



THE ELOQUENCE OF MARY ASTELL

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Part I

Mary Astell's Context

The Problem of *Ethos*

For the Renaissance woman,” writes Tita Baumlín, “*ethos* is [...] problematic, since any use of public language risked the destruction of both her public image and her private virtues” (230). Thus in the very act of drawing upon her *ethos* in order to engage in public discourse, the woman destroyed it. Such was the paradoxical situation in which the seventeenth-century woman writer found herself. This chapter will be devoted to an exploration of the elements of *ethos*, and why a woman was thought to be necessarily deficient in them. Since the method used here is the rhetorical one of placing texts and writers within a context, we shall have to take into consideration a number of beliefs and traditions, some of them at odds with one another. Nevertheless, in order to understand the challenges met by Mary Astell, it is important to understand the underlying values and convictions of her time.

Since the time of Aristotle, rhetorical theory has recognized the crucial importance of *ethos*: any speaker or writer must begin by securing an audience, a readership, of those who are prepared to trust his or her judgement. A speaker or writer who has no strong *ethos* is unlikely to be persuasive and may not even get a hearing; the audience has at the very least to be willing to pay attention if the discourse is to be heard at all. The address to considerations of *ethos* is to be found in the work of most classical rhetoricians. It is theorized in Aristotle: “We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided” (*Rhetorica* 1.2.1354). Probably better known in the Renaissance, however, were Cicero’s and Quintilian’s teachings on this subject. Quintilian calls it authority: “For he, who would have all men trust his judgment as to what is expedient and honourable, should both possess and be regarded as possessing genuine wisdom and excellence of character” (3.8.13). *Ethos* is held to be of two kinds: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic *ethos* is that which is generated during the course of reception: the text, or speech

itself, carries with it an authority or credibility that engages the recipient and exercises persuasion. This kind of *ethos* is considered in general more reliable because it is less open to manipulation. Extrinsic *ethos*, on the other hand, derives from the already-established reputation of the speaker or writer. Nearly all rhetoricians since antiquity have recognized its power. Here, for example, is what the ancient teacher of rhetoric, Isocrates, had to say about its importance: “[T]he man who wishes to persuade people will not be negligent as to the matter of character; no, on the contrary, he will apply himself above all to establish a most honourable name among his fellow-citizens”¹ (49). Aristotle agrees: “It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his powers of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses” (Aristotle, *Rhetorica* 1.2.1356). The drawback, of course, is that it is possible to create a false *ethos*: witness the spin-doctors of our own day. Extrinsic *ethos* works most reliably in small communities where the person is familiar and manipulation more easily detected. It is least reliable in contexts of mass communication.

Of the two, intrinsic *ethos* was by far the easier for women to achieve in Astell’s day. If the written discourse was allowed to speak for itself without reference to prior reputation, it was possible that it could impress its audience very favourably. This indeed is what occurred in respect of the writing of various women in the seventeenth century who published anonymously: if it showed sufficiently high quality, it was admired, though ironically the consequence often was that its authorship by a woman was disbelieved on the grounds that no woman could write so well. Owing to this frequently practised anonymity, the success of intrinsic *ethos* did not, as it would in the case of a man, contribute to a woman’s extrinsic *ethos*. Mary Astell’s *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* was so well written that a man actually claimed to have produced it himself, and Astell was obliged to refute his claim in a preface to the edition of 1706 in order to defend herself, even though she remained anonymous, divulging only her sex (8).

Within classical and Renaissance theories of *ethos*, there are three categories: considerations of intelligence, integrity, and goodwill. The speaker or writer must be seen to have authority to speak upon this particular subject to this particular audience. That is, he (the public speaker in classical rhetoric is assumed to be a male) must be

well informed so far as the subject matter is concerned, as well as being demonstrably a rational human being. The second component of *ethos* is integrity, or moral reliability. This element is especially important in the theory of Quintilian, who denies the title of orator to the immoral speaker; but it is also of course important to Christian rhetoricians such as Augustine, who makes the point that the preacher must practise his own precepts if he is to be believed: "How do they say something with words which they deny with deeds? The Apostle did not say vainly, 'They profess that they know God, but in their works they deny him'" (4.19.62). What this moral reliability means differs, of course, according to the values of the particular culture: for Quintilian, virtue means civic virtue, that which contributes to the public good; for Augustine, it means the practice of the specifically Christian virtues, especially love of God, one's neighbour, and oneself. The third element of *ethos* is goodwill for this particular audience at this particular time. It is, naturally, highly contextual, and it is accordingly hard to generalize about it. Goodwill also is one of the categories of response: if the rhetorician is perceived as rational, well-informed, ethically sound, and motivated by goodwill for this particular audience, that audience will respond by reciprocating the goodwill. They will also respond to the rationality and command of the subject matter displayed by the speaker, and to his projection of an ethical persona, by showing attentiveness to his arguments and a willingness to give them favourable consideration.

