

Annotated by Karenza Sutton-Bennett

[Page 9] TO prohibit women entirely from learning is treating them with the same indignity that Mahomet did, who, to render them voluptuous, denied them souls; and indeed the greatest part of women act as if they had really adopted a tenet so injurious to the sex, and appear to set no value upon that lively imagination, that sprightly wit which makes them more admired than beauty itself.

When we consider the happy talents which wo-men in general possess, and how successfully some have cultivated them, we cannot without indigna-tion observe the little esteem they have for the endowments of their minds which it is so easy for them to improve. They are, as Montaigne¹ says, flowers of quick growth, and by the delicacy of their conception, catch readily and without trouble the relation of things to each other. It is a melan-choly consideration that the most precious gifts of nature should be stifled, or obscured by a shame-ful neglect.

The charms of their persons, how powerful so- ever, may attract, but cannot fix us; something [Page 10] more than beauty is necessary to rivet the lover’s chain. By often beholding a beautiful face, the impression it first made on us soon wears away. When the woman whose person we admire is inca-pable of pleasing us by her conversation, languor² and satiety³, soon triumph over the taste we had for her charms: hence arises the inconstancy with which we are so often reproached; it is that barren-ness of ideas which we find in women that ren-ders men unfaithful.

The ladies may judge of the difference there is among them, by that which they themselves make between a fool who teases them with his imper-tinence, and a man of letters who entertains them agreeably; a very little labour would equal them to the last, and perhaps give them the advantage. This is a kind of victory which we wish to yield them. We would, without envy, see them di-viding with us a good, whose value is always greater than the labour by which it is acquired.

The more they shall enlarge their notions, the more subjects of conversation will be found be-tween them and us, and the more sprightly and affecting will that conversation be. How many delicate sentiments, how many nice sensibilities are lost by not being communicable, and in which we should feel an increase of satisfaction could we meet with women disposed to taste them!

But what are the studies to which women may with propriety apply themselves? This question I take upon myself to answer; and I entreat the la-dies to pardon me, if among all the sciences

¹ Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) was a prominent French philosopher and author in the Renaissance period.

² “*Languor* and lassitude signifies a faintness, which may arise from want or decay of spirits, through indigestion, or too much exercise; or from an additional weight of fluids, from a diminution of secretion by the common discharges” ([Johnson’s Dictionary Online](#), “languor, n.s.”).

³ “Fulness beyond desire or pleasure; more than enough; wearisomeness of plenty; state of being palled or glutted” ([Johnson’s Dictionary Online](#), “satiety, n.s.”).

which exercise the wonderful activity of the human mind, [Page 11] I pronounce that only some are fit to be cultivated by them. I would particularly recommend to them to avoid all abstract learning, all thorny re-searches, which may blunt the finer edge of their wit, and change the delicacy in which they excel into pedantic coarseness.

If their sex has produced Daciers⁴ and Chatelets⁵, these are examples rarely found, and fitter to be admired than imitated: for who would wish to see assemblies made up of doctors in petticoats, who will regale us with Greek and the systems of Leib-nitz. The learning proper for women is such as best suits the soft elegance of their form, such as may add to their natural beauties, and qualify them for the several duties of life. There is nothing more disgusting than those female theologians, who, adopting all the animosity of the party they have thought fit to join, assemble ridiculous synods in their houses, and form extravagant sects.

[...]

It is in such parts of learning only as afford the highest improvement that we invite women to share with us. All that may awaken curiosity, and lend graces to the imagination, suits them still better than us. This is a vast field where we may together exercise the mind; and here they may even excel us without mortifying our pride.

History and natural philosophy are alone sufficient to furnish women with an agreeable kind of study. The latter, in a series of useful observations and interesting experiments, offers a spectacle well worth the consideration of a reasonable being. But in vain does nature present her miracles to the generality of women, who have no attention but to trifles⁶: she is dumb to those who know not how to interrogate her.

Yet surely it requires but a small degree of attention to be struck with that wonderful harmony which reigns throughout the universe, and to be ambitious of investigating its secret springs. This is a large volume which is open to all; here a pair of beautiful eyes may employ themselves without being fatigued. This amiable study will banish languor from the sober amusements of the country, and repair that waste of intellect which is caused by the dissipations of the town. Women cannot [Page 13] be too much excited to raise their eyes to objects like these, which they but too often debase to such as are unworthy of them.

⁴ Anne le Fèvre Dacier (1645-1720) was a French scholar, author, and translator of classical literature. She learned Latin and Greek from her overhearing lessons that her father TanneGuy Le Fèvre gave to her brother. She was one of the first female translators and was highly regarded for her 1699 translation of Homer's *Iliad*.

