

## Chapter I

# “Dreading to Engage Her”: The Critical Reception of Mary Astell

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Let me obscured be, & never known  
Or pointed at about the Town,  
Short winded Fame shall not transmit  
My name, that the next Age may censure it:  
If I write sense no matter what they say,  
Whither they call it dull, or pay  
A rev<sup>r</sup>ence such as Virgil claims,  
Their breath's infectious, I have higher aims.  
“Ambition”

When Mary Astell presented a copy of her poems to Archbishop Sancroft, she wrote, in an accompanying dedicatory letter, that it “was not without pain and reluctance” that she broke off from what she called her “beloved obscurity.”<sup>1</sup> In writing of Astell in his *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* of 1752, George Ballard would transform Astell’s fondness for “obscurity” into a recurring theme in his account of her life. Astell, according to Ballard, expressed “modesty” in the publication of all of her works, being, as he writes, “extremely fond” of that “obscurity” which “she courted and doted on beyond all earthly blessings.” Her only ambition was, Ballard writes (citing from Astell’s own preface to *Letters Concerning the Love of God*), “to slide gently through the world without so much as being seen or taken notice of.” As Ballard would have it, without the “restless curiosity” of others, Astell would have maintained the obscurity that she desperately cultivated and always desired.<sup>2</sup> Ballard, as Margaret Ezell has written, may have been more “didactic” than “objective,” but it was Astell herself who asserted the wish to “most industriously shun a *great Reputation*,” declaring herself unwilling to receive praise “from any but an infallible Judge.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago, 1986), 405, 400.

<sup>2</sup> George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*, ed. Ruth Perry (Detroit, 1985), 383. Astell, according to Ballard, displayed the same reluctance for publicity in the publication of her *Moderation Truly Stated*: “In spite of all the arts she used to conceal herself, the learned soon discovered her to be the author, and accordingly gave her the applause due to her merit,” 386.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret J.M. Ezell, *Writing Women’s Literary History* (Baltimore, 1996), 79; Mary Astell and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (London, 1695), 4.

In the *Memoirs*, the emphasis upon Astell's efforts for self-concealment emerges most clearly in Ballard's rendering of the illness of the final years of her life. Astell, Ballard writes, "concealed" her breast cancer "in such a way that the few of even her most intimate acquaintances knew anything of the matter."<sup>4</sup> In her last days, "her thoughts ... fixed upon God and eternity," Astell left instructions that "no company might be permitted to come to her." She would not, Ballard remarks in a tone perhaps more appropriate to the genre of hagiography, "be disturbed in the last moments of her divine contemplations."<sup>5</sup> As one contemporary put it, Astell's desire for concealment was so great that in her final years, ending in her death in 1731, she simply "withdrew into herself."<sup>6</sup>

Ballard's description of Astell's propensities for obscurity emerges as a biographical trope, and also, from about the time when the *Memoirs* were published, a historiographical principle that governed the reception of her work.<sup>7</sup> That, as Ruth Perry writes, no woman "picked up where Astell left off," and that she was "forgotten so quickly," was not simply a function of the proclivities for withdrawal and obscurity emphasized in Ballard's account.<sup>8</sup> Astell herself observes in *Some Reflections upon Marriage* that it is the "Subtilty" of men which both "advances them to the Post of Honour," and also "gets them a Name," conveying it "down to Posterity." It is men, Astell continues, who "dispute for Truth as well as Men who argue against it; histories are writ by them, they recount each others great Exploits, and have always done so."<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, Astell's propensity for self-concealment, or what Elisa New calls (in a different context) "feminist invisibility," would lend itself to the reception that would await her work in a tradition of male historians who were interested, in Astell's own words, only in "each others great Exploits."<sup>10</sup>

As Florence Smith relates in her 1916 monograph on Astell, Ballard's "difficulty in gathering material" for the biography in 1752 would imply that Astell's reputation, by then, already "had died."<sup>11</sup> Astell was, of course, not unknown during her lifetime—especially for her advocacy in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* of a philosophical and theological retreat for women. Swift's *Tatler* essay of 1709 points to the irony that though "Madonella," his sardonic figure for Astell, had argued for

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4 In Ballard's account, the Reverend Mr Johnson, "a gentleman very eminent for his skill in surgery," performed the required operation, but, at Astell's behest, only "in the most private manner possible" (391). For the full account in Ballard of Astell's mastectomy, see *Memoirs of Several Ladies*, 391–92.

5 Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies*, 392.

6 Cited in Florence M. Smith, *Mary Astell* (New York, 1916), 162.

7 Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies*, 391.

8 Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 330.

9 Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage* (London, 1706), 88. Astell would echo this sentiment in *The Christian Religion as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England* (London, 1705) where she writes that since men are "the historians, they seldom condescend to record the great and good actions of women," 202.

10 See Elisa New, "Feminist Invisibility: The Examples of Anne Bradstreet and Anne Hutchinson," *Common Knowledge* 2.1 (1993): 99. For a discussion of early modern women and the writing of history, see D.R. Woolf, "A Feminine Past? Gender, Genre, and Historical Knowledge in England," *American Historical Review* 102 (1997): 645–79, as well as Devoney Looser, *British Women Writers and the Writing of History: 1670–1820* (Baltimore, 2000).

