

Mary Astell (1666–1731)

'Women are from their very infancy debarred those Advantages with the want of which they are afterwards reproached, and nursed up in those Vices which will hereafter be upbraided to them. So partial are Men as to expect Brick where they afford no Straw; and so abundantly civil as to take care we shou'd make good that obliging Epithet of Ignorant, which out of an excess of good Manners, they are pleas'd to bestow on us!'

Mary Astell, *A Serious proposal to the ladies, for the advancement of their true and greatest interest. By a lover of her sex* (London: Printed for R. Wilkin at the King's Head in St. Paul's Church-Yard, 1694), 1st ed.

by Janet Todd

An instant success, *A Serious Proposal* went through four new editions in seven years. Astell's argument attributes women's vanity, their frivolous obsessions with dress and appearance, to society's denigration of their intellect. By depriving women of religious and philosophical thought, men denied them an insight into the moral purpose of human life. An 'ingenuous and liberal Education' was, *A Serious Proposal* explained, 'the most effectual means' to secure women's 'progress in the way of Vertue'; it would provide them with both religious understanding and spiritual self-esteem.

To achieve these goals Astell suggested setting up a scholarly secular convent which would afford women a retreat from society and an opportunity to contemplate, study, and enjoy the friendship of like-minded learned women. She stopped short of detailing her syllabus. However, in line with her declaration that the 'only design' of her institution was religious, she damned the reading of plays and romances, declared the study of foreign languages nonessential and suggested in their stead instructive preaching and catechizing.

Following vociferous disapproval of her proposed female academy—her pamphlet was lampooned by famous contemporaries such as Richard Steele and the playwright Susanna Centlivre—Astell fired back with *A Serious Proposal, Part II* (1697), which left behind educational theory to scrutinize prevalent philosophical and theological assumptions that denied women the capacity for mental improvement. Three years later

Astell published *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), a lucid analysis of the asymmetries of seventeenth-century gender relations and the personal misery that arose from ill-judged matches. Even if her arraignment of women's inferior status at times conflicted with her high Tory belief in the necessity of a subject's absolute obedience to her monarch, the question Astell posed in the third edition of *Reflections* was unequivocal: "If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?"

Not much is known about Astell's life. She was born and raised in Newcastle in a well-to-do Tory Anglican household. Brought up as a gentlewoman, young Mary was taught privately by a learned but rather drunken clergyman uncle, who introduced her to philosophy and theological doctrine and probably instilled in her that unusual degree of piety which characterized her later writing. The death of her father in 1678 threw the family into financial turmoil; her uncle's death swiftly followed, then her mother's in 1684. So, at eighteen Mary Astell became an orphan with no dowry and few opportunities to support herself.

With remarkable determination she moved to London and set about establishing herself in a misogynist literary market. From the early 1690s until 1709 she published six books and three Tory pamphlets, which gained her a reputation for rhetorical precision and philosophical acuity.

After 1709 Astell ceased writing new works, corresponded only with friends and involved herself with the foundation of a charity school for girls in the salubrious suburb of Chelsea, where she had been living since her arrival in London. She died in 1731, less than two months after a mastectomy. Facing death with great courage and piety she ordered her coffin to be brought into her bedroom while she was still alive and, for the last two days, she refused nourishment and the company of friends so that she could contemplate God alone.