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Mary Astell's Female Retirement: Feminist Pedagogy and Politics in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*

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Abstract

Mary Astell's female retreat is a political project, dedicated to the full self-realization of students in a world that diminishes them and thwarts the development of their potential. Newly analyzing the pedagogical tools and distinctive setting of her seminary, I reveal its most progressive promise. In this political reading of *A Serious Proposal*, Astell emerges as an early figure in the broad political tradition of female resistance to patriarchal domination. She enables a subordinated group of women to arrive at new and oppositional ways of understanding themselves, each other, and even the world, and to act for change. The methods and tactics she employs in her retreat bring to light some surprisingly democratic and feminist dimensions of Mary Astell.

Introduction

In this article, I revisit why and how Mary Astell “proposes” a community of women in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, published in 1694 (part I) and 1697 (part II).¹ The text has garnered welcome attention in recent years, as commentators have debated such things as whether the female friendships in Astell's proposed retreat should be understood as Platonic (Kendrick 2018), Aristotelean (Broad 2009), or a little of both (Forbes 2021). These approaches represent exciting growth in a sophisticated literature on Astell, but I address two areas that will still benefit from more attention. First, in focusing so heavily on the character of female friendships, analysts sometimes narrow our focus from Astell's wide-ranging proposal to one aspect of it, and consequently make less visible some of the text's most progressive politics. Those are what I emphasize, especially by newly studying some of Astell's recommended pedagogical practices. Second, the secondary literature is rife with connections between Astell's *Proposal* and a host of male thinkers, from John Norris (Taylor 1999) and John Hicke (Apetrei 2008) to John Locke (Springborg 1995), and from Shaftesbury (Alvarez 2011) to Descartes (Sutherland 2005) to Malebranche (Ellenzweig 2003). Although these linkages have proven extremely fruitful, I hope to show more of what Astell's

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text looks like when we situate it among various threads in the history of feminist thought.² When we link any thinker with another, some aspects of their thought are amplified, some muted; connections real and imagined are equally valid and valuable, staples in the history of ideas. So, what does *Proposal* look like when linked to feminist-friendly thinkers writing both before and after Astell—what perhaps different features do *those* ties make visible, especially on the topic of pedagogy?³

My reading depends upon placing *A Serious Proposal* in a particular political context: Astell's educational village is part of her heated critique of patriarchy, also central to *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, published just six years later.⁴ I explore some of that through my analysis of the title page. I build on this with a deeper focus on what is problematic in Astell's view, and in need of alteration, socially, epistemically, and spiritually. The retreat is next explored as one possible solution (or at least a major contributor to solving these problems), especially looking at the pedagogical strategies advocated and its character as single-sex. Situated in such a context, Astell emerges as a foremother in the broad political tradition of female resistance to patriarchal domination. To resist the patriarchal status quo and work for something better, Astell's retreat promotes an alternative hierarchy of values. What Astell creates in her female seminary is what scholars like Nancy Fraser call a "counterpublic" (Fraser 1990, 67), for she enables a subordinated group of women to create "counterdiscourses" among themselves that include new and oppositional ways in which to understand themselves, each other, and even the world. As I will show, the pedagogical tools Astell recommends—self-knowledge and conversation—build both confidence and alliances, and female separatism enables these practices to flourish; feminists before and after her often adopt similar stances.

Not infrequently, commentators argue that Astell was "a profoundly conservative political thinker" and "was not an advocate for the political right of resistance" (Broad 2009, 66, 65); however, my focus on the political tools and pedagogical tactics employed in her retreat reveal an Astell who is more committed to feminist practices than we might expect from a figure we always first and conservatively mark as "High Anglican" and "Tory."⁵ Newly emphasizing critical pedagogical aspects of *A Serious Proposal* enables me to build on previous scholarship and contribute to making even better sense of the text; further, this reading provides multiple opportunities for suggestively placing Astell in the history of feminist thought. Such placement is warranted; as contemporary philosopher Rae Langton puts it, "Astell is not simply a feminist who happens to be a philosopher, or a philosopher who happens to be a feminist: her feminism and her philosophy are allies" (Langton 2000, 129).

The Title Page

Astell announces the *political* nature of her project immediately, on the title page. Several features provide both a tantalizing entry into and a theoretical frame for the book.

Astell does not initially sign her name to this (or other) work;⁶ she indicates only that the book is written "by a lover of her sex." I can find no history for the phrase. What are we to make of it (and of her assertion in *Reflections*, too, that "I love my sex" [RM, 29; also SP, 56])?

In this unique and startling authorial signature, Astell identifies *with* her potential female readers, and lays bare her deep affection for them. Repeatedly, her proposal has a basis in emotion: "I desire your improvement never so passionately" (SP, 121).

Assuring them of her love, she offers women a reason to trust her even as she condemns their way of life.⁷ This love can be understood as part of a feminist politics, and even linked to a connected way of knowing that challenges aspects of some Western epistemology.

What Astell does *not* do in this signature is adopt a disinterested, neutral, or “objective” philosophical stance (or seemingly even aspire to do so). This is perhaps unexpected; since she ridicules men who cover up their misogyny with the mask of supposedly disinterested scholarship (RM, 14), one might expect her to adopt, instead, a *properly* disinterested stance. Her surprising alternative, however, involves revealing her position, unmasking it *for* us, as it were, and establishing emotional connection with her readers. Astell *can* do this because she is confident that she can be both philosophical and committed to her sex, whereas her patriarchal opponents seemingly cannot manage to be both philosophical and political, or to acknowledge and responsibly use emotion. She refuses to see love as necessarily an impediment to philosophical inquiry; in fact, it may be a necessary means, for her “partiality” (SP, 83) enables her to know and appreciate the perspective of the subordinated group she is discussing, meaning she not only can but *must* make such a connection. Astell’s love for women is not an impediment but is positively tied to her pursuit of knowledge.

Here we can begin placing Astell in feminist traditions. One thinker who talks about the importance of love in gaining knowledge and working for liberation is Anna Julia Cooper. In “A Voice from the South” (1892), Cooper discusses how norms like “objectivity” and “statistical evidence” regularly cover up or justify unadulterated racism and sexism (in Cooper 1998). She, like Astell, sees behind these too-persuasive defenses, and injects affection into her search for an alternative. As Cooper scholar Vivian May says, Cooper “proposes that love (self-love and loving other persons) can go beyond the level of a personal or individual emotion: it can be a *site of moral reasoning* and a source for the collective struggle for liberating ‘all’ persons, not just some” (May 2007, 161; my emphasis). Such loving thinking is the polar opposite of knowing from a distance; for both Cooper and Astell, it is especially crucial when one is striving to come to know those one has (or others have) previously deemed incomprehensible or has misapprehended.

In Astell’s retreat, the students’ love for one another (“a great and dear affection to each other” [SP, 75]) is similarly deeply connected to their pursuit of knowledge. They learn collaboratively in caring, trustworthy relations. Present are both “particular Friendships” and “general Amity” (87; 100); these are critically important because “were there more Friendship we should have a better World” (98), for “tis without doubt the best Instructor to teach us our duty to our Neighbour” (99). Affection is an “instructor” and helps prudence develop.

This strategy, too, situates Astell in a feminist tradition: in addressing such problems as epistemic injustice and the epistemologies of ignorance, contemporary feminist epistemology speaks to the importance of “befriending one another as knowers,” especially in the face of systems of inequality (Olson and Gillman 2013, 75). Recent scholarship follows Astell in recognizing the “positive contributions that emotions make to knowledge and communication” (Narayan 1988, 32).

