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The Representation of Women's Status in domestic and political Patriarchy in Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft

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Influenced by Descartes, Astell (1666-1731) and Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) see women as reasoning creatures and claim that they should be treated as men are. Astell has attracted, as has Wollstonecraft, but for different motives, the label of "the first English feminist."¹ As Kolbrener observes, their feminisms are contrasted: 'Astell's feminism was still firmly rooted in conservative political commitments and the language of the High Church'² whereas Wollstonecraft's was 'based upon rights and natural liberty.'³

Both writers were politically committed, denouncing women's status and submission, and criticizing many aspects of patriarchy which Fletcher defines as 'the institutionalised male dominance over women and children in the family and the subordination of women in society in general.'⁴ There is an analogy between the family (microcosm) and the state (macrocosm) as Smith clearly explains: 'Monarchical theory, outlined most thoroughly by Robert Filmer [Patriarcha (1680)], stressed authority flowing from a natural, God-ordained patriarchal principle. As the father ruled his family and household at God's will, so the king held sway over his larger, national family.'⁵ The patriarchal analogy between the family and the state implies a parallel between the domestic microcosm of the family (with the husband's authority over his wife, the father's over his children and the master's over his servants) and the political macrocosm of the state (the king's authority over his subjects).

The analogy is complemented by the 'patriarchal opposition between the 'public' (economy/state) and the 'private' (domestic, conjugal and intimate life).'⁶ Domestic patriarchy refers to the submission of women, the final aim of their education being marriage, sometimes for economic survival, but always as a means of domestic patriarchy to maintain a 'patrilineal system of property inheritance.'⁷ Political patriarchy coupled with the social contract implies not only the absence of women's involvement in political life but also the absence of their civil existence.

¹ John MCCRYSTAL, 'Revolting Women: The Use of Revolutionary Discourse in Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft Compared,' *History of Political Thought*, vol. 14, n 2, 1993, p. 189.

² See Cynthia B. BRYSON, 'Mary Astell: Defender of the "Disembodied Mind,"' *Hypathia*, vol. 13, n  4, 1998, p.51.

³ William KOLBRENER, 'Gendering the Modern: Mary Astell's Feminist Historiography,' *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 44, n  1, 2003, p. 2.

⁴ Anthony FLETCHER, *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England 1500-1800*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1995, p. XV.

⁵ Hilda L. SMITH, *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists*, Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1982, p. 57.

⁶ Carole PATEMAN, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*, Cambridge: Polity P, 1989, p. 5.

⁷ Barbara TAYLOR, 'Mary Wollstonecraft and the Wild Wish of Early Feminism,' *History Workshop*, n  3, 1992, p. 213.

Astell and Wollstonecraft deal with the representation of women's status in domestic and political patriarchy as constructive, and proposing thinkers. Their apparent challenge to patriarchal society reflects their ambition to give enlightened women a better and more equal place. This paper deals with women's subjection in the household and in the state, linking rather than distinguishing the public and the private spheres. After a presentation of the writers and their works highlighting their common points and differences, the analysis of both writers' representations of women's status in domestic and political patriarchy will focus on particular aspects in law and social practices such as education and marriage. Finally we will turn to the constructive side of criticism: for both writers, women should be educated not to conform 'to the figure of the woman sculpted by masculine desire' to use Sharrock's words,⁸ but as rational creatures.

Astell and Wollstonecraft, writers committed to women's interests

No filiation can be established between Astell and Wollstonecraft. No proof exists that the latter had read any of the other's writing. Astell was born in Newcastle into a gentry family. Until the age of 13 she was educated by her uncle. After her parents' deaths, she moved to London at about the age of 21 and began her career as a writer. Her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) made her famous overnight and attracted the attention of several women patrons who gave her financial support. She set up a charity school for girls in Chelsea in 1709 and spent the final years of her life in London. Wollstonecraft was born in the capital in 1759; her father was a middle class gentleman farmer. From the age of 19, she 'worked in all of the traditional genteel female employments.'⁹ She was the paid companion of a widow before founding two day schools, then becoming a governess. Thereafter, '[s]he became first a translator and reader, afterwards a reviewer and editorial assistant'¹⁰ to a journal, supporting herself by writing.

The two women's writings belong to different historical contexts yet 'both wrote in response to political revolutions.'¹¹ Astell lived after the Civil War and the Glorious Revolution which led to questioning all authority in society and in the family, which resulted in a crisis both in political and in gender relations. For Wollstonecraft, it was in reaction to the French revolution, which is 'essential in order to understand [her] feminist challenge to English conservatism.'¹² For McCrystal, '[Their] revolutionary discourse deals at once with political revolution –

⁸ Catherine SHARROCK, 'De-ciphering Women and De-scribing Authority: The Writings of May Astell,' in Isobel GRUNDY and Susan WISEMAN (eds.), *Women, Writing, History, 1640-1740*, London: Batsford, 1993, p. 117.

⁹ Miriam BRODY (ed.), *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1982, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992, p. 4.

¹⁰ Marilyn BUTLER (ed.), 'General Introduction,' in Janet TODD and Marilyn BUTLER (gen. eds.), *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 7 vols., London: William Pickering, 1989, vol. 1, p. 8.

¹¹ MCCRYSTAL, 'Revolting Women . . . ,' p. 189.

