



THE ELOQUENCE OF MARY ASTELL

by Christine Mason Sutherland

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Having dealt with *inventio* and *dispositio* under logic, Astell turns her attention to rhetoric, by which (as a Ramean) she means *elocutio*: issues of style, tone, and accommodation of the audience. In this chapter I shall look at a number of issues that are important to consider in order to understand Astell's theory in the context of the late seventeenth century and to establish the significance of her contribution to rhetoric in that period. First I shall place Astell in terms of the new ideas current in her time: the plain style movement and, in particular, the new approach of the Cartesians. Among these, the most important influence on Astell's theory of *elocutio* is that of Bernard Lamy: drawing upon his work, she grounds her theory of style in the practice of morality. A comparison of his theory with hers will illuminate not only areas of agreement but also, and more importantly, the ways in which her theory departs from that of her main source. I shall also address the question of Astell's ambivalence toward rhetoric and try to account for it. Doing so will involve some discussion of the relationship between Bernard Lamy's *The Art of Speaking* and Arnauld and Nicole's *The Art of Thinking*. I shall then consider some possible influences coming from the period of classical rhetoric. And finally, I shall try to determine the extent to which Astell's theory may be considered feminist.

As in her theory of logic, the guiding principles of Astell's theory of *elocutio* are typical of the Cartesian sources upon which she draws. The first of these is that writing and speaking, like thinking, are natural, a birthright of each human being. She had begun her instruction on thinking with the promise that she would not "send you further than your Own minds to learn it" (117). She now reiterates this principle at the beginning of the section on rhetoric: "As Nature teaches us Logic, so does it instruct us in Rhetoric much better than Rules of Art" (137).¹ The other Cartesian principle that underlies her theory of both logic and rhetoric is that of clarity: as clarity of thought is of the first importance in thinking, so clarity of expression is the pre-eminent virtue of style. And these

two important principles are linked: “[A]s Thinking conformably to the Nature of Things is True Knowledge, so th’expressing our Thought in such a way, as more readily, and with the greatest Clearness and Life, excites in others the very same Idea that was in us, is the best Eloquence” (142). Clear thinking, as we saw in the last chapter, is linked with clear diction. In this commitment to simplicity, she shows herself to be in sympathy with the promoters of the plain style who had led a revolt against the grand style of rhetoric throughout the seventeenth century. As early as 1605, Bacon had complained that “men began to hunt more after words than matter” (26), being preoccupied with the niceties of style rather than with the truth of content. Throughout the century, Bacon’s objections had been echoed by the new philosophers, who found the language inappropriate for the new demands being made upon it. Among these, significantly, were Arnauld and Nicole. Astell quotes from *The Art of Thinking* at the end of her introductory paragraph on rhetoric (meaning *elocutio*), referencing the quotation in the margin: “All that’s useful in this Art is ‘the avoiding certain evil ways of Writing and Speaking, and above all an Artificial and Rhetorical Stile, Compos’d of false Thoughts, Hyperboles and forc’d Figures which is the greatest fault in Rhetoric’” (137).

How, then, are these “evil ways of Writing and Speaking” to be avoided? Astell’s advice is to apply the principles of morality to the arts of discourse. Throughout *A Serious Proposal, Part II*, she has argued for the interdependence of the understanding and the will: just as ignorance contributes to unethical behaviour, so inadequacies of thinking arise from moral deficiencies. In the passage on rhetorical theory, she shows how this relationship plays out in detail. The “evil ways” are not just technically bad: they are actually immoral, and are caused by moral failure. As she explains it, to avoid faults in writing it is necessary to eradicate “those Vicious Inclinations from whence the most distastful faults of Writing proceed” (142). She identifies pride, vanity, deceitfulness, laziness and contempt for the audience as the moral flaws most likely to lead to faults in writing:

For why do we chuse to be Obscure but because we intend to Deceive, or wou’d be thought to see much farther than our Neighbours? One sort of Vanity prompts us to be Rugged and Severe, and so possess’d with the imagin’d Worth and Solidity of our Discourse, that we think it beneath us to Polish

it; Another disposes us to Elaborate and Affected ways of Writing, to Pompous and improper Ornaments; and why are we tediously Copious but that we fancy every Thought of ours is extraordinary? (143)

Unwarranted attacks on other writers are motivated by revenge and often demonstrate a prideful unwillingness to be corrected. Problems of coherence arise from lazy thinking: we cannot express ourselves clearly, she points out, if we have not fully thought out what we want to say.

