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Mary Astell on Marriage and Lockean Slavery

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Abstract: In the 1706 third edition of her *Reflections upon Marriage*, Mary Astell alludes to John Locke’s definition of slavery in her descriptions of marriage. She describes the state of married women as being ‘subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, Arbitrary Will of another Man’ (Locke, *Two Treatises*, II.22). Recent scholars maintain that Astell does not seriously regard marriage as a form of slavery in the Lockean sense. In this paper, I defend the contrary position: I argue that Astell does seriously regard marriage as a form of slavery for women and that she condemns this state of affairs as morally wrong. I also show that, far from criticizing Locke, Astell draws on key passages in his *Thoughts concerning Education* to urge that women be educated to retain their liberty.

In *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), the English feminist Mary Astell (1666-1731) expresses her opinion on the unhappy marriage of her neighbor, Hortense Mancini, the duchess of Mazarin (1646-99).¹ At the age of fifteen, the unfortunate Hortense was married off to the wealthy duke of Meilleraye and Mayenne, a psychologically disturbed older man. Following years of abuse, the duchess separated from her husband and fled to England, where she

¹ Astell’s work was first published anonymously in London in 1700 as *Some Reflections Upon Marriage, Occasion’d by the Duke & Dutchess of Mazarine’s Case; Which is also consider’d*. It ran into three further editions in Astell’s lifetime (in 1703, 1706, and 1730). Unless otherwise noted, my references are to the 1706 third edition, Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage*, in *Astell: Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge, 1996). For details on the duchess, see Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago and London, 1986), pp. 151-6.

became a favorite to King Charles II. In response, her husband initiated legal proceedings to have her returned to France. In defence of her actions, the duchess published her *Mémoires* (1675), including a detailed account of the duke's cruelty and perversion. She reported that the duke continually opposed her 'most innocent desires', alienated her from family and friends, turned her servants against her, betrayed her secrets, sullied her reputation, and exposed her health and her life 'to his most unreasonable caprice'.² In short, she described her marriage as a condition of 'unparall[el]ed slavery'.³

In her *Reflections*, Astell uses this well-publicized case to reflect on the reasons why there are so few happy marriages in her time. Like the duchess, Astell appropriates the rhetoric of slavery to make her point. She observes that men might be happy in the married state, but that for women the attainment of happiness is much more difficult. During courtship, Astell warns, a man may call himself a woman's 'Slave a few days, but it is only in order to make her his all the rest of his Life'.⁴ The problem is that men are taught to have a contemptuous opinion of the female sex as a whole. A husband is taught that his wife is made to be 'a Slave to his Will' with 'no higher end than to Serve and Obey him'.⁵ It is no great matter to men 'if Women who were born to be their Slaves, be now and then ruin'd for their Entertainment'.⁶ Expressing

² Hortense Mancini, duchess of Mazarin, *The Memoires of the Dutchess Mazarine* (London, 1690), pp. 28-9.

³ Mazarin, *Memoires*, p. 29. Along similar lines, in the published legal proceedings, her advocate was so outraged by the duke's extradition request that he demanded to know: 'Must a Wife be eternally enslav'd to the Caprices, Enthusiasms, and false Revelations of her Husband?' See Monsieur de St. Evremont, *The Arguments of Monsieur Herard, For Monsieur the Duke of Mazarin, Against Madam the Dutchess of Mazarin, His Spouse. And the Factum For Madam the Dutchess of Mazarin, Against Monsieur the Duke of Mazarin, Her Husband* (London, 1699), 'The Preface', p. 128. In her *Reflections*, Astell uses the running title for this work, *The Duke and Dutchess of Mazarin's Case* (see Astell, *Reflections*, pp. 1, 32).

⁴ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

some sympathy for the duchess, Astell observes that being ‘yok’d for Life to a disagreeable Person and Temper’, must be ‘a misery none can have a just Idea of, but those who have felt it’.⁷ Yet the injustice of a wife’s subjection to her husband is seldom challenged by men, and ‘how much soever Arbitrary Power may be dislik’d on a Throne, not *Milton* himself wou’d cry up Liberty to poor *Female Slaves*, or plead for the Lawfulness of Resisting a Private Tyranny’.⁸

In the following discussion, I examine the deeper significance of Astell’s comparisons between the condition of slavery and the institution of marriage in her time. In a long preface to the 1706 third edition of her *Reflections*, Astell makes one of her most striking statements about slavery and marriage. She remarks that

tho’ a Husband can’t deprive a Wife of Life without being responsible to the Law, he may however do what is much more grievous to a generous Mind, render Life miserable, for which she has no Redress, scarce Pity which is afforded to every other Complainant. It being thought a Wife’s Duty to suffer everything without Complaint. If *all Men are born free*, how is it that all Women are born slaves? as they must be if the being subjected to the *inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary Will* of Men, be the *perfect Condition of Slavery*? and if the Essence of Freedom consists, as our Masters say it does, in having a *standing Rule to live by*? And why is Slavery so much condemn’d and strove against in one Case,

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-7.

and so highly applauded and held so necessary and so sacred in another?⁹

In this passage, Astell refers in italics to Locke's definition of slavery in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689).¹⁰ Because her argument is made in a series of rhetorical questions, it is difficult to discern her exact meaning. On the surface, she appears to be condemning slavery and calling for the extension of the natural right of liberty to all human beings, both men and women. But one commentator, Patricia Springborg, maintains that here Astell does not seriously regard marriage as a form of slavery in the Lockean sense.¹¹ In terms of her wider political commitments, Springborg point outs, Astell is an advocate of passive obedience to political authority, or the doctrine that subjects are obliged to submit patiently to the penalty for disobedience to unjust authority. In her view, subjects are never justified in exercising active resistance to tyranny. When Astell asks 'If *all Men are born free*, how is it that all Women are born slaves?', according to Springborg, she is adopting a 'subversive stratagem' designed to highlight the hypocrisy of those Whigs who do not consistently apply their domestic theory of passive obedience to the public domain.¹² There is further support for this reading in Astell's

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-19.

¹⁰ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge, 1988), II.22. (Hereafter, my references are to treatise and section numbers in this edition.) To be more accurate, in this paragraph Locke provides a negative definition of the '*Freedom of Men under Government*' as 'not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, Arbitrary Will of another Man' (II.22). Astell does not explicitly acknowledge the source of her quotation.

¹¹ See Patricia Springborg, *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 227; Patricia Springborg, 'Republicanism, Freedom from Domination, and the Cambridge Contextual Historians', *Political Studies* 49 (2001), pp. 851-76 (p. 867); and Patricia Springborg, introduction to *Astell: Political Writings*, p. 18, n. 20.

