

This paper is published in *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Early Modern European Philosophy*, edited by Karen Detlefsen and Lisa Shapiro (New York and London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 493-505; DOI: 10.4324/9781315450001-43. **Please cite the published version.**

Mary Astell (1666–1731)

Jacqueline Broad

Mary Astell presents a curious Gestalt figure among early modern philosophers: perceived in one way, she appears to be a radical progressive; seen in another, she emerges as an evangelical conservative. This ambiguity is reflected in two dominant interpretations of her philosophical views concerning women, one feminist, the other religious. On the first reading, scholars have interpreted Astell as someone who uses Cartesian ideas for feminist ends, consisting (in this context) mainly in the higher education of women so that they might cultivate a certain autonomy or independence of judgment. Most recently, this interpretation has been put forward by myself (Broad 2015: ch. 9; 2019), Karen Detlefsen (2016, 2017a, 2017b), and Allairen Forbes (2019), but its origins can be traced back to Ruth Perry's biography of Astell as "An Early English Feminist" (1986) and Bridget Hill's work on Astell as "The First English Feminist" (1986). These scholars draw their evidence from Astell's writings addressed to women, namely her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II* (1694, 1697), *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), and *The Christian Religion, as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England* (1705). In her arguments for women's education, they maintain, Astell draws on Cartesian metaphysical, epistemological, and methodological principles to bolster her belief that women are naturally capable of attaining wisdom and virtue, provided that they receive the right kind of training and encouragement. On this view, Cartesianism provides strong philosophical support for Astell's practical plans

for an all-female academy of learning, a place where women can study the foundations of philosophy and religion. Detlefsen claims that these ideas are recognizably feminist insofar as they are intended to remedy an “ill” or a disadvantage that women suffer from compared to men (2017a: 205), namely, that they are kept in ignorance concerning their true interests. Astell regards women’s educational disadvantages as morally wrong insofar as their ignorance prevents them from attaining virtue and happiness and therefore salvation. Detlefsen adds that Astell’s feminism requires “some social change, namely that men allow women greater freedom to flourish as rational beings” (2016: 90). Her learned academy is designed to facilitate this social change by teaching women to think for themselves and to attain freedom from custom, prejudice, and authority (see Sowaal 2007: 231–4). For simplicity’s sake, I will call this the Feminist Reading of Astell’s works (though I allow that there might be other, alternative, feminist readings of her texts).

On the second dominant reading, scholars have taken a more historical-contextualist approach to Astell’s writings about women (e.g. Kinnaird 1979; Smith 2007). They proceed by situating Astell’s *Proposal* against the backdrop of an evangelical revival of the Anglican religion in the 1690s. Against this historical background, they claim, it is possible to see that Astell uses Cartesian philosophical ideas to serve a conservative agenda: namely, to call for the education of women for the sake of promoting the Anglican religion in England. In terms of its chief purpose, these scholars argue, the *Proposal* does not dramatically differ from other Anglican manuals for women in this period, such as Richard Allestree’s *Ladies Calling* (1673).

Lately, this reading has been defended by Hannah Smith (2007), but its origins trace back to Joan K. Kinnaird’s influential 1979 article on Astell’s “Conservative Contribution to

English Feminism.” Elements of this reading can also be found in the work of Perry (1986) and Patricia Springborg (2005). This interpretation poses a problem for the Feminist Reading because it suggests that Astell’s feminism is extremely limited or even illusory or merely apparent. On this reading, the true purpose of her academy is not to enable women to acquire independence of judgement, but rather (as Astell herself says) “to stock the Kingdom with pious and prudent Ladies,” ladies who will “pay a strict conformity to all the Precepts of their holy Mother the Church,” and “serve the ends of Piety and Charity” (Astell 2002: 76, 84, 89). Let’s call this the Conservative Reading.

While I do not endorse this second approach, I think it is more compelling than some scholars (including myself) have hitherto recognized. On closer analysis, the advocates of this interpretation suggest that any Feminist Reading we might give of Astell’s texts can be accounted for by a Conservative Reading: that is, that any account of Astell as someone who puts philosophy to the service of feminist ends can be better explained by a reading of her as someone who intends to bring about a reformation in female manners *for the sake of the Anglican Church*. Later I will spell out this interpretation in more detail, but for now it suffices to note that it operates much like an “argument to the best explanation.” Scholars who favor this interpretation begin with the same observational evidence that grounds the Feminist Reading, such as Astell’s value for women’s education, her emphasis on women’s rational souls (as distinct from their bodies), and her calls for women to improve their powers of reasoning. But it is implied that the Conservative Reading is the better explanation for the observed phenomena, because this interpretation is simpler, it explains more of the evidence, it fits with the historical context, and it does not make unnecessary and anachronistic assumptions about “feminism.” One implication of this approach is that it places the onus on

advocates of the Feminist Reading to point to unequivocal instances in which Astell's Cartesian philosophy serves feminist ends and not merely conservative Anglican goals. Let's call this the Conservative Challenge.