11 Smith, *Mary Astell*, 34.

feminine “Solitude,” her proposal “had made more Noise in the world” than she intended.<sup>12</sup> Notwithstanding Astell’s influence upon her immediate contemporaries, Elizabeth Elstob, in a letter to Ballard after the publication of the *Memoirs*, could offer only her consolation on the fate of the volume commemorating the writings and skill of “learned Ladies”:

I am extremely sorry to hear of the disappointments you have met with ... This is not an Age to hope for any encouragement to Learning of any kind. For your part I am sorry to tell you the choice you have made for the Honour of the Females was the wrongest subject you could pitch upon.<sup>13</sup>

The subject of “learned ladies,” not least of all Astell, was not, and would not be, a popular one for generations. Astell’s expressed desire for obscurity was in the end fulfilled, not out of deference to her own Christian inclinations, but by a historiographical tradition that often overlooked her presence. It was not Ballard’s sympathetic treatment of Astell that set the tone for her early reception; rather, it was Bishop Francis Atterbury’s remark to George Smalridge, written after the bishop had dined—unsatisfactorily—with Astell. Objecting to Astell having been, in their sole meeting, “a little offensive and shocking in her expressions,” Atterbury concluded: “I dread to engage her.”<sup>14</sup> Astell’s manner was shocking to the Bishop; the refusal to engage with her work, though not the norm during her life, characterized Astell’s reception, or rather her relative obscurity, for the next 150 years.<sup>15</sup>

The impetus for Astell’s twentieth-century revival began with Smith’s monograph on Astell.<sup>16</sup> The revival was informed (and continued to be, in various ways, through much of the twentieth century) by the principles of what Devoney Looser has called “herstorical method.” Herstorical method focuses upon constructing “female-centered accounts of the past,” and emphasizes, in the context of work on Astell, the ways in which she anticipated more contemporary feminist educational and social agendas.<sup>17</sup> Smith provides a characteristic version of this approach in her affirmation that “the modern viewpoint” reveals the “basic falsity” of Astell’s positions; thus her political and theological pamphlets—evidencing her allegiance to Tory politics and High Church theology—passed into justifiable “oblivion.” The educational pamphlets, however, held out more “interest” for Smith, because of the way in which

<sup>12</sup> *The Tatler*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1987), 1:240.

<sup>13</sup> Cited by Smith, *Mary Astell*, 169–70.

<sup>14</sup> On Ballard’s attempt to protect Astell from Atterbury’s insinuations, see Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 218–19.

<sup>15</sup> For the details of Astell’s reputation and reception during her lifetime, see Smith, *Mary Astell*, 25–34.

<sup>16</sup> See also Karl D. Bulbring, “Mary Astell: An Advocate of Women’s Right Two Hundred Years Ago,” *The Journal of Education* (London, 1891): 199–203; Katherine S. Pattinson, “Mary Astell,” *Pall Mall Magazine* (June 1893): 133–40; and Harriet McIlquham, “Mary Astell: A Seventeenth Century Women’s Advocate,” *Westminster Review* 149.4 (1898): 440–49. Bulbring writes that those celebrating Mary Wollstonecraft for promoting women’s rights should rightfully mention her predecessor Astell; similarly, McIlquham cites Astell as a forerunner of Wollstonecraft and “a pioneer of the modern ‘Women’s Rights’ Movement” (445).

<sup>17</sup> Looser, *British Women Writers*, 1.

they anticipated contemporary models of education for women.<sup>18</sup> Some contemporary scholars, also reading Astell from within the context of a liberal tradition of rights, elaborate more sophisticated versions of Smith's perspective in which, for example, Astell's "conservative values" are seen as "delimitations" of an otherwise "proto-feminist agenda."<sup>19</sup> The implicit attribution of contradiction to Astell's thinking (between progressive educational ideals and conservative political values) may, however, simply register Astell's failure to fit neatly within the expectations produced by contemporary interpretive accounts.<sup>20</sup>

Recent innovations in Astell scholarship can be attributed to several factors—not all of them local to discussions about Astell herself. Indeed, general changes in feminist methodology and historiography have had dramatic implications for studies of early modern women writers in general, and Astell in particular. Looser, for example, departing from those earlier avatars of what she calls "herstory," appeals to contemporary feminists to "define 'history' more broadly," and to acknowledge that women writers "used historical material with widely diverging interests and results." Such an emphasis helps to reveal, Looser argues, the significance of women's contributions to the developments of the "long-eighteenth century," though rarely, she adds, "in the uncomplicated fore-motherly, and proto-feminist ways" that many had hoped.<sup>21</sup> Citing Elaine Hobby's assertion that "we find in the past what we look for" and "only come up with answers to questions we think to ask," Margaret Ezell has called, accordingly, for "a consideration of our historiography"—often based on Whig and evolutionary assumptions—and a reconsideration of those "patterns of inquiry which will determine the future direction of women's literary history."<sup>22</sup> Barbara Lewalski similarly writes that early modern women's writing has been "too narrowly contextualized—studied chiefly in relation to other women's texts, or to modern feminist theory."<sup>23</sup> Traditional feminist concerns may have, as Looser writes, engaged primarily with the works of ostensible "trailblazers," ignoring those texts anomalous to contemporary paradigms.<sup>24</sup> The changes over the past decades, however, have moved contemporary scholars away from

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Mary Astell*, 158, 35.

<sup>19</sup> See Catherine Sharrock, "De-ciphering Women and De-scribing Authority," in *Women, Writing, History: 1640–1740*, eds. Isobel Grundy and Susan Wiseman (Athens, GA, 1992), 122.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert Butterfield long ago identified this historiographical tendency (exemplified in Smith's work), describing what he calls the "whig interpretation of history" which comes to organize "the whole course of centuries upon what is really a directing principle of progress." Through "reference to the present day," historians classed historical figures into those "who furthered progress ... and those who tried to hinder it" (*The Whig Interpretation of History* [London, 1931], 101).

