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The Passions and Self-Esteem in Mary Astell's Early Feminist Prose

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of Arts and Humanities

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements of the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Kathleen A. Ahearn

June 2009

Advisor: W. Scott Howard, Ph.D.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the influence of Cambridge Platonism and materialist philosophy on Mary Astell's early feminism. More specifically, I argue that Astell co-opts Descartes's theory of regulating the passions in his final publication, *The Passions of the Soul*, to articulate a comprehensive, enlightenment and body friendly theory of feminine self-esteem that renders her feminism modern. Previously, Astell's feminism has been viewed as elitist, effete and contradictory to her conservative political commitments as a Tory apologist in the last years of the seventeenth century. Recently, scholars have read her work in paradoxically contradictory ways -- as barely feminism at all or as prefiguring radical feminist agendas that deny women's difference. To this point, only scant attention has been paid to Astell's treatment of the passions and, therefore, to her attunement to the problem of women's feminine embodiment in a Renaissance context. My analysis of Astell's theory of feminine self-esteem follows both textual and contextual cues, thus allowing for a reorientation of contemporary analyses of her early feminism vis-a-vis contemporary feminist theory.

The textual cues I analyze are found throughout her first four publications but especially in her second *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, which constitutes a robust philosophical defense of her proposed academy for women. An entire chapter in this

text is devoted to her use of Descartes's theory of regulating the passions to render women more substantial and inherently worthy. This rendering becomes more concrete in Astell's sarcastic fourth publication, *Reflections Upon Marriage*, as she employs the language of the social contract to depict wives as contractual slaves. Her assertion, I argue, is theoretically consistent when read in light of her, by then, fully developed theory of women's inherent worth, since this theory is based on the enlightenment principles of self-mastery, independence and self-preservation. Contextually, I align Astell's early feminism in a dialogic sense to the Continental "querelle des femmes," especially as presented in writings by Christine de Pizan and Agrippa. Astell, I argue, contributes to the "querelle" by framing the feminist problem she wishes to solve (women's inherent equality despite bodily "inferiority") in a robust philosophical manner that uncannily prefigures Wollstonecraft's call for the universalization of human virtues and the reform of women's education.

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Introduction

Much Astell scholarship to this point has been preoccupied with the problem of contradiction within her corpus. Ruth Perry's characterization of Astell in the following passage is typical of this trend. She writes,

All the contradictions of the period we call the 'enlightenment' were embodied in the life and writings of Mary Astell, a feminist intellectual who lived from 1666 to 1731. She argued for women's right to an independent intellectual life, yet she upheld absolute monarchy in the state. She believed in Reason but distrusted the materialism of the new way of ideas. (357)

This approach of highlighting contradictions within Astell's work has led to corresponding contradictions with respect to how her feminism is interpreted by contemporary scholars. For example, in a recent collection of essays Hilda Smith characterizes Astell's feminism as "radical" while Sharon Achinstein regards Astell's early work as barely feminism at all (204). This study, by contrast, takes part in what William Kolbrener has termed the "third phase" of Astell scholarship. He defines this stage as participating in "the recovery of the linguistic or discursive contexts of particular utterances. As 'texts are concerned with their own questions, and not with ours'" (6). This approach, borrowing as it does from the Cambridge school of history, aims to avoid anachronism and prolepsis in the reading of early modern women's texts, Astell's in particular. Along these lines, a new emphasis on consistency within Astell's corpus is

being highlighted, as when E. Derek Taylor writes of the “remarkable degree of consistency [Astell] maintains . . . throughout her major works” (179)

This study is situated firmly within the third phase of Astell scholarship with its emphasis on consistency and close contextual/interdisciplinary analysis. My goal is to more accurately understand Astell’s early feminism, her position within (as opposed to marginally opposed to) foundational philosophical and political debates of the seventeenth century, and to renew interest in her relevance to modern incarnations of feminist theory. In this manner I follow the lead of scholars like Alice Sowaal, who has presented what she calls Astell’s original “theory of mind,” and Lisa Shapiro, who discerns in the confessional style of Princess Elisabeth’s letters to Descartes a legitimate, if unsystematic, way of “doing” philosophy. Up to this point, most of the interdisciplinary scholarship concerning Astell’s corpus is concerned with her rationalist framework, including her early flirtation with materialist philosophy that she later repudiated in her final publication, *The Christian Religion* (1705). This dissertation, by contrast, privileges the influence of materialism upon the development of Astell’s early feminism, a topic that has received only scant attention to this point. More specifically, I argue that Astell’s early feminism anticipates modern incarnations of feminist theory because of its body-friendly orientation that arises from her original use of Descartes’s theory of regulating the passions, otherwise known as his moral theory.

Astell’s use of Descartes’s moral theory in the service of her feminist goals is not explicitly stated anywhere within her first four publications. Thus, my methodology in regards to discerning and presenting Astell’s theory of feminine self-esteem is collage-

like, in that I piece together textual, contextual, and intellectual cues from within her first through her fourth publications, which I characterize as her early feminist prose. The heart of Astell's theory of feminine self-esteem arises, I argue, in her third publication, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II* (1697) when she directly addresses Descartes's moral theory in his final publication, *The Passions of the Soul* (1659). But the seeds of this theory exist within *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695), Astell's first publication in which she attempts to make sense of how bodies, creatures, and neighbors can be part of God's creation.¹ Similarly, her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part I* (1694), with its emphasis on a woman's true or inherent worth, prefigures her philosophical defense of a new kind of education that she bases on both moral and rationalist foundations. Finally, I apply Astell's theory of feminine self-esteem to a close reading of the concepts of liberty and enslavement within her first and to this point most studied text, *Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700).

Textually speaking, I argue that Astell's attunement to the Enlightenment concepts of self-mastery, independence and inherent worth, with its tangential notion of self-preservation, renders her treatment of wives as slaves in the state of marriage serious, theoretically consistent, and politically charged in an anxious sense. In this analysis I agree with Jacqueline Broad and Mark Goldie's recent contention that Astell's conception of freedom is essentially epistemological, i.e., we are free when we are in control of our passions, emotions, reactions, and behaviors, yet I read the liberal strains

¹ Both E. Derek Taylor and William Kolbrener point out that although Astell's first *Serious Proposal* was published before *Letters*, she most likely composed *Letters* first, thus I refer to this text as her first publication..

within her theory of feminine self-esteem as promoting the radical sounding pronouncements she makes and then retreats from throughout *Reflections*. With this framework in place, the complexity and consistency of Astell's feminism comes into sharp focus, in that she privileges both tranquility and self-mastery, thereby positing an early feminist ethic that paradoxically privileges both order *and* liberation. Though these impulses are consistent with her intellectual commitments, they pose problems for Astell in regards to her conservative political agenda (that is more fully realized in later political tracts) and her own self-preservation as a single, self-supporting woman.

Recently, Astell has been labeled, the “true inheritor of the Cambridge Platonists,” which is a well deserved and arguably more apt label than “the first English feminist” (Taylor & New 11, Hill 1). The first chapter of my dissertation traces Astell's entanglement with Cambridge Platonist philosophy in her first publication, *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695), which consists of a collection of philosophical exchanges with her mentor, John Norris.² As the “true inheritor” of Cambridge Platonism, Astell argues against Norris's claim that God and only God (as opposed to “creatures”) should be the object of human love. This claim, I point out, strikes Astell as fallacious both in light of her religious and her emerging philosophical orientations. Returning to the work of one of the original Cambridge Platonists, Henry More, Astell argues with Norris that “sensible congruity,” gleaned from More's neo-Platonist notion of “vital congruity,” links body and mind with spirit and nature in a metaphysical way, thus

² I refer to Cambridge Platonism as neo-Platonism in other parts of the dissertation, using these terms interchangeably.

rendering human contact a potentially redemptive, as opposed to a corruptive, influence. In this chapter I tie together three strains of thought that emerge within Astell's critique of Norris in *Letters*: God's commandment to love one's neighbors, a body friendly philosophy, and her expressed goal of improving women's moral standing. These interweaving strands, I show, intersect within Astell's early feminist framework to become key, germinating elements in the emergence of her unique theory of feminine self-esteem. It is my argument that Astell was not satisfied with the Moreau, metaphysical approach to explaining mind/body connectivity. This dissatisfaction, in turn, led her to search for a more substantial (read material) explanation for mind/body connectivity.

In the second dissertation chapter, I examine Astell's emerging preoccupation with women's true (or inner) worth in light of her rationalist and materialist leanings. Read singly, Astell's *Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part I*, can be interpreted in an entirely rationalist framework with its privileging of "the Substance for the Shadow, Reality for Appearance" (146). With this emphasis in mind, we might view Astell's preoccupation with women's vanity, frivolous speech (or gossip), and her negative attunement to fashion as prefiguring second wave feminist admonitions for women to reject objectification by men. Indeed, Astell seems to head in this direction at the beginning of the text when she writes of women's implicit involvement in their own enchainment, an idea that prefigures Simone de Beauvoir's critique of marriage in *The Second Sex*. I read Astell's first *Serious Proposal*, however, as inaugurating her theory of feminine self-esteem in that she sets up its key components by way of contrasts. For

example, she contrasts feminine vices like talkativeness and general frivolity with a woman's potential to achieve "Bravery and Greatness of Soul," a heroic characterization or virtue that was typically reserved for men in a Renaissance context (171).

The missing link for Astell concerns women's inherent inferiority due to her feminine embodiment and embedded gendered prejudices that abounded in this era and that Alice Sowaal has named the "women's defective nature" prejudice. One problem of reading a body attunement in Astell's first *Seriuos Proposal to the Ladies* is that such an attunement is not explicitly stated. Rather, Astell complains of women's vanity, of men's flattery, and she warns of the short-lived nature of youth and beauty. I tackle this problem by contextualizing Astell's critique of feminine vices in a comparison of her arguments to those of early Renaissance thinkers, Christine de Pizan and Agrippa. Both of these authors took part in the long standing, Continental "querelle des femmes," or woman's argument; his analysis demonstrates the diaological aspect of Astell's work across time and contexts as well as its body consciousness in regards to the systemic, Renaissance problem of women's bodily inferiority.

In the third dissertation chapter, I focus upon the final "chapter four" of Astell's *Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II*, in which she addresses Descartes's last publication, *The Passsions of the Soul*. In this neglected last chapter of Astell's defense of her women's academy, I highlight the materialist answer to her dilemma concerning women's equality of soul and intellect in light of the customary notion of women's bodily ineferiority (a Renaissance commonplace). Within Henry More's theory of vital congruity, Astell had previously found justification for the notion that mind and body

interact and that there is, therefore, a divine use for nature. Similarly, Astell infers that there is a reason and use for women's creation (apart from men's use) and that this reason can be determined and cultivated within her academy by way of a rationalist and a moralist orientation toward education that emphasizes temperance with respect to bodily passions and union with women friends. By overlaying Descartes's materialist system of mind and body causality upon the neo-Platonist concept of vital congruity, Astell offers women a concrete way of attaining a substantial, wise, and ethical characters despite supposed bodily inferiority and sexist customs. More specifically, she utilizes Descartes's concept of generosity to argue that a woman's inherent worth is not only given by God but that it may be cultivated through the processes of habituation and wise, timely action or "resolution." Finally, I point out that Enlightenment friendly concepts such as self-mastery, the primacy of the will, and epistemological liberty (i.e., independence) are implicit within Astell's conception of feminine self-esteem since her conception relies upon Descartes's framework to which these notions are central. This examination ultimately debunks the assumption that Astell's feminism lacks a framework for self-preservation, which has led to confusing reads of her use of the language of the social contract in *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*, which is the subject of the final dissertation chapter.

In the fourth dissertation chapter I analyze Astell's most well known early feminist pamphlet, *Reflections Upon Marriage*, in light of her theory of feminine self-esteem. I argue that Astell's framework for the development of feminine self-esteem includes an ethic of self-preservation that renders her use of the language of the social contract in this

publication theoretically consistent and politically (read anxiously) charged. Along these lines, I explain Astell's repeated references to wives as slaves in this text from the perspective of her theory of women's inherent worth, developed in her previous publication with its implicit, dual emphases on self-preservation and independence. Building upon Mark Goldie's recent finding that Astell was angered by Locke's admission of women's natural inferiority, as opposed to his political theory, I tie references Astell makes to natural law in the introduction of *Reflections* to the Hobbesian explanation of how the use of force is a legitimate way to form a contract. I then argue that the bold, liberal sounding argument Astell makes concerning women's slavery in the state of marriage is in response to the Hobbesian notion of contract, based as it is on might, as well as a Miltonic conception of marriage as a protective commonwealth. This analysis demonstrates Astell's attunement to the nuances and implications of contract theory from an early feminist angle, despite that her primary argument for liberty was founded in epistemology. Finally, I highlight the dialogic nature of Astell's feminism by tracing her influence on an anonymous petitioner who argued for reform in marriage law, her sympathetic link to women dissenters of the English Civil War period, and to the influence of her supposed intellectual rival, Damaris Masham, on her polemical style.

Each of the four dissertation chapters contains a concluding section that extends the discussion beyond Astell's philosophy and her politics to the topic of genre. It is my contention that Astell's development from a student of philosophy within *Letters*, to a philosopher in her own right in the second *Serious Proposal*, to an influential polemicist in *Reflections* belies her supposed love of obscurity and reveals both intellectual ambition

and an attunement to dialogism. The dialogism I point to within these chapter sections is twofold; on one hand I demonstrate direct theoretical and stylistic influence on Astell by her mentor, John Norris, and her peer, Damaris Masham. On the other hand, I suggest that Astell takes part in indirect exchanges with authors, ideas and even dissenters that she did not know or name in her texts. An example of this dialogical impulse can be made by comparing Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia's correspondences to Descartes with Astell's correspondences to John Norris. Uncannily, Princess Elisabeth's line of questioning inspired Descartes's final publication, *The Passions of the Soul*, which in turn influenced the development of Astell's theory of feminine self-esteem. Similarly, I tie Astell's use of utopianism, both stylistically and theoretically within her first *Serious Proposal* to similar impulses found within Margaret Cavendish's closet drama, *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668). Both authors, I argue, create separatist/reparative spheres for women to escape and to heal from the negative impacts of the marriage economy, and both rely on materialist philosophy to support their feminist/utopian visions. In this comparison, I call attention to Gordon Schochet's notion that political and social ideas "are artifacts in important and irreducible senses; social and political ideas are precisely about preserving or changing political, social, and legal arrangements and systems" (224). From this framework, I argue that both of these authors' utopian/feminist visions engage in critical and important ways with major seventeenth-century political and philosophical ideas

I conclude the dissertation by suggesting that my analysis of the body-friendly elements of Astell's early feminism may encourage new ways of theorizing her feminist

philosophy both in terms of Enlightenment feminist thought, ie., in comparison to Mary Wollstonecraft, and in terms of contemporary feminist philosophy, as in Nancy Snow's reformulation of feminine flourishing to encompass women's emotional wholeness in terms of restraint as well as the freedom to express outrage over injustices.

Chapter One: Materialism in Mary Astell's Early Feminist Prose

Introduction

Mary Astell arrived in Chelsea from her home in Newcastle in 1687 at the age of twenty-one as a single woman with virtually no means of support. She was, as Ruth Perry points out in her biography of Astell, too “genteel” and too intellectually inclined to become a governess. Her move to Chelsea near the end of the seventeenth-century was risky, and Astell at one point had to beg for sustenance when she ran out of money and began to sell personal belongings to survive. She wrote a letter to the then Archbishop of Canterbury, John Sancroft, who was known for his charity. The letter, in hindsight, is filled with what appears to be conscious misspellings, perhaps to underscore her vulnerability and need for aid. Sancroft was a wise choice in her appeal for aid as he had similar political views, since her upbringing in the northern town of Newcastle was conservative, in support of the official Church of England. Further, Sancroft had just been released from prison along with six other Bishops for refusing to sign the “Declaration of Indulgence” under James II, “which they felt undermined the established church” (Perry 66). Astell demonstrates an uncommon sense of social verve in the following her letter which reads,

My Lord

I come to yr grace as an humble petitioner being brought to very great necessaty threw some very unfortunate circumstances yt I have Laine under for some time I have pawned all my cloaths & now am brought to my Last Shift yt is to desire ye charity of yr grace & some others of ye bishops, my Lord I am a gentlewoman & not able to get a liflyhood, & I may say with ye steward in ye gospelle worke I cannot & to beg I am ashamed, but meer necessaty forces me to give yr grace yt trouble hoping yr charity will consider me, for I have heard a very great and good character of wt charity you have done & do dayly, so yt I hope for yr pittty upon my unhappy state, & grace please to admit me to speak to you I will give you a very just account of my circumstances whc is to long to do in writing so I humbly yr admittance to,

My Lord/Yr graces/most humble & most /devoted servant (qtd. in Perry 66)

Astell included a stitched book of poems, and her plea for assistance was a success since Sancroft assisted her both financially and socially by introducing her to wealthy Anglican women neighbors in Chelsea who would later become her patrons.³ He also introduced her to her lifelong publisher, Richard Wilkin, who, Perry notes, “published her first book in 1694, and who handled all her work for the next thirty-six years” (68). In all Astell published nine texts, including a lengthy book entitled, *The Christian Religion* (1694), from 1694 through 1709 (Sullivan xv).

Within her letter to Sancroft, Christine Mason Sutherland discerns a distinct sense of social verve and that is characteristic, I argue, of all of Astell’s early prose publications. First, she points out that Astell puns on the word “shift” in the line, “I have pawned all my cloaths & now am brought to my Last Shift.” This line reads in a slightly

³ Astell’s friends and patrons in this period included: Lady Ann Coventry, Lady Elizabeth Hastings, and Lady Catherine Jones all of whom, according to Sullivan, shared “Astell’s High Church piety and her interst in the education of women” (Sutherland xiv).

vulgar, verging on bawdy, manner given that her audience is the Archbishop of Canteburty, yet it also connotes distress and is thus a risky word play that worked. Further, Sutherland points out that Astell obliquely references the biblcial “Parable of Talents” when she writes, “my Lord I am a gentlewoman & not able to get a liflyhood, & I may say with ye steward in ye gospelle worke I cannot & to beg I am ashamed, but meer necessaty forces me to give yr grace yt trouble hoping yr charity will consider me.” Recall that the “Parable of the Talents” concerns three sons being given the opportunity to multiply gifts, yet only one of the sons succeeds in the task. Astell is claiming in the above lines that she cannot fulfill “ye gospelle worke” because she cannot “get a liflyhood” because none is available to her, none is given. Yet, in a sense her written words are the ‘talent’ that she will use for her own and others’ gain.

In my view Sutherland misses another level of subtle social skill Astell employs in this letter. Astell, I aruge, purposefully downplays her erudition in the correspondence including her skills in grammar and spelling to highlight her economic need and increase her chances of Sancroft’s will aid. Evidence for this claim can be found in an often neglected section of the *Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II*, in which she writes of the importance of women learning conventional spelling and grammar. She advises, “as to spelling which they’re said to be defective in, if they don’t believe as they’re usually told, that its fit for ‘em to be so, and that to write exactly is too Pedantic, they may soon correct that fault, by Pronouncing their words aright and Spelling ‘em accordingly” (143). Similarly, the elevated erudition found within her first publication, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, suggests that Astell was precociously intellectual and that she knew how

to spell and engage in debate. On this point Norris responds to Astell's first letter concerning a critical point in one of his recently published theosophical writings,

Practical Discourses Upon Several Divine Subjects, Volume 3 (1693),

I hope you will in Equity, allow me some time to recover my self out of that wonder I was cast into, to see such a Letter from a Woman, besides what was necessary to consider the great and surprising Contents of it. I find you thoroughly comprehend the Argument of my Discourse, in that you have pitch'd upon the only material Objection to which it is liable; which you have also press'd so well, and so very home, that I can't but greatly admire the Light and Penetration of your Spirit. (71)

Thus, in 1693 at the age of twenty-seven, Mary Astell began to multiply her talent. A then obscure single woman whose uncle Ralph Astell had tutored her in the tenets of Cambridge philosophy from the time she was eleven, she boldly wrote to the "last" Cambridge Platonist, John Norris, to inquire about an epistemological problem she discerned in one of his texts. Although the importance of female friendship and patronage has been highlighted in Astell's biography and in recent scholarship, her relationship with Norris, which resulted in her first (supposed) reluctant publication, was seminal in her development as a philosopher and a public thinker/polemicist. The relationship, it seems, was equally gratifying on both sides. Astell, for her part, writes that "every Period of yours dilates my Mind, calls it forth to pursue its hidden Beauties in a Train of useful and delightful thoughts." (79). Norris likewise delights in his role of philosophical mentor, and yet he is rarely paternalistic and later coaxes her into publishing the letters, thus launching her career. He observes in response to her third letter, for example, "The sincere Love you seem to have for Truth, and the great Progress you have made in it, together with that singular Aptness of Genius that appears to be in

you for further Attainments, makes me not only willingly enter into a Correspondence with you, but even to congratulate myself the Opportunity of so uncommon a Happiness” (81).

The Influence of Cambridge Platonism

Like Norris, Astell was a rationalist, but of a very complex sort. According to Ernst Cassirer, author of *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, the original Cambridge Platonists: Smith, More, Whichcote, and Cudworth, who wrote in the early 1650s through the early 1680s, were fundamentally at odds with the prevailing intellectual and religious trends of the era in which they wrote. Exhibiting a strong commitment to ancient thought, particularly the philosophy of Plotinus as articulated in *The Enneads* (about 260AD), these men wrote against dogmatic religion, in particular Calvinist (Protestant) strains of thought which emphasized “the insistence on man’s original sin and predestination” (Mintz 80).⁴ They syncretized pagan and Christian influences, thus running against the momentum of the English spirit of progress with its tendency to shy away from ancient, scholastic influences in its embrace of the emerging vogue of secular philosophy as expressed most prominently in Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651). The Cambridge Platonists stood, above all, against this particular materialist influence, as a Hobbesian mechanistic outlook of nature, human beings, and the body politic veered dangerously in the direction of atheism. This movement negated, in Henry More’s view,

⁴ Cudworth wrote in opposition to Calvinist strands of Protestant thought concerning divine justice, i.e., that “God is infinity and overflowing with fullness and fecundity.” He also defended the idea of moral and religious freedom against religious fatalism (Cassirer 7).

“the power of God upon this great Automaton, the World” (*Antidote Against Atheism*, qtd. in Mintz 86).

The Cambridge thinkers were rationalists, but of a particular, quasi-Cartesian sort.

Alan Nelson defines a traditional rationalist as one who,

identif[ies] the intellect, the mind, or the rational part of the soul (or even the state) as of primary importance in receiving and holding knowledge. The corresponding objects of knowledge are then non-sensory, general and unchanging or eternal. Traditional empiricisms, by contrast, identify senses, or common sense, or the sensitive part of the soul as of primary importance. The corresponding objects of knowledge are then the prejudices of the senses and the truth is uncovered, [and] that truth is revealed to be simple. (8)

The Cambridge thinkers, in contrast to traditional rationalists, overlaid their “clear philosophical thinking and the dialectical search for truth” with a marked religiosity that purported to align, in a less dualistic fashion, rationalism and religion, or more accurately, rationalism and spirituality; so that, the “real presence of God in man [becomes] man’s reason” (Mintz 82). Jacqueline Broad summarizes this impulse as a tendency “to accept or dismiss a philosophical viewpoint solely in order to affirm the existence of a providential God” (128).

Arguments contained within Henry More’s *An Antidote Against Atheism* (1653) and his *Immortality of the Soul* (1659) illuminate not only More’s influence on both John Norris, but the urgency with which the Cambridge Platonists argued in two distinct generations against the philosophically dangerous (read atheistic) components of the materialist paradigm. “The grand Truth,” Mores writes in his opening lines of *Antidote*:

which we are now to be employed about and to prove, is, *That there is a GOD:* And I made choice of this Subject as very seasonable for the Times we are in, and are coming on, wherein Divine Providence more universally loosening the minds of men from the awe and tyranny of mere accustomed Superstition, and permitting a freer perusal of matters of Religion than in former Ages the Tempter would take advantage, where he may, to carry men captive out of one dark prison into another, out of *Superstition* into *Atheism* it self. (3)

Anticipating the debate a generation later between his student and friend, John Norris and the giant of empiricism, John Locke, More argued for the existence of God by “proving” the reality of innate ideas. In other words he believed that no human being could possess an abstract ideas like God, infinity, perfection, moral goodness, mathematical theorems, if those ideas were not implanted in the human soul by its creator. He explains:

no man can discourse and reason of any thing without recourse to settled Notions deciphered in his own Mind: and that such an Exception as this implies the most contradictory Absurdities imaginable, to wit, as if a man should reason from something that never entered into his Mind, or that is utterly out of the ken of his own Faculties. (10 – 11)

Abstract ideas could not, he further argued, be deduced solely from sensate experience because abstract ideas are of a different substance than the sensate; they must therefore come from somewhere else. Contrary to Norris’s later adaptation of this maxim, More was interested in transcending the dualistic separation of spirit from matter that had been inherited from Descartes. His was a moderating viewpoint between the polar extremes of rationalism and empiricism; whereby, he acknowledged both the reality of the material world *and* the reality of the immaterial world, as in the following quotation from the *Immortality of the Soul*:

For I demand of you then, sith you professe your selves to believe nothing but *Sense*, how could *Sense* ever help you to that Truth you acknowledged last, *viz.* *That that which exists without the help of another is necessary and eternall?* For *Necessity* and *Eternity* are no *sensible* Qualities, and therefore are not the Object of any *Sense*; and I have already very plentifully proved, that there is other Knowledge and perception in the Soul besides that of *Sense*. Wherefore it is very unreasonable, whenas we have other Faculties of Knowledge besides the *Senses*, that we should consult with the *Senses* alone about matters of Knowledge, and exclude those Faculties that penetrate beyond *Sense*. A thing that the profess'd *Atheists* themselves will not doe when they are in the humor of Philosophising (24)

In this passage More strives to re-emphasize, “other Knowledge and perception in the Soul *besides* that of Sense,” demonstrating his (and that of the Cambridge Platonists as a whole) waning position in the debate over the primacy of sense versus innate ideas.

Ernst Cassirer describes More’s position as “defensive.” He explains,

From year to year the Cambridge men witness the increasing need for assuming a merely defensive posture with respect to the prevailing forces of the age.. The waves of political, philosophical, and theological controversy swirling around them break in upon them from all sides. (42)

On the other hand, Alan Nelson describes the emphasis we see in More’s work as expressing “pockets of shared concerns and overlap between rationalism and empiricism” (4). He further explains that “all empiricists need to have some account of how abstract, general truths are derived from what is given by the senses” (4). Locke will go on to resolve this question by substituting the concept of the innate idea with, as Nelson puts it, “an essential reliance on innate operations of the mind” (4). Yet even Locke’s famous comparison of the mind to a blank sheet of paper or an empty cabinet takes precedence in More’s work when he writes sarcastically of “whether the Soul of man [may] be Abrasa Tabula, a Table-book in which nothing is writ; . . .” (*Antidote* 14).

The influence of Henry More on both John Norris and Mary Astell was profound, although this influence led them in starkly different directions, at least in this phase of their publishing careers and correspondences.⁵ In fact, begins her correspondence with Norris shortly after he published his critique of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Norris's critique entitled, *Cursory Reflections Upon a Book Call'd An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), takes up the debate that More had devoted himself to over thirty years prior. In this pamphlet, Norris responds to Locke's classic empiricist assertion against the notion of "innate ideas":

I agree then with these Men of innate Principles, that there is no Knowledge of these general and self-evident Maxims in the Mind, till it comes to the Exercise of Reason: but I deny that the coming to the use of Reason, is the precise time when they are first taken notice of; and, if that were the precise time, I deny that it would prove them innate. (54)

In this same chapter (II) Locke further explains how the mind moves from reception to abstraction via the senses, transforming his 'blank sheet of paper' metaphor for the human mind to that of the even more offensive (to Norris) "empty Cabinet" metaphor:

The Senses at first let in particular Ideas, and furnish the yet Empty Cabinet: And the Mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the Memory, and Names got to them. Afterwards the Mind proceeding farther, abstracts them, and by Degrees learns the use of general Names. In this manner the Mind comes to be furnish'd with Ideas and Language, the Materials about which to exercise its discursive Faculty. (55)

⁵ Though I will not be addressing Astell's final publication, her book *The Christian Religion* in this dissertation, it is important to note that upon its publication in 1705, Astell's philosophical commitments had reverted back to an accord with Norris that belies her earlier and incisive critique of his philosophy. E. Derek Taylor speculates that this philosophical circling back was a result of personal animosity between Astell, Norris and his patron, Damaris Masham.: "Astell's mature philosophical and theological thought, as found . . . in the whole of the final edition of *Christian Religion*, reveals not a deferential figure demurely straddling the intellectual fence between Norris and Locke, but a thinker who has willingly joined the former in a battle against the latter, one she probably knew they would lose. The reasons for her final choice of allegiances were . . . philosophical, political, theological, rhetorical – and personal" (513).

In his reply Norris takes great care to clarify that he is not just a man “of innate Principles,” but he is a modern neo-Platonist with a far more nuanced conception of rationalist impulses than Locke allows. He responds in *Cursory Reflections*:

You know Sir I account for the Mode of Human Understanding after a very different way, namely, by the Presentialness of the Divine or Ideal World to our Souls where we see and perceive all things. For a fuller account of which I refer you to my *Reason and Religion*, and to my *Reflections* lately publish'd. I cannot therefore by my Principles admit of any such Innate Characters in a strict and proper Sense. Only I may, and am also inclined to admit something of near Analogy with it. Supposing that God may and does exhibit some particular Truths of the Ideal World more early, more clearly, and more constantly to the view of the Soul than others, that by these she may be the better directed to the Good of the Reasonable Life, as Animals by sensitive Instincts and Inclinations are to the Good of Sense. This is all that I conceive to be strictly Passible or True in that grey-headed venerable Doctrine of Innate or Common Principles. (20 -21)

Norris's critique becomes more pointed, however, when he makes direct reference to the notion of the mind as “empty cabinet” waiting to be “furnished” by the senses. Without sarcasm, he refers to the “Ingenious Author” of *The Essay* in his attempt to clarify exactly what an idea, in the Lockean sense, is:

I would know what kinds of things he makes these Ideas to be as to their Essence or Nature. Are they in the first place Real Beings or not? Without doubt Real Beings, as having Real Properties, and really different from another? . . . Well if Real Beings, then I demand, are they Substances, or are they Modifications of Substances? He will not say they are Modifications. For besides that a Modification of Substance cannot be Representative of a Substance, there being no manner of likeness between a Substance and a Mode. (23)

Norris concludes his pamphlet on stronger, less philosophical terms by declaring, “But what a strange Adventure is it in Philosophy to make the Idea of God to come in by our Senses, and to be derived from Sensible Objects! For besides the Difficulties and Absurdities already touch't upon, what is there in the Material World that can resemble

God? Nay, what is there in the whole Creation that can represent him to our Thoughts?" (29). The repartee between Norris and Locke demonstrates what Alan Nelson has termed the "depth of the chasm" between the two philosophical camps despite some of the overlaps that Norris acknowledges (4). E. Derek Taylor describes this chasm in even stronger terms when he explains that "Locke's sense-based epistemology . . . had emerged by 1700 as the launching pad for materialist arguments of all stripes and colors that threatened to subsume the very notion of 'spirit' (and ultimately of God) altogether" (509). Norris's defensive response to this anticipated shift led him in the direction of an extremist posture, embracing both Cartesian dualism and the philosophy of Nicholas Malebranche to argue that there is no substantial correlation between body (senses/nature) and the workings of the mind. Norris's adaptation of Malebranche's vision that God is the sole mover of matter, so to speak, is called occasionalism and the outcome of his occasionalism was a quietist, almost monastic, orientation toward the duties and responsibilities one owes to people. Astell found this outcome of Norris's occasionalist philosophy distasteful, yet she begins her correspondence with him on a finer philosophical point, concerning the problem of human pain with respect to the love of God.

Astell's opening question to Norris concerning his occasionalism goes to the heart of the materialist/rationalist debate. In her opening letter, she critically addresses his argument concerning why God should be the sole object of human love, as opposed to both God *and* humans being the objects of love. On this point Norris had written: "God is not only the Principal, but the sole Object of our Love because he is the only efficient

Cause of our Pleasure” (qtd. in Astell 69 – 70). This equation is problematic for Astell because it leaves out the reality of pain and recasts pleasure as redemptive. She writes,

If the Author of our Pleasure be upon that account the only Object of our Love, then by the same reason the Author of our Pain can't be the Object of our Love, then by the same reason the Author of our Pain can't be the Object of our Love; and if both these Sensations be produced by the same Cause, then that Cause is at once the Object of our Love, and of our Aversion; for it is as natural to avoid and fly from Pain, as it is to follow and pursue Pleasure. (70)

Norris agrees with Astell in “Letter II” that she has touched upon “the only material objection to which it [his argument] is liable” (71). She concludes in “Letter I” that “that which Causes Pain does us Good as well as that which Causes us Pleasure; and therefore it can't be true, That nothing does us Good, but what Causes Pleasure” (71). Norris Responds to Astell's critique by clarifying what he means by the love of God. He explains that “not Absolute but Relative Good is the Formal Object of our Love; that is, that we love a thing not as it is good in it self, but as 'tis good to us” (71). He bolsters this utilitarian explanation for his privileging of pleasure by then connecting this more nuanced conception of the love of God to the problem of human pain:

Though I acknowledge Pain to be as truly the Effect of GOD as Pleasure (for I know not what else shou'd cause it) yet it is not after the same manner the Effect of GOD as Pleasure is. Pleasure is the natural, genuine and direct Effect of GOD, but Pain comes from him only indirectly and by Accident. (73)

Pain, for Norris, is a secondary effect for “when he causes Pain, 'tis not that he wills it from within, or for it self (for so 'tis not at all lovely) but only from without, and for the sake of something else as it is necessary to the Order of his Justice” (73). Pain, he explains, is connected to human sin, for “if there had been no Sin, there wou'd never have been such a thing as Pain, which is a plain Argument that God wills our Pleasure as

we are Creatures, and our Pain only as we are Sinners” (73). Norris then adds a postscript to this letter in which he re-conceptualizes pain as “medicinal: “As to the present Life, the pain that GOD inflicts upon us here, is only Medicinal, and in order to our greater good, and consequently from a Principle of Kindness” (75). God, he concludes is like a surgeon who does us immediate harm only for our ultimate good. Astell, of course, is not satisfied with Norris’s response, and their correspondence continues.

Astell’s materialism vis-à-vis Norris’s occasionalism begins to take shape in “Letter III.” She writes early in this letter of “a Notion which I have entertain’d” concerning what Norris has termed the medicinal aspect of pain. But her notion, rather than merely reiterating Norris’s, chips away at the idealist aspects of his theory of love. Evoking her neo-Platonist forebears, especially Henry More, Astell divides the soul into two parts, the inferior part “which is exercised about objects of sense” and the superior part, known as “the Understanding and the Will” (77). By way of division, Astell slips a materialist element into an argument concerning body/mind causality:

Now I suppose that this disagreeable Modification [pain] is in the inferior part of the Soul, that which is exercis’d about Objects of Sense, and does not necessarily and directly affect the superior part . . . and therefore is no real evil to that which is properly the man. (77)

The division of the soul into two parts necessarily assumes a connection between the soul/mind and “objects of sense” although Astell does not yet theorize how such a connection might take place; that will come later. Rather, for now she focuses on how pain may be part of Norris’s theory of love by dividing pain itself into two separate kinds,

sensible and mental. Sensible pain, she argues, is caused by God's will through the movement of sensible objects toward the lower part of the soul while mental pain is caused by human beings and is associated with sin. She summarizes,

The short is, GOD is the Author of Pain considered as a Sensation, and so he is of all our Faculties and Powers; and as it proceeds from him it is good, designed to do us good, and therefore our Good. But he is not the Author of Pain considered as an Evil, as such it is purely and entirely owing to our selves; and since there is nothing truly and absolutely the Object of the hatred of a Rational creature but Sin, . . . consequently GOD's being the Author of Pain can be no just bar to our Love, much less any motive to our Hatred or Aversion. (79)

Here, Astell is agreeing with Norris's contention that pain can be medicinal except when it is connected to sinfulness; however, her argument goes a step further a few lines later when she mentions the term "Vital Principle": "For where there is a true Vital Principle, where the soul is not quite mortified, or at least Paralytick and Diseas'd, 'twill as certainly feel pain when 'tis thrust out of its Natural Order, and does not move towards GOD the true Term of its Motion" (78). Here, Astell is indirectly alluding to a link between mind and body by positing that the soul may be "mortified" if the body is "Pralytick or Diseas'd."⁶ This kind of sensible pain, unlike mental pain that is derived from sin, is "good" since "it is designed by God to better and improve the Spirit of the Mind" (79). By referencing Henry More's philosophical concept of vital congruity in this letter, Astell sets herself up for a more direct and combative critique of Norris's

⁶ The connection between mind and body is further emphasized a few lines later when Astell writes, "it being as necessary to the Soul to feel Pain and Torment when she does not stand rightly affected to her GOD, as when her Body lies under Sickness or outward Violence: And in proportion to the health of the soul, and the fineness of its Complexion, so is the degree of its Pain when interrupted in his Motions toward him" (78).

occasionalist theory of causation, which remains problematic since it denies any type of connection or causality between the body and mind.

A more nuanced understanding of Norris's use of Malebranchean occasionalism is called for in order to understand the depth of Astell's philosophical critique and how she will later evolve this critique into her original theory of feminine self-esteem.

According to Jacqueline Broad, Norris's strain of occasionalist (or causal) theory of sensation contributed to his view that material objects (and even human beings) were merely "occasions" for God to cause sensations within the human body or soul. In other words, all sensations in the human mind and body are derived strictly from God's will. Norris maintained primarily that "God is the only truly causally efficacious being, only he can be the cause of our pleasure" (Broad 130). This viewpoint, which Norris used to "prove" that a material object could not move an immaterial or transcendent entity, like a human soul, cemented his controversial theosophical stance summarized by the notions that "desire ought to be reserved for God alone" and that fellow humans are to be approached "with disinterested benevolence," which some of his peers understood as a quietist approach (Acworth 675).

Norris's occasionalist philosophy with his attendant reputation for being a "mystical dreamer" resulted from his adaptation of the French philosopher Nicholas Malebranche's impulse to "extend the Cartesian method to theological questions" (Acworth 674 & 676). For Malebranche, this meant developing a theory of grace that did not, at first, appeal to Norris because it included a vision of God as disinterested in terms of human relationship (Acworth 674). What appealed to Norris, by contrast, was

Malebranche's philosophical theory of occasionalism, which Acworth defines as a "theory of knowledge with its insistence on man's direct vision of the divine Ideas, and its consequent identification of truth with God. At all events, Norris shared with Malebranche a basic approach to God, apprehended as present to the soul in the form of truth" (675). Thus, under Malebranche's influence, mechanistic explanations extend into all realms of reality (material *and* spiritual), and this notion influenced him to emphasize the "immediate presence of God to the soul as the precondition of all knowledge;" thereby, putting him in direct conflict with Locke (676).

The influence of Malebranche's occasionalist philosophy on Norris's epistemology results in his departure from classic neo-Platonist stances that allowed for mind/body connectivity (even when the connection was metaphysically). This departure leaves his theory concerning love of God increasingly open to attack, not just by materialists but from fellow rationalists, including Astell. As her critique of Norris's occasionalism gains momentum throughout *Letters*, a picture emerges of her placement, quite literally, at the center of this debate. But what is most interesting about Astell's centrist or "middling" position, is its relationship to her emerging feminist philosophy, a connection that is not readily obvious on the surface.

In Norris's reply to Astell in "Letter IV" he pays her a compliment by labeling the points she has set forth concerning the dual aspects of pain as "your true System" (82). His compliment, which essentially raises her philosophical discourse to his level, may have emboldened her to continue her critique of his ideas and to further develop her own "System." At any rate, Norris signals that he fully understands the implications of her use

of the Morean concept of a “Vital” principle, for he takes pains in his response to theorize how his strict interpretation of Cartesian dualism (applied to spiritual matters) negates any chance for mind/body causality. He begins,

For though according to the Law of this State Pain be always occasioned by some Motion or Change in the Parts of the Body, yet since ‘tis the Soul that truly feels it, and GOD that truly raises it, I can easily conceive, that GOD can, if he pleases, raise the Sensation of Pain in her though no Change be made in the Body, nay though she had no Body at all. That GOD for instance can raise the Sensation of Burning in the Soul without any Impression of Fire upon her Body. (83)

Here, Norris hints at the extremism inherent in his occasionalist paradigm when he indicates that there may, in fact, be no need for a “Body at all.” His example of a feeling of burning in the soul caused by God “without any Impression of fire upon her Body” drives this point home. Norris is unrelenting in his emphasis on God’s “efficacious” nature with respect to causality, as when he summarizes two pages later,

We are certainly the meritorious Causes of all our natural Evils, as bringing them upon us by our Sins, but that we are the efficient Causes of any of them I deny. As all our good is wholly from GOD, so in this Sense is our evil. We have not the Power to modifie our own Souls, and can no more raise the Sensation of Pain in them than that of Pleasure, GOD is the true Author of both, as I have elsewhere shewn. (85)

The quietist strains inherent in Norris’s occasionalism become evident at the end of this chapter. Pleasure, he argues, is not “formally” sinful because, “As Sin cannot be formally pleasant, so neither can Pleasure be formally sinful. All pleasure in itself is simply good” (85). This is a point Astell can never concede as she acknowledges that wicked men feel “what we call sinful Pleasures.” How, then, to accommodate these two, seemingly contradictory viewpoints concerning pleasure and sin? Norris returns to his occasionalist philosophy to work out the problem. He argues at the end of “Letter IV”

that we must “distinguish between the movements of the Soul and the movements of the Body” (86). Bodily movements, he argues, “may be determined by those Objects which environ it, and so by those Movements we may unite our selves to those things which are the natural or occasional Causes of our Pleasure” (86). Such “things” include fire *and* human beings in the sense that interactions with fire/human beings can give us pleasure, of a lower order. He concludes,

Thus because we find Pleasure from the Fire [or humans], this is Warrant enough to approach it by a Bodily Movement, but we must not therefore love it. For Love is a Movement of the Soul, and that we are to reserve for him who is the true Cause of that Pleasure which we resent by the Fire, who as I have proved is not other than GOD. By which you may plainly perceive what ‘tis I mean by saying that Creatures may be sought for our Good, but not loved as our Good (86).

The idea that neighbors or friends may be “approach[ed]” but not loved is problematic for Astell because it breaks the Christian commandment to love one’s neighbor, and it lacks common sense, or in her words, “‘tis too nice for common Practice” (80). For now, however, she will continue to focus upon what she and Norris have in common, namely, the belief that the love of God is central to human happiness and moral perfection.

In “Letter V” Astell continues to reduce and divide philosophical concepts that Norris does not clarify to her satisfaction. Now, she focuses upon the difference between grief and pain in order to make a distinction between uneasiness and sinfulness. Though Astell ends this letter with her unequivocal support for Norris’s central premise that “God only is the true Cause of all our Good . . . [and] he ought to be the only Object of our Love ,” it appears that the fine distinction she makes in this letter concerning uneasiness and grief will have a distinct role to play in subsequent letters as she critiques her

mentor's occasionalism on new grounds (86). Half way through the letter, she clarifies that there is a difference between evil, which she terms "Evil as Evil," and the sensation of pain or grief, which she labels "uneasiness." These last two concepts (pain or grief) correspond to the physical and mental realms respectively and though she admits that such states may devolve into pure evil, she states by contrast that "they are not pure and absolute Evils" (89). They may, she argues, become good or "our good." She explains,

for tho' Pain and Grief put the Soul into uneasie Circumstances, yet they don't withdraw her from her true Good, they rather excite her more strongly to cleave to him, and that trouble which sensible things occasion, and which she feels through the stirs her up to fix more firmly on him [God]. (89)

When Astell links uneasiness, an evil in a "lower Sense," to the body/emotions *and* the good, she makes room for a conception of relating to, even loving, human beings (and their sensual capacities) that is distinct from Norris's viewpoint. This is the case, philosophically at least, even as she concludes the letter by reaffirming Norris's emerging sense of disdain for both the human body and society. Astell frames this aversion not so much in terms of distaste but in terms of fear. She fears, for example, that the love/desire of people will lead humans astray into sinful pleasures and away from "our Innocence" that only a pure love of God "secures" (91). She writes,

Indeed if we allow the Creature to be in any degree our Good, 'tis hard to keep our selves from desiring it, and if we permit Desire, we can never be secure from irregular Love, that Shame and Misery of Mankind. It being easier not to desire at all than to desire with Moderation. (91)

Here again, we see a departure from Norris's unequivocal stance that love should be reserved only for God. Astell understands in this passage the pain of unrequited desire and the impracticalness (as well as distastefulness) of relating to fellow humans as

stepping stones to the divine. Further, her reference to the difficulty of achieving moderation with respect to human desire/love highlights her emerging preoccupation with the passions. She characterizes passion, a preoccupation that will become central to her feminist philosophy, in the following terms: “insinuating Passion . . . where-ever ‘tis admitted, will spread and makes it Way” (91).

In the next two letters Astell’s interest in the passions, particularly love/desire guides her ensuing discussion and further critique of Norris’s occasionalism. In “Letter VII” Astell characteristically divides love into two kinds: the “Love of Desire” and the “Love of Benevolence” (100). This division precipitates her ongoing discussion concerning the problem of God’s commandment to love one’s neighbor, a commandment which contradicts Norris assertion that God should be the only object of human love. At this point, Astell presents a confused argument as she attempts to account for the love of one’s neighbor while still affirming Norris’s framework. She writes near the beginning of “Letter VII,”

And being I have heard some Object against your Account of the first and great Commandment, *that it is prejudicial to the second*, and because I am of quite contrary Opinion, and think nothing does more effectually secure and improve it, I will therefore offer to your Consideration and Correction such Meditation as I have had about it. (100)

Astell is clearly struggling with this intractable problem as she continues: “I must needs conclude, that when such a Sense is put upon one Precept as causes it to clash and interfere with another, it can’t be the genuine meaning of it” (100). The answer, for her, is to theorize two kinds of love, one with infinite or inexhaustible qualities and the other with more limited characteristics. Astell’s goal in dividing love into two kinds, one

associated with the divine and the other associate with “neighbors,” is to avoid “Excess and Irregularity of that Desire that makes it sinful” (100). She concludes that these two different kinds of love can co-exist because “the Soul that centres all her Love on GOD has no Temptation to those Sins that obstruct her Benevolence to her Neighbour” (101). The love of God (love of desire) in this case, serves to purify the sinful aspects of “bare” human desire (love of benevolence), so that “she has no *Pleasure*, no *Coveting* and no *Ambition*” but to partake in the Divine Nature” (101). Such a partaking will lead humans to be more philanthropic, which Astell equates with benevolence. In this manner, she recasts Norris’s unpleasant, utilitarian notion of human beings..