⁵ Gabriella Emilia de Bréteuil, marchioness du Châtelet. She explained Leibnitz, translated Newton, and commented upon him. We have philosophical institutions of hers, which prove the force of her wonderful genius to all who have learning enough to render them capable of judging of it.

⁶ "To act or talk without weight or dignity; to act with levity; to talk with folly," "To mock; to play the fool," "To indulge light amusement" ([Johnson's Dictionary Online](#), "trifle, v.a.").

The sex is more capable of attention than we imagine: what they chiefly want is a well directed application. There is scarcely a young girl who has not read with eagerness a great number of idle romances, and puerile tales⁷, sufficient to corrupt her imagination and cloud her understanding. If she had devoted the same time to the study of hi-story, she would in those varied scenes, which the world offers to view, have found facts more inte-resting, and instruction which only truth can give.

[...]

[Page 14]This study, alike pleasing and instructive, will naturally lead to that of the fine arts, which it is fit the ladies should have a less superficial know-ledge of. The arts are in themselves too amiable to need any recommendation to the sex: all the objects they offer to their view have some analogy with women, and are like them adorned with the brightest colours. The mind is agree-ably soothed by those images, which poetry, paint-ing, and music trace out to it, especially if they are found to agree with purity of manners.

[...]

To familiarize ourselves with the arts is in some degree to create a new sense. So agreeably have they imitated nature, nay, so often have they em-bellished it, that whoever cultivates them, will in them always find a fruitful source of new pleasures. We ought to provide against the encroachments of languor and weariness by this addition to our na-tural riches; and surely when we may so easily transfer to ourselves the possession of that multitude of pleasing ideas which they have created, it would be the highest stupidity to neglect such an advan-tage.

There is no reason to fear that the ladies, by ap-plying themselves to these studies, will throw a shade over the natural graces of their wit. No, on the con-trary, those graces will be placed in a more conspicuous point of view: what can equal the pleasure we re-ceive from the conversation of a woman who is [Page 15] more solicitous to adorn her mind than her person? In the company of such women there can be no satiety; everything becomes interesting, and has a secret charm, which only they can give. The de-lightful art of saying the most ingenious things with a graceful simplicity is peculiar to them: it is they who call forth the powers of wit in men, and communicate to them that easy elegance which is never to be acquired in the closet.

But what preservative is there against weariness and disgust in the society of women of weak and unimproved understanding? In vain do they endeavour to fill the void of their conversation with insipid gaiety: they soon exhaust the barren funds of fashionable trifles, the news of the day, and

⁷ “Childish; boyish” ([Johnson’s Dictionary Online](#), “puerile, adj.”).

hackneyed⁸ compliments; they are at length obliged to have recourse to scandal, and it is well if they stop there: a commerce in which there is nothing solid must be either mean or criminal.

There is but one way to make it more varied and more interesting. If ladies of the first rank would condescend to form their taste upon our best authors, and collect ideas from their use-ful writings, conversation would take another cast. Their acknowledged merit would banish that swarm of noisy impertinents who flutter about them, and who endeavour to render them as contemptible as themselves: men of sense and learning would then frequent their assemblies, and form a circle more worthy of the name of *good company*.

In this new circle, gaiety would not be banished, but refined by delicacy and wit. Merit is not au-stere in its nature. There is a calm and uniform [Page 16] cheerfulness that runs through the conversation of persons of real understanding, which is far pre-ferable to the noisy mirth of ignorance and folly.

[...]

The ladies must allow me once more to repeat to them that the only means of charming, and of charming long, is to improve their minds; good sense gives beauties which are not subject to fade like the lilies and roses of their cheeks, but will prolong the power of an agreeable woman to the autumn of her life.⁹ If the sex would not have their influence confined to the short triumph of a day, they must endeavour to improve their natural talents by study, and the conversation of men of letters. Neglect will not then steal upon them in proportion as their bloom decays; but they will unite in themselves all the advantages of both sexes.

⁸ “To practise one thing; to accustom to the road.” Shakespeare “He is long hackney’d in the ways of men” ([Johnson’s Dictionary Online](#), “hackneyed, adj.”).

⁹ It was by her wit that the Dutchess of Valentinois charmed three successive monarchs, and preserved her influence to an extreme old age. It was to their wit that Madame doe Verac, Madam Tencin, and several other ladies owed their power to charming when their youth was fled. The graces of a fine understanding, improved by study, never grow old.