

A Serious Proposal
to the Ladies, For the
Advancement of Their
True and Greatest Interest

By Mary Astell

Markup and correction by Students and Staff of the University of Virginia

- [TP] -

A Serious
PROPOSAL

To the
Ladies,

For the Advancement of their true and greatest Interest.

By a Lover of her SEX.

LONDON

Printed for R. Wilkin at
the *King's Head* in *St. Paul's*
Churchyard , 1694.

A Serious
PROPOSAL
To the Ladies,
*For the Advancement of their
true and greatest Interest*

LADIES,

Since the Profitable Adventures that have gone abroad in the World,

- 2 -

have met with so great Encouragement, tho' the highest advantage they can propose, is an uncertain Lot for such matters as Opinion (not real worth) gives a value to; things which if obtain'd, are as flitting and fickle, as that Chance which is to dispose of them. I therefore persuade my self, you will not be less kind to a Proposition that comes attended with more certain and substantial Gain; whose only design is to improve your Charms and heighten your Value, by suffering you no longer to be cheap and contemptible. It wouls aim

- 3 -

is to fix that Beauty, to make it lasting and permanent, which Nature with all the helps of Art, cannot secure: And to place it out of the reach of Sickness and Old Age, by transferring it from a corruptible Body to an immortal Mind. An obliging Design, which wou'd procure them *inward* Beauty, to whom Nature has unkindly denied the *outward*; and not permit those Ladies who have comely Bodies, to tarnish their Glory with deformed Souls. Wou'd have you all be wits, or what is better Wise. Raise you above the Vulgar

- 4 -

by something more truly illustrious, than a founding Title, or a great Estate. Wou'd excite in you a generous Emulation to excel in the best things, and not in such Trifles as every mean person who has but Mony enough, may purchase as well as you. Not suffer you to take up with the low thought of distinguishing your selves by any thing that is not truly valuable; and procure you such Ornaments as all the Treasures of the *Indies* are not able to purchase. Wou'd help you to surpass the Men as much in Vertue and Ingenuity,

- 5 -

as you do in Beauty; that you may not only be as lovely, but as wise as Angels. Exalt and Establish your Fame, more than the best wrought *Poems*, and loudest *Panegyricks*, by ennobling your Minds with such Graces as really deserve it. And instead of the Fustian Compliments and Fulsome Flatteries of your Admirers, obtain for you the Plaudit of Good Men and Angels, and the approbation of him who cannot err. In a word, render you the Glory and Blessing of the present Age, and the Admiration and Pattern of the next.

And sure, I shall not need many words to persuade you to close with this Proposal. The very offer is a sufficient inducement; nor does it need the set-off's of *Rhetorick* to recommend it, were I capable, which yet I am not, of applying them with the greatest force. Since you cannot be so unkind to your selves, as to refuse your *real* Interest; I only entreat you to be so wise as to examine wherein it consists; for nothing is of worser consequence than to be deceiv'd in a matter of so great concern. 'Tis as little beneath your Grandeur as your Prudence, to examine

curiously what is in this case offer'd you; and to take care that cheating Hucksters don't impose upon you with deceitful Ware. This is a matter infinitely more worthy your Debates, than what Colours are most agreeable, or whats the Dress becomes you best? Your *Glass* will not do you half so much service as a serious reflection on your own Minds; which will discover Irregularities more worthy your Correction, and keep you from being either too much elated or depress'd by the representations of the other. 'Twill not be near so advantageous

to consult with your Dancing-master as with your own Thoughts, how you may with greatest exactness tread in the Paths of Vertue, which has certainly the most attractive *Air*, me and Wisdom the most graceful and becoming *Meen*: Let these attend you, and your Carriage will be always well compos'd, and ev'ry thing you do will carry its Charm with it. No solicitude in the adoration of your selves is discommended, provided you employ your care about that which is really your *self*; and do not neglect that particle of Divinity within

you, which must survive, and may (if you please) be happy and perfect when it's unsuitable and much inferiour Companion is mouldring into Dust. Neither will any pleasure be denied you, who are only desir'd not to catch at the Shadow and let the Substance go. You may be as ambitious as you please, so you aspire to the best *things*; and contend with your Neighbours as much as you can, that they may not outdo you in any commendable Quality. Let it never be said, that they to whom preeminence is so very agreeable, can be tamely content

that others shou'd surpass them in *this*, and precede them in a *better* World! Remember, I pray you, the famous Women of former Ages, the *Orinda* 's of late, and the more Modern *D'acier* and others, and blush to think how much is now, and will hereafter be said of them, when you your selves (as great a Figure as you make) must be buried in silence and forgetfulness! Shall your Emulation fail *there only*, where it is commendable? Why are you so preposterously humble, as not to contend for one of the highest Mansions in the Court of Heav'n? Believe

me Ladies, this is the only *Place* worth contending for; you are neither better nor worse in your selves for going before, or coming after *now*; but you are really so much the better, by how much the higher your

station is in an Orb of Glory. How can you be content to be in the world like Tulips in a Garden, to make a fine *shew* and be good for nothing; have all your Glories set in the grave, or perhaps much sooner? What your own sentiments are, I know not, but I cannot without pity and resentment reflect, that those Glorious Temples on which

- 12 -

your kind Creator has bestow'd such exquisite workmanship, shou'd enshrine no better than *Egyptian* Deities; be like a garnish'd Sepulchre, which for all it's glittering, has nothing within but Emptiness or Putrifaction! What a pity it is, that whilst your Beauty casts a lustre round about, your Souls which are infinitely more bright and radiant (of which if you had but a clear Idea, as lovely as it is, and as much as you now value it, you wou'd then despise and neglect the mean *Case* that encloses it) shou'd be suffer'd to overrun with Weeds, lye fallow

- 13 -

and neglected, unadorn'd with any Grace! Altho the Beauty of the Mind is necessary to secure those Conquests which your Eyes have gain'd; and Time that mortal Enemy to handsome Faces, has no influence on a lovely Soul, but to better and improve it. For shame, let us abandon that *Old*, and therefore one wou'd think, unfashionable employment of pursuing Butterflies and Trifles! No longer drudge on in the dull beaten road of Vanity and Folly so many have gone, before us; but dare to break the enchanted Circle that custom has

- 14 -

plac'd us in, atnd scorn the vulgar way of imitating all the Impertinencies of our Neighbours. Let us learn to pride our selves in something more excellent than the invention of a Fashion: And not entertain such a degrading thought of our own *worth*, as to imagine that our Souls were given us only for the service of our Bodies, and that the best improvement we can make of these, is to attract the eyes of men. We value *them* too much, and our selves too little, if we place any part of our worth in their Opinion; and do not think our *selves* capable of

- 15 -

Nobler Things than the pitiful Conquest of some worthless heart. She who has opportunities of making an interest in Heav'n, of obtaining the love and admiration of GOD and Angels, is too prodigal of her Time, and injurious to her Charms, to throw them away on vain insignificant men. She need not make her self so cheap, as to descend to Court their Applauses; for at the greater distance she keeps, and the more she is above them, the more effectually she secures their esteem and wonder. Be so generous then Ladies, as to do nothing unworthy of you; so

- 16 -

true to your Interest as not to lessen your Empire, and depreciate your Charms. Let not your Thoughts be wholly busied in observing what respect is paid you, but a part of them at least, in studying to deserve it. And after all, remember, *that* Goodness is the truest Greatness, to be wise for your selves, the greatest Wit, and that Beauty the most desirable, which will endure to Eternity.

Pardon me the seeming rudeness of this Proposal, which goes upon a supposition that there is something amiss in you, which it is

- 17 -

intended to amend. My design is not to expose, but to rectify your Failures. To be exempt from mistake, 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 divert themselves with our Miscarriages, are very often guilty of greater faults; and such as 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

- 18 -

from a Womans Pen. My earnest desire is, that you Ladies, would be as perfect and happy as 'tis 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 Piety which the men decry, and are the brightest Patterns of Religion that

- 19 -

the Age affords; 'tis my grief that all the rest of our Sex do not imitate such illustrious Patterns, and therefore I would have them increas'd and render'd more conspicuous, that Vice being put out of countenance, (because Vertue is the only thing in fashion) may sneak out of the world, and its darkness be dispell'd 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 are become very mean and contemptible, they would fain persuade the rest to be as despicable

- 20 -

and forlorn as they. We are indeed oblig'd to them for their management, in endeavouring to make us so; who use all artifice they can to spoil, 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

- 21 -

preposterous returns that the most of them make, to all the care and pains that is bestow'd on them, renders 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 endow'd them with greater propensions to Vertue, and a natural goodness of Temper *within*, which if duly manag'd, would raise them to the most eminent pitch of Heroick Vertue. Hither Ladies, I desire you

- 22 -

wou'd aspire, 'tis a noble and becoming Ambition; and to remove such Obstacles as lye in your way, is the design of this Paper. We will therefore enquire what it is that stops your flight, that keeps you groveling here below, like *Domitian* 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 Prudently, or that they are necessarily determined to folly, I must by no means

- 22 -

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.

- 23 -

The Incapacity, if there be any, is acquired not natural; 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

- 23 -

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 have excluded them from being Ornaments to their Families, and useful in their Generation; there is therefore no reason they should be content to be Cyphers in the World, useless at the best, and in a little time a burden and nuisance to all about them. And 'tis very great pity that they who are so apt to over-rate themselves in smaller matters, shou'd, where it most concerns

- 25 -

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 thro' all our Lives.

The Soil is rich and would, if well cultivated, produce a noble Harvest, if then the Unskilful Managers not only permit, but encourage noxious Weeds, tho' we shall suffer by their Neglect, yet

- 26 -

they ought not in justice to blame any but themselves, if they reap the Fruit of their own Folly. Women are from their very Infancy debar'd 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 shou'd make good that obliging Epithet of *Ignorant*, which out of an excess of good Manners, they are pleas'd to bestow on us!