In two of these elements, women during the Renaissance (and at most other times in the history of Western civilization) were thought to be deficient by nature. The ideology of the later medieval period, still very strong in the Renaissance, was influenced by the philosopher Thomas Aquinas, who took over from Aristotle the idea that woman was a deficient form of man: "It seems that woman ought not to have been produced in the original production of things. For Aristotle says that the female is an incomplete version of the male" (qtd. in Maclean 8). Nonetheless, Aquinas rather puzzlingly concludes that with reference to the species as a whole the female is not deficient but "according to the plan of nature" (9). What this means is that although women in general are part of nature, and necessary for procreation, the individual woman is to be seen as defective. And she was seen as particularly defective in reason.

This deficiency in reason – or intelligence, the first element in classical *ethos* – involved necessarily a deficiency also in morality, or integrity, the second element. Reason was supposed to govern the passions; if, therefore, reason was deficient, it could not control the passions as it ought. Thus woman was thought to be at the mercy of her emotions. This conviction is well demonstrated in a passage from a commentary on Genesis 2 by the Dominican Thomas de Vio, Cardinal Cajetan (1469–1534):

What philosophers have said about the production of woman [that she is a botched male] is recounted metaphorically by Moses. There is a great difference between the point of view of the philosophers and that of Moses; for the former considered the production of woman only in relation to sex, whereas Moses considered the production of woman not only as it concerns sex but also with regard to moral behaviours as a whole [*universam vitam moralem*]. Therefore he used a complex metaphor [...] as the sleep of Adam should be understood metaphorically, Adam is described asleep, not being woken up or keeping vigil. A deep sleep is sent by God into the man from whom woman is to be produced, and this defect of male power bears a likeness from which woman is naturally produced. For a sleeping man is only half a man; similarly the principle creating woman is only semi-virile. It is for this reason that woman is called an imperfect version of the male by philosophers. (qtd. in Maclean 9)

This perception of woman as morally deficient has a long history. It is found in the works of some of the early church fathers, but it goes back even further. Despite de Vio's ingenious reading of the account of the creation of woman given in Genesis 2, prejudice against women is not typical of the writings of the Old Testament, and although certain prophets were celibate, the traditional view of marriage in Judaism is positive. The prejudice therefore most probably derives originally from traditions outside both Christianity and Judaism. David S. Wiesen cites two such traditions: "Of course, asceticism was [...] subject to many non-Christian influences. The severe ethic of the Stoa and the extreme dualism of the Gnostic world view gave powerful encouragement to the ascetic rejection of the flesh" (154). He continues: "Proponents of such austere views looked with horror upon women as sensuality incarnate and in their exhortations in behalf of chastity naturally

attacked marriage as the destroyer of holiness.” Wiesen concludes that “Jerome’s satiric attacks on women and marriage are revealed as a Christian continuation of the anti-feminism of certain pagan thinkers” (154).

Given this background in the Fathers and Aquinas, it is not surprising to find a great outcry against women in the sermons of medieval preachers.² These negative views of women were slow to change, even in the Reformation. Martin Luther states that “it is evident [...] that woman is a different animal to man, not only having different members, but also being far weaker in intellect” (qtd. in Maclean 10). And again, or still, this rational deficiency makes woman morally unreliable:

[L]acking reason to guide her, she is governed by passions alone. [...] [W]e are prepared to hear of “the nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine forms of malice” that plague the world in the shape of women. Like a blotter she has absorbed them all. Beginning with the Seven Deadly Sins the catalogue runs to great length [...]: licentiousness, instability, intractability to God’s express commands, drunkenness and gluttony, pride, vanity, avarice, greed, seditiousness, quarrelsomeness, and vindictiveness, and evidently the most irritating of all, talkativeness. To end with the favourite summary of weary cataloguers: if all the seas were ink, and fields parchment, trees pens, and all who knew how to write were to write without ceasing, all the evil in women could not be expressed. (Kelso 11–12)

The conviction that women were deficient in reason, and consequently in morality, is demonstrated in some of the literature of the Renaissance. For example, in Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness* and Middleton’s *Women Beware Women* and *More Dissemblers Besides Women*, the female characters fall into sin with a suddenness that exceeds (for a later age) dramatic credibility. The women do not go through the process of wrestling with temptation: they simply fall. This depiction of women as undergoing an instantaneous transformation, however unbelievable in the twenty-first century, was quite consistent with the view of women that denied them their full share of rationality. Because at the time resisting temptation was seen as a matter of bringing to bear the light of reason upon the inclination of the passions, women were naturally at a disadvantage: they had so little with which to resist

temptation. It was partly this conviction about the extreme vulnerability of women to such temptation that led many moralists to recommend that women stay safely at home, out of harm's way. It was indeed one of the controversies of the time whether or not the virtue of women should be put to the test. Juan Luis Vives believes that it should: "[A]s St Hieronyme sayth she is chaste in dede that may do ivell and she liste and wull nat" (n.p.). Of course, women had their defenders: one of the favourite rhetorical pastimes of the period was the famous "Querelle des Femmes," exercises in the epideictic rhetoric of praise and blame, using this question as the subject.³ Not everyone believed that women were deficient in morality, or in reason either. Nevertheless, the weight of opinion was against women – certainly enough to bring their *ethos* into question should they dare to speak in public or venture into publication.

