

Mary Astell's Unlikely Feminist Revolution: Lessons on the Role of Religion in Fighting for Gender Rights in 18th-Century England, By Brandon G. Withrow

Abstract

The Christian philosopher and theologian Mary Astell (1666-1731) called for a counter-intuitive feminist revolution, which included the education of, and Protestant monastic community for, women (as an alternative to marriage), while simultaneously affirming a wife's submission to her husband. This thinker argued that the Bible does not discuss gender equality, while simultaneously basing a large portion of her case for equality on Trinitarian theology. Astell's religious nuances are reminders that the *modus operandi* of change is relative to the cultural and religious expectations of the world one is working in and the future one is seeking.¹

Following September 11, 2001, Americans were reintroduced to the world of the Middle East and along with this came the realization that gender discussions, questions of what constitutes gender-focused oppression, and how to bring about greater rights for women could not be answered by transplanting the ideals of Western feminism overseas. Transforming an entire culture's view of women requires more than changing the mind of its male leaders; it demands sympathetic attention to the religious concerns of the women within that culture.

The Christian West has not been without its own long history of differences of opinion on what constitutes gender oppression and how to address it within a religious context. This paper looks at the prominent philosopher and theologian, Mary Astell (1666-1731), as an example of an unusual plea for a feminist cultural revolution. In her day, Astell's call was radical enough to draw severe criticism from male objectors, but nuanced enough to confuse some scholars today.

One might expect that a turn-of-the eighteenth-century, Anglican, Christian woman whose life was regularly informed by the teachings and liturgy of the church might approach her challenge to gender inequality in society from several angles. She might appeal to Scripture as her vindicator, or to Whig political theory, as its rallying cry focused on individual rights and privileges for the people. Either might be an expected direction for many feminists in her day that were hoping to overthrow male authority in the church or in the household. Instead, the nuances of her religious revolt defy these expectations.

This defiance of what a feminist is and how activists have attempted to accomplish the task of equality within the West is a reminder that the work of feminism is inseparable from cultural and religious contexts. It is a noble thing for groups of differing religious backgrounds and a joint concern for human rights to come together for change. It cannot be assumed, however, that the method for progress is always the same regardless of one's context. Successful and lasting change demands a sensitive ear and deference to the culture and religious concerns of others. It may also lead to unexpected insight.

When one looks at Astell's brand of Christian feminism, there are three surprising points. First, according to Astell, Scripture has little to no interest in the gender conversation. Secondly, while Astell appeals to the Cartesian view of the immaterial soul to defend gender equality, her religious argument is centered on the orthodox insistence of the equal divinity of the Father and Son. Lastly, resulting from her Trinitarianism, Astell argues that married women should submit to their husbands as all submit to the magistrate. Each of these points, as it will be shown, are windows into the

complexities of her world and break away from contemporary feminist expectations of how one might approach social reform in her day.

Among scholars, Astell has drawn significant interest since the mid-1980s. Ruth Perry's 1986 biography, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An English Feminist*, began this flurry of work, and today specialists in political theory, feminism, and philosophy are all discovering her writings.² As will be seen, Astell is able to argue for the transformation of the social structure of England and yet maintain its stability. In Astell's view, women are to be educated, free to remain single and therefore be their own family heads. Society need not fret, however, as she is not calling for the destabilization of the family; after all, those who are already married should remain so.³ Any and all assumptions about the nature of her feminism first have to be checked against her religious concerns.

Astell's Feminism and the Bible's Silence on Equality

Mary Astell, whose public persona was reclusive, frumpy, and overly pietistic, lived just a few doors down from the seventeenth-century's most notorious bisexual and so-called "Roman whore," Hortense Mancini (1646–99), the Duchess Mazarin.⁴ In the last years of the seventeenth-century, Mancini was a shell of her former, diva self. Her husband, the wealthy Duke Armand de la Meilleraie, was an unstable Christian extremist. His compulsive behavior ventured into the absurd: he went so far as to mutilate the genitals of nude statues and forbade his maids from milking cows due to its perceived obscenity. Fearful the Duchess might find another lover, the Duke locked her up at home.

Mancini's divorce in 1666 and 1676 memoir left her to the mercy of Charles II, who provided a comfortable life, with a pension of £4,000 a year, in Chelsea.⁵ Not long after Astell moved into her Chelsea home (1686), King William ended Mancini's pension. Her death in 1699 revived discussions of the debacle and led Astell to revisit the infamous memoir in the form of her book, *Some Reflections on Marriage*, published the following year.