In this chapter, I propose to meet that challenge. First, I begin by spelling out those recent Feminist Readings of Astell and demonstrate how she employs certain Cartesian ideas—such as René Descartes's mind-body dualism and his method of judgement or “right thinking”—for apparent feminist ends. In the second part, I spell out the classic Conservative Reading of Astell's *Proposal* and explain why Kinnaird and Smith conclude that Astell's plans for social reform only appear to be radical, when they are really conservative. Here I highlight the fact that the Feminist Readings have so far fallen short of meeting the Conservative Challenge. In the third and final part, I aim to meet that challenge by drawing on newly discovered marginalia suggesting that Astell was highly critical of the Anglican reformers' ideas concerning women's intellectual abilities. This evidence takes the form of penciled notes in Anglican books from Astell's personal library in the Northamptonshire Record Office (NRO) in England, specifically the 1673 second impression of Allestree's *The Ladies Calling*, and the 1702 third edition of Abraham Woodhead, Obadiah Walker, and Allestree's *Paraphrase and Annotations upon all St. Paul's Epistles*.¹ My contention is that Astell *does* realize the radical feminist potential in Cartesian thought: she uses its critical tools to challenge the prejudicial attitudes of Anglican clerics toward women. More than this, her critique of the Anglican authors demonstrates that Astell intended to promote the intellectual independence of women and not simply transform them into orthodox Anglicans.

1. The Feminist Reading

In her *Proposal*, Astell asserts that any intellectual “incapacity” in women is the result of custom or convention rather than nature (Astell 2002: 59). In her opinion, women are not necessitated to folly and ignorance; any woman might exercise her freedom of will together with her understanding to discern the true and the good. The problem is that early modern women are actively discouraged from using their mental faculties; they are given only a rudimentary education and they are never taught to examine the foundations of their beliefs. According to Astell, “The cause ... of the defects we labour under, is, if not wholly, yet at least in the first place, to be ascribed to the mistakes of our Education; which like an Error in the first Concoction, spreads its ill Influence thro’ all our Lives” (2002: 60). This narrow education encourages an ignorance that is then perpetuated by custom and prejudice toward women’s intellectual capacities (see Sowaal 2007: 229). As a remedy, Astell proposes the establishment of her learned academy, a calm and quiet retreat in which women might “stand still and reflect on [their] own Minds,” and improve themselves in “Knowledge and true Religion” (2002: 68, 72).

Throughout the *Proposal*, Astell draws on Cartesian metaphysics to support her view that women are capable of improving their capacity for judgement, and she appeals to Cartesian epistemology and methodology to provide rules for thinking that facilitate that improvement. More specifically, Astell draws on Descartes’ dualist ideas concerning the mind (or soul) and body, and his conception of the self as a purely thinking thing. The mind and the body are regarded as distinct substances with different principal attributes; the body is “Extended Substance,” while the mind is “Spiritual or Thinking Substance,” body is “corruptible,” while the mind is “immaterial” and “immortal” (Astell 2002:183, 51). These ideas are further supported in Astell’s later work, *The Christian Religion*, when she presents an argument for

the real distinction between mind and body, appealing to the idea that we might conceive of the mind, a thinking thing, existing part from the body, an extended being (Astell 2013: §228). The upshot of her argument is that “because I and all other reasonable creatures think, therefore we are something that is not body” (§230). In her *Proposal*, Astell argues that a woman’s true perfection, like that of any human being, lies in her rational nature and not the perfection of her body (Astell 2002: 62). The soul or the “self” possesses a “particle of Divinity,” a “desire to advance and perfect its Being,” purposefully bestowed by God for the sake of her salvation (52–3, 62). These ideas ground Astell’s arguments for the view that women’s educational disadvantages are unjust or unwarranted, and also provide an ontological and epistemological basis for her plans for reform. Astell writes:

For, since God has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them? Since he has not denied us the faculty of Thinking, why shou’d we not (at least in gratitude to him) employ our Thoughts on himself, their noblest Object, and not unworthily bestow them on Trifles and Gaities and secular Affairs? Being the Soul was created for the contemplation of Truth, as well as for the fruition of Good, is it not as cruel and unjust to preclude Women from the knowledge of the one, as well as from the enjoyment of the other? (80)

In the second part of her *Proposal*, Astell demonstrates how Cartesian method might enable women to furnish their minds “with a stock of solid and useful Knowledge” (77–8); even without the benefit of a formal academy, they might learn to follow these rules for themselves. In various passages, she adapts the rules for thinking first put forward by Descartes in his *Discourse on the Method* (1637) and then reiterated in the works of Antoine Arnauld, Pierre Nicole, John Norris, and Nicolas Malebranche (see Astell 2002: 77–8, 166,

184, 189). In explaining her method, Astell begins by assuring her readers that they do not need to go beyond their own minds in order to learn it: they need only appeal to their inner “*Natural Logic*” (166). To discover truth, women do not need to “tumble over many Authors ... but may have it for enquiring after in [their] own Breasts” (167). An important first step is for them to lay aside all passion and prejudice in order to reason with clear ideas alone (167, 175); they must “determine nothing about those things of which we have not a Clear Idea, and as Distinct as the Nature of the Subject will permit” (172). In this way, she says, they will avoid “determining Dogmatically” about subjects they know little or nothing about (173). Next, they must avoid needless digressions (176), they must proceed methodically and deduce complex ideas from the most simple (177); then they must engage in a thorough examination of their subject before making a final judgement (177–8). Finally, they must not judge anything as true that is not clearly and evidently known to be so (178). In conditions of ignorance, they must suspend their judgement until they can attain clear ideas. If practical circumstances compel them to act, then they may do so on probable grounds, but they must all the while continue to search for truth (179).

