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# MARY ASTELL: CHRISTIAN FEMINIST

by  
**Margret Taube ©**

Submitted to the Committee on Undergraduate Honors at Baruch College of the City University of New York in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History with Honors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

England in the Seventeenth Century

Mary Astell's Early Years

Women's Education

Women and Marriage

Religio-Political Issues

Astell's Reception by Contemporaries

Astell's Religious Work in Close-Up

Defense of Christian Doctrines

Christian Principles

Political Implications

Astell's Christian Feminism

Conclusion

NOTES

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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## **INTRODUCTION**

*The Bible is for us, and not against us, and cannot without great violence done to it, be urg'd to our Prejudice.(1)*

If it is true that history's main function is didactic, it follows that societies select the stories and choose the heroes/heroines that seem the most relevant to their condition, even emphasizing some aspects, omitting others. A case in point of historiography's selective process is Mary Astell, Christian philosopher of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in England. Astell led a remarkable life in a remarkable century. Her work covered theological, political, and feminist thought. She debated the issues of her time with John Locke, Daniel Defoe, and the Earl of Shaftesbury, among others. Yet soon after her death patriarchal historiography neglected to consider her work. It remained lost for two centuries. In 1916, caused by women's growing awareness of their own history, Astell was rediscovered by historian Florence Smith. Today she is highly respected for her feminist work. She has been called "the first major English feminist," "the founder of the feminist movement," "undoubtedly a bluestocking and a feminist," "the first systematic feminist in England,"(2) and the "first English suffragette."(3) The honor these names rightly bestow on her, however, is problematic because it is limiting. Viewing Astell's feminist work in isolation of or even in contradiction to her religious and political thought invites misunderstandings. In my paper I will present Astell's life and work in the context of her time and in the context of her deep religiosity.

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*If GOD does not govern the World, it is not worth to stay in it.(4)*

Seventeenth and early eighteenth century English history has been represented as a Century of Revolutions, during which England transformed itself from a divine-right, hereditary monarchy to a parliamentary government. This Whig and Marxist interpretation sees a virtually absolute monarchy at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The monarch chose his/her ministers, determined who would sit in Parliament, summoned Parliament into session only if the situation required it, and conducted foreign policy as his/her own private prerogative. The monarch intervened in the nation's economy by controlling prices, customs, prohibiting land enclosure, and granting industrial and commercial monopolies. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, in contrast, Parliament was in permanent session, had control of foreign policy and finance, and chose King George I in an Act of Parliament that completely ignored hereditary claims to the throne. With this choice "politics had become a rational inquiry, discussed

in terms of utility, experience, common sense, no longer in terms of Divine Right, texts, and antiquarian research."<sup>(5)</sup> During this century of economic and political change, England grew from a second-class power to Great Britain, the world power of the eighteenth century. The economy developed from mercantilism, in which the king could cancel debts he had made, and gold and silver holdings were a measure of wealth (bullionism), to a laissez-faire economy, which created among other things the Bank of England and the National Debt. With the economic-political change the political theory transformed as well. As the theory of the divine right to rule paled in political discourse and practice, the formerly compulsory membership in the National Anglican Church gave way to legal toleration of dissent. At the beginning of the seventeenth century heretics were still burned, a practice discontinued in the more enlightened or secularized - eighteenth century. England, viewing the models of French absolutism and Dutch oligarchical republicanism, chose the latter model with all its trappings of parliamentary government, religious toleration and scientific progress, economic progress and imperialist foreign policy. Thus the principles of the social contract, liberty, and the right to dissent were replacing the tenets of arbitrary power of the divine-right monarch, dependence of subjects, and passive obedience. It was indeed a century of revolution. It was a century of momentous change and of momentous resistance to this change.

Into this age of fundamental transformation and fundamental tensions, Mary Astell was born in 1666 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in Northern England. The civil war that followed the Puritan Revolution had ended and the Restoration had begun just six years before Astell was born. It was nonetheless a time of turmoil. During the civil war and the Long Parliament Newcastle had been a thorn in the side of the Republicans. Staunchly Royalist and protective of the coal monopoly they had received from the crown, the Northumberlanders refused to supply the enemy with coal and defeated the attacking parliamentary army. Astell's grandfather, a lawyer, helped in the ensuing negotiations.<sup>(6)</sup> In Mary Astell's year of birth, the Great Plague was subsiding, and grave unemployment and high taxation caused riots in many parts of the country.<sup>(7)</sup> Astell's life stretched through the reigns of Charles II, James II, William and Mary, and finally Anne. The issues of her time - such as religious tolerance, dissenters' occasional conformity to Anglican ritual to secure government positions, papism - were in a way the aftershocks from Reformation and Restoration, as much as precursors of the Enlightenment. They were hotly debated in pamphlets and sermons. Rivalries between the two factions, the Whigs (defenders of the constitution and religious dissent) and the Tories (divine right royalists and loyal Anglicans) kept the public mood tense. However, for the majority of the English people the memory of the endless and bloody civil war was fresh and acted as a deterrent from violent feuds (with the exception perhaps of the Popish Plot). Even the Revolution of 1688 was bloodless (therefore "Glorious"). England, it seemed, longed for stability and order before all else.<sup>(8)</sup>

Astell was born into a "prominent commercial family."<sup>(9)</sup> Her father was a member of the Company of Hostmen (as members of the guild of coal merchants were called) in Newcastle, although only completing his apprenticeship when Mary was eight. His death when she was twelve plunged the family into serious financial distress.<sup>(10)</sup> Her mother, Mary Errington, from a Catholic gentry family, died in 1684, leaving Mary in the care of

her aunt. Mary Astell's family was Royalist (her grandfather's tombstone read "Triumphant Charles he's gone to see"(11) ) in a primarily Royalist region of northern England. Astell's extraordinary intelligence was recognized by her uncle, a curate at Newcastle's St. Nicholas Church, who undertook her education from her eighth birthday to his death when she was thirteen. Although such an education was not without precedent, it was unusual. In the seventeenth century, 83% of women in England could not even sign their own names.(12) Even in the upper classes it was common practice to teach both boys and girls the basics of reading and writing until boys would begin their formal education and girls would learn domestic skills.(13) In contrast, Astell's uncle exposed his niece to poetry, history, and theology, probably planting the seed for Astell's lifelong fervent Christian Platonism, which would become the centerpiece of her thought, informing both her political and her feminist ideas. Sir George Clark observes that Christian Platonism or Cambridge Platonism (because of its leading group of Cambridge academics headed by anti-calvinist Ralph Cudworth) was becoming increasingly old-fashioned in an era that grew more and more receptive to Calvinist doctrine.(14) For Astell, however, the Christian-Platonists' emphasis on the primacy of reason and the divinity of the soul, on a god of supreme goodness, wisdom, and love, (rather than Calvin's arbitrary God of selective predestination), and on the immaterial soul would become her comfort during a difficult life.(15) It also provided justification for studies in a time in which it was still questioned whether women actually had a soul, let alone intellect. As the immaterial soul was necessarily genderless, Astell could feel free from gender-limitations in her intellectual pursuits.

Although the Astell family belonged to the powerful coal-mining interest, the very same that had refused to deliver coal to a Parliamentary London, the Astells were by no means wealthy nor of nobility. Thus, Mary Astell's level of education has to be regarded as remarkable in a time in which women's education was customarily limited to women of the aristocracy.

After their father's death in 1678, Mary's brother chose to become a lawyer. For her, life did not seem to hold a purpose, however. On one hand, insufficient funds for a dowry made an appropriate marriage impossible. The fact that Astell did not seem to contemplate a marriage beneath her serves to illustrate her conservatism and class consciousness. Her feeling about such marriages, in fact, was very pronounced.