Some Reflections examined the Mancini tragedy with Astell's usual gift for nuance. In 1706, Astell added her famous preface to the book, in which she engaged the traditional arguments for male authority and supposed natural superiority.⁶ In this preface, Astell briefly engages the biblical arguments against gender equality with John Locke, "The Learned Paraphrast," as a main target.⁷

Like many biblical scholars of his day, Locke believed the Bible taught the natural inferiority of women. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, the Apostle Paul argues for the use of a head covering for women who are prophesying in church. In this passage, Paul indicates that a woman who does not cover her head dishonors her husband (11:5), and a man who has long hair dishonors Christ, his head (11:4, 14). The troubling quote raised by Locke was found in 11:3, which reads (in Astell's King James Version): "But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ." For Locke, this can only mean that a woman is in subjection to a man's superiority.⁸ Astell took notice of this point and engaged it.⁹

In *Some Reflections*, Astell is emphatic that Locke's Scriptural support proves more than he intends. She argues that Paul's only mention of what is true of men and women in nature is found in 11:14: "Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?" With some cheek, Astell asserts that in this statement, "there is much more said against the present Fashion of Men's wearing long Hair, than for the Supremacy they lay claim to."¹⁰ Astell reminds the reader of Paul's real point is in 11:11-12: "Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God." As she writes, "the Relation between the two

Sexes is mutual, and the Dependence Reciprocal, both of them Depending intirely [*sic*] upon God, and upon Him only; which one woul'd think is no great Argument of the natural Inferiority of either Sex."¹¹

More emphatically, Astell argues that the discussion of the natures of men and women is ultimately not a concern of the Bible, but philosophy. "Disputes of this kind, extending to Human Nature in general," writes Astell, "and not peculiar to those whom the Word of God has been reveal'd, ought to be decided by natural Reason only." The Bible "shou'd not be Interested in the present Controversy, in which it determines nothing, any more than it does between the *Copernican* and *Ptolemaic* Systems."¹²

Despite her protestations, she is aware of a few difficult passages beyond 1 Corinthians. She handles these swiftly, arguing that these passages are not prescriptive, but only descriptive:

But what says the Holy Scripture? It speaks of Women as in a State of Subjection, and so it does of the *Jews* and *Christians* when under the Dominion of the *Chaldeans* and *Romans*...But will any one say that these had a *Natural Superiority* and Right to Dominion? that they had a superior Understanding, or any Pre-eminence, except what their greater Strength acquir'd?¹³

If the Bible intended universal statements on male superiority and rule in its history, she notes, it would hardly have praised figures like Deborah, the judge of Israel (Judges 4-5). This passage, she writes, "overthrows the pretence of *Natural Inferiority*." "More might be said," she writes, "but one woul'd think here is enough to shew, that whatever other Great and Wise Reasons Men may have for despising Women, and keeping them in Ignorance and Slavery, it can't be from their having learnt to do so in Holy Scripture."¹⁴

Theology: Trinity and Gender Equality

While modern discussions among Christians on gender equality are often driven by exegetical questions, for Astell, this is far from central, and this makes her argument for change not only surprising, but a reminder to others about the necessity of religious literacy. Scholars often see Astell's argument for gender equality as starting with René Descartes' mind-body dualism.¹⁵ Descartes argued that the immaterial soul (mind) is distinct from the body. Men and women might be different physically, reasoned Astell, but the immaterial is without distinction.¹⁶ Ruth Perry writes that "Cartesian rationalism was the very cornerstone of her [Astell's] feminism...the base upon which she built the rest..."¹⁷ Patricia Springborg adds that "as long as women had souls, however they might be disqualified as bodies, they had the same right to self-improvement..."¹⁸ The non-gendered immaterial nature put men and women on level ground intellectually, so as long as the mind remained connected to the immaterial.

However, Astell's argument for immaterial equality does not end simply with Descartes' philosophy. Despite her conclusion that Scripture is not directly concerned with the subject of gender, she still has a serious religious basis for immaterial equality, and Astell turns her attention to Locke once again.

Locke's materialism, or concept of "thinking matter," was in opposition to Descartes' immaterialism and alarming for orthodox theologians. Locke challenged orthodoxy by admitting the possibility that God could give thinking power to matter, eliminating the need for the immaterial soul.¹⁹ Writes Locke: "It is possible, *i.e.* involves no Contradiction, that God the omnipotent immaterial Spirit should, if he pleases, give to some parcels of Matter, disposed as he thinks fit, a Power of Thinking..."²⁰ For Astell, this cut to the heart of Cartesian dualism, gender equality, and ultimately, Trinitarian

orthodoxy.

