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An Analysis of Early Modern Philosopher Mary Astell and a Critique of the Western Canon

The Western canon represents academia's standing foundation of valuable classic literature, music, philosophy, and works of art. The canon is made up of works that have been deemed noteworthy and essential to the academic in western culture and have undeniably influenced a great majority of contemporary works. Philosopher Alfred Whitehead sums this idea up by claiming that the safest generalization to be made about western philosophy is how it "...consists of a series of footnotes to Plato." What gets left out of Whitehead's quote is that the works of this series will be written by men and for men,¹ with perhaps the rare exception of mere tokenism as a response to the feminist's criticism of the exclusion and omission of women.

The history of philosophy has rested on the idea that there are characteristics that make one human, such as capacity for reason or justice, which are also characteristics associated with masculinity. To be a "man of reason," one needs to preserve masculinity and overcome femininity. The "feminine" traits that have been declared, by men, as being overly emotional, irrational, and unreliable.² Because of this, women have been subject to being seen as outsiders and incapable of philosophical inquiry since antiquity. Yet history embraces two fundamental concepts: evidence and interpretation.³ The issues of the present influence what the historian becomes concerned with in the past as well as what counts as evidence and interpretation. Today's standard course in early modern philosophy which focuses on a canonical framework falsely represents history and misinforms its audience that only men were philosophers.⁴

¹ On, Bat-Ami Bar, editor. *Modern Engendering: Critical Feminist Readings in Modern Western Philosophy*. NetLibrary, Inc., 1999. p. xii.

² Weiss, Penny A., and Alice Sowaal, editors. *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell*. Penn State Press, 2016.

³ Frith, Valerie, editor. *Women & History: Voices of Early Modern England*. Irwin Publishing, 1997. p. xvii.

⁴ Atherton, Margaret, editor. *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*. Access and Diversity, Crane Library, University of British Columbia, 2013. p. 1.

In an attempt to alter the representation of women in the history of philosophy I will be investigating philosopher Mary Astell (1666-1731), who shares these concerns towards scholarly history, education, and disregard for women. I will look into her philosophical publications, highlight her Cartesian mode of thought, and explain her theories on educating women. I will also be analyzing the social psychological need for representation and social constructivism with how Astell's affinity towards the education of women by women is a historical example predating models of identity stabilized in representation theories. In doing so, I also wish to bring to light the historical trend of women philosophers advocating for not only their right to education, but also their right to an education that is representative of their identity.

Mary Astell was born into a family of merchants in 1666, making her even more of an anomaly in her time due to the fact that many of the other educated women partaking in philosophical inquiry during this period were of the nobility. Still, she was able to find a place in various philosophical, religious, and political discourse and published letters and pamphlets, as well as four books: *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II* (1694, 1697), *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695), *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), and *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter Of the Church of England* (1705).⁵

Mary Astell is most known today because of the feminist nature of her writing and concepts of women's rights and autonomy that were quite ahead of her time. Astell recognized the exclusion of women's voices in the seventeenth-century, commenting on the control men have over the canon by explaining: "Histories are writ by them, they recount each other's great Exploits, and have always done so."⁶ In her first book, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Astell

⁵ Sowaal, Alice, "Mary Astell", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

⁶ Perry, Ruth, editor. *The Celebrated Mary Astell: Early English Feminist*. University of Chicago Press, 1986. p. 1.

argues for the necessity of women's education. This argument and her feminism are rooted in a Cartesian concept of soul and body dualism. Under Descartes' theory, the soul and the body are separate but "commingled," and the soul will be free of its embodiment after death; but Astell describes how sex is attached to the body and not the soul. Because of this, women and men share in a human essence which is identical and equal.⁷ She continues in the adoption and adaptation of Descartes' epistemology, starting from a premise "clearly and distinctly" known and making conclusions through deduction.⁸ Astell finds it ridiculous to have a concept of differing ability to reason due to sex; the thought "that a Man is Wiser than a Woman merely because he is a Man!" is preposterous.⁹ As mentioned above, it is common in this time period to assert that rationality is masculine and that irrationality is of the passions and feminine. She links rationality to the human essence and credits the sources of error, in relation to true knowledge, to the embodied nature and the senses.¹⁰ This theorizing done in the seventeenth century by philosopher Mary Astell showcases how the critics who denote gender inequality of the past as a historical oddity disregard the other historical oddity— those women, who despite their place in the social construct of being "less than," recognized their own worth and the worth of other women, predicting feminist ideology today. Rather than propounding the "historical oddity" of sexism, why not question why the male philosophers of these times, who are still today considered as the most wise thinkers, were not able to predict or conceptualize the same ideas of gender equality that women like Mary Astell and her female company had been able to?