¹² BRODY (ed.), p. 21.

*of subjects against rulers - and with a kind of sexual revolution: of women against men.*¹³

Astell advocated passive obedience, Wollstonecraft wanted to change society. Both wanted women to obtain the right to think and to speak; the latter also wanting them to have a civil existence. Astell was ‘*the first woman to denounce Locke’s politico-sociological positioning of women and wives.*’¹⁴ Wollstonecraft is deemed ‘*the first modern feminist theorist*’¹⁵ even if, before her *Vindication*, works dealt with women’s roles and rights. What is new in her work, Brody stresses, is her ‘*criticism of the social and economic system which created a double standard of excellence for male and female and relegated women to an inferior status.*’¹⁶

Both writers were committed to women’s interests. In her first *Proposal* Astell defines herself as ‘*A lover of her sex*’ with an intellectual and spiritual ambition for women. ‘*ambition*’ and ‘*improvement*’ are keywords in her commitment expressed in the opening pages of her first *Proposal*.¹⁷ Likewise, Wollstonecraft writes at the beginning of her ‘*Dedication*’: ‘*I plead for my sex, not for myself,*’¹⁸ which follows two similar assertions in her ‘*Introduction*’ (V 81-82, 82). Both writers wanted to make women aware of their capacities, of their worth to lead them to self-esteem (instead of interiorizing a so-called inferiority) and distinguish essence (the life of the mind and the soul for a better life) from appearances (the care of one’s body). Both share the conviction that women do not have to repress their intellect and that independence is necessary, yet not in the same fields: Astell intellectually, emotionally and, in Wollstonecraft’s case, one can add economically (V 85).

Both were in favour of women’s education and against their exclusion from knowledge. Astell advocated individual spiritual and moral reformation extending it to others through good examples (P 41) and would agree with Wollstonecraft’s aim: ‘*It is time to effect a revolution in female manners – time to restore to them their lost dignity . . .*’ (V 133). The latter looked for a reformation not only of women but of all society in keeping with the radical dimension of her ideas. This is why Sapiro refers to the liberal quality of her ideas: ‘*One reading of the book is that it called for extending the ‘rights of man’ to women . . .*’¹⁹ while Kinnaird stresses, Astell’s prefeminism ‘*was not born of liberal impulses but of conservative values. She preached not women’s rights but women’s duties. . .*’²⁰ Both women, however,

¹³ MCCRYSTAL, ‘*Revolting Women . . .*,’ p. 189.

¹⁴ BRYSON, ‘*Mary Astell . . .*,’ p. 56.

¹⁵ Cora KAPLAN, ‘*Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism,*’ *Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism*, London: Verso, 1986, p. 34.

¹⁶ BRODY (ed.), p. 25.

¹⁷ Mary ASTELL, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies. Parts I and II*, 1694, 1697, Patricia SPRINGBORG (ed.), London: Pickering, 1997, p. 9. Hereafter included in the text, preceded by *P*.

¹⁸ Mary WOLLSTONECRAFT, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792, in BRODY (ed.), p. 85. Hereafter included in the text, preceded by *V*.

¹⁹ Virginia SAPIRO, *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft*, Chicago: Chicago UP, 1992, p. 28.

²⁰ Joan KINNAIRD, ‘*Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism,*’ *Journal of British Studies*, n° 19, 1979, p. 73.

advocate 'the dignity of women, educational reform, and the ideal of companionate marriage.'²¹

Several works will be considered here. Astell's *Serious Proposal* (1694) claims that women should be treated as men are. It argues in favour of creating a college of higher education for women with a curriculum similar to that studied by men.²² Such a college would be a 'religious retreat' (P 18), for women where unmarried ones might withdraw either temporarily or not; they could later return to the world as governesses. Unlike Wollstonecraft, 'she makes no plea that the universities should admit women as well as men; she never argues that women have as much right as men to enter the professions and take part in the public life of the nation.'²³ As her college was not yet built, the Second Part of the *Proposal* (1697) provided a method for 'right thinking'²⁴ necessary for women's intellectual emancipation. *Reflections on Marriage* (1700) denounces the lack of balance of power within a marriage.

Wollstonecraft is a 'versatile writer.'²⁵ *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) starts with an address to Talleyrand-Périgord who delivered a report on education to the French National Assembly in 1791. It advocated a national system of education for both sexes of all ages; it however directed girls to domestic duties. As Moore puts it, she appeals to him 'to reconsider his views on female education in the light of the argument she makes for women's intellectual and moral equality. . . .'²⁶ Addressed to middle class women (V 81), a *Vindication* was written in response to conduct books for young women that 'have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers' (V 79). She defines it as 'a treatise . . . on female rights and manners' (V 79). Nowadays, it is called 'the founding text of Anglo-American feminism'²⁷ or 'the feminist declaration of independence.'²⁸ *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* is her unfinished novel on domestic tyranny with 'intertwined stories [many cases of women's sexual oppression]. The main one is that of Maria Venables, an upper middle-class woman, perfectly sound of mind, committed to an insane asylum by her husband who, in exercising his right to consign Maria to the asylum, separated her from her infant daughter.'²⁹ As Shanley writes, the novel 'explored the impact of law on creating and perpetuating sexual inequality. Together [with a *Vindication*] they constituted

²¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

²² See too Daniel Defoe's 'Academy for women' in *An Essay upon Projects*, 1697, ed. Henry Morley, London: Cassell, 1887, 171-72 and LEDUC's comparison between Astell's and Defoe's proposals in 'Mary Astell and Daniel Defoe, auteurs de projets féministes pour l'éducation?', *L'Éducation des femmes en Europe et en Amérique du Nord de la Renaissance à 1848*, ed. Leduc, Paris: L'Harmattan, 'Des idées et des femmes,' 1997, p. 144-59.

