



THE ELOQUENCE OF MARY ASTELL

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**Some Reflections
Upon Marriage**

By the time she came to write *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*, Mary Astell had had considerable success as a writer, having published both parts of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* and her correspondence with John Norris.¹ *Reflections* builds upon these achievements, but its purpose, its focus, and its audience are different. It was very well received in Astell's own day, running to five editions within her lifetime, and it remains one of the more accessible of her works to a twenty-first-century audience. In this chapter I shall use a discussion of *Reflections* to demonstrate Astell's expertise in what was for her a new kind of writing – epideictic, the rhetoric of praise and blame – and to track her further progress from *sermo* to *contentio*: here for the first time Astell engages in political discussion and also for the first time addresses a fully public audience.

To review briefly the discussion of audience in the previous chapters: her first work, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, most of which was written, though not published, before *A Serious Proposal*, had an audience of one. The letters began as a private correspondence, and although they were later published, the address remains a private one. Astell's main challenges in *Letters* were to express her ideas with the utmost clarity and to sustain her arguments logically, providing support and accommodating rebuttal. Since her audience of one was highly intelligent, sympathetic, and well acquainted with the subject of their discussion, there were few other rhetorical challenges to meet.

In her continued development as a writer, we see her broadening her intended audience. *A Serious Proposal, Part I* is addressed primarily to the ladies – that is, to women of a certain social standing. She belonged to the same social stratum herself, and had suffered some of the same disadvantages as the women she addressed. In *Part I*, she accommodates – besides the women – parents and possible patrons. But the focus is always on the ladies, and nearly all her arguments are addressed to them. She has

progressed from an audience of one to an audience of many, but the members of the audience are not diverse: they share most of their interests and values, and Astell is able to use these as material to promote her argument. In *A Serious Proposal, Part II* the audience is broader. There, though her primary audience is still the ladies, and though she still uses the convention of the letter, she clearly also has in mind other interested parties, including philosophers, in particular those who disagree with her fundamental convictions, and specifically John Locke and Damaris Masham.

In *Reflections* her audience is broader still. Unlike her previously published works, this one is not in the form of a letter. For the first time, then, Astell published a work that uncompromisingly belongs to *contentio*, to the full public discourse of oratory, not even in form using the much more permissible (for a woman) letter genre of *sermo*. Perhaps she made this change because she had no specific audience in mind. The audience is in fact the general public, all who take an interest in public welfare, and in particular leaders of opinion, formulators of cultural values in an age of change. Since the audience is fully public, then, it is appropriate that the form be a public one too. Her purpose in writing *Reflections* is given in the preface attached to the third edition of 1706: the *Reflections*, Astell states, “have no other Design than to Correct some Abuses, which are not the less because Power and Prescription seem to Authorize them” (7). In fact, she is launching an attack on the cultural values of her time, and in particular on those (chiefly, that is, the men) who perpetuate them. As in her other works, Astell withholds her name, though she makes no secret of her sex. As we have seen, she believes in the intrinsic *ethos* produced through rhetorical *logos*, rather than in extrinsic *ethos*: the text should speak for itself and should be evaluated on rational grounds.

In this work, then, Astell abandons the letter genre and goes fully public. Nonetheless, there are traces of the origins of the work in *sermo*. She uses throughout a style that in its immediacy derives from the conversational, though it is more controlled and focused, and it soars at times into full eloquence. The subject matter of *Reflections* embraces both the social domestic concerns of the ladies and the public and political issues that were under discussion by the gentlemen. What she clearly shows is that the two worlds – that of women and that of men, so sharply separated in the bourgeois ideology – must be seen as one.

