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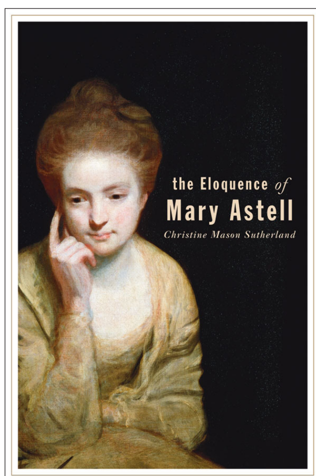

THE ELOQUENCE OF MARY ASTELL

by Christine Mason Sutherland

ISBN 978-1-55238-661-3

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A Serious Proposal to the Ladies

Part I

While engaged in the correspondence with John Norris, Astell began to write the work that in 1694 launched her career as a practising rhetorician: *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest. By a Lover of Her Sex*.[1] The proposal takes the form of a letter, directly addressed to her audience and beginning in proper correspondence style, "Ladies," (5). The conversational style of the letter dominates throughout. As we have seen, the experience of engaging in serious correspondence with a noted philosopher no doubt honed Astell's writing skills and made her comfortable with the genre of the letter on serious subjects. She now adapts this form to a different and wider audience. In fact, she is beginning to make the great transition mentioned in the last chapter: she is going at least semi-public, moving from *sermo* to *contentio*. *Letters Concerning the Love of God* was addressed to one person and was originally not intended for publication. Like others before her (including Cicero), Astell now uses this originally private form as a means of addressing a more public audience. Still, it is addressed specifically to the ladies – that is, women of Astell's social class. She is not yet directly addressing the other sex.

The occasion of the proposal was Astell's perception of the enormous problems encountered by single women in a culture that had no place for them. The Protestant celebration of marriage necessarily disvalued the woman who failed to find a husband. She was seen as an anomaly – a burden to society in general and to her family in particular. Without a specific role to fulfill, she was deprived not only of sufficient income but also of a nourishing social community in which she might prosper. The unmarried lady, therefore, too often lived a life of poverty and loneliness. There was, for instance, Astell's friend, Elizabeth Elstob, the noted Anglo-Saxon scholar. As long as her brother lived she prospered, for he shared her interests, encouraged her scholarship, and supported her financially.

After his death, however, she endured long years of poverty before finding congenial work as governess to the daughters of the Duke of Portland.[2] Many other women fared even worse. Only because she had built upon the early education she had received from her uncle had Astell herself escaped destitution. She was determined to do what she could for other women in a similar situation. As she saw it, education was the key.

Yet the poverty that was too often the fate of the single lady was not the only social evil she addressed. Just as serious as the material destitution of the unmarried woman, in her view, was the spiritual and intellectual deprivation of many of the rich ladies in high society, whose lives were filled with the frivolities of pleasure-seeking and self-indulgence. As we saw in the previous chapter, she wanted to rescue other women from "meanness of spirit" (Norris and Astell 49). Bathsua Makin had addressed this problem as early as 1673 in her *Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen*. She had complained that young girls were encouraged to "trifle away so many precious minutes meerly to polish their Hands and Feet, to curl their Locks, to dress and trim their Bodies" (22). Twenty years later, the situation had not improved. Ruth Perry describes the self-indulgent life of the typical upper-class girl of the 1690s. She was offered no serious academic education, learning only to embroider and make sweetmeats, and perhaps to sing or play the flute (*Celebrated* 104). The fashionable women of high society spent their days dressing for sumptuous parties, engaging in illicit love affairs, and gambling. According to Dr George Hickes, most of them were functionally illiterate: "It is shameful, but ordinary, to see Gentlewomen, who have both Wit and Politeness, not able yet to pronounce well what they read. They are still more grossly deficient in Orthography, or in Spelling right, and in the manner of forming or connecting Letters in Writing" (qtd. in Perry, *Celebrated* 104). Astell saw such a life as demeaning, an abuse of talents and a waste of the divine gift of reason.

