

Mary Astell (1666-1731)

Eileen O'Neill

Biography

Best known for her proposal to establish a women's college, Astell published on a variety of other topics: religious dissent, the social contract, the marriage contract, epistemic issues, mind-body dualism, immortality, proofs for God's existence, reason and revelation, and Locke's views on 'thinking matter'. Her correspondence with John Norris treated the pure love of God and occasionalism. On marriage she drew a shrewd contrast between the treatment of political tyranny by contractarians (such as Locke), and their failure to deal with domestic tyranny. Some of her reactions to the views of major philosophers anticipated later debates.

1. Philosophical influences on life and works

Mary Astell gained notoriety in her native England and beyond for *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies...* (1694), which advocated the founding of an Anglican academy for women. *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695) followed – her side of this correspondence with Cambridge Platonist John Norris was praised by Leibniz. Having failed to get support for her educational institution, Astell offered women a manual for improving their understanding: *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II* (1697) drew on Lockean views, Cartesian 'method', and the Port Royal Logic (see Port-Royal). After examining the marriage contract in *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700), Astell became a pamphleteer on religious and political topics, criticizing Defoe, Swift, Shaftesbury and Locke. (Swift retaliated by satirizing her in the *Tatler*.) *The Christian Religion...* (1705) responded to Locke, Damaris Masham and Archbishop Tillotson. Her circle of friends included Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, for whose posthumously published letters she wrote a preface, and the Anglo-Saxon scholar Elizabeth Elstob.

2. Social and political thought

According to Springborg (1996), the real focus of Astell's *Reflections Upon Marriage* is the 'absurdity of contractarian voluntarism'. Here, and in her pamphlets, Astell wants to show that contractarians such as Locke are reluctant to accept arguments against domestic tyranny on the basis of consent, while they press these arguments against the state. Indeed, Springborg suggests that Astell may be the first systematic commentator on Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*.

In Moderation Truly Stated... (1704a) and *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War in This Kingdom* (1704c), Astell defended the royalist cause and the Established Church, while challenging the work of James Owen and Charles Davenant; *A Fair Way with the Dissenters...* (1704b) attacked Defoe; *Bart'lemy Fair or an Enquiry after Wit* (1709) criticized Shaftesbury's *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* and charged Swift with irreligion.

3. The rejection of occasionalism

In *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, Norris had argued that God should be the sole object of our love and that Malebranche's occasionalism ensures this conclusion (see Occasionalism): all our perceptions and sensations, all our sources of pleasure, are caused solely by God. Astell had reservations about this view and, before allowing the correspondence to be published, appended a letter arguing specifically against occasionalism. Her criticisms are prefigured in medieval debates on secondary causation. The first is that 'it seems more agreeable to the Majesty of God, and that Order he has established in the World, to say that he produces our Sensations mediately by his Servant Nature, than to affirm that he does it immediately by his own Almighty Power' (1695: 281–2). Although Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles* and Molina's *Concordia* had advanced similar arguments, this objection is not conclusive (see Aquinas §3; Molina, L. de). For occasionalists, to hold that God concurs with secondary causes is to hold that God's own causal role in natural change is not sufficient to determine effects in all their specificity. They can therefore claim that their doctrine is more consistent with God's majesty than that of concurrence.

Astell's other objection is more powerful: if bodies contain 'nothing in their own Nature to qualify them to be instrumental to the Production of... sensations' (1695: 279), and if God is sufficient to cause these natural changes, then it seems God has created bodies in vain – which would be contrary to God's perfection. Aquinas had stated a like objection in *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

In place of occasionalism, Astell maintains that sensation is directly caused by mind–body interaction, and mediately caused by God. She goes beyond this Cartesian account to suggest that something like More's Neoplatonic 'plastic part of the soul' might explain the agreement between external objects and sensations (see More, H.).

4. Other metaphysical topics

The Christian Religion... attempts (1) to show how religious belief can and should be grounded in reason, (2) to determine the roles of reason and revelation, (3) to encourage women to examine Christian doctrines rationally, and (4) to examine the obligations that determine Christian practice. Towards these ends, Astell critically evaluates Archbishop Tillotson's sermons, Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Masham's *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God*, and the anonymous *Ladies' Religion*. In place of the Socinianism and scepticism she finds there, she offers her own rational accounts of revelation and Christian practice, which frequently rely on substantive metaphysical arguments (see Socinianism). For example, in addition to an ontological argument for God's existence, Astell offers a cosmological argument that turns on a 'causal likeness principle' different from that of Descartes. Her argument is vulnerable, none the less, to the well-known criticisms of Descartes' version.

