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# Self-Improvement in Astellian Friendship

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## Self-Improvement in Astellian Friendship<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

In this article, I argue that existing literature discounts the role of self-improvement in Astellian friendship. To make this element central, I show how an Epicurean analysis of Astellian friendship brings self-improvement clearly into focus. On the way to centering self-improvement, I show how extant accounts imply self-improvement without explicitly setting up the architecture to explain this element of Astellian friendship. Self-improvement is centralized by way of three shared themes between the Epicurean Garden and the Astellian religious retirement: the motivation to enter, the project inside, and the manner of friendship.

**Keywords:** Mary Astell, early modern philosophy, Epicurus, self-improvement, friendship

### Introduction

The theory of friendship that Mary Astell (1666–1731) puts forth in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (Astell 2002) has been characterized as Aristotelean (Broad 2009), Christian-Platonist (Kendrick 2018), and a hybrid theory that anticipates aspects of relational autonomy (Forbes 2020). All of these views capture something essential about Astellian friendship, which is at once transformative and spiritual. This article highlights how these existing characterizations overlook a primary feature of Astell's description of friendship as a self-improvement project that can only be

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the wonderful community who works on Mary Astell. Thank you to the audiences at the TEMPO (Traveling Early Modern Philosophy Organization) 2021 conference, the Second Annual Rackham Interdisciplinary Workshop in Ancient Philosophy, and the Friends of Mary Astell: Workshop on Astell's Social Philosophy for helping me think through early versions of this article. Thank you to Timothy Yenter, Marie Jayasekera, and Corey Mckibbin for reading drafts of this work and providing thorough comments. Thank you to the incredible reviewers and editors at FPQ for their insightful and directive comments. Finally, thank you to my mentor and committee member, All Lauren Forbes, for introducing me to Mary Astell's writings and reading every single version of this article.

achieved by an agent who is immersed in a strong community. To properly support this interpretation and make self-improvement central, I describe how Astellian friendship can be self-sacrificing but also focus on self-improvement and suggest we look to the function and structure of Epicurean friendship.<sup>2</sup> This comparison helps bring self-improvement to the fore and situates the role of benevolence in Astellian friendship. Self-improvement comes further into focus by way of three shared themes between the Epicurean Garden, a piece of secluded property on the outskirts of Athens where Epicurus and his followers practiced philosophy, and the Astellian religious retirement, Astell's proposed retreat in service of ladies' education in *Proposal*. The motivation to enter, the project inside, and the style of friendship are similar between these two communities. In particular, the reasons for ladies or Epicureans to respectively join the religious retirement or Garden are aligned.<sup>3</sup> A similar project is taken up in these institutions—namely, a community-based pursuit of education paired with a simple life. Finally, a very specific type of friendship is central on both accounts: one focused on improving the self and gaining security through a community of like-minded individuals.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, examining these shared

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<sup>2</sup> Jacqueline Broad mentions connections between Astell's writing and Epicurean philosophy in her 2015 book, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell: An Early Modern Theory of Virtue*. In the introduction, Broad (2015, 8–9) notes that Astell articulates an Epicurean picture of happiness, given that “she holds that the greatest pleasure in life is a certain ‘tranquility of the mind,’ or freedom from mental anxiety and perturbation, as well as freedom from bodily pain.” Broad explains this further in chapter 5, while discussing Astell's picture of happiness in detail. Although Broad makes mention of Epicurean influence in Astell's work, this article provides a more thorough treatment of this connection.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this article, I often use “ladies” instead of “women” in line with how Astell writes about the attendees of the retirement. Although “women” may be far more conventional now, Astell had specific types of women in mind as attendees: these attendees would be “ladies” more strictly in terms of their class and position in society. When I write about the retirement, and the particular educational program there, I will use “ladies.” When I describe Astell's comments on bad custom, I will speak to how she sees this impacting “women” more generally. This labelling tracks how Astell speaks of *women* more broadly when referring to capacities and *ladies* when describing the retirement, which is concerned with class.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, similarities can also be drawn between the religious retirement and religious convents. However, comparing the retirement to a convent does not bring forward self-improvement—a comparison to the Epicurean Garden brings this into focus in a more straightforward sense. It is also worth noting that comparing the religious retirement merely to a convent seems to ignore something important about

themes advances the primary claim of this article, that self-improvement is a central pillar of Astellian friendship.

In the first section, I describe the conditions of the retirement. In the second section, I outline the elements of the Astellian self. In the third section, I briefly lay out three extant accounts of Astellian friendship by Nancy Kendrick, Jacqueline Broad, and Allauren Forbes. There, I demonstrate the need for a new interpretive lens that explicitly highlights self-improvement and illustrate how these accounts identify important aspects of Astellian friendship but overlook the centrality of self-improvement. Broad's, Kendrick's, and Forbes's accounts all imply self-improvement without explicitly setting up the architecture to explain this element of Astellian friendship. In the fourth section, I show how an Epicurean analysis of Astellian friendship brings self-improvement clearly into focus. Similar commitments to education, self-improvement, friendship, and the rejection of unnecessary and unnatural desires exist at the cores of both systems. Examining Epicurean friendship helps solidify the centrality of self-improvement for Astellian friendship.

### **1. Proposal and the Religious Retirement**

In this first section, I examine the major themes in *Proposal* before describing the Astellian self in the following section. The goal here is to set up the conditions of the retirement—what kind of project exists at its core, and what societal issues does it aim to address? Here we also start to see what kind of *self* the object of self-improvement is—one that is socially situated and benefits from relations with others. Setting the stage in this way allows me to highlight self-improvement further in the final sections of this article.

In *Proposal*, Astell highlights four major themes that, in turn, illuminate the centrality of self-improvement in the religious retirement. Throughout *Proposal*, Astell encourages ladies to enter a religious retirement that improves the souls of its members through (1) distance from bad custom, (2) proper education, (3) space for religious devotion, and (4) female friendship. Self-improvement is intertwined with these four elements and provides a solution for ladies who are subject to bad custom. If ladies can engage in education, religious devotion, and friendship, they can appropriately focus on the self-improvement of their souls. This project involves engaging in a type of intellectual self-improvement. Ladies can diminish the influence

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Astell's proposal. The retirement offers up an alternative to the existing options at the time—marriage or a convent. Although the retirement contains elements of religious education and a focus on connection with God, this is a *third* option, not a retelling of an option that already existed. For this reason, a comparison to a convent does not capture the project Astell seems to have in mind and attempts to classify the retirement in a way that simplifies Astell's goals.

of bad custom and poor education by improving their minds—a specific kind of self-improvement. *Proposal* contains both argumentative and practical elements—it contains an elaborate proof of ladies’ moral and intellectual potential and functions as a practical handbook that encourages the reader to actualize this potential by entering a religious retirement for ladies.

