



'Innocent of Evil'

Learning About Godliness from
Nineteenth Century Evangelicals

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In my own day all mothers strictly forbade their daughters to read Rousseau's "Nouvelle Heloise", and all daughters, of course, longed to read nothing so much. I knew one young lady who owned to me that she stole a reading of it standing on the top steps of her father's library-ladder; and another, who procured it and carried it into the country with her on her wedding day, as the first fruits of being her own mistress.

Yet within these few years I happened to hear a girl of very warm feeling, enthusiastic, romantic, just the person whose head it would have turned of old, declare she had tried to read it, but been so disgusted that she threw it away before she got through half the first volume.

[Louisa Stuart, *Letters of Louisa Stuart*, 14]

The songs which were ordinarily sung... by young men and women and the lewd plays and interludes they occasionally saw were all calculated to produce mischief in [the] direction [of unchastity]. The whole of this is materially changed, the songs have all disappeared and are altogether unknown to young girls...

[Francis Place, *Autobiography*, 57]

...we are a much better people now than we were then, better instructed, more sincere and kind hearted, less gross and brutal, and have fewer of the concomitant vices of a less civilized state.

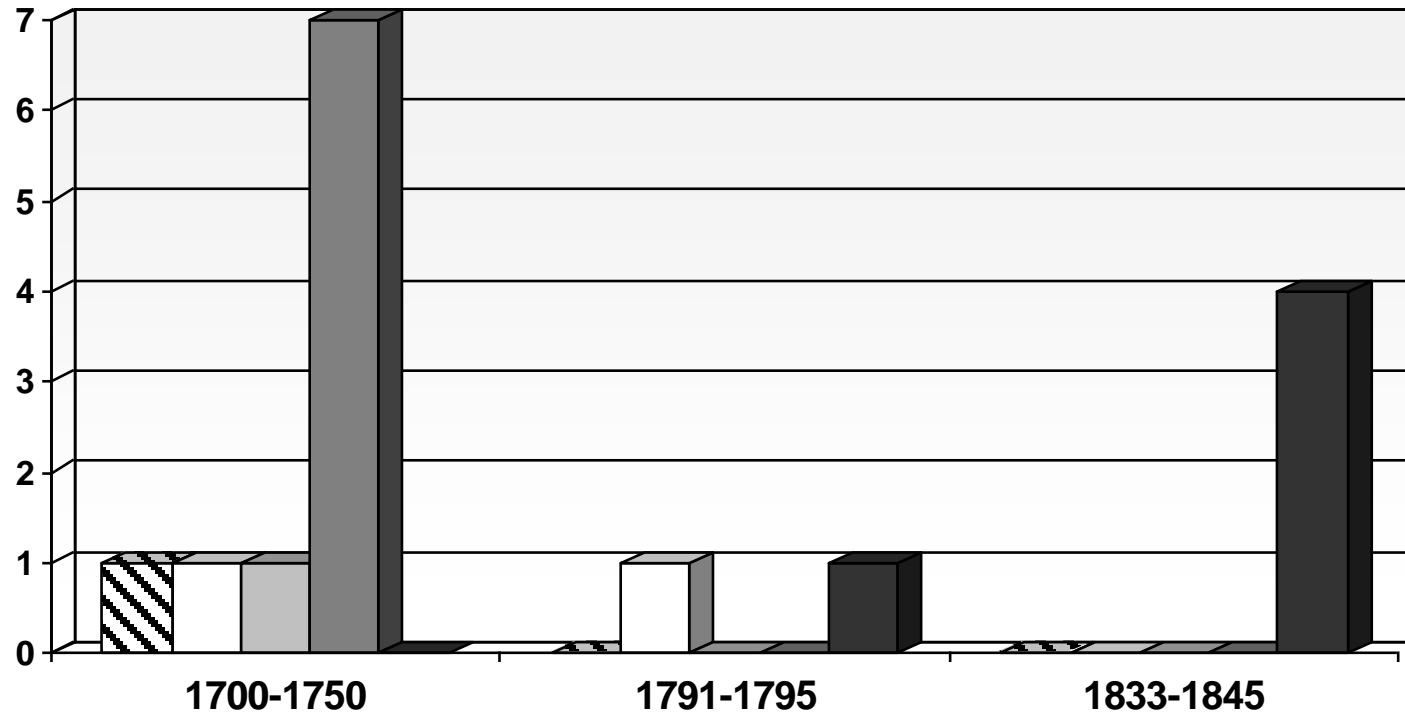
[Francis Place, *Autobiography*, 81]

