“If all Men are born Free, how is it that all Women are born Slaves?”

For many parts of the world such a bold protest resonates as tellingly today as it did three hundred years ago in England when Mary Astell (1666-1731) confronted the appalling moral and legal subordination of women, rich and poor alike, who entered into matrimony with the cards stacked heavily in the husband’s favor. It is Astell’s unstinting recognition of the arbitrary restraints imposed on women and her vigorous writing on their behalf that make her one of the earliest English feminists in history. Although prominent in her lifetime as the author of a number of treatises on women’s education as well as on theological, philosophical, and political subjects, Astell was nearly forgotten by the nineteenth century. However, since the appearance of Bridget Hill’s comprehensive study of Astell (1956) and Ruth Perry’s definitive biography (1986), various scholars have helped restore this original thinker and polemicist to her proper intellectual, religious, political, and social contexts.

At first glance Astell’s family origins were not especially propitious for a young woman seeking intellectual achievement. Born in Newcastle upon Tyne on 12 November 1666, the first of two children of Peter Astell, a coal merchant, and of Mary née Errington, who was also the daughter of a coal merchant, Mary enjoyed financial security but depended mainly on her paternal uncle Ralph Astell, curate of St. Nicholas’s, in
Newcastle, for her early education. As Perry observes, in the 1660s and 1670s many women in northern England were illiterate.³ Despite her good fortune in having this well-intentioned mentor, Astell’s uncle was suspended for drunkenness in the pulpit in 1677 and was generally in a downward spiral ever since his difficulties over liturgical issues during the Interregnum, when he was the vicar of Frodsham in Cheshire. Ironically, it was probably Ralph Astell’s involuntary retirement from his clerical duties that allowed him the leisure to concentrate on his niece’s education to good effect. As Sarah Apetrei remarks:

It is possible that her uncle's disappointments taught the young Mary an ambivalence towards the office of priest, which she revered as ancient and apostolic, but knew to be inhabited by fallible men. The contrast between his underachievement and her own illustrious reputation must have struck her in later life and confirmed her distrust of conventional wisdom about the disparity between male and female capacities.⁴

The timing of this education also coincided with the death of Mary’s father in 1678, after which her family were under more straitened circumstances. Whatever his deficiencies, however, Ralph obviously was an important influence on his niece and in the end endowed her with his considerable library, whose books were adorned with her marginalia, to the delight of curious scholars today.⁵

Sometime during the so-called “Glorious Revolution” – the upheaval in 1688 over King James II’s pro-Roman Catholic policies and his replacement by the Protestant Dutch Prince of Orange-Nassau, William III, and his consort Mary II of England – Astell moved to London to eke out an income as a hack writer in the growing book market pejoratively called “Grub Street.” A staunch Tory and High Church Anglican, Astell
readily found a supporter in the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Sanford, who was joined by eight other bishops in refusing to take oaths of allegiance to William. Even though her own family ignored her desperate circumstances, Sanford provided financial assistance and also probably influenced the bookseller Rich Wilkin to encourage her writing projects.\textsuperscript{6}

For the remaining years of her life Astell lived in Chelsea, an affluent London suburb where numerous boarding schools for girls made a congenial environment for a pioneer in women’s education. In 1694 she published her first work anonymously, \textit{A Serious Proposal to the Ladies}, which went through four editions by 1701. Although not the first in England to propose a college for women, Astell gave her utopian idea a concrete immediacy by decrying single women’s helpless situation:

She will not here be inveigled and impos’d on, will neither be bought nor sold, nor be forc’d to marry for her own quiet, when she has no inclination to it, but what the being tir’d out with restless importunity occasions. Or if she be dispos’d to marry, here she may remain in safety till a convenient Match be offer’d by her Friends, and be freed from the danger of a dishonourable one. Modesty requiring that a Woman should not love before Marriage, but only make choice of one whom she can love hereafter.\textsuperscript{7}

Astell’s pamphlet attracted a wide audience, including Daniel Defoe, who also mentions a female academy in his \textit{Essay on Projects} (1697), and Richard Steele, whose \textit{Tatler} (1709) ridiculed the audacity of “an order of Platonick Ladies” conspiring to build a nunnery.\textsuperscript{8} But such aristocratic and progressive women as Lady Catherine Jones,\textsuperscript{9} Lady Elizabeth [Betty] Hastings,\textsuperscript{10} and Anne, countess of Coventry,\textsuperscript{11} recognized at once Astell’s argumentative powers, welcomed her into their circle, and gave her badly needed financial support. Her influence on the literate women in her time can be documented:
A Serious Proposal had an enormous impact on the contemporary women who read it. Such women as Judith Drake, Lady Damaris Masham, Elizabeth Thomas, Lady Mary Chudleigh, Elizabeth Elstob, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu—these we know of—were encouraged by her book to think of women as a misunderstood and oppressed class of people. Their lives were changed by Astell’s texts and by her example; she showed them how to take themselves seriously as thinkers and writers.12

Astell’s writings were still very much in the minds of such later eighteenth-century feminists as Sarah Chapone and Elizabeth Carter.13

In 1697 Astell published Part II of her Serious Proposal, which engages in current theories of knowledge and especially challenges Locke’s radical empiricism in favor of an idealism deriving from immaterial sources. This supplement reflects her correspondence with John Norris of Bemerton, who espoused an epistemology closely related to Descartes and Malebranche, which was published as Letters Concerning the Love of God (1695).

After the focus on improving the conditions for the woman’s intellectual development, Astell next turned specifically to protest the moral and legal subordination of the wife in matrimony. Sparked by the recent death of the celebrated French courtesan Hortense Mancini, the duchess of Mazarin (1646-99), who spent her last years of exile in Chelsea, Some Reflections Upon Marriage (1700) begins with the “Shipwreck” of Mazarin by way of introducing the many hazards confronting women in the marriage contract. Although convinced that clergymen at the time of the Glorious Revolution who had pledged allegiance to James II were right in refusing to take new oaths of obedience to William III, Astell rejected the analogy between the husband’s and king’s inherent authority. Shock waves from this pamphlet were even greater than those caused by the Serious
Proposal, and by the third edition, published in 1706, Astell added a preface of over eight thousand words that combed the Bible for evidence of equality between the sexes and also for depictions of women as spiritual leaders.