The cure for these evils, however, is not mere resistance to temptation but something much more positive. For most important of all, and governing all the details of her advice, is the principle of love:

[T]he way to be good Orators is to be good Christians, the Practice of Religion will both instruct us in the Theory, and most powerfully enforce what we say of it. [...] Besides, being True Christians we have Really that Love for them which all who desire to perswade must pretend to; we've that Probity and Prudence, that Civility and Modesty which the Masters of this Art say a good Orator must be endow'd with. (142)

Astell demonstrates how this theory works in practice. In particular, the writer must be careful not to humiliate the audience, but on all occasions to spare their feelings, to let them “fancy if they please, that we believe them as Wise and Good as we endeavour to make them” (141). Thus encouraged, the readers will “conclude there's great hopes they may with a little pains attain what others think they Know already, and are asham'd to fall short of the good Opinion we have entertain'd of 'em” (141). It is important, then, to avoid being dogmatic, and above all to avoid boastfulness and bullying. The reader must always be treated lovingly and with great respect.²

The idea that the practice of rhetoric should be based on moral principles is consistent with the approach she has taken throughout *A Serious Proposal, Part II*. But her rhetorical theory at this point is informed, as she herself acknowledges, by Bernard Lamy's *The Art of Speaking*. Like Astell, Lamy connects the art of speaking with the principles of morality. As John T. Harwood explains, “Lamy's rhetorical system is never unrelated to his ethical and theologi-

cal beliefs" (145). Astell's debt to Lamy, whose work she cites, is obvious throughout her discussion. Both ground their rhetorical theory in the fundamental Christian virtue of love: says Lamy, "Those who are really pious, have no need to counterfeit; their charity shows it self quite through their discourse" (360). Both identify pride as a block to communication: nothing, says Lamy "is so invincible an obstacle to perswasion as arrogancy and boldness" (353). Astell makes the same point: "There's nothing more improper than Pride and Positiveness" (141). Both Lamy and Astell insist, moreover, that the Christian speaker should avoid humiliating the audience not simply because it is uncharitable to undermine their self-esteem, but also because it is ineffective. Lamy believes that effective persuaders "with such art conceal their triumph, that the vanquish't person is scarce sensible of his defeat, but rather thinks himself victorious over that error to which he was before a slave" (355). Astell makes the same point, and we hear echoes of Lamy even in her diction as she makes it: "And since many would yield to the Clear Light of Truth were't not for the shame of being overcome, we shou'd Convince but not Triumph, and rather Conceal our Conquest than publish it. We doubly oblige our Neighbours when we reduce them into the Right Way, and keep it from being taken notice of that they were once in the Wrong" (141).

In basing her instruction in rhetoric on the principle of Christian love, then, and in identifying writing errors with moral flaws, Astell appears to have been strongly influenced by Lamy: we hear echoes of him throughout the discussion. However, it is important not to overestimate his influence. At every point where she uses him, Astell makes the argument her own, accommodating it to her primary audience of women and expressing it in her own way. Furthermore, she by no means always agrees with Lamy. Some of these disagreements are technical – for example, Lamy believes the arts of speaking and writing to be essentially dissimilar:

The good Qualities of the Mind are not always concomitant with the qualities of a good Imagination, and happy Memory; which causes a great difference betwixt Speaking and Writing well. Oftentimes those who write well upon premeditation speak ill *Ex tempore*: To write well there is no need of a prompt, hot, and fertile Imagination. Unless our Wit be very bad indeed, upon serious Meditation we shall find what we ought, and what we might say upon any subject proposed; those who speak

easily and without premeditation, receive that advantage from a certain fertility and fire in the Imagination, which fire is extinguished by repose and cold contemplation in a Study. (309)

Astell, on the other hand, like Quintilian, sees a mutually supportive relationship between speaking and writing. They facilitate one another:

I have made no distinction in what has been said between Speaking and Writing, because tho they are talents which do not always meet, yet there is no material difference between 'em. They write best perhaps who do't with the gentile and easy air of Conversation; and they Talk best who mingle Solidity of Thought with th'agreeableness of a ready Wit.³ (143)

Another point on which Astell is in less than full agreement with Lamy concerns the human appetency for truth. In the course of his defence of the use of the passions in persuasion, Lamy justifies the appeal to the emotions on the grounds that reason is not enough. His supporting arguments, however, show his ambivalence on the question. On the one hand, he seems to admit that there is a natural love of truth; on the other, he appears to believe that it seldom comes into operation:

Were men Lovers of Truth, to propose it to them in a lively and sensible way, would be sufficient to perswade them: But they hate it, because it accommodates but seldom with their Interests, and is seldom made out, but to the discovery of their Crimes: In so much that they are affraid [*sic*] of its lustre, and shut their Eyes that they may not behold it. They stifle the natural love that Men have for it, and harden themselves against the salutiferous strokes that she strikes upon the Conscience. (246)

Lamy appears to have little trust in humankind: original sin rather than grace seems to predominate in the soul. This suspiciousness colours much of his rhetorical theory and even to some extent undermines his professed belief in the importance of charity. Mary Astell's love for her audience, on the other hand, is obvious throughout all her works addressed specifically to women (though not those addressed to a wider public). She has a higher regard than does Lamy for the moral potential of people in general: "Truth is

so very attractive, there's such a natural agreement between our Minds and it, that we care not to be thought so dull as not to be able to find out by our selves such obvious matters" (141). This difference in their attitudes is most clearly seen in the passages where they theorize relationships with the audience. Astell's theory is infused with tenderness, an almost maternal desire to spare the audience pain: we must not take the stance of the wise addressing the ignorant, but attempt only to "explain and illustrate what lay hid or might have been known before if they had consider'd it, and supposes that their Minds being employ'd about some other things was the reason why they did not discern it as well as we" (141). Lamy is very different. Even his theory as to the importance of charity is tainted with suspicion: "One may put on the face of an Honest man, only to delude those who have a reverence for the least appearance of truth; yet it follows not but we may profess love to our Auditors, and insinuate into their affections, when our love is sincere, and we have no design but the interest and propagation of truth" (359). There is no such suspicion of motive in Astell's theory.⁴

This suspicion, the rather grudging and limited trust in the honesty of both orators and audiences, probably arises from Lamy's conception of persuasion according to the traditional rhetorical model of warfare. Never far from his mind, it seems, is the conviction that the orator is primarily interested in winning. His vocabulary reflects a preoccupation with conflict: "If Postures be proper for defence, in corporal invasions; Figures are as necessary, in spiritual attacks. Words are the arms of the Mind, which she uses, to dissuade or persuade, as occasion serves" (226). The whole of chapter 4 of the second part of *The Art of Speaking* is devoted to a discussion of eloquence according to this model, and the first section is entitled "Figures are the Arms of the Soul. A Comparison betwixt a Soldier Fighting and an Orator Speaking." Lamy finds exact parallels between the two activities and explores them in great detail.

In fairness to Lamy, it is important to remember that the audience he was addressing was masculine, and since most young men were trained in the arts of warfare, the comparison would have made sense to them and perhaps helped them to understand some of the rhetorical strategies. Yet the hostility does seem to infect Lamy himself, and a certain resentment toward unsympathetic or turgid audiences manifests itself in his writing. Astell, on the other hand,

makes no use of warfare as means of explication. Furthermore, she does not share Lamy's underlying lack of trust in audiences, nor does she recommend it to her ladies. And her relationship with her own primary audience in this work is a tender one. She can become annoyed with them, it is true, and blame them for their resistance to instruction, but she never treats them as the enemy. The adversarial stance, though in some of her own writings she adopts it, is not one that she recommends to her audience of women.