Astell emphasizes throughout *Proposal* the way in which women’s current subordination is a matter of custom, not nature.<sup>5</sup> God has given both women and men intelligent souls, but custom has not encouraged women to improve their intellect (Astell 2002, 80). At a time when women were not afforded the same opportunities as men, Astell notes how women are “nurs’d up in the Ignorance and Vanity” and taught to value their beauty above the betterment of their souls (61). Given the current state of custom, Astell urges her reader not to wonder why most women are not wise but instead to marvel at the fact that *any* are wise. If men’s souls were neglected in the same way, they too would “sink into the greatest stupidity and brutality” (57). Astell encourages women to “dare to break the enchanted Circle that custom has plac’d us in” (55). So-called bad custom makes the project of self-improvement necessary for women in the first place for deep political, spiritual, and personal reasons.<sup>6</sup> Without an avenue for improvement, women’s subordination is inescapable. Astell suggests that women can break free from bad custom by engaging in, amongst other things, educational pursuits.<sup>7</sup>

By engaging in education, women can “expel that cloud of Ignorance which Custom has involv’d us in, to furnish our minds with a stock of solid and useful Knowledge, that the Souls of Women may no longer be the only unadorn’d and neglected things” (Astell 2002, 77). Astell identifies education as both a potential site of improvement and the place where defects in the soul originate. Since education plays such a formative role, a lack of education or poor education can spread “ill Influence” throughout a person’s entire life (60). To avoid this error, women must ideally be provided with educational opportunities from infancy to develop their intellectual abilities correctly (60). However, Astell is writing a proposal for a nonideal world where ladies enter the retirement in adulthood. Nonetheless, an opportunity

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<sup>5</sup> Here, I use “women” rather than “ladies” because Astell is concerned with how women, in full, lack opportunities for improvement of the mind and are subject to bad custom. When I turn to speak about the retirement more specifically, I refer to “ladies.”

<sup>6</sup> Karen Detlefsen (2016) describes how Astell speaks of good and bad custom. I adopt this distinction here to discuss how Astell speaks poorly of the type of custom she sees destroying the souls of women.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the importance of acknowledging and rejecting bad custom in Astell’s work, see Forbes (2019) and Sowaal (2007).

for amelioration exists; ladies can escape from bad custom and instead adorn their minds with knowledge, albeit far past the age Astell would prefer. Withdrawal allows ladies to develop their minds away from the noise of the world (68). In terms of a specific educational program, Astell calls for ladies to meditate (75), engross themselves in philosophical texts, notably the work of Descartes,<sup>8</sup> and reflect on the nature of religion and God. Astell's description of the function of education emphasizes how ladies in the retreat can take up this pursuit of self-improvement. The ladies that Astell addresses in *Proposal* are stuck in the enchanted circle of custom and deprived of all opportunities for self-improvement. The retreat provides an incentive to enter—ladies who attend will be given the resources and material conditions needed to focus on their souls. Self-improvement through education is the answer to Astell's more general worry about how bad custom leads to the deterioration of women's souls. Education is not synonymous with self-improvement but rather provides the means for women to improve their minds—education is a key tool on the path towards self-improvement.

Along with suitable education, the members of the retirement also require an outlet for religious devotion. The retirement, in part, acts as preparation for heaven, encouraging ladies to focus their attention on what they will take with them to the next world (Astell 2002, 80–81). Such a focus goes against the traditional insistence for ladies to focus on beauty, marriage, and worldly possessions. Rather, ladies should appreciate that "'tis Virtue only which can make [them] truly happy in the world as well as in the next" (80–81). The retirement provides an outlet wherein ladies can magnify their love of God and interpret scripture away from external influences such as specific churches or religious authorities. The more personal and less institutional relationship between God and ladies in the retirement is justified by Astell's assertion in *Christian Religion* that, when possible, we should judge matters for ourselves with our God-given liberty and reason (Astell 2013, 49–50). Further, Astell's focus on Descartes's work gives her a way to teach ladies about the value of their immortal and immaterial souls. This teaching should motivate ladies to primarily aim at God and the self-improvement of their souls above worldly or bodily pursuits since only their souls will accompany them to the next world.

Astell's educational and religious self-improvement project is best pursued within a community of friends. Astell speaks highly of friendship between women as "a Vertue which comprehends all the rest; none being fit for this, who is not adorn'd with every other Vertue" (2002, 98). Ladies within the retreat will love each other in a way where they come to think "nothing within the bounds of Power and Duty, too much to do or suffer for its Beloved; And [make] no distinction betwixt its Friend and

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<sup>8</sup> Astell (2002, 82–83) notes that since most ladies know the "French Tongue," they should read Descartes and Malebranche rather than novels and romances.

its self” (99). Friendship is concerned with “disinterest’d Benevolence” rather than any sort of personal gain (99). An integral part of being a good friend, for Astell, involves *mutual* admonishment and the correction of intellectual faults.<sup>9</sup> Friends must work to correct each other’s souls for mutual benefit to “remove all the stumbling blocks” obstructing their friends’ way to heaven (Astell 2013, 166). Despite a focus on how we can correct each other’s souls, an element of mutual self-improvement comes out here. Admonishment and the duties of being a friend are reciprocal, involving benefit that flows both ways.<sup>10</sup> As Christians, the entire community of the retreat exists as members of a unified body, wherein their individual goods are not separate from each other (2013, 153). Friendship, then, is “nothing else but Charity contracted” (Astell 2002, 98). True friends love each other without distinction, admonish, protect one another’s souls, and seek self-improvement on intentionally *mutual* terms (Astell 2013, 169).

