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Mary Astell's Critique of Marriage Practices

Patricia Springborg

He who has Sovereign Power does not value the Provocations of a Rebellious Subject, but knows how to subdue him with ease, and will make himself obey'd; but Patience and Submission are the only Comforts that are left to a poor People, who groan under Tyranny, unless they are Strong enough to break the Yoke, to Depose and Abdicate, which I doubt wou'd not be allow'd of here. For whatever may be said against Passive-Obedience in another case, I suppose there's no Man but likes it very well in this; how much soever Arbitrary Power may be dislik'd on a Throne, not Milton himself wou'd cry up Liberty to poor Female Slaves, or plead for the Lawfulness of Resisting a Private Tyranny.... For if Arbitrary Power is evil in itself, and an improper Method of Governing Rational and Free Agents it ought not to be Practis'd any where; Nor is it less, but rather more mischievous in Families than in Kingdoms, by how much 100000 Tyrants are worse than one. What tho' a Husband can't deprive a Wife of Life without being responsible to the Law, he may however do what is much more grievous to a generous Mind, render Life miserable, for which she has no Redress.... If all Men are born free, how is it that all Women are born slaves? as they must be if the being subjected to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary Will of Men, be the perfect Condition of Slavery? and if the Essence of Freedom consists, as our Masters say it does, in having a standing Rule to live by? And why is Slavery so much condemn'd and strove against in one Case, and so highly applauded and held so necessary and so sacred in another?¹

Mary Astell's reputation in the twenty-first century largely rests on her famous question: 'If all Men are born free, how is it that all Women are born slaves?', and she is hailed as a supporter of freedom from domination and of women's rights. In the first edition of *Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), which ran to five editions in her lifetime, Astell had made an argument for female slavery and male despotism that is deliberately ironic, later amplified

in the famous 1706 Preface. As a Tory pamphleteer, committed Christian and published theologian, it seems on the face of it odd that Astell should stake out such radical ground. And on closer examination, it is clear that Astell, who never went as far as Judith Drake² (whose work was credited to her), in comparing women with the 'slaves of our new colonies', in fact had quite a conservative view of the social order, based on hierarchy, piety and duty. Yet, she produced one of the most scathing commentaries on marriage and divorce in her day.

Reflections upon Marriage had been occasioned by the scandalous divorce of the Duchess of Mazarin but was not intended to sanction divorce. Astell as a High Church Tory defended the customary social order, however prejudicial to women. She was no defender of natural right any more than she was a defender of freedom of belief or of the press. Those who claim freedom of belief as a 'natural right' are subversive of the entire social order, she argued. Human beings were born into a tissue of networks and obligations; only the blind could pretend otherwise. Arguments for natural right were but thinly disguised arguments for might over right, which could only favour men as the stronger. Once married, she notes ironically, women were forced to recognize the superiority of the male sex, if only because it was the justification of their own servitude:

Men are possess'd of all Places of Power, Trust and Profit, they make Laws and exercise the Magistracy, not only the sharpest Sword, but even all the Swords and Blunderbusses are theirs, which by the strongest Logic in the World, gives them the best Title to everything they ... claim as their Prerogative; who shall contend with them? Immemorial Prescription is on their side in these parts of the World, Antient Tradition and Modern Usage! (xxii/29)

Several things are remarkable about *Reflections upon Marriage*. One is that it joins a number of works that respond to a genre of misogynous publications that flourished with the growing freedom of the press. Another is that it responds to certain trends in courtship and marriage that accompanied the gentrification that took place in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Britain with the increasing development of commercial society.³ Astell does not go so far as Drake, who painted elaborate caricatures of the dandy and the fop, but she names them and has plenty to say about the forms of entrapment and insincerity practised by urbane suitors courting eligible women, with no intention whatever of honouring the expectations they raise in their hopeful prey. So, after 'the Glitter and Pomp of a Wedding ... she whose Expectation has been rais'd by Court-ship, by all the fine things that her Lover, her Governess

and Domestic Flatters say, will find a terrible disappointment when the hurry is over, and when she comes calmly to consider her Condition, and views it no more under a false Appearance, but as it truly is' (54/60). For women also collude in their own subjection: 'Tho' we live like Brutes, we wou'd have Incense offer'd us that is only due to Heaven it self, wou'd have an absolute and blind Obedience paid us by all over whom we pretend Authority. We were not made to Idolize one another, yet the whole strain of Courtship is little less than rank Idolatry' (54/61).