It is this rejection of the metaphor of warfare as useful and appropriate for her ladies' understanding of rhetoric that constitutes one of Astell's most important contributions to rhetorical theory. Military comparisons would make no sense to her primary audience, who had no direct experience of battle. The kind of rhetorical activity for which she is preparing her audience of women is not *contentio* but *sermo*. It is to this private or semi-public kind of rhetoric that her theory applies, and she therefore advises an attempt always to bring about a win/win situation. The audience is to be reassured by a belief in their own intelligence, even if it means that the orator must conceal their mistakes from them. The orator's reward is not consciousness and acknowledgement of victory, which is morally dubious, but the innocent and spiritually valuable satisfaction of knowing that good has been done to others.

In spite of her disagreements with him, however, the importance of Lamy as a source for Astell's rhetorical theory cannot be doubted. Why, then, does she begin the passage with a quotation, not from Lamy, but from Arnauld and Nicole? And why does she appear at the beginning of the discussion to dismiss rhetoric as trivial? The answer to these questions involves some discussion of the relationship between *The Art of Thinking* and *The Art of Speaking*, and in particular some consideration of the author of the second work, Bernard Lamy. Its title suggests that the author wished it to be strongly associated with *The Art of Thinking*, the Port Royal Logic produced by Arnauld and Nicole, and because it was at first published anonymously, it is very likely that Astell mistakenly believed it to have been written by the same authors. As we shall see, this misapprehension might explain the slight but noticeable inconsistency in Astell's own attitude to rhetoric. It is therefore important to understand the circumstances of its original publication and why the author chose to remain anonymous.

Bernard Lamy belonged not to Port Royal, as did Arnauld and Nicole, but to another institution, the Congregation of the

Oratory of Jesus.⁵ He also held a teaching position at the college of Anjou. Like Arnauld and his collaborator and friend, Pierre Nicole, Lamy was a Jansenist – and therefore Augustinian – in his theological allegiance, and hostile to the Jesuits. He was also, like Arnauld and Nicole, a Cartesian, and he perceived, as they did, the connection between the theology of Augustine and the philosophy of Descartes. Following Descartes, he believed in making scholarly work available in the vernacular: like *Discourse on Method*, *The Art of Speaking* was written in French. It was this open support of Descartes that brought Lamy to the attention of the authorities in 1675, for Descartes's work had been officially condemned as tending toward scepticism, and in 1665 had been placed on the Index, a list of works Roman Catholics were not allowed to read. Lamy's open avowal of Cartesian principles had endangered his Order:

Lamy's adhesion to Cartesianism became a matter of public scandal. The official policy of the Oratory, as dictated by royal edict, was to remain faithful in philosophy classes to the Aristotelianism of Saint Thomas and to avoid any hint of the new doctrines. Orders were given requiring suspected Cartesians like Lamy to submit their lecture notes for examination by doctors of the Sorbonne. Propositions considered injurious to the state were found in which Lamy supposedly preferred democratic government to hereditary monarchy. A *lettre de cachet* exiled Lamy to a monastery near Grenoble and forbade him to teach or to preach. (Carr 128)

Lamy was reinstated in 1676, but at the time of the publication of *L'art de parler* in 1675, he was still in disgrace. Because he was keeping a necessarily low profile at the time, the work was published anonymously and did not bear his name until the French third edition of 1688. The original edition was translated into English almost immediately and published in 1676; it was attributed to "Messieurs du Port Royal" – that is, Arnauld and Nicole. In neither of the subsequent English editions of 1696 and 1708 – which were almost exact reprintings of the first – was Lamy named as author. Since Mary Astell cites the English translation (although she at least once refers to Arnauld and Nicole's *L'art de penser* by its French title), she almost certainly used this rather than the French original. She therefore most probably did not know that the two works had not both been produced by the scholars of Port Royal.