What Astell proposes is a complete reversal of such a lifestyle: she wants to turn these self-indulgent high-livers into serious scholars, given to prayer and good works. A greater change could hardly be imagined, nor one less likely to appeal to these ladies of fashion. What she is recommending would look to the average genteel lady of the 1690s to be little short of cruel and unusual punishment. How then is she even to get herself a hearing, let alone gain their support? She does so by introducing her topic very

gradually – whetting the reader's appetite, luring her on by sheer curiosity. Instead of stating immediately the problem the proposal addresses, as Swift does, for example, in "A Modest Proposal," Astell first recommends it without actually disclosing what it is. She describes it as something that will "improve your Charms and heighten your Value […] and fix that Beauty, to make it lasting and permanent, which Nature with all the helps of Art cannot secure" (5). Disingenuously, Astell denies using rhetoric, while at the same time taking advantage of every persuasive technique in her address to her readers: "And sure I shall not need many words to persuade you to close with this Proposal. [Readers still do not know what it is.] The very offer is a sufficient inducement; nor does it need the set-off's of Rhetorick to recommend it, were I capable, which yet I am not, of applying them with the greatest force" (6). Astell is wise thus to promote her proposal in advance of giving the least hint of what it is, or even the problem that it addresses. Only very gradually does she let the reader guess what she is about. First she introduces the unappealing words "Vertue" and "Wisdom." But she is careful not to frighten her readers off by suggesting any kind of self-denial: "No solicitude in the adornation of your selves is discommended, provided you employ your care about that which is really your *self*" (6). And she promises: "Neither will any pleasure be denied you, who are only desir'd not to catch at the Shadow and let the Substance go" (6). Next she appeals to their ambition and sense of competitiveness – neither a quality she particularly admires, as she will reveal later. For the time being, however, it seems that the promise of favourable attention may win over her audience. "You may be as ambitious as you please, so you aspire to the best things; and contend with your Neighbours as much as you can, that they may not out-do you in any commendable Quality. Let it never be said, that they to whom pre-eminence is so very agreeable, can be tamely content that others should surpass them in *this*, and precede them in a *better* World" (7). Precedence was of enormous concern to high-class ladies – and even to those of a lower class. Astell's appeal to this social value, therefore, is astute.

By degrees, Astell introduces the delights of the intellectual and spiritual life, appealing now to the ladies' sense of fashion: "For shame let's abandon that *Old*, and therefore one wou'd think unfashionable employment of pursuing Butter flies and Trifles" (7). Again saving their faces (something she will recommend in her rhetorical theory in *A Serious Proposal, Part II*), she attributes

this pursuit of "Vanity and Folly" not to the choices made by the ladies themselves but to the cultural influences to which they are subject. She urges them to "break the enchanted Circle that custom has plac'd us in" (7) and to aspire to a style of life more worthy of them. Always considerate of the feelings of her female readers, she excuses herself for appearing to criticize them: "Pardon me the seeming rudeness of this Proposal, which goes upon a supposition that there is something amiss in you, which it is intended to amend." None of us is perfect, she reminds them: "To be exempt from mistake, is a privilege few can pretend to"; but she assures them: "I Love you too well to endure a spot upon your Beauties" (8). It nevertheless becomes increasingly apparent that Astell is bent upon reforming her ladies. Yet she offers every excuse she can think of for their frivolity, blaming men for denying women any escape from the ignorance for which they are despised – ignorance that Astell believes is "the cause of most Feminine Vices" (11). It is lack of education, not inherent inferiority, that is the problem. The soil (to use her own metaphor) is good, but it wants cultivating (10).

Having thus prepared her readers and stimulated their curiosity by analyzing the problem and its causes while postponing its solution, Astell finally makes her proposal simply and directly. It is to erect "a Monastery, or if you will [...] 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" (18). Astell thus brings together the values of both the contemplative and the active life, in the way practised by some of the medieval monastic institutions. For her, the opportunity to "do the greatest good" (18) in the world is of equal importance with the nurturing of the soul; and this means for Astell intellectual activity as well as prayer, worship, and social service. In thus stressing the importance of intellectual activity, she is perhaps looking back to the example of some medieval monastic institutions for women where scholarship was encouraged. These, though rare in England, had existed. But scholarship in the Middle Ages had required the study of dialectic, and in the Renaissance of rhetoric, and both involved a good working knowledge of Latin. One of the great advantages of developments in the seventeenth century, Astell believed, especially the philosophical ideas of Descartes, was that it was now recognized that extensive professional educa-

tion was not necessary in order to engage in the life of the mind. The human being, she asserts, following Descartes, is naturally endowed with intellectual and linguistic capacities. Nor do the ladies have to learn foreign languages in order to become educated: Latin is no longer the *sine qua non* of the scholar.

Astell, then, combines the best of the old with the best of the new: she wants to bring back the monasteries, but not exactly in their old form. Much more stress is to be put upon intellectual development: the ladies are to study Descartes and Malebranche, for instance – not exactly easy reading. Another important difference is that attendance is to be voluntary – there will be no binding vows to force the ladies to stay should they wish to leave: "And since Inclination can't be forc'd, (and nothing makes people more uneasy than the fettering themselves with unnecessary Bonds) there shall be no Vows or irrevocable Obligations, not so much as the fear of Reproach to keep our Ladies here any longer than they desire" (29). This provision was crucial to the proposal since the fear of bondage was very great. In fact, one of the legitimate fears about marriage was (for women) the impossibility of getting out of it. It was partly this constraint that led Mary Astell in a later work (*Some Reflections Upon Marriage*) to ask why women were born slaves.

