



THE ELOQUENCE OF MARY ASTELL

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Letters Concerning the Love of God

When in 1693 Mary Astell initiated a correspondence with John Norris, she was following a trend that had been developing throughout the seventeenth century.¹ As we saw in the last chapter, in the wake of revolutions in philosophy that discredited the necessity of years of formal education to prepare for the philosophical enterprise, a number of women began to study the works of philosophers and to engage in debate about them. Descartes and his followers had made it possible for women to indulge their interest in these matters without the benefit of an extensive education and even without leaving their own homes; the women found that they could engage in discussion and debate by means of correspondence.² Since letters were considered an acceptable genre for women, they could thus pursue their interests in philosophy without risking their reputation. Some of these correspondences were conducted between renowned scholars and ladies of the nobility: Descartes corresponded with his pupil and patron, Queen Christina of Sweden, and with Elizabeth, Princess of Bohemia; Henry More with Anne Finch, Viscountess Conway; and Joseph Glanville with Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle. But by no means all the letter writers were eminent scholars or noble ladies. As Ruth Perry observes, at this time “learned correspondence became quite the rage” (“Radical Doubt” 476). According to Perry, Neoplatonists such as John Norris were especially devoted to these intellectual relationships conducted in letters (485). Before he embarked on the correspondence with Astell, he had already exchanged letters with Damaris Cudworth (later Masham) and had even dedicated a book to her, though she later repudiated his philosophy and adopted John Locke as her mentor. Norris had also corresponded with Mary, Lady Chudleigh. Both these women, and of course Astell herself, went on to publish their work. Perry suggests that this kind of learned correspondence served as a literary apprenticeship for many women who aspired to be writers (482). Certainly the correspondence with Norris gave

Astell, whose formal education had come to an end with the death of her uncle when she was thirteen, an experience of further education that we might compare with the modern graduate school. She was the kind of student every supervisor loves: highly intelligent, a critical thinker with independent judgement, not afraid to question and challenge the experts. She was already adept at argumentation, and Norris provided the challenge she needed to hone her skills and sharpen her wits still further. The opportunity of engaging in discussion with a noted scholar was crucial to her development as a writer: it was essential training in the process of scholarly enquiry. In this chapter, therefore, I shall first clarify the subject matter of the correspondence and then discuss in some detail what Astell learned from Norris.

The correspondence arose as the result of a question she addressed to him in September 1693. John Norris was eager to engage in such philosophical discussion, and the correspondence continued for the next year, overlapping with the writing and publication of her first book, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. What was the objection that troubled Astell and led to her initiating the correspondence? The answer to this question involves some discussion of the tenets of the Cambridge Platonists, to whose philosophical principles, as we have seen, Astell had been introduced by her uncle. As an undergraduate at Cambridge, Ralph Astell had studied under Ralph Cudworth, one of the most famous of the Cambridge Platonists. These were a group of Anglican clergymen associated with Cambridge University, many of them connected with Emmanuel College, to which Ralph Astell belonged.³ They were Platonists not in any strict sense of the word but in associating themselves with “the whole tradition of spiritualist metaphysics from Plato to Plotinus” (Copleston 54). The founder of this group known as the Cambridge Platonists, Benjamin Whichcote, reacted against the rather dour Puritanism of his upbringing and drew upon the Neoplatonic tradition of spirituality to assert a more optimistic view of human nature. Yet the Cambridge Platonists were also strongly Christian. They stood for the essentials of Christianity, with which all Christian sects could agree: “With regard to dogmatic differences, they [...] tended to adopt a tolerant and ‘broad’ outlook” (55). They stood, on the one hand, against the negative view of humanity represented by the Puritans, and on the other, against the growing atheism and materialism of their time. As Copleston says, “[T]hey were not in tune with either the

empiricist or the religious movements of their time and country” (56). Here are some of their principal tenets:

1. A belief in “the inner light.” One of the favourite sayings of the founder of the movement, Benjamin Whichcote, was a quotation from Proverbs 20:27: “The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord.”
2. A belief in reason. This did not mean that they rejected revelation – quite the contrary. But they believed that God-given reason (“the candle of the Lord”) was to be used in interpreting revelation. “Reason discovers what is natural; and Reason receives what is supernatural” (Whichcote, qtd. in Cassirer 40).
3. A belief in the fundamental importance of morality. Religion is not simply a matter of correct intellectual grasp; it must also be concerned with morality – that is, the will. Ernst Cassirer illuminates this position:

