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Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism

JOAN K. KINNAIRD

In 1675 Mrs. Hannah Woolley, schoolmistress and writer of books on cookery and household management, published *The Gentlewoman's Companion*. Her Introduction contains this unexpected diatribe:

The right Education of the Female Sex, as it is in a manner everywhere neglected, so it ought to be generally lamented. Most in this depraved later Age think a Woman learned and wise enough if she can distinguish her Husbands Bed from anothers. Certainly Mans Soul cannot boast of a more sublime Original than ours, they had equally their efflux from the same eternal Immensity, and [are] therefore capable of the same improvement by good Education. Vain man is apt to think we were meerly intended for the Worlds propagation, and to keep its humane inhabitants sweet and clean; but by their leaves, had we the same Literature, he would find our brains as fruitful as our bodies. Hence I am induced to believe, we are debar'd from the knowledge of humane learning lest our pregnant Wits should rival the trowing conceits of our insulting Lords and Masters.¹

Mrs. Woolley's complaint was intended for a female audience only, but the themes of her indictment—male oppression, the equal intellectual capacity of the sexes, the injustice of barring women from higher learning—appear openly and often in the literature of Restoration England. Rebellious daughters and emancipated wives, female *virtuosi*, "she-philosophers"—all rebels against male authority—crowd the Restoration stage. So many took up the cause of women in the "Battle of the Sexes" in the last decades of the century that one scholar has found in the pamphlet literature of the time "a large and well-defined movement, an early 'liberation war' of the sex."² Finally, in 1694 Mary Astell, self-styled "Lover of Her Sex," published the first considered plea by an Englishwoman for the

¹Hannah Woolley, *The Gentlewoman's Companion* (London, 1675), p. 2.

²A.H. Upham, "English Femmes Savantes at the End of the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of English and German Philology*, XII (1913), 262. Upham provides an excellent bibliographical guide to literature in defense of the female sex by

establishment of an institution of higher learning for women, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest*.³ So much activity on behalf of women might well justify the view that feminism—or, to be more accurate, protofeminism—had its genesis in the Restoration period.

The impulse to this new feminist consciousness, however, remains obscure. In French studies of feminism the governing assumption has been that “modernism and feminism go . . . together; they are two diverse aspects of one state of mind.”⁴ A similar assumption informs several English studies as well. Early feminism in Jean Gagen’s work on Restoration drama is seen as part and parcel of the ethos of the New Woman—as owing its rise to secular ideas and to the general revolt from authority after the Civil War. In *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*, Lawrence Stone links late seventeenth-century feminism directly with John Locke and the revolution in political thought. Locke, in his debate with Robert Filmer, extended the contract theory of government to the family when he contended that a voluntary contract for the begetting and raising of children was the basis of conjugal society. Stone concludes, “New claims concerning the status and rights of women were set in motion by the repudiation of monarchical patriarchy in the state in 1688, and were publicized by a handful of zealous feminists [he includes Mary Astell] at

both male and female authors. For references to the woman’s question in general, see Rae Blanchard, “Richard Steele and the Status of Women,” *Studies in Philology*, XXVI (1929), 325-55. For theoretical background of the controversy, see Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana, 1956). For studies of seventeenth-century women, see Myra Reynolds, *The Learned Lady in England 1650-1750* (1924; rpt. Gloucester, Mass., 1964) and Ada Wallas, *Before the Blue-stockings* (London, 1929). The most useful general survey is Doris Mary Stenton, *The English Woman in History* (London, 1956), which covers the Anglo-Saxon era to the nineteenth century. See also Allison Adburgham, *Women in Print: Writing Women and Women’s Magazines from the Restoration to the Accession of Victoria* (London, 1972) and Margaret Phillips and William Tomkinson, *English Women in Life and Letters* (London, 1927), which covers the period 1650-1830. See also Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919; rpt. London, 1978), and Christina Hole, *The English Housewife in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1953).

³Criticism of women’s education had been growing since the sixteenth century. Others before Mary Astell claimed women’s right to higher learning. Most notable were Anna Maria von Schurman, whose work appeared in English translation as *The Learned Maid*; or *Whether a Maid May Be a Scholar* (London, 1659) and Mrs. Bathsua Makin, author of *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen in Religion, Manners, Arts and Tongues* (London, 1673). Mary Astell alone proposed an institution of higher learning. Von Schurman spoke of private education and Mrs. Makin of boarding schools for “gentlewomen” of eight and nine years of age.

⁴George Ascoli, “Essai sur l’histoire des idées féministes en France, du XVI^e siècle à la Revolution,” *Revue de Synthèse Historique*, XII (1906), 168-169 as cited in Carolyn C. Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes: Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France* (Princeton, 1976). Lougee’s study confirms Ascoli’s view; she found that the seventeenth-century French “feminists” rejected custom, tradition, and religious authority.

the end of the seventeenth century." Still another force that has been seen as undermining patriarchal authority is Puritanism or, more narrowly, sectarianism. Keith Thomas, in his important article, "Women and the Civil War Sects," argues that the Puritan sects, with their various challenges to tradition, ultimately advanced the status of women by contributing "to the general process of substituting secular for divine sanctions for the arrangements of society." In rejecting the traditional arguments for woman's exclusion from church office, they were challenging the very same arguments used to justify the subordination of women in general. Their demand for religious toleration led to the "redefinition of the limits of paternal power" in the family.⁵

In view of these interpretations, it is puzzling to note that Mary Astell, considered to be by general consensus the first major English feminist for her defiant praise of woman, had no sympathies with Puritanism, secularism, or Lockean political thought. She was a staunch royalist and a fervid defender of the Church of England. Her loyalties must raise considerable doubt about the validity of linking feminism in this age exclusively with libertarian, antiestablishment trends. It is proposed in this paper—by exploring the main influences on Mary Astell's life and character, the sources of her thought, and the goals of her feminist programs—to demonstrate the paradox that feminism in its earliest phase owed as much, if not more, to conservative and Anglican values than it did to the antiauthoritarian and secular impulses in Restoration culture. Such a study, moreover, should make possible a tentative definition of what might be called "protofeminism," that is, of late seventeenth-century feminism in both its continuity with and differences from subsequent stages of the movement.

Mary Astell,⁶ her eighteenth-century biographer George Ballard observed, loved obscurity, "which she courted and doated [sic] on beyond all earthly blessings," and was "ambitious to slide gently through the world,

⁵Jean E. Gagen, *The New Woman: Her Emergence in English Drama 1600-1730* (New York, 1954); Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York, 1977), pp. 265, 340; Keith Thomas, "Women and the Civil War Sects," in *Crisis in Europe 1560-1660*, Trevor Aston (ed.), (New York, 1968), pp. 317-40. Thomas discounts the view that Puritanism proper improved the status of women by attacking wife-beating, accepting divorce, and preaching the spiritual equality of the sexes. His argument is restricted to the later sects. For a more sociological explanation of the emergence of feminism in Restoration England, see Roger Thompson, *Woman in Stuart England and America: A Comparative Study* (London, 1974). He stresses imbalance in the sex ratio and economic dislocation as important causal factors.