²³ KINNAIRD, 'Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution . . .,' p. 64.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²⁵ Mary Lyndon SHANLEY, 'Mary Wollstonecraft on Sensibility, Women's Rights, and Patriarchal Power,' in Hilda L. SMITH (ed.), *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998, p. 148.

²⁶ Jane MOORE, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, Plymouth: Northcote House, 1999, p. 37.

²⁷ KAPLAN, 'Wild Nights . . .,' p. 34.

²⁸ BRODY (ed.), p. 1.

²⁹ SHANLEY, 'Mary Wollstonecraft on Sensibility . . .,' p. 156.

*an extraordinary analysis of both the public and interpersonal workings of patriarchal power.*³⁰

The representation of women's status in social practices: education and marriage

So as to further the analysis of the two writers' representations of domestic and political patriarchy, something must be first said about how the situation of women evolved between Astell's and Wollstonecraft's time, given the socio-economic context and the long-term political aftermath of the Glorious Revolution. McKeon refers to the socio-economic background in order better to explain women's changing economic situation and increasing submission to patriarchy: *'the separation of the public from the domestic sphere is materially grounded in the capitalist transformation of the English countryside. . . . the emergence of modern patriarchy, and its system of gender difference, cannot be understood apart from the emergence of the modern division of labor and class formation.'*³¹ Focusing on gender difference, Hill writes, *'the victory of individualism was a victory for property, and wives by their very legal definition were propertyless so that all the Puritan emphasis on the virtues of thrift, industry and discipline tended towards the reinforcement not the weakening of the authority of husband and father.'*³²

The socio-economic background was reinforced by the political context. Perry explains how male authority was reasserted after the Glorious Revolution in theory as well in practice it tightened the reins on women and reaffirmed men's power over them.³³ The power in the state (limited monarchy) was set apart from the power within the family (absolute monarchy). She argues: *'Locke's statement, then, simultaneously legitimated two related forms of political practice: a limited monarchy responsible to an all-male citizenry in which each member was theorized as an absolute authority within his own family and as independent of any other citizen or household.'*³⁴

The repercussions of these changes on the situation of women are to be understood against the workings of patriarchy in the background. They depend on a conception of woman's inferiority which also means an inferior status in society, resting on limited female education, laws and customs. The system of patriarchy is embodied within the family, by gender roles [wife and mother] partly constructed by

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

³¹ Michael MCKEON, 'Historicizing Patriarchy: The Emergence of Gender Difference in England, 1660-1760,' *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 28, n°3, 1995, p. 298.

³² Bridget HILL (ed.), *The First English Feminist*, Aldershot: Gower, 1986. p. 21.

³³ Ruth PERRY, 'Mary Astell and the Feminist Critique of Possessive Individualism,' *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 23, n° 4, 1990, p. 449.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 450. Locke writes that 'the Power of a *Magistrate* over a Subject, may be distinguished from that of a *Father* over his Children, a *Master* over his Servant, a *Husband* over his Wife, and a *Lord* over his Slave' (*Two Treatises of Government*, 1690, ed. Peter Laslett, 1960, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988, 2 ch. 1, §2). For Pateman, '[Locke] explicitly agrees with Filmer that [...] that the husband's will must prevail in the household as he is naturally "the abler and the stronger"' [*Two Treatises* 1 §47; 2 §82] ' (121).

education and within the state, by legal and economic structures, such as women's loss of property rights after marriage.

Both writers dismiss the concept of woman's innate inferiority (*P* 10). For them woman's inferior situation is due to external causes, in particular education, which leads to sex differences. Astell develops the responsibility of education: '*if our Nature is spoil'd, instead of being improv'd at first; if from our Infancy we are nurs'd up in Ignorance and Vanity . . . 'tis not strange that the ill effects of this Conduct appear in all the future Actions of our Lives*' (*P* 11). Wollstonecraft's arguments follow the same logic: '*a profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore, and that women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes*' (*V* 79). No divine ordinance can be deciphered in women's inferior status.

This so-called inferiority leads to women's legal subjection. The right of primogeniture is one of the privileges given to the male sex, denounced in the *Wrongs of Women* (7.125, 128). In common law, husband and wife were '*one person*'³⁵ and marriage meant the '*civil death*' of women.³⁶ Hence Brody writes: '*A married woman, then, could legally hold no property in her own right, nor enter into any legal contract, nor for that matter claim any rights over her own children.*'³⁷ Wollstonecraft comments upon the fact that a wife is her husband's property both in *A Vindication* (*V* 107, 262-63) and in *Wrongs* where at least two sentences uttered by Maria bring the point home: '*[a wife] has nothing she can call her own*'³⁸ and '*a wife being as much a man's property as his horse, or his ass*' (2.11.158). A woman does not even own her own body, as Shanley notes: '*when Venables offers sex with Maria to his friend for a loan of five hundred pounds, both men regard the action as a plausible extension of Venables's prerogative as a husband.*'³⁹ It means that a '*married woman had no legal self in the patriarchal society. . . .*'⁴⁰

Laws are complemented by customs and denounced by both writers in the construction of women's subordination. *Wrongs* links them in the Preface (73). Astell castigates the force of '*that Tyrant Custom*' (*P* 15) in connection with education: '*Thus Ignorance and a narrow Education, lay the Foundation of Vice, and Imitation and Custom rear it up*' (*P* 14). Wollstonecraft associates custom and women's perennial submission (*V* 123, 262).