In the seventeenth century, a favorite theological target was that of Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), an Italian theologian, materialist, and anti-Trinitarian, who rejected the divinity of the Son.²¹ Being a creedal minimalist, Locke also never endorsed the full immaterial divinity of Christ.²² This point was important enough for Astell that by her second edition of the *Christian Religion* she gathered all sections covering Locke from the body of her book and turned them into a substantive appendix examining Locke's potential Socinianism.²³

The issues Astell had with Locke's "thinking matter," particularly in relationship with Descartes' mind-body dualism, have been, and continue to be, tackled in the literature.²⁴ In addition to that discussion, the affirmation of the Son's deity and immaterial equality with the Father was also an essential point for her egalitarianism. While Christ submits to the Father, he is still equal immaterially. In *Some Reflections* she addresses this theological point by discussing 1 Corinthians 11:3, where the Father is said to be the head of Christ. Astell argues that the Trinitarian baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19, which reads "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," speaks to their equality in substance. While Paul (1 Corinthians) states that the head of every woman is a man, he also says that the Father is the head of Christ. Astell reminds the reader that Paul is not insinuating natural "inequality," between women and men any more than he is between Christ and the Father, since it is evident "from the Form of Baptism, that there is no natural Inferiority among the Divine Persons, but that they are in all things Coequal."²⁵

In *Christian Religion*, Astell again appeals to the baptismal formula. "Now we know that there can be no inequality in the Divine Nature," she writes, "as the Scripture says nothing of a *Made GOD...GOD is One....*"²⁶ The immaterial equality of the Son with the Father is a model for the immaterial equality of men and women. Astell spends several pages in her "Appendix" demonstrating the creedal position that Christ is a "Divine Person" and "of the Substance of His Father."²⁷ Scripture may not be concerned with specific statements on gender equality, but for Astell religion is still central to it. Her brand of cultural revolution can only be understood against this theological background.

Trinitarianism and a Counter-Intuitive Revolution

Astell's feminism receives attention today because of its counter-intuitive approach to changing society. Rejecting the idea that the Bible was interested in the discussion of gender and calling for the establishment of educational institutions for women (first proposed in 1697 in her *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*) were risky. In her day, most men believed that women lacked the mental aptitude for an education, but according to Astell: "If GOD had not intended that Women shou'd use their Reason...He wou'd not have given them any, for He does nothing in vain."²⁸ God is "no Respector of Persons," as she writes. He gives out "Sense" to both men and women "with an Impartial Hand."²⁹ She also believed women should have the right and power to refuse marriage. The pressures of society made this nearly impossible as it was necessary for survival, but Astell proposed something like a Protestant monastic community for women to focus on learning and freedom.³⁰

For all her brash challenges, however, Astell was still a Tory. In a modern world, one might expect someone with her positions to try to undermine those who oppressed the women of society with marches, tweets, and pseudonymous blogs on The Huffington Post. Astell supported the divine right and rule of the monarch, including the monarch of the family. How is this possible?

In *Some Reflections* Astell writes, "If all men are born free, how is it that all

Women are born slaves?”³¹ Springborg’s reading of this statement leads to labeling Astell “a theorist of ‘freedom from domination’” and insisting that she cannot be “an out-and-out” royalist.³² The statement, as Sharon Achinstein points out, has a very different point to it than what is understood by Springborg. “Astell’s theological program is to defeat the *premise* of this theorem,” she writes, “humans are not, in her mind, ‘born free.’”³³ Achinstein convincingly argues that Astell believes that no one is born into a state of freedom. All human beings are born in subjection to God: “Astell sees hierarchy in Christian marriage not as a natural, but as a divine institution,” argues Achinstein. This means that “inequalities between men and women perceptible in the world are not a matter of divine command to Adam, but merely a historical fact, a matter of custom and prejudice.”³⁴

Moreover, her Tory political views are fueled by her Trinitarianism. The Son and Father are equal, but the Son still submits to the Father. In *Christian Religion*, Astell writes that the Son is God’s “condescension to Human Infirmary” and an example of obedience.³⁵ All humans should be like Christ and submit to their authorities, as she sees it. Christ can willingly submit, she argues, without destroying his equality.

Some non-conformists in England believed Christ was an example of a rebel, but Astell firmly rejects this. In her *Moderation Truly Stated* (1704), she writes that there cannot “be a more illustrious Example of Obedience both in Church and State, to Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical Parents, as well to His Heavenly Father, than the Blessed JESUS was.”³⁶ Likewise, women are free agents, but their freedom, like Christ’s, is to serve God. “Liberty for women consists in freedom of the will,” explains Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green, “or the freedom to decide for themselves between good and evil.”³⁷

In all of this, Astell is a prime example of a Western feminism that runs counter-intuitive to modern expectations. This perhaps makes her brand of revolution unlikely to succeed or more of an interesting artifact. It could also be understood as a reminder that inter-religious dialogue on shared issues of concern need to continually take into consideration that the *modus operandi* of change is relative to the cultural and religious expectations of the world one is working in and the future one is seeking.

