



American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS)

Mary Astell and the Feminist Critique of Possesive Individualism

Author(s): Ruth Perry

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4, Special Issue: The Politics of Difference (Summer, 1990), pp. 444-457

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#). Sponsor: [American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies \(ASECS\)](#).

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2739179>

Accessed: 02/07/2012 20:28

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press and American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Eighteenth-Century Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Mary Astell and the Feminist Critique of Possessive Individualism

RUTH PERRY

IT LONG HAS BEEN ASSUMED that democracy—that egalitarian political practice expressed in the simple formula that “all men are created equal”—is good for women and compatible with feminism. It is assumed that women, however devalued and disempowered, will benefit from the democratic extension of power—and be counted among those who are considered equal. Our culture’s stories about women’s participation in the revolutions of the eighteenth century—Betsy Ross and her friends stitching the new flag or the fierce Frenchwomen in the streets of Paris calling for the blood of aristocrats—reinforce this impression. Yet by the time Engels wrote *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, it was clear that the political inequality of the sexes was not ameliorated by a belief in democratic process.

Engels theorized that it was their unequal participation in the productive labor force that kept women subordinate. When women participated equally in waged labor, he predicted, political discrimination would wither away. Yet we have seen that equal participation in productive labor has simply lengthened women’s work day without changing the political reality that government is largely of men, by men, and in the interests of men. We also know by now that a belief in enfranchising the underclass does not necessarily entail a belief in women’s rights. It is a notorious fact that the present women’s movement emerged from the new left movement of the 60s—a movement which insisted on the more equitable distribution of society’s resources and power—and that women’s liberation began as a protest on the part of women activists to their devaluation, as women, within the movement.

Contemporary feminists theorize that a chronic cultural misunderstanding of the relationship between production and reproduction causes political and economic sexual inequality.¹ The point of this article is to demonstrate that some

¹ Groundbreaking explorations of this topic can be found in the collection of essays, *The Sexism of Social and Political Theory: Women and Reproduction from Plato to Neitzsche*, eds. Lorene M. G. Clark and Lynda Lange (Univ. of Toronto Press, 1979). See also Janet Farrell Smith, “Parenting and Property,” in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist*

of these formulations were anticipated by early feminist reactions to liberal political theory as it was emerging in seventeenth-century England, and that from the beginning, women were suspicious of the modern democratic state and their place within it. Certain class biases are to be expected, of course, in women literate enough and with class position privileged enough to permit observation of contemporary political process, yet it is instructive to examine their insights.

How, then, did politically-minded women understand their relation—as women—to those men who were trying to dismantle, or at least shift around, ruling-class power? How did women who recognized gender prejudice in their own societies react to democratic movements in the early stages of democratization, and what did those revolutions with their accompanying ideological justifications have to say about the rights of women? We know that in England, Mary Wollstonecraft was deeply engaged with the French Revolution and in her own country was virtually identified with it. But an earlier feminist, a high church Tory, had a more skeptical relation to the democratic revolution of her day—the Glorious or Bloodless Revolution as it is sometimes called.

Mary Astell, the earliest Englishwoman whose writings on the subject of gender inequality were widely distributed, took issue, as a woman, with the democratic theorists of her day, most notably Locke. Living at the time of the Glorious Revolution and committed to bettering the lot of “others of her sex,” she speaks as a woman in relation to the philosophy behind the revolutionary settlement. Indeed, the events of 1688–9, as the final act of a 40-year drama transforming England’s traditional hereditary monarchy into a constitutional monarchy, have always functioned as a litmus test for attitudes about democracy. To this day, many historians hail the Glorious Revolution as a major victory in the battle against feudal hierarchy, the consequence—and guarantor—of British liberty. But Mary Astell, and many Tories of her time, read petty opportunism in the ousting of James II and the invitation to William and Mary of Orange—and the substitution of the unstable tyranny of a party of unscrupulous men for the time-honored authority of an established king.

Mary Astell waited to publish her political views on the events of 1688–9 until a Stuart monarch had returned to the throne. And when she printed her views she did so anonymously; as a woman she was excluded from public affairs. She recognized that her status as a woman was not improved one whit for all the rhetoric of the republicans. Indeed, it could be argued that the political position of women worsened in the years following the Glorious Revolution, and that the reassertion of gender difference and hierarchy was one form of backlash to the cultural destabilization of the revolutionary settlement.