Like all her works, this is an occasional piece; in this case, the occasion is the gossip aroused by the publication of *The Arguments of Mons. Mazarin against the Dutchess, his Spouse, and the Factum for the dutchess by Mons. St Evremont*. This document consisted of the legal briefs of the lawsuit brought by the Duke of Mazarin against his estranged wife (Perry, *Celebrated* 153). The work had been translated from the French and published in 1699, shortly after the death of the duchess. A notorious figure in late seventeenth-century London, the duchess had led the kind of life of which Astell strongly disapproved. They were near neighbours in Chelsea, and Astell must have been well aware of her questionable lifestyle. Nevertheless, she was sorry for her. The publication of the old legal briefs inspired Astell to read the duchess's memoirs and to compare the two accounts. The story of her trials and the claims made by the duke as to his right to insist upon her obedience illustrated exactly the kind of abuse that moved Astell to outrage and stimulated her considerable powers of vituperation.

The abuse of Hortense de Mancini had begun at the hands of her famous uncle, the Cardinal Mazarin. Approaching death, Mazarin had given Hortense to the Duc de Meilleraye et Mayenne on condition that he take the name of Mazarin. Unfortunately the duke, though passionately in love with Hortense, was mentally unstable. His abuse of her and his wasting of her considerable fortune finally provoked her to demand a separation, which the courts denied. Thereupon, she escaped to England and took refuge at the court of her friend, Charles II, who gave her a generous pension of four thousand pounds a year, her husband having cut off the allowance originally made her from her own large estates. Her lifestyle after her separation from her husband was somewhat irregular, and Astell did not approve of it:

Had Madame Mazarine's Education made a right Improvement of her Wit and Sense, we should not have found her seeking Relief by such imprudent, not to say scandalous Methods, as running away in Disguise with a spruce Cavalier, and rambling to so many Courts and Places, nor diverting her self with such Childish, Ridiculous, or Ill-natur'd Amusements, as the greatest part of the Adventures in her Memoirs are made up of. (34)

But though her behaviour may not have been admirable, she was indeed an abused wife, and as such she drew Astell to her defence.

In *A Serious Proposal, Parts I and II* Astell's main concern was with the lot of unmarried women: it was for them that she planned the "Protestant monastery" that should serve both as a refuge and as an educational establishment. Now she extends her concern to embrace married women also. Though usually not reduced to such abject poverty as was often suffered by the unmarried, their position was in some respects even more pitiable. A woman had little power to choose her mate. She was, in theory, allowed to refuse the man her parents had chosen for her, but in practice such pressure was often brought to bear on her that in fact she had little choice. Once married, she was completely in her husband's power. She had no independent social or political status. Any money she brought to him as dowry became his to control, and if she left him for any reason at all, he retained it. Furthermore, he kept any children of the marriage. A woman who left her husband, therefore, lost everything: home, property, means of support, even her own children. A man might, in certain circumstances, obtain a divorce, but she could not. As Astell points out, "[I]f the Matrimonial Yoke be grievous, neither Law nor Custom afford that redress which a Man obtains" (46). At a time when the idea of the human right to freedom was growing, the total lack of it for the married woman was, Astell believed, particularly shocking. Her outrage is apparent throughout. It sets the whole tone of the discourse. For this is not primarily informative discourse, like *A Serious Proposal, Part II*, nor persuasive, like *Part I*: it falls into the epideictic category, the category of praise and blame. It is invective.

Reflections is Astell's most obviously feminist work. She is unsparing in her denunciation of the various parties responsible for the plight of women. There are three objects of Astell's attack: first the men, or to be more specific, the gentlemen, for as such they see themselves – gentlefolk, who lay claim to the virtues of courtesy and consideration that the term was supposed to imply. The second object is the ladies themselves, whom she indicts chiefly for their folly, and the third is the growing Whig faction, to which John Locke and his cohorts belonged. In this work Mary Astell goes beyond her earlier interests in philosophy and education and branches out into politics.²

Astell begins *Reflections* by giving the context, a short account of the life of Madam Mazarin, being careful not to excuse her faults. In beginning in this way, Astell shows that she is rhetorically astute: it is usually wise in a discourse of this confrontational

kind to begin by making allowances to the other side. The concession to the opposition creates a sense of honesty and fair play, and thus creates a good intrinsic *ethos* for the writer. This is not to suggest, however, that Astell is not sincere in her condemnation of the conduct of the duchess. A strict moralist, she can in no way condone her behaviour. But having made these concessions she proceeds to her main task: "But Madam Mazarine is dead, may her Faults die with her; may there be no more occasion given for the like Adventures, or if there is, may the Ladies be more Wise and Good than to take it! Let us see then from whence the mischief proceeds, and try if it can be prevented" (36).