In all three elements of *ethos*, therefore, women were seen as deficient: they lacked the full measure of rationality possessed by males, and as a consequence, they also lacked moral reliability. As for the third category, goodwill: if the audience had no faith in a woman's reason or in her morality, it was unlikely that they would perceive her as having goodwill toward them. What good could she do them? Hence, they would not extend their goodwill to her.

But woman's lack of *ethos* was not only a matter of her supposed deficiency in reason and therefore in morals. It was also a question of decorum, a very strong element in rhetorical theory from ancient times. In the third book of *Rhetorica*, for example, Aristotle comments: "Even in poetry, it is not quite appropriate that fine language should be used by a slave, or a very young man" (3.1.1404). In the Renaissance, considerations of decorum, or propriety, were of the greatest importance, and it is not easy to distinguish between the linguistic and the social. As Heinrich Plett says: "Decorum has always comprised both a socio-ethical and a socio-esthetical component" (366). In support of this claim, Plett refers to George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie*, where the chapter on stylistic decorum is followed by another on social decorum, "Of Decencie in behaviour which also belongs to the consideration of the Poet or maker." Puttenham comments on the difficulty of drawing a clear distinction between literary and social decorum:

[A]nd there is a decency to be obserued in every mans action and behaiour aswell as in his speech and writing, which some peradventure would thinke impertinent to be treated of in this booke, where we do but informe the commendable fashions of language and stile; but that is otherwise, for the good maker or poet, who is in decent speech and good termes to describe all things, and with prayse or dispraise to report of euery mans behaiour, ought to know the comelinesse of an action aswell as of a word, & thereby to direct himselfe both in praise and perswasion or any other point that pertaines to the Oratours arte. (181)

Puttenham is, of course, giving advice to the writer of fiction, but the principles he uses are drawn from contemporary codes of manners.

What one could do or say in public, then, was constrained by considerations of social status. The extent to which society depended upon the observance of “degree” is something that we with our democratic ideology find hard to understand. For a later age, democracy seems to guarantee freedom, something to which modern Western societies attribute the highest value. At the beginning of the seventeenth century in England, however, security seems to have been valued far more than individual freedom, and “degree” was thought to undergird that security. This conviction is well expressed in the speech Shakespeare puts in the mouth of Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*:

*Take but degree away, untune that string,
And hark what discord follows! Each thing melts
In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,
And make a sop of all this solid globe;
Strength should be lord of imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead;
Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong –
Between whose endless jar justice resides –
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;*

*And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself. 1.3.109–24)*

It is the loss of degree that John Donne laments in the famous passage from “An Anatomie of the World: The First Anniversary”:

*And new Philosophy calls all in doubt.
The Element of fire is quite put out,
The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to looke for it.
And freely men confesse that this world's spent,
When in the Planets and the Firmament
They see so many new; they see that this
Is crumbled out againe to his Atomies.
'Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone;
All just supply, and all Relation:
Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot,
For every man alone thinkes he hath got
To be a Phoenix, and that there can bee
None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee. (214)*

Decorum was not just a trivial matter of “who goes first”: indeed the observance of decorum in apparently trivial matters, such as the order of precedence, enacted and so reinforced that system which, it was thought, stood between civilization and the ultimate barbarity of “might is right.” To quote Heinrich Plett:

Anyone who infringes them [the restraints normative] is not only violating a prevailing social convention but is ultimately calling the entire social and political system into question. The ruling monarch is the guarantor of its stability; the hierarchy of norms borne by him reflects feudal habits of thought. [...] Each of the three estates is accorded a style appropriate to it, be it in depiction, address, or self-expression: “the nature of the subject” has ordained it thus. Nature in this case has the character

of a topos used to sanction the existing hierarchy of values and society. (366–67)

Part of the prejudice against women's engaging in public discourse, then, was derived from this strong sense of the importance of observing decorum. Such observance entailed a recognition of one's place in the order of things, and in the Protestant England of the seventeenth century the proper place of a woman was in the shadow of her husband. It was almost the only place available to her.

