

Introduction

THE LADIES CALLING: FEMINISM AND THE REFORMATION OF MANNERS

If asked to form a mental picture of a pious seventeenth-century woman, our imaginations might settle on a vision not unlike the figure pictured below.¹ Modestly clothed and seated, her eyes are set firmly on the crown of glory and the trappings of earthly interests are contemptuously strewn beneath her feet. Her only worldly possession is a book held in her left hand: we may assume it is a Bible. In an age of repeated 'Reformations of Manners', of purity movements in religion; an age characterized by anxiety about the volatile sexual and spiritual tempers of women, female piety is linked with chastity, submission and sobriety. Indeed, this image is taken from the frontispiece of *The Ladies Calling*, a work which has become a byword for the patriarchal moralism of the Augustan period.

With sections headed 'On Modesty' and 'On Meekness', and references to the 'natural imbecility' of women, this was hardly the rallying cry for a feminist revolution. It was rather a textbook for those members of the 'female gentry' who wished to learn how to live as godly virgins, wives and widows in the obedient state which was 'the womens lot' – and there were not inconsiderable numbers of such readers.² *The Ladies Calling* was the runaway success story of the conduct literature for women produced in late seventeenth-century England. Probably written by Richard Allestree, the author of the bestselling devotional guide, *The Whole Duty of Man* (1658), it went through twelve editions by 1727, and attained an

¹ This image is featured as the frontispiece to Richard Allestree, *The Ladies Calling* 7th edn. (London, 1700).

² *Ibid.*, Preface. On Allestree's female readers, see A. Kugler, 'Constructing Wifely Identity: Prescription and Practice in the Life of Lady Sarah Cowper', *The Journal of British Studies*, 40 (2001), pp. 291–323.



Figure I.1. Richard Allestree, *The Ladies Calling*, 7th edn. (London, 1700)
Bodleian Library: 1 b.161

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almost canonical authority in advice manuals of the eighteenth century.³ It is now remembered as an ‘anti-feminist’ textbook of conventional morality, which affirmed assumptions about gender differences in the mind as well as the body, and reinforced the principle of wifely submission.⁴ The title image, which appeared in each new edition between 1673 and 1727, conjurs a plausible vision of a pious woman in the age of *The Ladies Calling*, of Anglican hegemony and the Reformation of Manners.

Yet there is more to the picture than a first glance might suggest. It is interesting to note that the book is not at the centre of the composition. Perhaps significantly, it is held lightly in the shadows, while the woman’s eyes and right hand are clearly oriented away towards the light from heaven. More strangely, a small disembodied face glows from within her bosom. Whether intended to represent the image of God in humanity (a favourite theme of Allestree’s), or the spiritual ‘inner man’, or the indwelling Christ, or all of these, it is this inward radiance which lies at the heart of the picture. Indeed, throughout the volume, Allestree exhorted his female readers to ‘look inward to see ... an emanation of the eternal Brightness’, that ‘spiritual Essence, that ray of Divinity’ which ‘owns no distinction of Sexes’.⁵ The frontispiece illustrates that something else was going on in Allestree’s world, something more complex than the hardening of conservative cultural values. A new emphasis on the inner life, and on the ‘divine spark’ in the human spirit, was beginning to reshape English Protestant discourse on human nature and biblical authority. Indeed, Allestree’s severe advice is often couched in an incongruous prose style which is mystical and luminous; and his preoccupation with the inner life leads him to paradoxical statements about women’s equal capacities for ‘nobler things’ despite their inferior rational qualities.

Unwittingly, Allestree and other exponents of inward piety would help to stimulate a far-reaching critique of the social order they believed they were defending. *The Ladies Calling* was a source of inspiration for a generation of women writers who, between 1680 and 1710, launched a

³ On Allestree’s authorship of *The Whole Duty of Man* and its popular sequels, see P. Elmen, ‘Richard Allestree and *The Whole Duty of Man*’, in *The Library*, 5th series, 6 (1951), 19–27.

⁴ See A. Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 384–92; D. R. Woolf, ‘A Feminine Past? Gender, Genre, and Historical Knowledge in England, 1500–1800’, *The American Historical Review*, 102 (1997), p. 654; J. Bachelor, ‘The Conduct Book’, in R. Clark and J. Todd (eds.), *The Literary Encyclopedia*, available at: www.literarydictionary.com (2004).