Having described in some detail the principles according to which the ladies would live in the monastery, Astell follows the genre of the standard proposal by looking at some of the consequences and answering possible objections. In developing the advantages of her retreat, she details at some length the importance of giving women the right environment. She believes in the power of what she calls custom and we call cultural constraint, theorizing it (though she does not of course use these terms) as the social construction of reality. She sees the crucial importance of the context in which the ladies live and how hard it is for them to try to reform their lives and change their values while continuing to live among those who have no such aspirations. She represents the retreat, therefore, as an opportunity, as an escape: here they "may get out of that danger which a continual stay in view of the Enemy and the familiarity and unwearied application of the Temptation may expose them to" (18). What they are being offered is not a restriction of their freedom, but liberty itself: "You are therefore Ladies, invited into a place, where you shall suffer no other confinement, but to be kept out of the road of Sin" (19).

There follows what amounts to a panegyric on the delights of such a life – convincing because of its passionate sincerity. Astell is no sour moralist, trying merely to improve standards of behaviour; on the contrary, she is inviting her readers into a lifestyle that she obviously finds satisfying and joyful.

Next she turns to the possible objections her various readers might have to her proposal, dealing first with some of the anticipated reservations of the prospective students, the ladies themselves. Will they, for example, practise a life of unalleviated self-denial? By no means: the institution will "not only permit but recommend harmless and ingenious Diversions, Musick particularly, for 'Neither God nor Wise men will like us better for an affected severity and waspish sourness'" (26). Then there is the familiar objection that such religious retirement is unnecessary: "May not People be good without this confinement?" (40). She allows that they may; however, she points out that not everyone is strong enough to resist the corruption of the world: some degree of protection is advisable. She repeats once more her belief in the importance of the right social context for the practice of goodness.

Other objections that she anticipates are likely to be made by men. The proposal is addressed to the ladies, but Astell is astute enough to recognize that, since it is principally men who have the power and the money to set up her proposed institution, it is important to get them on side too. She therefore tries to anticipate, and answer, some of their possible objections. She refers, ironically, to the invasion of masculine privileged territory (a concern also addressed more than twenty years earlier by Bathsua Makin): "I know not how the Men will resent it, to have their enclosure broke down, and Women invited to tast of the Tree of Knowledge they have so long unjustly *monopolized*" (24). One fear she anticipates is that "a Learned Education [...] will make Women vain and assuming, and instead of correcting encrease their Pride" (41). She concedes that a smattering of learning might be dangerous – as it is, she pointedly remarks, for men. However, she does not propose that her ladies shall be superficially educated. Their knowledge will be in depth. They will therefore, like Socrates, recognize how little – relatively – they know.

Finally, there is the all-important question of money. In answering the assumed objection that such a retirement will cost too much, Astell first gives the pious answer – the objectors should

get their priorities right: "Who will think 500 pounds too much to lay out for the purchase of so much Wisdom and Happiness?" (42). However, on a more practical level, she argues that well-educated women if and when they marry will not waste money on frivolities, and moreover will know how to run a household thriftily. Then there is the problem of dowries, a major concern for upper-class parents, for without an adequate sum to bring to her husband, a girl could not hope to make a good marriage. Astell goes into the question in some detail: "Five or six hundred pounds may be easily spar'd with a Daughter, when so many thousand would go deep; and yet as the world goes be a very inconsiderable Fortune for Ladies of their Birth; neither maintain them in that *Port* which Custom makes almost necessary, nor procure them an equal Match" (43). Another advantage is that the monastery would provide a safe retreat from fortune-hunters: "[H]ere Heiresses and Persons of Fortune may be kept secure, from the rude attempts of designing Men; And she who has more Mony than discretion, need not curse her Stars for being expos'd a prey to bold importunate and rapacious Vultures" (39). In an obvious appeal to the parents of such an heiress, she points out, "here she may remain in safety till a convenient Match be offer'd by her Friends, and be freed from the danger of a dishonourable one" (39). Astell, then, intends her monastery to serve both as a refuge for single women and as a school for young girls who will later become – she hopes – sensible wives and mothers, willing and able to give a suitable education to their own children, particularly their daughters.