[T]he Cambridge conception of religious reason cannot be derived from the power of thinking alone. The presupposition shared by all these men is that the real instrument of religion is not to be looked for in thought and discursive inference. They combat logical as well as theological dogmatics, and dogmatics of the understanding as well as those of faith. For in both they see an obstacle to that pristine grasp of the divine which can spring only from the fundamental disposition of the will. These rationalists could also have assented to Pascal’s famous definition of faith: [...] “[T]his is what faith is: God felt in the heart, not in the head.” For like Pascal they distinguished sharply between the “order of the heart” and the “order of the understanding.” In the former are the substance and real object of religion. (31)

4. The paramount importance of love. Here the Christian and the Platonic coincide, for Christianity holds love to be the most important of the virtues (I Cor. 13). Ultimately the relationship between God and humankind is one of love. Augustine, one of the influences on the Cambridge Platonists, enlarges on the importance of love not only in his *Confessions* but also in *On Christian Doctrine*. And for Plato, too, it is a key concept: for example, in the *Phaedrus*

and the *Symposium*, he makes clear his doctrine of the importance of love.⁴ Cassirer believes that it is the centrality of love in the philosophy of the Cambridge Platonists that helps to distinguish them most clearly from the Puritans: “The outstanding peculiarity of Calvin’s theology was that it conceived the relation between God and man not from the standpoint of love so much as from that of a rigorous justice” (75). Whichcote, on the other hand, believed that “the religious duty of man is fully exercised in the continuance of love” (74). Beyond the central dogmas, as put forward in the creeds, the Cambridge Platonists believed that dogmatic variation among Christians matters less than toleration, unity, and the maintaining of loving relationships.⁵

It was the study of love that engaged the most particular attention of the Cambridge Platonist, John Norris: “[T]he analysis of love was a subject that had interested Norris from the beginning of his literary career” (Acworth 154). By the time Astell wrote to him, he had already published several works on the subject. Since the death of her uncle, Astell had continued to interest herself in this philosophy and to adopt many of its principles. However, hers was a critical mind, and she did not passively accept any ideas that were put forward. Her letter to Norris reveals her procedure as a scholar: she makes it a practice, she says, “to raise all the Objections that ever I can, and to make [the books she studies] undergo the Severest Test my Thoughts can put’em to before they pass for currant” (Norris and Astell 3). As a result of this strenuous criticism, she had come upon a difficulty – something she could not accept: if, as Norris states, God is the author of all our sensations, and if, as he further states, we love him because he is the cause of our pleasure – what about our pains? Is not God the author of them also?

For if we must Love nothing but what is Lovely, and nothing is Lovely but what is our Good, and nothing is our Good but what does us Good, and nothing does us Good but what causes Pleasure in us; may we not by the same way of arguing say, That that which Causes Pain in us does not do us Good, (for nothing you say does us Good but what Causes Pleasure) and therefore can’t be our Good, and if not our Good then not lovely, and

consequently not the proper, much less the only Object of our Love? (5)

This was the problem that prompted Astell to write to Norris, and it was the first topic of their extended correspondence, eventually published as *Letters Concerning the Love of God*. Astell represents herself to Norris as a humble enquirer seeking instruction, putting herself in the position of a pupil addressing the master: "I have brought my unwrought Ore to be refined and made currant by the Brightness of your Judgment, and shall reckon it a great Favour if you will give your self the Trouble to point out my mistakes" (46). Norris, who seems to have been a natural teacher as well as a philosopher, welcomed the opportunity to engage in correspondence with one who obviously had a brilliant though untrained mind:

I find you thoroughly comprehend the Argument of my Discourse, in that you have pitch'd upon the only material Objection to which it is liable; which you have press'd so well and so very home, that I can't but greatly admire the Light and Penetration of your Spirit. One of your clear and exact thoughts might easily satisfie your self in any Difficulty that shall come in your way, as having brightness enough of your own to dispel any Cloud that may set upon the Face of Truth. (Norris and Astell 9)

However, he also takes seriously her wish to be corrected. In the course of the correspondence, therefore, he not only engages with her ideas, but also corrects her philosophical procedure and her method in writing. This instruction was especially important to her development as a practising rhetorician, for from him she learned the importance of thorough and painstaking enquiry in writing as well as thinking.