But when a Woman Marrys unequally and beneath her self, there is almost Demonstration that the Man is Sordid and Unfair, that instead of Loving her he only Loves himself, traps and ruins her to serve his own Ends . ... For since GOD has plac'd different Ranks in the World, put some in a higher and some in a lower Station, for Order and Beauty's sake, and for many good Reasons; yet there is no manner of Reason for us Degrade our selves; on the contrary, much why we ought not.(16)

On the other hand, she could not follow her brother's example by earning a living. A third solution, a religious life in a convent, no longer existed since the dissolution of all convents and monasteries by Henry VIII in 1536. Her distress at her own uselessness is reflected in one of her poems of that time, In Emulation of Mr. Cowley's Poem call 'd the

Motto Jan. 7, 1687/8. Here, the frustration of a bright, young, ambitious woman, who finds all doors closed to her, finds expression.

What shall I do?

Not to be Rich or Great, Not to be courted and admir'd,  
With Beauty blest, or Wit inspir'd,...

and

How shall I be a Peter or a Paul?

That to the Turk and Infidel,  
might the joyful tydings tell,  
And spare no labour to convert them all:  
But ah my Sex denies me this, (17)

After this poetic process of elimination of choices, Astell decided that writing was the only field possibly open to her. Whether it was this decision or the fact that riots were again erupting in Newcastle all through 1686 to 1688 due again to rising unemployment,(18) at age twenty-one she moved to London to try her luck as a writer.

She settled in Chelsea, a wealthy suburb which, at the time, offered affordable and respectable boarding houses for young ladies and gentlemen. Nevertheless, her financial situation soon grew desperate. Help from her family seemed not to have been available. In her need, Astell turned for help to William Sancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury, whom she did not know socially, but whose religious principles she deeply admired. Sancroft had not only given up his position as bishop in protest against James II's Declaration of Indulgence, he had further endured imprisonment for refusing to swear allegiance to the House of Orange. Clerics who had felt that their oath of loyalty to James III made it impossible for them to swear allegiance to William and Mary after the Glorious Revolution in 1688 were called *non jurors*. There were attempts to accommodate these men by altering the wording of the new oath, but anyone who refused to swear allegiance by this new, less contentious version lost their post. Archbishop Sancroft was one of few (five bishops, and a few hundred lower clergy) who accepted these consequences. Sancroft's willingness to sacrifice worldly power and wealth for the sake of principles was a quality the Christian Platonist Astell would revere throughout her life. Sancroft helped Astell with money and contacts and may even have matched her with her publisher, Rich Wilkin. Wilkin became a loyal supporter of Astell's, admiring her acumen and style and sharing her conservative political and religious views. He may have commissioned three political tracts from her and allowed her to use his shop as her mailing address. He kept publishing her even when her work sold fewer and fewer copies.(19)

Astell's first book, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies For the Advancement of their true and greatest Interest. By a Lover of her Sex*, was published in 1694. Her proposal for women's education - as innovative in approach and scale as it was - belonged nonetheless to a tradition advocating women's education. However, it is hard to establish how much

of that tradition was known to Astell. Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Corteggiano* or Juan Luis Vives' *De institutione feminae Christianae* had become available in English translation during the seventeenth century and both spoke out in favor of women's education. Thomas More's example of providing his daughters with a classical education seemed to have been common knowledge, but Christine de Pizan's extensive work had almost completely sunk into obscurity by the seventeenth century.(20) The French Cartesian Poulain de la Barre, whose *De l'egalite des duex sexes* (1673) had been translated into English in 1677 as *The Woman as good as the Man*, wrote that women's minds functioned the same as men's, and that women therefore could become philosophers, lawyers, and diplomats.(21) These and other promoters of women's education, such as Mary Ward, Anna Van Schurman, Bathsua Makin, and Hannah Woolley, may or may not have been familiar names to Astell. In her *Proposal*, she refers by name solely to William Wotton (1666-1726), who supported the idea of women's education in his *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694).

Astell's brilliantly and extensively argued appeal to women to seek self-perfection in concert with her own life's example had a singularly forceful impact on contemporary writers in general and women in particular. According to Perry, Judith Drake's *An Essay in Defense of the Female Sex*, Lady Mary Chudleigh's *The Ladies Defence: or, The Bride-Woman's Counsellor Answer'd*, Lady Mary Montagu's *The Nonsense of Common Sense*, Elisabeth Elstob's *A Saxon Homily on the Birthday of St. Gregory*, and Sarah Scott's *A Description of Millennium Hall*, were thought to have been influenced if not directly caused by Astell's book.(22) To deny such influence, Daniel Defoe, who promulgated education for women in his *Essay upon Projects* in 1697, three years after *A Serious Proposal*, took great pains to point out that his ideas on that topic had been germinating long before the book by "The Lover of her Sex" had appeared. Even Bishop Burnet, who originally had discouraged a patron(23) from making a large contribution towards Astell's envisioned religious retreat for women, supposedly because of its semblance to a catholic convent, nevertheless wrote in 1708:

"The ill method of schools and colleges give the chief rise to the irregularities of the gentry as the breeding young women to vanity, dressing, and a false appearance of interest and behaviour....something like monasteries without vows would be a glorious design...(24)

The fear of Catholicism was widespread and often deliberately fanned for political advantage by either side. Astell, however, remained unimpressed by the threat of papism. Her mother's Catholicism may have contributed to that,(25) but the fact that other high church writers shared her attitude(26) indicates that after the Glorious Revolution the Catholics had ceased to be a relevant force in the nation. Astell even used the term "catholic" to mean "universal" without fear of being misunderstood.(27) Furthermore, she viewed the abolition of monasteries as an overreaction on the part of the Protestants.

but [I] have heard it generally complain'd of by very good Protestants, that Monasteries were Abolish'd instead of being Reform'd: ... And tho' none that I know of plead for Monasteries, ... or for anything else but a reasonable provision for the Education of one

half of Mankind, and for a safe retreat so long and no longer than our Circumstances make it requisite....."(28)

With the success of her first book, Astell's social circle began to expand, and she began to build close and lasting friendships with the wealthy women in her neighborhood. Certainly, her upbringing, her solid conservative values, and her education were the qualities that made her acceptable to these women, some of whom would also become her patrons. As is the fashion in historical writing today, the intensity of these friendships has been interpreted as evidence of homoerotic tendencies in Astell.(29) This interpretation may be based on sources such as Astell's second letter to John Norris, a famous Platonist of his day, with whom she corresponded. In this letter she admits to the weakness of not being able to love without desire:

I have contracted such a Weakness, I will not say by Nature (for I believe Nature is often very unjustly blam'd for what is owing to Will and Custom) but by voluntary Habit, that it is a very difficult Thing for me to love at all, without something of Desire, Now, I am loath to abandon all Thoughts of Friendship . . .(30)

Perry, however, leans toward a different explanation: First, these women became the family for or *Wahlverwandschaft* of a single, young woman. Second, the only friendships feasible in this era were female friendships, because friendships with men were dangerous and misconstruable. Third, and most importantly, the nature of friendship, of non-possessive, platonic love was closest to Mary Astell's idealistic temperament.(31)

In spite of having generous friends and patrons, Astell continued to struggle throughout her life, attempting to manage a respectable life in the absence of wealth, marriage or a paying profession.(32) She met this challenge as she had met any challenge before: "Up then my sluggard Soul, Labour and Pray."(33) Her Christian Platonism had found application in creating virtue out of necessity. Not being able to afford any amenities was tolerable, because to her, fundamentally, "bodies were a nuisance" and "should be prevented from interfering with the superior functions of the mind."(34)

Seeking a Christian Platonist mentor in London, Astell had contacted John Norris, one of the leading Cambridge Platonists in her time.

I have brought in my unwrought Ore to be refined and made currant by the Brightness of your Judgement, and shall reckon it a great Favour, if you will give yourself the Trouble to Point out my Mistakes, it being my Ambition not to seem to be without Fault, but if I can, really to be so, and I know no way more conducive to that end than the Advantage of such an Instructor.(35)

She had used her disagreement with Norris' idea that God was the author of human pleasure to start this correspondence. In her first letter, she had asked whether God was not the author of all human sensations - both pain and pleasure. In that case she concluded, that "if nothing be the Object of our Love but what does us Good, then something else does us Good, besides what causes Pleasure."(36) Norris had to accept her

reasoning. The ensuing correspondence was published in 1695 as *Letters Concerning the Love of God*.