The second half of “Letter VII” alternates between affirming Norris’s contention that one should “withdraw my Heart from my Neighbour, and fix it entirely on him who has Merit enough to deserve” and the Christian imperative that “our Saviour commands us to love our Neighbour as our selves, and to love one another as he has loved us” (101). Astell attempts to reconcile these contradictory commands by ascribing the love of self to the love of benevolence (a form of charity) and separating this kind of love from the “inexhaustible Ocean of Felicity” that should be reserved for and that emanates from God. But she simply cannot let go of the importance of friendship, describing it as that “which next to the Love of GOD has Precedency of all the rest,” and she claims her role is to “assert and advance it” [friendship]. Astell ends this rather confusing discourse by re-focusing on the love of God as primary in light of the dangerous nature of the human passions:

For though we may fancy that the Love of the Creature is not contradictory, but subordinate to the Love of GOD, yet Love being the most rapid of all Motions, if once our Desire be set a moving, in vain do we think to stop and circumscribe it; and therefore as it is unjust, so it is unsafe to give it the least Tendency towards any Object but him who is the only proper and adequate one. (103)

Here, we see Astell attempting to reconcile contradictory impulses in her earliest philosophical endeavor, and we witness her growing preoccupation with the problematic nature of human passions, a topic Norris tends to ignore.

In the next two letters, Norris and Astell are chiefly in agreement concerning the different degrees of love, the fact that his theory of love doesn't contradict God's second commandment to love one's neighbor, and of the "Reasons[s] for loving GOD so intirely"(109). Astell, it could be argued, takes Norris's theory a step further in "Letter IX" by invoking puritanical language in her support of the notion that one should "cleave to the uncreated" (111). In this letter, she denounces materiality:

'Tis our Misfortune that we live an animal before we live a rational Life; the Good we enjoy is mostly transmitted to us through Bodily Mediums, and contracts such a Tincture of the Conveyance through which it passes, that forgetting the true Cause and Source of all our Good, we take up with those occasional God that are more visible, and present to our animal Nature. (117)

Further, she equates "Bodily Mediums" and "our animal Nature[s]" with a derogatory picture of human society, as when she writes of our tendency to cleave "to little dirty Creatures" and of the human propensity to "strike in with the general herd" (117). The urge to read these passages within "Letters IX" in a traditionally rationalist/Cartesian framework is understandable, yet it distorts Astell's larger point. A closer examination of the context within which Astell makes such extreme statements concerning the body and fellow human beings reveals, once again, a more complicated picture.

First, it must be pointed out that Astell, more broadly, is beginning to converse with Norris in terms of morality, not just epistemology. Evidence of this shift appears early in “Letter IX” when she writes, “We desire only in order to happiness, nothing being desirable any further than as it promotes that End” (110). “Creatures” she argues, which are vain, inconstant and often unreasonable, cannot make us happy, “for let a Man grasp as much of the Creature as possibly he can, he will still find an Emptiness in his Soul . . . which is always why we are on a Hunt after a Variety of Enjoyments” (110). If, as Astell argues, “we desire a Union” that will make us genuinely happy, we will need to conform to God’s will. Another lengthy passage in this letter stands out as important to the shift in tone concerning “the creature.” Half way through “Letter IX” Astell launches into a discussion of regulating the passions that is Cartesian in emphasis but that is not Cartesian in the traditional, dualist sense. This passage is worth quoting at length:

I will only take notice of the Management of our Thoughts, because on them depends our Words and Actions, and derive the Necessity of the true Love of GOD, from the impossibility of governing our Thoughts as we ought without it. Now this is most certain, that what we love will be uppermost in our Minds; there is no better Mark to discover our love than by observing what is the most frequent Subject of our Thoughts. For Thought seems to me to be nothing else but the Determination of the soul to some certain Object which she desires either to contemplate or enjoy. . . . And therefore where-ever the Weight of our Desire rests, the Stream of our Thoughts will follow; ‘tis no Purpose to drive them away, for though we may for a while put a Force on them, they will insensibly steal back again. . . . We must above all things take care to regulate our desire, since it is by this that we fall into destruction. (112)

In this quotation, Astell is concerned less with Descartes’s method of reasoning than she is with his theory of regulating the passions. Her emphasis is on the intermingling of thought and desire as when she writes, “Now this is most certain that what we love will

be uppermost in our Minds.” At the same time, however, she hints at Descartes’s theory of regulating the passions through habituating thoughts since thoughts are “nothing else but the Determination of the soul,” a determination that “we must above all things take care to regulate” lest we fall into “destruction.” The love of God, at this point in Astell’s thinking, is a curative for unruly passions/desires “which is a further proof of the great Necessity that lies upon us to cut off all Desire from the Creature betimes” (117). It is less the “creature’s” dirtiness, or animality, that Astell is concerned with. Rather, she is far more concerned with replacing the unruly, destructive power of the passions with “that stable Center”, i.e., God. In this respect, she departs from Norris’s occasionalism even as she advises in this particular letter “to shut up all the Avenues of our Souls from created Good” (117).

Evidence of the kind of extremism for which Norris’s contemporaries criticized him abounds in “Letter X”. Perhaps he felt emboldened by Astell’s increasing support of his denunciation of the “creature” in “Letter IX” when he writes,

To be at once intirely divorced from all sensible Objects, to have all our Idols demolished, and our high Places taken down, to be divided from the whole Creation, and to have all the Ties broken which by a numerous Union linked us to it, to be forced to undergo a mystical Death, a spiritual Crucifixion, to be crucified to the World, . . . to dye to the Body and World where we live. (119)

Negating the notion he earlier conceded of two separate kinds of love, one for humans and one for God, Norris asserts, “We are therefore to cast both these Loves into one and the same Channel, and make them both flow in one full Current towards GOD” (122).

Norris’s is a world in which one should be “wholly unhinged and dislodged from the Creature and intirely bottomed upon another Center” since “‘Tis the Love of the Creature

that is the general Temptation to Sin” (123). Norris then asks Astell rhetorically, “how comes it to pass that we are so backward?” Her answer is illuminating both in its refutation of his philosophical extremism and in terms of her emerging feminism.

In “Letter XI” Astell responds with spiritual ardor to Norris’s rhetorical question, before launching into a final attack on his theory of love/society:

When therefore in my solitary Musings I entertain my self with these agreeable Contemplations, I fancy the whole intellectual World is offering up it self a flaming Sacrifice to GOD, and that there is no Contention among intelligent Beings but who shall with greatest Ardour, love, praise and serve the glorious Author of our Happiness! (126)

In her “solitary musing” Astell appears to agree with Norris concerning his quietist and enthusiast tendencies. Answering his question even more directly, she herself asks of “backward” objectors, “Do they not feel these Cords of a Man as himself is pleased to call them, these silken Bands of Love, these odiferous Perfumes drawing them after him, uniting them to him by the most potent charms?”(128). Throughout this letter Astell is in near complete agreement with Norris, even with respect to his quietism. A shift, however, occurs near the end of “Letter XI” in which Astell returns to the problem within Norris’s theosophy of God’s commandment to love one’s neighbor.

Astell will make a final attempt to convince Norris that the love of the creature, which she now refers to as either “neighbors” or “relations,” is congruent with the love of God even if this kind of creaturely love is different from divine love. In this section, she foregoes the necessity of proving that one must love one’s neighbors because “that it is so needs no Proof, being expressly affirmed by our Lord himself” (129). Rather, she declares, “let us inquire into the Reason *why* it is so” (129). She explains that since the

“love of Benevolence” is not a kind of love that could be directed toward or received by God, He “thought fit to devolve all his Right to that Love on our Neighbour, and to require as strict a Payment of it to his Proxy, as if he were capable of receiving it himself” (129). Here, she breaks from Norris’s notion that the love of the creature is secondary and utilitarian, a kind of nuisance that one is practically required to suffer through. Astell goes even further when she equates the love of benevolence to the love of desire in the following passage:

And besides, the Love of GOD pressing us to such an exact Imitation of him . . . and God being in nothing more imitable than in his Charity and Communicativeness, our Love to him will require us to transcribe this most lovely Pattern, and to do all the good we can to those whom he is constantly pursuing with his Benefits. (129)

God, she is saying, requires that humans be charitable. Astell expresses that she “cannot forbear to reckon it [love of creature] an irregular Affection” (130). This statement is in direct contrast to admissions she made in an earlier letter regarding her desire for and grief over the loss of a passionate friendship. This kind of desire, she affirms, is not unnatural.

Evidence of Astell’s shift from epistemological to moral considerations can be found in this same section when she corresponds the love of creatures, or relations” with justice. She writes, “I should therefore chuse to derive the Reasons why we are in the first place to regard our Relations, rather from Justice, and the Rules of Oeconomy, than from Love” (130). Justice in this case means practicing benevolence “to those within his own Verge and District, whose wants he is best acquainted with, and can most conveniently supply” (130). Such an exercise, which is aimed at selflessness versus

spiritual self-service, will help a person aim toward universal “Act[s] of Benevolence” (130). This is a further departure from Norris’s call to “to be at once intirely divorced from all sensible Objects, to have all our Idols demolished, and our high Places taken down, to be divided from the whole Creation, and to have all the Ties broken . . .” (119). Though Astell closes this letter with conciliatory raptures concerning “the thick Cloud of Creatures that obscures thy View,” her need for theoretical consistency has won out; for “a true Lover of GOD is always consistent with himself, one part of his Life does not clash and disagree with the other” (130).

In the first “Appendix” to *Letters*, Astell offers an epistemological solution to the “problem” of the love of creature. Returning to the philosophy of Norris’s own mentor, Henry More, Astell works out a new problem concerning materiality. Why, she asks, would God create the material world “in vain?” Returning to an epistemological line of questioning to resolve this “acknowledged truth,” Astell wonders at the “Variety of Objects as our senses are excercised about” in the following passage:

Yet if the Objects of our Sense have no natural Efficiency towards the producing of those Sensations which we feel at their Presence, if they serve no further than as positive and arbitrary Conditions to determine the Action of the true and proper cause, if they have nothing in their own Nature to qualifie them to be instrumental to the Production of such and such Sensations, but that if GOD should so please (the Nature of the things notwithstanding) we might as well feel Cold at the presence of fire as of water, and heat at the Application of water or any other Creature; and since GOD may as well excite Sensation in our Souls without these positive Conditions as with them, to what end do they serve? (131 – 132)

In this passage, Astell makes it clear that she is not in agreement with Norris that matter is purely mechanistic, or in her terms that “Objects of our Sense . . . have nothing in their own Nature to qualifie them to be an instrument to the Production of such and such

Sensations.” To prove that, in fact, matter may “be an instrument to the Production of . . . Sensations,” Astell turns to Henry More’s *Immortality of the Soul*. She writes,

Why therefore may there not be a Sensible Congruity between those Powers of the Soul that are employed in Sensation, and those Objects which occasion it? Analogous to that vital Congruity which your Friend Dr. More will have be between some certain Modification of Matter, and the plastick Part of the Soul, which Notion he illustrates by that Pleasure which the perceptive Part of the Soul (as he calls it) is affected with by good musick or delicious Viands, as I do this of Sensible by his of vital Congruity, and methinks they are so symbolical that if the one be admitted the other may. (132)

Both More and Cudworth, notable neo-Platonists, employed the notion of plasticity to refute purely mechanistic explanations for natural phenomena. Plasticity, a synonym for “vitality” referred in their writings to a spirit in nature that is God infused. Cudworth referred to nature as God’s “Subservient Minister” that could carry out the detailed work of creation. Cudworth explains this not uncommon early modern theory in his

Intellectual System of the Universe.⁷ He writes,

But still so, as that all is supervised by One *Understanding* and *Intending Cause*, and nothing passes, without His *Approbation*; who when either those *Mechanick Powers* fall short, or the *Stubborn Necessity* of *Matter* proves uncompliant, does overrule the same, and supply the Defects thereof, by that which is *Vital*; and that without setting his own Hands immediately to every work too; there being a *Subservient Minister* under him, an *Artificial Nature*, which is an *Archeus* of the whole world, governs the *Fluctuating Mechanism* thereof, and does all things faithfully, for Ends and Purposes, Intended by its Director (qt. in Patrides 26).

Henry More’s vision of “plasticity” with its separation of the soul into two parts appeals to Astell who employed it earlier in “Letter III” when she first disputed Norris’s

⁷ According to C.A. Patrides, Cudworth’s reference to “Plastic Nature...is a close relative of More’s Spirit of Nature, and like it, a direct descendent of the tradition of the *logoi spermatikoi* or *rationes seminales* introduced by the Stoics, qualified by the Neoplatonists, and adapted finally by any number of thinkers during the Renaissance” (26).

conception of pain. More divides the soul into two parts in *Book I* “Chapter III” of *The Immortality of the Soul*:

It may be doubted, whether there may not be Essences of a middle condition betwixt these *Corporeal* and *Incorporeal* Substances we have described, and that of two sorts, The one [spirit or soul] *Impenetrable and Indiscerpible* [indivisible], the other *Penetrable and Discerpible* [divisible]. (67, emphasis not added).

More is making a classic Cartesian distinction when he theorizes matter as divisible and penetrable in contrast to spirit, which is indivisible and impenetrable. But, as a neo-Platonist, he goes a step further by theorizing a connection between the binaries. In *Book I* “Chapter VII” he writes,

But notwithstanding the Penetrability and easy passage of a *Spirit* through *Matter*, there is yet for all that a capacity of a strong union betwixt them, and every whit as conceivable as betwixt the parts of *Matter* themselves. For what glue or Cement holds the parts of hard matter in stones and metals together. (81)

The “glue” or “Cement” that More describes as having the potential to unite spirit and matter is an adaptation of the Plotinian concept of “Spirit of Nature.”⁸ More adapts this concept in *Book III* “Chapter XII” of *Immortality*:

The Spirit of Nature therefore, according to that notion I have of it, is, a substance incorporeal, but without Sense and Animadversion, pervading the whole Matter of the Universe, and exercising an Plastical power therein according to the sundry predisposition and occasions in the parts it works upon, raising such Phaenomena in the World, by directing the parts of the Matter and their Motion, as cannot be resolved into mere Mechanical powers. (169)

⁸ C.A. Patrides explains the influence of Plotinus on the Cambridge Platonists: “Plotinus is certainly crucial. The Cambridge Platonists manifest the same rational mysticism so characteristic of him, and endorse in particular his experimental knowledge that the vision of God is attained ‘by an Intellectual touch.’ But there are important differences here. Plotinus, as a pagan, could assert that man achieves union with the Divine unaided, but the Cambridge Platonists as Christians regarded the candle of the Lord as a God-directing gift. Moreover, Plotinus’s reiterated counsel that a man should withdraw into himself is indeed echoed in many a statement by the Cambridge Platonists, but his further insistence on the necessity of man’s total isolation from the world was resisted at every turn,” except by Norris (17 – 18).

Astell has found in More's conception of the "Plastical power therein" her solution for how mind and body can interact, and therefore how God's material creation may be rendered useful. She writes in specific terms of the power (or congruity) of material objects "to draw forth . . . sensations in the Soul" concluding that God acts through "His Servant Nature mediately," not immediately, as Norris has impractically postulated (132). Further, her renaming Morean plasticity "sensible congruity" demonstrates both a level of currency with respect to the terms of the materialist/rationalist debate in her generation, as well as a high degree of assertiveness in invoking her mentor's mentor to refute his theory.⁹

Not surprisingly, Norris is displeased with Astell's letter in which she expresses "a middle Way." He responds emphatically in the final "Appendix" to *Letters* that his interpretation of occasionalism is "a Proposition of the most incontestable and philosophick Evidence" (133). Surprisingly, however, his denial contains a concession halfway through when he admits that a degree of sensible congruity may be "allowed" (137). Still, even this admission is surrounded by intricate, emphatic and stubborn sounding denials that build up to a final passage where he expresses his fear of a materialist slide into disorder. This fear corresponds with Astell's emerging attention within *Letters* to the problem of ordering the passions. In subsequent publications, she will connect the disorderliness of the passions to the "problem" of women's biological nature as conceived of in a Renaissance worldview. Just as Norris's fears concerning a

⁹ It is important to note that both More and Norris lost a measure of respect in their lifetimes for embracing spiritual ideas that were not in the mainstream. More, for example, believed in and wrote about ghosts, and Norris was accused of spiritual enthusiasm and a kind of quietism that went against the beliefs of his Cambridge Platonist forebears. Astell was aware of and sensitive to such criticisms.

slide into materialism have conservative political overtones, so too do Astell's impulses to grant women full human equality in an epistemological and a moral sense, have political overtones.

To prove his theory that "God only is the cause of [sensations]," Norris conceives of sensations as part of or "modifications: to the soul. In this manner, sensations of grief or joy may be postulated as originating from God, not other bodies or object. Bodies, Norris emphasizes, must be thought of in purely mechanical terms because they contain "but Magnitude, Figure and Motion, and that being without Thought it self it is not able to produce it in us" (134). Further, Norris writes of interactions with fellow human beings in atomistic terms:

This Body of mine is placed among and surrounded with a vast number and variety of other Bodies. These other Bodies according to the Laws of Motion established in the World strike variously upon mine, and make different Impressions upon it according to the degree of their Motion, and the difference of their Size and Figure. (135)

According to Norris, what occurs between bodies and/or sensible objects is worth paying attention to in so far as these interactions tend toward the "good and preservation" of the body or the "good of the animal life," because this is the place in which God has housed the soul. Further on in the letter, however, Norris betrays the difficulty in denying any body/mind causality when he concedes that there is a union between the two distinct substances, which he refers to vaguely as "those general Laws of Union" (136). Astell's sensible congruity is allowable under these "general Laws." Norris explains that, if desired, God could cause one to feel the sensation of extreme heat/pain while being

exposed to a temperate flame, but that God would probably not choose to do so unless it was “in regard[s] to the good state of the body” (137). Norris explains:

For in short, if by sensible Congruity you mean only, that considering the Good or Evil that arrives to the state of the Body from such an Impression there is an antecedent Aptness or Reason in the thing why GOD should touch the Soul with such or such a Sentiment rather than the contrary, I readily acknowledge that there is such a sensible Congruity. (137)

This more limited interpretation of sensible congruity sounds like Astell’s syncretic notion of nature as God’s servant. But Norris can’t go that far. He persists in denying a substantive body/mind union, or the power of sensible objects/bodies to alter, move or influence minds. Norris further denounces the notion of Nature as God’s servant in the strongest terms, declaring, “If therefore this be meant by sensible Congruity that the Objects of our senses have any real Part or Share in the Production of our Sensations, though it be only in an instrumental way, I utterly disclaim it as an absurd and unphilosophical Prejudice” (137). His explanation at the end of the last letter concerning why this idea is “absurd and unphilosophical” offers modern readers a glimpse into what, exactly, was at stake when thinkers such as Norris and Astell held onto the belief in God’s prominence throughout the whole chain of creation. He writes,

If it were not beneath the Grandeur and Majesty of GOD to create the World immediately, neither is it so to govern it, and if his Greatness will permit him to order and direct the Motions of Matter, much more will it to act upon and give sentiments to our Spirits, tho’ with his own immediate Hand, which is necessary to hold and govern the World which it has made. (138)

Astell shares Norris’s preoccupation with “Natural Order,” but her preoccupation by the end of *Letters* has shifted to a different philosophical problem, how one might order one’s passions so as to be in alignment with God (78). This new problem, I argue, is tied

to Astell's early feminist vision/philosophy, which emerges at the beginning of *Letters* in her second reply to Norris:

Fain I wou'd rescue my Sex, or at least as many of them as come within my little Sphere, from that Meanness of Spirit into which the Generality of them are sunk, perswade them to pretend to some higher Excellency than a well-chosen Pettycoat, or a fashionable Commode; and not wholly to lay out their Time and Care in Adorning their Bodies, but to bestow a Part of it at least in the Establishment of their Minds, since inward Beauty will last when outward is decayed. (80)

Astell will not fully work out the link between her concern with regulating the passions and the problem of women's vanity or "Meanness of Spirit" until her third publication, her second *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. For now, it is enough to discern the seeds of this tripartite connection: body, mind and passions as Astell challenges Norris to make room for the body, begins to pay attention to the problem of the passions, and laments the sorry state of women's moral standing in early modern society. The following chapter section will examine the one confessional moment within *Letters* in light of Astell's ambition to become a philosopher and her expressed desire for "obscurity" which I read in a conventional as opposed to a literal fashion.

Confession as a Style of Philosophizing

The short collection of poems Astell gave to John Sancroft after arriving in Chelsea contains a poem entitled "Ambition" that begins with the lines: "What's this that with such vigour fills my brest?/like the first mover finds no rest,/and with its force dos all things draw,/Makes all submit to its emperial Law!" (qtd. in Perry 405). Astell concludes that worldly ambitions, the province of "Mean spirited men," are "Vile" and

that her true ambition is to be humble in a Christian sense: “Let me obscured be, & never known (405). Similarly, Astell writes in the poem, “In Emulation of Mr. Cowlely,” “What shall I do? Not to be Rich or Great/Not to be courted and admir’d,/ With Beauty blest, or Wit inspir’d,/Alas! These merit not my care and sweat,/These cannot my Ambition please”(qtd. in Hill 13). I sense an element of bitterness in these lines that surfaces again when Astell’s conservative impulse arises in contradictory senses within her fourth publication, *Reflections Upon Marriage*. For example, she advises women: “she will freely leave him the quiet Dominion of this World, whose Thoughts and Expectations are plac’d on the next” (128).

I read Astell’s treatment of the motif of ambition and her stated love of obscurity as ambiguous. On one hand, these admissions may take part in what Elaine Hobby has termed “making a virtue of necessity;” whereby, women authors at mid-century turn constraints into permissions, into pockets of liberty and autonomy” (8). Hobby explains that one way in which women turned public speaking or writing, considered manly and dangerous especially two generations before Astell wrote, into a virtue was to “appear to fit neatly and invisibly into the status quo, apparently changing nothing but making their oppression less stifling” (8). Astell, it could be argued, was less stifled than her earlier feminist forebears of the violent Civil War years, yet she was economically and socially vulnerable and therefore would have wished to fit “into the status quo” on some levels. The introduction to *Letters* offers a further clue as to the real meaning of Astell’s love of obscurity. She writes of her reluctance to publish *Letters*:

So that if what I advance be no Truth, yet I am sure it is no Paradox, which is enough to fence me from Prejudice When I have desired the Reader to be so just to me as not to meddle with these Papers till he has first carefully perused the Discourse to which they relate. . . . I have nothing more to say here unless it be to give some account of the Reasons of our communicating a private Correspondence to the Publick, concerning which I shall leave the Reader to satisfie himself. (60 – 61)

Astell is clearly more worried about social “prejudice” than breaking with her expressed ambition for humility and obscurity. In fact, in an answer to her concerns, Norris convinces her to publish the volume since,

to be plain and free, I do verily think nothing can be more conducive . . . to promote the love of GOD, than your Divine Discourses, nothing more effectual to enlarge its Empire in the Hearts of Men, which is so excellent an End, that I can hardly see how you can possibly dispense with your self from serving it when you have it so far in your power. (63)

Astell agrees to publish the volume given that its purpose is, according to Norris, to “enlarge” the hearts of those who read their “Divine Discourses.” This other-directed purpose allows her to skirt the issue of her own ambition. The following passage from within “Letter V” belies Astell’s love for obscurity and reveals her assertive style and intellectual ambition: “I desire the Favour of you to furnish me with such a System of Principles as I may relie on, and to give me such Rules as you judge most convenient to initate a raw Disciple in the Study of Philsophy” (92).

Astell’s confessional moment in the rich “Letter III” has been previously read as an admission of lesbianism. In the first modern print edition of *Reflections and A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part I*, Bridget Hill claims that “a suspicion becomes a certainty The whole tone of this letter is intensely personal. She desperately appeals for Norris’s help to cure her “disorder,r” a passionate friendship with another woman” (8).

Alessa Johns subsequently relied upon Hill's claim of Astell's lesbianism to support a rather startling claim that Astell promoted lesbian relationships within her all women's academy: "at the same time , she says there is no reason why the women should not pair up, why certain couples might not find they have a special bond" (70). This is an example of the kind of "danger" Mark Lewellyn points to when scholars read early modern women's texts anachronistically and extra-contextually. In regards to the civil war poet, Katherine Philips, he writes against the impulse of some scholars to read her poetry concerning feminine love as taking part in the Sapphic tradition: "Philips [some scholars claim] is the earliest printed example of a woman's poetic expression in English of intense same-sex love between women" (Andreadis, qtd. in Lewellyn).

For Lewellyn, this approach grossly underestimates Philips's involvement in seventeenth-century neo-Platonist philosophy, especially concerning female friendships. Neglecting philosophical contexts, he claims "puts Philips's work into a shadow-land area, behind the culture of her time and certainly not central within it" (13). Less attention is now paid to Astell's supposed lesbianism, especially since E. Derek Taylor debunked the veracity of Hill's claim when he argued, "to say, as Hill must, that Norris somehow 'missed' or 'ignored' so astounding an admission on Astell's part bends all bounds of credibility – and Hill never explains, for that matter, why Astell would agree to publish a work that, in Hill's account, effectively 'outed' her" (507). Still her work tends to be read extra-contextually and as "not central" to philosophical ideas of her time. Astell's admission of love and pain *must*, I argue, be read contextually and philosophically, since it was ostensibly written to resolve the human problem of pain

within Norris's theory of love. Even further clues within the text lend evidence to the viewpoint that Astell's confession is part of her early way of "doing" philosophy, a way that she would later abandon.

In "Letter III" Astell confesses that she feels "deserted" by "creatures" and by God:

and [the soul] will feel the same uneasie chilliness and darkness come upon it when deprived of the Light of GOD's Countenance, that its inferiour part does when it wants the Sun's comfortable and enlightening Beams. And this I take to be the true meaning of what some People call Desertion; it being as necessary to the Soul to feel Pain and Torment when she does not stand rightly affected to her GOD, as when her Body lies under Sickness or outward Violence: And in proportion to the health of the Soul, and the fineness of its Complexion, so is the degree of its Pain when interrupted in its Motion towards him. (78)

But feeling, as she expresses, "deprived of the Light of GOD's Countenance" is a human fault since the desertion itself indicates that one's soul is not directed "towards him." At the end of this letter, however, she moves from a philosophical statement concerning ideal human relationships to her own weakness with respect to love:

Permit me to add a Word or two more which is of greater Concernment to me because of practical Consideration; you have fully convinced me that GOD is the only proper Object of my Love, . . . yet alas, sensible beauty does too often press upon my Heart, whilst intelligible is disregarded. For having by Nature a strong Propensity to friendly Love, which I have all along encouraged as a good Disposition to Vertue, and do still think it so if it may be kept within the Bounds of Good will: But having likely thought till you taught me better, that I need not cut off all Desire from the Creature, provided it were in Subordination to, and for the sake of the Creator: I have contracted such a Weakness, I will not say by Nature . . . but by voluntary Habit, that it is a very difficult thing for me to love at all, without something of Desire. (32 – 33)

This passage belies Astell's weakness concerning desire, which she conceptualizes as part of her "nature." Her nature, she further explains, consists of "a strong Propensity to

friendly Love,” which can be read as a personal quirk *or* as emblematic of female nature generally, a nature that is viewed as more prone to passions/emotions in a Renaissance context.

It is my view that Astell’s personal confession of love/grief in relationship to an unrequited friendship corresponds with her attunement to what Alice Sowaal has termed women’s “skeptical predicament” in this period. According to Sowaal, a female philosopher’s starting point “is not the result of philosophical argument but rather of societal prejudice and custom; it is not to be restricted to the realm of philosophical discussion, but rather to be entertained on an everyday basis” (238). Sowaal terms this societal prejudice the “Women’s Defective Nature Prejudice, WDN for short”:

According to this prejudice, a woman’s vice follows from the nature that women have, a nature that is defective. . . . On the individual level, when women hold the WDN Prejudice, they fall into a skeptical predicament. They believe their natures are defective, and that God is an entity that has created them in this defective manner. Therefore they have no desire to improve their minds, and they lack an ability to understand their perfections, which would otherwise guide them in living a virtuous life, itself a path to salvation. (231)

When gripped with this sort of skepticism, a woman cannot simply reason her way out of the predicament and conclude that society, not God has rendered women inferior.¹⁰

That Astell is clearly working with skepticism on a different level is evident when she

¹⁰ In Descartes’ *Meditations*, for example, philosophical skepticism takes the form of positing that God may be an “evil genius,” or a deceiver of humankind. In the “First Meditation,” Descartes writes, “I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh or blood or sense, but as falsely believing that I have all these things. I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation ” (15). This is the kind of philosophical exercise that Sowaal refers to as typical of philosophical training but that obviates the women’s “skeptical predicament.”

writes in “Letter III” of her desire to “rescue my Sex . . . from the Meanness of Spirit into which the Generality of them are sunk” (80). Not coincidentally, this admission follows her brief confession of weakness in love and is then followed by her criticism of Norris’s own notion ““that we may seek Creatures for our Good, but not love them as our Good”” (80). She agrees with this concept, “yet methinks ‘tis too nice for common Practice” (80). In other words, it is not applicable for her personally, nor for the ‘generality’ of women. In this case, her practical experience of grief and loss is at odds with Norris’s conception of ideal love. Unlike the “generality of women,” however, Astell is able to reason her way out of the predicament, as she concludes in a postscript to her third letter.

The tone of Astell’s postscript is sharp and distinct from her earliest letters, suggesting an impulse to correct the record and to disclaim her earlier confession:

The Writer of this Letter, who does not think herself oblig’d to persist in a Mistake because she once fell into it, but shall always be glad to be convinc’d of an Error, and to retract it, as she confesses she was mistaken, and express’d her self crudely in several places of this Letter, so she desires to retract what is said in this: For she owns ‘tis her Opinion, that next to Sorrow for our own Sins, our Neighbors refusing to receive the Spiritual Good we wish them, is the justest, greatest, and most lasting Cause of Grief; and that though Death, or some Temporary Calamities, may excuse a few Temporary Calamities, may excuse a few Temporary Tears, yet that only can challenge a deep and Settled Concern. (34)

The “mistake” Astell refers to in this passage is no longer the natural “defect” of her weakness in human love, but rather that she “express[ed] herself crudely in several places of this Letter.” The “crudeness” refers to her passionate expression of love, not the fact *that* she loved and grieved, since “next to Sorrow for our own Sins, our Neighbors

refusing to receive the Spiritual Good we wish them, is the justest, greatest, and most lasting Cause of Grief.” In other words, it is natural to feel sorrowful when love is not reciprocated. Personal expressions were and still are not part of high philosophical discourse, yet they were connected to Astell’s way of working out the problem of mind/body causality with respect to human love. This may explain why Astell chose to append this section of the letter as opposed to omitting it.

Astell makes another kind of confession within “Letter V” when she writes of Norris’s criticism of her division of the soul into two parts, the inferior and the superior. Norris had noted, “Thus the Stoicks reasoned of old, and thus you now. . . I do not see what Advantage accrues of this Distinction” (84). Astell admits that she isn’t sure of her “Supposition” either: “As for the Distinction of the Soul into inferior and superior Part, I am as little satisfied with it as you can be, and do confess to you ingenuously that I have no clear Idea of that which is properly my self, nor do I well know how to distinguish its Powers and Operations” (88). This is an extraordinarily unguarded moment in Astell’s letters. It is worth noting not just for its evocation of Cartesianism, the idea that she is grappling with the heady, Enlightenment concept of selfhood, but also with respect to Norris’s delighted response to her phrasing. He replies in “Letter VI”:

I like your Ingenuity in confessing that you have no Clear Idea of that which is properly your self, and I further tell you, that you never will have while you are in this State. We do not know our Souls here by any Idea of them, (as not seeing them yet in GOD) but only by Consciousness or interior Sentiment, which is the reason that the Knowledge we have of them is so imperfect. (94)

At this point Norris quotes Malebranche to underscore the unknowability of God and self:

He has made thee for himself. Wherefore I shall not discover to thee the Idea of thy Being, till that happy Time when the View of the very Essence of thy GOD shall deface and eclipse all thy Beauties, and make thee despise all that thou art, that thou mayst think only of contemplating him. (95)

It is probable that Astell was speaking more in Cartesian than in Malebranchean terms when she admits to not knowing “that which is properly my self” since Descartes’s project was to draw “attention to the manifest simplicity and knowability of the self” (Nelson 400).¹¹ A link between philosophy and feminism can thus be further drawn here to help explain Astell’s admission that her self “properly” cannot be known. This, in a sense, is an anti-Cartesian statement because it rests on the skeptical predicament that women as women must sort through.

Conclusion

In “Revising Descartes: On Subject and Community,” Timothy J. Reiss points out that Descartes’s conception of the cogito is often misunderstood to mean a separate, individual, self-regulating, embodied will and intellect, which inaugurates the modern

¹¹ It is my view that Astell and Norris were expressing different viewpoints concerning the unknowability of the self in these exchanges. I believe Astell’s admission concerns her femaleness, and Norris’s concerns the Malebranchean notion that the presence and the comprehension of infinite ideas “depends upon the presence of God to our mind . . . Malebranche’s main argument for vision in God rests on the requirement that there be present to us something that can include or contain all those things that we apprehend with our minds” (Scott 62). The self, like God, is thus unknowable from Norris’s perspective.

notion of an isolated, separate self, rife with alienation. But Reiss argues that a more contextual read of the influence of Descartes's schooling and of his famous text, *Meditations*, vis-à-vis his final publication, the *Passions of the Soul*, suggests that he was ultimately concerned with the individual in relationship to the community. He explains that within *The Passions*, "[Descartes's] context had been that of trying to understand how one could get from individual action, benefiting private interest in an imperfect society . . . to a new society where all acted to everyone's benefit" (31).

Astell demonstrates in her critique of Norris's occasionalism that she is interested in more than just philosophical consistency. She, like Descartes, is interested in how humans relate to one another, or in her term "neighborliness." A self in isolation makes little sense to her, especially when such a (gendered) self is conceived of as naturally inferior. Astell's expressed goal of leading women toward "some higher Excellency" will require an attunement not just to Descartes's rationalist framework but to his moral theory (80). But first she will have to convince women, as early feminist had done, of the extent of women's predicament.

Chapter Two: Defining a Woman's True Worth

Introduction:

Mary Astell's idea to create an all women's academy in the last years of the seventeenth century was by no means a new idea. A generation earlier, for example, Bathsua Makin had published her pamphlet, *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673) in which she argued that women are naturally fit to be educated. She writes in her pamphlet, "Seeing nature produces women of such excellent parts that they do often equalize, sometimes excel men in whatever they attempt, what reason can be given why they should not be improved . . . Learning perfects and adorns the soul, which all creatures aim at" (130).¹² Similarly, Richard Allestree published a popular, much reprinted treatise entitled, *The Ladies Calling in Two Parts by the Author of the Whole Duty of Man* (also in 1673). This text recasts feminine/Christian virtues such as modesty, meekness, compassion, affability and piety in more just, and, according to Alestree, "new and proportionate Accessions of [womanly] Duty" (5). Though he is not strictly writing a treatise on women's education in the tradition of Makin or Astell, he is addressing women's moral education, and he makes explicit references to the injustice of

¹² Frances Teague argues that Makin's plan for educating women differs from Astell's in that Makin believes married women (not just single women) should also be educated: "For Astell and her contemporaries, marriage and learning could not be reconciled" (96). This is an arguable point, for Astell mentions in her second *Serious Proposal* that she understands most women will eventually leave her monastery for marriage.

barring women from the kinds of education men typically receive. He writes, for example, in the preface,

Men have their parts cultivated and improved by Education, refined and subtilized by Learning and Arts, are like an inclosed piece of a Common, which by Industry and Husbandry becomes a different thing from the rest, tho the natural Turf own'd no such inequality. And truly had Women the same Advantage, I dare not say but they would make as good returns of it; some of those few that have bin tried, have bin eminent in several parts of Learning. (b1)

Astell specifically mentions Allestree's text in her second *Serious Proposal*; however, she never mentions Makin's whose framework fits into a more traditional, humanistic mode concerning separatist educational models for women. I view Astell's naming of Allestree but her exclusion of Makin as emblematic of the the new emphasis her academy places on moral education. The emphasis on a morality per se is not new, but Astell's method for teaching morality with its emphasis on Cartesianism (both in its rationalist and moralist frameworks) is new. Like Allestree whose goal was to "acquaint [women] with their own Value, [by] animat[ing] them to some higher thoughts of themselves" Astell begins her two part treatise on educating women by comparing how women currently are "mean and contemptible" to how they might become, brave and good (b2).

The first part of this chapter places Mary Astell's argument for an all women's academy within the context of the long standing humanistic debate concerning women's equality, known as the "querelle des femmes." This debate began in the late medieval period, culminating in Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*, which presents an allegorical fortress where women of virtue may learn and study in peace. In this chapter section, I trace similarities of content between *City of Ladies* and the first *Serious*

Proposal to argue that Astell is writing within an established early feminist tradition, but in a new philosophical/political context. The second chapter focuses upon classical and Renaissance notions of womanhood, especially as those notions are tied to feminine embodiment and the Renaissance conception of women's natural inferiority. The content of this chapter section serves to emphasize the implicit body-orientation that most early feminist arguments engaged in, directly or not. Astell, I argue, begins to engage with the philosophical problem of women's embodiment vis-à-vis the errors women make concerning their true or inner worth by way of her critique of commonplace feminine vices like vanity, talkativeness, and superficiality.

In the final chapter section I compare utopian impulses within Astell's first *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* to similar impulses within within Maragaret Cavendish's closet drama, the *Convent of Pleasure* (1668). Both texts conceive of a separatist, reparative sphere for women and both are founded upon materialist/philosophical frameworks, although these frameworks have different outcomes in each author's conceptions of an ideal sphere for women. Finally, I point out that such early feminist utopian influences have political overtones in that each author's critique of the early modern marriage economy is conceived to promote women's flourishing or happiness and thereby offers alternative possibilities for how society should be constructed to achieve that end.

Astell's Singularity and the "Querelle des Femmes"

In "Disappearing Ink: Early Modern Women Philosophers and Their Fate in History," Eileen O'Neil debunks the idea that seventeenth-century women philosophers were a rarity:

women's scholarly contributions, especially in philosophy, have frequently been considered astounding feats, accomplished by 'exceptional women,' which, while of significant interest at the time of the circulation or publication of a text, have been taken to be of marginal value given 'the long view' of history. (18)

Mary Astell has tended to be viewed in this way. A good example of this impulse arises Bridget Hill's abridged collection of Astell's early prose when she labels her "the first English feminist," writing of Astell's contributions as "powerful and independent":

On the basis of these two works [*Serious Proposals* I & II] alone, the powerful and independent intelligence of a remarkable woman is revealed. That both works ran to several editions in her lifetime suggests something of their popularity among her contemporaries (2).

This description of Astell as possessing an "independent intelligence" and as being "remarkable" follows O'Neil's critique of how early modern women philosophers are depicted to the letter. Astell's popularity in her lifetime belies Hill's remark in the introduction that "at her very best Mary Astell is very quotable," and it attests to the "marginal value" her work has tended to be accorded even (1). I take the adjectives, "exceptional," "remarkable" and even "independent" to be contemporary synonyms for the fraught (especially when applied to women) early modern term "singularity." The *Oxford English Dictionary* ascribes a number of meanings to this word with the most common usage in the seventeenth-century being:

the fact or quality of differing from others or from what is generally accepted, especially in thought or religion; personal, individual, or independent action, judgment, etc., especially in order to render oneself conspicuous or to attract attention or notice, (common from 1590 – 1700). (*OED* online)

Within her first *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Astell, it seems has this meaning of the word singular in mind, not its earlier usage: “distinctiveness . . . involving some superior quality.” That she is using the more common usage is evident when she worries out loud in the beginning of the first *Serious Proposal* that her “unfashionable” idea of educating women might be characterized as “singular” or odd and out of the ordinary. She writes:

Indeed a Learned Education for Women will appear so unfashionable, that I began to startle at the singularity of the proposition but was extremely pleas'd when I found a late ingenious Author (whose Book I met with since the writing of this) agree with my Opinion. For speaking of the Repute that Learning was in about 150 Years ago, *It was so very Modish* (says he) *that the fair Sex seem'd to believe that Greek and Latin added to their Charms: and Plato and Aristotle untranslated, were frequent Ornaments of their Closets. One wou'd think by the effects, that it was a proper way of Educating them, since there are no accounts in History of so many great Women in any one Age, as are to be found between the years 1500 and 1600* (Mr. Wotton's *Relfect. On Ant. And Mod. Learning*). (17)

Astell, in her state of being “startl[ed] at the singularity of the [her own] proposition,” is expressing her anxiety concerning “depart[ing] from what is customary.” This anxiety corresponds with the concern she expressed in the introduction to *Letters* that she would be subjected to “prejudice” if her ideas/critiques were published. Her admission here may be read similarly as employing both senses of the word singular; on one hand as an oddity and on the other hand as expressing a distinctive and superior quality that may set her apart negatively as a woman. Along these lines, Astell will later describe her goal

and persona in her fourth publication, *Reflections Upon Marriage*, as emanating from “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” (70). As is characteristic of much of Astell’s prose, her use of the word singular is nuanced, complex and paradoxical, in that it gestures both toward self-protection and self-assertion, i.e., she is a humble genius.

That Astell is more concerned in the first *Serious Proposal* with the common usage of the word “singular” is evident, however, when she bolsters her idea for educating women in the classics by quoting “Mr. Wotton’s” passage referring to women’s learning as customary two hundred years previously. Further, this reputable, male author “agree[s] with [her] Opinion,” thus demonstrating that hers is not a fringe idea that arose in a singular (i.e., independent) context, nor is the idea itself uncustomary since such educational practices occurred in the not so distant past.¹³ This discussion of Astell’s use of the term singular in defense of her “unfashionable” idea is intended to demonstrate that she took care in its early conception to justify its unorthodoxy. That Astell upheld a “desire for concealment” throughout her lifetime in light of the increasing

¹³I want to point out that Margaret Cavendish famously toyed with the nuanced meaning of the term “singular” in both a literal and figurative sense. In the introduction to her utopian novel, *The Blazing World*, she writes of her uncommon ambition: “for I am not covetous, but as ambitious as ever any of my sex was, is, or can be; which makes, that though I cannot be Henry the Fifth, or Charles the Second, yet I endeavour to be Margaret the First;” (6). In this sense she clearly wished to achieve ‘singular’ excellence, a kind of feminine rarity and genius. But these ambitions soured for her in real life as she came to be known as “Mad Madge,” and her considerable philosophical and literary ambitions were mocked, often in light of how she dressed. For example, Samuel Pepys called her a “mad, ridiculous, conceited woman” when she drew crowds (allegedly because of her outfit and because of the unusual nature of her invitation) on the occasion of her visit to the Royal Society. But perhaps he really mocked her because of her wish to be taken seriously as a natural philosopher among the members of the Royal Society. This wish was in direct contrast to her goal of feminine/authorial singularity, rendering her odd, mad and undesirable, all fates Astell took pains to avoid.

force of her early feminist argument attests to the fine line she tread between protecting her reputation and privacy while advocating publicly for her cause (Kolbrener & Michelson 2).

Additional textual evidence that Astell wishes to normalize the prospect of rendering women learned and thereby “serious,” can be found two pages later as she turns to another culture, that of the contemporary French salon, to argue that elsewhere the notion of women’s learning and participation in philosophy was not only *not* “singular” (i.e. rare), but also that great ladies of learning customarily emerged out of that French salon tradition and culture:

And since the French Tongue is understood by most Ladies, methinks they may much better improve it by the study of Philosophy (as I hear the *French Ladies* do) *Des Cartes*, *Malebranche* and others, than by reading idle *Novels* and *Romances*. ‘Tis strange we shou’d be so forward to imitate their Fashions and Fopperies, and have no regard to what really deserves our Imitation! And why shall it not be thought as genteel to understand *French Philosophy*, as to be accoutered in a *French Mode*? Let therefore the famous *Madame D’acier*, *Scudery*; etc. and our own incomparable *Orinda*, excite the Emulation of the English Ladies. (155)

In this passage Astell ties singularity in the sense of distinction/genius both to foreign women of learning and to the reputable English poet, Katherine Philips, whom she upholds as an exception.

A final point Astell articulates concerning “female Virtuos[ity]” is worth noting. In the following passage she argues that the cause of educating women beyond their current “mean” educational and moral state will not require unusual or gargantuan efforts. The prospect, she suggests, is not elitist; rather it is doable. She writes,

Such a course of Study will neither be too troublesome nor out of reach of the 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. Nor need she trouble her self in turning over a great number of Books, but take care to understand and digest a few well-chosen Ideas, and be truly acquainted with the nature of those Objects that present themselves to her mind. (152 – 153)

Under the surface of Astell's practical approach to educating women: "it is not intended she shou'd spend her hours in learning words but things," we see an emerging, egalitarianism. Compare, for example, Astell's assertion that her female students "take care to understand and digest a few well-chosen Ideas, and be truly acquainted with the nature of those Objects that present themselves to her mind" to Descartes's assertion within the *Passions of the Soul*:

that these things are useful to know in order to give everyone the courage to study the regulation of the passions. For since with a little skill one can change the movements of the brain in animals bereft of reason, it is plain that one can do it even better in men, and that even those who have the weakest souls could acquire a quite absolute dominion over all their passions if one employed enough skill in training and guiding them. (49)

Though classist impulses exist in Astell's early prose, so too can do Cartesian-inspired pronouncements, as in the above passage concerning each person's ability to be taught to think clearly and thereby act morally. In Astell's case "a few well-chosen Ideas" may very well tip the balance, so that "the famous Madame *D'acier*, *Scudery* . . . and our own incomparable *Orinda* excite the Emulation of the English Ladies."

Astell's reference in the opening paragraphs of her first *Serious Proposal* concerning women's learning "about 150 years ago" may be read in both a realistic and a rhetorical manner. Rhetorically, it seems clear that Astell was intent on reclaiming the

idea that educating women was, at one point, normal and customary not extraordinary, strange or subversive. Additionally, her reference to Wootton suggests the need to align herself with an established male authority figure. But we may also read Astell's reference to history 150 years ago in a literal way as potentially referencing the long ranging humanistic debate concerning the status and substance of women. This debate began in the late Medieval period and flourished in the Renaissance, carrying over into the seventeenth-century. Along these lines, Gordon Schochet has asserted in his essay, that ideas have a communal life (across time) and agency (across contexts):

Ideas, and especially political ideas, are not free-floating speculations; nor do they merely address other (sets of) ideas. All ideas are artifacts in important and irreducible senses; social and political ideas are precisely about preserving or changing political, social, and legal arrangements and systems. They are action-implicated even when they are shaped as analyses and criticisms of other ideas. To appreciate the actions contemplated by political ideas, it is necessary to understand the political arrangements to which those ideas are (or were) addressed and to know what is (or was) at stake in the debates to which they are (or were) contributions. (224)

Astell's early feminist pamphlets, I argue, address and develop the Continental "querelle des femmes" in a new political context. In other words, Astell's early feminist ideas were not "free-floating speculations" but rather developed out of and contributed to a larger established debate concerning women's equality.