⁵ *The Ladies Calling*, Preface.

remarkable attack on the ‘tyranny of customs’ which had excluded them from educational opportunities, and consigned them to subjection in marriage. These were women mostly unconnected with one another, who represented the full range of Protestant belief and practice from Quaker spirituality to High Church Anglicanism. Some were more celebrated than others: the Tory writer, Mary Astell, was widely commended by senior clergy, while the prolific visionary known only as ‘M. Marsin’ received scarcely a mention in contemporary literature. Yet for all their diversity, together they represented a real and coherent protest. Even men who, like Allestree, had been broadly supportive of women’s education, were troubled by the claims that were being made for sexual equality. In 1705, for example, the nonjuring Bishop of Thetford, George Hickes (who had publicly championed the cause of a school for girls in 1684, promoted the devotional writer Susanna Hopton and would go on to translate Fénelon’s *Traité de l’Education des Filles* in 1707),⁶ complained to Mary Astell that ‘comparing of women with men in your emulous manner, is an affectation which your best friends observe runs thro most of your excellent writings’. He went on, ‘The great *Hypatia* who I admire as well as you I am confident was a greater genius of a Woman than to reflect & couch such childish reflections in her Lectures & writings on the other sex.’⁷

The bookseller and journalist, John Dunton, edited the *Athenian Mercury* during the 1690s, a periodical which showcased the talents of female writers such as Elizabeth Singer Rowe, and welcomed correspondence and queries on all kinds of subjects from women.⁸ His attitude towards women during that period has been described as ‘philogyny’, and

⁶ See George Hickes, *A Sermon Preached at the Church of St. Bridget* (London, 1684) and *Instructions for the Education of a Daughter* (London, 1707); see also Susanna Hopton, *Devotions in the Ancient Way of Offices* (London, 1700), ‘To the Reader’.

⁷ ‘The Controversy betwixt Dr. Hickes & M^{rs} Mary Astell’, in Thomas Bedford (ed.), *The Genuine Remains of the late Pious and Learned George Hickes D.D. and Suffragan Bishop of Thetford: Consisting of Controversial Letters and other Discourses*, Lambeth Palace MS 3171, p. 204. The fifth-century mathematician, Hypatia of Alexandria, was a follower of Plotinus and the Neoplatonists.

⁸ On Dunton and the *Athenian Mercury*, see G. D. McEwen, *The Oracle of the Coffee House: John Dunton’s Athenian Mercury* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1972); S. Parks, *John Dunton and the English Book Trade* (New York: Garland, 1976); K. Shevelov, *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 1989); P. McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace, 1678–1730* (Oxford University Press, 1998); and H. Berry, *Gender, Society and Print Culture in Late-Stuart England: The Cultural World of the Athenian Mercury* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003). Berry claims that the *Mercury* contained ‘the first stirrings of self-consciously feminist protest’, p. 242, while other commentators have set its agenda firmly in the context of the Reformation of Manners campaign. See *ibid.*, pp. 33–4.

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he referred warmly to Mary Astell as ‘Divine *Astell*’ in his autobiography.⁹ However, in a series of heavily ironic treatises published during the reign of Queen Anne, between 1702 and 1715 (perhaps significantly written in a time of ill-health some years after the death of his beloved wife in 1697, and after a failed second marriage), he attributed the recent manifestation of female ambition to the government of a woman.¹⁰ He lamented that ‘we are all so well pleased with *Female Government*, that ‘tis only Women that are now prayed for in our Churches and Chappels’.¹¹ Dunton associated the aspirations of women with treacherous female sexuality, making the rather outrageous statement that ‘the *Body* of every Woman (*from the Queen to the Country Joan*) is full of Danger’.¹² Anticipating the objections to his claim that ‘Our Sovereign Lady ... has many *Infirmities*, as she is a *Woman*’, Dunton wrote:

*But methinks I hear some Lady reply, That I am a Woman, cannot take off from Vertuous Deeds; there’s no Sex in the Mind: St. Peter bids Husbands dwell with their Wives, as being Heirs together of the Grace of Life, (a) Souls have no Sexes. – And St. Paul, (b) says, There is neither Male nor Female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus ... – The Image of the Creator shines as clearly in Women as Men ... Besides (continue these Female Advocates) Women are more Charming in their Face, of a sweeter Voice, and more Spiritual in their Inward Beauty than Men ... So that Woman (barely considered as Woman) is made of better Stuff than Man; for if we look into Genesis, we shall find that Woman was the last work in the Creation, and so the most perfect and absolute, as we see when Artificers make an excellent Piece, they keep Polishing till the last, as being the Perfection and Crown of it.*¹³

He was not making this up: both male and female ‘advocates’ had used precisely these arguments over two centuries of the humanist debate known as the *querelle des femmes*. They were positions which he had indulged as ‘brave’, ‘witty’ and ‘rational’ back in 1697, when he published a dispute between men and women over the qualities of the female sex.¹⁴

⁹ W. E. Burns, *An Age of Wonders: Prodigies, Politics and Providence in England 1657–1727* (Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 141; J. Dunton, *Life and Errors of John Dunton* (London, 1705), p. 365.