It is not difficult to see how these Cartesian ideas might serve feminist ends. First, as Detlefsen points out, Descartes’ metaphysical ideas ground Astell’s feminist arguments for the intellectual equality of men and women; their equality is based on the fact that they have the same rational capacities and they “share an essential humanity” in terms of their rational souls (2016: 75). Second, Cartesian epistemology dictates that clear and certain knowledge is available to all human beings, regardless of their sex. This egalitarianism enables Astell to argue for the educability of women—the fact that they can be trained up to acquire greater moral and intellectual competence (see Sowaal 2007: 227, 235). Third, the Cartesian method

of her second *Proposal* teaches women *how* they might improve their natural capacities and think for themselves. Above all, Astell's rules for thinking are designed to help women attain the goal of *intellectual integrity*: that is, both freedom from prejudice and independence of judgement or the freedom to judge by the light of one's own reason (see Broad 2019: 811–12; see also Sowaal 2007: 231–4; Hickson 2017). Astell says:

Reason wills that we shou'd think again, and not form our Conclusions or fix our foot till we can honestly say, that we have without Prejudice or Prepossession view'd the matter in Debate on all sides, seen it in every light, have no bias to encline us either way, but are only determined by Truth it self, shining brightly in our eyes, and not permitting us to resist the force and Evidence it carries. (2002: 135)

On the Feminist Reading, such passages spell out the necessary conditions for women's autonomy (see Detlefsen 2016: 86–9, 2017: 28–31; Broad 2015: 170–83; Forbes 2019: 790, 796). To be autonomous agents, Astell suggests, women must recognize their beliefs and values as their own (they must take ownership of them) and make decisions consistent with their true selves or their essential natures. Cartesian method facilitates the realization of this autonomy by showing them how to reflect on their long-held beliefs and assumptions: it gives women the tools to step back and critically evaluate what they have taken for granted. Using this method enables them to overcome bad custom and “epistemic internalization injustice,” the internal assumption that they have defective reasoning abilities (Forbes 2019: 778; see also Sowaal 2007: 238). In short, the cultivation of intellectual integrity provides the necessary mindset for women to challenge oppressive gender norms and practices and to determine their life paths according to their own beliefs and values.

On this reading, while Astell's ideas may not fit with some modern-day conceptions of feminism, they qualify as feminist broadly speaking insofar as they contain the requisite descriptive, normative, and practical components of any theory worthy of the name. That is to say, when we examine Astell's writings, we find a descriptive account of women's disadvantages compared to men, a normative account of why those disadvantages should be rectified or removed, and a practical plan to bring about social reform (to some extent). It is therefore deemed appropriate to call her writings "feminist" on these grounds.

2. The Conservative Reading

Nevertheless, even advocates of the Feminist Reading concede that there are limitations to Astell's feminism. Detlefsen observes that "Cartesian epistemology should lead to radical intellectual independence, which in turn should lead to the radical challenging of customs. Yet, contrary to this logical trajectory, Astell espouses traditional social and political values" (2016: 80). Detlefsen highlights the fact that "Astell's purposes are resolutely theological" (78): Astell believes that "in this life, women ought to serve God" and her "call for excellent women's education ... is not only for a woman's sake but also a call meant to pay due heed to God" (78, 84). Astell's theology thus "precludes a more far-reaching feminism" and places limits on Astell's feminist plans for social reform (90).

The Conservative Reading takes these caveats even further, to assert that Astell's strategic purpose was never to argue for women's intellectual liberation but rather "to enable women to live as devout Anglicans" (Smith 2007: 32). Kinnaird allows that, upon first reading, Astell seemingly deserves her reputation as "the first major English feminist" (1979: 55). Kinnaird also observes that Astell draws on Cartesian philosophy to argue for the

intellectual equality of men and women, to celebrate the authority of the thinking self, and to propose a method for the improvement of women's minds (62). But then Kinnaird remarks that

the student of feminism ... must admit to considerable consternation on discovering what [Astell's] actual program was for the higher education of women. In *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, she makes no plea that the universities should admit women as well as men; she never argues that women have as much right as men to enter the professions and take part in the public life of the nation. Rather, she proposes simply the establishment of a 'Monastery' ... (1979: 64).

Kinnaird asks: how can someone who appears to be so radical and so progressive in terms of her theoretical feminist beliefs, turn out to be so conservative and so retrograde in terms of her practical feminism and her wider political vision? Her answer is that Astell's philosophical commitments make her appear to be more radical than she really is. Astell's "blend of Cartesian and Platonic principles" (59) makes her sound anti-authoritarian because in this period Cartesianism represented a significant challenge to ancient authority; it encouraged the systematic questioning of past prejudices and assumptions. But in Astell's case, Cartesian philosophy was not exploited for radical feminist ends—it served a deeply conservative socio-political agenda (1979: 66, 73). As a High-Church Tory, Astell was opposed to the toleration of separatist religious sects in England and wrote several pamphlets against the practice of "occasional conformity" in the Church (see Springborg 2005). As a devout Anglican, she was motivated to defend the Church's monopoly on religious worship against the threat of Protestant Dissent, a key concern in the 1690s.