I found it impossible to get through the very first of the novels, but is it not odd that I, an old woman of eighty and upwards, sitting alone, feel myself ashamed to read a book which sixty years ago I have heard read aloud for large circles consisting of the first and most creditable society in London?

Walter Scott's aunt, in the early 19th century, re-acquainting herself with the works of Aphra Behn, a 17th century writer, that she had read in her youth.

[Sir Walter Scott, *Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, quoted in Maurice Quinlan, *Victorian Prelude: A History of English Manners 1700-1830*, 1]

Number of New Translated Editions of the *Tales* by Type of Editing



- ▨ Made more explicit
- No expurgation
- ◻ Slight expurgation
- ◻ Mild expurgation and/or winnowing
- Major expurgation and/or winnowing



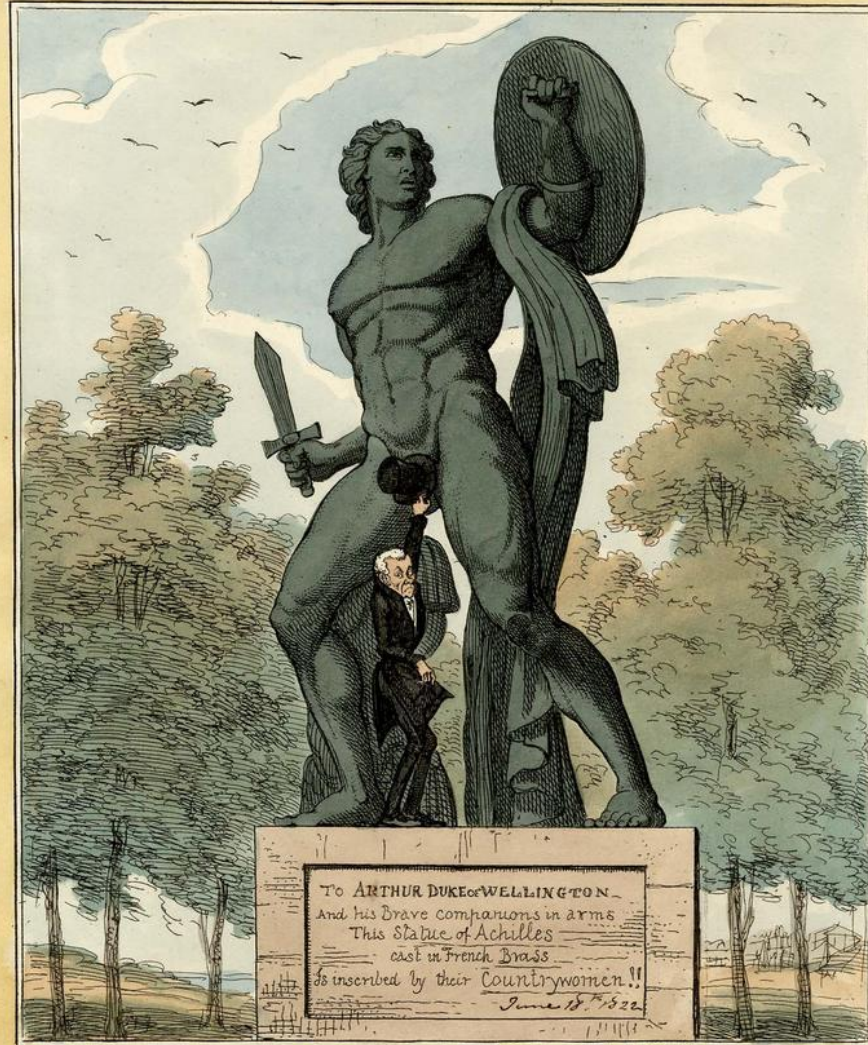
William Wilberforce (1759-1833)