The wide attention this publication received was to a great extent caused by the fact that one of the correspondents was a woman. "The Letters here laid open to thy View are a late Correspondence between myself and a Gentlewoman, and to add to thy Wonder, a young Gentlewoman. Her Name I have not the Liberty to publish."<sup>(37)</sup> Norris had tried to persuade Astell to give up her anonymity for this publication, but Astell had declined, not uncommon a reaction among women writers and artists of the period. Although the disappearance of Latin as the language of educated discourse had encouraged many women to participate in the debates of their century, which substantially increased the number of women writers, even established names such as Aphra Behn had to take into account that their name would seriously endanger their work's chances for a favorable public reception. According to Florence Smith, many writers (and artists) chose anonymity in countless instances for that reason.<sup>(38)</sup> It is true that in this particular period few pamphleteers trusted the volatile political power constellations enough to sign their works. John Locke, for example, (true to his own principle of self-preservation) was obsessive about keeping his material anonymous, which saved his life when he became a suspect after the Rye House Plot (in which a few Whigs had attempted the assassination of King James).<sup>(39)</sup> Daniel Defoe, on the other hand, - although having published his *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* anonymously - was found out, fined, and put in the pillory.<sup>(40)</sup> However, it has to be emphasized that these were dissenting opinions, whose authors were cautious about the repercussions of their dissent, while Astell wrote fervently in defense of the established - if embattled - institutions of church and government and yet did not wish to be named as author.

In 1700, Astell wrote her second major work, *Some Reflections Upon Marriage, Occasion'd by the Duke & Duchess of Mazarine's Case; which is also consider'd* as a response to the growing licentiousness of the Restoration age regarding marriage. Challenges to the institution of marriage were a consequence of women's growing self-confidence and the break down of the idea of a divinely ordained power structure. During and after the civil war women had taken care of home and business, they had acted as spies, built fortifications, and raised money for the war effort.<sup>(41)</sup> In the Protestant sects, women had become habituated to active participation, including preaching, and to spiritual equality with men.<sup>(42)</sup> The Glorious Revolution in 1688 had shattered the belief in divinely ordained authority within the state and therefore within the family. Ideas about a woman's role in society and about the institution of marriage were changing. A minister, for example, who had claimed in his sermon that the duty of a wife in pleasing and comforting her husband was God's punishment for her role in the Fall as "the Tempter's Agent,"<sup>(43)</sup> was exposed to an unprecedented storm of protest. Aphra Behn had one of her female characters (Olivia in *The Younger Brother*) remark: "when parents grow arbitrary, 'tis time we look into our Rights and Privileges."<sup>(44)</sup> And in Vanbrugh's *The Provok'd Wife* an unhappily married woman reflected,

Let me see - What opposes? My matrimonial vow - Why, what did I vow? I think I promis'd to be true to my husband. Well; and he promis'd to be kind to me. But he han't

kept his word. Why then I'm so absolv'd from mine. Aye that seems clear to me. The argument's good between the king and the people, why not between the husband and the wife?(45)

Astell was among the conservative voices on the issue, arguing that marriage - although almost inevitably unsatisfactory for women -was yet a holy institution and had to be honored as such. However, as George Ballard remarked, her book was written "with a vast deal of wit and smartness: and make[s] perhaps the strongest defence that ever yet appeared in print, of the rights and abilities of the fair sex."(46)

Today, Astell's *Proposal to the Ladies and Reflections upon Marriage* are her most popular works. However, contrary to Astell's feminist image today, she considered herself first and foremost a philosopher. In 1704, Astell turned her attention to the public debate of religious and political issues. Queen Anne's ascension to the throne in 1702 had brought a general increase in literary activity, having raised not only the hopes of Tories but also of women writers. Astell published a series of political pamphlets, displaying full mastery of the issues, facts, and theories in question. In the first of three pamphlets Astell wrote in 1704, she refuted James Owen's defense of occasional conformity (*Moderation a Vertue*) in a 185 page-long *tour de force* entitled *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*. Occasional conformity was a loophole, legislated by William of Orange, that allowed dissenters to remain in their government positions by taking communion once a year in the Anglican Church. This practice was violently opposed by the high church orthodoxy as well as by Tories. Their argument was that the dissenters' acceptance of such a vehicle for the preservation of their careers proved beyond doubt their opportunism and that their only interest was power, not religion. Astell was among the opponents of occasional conformity. She argued that if a religious difference was so grave that it forced a person to break with the National Church, any conformity however occasional with the National Church was unprincipled. If however, the religious differences were not that great after all, the dissenters could just as well return to the Anglican church. Her pamphlet met with great attention. Tory leaders guessed at the author's identity, and the pamphlet further fueled the debate on occasional conformity by provoking responses from Defoe, Leslie, and Owen himself.(47) According to Perry, Dr. Hickes, the non-juring bishop of Worcester, informed the master of University College, Oxford, Dr. Charlett, "And you may now assure your self, that Mrs. Astell is the author of that other book against Occasional Communion, which we justly admired so much."(48) Charles D'Aveanant's *Essays upon Peace at Home and War abroad* (1704), which she discussed in her preface, must have been an easy target for Astell. The essay had been written by the Tory D'Aveanant upon the Queen's order to write something more conciliatory towards Whig positions. According to Francis Atterbury, this had caused a weakness in D'Aveanant's argumentation, which, Atterbury wrote, "usually attends men who write against their honor and conscience."(49) Diligently and relentlessly, Astell exposed these weaknesses and inconsistencies in D'Aveanant's text and his shifting position on the issue of dissent.

How great a problem the issue of dissent presented becomes clear if we look at the wealth of material that was written on that topic. Astell's second pamphlet was a critique of Daniel Defoe's *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters. In 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*, Astell failed to pick up on Defoe's irony, but - to her defense - so did most of her contemporaries. In fact, Tories were fooled into believing that their former opponent had changed over into their camp. Also, *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 the Vindication of the Royal Martyr* concerned itself with dissenters and their threat to national security. In these pages Astell defended Charles I as a royal martyr and insisted that the challenges to royal authority by Whigs and Dissenters were a far more serious threat to society than papism.

The nature of the debate shows how closely connected religious issues were with political ones. This connection - although evident in other countries as well - was particularly strong in England. First, the existence of a national church necessitated this amalgam. To be a patriot was to be a member of the Anglican Church and vice versa. In many ways, the church helped substantially in the administration and moral supervision of the people. The pulpit was as much a tool of social control as of spiritual liberation. For example, in 1620 James I ordered the Bishop of London to preach "against the insolency of our women and their wearing of broad-brimmed hats, pointed doublets, their hair cut short or shorn." In 1626, the clergy had to preach that refusing to support the King financially was sinful. Membership in the national church was automatic at birth, attendance at Sunday services was compulsory, as was the payment of tithes to the local clergyman, who was in most cases the choice of the landed ruling class. Education had been Anglican monopoly before the civil war. It remained an ecclesiastical domain after the war, although now there were both Anglican schools and the schools of the Puritan dissenters. While the Reformation had abolished papal authority, the structure of society was still regarded as ordained by God. Therefore, any critique of the structure of society was seen (at least by high church Anglicans) as heresy, and any dissenting religious group was seen as dangerous to the state. For example, the Quakers' insistence on addressing social superiors with the familiar "thou" without removing their hats was as alarming to those concerned about the social *status quo* as to those concerned with the unity of faith.<sup>(50)</sup> During the greater part of the seventeenth century the Anglican Church and the dissenting sects were at loggerheads. The conflict was the more embittered because the questions whether and which dissenting religions should be tolerated or persecuted were also the questions about who was to have political power and who was to be excluded from it.

The translation of the Bible into English had invited a great variety of interpretations of the Scripture, which lead to the emergence of a great many sects and to skepticism towards all religious doctrine. To stem the tide of this growing skepticism and the resulting materialism seemed to be an impossible task for the Anglican Church. In her third major work, *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by A Daughter of the Church of England*, Astell combined a defense of the Anglican church with an attempt to protect women from the dangers of skepticism. Due to the book's Anglican orthodoxy and

Astell's refusal to give up her anonymity it was at first attributed to Francis Atterbury, the leading theoretician of the High Church.