Accordingly, Kinnaird regards Astell as part of “an aggressive Anglican resurgence” in this period (1979: 73), one that sought to recruit women as mothers and teachers of the young, to ensure the Church’s survival in succeeding generations. Astell’s plans for women’s education are in keeping with the Anglican program to educate both men and women in the Christian religion. Like many Anglicans of her time, she asserts that if mothers were better educated, then they might become “instruments of his [God’s] Glory, Blessings to this world, and capable of eternal Blessedness in that to come” (2002: 60–1). If women were given an “ingenious Education,” she says, then this

’twoul’d go a great way towards reclaiming the men; [because] great is the influence we have over them in their Childhood, in which time, if a Mother be discreet and knowing as well as devout, she has many opportunities of giving such a Form and Season to the tender Mind of the Child, as will shew its good effects thro’ all the stages of his Life.

(106)

More generally, Astell says that the great end of her institution will be “to revive the antient Spirit of Piety in the World, and to transmit it to succeeding Generations” (72).

For this reason, Kinnaird writes:

Mary Astell could not recognize the anti-authoritarian and pluralistic impulses inherent in the Cartesian doctrine of the thinking self. She preached the authority of the thinking self only to free women from the tyranny of ignorance and social frivolity that they might realize in their traditional sphere their full potential as wives, mothers, and teachers of the young (1979: 74).

On this reading, the true purpose of Astell’s academy is to rectify women’s educational disadvantages, but only so that they will be “fitter to promote a Reformation in others”

(Astell 2002: 105); that is, so they will be prepared to propagate the Anglican religion upon their return to wider society. Kinnaird concludes that Astell really promises “nothing more than a revival of Anglican nunneries” (1979: 65).

Along similar lines, Hannah Smith asserts that “What appears to be radical feminist zeal in Astell is in fact just a form of Anglican ‘social evangelism’” (Smith 2007: 41). In keeping with Kinnaird’s reading, Smith claims that Astell’s educational program was never about liberating the minds of individual women, but rather about training up female minds for the sake of preserving the Church’s pervasive influence in English society. Smith bolsters her case by showing how Astell’s ideas are remarkably similar to those of Anglican clerics of the time, such as Richard Allestree (1621/2–81), the author of the tremendously popular *Whole Duty of Man* (1658). Smith provides a useful comparison between Allestree’s *Ladies Calling* and the first part of Astell’s *Proposal* (Smith 2007: 37–8).

Like Astell, in his *Ladies Calling*, Allestree expresses a wish that Catholic nunneries had been reformed rather than abolished (1673: 157; Astell 2013: §379). “As for the religious order of Virgins,” he says, “in the present Roman Church, tho some, and those very great abuses have crept in; yet I think ‘twere to be wish’d, that those who suppress’d them in this Nation, had confin’d themselves within the bounds of a Reformation, by chusing rather to rectify and regulate, than abolish them” (“Of Virgins,” Allestree 1673: 3). With these sentiments, Allestree follows in the footsteps of several other Anglicans, namely Edward Chamberlayne, Clement Barksdale, and George Hickes (see Smith 2007: 36). Like these men, he was keen to promote orthodox Anglican beliefs and values in the female sex. In *The Ladies Calling*, Allestree’s chief design is to do women “a service” (to “rescue the whole Sex,” he says) by helping them overcome their educational disadvantages. Like Astell,

Allestree points to the fact that women “imbibe the common opinion” that they are incapable of aspiring to anything worthy or excellent (“The Preface,” n.p.). Out of charity, he proposes to acquaint them with their own Value, animate them to some higher thoughts of themselves; not to yield their Suffrage to those injurious Estimates the World hath made of them, and from a supposed Incapacity of Nobler things, to neglect the pursuit of them; from which God and Nature have no more precluded the Feminine, than the Masculine part of Mankind (“The Preface,” n.p.).

Like Astell, Allestree argues that women are spiritually equal to men and just as capable of attaining salvation. The “spiritual Essence, that ray of Divinity, owns no distinction of Sexes” and God has given “the feeblest Woman as large and capacious a Soul, as that of the greatest Heroe.” To attain excellence and dignity, women must no longer neglect their “nobler part” or “live as if they were all body,” but rather “make a juster estimate of their own worth” (“The Preface,” n.p.). Toward this end, women must be taught how to perfect the feminine virtues of modesty, meekness, compassion, affability, and piety.

With respect to fundamentals, Astell’s *Proposal* bears a close resemblance to Allestree’s *Ladies Calling*. This resemblance poses a problem for the Feminist Reading, because Anglican clerics such as Allestree were not in the business of promoting female autonomy and independence. While Allestree often takes a generous view of women’s abilities, he also points to biblical texts, such as 1 Timothy 2:11 (“Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection”), to assert “the inferiority of the woman in regard of the creation and first sin ... but also on the presumption that they needed instruction” (1673: 9). In his chapter “Of Meekness,” Allestree highlights the “natural imbecillity” of women “which renders them liable to seducement,” and also their passions which are “naturally the more impetuous” than

those of men (33, 39). As an antidote to their impetuosity, he recommends that women consult “sober guides” in order to understand “upon what grounds the Practice as well as Doctrin of our Church was founded” (34). He also describes “obedience to Superiors” as “a very happy imposition” on a woman’s will, given that God and nature have placed the sex “in a degree of inferiority to the other” (40). On the whole, it must be said, Allestree’s work is not directed toward women learning to think for themselves, for the sake of acquiring autonomous agency, but rather for the sake of adopting Anglican liturgical and devotional practices.

