A Serious Proposal to the Ladies

MARY ASTELL

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The 1694 text

Rendered into modern English with AI (Claude) and edited



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CONTENTS

Introduction vii

A Serious Proposal to the Ladies 1

Not nature but nurture 6
The mistakes of our education 7
The proposal: a religious retirement 16
Learning for women 20
The life of the house 24
The dangers of the world 29
The advantages of retirement 34
Friendship 37
Heiresses, pupils and poor gentlewomen 41
Objections answered 42
What it costs 45
A closing appeal 48

INTRODUCTION

Mary Astell (1666–1731), a coal merchant's daughter from Newcastle with no formal schooling, moved to London in her twenties and taught herself philosophy and theology. At 27 she published *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), signed only "By a Lover of Her Sex." Its argument is direct: women are as capable of reason as men, and if they seem frivolous it is because they are brought up to care for nothing but dress, flattery and marriage. "The cause therefore of the defects we labour under," she writes, "is, if not wholly, yet at least in the first place, to be ascribed to the mistakes of our Education."

Her remedy is a "Religious Retirement": a residential community, something between a college and a Protestant convent, where unmarried women could live together, study, pray, and prepare either for a useful life in the world or for a life of learning. She sketches its daily order and its studies—philosophy (she admired Descartes and the Cambridge Platonist John Norris) rather than mere languages—and answers the objection that it would look too much like popery. The plan was never realized, but the book was reprinted several times and made her famous.

This page gives Part I, the original proposal; Astell added a longer Part II, on method in thinking, in 1697. The right-hand column is Astell in modern English; the left is the 1694 first edition.

A Serious Proposal to the Ladies

Astell proposes a "Religious Retirement" where women can live together and study, and argues that women's faults come from their education, not their nature.

[1] Ladies,

[2] The profitable ventures now abroad in the world have met with great encouragement, though the highest advantage they can offer is an uncertain lot for things that opinion, not real worth, gives a value to. Even if obtained, such things are as fleeting and fickle as the chance that is to dispose of them. I therefore persuade myself that you will be no less kind to a proposal that comes with a more certain and substantial gain. Its only design is to improve your charms and heighten your value, by no longer allowing you to be cheap and contemptible.[1] Its aim is to fix that beauty which nature, with all the help of art, cannot secure, and to make it lasting and permanent. It would place that beauty beyond the reach of sickness and old age by transferring it from a corruptible body to an immortal mind. It is an obliging design. It would procure *inward* beauty for those to whom nature has unkindly denied the *outward*, and it would not allow ladies who have comely bodies to tarnish their glory with deformed souls. It would have you all be wits, or, what is better, wise. It would raise you above the common herd by something more truly illustrious than a resounding title or a great estate. It would stir in you a generous emulation to excel in the best things, and not in trifles that any common person with money

1 The "adventures" are the lotteries and subscription schemes of the 1690s, such as the Million Adventure, a government lottery of 1694.

enough may buy as well as you. It would not let you settle for the low thought of distinguishing yourselves by anything that is not truly valuable, and it would procure you ornaments that all the treasures of the *Indies* cannot buy. It would help you to surpass the men as much in virtue and ingenuity as you do in beauty, so that you may be not only as lovely but as wise as angels. It would exalt and establish your fame more than the best-wrought *poems* and the loudest *panegyrics* can, by ennobling your minds with graces that really deserve such fame. Instead of the bombastic compliments and fulsome flatteries of your admirers, it would win you the applause of good men and angels, and the approval of him who cannot err. In a word, it would make you the glory and blessing of the present age, and the admiration and pattern of the next.

[3] And surely I shall not need many words to persuade you to close with this proposal. The very offer is inducement enough. Nor does it need the embellishments of *rhetoric* to recommend it, even if I were capable of applying them with the greatest force, which I am not. Since you cannot be so unkind to yourselves as to refuse your *real* interest, I only beg you to be wise enough to examine what that interest consists in. Nothing has worse consequences than being deceived in a matter of such great concern. It is no more beneath your grandeur than it is beneath your prudence to examine carefully what is offered you here, and to take care that cheating peddlers don't palm off deceitful wares on you. This is a matter infinitely more worthy of your debates than which colors are most agreeable, or which dress suits you best. Your *mirror* will not do you half as much service as a serious reflection on your own minds. That reflection will reveal irregularities more worthy of your correction, and will keep you from being either too elated or too depressed by what the mirror shows you. It will not be nearly as useful to consult your dancing master as to consult your own thoughts on how you may tread most exactly in the paths of virtue. Virtue certainly has the most attractive *air*, and wisdom the most graceful and becoming *mien*. Let these attend you, and your

bearing will always be well composed, and everything you do will carry its charm with it. No concern for adorning yourselves is discouraged, provided you spend your care on what is really your *self*. Do not neglect that particle of divinity within you, which must survive, and may (if you please) be happy and perfect while its unsuitable and far inferior companion is moldering into dust. Nor will any pleasure be denied you; you are only asked not to snatch at the shadow and let the substance go. You may be as ambitious as you please, so long as you aspire to the best *things*. You may compete with your neighbors as much as you can, so that they do not outdo you in any commendable quality. Let it never be said that those who find precedence so very agreeable can be tamely content to let others surpass them in *this*, and take precedence over them in a *better* world! Remember, I beg you, the famous women of former ages, the *Orindas* of recent times, and the still more modern *Dacier* and others. Blush to think how much is said of them now, and will be said hereafter, when you yourselves (great a figure as you make) must be buried in silence and forgetfulness! Shall your emulation fail *only there*, where emulation is commendable? Why are you so perversely humble as not to compete for one of the highest mansions in the court of heaven?[2] Believe me, Ladies, this is the only *place* worth competing for. You are neither better nor worse in yourselves for going in before others or coming in after them *now*. But you really are better, and better in proportion as your station is higher in an orb of glory. How can you be content to be in the world like tulips in a garden, making a fine *show* and good for nothing, with all your glories setting in the grave, or perhaps much sooner? I do not know what your own sentiments are. But I cannot reflect without pity and indignation that those glorious temples, on which your kind Creator has bestowed such exquisite workmanship, should enshrine nothing better than *Egyptian* deities. They are like a garnished sepulcher, which for all its glit-

2 "Orinda" was the pen name of the poet Katherine Philips (1632–1664). Anne Dacier (1647–1720) was a French classical scholar and translator.

ter has nothing inside but emptiness or putrefaction![3] What a pity it is that while your beauty casts a luster all around, your souls should be allowed to be overrun with weeds, to lie fallow and neglected, unadorned with any grace! Your souls are infinitely brighter and more radiant than your beauty. If you had only a clear idea of them, you would despise and neglect the mean *case* that encloses them, lovely as that case is and much as you now value it. And yet the beauty of the mind is necessary to secure the conquests your eyes have won. Time, that mortal enemy of handsome faces, has no influence on a lovely soul except to better and improve it. For shame, let us abandon that *old*, and therefore, one would think, unfashionable occupation of chasing butterflies and trifles! Let us no longer drudge along the dull, beaten road of vanity and folly that so many have traveled before us. Let us dare to break the enchanted circle that custom has placed us in, and scorn the vulgar habit of imitating all the frivolities of our neighbors. Let us learn to pride ourselves on something more excellent than the invention of a fashion. Let us not entertain so degrading a thought of our own *worth* as to imagine that our souls were given us only to serve our bodies, and that the best use we can make of our bodies is to attract the eyes of men. We value *them* too much, and *ourselves* too little, if we place any part of our worth in their opinion. We undervalue ourselves if we do not think ourselves capable of nobler things than the pitiful conquest of some worthless heart. A woman who has the opportunity to secure an interest in heaven, and to win the love and admiration of God and angels, is too wasteful of her time, and does injury to her charms, if she throws them away on vain, insignificant men. She need not make herself so cheap as to stoop to court their applause. The greater the 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. Be so

3 A commonplace of the period contrasted the splendid temples of ancient Egypt with the animals worshiped inside them. The garnished sepulcher echoes Matthew 23:27–29.

true to your interest as not to lessen your empire and cheapen your charms. Do not let your thoughts be wholly taken up with observing what respect is paid you. Let at least a part of them be spent in studying to deserve it. And after all, remember that goodness is the truest greatness, that to be wise for yourselves is the greatest wit, and that the most desirable beauty is *that* which will endure to eternity.

[4] Forgive me the seeming rudeness of this proposal, which proceeds on the supposition that there is something amiss in you that it is meant to amend. My design is not to expose your failings but to correct them. To be free from mistakes is a privilege few can claim; the greatest mistake is to be past conviction and too obstinate to reform. Even the *men*, as precise as they would like to seem, and as much as they amuse themselves with our blunders, are very often guilty of greater faults, and of faults that are much more inexcusable, considering the advantages they enjoy. But I will not presume to correct the errors of those who either are, or at least *think* themselves, too wise to receive instruction from a woman's pen. My earnest desire is that you, Ladies, should be as perfect and happy as it is possible to be in this imperfect state. I love you too well to endure a spot upon your beauties if I can by any means remove it 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 improving them as you should. I know that very many of you do so. You countenance the piety that the men decry, and you are the brightest patterns of religion the age affords. It grieves me that all the rest of our sex do not imitate such illustrious examples. I would therefore have these examples multiplied and made more conspicuous. Then vice, put out of countenance (because virtue would be the only thing in fashion), may sneak out of the world, and its darkness may be dispelled by the confluence of so many shining graces. Some perhaps will cry out that I am teaching you false doctrine. Their seductions have made some among us very mean and contemptible, and so they would gladly persuade the rest of us to be as despicable and for-

lorn as those women. We are indeed obliged to them for their management in trying to make us so. They use every artifice they can to spoil us, and they deny us the means of improvement. So instead of asking why all women are not wise and good, we have reason to wonder that any are. Suppose the men were as much neglected as we are, with as little care taken to cultivate and improve them. Perhaps they would then be so far from surpassing the women they now despise that they themselves would sink into the greatest stupidity and brutishness. Most of them make perverse returns for all the care and pains bestowed on them, and that makes this no uncharitable or improbable conjecture. One would therefore almost think that the wise Disposer of all things foresaw how unjustly women are denied opportunities of improvement from *without*. By way of compensation, he seems to have endowed them with greater inclinations to virtue and a natural goodness of temper *within*. If this were properly managed, it would raise them to the most eminent pitch of heroic virtue. It is to this, Ladies, that I want you to aspire; it is a noble and becoming ambition. The design of this paper is to remove the obstacles that lie in your way. We will therefore inquire what it is that stops your flight. What keeps you groveling here below, like *Domitian* catching flies, when you should be busy winning empires?[4]

NOT NATURE BUT NURTURE

Astell denies that women are naturally incapable of prudence; any incapacity is acquired.

