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‘Nothing Pleases Like an Intire Subjection’¹: Mary Astell Reflects on the Politics of Marriage (1700)

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[I]f Absolute Sovereignty be not necessary in a State, how comes it to be so in a Family? or if in a Family, why not in a State; since no Reason can be alledg'd for the one that will not hold more strongly for the other? If the Authority of the Husband so far as it extends, is sacred and inalienable, why not of the Prince? The Domestic Sovereign is without Dispute Elected, and the Stipulations and Contracts are mutual, is it not then partial in Men to the last degree, to contend for, and practise that Arbitrary Dominion in their Families, which they abhor and exclaim against in the State? 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, scarce Pity which is afforded to every other Complainant. It being thought a Wife's Duty to suffer everything without Complaint. 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?²

Near the outset of her career, Mary Astell (1666–1731) challenged critics who ‘would perhaps remit me to the Distaff or the Kitchin [sic], or at least to the Glass and the Needle, the proper Employments as they fancy of a Woman’s Life.’³ Grasping the quill, she would vindicate herself adeptly. Often credited as the first English feminist, Astell produced treatises and occasional pieces on matters of state, church and civil society. *Some Reflections on Marriage, Occasion’d by the Duke and Dutchess [sic] of Mazarine’s Case*, first published in 1700, with further editions appearing in 1706 and 1730, is a milestone in Anglophone feminism that comes into sharper focus when also read as the work of a significant political thinker.

Astell’s depiction in *Reflections* of the position of women, especially wives, draws on *au courant* philosophies of political allegiance. In decades marked by what contemporary essayists called a ‘Rage of Party’, partisans clashed over the proper relationship between subject and sovereign. Tories, by and large, subscribed to doctrines of hereditary right, believing that political authority was rightfully vested in a monarch who had succeeded another in an orderly generational transition, and that the subject’s place was to extend obedience in exchange for paternalistic protection. Whigs, their opponents, saw civil government as a compact that a sovereign could breach with outrageous acts, and defended the people’s right to resist an oppressive ruler who overstepped his rightful bounds. Denying the existence of this right to resist, Tories professed twin precepts of passive obedience and non-resistance: if the sovereign commanded a subject to an unconscionable deed, the subject could at most refuse to perform it, accepting both the sovereign’s authority and the consequences of inaction. Party wrangling on these matters surged in the aftermath of the Revolution Settlement of 1688–9. Their views somewhat confounded by the deposition of James II and consequent ascension to the throne of William and Mary, many Whig enthusiasts for the new reign tempered their endorsements of the right to resist. In turn, stalwart proponents of passive obedience under Charles II and James II refined their logic so that they might conscientiously withhold support for a new regime whose legitimacy they questioned – if not plot against it actively, as some Jacobites did.

Astell was a deep-dyed Tory. In other political writings contemporaneous with *Reflections*, she maintains that ‘Order is a Sacred Thing’, that ‘Subordination is a necessary consequence of Order’, and, since ‘there is not any thing that tends more to Confusion than Equality’, the people must ‘humbly... observe where God has Delegated his Power, and submit to it.’⁴ *Reflections*, which probes the parameters of the subordination of wives to

husbands, is also a salvo in an ongoing battle about the nature of sovereign power and political obligation. The philosophical dialogue joined by such canonical figures as Thomas Hobbes, Robert Filmer and John Locke was itself shaped by analogical reasoning about the similarities between states and families: rulers (elected and hereditary), fathers and husbands. As we will see, Astell's figure of wifely submission embodies a distinctly Tory outlook on how passive obedience translates from the political to the personal realm – from one patriarchy to another – to bespeak a concealed but conscientious resisting non-resistance.

