



THE ELOQUENCE OF MARY ASTELL

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The *Christian Religion* is perhaps Astell's greatest work – the most profound and the most long-lasting – but from one point of view, her political pamphlets represent the most significant achievement of her career.¹ It is true that they are the least accessible to twenty-first-century readers, the issues they discuss having long since died. Yet they are important because they show a woman both participating in the kind of discussion traditionally limited to men and being respected and valued for the contributions she makes. Women had long been contributing to discussions of religious and educational matters. Their interest in these areas was acknowledged, and even those who did not approve of women writing might turn a blind eye to their activities in such fields. But politics was different. Political discussions, especially in the form of political pamphleteering, had the potential to sway public opinion and help set the agenda for parliamentary debate. That Mary Astell participated in such printed discussions as a celebrated contributor says much for her reputation during the early years of the eighteenth century and may be taken as a landmark in the progress of women toward full participation in public affairs.² With the publication of the political pamphlets, therefore, Astell's transition from *sermo* to *contentio* is complete.

Though a detailed discussion of the pamphlets is neither required nor indeed appropriate in the present context, some understanding of the issues involved is necessary for an appreciation of Astell's contribution.³ And this presents a difficulty, for not only are the issues themselves long since outdated; the attitudes that lay behind Astell's convictions are hard for modern men and women to accept. Astell, who has been celebrated as the first English feminist, is – by modern standards – the opposite of typically feminist in her political ideas. She supported the Tories: in her pamphlets, therefore, we find her adopting typically Tory positions and resisting, sometimes ferociously, the very principles of liberalism that modern society has come to value.

In order to understand as far as possible the fervour of the pamphlet war, we must understand how radically the English nation had been affected by the civil war, and especially the death of Charles I, which for Astell and other Tories was something far worse than execution: “The Murder of King Charles I is the gentlest expression by which one can mention that execrable Action” (Astell, *Moderation* 81). The rancour had by no means vanished by the early 1700s: the hurt and the guilt were still there, exacerbated by the abdication of James II and the accession of William and Mary. Too many people, too many families, had suffered for the wars and their consequences to be easily forgotten.⁴ The nation had polarized: those who supported the monarchy espoused the old political values, based in religion: the king was ordained by God and could not be deposed. The obligation to obey him (if only passively) remained, even if his policies displeased the people. As against this, the new men, the Whigs, asserted the power of the people. Astell and other Tories saw this as dangerously secular: God was being left out of the political equation and disaster would surely follow. For conservative thinkers such as Astell, order was an important issue. The hierarchical system guaranteed law and order and prevented the disastrous state of affairs in which might becomes right. The rejection of the divinely instituted hierarchy, with the king at the top, would put the whole structure of society at risk: “In a word, Order is a Sacred Thing, ’tis that Law which God prescribes Himself, and inviolably observes. Subordination is a necessary consequence of Order, for in a State of Ignorance and [De]pravity such as ours is, there is not any thing that tends more to Confusion than Equality” (*Moderation* 28).

It must be remembered that at this time religion was not a private matter: it was a highly public one, for both sides. Both Whigs and Tories – roughly corresponding to Dissenters and Anglicans – wanted to bring in what they thought was appropriate legislation. The issue was not at root religious: it was political. And what Astell and her party objected to was not the freedom of Dissenters to worship in their own way, but their political ambitions to put their ideas into practice for the whole nation. One of the most contentious issues in the early years of the eighteenth century was the question of Occasional Conformity. By law, only members of the Church of England could be elected to political office. Ambitious Dissenters, therefore, developed the practice of Occasional Conformity – that is, attending the Church of England