[5] Men of more wit than wisdom, and perhaps of more malice than either, have said that women are naturally incapable of acting prudently, or that they are necessarily determined to folly. Whatever they have said, I must by no means grant it. That hypothesis would make my efforts pointless, for then it would be useless to give women advice, or to try to reform their folly.

4 Domitian, Roman emperor AD 81–96, is said by Suetonius to have spent hours alone catching flies and stabbing them with a stylus.

Besides, there are examples in every age that amply refute the ignorance and malice of this assertion.

[6] The incapacity, if there is any, is acquired, not natural. None of women's follies is so necessary that they could not avoid it if they pleased. They do indeed labor under some disadvantages. We shall see presently what these are, and try to overcome them; but women need not settle for mean things, since they are capable of the best, if they do not fail themselves. Neither God nor nature has excluded them from being ornaments to their families and useful in their generation. There is therefore no reason they should be content to be ciphers in the world, useless at best, and in a little while a burden and nuisance to everyone around them. And it is a very great pity that those who are so apt to overrate themselves in smaller matters should be so insensible of their own worth where it most concerns them to know their value and stand upon it.

THE MISTAKES OF OUR EDUCATION

She traces women's faults to a neglected education, which breeds ignorance, vanity and slavery to custom.

[7] The defects we labor under must therefore be blamed on the mistakes of our education, if not wholly, then at least in the first place. Like an error in the first digestion, those mistakes spread their ill influence through all our lives.[5]

[8] The soil is rich, and if it were well cultivated it would produce a noble harvest. Suppose, then, that the unskillful managers not only permit noxious weeds but encourage them. We shall suffer by their neglect, but if they reap the fruit of their own folly, in justice they ought to blame no one but themselves. From their very infancy women are barred from the advantages they are later reproached for lacking. They are nursed up in the very vices for which they will afterwards be upbraided. Men are so unfair as to expect bricks where they provide no straw. And

5 In older physiology the "first concoction" was the first stage of digestion, in the stomach. A fault there was thought to corrupt every later stage.

they are so abundantly civil as to make sure we live up to that obliging epithet *ignorant*, which, out of an excess of good manners, they are pleased to bestow on us!

[9] One would indeed be apt to think that parents would take every possible care over their children's education, not only for *their* sakes but even for their *own*. And though the son carries the name down to posterity, a great part of the honor of a family certainly depends on its daughters. It is the kindness of education that binds our duty most firmly upon us. Being the means of bringing us into the world is not a matter of choice, and therefore it obliges us less. But to make sure that we may live wisely and happily in the world, and be capable of endless joys hereafter, is a benefit we can never sufficiently acknowledge. To bring poor children into the world, to neglect to fence them against its temptations, and so to leave them exposed to temporal and eternal miseries, is a wickedness I have no name for. It is beneath brutishness. The beasts are better natured, for they take care of their offspring until the young are able to care for themselves. And if mothers had a proper regard for their posterity, however *great* they are, they would not think themselves too *good* to perform what nature requires. Nor would pride and delicacy lead them to hand the poor little one over to the care of a foster parent. Or, if necessity forces them to appoint someone else to perform their duty, they would at least be as particular about the manners and inclinations of their nurses as they are about their complexions. Otherwise the nurses may pass on their vices with their milk, and form in the child evil habits that will not easily be rooted out.

[10] Nature, bad as it is and much as people complain of it, can be so far improved by the grace of God, upon our honest and hearty efforts, that if we do not fail ourselves, we may all, in *some* measure though not in an *equal* one, be instruments of his glory, blessings to this world, and capable of eternal blessedness in the world to come. But if our nature is spoiled at the start instead of being improved, if from infancy we are brought up in ignorance and vanity, and taught to be proud and petulant, del-

icate and fanciful, moody and inconstant, it is no wonder that the bad effects of this upbringing show in every future action of our lives. And since it is ignorance, either habitual or actual, that causes all sin, how are those likely to escape *this* who are brought up in *that*? So the fact that women are of no use to most men, and a plague and a disgrace to some, is not much to be regretted on the *men's* account. It is the product of their own folly in denying women the benefits of a noble and liberal education, the most effective means of directing them into the ways of virtue and securing their progress in them.

11 That ignorance is the cause of most feminine vices can be shown by the pride and vanity usually imputed to us. If thoroughly sifted, I suppose, these will turn out to be in one way or another the source and origin of all the rest. They are very bad weeds, but they grow from good soil; they are nothing but generosity degenerated and corrupted. God has planted in every rational nature a desire to advance and perfect its being, to spur it on to every worthy and becoming action. Certainly, next to the grace of God, nothing so powerfully restrains people from evil and stirs them up to good as a generous temper.[6] And so to be ambitious of perfections is no fault, though it is a fault to take the glory of our excellences to ourselves, or to glory in ones we do not really have. If women's haughtiness showed itself in disdaining to do a mean and evil thing, if they took pride in something that truly perfects a rational nature, there would be no harm in it. But then they ought not to be denied the means of examining and judging what does perfect it; they should not be fobbed off with tinsel goods. If a false light or a distorting medium makes them choose wrongly, the loss is theirs, but the crime is the deceivers'. She who rightly understands what the perfection of her nature consists in will spend her thought and effort on acquiring those perfections. But she who is kept ignorant of the matter will settle for whatever objects first present themselves and bear some plausible resemblance to what she

6 "Generosity" and "generous" here carry the older sense of nobility of spirit or high-mindedness.

desires; a show of advantage is enough to make them attractive bait to a woman who lacks the judgment and skill to tell reality from pretense. From this it easily follows that she who has nothing else to value herself on will be proud of her beauty, or of her money and what it can buy. She will think herself greatly obliged to the man who tells her she has those perfections she naturally longs for. Her inborn self-esteem and desire of good, now degenerated into pride and mistaken self-love, will readily open her ears to whatever sets out to feed and delight them. When a cunning, scheming enemy from outside has won these traitors within over to his side, he has the poor unhappy creature at his mercy. She now swallows his poison quite smoothly, because it is offered in a golden cup, and listens credulously to the most damaging proposals, because they come accompanied by a show of esteem. Her vanity makes her swallow praise wholesale, without examining whether she deserves it or whose hand it comes from. Such a woman will count it mere gratitude to think well of the man who values her so highly, and will think she simply must take pity on the poor despairing lover whom her charms have brought to die at her feet. Love and honor are things every one of us naturally esteems; they are excellent in themselves and very worthy of our regard. And the readier we are to embrace whatever resembles them, the more dangerous it is that these venerable names should be wretchedly abused and fixed to their direct opposites. Yet this is the custom of the world. And how can she possibly detect the fallacy, when she has no better notion of either than what she gets from plays and romances? How can she be furnished with any solid principles, when her very instructors are froth and emptiness? If women were rightly educated, on the other hand, and had gained a well-informed and discerning mind, they would be proof against all these assaults. They would see through and scorn the silly little tricks used to ensnare and deceive them. Such a woman would value herself only on her virtue, and so would guard most carefully what she prizes so highly. She would know that her true commendation, and the

only thing that raises her up, is not what others say but what she herself does. The loudest praises are not half so satisfying as the calm and secret applause of her own mind. A mind acting on true principles of honor and virtue would not fail, on reviewing itself, to anticipate the delightful eulogy she will one day hear.

[12] We give up the substance for the shadow and reality for appearance. We embrace the very things that we would hate and flee if we understood them, and we are reconciled to them merely because they usurp the name of those venerable objects we desire and seek, though they have nothing of their nature. Where does this come from, if not from ignorance, from a lack of understanding to compare and judge things, to choose a right end, to fit the means to the end, and to rate everything at its proper value? Were it not for this delusion, is it likely that a lady who passionately desires to be admired would ever consent to actions that make her base and contemptible? Would she be so absurd as to think she could win love, or keep it, by methods that cause disgust and so end in hatred? Would she count it part of her grandeur, or hope to gain esteem, by excesses that in fact lower her in the eyes of all thoughtful and judicious people? Would she be so silly as to put on airs and think herself the better person because she has more money to spend lavishly, or the good luck to have a cleverer tailor or milliner than her neighbor? By the regard she pays to wit, she seems to lay some claim to it herself. Would she then so undervalue her own judgment as to let the scurrility and noisy, profane nonsense of men whose brazen foreheads are better than their brains pass for wit? Would she be so weak as to imagine that a few airy fancies joined to a great deal of impudence (the true definition of modern wit) can mark a man as a man of sense, when he runs counter to all the sense and reason that ever appeared in the world? Nothing could be a sign of greater shallowness than this, unless it is to regard and esteem him for it. If a woman truly understood herself, would she be affected by either the praise or the slander of those worthless people whose lives directly contradict reason and are a very sink of corruption? One would

blush to be commended by them, for fear of being taken for a partner in their crimes or one who winks at them. Will a woman who has a jot of discernment think to satisfy her greedy desire for pleasure with those promising nothings that have deluded her again and again? Or will she, to obtain such bubbles, risk forfeiting joys that are infinitely satisfying and eternal? In short, if ignorance did not impose on us, we would never squander the greatest part of our time and care on decorating a tenement on which our lease is so very short, and which, for all our efforts, may lose its beauty before that lease is up, while all the time we neglect a more glorious and lasting mansion! We would never be so particular about the house and so careless of its inhabitant, whose beauty can be greatly improved and will last forever without diminution or decay!

[13] So ignorance and a narrow education lay the foundation of vice, and imitation and custom build it up. Custom is that merciless torrent that sweeps everything before it, and in fact none can stem it but those who have a great deal of prudence and a deep-rooted virtue. For it is only fitting that she who cannot supply better rules should follow those she sees before her, lest she merely change the instance and keep the absurdity. All the sin and folly in the world certainly has nothing in itself to recommend it, and it would puzzle a thoughtful person to account for it if custom did not help to solve the difficulty. For virtue without question has the advantage over vice on every count. It is far more pleasant in the *act*, as well as more advantageous in its *consequences*, as anyone may easily see who will only use her reason properly in serious reflection on herself and on the nature of things. It is custom, therefore, that tyrant custom, which is the great motive of all those irrational choices we see made every day 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 around us do. We part with our peace and pleasure, as well as our innocence and virtue, merely to comply with an unreasonable fashion. And having hardened ourselves to folly, we do not know how to quit

it. We go on in vice, not because we find satisfaction in it, but because we are strangers to the joys of virtue.