³⁵ See Susan STAVES, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660-1833*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990, pp. 1-5, 178-95.

³⁶ SHANLEY, 'Marriage Contract and Social Contract in Seventeenth-Century English Political Thought,' *The Western Political Quarterly*, n° 32, 1979, p. 91 (n. 51).

³⁷ BRODY (ed.), p. 30.

³⁸ Mary WOLLSTONECRAFT, *The Wrongs of Woman, or; Maria. A Fragment in Two Volumes*, 1798, in Gary KELLY (ed.), *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman*, 1976, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980, book 2, chapter 11, p. 158.

³⁹ SHANLEY, 'Mary Wollstonecraft on Sensibility . . .,' p. 158.

⁴⁰ Carol H. POSTON, 'Mary Wollstonecraft and "The Body Politic,"' in Maria J. FALCO (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1996, p. 89.

Customs resulting in women's lack of proper education participate in the construction of female inferiority. Astell would fully agree with Wollstonecraft's assertion that '*everything conspires to render the cultivation of the understanding more difficult in the female than the male world*' (V 145). They both denounce a double standard. Astell calls attention to a vicious circle and men's responsibility: '*Women are from their very infancy debarr'd those advantages with the want of which they are afterwards reproached and nursed up in those vices which will hereafter be upbraided to them*' (P 10). Parallel ideas and terms are to be found in *A Vindication*: '*it is unreasonable, as well as cruel, to upbraid them with faults that can scarcely be avoided . . .*' (V 225). Both writers blame men who encourage ignorance in order to keep women subservient (P 9, V 80).

The genteel education given at home by private tutors, or for the upper middle class in boarding schools, consisted in teaching the accomplishments along with reading and writing, stressing appearances over being. Middle-class girls were also taught household management. Astell violently criticizes the importance given to the appearance of their bodies: '*I cannot . . . reflect, that those Glorious Temples . . . be like a garnish'd Sepulchre, which for all its glittering, has nothing within but Emptiness and Putrefaction*' (P 7).⁴¹ A hundred years later, Wollstonecraft's denunciation is less scathing: '*genteel women are, literally speaking, slaves to their bodies and glory in their subjection*' (V 131).

The aim of such an education is to make women pleasing objects in the eyes of men. Wollstonecraft's comparison is explicit as concerns men's sexual desire that is to be teased by reified women: women were like '*standing dishes to which every glutton may have access*' (V 254) while Astell was less virulent, comparing women to '*Tulips in a Garden*' (P 7). What Purkiss writes about Astell can apply to Wollstonecraft: '*Astell is critical of women's representation of their bodies as commodities to be bought and sold, items of display which signify their price in a mercenary marriage market.*'⁴² The importance given to appearances leads both writers to denounce the vanity of women's conversation and occupations: Astell refers to '*that Meanness of Spirit*' (Letters 32-33) and Wollstonecraft to '*the mind [that] is left to rust*' (V 174).

The resulting risk is twofold. On the one hand, ignorance (including romantic illusions about their future lives) which leads to vice for Astell (P 11, 14) and for Wollstonecraft (V 156), for whom ignorance is slavery (V 261-62). On the other hand, a lack of independence of reasoning and judgement will make them bad wives and bad mothers (P40, 42, V 119, 137), that is, a '*nuisance*' for society, in Astell's words (P 10). For both writers, '*an educated mother is a better one*' (P 40, 41-42, V 113, 137, 139, 272)⁴³.

⁴¹ See Jonathan SWIFT's similar observations in *A Letter to a Young Lady, on Her Marriage*, 1723, *Irish Tracts 1720-1723 and Sermons, The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Louis Landa, 14 vols., Oxford: Blackwell, 1948, 9: 83-94 and Claude RAWSON's article 'Swift, les femmes et l'éducation des femmes,' in LEDUC (ed.), *L'Éducation des femmes en Europe et en Amérique du Nord de la Renaissance à 1848*, p. 245-65.

⁴² Diane PURKISS, 'Public Disturbance and Public Speaking: Mary Astell,' *Baetyl*, n°1, 1993, p. 45.

⁴³ BRODY (ed.), p. 28.

Both are angry women, denouncing women's subjection in society, criticizing fellow women above all as victims of their environment and their limited education. Françoise Barret-Ducrocq stresses that women '*forge their own chains*': '*C'est . . . parce qu'on les habitue dès l'enfance à forger leurs propres chaînes qu'elles prennent pour naturel ce qui n'est que le produit de leur formation. Le goût des poupées, par exemple, ou l'amour des beaux atours. . .*'⁴⁴ She adds: '*Le conditionnement, auquel elles sont soumises . . . fait de la majorité d'entre elles, du moins, dans les classes aisées, des infirmes de la raison.*'⁴⁵ She refers to Wollstonecraft's own condemnation: '*Whilst they are absolutely dependent on their husbands, they will be cunning, mean, selfish . . .*' (V 258).

