



THE ELOQUENCE OF MARY ASTELL

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Mary Astell and the Problem of *Ethos*

As we have seen, the consensus in the seventeenth century was that women lacked all the requirements of *ethos*: rationality, moral reliability, and goodwill.¹ In spite of this prejudice, however, the number of women who wrote and published their work increased significantly. These women faced and solved the problem in a variety of ways. To mention only a very few of them: Margaret Cavendish exploited it – notoriety served her purpose of self-promotion; Bathsua Makin evaded it by adopting the persona of a man; and Margaret Fell openly defied it, justifying her position by providing alternative interpretations of Biblical texts. But it was Mary Astell who argued cogently against it.

The first requirement for any woman who thus transgressed against accepted norms was necessarily a conviction that she had both the right and the ability to publish her ideas. Surmounting the many obstacles required an unusual strength of purpose, determination, and persistence, and without robust self-confidence, nothing could be achieved. Upon what strengths did women draw? The women cited above resolved the problems of a woman's *ethos*, to their own satisfaction at least, by identifying with a tradition other than the Protestant bourgeois model of the private and silent domestic figure. Margaret Cavendish adopted the ideology of deliberate display that belonged to the nobility; Bathsua Makin identified herself with the Renaissance tradition of the learned woman that developed in England in the sixteenth century; and Margaret Fell considered herself to belong to the even older prophetic tradition in which gender was irrelevant. Like other women, Astell refused to align herself with ideals of silent and publicly inactive feminine behaviour. Her inspiration and support derived from the ideas of two schools of thought that dissented from the received opinion of the time: on the one hand, she identified with the Christian Platonists; on the other, she was supported in her belief in her own powers as a woman by the Cartesians.

Astell derived her Christian Platonist ideas in the first instance, no doubt, from her uncle, Ralph Astell, who undertook her early education. Ralph Astell had been a member of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, the centre of the Cambridge Platonists, and there he had come under the influence of one of the most important of them, Ralph Cudworth. After the death of her uncle, Astell continued to read the works of the current Christian Platonists, in particular John Norris, with whom she corresponded. The influence of the Christian Platonist philosophy is apparent in all of Astell's works. It is particularly important in her resolution of the problem of *ethos*, for unlike the Aristotelians, the Christian Platonists had a high view of women.

Plato himself, in *The Republic* (and in the *Timaeus*) includes women among the guardians of the state, and makes no distinction between the sexes in their education:

If then we are to employ women in the same duties as the men, we must give them the same instructions.

Yes.

To the men we gave music and gymnastics.

Yes.

Then we must train the women also in the same two arts, giving them besides a military education, and treating them in the same way as men. (*Republic V*, qtd. in Kersey 2)

Women, then, must be given the same education as men because they are expected to engage in the same kind of work and because they share the same nature: Socrates concludes that “we shall not have one education for men, and another for women, especially as the nature to be wrought upon is the same in both cases” (8).²

There is no question that Plato himself had a much higher opinion of women than did Aristotle. The Christian Platonists, however, had extended Platonic ideas by adding to them Christian principles. One of the Church Fathers who influenced their thought was Augustine of Hippo, who believed that “while woman might be inferior to man by nature, she was his equal by grace” (Schiebinger 169), and that in the mind “there is no sex” (Harth 3). Furthermore, the Christian Platonists believed that the feminine was an essential element in creation: “Neoplatonists [...] held that creativity – both intellectual and material – resulted from a union of masculine and feminine principles. The Neoplatonists described

creation as the union of opposing male and female elements and made the joining of those elements the basis of all creativity. For Henry More, the masculine without the feminine was imperfect, incomplete" (Schiebinger 133). This view is obviously in contrast to the Aristotelian view, which, as we saw in chapter 1, holds that the male is perfect and the female deficient.