The proposal ends with an appeal for funds: "Is Charity so dead in the world that none will contribute to the saving their own and their neighbours Souls?" (44). She summarizes her main arguments in the last paragraph, and ends on an optimistic note: "She who drew the Scheme is full of hopes, it will not want kind hands to perform and compleat it" (47). And since the proposal has been made in the form of a letter, she signs herself "Ladies, Your very humble Servant," but withholds her name.

Mary Astell's *Serious Proposal* created quite a stir in London: four editions were published in the next seven years; in fact, among all her writings it was this particular work that received the most attention during her lifetime[3] (Hilda Smith 137). The quality of the work no doubt justified this attention. Nevertheless, its popularity is surprising in view of the fact that what Astell proposed was by

no means new. Astell herself was delighted to find support for her ideas in a work by Sir Henry Wotton, from which she quotes:

> Indeed a Learned Education of the Women will appear so unfashionable, that I began to startle at the singularity of the proposition, but was extremely pleas'd when I found a late ingenious Author (whose Book I met with since the writing of this [*Mr Wotton's Reflect. on Ant. and Mod. Learn. p 349, 350]), agree with me in my Opinion. For speaking of the Repute that Learning was in about 150 years ago: *It was so very modish* (says he) *that the fair Sex seem'd to believe that* Greek *and* Latin *added to their Charms; and* Plato *and* Aristotle *untranslated, were frequent Ornaments of their Closets. One wou'd think by the effects, that it was a proper way of Educating them, since there are no accounts in History of so many great Women in any one Age, as are to be found between the years 15 and 1600.* (22)

Besides Wotton, there had been many others who had thought this kind of serious education good for women. Some had even proposed a women's academy, others some kind of religious institution. In "A Refuge from Men: The Idea of a Protestant Nunnery," Bridget Hill gives an account of these proposals. One of the earliest suggestions came from Thomas Becon (1512–1567), during whose lifetime, of course, the monasteries had been dissolved by Henry VIII. Though a staunch Protestant, Becon proposed the foundation of schools for women and children like "the monasteries of solitary women whom we heretofore called nuns, built and set up, and endowed with possessions of our godly ancestors" (qtd. in Hill 110). Robert Burton, in his famous *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), suggests that "some time or other, amongst so many rich bachelors, a benefactor be found to build a monastical college for old, decayed, deformed, or discontented maids to live together" (qtd. in Hill 111). The idea was brought forward again by a character in a play by Sir William D'Avenant in 1636. In the mid-seventeenth century the same idea was used again in two plays written by Margaret Cavendish, *The Female Academy* and *The Convent of Pleasure*. The Protestant divine Thomas Fuller praised the institution of nunneries: "Yea, give me leave to say if such Feminine Foundations had still continued, provided no vows were obtruded upon them [...] haply the weaker sex [...] might be heightened to a higher perfection than hitherto hath been obtained" (qtd. in Hill 112).

Not only had the idea of a Protestant monastery often been suggested: it had even been tried. In the 1630s, there had been a famous settlement of women at Little Gidding under the direction of Nicholas Ferrar.[4] The women lived much the kind of life recommended by Mary Astell – devoting themselves to prayer, study, and good works (F. Smith 67).[5] Possibly inspired by the example of Little Gidding, Lettice, Viscountess Falkland conducted her own household on religious principles which also applied to her charity school. According to her biographer, John Duncon, she also had plans to set up something like nunneries, believing that there should be "places for the education of young Gentlewomen, and for retirement of Widows [...] hoping [...] that learning and religion might flourish more in her own Sex than hither-to-for" (qtd. in F. Smith 67). A similar lifestyle was practised by Mary and Anne Kemys, who established an Anglican sisterhood rather like that of Little Gidding at Naish Court.

Obviously, Astell's proposal was not new. It had been suggested, and tried, many times before. What was it, then, that seized public attention and made it famous in its own time? I suggest that it was the brilliance of Astell's rhetoric that made her proposal so arresting. As I have shown, her use of structure is masterly: she prepares the ground very carefully before setting forth her proposal, making full use of suspense, luring her audience to read on out of sheer curiosity. She knows and understands them extremely well, and introduces her project with the greatest tact and circumspection, anticipating their probable reservations, and offering convincing assurances that these are unwarranted. She is also shrewd enough to make her address directly to the ladies themselves. Bathsua Makin had made her proposal to the gentlemen, posing as a man herself. Astell, on the contrary, not only acknowledges her sex, but subtly empowers her audience of ladies by making her suggestions directly to them: let them take charge of their own destiny by insisting upon an education. She is not so foolish as to admit it, but what she is really calling for is something like a social revolution: by addressing the women, not the men, she is encouraging a revolt against the status quo. The very terms in which she rebukes men for withholding education from women are provocative: "Altho' it has been said by Men of more Wit than Wisdom, and perhaps of more malice than either, that Women are naturally incapable of acting Prudently, or that they are necessarily determined to folly, I must by no means grant it" (9). In fact, she challenges received

wisdom and assumes an authority to protest against it that her society has by no means granted her. The fact that she is a woman, addressing women, gives added force to her proposal.