She also offers a two-part argument for the immortality of the human mind: first she argues for the immortality of immaterial things, and then offers a 'real distinction' argument to prove that the mind contains none of the properties of extended matter. Her Platonic first argument bears a striking resemblance to that of Leibniz for the 'natural indestructibility' of monads:

A Being is Mortal and Corruptible, or ceases to Be, when those Parts of which it consists... are no longer thus or thus United.... Hence it follows, That a Being which is Uncompounded, which has no Parts, and which is therefore incapable of Division and Dissolution, is in its own Nature Incorruptible.... If then the Mind be Immaterial, it must in its own Nature be Immortal.

(Astell 1705: 248–9, §§257–8)

In response to the possibility of divine annihilation, she adds: ‘He does nothing in vain, and can’t be suppos’d to Make a Creature with a design to Destroy or Unmake it’. In addition to depending upon speculation about the ‘purposes of God’, this response also does not address an issue which also remained for Leibniz: the possibility of instantaneous *natural* annihilation.

Astell’s version of the real distinction argument is especially of interest in light of twentieth-century interpretations of Descartes’ argument as an epistemic one (Wilson 1978). She reasons:

When two Complete Ideas... have different Properties and Affections, and can be consider’d without any Relation to, or Dependance on each other, so that we can be sure of the Existence of the one, even at the same time we can suppose that the other does not Exist, as is indeed the case of a Thinking and of an Extended Being, or of Mind and Body; here these two Ideas, and consequently the things they represent, are truly Distinct and of Different Natures.

(Astell 1705: 248–9, §§257–8)

Astell regarded the foregoing arguments and their theological consequences as threatened by the possibility of Locke’s ‘thinking matter’. She notes that according to Locke’s Essay:

it is impossible for a Solid Substance to have Qualities, Perfections, and Powers, which have no Natural or Visible Connexion with Solidity and Extension; and since there is no Visible Connexion between Matter and Thought, it is impossible for Matter, or any Parcels of Matter to Think.

(Astell 1705: 259, §267)

This view parallels what Margaret Wilson has called Locke’s ‘official position’: all properties and powers of an object ‘stand in comprehensible or conceivable relations to its Boylean “primary qualities”’ (1979: 144). Like Wilson, Astell argues that this position is inconsistent with Locke’s view in his third letter to Stillingfleet: ‘*Some Parcels of Matter be so order’d by Omnipotence as to be endued with a Faculty of Thinking*’ (Astell 1705: 259, §267). Astell concludes that God’s superaddition of thought to matter could only create an ‘Arbitrary Union’ between matter and the faculty of thought, so that ‘it is not Body that Thinks, but the mind that is United to it, Body being still as incapable of Thought as it ever was’ (1705: 261, §269).

List of works

Astell, M. (1694) *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, For the Advancement of their true and greatest Interest*. By a lover of Her Sex, London; repr. in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies Parts I and II*, by Mary Astell, ed. P. Springborg, Brookfield, VT: Pickering & Chatto, 1996.

(An important early English text concerning women's education, which advocates the founding of an Anglican academy for women.)

Astell, M. (1695) *Letters Concerning the Love of God, Between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris: Wherein his late Discourse, shewing That it ought to be intire and exclusive of all other Loves, is further cleared and justified.* Published by J. Norris, M.A. Rector of Bemerton near Sarum, London.

(Astell's correspondence with the Cambridge Platonist who defends Malebranche's occasionalism; her appended letter makes clear her reasons for rejecting occasionalism.)

Astell, M. (1697) *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II. Wherein a Method is offer'd for the Improvement of their Minds*, London; repr. in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies Parts I and II*, by Mary Astell, ed. P. Springborg, Brookfield, VT: Pickering & Chatto, 1996.

(A manual for improving the understanding, designed for women; it draws on the views of Locke, Descartes and the Port-Royal logicians.)