In asserting as she did the intellectual equality of the sexes, then, Astell had the full support of the tradition in which she was educated. And this strong sense not only of her own intellectual powers, but also those of women in general, had been strengthened by ideas arising from the philosophy of Descartes. Feminist opinion is deeply divided about the effect of Cartesian ideas on the position of women. Some modern feminists are inclined to see them as working against the interests of women.³ Ruth Perry, however, argues that in the seventeenth century the effect of Descartes's philosophy was liberating. This is particularly true of Mary Astell. Perry goes so far as to claim that "Cartesian rationalism was the very cornerstone of her feminism" (Perry, "Radical Doubt" 491). Cynthia Bryson agrees: "What Astell sees in Descartes' method is the opportunity for self-determination, a goal which any individual who feels her or his social group has been denied it would wholeheartedly embrace" (43). These scholars support the view that Descartes did women a great service by dissociating the mind from the body. Women had been thought to be dominated by the body and its passions to such an extent that their reason was disabled. Descartes's philosophy allowed them to identify themselves with the rational and spiritual, to claim that the essential self was independent of the body altogether. If the intellect could thus be seen as disconnected from the body, women could challenge the prejudice that saw their reason as perpetually and inevitably inhibited and compromised by their emotions. As Bryson puts it, "The disembodied mind is the 'who' a person is, and the gendered body is meaningless to individuality and identity" (49). Furthermore, in challenging Aristotelian philosophy, Descartes began to unsettle the ancient doctrine of the humours that undergirded belief in women's inferiority: "The idea of man as a machine undermined the Aristotelian dictum that because women are colder than men they have a lesser reason" (Schiebinger 174). On a more practical level, Descartes helped to empower women by questioning the necessity of the long and complicated classical education and the process of traditional logical disputation as preliminaries to engag-

ing in the life of the mind. Furthermore, by his example he helped to legitimize the use of the vernacular for scholarly purposes, thus demonstrating that it was not necessary to be able to write in Latin in order to engage in intellectual discussion. Astell certainly draws upon Descartes's philosophy in her rhetorical theory. She also uses his ideas to support her own sense of women's intellectual abilities.⁴

Descartes himself, however, did not directly address the question of women's intellectual capacity; it was one of his followers who applied Cartesian principles to this issue and in doing so provided strong support for women engaging in scholarship and particularly in rhetoric. François Poullain de la Barre (1647–1723) was an ex-Jesuit who became converted to Cartesian thought in 1667. Thereafter, he devoted himself to working out some of the implications of Descartes's ideas. His interest in the question of women's intellectual powers arose from his perception that this issue served as an effective demonstration of the utility of the Cartesian method. As Daniel Frankforter and Paul Morman put it, “[T]he issue of sexual inequality was an ideal vehicle for [Poullain's] purpose. What better way to illustrate how social custom – reinforced by the learned opinion of the ancients – creates a heavy weight of prejudice that men (and women themselves) accept as unquestioned fact?” (xxiii). In 1673 Poullain published *De l'Égalité de deux Sexes*, in the preface of which he proposes to refute both general and expert opinion. In the course of his argument, he naturally considers the question of rhetoric. Girls, he claims, have as much natural aptitude as boys, and are in many respects superior:

There is in their conversation the greatest vivacity, sprightliness and freedom. They more quickly comprehend what they are taught. When we pay them equal attention, girls are more diligent, and more patient at work, more obedient, more modest, and more self-controlled. In a word, we see in them to the highest degree all the excellent qualities that are assumed when they are found in young men, to make these boys more fit than their fellows for great things. (35)

So far as articulacy is concerned, women, he believes, are definitely superior. Of men, he says, “Only a few express themselves with clarity, and the struggle they have to get their words out spoils

the flavour of whatever they can say [that is] of value” (37). He continues:

Women, on the other hand, state what they know clearly and with order. Words cause them no trouble. They begin and continue as it pleases them. When they are at liberty, their imaginations are inexhaustible. They have the gift of presenting their ideas with a gentleness and good nature that works as well as reason in winning assent – while men, in their turn, usually employ a hard, dry style. (39)

Women, he says, express themselves gracefully. They acquire “more [knowledge] of language from practice alone than most men do from practice combined with study” (43). In fact, “no-one can dispute that eloquence is a natural talent peculiar to them. [...] There are women’s letters on the topic of the passions, whose course constitutes the beauty and whole secret of eloquence. [...] All the rhetoric in the world could not give men this skill that costs women nothing” (45).

Women are competent in more than rhetoric, however. Poullain goes on to argue that they are, or could easily become, men’s equals or superiors in medicine, philosophy, history, and law. In almost every respect, he believes, women are to be regarded as in no way inferior to men. The fact that they are so regarded he attributes to men’s conspiracy to make them fearful, ignorant, and insecure:

In everything that we make women learn, do we see anything that would contribute to instructing them soundly? On the contrary, it seems that we have agreed on this kind of education in order to diminish their courage, cloud their intellects, and fill their minds with nothing but vanity and foolishness – to stifle all the seeds of virtue and of truth in them, to render useless all the inclinations they might have to great things, and (by denying them the means) to deprive them of the desire to perfect themselves as we do. (157)