The "querelle des femmes" (translated from French as "the woman's quarrel") originated in France in late 14th century in response to misogynist, anti-courtly love passages found within the revised, late medieval epic poem, *The Romance of the Rose*

(1277).¹⁴ The second author of this allegorical text, Jean de Meun, drastically shifted the tone and theme of the poem, so that satire and “unveiled allegory,” especially with respect to codes of courtly love prevailed within the latter half of the text (xxv).¹⁵

According to Charles W. Dunn,

The irreverence shown towards women in Jean’s portion of *The Romance* arises from the author’s conscious reaction against the humility of Guillaume’s courtly Lover. According to Jean’s thesis, however, a lover should not dance in attendance. Such behavior would be an intolerable misapplication of the true purpose of love. He should possess and fecundate. (xxv)

Examples of “the irreverence shown towards women” that Dunn alludes to in the above passage are easy to locate within the poem’s second part. For example, in passages from “part 43” entitled “The jealous husband recalls the war between Beauty and Chastity,” we see the emergence of suspicion, as opposed to wonder, with respect to womanly beauty:

I swear by God, who is of Heaven king,
That every dame who wishes to be fair
And paints her face that she may seem to be,
Admiring the reflection in her glass,
Taking great care with ornaments and clothes,
Is willing to make war on Chastity,
Homage to Venus all the women pay,
Regardless of the profit or the loss,
Painting and primping to deceive the men
Who watch them as they trail about the streets
To see and to be seen, and rouse desire
Of fornication in the lookers-on. (43.39 - 57)

¹⁴ The first part of the poem, to line # 4,058, was completed by Guillaume de Lorris in 1237. Jean de Meun completed the poem, up to line # 21, 780 in 1277.

¹⁵ The following brief passage is an example of an earlier, more traditional portrayal of courtly love from the side of the male courtier. This passage is located within the first part of the *Romance of the Rose*: “In ladies’ service labor and take pains;/Honor and champion them; and if you hear/calumnious or spiteful talk of them/ Reprove the speaker; bid him hold his tongue./ Do what you can damsels and dames to please./ Let them hear you narrate most noble tales./You’ll gain a worthy reputation thus” (45).

In this passage, neo-platonic notions of beauty that evoke the divine devolve into its opposite, a descent into carnal womanly beauty that “rouse[s] desire of fornication in lookers-on.” Jeun de Meun’s bawdy attacks on the courtly love ideal, in general, and women, in particular, gain momentum throughout the text, as in the subsequent, “Part 44,” entitled “The Jealous Husband recounts how women have deceived men”:

May wolves devour the flesh, dogs gnaw the bones
Of those by whom I am so cuckolded.
Foul woman, ribald hussy, lecherous bitch,
By you and your vile ways I’m put to shame.
May you not live one year beyond the day
When you bestowed your body on such curs!
And by Saint Peter ‘twas your mother’s gift,
Who sent it to you out of love for me,
As you gave me to understand, that I
Might save my money while she spend her own.
If those are not the very words you used,
I’ll see her burned alive, the dirty whore,
Old prostitute, vile bawd, and sorceress –
(44. 28 – 33, 170-180)

The emphasis in this passage is placed upon the husband’s cuckolding: “I am so cuckolded./Foul woman, ribald hussy, lecherous bitch”/by you and your vile ways I am put to shame.” The woman must consequently be punished, in this case with curses that reinforce negative stereotypes concerning womanhood. For example, old women are “sorceress[es]”, wives spend their husband’s money, and women are inclined to prostitution and are generally deceitful (“to ask the truth of her were labor lost.”) Though satirical, the degraded nature of this portrayal of human love marks a dramatic shift in the

courtly love tradition that elicited responses by “some of the most distinguished humanists of [the] age” (Zamon Davis xxxvi).¹⁶

In “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” Joan Kelly uncovers how “gender codes” within the courtly love tradition shifted to match economic and political realities of the emerging early modern state. Prior to the fourteenth-century, Kelly points out that adulterous love relationships between feudal noblewomen and their courtly lovers modeled the power dynamic between knight and lord. These relationships, she explains, were characterized by “the right to freely enter a relationship of service” (24). This freedom in offering one’s services implied mutuality, “and it signified fidelity, constancy in that service” (24). In the sphere of the courtly love relationship, this meant that married noblewomen were not dominated and that they too were expected to give back reciprocally to their lovers, because “homage entailed reciprocity of rights and obligations, a service on the lady’s part as well”(23). The main question Kelly sets out to answer is how patriarchal cultures could allow such a relationship of “mutuality” to exist and even flourish outside of marriage (23)? The answer she proposes rests on the premise that no such relationship could exist if it were a fundamental threat to the patriarchal structure of late medieval society; there had to be another explanation for the

¹⁶ I am aware that de Meun’s use of bawdy insults can be read not just as satirical but as humorous. This may have been his intention, but the effect in his lifetime was to trigger the “woman’s debate” in a variety of serious and satirical guises.

phenomenon of married noblewomen entering into romantic/sexual love relationships that were reciprocal on a variety of levels.¹⁷

The specific answer Kelly offers concerns the noblewomen's place within the fiefdom since "Feudalism . . . bound power to landed property; and it permitted both inheritance and administration of feudal property by women. A feudal husband tolerates a 'wife's diversions'" (227). Thus, while her husband was away crusading, "the lady presided over the court at such times, administered estates, took charge of vassal services due the lord. She *was* the lord – albeit in his name rather than her own – unless widowed and without male children" (28). Additionally, Kelly points out that noblewomen influenced the cultural flourishing of courtly love poetry, and they were generally patrons of the arts. Additionally, a noblewoman's property inheritance was not a threat to aristocratic families because the lord's "primary aim [was] to get and maintain a fief [which] *required* her support, perhaps even her inheritance" (Kelly 28). Finally, medieval aristocratic families didn't care much about illegitimacy:

The expansive, exploitative aristocratic families of the eleventh and twelfth centuries could well afford illegitimate members. For the feudality, they were no drain as kin but rather a source of strength in marital alliances and as warriors" (29).

Therefore, a woman's extramarital affairs, whether or not they led to illegitimate offspring, had no negative bearing on the family's estates and power, and therefore such arrangement could continue and even flourish.

¹⁷ Kelly explains: "We could probably maintain of any ideology that tolerates sexual parity that: 1) it can threaten no major institution of the patriarchal society from which it emerges; and 2) men, the rulers within the ruling order, must benefit by it. Courtly love surely fits these requirements" (29).

All of this changed in the fourteenth century when, as Kelly points out, fiefs gave way to independent city states, and the nobility “held property but no seigniorial power” (31). Sometimes a “signorie” would overthrow a nobleman, take his lands and set up a small military force that existed as “ornament of a court” (31). In this setting of diminished power and without legal claims to status, legitimacy became exceptionally important to the nobility and thus women’s chastity (to ensure noble blood lines) became of paramount importance in proving social status as other assurances were lost. In a political climate characterized by “assassinations, coups, and invasions [and where] power stayed closely bound to military force” a noble woman’s access to power became largely “indirect and provisional” (33). This trend was doubly reinforced by the new cadre of humanistic tutors and educators who looked to classical sources containing misogynistic teachings on the nature of women (Kelly 45). Therefore, feminine ideals shifted as did the practice of educating women alongside men in the arts of leadership and fighting, a notable aspect of the courtly era. A noblewoman’s role thus became to “magnify [her husband’s] princely being” since landholdings, military might, economic power and codes of subservience no longer did. Love and sex, for the noblewoman, was now bound to marriage. In short, a noblewoman’s role became ornamental and symbolic, and she was rewarded for her chastity. Kelly claims that this shift in love ideals and feminine roles from mutuality/agency to dependence/ornamentation marks the point at which, “the relations of the sexes . . . assumed its modern form” (36).

The first female author to comment upon the emerging subordination in women’s status vis-à-vis the courtly love ideal was the late medieval French author, Christine de

Pizan. Pizan, who lived in France during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries had rare access to higher learning as a child, and, like Astell, she led an unconventional private life; having been widowed at 25, she never remarried. Being a young widow, she supported herself, her two children and her mother by becoming a professional writer, as opposed to remarrying. Her range of publications include a collection of lyric poetry, a series of argumentative letters that inaugurated the “querrelles des femmes,” a utopian feminist prose text that defends women’s natures and education (her most well known publication to contemporary audiences) and a biography of the French monarch Charles V, as well as additional prose works. The editor of a modern translation of her texts, Natalie Zemon Davis, refers to Pizan as

a *polyscribator*, since she wrote on so many diverse subjects. Between 1390 and 1429 she produced a vast corpus of works in verse and prose, whose range shows a technical mastery of the various well-established literary genres of her day and demonstrates an astonishing poetic versatility. (xxv)

Pizan’s feminist utopia, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), which Zemon Davis asserts is “the first work by a woman in praise of women,” is similar on both generic and polemical terms to Astell’s first *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (xlix).¹⁸ The chief similarities between Astell’s and Pizan’s texts consist in the separatist utopian motif, their defensive recasting of emerging misogynist tropes, and the early feminist content of their works, including the imperative of educating women, women’s natural equality (even superiority) to men, and the recasting of womanly virtues.

¹⁸ Zemon Davis neglects in this passage the Greek poet Sappho whose poetic fragments praise women.

Pizan's text takes on typically medieval form, in that she structures her text as dialogue among three allegorical, feminine figures: "Reason," "Rectitude," and "Justice." That the central character is modeled after the author herself suggests that Pizan is working within the utopian tradition.¹⁹ At the beginning of the book, the central character, "Christine," has become confused by the misogynist rhetoric of influential humanist thinkers:

And so I relied more on the judgment of others than on what I myself felt and knew. I was so transfixed in this line of thinking for such a long time that it seemed as if I were in a stupor. . . . And I finally decided that God formed a vile creature when He made woman, and I wondered how such a worthy artisan could have deigned to make such an abominable work which, from what they say, is the vessel as well as the refuge and abode of every evil and vice. (4 -5)

One by one, the three allegorical figures appear and set her straight on the nature of womanhood. They reveal to Christine that her life holds a distinct purpose -- to construct a walled city into which only women (of the past, present and future) may enter. The allegorical nature of the city itself becomes evident when "Lady Reason," the first and arguably the most important of Christine's visitors, connects the foundation of the city to the emerging literary practice of listing illustrious women from the past as a way to defend womanhood against misogyny:

¹⁹ The genre of utopian fiction in its "modern guise" is usually thought to begin with Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*. One of the defining features of this genre is the placement of the author as a central character within the story. However, in the *City of Ladies*, written more than one hundred years previously, Christine de Pizan inserts herself into her allegorical/utopian city as a meta-character, suggesting that this aspect of the genre developed much earlier.

Fair daughter and dear friend, now I have prepared for you a large and wide ditch, completely cleared of earth, which I have carried out in large basketfuls on my shoulders. Now it is time that you lay down the heavy sturdy stones for the foundation of the walls of the City of Ladies. Take the trowel of your pen and ready yourself to lay down bricks and to labor diligently, for you can see here a great and large stone which I want to place as the first in the first row of stones in the foundation of your City (38).²⁰

The “Lady Reason” lists famous and infamous (i.e., not virtuous) women from antiquity, from more recent history, and from the biblical tradition as examples of what women may aspire to. In this gesture, Pizan is co-opting a humanist trope inaugurated by Boccaccio’s influential text entitled *Concerning Famous Women* (1401), which consists of a compendium of famous and infamous pagan women and is considered ambiguous by contemporary scholars as to whether Boccaccio’s intention was to defend or denigrate women.

Zemon Davis points out that Pizan both “digests and recasts” Boccaccio’s project and that her use of this literary device in defense of women exposes the misogynist tendencies within Boccaccio’s work. For example, Boccaccio eliminated Christian saints from his list of model women because their unusual heroism “disqualif[ied] themselves as examples of [actual] womanhood;” nor did he write about contemporary women because “illustrious contemporary women are too few to be mentioned” (Zemon- Davis xxxix). Pizan’s approach generally tends to differ from Boccaccio’s. For example, she includes illustrious, learned women from the classical period, such as Sappho, “that most subtle woman, poet, and philosopher;” an anonymous Roman she refers to as “a woman

²⁰ Curiously, de Pizan’s reference to digging and cultivate the earth around the walled fortress prefigures Allestree’s comparison of uneducated women as common land outside of private enclosures that has not been cultivated but that is equally rich as the land inside (men’s minds after being educated).

who breast-fed her mother in prison;” biblical figures including Judith, Esther and Ruth; the mythological Amazon warriors; and pagan mythological figures thought to be injurious of men, such as Medea and Circe. As for these last two figures, Pizan focuses on their supernatural powers as opposed to their destructive natures. In regards to Medea, for example, she writes, “she surpassed and exceeded all women; she knew the powers of every herb and all the potions which could be concocted, and she was ignorant of no art which can be known” (69). Along these lines, Circe “knew so much about the art of enchantments She knew how to metamorphose the bodies of men into those of wild beasts and animals through the power of a drink” (70). Pizan considered such powers extraordinary, not satanic.

There are both uncanny similarities and important differences between Pizan’s *Book of the City of Ladies* and Mary Astell’s first *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. First, it must be pointed out that the genre in which de Pizan set out to defend women in her *City of Ladies* is not only utopian, but it is allegorical; whereas, Astell’s first *Serious Proposal* is a polemical, prose tract with practical aspirations and a hint of utopianism in one of its sections.²¹ Despite generic and historical differences, however, a number of commonalities exist within the two texts that serve to illuminate the teleological nature of

²¹ An example of the practical side of Astell’s educational plan can be found in a passage where she outlines its cost. She writes, “What generous Spirit has a due regard to the good of Mankind, will not be forward to advance and perfect it? Who will think 500 pounds too much to lay out for the purchase of so much Wisdom and Happiness? Certainly we shou’d not think them too dearly paid for by a much greater Sum, did not our pitiful and sordid Spirits set a much higher value on Money than it deserves” (168). Additionally, in her dedicatory epistle to Princess Ann of Denmark, Astell encourages the Princess to fund the retreat when she writes, “And when I consider you Madam as a Princess who is sensible that the Chief Prerogative of the Great is the Power they have of doing more good than those in an Inferior Station can, I see no cause of fear that your Royal Highness will deny Encouragement to that which has no other Design than the Bettering of the World, especially the most neglected part of it as to all Real Improvement of the Ladies” (137).

the feminist polemic that underlies each of these works. The first and most obvious commonality is separatism, which exists as a defining feature of each project, though the nature of the separatism shifts when we get to Astell's *Serious Proposal*. In the opening pages of *City of Ladies*, Pizan makes it clear why separatism is important; hers is a fortress with no apparent way in or out. On this topic, the narrator, "Christine," ruminates on the customary prejudice against women:

To the best of my knowledge, no matter how long I confronted or dissected the problem, I could not see or realize how their claims could be true when compared to the natural behavior and character of women. Yet I still argued vehemently against women, saying that it would be impossible that so many famous men – such solemn scholars, possessed of such deep and great understanding, so clear-sighted in all things, as it seemed -- could have spoken falsely on so many occasions. (4)

This passage calls to mind the modern notion of women uncritically digesting society's sexist views and then adopting such views thus stunting themselves. This is the heart of what Alice Sowaal has termed the women's skeptical predicament, which Astell, like Pizan, strives to overcome by removing women from its root cause. Sowaal explains,

Astell holds that women cannot improve their minds in a society where the custom is to mock and degrade them. The establishment of the Religious Retirement would combat this custom by enacting what I will call a Separatist Strategy. When women removed themselves from the force of these customs, though their vice will not immediately be reformed, at least their wills can be released from the manacle of custom. (232)

Pizan similarly argues that women must be separated from their misogynist environments to banish the "stupor" from which the main character, "Christine," suffers and that renders her possessed of "so many devilish and wicked thoughts about women" (4).

Further, the character, “Christine” has been so “transfixed in this line of thinking,” that, “I detested myself and the entire feminine sex as though we were monstrosities in nature” (5). Symbolically, the first figure to visit Christine is, “Lady Reason,” who admonishes her to snap out of her state of confusion and inaction:

Fair daughter, have you lost all sense? Have you forgotten that when fine gold is tested in the furnace, it does not change or vary in strength but becomes purer the more it is hammered and handled in different ways? Do you not know that the best things are the most debated and the most discussed? . . . Notice how these same philosophers contradict and criticize one another, just as you have seen in the *Metaphysics* where Aristotle takes their opinions to test and speaks similarly of Plato and other philosophers. (6 – 7)

“Lady Reason” delivers a twin message to Christine: 1.) that philosophers are fallible men and, 2.) that men’s ideas are debatable. This passage suggests that women may overcome pernicious teachings if they are taught to reason and question as men are taught, but that this reasoning and questioning must happen in an unbiased framework and in a protective setting where women may be disabused of their “stupors.” Women, “Lady Reason” affirms, must learn to “debate and discuss” as men do, but the difference is that their first line of inquiry must be the prejudicial views on the nature of women. In this manner women may learn to overcome self-hatred as well as the hatred of “the entire feminine sex” to which the male dominated culture exposes them.

Astell is even more ambitious than Pizan in her first *Serious Proposal*, which she names variously: a “proposal,” a “monastery” and a “religious retirement.” Her plan will not only be to reform women’s lives but to “amend the present and improve the future age.” This is a significant difference between Astell’s and Pizan’s utopian visions; one is enclosed and bounded the other is fluid:

Now as to the Proposal, it is to erect a *Monastery*, or if you will (to avoid giving offence to the scrupulous and injudicious . . .) we will call it a *Religious Retirement*, and such as shall have a double aspect, being not only a Retreat from the World for those who desire that advantage, but likewise an Institution and previous discipline, to fit us to do the greatest good in it; such an institution as this . . . would be the most probable method to amend the present and improve the future Age. (150)

Astell's "Religious Retirement" will not only provide women with a "Retreat from the World," but it will also "amend" the world, suggesting Astell's awareness of the underlying political implication of reforming the status of women. In other words, Astell is aware and begins to express, in Schochet's terms, "the political arrangements to which [her] ideas are addressed and to know what is at stake in the debates to which they are contributions" (224). Though Astell refuses to restrict her monastery to "virtuous women," she walks a fine line between insult and instruction when she writes that her goal for women is to "heighten your value by suffering you no longer to be cheap and contemptible" (139). She further writes, "Pardon the seeming rudeness of this Proposal, which goes upon the supposition that there's something amiss in you, which it is intended to amend. My design is not to expose, but to rectify your failures;" whereas, Pizan closes off her city -- "for the walls of the city will be close to those women who lack virtue" (142, 11).

In the following passage, Astell targets "Tyrant custom," thus moving her polemic a step beyond Pizan's allegorical presentation of a walled city that symbolizes women's need to reclaim their minds:

Thus Ignorance and a narrow Education lay the Foundation of Vice, and Imitation and Custom rear it up. Custom, that merciless torrent that carries all before it, and which indeed can be stem'd by none but such as have a great deal of Prudence and a rooted Vertue. (147)

One practical way Astell proposes to overturn customs that render women useless and vain is to replace male teachers with female teachers and role models. Friendship among the women in her retreat will include mentoring in both learning and virtuosity. She explains,

Farther yet, besides that holy emulation which a continual view of the brightest and most exemplary Lives will excite in us, we shall have opportunity of contracting the purest and noblest Friendship; a Blessing, the purchase of which were richly worth all the World besides!" (163).

Women will not only serve as "holy emulation[s]" but as teachers for other women "for I cannot imagine wherein the hurt lies, if instead of doing mischief to one another, by an uncharitable and vain Conversation, women be enabled to inform and instruct those of their own Sex at least;" (155). The ending phrase, "at least," suggests that women are qualified to teach men and/or that women are fit for more than being teachers.

Another key difference between the two feminist works concerns Astell's reminder that her retreat is voluntary, temporary, and practical as opposed to eternal, enclosed and even elitist as Pizan's city is depicted. Regarding this topic Astell explains to the "ladies": "your retreat shall be so manag'd as not to exclude the good Works of an Active, from the pleasure and serenity of a Contemplative Life, but by a due mixture of both retain all the advantages and avoid the inconveniences that attend either" (151 – 152). Astell's defense of women's education is aimed equally at the criticism she anticipates, chiefly that her monastery sounds too much like a Catholic convent. Her

conclusion to the second *Serious Proposal* addresses this and other impending misogynist criticisms, thus anticipating the emergence of Astell's sharp, at times bitter tone that characterizes her third publication, *Reflections Upon Marriage*. At the end of her proposal, for example, she writes:

We will not vie with them in thumbing over Authors, nor pretend to be walking Libraries provided they'll but allow us a competent Knowledge of the Books of GOD, Nature I mean and the Holy Scriptures: And whilst they accomplish themselves with the Knowledge of the World; and experiment all the Pleasures and Follies of it, we'll aspire no further than to be intimately acquainted with our own Hearts. And sure the Complaisant and Good natur'd Sex will not deny us this; nor can they who are so well assur'd of their own Merit entertain the least Suspicion that we shall overtop them. It is upon some other account therefore that they object against our Proposal, but what that is I shall not pretend to guess.
(180)

Up to this point, Astell has not alluded to the war of the sexes (in print) but she does so here, speaking sarcastically of men as the "the Complaisant and Good natur'd Sex . . . who are so well assur'd of their own merit" (180). Women's ambitions with respect to education, she argues, are too humble for men; they will not, in other words, be "overtop[ed]."

Like Pizan, Astell employs the word "enclosure" in her proposal, but in her case, she uses this term in a negative capacity to describe the exclusive masculine claim to knowledge against which her women's academy is set up as a corrective:

The Ladies, I'm sure, have no reason to dislike this Proposal, but I know not how the Men will resent it to have their enclosure broke down, and Women invited to taste of that Tree of Knowledge they have so long unjustly monopoliz'd. But they must excuse me, if I be partial to my own Sex as they are to theirs, and think Women as capable of Learning as Men are, and that it becomes them as well.
(155)

Here, Astell reverses Pizan's construction of an enclosed fortress to protect women against misogyny, and she reverses its effect. Rather, she recasts the "monopoly" on knowledge and learning as the real unjust "enclosure" that her proposal will break down.²² Here again, Astell's polemic veers in the direction of political critique.

Each of these two early feminist texts, it can be argued, engages in social reform, if at a theoretical/imaginative level. Pizan, for example, includes a lengthy section in her book in which she decries rape, arguing that it is a crime that should be punished by death. She describes the emotional devastation of rape on a woman's psyche as she recounts the story of the Roman noblewoman, Lucretia who allowed a courtier, her husband's trusted friend, into her bed chamber during his absence, only to be raped by him (161 – 162). Lucretia blames herself for the rape and later commits suicide, declaring, "yet I cannot free myself from the torment nor extricate myself from the pain. From now on, no woman will ever live shamed and disgraced by Lucretia's example" (162). This anecdote attests to the historically entrenched notion that women bring rape upon themselves at the same time that it collapses class barriers in that all women, regardless of class, status, age, etc., can suffer rape.

Astell's social/political critique, by contrast, primarily concerns marriage and its corollary, the business of courtship. At the end of the first *Serious Proposal*, for example, she writes of one of the practical purposes of her academy as a safe space for women who are not yet married. Not only will such women be free from sexist

²² A further parallel can be drawn to Margaret Cavendish's closet drama, *The Convent of Pleasure*, which is literally infiltrated by a male onlooker who feels the convent threatens the patriarchal marriage economy. I shall further explore this parallel in the final chapter section.

educational practices that render women less than human, but “she will not be here inveigled and impos’d on, will neither be bought nor sold, nor be forc’d to marry for her own quiet, when she has no inclination to it, but what the being tir’d out with a restless opportunity occasions” (165). Later, Astell will speak in even stronger terms of courtship as a kind of “violence” against women, invoking metaphors from the Hobbesian state of nature, but for now she has just begun to touch upon the political implications of women’s being “forc’d to marry for her own quiet.” Her critique calls to mind Kelly’s analysis of the Medieval noblewoman’s devaluation from political empowerment and reciprocity in the realm of courtly love to chastity, passivity and ornamentation in marriage. In this respect, the language Astell employs to critique the conventions of courtship in her day reflect an understanding of the political and economic implications underlying women’s relationship to love, courtship and marriage.

Countering Renaissance Misogyny

Astell’s early feminist arguments within her first *Serious Proposal* come into sharper focus when her proposal is read in light of an influential sixteenth-century text in defense of women, entitled *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex* (1529) [translated into English in 1542]. This text, written by the heterodox humanist scholar, Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, moved the Continental debate known as the “querelles des femmes” in a new direction by using paradox to overturn customary views on women’s nature. This Renaissance text more directly than Pizan’s demonstrates an attunement to the political and economic influences that Kelly illuminates in “Did

Women Have a Renaissance?” and it represents a shift in how Renaissance scholars (both men and women) argued for women’s equality. The following will highlight the change Agrippa’s text inaugurated concerning the “querelle des femmes” after its publication and dissemination throughout Europe. This examination will aid in further contextualizing Astell’s unique, philosophically influenced kind of early feminism, particularly with respect to her emerging theory of feminist self-esteem.

Like Pizan who wrote her *Book of the City of Ladies* just over a century earlier, Agrippa’s *Declamation* demonstrates an attunement to the earliest influences within the “querelle des femmes” including Bocaccio’s compendium of heroic women in *Concerning Famous Women*.²³ According to Albert Rabil Jr., the editor of a modern edition of Agrippa’s text, its influence on the sixteenth-century version of the “querelle des femmes” cannot be overstated: “his [Agrippa’s] declamation . . . was almost immediately translated into French, English, Italian, and German [from Latin]. His influence throughout the sixteenth century was enormous and continued into the following century, and his text was plagiarized all over Europe” (3).²⁴ Rabil points out that one of the most gripping aspects of this text was “his use of paradox to overturn the misogynistic interpretations of the female body in Greek medicine, the Bible, Roman and canon law, theology and moral philosophy and politics” (4). This aspect of his text has

²³ Agrippa’s *Declamation* was originally delivered as a lecture in 1509 at the University of Dole (Rabil 3). Pizan’s text was published in 1405.

²⁴ Rabil further emphasizes the extent of Agrippa’s influence when he writes with respect to contemporary scholarly debates concerning his text, “the question of the seriousness of his intent pales in the face of the literature it inspired and the importance of that literature in molding new attitudes that would eventually bear fruit” (13).

particular relevance to Astell's early feminism with its roots in materialist philosophy, as shall be further illuminated in this chapter section.

Agrippa's use of paradox with respect to commonplace biblical notions of woman's inferior placement in God's creation is instructive.²⁵ Rabil connects Agrippa's reasoning that women are superior to men to the Spanish, Franciscan priest and writer, Rodriquez del Padron, whose text, *The Triumph of Women* (published at the end of the fifteenth-century in Spanish) most likely influenced Agrippa's text (20 – 21). For example, Padron follows a neo-Platonist line of thought when he claims that "women are not vain in their love of clothes and cosmetics by arguing that they are fond of beautiful things because they are more akin to divine beauty" (21). Fundamentally, Padron prefigures Agrippa, in that he recasts women as superior to men because, as he argued, Eve was created within Paradise while Adam was created first, but from dust (an inferior substance) located outside of Paradise (21). Agrippa's text shows the influence of Padron, but he twists the argument slightly by focusing on language, not the material substance of creation:

So let me begin my subject at the beginning. Woman was created much superior to man as the name she has received is superior to his. For Adam means earth, but Eve is translated as life. And as far as life is to be ranked above earth, so far is woman to be ranked above man. (44)

²⁵ It is interesting to note that Astell never takes the stance that women are superior to men, though it is one that humanist scholars all over the continent experimented with; rather, she tends to lament women's current state of foolishness, though she blames custom and male authority figures for the degraded state of women. Like de Pizan, Astell is more influenced in affirming that women are persons. On this theme Pizan took it a step further by emphasizing that men and women are of the same species when she wrote "[women] are not another species or dissimilar race" (187).

Rabil points out that Agrippa's purpose was to "demolish all received wisdom regarding women from every authoritative source and prove the opposite" (13). This purpose, he claims, necessitated a paradoxical framework since "the opposite of the inferior status of women is not their equality with men but their superiority, and so that becomes his thesis" (13). Developing the motif of recasting biblical creation in favor of Eve, Agrippa writes,

For when the Creator came to the creation of woman, he rested himself in this creation, thinking that he had nothing more honorable to create; in her were completed and consummated all the wisdom and power of the Creator; after her no creation could be found or imagined. (47)

Next, he employs one of Jesus's most famous parables, summarized simply as -- the last shall be first and the first shall be last -- when he applies this paradoxical logic to the order of Eve's creation. He goes a step further, however, when he ties Eve's "created last" status to sovereignty, thus prefiguring and reversing patriarchal theoretical conceptions of power that will become rooted in Adam's natural, divinely created dominance over Eve (because he was created first)":²⁶

²⁶ Gordon Schochet's study of Filmerian notions of political power shed light on the radical implications of Agrippa's reversal of power derived by the order of creation: "Filmer's world was patriarchally structured and presumed the inherent, natural inferiority of women . . . In the final analysis, what was at issue in the mid-seventeenth-century political debates . . . was the possession and control of the state. Among the important sub-disputes were the questions of whether politics and the state were natural or the results of human artifice and whether political origins were to be founded in familial, patriarchal organization or in a so-called state of nature. If the latter, what made people sufficiently free to establish civil society? The patriarchal response was much the easier alternative, and Filmer attacked the notions of 'natural freedom' and individual 'rights' that the state of nature and contract theories presupposed" (228).

woman was the last in time of all things created; in the conception of the divine mind, however, she was first of all, as much in prestige as in honor. . . . For woman was the last work of God, who introduced her into our world as the queen of a kingdom already prepared for her, adorned and perfect in everything. It is therefore right that every creature love, honor, and respect her; right also that every creature submit to and obey her, for she is the queen of all creatures and their end, perfection, and glory, absolute perfection. (48)

Whether or not Agrippa was arguing seriously in this passage when he writes that woman is the “queen of a kingdom,” wherein “every creature [should] submit to her,” is, according to Rabil, beside the point. The point, he contends, is that Agrippa uses paradox to demonstrate the slanted, arbitrary nature of biblical exegesis. For Agrippa “there is no theoretical justification for the status quo; and . . . using texts on which oppressive interpretations have been based, one may just as well arrive at opposite conclusions” (Rabil 12 – 13).²⁷ At the end of his *Declamation* one could argue that Agrippa’s lecture is, in fact, serious when he ties the condition of women’s lives in his lifetime to the customary arrangements of politics, property management and education:

²⁷ That Agrippa’s use of paradox sometimes verges on the humorous, even the outrageous, is not in question here. A good example of this can be found when Agrippa writes of the wonders of women’s menstrual blood, which reads like a satirical account of early modern medical practices/notions: “No one will be astonished at the number of prodigious phenomena – beyond all those I have cited – that nature is pleased to create among women, if he has read the works of philosophers and doctors, of which an example is ready to hand, menstruation. Menstrual blood, in addition to the fact that it cures some quartan fevers, hydrophobia, epilepsy, elephantiasis, depression, madness, and many other similar pernicious illnesses, is not less worthy of being admired for numerous other effects; among other marvels, for example, it extinguishes fires, calms tempests, keeps away the danger of raging waters, expels every nuisance, unbinds spells, and puts evil spirits to flight” (59).

But since the excessive tyranny of men prevails over divine right and natural laws, the freedom that was once accorded to women is in our day obstructed by unjust laws, suppressed by custom and usage, reduced to nothing by education. For as soon as she is born, a woman is confined in idleness at home from her earliest years, and, as if incapable of functions more important, she has no other prospect than needle and thread. Further, when she has reached the age of puberty, she is delivered over to the jealous power of a husband, or she is enclosed forever in a workhouse for religious. She is forbidden by law to hold office In addition, women are excluded from the court, the judgments, from adoption, from intercession, from administration, from the right of trusteeship, from guardianship, from matters of inheritance, and from criminal trials
(95)

This passage, especially with respect to Agrippa's use of terms like "jealous power" and "tyranny" to describe a husband, is strikingly similar in tone and content to passages within Astell's fourth, most cynical, feminist pamphlet, *Reflections Upon Marriage*. Indeed, this similarity is most likely not coincidental, as Rabil demonstrates how Agrippa's influence spread to Great Britain in the middle of the sixteenth century:

central to the English debate and the only writer (apart from Castiglione, whose *Book of the Courtier* was translated into English in 1561) to recognize that the real issue was . . . exposing the social, political and economic inequalities underlying the mistreatment and inequality of women (29).²⁸

Another tactic Agrippa uses in his influential text is the reversal of commonplace feminine vices, turning these habits into virtues, often to comic effect. He tackles, for example, the womanly vice of talkativeness, a fraught topic for early feminists and their detractors:

²⁸ According to Rabil, at least three English polemicists were influenced by Agrippa's text: Sir Thomas Elyot, (*Defense of Good Women* (1540), Robert Vaughan and Edward Gosnhyll (29).

Just as power had a sexual dimension when it was claimed by women, so did speech. A good woman spoke little. Excessive speech was an indication of unchastity. By speech women seduced men. Eve had lured Adam into sin by her speech . . . witches were commonly accused of having spoken abusively, or irrationally, or simply too much. . . . As enlightened a figure as Francesco Barbaro insisted on silence in a woman, which linked to her perfect unanimity with her husband's will and her unblemished virtue [her chastity]. (Rabil xxv)

During the Restoration, Margaret Fell Fox tackled this issue in serious, polemical terms in her pamphlet, *Women's Speaking Justified* (1667). In this publication Fell Fox offers alternative interpretations of the biblical commonplace that women should be silent, chaste and obedient, but her primary emphasis is on the feminine imperative for silence. Claiming full authority in her own exegetical exercise, Fell Fox professes to "lay down how God himself hath manifested his Will and Mind concerning women, and unto women" (2). She then offers her own viewpoint concerning the "forbid[ding] Women's Speaking":

So these elders of Isreal did not forbid her speaking, you blind Priests do; yet you will make a Trade of Womens words to get money by, and take Texts, and Preach Sermons upon Womens words; and still cry out, Women must not speak, Women must be silent; so you are far from the minds of the Elders of Israel who praised God for a Womans speaking. (16)

In contrast to Fell Fox's biting polemic against "you blind Priests" Agrippa writes in a playful, enigmatic manner throughout most of the *Declamation*. For example, on the topic of women's speech (which is but one of many) he asks rhetorically,

Did we not first learn to speak from our mothers or from our nurses? Without doubt nature itself, architect of the world, in its far-seeing wisdom toward the human race, has accorded this privilege to the female sex, making it difficult to find anywhere a mute woman. It is certainly beautiful and praiseworthy to surpass men at precisely the point at which humans are particularly superior to all other living creatures. (61)

Here, Agrippa plays on two feminine stereotypes, the chattering, gossipy woman and the idea (still held) that girls are particularly more adept at expressing themselves verbally than boys, though this is usually interpreted as a developmental difference that is equalized with age. Agrippa, however, is clearly making fun when he writes that it is “difficult to find anywhere a mute woman,” but he recasts this “trait” in positive terms by connecting it to “the architect of the world” who made women “to surpass men at precisely the point at which humans are particularly superior to all other living creatures.”²⁹ In these two lines, Agrippa overturns the stereotype while utilizing the association of women with talkativeness as a strength that indicates magnificence, for women are thus “superior to all other living creatures.”

Astell shares Agrippa’s concern for raising women up from the category of the animal to fully human, but her arguments are thoroughly inflected with rationalist philosophy, as opposed to biblical arguments. She alludes, for example, to the womanly vice of frivolous speech in her first *Serious Proposal* in the following manner:

I have sometimes smil’d betwixt scorn and pity, to hear Women talk as gravely and concernedly about some trifling disappointment from the Milliner or Taylor, as if it had related to the weightiest concerns of their Souls, nay, perhaps more seriously than others who wou’d pass Good, do about their eternal interest; but turn the talk that way, and they grow as heavy and cold as they were warm and sensible before. (159 – 160)

Astell is well known for her impatience with womanly vanity and frivolity or, as she likes to call it, “froth and impertinence” (160). Rather than dwell on this vice or poke fun of it

²⁹ Agrippa’s emphasis on women’s superior capacities with respect to speech calls to mind the Gospel according to John which opens, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (86). Agrippa’s discourse on women’s speech can be viewed in light of this passage whereby a propensity to speak and to speak well connotes a close associated with the divine: “He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (86).

as Agrippa does, she chooses rather to write optimistically and philosophically about women's potential for change and advancement. This generally occurs in a Cartesian framework as in the following passage when she argues that "desire to advance and perfect its Being, is implanted by GOD in all Rational Natures, to excite them hereby to every worthy and becoming Action" (145). More specifically, Astell writes that "women need not take up with mean things, since they are capable of the best" (143). Similarly, she reverses her attention from women's vain and silly tendencies in speech to a discussion of the pernicious effects of flattery (particularly with respect to men's speech) on women's minds, motivations and self-esteem. This shift in argumentation accords with her separatist argument that women must, temporarily at least, be removed from customary prejudice if a real change in mind and soul is to occur:

From the . . . constant flattery of external Objects, arises that querulousness and delicacy observable in most Persons of fortune, and which betrays them to many inconveniences. For besides that it renders them altogether unfit to bear a change . . . it likewise makes them perpetually uneasy, abates the delight of their enjoyments. (160)

In other words, flattery thwarts human potential, turning a "fussy" temperament, into a falsely perceived "piece of Grandeur," when in reality this kind of behavior betrays a "poor weak mind" (160). Further, the trap of flattery is even more dangerous for women because it rests on such a "Sandy" impermanent foundation which renders women anxious and impetuous with respect to marriage choices. The biggest danger, Astell argues at the end of her first *Serious Proposal*, is that women will fly "to some dishonourable Match as her last, tho' much mistaken Refuge, to the disgrace of her Family and her own Irreparable Ruin" (169). False flattery, or male speech, thus

encourages and precipitates women's "Ruin." Though Astell is concerned with rendering women less frivolous in speech, her argument is a departure from Agrippa's in that she shifts the focus away from women's silly speech toward men's conniving uses of speech. Astell's monastery thus offers women an alternative to the "mistaken" refuge of a hasty marriage; speech may thus be conceived of in a corrective versus a ruinous manner, so that:

In stead of that Froth and Impertinence, that Censure and Pragmaticalness, with which Feminine Conversations so much abound, we should hear their tongues employ'd in making Proselytes to heaven, in running down Vice, in establishing Vertue and proclaiming their Makers Glory. (164)

As for the pesky vice of womanly talkativeness, Astell claims that learning will cure this vice because "the more she knows, she will be less subject to talkativeness" (167).

Concerning beauty, an emerging preoccupation in Astell's polemic, Agrippa argues from a Platonist standpoint in his text's final section entitled "The Superior Beauty of Women." In this account Agrippa argues that a woman's natural beauty and sense of aesthetic proportion makes her a "marvel to behold" and brings men even closer to God. As Rabil points out, this accords with a Neoplatonist framework because,

ideas of female beauty and harmony are connected to notions of moral goodness and virtue. . . . Her symmetry and proportion are connected to the circle, the symbol of harmony in Renaissance thought and language suggesting harmony in this respect appears in connection with a description of her eyebrows, mouth stomach, etc. (50 – 51)

For Agrippa, God created "in woman all that is beautiful and whole in the world" (51).

This emphasis is in direct contrast to de Meun's misogynist account of womanly beauty as a destabilizing, deceitful feature that leads men astray. Agrippa's commitment to the Neoplatonist concept of beauty in his defense of women focuses, rather, on women's

material as opposed to her symbolic, attributes. For example, he emphasizes women's tendency to exhibit harmonious proportions:

Under her nose is a red mouth, which owes its beauty to the symmetrical disposition of her tender lips; when she smiles we see her dainty teeth, well placed, as white as ivory, less numerous however than those of men, for woman is neither a glutton nor as aggressive as man. (51)

Donne's poetry evokes both orientations (symbolic and material) toward womanly beauty as his elegy, "Love's Progress" demonstrates in the following lines: "The brow becalms us when 'tis smooth and plain,/ And when 'tis wrinkled, shipwracks us again./ Smooth, 'tis a Paradise, where we would have/ Immortal stay, but wrinkled 'tis our grave/" (180). In contrast to Agrippa's account of the transformative power of womanly beauty, Donne focuses on decayed or compromised womanly beauty and its effect on men. For example, when a woman is "wrinkled," a man is "shipwrecked." This suggests not only the power of feminine beauty over men, but also the power of the male gaze over women, for when a woman's beauty decays, she loses her divine proximity and is of little use, spiritually speaking. Worse, she reminds men of their mortality, setting her up to be maligned with age as she loses her divine "glow," a point Astell makes explicit toward the end of her first *Serious Proposal*: "the respect which us'd to be paid her decays as fast as her Beauty" (169).

Agrippa, on the other hand, neglects to account for beauty's decay when he emphasizes the power of womanly beauty to save men. He uses the biblical example of Sarah (Abraham's wife) and Abigail (wife of Nabal), both of whom possessed three kinds of beauty: "wise disposition, facility with words, and a beautiful body," to exemplify

how a husband might be “saved by the beauty of his wife” (52). From an early feminist standpoint, we shall see that Astell’s polemic advances the “querelles” in a new direction as she moves away from the notion of a woman’s worth being tied to her use for men either materially or spiritually. In *Reflections* Astell will denounce the notion that a woman is made for a man’s use, prefiguring Simone de Beauvoir’s powerful philosophical stance that women are not born but made. Along these lines, Astell writes in *Reflections* that “she was made to be a Slave to his Will, and has no higher end than to Serve and Obey him!” (111). From Astell’s perspective, a woman is an end in herself. She has been created by God, an entity who may have designs for her that have little to do with serving men or even raising children.

Astell’s emphasis on the negative side of feminine beauty/vanity throughout her first *Serious Proposal* reflects her commitment to a rationalist versus a purely Neoplatonist line of reasoning. She repeatedly privileges the “substance over the shadow,” thereby espousing what Alan Nelson has characterized as a fundamental characteristic of rationalist thought. He explains,

Once it is understood that the appearances or phenomena of unschooled, everyday life are grounded in simple ideas expressing a Truth inaccessible to sensory investigation, the phenomena themselves appear in a new light to the rationalist. The appearances are transformed and reconfigured by the reality of which they are, after all, mere appearances. (Nelson 8)

Astell recasts this line of reasoning along early feminist lines when she argues at the beginning of the first *Serious Proposal* that:

no solicitude in the adoration of your selves is discommended, provided you employ your care about that which is really your *self*; and do not neglect that particle of Divinity within you, which must survive, and may (if you please) be happy and perfect, when its unsuitable and much inferior Companion [the body] is mouldering into Dust. (140)

In other words, Astell is saying that a woman's true self is separate from her body and is imbued with a "particle of Divinity." In this case she is arguing principally along rationalist lines.

A shift occurs, however, when Astell writes of the corrupting power of beauty, not for men, but for women. Beauty, she emphasizes, is an especially fraught topic for women, since a woman's sense of worth tends to be connected to her relative beauty. For Astell, vanity and flattery are the twin vices that "ensnare and deceive" women, eventually rendering them "cheap and contemptible" (146, 139). This shift from beauty as proximity to the divine to beauty as agent of moral corruption suggests a shift in the underlying rationalist framework that upholds Astell's argument. For in denouncing "silly Artifices" in favor of "Substance" and "that particle of Divinity in you," Astell begins to articulate a theory of feminine self-esteem in her first *Serious Proposal* that bypasses the association of feminine beauty with self-worth. To fully and consistently support this notion in her second *Serious Proposal*, she will need to apply materialist elements to her epistemological framework.

In this manner, she will be able to argue that women who attend her academy may "surpass the Men as much in Vertue and Ingenuity, as you do in Beauty; that you may not

only be as lovely but as wise as Angels” (140).³⁰ Here and elsewhere in the *Serious Proposal*, Astell calls on women to value themselves less on appearance (which is chimerical) and more on virtuous actions (which may render women immortal, like angels). She ends the pamphlet by promising women that in her academy they will develop a stable, as opposed to a “sandy,” basis for self-worth. She describes this sense of worth in heroic terms in the following passage:

There is a sort of Bravery and Greatness of Soul, which does more truly ennoble us than the highest Title, and it consist in living up to the dignity of our Natures, being so sensible of our own worth as to think our selves too great to do a degenerate and unbecoming thing. (171)

Here, Astell circles back to her opening remark that her academy is designed so that women may “improve your Charms and heighten your Value” (139). Her argument evolves from a focus on degeneracy to a focus on the heroic potential in women for “Bravery and Greatness of Soul.” Such characteristics, from Astell’s vantage point, are not exclusively male, but rather are universal since “a desire to advance and perfect its Being, is planted by GOD in all Rational Natures, to excite them hereby to every worthy and becoming Action” (145). For Astell, a woman is a human being not an animal, and she is endowed with a rational nature and a natural inclination toward perfection in both a spiritual and a moral sense.

³⁰Curiously, this passage calls to mind a passage in “Book V” of *Paradise Lost* when Raphael explains to Adam that humans may aspire to the realm of angels. The passage reads, “time may come when men/with angels may participate, and find/ no inconvenient diet, nor too light fare:/ And from these corporal nutriments perhaps/your bodies may at last turn all to spirit,/ improved by tract of time, and winged ascend/ Ethereal, as we, or may at choice/Here or in heavenly Paradise dwell;” (5.493-500).

In the *Renaissance Notion of Woman* Ian MacLean exposes shifting attitudes and beliefs within biblical, medical, ethical and legal writings in the early modern period to which Astell necessarily had to address her argument. MacLean argues that by the end of the 16th century medical discoveries and advances altered the Aristotelian notion that a woman was essentially a ‘botched’ male. There was, he claims, a new sense of wonder and respect for the procreative function of the uterus (33). Additionally, though women’s bodies were still seen in light of the humors, meaning the uterus was thought to be physiologically “colder and moister in the dominant humors . . . after 1580 this is no longer assumed to be a sign of imperfection” (34). Rather, the cold/moist characteristic of women’s biology was viewed as contributing to her primary function, which was to nourish a fetus and subsequently to raise children. In this respect and for this function, women were perfectly created, but in other respects or for other functions, women were still considered imperfect or lacking. Maclean explains, “Her physiology and humours seem to destine her to be the inferior of man, both physically and mentally . . . woman therefore remains notionally the inferior of the male” despite medical discoveries and ethical shifts that viewed her makeup and character in a more positive light (44).

The implications of women’s biological difference on her psychology were thus mixed. On the positive side, her cold/moist nature accounted for a better memory and a stronger sense of imagination. On the other hand, this trait could also connote “mental changeability . . . manifesting itself in deceit, inconstancy, lack of stamina, infidelity, but also inventiveness” (42). Maclean adds that although the uterus was held, biologically speaking, in a more respectful light than in earlier eras, still “the effect of the uterus on

the mind weakens rationality and increases the incidence and violence of the passions in women: hate, vengeance, fear, anger are all thought commonly to hold greater sway over the female sex; but also compassion, pity and love” (42). Other feminine physiological characteristic reinforce women’s psychological differences from men and thereby justify an alternative set of virtues to which women should aspire for the perfection of their natures. For example, the softness of a woman’s body connotes passivity and the ordeals of childbirth translate into a greater capacity to withstand pain or to endure hardship (i.e., long suffering) (42). The characteristics of “passivity, receptiveness, compassion and mutability,” which Maclean connects to the “metaphorical association of woman with mother earth, nutrition, fruitfulness, and the fluctuations of the mood,” reinforce the association of women with inferiority and lend credence to the development of a separate set of virtues for women.³¹ Maclean explains that ancient virtue theories deriving from Seneca and Epictetus “distinguish masculine and feminine virtue on the grounds of strength and weakness, and the one direct referent to women in Epictetus’s *Enchiridion* exhorts them to practice the traditional female virtues of modesty and respectfulness” (55). Thus, despite medical advancements and a new respect for women’s procreative functions, little changed for women.

