The Female Right to Literature, in a Letter to a young Lady from Florence.

By ———

While you, Athenia, with assiduous toil
Reap the rich fruits of learning's fertile soil:
Now search whate'er historick truth has shewn,
And make the wealth of ages past your own;
Now crop the blossoms of poetick flow'rs,
And range delighted in the Muses bowers;
Say, will the sweetest of her sex attend
To lines by friendship, not by flattery penn'd;
To lines which tempt not worth with empty praise;
But to still greater height that worth would raise;
To lines which dare against a world decide,
And stem the rage of custom's rapid tide!

Come then, Athenia, freely let us scan
The coward insults of that tyrant, man.
Self-prais'd, and grasping at despotic pow'r,
He looks on flattery as the female dow'r;
To Nature's boon ascribes what force has giv'n,
And usurpation deems the gift of heav'n.
See the first-peopled East, where Asia sheds
Her balmy spices o'er her fertile meads:
There, while th’ Assyrian stretch’d his wide domain
From distant Indus to the Cyprian main,
All nature’s laws by impious force were broke;
The female sex to flaviy’s galling yoke
Bow’d their fair necks: from social life confin’d,
And all th’ exertions of th’ enlighten’d mind,
Clos’d in a proud Seraglio’s wanton bow’rs,
The dalliance of a tyrant’s looser hours.
By kings’ examples subjects form their lives,
Dependent satraps had their train of wives;
Proportion’d pow’r each petty tyrant craves,
And each poor female was the slave of slaves.

When Persia next o’erturn’d th’ Assyrian throne,
Destroy’d her tyranny and fix’d its own;
The fair distress’d no milder treatment saw,
This was indeed th’ unalterable law.
In future times, whatever matters came,
Tyrants were chang’d, but tyranny the same;
At length t’ accumulate the female woe’s,
The grand impostor Mahomet arose;
Swoln with prophetic lyes, he lay’d his plan
On the firm basis of the pride of man;

“Women, the toys of men, and slaves of lust,
“Are but mere moulds to form man’s outward crust;
“The heavenly spark, that animates the clay,
“Of the prime essence that effulgent ray,
“Th’ immortal soul is all to man confin’d,
“Not meanly squander’d on weak woman-kind.”

T. 4

Accursed
Accursed wretch! by hell’s black council driv’n
Thus to debase the fairest work of heav’n.
And could Religion rear her sacred head
Fraught with such doctrines? could such errors spread
From western Tangier, and the sun-burnt Moor,
To the cold Tartar’s ever-frozen shire?
Ev’n Greece too not exempt, Greece, once the seat
Where Sense and Freedom held the reins of state;
Where Force was Reafon’s hand-maid; where the bands
Of Love and Friendship join’d the wedded hands;
Where flourish’d once, and flourish still in fame
Th’ Athenian matron, and the Spartan dame.

In Rome too Liberty once reign’d, in Rome
The female virtues were allow’d to bloom,
And bloom they did: when Cannæ’s fatal plain
Was heap’d with mountains of the Roman slain,
Was there a matron wept her children dead?
Was there a matron wept not those that fled?
Then when each rumour seem’d the voice of fate,
And spoke the victor thund’ring at their gate,
Was there one mention’d peace? did they not pour
Their wealth, their jewels to the publick store,
In emulous haste all press’d to be poor?

Alas how chang’d! how are the mighty sunk,
From the firm Patriot to the whining Monk!
Where Industry sccur’d the publick good,
Where censours, consuls, and dictators plough’d.

Now
Now lazy zealots batten on the spoil,
And consecrated Sloth devours the farmer's toil.
But oh, still worse! where Love and Friendship shone,
Domestic Tyranny has fix'd his throne,
With all his train of monsters: at his side
Swoln with self-flatteries sits stiff-neck'd Pride;
Two twin-born fiends his other ear engage,
Heart-canker'd Jealousy, and fire-ey'd Rage;
In front, his empire's sole support and source,
Rattling chains, bars and locks, flanks brutal Force;
Whilst pale and shrivell'd, crouch'd beneath the chair,
Lies sneaking, conscious Worthlessness; and near
Squint-ey'd Suspicion lurks, with self-distracting Fear.