[14] Add to this the hurry and noise of the world, which generally keeps us so busy and preoccupied that we have little time and less inclination to stand still and reflect on our own minds. The trivial amusements that have seized us keep their grip so well, and buzz about our ears so constantly, that we cannot attend to the dictates of our reason, nor to the soft whispers and winning persuasions of the divine Spirit. If we were willing to use its help, we might shake off these follies and regain our freedom. But alas! to complete our misfortunes, by constant application to vanity and folly we quite spoil the texture and frame of our minds. We loosen and scatter them so much that nothing solid and substantial will stay in them. By habitual inattention we make ourselves incapable of any serious and improving thought, until our minds themselves become as light and frothy as the things they deal with. To all this we may further add the great effort that bad people make to corrupt the good, and the unaccountable reluctance of too many good people to stand up for and spread the piety they profess. (So strangely are things turned around that virtue wears the blushes that belong to vice, and vice swaggers with the authority of virtue!) Then we have a fairly full account of the causes of our failure to improve.

[15] A poor young lady is taught to value herself on nothing but her clothes, and to think she is very fine when she is well turned out. She hears it said that it is wisdom enough for her to know how to dress herself so as to become lovable in the eyes of the man whose business it is to be knowing and learned. Who can blame her, then, if she spends her effort and her money on such accomplishments, and sometimes carries it further than her misinformer would wish? She sees the vain and the showy parading through the world, attended by the courtship and admiration of everyone around them. No wonder her young eyes are dazzled by the pageantry! She lacks the judgment to form a proper estimate of them and their admirers, and so she longs to be as fine and celebrated a thing as they are! What

though she is sometimes told of another world? She has a livelier perception of this one, and may well think that if her instructors were in earnest when they told her of the *hereafter*, they would not be so busy and concerned about what happens *here*. She is perhaps taught the principles and duties of religion, but she is not acquainted with their reasons and grounds, since she is told that it is enough for her to believe, and that examining why and wherefore is no business of hers. And so, though her piety may be tall and spreading, it lacks foundation and root. The first rough temptation overthrows and blasts it, or perhaps, like the short-lived gourd, it decays and withers of its own accord.[7] But why should she be blamed for setting no great value on her soul, when its noblest faculty, her understanding, has been made useless to her? Why censure her for abandoning a way of life whose privileges she was never acquainted with? It is highly reasonable in itself, but she was urged to embrace it with as little reason as she now forsakes it. For if her religion itself is taken up as the fashion of the country, it is no strange thing that she lays it down again in conformity with fashion. Consider instead the woman whose reason is allowed to display itself, to inquire into the grounds and motives of religion, to examine its graces and search out its hidden beauties. She is a Christian by choice, not in conformity with those around her, and she holds fast to piety because it is her wisdom, her interest and her joy, not because she has grown used to it. She is not only eminently and unshakably good, but able to give a reason *why* she is so. Such a woman is too firm and stable to be moved by the pitiful allurements of sin, and too wise and too well grounded to be undermined and supplanted by the strongest assaults of temptation. Without doubt a truly Christian life requires a clear understanding as well as well-ordered affections, so that both together may move the will to a direct choice of good and a steadfast adherence to it. For though the heart may be honest, it is only by chance that the will is right if the understanding is

7 The gourd that grew up in a night to shade the prophet Jonah and withered the next day (Jonah 4:6–10).

ignorant and clouded. Why do we sometimes unhappily see people falling away from their piety? Surely because it was their affections, not their judgment, that inclined them to be religious. Reason and truth are firm and unchangeable, and she who builds on them stands on sure ground. Mood and inclination are sandy foundations. She who is swayed more by her affections than by her judgment owes the happiness of her soul in great measure to the temper of her body. Her piety may perhaps blaze higher, but it will not last as long. For the affections are various and changeable and moved by every object, and the latest comer easily undoes whatever its predecessor had done. Such people are always in extremes. They are either violently good or quite cold and indifferent, and they are a constant trouble to themselves and others with their unseemly raptures or needless scruples. There is no beauty or order in their lives; all is headlong and inexplicable. Now they are furiously set on one course, though they cannot well say why, and soon they are just as violent in the opposite extreme. Having more *heat* than *light*, their zeal outruns their knowledge. Instead of presenting piety as it is in itself, the loveliest and most inviting thing imaginable, they expose it to the contempt and ridicule of a censorious world. Their devotion is rickety: starved and stunted in some of its vital parts, misshapen and overgrown in less important matters. One duty is *overdone* to make up for the neglect of another, and the mistaken person thinks that being often on her knees atones for all the failings of her conduct. She does not consider that it is useless to pray for graces we take no care to practice, and a mockery to adore perfections we run counter to, or that the true end of all our prayers and outward observances is to work our minds into a truly Christian temper, to win for us the mastery of our passions, and to bring all irregular inclinations under control. Then we may be as like God in purity, charity and all his imitable excellences as is consistent with the imperfection of a creature.

THE PROPOSAL: A RELIGIOUS RETIREMENT

She proposes a retreat that shelters women from the world and trains them to do good in it.

16 And now that we have discovered the disease and its cause, it is proper to apply a remedy. Single medicines are too weak to cure such complicated distempers; they require a full dispensary. And what would a good woman refuse to do, if she could hope by doing it to benefit the greatest part of the world and improve her sex in knowledge and true religion? I do not doubt, Ladies, that the age, bad as it is, affords very many of you who will readily embrace whatever truly tends to the glory of God and your mutual edification, to revive the ancient spirit of piety in the world, and to pass it on to succeeding generations. I know there are many of you who love God so ardently that you think no time too much to spend in his service, and nothing too difficult to do for his sake. You bear such hearty goodwill to your neighbors that you grudge no prayers or pains to reclaim and improve them. I therefore have nothing more to do than to make the proposal and prove that it will serve these great and good ends. Then it will be easy to answer the objections that people of more wit than virtue may happen to raise against it.

17 Now as to the proposal: it is to erect a *monastery*. Or, if you prefer, we will call it a *religious retirement*, to avoid offending the scrupulous and injudicious with names which, though innocent in themselves, have been abused by superstitious practices. It shall have a double aspect. It will be a retreat from the world for those who desire that advantage, and it will also be an institution and preparatory discipline to fit us to do the greatest good in the world. Such an institution as this (if I am not greatly deceiving myself) would be the likeliest way to amend the present age and improve the future one.[8] For here those who are convinced of the emptiness of earthly enjoyments, who are sick

8 "Religious retirement," "retreat" and "this society" are Astell's names for her planned residential community of women.

of the vanity of the world and its impertinences, may find more substantial and satisfying entertainments. They need not be confined to what they justly loathe. Some wish to know and fortify their weak side, and to do good to themselves first so that afterward they may be able to do more good to others. Some, for their greater security, are willing to avoid *temptation*. These may escape the danger they would face by staying continually in sight of the enemy, under the familiarity and unwearied persistence of the temptation. They may gain an opportunity to look into themselves, to become acquainted at home, and to be no longer the greatest strangers to their own hearts. Those who wish to attend, in a more particular and undisturbed way, to the great business they came into the world for (the service of God and the improvement of their own minds) may find a convenient and blissful refuge from the noise and hurry of the world. It is a world so cumbersome, so infectious, that even if the grace of God and their own strict watchfulness keep them from sinking into its corruptions, it will still dampen their flight to heaven and keep them from reaching any eminent height of virtue.

[18] You are therefore invited, Ladies, into a place where you will suffer no other confinement than being kept out of the road of sin. You will not be deprived of your grandeur. You will only exchange the vain pomps and pageantry of the world, its empty titles and forms of state, for the true and solid greatness of being able to despise *them*. You will only give up the chatter of insignificant people for intelligent conversation, the froth of flashy wit for real wisdom, and idle tales for instructive discourse. Some pretended to love and admire you while they really served their *own* base ends. You will exchange their deceitful flattery for the timely reproofs and wholesome counsel of your hearty well-wishers and affectionate friends. These will win you the perfections that your false lovers claimed you had, and kept you from obtaining. No difficult task will be imposed on you. All your labor will be only to prepare for the highest degrees of that glory whose very lowest degree is more than you are at present able to conceive. The prospect of it is enough to outweigh all the

pains of religion, if there were any in it—as in truth there are none. All that is required of you is to be as happy as you possibly can, and to make sure of a felicity that will fill all the capacities of your souls! Once you have tasted this happiness, you will be fully convinced that you could never do too much to obtain it. Nor could you be too anxious to adorn your souls with the tempers and dispositions that will make you even now, in some measure, the holy and heavenly creatures you hope one day to be in a more perfect way. Without these qualifications you can neither reasonably *expect* the happiness of the life to come nor be *capable* of enjoying it. Happy retreat! It will bring you into such a *paradise* as your mother *Eve* forfeited. There you will feast on pleasures that do not behave like those of the world. Worldly pleasures disappoint your expectations and dull your appetites, and the disgust they give you sets you on a fruitless search for new delights, which once obtained are as empty as the old ones. These pleasures will make you truly happy *now* and prepare you to be *perfectly* happy hereafter. Here are no serpents to deceive you while you amuse yourselves in these delicious gardens. No provocations are given in this friendly society except to love and to good works. These will supply such engaging employment that you will have as little inclination as leisure to pursue those follies which, in the time of your ignorance, passed with you under the name of love. Yet there are not two things in nature more different than *true love* and that *brutish passion* which pretends to ape it. Here there will be no rivalry except in the love of God, and no ambition except to win his favor. Nothing will recommend you to that favor more effectively than a great and tender affection for one another. Envy, that canker, will not disturb your hearts here. How can a woman resent another's welfare when she counts it the greatest part of her own? No covetousness will gain admittance into this blessed abode, except the desire to amass huge treasures of good works and to win one of the brightest crowns of glory. You will not be anxious to increase your fortunes, but to enlarge your minds, and you will esteem no grandeur equal to being conformed to the meek and

humble Jesus. So you only withdraw from the noise and trouble, the folly and temptation of the world, in order to enjoy more peacefully yourselves and all the innocent pleasures the world can afford you. Above all you will enjoy the one pleasure that is worth all the rest: a noble, virtuous and disinterested friendship. And to complete it all, there is that *acme* of delight which the devout, seraphic soul enjoys when, dead to the world, she devotes herself entirely to the contemplation and enjoyment of her Beloved. Having freed herself from all the hindrances that held her back from without, she moves in a direct and vigorous motion toward her true and only Good. She now embraces him and rests in him with an inexpressible pleasure, intelligible only to those who have tried and felt it. We can no more describe it to the dark and sensual part of mankind than we can describe the beauty of colors to the blind or the harmony of sounds to the deaf. In short, the place to which you are invited will be a type and foretaste of heaven. Your employment will be, as it is there, to magnify God, to love one another, and to share the useful *knowledge* you will gain by making proper use of your time in study and contemplation. Once gained, that knowledge will give you a far sweeter and more lasting delight than all those pitiful diversions, those revels and amusements, which now, because you know nothing better, seem the only pleasing and tasteful entertainments.