Astell's last published work *Bartlemy Fair: Or, An Enquiry after Wit; In which due Respect is had to a Letter Concerning Enthusiasm, To my Lord \* \* \* . By Mr. Wotton* (1709) was a response to Shaftesbury's *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm*. Shaftesbury had suggested that dissenters in general and the Huguenots in particular should rather be mocked than elevated to the status of martyrdom by persecution. The Huguenots had been welcomed to England as fellow Protestants persecuted by the Popish French. However, their religious mysticism began to generate protest against them in Britain. At Bartholomy's Fair a puppet show had made fun of their mysticism, and Shaftesbury claimed in his essay that ridicule was the most effective and humane way to rid society of extremists. He argued that Christianity had survived persecution but might not have survived if Jews had ridiculed Jesus in a puppet show a la Bart'lemy's Fair. Astell was scandalized by what she perceived as facetiousness. She pointed out vehemently and effectively the danger of Shaftesbury's suggestion as well as of his theory of a "free marketplace of ideas," in which all ideas had equal chances of being recognized and adopted.

After *Bart'lemy's Fair*, Astell ceased to publish - possibly because of a growing disillusionment with the decreasing effect and resonance her writing seemed to have. Some historians have maintained that her discouragement grew out of the ridicule women writers of her age had to endure. Women writers were often ridiculed as *precieuses*, *women savantes*, and *she-philosophers*, their work was easily discounted or mocked (which arguably proves Shaftesbury's point about the lethal effect of derision), or treated with the same kind of disingenuous flattery that was reserved for women in general, which Astell summed up as calling "them [women] fools to their faces," or "abusing them in a well-bred way."<sup>(51)</sup> Claiming that "learned women" were acting above their sex was a formidable weapon in men's battle to protect their claim to superiority. It could at one stroke re-establish the paralyzing gender definition and isolate as a freak the woman who was proving that definition wrong. Such a woman - belonging neither to the female nor the male sex - deserved admiration or sympathy from neither.

However, it is hard to believe that a woman of Astell's self-possession would let condescension stand in her way. Her intrepid self-confidence had enabled her to move to London, to begin a correspondence with a leading philosopher at age 27, but most importantly to stand her own in a political and theological/philosophical debate with the men who were (with the sole exception of Daniel Defoe) Oxford or Cambridge graduates, while she had no formal education.

She was parodied in *The Tatler* as "Madonella," whose mind was so fixed on airy abstractions that she failed to protect the young women in her convent from a designing man.<sup>(52)</sup> Also in *The Tatler*, her envisioned religious retreat was ridiculed as

Colleges for young Damsels, where, instead of Scissors, Needles, and Samplers; Pens, Compasses, Quadrants, Books, Manuscripts, Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, are to take up

their whole Time. Only on Holidays the Students will, for moderate Exercise, be allowed to divert themselves with the Use of some of the lightest and most voluble Weapons; and proper Care will be taken to give them at least a superficial Tincture of the Antient and Modern Amazonian Tactics.(53)

However, Astell's undaunted reply to this parody showed that she knew the quality of her writing.

"The harmless Satyr does not bite; and tho' it shew'd its Teeth against the Proposal to the Ladies, our honest Compiler has made an honourable Amends to the Author, (I know not what he has to the Book-Seller) by transcribing above an hundred Pages in to his Ladies Library, verbatim; except in a few Places, which if the Reader takes the Trouble to compare, perhaps he will not find improv' d."(54)

Therefore, it seems more likely that she enjoyed confounding her male audience with samples of female intellectual fortitude. That she succeeded can be seen in the grudging respect Bishop Atterbury paid her when he commented to Bishop Smalridge about Astell's critique of his, Atterbury's, sermon.

Had she as much good Breeding as good sense, she would be perfect: but she had not the most decent manner of insinuating what she means, but is now or then a little offensive & shocking in her expressions; wch I wonder at because a Civil Turn of Words (even where the matter is not pleasing) is what her Sex is always Mistress of... I dread to engage her... (55)

Similarly, several antiquarian friends of George Ballard were impressed with Astell's pamphlets, calling them "convincing Proof of her Strong Sense, great Genius, and excellent Capacities"(56) or finding "a great deal of Truth and Mirth" in them.(57)

Therefore, a more likely explanation for Astell's retirement from writing is the combination of a developing cataract, which made writing more and more difficult, and the awareness of a growing gap between her and the *Zeitgeist*. A third factor may have been Astell's lifelong concern about leading a useful life. Her combination of strong spirituality and strong spirit might have raised in her the desire to realize her vision of a religious retreat. After all, her ideal of a Christian life was to "live a Contemplative Life without being Recluse, and as this will be very much for the good of Society, so I know not any thing else can render Society in its present degenerate condition, tolerable to an honest Mind."(58)

Whatever her reasons were, from about 1710 Astell turned her attention to the Chelsea school for orphans. As she had failed to raise the funds necessary for her retreat for upper-class women, this school for poor orphan girls became her project for women's education instead. Here, she dedicated herself wholeheartedly to providing girls with an education and preparation for employment.(59) In 1731, at age 65, Mary Astell died of breast cancer, having remained stoic as always, even in the face of a slow and painful death.

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*But the Contemplation of Immaterial Beings and Abstracted Truths, which are the Noblest Objects of the Mind, is look'd on as Chimerical and a sort of Madness. (60)*

Astell's work embraced three main themes, the defense of the Christian faith, the conservation of the divine-right monarchy complete with Anglican spiritual monopoly, and the assertion of women's intellectual equality and advocacy of women's education. In the twentieth century her feminist thought has received most attention for several reasons. First, the issue that were of vital importance in Astell's age (the question of the divine right of kings, the treatment of dissenters, for example) have lost their relevance today. Second, except in women's issues, Astell argued the conservative sides of topics. Since history is a chronology of achievement and innovation, Astell is remembered for her contribution to progress in feminist thought. Third, the improvement of women's lives was clearly a central mission in her life.

However, the more carefully one studies Astell's work, the more clearly Christian Platonism emerges as the her main theme. As I will attempt to demonstrate in the following, the Christian doctrine not only informs but creates her political and feminist ideas. The reason for this primacy of Christian doctrine can be found first in the comfort religion must have provided her in her adolescence, when she was faced with the loss of her father, her uncle, and her mother. It can also be found in the freedom and encouragement Christian Platonism afforded Mary Astell's intellect. Christian Platonism - as we have seen - greatly encouraged learning as a way toward moral and intellectual self-perfection. The soul - immaterial and therefore without gender - was free of gender restrictions. In discovering and mastering intellectual territory, Astell's ambition found an outlet. Study and contemplation, two principles of Christian Platonism, gave Astell the freedom to be active, creative, and independent. This was liberty for Astell, and it is this idea of spiritual liberty that she offered women and that she set up against Locke's idea of political liberty. Religion was all-important to her. The strength and comfort she discovered in the Christian faith instilled in her a missionary zeal, a wish to impart her knowledge to other women, which is already visible in her first two major works, but which she fully realized in *The Christian Religion as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England*.