Astell’s signature is also consistent with philosopher Alison Jaggar’s assertion that there can be a “mutually constitutive rather than oppositional relation between reason and emotion” (Jaggar 2008, 385). However, when Jaggar took the Western philosophical tradition to task for considering emotion “subversive of knowledge” (378), she ignored thinkers like Astell (and Cooper), inadvertently rewriting her out of our

history.⁸ Astell is in fact *also* part of that Western tradition and quite evidently did *not* think love subversive of philosophy.⁹

Astell's *love* for women also intentionally contrasts with its direct opposite: the *hatred* of the female and the feminine that she repeatedly argues characterizes patriarchy. Astell distances herself from this ideology on the very title page, where the reader begins their journey. Feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye concurs that "*woman-loving* . . . [is] the polar opposite of misogyny" (Frye 1983, 158). This misogynist ideology mischaracterizes, misdirects, and devalues women's lives, which Astell, by contrast, will properly appreciate, especially as she directs women to ever more noble ends. The contemporary philosopher Sandra Harding claims that "at least a latent love of women deeply permeates most (all?) feminist thought," placing Astell's signature in the early stages of a long tradition, though, Harding continues, "the fact of the feminist love of women can be confusing to onlookers who are not used to the idea of loving and valuing women for themselves rather than primarily for how they serve the needs of men, children, or the dominant groups in society" (Harding 1991, 252–53). Although numerous commentators stress that Astell advocates women's equality (only) within a (conservatively) hierarchical society, this love for women, according to Harding, "appears to be a betrayal of 'the natural order'" (253) as understood by conservatives, a betrayal that Astell easily endorses.

By including in the title that the "Serious Proposal" is "for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest," Astell further reveals that women's "true and greatest interest" is currently *not* being "advanced"; in fact, women have been actively directed *away from* their true interest because the existing social system works against them—it is not in their interest. Astell's title, like her signature, recognizes the existence of and rejects patriarchal misogyny, inviting readers to open themselves to doing the same.

Overall, the title page offers the first clues that Astell is not asking only for changes in individual women—for their personal reform or transformation, as some contest—but for societal change as well. She is, after all, a *political* thinker. She is demanding, she signals here, inquiry that is not compromised by its covert grounding in patriarchal values (however dressed up in theological, political, or philosophical necessity) but that is, instead, overtly grounded in more feminist-friendly values that make us better thinkers who might enable *everyone* to lead better lives. Disinterest and dispassion are neither required nor even particularly helpful in this enterprise. She is also demanding a culture that appreciates and loves women, as she does, rather than despising them, and that even extends their reformed influence. In the body of the text, the politics of the title page are buttressed and further developed.

Astell's Critique of the Status Quo

To examine Astell's female retreat as a positive political project, we first need briefly to recall her biting critique of women's subordination and the culture that supports it. The retreat then emerges as a solution to the status quo: a place where the looming threats to women will be averted and their deficiencies remedied. "Feminism begins," Harding reminds us, "with a sense of moral outrage at how women are treated in both word and deed" (Harding 1991, 253). The structure of *Serious Proposal* is first to show "those inconveniences to which Ladies are expos'd by living in the World, and in the next place the positive advantages of a Retreat" (SP, 89). Astell proceeds through this strategy at least twice (the presentation is, perhaps, more spiral than linear), focusing

first on what we might call social deficiencies and remedies, and then on epistemic problems and solutions.

The basic problem, Astell asserts, is the miseducation of daughters:¹⁰ “The Cause therefore 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 . . . spreads its ill Influence through all our Lives” (SP, 59–60). As she documents in *Reflections*, Astell’s contemporaries lived in a world where women were “beat, not *for* but *from* the Muses; Laughter and Ridicule . . . drive them from the Tree of Knowledge” (RM, 28). She remarks, possibly from firsthand knowledge, that women who possess some learning “are star’d upon as Monsters” (28), and in *Proposal* she dismisses those who “make[] the most Grimace at a Woman of Sense” (SP, 232). Under patriarchal rule, whatever intelligence women have must be masked with what Astell calls an “affected Ignorance,” since “serious thought” by women is considered incompatible with being entertaining, nice, and attractive to men (125), the more important social objectives. “Patriarchy rewards (at least pretended) ignorance in women, and punishes (even the appearance of) intelligence” (Weiss 2016, 143).

As Astell summarizes the problem, “nurs’d up in Ignorance and Vanity,” two terrible teachers,¹¹ we have taught females “to be proud and Petulant, Delicate and Fantastick, Humorous and Inconstant” (SP, 61), a damning if elegant list of feminine vices.¹² Their poor training leaves women vulnerable to the deceits of men¹³ and misconceptions of virtue, which leads them to “lavish out the greatest part of [their] Time and Care, on the decoration” of their bodies rather than on the perfection of their minds or souls (66), in order to please men who largely control their fate. Women ultimately internalize pervasive patriarchal values and judgments. But, Astell contends, they are trying to gratify men who are hardly worth their time and who, furthermore, actually loathe them for their efforts (65). Striving to meet standards men ridicule them for pursuing, in the end men can enslave women (109) who embody feminine so-called virtues.

Astell next emphasizes the neglected “delights” of the mind. Women learn only from the senses and from “Trifles,” she says,¹⁴ which results in “a very partial knowledge of things, nay, almost a perfect ignorance in things of the greatest moment” (SP, 90). Their ideas of the most critical matters, such as “*God Religion, Pleasure and Pain, Honour and Dishonour*,” become “strong and fixt” even though they are in error, and, she says, it is “scarce possible to introduce a new Scheme of Thoughts and so to disabuse us” (90). Women are often both mistaken and ill-prepared to learn better.

The “Toys and Vanities of the world” keep from women “a due knowledge of the most important things” (SP, 92), and hurriedness leaves them with “no opportunities for thoughtfulness and recollection” (94).¹⁵ Consequently, Astell concludes, “like Machins we are condemn’d every day to repent [repeat] the impertinencies of the day before, [which] shortens our Views, contracts our Minds, exposes [us] to a thousand practical Errors, and renders Improvement impossible” (94).

Astell’s critique is broad in its reach. She condemns the social priorities of her time, which she might argue are almost in inverse order. She captures social problems through her criticisms of both what is venerated, including fashion and superficial wit, and what is disdained, such as religion, true friendship, and the educated woman. Destructive gendered dynamics misdirect both sexes away from constructive relationality and from concern with the mind and soul; in addition, these dynamics make women vulnerable to the misconduct of corrupted men who have power over them.

Strategizing for Change

To equip young women to go against the status quo, Astell has to enable them to resist its most powerful weapons for enforcing conformity: public opinion and custom. And she has to appeal, through her love, to women damaged by subordination, women largely “functionally illiterate,” to boot (Sutherland 1991, 148).

Astell hopes to get her female readers to see that they should care about the opinions of different, better parties: people who have true and empowering ideas, rather than those who want to subordinate and take advantage of them. They should also focus on their internal standards: “the calm and secret Plaudit of her own Mind” (SP, 64). Public opinion proves an inadequate guide to socially productive or ethical behavior; she contrasts the value that opinion sets on matters to their “real worth” (51). The power opinion exerts keeps women from aspiring to the most ennobling endeavors and grasping the most beautiful, delightful truths; prejudices “are the grand hindrance in our search after Truth . . . [they] hinder the free range of our thoughts and . . . erect a Tyranny over our free born Souls” (133).