Hail, happy Britain, dear parental land,
Where Liberty maintains her latest stand!
Oh while amidst tyrannick realms I rove,
Enamour'd let me pour my filial love
Into thy bosom. When the raven wings
Of darkness hover o'er me, when the springs
Of every outward sense are shut, my soul
Thee oft revisits, oft without controul
Ranges thy fields delighted, and inhales
Friendship's pure joys, and Freedom's healthful gales.

But say, Britannia, do thy sons, who claim
A birth-right liberty, dispense the same
In equal scales? Why then does Custom bind
In chains of Ignorance the female mind?

Why
Why is to them the bright ethereal ray
Of science veil’d? Why does each pedant say,
"Shield me, propitious powers, nor clog my life
With that supreme of plagues a learned wife.
"’Tis man’s, with science to expand the soul,
And wing his eagle-flight from pole to pole;
"’Tis his to pierce antiquity’s dark gloom,
And the still thicker shades of times to come;
"’Tis his to guide the pond’rous helm of state,
And bear alone all wisdom’s solid weight.
"Let woman with alluring graces move
The fondling passions and the baby love;
"Be this our only science, be her doom
"Fix’d to the toilette, the spinnet and loom.”

Tongue-doughty pedant, was Athenia’s soul
Form’d for these only? Bring th’ exactest rule
Of judgment to the tryal, prove that e’er
Thy school-proud tribe engross’d a greater share
Of mental excellence; tho’ vernal Youth
Juxtapose her lovely bosom, yet blest Truth,
Offspring of Sense and Industry, has there
Long fix’d her residence; and taught the fair
Or wisdom’s deep recesses to explore,
Or on invention’s rapid wings to soar
Above th’ Aonian mount; and can’t thou think
That virtues, which exalt the soul, can sink
The outward charms? must knowledge give offence?
And are the graces all at war with sense?

Say,
Say, who of all the fair is form'd to move
The fondest passions, most exaltick love,
More than Athenia? in her gentle eye
Soft innocence and virgin modesty
Incessant shine, while still a new-born grace
Springs in each speaking feature of her face.
Her sprightly wit no forward pertness spoils:
No self-assuming air her judgment foils;
Still prone to learn, tho' capable to teach,
And lofty all her thoughts, but humble all her speech.
Proceed, Athenia, let thy growing mind
Take ev'ry knowledge in of ev'ry kind:
Still on perfection fix thy steady eye,
Be ever rising, rise thou ne'er so high.
But oh reflect, that in th' advent'rous flight,
Thou mount'st a glorious, but a dangerous height:
When ev'ry science ev'ry grace shall join,
When most thy wit, when most thy beauties shine,
When thickest crowds enamour'd press around,
When loudest ev'ry tongue thy praise shall found,
When verse too offers incense to thy shrine,
And adoration breathes in ev'ry line,
Then let my friendly Muse express her care,
Then most will danger spread her viewless snare;
Then let this truth possess thy inmost soul,
"One drop of Vanity may spoil the whole."

Not self-secure on earth can Knowledge dwell,
Knowledge the bliss of heav'n and pang of hell,
Alas
Alike the instrument of good and evil,
The attribute of God and of the Devil.
Without her, Virtue is a powerles Will;
She, without Virtue, is a powerful ill;
Does she then join with Virtue, or oppose,
She proves the best of Friends, or worst of Foes.
O! be they once in happiest union join'd,
And be that union in Athena's mind.

On Shakespeare's Monument at Stratford upon Avon.

By the Same.

Great Homer's birth ev'n rival cities claim,
Too mighty such monopoly of Fame;
Yet not to birth alone did Homer owe
His wondrous worth; what Egypt could bestow,
With all the schools of Greece and Asia join'd,
Enlarg'd th' immense expansion of his mind.
Nor yet unrival'd the Mæonian strain,
The British Eagle, and the Mantuan Swan
Tow'r equal heights. But happier Stratford, thou
With incontested laurels deck thy brow:
Thy Bard was thine unschoold, and from thee brought
More than all Egypt, Greece, or Asia taught.
Not Homer's self such matchless honours won;
The Greek has Rivals, but thy Shakespeare none.

*Milton.*

A SONG.