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*Christ came into the World in a Learned and Inquisitive Age; there was whole Nation, and their Rulers more especially, concern'd in point of Interest and Honour, to detect the Apostles if they were Impostors. And we find that they omitted nothing that either Bribery or Malice, Cunning or Power cou'd do to hinder the Preaching of the Gospel. So that we cannot ... deny that there were such Men as the Apostles and Evangelists ...for ... multitudes of all ranks have acknowledg'd it for above this 1600 years. (61)*

By demonstrating the truth of the doctrine and the love and liberation the faith offered, *The Christian Religion* was meant to protect women from the danger of religious

skepticism. The danger of skepticism was not to be underestimated, for "whenever we find a Man endeavouring to corrupt a Woman's Faith, we may without breach of Charity conclude, he has a design to ruin her in this World as well as in the next."[\(62\)](#) But by proving the Christian doctrines to be true and the love and liberation through God to be relevant, the book served also as a defense of the Anglican church. By 1705, the Anglican Church was in dire need of such defense. It had long lost its spiritual monopoly, as the dissenting sects became ever more established, and economic and scientific progress gained ever more a priority over spiritual matters. A faithful soldier of the Anglican Church, Astell held the fort and called her fellow women to arms as well. "A Woman may put on the whole Armour of GOD without degenerating into a Masculine Temper; she may take the Shield of Faith, the Sword of the Spirit, the Helmet of Salvation, and the Breastplate of Righteousness without any offence to the Men."[\(63\)](#)

In 360 pages, she battled the enemies of the established church on multiple fronts. Unitarians, for example, had triggered what Clark called a "ferocious Trinitarian debate"[\(64\)](#) by their claim that Christ was not divine and that therefore the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was erroneous. Astell defended the Doctrine of the Trinity as a central part of the Scripture and as indispensable for true Christians.

The Father is GOD, the Son is GOD, and the Holy Ghost is GOD, is plain from Scripture, the Name of GOD being ascribed to each of these Divine Three, in such a manner as it is never imparted to any Creature. How we Know that there can be no inequality in the Divine Nature; as the Scripture says nothing of a Made GOD, so right Reason explodes it; and to pay Divine Worship to any but GOD is gross Idolatry."[\(65\)](#)

To counter the deists' attack of the Doctrine of Divine Revelation, Astell explained that not only did divine revelation exist, it was also superior to reason. "I will most gladly and thankfully receive every Divine Revelation. For certainly the Sun of Knowledge, the Light that enlightens every Man ... must make greater Discoveries than my feeble Taper can pretend to."[\(66\)](#) Neither was reason in any way in competition with or opposition to divine revelation. As God's will was often difficult to identify, Astell offered a rule of thumb on how to ascertain it.

Whatever Doctrine or Precept tends to the humbling of our proud Understandings, the subduing of our stubborn Wills, and the restraining of our exorbitant Affections (tho' we may call these Reason, Liberty, and the Rights of human Nature) does indeed proceed from God.[\(67\)](#)

Repudiating the various theological grievances of the sects, Astell asserted that the Bible as the Word of God was not a catalogue from which believers could pick and choose. Rather, it had to be accepted and followed wholly and any failure to do so was unchristian.

Not only the competing sects concerned Astell, however, but the state of contemporary faith in general. Even those who agreed with Anglican orthodoxy had been so corrupted and weakened by the growing materialism that in some people the love of God had

deteriorated into a "bare sentiment of Pleasure," no less controllable than the "motion of our Pulse." Materialism had taken the place of idealism, opportunism the place of principles. As a result, modern Christians lacked moral stamina, because they "abhor nothing so much as suffering for Righteousness sake, and had rather do the greatest Evil than endure the least.(68) She took exception also to her era's preference for worldly goods and achievements, as well as its illusion of independence from God. Her England had changed and her increasing disconnection from it becomes tangible in her sarcastic remark,

But thanks be to Providence and the Love of Just and Natural Rights, the trying times of the Gospel are past, we are deliver'd from that slavery, and as the World now goes, it is most for GOD's Service that we keep what we have got, and add as much to't as we can.(69)

To fight the growing secularization, Astell and her High-Church sympathizers called for a return to the principles of the Primitive Church. The evocation of the principles of the early Christians was a frequently used tool of pamphleteers and ministers in the seventeenth century. Early Christianity, it was argued, had triumphed over Roman civic religions because of its focus on the spiritual rather than the material and on the *City of God* (St. Augustine) rather than on the earthly city of Rome. Perhaps a return to the early Christian principles of virginity, chastity, poverty, world--renunciation, and martyrdom could help the Anglican Church to re-unify and overcome the challenges of its own time. For Astell the Primitive Church may have had an added attraction in that it had provided a valid alternative for the lives of women, who until then had been defined exclusively as part of the *familia* under the *patria potestas*. Her list of achievements of biblical women shows that this facet of the Primitive Church was not lost on her. The importance of Astell's rescue mission of the church was summed up in her cry, "if GOD does not govern the World, it is not worth to stay in it."(70)

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*I can as soon question my own Being, as the Being of a GOD, for I Am only because he is.(71)*

Astell's God was a divine Being, perfect because self-existing and of infinite wisdom, goodness, justice, and love, on whom humans depended for everything, and toward whom they had duties. These duties (to the self, to neighbors, and to God) were interconnected, and any violation of one duty was a violation of the others. The duties to the self included the exclusive acceptance of divine and divinely ordained authority, the application and perfection of one's talent, and the avoidance of pride and the cultivation of humility. According to Astell, the primary reason for women's follies and vices was that they paid attention to other people's opinions - usually those of men - rather than judging for themselves. But relying on the judgment of people who held no position of divine authority was dangerous. "Follow no Man's Judgment or Authority any farther than as he brings his Credentials from the Great Master who is in Heaven. Were other People to Answer for us in the next World, they might reasonably expect to judge for us

in this." Thus, a woman's obedience to a priest, for example, was not justified because of his learning or his gender, but because "through him she is obedient to GOD." Reminiscent of an early Christian, Astell distinguished sharply between divine (just) and merely human authority and argued that the refusal to submit to human authority did not create disorder but rather order in the world, because it ensured mankind's exclusive submission to divine authority. For that reason, she argued, independent judgment was pleasing to God.

Just as pleasing to God was the perfection of one's talent for God's glory. "GOD did not give us any Talent to lay up in a Napkin, we must therefore improve in our Intellectuals as well as in our Morals." In fact, Christians should "pursue the great Design of Christianity, by advancing to the utmost degree of Perfection of which Human Nature is capable." Perfection, especially of an intellectual nature, required study. Accepting that providence kept women out of public life (for now), Astell advocated as the perfect course of study for women what she called "speculation" or philosophy. Speculation taught women "the Weakness and Strength of our Minds; to form our Judgments, and to render them always just; to know how to discover false Reasonings, and to disentangle Truth from those mazes of Error into which Men have hunted her."[\(72\)](#) An example of false reasoning was the application of the term pride. Obviously taking aim at the dissenters' practice of occasional conformity, Astell argued that people who were base enough to "do any mean thing to get into Favor and Office"[\(73\)](#) called others, who refused such behavior, proud, confusing pride with uprightness and humility with baseness.

The duties toward neighbors included an active love of them, the absence of envy, and the suppression of revenge. Active love means not only not to harm, but to help others and to care for their welfare. Envy was a sin so "Injurious to GOD, to our Neighbour and to our Selves, so black in its own Nature, that were we Saints in all other respects, this alone wou'd transform us into Devils." But if envy caused injury, the appropriate Christian reaction remained to resist no evil, to turn the other cheek, and to do good to those who were filled with hatred. Revenge was disallowed, for it "Usurps GOD's Prerogative and hurts our Neighbour, so it Degrades and Injures our selves." Instead, it was true piety "to suffer like a Christian, and to receive the Glorious Crown of Martyrdom for so doing."[\(74\)](#)

The duties to God, finally, included the acceptance of the Christian doctrine after independent examination of it, paying public homage to God in a congregation, absolute and joyful obedience to his will and therefore obedience to those he installed into worldly power.

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*Our Lord has told us; that whoever Despiset His Ministers Despiset Him... And since it is by GOD's appointment that Kings Reign, and that Princes have Authority to Decree Justice; ... he who will not submit himself for the Lord's sake, to every Ordinance of Man,*

*that is, to every Lawfully Constituted Form of Government, is a Rebel against the Divine Majesty, and must expect the terrible Punishment due to such Resistance."*(75)"

When we accept the premise that God had also created the structure of human society, the political implications of the Christian doctrines become clear. Those who disobeyed or rebelled against the rules of society did not only hurt society but violated God's will. Christians were obliged to obey "just" authority completely. Only if their obedience brought them in conflict with God's will, could they resort to passive obedience accepting, of course, the punishment by their "just" ruler for resisting orders. In other words, societal change by human agency was impossible. Astell's world was peaceful but stagnant, incapable of integrating new ideas such as the ideas circulating in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century concerning, for example, a state of nature, man's liberty and equality, the principle of self-preservation, and a social contract.