In the retreat, Astell will provide women with truly *estimable people* who will be better and more collaborative influences. Both the teachers and others attending the retreat will set different, and better, standards that encourage women “to advance and perfect [their] Being” (SP, 62). They must, in particular, stop overvaluing the opinions of men, including men’s prejudicial views on women; Astell goes so far as to say, “We value *them* too much, and our *selves* too little, if we place any part of our worth in their Opinion” (55).¹⁶

Next, Astell hopes to encourage women to resist custom as they might any tyrannical force that wants to “manacle the Will” (SP, 139) and get them to abide by the most meaningless and injurious norms: “dare to break the enchanted Circle that custom has plac’d us in” (55), she challenges. The “Custom of the World . . . affix to their direct contraries . . . these venerable Names” of “Love and Honour” (63), encouraging women mistakenly to pursue corrupt, demeaning practices. Custom reinforces women’s poor education: “Ignorance and a narrow Education, lay the Foundation of Vice, and Imitation and Custom rear it up” (67).

Many feminist thinkers have, like Astell, wrestled with the power of opinion and custom to erect obstacles to women’s freedom and autonomy. Wollstonecraft recognized how Rousseau’s affection for women’s sex-specific virtue of “modesty” made women dangerously dependent on the opinions of others—on the authority of men (MacKenzie 1993, 40–41). John Stuart Mill, famous for writing on the tyranny of the majority, saw as the obstacle to feminism the fact that people’s “feelings connected with this subject [are] the most intense and most deeply-rooted of all those which gather round and protect old institutions and customs” (Mill 1869/1988). He recognized that “the burthen is hard on those who attack an almost universal opinion” (2). He said, “I do not therefore quarrel with them [antifeminists] for having too little faith in argument, but for having too much faith in custom and the general feeling” (3).

In listing the “advantages” of the retreat, the first one noted is that “it helps us to mate [rival] Custom and delivers us from its Tyranny” (SP, 94). This is no small task, as Astell speaks of custom in dramatic terms, such as “that merciless torrent that carries all before” it (67). Astell will help women find the *epistemic confidence* and authority to question such conventions, so that they will follow rational principles of behavior rather than the customary forms that make them unfree (Detlefsen 2016, 85).¹⁷ Both *Proposal* and *Reflections* contain numerous, heartfelt pleas to women to grasp

what is at stake in resistance to custom, from “our Liberty” (SP, 120) and our “own interest” (121) to “tranquility of mind” (123) and the chance “to brighten and enlarge your Soul” (122). Women need earnestly to believe, as Astell does, that “it is in your Power to regain your Freedom, if you please but t’endeavour it” (121).

Astell easily concedes that for those used to abiding by the values of the status quo, it is hard “to quit an old road” (SP, 94). Doing so requires of women “courage as well as prudence” (95), or both epistemic *and* political virtue. She warns that women must learn to withstand “all the Scoffs and Noises of the world” (95).¹⁸ She recognizes that “she who would endeavor to put a stop to [custom’s] Arbitrary Sway. . . is in a fair way to render her self the *Butt* for all the Fops in Town” (95), but encourages women to be “above unjust Censures” and “empty Laughter” (120–21).¹⁹ Astell also reassures potential students that there is no shame in needing to learn (124–25), and reminds them that they luckily already possess tools they need to improve themselves; for example, rather than devotedly contending for empty victories, they can redirect their ambition “to the best *things*” (53).²⁰ Too, though the changes Astell advocates can seem overwhelming tasks, she insightfully recalls to her readers “the Labour and Cost. . . Money [and] Pains t’obtain a gay outside” (121) that can be withdrawn and redirected. Still, she honestly acknowledges that “we can’t do *any* thing, much less what’s Great and Excellent without some Pain and Weariness”; fortunately, “we are all on Fire, and only want to know wherein to employ our Activity” (133), and “brave Spirits delight to stem the Tide” (140).

Astell unpacks these various dynamics as a strategist preparing women to do political battle. Even the appeal to women’s ambition, as political theorist Teresa Bejan has recently argued, was “the best way to inspire her sisters” (Bejan 2019, 794); it was an ongoing concern of Astell’s how to “excite a generous Emulation in my Sex [and] persuade them to leave their insignificant Pursuits for Employments worthy of them” (cited in Bejan). Continuing to think strategically, I argue next, Astell also contends for the necessity of separation, as well as for the tools of what we can recognize as feminist-friendly pedagogy.

The Retreat

“And now,” Astell announces, “having discovered the Disease and its cause, ‘tis proper to apply a Remedy” in order to “improve her Sex in Knowledge and true Religion” (SP, 72). Her proposal “is to erect a *Monastery*, or. . . a *Religious Retirement*, and such as shall have a double aspect, being not only a Retreat from the World for those who desire that advantage, but likewise, an Institution and previous discipline, to fit us to do the greatest good in it” (73). She says this “Happy Retreat” will introduce women into a “such a *Paradise* as your Mother *Eve* forfeited” (74). Boldly continuing to call up Eden, Astell pledges that there will be “no Serpents to deceive you. . . in these delicious Gardens” (74), and that students will at last be “invited to tast of that Tree of Knowledge [men] have so long unjustly *monopoliz’d*” (83). Returning to the ideas of the title page, Astell says that women will learn what “it *concerns* them to know, and which tends to their real interest and perfection” (78).

The tradition in which we can place this general effort is long and ongoing. Preceding Astell, we recall Christine de Pizan building a “city of ladies,” which would be “a refuge and defense against the[ir] various assailants” and could change the course of “a war in which women have had no defense” (Pizan 1405/1982, 10); it was to be established for “women worthy of praise” (11). Succeeding Astell,

Voltaireine de Cleyre warned against underestimating either “the force of early influence” or the power of “the school,” and suggested that secular education should “instruct its children in their earliest infancy to think—think for themselves” (de Cleyre 1887/2005, 181) and higher education should embody “enthusiasm for the liberation of mankind from mental slavery” (186). The *Declaration of Sentiments* included among its list of grievances—evidence of men’s tyranny—that “He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her” (Stanton 1848b/2004). Female seminaries had recently popped up all over the United States, including Emma Willard’s Troy Female Seminary (1821) and Catharine Beecher’s Hartford Female Seminary (1823). All this is to say that education, including that in single-sex settings, has long been of interest to feminists, and in women’s defense.

In Astell, two important pedagogical tools are used in the retreat to accomplish its goals, both understudied. The first involves self-knowledge, the second, dialogue. The two operate together, and do so, third, in a distinctive space. Links with feminist thinkers before and after her are abundant on these subjects.

Self-knowledge

Early in *Proposal*, Astell encourages women to “reflect[] on your own Minds” and “to consult . . . with your own thoughts” (SP, 52). She suggests that “a Woman, if she truly understood her self,” would not “be affected either with the praises or calumnies of those worthless persons, whose Lives are a direct contradiction to Reason, a very sink of corruption” (66). Women’s lack of self-knowledge translates to vulnerability to the deceivers Astell repeatedly lambasts. Thus, she calls on women to “reflect on our own minds . . . [to] rescue our selves out of that woeful incogitancy [thoughtlessness] we have slipt into” (95).

In the retreat, women would have the opportunity “to look into themselves, to be acquainted at home and no longer the greatest strangers to their own hearts” (SP, 73). The idea that women in a corrupted world are “strangers to their own hearts” bespeaks a deep alienation that cries for remedy (and conjures the possibility that certain knowledge has been suppressed). The implication is that women in patriarchal societies are more acquainted with what they are *supposed* to be, as determined by men, than with what they themselves desire; they are more acquainted with men’s corrupted hearts than with their own.

Perhaps surprisingly, questions about women’s self-knowledge have broad appeal in contemporary feminist epistemology (though the discussions have not drawn on Astell). Sara Ahmed describes the struggles that arise because feminists “do not want what others want you to want (Ahmed 2017, 53 and 55), struggles involving how to know and hold on to one’s (best) self; Rae Langton parses exactly what it might mean for women to lack self-knowledge (Langton 2000, 131–32), especially nonharmful knowledge; and Miranda Fricker describes how women (and other oppressed groups) lack concepts needed to understand and to convey their own experiences, due to hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007).