services just often enough to qualify.⁵ The practice drew public attention when the Lord Mayor of London attended both his own dissenting church and the Church of England on the same day. The Tories thereupon tried to bring in a bill against Occasional Conformity. According to the conservatives, “government ought to be in the hands of those whose birth and estates insured less self-interested motives and put them above common temptations” (Perry, *Celebrated* 197). They saw Dissenters who aspired to political office as power hungry men on the make. Occasional Conformity was the thin end of the wedge: allow the Dissenters into office, and the whole foundation of the body politic, the stability of the entire nation, would be jeopardized. Allowing Dissenters political power, therefore, was seen as a threat to the whole nation. It would involve, first of all, a possible shift of power from the old class of the nobility to the new bourgeoisie; furthermore, it would promote the power of parliament as against that of the monarch. Since the monarch was, according to Tory values, God’s vice-regent, such a shift in power would be a direct insult to God. It would also, according to Astell, involve a shift in values toward materialism and even atheism. Religious belief might cease to be politically relevant. Astell saw allowing Occasional Conformity, then, as a dangerous move in the direction of a wholly secular society.

Astell’s first political pamphlet, *Moderation Truly Stated* (1704), was directed to this particular issue. It was written as a contribution to the pamphlet war initiated by Daniel Defoe in *An Enquiry into the Occasional Conformity of Dissenters*, first published in 1698. However, Astell wrote in response not primarily to Defoe, but to *Moderation a Vertue* (1703) by the Welsh Presbyterian minister James Owen, a work much more moderate and reasonable in its approach and therefore more persuasive – and more dangerous to the Tory cause. Moderation was for Astell not a virtue: she regarded it as lukewarmness in religious matters. Her pamphlet, in fact, answers Owen’s *Moderation a Vertue* as well as *Essays upon Peace and War* (1704) by Charles D’Avenant, who was regarded by Astell and other Tories as a turncoat. Her reply to D’Avenant was included as a preface to *Moderation Truly Stated* and is one of the best parts of the work.⁶

Astell’s defence of the Tory position was admirable, and showed how powerful a woman’s argumentation could be. She had researched the topic with her usual scholarly thoroughness, having acquainted herself with the details of the contemporary contro-

versy and being familiar with current authors on both sides of the debate: “She appeared to know every word of Clarendon by heart, only just published, 1702–4. She turned Calamy inside out, with his account of the sufferings of the ejected nonconforming ministers at the Restoration, and discussed instead the way the Anglican clergy had been treated during the years of the Commonwealth” (Perry, *Celebrated* 195). She also demonstrates a wide knowledge of history, both ancient and modern, and acquaintance with some of the classical and Christian writers of antiquity: she refers to Tacitus and Tertullian and quotes Virgil in translation. She shows familiarity with more modern sources too, using not only well-known authors such as Machiavelli, but also politicians of an earlier age. She quotes Sir Francis Walsingham, “faithful Secretary,” as she calls him, of Elizabeth I, to demonstrate that the problems arising “when Conscience exceeds its bounds and grows to be Faction” are not new (94). This formidable breadth of knowledge is effectively used in support of her position: she displays all her customary rhetorical brilliance, acutely addressing and answering the arguments of the opposition. Perry believes that the effectiveness of Astell’s pamphlet is demonstrated by the number of prominent writers who replied to it, including James Owen, whose pamphlet she had attacked, Charles Leslie, and Defoe. However, they did not know at first to whom they were replying, for Astell maintained her usual anonymity. It was Dr. George Hickes who revealed her identity. In a letter dated December 9, 1704 to Dr. Charlett, master of University College, Oxford, he wrote: “And you may now assure your self, that Mrs Astell is the author of that other book against Occasional Communion, which we justly admired so much” (qtd. in F. Smith 158).

Her next contribution to the pamphlet war came primarily in response to Defoe’s *More Short Ways with Dissenters* (1704). In *A Fair Way with the Dissenters* (1704), she answers Defoe (Mr. Short-Ways, as she calls him) point by point, undermining his arguments and demonstrating their inconsistency:

Now give me leave to laugh a little, and ’tis at his telling us, That *The Scots have an undoubted Right to the Presbyterian Establishment* because forsooth! ’tis the *Original Protestant Settlement of that Nation*. [...] But if Episcopacy is not to be restored in *Scotland*, against the Constitution of the Nation, by

the same Rule it is not to be destroyed in *England*, since it is our Constitution. (103)

Occasionally she pours scorn upon Defoe's writing: "Seventhly, Short-Ways is under a great mistake when he tells us, in his Admirable English, That 'The Barbarisms and Bloudy Doings us'd with the Episcopal Party in Scotland amounted to few'" (101). She concludes by asserting that she has successfully made her case against "the Secret Designs of the Dissenters, which are conceal'd under the Colour of Conscience" (112). Sympathetic though she was with any who were sincere in their objections, she believed that most of the occasional conformists were acting solely in the interests of ambition.