Norris recognized that Astell's main experience in discourse up to this point had been in conversation. Her method, therefore, reflected the typical conversational style: frequent changes of subject with little extension or depth of treatment. Accordingly, he advises her not to embark upon a new topic before the old one has been thoroughly exhausted:

I would have these Subjects well fitted and chosen, that so we may not enter upon a new Argument till that which was first undertaken be thoroughly discharged, whereby we shall avoid a Fault very incident to common Conversation (wherein new Questions are started before the first is brought to an Issue) and which makes the Discoursings of the most intelligent Persons turn to so little an account. But this Fault so frequent and almost unavoidable in the best Companies, is easily remedied in Letters, and therefore since we are now fallen upon a noble and sublime Subject, I desire we may go to the Bottom of it, and not commence any new Matter till we have gone over all that is of material Consideration in this of Divine Love. (54)

He goes on to give her a projection of the structure of the present letter: "I shall therefore first of all set down what by comparing the several Parts of your Letter together I take to be your Notion. Which when I have stated and considered, I shall reflect upon some single Passages in your Letter that relate to it. And in this you have the Model of the Answer that I intend" (56). In outlining his own procedure, he also tactfully gives her a model for her own scholarly discourse.

Norris was diplomatic in the advice he gave, but he could also be severe. Here is one example of his criticism of her philosophical approach: "[A]s I am not satisfied with the Grounds of your Distinction, so neither am I with the Use and Application you make of it" (63). Two of her passages, he says, require particular comment: "One is, that mental Pain is the same with Sin, the other is, that Sin is the only true Evil of Man" (74). Sin, he explains, is an act and pain a passion: they cannot therefore be identical; it is necessary to distinguish sin from its punishment. He thus encourages her to think philosophically, making definitions and distinctions, engaging in thoughts of greater complexity at a deeper level.

Astell was immensely grateful for the help he gave her. Her social life, though it brought her into contact with congenial ladies who admired and supported her, offered little in the way of intellectual stimulation. She must have been by far the most able thinker of her circle. The chance to enter into discussion with someone whose superior scholarship and wide philosophical experience could

challenge her own ideas gave her the necessary preparation for the work she was later to undertake. Her intellectual isolation as a single woman living outside the society of men whose education might have sparked her own ideas had made her thirsty for exactly the kind of challenge that Norris gave her. Not only did he engage in serious philosophical discussion with her, correcting her procedures and clarifying her ideas; he also recommended books to her and on one occasion sent a book for her to read. She thanked him for recommending the philosophy of Malebranche and wished she could read him in the original language. Knowing how much she needed a mentor, she gratefully acknowledged his help in Letter V, dated December 12, 1693, when the correspondence had continued for some months:

I have hitherto courted knowledge with a kind of Romantic Passion, in spite of all Difficulties and Discouragements: for knowledge is thought so unnecessary an Accomplishment on a Woman, that few will give them selves the Trouble to assist them in the Attainment of it. [...] But now, since you have so generously put into my Hand an Opportunity of obtaining what I so greedily long after, that I may make the best Improvement of so great Advantage, I give my self entirely to your Conduct, so far as is consistent with a rational not blind Obedience, bring a free and unprejudiced Mind to receive from your Hand such Gravings and Impressions as shall seem most convenient, and though I can't engage for a prompt and comprehensive Genius, yet I will for a docile Temper. (79)

It is in this letter that she specifically requests further instruction. She meekly accepts his criticism of her hastiness and asks that when he thinks “we have sufficiently examined the Subject we are upon,” he will instruct her in proper philosophical procedure: “I desire you to furnish me with such a System of Principles as I may rely on to give me such Rules as you Judge most convenient to initiate a raw Disciple in the Study of Philosophy: least for want of laying a good Foundation, I give you too much Trouble, by drawing Conclusions from false Premises, and making use of improper Terms” (102). Norris responds by assuring her that she has already corrected her philosophical error and that “all is right and as it

should be" (104). In fact, he gives her what amounts to an excellent report: "Your Hypothesis, as you now explain and rectifie it, runs clear and unperplexed, and has nothing in it but what equitably understood challenges my full Consent and Approbation" (104).

