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Mary Astell

Theorist of Freedom from Domination

Philosopher, theologian, educational theorist, feminist and political pamphleteer, Mary Astell was an important figure in the history of ideas of the early modern period. She contributed to the British debate over toleration and dissent from the 1690s, which inaugurated the modern secular state. Among the first systematic critics of John Locke's entire corpus, she is best known for the famous question that prefaces her *Reflections on Marriage*: 'If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?' She is claimed by modern Republican theorists and feminists alike, but as she is a High Church Tory, the peculiar constellation of her views sits uneasily with modern commentators. Patricia Springborg's study addresses these apparent paradoxes and recovers the historical and philosophical contexts for her thought. She shows that Astell was not alone in her views; rather, she belonged to a cohort of early modern female philosophers who were important for the reception of Locke and Descartes and who grappled with the existential problems of a new age.

Patricia Springborg is Professor of Political Theory at the University of Sydney and Adjunct Professor in the School of Economics at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano.

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Free University of Bozen-Bolzano



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521841047

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First published 2005

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Springborg, Patricia.
Mary Astell: theorist of freedom from domination / Patricia Springborg.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-84104-6 (hardback)

1. Astell, Mary, 1668–1731 – Political and social views. 2. Women’s rights –
Great Britain – History – 18th century. 3. Feminism – Great Britain –
History – 18th century. I. Title.

JC176.A88s67 2005
305.42’092 – dc22 2004027523

ISBN-13 978-0-521-84104-7 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-84104-6 hardback

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This book is dedicated to the memory of the missing, to early modern women, in general, and, in particular, to those peculiarly modern souls whose lives I mourn: Christine Main Ambrose, who died so young while the book was in progress, and without whose excellent research assistance it would not have been possible; my editor at Cambridge University Press, who had great enthusiasm for this project, the late Terence Moore; the late Dick Ashcraft, an exemplary Locke scholar with whom I was privileged to be acquainted; the late Bruce Cochrane, a literary scholar who was so generous in answering my queries on specialist points; and my dear friend and fellow New Zealander, Susan Moller Okin, a pioneering feminist political theorist who made a prestigious career at Brandeis and Stanford and of whose early death I learned as I finished the revisions for the book.

May they rest in peace and in the knowledge that their labours were not in vain.

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Acknowledgements

This book grew out of my project to publish scholarly editions of Astell's works, and in the course of it I have incurred many debts. The Vice-Chancellor's Publication Fund of the University of Sydney and the Research Council of Australia, through ARC Small Grant F10.26994 93/94/95, covered research expenses specific to this project, particularly the salaries of my excellent research assistants, Christine Main Ambrose and Kathy Dempsey, to whom I am greatly indebted. To the Librarian of Fisher Library, University of Sydney; the State Library of New South Wales, in particular Sue Thomas; the State Library of Victoria; the Rare Book Librarian of the Library of Congress; Georgiana Ziegler, Betsy Walsh and the unfailingly helpful staff of the Folger Shakespeare Library, many thanks for assistance.

I am enormously thankful to those institutions that provided support for full-time research for this and other projects in the years 1993–5: the University of Sydney and the Folger Institute (1993); the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (1993–4); the Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for a Research and Writing Grant that the Brookings Institution administered (1994–5). To my program directors at these institutions, Lena Orlin at the Folger Institute; Jim Morris, Michael Lacey and Ann Sheffield at the Woodrow Wilson Center; John Steinbruner at Brookings; and Kate Early at the MacArthur Foundation, I am truly thankful for support and kind understanding as I juggled my projects. I owe the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin a great debt of gratitude for a fellowship in 2000–1, which provided the ideal conditions and library facilities for the completion of this work. I owe important insights on republicanism

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and freedom from domination to Zhiyuan Cui in discussions at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, January 12–16, 2004, for which I truly thank him and the Kolleg. And some of the revisions were done during the tenure of my fellowship at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences (SCASSS), in Uppsala, 2002–3, and I wish to thank the Collegium's directors Björn Wittrock, Barbro Klein and Göran Therborn – and their magnificent staff – for their support.