Just as Astell replies to two adversaries in *Moderation Truly Stated*, so she again addresses two in *A Fair Way with the Dissenters*. This time, her pamphlet was already in press when she read James Owen's *Moderation Still a Vertue* (1704). She therefore added a postscript that replied to his charges. One of these attacked her original pamphlet as being "Verbose and Virulent." She responds by nicely turning the tables, admitting the accusation and explaining her use of language as "answering the Dissenters Arguments against Schism and Toleration in their own Words [...] and their Virulency against the Government in Church and State as by Law established. [...] There you may find that those Expressions about Schism, which our Author is so offended at [...] are the very words of Mr Edwards the Presbyterian" (115). One of the most interesting parts of this postscript concerns her distinction between "Dissenters in Conscience" and "Dissenters in Faction," claiming that "the stater [that is, herself] has a true Compassion for Dissenters in Conscience [...] believing the greatest number of the Separation to be of this sort" (116).

Throughout her arguments in both pamphlets, she repeatedly insists that the issue is political ambition, not religious objection. As the postscript proceeds, she refers more frequently to that event which is the crux of all the arguments of the pamphlet war: the execution of King Charles I and whether or not it was justified. She denies that his conduct was any worse than that of previous monarchs; on the contrary, she points out that the events of the 1640s were preceded by a period of unusual peace. But even had he been "as bad as the worst of his revilers would represent him. What then? Neither the Laws of God nor of the Land, gave his subjects

any Authority to use him as they did" (125). More than fifty years later, the execution of the king remained the great issue between the contending political parties.

Astell's next pamphlet is addressed directly to this issue. It was written in response to a sermon by Bishop White Kennett, *A Compassionate Enquiry into the Causes of the Civil War*, preached on the anniversary of the king's execution on January 31, 1704. Kennett was a Whig, and though ostensibly preaching in honour of the beheaded king, he tries to avoid placing the blame upon the parliamentary party that eventually executed him. He blames Charles's ministers for giving him bad advice, and he attributes the trouble to an understandable fear of the French influence and the real possibility that England would be returned to allegiance to the Roman Catholic church. Kennett was no doubt trying to make peace between the warring parties. It is indeed known that Queen Anne was all in favour of reaching a compromise that should bring an end to the hostilities created by the civil war. However, like many moderates, he pleased neither side: the Whig party thought he showed too much respect for the Stuart kings, and the Tories that he treated the republican rebels too gently. Mary Astell's pamphlet defends the position taken by Kennett but takes it much further. It is, Ruth Perry believes, a royalist manifesto (*Celebrated* 209).

The title of Astell's pamphlet, *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War* (1704), reflects that of the sermon to which she is responding, while subtly suggesting by her use of the word "rebellion" who was to blame. She begins by citing Kennett's sermon, recognizing that he is a priest in the Church of England and pointing out that the canons of the church enjoin obedience to the sovereign. As the discourse continues, it becomes clear that Astell rejects Kennett's attempts to reconcile the two sides: the Tories, the spiritual children of the Cavaliers, and the Whigs, who belong to the same political persuasion as the Roundheads. Astell is against any compromise since allowing any ground to the enemy would endanger the state. The fear of "popery," which according to Kennett lay behind much of the resistance to King Charles I, did not, she believes, arise from the actions of the king but was deliberately fostered by the parliamentary party: "The people THOUGHT themselves too much under French Counsels and a French Ministry?" she asks, quoting Kennett, and replies: "The Scots and Mr Pym told them so" (144). In other words, the

French threat, the threat of popery, was simply fabricated by the Parliamentary party, who were intent upon serving their own political purposes by wresting power from the sovereign.