Yet though she has professed in this letter to have "a docile Temper," it is worth noting that she reserves the right to disagree with him: she qualifies her intellectual subordination to his instruction by refusing to give up her own right to judge according to what seems to her rational. She does not always see things his way, and she is not afraid to challenge him. As the correspondence continues, she gains confidence in her own powers, and even after it is finished she adds an appendix that offers a telling critique of his philosophical position. So Platonic is Norris that he argues that the duty of the Christian is to die to the material world. God does not need it: he can give the experience of sensation bypassing the body altogether. Astell disagrees: such a position, she argues, "renders a great Part of God's workmanship vain and useless" (278). She believes that God's acting through the body contributes more to his glory than bypassing it would do (282). Norris, in a brief response, maintains that Nature is a mere chimera, but declines to continue the discussion further. Furthermore, in spite of her respect for him, and her deferential tone, she can be as direct as he can. For instance, when Norris objects to her division of the soul into inferior and superiors parts, she admits that she is confused, but says that she found the distinction in his own work, citing the text, *Christian Blessedness*, and even giving the page number, 158. Norris is forced to defend himself, acknowledging that he does "make use of this Scheme of Speech" (109) but asserting that he is only using common popular parlance and that the distinction must not be taken literally. His defence is, in truth, a bit lame: Astell, perhaps without precisely meaning to, has caught him out.

As in most good tutorial relationships, then, the instructor is learning from the student as well as the student from the instructor. Norris is honest and generous enough to acknowledge that he has benefited both morally and intellectually from the correspondence: he has received "not only Heat but Light, intellectual as well as moral Improvement" (Preface n.p.). He continues: "to my knowledge I have never met with any that have so inlightened my Mind, enlarged my Heart, so entered and took Possession of my Spirit, and have had such a general and commanding Influence over my whole Soul as these of yours" (Preface n.p.). This is no

mere flattery: according to R. Acworth, Astell had contributed significantly to Norris's most cherished philosophical project, the refinement of the philosophy of love. He was "greatly assisted by Mary Astell, an admirer of his writings" (172), and it was in fact she who convinced him to change his position: "[A]lthough Norris at first rejected Mary Astell's reasoning, insisting that pain was a real evil and that God was to be loved in spite of, and not because of, being its author, he came in the course of their correspondence to accept her basic point" (173).

As the discussion moves on to other matters on which they obviously think alike, Astell is encouraged to express her opinions and confess her problems without restraint. In these letters, she displays a freedom that seldom appears in her later works. Confident of the superior intellectual powers of her correspondent and trusting his discretion, she obviously does not feel that she has to tailor her discourse to his interests and understanding in any way that restricts her, and the result is a kind of confessional intimacy usually more typical of the diary than of the letter. On occasion, she appears to be meditating on paper rather than communicating: the love of God is "so divine a Cordial, that the least Drop of it is able to sweeten and outweigh all the troubles of this present State [...] and were it but largely shed abroad in our hearts we should be out of reach of Fortune" (99). Her audience in these passages would appear to be herself, or perhaps God, rather than another human being. The tone of the *Letters*, then, is quite different from that of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, begun a little later but while the correspondence was still in progress. In that work, she is the mentor, and the tone reflects the stance she adopts toward the audience. In the *Letters*, it is she who is being mentored, at least in her view, and her tone is one of deference to his greater knowledge – a deference, however, that does not preclude her arguing forcefully with him when she disagrees.

There can be no doubt that it was the experience of corresponding with Norris that established the genre that Astell made her own. In her subsequent works, she uses the genre of the letter in both parts of *A Serious Proposal* and in *The Christian Religion*. It is true that our sense of the discourse as a personal letter recedes further and further into the background in successive works. In *The Christian Religion*, aside from providing the occasion for introducing the topic and from the very rare addresses to Lady Catherine, the form of the letter is scarcely noticeable. Yet it seems that it

is the letter genre that allows her to move gradually from *sermo* to *contentio*. From private letter, to public letter, from public letter to political pamphlet – this is the transformation to be observed in Astell’s career as a writer. With each publication her audience broadens, until at last she addresses the great public world of political interest.