If we return to the Feminist Reading, we can now see that Astell’s emphasis on women’s rational souls, her ideal of the thinking self, and her method of judgement can be re-read as serving a purely conservative Anglican program like Allestree’s. On the Conservative Reading, Astell gives only a descriptive account of women’s *spiritual* disadvantages compared to men, a *religious-based* normative account of why those disadvantages should be rectified, and a practical plan to bring about a reformation of female manners in society, not for women’s own sakes but for the sake of maintaining the Anglican monopoly on worship. Smith concludes that “in the *Serious Proposal*, Astell appears more as the High Church moralist, reacting against contemporary mores, than as a ‘first feminist’” (Smith 2007: 32). On her reading, the descriptive, normative, and practical components of Astell’s theory only *appear* to be feminist; in reality, they are designed to turn women into good Anglicans.

At this point, the Conservatives might claim that their reading is the best explanation of the textual evidence. First, their explanatory hypothesis is simpler: it does not attribute radically progressive views to Astell, when she was clearly devoted to the High-Church Anglican cause. Second, the Conservatives’ hypothesis explains more of the evidence: it

explains why Astell's practical proposals for reform seem so "passive and effete," as Perry puts it (1986: 97), and it explains why Astell repeatedly emphasizes that women ought to use their reason "about the noblest objects, and in the business of greatest consequence, therefore in religion" (Astell 2013: §5). Third, there appears to be no reason to go beyond the Conservative Reading toward a Feminist one, when the historical and textual evidence supports a more circumspect approach, one that takes into account the striking similarities between Astell and the Anglican reformers. Consequently, the onus is on supporters of the Feminist Reading to show that Astell was devoted to the intellectual liberation of women for their own sakes, and not just for the Anglican cause. This is the Conservative Challenge I mentioned at the start.

3. Meeting the Conservative Challenge

To meet this challenge, I turn now to the handwritten marginalia in books in the King's Cliffe School Library in the Northamptonshire Record Office in England. Astell's books were most likely donated to this library by her friend Elizabeth Hutcheson, the executor of her will (see Perry 1986: 519, n.27). In 1744, Hutcheson joined Hester Gibbon and William Law in the English village of King's Cliffe, Northamptonshire, where Law established a charitable school for poor girls along with a library. Both E. Derek Taylor (2005–6) and Sarah Apetrei (2010: 81) have drawn attention to Astell's personal items in this collection, including Astell's annotated copy of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1697) and her copies of William Cave's *Primitive Christianity* (1675), his *Antiquitates Christianae* (1675), and his *Apostolici* (1677).² But Taylor and Apetrei omit any mention of two further texts that also bear the marks of Astell's ownership: Abraham Woodhead, Obadiah Walker, and Richard

Allestree's *A Paraphrase and Annotations upon all St. Paul's Epistles* (NRO, 3.A.10),³ and Richard Allestree's *The Ladies Calling* (NRO, 3.K.15). The marginalia in these volumes demonstrates that Astell challenged prejudicial attitudes toward women in popular Anglican works of her time, especially the idea that women were created subordinate or inferior to men.

While the NRO catalogue does not officially attribute ownership of the *Paraphrase and Annotations* to Astell, in the top right-hand corner of one of the first blank pages, there is a handwritten inscription: "M.A. May 5th 1710." Throughout this volume, there are also various marginal notes in pencil and ink that bear a striking resemblance to the handwriting in Astell's extant manuscript letters to Henry Dodwell and Ann Coventry, dated from the early 1700s.⁴ Their contents also echo sentiments expressed in Astell's published writings, especially the Preface to the third edition of her *Reflections Upon Marriage* (Astell 1996), first published in 1706. In her Preface, Astell raises several critical points against John Locke's posthumous 1706 work *Paraphrase and Notes on the First Epistle of St. Paul* (see Goldie 2007: 81–5). In this volume, Locke provides a gloss on 1 Timothy 2:11–12 ("Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence"), suggesting that women are in natural subjection to men, and that a woman must never act upon the presumption of her own knowledge and abilities. In her *Reflections*, contra Locke's view, Astell points out that the Bible never explicitly states that a woman's subjection to her husband is a "law of nature"; rather, the scriptures suggest that a woman's subordination is a result of custom, contract, and civil law (1996: 26). Along similar lines, in response to the section on 1 Timothy 2:11–12 in the *Paraphrase and Annotations*, there is a handwritten note: "A Woman then is not

naturally subject to a Man as Man, but accidentally so, and because he is her Husband” (326).⁵ In her *Reflections*, Astell also argues that the fact that Adam was created before Eve does not prove her natural subjection to him any more than “the Living Creatures, Fishes, Birds and Beasts being form’d before them both, proves that Mankind must be subject to these Animals” (1996: 21). In a footnote to the *Paraphrase and Annotations*, Woodhead, Walker, and Allestree claim that because Adam was created first, he has “more worth” (1702: 326). The author of the marginal notes retorts: “Beasts were created before Adam, are they therefore more worthy?” (326). On the basis of the handwriting and these similarities to the *Reflections*, it is highly probable that Astell is the “M.A.” of the inscription as well as the author of the notes in this volume; in what follows, I attribute the annotations to her.⁶