According to Ruth Perry, it was Poullain de la Barre’s writings that “gave Astell her method of attack and thus prepared the way for both volumes of *A Serious Proposal*” (*Celebrated* 72). Poullain’s *De l’Egalité des deux sexes* was published in 1673; in 1677 it was translated into English and published as *The Woman as Good as*

the Man. But apparently the version that had the most influence in London was the 1690 French edition: “[I]t caused quite a stir in Paris, and in 1692 and 1693, parts of it were exported to London by a French Huguenot named Pierre Motteux. Astell may well have read these in *The Gentleman’s Journal* or *The Ladies Journal*” (Perry, *Celebrated* 482).⁵ Supported, then, on the one hand by the conservative and backward-looking Neoplatonists and on the other by the forward-looking Cartesians, Astell challenges received opinion on the nature of woman: she denies that woman is inferior to man either intellectually or morally; she argues forcefully against the idea that the woman is made simply to serve the man; and she asserts that her talents are to be used in the public as well as in the private sphere.

Astell’s most sustained argument for the full rationality of women is found in the Preface to the 1706, that is, the third edition of her *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*. Originally published in 1700, this work had drawn criticism, some of it based upon the conventional position that women were inferior to men. Astell set out to refute this claim, arguing from experience, from authority – that of Scripture – and from sheer reason, reinforcing her arguments by demonstrating the literal analogy between domestic and national governance. The constitutional crisis was the burning issue of the day. Astell’s adroit association of the question of the status of women with the political question gave it prominence and immediacy.

Astell begins her argument for the full rationality of women by simply referring to experience. In this simple appeal to common experience, she shows her modernity. She does not appeal to ancient authorities, not even Plato, who had a relatively high opinion of women. Observe, she says. She declares that she was

[i]gnorant of the *Natural Inferiority* of our Sex, which our Masters lay down as a Self-Evident and Fundamental Truth, She saw nothing in the Reason of Things, to make this either a Principle or a Conclusion, but much to the contrary. [...] For if by the Natural Superiority of their Sex, they mean that *every* Man is by Nature superior to *every* Woman, which is the obvious meaning, and that which must be stuck to if they would speak Sense, it wou’d be a Sin in *any* woman to have Dominion over *any* Man, and the greatest Queen ought not to command but to

obey her Footman, because no Municipal Laws can supersede or change the Law of Nature. (*Some Reflections* 9)

This argument had all the more force as Astell was writing during the reign of Queen Anne. She continues her appeal to common experience: "If they mean that *some* Men are superior to *some* Women this is no great Discovery; had they turn'd the Tables, they might have seen that *some* Women are superior to *some* Men" (10).

Astell goes on to give arguments from the authority of Scripture. These are in part conventional: she cites respected female figures from the Old Testament – Miriam, Deborah, Ruth, the Widow of Zarephah, Esther – in a way that had become standard since Christine de Pisan had written in defence of women in the fifteenth century.⁶ However, some of Astell's citations of Scripture to defend her position are more original and show her powers of astute argumentation. In fact, she begins with an interpretation of certain debated texts from the New Testament epistles. Demonstrating her command of theology, she skilfully interprets these passages so that they support, rather than contest, the status of women. For example, she refers to I Corinthians 11:3, a verse that would appear to ground the inferiority of women in dogma: "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." Here is what she says about it: "[N]o inequality can be inferred from hence, neither from the Gradation the Apostle there uses, that the Head of every Man is Christ, and that the Head of the Woman is the Man, and the Head of Christ is God, It being evident from the Form of Baptism, that there is no natural Inferiority among the Divine Persons, but that they are in all things Co-equal" (11). Thus arguing from the liturgy and the equality of the three persons of the Trinity, she establishes from the words of St. Paul himself that women are to be seen as the equals of men, spiritually speaking. In this she harks back to the Catholic theology of the Middle Ages, as influenced by St. Augustine, abandoning the sexism of the later Protestant approaches. She also adroitly argues from St. Paul's choice of specific words that women in general are not inferior to men:

But scripture commands wives to submit themselves to their own husbands; True, for which St Paul gives a mystical reason

(Eph. 5.22 etc.) and St Peter a Prudential and Charitable one (I St Peter 3) but neither of them derive that subjection from the Law of Nature. Nay, St Paul, as if he foresaw and meant to prevent this Plea, giving Directions for their Conduct to Women in general (I Tim. 2), when he comes to speak of Subjection, he changes his Phrase from Women, which denotes the whole Sex, to Woman, which in the New Testament is appropriated to a Wife. (*Some Reflections* 20)⁷

Astell does indeed accept the scriptural injunction that wives should obey their husbands, but she sees this as primarily a matter of convenience, saying nothing about their essential nature. The superiority is one of office only:

We do not find that any Man thinks the worse of his own Understanding because another has superior Power; or concludes himself less capable of a Post of Honour and Authority, because he is not Prefer'd to it. How much time wou'd lie on Men's hands, how empty would the Place of Concourse be, and how silent most Companies did Men forbear to Censure their Governors, that is, in effect, to think themselves Wiser. Indeed Government wou'd be much more desirable than it is, did it invest the Possessor with a superior Understanding as well as Power. And if mere Power gives a Right to Rule, there can be no such thing as Usurpation; but a Highway-Man so long as he has strength to force, has also a Right to require our Obedience. (*Some Reflections* 16)

As is apparent in this quotation, Astell bases her arguments not only on Scripture, but also on the analogy of the government of the state.⁸ Here she argues most strongly and compellingly, bringing to bear on the question of women's status the kind of reasoning that was constantly used at this time to determine political issues. Time and again, she draws a parallel between domestic and public economy. What goes for the one must surely be applicable to the other: "[W]hy is Slavery so much condemn'd and strove against in one Case, and so highly applauded and held so necessary and so sacred in another?" (19). The subjection of women is undeniable, but the fact that they are everywhere subordinate to men does nothing to prove their incapacity: "That the Custom of the World has put Women, generally speaking, into a State of Subjection, is

not deny'd; but the Right can no more be prov'd from the Fact, than the Predominancy of Vice can justifie it" (10). That men have had a greater success in intellectual endeavours and public affairs Astell admits; but, like Poullain, she attributes this discrepancy to women's lack of the advantages of education: "For Sense is a Portion that God Himself has been pleas'd to distribute to both Sexes with an Impartial Hand, but Learning is what Men have engross'd to themselves" (21). She believes that given the same advantages of education, women would do much better. Finally, she argues that if indeed men believe that women are irrational, then they must treat them as they treat animals. To do otherwise is unfair: "But if Reason is only allow'd us by way of Raillery, and the secret Maxim is that we have none, 'tis the best way to confine us with Chain and Block to the Chimney-Corner" (29). It is unjust for men to declare that women have no reason, and then to expect them to behave reasonably.

If it is true that women are intellectually equal to men, what conclusions can be drawn about their purpose and their function? Astell argues that their primary function is to serve God: "[T]is certainly no Arrogance in a Woman to conclude, that she was made for the Service of God, and that this is her End. Because God made all Things for Himself, and a Rational Mind is too noble a Being to be Made for the Sake and Service of any Creature" (11). Milton, who was typical of the Puritans of his age, had thought otherwise: for him, even woman's spirituality is mediated by her husband. His Eve in *Paradise Lost* is subordinated to Adam: "He for God only, / She for God in him" (4.299). He shows Eve as embracing this subordination willingly, even eagerly. When the Archangel Raphael and Adam are engaged in a philosophical discussion about astronomy, Eve withdraws to tend to her garden. But she does so, Milton is careful to explain, not because the intellectual level of the conversation is beyond her:

*Yet went she not as not with such discourse
Delighted, or not capable her ear
Of what was high; such pleasure she reserv'd
Adam relating, she sole Auditress;
Her Husband the Relater she preferr'd
Before the Angel, and of him to ask
Chose rather. (8.48–54)*

For Milton, Eve's undisputed rationality does not preclude her absolute intellectual subservience to her husband. It is worth noting that in Milton's view this subservience dates from before the Fall: in the opinion of some moralists – referred to by Astell in *Reflections* (12) – woman's subjection was the result of the Fall, and her punishment for her part in it. But in *Paradise Lost* Milton grounds it deeply in her very reason for being.

For Mary Astell, on the other hand, service to a man is entirely subordinate to a woman's first responsibility, which is to serve God. How then is God to be served? The answer is interesting and a little unexpected from such a stern moralist as Astell: "*We ought as much as we can to endeavour the Perfecting of our Beings, and that we be as happy as possibly we may*" (*Serious Proposal*, II 83). Now it is true that she defines perfecting our being as including the patient endurance of trials (such as living with a cruel husband); but she also believes that a woman has an absolute duty to improve and develop the rational faculty that God has given her and that doing so will lead to her ultimate happiness:

God does nothing in vain, he gives no power or Faculty which he has not allotted to some proportionate use, if therefore he has given to Mankind a Rational Mind, every individual Understanding ought to be employ'd in somewhat worthy of it. The Meanest Person shou'd think as Justly, tho' not as Capaciously, as the greatest Philosopher. And if the Understanding be made for the contemplation of Truth, and I know not what else it can be made for, either there are many Understandings who are never able to attain what they were design'd for, which is contrary to the Supposition that GOD made nothing in Vain, or else the very meanest must be put in the way of attaining it. (*Serious Proposal*, II 118)

