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## IMPRESSIONS IN THE BRAIN:

### MALEBRANCHE ON WOMEN, AND WOMEN ON MALEBRANCHE

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In the late seventeenth century, a number of women actively embraced the new Cartesian philosophy in their published works. Some appealed both implicitly and explicitly to Descartes's views about the mind's natural ability to find truth; some highlighted the soul's essential nature as a non-bodily substance; and others wrote about the Cartesian method of overcoming the influence of the senses and the passions on the mind.<sup>1</sup> At first glance, it is understandable why Descartes' ideas were so attractive. As Mary Astell (1666–1731) remarked in 1697, 'All have not leisure to Learn Languages and pore on Books, nor Opportunity to Converse with the Learned'.<sup>2</sup> Yet with Cartesian philosophy – and other 'new philosophies' of the period, such as those of Locke and Hobbes – women did not require a formal

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<sup>1</sup> For details, see M. Atherton, 'Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason', in *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, edited by L. M. Antony and C. Witt (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), 19–34; S. Bordo, 'Introduction' to *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes*, edited by S. Bordo (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 1–25; J. Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); E. Harth, *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992); E. Harth, 'Cartesian Women', in *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes*, 213–31; S. Hutton, 'Women Philosophers and the Early Reception of Descartes', in *Receptions of Descartes: Cartesianism and Anti-Cartesianism in Early Modern Europe*, edited by T. M. Schmaltz (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 3–23; J. K. Kinnaird, 'Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism', *The Journal of British Studies* 19:1 (1979), 53–75; E. O'Neill, 'Women Cartesians, "Feminine Philosophy", and Historical Exclusion', in *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes*, 232–57; R. Perry, 'Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18:4 (1985), 472–93; K. M. Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); H. L. Smith, *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth Century English Feminists* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); and H. L. Smith, 'Intellectual Bases for Feminist Analyses: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in *Women and Reason*, edited by E. D. Harvey and K. Okruhlik (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 19–38.

<sup>2</sup> M. Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, edited by P. Springborg (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1997), 119.

institutional training; all they required was a mind and the ability to ‘use their own Faculties rightly, and consult the Master who is within them’.<sup>3</sup> In theory at least, the fact of their womanhood did not exclude them from participation in philosophical discourse.

Nevertheless, Descartes himself never makes the point that ‘the mind has no sex’ or that women are naturally capable of practising Cartesian method. These are conclusions that early modern women – and one early modern man, François Poulain de la Barre (1647–1723)<sup>4</sup> – drew from his ideas; but Descartes makes no remarks about women in his texts. By contrast, Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715) was positively outspoken about the female sex. A French Catholic priest, Malebranche was one of the most significant proponents of Cartesian philosophy in the latter half of the seventeenth century. In 1674–75, Malebranche published his first and largest work, *De la recherche de la vérité* (*The Search after Truth*), a blend of Cartesian and Augustinian principles. Following Descartes’ lead in the *Meditations* (1641), Malebranche invited others to raise objections to his ideas, and over the years he added seventeen *Éclaircissements* (*Elucidations*) to his main work. In the remaining four decades before his death, he published a further ten philosophical works and engaged in several public disputes, most notably with fellow Cartesian Antoine Arnauld. In his hey-day, Paul Hazard observes, Malebranche enjoyed a fame ‘so dazzling that at this distance of time it is not easy to realize its brilliance. Its rays penetrated far beyond the frontiers of his own country, and it lasted longer than his life’.<sup>5</sup> Malebranche’s books were widely read, frequently admired, and – at the end of the century, at least – vehemently criticised.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> On F. P. de la Barre, see S. Stuurman, *François Poulain de la Barre and the Invention of Modern Equality* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> P. Hazard, *The European Mind (1680–1715)*, trans. J. L. May (London: Hollis & Carter, 1953), 134.

In *Malebranche and British Philosophy*, Charles McCracken observes that in the 1690s Malebranche was one of the key philosophers to be reckoned with in Britain.<sup>6</sup> His influence extended from English royalty to Cambridge Quakers to Oxford theologians to ‘ladies who wrote essays on divinity’.<sup>7</sup> In 1694–95, two English translations of Malebranche’s complete *Search after Truth* appeared in print, one by Thomas Taylor,<sup>8</sup> and the other by Richard Sault.<sup>9</sup> One of Malebranche’s shorter works, *Conversations chrétiennes* (*Christian Conversations*) of 1676, also appeared in English translation as *Christian Conferences* in 1695.<sup>10</sup> McCracken discusses the several Englishwomen who expressed an interest in Malebranche’s philosophy around this time, including Damaris Masham (1659–1708), Mary Chudleigh (1656–1710), and Mary Astell.<sup>11</sup> But he does not highlight a significant feature of their engagement with Malebranche: the fact that all three women – as well as a fourth, the Quaker pamphleteer Anne Docwra (c. 1624–1710) – address Malebranche’s views about women in his *Search after Truth* and the *Christian Conferences*. This topic is the focus of my paper.

In the *Search after Truth*, Malebranche makes both positive and negative claims about women’s minds. In the second book of the *Search*, as part of an account of the errors arising from the prejudices of imagination, he devotes an entire section to

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<sup>6</sup> C. J. McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>8</sup> N. Malebranche, *Father Malebranche’s Treatise concerning the search after truth the whole work compleat*, trans. Thomas Taylor (Oxford, 1694).

<sup>9</sup> N. Malebranche, *Malebranch’s Search After Truth, or, A treatise of the nature of the humane mind and of its management for avoiding error in the sciences*, trans. R. Sault, 2 vols (London, 1694–95).

<sup>10</sup> N. Malebranche, *Christian Conferences: Demonstrating the Truth of the Christian Religion and Morality* (London, 1695).

<sup>11</sup> McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy*, 5–6. Other early modern Englishwomen who comment on Malebranchean philosophy (not discussed here) include Elizabeth Thomas (1675–1731), Sarah Fyge Egerton (1670–1723), and Catharine Trotter Cockburn (1679–1749). For their opinions, see R. Gwinnett and E. Thomas, *The Honourable Lovers: Or, The Second and Last Volume of Pylades and Corinna* (London, 1732), 131–152, 199–224; S. F. Egerton, *Poems on Several Occasions, Together with a Pastoral* (London, 1703), 27–31; and C. T. Cockburn, *The Works of Mrs Catharine Cockburn, Theological, Moral, Dramatic, and Poetical*, edited by T. Birch, 2 vols (London, 1751), vol. 2, 190–91.