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<sup>9</sup> Thank you to an anonymous reviewer who pointed out that this description of friendship, which involves helping another to receive a disposition well-suited to salvation, is closely in line with the Christian ideal of loving one’s neighbour. Here, the right way to love one’s neighbour involves extending help without expectation of return.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Yenter raised an objection to my view: that one can be interested in self-improvement solely for the sake of others. However, the way in which Astell sees all selves as socially situated remedies this issue. All selves, as part of a larger whole, benefit from engagement in community. Self-improvement taken up by socially situated individuals is not egoistic, problematic, or atomistic. When a socially situated individual engages in self-improvement, this activity benefits others as well. Being a socially situated self involves acknowledging the esteem and care we all deserve. Self-improvement is an important part of the entire social apparatus Astell subscribes to theologically. Without self-improvement, no member of the social web properly esteems themselves. In the retirement, ladies engage in self-improvement to improve their souls and minds—an activity that cultivates an environment wherein the community at large can flourish. Even if some ladies engage in self-improvement for primarily external reasons, such as the salvation of their friends, they will nonetheless receive personal benefit, and therefore self-improvement, through this activity. Regardless, I argue that it seems that ladies in the retirement *intentionally* engage in reciprocal activity: the mutuality of self-improvement is built into the retirement in a nonaccidental manner. Self-improvement in the retirement is intentional and nonaccidental given the goals that Astell has in mind. The motivation to enter, as will be discussed in later sections, pulls strongly at ladies who are interested in improving their souls through education and religious devotion. Entering for the sake of this goal makes self-improvement intentional from the start as a primary goal for ladies.

Taken together, these four themes establish that ladies in the retirement should aim to (1) escape bad custom in a space dedicated to (2) proper education and (3) religious devotion, which are taken up within (4) a community of like-minded friends. Self-improvement is bound to all of the goals of the retirement: ladies stand to benefit from an arrangement that removes the influence of bad custom and encourages the pursuit of education, religious devotion, and female friendship. Ultimately, the religious retirement gives the unified body of ladies the opportunity to focus on a mutual project of self-improvement. These four elements establish the centrality of self-improvement within the retirement in a thematic sense. Still, there are also moments in the text where Astell herself gestures at self-improvement more concretely. First, we can see how Astell describes the retirement as a place to “attend the great business they came into the world about, the service of God and improvement of their own minds” (2002, 73). Astell similarly describes the retirement as a type of Heaven where “your Employment will be as there, to magnify God, to love one another, and to communicate that useful *knowledge*, which by the due improvement of your time in Study and Contemplation you will obtain” (76). Further, we can look to how Astell notes, “one great end of this institution, shall be to expel that cloud of Ignorance, which Custom has involv’d us in, to furnish our minds with a stock of solid and useful Knowledge, that the Souls of Women may no longer be the only unadorn’d and neglected things” (77). Here, Astell concretely outlines how ladies can improve their minds and avoid the current neglect created by bad custom. This theme of what Astell calls “the improvement of our Intellectuals” shows the kind of self-improvement she has in mind—one that focuses on a strict educational and religious program (81). When it comes to how self-improvement is propped up by friendship, Astell reminds us that “nothing is more likely to improve us in Vertue, and advance us to the very highest pitch of Goodness than unfeigned Friendship, which is the most beneficial, as well as the most pleasant thing in the world” (100). Throughout *Proposal*, self-improvement is a shared thread underlying Astell’s commitments to education, religious devotion, and friendship, which, when taken together, provide the proper solution to bad custom.

## 2. The Astellian Self

The object of self-improvement within the retirement is the Astellian self. Astell’s understanding of the self is highly indebted to Cartesian dualism.<sup>11</sup> Descartes considers the body and mind to be separate; he notes in *Meditation IV* that “I have on the one hand a clear and distinct idea of myself insofar as I am a thinking, non-

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<sup>11</sup> Descartes’s view cannot be explored in more detail here. For a more thorough discussion of Descartes on the soul, see Chamberlain (2020). To see more about Astell’s theory of mind, see Sowaal (2007).

extended thing and, on the other hand, I have a distinct idea of the body insofar as it is merely an extended, non-thinking thing” (Descartes 1998, 71–72). Since these two substances can be grasped as distinct ideas, Descartes is certain that his mind is distinct from his body. Despite being distinct, the mind and body are merged to such an extent that a union is formed. In *Meditation VI*, Descartes cites the existence of sensations like hunger and thirst as a result of the intermingling of mind and body, wherein bodily sensations are perceived in the mind. Astell similarly holds that the self is a union of two substances, the soul and the body. Astell maintains in *Christian Religion* that the two substances are distinct (2013, 181–83). Her argument rests on the assertion that the soul is an immaterial and immortal thing that is primarily concerned with thinking, whereas the body is a material and mortal thing that is primarily concerned with extension. Since we can have a complete idea of either of these two substances without dependence on the other, they are distinct (183–84).

Beyond describing the Astellian self, it is essential to note the way in which Astell considers all individual selves to be a part of a larger whole.<sup>12</sup> Astell asserts that when it comes to neighbourly love, Christians are particularly connected as they are “under a further and higher obligation, the duty they owe to one another being founded on their mutual relation to Christ their head” (2013, 151). However, non-Christians still participate in this neighbourly love, albeit for a different reason, since they “partake in the same nature” despite not being related through the Christian faith (151). Given our duties to our neighbours, Astell considers each self “as a part of one great whole, in the welfare of which [their] own happiness is included” (152). Acting within this larger whole involves choosing those actions that are the most public, universal, and concerned with the greatest good (152). So then, the self that Astell is interested in is socially situated: being an individual and engaging in moral improvement involves relations with others.<sup>13</sup> Selfhood and self-improvement do not only depend on the individual but also should be considered in relation to the social apparatus that connects persons to one another. When we consider ourselves as part of a large whole, self-improvement is not insulated; mutual transformation can occur through social relations.

With a picture of the aims of the retirement and the Astellian self in focus, I will move on to describe the overlooked centrality of self-improvement in the religious retirement. Throughout my interpretation, it becomes clear how the self stands to benefit from living in a community of like-minded ladies.

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<sup>12</sup> For the Cartesian connection here, see Descartes’s correspondence with Elisabeth, Princess of Bohemia (Descartes 2015, 1–118).

<sup>13</sup> All Lauren S. Forbes (2020) makes such a suggestion and illustrates how Astell’s theory of friendship anticipated aspects of relational autonomy.

### 3. Extant Accounts of Astellian Friendship

By way of Astell's discussion of friendship, the importance of self-improvement comes most into view. Astell's high praise of friendship between Christian ladies is not without complications. The description of friendship as "disinterest'd Benevolence" and "charity contracted" is most at odds with the element of mutuality between friends (Astell 2002, 98–99). Extant accounts of Astellian friendship tend to emphasize the former element of disinterested benevolence. This section describes three accounts of Astellian friendship. Although these accounts are vibrant and highlight essential aspects of Astellian friendship, they fail to appreciate the centrality of self-improvement, suggesting the need for a different type of analysis to bring out this element.<sup>14</sup> I show how this element is overlooked despite the fact we might see implications of it within Broad's, Kendrick's, and Forbes's accounts.