This issue has *long* been of concern to feminist-sympathizing thinkers, too, who have talked about the importance of self-knowledge in a stunning variety of ways. Among the earliest philosophical writings we have, Aesara of Lucania (circa 425 BCE or as late as 100 CE) said that through introspection into our own nature we can understand “the technical structure of three areas of human law: individual morality, laws governing

the moral basis of the family, and laws governing the moral foundation of social institutions” (in Waithe 1987, 24). Aesara wrote, “By following the tracks within himself whoever seeks will make a discovery: law is in him and justice, which is the orderly arrangement of the soul” (20). As in Astell, a failure to have self-knowledge results in a failure to understand the world. Along similar lines, Christine de Pizan’s 1405 *Book of the City of Ladies* features as a main character Lady Reason, whose otherworldly gift is “clear self-knowledge,” revealing people’s “essences [and] qualities,” their “own special qualities and faults” (Pizan 1982, 9). In Christine’s case as in Astell’s, the negative characterizations of women uttered by male authorities in every field had caused her to doubt what she had thought she knew about herself and other women, and she is called to return to and build upon that more accurate self-knowledge, now more firmly reestablished as credible. Frances Wright (1795–1852), to draw from yet another tradition, divided knowledge into two categories: knowledge of ourselves (from anatomy to natural history) and knowledge of the world around us (Wright 1834/2004). Knowledge of ourselves enables us to understand human nature, and then to assess other knowledge claims on the basis of their consistency with it; it is critical to leading an intellectually alive and reliable life. Clearly, this issue has received sustained feminist attention for centuries, and is consistently treated as quite consequential.

Astell does not raise this issue of self-knowledge only in *Proposal*; in *Reflections*, too, she rues the fact that woman “puts her Fortune and Person entirely in his Powers; nay even the *very desires of her Heart* . . . so as that it is not lawful to Will or Desire any thing but what he approves and allows” (RM, 48, my emphasis). Astell reveals the social cause of the alienation: the world does not want women to have self-knowledge; it is more important that they know what men desire, and that they subsume their will—“the very desires of [their] heart”—to that of men.

In response, Astell says repeatedly, women in the retreat will learn “by looking into our own Hearts” (SP, 216), which she calls “one of the best Books we can Study” (216–17), and she confirms that women will leave the retreat “intimately acquainted with our own Hearts” (234). Self-knowledge, “consult[ing]. . . with your own thoughts” (52) and “car[ing] about that which is really your *Self*,” especially that “particle of Divinity within you” (53), appears, interestingly and repeatedly, as both a method and a goal. Astell redirects women’s attention from confining aspects of the body (fashion, beauty) to the more stable and important—mind, soul, and heart—as the objects of self-knowledge.

One should know many things about one’s self according to Astell, and, importantly, she prudently adds, one must be open to such knowledge having to evolve over the course of one’s life.²¹ Knowing that each of us has different abilities, Astell encourages us, for example, “To Know our own Strength” (SP, 154), “Capacities” (156), and “Particular Passions” (216), and to “observ[e] the bent and turn of our own Minds, which way our Genius lies and to what it is most inclin’d” (153). We might gather which “Studies and Employments . . . Nature has fitted us for” (157). Astell describes one’s heart as a “faithfull Director” and a “Master within us” (156). We cannot “proceed to the Cure of . . . the Defects of our Mind” (158), Astell declares, without self-knowledge.

For Astell, women’s reflective and sustained look inward is preferable to three more common and overlapping things: being ignorant about one’s own desires, thoughts, tendencies, and value; being guided primarily by someone else’s (often unholy) desires and prejudicial views; and being overly concerned with how others see us, externally, rather than with our internal development. As philosopher Lisa Shapiro captures it, looking

inward will teach women “that one is capable of . . . inward beauty in oneself” and that such beauty can be cultivated (Shapiro 2013, 338). It transforms women’s overwhelming concern with how others see them and what others want of them into an awareness of their true nature and worth, as rational, moral, spiritual, and passionate beings.²²

Scholars have not yet paid much attention to this method and goal of learning in *A Serious Proposal*; nonetheless, it plays a large role in Astell’s thought. It will end the practice she despises of women being “insensible of their own worth” (SP, 59). It will render women less vulnerable to the deceptions and seductions of men—a much-repeated refrain—because, as Shapiro argues, for early modern women, an internal focus entails “a kind of inward form of self-possession, a grip on one’s thoughts, a confidence in making the moves of reasoning proper to thinking” (Shapiro 2013, 344). Astell’s advocacy of self-possession and well-grounded self-confidence in women contrasts mightily with her status quo—with women being strangers to their own hearts and shrinking under the power of public opinion and custom. As method and goal, self-knowledge shifts the focus away from and undermines patriarchy’s spurious truth claims about women.

The value Astell places on women’s self-knowledge, the potential she sees in it, can be linked in yet more ways to feminist theory. Educational theorist Elana Michelson describes, like Astell, how feminist pedagogy assumes “that the lives of women . . . are sites from which authoritative knowledge can be generated” (Michelson 1996, 631). This approach calls attention to women as “unauthorized agents of knowledge” (629) who might dare to learn from their “epistemologically unsanctioned lives” (649). And no one more than Audre Lorde has testified to the fact that women “have been taught to suspect this resource” (Lorde 1978, 53), to distrust their internal knowledge and energy, what she calls “the *yes* within ourselves” (57). Lorde agrees with Astell that women’s self-knowledge has been suppressed, and that its suppression, as Lorde puts it, “keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined” (58). The residents in Astell’s retreat might, through introspection, discover that they are beings “not made for servitude” (Langton 2000, 129).

In Astell, self-reflection is an active, difficult (SP, 100, 185), and ongoing (216) process, not only a means of knowing about one’s own one mind, but ultimately necessary to come to know one’s friends, and to understand human nature, morality, and God; feminist thinkers before and after her, we have seen, make similar claims. Astell thus prescribes for women a relatively accessible way of knowing, and counts what women learn this way as knowledge. Perhaps unexpectedly, Astell is recommending a pretty feminist pedagogy: one that trusts and treats women as knowers whose new epistemic confidence will enable them to challenge injurious aspects of the world around them. Later figures in the philosophy of education like John Dewey and Paulo Friere are famous for celebrating and building on self-knowledge among unexpected, everyday knowers; it is intriguing to consider the extent to which Astell can be linked to such democratic luminaries, or the extent to which their political projects reveal something of the importance of Astell’s emphasis on self-knowledge.

Conversation

To fully grasp Astell’s educational politics requires that we add her next pedagogical practice, which is similarly underemphasized in the literature: a certain mode of conversation. She says we can *only* learn “the several workings of Human Nature, [as well as] the little turns and distinctions of Various Tempers” through “Conversation and the

Reflections it Occasions” (SP, 216). (This, too, suggests possible links to figures like Dewey and Friere, who emphasize shared inquiry and the interrogation of experience.)