Astell’s earliest known reaction to the Glorious Revolution appears in a minor

Theory, ed. Joyce Trebilcock (Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 199–213; Susan Okin, “Women and the Making of the Sentimental Family,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, II.1 (Winter 1982): 65–88; Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford Univ. Press, 1988), and Ann Ferguson, *Blood at the Root: Motherhood, Sexuality and Male Dominance* (Pandora Press, 1989).

pamphlet skirmish of 1703/4. Dr. White Kennett, then rector of St. Botolph's in Aldgate and a leading Whig theoretician, had preached a sermon interpreting the extenuating circumstances leading to the Civil War and by extension the Glorious Revolution. It all began, he said, when Charles I took a Catholic consort, making the court hospitable to papists and alarming sincere Protestants with "terrible Apprehension of the *Romans coming to take away their Place and Nation*, that this strength of Fear too much began the Civil War."² The occasion of Dr. Kennett's sermon, the annual fast day commemorating the Royal Martyr, had already been made ambiguous in 1689, by being designated a day of thanksgiving for the nation's deliverance from the tyranny of James II. It was clear to all that Dr. Kennett was in fact celebrating this latter precedent despite rhetorical references to the tragic fate of Charles I. "Popular Insurrections have been hardly subdu'd, without casting too strong a Bias upon the Power that Subdu'd 'em . . . and leaving a Wound upon Monarchy it self" he said.³ "We of yesterday remember, that when an Arbitrary Executive Power was much more effectually set up in a later Reign, it broke short *that* Reign: And for the future it shall never be attempted, without bringing down Ruin and Confusion upon those who shall attempt it."⁴

Kennett's sermon implicitly blamed Charles for his own beheading, applauded the steps taken against "Arbitrary Executive Power" in a "later Reign," and by implication warned the present monarch of her vulnerability to popular opinion. It caused great indignation in Tory circles and elicited a number of answering pamphlets. Someone reprinted and circulated Kennett's 1686 panegyric to James II under the new title of *White against Kennet*.

Among those who responded in print to Dr. Kennett's salvo was Mary Astell, who took a very different view of the parallel he drew between the Civil War and the Glorious Revolution in her *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War in this Kingdom* (1704). Both, to her mind, had been national disasters. She reminded her readers that an Act of Parliament had enjoined the nation to mourn the Royal Martyr, a directive Dr. Kennett was hardly obeying when he used the occasion to praise the Revolution of 1688. "If . . . 48 is so like 88, and that what the *Forefathers* acted, proceeded from much the same Causes, by which their *Off-spring* were influenced; what can plain Men think, but that . . . there can be no great harm in the Actions of our Forefathers, which might well enough be forgot, or remember'd to other Purposes than the Act of Parliament enjoins."⁵ Is it not an inconsistency to deplore the fate of Charles I but at the same time to approve and justify the treatment of James II, she asked? "If we think [James'] Fall to be Just, and [Charles'] to be Unjust and Deplorable,

² White Kennett, D.D., *A Compassionate Enquiry into the Causes of the Civil War in a Sermon Preached In the Church of St. Botolph Aldgate, On January XXXI, 1703/4, the Day of the Fast for the Martyrdom of King Charles the First* (London, 1704), p. 14.

³ Kennett, p. 17.

⁴ Kennett, p. 21.

⁵ Mary Astell, *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War in this Kingdom* (London, 1704), p. 53.

we may in time come to abhor those Principles that brought him to the Block, and the Practices that flow from them, as being equally destructive of the Best, as well as of the worst Princes; and then what will become of the Peoples Right to shake off an Oppressor?"⁶ Violence could be visited upon the guilty and the innocent alike with terrible indeterminacy. To condemn Charles' beheading in 1649 was to call into question at least the premises of the Glorious Revolution. Notwithstanding this logic, and contrary to the spirit of the Act of Parliament commemorating the Royal Martyr, Astell charged that the Whigs continued to operate by principles that had justified both rebellions in the first place. "There is still a Party, and that a restless and busie one, who act by those very Principles that brought the Royal Martyr to the Block; and there are yet too many . . . who, instead of deploring that Crying and National Sin, justifie and rejoice in it."⁷

Mary Astell distrusted the rhetoric about individual freedom and the rights of the governed that justified the Glorious Revolution. It was empty cant, she believed, in the service of party politics. No one could claim that the reign of William and Mary had been without its signs of monarchical tyranny. Why did no one complain about "*Illegal Acts and Arbitrary Power, of Oppression and Persecution*, in a Reign that tugg'd hard for a Standing Army in times of Peace; that had Interest to suspend the *Habeas Corpus* Act several times, tho' it be the great security of the *English* Liberties; that ousted 7 or 8 Reverend Prelates . . . besides several of the inferior Clergy, and members of the Universities, and that only for *Conscience sake*, and because they cou'd not swallow such new Oaths, as they believ'd to be contrary to the old ones . . . ?"⁸ Astell believed that the Glorious Revolution, like the Civil War, had been fomented for reasons of ambition and revenge, "to piece together broken Fortunes," and to install certain men in the posts they coveted.⁹ Despite their reflexive defenses of liberty, she did not believe that those responsible for the revolutionary settlement had the interests of the nation or the church at heart.