⁶Mary Astell's works are, in chronological order:

A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest (hereafter, *Serious Proposal*), 4th ed.; London, 1701 [original ed.: Pt. I, 1694; Pt. II, 1697], rpt. New York, 1970). Part I of *Serious Proposal* went through four editions in 1694, 1695, 1696, and 1701. Part II appeared separately in 1697 and with Part I in a combined edition in 1701.

without so much as being seen or taken notice of."⁷ As far as her private life is concerned, Mary Astell almost did succeed in this wish, for regrettably little is known of her personal history.⁸ She was born at Newcastle in 1666 into a gentry family of royalist sympathy that included lawyers and clergymen, as well as merchants. Ralph Astell, a clergyman uncle, supposedly educated the bright young girl until his death in her early teens. In her twenties, orphaned after the death of her mother, she left home—even though a brother Peter continued to live in Newcastle—and moved to London. By 1695 she was settled in Chelsea. For a time she was an independent householder but later joined the household of the daughter of the Earl of Ranelagh, Lady Catherine Jones, with whom presumably Mary Astell lived until her death in 1731. Mary Astell never married—disappointed, Ballard reports, by the breakdown of marriage negotiations with an eminent clergyman.⁹

Her circle consisted mainly of Anglican divines whom she joined in theological debate and in literary warfare against the Dissenters, earning thereby a reputation as an "ingenious" lady and a formidable polemicist.¹⁰ Despite her stern appearance—she is described as "in outward form, indeed, rather ill-favored and forbidding"—she attracted the friendship of

Letters Concerning the Love of God Between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris (hereafter, *Letters*) (London, 1695). The second and third editions appeared in 1705 and 1730.

Some Reflections upon Marriage (hereafter, *Some Reflections*) (4th ed.; London, 1730 [original ed. 1700], rpt. New York, 1970). The four editions appeared in 1700, 1703, 1706, and 1730.

Moderation Truly Stated: or a Review of a Late Pamphlet Entitul'd Moderation a Vertue with a Prefatory Discourse to Dr. D'Avenant Concerning His Late Essays on Peace and War (hereafter, *Moderation*) (London, 1704).

A Fair Way with the Dissenters and Their Patrons (hereafter, *Fair Way*) (London, 1704).

An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War in This Kingdom (hereafter, *Impartial Enquiry*) (London, 1704).

The Christian Religion as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England (hereafter, *Christian Religion*) (3rd. ed.; London, 1730 [original ed. 1705]). The second edition appeared in 1717.

*Bar'tlemy Fair or an Enquiry after Wit . . . To My Lord * * ** By Mr. Wotton [pseudonym] (London, 1709). A second edition was published in 1722 under the title, *An Enquiry after Wit*.

An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex (London, 1696) is now generally attributed to Judith Drake rather than to Mary Astell. See Florence Smith, *Mary Astell* (1916; rpt. New York, 1966), Appendix II, pp. 173-82.

⁷George Ballard, *Memoirs of British Ladies . . .* (2nd ed.; London, 1775), p. 308.

⁸Smith, *Astell*, ch. 1. (For full citation see n. 6). I am indebted to this fine expository study of Mary Astell's life and work for biographical detail and for references to contemporary sources.

⁹Ballard, *Memoirs*, pp. 449-50. Contemporary sources refer to her as Mrs. Astell, a convention of address. For consistency, I have retained that usage.

¹⁰The first contemporary notice of Mary Astell appears in John Evelyn's *Numismata* (1697), p. 265, where she is included among the celebrated women of the age.

a number of brilliant young women. Besides Lady Catherine Jones, her feminine disciples included Lady Elizabeth Hastings (she who inspired the compliment, "To love her is a liberal education."); Lady Elizabeth's four half sisters; Lady Anne Coventry, author of devotional tracts; and Catherine Atterbury, wife of Francis Atterbury, the prominent Tory and high church divine. There was also Elizabeth Elstob, the Anglo-Saxon scholar, who came from Newcastle and probably knew the Astell family there. During her years in London, Elizabeth Elstob visited Mary Astell frequently and later furnished George Ballard with many details on Mary's life. Twenty years younger but especially dear to Mary Astell was the future Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who in later life testified to the formative influence Mary Astell had had upon her early years.

There are fleeting glimpses of the feminist's life in Chelsea. Spying from her window idle visitors come for "chatt and tattle," she leans out to announce that "Mrs. Astell is not at home"—not suffering such triflers to make inroads upon her more serious hours.¹¹ More graciously she receives the young antiquarian, Ralph Thoresby, who had come with the "obliging Mr. Croft, the minister, who introduced me to the celebrated Mrs. Astell."¹² At dinner she argues divinity with Dean Atterbury, no stranger to polemics, who admires her intellect but admits ruefully, "I dread to engage her."¹³ At tea she sits with the ladies reflecting on the memoirs of her Chelsea neighbor, the Duchess of Mazarin, who serves "as an unhappy Shipwreck to point out the Misfortune of an ill Education and unsuitable Marriage."¹⁴ An interest in science prompts a visit to Sir Hans Sloane to see his curios and to show him some of hers. She walks through the fields of Chelsea with Lady Elizabeth Hastings to consider possible sites for a school for girls.¹⁵ Dramatically she confronts Lady Mary Wortley Montagu with the promise that she will return from the dead, if possible, to prove the truths of the Christian religion to her skeptical young friend.¹⁶ And on many a Sunday morning, despite inclement weather, she is seen walking from Chelsea to St. Martin's to hear a celebrated preacher. In the last

An obituary notice in 1731 describes her as "a Gentlewoman very much admired for several ingenious Pieces . . . in the cause of Religion and Virtue" and praises her "elevated mind" and "Turn of Genius above what is usual in her own Sex, and not unworthy of the most distinguished Writers of the Other." *Remarks and Collections of Thomas Hearne*, H.E. Salter (ed.), (Oxford, 1915), X, 426. For individual opinions see Smith, *Astell*, pp. 20, 119, 157-58, and *passim*.

¹¹Ballard, *Memoirs*, p. 309.

¹²Ralph Thoresby, *Diary*, Rev. Joseph Hunter (ed.), (London, 1830), II, 161.

¹³Ballard, *Memoirs*, p. 312.

¹⁴*Some Reflections*, p. 7.

¹⁵Smith, *Astell*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁶Robert Halsband, *The Life of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (Oxford, 1956), p. 118.

years, too, there are moving glimpses of Mary Astell stoically enduring an operation for cancer and dying some time later (in 1731) alone—having barred her friends in the last days—with a coffin and shroud set by the bed to fix her mind upon eternity.¹⁷

The glimpses are few for a life that spanned sixty-five years. But if obscurity cloaked her personal life, it certainly did not hide her militant views. In 1695 the Platonist divine, John Norris, rector of Bemerton, won her permission to publish their correspondence, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, so long as he did not reveal her identity. Mary Astell had initiated that correspondence two years before, and in her first letter struck a note of feminine assertiveness that would echo through all subsequent writings:

Sir,

Though some morose Gentlemen wou'd perhaps remit me to the Distaff or the Kitchin, or at least to the Glass and the Needle, the proper Employments as they fancy of a Womans Life; yet expecting better things from the more Equitable and ingenuous Mr. Norris, who is not so narrow-Soul'd as to confine Learning to his own Sex, or to envy it in ours, I presume to beg his Attention a little to the Impertinencies of a Womans Pen.¹⁸

The early correspondence with Norris reveals as well an identification with her sex as a whole and a personal commitment to the advancement of women that mark the true feminist. These characteristics, it may be argued, distinguish the feminist as a type quite distinct from two other related species—on the one hand, the “learned lady” who, while often critical of males, is concerned only with her own pursuits; and on the other hand, the dissident or unconventional woman whose behavior may violate society’s norms but who feels no need to protest or improve the condition of women in her society.¹⁹ By contrast, Mary Astell was a true feminist, a woman with a mission: “Fain wou'd I rescue my Sex,” she declared resolutely, “or at least as many of them as come within my little Sphere from that Meanness of Spirit into which the Generality of 'em are sunk.”²⁰

Dean Atterbury once regretted that Mrs. Astell had not the “most decent manner of insinuating what she means, but is now and then a little offensive and shocking in her expressions”; she lacked, he found, “a civil

¹⁷Ballard, *Memoirs*, pp. 315, 317.