Astell proceeds by giving a defence of marriage as an institution. Everyone, she acknowledges, seems to complain about it, but it is in itself good, both by sacred and by secular standards: "The Christian Institution of marriage provides the best that may be for Domestic Quiet and Content, and for the Education of Children; so that if we were not under the tie of Religion, even the Good of Society and civil Duty would oblige us to what that requires at our Hands" (37). The trouble lies not in the institution but in the immoral practices of those who marry. As Astell traces faults in thinking and writing to moral flaws, so she attributes the sorrows of marriage to the failure of the partners to observe Christian standards of behaviour. Marriage requires, in the first place, mutual tolerance: "For he who would have every one submit to his Humours and will not in his turn comply with them, tho' we should suppose him always in the Right, whereas a Man of this temper very seldom is so, he's not fit for a Husband" (37).

Astell now launches into her attack on men: it is not surprising that so many men appear to be unhappy in their marriages, for they select their partners for all the wrong reasons. The first of these is money. Astell allows that the pair must have enough to live on in a manner appropriate to their social standing, but she denies that money ought to be the chief, much less the sole consideration. The intolerable burden of living with an uncongenial wife is a sorrow that many men bring upon themselves because they choose their wives only with a view to the fortunes they bring as dowry. Thus they often impose on themselves an exile from their own homes because they find they cannot live with their wives.

Marrying for money, however, is not the only cause of unhappy unions. What about those who marry for love of beauty? Astell considers this to be just as bad, just as indefensible, just as likely

to lead to disappointment: "There's no great odds between his Marrying for the Love of Money, or for the Love of Beauty, the Man does not act according to Reason in either Case, but is govern'd by irregular Appetites" (41). Then there are those who choose their wives for their "wit" – their apparent cleverness. Surely this is unexceptionable? Not so, at least, not in the current social context: "But he loves her wit, perhaps, and this you'll say is more Spiritual, more refin'd; not at all if you examine it to the Bottom. For what is that which nowadays passes under the name of Wit? A bitter and ill-natur'd Raillery, a pert Repartee" (41): what we should now call smartness or cheekiness, or even caustic sarcasm. Again, Reason is to be the criterion: anything not consistent with "Decorum and Good Manners [...] is not just and fit, and therefore offends our Reason" (42). Here Astell digresses to assert that however disagreeable woman's wit may be, it can never match man's for sheer distastefulness. Yet a woman who is admired for her wit is likely to come as close as she can to this degraded standard. "A Man then cannot hope to find a woman whose Wit is of a size with his, but when he doats on Wit it is to be imagin'd that he makes choice of that which comes the nearest to his own" (42). Furthermore, "it is not improbable that such a Husband may in a little time by ill usage provoke such a Wife to exercise her Wit, that is her Spleen, on him, and then it is not hard to guess how very agreeable it will be to him" (43).