The Glorious Revolution, to Astell's mind, served the interests of Whigs, of Dissenters, and of men. For what is significant about Mary Astell's reaction to the dispensation of 1689 is that it contains elements of an early feminist critique of liberal political theory. She recognized from the beginning that the rhetoric of "government for the people" was never intended to include women; her alienation from the liberal political philosophy of her day calls our attention to the androcentricism of that philosophy. With a contemporary woman's voice she commented on the meaning of political thought in the Enlightenment for her sex. As she wrote in 1700: "If *all Men are born free*, how is it that all Women are born Slaves?"¹⁰

⁶ Astell, pp. 17–18.

⁷ Astell, p. 58.

⁸ Astell, pp. 59–60.

⁹ Astell, p. 16.

¹⁰ Mary Astell, *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*, 3rd ed. (London, 1706), Preface, p. 11.

Elsewhere I have examined the biographical configuration that in part accounts for Astell's identification with Tory ideology, the party of her friends and patrons.¹¹ But here I want to explore Astell's intellectual reasons for distrusting the settlement of 1689. I argue that Mary Astell's resistance to Whig ideology was partly based on gender loyalty, not only on party politics. While it would be foolish to claim that Mary Astell had a late twentieth-century feminist perspective that permitted her to see the difficulties implicit in applying theories of individual rights or contracts about property to people with bodies that have an asymmetrical relation to reproduction—nevertheless, I will argue that she thought the doctrine of individualism selfish and asocial and was suspicious of the way genetic theories of citizenship beginning with a "state of nature" erased the social and political meaning of maternity. She also recognized that women lost their political rights when they married—along with their property rights—and she advised women not to marry.

The relationship between Astell's feminism and her conservatism is a complicated one, for these ideological elements harmonized in her character though they seem inconsistent to a modern feminist consciousness. For one thing, Whig and Tory, liberal and conservative, had different social implications than they do today—in relation to class, to commerce, to charity, to political power. Then it was not so clear as it would seem to be now from the vantage of the capitalism-inspired democracy that survived the political struggles of Astell's period, that the republican position was progressive and the monarchist position retrograde. Moreover, in some profound sense, these terms were irrelevant to a class of persons who were not considered citizens. As noted by the heroine of Mary Wollstonecraft's novel, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Women*, a man could rob his wife with impunity and "the laws of her country—if women have a country—afford her no protection or redress from the oppressor."¹² Maria Venables learned to her horror that her national state constructed women as property, not as citizens. Astell's slavery metaphor was very much to the point.

From her vantage point as a non-participant, Astell believed that monarchy was the best means for keeping the general peace. To her mind, republicanism licensed ever-changing groups of men to compete and fight with one another for political power, with inevitable bloodshed and suffering for all. Her conservatism was based on the belief that one authority was better than many, because less volatile. It was a notion of monarchy like that of Oliver Goldsmith's Dr. Primrose, a man of liberal proclivities, as little interested in his own power, whether in the family or the polity, as any man in Western literature. Dr. Primrose declares that since "I naturally hate the face of a tyrant, the farther off he is removed from me the better pleased am I. The generality of mankind also are of my way of thinking, and have unanimously created one king, whose elec-

¹¹ See my *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (1986), especially chapter 8.

¹² Mary Wollstonecraft, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Women*, with an introduction by Moira Ferguson (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1975), p. 108.

tion at once diminishes the number of tyrants, and puts tyranny at the greatest distance from the greatest number of people."¹³

I am also arguing that what Astell intuited about the "liberal" attitudes towards women's rights was true. While the Glorious Revolution may have justified the actions of male citizens on their own behalf, it simultaneously reaffirmed the subservience of women to men.¹⁴ As Rachel Weil has brilliantly demonstrated, even the literal, physiological fact of the queen's maternity was denied in the scramble for power: her own authority on the subject of her reproductive labor was discounted and her attending women's repeated testimony about the truth of her lying-in was branded as a political lie.¹⁵ James' daughters, Mary and Anne, were scrutinized and criticized for their deficiencies in filial piety, while their husbands were glorified as defenders of liberty and foes of tyranny.¹⁶ Theatrical productions of *King Lear* with its vulnerable father and powerful daughters were banned in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, and Purcell's 1689 *Dido and Aeneas*, with its message about the glorious political imperatives of men and the interference of women, was staged for the first time.¹⁷