Besides more than a half dozen political pamphlets, mainly in opposition to the Occasional Conformity Bill that enabled Dissenters to hold public office by nominally taking communion in an Anglican church, Astell’s last major publication was a personal statement of her Anglican faith, *The Christian Religion, as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England* (1705). Intended as a defence of the Established Church doctrine during a tumultuous period of controversy regarding Dissenters, Roman Catholics, Deists, and other free-thinkers, it is also about women’s need to develop their minds through philosophical discourse: “For cou’d we but once excite in each others Breast a noble thirst after Perfection, placing our Perfection in that wherein it truly consists,” women would find their intellectual strength. As usual Astell is at her best in this long treatise when giving pungent and earthy attacks on the prevailing male dominance.

After withdrawing from society in 1709 Astell founded a charity school for the daughters of the Royal Hospital pensioners, with financial support from her patrons Anne, countess of Coventry, Lady Catherine Jones, and Lady Elizabeth Hastings. It is not clear how these wealthy women came to patronize Astell. As Perry observes: “We do not know whether they came to know Mary Astell because of the books she had written or because she settled in their neighborhood.” To Lady Catherine Jones, however, Astell dedicated the *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695) and *The Christian Religion* (1705). Since Lady Betty had a richly bound copy of the second edition of *Some Reflections*, and Lady Anne possessed a copy of *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, we
may infer that these women held a high respect for Astell’s writings. Poor health in 1718-19 made her experiment with living in Sussex for a few months to recover. Near the end of her life she developed breast cancer and survived the painful surgery, performed in those days without the benefit of anaesthesia of any kind. Shortly after that trauma, she died on 9 May 1731, aged 65, and was buried in Chelsea.

* * *

Hortense Mancini, duchess of Mazarin

In the opening sentence of Reflections, Astell wryly observes that it was the recent death of the duchess Mazarin that prompted her to spend an afternoon for what amounts to over twenty thousand words of moral reflections:

Curiosity, which is sometimes an occasion of Good, and too frequently of Mischief, by disturbing either our Own, or our Neighbour's Repose, having put me upon reading the Duke and Dutchess of Mazarine's Case; I thought an Afternoon wou'd not be quite thrown away in pursuing some Reflections that it occasion'd.

Born in Rome to the Italian Baron Lorenzo Mancini and Girolama Mazzarini, the sister of the powerful Cardinal Mazarin, the chief minister of France, Hortense, together with her four sisters, became known as the “Mazarinettes” at the court of Louis XIV.

Mazarin’s first cousins, Charles II of England, and Charles Emmanuel II, Duke of Savoy, both proposed marriage to Hortense, as well as the Duke of Lorraine; but for various reasons the negotiations failed. Finally in 1661, at the age of fifteen, she was united with the very rich Armand-Charles de la Porte, duc de La Meilleraye, who was given the title
of duc Mazarin. After the Cardinal’s death a few years later, Armand-Charles took possession of Hortense’s enormous inheritance, including the *Palais Mazarin* in Paris, which contained a valuable art collection.\(^{18}\)

From the outset their marriage was a failure, largely because of Armand-Charles’s mental instability, miserliness, and excessive Jansenism. While forced from Paris to live in the country, Hortense had a lesbian relationship with a sixteen-year-old girl, Sidonie de Courcelles, and as a consequence both were sent to a convent, much to the distress of the nuns supposed to watch over them. Surprisingly, Hortense still had four children with her husband; but by June 1668, having endured enough, she fled to Rome, to stay with her sister Marie Mancini, Princess Colonna. For a number of years she enjoyed the protection of Louis XIV, who gave her a generous pension, and also of the Duke of Savoy. After death ended this support, Hortense went over to England in 1675 and eventually became Charles II’s favorite mistress and was granted a pension of four thousand pounds.

Further sexual affairs, however, including another lesbian friendship, with King Charles’s illegitimate daughter Anne, Countess of Sussex, caused difficulties at court and compromised her financial security. But even after the death of Charles and the departure of James II, Hortense received a modest pension under Willam and Mary. As a friend of Charles de Saint-Évremond, who also was living in London at this time, Hortense was in a position to entertain many of the leading intellectuals of the day. In the end, together with her sister Marie Mancini, Hortense was among the first women in France to publish intimate accounts of their troubled marriages, a practice followed by such eighteenth-century women as Teresia Constantia Phillips\(^{19}\) and Laetitia Pilkington.\(^{20}\)
Some Reflections upon Marriage (1700): Outline Summary

1. Example of Duchess of Mazarin’s bad marriage.
   pp. 1-9: summary of the duchess of Mazarin’s case.
   pp. 9-10: why attack marriage as institution because of this singularly bad example?

   pp. 10-11: being tied to one only should not be a problem if it is true friendship rather than brute appetite.
   pp. 11-12: Christian institution of marriage the best way for education of children.

3. Explanations of typical failed marriages and their causes.
   pp. 13-21: explains why so many marriages are unhappy – motives of the man in the contract and consequences for the woman.
   pp. 21-22: neither wit nor beauty suffices to make the woman endearing to the man.
   pp. 22-23: marrying a woman for her fortune does not usually result in a happy union.

4. Warnings against women foolishly entering marriage.
   pp. 23-28: women’s false expectations from marriage, especially when fooled by the flattery of courtship.
   p. 35: “A Meer Obedience, such as is paid only to Authority, and not out of Love and a sense of the Justice and Reasonableness of the Command, will be of an uncertain Tenure.” pp. 35-36: Even when a woman takes due precaution before getting married, there is still a grave risk of being a victim of the husband’s power.
   pp. 36-37: usual man’s fantasy of an ideal wife, completely submissive to his desires.
   p. 38: “even when he is her equal,” difficulty for the woman to understand that her spouse may be solely concerned with mercenary motives in the marriage.
   p. 39-40: “but when a woman marries unequally and beneath herself, she is bound to suffer the consequences of someone who cannot respect her and exploits her at will.