- 27 -

One wou'd be apt to think indeed, that Parents shou'd take all possible care of *their* Childrens Education, not only for their sakes, but even for their *own*. And tho the Son convey the Name to Posterity, yet certainly a great Part of the Honour of their Families depends on their Daughters. 'Tis 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 the less obliging: But to procure that we may live wisely and happily in it, and be capable of

- 28 -

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 expos'd to temporal and eternal Miseries, is a wickedness, for which I want a Name; 'tis beneath Brutality, the Beasts are better natur'd, for they take care of their off-spring, till they are capable of caring for themselves. And, if Mothers had a due regard to their Posterity, how *Great* soever they are, they wou'd not think themselves too *Good* to perform what Nature

- 29 -

requires, nor thro' Pride and Delicacy remit the poor little one to the care of a Foster Parent. Or, if necessity inforce them to depute another to perform their Duty, they wou'd be as choice at least in the Manners and Inclinations, as they are in the complections of their Nurses, least 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 complain'd of, is so far improveable by the grace of GOD, upon our honest and hearty endeavours, that if we are not

- 30 -

wanting to our selves, we may all in *some*, tho 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 spoil'd, instead of being improv'd at first; if from our Infancy, we are nurs'd up in Ignorance and Vanity; are taught to be Proud and Petulent, Delicate and Fantastick, Humorous and Inconstant, 'tis not strange that the ill effects of this Conduct appears in all the future Actions of our Lives. And seeing it is Ignorance, either habitual or actual, which is

- 31 -

the cause of all sin, how are they like 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 'tis 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 Vertue.

For that Ignorance is the cause of most Feminine Vices may be instanc'd in that Pride and Vanity which is usually imputed to us, and

- 32 -

which, I suppose, if thoroughly sifted, will appear to be some way or other, the rise and Original of all the rest. These, tho 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 perfections

- 33 -

is no fault; tho to assume the Glory of our Excellencies to our selves, or to Glory in such as we really have not, are. And were Womens haughtiness express'd in disdainning to do a mean and evil thing; wou'd they pride themselves in somewhat truly perfective of a Rational Nature, there were 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 impos'd on with tinsel ware. If by reason of a false Light, or undue Medium, they chuse amiss; theirs is the loss, but the Crime is the

- 34 -

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 resemblance 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 pretence. From whence it easily follows, that she who has nothing else to

- 35 -

value her self upon, will be proud of her Beauty, or Money, and what that can purchase; and think her self mightily oblig'd to him, who tells her she has those Perfections which she naturally longs for. Her imbred 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 a cunning designing Enemy from without, has drawn over to his Party these Traytors within, he has the Poor unhappy Person at his Mercy, who now very glibly

- 36 -

swallows down his Poyson, because 'tis presented in a Golden Cup; and credulously hearkens to the most disadvantageous Proposals, because they come attended with a seeming esteem. She whose Vanity makes her swallow praises by the whole sale, 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

- 37 -

one of us naturally esteem; they are excellent things in themselves, and very worthy our regard; and by how much the readier we are to embrace what ever resembles them, by so much the more dangerous, it is that these venerable Names should be wretchedly abus'd, and affixt 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 they rightly Educated, had they obtain'd a well inform'd and discerning Mind, they would be proof against all these Batteries, see through and scorn those little silly Artifices which are us'd to ensnare and deceive them. Such an one would value her self only on her Vertue, and consequently be most chary of what she esteems so much. She would know, that not what others say, but what she her self 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 Plaudit of her own Mind; which moving on true Principles of Honour and Vertue, wou'd not fail on a review of it self to anticipate that delightful Eulogy she shall one day hear.

Whence is it 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 Appearance, and embrace those very things, which if we understood, we shou'd hate and

fly, but now are reconcil'd to, merely because they usurp the Name, tho they have nothing of the Nature of those venerable Objects we desire and seek? Were it not for this delusion, is it probable a Lady who passionately desires to be admir'd, shou'd ever consent to such Actions as render her base and contemptible? Wou'd she be so absurd as to think either to get love, or to keep it, by those methods which occasion loathing, and consequently end in hatred? Wou'd she reckon it a piece of her Grandeur, or hope to gain esteem by such excesses as really lessen her in the eyes of all considerate

and judicious persons? Wou'd she be so silly as to look big, and think her self the better person, because she has more Mony to bestow profusely, or the good luck to have a more ingenious Taylor or Milliner than her Neighbour? Wou'd she who by the regard she pays to Wit, seems to make some pretences to it, undervalue her Judgment so much as to admit the Scurrility and profane noisy Nonsense of men, whose Fore-heads are better than their Brains to pass under that Character? Wou'd she be so weak as to imagine that a few airy Fancies, joyn'd with a great deal of

Impudence (the right definition of modern Wit) can be speak him a Man of sense, who runs counter to all the sense and reason that ever appear'd in the world? than which nothing can be an Argument of greater shallowness, unless it be to regard and esteem him for it. Wou'd a woman, if she truly understood her self, be affected either with the praises or calumnies of those worthless persons, whose Lives are a direct contradiction to Reason, a very sink of corruption; by whom one wou'd blush to be commended, lest they shou'd be mistaken for Partners or

Connivers at their Crimes? Will she who has a jot of discernment think to satisfy her greedy desire of Pleasure, with those promising nothings that have again & again deluded her? Or, will she to obtain such Bubbles, run the risque of forfeiting 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 it's Beauty e're that Lease be out, and in the mean while neglect a

- 44 -

more glorious and durable Mansion! We wou'd never be so curious of the House, and so careless of the Inhabitant, whose beauty is capable of great improvement, and will endure for ever without diminution or decay!

Thus Ignorance and a narrow Education, lay the Foundation of Vice, and imitation and custom rear it up. Custom, that merciless torrent that carries all before. And which indeed can be stem'd by none but such as have a great deal of Prudence and a rooted Vertue. For 'tis but Decorous that she who is not capable of

- 45 -

giving better Rules, shou'd follow those she sees before her, lest she only change the instance, and retain the absurdity. 'T wou'd puzzle a considerate Person to account for all that Sin and Folly that is in the World, (whcih certainly has nothing in it self to recommend it,) did not custom help to solve the difficulty. For Vertue without question has on all accounts the preeminence of Vice 'tis abundantly more pleasant in the *Act*, as well as more advantagious in the *consequences*, as any one who will but rightly use her reason, in a serious reflection on her self, and the

- 46 -

nature of things, may easily perceive. 'Tis custom therefore, that Tyrant Custom, which is the grand motive to all those irrational choices which we daily see made in the World, so very contrary to our *present* interest and pleasure, as well as to our Future. We think it an unpardonable mistake, not to do what others do round about us, and part with our Peace and Pleasure as well as our Innocence & Vertue, meerly in compliance with an unreasonable Fashion. And having inur'd our selves to Folly, we know not how to quit it; we go on in Vice, not because we find satisfaction

- 47 -

in it, but because we are unacquainted with the Joys of Vertue.

Add to this the hurry and noise of the world, which does generally so busy and pre-engage 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 buz about our Ears, that we cannot attend to the Dictates of our Reason, nor to the soft whispers and winning persuasives of the divine Spirit, by whose assistance were we dispos'd to make use of it, we might

- 48 -

shake off these Follies, and regain our Freedom. But alas! to complete our misfortunes, by a continual application to Vanity and Folly, we quite spoil the contexture and frame of our Minds; so loosen and

dissipate, that nothing solid and substantial will stay in it. By an habitual inadvertency we render our selves 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

- 49 -

backwardness that appears in too many good persons, to stand up for, and propagate the Piety they profess; (so strangely are things transposed, that Vertue puts on the blushes, which belong to Vice, and Vice insults with the authority of Vertue!) and we have a pretty fair account of the Causes of our non-improvement.

When a poor Young Lady is taught to value her self on nothing but her Cloaths, and to think she's very fine when well accoutred. When she hears say, that 'tis Wisdom enough for her to know how to dress

- 50 -

her self, that she may become amiable in his eyes, to whom it appertains to be knowing and learned; who can blame her if she lay out her Industry and Money on such Accomplishments, and sometimes extends it farther than her misinformers desire she should? When she sees the vain and the gay, making 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

- 51 -

thing as they! What tho' she be sometimes told of another World, she has however a more lively perception of this, and may well think, that if her Instructors were in earnest, when they tell her of *hereafter*, they would not be so busied 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, 'tis enough for her to believe, to examine why, and wherefore belongs not to her. And therefore, though her Piety may be tall and spreading,

- 52 -

yet because it wants foundation and Root, the first rude Temptation overthrows and blasts it; or perhaps the short liv'd Gourd decays and withers of its own accord. But why should she be blamed for setting no great value on her Soul, whose noblest Faculty, her Understanding is render'd useless to her? Or censur'd for relinquishing a course of Life, whose Prerogatives she was never acquainted with, and tho' highly reasonable in it self, was put upon the embracing it, with as little reason as she now forsakes it? For if her Religion it self, be taken up as the Mode of the

- 53 -

Country, 'tis no strange thing that she lays it down again, in conformity to the Fashion. Whereas she whose Reason is suffer'd to display it self, to inquire into the grounds and Motives 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 'tis her Wisdom, her Interest, her Joy, not because she has been accustom'd 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 mov'd by the pitiful Allurements of sin, too wise and too well bottom'd to be undermin'd and supplanted 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 stedfast adherence to it. For tho the heart may be honest, it is but by chance that the Will is right, if the Understanding be ignorant and Cloudy. And whats the reason that we sometimes unhappily see persons falling off from their Piety, but

because 'twas their Affections, not their Judgment, that inclin'd them to be Religious? Reason and Truth are firm and immutable, she who bottoms on them is on sure ground: Humour and Inclination are sandy Foundations; and she who is sway'd by her Affections more than by her Judgment, owes the happiness of her Soul in a great measure to the temper of her Body; her Piety may perhaps blaze higher, but will not last so long. For the Affections are various and changeable, mov'd by every Object, and the last comer easily undoes whatever

its Predecessor had done before it. Such Persons are always in extreams; 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 extream. Having more *Heat* than *Light*, their Zeal out runs their knowledge and instead of representing Piety as it is in it self, the most lovely and inviting

thing imaginable, they expose it to the contempt and ridicule of the censorious World. Their Devotion being ricketed, starv'd and contracted in some of it's 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, atones for all the miscarriages of her Conversation: Not considering that 'tis 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 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, 'tis proper to apply a Remedy; single Medicines are too weak to cure such complicated Distempers, they require a full Dispensatory; and what wou'd 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 antient 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

- 60 -

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 Vertue may happen to raise against it.