Following this line of dualistic theorizing, the concept of imperfect virtue, borrowed from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, emerges as a way for women’s natures

³¹ Maclean points out that Aristotelian notions of male/female were highly dualistic and continued to influence Renaissance notions of women. He explains, “The duality male/female is therefore paralleled by the dualities active/passive, form/matter, act/potency, perfection/imperfection, completion/incompletion, possession/deprivation.. In a celebrated passage of *the De generatione animalium* Aristotle describes the female as... ‘animal occasionatum’” (8).

to be perfected along the lines of her inferior status (i.e., she is perfect in her nature but still inferior to men). Characteristics associated with womanhood and connecting to women's physiological differences translated into the "imperfect virtues" of: chastity, modesty, and "long-suffering (Maclean 51). In this manner, women are afforded the status of human beings with the capacity to improve and become perfected, but, as Maclean points out, "woman, by her association with passivity, seems excluded from Aristotle's moral universe, unless she obtains entrance through these virtues deemed as imperfect as she is thought to be" (51).³² Heroic or perfect virtues in the Aristotelian sense such as "courage, liberality and magnificence" are fundamentally denied women and with them, an entire range of potential for what contemporary virtue theorists call "human flourishing."³³ In this context, it is easy to see how the notion of imperfect virtue applies to women who are "perfect in nature," provided we are speaking of childbirth, childrearing, nurturance and homemaking but little else.

In "Virtue and the Subjection of Women," Nancy Snow contends that traditional virtue theories concerning woman's nature tend to rest on faulty/prejudicial assumptions that "set identity conditions for women that deny women's full humanity," not to mention the possibility of flourishing (46). This explains why, even as late as the end of the seventeenth century when it is no longer necessary to argue that women are, in fact, human, Astell still does so in *Reflections*, as when she states sarcastically, "I know not

³² In this respect, Carole Pateman has pointed out that because women are deemed as capable of only imperfect virtue, they cannot be conceived of as citizens, because citizens must be capable of transcending their passionate, animal natures in order to move beyond the bonds of "particularity" that characterizes the private sphere into the universality, which characterizes the public spheres. Pateman concludes, "Women by virtue of their natures, are a source of disorder in the state" (18).

³³ I am following the lead of Nancy Snow when I use the term "human flourishing" in this chapter section.

whether or no Women are allow'd to have Souls, if they have perhaps, it is not prudent to provoke them too much, lest silly as they are, they at last recriminate . . ." (113). Snow explains how biblically inspired characteristics render women less than human. She writes that commonplace feminine virtues such as:

patience, gentleness, docility, submissiveness . . . lead to stunted, one-dimensional personalities that are incapable of reacting appropriately to conditions of oppression. Though meekness in certain contexts could be a virtue, being pervasively meek or submissive in all situations is not. Cultivating emotional wholeness ensures that one will develop a healthy sense of self-esteem, and so will react to oppression with proper spirit and appropriate anger. (54)

It is noteworthy that the concept of self-esteem should arise in this quotation. In conjuring the notion of esteem, Snow is implying that a virtue theory that does not oppress women would begin with self-esteem. She writes of a "healthy sense of self-esteem" implying that self-confident women could and would freely express a wide range of emotions, which in turn would render them more vital and even moral since oppression or injustice could be reacted to with "appropriate anger," not passivity. In *The Disorder of Women*, Pateman references women's association with the passions (read unruliness) as a justification for denying women a role or voice in civic society, what MacLean referred to as the Aristotelian moral universe. She explains:

Women . . . are a source of disorder because their being, or their nature, is such that it necessarily leads them to exert a disruptive influence in social and political life. Women have a disorder at their very centers – in their morality – which can bring about the destruction of the state. Women thus exemplify one of the ways in which nature and society stand opposed to each other. (18)

In this light we begin to see a connection between Astell's earlier metaphysical preoccupation with order (in *Letters*) and her emerging desire to render women less "mean" within her academy. Essentially, her feminist problem has become a moral one.

Though Astell's early feminist forebears, including Pizan and Agrippa, agreed with her on key points, including that "there is not the slightest doubt that women belong to the people of God and the human race as much as men" neither imagined a role for women in the public sphere (Pizan 187). Pizan locked virtuous, learned women away eternally in her walled/allegorical city. Agrippa, to his credit, denounced customary laws and civic practices that subjugated women, but he offered no alternative beyond his powerful rhetorical debate. Astell, on the other hand, positions her academy in the real world where women of means and upper class distinction could enter and leave at will, where flattery and vain adornments would be reduced, and where women would teach one another. Her proposal thus progresses the other two arguments with its emphasis on realism and service outside of the monastery where women from her academy "will become Antidotes to expel the Poyson in others, and spread a salutary Air on ev'ry Side" (167).

It would be a stretch to argue that Mary Astell was a social reformer, just as it would be incorrect to suggest that she was, at heart, a liberal. Essentially, as her next two publications will bear out, she was an early feminist philosopher and a polemicist. However, her belief that women's moral and intellectual improvement would lead them to become "Antidotes" against "the worlds Corruptions" has dual implications. On one hand, it points to the seriousness, practically and theoretically speaking, of her feminist

argument, and, on the other hand, it implies that women are not just capable of becoming men's intellectual equals, but they are capable of becoming men's moral equals as well. This viewpoint effectively renders barriers to a woman's involvement in civic life baseless. Along these lines, Carole Pateman has argued that women have been traditionally viewed as unable to "transcend their natures in the manner demanded by civic forms of life" since such forms require that one abide in justice and "only men are capable of sublimating their passions and thus capable of the justice that civil life demands" (22). In her next publication Astell will lay out a detailed, ingenious plan for surmounting the obstacle of feminine emodiment to women's being fully included, both intellectually and morally, into the category of human being. The following chapter section will underscore Astell's dialogic relationship both thematically and stylistically with the Restoration author, Margaret Cavendish, who employed materialist philosophy to create a separatist feminist sphere.

Materialism in Two Early Feminist Utopias

According to Kate Lilley, the genre of women's utopian writing (she begins in the 17th century) is characterized by "questions of control, knowledge, opportunity and freedom, through an attention to sociality and culture rather than the political and juridical, narrowly conceived" (104). Though I agree that feminist utopianism as it manifested, for example, within works by authors like Margaret Cavendish and Mary Astell's, eschews direct treatments of "the political and juridical" (especially as compared to More's *Utopia* or Bacon's *New Atlantis*), I view the subtext of these women's utopian

visions as politically charged, especially when read in light of each author's unique relationship to materialist philosophy.³⁴ To be sure, early feminocentric utopias have key characteristics and motifs in common including a material enclosure to secure women from enemies and threats (including the male gaze); an emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge; a shift in authority from male teachers to female teachers/mentors; the privileging of female friendship; and a concentration on pleasure -- be it material, spiritual, intellectual or a combination of all three. A comparison of the differing orientations toward the common theme of pleasure within the distinct feminist utopias created by Margaret Cavendish and Mary Astell sheds insight on how materialist philosophical paradigms inform early feminism and inspire alternative conceptions of feminine flourishing.

William Kolbrener argues "'Astell's Design of Friendship' in *Letters* and *A Serious Proposal*" that the materialist leanings that emerge in Astell's later exchanges with Norris allow for an alternative theory of friendship that is curative rather than sacrificial (i.e. characterized by martyrdom). That shift, he explains, corresponds with her emerging critique of Norris's denunciation of the body, i.e., his viewpoint that 'creatures' are to be merely tolerated, even shunned, in favor of a meditative lifestyle devoted to loving God. This, as has been pointed out, is an untenable position for Astell to support both religiously and philosophically, hence her foray into Henry More's theory of plasticity and vital congruity; whereby, an accord between body and mind might be

³⁴ Cavendish's *Blazing World* certainly addresses androcentric utopian motifs including alternative arrangements of power orientations toward nature and science, however, her feminocentric closet dramas fall more closely in line with Lilley's conception of an alternative utopian tradition.

achieved. Kolbrener points out that Astell's theory of friendship in the earlier portion of *Letters* (when she writes of her grief over a friend not returning her love) accords with an occasionalist metaphysics that views the creature as a shadow of the divine, unable to provide the kind of fulfillment that only God can offer. Astell, in this portion of letter, offers gratitude for her loss since this loss will lead her to rely not on human beings for fulfillment but on God. She explains in "Letter III":

But though I can say without boasting, that none ever loved more generously than I have done, yet perhaps never any met with more ungrateful Returns, which I can attribute to nothing so much as the Kind of my best Friend [God], who saw how apt my Desires were to stray from him, and therefore by those frequent Disappointments would have me learn more Wisdom than to let loose my heart to that which cannot satisfy. (80)

According to Kolbrener, the ethic of loss/martyrdom expressed within this letter shifts in Astell's next publication to match her changing metaphysical commitments. In other words, Astell revised her argument at the end of *Letters* to account for the love of people by accounting for the body as inclusive of God's creation. Her co-option, then, of More's mind/body theory (vital congruity) allows her to conclude that God's commandment to love one's neighbor is consistent with a less drastic form of occasionalism than Norris presented.

Kolbrener points out that Astell's revised metaphysics allow "for the manifestation of spirit in the material world . . . reinstat[ing] the possibility of resemblance, and, as a consequence, the possibility of the radically different conception of friendship articulated in *A Serious Proposal*" (62). By resemblance, Kolbrener is speaking of "an earlier metaphysics – of Donne, Milton, and the Cambridge Platonists

[that is] presupposed upon the continuity between divine and human realms (where material part can stand in for spiritual whole)” (62). For Astell then, friendship is not only a sign that points to the divine via loss and disappointment, but a way in which the divine may create heaven on earth, so to speak. This orientation accords with the metaphysics Astell presents in her “Appendix” to *Letters* when she expresses that God has a specific use for the body and its sensations: “It seems more agreeable to the Majesty of GOD, and that Order he has established in the World, to say that he produces our Sensations *mediately* by his Servant Nature, than to affirm that he does it *immediately* by his own Almighty Power” (132). In other words, God created the body and its array of autonomous functions to do his will. This, as Kolbrener points out, is not a fixed position for Astell, but it is one that lends a feminocentric spirit of utopian fervor to her proposal.

The philosophical underpinnings of Mary Astell’s utopian vision within her first *Serious Proposal* contain both rationalist and materialist underpinnings. The rationalist emphasis is depicted throughout as she describes a somewhat austere academy in which women will shun fancy dressing, upscale eating, romance novels and idle gossip. Rather, through the practice of sensual austerity, the women will learn to develop a taste for lasting pleasures that will not debase their inherent natures by turning them into silly ornaments. Within her “Happy Retreat” Astell promises her students that:

you shall suffer no other confinement, but to be kept out of the road of sin: You shall not be depriv'd of your grandeur, but only exchange the vain Poms and Pageantry of the world, empty Titles and Forms of State, for the true and solid Greatness of being able to despise them. You will only quit the Chat of insignificant people for an ingenious Conversation, froth of flashy Wit for real Wisdom; idle tales for instructive discourses. (150)

Such advice accords with her earlier rationalist assertion that the women's academy will privilege "Reality for Appearance" (146).

The overriding purpose of Astell's society is to train women to appreciate "much sweeter and durable delights" than they are accustomed, especially at a young age and when exposed to the marriage economy (151). This shift in aesthetics will be achieved, she insists, through a rationalist framework that denies bodily pleasure and delight in favor of such intangibles as the "love of one another" and "that useful knowledge which by the due improvement of your time in Study and Contemplation you will obtain" (151). Specifically, women will be encouraged to develop a "God-like temper of Mind" by supplementing "useful" study with austere lodging and daily habits that eschew luxury or excess. For example, in regards to grooming the body, Astell recommends that her students spend "no more of it [time] on the Body than the necessities of Nature require . . . that it may neither be buried in Idleness, nor lavish'd out in unprofitable concerns" (156). With regard to diet, clothing and lodging, Astell recommends simplicity, for "what is most plain and decent, what Nature not Luxury requires" is best for her overall purpose (157). Further, rather than wasting time on opulent dressing, "that grand devourer," Astell's students will spend their time and resources involved not just in study, but in charity and teaching. Women will be engaged in "relieving the Poor,

healing the Sick, mingling Charity to the Soul with that they express to the Body, instructing the Ignorant, counseling the Doubtful, comforting the Afflicted, and correcting those that err and do amiss” (156).

Though it seems Astell rather earns her reputation as a dour moralist in these pages, it must be noted that she tempers her asceticism by stressing that no vows need be taken and that women are free to come and go.³⁵ Further, the physical rigors she proposes are meant to predispose the body/mind to its “Divine and God-like temper;” they are not meant as corporeal punishments: “But we intend not by this to impose any intolerable burden on tender Constitutions, knowing that our Lord has taught us, that Mercy is to be prefer’d before Sacrifice; and that Bodily Exercise profiteth but a little” (157). Astell’s utopianism, even in its pragmatism, surfaces in this section as she describes “this happy Society” as “but one body, whose Soul is love, animating and informing it, and perpetually breathing forth itself in flames of holy desires after GOD and acts of Benevolence to each other” (157). There will be no envy, deceit or “Offensive Raileries” and “censure will refine into Friendly Admonition” (156). The perfection she describes has a distinctly moralist tone to it.

As Kolbrener has pointed out, Astell’s metaphysical slide toward materialism in *Letters* allows for a model of friendship within her first *Serious Proposal* that is not just sacrificial (i.e. tending toward loss and leading away from the love of creature) but that is restorative and modeled on divine love, which humans may replicate. Along these lines,

³⁵ Patricia Springborg describes Astell’s portrayal in an issue of *Tatler* in the following light: “Richard Steele (1672 – 1729), Irish essayist, dramatist and politician, lampooned Astell in the *Tatler* as the founder of an ‘order of Platonick Ladies . . . who . . . gave out, that their Virginity was to be their State of life during their Mortal condition and therefore resolv’d to join their Fortunes and erect a Nunnery’” (xiv).

Astell refers to friendship among women within her academy as a form of “holy emulation” that is “the most refin’d and disinterress’d Benevolence, a love that thinks nothing within the bounds of Power and Duty, too much to do or suffer for its Beloved” (163 - 164). She goes on, “There are no Interests here to serve, no contrivances for another to be a stale to; the Souls of all the Religious will be open and free, and those particular Friendships must be no prejudice to the general Amity” (164). Though Astell had earlier expressed a degree of class consciousness in her proposal by suggesting that lower class women would not be allowed to educate noble women; here, with her concern for the “general Amity,” she suggests an openness and egalitarianism that she will develop later in her second *Serious Proposal*. Finally, an element of pragmatism exists within Astell’s brief but important treatise on friendship. This element both tempers her idealism, and it offers a feminist perspective on the theme of relatedness. Departing from the motif of friendship as a “Blessing, the purchase of which were richly worth all the World besides!” Astell warns that intimate friendships must not be entered into with haste (163). She suggests rather that within her retreat, women will learn to discern true from false friends. She explains.

considering how apt we are to disguise our selves, how hard it is to know our own hearts much less anothers’, it is not advisable to be too hasty in contracting so important a Relation; before that be done, it were well if we could look into the very Soul of the beloved Person, to discover what resemblance it bears to our own, and in this Society we shall have the best opportunities to do so. (164)

In this formulation of female friendship, the practice of self-scrutiny is applied to the scrutiny of others in the service of self-protection, which is one of the primary aims of Astell’s academy and her subsequent pamphlet on marriage. This offers another example

of a modern aspect of Astell's early feminism, in that her advocacy of discernment and self-assertion with respect to choosing friends counters the feminine ideal of passivity and privileges self-preservation over martyrdom.

Aspects of Astell's first *Serious Proposal* align with Lilley's notion of feminist utopias as concerning themselves with "questions of control, knowledge, opportunity and freedom, through an attention to sociality and culture rather than the political and juridical, narrowly conceived." However, when we read her shifting conception of friendship from *Letters* to the first *Serious Proposal* in light of her epistemological commitments, a fuller picture emerges. In this light we begin to see that Astell's brief venture into utopianism in this text is not so very different from the male tradition; whereby, "well-educated men, explor[e] and debat[e] the possibilities for systematizing happiness – their happiness – within an 'enlightened' public sphere which, in part, defined itself through the exclusion of women as agents" (Lilley 103 – 104).

Snow links prejudicial/gendered virtue theories to the concept of women's flourishing by calling to mind the notion of self-preservation, which is rarely aligned, in Astel's day, to notions of female virtuosity. Her list of a reparative virtue theory for women includes such "goods" as: self-preservation, autonomy and achievement, life in society, procreation and the care of offspring, as well as emotional wholeness (47 – 51).³⁶ Astell's proposal emphasizes at least three goods from the above list: self-preservation, autonomy (of a sort), and life in society. Snow describes self-preservation

³⁶ Snow recounts a classical conception of emotional wholeness as deriving from Aristotle who theorized that "emotional wholeness is experiencing emotion in the right way, at the right time, and for the right reasons. At its most expansive, emotional wholeness is appropriate engagement with all of the emotions of the human repertoire" (53).

as a good that includes both physical and mental characteristics and that is intimately linked to self-esteem. She argues that self-esteem is promoted by having self-respect and can be thought of as ‘liking oneself’ and being willing to take care of oneself” (57).

Astell’s academy is fundamentally designed to promote sanctuary or self-care (from being “bought and sold”), so that women may become cognizant of “our own worth as to think ourselves too great to do a degenerate and unbecoming thing” (165, 171).

Friendship among women, according to Snow, is associated with the good of life in female society, but it also supports self-esteem, which is fundamental for human/feminine flourishing, in that,

the solidarity of friendship is especially important in enabling women to survive and combat conditions of oppression. Friendships between women . . . can be important sources of courage, strength, and self-esteem. These friendships can empower women by giving them knowledge, encouraging emotional wholeness, and fostering respect for women’s autonomous choices. (59)

By attending to the epistemological underpinnings of Astell’s theory of friendship and self-esteem (to be further developed in the next chapter) we see that Astell’s utopianism is not a separate, parallel tradition running alongside male (canonical) utopian visions, but rather that it is inclusive and corrective of that tradition. Further, Astell’s utopian vision includes the male characteristic/trait of independence in the face of human community as when Astell warns her retreatants to take care in choosing friends: “it is not advisable to be too hasty in contracting so important a Relation; before that be done, it were well if we could look into the very Soul of the beloved Person” (164). Astell’s utopian moment in her first *Serious Proposal* is thus less narrow than previously conceptualized, in that her inclusion of women’s well being/flourishing through the

promotion of autonomy and a reparative socialibility is ultimately designed to render women “Antidotes to expel the Poyson in others” (167).

Margaret Cavendish’s closet drama, the *Convent of Pleasure* (1668), offers another unique perspective on early feminist/separatist enclosures, especially concerning the motif of material pleasure, which is downplayed within Astell’s text. Surprisingly, both Cavendish and Astell were captivated by aspects of materialist arguments that fed their early feminist visions. As we have seen, Astell was acutely attuned to Neoplatonist configurations of mind/body connectivity. She felt compelled to justify a philosophical as well as a theological use for the body. In doing so, I have argued, she found value, or worth, for the female body by way of asceticism and self-control. Margaret Cavendish, by contrast, embraces luxury, sensual pleasure, elaborate dressing and even gossip and frivolity within her enclosed separatist utopia, which is, not coincidentally, conceived of as a convent. A closer look at Cavendish’s unique orientation toward materialist philosophy reveals how these two authors’ seventeenth-century conceptions of pleasure/separatism could be so disparate, especially given that each author employs a strident feminist tone in her publication.

Margaret Cavendish was captivated by atomism. Unlike Astell who achieved a measure of celebrity as an intellectual in her lifetime, Cavendish wrote copiously in a variety of genres including philosophical discourses, poetry, closet dramas, utopian fiction, and autobiography, but she was ridiculed and shunned. As a young woman, she fled revolutionary England for France with the court of Queen Henrietta Maria. In exile, she met her husband, William Cavendish, and was exposed to the salon culture of Paris,

which included such intellectual giants as Thomas Hobbes and Renee Descartes.³⁷ Astell came away with an acute interest in science, particularly atomist theory. Though she was mocked during the Restoration on a subsequent, invited visit to the Royal Society, she has recently been credited as being one of the first English citizens to introduce atomist philosophy to England from its continental origins.³⁸ Cavendish's atomism, as Sheehan and Tillery point out, incorporated concepts from two competing worldviews, that of organicism, whereby matter is seen to be vital or infused with the spirit of God; and mechanism, whereby matter is seen as inert, inorganic and subject to molding and use by man for his own ends. Examples of Astell's atomist theory abound in her prose works, yet her unsystematic style of writing/thinking require close scrutiny to discern both the nature of her theory and its implications within her imagined worldview. In *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), which serves as an introduction to her unruly utopian novel, *The Blazing World*, Cavendish articulates the following atomist theory:

When I say, that None of Nature's Parts can be call'd Inanimate, or Souless; I do not mean the Constitutive parts of Nature, which are, as it were, the Ingredients whereof Nature consists, and is made up; whereof there is an Inanimate part or

³⁷ According to Anna Batigelli, Margaret Cavendish took part in her husband's Parisian salon while living in exile during the English Civil War. Batigelli describes this formative period in the following passage: "In 1645, she [Cavendish] found herself at the center of a scientific salon in which some of the leading thinkers of her day, including the great expositors of mechanism, Rene Descartes and Pierre Gassendi, circulated, reviewed, and discussed their ideas" (45). During this period, Cavendish was tutored by her brother-in-law, Charles Cavendish, and she was shunned by Hobbes.

³⁸ Sheehan and Tillery cite new biographical trends in Cavendish studies, which view her atomist philosophy favorably, even seriously: "for example, Kargon, a historian of science, claims that Cavendish, along with Hobbes, played a central role in the initial introduction of atomism and mechanism to social circle in England. . . . And a more recent biographer, Kathleen Jones, insightfully suggests that Cavendish's contemporaries probably understood her writings even though modern scholars are puzzled by it" (5).

degree of Matter, as well as Animate; but I mean the part or effects of this composed body of Nature, of which I say, that none can be call'd Inanimate; for though some Philosophers think that nothing is animate, or had life in Nature, but Animals and Vegetables; yet it is probably, that since Nature consists of a commixture of animate and inanimate Matter, and is Self-moving, there can be no part or particle of this composed body of Nature, were it an Atom, that may be call'd Inanimate. (23)

For clarity, the most important part of this passage is the ending lines in which Cavendish argues that nature is a “commixture of animate and inanimate Matter and is Self-moving.” If we add the word “therefore” before the next line in the passage as in, “[therefore] there can be no part or particle of this composed body of Nature . . . that can be call'd Inanimate,” we see that Cavendish’s atomism is distinct from that of her philosophical ‘peers’ -- Descartes and Gassendi -- both of whom set matter into motion by an outside force, namely God. Cavendish, by contrast, following an epicurean influence, believing that matter is ‘self-moving’ even as it is a mixture of animate and inanimate particles. In this way she attempts to find a philosophical balance between the new science and the older but still prevalent, organic view of nature. Sheehan and Tillary explain:

From Cavendish’s earliest writings to her final books on natural philosophy, we see a strong adherence to atomism, a mechanistic concept; however, we also witness a complicated attempt to reconcile the vitalism of organicism with the start implications of Enlightenment mechanism. (11)

The implications, from Cavendish’s standpoint, of a purely mechanistic (read utilitarian) view of nature are dire, as she implies in various passages within her utopia, *The Blazing World* (1666). A good example of Cavendish’s melding of materialist and vitalist philosophy with politics when she declares that “not any particular State, Kingdom or

Common-wealth, was contented with their own shares; but endeavoured to encroach upon their neighbours, and that their greatest glory was in Plunder and Slaughter” (217) [sic]. Nature, in other words, is imbued with life – “nothing can move itself, without it have life” – and therefore the human relationship to nature should be circumscribed along ethical limits, so that “Plunder and Slaughter” are curtailed (*Blazing World* 197).

Sheehan and Tillary concur that “what we see in Cavendish’s works – to her credit we believe – is one of the earliest attempts to grapple with the implications of mechanism to a culture that was still dominated by an organic view of reality” (2).

Cavendish’s closet drama, the *Convent of Pleasure* (1668), is of comparative interest to this study because it couples both her complex approach to atomism with an overtly feminist/separatist motif. More specifically, Cavendish conceives of a convent invented by a young noblewoman to avoid marriage. Calling herself the “Votress of Nature” this character, named “Lady Happy,” surrounds herself with other women and indulges in sensual pleasures including fine dressing, dining and play acting. Like Astell, Cavendish conceives of her utopian feminist sphere against the backdrop of the early modern marriage economy, of which young noblewomen like Lady Happy are its prime currency. The play begins, for example, with two gentlemen conspiring to court the heroine whose father has recently died, leaving her with a fortune. Lady Happy, however, has decided to forego the “crosses and sorrows” associated with marriage in favor of “pleasure, freedom, or happiness,” all of which she decides will be available to her and other female retreatants in her convent where “retiredness bars the life from nothing else but Men” (99).

Like Astell, Cavendish believes that God created nature, bodies and the sensual world for a purpose, though the purpose she envisions is starkly different from Astell's. In Cavendish's worldview, God did not create nature to "cross, vex and pain [creatures]," but rather "the gods are bountiful, and give all that's good, and bid us freely please our selves in that which is best for us" (99 – 100). Though Cavendish cautions against excess, she nonetheless advocates the enjoyment of luxuries like fine clothes and furnishings, abundant feasts as well as participation in romantic plays, and she even hints at the possibility of sexual experimentation with other women. Cavendish's convent, however, is not all epicurean excess. Rather, her feminist polemic resurfaces throughout the play in lines like the following: "But those Women, where Fortune, Nature, and the gods are joined to make them happy, were mad to live with Men, who make the Female sex their slave, but I will not be so inslaved, but will retire from their company" (101). Enjoyment of nature's bounty is important, but the key component of this play is its removal from women from the marriage economy and the attendant anxiety created by male members of the cast who will eventually infiltrate the convent.

Though both Astell and Cavendish wish to separate women from the false hope that they might find true happiness and fulfillment in marriage, they go about this project in different ways that follow their separate materialist commitments. Astell, as we have seen, employs asceticism to teach women to value themselves inherently and to take pleasure in weightier concerns than the preservation of beauty for the attainment of a false sense of status. Cavendish, on the other hand, embraces sensual pleasure/beauty for its own sake and encourages women "to take pleasure in our own Beauties, whilst they

are fresh and young” (105). To this end “a great Looking-Glass [is placed] in each Chamber, that we may view our selves” (105). With mirrors in the women’s bedrooms and men relegated to the margins of the convent, the male gaze is rendered impotent as the women are taught to “take pleasure in our own Beauties.” In “The Politics of Feminine Retreat in Margaret Cavendish’s *The Female Academy and the Convent of Pleasure*,” Hero Chalmers argues that “it is men whose stability relies on being able to gaze rather than the women who need to be gazed upon” (86). In this manner, Cavendish remains true to her epicurean/atomist emphasis while she applies her brand of materialist philosophy to a critique of marriage. If we conflate the categories of nature and of woman, we see that Cavendish’s celebration of the abundance of nature and of its possibility for its own agency and end, applies equally to women. She articulates this same viewpoint even more directly in her poem, “A Dialogue Between an Oake, and a man Cutting Him Down.” Speaking in the voice of the Oak she writes, “ More Honour tis, my owne green Leaves to beare./ More Honour tis, to be in Natures dress,/ Then any Shape, that Men by Art express/ I am not like to Man, would Praises have,/ And for Opinion make my selfe a Slave.” (262).

As in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, Cavendish’s closet drama treads a fine line between comedy and tragedy.³⁹ At the edges of the play the “Gentlemen” continue

³⁹ I am referring here to the hasty marriage between Isabella, the defiant nun who refused to trade her virginity for her brother’s life, and the Duke at the end of *Measure for Measure*. Of this ending, Anne Barton writes, “There is, after all, nothing to prepare one for a marriage between the Duke and Isabella. There have been no love passages of even the shyest and most inarticulate kind between them. She has never expressed any dissatisfaction with her original choice of a religious life, nor has the Duke retracted his statement at the beginning of the play that he is impervious to love. . . . The situation is not made more credible by the fact that , even as Angelo has uttered no word of love or acceptance of the faithful Mariana,

to congregate outside of the gates of the convent, growing increasingly agitated. One advises that they “smoak them [the women] out, as they do a Swarm of Bees” (107). Another advises that they look for a place in which they may “peak into the Convent” (108). Still another suggests they dress up as women to gain entry. When a nobleman takes this suggestion and enters, a complex cross dressing scene ensues; whereby, this man plays a woman playing a man in a pastoral drama to court the “Lady Happy,” who is of course, playing the part of a man. He succeeds in getting the Lady Happy to fall in love with him while he is in the guise of a woman. This constitutes a “disgrace” for the Lady Happy, apparently not because she has fallen in love with a woman, but because she has lost her sovereignty. Indeed, all is lost in the final scenes when the imposter reveals himself to be a man and informs the Lady Happy that they will be getting married:

But since I am discover'd, go from me to the Councillors of this State, and inform them of my being here, as also the reason, and that I ask their leave I may marry this Lady; otherwise, tell them I will have her by force of Arms. (129)

Thus, under threat “by force of Arms” the Lady Happy, once a “Votress of Nature,” has become a wife and “all my sweet young Birds are undone, the Gods comfort them” (130).

According to Kate Lilley, early feminist utopian authors were more limited than their male counterparts in terms of the scope of their political goals and visions. She explains,

Men's utopias have focused on political systems and laws; utopian writing by women has tended to focus strategically on the possibilities and problems of

so Isabella says nothing whatever in response to the Duke's proposal of marriage. Like the theatre audience, presumably, she is dumb with surprise” (582).

gendered social life and the weight of custom -- micropolitical questions of sexuality, maternity, education, domesticity and self-government – while declining the burden of representing a fully articulated model of a new political order. (118)

It is curious to note, however, that neither Astell nor Cavendish broaches the topic of maternity or domesticity in their respective utopias. Rather, the primary motifs that these two seventeenth-century authors share in common are marriage (freedom from it), education, and leisure -- be it for intellectual, religious or entertainment purposes.⁴⁰ Marriage, as we have seen in this chapter, is a distinctly political construct, involving power, wealth and the transfer of property. Both authors repeatedly refer to women as literal and figurative slaves within this institution and offer visions of an alternative possibility, even if this vision is fleeting, as with Cavendish's closet drama. Astell, by contrast, was writing an actual proposal for a separatist women's academy that she believed would be funded. Her *Dedication to Princess Ann* at the opening of her first *Serious Proposal* attests to the seriousness of her plan:

And when I consider you Madam as a Princess who is sensible that the Chief Prerogative of the Great is the Power they have of doing more good than those in an Inferior Station can, I see no cause to fear that your Royal Highness will deny Encouragement to that which has no other Design than the Bettering of the World, especially the most neglected part of it as to all Real Improvement, the Ladies. (137)

She hoped and even expected at the time of her writing that her academy would be funded at least partially by Queen Ann and hence her polemic is careful, the politics

⁴⁰ Leisure is not a 'light' topic in either Astell's or Cavendish's utopias, especially when we read their visions in light of philosophical imperatives. Astell's conception of leisure "here afforded," for example, connects to the Cartesian notion of freedom from prejudice or, in Descartes words in the *Meditations*, "freeing ourselves from all our preconceived ideas" (Bryson 9). Cynthia Bryson explains that for Descartes, "freedom is necessary for obtaining the foundations of knowledge, freedom is different from free-will in judgment, freedom is necessary for philosophizing itself and for reaching the cogito" (43).

guarded.⁴¹ Margaret Cavendish, by contrast, was writing in the then subversive genre of the closet drama. She can thus be seen both as representing a diminished royalist perspective during the Restoration, but her feminist polemic is undeniable; it is overt and subversive. Men, she points out, are anxious and inclined to violence and usurpation when women retreat from the marriage economy, pointing to the importance of women's positions within that economy, if it is to function smoothly.

I have argued that each of these two authors employs a materialist framework to support her early feminist vision. Astell's theory of redemptive female friendship, the only purely utopian part of her proposal, arises out of her identification with Neoplatonist strands of materialist philosophy; it thus complicates and tempers her penchant for asceticism that arises out of her rationalist commitments. Cavendish, by contrast, embraces the Epicurean side of her atomist theory, arguing that all facets of material life including women's bodies, food, the natural world, etc., deserve to be embraced and celebrated. In their differing uses of materialist strands of philosophy; however, each author participates in what Lilley calls the "androcentric" side of the utopian genre:

The province of well-educated men, exploring and debating the possibilities for systematizing happiness – their happiness – within an 'enlightened' public sphere which, in part, defined itself through the exclusion of women as agents, and by contrast with a feminized private sphere. (104)

I am arguing, by contrast, that both Cavendish and Astell participate in "possibilities for systemizing happiness," which have implications for the greater good, beyond the exclusive improvement of women's material and spiritual conditions.

⁴¹ Both Sullivan and Springborg point out that Bishop Gilbert Burnet dissuaded Princess Ann and possibly other patrons from funding the academy because of its Catholic overtones (Sullivan 63, Springborg xiii)

Conclusion:

I have argued in this chapter that Astell's feminism is not "singular," in the sense of arising out of a vacuum. By connecting Astell's arguments concerning her goal of instructing women on their true or inner worth to earlier Renaissance prejudices concerning women's bodily inferiority and the longstanding "querelle des femmes" I have shown that Astell's early feminist plan to reform women's education is indirectly connected to a body-conscious ethic that her earlier materialist leanings support. Further, I have shown that materialism philosophy, with its attention to the body and atomist theories of causation offered women writers and thinkers viable frameworks with which to posit reparative feminist spheres that have social and political implications. In the next chapter, I will highlight how Astell co-opts Descartes's theory of regulating the passions in a philosophically robust defense of her women's academy. In other words, I will show how Astell concretely plans to teach women who to find and cultivate their inner "Shining" self-worth.

Chapter Three: Cartesian Generosity & Early Feminist Self-esteem

Introduction

In this chapter, I link the emergence of Astell's theory of feminine self-esteem in her first *Serious Proposal* with the philosophical underpinnings of this theory in her second *Serious Proposal*. To date, very little emphasis has been placed on Astell's reliance on Descartes's theory of the passions/judgment despite that she devotes an entire chapter to it (some forty pages) in her second *Serious Proposal*. In the spirit of reading Astell's early feminist pamphlets with an eye toward philosophical, and even political, consistency, this chapter is devoted to understanding the complexity of Astell's conception of early feminist self-esteem in light of a detailed treatment of Descartes's theory of the passions. This theory accords with her recognition that prejudicial Renaissance notions of womanhood must be taken into account if women are to accorded the status of human being. In other words, Astell was cognizant of the fact that "women are intimately associated and intermingled with their bodies," and she exploited Descartes's system of mind/body unity with this recognition in mind in order to advance women's equality on several philosophical fronts (Broad 174).

When we read Astell's early feminist polemic in light of Descartes's *Passions*, new possibilities for understanding the seeming contradictions in her corpus emerge. For

example, in an insightful essay that unravels Astell's political inconsistencies in light of her use of Cartesian moral philosophy, Jacqueline Broad concludes that "Astell's writings show that radicalism is not the necessary outcome of Descartes's philosophy" (179). I am less interested in the political contradictions that Broad resolves in her essay than I am in underscoring the modernity of Astell's feminism and hence its relevance to second and third wave feminist theories and agendas. In this regard, reading Astell's theory of self-esteem in light of Descartes's moral philosophy counters such notions as have been recently advanced by Sharon Achinstein that "Mary Astell is at pains to obliterate the ideology of self-possession," and consequently her early feminism supports a kind of egalitarianism that is not consistent with modern feminism(s) especially those that support women's bodily difference (24). The following analysis is aimed at correcting such views that persist because scholars tend to gloss the impact of Descartes's moral theory on Astell's thinking about women's flourishing.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section explores the development of the Cartesian notions of habituation and generosity from his revised and more nuanced theory of mind/body connection as illustrated within *The Passions of the Soul* (1659). Descartes's belief that the body and mind were physically and metaphysically linked appealed to the materialist side of Astell's thinking and influenced her to argue that women could not only learn to think as well as men, but that women could also become moral and generous, like men could. In the second chapter section I demonstrate how Astell applied Descartes theory of judgment or habituation to an ideal of generosity that encompasses women's material reality and potential. I specifically

analyze her often neglected final chapter of the second *Serious Proposal* which is devoted to Descartes's *Passions*. The third and final chapter section compares the correspondences and mentoring relationship between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and Descartes to those of Mary Astell and John Norris. The purpose of this section is to shed light on the uncanny thematic similarities of Elisabeth's and Astell's questions/criticisms of their mentors and to trace, following Lisa Shapiro's lead, a distinct feminine style of philosophizing that is present in both sets of letters.

The Passions and Cartesian Habituation

According to Debra Brown and Calvin Normore, Descartes revised rather than revolutionized Thomist conceptions of the passions when he wrote his final publication, the *Passions of the Soul* (1649). For Aquinas, passions originated in the body or were seen, according to Brown and Normores as "wholly bodily" (88). The model of the virtuous sage or citizen, i.e. one whose "passions are subordinate to the reason and will," was Christ who exhibited no bodily but only intellectual passions (88). Brown and Normore explain, "Despite Aquinas's intention to distance his view from that of Stoics, the figure of Christ stands as a model human being for Aquinas, and Christ has no passions except '*propassiones*' or intellectual passions, which are not tied to the body in the way the passions are in humans" (88). Unlike Aquinas, Descartes refused to divide the soul into two distinct parts, the intellectual and the sensitive, and he therefore could theorize an interconnectedness, or union, between mind and body with respect to the

passions, emotions that arise in relationship to sensory experience.⁴² In this sense, though Descartes's system for theorizing how the passions function and from where they originate is only a revision of the Thomist system, this revision "in its time offered a radically new way of conceiving of the passions" (Brown and Normore 84). And it was a theory from which Astell borrowed for her unique end.

To understand how and why Astell co-opted Descartes's theory of the passions to bolster her early feminist framework, several key terms within his system must be grasped. These terms include: union, habituation/judgment and generosity (a synonym for esteem). We will begin with union, or mind/body union, as this term connects to Descartes's vision for how mind and body specifically (read: materially) interact. Recall that Astell harkened back to More's theory of vital congruity, renaming it sensible congruity, to argue that there is a use for God's material creation (or the body.) Henry More, who was famously suspicious of Descartes's mechanism, proposed that "a spirit in nature" infused matter, giving it the capacity to interact with mind/soul. Recall also that in the *Immortality of the Soul* he had written of "a substance incorporeal, but without Sense and Animadversion, pervading the whole Matter of the Universe" which he called the "Spirit of Nature." This spirit, he contends, "direct[s] the parts of the Matter and their Motion" (169). More's point is to combat purely mechanistic conceptions of nature, but he doesn't go further in explaining how the spirit within nature directs matter. For her

⁴² Descartes defines the term passion "Article 27" when he writes that passions are "perceptions or sensations or excitations of the soul which are referred to it in particular and which are caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of the spirits" (34).

part, Astell follows Norris in her agreement that “there be no such thing as Sensation sin Bodies” but she asks, why can’t there be a “congruity” between mind and body; whereby, a “Presence” (borrowed from More’s spirit of nature) within bodies or matter “draw(s) forth such sensations in the soul?” (182). Both Astell and her predecessor, Henry More, are vague about how the plastic part of nature works on, moves, and/or interacts with the mind, which is a different substance. Descartes, by contrast, attempts to resolve the dilemma of mind/body union in mechanistic terms.

In “Article 31” Descartes asserts that mind/body interaction occurs by way of a “small gland” that serves to stir up feelings, emotions, and muscular or vascular changes in the body:

even though the soul is joined to the whole body, there is nevertheless one part in [the body] in which [the soul] exercises its functions in a more particular way than in all the others . . . to have plainly ascertained . . . a certain extremely small gland, situated in the middle of its substance, and so suspended above the duct by which the spirits of its anterior cavities are in communication with those of the posterior that its slightly movements can greatly alter the course of these spirits, and conversely the slightest changes taking place in the course of the spirits can greatly alter the movements of this gland. (36)

If Descartes had stopped here, then his theory of the passions would have chiefly been a rewording of the Thomist system that located the passions within the body and conceived of them as completely subordinate to human reason. In turn, human reason is subordinate to “universal reason”; whereby, “the human is capable of bringing to bear universal considerations in deducing a particular course of action” (Brown and Normore 87). For Descartes, however, a distinction arises because he manages to preserve the dualistic conception of mind and body as distinct substances, while he blurs the hard lines of

distinction between these substances by proposing that passions and actions are the same thing. In other words, modes of the soul (passions) and modes of the body (actions) are not necessarily distinct; therefore, a unity may be posited. This unity goes beyond a purely mechanistic explanation of how sensations, via the “extremely small gland” located in a person’s chest, may enter the body and peripherally affect the mind or soul. The soul’s “sovereignty” from bodily or sensual incursions is less stable within Descartes’s taxonomy. A look at the origins of Descartes’s final publication helps further explain this shift from mind/body as distinct to mind/body as interdependent.

On a practical level Descartes wrote *The Passions* to further explore questions that arose between him and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia in a series of correspondences over six years concerning the problem of mind/body interaction. Like Astell, Elisabeth asked a commonsensical question of her friend and mentor Descartes. Why, she wanted to know, when a person gets sick, does his/her mental acuity decrease if a body can’t affect a mind or soul? Astell had posed an uncannily similar question to Norris in the appendix to *Letters* when she observed:

For as the Soul forsakes the Body when this vital Congruity fails, so when this sensible Congruity is wanting, as in the Case of Blindness, Deafness, or the Palsie, &c. the Soul has no Sensation of Colours, Sounds, Heat and the like, so that although Bodies make the same Impression that they used to do on her Body, yet whilst it is under this Indisposition, she has not the Sentiment of Pleasure or Pain which used to accompany that Impression, and therefore though there be no such thing as Sensation in Bodies, yet why may there not be a Congruity in them by their Presence to draw forth such Sensations in the Soul? (184)

Each of these women is concerned with the body vis-à-vis the mind when the body is “in disposition,” a chronic state for Elisabeth who suffered physically and emotionally as a

result of profound personal losses during the English Civil War.⁴³ She confessed her suffering to Descartes, utilizing herself as a kind of case study to probe and challenge his strict substance dualism which left very little room for common sense observations such as that when one has a fever, one thinks less clearly. In her opening letter in 1643, she poses her key philosophical question concerning Descartes's philosophy:

So I ask you please to tell me how the soul of a human being (it being only a thinking substance) can determine the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions. For it seems that all determination of movements happens through the impulsion of the thing moved, by the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it, or else by the particular qualities and shape of the surface of the latter. Physical contact is required for the first two conditions, extension for the third. You entirely exclude the one [extension] from the notion you have of the soul, and the other [physical contact] appears to me incompatible with an immaterial thing. That is why I ask you for a more precise definition for the soul than the one you give in your *Metaphysics*, that is to say, of its substance separate from its actions, that is, from thought. (62)

The series of correspondences between Descartes and Elisabeth that concern her physical and mental weaknesses begins in May 1645 when Descartes writes to Elisabeth of her illness, lamenting: "I was extremely surprised to learn...that your Highness has been ill for a long time, and I rue my solitude for it is the reason I did not know anything of this sooner" (85). Elisabeth, according to Descartes, had a serious "low-grade fever, accompanied by a dry cough, which lasted three or four weeks, and that after you had recovered from this for five or six days, the illness returned" (86). Though Descartes was

⁴³ According to Shapiro, Princess Elisabeth's familial and financial troubles were well known; she was born in 1618 to Elizabeth Stuart (daughter of James I of England and sister of Charles I) and Frederick V of Bohemia (503). Her father, Shapiro points out, lost, by 1620, "not only the throne of Bohemia, but also his own land. The family went into exile, first in Germany and then in the Hague" (505). The family was from this point forward in debt and dependent upon royal foreign relations for support, which left little security especially after Charles I's beheading in the English Civil War. Elisabeth suffered the death of a sibling, her father and the conversion of one brother to Catholicism. She eventually became the abbess of an English protestant convent. Shapiro notes, "As abbess she offered refuge to those whose religious beliefs were less orthodox, including Jean Labadie and his followers. Elisabeth died in 1680" (503).

not a physician, he gives Elisabeth advice on how to cure her illness since she had given him “the honor . . . last summer of wanting to know my opinion regarding another indisposition . . . [this] made me hope that the liberty I take will not be disagreeable” (86). Descartes’s advice is curiously psychological. He writes, for example, that “the most common cause of a low-grade fever is sadness, and the stubbornness of fortune in persecuting your house gives you matters of annoyance which are so public and so terrible”(86). Here, Descartes is already suggesting a mingling of mind and bodily states, but his perspective is principally, neo-Stoic.

In “On the Stoic Conception of the Good,” Michael Frede explains that Descartes exhibits neo-Stoic influences when he emphasizes self control, or the transcendence of one’s fortune in the quest for “the perfect felicity,” as he is beginning to do in his correspondences with Elisabeth.⁴⁴ Frede contends:

Following the Socratic tradition, the Stoics assume that, in order to achieve true well-being, in order to have a good life, one needs a certain competence which we may call virtue. One must be good at taking care of oneself, at dealing with the kinds of situations and problems one encounters in life. Following Socrates, the Stoics think that this competence is a real art, the art of living, and that wisdom, perfect rationality, the perfection of reason, consists in having mastered this art. (71)

⁴⁴ Katerina Ierodiakonou names Descartes as one of the major seventeenth-century thinkers who was influenced by the revival of Stoicism: “Many philosophers and scientists of this period [17th & 18th centuries] are substantially influence by Stoic doctrines. In particular, some of the most important early modern philosophers such as Hobbes, Descartes, and Spinoza incorporated in their philosophy Stoic elements; others like Hume, considered Stoicism an appropriate target for their skeptical attacks, and scientists like Newton drew on Stoic ideas” (3).

With this influence in mind, Descartes advises Elisabeth that she:

Should . . . be the most happy . . . if only it would please her to cast her eyes on that which is right under her and compare the value of those goods she possesses, and which can never be taken away from her, with that of those goods which fortune has plucked from her . . . Then she will see all the many reasons she has to be content with her own goods. (88)

Princess Elisabeth's reply to Descartes is instructive on a number of levels. For in it she personalizes the philosophical problem of mind/body interdependence, but even more importantly, she does so by calling attention to her gender, i.e., her defective (female) bodily state:

Know thus that I have a body imbued with a large part of the weaknesses of my sex, so that it is affected very easily by the afflictions of the soul and has none of the strength to bring itself back into line, as it is of a temperament subject to obstructions and resting in an air which contributes strong to this. (88)

This quotation highlights a key insight, I argue, that Astell had in mind as she crafted a conception of feminine self-esteem with Descartes's theory of the passions in mind.