5. Christian stoicism the only remedy for woman in marriage.
   pp. 40-41: woman’s moral advantage of denying herself on earth for rewards in heaven.
p. 42: the best circumstances for the man and woman in choosing each other for the marriage union? Just be good Christians!

p. 43: wife must obey husband, but husband must respect her rights in doing so.

p. 44: wife’s problem of accepting subjection as her role.

pp. 45-46: satiric attack on husbands who usurp power over women.

p. 47: requirement that husband exerts his power with respect for wife’s sacrifice of herself in the unequal contract.

p. 48: living in subjection actually easier than for those in power who have to answer in the end for their control over others.

p. 49-50: doubts about the arrangement since it seems inevitable the man cannot respect his wife because of her unquestioned subjection to him – doubts about whether “the People were made for the Prince who is set over them.”

pp. 50-51: being able to bear contempt a sign of inward worth and true ground of superiority.

6. Admonition to men who do not respect women’s integrity in marriage.

pp. 53-54: men should be wary of provoking women too much because they may find themselves victims of the same contempt from the “defenceless Enemy.”

p. 55: the woman’s exemplary part in living in marital subjection.

pp. 56-57: marriage not the highest endeavour for the woman who is truly aware of the world’s delusions.

pp. 58-59: woman’s satiric attack on men who are given the power to make worlds and ruin them.

pp. 59-60: satiric attack on wife’s hopeless subjection and if the wife cannot bear it, she has failed in her Christian duties of humility, self-denial, patience and resignation.

pp. 60-61: a woman might rebel against notion that a husband is really qualified to exert the authority conferred on him in marriage. – It is in the husband’s interest that women should be granted a good education.

pp. 62-63: if a great Stoic like Cato committed suicide rather than endure Caesar’s power, how can we expect “an ignorant weak Woman shou’d have patience to bear a continual outrage and Insolence all the Days of her Life?”

pp. 63-66: if besides a fine education a gentleman should be made acquainted with all the dangers of living in the real world, it is no less true for the woman.

p. 66: like men, women also have souls and have a natural desire to seek perfection.

7. Warnings to women against seduction by the male.

pp. 68-70: women must be ever on guard against men, who take it for granted that women are inferior and need to be flattered and pampered into playing their required role.

pp. 70-78: the steps to perdition are gradual and usually unnoticed until it is too late – the many traps toward seduction of the woman.
p. 79: the woman at greatest danger when she has conversation with men and is confident that she can avoid their snares to seduce them.

pp. 80-85: more instances of male traps for women.

8. Christian martyrdom a means to heaven for the woman.

p. 93: woman who marries to educate souls for heaven and suffers martyrdom in doing so is more heroic than the famous masculine heroes can boast of.

p. 97: if the male is wise and good, his power will not be an infringement on the woman, and she in turn can find consolation, in case she feels injured, in her exercise of virtue and the reward of it hereafter.

* * * * * *

Some Reflections upon Marriage (1700): Analysis

From the beginning paragraph emphasizing her “curiosity” about the circumstances of Mazarin’s death, Astell leads us to expect mostly random, spontaneous thoughts on marriage rather than a tightly reasoned dissertation. The spectacle of a duchess and gifted woman ruined by the male-dominated mating system is cause for our compassion but not for any justification of her subsequent libertine, wasted life. Astell, however, seems much less interested in this notorious woman’s career than in the more general evils of marriage as witnessed in her contemporary England. She glosses over Hortense Mancini’s initial predicament of being essentially sold off at the age of 15 to Armand-Charles de la Porte, duc de La Meilleraye, the wealthy but mentally challenged man hand-picked by Cardinal Mazarin himself. Although mustering some pity for her, Astell condemns Hortense’s wayward course as if opportunities to overcome her misfortune were ever available to her.
Given that sexual desire is never addressed in this discourse on marriage, it is probably superfluous to ask what Astell thought about Hortense’s lesbian affairs. No matter how unfortunate the marriage, one supposedly always has the inner resources to overcome her fate:

An ill Husband may deprive a Wife of the comfort and quiet of her Life; may give her occasion of exercising her Virtue, may try her Patience and Fortitude to the utmost, but that's all he can do: 'tis her self only can accomplish her Ruin. (p. 3)

Instead of seeking pleasure and influence through adulterous liaisons at court, Hortense should have relied on Christian piety as a consolation for worldly disappointments.

Astell apparently took little stock of the whole phenomenon of woman’s beauty as a source of power over the male: she would have been appalled by Henry Fielding’s comparison of his heroine Sophia Western in *Tom Jones* to this same courtesan:

She was most like the Picture of Lady Ranelagh; and I have heard more still to the famous Duchess of Mazarine; but most of all, she resembled one whose Image never can depart from my Breast, and whom, if thou dost remember, thou hast then, my Friend, an adequate Idea of Sophia.

(Book IV, chap. 2).

She would also doubtless be displeased by Fielding’s invoking Lady Ranelagh – Margaret (née Cecil) Jones, the second and adulterous wife of Richard Jones, Third Viscount and First Earl of Ranelagh, the father of her closest friend and benefactress, Lady Catherine Jones.²¹

By contrast, Fielding’s rival novelist, Samuel Richardson, shared Astell’s disregard of cosmetic appearance when presenting his ideal Christian heroine, Clarissa Harlowe. Since Astell’s exemplary life may have been an influence on this fictional character, it is
worth noting that Richardson relegates the task of praising her physical beauty to the prostitutes at the brothel where the rake, Robert Lovelace, has imprisoned her:

    Already have our mother [Mrs. Sinclair] and her daughters been about me. 'Charming Lady!' What a complexion! 'What eyes! What majesty in her person! ---O Mr. Lovelace, you are a happy man! ---You owe us such a Lady!' ---Then they remind me of my revenge, and of my hatred to her whole family. Sally was so struck with her, at first sight, that she broke out to me in those lines of Dryden:

    ---Fairer to be seen

    Than the fair lily on the flow'ry green!