In *Reflections on Marriage*, Astell takes as a point of departure, the Duchess of Mazarin, a well-connected socialite whose tempestuous marriage was a *cause célèbre*. Thwarted by a possessive, unstable husband, she had abandoned him and her young children to become a globetrotting *bonne vivante*; on her death in 1699, diarist John Evelyn remembered her as 'dissolute and impatient of matrimonial restraint'.⁵ Astell begins *Reflections* by sympathizing with the notorious Duchess's frustrations, characterizing the Duke as an 'absolute Lord and Master' (34). However, she insists that his abuses do not 'Authorize a Woman's ... breaking from the strongest Bands' (35). Even if provoked, the Duchess ought to have endured the marriage in a spirit of 'Discretion' and 'Vertue [sic]' (34, 35).

Astell proceeds from the Mazarin case to expound the nature of contemporary marriage and alert women to its hazards. Kept ignorant of the world and fed on 'unreasonable Desires and Expectations' (60), imprudent women fall prey to designing men. Once under the 'Matrimonial Yoke' (59), Astell explains, 'the Woman has in truth no security but the Man's Honour and Good-nature, a Security that in this present Age no wise Person would venture much upon' (51). Free to inflict misery, domineering husbands consign wives to materially and spiritually unfulfilling lives. Sometimes neglect is the best outcome, because it affords women 'Silence and Solitude' (40). Astell concedes that 'if a Wife's case be as it is here represented, it is not good for a Woman to Marry, and so there's an end of [the] Human Race' (77–8). Forewarned by Astell's alarums, an informed woman could 'duly examine and weigh all the Circumstances, the Good and Evil of a Married State ... and either never consent to be a Wife, or make a good one when she does' (75).

Astell's treatise on marriage is rife with tropes of government. In the 1706 preface, she wryly remarks that *Reflections* has been 'accus'd of being so destructive to the Government, of the Men I mean' (8) because it exposes their 'Arcana Imperii', state secrets – a phrase she repeats in the treatise proper (78).

Astell describes a patriarchy comprised of artful and exacting despots. She maintains that modern beaux contrive 'to get the poor Woman into their Power, to govern her according to their Discretion' (66). Even when the wife is her husband's social superior before marriage, he demands a docile subject 'whom he can intirely Govern' (51). Marriage grants husbands 'an absolute Power over' wives' desires (48–9). Assurances are unreliable and unenforceable: Astell deplores that 'Covenants betwixt Husband and Wife, like Laws in an Arbitrary Government, are of little Force, the Will of the Sovereign is all in all' (52).

Because patriarchal dominion is absolute and often arbitrary, Astell equates women's social position to that of slaves – not to the chattel slavery of colonial plantations but to the political slavery of the radically unfree subject. The purposes of her famous analogy, however, are as much ironic as polemical. One instance of the comparison occurs as the crescendo of her 1706 preface:

If all Men are born free, how is it that all Women are born Slaves? ... 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? (18–19)

The outcry is eloquent. But being born free and equal was a Whig tenet, not a Tory one. Neither Astell nor her Tory fellow-travellers subscribed to the ideas of natural liberty articulated by philosophers like Locke, Gilbert Burnet and Benjamin Hoadly. Throughout *Reflections*, Astell means to make champions of resistance doctrine squirm by turning their own maxims against them. She taunts Whig contractualists for being covert supporters of the passive obedience they purport to revile – for wives, at least:

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. (46–7)

With a waspish desire to puncture Whig orthodoxy, Astell castigates those who, she alleges, 'practise that Arbitrary Dominion in their Families, which they abhor and exclaim against in the State', for 'if Absolute Sovereignty be not necessary in a State, how comes it to be so in a Family?' (17).

The intensity and expressiveness of Astell's critiques of marriage as practised – a zone of subjugation and unfreedom – raises the question of her views on marriage in theory. As much as Astell decries the desperate position to which wives have been relegated, her conjugal model might nonetheless aptly be characterized as patriarchal. For Astell as much as for contemporary anti-feminist writers, the married state grants the husband the place of authority, and the wife is obliged to accept it. She has willingly subjected herself, and hence