The period following the Glorious Revolution was a time for reasserting male authority and for reinventing all the reasons for women's subservience to men. Much was made of Mary's obedience as a wife and of her signing over to William her legal right to rule England. Although the throne was hers by lineal right, no one thought it odd that she considered her duty to William a more compelling obligation than her duty to the nation. Gilbert Burnet, who took credit for showing Princess Mary this virtuous path, described with much self-congratulation the scene in which she announced to William her intention of wifely obedience in this matter of ruling England.¹⁸

Nor did the Glorious Revolution do anything to extend the political entitlements of women as a class in a formal way. Although it established men's right to resist tyranny and to insist on a Protestant succession, in theory as well as practice it tightened the reins on women and reaffirmed men's power over them. John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*, which provided the theoretical justification for the revolutionary settlement, in separating the rights of citizens from the obligations of families, announced a paradigm shift from a political

¹³ *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Chapter XIX.

¹⁴ Joan Landes's recent book, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), shows how in France too the revolutionaries were quick to exclude women from the new dispensation. Within a very short time, the reaffirmation of male domination was linked to the rhetoric of the revolution.

¹⁵ Rachael Weil, "The Politics of Legitimacy: Women and the Warming-Pan Scandal," forthcoming in *Perspectives on the Glorious Revolution*, Lois Schwoerer, ed., Cambridge Univ. Press.

¹⁶ See Howard Nenner's essay in *Perspectives on the Glorious Revolution*, ed. Lois Schwoerer, and also his "Traces of Shame in England's Glorious Revolution," *History* 73 (June 1988): 238–47.

¹⁷ For the banning of *King Lear* see Lois G. Schwoerer, "Concept and Image of Queenship in the Reign of Queen Mary II, 1689–1694," unpublished paper, p. 15.

¹⁸ Bishop Gilbert Burnet, *History of His Own Time*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1832), iii: 137–39.

world populated by men and women involved in a web of familial and sexual interconnections to an all-male world based solely on contractual obligation.¹⁹ Some historians have seen Locke's statement as evidence of the real decline in this period of the significance of kin relations in political life. Such theorists as Linda Nicholson argue that the emergence of a public sphere unstructured by kinship and the concurrent restriction of these kin connections to domestic life, excluded aristocratic women from power dynamics at court and increasingly from local decisions on their estates.²⁰

At the very least, the *Second Treatise* set the philosophical terms for theorizing power in the state and in the family—and for disconnecting the two—until well into this century. Just as the warming-pan scandal undermined the political significance of Mary of Modena's maternal agency in a practical way, Locke's doctrine excluded women from the new ideological scripts that men took to be the basis of government. Only qualified men were theorized as individuals, free to pursue their own courses and free from the domination of all other men. In modeling government as a contractual business rather than as a family relationship, Locke relocated politics outside the household in exclusively male space. Locke's statement, then, simultaneously legitimated two related forms of political practice: a limited monarchy responsible to an all-male citizenry in which each member was theorized as an absolute authority within his own family and as independent of any other citizen or household.

According to Peter Laslett, *The Second Treatise on Government* was written as early as 1679 at the behest of the first Earl of Shaftesbury, who was looking for a justification for excluding Catholic James from the royal succession. It was later recast, Laslett claims, to authorize the events of 1688, and to refute the premises of Sir Robert Filmer, who defended monarchical privilege by identifying it with fathers' parental power. The seventeenth-century patriarchalists, in arguing that a king is as unalterably the father of his people as a biological father, literally defended the kingly power of the English sovereigns by tracing

¹⁹ As late as 1961, all-male or predominately male juries were permitted by the U.S. Supreme Court by virtue of a law that made men apply for exemptions but granted automatic exemptions to women unless they volunteered for jury duty. Frances Olsen, "Statutory Rape: A Feminist Critique of Rights Analysis," *Texas Law Review* 63 (November 1984): 392.