<sup>21</sup> Looser, *British Women Writers*, 2–3.

<sup>22</sup> Ezell, *Writing Women's Literary History*, 9, 12. Explaining the problem with precedent methodologies, Ezell writes: "By unconsciously permitting our perceptions to be shaped by unexamined ideologies, perhaps unwittingly carried over from certain privileged texts or theories, we may have infused the values and standards of those texts and theories in our constructions of the past" (7). Significantly, in Ezell's account, the figure of Astell functions as a means to question feminist literary histories presupposed upon the principle of continuity with present concerns (27). See Elaine Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing 1649–88* (Ann Arbor, 1989), 204.

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Looser, *British Women Writers*, 6; Ezell, *Writing Women's Literary History*, 23.

the narrowly contextualizing practices which characterized earlier generations of scholarship.<sup>25</sup>

Within Astell studies, the first critical advances were biographical and editorial, and only after that methodological. Ballard had already noted the diversity of Astell’s commitments in his *Memoirs*, emphasizing that she “made herself a complete mistress of everything she attempted to learn with the greatest ease imaginable.”<sup>26</sup> But it was not until Ruth Perry’s *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (1986) that the full range and details of Astell’s learning and commitments became available to Astell scholars. That Astell would write in many genres, to many audiences, was a symptom of her engagement with all aspects of the intellectual world she inhabited. Astell displayed, Perry writes, a “comfortable affection for other women and their gossip about court fashion,” while at the same time pursuing “relentless arguments about the Occasional Conformity Bill.” “She passed along recipes for medicinal potions one day,” Perry continues, “and carefully interpreted results of parliamentary elections the next.” In the diversity of her interests and commitments, Perry argues, Astell was “unlike any other intellectual of her time.”<sup>27</sup> The inclusive portrait of Astell that Perry revealed through biography, Bridget Hill achieved, the same year, with the publication of a broad selection of her writings in her *The First English Feminist*.<sup>28</sup> Patricia Springborg’s scholarly editions of the two parts of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, and later, in a separate volume, *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (along with Astell’s other political writings), foreground the extent to which Astell’s works were both part of an emergent proto-feminist canon, and also central to the development of early modern discourses of theology, philosophy, and history.<sup>29</sup> Astell’s appearance in the

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<sup>25</sup> Hobby’s *Virtue of Necessity* was groundbreaking in this regard in providing more thorough historical contextualization of women’s engagement with contemporary political and educational issues. For more recent work on women’s writing and politics in context, see *Women’s Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition*, ed. Hilda L. Smith (Cambridge, 1998), especially the introduction, 1–21.

<sup>26</sup> Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies*, 382.

<sup>27</sup> Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 327; Bridget Hill, *The First English Feminist* (London, 1986), in a biographical introduction to *Some Reflections*, also notes Astell’s diverse set of commitments. “She has been variously described,” Hill writes, “as Platonist, a Cartesian rationalist, a Lockean feminist, an English Femme Savante, and the ‘first major English feminist.’ If some of these labels are more relevant to her than others,” Hill asserts, “there is not one that, by itself, adequately describes her” (49). For a brief introduction to Astell’s life and works, see Jacqueline Broad’s entry on Mary Astell in *British Philosophers 1500–1799*, vol. 252 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, eds. Philip B. Dematteis and Peter Fosl (Detroit, 2002), 3–10. See also Jennie Batchelor’s essay on Astell in the *Literary Encyclopedia*, <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=168>.

<sup>28</sup> Hill excerpts from a wide range of Astell’s theological, political, and philosophical tracts, as well as some of her poetry. Hill’s work was anticipated, though on a more modest scale, by Moira Ferguson’s *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578–1799* (Bloomington, 1985), which includes a selection of Astell’s works.

<sup>29</sup> *Astell: Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge, 1996); Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I & II*, ed. Patricia Springborg (London, 1997). Hilda L. Smith’s *Reason’s Disciples: Seventeenth Century English Feminists* (Urbana, 1982) remains an early milestone in the consideration of seventeenth-century women. The publication of scholarly editions of Astell’s major works has continued with the publication of the Astell–Norris correspondence, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, eds. E. Derek Taylor and Melvyn New (Aldershot, 2005).

*Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (edited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in 1985) and the fifth edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (1986) would insure that Astell would not only be a name to be cited (as she may have been in previous generations), but an author of texts to be read by scholar and student alike.<sup>30</sup>

The current volume, indebted both to the recent methodological advances in women's studies, as well as to the biographical and textual work achieved by Perry, Hill, and Springborg follows the implicit imperative of Lewalski's volume by attending to Astell's works in the contexts in which they were articulated. The renewed significance of contexts in the works of feminist scholars like Hobby, Looser, and Ezell dovetails with the methodology of the Cambridge School of history—that is, the works of Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock. “Cambridge History” has attempted to correct what Pocock calls those “extra-historical” impulses which have lead, especially within early modern historiography, to the twin errors of “anachronism,” the “attribution to a past author of concepts which could not have been available to him,” and “prolepsis,” treating the author “as anticipating the formation of arguments in whose subsequent formation, the role of his text, if any, had yet to be fully demonstrated.”<sup>31</sup> As Skinner explains, the “mythology” of both “anachronism” and “prolepsis” emerges when historians are more “interested in the retrospective significance of a given episode than in its meaning for the agent at the time.”<sup>32</sup> For both Pocock and Skinner, the antidote for proleptic and anachronistic histories (sometimes manifesting themselves in the versions of “herstory” to which Looser calls attention) is an emphasis on the recovery of the linguistic or discursive contexts for particular utterances. As “texts are concerned with their own questions, and not with ours,” the readings of the Cambridge School are governed not by contemporary historiographical traditions, but by the questions—and contexts—to which individual authors respond.<sup>33</sup> With what might be called the second phase of Astell scholarship completed—that is, with the elaboration of Astell's life, and the publication of scholarly editions of her texts—the current volume participates in the task of elaborating Astell's works in their various contexts.