Astell is aware that these elaborate courtship practices are among the hazards of affluence to which the rising bourgeoisie, in this case the gentry, is prone, observing of the petty domestic tyrant: 'if he has Prosperity enough to keep him from considering, and to furnish him with a train of Flatterers and obsequious Admirers; and Learning and Sense enough to make him a Fop in Perfection; for a Man can never be a complete Coxcomb, unless he has a considerable share of these to value himself upon; what can the poor Woman do?' (28/47). The development of market society in this period had increased the disposable income of the commercial classes, with both positive and negative consequences. It saw the rise in investment on the burgeoning stock market, in banking and in property; the rise of party politics, including politicking and caballing in coffee houses; but also the emergence of more ephemeral pastimes like horse-racing, gambling and fashion in all its forms. That these economic changes should be accompanied by changes in courtship and marriage practices, which have always included an element of conspicuous display, should not surprise us. And, while we usually credit Britain under the Hanoverians with these developments, later to be meticulously detailed in the novels of Jane Austen and George Eliot, Astell and Drake furnish evidence that these trends were well under way in the reign of Queen Anne. They lie behind Astell's mocking portrait of the modern gentleman, posturing, politicking, ruling and judging, but also drinking and gambling:

All famous Arts have their Original from Men, even from the Invention of Guns to the Mystery of good Eating. And to shew that nothing is beneath their Care, any more than above their Reach, they have brought *Gaming* to an Art and Science, and a more Profitable and Honourable one too, than any of those that us'd to be call'd *Liberal*! Indeed what is it they can't perform, when they attempt it? The Strength of their Brains shall be every whit as Conspicuous at their Cups, as in a Senate-House, and when they please they can make it pass for as sure a Mark of Wisdom, to drink deep as to Reason profoundly; a greater

proof of Courage and consequently of Understanding, to dare the Vengeance of Heaven it self, than to stand the Raillery of some of the worst of their fellow Creatures. (89/78)

The dynastic crisis of 1688, like the civil war that preceded it, seemed to create the space in which women could insert themselves, before peace settled them back down in their domestic roles. Astell, although the daughter of a journeyman from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, had joined a circle of like-minded aristocratic High Church Tory women, who included her patrons, Lady Catherine Jones, daughter of the Earl of Ranelagh, Paymaster-General of the Navy, to whom Astell's *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695) and her magnum opus *The Christian Religion as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church* (1705) are dedicated; Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to whose *Embassy Letters: The Travels of an English Lady in Europe, Asia and Africa* (1724, 1725), Astell added a preface (see Chapter 4 of this volume); Lady Anne Coventry and Lady Elizabeth Hastings, as well as Elizabeth Elstob, the Anglo-Saxon scholar, and Princess Anne. It was the future queen to whom Astell had previously appealed with her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), dedicated to Princess Anne, who is reported to have encouraged her project for a women's Platonic academy. It was not the misogynist mockery to which Astell was exposed for her *Project* that killed it, but rather the charge of Bishop Burnet that it smacked too much of an Anglican nunnery. But of mockery there was plenty. Astell was lampooned by the greatest satirists of her day, Jonathan Swift, Richard Steele as well as Daniel Defoe, Astell's nemesis in *A Fair Way with the Dissenters and Their Patrons* (1704), responding to Defoe's pamphlet of that year, *More Short-Ways with the Dissenters*. Defoe had plagiarized her in his proposal for 'An Academy for Women' in his *Essay on Projects* (1697) while Bishop Berkeley thought her ideas in the *Proposal* worth plagiarizing to the extent of some 100 pages in the *Ladies Library*, which Steele edited, and Steele added insult to injury by making Astell the butt of satire in *Tatler* nos. 32 and 63. As the promoter of women's causes, and particularly women's education, Astell is said to have been the model for Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), and as late as 1847, Lilia, heroine of Alfred Lord Tennyson's *The Princess*, dreams of a women's college cut off from male society. Astell's female academy was later famously lampooned in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Princess Ida* (1887), but this time at one remove, through Tennyson. Over its gates, the inscription would read, 'Let no man enter on pain of death', a deliberately truncated version of the famous inscription that adorned the doors of Plato's Academy, 'Let No Man Enter Here Unless He Study Geometry'.