Nancy Kendrick offers a Christian-Platonist interpretation of Astellian friendship. Kendrick (2018, 48) argues that Astellian friendship involves a rejection of the criteria of reciprocity and partiality. Christians extend goodwill to enemies in a nonreciprocal manner, and to the vicious, in a nonpartial way, for these people can bring us closer to God (52). We might prefer the company of a friend who brings us closer to God through admonishment,<sup>15</sup> but we can also gain something from enemies who challenge us (60). Kendrick insists that Astellian friendship is grounded in the love of benevolence, which is entirely disinterested, expecting nothing in return (55). The love of benevolence is directed to the Divine Good. Ladies who form friendships can do so because they all direct their love towards God. Through this love, a friendship that expects nothing in return is established. Friendship is spiritual, then, because "it is the bond created between persons by means of each person's participation in the Divine Good" (58). Such a connection does not stamp out the possibility of reciprocity, for friends can assist each other in directing their love towards God (58). Given this, Kendrick concludes that Astell "argues that a wicked person or an enemy *is* a friend" (59).

Kendrick's account cannot be used to highlight the self-improvement project at the core of the Astellian religious retreat. Kendrick's insistence that the love of benevolence is completely disinterested de-emphasizes how ladies aim to utilize

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<sup>14</sup> This article does not aim to reject existing interpretations in a wholesale manner, as both Kendrick and Broad offer ways to account for various elements of Astellian friendship. This section *only* aims to show how existing accounts have limitations when it comes to describing self-improvement, the focus of this project. By doing so, the importance of a new lens—the Epicurean lens—will be highlighted.

<sup>15</sup> For more on admonishment in the context of Astellian friendship, see Jen Nguyen (2022).

friendship as a way towards moral progress. Ladies in the retreat expect something in return to help them better their own souls. Kendrick's description of enemies as friends seems to overextend a Christian argument about patience to the context of friendship. Indeed, Christians should be patient and extend goodwill to their enemies and those who challenge them. However, this does not imply that Christians are *friends* with everyone. To suggest this appears to misrepresent the fact that Astell describes friendship as "a Vertue which comprehends all the rest; none being fit for this, who is not adorn'd with every other Vertue" (2002, 98). Astell's point here seems at odds with Kendrick's insistence that "Astell is determined to extend her conception of friendship to include enemies and the wicked" (59).

Further, it is worth noting how my comments can still mesh with the distinction between a love of desire and a love of benevolence in Astell's correspondence with John Norris (*Letters*).<sup>16</sup> Self-improvement can coexist with the essential distinction between the different sorts of love that Astell identifies and their proper objects.<sup>17</sup> As noted in Kendrick's theory of Astellian friendship, there is a strong sentiment in *Letters* shared by John Norris and Astell that the correct type of love for our neighbours is a benevolent love.<sup>18</sup> By benevolent love, Astell means the kind of love that one extends without expectation of return. This kind of love is extended on its own terms and not for any future benefits.<sup>19</sup> If this is the case, the project of mutual

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<sup>16</sup> Thank you to the audience at the TEMPO (Travelling Early Modern Philosophy Organization) 2021 conference and to Timothy Yenter, in particular, for raising this line of questioning.

<sup>17</sup> Although it would be worthwhile and fascinating, providing a complete taxonomy of love in Astell's work is outside the scope of this article. Here, I will keep with describing the kinds of love most relevant to this article—love of benevolence being the most pressing. To read more about love in Astell, see Jacqueline Broad's (2015) *The Philosophy of Mary Astell: An Early Modern Theory of Virtue*. As well, Astell's correspondences with John Norris may be of particular interest to those wishing to explore this topic in more detail.

<sup>18</sup> As an important side note, this discussion of *Letters* aligns with the selection of primary text from Astell that Kendrick employs to describe Astellian friendship as Christian-Platonist. Kendrick pulls from *Proposal, Some Reflections Upon Marriage, The Christian Religion, and Letters*. This means that here I am not merely pointing to somewhere outside of Kendrick's range of sources where there is textual evidence about the different sorts of love. Rather, I aim to show how part of Kendrick's view does not account for textual elements in *Letters*, a source that Kendrick considers in her work.

<sup>19</sup> Thank you to an anonymous reviewer who aptly pointed out that any benefits that flow from love or friendship exist even when someone aims to love benevolently.

self-improvement that I describe may conflict with this assertion, for ladies in the retirement should not expect a return when they engage in relationships.

Without dismissing the importance of this distinction, I will note that there is textual evidence that supports the possibility that Astell is thinking about the function of friendship and the appropriate sorts of love, such as benevolent love, in varying ways. Consider this passage from *Letters*:

There is yet another Indecency that would be prevented were our Love only benevolent; and that is, that strong Antipathy which usually succeeds Affection whenever it comes to a Rupture, as 'tis odds but it may, considering the great Weakness of Humane Nature, and how seldom a Man is in every Stage of his Life consistent with himself, for a rightly constituted Friendship will incline us by all the Arts of Sweetness and Endearment to win upon the Offender, who has so much the greater *need* of our Benevolence, by how much he does the less *deserve* it. Our Kindness when he no longer returns it is the more excellent and generous, because more free: And though it can't be called Friendship when the Bond is broke on one side, yet there may be a most refined and exalted Benevolence on the other. (Taylor and New 2017, 102)

Astell begins with the observation that directing a love of desire at the creature<sup>20</sup> can subject one to the possibility of disappointment in the case of a “Rupture” on one side. Here, Astell identifies a practical worry about relying on the creature instead of God when it comes to desire—such a strategy can leave one disappointed. If our love is benevolent, this practical worry is remedied since our kindness is free, without the expectation of return. However, Astell closes out the passage by importantly noting that “it can't be called Friendship when the Bond is broke on one side, yet there may be a most refined and exalted Benevolence on the other” (Taylor and New 2017, 102). Astell clearly states that a relationship that is broken on one side and lacks mutuality cannot be called friendship. In a reciprocal relationship like friendship, intentional mutuality flows both ways. In a nonreciprocal relationship, there may be *benevolent love*, but that does not necessarily mean there will be *friendship*. Despite her insistence that we should direct a love of benevolence to the creature, Astell suggests

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What matters here is that someone extends benevolent love without expectation of return, even if they end up benefitting in some material way. This point explains why, for Astell, there are different motives for extending benevolent love and entering into a friendship.

<sup>20</sup> A human object rather than God.

that friendship is a mutual and reciprocal endeavour.<sup>21</sup> This suggestion indicates that the motives for extending benevolent love and friendship may differ, meaning that for ladies in the retirement, something beyond the benevolent love that Kendrick highlights is extended when entering into friendships.