    More fresh than May herself in blossoms new!--- (Clarissa, 1st ed., 1748), 3: 283)22

Doubtless because of the overabundance of “male gaze” in traditional literary accounts, whatever her private attitudes toward a woman’s appearance, including her own, Astell’s writings reveal little or no erotic interest.

    At least in principle Astell wants to defend marriage as a religious institution that she believes offers the best chances for raising children to become properly educated and morally responsible members of society. Despite Mazarin’s scandalous career, the institution itself presumably works well for others:

    Could there be no such thing as an happy Marriage, Arguments against Marriage would hold good, but since the thing is not only possible, but even very probable, provided we take but competent Care, Act like Wise Men and Christians, and acquit our selves as we ought, all we have to say against it serves only to shew the levity or impiety of our own Minds. . . . (p. 10)

Lacking in this essay, however, is any positive historical instances of a “happy” marriage. One obvious contemporary Astell might have cited was Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea (1661-1720), who became a maid of honour to Mary of Modena, wife of
James, Duke of York, later King James II. Anne’s marriage to the courtier Heneage Finch in 1684 was from all appearances an ideal relationship and celebrated in her love poems, including *Letter to Dafnis April 2d: 1685*:

This to the Crown, and blessing of my life,
The much lov'd husband, of a happy wife.
To him, whose constant passion found the art
To win a stubborn, and ungratefull heart;
And to the World, by tend'rest proof discovers
They err, who say that husbands can't be lovers.
With such return of passion, as is due,
Daphnis I love, Daphnis my thoughts persue,
Daphnis, my hopes, my joys, are bounded all in you:
Ev'n I, for Daphnis, and my promise sake,
What I in women censure, undertake.
But this from love, not vanity, proceeds;
You know who writes; and I who 'tis that reads.
Judge not my passion, by my want of skill,
Many love well, though they express itt ill;
And I your censure cou'd with pleasure bear,
Wou'd you but soon return, and speak itt here.\(^{21}\)

Perhaps the fact that Astell lost her parents as a child and subsequently had to depend on an uncle who never married may have deprived her of good examples in her own immediate family. But it is still remarkable that at least for the sake of argument she omits any historical evidence here of exemplary cases and even casts doubt on the sincerity of her defence of marriage. As Perry remarks,
All her life Astell resisted male attractions with no difficulty. Not only did she never marry, but there is no evidence that she ever entertained any suitors. . . . She fumed at the universal opinion that women needed husbands and really did think that women were, on the whole, better off living with other women.24

Unfortunately we do not know the circumstances of those “male attractions” or whether Astell even had suitors given her lack of a dowry, not to mention her being openly antagonistic toward the legally accepted male superiority of her social system.

After briefly stipulating that the foundation of marriage is a true friendship between the man and woman, without mercenary motives, Astell devotes over six thousand words (pp. 13-41) to explaining why so many marriages are unhappy, mainly because of the male prerogative to make the contract entirely in accordance with his wishes. Without an affective bond, both master and subject will suffer:

A Meer Obedience, such as is paid only to Authority, and not out of Love and a sense of the Justice and Reasonableness of the Command, will be of an uncertain Tenure. As it can’t but be uneasie to the Person who pays it, so he who receives it will be sometimes disappointed when he expects to find it, for that Woman must be endow’d with a Wisdom and Goodness much above what we suppose the Sex capable of, I fear much greater than e’re Man can pretend to, who can so constantly conquer her Passions, and divest her self even of Innocent Self-love, as to give up the Cause when she is in the right, and to submit her enlightened Reason, to the imperious Dictates of a blind Will, and wild Imagination, even when she clearly perceives the ill Consequences of it, the Imprudence, nay Folly and Madness of such a Conduct. (p. 35)

The pithy first sentence in this passage seems to damn the whole presumption of the marriage contract despite Astell’s own statement to the contrary elsewhere, and the glaring omission of any cases where the contract is formed “out of Love and a sense of
the Justice and Reasonableness of the Command” reveals her deeply conflicted views about matrimony under all circumstances.

Even after taking all precaution before consenting to marry the woman seems bound to fail anyway because of the shortage of good men:

> And if a Woman runs such a Risque when she Marrys Prudently, according to the Opinion of the World, that is, when she permits her self to be dispos’d of to a Man equal to her in Birth, Education and Fortune, and as good as the most of his Neighbours, (for if none were to marry, but Men of strict Vertue and Honour, I doubt the World would be but thinly Peopled) if at the very best her Lot is hard, what can she expect who is Sold, or any otherwise betray’d into mercenary Hands, to one who is in all, or most respects unequal to her? (pp. 35-56)

In language suggesting that even legitimate marital arrangements resemble the unseemly world of “human trafficking” and prostitution, Astell’s ironic parenthetical observation implies that in the end the woman is doomed to sacrifice herself for the sake of breeding a new generation. Hence the only solution is to deny the transitory pleasures of this world and prepare for lasting ones in the next:

> The better our Lot is in this World and the more we have of it, the greater is our leisure to prepare for the next; we have the more opportunity to exercise that God-like Quality, to tast that Divine Pleasure, Doing good to the Bodies and Souls of those beneath us. Is it not then ill Manners to Heaven, and an irreligious contempt of its Favours, for a Woman to slight that nobler Employment, to which it has assign’d her, and thrust her self down to a meaner Drudgery, to what is in the very literal Sense a caring for the things of the World, a caring not only to Please, but to Maintain a Husband? (pp. 40-41)

In such a moment of “reflection” as this, it is unclear whether Astell is recommending that the wife make the best of a bad situation and tolerate an abusive husband while
concentrating her attention on tasting “that Divine Pleasure” of helping those below her or simply of avoiding marriage altogether.