However, if men are to be blamed for marrying for all the wrong reasons, so are women: "But do the Women never chuse amiss? Are the Men only in fault?" (43). Astell is reluctant to blame women – she would rather pity them, she asserts. Even men must admit that the wife has "much the harder bargain. [...] [S]he puts her self entirely into her Husband's Power" (46). If he is unpleasant, neglectful, even abusive, she has no recourse in law. Astell points out that women cannot really be said to choose at all: all they have is the power of refusal. Yet in their failure to exercise this power, they show themselves to be foolish, even if they are not so much to blame as the men. She accuses them of being taken in by the courtship rituals of the time, according to which a man represented himself as the servant, even the slave, of the lady: "[H]e may call himself her slave a few days, but it is only to make her his all the rest of his Life" (44). Women, she thinks, are too susceptible to flattery, and men simply take advantage of their weakness, telling them lies and making false promises. If instead of flattering

their ladies that they were already wise and good the men would attempt to make them so, those ladies might deserve the praise that is lavished on them. But such reformation is not likely: “[A]s long as Men have base and unworthy Ends to serve, it is not to be expected that they should consent to such Methods as would certainly disappoint them” (45). For the women would then see through the false protestations of their lovers, and refuse them. The worst offenders in using this deceitful discourse, then, are the least likely to reform.

Taken in by false flattery, believing literally that the lover is her “humble servant,” which really amounts to nothing more than a form of words, the woman puts herself into the position of the unpaid labourer:

A lover who comes upon what is call'd equal Terms, makes no very advantageous Proposal to the Lady he Courts, and to whom he seems to be a humble Servant. For under many sounding Compliments, Words that have nothing in them, this is his true meaning, he wants one to manage his Family, an House-keeper, a necessary Evil, one whose Interest it will be not to wrong him, and in whom therefore he can put greater confidence than in any he can hire for Money. One who may breed his Children, taking all the care and trouble of their Education, to preserve his Name and Family. One whose Beauty, Wit, or good Humour and agreeable Conversation, will entertain him at Home when he has been contradicted and disappointed abroad; who will do him that Justice the ill-natur'd World denies him, that is in any one's Language but his own, sooth his Pride and Flatter his Vanity, by having always so much good Sense as to be on his side, to conclude him in the right, when others are so Ignorant, or so rude as to deny it. Who will not be Blind to his Merit nor contradict his Will and Pleasure, but make it her Business, her very Ambition to content him; whose softness and gentle Compliance will calm his Passions, to whom he may safely disclose his troublesome Thoughts, and in her Breast discharge his Cares; whose Duty, Submission and Observance, will heal those Wounds other Peoples opposition or neglect have given him. In a word, one whom he can intirely Govern, and consequently may form her to his will and liking, who must be his [for] Life, and therefore cannot quit his Service, let him treat her how he will. (51)

The woman is, in fact, little better than a slave.

This brings us to the question of Astell's political interests, and her use in *Reflections* of the language of politics and of law, including the vocabulary of slavery. Early in the preface to the 1706 edition, she institutes the parallel that she will continue to use throughout. "Far be it from her to stir up Sedition of any sort, none can abhor it more; and she heartily wishes that our Masters wou'd pay their Civil and Ecclesiastical Governors the same Submission, which they themselves exact from their Domestic Subjects" (8). The parallels continue:

[I]f Absolute Sovereignty be not necessary in a State, how comes it to be so in a Family? or if in a Family, why not in a State; since no Reason can be alledg'd for the one that will not hold more strongly for the other? If the Authority of the Husband so far as it extends, is sacred and inalienable, why not of the Prince? The Domestic Sovereign is without Dispute Elected, and the Stipulations and Contract are mutual, is it not then partial in Men to the last degree, to contend for, and practise that Arbitrary Dominion in the Families, which they abhor and exclaim against in the State? (17)

In fact, the exercise of arbitrary power – that is, tyranny – is worse in the family than in the state, for it involves far more tyrants than merely one: every husband becomes a potential tyrant. The comparisons continue. Astell uses political language to represent the exercise of power within marriage: "Covenants between Husband and Wife like Laws in an Arbitrary Government, are of little Force, the will of the sovereign is all in all" (52). The woman "elects a Monarch for Life" and "gives him an Authority she cannot recall however he misapply it." This is a very timely comparison in the context of seventeenth-century politics: the rightful king, Charles I, had been beheaded for the alleged abuse of power, and his son James II had been forced to abdicate only a dozen years earlier. No such recourse was allowed to women. And in another passage, the question of rebellion is again raised:

He who has Sovereign Power does not value the Provocations of a Rebellious Subject, but knows how to subdue him with ease, and will make himself obey'd; but Patience and Submission are the only Comforts that are left to a poor People, who

groan under Tyranny, unless they are Strong enough to break the Yoke, to Depose and abdicate, which I doubt wou'd not be allow'd of here. For whatever may be said against Passive-Obedience in another case, I suppose there's no Man but likes it very well in this; how much soever Arbitrary Power may be dislik'd on a Throne, not Milton himself wou'd cry up Liberty to poor Female Slaves, or plead for the Lawfulness of Resisting a Private Tyranny. (47)

Here we see Astell making use of the concept of freedom, so much under debate in her time, to represent the case of women. She has already used this idea in an earlier passage: "If *all men are born free*," she asks, quoting Locke, "how is it that all Women are born slaves? as they must be if the being subjected to the *inconstant, uncertain, arbitrary will of men be the perfect Condition of Slavery?*" (18).³ The proper relationship between king and country, as between man and wife, Astell sees as a matter of service, not from the subordinates to the superior, but from the superior to the subordinates: "Nor will it ever be well either with those who Rule or those in Subjection, even from the Throne to every Private Family, till those in Authority look on themselves as plac'd in that Station for the good and improvement of their Subjects, and not for their own sakes" (56). And she goes on to point out that "he who shou'd say the People were made for the Prince who is set over them, wou'd be thought to be out of his Senses as well as his Politicks" (57). Yet it was commonly held that women were made only for the benefit of men.

It might appear from the parallels cited above that Astell is demanding that women be treated according to the democratic principles espoused by the political party of the Whigs: that she believes that hierarchy, whether in the state or in the family, is to be resisted. But in fact, Astell was a high Tory, a conservative, a Royalist, who believed in hierarchy as ordained by God: hierarchy in the state, where God had appointed the king as ruler; hierarchy in the church, where bishops had the right to rule; and hierarchy also within the family. She did not believe that all women were subordinate to all men, but she did believe in the divine right of husbands, as in the divine right of kings.⁴ This apparent inconsistency has been the subject of considerable debate among Astell scholars. Hilda Smith thinks Astell implicitly contradicts herself at this point (118). Patricia Springborg contends that *Reflections* is

not really about marriage at all, but about politics (*Astell, Political Writings* xxviii).

The question is highly complex. My own reading of this element in *Reflections* is as follows. Astell is becoming increasingly interested in politics. Her objections to the empiricism of Locke, begun in philosophy, have now moved to embrace politics as well. The two, after all, are very closely linked in seventeenth and early eighteenth-century thought. Objecting as she does to the political philosophy of the Whigs, she cannot forbear to point out that their application of it is inconsistent: if they truly believe in freedom, why not freedom for women as well as men? What applies in the one case applies equally in the other. Given their convictions, they ought to act to make available to women the same freedom that they are anxious to assert as the right of men. Unless they can prove that women, like animals, are deficient in reason, and hence ought to be “chained to the chimney corner” (29), they are bound by their own convictions to treat them as fully human; and this would necessarily involve giving them rights in the family.

But Astell’s own solution to the problem of abused women is different, and it is typical of her:

[I]f a Woman were duly Principled and Taught to know the world, especially the true Sentiments that Men have of her, and the Traps they lay for her under so many gilded Compliments, and such a seemingly great Respect, that disgrace wou’d be prevented which is brought upon too many Families, Women would Marry more discreetly, and demean themselves better in a Married State than some People say they do.⁵ (74)

In fact, she reiterates the advice which she has given at length in *A Serious Proposal, Part II*: “[S]he shou’d be made a good Christian and understand why she is so, and then she will be everything else that is good” (*Some Reflections* 74).