Virginia Woolf famously remarked upon the “deplorable” fact that “nothing is known about women before the eighteenth century.” Despairing, Woolf confesses,

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<sup>30</sup> On the politics of anthologies and their role in canon formation, see Ezell, *Writing Women's Literary History*, 39–65.

<sup>31</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, “Quentin Skinner: The History of Politics and the Politics of History,” *Common Knowledge* 10.3 (2004): 537. For Ezell's discussion of evolutionary models in feminist historiography, see *Writing Women's Literary History*, 21–30.

<sup>32</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge, 2002), 1:73. “For example,” Skinner writes, “it has often been suggested that, with Petrarch's ascent of Mount Ventoux, the age of the Renaissance dawned.” “Now this might,” Skinner continues, “in a romantic sort of way, be said to give us a true account of the significance of Petrarch's action and its interest for us. But no account under this description could ever be true of any action Petrarch intended, or hence of the meaning of his act” (73).

<sup>33</sup> Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 88. For Skinner's extensive response to critics who attack the very possibility of the recovery of authorial intention, see “A Reply to My Critics” in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, ed. James Tully (Princeton, 1988), 231–88. Similarly, Ezell, observing that early modern women's texts are “part of a dialogue,” recommends “approaches that would invite fresh questions about the past rather than silencing its answers” (*Writing Women's Literary History*, 65).

“I have no model in my mind to turn about this way and that.”<sup>34</sup> Following Pocock’s call to attend to “the patterns of polyvalence” sometimes present in an author’s work (what Peter Burke labels “contexts in the plural”), one might argue that there is not merely a need for a single “model,” as Woolf calls it, but for various *models* for the consideration of the writings of early modern women—especially the works of Astell.<sup>35</sup>

Astell wrote in a variety of distinctive genres: a chronological account of her writings and their genres provides a schematic sense of her various intellectual engagements. Such a narrative would begin in 1689 with the twenty-three-year-old Astell, the orphaned daughter of a Newcastle coal merchant, presenting the collection of her spiritual poetry to Sancroft (she had traveled alone to London in 1688). Residing in Chelsea, Astell cultivated friendships with the likes of Sancroft and Bishop (later Dean) Atterbury, as well as with the women who became her lifelong friends and patrons—including Lady Catherine Jones, Lady Elizabeth Hastings, Lady Ann Coventry, and Elizabeth Hutcheson. In 1693, she extended these connections by initiating a correspondence with the Malebranchian philosopher, John Norris. *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, the full Astell–Norris correspondence published in 1695, shows Astell delving into the controversy over Nicolas Malebranche’s occasionalist metaphysics as well as refining the distinction between divine and human love. For her occasionalist affinities—the belief in the exclusive efficacy of God as sole cause of all events in this world through direct intervention—and the ostensible religious “enthusiasm” it entailed, she was attacked by, among others, Lady Damaris Masham in her *Discourse Concerning the Love of God* in 1696.<sup>36</sup>

While in correspondence with Norris, Astell began to compose her *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* which, with its sequel *Part II* in 1697, articulated her program for women’s educational reform, bolstered (especially in *Part II*) with philosophical arguments from sources ranging from Descartes and Malebranche to the Port Royal school. Astell’s proposal for a “Religious Retirement” for women never materialized (though Ballard claims that Astell had collected £10,000 for the project); Astell did, however, go on to help found a charity school in Chelsea in 1709.<sup>37</sup> Although published anonymously, the tract would solidify her contemporary reputation, earning praise from the likes of John Evelyn in his *Numismata* (1697), and emulation from Daniel Defoe in his *Essay upon Projects* (1697), as well as inspiring a generation of young women writers, including Elstob, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and Lady Mary Chudleigh.<sup>38</sup> From the success of her considerations of educational reform, in

34 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London, 1967), 69.

35 “When a diversity of such languages is to be found in a given text,” Pocock writes (*Virtue, Commerce and History* [Cambridge, 1986]), “it may follow that a given utterance is capable of being intended and read, and so of performing, in more than one of them at the same time.” The author, Pocock continues, “may move among these patterns of polyvalence, employing and recombining them according to the measure of his capacity” (9); Peter Burke, “Context in Context,” *Common Knowledge* 8.1 (2002): 174.

36 *Letters* was also attacked by Daniel Whitby, *A Discourse of the Love of God* (London, 1697).

37 Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies*, 383; Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 231.

38 See Broad, *British Philosophers 1500–1799*, 7. Astell is considered to be the prototype for Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1747–48), as well as Valeria in Suzannah Centlivre’s *The Basset Table* (1705); her *Proposal* the model for Sarah Scott’s *Millenium Hall* (1750).