Conversation is perhaps Astell’s most revered method, her preferred pedagogy,²³ more important even than the substance of the curriculum.²⁴ Astell thinks corruption in the world is apparent in the fact that we find “serious discourse . . . disagreeable” and think “pertinent and useful Conversation” is “rude and barbarous” (SP, 102). Her contemporaries have become both incapable and undesiring of elevating discourse. In the conversations that do occur, nothing is sacred, as “Vertue her self as bright as she is, can’t escape the lash of scurrilous Tongues” (108). In this upside-down set of values, we tolerate only “Lecture[s] on the Fashions” (102). Impoverished discourse brings vice and ignorance in its wake and prevents virtue and knowledge from being developed or supported. We need better conversation. It can become the means to knowledge and agency, and ultimately to social change.²⁵

William Kohlbrenner has shown how the conversation Astell deplors structured exchanges between men and women, especially in courtship; there we find “a sexual politics defined entirely in terms of inauthenticity” (Kohlbrenner 2003, 10). Men engage in all sorts of flattery, artifice, and flights of imagination in order to deceive women about their true intentions: “exploitation, whether political or sexual, emerges for Astell as a function of self-interested misrepresentation” (16). Women get brought into that sort of exchange, for here, as elsewhere, men govern. In 1784, Judith Sargent Murray similarly mourned the fate of women who would “fall a sacrifice to some worthless character, whose interest may lead him to the most hyperbolic lengths in the round of flattery” (Murray 1784/1995, 46).

Women’s minds, in particular, are negatively affected by the content of their conversation, distracted and preoccupied by matters that narrow and limit them, even while keeping them busy. If we converse only about “trifles” (SP, 90), Astell writes, “our minds themselves become as light and frothy as those things they are conversant about” (68). What she calls our “Thinking Power” (163) develops from a multiplicity of factors, including the education we receive, the reading we pursue, and the conversations we participate in (164), engagement that can either constrict or enhance our “Thinking Power.”²⁶

Astell uses many descriptors for desirable social exchange: such conversation can be “exemplary” (SP, 89), “holy” (95), “pertinent and useful” (102), “ingenious” (74, 106), “instructive” (74), and “pious” (194). Her preferred mode of exchange is contrasted with “Idle twattle” (204), and with the ways we try to impress one another using methods full of error and vice, such as superficiality and “Volatileness of Thought” (160), that actually hinder our pursuit of wisdom. But through better conversation we can correct one another’s faults (89; also 123), build our capacity for “Contemplation and the Exercises of the Mind” (160), and make “Proselytes to heaven” (102). Even with such esteemed ends, dialogue is still described as “entertaining” and “agreeable” (123), having a “gentile and easy air” (196).

Astell’s conversations seem to *require* as well as to *shape* a certain temper, in an ongoing process: “too much of either . . . Mirth [or] Melancholy,” for example, “render[s] us unfit to Converse with our selves or others” (SP, 215), but the effect of good conversation is also to “procure us a more serious Temper, a graver Spirit” (96, my emphasis). Each interlocutor possesses a positive view of themselves—one we have seen emerge in the focus on self-knowledge—but a sense of self that is also reasonably modest and humble (see 154–55, 194). Interlocutors are open to seeing the limits of their knowledge, and to learning from others (164). Conversing well helps develop

a temper that is willing and able to participate in more conversation, which increases wisdom and leads to a better temper that desires more discourse, and so on. Astell advocates and prepares us for continuing education.

Denied formal learning opportunities, much of women's education had in fact been relational. Those relations, however, "have made them morally and intellectually vicious" (Forbes 2021, 488). But now new relations born from and birthing new ways of conversing will give rise to different knowledge—knowledge of important things, from the self to one's friends to ethics to God, and will leave in the dust previous knowledge of witticisms and fashions. Importantly, the conversations in the "happy Society" (SP, 87) of the retreat take place among friends—trustworthy friends concerned with one another's true interest. Transformation will be a collaborative process—the means are dialogical, and the goal is not just improving the self but also the other, and eventually even more others outside the retreat, as we will see in a moment.

This pedagogical tool, like the earlier one of self-knowledge, has democratic aspects. First, like self-knowledge, conversation is accessible to most everyone. Astell notes that conversation about the most ordinary, everyday subjects can be fruitful: "every Turn in our own and our Neighbor's life will be Useful to us" (SP, 215). Second, the relation of the speaker to the listener in conversations is different from the relationship between a lecturer and a listener. Using political language, literary scholar Jane Donawerth argues that Astell's more democratic "mode of inquiry . . . liberate[s] the audience from a dictatorship by the speaker" (Donawerth 1998, 197). Interlocutors are neither dictated to nor passive but lead each other to knowledge. Finally, entailed in this conversational dynamic is the implication that one is listened to; because each learns "when to use and when to hold one's Tongue" (SP, 106), conversations can bring women to voice.

In twentieth-century feminism, shared experience learned about through honest dialogue in consciousness-raising (CR) groups (especially popular in the 1960s and 70s) provided a means and model of how to move from (isolated, personal) experience to (shared, relational) knowledge to (collective) action. The dialogical method of CR groups enabled women "to challenge[] the hegemonic discourse and material institutions" (Michelson 1996, 635). Beginning from themselves, but not stopping with unexamined or isolated experience, women repudiated much that had carried the banner of authoritative knowledge. In order to avoid simple reliance on personal experience as universally authoritative, we need Astell's second feminist tool of discourse: the possibility of reflecting together on experience, the possibility of moving from what we learned in the world to what we can learn together about the world (641).²⁷ Astell recommends that "our *united Strength* shou'd be employ'd in the search" for truths (SP, 154, my emphasis).

Astell's pedagogy brings together in mutually profitable relationships women who were isolated from or competitive with one another. It treats them as capable knowers and supports the dialogical tools they need to improve. It puts them in an environment where they learn from and with one another. Their conversation enables and motivates them to question the status quo.

Teachers

Astell's teachers fit right into this scheme and add to my novel reading of her text. They support and supplement the politically informed, feminist-friendly resources available to students through self-knowledge and conversation. The traits the teachers will possess include "consummate Prudence, sincere Piety and unaffected Gravity" (SP, 87), or

practical wisdom, religiosity, and dignity. These are the same traits they aspire to bring out in their students—the teachers are models, as the students will later be for others. The teachers, furthermore, are ones “Whose scrutiny into their own hearts has been so exact, they fully understand the weaknesses of human Nature, are able to bear with its defects, and by the most prudent methods procure its Amendment” (88); self-knowledge plays a critical role for them, too. The teachers “assert their Authority when there is just occasion for it,” and, because they have “perfect government of themselves, therefore rule according to Reason.” They are nonetheless “lov’d and reverenc’d” because they employ “tenderness and prudence . . . sweetness and affability” (SP, 88).²⁸

The virtues the teachers embody and pass on are completely opposite traditional female virtues, for Astell’s potential students, she never tires of reminding us, are not prudent, pious, and grave, but imprudent, impious, and “light and frothy” (SP, 68), when not “cheap and contemptible” (51). The interaction between teacher and student is relatively dialogical, as is that between students: “Piety,” for example, “shall not be roughly impos’d, but wisely insinuated, by a perpetual Display of the Beauties of Religion in an exemplary Conversation” (89). The teacher models both true female virtue and constructive social relations that differ dramatically from those in the world outside the retreat. Students are not passive recipients of their teachers’ wisdom, but active participants in the co-creation of knowledge, as feminist pedagogy requires.

To see the politics here, compare Astell’s pedagogy with bell hooks’s work in “Toward a Revolutionary Feminist Pedagogy.” hooks’s favorite teacher taught “an oppositional world view—different from that of our exploiters and oppressors,” enabling students “to look at ourselves, at the world around us critically—analytically—to see ourselves first and foremost as striving for wholeness, for unity of heart, mind, body, and spirit” (hooks 1965/1999, 48). hooks might argue that Astell’s teachers are likewise engaging in “education for critical consciousness” (48) when they develop in women what Astell calls “a well-inform’d and discerning Mind” (SP, 64). Further, just as hooks’s teacher was “committed to the full self-realization of [their] students,” which she calls “necessarily and fundamentally radical” (hooks 1965/1999, 49), Astell’s instructors teach women to reject the negative things said about the female sex and instead to value the highest in themselves, to “live up to the dignity of their Nature” (SP, 57). Finally, rather than integrating students “into the logic of the present system and bring[ing] about conformity to it” (hooks 1965/1999, 49, quoting Richard Shaull), hooks continues, revolutionary feminist pedagogy prepares students to “participate in the transformation of their world,” a goal, we will shortly see, Astell shares.