[19] But we were not made for ourselves, and there is no means by which we can glorify God and do good to our own souls so effectively as by performing offices of charity and kindness to others. And so that every virtue, and the highest degrees of every virtue, may be exercised and promoted as much as possible, your retreat will be managed so as not to shut out the good works of an *active* life from the pleasure and serenity of a *contemplative* one. By a proper mixture of both, it will keep all the advantages and avoid the inconveniences that attend each. It will not cut you off from the world so far as to keep you from bettering and improving it. Rather, it will qualify you to do the world the greatest good, and it will be a seminary to stock the

kingdom with pious and prudent ladies. Their good example, it is to be hoped, will so influence the rest of their sex that women may no longer pass for those little useless and impertinent animals which the bad conduct of too many has caused them to be mistaken for.

LEARNING FOR WOMEN

She argues that women should study real knowledge and philosophy, since God gave them minds as well as men.

[20] So far we have considered our retirement only in relation to religion, which is indeed its *main*, I may even say its *only*, design. Nor can this be thought too narrowing a word, since religion is the entire business of our lives and, broadly considered, takes in everything we have to do. Nothing is a fit employment for a rational creature unless it tends, *directly* or *remotely*, toward this great and *only* end. But as we have observed all along, religion never appears in its true beauty unless it is accompanied by wisdom and discretion. Without a good understanding we can scarcely be *truly* good, and never *eminently* so, because we are liable to a thousand seductions and mistakes. Even men themselves, if they lack a competent degree of knowledge, are carried about with every wind of doctrine. Therefore one great end of this institution will be to dispel the cloud of ignorance in which custom has wrapped us. It will furnish our minds with a stock of solid and useful knowledge, so that the souls of women may no longer be the only unadorned and neglected things. It is not intended that our members should waste their time and trouble their heads about the irrelevant matters that the fashion of the world has turned up as learning; their impertinence has been excellently exposed by an ingenious pen[9]. Instead they should busy themselves in a serious inquiry after *necessary* and

9 ASTELL'S NOTE. Mr. Norris, *Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life*.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE. John Norris (1657–1711), English Platonist philosopher and clergyman, and Astell's correspondent; his *Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life* appeared in 1690.

perfective truths;[10] that is, something which it *concerns* them to know, and which tends to their real interest and perfection. The excellent author just mentioned will tell them well enough what that is. Such a course of study will be neither too troublesome nor beyond the reach of a female virtuoso. It is not intended that she should spend her hours learning *words*, but *things*, and therefore no more languages than are necessary to acquaint her with useful authors. Nor need she trouble herself with turning over a huge number of books. She should rather take care to understand and digest a few good, well-chosen ones.[11] Let her only obtain right ideas, and become truly acquainted with the nature of the objects that present themselves to her mind. Then it does not matter whether or not she can tell what fanciful people have said about them; and a thorough understanding of Christianity as professed by the *Church of England* will be enough to confirm her in the truth, even if she has no catalogue of the particular errors that oppose it. Indeed, a learned education for women will seem so unfashionable that I began to be startled at the singularity of my proposal. But I was extremely pleased to find that a recent ingenious author (whose book I came across after writing this) agrees with me in my opinion. For speaking of the repute in which learning was held about a hundred and fifty years ago, he says[12]: "It was so very fashionable that the fair sex seemed to believe that Greek and Latin added to their charms; and Plato and Aristotle untranslated were frequent ornaments of their private chambers. One would think from the effects that it was a proper way of educating them, since there are no accounts in history of so many great

10 Astell's phrase is "our Religious," meaning the women living in the retirement; it is rendered "our members" or "its members" throughout.

11 In Astell's day a "virtuoso" was a person devoted to learning, especially natural philosophy.

12 ASTELL'S NOTE. Mr. Wotton, *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning*, pp. 349–350.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE. William Wotton (1666–1727), English scholar; his *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694) was a contribution to the debate over the ancients and the moderns.

women in any one age as are to be found between the years 1500 and 1600.

[21] 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 should we not (at least out of gratitude to him) employ our thoughts on himself, their noblest object, instead of unworthily spending them on trifles and gaieties and worldly affairs? Since the soul was created for the contemplation of truth as well as for the enjoyment of good, is it not as cruel and unjust to shut women out from the knowledge of the one as from the enjoyment of the other? This is all the more so because the will is blind and cannot choose except as the understanding directs it. To put it more exactly, the soul always *wills* according to how she *understands*, so that if she *understands* wrongly she *wills* wrongly. And as exercise enlarges and raises any faculty, so lack of use leaves it cramped and diminished. If we make little or no use of our understandings, we shall soon have none to use. The more contracted and unemployed the deliberating and directing power is, the more liable the choosing power is to unworthy and harmful choices. What but the lack of an intelligent education makes most women's conversation so insipid and foolish, and their solitude so *unbearable*? Learning is therefore necessary to make them more agreeable and useful in company, and to supply them with fitting entertainment when they are alone. Then they will not be driven to the miserable shifts that too many resort to in order to pass their time, that precious talent which never hangs heavy on the hands of a judicious person. Our happiness in the next world depends so much on the dispositions we carry with us out of this one that without a right habit and temper of mind we are not capable of happiness at all. Our beatitude consists in the contemplation of the divine truth and beauty as well as in the enjoyment of his goodness. Can ignorance, then, be a fit preparation for heaven? Is it likely that she whose understanding has been busy with nothing but froth and trifles should be able to delight herself in noble and sublime truths? Let those who deny

us the improvement of our intellects, then, either take up the paradox of the man who said "that women have no souls," or else allow us to cultivate and improve them. Nowadays, when souls are granted even to brutes, that paradox would be as unphilosophical as it is rude. There is indeed a sort of learning that is worse than the greatest ignorance: a woman may study plays and romances all her days and be a great deal more knowing, but never a jot the wiser. Knowledge like this serves only to instruct her in the greatest follies and push her forward in practicing them. Yet how can they fairly blame her who forbid her anything better, or at least will not give her the opportunity of it? A rational mind *will* be employed. It will never be satisfied with doing nothing, and if you neglect to supply it with good materials, it is likely to make do with whatever comes to hand.

[22] We do not claim that women should teach in the church, or usurp authority where it is not allowed them. Only permit us to understand our *own* duty, and not be forced to take it on trust from others; permit us to be at least learned enough to form in our minds a true idea of Christianity, since this is so very necessary to guard us against the dangers of these *last* and *perilous days*. In these days deceivers, part of whose character is to *lead captive silly women*, need not *creep into houses*, since they have authority to proclaim their errors from the *housetop*. And let us also acquire a true practical knowledge, one that 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.[13] And since most ladies understand *French*, it seems to me they could make much better use of it by studying philosophy (as I hear the *French ladies* do), reading *Descartes*, *Malebranche*, and others, than by reading idle *novels* and *romances*. It is strange that we should be so eager to imitate their fashions and fopperies and pay no attention to what is truly worth imitating in them! And why should it not be thought as genteel to understand *French philosophy* as to be decked out in a *French fashion*? Let the famous Madame *Dacier* and others,

13 Echoing 2 Timothy 3:1–6 and Luke 12:3.

then, and our own incomparable *Orinda*, stir the English ladies to emulation.[14]

[23] The ladies, I am sure, have no reason to dislike this proposal. But I do not know how the men will take it, to have their enclosure broken down and women invited to taste of that tree of knowledge they have so long unjustly *monopolized*. They must excuse me, though, if I am as partial to my own sex as they are to theirs, and think women as capable of learning as men are, and that learning becomes them just as well. For I cannot see where the harm lies if women, instead of doing mischief to one another by uncharitable and vain conversation, are enabled to inform and instruct those of their own sex at least. The Holy Ghost has left it on record that *Priscilla*, as well as her husband, instructed the eloquent *Apollos*, and the great Apostle found no fault with her. It will therefore be very proper for our ladies to spend part of their time in this retirement adorning their minds with useful knowledge.[15]

THE LIFE OF THE HOUSE

She sketches the members' prayers, fasts, studies, charity and diversions, and the women who will govern them.

[24] There is no need now to go into the details of how its members are to be governed, or of their offices of devotion, employments, work, and so on. It is enough for the present to say that they will be more than ordinarily careful to redeem their time. They will spend no more of it on the body than the necessities of nature require, and by a judicious choice of employment and constant industry in it they will make such good use of this invaluable treasure that it is neither buried in idleness nor squandered on unprofitable concerns. A set portion of it will be paid daily to God in prayers and praises, and the rest shall be employed in

14 René Descartes (1596–1650) and Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715), French philosophers; Anne Dacier (1647–1720), French classical scholar and translator; "Orinda" was the pen name of the English poet Katherine Philips (1632–1664).
15 Acts 18:24–26; Paul greets Priscilla and Aquila warmly in Romans 16:3.

innocent, charitable, and useful business. This may be study, whether learning themselves or instructing others, for part of their work is intended to be the education of those of their own sex. Or it may be spiritual and bodily works of mercy: relieving the poor, healing the sick, mingling charity to the soul with the charity they show to the body, instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, comforting the afflicted, and correcting those who err and do wrong.