1700, Astell authored her *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, a defense of the Duchess of Mazarine (against the libelous attacks upon her character for alleged marital infidelities), and a formidable analysis of the asymmetries of contemporary courtship and marriage practices. Astell's advice in the tract that "it is not good for a woman to marry" reflects her own commitment to a life of devotion and service to God, as well as her hesitation to enter into a bond that would place her subject to what she calls a "Monarch for Life."<sup>39</sup>

In 1704, Astell turned to politics and history: her three works, *A Fair Way with the Dissenters*, *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War in the Kingdom*, and *Moderation Truly Stated* (responses to the works of Daniel Defoe, White Kennett, and James Owen respectively), elaborated her attack on Whigs and Dissenters, and in particular the practice of occasional conformity. In these texts, Astell outlines her Tory political perspective and her allegiance to a worldview that had its origin and authority in the figure of the "Royal Martyr," Charles I. From politics, the narrative would conclude, Astell turned back to her more youthful concerns of the *Letters*—that is, theology. Her penultimate work, *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England* (which, published first in 1705, was followed by her *Bart'lemy Fair* of 1709, an attack on the third Earl of Shaftesbury's *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm*) provides a systematic distillation of her mature theological views.

Such an account certainly serves a heuristic function, but the unequivocal categorization of Astell's works within different genres obscures the way in which her individual works themselves employ varied sets of vocabularies. In this collection, Springborg's observation that *Some Reflections* is as much about politics as it is about domestic relations becomes emblematic of Astell's work as a whole, in which varieties of vocabularies are invoked within individual texts.<sup>40</sup> The contributors to this volume demonstrate how Astell's different works each transcend the limitations of genre—requiring more than one Woolfian "model" to be adequately understood. For Astell, political, theological, and educational discourses (among others) continuously overlap and help to inform and re-define one another.

Given the emphasis on the plurality of contexts, the current volume includes the work of scholars from a variety of disciplines—literature, philosophy, and history. The turn towards the elaboration of different discourses does not, however, entail an abandonment of the concerns of early generations of Astell critics. To assert with Pocock the importance of discourses, or with Skinner the importance of "linguistic contexts," may, however, mean to turn away from a certain version of "herstory." Such a move entails looking at Astell as one of many (mostly masculine) agents, employing, and inflecting the languages of, for example, Cartesian philosophy, Anglican theology, or Tory politics. Yet to follow the imperative of Melinda Zook to integrate men's and women's studies, and to see the way in which Astell shared the concerns and reference-points of her male contemporaries, does not mean to ignore Astell's feminine (or feminist) voice.<sup>41</sup> Astell, when seen within the various

<sup>39</sup> Astell, *Reflections*, 88–89, 31.

<sup>40</sup> Springborg, introduction to *Astell: Political Writings*, xxviii.

<sup>41</sup> Melinda Zook, "Integrating Men's History into Women's History: A Proposition," *The History*

frameworks within which she wrote, will not be left to appear a mere man “in Petticoats” (a phrase Astell herself employs in objecting to the representation of women by contemporary historians).<sup>42</sup> Astell consistently foregrounds her concerns on gender, but those concerns, as the essays in this volume demonstrate, are always mediated through a manifold set of convictions.<sup>43</sup> The sub-title of this volume places “gender” as the middle term to emphasize that though Astell’s articulation of her conceptions of gender were central, they were always elaborated through the vocabularies which emerge from the dual and sometimes competing registers of “reason” and “faith.”

In the essays that open this volume, Sharon Achinstein and Hannah Smith focus on Astell’s conception of “faith,” demonstrating the ways in which Astell’s feminist commitments were in fact mediated by her developing theological commitments. In her “Mary Astell, Religion, and Feminism,” Achinstein writes that Astell’s theology provides a rich ground for feminist analysis. Achinstein shows that early modern scholars, writing within a liberal historiographical tradition, have often neglected the theological aspects of Astell’s works. While, as Achinstein argues, the separation of private and public achieved through liberal political theory and practice was to consign religion to the private realm, the triumph of the “feminist Astell” is that she disrupts the consignment of women to the domestic sphere. Placing Astell in dialogue with Hobbes, Locke, and Charles Davenant (among others), Achinstein demonstrates that Astell denies the fictional positing of the autonomous individual in the state of nature—upon which the relegation of women to the private sphere depended. Through an analysis of Astell’s *Some Reflections, Christian Religion* and the two parts of *A Serious Proposal*, Achinstein shows how Astell’s conceptions of feminist agency, passions, and virtue were presupposed upon a radical form of theological dependence which challenged the emerging perception of emancipation based on voluntarist notions. Through looking at Astell’s conceptions of materiality, personhood, and rationality, Achinstein argues that Astell’s works elaborate a feminist challenge to her contemporaries—though not one which provides an unequivocal precedent for contemporary feminists.

In her “Mary Astell and the Anglican Reformation of Manners in Late-Seventeenth-Century England,” Hannah Smith turns to the context of Anglican morality as a means of providing a re-reading of Astell’s *A Serious Proposal* of 1694. *A Serious*

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*Teacher* 34.1 (2002): 373–87.

<sup>42</sup> Astell, *Christian Religion*, 202.

<sup>43</sup> Catherine Gallagher’s “Embracing the Absolute: The Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England,” *Genders* 1.1 (1988): 24–39, stands as an early turning-point in Astell studies in affirming the inter-relation between what had been considered incommensurable commitments in Astell’s work. By coining the phrase “Tory Feminism” (in relation to a group of early modern women including Astell and Margaret Cavendish), Gallagher anticipates the work of some of the contributors to this volume by affirming that Astell’s work entails a hybrid of radical gender insights and right-wing Tory politics. Gallagher was herself, in some sense, anticipated by Joan K. Kinnaird in “Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism,” *Journal of British Studies* 19.1 (1979): 53–75, which elaborates Astell’s feminist languages in the context of traditions of conservative thought.