It had not always been so. The situation had been very different in the Middle Ages. In a study of a woman of the early Enlightenment period, it may seem unnecessary to discuss the medieval status of women; however, Mary Astell drew her inspiration from medieval ideologies and institutions as well as from some of the philosophy current in her own time. It is important, then, to understand something of medieval ideas of the status of women and how they came to change. Few if any medieval women enjoyed full control over their lives – but then very few men did either. During the Middle Ages, however, in spite of the strictures of Aristotle via Thomas Aquinas, women were not thought of exclusively in terms of their service to men. In “Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes,” an essay whose title nicely encapsulates the fundamental paradox, Eleanor Commo McLaughlin explains how medieval Christianity perceived the standing of the sexes and shows that in some respects, the medieval view gave women greater freedom than in subsequent centuries. It would, of course, be outrageous to suggest that the position of women in the Middle Ages was in general an enviable one. Women were both feared and despised, and they seldom had rights equivalent to those of the men of their class. Nevertheless, according to McLaughlin, the doctrines of Christianity, revolutionary at the beginning of the Christian era, had some effect upon a society which, in theory at least, upheld them. And Christian doctrine taught that, whatever might obtain in the secular and temporal world, in the spiritual and eternal state of things in the world to come, men and women were equal. St. Paul states: “In Christ there is no male or female” (Galatians 3:28). According to McLaughlin, there were thought to be two “orders”: the order of creation, in which woman was subordinate to man, and the order of resurrection, in which she was his equal. In the society of the medieval period, which took matters of

faith seriously, this distinction had some practical consequences. What it meant for women was that they were not seen exclusively as supporters of men, or helpmates, but spiritually, as persons in their own right, standing before God not as somebody's daughter or wife, but as themselves. Furthermore, marriage was not, in the spiritual hierarchy of the Middle Ages, the position of highest status for women. First came virginity; widowhood came second, with marriage a poor third.

It is important not to overrate the degree of respect accorded to women on these spiritual grounds. Practically, it often made very little difference; when a woman enjoyed respect, it was usually because of her social rather than her spiritual standing. Virgins were not always thought of as necessarily holy simply because they were unmarried, and widows had a bad time of it for the most part, though there is evidence that some of them, particularly among tradesmen and craftsmen, achieved a degree of independence.⁴ Nevertheless, there were some advantages to be found in consequence of theologically held positions: for example, some at least of the virgins and widows found refuge in the life of the religious, a life that, especially in the earlier Middle Ages, offered possibilities for self-development. Probably as significant as any practical benefit, however, was a general state of mind that to some extent took a woman seriously as a person in her own right, not the mere adjunct of the man.

If in the spiritual scheme of things women enjoyed some recognition of their independence from men, in high feudalism they enjoyed, to a certain degree, both privilege and power. Of course, this power and privilege applied only to women of the nobility; yet it had implications, perhaps, for other women too. "Feudalism, as a system of private jurisdiction, bound power to landed property; and it permitted both inheritance and administration of feudal property by women. Inheritance by women often suited the needs of the great landholding families, as their unremitting efforts to secure such rights for their female members attest" (Kelly-Gadol 144). Not only might a woman on occasion inherit property: during her lord's absence, which frequently occurred during times of warfare, she acted as his deputy. She became, in his absence, the lord to whom vassals owed allegiance.

Reflecting this feudal relationship of vassalage, there arose the phenomenon of courtly love, in which the lover was the servant and the lady was spoken to as "midons," a form of address used

in feudalism by the vassal to his lord (Lewis 2). Now it is perhaps true that courtly love existed primarily as a literary convention; nevertheless, literature and life impact upon each other, and some of the ideals of courtly love have survived even into twenty-first-century social practice. At the time, the convention of courtly love served to some degree to raise the profile of the lady and to give her some emotional and even spiritual significance. At a time when marriages were arranged to suit the concerns of landholders to maintain and increase their property, with little regard to the feelings of either the woman or the man, courtly love served to humanize the relation between the sexes. Joan Kelly-Gadol associates this phenomenon with the influence of Christianity, particularly its recognition of the importance of love, its key virtue.

In Christian Europe *passion* acquired a positive, spiritual meaning that classical ethics and classical erotic feeling alike denied. Religious love and courtly love were both suffered as a destiny, were both submitted to and not denied. Converted by a passion that henceforth directed and dominated them, and for which all manner of suffering could be borne, the courtly lovers, like the religious, sought a higher emotional state than ordinary life provided. (143)

It is this insistence upon love, indeed, that characterizes the accommodation of classical rhetoric to the new Christian culture, achieved by St. Augustine of Hippo in *On Christian Doctrine*.⁵ It must be recognized, of course, that the strong adulterous element to be found especially in the earliest manifestations of courtly love was in direct conflict with Christian morality. Nevertheless, as a means of providing an ideology in which women were seen as powerful figures, commanding not only respect but also devotion, even obedience, courtly love was a powerful force in the Middle Ages.