A focus on Astell’s teachers strengthens the idea that the retreat is a political project, pedagogically dedicated to the full self-realization of students and others in a world that belittles them and thwarts the development of their potential. But even more is required to encourage self-knowledge and facilitate these relatively democratic, empowering conversations among self-confident students and between students and teachers. These pedagogical practices need a distinctive setting: a separatist female space.

Separatism

We more often place Astell in traditions of Aristotelean friendship, Cartesian epistemology, or Lockean politics than something like feminist separatism; most commentators briefly acknowledge the separatist space Astell advocates, but do not fully mine its importance. When we put Astell in that feminist separatist tradition, important aspects of her work become more visible. Women love what is virtuous in one another in the

seminary, and *become* better people, together, building mutually enhancing relationships. These active processes require a setting conducive to them, especially when the world is hostile to them in any number of ways. Women need a place to become good, charitable, loving, self-confident, just, thoughtful, pious, and prudent; this requires “be[ing] kept secure, from the rude attempts of designing Men” (SP, 102).²⁹

Marilyn Frye defines feminist separatist spaces as “separation of various sorts or models from men and from institutions, relationships, roles and activities which are male-defined, male-dominated and operating for the benefits of males and the maintenance of male privilege—this separation being initiated or maintained, at will, *by women*” (Frye 1983, 96). Like Fraser’s diverse counterpublics, Frye’s separatist spaces come in a variety of forms, ranging from women’s weekly CR groups to lesbian land. Their shared purpose involves challenging male domination. Astell seems a worthy foremother in this tradition, meeting every aspect of Frye’s definition. She frees women from men’s deceitful and injurious sway over them, an influence that serves only narrow male interests. She prepares them to question the “male-defined” world as they re-examine everything from how women are characterized to how the Bible is interpreted. She focuses on and celebrates women’s relationships with one another, and what those relationships make possible, preparing some women to thrive outside of marriage (through female friendships, which, Kendrick argues, “provid[e] women with a divinely authorized alternative to the male-female bond of marriage” [Kendrick 2018, 48]), and others to enter more egalitarian marriages.³⁰ The separation is voluntary, and maintained by women, as membership in Astell’s school is “voluntary and free, and no other tye but the Pleasure, the Glory and Advantage of this blessed Retirement . . . confine her to it” (SP, 89).

Frye emphasizes the rich possibility separatism offers for redefinition. She writes, “When our feminist acts or practices have an aspect of separation, we are assuming power by controlling access and simultaneously by undertaking definition” (Frye 1983, 105). The more powerful usually get to do the defining—“definition,” Frye states, “is another face of power” (105). Women do not possess what Frye calls “semantic authority” (106).

But when we end women’s isolation, competition, and powerlessness by bringing them together, separately and under certain conditions, “we are able,” according to Frye, “to arrogate definition to ourselves” (106), or to “expand discursive space,” as Fraser says (Fraser 1990, 67).³¹ Astell’s entire project contests the definition of woman as rightly uneducated and largely uneducable, especially in fields she recommends for them such as theology and philosophy. She writes that men lay claim to “Superior Genius” and assert the “*Natural Inferiority* of our Sex . . . as a Self-Evident and Fundamental Truth” (RM, 9). She, however, suggests that men blame women as having by nature the weaknesses that are in fact the *product* of inequality: “Women are from their very Infancy debar’d those Advantages, with the want of which, they are afterwards reproached, and nursed up in those Vices which will hereafter be upbraided to them” (SP, 60). Astell’s retreat is a way to deny men continued power to define women and desirable social relations.³² This separation bears even more fruit when women engage outside the retreat.

Changing Others

One more piece contributes to my reading of *A Serious Proposal*, this one regarding the retreat’s ability to effect change beyond its gates. We saw that in the very first sentence

where Astell introduces the retirement, she speaks of its “double aspect” (SP, 73). In addition to bringing about self-improvement, the school enables great good to be done in the world (232).³³

Feminism is inconceivable without a “mission” of social change; even if “the personal is political,” personal change alone does not a movement make. Whether focusing on women’s behaviors in the home (mothering, domestic labor, sexual relations), on women’s opportunities in the public sphere (education, suffrage, paid labor), or issues in the world more generally (prisons, war, racism), feminists by definition advocate social change.

I highlight a political purpose of the school: its link to social change. Astell’s proposed female friendships are undoubtedly close moral and spiritual relationships, as Alessa Johns and Nancy Kendrick ably and differently demonstrate (Johns 1996; Kendrick 2018), but they are also political bonds built in a collaborative environment that is political as well as educational in structure and intent. Much commentary holds otherwise. For instance, Simone Webb writes that “The result of Astell’s method won’t be a societal change that provides women with rights and opportunities: rather, it takes the form of individual women’s internal transformation. . . . Her attention is on individual self-improvement, not on communal resistance to oppression” (Webb 2018). I agree that one of Astell’s goals is “self-improvement” but differ when it comes to her supposedly minimal disposition toward “communal resistance to oppression.” Jacqueline Broad similarly writes that “it is not immediately clear how such female friendships [in the retreat] might bring about social reform in a more general sense”; she asserts that in only “one or two passages” does Astell perhaps suggest that female friendship might be “a socially disruptive force” (Broad 2009, 84). I think, instead, that Astell suggests the possibility of “social disruption” in a great many passages, only some involving those intense female friendships. Astell states, “It is not my intention that you shou’d seclude your selves from the World” (SP, 231). She hopes to influence practice, and the future.

Women are not only redefining themselves in the school, they are reevaluating the social landscape. The critique Astell expects is devastating. She says, for example, that women in the retreat will come to “*despise* . . . the vain Pumps and Pageantry of the world” (SP, 74), “*spurning* away these empty nothings” (98). She advises them to “*Disengage* our selves from all our former Prejudices” (133). And as they educate others, she adds, they will “strive to *divorce* them from such Objects as they’re endear’d and fastned to by a thousand ties” (229, all emphases added). “Despising,” “disengaging,” and “divorcing” themselves and others from injurious social norms, practices, and ideologies unmistakably summons up, again, separation, resistance, and redefinition.

Astell sums up her advice to women: first “Retire a little,” and then “venture out” (SP, 232; also 105). After students have “calmly and sedately observ’d and rectify’d what is amiss in [them]selves,” they will “promote a Reformation in others”³⁴ and act to “spread a salutary Air on ev’ry Side” (105). “Withdraw” and disengage (75), “retire from the World” (95). Regroup. Agitate. Improve the world. Increase benevolence, improve judgment, model piety, and extend civility. In *A Serious Proposal*, Astell offers a theory of social change and a grassroots model of how to enact it.

In *Reflections*, Astell despises “those fine Discourses which have been made against the Women from our great Fore-fathers to this present Time!” (RM, 59), again referencing the patriarchal ideology that encourages contempt for women. Her students would not only unlearn this but help spread a different ideology with indisputably feminist-friendly elements at its core. In a dramatic moment, Astell even encourages women

to imagine “a time when her Sex shall be no bar to the best Employments, the highest Honour; a time when that distinction, now as much us’d to her Prejudice, shall be no more” (75). Her students are enabled to imagine a different social world, and to begin to enact it, spreading the word.