‘The imagination of women’.<sup>12</sup> He observes that some women have stronger minds than some men. Some women, he says, are tremendously learned and courageous, others are strong and constant, and some are capable of anything. In the ‘Preface’ to his *Elucidations of The Search after Truth*, he writes approvingly that women are quicker to recognise the falsity of certain prejudices, because they exercise greater caution in their judgments than most learned men.<sup>13</sup> On the negative side, however, Malebranche asserts that most women are unsuited to the contemplation of abstract metaphysical truths. The fault lies with their brain fibres, he argues. Because these fibres are so soft and delicate (compared to those of most adult men), the animal spirits disturb women’s brains to a far greater extent. As a consequence, women become preoccupied by surface details, with the latest fashion or emotional drama, and they do not have the concentration span to address complex questions: ‘A trifle is enough to distract them, the slightest cry frightens them, the least motion fascinates them.’<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere, Malebranche implies that the female sex is ‘feeble-minded’,<sup>15</sup> ‘stupid and weak’,<sup>16</sup> ‘blindly submissive’<sup>17</sup> and hopelessly ‘superstitious’.<sup>18</sup> In an extended chapter on ‘The communication between the brain of a mother and that of her child’, he holds mothers responsible for the ‘derangement’ of infant minds – for the fact that by virtue of their connection with a woman in the womb, children are born with a love of sensible things. In a subsequent chapter, he also laments that women, as mothers and nurses, have such a pernicious influence on the early education of children.

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<sup>12</sup> N. Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, trans. and edited by T. M. Lennon and P. J. Olscamp, and *Elucidations of The Search after Truth*, trans. and edited by T. M. Lennon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 130–31. Unless otherwise noted, my citations are from this edition.

<sup>13</sup> Malebranche, *Elucidations*, 542.

<sup>14</sup> Malebranche, *Search after Truth*, 130.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

With Malebranche's views on women, then, we are confronted with a number of apparent contradictions. He affirms that women are mentally strong and courageous, and yet he claims that they are stupid and feeble-minded; they are apparently capable of constancy, and yet they are easily distracted; they are better at overcoming the prejudices of sense than most learned men, and yet they are responsible for imparting those prejudices to children in the first place. What, we might ask, is Malebranche's decided opinion on women's mental capacities? Does he espouse a theory of biological determinism concerning women's intellectual inferiority, or does he simply describe a socio-cultural phenomenon of his time? Are women necessarily condemned to feeble-mindedness, in his view, or are they capable of overcoming the body's influence on the mind, given the right education and training? In a recent article, Katharine Hamerton supports the former position, claiming that Malebranche 'presented the female mind as deeply, inherently, essentially sexed in its corrupt dependence on the female body'.<sup>19</sup> She points to textual evidence that Malebranche regarded women's intellectual nature as necessarily limited or debilitated by their physiology, and hence she challenges the view that all Cartesian philosophy carried 'benefits for women' or 'feminist potential' in this period. Hamerton adds that

The mid- to late eighteenth century would see a heightened use of

Malebranchean-style critiques deployed to deny women full access to the

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<sup>19</sup> K. J. Hamerton, 'Malebranche, Taste, and Sensibility: The Origins of Sensitive Taste and a Reconsideration of Cartesianism's Feminist Potential', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69:4 (2008), 533–58 (537). Hamerton is not the only recent scholar to highlight the negative aspects of Malebranche's views about women: see also R. Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), 78; and P. Springborg, *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 65.

Enlightenment's search after truth and even serious aesthetic judgment (among other restrictions), relegating them to a trivialized taste.<sup>20</sup>

Given the historical-textual evidence, it seems clear that Malebranchean-style views about women's 'physiological sensibility' had a negative impact on eighteenth-century perceptions about women and taste. But, in my view, it is not so clear that Malebranche himself advocated a gendered physiological essentialism in his works, or that he should be interpreted as a biological determinist with respect to women's minds. In this paper, I argue that the opinions of women thinkers of the period – namely Mary Astell, Damaris Masham, Mary Chudleigh, and Anne Docwra – shed significant light on this subject. Each of these women might be regarded as a 'defender of her sex', meaning someone who argued in favour of women's natural capacity for wisdom and virtue. Mary Astell published three major feminist works, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (part I, 1694; part II, 1697) and *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700). Mary Chudleigh was the author of *The Ladies Defence* (1701), a response to a misogynist pamphlet on female submission within marriage. Damaris Masham wrote a plea for women's education in her *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (1705). And while Anne Docwra did not publish a defence of women as such, in her *Epistle of Love* (1683) she argued in favour of women's capacity to preach religion. In their writings, these women all engage with Malebranche's views about women. Taken as a whole, their commentaries reveal how it is possible to dispel some of the apparent contradictions raised by his views, and to rehabilitate the reputation of Cartesian philosophy – and Malebranche's philosophy, in particular – as a potential source of feminist sentiment in this period.

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<sup>20</sup> Hamerton, 'Malebranche, Taste, and Sensibility', 555.

## ERROR AND THE LEARNED

Present-day philosophers discuss Malebranche chiefly in relation to his two most famous doctrines: the theory of causation known as occasionalism, and the epistemological doctrine of ‘seeing all things in God’. Unlike his mentor Descartes, Malebranche maintains that God is the only causally efficacious being, and that all created things, both material and immaterial in nature, are causally impotent. The mind and the body are incapable of having a causal impact on one another, and bodies are likewise incapable of causally influencing other bodies. In addition, Malebranche maintains that all the ideas in our minds – all those representations that are immediately present to the mind, including our representations of physical objects – are ‘seen’ in the mind of God. We are not the originators of our own ideas; everything we know, every representational idea we have, partakes of an essence or an eternal archetype in the divine understanding.

Early modern women express varying degrees of sympathy and antipathy toward these doctrines. But they are also concerned with what are now less well-known aspects of Malebranche’s philosophy: his detailed account of the problem of error, and his emphasis on the importance of methodically exercising freedom of mind in the search for wisdom and happiness.