The marginalia reveals that Astell was critical of the Anglican clerics’ assumptions about women’s inferiority to men. In the section on “The First Epistle of S. Paul to the Corinthians Paraphrased,” the authors of the *Paraphrase* interpret 1 Corinthians 11:7 as suggesting that a “woman is [only] the [image, and] glory of man” (1702: 97). In response in the margins, Astell points out that “The Scripture says that both Women as well as Men were Created in the Image of GOD see Gen” (97), alluding to Genesis 1:27 (“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them”). When the Anglican authors suggest *both* that woman is “inferior in the creation” *and* that woman is placed in subjection to her husband as a result of Eve’s transgression, Astell points to their inconsistency: it must follow that a woman’s inferiority is therefore “not the Condition of her Nature but the Punishment of her Sin” (97). In their footnotes, the male authors maintain that a woman ought to be covered in church as a sign of her “modesty, reverence, and subjection, the duties of the woman towards the man” (97). Here Astell’s

comeback is: “So Men say, but I do not find that the Word of GOD says so, further than that wives shou’d be subject to their own Husbands; but this is for other Reasons, and not because of the Natural Inferiority of the Sex” (97). When the authors subsequently contradict themselves by asserting that men and women are “equal” in the eyes of God, Astell inquires “Where then is any *Natural Inferiority* [?]” (98). Here we have explicit evidence that Astell was critical of the Anglican clerics’ views about women; in particular, she did not approve of their assertions that women are naturally subject or naturally inferior to men.

Of course, these comments in themselves do not decisively meet the Conservative Challenge; they do not undermine the view that Astell thought that women’s understandings should be improved solely for the sake of preserving Anglican liturgical doctrines and practices. After all, she might have made these comments because the Anglican resurgence would have foundered if clerics had continued to assume that women were naturally inferior to men and did not have the ability to make rational judgements for themselves, independently of their husbands, fathers, and other spiritual directors. Here Astell may have argued for the equality of men and women in the eyes of God, simply to bolster the case for the revival of Anglican nunneries in England, to show that women were capable of being educated for higher things. She may have challenged the Anglican authors’ prejudices about women for the purpose of bringing about a more thoroughgoing reformation rather than a half-hearted one.

Nevertheless, the marginal notes in the NRO copy of Allestree’s *Ladies Calling* suggest that Astell’s critique of the Anglican program runs much deeper. In this volume, there are even more compelling reasons to attribute the handwritten annotations to Astell. In a slip of paper bound to the inside of the book, there is an inscription “Mary Astell her Book given

her,” and on a blank flyleaf in a childish hand there is the note “Mariæ Astell Ex Dono Radulphi Astell,” indicating that the book was a gift to Astell from her clergyman uncle Ralph Astell. Throughout this volume, and especially in “The Preface” and the chapter “Of Meekness,” there are numerous comments in pencil in the margins; there is also a poem in ink on the opening flyleaf signed by “Phylia” and dated 1697.⁷ Upon comparison, the handwriting in these notes and in the poem is identical to the hand in other Astell manuscripts and the *Paraphrase and Annotations* marginalia, and the intellectual content of these notes once again strongly suggests that Astell was their author.

On the one hand, many of the annotations express admiration for Allestree’s work. In “The Preface,” Allestree reflects on women’s understandings, observing that it is “a little hard to pronounce, that they are naturally inferiour to Men,” when one considers the educational advantages of men (“The Preface,” n.p.). At this point, the note in the margin reads: “Not inferior in Understanding to Men.” This same observation is echoed by Astell in her *Christian Religion*, when she says that she is unable to discern “that women’s understandings are inferior to men’s” (Astell 2013: §266). Also in *The Ladies Calling*, in response to Allestree’s assertion that “whatever vicious impotence Women are under, it is acquir’d, not natural,” there is a handwritten note “Womens Faults acquir’d not Natural” (“The Preface,” n.p.). This observation corresponds to Astell’s well-known assertion in her first *Proposal* that a woman’s “Incapacity, if there be any, is acquired not natural” (2002: 59). The footnotes in Astell’s second *Proposal* and her *Christian Religion* explicitly acknowledge Allestree’s work as a source of her ideas (Astell 2002: 222; Astell 2013: §1). The marginalia in *The Ladies Calling* further indicates that Astell wrote these treatises with one eye on Allestree’s text.

On the other hand, these marginal notes are also highly critical of Allestree's opinions concerning women. In his chapter "Of Meekness," Allestree observes that many women, "seduced by the zeal of a new teacher, have given up their understandings to him" (1673: 32). In response, Astell says: "Whence is this but from their not being taught to Use their Understandings, or imagining they have none to use [?]" When Allestree mentions that their "natural imbecillity" makes women "liable to seducement," Astell corrects him by saying: "or rather ill Education. As he seems to allow in what follows" (33). Later, Allestree notes that many "she-zealots" might have avoided exposing themselves to criticism, if only they had followed "sober guides" (34). In response, Astell adds "but used their own Reason in following them" (34). In the same paragraph, she further observes that "Women must Examin well the Ground of Religion" (34). Here Astell's emphasis is on women shunning a blind obedience to their teachers and learning to judge for themselves. When Allestree notes that some women have a tendency not to judge tenets according to truth and reason but to prepossession and others' firmly held convictions, Astell writes in the margins: "Women then must Judge and Judge conformably to Truth and Reason not to any Mans dictates" (30).