*Proposal* may have been conventionally viewed as an early argument for “female intellectualism” in an interpretive tradition which views the tract as part of the “first wave” of feminism. Smith, however, argues that for the tract to be fully understood it must be placed in the context of the primarily religious preoccupation with morality of the decades in which it was written. Smith thus places Astell not in the milieu of women writers on education such as Anna Maria van Schurman, Bathsua Makin, and Judith Drake, but in the company of Anglican predecessors such as Edward Chamberlayne, Clement Barksdale, George Hickee, and Richard Allestree. By detailing the late-century preoccupation with moral reform and the various Societies for the Reformation of Manners which then flourished, Smith shows *A Serious Proposal* to be a product of the contemporary concern with the vice and irreligion of Restoration society—part of the Anglican campaign for the reformation of manners. Astell, though complying with orthodox Anglican thought, would be subject to the ridicule and suspicion of the likes of Gilbert Burnet, Smith concludes, because of her emerging profile as a High Church zealot and Tory polemicist.

William Kolbrener, in his “Astell’s ‘Design of Friendship,’” shows the confluence between Astell’s early theological and political arguments. He argues that the metaphysical assumptions which underlie Astell’s anatomy of friendship in her contributions to the *Letters* would develop, in *A Serious Proposal, Part I* and later in *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, into categories that would help her to describe the social and political realities of latitudinarian England. Kolbrener demonstrates how the degraded realms of materiality, artifice, and prejudice associated in the *Letters* with desire for the creature would, in both *A Serious Proposal* and *Some Reflections*, come to characterize first the culture of masculine courtship and then latitudinarian orthodoxy in general. By contrast, authentic and substantial love, associated exclusively by Astell in the *Letters* with love for the Creator, manifests itself in the friendships enjoyed in the feminine retreat advocated in *A Serious Proposal*. In Kolbrener’s reading of the 1694 tract, Astell salvages friendship as both meaningful and theologically defensible through a rejection of the occasionalist metaphysics of the *Letters* and a return to the metaphysical assumptions of the Cambridge Platonists. In showing the parallel between the metaphysics articulated in Astell’s ‘Appendix’ to the *Letters* and those underlying her conception of feminine friendship in *A Serious Proposal*, Kolbrener gives weight to the speculations of Ruth Perry and Derek Taylor that, though published earlier, *A Serious Proposal* was actually composed after the bulk of the correspondence between Norris and Astell had taken place.

Kolbrener argues that the theological categories of *Letters* would come to inform Astell’s later work on courtship, friendship, and marriage in her criticism of latitudinarian culture. In his “Mary Astell and John Locke,” Mark Goldie emphasizes the importance of theology in Astell’s encounter with the works of John Locke. Against a dominant view in Astell studies, argued most forcefully by Patricia Springborg, that Astell’s work was motivated by an animus against Locke’s political thought, Goldie argues that Astell’s attack upon Locke was primarily philosophical and theological. By detailing the character and chronology of Locke’s early reputation (and demonstrating the centrality of Locke’s *Essay* and not the *Two Treatises* to his contemporary reception), Goldie contends that Astell’s arguments

entail an assault on Whigs and Dissenters—and do not anticipate modern feminist critiques of liberal democracy. Astell, in elaborating a politics described by Goldie as “Machiavellian Toryism,” may have been thinking about the works of Plato, Machiavelli, and More, but certainly not the Locke of the *Two Treatises*. When Astell does turn to Locke in her *Christian Religion*, the principal terms of the engagement with him are theological and moral, not political. Though not engaging extensively with Locke’s political tract, in the 1706 Preface to *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, Astell launches an (heretofore unacknowledged) attack on a different work of Locke’s, his posthumously published *Paraphrase and Notes on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*. Through re-assessing Locke’s early reputation, and refining our conception of Astell’s engagement with his works, Goldie argues that Astell’s idiosyncratic and complex Tory ideology was guided by theological concerns; when assailing Locke, Astell’s target was primarily his materialism and Socinianism rather than his politics.

In Goldie’s reading, Astell decidedly did not provide “feminism’s first retort to liberal modernity.” In her “Mary Astell’s Law of the Heart,” Corrinne Harol also turns to Astell’s engagement with Locke, attempting to recuperate aspects of “the modern or at least radical Astell.” By foregrounding the centrality of desire in the two parts of *A Serious Proposal*, Harol argues that Astell articulates a version of the subject in consonance with a different liberal tradition—one that would eventually manifest itself in the moral “perfectionism” of a later tradition of “positive liberalism.” In showing how Astell’s conception of desire emerges out of the tensions between the Anglican concepts of “laws written into the heart” and Locke’s notions of subjectivity from the *Essay*, Harol argues that desire is the key to spirituality for Astell. In contrast to Locke, where the progressive revisions of the *Essay* evoke an increasingly depraved conception of desire, Astell imagines desire as the only guarantor of moral goodness. Where Locke depicts desire as working in opposition to the moral faculty of understanding and therefore requiring suppression, Astell advocates the development of an “autonomous mind” where rationality and passion are not at odds, but rather united in the service of God. For Harol, it is surprisingly Locke who is figured as the “proponent of repression, and even the pseudo-idealist.” Astell, by contrast, “enmeshed in the realities of life in society,” holds out the promise, through the alignment of reason and desire, of the possibility of spiritual perfection.