Like Descartes, Malebranche was committed to the view that the senses are unreliable guides to truth, and that knowledge can be founded on clear and distinct ideas alone. In the first five books of the *Search after Truth*, Malebranche spells out the main sources of human error. Like Descartes, he makes a distinction between two faculties of mind: the understanding and the will. The understanding is that passive faculty of ‘receiving various ideas’ and ‘perceiving various things’,<sup>21</sup> and the will is

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<sup>21</sup> Malebranche, *Search after Truth*, 2.

the active faculty of having certain inclinations one way or another. God has designed human beings such that the natural or irresistible inclination of the will is towards the good in general, or God himself. But as a result of Original Sin, human inclinations have become corrupted and individuals often stray from the path to truth and happiness. The problem is that the human mind is united not only with God but also with a material body. The body influences the mind by giving rise to *sensations* and the *imagination* in the understanding, and by creating *passions* and *inclinations* in the will. For Malebranche, these four different influences on the mind, together with the finite intellect, constitute the main sources of error. Although the information they provide is essential to the preservation of the body, they are not reliable guides to truth and happiness. Error and sin arise when we allow them to exert an undue influence on our judgments about what is true and good.

In a crucial part of the *Search*, Malebranche attacks those scholars who prefer to become slaves to tradition and authority rather than exercise the freedom of their minds. These scholars sustain important errors, he says, because they are reluctant to give up their former opinions. They have invested so much time and effort in learning languages, reading books and cramming their heads full of useless information that they stubbornly cling to their views even in the face of rational opposition. Malebranche describes such ‘counterfeit scholars’ as ‘of large memory and small judgment, happy and strong with citations, unhappy and weak in reason’.<sup>22</sup> ‘One frequently finds in their books long passages in Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic, used to prove completely obvious things.’<sup>23</sup> This would not be so bad if such scholars did not inspire laziness and arrogance in their followers, and lead others to condemn the proponents of new philosophies. Malebranche laments that

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.



many people reject Descartes's philosophy for the ridiculous reason that its principles are too simple and easy! There are no obscure, mysterious terms in this philosophy; *women and people who know neither Greek nor Latin can learn it*; therefore, it must be something insignificant, and inappropriate for great geniuses to apply themselves to.<sup>24</sup>

In the Preface to his *Elucidations*, Malebranche makes a further contrast between women and learned men. He says that those men who are popularly regarded as 'the cleverest and most enlightened of men' are usually guilty of making hasty judgments about things.<sup>25</sup> This is because they judge according to memory and long-held prejudices, and not upon considered reflection or a careful, attentive reading of a topic. By contrast, 'it often happens that women and children recognise the falsity of certain prejudices that have been attacked, because they do not dare judge without first examining, and because they concentrate as much as they can on everything they read'.<sup>26</sup>

Early modern women celebrate Malebranche's attack on the arrogance of the learned. In the late seventeenth century, Anne Docwra wrote at least seven works on religious and political topics, many of them defending the Quaker cause.<sup>27</sup> In a 1700 essay titled '*A Treatise concerning Enthusiasm, or Inspiration, of the Holy Spirit of God*', Docwra cites Malebranche's *Search after Truth* in defence of her belief in divine inspiration. As a Quaker, Docwra maintains that the Light of Christ is present in every individual, regardless of gender, social status or race. Every human being is capable of obtaining salvation, provided that they recognise the presence of this Light within the self – a light that both reveals one's sinfulness, and yet enables the

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 454; my italics.

<sup>25</sup> Malebranche, *Elucidations*, 542.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> On Docwra's religio-political thought, see J. Broad and K. Green, *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 235–42.

individual to overcome sin and attain happiness. In her essay, Docwra teaches that Christ the ‘infallible teacher, that never deceived any Man [...] is sufficient to bring all Mankind out of Darkness’ and into truth.<sup>28</sup> If someone is ‘in the Light’, so to speak, then she is capable of interpreting Scripture for herself, even without a formal education in Hebrew, Greek, or Latin. Docwra criticises those who teach that ‘the work of the Ministry is from Books of Learned Men’,<sup>29</sup> or those who preach for money, ‘keeping People always in Teaching, that they may be always Paying them’.<sup>30</sup> She warns that ‘If we look into the History of former Ages, we shall find, that the chief Obstructers of the Blessed Truth have been some of the Learned, and are so still’.<sup>31</sup> She supports this point with reference to

*F. Malebranch, that famous French-man, in his Book, intituled, A Search after Truth, [who] says That Learned Men are most subject to Error; and shews divers Reasons for it, p. 75. Also in the Preface of his Book, and several other places, wherein are many excellent things worth the regarding.*<sup>32</sup>

Docwra then cites Malebranche’s arguments as confirmation that the Light is the ‘*Light of the Mind*, and not of the *Body*’, and that it is divine rather than natural in inspiration.<sup>33</sup>

While Docwra does not highlight Malebranche’s positive claim about women’s natural reason, her contemporary Mary Astell does. From 1693–94, Astell was engaged in a philosophical correspondence with Malebranche’s main English disciple,

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<sup>28</sup> A. Docwra, ‘A Treatise concerning Enthusiasm, or Inspiration, of the Holy Spirit of God. By A. D.’, in *The Second Part of An Apostate-Conscience Exposed: Being an Answer to a Scurrilous Pamphlet* (London, 1700), 38.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* Docwra quotes from T. Taylor’s translation of the chapter ‘That we see all things in God’ in Malebranche’s *Search after Truth* (1694).

John Norris (1657–1711), the rector of Bemerton.<sup>34</sup> In her first letter to Norris, Astell questioned his logical leap from the Malebranchean theory that God is the only efficient cause, to his view that God alone deserves our love. Once Norris had satisfied her query, she asked him ‘to furnish me with such a System of Principles as I may rely on, and to give me such Rules as you judge most convenient to initiate a raw Disciple in the Study of Philosophy’.<sup>35</sup> In reply, Norris recommended Malebranche’s *Search after Truth* and his *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques* (*Christian and Metaphysical Meditations*) of 1683,<sup>36</sup> two works that were not then available in English. In response, Astell wished that she ‘could read that ingenious Author in his own Language’ or that he spoke English.<sup>37</sup> But this did not prevent Astell from recommending Malebranche to her female readers. In 1694, Astell published her first call for the higher education of women, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest*. Calling herself a ‘Lover of her Sex’, Astell argued that the intellectual inferiority of women was the result of custom rather than nature; and that if women were to study the grounds of religion and philosophy, then they might improve their understanding. As part of her vision for a female academy, she advises women that ‘since the *French Tongue* is understood by most Ladies, methinks they may much better improve it by the study of Philosophy (as I hear the French Ladies do) [of] *Des Cartes, Malebranch* and others, than by reading idle *Novels* and *Romances*’.<sup>38</sup>

In the next few years (1694–95), two rival English translations of Malebranche’s *Search after Truth* appeared in print. Astell’s subsequent works, the

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<sup>34</sup> Their exchange was later published as *Letters concerning the Love of God* (1695). For a modern edition, see M. Astell and J. Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, edited by E. D. Taylor and M. New (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005). My citations are from this text.