[25] 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 they will keep strictly to all the precepts of their holy mother the *Church*, whose sacred injunctions are too much neglected, even by those who profess the greatest zeal for her. There will be the daily performance of the public offices in the cathedral manner, in the most moving and uplifting way, the celebration of the Holy Eucharist every Lord's Day and holy day, and a course of solid, instructive preaching and catechizing. Besides all this, our members will consider that the holy Jesus punctually observed the innocent usages of the *Jewish* Church, and that, though in many instances the *reason* for the command no longer applied to him, he would still obey its *letter*, to avoid giving offense and to set us an admirable pattern of obedience. Therefore, though it may be thought that such pious souls have little need of the severities of fasting and mortification, they will regard it as a special part of their duty to observe carefully all the fasts of the Church, namely: *Lent*, *Ember* and *Rogation days*, *Fridays* and *vigils*. Most people pay so little heed to these times that one would scarcely believe they were set apart for religious purposes, if we did not find them in the antiquated rubrics. And as their devotion will be regular, so it will also be solid and substantial. They will not rest in the mere outside of duty, nor imagine that keeping their fasts and offices will buy them license to indulge a darling vice.[16] Instead, having long since laid the ax to the root of sin and destroyed its whole body, they will look on

16 Ember days are the fast days kept in each of the four seasons of the year; Rogation days are the three days before Ascension Day.

these holy times of recollection and extraordinary devotion (without which fasting means little) as excellent means of keeping it down, and of pulling up even the smallest fiber of it that may happen to remain in them. We do not mean by this, however, to impose any intolerable burden on delicate constitutions. Our Lord has taught us that mercy is to be preferred to sacrifice, and that bodily exercise profits little, the chief business being to obtain a divine and godlike temper of mind.

[26] And as this institution will strictly require all pious and profitable employments, so it not only permits but recommends harmless and ingenious diversions, music in particular, and such as may refresh the body without weakening the mind. Those who make religion an enemy of innocent nature do it a disservice, and they wrong the Almighty when they represent him as imposing burdens that cannot be borne. Neither God nor wise men will like us any better for an affected severity and waspish sourness. Nature and grace will never disagree, provided we do not mistake the one nor indulge the petulance of the other. There is nothing disagreeable in religion except what we ourselves have unhappily put there. For true piety is the sweetest and most engaging thing imaginable: as it is most obliging to others, so it is easiest for ourselves. It is in truth the highest *epicureanism*, heightening our pleasures by refining them. It keeps our appetites in that due regularity which not only grace but even nature and reason require. When that regularity is broken there may be a transport, but there can be no true and substantial delight.

[27] As to *lodging*, *dress*, and *diet*, these may quickly be settled by the ladies who subscribe. I do not doubt they will choose what is most plain and decent, what nature and not luxury requires. And since neither food nor clothes commend us to God, they will content themselves with things that are fit and convenient, without raising scruples in themselves or giving any trouble or offense to others. She who considers how much better an account money given to the poor will turn to than money laid out on unnecessary expenses for herself needs no warnings

against superfluities. She who truly loves herself will never waste on a decaying carcass the money that, if prudently spent, would procure her an eternal mansion. She will never think herself so finely dressed as when the backs of the poor bless her, and will never feast so luxuriously as when she feeds a hungry person. No perfume will be thought so pleasing as the odor of good works, and no cosmetic wash so beautifying as her own tears. For her heroic soul is too great to aspire to any empire but that of her own breast, or to care for any conquest other than rescuing poor unhappy souls from the slavery of sin and Satan, the only tyrants that cannot be borne. So whatever decay she notices in her face will concern her very little, but she will correct with the greatest speed and care the slightest spot that might spoil the beauty of her lovely soul.

[28] In a word, this happy society will be but one body. Its soul is love, animating and informing it, and perpetually breathing itself out in flames of holy desire for God and in acts of benevolence to one another. Envy and uncharitableness are vices only of small and narrow hearts. It is therefore supposed they will not enter here, among persons whose dispositions, as well as their births, are to be generous. Censure will be refined into friendly admonition, and all scoffing and offensive raillery will be detested and banished from this place. Here not only the words and actions but even the very thoughts and desires of its members tend to promote the most tender love and universal goodwill; for though there may be particular friendships, they must by no means harm the general amity. So these innocent and holy souls would run their race, measuring their hours by their devotions and their days by the charitable works they do. So they would live the life of heaven while on earth, and receive in their hearts a pledge of its joys. 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 performed? what temper their hearts are in? what good they have done? and what progress they have made toward heaven? And then, with the applause of a satisfied conscience, to sleep

sweetly in peace and safety, with angels pitching their tents round about them, and he who neither slumbers nor sleeps rejoicing over them to do them good!

[29] And so that these great designs may be better pursued and effectively achieved, care shall be taken that our members are under the guidance of persons of irreproachable lives, consummate prudence, sincere piety, and unaffected gravity. These are to be no novices in religion, but such as have spent the greater part of their lives in the study and practice of Christianity, who have lived *much*, however long their stay in the world has been. Their understandings are to be clear and comprehensive, their passions under command, their affections regular, and their knowledge able to govern their zeal. They are to be persons whose scrutiny of their own hearts has been so exact that they fully understand the weaknesses of human nature, can bear with its defects, and know the most prudent methods of bringing about its amendment. They are to be plentifully furnished with instruction for the ignorant and comfort for the disconsolate. They must know how to quicken the slothful, awaken the complacent, and dispel the doubts of the scrupulous. They must not be ignorant of when to use the spur and when the rein, but be duly qualified to minister to all the spiritual needs of their charge, watching over their souls with tenderness and prudence and applying fitting medicines with sweetness and affability. They are to be sharp in detecting the very approach of a fault, wise in preventing it, and charitable in bearing with every pardonable infirmity. Their sweetness of nature must match all their other good qualities, and everything in them must conspire to make them loved and revered. They must have perfect government of themselves, and therefore rule by reason, not mood, consulting the good of the society and not their own arbitrary sway. Yet they must know how to assert their authority when there is just occasion for it, and not harm their charge by an indiscreet slackness and loosening of the reins of discipline. But what occasion will there be for rigor, when the design is to present virtue in all her charms and native loveliness, which

must surely attract the eyes and win the hearts of all who see her? The design is to join the sweetness of humanity to the strictness of philosophy, so that both together, improved and heightened by grace, may make up an accomplished *Christian*. Such a woman, if she is truly one, is certainly the best-bred and best-natured person in the world, adorned with a thousand charms, most happy in herself, and most agreeable and beneficial to everyone around her. And so that everyone who comes under this holy roof may be such an amiable, such a charming creature, whatever faults they bring with them shall be corrected by sweetness, not severity; by friendly admonitions, not magisterial reproofs. Piety shall not be roughly imposed but wisely instilled by a constant display of the beauties of religion in exemplary conduct, the continual and most powerful sermon of a holy life. And since inclination cannot be forced (and nothing makes people more uneasy than fettering themselves with unnecessary bonds), there shall be no vows or irrevocable obligations, not even the fear of reproach, to keep our ladies here any longer than they wish. No: every act of each woman devoted to this life shall be voluntary and free. Nothing shall bind her to it except the pleasure, the glory, and the advantage of this blessed retirement.

THE DANGERS OF THE WORLD

She lists what living in the world costs women: vain ideas, fickleness, temptation, gossip and lost time.

[30] And now, I suppose, you will spare me the trouble of proving that this institution will greatly serve the ends of piety and charity. It seems to me self-evident, and the proposal itself is proof enough. But if it will not promote these great ends, I shall consider myself much obliged to anyone who will show me what will. Provided my neighbor's good is advanced, it makes very little difference to me whether it is by my method or by someone else's. Here there will be no impertinent visits, no foolish love affairs, no idle amusements to distract our thoughts and

waste our precious time. Very little of that time will be spent on dressing, that great devourer, and everything that goes with it, and no more than necessity requires on sleeping and eating. So here is a huge treasure gained, which, for all I know, may purchase a happy eternity. But we need not rest in generalities. A quick look at some particulars will amply demonstrate how useful such a retirement would be. This will appear, first, from a few of the inconveniences to which ladies are exposed by living in the world, and next, from the positive advantages of a retreat.

[31] First, then, as to the inconveniences of living in the world. Not the smallest of them is the strong *idea* and warm perception it gives us of its vanities. Since these are always at hand, constantly thronging around us, they necessarily push aside all other objects. The mind is taken up with the pleasing perceptions that external objects occasion and agreeably entertained by them, and so it settles on them as its only good. It has no leisure to taste the delights that arise from reflecting on itself, or to receive the *ideas* that such reflection conveys. Consequently it forms all its notions from those *ideas* alone which sensation has furnished it with. It knows nothing of the more excellent ones that arise from its own operations and from serious reflection on them, though these are the very ones needed to correct the mistakes and supply the defects of the others. From this comes a very partial knowledge of things, indeed an almost complete ignorance of the things of greatest importance. We are familiar with the sound of certain words, for example *God, religion, pleasure* and *pain, honor* and *dishonor,* and the like. Yet we have no other *ideas* than those conveyed to us by the trifles we spend our time with, and so we frame strange and awkward notions of these words, conforming only to the *ideas* that sensation has furnished us with. These notions sometimes grow so strong and fixed that it is scarcely possible to introduce a new scheme of thoughts and so to undeceive us, especially while these objects crowd thick around us.

[32] Thus she who sees herself and others respected in proportion to the pomp and bustle they make in the world will form

her idea of honor accordingly. She who has tasted no pleasures but those that arise in the presence of outward objects will look no higher than her senses for her gratification. And so we can account for the strange insensibility some people show when you speak to them about any serious religious matter. They are then so dull that you will have a hard time making them understand the clearest truth. Yet if you banter with the same people, or chat with them about some fashion or foppery, they will appear very quick, expert, and ingenious. I have sometimes smiled, between scorn and pity, to hear women talk as gravely and anxiously about some trifling disappointment from their milliner or tailor as if it concerned the weightiest interests of their souls. They talk perhaps more seriously than others who would pass for good talk about their eternal interest. But turn the conversation that way, and they grow as heavy and cold as they were warm and lively before. And why is this, except that their heads are full of the one and entirely empty of such ideas as might give them an adequate notion of the other? To discuss such matters with them, therefore, is as pointless as presenting mathematical demonstrations to someone who does not know what an angle or a triangle means. (This, by the way, shows the great usefulness of judicious catechizing, which is necessary to stir up clear ideas in the mind. Without it, the mind can get little benefit from the sermons of the pulpit, and perhaps the neglect of the former is the reason why the great abundance of the latter has no better effect.) From all of this it appears that if we would not be imposed upon by false representations and impostures, and if we would gain a proper knowledge of the most important things, we must remove the little toys and vanities of the world from us, or ourselves from them. We must enlarge our ideas and seek out new fields of knowledge by which to correct our first mistakes.