Jacqueline Broad suggests that functional similarities can be drawn between Aristotelean and Astellian friendship. Broad (2009, 71) argues that Aristotelean character friendship, wherein friendship is “based upon mutual recognition of the other’s moral goodness or excellence of character,” aligns neatly with Astellian female friendship. In such a relationship, a friend promotes their friend’s good for her own sake and not for personal or selfish reasons (71). After some time spent sharing their lives and interests, people become character friends (71). Astell’s recommendation to love our friends based on who they are at the core, and not based on accidental properties like appearance or wealth, fits here (72). Character friendship must occur between virtuous persons *only* and involves a nonselfish promotion of a friend’s good.

Broad’s description of Astellian friendship has certain merits above a Christian-Platonist interpretation when it comes to accounting for self-improvement. In particular, Broad clearly describes how ladies can work together for the sake of reciprocal moral progress. However, Broad’s interpretation has complications when applied to the situation of ladies who are subject to bad custom.<sup>22</sup> As Broad (2009, 72) notes, “Astell also follows the classical tradition by allowing that only virtuous agents can become character friends.” Broad is careful to note that ladies need not be *perfectly* virtuous to become friends in the first place, but some level of virtue is still required. In short, “while a virtuous friend must possess the virtues (in part or to some degree), she does not have to be fully or perfectly virtuous herself in order to become a friend in the first place” (73). Although Broad acknowledges perfect virtue is not a requirement to progress towards character friendship, it remains an open

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<sup>21</sup> Although I do not have space for a complete treatment of this line of discussion, this passage suggests something more complex about the connection between the different types of love Astell identifies and the function of friendship than most accounts imply. More work is needed to demystify Astell’s comments in *Letters*.

<sup>22</sup> Astell describes the current state, where women lack educational opportunities and the ability to improve their souls, as a sort of “custom. Women are not afforded the same opportunities as men, and this creates an imbalance—women cannot improve their own state unless they break free from this cycle. See Astell’s description of custom in *Proposal* (2002, 55), editor Patricia Springborg’s related footnote (55n2), and Allauraen Forbes’s (2019) interesting comments on the specific kind of “bad” custom I refer to in their work, “Mary Astell on Bad Custom and Epistemic Injustice.” Here, Forbes describes bad custom as the kind of thing that exercises epistemic power over women “in a way that limits their intellectual capacities” (777).

question if ladies leaving the grips of bad custom will have the minimum requisite level of virtue for this task. Astell describes ladies as “nurs’d up in Ignorance and Vanity” due to bad custom and poor educational practices (2002, 61). From infancy, women lack the opportunities for moral improvement that men are afforded. For this reason, it is not clear that women entering the retirement will be set up in the right way to pursue the *classical* progression of character friendship, given their environmental influences and social positioning. We may want to describe the conditions of entering friendship in a different way for ladies embroiled in bad custom. In a related sense, it is not clear that the core reason to become friends, for Astell, is to appreciate one another’s excellence. The central role of correcting intellectual faults has been understated here. So, until ladies spend enough time together and away from bad custom, can they be called character friends? Broad’s account seems unable to adequately capture Astell’s view that friendship involves a project of mutual self-improvement. A brand of friendship in which friends are meant to pursue each other’s good with no selfish intent seems not as well-suited to address the fact that the retirement contains a self-improvement project.

In sum, these first two views emphasize elements of Astellian friendship that discount the significance of self-improvement in Astell’s work. The Christian-Platonist interpretation of Astellian friendship falls short since Kendrick insists that Astellian friendship is entirely disinterested. An interpretation that describes friends as expecting nothing in return is in fundamental tension with the sort of mutuality central to Astellian friendship. Broad’s account gets closer to describing mutual self-improvement but is complicated by the influence of bad custom. Further, it seems that an Aristotelian brand of Astellian friendship focuses on virtue above moral progress. In Astell’s work, progress through self-improvement plays a more prominent role than Broad’s account suggests.

Given the shortcomings of the two previous accounts in terms of providing an interpretation of Astellian friendship that sets up the right architecture to describe self-improvement, I will now examine a promising stepping stone, Allairen Forbes’s (2020) work, that describes the kind of relational autonomy that emerges from Astellian friendship. Forbes’s account is a fitting springboard here since it “incorporates aspects of both Broad and Kendrick’s views” to make sense of the way that Astell can anticipate a concept that “was not formally theorized until hundreds of years later” (2020, 487). Forbes takes a core part of Astellian friendship to be its ability to correct for bad custom, which improperly shapes women. Given this corrective element, “it is clear that friendship and improvement have some kind of reciprocal causal relationship” on this account (488). Friendship allows one to achieve virtue and guide their friends towards this as well. Because of this characterization, Forbes describes friendship as instrumentally valuable and “productive of virtue” (489). Forbes argues that Astell advises that we extend *common* charity to all, but not

in a way that makes this friendship. She classifies Astellian friendship as an intense and deep relation that can only be extended to a select few (489). Forbes identifies tension in Broad and Kendrick's accounts that make it challenging to describe Astellian friendship fully. Although Forbes finds the functional similarities between Aristotelian character friendship and Astellian friendship helpful and compelling, this structure does not explain how Astell describes friendship as a "crowning virtue" (492). Kendrick's account is problematic because it rejects the strong sense of character friendship present and seems to suggest that, for Astell, just about anyone can be proper friends (492). Given this tension, Forbes interprets Astellian friendship as involving "virtue-facilitating friendship" that is morally transformative and "post-virtue friendship," a true friendship that exists after transformation (492). In this description of friendship as either general or true, a "pre-theoretical" version of relational autonomy emerges. Astell's theory of friendship identifies how social relations shape identity in a way that aligns with recent literature on autonomy (494). It is here that we start to see hints of how we might move towards self-improvement most clearly, with Forbes noting that

Astell casts knowledge as a communal good to which all have a right; we are all parts of the same whole and by improving ourselves we make it possible to fulfill our obligation to serve others by helping them improve, too—much as one does in the mutual moral transformation of general friendship. (2020, 495)

As parts of the same whole, ladies in the retreat work to improve one another in a mutual sense. In doing so, ladies become autonomous by way of their social relationships. Building one another up through friendship, and becoming autonomous along the way, allows women to adjust for bad custom and "social relations that block autonomy at every turn" (500). Forbes argues that general friendship allows ladies in the retreat to build up aspects of relational autonomy such as self-determination and self-governance. Self-determination requires conditions in which ladies are "able to choose who to be, including gaining the opportunity to put those choices into practice" (496). In contrast, self-governance involves intellectual skills, like the ability to reason and identify one's choices as one's own (496). General friends in Astell's retirement "work together to develop their rational capacities" and build one another up (496). True friends continue to build up relational autonomy through self-authorization. This element allows ladies to *think* they are self-governing and self-determining. Forbes points out how this comes out in Astell's picture of true friendship, which contains "self-respect, self-trust, and self-esteem" (497). A true Astellian friend respects, trusts, and esteems others in a way that promotes relational autonomy (497).

