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Women's Nature in Damaris Cudworth Masham (1659–1708)

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Damaris Cudworth Masham challenges a number of sexist and misogynist views about women's nature in the early modern period. In her first treatise, *A Discourse concerning the love of God* Masham questions Nicolas Malebranche's suggestion that human beings are born sinful by virtue of their union with mothers in the womb. For Masham, this viewpoint has intolerable consequences: because God himself necessitates us to love sensual pleasures in a woman's body, Malebranche's theory makes God "a Partner in our Wickedness" (1696: 76, 102); his theory should be rejected.

In her second work, *Occasional thoughts, in reference to a vertuous or Christian life*. Masham challenges the common belief that a woman's virtue consists in chastity alone, and she rejects the idea that women do not need to understand the grounds of their religious beliefs in order to be virtuous and happy. To be accountable for their moral conduct, and to avoid sinking to the level of "brutes", Masham says, women must be granted the freedom to form their own judgments rather than blindly submit to the variable opinions of men (1705: 66, 17). They must not be taught to think that their virtue consists wholly in sexual purity (their "honour" or chastity), because this quality is more akin to bodily health than moral excellence (1705: 21-2). Instead women must be encouraged to cultivate the virtue of rational creatures: the constant regulation of their desires and appetites in accordance with reason.

Like her friend John Locke, Masham regards reason as that faculty that enables human beings to discover the connection between ideas (whether "*certain, probable, or none at all*"), and to regulate their assent accordingly (1705: 33). But Masham goes further than Locke by arguing that women should be properly educated so that they might improve their reason, and so that they might influence the next generation, through their positive example and instruction as mothers.

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