



## THE ELOQUENCE OF MARY ASTELL

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**Part III**

**Mary Astell's Rhetorical Theory**



Mary Astell was not only a distinguished practitioner of rhetoric; she was also a theorist, and her rhetorical theory is one of the most important contributions she made to the rhetorical tradition. Astell's rhetorical theory is to be found in chapter 3 of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II*. It is put forward in ninety-six pages (in the original edition) of detailed discussion and includes a great deal of highly practical advice. The first fifty-four pages of this discussion are devoted not specifically to rhetoric, but to logic. However, this forms an important part of her theory of rhetoric, for Mary Astell appears to have followed Petrus Ramus in confining rhetoric proper to matters of style: *inventio* and to some extent *dispositio*, the discovery and arrangement of the arguments, she treats therefore under logic, seeing it as the essential preliminary to rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> The whole discussion is remarkable for its accessibility to her primary audience of women: there is nothing in it to frighten them. At the same time, it is never condescending, and Astell maintains the discussion at a level that accommodates those more advanced in philosophical thought than her scantily educated ladies. She never makes the mistake of confusing lack of education with lack of intelligence. The ideas she puts forward make strong demands upon the understanding; it is Astell's compelling clarity that renders them accessible. But as we have seen, although her primary audience was women, she also had a broader audience in mind, including those contemporary philosophers and theologians with whose positions she disagreed. In this chapter, then, I shall discuss Astell's theory of logic and try to establish not only some of her sources, but also the extent to which she transcends them.

Perhaps the most important element in Astell's rhetorical theory, both for *inventio* and *dispositio* – which she treats under logic – and for her style, is that thinking and writing are natural:

As to the *Method* of Thinking [...] it falls in with the Subject I've now come to, which is, that *Natural Logic* I wou'd propose.

I call it natural because I shall not send you further than your Own Minds to learn it, you may if you please take in the assistance of some well chosen book, but a good Natural Reason after all is the best Director, without this you will scarce Argue well, though you had the Choicest Books and Tutors to Instruct you, but with it you may, tho' you happen to be destitute of the other.<sup>2</sup> (117)

What is immediately apparent here is Astell's debt to Descartes. His influence is apparent throughout her theory of logic and extends also to her theory of style. Having enunciated Descartes's principle of the naturalness of human thought, its givenness, she turns to a discussion of another of his principles: the importance of clear and distinct ideas. Her discussion of the difficulty of arriving at conceptions of sufficient clarity involves a consideration of the deficiencies of language itself.<sup>3</sup> She shares with other thinkers of her time a dissatisfaction with the fluidity of the meanings of words, an instability that inhibits exactness and clarity: "Thus many times our Ideas are thought to be false when the Fault is really in our Language" (122). Constant vigilance is required if the slipperiness of language is to be overcome:

The First and Principal thing therefore to be observed in all the Operations of the Minds is, That we determine nothing about those things of which we have not a Clear Idea, and as Distinct as the Nature of the Subject will permit, for we cannot properly be said to Know any thing which does not Clearly and Evidently appear to us. (122)

She then turns to Descartes in order to nail down exactly what is meant by clear and distinct ideas:

That (to use the words of a Celebrated Author) may be said to be "clear which is Present and Manifest to an attentive Mind; so as we say we see Objects Clearly, when being present to our Eyes they sufficiently Act on 'em, and our Eyes are dispos'd to regard 'em. And that Distinct, which is so Clear, Particular, and Different from all other things, that it contains not any thing in it self which appears not manifestly to him who considers it as he ought." (123)

This direct quotation from Descartes she documents in the margin, citing his *Principes de la Philosophie* and giving the page number. Clarity for Astell is “the best eloquence” (142), and obscurity one of the faults most to be avoided; and the achievement of the one and avoidance of the other require, first of all, clear thought – clarity at the level of *inventio*: “Obscurity, one of the greatest faults in Writing, does commonly proceed from a want of Meditation, for when we pretend to teach others what we do not understand our selves, no wonder that we do it at a sorry rate” (138).

