Mary Astell (1666–1731)
Conservative Feminist?

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Great Philosophers Extramural Lecture Series
Trinity College Dublin

October 2, 2018
Mary Astell (1666–1731)

1. Life and Writings

2. Feminism
   - Critique of Biological Determinism
   - Defence of Women’s Intellectual Autonomy
   - Critique of Patriarchy

3. Tory Politics

4. High-Church Religion

5. A Coherent Worldview?
Life and Writings

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5. A Coherent Worldview?
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Feminism

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Feminism

**Definition**

An approach to scholarship and/or activism primarily shaped by concerns about the status of women in society and the conviction that women are fundamentally the equals of men.

Some Notes

This definition is very broad, and perhaps a bit controversial. It also contains several vague terms that will be filled in differently by different feminists.

On this very broad definition, it is not very controversial to say that Astell is a feminist.

How similar is Astell to contemporary feminism?

Three common concerns:

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- Defence of Women's Intellectual Autonomy
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Biological Determinism

Definition

The view that observed differences between men and women are rooted in biological factors so that no amount of social change will alter them.

Example

In most Western countries, secondary school boys on average outperform girls in maths and spatial reasoning, while girls on average outperform boys on language tasks.

Feminist Descriptive Claim

This is explained by differences in socialization and education.

Feminist Normative Claim

We can and should act to change social and educational structures to eliminate this disparity.
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Astell Against Biological Determinism (Background)

the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false. . . is naturally equal in all men. . . the diversity of our opinions does not arise because some of us are more reasonable than others but solely because we direct our thoughts along different paths and do not attend to the same things. For it is not enough to have a good mind; the main thing is to apply it well.

– Descartes, Discourse on Method (1637), Part One

Again, your lordship [Bishop Stillingfleet] charges me, that I do not place certainty in syllogism; I crave leave to ask again, and does your lordship? ... And if you do, I know nothing so requisite, as that you should advise all people, women and all, to betake themselves immediately to the universities, and to the learning of logic, to put themselves out of the dangerous state of scepticism. . . The merchant cannot be certain that his account is right cast up, nor the lady that her coach is not a wheelbarrow, nor her dairymaid that one and one pound of butter are two pounds of butter. . . nay, according to this rule, whoever lived before Aristotle. . . could not be certain of any thing.

– Locke, Reply to Stillingfleet’s Answer to his Second Letter (1699)
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Astell on Women’s Intellectual Capacities

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If God had not intended that women should use their reason, He would not have given them any, for He does nothing in vain.

Astell on Women’s Intellectual Capacities

Women are from their Infancy debar’d from those Advantages, with the want of which they are afterwards reproached... So partial are Men as to expect Brick where they afford no Straw; and so abundantly civil as to take care we shou’d make good that obliging Epithet of *Ignorant*, which out of an excess of good Manners, they are pleas’d to bestow on us!

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Boys have much Time and Pains, Care and Cost bestow’d on their Education, Girls have little or none. The former are early intiated in the Sciences, are made acquainted with antient and modern Discoveries, they study Books and Men, have all imaginable Encouragement... The latter are restrain’d, frown’d upon, and beat, not for, but from the Muses; Laughter and Ridicule, that never-failing Scare-Crow, is set up to drive them from the Tree of Knowledge. But if, in spite of all Difficulties Nature prevails, and they can’t be kept so ignorant as their Masters would have them, they are star’d upon as Monsters, censur’d, envied, and every way discouraged.

— Reflections upon Marriage, 5th ed. (1730), 75–76
But if our Nature is spoil'd, instead of being improv'd, at first; if from our Infancy we are nursed up in Ignorance and Vanity; are taught to be Proud and Petulant, Delicate and Fantastick, Humorous and Inconstant, 'tis not strange that the ill effects of this Conduct appear in all the future Actions of our Lives.

— *Serious Proposal*, Part 1, 19
Defence of Women’s Intellectual Autonomy

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As the Church of Hierusalem [Jerusalem], Alexandria, and Antioch have erred: so also the Church of Rome hath erred. . . in matters of faith.