Strange! That such Principles shou'd be suffer'd in a Christian Nation, a Nation that has smarted so severely by them! But stranger yet, that any Prince shou'd Employ and Trust Men of these Principles! 'Tis certain he can have no hold of them; for whenever they get Power and Think that a Change will be for their Interest, they will never want Pretences to throw him out of the Saddle. (168)

Astell believes that popery itself is much less dangerous than presbyterianism. She acknowledges that “the People were wrought up into *Apprehensions and Fears of Popery*”; however, she denies that “the King and his Faithful Subjects were the cause of this” (176).

Since these events happened long before Astell herself was born, we may question why she is so strongly engaged with them. It might seem that an execution that had taken place fifty-five years previously would hardly merit such attention. Patricia Springborg is probably right in ascribing this interest to the similarity Astell perceives between the causes of the civil war and the political issues of her own time (*Astell, Political Writings*, 178). The cause of the civil war, Astell believes, was rebellion against the Christian principle of the authority of the monarch and its replacement with wholly secular principles. It is these principles that Astell sees as the great danger of the political tendencies of the early years of the eighteenth century:

Was not one of the Causes of the Civil War, ‘That small or rather no Authority or Power, that is allow’d the King [...] by the *Presbyterians*’ or *Whiggs*, or whatever you call them? For they are all of the same Original, they act upon the same Principles and Motives, and tend to the same end, who place the Supreme Power originally in the People, giving them a Right, or at least an Allowance to resume it, whenever they believe they have a sufficient Cause; that is, in plain *English*, whenever they think fit, and are strong enough to put their *Thoughts* and *Fancies* in execution. (185)

The threat, then, is an immediate threat, since the contemporary Whigs hold the same political beliefs as the parliamentary party of fifty years ago.

The first three of Astell's political pamphlets were published in 1704.⁷ The fourth and last one, *Bart'lemy Fair, or an Enquiry after Wit*, came out in 1709. It answers *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708), written by Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury, who had been heavily influenced by Astell's old adversary, Locke. Astell did not know precisely who had written the pamphlet – in fact, she thought it had been produced by a member of the Kit-Cat Club, whose members were committed Whigs. The issue in this case was how to deal with religious fanaticism, or enthusiasm, as it was then called. Shaftesbury calls for mild measures, suggesting that the best way of dealing with religious fanaticism is not to persecute it – for such a response merely creates martyrs – but to laugh at it. He suggests that the opponents of Jesus Christ might have done better to lampoon him in a puppet show than to crucify him. In fact, ridicule has already been effectively used: he refers to the puppet show mocking the Puritans in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*. But Astell sees in this approach not charitable willingness to spare the misdirected but a fundamental scepticism about all religious matters.

As with the earlier pamphlets, the position taken by Shaftesbury is one that most twenty-first-century readers find far more sympathetic than Astell's apparent intolerance. Yet Shaftesbury's toleration was founded upon a belief in the possibility of total objectivity, in which conclusions are reached on the basis of reason alone. Strongly as opinion in the twenty-first century supports the toleration advocated by Shaftesbury, there is growing scepticism about rational objectivity. Today, the importance of context and inherited cultural values is widely acknowledged. Here, surprisingly, Astell appears more in tune with postmodern approaches than her adversaries. As Ruth Perry notes, Astell knew that Shaftesbury's refusal to take context into account was a mistake:

As she well knew, no one was ever unencumbered by previous commitments. [...] No one was ever as free as Shaftesbury's line of reasoning required humans to be in order to judge the truth for themselves. [...] She understood very well that the "Bart'lemy Fair method" could only work in the most ideal circumstances – circumstances that had never yet obtained in the real world. (*Celebrated* 227)