However, when she wrote her first letter to Norris, Astell had no thought of publication. The idea had never crossed her mind. It took all Norris’s powers of persuasion to get her to allow him to publish their correspondence. While writing the letters, she had supposed that she was engaged in private discourse, and therefore felt free to discuss intimate problems concerning her own emotions that she certainly would not have aired before a public audience. For example, she confides to Norris how hurt she has been by the indifference and ingratitude of her friends: “But though I can say without boasting that none ever loved more generously than I have done, yet perhaps never any met with more ungrateful Returns” (50). As the context makes clear, Astell is speaking here as the disappointed teacher: “Fain would I rescue my Sex, or at least as many of them as come within my little Sphere, from the Meanness of Spirit into which the Generality of ’em are sunk” (49). Perhaps her own intellectual loneliness contributed to her desire to educate the women she met socially. In any event, it appears that her well-intentioned instruction was not well received: most of them, she thought, did not aspire to any “higher Excellency than a well-chosen Pettycoat, or a fashionable Commode” (49). She attempts to adopt the Augustinian position recommended by Norris – that “we may seek Creatures *for* our good, but not love them *as* our good” – but finds it hard to achieve. She confesses that she is still motivated by something other than pure benevolence and that her response is not wholly rational: “for there’s no Reason that we should be uneasie because others won’t let us do them all the good we would” (50).

In the context of a private correspondence, Astell felt free to confide to Norris some of her most intimate concerns. She dreads the consequences of publishing these personal reflections: “For truly Sir, when we expose our Meditations to the World, we give them the Right to judge, and we must either be content with the Judgment or keep our Thoughts at home” (Preface n.p.). This acknowledgement of the reader’s right to judge does not, however, prevent her from complaining bitterly in *The Christian Religion*

that she is being judged (by the writer of *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God*) on what was originally a private correspondence (131). She is in fact distressed by Norris's insistence that the *Letters* ought to be published. She protests that publication would compromise her privacy, referring to "my darling, my beloved Obscurity, which I court and doat on above all Earthly Blessings" (Preface n.p.).

This desire for obscurity is naturally related to her sense of what is proper for a woman. She shrinks, indeed, from the very publicity value that her gender gives to the correspondence. For Norris, it appears to be an advantage. Part of the interest of the *Letters* lies in the astonishing fact that they are written by a woman: he refers to those readers who "from the surprizing Excellency of these Writings may be tempted to question whether my Correspondent be really a Woman or no" (Preface n.p.). His fulsome praise of her writing, sincere though it undoubtedly is, is given in this context of surprise that a woman could write so well. He refers to "such Choiceness of Matter, such Weight of Sense, such Art and Order of Contrivance, such Clearness and Strength of reasoning, such Beauty of Language, such Address of Style, such bright and lively Images and Colours of things, and such moving Strains of the most natural and powerful Oratory" (Preface n.p.). To Astell this appears to be mere vulgar showmanship, useful only "to decoy those to Perusal of them, who wanting Piety to read a book for its Usefulness, may probably have the Curiosity to inquire what can be the Product of a Woman's Pen" (Preface n.p.). Far from wishing to attract admiration for her unusual achievement, she considers it a pity that "it should be any bodies Wonder to meet with an ingenious Woman" (Preface n.p.). In the end, however, she admits that publication of her letters might do some good: it might "excite a generous emulation in my Sex, perswade them to leave their insignificant Pursuits for Employments worthy of them" (Preface n.p.). Reluctantly, Astell finally gives her permission for the publication of the *Letters*, but only on condition that her name does not appear, even in initials. A further requirement is that the work be dedicated to someone she will in due course name. Her nominee is her friend Lady Catherine Jones.

There can be little doubt that Astell agreed to the publication of the *Letters* principally to attract a wider public for *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. This work, begun during her correspondence with Norris, was published in 1694. When the *Letters* came out the next year, 1695, she was identified on the title page only as the

author of the *Proposal*: the full title of the published correspondence is *Letters Concerning the Love of God, Between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr John Norris*. Shrinking from publicity for herself, she nonetheless desired it for the *Proposal*. The education of women was the project closest to her heart, and to promote it she was willing to risk the unwelcome publicity and self-exposure that the publication of the *Letters* would bring. *Letters Concerning the Love of God* was indeed bitterly attacked by none other than Damaris Masham, once the protégée of Norris, acting under the direction of John Locke. In due course, as we shall see, Astell found it necessary to reply in detail. Meanwhile, however, she was preoccupied by her project of working toward the establishment of her proposed Protestant monastery for women. Philosophy would have to wait. Although she responded in part to Masham's criticism in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II*, it was not until 1705 that she finally brought out the work that fully answered the attack on the *Letters*. For the next few years she would be principally engaged in pleading the cause of women's liberation from ignorance and what amounted to slavery, and in political pamphleteering. The correspondence with Norris had been invaluable in preparing her for these undertakings.