Second, both writers vituperate women not just as victims, but also as accomplices in their own fate, when they are not held responsible, even guilty, manipulators, drawing advantages from the inferiority they contribute creating; women use appearances, '*the great art of pleasing*' (V 111) so as to gain a so-called share of power (V 126). Wollstonecraft draws a further conclusion: '*Women, obtaining power by unjust means, by practising or fostering vice . . . become either abject slaves or capricious tyrants*' (V 133). Both writers are very critical of women, accusing them overtly in a misogynistic tone: Astell challenges them to submit: '*How can you be content to be in the World like Tulips in a Garden, to make a fine shew and be good for nothing?*' (P 7) and Wollstonecraft writes '*It is your own conduct, O ye foolish women! which throws an odium on your sex*' (V 309).

Such charges seek to force women to see their '*real Interest*' (P 6, V 135), that is to cultivate their minds for the life to come, as Astell writes, playing on women's vanity to better describe her project: '*[The] aim is to fix that Beauty, to make it lasting and permanent . . . and to place it out of the reach of Sickness and Old Age, by transferring it from a corruptible Body to an immortal Soul*' (P 5). She wants to free women from the tyranny of appearances and ignorance so that they '*might realize in their traditional sphere their full potential as wives, mothers, and teachers of the young*,'⁴⁶ a threefold aim with which Wollstonecraft would have agreed. The latter fights against what Poston calls the '*erasure of the female self*'⁴⁷ when she writes '*I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves*' (V 156), which is exactly what Astell meant when she wrote: '*our only endeavour shall be to be absolute Monarch in our own Bosoms*' (P 180). Both writers want their works to be incentives to convince women that, as reasoning creatures, they should reject their interiorized sense of inferiority.

Apart from education, marriage is another target of both writers' criticisms. Some key elements concerning that institution in the early modern period must be borne in mind. Sommerville recalls that '*any woman who wanted to marry was morally obliged to accept subjection to her husband as part of the divine institution of marriage.*'⁴⁸ Astell is quite in keeping with these ideas when she asserts that

⁴⁴ Françoise BARRET-DUCROCQ, 'Une Percée conceptuelle dans le champ philosophique: Mary Wollstonecraft pense la différence des sexes,' *Cercles*, n°4, 2002, p. 41.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴⁶ KINNAIRD, 'Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution . . .,' p. 74.

⁴⁷ POSTON, 'Mary Wollstonecraft and "The Body Politic,"' p. 90.

⁴⁸ Margaret R. SOMMERVILLE, *Sex and Subjection: Attitudes to Women in Early-*

husbands like kings are ‘*the representatives of God*’⁴⁹ and likewise, ‘*[s]he then who Marrys ought to lay it down for an indisputable Maxim that her Husband must govern absolutely and intirely, and that she has nothing else to do but Please and Obey*’ (R 62). Astell justifies the wife's obedience to her husband in terms of her submission for ‘*GOD's sake*’ (R 75); she would obey not her husband but God. Astell refers to marriage as a sacrament, presented in heavenly terms (R 36) and not as a contract implying the free consent between people.⁵⁰ She cannot agree with Locke whose ‘*social contract*,’ in Bryson's words, ‘*constitutes the political realm of men, while the marriage contract governs the private world of women*.’⁵¹ She ‘*strongly disagrees with this contractual account of the natural authority*,’⁵² writing in *Reflections*: ‘*Covenants betwixt Husband and Wife, like Laws in an Arbitrary Government, are of little Force, the Will of the Sovereign is all in all*’ (R 106). For her, men are not free but depend on God's authority: Therefore, they are not free to sign a contract, to give someone else what they do not own. Unlike Astell, Wollstonecraft defends a whig view of marriage, writing: ‘*The divine right of husbands, like the divine right of kings, may, it is to be hoped, in this enlightened age, be contested without danger . . .*’ (V 128).

Both writers supported the religious institution of marriage. For Astell, the marriage bond was sacred; Wollstonecraft also supported marriage (V 167) as Shapiro puts it: ‘*[she] believed strongly in the institution of marriage, as long as it was founded on the correct principles of affection based on respect*.’⁵³ Yet both women scathingly criticized its practice. Comparisons and metaphors are eloquent: a wife is called an ‘*upper servant*’ (*Reflections* 78, V 127, 169). Marriage is considered a prostitution as soon as the marriage market by Astell (P 39) and as a whole in Wollstonecraft (V 152, 168) who also describes marriage as ‘*legal prostitution to increase wealth or shun poverty*.’⁵⁴ She chooses slavery as ‘*a suitable metaphor for the oppressed state of a wife*’ (V 276);⁵⁵ marriage is even depicted as the archetypal prison in *Wrongs*: ‘*Marriage had bastilled me for life*’ (2.10.154-55).

In the case of unhappy marriages, both authors suggest potential benefits. For Astell, a wife has two solutions either submission or religious devotion, as is stressed in the closing sentence of *Reflections*: ‘*if any Woman think her self Injur'd, she has a Remedy in reserve which few Man will Envy or endeavour to Rob her of, the Exercise and Improvement of her Vertue here, and the Reward of it hereafter*’ (R

Modern Society, London: Arnold, 1995, p. 217.