Notwithstanding her noble effort to emphasize the positive and her appeal to Stoic reason under stress, the tone of this essay hardly becomes didactic or dryasdust. On the contrary, on nearly every page the reader is jolted with volcanic outbursts against the prevailing male power over every aspect of the woman’s social existence:  

She who Elects a Monarch for Life, who gives him an Authority she cannot recall however he misapply it, who puts her Fortune and Person entirely in his Power; nay even the very desires of her Heart, according to some learned Casuists, so as that it is not lawful to Will or Desire any thing but what he approves and allows, had need be very sure that she does not make a Fool her Head, nor a Vicious Man her Guide and Pattern, she had best stay till she can meet with one who has the Government of his own Passions and has duly regulated his own Desires, since he is to have such an absolute Power over hers. (pp. 32-33)

After such a dire warning, Astell’s young woman reader has little ground to hope anything good likely to come from marriage. Again, she seems to be implying the much more desirable alternative of joining a financially independent female community. Whether her male readers would welcome this alternative apparently did not worry her unduly – that was her polemical strength in saying exactly what she thought to be the truth, even at the risk of offending patriarchal power.

When next contemplating the inherent circumstances of unequal power arrangements between the sexes, a harangue of over five thousand words (pp. 43-66), Astell launches a stream of invective against the male presumption toward the female:

But how can a Man respect his Wife when he has a contemptible Opinion of her and her Sex? When from his own Elevation he looks down on them as void of Understanding, and full of Ignorance and Passion, so that Folly and a Woman are equivalent Terms with him? Can he think
there is any Gratitude due to her whose utmost services he exacts as strict Duty? Because she was made to be a Slave to his Will, and has no higher end than to Serve and Obey him? (p. 49)

By the middle of the essay Astell reaches an ironic, apocalyptic vision of the man’s almost godlike power over mortal existence:

But how can a Woman scruple intire Subjection, how can she forbear to admire the worth and excellency of the Superior Sex, if she at all considers it? Have not all the great Actions that have been perform’d in the World been done by them? Have not they founded Empires and over-turn’d them? Do not they make Laws and continually repeal and amend them? Their vast Minds lay Kingdoms wast, no bounds or measures can be prescrib’d to their Desires. War and Peace depend on them, they form Cabals and have the Wisdom and Courage to get over all these Rubs which may lie in the way of their desired Grandeur. What is it they cannot do? They make Worlds and ruin them, form Systems of universal Nature and dispute eternally about them, their Pen gives worth to the most trifling Controversie, nor can a fray be inconsiderable if they have drawn their Swords in’t. All that the wise Man pronounces is an Oracle, and every Word the Witty speaks a Jest. It is a Woman’s Happiness to hear, admire and praise them, especially if a little Ill-nature keeps them at any time from bestowing due applauses on each other. And if she aspires no further she is thought to be in her proper Sphere of Action, she is as wise and as good as can be expected from her. (pp. 58-59)

Despite her effort to keep up a Christian pose, Astell climaxes this reflection by noting that even Cato the Younger, that great ancient Roman Stoic philosopher, finally chose death rather than surrender to Julius Caesar’s dictatorial power. Facing comparable tyranny at home, what other course does a woman of integrity have?

Tho’ Ambition, as 'tis usually understood, is a Foolish, not to say a Base and Pitiful Vice, yet the Aspirings of the Soul after true Glory are so much its Nature, that it seems to have forgot it self and to degenerate, if it can forbear; and perhaps the great Secret of Education lies in affecting the
Soul with a lively Sense of what is truly its Perfection, and exciting the most ardent Desires after it. (p. 66)

In a poem, “Ambition,” written when she was only eighteen, Astell recorded a mystical moment that Sarah Apetrei deftly interprets:

Astell wrote about how her inner experience of a divine “vigour” which “fills my breast” defied all those “Who falsely say that women have no Soul.” Although she vowed that her aspirations were spiritual and unworldly, it seems clear that this lively interiority was part of the inspiration for a life dedicated to reforming action on behalf of women.26

If women are allowed to have souls, it follows that like men they have the same natural desire to seek intellectual, moral, and spiritual fulfilment. It is this irrepressible conflict between her lofty religious principles of ascetic self-denial and her visceral rebellion against social injustice that generates a powerful meditation on the plight of women in a male-dominated world.

At this stage Astell turns to a nearly four thousand word account (pp. 68-85) of the man’s various strategies in seducing women to their destruction. The worst case is that of the circumspect woman who may be taken in by a suitor too clever to resort to the usual tricks of courtship:

And generally the more humble and undesigning a Man appears, the more improbable it looks that he should dare to pretend, the greater Caution shou’d be us’d against him. A bold Address and good Assurance may sometimes, but does not always take. To a Woman of Sense an artificial Modesty and Humility is a thousand times more dangerous, he only draws back to receive the more Encouragement, and she regards not what Advances she makes towards him, who seems to understand himself and the World so well as to be incapable of making an ill use of them. (p. 7

Astell concludes with warning that any conversation with the enemy is dangerous:
A Man understands his own Merit too well to lose his time in a Woman’s Company were it not to divert himself at her cost, to turn her into a Jest, or something worse. And whereever you see great Assiduities, when a Man insinuates into the Diversions and Humors of the Lady, Liking and Admiring whatever she does, tho’ at the same time he seems to keep a due Distance, or rather exceeds in the profoundest Respect, Respect being all he dare at present pretend to, when a more than ordinary deference is paid, when something particular appears in the look and Address, and such an Obsequiousness in every Action, as nothing cou’d engage a Man to, who never forgets the Superiority of his Sex, but a hope to be Observ’d in his turn: Then, whatever the Inequality be, and how sensible soever he seems to be of it, the Man has for certain his Engines a [sic] Work, the Mine is ready to spring on the first opportunity, and ’tis well if it be not too late to prevent the poor Ladie's Ruin. (pp. 84-85)

Given these seemingly inevitable conditions of laying siege to women’s virtue, it is odd, perhaps, that Astell did not call for their barring single women from public events altogether. During the mid-eighteenth-century heyday of the London pleasure gardens, for instance, Richardson warned against the dangers of respectable women appearing in such places.27