¹⁸*Letters*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁹Examples of “Learned Ladies” might include the Duchess of Newcastle, Anne Conway, Elizabeth Elstob; unconventional women—Lady Halkett, Celia Fiennes, Lady Ann Fanshawe; true feminists—Lady Mary Chudleigh, Judith Drake, Hannah Woolley, Aphra Behn, Damaris Masham.

²⁰*Letters*, p. 49.

turn of words."²¹ Nowhere are the directness and asperity of which Atterbury complains more apparent than in her censure of that meanness of spirit in the female sex. Mrs. Astell upbraided the gentlewomen of her day, all too many of whom were "content to be Cyphers in the World, useless at the best, and in a little time a burden and nuisance to all about them." Their conversation was insipid—"idle twattle and uncharitable Remarks"—and their company tedious. Preoccupied with fashion, their bodies were "Glorious Temples which enshrine no better than Aegyptian Deities"; they were like to the "garnish'd Sepulchre, which for all its glittering, has nothing within but emptiness or putrefaction!" In her ire, the metaphors spill forth in reckless profusion. "How can you be content," she rails, "to be in the World like Tulips in a Garden, to make a fine shew and be good for nothing?" Women must wake to a new consciousness of their worth:

For shame let's abandon that *Old*, and therefore one wou'd think,
unfashionable employment of pursuing Butter-flies and Trifles!
No longer drudge on in the dull beaten road of Vanity and Folly
which so many have gone before us, but dare to break the en-
chanted Circle that custom has plac'd us in.²²

Perhaps not Atterbury's "civil turn of words"—but, confused metaphors notwithstanding, a dramatic manifesto.

Before Mary Astell could rescue other women, she herself had to be freed. What had liberated her own consciousness and empowered her to break through custom's "enchanted Circle"? The answer perhaps startles the modern reader conditioned to anticipate sociological explanations of change and prone, in an age of waning ideologies, to dismiss systems of thought as ineffectual. The magic charm for Mary Astell was nothing less than philosophy. "I have courted Truth," she exulted, "with a kind of Romantick Passion."²³ And the truth that she courted and that made her free was a heady blend of Cartesian and Platonic principles.

That blend of philosophies did not originate with Mary Astell but with the Cambridge-Platonists. They—most notably Henry More and Ralph Cudworth—were Descartes' earliest admirers in England, able and enthusiastic propagandists for his views. In the 1650s they had eagerly embraced his scientific metaphysics, his proofs for the existence of God, and his dualistic epistemology, for they found in him, or so they thought, a redoubtable champion in the war against both scholastic obscurantism and atheistic materialism. Descartes stood, in their minds, for a sounder union of the modern and the spiritual, and they pitted him against Hobbes, their archenemy. Gradually, it is true, their ardor for Descartes cooled as the Platonists came to appreciate the difficulties that his dualism raised for a providential interpretation of the universe. By 1671, More felt com-

²¹Letter of Dean Atterbury to Dr. George Smalridge in Ballard, *Memoirs*, p. 312.

²²*Serious Proposal*, pt. i, p. 6; pt. ii, p. 131; pt. i, p. 3.

²³*Letters*, p. 78.

pelled to dissociate himself from Descartes, whom he thereafter classified with the "mechanicks" and atheists; but by that time Cartesian ideas—available in direct translations of Descartes' works and in popularizations, commentaries, and critiques—had passed, sometimes in debased form, into the general intellectual currency.²⁴

Mary Astell refers often to Descartes, but apparently she never read his works in the original; her references are always to translations of French popularizations.²⁵ Perhaps because she worked with translations, or perhaps because she lacked a rigorous training in logic, she seems unaware of philosophical rifts or of important distinctions between philosophical schools. She pays homage impartially to the "celebrated" Descartes and the "ingenious" Locke, and long after More had formally broken with Descartes she continued to link them.²⁶ Throughout her life, Mary Astell remained, somewhat anachronistically, a Cartesian Platonist enthralled with a vision of an ordered universe, with an idea of God as divine rationality. Yet from that allegiance she derived a radically new epistemology based on the thinking self, and this new conception of the mind's essential independence admirably served her purposes as a champion of women.

That science and mathematics in the seventeenth century stimulated the literary imagination has been well attested; that science and mathematics, at least in Cartesian form, encouraged a new feminist sensibility has yet to win the recognition and study it deserves.²⁷ Many women dabbled in science in Restoration England, marvelled at the wonders revealed by microscope and telescope, and eagerly stocked their curio cabinets. Science was, after all, a fashionable pursuit. But feminists such as Mary Astell, Hannah Woolley, Damaris Masham, Aphra Behn, Judith Drake, and Lady Chudleigh did more than dabble. They felt a special intellectual affinity to the new philosophy and were more interested in theory than in amateur experimentation. Aphra Behn was the first to do an English translation of Fontenelle's *Plurality of Worlds*, inspired, as she

²⁴Marjorie Nicolson, "The Early Stages of Cartesianism in England," *Studies in Philology*, XXVI (1929), 356-74. See also Ernst Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, James Pellegrino (trans.), (Austin, 1953), Ch. 2, and Rosalie Colie, *Light and Enlightenment: A Study of the Cambridge Platonists and the Dutch Arminians* (Cambridge, 1957), Ch. 4.

²⁵She cited Francois Bayle who wrote *The General System of Cartesian Philosophy* (1670) and drew even more heavily on Arnauld's *The Art of Thinking or the Port Royal Logic* (1685). The latter work provided the Cartesian basis for Part II of *A Serious Proposal*. She also referred often to Malebranche but her knowledge of his modifications of Descartes apparently came through her correspondence with Norris, a great admirer of Malebranche. She confessed to Norris that she could not read Malebranche in French (*Letters*, p. 149). For Cartesian studies available in England, see Sterling P. Lamprecht, "The Role of Descartes in Seventeenth-Century England," *Studies in the History of Ideas*, III (New York, 1935), 181-240.

²⁶*Serious Proposal*, pt. ii, pp. 102, 119; pt. i, p. 144.

²⁷For a striking example of the link between Cartesianism and feminism, see Michael A. Seidel, "Poulain De La Barre's *The Woman as Good as the Man*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* XXV (1974), 499-508. Poulain's work appeared in English translation in 1677, but there is no evidence that Mary Astell read it.

says, by "the Author introducing a Woman as one of the Speakers."²⁸ Mary Astell even claimed theoretical science as women's proper sphere, since "men were made for active life and women to be retired," and "for this reason [women were] designed by Providence for speculation . . . and I make no question but great Improvements might be made in the Sciences, were not Women Enviously excluded from this their proper Business."²⁹ Lady Chudleigh, like Mary Astell, indulged in rhapsodic descriptions of the newly revealed universe—its glorious orbs and limitless vistas. Somewhat bitterly she looked forward to eternal life when men could no longer bar women from scientific pursuits, and they would be free at last to discourse with higher rational beings on the laws that governed the universe—"And we shall then the whole of Nature know; / See all her Springs, her secret Turning view, / And be as knowing and as wise as you."³⁰ In some curious way the boundless universe with its infinite worlds served to highlight for feminists like Mary Astell the parochial circumscription of their private worlds, and the grand design of the universe—its rationality and lawfulness—seemed to underscore the lack of meaning and the lack of purpose in their own lives.

