

Cambridge University Press

0521841046 - Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination

Patricia Springborg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Astell and Early Modern Feminism

1. A Reply to My Critics: Astell, Locke and Feminism

Mary Astell (1666–1731) is now best known for her famous rhetorical question in the 1706 Preface to *Reflections upon Marriage*: ‘If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?’¹ These well-chosen words have earned her a place not only in the feminist but also in the republican canon as a theorist of ‘freedom from domination’.² Prior to her recent resurrection she was best known as the author of *A Serious Proposal*, which advocated a Platonist academy for women, a project that seems briefly to have attracted the support of Queen Anne, to whom it was dedicated, until the ridicule to which it was subjected made it too politically risky. As the promoter of women’s causes, and particularly women’s education, Astell is said to have been the model for Richardson’s *Clarissa*,³ and, as late as 1847, Lilia, heroine of Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *The Princess*, dreams of a women’s college cut off from male society. Astell’s female academy was later famously lampooned in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Princess Ida*, but this time at one remove, through Tennyson.⁴ Over its gates the inscription would read, ‘Let no man enter on pain of death’, a deliberately truncated version of the famous inscription that adorned the doors of Plato’s Academy, ‘Let No Man Enter Here Unless He Study Geometry’.

It is noteworthy that Astell, who has been deemed ‘England’s First Feminist’,⁵ has only recently been republished and reinstated as a significant late-seventeenth-century political commentator. For reasons that we cannot gauge, although her High Church Toryism might be suspected, she appears to have already disappeared from feminist social and

Cambridge University Press

0521841046 - Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination

Patricia Springborg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

political discussion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁶ Mary Hays, a friend of Mary Wollstonecraft, mentions her in a *Female Biography*, but there is no direct evidence that either Wollstonecraft or Catharine Macaulay had in fact read her.⁷ Revived in the twentieth century, her works have so far attracted two biographies,⁸ two anthologies,⁹ three diplomatic editions¹⁰ and a growing collection of articles.¹¹ Astell's twentieth-century reception focuses primarily on her 'proto-feminist' critique of the condition of women, flagged by her famous rhetorical question. But her feminism is seen to sit uneasily with her Anglican High Church and Tory views, and the critical literature rarely does justice to the extraordinary range of her thought or treats in sufficient detail her substantive arguments to resolve this *prima facie* problem. This book tries to remedy this deficit, at the same time attempting to recover the contexts for Astell's thought at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

I make no apology for the fact that much of the material this book contains has already appeared in articles and book chapters. I have a particular reason for wishing to collect the material between two covers, as an attempt at a coherent overall assessment of Astell, a thinker of great range who adopted complex positions on questions philosophical and political, not least the problem of women. My reason is that the struggle for the appropriation of Astell as a thinker seems, ironically, to mirror in emotional intensity and the degree of personalism the very struggles in which she was engaged. My work on Astell has attracted a fair degree of comment, and while some commentators endorse and, indeed, expand on my line or argument, I find that I have been strangely misread and misrepresented by others. I do not take this personally, although, perhaps because feminism is such a contentious issue, the language is sometimes unduly personal. In many respects this mini-debate over Astell is symptomatic of the Academy in general, ours – which lives off the creation and destruction of straw men – as well as hers, for Astell was no stranger to polemic.

Those who take issue with me do so on two counts: first, the role of Locke in Astell's thought, and second, her feminism. Let me say at the outset that Astell, like other early modern feminists, has been largely the monopoly of literary scholars and early modern historians, and only in exceptional cases treated by political theorists – Carole Pateman is the outstanding exception. For the historians, 'Saint Locke', who so greatly influenced the Founding Fathers of America, seems to stand in the way of a serious consideration of Locke as Astell or contemporaries saw him – a

Cambridge University Press

0521841046 - Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination

Patricia Springborg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

more unflattering picture of the party man. For literary scholars the problem is a different one: how to reconcile Astell's feminism with her High Church Tory politics. As I shall argue at some length, this is a problem falsely posed – and bespeaks progressivist assumptions about a 'proper' feminism that are anachronistic when applied to seventeenth-century women.