¹⁰ These included his *Petticoat Government, in a Letter to the Court Lords* (London, 1702); *A Cat May Look Upon a Queen, or A Satyr on Her Present Majesty* (London, 1708); *Neck or Nothing* (London, 1713); *Queen Robin* (London, 1714); and *King-Abigail: or, the Secret Reign of the She-Favourite* (London, 1715). On his affection for first wife Elizabeth, daughter of the Presbyterian minister Samuel Annesley, see his *Life and Errors* (London, 1705), pp. 360–439.

¹¹ *A Cat May Look Upon a Queen*, p. 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 15. ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–20.

¹⁴ See *The Challenge Sent to Sir Thomas &c., or, The Female War* (London, 1697) and *The Life and Errors*, p. 258.

Dunton's 'female advocate' might have been one of any number of women writers who had recently gone into print to insist upon these points. Arguments for the dignity of a woman's nature or even 'the pre-eminence of the female sex' were not new, but the intensity of the debate in and around the 1690s – particularly in works written by women themselves – was quite out of the ordinary. This phenomenon has been noted with interest by several historians. Ruth Perry describes the 1690s and 1750s as high points in the historical evolution of feminism thought.¹⁵ Bridget Hill, tracing the influence of François Poulain de la Barre's *The Equality of the Sexes* on English writers, remarked upon 'the sudden outburst of feminist tracts that mark the 1690s'.¹⁶ For his part, Christopher Hill noticed that there was a common religious basis to these defences and rather complacently commented that, 'It would be interesting to study the women who spoke up for their sex in the 1690s and the early years of the eighteenth century', observing that 'Mary Astell, for example, bases her case in *Reflections Upon Marriage* very largely upon the Bible'.¹⁷ Two recent studies by Paula McDowell and Rachel Weil focus on the period between 1680 and 1730 as one in which women's place within political life and discourse evolved significantly, and point to the importance of feminist writers in that process.¹⁸

In around 1680, the poet and Oxford fellow, Robert Whitehall, engaged in a literary debate with Mary More, a portrait painter living in London near Gresham College. More opened the exchange with a remarkable essay, which bore the long title:

The Womans Right: Or Her Power in a Greater Equality to Her Husband Proved than is allowed or practised in England, From misunderstanding some Scriptures, and false rendring others from ye Originall, plainly shewing an equality in Man & Woman before ye Fall, & not much difference after. The Equality of their Souls is also proved in that Women have done whatever is of value that men have done, what hath been done may be done.

This short treatise, together with Whitehall's detailed refutation, survives in his manuscript miscellany at the British Library and remained unpublished until the twentieth century.¹⁹ More's case for equality hinged on the

¹⁵ R. Perry, 'Writing the History of English Feminism' (review article), *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 2 (1983), p. 102.

¹⁶ B. Hill, review of 'Desmond M. Clarke, *The Equality of the Sexes*. by Francois Poulain de la Barre', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 49 (1996), p. 169.

¹⁷ C. Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 409.

¹⁸ McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street*; R. Weil, *Political Passions: Gender, the Family and Political Argument in England, 1680–1714* (Manchester University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ 'The Womans Right', BL Harley MS 3918, pp. 121–45 (ff. 46–58); see M. Ezell, *The Patriarch's Wife: Literary Evidence and the History of the Family* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), Appendix ii, pp. 194–5.

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argument that the Greek verb (ὑποτάσσω), used in the New Testament to describe a wife's duty to her husband, was different from the verb used to convey the obedience due to a parent from a child (ὑπακούω).²⁰ She objected to the habit among commentators of insisting upon 'obedience' for wives as they did for children.²¹ Women were to 'submit' to their husbands only in the same way that all Christians were required to submit 'one to another in the fear of God' (Ephesians 5:21, AV), the same word being used for both obligations. 'Obedience', More observed, was nowhere required from wives to their husbands in Scripture. She also used humanist arguments from the *querelle des femmes* (such as those cited by John Dunton), as well as biblical and historical examples, to defend the point that 'it is y^e want of learning, & y^e same education in women, y^t men have, w^{ch} makes them loose their right' to the 'perfect equality' which women enjoyed before the Fall.²²