In any case, Astell again upholds Christian devotion and hope for the next world as the only therapy for bearing all the afflictions experienced in a bad marriage:

This is a true, and indeed the only consolation, this makes her a sufficient compensation for all the neglect and contempt the ill-grounded Customs of the World throw on her, for all the Injuries brutal Power may do her, and is a sufficient Cordial to support her Spirits, be her Lot in this World what it may. (pp. 88-89)

As if not being able to resist throwing yet more acid against the adversary, Astell repeats almost the same invectives against men that she used previously (pp. 58-59) and elevates the woman who marries to produce children whom she would educate for heaven’s
reward and undergoes martyrdom in the process over the most famous masculine heroes. After such prolonged vitriol in these reflections, Astell’s concluding hope for a wise and good husband to ease the woman’s subjection in marriage seems at best to be just wishful thinking. Once again, the alternative is that utopian community of well-bred and financially independent women that she was able to enjoy to the end of her life and tried to institute for other women as well.

Preface to Some Reflections upon Marriage (1706)

Throughout the original text of Reflections (1700) there is an obvious imbalance between the relatively few positive statements in support of the institution of marriage and the explosive attacks on the absolute male authority that makes the wife nothing more than a slave for life. Moreover, there is also a fundamental contradiction between the Tory and High Church Anglican, on the one hand, and the uncompromising feminist radical, on the other. In all of her most bitter irony toward the male’s conventional role as tyrannical husband, Astell raised the specter of rebelling against marriage in general. But rather than attempting to smooth over this offensive position, Astell added a preface of over eight thousand words to the third edition of Reflections, published in 1706, which invokes Biblical evidence to argue on theological grounds the inherent equality of the sexes.

From the beginning of this preface Astell goads her male detractors with a swipe at their own predilection to resist political authority: “Far be it from her to stir up
Sedition of any sort, none can abhor it more; and she heartily wishes that our Masters wou'd pay their Civil and Ecclesiastical Governors the same Submission, which they themselves exact from their Domestic Subjects.” What seems clear, however, is that the accession of Queen Anne in 1702 emboldened Astell all the more to challenge male presumption:

'Tis true, thro' Want of Learning, and of that Superior Genius which Men as Men lay claim to, she was ignorant of the Natural Inferiority of our Sex, which our Masters lay down as a Self-Evident and Fundamental Truth. She saw nothing in the Reason of Things, to make this either a Principle or a Conclusion, but much to the contrary; it being Sedition at least, if not Treason to assert it in this Reign. [iii]

With a female monarch on the throne the tables have turned, and now it would be actually treasonous to uphold “the Natural Inferiority of our Sex.” Fortunately for her argument here, Queen Anne’s marriage to Prince George of Denmark in 1683, though arranged by her uncle Laurence Hyde, Earl of Rochester, was from all appearances a congenial partnership; and despite the misfortune of not producing an heir, her seventeen pregnancies are proof that it was not from a lack of marital duty.

More sharply than in her rather diffuse “reflections,” Astell now states categorically that custom, not nature, has cast women in a state of subjection in her society. Women, as well as men, were created for higher purposes than to be mere vassals: “a Rational Mind is too noble a Being to be Made for the Sake and Service of any Creature. The Service she at any time becomes oblig'd to pay to a Man, is only a Business by the Bye.” Then, in a famous stroke of earthy reference, Astell compares the woman’s plight as a wife to an unseemly but necessary arrangement that requires her all in performing her unwanted duty: “Just as it may be any Man's
Business and Duty to keep Hogs; he was not Made for this, but if he hires himself out to such an Employment, he ought conscientiously to perform it.” A corollary may be that the wife was not created to serve a porcine brute of a husband but nevertheless needs to fulfill her contract as scrupulously as humanly possible.

A key argument in this preface is that the male interpretive authorities of the Bible were prejudiced against women and that nowhere in this authoritative as well as popular moral guide are women shown to be naturally inferior to men:

But what says the Holy Scripture? It speaks of Women as in a State of Subjection, and so it does of the Jews and Christians when under the Dominion of the Chaldeans and Romans, requiring of the one as well as of the other a quiet submission to them under whose Power they liv’d. But will any one say that these had a Natural Superiority and Right to Dominion? that they had a superior Understanding, or any Pre-eminence, except what their greater Strength acquir’d? Or that the other were subjected to their Adversaries for any other Reason but the Punishment of their sins, and in order to their Reformation? Or for the Exercise of their Vertue, and because the Order of the World and the Good of Society requir’d it? [ix]

Astell accepts the account in Genesis of the Fall and of God telling Eve that hereafter she was to obey Adam as her husband, but she understands it only as a prediction of events to come rather than as proof that the woman is naturally inferior to the man. A parallel account in this same book has Isaac telling Esau, his first born son, that he should obey his younger brother, Jacob, but that eventually he should overthrow his dominion:

‘Tis true that GOD told Eve after the Fall that her Husband shou'd Rule over her: And so it is that he told Esau by the mouth of Isaac his Father, that he shou'd serve his younger Brother, and shou'd in time, and when he was strong enough to do it, break the Yoke from off his Neck. Now why one Text shou'd be a Command any more than the other, and not both of
them be Predictions only; or why the former shou'd prove Adam’s natural Right to Rule, and much less every Man’s, any more than the latter is a Proof of Jacob’s Right to Rule, and of Esau’s to Rebel, one is yet to learn? The Text in both Cases foretelling what wou’d be; but [err. in] neither of them determining what ought to be. [xi]

Although accepting that “Scripture commands Wives to submit themselves to their own Husbands,” Astell argues that neither St. Paul nor St. Peter, the main authorities for this directive, ever stated that women in general were by natural law subject to men. Even St. Paul’s alleged prohibition against women speaking in the church has been distorted by male interpreters:

tho’ he forbids Women to teach in the Church, and this for several Prudential Reasons, like those he introduces with an I give my Opinion, and now speak I not the Lord, and not because of any Law of Nature, or Positive Divine Precept, for that the words they are Commanded (I Cor. 14.24.) are not in the Original, appears from the Italic Character, yet he did not found this Prohibition on any suppos’d want of Understanding in Woman, or of ability to Teach; neither does he confine them at all times to learn in silence. [xii]

Throughout all of her detailed analysis of Biblical passages traditionally adduced by misogynistic interpreters to justify the status quo of women’s subordination, Astell demonstrates a formidable power to meet any contemporary male theologian in the field of combat. Even if abrasive or sarcastic at times, all that she is finally asking for is the woman’s right to the intellectual freedom traditionally the almost exclusive privilege of men.