These comments highlight how the Conservative Challenge might be met. As I indicated earlier, to meet this challenge it is necessary to point to those feminist ends that go beyond the goals of a mere Anglican revival. Here is one such end: that women judge according to their own reason and "not to any Mans dictates." While Allestree encourages women to understand the grounds of their religion, he does not encourage the attainment of intellectual integrity in women: their disengagement from prejudice and the freedom to judge for themselves, by the light of their own reason. Like his Anglican contemporaries, Allestree supports female education for the sake of raising the next generation of good Anglicans; he

intends for women to imbibe and propagate Anglican orthodoxy in their roles as wives, mothers, and educators of the young. In *The Ladies Calling*, his emphasis is on women following “sober guides” in order to avoid being seduced by the unorthodox religious views of overzealous teachers (1673: 32, 34). In his scriptural exegesis, he emphasizes that women require “instruction” and that they must show an “obedience to Superiors” (9). Astell also encourages women to submit themselves to the dictates of the national church, but she intends for them to do so after a process of critical reflection on their long-held beliefs and values. To acquire this capacity for critical reflection, she suggests, women must be taught how to judge with impartiality—they must be taught to imbibe those right rules for thinking of her second *Proposal*. Only then will women obtain “true liberty, which consists not in a power to do what we will, but in making a right use of our reason, in preserving our judgments free, and our integrity unspotted” (2013: 249). To submit blindly to the dictates of others is “an affront to God, by despising or at the best neglecting the talents He has given us, and a direct disobedience to that command of Christ’s, ‘call no man master upon earth’; that is, follow no man’s judgment or authority any further than as he brings his credentials from the great master who is in heaven” (§3).⁸ If men expect a blind submission, she says, “if they would have us stifle, or act contrary to the sentiments of a well-informed judgment, and expect a tame compliance where honor and conscience oblige us to oppose them, in this case opposition is integrity” (§303). In Astell’s view, women will always be entitled to assert “that most valuable privilege, and indefeasible right, of judging for ourselves where God has left us free to do so” (§256); they have a right to exercise their intellectual integrity.

The content of this marginalia reveals that Astell’s primary purpose goes beyond merely propagating the Anglican religion. Her emphasis on promoting intellectual integrity—on

women following their own independent judgement and shunning the prejudices of others—might be compatible with an Anglican agenda to some extent, but the marginalia shows that there are many issues on which they might come apart, such as Allestree’s sexist attitudes toward women and his Anglican emphasis on following one’s spiritual directors without question. In short, these annotations—and the sentiments they express—provide good reasons for going beyond a Conservative Reading to a Feminist one.

On the Conservative Reading, Astell’s so-called feminist ideas—both her descriptive and her normative claims about women’s disadvantages, as well as her concrete plans for social reform—can be better explained by a conservative Anglican agenda, one in which female education was central to the maintenance of the Church’s monopoly on religious worship in late seventeenth-century England. On the Feminist Reading, Astell’s principal design is to sharpen women’s minds, not merely for the purpose of bringing about an Anglican reformation in manners, but so that women might make careful evaluative judgements about their beliefs and values. The notes in Astell’s copy of *The Ladies Calling* and in the *Paraphrase and Annotations* reveal why her key philosophical writings about women cannot be reduced to a Conservative Reading alone. Her marginal comments in these works provide compelling reasons to think that Astell intended her Cartesian-inspired methodology to serve recognizably feminist ends in addition to devout Anglican goals. Her criticisms of the Anglican authors—Allestree, Woodhead, and Walker—reveal that she aimed to bring about an intellectual liberation for women and not simply transform them into abiding Anglicans. By encouraging women to attain freedom from prejudice and the freedom to judge for themselves, Astell intended for women to develop the intellectual integrity that would enable them to become truly autonomous agents.

¹ These volumes are held in the King's Cliffe School Library at the Northamptonshire Record Office, England, NRO 3.K.15, box 70, and 3.A.10, box 23. I am grateful to the NRO for granting me access to this library. I would also like to thank the Australian Research Council: the research and writing for this paper was funded by two ARC research grants (FT0991199 and DP190100019).

² See King's Cliffe School Library, Northamptonshire Record Office, NRO 3.D.17, box 24; NRO 3.E.21, box 1; NRO 2.F.9, box 67; NRO 2.F.11, box 12.

³ The English Short Title Catalogue attributes authorship of this work to Abraham Woodhead, Obadiah Walker, and Richard Allestree; the title page of the 1708 reissue confirms this attribution.

⁴ The Astell-Dodwell correspondence is held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (MS Eng. Letters c. 28, fols. 78–9, 100–3). The Astell-Coventry letters are in the private family papers of His Grace the Duke of Beaufort, in the Muniments Room at Badminton Estate in Gloucestershire, England ("Family Papers: Lady Anne Coventry," FmT/B 1/3/2). I am extremely grateful to His Grace and his archivist Elaine Milsom for granting me access to the original manuscripts of the latter correspondence, first published in Perry (1986).

⁵ In my transcriptions throughout this chapter, I have spelt out seventeenth-century abbreviations and contractions, and replaced symbols and thorns with words, to make the texts accessible to modern readers.