The Cartesian philosophy fostered an introspective psychology, a radical consciousness of self—important to the growth of feminism—by its insistence on the thinking I as the touchstone of all knowledge and even of existence. "*Je pense, donc je suis*": The revolutionary implications of that statement in an age still wedded to a corporate and authoritarian world view cannot be dismissed. Here was a philosophy that began not with revelation or the wisdom of the ancients or even with nature and sense experience, but with consciousness itself. And here was a philosophy presented not in syllogisms or in elaborate academic discourse but in a personal memoir of autobiographical fragments, anecdotes, observations, and reflections. "Truth" in the Cartesian system was not subjective, but it could be known only by and through the self reflecting on innate ideas or proceeding through methodical doubt to a clear perception of truth. Self-awareness is central to the Cartesian experience.

The shaping of a sensibility, of course, cannot be documented. Much easier to establish is the conceptual debt that Mary Astell and other feminists owed to Descartes and his Platonist commentators. The first and greatest debt is to the Cartesian notion of divine rationality and its correspondence in the human mind. Descartes had argued that reason was by nature equal in all men, for since reason alone distinguished men from brutes, it must be found complete in each individual—"the difference of greater and less holds only among the Accidents, and not among the Forms or Natures of Individuals of the same Species."³¹ It was this notion, stated

²⁸Quoted in Gagen, *New Woman*, p. 56.

²⁹*Christian Religion*, p. 296.

³⁰[Lady Mary Chudleigh] *The Ladies Defence: or the Bride-Woman's Counsellor Answer'd: A Poem in a Dialogue . . . Written by a Lady*. (London, 1701).

³¹René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part I in *A Discourse on Method and Selected Writings*, John Veitch (trans. and ed.) (New York, 1951), p. 2.

clearly in Descartes but not developed in its social implications, that the feminists seized upon so avidly. Mary Astell boldly proclaimed the radical thesis that God had given all mankind the same intellectual potential—whether ancient or modern, rich or poor, male or female. Circumstances determine the extent to which men and women may exercise their rational faculties, but the faculties are present in all, at least as “sleeping powers.”³²

Secondly, she took from Descartes and from the Platonists the authority of the thinking self. Looking back on his classical education and rejecting its formalism, Descartes decided it was necessary to sweep away the rubble and begin anew with knowledge tested in the crucible of self-discovery. His disciple, who had never enjoyed a formal education, took heart from this suggestion that her lack of schooling put her at no serious disadvantage in the quest for truth. As she wrote to Norris,

For though I can't pretend to a multitude of Books, or the advantages of Academical Education, yet *Thinking* is a Stock that no Rational Creature can want, if they know but how to use it; and this, as you have taught me, with Purity and Prayer, (which I wish were as much practis'd as they are easie to practise) is the way and method to true Knowledge.³³

Later she would use that argument to bolster the confidence of women. God who made nothing in vain had made the understanding for the contemplation of truth and in his “Wisdom and Equity” had given all a “Teacher in their own Bosom” to enlighten them in both human and divine truths or direct them to the proper source of instruction. Worldly knowledge was not essential. “All have not Leisure to learn Languages and pore on Books, nor Opportunity to converse with the Learned; but all may think, may use their own Faculties rightly and consult the Master who is within them.”³⁴

And if occasional misgivings arose about the “Teacher in their own bosoms, . . . the Master who is within,” then Mary Astell’s third debt to Descartes—faith in Cartesian method—dispelled them. Mary Astell was enthralled with methodology, with “right thinking,” the rigorous analysis and orderly progression of thought that made it possible to sweep away preconceptions, prejudices, outworn beliefs, and false notions in the advance toward truth. Again and again in her writings she insisted on the need for clearly defined terms, precise wording, and a simple rational style. So strongly did Mary Astell feel about “right thinking” and its crucial role in the liberation of women that she followed Part One of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) with a Part Two (1697), which was little more than an elaborate exposition of Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*.

³²*Serious Proposal*, pt. i, p. 29.

³³*Letters*, pp. 2-3.

³⁴*Serious Proposal*, pt. ii, p. 98.

Fortified thus with faith in the equal intellectual capacity of the sexes and the authority of the thinking self, and secure in a supportive methodology, Mary Astell could dismiss with almost flippant ease conventional arguments about the inferiority of women. To those who argued that men were physically superior to women and that strength of mind accompanied strength of body, she responded wryly, "'tis only for some odd Accidents which Philosophers have not yet thought worth while to enquire into, that the sturdiest Porter is not the wisest Man!" To those who argued that history celebrated almost exclusively the deeds of men and so demonstrated pragmatically their superiority, she responded with even heavier irony:

Have not all the great Actions that have been perform'd in the World been done by Men? Have not they founded Empires and overturn'd them? Do not they make Laws and continually repeal and amend them? Their vast Minds lay Kingdoms waste, no Bounds or Measures can be prescrib'd to their Desires. . . . What is it they cannot do? They make Worlds and ruin them, form Systems of universal Nature and dispute eternally about them."³⁵

If women did not appear often in the pages of history, perhaps it was because men, not women, wrote those histories. And on the rare occasions when they condescended to record the great and good actions of women, men usually said that such women acted above their sex, as much as to say that not women but "Men in petticoats" had performed them.³⁶ An unbiased review of ages past, she contended, with innocent bias on her own part, would reveal that nations, especially the English, had flourished more under feminine than under masculine governance. England had enjoyed a golden age in the reign of Elizabeth, an age in which—as William Wotton's *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694) had demonstrated to her satisfaction—female learning was neither unfashionable nor singular. Mary Astell would have the women of her day imitate the learned ladies of Tudor times. And instead of slavishly mimicking French fashions in speech, dress, and the reading of plays and romances, she would have them look to such models as Mme. Dacier, Mme. Scudéry, and the philosophical ladies of the French salons who studied so earnestly the works of Descartes and Malebranche.³⁷ In her fondest dreams she imagined a new golden age that might dawn in the reign of Anne and rival or eclipse all previous epochs of greatness.

Mary Astell prided herself on her modernity and her self-reliance, and that pride shines through her account of how she had ventured forth unaided by authority on the doubtful mission of rescuing her sex (she writes here in the third person):

³⁵*Some Reflections*, pp. 86, 60.

³⁶*Christian Religion*, p. 206.

³⁷*Serious Proposal*, pt. i, pp. 18, 20.

She neither advis'd with Friends, nor turn'd over antient or modern Authors, nor prudently submitted to the Correction of such as are, or such as *think* they are good Judges, but with an *English* spirit and Genius, set out upon the Forlorn Hope, meaning no Hurt to any body, nor designing any thing but the publick Good, and to retrieve, if possible, the Native Liberty, the Rights and Privileges of the Subject.³⁸

The spirit and genius may have been English, as she says, but the philosophical inspiration for her feminist vision was undeniably French.