Closely related to Descartes’s insistence on clarity and distinctness is the principle of attention. In fact, according to Thomas M. Carr, “the clarity and distinctness of self-evidence are functions of attention” (39). He quotes from Descartes’s *Principes*: “I call clear that which is present and manifest to an attentive mind” (qtd. in Carr 39). For Descartes, what draws and maintains attention is admiration, in its seventeenth-century sense of wonder, more than a flattering regard. Referring to Descartes’s *Les Passions de l’âme*, Carr asserts: “[Descartes] not only includes admiration among his six primitive passions in which all others find their source (3.1006), he labels it the first of all the passions (3.999). This admiration is ‘a sudden surprise of the soul which brings it to consider with attention objects that seem rare and extraordinary to it’” (53). Astell too stresses the importance of admiration, though she sees its application more particularly to matters of style: “[W]hatever it is we Treat of our Stile shou’d be such as may keep our Readers Attent, and induce them to go to the End. Now Attention is usually fixt by Admiration, which is excited by somewhat uncommon either in the Thought or way of Expression” (144). The debt to Descartes is obvious, though at this point unacknowledged.

Also unacknowledged is Astell’s most important debt to Cartesian principles: the six rules she gives for *inventio* and *dispositio*. A comparison of these rules with the four given by Descartes in *Discourse on Method* demonstrates his influence. Here are Descartes’s rules:

I believed that the following four rules would be sufficient, provided I made a firm and constant resolution not even once to fail to observe them:

The first was never to accept anything as true that I did not know evidently to be so; that is, carefully to avoid precipitous

judgment and prejudice; and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind with such clarity and distinctness that I would have no occasion to put it in doubt.

The second, to divide each of the difficulties I was examining into as many parts as possible and as required to solve them best.

The third, to conduct my thoughts in an orderly fashion, commencing with the simplest and easiest to know objects, to rise gradually, as by degrees, to the knowledge of the most composite things, and even supposing an order among those things that do not naturally precede one another.

And last, everywhere to make enumerations so complete and reviews so general that I would be sure of having omitted nothing. (10)

Here are Mary Astell's six rules:

**RULE I** Acquaint our selves thoroughly with the State of the Question, have a Distinct Notion of our Subject whatever it be, and of Terms we make use of, knowing precisely what it is we drive at.

**RULE II** Cut off all needless Ideas and whatever has not a necessary connexion to the matter under Consideration.

**RULE III** To conduct our Thoughts by Order, beginning with the most Simple and Easie Objects, and ascending by Degrees to the Knowledge of the most Compos'd.

**RULE IV** Not to leave any part of our Subject unexamined. [...] *To this Rule belongs that of Dividing the Subject of our Meditations into as many Parts as we can, and as shall be requisite to Understand it perfectly [...]*

**RULE V** Always keep our Subject Directly in our Eye, and Closely pursue it thro all our Progress.

**RULE VI** To judge no further than we Perceive, and not to take any thing for Truth, which we do not evidently Know to be so. (128)

It is immediately apparent that Astell's rules of logic have been inspired by Descartes. But what is important to note here is the way Astell accommodates his directions to her primary audience of women. Since they are less educated than the audience for which he wrote, she adds advice that she believes they especially need to follow. In particular, the women need to guard against hastiness and lack of focus. For example, in her commentary on Rule II, she warns them about

those causeless Digressions, tedious Parentheses and Impertinent Remarques, which we meet with in some authors. For, as when our Sight is diffus'd and extended to many objects at once, we see none of them Distinctly; so when the Mind grasps at every Idea that presents it self, [or] rambles after such as relate not to its present Business, it loses its hold and retains a very feeble Apprehension of that which it shou'd Attend. (126)

The length of Astell's commentary on this rule suggests that she sees digression as a particular danger for her audience. It is significant that what she says here sounds very much like a description of conversation, where one subject frequently leads naturally into another. This form of communication would, of course, have been practised constantly by the women in her audience; therefore, they need to guard against transferring the characteristics of oral communication too freely to their written discourse. She had herself fallen into this error and been reproved for it, as we have seen, by John Norris.