Again, Astell stresses the importance of understanding: a woman cannot truly engage in moral behaviour unless she has understood its principles. Morality and comprehension work together. Once again, Astell argues that it is in men’s best interests to provide education for women, for only so can they be sure of wives who are reliable, trustworthy, and good company. Properly educated, a woman would “duly examine and weigh all the Circumstances, the Good and Evil of a Married State, and not be surpriz’d with

unforeseen Inconveniences, and either never consent to be a Wife, or make a good one when she does" (75).

From the parallels she draws between the political and the domestic, Astell does not derive what appears to the twenty-first-century feminist to be the obvious conclusion. For her, the authority of the husband is ordained by God, and even if it were not, common sense would dictate some hierarchy within the family: "Now unless this supremacy be fix'd somewhere, there will be a perpetual Contention about it, such is the love of Dominion" (15). All that Astell recommends is that women should cease to be fools and men cease to be villains. Until this state of affairs can be brought about, marriage for women will continue to be martyrdom. Yet if they enter into that state rationally, they have a better chance of happiness in this life and can be sure of reaping their reward hereafter.

It is the appeal to reason that characterizes the arguments throughout. The gentlemen should use their powers of reason in choosing a wife, the ladies in accepting a husband; the Whigs should be reasonable in applying the same political standards within the family and the state. And men in authority of any kind should recognize that it is in their own best interests to promote the understanding of those for whom they are responsible:

Superiors don't rightly understand their own interest when they attempt to put out their Subjects Eyes to keep them Obedient. A Blind Obedience is what a Rational Creature shou'd never Pay, nor wou'd such an one receive it did he rightly understand its Nature. For Human Actions are no otherwise valuable than as they are conformable to Reason, but a blind Obedience is Obeying without Reason, for ought we know against it. (75)

In the importance she places on reason, both in her arguments and in her preference for *logos* over *ethos* as a means of persuasion, Astell shows herself as typical of the Enlightenment. Although she does not believe reason to be the only criterion, especially in matters of faith, she holds that the divine light – "the candle of the Lord" as the Neoplatonists called it – is innate in every human being, male and female alike. In *A Serious Proposal, Part II* she claims for women an equal share with men in this divine reason; here she is demanding that both women and men exercise that gift, using it to direct their behaviour.

What then are the most salient characteristics of Astell's achievement in this work? The most obvious one is that here for the first time she engages in a new kind of rhetoric. *A Serious Proposal, Part I* is deliberative rhetoric, the rhetoric of persuasion. *Part II* is forensic, the rhetoric of information. With *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* she completes her mastery of all three forms, for this work is epideictic, the kind of rhetoric that deals with praise and – as in this case – blame. It is important to recognize what Astell is about, for although this is her most strongly feminist work, contemporary feminists are likely to find it puzzling and unsatisfactory. Beyond suggesting that both men and women should become wise and good, Astell offers no real solution to the problem of gross injustice toward married women. She does not attempt to. For this is neither a proposal nor a philosophical discussion: *Reflections* is fundamentally a work of invective. It is vituperation. She does it very well, and is obviously enjoying herself.

An equally salient characteristic of *Reflections* is Astell's use of enthymemes.⁶ She can assume that her audience will be both knowledgeable and interested in the current political debate, and she uses that knowledge and interest to her advantage. Particularly so far as the Whigs among her readership are concerned, she draws upon the assumptions that she can expect them to make, using that which to them is incontestable to force her point home. Her adoption of the political parallels, therefore, is designed both to engage the interest of the audience – for politics was the most discussed subject of the time – and to attack her political enemies. This use of current interests to strengthen her arguments is particularly astute, for among the general audience she here addresses there might be few seriously concerned about the plight of married women, but many for whom political convictions and allegiances are burning issues.