her agency is tightly constrained. But in *Reflections* obligation does not license oppression. A good husband, like a good ruler, moderates his temperament: he self-governs as much as he governs (48–9). Husbands *ought not* flaunt their supremacy or exercise it cruelly: to do so ‘provokes the Oppress’d’ (78). They should ‘sweeten’ the authority they exercise: ‘to give evidence that he has a Right to those Prerogatives he assumes, [a man] shou’d treat Women with a little more Humanity and Regard than is usually paid them’ (58). To display benevolence demonstrates the rightfulness of their authority; severity makes it appear dubious. Extending her insights from the marital to the governmental, Astell argues that ‘Authority may be preserv’d and Government kept inviolable, without ... nauseous Ostentation of Power’ (54), and hence it will never ‘be well ... even from the Throne to every Private Family, till those in Authority look on themselves as plac’d in that Station for the good and improvement of their Subjects’ (56). As subjects will their sovereigns, ruled rightly, wives will honour and heed their husbands’ dominion:

A peaceable Woman indeed will ... neither question her Husband’s Right nor his Fitness to Govern; but how? Not as an absolute Lord and Master, with an Arbitrary and Tyrannical sway, but as Reason Governs and Conducts a man, by proposing what is Just and Fit. (79)

Astell rues that husbandly authority as practised seldom resembles her prescriptions, but avers that it is not the wife’s place to challenge an imperious husband. In the event the marriage is malign, the ‘peaceable’ wife, like the Tory subject, nonetheless patiently perseveres.

Astell, like her cohort of Tory thinkers, anathematizes revolt. The spectre of female rebellion haunts the text, but its threat is consistently minimized. Responding to her initial critical reception in the 1706 preface, she insists that she cannot ‘imagine how she any way undermines the Masculine Empire, or blows the Trumpet of Rebellion’; ‘she did not in any manner prompt them to Resist’ (8, 9). Having made ‘Resisting a Private Tyranny’ a sardonic joke, Astell acknowledges that ‘women are not so well united as to form an Insurrection’ (29). She adds that the notion that women might be ‘Strong enough to break the Yoke, to Depose and Abdicate ... [will] not be allow’d of here’ (46). Not for her the rhetorical flourishes of Mary Wollstonecraft, who less than a century later would call for a ‘Revolution in female manners.’⁶ Astell instead contends that ‘Patience and Submission are the only Comforts that are left to a poor People, who groan under Tyranny’ (46). The same wisdom applies in the household as in the nation. When a woman marries,

even when her husband proves himself to be foolish, despotic, or violent, it has to be her 'indisputable Maxim, that her Husband must govern absolutely and intirely, and that she has nothing else to do but to Please and Obey' (62), for 'she who Elects a Monarch for Life ... gives him an Authority she cannot recall however he misapply it' (48).

In Astell's account the task for women who self-subject by opting into the married state is to submit, but not unthinkingly. Wives supply not 'Blind Obedience' (61, 75) but a clear-sighted variant: resigned, reasoned, or, better still, 'Chearful' (54, 56). Astell's call is for a *virtuous* submission in keeping with the seamless garment of Tory passive obedience: 'A Woman ... that cannot patiently submit even when Reason suffers with her, who does not practice Passive Obedience to the utmost, will never be acceptable to such an absolute Sovereign as a Husband' (61). Astell avows that 'She who can't do this is no way fit to be a Wife' (62), and in an earlier treatise she outlined another option: a haven for unmarried women, part academy and part Protestant monastic community, where dedication to the *vita contemplativa* could produce a 'Beneficence [that] moves in the largest Sphere' and secure 'the Glory of Reforming this Prophane and Profligate Age'.⁷ (Astell herself never married.)

Bleak as the conjugal state may appear, for Astell it is through acts of submission that wives achieve a sort of moral power. Marriage becomes a trial of, and staging ground for, beliefs both religious and political. While active rebellion is prohibited, conjugal dissidents can withdraw into a world of conscience that is even, after a fashion, liberating: 'the Mind is free, nothing but Reason can oblige it, 'tis out of the reach of the most absolute Tyrant' (56). Astell also allows the possibility of a 'meer Obedience' (50) produced only by discipline – a coerced subjection that calls attention to its own incompleteness. Even in the midst of patriarchal oppression, the submissive wife shines:

When a Superior does a Mean and unjust Thing ... and yet this does not provoke his Inferiors to refuse that Observance which their Stations in the World require, they cannot but have an inward Sense of their own real Superiority, the other having no pretence to it, at the same time that they pay him an outward Respect and Deference, which is such a flagrant Testimony of the sincerest Love of Order as proves their Souls to be of the highest and noblest Rank. (58)

Even as her compliance in the face of injustice registers outwardly, the patient and principled wife exudes a glorious righteousness that upholds a larger social and political hierarchy.