Now as to the Proposal, it is to erect a *Monastery*, or if you will (to avoid giving offence to the scrupulous and injudicious, by names which tho innocent in themselves, have been abus'd by superstitious

- 61 -

Practices.) 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 myself,) would be the most probable method to amend the present, and improve the future Age. For here, those who are convinc'd of the emptiness of earthly Enjoyments, who are sick of the vanity of the world, and its impertinencies, may find more

- 62 -

substantial and satisfying entertainments, and need not be confin'd to what they justly loath. 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

- 63 -

to their own hearts. Such as are willing in a more peculiar and undisturb'd 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 cumbersome, so infectious, that altho' thro' the grace of GOD, and their own strict watchfulness, they are kept from sinking down into its corruptions, 'twill however damp their flight to heav'n, hinder them from attaining any eminent pitch of Vertue.

- 64 -

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 depriv'd of your grandeur, but only exchange the vain Poms and Pageantry of the world, empty Titles and Forms of State, for the true and solid Greatness of being able to

dispise *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 pretence of loving and admiring you, really served

- 65 -

their *own* base ends, for the seasonable Reproofs and wholsom 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 enjoyn'd 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 are able to conceive, and the prospect of it sufficient to out-weigh all the Pains of Religion, were there any in it, as really there is none. All that is requir'd of

- 66 -

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'l be fully convinc'd, you cou'd never do too much to obtain it; nor be too solicitous to adorn your Souls, with such tempers 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

- 67 -

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 obtain'd 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 your selves in these delicious Gardens.

- 68 -

No Provocations are given in this Amicable Society, but to Love and to good Works, which will afford such an entertaining employment, that you'l have as little inclination as leisure to pursue those Follies which in the time of your ignorance pass'd with you under the name of love; altho' there is not in nature two more different things, than *true Love*, and that *brutish Passion* which pretends to ape it. Here will be no Rivalling but for the love of GOD, no ambition but to procure his Favour, to which nothing will more effectually recommend you,

- 69 -

than a great and dear affection to each other. Envy, that Canker, will not here disturb your Breasts; for how can she repine at anothers wel-fare, who reckons it the greatest part of her own? No Covetousness will gain admittance in this blest abode, but to amass huge Treasures of good Works, and to procure one of the brightest Crowns of Glory. You will not be solicitous to encrease your Fortunes, but enlarge your Minds; esteeming 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, that you may more peaceably enjoy your selves, and all the innocent Pleasures it is able to afford you, and particularly that which is worth all the rest, a noble, Vertuous and Disinterest'd Friendship. And to compleat all that *acme* of delight which the devout Seraphic Soul enjoys, when dead to the World, she devotes her self entirely to the contemplation and fruition of her Beloved; when having disengag'd her self from all those Lets which hindred her from without, she moves in a direct and vigorous motion towards her

true and only Good, whom now she embraces and acquiesces in, with such an unspeakable pleasure, as is only intelligible to them who have tried and felt it, which we can no more describe to the dark and sensual part of Mankind, than we can the beauty of Colours, and harmony of Sounds, to the Blind and Deaf. In fine, the place to which you are invited will be a Type and Antipast of Heav'n, where your Employment will be as there, to magnify GOD, and to love one another, and to communicate that useful *knowledge*, which by the due improvement of

your time in Study and Contemplation you will obtain; and which when obtain'd, will afford you a much sweeter and durable delight, than all those pitiful diversions, those revellings and amusements, which now thro your ignorance of better, appear the only grateful and relishing Entertainments.

But because we were not made for our selves, nor can by any means so effectually glorify GOD, and do good to our own Souls, as by doing Offices of Charity and Beneficence to others; and to the intent, that every Vertue, and the highest degrees of every Vertue, may be exercis'd

& promoted the most that may be; your Retreat shall be so manag'd as not to exclude the good Works of an *Active*, from the pleasure and serenity of a *contemplative* Life, but by a due mixture of both, retain all the advantages, and avoid the inconveniencies that attend either. It shall not so cut you off from the world, as to hinder you from bettering and improving it; but rather qualify you to do it the greatest Good, and be a Seminary to stock the Kingdom with pious and prudent Ladies; whose good Example it is to be hop'd, will so influence the rest of their Sex, that Women may no longer pass for those little

useless and impertinent Animals, which the ill conduct of too many, has caus'd them to be mistaken for.

We have hitherto consider'd our Retirement only in relation to Religion, which is indeed its *main*, I may say, its *only* design; nor can this be thought too contracting a word, since Religion is the adequate business of our lives; and largely consider'd, takes in all we have to do; nothing being a fit employment for a rational Creature, which has not either a *direct* or *remote* tendency to this great and *only* end. But because, as we have all along observ'd, Religion never appears in it's true Beauty, but when it is accompanied

with Wisdom and Discretion; and that without a good Understanding, we can scarce be *truly*, but never *eminently* Good; being liable to a thousand seductions and mistakes; for even the men themselves, if they have not a competent degree of Knowledge, they are carried about with every wind of Doctrine. Therefore, one great end of this institution, shall be to expel that cloud of Ignorance, which custom has involv'd us in, to furnish our minds with a stock of solid and useful Knowledge, that the Souls of women may no longer be the only unadorn'd and neglected things. It is not intended

- 76 -

that our Religious shou'd waste their time, and trouble their heads about such unconcerning matters, as the vogue of the world has turn'd up for Learning; the impertinency of which has been excellently expos'd by an ingenious Pen, but busy themselves in a serious enquiry after *necessary* and *perfective* truths; something which it *concerns* them to know, and which tends to their real interest and perfection, and what that is, the excellent Author just now mention'd, will sufficiently inform them, such a course of Study will neither be too troublesome nor out of the reach of a Female Virtuoso;

- 77 -

for it is not intended she shou'd spend her hours in learning *words* but *things*, and therefore no more Languages than are necessary to acquaint her with useful Authors Nor need she trouble her self in turning over a huge number of Books, but take care to understand and digest a few well-chosen and good ones. Let her but obtain right Ideas, and be truly acquainted with the nature of those Objects that present themselves to her mind, and then no matter whether or no she be able to tell what fanciful people have said about them: And throughly to understand Christianity as profess'd by the *Church* of

- 78 -

England, will be sufficient to confirm her in the truth, tho she have not a Catalogue of those particular errors which oppose it. Indeed a Learned Education of the Women will appear so unfashionable, that I began to startle at the singularity of the proposition, but was extreemly pleas'd when I found a late ingenious Author (whose Book I met with since the writing of this) agree with me in my Opinion. For speaking of the Repute that Learning was in about 150 years ago: *It was so very modish* (says he), ^{Wotton} that *that the fair Sex seem'd to believe that Greek and Latin added*

- 79 -

to their Charms; and Plato and Aristotle untranslated, were frequent Ornaments of their Closets. One wou'd 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.

For, 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 faculty of Thinking, why shou'd we not (at least in gratitude to him) employ our Thoughts on himself, their noblest Object, and not unworthily bestow them on Trifles and Gaities

- 80 -

and secular Affairs? Being the Soul was created for the contemplation of Truth, as well as for the fruition of Good, is it not as cruel and unjust to preclude Women from the knowledge of the one, as well as from

the enjoyment of the other? Especially since the Will is blind, and cannot chuse but by the direction of the Understanding; or to speak more properly, since the Soul always Wills according as she #nderstands, so that, if she *Understands*, amiss she *Wills* amiss: And as Exercise enlarges and exalts any Faculty, so thro' want of using, it becomes cramped and lessened; if we make little or no use of our

- 81 -

Understandings we shall shortly have none to use; and the more contracted, and unemploy'd the deliberating and directive Power is, the more liable is the elective to unworthy and mischievous options. What is it but the want of an ingenious Education that renders the generality of Feminine Conversations so insipid and foolish, and their solitude so *insupportable*? Learning is therefore necessary to render them more agreeable and useful in company, and to furnish them with becoming entertainments when alone, that so they may not be driven to those miserable shifts, which too many make use of to put off their time,

- 82 -

that precious Talent that never lies on the hands of a judicious Person. And since our Happiness in the next world depends so far on those dispositions which we carry along with us out of this, that without a right habitude and temper of mind, we are not capable of Felicity; and seeing our Beatitude consists in the contemplation of the divine Truth and Beauty, as well as in the fruition of his Goodness, can Ignorance be a fit preparative for Heaven? Is't likely that she whose Understanding has been busied about nothing but froth and trifles, shou'd be capable of delighting her self in noble and sublime

- 83 -

Truths? Let such therefore as deny us the improvement of our Intellectuals, either take up *his* Paradox, who said, *That Women have no Souls*; which at this time a day, when they are allow'd to Brutes, wou'd be as unphilosophical as it is unmannerly; or else let them permit us to cultivate and improve them. There is a sort of Learning indeed which is worse than the greatest Ignorance: A woman may study Plays and Romances all her days, & be a great deal more knowing, but never a jot the wiser. Such a Knowledge as this serves only to instruct and put her forward in the practice of the greatest Follies;

- 84 -

yet how can they justly blame her, who forbid, or at least, won't afford opportunity of better? A rational mind will be employ'd, it *will* never be satisfy'd in doing nothing; and if you neglect to furnish it with good materials, 'tis like to take up with such as come to hand.