¹² Patricia Springborg, 'Mary Astell (1666-1731), Critic of Locke', *American Political Science Review* 89 (1995), pp. 621-33 (p. 621). Here Springborg reiterates a point first made in Joan

preceding remarks that: ‘if Absolute Sovereignty be not necessary in a State, how comes it to be so in a Family? or if in a Family why not in a State; since no Reason can be alledg’d for the one that will not hold more strongly for the other? If the Authority of the Husband so far as it extends, is sacred and inalienable, why not of the Prince?’¹³ Here her point would appear to be that the head’s authority is sacred and inalienable in *both* the political and familial spheres. Springborg thus concludes that Astell’s remark about women being born into slavery must be ironic. She points out that because Astell rejects ‘Locke’s claim to “property” in one’s own person ... she could not literally argue that women were slaves compared to men’.¹⁴ In her annotations to the *Reflections*, Springborg repeats this point once again, stating that ‘Since Astell denied property in one’s person, vouched for in Locke by the right to real property (a right to which women were denied) she could not technically argue the slavery of women compared with the freedom of men. Nor does she seriously attempt to do so’.¹⁵ In her biography of Astell, Ruth Perry likewise observes that Astell ‘used the word “slavery” strictly as a metaphor when bemoaning the plight of women’.¹⁶

K. Kinnaird, ‘Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism’, *The Journal of British Studies* 19, no. 1 (1979): ‘Certain passages in her [i.e. Astell’s] feminist tracts may seem to suggest that the Civil War had had a liberal impact on her thinking; but when read against her extended works on religion and politics, those passages appear in their true light as ironic arguments designed to meet an opponent on his own grounds. ... Did her adversary argue that absolute sovereignty was not necessary in the state? Then why was it necessary in the family[?] ... Here Mary Astell is not challenging the authority of either the husband or the prince; she is taking logic to an extreme in order to expose the inconsistency of a double standard’ (pp. 68-9).

¹³ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 17.

¹⁴ Springborg, ‘Republicanism, Freedom from Domination’, p. 867.

¹⁵ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 18, n. 20. See also Springborg, *Mary Astell*, p. 227.

¹⁶ Perry makes this remark in the context of noting that Astell ‘did not observe that a number of her acquaintances owned or traded in actual slaves to work British plantations in the Caribbean’ (Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, p. 8). For Perry’s own account of Astell’s political position vis-à-vis Locke, see Ruth Perry, ‘Mary Astell and the Feminist Critique of Possessive Individualism’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23 (1990), pp. 444-57.

In this paper, I argue that Astell *does* affirm that early modern wives are in a state of slavery in the Lockean sense of being subject ‘to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary Will of Men’, and, moreover, that she regards this condition as morally wrong. Numerous political theorists have discussed Locke’s failure to extend his critique of slavery to the condition of African and American Indian slaves in his day,¹⁷ but few have discussed his failure to extend his critique to the condition of married women in his time. I think that Astell is of interest for being one of the few writers to adapt and then apply Locke’s theorizing on the subject to the situation of early modern women.

To substantiate this claim, in the first part of this paper, I spell out Locke’s concept of slavery in the *Two Treatises*, as well as his reasons for regarding some forms of slavery as morally objectionable and his justifications for resistance to such slavery. In the second part, I demonstrate that Astell uses the concept of slavery in the same sense as Locke throughout her *Reflections*. In the third part, I then situate Astell’s thoughts about marriage in the context of the broader moral framework of her longest work, *The Christian Religion, as Profess’d by a Daughter of the Church of England* (1705), in order to show that Astell regards female slavery as morally wrong. In the fourth and final part, I contend that my reading of the *Reflections* lends further support to the idea that Astell encourages women to consider not marrying at all. In a recent article in this journal, Andrew Lister maintains that if we view Astell’s *Reflections* as a response to anti-marital satires of the period, then we can see that the work was designed ‘to get women to reflect on whether to marry and

¹⁷ For an overview of the literature, see James Farr, ‘Locke, Natural Law, and New World Slavery’, *Political Theory* 36, no. 4 (2008), pp. 495-522 (especially n. 4 and 5).

seriously to consider not marrying'.¹⁸ In keeping with this interpretation, I suggest that an underlying objective of the text is to urge that women be educated *for liberty*, so that they might avoid being tricked or forced into situations of dependence upon men. Toward this end, I maintain that, far from criticizing Locke, Astell draws on key passages from his *Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) to support her argument.¹⁹

I

In the opening sentence of his *Two Treatises*, Locke affirms that 'Slavery is so vile and miserable an Estate of Man, and so directly opposite to the generous Temper and Courage of our Nation; that 'tis hardly to be conceived, that an *Englishman*, much less a *Gentleman*, should plead for't'.²⁰ Here Locke specifically targets Sir Robert Filmer, the author whom he claims would persuade all Englishmen 'that they are Slaves, and ought to be so'.²¹ Situated in its original historical context, however, the other likely targets of the *Two Treatises* are the Stuart monarchs and various Tory defenders of monarchical absolutism in the 1680s. According to Peter Laslett, the text plausibly can be read as a Whig justification for the exclusion of the future Catholic King

¹⁸ Andrew Lister, 'Marriage and Misogyny: The Place of Mary Astell in the History of Political Thought', *History of Political Thought* 25, no. 1 (2004), pp. 44-72 (p. 44).

¹⁹ As a caveat to the following discussion, I would like to emphasize that Astell's critique applies only to the state of marriage as it happens to be, as a matter of descriptive fact, in her lifetime. In an ideal world, she says, marriage would live up to its status as a God-ordained institution, one of the most 'sacred and Strongest bonds', designed to 'engage the married Pair for Life', and to provide 'mutual Comfort and Assistance' for both men and women. See Mary Astell, *Some Reflections Upon Marriage. With Additions. The Fourth Edition* (London, 1730; reprint, New York, 1970), pp. 10, 17, 16. (This edition is hereafter cited as *Reflections* [fourth edition], to distinguish it from Springborg's *Reflections*, which is based upon the third edition.) In short, in Astell's view, marriage *need not* be a state of slavery for women, or a state in which wives are subjected to the unlimited will of their husbands; this is only a contingent state of affairs. In the preface to her third edition, Astell looks forward to a future in which 'a Tyrannous Domination which Nature never meant, shall no longer render useless if not hurtful, the Industry and Understandings of half Mankind' (*Reflections*, p. 31).

²⁰ Locke, *Two Treatises*, I.1.