Of my two central claims about Astell, that she is indeed a feminist, albeit a High Church Tory, and that her work belongs in an important way to the reception of John Locke, representing one of the most important early critiques of his entire corpus, the second seems to be the more contentious. While taken for granted by some writers and further expanded upon by others, it has been summarily dismissed by yet others again. My most critical reader, who deems my claim to be 'hugely inflated and unsustainable', supports his/her argument in the following way: 'In part, the problem is that Springborg does not have a sufficient sense of practical politics. Astell was writing party propaganda against politicians and other propagandists; her target was not an abstracted [*sic*] philosopher like Locke and [Springborg's claim that] the tract *Moderation* "traces the contours of Locke's career" is fantasy. *Moderation* is chiefly an attack on religious Dissenters, and Locke was never a Dissenter'.¹² But this is a point that I have been very careful to make. It was not that Locke was in fact a dissenter, but that he was taken to be one by Astell, either in ignorance or, more likely, in willful misrepresentation. The question of whether or not Locke was principally an 'abstracted philosopher' is a bit more tricky. Personally I believe, and I try to make the case, that Astell was probably right and that the man who today might look like an abstracted philosopher, in her day looked like a thorough-going Whig and party man. The more critical modern reception of his works, including that of Ashcraft, finds not only that Locke's *pièces d'occasion*, the *Two Treatises of Government* of 1689, the Letters on Toleration of 1667 and 1690 and the Minute to Edward Clarke of 1690, were overtly political, but also that Locke's apparently academic treatises like the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of 1690, his 'Remarks upon Some of Mr. Norris' Books, wherein he asserts P. Malebranche's Opinion of seeing all Things in God' of 1693, and *The Reasonableness of Christianity* of 1695, have strongly polemical targets.

But Astell's feminism is not uncontentious either. In my various pieces I have tried to emphasize that no simple view of her as a proto-feminist does justice to the complexity of her thought, or the importance of the substantive issues with which she was preoccupied, through which her

Cambridge University Press

0521841046 - Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination

Patricia Springborg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

feminism was mediated. A brief perusal of her titles is enough to tell us that this was a woman politically and philosophically engaged in substantive debates, which could not be simply reduced to feminist issues. The subjects she treated ranged, in chronological order, from, first, philosophical questions concerning human agency and the capacity for personal salvation that belong to the reception of Descartes and concern the standing of the Malebranchistes, Port Royal Jansenists and Cambridge Platonists; second, to practical questions of women's education and the possibility of establishing a female academy along the lines of the Port Royal School; third, to the political question of a Tory, as opposed to Whig, version of the English Civil War, as establishing precedents for the regime change that took place in 1688–9; and fourth, to the constitutional issues of religious toleration and occasional conformity for dissenters. No one perusing such a list could sensibly claim that Astell was a feminist *tout court*. Indeed, what is of particular interest in her *corpus* is how comprehensively it ranges across the issues that divided the polity in her day. From the English Civil War in mid-century, to the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and through two dynastic changes, seventeenth-century Britain suffered great fissures in church–state relations that were the consequence of old political polarities and brought new ones into being. Roundhead and royalist gave way to Whig and Tory, but there was a persistent tendency to keep the old alignments alive by seeing the newly emerging political parties as their surrogates. How to heal these fissures and bring about an accommodation between conflicting poles of opinion took the form of an intense debate around the issue of toleration. For religious and political polarities were to some extent overlapping and, if Toryism was associated with High Church Anglicanism, Whiggism was associated with non-conformity and dissent. A number of Astell's most important works are specific contributions to the debates surrounding these critical political and constitutional issues.

If Astell is not simply a feminist, she is not simply a political pamphleteer either. She brings to the political stage a peculiar constellation of philosophical and theological views, expounded in works crucially important for the study of early modern conceptions of human agency. To reduce these philosophical questions to politics would be profoundly mistaken. Astell's own agonizing over mind–body problems and the nature of freedom, which bring her at some moments within the Cartesian orbit as a Malebranchean, then closer to Locke in her search for a 'sensible congruity' in the unity of personhood, and finally to a distancing once again from this figure whom she associates with toleration and

Cambridge University Press

0521841046 - Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination

Patricia Springborg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

dissent, is evidence enough of the seriousness with which such fundamental questions engaged her. It is not at all surprising that, having canvassed such a wide philosophical spectrum, Astell should be the subject of very different interpretations of her views. The intelligent essays of E. Derek Taylor and Sarah Ellen Zweig work through the possibilities to reach quite different but, I suggest, not entirely incompatible conclusions.¹³