To those I must thank for offering assistance on points of information and reading drafts of my material on Astell, I must single out Quentin Skinner, Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge; Mark Goldie, Vice-Master at Churchill College, Cambridge; John Pocock, Professor Emeritus at the Johns Hopkins University; Professors Carole Pateman of the University of California, Los Angeles; Johann Sommerville, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; Margaret Sommerville, Lois Schwoerer and Philip Hamburger at George Washington University; Ann Kelly at Howard University; Steven Zwicker at Washington University–St. Louis; Kathleen Lesko, Scholar-in-Residence at the Folger Shakespeare Library; Patricia Stablein, Scholar-in-Residence at La Trobe University, Australia; the late Dick Ashcraft of the University of California, Los Angeles; the late Bruce Cochrane of the University of Canterbury, New Zealand; and the late Christine Main Ambrose, my research assistant at the University of Sydney. To Joseph Brinley at the Woodrow Wilson Press, who so graciously gave up his prebendary right to publish the book, to his readers including Ruth Perry, and to Eileen O'Neill and Sarah Hutton, readers for Cambridge University Press, I am truly grateful for knowledgeable and careful comments. It is with great sadness that I include my editor at Cambridge University Press, the late Terence Moore among the dedicatees; grateful thanks also to Shari Chappell, the Production Editing Supervisor, Louise Calabro, my production editor, and Christa Tappeiner of the Free University of Bolzano, who helped me with the index. Last, but not least, I thank my sons, Ziyad Latif and George Daniel Springborg, who have shown such support for their mother's writing projects.

Grateful thanks are due to my publishers for permission to reuse material from the following essays: 'Mary Astell (1666–1731), Critic of Locke', *American Political Science Review*, 89, 3 (September 1995): 621–33; 'Astell, Masham and Locke', in Hilda L. Smith, ed., *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 105–25; 'Mary Astell and John Locke', in Steven Zwicker, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1650 to 1750* (Cambridge:

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Cambridge University Press, 1998), 276–306; ‘Republicanism, Freedom from Domination and the Cambridge Contextual Historians’, *Political Studies*, 49, 5 (2001): 851–76; and ‘Mary Astell (1666–1731), Critic of the Marriage Contract/Social Contract Analogue’, in Anita Pacheco, ed., *A Companion to Early Modern Women’s Writing* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 216–28; as well as from the introductions to my three editions of Astell’s works: *Mary Astell (1666–1731): Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *Mary Astell: ‘A Serious Proposal to the Ladies’* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1997); and *Mary Astell’s A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I (1694) and II (1697)* (Peterborough, Ont., Canada: Broadview Press, 2002).

A Note on Editions of Astell’s Works Cited

Page numbers of Astell’s works are to the original editions, where they lack a modern edition, as in the case of *Moderation Truly Stated* (1704), *The Christian Religion* (1705) and *Bart’lemy Fair* (1709). Citations to *Reflections upon Marriage* of 1700 are to the third (1706) edition, which includes Astell’s famous 1706 preface; citations from *A Fair Way with the Dissenters* (1704) and *An Impartial Enquiry* (1704) are to the original editions. In the case of the three latter works, page numbers are also given, followed by a forward slash to my 1996 Cambridge edition. Citations from Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I* (1694) and *II* (1697) are to the original editions and to my 2002 edition for Broadview Press.

A Note on the Structure of the Book

The Introduction, which begins with ‘A Reply to My Critics’, addresses the central issue upon which this study turns: Astell and early modern feminism. Astell, as a High Church Tory, presents, or appears to present, a paradox for modern feminist thought. My purpose here is to try to show that this paradox has its source in our own presuppositions and a Whiggish progressivism that imputes to historical actors assumptions that could only be the product of the historical processes in which they participated. This is particularly ironic in the case of Astell, who lived through the birth pangs of Whiggism as Whig and Tory positions consolidated in political parties. The issue of Astell and classical republicanism turns, in my view, on just such false presuppositions. I address associated misconceptions: women and ‘myth of the state’ and the social gendering of knowledge, and I try to establish a context for her thought among

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women philosophers, dramatists, novelists and political pamphleteers of her day.

Chapter 1, ‘Mary Astell, Philosopher, Theologian and Polemicist’, is devoted to establishing briefly the context for the work of a woman intellectual, who was considerably influential in her day but who subsequently dropped out of the canon, and about whose personal life we know very little. As well as introducing Astell’s political and philosophical milieus, it includes an overview of her corpus and sketches of the major figures with whom she interacts. It includes an account of the bitter debates between Norris and Locke, and between Astell and Masham, over the Cartesian mind–body problem. Astell’s own vacillation between Malebranchian occasionalism and a more Lockean solution in the form of a ‘sensible congruity’ between mind and body represent the horns of this dilemma.

Chapter 2, ‘Astell, Drake, Education, Epistemology and the *Serious Proposal*’, sets Astell’s most famous work in her day in the context of other works on female education. More importantly, since Part II of *A Serious Proposal* is a disquisition on the Port Royal logic and a critique of Locke’s epistemology, this aspect of her work is also treated. Among contemporary advocates of female education, Judith Drake, whose *Essay* was until recently credited to Astell and catalogued in Locke’s library along with Astell’s *A Serious Proposal*, is closest to her thought and is also discussed here.