Hannah More (1745-1833)



Thomas Gisborne (1758-1846)



To ARTHUR DUKE OF WELLINGTON
 And his Brave companions in arms
 This Statue of Achilles
 cast in French Brass
 is inscribed by their Countrywomen!!
 June 18th 1822

Printed by G. Smith at No. 21, St. Paul's Church-yard, London.

Making Decent

Pub^d by G. Humphreys at St. James's St. London August 8th 1822.

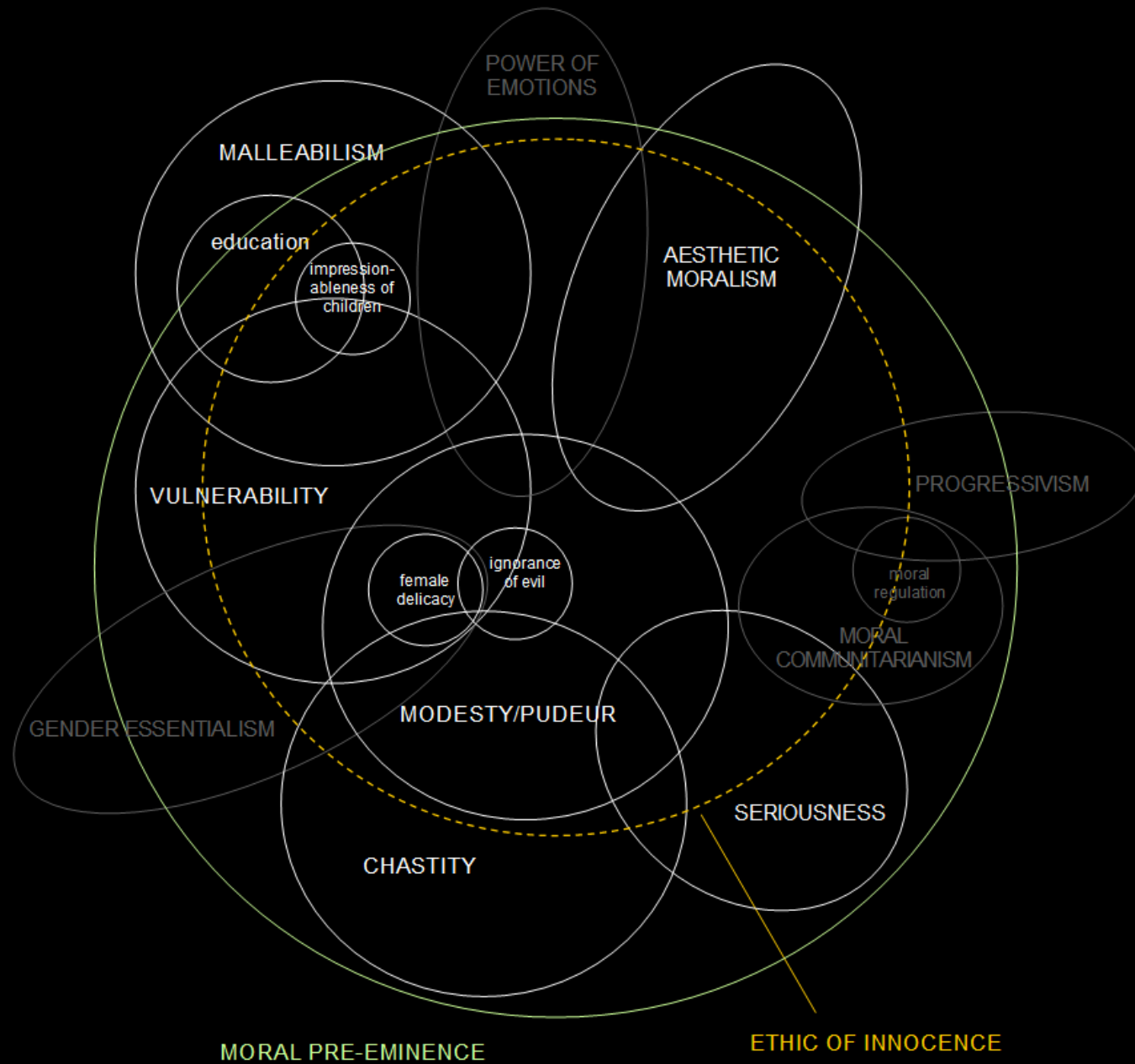
This Print Commemorative of Anglo-French BRASS & true British CHASTITY, is inscribed with veneration to that worthy man
 Mr. Williforce, who with sacrilegious regard for the morals of his country, has undertaken to make the above fig Decent, from Win the Mill Trust.