We pretend not that Women shou'd teach in the Church, or usurp Authority where it is not allow'd them; permit us only to understand our *own* duty, and not be forc'd to take it upon trust from others; to be at least so far learned, as to be able to form in our minds a true Idea of Christianity, it being so very necessary to fence us against

- 85 -

the danger of these *last* and *perilous days*, in which Deceivers, a part of whose Character is, to *lead captive silly Women*, need not *creep into Houses*, since they have Authority to proclaim their Errors on the *House top*. And let us also acquire a true Practical Knowledge, such as will convince us of the absolute necessity of *Holy Living*, as well as of *Right Believing*, and that no Heresy is more dangerous, than that

of an ungodly and wicked Life. And since the *French Tongue* is understood by most Ladies, methinks they may much better improve it by the study of Philosophy (as I hear the *French Ladies* do,) *Des Cartes*,

- 86 -

Malebranch, and others, than by reading idle *Novels* and *Romances*. 'Tis strange we shou'd be so forward to imitate their Fashions and Fopperies, and have no regard to what is truly imitable in them! And why shall it not be thought as genteel, to understand *French Philosophy*, as to be accoutred in a *French Mode*? Let therefore the famous *Madam D'acier*, &c. , and our own incomparable *Orinda*, excite the Emulation of the English Ladies.

The Ladies, I'm sure, have no reason to dislike this Proposal, but I know not how the Men will resent it, to have their enclosure broke down, and Women invited

- 87 -

to tast of that Tree of Knowledge they have so long unjustly *monopoliz'd*. But they must excuse me, if I be as partial to my own Sex as they are to theirs, and think Women as capable of Learning as Men are, and that it becomes them as well. For I cannot imagine wherein the hurt lyes, if instead of doing mischief to one another, by an uncharitable and vain Conversation, women be enabled to inform and instruct those of their own Sex at least; the Holy Ghost having left it on record, that *Priscilla* as well as her Husband catechis'd the eloquent *Apollos*, and the great Apostle found no fault with her. It will therefore

- 88 -

be very proper for our Ladies to spend part of their time in this Retirement, in adorning their minds with useful Knowledge.

To enter into the detail of the particulars concerning the Government of the *Religious*, their Offices of Devotion, Employments, Work, &c. is not now necessary. Suffice it at present to signify, that they will be more than ordinarily careful to redeem their time, spending no more of it on the Body than the necessities of Nature require, but by a judicious choice of their Employment, and a constant industry about it, so improve this invaluable Treasure, that it may neither

- 89 -

be buried in Idleness, nor lavish'd out in unprofitable concerns. For a stated portion of it being daily paid to GOD in Prayers and Praises, the rest shall be employ'd in innocent, charitable, and useful Business; either in study (in learning themselves, or instructing others; for it is design'd that part of their Employment be the Education of those of their own Sex) or else in spiritual and corporal Works of Mercy, relieving the Poor, healing the Sick, mingling Charity to the Soul with that they express to the Body, instructing the Ignorant, counselling the Doubtful, comforting the Afflicted, and correcting those that err and do amiss.

- 90 -

And as it will be the business of their lives, their meat and drink to *know* and *do* the Will of their heavenly Father, so will they pay a strict conformity to all the Precepts of their holy Mother the *Church*, whose sacred Injunctions are too much neglected, even by those who pretend the greatest zeal for her. For, besides the daily performance of the Publick Offices after the Cathedral manner, in the most affecting and

elevating way, the celebration of the Holy Eucharist every Lords Day and Holyday, and a course of solid instructive Preaching and Catechizing; our Religious, considering that the holy JESUS punctually

- 91 -

observ'd the innocent usages of the *Jewish* Church; and tho in many instances the *reason* of the Command ceas'd as to him, yet he wou'd obey the *letter* to avoid giving offence, and to set us an admirable pattern of Obedience; therefore, tho' it may be thought such pious Souls have little occasion for the severities of fasting and mortification; yet, they will consider it as a special part of their Duty, carefully to observe all the Fasts of the Church, *viz. Lent, Ember, and Rogation-days, Fridays*, Fridays and *Vigils*; times so little heeded by the most, that one wou'd scarce believe them set apart for Religious Purposes, did

- 92 -

we not find them in the antiquated Rubricks. And their Devotion will be regular, so shall it likewise be solid and substantial. They will not rest in the mere out-side of Duty, nor fancy the performance of their Fasts and Offices will procure them license to indulge a darling Vice. But having long since laid the Ax to the root of sin, and destroy'd the whole body of it, they will look upon these holy times of recollection and extraordinary Devotion (without which Fasting signifies little) as excellent means to keep it down, and to pluck up every the least Fibre that may happen to remain in them. But we intend

- 93 -

not by this to impose any intolerable burden on tender Constitutions, knowing that our Lord has taught us, that Mercy is to be prefer'd before Sacrifice; and that Bodily Exercise profiteth but a little, the chief business being to obtain a divine and God-like temper of Mind.

And as this institution will strictly enjoyn all pious and profitable Employments, so does it not only permit but recommend harmless and ingenious Diversions, Musick particularly, and such as may refresh the Body, without enervating the mind. They do a disservice to Religion who make it an enemy to innocent

- 95 -

Nature, and injure the Almighty when they represent him as imposing burdens that are not to be born. Neither GOD nor Wise men will like us the better, for an affected severity and waspish sourness. Nature and Grace will never disagree, provided we mistake not the one, nor indulge the petulency of the other; there being no Displacencies in Religion, but what we our selves have unhappily made. For true Piety is the most sweet and engaging thing imaginable, as it is most obliging to others, so most easie to our selves. 'Tis in truth the highest *Epicurism*, exalting our Pleasures by resining

- 94 -

them; keeping our Appetites in that due regularity which not only Grace, but Nature and Reason require, in the breach of which, tho' there may be a Transport, there can be no true and substantial delight.

As to *Lodging, Habit* and *Diet*, they may be quickly resolv'd on by the Ladies who shall subscribe; who I doubt not will make choice of what is most plain and decent, what Nature, not Luxury requires. And since neither Meat nor Cloaths commend us unto GOD, they'l content themselves with such things as are fit and convenient, without occasioning scruple to themselves, or giving any

trouble or offence to others. She who considers to how much better account that Money will turn, which is bestow'd on the Poor, then that which is laid out in unnecessary Expences on her self, needs no Admonitions against superfluities: She who truly loves her self, will never waste that Money on a decaying Carkass, which if prudently disburs'd, wou'd procure her an eternal Mansion. She will never think her self so fine, as when the backs of the Poor do bless her; and never feast so luxuriously as when she treats an hungry person. No perfume will be thought so grateful as the Odour of Good

Works; nor any Wash so beautifying as her own tears. For her Heroic Soul is too great to ambition any Empire but that of her own Breast; or to regard any other Conquest than the rescuing poor unhappy-Souls from the slavery of Sin and Satan, those only unsupportable Tyrants; and therefore what Decays she observes in her Face will be very unconcerning, but she will with greatest speed and accuracy rectify the least Spot that may prejudice the beauty of her lovely Soul.

In a word, this happy Society will be but one Body, whose Soul is love, animating and informing it, and perpetually

breathing forth it self in flames of holy desires after GOD, and acts of Benevolence to each other. Envy and Uncharitableness are the Vices only of little and narrow hearts, and therefore 'tis suppos'd, they will not enter here amongst persons whose Dispositions as well as their Births are to be Generous. Censure will refine into Friendly Admonition, all Scoffing and offensive Railleries will be abominated and banish'd hence; where not only the Words and Actions, but even the very Thoughts and Desires of the Religious, tend to promote the most endearing Love, and universal Good-

will; for tho' there may be particular Friendships, they must by no means prejudice the general Amity. Thus these innocent and holy Souls shou'd run their Race, measuring their hours by their Devotions, and their days by the charitable Works they do. Thus wou'd they live the life of Heaven whilst on Earth, and receive an Earnest of its Joys in their hearts. And now, what remains for them to do at Night, but to review the Actions of the Day? to examine what Passions have been stirring? How their Devotions were perform'd? in what temper their Hearts are? what good they have done? and what

progress made towards Heaven? and with the plaudit of a satisfied Conscience sweetly to sleep in peace and safety, Angels pitching their Tents round about them, and he that neither slumbers nor sleeps, rejoicing over them to do them good!