Astell, M. (1700) *Some Reflections Upon Marriage, Occasion'd by the Duke and Duchess of Mazarine's Case; which is also consider'd*, London; *Reflections Upon Marriage. The Third Edition. To which is Added A Preface, in Answer to some Objections*, London, 1706.

(An examination of women's position in the 'estate of marriage'; it argues that contractarians use arguments from political tyranny against the state, but are reluctant to deal with domestic tyranny.)

Astell, M. (1704a) *Moderation truly Stated: Or, A Review Of A Late Pamphlet Entitul'd, Moderation a Vertue. With a Prefatory Discourse To Dr. D'Aveanant, Concerning His late Essays on Peace and War*, London.

(An examination of the relation between church and state, by way of a detailed rebuttal of the defence of 'occasional conformity' to the Church of England; Astell argues for strict conformity.)

Astell, M. (1704b) *A Fair Way With The Dissenters and Their Patrons. Not Writ by Mr. L[esle]y, or any other Furious Jacobite whether Clergyman or Layman; but by a very Moderate Person and Dutiful Subject to the Queen*, London.

(An attack against Defoe's satirical defence of religious toleration.)

Astell, M. (1704c) *An Impartial Enquiry Into The Causes of Rebellion and Civil War In This Kingdom: In an Examination of Dr. Kennett's Sermon, Jan. 31. 1703/4. And Vindication of the Royal Martyr*, London.

(A royalist defence, arguing that Whigs and religious dissenters erode the authority of the state by placing supreme power in the people.)

Astell, M. (1705) *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter Of The Church of England*, London.

(A response to Locke and Masham.)

Astell, M. (1709) *Bart'lemy Fair: Or An Enquiry after Wit in which due Respect is had to a Letter Concerning Enthusiasm, To my Lord * * **. By Mr. Wotton, London.

(An attack on Shaftesbury's argument that the application of good sense and pointed ridicule, rather than the elimination of liberty of conscience, are the best ways to deal with religious fanaticism.)

Astell, M. (1965) Preface to the Embassy Letters, in *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, ed. R. Halsband, Oxford: Clarendon Press, vol. 1, appendix 3.

Astell, M. (1996) *Astell: Political Writings*, ed. P. Springborg, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(This contains a useful introduction and bibliography, as well as the best modern editions of *Reflections upon Marriage*, *A Fair Way with the Dissenters and their Patrons*, and *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion*.)

References and further reading

Atherton, M. (1993) 'Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason', *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, ed. L. Antony and C. Witt, Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

(Discusses Astell's and Damaris Masham's views about reason and its relation to gender.)

Ayers, M. (1991) *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology*, London: Routledge.

(Contains important objections to Astell's charge of inconsistency in Locke's view of thinking matter.)

Ballard, G. (1752) *Memoirs of several Ladies of Great Britain...*, Oxford: W. Jackson; repr. ed. R. Perry, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1985.

(The only source of biographical data from someone roughly contemporary to Astell.)

Ferguson, M. (1985) *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578–1799*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985.

(Places Astell's social philosophy about women in its historical context; includes excerpts from *A Serious Proposal* and *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*.)

Kinnaird, J. (1979) 'Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism', *The Journal of British Studies* 19 (1): 53–75.

(An introduction to Astell's social and political views.)

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

(A detailed social and intellectual history of Astell and her times; appendices include some of Astell's letters and poems.)

Smith, F. (1916) *Mary Astell*, New York: Columbia University Press.

(The first major study of Astell; it provides a good survey of her thought.)

Smith, H. (1982) *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

(An examination of seventeenth-century social and political philosophy, and the women writers of that period who, like Astell, foreshadowed the feminism of Wollstonecraft.)

Squadrito, K.M. (1987) 'Mary Astell's Critique of Locke's View of Thinking Matter', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (3): 434–439.

(A critical treatment of Astell's objections to Locke's position.)

Squadrito, K.M. (1991) 'Mary Astell', *A History of Women Philosophers*, vol. 3, ed. M.E. Waithe, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers

. (A survey of Astell's philosophical contributions.)

Wilson, M.D. (1978) *Descartes*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

(Offers an epistemic reading of Descartes' real distinction argument which parallels that of Astell.)

Wilson, M.D. (1979) 'Superadded Properties: The Limits of Mechanism in Locke', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (2): 143–150.

(As in *The Christian Religion*, this piece charges Locke with inconsistent views regarding thinking matter.)