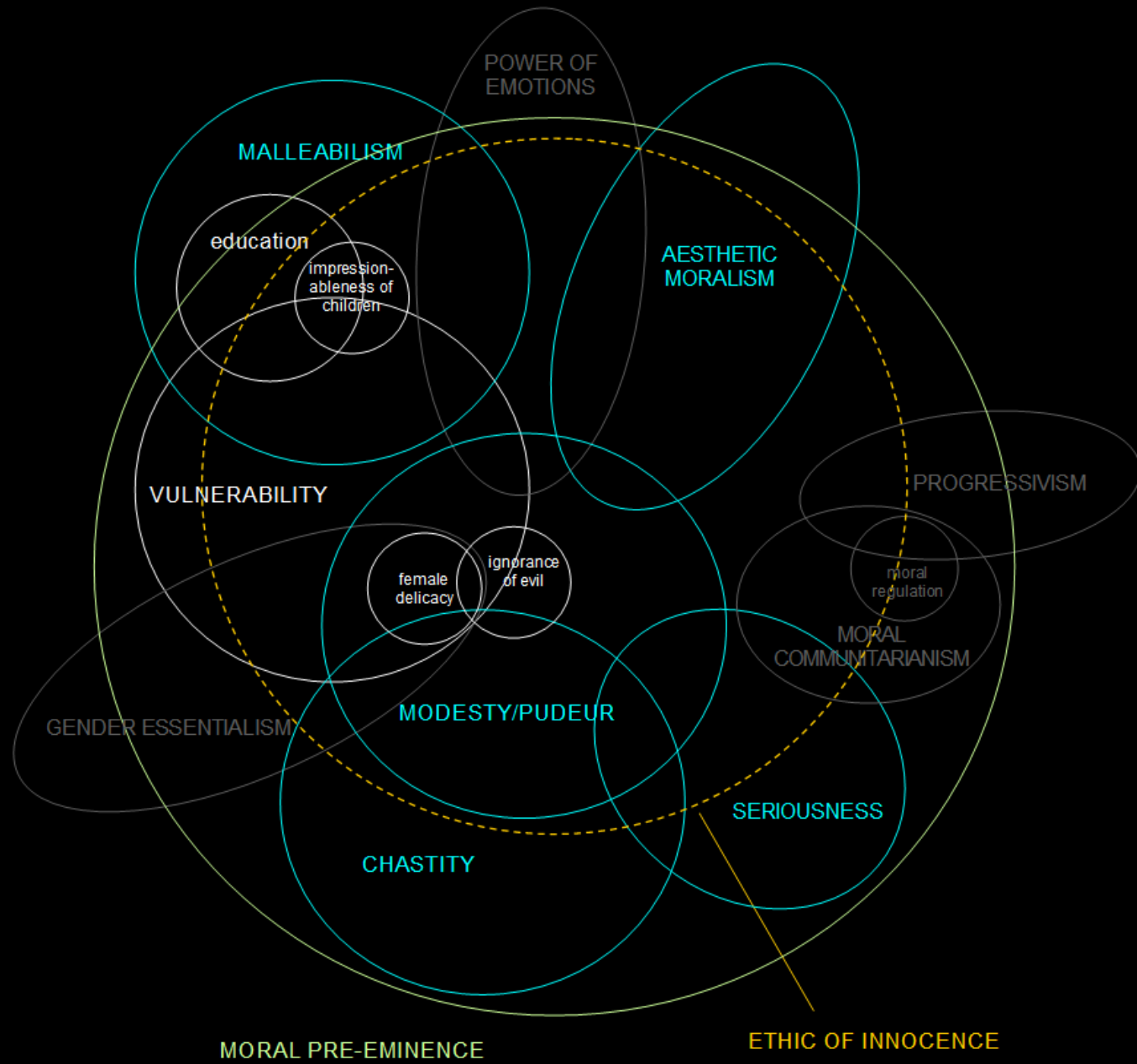


Sarah Trimmer (1741-1810)



Henrietta Bowdler (1750-1830)





1. Seriousness

...to subdue a worldly temper, to control irregular desires, and **to have a clean heart**, is to extinguish the soul, and spirit, and essence of sin.

[Hannah More, *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society*, 18]

...while the servants of Christ continue in this life, glorious as is the issue of their labours, they receive but too many humiliating memorials of their remaining imperfections, and they daily find reason to confess, that they cannot do the things that they would. **Their *determination*, however, is still unshaken, and it is the fixed desire of their hearts to improve in *all holiness*--** and this, let it be observed, on many accounts. Various passions concur to push them forward; they are urged on by the dread of failure, in this arduous but necessary work; they trust not, where their all is at stake, to lively emotions, or to internal impressions however warm; the example of Christ is their pattern, the word of God is their rule; there they read, that 'without holiness no man shall see the Lord'.

[William Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, 108-9]

Should it be thought that some of the topics, which have been here noticed, have received more attention than they deserve, it should be remembered that **nothing can be of trifling importance, which relates to morals**; and that an imperceptible stream may, by undermining the foundations, gradually endanger the safety of a building, which might securely defy the violence of a torrent. Many things which appear trivial to a superficial observer, are intimately connected with the welfare, and, indeed, the existence of Society...

[John Bowles, *Reflections on the Political and Moral State of Society*, 144]

Is the British Stage now irreproachable? Does it exhibit no scenes which give pain to modest eyes, no language grating to modest ears? Does it exhibit nothing which, a Christian need be ashamed of writing, of acting, of witnessing? Let those who are the best acquainted with the theatre answer the question to their own consciences. And whenever any woman is deliberating whether she shall or shall not attend the representation of a particular drama, let her ask herself this further question; Whether she is not bound in conscience, if she lays claim to the consistency of a Christian, at once to decide in the negative, unless she has sufficient reason to believe that the former enquiry, viewed as relating to that drama, can, with truth, be answered to her satisfaction?

[Thomas Gisborne, *Duties of the female sex*, 166]

2. Aesthetic Moralism

It is necessary that vice be not clothed in amiable colours; in colours which may disguise its deformity from the spectator, or tempt him to pardon, perhaps to imitate it, for the sake of the engaging qualities with which it is surrounded. He knows little of human nature who thinks that the youthful mind will be secured from the infecting influence of a vicious character, adorned with polished manners, wit, fortitude, and generosity, by a frigid moral, delivered at the conclusion, or to be deduced from the events of the drama.