This state of affairs was disturbed – even challenged – in the first instance not by the Reformation but by the Renaissance. As Régine Pernoud has argued, what really distinguished the Renaissance was not so much the rediscovery of ancient texts as a new attitude toward classical civilization, one that took classical culture as a model to be followed. This was associated with a move to replace the ideal of the *via contemplativa* with the *via activa*.⁶ The men of the Renaissance, following Cicero, saw the ideal

human being as one fully engaged with the world. For women, according to Pernoud, this meant a return to classical ideas about their function and position that entirely disregarded their standing as spiritual entities. Kelly-Gadol, on the other hand, associates the decline in women's status with the rise of the nation-state: as the feudal system weakened and gave place to statism, the power of the nobleman dwindled into that of a mere courtier, seeking only to influence his prince. In the same way, the power of the lady receded until her major role was only to exercise charm: she too possessed now only the ability to influence, rather than to exercise power (Kelly-Gadol 150).

To some extent, the effects of the return to the values of classicism and the rise of statism were mitigated so far as women were concerned by Christian humanism. Important in this movement were certain royal and aristocratic women who served as patrons of the new learning and encouraged the education not only of boys but of young girls as well. For example, Isabella of Castile (patron of Christopher Columbus) employed Beatrix Gelindo, a female professor of rhetoric at the University of Salamanca, to teach her daughter, Catherine (Donawerth, "Politics" 316). Catherine became the first queen of Henry VIII of England. Educated herself, Catherine was concerned that her daughter Mary (later Mary I) should receive the best available instruction. She therefore invited to England, as tutor for her daughter, the Christian humanist scholar Juan Luis Vives, who had worked with Erasmus and had indeed written *The Instruction of a Christen Woman* for Catherine while she was still a young princess; for Princess Mary he wrote *Plan of Study for Girls* (Glenn 129). Like other notable Christian humanist scholars of his time – Desiderius Erasmus, Thomas More, and Thomas Elyot – Vives believed that girls should be educated. All these men wrote on the subject, questioning the traditional belief that women were incapable of receiving a fully intellectual education. Sir Thomas Elyot, in *The Defence of Good Women*, denies that women are lacking in either reason or morality: "I see well inoughe that women beinge well and vertuously brought up do not onely with men participate in reason, but som also in fidelity and constancie be equall unto them" (22).

But it is dangerously easy to overestimate the significance of such support, and even its nature: Erasmus defends the education of women on the grounds that it prepares them for marriage, and Elyot's Widow Zenobia asserts that the chief value of the moral

philosophy that she and her women friends studied was to teach them the importance of being obedient wives: they “learned to honour [their] husbands nexte after God; which honour resteth in due obedience” (qtd. in Woodbridge 20). Erasmus and Elyot, Luis Vives, and Sir Thomas More, in spite of believing that a woman can and should be educated, nevertheless do not believe that she ought to enter public life. Her proper (that is, appropriate) sphere of influence is the home. A letter from Sir Thomas More to his scholarly daughter, Margaret Roper, refers to her “singular love of virtue, the pursuit of literature and art.” He continues:

Content with the profit and pleasure of your conscience, in your modesty you do not seek for the praise of the public, nor value it overmuch if you receive it, but because of the great love you bear us, you regard us – your husband and myself – as a sufficiently large circle of readers for all that you write. [...] In your letter you speak of your imminent confinement. We pray most earnestly that all may go happily and successfully with you. May God and Our Blessed Lady grant you happily and safely to increase your family by a little one like to his mother in everything except sex. Yet let it by all means be a girl, if only she will make up for the inferiority of her sex by her zeal to imitate her mother’s virtue and learning. Such a girl I should prefer to three boys. (155)

Even the enlightened Thomas More, then, still believed that women were naturally inferior to men, though he also believed that they could correct the deficiency by education. What comes out most clearly, however, is his conviction that his daughter should not make her scholarship public: it is for the benefit of her family alone. Erasmus too saw woman in terms of her family relationships, and although like More he recommended the education of women, he also, like More, believed that the function of the married Christian woman was to support and serve her husband.

But what of the Reformation? It has sometimes been assumed that women’s position improved significantly under the Protestants. In some respects it did, but not in all. Both advantages and disadvantages were related to revolutionary Protestant ideas about marriage. The reformers challenged the asceticism of the Fathers and disputed the interpretation of Scripture with Roman Catholic theologians. The reforming theologians cited such passages as

Hebrews to support their view that marriage was a praiseworthy state, in no way inferior to virginity: "Marriage is honourable in all and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge" (Heb.13:4). Whereas the medieval church had honoured virginity and celibacy in both sexes above marriage, the reformers, on the contrary, elevated marriage to a new dignity and status. Women's sexual activity was no longer seen as shameful. In a letter written to three nuns in 1524, Luther has this to say: "Women are ashamed to admit this, but Scripture and life reveal that only one woman in thousands has been endowed with the God-given aptitude to live in chastity and virginity. [...] God fashioned her body so that she should be with a man, to have and rear children. [...] No woman should be ashamed of that for which God intended her" (qtd. in O'Faolain and Martines 196).