²¹ *Ibid.*

James II from succession to the throne.²² To achieve this end, Locke aimed to persuade his readers that under a Catholic monarch the English people would have no other security for their property, their lives, liberties, and estates, save the will or pleasure of their king. His point was that if Englishmen really valued their liberty, then they should abhor the fact that the monarch was about to—or, in fact, *had already*—enslaved the nation.²³

So what is ‘slavery’ according to Locke? In chapter four of his *Second Treatise* (‘Of Slavery’), Locke defines slavery by contrast with its opposite, the condition of liberty or freedom. In his opinion, true liberty is not, as Robert Filmer suggests, a ‘*Liberty for every one to do what he lists, to live as he pleases, and not to be tyed by any Laws*’. Rather in a state of natural freedom, human beings still live under the restraint of the law of nature (the law of reason), and likewise the ‘*Freedom of Men under Government*’ is ‘to have a standing Rule to live by, common to every one of that society ... and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, Arbitrary Will of another Man’.²⁴ In Locke’s view, someone might be free even though their actions are constrained by the law, provided that that law is *non-arbitrary* or governed by moral reasons.²⁵ By contrast, slaves are ‘subjected to the Absolute Dominion

²² It was once thought that Locke wrote the *Two Treatises* in order to provide a justification for the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 and for pledging allegiance to William III. But in his modern edition, Laslett presents a persuasive case for the view that the *Two Treatises* was drafted during the Exclusion Crisis of 1679-81, and that it is ‘a demand for a revolution to be brought about, not the rationalization of a revolution in need of defence’ (Laslett, introduction to Locke, *Two Treatises*, p. 47).

²³ See Farr, ‘Locke, Natural Law, and New World Slavery’, p. 507.

²⁴ Locke, *Two Treatises*, II.22.

²⁵ On Locke’s concern with liberty as ‘the absence of arbitrary restraint and of arbitrary will’, see Lena Halldenius, ‘Locke and the Non-Arbitrary’, *European Journal of Political Theory* 2, no. 3 (2003), pp. 261-79 (p. 263). Halldenius interprets Locke as upholding that republican conception of liberty articulated most recently in the writings of Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner. See Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford, 1997), and Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998).

and Arbitrary Power of their Masters'.²⁶ They are unfree because someone has the power to dispose of their property—whether that be their life, liberty, and limb ('property in one's person') or their material possessions—according to his arbitrary will and pleasure, without being accountable to the law. Whatever the slave chooses to do is dependent upon the will of another man, regardless of whether or not that man's will conforms to moral reasons. For someone to be in this condition of slavery requires only that the master have a discretionary power over that person's life. It is not the case that the master must *exercise* that power, or that the slave must suffer from the actual loss of his or her possessions—the mere threat of loss is enough to enslave. 'For who could be free,' Locke asks, 'when every other Man's Humour might domineer over him?'²⁷ As a consequence, slaves do not have 'Property in their own disposal'. In fact, strictly speaking they have 'no property at all' because someone else has the power to take it away from them, at his arbitrary will and pleasure.²⁸ Hence the life of a slave is characterized by a perpetual state of uncertainty and insecurity. Even when all is going well, the life of a slave is vulnerable to another person's capricious interference.

Some scholars argue that, by attempting to convince his readers that absolute monarchy was tantamount to slavery, Locke had a more radical political objective in mind: a 'call to arms', that is, or a justification for armed revolution against the Stuart monarchy.²⁹ The law of nature (or the law of reason), according to Locke, tells us 'that being all equal and independent, no

²⁶ Locke, *Two Treatises*, II.85.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, II.57.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, II.174.

²⁹ See, for example, Richard Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics & Locke's Two Treatises of Government* (Princeton, NJ, 1986).

one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions'.³⁰ All human beings are the workmanship of one 'Sovereign Master', who is God. We are all God's property, according to Locke, 'sent into the World by his order and about his business ... made to last during his, not one another's Pleasure'.³¹ It follows from this precept that no human being has the power

to deliver up their *Preservation*, or consequently the means of it, to the Absolute Will and arbitrary Dominion of another; whenever any one shall go about to bring them into such a Slavish Condition, they will always have a right to preserve what they have not a Power to part with; and to rid themselves of those who invade this Fundamental, Sacred, and unalterable Law of *Self-preservation* for which they enter'd into Society.³²

Other than in cases of lawful conquest, according to Locke, slavery cannot be justified because it violates a man's inalienable right to self-preservation.³³

Whosoever threatens a man with slavery, or takes away the freedom that is the 'Fence' to his preservation, puts himself into a state of war with that man.³⁴

And by the same reasoning, 'whenever the *Legislators endeavour to take away, and destroy the Property of the People*, or to reduce them to Slavery

³⁰ Locke, *Two Treatises*, II.6.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, II.149.

³³ In his chapter 'Of Slavery', Locke defines the 'perfect condition of slavery' as 'nothing but the State of War continued, between a lawful Conqueror, and a Captive' (Locke, *Two Treatises*, II.24). He argues that in the context of lawful conquest, slavery is justified because the captive-turned-slave has forfeited his natural right to liberty by engaging in 'some Act that deserves Death' (II.23) against his lawful conqueror. Yet Locke also imposes certain theoretical constraints on justified slavery: he emphasizes that the slave-holder has rights over the unjust aggressor alone, and not his innocent countrymen (II.179), his possessions (II.180), his innocent wife and children (II.182-3), or future generations (II.189).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, II.17.

under Arbitrary Power, they put themselves into a state of War with the People, who are thereupon absolved from any farther Obedience'.³⁵ In such circumstances, the people may exercise their 'Right to resume their original Liberty' and establish a new legislative power, by force if necessary.³⁶

In sum, then, Locke provides a definition of the condition of slavery as the being subject to the arbitrary or unlimited will of another man. He allows that in nearly all circumstances such slavery cannot be morally justified because it deprives the individual of the security or 'fence' to his self-preservation; and in nearly all circumstances, it is morally permissible for individuals to resist being subjected to a state of slavery because the law of self-preservation (which is supported by the law of reason) justifies such resistance.

II

We will now see that, in the main body of her *Reflections*, Astell characterizes early modern marriage as the state of being subject to the absolute power and arbitrary will of another human being, in which there is no redress to the law for any injury or injustice done, and no safeguard or security for one's personal or real property.

Astell develops her identification of marriage with slavery partly in response to John Sprint's *The Bride-Womans Counsellor* (1699), a misogynist wedding sermon of the period. In this sermon, ostensibly on the biblical text that 'she that is married, careth for the things of the World, how she may please her Husband' (1 Corinthians 7:34), the Reverend Sprint blames the

³⁵ *Ibid.*, II.222.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

unhappiness of the marriage state on ‘the Indiscretion and Folly ... of disobedient Wives’.³⁷ To reform the institution, Sprint counsels, wives must perform their sacred duty of obedience and condescend to give their husbands ‘the title of *Lord* and *Master*’.³⁸ This requires them to be pliant and yielding to their husbands’ every will and desire. As a matter of rule, he says, ‘the very Desire of the Heart’ ought to be regulated by the husband ‘so far that it should not be lawful to will or desire what she herself liked, but only what her Husband should approve and allow’.³⁹ He warns that ‘Tho’ Women may think, that their Thoughts are free, that they are at Liberty to think as they please, yet let them know, that the Heart-searching God takes Cognizance of their Thoughts, and is very much displeas’d when he finds any to be such as are beneath the Dignity and Excellency of the Husband’.⁴⁰

In opposition to Sprint, Astell protests that ‘whatever other Great and Wise Reasons Men may have for despising Women, and keeping them in Ignorance and Slavery, it can’t be from their having learnt to do so in Holy Scripture’.⁴¹ She openly sympathizes with women such as the duchess of Mazarin who have been denied their ‘most innocent desires, for no other cause but the Will and Pleasure of an absolute Lord and Master’.⁴² She observes that

³⁷ John Sprint, *The Bride-Womans Counsellor. Being a Sermon Preach’d at a Wedding* (London, 1699), p. 4.