[Thomas Gisborne, *Duties of the female sex*, 170]

Mr Bowdler has not executed his task in any thing of a precise or prudish spirit... and only effaced those gross indecencies which every one must have felt as blemishes, and by the removal of which no imaginable excellence can be affected.

...it has in general been found easy to extirpate the offensive expressions of our great poet, without any injury to the context, or any visible scar or blank in the composition. **They turn out not to be so much cankers in the flowers, as weeds that have sprung up by their side**—not flaws in the metal, but impurities that have gathered on its surface—and that, so far from being missed on their removal, the work generally appears more natural and harmonious without them.

[(Francis Jeffrey), *The Edinburgh Review*, Oct. 1821]

...we speak... to repel all that is pure from the perusal of this enchanted repository of pollution... [for] we have here, for the first time in the history of our literature, a great work, of which the very basis is infidelity and licentiousness, and the most obtrusive ornaments are impure imaginations and blasphemous sneers...the poet has... construct[ed] the most spacious and splendid temple of lust and impiety that has ever been reared by human profligacy and genius... **He has struck a blow against the honour and happiness of his species, which will make him be remembered...**

[Edinburgh Monthly Review, Oct. 1819]

He who should prove to us that **one really great poet was radically a cold, selfish, bad man**... would, indeed, do more to poison the sources of kindness and charity, and every noble sentiment, than all the satirists that ever denied or derided virtue from the beginning of the world.

[(GJ Lockart), *Quarterly Review*, Nov. 1834]

The end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing.

[...]

[Shakespeare's] first defect is that to which may be imputed most of the evil in books or in men. He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose... **for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better...**

[Samuel Johnson, *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, Introduction, xiv, xix]

3. Malleabilism

The mind is originally an unsown field, prepared for the reception of any crop; and if those, to whom the culture of it belongs, neglect to fill it with good grain, it will speedily be covered with weeds. If right principles of action are not implanted, wrong principles will sprout up.

[Thomas Gisborne, *Duties of the Female Sex*, 44]

...such fascinating qualities are lavished on the seducer, and such attractive graces on the seduced, that the images indulged with delight by the fancy, carry on the reader imperceptibly to a point which is not so far from their indulgence in the act as some imagine.

[Hannah More, *Moral sketches*, 143]

When I exhort a well educated and virtuous youth to avoid drunkenness, gaming, adultery, murder; he will perhaps answer as Hazael did to the prophet, 'What! is thy servant a dog, that he should do this thing?' (2 Kings 8:13) God grant that he may always hear of these vices with the same honest indignation; but in order to this, he must not presume too much on his own strength, and he must carefully avoid all the temptations I have already mentioned; or **he may be led on, step by step, till he lose his principles, his character, his innocence, and his happiness.**

[Henrietta Bowdler, *Sermons*, 118]

Is it not a fundamental error to consider children as innocent beings, whose little weaknesses may perhaps want some correction, rather than as beings who bring into the world a corrupt nature and evil dispositions, which it should be the great end of education to rectify?

[Hannah More, *Strictures on the system of female education*, 56]

4. Innocence

I will not undertake to say which of Lord Byron's poems may or may not be read without danger; but of all works palpably evil or even doubtful, the duty of the Christian is clear, **to abstain from familiarity with them.**

[Christian Observer, *Writings of Lord Byron* (May 1825)]

...the sense in which Christian parents would wish to impress on their children, **to know the world, is to know its emptiness, its vanity, its futility, and its wickedness.** To know it is to despise it; and in this view, an obscure Christian in a village may be said to know it better than a hoary courtier, or wily politician; for how can they be said to know it, who go on to love it, to value it, to be led captive by its allurements, to give their soul in exchange for its lying promises?

[Hannah More, *Strictures on the system of female education*, 130]

There is some knowledge which it is a praise not to know...