Astell’s school, then, is not set up only to address the deficiencies of those who attend it; instead, it encourages women who come out to provide a model for other girls and women to imitate—to transform them, too. Astell’s students interact outside of the school as they learned within the retreat, befriending more people, learning together. Thus, the retreat’s concerns with spiritual and moral transformation sit alongside and are tied to a political aspect: the school is a response to a social problem and a source of social change. I do not think this is modest, as others have suggested, but central.

Were I to be truly daring, I might take this analysis one step further. In *Reflections*, Astell reassures readers that she is not fomenting rebellion among women, saying that “Women are not so well united as to form an Insurrection” and in fact “love their chains” (RM, 29). Yet the women of *Proposal* no longer love their chains, and become, in fact, quite “united.” Will they, then, “form an Insurrection”? I leave open the possibility that they just might.

Why Have We Been Drawn to Conservative Interpretations of Astell?

This reading of *Proposal* sheds needed light on neglected aspects of the book, foregrounding pedagogy for the first time, and showing more precisely how women are to be empowered in their own lives and in their communities. My political lens makes better sense of Astell’s plea to women to stop being “in Love with servitude and folly” (SP, 120). She argues vehemently against what she calls “Contentedness with our Condition” (131). Astell uses female separatism and feminist-friendly pedagogical strategies to push toward social transformation. In doing so, she earns her place on various threads in feminist history.

I am left wondering why we are usually drawn to much more conservative interpretations of Astell. I offer a few possibilities that go beyond questions of textual exegesis.

First, the way we tend to neglect or understate the more radical aspects of Astell’s thought is consistent with the way we minimize the radical insights of many religious feminists, assuming that religiosity entails what many would call political conservatism. Yet like so many others in virtually every religious tradition (historically and still today), Astell contests conservative interpretations of the religious texts she loves and is actively empowering more women to read and debate them. In fact, as Sarah Apetrei demonstrates in her study of the “feminization of religion . . . in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries,” a host of women writers made arguments akin to Astell’s on marriage and education, representing “the full range of Protestant belief and practice from Quaker spirituality to High Church Anglicanism.” “[T]here was,” Apetrei contends, “a common religious basis” to their feminist arguments (Apetrei 2010, 17, 4, 6). Alessa Johns is right that Astell’s monastery is her “way of reconciling her love of God, her longing for friendship, her personal ambition, and her desire for women’s empowerment” (Johns 1996, 72). Those things *are* compatible.

Second, I think in our righteous and determined attempts to add women to the lists of who should be read in various disciplines, including philosophy and political theory, we often try to show how women are like or linked to the men who have already made the cut. Because few of those men were progressive in feminist directions, we sometimes

underplay those elements in women like Astell. We *can* show how women like Astell were in dialogue with many others, including canonical men like Locke and Descartes, and others (women!) not on the exclusive “must read” list but who should be included in a greatly expanded canon. But we *could* and *should* also note (and celebrate) where they are emphasizing different ideas and practices, or arguing for them differently. Why *weren't* these others talking about gender inequality as profoundly as Astell, paying as much attention to the potential of everyday relationships for social transformation, showing how certain pedagogical tools can liberate the silenced, or letting a more-encompassing love influence their philosophical tone and content? We *could* allow women to determine the frame at least sometimes, and then criticize men who are not raising these issues, or are doing so less philosophically.³⁵

Finally, as a political theorist I'll add that our political concepts are not always understood as subtly, defined as complexly, or deployed as agilely as they could be. We sometimes rest comfortably with distinctly drawn categories (like reason vs. passion) that do not messily overflow or come in endless (and combined) varieties. For example, those who argue that the conservative Astell “was not an advocate for the political right to resistance” may see resistance in a cabined or limited way, as pertaining only to the relation between sovereign and subjects. We need to make room for someone like Astell, who clearly and repeatedly encourages the *practice* of resistance rather than emphasizing the *right* to resist; a noncontractual thinker, having the right is not her interest as much as *doing* right is her dominant concern, even if doing right in fact entails resistance. Astell, and others linkable to her, could help us deepen or even redefine our terms. That's yet another level of Astell's radical potential.

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Notes

1 It was published “in its fourth and final edition in 1701” (Taylor 2005/2006, 197). Only part I went through multiple editions, and the two were combined early. Patricia Springborg contends that “Something of a revolution in her thought . . . takes place between Parts I and II” (Springborg 2002, 19).

2 Eileen O'Neill problematizes “*rational reconstructions* of the early modern women philosophers' arguments . . . [which] underline the extent to which we share, with past philosophers, a tradition of both problems and argumentational strategies for solving the problems” (O'Neill 2005, 188). O'Neill worries about the possibility of distorting historical views (193) in an enterprise like mine that links Astell to theory that came (mostly) after her. I think, though, that it is not only valid but critical to establish connections to threads and traditions that have been lost to us through the consistent, tragic erasure of women thinkers (Spender 1982). Sara Ahmed wisely calls for creating “desire lines,” paths to work that has been “cast aside or left behind” (Ahmed 2017, 15). Further, contemporary developments and concerns can sometimes profitably highlight or better name what has otherwise been missed or misread in historical thinkers. In the end, I read (and reread) Astell's text with some recent tools like a detective confronting a cold case with technologies newly available to read old evidence. The text, the evidence, is still the ultimate guide.

3 I am certainly not the first to link Astell to other female theorists, but I connect her to different threads and themes in different thinkers, and ultimately engage in this for a distinctive purpose. See, for example, Karen Green, who discusses Astell, Cockburn, and Macaulay (Green 2015), and Guyonne Leduc, who covers Astell and Wollstonecraft (Leduc 2010); these are among the most familiar linkages.

4 Springborg rightly states that the two “works stand to one another in an organic relationship” (Springborg 2002, 17). References in the text are to Springborg's editions of *A Serious Proposal* (Astell 1694 and 1697/2002) and *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (Astell 1700/1996), abbreviated as SP and RM.

5 Although this is not a dominant strain in Astell commentary, I am not alone in emphasizing these more progressive aspects. For example, Kathleen Ahern writes of an “an emerging egalitarianism” in Astell’s *Proposal* (Ahern 2009, 60).

6 In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf famously wrote, “I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman” (Woolf 1929, 51). Astell does identify her sex, but not her name.

7 Later in the text, Astell discusses how to write about “our Neighbours Ignorance” in ways that will make them more receptive to criticism. See SP, 193–94.

8 As I document in *Canon Fodder: Historical Women Political Thinkers*, such overgeneralized critiques of “the Western canon” leave out all the exceptions to the dominant threads, which means erasing most women thinkers (Weiss 2009). If we mean to critique certain people or schools of thought, we should better limit the subject. More important, we should not ignore dissenting and contending voices.

9 Astell might even agree with Jaggar’s idea that the myth of the dispassionate investigator has contributed to the silencing of women (Jaggar 2008, 386). Further, I think Jaggar would consider Astell’s love for women an exciting “outlaw” emotion that “incorporate[s] feminist perceptions and values,” and is “necessary for developing a critical perspective on the world” (387).

10 In RM, Astell similarly attributes the Duchess of Mazarine’s problems to “an ill Education and unequal Marriage” (RM, 33), further showing consistency in the two texts.

11 In RM, Astell treats “Affliction” as a positive instructor of women (RM, 32 and 40), much as Virginia Woolf centuries later talked about the insights women gained (as well as the losses) from “poverty, chastity, [and] derision” (Woolf 1938, 78). The similarity is intriguing. She does, however, unqualifiedly condemn “Froth and emptiness” as women’s “Instructors” (RM, 64).

12 Each item can be parsed for its particular importance to Astell. In RM, by contrast, Astell charges men with “inordinate Passion, Rashness, Humour, Pride, [and] Covetousness” (RM, 36). These lists of gendered vices are worth comparing in greater detail—only one item is on both.