And to the end, that these great designs may be the better pursu'd, and effectually obtain'd, care shall be taken that our Religious be under the tuition of persons of irreproachable Lives, of a consummate Prudence, sincere Piety, and unaffected Gravity. No Novices in Religion, but such as have spent the greatest part of their lives in the study and practice of

Christianity; who have lived *much*, whatever the time of their abode in the world has been. Whose understandings are clear and comprehensive, as well as their Passions at command, and Affections regular; and their knowledge able to govern their Zeal. Whose scrutiny into their own hearts has been so exact, that they fully understand the weaknesses of human Nature, are able to bear with its defects, and by the most prudent methods procure its Amendment. Plentifully furnish'd with instructions for the ignorant, and comfort for the disconsolate. Who know how to quicken the slothful, to awaken

the secure, and to dispel the doubts of the Scrupulous. Who are not ignorant when to use the Spur, and when the Rein, but duly qualified to minister to all the spiritual wants of their Charge. Watching over their Souls with tenderness and prudence; applying fitting Medicines with sweetness & affability. Sagacious in discovering the very approaches of a fault, wise in preventing, and charitable in bearing with all pityable Infirmities. The sweetness of whose Nature is commensurate to all the rest of their good Qualities, and all conspire together to make them lov'd and reverenc'd. Who have the

perfect government of themselves, and therefore rule according to Reason, not Humour, consulting the good of the Society, not their own arbitrary sway. Yet know how to assert their Authority when there is just occasion for it, and will not prejudice their Charge, by an indiscreet remissness and loosning the Reins of discipline. Yet what occasion will there be for rigour, when the design is to represent Vertue in all her Charms and native Loveliness, which must needs attract the eyes, and enamour the hearts of all who behold her? To joyn the sweetness of Humanity to the strictness of Philosophy, that both together

being improv'd and heighten'd by grace, may make up an accomplish'd *Christian*; who (if truly so) is certainly the best-bred and best-natur'd person in the world, adorn'd with a thousand Charms, most happy in her self, and most agreeable and beneficial to all about her. And that every one who comes under this holy Roof, may be such an amiable, such a charming Creature, what faults they bring with them shall be corrected by sweetness, not severity; by friendly Admonitions, not magisterial Reproofs; Piety shall not be roughly impos'd, but wisely insinuated by a perpetual Display of the

Beauties of Religion in an exemplary Conversation, the continual and most powerful Sermon of an holy Life. And since Inclination can't be forc'd, (and nothing makes people more uneasy than the fettering themselves with unnecessary Bonds) there shall be no Vows or irrevocable Obligations, not so much as the fear of Reproach to keep our Ladies here any longer than they desire. No: Ev'ry act of our Religious Votary shall be voluntary and free, and no other tye but the Pleasure, the Glory and Advantage of this blessed Retirement, to confine her to it.

And now, I suppose, you will save me the labour of

proving, that this institution will very much serve the ends of Piety and Charity; it is methinks self-evident, and the very Proposal sufficient proof. But if it will not promote these great ends, I shall think my self mightily oblig'd to him that will shew me what will; for provided the good of my Neighbour be advanc'd, 'tis very indifferent to me, whether it be by my method or by anothers. Here will be no impertinent Visits, no foolish Amours, no idle Amusements to distract our Thoughts, and waste our precious time; a very little of which is spent in Dressing, that grand devourer, and its concomitants;

- 107 -

and no more than necessity requires in sleep and eating; so that here's an huge Treasure gain'd, which for ought I know, may purchase an happy Eternity. But we need not rest in generals, a cursory view of some particulars will sufficiently demonstrate the great usefulness of such a Retirement; which will appear by observing first, a few of those inconveniences to which Ladies are expos'd, by living in the world, and in the next place the positive advantages of a Retreat.

And first, as to the inconveniences of living in the World; no very small one is that strong *Idea* and warm perception it gives us of its

- 108 -

Vanities; since these are ever at hand, constantly thronging about us, they must necessarily push aside all other Objects, and the Mind being prepossess'd and gratefully entertain'd with those pleasing Perceptions which external Objects occasion, takes up with them as its only Good, is not at leisure to taste those delights which arise from a Reflection on it self, nor to receive the *Ideas* which such a Reflection conveys, and consequently forms all its Notions by such *Ideas* only as sensation has furnish'd it with, being unacquainted with those more excellent ones which arise from its own

- 109 -

operations and a serious reflection on them, and which are necessary to correct the mistakes, and supply the defects of the other. From whence arises a very partial knowledge of things, nay, almost a perfect ignorance in things of the greatest moment. For tho we are acquainted with the Sound of some certain words, v. g. *God, Religion, Pleasure* and *Pain, Honour* and *Dishonour*, and the like; yet having no other *Ideas* but what are convey'd to us by those Trifles we converse with, we frame to our selves strange & awkward notions of them, conformable only to those *Ideas* sensation has furnish'd us with, which

- 110 -

sometimes grow so strong and fixt, that 'tis scarce possible to introduce a new Scheme of Thoughts, and so to disabuse us, especially whilst these Objects are thick about us.

Thus she who sees her self and others respected in proportion to that Pomp and Bustle they make in the world, will form her *Idea* of Honour accordingly. She who has relish'd no Pleasures but such as arise at the presence of outward Objects, will seek no higher than her Senses for her Gratification. And thus we may account for that strange insensibility that appears in some people when you speak to them of any serious

- 111 -

religious matter. They are then so dull you'll have much ado to make them understand the clearest Truth: Whereas if you rally the same persons, or chat with them of some Mode or Foppery, they'll appear very quick, expert, and ingenious. I have sometimes smil'd to hear Women talk as gravely and concernedly about some trifling disappointment from their Milliner or Taylor, as if it had related to the weightiest concerns of their Soul, nay, perhaps more seriously than others who wou'd pass for Good, do about their eternal Interest; but turn the talk that way, and they grow as heavy and cold as

- 112 -

they were warm and sensible before. And whence is this, but because their heads are full of the one, and quite destitute of such Ideas as might give them a competent notion of the other; and therefore to discourse of such matters, is as little to the purpose as to make Mathematical Demonstrations to one who knows not what an Angle or Triangle means. (Hence by the way, will appear the great usefulness of judicious Catechizing, which is necessary to stir up clear Idea's in the mind, without which it can receive but little benefit from the Discourses of the Pulpit, and perhaps the neglect of the former

- 113 -

is the reason that the great plenty of the latter has no better effect.) By all which it appears, that if we wou'd not be impos'd on by false Representations and Impostures, if we wou'd obtain a due knowledge of the most important things, we must remove the little Toys and Vanities of the world from us, or our selves from them; enlarge our Ideas, seek out new Fields of Knowledge, whereby to rectify our first mistakes.

From the same Original, *viz.* the constant flattery of external Objects, arises that querulousness and delicacy observable in most Persons of Fortune, and which betrays

- 114 -

them to many inconveniencies. For besides that, it renders them altogether unfit to bear a change, which considering the great uncertainty, the swift vicissitudes of worldly things, the Greatest and most established, ought not to be unprepar'd for; besides this, it makes them perpetually uneasy, abates the delight of their enjoyments, for such persons will very rarely find all things to their mind, and then some little disorder which others wou'd take no notice of, like an aching Tooth or Toe, spoils the relish of their Joys. And tho many great Ladies affect this temper, mistaking it for a

- 115 -

piece of Grandeur, 'tis so far from that, that it gives evidence of a poor weak Mind; a very childish Humour, that must be cocker'd and fed with Toys and Baubles to still its frowardness; & is like the crazy stomach of a sick Person, which no body has reason to be fond of or desire.

This also disposes them to Inconstancy, (for she who is continually supply'd with variety, knows not where to fix,) a Vice which some women seem to be proud of, and yet nothing in the world so reproachful and degrading, because nothing is a stronger evidence of a weak and injudicious mind. For it supposes us either so ignorant as

- 116 -

to make a wrong Choice at first, or else so silly as not to know and stick to it, when we have made a right one. It bespeaks an unthinking inconsiderate Mind, one that lives at Random, without any design or end; who wanting judgment to discern where to fix, or to know when she's well, is ever fluctuating and uncertain, undoing to day what she had done yesterday, which is the worst Character that can be given of ones Understanding.

A constant Scene of Temptations, and the infection of ill company, is another great danger, which conversing in the world exposes to. 'Tis a dangerous thing to have all

- 117 -

the opportunities of sinning in our power, and the danger is increas'd by the ill Precedents we daily see of those who take them. *Liberty* (as some body says) *will corrupt an Angel*. And tho it is indeed more glorious to conquer than to fly, yet since our Vertue is so visibly weakned in other instances, we have no reason to presume on't in this. 'Tis become no easy matter to secure our Innocence in our necessary Civilities and daily Conversations; in which, if we have the good luck to avoid such as bring a necessity on us, either of seeming rude to them, or of being really so to GOD Almighty, whilst

- 118 -

we tamely hear him, our best Friend and Benefactor affronted, and swallow'd it, at the same time, that we wou'd reckon't a very pitiful Spirit to hear an Acquaintance traduc'd and hold our Tongue; yet, if we avoid this Trial, our Charity is however in continual danger, Censoriousness being grown so modish, that we can scarce avoid being active or passive in it; so that she who has not her pert jest ready to pass upon others, shall as soon as her back is turn'd, become a Jest her self for want of Wit.

In consequence of all this, we are insensibly betray'd to a great loss of time, a Treasure

- 119 -

whose value we are too often quite ignorant of, till it be lost past redemption. And yet, considering the shortness and uncertainty of Life, the great work we have to do, and what advantages accrew to us by a due management of our time, we cannot reconcile it with prudence to suffer the least minute to escape us. But besides our own lavish Expences (concerning which one may ask as *Solomon* does of Labour, *What Fruit have we of all that Sport and Pastime we have taken under the Sun?*) So unreasonable is the humour of the World, that those who wou'd reckon it a rudeness to make so bold with

- 120 -

our Mony, never scruple to waste, and rob us of this infinitely more precious Treasure.

In the last place, by reason of this loss of time and the continual hurry we are in, we can find no opportunities for thoughtfulness and recollection; we are so busied with what passes abroad, that we have no leisure to look at home, nor to rectify the disorders there. And such an unthinking mechanical way of living, when like Machins we are condemn'd every day to repent the impertinencies of the day before; shortens our Views, contracts our Minds, exposes to a thousand practical Errors, and renders

- 121 -

Improvement impossible, because it will not permit us to consider and recollect, which is the only means to attain it. So much for the inconveniences of living in the World; if we enquire about Retirement, we shall find it does not only remove all these, but brings considerable advantages of its own.