²⁰ See Linda J. Nicholson, *Gender and History: The Limits of Social Theory in the Age of the Family* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986), passim, and particularly p. 106. Joan B. Landes makes a similar argument about the implications for women of the French Revolution: that the movement from Versailles to the revolutionary assemblies signalled the democratization of power among men of different classes and the simultaneous exclusion of ruling class women from the political process. Sarah Maza states the case this way for France in the late eighteenth century in "The Diamond Necklace Affair Revisited (1785–1786)," forthcoming in Lynn Hunt, ed., *Eroticism and the Body Politic*: "The 1780s and '90s in France, and later periods throughout Europe, witnessed the gradual demise of royal and aristocratic courts modeled on households, in which female rulers, relatives, and mistresses played a recognized (if often limited) role, and the ascendancy of entirely masculine representative bodies."

their lineal descent directly from Adam, Noah, or one of the "seventy-two father-kings who were raised up at Babel."²¹

But incorporated within the terms of patriarchal power, as Carole Pateman has pointed out, assumed but not remembered, is a man's sexual access to a reproductive female. Patriarchal right has to be preceded by a sexual contract. "A man's power as father," she writes, "comes after he has exercised the patriarchal right of a man (husband) over a woman (a wife)." Thus, patriarchal political right "originates in sex-right or conjugal right." Seventeenth-century contract theorists, according to Pateman, never wished to question this original gender-based conjugal right in challenging the patriarchalists. "Instead, they incorporated conjugal right into their theories and, in so doing, transformed the law of male sex-right into its modern contractual form."²² In discrediting the principle that paternal, procreative power was the moral and legal basis for monarchy, Locke excluded from theoretical consideration any political rights that women might have had by virtue of their kinship relations. But there was never any question of reinstating for them the rights of common citizens derived from the public world of contracts.

As everyone knows, Locke begins the *Second Treatise* not with families but with property, which is for him the most fundamental form of equality among individuals: their inherent equality in property. In a state of nature the world and all its goods belonged to all men in common, to use to their best advantage. Furthermore, everyone could be said to have property in this own person, in the labor of his body and the work of his hands. When a man mixed his labor with the soil or the trees that belonged to all in common, he took them out of the common store, and the land he tilled or the fruit he picked became his own personal property because they partook of that which was undeniably his—that is, his labor.

Locke posits from the outset, in the case of these self-owning individuals, that each of them has the right—and the propensity—to strive for the unlimited accumulation of property. Indeed, the point of political power, as Locke then develops it, is to regulate contractual relations and to protect such unequal distribution of property as will inevitably arise. Property owners who accept the protection of the state against theft or invasion tacitly consent to the government that so protects them. Thus citizenship, for Locke, is *established* by owning property and by requiring the service of the state to protect it. C. B. Macpherson's gloss on Locke goes even further; he states that for Locke, individuality can *only* be fully realized in accumulating property. Hence his term: possessive individualism.²³

²¹ Gordon J. Schochet, *Patriarchalism in Political Thought* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), p. 143.

²² Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, California: Stanford Univ. Press, 1988), p. 3.

²³ C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 255–56. Although Macpherson's analysis has been criticized as pertaining only to simple agrarian capitalism, his gloss on Locke's theory is still relevant to a modern analysis of gender and property-in-the-self.

Yet if this is the definition of an individual—a property-owning being independent of all other property-owning beings—it is a definition which, in seventeenth-century England, deliberately excluded adult women. Nor am I simply referring to women's loss of property rights at marriage. The requirement that a citizen own property in his own person is the crucial move in Locke, I believe, by which women were excluded from their place in the polity.²⁴ When Richardson's Pamela hides her writings about her person, under her clothes, she is acting on the mistaken assumption that although she has no other place to call her own, she might be said to have property in her own person. When Mr. B. threatens to strip her to get at these papers that illusion is dispelled. Women have rarely been proprietors of their own persons in the sense of having the absolute right to dispose of their time, energy, or sexual urges—whether we speak of their reproductive or sexual services or their productive labors. Their persons have invariably been understood to be the property of their fathers, husbands, or masters; their labor has been understood to be at the disposal of their families.²⁵

Mary Astell ridiculed this common understanding when she asked sarcastically in 1706: "To whom [do] we poor fatherless Maids, and Widows who have lost their Masters, owe Subjection? It can't be to all Men in general, unless all Men were agreed to give the same Commands; do we then fall as Strays to the first who finds us?" Significantly, Locke nowhere in his scheme considers the anomalous political status of single adult women. Astell's construction of herself as a free British citizen, subject to no one but her monarch, was a radical reconception of women's place in the polity. In bypassing the political contract made by men, Astell at once invoked the earlier doctrine of the divine right of monarchs over all subjects alike and at the same time denied the power of all men over all women.