⁴⁹ ASTELL, *Some Reflections upon Marriage, Occasion'd by the Duke & Dutchess of Mazarine's Case; Which Is Also Consider'd*, 1700, in Patricia SPRINGBORG (ed.), *Astell. Political Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996, pp. 110-11. Hereafter included in the text, preceded by R.

⁵⁰ See LOCKE, *Two Treatises* 1 §47, 2 §80-83.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵² Alice BROWNE, *The Eighteenth-Century Feminist Mind*, Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1987, p. 93.

⁵³ SAPIRO, *A Vindication of Political Virtue*, p. 144.

⁵⁴ WOLLSTONECRAFT, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 1790, in TODD (ed.), *Political Writings*, p. 21.

⁵⁵ MOORE, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, p. 3.

80). Through submission women can show *'their inherent moral superiority.'*⁵⁶ Unhappy marriages can even prepare *'long-suffering women for sainthood'*⁵⁷ as one's soul can improve through trial, to which marriage is assimilated (R 131). For Wollstonecraft, the mistreated wife can become a better mother for *'an unhappy marriage is often very advantageous to a family, and that the neglected wife is, in general, the best mother'* (V 114-15).

Astell and Wollstonecraft's purpose: to educate women as rational creatures

The constructive aspect of their criticism is clear in both writers' texts. Both defend men's and women's intellectual innate equivalence based on rationality. Women's so-called mental and physical inferiority takes its roots in the traditional interpretation of the Bible. Astell speaks out against such a tradition. For example, she argues: *'For since God has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them?'* (P 22). Both acknowledge women's inferior physical strength: Wollstonecraft writes: *'the female in point of strength is, in general, inferior to the male. This is the law of Nature'* (V 80). Yet men's strength did not, for her, mean strength of mind.

Both assert that women as well as men are "rational creatures" (V 139). They resort to religious arguments to prove this. Astell takes her arguments from Genesis saying that men and women were created in God's image and gifted with reason (P 22). Her assertion is reinforced by another in her second *Proposal*: *'GOD does nothing in vain, he gives not Power of Faculty which he has not allotted to some proportionate use, if therefore he has given to Mankind a Rational Mind, every individual Understanding ought to be employ'd in somewhat worthy of it'* (P 118). Reason has not been granted to women without any purpose. Wollstonecraft agrees with this twofold argument. One finds a question in her text similar to Astell's: *'the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; for, can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason?'* (V 143).

As women are seen to be gifted with reason, this should therefore be improved: women have to develop their talents as a duty to themselves and to God for both writers (P 22, V 143). The parable of talents is implicitly hinted at by Astell (P 39) and explicitly by Wollstonecraft (V 140). That *'power of improvement'* (V 143) is complemented by understanding for Wollstonecraft (V 156). Improvement so as to develop intellectual and spiritual liberty would not be possible without a proper education.

Both refer to the aim of women's life which is not to be but pleasing objects and men's slaves, an affront to God. Astell refers to God's design: *'What did we come into World for? To Eat and to Drink and to pursue the little Impertinences of this Life? Surely no, our Wise Creator has Nobler Ends whatever we have; He sent us hither . . . to Prepare our selves and be Candidates for Eternal Happiness in a better'* (P 88). Wollstonecraft asks a parallel rhetorical question about the aim of a woman's earthly life. After an assertion (*'I will take for granted, she was not created*

⁵⁶ Kamille STONE STANTON, "'Affliction, the Sincerest Friend': Mary Astell's Philosophy of Women's Superiority through Martyrdom," *Prose Studies*, vol. 29, n° 1, 2007, p. 108.

⁵⁷ KINNAIRD, 'Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution . . . ,' p. 67.

merely to be the solace of man, and the sexual should not destroy the human character' [V 143-44; see too 138, 156]), she addresses a direct question to God the creator in so far as Genesis is often mentioned: *'hast thou created such a being as woman, who can trace Thy wisdom in Thy works, and feel that Thou alone art by Thy nature exalted above her, for no better purpose . . . [than] to submit to man, her equal . . . ? Can she consent to be occupied merely to please him . . . when her soul is capable of rising to Thee?'* (V 162). Both writers provide rational arguments and also rely on theology to argue that one has to improve and prepare for life in the next world through activities in this world (among which being good mothers and, Wollstonecraft would add, good citizens).

Reason and education are necessary so as to discharge one's duties (to oneself, to one's family and to the community) as Wollstonecraft points out (V 155-56, 158). Both writers acknowledge differences in men's and women's tasks (P 149-50, V 260). What Shanley writes about Wollstonecraft can also be applied to Astell: *'she accepted the notion that one of women's primary roles and social contributions . . . was nurturing and raising children.'*⁵⁸

If a better female education is indispensable, what does a better education mean? First of all the autonomy of women's thought based on an awareness of their worth and self-esteem. Astell developed a method to teach women how to think. No such element is suggested by Wollstonecraft. Women's intellectual autonomy is a means to become independent of others' opinions. Astell stresses the destructive importance given others' opinions: *'We value them too much, and our selves too little, if we place any part of our desert in their Opinions, and do not think our selves capable of Nobler Things than the pitiful Conquest of a worthless heart'* (P 8).