Astell’s Reflections may not have brought about a social revolution, but it was provocative enough to arouse significant responses in the press during the
early years of the eighteenth century. Richard Steele’s journal, *The Tatler*, No. 32 (1709), satirized her attack on marriage as an aberration of nature:

> There were some Years since a Set of these Ladies who were of Quality, and gave out, That Virginity was to be their State of Life during this mortal Condition, and therefore resolved to join their Fortunes, and erect a Nunnery.

Although Astell proposed a college for the education of women, comparable to what men had been privileged to for centuries, Steele arouses fears of medieval Roman Catholicism by calling the institution a convent. Despite their efforts to seclude themselves from the world, these “Platonicks” were approached by a rake and his company who played upon their vanity to gain their confidence. Madonella, the “Projectrix of the Foundation,” was especially deceived by his flattering remarks about her “seraphick Discourse” and in the end seduced along with her followers, so that “there was hardly one of them but was a Mother or Father that Day Twelvemonth.” In our day Astell would have dismissed this sort of thing as “locker room humor.”

A more sympathetic and worthwhile response to Astell appears in Bernard Mandeville’s *The Virgin Unmask’d: or, Female Dialogues betwixt an Elderly Maiden Lady, and her Niece* (London, 1709). The Preface explains that the purpose of the dialogues “is to let young Ladies know whatever is dreadful in Marriage, and this could not be done, but by introducing one that was an Enemy to it. Therefore, tho’ Lucinda speaks altogether against Matrimony, don’t think that I do so too” [ix]. But Mandeville does allow the “old maid” Lucinda’s arguments to be heard fairly and supports her protest against the poor education available to women in his society.²⁹ If the title alone implies behind-the-scenes eroticism, the aunt’s observations of her niece’s sexual
development are not just for the sake of pornographic titillation. Mandeville’s main
criticism of Astell’s diatribe against marriage is its refusal to account for the woman’s
sexual urges, and at a decisive moment in their conversation the niece Antonia suddenly
gains the upper hand over her mentor:

We may discant on these Things as we please; but as that Longing and Fondness, which the Males
and Females of all other Creatures, are observed, to have for one another at certain Times, were,
without doubt, design’d as a Means, by which, to their Mutual Satisfaction, they should perpetuate
their Kind: So it would be very strange, that Nature should have given the same Desire to Men and
Women for no other Reason, than to try their Cunning and Discretion in stifling and hiding of
them before each other. (p. 31)

Although conceding the necessity of the biological appetites for propagation and
admitting that the great majority of women lose their “Innate Reservedness, and a Kind
of Horror, against losing their Virginity” before turning forty, Lucinda questions whether
the record will prove that they did not regret their state of being married. As a physician
who studied the causes of hysteria, Mandeville probably had doubts about Astell’s own
fears of losing her virginity even if he shared her larger concern with improving women’s
education and expanding their role in society.

In 1714 Steele paid a more generous compliment to Astell with the publication of The
Ladies Library, “written by a lady,” but really a compilation of various unacknowledged
authors, including Astell, on women’s education. Until 1980, when Stephen Parks
reproduced a transcription of the 1713 agreement with Steele and Jacob Tonson, it was
not known that George Berkeley, the Irish philosopher and bishop of Cloyne, was the
compiler of this work.30 As Derek Taylor has recently demonstrated, Berkeley
plagiarized whole chunks of A Serious Proposal to the Ladies but not without making
extensive revisions to her text that Astell herself appeared to accept when making notes of them for a new edition that never materialized. Perhaps more importantly, it is a quiet tribute to Astell’s lasting influence that Berkeley valued her ideas on education to the extent of incorporating them with his own when attempting to found a college in 1729 in Bermuda for cultivating a “reformation of manners” among the colonists and for bringing “religion, morality, and civil life” to the indigenous people of Bermuda.

Astell’s life and work inspired George Ballard to write *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752), which was begun already in the 1740s while this historian gathered evidence from such personal acquaintances of hers as the Anglo-Saxon scholar Elizabeth Elstob. Although praised for her life-long efforts to improve women’s education, Astell was finally extolled for her deep religious faith and ascetic discipline:

> As her notions and sentiments of religion, piety, charity, humility, friendship, and all the other graces which adorn the good Christian, were most refined, and sublime; so she possessed those rare and excellent virtues, in a degree as would have made her admired and distinguished in an age less degenerate and profane.

Ballard describes in detail not only the excruciating pain Astell suffered during the removal of her cancerous breast but also her care in performing the operation “in the most private manner imaginable” to avoid the “male gaze” as much as possible. In her final days she dedicated all her energy to spiritual meditation and refused even to see her dearest friend Lady Catherine Jones:

> being confined to her bed, and finding the time of her dissolution draw nigh, she ordered her coffin and shroud to be made, and brought to her bed-side; and there to remain in her view, as a constant memento to her approaching fate, and that her mind might not deviate or stray one moment from GOD, it’s most proper object.
It is hardly a coincidence that Clarissa Harlowe orders her coffin and uses it as a writing desk during her final preparations for death. Richardson, we now know, printed the fourth edition of *Reflections*, and there is evidence that he also involved himself in making some of the significant emendations to this work.\(^{35}\) In his last novel, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, Richardson’s exemplary hero advocates establishing in every county of England

*Protestant Nunneries,* in which single women of small or no fortunes might live with all manner of freedom, under such regulations as it would be a disgrace for a modest or good woman not to comply with, were she absolutely on her own hands; and to be allowed to quit it whenever they pleased.\(^{36}\)

Although her name never appears anywhere in his published work or surviving correspondence, Richardson was surely the most conspicuous eighteenth-century male convert to Mary Astell.