Because they never posited parity for women in a state of nature, neither Hobbes nor Locke assumed that women participated in the struggle for control over others. Women's tacit obedience to their male relatives was taken for granted; male domination within the family was assumed. Locke does not even notice when he proclaims that "he who attempts to get another man into his absolute power, does thereby *put himself into a state of war with him*,"²⁶ that he is

²⁴ Three hundred years after Locke articulated every citizen's right to property in his person, the Supreme Court is divided on whether or not to permit adult women to do as they choose with their own reproductive bodies.

²⁵ Gerda Lerner, in *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), asserts that contrary to Engels' formulation that the servitude of women results from the division of labor and development of private property in a capitalist economy, the appropriation of women's sexual and reproductive services occurred prior to the formation of other forms of property. The exchange of women both to avoid war and to produce more children—this appropriation of women's bodies as guarantors of political alliances and for human reproduction—argues Lerner, is the very foundation of private property, its first instance and most visible sign.

²⁶ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), p. 14.

describing the everyday situation of courtship. In *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*, Mary Astell asserted that a woman makes a man the greatest compliment in the world when she agrees to take him for better or worse, that is, to place herself and her goods in his power.²⁷ The formulation that men invest their equal individual claims in a protective and regulatory sovereign was never thought to apply to women, who were never assumed in any case to have independent rights, mobility, or choice.

The place of women in Locke's theory of property and the polity is illuminated in his discussion of children, a discussion crucial to his examination of Filmer. Surely in Locke's own terms a mother must own her child. She has certainly produced it with her own labor, has done what no one else can do for her, and has brought forth a new human being where no human being existed before. Hobbes, in fact, recognized this natural right of mothers to dominion over their children. "For in the condition of meer Nature," he says in the *Leviathan*, "where there are no Matrimonial lawes, it cannot be known who is the Father unless it be declared by the Mother: and therefore the right of Dominion over the Child dependeth on her will, and is consequently hers. Again, seeing the Infant is first in the power of the Mother, so as she may either nourish, or expose it; if she nourish it, it oweth its life to the Mother; and is therefore obliged to obey her. . . ." ²⁸

Locke, however, is less straightforward about the matter of children. On the one hand he was forever reminding Filmer's followers that the Fifth Commandment ordered children to obey both parents, not just the father.²⁹ On the other hand, he was at some pains to separate public from private in order to defeat Filmer's argument that a king was the father of his people. Locke thus distinguished the artificially constructed power of a magistrate over a subject, which is voluntarily submitted to, from the "natural" forms of power: "that of a *father* over his children, a *master* over his servant, a *husband* over his wife, and a *lord* over his slave."³⁰ True, he admits, government may have originated with the father's power as "he was the fittest to be trusted; paternal affection secured [his children's] property and interest under his care; and the custom of obeying him, in their childhood, made it easier to submit to him rather than to any other."³¹ But it is the absurdity of translating maternal power into magisterial power that Locke uses to deliver the *coup de grace* to Filmer's parental analogy. He in-

²⁷ *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*, p. 44.

²⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1950), Part II, chapter xx, "Of Dominion Paternall, and Despotical", p. 169. But dominion, according to Hobbes, could be established by conquest (law) as well as by generation. Civil law generally ruled that as the mother was subject to the father, the child, too, came within the father's power. Thus, the father's title to obedience from the child came from his control of the mother. For Hobbes, the reason that civil law favored the father over the mother was obvious: "It is because for the most part Common-wealths have been erected by the Fathers, not by the Mothers of families."

²⁹ Schochet, *Patriarchalism*, pp. 248-9.

³⁰ Locke, *Second Treatise*, p. 7.

³¹ Locke, p. 56.

stances a monarch on the throne who, he says, owes his mother the honor that is always due parents. He points out that “this lessens not his authority nor subjects him to her government.”³² He invites us to scoff at the unreasonableness of projecting a mother’s natural right to obedience into public demands: “and will any one say, that the mother’s natural right hath legislative power over her children? that she can make standing rules, which shall be of perpetual obligation, by which they ought to regulate all the concerns of their property, and bound their liberty all the course of their lives?”³³ Of course not. These are the prerogatives not of parental power but of magisterial power, Locke’s crucial distinction.³⁴

The model of political life developed by Hobbes and Locke also excludes women insofar as human beings in a state of nature are imagined without mothers. In theorizing individuals as ontologically prior to society, their model of an abstract individual leaves the mother out of the process and ignores the essential interdependence which is a sociological and psychological fact of life for women. In supposing that individuals exist separately before they come together in society, these theorists ignore the work that women do in bearing and tending the young and in caring for the bodily needs of their families. The world of possessive individualism projected from such skewed conceptions about human society is a world in which the only players who matter are adult white men, competing with one another and adjudicating their disputes with contracts. Love, trust, friendship, art, invention—all are irrelevant to instrumental agreements about the distribution of property.