While both Goldie and Harol outline the theological underpinnings of Astell’s political conceptions, in her “Religious Nonconformity and the Problem of Dissent in the Works of Aphra Behn and Mary Astell,” Melinda Zook focuses upon Astell’s tracts of the first decade of the eighteenth century to elaborate the parallels between Astell’s political conceptions and her perceptions of both gender and sexuality. In the process, Zook identifies an unexpected (and apparently unlikely) context for the political tracts of 1704. Aphra Behn, one of the Restoration theatre’s most prolific authors, who wrote before the Glorious Revolution and Act of Toleration in 1689, might seem to endorse views of marriage and sexuality diametrically opposed to those of Astell. Zook argues, however, that as an earlier “Tory feminist,” Behn—specifically her views on Dissenters—provides an important precedent for Astell’s thought. Behn and Astell not only both equate Dissenters with rebellion and chaos

(as did many Restoration royalists); they likewise represent dissent as a direct threat to both social and sexual orders. Astell's representations of Dissenters (including occasional conformists, latitudinarians, and Socinians) parallel Behn's earlier representations of the Puritan-Dissenter in plays such as *The City Heiress* and *The Roundheads*. By focusing on the "image of the hypocritical, ambitious, dissembling, canting, and often lustful Dissenter," Zook outlines the Tory ideology articulated by both Astell and Behn. In this reading, Astell, like Behn before her, linked the religious and political "enthusiasm" of Dissenters with a predatory sexuality. For Zook, Astell's conceptions of gender emerge as a *political* concern—a function of her distrust of dissenting politics which reveals its duplicity through its licentious sexuality.

Claire Pickard also shows the relationship between political concerns and gender in Astell's work, through focusing on the conception of agency in Astell's rarely discussed poetic *oeuvre*. In "'Great in Humilitie': Mary Astell's Poetry," Pickard delineates the relationship between literary, spiritual and political registers in the collection of manuscript poems presented to Sancroft in 1689. For Pickard, Astell's literary ambitions for glory are fulfilled through service, passivity, and even martyrdom. By constructing her own sense of personal ambition through the discourses associated with the Royal Martyr Charles I, Astell's poetry demonstrates that exclusion from the machinations of earthly power—and the possibility of what she calls in *Some Reflections* "Heroic Action"—serves as the necessary pre-requisite for the realization of spiritual ambition. Astell intimates, Pickard argues, that a specifically feminine martyrdom may in fact assure a heavenly reward even greater than that to be achieved by "famous Masculine Heroes." In Pickard's reading of the poems, gender, though an impediment to earthly power, becomes a means in Astell's quest to achieve "a Crown of Glory." The implicit argument of the poems, Pickard claims, anticipates the passivity and martyrdom advocated in the prose—as in *Some Reflections*, where Astell most vigorously argues for a non-material solution to the problems of gender inequality.

In "'Tis better that I endure': Mary Astell's Exclusion of Equity," Ann Van Sant explores another—hitherto unelaborated—context for Astell's major works: early modern property rights. Van Sant traces the emergence of equity from out of the framework of common law (in which the concept of equity remained undeveloped), and elaborates the legal, political, and theological vocabularies of equity contemporary with Astell's tracts. During the early modern period, the separate jurisdiction of equity served as a means of accommodating married women's property rights (before their legal recognition in the Married Women's Property Act of 1882). But Astell herself consistently aligns her thinking with the prescriptive power of law as ancient custom and against the exceptionality implied in equitable thinking. Van Sant thus explores the paradox that though Astell's tracts—in particular *Some Reflections*—elaborate injustices towards women in terms of "inequity," Astell resolutely ignores the ameliorative remedies offered by the rule of equity, deliberately locating both justice and equity solely in the divine. Astell's refusal to bring equity down to earth—into the practical context of marriage and domestic relations—can be attributed, according to Van Sant, to her political and theological principles. The ironic dismissal of Defoe in

her *A Fair Way with the Dissenters* and the appeal to obedience in *A Christian Religion* stand as Astell’s affirmation of obedience and authority against the lawlessness implied in the exceptionalism of equity—which was increasingly associated with dissent, non-conformity, and religious toleration.

The triptych of essays by Eileen O’Neill, Jacqueline Broad, and Derek Taylor, focusing more specifically on languages of “reason,” articulate the philosophical contexts for Astell’s work. In “Mary Astell on the Causation of Sensation,” O’Neill examines Astell’s arguments with Norris in *Letters Concerning the Love of God* in the framework of longstanding debates between Aristotelian naturalist philosophers, on the one hand, and theologians advocating occasionalism, on the other. O’Neill demonstrates how Astell’s philosophical arguments are dependent upon the philosophical discourses developed by contemporaries, as well as the older philosophical traditions that informed them. Thus O’Neill considers Astell’s debate with her contemporary Nicolas Malebranche on occasionalism in relation to Thomas Aquinas’s attack upon the occasionalism advocated by the Islamic theologian al-Ghazali. In elaborating Astell’s own position on occasionalism, and its ramifications for mind-body interaction, O’Neill identifies Astell’s stance with that of Descartes—whose concurrentist position about bodies as partial efficient causes of sensation she would come to emulate. From out of the earlier medieval debate, Astell appears as a figure opposing both Malebranche’s and Norris’s occasionalist rationalism and Locke’s materialistic empiricism—advocating instead something close to the “orthodox Cartesian position.”