Chapter 3, ‘Astell on Marriage, Patriarchalism and Contractarianism’, establishes the social context for Astell’s important critique of marriage mores and the more general principle to which they appeal, customary right, addressing her principal argument against the proto-liberal positions of Milton and Locke. Astell argued that, by defending the public–private distinction, these proto-Whigs created a public zone of political participation, from which women were excluded, and a private realm of domesticity, where women were ‘enslaved’ as legal minors, dependent on their husbands and sons for any form of social standing. Ultimately renowned for her 1706 preface to *Reflections upon Marriage*, Astell, as a High Church Tory, argues a position more complicated than at first appears.

Chapter 4, ‘Mary Astell and the Settlement of 1689’, addresses the specific context for Astell’s three Tory political pamphlets of 1704, *Moderation Truly Stated*, *A Fair Way with the Dissenters*, and *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War*, the first two analyzed in more detail in Chapter 5. *An Impartial Enquiry*, Astell’s history of the English Civil War, is a cautionary tale that takes 1649 as an analogue for the possible return

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of civil unrest due to the settlement of 1689. It became a classic work in the Tory canon but has remained relatively unexamined.

Chapter 5, 'A Fair Way with the Dissenters and Their Patrons', recounts Astell's bitter debates with Daniel Defoe and James Owen. *Moderation Truly Stated*, the first of Astell's three political pamphlets of 1704, possibly commissioned by her printer and written in the heat of the occasional conformity debate against the dissenters, is a reply to Owen's *Moderation a Virtue* of 1703, while *A Fair Way with the Dissenters* is a response to Defoe's *More Short-Ways with the Dissenters* of 1704.

Chapter 6, 'Astell, Locke and the Highway Man: A Test Case', is what it claims to be: a test case for my proposition that Astell is indeed, so far as one can establish, the first systematic critic of John Locke's entire corpus, an honour usually credited to Charles Leslie. Astell's arguments, made in the main body of her *Reflections upon Marriage* of 1700, and later amplified in her 1706 preface to that work, can be shown to have predated Leslie's by three years. Moreover, they are arguments characteristic of Astell's entire philosophical critique of Locke and his incipient liberalism, based on the distinction between the public and private realms. Astell's bitter protests in her pamphlets of 1704 that her arguments are unfairly credited to the High Flyers, High Church and Tory *men*, particularly Leslie, are evidence enough, if more were needed, that it was an occupational hazard of women, whose works were by convention published anonymously, to be plagiarized. Astell's challenge to Locke, repeated by Leslie, was quite simply to apply in the private realm of the family the standards of accountability and fairness that, as a democrat, he demanded of political institutions in the public sphere.

The final chapter, Chapter 7: 'Astell, Drake and the Historical Legacy of Freedom', takes a new look at Astell's legacy and that of her contemporary, Judith Drake. Perhaps due to the recent upsurge of scholarly work, Astell has been enlisted by Philip Pettit in his recent book as a republican, on the strength of her arguments for freedom from domination. This not only flies in the face of her avowed royalism and High Church Tory politics, but it also reduces her to the author of the famous rhetorical question about freedom. It is important to see why the question was rhetorical, and how in this regard her position contrasts with that of Judith Drake, who argues quite literally that women are enslaved. Astell does not, precisely because she does not accept Locke's argument that human beings have property in their own selves and cannot therefore consistently argue that the self can be alienated by slavery. Her arguments for freedom from domination surely rest on different grounds, namely, the integrity of the

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person as body and soul in Christian doctrine. Indeed, as I shall try to show, seventeenth-century arguments for freedom from domination in general tended to be an exercise in rhetorical forensics that cashed out in terms of specific justiciable rights. But Astell was not a rights theorist, and it is ironic that, in the long haul, she should be seen to join her bitter adversary, Locke, as a defender of natural rights, and in particular the right to freedom, in the legacy they bequeathed to future feminists and civil libertarians.

The Appendix comprises a Glossary and Selective Biographical Notes containing additional material that would have unduly encumbered the text. Asterisks preceding the names of persons and events mentioned in the chapters indicate entries there. Where I have not had access to specialist treatments, I have resorted to the usual range of encyclopedias and biographical dictionaries: the *Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)*, the *Dictionary of British and American Writers 1660–1800* and the *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, as well as the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*, the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and online databases and sources such as *European Writers, 1000–1900*. Unless otherwise acknowledged, the reader can assume that the biographical information I give is from some combination of these sources.