³⁸ Sprint, *Bride-Womans Counsellor*, p. 13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴¹ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 28. Like Sprint, Astell emblazons the title-page to her 1706 *Reflections* with citations from I Corinthians 7, but with different rhetorical intent: ‘*If a Virgin Marry, she hath not sinned; nevertheless such shall have trouble*’ and ‘*The Wife is bound by the Law so long as her Husband liveth, but if her Husband be dead she is at liberty to be Married to whom she will, only in the Lord. But she is happier if she so abide after my Judgment.* I Cor. 7. 28, 39, 40.’ These biblical quotations are omitted from Patricia Springborg’s edition of Astell’s work.

⁴² Astell, *Reflections*, p. 33. Here Astell echoes the duchess of Mazarin’s claim that her husband opposed her ‘most innocent desires’ (Mancini, *Memoires*, p. 28).

when a woman marries, she gives a man an ‘absolute Power’,⁴³ her husband governs ‘absolutely and intirely’:⁴⁴ ‘if the Matrimonial Yoke be grievous,’ she says, ‘neither Law nor Custom afford her that redress which a Man obtains’.⁴⁵ The woman must be ‘his for Life, and therefore cannot quit his Service let him treat her how he will’.⁴⁶ For this very reason, Astell says, quoting from Sprint’s sermon:

She who Elects a Monarch for Life, who gives him an Authority she cannot recall however he misapply it, who puts her Fortune and Person entirely in his Powers; *nay, even the very desires of her Heart, according to some learned Casuists, so as that it is not lawful to Will or Desire any thing but what he approves and allows*; had need be very sure that she does not make a Fool her Head, nor a Vicious Man her Guide and Pattern.⁴⁷

A woman who marries must be prepared to ‘submit her enlightned Reason, to the Imperious Dictates of a blind Will, and wild Imagination, even when she

⁴³ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 49.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51. In the early modern period, it should be noted, it was almost impossible for a woman to obtain a divorce.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-9. My italics indicate Astell’s quotations from Sprint. Other seventeenth-century English women also accuse Sprint of reducing marriage to slavery. In the anonymous *Female Advocate* (1700), published in the same year as Astell’s *Reflections*, ‘Eugenia’ writes against Sprint that if women cannot have freedom of mind, and enjoy ‘the Liberty of Rational Creatures’, then they are certainly ‘very Slaves’ (see Eugenia, *The Female Advocate; Or, A Plea for the just Liberty of the Tender Sex, and particularly of Married Women* [London, 1700], pp. 49 and 41). And Mary Chudleigh, the author of the *Ladies Defence: or, The Bride-Woman’s Counsellor Answered* (1701), rails against Sprint for thinking that women ‘cannot be obedient Wives, without being Slaves, nor pay their *Husbands* that *Respect* they owe them without sacrificing their *Reason* to their *Humour*’ (Mary Chudleigh to Elizabeth Thomas, 19 October 1701; in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Rawlinson Letters 90, f. 62). Similar points about marriage and slavery are raised in Sarah Chapone’s *The Hardships of the English Laws in Relation to Wives* (London, 1735).

clearly perceives the ill Consequences of it, the Imprudence, nay Folly and Madness of such a Conduct'.⁴⁸

Astell allows that women may be happy in some marriages, but marriage itself is still a form of slavery in the sense that someone else has the capacity to interfere arbitrarily in a woman's affairs, according to their will and pleasure—even if they never exercise that capacity. For this reason, a woman must be wary that the way a man treats her during courtship might not be the way he treats her for life. With respect to women, she warns, most courting men secretly think that 'as we set you up, so it is in our power to reduce you to your first obscurity, or to somewhat worse, to Contempt; you are therefore only on your good behaviour, and are like to be no more than what we please to make you'.⁴⁹ Consequently, when a woman decides to marry, she must be mindful that she lays 'aside her own Will and Desires, to pay such an intire Submission for Life, *to one whom she cannot be sure will always deserve it*'.⁵⁰

A married woman must also be prepared to accept that, despite any agreement prior to her marriage, her property might be taken from her at her husband's will and pleasure. According to seventeenth-century common law, when a man and woman married they became 'one person', in the sense that the legal existence of the woman was subsumed under that of her husband (the state known as 'coverture').⁵¹ Once she became a wife, or a *feme covert*, a woman's property passed to her husband, who gained the right to dispose of it as he saw fit. In terms of her 'real property' (that was, typically, her land), her

⁴⁸ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 50.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78; my italics.

⁵¹ William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (Philadelphia, 1879), vol. I, p. 442; quoted in Janelle Greenberg, 'The Legal Status of the English Woman in Early Eighteenth-Century Common Law and Equity', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 4 (1974), pp. 171-81 (p. 173).

husband became entitled to use any rent or profits associated with that property. By means of a prenuptial marriage settlement, a woman could take certain precautions against losing her land and goods once she was married. This was typically an agreement between the prospective wife and husband that the woman would retain some of her property ‘to her own separate use and enjoyment’ (her pin money).⁵² Alternatively, before marriage, the wife could also ‘convey lands to trustees in trust, to pay the rents and profits to her sole and separate use’.⁵³ Despite such safeguards, Astell notes that the husband,

being absolute Master, she and all the Grants he makes her are in his Power, and there have been too many instances of Husbands that by wheedling, or threatning their Wives, by seeming Kindness or cruel Usage, have perswaded or forc’d them out of what has been settled on them. So that the Woman has in truth no security but the Man’s Honour and Good-Nature, a Security that in this present Age no wise Person would venture much upon.⁵⁴

Astell adds that ‘Covenants betwixt Husband and Wife, like Laws in an Arbitrary Government, are of little Force, the Will of the Sovereign is all in all’.⁵⁵

We can see, then, that Astell characterizes the early modern marriage state as a form of slavery in the Lockean sense of being subject to the arbitrary will

⁵² Greenberg, ‘Legal Status of the English Woman’, p. 176.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 51.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

of another man, with no standing rule or law to provide security for one's property. From the moment they marry, women enter a state of uncertainty and insecurity—they cannot be sure that they will be treated well in future; and if they are not, if their husband does happen to look unfavorably upon them, they have no avenue of redress or appeal to the law for any injuries or injustices done. Even if the husband is kind and honorable, it is still the case that he is absolute master, 'she and all the Grants he makes her are in his Power'.⁵⁶ Women have no security that their property will remain their own within marriage, whatever contracts they might have entered into prior to matrimony.