"The Mind is free, nothing but Reason can oblige it, 'tis out of the Reach of the most absolute Tyrant": In describing the autonomy of the mind, Mary Astell writes like an early prophetess of the Enlightenment. And she sounds like a believer in unlimited secular progress when she argues that women should be free to determine and develop their own intellectual proclivities since intellectual variety was as exhilarating and beautiful as physical variety.³⁹ The student of feminism, then, must admit to considerable consternation on discovering what her actual program was for the higher education of women. In *A Serious Proposal* she makes no plea that the universities should admit women as well as men; she never argues that women have as much right as men to enter the professions and take part in the public life of the nation. Rather she proposes simply the establishment of a "*Monastery*, or if you will (to avoid giving offence to the scrupulous and injudicious, by names which tho' innocent in themselves, have been abus'd by superstitious Practices), we will call it a Religious Retirement." To this "Type and Antepast of Heav'n" women of gentle birth could (upon payment of five or six hundred pounds) withdraw temporarily from the world and devote themselves to intellectual pursuits, to corporal works of mercy, to the cultivation of friendship, and to the celebration of the neglected liturgy of the Anglican Church.⁴⁰ In emphasis, her institution was to be "rather Academical than Monastic."⁴¹ The "Religious" would not "trouble their heads about such unconcerning matters, as the vogue of the world has turn'd up for Learning. . . ." but rather would devote themselves to a course of study neither "too troublesome nor out of the reach of a Female Virtuoso; for it is not intended she shou'd spend her hours in learning *words* but *things*, and therefore no more Languages than are necessary to acquaint her with useful Authors."⁴² (Elsewhere she declares that women will not pretend to be "walking Libraries" but will rest content with a "competent Knowledge of the Books of GOD, Nature I mean and the Holy Scriptures.")⁴³ The academy would serve "to stock the Kingdom with pious and prudent

³⁸*Some Reflections*, Appendix, p. 95.

³⁹*Serious Proposal*, pt. ii, p. 85.

⁴⁰*Serious Proposal*, pt. i, pp. 14, 16, 21-22.

⁴¹*Serious Proposal*, pt. ii, p. 157.

⁴²*Serious Proposal*, pt. i, pp. 17-18.

⁴³*Serious Proposal*, pt. ii, p. 159.

Ladies, who would so inspire the rest of their sex that women might no longer pass for those little useless and impertinent Animals."⁴⁴ But women, Mary Astell stated flatly, out of conviction or a sense of pragmatic realism, "have no business with the Pulpit, the Bar or St. Stephen's Chapel."⁴⁵

How could such radical fervor, such feminist zeal end in so tame a proposition—a "serious proposal" that, notwithstanding Mary's academic emphasis, seems to promise nothing more than a revival of Anglican nunneries?⁴⁶ Perhaps a psychological explanation is in order. This feminist who had advanced radical theories might be imagined as retreating in fright when the time came to implement those theories; she might, in short, be seen as sublimating her grievances in some socially acceptable mode of behavior such as religious activity rather than daring to attack the oppressive social order. One passage at least in Mary's writings might seem to support this view of conscious sublimation, as she urges unhappy women to fix their gaze upon eternity:

She will discern a Time when her Sex shall be no Bar to the best Employments, the highest Honour; a Time when that Distinction, now so much us'd to her Prejudice, shall be no more; but provided she is not wanting to her self, her Soul shall shine as bright as the greatest Heroe's. This is a true, and indeed, the only Consolation; this makes her a sufficient Compensation for all the Neglect and Contempt the ill-grounded Customs of the World throw on her; for all the Injuries brutal Power may do her, and is a sufficient Cordial to support her Spirits, be her Lot in this World what it may.⁴⁷

But one passage can hardly prove a case. And the explanation of timidity of spirit does not fit the personality of Mary Astell as projected in her own writings and as captured in characterizations of her. When a later commentator in discussing *A Serious Proposal* referred to the author as a "fair and elegant lady of quality," Lady Louisa Stuart, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's granddaughter, responded with derisive glee:

This fair and elegant lady of quality was no less a person than Mistress Mary Astell, of learned memory, the Madonella of the Tatler, a very pious, exemplary woman, and a profound scholar,

⁴⁴*Serious Proposal*, pt. i, p. 17.

⁴⁵*Serious Proposal*, pt. ii, p. 123.

⁴⁶Ballard says that Bishop Burnet dissuaded "a certain great Lady," perhaps Princess Anne, from endowing the academy because the proposal seemed to be "preparing a way for Popish Orders" (*Memoirs*, p. 307). Defoe, inspired by Mrs. Astell, planned a female academy that would correct the excesses in her proposal: See *An Essay on Projects* (1697). The only school Mrs. Astell actually founded was a charity school for the daughters of Chelsea pensioners.

⁴⁷*Some Reflections*, p. 84.

but as far from fair and elegant as any old schoolmaster of her time; in outward form, indeed, rather ill-favored and forbidding, and of a humor to have repulsed the compliment roughly had it been paid her while she lived.⁴⁸

Lady Louisa Stuart's description rings true, and it finds an echo, as we have seen earlier, in other biographical accounts. There one feels with an absolute certainty is the Mary Astell who in *Bart'lemy Fair* could denounce with waspish severity the Earl of Shaftesbury and the dissolute wits of the Kit-Kat Club. There is the Mary Astell who could needle Richard Steele—no foe to women's rights—into ungenerous satire in *The Tatler*.⁴⁹ There, too, is the fearsome polemicist who trounced Daniel Defoe for his dissenting views.⁵⁰ Dean Atterbury, who had winced often enough beneath her criticism ("She strikes me very home, you see"), would recognize that Mary Astell.⁵¹ The theory of sublimation and withdrawal simply will not do: Mary Astell was no timid lady, and her religious retirement was no timid withdrawal from the world.⁵²

What, then, is a more credible explanation? The answer lies in her conservative views on social and political issues, for only these views will illumine the true purpose of her "grand design." In this light her proposed "Monastery" will emerge as a means of enlisting the energies of the ladies to confront, not avoid, the problems of society in her time. Our difficulty of understanding here may well lie in our tendency to assume that there is necessarily a contradiction between feminism and conservatism.

Seventeenth-century political theory was traditionally grounded in the family as the natural unit of society. The king, in a very real sense, was the father of his people and, conversely, the family was a little monarchy, patriarchal and authoritarian. And since the political order reflected the social order, it might be presumed that the civil war which saw a rebellion against the father figure, Charles I, would have significant repercussions on family relationships. Restoration plays would seem to bear out that presumption, for they show that the institution of matrimony and family

⁴⁸Quoted in Smith, *Astell*, pp. 15-16. "Madonella of the Tatler" is a reference to Swift's satire in Nos. 32 and 62 of *The Tatler* on a Female Academy of Platonists, presided over by Madonella. The high-minded ladies are easily seduced by rakes.

⁴⁹*The Tatler*, Nos. 166 and 253.

⁵⁰A *Fair Way with the Dissenters and their Patrons* (1704) was her answer to Defoe's satire, *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702).

⁵¹Quoted in Ballard, *Memoirs*, p. 312.