Forbes's account helps to describe the self-improvement in Astellian friendship. Importantly, Forbes identifies how a unified body of ladies might use friendship as a way to morally progress and address bad custom. Here, self-improvement is not explicitly described but fits in neatly. This interpretation, and the broader conversation on relational autonomy, gets us the closest to describing self-improvement but needs further elaboration. It seems that Forbes's account gets us on the right track in describing how ladies come to properly value one another through friendship. However, Forbes is focused on how mutual respect, trust, and esteem might allow ladies to nurture relational autonomy and properly value one another. An explicit picture of how mutual *self-improvement* allows the unified body of ladies to pursue a general goal is missing. To explicitly point out self-improvement, Forbes's account would need to describe how self-improvement is propped up and supported by the generation of relational autonomy. We might think of ways to sketch out this connection, but they are absent in Forbes's account. In short, despite how we can see Forbes's work implying the centrality of self-improvement, the exact architecture needed to bring this element to the fore is absent. Given that this link is missing, I adopt a new interpretive lens in the following sections to highlight self-improvement. This lens will not be Aristotelian, Christian-Platonist, or focused on relational autonomy. Rather, I look at conceptual resonances between Astellian and Epicurean friendship to further my interpretation. Examining these conceptual resonances allows me to bring an understudied element to the fore.

#### **4. Conceptual Resonances: The Religious Retirement and Epicurean Garden**

I have argued that the previous accounts do not explicitly describe the self-improvement project at the core of Astellian friendship. Indeed, self-improvement is obscured under an Aristotelian or Christian-Platonist interpretation of Astellian friendship. Forbes's account is useful for the aim of this article but still lacks the explicit architecture needed to motivate the centrality of self-improvement. An Epicurean analysis of Astellian friendship brings self-improvement into focus and works to accomplish the primary goal of this article—to make self-improvement central. In this section, I begin by briefly describing a historical Epicurean community, the Garden. This discussion will explain the main commitments of Epicurean philosophy and illustrate how the Epicurean community functioned as a web of mutual trust. Following this, I will forward three valuable conceptual resonances between the religious retirement and the Epicurean Garden. Before highlighting these themes, it is worth emphasizing that this article does not set out to prove that Astell was an Epicurean or that all elements of Astell's work are aligned with Epicurean

philosophy.<sup>23</sup> Instead, this article shows how certain similarities between the Astellian retirement and the Epicurean Garden help bring to the fore the conception of self-improvement that I have argued is central to Astell's account of friendship.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4.1. The Epicurean Garden

The Epicurean Garden was a private and secluded property situated on the outskirts of Athens where Epicurus and his followers lived and studied philosophy (Morrison, n.d.). In this community, Epicurean friends pursued the common goal of living pleasantly with inner tranquility (*ataraxia*), a state with no pain or mental disturbance (Epicurus 1994, 30–31 [*Letter to Menoeceus*, 131]). Living away from

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<sup>23</sup> There is evidence that Astell read and was familiar with Epicurus. Astell mentions Epicureanism on multiple occasions in *Proposal* and *Christian Religion*. In *Proposal*, Astell remarkably asserts that there is “the highest Epicurism exalting our Pleasures by refining them; keeping our Appetities in that due regularity which not only Grace, but even Nature and Reason require” (2002, 86). Here, it is clear that Astell understands that we should refine our pleasures for religious reasons *and* to do what is natural. This assertion appears to confirm that Astell is familiar with the Epicurean classification of desire. In *Christian Religion*, Astell stops herself, noting, “I only fear there is too much Epicurism in it,” after she states that we should aim to “keep the body in good tune, to avoid pain, and to always be easy” (2013, 233–34). Once again, Astell seems familiar with the main tenants of Epicurean philosophy. Astell was also an avid reader of Descartes's works, which contain mentions of Epicurean philosophy. Although it is not clear which exact figures Astell may have engaged with, through primary texts or through her reading of figures like Descartes, her passing comments show a general familiarity with Epicureanism. For more about Astell's personal library, see Magdalene College's discovery of forty-seven books and pamphlets owned by Astell: “Library Discovery Reveals a Science Student Way Ahead of Her Time,” Magdalene College website, March 8, 2021, <https://www.magd.cam.ac.uk/news/library-discovery-reveals-science-student-way-ahead-her-time>.

<sup>24</sup> Epicurus and Astell are not the only thinkers who have imagined or created an ideal community centered around self-improvement and comradeship, as pointed out by an anonymous reviewer. I have chosen to compare Epicurean and Astellian pictures of the community, and friendship more specifically, despite other available avenues of comparison. As will be shown in the following sections, the specific similarities between the two systems of friendship help highlight self-improvement in Astell's picture of friendship. Of course, this is not the only source of interpretation when it comes to unravelling Astell's thoughts, but it is a source that presents an interesting lens for us to look through when it comes to the goals of this article. Other avenues may present fruitful opportunities for picking out other elements of Astell's work.

others for tranquility and security is cited in the Epicurean model of social progress as the reason people originally entered communities. Before this time, individuals were subject to external threats such as attacks from nonhuman animals or harm from extreme weather (Christensen 2020, 307). Joining a community diminishes these threats and establishes security. However, living in a community opens one to other threats, such as harm at the hands of fellow citizens and stress from politics, traditional education, and the threat of punishment under the law (307–8). Living in a traditional community is not a perfect solution, as it generates fear and anxiety, which impacts tranquility. Epicurus encouraged his followers to instead “free themselves from the prison of general education and politics” (Epicurus 1994, 39 [*The Vatican Collection of Epicurean Sayings* (SV) 58]) and live in a community of like-minded persons. This sort of arrangement protects individuals from external threats *and* the threats of living within a traditional society.