Before turning to her use of Descartes's theory, however, it is instructive to note how Elisabeth's confessions constituted a viable philosophical critique and how that critique nudged Descartes's thinking on the problem of his substance dualism in a new, more body friendly direction. Lisa Shapiro summarizes this new direction in Descartes's thinking as "respect[ing] the fact that we are embodied . . . indeed, [that] our embodiment might well be understood to be an integral part of reason itself" (Shapiro 516).⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Shapiro explains that, like Astell, Elisabeth adopts a mediating position with respect to mind/body dualism and causality. She explains that Elisabeth's emerging philosophy of mind is situated between 'reductionist materialists' like Hobbes who believed that all thought was dependent upon bodily conditions (i.e. thought is a bodily activity and not a manifestation of a divine, rationalist order) and Descartes's substance dualism which held that the body and soul/mind are distinct substances that cannot interact (511).

Descartes chiefly ignores Elisabeth's confession concerning her constitutional weakness, and he continues to offer her neo-Stoic remedies: "I find for this but one remedy, which is to divert one's imagination and one's senses as much as possible and to employ only the understanding alone to consider them when one is obliged to by prudence" (91). Descartes contends that if Princess Elisabeth could just "turn her imagination from" her "true sources of displeasure . . . this alone would be capable of bringing her back to health" (92). But Elisabeth is not convinced: "This [is] anxiety no sooner calmed by reasoning than a new disaster produces another anxiety" (cite).

In his replies to Elisabeth, Descartes does not consider her femaleness as a contributing factor to her ongoing illness, but rather he considers her illness to be a reflection of sadness, which results from her inability to control her mind. He doesn't blame her for this, perhaps she simply never learned, but Princess Elisabeth will not be swayed from the problem of her female embodiment. She replies, "If I could yet make my mind conform to your last precepts, there is no doubt that I would cure myself promptly of maladies of the body and weaknesses of the mind" (93). At length, Elisabeth describes her inability to control her mood via thinking because her body is simply too unruly and beyond her ability to control:

There is something surprising in misfortunes, even those that have been foreseen, of which I am mistress only after a certain time; my body becomes so strongly disordered that several months are necessary for me to restore it, and those months hardly pass without some new subject of trouble. . . . If I were able to profit, as you do, from everything that presents itself to my senses, I would divert myself without difficulty. (93)

Shapiro points out that in this passage Elisabeth is, on one level, affirming her female weakness and, on another level, she is disagreeing with Descartes that the soul has complete sovereignty over the body, that it is distinct. For her and perhaps for women generally, this is simply not the case as Shapiro points out. In an earlier passage the latter interpretation of Elisabeth's confession predominates, emphasizing that her weakness and failure to triumph mentally constitutes a flaw in Descartes's philosophy:

If my life were entirely known to you, I think the fact that a sensitive mind, such as my own, has conserved itself for so long amidst so many difficulties, in a body so weak, with no counsel but that of her own reason . . . would seem more strange to you than the causes of this present malady. (89)

Here, Elisabeth is defending herself against Descartes's Neostoic remedies, i.e., his insistence that she should be able to turn her mind away from her physical malady to achieve "perfect felicity." This, Elisabeth infers more broadly, is unrealistic given the varieties of human and bodily states. Shapiro points out that Elisabeth's protests concerning Descartes's proposed remedies do not suggest that she was moving entirely away from rationalist interpretations of body/mind dualism. Rather, the emphasis in the above passage on her ability to preserve her sanity by way of "her own reason" suggests to Shapiro that she believes "the soul has a sort of autonomy from the body; it can have these other thoughts at will. With her denial, however, Elisabeth seems to be suggesting that there are certain limits to or conditions on the soul's autonomy" (511).

In her earlier letters to Descartes's Elisabeth opens up a new line of questioning concerning mind/body causality:

I also find that the sense shows me that the soul moves the body, but they teach me nothing (no more than do the understanding and the imagination) of the way in which it does so. For this reason, I think that there could be some properties of the soul, which are unknown to us, which could perhaps overturn what your *Metaphysical Meditations* persuaded me of by such good reasoning: the nonextendedness of the soul Though extension is not necessary to thought, neither is it at all repugnant to it, and so it could be suited to some other function of the soul which is no less essential to it. (72)

Here, Elisabeth is moving beyond the question of how the soul and body, two distinct substances, may interact, to a postulation that the soul's substance is not only immaterial, but an "extension," which is typically a property of matter and body, could be one of its features. In other words, the body may be an extension of the soul.

Brown and Normore shed interesting light on this topic. They contend that in *The Passions*, Descartes postulates that mind/body interdependences creates, in effect, a new substance. They explain that if Descartes's substance dualism still held sway in his final publication, then "bodily motions . . . could not be modes of an immaterial substance and states of mind . . . could not be state of the body" (93). Rather, they point out that Descartes refers to the intersection of mind and body as "one thing," so that "there is not a real distinction between a passion of the soul and the action which produces it" (94). This point harkens back to Descartes discussions in earlier texts regarding clear and distinct ideas. Descartes has, Normore and Brown contend, clear and distinct ideas about the substance of the body and the substance of the mind, but he does not have clear and distinct ideas about the modes of these two substances: "the issue of their ontological independence is itself the more obscure" (95). Shapiro confirms that "Elisabeth's insight

. . . is to draw this distinction between autonomy and the sort of independence that makes something a substance” (515).

Eileen O’Neill confirms the notion that Descartes’s emerging conception of mind/body interaction is metaphysically consistent; in other words, she argues that within Descartes’s system two distinct substances *can* interact, causally speaking. She explains this metaphysical consistency by exploring the Cartesian conception of containment, a principle which affirms that “a cause possesses everything, in some sense, that comes to exist in the effect” (232). O’Neill explains that Descartes’s containment principle is even further subdivided into two kinds of containment, “formal” and “eminent” containment. Formal containment exists “when the perfections in the effect are contained in the same or greater degree in the cause;” whereas, eminent containment requires that “the cause is a more noble kind of entity than the effect (or than any other thing which formally contains the perfections that are found in the effect)” (237). Without a clear understanding of these two nuanced aspects of Descartes’s causal theory, it is easy to conclude that Descartes was metaphysically inconsistent within *The Passions*, since mind and body, two distinct substances, should not be able to interact. But Descartes’s theory of eminent containment allows for two distinct and ontologically disparate substances to interact. For example, God is of a very different nature and status than a stone, yet God created stones, and thereby “God eminently contains the perfections of the rock, but the infinitely perfect substance [God] and a portion and a portion of finite, material substance clearly have very different natures” (240).

But Descartes's taxonomy of the passions is not merely a mechanistic explanation for how two distinct substances may affect one another. Rather, it was written to articulate how someone such as Elisabeth might overcome her material/physical circumstances to achieve greatness of soul:

The great souls have reason so strong and so powerful that, even though they too have passion, and often even more violent ones than most do, their reason nevertheless remains mistress, and makes it such that even afflictions serve them and contribute to the perfect felicity which they can enjoy already in this life. (87)

Here, Descartes is articulating a neo-Stoic conception of "perfect felicity," which requires that "reason nevertheless remains mistress." Further, Descartes's theory of the passions follows the neo-Stoic line in that, "ethics follows from natural philosophy: we can only gain understanding of our passions, and so be able to properly regulate them and lead a virtuous life, by properly understanding the nature of the human body, of the human soul, and of their union (Shapiro 275). What is required for this study is an understanding of two Cartesian principles that arise within Descartes's theory of the passions: 1) his theory of judgment/habitation, and 2) his conception of esteem, otherwise known as generosity. Astell, I argue, utilizes these two principles, as well as the governing neo-Stoic notion that "correct moral judgments . . . develop from a proper concern with self-preservation" to bolster her early feminism and render it modern (275).

Descartes's theory of habituation is concerned with prudent judgment and wise behavior in human beings, and it begins to take shape at the end of "Part I" of *The Passions*. In "Article 48," for example, Descartes introduces his theory when he writes, "For there is no doubt that those in whom the will can naturally conquer passions [and]

most easily stop the accompanying movements of the body have the strongest souls”

(46). He further explains:

the weakest souls of all are those whose will does not decide in this way to follow certain judgments, but continually allows itself to be carried away by present passions, which, often being opposed to one another, draw [the will] by turns to their side, and getting it to struggle against itself, put the soul in the most deplorable condition it can be in . . . obeying now the one and now the other, it is in continual opposition to itself, and so renders the soul enslaved and unhappy. (47)

Notice that for Descartes freedom is not a political but rather an epistemological concept.

A soul is “enslaved and unhappy” when the will (located in the soul and only *potentially* sovereign) is under the sway of the passions, thus the will/soul “struggle[s] against itself.” This, I argue in Chapter Four, is Astell’s primary meaning of freedom in her fourth publication.

In “Article 49,” Descartes links proper judgment with clear and distinct reasoning when he explains:

It is true that there are very few men so weak and irresolute that they will nothing but what their passions dictate to them. The greater part have decisive judgments which they follow in regulating a part of their actions. And though these judgments are often false . . . they can be regarded as its proper weapons, and souls can be thought to be stronger or weaker to the extent that they are more or less able to follow these judgments and resist the present passions opposed to them. But there is still a great difference between resolutions that proceed from some false opinion and those that rest on knowledge of the truth alone, since we are sure never to have either regret or repentance if we follow the latter. (47)

Here, Descartes aligns the reason and the will by positing that if one can reason well, (i.e., know “the truth alone”) then one is armed, so to speak, with the capacity to engage in “decisive judgments.” But most people act based on “some false opinion,” a fact that poses a problem for Descartes’ theory since one cannot always discern or know all of the

variables that need to be considered when forming a judgment; in other words, clear distinction (as in pure reasoning) cannot be achieved. In this case, Descartes argues that one must do one's best to make decisions, or resolutions, based on the limited information one has. He specifically advises against "irresolution," arguing that it is better to make a mistake than to remain inert.⁴⁶

Descartes refines his theory of judgment to account for his conception of mind/body union in "Part I" by introducing a second theory, that of habituation in "Article 50":

It is also useful to know that although movements – both of the gland and of the spirits and brain – which represent certain objects to the soul are naturally joined with those [movements] which excite certain passions in it, they can nevertheless by habituation be separated from them and joined with other quite different ones; and even that this disposition can be acquired by a single action and does not require long practice. (48)

Here, Descartes asserts mind/body causality when he states that the "gland" and the "spirits" are "naturally joined," and he implies that one may exploit this mind/body union by practice. In other words, one can divert one's attention to other sense objects, so that "by habituation [one can] be separated from them [certain passions] and joined with other quite different ones." Descartes's theory of habituation can thus be summarized as using one's volition/will to affect psychological and/or moral change in the individual. Further, Descartes emphasizes that his conception of judgment (i.e., discerning the right thing to

⁴⁶ Descartes's discourse on resolution/irresolution with respect to the passions calls to mind Hamlet's indecision regarding the revenge he feels he exact on his uncle: "What's Hecuba to him, or he to [Hecuba]/that he should weep for her? What would he do/Had he the motive and [the cue] for passion/that I have? (3.1.559-563). In the next scene during Hamlet's famous "to be or not to be" speech, he laments: "And thus the native hue of resolution/Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,/and enterprises of great pitch and moment/with the regard their currents turn awry/and lose the name of action" (3.1.82-87).

do even if a mistake is inevitable) and habituation (i.e., training oneself to pay attention to wholesome influences) are egalitarian practices that can be learned by almost anyone without “long practice.” He emphasizes the availability of virtue to all in the following passage, also found in “Part I”:

Now these are useful to know in order to give everyone the courage to study the regulation of his passions. For since with a little skill one can change the movements of the brain in animals bereft of reason, it is plain that one can do it even better in men, and that even those who have the weakest souls could acquire a quite absolute dominion over all their passions if one employed enough skill in training and guiding them. (49)

Descartes’s reference to the training of animals – “one can change the movements of the brain in animals” – was probably not lost on Mary Astell who firmly believed that women’s minds and material conditions left them not much further up the great chain of being than animals. Even the weakest souls, which Descartes defines as those unable to regulate their will/passions, “could acquire a quite absolute dominion . . . if one employed enough skill in training and guiding them.” This passage offers Astell fruitful philosophical grounding for her all women’s academy that she designed to strip women of “custom, that tyrant” and to train women how to think properly, judge wisely and ultimately engage in activities and choices that promote self-preservation.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Habituation sounds a lot like cognitive behavior therapy which came into wide usages in the early 1990s as an alternative treatment (from psychotherapy and pharmaceutical treatments) to conditions like depression, anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder. In this book *Learned Optimism*, Martin Seligman echoes Descartes’s notion that we can train our thoughts. He writes, “habits of thinking need not be forever. One of the most significant findings in psychology in the last twenty years is that individuals can choose the way they think” (8). Seligman poses the questions: “What if depression arises from mistaken inferences we make from the tragedies and setbacks we all experience over the course of a life?” and “What if we can unlearn pessimism and acquire the skills of looking at setbacks optimistically” (13).

In “Part II” of *The Passions*, Descartes introduces the concept of generosity/esteem as he more fully outlines the details of what the passions consist and how they operate in both the mind and body. In “The Passions and Philosophy,” Susan James points to Descartes’s reformist impulse as he reduces his list of primary passions to six from eleven, following Aquinas. Descartes identifies the six primitive passions as “namely Wonder, Love, Hatred, Desire, Joy and Sadness – and that all the others are composed of some of these six or are species of them” (56). By contrast, Aquinas’s list consisted of binary pairings of eleven opposites. James, emphasizing the systematizing tradition to which Descartes added, attests to the importance of the passions to early modern philosophy:

The passions are not, for seventeenth-century philosophers, embellishments to be tacked on to the back of a treatise once the real work is done, or added to a map when the surveying and measuring are completed. They are [rather] integral to the landscape, vital to a philosophical grasp of our own nature and our power to comprehend and negotiate the natural and social environments in which we live. (145)

Descartes’s revision of the primitive passions is thus in keeping with the scholastic tendency, beginning with Aquinas, to significantly reduce the list of available mind states (problematic or not) so as to be able to theorize their regulation.

Unlike philosophies of mind/morality before his, however, Descartes’s system begins with a surprising emotion, “wonder,” which he considered the primary source of all other passions, including generosity. In “Part II” he explains that the emotion/passion of wonder occurs within us,

when the first encounter with some object surprises us, and we judge it to be new, or very different from what we knew in the past or what we supposed it was going to be, this makes us wonder and be astonished at it. (52)

In “Article 161” Descartes defines generosity as both a passion and a virtue when he writes, “one may excite in oneself the Passion and then acquire the virtue of Generosity” (109). Shapiro explains that for Descartes “generosity is a species of wonder” because “in generosity, we wonder at the freedom of our will” (260). Further, wonder is not just characterized by surprise, but it incites in humans the desire “to learn more about what we initially wonder at” (Shapiro 260). This notion of the human capacity to learn as tied with wonder is similarly expressed in “Article 161” when Descartes writes, “it is certain nevertheless that good education is very useful for correcting deficiencies of birth” (109). Along these lines, we see not only the link between passion and self-esteem developing in this Cartesian definition, but we see an alternative to the 16th century usage of the term generosity. Descartes intimates this difference when he distinguishes “Magnanimity, following the usage of our Schools” from generosity, in that “there is no virtue to which good birth seems to contribute so much as that which makes one esteem oneself only at his true worth” (109). Recall how often Astell refers to the phrasing “one’s true worth” in her first *Serious Proposal*. I shall return to that point in the second chapter section, but first, we must further understand what exactly Cartesian generosity is.

A fuller picture of the 16th-century notion of generosity as encompassing nobility can be found in Castiglione’s, *The Book of the Courtier*, when he writes in the chapter “Nobility of Birth”:

For if a gentleman strays from the path of his forebears, he dishonours his family name and not only fails to achieve anything but loses what has already been achieved. Noble birth is like a bright lamp that makes clear and visible both good deeds and bad, and inspires and incites to high performances as much as fear of dishonour; or hope of praise; and since their deeds do not possess such noble brilliance, ordinary people lack both this stimulus and the fear of dishonour; nor do they believe that they are bound to surpass what was achieved by their forebears. (54)

In Castiglione's depiction of the European Renaissance worldview, one is pushed by the pressure of one's ancestors to perform "good deeds." The importance of engaging in such good deeds is external, based upon living up to or even "surpass[ing]" one's "forebears." There is, in effect, a level of competition and pride associated with this virtue. Furthermore, the notion is distinctly classist in that, as Castiglione summarizes, the inclination to "high performances" exists as a "bright lamp" *only* for the nobility; it is not a standard to which "ordinary people" need aspire. Descartes's conception of generosity, arising as it does out of his mind/body causal theory, is distinct from its Renaissance counterpart. Stephen Voss, editor/translator of the complete modern edition of Descartes's *Passions*, terms this distinction, "the Cartesian artificial aristocracy." He writes, "But while 'good birth' is a natural source of generosity, anyone can be trained in its acquisition; no one is barred from the Cartesian artificial aristocracy" (109). As we have seen and shall continue to observe, this aspect of Descartes's theory applied to Astell in its application to women who were generally conceived of as inferior.

In the following definition of generosity from "Article 153," Descartes spells out how generosity is integral to his version of the passions and distinct from the sixteenth century notion of the term:

So I believe that true Generosity, which makes a man esteem himself as highly as he can legitimately esteem himself, consists only in this: partly in his understanding that there is nothing which truly belongs to him, but this free control of his volitions, and no reason why he ought to be praised or blamed except that he uses it well or badly; and partly in his feeling within himself a firm and a constant resolution to use it well, that is, never to lack the volition to undertake and execute all the things he judges to be best – which is to follow virtue perfectly. (104)

Here, we see how epistemology leads to moral theory in Descartes taxonomy. For Descartes, generosity, which as we have seen he links to self-esteem, consists of two parts: understanding that one has “free control of his volitions” and a disposition or “feeling within himself” to “use it well.” Shapiro emphasizes that Descartes’s focus not both will and on the “feeling” inside oneself of the capacity to use the will well links the term generosity to his theory of habituation. She explains, “knowing that free will exists is not enough to allow us to redirect our thoughts . . . away from passions [that] come to us independently of the will” (254 - 255). We must also have what Shapiro terms “a feeling toward one’s own power in that undertaking” (258). Essentially when one habituates one’s thinking toward wholesome influences and sensations, that feeling of inward prowess over the will and senses is strengthened. From Astell’s perspective, this further explains her emphasis on a separatist style of educating women, so that they can feel within themselves different, more heroic capacities than what society teaches them to feel.

To further explain, recall that habituation is quite simply the process of redirecting one’s thoughts. This process is necessary because the passions, in particular, and our senses, in general, have the tendency to fool us. Shapiro explains, “The most

common error of the passions lies in the way in which they exaggerate or under-value the importance of things” (270). Habituation thus involves interrupting the process of being fooled by our senses by encouraging the critical examination of one’s feelings and reactions, then acting in opposition to our habitual inclinations. Suspension of judgement or action in the face of strong, potentially destructive feelings is, for Descartes, an act of supreme self-mastery and the only real basis for self-esteem. Again, the sense of wonder one feels at one’s ability to control oneself propels one to act in further virtuous ways, so that, as Descartes’s emphasizes, “generosity is just a wonder at our own power . . . we esteem not just our willing, but our having willed well” (259).⁴⁸

Descartes’s concept of generosity is thus tripartite: it begins with rational thought (i.e. knowing what is right to the best of one’s ability), feeling within oneself the inclination to act on what we know to be right, and finally acting skillfully (otherwise known as resolution). “Article 152,” encapsulates these three points:

I observe but a single thing in use which could give us just cause to esteem ourselves, namely the use of our free will and the dominion we have over our volitions. For it is only the actions that depend on that free will for which we could rightly be praised or blamed; and in making us masters of ourselves, it renders us like God in a way, provided we do not lose by laziness the rights it gives us. (103)

O’Neill points out that when Descartes claims that having “dominion over our senses . . . renders us like God,” he is conceiving of likeness to God in the weakest possible sense (242). She explains that he “does not reject the causal powers of the mind” (244).

⁴⁸ In “Article 54” Descartes links wonder to self-esteem: “Esteem or Scorn is joined to Wonder according as it is the greatness of an object or its smallness we are wondering at. And we can thus esteem or scorn our own selves, whence come the passions and then the disposition of Magnanimity or Pride, and Humility or Servility” (52).

In “Part III” Descartes clarifies how wise judgment may be fostered by listing some of the benefits of generous people. First he points out in “Article 154” that generosity “keeps one from scorning others” (104). Further, “Those who have this understanding and this feeling about themselves are easily convinced that every other man can also have them about himself, because there is nothing therein that depends on others” (104). Contrary to Castiglione’s depiction of generosity as being tied to an aristocratic birth, Descartes’s revision of the term connotes both independence and liberalism since “every other man” can become generous if properly trained.

In “Article 154” Descartes introduces a second characteristic of his revised notion of generosity when he conceives of this passion as a brace against custom:

And as they do not think themselves to be greatly inferior to those who have more goods or honors, or even those who have more intelligence, knowledge or beauty, or in general surpass them in other perfections, neither do they esteem themselves greatly above those they surpass, because all these things seem to them to be extremely insignificant in comparison with the good will for which alone they esteem themselves, and which they suppose also to be – or at least to be capable of being – in every other man. (104)

Thus generosity in the Cartesian sense constitutes a revolt against classism and customary measures for assigning self-worth since Descartes denies the notion that “more good or honors, or even those who have more intelligence, knowledge or beauty surpass them.” The playing field is, in effect, leveled as those who practice generosity are imbued with a measure of “good will” that elides competitiveness. Astell, I argue, was attuned to this Cartesian sense of generosity, and she used it to craft a system of feminine self-esteem/education that was based upon it.

So far, we have seen that for Descartes the development of generosity leads one to possess humility, graciousness (or good will) towards others, and the ability to shun false notions of self-worth in favor of real or true self-worth that arise independently of outer circumstances.⁴⁹ In “Article 156” Descartes veers toward the modern usage of the term generosity, but he adds the quality of heroism to his definition when he writes, “those who are generous in this way are naturally inclined to do great things, and yet to undertake nothing they do not feel themselves capable of” (105). Pride, for Descartes, is a major stumbling block toward developing the passion/virtue of generosity in that “the Proud try to abase all other men, and, as they are slaves of their Desires, their souls are incessantly agitated by Hatred, Envy, Jealousy, or Anger” (“Article 158” 106). Here again, we see how virtue is tied to self-mastery in that the abasement of “all other men” stems from pride, which is the result of being “slaves of their desires.”

Near the end of “Part III” Descartes ties resolution to virtue by articulating a “method of judgement which is akin to, but slightly different from, his method of reasoning (Shapiro 268). Shapiro explains that “while the outcome of practical deliberation does seem to leave us very far from the certainty required in the sciences, it still shares something with scientific method” (269). In “Article 170” Descartes

⁴⁹ It is important to note that although Descartes privileges the virtue of humility, he distinguishes between “virtuous humility,” which is characterized by good will toward others and ‘unvirtuous humility’, which he terms “Servility” as “it consists mainly in feeling weak or not very resolute, and in being unable to keep from doing things we know we will later repent of, as though we did not have full use of our free will, and also in believing we cannot survive by ourselves or do without many things whose acquisition depends on others . . .” (107). It is my contention that Astell was keen to this distinction and used it to her advantage within her second *Serious Proposal*.

identifies “irresolution” as a roadblock toward what Shapiro terms “practical deliberation” (269):

Irresolution is a species of Apprehension, which, keeping the soul balanced as it were among many actions it is able to do, causes it to execute none of them, and thus to have time for choosing before deciding. In this, truly, it has some beneficial use. But when it lasts longer than necessary and causes the time needed for acting to be spent deliberating, it is extremely bad. (113)

Descartes’s method of judgment emerges in this passage as a system that is surprisingly tolerant of human limitations. For example, in “Article 156” when Descartes’s ties heroism to generosity, he specifies that one should not act beyond one’s limits even in behaving heroically: “Those who are Generous in this way are naturally inclined to do great things, and yet to undertake nothing they don’t feel themselves capable of” (105). On one hand, he emphasizes how to become generous, but on the other hand, he advocates doing one’s best despite imperfect knowledge. In other words, Descartes concedes that in daily decision making, as opposed to purely theoretical reasoning, we cannot know everything. We must, Shapiro explains, “come to terms with our limited ability to achieve certainty” (269). Voss further emphasizes the interplay between the understanding and the will in Descartes’s system of regulating the passions when he writes:

The capacity to attend to different thoughts is a special case of the capacity to use free will, guided by reason, in order to discipline the passions. Like the first remedy that Descartes mentions in this article, this remedy requires the enlightened and resolute use of the understanding (which is partially within our control) and the will (which is absolutely in our control). (133)

Though clarity and distinction are important, Descartes affirms in “Article 113” that the remedy of an excess of irresolution (i.e., paralysis) “is to accustom ourselves to form

certain and decisive judgments about whatever is presented, and to believe that we always discharge our duty when we do what we judge to be best, even though perhaps we judge poorly” (113). Instead of lamenting the imperfection of the human capacity to judge perfectly, Descartes advises pausing before acting when one doesn’t have enough information to make a correct or wise judgement in “Article 211”:

when the Passion favors only things whose execution admits of some delay, one must abstain from making any immediate judgment about them, and distract oneself by other thoughts until time and rest have completely calmed the excitation of the blood. (134)

Here, Descartes further emphasizes self-control in a Neostoic sense by advocating a mode of habituation, or pausing; whereby, one may “distract oneself . . . until time and rest have completely calmed the exciation of the blood.” Further, his emphasis on tranquility or “calming . . . excitation” privileges a neo-Stoic notion of the term as when he describes in “Article 190,” entitled “About Self-satisfaction”⁵⁰ :

The Satisfaction which those who contantly follow virtue always have is a disposition in their soul which is called tranquility and repose of conscience. But that which one acquires afresh when one has just done some action one thinks good is a Passion, namely a species of Joy, which I belive to be the sweetest of all, because its cause depends only on ourselves. (121)

Thus tranquility, a privileged concept in Astell’s system, is founded upon independence.

⁵⁰ Shapiro explains that “there is a deep difference between the Stoics and Descartes . . . [in that] the Stoics aim to offer a wholly materialist account of human understanding, and so of our moral development. For Descartes, on the other hand, human reason is a faculty of an immaterial mind united with a body. Descartes’s dualism and account of mind-body union complicates any developmental story” (275).

Cartesian Generosity and Astellian Self-Esteem

Astell wrote her second *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* with the intent of “lay[ing] down in this second part some more minute Directions” concerning the curriculum and underlying philosophy of her school for women (79). Those “minute Directions” are summarized in Cartesian terms in her introduction entitled, “The Introduction Concerning a farther Perswasive to the LADIES to endeavour of their Minds”[sic]. Curiously, Astell begins her chapter by returning to the motif of singularity. Instead of expressing anxiety about the singularity of her proposal, though, she now advises the “Ladies” to embrace singularity, which connotes boldness and independence in this text:

And pray what is't that hinders you? The singularity of the Matter? Are you afraid of being out of the ordinary way and therefore admir'd and gaz'd at? Admiration does not use to be uneasy to our Sex; a great many Vanities might be spar'd if we consulted only our own conveniency and not other peoples Eyes and Sentiments. . . . Singularity is indeed to be avoided except in matters of importance, in such a case why shou'd not we assert our Liberty, and not suffer every Trifle to impose a Yoke of Impertinent Customs on us? (73)

Here, Astell challenges her audience to strive for singularity “in matters of importance,” which in this case refers to “assert[ing] our Liberty.” Though it is tempting to read the emerging polemical tone in this passage as liberal, even revolutionary, Astell is speaking of liberty in the Cartesian sense, meaning the sovereignty of the soul/will over unruly passions in the pursuit of virtue.

The final passage of her introductory chapter supports this reading of Astell's polemic as distinctly influenced by Descartes both in terms of his method of reasoning

and his method of judgment. Referring to both methods in the following quotation, she outlines the educational curriculum for her women's academy:

In order to which it was in general propos'd to acquaint them [women] with Judicious Authors, give them opportunity of Retirement and Recollection and put hem in a way of Ingenious Conversation; . . . Whereby they might enlarge their prospects, rectify their false ideas, form in their Minds adequate conceptions of the End and Dignity of their Natures; . . . know wherein the Nature of a true Christian consists; and not only feel Passions, but be able to direct and regulate their motions. (78)

Astell's academy is robust and ambitious, in that her students will not only read "Judicious Authors;" but they will become aware of "the End and Dignity of their Natures" by way of learning "to direct and regulate their [passions's] motions." Further, calling directly to mind the Cartesian method for regulating the passions, Astell ends her introductory chapter by emphasizing the importance of tranquility. She writes, "for you know very well that true Joy is a sedate and solid thing, a tranquility of mind, not a boisterous and empty flash" (76). If we read this line out of context, we may be tempted to conclude that Astell, like Norris, is advocating quietism. Her academy could thus be viewed as a retreat from the world not unlike Christine de Pizan's allegorical, walled city -- a safe haven that is bound and wholly allegorical. Yet, reading Astell's entire early feminist oeuvre, especially this particular pamphlet with its numerous direct and indirect references to Descartes's *Passions*, we must come to another conclusion. Recall that Descartes, in "Article 190" of *The Passions* wrote that "the Satisfactions which those who constantly follow virtue always have is a disposition in their soul which is called tranquility and repose of conscience" (121). In this context, we see that Astell's emphasis on developing a "sedate . . . and solid . . . tranquility of mind" is in the service

of acquiring virtue, not escaping from the harsh world. This is, of course, a special problem when applied to women.

Jacqueline Broad argues that the emphasis on joy and happiness found within Descartes's *Passions* calls attention to "his guise as a philosopher in search of happiness and the good life." This "guise" is in opposition to his "legacy [as understood] according to a rather narrow set of philosophical concerns – his skeptical challenge, his rationalist epistemology, and his dualist theory of mind and body, in particular" (166). Broad reads Astell's focus on tranquility in her second *Serious Proposal* in light of Descartes's *Passions* with an emphasis on reconciling the tendency to see Astell's conservatism as contradictory to her feminist polemic.

Though I agree with Broad, my task is to move the argument concerning Descartes's influence on Astell away from the tired argument concerning the political inconsistency toward a fuller understanding of her early feminist framework as encompassing Cartesian moral philosophy. I therefore read Astell's emphasis on tranquility in her first chapter of the second *Serious Proposal* slightly differently than Broad. Since Descartes's conception of tranquility was expressed in the service of claiming the passions to facilitate the acquisition of virtue, I read Astell's use of this term in the same light, except now we are talking about women, who are embodied in inferior "weaker vessels" with little possibility to overcome their inferiority.

Astell thus has a twofold problem. On one hand, she must tackle the very human problem of self-mastery and on the other hand, she must tackle the problem of women's inferiority which is rooted in the medieval and Renaissance notions of women's

compromised biology and morality. This partly explains why Astell focused so much on the feminine vices of vanity and talkativeness in her first *Serious Proposal*. In that text, Sowell points out

Astell is focused on disengagement from prejudice, and in particular from the prejudice that women ‘naturally’ have ‘feminine vices’ – vanity and pride (SP 62). According to this prejudice, a woman’s vice follows from the nature that women have, a nature that is defective. (231)

Astell’s second *Serious Proposal*, by contrast, deals almost exclusively with her curriculum; she rarely addresses women’s concerns directly. Rather, she writes universally of the methods, chiefly Cartesian, she will employ in her academy while refraining from addressing women’s vices *or* virtues (nor the bias of male detractors) until the proposal’s conclusion. This strategy can be interpreted in at least two ways. First, Astell may be attempting to build her own credibility among an audience of peers (mostly male) and potential donors. At this point, she firmly believed she had a chance to fund her academy. Second, she may be discreetly moving to universalize women’s educational concerns/needs as *human* concerns/needs based on the Cartesian notion articulated in “Article 161” that “it is certain nevertheless that good education is very useful for correcting deficiencies of birth ” (109).

Further, Astell adopts a tone of optimism, even good will, in this studied erudite text, in contrast to her sometimes sniping tone in her first *Serious Proposal*. This too can be attributed to Descartes’s growing influence on her thinking about women’s education, emancipation and self-esteem. Along these lines, she writes,

But where is the shame of being taught? For who is there that does not need it? Alas, Human Knowledge is at best defective, and always progressive, so that she who knows the most has only this advantage, that she has made a little more speed than her Neighbours. (77)

This passage again calls to mind Descartes's egalitarian assertion in "Article 50" that:

"even those who have the weakest souls can acquire a quite absolute dominion over all their passions"(51). Another striking aspect of this passage is her use of the pronoun "she" next to the term "Human Knowledge," further conflating women with humanity and the emerging contractarian theory of natural freedom, a topic I shall address at length in the final dissertation chapter. Astell concludes her introduction with a list of ills she hopes her academy will correct. These ills include: "Ill-nurture, Custom, loss of time, the want of Retirement, or of knowing how to use it, so that by the disuse of our Faculties we seem to have . . . sunk into an animal life wholly taken up with sensible objects" (78).

This is a particular Cartesian moment, for what distinguishes animals from humans is the developed mind. This is of particular and pointed concern for women since, as Sowaal so aptly points out, "a woman's vice follows from the nature that women have, a nature that is defective."

In Chapter II of the second *Serious Proposal*, Astell signals that the foundation of her "Method of Improvement" rests upon an attunement to Descartes's theory of the passions. Like Descartes, Astell's project is moral, not just epistemological. She is concerned with the "Art of Well-Living, the Study of the Divine Will and Law, that so we may be Comfortable to it in all things" (97). Part of her aim then is to awaken a new kind of desire in women. This desire, like Descartes's emphasis on the feeling side of

generosity, begins with a “Sentiment” that she defines as “a lively relish of our true Good” and that “will not only Balance, but if attended to and improv’d, very much outweigh the Pleasures of our Animal Nature” (98). Here again, we see Astell’s preoccupation with raising women’s status from the animal to the human realm. She makes indirect reference to the passions in this section when she declares that: “No certainly, we cannot have such narrow groveling hearts; no we are all on Fire, and only want to know wherein to employ our Activity and how to manage it to the best advantage” (89). Astell’s assertion that “we are all on Fire” suggests the power of the passions to override good sense (and not just in women.)

Jacqueline Broad explains that there were two fundamental approaches in the early modern period to theorizing the passions. The Stoic position viewed the passions as inherently evil and “to be avoided altogether in the good life” (172). James explains that the Stoic viewpoint holds the passions as tumultuous, riotous unappeasable spiritual burdens over which very few human beings may gain dominion. She connects this emphasis with the trope of storm winds:

Images of civil strife within the soul are matched by a view of the passions as natural disorders – as storms, torrents, tempests. They are winds that put the mind in tumult, sweeping us along like ships in a gale, and as storms disturb the harmony of nature, passions are discordant and jangling . . . The passions . . . are furious reboundings, they are violent and rash sallies, they are ascensions and recessions of folly. (142 – 143)

This description evokes sixteenth-century literary tropes, particularly in Shakespearian drama. *The Tempest* comes to mind (“ships in a gale”) as well as *Othello* (“accensions and recessions of folly”). James further describes a Stoic orientations towards the

passions “feeding its own restlessness by setting us off on courses of action that fail to satisfy us and further damage our well being” (143). A speech by Ulysses in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* illustrates the voraciousness of unappeased appetite/desire:

Force should be right, or rather, right and wrong
(Between whose endless jar justice resides)
Should lose their names, and so should justice too!
Then every thing include itself in power,
Power into will,/ will into appetite,
And appetite, an universal wolf
(So doubly seconded with will and power),
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself. (1.3.116 – 124)

The Aristotelian position to which Descartes principally subscribed viewed “the passions as desirable features of a moral life – so long as they are directed toward their proper objects” (172). This, she explains, tended to be Descartes’s position as in “Article 212”:

But as for those [pleasures] that are common to it and the body, they depend entirely on the Passions, so that the men they can move the most are capable of tasting the most sweetness in this life. It is true that [these men] may also find the most bitterness in it when they do not know how to employ them well. (135)

In her remark at the beginning of Chapter II that “we are all on fire, and only want to know wherein to employ our Activity, and how to manage it to the best advantage,” Astell suggests that she is co-opting Descartes’s Aristotelian orientation toward the passions. By the end of her second *Serious Proposal*, we see her further transforming this orientation toward a holistic approach that is uncannily modern, even contemporary. This is remarkable given Astell’s reputation as a severe moralist, a reputation that was bolstered in her lifetime by her association with Norris and that continues in

contemporary circles when scholars discover and lift (often out of context) lines like the following in Astell's second *Serious Proposal*: "And were we not sunk into Sense, and buried alive in a crowd of Material Beings, it might seem impossible to think of any thing but Him" (160). Astell is no longer referring to her fellow human beings as "dirty little creatures" in this publication, but she is still influenced to see materiality and the human body through Norris's occasionalist lens; whereby, "these Mud-walls enclose our Earthly Tabernacle and will not suffer us to be pierc'd with the Beams of Glory" (161). Similarly, she is pessimistic regarding the possibility of overcoming passionate feelings when she writes in Chapter I: "but is there no Remedy for this disorder, since we hope that All are not irrecoverably lost, tho too many are so invellop'd in Prejudice that there's little probability of disengaging them" (91).

Astell's pessimism and her neo-Stoic orientation toward the body shift dramatically, however, by the end of the second *Serious Proposal*, as in Chapter IV where she exhibits an Aristotelian attitude toward the passions. A good example occurs in the following passage when she writes:

We must abound both in Good-Nature and Discretion, and not seldom make use of quite contrary means to bring about the End we aim at. Removing all Fuel from the Passion sometimes; and sometimes indulging it as far as Innocently we may; and if nothing else will do, give it line enough, that so it may destroy it self in its own Excesses. (176)

Astell's counter-intuitive impulse to give the passion "line enough that so it may destroy it self in its own Excesses" is not only a departure from the 16th century usage (viewing passions as "an universal wolf"), but it steers her use of the passions in a modern direction with an emphasis on ceasing fighting. This fresh orientation toward the body

and its attendant, unruly feelings emerges in Chapter IV, “Concerning the Regulation of the Will and the Government of the Passions,” demonstrating with little doubt that Astell’s new orientation is directly influenced by Descartes’s final publication. Most scholars to this point have entirely missed, glossed, or ignored this reference despite that it accounts for thirty pages (approximately one fourth) of her (to date) most robust and philosophically defended publication.⁵¹

In “Chapter II,” Astell signals that her orientation towards the Cartesian conception of the passions, in particular generosity, has a specific early feminist end. In order for her to find a suitable and consistent use for Descartes’s version of generosity; however, Astell must account for the particular state of dependency that women typically find themselves in materially and emotionally. In this regard, Astell returns again to the motif of neighbors, a recurring trope. In the following passage, she toys with the appealing notion of generosity as connoting independence (of thought, will, and esteem based on virtuous acts) vis-a-vis the reality of human interdependence:

⁵¹ Astell names Descartes’s *Passions of the Soul* as an influence in this chapter: “But this [an account of the passions] being already accounted for by Des Cartes [*Les Passions de l’Ame] and Dr. More, in his excellent Account of Verue, I cannot pretend to add any thing to what they have so well Discours’d” (165). And yet she does add to the discussion as shall be revealed.

the Author of our Nature . . . has endow'd us with Principles sufficient to carry us safely thro them all, if we will but observe and make use of 'em. One of these is Generosity, which (so long as we keep it from degenerating into Pride) is of admirable advantage to us in this matter. It was not fit that Creatures capable of and made for Society, shou'd be wholly independent, or Indifferent to each others Esteem and Commendations; nor was it convenient considering how seldom these are justly distributed, that they shou'd too much regard and depend on them. It was requisite therefore that a desire of our Neighbors Good Opinion shou'd be implanted in our Natures to the end we might be excited to do such things as deserve it, and yet withal a Generous neglect of it, if they unjustly withheld it where it was due. There's so little reason that we shou'd be discouraged from what is truly excellent and becoming on account of being Scoft and Laughed at for it, that on the contrary this is a new accession to our Glory. (95)

This passage exhibits Astell's characteristic impulse to mediate. On one hand, she agrees with Descartes that a "Generous neglect of [our Neighbors Good Opinion] can contribute to "a new accession to our Glory." Yet, on the other hand, she recognizes that God made sure that "our Neighbors Good Opinion shou'd be implanted in our natures." In other words it is not only normal but Godly to aspire the good will and esteem of one's neighbors or community. This is all the more the case for women who have generally not been educated in the art of self-mastery and whose weaker bodies are paradoxically tied to self-value when their bodies accord with male beauty standards.

Before delving into a study of Astell's specific use of Cartesian habituation/judgement vis-a-vis her concept of feminine self-esteem, we must understand how she co-opted Descartes theory of the passions *in light of* her Cambridge Platonist roots. In Chapter IV she explicitly names not only Descartes's *Passions of the Soul* but also Henry More's *Account of Virtue* as primary sources. Both are texts that treat the passions in such a manner as to leave her own account, in her words "unworthy."

Characteristically, however, she manages to articulate a mediating position between these

two philosophical accounts that serves her unique feminist end and that allows her to proceed with intellectual consistency.

In a passage from *An Account of Virtue*, More displaces wonder with love as the primary passion -- a lead that Astell will follow and that accords with her allegiance to Norris. In the following passage, More clarifies how his account of the passions differs from Descartes's:

DES CARTES brings all the Passions of the Soul under six principal and primitive kinds: Namely, Admiration, Love, Hatred, Cupidity, Joy, and Grief. . . . For as soon as a new Object, or an old one under new Circumstances, occurs unto us, it stops and entertains our Faculty of Considering: . . . and this is called Admiration. Now because this may so happen . . . it may deservedly be called the very first Passion. Yet after this, when the Soul comes to consider the Object as grateful or ungrateful, (which is the same almost as good or evil) then one of them excites Love, and the other Hatred. . . . I will not deny that Des Cartes has his reasons thus to enumerate the Passions; however I think I have as sufficient Motives to contract them; and that into the three first, of Admiration, Love and Hatred. For what is Desire but Love, extending itself towards future Good? (44-45)

Astell remains true to her Cambridge Platonist roots when she follows More's lead by displacing wonder with love as "the very first Passion." She writes in Chapter IV, "but Love seems to be the predominant Passion in every one, and that which makes one of the former more remarkable than another, is only because it has been oftner mixt with Love" [sic] (166). Unlike More, however, Astell sees no reason to "contract" Descartes's argument that wonder is the primary passion. Rather, she concedes,

As a further confirmation of what has already been said we may observe; That Admiration gives Rise to all the Passions; for unless we were Affected with the Newness of an Object, or some other remarkable Circumstance, so as to be attentively engag'd in the Contemplation of it, we shou'd not be any wise mov'd, but it wou'd pass by unregarded. (165)

Here, she agrees with Descartes's position "that Wonder is the first of all the passions" since the feeling of surprise experienced when "we judge it to be new" occurs whether or not we know if the object/feeling is, "suitable to us or not" (52). Her way, however, of accounting for both the primacy of wonder *and* love within her own taxonomy is rather straightforward. She concedes that wonder is the primary passion but that love is the "leading Passion . . . to which the Temper of [the] Body inclines and on which the rest do in a manner wholly depend, especially if it be confirmed by education and Custom, so that if we duly manage this, we have the command of all" (166). It would seem that there is little difference between the words "leading" and "primary" but Astell distinguishes between the two terms several lines later when she writes, "Love seems to be the predominant Passion in every one . . . And indeed, since this is *at the bottom of all the Passions*, one wou'd think they're nothing else but different Modifications of it, occasion'd by some Circumstance in the Subject or Object of this Passion" [emphasis added] (166). I take Astell's phrasing concerning love as being "at the bottom of all the Passions" to mean that love underpins Descartes's list of six primary passions. In other words, the passions of wonder, fear, hope, joy, sorrow etc., are all manifestations of love either thwarted, attained, hoped for or lost. But wonder, which Astell likens to as admiration, is still important within her taxonomy:

if we Love GOD will All our Soul, as He certainly Deserves, and as we certainly Must if we wou'd be Happy; we shall be so taken up with the Contemplation and *Admiration* of his Beauties, have so boundless *Esteem*, such awful Veneration for, and so great a Contempt of all things in Comparison of Him; that our Desires will be carried out after nothing but God and such things as may further our Union with Him. (167)

Though it may appear that Astell has dropped philosophical consistency in this passage in favor of being swept up in occasionalist fervor, in reality she has not lost her self. Rather, she acknowledges that although love underpins the primary passions, one is not necessarily educated or influenced by custom to direct that love toward God, its correct object. This is why love's proper object must be, as she states, "confirm'd by Education and Custom" (166). This is a distinctly Cartesian notion, one which will be further bolstered by Astell's use of Descartes's theory of habituation.

Indeed, most of Chapter IV deals with habituation, not the love of God. Moving away from a Neostoic orientation toward the passions as insurmountable except in exceptional cases, Astell argues that the control of one's passions is within reach:

If therefore we assist it [a passion] with a little Meditation, it will readily come over; and tho we may find it difficult absolutely to quash a Passion that is once begun, yet it is no hard matter to transfer it, so that it may pour forth it self in all its pleasing transports, without fear of danger, or mixture of uneasiness. (169)

Astell's use of the word "transfer" in the above passage signals her attunement to Descartes's theory of habituation, which involves diverting one's attention when gripped by emotion. Recall that in "Article 45" Descartes defined habituation as a form of displacement: "Our Passions cannot likewise be directly excited or displaced by the action of our will, but they can be indirectly by the representation of things which are usually joined with the passions we will to have and opposed to the ones we will reject" (43). Here, Descartes's signals that the will is not sovereign, nor is it powerless in that it may direct the senses toward "the representation of things which are usually joined with the passions we will to have." Astell's phrase that we cannot "quash a Passion that is

once begun” accords with Descartes’s notion of the will’s limited sovereignty over the body and its emotions. And she is also in agreement with Descartes that when agitated by an unwholesome feeling, we may “transfer” that feeling by paying attention to something different. This accords with Astell’s earlier, holistic conception of the passions, in which she argues that we may divert, direct or “let it [the passion] sink by degrees;” or we may “Modify it.” All of these verbs connote agency but within limits (161).

At the end of Chapter IV and within the conclusion to her second *Serious Proposal*, Astell makes her use of the Cartesian theory of habituation/generosity in the service of women’s self-esteem explicit. Before concluding the text, she concedes in Chapter IV that “it may be thought a considerable omission that no directions have been given, any further than the management of our Own Inclinations and Passions” (175). She then emphasizes that the primary topic of this work is the regulation of the passions, not a strict educational curriculum since “Education is a beaten Subject, and has been accounted for by better Pens than mine” (175). Astell has thus devoted her entire fourth chapter and her conclusion to the subject of managing the passions since “if a Passion that is young and tender gives us work enough . . . who set about the Cure of an Old and inveterate one” (175)? And what passion, she implies in her conclusion, is more old and inveterate than the one (falling in love) that teaches women that “we were made for nothing else but to Admire and do them [men] Service?” (178). Here, Astell ties a discussion of custom to the specific problem of women’s passions, one that she will further develop in her next publication, *Some Reflections upon Marriage*. She explains

that when a “Passion of any sort [gets] the hank of one, it becomes so Natural, so Agreeable, that when going about to wean them from it, looks like an attempt to depriv ‘em of all their Joy; and they’re hardly persuaded to part with what’s a Present delight, let its Consequences be what they may” (176). For this reason, women in particular must be separated from society (if only temporarily) so that they may learn to discern regular (connected to God’s will) from irregular passions (connected solely to the animal life) and choose wisely; thereby, circumventing “our Ruin”.