The claim for Astell as a theorist of freedom from domination, and therefore a republican, is much more difficult to accommodate, as we shall see. Not only was Astell not a republican but an out-and-out royalist, but she was not a rights theorist either. She explicitly argued against the Hobbesian and Filmerian notion of freedom as the power 'to do as one lists', and in favour of the classical notion of freedom as the power to erect a principle of action and follow it. In this respect she followed Aristotle, the Stoics and, curiously, John Locke, foreshadowing also the position on freedom of that neo-Stoic Rousseau. For this reason, perhaps, exponents of republicanism and rights theory have claimed her as their own, but mistakenly, I believe. It is true that in her satire of the morals and mores of marriage, on the issue of women's education, and even in her religiosity, Astell appeals to civic values that have been identified as peculiarly Roman or neo-Roman. Those who look for the origins in England of civil society and the state tend to ascribe these values to classical republicanism, but mistakenly, in my view. These values, which became enshrined in Protestant thought from the time of Luther on, represent rather the diffusion of Renaissance classical humanism, with its discernible Roman roots, but which was not necessarily republican, if it bespoke political institutions at all. Its very diffuseness, and the capacity of humanism to meld seamlessly with vernacular culture, militates against such a simple identification.

Nevertheless, despite the complexity of the intellectual landscape in which Astell was operating, it is hard to overestimate the power of certain issues to polarize opinion and to create predictable alignments. This makes it possible to map certain constellations of opinion. For the polarities of the political theatre of action were seen by contemporaries to have their analogue in philosophy and theology. Nor were the relations between political polarities and fundamental philosophical and theological divisions simply analogical. They clustered together. If one were to summarize them, one could say that Hobbesian materialism and Lockean physical realism characterized one of the poles, while Cartesian dualism and its various modifications by the Malebrancheans and the Port Royal School, along with the Cambridge Platonists, characterized the

Cambridge University Press

0521841046 - Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination

Patricia Springborg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

other. And while the late Hobbes and Locke tended to be associated with Whiggism, the Cartesians and Platonists tended to be identified with a conservative or Tory mindset. Although altogether too crude a schematization to account for the complex alignments that in fact obtained, such a characterization is not wide of the mark in terms of the way in which the opposing parties depicted one another. These alignments were sometimes worked through in surprising contexts. One of the most unexpected, for instance, is the battle between the ancients and moderns. Here, as in the reception of Descartes, women philosophers tended to take a predictable position – on the side of the moderns – in part because they saw a classical education and the veneration of the Greeks and Romans as a barrier erected by men against them, as that half of the human race denied the right to formal schooling at all. It was on the issue of education that they tended to be most outspokenly feminist, and no one more famously than Astell.

The issue of Astell's feminism requires an admission on my part. Having myself referred to Astell mostly as a proto-feminist, I realize now that I was wrong to do so. The refusal to apply the term 'feminist' to those women who early engaged in the struggle to be recognized as minds and bodies with the autonomy and rights granted to men involves a kind of reverse anachronism.¹⁴ It assumes that we moderns, or postmoderns, have a monopoly on the claim to feminism, and that to pass the test earlier thinkers would have to exhibit the sort of Whiggish political progressivism that could only be the outcome of the process in which they were engaged. Although equivocating over application of the label in my earlier writing on Astell, I nevertheless took care to stress that her Toryism could not be seen to stand in the way of her feminism. Living under a constitutional monarchy and an established church, these Tory women, Mary Manley and Aphra Behn as well as Astell, could not be sure, in advance of the French Revolution, that progressivism – let alone republicanism – would win out, and they were far too pragmatic to tie their programme to such high-stakes politics.

This is to state the problem from the point of view of an external observer in terms of a counterfactual proposition, which is not, of course, how they saw it. For them it did not need explaining because, as Anglicans under the Crown, Toryism was orthodoxy, whereas republicans, seen to resist the monarchy, and dissenters, seen to resist the church, were believed to be deviants, if not indeed heretics. It was convenient for Tories to associate republicanism and dissent with the Whigs. One cannot sufficiently stress that fears about political instability that prevailed under

Cambridge University Press

0521841046 - Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination

Patricia Springborg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the late Stuarts – fears dating from the Exclusion Crisis to the death of Queen Anne – were as much fears for the church as for the state. The fact of an established state church meant that religion and politics were inextricably intertwined and, if the fact of a Catholic Duke of York posed a peculiar kind of threat to the Crown, the fact of widespread religious non-conformity and dissent posed a peculiar threat to the church. These issues were of such a pressing nature that they served to polarize most political thought, as I have suggested, and it is not surprising that this is the period in which party politics characterized as Whig and Tory emerged. They also led to the conflation of positions by adversaries, not just for polemical purposes but because, in the struggle to understand these emerging political alignments, stereotyping had a role to play. So, for Astell and Aphra Behn, for instance, it was axiomatic that dissenters and Whigs were one and the same,¹⁵ whereas, for the Whigs, it was easy to conflate Toryism with Catholicism and Caesaropapism.