In fact, Lamy, though he shares some of Arnauld and Nicole's reservations about rhetoric, and like them bases his ideas in Cartesian philosophy, is much more sympathetic to it than are the authors of *L'art de penser*. There are, of course, areas of strong agreement between them, one of the strongest being the Cartesian principle of the naturalness of speaking. Lamy believes this to be the guiding principle of effective *dispositio*: "[T]hey speak most clearly and intelligibly, who speak most simply, and most according to the natural order and impressions upon their Mind" (Lamy 196). As is apparent in the quotation from their work with which Astell begins her discussion, Arnauld and Nicole so strongly believe in natural eloquence and so greatly resist late Renaissance models of rhetoric that they attempt to exclude from it any function other than a merely corrective one. Carr, it is true, believes that "the grudging concessions they make to traditional rhetoric for the sake of sermons can be extended to legitimize a more wide-ranging eloquence than they admit" (63). Nevertheless, he concedes that their advice about rhetoric is "invariably negative" (86). "Their treatment of the emotions is perfunctory. The only role allowed them is that of supporting the ideas of the orator. [...] No effort [...] is made to follow up on Descartes' suggestions about the passions' potential for strengthening attention" (86).

It is this negative attitude to rhetoric that Mary Astell appears at first to share. Yet though she begins her discussion with a forceful rejection of the preoccupation of late Renaissance rhetoric with a virtuoso display of proficiency in the traditional tropes and schemes, as the discussion proceeds it seems that she is not as hostile to it as might first appear. Because she believed *The Art of Speaking* to have been written by the same authors as *The Art of Thinking*, she may not have noticed this gradual slippage into a more positive attitude to rhetoric. It is, however, apparent to the reader that she is increasingly taking Lamy, rather than Arnauld and Nicole, as her guide. For example, in spite of the condemnation of the rhetorical style cited above, later in the passage she is by no means wholly against the use of figures of speech. In fact, she refers her readers to *The Art of Speaking* for a full treatment of them (144). Interestingly, she immediately associates the use of the figures, which engage the emotions, with retaining the reader's attention: "He who would take must be Sublime in his Sense, and must cloath it after a Noble way" (144). She concedes that "if Ornament be wholly neglected, very few will regard us" (140). The perfect orator considers that "as

mere Flourish and Rhetorick are good for nothing, so neither will bare Reason dull and heavily express'd perform any great matter [...] and thinking it not enough to run 'em down with the strength of Reason, he draws them over to a Voluntary Submission by th' attractives of his Eloquence" (145). In this recognition of the value of a certain amount of ornament, she agrees not only with Lamy, but also with Descartes himself (Carr 87) rather than with Arnauld and Nicole.

As the discussion of rhetoric continues, we find that the influence of Lamy increases. Particularly important is the fifth section of *The Art of Speaking*, entitled "A Discourse in which is given an Idea of the Art of Persuasion." Lamy's definition of persuasion is wide: to quote Thomas Carr, Lamy holds that rhetoric is not "limited to the pulpit, the law courts, or negotiations – the traditional areas of *la grande eloquence* – persuasion takes place in all areas of life, whenever we seek to bring others around to our views" (Carr 129). Of course this idea of rhetoric is not a new one: it reproduces Plato's definition of rhetoric as "the art of influencing men's minds by means of words, whether the words are spoken in a court of law or before some other public body or in private conversation" (261). Later rhetorical tradition, however, had often restricted it to public discourse. Lamy's inclusion of everyday discourse within the scope of rhetoric is naturally particularly attractive to Mary Astell, who believes that "Women have no business with the Pulpit, the Bar or *St Stephen's Chapel*" (*A Serious Proposal, Part II* 143). She is educating her readers to participate in "Private Conversation" (143) and of course in writing.

Given this theoretical base, what methods does Astell recommend to her readers? First, they are to trust their own judgement, believing that the arts of expression are fundamentally natural. The abandonment of the belief that rhetorical expertise involves the learning of Latin and a rigorous apprenticeship to the methods of logic, as well as the memorization of the figures of rhetoric, has effectively opened the world of the intellect to women, and Astell's women readers can reap the benefits of this revolution of thought. They do not even have to learn modern languages, much less ancient dead ones. This means that they can teach themselves. Naturalness and simplicity are the rhetorical virtues she holds up to her readers, along with clarity, to which they both contribute; and these virtues are to be directed and supported by a genuine love for the audience. However, she does not wholly reject tradi-

tional rhetoric: as we have seen, her ladies should not neglect any rhetorical devices that might aid in focusing attention by exciting wonder and making the reception of the discourse pleasurable and thus persuasive. She therefore refers them to Lamy's exposition for specific instruction.