⁶ Of course, it is still *possible* that the author of these notes is someone else, such as her friend Elizabeth Hutcheson, who may have had similar handwriting. But in the absence of further

evidence, the balance of probabilities comes down on the side of Astell and, in any case, the author of this marginalia reveals a strong familiarity with Astell's way of thinking.

⁷ This poem raises the tantalizing possibility that Astell adopted the pseudonym "Phylia" in other writings. The title page of *Ladies Calling* is also marked "Ex Libris Phylia" in ink, with "Phylia" noted in pencil in the top left-hand corner. For further details, see Broad and Sutherland 2020.

⁸ On the anti-authoritarian import of Astell's frequent injunctions to "call no man master upon earth" (Matthew 23:9–10), see Apetrei 2008, 2010.

RELATED TOPICS

Personal and Moral Autonomy; Men, Women, Equality and Difference; Education; Beauty, Embodiment and Sexuality; Friendship

REFERENCES

[Allestree, Richard]. 1673. *The Ladies Calling In Two Parts. By the Author of the Whole Duty of Man, & c. The Second Impression*. Oxford: at the Theater.

Apetrei, Sarah, 2008. "'Call No Man Master Upon Earth': Mary Astell's Tory Feminism and an Unknown Correspondence," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41/4, 507–23.

Apetrei, Sarah, 2010. *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Astell, Mary, 1996. *Reflections Upon Marriage*, in *Astell: Political Writings*, edited by Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Astell, Mary, 2002. *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, edited by Patricia Springborg (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press).

Astell, Mary, 2013. *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England*, edited by Jacqueline Broad (Toronto, ON: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies and Iter Publishing).

Broad, Jacqueline, 2015. *The Philosophy of Mary Astell: An Early Modern Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Broad, Jacqueline, 2019. "Mary Astell's Critique of Pierre Bayle: Atheism and Intellectual Integrity in the *Pensées* (1682)," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 27/4: 806–23.

Broad, Jacqueline, and Catherine Sutherland, 2020. "An Astell Pseudonym Uncovered." In Project Vox *Revealing Voices* blog series, <<https://projectvox.org/uncategorized/revealing-voices-jacqueline-broad-and-catherine-sutherland/>>, accessed December 31, 2021.

Detlefsen, Karen, 2016. "Custom, Freedom, and Equality: Mary Astell on Marriage and Women's Education," in *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell*, edited by Alice Sowaal and Penny A. Weiss (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press), 74–92.

Detlefsen, Karen, 2017a. "Cartesianism and its Feminist Promise and Limits: The Case of Mary Astell," in *Descartes and Cartesianism: Essays in Honour of Desmond Clarke*, edited by Stephen Gaukroger and Catherine Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 191–206.

Detlefsen, Karen, 2017b. "Liberty and Feminism in Early Modern Women's Writing," in *Women and Liberty, 1600–1800: Philosophical Essays*, edited by Jacqueline Broad and Karen Detlefsen (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 17–32.

Forbes, Allauraen Samantha, 2019. "Mary Astell on Bad Custom and Epistemic Injustice," *Hypatia* 34/4: 777–801.

Goldie, Mark, 2007. "Mary Astell and John Locke," in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, edited by William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate), 65–85.

Hickson, Michael W. 2017. "Disagreement and Academic Scepticism in Bayle," in *Academic Scepticism in the Development of Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Plínio Junqueira Smith and Sébastien Charles (Cham, Switzerland: Springer), 293–317.

Hill, Bridget, ed. 1986. *The First English Feminist: "Reflections Upon Marriage" and Other Writings by Mary Astell* (New York: St. Martin's Press).

Kinnaird, Joan K. 1979. "Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism," *The Journal of British Studies* 19/1, 53–75.

Perry, Ruth, 1986. *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).

Smith, Hannah, 2007. "Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), and the Anglican Reformation of Manners in Late-Seventeenth-Century England," in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, edited by William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate), 31–47.

Sowaal, Alice, 2007. "Mary Astell's *Serious Proposal*: Mind, Method, and Custom," *Philosophy Compass* 2, 227–43.

Springborg, Patricia, 2005. *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Taylor, E. Derek, 2005–6. "Mary Astell's Work Towards a New Edition of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Part II," *Studies in Bibliography* 57, 197–232.

Woodhead, Abraham, Obadiah Walker, and Richard Allestree, 1702. *A Paraphrase and Annotations upon all St. Paul's Epistles. Done by several Eminent Men at Oxford, Correct'd and Improv'd by the late Right Reverend and Learned Bishop Fell*, 3rd ed. (London: Printed for R. Smith).

FURTHER READING

Boyle, Deborah, 2011. “Mary Astell and Cartesian ‘*Scientia*’,” in *The New Science and Women’s Literary Discourse: Prefiguring Frankenstein*, edited by Judy Hayden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 99–112. (An excellent account of Astell’s theory of knowledge and Cartesian “*scientia*.”)

Broad, Jacqueline. (2017) “Mary Astell (1666-1731).” In *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/astell/>>, accessed December 31, 2021. (An accessible online precis of Astell’s philosophical thought.)

O’Neill, Eileen, 2007. “Mary Astell on the Causation of Sensation,” in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, edited by William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate), 145–63. (A superb analysis of Astell’s Cartesian theory of causation.)

Sowaal, Alice. (2015) “Mary Astell.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/astell/>>, accessed December 31, 2021. (Another reader-friendly online account of Astell’s philosophy.)