For first, it helps us to mate custom, and delivers us from its Tyranny, which is the most considerable thing we have to do, it being nothing else but the habituating our selves to Folly that can reconcile us to it. But how hard is it to quit an old road? What courage as well as prudence

- 122 -

does it require? How clear a Judgment to overlook the Prejudices of Education and Example, and to discern what is best, and how strong a resolution, notwithstanding all the Scoffs and Noises of the world to adhere to it! For Custom has usurpt such an unaccountable Authority, that she who wou'd endeavour to put a stop to its Arbitrary Sway, and reduce it to Reason, is in a fair way to render her self the *Butt* for all the Fops in Town to shoot their impertinent Censures at. And tho a wise Woman will not value their Censure, yet she cares not to be the subject of their Discourse. The only

- 123 -

way then is to retire from the world, as the *Israelites* did out of *Egypt*, lest the Sacrifice we must make of its Follies, shou'd provoke its Spleen.

This also puts us out of the road of temptation, and very much redeems our Time, cutting off those extravagancies on which so much of it was squandred away before. And furnishing us constantly with good employment, secures us from being seduc'd into bad. Great are the Benefits of holy Conversation which will be here enjoy'd: As Vice is, so Vertue may be catching; and to what heights of Piety will not she advance, who is plac'd where the sole Business

- 124 -

is to be Good, where there is no pleasure but in Religion, no contention but to excel in what is truly commendable; where her Soul is not defil'd nor her Zeal provok'd, by the sight or relation of those Villanies the World abounds with?

And by that Learning which will be here afforded, and that leisure we have, to enquire after it, and to know and reflect on our own minds, we shall rescue our selves out of that woful incogitancy we have slipt into, awaken our sleeping Powers, and make use of that reason which GOD has given us. We shall then begin to wonder at our Folly, that amongst

- 125 -

all the pleasures we formerly pursued, we never attended to that most noble and delicious one which the chase of truth affords us; and bless our selves at last, that our eyes are open'd to discern how much more pleasantly we may be entertain'd by our own Thoughts, than by all the Diversions which the world affords us. By this means we are fitted to receive the influences of the holy Spirit, and are put in a due frame of Devotion. No doubt but he has often knock'd at the door of our hearts, when the croud and noise of our Vanities would not suffer us to regard or hear him; and could find no admittance

- 126 -

when our house was so fill'd with other company. Here therefore is the fittest place for his Entertainment, when we are freed from outward disturbances, and entirely at leisure to attend so divine a Guest. Our Devotions will be perform'd with due attention, those Objects that used to distract being now remov'd from us; simplicity of desire will beget simplicity of thought, and that will make our minds most intense and elevated, when we come to address our selves to the Throne of Grace. Being dead to the things of this world, we shall with greater fervour petition for those of another; and living always in a lively

- 127 -

and awful sense of the divine Majesty, our hearts will ever be dispos'd to approach him in the most solemn, serious and reverent manner. 'Tis a very unseemly thing to jump from our Diversions to our Prayers; as if when we have been entertaining our selves and others with Vanity, we were instantly prepar'd to appear in the sacred presence of GOD. But a Religious Retirement and holy Conversation, will procure us a more serious Temper, a graver Spirit, and so both make us constantly sit to approach, and likewise stir us up to be more careful in our preparations when we do. For besides all other

- 128 -

improvements of knowledge, we shall hereby obtain truer Notions of GOD than we were capable of before, which is of very great consequence, since the want of right apprehensions concerning him, is the general cause of mistakes in Religion, and Errors in Practice; for as he is the noblest Object of our Understanding, so nothing is more necessary or of such consequence to us as to busy our thoughts about him. And did we rightly consider his Nature, we shou'd neither dare to forget him, nor draw near to him with unclean hands, and unholy hearts.

From this sacred Mountain where the world will

- 129 -

be plac'd at our feet, at such a distance from us, that the steams of its corruptions shall not obscure our eyesight; we shall have a right prospect of it, and clearly discern that all its Allurements, all those Gaities and Pageantries which at present we admire so much, are no better than insignificant Toys, which have no value but what our perverse Opinion imposes on them. Things which contribute so very little to our real Good, that even at *present*, which is their only season, we may live much happier without than with them; and which are so far from being necessary to true Felicity, that they

- 130 -

shall vanish and be no more when that is consummate and perfect. Many are the Topic's from whence we might declaim against the vanity of the world, but methinks Experience is so convincing, that it supersedes all the rest, and wou'd certainly reclaim us from the immoderate love of earthly enjoyments, did we but seriously hearken to it. For tell me Ladies, if your greatest Pleasures are not attended with a greater sting; when you think to grasp them, do they not either vanish into froth, or gall your fingers? To want, or to enjoy them, is equally tormenting; the one produces in you the Pain

- 131 -

of Hunger, the other of Loathing. For in reality, there is no good in them, nothing but the Shadow and Appearance; if there were, you cou'd not so easily loath your old Delights, and be so fond of variety, what

is truly desirable never ending in disgust. They are not therefore Pleasures but Amusements which you now pursue, and which, through your ignorance of better Joys, pretend to fill their place; toll you on with fair pretences, and repay your Labour with defeated Hopes. Joys, not near so lasting as the slightest toy you wear; the most capricious Humorist among you is more constant far than

- 132 -

they. Come hither therefore and take a true view of 'em, that you may no longer deceive your selves with that which profits not; but spurning away these empty nothings, secure a portion in such a Bliss as will not fail, as cannot disappoint you! A Felicity which depending on GOD only and your own Minds, is out of Fortunes reach, will place you above the Batteries of the world, above its Terrors and Allurements, and enable you at once to triumph over, and despise it. And what can be more glorious, than to have a mind unshaken by the blandishments of Prosperity, or the rough shocks of Adversity;

- 133 -

that passes thro both with the same indifferency and integrity, is not to be tempted by either to a mean unworthy and indecent Action?

Farther yet, besides that holy emulation which a continual view of the brightest and most exemplary Lives will excite in us; we shall have opportunity of contracting the purest and noblest Friendship; a Blessing, the purchase of which were richly worth all the world besides! For she who possesses a worthy Person, has certainly obtain'd the richest Treasure! a Blessing that Monarchs may envy, and she who enjoys is happier than

- 134 -

she who fills a Throne! a Blessing, which next to the love of GOD, is the choicest Jewel in our Caelestial Diadem, which, were it duly practic'd, wou'd both fit us for heav'n, and bring it down into our hearts whilst we tarry here. For Friendship is a Vertue which comprehends all the rest; none being fit for this, who is not adorn'd with every other Vertue. Probably one considerable cause of the degeneracy of the present Age, is the little true Friendship that is to be found in it; or perhaps you will rather say, that this is the effect of our corruption. The cause and the effect are indeed reciprocal;

- 135 -

for were the world better, there wou'd be more Friendship, and were there more Friendship we shou'd have a better world. But because *Iniquity abounds*, therefore the *love of many* is not only *waxen cold*, but quite benum'd and perish'd. But if we have such narrow hearts, be so full of mistaken Self-love, so unreasonably fond of our selves, that we cannot spare a hearty Good-will to one or two choice Persons, how can it ever be thought, that we shou'd well acquit our selves of that Charity which is due to all mankind? For Friendship is nothing else but Charity contracted; it is (in the words of an admired Author)

- 136 -

a kind of revenging our selves on the narrowness of our Faculties, by exemplyfying that extraordinary charity on one or two, which we are willing, but not able to exercise towards all. And therefore 'tis without doubt, the best Instructor to teach us our duty to our Neighbour, and a most excellent Monitor to excite us to make payment as far as our power will reach. It has a special force to dilate our hearts, to deliver them from

that vicious selfishness and the rest of those *sordid passions*, which express a narrow illiberal temper, and are of such pernicious consequence to mankind. That institution therefore,

- 137 -

must needs be highly beneficial, which both disposes us to be friends our selves, and helps to find them. But by Friendship I do not mean any thing like those intimacies that are about in the world, which are often combinations in evil, and at best but insignificant dearnesses; as little resembling true Friendship, as Modern Practice does Primitive Christianity. But I intend by it the greatest usefulness, the most refin'd and disinterest'd Benevolence, a love that thinks nothing within the bounds of Power and Duty, too much to do or suffer for its Beloved: And makes no distinction

- 138 -

betwixt its Friend and its self, except that in Temporals it prefers her interest. But tho it be very desirable to obtain such a Treasure, such a Medicine of Life, (as the wise man speaks) yet the danger is great, least being deceiv'd in our choice, we suck in Poyson where we expected Health. And considering how apt we are to disguise our selves, how hard it is to know our own hearts, much less anothers, it is not advisable to be too hasty in contracting so important a Relation; before that be done, it were well if we could look into the very Soul of the beloved Person, to discover what resemblance

- 139 -

it bears to our own, and in this Society we shall have the best opportunities of doing so. There are no interests here to serve, no contrivances for another to be a stale to; the Souls of all the Religious will be open and free, and those particular Friendships must be no prejudice to the general Amity. But yet, as in Heav'n, that region of perfect Love, the happy Souls (as some are of opinion) now and then step aside from more general Conversations, to entertain themselves with a peculiar friend; so, in this little emblem of this blessed place, what shoud hinder, but that two Persons of a sympathizing disposition

- 140 -

the *make* and *frame* of whose Souls bears an exact conformity to each other, and therefore one wou'd think, were purposely design'd by Heaven to unite and mix; what shou'd hinder them from entring into an holy combination to watch over each other for Good, to advise, encourage and direct, and to observe the minutest fault in order to its amendment. The truest effect of love being to endeavour the bettering the beloved Person. And therefore nothing is more likely to improve us in Vertue, and advance us to the very highest pitch of Goodness, than unfeigned Friendship, which is the most

- 141 -

beneficial, as well as the most pleasant thing in the world.