Although she does not believe that rhetoric can be learned by rule, she does support the judicious use of models. Since no writer has a perfect style, the best procedure is to choose a number of models, imitating what is good in each while avoiding the faults. There follows a passage that might have been inspired by the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, a discussion of how each of the styles can degenerate: the grand style can "fly out of sight and by being Empty and Bombast become contemptible," the simple style can easily slide into the "Dull and Abject;" the severe style can be dry, and the florid vain.⁶ The apprentice writer must therefore exercise her judgement in the use of models. Above all, she must put into the practice of her writing the Christian virtues, particularly the most important one, the love of God and of the audience, for God's sake.

It remains to pursue somewhat further the complex question of her sources. We know that she drew heavily upon Descartes, Arnauld and Nicole, and Lamy because she cites them. She also refers her readers to Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*. Yet these authorities seem insufficient to explain her thorough knowledge of the principles of classical rhetoric, and we may speculate that she used a variety of other sources as well. Erin Herberg has demonstrated Astell's debt to Aristotelian and Ciceronian rhetoric, and also suggests the influence of Plato, mediated principally by the Cambridge Platonists in whose traditions she was trained by her uncle. Of all the rhetorical authorities, however, I believe it is to Augustine that Astell owes most. Her seventeenth-century sources were of course strongly influenced by him: not only Arnauld, Nicole, and Lamy, but also the Cambridge Platonists who drew upon his philosophy. Norris, indeed, quotes liberally from Augustine in his correspondence with Astell in *Letters Concerning the Love of God*. So strongly does her theory recall Augustine's, however, that one is tempted to believe she had access to *On Christian Doctrine* or *The Confessions*.

For example, her insistence that the emotional element in language is important not only to stimulate the audience to act upon the message but also to ease communication and maintain

their interest is strongly reminiscent of Augustine. He allows the grand style on occasions when it is necessary to stimulate the audience to action: "But when something is to be done and he is speaking to those who ought to do it but do not wish to do it, then those great things should be spoken in the grand manner in a way appropriate to the persuasion of their minds" (*On Christian Doctrine* 4.19.38). Augustine also allows the use of the moderate style:

That which the moderate style urges, that is, that eloquence itself be pleasing, is not to be taken up for its own sake, but in order that things which may be usefully and virtuously spoken, if they require neither a teaching nor a moving eloquence, may have a knowing and sympathetic audience which may assent more readily to that which is being said because of the delight aroused by that eloquence. (4.25.55)

What is most impressive about Astell's rhetorical theory, however, is not her ingenuity in drawing upon and blending ideas from various sources, but her originality in putting her own spin on them. She reconstitutes the theories of her sources, adapting them to her primary audience of women, and in doing so brings them out of the public into the private sphere. The theories of Augustine were formed with a view to instructing the Christian preacher, those of Aristotle and Cicero to prepare the student for a career in politics or law. Similarly, the audiences to whom her modern sources, Arnauld and Nicole and Lamy, addressed their discourse were predominantly masculine. Her ladies, on the other hand, debarred as they were from public speaking (and in Astell's view rightly so), would be concerned with the rhetoric of *sermo* rather than *contentio*. It is to this private, or semi-private rhetorical tradition that Astell makes her important contribution to rhetorical theory. Not that she necessarily believes that women's discourse should be confined forever to the private sphere: though she does not hold with their speaking in public, certainly in *The Christian Religion*, as we have seen, she recommends that through print they make a contribution to public discussion. Indeed, before long she will do so herself, and will prove to be as effective in *contentio* as any of her adversaries. Yet in *A Serious Proposal, Part II*, she is instructing beginners; obviously they will start with the practice of *sermo*, private or semi-public speaking and writing, and it is to *sermo* that her theorizing relates.