Her tone throughout is that of the caring mentor: affectionate, respectful but authoritative. It is utterly different from the tone she adopts in her earliest work, the correspondence with John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, which she began in 1693. In that work she is deferential to her audience but she does not have to make allowances for ignorance or lack of self-esteem in her reader. The quite different audience of *A Serious Proposal* requires another rhetorical approach entirely. To accommodate her audience she must to some extent veil her powerful intelligence, avoid dazzling them with her superior intellectual capacity. Her tone in *A Serious Proposal*, then, demonstrates an important development in her craft as a rhetorician: she is equally able to address an eminent philosopher and a group of barely literate upper-class ladies. The tone in both works is intimate, but the intimacy is of very different kinds. That of her correspondence with Norris is the intimacy of two scholars who understand each other very well and are in substantial agreement. The address, though always respectful, is personal. The intimacy of *A Serious Proposal* is different. Here she sounds like a mother – loving, but strict – addressing her children. Never condescending to them, she addresses her women readers with genuine respect and affection, finding excuses for their ignorance and attributing to them the very best motives.[6] Determined on their moral reform, she is not so injudicious as to say so directly, at least not at first. She recommends her ideas in terms of the readers' values, not her own. And perhaps most persuasive in the tone of the work is her obvious sincerity: when she describes the delights of scholarship and holiness, she writes with emotional power:

> In a word, this happy Society will be but one Body, whose Soul is love, animating and informing it, and perpetually breathing forth it self in flames of holy desire after GOD, and acts of benevolence to each other. Envy and Uncharitableness are the Vices only of little and narrow hearts, and therefore 'tis suppos'd, they will not enter here amongst persons whose Dispositions as well as their Births are to be Generous. (27)

Finally, there is the attractiveness of her style: Astell was recognized as one of the finest stylists of her day. Here is an example

of her writing at its best – nothing overstated, but with a satirical sharpness that makes it irresistible:

> Let those therefore who value themselves only on external accomplishments, consider how liable they are to decay, and how soon they may be depriv'd of them, and that supposing they shou'd continue, they are but sandy Foundations to build Esteem upon. What a disappointment it will be to a Ladies Admirere as well as to her self, that her Conversation shou'd lose and endanger the Victory her eyes had gain'd! For when the Passion of a Lover is evaporated into the Indifference of a Husband, and a frequent review has lessen'd the wonder which her Charms at first had rais'd, she'll retain no more than such a formal respect as decency and good breeding will require; and perhaps hardly that; but unless he be a very good Man (and indeed the world is not over full of 'em) her worthlessness has made a forfeit of his Affections, which are seldom fixt by any other things than Veneration and Esteem. (46)

For whatever reasons, Mary Astell's *Serious Proposal* made quite an impact on contemporary London, as she herself acknowledges in the introduction to *A Serious Proposal, Part II*. Some of the adverse criticism was probably motivated by jealousy: according to Bridget Hill, Bishop Gilbert Burnet, who was said to have persuaded a potential patron not to endow the proposed institution on the grounds that it sounded too Roman Catholic, shortly afterwards proposed something very similar himself, using the same terms: "[H]e expressed himself in favour of 'something like Monasteries without Vows which would be a glorious Design'" (Hill 118). Daniel Defoe said he admired her, but also asserted that his own scheme was quite different. In fact, he borrowed heavily from Astell, without acknowledgement (Springborg, *Mary Astell* xiii). Another writer of the time whom Astell believed to have plagiarized her was Richard Steele: Astell herself indirectly accuses him of doing so in the introduction to *Bart'lemy Fair*: he has, she says, "transcribed above an hundred pages into his Ladies Library, verbatim" (qtd. in Springborg, *Mary Astell* xxxviii n.49). However, it is now thought that the plagiarist was not Steele but George Berkeley (xxxviii n. 47, 48).

With the publication of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, then, Astell became known to the world of the 1690s and launched her

career as a rhetorician, a writer of persuasive discourse. Over the next few years, her work would become well known not only to the ladies whom she addressed, but also to the intellectual elite: philosophers, politicians, clergymen. Though known to have been produced by a woman, her ideas were respected, argued about – and against – plagiarized, and satirized. Within a few short years of her arrival in London to what threatened to be a life of poverty and despair, Astell had become a success.