In the second half of the seventeenth century, the tenets of Jansenism reactivated in France a tradition in Christian thought which condemned the desire for knowledge as a form of vanity, in every sense of the word: knowledge of nature and of creatures was considered to be inaccessible to human reason, and turned man away from the love of the Creator. The desire for knowledge was of course a cornerstone of the system of three concupiscences that Pascal borrowed from the First Epistle of Saint John: ‘Everything that is in the world is concupiscence of the flesh, concupiscence of the eyes, or pride of life: libido sentiendi, libido sciendi, libido dominandi’.\(^1\) This was because ‘since man has lost the true good, everything may equally appear to him such […]’. Some seek it in authority, others in curiosities and sciences, others in voluptuous pleasures.\(^2\) This libido sciendi, or ‘concupiscence of the eyes’, blinds the mind which loses its awareness of the insatiability of its desire and of the inaccessibility of the ultimate truths: ‘the principal disease of man is a restless curiosity after things which he cannot know, and it is not so bad for him to be in error, as it is to have this useless curiosity’.\(^3\) On this point at least, Bossuet is in complete agreement with Pascal, when he describes curiosity as ‘the mother of all the dangerous sciences’ (‘la mère de toutes les sciences dangereuses’) by which he was admittedly referring primarily to magic, astrology and ‘all the other sciences through

\[^{1}\] ‘Tout ce qui est au monde est concupiscence de la chair, ou concupiscence des yeux, ou orgueil de la vie: libido sentiendi, libido sciendi, libido dominandi’, Pascal Blaise, Pensées (edition Lafuma n°545 / edition Brunschvicg n° 460).


\[^{3}\] ‘la maladie principale de l’homme est la curiosité inquiète des choses qu’il ne peut savoir et il ne lui est pas si mauvais d’être dans l’erreur que dans cette curiosité inutile’, Pascal, Pensées (744 / 618).
which one imagines oneself able to divine the future,\textsuperscript{4} when God has reserved such knowledge to Himself, but which in fact also includes all the natural sciences. For this ‘concupiscence of the eyes’ is what produces the practice of sciences, which are dangerous as a matter of principle as they stem from a curiosity that, in the Bible, gives rise to Original Sin: when tempted by the serpent, Eve says that the fruit of ‘the tree of the science of good and evil’ (‘l’arbre de la science du bien et du mal’) is ‘good and pleasing to the eye’ (‘beau et agréable à la vue’). She takes some and gives some to Adam: and ‘at the same time, the eyes of both of them were opened’ (‘en même temps, leurs yeux furent ouverts à tous deux’\textsuperscript{5}).

This is quite clearly the essential taboo standing in the way of women gaining access to culture and science throughout the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{6} It is stated furthermore in so many words by the anonymous author of a book published in 1718, entitled Les Femmes sçavantes ou Bibliothèque des dames qui traite des sciences qui conviennent aux dames, and whose object – as indicated in the dedicatory epistle ‘to scholarly and studious ladies’ (‘aux dames savantes et studieuses’) – was to combat ‘the unfair and disobliging feelings, which ignorant people had allowed themselves to develop, [that] made them condemn indiscriminately your studies and your science’ (‘les sentiments injustes et désavantageux, dont le peuple ignorant s’était laissé prévenir, [qui] lui faisaient condamner sans discrétion vos études et votre science’):

\begin{quote}
It was, it seems, a dishonour for you to love Literature, not only literature whose end was only curiosity and pleasure, but even that which was most likely to lead you to virtue and sound piety. It was required of you that you should remain in ignorance and the intention was that so many fine minds, full of vivacity and penetration, should be uneducated and as though buried in ignorance. It was claimed that science was a fruit that you were not allowed to touch, without bringing into the world a series of misfortunes, as did in earlier times the first of all women, by eating the fruit that God had forbidden. A prejudice that was so fatal for your glory led me to take up your defence and to make manifest that those who hold such feelings are mistaken; that science and study are occupations worthy of
\end{quote}