Astell comments on other rules too. Especially interesting is her comment on Rule IV, derived from Descartes's Rule IV, for here she feeds in ideas of decorum:

[A] Moral Action may in some Circumstance be not only Fit but Necessary, which in others, where Time, Place and the like have made an alteration, wou'd be most Improper; so that if we venture to Act on the former Judgment, we may easily do amiss, if we wou'd Act as we ought, we must view its New Face, and see with what Aspect that looks on us. (127)



This is a particularly good example of Astell's accommodation of Descartes's ideas to her own audience. Obviously, propriety was of great concern to her high-born ladies, as it was to Astell herself. Completeness for Astell and her audience includes, as it does not for Descartes, a study of the rhetorical situation: a change in time and place will involve a reconsideration of the facts, a different selection from them, perhaps, and a new presentation.

Rule V adds to those given by Descartes, and again it is apparent that Astell sees her audience to be in need of this particular piece of advice. As with Rule II, there is a danger of wandering attention, distraction, inattention to detail, so that the thinking becomes superficial and logically disconnected. Having directed her readers to keep the subject in view, she goes on: "[...] there being no better Sign of a good Understanding than Thinking Closely and Pertinently, and Reasoning dependently, so as to make the former part of our Discourse a support to the Latter, and *This* an Illustration of *That*, carrying Light and Evidence in ev'ry step we take" (127). This instruction in the process of logical argumentation is particularly necessary for her audience of women who would be far more comfortable with a narrative than with an argumentative approach.

Astell's rules for thinking – that is, *inventio* – are combined with instructions for *dispositio*. Thus, Rule III is "to conduct our Thoughts by Order, beginning with the most Simple and Easie Objects," and Rule IV, which introduces *divisio*, stresses the importance of recapitulation and the drawing of conclusions at the end of each part of the discourse. She reiterates and extends this advice in her later discussion of rhetoric. In fact, she finds it ultimately impossible to separate the method of thinking from organization, and organization from style. Thus in her praise of clarity in style, she speaks of the importance of "Exactness of Method; [...] by putting every thing in its proper place with due Order and Connexion, the Readers Mind is gently led where the Writer wou'd have it" (138).

Astell's rules, then, though well accommodated to her own audience, owe an obvious debt to Descartes. Yet in giving these rules, Astell does not quote him or even name him. She introduces them by giving a general acknowledgement: "which Rules as I have not taken wholly on Trust from others, so neither do I pretend to be the Invention of 'em" (126). Obviously she is drawing upon many different sources and using them to create her own theory rather than

simply reproducing them. Who then were some of these others to whom she refers? We may suspect that many of the authors she had read contributed to her theory, but we can be sure only of the influence of those whom she cites. Two of the more important of these are Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, the authors of *The Art of Thinking*. It was available to her in English, and she probably read it in translation. However, since she cites it by its French title as well, she may have used both the translation and the original.

The Antoine Arnauld whose work informed Astell's theory of logic (there were many of the Arnauld family who bore that name) was born in 1612 and lived until 1694. His collaborator, Pierre Nicole, was thirteen years younger.<sup>4</sup> Arnauld taught in the Little Schools of Port Royal for which he and Pierre Nicole wrote their famous *L'art de penser*, which was published in 1662 (Dickoff xxviii). Interestingly, given the importance of *L'art de penser* to Astell's theory, Port Royal des Champs was a Cistercian institution founded in 1204 to provide an education for women. In 1223 it was granted the privilege of serving as a retreat house for seculars and was therefore open to many among the pious, both men and women, who had not taken religious vows. Blaise Pascal, whose *Soul of Geometry* was a key influence on the Port Royal Logic (Springborg, *Mary Astell* 190 n.114), was a retreatant there.