Epicurean communities rely on two factors for stability. First, an Epicurean community enjoys security because all members pursue the common goal of living pleasantly. The pursuit of this common goal results in a stable community because, as Epicurus notes, “it is impossible to live pleasantly without living prudently, honourably, and justly and impossible to live prudently, honourably, and justly without living pleasantly” (1994, 32 [*The Principal Doctrines* (KD) V]). Second, the pursuit of the common goal of tranquility grounds the Epicurean community in a web of mutual trust. A life without friends is full of traps, so one should acquire friends for security and tranquility. But security does not only go one way—an Epicurean wants friends, as Seneca describes, not just

so that he might have someone to attend to him when sick, and to help him when he is thrown into prison or is impoverished, but so that he might have someone whom he might himself attend to when that person is sick and whom he might free from imprisonment by his enemies. (Epicurus 1994, 81 [*IG* 54])

In this way, friendship is a *mutual* benefit rather than a pursuit concerned merely with self-improvement. A short example will show how this guarantee contains mutuality. In an Epicurean community, if Chantalle wrongs her friend Rachel, this will undoubtedly hurt their relationship. This harm goes further, though, since now Chantalle’s friends Megan, Jess, and Matt will be suspicious of her. Because a community is connected in a web of mutual trust, any wrongdoing in a single relationship leaks into the community. To maintain tranquility and the security that

her friends will help her, Chantalle must be a good friend to all. Otherwise, she risks jeopardizing all of her relationships in the community.<sup>25</sup>

Epicurean friendship is rooted in *mutual* benefit rather than egoistic pursuits. This becomes clearer once one examines the Epicurean writings on utility in friendship. One might worry that Epicurean friendship is too focused on utility, about what one can get from their friend rather than friendship itself. However, that worry dissolves when we consider that Epicureans assert that they “do not need utility from our friends so much as we need *confidence* concerning that utility” (Epicurus 1994, 38 [SV 34]; emphasis added). Confidence about utility generates tranquility and a sense of security. As noted throughout the article, this guarantee is *mutual* and not a matter of mere self-improvement: friendship is neither solely based on utility nor void of utility.

#### 4.2. Reasons to Enter

*Happy Retreat! which will be the introducing you into such a Paradise as your Mother Eve forfeited, where you shall feast on Pleasures, that do not like those of the World, disappoint your expectations, pall your Appetities, and by the disgust they give you, put you on the fruitless search after new Delights, which when obtain'd are as empty as the former; but such as will make you truly happy now, and prepare you to be perfectly so hereafter. Here are no Serpents to deceive you, whilst you entertain your selves in these delicious Gardens. (Astell 2002, 74)*

This first shared feature is the Epicurean and Astellian emphasis on withdrawing from the “noise” of society, which is aligned in the respective primary texts. Epicurus maintains that “the purest security is that which comes from a quiet life and withdrawal from the many” (1994, 33 [KD XIV]), and Astell describes the “hurry and noise of the World which does generally so busy and pre-engage us” (2002, 68) as a reason to enter the religious retirement. For Astell and Epicurus, leaving traditional society calls for one to “break the enchanted Circle that custom has plac'd us in” (Astell 2002, 55) and “free themselves from the prison of general education and politics” (Epicurus 1994, 39 [SV 58]). The reason to enter either the retirement or the Garden exists on two levels. In one sense, withdrawing allows one to break free from bad custom, poor education, and the stressors of traditional society.<sup>26</sup> In a second

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<sup>25</sup> This example is adapted from Eric Brown’s (2009) “Politics and Society.”

<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting the way in which both communities exist apart from traditional society in a qualified manner. Both communities had to interact with a nearby state for the sake of property laws, food, and military protection.

way, entering the retirement or Garden gives one a positive benefit, allowing for greater security, tranquility, and space for proper self-improvement. At both levels, attendees stand to benefit from an arrangement that allocates the resources and space to better the soul.

The religious retirement and the Epicurean Garden provided a place for women to engage in educational pursuits, despite a lack of other such outlets at the respective times. Membership in the Epicurean Garden was more accepting than Greek society, which only gave citizenship to free male citizens. The Garden allowed enslaved people, women,<sup>27</sup> and non-Greeks to attend since individuals in these groups could pursue the Epicurean goal—tranquility (Christensen 2020, 315). Similarly, Astell’s religious retreat provided ladies an option other than marriage or a strictly religious convent. Both institutions offered ladies a way to break free from custom rather than play out the limited roles expected of them.<sup>28</sup>

### 4.3. The Project Inside

*In other activities, the rewards come only when people have become, with great difficulty, complete [masters of the activity]; but in philosophy the pleasure accompanies the knowledge. For the enjoyment does not come after the learning but the learning and the enjoyment are simultaneous. (Epicurus 1994, 37 [SV 27])*

The projects inside the retirement and the Garden also focused on analogous goals. In both places, a thorough and regular philosophical education was central to the lives of the attendees. Epicurus describes philosophy as an activity that is both enjoyable in its result and throughout the process of learning (1994, 37 [SV 27]). Astell similarly argues that studying philosophy, especially the works of French philosophers

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<sup>27</sup> In the introduction of *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writing and Testimonia*, D. S. Hutchinson notes that because the Epicurean Garden allowed women to attend, rumours were spread that the Garden only allowed membership to women to host orgies and parties (Epicurus 1994, xi–xii). This rumour was spread due to the existence of female Epicureans and the caricature of Epicureans as only concerned with bodily pleasures.

<sup>28</sup> Astell and Epicurus have been accused of a sort of political quietism. The Astellian retreat and Epicurean Garden pose a puzzle, for each community seems to withdraw from traditional politics and focus on the personal instead. Although exploring this topic is outside the scope of this article, this is yet another place where the projects appear aligned. The retirement and Garden present as societies that largely disengage with conventional politics.

at the time, is better suited for ladies than are novels and romances (2002, 81–82). Ladies and Epicureans are expected to spend the bulk of their time engaged in reflection and contemplation. Attendees of both institutions engage in *self-improvement* for the betterment of their souls and their intellect. This part of the retreat contains an element of self-improvement; individuals are motivated in their educational pursuits by the possibility of intellectual improvement and tranquility.<sup>29</sup>

The educational pursuit taken up by Epicureans and ladies is paired with a simple life and an emphasis on necessary physical desires. A hedonistic misreading of Epicurean philosophy as the pursuit of mere pleasure would put Astell and Epicurus at odds on this topic. However, examining the primary Epicurean texts clarifies that the pursuit of physical and mental pleasure need not involve sin and temptation. For Epicureans,

It is not drinking bouts and continuous partying and enjoying boys and women, or consuming fish and the other dainties of an extravagant table, which produce the pleasant life, but sober calculation which searches out the reasons for every choice and avoidance and drives out the opinions which are the source of the greatest turmoil for men's souls. (1994, 31 [*Letter to Menoecus*, 132])

On the Epicurean view, pleasure is not simple sensory hedonism. Instead, pleasure is taken to consist of tranquility and a lack of pain rather than the enjoyment of specific positive pleasures. Astell paints a surprisingly similar picture, arguing that although the gospel condemns a life of sensual pleasure,

it does not follow that the life of a Christian is not a life of pleasure in reality and in a true sense. So far is Christianity from depriving us of anything desirable, that it affords us the only solid, satisfying, and durable pleasures. For our creator is too good to give us appetites and desires merely to torture us, and having planted in our nature a desire of pleasure, He designs without doubt to satisfy it. But then having given us reason and liberty, and set before us great variety of pleasures, He expects we should choose the best; and by forbearing the other, exercise our virtue and so prepare ourselves in this short time of trial, for pleasures infinite and eternal. (Astell 2013, 231)

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<sup>29</sup> In the case of Astellian ladies, intellectual pursuits are also sought after for a further reason, to ascertain the nature of God. This focus on God, however, does not negate the existence of a personal project of self-improvement.