In response, it might be objected that early modern wives were not properly enslaved because husbands did not have the power to take *their lives* with impunity.⁵⁷ Astell herself concedes that 'a Husband can't deprive a Wife of Life without being responsible to the Law'.⁵⁸ But if we look carefully at Locke's concept of slavery, we can see that while the power of life and death is sufficient to enslave, it is not a *necessary* condition of slavery in his view (it does not have to be present in every instance). When Locke defines absolute power as 'the power to kill', this is always in the context of spelling out *justified* slavery, or those instances of slavery that occur in the context of a just war.⁵⁹ In such cases, an unjust aggressor forfeits his life by engaging in 'some Act that deserves Death',⁶⁰ and in response the lawful conqueror may either execute his captive then and there, or 'make use of him to his own Service'.⁶¹

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵⁷ I am grateful to Andrew Lister for bringing this point to my attention.

⁵⁸ Astell, *Reflections*, pp. 17-18.

⁵⁹ Locke, *Two Treatises*, II.23, II.172.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, II.23.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

If the conqueror chooses the latter, he retains the power to take away his captive-cum-slave's life whenever he pleases. But in a general sense, for Locke, slavery simply consists in being subject to the 'inconstant, uncertain, unknown, Arbitrary Will of another Man'.⁶² Slavery can take the form of someone having absolute power over your liberty, your health, your body, or your material property ('what tends to the Preservation of the Life'),⁶³ it does not *have to* take the form of having the power to take your life at whim. Needless to say, Astell concerns herself with slavery in this general sense, not just-war slavery.

So what now of Springborg's claim that Astell is being 'ironic'? Is it the case that Astell characterizes marriage as slavery only in order to highlight the absurdities of contractarianism? If this were the case, then Astell's argumentative point (or the irony) would presumably rely on the fact that no one seriously thinks that a wife's subjection to the arbitrary will of her husband is wrong. But this is not the case. In light of her wider moral commitments, I now argue, *Astell herself* regards female slavery in marriage as morally wrong.

III

In his *Two Treatises*, Locke's main objection to slavery was that it was a breach of the law of nature that tells us that we cannot deliver up our preservation to 'the Absolute Will and arbitrary Dominion of another'.⁶⁴ In her *Christian Religion*, Astell also defends the law of self-preservation as sacred and unalterable, but with an important qualification. She asks

⁶² *Ibid.*, II.22.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, II.6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, II.149.

WHAT then is *Self-Preservation*, that Fundamental Law of Nature, as some call it, to which all other Laws, Divine as well as Human, are made to do Homage? and how shall it be provided for? Very well; for it does not consist in the Preservation of the Person or *Composite*, but in preserving the Mind from Evil, the Mind which is truly the Self, and which ought to be secur'd at all hazards. It is this *Self-Preservation* and no other, that is a *Fundamental Sacred and Unalterable Law*, as might easily be prov'd were this a proper place; which Law he obeys, and he only, who will do or suffer any thing rather than Sin. *No Man having a power to deliver up this Preservation, or consequently the means of it, to the absolute Will and arbitrary Dominion of another, but has always a Right to Preserve what he has not a Power to part with*, as a certain Author says in another Case where it will not hold.⁶⁵

Here Astell quotes from II.149 of Locke's *Two Treatises*. Against Locke, she self-consciously adopts the position of a Cartesian dualist: she regards the self as the immaterial mind and not the material body or the mind-body composite.⁶⁶ In her view, the right to self-preservation is in fact the right to preserve *the mind alone* from destruction; the mind is God's true workmanship. On this reading, then, Astell does in fact have a theory of

⁶⁵ Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter Of The Church of England* (London, 1717), §274. Hereafter my references are to paragraph numbers in this second edition of her work. These numbers accord with those in my modernized edition, Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England*, ed. Jacqueline Broad, Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Toronto series (Toronto, forthcoming).

⁶⁶ On Astell's commitment to the Cartesian real distinction, see Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green, *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 274-5.

‘property in one’s person’, where ‘person’ is taken to be the immortal soul, and her ‘property’ (in the seventeenth-century sense of ‘that which belongs to her’)⁶⁷ consists in her free will, her reason, and her capacity to attain either eternal misery or eternal happiness through her own efforts.

In a paragraph on ‘Liberty and Slavery’ in the same work, Astell expands on this theme. She says that true freedom or liberty ‘consists not in a Power to do what we Will, but in making a Right use of our Reason, in preserving our Judgments free, and our Integrity unspotted, which sets us out of the reach of the most Absolute Tyrant’.⁶⁸ A freeman is one ‘who acts according to Right Reason, and obeys the Commands of the Sovereign Lord of all, who has not put the Liberty of His Creatures in any one’s power but in their own’.⁶⁹ To be free, on this view, requires the absence of obstacles to the use of one’s capacity for rational judgement. By contrast,

subjection to our Passions is of all Slaveries the most grievous and ignominious; because the Mind it self puts on its own shameful yoke, and we are willing Slaves to the vilest Masters. Whereas in other cases, our Bodies only are Slaves by constraint, and perhaps to an Honourable Person, whilst the Mind may be freer than his whose Chain we wear.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ On the seventeenth-century connotation of property as ‘that which belongs to somebody’, see Karl Olivecrona, ‘Appropriation in the State of Nature: Locke on the Origin of Property’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35, no. 2 (1974), pp. 211-30 (p. 219).

⁶⁸ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §249.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Here Astell distinguishes between slavery by bodily constraint (the absence of social liberty) and ‘the most grievous and ignominious’ form, that of mental subjection (the absence of moral liberty).⁷¹

In light of these points, we can see why Astell might think that being subject to the arbitrary will of another human being is morally wrong—that is, because it hinders an individual from acting according to right reason and obeying the commands of God.

In *The Christian Religion*, Astell says that once a woman marries, the business of pleasing a husband ‘has all the application of our Minds; we watch all advantages, improve all accidents, and let no opportunity slip us’ with respect to our worldly affairs. As a result, ‘the other World is out of sight, and for this reason out of mind’.⁷² Likewise, in her *Reflections*, Astell describes marriage as literally ‘a caring for the things of the World, a caring not only to please, but to maintain a Husband’.⁷³ The conditions and constraints of marriage are such that, by their very nature, they *prevent* women from thinking of higher things and attaining moral perfection. A married woman must ‘court and fawn’ to her husband to ensure that she will be treated well.⁷⁴ If her husband is ‘full of himself’, then he must be ‘always Admir’d, always Humour’d’ and ‘she must follow all his Paces, and tread in all his unreasonable steps, or there is no Peace, no Quiet for her’.⁷⁵ She must ‘sooth

⁷¹ On the distinction between moral and social liberty, see Lena Halldenius, ‘The Primacy of Right: On the Triad of Liberty, Equality, and Virtue in Wollstonecraft’s Political Thought’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2007), pp. 75-99 (p. 77). In this paper, Halldenius also provides an analysis of Mary Wollstonecraft’s use of the term ‘slavery’ (pp. 76-7), a usage that closely resembles Astell’s.