– The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1562), §19

I seem to detect in [my opponent] the firm belief that in philosophizing one must rely upon the positions of some famous author, so that if our mind does not marry the thinking of someone else, it remains altogether sterile and fruitless. Perhaps he thinks that philosophy is the creation of a man, a book like the Iliad or Orlando Furioso, in which the least important thing is whether what is written in them is true. . . that is not the way it is. Philosophy is written in this all-encompassing book that is constantly open before our eyes, that is the universe.

– Galileo, The Assayer (1623) in The Essential Galileo, p. 183
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We may as rationally hope to see with other Mens Eyes, as to know by other Mens Understandings.

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Forming of Sects and Parties in Philosophy, that shall take their Denominations from, and think themselves obliged to stand by the Opinions of any particular Philosophers, is, in a manner, wholly laid aside [in modern philosophy]. *Des Cartes* is not more believed upon his own Word, than *Aristotle*.

– Wotton, *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1697), 364
Madam,
When I borrowed *The Lady’s Religion*, your Ladyship I believe had no suspicion of being troubled with such a long address, nor had I any design to give you this trouble. Though if there be anything peculiar in “a lady’s religion,” to distinguish it from that of other Christians, a woman I should think is as like to be acquainted with that peculiarity as a man.

— *The Christian Religion*, §1
S E C T. I. Of Religion in general; and of the Christian Faith.

The Introduction, and herein
§. 1. The Occasion of this Letter.
2. The Design.
3. Every one must judge for themselves.
4. And how.
5. Women as well as Men.
6. Why the Writer of this Letter is a Christian.

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§. 7. Our natural Notion of G O D.
8. Demonstration of the Existence of G O D.
9. Whom Reason teaches us to Acknowledge, from the consideration of the Universe.
10. And of our own Being, and our Fellow-Creatures.
11. Our thirst after Happiness prompts us to enquire after the Will of G O D.

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Thus faith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways and see, and ask for the Old Paths, where is the good Way, and walk therein, and ye shall find Rest for your Souls. Jer. 6. 16.

London:
THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

As Profess'd by a
DAUGHTER
OF THE
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LONDON:

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to pretend to dictate to our fellow rational creatures... is an assuming of [God’s] prerogative, and an usurpation upon their just and natural rights, who have as much right to abound in their own sense as we have to abound in ours. And to submit to such dictates in an affront to God, by despising or at the best neglecting the talents He has given us, and a direct disobedience to that command of Christ’s, “call no man master upon earth” [Matthew 23:9–10].... we may observe, if we please, that a man never sets up himself to be anyone’s oracle or director, but out of some selfish and base design.

– *The Christian Religion*, §3
Critique of Patriarchy

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Definition

‘Patriarchy’ is a broad term for the structures of male privilege and female oppression. Feminist critique, both in Astell and in more recent writers, often focuses on uncovering patriarchy in places where people (or at least men) hadn’t noticed it.
Astell’s Critique of Patriarchy

Men being... by nature all free, equal and independent, no man can be put out of this estate and subjected to the political power of another without his own consent.

– Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (1689), §95

If all Men are born Free, how is it that all Women are born Slaves?

– Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), 66

Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains.

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Astell’s Understanding of the Structure of Patriarchal Oppression

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- Households are subject to patriarchal governance, so that to marry is to come under the authority of a man.
- Most men exercise this authority tyrannically and/or incompetently.
Domestic and Political Governance

Dominion is acquired two wayes; By Generation, and by Conquest. The right of Dominion by Generation, is that, which the Parent hath over his Children; and is called Paternall... whereas some have attributed the Dominion to the Man onely, as being of the more excellent Sex; they misreckon in it. For there is not always that difference of strength or prudence between the man and the woman, as that the right can be determined without War. In Common-wealths, this conversie is decided by the Civill Law... In this condition of meer Nature, either the Parents between themselves dispose of the dominion over the Child by Contract...[or] If there be no Contract, the Dominion is in the Mother. For in the condition of meer Nature, where there are no Matrimoniall lawes, it cannot be known who is the Father, unlesse it be declared by the Mother: and therefore the right of Dominion over the Child dependeth on her will, and is consequently hers.

— Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), ch. 20
[The term] ‘paternal power’... seems so to place the power of parents over their children wholly in the father, as if the mother had no share in it, whereas if we consult reason or revelation, we shall find she hath an equal title. This may give one reason to ask whether this might not be more properly called ‘parental power’.