Astell's choice of words here is significant; the Christian life is *a life of pleasure* in reality and in a true sense. Astell speaks similarly in other passages, describing the Christian life as one "abound with self-satisfaction," the only way to "enjoy that tranquility of the mind," and consisting of "religion [as our] pleasure" (2013, 198–99). Astell's religious devotion and the Epicurean pursuit of pleasure are not in fundamental tension. Instead, both acknowledge that pleasure is brought about by intellectual and psychological betterment for tranquility, not just mere physical pleasure.<sup>30</sup>

However, this is not to say that Astell and Epicurus reject bodily pleasures in a wholesale way. Astell notes that the Christian religion only renounces worldly pleasures "as much as the necessities of life permit" (2013, 230). This assertion aligns with the Epicurean distinction between the different kinds of desires. Epicurus encourages his followers to pursue those desires that are both natural and necessary—such as drinking when thirsty or eating when hungry (1994, 34–35 [KD XXVI and XXIX–XXX]). Epicureans "spit upon the pleasures of extravagance" (1994, 82 [IG 59]), which are natural and unnecessary desires, such as fancy food and excessive drink, or those empty desires like political power and wealth, which do not truly bring about pleasure and tranquility. Empty desires are not natural, for they bring about no pain when left unfilled (Epicurus 1994, 34–35 [KD XXVI and XXX]). Further, empty desires tend to bring about trouble and anxiety that exceed the initial pleasure (Epicurus 1994, 32 [KD VIII]). So, when it comes to physical desire for both Astell and Epicurus, one should focus on fulfilling only those natural and necessary desires that are easily fulfilled. Doing so will allow us to achieve "tranquility of mind, which is the heaven of this world" (Astell 2013, 243).

#### 4.4. Friendship and Mutual Benefit

*Friendship dances around the world announcing to all of us that we must wake up to blessedness.* (Epicurus 1994, 38 [SV 52])

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<sup>30</sup> One might worry that Christianity and Epicureanism are too theologically opposed. First, I will note that despite accusations, Epicureans were not atheists. Further, Epicurus and Astell both argue for the existence of God(s) by pointing to the clear knowledge we have of such entities. Despite this description of God's existence as clear and obvious, there are apparent theological differences between Epicurus and Astell. These differences seem unsurprising given the historical and religious contexts of the texts. For this reason, I can accept that this part of the comparison is less aligned. The difference does not render this article unable to describe the self-improvement project that exists at the cores of both communities and appears inconsequential for that reason.

The Epicurean and Astellian pursuit of a simple and educational life is best fulfilled in a community of like-minded friends. The Epicurean web of mutual trust sheds light on how members of the Astellian retreat can engage in self-improvement in a way that does not conflict with Astell's belief that friendship is "a love that thinks nothing within the bounds of Power and Duty, too much to do or suffer for its Beloved" (2002, 99). Due to a commitment to upholding mutual benefit and security, Epicureans "rejoice at [their] friends' joys just as much as [their] own" (Epicurus 1994, 63–64 [Fin. I.67]). Further, an Epicurean "feels no more pain when he is tortured than when his friend is tortured, and will die on his behalf" (Epicurus 1994, 39 [SV 56–57]). Both Astellian and Epicurean friendships involve a willingness to sacrifice everything for a friend since "benefitting [others] is pleasanter than receiving benefits" (1994, 104 [IG 157]). The goods acquired through friendship, such as security, self-improvement, and love, flow reciprocally. No one is expected to engage in this relationship for *mere* self-improvement or with no hope of mutual benefit, "for the former makes gratitude a matter for commercial transaction, while the latter kills off good hope for the future" (Epicurus 1994, 38 [SV 39]). Epicurean and Astellian friendship contain a balance of care for oneself and others through reciprocal benefit.

Additionally, Epicurus and Astell both acknowledge how friends can admonish each other and correct intellectual faults. Astell takes friendship "to consist in advising, admonishing, and reproofing as there is occasion, and in watching over each other's souls for their mutual good" (2013, 169). Philodemus, an Epicurean, notes a similar function of friendship in *On Frank Criticism*, where he holds that we should avoid false modesty "for he will not consider a slanderer one who desires that this friend obtain correction, when he is not such [i.e., a slanderer], but rather one who is a friend to his friend" (Philodemus 1998, 61 [fr. 50]). Part of being an Epicurean friend involves listening to what a friend says and correcting them (Philodemus 1998, 45 [fr. 28]). The need for admonishment amongst ladies and Epicureans maps onto the fact that both communities are set on improving the intellect and souls of attendees. As well, correcting one's friends helps them cast out false beliefs that may cause fear and anxiety (Christensen 2020, 315). Astellian and Epicurean friendship involve reciprocal self-improvement, which comes about through philosophical dialogue and reflection.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that a central element of Astellian friendship is a mutually beneficial self-improvement project. My analysis clarifies an essential part of Astellian friendship that is not fully captured by extant accounts. While examining the role of education and admonishment through friendship, it becomes clear how self-improvement is not at odds with Astell's description of friendship as charity contracted and benevolent in nature. Self-improvement within a community of like-minded persons is Astell's solution to the bad custom and poor educational practices

that she identifies as the primary factors that deteriorate women's souls. Examining Astellian friendship reveals how self-improvement shows up between ladies in the retirement. By adopting a novel lens not taken up by other accounts, this article has suggested another layer of influence that can help unravel Astell's complex and vibrant picture of female friendship—an influence that has been largely overlooked. Although Epicureanism is undoubtedly not the *only* source that is in harmony with Astellian friendship, this lens helps show how Astellian friendship contains a central element of mutual self-improvement.

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