13 In RM, by contrast, Astell writes that in their education, boys are “acquainted with . . . the Follies, the Cheats, . . . and warn’d of the Application and Design of those who will make it their Business to corrupt him” (RM, 64). Unfortunately, “women are left ignorant of these motives and methods, and thus made considerably more vulnerable, dependent, and manipulable” (Weiss 2016, 132).

14 She also says women’s “Understanding has been busied about nothing but froth and trifles,” which she contrasts with the “noble and sublime” (SP, 81; also 91). In her play “Trifles,” Susan Glaspell shows that though women’s tasks might be considered trivial, their pastimes nothing but trifling, women in fact both possess knowledge through such work and more easily learn through it to collaborate to build more knowledge (Glaspell 1916).

15 This was a concern among feminist-minded writers before and after Astell. For example, in *Suggestions for Thought* (1860), Florence Nightingale wrote of women, “they never find an hour free in which to collect their thoughts.” She asks, “Is man’s time more valuable than woman’s?” (Nightingale 1994, 584).

16 Astell is more reluctant to allow people to discard religious opinions, but even there she allows for exceptions, calling on us to follow authority (only) when “we’re not able to determine for our selves” (SP, 139). For more on her exceptions to following authority, see Weiss 2016.

17 In the end, Anthony Pollack’s argument goes, their new education will even make “transparent the mechanisms through which (female) subjects’ consent is manufactured,” the way “they are made to conflate their own personal interests with those of the patriarchal system that denies them access to education and legal redress” (Pollack 2010, 30).

18 Perhaps they should follow Astell herself, who declared in part I that “she is very indifferent [to] what the Critics say” of her work (SP, 119).

19 Similarly, the authors of the *Declaration of Sentiments* said they “anticipate no small amount of misconception, misrepresentation, and ridicule,” and Elizabeth Cady Stanton still encouraged women “to buckle on the armor that can best resist the weapons of the enemy, ridicule and holy horror” (Stanton 1848a).

20 Astell has no problem with women’s ambition: “A desire to advance and perfect its Being, is planted by GOD in all Rational Natures, to excite them hereby to every worthy and becoming Action” (SP, 62).

21 Interestingly, Astell recommends that in raising children, mothers “observ[e] a Childs Temper” and “know how to manage different Tempers Prudently” (SP, 203). Children’s selves, that is, also warrant attention and respect.

22 I mean to imply that we do not necessarily see in Astell the familiar mind–body distinction and a simple defense of the superiority of reason to passion. She seems to know that thinking about the body still involves thinking, for one thing; for another, as we have already seen, she has ways of blending reason and passion, each potentially supporting the other; finally, it’s even interesting that she still uses “feminine” norms like “beauty” to describe the reformed female soul.

23 Impressively, there are thirty-seven references to some variety of the word “conversation” in *A Serious Proposal*, twenty-nine mentions of “talk,” and another twenty references to “discourse.” Even more attention to the better and worse ways we speak with one another is evident in the numerous additional references to “wit,” “tongues,” “noise,” “laughter,” “lectures,” “censures,” and so on. And this doesn’t even touch on the entire chapters dedicated to rhetoric, or how we might “place our Subject in a Right Light, and excite our Hearers to a due consideration of it” (SP, 190). Something is clearly going on.

24 “Nor need she trouble her self in turning over a great number of Books,” (SP, 78; also 167), Astell says of her imagined student. Astell did not take up the task of creating some model curriculum, leaving others the task who “have a more exact Knowledge of Human Nature, a greater Experience of the World, and of those differences which arise from Constitution, Age, Education, receiv’d Opinions, outward Fortune, Custom and Conversation, than I can pretend to” (229).

25 Astell herself, it is worth recalling, learned as a member of a critically important friendship circle what conversation can enable, and she extends the insights she gained to both her readers and prospective students. Numerous early modern writers explored how they might “create opportunities for authoritative and socially transformative utterance within their texts” (Larson 2011, 2), too, knowing how “conversation offered early modern women both a challenge and an opportunity” (Dodds 2019).

26 Recent studies have shown Astell to be correct—there is, for example, a relationship between children being engaged in conversation “and the growth of neural processing capacities.” It is less important for children to be spoken to (the quantity of words they hear) than for them to be engaged in conversation. See Walsh 2018.

27 It is potentially problematic, at this point, that Astell’s retreat does not look terribly diverse. It seems clear that most women there are of a certain class, though the fact that Astell tries to lure benefactors to her project leaves open the possibility that some students would be provided for. The other way there is potentially a corrective—a way for women to learn from and with more diverse others—is through the more wide-ranging conversations with others outside the school. These take place in multiple ways, including through charitable efforts that put students in a position to serve and converse with those in greater need. It is possible that these conversations are not merely one-way streets of educating but continue to be part of the education of Astell’s students in that never-ending process of dialogue and improvement they have now learned. Jane Addams would later describe the unexpected education of the social worker in dialogue with her clients in “The Subtle Problems of Charity” (Addams 1899), a process insightfully described by Wynne Moskop in “Addams’s Friendship Practices” (Moskop 2019).

28 Here again we see that a simple mind/body or reason/emotion split does not occur in Astell.

29 It may also be the case that separatism recognizes the truth of Stanton’s claim that “women alone must do this work—for women alone can understand the height and the depth, the length and the breadth of her own degradation and woe. Man cannot speak for us—because he has been educated to believe that we differ from him so materially, that he cannot judge of our thoughts, feelings and opinions by his own” (Stanton 1848a).

30 This is one reason many men voiced opposition to Astell’s retirement, as well as to many other women’s academies of the era: “they aimed to bypass traditional and male-approved ideas of what female education should be; they were far too self-sufficient and challenged the whole role that women were expected to play” (Hill 1987, 119).

31 Fraser wants to distinguish separatism from counterpublics, but I think she misses the variety of forms, durations, and purposes of separatist spaces Frye discusses. Fraser assumes those who separate have no intention of ever interacting with a wider public, but Frye does not. Both agree there is a call for withdrawal and regrouping, but Fraser thinks agitating afterward is unique to counterpublics (Fraser 1990, 68). I side with Frye here, though I am focused mostly on the agreement between the two.

32 As Pollack describes it, “Astell prioritizes women’s need to ‘debate their real interests’ against the ideals of desirable femininity ‘offered by cheating hucksters’ in masculinist public discourse” (Pollack 2010, 30).

33 There are numerous mentions of work beyond the school, including: “to magnify GOD, to love one another, and to communicate that useful knowledge” (SP, 76); “charitable, and useful Business; either in

study in learning themselves or instructing others, for it is design'd that part of their Employment be the Education of those of their own Sex; or else in spiritual and corporal Works of Mercy" (84); and "not content to be happy themselves" alone, they "diffuse their benign Influences round about" (101) and "propagate Wisdom and Piety to all about her" (104).

34 The phrase "promot[ing] a Reformation" clearly has religious overtones. I agree with Ahern that "Astell's polemic still veers in the direction of political critique" (Ahern 2009, 76), and that, as Springborg indicates, Astell can (also) be referring to "the reformation of manners" (SP, 58, fn. 3). Astell reminds us in her conclusion, too, that the retreat she recommends "is rather Academical than Monastic" (SP, 232).

35 Recently, a colleague told me that she was not including any women in her medieval philosophy class because they weren't in dialogue with the men on her syllabus the way the men were with one another. To the extent that is true, and I am not convinced it is true, since many potential connections remain unexplored or underdeveloped and others are already well established, it shows that we are driven to focus on where women are similar or linkable to relatively mainstream men.

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