⁷² Astell, *Christian Religion*, §106.

⁷³ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 53. Here Astell deliberately echoes 1 Corinthians 7:34, the subject of John Sprint’s misogynist sermon, *The Bride-Womans Counsellor*: ‘she that is Married careth for the things of the World, how she may please her Husband’.

⁷⁴ Astell, *Reflections* (fourth edition), p. 8.

⁷⁵ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 47.

his Pride and Flatter his Vanity, by having always so much good Sense as to be on his side, to conclude him in the right, when others are so Ignorant, or so rude as to deny it. Who will not be Blind to his Merit nor contradict his Will and Pleasure, but make it her Business, her very Ambition to content him'.⁷⁶

The marriage state cultivates hypocrisy, insincerity, lying, flattering, fawning, and deceit in women. This is the cunning of a slave—it is not virtue. Worst of all, a wife must deceive both herself and her husband about what is reasonable and good: a married woman 'must believe him [the husband] Wise and Good and in all the respects the best, at least he must be so to her'.⁷⁷ When we enjoy our liberties merely by the grace or goodwill of someone else, Astell warns, then this produces a certain kind of moral character, a servile one, which is morally repugnant. In addition, and most egregious of all, the marriage state encourages women to act contrary to the dictates of their own reason.

Springborg claims that Astell cannot literally maintain that married women are enslaved because she rejects Locke's theory of property in one's own person. There are now two responses we can make here. First, Astell does not need to uphold Locke's theory of personal property to make the bare descriptive claim that married women are enslaved in Locke's sense of being subject to the arbitrary will of another man. In her view, married women are enslaved because their husbands have the discretionary power to interfere in their lives at whim, without relief or redress from the law for any injuries done. This is true regardless of whether or not Astell holds to Locke's theory of property in one's person.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Second, we might think that Astell *does* in fact support a theory of property in one's person along similar lines to that of Locke. Locke's theory of property in one's person stems from his original observation that we are 'all the Workmanship of one Omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker; All the Servants of one Sovereign Master, sent into the World by his order and about his business'.⁷⁸ We enjoy our personal property, or 'that which belongs to us' (such as our reason and our free will), solely by virtue of God's original creative act and ordinance. Furthermore, the law of reason tells us that our actions, and the rules for our actions, must be conformable to the will of this infinitely wise God.⁷⁹ Because it is the will of our maker that we preserve his workmanship, it is therefore wrong for anyone to act against this '*fundamental Law of Nature ... the preservation of Mankind*'.⁸⁰ According to Astell, these sentiments are basically correct. In her writings, Astell also affirms the Ephesians 2:10 precept that we are God's workmanship, 'created in Christ Jesus unto good works'.⁸¹ She also says that 'No body will be so absurd as to deny that it is the indispensable duty of all reasonable Persons to conform themselves entirely to God's Will, so soon as they can be inform'd of it'.⁸² And she says that it is God's will that we preserve what he has given us. Of course, unlike Locke, Astell regards 'property in our person' as the immortal, immaterial mind, and not the human body. Yet, notwithstanding this difference, she depicts the state of marriage as objectionable because it

⁷⁸ Locke, *Two Treatises*, II.6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, II.135.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, II.6.

⁸¹ See Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Peterborough, ON, 2002): 'she is GOD's workmanship, endow'd by him with many excellent Qualities, and made capable of Knowing and Enjoying the Sovereign and Only Good' (p. 233).

⁸² Astell, *Christian Religion*, §23.

encroaches upon that which belongs to a woman—her free will, her reason, and her capacity to acquire salvation. The state of marriage is such that men are permitted to deprive women of their moral liberty and thus potentially condemn them to eternal misery.

Nevertheless, Springborg is right to note that while Locke thinks that the law of self-preservation gives subjects the right to resist those who would attempt to enslave them (with force, if need be), Astell does not allow that married women are at liberty to resist their husbands with violence. Astell does not encourage married women ‘to Resist, or to Abdicate the Perjur’d Spouse’.⁸³ In the Preface to her 1706 *Reflections*, Astell states categorically that she does not blow ‘the Trumpet of Rebellion to the Moiety of Mankind’.⁸⁴ Rather, she exhorts wives ‘not to expect to have their own Will in any thing, but to be intirely Submissive, when once they have made choice of a Lord and Master, tho’ he happen not to be so Wise, so Kind, or even so Just a Governor as was expected’.⁸⁵ Astell advises that a Woman ought to ‘either never consent to be a Wife, or make a good one when she does’.⁸⁶ And a good wife, she says, must ‘practise Passive Obedience to the utmost’.⁸⁷ In the main text, she says that a ‘peaceable Woman ... will neither question her Husband’s Right nor his Fitness to Govern’.⁸⁸ If a man abuses his power and acts like a tyrant, he does not forfeit his rights, as Locke and the Whigs maintain; the woman is

⁸³ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 9.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

not at liberty to depose her tyrant husband. ‘Patience and Submission are the only Comforts that are left to a poor People, who groan under Tyranny.’⁸⁹

Astell offers both religious and pragmatic reasons for this recommended submission. First, as Springborg rightly points out, Astell is a loyal adherent to the Anglican doctrine of passive obedience, the doctrine that subjects are required to render active obedience to their leaders where they can, and to submit quietly to any punishment where they cannot. In Astell’s view, it is our duty to God to submit patiently to our superiors, even if they are personally unworthy of our submission. This is the case because divine law requires our obedience to the office, and ‘nothing but what’s Just and Fit, can be enjoyn’d by a Just, a Wise, and Gracious GOD’.⁹⁰ Second, Astell claims that outward obedience to our governors must take place for the sake of order. That is to say, for the sake of peace and quiet in civil society, there must be a ‘last Resort’—a common umpire with the executive power to interpret and apply the laws—and the same is true of the family, where the husband must have ultimate authority.⁹¹

IV

In light of these points, it might be objected that my interpretation of Astell on marriage and slavery faces a few difficulties. First, Locke himself maintains that human beings can never voluntarily consent to slavery.⁹² In his view, enslavement is the result of either ‘force’ or ‘fraud’: human beings are either compelled to submit to arbitrary power, or they are tricked and deceived into

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁹² Locke, *Two Treatises*, II.23, II.172.

doing so.⁹³ But if marriage is a form of slavery, according to Astell, and no woman can voluntarily enter into such slavery, then how does a woman ever consent to marry in the first place? Must we conclude that all marriage contracts are the result of either force or trickery? Second, if Astell is an advocate of passive obedience in marriage, then how does this sit with her explicit claim that: ‘A Blind Obedience is what a Rational Creature shou’d never pay ... For Human Actions are no otherwise valuable than as they are conformable to Reason, but a blind Obedience is an Obeying *without Reason*, for ought we know *against it*.’⁹⁴ When she advocates passive obedience to tyrannical husbands, no matter how unreasonable they might be, does she in fact contradict herself?