– Locke, *Second Treatise*, §52
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Thus ’twas easy and almost natural for children by a tacit and scarce avoidable consent to make way for the father’s authority and government... Thus the natural fathers of families, by an insensible change, became the politic monarchs of them too.

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**Question**

According to Hobbes and Locke, why does the male head of household end up having ‘dominion’?
Domestic and Political Governance

She must be a Fool . . . who can believe a Man, Proud and Vain as he is, will lay his boasted Authority, the Dignity and Prerogative of his Sex, one Moment at her Feet, but in Prospect of taking it up again to more Advantage; he may call himself her Slave a few days, but it is only in order to make her his all the rest of his Life.

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– Reflections upon Marriage, 17

a reasonable Man can’t deny that [the wife] has by much the harder Bargain: because she puts her self intirely into her Husband’s Power, and if the Matrimonial Yoke be grievous, neither Law nor Custom afford her that Redress which a Man obtains . . . how much soever Arbitrary Power may be dislik’d on a Throne . . . [none] of the Advocates of Resistance, would cry up Liberty to poor Female Slaves, or plead for the Lawfulness of Resisting a private Tyranny.

– Reflections upon Marriage, 20
She must be a Fool . . . who can believe a Man, Proud and Vain as he is, will lay his boasted Authority, the Dignity and Prerogative of his Sex, one Moment at her Feet, but in Prospect of taking it up again to more Advantage; he may call himself her Slave a few days, but it is only in order to make her his all the rest of his Life.

– Reflections upon Marriage, 17

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– Reflections upon Marriage, 20

[A husband governs] Not as an absolute Lord and Master, with an arbitrary and tyrannical Sway, but as Reason governs and conducts a Man, by proposing what is just and fit.

– Reflections upon Marriage, 56
Domestic Patriarchy and Universal Patriarchy

if by the Natural Superiority of their Sex, they mean, that every Man is by Nature superior to every Woman... the greatest Queen ought not to command, but to obey her Footman... If they mean that some Men are superior to some Women, this is no great Discovery... some Women are superior to some Men. Or had they been pleased to remember their Oaths of Allegiance and Supremacy they might have known, that One Woman [Queen Anne] is superior to All the Men in these Nations.

- Reflections upon Marriage, 60
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- *Reflections upon Marriage*, 60

let me beg to be inform’d, to whom we poor Fatherless Maids, and Widows who have lost their masters, owe Subjection? It can’t be to all Men in general, unless all Men were agreed to give the same Commands; Do we then fall as Strays, to the first who finds us?

- *Reflections on Marriage*, 76
Men never mistake their true Interest more than when they endeavour to keep Women in Ignorance. . . If Man’s Authority be justly establish’d, the more Sense a Woman has, the more Reason she will find to submit to it.

– *Reflections upon Marriage*, 37
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— Reflections upon Marriage, 37

The only danger [in women’s education] is that the Wife be more knowing than the Husband; but if she be ’tis his own fault, since he wants not opportunities of improvement; unless he be a natural Block-head, and then such an one will need a wise Woman to govern him.

— Reflections upon Marriage, 98–99
Men are possessed of all Places of Power, Trust and Profit, they make Laws and exercise the Magistracy, not only the sharpest Sword, but even all the Swords and Blunderbusses are theirs; which by the strongest Logick in the World, give sthem the best Title to every Thing they please to claim.

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– *Reflections upon Marriage*, 76

But whoever he be that thus happens to become our Master, if he allows us to be reasonable Creatures ... it would tend, I should think, to our Master’s Advantage ... to teach us to improve our Reason. But if Reason is only allow’d us by way of Raillery, and the secret Maxim is, that we have none... ’tis the best way to confine us with Chain and Block to the Chimney-Corner... I do not propose this to prevent a Rebellion, for Women are not so well united as to form an Insurrection. They are for the most part wise enough to love their Chains.

– *Reflections upon Marriage*, 77
1. Life and Writings

2. Feminism
   - Critique of Biological Determinism
   - Defence of Women’s Intellectual Autonomy
   - Critique of Patriarchy

3. Tory Politics

4. High-Church Religion

5. A Coherent Worldview?
Christians are under the strictest obligation to render active obedience to just authority, in all instances that are not contrary to God’s commands, and to submit quietly to the penalty where they cannot actually obey.