2. Early Modern Women and 'Myth of the State'

The relative absence of texts in the history of political thought on and by early modern women, which is often remarked, reflects not their political or literary incapacity but rather the separate spheres that the social construction of gender imposed. The public and private worlds into which social life was divided, and which it was the intention of the theoreticians of the early modern state to entrench, were founded on homologous contracts. One, the social contract, constituted the political world of men; the other, the marriage contract, governed the private world of women. Female, let alone feminist, texts in political thought were an anomaly, given that women until the twentieth century were officially not political creatures – and yet in rare cases, like that of Astell, we have them. The status of married women as legal minors in Western Europe and North America until enactment of married women's property acts of the 1880s barred their participation in states in which political rights were tied to the capacity to own property. Astell's percipient critique of the marriage contract–social contract analogue, her critique of John Locke, perhaps the first to encompass his entire *corpus*, and her exposure of the theories of Locke and Hobbes as fathers of a liberalism that did not extend to women anticipated modern feminist critiques of a liberal democratic state as yet unborn.

How do we explain this? It does little justice to the capacity of women to fabricate an existence amid the legal and structural constraints within

Cambridge University Press

0521841046 - Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination

Patricia Springborg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

which they found themselves, to harp too much on their absence from the official record, if it were even true.¹⁶ To some extent the problem is definitional. But that we so readily acquiesce in a definition of the public realm that restricts it to the nation-state and its forms is a story in itself. It belongs to the much larger phenomenon of myth of the state, which has allowed public life and its manifold forms to be co-opted by the nation-state as the privileged bearer of community, the authoritative promulgator of rules, and the sovereign source of law, exercising a monopoly of coercive force within its territorial borders. It is a corollary of the civil society and the state, or public–private distinction, to sideline those engaged in endeavours that do not serve state purposes – and here we have a possible explanation of the social gendering of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, sanctioned by the belief that the masculine was definitively public, the feminine characterizing the quintessentially private sphere.¹⁷

This crude conception of male as winner, female as loser, traces a straight line from state-of-nature arguments, where power falls to the stronger, presumed to be male – at least by Hobbes and Locke – a notion against which Plato was among the first to campaign in his rebuttal of Thrasymachus in the *Republic*.¹⁸ But to little avail; the sophist notion that Thrasymachus represents, of politics as structured by a struggle for power in which it falls to the strongest to rule in their own interests, prevailed, only to be reinstated by Hobbes – and later by Marx – and to this day, notions like ‘soft power’ and ‘strong democracy’ seem to appeal to brute strength as the test of social power.¹⁹ Even in the academy, the social gendering of knowledge continues apace, arts and humanities being thought of as feminine and ‘soft’ subjects, the ‘hard’ sciences as masculine, with important consequences for the wider social division and specialization of labour. Myth of the state describes a body of theory not much in vogue any longer, but in the hands of Ernst Cassirer and Friedrich Meinecke, it represented an early critique of the totalizing power of the state in which ‘clubs are trumps’ – to use Hobbes’s memorable phrase.²⁰ I note with interest that the very theorists whom Cassirer and Meinecke credit with pioneering *étatisme* are the same theorists – particularly Machiavelli – now being repackaged as ‘classical republicans’.