O’Neill emphasizes the congruities between what she sees as Astell’s anti-occasionalist philosophical perspective and that of Descartes. In her “Astell, Cartesian Ethics, and the Critique of Custom” Jacqueline Broad focuses on the so-called tension between Astell’s conservative political commitments and her Cartesian philosophy. In Broad’s reading, these tensions disappear if we interpret Astell’s “Cartesian challenge to custom” according to an ethical rather than epistemological model of Cartesianism. In the second part of *A Serious Proposal*, Broad points out, Astell appeals to Descartes’s conception of ethics, and not solely to the Cartesian epistemology that figures so broadly in thinkers advocating what Jonathan Israel has called “radical enlightenment.” Broad shows how Astell’s appropriations of Cartesian philosophy are modeled upon those of Cambridge Platonists (such as Henry More) who also try to accommodate Cartesian rationalism within the context of Anglican practice and ethics. Acknowledging Astell’s primarily prudential aims—“her design to effect a moral reformation in women”—reveals the proper context for Astell’s engagement with Descartes. For Broad, a closer examination of Astell’s pursuit of Cartesian ethical ideals enables a more nuanced understanding of her feminist views in consonance with her conservative political ideals.

Continuing the focus upon Astell’s philosophical discourses, in “Are You Experienced?: Astell, Locke, and Education,” E. Derek Taylor also acknowledges Astell’s debt to Descartes, but in the service of a discussion of Astell’s attitudes towards pedagogy and education. Notwithstanding Astell’s concession to Descartes’s conception of the immateriality of reason, Astell’s own accommodations to pedagogy and sensationalist psychology would seem to reveal a surprising affinity to her

philosophical nemesis, John Locke. While Patricia Springborg has remarked that Astell makes “a surprising concession to the principles of a Lockean sensationalist psychology,” Taylor asks whether Astell was “implicitly a true empiricist, and of Locke’s party without knowing it?” Focusing on Astell’s arguments about education in works that span four decades—from *Letters* to *A Serious Proposal* to *Some Reflections* to *Christian Religion*—Taylor shows how Astell’s commitment to education gained its energies primarily from the educational theories of Descartes, Malebranche, and Norris, and not from an engagement with Locke’s work. Astell, Taylor argues, may concede that in the acquisition of truth “bodies matter.” Yet while Locke asserts that sensory perception is central to the acquisition of all human knowledge, Astell emphasizes an educational practice which at once acknowledges, but simultaneously helps to undo, the “prejudices of senses.” Taylor concludes that Locke’s sensationalist psychology was not, for Astell, ineluctable; Astell’s own program for educational reform for women, rescued from the senses, is based on an essentially rationalist account of learning ultimately deriving from Cartesian philosophy.

With the concluding essay, Hilda L. Smith’s “‘Cry up Liberty’: The Political Context for Mary Astell’s Feminism,” the volume returns to an analysis of the political vocabularies in Astell’s work to explicitly address the connection between Astell’s royalist politics and her feminist arguments. Writing against those who point to the ostensible contradiction of Astell’s positions, Smith shows that it was, in fact, Astell’s Tory politics that enabled her arguments on behalf of women. Situating Astell’s thought in relationship to the Protestant sectaries of the 1640s and 1650s, Smith shows how the contradiction of Puritan opposition to the King and their assertion of strong patriarchal authority within the family (a contradiction inherited by Astell’s dissenting contemporaries), provided an opening for Astell’s Tory defense of women. It is Astell’s royalism, Smith argues, that allows her to raise questions about women’s standing in society which, in fact, eluded the likes of Locke (who cited the Fifth Commandment in arguing equal respect for fathers and mothers, but asserted the authority of men in the domain of property rights). In Smith’s readings of *A Serious Proposal* and *Some Reflections*, Astell elaborates arguments in defense of women that go even further than those of Margaret Fell, whose *Women’s Speaking Justified* is often cited as a less ambiguous, and therefore more appropriate, antecedent for contemporary versions of feminism. Smith points out that Fell’s focus was on “future life,” while Astell, by unmasking the “partial universalism” of Civil War sectarian discourses (and their later Whig embodiment), provides a *practical* analysis and critique of the dynamics of the early modern family. Paradoxically, it is Astell more than sectaries, Quakers, or Locke who provides concrete arguments in defense of women in the context of early modern Britain.

Was Mary Astell, then, a proto-feminist? A feminist? For Smith, as for some of the other contributors to this volume, the answer is, unequivocally, yes. But the Mary Astell who emerges from Smith’s analysis is a feminist who perplexes the categories of contemporary feminism, and whose own arguments in defense of women were always complicated and—as Smith shows—in some sense energized, by her Tory political commitments. When discussing the early modern period, “women,” as Rachel Weil has noted, “is not always a useful term for political and social

categorization.”<sup>44</sup> The category, when unqualified, fails in relation to Astell because her defense of women emerges out of the totality of her complex and sometimes enigmatic set of commitments and convictions—whether theological, political, legal, or philosophical—which the contributors to this volume endeavor to elaborate.

While the first phase of the recovery of early modern women’s writings was in the mode of an archeological dig for “first feminists,” and the second a presentation of their texts to a modern audience, by the 2000s we are ready to re-embed Astell in the thicker contexts of the history and philosophy of her time. The feminists of the 1980s have succeeded triumphantly within a quarter century in persuading historians, philosophers, and literary scholars (who do not necessarily identify themselves with feminist studies) that they too cannot leave Astell out of their reckoning. The essays presented in this collection, following on the achievements of earlier scholars, show Astell to be not only a figure in the proto-feminist canon, but a major innovator in the long eighteenth century.

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<sup>44</sup> Rachel Weil, *Political Passions: Gender, the Family and Political Argument in England: 1680–1714* (Manchester, 1990), 4.