly so hereafter. Here are no Serpents to deceive you, whilst you entertain yourself in these delicious Gardens.

Provocations are given in this amicable society, but to love and to good works, which will afford such an entertaining employment, that you'll have as little inclination as leisure to pursue those follies which in the time of your ignorance passed with you under the name of love; ³⁰although there are not in nature two more different things, than true love, and that brutish passion which pretends to imitate it.³¹ There will be no rivalry, but for the love of God, let there be no ambition but to procure His favour, where nothing will more effectively recommend you than a great and dear affection to each other. Envy, that canker³², will not here disturb your breasts; for how can she resent another's welfare, who reckons it the greatest part of her own? No covetousness will gain admittance in this blessed home, except the desire to amass huge riches in good works, and to earn one of the brightest crowns of glory. You will not be solicitous to increase your fortunes, but enlarge your minds; regarding no grandeur like being conformable to the meek and humble Jesus. So that you only withdraw from the noise and trouble, the folly and temptation of the world, in order to more peacefully enjoy yourselves and all the innocent pleasures it can afford you, especially one which is worth all the rest: a noble, virtuous, and selfless friendship. In short, the place you are invited to will be a preview and antipast of Heaven.³³ Where your employment will be as there, to magnify God, and to love one another, and to communicate that useful knowledge, which, due by improvement of your time in study and contemplation, you will obtain. And when obtained, it will afford you a much sweeter and durable delight, than all those

²⁹ In this context, this does not mean anger, but instead it means one's character, moral quality, and or inner habits

³⁰ The distinction reflects contemporary moral philosophy separating virtuous, selfless affection from mere sexual desire or lust.

³¹ Instead of the modern interpretation of being non-human, in this context, they used the word creature to describe a human being created by God

³² a spreading ulcer or cancerous tumor, derived from the Latin word for "crab". This early definition included both a medical sense and the metaphorical one of a corroding, corrupting force

³³ Foretaste, specifically a first course to whet the appetite. A small taste of the joys of heaven

pitiful diversions, those revellings and amusements, which now, through your ignorance of better, appear the only grateful and relishing entertainment. But because we were not made for our selves, and since we cannot by any means effectually glorify God and do good to our own souls, but by doing good works of charity and beneficence to others; and to the intent, that every virtue may be exercised and promoted the most that may be, your retreat will be so managed to not exclude the good works of an active life, are not excluded from the pleasure and serenity of a contemplative life. Instead, by a proper mixture of both, you retain all the advantages, and avoid the inconveniences that attend either. It will not so cut you off from the world, as a way to hinder you from bettering and improving it; but rather qualify you to do the greatest good, and be a seminary to raise the kingdom with pious and prudent ladies. Whose hopes to be good examples, will influence the rest of their sex, so that women may no longer pass for those little useless and impertinent animals, which the ill conduct of too many, has caused them to be mistaken for.

We have previously considered our retreat only in relation to religion, which is indeed its main, I may say, its only purpose. Neither can this be thought of as too narrow a focus, since religion is the adequate business of our lives, and largely considered, encompasses everything we are meant to do. Nothing is a fit employment for a rational creature, which has neither a direct or remote connection to this great and only end. But because, as we have observed all along, religion never appears in its true beauty when it is accompanied with wisdom and discretion; and that without a good understanding, we can scarcely be truly, but never eminently good. Without knowledge we are liable to a thousand seductions and mistakes; for even the men themselves, if they do not have a competent degree of knowledge, they are carried about with every wind of doctrine.

Therefore, one great goal of this institution will be to expel that cloud of ignorance, which custom has kept us in, to furnish our minds with solid and useful knowledge, so that the souls of women may no longer be unadorned and neglected things.

It is not intended that religious women should waste their time, and trouble their heads about unconcerning matters, as the popularity of the world has labeled learning, the impertinency³⁴ has been excellently exposed by an ingenious Pen. Instead, they should busy themselves in a serious inquiry into necessary and perfective truths; something which it concerns them to know, and tends to their real interest and perfection. What that is, the excellent author just now mentioned, and has sufficiently informed them. Such a course of study will neither be too troublesome nor out of the reach of a Female Virtuoso;³⁵ for it is not intended she should spend her hours learning words but learning things. Therefore, she needs to know no more languages than necessary to acquaint herself with useful authors. Nor does she need to trouble herself in turning over a huge number of books, but take care to understand and digest a few well-chosen and good ones. Let her obtain the right ideas, and be truly acquainted with the nature of these objects that present themselves to her mind; then it will not matter whether or not she is able to tell what imaginative people have said about them. And if she thoroughly understands Christianity as professed by the³⁶ Church of England, that will be sufficient to confirm her in the truth, even though she cannot make a Catalogue³⁷ of every particular error that opposes it.