It may be urged [...] that as soon as young persons get out of their parents' hands, they will naturally choose their books for themselves. This, is granted.—But is not every year which prolongs their precious innocence, a year gained? May not, within that period, the nascent libertinism be checked, the ardent imagination fixed to other pursuits, the sentiment of virtue kindled, the taste for purity confirmed, and the habit and love of prayer established?

[Hannah More, *Moral sketches*, 145]

It was not without considerable hesitation that we undertook to bring that mass of profligacy before the eyes of the British public. **We feared that the very names now transcribed might seem to sully our page;** and we were not without apprehension that some of those whose feelings it is at once our desire and our duty to consult might think that more of harm might be done by advertising, as it were, such works, than of good by their exposure. These opinions were not without their weight on our minds, but we thought, on the whole, and we are, on re-consideration, more and more satisfied, that the preponderance is the other way. The habit of 'labeling 'vials' or packets of POISON with that cautionary description may, though very rarely , have prompted or facilitated a murder or a suicide--but how many ignorant and heedless persons has it not saved from destruction! Since we cannot prohibit the sale of poison, and since every one knows that opium and arsenic are to be had at every apothecary's shop, the common sense of mankind demands that the danger should be pointed out in legible characters.

[John Croker, 'French Novels', *Quarterly Review*, 1836]

For the party of reticence, indecent, filthy, unnamable, and shameful things went beyond the limits of human understanding and transgressed the boundaries of social order; consequently, **speaking of them was to commit a powerful act of pollution and contagion.**

[Rochelle Gurstein, *The Repeal of Reticence*, 53]

‘You are going to tell the whole world that there is such an offence, to bring it to the notice of women who have never heard of it, never thought of it, never dreamt of it. I think this is a very great mischief.’

[Lord Desart, during a parliamentary debate on a law criminalizing female homosexuality, 1921, quoted in Ari Adut, *On Scandal*, 43]

5. Chastity

To the sacred institution of marriage we owe the greatest blessings which this imperfect state affords, and to it we owe many of the virtues which will lead us to heaven.

[Henrietta Bowdler, *Sermons*, 124-5]

...the glory of the Christian Religion, [is] that while it checks every approach to vice, and condemns even a thought that is impure, it sanctifies all the virtuous affections of our nature; it connects every relation of life with our duty to GOD; **it bids us perform, for his sake, all those kind offices which even natural affection would lead us to perform for our own...**

[Henrietta Bowdler, *Sermons*, 124]

Their hands were joined; and the delicate reserves that religion taught them hitherto to observe in each other's company now being unnecessary, they entered on a state blessed with all the enjoyments that an unshackled affection could yield to minds seasoned with the benevolence and purity of Christianity. Their equal regard to God diminished not one enjoyment in which a fond couple could share, but was, on the contrary, an additional source of pleasure. **They 'delighted in God,' and they delighted in the society of each other.**

[‘Review of Bean’s Advice to a New Married Couple’, *Christian Observer*, 1804]

...that most pernicious and destructive of all vices,--adultery: a vice hostile to an institution which is the parent of every other institution, the source of every social affection, and which is raised to the highest degree of sanctity, and guarded with the most distinguished care, from even the remotest danger of violation, by that Holy Religion, which consults both the present and future happiness of mankind.

[John Bowles, *Reflections on the Political and Moral State of Society*, 134]

...they who kill the body, have no more that they can do; **but may every young woman look with horror on the wretch**, who, under the pretence of love, would rob her of her virtue, of the esteem of her friends, of her character in this world, and perhaps of her eternal happiness in the next.

[Henrietta Bowdler, *Sermons*, 120]

How gladly... he would have welcomed centuries of a material hell, to escape from the more awful spiritual hell within him—to buy back that pearl of innocence which he had cast recklessly to be trampled under the feet of his own swinish passions!

[Charles Kingsley, *Yeast*, quoted in Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 375]