But to hasten; such an institution will much confirm us in Vertue, and help us to persevere to the end, and by that substantial Piety and solid Knowledge, we shall here acquire, fit us to propagate it when we return into the World. An habitual Practice of Piety for some years will so root and establish us in it, that Religion will become a second Nature, and we must do strange violences to our selves, if after that we dare venture to oppose it. For besides all the other Advantages that Vertue has over Vice, this will disarm it of *Custom*, the only thing

that recommends it, bravely win its strongest Fort, and turn its own Cannon against it self. How almost impossible wou'd it be for her to sin, whose Understanding being clearly illuminated with the knowledge of the Truth, is too wise to be impos'd on by those false *representations* that sin wou'd deceive it with; whose will has found out and united it self to its true *Centie*; and having been long habituated to move in a *right* line, has no temptation to decline to an *Oblique*. Whose affections have daily regaled on those delicious Fruits of Paradise, which Religion presents them with, and are therefore too sublime and refin'd

to relish the muddy Pleasures of sensual Delights. It must certainly be a Miracle if such an one relinquish her Glory and Joy; she must be as bad as *Lucifer* himself who after such Enjoyments can forsake her Heaven. 'Tis too unreasonable to imagine such an Apostacy, the supposition is monstrous, & therefore we may conclude will never, or very rarely happen. And then what a blessed world shou'd we have, shining with so many stars of Vertue! Who, not content to be happy themselves, for that's a narrowness of mind too much beneath their Godlike temper, would like the glorious Lights of Heav'n, or

rather like him who made them, diffuse their benign Influences round about. Having gain'd an entrance into Paradise themselves, they wou'd both shew the way and invite all others to partake of their felicity. Instead of that froth and impertinence, that Censure and Pragmaticalness, with which Feminine Conversations so much abound, we should hear their tongues employ'd in making Proselytes to heaven, in running down Vice, in establishing Vertue, and proclaiming their Makers Glory. 'Twou'd be more genteel to give and take instructions about the ornaments of the Mind, than to

enquire after the Mode; and a Lecture on the Fashions wou'd become as disagreeable as at present any serious discourse is. Not the Follies of the Town, but the Beauties and the Love of JESUS wou'd be the most polite and delicious Entertainment. 'Twould be thought as rude and barbarous to send our Visitors away uninstructed, as our foolishness at present reckons it to introduce a pertinent and useful Conversation. Ladies of Quality wou'd be able to distinguish themselves from their Inferiors by the blessings they communicated, and the good they did. For this is their grand Prerogative, their *distinguishing Character*, that they are plac'd in a condition which makes that which is every ones chief business, to be their only employ. They have nothing to do but to glorify GOD, and to

benefit their Neighbours, and she who does not thus improve her Talent, is more vile and despicable than the meanest Creature about her.

And if after so many spiritual Advantages, it be convenient to mention Temporals, here Heiresses and Persons of Fortune may be kept secure, from the rude attempts of designing Men; And she who has more Mony than Discretion, need not curse her Stars, for being expos'd a prey to bold importunate and rapacious Vultures. She will not here be inveigled and impos'd on, will neither be bought nor sold, nor be forc'd to marry for her own quiet, when she has no inclination to it, but what the being tir'd out with a restless importunity occasions. Or if she be dispos'd to marry, here she may remain in safety till a convenient Match

be offer'd by her Friends, and be freed from the danger of a dishonourable one. Modesty requiring that a Woman should not love before Marriage, but only make choice of one whom she can love hereafter: She who has none but innocent affections, being easily able to fix them where Duty requires.

And tho at first I propos'd to my self to speak nothing in particular of the employment of the Religious, yet to give a Specimen how useful they will be to the World, I am now inclin'd to declare, that it is design'd a part of their business shall be to give the best Education to the Children of Persons of Quality, who shall be attended and instructed in lesser matters by meaner persons deputed to that Office, but the forming of their minds shall be the particular care of those of

their own Rank; who cannot have a more pleasant and useful employment than to exercise and encrease their own knowledge, by instilling it into these young ones, who are most like to profit under such Tutors. For how can their little Pupils forbear to credit them, since they do not decry the World (as others may be thought to do) because they cou'd not enjoy it; but when they had it in their power, were courted and caress'd by it, for very good Reasons, and on mature deliberation, thought fit to relinquish and despise its offers for a better choice? Nor are mercenary people on other accounts capable of doing so much good to young Persons, because, having often but short views of things themselves, sordid and low Spirits, they are not like to form a generous temper in the minds of the

Educated. Doubtless 'twas well consider'd of him, who wou'd not trust the breeding of his Son to a Slave, because nothing great or excellent could be expected from a person of that condition.

And when by the increase of their Revenue, the Religious are enabled to do such a work of Charity, the Education they design to bestow on the Daughters of Gentlemen who are fallen into decay, will be no inconsiderable advantage to the Nation. For hereby many Souls will be preserv'd from great Dishonours, and put in a comfortable way of subsisting, being either receiv'd into the House, if they incline to it, or otherwise dispos'd of. It being suppos'd that prudent men will reckon the endowments they here acquire a sufficient *Dowry*; and that a discreet and vertuous Gentlewoman will make a better

Wife than she whose mind is empty, tho her Purse be full.

But some will say, May not people be good without this confinement? may they not live at large in the world, and yet serve GOD as acceptably as here? 'tis allow'd they may; truly wise and vertuous Souls will do it by the assistance of GODS Grace, in despite of all temptations; and I heartily wish, that all Women were of this temper. But it is to be consider'd, that there are *tender* Vertues, who need to be screened from the ill Airs of the world: Many persons who had *begun* well might have gone to the Grave in peace and innocence, had it not been their misfortune to be violently tempted. For those who have honest Hearts have not always the strongest Heads; and sometimes the enticements of the world, and the subtil insinuations

of such as lye in wait to deceive, may make their Heads giddy, stagger their Resolutions, and overthrow all the fine hopes of a promising beginning. 'Tis fit therefore, such tender *Cyons* shou'd be transplanted, that they may be supported by the prop of Vertuous Friendship, and confirm'd in Goodness by holy Examples, which alas! they will not often meet with in the world. And, such is the weakness of human Nature, that bad people are not so apt to be better'd by the Society of the Good, as the Good are to be corrupted by theirs. Since therefore we daily pray against temptation, it cannot be amiss if we take all prudent care to avoid it, and not out of a vain presumption face the danger, which GOD may justly permit to overcome us for a due correction of our Pride. It is not impossible

- 152 -

for a man to live in an infected House or Town, and escape with Life and Health; yet if he have a place in the Country to retire to, he will not make slight of that advantage; and surely the Health of our Souls is of greater consideration than the health of our Bodies. Besides, she has need of an establish'd Vertue and consummated Prudence, who so well understands the great end she was sent into the world about, and so faithfully pursues it, that not content to be wise and good her self alone, she endeavours to propagate Wisdom and Piety to all about her. But neither this Prudence nor heroic Goodness are easily attainable amidst the noise and hurry of the world, we must therefore retire a while from its clamour and importunity, if we generously design to do it good; and having

- 153 -

calmly and sedately observ'd and rectify'd what is amiss in our selves, we shall be fitter to promote a Reformation in others. A devout Retirement will not only strengthen and confirm our Souls, that they be not insected by the worlds Corruptions, but likewise so purify and resite them, that they will become Antidotes to expel the Poyson in others, and spread a salutary Air round about them.

If any object against a Learned Education, that it will make Women vain and assuming, and instead of correcting, encrease their Pride: I grant, that a smattering in Learning may; for it has this effect on the Men, none so Dogmatical, and so forward to shew their Parts as your little *Pretenders* to Science. But I wou'd not have the Ladies content themselves with the *shew*, my

- 154 -

desire is, that they shou'd not rest till they obtain the *Substance*. And then she who is most knowing, will be forward to own with the wise *Socrates*, that she knows nothing: nothing that is matter of Pride and Ostentation; nothing but what is attended with so much ignorance and imperfection, that it cannot reasonably elate and puff her up. The more she knows, she will be the less subject to talkativeness and its sister Vices, because she discerns, that the most difficult piece of Learning is, to know when to use and when to hold ones Tongue, and never to speak but to the purpose.

But the men if they rightly understand their own interest, have no reason to oppose the ingenious Education of the Women, since 'twou'd go a great way towards reclaiming the men; great

- 155 -

is the influence we have over them in their Childhood, in which time, if a Mother be discreet and knowing as well as devout, she has many opportunities of giving such a *Form* and *Season* to the tender Mind of the Child, as will shew its good effects thro' all the stages of his Life. But tho' you should not allow her

capable of doing *good*, 'tis certain, she may do *hurt*: If she do not *make* the Child, she has power to *marr* him, by suffering her fondness to get the better of discreet affection. But besides this, a good and prudent Wife, wou'd wonderfully work on an ill man; he must be a Brute indeed, who cou'd hold out against all those innocent Arts, those gentle persuasives, and obliging methods she wou'd use to reclaim him. Piety is often offensive, when it is accompanied with indiscretion: but

- 156 -

she who is as Wise as Good, possesses such Charms as can hardly fail of prevailing. Doubtless, her Husband is a much happier Man, and more likely to abandon all his ill Courses, than he who has none to come home to, but an ignorant, froward and fantastick Creature. An ingenious Conversation will make his life comfortable, and he who can be so well entertain'd at home, needs not run into Temptations in search of Diversions abroad. The only danger is, that the Wife be more knowing than the Husband; but if she be, 'tis his own fault, since he wants no opportunities of improvement; unless he be a natural *Blockhead*, and then such an one will need a wise Woman to govern him, whose prudence will conceal it from publick Observation, and at once both cover and supply his defects. Give

- 157 -

me leave therefore to hope, that no Gentleman who has honourable designs, will henceforward decry Knowledge and Ingenuity in her he wou'd pretend to Honour: Or if he does, it may serve for a Test to distinguish the feigned and unworthy from the real Lover.