In response to the first difficulty, I think that Astell *does* affirm that women are either forced or deceived into entering the state of marriage. This is why her emphasis is on teaching women *to remain single* if they do not have to marry.⁹⁵ In his recent article, Andrew Lister argues that in the *Reflections*, Astell ‘painted marriage as a form of absolutism in principle, and often tyranny in fact, not to revolutionize the institution of marriage, but to get women to think twice about marrying’.⁹⁶ In his view, her primary purpose was to open women’s eyes to the fact that marriage was a choice, and not a necessary or an inevitable life path. Her goal was ‘to suggest to women of means that not marrying was a sensible option’, if they did not have to marry.⁹⁷ Like her earlier work, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), a

⁹³ *Ibid.*, II.181.

⁹⁴ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 75.

⁹⁵ Lister, ‘Marriage and Misogyny’, pp. 45, 46.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

detailed argument in favour of an all-female academic institute, this work was also a call for the education of women.

In keeping with Lister's view, I think that Astell underscores the importance of women acquiring a thorough education so that they can avoid being tricked into a state of subjection to the absolute, arbitrary power of men. To make this point, in one part of her *Reflections*, Astell appropriates Locke's advice about the education of male citizens in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*.⁹⁸ In this work, first published with Locke's name on the dedication in 1695, Locke offers a practical method whereby children might be educated to become adults who are 'in temper neither slavish nor tyrannical but free men, independent and self-reliant'.⁹⁹ One of Locke's main objectives is 'to set the *mind* right, that on all occasions it may be disposed to consent to nothing but what may be suitable to the dignity and excellency of a rational creature'.¹⁰⁰ For this purpose, in the early years of education, it is imperative that a young man learn to develop his own independent capacity for rational judgment; he must be taught 'to think for himself' or, as Locke says elsewhere, 'to see with his own eyes'.¹⁰¹ Once he has this capacity for rational judgment, the citizen cannot be readily imposed upon by those who wish to lead him astray. He is master of his passions and interests; he subjects all his opinions to the light of his reason; and, if needs be, he questions the authority of those who would seek to govern him. In §94, Locke provides practical

⁹⁸ See Astell, *Reflections*, p. 64. In a footnote to this passage, Springborg simply notes that the 'celebrated Author' to whom Astell refers is '[p]ossibly Samuel Wesley ... but more likely Locke' (*ibid.*, n. 18).

⁹⁹ Nathan Tarcov, *Locke's Education for Liberty* (Chicago and London, 1984), p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ John Locke, *Some Thoughts concerning Education and Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, eds. Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1996), §31.

¹⁰¹ Locke, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, pp. 200-1.

advice to safeguard pupils against those unscrupulous persons who would convince them that true freedom is ‘to take their swing in a full enjoyment of what was before forbidden them’. The tutor should warn his pupil that such men

who persuade him not to follow the sober advices he has receiv’d from his *governors*, and the counsel of his own reason, which they call being govern’d by others, do it only that they may have the government of him themselves; and make him believe, he goes like a man of himself, by his own conduct, and for his own pleasure, when in truth he is wholly as a child led by them into those vices which best serve their purposes.¹⁰²

To avoid such dangers, a young man must learn to be suspicious of all those who would govern him for their own selfish ends.

In her *Reflections*, Astell extends the same advice to women who are contemplating marriage. Quoting verbatim from Locke’s *Thoughts concerning Education*, she writes:

A young Gentleman, as a celebrated Author tells us, ought above all Things to be acquainted with the State of the World, the Ways and Humours, the Follies, the Cheats, the Faults of the Age he is fallen into;¹⁰³ he should by degrees he inform’d of the Vice in Fashion, and warn’d of the Application and Design of those who will make it their

¹⁰² Locke, *Thoughts concerning Education*, §94.

¹⁰³ Compare Locke, *Thoughts concerning Education*, §94: ‘Besides being well Bred, the *Tutor* should know the World well; The Ways, the Humors, the Follies, the Cheats, the Faults of the Age he is fallen into, and particularly of the Country he lives in.’

Business to corrupt him, should be told the Arts they use, and the Trains they lay,¹⁰⁴ be prepar'd to be Shock'd by some, and Caress'd by others; warn'd who are like to oppose, who to mislead, who to undermine, and who to serve him. He should be instructed how to know and distinguish them, where he should let them see, and when dissemble the Knowledge of them and their Aims and Workings.¹⁰⁵ Our Author is much in the right, and not to disparage any other Accomplishments which are useful in their Kind, this will turn to more Account than any Language or Philosophy, Art or Science, or any other Piece of Good-breeding and fine Education that can be taught him,¹⁰⁶ which are no other wise excellent than as they contribute to this, as this does above all Things to the making him a wise, a vertuous and useful Man.¹⁰⁷

For Astell, it is important that a young woman acquire the same knowledge of the world. The only difference is that greater care ought to be taken to ensure that a woman's reputation and honor are protected, since 'they may be ruin'd by a little Ignorance or Indiscretion'.¹⁰⁸ For this reason, 'A Woman cannot be too watchful, too apprehensive of her danger, nor keep at too great a distance

¹⁰⁴ Compare Locke, *Thoughts concerning Education*, §94: 'He should by degrees be inform'd of the Vices in fashion, and warned of the Applications and Designs of those, who will make it their Business to corrupt him. He should be told the Arts they use, and the Trains they lay.'

¹⁰⁵ Compare Locke, *Thoughts concerning Education*, §94: 'He should be prepar'd to be shock'd by some, and caress'd by others; warn'd who are like to oppose, who to mislead, who to undermine him, and who to serve him. He should be instructed how to know, and distinguish them; where he should let them see, and when dissemble the Knowledge of them, and their aims and workings.'

¹⁰⁶ Locke also argues that it is more important for a young man 'to judge right of men, and manage his affairs wisely with them, than to speak *Greek* and *Latin*, or argue in mood and figure; or to have his head fill'd with the abstruse speculations of natural philosophy and metaphysicks' (Locke, *Thoughts concerning Education*, §94).

¹⁰⁷ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 64.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

from it'.¹⁰⁹ Like Locke, Astell emphasizes that a woman must be on her guard against those who would flatter, cheat, and mislead her, only in order to get her 'into their Power, to govern her according to their Discretion.'¹¹⁰ One of the best defences against this condition is education in 'the ways of the world'.¹¹¹ In particular, a woman must be disabused of the notion that marriage is 'her only Preferment, the Sum-total of her Endeavours, the completion of all her hopes, that which must settle and make her Happy in this World',¹¹² and that she has 'no mighty Obligations to the Man who makes Love to her'.¹¹³ Given the state of marriage in Astell's time, there is no reason for a woman to be desirous of being a wife or 'to reckon it a Piece of Preferment when she is taken to be a Man's Upper-Servant'.¹¹⁴ The text of the *Reflections* thus serves an educative, consciousness-raising purpose. Astell encourages a shift in thinking about marriage for women—a less romantic and more realistic view of married life, as one in which a husband might rule with 'an arbitrary and tyrannical sway'.