⁵²Regina Janes in "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary Or, Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft Compared," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, Ronald C. Robertson (ed.), V (Madison, 1976), 121-39, rightly stressed Mrs. Astell's religious conservatism, but by ignoring her political writings is led to conclude that her work shows "no new ordering of thought consequent upon a new intellectual discovery," and that her proposal resolved the conflict between ambitions and opportunities for women "by dropping out this world[sic]." (pp. 125, 127). Mrs. Astell always insisted that her "Female Monastery" was not "prejudicial to an Active Life; 'tis as far from that as a Ladys Practising at home is from being a hindrance to her dancing at Court, For an Active Life consists not barely in Being in the World, but in doing much Good in it." (*Serious Proposal*, pt. ii, pp. 157-58).

authority were being submitted in the last decades of the century to lighthearted raillery and sometimes to searching analysis. The plays abound with women who elope with their lovers in defiance of parental will, demand marriage contracts to guarantee their personal freedoms, and even, in some instances, insist on the same sexual freedoms that males traditionally enjoyed. Some reject matrimony completely, choosing rather to pursue their intellectual interests or their own private pleasures.⁵³

Had her goals been secular, Mary Astell would certainly have found reinforcement in Restoration plays. But she clearly had no wish for support from this quarter. Her contemporary, Aphra Behn, the first successful English woman dramatist, never appeared in her list of women worthy of emulation. Indeed, Mrs. Astell never spoke of plays, playwrights, or of the theater except to denounce them. The licentiousness of the Restoration stage outraged her. Marriage was sacred—"too sacred to be treated with Disrespect, too venerable to be the Subject of Raillery and Buffoonery." He who made fun of marriage or who depicted the wife as a domestic shrew and the husband as a tyrant or a cuckold should be seen for what he truly was, "a dangerous Enemy to the Publick, as well as to private Families."⁵⁴

God had ordained marriage. And further he had willed that man should rule the family. Often enough Mary Astell lashed out spitefully against men in her writings. She chided women for deriving their image of self-worth from male esteem and for failing to realize that they were "capable of Nobler Things than the pitiful Conquest of some worthless heart." Men, she was fond of declaiming, had for centuries deliberately kept women sunk in folly and ignorance that they might tyrannize over them. This anti-male bias was a decided and, in most ways, unattractive feature of Mrs. Astell's personality. Yet despite her rancor against men, she never challenged their God-given right to rule the family. The seventeenth-century view that the wife belonged to the husband and was his property echoes in her statement, "She who has vow'd her Affections to one, and is his Property, cannot without injustice and even Perjury, parcel them out to more." Husbands should rule justly, remembering that they were images of divine authority, but if they did not, women had no recourse but submission and no refuge but religious devotions. Not the least of matrimony's advantages, Mrs. Astell tartly observed, is the preparation it offers long-suffering women for sainthood.⁵⁵

The sole rights Mrs. Astell recognized for women with respect to matrimony were negative ones and anterior to the married state—the right to reject a suitor whom one could not in good faith hope to love, and the right to remain single. Like other feminists and moralists of the time, she inveighed bitterly against those parents and guardians who were so concerned with property settlements or social advantage that they forced their unwilling charges into marriages beneath their social rank or into

⁵³See Gagen, *New Woman*, esp. pp. 119 ff., 129 ff., 141 ff.

⁵⁴*Some Reflections*, p. 16.

⁵⁵*Some Reflections*, pp. 12, 23-24.

marriages with detested partners.⁵⁶ "They only who have felt it, know the Misery of being forc'd to marry where they do not love."⁵⁷ More poignantly still, she depicted the plight of the aging unmarried woman in a society that afforded women no real alternative to matrimony. All too often lacking spiritual and intellectual resources to draw upon, the "superannuated virgin" was a tragic figure to contemplate. Mrs. Astell's "Religious Retirement" was designed to provide a refuge for her and for other unmarried women—much like the nunneries of old, but free from compulsory vows. There the young heiress could bide her time until her friends arranged a suitable match. There "Persons of Quality" who were "overstocked" with children might "honourably dispose" of them without impairing their estates⁵⁸ or forcing their daughters into marriages beneath their rank—which she saw as "ill Manners to Heaven, and an irreligious Contempt of its Favours."⁵⁹ There women—who chose not to marry or who could not find husbands—might be trained in piety and useful knowledge for service in the world.⁶⁰ Women did have rights before marriage, but with marriage rights ended and duties began. "She then who Marries, ought to lay it down for an indisputable Maxim that her Husband must govern absolutely and intirely, and that she has nothing else to do but to Please and Obey."⁶¹ Marriage for Mrs. Astell was sacred, and the family remained a little monarchy, patriarchal and authoritarian.

These conservative views on marriage are in full accord with Mary Astell's political views. Certain passages in her feminist tracts may seem to suggest that the Civil War had had a liberal impact on her thinking; but when read against her extended works on religion and politics, those passages appear in their true light as *ironic* arguments designed to meet an opponent on his own grounds. Did her adversary argue that absolute sovereignty was not necessary in the state? Then why was it necessary in the family, "since no Reason can be alledged for the one that will not hold more strongly for the other? If the Authority of the Husband, so far as it extends, is sacred and inalienable, why not that of the Prince?" Here Mary Astell is not challenging the authority of either the husband or the prince; she is taking logic to an extreme in order to expose the inconsistency of a

⁵⁶See Lady Mary Chudleigh, *The Ladies Defence*, preface and p. 5. "Unhappy they, who by their Duty led / Are made the Partners of a hated Bed; / And by their Fathers Avarice or Pride / To Empty Fops, or Nauseous Clowns are ty'd;" and "Of Riches" in *Essays upon Several Subjects* (1710), p. 70. Hannah Woolley also attacked "the insufferable grief of a loathed bed" in *The Gentlewoman's Companion*, p. 89. These feminists, however, like Mary Astell, preached respect for parental will and submission to the authority of even a tyrannical husband. Mary Astell seems to have drawn her ideas on marriage and family life directly from Richard Allestree's *The Ladies Calling* (1673). The parallels are too many to be coincidental. She differs only in insisting on a serious education for women.

⁵⁷*Some Reflections*, p. 7.

⁵⁸For the striking rise in marriage costs for the aristocracy, see Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 632-49.

⁵⁹*Some Reflections*, p. 45.

⁶⁰*Serious Proposal*, pt. i, pp. 35, 39.

⁶¹*Some Reflections*, p. 60.

double standard. Did her adversary argue the right of resistance against tyranny? Then why not extend that right (though, again, she is not advocating this) to long-suffering wives? "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 so ever Arbitrary Power may be dislik'd on a Throne, not *Milton*, not B.H. [Hoadly], nor any of the Advocates of Resistance would cry up Liberty to poor *Female Slaves* or plead for the Lawfulness of Resisting a private Tyranny."⁶² Her arguments seem reasonable, but the ironic starkness of her reductive logic is meant to dissuade, not to convince. Mary Astell believed passionately in the sacred and inalienable rights of the sovereign and decried all theories of popular sovereignty and lawful resistance. The Civil War did loom large in her consciousness—but as a specter and a warning.

As she saw it, the Civil War was not an uprising by liberty-loving Englishmen against a Stuart despot but an "unnatural Rebellion" against one of the "most Virtuous and most Religious of our English Princes." Factious sectarians, abetted by Milton, Buchanan, and those "Mercenary Scribblers whom all sober Men condemn," had seduced the "Good natur'd English People."⁶³ Under the banner of popular rights and liberties, the sectarians had set out to destroy the government in church and state and in so doing had served unwittingly as dupes of Rome. Behind the hateful Puritan conspiracy Mrs. Astell detected a more dangerous and more hateful popish conspiracy. It was the Papists who spread seditious ideas, hoping thereby to engineer the overthrow of English institutions and liberties.⁶⁴ Indeed, the Church of Rome continued to plot the destruction of England, conspiring even now in the reign of Anne through "that dearest Spawn of hers our English Dissenters."⁶⁵ The "Deposing Doctrine," she declared, was "as rank Popery as Transsubstantiation," and the theory of popular sovereignty was another popish innovation—idol worship of "Lord God the People."⁶⁶ Only God's intercession had saved England from papist malice, sectarian fury, and the tyranny of mob rule. In the Common-

⁶²*Some Reflections*, Appendix, pp. 106-07; pp. 34-35.