³⁴ The quality or state of not having anything to do with the matter at hand.

³⁵ A woman of exceptional skill; a master of an art by her talent and knowledge

³⁶ The author assumes a grounding in Anglican Christianity; a proper knowledge of its teachings is considered indispensable to being morally and spiritually complete.

³⁷ A list of heresies or mistaken doctrines opposed to church teachings

Indeed, a learned education of the women will appear so unfashionable that I began to feel uneasy about the proposition, but I was extremely pleased when I found a late ingenious Author, whose book I came across since writing this, agreed with me in my opinion. He speaks of the reputation that learning was about 150 years ago: “It was so very modish that the fair sex seemed to believe that ³⁸Greek and Latin added to their Charms; and Plato and Aristotle untranslated, were frequent Ornaments of their Closets. One would think by the effects that it was a proper way of educating them, since there are no accounts in History of so many great Women in any one Age, as are to be found between the years 15 and 1600.”

³⁹For since God has given women as well as men intelligent souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them? Since he has not denied us the ability of thinking, why should we not, at least in gratitude to him, use our thoughts on him, their noblest object, and not unworthily bestow them on trifles and gaieties of secular affairs? Being the soul was created for the contemplation of truth, as well as for the fruition of good. Is it not just as cruel and unjust to preclude women from the knowledge of the one, as well as the enjoyment of another? Especially since the will is blind and cannot choose only by the direction of the understanding, or to put it more properly, since the soul always wills according to what she understands. Therefore, if she misunderstands, she will misunderstand. And as practice strengthens and exalts any faculty, so through lack of using, it becomes cramped and lessened. If we make little or no use of our understanding, we shall shortly have none to use; and the more contracted, and inactive our deliberating and directive Power is, the more likely our power becomes unworthy and harmful decisions.

What is it but the lack of an ingenious education, that renders feminine conversations so insipid and foolish, and their solitude so unbearable? Learning is therefore necessary to render them more agreeable and useful in company, and to furnish them with becoming entertainment when alone. In this way, they may not be driven to those miserable habits, which too many make use of to put off their time, that precious gift that is never wasted in the hands of a judicious person. ⁴⁰And since our happiness in the next world depends so much on the dispositions we carry along with us out of this life, that without a right habitude and temper of mind, we are not capable of blissfulness; and seeing our bliss consists in the contemplation of the divine truth and beauty, as well as in the fruition of his goodness, can Ignorance be a fit preparation for heaven?

Isn’t it likely that she whose understanding has been busied about nothing trifles, should be capable of delighting herself in noble and sublime truths? Let those who deny us the improvement of our minds, either take up his paradox, who said, “That Women have no Souls”; which today, when souls are allowed to animals, would be as unphilosophical as it is rude; or else let them permit us to cultivate and improve our intellects. There is a kind of learning which is worse than the greatest ignorance: A woman may study plays and romances all her days, and be a great deal more “informed”, but never any the wiser for it. This kind of knowledge serves only to instruct her to engage in the practice of greatest follies. Yet, how can they fairly blame

³⁸ During the Renaissance and early modern period, knowledge of classical languages was considered a mark of refined intelligence, even for women, but was often superficial rather than practical.

³⁹ Formal education for women was rare in the 17th and 18th centuries; the text reflects early advocacy for cultivating women’s minds, not merely their accomplishments in social graces.

⁴⁰ The author emphasizes that ignorance weakens the soul’s capacity to choose rightly, a notion rooted in both Christian theology and early Enlightenment ideas about reason and virtue.

her, when they forbid, or at least, won't afford an opportunity for better? A rational mind will be engaged, it will never be satisfied in doing nothing; and if you neglect to provide it with good materials, it is likely to occupy itself with whatever has come to hand.