Perhaps this is not surprising, given that classical republicanism belongs also to myth of the state as one of its subtler forms. Under the classical republican aegis, early modern nation-states of the West succeeded in laying claim to the mantle of the Athenian *polis* and the Roman Republic, at the same time distancing themselves from the East

Cambridge University Press

0521841046 - Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination

Patricia Springborg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

as 'oriental', 'despotic' and 'other', as I have argued in various pieces.²¹ Ironically, the dynamics of legitimacy described by one of the greatest *étatists*, Thomas Hobbes, provide us with the most promising approach to the phenomenon of cultural distancing – but at one remove, through Carl Schmitt, architect of the juridical system of the most demonic expression of myth of the state, that great Leviathan, the Third Reich. Hobbes, in describing the relentless anarchy of the war of all against all as the perpetual threat to peace and security outside state boundaries, provided Schmitt with a model for the logic of anarchy within. Extrapolating from Hobbes's characterization of the state of nature as a condition in which men were wolves to their fellows, his own reflection on the ancient phrase *homo homini lupus* employed by Hobbes, Schmitt arrived at a theory of generalized hostility to the Other.²² The ubiquitous human tendency to create social distance in terms of the stereotypes 'Freund und Feind' – 'friend and foe', 'insider and outsider' – that Schmitt describes provides an explanatory vehicle for the social gendering of knowledge and forms of social stereotyping congruent with the masculinization of winners and feminization of losers, to which Eileen O'Neill refers. The human genius for creating out of the known the unknown, out of sameness otherness, out of the familiar the foreign that Schmitt describes is the same phenomenon that Sigmund Freud described as 'the narcissism of minor differences', the dynamic behind racism and ethnic conflict. Where the distance between individuals in terms of gender, race or ethnicity is small, the search for markers to create social distance between insider and outsider requires the amplification of minor differences.²³

The ubiquitous prejudice that accompanies myth of the state and its restrictive public–private binary distinctions – whether expressed as strong–weak or masculine–feminine – has led in turn to a narrowness in the definition of public life that excludes not only women. So, for instance, Elizabethan and early Stuart England, which saw the richest flowering of commentary on the changing forms of public life in all their social and political dimensions, has been virtually expunged from the history of political thought. This is due to exclusions on the basis of genre rather than gender. The works of Marlowe, Kyd, Jonson, Spenser and Shakespeare, intensely political in the broad sense, were cast for the stage or in verse, for a complex of reasons that included forms of lyric expression favoured by Renaissance writers; a preference for 'veiled allegory' due to religious, Hermetic and magical beliefs; involvement in foreign and sometimes treasonable causes; and, not least, the activities of

Cambridge University Press

0521841046 - Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination

Patricia Springborg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

secret police particularly draconian under Elizabeth's secretary of state, Walsingham. New Historicists are now seeking to rectify the loss for which the old historians are guilty, but political theorists have yet to leap into the fray.²⁴

Commentators have noted the capacity of seventeenth-century women to live in the interstices of social institutions as novelists, dramatists and political pamphleteers.²⁵ Astell is a curious case. On the one hand, she undertook a self-conscious critique of the very institutions at the root of female oppression: contemporary education and marriage practices. On the other, she was a High Church Tory pamphleteer, and probably a commissioned one, who in essential aspects defended the existing social order, church and queen. This gives some commentators pause in applying to her the epithet 'feminist'.²⁶ But while caution against anachronism is prudent, the belief that Toryism disqualifies women as feminists is anachronism of a different kind. It makes Whiggish assumptions about progressivism as a qualification for feminism that could only be made with post-Enlightenment hindsight. In a curious way this refusal to see Astell, along with Manley, Judith Drake and Aphra Behn, all of them Tories, as fully fledged feminists is the same category mistake of which Carole Pateman so cleverly convicts post-modern, post-colonial theorists who see feminism as an extension of the white male, one-dimensional Enlightenment culture of rights²⁷ – but in reverse. Such consequentialism is fallacious; if these women could not be expected to anticipate Enlightenment progressivism, they were not responsible for its ill effects either. Feminism does not come as a neatly tailored political package, nor is it even a political persuasion, far less primarily a social movement. What counts as feminist is the long struggle against misogyny and for a woman's voice, dating from the Middle Ages on in Europe – and probably manifested in different forms at different times in most cultures – that by exerting relentless pressure eventually, in the English case, made the conjunction of Whig progressivism and feminism possible. Those post-modern and post-colonial theorists who see feminism as an attenuated consequence of the European Enlightenment, could therefore be accused of the same sort of myopia and Eurocentrism of which they convict others!

In many instances the apparent absence of European women from the public sphere is due to genre rather than gender. In so-called less developed countries women have often been more visible as farmers, shopkeepers, piece workers, and sometimes the owners of small domestic businesses, than in Europe, which suffered from 'housewifization'