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Mary Astell, A Brief Chronology

- 1666 November 12, Mary Astell is born to Mary Errington and Peter Astell and is baptized at St. John's Church in Newcastle-on-Tyne.
- 1672 Charles II's Declaration of Indulgence for Protestant Dissenters.
- 1673 Declaration of Indulgence revoked and the Test Act banning Catholics from holding office passed.
- 1678 Sancroft becomes Archbishop of Canterbury. Astell's father, Peter Astell, dies.
- 1679 Exclusion Bill to ban James II from the throne debated.
- 1681 Oxford Parliament meets.
Oxford Parliament dissolved.
- 1683 Rye House Plot.
- 1684 October 16, Mary Errington, Astell's mother, dies.
- 1685 Charles II dies and is succeeded by James II.
James II's Parliament.
- 1686 Astell moves to London, living mainly in Chelsea.
- 1687 James II's Declaration of Indulgence for liberty of conscience.
- 1688 James dissolves Parliament.
Birth of James's son and possible heir.
Invasion of Prince William of Orange and his wife, Mary, James's own daughter.
James flees to France.
- 1689 Convention Parliament meets and offers the crown to William and Mary jointly.
Coronation of King William III and Queen Mary II.

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Mary Astell, a Brief Chronology

- Nine Years' War against France begins. Bill of Rights, regulating the English succession, nominates Mary's sister Anne and her children as next in line to the throne.
Toleration Act passed, allowing freedom of worship for Protestant dissenters.
- 1690 Secession of nonjurors from the Church of England.
- 1693 Astell begins her correspondence with John Norris of Bemerton.
- 1694 Queen Mary II dies childless.
Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* is first published anonymously.
- 1695 The Astell–Norris correspondence is published as *Letters Concerning the Love of God*.
Second corrected edition of Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* is published.
- 1696 The Fenwick Conspiracy, a plan by James II and King Louis XIV of France to assassinate King William, is uncovered.
Third corrected edition of Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* is published.
- 1697 Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Part II, is published, dedicated to Princess Anne of Denmark, who later became Queen Anne.
- 1700 Anne's only child, William, dies.
Astell's *Reflections upon Marriage* is published anonymously.
- 1701 The Act of Settlement establishes the Dowager Electress Sophia of Hanover, a granddaughter of James I, as next in line to the throne.
James II dies in exile.
Louis XIV of France nominates the son of James II, James III, known as the Old Pretender, as heir to the English throne.
- 1702 King William III dies in an accident.
Queen Anne, daughter of James II and the last of the Stuarts, succeeds to the throne.
- 1704 Astell's *An Impartial Enquiry* is published.
Astell's *Moderation Truly Stated* is published.
Astell's *A Fair Way with the Dissenters* is published.
- 1705 An octavo volume of Astell's *The Christian Religion* is published anonymously.
Second corrected edition of Astell's *Reflections upon Marriage* is published.

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- 1706 Astell engaged in controversy with Bishop Atterbury.
Third edition of Astell's *Reflections upon Marriage* is published, to which is added a preface.
- 1707 The first Parliament of Great Britain meets.
- 1709 Astell's *Bart'lemy Fair* is published anonymously.
- 1711 Occasional Conformity Act is passed.
- 1712 Tax records indicate that Astell is now living in her own residence on the street called By the Swan.
At some indeterminate date between 1712 and 1720, Mary refocused her energy on creating a charity school for girls rather than a women's college. Her friends, Lady Catherine Jones, Lady Elizabeth Hastings and Lady Ann Coventry, along with others, establish a charity school for girls. The school remained active until the latter part of the nineteenth century.
- 1714 The Electress Sophia of Hanover dies.
Queen Anne dies and is succeeded by the Lutheran King George I, Sophia's next descendant in line.
- 1715 First Parliament of George I meets.
- 1719 Occasional Conformity Act is repealed.
- 1722 Atterbury's plot to launch an armed invasion of Britain in favour of the Old Pretender is discovered.
Atterbury is exiled, and Robert Walpole seals his position as the King's first minister, a position he holds for twenty years.
Astell's *An Enquiry after Wit* is published as the second edition of *Bart'lemy Fair*.
- 1727 George I dies and is succeeded by George II.
- 1730 Fourth edition of Astell's *Reflections upon Marriage* is published 'with additions' in London.
Fifth edition of Astell's *Reflections upon Marriage* is published in Dublin.
Third edition of Astell's *Letters Concerning the Love of God* is published.
Third edition of Astell's *The Christian Religion* is published.
- 1731 May 9, Astell dies of breast cancer and is buried in Chelsea Churchyard.