The theory of the state of nature served to justify the principles of man's liberty and equality and of the social contract that defined civil society. In the state of nature men were free and independent from one another. But life in this atomized society was at worst constant warfare (Hobbes) or at best inconvenient because each man had the executive power in him (Locke). Thus, men voluntarily formed communities for mutual protection and the protection of their property. For the purpose of protection only did they agree to be ruled. Consequently, their obedience to their leader was not legitimized by his divine authorization, but by his utility to the community. The contract between ruler and ruled could be cancelled at any time, if abuse of power occurred. To Astell, the idea of a state of nature, in which men were equal and free seemed preposterous.

I have hitherto thought, that according to Moses, we were all of Adam's Race, and that a State of Nature was a mere figment of Hobbs's Brain... till you were please'd to inform me "of that Equality wherein the Race of Men were plac'd in the free State of Nature." How I lament my stars that it was not my good Fortune to Live in those Happy Days when Men sprung up like so many Mushrooms or Terrae Filii, without Father or Mother or any sort of dependency.(76)

Of course, her exaggeration had been ironical, for Locke had admitted that children were not born "in this full state of Equality"(77) but born to it, able to claim it once they had reached the age of reason. However, it expressed Astell's main objection. How could humans ever be completely free and independent, she asked, if by definition they were dependent and weak? "Our Weaknesses and Wants perpetually remind us that we are Poor, Dependent Beings; Creatures, whose very Natures and Existence as such, supposes entire Dependence."(78) To her, Locke's ideas of men's liberty and independence were a model of human hubris. Liberty as defined and advocated by her had little in common with Locke's political reading.

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is Liberty. True Liberty, which consists not in a Power to do what we Will, but in making a Right use of our Reason, in preserving our Judgments Free, and our Integrity unspotted, which sets us out of the reach of the most Absolute Tyrant.(79)

Similarly, Astell categorically rejected Locke's principle of self--preservation. Locke maintained that God had equipped mankind with the same desire for self-preservation that he had given animals in order to protect and preserve his creation.(80) He derived from this principle the significance of law to society as well as the justification of rebellion. In her response, Astell reminded her reader that humans were composed of mind and body, of which the mind was the worthier part. Thus, she insisted, although she was not opposed to the principle of self-preservation, it was the preservation of the mind, which was truly the self, that counted, not the preservation of the entire person.(81)

Finally, as there existed neither liberty nor independence among men, the premise upon which the concept of a social contract had been erected had collapsed. Weak and dependent people could not bestow on others what they themselves did not possess in the first place, namely power.(82) Therefore, they could not revoke it, either. The only legitimate - and effective -protection against arbitrary rule was the ruler's fear of God.

They who think the Awe of GOD's Sovereignty but a poor Restraint, and are therefore for Subjecting His Vice-gerents to the Coercion of their Subjects, against the Laws of this Nation as well as against the Doctrine of the Church, against Scripture, and Common Sense, shew too little regard to any Religion.(83)

It seems clear then that the positions of Astell and Locke - or high church and Whig - were irreconcilable. For Astell, political change was not only unnecessary, but an offense of divine law, pursued only by agitators and demagogues for personal gains. Locke, on the other hand, insisted that social contract and "Civil Government" were the *conditio sine qua non* of civil society. Absolute monarchies not only failed to qualify as civil societies, but were even worse than the state of nature, where men at least did not have to "submit themselves to the unjust will of another."(84) While Locke and his sympathizers looked for political solutions in this world, Astell's political thought was a pure extension of her theology.

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*If God had not intended that Women shou'd use their Reason, He wou'd not have given them any, for he does nothing in vain.(85)*

Astell's feminist thought was as steeped in Christian doctrine as her political ideas. It operated within the same fixed parameters of society and was in total agreement with her conservatism in politics and religion. Today, this fact is frequently viewed as a contradiction, as "scholars reveal their assumption that religious faith and feminist convictions are necessarily antithetical."(86) However, rather than functioning as an obstacle, Astell's theology actually helped her by affording her room in which to develop her feminist thought. Her solution to improving women's lives lies in education. Taking for granted the Platonic idea of humanity's drive toward self-perfection, Astell claimed that women had been misguided as to what deserved improvement. "Your Glass will not do you half so much service as a serious reflection on your own Minds, which will discover Irregularities more worthy your Correction, and keep you from being either too

much elated or depress'd by the representations of the other."(87) The concentration on outer appearance only earned men's, not God's approval, and it was a waste of intellect if one was "content to be in the World like Tulips in a Garden, to make a fine shew and be good for nothing."(88) Instead, the soul as the true seat of self was a particle of the divine and therefore deserved great attention. She appealed to women "not to neglect that particle of Divinity within you, which must survive."

Men intentionally denied women the opportunity to develop their mental capacities, in order to secure their continued control over women,. The worst consequence of such manipulation was that men kept women from communicating with God directly. While the Reformation had provided direct access to the Scripture to every believer, "women without their own Fault, are kept in Ignorance of the Original, wanting Languages and other helps to Criticize the Sacred Text, of which they know no more, than Men are pleas'd to impart in their Translations."(89) Having to rely on a middle-man to receive the word of God was dangerous, because women had no way of examining men's interpretation. For that reason, women had been deceived about the true nature of their subjection to men, because in contrast to the general interpretation of the Bible, women's subordination to men was by no means a natural law, but only the consequence of a misinterpretation. In a remarkable examination of the Bible, Astell pointed out place after place in the Bible that were commonly interpreted as hostile to women, and offered alternative interpretations. For example, she claimed that by taking St. Paul in I Cor.ii literally, one could conclude only that women could pray and prophecy in the church, just as long as they kept their heads covered and that men did not have to cover their heads, but were forbidden to wear long hair. "By all that appears in the Text," she concluded, "it is not so much a Law of Nature, that Women shou'd Obey Men, as that Men shou'd not wear long Hair."(90) She similarly challenged the interpretation that St. Paul had ordered for women to be silent in church. According to Astell, St. Paul's order referred to one isolated incident, in which a false apostle had led some of "their Rich and Powerful but silly" women astray, because they had failed to search the scriptures to ascertain whether the apostle actually spoke the truth. Naturally, St. Paul saw the need to

reprove them so severely in order to humble them, but this being done, he takes care in the Conclusion to set the matter on a right Foot, placing the two Sexes on a Level, to keep Men as much as might be, from taking advantages which People who have strength in their hands, are apt to assume over those who can't contend with them. For he says, Nevertheless... the Man is not without the Woman, nor the Woman without the Man, but all things of God."(91)

Conceding that the Scripture did speak of women as in a state of subjection, she quickly qualified her concession by adding that Jews and Christians had been described as in a state of subjection as well, as long as they were under the power of the Chaldeans and Romans. But, she asserted, no one would therefore argue that the Chaldeans and Romans had a "Natural Superiority and Right to Dominion."(92) To the contrary, God's command of women's subordination was protective of women, because they were weaker than men physically, but by no means intellectually.

Furthermore, Astell argued, the Scripture could refer to the submission of wives to their husbands only, because if all women were to be subordinate to all men, it would follow that a queen owed submission to her footman. Thus, women's "preposterous humility" was not in response to a natural law, but to men's assertion of women's naturally inferior intelligence. To demonstrate how far removed from reality such a claim was, Astell described the inequality of education between the two sexes.

The Incapacity, if there be any, is acquired not natural; ... Women are from their very Infancy debar'd those Advantages [Education], with the want of which they are afterwards reproached, and nursed up in those Vices which will hereafter be upbraided to them. So partial are Men as to expect Brick where they afford no Straw.(93)

Since men were hostile to women's intellectual development, Astell's vision of a voluntary *Religious Retirement* was the best way for women to gain direct access to God and self-fulfillment by way of worship and study, unimpeded by men's designs. The envisioned "convent" would not enclose women nor make them stay all their lives, because - although Astell had little good to say about men - she did endorse the institution of marriage in principle and did not want to keep women from getting married if they so wished.