'The Womans Right' has been described as 'foreshadowing later writers such as Judith Drake and Mary Astell', and indeed it sets the tone for the flood of published works on the status of women in marriage and society which poured on to the scene in the 1690s.²³ Astell's *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694, Part II in 1697) was one of the earliest and most influential essays on the theme. She proposed an all-female college or 'Religious Retirement' where women might gain a serious theological education and share a liturgically-centred common life.²⁴ Astell equated women's spiritual capacities with their intellectual potential, leading to the conclusion that women should share the same privileged access to learning, and especially to religious instruction, as the men. Her *Proposal* was followed up by *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*, which in its 1706 edition made an even more radical critique of the subjection of women in the household and the wider world. A spate of other tracts created a chorus of protest: Judith Drake in her *Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (1696) raged at the 'Usurpation of Men and the Tyranny of Customs' which had deprived her sex of the advantages of education; and towards

²⁰ 'The Womans Right', pp. 140–4 (ff. 55–7).

²¹ See, for example, Allestree, *The Whole Duty of Man* (London, 1659), p. 311; Thomas Gouge, *Christian Directions, Shewing How to Walk with God All the Day Long* (London, 1661), pp. 139–42; Richard Baxter, *Mr Baxters Rules and Directions for Family Duties* (London, 1681), p. 1.

²² 'The Womans Right', pp. 144, 133.

²³ M. Ezell, in H. Ostovich, E. Sauer and M. Smith (eds.), *Reading Early Modern Women: An Anthology of Texts in Manuscript and Print, 1550–1700* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 88.

²⁴ Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies: for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest. By a Lover of her Sex* (London, 1694), p. 61.

the end of the period, Lady Mary Chudleigh, Elizabeth Thomas and the anonymous 'Eugenia' published responses to a wedding sermon in which wives were enjoined to submission, insisting instead upon the rational and moral fitness of women for an equal role within marriage.²⁵ In addition to these more obviously 'feminist' works a host of other writings by women appeared during the same decade: the Tory pamphlets of Elinor James; plays by Mary Pix, Susanna Centlivre and 'Ariadne'; the satirical poems of Alicia D'Anvers; Damaris Masham's philosophical treatises; Delarivier Manley's fiction; the letters and plays of Catharine Trotter; the devotional works of Elizabeth Singer Rowe and Susanna Hopton; not to mention the correspondence in the *Athenian Mercury*.²⁶

While these literary and social circles intersected in quite demonstrable ways, there was another source for feminist ideas which seemed altogether distinct from and marginal to the published activity of ladies of quality. Prophetic and spiritualist groups which gave prominence to female leaders and visionaries had been springing up since the time of the Civil War: Quakers, Seekers and Philadelphians, Bourignonists, French Prophets. Peripheral as these movements were thought to be, they were also the focus for intense anxiety about female ambitions and disorder. Indeed, the roles which they offered to women could be highly influential, and they were beginning to develop reasoned apologies for women's participation as well as institutionalizing the charismatic offices which they inhabited. Quaker women, and men, continued to advance theological defences of women's speaking.²⁷ In *The Womans Advocate* (1697), and *Good News to the Good Women* (1700), the female theologian 'M. Marsin' condemned the exclusion of women from religious ministry and education, and constructed an almost liberationist soteriological system in which, as she argued, Christ's redeeming work had restored the sexes to a state of equality.²⁸ The Philadelphian Society, as

²⁵ Judith Drake, *Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (London, 1696), p. 3; 'Eugenia', *The Female Advocate: or, A Plea for the just Liberty of the Tender Sex, and particularly of Married Women. Being Reflections On a late Rude and Disingenuous Discourse, Delivered by Mr John Sprint, in a Sermon at a Wedding, May 11th, at Sherburn in Dorsetshire, 1699* (London, 1700); Lady Mary Chudleigh, *The Ladies Defence or, the Bride-Woman's Counsellor Answer'd: A Poem in a Dialogue Between Sir John Brute, Sir William Loveall, Melissa, and a Parson* (London, 1701).

²⁶ Helen Berry has suggested that the anomalies of the decade had to do primarily with print culture and 'the prominence given to female correspondence in the *Athenian Mercury* and elsewhere at this time'. *Gender, Society and Print Culture*, p. 236.

²⁷ These included Elizabeth Bathurst, 'The Sayings of Women', in *Truth Vindicated* (London, 1695) and William Mather, *An Instrument from that Little Stone* (London, 1695). George Whitehead also gave a theological apology for women's speaking in *The Christianity of the People Commonly called Quakers* (London, 1690).

²⁸ M. Marsin, *The Womans Advocate* (London, 1697), p. 4.