[33] From the same source, namely the constant flattery of external objects, arises the querulousness and fastidiousness seen in most people of fortune, which exposes them to many inconveniences. It makes them wholly unfit to bear a change,

and given the great uncertainty and swift vicissitudes of worldly things, even the greatest and most firmly established ought to be prepared for one. Besides this, it makes them perpetually uneasy and lessens the delight of their enjoyments. Such people will very rarely find everything to their liking, and then some little disorder that others would not even notice, like an aching tooth or toe, spoils the relish of their joys. Many great ladies affect this temper, mistaking it for a mark of grandeur. Yet it is so far from that that it proves a poor, weak mind. It is a very childish humor that must be coddled and fed with toys and baubles to quiet its peevishness. It is like the queasy stomach of a sick person, which nobody has reason to be fond of or to wish for.

[34] This also disposes them to inconstancy, for she who is continually supplied with variety does not know where to settle. Some women seem proud of this vice, and yet nothing in the world is so shameful and degrading, because nothing is stronger evidence of a weak and injudicious mind. For it implies that we are either so ignorant as to make a wrong choice in the first place, or so silly that we do not recognize a right one and stick to it once we have made it. It betrays a thoughtless, inconsiderate mind, one that lives at random without any design or purpose. She lacks the judgment to see where to settle or to know when she is well off, and so she is always fluctuating and uncertain, undoing today what she did yesterday. That is the worst character that can be given of anyone's understanding.

[35] A constant scene of temptations and the infection of bad company are another great danger to which living in the world exposes us. It is a dangerous thing to have every opportunity for sinning in our power, and the danger is increased by the bad examples we see every day of those who take those opportunities. *Liberty* (as somebody says) *will corrupt an angel.* It is indeed more glorious to conquer than to flee. Yet since our virtue is so visibly weakened in other respects, we have no reason to rely on it in this one. It has become no easy matter to preserve our innocence in our necessary civilities and daily conversation. In these

we may have the good luck to avoid company that forces a choice on us: either to seem rude to them, or to be truly rude to God Almighty by tamely hearing him, our best friend and benefactor, insulted and swallowing it—when all the while we would think it a very poor spirit that could hear an acquaintance slandered and hold its tongue. Yet even if we escape this trial, our charity is still in constant danger. Censoriousness has become so fashionable that we can hardly avoid either practicing it or suffering it. She who does not have her pert jest ready to pass on others will, as soon as her back is turned, become a jest herself for lack of wit.

[36] As a result of all this, we are imperceptibly led into a great loss of time. Time is a treasure whose value we too often do not know at all until it is lost beyond recovery. And yet, considering the shortness and uncertainty of life, the great work we have to do, and the advantages that come to us from managing our time properly, it cannot be prudent to let even the smallest minute slip away from us. But there is our own lavish spending of it, about which one may ask, as *Solomon* does of labor, *What fruit have we of all the sport and pastime we have taken under the sun?* And besides that, the humor of the world is so unreasonable that people who would think it rude to make so free with our money never hesitate to waste this infinitely more precious treasure and rob us of it.[17]

[37] Lastly, because of this loss of time and the constant hurry we are in, we can find no opportunity for thoughtfulness and recollection. We are so busy with what goes on abroad that we have no leisure to look at home, or to set right the disorders there. Like machines, we are condemned every day to repeat the trivialities of the day before. Such a thoughtless, mechanical way of living narrows our views, contracts our minds, and exposes us to a thousand practical errors. It also makes improvement impossible, because it does not allow us to con-

17 Astell adapts Ecclesiastes 1:3: "What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?"

sider and recollect ourselves, and that is the only means of attaining it.[18]

THE ADVANTAGES OF RETIREMENT

Retirement frees women from custom, gives them leisure for learning and devotion, and shows the world's pleasures as empty.

So much for the inconveniences of living in the world. If we look into retirement, we shall find that it not only removes all of these but brings considerable advantages of its own.

[38] First, it helps us to checkmate custom and frees us from its tyranny. That is the most important thing we have to do, since nothing but habituating ourselves to folly can reconcile us to it. But how hard is it to leave an old road? What courage, as well as prudence, does it require? How clear a judgment is needed to see past the prejudices of education and example and discern what is best! And how strong a resolution is needed to hold to it in spite of all the scoffs and noise of the world! For custom has seized such an unaccountable authority that any woman who tries to check its arbitrary sway and bring it under reason is well on her way to making herself the *butt* for all the fops in town to shoot their impertinent censures at. A wise woman will not care about their censure, yet she does not like to be the subject of their talk. The only way, then, is to withdraw from the world, as the *Israelites* did out of *Egypt,* lest the sacrifice we must make of its follies should provoke its spleen.[19]

[39] This also takes us out of the road of temptation and redeems a great deal of our time, cutting off the extravagances on which so much of it was squandered before. By constantly furnishing us with good employment, it keeps us from being seduced into bad. Great are the benefits of the holy conversation that will be enjoyed here. As vice is catching, so virtue may be too. To what

18 The 1694 text prints "repent," probably a misprint for "repeat," which the comparison with machines requires.

19 See Exodus 8:26, where Moses says the Israelites' sacrifices would offend the Egyptians, and so they must go out into the wilderness to offer them.

heights of piety will she not rise who is placed where the only business is to be good? There the only pleasure is in religion, and the only rivalry is to excel in what is truly commendable. There her soul is not defiled, nor her zeal provoked, by the sight or report of the villainies the world abounds with.

[40] And through the learning offered here, and the leisure we shall have to pursue it and to know and reflect on our own minds, we shall rescue ourselves from the woeful thoughtlessness we have slipped into, awaken our sleeping powers, and make use of the reason God has given us. We shall then begin to marvel at our own folly. Among all the pleasures we used to pursue, we never paid attention to the noblest and most delicious one, which is found in the chase of truth. We shall count ourselves blessed at last that our eyes have been opened to see how much more pleasantly our own thoughts can entertain us than all the diversions the world affords. In this way we are made fit to receive the influences of the Holy Spirit and are put in a proper frame for devotion. No doubt he has often knocked at the door of our hearts when the crowd and noise of our vanities would not let us notice or hear him, and he could find no admittance when our house was so full of other company. Here, then, is the fittest place to entertain him, when we are freed from outward disturbances and wholly at leisure to attend to so divine a guest. We shall perform our devotions with proper attention, since the objects that used to distract us have now been removed. Simplicity of desire will produce simplicity of thought, and that will make our minds most intent and elevated when we come to address ourselves to the throne of grace. Being dead to the things of this world, we shall petition with greater fervor for those of another. Living always in a lively and awed sense of the divine majesty, our hearts will always be disposed to approach him in the most solemn, serious, and reverent manner. It is a very unseemly thing to jump from our diversions to our prayers. It is as if, after entertaining ourselves and others with vanity, we were instantly ready to appear in the sacred presence of God. But a religious retirement and holy conversa-

tion will give us a more serious temper and a graver spirit. So they will both keep us always fit to approach him and also stir us to be more careful in our preparation when we do. Besides all other improvements in knowledge, we shall in this way gain truer notions of God than we were capable of before. This is of very great consequence, since the lack of right apprehensions concerning him is the general cause of mistakes in religion and errors in practice. He is the noblest object of our understanding, and so nothing is more necessary, or of greater consequence to us, than to occupy our thoughts with him. And if we rightly considered his nature, we would neither dare to forget him nor draw near to him with unclean hands and unholy hearts.

[41] From this sacred mountain, where the world will be placed at our feet, so far off that the fumes of its corruptions cannot cloud our eyesight, we shall have a true view of it. We shall see clearly that all its allurements, all those gaieties and pageantries we now admire so much, are no better than trifling toys, with no value except what our perverse opinion puts on them. These things contribute so very little to our real good that even at *present*, which is their only season, we could live much happier without them than with them. They are so far from being necessary to true happiness that they will vanish and be no more when that happiness is complete and perfect. There are many topics from which we might declaim against the vanity of the world, but it seems to me that experience is so convincing that it makes all the rest unnecessary. It would certainly reclaim us from an immoderate love of earthly enjoyments, if only we would listen to it seriously. For tell me, Ladies, whether your greatest pleasures do not come with a greater sting. When you think you have them in your grasp, do they not either vanish into air or chafe your fingers? To lack them and to enjoy them torment you equally: the one gives you the pain of hunger, the other the pain of loathing. For in reality there is no good in them, nothing but the shadow and appearance of it. If there were, you could not so easily grow sick of your old delights and be so fond of variety, since what is truly desirable never ends in

disgust. So it is not pleasures but amusements that you now pursue. Because you know no better joys, these amusements pretend to fill their place, lure you on with fair promises, and repay your labor with disappointed hopes. These are joys that do not last nearly as long as the flimsiest trinket you wear; the most capricious creature of whims among you is far more constant than they are. Come here, then, and take a true look at them, so that you may no longer deceive yourselves with what does you no good. Spurn these empty nothings, and secure a share in a bliss that will not fail and cannot disappoint you! It is a happiness that depends only on God and on your own minds, and so is out of fortune's reach. It will set you above the batteries of the world, above its terrors and its allurements, and enable you at once to triumph over it and to despise it. And what can be more glorious than a mind unshaken by the flatteries of prosperity or the rough shocks of adversity? Such a mind passes through both with the same indifference and integrity, and cannot be tempted by either into a mean, unworthy, or indecent action.

FRIENDSHIP

She describes the pure friendship between women that the retreat would make possible.