It was a qualified endorsement, however. In *Reflections upon Marriage*, Astell warned that women had plenty of difficulties to face in a marriage. To name only a few, women had to accept a monarch for life without the option to dethrone such monarch should he turn into a tyrant. Furthermore, marriage was only one facet of a man's life, but was the entirety of a woman's life. Finally, women were so completely dependent on their husbands that even a pre-marital agreement to protect the wife's property was futile, because the husband's will was the only rule accepted in a marriage. Thus, Astell asserted, an unhappy marriage was disproportionately harder on women than on men. So hard, indeed, that Astell warned, if "Humility and Self-denial, Patience and Resignation"(94) did not lay in a woman's capacity, she should refrain from marrying. In fact, because marriage was the only way to continue the human race, women's consent to an arrangement so disadvantageous to them was a more heroic deed than "all the famous Masculine Heroes can boast of, [because] she suffers continual martyrdom to bring Glory to GOD and Benefit to Mankind."(95) Women's self-sacrifice, in other words, deserved recognition and respect. But self-sacrifice it was. However difficult a marriage was to turn out, instead of seeking an-eye-for-an-eye satisfaction, women should turn to religion and remain faithful, pious, and modest. Astell's statement that women could at least ensure reward in the next life by becoming morally superior to their husbands reflects the principle of active obedience, the commandment to "love thy enemy," and the world-renunciation of early Christians.

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*If all Men are born free, how is it that all Women are born slaves?(96)*

In her feminist work, Astell drew frequent parallels to existing political power structures and to new political ideas, the latter usually to beat her political opponents with their own weapons. For example, she asked if the arbitrary power of a prince could be worse than the arbitrary power of a husband. Similarly, she spoke of a husband as a monarch for life. Finally, in the conclusion to her *Reflections*, Astell anticipated a reader's question whether, "according to modern Deduction,"(97) a man who abused his power forfeited his power. A Christian to the core, however, she refused to accept that inference and argued instead that a woman's only defense against injury were her virtue and the promise of reward in the next life. Today, some historians feel that Astell stopped short of making the crucial step toward women's liberation by failing to apply Locke's political formula to the private sphere. How could a woman who pleaded her sex's case so clearly and convincingly not undertake the next step to effect or at least demand change? The solution she offered to her readers seems a mere evasion of the question: a husband "who would have that Superiority he pretends to,..." and who knew that "the less he requires, the more will he Merit that Esteem and Deference, which those what are so forward to exact, seem conscious they don't deserve."(98) The kind of enlightened patriarch Astell endorsed as solution appears to enter the argument somewhat as a *deus ex machina*, unexpected, inconclusive, and counter-climactic. His sole purpose was to reconcile Astell's claims of women's spiritual and intellectual equality with her advocacy of the status quo of a society in which inequality ruled.

However, if we see her feminism from her theological rather than from our political point of view, the "conflicting and contradictory nature of her ideas"(99) dissolves. The spiritual and the material are two distinctly different realms. As for Astell, the spiritual was by far the more important one. Denying the existence of a political process, how could she use it for her feminist cause? Instead, Astell saw the solution to political as well as gender problems in the internal process of self-perfection. For if humanity aspired to approximate God in wisdom, love, justice, and goodness, its conflicts would disappear. Therefore, Astell's primary concern was the cultivation of women's souls by way of women's education. If seen in this context, her enlightened patriarch no longer appears to be an attempt to patch up two irreconcilable positions, but turns out to be the legitimate heir of Plato's ideal ruler, who deserves power because he does not seek it. He is also in essence an image of God, who created humans as free agents so they could choose freely to depend on his power.(100)

In conclusion, Astell's remarkable talent at polemic and her inspiring message of women's spiritual equality have tempted today's historians to measure Astell by twentieth-century standards. However, the assumption that Astell "belongs more to this century than to her own, and would find today the support she lacked in her own time,"(101) fails to consider how lost Astell would feel in our century of rampant materialism. It seems indicative of her priorities that she ceased to write when the causes of Anglican church and absolute monarchy were failing, although she could have continued to develop and expound feminist theory. The fact that she neglected to do so, suggests that while writers like Bathsua Makin argued for women's education because it would make women better mothers, Astell argued for women's education primarily because it would make them better Christians.

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## NOTES

(1) Mary Astell. **The Christian Religion as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England in a Letter to the Right Honourable TL, CI.** London: 1705. xxi

(2) Kinnaird, Robert Halsband, Beatrice Scott, Katharine M. Rogers as quoted in Bridget Hill, **The First English Feminist.** New York: St. Martin's Press. 1986. 52

(3) Florence Smith. **Mary Astell.** New York: Columbia University Press, 1916. 162

(4) Mary Astell, **The Christian Religion.** 109

(5) Christopher Hill. **The Century of Revolutions. 1603 - 1714.** New York, London: W.W.Norton & Company, 1961, 3

(6) Ruth Perry. **The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. 33/34.

(7) Clark, Sir George. **The Later Stuarts: 1660-1714.** 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1985. 66.

(8) Clark. xxi

(9) Antonia Fraser. **The Weaker Vessel.** New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984. 330

(10) Astell. **Political Writings.** Patricia Springborg, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1996.xi

(11) Florence Smith, 1916, 5; Joan Kinnaird, 1979, 69, 63 as quoted in Astell. **Political Writings.** Patricia Springborg. xii

(12) Perry. 53

Perry uses a compilation of signatures in court records, together with figures supplied by David Cressy. **Literacy and Social Order: Reading the Writing in Tudor and Stuart England.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980; Sarah Mendelson. "Stuart Women's Diaries." In: **Women in English Society 1500-1800.** Ed. Mary Prior, London: Methuen, 1985; and R.A. Houston, "The Development of Literacy: Northern England 1640-1750," *Economic History Review*, 2d ser. 35, no 2 (May 1982): 199-216 Patricia Springborg, 1996, xi, uses the same numbers and refers to Cressy as her source.

(13) Perry. 53

(14) Clark. 32/33

(15) A. Hilary Armstrong, **The Saint Augustine Lecture. St. Augustine and Christian Platonism**. Villanova University Press, 1967

(16) Astell. **Reflections**. 38

(17) Astell. "The Motto." In **Bridget Hill**. 185

In quoting Astell, I will use her practice of capitalization, but I will refrain from her practice of italicization of the quotes she inserts into her text, as the emphasis of single words or parts of sentences makes sense only if we undertake an in-depth analysis of her texts and of those texts she quotes. Apart from such a task, however, the italicization - although illustrating her closeness to other texts - seems to me unnecessarily confusing to the reader.

(18) Perry. 41

(19) Perry. 68, 69

(20) Sarah Lawson asserts as much in her introduction to: **Christine de Pisan. The Treasure of the City of Ladies**. Translation and Introduction by Sarah Lawson. New York: Penguin Classics, 1985. 15 In Kosinski/Brownlee's **The Selected Writings of Christine de Pisan**, it is maintained that Johann Eberti of Germany included de Pisan in his encyclopedia of more than five hundred learned women in 1706, but it does not necessarily follow that de Pisan was therefore also known in England. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski Jr. and Ed. and Kevin Brownlee. **The Selected Writings of Christine de Pisan**. New York: A Norton Critical Edition, W. W. Norton & Company, 1997. xv

(21) Perry. 16

(22) Perry. 106-111

Although I could not detect any similarity between Drake and Astell. The topic was very popular at the time and a direct link is difficult to determine. In some libraries *In Defense of the Female Sex* is still attributed to Mary Astell, which is quite unthinkable, because the style is completely different. The author of *In Defense* does not use any references to other works at all, which were an integral part of any of Astell's arguments. The writing is not intellectual enough to justify its attribution to Astell or its influence by her. It may have been influenced by a number of writings, such as **Lord Halifax' Advice to a Daughter, or Lady's New Year Gift** (1688). *The Nonsense of Common Sense*, however, uses the same kind of quotation and annotation practice as Astell. Also the two women had been friends, so a direct influence is much more believable here. Sarah Scott's **A Description of Millennium Hall** (London: J. Newbery, 1762) could very well be a poetic realization of Astell's envisioned religious retreat. It describes a group of women living together, studying, creating, playing music, teaching children from the parish families, providing for the poor and helping them provide for themselves. Their

love of books, their being found "deficient in the bon ton" by a traveler, one woman's wifely loyalty to a less than perfect husband all echo Astell's ideas of women's education, capabilities, and marital duties.