Sometime in the mid-1650s, Arnauld began to collaborate with Pierre Nicole, and the two frequently worked together from then on.<sup>5</sup> In 1641 Arnauld was asked as a theologian to comment on Descartes's *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (Dickoff xxxv). In 1648 Descartes himself asked Arnauld's opinion of the *Meditationes*. As a result of the earlier request (in 1641), Arnauld had studied the *Meditationes* and was attracted to Descartes's philosophy. Accordingly, when he and Pierre Nicole came to write *L'art de penser* in 1661, they drew heavily on Cartesian philosophy, supporting it but also to some extent redirecting it in the light of Augustinian theology.

Thomas Carr's discussion of the eloquence of Port Royal usefully clarifies the relationship between the Cartesian and Augustinian elements in *L'art de penser*:

Arnauld [...] was attracted by the distinction between the pure intellect and sense perception in Cartesian epistemology. As early as 1641[...] Arnauld had noted the convergence of Descartes' philosophy with that of Augustine. Indeed the

explicit discussion of eloquence in terms of Cartesian attention that is inaugurated in the *Logique de Port Royal* is a product of Nicole and Arnauld's allegiance to Descartes' psychophysiology coupled with their Augustinian stress on concupiscence. At each step, Cartesian elements are re-oriented by a theological imperative. [...] The distinction between the two kinds of thought (pure intellect and sense perception) takes on a religious colour absent in Descartes when Arnauld and Nicole cite Augustine's teaching that, since the Fall, humans find it more pleasurable to attend to the product of the senses represented by corporal images than to pure ideas. (65)

This Christian interpretation of Descartes's philosophy attracted Astell because it brought together and reconciled two of her most deeply held beliefs: her belief in human reason and her belief in God. The whole of *A Serious Proposal, Part II* is based on the assumption that reason and faith inform one another and that if they are functioning as they ought, they must produce both impeccable morality and religious devotion. A brief comparison of her ideas on this subject with those of Descartes and of Arnauld and Nicole demonstrates the extent to which her thinking was grounded in her theological convictions and suggests that she took her ideas on thinking not simply from Descartes, but from Arnauld and Nicole's conflation of Cartesian philosophy with Augustinian theology.

I begin, then, with Descartes. The obvious objection to Descartes's theory of the naturalness of human reason – a theory taken up by Mary Astell – is the fact of human error. Descartes himself answers this objection by attributing error in part at least to immaturity: “Descartes warns against hasty judgments and preconceived notions in the first rule of the *Discours* because the prejudices of prolonged childhood that present such obstacles to his philosophy are the accumulated residue of hasty judgments made before the will was mature” (Carr 38). Arnauld and Nicole, though they do not dispute Descartes's attribution of error to immaturity, obviously do not think it sufficient to cover all cases. In chapter 9 of part I of *L'art de penser*, they develop Cartesian ideas of the prejudices of childhood being responsible for errors in reasoning as these apply to the study of physics; but in chapter 10, they turn their attention to ethics, and here they draw upon Augustine's doctrine of concupiscence (73). They apparently consider physics

to be neutral, something to which human passions do not apply. But ethics is not neutral; the study of ethics is extremely vulnerable to errors arising from human sinfulness. They therefore make a distinction between scientific knowledge and ethical or human knowledge: for the latter, the theological perspective of Augustine is required. Earlier, in part 1, Arnauld and Nicole have introduced the idea that the Fall of man has undermined the powers of the intellect: “The images of material things enter the brain through the senses and – as St Augustine frequently remarks – man since the Fall has so accustomed himself to considering only material things that most men believe they can conceive only what they can imagine, that is, what they can represent to themselves by means of material images” (32). In chapter 10, they resume the argument: “Though in God alone is true happiness found and though only in the pursuit of God is the pursuit of happiness, still the corruption of sin has impelled man to seek happiness in a multitude of things” (73). It is this distortion of the nature of true happiness that has twisted the moral sense and given rise to errors of judgement in ethics.