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well as embellishing the German mystic Jacob Boehme's doctrine of 'Sophia', or feminized Divine Wisdom, also received spiritual oversight from two elderly prophetesses and prompted concerns about the 'disorders' which ensue, 'when gifted women presumed to exercise their gifts in assemblies of men'.²⁹ Its founding members articulated a startlingly forceful biblical and theological case for women's equality with, and even their spiritual advantage over, men.³⁰

The coincidence of feminist writings around the 1690s raises questions about the particular intellectual and cultural conditions which made such a critique possible and resonant at this historical moment. A constellation of factors may have created these conditions: heightened apocalyptic expectation; new medical insights into female nature; the impact of Cartesian and Platonic discourse about the 'sexless mind'; a surplus of unmarried women; better opportunities for publishing activity and, associated with that, the new models for female authorship in England. Notable among these was Katherine Philips, who offered a pious alternative to the frenzied prophetess or the dissolute Restoration playwright who came to represent the seventeenth-century 'woman writer'. We might also speak of a 'feminization' of religion in this period which dovetailed with the movement for moral reformation, challenging the tradition of male spiritual superiority and dominance in the Church. The combination of these contingencies accounts more persuasively for the emergence of feminism in England than any single explanation. However, it is also my contention that the impulse for moral reform and the apocalyptic fervour which surrounded the Williamite Revolution acted as a catalyst for the process, stimulating unprecedented numbers of women to intervene in debates about religion, marriage and education.

Religious politics in England between around 1678 and 1714 were dynamic, volatile and fraught with tension. The fires of anti-popery were stoked by the spurious Popish Plot, and they brought to the boil a simmering hostility towards James Stuart, the Catholic Duke of York, at the time of the Exclusion Crisis in 1678–81. During James II's brief reign from 1685 to 1689, Protestant England faced a stark choice. It could either resist a legitimate monarch and thus risk a bloody return to the turmoil of the Civil Wars, or submit to what looked like a wholesale re-catholicization

²⁹ Letter from Henry Dodwell to Francis Lee, dated 12 October 1697, reproduced in Christopher Walton (ed.), *Notes and Materials for an Adequate Biography of the Celebrated Divine and Theosopher, William Law* (London, 1854), p. 188.

³⁰ Richard Roach, *The Great Crisis: or, the mystery of the times and seasons unfolded; with relation to the late disorder and confusion of the seasons of the year* (London, 1725), pp. 88–201.

process and absolutist regime.³¹ This would be a national disaster as well as a religious one: it would, it was feared, reduce England to the status of vassal to that French tyrant, Louis XIV. When in June 1688 a male heir was produced (in highly controversial circumstances) by the King and his second wife, Mary of Modena, hopes of a Protestant succession through James' daughters, Mary and Anne, appeared to have been shattered. These desperate prospects, compounded by James' centralizing administration, tolerationist agenda and reliance on a standing army, brought matters to a head and within months a Protestant invasion was successfully orchestrated. In February 1689 William, Prince of Orange, was crowned joint sovereign of England alongside his wife, James' eldest daughter Mary. The events of the 'bloodless revolution' prepared the ground for a new era of constitutional monarchy, parliamentary politics characterized by the tug-of-war of party competition, and, concomitantly, the age of 'High' and 'Low' factions within the Church of England.

Indeed, the character and status of the national Church was divisive at all levels, for it stood both as a symbol of England's Reformation and as the guarantor of the monarch's divine right. Destabilized by encroaching Catholicism and absolutism on one side, and defiant dissent and heterodoxy on the other, the Church found itself the battleground for the nation's moral and political identity. Where was the safe ground on which the Church could establish its spiritual authority and cohesion? For the High Church party, too much breadth within the communion or toleration outside of it would fatally weaken its discipline. Among their opponents, the Tory way was the high road to popery and religious tyranny. While the English Church might look to the King as the focus of its unity and defender of Anglican Protestantism, this relationship was problematized (to say the least) by the successive regimes of a Catholic with strong links to France, and a Dutch Prince raised in the continental Reformed tradition. Loyalties were so perplexed that the very party for whom civil obedience and non-resistance was valued most highly became the greatest threat to the King's personal security: the most implacable Tories and the nonjurors – deprived bishops, clergy and office-holders, many of whom had resisted James II's own tolerationist reforms, and who now refused to swear an oath of allegiance to William III – were re-cast as rebels and schismatics. As

³¹ The reality of this threat was disputed by John Miller in 'The Potential for Absolutism in Later Stuart England', *History*, 69 (1984), 187–207, while William Speck insists that James really was pursuing an absolutist agenda in *Reluctant Revolutionaries: Englishmen and the Revolution of 1688* (Oxford University Press, 1988). At any rate, the perception was at least as important as the fact.