(23) George Ballard calls this patron a "certain great lady," which leaves it unclear whether the patron was Queen Anne.

George Ballard. **Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain who have been celebrated for their writings or skill in the learned languages Arts and Sciences.** Oxford: 1754. 146

(24) Gilbert Burnett. **History of Our Own Times.** Edinburgh. 1728. Vol. IV, 205  
In 1705, in *The Christian Religion*, Astell made an emotional appeal to Queen Anne. "May we not hope that she will not do less for Her own Sex than She has already done for the other; but that the next Year of Her Majesty's Annals will bear date, for Her Maternal and Royal Care of the most helpless and most neglected part of Her Subjects. If She overlooks us we have no farther prospect; 321

(25) Perry. 39

(26) Charles Leslie in his reply to James Owen wrote "And there is at present much greater Danger to the Government from the Dissenters than from the Papists." (**The New Association.** 10).

(27) Mary Astell. **The Christian Religion.** 37.  
"Now I think myself in Catholick Communion with the Church of GOD..."

(28) Astell, **The Christian Religion.** 320.

(29) See Perry. 140-142. Also: **Bridget Hill.** 9 Norris "failed to appreciate her implicit confession of a passionate love for a woman."

(30) Astell, Norris. **Letters concerning the Love of God between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris.** 2nd ed. London: 1705. 33/34.

(31) Perry. 140-142.

A comparison with another description of a women's friendship may serve to support Perry's reading. In Scott's **Millennium Hall**, the friendship of two adolescent girls shows the same intensity that is tangible in Astell's writing: "Miss Melvyn was so pleased with the generosity of her little pupil, that she gave her as many caresses as the other had lavished on her, in order to obtain the promise she so much wished for..."

(32) Perry. 121.

(33) Astell, "The Invitation in Perry. **The Celebrated Mary Astell.** 403.

(34) Perry. 124

(35) Astell, Norris. 31/32

(36) Astell, Norris. 4

(37) John Norris. Preface to **Letters Concerning the Love of God**. A.

(38) Florence Smith. 40

(39) John Locke. **Two Treatises of Government**. Peter Laslett, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. 32.

"And he persisted in all his other exasperating attempts to conceal it [his authorship of *Treatises*], in a way which can only be called abnormal, obsessive ....In Locke's own library, this book in all its editions was catalogued and placed on the shelves as anonymous, so that the casual browser should find nothing to compromise the secret." 6.

(40) Perry. 192

(41) Jerome Nadelhalf, in his Essay "The English Woman's Sexual Civil War: Feminist Attitudes toward Men, Women, and Marriage: 1650-1740" **Journal of the History of Ideas**, 43, 4 (1982): 558 sums up Keith Thomas "Women and Civil War Sects," **Past and Present**, No. 13 (April 1958), 42-62. And Patricia Higgins "The Reaction of Women with Special Reference to Women Petitioners," in Brian Manning, ed. **Politics, Religion, and the English Civil War** (London, 1973), 212, 215-221.

(42) Christopher Hill. 143.

(43) Bridget Hill. 36.

(44) Aphra Behn in **Bridget Hill**. 41.

(45) Vanbrugh in **Bridget Hill**. 41.

(46) George Ballard. 450.

(47) Perry. 195.

(48) Letter of Dec. 9, 1704 as quoted in Perry, 196. She gleaned the letter from Ballard's manuscript copy of **Memoirs of Several Ladies**, as the published version of *Memoirs* did not include this letter.

(49) Atterbury. **The Espistolary Correspondence, Visitation Charges, Speeches, and Miscellanies of the Right Reverend Francis Atterbury**, as quoted in Perry. 199.

(50) Christopher Hill. 64; 142-144.

(51) Mary Astell. **Some Reflections upon Marriage, Occasion'd by the Duke & Dutchess of Mazarine's CASE**; which is also considered. 2nd ed. London: 1706. 23.

(52) **The Tatler**, no. 32, from Tuesday 21 June to Thursday 23 June, 1709 as quoted in **Bridget Hill**. 16 It is unclear whether it was Jonathan Swift or Richard Steele, the editor, who caricatured Astell thus.

(53) **The Tatler**, no. 63, from Thursday 1 September to Saturday 3 September, 1709 as quoted in **B. Hill**. 17

(54) Perry, 230. From the 1722 Preface to **Bart'lemy Fair**.

(55) This quote is used by Perry and Springborg, but is used first by George Ballard. 453 As a matter of fact, Ballard cannot resist to remark: "Whether this letter was published to expose the lady or the bishop, or both, or what other views the compiler of that work had in publishing it is not in my power to determine." 453

(56) Letter by William Parry to Ballard, dated March 12, 1743, as quoted in Perry. 196

(57) Letter by Thomas Rawlins to Ballard, dated February 19, 1743, as quoted in Perry. 196-97

(58) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 96

(59) The education of children by a convent of ladies is picked up in Millennium Hall.

(60) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 209

(61) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 25/26

(62) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 29

(63) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 71/72

(64) Clark. **The Later Stuarts**. 386

(65) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 44

(66) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 11

(67) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 19

(68) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 315; 76

(69) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 323

- (70) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 109
- (71) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 6
- (72) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 203; 72; 210; 207/208
- (73) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 111
- (74) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 122; 167; 189; 187; 38
- (75) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 59; 35; 118; 321
- (76) Astell. "A Prefatory Discourse to Dr. D'Aveanant" in **Moderation truly Stated. Or, A Review Of A Late Pamphlet Entitul'd Moderation a Vertue**. London: Richard Wilkin, 1704. xii
- (77) Locke. 304
- (78) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 183
- (79) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 195
- (80) Locke. 205
- (81) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 217
- (82) Patricia Springborg. "Mary Astell: Critic of Locke." *American Political Science Review*. **Am. Pol. Sci. Assoc.** Wash. DC. 89 (1995): 624
- (83) Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 322
- (84) Locke. 276
- (85) Astell. **Reflections upon Marriage**. 5
- (86) Margaret Olofson Thickstun. "This was a Woman that taught: Feminist Scriptural Exegesis in the Seventeenth Century." **Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture**. 21 (1991): 150.
- (87) Astell. A Serious Proposal. In **Bridget Hill**. 140
- (88) Astell. A Serious Proposal. In **Bridget Hill**. 141  
Macey, Jr. in his "Eden Revisited" argues this to be a reference to Milton's Paradise Lost, in which Milton had presented the Garden of Eden as a hierarchical place with Adam in power and Eve the " unsupported Flow'r" dependent on "her best prop," Adam, for moral strength. (164/5)

(89) Astell. **Reflections**. viii

(90) Astell. **Reflections**. vi

(91) Astell. **Reflections**. vii

(92) Astell. **Reflections**. ix

(93) Astell. "A Serious Proposal". In **Bridget Hill**. 143

(94) Astell. **Reflections**. 57

(95) Astell. **Reflections**. 89

(96) Astell. **Reflections**. Preface (pages unnumbered)

(97) Astell. **Reflections**. 92

Locke had insisted on the wife's subordination, but argued as well that "the Power of the Husband being so far from that of an absolute Monarch, that the Wife has, in many cases, a Liberty to separate from him;" which is very similar to Hobbes' position in Leviathan. Locke. 321

(98) Astell. **Reflections**. 93

(99) **Bridget Hill**. 2

(100) "We are not God's slaves, but subject ourselves to supernatural power of our own free will." Astell. **The Christian Religion**. 16

(101) Florence Smith. 164

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