<sup>35</sup> Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 92.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>38</sup> Astell, *Proposal*, 24.

second part to the *Proposal* (1697) and the third edition of her *Reflections upon Marriage* (1706), repeat Malebranche's sentiments about the arrogance of the learned in the *Search*. Just as Malebranche despises those 'books we cannot understand without a dictionary',<sup>39</sup> Astell warns that 'We have a mistaken idea of Learning if we think to pretend to't by sending our Reader every minute to the Dictionary'.<sup>40</sup> Of course, these sentiments are common to other Cartesians of the time, such as Antoine Arnauld (1612–94) and Pierre Nicole (1625–95), the authors of *Logic or the Art of Thinking* (1662). Astell cites these men when she observes that 'These Operations [of the Mind] proceed merely from Nature, and that sometimes more perfectly from those who are altogether ignorant of Logic, than from those who have learnt it'.<sup>41</sup> But in the 1706 Preface to her *Reflections upon Marriage*, Astell explicitly calls on Malebranche when she advises that

Sense is a Portion that GOD Himself has been pleas'd to distribute to both Sexes with an Impartial Hand, but Learning is what Men have engross'd to themselves, and one can't but admire their great Improvements! For after doubting whether there was such a thing as Truth, and after many hundred years Disputes about it, in the last Century an extraordinary Genius arose, (whom yet some are pleas'd to call a Visionary) enquir'd after it, and laid down the best Method of finding it. Not to the general liking of the Men of Letters, perhaps, because it was wrote in a vulgar Language, and was so natural and easy as to debase Truth to Common Understandings, shewing too plainly that Learning and true Knowledge are two very different things. "For it often happens (says that Author) that Women and Children acknowledge the Falsehood of those Prejudices we contend with, because they do not dare to judge without

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<sup>39</sup> Malebranche, *Search after Truth*, 303.

<sup>40</sup> Astell, *Proposal*, 146.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

examination, and they bring all the attention they are capable of to what they read. Whereas on the contrary, the Learned continue wedded to their own Opinions, because they will not take the trouble of examining what is contrary to their receiv'd Doctrines".<sup>42</sup>

Here Malebranche is undoubtedly 'the extraordinary Genius' in question, for Astell quotes almost verbatim from the second volume of Richard Sault's English translation of Malebranche's *Search after Truth* (1694–95).<sup>43</sup> Far from seeing Malebranche as an advocate of biological determinism, Astell highlights Malebranche's positive claim that women have the natural intellectual capacity to overcome prejudices and avoid erroneous judgements. On her reading, Malebranche can be called on to support the view that God has distributed sense to 'both Sexes with an Impartial Hand'.

### CAUSES OF PREJUDICE

Nevertheless, while Malebranche claims that uneducated women are better able than learned men to overcome prejudices, he also asserts that women are the causes of those prejudices in the first place. Let us now turn our attention to this negative claim.

As part of his account of the errors of the imagination in the *Search after Truth*, Malebranche claims that mothers are responsible for 'the primary derangement of the mind and will of men'.<sup>44</sup> According to Malebranche, mothers corrupt the hearts of their offspring in the womb. During gestation, the foetus's body is so closely joined

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<sup>42</sup> M. Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage* (1706), in *Astell: Political Writings*, edited by P. Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 21–22.

<sup>43</sup> In the Preface to his *Elucidations of The Search after Truth*, Malebranche writes: 'Therefore it happens often, that Women and Children discover the falsity of certain Prejudices which have been controverted, because they dare not pass their Judgments upon them without Examination, but use all the attention they are capable of in what they read; whereas, on the contrary, the Learned persist in their Opinions, because they will not give themselves the trouble to examine those of others, when they are directly opposite to what they think already' (Malebranche, *Search after Truth*, translated by Sault, vol. 2, 359). P. Springborg wrongly notes that Astell offers a 'somewhat free rendering' (Astell, *Reflections*, 22) of Book I, Chapter I of both Taylor and Sault's translations of the main text, *The Search after Truth*.

<sup>44</sup> Malebranche, *Search after Truth*, 119.

to its mother's that the foetus is capable of experiencing the same sensations and passions. Mothers therefore have the power to imprint 'in their unborn children all the very same sensations by which they themselves are affected, and all the same passions by which they are agitated'.<sup>45</sup> This is a problem because 'As there are few women without some weakness, or who have not been disturbed by some passion during pregnancy, there must be very few children whose minds are not distorted in some way, and who are not dominated by some passion'.<sup>46</sup> All children are born with a love of sensory pleasure because they are infected by their mothers' corruption. Even if women were to think nothing but purely intellectual thoughts during pregnancy, this would do nothing to cure the infection, since mothers transmit only what can be transmitted through the body's animal spirits. The ideas of the pure intellect cannot be passed in this way. The 'corrupting and destroying' of children's minds is completed in early childhood when they are obliged to speak regularly with their uneducated nurses and mothers. 'These women,' Malebranche says, 'talk nothing but nonsense, or ridiculous and frightening tales. They speak to them only of sense-perceptible things, and in such a way as to confirm them in their false judgments of sense.'<sup>47</sup> Women, in short, are held directly responsible for many of the prejudices that Malebranche seeks to overcome in his *Search after Truth*.

Early modern women have mixed responses to these views. In *An Apostate-Conscience Exposed* (1699), Anne Docwra cites Malebranche's claims without criticism in support of her view that a child may resemble someone other than his father. In response to the claims of her disputant, a man named Francis Bugg, she says that

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 126–27.

There may be a secondary cause of likeness after a Child is begotten, whosoever reads *F. Malebranch*, that Famous French Man, in his *Search after Truth* [...] may find therein many excellent Things [...] he hath a pretty large Discourse of the Accidents that happens to a Child in the Womb of a Woman, after it is Begotten, in producing different likeness, with remarkable Arguments upon this subject.<sup>48</sup>

Docwra's point is that a child might not look like his biological father because the powerful workings of his mother's imagination in the womb have caused him to resemble another man.