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² Even her most lauded work, *The Christian Religion as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England* (1705, 1717, 1730), has only been republished as an “Appendix.” Jacqueline Broad of Monash University is currently working on a critical edition. See <http://arts.monash.edu.au/philosophy/staff/jbroad.php> [accessed online on 8-12-2011].

³ This is based on her reading of the New Testament.

⁴ Leslie Carroll, *Royal Affairs: A Lusty Romp Through the Extramarital Adventures That Rocked the British Monarchy* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 224.

⁵ Christine Mason Sutherland, *The Eloquence of Mary Astell* (Calgary, Alberta, Canada: University of Calgary Press, 2005), 81.

⁶ Mary Astell, "Some Reflections on Marriage," in *Astell: Political Writings (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought)*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: New York, 1996), 7-31 (hereafter referred to as *SRM*).

⁷ William Kolbrenner and Michal Michelson, eds., *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith* (Ashgate: Burlington, VT, 2007), 81. Originally, scholars did not realize this was Locke. Patricia Springborg (*Astell, SRM*, 20, n. 26) wrote that it was either Sir Robert Filmer (1595-1653) or William Nichols (1664-1712). Mark Goldie is the first to make the connection.

⁸ John Locke, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Galatians and Second Corinthians, Romans, and Ephesians* (Cambridge: Brown, Shattuck, and Company, 1832), 140.

⁹ William Kolbrenner and Michal Michelson, *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, 81.

¹⁰ Astell, *SRM*, 12.

¹¹ Astell, *SRM*, 13.

¹² Astell, *SRM*, 13. All quotes are to the original. Archaic English grammar and spelling have been preserved.

¹³ Astell, *SRM*, 14-15.

¹⁴ Astell, *SRM*, 24-28.

¹⁵ Current discussions are focused on her interactions with Cambridge Platonist, John Norris, but are beyond the scope of this article. For more analysis see Mary Astell and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God (Early Modern Englishwoman: a Facsimile Library of Essential Works)*, eds. E. Derek Taylor and Melvyn New (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 1-41; E. Derek Taylor, "Mary Astell's Ironic Assault on John Locke's Theory of Thinking Matter," *Journal for the History of Ideas* 62 No. 3 (July 2001): 505-22; Jacqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Cambridge, 2002): 90-113; Eileen O'Neill, "Mary Astell on the Causation of Sensation," in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, 145-64.

¹⁶ Sue Vilhauer Rosser, *Women, Science, and Myth: Gender Beliefs from Antiquity to the Present* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 40.

¹⁷ Ruth Perry, "Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18 No. 4 (Autumn 1985): 491.

¹⁸ Patricia Springborg, *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination* (New York: Cambridge, 2005), 14.

¹⁹ For more see, John W. Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1983).

²⁰ John Locke, *Mr. Locke's Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Second Letter* (London: H.C. and Churchill, 1696), 430.

²¹ Edwin McCann, "Locke's Theory of Substance Under Attack!" *Philosophical Studies* 106 (2001): 93.

²² Michael Alexander Stewart, *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke*, Vol.3 of *Oxford Studies in the History of Philosophy* (New York: OUP, 2000), 112.

²³ Astell and Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, 3.

²⁴ Patricia Springborg "Mary Astell (1666-1731), Critic of Locke," *The American Political Science Review* 89 No. 3 (Sept. 1995): 630.

²⁵ Astell, *SRM*, 11.

²⁶ Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion As Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England Containing Directions for the Due Behavior of Women in Every Station of Life* (London: W. Parker, 1730), 44 (hereafter, *CR*).

²⁷ Astell, *CR*, 305.

²⁸ Astell, *CR*, 5.

²⁹ Astell, *SRM*, 26, 21.

³⁰ Sutherland, *Eloquence*, 82

³¹ Astell, *SRM*, 18.

³² Springborg, *Theorist of Freedom*, 1, 33.

³³ William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson, *Mary Astell: Reason Gender, Faith*, 20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Astell, *CR*, 97-98.

³⁶ Mary Astell, *Moderation Truly State: or, A Review of a Late Pamphlet, Entitled Moderation A Vertue with a Prefatory Discourse to Dr. D'Aveanant Concerning His Late Essays on Peace and War* (London: J.L. Rich Wilkin, 1704), 13-16, 59.

³⁷ Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green, *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 284.

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