However, the great gift of reason is not meant, she believes, to be used only for personal profit. It is also to be used for the benefit of the community:

Our Faculties were given us for Use not Ostentation, not to make a noise in the world but to be serviceable in it, to declare the Wisdom, Power and Goodness, of the All-Perfect Being from whom we derive All our Excellencies, and in whose Service they ought Wholly to be employ'd. Did our Knowledge serve

no other purpose than the exalting us in our own Opinion, or in that of our Fellow Creatures, the furnishing us with Materials for a quaint Discourse, an agreeable Conversation, 'twere scarce worth while to be at the trouble of attaining it. But when it enlarges the Capacity of our Minds, gives us nobler Ideas of the Majesty, the Grandeur and Glorious Attributes of our adorable Creator, Regulates our Wills and makes us more capable of Imitating and Enjoying him, 'tis then a truly sublime thing, a worthy Object of our Industry: And she who does not make this the end of her Study, spends her Time and Pains to no purpose or to an ill one. (Serious Proposal, II 96)

This passage, although it provides us with a good grasp of Astell's fundamental convictions, is easy to misunderstand. In particular, her statement that we were put into the world "not to make a noise in it, but to be serviceable" seems to echo the bourgeois ideal of the silent woman. But the distinction she is making here is not between the silent, private woman and the public one, but between the woman who is merely ambitious for herself and the one who wants to serve her world. It is a question of motivation. "The true Christian," she asserts in *The Christian Religion*, "seeks a Reputation from Vertues of a public, not a private nature" (325). Astell in fact challenged the prejudice against women's participation in public affairs. Although she did not believe that women should engage in public speaking,⁹ it is apparent from her own practice that she herself did her best to contribute to the public good. What she could not achieve in her own person, she accomplished through her writing. Andrew Hiscock has drawn attention to the importance of writing as a way of reconciling a woman's desire to contribute to the common good with society's determination to relegate her to the private sphere. Of Margaret Cavendish, he observes that she "appears to have been fascinated by the ways in which the printed word allowed her access to the stage of oratory without necessitating physical performance or presence" (411). The same is true of Mary Astell: she did not content herself with a private and domestic exercise of her powers, but entered into some of the most important political discussions of her day. For her, this was part of being serviceable in the world, something to which she believed she had been called. Her talents were such that they could not be fully used merely in a private capacity.

As for Astell's own views about *ethos*, it is not surprising to find that she takes a Platonic position. She makes her most explicit statement on this question in the Preface added to the 1706 third edition of *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*. There had been extensive speculation about the authorship of this work, which, like all of Astell's writing, was published anonymously. In fact she had heard that a certain gentleman had claimed to have written it himself (8). Astell is impatient of all such speculation:

If any is so needlessly curious as to enquire from what Hand they [the *Reflections*] come, they may please to know, that it is not good Manners to ask, since the Title-Page does not tell them. [...] 'Tis a very great Fault to regard rather who it is that Speaks, than what is Spoken; and either to submit to Authority, when we should only yield to Reason; or if Reason press too hard, to think to ward it off by Personal Objections and Reflections. (7)

In this insistence on the importance of relying upon manifest truth rather than upon the reputation of the speaker, Astell's position is very close to that of Plato:

[T]he priests in the sanctuary of Zeus at Dordona declared that the earliest oracles came from an oak tree, and men of their time, who lacked your modern sophistication, were simple-minded enough to be quite satisfied with messages from an oak or a rock if only they were true. But truth is not enough for you; you think it matters who the speaker is and where he comes from. (*Phaedrus* 275)

Concerned as she was to defend women and to establish their reputation as intellectually and morally the equals of men, Astell still believed that a text could, and should, carry its own authority within it. Its authorship by a woman – in her publications Astell often acknowledged her sex, though not her name – should not detract from its persuasive appeal, for this should be to reason, not to extrinsic *ethos*.

Mary Astell, then, addressed the question of woman's *ethos* by powerfully arguing the case for the full competence of women to engage in the life of the mind. She believed women to be no less intelligent and no less virtuous than men. If they appeared to be

deficient in either mental grasp or moral behaviour, it was only because they had been denied the kind of education that would develop their potential. Women were made for God, not for men, and service to God implied the full use of God-given talents, not only for personal development in spirituality, but also for the common benefit of the world at large. In her own practice she acted upon her conviction that, at least for women like herself, using those talents would involve venturing beyond the private sphere of activity. Identifying herself with the Christian Platonists, and drawing upon Cartesians such as Poullain de la Barre for support, she offered one of the most compelling defences of women of her time.