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Mary Astell’s Publications

1694 A Serious Proposal To the Ladies For the Advancement of their true and greatest Interest. BY a Lover of Her Sex.

1695 Letters Concerning the Love of God, Between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris.

1697 A Serious Proposal to the Ladies Part II Wherein A Method is offer’d for the Improvement of their Minds.

1700 Some Reflections Upon Marriage, Occasion’d by the Duke & Duchess of Mazarine's Marriage Case; which is also consider’d.

1706 Reflections Upon Marriage. The Third Edition. To which is Added a Preface, in Answer to some Objections. 4th edition: 1730, printed by Samuel Richardson and possibly edited in part by this printer and author.

1704 Moderation truly Stated: Or, A Review of a Late Pamphlet Entitul’d Moderation a Vertue. With a Prefatory Discourse to Dr. D’Aveanant, Concerning His late Essays on Peace and War.

1704 A Fair Way with the Dissenters and Their Patrons. Not Writ by Mr. L——y, or any other Furious Jacobite whether Clergyman or Layman; but by a very Moderate Person and Dutiful Subject to the Queen.

1704 An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War in this Kingdom: In an Examination of Dr. Kennett's Sermon Jan. 31, 1703/4. And Vindication of the Royal Martyr.


1709 Bart’lemey Fair: Or, An Enquiry after Wit; In which due Respect is had to a Letter Concerning Enthusiasm, To my Lord ***, By Mr. Wotton. 2nd edition: 1722. An Enquiry after Wit, wherein the Trifling Arguing and Impious Railery of the Late Earl of Shaftesbury in his letter concerning Enthusiasm and other Profane Writers are fully answered and justly exposed.

Secondary Works


Harris, Jocelyn, “Philosophy and Sexual Politics in Mary Astell and Samuel Richardson,” special issue of *Intellectual History Review* 22:3 (September 2012), eds. Peter R. Anstey and Jocelyn Harris, 445-63.


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"Mary Astell and John Locke," The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1650 to 1750, ed. Steven Zwicker (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), 276-306.


Sutherland, Christine M., The Eloquence of Mary Astell (Calgary: Univ. of Calgary Press, 2006).


________, “A Parallel Case for Richardson’s Clarissa,” *Modern Language Notes*, 28 (1913), 103-05.
Preface to the 3rd edition of Some Reflections upon Marriage (1706), Sig. a.

Ruth Perry, The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986). In the present century alone, there have been a number of book-length studies, including Patricia Springborg, Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination (Cambridge University Press, 2005); C. M. Sutherland, Eloquence of Mary Astell (University of Calgary Press. 2005); William Kolbrüner and Michal Michelson (eds.), Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), and Sarah Apetrei, Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Perry, p. 53.

Apetrei, p. 80.

Apetrei, p. 81-84.


See Perry, pp. 245-47. See also C. I. McGrath, “Richard Jones,” ODNB.


See Emma Major, “Anne, countess of Coventry,” ODNB.


“In a discussion about spiritual warfare, Astell suggested that the male values of martial prowess and heroism were contemptibly worldly compared with true moral courage, and that ‘A Woman may put on the whole Armor of GOD without degenerating into a Masculine Temper.’” Apetrei, p. 114.

The above biographical information derives from Perry’s book cited and also her ODNB article for Astell.


See Emma Plaskitt, “Teresia Constantia Phillips,” ODNB.

See A. C. Elias Jr., “Laetitia Pilkington,” ODNB.

See note 9.


http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/finch/finch-anne.html

Perry, pp. 145-46.

“For all Astell’s own passion for friendship, she could also be downright unpleasant to those who did not meet her exacting standards of intellectual and political rectitude. Francis Atterbury, for example, who would later be consecrated Bishop of Rochester, found her ‘offensive and shocking in her expressions’ when she took him to task for an unsatisfactory sermon,” Sarah Apetrei, Women, Feminism, and Religion in Early Enlightenment England (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), p. 89.

Apetrei, p. 90.

“In Reflections Upon Marriage, she addressed her application to ‘this Glory of her own Sex and Envy of the other’ for her patronage of women's education and ‘liberties’. She remarked upon the congruity of Anne’s ‘obstinate Vertue and Piety’ and her femininity, commenting that she, ‘being a Woman, is truly and in good earnest Religious’. In a Tory essay of 1704, Astell also observed that the English nation has tended to ‘Flourish more under a Feminine than under a Masculine Regiment’. Astell was apparently at least as enthusiastic about the successful reign of a female as she was about Anne’s Tory credentials and celebrated ‘Bounty’ to poor clergy.” Apetrei, p. 144.

Apetrei perhaps overstates that Mandeville “lampooned” Astell even though admitting his “slightly more respectful commentator” than the salacious mockery found in the Tatler. Apetrei categorically assumes that Jonathan Swift was the author of the reply to the letter-writer Charles Sturdy in this issue. Although the name Isaac Bickerstaff was adopted by Swift in his celebrated attack on John Partridge, the astrologer, it was Richard Steele who began the Tatler with this nom de plum for his fictitious editor and thus probably the author of the attack on Astell. The collected reprint of the Tatler was entitled The Lucubrations of Isaac Bickerstaff Esq; 2 Vols. (London, 1710). In an email note (8 June 2013), James Woolley kindly replied to my doubts about the Swift attribution, addressed to C18-L: “Herbert Davis, in his edition of Swift’s Prose, vol. 2 (1940), xxix-xxxi, says it’s not by Swift. Donald Bond, in his edition of the Tatler (1987), says it’s not by Swift. So you are in good company.”


M. A. Stewart, “George Berkeley,” ODNB.


Ballard, p. 460.


Sir Charles Grandison, 1st edn., 7 vols. (1753), 4: 140.