⁶³*Impartial Enquiry*, pp. 11, 29, 59. Mary Astell came of a strongly royalist family. The epitaph for her doughty grandfather, William Astell of Newcastle, is a curious and amusing political manifesto that recounts his sufferings for Charles I and his heavenly reward—union not with God but with his royal master—"Triumphant Charles he's gone to see" (Smith, *Astell*, p. 5).

⁶⁴Mrs. Astell was steeped in Anglican writings on the Civil War. She praised most particularly Clarendon's "incomparable history." The more bizarre notions of a Catholic conspiracy she took from the work of a now little known Anglican divine, John Foulis, whose *History of the Wicked Plots and Conspiracies of our Pretended Saints* showed how the sectaries "copy to the life after the Original that the Papists have set them." She warmly recommended to her readers his "admirable Book," *History of Popish Treasons and Usurpations*, which would convince them of "the Pernicious Practices of that Church" (*Impartial Enquiry*, pp. 37, 23). She may have been influenced, too, by "panic fears of Catholic Plots." See Robert Clifton, "The Popular Fear of Catholics during the English Revolution," *Past and Present*. No. LII, (August 1971), 23-55.

⁶⁵*Fair Way*, p. 14.

⁶⁶*Impartial Enquiry*, p. 23; *Moderation*, p. 46.

wealth era "*the Free-born People of England*" had been forced to wear "the heavy and shameful Yoke of some of the vilest of their Fellow Subjects: Till GOD was pleas'd to restore our Monarch, and with him the Exercise of our Religion, and the Liberties of the *English Nation*."⁶⁷ The lesson Mrs. Astell drew from the Civil War was that the established order must be preserved inviolate to protect religion, civil rights, and property. "Order is a Sacred Thing," she concluded—the law that God had decreed for Himself and had observed from all eternity.⁶⁸ She enjoined her countrymen to read and embrace the *Elizabethan Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion* that defined rebellion as the sin encompassing all other sins. "Let no Man dispise this true Reform'd Doctrine."⁶⁹

Such views probably occasioned some scruples about the Revolution of 1688. Although she gloried in the Revolution Settlement and referred to 1689 as "the first year of the Nations Deliverance," her few references to James II and to the rebellion against him were oblique and ambiguous. Nothing could be "more severe and spiteful" than to argue that the Revolution of 1688 could only be justified by justifying the Parliament in 1643. But she never explained why this was so. On the opposition of the seven bishops, her position was even more noncommittal:

Whether those Church-men who brought about the late Revolution did Well or Ill in't? If they did Well, why is it thrown in their Dish, why are they eternally reproach'd with it? If ill, what's to be said but that they Repent, and for the future Detest and Abjure the Men and Principles that led them into it.⁷⁰

In her view, the Revolution was over. With the death of James in 1701 and the succession of Anne to the throne, even the most scrupulous non-juror should be satisfied. Englishmen could and should unite now behind altar and throne, rejoicing "under the most excellent Constitution and gentle Government in the World."⁷¹

England's institutions were admirable, but unfortunately human nature—or at least male nature—was not. When Mary Astell reviewed the social order, as she did in *Bart'lemy Fair or an Enquiry after Wit*, she found noble institutions and noble aims corrupted by ignoble men. "The Oppression we suffer, not from our Governours, but from our Fellow-Subjects, is enough to make a wise Man mad." A glorious monarchy was engaged in a just war, and yet the chocolate, coffee, and gaming houses were crowded with irreligious cowards "who if they were not Poltrons, wou'd be serving their Queen and Country in a Camp."⁷² Dissenters openly attacked the

⁶⁷*Impartial Enquiry*, p. 10.

⁶⁸*Moderation*, p. 59.

⁶⁹*Impartial Enquiry*, p. 35.

⁷⁰*Fair Way*, pp. 16, 17, 22.

⁷¹*Bart'lemy Fair*, p. 55.

⁷²*Bart'lemy Fair*, pp. 55, 109.

Church of England, so admirably settled by the wise and judicious Elizabethan divines. Libertines scoffed at sacred teachings although in all ages and all societies "it was never thought a Service to the Public to expose the Established Religion, no not when it was ever so false and ridiculous in itself." An Anglican House of Commons—"Men of Sense, Men of the Highest Power and greatest Wit, and who are the noblest Actors for Liberty and Mankind"—passed just laws only to have them perverted. The poor man who sought justice against a rich and powerful adversary discovered to his ruin that "mere Forms, Quirks and Subtilties" prevailed "over Reason and the Equity of Things" and that the best cause availed less than "the greatest Number of Friends." And the old English nobility ("not more remarkable for their Loyalty to their Prince, than their Piety to their God")—these natural leaders—had passed away. In their place a generation of dissolute rakes squandered their estates, unmindful of the old obligations of charity, hospitality, and liberality.⁷³ England lived in a degenerate age, and reform would come not with a change in institutions but only with a change in hearts. Englishmen, Mary Astell noted, liked to prate of Roman liberty but failed to realize that there could be no Roman liberty without Roman virtue.⁷⁴

So a moral reformation⁷⁵ was called for, and in that reformation English gentlewomen, educated gentlewomen, had a mission to perform. Theirs the task "to revive the ancient Spirit of Piety in the World and to transmit it to succeeding Generations." Trained in their "Religious Retirement" to virtue and knowledge, the ladies would go forth to counter by their wisdom and example the rising tide of infidelity:

And then what a blessed World shou'd we have, shining with so many stars of *Vertue*, who not content to be happy themselves alone, for that's a narrowness of mind to much beneath their God-like temper, would like the glorious Lights of Heaven, or rather like him who made them, diffuse their benign influences wherever they come. Having gain'd an entrance into Paradise themselves, they would both shew the way, and invite others to partake of their felicity.⁷⁶

Their sphere of action would be the family. Mary Astell was not interested in freeing women from domestic tyranny to send them forth into the

⁷³*Bart'lemy Fair*, pp. 23, 54-55, 84.

⁷⁴*Moderation*, p. 106.

⁷⁵Mrs. Astell looked to antiquity for her models of reform. Her heroes were the ancient Greek statesmen—Phocion, Aristides, Themistocles, and Pericles—and those stalwart Roman patriots—Cincinnatus, Curius Dentatus, Fabricius, Decius, Fabius, and Regulus. Cincinnatus most captured her imagination: "A sorry Roman, who knew no better than to return to his Plough, from the head of a Triumphant Army, to dine upon Turneps, dress'd by his own victorious Hands." Cincinnatus and his turnips appear in almost all of her moral exhortations to frugality, simplicity, and genuine patriotism (*Moderation* p. 1-9; *Bart'lemy Fair*, p. 9).

⁷⁶*Serious Proposal*, pt. i, pp. 14, 34.

world. The ladies, in her opinion, were too much in the world already. Rather, she was intent on summoning them home—home from the playhouses and the pleasure gardens, home from the tea tables and the card tables—home to their proper sphere, the family and the hearth.