Yet, according to Perry, it is unlikely that Astell's arguments carried conviction at the time, in a society increasingly given over to materialism, scepticism, and the denial of spiritual values. Indeed, according to Van C. Hartmann, it was precisely because she saw how destructive of society the new commercial values would be that Astell was moved to write so eloquently against them: "Astell's pamphlet illustrates the unsettling impact that the new capitalism was having on social relations and human identity, especially for women, and thus helps us understand the essential continuity between High Church Tory conservatism and Astell's progressive feminism" (244).⁸

By 1709 opinion was increasingly supportive of this new commercialism that ignored the older values of community, and Astell's influence declined. In the earliest years of the eighteenth century, however, her clear vision and the ability to convey it powerfully to her audience gave her opinions considerable weight. Among the many pamphlets published on the issue of Occasional Conformity in these years, hers are distinguished by superior scholarship. She had read all the relevant books and documents, had studied all the arguments, and above all was thoroughly familiar with the historical background. As Florence Smith argues, "[T]he strength of her argument lies in the historical method she pursues in going back to original sources" (152). All authorities on Astell agree that she was highly respected by the conservatives of her own time, especially the clergy. Ruth Perry believes that in engaging in political discussion, Astell "wrote as a celebrity" (*Celebrated* 185). She had by this time (1704) demonstrated her skill in argumentation and devastatingly scathing satirical wit, and her writing was highly valued by her own party. As Myra Reynolds observes, "[S]he was beyond [...] most men of her day in her command of satire and irony" (299). Her reputation grew: "She became a figure in London society. Her pamphlets were widely read and discussed" (Perry, *Celebrated* 210). Perry quotes an (anonymous) Tory pamphleteer who praised the "Heroine [...] Mrs A'____l' who, he says, 'hath maintain'd her Position not only with the Air of a Disputant, but the Spirit of a *Christian*'" (210). And Henry Dodwell, professor of ancient history, praised her "excellent and ingenious writings" (qtd. in Perry, *Celebrated* 211). Such respect, however, did not stop Astell from disagreeing at times with her supporters. As she had begun her career by questioning one of the arguments of John

Norris, so she continued, refusing to submit to any position that failed to commend itself to her reason.

Her consummate skill as a writer can still be enjoyed today, long after the issues of which she so passionately wrote have been forgotten. In the pamphlets, Astell uses a more colloquial, conversational style than in her earlier work. There she had used a voiced style and an intimate tone, it is true, but still one of some formality, especially in diction. No such considerations of propriety withheld her in her pamphleteering: she took as her model the style of other writers in the pamphlet war and wrote accordingly. The style she adopts for polemic is colloquial, ringing with immediacy. For example, this is how she begins *A Fair Way with the Dissenters*:

WELL! If in Disputes in Print and Disputes at *Billingsgate*, which, as they are manag'd, are equally scolding, he were to carry the day who rails loudest and longest; Wo be to the poor Church and its Friends, they could never shew their Faces or hold up their Heads against the everlasting Clamour of their Adversaries. (87)

In thus referring to *Billingsgate*, the fishmarket notorious for bad language, Astell appeals to popular knowledge and popular prejudice. Again, in refuting Defoe's anonymously published *More Short-Ways with the Dissenters*, she adopts an exceedingly informal conversational style:

Sixthly, *Short-Ways* will have it that my Lord *Clarendon's* History tells us that *K. Charles I. brought all the Calamities of Civil war upon on his own head*. Bless me! what hideous Spectacles Prejudice and Prepossession are upon a Reader's nose! But when our brother *Short-Ways* has laid these aside, has wip'd his Eyes, and is willing to see clearly, I would then advise him to another Perusal of that excellent and useful History, which he will find to be point blank against his Assertion [...] . (101)

This informality extends occasionally to her use of colloquial vocabulary – for example, in this passage from *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War*, where she uses the slang word “bubbled” for “deceived,” or “taken in”:

But sure we of this age, who have this dismal tragedy so fresh in our Memories, must be the greatest Fools in nature, if we

suffer our selves to be bubbled any more by Men of the same Principles, and by the same Artifices so often detected, and so justly abhorr'd. (138)