But what of those women who are compelled to marry, or have no other choice but to marry? And what of those women who realise the deception only *after* they have made their vows? What options do they have? Once again, for Astell, the unhappy state of marriage in her time demonstrates the 'Necessity of a good Education',¹¹⁵ so that women can retain their freedom of judgment, and develop the moral character necessary to be virtuous agents, even when

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹¹¹ 'If a Woman were duly principled, and taught how to know the World, especially the true Sentiments that Men have of her, and the Traps they lay for her under so many gilded Compliments, and such a seemingly great Respect, that Disgrace would be prevented which is brought upon too many Families' (*ibid.*, p. 74).

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

they find themselves in conditions of dependence on men. In Astell's view, an education for liberty might enable a woman to avoid a condition of mental slavery within the matrimonial state. Like Locke, Astell maintains that it is important for women to develop their own independent capacity for rational judgment, in order to avoid being swayed by others' opinions. She emphasizes that, without an improved reason, women become 'mere Properties, without any Rule or Judgment of our own, carry'd on by what our Company, or any assuming Person has the assurance to impose.'¹¹⁶ A woman can retain her capacity for independent rational judgment within marriage, she just has to learn how. In *The Bride Womans Counsellor*, Sprint argued that married women were wrong to think 'that their Thoughts are free, that they are at Liberty to think as they please'.¹¹⁷ He claimed that they must only ever will or desire whatever their husband willed and desired. In response, Astell asserts that 'the Mind is free, nothing but Reason can oblige it, 'tis out of the Reach of the most absolute Tyrant.'¹¹⁸ Though the order of the world requires 'an *Outward* Respect and Obedience from some to others', a woman's inward life is always at her own disposal.¹¹⁹ This is all that women need do in marriage: show an outward respect. In her mind, a woman might resist her husband's beliefs; she does not have to think as her husband thinks. So long as women are educated in this fact—that their capacity for reason is free, that it transcends whatever bodily condition they might occupy—then they might avoid the condition of mental slavery within marriage.

¹¹⁶ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §288.

¹¹⁷ Sprint, *Bride-Womans Counsellor*, p. 12.

¹¹⁸ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 56.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

As for slavery by bodily constraint (the loss of social liberty), Astell emphasizes that the loss of bodily freedom does not necessarily threaten a woman's ultimate preservation. If she finds herself in such a condition of slavery, she must conscientiously perform her wifely duties, much as a man must conscientiously perform his duty to keep hogs once he has hired himself out for such employment.¹²⁰ But if such bodily slavery might potentially lead to her damnation, then it would seem that Astell's moral views *do* commit her to some form of resistance against aggressors. Wives could not be required to submit to those dictates or commands from their husbands that jeopardized their salvation. Married women would have a right to *passive resistance*, at least, against those who would enslave them by force. A woman might refuse her husband's requests for her to participate in a sinful or irreligious action, for example. Importantly, such conscientious resistance would not contravene Astell's theory of passive obedience, or the notion that subjects must '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'.¹²¹ A disobedient wife must be prepared to submit to her punishment without complaint or retaliation; she is not at liberty to 'Abdicate the Perjur'd Spouse', or wage open rebellion against him.¹²² But she is nevertheless permitted disobedience when her superior sins against right reason or requires something that is contrary to the moral law. These points enable us to solve the second difficulty mentioned above. In Astell's view, a married woman's adherence to the doctrine of passive obedience does not necessarily commit her to a blind, unquestioning obedience to her husband.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹²¹ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §149.

¹²² Astell, *Reflections*, p. 9.

It would appear, then, that there is a more radical message in Astell's *Reflections* than scholars have hitherto acknowledged. When Astell says that it is her purpose in this work to retrieve 'the Native Liberty, the Rights and Privileges of the Subject', there is a sense in which she is being entirely serious and sincere.¹²³ In his *Two Treatises*, Locke maintains that the arguments of absolute monarchists are 'not of any force to draw those into Bondage, who have their Eyes open'.¹²⁴ Astell upholds the same point with respect to women being drawn into marriage. In a 1705 letter to an unknown correspondent, she says that 'I would have women as well as men to see with their own eyes as far as they will reach, & to judge according to the best of their own understandings'.¹²⁵ In her *Reflections*, she likewise insists upon the 'Natural Right of judging for herself' because she would have everyone 'see with their *own* eyes, and Judge according to the best of their *own* Understandings'.¹²⁶ A similar refrain is repeated throughout Astell's *Christian Religion*. For Astell, the brainwashing of women into a slavish temper of mind—such that they are taught to think and will as men would have them

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹²⁴ Locke, *Two Treatises*, I.1.

¹²⁵ 'The Controversy betwixt Dr. Hickes & Mrs. Mary Astell', in Thomas Bedford (ed.), 'The Genuine Remains of the late Pious and Learned George Hickes D. D. and Suffragen Bishop of Thetford', in the Lambeth Palace Library, London, MS 3171, f. 197. For an in-depth analysis of this correspondence, see Sarah Apetrei, "'Call No Man Master Upon Earth": Mary Astell's Tory Feminism and an Unknown Correspondence', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41, no. 4 (2008), pp. 507-23. On the basis of this recently discovered exchange, Apetrei concludes that Astell may have been a more radical religious thinker than scholars have previously thought.

¹²⁶ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 10. Using the same words, in her political pamphlet *Moderation Truly Stated* (1704), Astell urges the reader not to believe her upon her 'bare word' and 'to take nothing upon Trust, but to see with his *own* Eyes, and to judge according to his *own* Understanding'. See Mary Astell, *Moderation truly Stated: Or, A Review of a Late Pamphlet, Entitul'd. Moderation a Vertue. With a Prefatory Discourse to Dr. D'Aveanant, concerning His late Essays on Peace and War* (London, 1704), p. 2.

think and will, without question—is the greatest threat to their property or that which truly belongs to them, the freedom of their minds.

Springborg has claimed that Astell's *Reflections* is a work of political allegory and predominantly an ironic critique of Whig contractarianism rather than traditional Christian marriage. On these grounds, she claims that Astell was 'far from being a proto-feminist who was highly critical of marriage as an institution'.¹²⁷ But this purely political interpretation of the *Reflections* overlooks Astell's serious moral message. Viewed in terms of her moral commitments, the normative force of the work is that marriage *is* a form of slavery, and that this slavery is wrong because it threatens a woman's freedom of will, her capacity for reason, and her ultimate salvation. Astell's positive point, however, is that if women are properly educated 'to see with their own eyes', then they might avoid being ensnared in such a grievous state of bondage.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ See Patricia Springborg, 'Mary Astell, Critic of the Marriage Contract/Social Contract Analogue', in *A Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing*, ed. Anita Pacheco (London, 2002), pp. 216-28 (p. 226). See also Springborg, *Mary Astell*, p. 135; and Springborg, introduction to Astell, *Reflections*, p. xxviii.

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