If Astell's broad interests included theology and social criticism, she was also a highly successful political pamphleteer. The rise of Whig political ideas, reflecting the emerging dominance of the bourgeois class and the compartmentalization of values in the division between public and private life that accompanied increasing economic development, produced an intensification of the division of labour and an increasing gap between the genders. In *Reflections upon Marriage*, Astell addresses the political consequences, railing against the hypocrisy of Whiggish values that hold the public to standards of freedom and democracy which would never be tolerated in the private sphere. And here, she addresses specific persons: John Milton, sublime poet, also a radical democrat and the author of a notorious work on divorce and the Earl of Shaftesbury, to whom she dedicates a later work, *Bart'lemy Fair* (1709), along with his influential secretary, John Locke (1632–1704). The famous question of the *Reflections*, '*If all Men are born free*, how is it that all Women are born slaves?' – italicized to indicate quotation – makes direct reference to Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*. His *First Treatise* had set out to rebut Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*, founded, Locke claims, on the principles '*That all Government is absolute Monarchy*' and '*That no Man is Born free*'. It was to the refutation of patriarchalism that Locke's *First* and *Second Treatises* were dedicated. Astell seems to be quoting from two different sections of Locke's *Second Treatise*. The first is Book 2, §22: 'A Liberty to follow my own Will in all things, where the Rule prescribes not; and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, Arbitrary Will of another Man.'⁴ The second is Book 2, §149, the same passage that Astell in *The Christian Religion* quotes from the *Two Treatises* with acknowledgement.⁵

For no Man, or Society of Men, having a Power to deliver up their *Preservation*, or consequently the means of it, to the Absolute Will and arbitrary Dominion of another; whenever any one shall go about to bring them into such a Slavish Condition, they will always have a right to preserve what they have not a Power to part with (Locke, 1988, p. 367)

Astell's most powerful argument was the Platonist one, that if one accepts the rule of the stronger on the grounds that might is right, then ethical arguments are out the window and the game is over. She is particularly scathing of the hypocrisy of those who preach democracy in the public sphere but are happy to allow tyranny in the family, targeting John Milton by name. Milton (1608–1674), anti-Royalist poet and pamphleteer, had in

1641 produced three pamphlets vehemently attacking the Church. In 1643, he married a seventeen-year-old girl, a marriage that lasted only a month, leading Milton to write on the need for divorce, which further angered the clergy. His *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), defending the right of the people to judge their rulers, appeared soon after the King's death, prompting the newly formed Council of State to invite Milton to become their Latin secretary. Pamphlets written by Milton in this period show that he favoured republicanism against monarchy, complete separation between Church and state, and the permanent rule of Cromwell's Chiefs of the Army and the Council. Astell had multiple reasons then for attacking Milton, whom she includes among 'those Mercenary Scriblers whom all sober men condemn',⁶ and whose attack on Charles I, 'the martyr King', deeply offended her. Milton, democrat and defender of divorce on the grounds of freedom for men, declared, 'in vain does he prattle about liberty in assembly and market-place who at home endures the slavery most unworthy of man, slavery to an inferior'.⁷ Astell turned against him his own argument of the *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, that freedom is a God-given right. No one, Milton maintained, 'can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were borne free, being the image and resemblance of God himself'.⁸ Just so, she argued, and it holds equally for women. Realizing the seditious force of her arguments even in the first drafting of *Reflections*, Astell concludes, 'perhaps I've said more than most Men will thank me for, I cannot help it, for how much soever I may be their Friend and humble Servant, I am more a Friend to Truth', going on to insist that she does men 'more Honour than to suppose their lawful Prerogatives need any mean Arts to support them':

If they have Usurpt, I love Justice too much to wish...continuance to Usurpations, which tho' submitted to out of Prudence, and for Quietness sake, yet leave every Body free to regain their lawful Right whenever they have Power and Opportunity. I don't say that Tyranny *ought*, but we find in *Fact*, that it provokes the Oppress'd to throw off even a Lawful Yoke that sits too heavy: And if he who is freely Elected, after all his fair Promises and the fine Hopes he rais'd, proves a Tyrant, the consideration that he was one's own Choice, will not render more Submissive and Patient, but I fear more Refractory. (78–79)

The law of God does not rule on earth. But were it to, it would require consistency in both public and private domains. In the paean to Queen Anne that concludes the preface, Astell hails a future heaven on earth: 'those Halcyon, or if you will *Millennium* Days, in which the Wolf and the Lamb

[i.e., men and women] shall feed together, and a Tyrannous Domination which Nature never meant, shall no longer render useless if not hurtful, the Industry and Understandings of half Mankind!' (31).

What is perhaps most remarkable about Astell's *Reflections* is the degree to which she self-consciously responds to the political polarization brought about by the rising bourgeoisie and reflected in the developing party system. Like other contemporary female pamphleteers, Astell was staunchly Tory and High Church, finding the support of the Earl of Shaftesbury and Locke for the Dutch king William seditious to the point of treason, on the grounds that in a land in which the sovereign was also head of the established church, dynastic change could also be treated as heretical! To some extent the critique by these women of Whiggism and freedom of opinion as seditious was a failure of imagination in a Tory age. But, the same could not be said of Astell's social criticism, and particularly her critique of marriage customs, foundational in any society, a critique which was economically grounded, thoroughgoing and generalized to the political level.