Oddly, however, this use of colloquial vocabulary is part of a style that can only be identified as grand. This, after all, is persuasive writing at its most urgent. There is an appeal to the emotions characteristic of the grand style, revealing itself in the use of rhetorical tropes and schemes.⁹ The following passage from *An Impartial Enquiry*, for example, demonstrates her use of the rhetorical question, the exclamation, and irony:

Is it not an Inconsistency to deplore the Fate of *Char.* I and to justify that of other Princes? If we think their Fall to be Just, and his to be Unjust and Deplorable, we may in time come to abhor those Principles that brought him to the Block, and the practices that flow from them, as being equally destructive of the Best, as well as the worst Princes; and then what will become of the Peoples Right to shake off an Oppressor? Must we take that dull way which *David* took, and which the old-fashion'd Homilies talk of, Wait God's time, and let him go down to the Grave in Peace? Why at this rate we may tamely have our Throats cut; and sure it is better to be beforehand with him! (148)

She also makes use of the long periodic sentence, gradually building the tension to a climax. In the following passage, she castigates the reign of William III (much approved by the Whigs):

As little did we hear of *Illegal Acts* and *Arbitrary Power*, of *Oppression* and *Persecution*, in a Reign that tugg'd hard for a Standing Army in time of Peace; that had Interest to suspend the *Habeas Corpus* Act several times, tho' it be the great Security of the *English* Liberties; that outed 7 or 8 Reverend Prelates, the Ornament and Glory of the English Church, besides several of the inferiour Clergy, and Members of the Universities, and that only for *Conscience sake*, and because they cou'd not swallow such new Oaths, as they believ'd to be contrary to the old ones: And tho' 12 of them were thought so deserving, that there was a Provision made in their Favour, even by that Act that depriv'd them of their Freeholds and Subsistance, of the Rights

as *English-men* and Ministers of God's Church, yet not one of them enjoy'd, in that Human, Charitable and Religious Reign! the Advantages which the *Body of the Good-natur'd English People* design'd them. (194)

This stylistic expertise serves her well as a polemicist and gives a sharp edge to her attack. She has a keen eye for the inconsistencies of her opponents' arguments and a biting, satirical wit. Particularly successful is her refutation of Dr. D'Avenant, who had changed his political opinions: as Florence Smith says, "[I]n a skillful manner she wove together the Doctor's opinions with comments of her own so as to bring out the change in his views" (139). She is adept at turning the arguments of her opponents against them, a skill she shows particularly in refuting Biblical evidence brought forward by the opposition: her thorough familiarity with Scripture allows her to put the citations in context and offer convincing alternative interpretations.

After 1709, Astell produced no new works. Indeed, *Bart'lemy Fair* itself was something of an afterthought. Since she had been so successful, so highly regarded, the question must arise as to why she wrote no more. But perhaps a more relevant question to ask is why the early years of the eighteenth century provided her with exactly the right context for her work. What circumstances provided her with the opportunity to use her talents in the political arena? A number of them no doubt contributed, but pre-eminent among them must be the succession in March 1702 of Queen Anne. In "A Prefatory Discourse to Dr D'Avenant," which introduces *Moderation Truly Stated*, she refers to the Queen as "the Light of England. She is the breath of our nostrils, we know not how to live if this fails us" (xxviii). The new reign brought a new hope to many of the conservative persuasion, but for Astell there were added reasons to look eagerly to a better future.

In the first place, Anne was a Stuart, daughter of the deposed James II. Her sister, Mary II, who had reigned before her, was also of course a Stuart; but her sister's husband, William of Orange, had refused to be a mere consort and had insisted upon the holding the monarchy in his own right jointly with his wife. Many among the Royalist party objected strongly to this arrangement: William III had, in their view, no claim to the throne whatever. Some of them, including Astell's friend and patron, William Sancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury, had refused to swear allegiance to him.