This disposition, for Astell, is expressly *heroic*. Women's inferior social position may not be enough 'to make a Noise ... to found or overturn Empires,

yet it qualifies them for what is infinitely better, a Kingdom that cannot be mov'd' where 'her Soul shall shine as bright as the greatest Heroes' (76, 75). In Heaven, gender inequities cease. Moving from the equal to the comparative and superlative, Astell soon represents this feminine mode of passive heroism as unparalleled: to discharge an

intire Submission for Life, to one whom she cannot be sure will always deserve it, does certainly perform a more Heroic Action than all the famous Masculine Heroes can boast of[.] (78)

Even Cato, whose love of liberty led him to commit suicide rather than kowtow to Julius Caesar (63), is bested by the iconic wife, who by enduring 'continual Martyrdom' (78) maintains a luminous and indomitable integrity that shames the power that looms over her. This is her recourse; her 'consolation' (75); her 'Remedy in reserve' (80). 'Subjection ... is not over easie', Astell affirms. Only a 'sound Understanding, and Grace' can 'heartily reconcile us to Obedience' (54). Outward self-abnegation thus masks inward self-assertion.

The end of the 1706 preface to *Reflections* offers an alternative iconography: Queen Anne, an indisputable example of female authority whose accession postdates the original treatise. Practically daring men to withhold their allegiance and prove themselves both misogynists and rebels, Astell lauds the Queen as a defender of liberty whose auspicious reign will lead to 'Halcyon, or if you will Millennium Days,' when 'a Tyrannous Domination which Nature never meant, shall no longer render useless if not hurtful, the Industry and Understandings of half Mankind!' (31). Astell's detractors are Anne's, she insinuates, and threaten the golden age Anne would otherwise inaugurate for England and for women. If the icon within the *Reflections* proper is the steadfast wife accommodating her husband's power while exercising her contemplative conscience, the new preface enfolds the wifely martyr's perseverance into a triumphant, even triumphalist, scene of sovereign splendour.

Astell's feminism in *Reflections* is thoroughly enmeshed with her Tory views on state power. Her rebuff to classic patriarchalism is most discernible in the way she aligns the relation of wife to husband and that between subject and sovereign *de facto* rather than *de jure*. For Astell it is not the nature of things but 'the Custom of the World [that] has put Women, generally speaking, into a State of Subjection' (10). As with other post-1688 Tory political thinkers, passive obedience and non-resistance prevail as moral duties. Wives must defer to husbands, and subjects to their sovereigns, not because of their inherent superiority or the authority they have inherited since Adam, but simply because

they happen to be in place at present. Astell's bad husband must be obeyed no less, and no more, than King William III, who (at the time of *Reflections*' first publication) occupies the throne irrespective of its rightfulness.

Cannily switching between figure and ground in likening family to state, Astell uses arguments about marriage to ridicule her ideological opponents as champions of political resistance who nonetheless cling to patriarchal privileges in their home lives. This is the context for the statements about slavery and liberty for which Astell is most remembered. Passive obedience underpins Astell's thinking about both subjects and wives. But in the interstices of *Reflections* is a kind of principled noncompliance located inwardly in the conscience, rather than outwardly in the temporal world. In a different vein, her prefatory encomium to Queen Anne imagines a female sovereignty that overthrows notions of natural womanly obedience and gives at least one woman a new way forward extrinsic to the family. *Reflections* exposes the abuses of patriarchal authority while also carving out a space for women both to withstand and ultimately overcome them. For in marriage as in the state, Astell's passive obedience may evince quietism – but not complicity.