⁷ Astell, Mary. *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Parts 1 and 2. Edited by Patricia Springborg, Pickering & Chatto, 1997. pp. 52-53.

⁸ Astell, SP II, pp. 149-53.

⁹ Astell, Mary. *The Christian Religion: as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England*. W.B. for R. Wilkin, 1717. p. 71.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 154-55.

In *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, she advocates and insists women have a right to the life of the mind.¹¹ Her book also advocated for a school for women only, which I will go into detail on later. The book acknowledges the marginalization of the woman as well as to explain her right to a voice in the canon:

Were not a morning more advantageously spent at a Book than at a Looking-Glass, and an Evening in Meditation than in Gaming? Were not Pertinent and Ingenious Discourse more becoming in a visit, than Idle twattle and uncharitable Remarks? than a Nauseous repetition of a set of fine words which no body believes or cares for? And is not the fitting our selves to do Real Services to our Neighbors, a better expression of our Civility than the formal performance of a thousand ridiculous Ceremonies, which every one condemns and yet none has the courage to break thro? ¹²

This excerpt highlights the way Astell writes directly to her female readers, a rather rare occurrence for women of her time. She warns readers against falling into the status quo of mediocrity ascribed to women at the time and insists that women fulfill their potential as rational beings.

For Astell, in order to develop rationality, women must pursue a quality education, one that develops and protects their God-given rationality as opposed to a bad education, which robs one of the means to the end of honoring and serving God by failing to develop one's God-given rationality.¹³ In *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II*, Astell argues for an educational model that she thinks would be the most beneficial to women. For example, Astell asserts this good education should occur in a religious retreat and women-only institutions. The exclusion of men from these institutions, especially if equality of sex is what is desired, is justified by the widespread domination of men in the world and the fact that male-led education doesn't allow

¹¹ Perry, p. 99.

¹² Astell, SP I, p. 131.

¹³ Weiss, Sowaal, p. 78.

for the development of women's true nature.¹⁴ Women-only retreats also promote female bonding. Learning is a function of relation and as such, Astell's women-only proposal encourages and cultivates female friendship, "a Vertue [*sic*] which comprehends all the rest."¹⁵ During this time England had no tradition of women in academia or scholarship, at this time it was uncommon for a woman to be able to read or write in her native tongue. It seems irrational then to attempt to compare the wit and ability to reason between a man and a woman when gender was more relevant to the received education than social class, places like Cambridge were open to any man but closed to the woman of even the oldest noble families.¹⁶

Social constructivism was not a theory in Astell's time, but looking back, it aligns well with Astell's argument for the need for women to be taught by women. Social constructivism is a cognitive theory that says that understanding is determined by the experiences of the learner. It contrasts with the view that education involves a transfer of knowledge from an active teacher to a passive learner. Instead, this theory highlights the need for the learner to have an internal dialogue. Learning is critically dependent on the qualities of a collaborative process within an educational community, which is situation-specific and context-bound. However, learning must also be seen as more than the assimilation of new knowledge by the individual; it must also be a process through which learners are integrated into a knowledge community.¹⁷ A key factor in this theory is the way one's social experiences shapes their understanding. Psychologist Lev Vygotsky believed that learning could not be separated from its social context. Because every human develops in reference to culture, that culture provides a large basis for understanding that eventually becomes individual. This theory of learning aligns Astell's demand that women be

¹⁴ Ibid. 79

¹⁵ Astell, SP I, p. 98.

¹⁶ Perry, p. 104.