William's Protestantism was not of a kind to appeal to Anglicans of Astell's rather High Church stamp, and the exclusion of non-jurors in his reign angered the conservative party. With the accession of Anne, many hoped that matters might improve, and it did indeed seem that they might. Anne herself was inclined to the Tory position politically, and "was known to be sympathetic to the High Church position, had spoken for it, and was herself a conservative Anglican" (Perry, *Celebrated* 188). Astell, therefore, may have been looking forward to Anne's support of the political and religious causes that were so dear to her. The conservative party might come again to predominate, and the convictions of the High Church Anglicans would flourish under the approval of the monarch. The conservatives, therefore, were riding high at the time of Anne's accession, and were already moving to regain some of the power and influence they had lacked in the previous reign.

But for Astell there was even more cause for hope, arising from the fact of Anne's being a woman. Her delight in this instance of a woman's power comes to the fore in several of her works at this time, including, as we have seen, *The Christian Religion*. In *Moderation Truly Stated*, a woman lectures two men on the impropriety of their sneering remarks about women:

[I]n a Lady's reign, and even in Books that you Dedicate to her Majesty, you take upon yourself to tell the World that in this Kingdom no more Skill, no more Policies are requisite, than what may be comprehended by a Woman. As if there were any Skill, and Policy that a Woman's Understanding could not reach. So again, if women do anything well, nay should a hundred thousand Women do the Greatest and most Glorious Actions, presently it must be with a Mind (forsooth) above their Sex! Now if Women be such despicable Creatures, pray what's the plain English of all your fine Speeches and Dedications to her Majesty, but Madam we mean to flatter you? (liii)

To Astell, the accession of a woman who was also a Stuart, a conservative and a High Church Anglican appeared to promise a new world, or rather a return to the old one of the early seventeenth century. She hoped and believed that Anne would be another Elizabeth. Indeed, she suggests, though not perhaps wholly seriously, that all our monarchs should be queens, since so many of the best have been women (lv). She cites Isabella of Castile, Margaret

of Denmark, and Zenobia of Palmyra (29). Astell's anticipation of the Queen's support for women had begun even before she came to the throne. It was rumoured that Princess Anne, as she then was, had been prepared to endow Astell's proposed Protestant monastery for women with ten thousand pounds (Perry, *Celebrated* 134). Whether or not it was indeed she who came forward – only to be discouraged by the counsel of Bishop Burnet – Mary Astell no doubt at one time had hopes of her royal support, for it was to her that she dedicated Part II of *A Serious Proposal*. By the end of the first decade of Anne's reign, however, some of these hopes had been disappointed. In the first instance, the Queen found it wise to try to make peace between the warring political factions. Then she came increasingly under the influence of her Whig courtiers, especially the ladies, to whom she listened more and more. It is true, however, that the mere fact of her being on the throne apparently encouraged her female subjects. As Ruth Perry points out, the reigns of Elizabeth I and of Victoria similarly encouraged women (*Celebrated* 188). But Anne was not a strong monarch, as Elizabeth I had been, and not as influential as Victoria was to become.¹⁰ The position of women did not greatly change during her reign. Indeed, already in *An Impartial Enquiry*, published in 1704, Astell is inclined to fault Anne for being too conciliatory:

[H]er only fault, if Duty and Respect will allow that Expression, consists in too much of the Royal Martyr's Clemency and Goodness; Her Majesty's Reign having left us nothing to wish, but that she had less of K. *Charles* and more of the Spirit of Q. *Elizabeth*, since a Factious People can no way be kept in bounds, but by a sprightly and vigorous Exertion of just Authority. (195)

The early years of the eighteenth century, then, gave Astell a unique opportunity to participate in public discussion of matters very close to her heart. The pamphlets represent her crowning achievement, the summit of her success. True to her own conviction that the greatest Christian virtues are public ones, she finally emerged as a political thinker whose work was taken seriously. The experience of producing her earlier works had trained her in strenuous argumentation and had given her a command of style seldom equalled in her day. When in 1709 she turned her attention again toward education, it must have been with a feeling that she had already made an important contribution to public life.