– *The Christian Religion*, §149
Passive Obedience

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– *The Christian Religion*, §149

we are in the first place to observe the laws of God strictly so called, that is the positive and direct commands and prohibitions laid down in holy writ . . . In the next place the commands of our lawful governors are to be actually obeyed, if they are not inconsistent with the laws of God; or if they can’t be obeyed they must be patiently submitted to.

– *The Christian Religion*, §332
Preserving Hierarchy

Nor is it only charity but justice, that requires our superfluities should be laid out upon our indigent brethren. All that which exceeds the necessities and moderate conveniences of life, according to that rank which providence has placed us in...is a superfluity.

— *The Christian Religion*, §178
Nor is it only charity but justice, that requires our superfluities should be laid out upon our indigent brethren. All that which...exceeds the necessities and moderate conveniences of life, according to that rank which providence has placed us in...is a superfluity.

– *The Christian Religion*, §178

we must remember our characters, the rank and station God has placed us in, the gifts He has bestowed upon us, the reputation and esteem we have acquired. For to do anything that misbecomes us, by being contrary to what is justly expected from us on any of these accounts...is...unlawful to us.

– *The Christian Religion*, §330
High-Church Religion

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tho every one be allow’d to Examine [church teachings], for they will bear the Test, yet it is not fit that he shou’d draw Conclusions, contrary to what has been already determin’d by the Catholick Church, or even by that particular Church of which he is a member, unless where it does plainly and evidently contradict that sense of Holy Scripture which has been received by the Church Universal.

– *Serious Proposal*, Part 2, 51–52
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– *Serious Proposal*, Part 2, 51–52

I will with all humility submit to God’s authority in His church. Not to the man whom I may fancy or choose, for this were to follow my own way, and not God’s; but to him or them who shall have lawful authority over me. . . I will consult the bishop of the diocese in which I live, if it be a matter of great concern, but upon less occasions, the parish priest. . . in pure obedience to God, who has commanded me to “obey them who have the rule over me,” and who “watch,” or at least ought to watch, “for my soul” [Hebrews 13:17].

– *The Christian Religion*, §50
A Coherent Worldview?

1. Life and Writings

2. Feminism
   - Critique of Biological Determinism
   - Defence of Women’s Intellectual Autonomy
   - Critique of Patriarchy

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5. A Coherent Worldview?
The Critique of Patriarchy

- Women are taught from birth not to think for themselves but to defer to men.
- As a result, they need to marry.
- This need to marry is reinforced by social norms and practices of ridicule (fear of being a ‘spinster’).
- Households are subject to patriarchal governance, so that to marry is to come under the authority of a man.
- Most men exercise this authority tyrannically and/or incompetently.

Solutions
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Solutions

- Helping women avoid bad marriages.
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**Solutions**

- Helping women avoid bad marriages.
- More opportunities to avoid marriage altogether.
Moderate Tory Understanding of Social Hierarchy

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Patience and Submission are the only Comforts that are left to a poor People, who groan under Tyranny, unless they are Strong enough to break the Yoke, to Depose and Abdicate, which I doubt, would not be allow’d of here. For whatever may be said against Passive-Obedience in another Case, I suppose there’s no Man but likes it very well in this.

- Reflections upon Marriage, 20
Indeed nothing can assure Obedience, and render it what it ought to be, but the Conscience of Duty, the paying it for God’s sake. Superiors don’t rightly understand their own Interest when they attempt to put out their Subjects Eyes to keep them Obedience. A blind Obedience is what a Rational Creature should never pay, nor would such an one receive it, did he rightly understand its Nature... God himself does not require our Obedience at this rate; he lays before us the Goodness and Reasonableness of his Laws.

– Reflections upon Marriage, 51
A Coherent Worldview?

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On the other hand, she maintains conservative political and religious positions, advocating for the preservation of traditional hierarchies and submission to authorities.

Astell believes that this position is consistent because submitting to an authority we ourselves recognize as legitimate or playing a role we ourselves recognize as our own within the hierarchy, can be an expression of our rational autonomy.

In fact, the attempt to foster this kind of autonomous obedience in one’s subordinates may be what distinguishes legitimate authority from tyranny, on Astell’s view.
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