But above all, it is Astell's style that makes *Reflections* such excellent reading – still. Renowned for her eloquence in her own day, she brings to her invective a consummate rhetorical expertise. Her style is lucid, spare, the words exactly chosen, the sentence structures designed for maximum impact. Her language is deliberately wounding. She is devastating in her use of irony and sarcasm, some of it obvious, some more subtle. In her indictment of men she has recourse to an animal vocabulary: the husband who always insists upon having his own way “ought to be turn'd out of the Herd to live by himself” (37). Here with this simple choice of “herd” instead

of “community” Astell implies without stating it the beastliness of the intolerant husband. A similar use of innuendo is found in the veiled comparison of husbands with pigs in the preface added to the third edition of 1706:

[T]is certainly no Arrogance in a Woman to conclude, that she was made for the Service of God, and that this is her End. Because God made all Things for Himself, and a Rational Mind is too noble a Being to be Made for the Sake and Service of any Creature. The Service she at any time becomes oblig'd to pay to a Man, is only a Business by the Bye. Just as it may be any Man's Business to keep Hogs; he was not Made for this, but if he hires himself out to such an Employment, he ought conscientiously to perform it. (11)

Critical though she is of her political enemies, and at times even of women themselves, it is in her indictment of men that she is particularly unsparing. She expresses withering contempt for the mindless aspiring beau: “A Husband indeed is thought by both Sexes so very valuable, that scarce a man who can keep himself clean and make a Bow, but thinks he is good enough to pretend to any Woman” (66). She sarcastically dismisses the contemptuous charge that women cannot keep a secret: “Some Men will have it, that the Reason of our Lord's appearing first to the Women, was their being least able to keep a Secret; a Witty and Masculine Remarque, and wonderfully Reverent!” (27). More subtle is her use of irony – the following is fair example of her mastery of this trope:

[I]t were ridiculous to suppose that a woman, were she ever so much improv'd, cou'd come near the topping Genius of the Men, and therefore why shou'd they envy or discourage her? Strength of Mind goes along with Strength of Body, and 'tis only for some odd Accidents which Philosophers have not yet thought worth while to enquire into, that the Sturdiest Porter is not the Wisest Man! (77)

Occasionally, Astell makes women also the butt of her wit as when (again using the language of slavery) she bitingly complains that women “are for the most part Wise enough to Love their Chains, and to discern how very becomingly they set” (29). Her satire is

made particularly telling by her mastery of sentence form. Consider the elegant economy of the throw-away phrase in which she refers to “Lovers, who are not more violent in their Passion than they are certain to Repent of it” (43). Notice, too, the perfect balance and the laconic style here: “Women [...] are blam’d for that ill Conduct they are not suffer’d to avoid, and reproach’d for those Faults they are in a manner forc’d into” (65).

In conclusion, then, *Reflections* represents a number of “firsts” for Astell. Here for the first time, as we have seen, she engages fully in *contentio*, public rhetoric. Also for the first time she writes an epideictic work. Elements of praise and blame have certainly been present in her earlier works, just as elements of persuasion and information are to be found in this. But the overriding purpose of this work is to attack the public cultural values of her time, particularly as they concern women. *Reflections* is one of the more important of early feminist works, though its feminism belongs to its own time, not ours. And it is not only cultural values that she attacks, for this work includes a telling criticism of the political and philosophical values of her opponents, the rising Whig party. Here she first shows her powers in political rhetoric. The criticism begun in *A Serious Proposal, Part II* now blossoms. Her feminism and her politics work off each other, sharpen their edges against each other. She argues tellingly, forcefully, showing promise of the eloquence of her attack on her political opponents in her subsequent works, *The Christian Religion* and the political pamphlets.

Reflections is in many ways a more ambitious piece of discourse than either of the Proposals – wider in its scope, addressed to a more public, more heterogeneous audience, engaging more fully than ever before in the public debate about politics, engaging in a new kind of rhetoric, and extending her interest in feminist concerns to include married women. That Astell was able to accomplish so well her various purposes is proof of her consummate rhetorical skill.