Both writers refer to the authority of reason and the autonomy of the mind. For Astell, *'The Mind is free, nothing but Reason can oblige it, 'tis out of the reach of the most absolute Tyrant'* (R 56) while Wollstonecraft writes: *'they [women] must only bow to the authority of reason, instead of being the modest slaves of opinion'* (V 139). Wollstonecraft's ideas are quite in keeping with an emancipation from the patriarchal system (V 135).

Time should be taken before marriage to give women a better education. Astell emphasizes its import: *'a discreet and vertuous Gentlewoman will make a better Wife than she whose mind is empty tho' her Purse be full'* (P 40), personal qualities being more important than material wealth. Likewise, in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, Wollstonecraft refers to *'early marriages'* as *'a stop to improvement'*⁵⁹ and *'wanted to delay it so that women could have time to develop their understandings.'*⁶⁰

A better education would lead first to a better choice of one's husband. Astell rejects any forced marriage (P 39). Since a woman, she writes, *'[e]lects a Monarch for Life'* (R 43), women's choice should rely on reason, not appearances or appetites (P 39). She advocates kindness, esteem and friendship, the ideal of her academy, as the basis for marriage. A similar conception is expressed by Wollstonecraft: *'they*

⁵⁸ SHANLEY, 'Mary Wollstonecraft on Sensibility . . .,' pp. 149-50.

⁵⁹ WOLLSTONECRAFT, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, 1787, in TODD and BUTLER (gen. eds.), *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, vol. 4, p. 31.

⁶⁰ POSTON, 'Mary Wollstonecraft and "The Body Politic,"' p. 91.

[women] should not be led astray by the qualities of a lover – for as a lover the husband, even supposing him to be wise and virtuous, cannot long remain' (V 228). She condemns such a foolish attitude (romantic and sexual love) in the choice of a marriage partner and advocates 'supportive friendships over promiscuous sexual relationships . . .'⁶¹ as the basis for relations between husband and wife (V 113-15, 169-70, 243, 272).

Two long-term positive consequences could appear. First Astell considers the possibility of the recovered dignity of marriage if the husband is enlightened (R 132). Second, for Wollstonecraft, love would be a more noble feeling: 'even love would acquire more serious dignity, and be purified in its own fires . . .' (V 227). Thus both advocate 'a new kind of marriage'⁶² with improved relations between the sexes. As to Astell's ideas here, Kinnaird refers to 'an enlightened ideal of marriage as rational and companionate',⁶³ which could be equally well applied to Wollstonecraft who uses the word 'companions' ('agreeable or rational companions' [V 202]).

Educating women is an imperative to prepare them for their duties in married life. With this on mind, Wollstonecraft recalls the consequences of a lack of proper education: 'Do the women who, by the attainment of a few superficial accomplishments, have strengthened the prevailing prejudice, merely contribute to the happiness of their husbands?' (V 119). Education should enable a wife to be a companion, a 'helpmate' (V 139, 268). Wollstonecraft establishes a link between wives' and mothers' characters: 'have women who have early imbibed notions of passive obedience, sufficient character to manage a family or educate children?' (V 119, see too 168, 272). She refers to independence of mind and character in the contrasting portraits of good and bad mothers, portraits drawn when two wives were left widows. The uneducated woman becomes in turn unable to educate her children (V 136-37). The reverse, 'a woman with a tolerable understanding' (V 137), properly educated, will prove a good mother (V 272). It will lead to 'enlightened maternal affection' (V 271).

Both writers consider attention given to young children as a short-term duty. Kinnaird writes: 'she [Astell] urged women to nurse their infants and watch over their children in their formative years.'⁶⁴ Some influence of Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* may perhaps be detected in the heed that should be paid to infants and young children. Wollstonecraft also refers to 'the care of children in their infancy' (V 271) and conjures up the suckling mother (V 227, 259, 323). Both writers see women endowed with a long-term mission in relation to their families and society. Astell refers to a civil mission and a moral one (P 150). Educated women's task was 'to revive the ancient Spirit of Piety in the World and to transmit it to succeeding Generations' (P 18) whereas Wollstonecraft refers more largely 'to reform the world' (V 133). Both writers think of women's roles not only in their families but also in the community (P 151-52, V 265).

Women's independence for Astell was essentially intellectual and spiritual, not as clearly economic as for Wollstonecraft, perhaps because they did not address the

⁶¹ TODD (ed.), p. XXIII.

⁶² SHANLEY, 'Mary Wollstonecraft on Sensibility . . .', p. 155.

⁶³ KINNAIRD, 'Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution . . .', p. 72.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

same social strata and because women's socio-economic situation had evolved. Both writers argue that being able to support oneself would provide an alternative to marriage as a means of economic survival. For Astell, single women leaving her monastery could become governesses (*P* 24, 39) and be as useful as mothers (*P* 150). She did not advocate women's access to professions as she knew that was impossible in her time but she hoped it would no longer be impossible in the future (*R* 75).