But another woman thinker of the time, Damaris Masham, was not so accepting of Malebranche's imputations against women. The daughter of the Cambridge Platonist, Ralph Cudworth (1617–88), Masham first came to public notice as an acquaintance of Malebranche's English follower, John Norris. In 1688, Norris dedicated his *Theory and Regulation of Love* to Masham, praising her as someone of 'extraordinary Genius'.<sup>49</sup> Later, in his 1690 text, *Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life*, Norris comforts Masham over the supposed loss of her eyesight.<sup>50</sup> In various passages, he refers her 'to your deservedly admired Monsieur *Malebranche* in his *de la Recherche de la Verité*', to the 'authority of your excellent *Malebranche*' and to 'your Friend M. *Malebranche*',<sup>51</sup> consoling her with the observation that reading does not contribute to true knowledge anyway. But while Masham might have once admired Malebranche as well as Norris by the 1690s, she had greater sympathy for the empiricist views of her good friend John Locke (1632–1704). Her first book, *A*

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<sup>48</sup> A. Docwra, *An Apostate-Conscience Exposed, And The Miserable Consequences thereof Disclosed* (London, 1699), 50.

<sup>49</sup> J. Norris, *The Theory and Regulation of Love* (Oxford, 1688), ii–v.

<sup>50</sup> J. Norris, *Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life: With reference to the Study of Learning and Knowledge* (London, 1690), 62.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 37, 75.

*Discourse concerning the Love of God* (1696), is an extended critique of the Malebranchean philosophy from a common-sense empiricist point of view.

In this work, Masham's main targets are Malebranche's doctrine of 'seeing all things in God', his theory that God is the sole efficient cause of all our sensations, and Norris's moral view, based upon Malebranche's theory, that we are obliged to love God alone with a love of desire. But Masham also criticises Malebranche's views about women in his *Conversations chrétiennes*.<sup>52</sup> In that work, a popularised version of his philosophy, the speaker known as Theodore repeats Malebranche's sentiments about women and children in the *Search after Truth*. Theodore says that '*There is no Woman that has not some traces in her Brain, and motions of her Spirits, which carry her to something sensible*', and that '*when the Child is in the Womb of its Mother, it has the same traces, and the same motion of the Spirits*'.<sup>53</sup> As a consequence of this union, he says, the child is born a sinner, irrespective of his mother's propensity toward virtue and piety.

Masham rejects this theory with the observation that 'There seems to be some things in this Hypothesis very unintelligible; And also that it has Consequences intolerable to be admitted'.<sup>54</sup> Though she does not immediately elaborate on those 'intolerable consequences', throughout the *Discourse* she rejects Malebranche's theory on the grounds that it challenges the existence of human freedom and impugns the majesty of God. First, according to an empiricist theory of knowledge, we can love God only once we have formed an idea of love. And yet God has created us such that we can form an idea of love only once we have had pleasing sensory experiences of other people and material things. It is therefore necessary to love other creatures

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<sup>52</sup> See D. C. Masham, *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1696), in *The Philosophical Works of Damaris, Lady Masham*, introduction by J. G. Buickerood (Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), 71–6, 103–4, 107–8.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Masham, *Discourse*, 75.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.



before we can love God himself. If this involuntary love is sinful, as Norris suggests, then we are ‘necessitated by God himself’ to commit such sin.<sup>55</sup> Alternatively, if we agree with Malebranche’s occasionalism and theory of ‘vision in God’, then we must accept that our idea of love comes from God, and that God himself inclines us toward love of sensible things, and is in fact ‘a partner in our wickedness’.<sup>56</sup> Needless to say, it is ‘unworthy of, and mis-becoming the Majesty of the great God, *who is of Purer Eyes than to behold iniquity*, to be as it were at the beck of his sinful Creatures, to excite in them Sentiments of Delight and Pleasure, whenever they are dispos’d to transgress against his Laws’.<sup>57</sup>

Despite such criticisms, however, Masham evidently agrees with Malebranche’s claim that women as mothers and nurses have a negative impact upon the early inclinations of children. Like him, she maintains that ‘loose Education’ and ‘ill Custom’ promote the acquisition of vices in our youth:

There being scarce any Vice we are capable of, which is not instill’d into us [...] in our very Childhood, by those foolish People that usually have the direction of it. For it is obvious that there are few Children who are not taught by their Nurses to be Proud, Angry, Covetous, and Revengeful; and principled with those Vices, even before they have Language enough to talk of them.<sup>58</sup>

Unlike Malebranche, Masham proposes in her second work, *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life*, a remedy for the failings of our early education. She says that because mothers are typically the early educators of men, then they must be properly educated too. She laments that

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

the information and improvement of the Understanding by useful Knowledge, (a thing highly necessary to the right regulation of the Manners) is commonly very little thought of in reference to one whole Sex, even by those who in regard of the other, take due care hereof. But to this omission in respect of one Sex, it is manifestly very much to be attributed, that that pains which is often bestow'd upon the other, does so frequently, as it does, prove ineffectual Since the actual assistance of Mothers, will (generally speaking) be found necessary to the right forming of the Minds of their Children of both Sexes; and the Impressions receiv'd in that tender Age, which is unavoidably much of it passed among Women, are of exceeding consequence to Men throughout their Lives, as having a strong and oftentimes unalterable influence upon their future Inclinations and Passions.<sup>59</sup>

Masham suggests that although some women do make a negative impression on children, just as Malebranche maintained they do, this is not a necessary state of affairs. If women's understandings were improved, then women might in fact have a positive impact upon the future inclinations of their children by turning their children *away* from the prejudices of the senses and the passions. As part of her argument, Masham affirms that all human beings are 'indu'd [...] with a liberty of acting, or not, suitably and agreeably hereunto; whence we can, according to the preference of our own minds, act either in conformity to, or disconformity with, the will of the Creator'.<sup>60</sup> God has given human beings '*Freedom or Liberty of Action*'<sup>61</sup> such that they might either act contrary to His will or attain self-excellence through their own efforts. Masham allows that the early inclinations of both men and women are not set

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<sup>59</sup> D. C. Masham, *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (1705), in *The Philosophical Works*, 7–8.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 64–5.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 69–70.

in stone, for a child's inclinations might be directed this way or that, depending on the quality of her early education.

Masham's writings thus reveal how Malebranche's claims about women's pernicious influence on children might be interpreted as mere descriptive claims – about 'how things happen to be' in a particular socio-cultural context, as a result of women's poor education, rather than 'how things must be'. But is this what Malebranche himself says in the text? Does he himself acknowledge that women are free to overcome the influence of society, the body, and the senses? And does he allow that women's minds are perfectible like those of men?