In her conclusion, Astell offers the most explicit link between feminine self-esteem and Cartesian generosity. Co-opting Descartes’s spirit of egalitarianism, she writes “the Humblest Person that lives has some Self-Esteem, nor is it either Fit or Possible than any should be without it” (179). Astell’s impulse to propose a system of self-regulation that is based on Descartes’s theory of the passions arises then from her conclusion that “we will value our selves on somewhat or other, why shou’d it not be on the most substantial ground?” (179). Further, Astell contends that self-preservation is not possible if women do not love themselves in their own right, nor is it based on how they measure up to worldly standards: “Because we always Neglect what we Despise, we ake no care of its Preservation and Improvement, and were we thoroughly possess’d with a Contempt for our selves, we shou’d abandon all Care both of Temporal and Eternal Concerns, and burst with Envy at our Neighbors” (179). Here again, she alludes to the motif of society/neighbors, but this time she will develop this line of thought in the dirction of generosity in the Cartesian sense; whereby, the love of oneself based on self-mastery illicitly in humans a sense of magnamity and corrected humility:

the only difference therefore between the Humble and the Proud is this, that whereas the former does not prize her self on some Imaginary Excellency, or for any thing that is not truly Valuable; does not ascribe to her self what is her Makers due, . . . so that her Self-Esteem does not terminate in her *Self* but in God, and she values her self only for GOD's sake. . . . The Proud on the contrary is mistaken both in her Estimate of Good, and in thinking it is her Own; she values herself on things that have no real Excellency . . . all her care is to Raise her self, and she little considers that the most excellent things are distributed to others in an equal, perhaps in a greater measure than to herself. (179)

Here, Astell follows Descartes's conception of generosity in her explanation that when women value themselves "on things that have no real Excellency" they will be possessed of a spirit of envy and competitiveness rather than a sense of good will and cooperation. Recall that for Descartes the generous are those who have mastered "their Passions – particularly Desires, Jealousy and envy . . . and Hatred of men" (105).

A final clarification needs to be made concerning Astell's statement that self-esteem rightfully terminates in God. How, we might ask, is this a Cartesian conception of the self based on self-mastery? Sharon Achinstein has recently argued that we misunderstand Astell's early feminism when we read an Enlightenment bias into her thinking, especially with respect to her conceptions of the self. She claims: "Mary Astell, in fact, is at pains to obliterate the ideology of self-possession" and that her framework is grounded in "a logic of obedience . . . and submission to the state and its church" (27). In reality, as a close read of the end of Chapter IV reveals, Astell's theory of feminine self-esteem relies on the concepts of self-possession and preservation. Though obedience *is* key in Astell's framework, she believed in a just and orderly God as in: "If we allow that GOD Governs the Universe, can we so much as imagine that it is not Govern'd with the Greatest Justice and Equity, Order and Proportion?" (174). With respect to the passions, Astell's plan for

the education of women includes teaching her students to cultivate “regular” as opposed to “irregular” passions. She explains, “That a Passion of any sort having got the hank of one, it becomes so Natural, so Agreeable, that the going about to wean them from it, looks like an attempt to deprive them of all their Joy” (176). Astell wishes to teach her students to indulge in “much Sweeter delights” that “arise from the due use of Reason; and with which those Wise and Holy Souls are entertain’d, who prefer the relishes of a Rational before those of an Animal Life” (176). We see in this passage that Astell can both hold a religious conception of the self *and* an Enlightenment perspective based on the cultivation of reason in the service of morality at one and the same time. One emphasis need not negate the other.

The same holds true for Astell’s early feminism though Achinstein wouldn’t agree. She argues that the religious strain within Astell’s thinking trumps all others strains. She argues that Astell:

does not . . . anticipate current feminist thought by pointing out the ways that male superiority is often predicated on the seldom-avowed concepts of natural differences between men and women. Her reasoning derives from other premises, and her goal is utterly different from current feminist agendas of recognizing and valuing difference. (21)

Achinstein’s conclusion stems in large part from her neglect of Astell’s emphasis on regulating the passions, which, I argue, underscores Astell’s privileging of bodily difference (and customary prejudices) between men and women. Astell is aware, I have argued, that the reform of women’s lives must begin with their characters, which is uniquely tied to being embodied female and thus biologically inferior. It follows then that Astell’s educational plan begins with the premise that women are worthy and

loveable, deserving of preservation and care *because* they are “such a considerable part of GOD’s Creation” (178). Achinstein is thus wrong to read Astell’s language of the self in relationship to God in a reactionary sense, so that “unlike current feminists, [she] take the argument for dependency back a step” (22). We need only look into Chapter IV to see that, once again, Astell’s conception of dependency is far more nuanced than Achinstein perceives and that this conception is also tied to Descartes’s theory of regulating the passions.

In Chapter IV Astell returns to the theme of the individual as a social being, a particularly fraught topic for women and one that Descartes’s addressed less directly than Astell:

And as to the Influence that another Persons Passion may have on us, enough has bin said to warn us, not to dally with the Flame when our Neighbours house is on Fire, lest we be consum’d in it; and carefully to avoid doing any thing which may excite, or increase their Passions. But when we discern that the Plague is begun, let’s remove with all possible speed out of the infected Air. (177)

Here, Astell moves away from advocating martyrdom over self-preservation: “let’s remove with all possible speed out of the infected Air.” This advice certainly contradicts the early modern feminine virtue of long suffering. We may read such passages in light of Descartes’s concept of virtuous versus unvirtuous humility. In “Article 159,” for example, Descartes distinguishes between these two kinds of humility when he writes:

As for Servility or unvirtuous Humility, it consists mainly in feeling weak or not very resolute, and in being unable to keep from doing things we know we will later repent of, as though, we did not have full use of our free will, and also in believeing we cannot survive by ourselves or do without many things whose acquisition depends on others. So it is directly opposed to Generosity, and those whose minds are most servile often turn out to be the most arrogant and haughty, just as the most generous are the most modest and humble. (106 – 107)

Here, we see just how strongly Descartes's privileges independence in his conception of generosity. Engaging in unvirtuous humility, otherwise known as "Servility," connotes dependence and a lack of initiative and free will. Astell agrees that one should cultivate virtuous humility when she writes in Chapter IV:

The Ladies I hope pass a truer estimate of them selves, and need not be told that they were made for nobler purposes. For tho I wou'd by no means encourage Pride, yet I wou'd not have them take a mean and groveling Spirit for true Humility. (178)

In this passage we see how esteem based on "a truer estimate" of oneself, will lead one away from exhibiting "a mean and groveling Spirit." Further, in Chapter III, we see Astell equivocating on topic of obedience, as she betrays a strong Enlightenment influence even with respect to religious authority:

So it cannot be thought sufficient that Women shou'd but just know whats Commanded and what Forbid, without being inform'd of the Reasons why, since this is not like to secure them in their Duty. For we find a Natural Liberty within us which checks at an Injunction that has nothing but Authority to back it; and tho Religion is indeed supported by the Strongest Reasons, and inforc'd by the most powerful Motives, yet if we are not acquainted with 'em, tis all one to us as if it were not. (148)

Here, Astell ties the questioning of authority figures to educational reform. Women cannot, she argues, expect to obey commands if they are not taught or "inform'd of the Reasons why." Obedience here is conceived of in terms of rationality, not martyrdom. Further, Astell's use of the term "Natural Liberty within us" derives from Descartes who conceived of freedom within *The Passions* as freedom of the will over the tyranny of the passions, i.e., freedom to choose how we act. Astell signals her use of the Cartesian notion of freedom, nuanced as it is, by ending her second *Serious Proposal* with the line

“our only endeavour shall be to be absolute Monarchs in our own Bosoms” (180).

Thus, amidst her concluding pages, Astell’s tone shifts from philosopher to polemicist as she addresses her detractors, those “Perverse Opposers,” and she assures the male readers that “therefore [they] may still enjoy their Prerogatives for us, we mean not to intrench on their Lawful Privileges” (179). These are sarcastic statements that mark Astell’s slide, puzzling and ingenious as it often is, into the language of politics. In the following chapter section, I will once again take up the motif of feminine styles of “doing” philosophy in comparing Princess Elisabeth’s and Astell’s correspondences with prominent male mentors.

Feminine Styles of Philosophizing

In “Princess Elisabeth and Descartes: The Union of Soul and Body and the Practice of Philosophy,” Lisa Shapiro concludes that Elisabeth’s letters to Descartes exhibit a unique and legitimate style of philosophizing that was not systematic, as with canonical/philosophical thinkers, yet that was suited to her circumstances and to her chief philosophical inquiry (how body and mind interact). Shapiro infers Elisabeth’s point by sorting through the implications of her line of questioning concerning her illness and its implications for Descartes’s conception of mind/body dualism. The similarities between Elisabeth’s context and style of philosophizing and Astell’s context and style of philosophizing are uncanny. Even though Astell will eventually strike out on her own as a public figure, whereas Elisabeth closely guarded her privacy, a great deal of inference and close study is required to piece together the contribution she makes to early feminism

and its relationship to modern and contemporary feminisms. This work, however, reveals what Shapiro argues, and I agree, is “a legitimate and a good way of doing philosophy” (520).

Shapiro observes that Elisabeth’s letters to Descartes betray both her “philosophical temperament” and an uncommon measure of self-confidence:

To persist in asking these naïve questions either requires an almost incredible degree of self-effacement . . . or an incredible degree of confidence. By considering both possibilities . . . we can begin to understand Elisabeth’s own self-devaluation; we might see her persistent self-effacement either as arising from her philosophical temperament or as said with some irony, and so revealing the confidence of one who is trying to get her correspondent to see her point (519).

The “naïve” line of questioning that Shapiro refers to in this passage concerns Elisabeth’s observation based on her personal experience that being sick clouds the mind:

It is altogether very difficult to understand that a soul, as you have described it, after having had the faculty and the custom of reasoning well, can lose all of this by some vapors, and that being able to subsist without the body, and having nothing in common with it, the soul is still so governed by it. (68)

This “naïve” question is, however, just the kind of critique that, in Shapiro’s terms, “challenge[s] the presuppositions of a given [philosophical] problem” (519).

Elisabeth’s subsequent letters challenge Descartes’s presupposition concerning the soul’s substance, not how two distinct substances may interact, which is an old question that Descartes does not answer to her satisfaction. In the following quotation, Elisabeth’s challenge is made more explicit when she writes,

this will serve, I hope, as an excuse for my stupidity in being unable to comprehend, by appeal to the idea you once had of heaviness, the idea through which we must judge how the soul (nonextended and immaterial) can move the body; nor why this power [puissance] to carry the body toward the center of the earth, which you earlier falsely attributed to the body as a quality, should sooner persuade us that a body can be pushed by some immaterial thing than a demonstration of a contrary truth (which you promise in your physics) should confirm us in the opinion of its impossibility. (68)

There must be another way, Elisabeth is saying, to explain how body and soul interact.

Later, she will concede that “the mind is autonomous – we are agents in our own thinking and determine our own thoughts. Nevertheless, in order to be autonomous in this way, “the mind depends upon the good health of the body” (Shapiro 516). Elisabeth’s persistent, even tenacious, line of questioning constitutes a way of philosophizing that was bolstered by her trust in Descartes’s friendship, that is, his respect for her. Shapiro concludes that “this way of doing philosophy might not lend itself easily to a systematic presentation of one’s view, but it still strikes me as both a legitimate and a good way of doing philosophy” (520).

In terms of content, Astell, without having read (or known) of Elisabeth’s remarks, asks a very similar commonsensical kind of question to Norris concerning mind/body interaction. Recall that Elisabeth cannot concede that a body and soul have nothing in common since when in sickness “the soul is still so governed by it [the body].”

For her part, Astell pushes Norris to consider,

For as the Soul forsakes her Body when this vital Congruity fails, so when this sensible Congruity is wanting, as in the Case of Blindness, Deafness, or the Palsie, &c. the Soul has no Sensations of Colours, Sounds, Heat and the like, so that although Bodies make the same Impression that they used to do on her Body, yet whilst it is under this same Indisposition, she has not that Sentiment of Pleasure or Pain which used to accompany that Impression. (132)

Astell, as we have seen, will utilize the same common sense observation that a sick body affects one's ability to perceive and think in order to argue that there is a use for nature. For her part, she employs a less scientific, more mystical, explanation for how mind and body may interact, in that she draws upon More's notion of vital congruity; whereby, bodies "draw forth Sensations in the soul" (132). She doesn't explain or seek to find out how such a 'drawing forth' occurs. Rather, her point is to resolve the problem of the usefulness of all of God's creation, including bodies, nature and by proxy women.

Each of these two philosophers can thus be seen attempting to account for the body within a rationalist framework. Descartes listened to Elisabeth, and he softened his perspective on mind/body dualism, developing a unique, neo-Stoic method of judgment called habituation. Elisabeth's challenge to Descartes to think more carefully about the union of the soul and body inspired him to write *The Passions of the Soul*, which constituted a fuller, mechanical explanation of mind/body interaction (Shapiro 503). For his part, Norris similarly fostered Astell's self-confidence. He writes, for example, in his first response to Astell's letter:

Though in Civility to your Person, my Answer ought to have bee more speedy, yet considering the weight of your Letter, I think it cannot be well to slow, and I hope you will in Euity, allow me some time to recover my self out of that wonder I was cast into, to see such a Letter from a Woman, besides what was necessary to consider the great and surprising Contents of it. (71)

Norris expresses similar astonishment that Astell could have written such letters in his introduction, and he offers to vouch for the truth that a woman did, indeed, write the letters in anticipating doubters. Further, he steers her away from personal confession, as

discussed in the first dissertation chapter, by ignoring her one confessional moment and discoursing with her solely on the topics of occasionalism, the love of God and how metaphysical and theological inconsistencies may be resolved. Whereas Descartes's treated Elisabeth as a friend and offered her psychological help that led to profound philosophical insights (due partially to the persistence of her questioning), Norris's relationship with Astell was more formal; for example, he always addresses her as "Madam." As *Letters* progresses, he drops the commentary on her precocity and he 'does' philosophy with her like an equal, considering her points, reframing her arguments to demonstrate his full understanding of them, and then refuting them based on his preconceptions, as he would do with any other equal. Astell, for her part, rarely backed down on her philosophical critiques of Norris's occasionalism; rather, she reinforced her allegiance and debt to him in fervent passages that avowed their shared love of God and their rationalist commitment to sustain theology as a cornerstone of philosophy in a rationalist framework (a losing battle).⁵² Such passages as the following from "Letter IX" are tedious and repetitive to read, but they served Astell's purpose which was to bolster her alliance with Norris while debating with him:

⁵² Eileen O'Neill argues that by the eighteenth-century philosophy as a discipline was being purged of its historically religious roots, or in her words from "the taint of religion" (34). She points to a text written in 1832 entitled, *Manual of the History of Philosophy*, which categorized Astell's mentors and her religious/philosophical forebears, (especially More and Cudworth) under the heading of "supernaturalists and mystics," thus denying that these men were "once taken to be major philosophical thinkers" (34).

That the creature cannot make us happy is evident from all those Topicks that declare its Vanity . . . it cannot be reasonable to love the Creature, and consequently if Love be not an unreasonable Passion, and if it be fit to love at all, 'tis highly reasonable to love GOD, and him only. . . . And therefore to fix our Love warmly and entirely on God . . . if therefore we desire a Union, we must be conformed to the Divine Nature. . . . (110 -111)

This quotation that follows Astell's critique of Norris's quietism can be viewed in at least three ways. First, it may be viewed as equivocation on Astell's point concerning the inclusiveness of the body/neighbors vis-à-vis Norris's occasionalism. Second, it can be used as an example of the overall contradictory nature of her thinking. Alternatively, we may view Astell in her first publication asserting a viable, intellectual critique of Norris's occasionalist theory only to retreat from it in deference to him and as a way of continuing on with their written correspondence. With this correspondence, the editors of the modern edition of *Letters* attests, "one can only imagine Astell's satisfaction at having an established philosopher accept the efficacy of her corrective" (24). Further, the precariousness of her financial situation – she came from a bankrupt yet upper middle class background -- lent a particular "awkwardness [to] her social position" that was characterized by a sense of urgency both financially and socially (Taylor and New 7). Given that Astell began corresponding with Norris shortly after she arrived in London, the importance of his mentorship, which began her career as a writer and polemicist, cannot be over emphasized.

A second point in comparing and contrasting Elisabeth's and Astell's styles of philosophizing needs to be made. Shapiro defines Elisabeth's style as self-deprecating and indeed, Elisabeth's protestations of her "stupidity," her weakness and her inability to

order her thoughts go beyond conventions of humility with respect to written correspondences of the period. Elisabeth, for example, opens her first letter by referring to herself as “an ignorant and intractable person” (61). In this same letter she writes of the “shame of showing you so disordered a style” (62). She often calls attention to her ignorance, even while discussing such heady intellectual topics as classical Stoicism and the “problem of the three circles” (otherwise known as Apollonius’s problem), as in: “I would not have sent you evidence of my ignorance until I knew you were done with those of that mindset;” and, “You must be surprised that, after you told me that my reasoning does not appear altogether ridiculous to you, I have waited so long to take advantage of your responses” (72, 73 & 127). Descartes, by contrast, continuously responds to Elisabeth with encouragement, betraying more informality within their correspondences than between Astell and Norris. For example, Descartes wrote in his letter to Elisabeth on November 3, 1645:

I encounter good reasoning so infrequently, not only in the conversations I have in this desert, but also in the books I consult, that I cannot read what is in the letter from your Highness without drawing from them a feeling of extraordinary joy. I find your reasoning so strong that I would prefer to admit I am beaten than to undertake to resist it. (125)

Astell expresses a similar sentiment of intellectual joy/passion in many of her correspondences with Norris, as in the opening of “Letter III”:

You see how greedily I embrace the advantageous Offer you made me in the Close of your excellent Letter; for which I would return some Acknowledgments, but that I want Expressions suitable to its Value and Resentments. Nor is there anything in it from which I can with-hold my Asssent, but that too favourable Opinion you seem to have conceiv’d of a Person who has nothing considerable in her but an honest Heart, and a Love to Truth. (76)

In this passage Astell follows gender and class conventions with respect to humbling herself before her mentor, yet her gestures within these conventions differ from those of Elisabeth, in that she avows her self-worth when she affirms that she is a person with “an honest Heart and a Love to Truth.” Throughout *Letters*, Astell acknowledges her debt to Norris, and she makes it clear that she wants him to teach her how to do philosophy correctly. She asks him quite pointedly, for example, at the end of “Letter V”:

I desire the Favour of you to furnish me with such a System of Principles as I may rely on, and to give me such Rules as you judge most convenient to initiate a raw Disciple in the Study of Philosophy; lest for want of laying a good Foundation, I give you too much Trouble, by drawing Conclusions from false Premises, and making use of improper Terms. (92)

Here and in the below passage we see two impulses occurring that set Astell’s style of philosophizing apart from Elisabeth’s. First, she asks Norris for formal instruction in the “Study of Philosophy,” a request that attests to her larger ambition to write in a public medium as a philosopher. Astell does not describe herself as stupid or unworthy. Rather, she recasts the convention of humility by emphasizing that she will be a better correspondent for Norris if he teaches her, so that she won’t “draw Conclusions from false Premises and make use of improper Terms.” Second, Astell bends gendered conventions of humility in the below passage by praising Norris for being a man who thinks liberally with respect to women’s capabilities. She writes in “Letter V”:

So candid and condescending a Treatment of a Stranger, a woman, and so inconsiderable an one as my self, shews you to be as much above the Generality of the World in your Practice, as you are in your Theory and Speculation. Hitherto I have courted Truth with a kind of Romantick Passion, in spite of all Difficulties and Discouragements: for knowledge is thought so unnecessary an Accomplishment for a Woman, that few will give themselves the Trouble to assist us in the Attainment of it. (87)

Astell casts herself as “inconsiderable,” being a woman, yet she also praises Norris as special or “above the Generality of the World” because he is willing to teach her. This shifts the emphasis from her inconsiderableness to his specialness, and it indirectly underscores the motif of feminism as central to her philosophical inquiry.

Ironically, Elisabeth’s less formal line of questioning may be viewed as having resulted in far more substantial results, in that it inspired Descartes’s final publication, *The Passions of the Soul*, with her statement in a letter on September 13, 1645: “I would . . . like to see you define the passions, in order to know them better” (110). Astell’s style of philosophizing follows her goal of learning how to *do* philosophy as men do.

Consequently, her style within *Letters* is markedly more assertive than Elisabeth’s style. For example, after observing an intellectual flaw within Norris’s occasionalist paradigm, she takes the liberty to offer him a correction. She argues:

Pain as you tell it, is nothing else but a disagreeable Modification of the Soul . . . Now I suppose that this disagreeable Modification is in the inferior part of the Soul, that which is exercis’d about Objects of sense, and does not necessarily and directly affect the superior part . . . And this I take to be the right Notion of Pain considered as a Sensation and as GOD is the Author of it; but then I deny that in this sense it is strictly and properly an Evil. (26)

Here, we see Astell taking her critique of Norris’s theory concerning bodily pain to a new level by offering a modification of his theory; thereby, allowing her to mediate between rationalist and commonsense, materialist view points. In this passage we see her assertiveness mounting as she uses phrases like “I suppose” then, “I take to be the right notion” and finally, “I deny.” Even in her first publication, Astell claims philosophical

authority while still negotiating powerful class and gender conventions; she will later drop such conventions when writing her second *Serious Proposal*.

A final point needs to be addressed concerning privacy and the personal nature of the letters between the two sets of correspondents. Princess Elisabeth, it must be noted, never intended for her private correspondences with Descartes to be published, though Descartes did wish to make the correspondences public, and she took measures to make sure that such an unauthorized publication would occur after Descartes's death.⁵³

Astell's relationship to privacy is different than Elisabeth's, in her introduction to *Letters*, composed *after* Norris convinced Astell to publish their correspondences,

Since then the Air is so unkind, let's keep our tender Plants beneath a Glass; . . . These and some other Consideration have recommended to me, my darling, my beloved Obscurity, which I court and doat on above all Earthly Blessings, and am as ambitious to slide gently through the world, without so much as being seen or taken notice of in it, as others are to bustle and make parade on its Theatres. And therefore, though I desire by all laudable means to secure a good, I will most industriously shun a great Reputation. (65)

Astell's "beloved Obscurity," Kolbrener points out, has emerged as a "biographical trope" dating back to her earliest biographer George Ballard, who wrote an entry on Astell in his *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752) (2). Though she may have been sincere when she wrote in the above quotation that "I will most industriously shun a great Reputation," he expressed desire to "by all laudable means . . . secure a good" belies her philosophical and activist ambitions that were couched under gendered conventions of the period. Along these lines, Elaine Hobby points out in *Virtue of*

⁵³ In the modern edition of the complete letters between Descartes and Elisabeth, Lisa Shapiro points out that upon Descartes's death, Elisabeth "refused permission and asked that the letters be returned to her. It is quite clear that, at least from Elisabeth's point of view, the correspondence was not intended for any audience" (2).

Necessity: English Women's Writing 1649 – 1688 that in the seventeenth century “women were not supposed to enter the public world in any form, and that prohibition extended to a ban on ‘making public’ their words” (1). Women writers of this period, she argues, turned constraints into permissions (i.e., virtues into necessities); thereby, justifying new paths into publishing and public speaking (8). This endeavor involved finding ways to “persuade their readers that such acts were not entirely reprehensible” especially given the religious-based stricture for women to exhibit deference to “male authority” and exhibit “obedience and silence” (Hobby 6). Astell engages in the long established tactic of ‘making a virtue of necessity’ when she defers to Norris, but as has already been pointed out, she does so almost ironically. For example, her opening letter begins,

Though some morose Gentlemen wou'd perhaps remit me to the Distaff of the Kitchin, or at least to the Glass and the Needle, the proper Employments as they fancy a Womans Life; yet expecting better things from the more Equitable and Ingenious Mr. Norris, who is not so narrow-Soul'd as to confine Learning to his own Sex, or to envy it in our, I presume to beg his Attention a little to the Impertinencies of a Womans Pen. (69)

Here, we see Astell barely engaging the convention of gendered humility. Rather, she cleverly reverses this trend by calling attention to Norris's ingenuity amidst a crowd of “narrow-Soul'd . . . morose Gentlemen” who perpetuate the prejudices against women. When Astell does express humility and deference to Norris; however, she is sincere, finding it difficult to contain her excitement to be conversing with him concerning subjects that have “increased my Natural Thirst for Truth” (69). In such passages, Astell gives herself up “entirely to [Norris's] Conduct,” which I read as a genuine expression of

trust and gratitude on her part at his willingness to treat her ideas seriously and teach her how to debate (87).

In conclusion, despite that we cannot really know whether or not Astell loved her obscurity, we know that she agreed to have *Letters* published. We also know that she took care to annotate some of her key points, that she retracted her confession concerning emotional weakness (her desire for friendship) and that she co-wrote an introduction in which her doubts about entering the public sphere privilege self-protection, not self-censure:

When I have desired the Reader to be so just to me as not to meddle with these Papers till he has first carefully perused the Discourse to which they relate, and which contains the Principle upon which they proceed, I have nothing more to say here unless it be to give some account of the Reasons of our communicating a private Correspondence to the Publick, concerning which I shall leave the Reader to satisfy himself. (61)

It is probable that the above passage, which expresses more fully a desire to be “fence[d] from prejudice” is Astell’s concern since, as a respected philosopher and cleric, Norris had little reason to fear public censure. By contrast, Astell’s repeated use of the word singular throughout her early pamphlets suggests that her fear of publicity stemmed from her anxiety about her economic well being. By the end of her second *Serious Proposal*, however, the tone of trepidation shifts. Now, Astell assertively addresses her detractors:

He then who wou’d Object to purpose must shew that the Good it may do is not equivalent to the Evil which may attend it; that the Ladies will suffer greater inconveniencies with, than without it, and that it will not in the Main be. Otherwise we shall take liberty to believe that it is Humor, Covetousness or any thing rather than Reason which restrains him from Approving and Promoting it. (181)

The problem, she concludes, is not with her plan for the educational reform of women, which *is* singular, but with misogyny.

Conclusion:

In this chapter I have shown the robustness and syncretism that Astell employs in her use of Descartes's theory of regulating the passions to explain how women may achieve self-esteem and learn to protect themselves better, in this case *vis-à-vis* courtiers and neighbors. Further, Astell's application of the Cartesian notion of generosity, which is based on virtue as opposed to social class, sets up her framework as egalitarian, that is, applicable to anyone who can be taught. Similarly, I show that Astell's theory contains an implicit ethic of self-preservation that manifests when Astell writes of the negative consequences of "blind Obedience," which corresponds to the Cartesian notion of unvirtuous humility. Finally, I ended by comparing Astell's and Princess Elisabeth's styles of philosophizing. These two women "do" philosophy by questioning received/given ideas. In Astell's case, her ambition to be known and respected as a philosopher in her own right encourages the more assertive tone within her letters and the ambitious plan she outlines for reforming women's education along both rationalist and moralist line. This ambition/assertion calls into question the literalness with which scholars tend to read her claim to love her own obscurity.

Chapter Four: Marriage, “This Bitter Cup”⁵⁴

Introduction

Throughout her fourth publication, *Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700), Astell utilizes tropes of enchainment when referring to wives or engaged women. The most often cited example of this tendency can be found in her 1706 preface to *Reflections* when she writes, “*If all Men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?*” (76). Direct references to slavery occur within the 1706 preface no less than seven times in seventeen pages. Further, Astell weaves in references to classic social contract theory with specific allusions to slavery and subjection as in the concluding clause to her above quotation when she writes, “as they [women] must be [slaves] if the being subject to the *inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary Will of Men, be the perfect Condition of Slavery?*” (76). Astell lifts the italicized portion of this sentence (a technique called animadversion) directly from chapter four of Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*, concluding “and why is Slavery so condemn’d and strove against in one Case, and so highly applauded, and held so necessary and so sacred in another” (76)?

Given such bold usage of the language of the social contract vis-à-vis the subjection of women, it is understandable that an earlier generation of Astell scholars

⁵⁴ The phrase “this bitter cup” comes from the opening pages of *Reflections*. The full line reads: “Nor does she in her Retirements reflect so much upon the hand that administers this bitter Cup, as consider what is the best use she can make of it” (96).

would claim her as “feminism’s first retort to liberal modernity” (Goldie 66). But Mark Goldie’s more careful contextualization of Astell’s contractarian rhetoric in light of Locke’s living reputation as the author of the *Essay Concerning Understanding*, corrects the mistaken notion that Astell is purely (or solely) “doing” political theory in *Reflections*. Rather, Goldie contends that Astell is continuing to engage with Locke’s epistemology and that her rhetorical flares fall in line with a tradition of propagandist Tory pamphleteering. Goldie’s findings are convincing, especially in light of Astell’s conservative religious and political beliefs, but they don’t tell the whole story.

A shift in interpretation occurs when we read *Reflections* in light of the Cartesian influences on Astell’s theory of feminine self-esteem. This theory is familiar to Astell, and she spends many pages within her sober, highly philosophical second *Serious Proposal* debunking the notion that women aren’t fit to learn and become just and virtuous. Women can learn, she proposes, as anyone can learn, under the correct educational circumstances. Now she faces the problem of exposing how women’s supposed natural inferiority, i.e., “Women’s Defective Nature Prejudice,” is embedded in classic contractarian notions of marriage; thereby, enchaining women, quite literally.

Patricia Springborg has argued in her influential essay, “Mary Astell, Critic of Locke” that Astell’s repeated references to slavery in *Reflections* aren’t serious: “In richly written rhetorical passages she mounts a vehement protest against the estate of marriage in her day – language marked by images of freedom and slavery that her ontological commitment did not allow her to translate into political theory” (631). Springborg supports this assertion by clarifying that Astell denied the Lockean theory of

property in the person, thus “she could not technically argue the slavery of women compared with the freedom of men” (632). Springborg is mistaken, however, in her assumption that Astell lacked a framework for self-preservation, or in Achinstein’s terms, that “she is at pains to obliterate the ideology of self-possession” (27). These viewpoints neglect Astell’s theory of feminine self-esteem, which at its core supports an ethic of self-preservation, as we have seen. In fact, *Reflections* as a whole may be read as a primer on how not to marry badly in order to preserve one’s standing in this world. If one does marry badly, one can always be a Christian martyr, but this is not Astell’s first line of argumentation, nor is it her ultimate wish for women.

My aim in this chapter is to take Astell’s numerous references to slavery seriously by examining those references in light of her nuanced theory of feminine self-esteem and by bringing to light her awareness of contractarian state of nature theories that posited women as coequal in the state of nature. Though I agree with Goldie’s contention that Astell’s references to Locke in the preface to *Reflections* concerned his sexist pronouncements within *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (1705), I disagree that her use of the language of the social contract was akin to propaganda. Rather, I read Astell’s references to the social contract as critiquing seventeenth-century notions of natural law, as those notions bound women to servitude in marriage. Further, her new, more political line of argumentation is consistent with her earlier feminist framework that rests on the assumption that women have inherent value, can develop self-mastery, independence and “due poise of mind”: they can thus become citizens. Of course, it is doubtful that such characteristics can be cultivated in a society that refuses to

properly educate women, nor one that offers women a juridically unequal union as their sole avenue of social expression.

This chapter is divided into four sections, the first of which will contextualize *Reflections* around Goldie's recent assertion that Astell was more concerned about sexism in Locke's *Paraphrase* than his contractarian political theory. I build upon Goldie's findings by demonstrating that, indeed, Astell's sarcastic tone in *Reflections* stemmed from Locke's claim of women's inferiority in *The Paraphrase* but that her sarcasm/criticism was directed at the early modern marriage contract in its Hobbesian form. In the second and third chapter sections, I employ three theoretical aspects of the social contract: self-preservation, consent, and rebellion to decipher Astell's polemic against marriage. My specific purpose is to demonstrate Astell's goal of exposing the theoretical nature of women's enslavement from the point of view of the social/marriage contract. I end the chapter section by reading *Reflections* dialogically in light of three specific authors: an early eighteenth-century anonymous author who wrote on marital reform, a dissenting prophetess who ignored generic conventions and died in obscurity and Astell's contemporary the Lady Damaris Masham, whom I argue influenced Astell's polemical style in *Reflections*.

Astell appears to have given up on her project of reforming women's education by the time she publishes, *Reflections Upon Marriage*. Referring obliquely to the ruinous life story of the Duchess of Mazarin, the ostensible subject of this tract, Astell writes in the opening pages "that she was capable of being a great Ornament to her Family and Blessing to the Age she liv'd in, should only serve . . . as an unhappy Shipwrack to point out the dangers of an ill Education and unequal Marriage" (90). By the time Astell composed *Reflections*, it was clear that her academy for women would not be funded as she optimistically hoped. Her preface to the first *Serious Proposal* betrays her earlier optimism. She writes to the then Princess Ann of Denmark, "I see no cause to fear that your Royal Highness will deny Encouragement to that which has no other Design than the Bettering of the World especially the most neglected part of it as to all Real Improvement, Ladies" (139). According to Springborg, Bishop Gilbert Burnett actively campaigned against Astell's proposal because it "smacked too much of a Catholic nunnery and would bring disrepute as being Popish" (xiii). But a further slight must have incensed Astell since Burnett had published a tract entitled *Enquiry into the Measures of Submission to the Supream Authority* (1698), in which he asserts women's natural inferiority when he writes, "it is certain, that the Law of Nature has put no differene nor subordination among Men, except it be that of Children to Parents, or of Wives to their Husbands; so that with Relation to the Law of Nature, all Men are born free" (qtd. in

⁵⁵ Astell had by now stopped seriously arguing about whether or not women are fully human, hence the sarcasm that abounds within this text as she contended with what must have seemed, by then, tired arguments.

Springborg 629). Locke, as we shall see, makes a similar assertion in his *Paraphrase* thereby denying women a proper education and the chance for a measure of justice within one of the only early modern institutions open to women.

Beginning with the unfortunate case of the Duchess of Mazarin, a noblewoman who was refused a divorce by French courts, Astell highlights how the Duchess was “ruined” by both her arranged marriage and her poor education since “had Madam Mazarine’s Education made a right Improvement of her Wit and Sense, we should not have found her seeking Relief by such imprudent, not to say scandalous Methods as the running away in Disguise with a spruce Cavalier” (91).⁵⁶ The Duchess of Mazarin’s story is a cautionary tale to demonstrate the fragility of justice and happiness for wives in what Astell deems to be fundamentally a slave contract. Further, it illustrates that without the proper education all a woman can hope for in marriage is to suffer “a continual Martyrdom” (130).⁵⁷

Mark Goldie contends in his essay, “Mary Astell and John Locke” that Astell’s real target in *Reflections* was Locke’s little known (to contemporary readers) publication entitled, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*. In this lengthy text of biblical exegesis, Locke writes explicitly of women’s inferiority to men in an interpretation of St. Paul’s often analyzed quotation from *I Corinthians* concerning the

⁵⁶ Duchess Mazarin’s reliance on the court of Charles II for an allowance after her separation further diminished her social reputation

⁵⁷ It should be noted that the occasion for *Reflections* was the ruination (or undoing) of a noblewoman as the result of a bad marriage. The publication in England of legal briefs in 1699 concerning the French Lady Mazarin’s attempt to get a divorce from her husband who had squandered her estates informed Astell’s invective against marriage in *Reflections*. Lady Mazarin left her husband despite being denied a divorce and soon after associated herself with the court of Charles II, ruining her reputation and relying upon the king for a yearly allowance (Sutherland 80 – 81).

veiling of women during prayer and church services. The offense that Astell took to Locke's interpretation of the passage from *I Corinthians* must have been exacerbated in her mind by his underscoring of the following prejudicial, yet biblically supported lines, from within St. Paul's epistles. The following lines are highlighted for interpretation in Locke's text:

- 7.) For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man.
- 8.) For the man is not of the woman: but the woman of the man.
- 9.) Neither was the man created from the woman: but the woman for the man.
- 10.) For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head, because of the angels. (219)

We have seen that humanist scholars since the Medieval period argued against the biblical notion that womankind was inherently inferior to mankind because of her weaker mental, emotional and physical constitution. In fact, Agrippa, argued that women are superior to men despite the curse laid upon women as a result of Eve's original transgression. He suggested, by contrast, that the subjugation women suffered in society was man made, not natural or divine. Locke signals in the above list that he agrees with commonplace (anti-early feminist) interpretations of the passage, though his interpretation is complicated by his agreement that women have a right to prophesy in churches. In defense of women's active participation in church services, Locke paradoxically advances a liberal, tolerationist perspective: "Now that the spirit of God and the gift of prophesie should be poured out upon women as well as men in the time of the gospel is plain from Acts. II.17 and then where could be a fitter place for them to utter their propheties in than the Assemblies" (221). Yet Locke makes clear that though

women have the right to pray, prophesy and speak in church services in extraordinary cases, as when moved by the spirit of God, they are generally commanded to remain silent. Locke explains, “Silence enjoyned the women is for a mark of their subjection to the male sex” (221). He further asserts that “the women in the churches were not to assume the personage of Doctors, or speak there as teachers, this caryed with it the appearance of superiority, and was forbidden” (221).

Locke’s interpretation of St. Paul’s passage in *I Corinthians* demonstrates that liberal notions of toleration, freedom, and equality in the early modern period could and most often did exclude women. The political nature of this exclusion becomes evident when Locke emphasizes that the veiling of women during church services must be upheld because “this [unveiling] would have too great an air of standing upon even ground with the men, and would not have well comported witt the subordination of the sex” (222). He continues, “the subjection of their [women’s] sex should not be forgotten, but owned and preserved by their being covered” (222). And in perhaps his most revealing and galling statement he writes, “And therefore we see that, in both these cases, the aim was to maintain and secure the confessed superiority and dominion of the man and not permit it to be invaded soe much as in appearance” (222). Astell would have paid particular attention to the way in which Locke’s arguments concerning women’s veiling in the above passage supports the position of men as dominant. She may have taken particular offense to Locke’s reasoning that women’s natural inferiority leads to men’s “dominion” especially since her feminist proposals to this point have concerned raising women from the animal realm (over which man has dominion) to the human realm, over which God

has dominion. This term also marks Locke's interpretation as distinctly political and may have influenced Astll to shift her feminist commentary in a sharply political as opposed to philosophical direction.

Astell was not the first English feminist to object to the command, found in *I Corinthians*, that women should be veiled and silent in church. Margaret Fell Fox argued eloquently, as we have seen, for the right of women to speak and prophesy in church. With confidence, Fell Fox opens her pamphlet by indicating she is qualified to interpret scripture. She writes, "but first let me lay down how God himself hath manifested his Will and Mind concerning women, and unto women" (3). Fell Fox strikes at the heart of the misogynist claim - that a woman's sinful/weak nature stemmed from Eve's fall from Paradise - by focusing upon a neglected aspect of the biblical scene in Genesis when God promptly cursed the serpent after he learned of Eve's transgression. First, she reminds her readers that God put "enmity" between Eve, her offspring and the serpent; so that, "If the Seed of Woman speak not, The Seed of the Serpent speaks, for God hath put enmity between the two Seeds"(4). In this sense, she justifies women's speaking in church by tying this act to the salvation of the entire congregatin. Regarding the problematic passage from Corinthians, which states, "let your Women keep silence in the Church," Fell Fox argues that the passage is quoted out of context. When read in context, she interprets the meaning as: "Man is commanded to keep silence as well as the woman, when they are in confusion and out of order" (8). Fell Fox's attack on male authority coupled with her persona as a learned exegete counters the kinds of sexist interpretations of biblical passages that Locke, liberal though he was, promoted in his *Paraphrase*.

For her part, Astell approaches the problematic passage from *I Corinthians* in a novel manner. This manner is in keeping with the politically tinged tone of *Reflections*. Goldie convincingly shows that Astell's real target in the preface to *Reflections* is indeed Locke's *Paraphrase*. As evidence, he points out that "its [the preface's] chief burden is scriptural, and the bulk of it is devoted to investigating the position of women in the Old and New Testaments, against the claims of critics who say that her feminist principles 'were not agreeable to scripture'" (81). He similarly demonstrates that though Astell never refers to Locke's text directly (and doesn't quote from it), she closely paraphrases Locke's interpretation of *I Corinthians* and that she refers "no less than six times to the terms 'natural superiority,' 'natural inferiority,' or 'natural subjection'" (82). These references suggest how troubled Astell was by Locke's arguments concerning women's subordination based on natural law.⁵⁸ Additionally, Goldie emphasizes that Astell refers to Locke in more than one instance indirectly as, "That learned Paraphrast . . . who lays so much stress on the Natural Subjection" (77). Astell herself shows a liberal bent in this portion of the preface. Referring to Locke's *Paraphrase* as "the vulgar interpretation," she suggests that scriptural passages should not be read literally, claiming:

⁵⁸ According to Jack Donnelly, the concept of natural law derived from Aquinas's "theory of natural law and right;" whereby, a law is an 'ordinance or reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community and promulgated. All law is encompassed within what Aquinas calls the 'eternal law' of God" (45). According to Aquinas, politics falls under a branch of natural law, which is not necessarily divine. In other words, "human laws . . . are particular specifications of the general precepts of natural law" (46). Donnelly argues that Locke uses the term natural law to "in effect . . . judge human nature and select certain aspects for special protection by natural rights, while others are consigned to be repressed by the state and other institutions" (38).

I shou'd be glad to see a Natural, and not a Forc'd Interpretation given of it by those who take it Literally. Whereas if it be taken Allegorically, with respect to the Mystical Union between Christ and his Church, to which St Paul frequently accommodates the Matrimonial Relation, the difficulties vanish. (78)

Though Astell's correspondence with Norris in *Letters* aligned her with a conservative strand of theosophy, here she demonstrates that her conservatism is not absolute and that above all, she values the human (and feminine) capacity to reason and interpret sacred texts.

Like Fell Fox, Astell's answer to Locke's argument for women's natural inferiority concerns the question of church conventions, not dominion or natural subjection. But her argument reads as less serious than Fell Fox's when she sets out to ridicule Locke's point and his claim to exegetical authority. First, Astell plays with the concept of natural law by using it to ironically justify her own authority as an exegete.

On this point she writes,

She hopes it is no Presumption to insist on this natural Right of Judging for her self, and the rather, because by quitting it, we give up all the Means of Rational Conviction. Allow us then as many Glasses as you please to help our Sight, and as many good Arguments as you can afford to Convince our Understandings: But don't exact of us we beseech you, to affirm that we see such things as are only the Discovery of Men, who have quicker Senses. (72)

This passage gives us a taste of the level of wit and sarcasm throughout *Reflections* in sentence after sentence. Playing on the term "natural" (as in natural law), Astell ascribes a "natural Right of Judging for her self" to women who, though duller than men, may discover truths or ideas in scripture that fall outside of "the Discovery of Men."

In regards to the problematic passage from *I Corinthians*, Astell concludes that the "Apostle ... says not a word of Inequality, or natural Inferiority, but concludes, that a

woman ought to cover her head and a Man ought not to cover his, and that even Nature itself, teaches us, that if a Man have long hair it is a shame unto him” (73). Like Fell Fox, Astell shifts the focus away from women’s obedience, silence and subjection, yet she moves away from the topic of order in the congregation and refers, instead, to the custom of men being clean shaven in this time period. She thus concludes, “It is not so much a Law of Nature, that Women shou’d Obey Men, as that Men shou’d not wear long Hair” (73). On the surface this line reads like pure sarcasm but a closer analysis in light of Astell’s distaste for Locke’s sexist use of natural law reveals that Astell is critiquing the concept that dominion over any human being is customary. This idea is, of course, a cornerstone of classic social contract theory. We can here read Astell’s use of political language in this text as more than just rhetorical, which is Goldie’s viewpoint. Rather, we can see that her use of the language of the social contract is employed to critique male systems of dominance and privilege, particularly in marriage and in education.

Ironically, Astell’s basis for arguing against women’s natural subjection runs counter to her own political commitments, which tend toward supporting monarchical power, yet it is supported by her commitment to the Cartesian theory of the human capacity for regulating the passions and becoming ethical and just (i.e., citizens). Below, we shall see how Astell makes sense of these competing impulses.

For Astell, there is nothing romantic or appealing about courtship or marriage both of which comprise the contents of “this bitter cup” (96). Her negative tone with respect to this subject anticipates second wave feminist critiques of marriage, love, and childrearing, as in the canonical second wave feminist text, *The Second Sex*, by Simone

de Beauvoir.⁵⁹ Astell repeatedly and directly refers to women as slaves in the state of marriage, and she often blames women for falling into the traps men and society set for them. A good example of this tendency occurs in the first ten pages of the pamphlet when Astell writes, “you are weak enough to be impose’d on, and vain enough to snatch at the Bait” (100). Further, she claims that courtship is a “violent” custom, in that its true aim is to separate women of means from their fortunes and “to reduce you to your first obscurity” (100). It is understandable that an earlier generation of scholars would overstate Astell’s modern sounding attacks on the contractual state of marriage, in which wives of this period juridically lost their sense of personhood, as “feminism’s first retort to liberal modernity” as Goldie puts it.

But the picture is more complicated than one of overstatement. Astell is angry with Locke’s view that women are naturally inferior to men. This anger arises, as Goldie convincingly demonstrates, from Astell’s exposure to Locke’s *Paraphrase*, not his *Second Treatise of Government*. Yet, Astell has clearly read Locke’s major philosophical and political treatises (since she quotes directly from them), and her frustration brims when she realizes it won’t be possible to get funding for her women’s academy. Thus the hope and philosophical fervor with which she justified her women’s academy in the second *Serious Proposal* gives way to sarcasm and biting wit, as she realizes her only recourse is to argue against men like Locke whose arguments concerning natural freedom

⁵⁹Like Astell, Simone de Beauvoir writes unromantically of marriage in chapter xvi of *The Second Sex* entitled, “The Married Woman”: “washing, ironing, sweeping, ferreting out rolls of lint from under wardrobes – all this halting of decay is also the denial of life . . . Thus woman’s work within the home gives her no autonomy, it is not directly useful to society, it does not open out on the future, it produces nothing. It takes on meaning and dignity only as it is linked with existent beings who reach out beyond themselves, transcend themselves, toward society in production and action” (456).

are fraught with fallacies and unjust consequences for women. The key to unlocking Astell's goal in this pamphlet is to remember that her primary justification for the reform of women's education in her previous two publications is the Cartesian notion of mastery and sensual independence, an epistemological "freeborn" status that she equally ascribes to women.

Cartesian notions of freedom are different from Lockean notions of freedom, in that they entail freedom from enslavement to pernicious passions or emotions. To review one gains mastery and freedom via learning a method Descartes proposed for self-control. For Locke, the term is political. One is free not so much from personal demons but from a tyrant. Freedom for Locke is a state into which rational (property owning) men are born into. They then choose to forego some civic freedoms in favor of personal restrictions that give them more security (through an elected government with standing rules). Such governments may be overthrown should the representatives of that government prove tyrannical. To promote this new conception of political freedom, Locke devotes an early chapter in his *Second Treatise of Government* to defining slavery and positing freedom as its opposite:

But freedom of men under government is to have a standing rule to live by, common to everyone of that society, and made by the legislative power erected in it; a liberty to follow my own will in all things where the rule prescribes not; and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man. (272).

Astell, as we have seen, lifts these very lines to emphasize that married women are slaves. The question is, why does she repeatedly equate marriage with slavery, especially if, following Goldie, she is not really critiquing the social contract?