For Wollstonecraft, independence was indispensable; it also resulted from the ability to support oneself (*V* 268). She saw economic autonomy as necessary for single women, referring to '*the bitter bread of dependence*' (*V* 160) for those who became a burden on their families.⁶⁵ Such was also the case for wives who sought to be independent from their husbands; without which, as Shanley writes: '*husbands and wives could not experience the kind of equality that Wollstonecraft saw as a prerequisite for 'friendship' within marriage.*'⁶⁶ Yet she does not forget to add that for the author a job is not compulsory. Wollstonecraft refers to a range of possibilities available to women (not ladies): practising physicians, farmers, shop keepers (*V* 266-68); they might also be interested in business, politics and history.

Having a job would give women a civil existence not as subordinated wives and mothers in private life, but as individuals participating in society, in the state, which would lead to questioning the separation of the private and public spheres. For both women, contrary to the prevailing ideology of patriarchy, there is continuity between '*the domestic life*' of the family and '*the political life of the state.*'⁶⁷ Astell denounced a double standard: why accept in the family what is not accepted in the state, that is a tyrant (*R* 17, 18-19, 46-47)? Concerning Wollstonecraft's writings Todd stresses that '*it is this which seems most revolutionary: an insistence that private and public are joined and, [that] long before the 1960s, the personal and political are one*' as the feminist Kate Millett put it,⁶⁸ '*to deny the political aspect of familial relations was to curb those of women's rights which were external to the family,*'⁶⁹ in the 1960s. To avoid anachronism, one must bear in mind that, as women, Astell and Wollstonecraft were excluded from men's political or social contracts.

The two writers' arguments are often complementary when they are not similar. Some of Astell's ideas reappeared in Wollstonecraft's works, in particular about the education of women as rational beings. For Astell and Wollstonecraft, it is the key to personal and social progress. It is a right of women and, for Wollstonecraft, it is even 'a social imperative.'⁷⁰ Astell does not explicitly refer to women's rights (civil,

⁶⁵ See HILL, *Women Alone: Spinners in England 1660-1850*, New Haven: Yale UP, 2001.

⁶⁶ SHANLEY, 'Mary Wollstonecraft on Sensibility . . .', p. 160.

⁶⁷ BRODY, 'Mary Wollstonecraft: Sexuality and Women's Rights (17590-1797)', Brody, in Dale SPENDER, *Feminist Theorists: Three Centuries of Women's Intellectual Traditions*, London: Women's P Ltd, 1983, 43.

⁶⁸ TODD, ed., XIX. See Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, New York: Doubleday, 1970, p. 23-58.

⁶⁹ SMITH, *Reason's Disciples* 59.

⁷⁰ Brody, ed., 54.

property or political rights) beyond intellectual autonomy and education contrary to Wollstonecraft. Both hint at or refer to natural rights.

A tension can be observed in both writers' representations in patriarchy: in Astell, as she advocates women's independence, in particular in *Proposal*, even though she has to note women's submission as wives in *Reflections*. There is perhaps an opposition, as Hill observes, between 'her attachment to the divine right of kings and passive obedience' and 'her reluctance to accept women's position as slaves to domestic tyranny,'⁷¹ when she writes 'by how much 100,000 Tyrants are worse than one' (R 17). She can understand and does not condemn women's rebellion against tyrannical husbands (R 78-79). Even so, she does not accept such rebellion, still less does she encourage it since a woman has to obey her husband behind whom she sees God.

Astell explains how a husband should govern his household: '*Not as an absolute Lord and Master, with an Arbitrary and Tyrannical sway, but as reason Governs and Conducts a Man, by proposing what is Just and Fit*' (R 132). Here she draws the portrait of the enlightened husband. In addition, she does not hesitate to advocate celibacy if conditions are not fulfilled for an enlightened marriage since her alternative for women is either to '*patiently suffer what she cannot cure*' (R 75) or '*never consent to be a Wife*' (R 75). If a woman does not accept to '*Please and Obey*' (R 62), to be an '*upper servant*' (R 78), a '*slave*' (R 44, 57, 58, 65, 76) in marriage which means '*an intire Submission for Life*' and '*a continual martyrdom*' (R 78), she had better stay single. What is to be hoped in Astell as well as in Wollstonecraft (V 228-29) is that, when women are educated, they would choose their husbands more carefully (R 74), leading to women's better situation in the domestic patriarchy.

In Wollstonecraft's case, the tension lies between the domestic role of 'rational motherhood'⁷² and personal achievement in public life. She applies to women what Bacon writes about men; she quotes him: "*Certainly the best works, and of greatest merit for the public, have proceeded from the unmarried or childless men*" (V 157) and adds '*I say the same of women,*' yet she does not advocate celibacy for women, at least not for the same reasons as Astell. As a compromise she distinguishes two categories of women: '*though I consider that women in the common walks of life are called to fulfil the duties of wives and mothers, by religion and reason, I cannot help lamenting, that women of a superiour cast have not a road open by which they can pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence*' (V 228).

The continuity between domestic and public domains (with a cross-influence) is clearly stated in a sentence that encapsulates her hope: '*Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens*' (V 231). The personal and the political are closely linked when she writes near the end of her book: '*Make women rational creatures and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives and mothers – that is, if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers*' (V 306). As with Astell, men should be first enlightened to make such a situation possible. The personal and the political would be more tightly connected as, for her, women, as mothers of future citizens, ought to be represented

⁷¹ Hill (ed.), 43.

⁷² BRODY (ed.), 57.

in politics (*V* 228). Audacity does not reside in the personal, in celibacy, but in the political field.

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