### **FREEDOM AND THE WILL**

First, it must be noted that, despite his occasionalism and his theory of vision in God, Malebranche expresses a strong commitment to human freedom in all his works.<sup>62</sup> Contrary to Masham's opinion, Malebranche seeks to absolve God from being 'a partner in our wickedness', arguing that human beings are in fact entirely responsible for their own sins. In order to be morally accountable for their actions, according to Malebranche, all human beings must have free will. On the one hand, it is true that God has determined our will to the extent that he has given it an irresistible or an invincible inclination to love the good in general or universal good, that is, God himself.<sup>63</sup> But on the other, God has also given us the power to direct this natural inclination toward particular goods, and to bestow our love on something other than God. This inclination toward particular goods is not invincible, for in this case, the

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<sup>62</sup> On this topic, see E. J. Kremer, 'Malebranche on Human Freedom', in *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, edited by S. Nadler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 190–219; S. Peppers-Bates, *Nicolas Malebranche: Freedom in an Occasionalist World* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009); A. Pessin, 'Malebranche's Doctrine of Freedom/Consent and the Incompleteness of God's Volitions', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 8:1 (2000), 21–53; A. Pyle, *Malebranche* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), chapter 9; and T. M. Schmaltz, *Malebranche's Theory of the Soul: A Cartesian Interpretation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), chapter 6.

<sup>63</sup> Malebranche, *Search after Truth*, 5.

will is free to consent or not to consent to love particular objects. In order to avoid sin, says Malebranche, 'it is of the greatest importance to make good use of our freedom by always refraining from consenting to things and loving them until forced to do so by the powerful voice of the Author of Nature'.<sup>64</sup> In this view, an individual is not the primary cause of her inordinate desire for chocolate, nor for her coveting of another woman's husband. God has determined her to have these inclinations toward particular goods, as a natural consequence of her invincible inclination toward the good in general. But it is the individual's fault if she does not pause and critically reflect on whether or not these particular objects are worthy of her love. Such a concept of freedom seemingly enables Malebranche to overcome the problem of reconciling his occasionalism and the theory of vision in God with human freedom. That is, our freedom to suspend our consent to particular goods does not challenge God's power because it does not create any new modification or real change in the mind.

In her various statements on freedom and the will, Mary Astell repeats these same points. But more than this, Astell incorporates Malebranche's concept of freedom into her feminist project to end male tyranny over women's 'free born Souls'.<sup>65</sup> Her comments reveal how Malebranche's philosophy might be seen as amenable to feminist thought.

Like Malebranche, Astell maintains that God determines our souls to the extent that he has implanted us with an incessant desire after happiness. She agrees that our souls are naturally inclined toward the universal good or 'towards Good in general, or towards himself, for he only is our True Good'.<sup>66</sup> It is in fact impossible 'for a Man to

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>65</sup> Astell, *Proposal*, 89.

<sup>66</sup> Astell, *Proposal*, 153.

chuse that which he believes to be contrary to his only Good'.<sup>67</sup> She says that 'there are certain Motions or Inclinations inseparable from the Will, which push us on to the use of that Power, and determine it to the Choice of such things as are most agreeable to them'.<sup>68</sup> But echoing Malebranche, Astell asserts that human understanding has 'been darkn'd by the Fall',<sup>69</sup> and that 'It is the Misery of our Deprav'd Nature to be too fast ty'd to Sensible things, to be strongly, and in a manner wholly affected with them'.<sup>70</sup> We do not see that particular things could never in fact satisfy our desire for happiness in the same way that God (the universal good) can. Instead, we make precipitous judgments and affirm that something is good, when it is in fact only the false appearance of good.<sup>71</sup>

In her later work, *The Christian Religion* (1705), Astell again recalls Malebranche when she defines a free agent as someone who has the power to determine the motions of his mind 'this way or that' toward agreeable and pleasurable objects.<sup>72</sup> And we are most free when we 'stay' our power to love something or 'suspend' our assent to particular goods. True freedom does not consist 'in a bare power to do what we Will' (i.e. in acting upon our inclinations), but rather 'in preserving our Judgments free'.<sup>73</sup> In the *Proposal*, Astell says that human beings are free to avoid sin and error by not 'fixing our foot' or 'forming conclusions' based upon confused and obscure ideas.<sup>74</sup> We sin when we do nothing and let our natural inclinations determine our judgments. In order to avoid error and sin we must be

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<sup>67</sup> Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 91.

<sup>68</sup> Astell, *Proposal*, 153.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>70</sup> M. Astell, *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter Of The Church of England* (London: R. Wilkin, 1705), 295.

<sup>71</sup> Astell, *Proposal*, 114.

<sup>72</sup> Astell, *Christian Religion*, 86.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>74</sup> Astell, *Proposal*, 90.

cautious, and ‘Judge of Nothing but what we see Clearly’.<sup>75</sup> While we might not be able to avoid ignorance, we can avoid error; while ‘we cannot Judge of things of which we have no Idea [...] we can suspend our Judgment about those of which we have, till clearness and evidence oblige us to pass it’.<sup>76</sup>

On this subject, we might think that Astell simply follows the orthodox Cartesian position. Tad Schmaltz observes that Descartes himself holds that freedom is ‘an undetermined power of choice’.<sup>77</sup> But there are several reasons to think that Astell’s concept of free will comes directly from Malebranche rather than Descartes. To begin with, Descartes all but identifies the will with ‘the power to act freely’,<sup>78</sup> since for him, the will is free and undetermined. But Malebranche makes a careful distinction between the will and its freedom. In his view, the will can be both unfree and determined (in the case of its inclination toward the good in general), and also free and undetermined (in the case of its power to consent or not to consent to particular goods). Astell agrees with Malebranche on these two basic points, holding that the will is irresistibly determined to love the universal good, but that it is nevertheless a power to give or withhold our consent to particular goods. She also explicitly acknowledges a debt to the Malebranchean conception of the will. First, when Astell defines our inclination toward the general good as ‘the only Natural Motion of the Will’,<sup>79</sup> she repeats verbatim Norris’s Malebranchean point in the *Letters* that ‘the natural Motion of the Will is to Good in general’.<sup>80</sup> Second, in the *Christian Religion*, when Astell describes love as the ‘*Original bent and endeavour of*

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>77</sup> Schmaltz, *Malebranche’s Theory of the Soul*, 192–93.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>79</sup> Astell, *Proposal*, 98.