[42] Further still, besides the holy emulation that the constant sight of the brightest and most exemplary lives will stir up in us, we shall have the opportunity of forming the purest and noblest friendship. It is a blessing well worth buying at the price of all the rest of the world! For she who possesses a worthy person has certainly won the richest treasure! It is a blessing that monarchs may envy, and she who enjoys it is happier than she who sits on a throne! It is a blessing that, next to the love of God, is the choicest jewel in our heavenly crown. If it were properly practiced, it would both fit us for heaven and bring heaven down into our hearts while we remain here. For friendship is a virtue that includes all the rest, since no one is fit for it who is not adorned with every other virtue. Probably one considerable

cause of the degeneracy of the present age is how little true friendship is to be found in it. Or perhaps you would rather say that this is the effect of our corruption. Cause and effect are indeed reciprocal: if the world were better there would be more friendship, and if there were more friendship we should have a better world. But because *iniquity abounds*, the *love of many* has not only *grown cold* but become completely numbed and dead.[20] But suppose our hearts are so narrow, so full of mistaken self-love, so unreasonably fond of ourselves, that we cannot spare a hearty goodwill for one or two chosen persons. How can anyone ever think, then, that we would do our duty well in the charity owed to all mankind? For friendship is nothing but charity contracted. It is (in the words of an admired author) a kind of revenge on the narrowness of our faculties: we show toward one or two that extraordinary charity which we are willing, but not able, to exercise toward everyone.[21] So friendship is without doubt the best instructor to teach us our duty to our neighbor, and an excellent monitor to urge us to pay that debt as far as our power reaches. It has a special power to enlarge our hearts and to free them from that vicious selfishness and the rest of those *sordid passions* that show a narrow, ungenerous temper and do such harm to mankind. An institution that both disposes us to be friends ourselves and helps us to find friends must therefore be highly beneficial. But by friendship I do not mean anything like the intimacies that go about in the world. These are often partnerships in wrongdoing, and at best trivial fondnesses, as little like true friendship as modern practice is like primitive Christianity. What I mean by it is the greatest usefulness, the most refined and disinterested benevolence. It is a love that thinks nothing within the limits of power and duty too much to do or to suffer for its beloved, and that makes no distinction between its friend and itself, except that in worldly matters it puts her interest first. Though it is very desirable to obtain such

20 Echoing Matthew 24:12: "because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold."

21 The "admired author" is John Norris, in *The Theory and Regulation of Love* (1688).

a treasure, such a medicine of life (as the wise man calls it), the danger is great that we may be deceived in our choice and suck in poison where we expected health. Consider how ready we are to disguise ourselves, and how hard it is to know our own hearts, let alone another's. It is not advisable, then, to be too hasty in entering so important a relationship. Before we do, it would be good if we could look into the very soul of the beloved person, to discover how far it resembles our own; and in this society we shall have the best opportunities of doing so.[22] Here there are no interests to serve, and no schemes in which one person is made a decoy for another. The souls of all its members will be open and free, and those particular friendships must do no harm to the general amity. And yet in heaven, that region of perfect love, the happy souls (as some believe) now and then step aside from the more general company to spend time with a particular friend. So in this little emblem of that blessed place, what should prevent two persons of a sympathetic disposition from doing likewise? Suppose the *make* and *frame* of their souls correspond exactly to each other, so that one would think heaven designed them on purpose to unite and mingle. What should prevent them from entering into a holy alliance to watch over each other for good, to advise, encourage and direct each other, and to note the smallest fault so that it may be mended? For the truest effect of love is to try to make the beloved person better. Nothing, therefore, is more likely to improve us in virtue and raise us to the very highest pitch of goodness than unfeigned friendship, which is the most beneficial as well as the most pleasant thing in the world.

[43] But to hurry on. Such an institution will greatly confirm us in virtue and help us to persevere to the end. Through the substantial piety and solid knowledge we shall acquire here, it will also fit us to spread them when we return into the world. A habitual practice of piety for some years will root and establish us in it so firmly that religion will become second nature, and we would have to do strange violence to ourselves to dare

22 Ecclesiasticus 6:16: "A faithful friend is the medicine of life."

oppose it after that. For besides all the other advantages that virtue has over vice, this will disarm vice of *custom*, the only thing that recommends it. It will bravely take vice's strongest fort and turn its own cannon against it. How nearly impossible it would be for such a woman to sin! Her understanding, clearly illuminated by the knowledge of the truth, is too wise to be imposed on by the false *representations* with which sin would deceive it. Her will has found its true *center* and united itself to it, and, having long been used to moving in a *straight* line, has no temptation to swerve into an *oblique* one. Her affections have feasted daily on those delicious fruits of paradise that religion offers them, and are therefore too lofty and refined to relish the muddy pleasures of sensual delight. It would surely take a miracle for such a woman to give up her glory and joy; she would have to be as bad as *Lucifer* himself to forsake her heaven after such enjoyments. It is too unreasonable to imagine such an apostasy. The supposition is monstrous, and so we may conclude that it will never, or very rarely, happen. And then what a blessed world we should have, shining with so many stars of virtue! They would not be content to be happy themselves, for that is a narrowness of mind far beneath their godlike temper. Like the glorious lights of heaven, or rather like him who made them, they would spread their kindly influence all around them. Having gained entrance into paradise themselves, they would both show the way and invite everyone else to share their happiness. Instead of the froth and triviality, the fault-finding and meddling, that women's conversations are so full of, we should hear their tongues employed in winning converts to heaven, in decrying vice, in establishing virtue, and in proclaiming their Maker's glory. It would be more genteel to give and take instruction about the ornaments of the mind than to ask about the latest fashion; and a lecture on the fashions would become as unwelcome as any serious conversation is at present. Not the follies of the town, but the beauties and the love of Jesus, would be the most polite and delightful entertainment. It would be thought as rude and uncivilized to send our visitors away uninstructed as

our foolishness now thinks it to introduce relevant and useful conversation. Ladies of quality would be able to distinguish themselves from their inferiors by the blessings they shared and the good they did. For this is their great prerogative, their *distinguishing character*: they are placed in a condition that makes what is everyone's chief business their only occupation. They have nothing to do but to glorify God and to benefit their neighbors. She who does not improve her talent in this way is more vile and contemptible than the lowest creature around her.

HEIRESSES, PUPILS AND POOR GENTLEWOMEN

The house would protect heiresses, educate children of rank, and give poor gentlewomen an education as a dowry.

44 And if, after so many spiritual advantages, it is fitting to mention worldly ones: here heiresses and women of fortune may be kept safe from the crude advances of scheming men. She who has more money than discretion need not curse her stars for being exposed as prey to bold, importunate and rapacious vultures. Here she will not be lured in and imposed on. She will be neither bought nor sold, nor forced to marry for the sake of her own peace when she has no inclination to it, except what being worn out by relentless pestering produces. Or if she is inclined to marry, she may stay here in safety until her friends offer a suitable match, and be free from the danger of a dishonorable one. For modesty requires that a woman should not love before marriage, but should only choose someone she can love afterward; and she whose affections are wholly innocent can easily fix them where duty requires.[23]

45 At first I intended to say nothing in particular about the occupations of its members. Yet to give a sample of how useful they will be to the world, I am now inclined to declare that part of their work is meant to be giving the best education to the children of persons of quality. These children will be looked after,

23 "Friends" here, in the usage of Astell's day, means a woman's family and guardians.

and taught minor matters, by persons of lower rank appointed to that task, but the forming of their minds will be the special care of members of their own rank, who could have no more pleasant and useful occupation than to exercise and increase their own knowledge by instilling it into these young ones, who are most likely to profit under such tutors. For how can their little pupils help believing them? These tutors do not decry the world (as others may be thought to do) because they could not enjoy it. When they had it in their power, and were courted and caressed by it, they judged it right, for very good reasons and after mature deliberation, to give up and despise its offers for a better choice. Hired people, moreover, cannot do as much good for the young, for other reasons too. They often have only short views of things themselves, and sordid, low spirits, so they are unlikely to form a generous temper in the minds of those they educate. No doubt he judged well who would not entrust the upbringing of his son to a slave, because nothing great or excellent could be expected from a person in that condition.

[46] When the growth of their income enables its members to do such a work of charity, they intend to educate the daughters of gentlemen who have fallen on hard times, and that education will be no small benefit to the nation. Many souls will thereby be preserved from great dishonor and set in a comfortable way of living, either by being received into the house, if they wish it, or by being otherwise provided for. For it is assumed that prudent men will count the accomplishments these young women acquire here a sufficient *dowry*, and that a discreet and virtuous gentlewoman will make a better wife than one whose mind is empty, though her purse is full.

OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

She answers that some virtues need shelter, that real learning cures pride, and that educated wives benefit men.

[47] But some will say: can people not be good without this confinement? Can they not live at large in the world and still serve

God as acceptably as here? It is granted that they can. Truly wise and virtuous souls will do it, with the help of God's grace, in spite of every temptation; and I sincerely wish that all women were of this temper. But it must be considered that there are *tender* virtues that need to be screened from the bad air of the world. Many people 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 do not always have the strongest heads. Sometimes the enticements of the world, and the subtle insinuations of those who lie in wait to deceive, may make their heads spin, shake their resolutions, and overturn all the fine hopes of a promising beginning. It is right, then, that such tender *shoots* should be transplanted. There they may be held up by the prop of virtuous friendship and confirmed 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 as apt to be improved by the company of the good as the good are to be corrupted by theirs. Since, then, we pray daily against temptation, it cannot be wrong to take every prudent care to avoid it, rather than face the danger out of vain presumption. God may justly allow that danger to overcome us, as a fitting correction of our pride. It is not impossible for a man to live in an infected house or town and escape with his life and health. Yet if he has a place in the country to retire to, he will not make light of that advantage. And surely the health of our souls matters more than the health of our bodies. Besides, a woman needs a settled virtue and a perfected prudence if she understands so well the great purpose for which she was sent into the world, and pursues it so faithfully, that she is not content to be wise and good herself alone, but tries to spread wisdom and piety to everyone around her. But neither this prudence nor this heroic goodness is easily attained amid the noise and hurry of the world. We must therefore withdraw for a while from its clamor and importunity if we generously intend to do it good. Once we have calmly and soberly observed and corrected what is wrong in ourselves, we

shall be better fitted to promote a reformation in others. A devout retirement will not only strengthen and confirm our souls, so that they are not infected by the world's corruptions. It will also purify and refine them so thoroughly that they become antidotes to expel the poison in others, and spread a healthful air all around them.

[48] If anyone objects to a learned education on the grounds that it will make women vain and presumptuous, and will increase their pride instead of correcting it, I grant that a smattering of learning may do so. It has this effect on men: none are so dogmatic, and so eager to show off their abilities, as your little *pretenders* to knowledge. But I would not have the Ladies content themselves with the *show*. My wish is that they should not rest until they obtain the *substance*. And then she who knows most will be the first to admit, with the wise *Socrates*, that she knows nothing. She knows nothing that is a matter for pride and ostentation, nothing that does not come with so much ignorance and imperfection that it cannot reasonably make her elated and puffed up. The more she knows, the less subject she will be to talkativeness and its sister vices, because she sees that the most difficult piece of learning is to know when to speak and when to hold one's tongue, and never to speak except to the purpose.