Now, who that has a Spark of of Piety, will go about to oppose so Religious a design? What generous Spirit that has a due regard to the good of Mankind, will not be forward to advance and perfect it? Who will think 500 pounds too much to lay out for the purchase of so much Wisdom and Happiness? Certainly, we shou'd not think them too dearly paid for by a much greater Sum, did not our pitiful and sordid Spirits set a much higher value on Money than it deserves. But granting so much of that dear

- 158 -

Idol is given away, a person thus bred, will easily make it up by her Frugality and other Vertues: if she bring less, she will not waste so much, as others do in superfluous and vain Expences. Nor can I think of any expedient so useful as this to Persons of Quality, who are over-stock'd with Children; for thus they may honourably dispose of them without impairing their Estates. Five or six hundred pounds may be easily spar'd with a Daughter, when so many thousand would go deep; and yet as the world goes be a very inconsiderable Fortune for Ladies of their Birth; neither maintain them in that *Port* which Custom makes almost necessary, nor procure them an equal Match; those of their own Rank (contrary to the generous custom of the *Germans*) chusing rather to fill their Coffers than

- 159 -

to preserve the purity of their Blood, and therefore think a weighty Bag the best Gentility, preferring a wealthy Upstart before the best Descended and best Qualified Lady: Their own extravagancies perhaps having made it necessary, that they may keep up an empty shadow of Greatness, which is all that remains to shew what their Ancestors have been.

Does any think their money lost to their Families, when 'tis put in here? I will only ask what course they can take to save it, and at once to preserve their Money, their Honour and their Daughters too? Were they sure

the Ladies wou'd die unmarried, I shou'd commend their Thrift; but Experience has too often shewn us the vanity of this expectation. For the poor Lady having past the prime of her

- 160 -

years in Gaity and Company, in running the Circle of all the Vanities of the Town, having spread all her Nets and us'd all her Arts for Conquest, and finding that the Bait fails where she wou'd have it take, and having all this while been so over-careful of her Body, that she had no time to improve her mind, which therefore affords her no safe retreat now she meets with Disappointments abroad, and growing every day more and more sensible that the respect which us'd to be paid her, decays as fast as her Beauty; quite terrified with the dreadful name of *Old Maid*, which yet none but Fools will reproach her with, nor any wise Woman be afraid of; to avoid this terrible *Mormo*, and the scoffs that are thrown on superannuated Virgins, she flies to some dishonourable Match

- 161 -

as her last, tho much mistaken Refuge, to the disgrace of her Family, and her own irreparable Ruin. And now let any person of Honour tell me, if it were not richly worth some thousand Pounds, to prevent all this mismischief, and the having an idle Fellow, and perhaps a race of beggarly Children to hang on him, and to provide for?

Cou'd I think of any other objection, I wou'd consider it; theres nothing indeed which witty persons may not argue *for* & *against*, but they who duly weigh the Arguments on both sides, unless they be extremely prejudiced, will casily discern the great usefulness of this Institution. The *Beaux* perhaps, and topping Sparks of the Town, will ridicule and laugh at it. For Vertue her self as bright as she is, can't escape the lash of scurrilous

- 162 -

Tongues; the comfort is, whilst they impotently endeavour to throw dirt on her, they are unable to soil her Beauty, and only render themselves the more contemptible. They may therefore if they please, hug themselves in their own dear folly, and enjoy the diversion of their own insipid Jests. She has but little Wisdom and less Vertue, who is to be frighted from what she judges reasonable by the scoffs and insignificant noises of ludicrous Wits, and pert Buffoons. And no *wonder* that such as they, (who have nothing to shew for their pretences to Wit, but some scraps of Plays, and blustering Non-sence; who fancy a well adjusted Peruke is able to supply their want of Brains, and that to talk *much* is a sign of Ingenuity, tho't be never so little to the purpose,) object against our Proposal; 'twould

- 163 -

indeed spoil the Trade of the gay fluttering Fops, who wou'd be at a loss, had they no body as impertinent as themselves to talk with. The Criticism of their Dress wou'd be useless, and the labour of their *Valet de Chambre* lost, unless they cou'd peaceably lay aside their Rivalling, and one Ass be content to complement and admire another. For the Ladies wou'd have more discernment than to esteem a Man for such Follies as shou'd rather incline them to scorn and despise him. They wou'd never be so sottish as to imagine, that he who regards nothing but his own brutish Appetite, shou'd have any real affection for them, nor ever expect Fidelity from one who is unfaithful to GOD and his own Soul. They wou'd not be so absurd as to suppose, that man can esteem them who neglects his

Maker; for what are all those fine Idolatries, by which he wou'd recommend himself to his pretended Goddess; but mockery and delusion from him who forgets and affronts the true Deity? They wou'd not value themselves on account of the Admiration of such incompetent Judges, nor consequently make use of those little trifling Arts that are necessary to recommend them to such Admirers: Neither wou'd they give opportunity to profess themselves their Slaves so long, till at last they become their Masters.

What now remains, but to reduce to Practice that which tends so very much to our advantage. Is Charity so dead in the world that none will contribute to the saving their own and their neighbours Souls? Shall we freely expend our Money to purchase Vanity,

and often times both present and future Ruin, and find none for such an eminent good Work, which will make the Ages to come arise and call us Blessed? I wou'd fain persuade my self better things, and that I shall one day see this *Religious Retirement* happily settled, and its great designs wisely and vigorously pursu'd; and methinks I have already a Vision of that lustre and glory our Ladies cast round about them! Let me therefore intreat the rest of our Sex, who tho at liberty in the world, are the miserable Slaves of their own vile affections; let me entreat them to lay aside their Prejudices, and whatever borders on Envy and Malice, and with impartial eyes to behold the Beauties of our *Religious*. The native innocency and unaffectedness of whose Charms, and the unblameable

Integrity of their Lives, are abundantly more taking than all the curious Artifices and studied Arts the other can invent to recommend them, even bad men themselves being Judges, who often betray a secret Veneration for that vertue they wou'd seem to despise and endeavour to corrupt. As there is not any thing, no not the least shadow of a motive to recommend vice, but its fashionableness, and the being accustom'd to it; so there is nothing at all forbidding in vertue but her uncouthness. Acquaint your selves with her a little, and you'l wonder how you cou'd be so foolish as to delight in any thing besides! For you'l find her Conversation most sweet and obliging; her Precepts most easy and beneficial; her very tasks Joys, and her Injunctions the highest Pleasures. She will not

rob you of any innocent delight, not engage you to any thing beneath your Birth and Breeding: But will put a new and more grateful relish into all your Enjoyments, and make them more delicious with her Sweetness She'll preserve and augment your Honour, by allying you to the King of Heaven; secure your Grandeur by fixing it on a firm bottom, such as the caprice of Fortune cannot shake or overthrow; she'll enlarge your souls, raise them above the common level, and encourage that allowable Pride of Scorning to do a base unworthy action. Make you truly amiable in the eyes of GOD and Man, preserve even the Beauty of your Bodies as long as 'tis possible for such a brittle thing to last; and when it must of necessity decay, impress such a loveliness on your Minds,

as will shine thro' and brighten your very Countenances; enriching you with such a stock of Charms, that Time which devours every other thing, shall never be able to decay. In a word, 'tis Vertue only which can make you truly happy in this world as well as in the next.

There is a sort of Bravery and Greatness of Soul, which does more truly ennoble us than the highest Title, and it consists in the living up to the dignity of our Natures, scorning to do a mean unbecoming thing; in passing differently thro' Good and Evil Fortune, without being corrupted by the one or deprest by the other. For she that can do so, gives evidence that her Happiness depends not on so mutable a thing as this world; but, in a due subserviency to the Almighty, is bottom'd only on

- 169 -

her own great Mind. This is the richest Ornament, and renders a Woman glorious in the lowest Fortune: So shining is real worth, that like a Diamond it loses not its lustre, tho cast on a Dunghill. Whereas, she who is advanc'd to some eminent Station, and wants this natural and solid Greatness, is no better than Fortunes *May-game*, rendered more conspicuous, that she may appear the more contemptible. Let those therefore who value themselves only on external Accomplishments, consider how liable they are to decay, and how soon they may be depriv'd of them, and that supposing they shou'd continue, they are but sandy Foundations to build Esteem upon. What a disappointment will it be to a Ladies Admirer as well as to her self, that her Conversation shou'd lose and endanger

- 170 -

the Victory her eyes had gain'd! For when the Passion of a Lover is evaporated into the cool temper of a Husband, and a frequent review has lessen'd the wonder which her Charms at first had rais'd, she'll retain no more than such a formal respect as decency and good breeding will require, and perhaps hardly that; but unless he be a very good Man (and indeed the world is not over full of 'em) her worthlessness has made a forfeit of his Affections, which are seldom fixt by any other thing than Veneration and Esteem. Whereas, a wise and good Woman is useful and valuable in all Ages and Conditions; she who chiefly attends the *one thing needful*, the *good part which shall not be taken from her*, lives a cheerful and pleasant Life, innocent and sedate, calm and tranquile,

- 171 -

and makes a glorious Exit; being translated from the most happy life on Earth, to unspeakable happiness in heaven; a fresh and fragrant Name, embalming her Dust, and extending its Perfume to succeeding Ages. Whilst the Fools, and the worst sort of them the wicked, *live* as well as *die* in Misery, go out in a snuff, leaving nothing but stench and putrefaction behind them.

To close all, if this *Proposal* which is but a rough draught and rude Essay, and which might be made much more beautiful by a better Pen, give occasion to wiser heads to improve and perfect it, I have my end. For imperfect as it is, it seems so desirable, that she who drew the Scheme is full of hopes, it will not want kind hands to perform and compleat it. But if it miss

- 172 -

of that, it is but a few hours thrown away, and a little labour in vain, which yet will not be lost, if what is here offer'd may serve to express her hearty Good-will, and how much she desires your Improvement, who is

LADIES,

Your very humble Servant.

Footnotes

Wotton Astell herself (or a later editor) included a marginal citation here: Mr. Wotton's Reflec. on Ant. and Mod. Learn.p.349, 350.