Mary Astell thought it absurd to think of the production of people abstractly, as if children came from nowhere like so many mushrooms; and she wrote in one of her pamphlets: “I had hitherto thought that a State of Nature was a meer figment of *Hobb’s Brain* . . . till you were pleas’d to inform me ‘of that Equality wherein the Race of Men were place’d in the free State of Nature.’ How I lament my stars,” she continued, “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!”³⁵ Such formulation erased women’s reproductive agency, Mary Astell recognized, for the sake of a theory that proclaimed all men equal and all women irrelevant.

³² Locke, p. 37.

³³ Locke, p. 36.

³⁴ Mary Astell, it must be noted, reversed Locke’s claim that family relationships were absolute and given (though you grew out of them if you were a man), while the relationship in a state between the governor and the governed was voluntary. She argued that on the contrary, one’s duties to the pre-existing state were absolute and pre-determined—as to one’s family of origin. A person was born into those relationships of dependence and obedience and was stuck with them. But to submit to the private authority of a husband was a voluntary matter, she argued, and a wise woman would think twice before marrying.

³⁵ Mary Astell, “A Prefatory Discourse to Dr. D’Avenant” in *Moderation Truly Stated* (London: 1704), p. xxxv.

Even taking into account historical differences in the social construction of motherhood, women's relation to their child-bearing bodies in the seventeenth century, when examined from the point of view of a political theory of possessive individualism, did not fit Locke's model of the autonomous individual creating property. Mother-child relations do not assimilate to a story about autonomy, competition, and profit. To begin with, adult heterosexual women are never simply individuals, but are, *in posse*, more than one person. Nor do the obligations they feel to the children they produce resemble the political obligations of the social contract. The property relation women have to their bodies and to their children is neither patriarchal nor contractual when examined from the perspective of seventeenth-century political philosophy. The procreative body as well as women's work in tending the bodily needs of the weak and infirm were simply ignored in the stories told by Hobbes, Locke, and other contract theorists when describing the "state of nature." Where women were taken into account as parents, the social significance of this function was subsumed to the brotherhood of men.

On these issues—property and reproduction—Astell left no record of her thought. But she was deeply suspicious of the separation of public from private politics, and pressed for a single consistent standard for government in the family and in the polity. In what could be construed as another version of patriarchalism, Astell insisted that the forms of social relations thought to be "natural" and "just" in the family were "natural" and "just" in the state, and vice versa. When Locke separated these two spheres, treated them as if different rules applied in them, the effect on women of this move, she was quick to point out, was to exclude them from the public and tyrannize over them in private. The contract among male citizens seemed to entail a silent clause about the subjugation of women. Even the queens in the drama of 1689 played curiously muted parts. Mary of Modena's political role as the producer of a Stuart heir was openly denied and mocked, and Queen Mary transferred her public political power to William in deference to her private status as an obedient wife.

Perhaps Astell was suspicious of high-sounding sentiments about freedom and government for the sake of the governed because she knew that most men behaved tyrannically at home. Absolutist doctrine openly defied in the state what passed without protest in the family. In that domain, women had not the rights of a common citizen. "Let the business be carried on as Prudently as it can be on the Woman's side, a reasonable Man can't deny that she has by much the harder bargain. Because she puts her self entirely into her Husband's Power, and if the Matrimonial Yoke be grievous, neither Law nor Custom afford her that redress which a Man obtains."³⁶

Many women were stuck for life in precisely the kind of situation Locke decried as intolerable in the state. Women in these situations had always had to practice non-violent obedience—the attitude advocated by Tory monarchists. As Astell described a married woman's lot: "A Woman that is not Mistress of

³⁶ *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*, p. 27.

her Passions, that cannot patiently submit even when Reason suffers with her, who does not practice Passive Obedience to the utmost, will never be acceptable to such an absolute Sovereign as a Husband.”³⁷ This long-suffering endurance on the part of many women was one reason why Astell had so little patience with Locke’s restless citizen, ready to shout “tyranny” at every possible affront. “For whatever may be said against Passive-Obedience in another case, I suppose there’s no Man but likes it very well in this; how much soever Arbitrary Power may be dislik’d on a Throne, not *Milton* himself wou’d cry up Liberty to poor *Female Slaves*, or plead for the Lawfulness of Resisting a Private Tyranny.”³⁸