[49] But men, if they rightly understand their own interest, have no reason to oppose the intelligent education of women, since it would go a long way toward reclaiming men. Great is the influence we have over them in their childhood. At that time, if a mother is discreet and knowledgeable as well as devout, she has many opportunities to give the tender mind of the child such a *form* and *seasoning* as will show its good effects through every stage of his life. But even if you will not allow that she is capable of doing *good*, she certainly can do *harm*. If she does not *make* the child, she has the power to *mar* him, by letting her fondness get the better of discreet affection. Besides this, a good and prudent wife would work wonders on a bad man. He would have to be a brute indeed to hold out against all the innocent arts, the gentle persuasions and the obliging methods she would use to

reclaim him. Piety often gives offense when it comes with indiscretion, but she who is as wise as she is good possesses such charms as can hardly fail to prevail. No doubt her husband is a much happier man, and more likely to abandon all his bad ways, than one who has no one to come home to but an ignorant, peevish and fanciful creature. Intelligent conversation will make his life comfortable, and he who can be so well entertained at home need not run into temptations looking for amusements elsewhere. The only danger is that the wife may be more knowledgeable than the husband; but if she is, it is his own fault, since he lacks no opportunities to improve himself. The exception is if he is a natural *blockhead*, and then such a man will need a wise woman to govern him, whose prudence will hide it from public notice and will at once both cover and make up for his defects. Allow me therefore to hope that no gentleman with honorable intentions will from now on disparage knowledge and intelligence in the woman he claims to honor. Or if he does, it may serve as a test to tell the false and unworthy lover from the real one.

WHAT IT COSTS

She argues that a few hundred pounds spent here would save families money, honor and daughters.

[50] Now, who that has a spark of piety will set out to oppose so religious a plan? What generous spirit with a proper regard for the good of mankind will not be eager to advance and perfect it? Who will think 500 pounds too much to spend on buying so much wisdom and happiness? Surely we would not think them too dearly bought at a much greater sum, if our pitiful and sordid spirits did not set a far higher value on money than it deserves. But granting that so much of that beloved idol is given away, a woman brought up in this way will easily make it up by her frugality and other virtues. If she brings less, she will not waste as much as others do on superfluous and vain expenses. Nor can I think of any expedient as useful as this to people of

rank who are overstocked with children, for in this way they can provide for them honorably without impairing their estates. Five or six hundred pounds can easily be spared with a daughter, when so many thousands would cut deep. And yet, as the world goes, this would be a very small fortune for ladies of their birth. It would neither keep them in the *style* of living that custom makes almost necessary nor get them an equal match, since men of their own rank (contrary to the generous custom of the *Germans*) choose to fill their coffers rather than to preserve the purity of their blood. They therefore think a heavy moneybag the best gentility, and prefer a wealthy upstart to the best-descended and best-qualified lady. Perhaps their own extravagance has made this necessary, so that they may keep up an empty shadow of greatness, which is all that remains to show what their ancestors were.

[51] Does anyone think their money is lost to their families when it is put in here? I will only ask what course they can take to save it, and at once to preserve their money, their honor and their daughters too. If they were sure the ladies would die unmarried, I would commend their thrift, but experience has too often shown us how vain this expectation is. For the poor lady has spent the prime of her years in gaiety and company, running the whole round of the vanities of the town. She has spread all her nets and used all her arts for conquest, and finds that the bait fails where she would have it take. All this while she has been so overcareful of her body that she had no time to improve her mind, which therefore offers her no safe retreat now that she meets with disappointments in the world outside. And she grows every day more and more aware that the respect that used to be paid her is fading as fast as her beauty. Then, thoroughly terrified by the dreadful name of *old maid* (though none but fools will reproach her with it, and no wise woman will be afraid of it), and wanting to avoid this terrible *bugbear* and the scoffs thrown at superannuated virgins, she flies to some dishonorable match as her last, though much mistaken, refuge, to the disgrace of her family and her own irreparable

ruin.[24] And now let any person of honor tell me: would it not be richly worth some thousands of pounds to prevent all this mischief, and to be spared an idle fellow, and perhaps a brood of beggarly children, hanging on him to be provided for?

52 If I could think of any other objection, I would consider it. There is indeed nothing that clever people cannot argue *for* and *against*, but those who duly weigh the arguments on both sides will easily see the great usefulness of this institution, unless they are extremely prejudiced. The *beaux*, perhaps, and the leading sparks of the town will ridicule it and laugh at it. For virtue herself, bright as she is, cannot escape the lash of scurrilous tongues. The comfort is that while they feebly try to throw dirt on her, they cannot soil her beauty, and only make themselves the more contemptible. They may therefore, if they please, hug themselves in their own dear folly and enjoy the amusement of their own insipid jokes. She has little wisdom and less virtue who can be frightened away from what she judges reasonable by the scoffs and empty noise of facetious wits and pert buffoons. And it is no *wonder* that people like these object to our proposal. They have nothing to show for their claims to wit but some scraps of plays and blustering nonsense. They imagine that a well-arranged periwig can make up for their lack of brains, and that to talk *much* is a sign of intelligence, however little it is to the purpose. It would indeed ruin the trade of the showy, fluttering fops, who would be at a loss if they had no one as frivolous as themselves to talk with. The criticism of their dress would be useless and the labor of their *valet de chambre* wasted, unless they could peaceably lay aside their rivalry and one ass be content to compliment and admire another. For the ladies would have more discernment than to esteem a man for follies that ought rather to make them scorn and despise him. They would never be so stupid as to imagine that he who cares for nothing but his own brutish appetite could have any real affection for them. Nor would they ever expect fidelity from one who is

24 Astell writes "Mormo," the name of a female bogey in Greek folklore used to frighten children; hence any bugbear.

unfaithful to God and to his own soul. They would not be so absurd as to suppose that a man who neglects his Maker can esteem them. For what are all those fine idolatries by which he would recommend himself to his so-called goddess but mockery and delusion, coming from one who forgets and affronts the true Deity? They would not value themselves for the admiration of such incompetent judges, and so they would not use the trifling little arts needed to recommend themselves to such admirers. Nor would they give these men the chance to profess themselves their slaves for so long that at last they become their masters.

A CLOSING APPEAL

She urges women to support the plan and to prefer virtue's lasting beauty to fashion.

53 What remains now but to put into practice what is so very much to our advantage? Is charity so dead in the world that no one will contribute to saving their own and their neighbors' souls? Shall we freely spend our money to buy vanity, and often ruin both present and future, and find none for so eminently good a work, one that will make the ages to come rise up and call us blessed? I would gladly persuade myself of better things. I hope that I shall one day see this *religious retirement* happily established, and its great purposes wisely and vigorously pursued. And I think I already have a vision of the luster and glory our ladies cast all around them! Let me therefore entreat the rest of our sex, who, though at liberty in the world, are the miserable slaves of their own base affections. Let me entreat them to lay aside their prejudices, and whatever borders on envy and malice, and look with impartial eyes on the beauties of our members. The native innocence and naturalness of their charms, and the blameless integrity of their lives, are far more attractive than all the elaborate artifices and studied arts the others can invent to recommend themselves. Even bad men themselves would judge so, for they often betray a secret vener-

ation for the virtue they pretend to despise and try to corrupt. There is nothing, not the least shadow of a motive, to recommend vice except its fashionableness and our being used to it. In the same way, there is nothing at all forbidding in virtue except her strangeness. Get to know her a little, and you will wonder how you could be so foolish as to delight in anything else! For you will find her company most sweet and obliging, her precepts most easy and beneficial, her very tasks joys, and her commands the highest pleasures. She will not rob you of any innocent delight, nor commit you to anything beneath your birth and breeding. Instead she will put a new and more pleasing relish into all your enjoyments and make them more delicious with her sweetness. She will preserve and increase your honor by allying you to the King of Heaven. She will secure your grandeur by setting it on a firm foundation, one that the caprice of fortune cannot shake or overthrow. She will enlarge your souls, raise them above the common level, and encourage that permissible pride which scorns to do a base, unworthy action. She will make you truly lovable in the eyes of God and man. She will preserve even the beauty of your bodies as long as so brittle a thing can last. And when it must necessarily decay, she will imprint such loveliness on your minds as will shine through and brighten your very faces, enriching you with such a stock of charms as time, which devours everything else, will never be able to wear away. In a word, it is virtue alone that can make you truly happy in this world as well as in the next.

[54] There is a kind of bravery and greatness of soul that ennobles us more truly than the highest title. It consists in living up to the dignity of our natures and scorning to do a mean, unbecoming thing. It means passing evenly through good and bad fortune without being corrupted by the one or depressed by the other. For she who can do this shows that her happiness does not depend on so changeable a thing as this world. Instead, in due subordination to the Almighty, it rests only on her own great mind. This is the richest ornament, and it makes a woman glorious in the lowest fortune. Real worth shines so brightly

that, like a diamond, it does not lose its luster even when thrown on a dunghill. But she who is raised to some eminent station and lacks this natural and solid greatness is no better than fortune's *laughingstock*, made more conspicuous only so that she may appear the more contemptible. Let those, therefore, who value themselves only on external accomplishments consider how liable these are to decay, and how soon they may be deprived of them. And let them consider that, even supposing these should last, they are only sandy foundations to build esteem on. What a disappointment it will be, to a lady's admirer as well as to herself, when her conversation loses and endangers the victory her eyes had won! For when the passion of a lover has evaporated into the cool temper of a husband, and frequent viewing has lessened the wonder her charms first raised, she will keep no more than the formal respect that decency and good breeding require, and perhaps hardly that. Unless he is a very good man (and indeed the world is not overfull of them), her worthlessness has forfeited his affections, which are seldom held fast by anything other than veneration and esteem. A wise and good woman, on the other hand, is useful and valuable at every age and in every condition. She who attends chiefly to the *one thing needful*, the *good part which shall not be taken from her*, lives a cheerful and pleasant life, innocent and composed, calm and tranquil, and makes a glorious exit. She is carried from the happiest life on earth to unspeakable happiness in heaven, while a fresh and fragrant name embalms her dust and spreads its perfume to later ages. Meanwhile fools, and the worst sort of fools, the wicked, *live* as well as *die* in misery. They go out like a snuffed candle, leaving nothing behind them but stench and putrefaction.[25]

[55] To conclude: this *proposal* is only a rough draft and a crude essay, and a better pen could make it much more beautiful. If it gives wiser heads occasion to improve and perfect it, I have achieved my aim. For imperfect as it is, it seems so desirable that she who drew up the scheme is full of hope that it will not

25 Astell quotes Christ's words to Martha about her sister Mary in Luke 10:42.

lack kind hands to carry it out and complete it. But if it fails of that, it is only a few hours thrown away and a little labor in vain. Even so, that labor will not be lost if what is offered here can serve to express the hearty goodwill, and the great desire for your improvement, of her who is, Ladies, your very humble servant.