<sup>80</sup> Astell and Norris, *Letters*, 119.

*the Soul towards Good in general*,<sup>81</sup> she paraphrases Norris's definition of love as 'that original Weight, Bent or Endeavour whereby the Soul of Man stands inclined and is moved forwards to Good in general or *Happiness*'.<sup>82</sup> Norris's definitions closely follow Malebranche's own in the *Search after Truth*.<sup>83</sup>

This Malebranchean concept of freedom, as the power to suspend our assent to particular goods, lies at the heart of Astell's feminist programme of reform in her two *Proposals* and her *Christian Religion*. In these works, freedom for women is primarily freedom of the will rather than freedom of bodily action or freedom from external constraint. For Astell, women are not free when men deprive them of their ability to make their own judgments, or to exercise their freedom in the giving and withholding of assent.<sup>84</sup> She warns women that 'we must Judge finally for our selves ... because if we determine amiss *we must answer for it*'.<sup>85</sup> To attain wisdom and virtue, women must learn to regulate their wills, and teach themselves to suspend their assent to propositions 'till forc'd to do so by the evidence of Truth'.<sup>86</sup> Women must 'suspend their Inclinations as we both May and Ought, and restrain them from determining our Will, till we have fairly and fully examin'd and ballanc'd according to the best of our Knowledge, the several degrees of Good and Evil present and future that are in the Objects set before us'.<sup>87</sup> Astell calls on every woman to exercise her freedom and perfect her mind toward wisdom and happiness, regardless of her physical circumstances; this is her 'serious proposal to the ladies'.

### SEARCH AFTER TRUTH

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<sup>81</sup> Astell, *Christian Religion*, 136.

<sup>82</sup> J. Norris, 'A Discourse Concerning the Measure of Divine Love', in *Practical Discourses Upon several Divine Subjects* (London, 1693), 13.

<sup>83</sup> Malebranche, *Search after Truth*, 5, 267.

<sup>84</sup> Astell, *Christian Religion*, 36.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>87</sup> Astell, *Proposal*, 155.

In light of Astell's adoption of Malebranche's concept of freedom for feminist purposes, let us now re-evaluate the view that Malebranche is committed to a radical biological determinism about women's capacity to attain truth and happiness. Is it the case that Malebranche believes that women differ essentially from men, and that they are not at liberty to suspend their judgments about, for example, the moral worthiness of particular goods?

In his section on 'The imagination of women', Malebranche claims that the main obstacle to women's search after truth is the 'delicacy of their brain fibers', and because 'insignificant things produce great motions in the delicate fibers of their brains, these things necessarily excite great and vivid feelings in their souls, completely occupying it'.<sup>88</sup> As he explains,

Everything that depends upon taste is within their area of competence, but normally they are incapable of penetrating to truths that are slightly difficult to discover. Everything abstract is incomprehensible to them. They cannot use their imagination for working out complex and tangled questions. They consider only the surface of things, and their imagination has insufficient strength and insight to pierce it to the heart, comparing all the parts, without being distracted.<sup>89</sup>

Here Malebranche appears to suggest that women are not free to overcome the influence of their bodies.

But these remarks must be placed in context. First, it is crucial to note that Malebranche also says that 'What is abstract is incomprehensible to *most men*'.<sup>90</sup> For the majority of men, 'Only what is sensible awakens them, and fixes and sustains their mind's perception. They cannot consider and hence cannot understand what does not

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<sup>88</sup> Malebranche, *Search after Truth*, 130.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Malebranche, *Elucidations*, 612; my italics.



come under the senses or the imagination'.<sup>91</sup> The negative and sometimes all-engrossing influence of the body is a problem for anyone engaged in the search after truth – not just for women. Human beings make erroneous judgments because the soul-body union hinders the proper exercise of their freedom of will. The body 'tyrannizes' the mind and 'tears it away from God';<sup>92</sup> the bodily passions 'dominate, or rather, tyrannize reason';<sup>93</sup> and it is thus difficult for us to rid ourselves of 'the slavery' to which sin has reduced us.<sup>94</sup> Men suffer from this enslavement as much as women.

Second, while Malebranche attributes a woman's intellectual limitations to her physiology, or what he calls her 'delicate brain fibers', he does not assert that this physiology is fixed or unchangeable in nature. In the very next section of the *Search*, Malebranche claims that the imaginations of boys and young men also suffer from the adverse effects of soft and delicate brain fibres. But due to the agitation of the animal spirits, these fibres change over a period of time, such that they become harder and less flexible. One way in which they can change is through frequent study, meditation and training: 'For just as we acquire a facility for moving the fingers of our hands in all kinds of way and with great speed by the frequent use we make of them in playing instruments, so too *the parts of our brain* whose movements is necessary for imagining whatever we wish acquire through use a certain facility for being bent.'<sup>95</sup> Malebranche's advice is explicitly directed at men because – in his day and age, as a matter of custom – women are 'not involved in seeking truth and teaching others'.<sup>96</sup> But in theory, he does not rule out the idea that some women's minds could benefit

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Malebranche, *Search after Truth*, 339.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 415.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 132; my italics.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

from study and meditation. While ‘the delicacy of brain fibers is usually found in women’, according to Malebranche, ‘it is not at all certain that it is to be found in all women’.<sup>97</sup>

On the whole, Malebranche maintains that God has granted everyone the freedom to resist their inclination toward morally unworthy objects. Due to the fallen condition of man, ‘The least impression from his senses or his passions interrupts his mind’s closest attention, and the flow of spirits and blood sweeps the mind along with it and continually drives it toward sensible objects’.<sup>98</sup> But even in this weak and corrupt state, if men ‘always made proper use of their freedom, they would never be mistaken’.<sup>99</sup> It follows from this theory of human freedom that *women* are also free to resist the influence of the body on their minds, even though many women will choose not to do so or will be prevented from doing so by custom. Most women, like most men, will be unable to overcome their delicate brain fibres and resist the prejudices of sense, since they will be ‘incapable of penetrating to truths that are slightly difficult to discover’.<sup>100</sup> But some exceptional men and women will exercise their freedom and overcome their physiology. In fact, Malebranche adds, some women can ‘have stronger minds than some men’:

There are strong, constant women, and there are feeble, inconstant men. There are learned women, courageous women, women capable of anything; and on the other hand, one finds men who are soft and effeminate, incapable of penetrating or accomplishing anything. In short, when we attribute certain defects to a sex,

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 130–31.

to certain ages, to certain stations, we mean only that it is ordinarily true, always assuming there is no general rule without exceptions.<sup>101</sup>

It is telling that, on the basis of these comments, one early modern woman embraces Malebranche as a champion rather than a critic of women's reasoning abilities. In her *Ladies Defence*, Mary Chudleigh draws on Malebranche's remarks to highlight the fact that women are capable of learning. Chudleigh's work is a response to John Sprint's *The Bride-Womans Counsellor* (1699), a controversial sermon on female submission within marriage. In his pamphlet, Sprint advises that a woman must practise absolute obedience to her husband, to the extent that she must yield to his every will and desire. As a matter of rule, Sprint says, 'the very Desire of the Heart to be regulated by him 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'.<sup>102</sup> He also highlights the fact that 'Women are of weaker Capacities to learn than Men'.<sup>103</sup> In a later work, Chudleigh concedes that women do 'think too superficially to think truly', they cannot 'carry on a Train of Thought', and 'are apt to be misled by Appearances, to be govern'd by Fancy, and the impetuous Sallies of a sprightly Imagination'.<sup>104</sup> But she asserts that women are capable of intellectual improvement, given the proper training and guidance. In 'The Epistle Dedicatory' to her *Defence*, Chudleigh recommends that women study moral philosophy in order to inform their understandings, improve their judgments, and regulate their wills and affections. In the 'Preface', she calls on Malebranche's authority to confirm the view that women are 'capable of every thing', even learning:

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> J. Sprint, *The Bride-Womans Counsellor. Being a Sermon Preach'd at a Wedding* (London, 1699), 6.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>104</sup> M. Chudleigh, 'Of Friendship', in *The Poems and Prose of Mary, Lady Chudleigh*, edited by M. J. M. Ezell (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 348.

That we are generally less Knowing, and less Rational than the Men, I cannot but acknowledge; but I think 'tis too oftener owing to the illness of our Education, than the weakness of our Capacities. The learned *F. Malebranch* says, '*Tis in a certain Temperature of the Largeness and Agitation of the Animal Spirits, and conformity with the Fibres of the Brain, that the Strength of Parts consists*'; and he tells us, That Woman are sometimes blest with that Just Temperature and are Learned, Couragious and capable of every thing; and instead of that nauseous Jargon, and those impertinent Stories with which our Maids usually entertain us in our younger Years, taught the Languages of the Schools, and accustom'd to the reading of Histories, and Books of Morality; and did our Husbands treat us with that Kindness, that Sincerity, I will not say that Respect, for fear that should be thought too much for a Wife, but only with that common Civility which is due to Strangers, they would meet with a grateful return, and have much less reason to complain.<sup>105</sup>

In the main body of her *Defence*, Chudleigh likewise emphasises that women would be better wives if they were encouraged to have greater rather than lesser freedom of mind. Her sole female protagonist, 'Melissa', wishes that women would study 'to be Good, and Wise' and learn to 'let their Reason dictate to their Will'.<sup>106</sup> She assures the men that female education would not challenge male supremacy in the home: 'The Tyrant Man may still possess the Throne;/'Tis in our Minds that we wou'd Rule alone.'<sup>107</sup> Though neither Melissa nor Chudleigh make the point, this kind of freedom – freedom of mind rather than freedom of bodily action – is precisely the kind of freedom that Malebranche espouses in his work too.

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>105</sup> Chudleigh, *Ladies Defence*, in *Poems and Prose*, 12.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

Cartesian philosophy has been widely heralded as a source of feminist inspiration in the seventeenth century. Descartes himself never discusses the topic of women's mental capacities or the notion that 'the mind has no sex', but Nicolas Malebranche his follower displays no such reticence about women. At first glance, the bulk of Malebranche's comments do not appear to be amenable to feminist thought. In the *Search after Truth*, he highlights the superficiality and inattentiveness of women's minds, and blames their intellectual deficiency on the delicacy of female brain fibres. On these grounds, it had been argued that Malebranche espouses a negative biological determinism about women, and promotes the idea that there are inherent 'physiological limitations to women's minds'.<sup>108</sup> But in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a period that marks the height of Malebranche's fame in England and Europe,<sup>109</sup> several English women explicitly touched upon Malebranche's views about women. The writings of these women, many of whom were defenders of their sex, reveal how we might dispel the apparent misogyny in Malebranche's thinking and reaffirm the liberating potential of Cartesian philosophy in the early modern period. We have seen that some women embraced Malebranche's comparisons between women's natural reason and the prejudices of learned men. Some critically assessed his claim that women are responsible for the early inclinations of children, while others celebrated his suggestion that women are capable of intellectual improvement by exercising their freedom of will. At least two women, Astell and Chudleigh, explicitly highlighted the feminist potential in his remarks. Astell's writings prompt us to re-assess Malebranche's negative remarks about women in light of his theory of human freedom, or the view that human beings are always free to

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<sup>108</sup> Hamerton, 'Malebranche, Taste, and Sensibility', 536, 538.

<sup>109</sup> See A. Pyle, 'Nicolas Malebranche: Insider or Outsider?' in *Insiders and Outsiders in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, edited by G. A. J. Rogers, T. Sorell, and J. Kraye (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 122-50.

suspend consent to the inclinations of their bodies. In the *Search after Truth*, he suggests that though there might be some physical obstacles in a woman's search for truth, they are not insurmountable or invincible. The influence of the body can be overcome and delicate brain fibres strengthened through proper training in the exercise of free will. Likewise, Chudleigh's comments prompt us to interpret Malebranche's negative remarks about women as reflections on a culturally-constructed state of affairs rather than a necessary biological pattern. Women's lack of rationality, she argues, is the result of poor education rather than innate weakness. In her defence, she cites Malebranche's claims that, given the right circumstances, some women can have stronger minds than some men. The writings of these early modern women prompt us to see Malebranche's remarks about women positively in the context of his wider philosophical theories about human error and freedom of the will. Contrary to first impressions, Malebranche's philosophy allows that women are free to attain truth and happiness, regardless of their physiology. Since the path to enlightenment requires considerable psychological discipline, some women, like some men, will inevitably fail at the task of overcoming the influence of their bodies. But in theory, at least, women are 'capable of anything'.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Malebranche, *Search after Truth*, 131.

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