This matter of the theorizing of *sermo* brings us to the important question of the extent to which Astell's theory may be seen as feminist. The question can be approached in a number of different ways. Obviously, the theory is feminist inasmuch as it is addressed to women (the primary audience in *A Serious Proposal, Part II*) and is formulated in response to what Astell sees as their greatest need. However, as we have seen, it does not derive from feminine sources, nor does it arise in the context of a community of females. Indeed, it might be argued that it is the very lack of such a community that stimulates Astell to write in the first place. Although she did have one or two like-minded women friends, these were not sufficient to create a community of discourse. Astell's hope, as she expressed it in a letter to John Norris, was that she might be able to educate her friends to the point where they could become intellectual companions (Norris and Astell 49–50).⁷

We may also see as feminist her stress upon consideration for the audience, correcting them gently, preserving their self-esteem: “[W]e should Convince,” she asserts, “but not Triumph.” Indeed, she believes “we should [...] rather Conceal our Conquest than publish it” (141). In this tenderness toward the audience we may hear a forecasting of the rhetoric of care typical of certain twentieth-century approaches. To quote Amanda Goldrick-Jones: “Much North American feminism now equates this ‘ethic of care’ with women’s ethical and moral voice, so much so that the notion of women’s ‘different voice’ has become a powerful governing trope” (30). Astell’s recommendations seem very similar to the approach of feminists such as Nel Noddings, and as suggested earlier, they seem to be grounded in her motherly care for the women she addresses.

However, in spite of the obvious similarity, ultimately Astell’s theory is at odds with these modern positions in certain significant ways. An important element in much of the late twentieth-century discussion of the ethics of care is the notion of difference. The title of Carol Gilligan’s book is *In a Different Voice*, and the authors of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* hold that women even think differently from men: what they call “separate knowing” is typically masculine; “connected knowing” is typically feminine (Belenky et al. 104).⁸ But the whole thrust of Astell’s argument throughout all her works is that women are not significantly different from men: she wants to establish the essential similarities, not the differences. In her time, much of the discrimination against women was founded

upon this very idea of difference, and except in certain areas Astell therefore challenges it. She recognizes some differences, it is true: in *A Serious Proposal, Part II*, she rather sourly intimates that mothers are morally superior to fathers (150); and in *The Christian Religion*, she claims that women are more open than men, more prone to self-disclosure (391). Then of course issues of propriety constrain women's practice: it is not appropriate for them to speak in public, and Astell's own policy was to remain officially anonymous in her writings. But these few exceptions aside, she believes that women are by nature much the same as men.

We should not assume, therefore, that Astell suggests that it is simply because they are *women* that her readers should be tender with their audiences. Her own practice refutes such an assumption: as we have seen, in *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* and the political pamphlets, nobody could be less sparing of her audience. In these works she engages in verbal warfare – full *contentio* – and does it very well. If Astell means her theory to apply to all rhetoric, then her theory is at odds with her practice. However, I think it is clear that Astell means her theory to apply specifically to *sermo*. As we have observed, she never writes into the void but always addresses a particular audience in a particular rhetorical situation. Her primary audience in *A Serious Proposal, Part II* is upper-class women, and it is to them, in relation to the kind of rhetoric that they will use, that she directs her advice; and for the foreseeable future, they will be engaged not in *contentio* but in *sermo*. It is a question, not of *gender*, but of *genre*, and as Erin Herberg has pointed out, Astell's theory is equally appropriate for men (156). Whatever the gender of the speaker, the less public form of rhetoric demands a relationship with the audience quite different from that which is appropriate to *contentio*.

It is indeed in this theorizing of *sermo* that Mary Astell makes her most important contribution to rhetorical theory. In her own time, it was important in offering instruction in rhetoric to women in a way that accommodated their particular needs and interests. It made accessible a body of theory that might otherwise have been impossible for many members of her audience to grasp. By relating rhetorical theory to moral practice, she brought it into line with concepts that her audience of women readily understood. In the longer term, her theory is interesting and relevant because it shows the application of traditional rhetorical principles not only to *contentio* but also to *sermo*. Perhaps even more important, it shows

where these principles fail to apply: by challenging the propriety of the accepted adversarial practices of *contentio* to the more private *sermo*, she makes explicit the difference between them. The particularity of her recommendations on the tender consideration of the audience brings rhetorical theory into the sphere of the intimate and – with some reservations – may be seen as anticipating the rhetoric of care that is typical of the work of some of the most influential twentieth-century feminists. Inasmuch as she puts forward a theory of *sermo*, Mary Astell's theory of rhetoric is as relevant today as it was in her own time.

