A Mother’s Guiding Poems for Her Children, 1757

In 1757 Martha Wadsworth Brewster, a Connecticut mother in her twenties, composed two acrostic poems of advice for her young children. In acrostics, a popular format of the time, the first letters in each line of a stanza spell out a word or name. What are her guiding principles for her children? How does her advice to her son differ from that to her daughter?

An Acrostic for my only Son

W hile Amorous, Gay, and Sanguine swells thy Veins,
A n Off’ring of first Fruits, Jehovah Claims.
D ue Odours of a sweet Perfume Present,
S teep’d in the Blood of the new Covenant;
W hat vulgar Notes Applaud, must be Suspected;
O bedience to the Standard ne’er Neglected;
R etire within the Mind, and shut the Door,
T o all disord’red Passions, Rude and Sow’r,
H ere summons, and exert each Manly Pow’r.

B y Adequate, and Studious Observation,
R ise to the Poles, then dive to Navigation.
E arly enrich thy Heart with moral Virtues,
W hereby to rectify inverted Nature:
S urvey the Globe of Man, then turn thine Eyes
T o search through Nature’s obscure Mysteries;
E nvry may Hiss in Vain, at virt’ous Minds,
R egent in her own Breast, she sits Enshrin’d.

An Acrostic for my only Daughter

R eceive good Counsel of the Wise, nor let
U nhallow’d Lips Provoke, or Cause to Fret.
B e Wise and Virt’ous, Modest, Chaste and Grave,
I ncrease in Learning, practice what you have,
E nter the List ’gainst Sin, with Courage Brave.

B e not Exalted far above your Sphere;
R egard those Minds that truly Noble are:
E steem a real Friend, if such there be;
W ith Kindness overcome an Enemy:
S et not your Heart on Pomp, and Worldly Pleasure,
T is not a lasting, nor a solid Treasure.
E mploy your Thoughts on Good, delight in Reading,
R eceive the Lord, and Live, and Die Believing.