¹⁷ McInerney, Dennis M. Educational psychology: Constructing learning. Pearson Higher Education AU, 2013.

taught by women, because the culture that had heretofore constructed their opinions was one of men. She also makes claims in regard to how developing one's own critical-rational capacity allows a woman to reject social customs, or constructs, which her own reason tells her are wrong.¹⁸

Mary Astell's concept of sex being tied to the body rather than the soul seems to be another way she was ahead of her time. Although Astell did assert the need for gender-roles, she believed that human nature is unsexed and therefore equal, but she also makes claims in regard to how humans have roles based on their genders, for example a difference between the mother and the father.¹⁹ Some feminists critique Astell for the ambivalence of this idea. The claim of marriage being a Christian institution implies a godly sanction of marriage inequality and gender roles, as well as her explicate statement that wives ought to "submit themselves to their Husbands," based on biblical claims.²⁰ However, her defenders propose that her theology sees the marriage hierarchy as being one in which God made the wife subordinate to the husband, while also preserving the equality between men and women. She also points out how women are free outside of the bond of marriage.²¹

Mary Astell's relentless passion over the education and rights of women bore fruits within her own lifetime. In 1709, Astell began the Chelsea School, which was meant to handle thirty poor girls. She advanced the development of the school by convincing wealthy citizens to assist in subsidizing the costs, as well as aiding in the development of the curriculum and other planning necessities. The Chelsea charity girls were taught to read, write, knit, mark, cast

¹⁸ Weiss, Sowaal, p. 79.

¹⁹ Astell, CR, p. 296.

²⁰ Weiss, Sowaal, p. 81.

²¹ Ibid, 85.

accounts, and do plain work.²² While social reform of England focused heavily on the Christian education of the poor, the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge began charity schools and instructed Christian virtues.²³ These schools ultimately intended to “save” the poor from atheism, skepticism, and heresy. These schools also aided in the reformation of the labor force and was partially intended to keep the orphaned and poor from thievery.

Unlike the education model being advocated for by Astell, these schools were not meant to develop the life of mind or capacity of reason, but to provide enough basic literary skill for an apprenticeship as well as to instill Christian values. Astell criticized these schools for bending thoughts always to God. In communication with the Society, she reported the seven trustees governing the school are all ladies and gentlewomen, and the school is to always be under the direction of women. Upon noticing Astell’s interest in theological connections to knowledge and education, for example the God-given rationality she speaks so highly of, we may be surprised that her school did not put their main focus in godly devotion, but rather literacy and independence. I hypothesize that this was because of her Cartesian dualistic ontology and epistemology. She recognizes God as creating finite rationality in the soul and different modes of understanding, and part of our task as knowers is to understand our various cognitive capacities, recognize our limits, and constrain ourselves therein.²⁴ Astell sees purpose in preparing the soul for the afterlife as well as assisting others in perfecting their soul as a service to God; through education a woman gains knowledge and has “very great use of it, not only in the Conduct of her own Soul but in the management of her family...Education of Children is a most necessary

²² Perry, p. 233.

²³ Ibid, 233

²⁴ Astell, SP II, pp. 146-152.

Employment...”²⁵ She sees godly devotion as encompassing a good education because by doing so one is developing their God-given rationality.

Despite the misleading drift of the Western canon, there were brilliant female thinkers throughout the history of philosophy. Telling only a single story of something that has so much depth, history, and culture can come with unintended consequences, for example, the exclusion of marginalized people from the discipline of philosophy as well as the perpetuation of “othering.” Not only does the exclusion of women perpetuate a false history of philosophy, it also perpetuates the underrepresentation of women pursuing philosophy as a career in comparison to men. History is a continuum of ever-changing interpretations, and breaking from tradition may seem to imply breaking away from distinctively philosophical questions entirely, which is why reevaluation and inclusion of the canon shouldn’t be confused with a desire to take down and remove the brilliant minds of modernity, like Kant, Spinoza, or Descartes for example. As referenced multiple times, Mary Astell was often inspired by Descartes and he certainly was a significant influence on her ideas. Mary Astell is one of the many voices who deserves to be studied and discussed just as much as any other male philosopher, if for no other reason than her early foreshadowing of social constructivism in her educational theory. Her radical ideas exemplify how she was capable of reason and advocated for the other women whom she knew were also capable. This is an example of the way philosophy can avoid telling a single story and recover forgotten voices of history without disregarding the legacies like Cartesianism.

²⁵ Astell, SP II, p. 202.

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