Recall that Astell has a tendency to clarify certain polemical points in prefaces or appendices, beginning with *Letters*. Along these lines, her preface to her first *Serious Proposal* contains a direct financial appeal to Queen Ann, demonstrating that her proposal was conceptualized with seriousness and practicality in mind. Additionally, the theoretical/philosophical nature of her second *Serious Proposal* was intended to bolster her case for educating women separately, to deny claims that her academy would be like a Catholic nunnery, and to demonstrate the rationality and studied nature of her plan. By the time she composed her fourth publication, it was obvious that her academy would not be funded. Similarly, her detractors had begun to accuse her of religious enthusiasm and inavete, a point I shall address in the final section of this chapter. And so she was left with women's frivolity/stupidity and social customs that led women into marital traps.

Matrimony thus becomes the enemy in Astell's framework because it exemplifies women's lack of freedom both in a personal/Cartesian sense (as a woman foolishly succumbs to vanity and flattery), and in a political/Lockean sense (as women have few avenues to escape from tyranny). The concept of freedom becomes a key, framing motif of her polemic, not just a rhetorical device. This is contrary to Springborg's claim in "Mary Astell: Critic of Locke" that she was not "serious" when she claims countless times throughout the body of *Reflections* that women are slaves. Springborg contends, "Astell denied Locke's claim to property in one's person . . . since Astell denied property in one's person . . . she could not technically argue the slavery of women compared to the freedom of men" (632). Springborg is right to look for consistency in Astell's feminist framework, but her argument ignores the Cartesian side of Astell's conception of

freedom, which, I argue, she carries forward into *Reflections*. In other words, Astell's conception of feminine self-esteem is itself founded upon an ethic of morality and self-preservation, or in Astell's terms "in-bred self-esteem and desire of good" (145). Self-preservation in this case is not the same as the Lockean conception of self-possession, since Astell's idea of personhood is essentially religious (i.e., people belong to God, not to themselves). But her seemingly backward leading conception of personhood is tied to a notion of a God that is just and good as was demonstrated in the third dissertation chapter (Achinstein 22).⁶⁰ Further, her notion of self-hood is complicated by the Enlightenment-friendly emphasis she places on a woman's rationality, self-mastery, and independence from harmful passions and prejudicial customs.

Marriage, far from being a safe haven, is an institution where women can become "ruined." As an advocate for women's advancement along the great chain of being toward full humanity, Astell's next line of attack, failing to educate women as she had planned, is to expose the dangers and traps women face when they become, "Domestic Subjects" (70). Astell's attack on the institution of marriage begins as she ties the specific case of the Duchess of Mazarin to the general "misery" women may expect if they marry badly:

⁶⁰ Astell expresses a conservative religious viewpoint when she writes in her second *Serious Proposal* that "God governs all, even the most free of all his Creatures." However, she follows up this assertion with the opened ended question, "But who can reconcile me these? Or adjust the limits between GOD's Prescience and Mans Free-will" (101). However Astell's God, is just and "governs the Universe with the Greatest Justice and Equity, Order and Proportion" (174).

To be yok'd for Life to a disagreeable Person and Temper, to have Folly and Ignorance tyrannize over Wit and Sense; to be contradicted in every thing one does or says, and bore down not by Reason but Authority; to be denied ones most innocent desires, for no other cause but the Will and Pleasure of an absolute Lord and master, whose Follies a Woman will all her Prudence cannot hide, and whose Commands she cannot but despise at the same time she obeys them; is a misery none can have a just Idea of, but those who have felt it. (90)

The emphasis in this passage is on emotional and intellectual freedom, as in: “to be denied ones most innocent desires” and “to have Folly and Ignorance tyrannize over Wit and Sense,” which follows her Cartesian/epistemological conception of freedom. But a connection may also be made in this passage to Milton’s writings on divorce in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643). Astell’s fears for women’s emotional, social, and economic ruin coincide with Scott Howard’s interpretation of Milton’s use of metaphors in *The Divorce Tracts* to evoke “the hope and desire that motivate a marriage, and the shock, sorrow, and rage that mark its failure,” especially when such a marriage fails to deliver the true purpose of marriage which, is “not procreation but mutual companionship” (24,18).

Astell, of course, is interested in exposing women’s “entire” subjection in marriage, but she also makes it clear that, like Milton, she is concerned with compatibility as a precondition for freedom since, “an ill husband may deprive a Wife of the comort and quiet of her life” (91). Unlike Milton, Astell’s concern for women’s condition in marriage rests on the claim that women are not made for men’s use or comfort. Both Milton and Astell use the noun “ruin” and the verb “demean” to describe a degraded condition (for men in Milton’s case and women in Astell’s) that results from an unhappy marriage. Milton writes, “he who marries intends as little to conspire his

own ruine, as he that swears Allegiance: and a whole people is in proportion to an ill Government, so is one man to an ill marriage” (118). Astell laments that for a woman who chooses a husband based on passion: “Her ruin is commonly too far advanc’d to be prevented” (121). In more overtly feminist terms, she characterizes men’s motives with respect to marriage as aimed generally at “accomplish[ing] her ruin,” so women must be instructed as to their true goals; whereas, Milton writes more generally of the degraded human state when men and women are forced to endure an incompatible marriage union: “God never gave us express allowance, only he gave us reason . . . but in this economical misfortune, thus to demean ourselves (125). Women, Astell hopes, will learn to paradoxically “demean themselves better in a Married State” (127).

By contrast, Milton’s use of the word “demean” suggests choice as in, “but in this economical misfortune, thus to demean ourselves . . . we have an expressed law of God” (127). Milton is arguing against the standard interpretation of the “law of God” in the hope that marital reform could promote personal liberty. Astell has little hope that such liberty exists for married women, only that they can diminish their suffering by choosing better. Thus we can see that Astell writes of a woman’s absence of liberty in marriage in quasi-Miltonic terms and from a strong (when viewed alongside Milton) feminist angle. In the next chapter section, I shall demonstrate that there is an implicit, even revolutionary, strain within Astell’s early feminist critique of the marriage contract. This critique renders her evocation of Milton in the early pages of *Reflections*: “Not Milton himself wou’d cry up Liberty to poor Female Slaves, or plead for the lawfulness of Resisting a Private Tyranny,” apt (102).

Wives as Captives

Locke published his *First Treatise of Government* in 1681 in response to Filmer's *Patriarcha* (1679), a treatise written in defense of monarchical forms of government. A passage from within *Patriarcha* exemplifies the kind of critique that social contract theorists like Locke were making in response to the Filmerian notion that the right of monarchical rule was inherited from Adam's biblical right of dominion over Eve. Filmer asks rhetorically,

Had the patriarchs their power given them by their own children? Bellarmine dares not say it, but the contrary. If then, the fatherhood enjoyed this authority for so many ages by the law of nature, when was it lost or when forfeited, or how is it devolved to the liberty of the multitude? (13)

Locke's criticism of Filmer in the following passage from his fifth chapter of the *First Treatise of Government* underscores the shift in political theory that Locke's text inaugurates in Astell's generation. Further, it underscores the importance of women's inferior status in the Lockean conception of freedom:

But if these words here spoke to Eve must needs be understood as a law to bind her and all other women to subjection, it can be no other subjection than what every wife owes her husband, and then if this be the 'original grant of government' and the 'foundation of monarchical power' there will be as many monarchs as there are husbands. If, therefore, these words give any power to Adam, it can be only a conjugal power, not political: the power that every husband hath to order the things of private concernment in his family, as proprietor of the goods and land there, and to have his will take place before that of his wife in all things of their common concernment; but not a political power of life and death over her, much less over anybody else. (245)

This passage is important in a number of respects. First, Locke is here debunking the homology argument which reasons that "there will be as many monarchs as there are

husbands.” Second, he is defining political power as the “power of life and death” and separating the private from the public realms, naming one realm “political” and the other a “private concernment in his family.” By doing so, he upholds the notion of a woman’s natural inferiority arguing that “every wife owes her husband” subjection, following Eve’s curse. A closer look, however, at Hobbes’s *Leviathan* from an early feminist perspective reveals how closely conjugal and political power were tied, theoretically speaking. This analysis will further reveal how Astell’s use of the language of the social contract within *Reflections* was intentional and consistent with her prefatory remarks concerning women’s supposed natural inferiority.

Carole Pateman, author of *The Sexual Contract*, uncovers the link between state of nature theories and the role of women in the construction of civil society. In an essay concerning Hobbes, patriarchal political theory and conjugal (or sex) right,” for example, she utilizes the terms “sex right” to underscore the importance of the domination of women in the construction of civil/male power and political right. Conjugal right, she argues, is simply “the right exercised by men as husbands over their wives” (55). The sexual contract, by contrast, stems from a collective agreement that is based upon:

a political mechanism which secures for [men] collectively the fruits of the conquests made severally by each man in the natural condition. Through the civil institution of marriage, they can lawfully obtain the familiar ‘helpmeet’ and gain the sexual and domestic services of a wife, whose permanent servitude is now guaranteed by the law and sword of Leviathan. (67)

Astell uncannily signals her attunement to the injustice of conjugal right for women in at least two instances within *Reflections*. For example, in the preface she writes of “that Superior Genius which *Men as Men* lay claim to” [emphasis added] (71). The phrase,

“men as men” refers to the privileges/rights that men have by virtue of their sex. Similarly, she writes in the body of *Reflections* of lower class men being elevated and given a measure of social respect by virtue of being married. She writes, “A Husband is such a Wonder-working Name as to make an Equality, or something more, whenever it is pronounc’d” (119).

Pateman probes Hobbes’s contract story to get to the bottom of the logic that supports male privilege/right vis-à-vis female subordination/inferiority in classic social contract models, which rest on the assumption that “all men equally are by nature free” (141). The inconsistencies she discerns are most apparent in *Leviathan* where Hobbes sometimes refers to women in the state of nature (before civil society was instituted) as free, even as “lords,” but where he also refers to women as servants or slaves. For example, in Chapter XX entitled, “Of Dominion Paternal and Despotical,” Hobbes describes gender neutral criteria for political dominion when he writes:

We find in history that the Amazons contracted with the men of the neighbouring countries to whom they had recourse for issue, that the issue male should be sent back but the female remain with themselves, so that the dominion of the females was in the mother. If there be no contract, the dominion is in the mother. For in the condition of mere nature, where there are no matrimonial laws, it cannot be known who is the father unless it be declared by the mother and therefore the right of dominion over the child dependth on her will, and is consequently hers. But if she expose it, and another find and nourish it, the dominion is in him that nourishes it. (129 – 130)

Power is here conceived of in terms of the ability to give and take away life, which women inherently possess as mothers. For Hobbes, political power derives from dominion and dominion is achieved by force or threat of force, otherwise known as “awe,” when an enemy is vanguished and thus surrenders (Pateman 64 - 65). Futher,

Hobbes distinguishes between the terms servant and slave by explaining that a contract can be made between victor and vanquished under the threat of death:

And this dominion is then acquired to the victor when the vanquished, to avoid the present stroke of death, covenanteth either in express words, or by other sufficient signs of the will, that so long as his life and the liberty of his body is allowed him, the victor shall have the use thereof, at his pleasure. And such covenant made, the vanquished is a SERVANT, and not before. (130)

In this passage, servitude is deemed voluntary even though it is accepted under duress or the threat of death. Here, it doesn't seem that Hobbes is drawing a distinction between slavery and servitude, yet, in fact, he does draw a distinction several lines later when he explains that a servant is not:

a captive (which is kept in prison or bonds till the owner of him that took him, or bought him of one that did; . . . for such men, commonly called slaves, have no obligation at all, but may break their bonds or the prison, and kill or carry away captive their master, justly). A servant, by contrast "hath corporeal liberty . . . upon promise not to run away, nor to do violence to his master. (131)

Later, I shall call attention to Astell's conflation of the terms servant/slave within *Reflections* in light of Hobbes's distinction between these terms. For now, it is important to note the contradictory way Hobbes conceives of power as gender neutral in one chapter and gendered in a subsequent chapter, an inconsistency Pateman exploits in the development of her notion of the sexual contract.

In Chapter XXII entitled "Of Systems Subject, Political and Private" Hobbes prefigures Locke's separation of the public/political from the private/personal spheres:

Private bodies regular and lawful are those that are constituted without letters or other written authority, saving the laws common to all other subjects And because they be united in one person representative, they are held for regular, such as are all families, in which the father ordereth the whole family. (153)

Here, Hobbes writes as if the father's authority in the family is natural, which would contradict the notion of women coequality in the state of nature. In "Of Counsel" he similarly writes, "But where a man may lawfully command, as a father in his family, or a leader in an army, his exhortations and dehortations are not only lawful, but also necessary and laudable" (167). Pateman asks how Hobbes, whom she labels a "consummate logician," leaps from a gender neutral condition of violence and brutality in the state of nature to one in which patriarchally structured families abound. She takes the liberty to fill in the missing story, as it were, that would make Hobbes's illogical. Pateman proposes that Hobbes's conflation of women with servants within families occurred during the war of all against all when women were rendered vulnerable by the condition of pregnancy/childrearing:

mothers are lords in Hobbes's state of nature, but paradoxically, for a woman to become a mother and a lord is her downfall. She has then given an opening for a male enemy to outwit and vanquish her in the ceaseless natural conflict. Mother-right can never be more than fleeting. (65)

Pateman contends that a woman, being reasonable, would never "contract of her own free will to enter into a long-term sexual relationship and become a 'wife', that is, to be in servitude to – to become the servant (slave) of – a man" unless the threat of death/brutality were her only other alternative (64). Pateman, like Astell, conflates the terms servant and slave, but Hobbes did not do so, in that he calls attention to the vanquished's "willingness" to enter into a seemingly unfavorable contract since the only alternative would be death. Slavery, by contrast, connotes captivity and the possibility of rebellion whereas servitude connotes obsequiousness or in Hobbes's terms "upon

promise not to run away, nor to do violence to [her] master.” This difference calls attention to the Hobbesian notion of self-preservation; whereby, “a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life or taketh away the means of preserving the same, and to omit that by which he thinketh it may best be preserved” (79). Not coincidentally, this tendency is part of Hobbes’s notion of the “Law of NATURE,” which he defines as “general rule, found out by reason” (79). Astell’s designation of women as slaves may thus be read, following Hobbes, with an undertone of rebellion, since with slaves, who are “captives,” there is always the possibility of rebellion.

Recall that Astell refers often to the law of nature/reason in the preface to *Reflections*. Unlike Hobbes, however, she construes natural law in terms of justice, or coequality, between the sexes. She writes, “Consequently the Sovereignty of a Woman is not contrary to the Law of Nature; for the Law of Nature is the Law of God ” (81). She again contradicts Hobbes when she concludes her preface by claiming that the Millennium will feature an end to “Tyrannous Domination which Nature never meant, [and that] shall no longer render useless if not hurtful, the Industly and Understandings of half Mankind!” (87). In the Hobbesian system, women are rendered slaves by force, or the threat of force, a notion that was not unlost on Astell when she wrote of the bitterness of marriage and the “violence” of courtship. This language reveals a remarkable attunement to Pateman’s conception of the hidden story of vanquishment within Hobbes’s social contract theory. Similarly, her sporadic use of the term “servant” as a synonym for wives attests to socialization of slaves to “love their chains.”

Astell's sour picture of marriage and courtship invokes Hobbes's pessimistic view of human nature, as when he writes in *Leviathan* that "the characters of man's heart, blotted and confounded as they are with dissembling, lying, counterfeiting, and erroneous doctrines, are legible only to him that searcheth hearts" (4). Similarly, Astell writes of courtship in the most pessimistic of terms, uncovering a man's motives as purely selfish. She explains, speaking as if in the voice of a courtier:

We who make the Idols, are the greater Deities; and as we set you up, so it is in our power to reduce you to your first obscurity, or to somewhat worse, to Contempt; you are therefore only on your good behavior, and are like to be no more than what we please to make you. This is the Flatterer's Language aside, this is the true sense of his heart, whatever Grimace may be before the Company" (100).

Here, Astell emphasizes the precariousness of a woman's value when it is dependent upon male standards, which reduces her to an "obscurity," or a state of nothingness. Her pessimism is designed to call attention to the contractarian nature of marriage and of women's state of obscurity and dependency within marriage after the glow of courtship has faded, and now "she must make court to him for a little sorry Alimony out of her own Estate" (95). Invoking the Hobbesian meaning of the word "servitude," Astell explains a wife's true role:

one to manage his Family, an House-keeper, a necessary Evil, one whose interest it will be not to wrong him, and in whom therefore he can put greater confidence than in any he can hire for Money. One who may breed his Children, taking all the care and trouble of their Education, to preserve his Name and Family. . . . One whose Beauty, Wit, or good Humour and agreeable Conversation, will entertain him at Home. . . . Who will but make it her very Ambition to content him. (105) ⁶¹

⁶¹ The hyperbolic language of this passage is reminiscent of a well known second wave feminist essay by Judy Brady entitled "I Want a Wife." One passage reads: "I want a wife who will work and send me to school. And while I am going ot school I want a wife to take care of my children. I want a wife to keep

This is a perfect description of servitude in the Hobbesian sense of a servant agreeing to obey and not flee to preserve life and limb. Ironically, the ostensible subject of Astell's pamphlet, the Duchess of Mazarin, did flee and then died a kind of social death.

Astell's harsh polemic concerning courtship is likewise designed to expose the theoretical "violence" that underpins the marriage contract, in which "the Husband gains his Will. For Covenants betwixt Husband and Wife, like Laws in an Arbitrary Government, are of little Force, the Will of the Sovereign is all in all" (106). A woman's only recourse, in Astell's mind, is to proceed cautiously in the face of flattery and "in all other respects let there be as much equality as may be" (108). This is where her previous views on women's education come into play, for Astell did not believe that the marriage contract would be reformed, but she believed in women's full humanity, even as she expressed frustration at women's present state and complicity in their own enchainment. Though Astell is arguably less blaming of women in this publication than in her previous text, she briefly adopts a tone of censure:

Tho' in reality it is not the World that abuses us, 'tis we abuse ourselves, it is not the emptiness of that, but our own false Judgments, our unreasonable Desires and Expectations that Torment us; for he who exerts his whole strength to lift a Straw, ought not to complain of the Burden, but of his own disproportionate endeavour which gives him the pain he feels. The World affords us all the Pleasure a sound Judgment can expect from it, and answers all those Ends and Purpose for which it was design'd, let us expect no more than is reasonable, and then we shall not fail of our Expectations. (114)

track of the children's doctor and dentist appointments. And to keep track of mine, too. I want a wife to make sure my children eat properly and are kept clean. I want a wife who will wash the children's clothes and keep them mended. I want a wife who is a good, nurturant attendant to my children" (120-121). Syfters's conflation of matrimony with servitude is uncannily reminiscent of Astell's description of a wife as an "Upper-servant."

Here, Astell is exhibiting a conservative viewpoint concerning what women can expect and what they can change about marriage, namely very little; for the institution is by nature unequal. Her primary hope then is to remedy women's "false Judgments" and "unreasonable Desires and Expectations" to avoid making "a Fool her Head, nor a Vicious Man her Guide and Pattern" (104). On this point, we can see congruence between Astell's critique of marriage and her educational theory concerning the feminine regulation of the passions.

Astell's chief complaint in this text is not women's complicity with her own enslavement, but the contractual form of marriage which renders women obscure, dependent, servile and subject to institutionalized misogyny. Astell's use of the homology argument can thus be seen as exposing the Hobbesian "missing story" of conquest prior to marriage *and* of exposing how patriarchal power carries over into Lockean social contract. This analysis is in contradiction to Godlie's point that Astell employs the homology argument as anti-Whig propaganda (74):

She . . . draws a parallel between government in the state and government in the family, and challenges Whigs to apply to the latter the principles they insist upon in the former. . . . Undoubtedly Astell made a powerful polemical move in order to expose Whig hypocrisy. The difficulty, however, is that her argument is far from novel, and she did not make it against Locke. (74)

Though it is clear that Astell is not specifically addressing Locke's *Two Treatises* in the body of *Reflections*, it is likewise obvious that she is primarily concerned with gender inequity in marriage. This concern becomes prominent in quotations such as the following when Astell writes sarcastically, "I know not whether or no Women are allow'd to have souls, if they have perhaps, it is not prudent to provoke them too much,

lest silly as they are, they at last recriminate” (113). This line plays ironically into the notion of women’s inherent (bodily and emotional) unruliness, which Astell presents as a danger to an orderly marriage (and society) although she later debunks this assertion by calling attention to a husband’s absolute power in marriage where the threat of violence is implicit.⁶² She explains, “And if she shews any Refractoriness, there are ways enough to humble her; so that by right or wrong the Husband gains his Will” (106).

Further evidence that Astell was attuned to Hobbesian notions of the social contract can be found in one of her Tory pamphlets entitled, *Moderation Truly Stated* (1704):

And now give me leave to take notice of a very pretty Conceit, which is New and your Own. We have had many fine Schemes of Government, have traced it up to the State of Nature, Original Contract and all that, ----- but I don’t remember that ever I heard this till now, that Pride was the Foundation of Sovereign Empire over the rest of Mankind. (xx)

The purpose for Astell’s unflattering allusion to the “Original Contract” in the above passage is to debunk the notion that such “Schemes of Government” would be more just than a monarchical form of government since the problem of human vices like pride and ambition are left unaddressed. Astell writes in a similarly unflattering manner of Locke’s idea within *Leviathan* that human beings spring up like mushrooms and that infants contract with parents for self-preservation. In her essay, “God Hath Ordained Man a

⁶² Margaret Cavendish’s closet drama, *The Convent of Pleasure*, similarly calls attention to the inherent violence within the marriage contract. At the end of the play, an imposter dressed as a woman reveals his true identity and his plan to marry the head priestess, whom he has been wooing “in Imagination but not in Reality” (131). The Prince declares, “But since I am discover’d, go from me to the Councillors of this State, and inform them of my being here, as also the reason, and that I ask their leave I may marry this Lady; otherwise, tell them I will have her by force of Arms” (129). One of the priestess’s ladies in waiting then declares: “all my sweet young Birds are undone ” (130).

Helpmate,” Pateman makes sense of this seemingly absurd account of human creation/relation. She does so by following Hobbes’s logic:

Hobbes took contract much further than most other classic contract theorists and claimed that even infants (could be said to have) contracted themselves into subjection to mothers. To posit a contract by an infant is to reject outright any suggestion that political subjection is natural and to confirm in the most emphatic possible manner that all dominion is conventional in origin. (55)

Here, we are getting to the core of Astell’s problem with contradiction. For, on one hand, she vehemently disagrees with the political concept of rebellion, but on the other hand, she must necessarily agree with Hobbes’s assertion that women are coequal in the state of nature and that servitude is a contractual outcome of the marriage contract. Her wish then to set “Liberty upon a better Foot” is slightly dangerous, in that it brings her into problematic alignment with Hobbesian political theory.

On this point, it is important to point out that liberty is not the enemy for Astell. Rather, violent disorder as a result of a failure to rein in human vice is the enemy. This more epistemological conception of liberty is expressed near the end of the tract when Astell writes, “We suppose it in our power to shorten the Line of our Liberty when ever we think fit, not considering that the farther we run, we shall be the more unwilling to Retreat and unable to judge when a Retreat is necessary” (124). Here, Astell is speaking of a woman’s emotions during courtship by describing how quickly ‘like’ may transform into ‘love’ even when the object of love is unworthy or even despicable. In this instance we see Astell applying an epistemological, as opposed to a political, emphasis to the term liberty. In her more politically charged pamphlet, *Moderation*, she makes a similar gesture when she describes vices like “Impiety, Ambition, Envy, Malice, Revenge,

Hypocrisy, Fraud, and Intemperence” as the character traits that “Damage . . . our Country” (xix & xx). From these two examples we can see that Astell’s primary use of the terms liberty and freedom are employed in the Cartesian sense of freedom as “a strictly philosophical conception of liberty as freedom of the will” (Broad 178). But the picture is further complicated when Astell’s notion of philosophical freedom is applied to a fundamentally political construction, the early modern marriage contract.

Before examining how Astell used key aspects of social contract theory to expose the extent of women’s subordination in marriage, it is important illuminate Locke’s theoretical relationship to women. Locke doesn’t say very much concerning women in his *Second Treatise of Government*, but what he does say, especially in combination with his utterances concerning women in *The Paraphrase*, incensed Astell. Locke, as we have seen in an excerpt from the *First Treatise*, excludes women from the social contract by dividing the private/familial from the public/political, rendering the former legitimate and the latter unworthy of much commentary. The implications of this split in terms of justice for wives were obvious to Astell, but not obvious to her readers. Pateman argues convincingly that Locke’s position concerning women’s inferiority was well thought out. This is so, she argues, because Locke was contradicting arguments within Filmer’s *Patriarcha*, a political treatise on the divine political right of monarchs, by arguing that even monarchs can behave tyrannically and may thus be overthrown. Locke’s conception of political power/dominion rests on a theory of natural freedom for property owning men. Underlying this assumption of freedom is a further corollary concerning self-preservation. This corollary distinguishes the Lockean from the Hobbesian version of

the social contract, in that Locke denies tyranny, or the threat of death, is a legitimate way to form a contract. This is so, he argues in “Chapter Two” of the *Second Treatise* because the state of nature is not,

a state of licence, though man in that state have an uncontrollable liberty to dispose of his person or possessions, yet he has not at liberty to destroy himself, or so much as any creature in his possession, but where some nobler use than its bare preservation calls for it. The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges everyone. (263)

Both Hobbes and Locke consider self-preservation a natural human feature, but Locke denies that the threat of death is a grant of power. Rather, his view of the natural law holds that beyond self-preservation and the rule of law, human beings may not kill one another:

So by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not into competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, liberty, health, limb or good of another. (264)

Locke’s version of civil society differs from that of Hobbes’s, in that he envisions humans as more benevolent. For Hobbes, human beings are selfish, brutal, violent and wholly self-interested. They form alliances merely for self-protection and advancement. For Locke, however, humans “are naturally induced to seek communion and fellowship with others: this was the cause of men’s uniting themselves at first in politic societies” (268). A social contract then is “one of agreeing together mutually to enter into one community, and make one body politic; . . . For Truth and keeping of faith belongs to men as men, and not as members of society” (268).

Locke's more benevolent view of human nature influences him to gloss the potential effects of tyrannous husbands on his private "subjects," i.e. his wives and children. Concerning the relationship between husbands and wives, Lockes holds a similarly benevolent viewpoint of human beings "agreeing together mutually to enter into one community" when he describes marriage in the *Second Treatise*:

But the husband and wife, though they have but one common concern, yet having different understandings, will unavoidably sometimes have different wills too; it therefore being necessary that the last determination, i.e. the rule, should be placed somewhere, it *naturally* falls to the man's share, as the abler and the stronger. [emphasis added] (302)

In this passage, Locke avoids declaring that men are superior to women, yet he invokes natural law and faulty reasoning (might makes right) to argue that leadership in private matters naturally "falls to the man's share" because men are "the abler and the stronger." Here, we must understand that Locke's use of the concept of natural law is revised from a Calvinist conception as "the basic norms God created, and confirmed in the covenant, for the right ordering of our marital and sexual lives" (Witte). Locke, Witte points out, has shifted to a conception of marriage as invoking both the Calvinist sense of following God's "basic norms," which included a patriarchal structuring, and the seventeenth-century sense of marriage as a "domestic commonwealth" (Witte 175). This accounts for his confused conception of marriage as a contract between consenting equals and his notion that women ultimately defer to their husband's authority in marital conflicts.

Astell's reference to the Lockean case of the highway man in her preface to *Reflections* may be a direct reference to this fallacy. The example in Locke's text is used to illustrate the notion that a highway robber with superior strength, cunning and

weaponry does *not* hold political power because of his ability to rob innocent passers by. Rather, in Locke's argument the highway man breaks the rule of law and may be prosecuted. In other words, might does not equal right, except in marriage as the above passage indicates, except that Locke stresses marriage is a companionate institution based on mutual affection. Astell responds, "And if mere Power gives a Right to Rule, there can be no such thing as Usurpation; but a Highway-Man so long as he has strength to force, has also a Right to require our Obedience" (76). This is precisely the case in the marriage contract, Astell argues, but the logic does not hold up when applied to Lockean civil contracts which combine with an earlier view of marriage as founded on biblical, patriarchal principles.

Astell's bold use of the language of the social contract and her repeated invocations of natural law in her introduction to *Reflections* indicate that she ascribed to the commonwealth notion of marriage, but her view of natural law was fundamentally different from Locke's. Witte further explains that the radicalness of Milton's critique of marriage in *The Divorce Tracts* stemmed from his viewpoint that "the domestic commonwealth, like the political commonwealth, may be dissolved if it fails in its fundamental purpose; . . . The purpose of forming a political commonwealth is to protect liberty, establish order, and secure peace, Milton argued" (180). Astell, it should be pointed out, argued the same point in *Reflections*: "for Quietness sake, yet leave every Body free to regain their lawful Right whenever they have Power and Opportunity" (131). Yet she parts company with Milton when it comes to arguing for divorce; rather, women should suffer as Christian martyrs if the commonwealth ideal breaks down.

Gordon Schochet argues that Locke's omission of women from participation in political society may have been unconscious, the result of his tacitly "endorsing prevailing practices or . . . [being] oblivious to the presuppositions from which they argued" (224). He concludes that Locke's exclusion of women, though regrettable, "provid[ed] the opening that was necessary for the long-term emergence of women as politically visible" (235). Pateman disagrees. From her perspective, political right is covertly granted and upheld via women's exclusion from the social contract and from political inclusion as citizens. She asks in her essay, "Women's Writing, Women's Standing": "was there such a creature as a freeborn Englishwoman" (369)? To support her argument, Pateman divides the early modern notion of civil rights into two categories, civil/political (to which woman could aspire) and "special" men's rights (that "men as men" enjoy). Pateman explains that this conception of rights as arising out women's exclusion from the notion of natural freedom. She argues, "Men's special rights . . . depended on the denial that women were born free, or possessed the requisite form of rationality and other capacities to take part in public and political life. Early feminists [like Astell] recognized and attacked men's special rights" (370). For Pateman, Locke's exclusion of women from full participation in the social contract was conscious, cloaked though it was in a vision of marriage as mutual and contractual. Similarly, Astell's exposure of women's actual standing in marriage is conscious in its employment of tropes of enchainment to emphasize women's contractual bondage.

Courtship as Violence

One way of discerning Astell's conscious exposure of inherent injustices within the marriage contract is to analyze her critique in light of rebellion, consent and self-possession, three key contractarian terms. Rebellion, recall, is a legitimate threat to masters by slaves, since slaves are held in captivity, and they have not yet adopted an attitude of obsequiousness or servility in exchange for more freedoms. At the beginning and end of *Reflections*, Astell underscores rebellion as a corollary to slavery when she sarcastically asserts that she is not advocating rebellion because women have already become servants, i.e. they have surrendered. The following passage from the beginning of the text is a good example of her flirtation with this concept. She explains in the following passage that women would be the last group to revolt against their "Domestic Governors" because they "Love their Chains" (86). Nor have they been exposed to the kind of education that would incite them to organize and usurp authority:

I do not propose this to prevent Rebellion, for Women are not so well united as to form an Insurrection. They are for the most part Wise enough to Love their chains, and to discern how very becomingly they set. They think as humbly of themselves as their Masters can wish, with respect to the other Sex, but in regard to their own, they have a Spice of Masculine Ambition, every one wou'd Lead, and none will Follow. . . . And therefore as to those Women who find themselves born for Slavery, and are so sensible of their own Meanness as to conclude it impossible to attain to any thing excellent, since they are, or ought to be best acquainted with their own Strength and Genius, She's a Fool who wou'd attempt their Deliverance or Improvement. (86)

The term "born for slavery" may be read in a contractarian sense to mean that "once childless women saw the fate of women who decided to exercise maternal lordship they would, as rational beings, choose to remain childless and conserve their natural freedom.

Their enslavement, leading to servitude over generations, is theoretically necessary or “there will be no original contract and no law of matrimony” (Pateman 66).⁶³ Therefore, when a “Spice of Masculine Ambition” incites women to revolt, they are not organized, educated or emotionally fit to follow through. Finally, it should be pointed out that Astell sets herself up ironically in the passage as an agent of women’s “Deliverance,” except that she is a “Fool” to think that servants can be liberated (86).

At the end of *Reflections* Astell returns to the motif of rebellion when she repeats that she is not advocating it. Here, her analysis is less ironic than legalistic:

I don’t say that Tyranny ought, but we find *in Fact*, that it provokes the Oppress’d to throw off even a Lawful Yoke that sits too heavy: and if he who is freely Elected, after all his fair Promises and the fine Hopes he rais’d, proves a Tyrant, the consideration that he was one’s own Choice, will not render more Submissive and Patient, but I fear more Refractory. (131)

In this passage Astell blends the contractarian concepts of slavery -- when she references the “Lawful Yoke that sits too heavy” and consent when she writes of “one’s own Choice” -- to assert that though she is not a promoter of rebellion, it will “in Fact” occur if unjust conditions persist. We see her thus arguing in a conservative framework for women’s better treatment in marriage because she is promoting social order, a conservative value. Astell again ties this line of reasoning to her educational plan, suggesting that women’s ignorance and lack of emotional control makes rebellion in the face of tyranny all the more likely: “can it be thought that an ignorant weak Woman

⁶³ The original contract that Pateman refers to is a revision of the Filmerian notion that paternity connotes political power. Pateman explains, “Another act of political genesis is require before a man can acquire the natural right of fatherhood. . . . Adam’s political title is granted *before* he becomes a father. If he is to be a father, Eve has to become a mother. In other words, *sex-right or conjugal right must necessarily precede fatherhood*. The genesis of political dominion lies in Adam’s sex-right, not in his fatherhood” (57).

shou'd have patience to bear a continual Out-rage and Insolence all the days of her Life? . . . *an Ass tho'd slow if provok'd will kick*" (117). Astell ends her pamphlet by confirming that "a peaceable Woman indeed will not carry it so far, she will neither question her Husban'ds Right nor his Fitness to Govern" (132). In the dissertation conclusion, I shall argue that Astell's ambiguous stance toward rebellion throughout this pamphlet promotes an ethic of self-preservation that trumps her conservatism.

Returning to the contractarian notion of consent, Carole Pateman argues that there are radical implications to consent theory, or voluntarism, in her book *The Disorder of Women*:

The starting point of early social contract and consent theory was a specific conception of individuals as 'naturally' free and equal, or as born free and equal to each other. The idea that individuals are 'naturally' free and equal raises a fundamental, and revolutionary, question about authority relationships of all kinds; and why a free and equal individual can ever legitimately be governed by anyone else. (72)

Astell's feminist purpose comes into clearer focus when we look more closely at how she utilizes the theory of consent to expose that the contractarian "appearance of equality between men and women is misleading" (Pateman 72). In Astell's terms "more Judge according to Appearances, than search after the Truth of Things" (92). The truth, from Astell's perspective, is that women are "abused" by the customs of courtship and that men's true motives with respect to marriage are hidden. This accounts for her assertion at the end of the pamphlet that a woman should "either never consent to be a Wife, or make a good one when she does" (127).

Locke's characterization of marriage as a mutual contract made in civil society between equals is, for Astell, a gloss of the true nature of the marriage contract. For his part, Locke is explicit in chapter six of *The Second Treatise* that marriage is a voluntary contract:

Conjugal society is made by a voluntary compact between man and woman; and though it consist chiefly in such a communion and right in one another's bodies as is necessary to its chief end, procreation, yet it draws with it mutual support and assistance, and a communion of interest too, as necessary not only to unite their care and affection, but also necessary to their common offspring, who have a right to be nourished and maintained (300).

Astell contradicts this harmonious picture of a companionate marriage between two ostensible equals when she describes marriage from the woman's perspective as a "Disconsolate State . . . Nor does she in her Retirements reflect so much upon the hand that administers this bitter Cup" (96). Regarding the Lockean notion that marriage is a "voluntary compact between a man and woman" Astell counters in *Reflections*: "A Woman indeed can't properly be said to Choose, all that is allow'd her, is to Refuse or Accept what is offer'd" (99). Indeed, Pateman points out that a characteristic of the marriage contract from the feminine perspective is its "presuppos[ition] that individuals are rational, that they have, or are able to develop the moral and intellectual capacities necessary to enable free commitment" (73). Locke, on one hand, affirms that women possess such qualities, and on the other hand, he denies that they do, as pointed out previously. Astell sarcastically calls attention to this inconsistency when she writes in *Reflections*, "I know not whether or no Women are allow'd to have Souls, if they have perhaps, it is not prudent to provoke them too much, lest silly as they are, they at last

recriminate” (113). Pateman agrees that women, though ostensible co-equals in the marriage arrangement, are not equal because “in the relationship between the sexes it is always women who are held to consent to men” (89). Women are rarely agents; rather, they are usually recipients of contracts, a phenomenon Astell highlights in *Reflections*.

The concepts of consent, rebellion, and even self-possession are tied theoretically together in the contractarian sense. This is the case especially for Locke because of the distinction he draws between valid and invalid contracts. He articulates this distinction in chapter four of the *Second Treatise* entitled, “Of Slavery,” a passage from which Astell quotes in her preface:

For a man, not having the power of his own life, cannot, by compact or his own consent, enslave himself to anyone, nor put himself under the absolute, arbitrary power of another, to take away his life when he pleases. Nobody can give more power than he has himself; and he that cannot take away his own life cannot give another power over it. (273)

Here, consent and self-possession, which Locke defines as encompassing “life, liberty and estate,” arise from the condition of “man being born . . . with a title to perfect freedom, and an uncontrolled enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of the law of nature” (304). It follows from this assertion that a naturally free man has “by nature a power not only to preserve his property . . . against the injuries and attempts of other men, but to judge of and punish the breaches of the law in others” (304). Freedom and self-possession, however, are not ‘natural’ to all men, and we have already seen that these concepts don’t apply to women. In this sense, both a distinction and a similarity between the Hobbesian and the Lockean notions of slavery and servitude within contracts emerge,

leaving an opening for Astell and later generations of feminist theorists and activists as Schochet predicted.

This opening occurs when Locke affirms that slaves have, in effect, “forfeited their lives, and with it their liberties, and lost their estates, and being in the state of slavery not capable of any property, cannot in that state be considered as any part of civil society, the chief end whereof is the preservation of property” (303). Locke never openly declared that women, as slaves, lost all right to “preservation of property,” but Astell can infer that logically he meant exactly this, since, following Hobbes’s contract story, women were “taken in a just war” and were thus “subjected to the absolute dominion and arbitrary power of their masters” (303). Astell’s repeated references to women as slaves as in -- “she was made to be a Slave to his Will” and husbands are “Masters of her Estate” -- are serious because they reflect her viewpoint that women are customarily stripped of the “enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of the law of nature” (99, 111). The only kind of freedom that is left for women is the freedom to suffer injustices with dignity. It remains to be shown how Astell’s conception of self-possession renders her critique of Locke’s exclusion of women from the social contract consistent.

Astell mentions passive obedience, a Tory concept, in a number of passages within the text but in an uncustomary manner for a Tory propgandist. For example, she writes of the dangers of blind obedience in the following quotations:

Indeed nothing can assure Obedience, and render it what it ought to be, but the Conscience of Duty, the paying it for GOD's sake. Superiors don't rightly understand their own interest when they attempt to put out their Subjects Eyes to keep them Obedient. A Blind Obedience is what a Rational Creature shou'd never Pay, nor wou'd such as one receive it did he rightly understand its Nature. For Human Actions are no otherwise valuable than as they are conformable to Reason, but a blind Obedience is an Obeying *without Reason*, for ought we know *against* it. (128)

The emphasis in this passage is on the "Duty" of "Superiors," not on the servility of subjects. Women, Astell contends, are rational beings and therefore they should not "obey without Reason" because "GOD himself does not require our Obedience at this rate" (128). Though Springborg is correct that Astell does not, in this text, advance a specific conception of feminine self-possession, when we read her second *Serious Proposal* carefully and in a teleological sense, it becomes apparent that self-possession, as in women owning rationality and ultimately belonging to God, demonstrates the tying of a philosophical/religious conception of freedom to the political problem of women's enchainment.

Recall that Astell emphasized women's self-esteem at the end of her second *Serious Proposal*. Here, she asserts that women are "GOD's Workmanship, endow'd by him with many excellent Qualitites, and made capable of Knowing and Enjoying the sovereign and Only Good, and she values herself only for God's sake" (179). Achinstein sees this and other religious minded assertions in the second *Serious Proposal* as evidence of Astell's repudiation of the theory of voluntarism because she "bas[ed] her argument upon a religious conception of identity as dependent" (25). But Achinstein has failed to discern the complexity of Astell's conception of feminine self-possession -- as

both dependent (upon God) and independent (of sense, custom, prejudice, gossip, passions and men). Astell's God, we must remember is just and would not, as stated above, "require our Obedience at this [irrational] rate." In this sense we can see that Astell's theory of feminine self-possession is inclusive both of dependence on God *and* the wise/skillful use of rationality. Astell's early feminism thus resides at the cusp of Enlightenment and Scholastic conceptions of the self, though her framework sets her theory up as paradoxically consistent, in that she can argue both *for* "quietness" and *against* "tyranny" in the same sentence as in: "for Quietness sake, yet leave every Body free to regain their lawful Right whenever they have Power and Opportunity" (131).

It is incorrect then for Achinstein to conclude that Astell's early feminism is "assertively otherworldly" and that her conception of personhood renders her work "only peripherally interested in questions of human justice as fairness" (29). If, by contrast, we take into consideration what Astell wrote, we have to account for such assertions as the following made in her preface when she argues that her pamphlet is written "to retrieve, if possible, the Native Liberty, the Rights and the Privileges of the Subject" (70). The "if possible" disclaimer renders her work far less radical than contemporary feminist would like, yet such an assertion in total contradicts Achinstein's negative claim concerning Astell's relationship to human justice. The following analysis of Astell's feminist arguments vis-à-vis an anonymously authored petition on marriage reform, a female dissenter in the English Civil War period, and a contemporary critic of her earliest publication demonstrates the dialogical nature of Astell's work, the inherent action

oriented nature of her polemic and her paradoxical relationship with dissenting women of previous generations.

Astell in Dialogue

The following section will highlight Astell's influence on an anonymously authored petition entitled *The Hardships of the English Lawes Concerning Wives* (1735). I make this comparison to demonstrate that her use of tropes of slavery within *Reflections* implicitly addresses women's material reality. Like Astell, the anonymous of *Hardships* begins with a premise that locates her argument in the "querelle des femmes," dating back to the late Medieval, early Renaissance period.⁶⁴ This context becomes apparent when the author claims, "Notwithstanding this discouraging *Reflection*, I shall . . . explain the original Curse of Subjection passed upon Woman, and shew that the Laws of *England* go far beyond it" [emphasis added] (223). It is not a stretch to assume that the capitalized word "Reflection" in this sentence is a reference to Astell's *Reflections*, which was reprinted four times, the last being in 1730 (Hill 63).

In her petition the anonymous author follows precedent in her attempt to reconcile commonplace biblical justifications for Eve's subjection with early feminist calls for more fairness in the state of marriage. Like Astell, this author spends less time on biblical arguments, focusing her attention of contractarian language and theories to

⁶⁴ Barbara J. Todd affirms that the anonymous author of *Hardships* is a woman: "I see no reason to doubt the author's self-identification as a married woman whose husband, unusually, has given her 'leave to be somebody'. The tone and purpose of the work is completely different from treatises on the lay by men for women . . . and also from works in which a male author has adopted a female persona. Its earnest passion argues for female authorship, while its occasionally haphazard structure suggests self-education in the law" (343).

develop her case for the juridical slavery of women. Wives, she claims, have “been entirely deprived of their Liberty, or even of making Use of their Ingenuity and Industry to procure them a Subsistence, when those who would provide it for them, refuse it, or are incapable of it” (221). The subject of *Hardships*, in contrast to *Reflections*, is lower class wives which makes the theoretical comparisons/link between the two texts especially apt since Astell’s feminism has been labeled impractical and “effete.”⁶⁵ Like Astell, the anonymous author bases her argument concerning marriage as akin to a slave contract on the Hobbesian claim of women’s natural equality in the state of nature thus exposing Astell’s attunement to “questions of human justice as fairness.” In the opening page of her petition, the anonymous author references the state of nature:

For since we seem to be hasting into a State of Nature, in which there can be no Appeal but to the Laws of our country . . . which directs a Man to erect a private Court of Equity in his own Breast, what shall restrain the Strong from oppressing the Weak. (218)

Here, we see a shift in emphasis from women’s natural equality, which is Astell’s preoccupation, to the “Laws of our country,” which the anonymous author ties materially to women’s subjection. It has been easy to gloss Astell’s use of tropes of enchainment within *Reflections* as rhetorical flourishes (or as theoretically inconsistent), but the anonymous author’s literal application of the Astellian conception of slavery (rhetorically and contractually) compels us to think differently about her influence, as well as the implications and modernity of her theory of feminine self-esteem. For example, in the

⁶⁵ Ruth Perry describes Astell’s feminism negatively in *The Celebrated Mary Astell*: “to the modern sensibility, her claim for equality on the basis of rationality – ‘I think, therefore, I am as good as anyone else’—seems an unnecessary refinement of a claim based on simple humanity or an absolute political right. Tied to education and to leisure, this is more elitist than a conception of equality based in productivity or in need” (97).

following passage the anonymous author refers to the Hobbesian conception of women as lords in the state of nature:

How comes it to pass then, that the Opinions and Customs of all Nations should give them that Superiority, even when 'tis supposed they could have had no Information of the Curse of Subjections passed upon Woman? I say all Nations, the Exceptions being too few to destroy a general Rule, tho's enough to establish Mr. Hobb's Assertion that Superiority is not founded in Nature (223).

Both Astell and the anonymous author frame their early feminist arguments around conceptions of slavery that accord with the Hobbesian social contract; the difference, is that Astell's argument is predominantly theoretical. It is tied only loosely to an actual case of spousal abuse and this case occurred within the upper class with the main wreckage being the woman's loss of social dignity and allowance. But when Astell's bold theoretical claim, "If all Men are born free, how is it that all Women are born slaves?" is applied to lower class wives as in the case of *Hardships*, a new dimension of her theory and of the applicability of her feminism emerges (76). Further, the legalist style of *Hardships* with its reference to women's equity suggests a more activist approach but I see the seeds of this activism as nascent in Astell's text.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ The juridical term "equity" needs to be further explained. In "The Elizabethan Chancery and Women's Rights," Maria L. Cioni highlights the "common law fiction that a 'feme cover' [wife] had not rights separate from the spouse" (161). Her scholarship reveals that from the mid-sixteenth century onward, wives, widows and single women had increasing access to the Chancery court's less formal and more sympathetic treatment of women with respect to inheritance, dowries, land holdings, rents and incursions on property rights by in-laws and adult children. Equity in this context "manifests in the progression from contract to trust, from equity to equitable estates, from moral duties to proprietary right" (162). According to W.R. Prest, "Women were involved as 'principal plaintiffs' in more than a sixth of all Chancery suits during the second half of the sixteenth century and no fewer than a quarter of such cases heard during the century 1613 – 1714," thus attesting to its increased popularity and use by women to secure legal status/property rights (181). The expansive nature of the court included, "compensate[ing] women for disadvantages they might suffer at common law" gave women practice at defending their legal rights and afforded "unquestioned improvements in the status of propertied women, which are so marked a feature of English society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (182). In other words, Chancery litigation

Unlike *Reflections*, *Hardships* is organized as a legal brief with specific case studies and summary comments including answers to potential objections. Before outlining three specific cases of spousal abuse, the author lists three corresponding contractarian points that each case addresses. The three points she intends to address by way of case studies include the following: I.) that “the Estate of Wives is more disadvantageous than Slavery itself.” II.) that “Domestick Governors” may ignore the act of Habeas Corpus and imprison/ murder their wife; and III.) that “wives have no property in their *own Persons, Children or Fortunes.*” (218). The last point, in particular, is a far more explicit attack on the Lockean exclusion of women from citizenship than Astell’s, since the author directly addresses the problem of self-possession, whereas Astell’s critique is implicit.