From her vantage as a woman, she questioned the wisdom of Locke’s confidence in diffusing control among many. Anxious to preserve the independent integrity of every single man in his hypothetical commonwealth against the incursions of every other man, Locke had claimed that 100,000 tyrants were better than one. A man, he said, was in a “much worse condition, who is exposed to the arbitrary power of one man, who has command of 100,000, than he that is exposed to the arbitrary power of 100,000 single men.”³⁹

But what the arbitrary power of 100,000 men conjured up for Astell was that many husbands. In declaiming against tyranny at home, she echoed Locke’s words while reversing his meaning. “For if Arbitrary Power is evil in it self, and an improper Method of Governing Rational and Free Agents, it ought not to be Practis’d anywhere; Nor is it less, but rather more mischievous in Families than in Kingdoms, by how much 100,000 Tyrants are worse than one.”⁴⁰

Why set different standards for the private domain and the public? she demanded. Why one rule for women at home and another for men abroad? “If Absolute Sovereignty be not necessary in a State, how comes it to be so in a Family? or if in a Family why not in a State; since no Reason can be alledg’d for that one that will not hold more strongly for the other?” To all republicans she asked: “If the Authority of the Husbands so far as it extends, is sacred and inalienable, why not of the Prince? The Domestic Sovereign is without Dispute Elected, and the Stipulations and Contract are mutual [. I]s it not then partial in Men to the last degree, to contend for, and practise that Arbitrary Dominion in the Families, which they abhor and exclaim against in the State?”⁴¹

Astell concurred with contemporary political theorists that the family provided the original prototype for the politics of social relations. That was where one first learned to negotiate power, and where one first experienced oneself in relation to a social group. But because she was a woman, the existing family structures appeared differently to her than they did to Locke or Hobbes. She saw intuitively that there was a relation between public and private systems in the state, and that the position of women was pivotal. As she put it: “Is there e’re

³⁷ *Some Reflections*, p. 54.

³⁸ *Some Reflections*, p. 27.

³⁹ *Some Reflections*, p. 72.

⁴⁰ *Some Reflections*, pp. 10–11.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

a Cöbler that is not absolute in his Garret, and thinks that in this he does not go beyond his Last? Do not all Degrees of Men Act as Arbitrarily as their Strength will suffer them, in their Families, their Lordships, Jurisdictions and Offices, and is it not then very natural for the Prince to think that he may be as Absolute in his . . . ? Thus the Corruptions of the Feet Fume up to the Head, and Men grow sensible of the mischiefs of Arbitrary Power when exercis'd upon them, but take no notice of the Evil . . . which they exercise themselves."⁴² She saw that women were treated as property within the family, or, as she put it, as "upper servants"—and that this was at odds with the much vaunted English ideal of liberty. She refused to bracket any part of life from political examination and insisted that political theorists use a single standard for personal autonomy in the family and in the state.

Astell believed that monarchy and a strong national church were the only feasible protection against faction and civil war, and that it behooved one to try one's citizenly best to support the existing hierarchy in the interests of peace. Class and hierarchy were, for her, a weapon to be turned against gender prejudice. If by claiming the natural superiority of men, she said, her critics meant "that every Man is by Nature superior to every Woman . . . it would be a Sin in any *Woman* to have Dominion over any Man, and the greatest Queen ought not to command but to obey her Footman."⁴³ If class difference permitted some women to rule some men, it proved that gender inequality was not a law of nature. Queen Anne's reign broke the political contract among men both because she was a woman and because she was the first hereditary Stuart monarch on the throne since the revolutionary settlement.

Consistently on the side of women *and* of a stable monarchy, Astell was critical of Hobbes and Locke for disregarding women's maternal agency and for refusing to consider the political status of single adult women. I have been arguing that her gender and class allegiances positioned her to see the asocial and androcentric aspects of liberal political ideology as it was emerging. In many different contexts Astell emphasized the collective obligation to one's fellows, and admonished her readers to submerge their selfish individual claims for the common good. This was the essence of her monarchist doctrine. She was aware of the complicated interdependence among people. This is why she found the construct of a "state of nature" absurd, because she insisted that social obligation came before individual rights. Closely examined, her analysis proves surprisingly shrewd today, as we find ourselves in a culture created in part by these political theorists—a culture of possessive individuals.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

⁴² Ibid., p. xxxvi. Gerda Lerner's claim that arbitrary authority in the state is "continuously reconstituted in the family through sexual dominance" is not far from Astell's point. She writes: "Regardless of the political or economic system, the kind of personality which can function in a hierarchical system is created and nurtured within the patriarchal family." *Creation of Patriarchy*, p. 216.

⁴³ *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*, p. 3.