Woman's predisposition toward sexual activity was affirmed – in marriage at least. But outside marriage, her opportunities were increasingly curtailed. In Protestant countries, there was no longer the refuge of the nunnery for the unmarried or the widowed, and within marriage, the woman's position was dictated by the idea of the unity of the flesh. This was of course not a new idea: it is, at least according to one interpretation, set forth in the account of the creation of woman in Genesis 2. However, at this time, among the early Protestants who denied the impurity of the sex act itself, it received a new emphasis. The mystical unity of man and wife appealed strongly to the reformers because they saw marriage as a metaphor for the relationship between Christ and the church. This draws upon the older use of the same metaphor to express the relationship between Yahweh and the people of Israel. The Christian metaphor is used by the writer of the epistle to the Ephesians to suggest to husbands that their treatment of their wives should be as self-sacrificial as was that of Christ for his bride, the church:

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh and

of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless, let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and let the wife see that she reverence her husband. (Eph. 5:25–33)

I have quoted the passage in full, in the version that would have been familiar to seventeenth-century Englishwomen. The writer expresses a kind of mutuality in the marriage relationship, which was innovative in his time – that is, the first century of the Christian era. However, it is the traditional subjection of the wife to the husband that was most often stressed by the moralists of the Reformation. The doctrine of the unity of the flesh was interpreted to mean that there was indeed one person, but that person was the husband. As Edmund Tilney puts it in *The Flower of Friendshippe*, “the wise man may not be contented only with his spouse’s virginity, but by little and little must gently procure that he maye also steale away her private will, and appetite, so that of two bodies there may be made one onely hart, which she will soone doe, if love raigne in hir” (32). Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* demonstrates the same understanding of the marriage relationship:

Such should conjugal love be, still the same, and as they are one flesh, so should they be of one mind, one consent, Geryone-like; the same. A good wife, according to Plutarch, should be as a looking-glass, to represent her husband’s face and passion. If he be pleasant, she should be merry; if he laugh, she should smile; if he look sad, she should participate of his sorrow, and bear a part with him, and so they should continue in mutual love one towards another. (3:59)

Obviously, the instructions of the writer of Ephesians were interpreted in accordance with classical ideas of the wife’s position, though there were some moralists who also stressed the husband’s responsibilities. In the cultural values of the time, as in the law, the wife was subsumed under the person of the man. Woman had her place, but that place was in her husband’s shadow.

What did filling that place entail? It meant that man and woman had different functions in the social scheme of things,

functions that were complementary: he was to be concerned with the public world, she with the private. However, the situation was more complex than it might appear. As Ruth Kelso has shown, one of the inconsistencies of the period was not only that men and women were supposed to live by different codes, but also that the codes themselves derived from different traditions: “The moral ideal for the lady [of the Renaissance] is essentially Christian [...] as that for the gentleman is essentially pagan. For him the ideal is self-expression and realization. [...] For the lady the direct opposite is prescribed. The eminently Christian virtues of chastity, humility, piety, and patience under suffering and wrong, are the necessary virtues” (36). The pagan code referred to by Kelso was the Aristotelian code of magnanimity; but the Renaissance concept of the ideal citizen-orator, derived from classical models, was yet different from them in that it recognized the individual person as the ancients did not. As Tita French Baumlin says, “This new consciousness of self and of man’s power to shape it characterizes Renaissance discourse” (231).⁷ Language was beginning to be seen as the tool whereby a man created his image, and since the time of Machiavelli, it had been recognized that this public image might be to some degree a fabrication. “Seeming rather than being good is most crucial to the political success of the prince [...] for ‘having [the qualities expected in a good and just ruler] and always conforming to them would be harmful, while appearing to have them would be useful’” (Baumlin 236). Part of the Renaissance gentleman’s duty, then, was to fashion for himself a persuasive identity, to give himself, in other words, a voice:

[I]f the English humanists never managed to produce a coherent rhetorical theory, and they didn’t, at least through their mish-mash of Ciceronianism and Christianity they showed people what voice is. In humanism, voice, character, self, and *ethos* all have the same meaning, for rhetorically they all come down to one quality: a sense of a person speaking to other people. (Sloane, qtd. in Baumlin 230)

But fashioning her own identity and finding her own voice were forbidden to the Renaissance woman. Her identity, as we have seen, was subsumed under that of her husband, and pre-eminent among the virtues she was supposed to possess was that of silence: it was the feminine equivalent of the masculine virtue of eloquence.