To prove that wives are contractual slaves, the author summarizes the case of a widow whose first will was revoked upon remarriage. When her second husband died, she petitioned the court for reinstatement of her first will. In this petition, her lawyer tellingly argued that the widow had been a ‘captive’ in her marriage, thus she could legally be likened to a slave. The author’s use of the contractarian concept of captivity demonstrates her impulse utilize a key contractarian notion that Astell similarly alludes to in her tract. Whereas Astell often uses the terms slave and servant interchangeably, this anonymous author cites legal precedent to prove that a woman actually *is* a juridical slave, i.e., a captive:

“could be lucrative” for women, affording women as it did an avenue of “authority, control and security” (182).

The Council for the Will cited many Authorities from the civil Law, and shewed, that among the *Romans*, if a Man had made his Will, and was afterwards taken *Captive*, such Will *revived* and became again in Force, by Testator's repossessing his Liberty: And thence inferred that as Marriage was a *State of Captivity*, Wills made by Women who became Free by Survivorship ought to revive with their Freedom. (219)

The judge, according to the author's summary, ruled that marriage is a voluntary state, not a state of captivity, and he therefore ordered that the widow's will be made void since she is free -- apparently to perish in poverty. The author's outrage in her concluding statement is palpable. She writes, "*Observation*: the Arguments of the Council make the Estate of Wives equal to, the Distinction of the Court worse than, Slavery itself" (219).

The anonymous author then details two accounts of extreme spousal abuse to bolster her argument that "she [a wife] may reflect that she is in the Condition of a Slave" (220 – 221). The first involves "Mrs. Veezy," who killed herself after her husband, "confined [her] for some Years in a Garret, without Fire, proper Cloathing, or any of the Comforts of Life; that he had frequently Horse-whipt her; that her Sufferings were so great and intolerable, that she destroyed her wretched Lif'e (219). This case is recorded to draw attention to "the full Extent of [husbands'] despotick Power" to imprison and kill their wives (219). According to the anonymous author, the husband was acquitted, an action that effectively condoned the crime. The case she highlights can be likened to Atell's assertion that masters/husbands seldom give up their rights or privileges in favor of slaves/wives, a fact that renders the Lockean notion of companionship between a married couples absurd. The undertone of violence is unmistakable in the above examples cited by the anonymous author, yet it is subtler in *Reflections* as when Astell

writes, “he who has Sovereign Power does not value the Provocations of a Rebellious Subject, but knows how to subdue him with ease, and will make himself obeyed” (102).

The second case presented involves a “modest agreeable Gentlewoman, well educated” whose husband abandoned her and her children, leaving them impoverished. When this woman attempted to find employment as a household servant, “he refused it, unless he might have leave to visit her [i.e., to have sex with her] when he pleased; and the Wages which she should earn, being not hers, unless it was paid to him, he might have sued the Person, who should entertain [employ] her” (220). The anonymous author points out a fact that Astell alluded to some thirty-five years previously when she wrote, “she had need be very sure that she does not make a Fool her Head, nor a Vicious Man her Guide and Pattern,” since “neither Law nor Custom afford her that redress which a Man obtains” (101).⁶⁷ Indeed, this abandoned wife who could not support herself without forfeiting her wages is left to rely on charity, or in the author’s words, she is never really “provided for” (220). The anonymous author concludes: “Observation: hence it appears that Wives have no Property neither in their intellectual, or personal Abilities nor in their Fortunes” (220). The final reference to Hobbes in her petition supports her claim that women are naturally imbued with “property in the person” but are stripped of this “freeborn” state of self-possession when they marry.

⁶⁷ In a footnote to the modern edition of *Hardships*, it is indicated that “A woman’s right to refuse conjugal relations even with her estranged husband was not legally guaranteed until 1891” (224).

The anonymous author returns to the motif of slavery when she concludes her petition by emphasizing “that our Laws forbid the buying and selling of Men, there being such an absolute Inconsistency in the Conditions of a Free-born *English* Man and a Slave, that they will by no Means comport in the same Community” (221). In conclusion, Astell’s answer to the problem of the juridical slavery of wives is educational reform. *Reflections* can be seen as an extension of her first and second *Serious Proposals* in the sense that she is now attempting to expose the true nature of the marriage contract before “[a woman’s] ruin is . . . too far advanc’d to be prevented” (121). She thus attempts to “Deliver” women -- not from actual bondage as the anonymous author does -- but from falsehood, so that “there be as much equality as may be” in a fundamentally unjust institution (108). In this sense, Astell’s theory of feminine self-esteem and her critique of early modern marriage can be seen as implicitly modern.

Further, I wish to call attention to Astell’s ambiguous relationship to dissenting women of the English Civil War period. This relationship, I argue, accords with a major premise of this study -- that Astell is dialogically tied in thematic and stylistic manners earlier and later generations of feminists. Just as Astell appears to have influenced the anonymous author’s call for legal reform of marriage laws, so too, I am arguing, did English activist and petitioners during the English Civil period, a crucial time for early feminist publishing and activism, influence Astell. In a recent article, Melinda Zook argues that “Astell was hesitant to simply dismiss [dissenting] women, but ultimately they had no place in her Tory worldview” (113). This assertion attests to the way scholars tend to delimit Astell’s intellectual breadth because of her political

conservatism. The following will build upon the sympathy Zook discerns between Astell and dissenting women of the English Civil War period by paying particular attention to gendered manifestations and pitfalls concerned with the genre of political pamphleteering. More specifically, I compare Astell's skill as a pamphleteer to the Lady Eleanor Davies, a self-described prophetess who ignored the conventions of the millennial pamphlet to her peril.

Lady Eleanor Davies was a self-styled prophetess and the kind of unruly woman who would have made a conservative moralist like Astell uncomfortable. Yet, her story of personal disaster that resulted in part by her foray into publishing is one Astell would have sympathized with. According to Megan Matchinske who wrote "Holy Hatred: Formations of the Gendered Subject in English Apocalyptic Writing (1625-1651)," Eleanor Davies was a prolific pamphleteer of the millennial genre that employed a kind of rhetoric known as "holy hatred." According to Matchinske, Davies built up a following and notoriety when "she accurately prophesied the deaths of her first husband John Davies, Lord Buckingham, Archbishop Laud, and King Charles I" (358). However, Matchinske argues that Davies's failure to co-opt generic conventions of the millennial pamphlet helped to ensure that "her career [would be] marked with periods of incarceration and near oblivion" (358). Davies's personal story of crippling fines, the loss of her inheritance, and repeated incarcerations in Bedlam and the Tower of London offers a cautionary tale of the perils facing unconventional women who led quasi-public lives in the seventeenth-century. Astell's personal story of overcoming poverty as a single woman of learning/letters is equally unconventional, yet she was also fiercely

attuned to her own self-preservation, a quality that Davies lacked. One way Astell protected herself and her livelihood as a public figure, I argue, was by mastering generic conventions associated with the political pamphlet. Davies's failure in her chosen sub-genre, the millennial pamphlet, offers a stark contrast.

According to Matchinske, the genre of millennial pamphleteering at mid-century encompassed "texts [that] invariably posit a catastrophic world end with England at its epicenter. And they do so by equating the personal and the universal, the individual with the national" (354). Such texts offered guidance to and exerted social control over audiences, yet their authors were generally men who paid little attention to the question of exegetical authority. This was not the case for Eleanor Davies who struggled with the problem of authority and who mis-employed the rhetoric of "holy hatred;" thereby, putting herself at personal risk. According to Matchinske, Davies disregarded the very *raison d'être* of the millennial pamphlet when she focused on her authority to prophesy and highlighted personal vendettas as opposed to national causes. For example, Davies could have exploited the broader early feminist concern with a woman's right to speak and prophesy or with women's poverty but she fails to.

A case of generic failure can be found in *The Lady Eleanor Her Appeal* (1646) when she writes of her first husband's death that she apparently caused after he burnt "this Book of mine" (15).⁶⁸ She recounts, "beginning at home first, where this Book of mine was sacrificed by my first Husbands hand, thrown into the fire, whose Doom I gave

⁶⁸ The "book he burnt" is most likely a reference to a pamphlet she was authoring, not a book she was reading.

him in letters of his own Name (John Davies, loves Hand) within three years to expect the mortal blow” (15). Such accounts were no doubt sensational reading for Davies’s audience, but they must have also stirred anxieties concerning feminine unruliness, and they failed to address any broader Puritan ideals or complaints such as abuses within the church hierarchy. Matchinske explains, “not only do her texts become more easily disposable, subject to greater ridicule and indifference by virtue of their failure to fulfill certain accepted conventions, but her own status in relation to them is held equally suspect” (363). In this regard, Davies’s authority to prophesy becomes the ostensible subject of her pamphlet, not her actual prophesies or message. This particular generic failure, Matchinske points out, was combined with an aggressive tone and contributed to her economic vulnerability.⁶⁹ Further, Davies reasserted her aristocratic heritage in a genre that was ostensibly aimed at a populist audience; thereby, breaking yet another generic code and further alienating her audience and potential patrons (358 – 359).

In my view Zook’s observation that Astell “had little or no concern for marketability” is incorrect because this claim neglects the biographical fact of Astell’s early years of extreme economic vulnerability when she first moved to Chelsea as a young woman from Newcastle. (110) It also neglects her entry into the raucous generic tradition of political pamphleteering in which previous generations of women

⁶⁹ According to Matchinske, Davies suffered great personal loss as a result of her publishing and prophesying activities; she published “over sixty individual tracts, some as many as forty pages in length” (Matchinske 358). For publishing tracts illegally, Davies “spent two years, from 1633 to 1635, at Gatehouse in Westminster. . . For this she was fined 3000 pounds, an exorbitant amount at that time” (358). Additionally, Davies spent 16 months in Bedlam for disrupting church services as a dissenter, and she was also “imprisoned again for brief periods in 1646 and 1651” (358).

authors/activists had participated with mixed results.⁷⁰ Further, it fails to account for the system of patronage by conservative, wealthy women on which Astell mostly relied for her livelihood throughout her life. Susan Wiseman attests to the social and political dangers associated with women who stepped into the public arena by publishing pamphlets, treatises, tracts, prophesies and/or petitions. She traces the development of the “porno-political” pamphlet, a sub-genre of the political pamphlet that was used to reassert conservative political values in a climate of intense political and social upheaval at mid-century.⁷¹

Such pamphlets emerged during the Civil War years when the traditional patriarchal system was breaks down both actually and theoretically. Its emergence also coincide with raucous rioting, often by women in the streets of London to protest the war, call for economic redress and as it did during the English Civil War period, Wiseman explains that women’s entry into public discourses renders an invisible part of the patriarchal system (the sexual contract in Pateman’s lexicon) visible (146). Wiseman explains that “the idea of parliamentary sovereignty and freedom counterposed to patriarchal theory illuminated women . . . [in] the analogy of the family and the state”

⁷⁰ Phyllis Mack describes women dissenters/visionaries as “human transmitter[s] of divine knowledge, a sort of spiritual battery, humming with the energy of the universe. Prophecy and witchcraft, or prophecy and possession by diabolical powers, were often conflated, not only because the external behavior of both these types was similar but because, in both cases, the woman’s body and behavior frequently exhibited tangible signs (catatonia, witches marks) that betrayed her as a being whose fragile mental and moral powers had been submerged beneath a tidal wave of occult energy” (89).

⁷¹ Joad Raymond documents early modern women’s involvement in the publishing tracts, prophesies, and petitions during the English Civil War: “New and hitherto unheard voices were made audible in print, encouraged by the unprecedented openness of the press during the 1640s. Among the speeches of these new voices were petitions from artisans, apprentices and women that became a feature of parliamentary political life. . . . the number of printed writings by women increased significantly during the 1640s, though actual quantities remained very low; as a percentagle of total publication the figure rose from about.4 per cent to about 1 per cent” (197).

(146). In other words, the breakdown of silence and control over women was analogous to the breakdown of the traditional monarchichal form of government, hence a backlash ensued in print to reassert order.

Porno-political pamphlets were literally scurrilous (and humorous) mock pamphlets and/or petitions that equated sincere attempts at political agency/reform with sexual desire. Henry Neville's mock petition, *The Ladies Parliament* (1647) is a perfect example of this genre. His pamphlet is written in response to anonymous and group authored petitions drawn up and submitted to Parliament during the early and middle years of the English Civil War when it was common for mobs of women to descend upon parliament to make brash political demands.⁷² Neville opens one such pamphlet with an insult. He describes the politicking women as: "The Rattel-head Ladies being assembled at Kattes in Coven Garden." Then the body of the mock petition turns bawdy:

A motion was made for the putting down of Playes, whereupon the Lady Monmouth stood up and desired it might be explained, what Plaies was meant, for as much as it should be put down the Playes, it might procure much to the providence of the House, as also for Mistriss Young who had deserved well of their Lordships, but answer being made, Stage plays were only understood, she declared that she could concur with the House; in that St. John Sucklin was denied, but she liked his play well. (1 & 10)

The point of this passage is to reinforce the stereotype of women's capacious sexual appetite and to equate serious, public speaking and/or assembling with sexual desire; thereby, rendering such activities politically silly and morally dangerous.

⁷² Ellen A M'Arthur reports that in 1642 at least two mobs of women, one numbering 400 and another one numbering in the range of 500 (with some men dressed as women!) assembled in front of Parliament to submit opinions and petitions to MPs. One account of the mob describes it as "multitudes of women at the Houses, pressing to present a petition to the Parliament; and their language is that where there is one woman now here, there would be five hundred to-morrow" (698).

Another porno-political pamphlet entitled, “The Ladies Remonstrance” begins with a more overt pornographic slight on its title page which reads: “The Ladies Remonstrance or a Declaration of the Waiting-Gentlewomen, Chamber-maids, and Servant-maids, of the City of LONDON and within the Loyns of Copulation; To all Gentlemen . . . These greetings”(1). One of the pamphlet’s passages features a level of sexual insult that, according to Wiseman, was new to this genre:

Also we Declare, That we will admit of a toleration in our Region, that those whose desire is weak and tender, may have their choice to lye by *a Red man, a Brown man, a Pale man, a Black man, a Flaxen-hair man, a Fat man, a Lean man, a Tall man, a Short man, an Old man, or a Young man*, provided there be no too superstitious, nor too rigid. [emphasis not added] (3)

This quotation conflates sexual and racial innuendos into a word picture that presents women as possessed of sexual desire and even as animalistic, since their desire includes men of “inferior” races such as “a Red man, a Brown man,” etc. Such utterances were effective because they served to “delegitimize[d], demonize[d], and scapegoat[ed] ‘others;’” thereby, denying them political influence (Achinstein 34). Astell’s cognizance of a woman special need to guard her reputation is in evidence *Reflections*:

What an ill Figure does a Woman make with all the Charms of her Beauty and Sprightliness of her Wit; . . . tho’ she be the best Economist in the World, the most entertaining Conversation, if she remit her Guard, abate in the Servity of her Caution and Strictness of her Vertue, and neglect those Methods which are necessary to keep her not only from a Crime, but from the very suspicion of one. (92)

This is a classic rendition of the gendered double standard, yet it has particular poignancy in the context of Astell’s pamphlet, because she needed to take special care to guard her reputation as a public figure. This, in my view, accounts for the increase in contradictory

statements at the end of *Reflections* as when she writes, “a peaceable Woman indeed will not carry it so far, she will neither question her Husband’s Right nor his fitness to Govern” (132). This line clearly contradicts the impetus of the rest of *Reflections* yet it, in my mind, attests to more the pressures Astell felt as a single woman making a public living as a writer/polemicist and feminist, than to inherent theoretical inconsistencies. Though Astell was politically out of sync with dissenting women authors of the English Civil War period, she was empathetic to the plight of women who unjustly suffered because they were “singular” in the sense of calling attention to themselves for writing, calling for reform or living in a way that was not conventionally proscribed.

Finally, I wish to call attention to the relationship between Astell and one of her contemporaries, the Lady Damaris Masham, who was her supposed enemy. I argue that a relationship that borders on mentorship exists between these two authors, especially in terms of Astell’s emerging polemical style. This finding contradicts the supposed adversarial connection between these two philosophers/pamphleteers, who are linked respectively to Norris and to Locke, and it furthers the project of reading Astell’s texts as part of, not emerging separate from, the social, political and rhetorical climate in which she lived and worked. A quotation from the end of Astell’s second *Serious Proposal* has been used as evidence that Astell held the Lady Damaris Masham, a major patron of Locke, in contempt:

She who makes the most Grimace of a Woman of Sense, who employs all her little skill in endeavouring to render Learning and Ingenuity ridiculous, is yet very desirous to be thought Knowing in Dress, in the Management of an Intreague, in Conquestry or good Houswifry. (179)

Though “she” in this passage remains unnamed, Astell is most likely referring to Masham’s *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1696), which was written as a critique of Norris’s theosophy expressed in *Letters*. At the end of her second *Serious Proposal*, Astell addresses Masham’s charge of enthusiasm, and we may read her emerging, defensive tone in this section as a progression from philosophical to polemical discourse. The following will demonstrate how Masham’s critique strengthened Astell’s resolve and influenced her style as an emergence political pamphleteer.

Ironically, Damaris Masham was the daughter of Ralph Cudworth, one of the Cambridge Platonists who so influenced Astell. According to James Buickerood, Masham grew up “in the at once fecund and stultifying – particularly for a girl – environs of a master’s lodgings of a Cambridge college” (vii). Though her father most likely supervised her tutoring and, “her published books show her to have been a voracious and wide ranging reader,” she did not adopt or even very much sympathize with the Cambridge Platonist school of thought (viii).⁷³ Rather, she developed her own viewpoints and chose idiosyncratic intellectual allegiances that suited her emerging intellectual concerns, chief among those being “virtue and friendship” (vii). In this manner, she shared a remarkably similar temperament and intellectual story with Astell even as each took up opposing philosophical stances. For example, Masham struck up a correspondence with Locke in 1682, (Astell wrote to Norris about a decade latter), and

⁷³ Like Masham, Astell’s erudition is often overlooked. Goldie counters this trend when he observe that in *Moderation Truly Stated* Astell “displays her familiarity with a range of major political treatises, for she cites Plato’s *Republic*, Machiavelli’s *Discourses*, More’s *Utopia*, Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, and Hobbes’s *Leviathan*” (77).

this correspondence between Masham and Locke would eventually culminate in Locke's moving into Masham's family's home where she supported him as a patron.

Masham's correspondences with and mentorship under Locke broadened her intellectual scope as she began to study the beliefs and practices of a variety of Protestant religious sects all of which adhered to the doctrine of "inner light"(xi). Buickerood points out that Masham studied these sects to arm herself against dangerous thinking associated with enthusiasm, not because of religious curiosity:

Very possibly there is a deeply personal dimension to her repudiation of religious positions that entail retirement from the social world and contemplation as the chief means of pleasing God. On Masham's understanding of virtue from at least the mid 1690s, human duty to God entails the rational regulation of human passions. If these expressions of a desire to withdraw, to become a Stoic, to live within communities of the regenerate, represent genuine personal desire or impulses, very possible she conceived herself to be obliged not to succumb to such desires; joining a nunnery would be to repudiate scriptural rules for the conduct of human life (xii).

Masham's attention to the regulation of the passions is thus differentiated from Astell's in that Astell's co-opts Descartes's theory to argue that women can become orderly, objective, rational and ethical, while Masham worried that an emphasis on self-regulation could lead to dangerous forms of ascetism.

According to Buickerood, the variety of Protestant sects that abounded in England prior to, during, and after the Civil War held "in common doctrines of divine illumination and affective union characterizable in the elastic usage of the day as 'enthusiasm'" (xix). Enthusiasm, by this broader definition, could include ecstatic gestures (trembling, quaking, fainting), visionary trances, rants and/or disruptive public acts such as raucously interrupting sermons, singing in verse to large audiences, prophesying in public and/or

publishing incendiary, Millenarian tracts. On the other end of the spectrum, enthusiasm could likewise entail, “a supposed requirement of self-abnegation and disdain for . . . matter in general and flesh in particular” (xix). One particularly controversial manifestation of this form of quietism found expression in the writing of Miquel de Molinos in the 1670s whose extreme brand of quietism advocated denouncing desire to the point that performing any kind of action might be considered offensive to God; one’s goal in this life was to become inert. Norris’s occasionalism/quietism, from Masham’s perspective, fell into this category of extreme enthusiasm

Recall that although Astell holds a mediating viewpoint in *Letters*, she at times breaks into occasionalist “love of God” fervor. Even though she emphasizes community in *Letters*, there are passages where she espouses complete withdrawal from society. For example, in “Letter VII” she writes, “we should without Reluctancy banish the Creature from our Hearts, abandoning all other Desires but that which has all the Pleasure and Advantage of Love, without any of its Pain and Imperfection”(98). And in even stronger terms, she repudiates society altogether in “Letter IX” when she writes, “and therefore an ardent Lover of GOD will consider how incongruous it is to present him with a mean and narrow Soul, a Heart groveling on the Earth, cleaving to little dirty Creatures” (137). Astell’s reference to humans as, “dirty little Creatures” was just the kind of extremism that Masham deplored and felt called to denounce. But Astell was not wholly unaware of the precarious territory she traversed as she both agreed with and criticized Norris’s theory of love as in “Letter IX”:

It may perhaps be objected that this is metaphysical Nonsense, for the Creature is so necessary in order to our Good, that whilst we are in the World we are so far from being happy, that we cannot so much as subsist without it. I do not deny this, provided the Creature be used only as an *Occasion* of our Good, and with that Indifferency that is due to it. (119)

For Masham, Astell's flirtation with occasionalist philosophy was "metaphysical Nonsense;" however, her chief criticism was with Norris an influential philosopher, clergyman and former friend of Locke, not with Astell's responses to him. Further, Astell's movement away from Norris's theory of love may be viewed as a positive response to Masham's criticism, for her emphasis on tranquility of mind, on sober rational learning and wise judgment are anything but enthusiastic. Further, these ideas bring her discourse into mainstream currents against the tide of Norris's increasing marginalism. At any rate, Astell shifts from a conception of the body as a "Carkass" and people as "dirty creatures" to a holistic view of the human body, mind and emotions as naturally embodying passions that need to be tamed. In "Chapter IV" of the second *Serious Proposal*, she had written, "it appears that it is no fault to have Passions, since they are natural and unavoidable, and useful too" (162).

The context of Masham's critique of Norris's published lecture, *Practical Discourses Upon Several Divine Subjects* (1693), is now rather well documented. In summary, Masham objected specifically to Norris on two key points. The first point of contention concerned Norris's theory of love; whereby, he argued that there are two levels of love: the love of desire and the love of benevolence. According to Norris, the love of desire is a superior kind of love that should be reserved for God. That Norris puts forth a seemingly 'lesser' form of love (benevolence) with respect to human beings

struck Masham as false because “all human love is characterized by desire” (Buickerood xv). Additionally, Masham counters Norris’s borrowed (from Malebranche) theory of “vision in God,” which can be summarized as a complex syncretization of Cartesian, Neoplatonic and Augustinian influences.

In *On Malebranche*, David Scott explains the various strands of thought that contributed to Norris’s theory of vision in God. He writes, “Like Descartes he [Malebranche] thinks ideas are the immediate objects of our perception; like Plato he thinks that they are real and external to us; and like Augustine he thinks that they are in God and are seen there” (58). This is the line of thinking Norris followed. Scott further connects Malebranche’s complicated, metaphysical notion of “vision in God” to Norris’s occasionalist theory of causation by separating the soul from the ideas that arise within it. The soul, which contains the mind, is limited and finite; whereas, ideas, which Malebranche conceives of as external to the mind, are infinite because they emanate from God (not from souls). This then “rules out the possibility that ideas are in the soul” – a distinctly anti-Cartesian notion that Astell would most likely have refuted if her correspondences with Norris had led in that direction (60). In other words, ideas attest to the existence of God or the “presence of God in our minds” (62). This theory places God as causally central to both causation generally and to cognition specifically, so that “there [is] present to us something that can include or contain all those things that we apprehend in our minds,” namely God (62). This theosophical orientation helps to explain Norris’s over-emphasis on love within *Practical*. The following is an example of the kind of theological discourse Masham felt compelled to critique in *Discourse*:

that God only is to be loved, if God be the only proper Object of our Love; and 'tis clear, that he is the only proper Object of our Love, if he only be our Good; and tis clear that he only is our Good, if he only does us Good, if he only perfects and betters our Beings; and 'tis as clear that he only does so, if he be the only true Cause of all our Pleasure, of those grateful Sensations whereof we are Conscious, and wherewith we are affected (qtd. in Buickerood xvi).

Norris's occasionalism, as expressed in the above quotation inspired Astell's criticism as well as Masham's. As has been demonstrated in the first dissertation chapter, Astell was concerned about Norris's neglect of the problem of pain in his theory of love. Her argument went further, however, by extending her critique of Norris's theory of love to his emphasis on quietism when she argued that God commanded his people to love one another. In this way, her criticism of Norris is similar to Masham's criticism.

For her part, Masham's argument against occasionalism was supported by her alignment with Lockean materialism. Jacqueline Broad underscores the similarities between Masham's and Astell's critiques of Norris by highlighting at least two additional ways that their ideas coincide. These two points include the Cambridge Platonist theory of plasticity and a revision of feminine virtue, particularly chastity. The theory of plasticity, according to Broad, was articulated by a number of early modern philosophers including Masham's own father, Ralph Cudworth. This theory offers another account for how the material world may be governed by God but not in all of its most minute operations. In other words Masham's co-option of plasticity to explain the practical side

of how nature carries out God's plan is similar to Astell's conclusion that a sensible congruity governs nature to carry out God's will as his "servant."⁷⁴

According to Broad, "the theory of plastic nature is essential to Cudworth's system, because it strikes a medium; it is 'a living Stamp or Signature of Divine Wisdom' in the created world, and yet it does not require God to exert a solicitous Care or Distractious Providence'" (142). It is striking that each of the three female philosophers treated in this study, Astell, Princess Elisabeth, and Masham was compelled to propose a mediating explanation for the agency/efficacy of material creation in light of the existence of an all knowing God. What each of these philosophers has in common is an attribution of divine use for aspects of the material realm, especially the body. Broad summarizes this concept in Masham's *Discourse* with the following line: "Plastic nature or 'plastic powers' are the executors of God's grand design, his causal instruments in the natural world" (143). Paradoxically, Masham's use of the theory of plasticity to refute quietism is nearly identical to Astell's insistence that God creates nothing in vain. Both authors refute quietism, and they both contribute, in varying degrees, to the early feminist project of theorizing women's bodily differences (i.e., her tropological proximity to nature) as fundamental to God's plan

I argue that Masham influenced Astell's stylistically as well as theoretically. Scholarly support for the stylistic side of my argument can be found in Buickerood's introduction to Masham's two published texts:

⁷⁴ Recall that Princess Elisabeth similarly theorized a use for nature, so that mind/thinking might be able to be conceived of as "extended."

A number of readers have interpreted the book to be a personal as much as a philosophical attack on Norris and Astell. But much in this interpretation suffers from crippling deficiencies of evidence, argument, knowledge of the context in which the work was written and published as well as a lack of appreciation of the breadth of Masham's knowledge and reading. Given the religious, ecclesiastical, and civic context in which it was composed and the importance Masham very clearly attached to the issues at stake, the tract's polemical character is unsurprising. (xviii)

Buickerood counters the myth of an acrimonious relationship between Masham and Astell by pointing out that there is but one reference to Astell in the one hundred and twenty-six page *Discourse* and that this reference is rather neutral. Scholars up to this point, however, have exaggerated the tone of the reference as in the following often quoted passage from an essay by E. Derek Taylor:

In 1696 while Astell was in the midst of composing *Serious Proposal, Part II*, a mocking (and acute) response to Norris and Astell's Letters . . . had been published. Though the author of *Discourse* was Damaris Masham (1658 – 1708) . . . Astell and Norris both suspected Locke of authoring the attack, and with good reason. (510)

Taylor characterizes Masham's *Discourse* as a, "thinly veiled attack on Astell . . . [that] incensed her against Locke and raised her defenses for Norris" (510). Buickerood, by contrast, sees little evidence for such an interpretation, especially given that the bulk of *Discourse* concerns Norris's earlier text, *Practical Discourses*, and its primary source, Malebranche's *Conversations Chretiennes* (xviii). Additionally, Buickerood observes stylistic characteristics within this text such as Masham's sharpness that can be likewise found in Astell's first polemical pamphlet. He observes that Masham's critique is "peppered . . . with irony at times amounting to sarcasm, punctuated by expressions of incredulity that Norris could draw or could fail to draw a given inference" (xviii). Such

a style, he further points out, is “conventional and rarely, if ever, slip in the direction of ad hominem attacks on Norris” (xviii). Indeed, Masham’s *Discourse* is less argumentative in tone than Norris’s own published critique of Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* entitled: *Cursory Reflection Upon a Book Call’d: An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Norris’s is the first published critic of Locke’s *Essay* and given this fact it is understandable why scholars would group Astell and Norris in opposition to Masham and Locke. But the picture is again more complex.

The one direct reference Masham makes to Astell in *Discourse* must be read, Buickerood contends in opposition to Taylor, in light of the context of the wider debate between Norris and Locke. In this context, I see a sympathetic link from Masham toward Astell:

This hypothesis seems, yet at least, of moment enough to be so far inquired into, as these Papers have Undertaken: Since how unserviceable or injurious soever it really is to Piety, it has yet been Seriously and Zealously pretended to be of great use to Religion; And that not only by a young Writer, whose judgment may, perhaps, be thought Byassed by the Affectation of Novelty; But also it is made the very Ground of Christianity, by a Man of an established Character in the World of Philosophical Science. (78)

The “hypothesis” Masham refers to is Norris’s occasionalism that she illuminates in the form of an animadversion, a rhetorical technique Astell employs first in *Reflections* after Masham’s critique of *Letters* was published:

That God, not the Creature, is the immediate, efficient Cause of our Sensations: For whatever gives us Pleasure (say they who hold this Hypothesis) has a right to our Love; but God only gives us Pleasure, therefore he only has a right to our Love. (7)

Scholars agree that Astell is the “young Writer, whose judgment may, perhaps, be thought Bypassed by the Affectation of Novelty” in this passage. But references to Astell’s youth and the equivocal phrase, “whose judgement may perhaps be thought Bypassed,” support Buickerood’s contention that this is far from a vehement attack. By contrast, it can be read in a protective light. The real target for Masham is Norris who had an established reputation, and I read Masham’s reference to Astell in the above passage as sincere and protective, rather than sarcastic.

It is true that Astell may have been, as Taylor described, “galled” by Masham’s reference to enthusiasm, but we must remember that she was not accusing Astell, but rather Norris, of this charge (510). The passage in which scholars conflate the attack on Norris and Astell reads:

These Opinions of Mr. N. seem also to indanger the introducing, especially amongst those whose Imaginations are stronger than their Reason, a Devout way of talking, which having no sober, and intelligible sense under it, will either inevitably by degrees beget an Insensibility to Religion, in those themselves who use it, . . . or else will turn to as wild an Enthusiasm as any that has been yet seen, and which can End in nothing but Monasteries, and Hermitages, with all those Sottish and Wicked superstitions. (120)

I agree with Taylor that this may indeed be a “thinly veiled attack on Astell,” who *did* propose a women’s academy/monastery. Yet Masham lays the blame squarely on Norris when she contends that “this the Author of the *Christian Conversation* foresaw very well must be the Consequence” (120). Further, it must be pointed out that Astell’s plan was being attacked not just by one critic but by many. Astell alludes to her “enemies” in the following quotation near the end of her second *Serious Proposal*:

They must either be very Ignorant or very Malicious who pretend that we wou'd imitate Foreign Monasteries, or object against us the Inconveniencies that they are subject to; a little attention to what they read might have convinc'd them that our Institution is rather Academical than Monastic. So that it is altogether beside the purpose, to say' tis too Recluse, or prejudicial to an Active life. (178)

Here, we see Astell responding to “some objections,” not specific complaints, and no critic is mentioned by name. Though she may be referring to Masham's *Discourse* here, we cannot be sure. We can be sure, however, that Astell was attuned to major intellectual debates of her day and in previous generations, and she sought to align herself in a way that positioned her closer to the mainstream.

Masham's critical style in *Discourse* can be characterized as assertive, somewhat saracastic, but not generally combative. In a number of instances, she makes a gesture that could go in the direction of an ad hominen attack (on Norris or Malebranche), but she rarely carries her criticism to that level. In this way, she keeps the focus on her critique of enthusiasm and draws attention to herself as both sober and learned. Specific passages exemplify her style of criticism. The first is sarcastic, even humorous, occuring early on in *Discourse* as Masham speaks generally of those who promote contemplation as “The perfection of a Christian State” (4). She complains that such men (like Norris) who assert that:

the Duties of a Social Life (for which 'tis plain Mankind were intended) to be low Matters, fit only to exercise the young Christian, not yet advanced into the Spiritual State; to which when he arrives, even but to the first Degree (for they talk of here Degrees at least of it, by which Perfection is to be ascended to) he then looks down upon all the Duties of the second table, as an inferior dispensation, belonging to those of a lower Class. And when he is ascended to the highest Degree, he is then got above Reason iself; being first melted and brought to nothing, and then lost and swallowed up in God. (4 -5)

Masham's sarcasm blossoms in the above quotation when she writes of clerics being "swallowed up in God." But the sarcasm is tempered by a subsequent line in which she reminds readers that she is critiquing potentially infectious, and fallacious views. She writes that her criticism "show[s] of how dangerous Consequence it is to talk after this Fashion." It is noteworthy that her critique betrays a populist influence as when she speaks of men like Norris looking down upon "all the Duties of the second table, as an inferior dispensation, belonging to those of a lower Class." Astell, in her description of the superior man's duty to inferiors in *Reflections* supports this viewpoint.

Regarding Masham's tone in *Discourse*, Buickerood contends that her remarks are "by no informed standard notably unkind or hostile to the authors of the theses it criticizes" (xviii). An early reference to Norris as "either the Author himself, or this great Assertor of this Hypothesis..." is clearly ironic since she wholeheartedly disagrees with Norris and Malebranche's hypothesis (9). The "Author himself" is, of course, Malebranche while "this great Assertor" is Norris. Referring to Norris as an "Assertor," not a philosopher, is indeed a slight, but it is a customary slight and not an attack. In fact, she later tempers her remark in *Discourse's* conclusion when she refers to Norris as "a Man of an Established character in the World of Philosophical Science" who has undue influence on less sophisticated followers (78). Goldie supports Buickerood's view that Masham's references to Norris, though sarcastic, were conventional in what he refers to as "this most libelous age, [when] the most senior politicians were fair game for rancorous political denunciation" and when Locke himself, "was subject to savage

indictments from the mid-1690s onwards” (70). The point here is that Masham’s criticism of Norris/Astell in *Discourse* was mannered.

Textual evidence supports my claim that Astell was answering rather than reacting to Masham’s critiques. Further, she can even be observed adopting elements of Masham’s argumentative style on at least three points. The first point is Masham’s tendency to drop copious, direct textual quotations of her subject into her own arguments in order to refute the argument, a rhetorical technique known as animadversion. For example, she writes near the end of *Discourse*:

But another Reason, besides the narrowness of our Capacities, *Why we cannot divide our Love* between God and the Creature, is, *because we cannot love wither of them, but upon such a Principle as must utterly exclude the love of the other;* which is thus offered to be made out: *We must not love any thing but what is our true Good. There can be but one thing that is so: And that must be either God, or the Creature.* What is our *True Good*, he tells us is that which can both *Deserve and Reward our Love*. But certainly whatever is a Good to us, is a True Good, since whatever pleases us; pleases us: And our Love, which he says is to be *deserv’d and rewarded*, is nothing else but that Disposition of Mind, which we find in our selves towards any thing with which we are pleas’d. (89)

The italicized sections of the above texts are carefully placed quotations from an unnamed Norris text in which she highlights the absurdity of his theory next to her more sober claim concerning Christian love of neighbors. Astell similarly and deftly employs this technique for the first time in her early feminist publication within the 1706 preface, which was written shortly after Masham’s *Discourse* was published. Her most famous use of the technique of animadversion concerns a well known passage from Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*:

If all Men are born free, how is it that all Women are born slaves? As they must be if the being subjected to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary Will of Men, be the perfect Condition of Slavery? And if the Essence of Freedom consists, as our Masters say it does, in having a standing Rule to live by? And why is Slavery so much condemn'd and strove against in one Case, and so highly applauded and held so necessary and so sacred in another? (76)

Like Masham, Astell inserts her own argument that women are human and therefore free into a famous philosopher's argument. A second, seemingly inconsequential way this influence manifests in Astell's writing is her use of sarcastic monikers or abbreviations to name the object of her criticism. Masham, for example, repeatedly refers to Norris as "Mr. N" in *Discourse* while Astell follows suit in *The Christian Religion* when she refers to Locke as, "Mr. L." Likewise, whereas Masham labeled Norris "the Great Asserter" in *Discourse*, Astell referred to Locke as "that Learned Paraphrast" in her preface to *Reflections*. Such sarcastic labels signal both authors's entry into the genre of public dispute.

A third, related way in which Astell follows Masham's stylistic lead concerns the question of scriptural authority, a particularly fraught subject for female polemicists as shall be touched upon in the dissertation conclusion. Halfway through *Discourse*, Masham calls into question Norris's exegetical authority:

But Mr. N. pretends that there are places of Scripture, besides that of his Text, which make good his Opinion. Scripture-Authority, is that to which Reason may falsely refer itself: But it were to be wished that it were appeal'd to with more Care and Consideration than it often is; and that Men would be presently because perhaps they are persuaded their Opinions are Right, back them with any Text of Scripture that they can make Chime to them, tho' they be very little, or not at all to the Purpose. (84)

Here, Masham conflates Norris's "Scripture-Authority" with mere "Opinion." Compare this move to the following passage from Astell's preface to *Reflections*: "But Scripture is not always on their side who make parade of it, and thro' their skill in Languages and the Tricks of the Schools, wrests it from its genuine sense to their own Inventions . . ." (74). Though each author's intentions and politics were different, each succeeds, like Agrippa did over one hundred years previously, in destabilizing mainstream (male) exegetical authority. It could be argued that Astell was merely employing generic conventions of written political debate that she picked up by reading various political tracts. It is likely, however, that Masham's critique of Letters influenced her both theoretically and stylistically.

Theoretically, I see Masham's charge of enthusiasm as spurring Astell to defend her women's academy on solid, philosophical grounds, thus debunking the notion that she was somehow carried away by Norris's quietism and his extremism to promote "nunneries." Astell is careful to point out that her school is not a nunnery and her emphasis on tranquility and the regulation of the passions lends a sober, utilitarian aspect to her proposal. Stylistically, we see Astell shifting at the end of the second *Serious Proposal* into a defensive, sarcastic stance as she calls her detractors "Pervers Opposers" of her plan (182). For the first time, we see Astell lashing out with irony before employing veiled ad hominem attacks (following Masham) and copious animadversions. I see Astell strengthening her philosophical argument and learning to defend it ascerbically (even bitterly) in part as a result of Masham's critiques. In my view Astell had the

capacity to respond as an intellectual equal to Masham's criticism as was expected of her as a public, intellectual figure in a male dominated arena

Conclusion

Astell was angered by Locke's admission in *The Paraphrase* that women are naturally inferior to men. Her phrase, "I know not whether or no women are allowed to have souls" is characteristic of the kind of sarcasm she employs throughout this text (113). It also offers a cue to the reader that her argument concerning women's exclusion from injustice within the marriage contract is grounded in the use by classic contract theorists that women both are, and are not, coequal in the state of nature. Astell employs the contractarian concepts of consent, self-preservation, and slavery/tyranny to show that women are juridical slaves, a claim that formerly was viewed as counter to her political/theoretical orientation. When we read the claims Astell's makes within *Reflections* in light of her theory of feminine self-esteem, however, the theoretical inconsistency disappears.

What is left is Astell's uncomfortable grappling with the radical implications of her theory when applied to women's condition in marriage. Astell stresses the "violence" of courtship, as in the violent pull of passionate love, and the imperative of finding a husband who has control over his passions since he will eventually obtain absolute power over his wife. A woman must therefore choose wisely, Astell argues, because once she is married "she has by much the harder bargain" (101). Finally, I emphasized that the dialogic aspect of Astell's feminism emphasizes her sympathetic attunement to the cause

of female dissenters as well as the action-implicated nature of her polemic when applied to a new sets of circumstance.

Dissertation Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this dissertation, Mary Astell was preoccupied with order, both in an epistemological sense of promoting tranquility and in a political sense of privileging order in the state. Paradoxically, her emphasis on order with respect to regulating the passions lent a revolutionary tenor to her theory of feminine self-esteem (especially in *Reflections*) since she co-opted Descartes's moral theory with its implicit emphasis on self-mastery, self-possession and self-esteem. Thus, I have shown that Astell's goal of teaching women to gain control over passions and emotions is consistent with both conservative *and* liberal impulses within her early feminist pamphlets. Further, the emphasis Astell places on regulating the passions for the purpose of moral development and self-preservation is distinctly feminist and constitutes a critique of the use of natural law by contractarian theorists, like Locke, who carried patriarchal political theory into the contractual state of marriage. Carole Pateman's nuanced definition of disorder, which was a preoccupation for rationalists like Astell, clarifies the complexity with which she broached this fraught topic. The first and most obvious meaning of disorder, Pateman observes, connotes "a rowdy demonstration, a tumultuous assembly, a riot, a breakdown of law and order" (18). This connotation is reminiscent of the mob of women who descended onto Parliament throughout the English Civil War years and with whom Astell held an ambiguous -- at once sympathetic and critical -- relationship. Such

women represented a threat to political order as well as her ideal of feminine composure. She described such women in her pamphlet, *Moderation Truly Stated* as “Intriguing and Politick Ladies . . . on the Factious side” (qtd. in Zook 111). A second kind of disorder, however, concerns “an internal malfunction of an individual, as when we speak of a disordered imagination or a disorder of the stomach or intestines” (Pateman 18). This second connotation of the word parallels Astell’s use of Descartes’s moral theory for her feminist purposes. For, as Princess Elisabeth expressed to Descartes in her critique of his neo-Stoicism, her feminine body was constitutionally weaker than his, thus calling into question the logic of his mind/body dualism. Princess Elisabeth’s encouragement of a more body-friendly framework in turn influenced Astell to envision a way of rendering women’s inherent disorder unproblematic.

I have shown that Astell’s body-friendly framework privileges the feminine will as independent, though influenced by the senses and bodily needs and conditions. I have argued that Astell, like Princess Elisabeth before her, was attuned to Renaissance misogynist prejudice, including the notion that women are less able to control their passionate, emotional natures. Thus she conceptualized her theory of self-esteem to take into account both intellectual and bodily coequality. Though Astell never directly commented upon whether or not women are inferior to men in a bodily sense, she criticized the notion that superior force/might may be considered a grant of power, which is a Hobbesian idea that Locke illogically adopted with respect to women in his version of the marriage contract. By contrast, Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) announced women’s inferiority based on a weaker constitution:

“women’s apparent inferiority with respect to bodily strength, must render them, in some degree, dependent on men in the various relations of life” (11). Though the word “apparent” in the above passage qualifies Wollstonecraft’s claim, Astell, in my view, answers the Renaissance prejudice concerning women’s disordered bodies in an unequivocal manner; women, she argues, can be taught to change their apparently weaker natures.

I have further argued in this dissertation that Astell’s early feminist framework contains an implicit, action-implicated emphasis despite that she never mentions the word divorce. By linking Astell’s epistemological conception of liberty with Mitton’s idea that the commonwealth model of marriage should constitute a safe haven for families where liberty is paramount, I demonstrate that Astell’s early feminist theory is aligned with radical epistemologies, even when she makes efforts to back paddle from such assertions. The action-implicated nature of her early feminism, I pointed out, can be seen in the anonymously authored petition to Parliament in the early eighteenth-century entitled, *The Hardships of the English Laws Concerning Wives*. This petition, I have shown, was influenced by Astell’s argument for the reform of English marital law. Furthermore, the anonymous author of this petition calls attention in realistic terms to the kind of tyranny Astell refers to as a grave possibility for all wives. In this sense, her feminism is not effete or irrelevant to modern feminisms, which exist fundamentally to improve the conditions of women’s material lives within misogynist and prejudicial contexts.

My close analysis of Astell’s treatment of the passions vis-à-vis the development of her early feminism has been presented, in part, to move away from the notion that her

feminist thinking is simplistic and essentially irrelevant to modern incarnations of feminism, a sort of curiosity; whereby, “to the present, action-oriented age, Astell’s decision to contemplate abstract Truth rather than to try to change the material conditions of women’s lives seems both passive and effete” (Perry 97). Furthermore, the notion that Astell’s feminism is purely rationalist needs to be revised. For example, in a recent article, Cynthia Bryson characterizes Astell’s relationship to Cartesianism in purely dualistic terms as “grounded on her understanding of Cartesian dualism . . . Astell simply wants each woman to move beyond her designation as ‘female’ to non-gendered reasoning and pure rationality in a disembodied ‘self’” (55). This notion harkens back to scholarship in the late 1980s, most notably by Catherine Gallagher, who argued that Astell prefigured radical (chiefly American) strands of second wave feminism in her denial of bodily difference, since, as Gallagher claims, Astell located women’s equality strictly in the Cartesian cogito:

many seventeenth-century writers were inspired by Descartes’s dualism to assert their intellectual equality with men; for if, as Descartes argued, mind has no extension, then it also has no gender. In Astell’s system of thought, then, the male monopoly on knowledge was revoked, not through the matter-bound perspectivalism that attracted Cavendish, but through the creation of matterless substance identical with the subject, neither body nor soul, but Mind. (34)

Following Astell’s own textual cues, I have shown that her conception of women’s equality was far more complex than previously conceived. Further, it feels distinctly incongruent to associate Mary Astell’s early feminism with such radical American feminist thinkers as Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, and Susan Brownmiller. The disconnect is simply too great. However, when we bring Astell’s attunement to the body

into the framework of her theory of feminine self-esteem, new and more apt comparisons open up, not the least of which concerns the Enlightenment-friendly characterization of Astell's feminism vis-à-vis Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Similarities concerning the universalization of feminine virtues, the reform of women's education, the importance of rationalism, and the symbolic slavery of women in marriage, to name a few, exist within these texts and merit further exploration. Further, this dissertation has pointed to comparisons between Miltonic and Astellian conceptions of the companionate marriage, a comparison that merits much closer study.

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