Although a traditionalist in her premise that families need the rule of a male sovereign—"Nor can there be any Society great or little, from Empires down to Private Families, without a last Resort, to determine the Affairs of that Society by an irresistible Sentence"⁷⁷—Mary Astell was anything but a traditionalist in her conception of the gentlewoman's role within the patriarchal structure. She belongs in the ranks of those seventeenth-century reformers, Puritan and Anglican alike, who promoted an enlightened ideal of marriage as rational and companionate, and who elevated the status of women in marriage by assigning to them responsibility for perpetuating those domestic virtues that alone can sustain society.⁷⁸ Her directives for the ideal match were simple: "let the Soul be principally consider'd, and Regard had in the first place to a good Understanding, a vertuous Mind; and in all other respects let there be as much Equality as may be. If they are good Christians and of suitable Tempers all will be well." Marriage should be based on kindness, esteem, and, above all, on "Friendship"—that ideal of her academy that she defined as "the greatest usefulness, the refin'd and disinterest'd Benevolence, a love that thinks nothing within the bounds of Power and Duty, too much to do or suffer for its Beloved."⁷⁹ Much more than other reformers, however, Mary Astell insisted on the need to educate women to their responsibilities in marriage. Men acted against their own best interest, she argued, when they set up "the Scare-Crow of Ridicule to fright women from the Tree of Knowledge,"⁸⁰ for only a woman of ingenious education could build a strong and happy marriage and reclaim, as was her duty, a wayward husband:

She who is as Wise as Good possesses such charms as can hardly fail of prevailing. Doubtless her Husband is a much happier Man and more likely to abandon all his ill Courses than he who has none to come home to and an ignorant froward and fantastick Creature. An ingenious conversation will make his life comfortable and he who can be so well entertain'd at home need not run into Temptations in search of diversions abroad.

None but a brute would be able to withstand "all those innocent arts, those gentle persuasives and obliging methods" that the virtuous and prudent wife would use to rescue him from vice.⁸¹

⁷⁷*Some Reflections*, p. 105.

⁷⁸Stone's thesis in *The Family, Sex and Marriage* is that "affective individualism" and "companionate marriage" slowly gained acceptance in England between 1500 and 1800.

⁷⁹*Some Reflections*, pp. 46, 18; *Serious Proposal*, pt. i, p. 33.

⁸⁰*Some Reflections*, p. 122.

⁸¹*Serious Proposal*, pt. i, p. 38.

Equally important, an ingenious education would produce effective mothers. Mrs. Astell decried the seventeenth-century practice of turning the young over to "ignorant wet nurses" and "low-minded servants." Again in the new reform tradition, she urged women to nurse their infants and watch over their children in their formative years to "give such Form and Season to the Tender mind of the child as will shew its good effects through all the stages of his life."⁸² The proper rearing of children was a noble calling, and it was the mother's prime responsibility:

For Fathers find other business. They will not be confined to such laborious work, they have not such opportunities of observing a child's temper, nor are the greatest part of 'em like to do much good, since precepts contradicted by Example seldom prove effectual.

(Mary Astell could never resist the feminist barb!) Like the Roman matrons of yore, the educated gentlewomen would raise up a generation of patriots equal to the moral obligations of liberty. As wives and mothers, or as governesses to the children of gentle families, the ladies would carry out their mission. For the single woman, Mary Astell saw the greatest responsibilities, for "the whole World is a single Ladys Family, her opportunities of doing good are not lessen'd but encreas'd by her being unconfin'd . . . her Beneficence moves in the largest sphere." To the ladies was reserved perhaps "the Glory of Reforming this Prophane and Profligate Age."⁸³

Such was Mary Astell's feminist vision. And when restored to full outline and perspective, its seeming paradox disappears—her mingling of radical feminist zeal with a conservative program. Her feminism was not born of liberal impulses but of conservative values. She preached not women's rights but women's duties, not personal fulfillment or self-expression but corporate responsibility, not a secular but a religious way of life. Far from being a lonely critic of the established order, she was a supporter of the Establishment and a respected and influential figure in an aggressive Anglican resurgence.⁸⁴ Her plan for a "Female Monastery" was as much a contribution to that Anglican revival as her later polemical tracts against the political influence of the Dissenters.⁸⁵ When the Occasional Conformity controversy seemed to threaten a Tory crisis in church and state in the early years of the eighteenth century, she joined such divines as Henry Sacheverell, Francis Atterbury, Charles Leslie, Thomas Sherwill, and Thomas Wagstaffe in defense of the Anglican cause, publishing in 1704 two bitter tracts against the Dissenters and those who

⁸²*Ibid.*, pt. i, p. 38. For the reformers' views on nursing see Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage*, pp. 426-32, and Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*, pp. 118 ff.

⁸³*Serious Proposal*, pt. ii, pp. 129-30.

⁸⁴It should be noted that with the exception of Aphra Behn the late seventeenth-century feminists were devout Anglicans.

⁸⁵She favored "the total Destruction of Dissenters as a Party" and the suppression of their schools (*Fair Way*, pp. 3, 6).

avored toleration of them—*Moderation Truly Stated* and *A Fair Way with the Dissenters and their Patrons*. There is no real break here between her earlier feminist writings and these partisan attacks; they are of a piece. Conservative thought in the late seventeenth century was marked by creative energy and originality as men and women devoted to church and throne sought intellectually to hammer out a new political mythology (providential divine right replacing hereditary divine right) to justify the overthrow of James II, politically to curb the growing power of the Dissenters, and morally to bring about that reformation of manners and morals that alone could secure the Revolution of 1688.⁸⁶ Mary Astell belongs to that revitalized conservative world.

A review of her career makes possible now a concluding statement on the nature and scope of English protofeminism. Feminism proper, associated with the late nineteenth century, is the doctrine of the complete equality of the sexes. Such seventeenth-century protofeminists as Mary Astell, Hannah Woolley, and Lady Mary Chudleigh made no such claim; they preached only equality of "souls" and hence, according to the philosophic understanding of the time, equality of the rational faculties God had given to men and women alike that they might achieve personal sanctity. As a matter of course, they seem to have accepted the idea of distinct masculine and feminine natures. Men and women differed physically, and since emotions were rooted in the body, it followed that the two sexes enjoyed different temperaments, different sensibilities, and different gifts. God had therefore allotted to each sex its proper sphere: as Mary Astell pointed out, men were made for public life, women for private life. In short, the sexes were equal in dignity and in moral responsibility, but different in their equivalence—and so in their appointed tasks.

Imbued as she was with the corporate view of society, believing firmly in the legitimacy of degree, priority, and place in the social order, enthralled with the rational design of the universe, Mary Astell could not recognize the antiauthoritarian and pluralistic impulses inherent in the Cartesian doctrine of the thinking self. She preached the authority of the thinking self only to free women from the tyranny of ignorance and social frivolity that they might realize in their traditional sphere their full potential as wives, mothers, and teachers of the young. That later generations of feminists would invoke that same authority against the established order was beyond the reach of her imagination. In the nineteenth century, feminists would spurn the notion of distinct natures and distinct spheres, as they claimed for women the right to participate fully in public life; by that time they would look upon domestic duties and virtues as marks of the

⁸⁶For the creativity of Anglican thought, see Gerald M. Straka, *Anglican Reaction to the Revolution of 1688* (Madison, 1962), esp. Ch. 6. For the political crisis see Gareth Bennett, *The Tory Crisis in Church and State, 1688-1730: the Career of Francis Atterbury, Bishop of Rochester* (Oxford, 1975) and John Flaningam, "The Occasional Conformity Controversy: Ideology and Party Politics, 1697-1711," *J.B.S.*, XVII (1977), 38-62. On the reformation of manners and morals, see Dudley Bahlman, *The Moral Revolution of 1688* (New Haven, 1957).

subjugation of women. And in our time they have attacked "the feminine mystique" as an expression of male chauvinism, quite unaware that this mystique had been, to a large extent, the conscious creation of the early English feminists. Ironically, if inevitably, the later history of English feminism has done much to obscure the conservative origins of the movement, and thus to perpetuate in scholarship a liberal bias which has kept us from recognizing that, fully as much as Puritanism, secularism, and Lockean political theory, conservative Anglican thought also promoted the dignity of women, educational reform, and the ideal of companionate marriage.

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