Indeed, in Aristotle's *Politics*, we read: "We must therefore hold that what the poet Sophocles said of woman 'A modest silence is a woman's crown' [...] contains a general truth, but a truth which does not apply to men" (44). This dictum was partially based on an assumed connection between speaking and sexual activity that dates back at least as far as Aristotle, and forward at least as far as Darwin, if not beyond. Aristotle held that mental activity depleted the strength women had available for their unborn children: "Children evidently draw on the mother who carries them in the womb, just as plants draw on the soil" (qtd. in Jamieson 68). And Darwin believed that whereas the female used her strength to form ova, the male expended "much force in fierce contests with rivals, in wandering about in search of the female, *in exerting his voice*" (italics added) (Jamieson 68). Quintilian also saw a connection between sexual activity and speaking:

[P]hysical robustness is essential to save the voice from dwindling to the feeble shrillness that characterises the voices of eunuchs, women, and invalids, and the means for creating such robustness are to be found in walking, rubbing-down with oil, abstinence from sexual intercourse, an easy digestion, and, in a word, the simple life. (II.I.2, 19)⁸

Connected with this idea of the mutual exclusivity of fertility and eloquence was the association made between volubility and unchastity. In his *The Excellencie of Good Women*, Barnabe Rich asserts that "a Harlot is full of words" (qtd. in Woodbridge 77). It seemed to follow that one who was full of words was a harlot. Tita French Baumlin cites a number of sixteenth-century moralists who made this connection between loquaciousness and unchastity:

As Thomas Bentley points out (1582) a woman who breaks "silence [...] is no more a maid, but a strumpet in the sight of God" (sig. A2). This sentiment is proverbial: "an eloquent woman is never chaste," appears from the fifteenth century on (Labalme 139, 150). [...] Robert Cleaver (1598) offers "her talke or speech, or rather her silence as a 'signe' denoting a woman's chastity" (95). (241)

A talkative woman was more likely to be accused of witchcraft than was a silent woman: "In Essex County, Massachusetts, more

'witches' were convicted of 'assaultive speech' than any other crime. [...] Encompassed in such assaults were 'slander,' 'defamation,' 'filthy speeches,' and 'scandalous speeches'" (Jamieson 75). The situation was similar in England. The punishment for inappropriate speech could thus be execution: "At the stake, fire, a metaphor for speech, consumed the witch and her ability to speak. Alternatively, fiery words were drenched permanently by drowning" (75). Less drastic, but still sufficiently unpleasant, were the ducking stool and the "Skimmington Ride": In the former, the loquacious woman was ducked in the local pond; in the latter, she was made to wear the brank, a sharp bridle, and was driven through the community to be mocked and vilified.

The woman who became an eloquent speaker or writer, then, was believed to be in some way betraying her sex. Sometimes she was accused of harlotry, sometimes even of witchcraft. At the very least, she might be seen as something less than, other than, a true woman – something unnatural. This sense of the woman as transgressing against her own gender comes out strongly in the references to speaking and writing women as androgynous. In her discussion of Ben Jonson's *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman*, Cheryl Glenn notes that the Collegiate Ladies were said to be "rather hermaphroditical,' *epicoene*, in fact, monstrously unnatural. [...] So for Jonson, androgyny can be the only acceptable explanation for autonomous women. And misogyny is the only solution" (134). The "hermaphroditical authority" with which these women spoke was felt to be against nature (134). The hermaphrodite, according to Ian Maclean, was "firmly placed in the category of monsters by renaissance physiologists" (12). Women who stepped out of the stereotypical behaviour could be regarded as unsexing themselves. For example, when Lady Macbeth resolves upon a course of cruelty, thought to be untypical of women, she calls upon the spirits to "unsex me here" (1.5.40).

A woman could not normally retain the respect accorded to her gender if she transgressed against what were thought to be its characteristics. Kathleen Hall Jamieson shows that this prejudice goes back to antiquity:

If a wife 'wants to appear educated and eloquent,' noted Juvenal, 'let her dress as a man, sacrifice to men's gods, and bathe in the men's baths.' This aspiration was not taken to be the sincerest form of flattery because, said women's rights opponents, 'when she

unsexes herself, and puts on the habiliments and claims to exercise the masculine functions of man in society, she has lost the position which she should occupy. When woman violates the law which God has given her, she has no law, and is the creature of hateful anarchy.
(77)

Here we see clearly that insistence upon “degree,” the hierarchical placement of every creature, which during the Renaissance guaranteed a defence against the terrifying possibility of anarchy.

However, there was an exception to this rule: according to most authorities, if the woman concerned were a monarch, she was allowed, even expected, to act in accordance with the masculine code of behaviour. “The princess is, as it were, a man by virtue of her birth, and hence the masculine standard of morality applies to her” (Maclean 62). Her status as a “prince,” then, took precedence over her gender; though even this dictum could be questioned, and of course was questioned, notably by John Knox in his tract *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*. What Knox is questioning here, however, is not specifically the propriety of public speech by the female monarch, but the legitimacy of the female monarch herself. That a woman should rule is, for him, “monstrous” – a distortion, a malformation, of the way things should be. Elizabeth I, the finest and most successful of Renaissance princes, was well aware of the gender confusion that her position as monarch involved.⁹ She not only negotiated it very carefully; she even exploited it, so as to give herself the advantages of both sexes at once. As Leah S. Marcus says, “We can observe her building the myth of her own androgyny” (137). Consummate politician that she was, she was able to appeal to her subjects’ loyalty on the ostensibly weak grounds that she was only a woman; yet at the same time she claimed the heart of a king, “and a king of England too” (qtd. in Thompson 392). In her Golden Speech, she assumed the virtues, not just of queenship but also of kingship – an almost perfect example of androgyny:

To be a king and wear a crown is more glorious to them that see it than it is pleasure to them that bear it. For myself, I was never so much enticed with the glorious name of a king or royal authority of a queen as delighted that God hath made me this instrument to maintain His truth and glory, and to defend this

kingdom, as I said, from peril, dishonour, tyranny and oppression. (qtd. in Thompson 392)

Mindful that the first duty of a man, especially a king, was courage, she stressed her lack of fear, and praised God, "Who hath ever yet given me a heart which never yet feared foreign or home enemies" (393). However, she never forgot or denied that she was a woman; she acknowledged her gender and its disabilities frankly, and by doing so, turned them into strengths. The humility topos was never more effectively used. The paradoxical nature of her exploitation of both genders, of her manipulation of androgyny, is well expressed by Tita French Baumlin:

In Elizabeth's textualized self, authority and Other are met in one. In her case, the cultural identifications of authority and alien oscillate: as a monarch she wields great power; yet as a woman, she is marginalized by the power she represents. Any assertion of her authority requires that she alienate herself and call attention to her alienness [...] that she invoke, ultimately to subvert, the rhetoric of silence enforced on her gender. (254)

Elizabeth I was able to negotiate her dual self, the sovereign and the woman, in part because she was a virgin: to some extent, a woman became exempt from the weaknesses of her gender by renouncing her sexuality. Although in the Protestant England over which Elizabeth ruled, the virgin was, in theory, no longer respected above the married woman, in practice Elizabeth was able to draw upon a long tradition of respect for the virgin, which added to the mystical qualities of kingship that other mystique that belonged to virginity. And of course her virginity, or at least her unmarried state, allowed her to retain the power in her own hands: had she married, that power would have been transferred to her husband. The difficulty of finding a husband who would be acceptable to her people may in part explain why she never married; however, it is just as likely that she wished to retain her power herself. Although Elizabeth died at the beginning of the seventeenth century, well before Astell's time, the legacy of her achievements was of inestimable value to the women of later generations. For Elizabeth had demonstrated, to put it crudely, that a woman could beat the men at their own game: one of the most successful of England's monarchs, she was also one of the most powerful women in Western history.

Women – and men – of succeeding centuries looked back to her reign as the golden age; and there is no doubt that her *ethos* was a source of confidence and strength to the women who came after her.¹⁰

In nearly every respect, then, a woman's personality and activity were to be different from a man's. And if the creation of his identity through language was one of the more important duties of the man, it was silence that characterized the good Renaissance woman.¹¹ The practice of rhetoric, therefore, was seen to be inappropriate in women, but some moralists – Leonardo Bruni, for example – held that they should avoid even the study of it. In a letter to Baptista Malatesta, outlining a suitable course of study for women, he specifically excludes certain kinds of study, among them rhetoric:

You will be surprised to find me suggesting (though with much [...] hesitation) that the great and complex art of rhetoric should be placed in the same category [of excluded studies]. My chief reason is the obvious one, that I have in view the cultivation most fitting to a woman. To her, neither the intricacies of debate nor the oratorical artifices of action and delivery are of the least practical use, if indeed they are not positively unbecoming. Rhetoric in all its forms – public discussion, forensic argument, logical defence and the like – lies absolutely outside the province of woman. (qtd. in Kersey 23)

As Ruth Kelso explains, rhetoric “was under suspicion as leading to vain exhibitions of mere verbal skill, clashing most of all with the desired unobtrusiveness of a woman who held her tongue” (76).

It must be remembered, however, that the rhetoric from which women were excluded so rigorously was *contentio*. Bruni himself was indeed one of the earliest scholars to promote this kind of rhetoric in the Renaissance. As John Tinkler observes, it was Bruni who, with Vergerio, “developed humanist oratory” (285). As we have seen, so long as they did not “go public” and draw attention to themselves before men, women were free to engage in the arts of *sermo*, whether in conversation or in the writing of letters.

To conclude then: deficient in all the requirements of *ethos* – rationality, moral reliability, and goodwill – and inhibited by considerations of propriety that denied her the right to go public, the woman writer of the Renaissance who wished to publish

her work faced enormous obstacles. Nevertheless, an increasing number of women did indeed write and publish, making their voices heard in spite of the fact that they were not supposed to have any. By the time of Mary Astell, a significant number of women had published, most of them anonymously, and their work had received some recognition. The prejudice against women as public figures had by no means disappeared. Yet certain philosophical ideas current in the seventeenth century – some old and some quite new – encouraged women to develop a stronger sense of their own powers and gave them the confidence to participate in the intellectual life of the community. It was upon these philosophies that Astell drew in embarking upon her career as a thinker and writer at the end of the seventeenth century.