Throughout *The Art of Thinking*, Arnauld and Nicole frequently cite Augustine and use theological instances and examples to clarify their arguments. It is this bringing together of Cartesian philosophy and Augustinian theology that Mary Astell draws upon in her own theory of logic, a theory that emerges from her discussion of the relationship between the understanding and the will. She believes that each must inform the other, but her underlying conviction is that intellectual failures are fundamentally the result of sin.<sup>6</sup> She does reluctantly allow that some intellectual incapacity may be innate: “[S]ome minds are endow’d by their Creator with a larger Capacity than the rest” (111). However, she urges her audience to be very sure of their disability before they give up: “Yet e’er we give out let’s see if it be thus with us in all Cases: Can we Think and Argue Rationally about a Dress, an Intreague, an Estate? Why then not upon better Subjects?” (111). It is much more likely that disinclination for intellectual pursuits arises from deficiencies in the will rather than in the understanding. She works out this thesis in the first two chapters of the book; in the third she shows its practical application. In doing so, she shows in detail how the mind is inhibited by failures in morality. For example, the claim of each successive scholar to hold a monopoly on the truth strikes her as absurd (107). It is wrong to claim a personal

and privileged enlightenment, or to try to use one's knowledge for personal aggrandizement. It is not by such practices – inspired by pride – that truth may be found; nor do they contribute to the moral and spiritual health of those who use them.

Astell cites *The Art of Thinking* at various points in chapter 3 of *A Serious Proposal, Part II*. She begins her discussion of logic by acknowledging her debt to this work and quoting from it: “For as a very Judicious Writer on this Subject (to whose Ingenious Remarks and Rules I am much obliged) well observes, ‘These Operations [of the Mind] proceed meerly from Nature, and that sometimes more perfectly from those who are altogether ignorant of Logic, than from others who have learn’d it’” (117).<sup>7</sup> She refers to the work again in her discussion of sophisms. She declines to list all these, suggesting instead that her readers consult *The Art of Thinking*, giving the part and chapter numbers to make the consultation easy for them (133).

Yet in spite of this obvious – and fully acknowledged – debt to *The Art of Thinking*, what comes across most clearly is the difference between that work and Astell's *Serious Proposal, Part II*. Astell draws upon Arnauld and Nicole, Descartes, and even her old enemy, John Locke, but she does not in any sense imitate them. She uses them as material out of which she creates something new. She transmutes and transcends her sources, and the work is her own. Partly this difference is brought about by the different rhetorical situation: the audience is different from the anticipated audiences of her sources, and her purpose is unlike theirs. These changes promote a wholly different tone: Descartes, Arnauld and Nicole, and Locke, however accessible they try to make their ideas, write as philosophers in philosophical style; Astell's tone, though somewhat more formal than the one she uses in *A Serious Proposal, Part I*, is still conversational. She adopts the commonsense stance of the mentor, even the mother, not aspiring to the dignity of the authority. Yet all this she achieves without sacrificing the depth of intellectual approach to her subject or overlooking its complexity.

Astell concludes her discussion of logic by demonstrating how to apply her method to the consideration of specific questions. She takes two standard questions: “Whether there is a God or a Being Infinitely Perfect” and “Whether a rich Man is Happy.” In the first of these, the arguments she uses show that she was familiar with the discussion between Stillingfleet and Locke on questions of this kind, and as Patricia Springborg points out, the reference

to the watchmaker is evidence that she also knew the arguments of Descartes.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it is obvious that Astell has read Descartes's argument for the existence of God in *Principes de la Philosophie*. What is remarkable here is not so much her grasp of the philosophical principles involved as her ability to make the steps in the argument plain to the amateur:

For in the first place, what ever has any Perfection or Excellency (for that's all we mean by Perfection here) must either have it of it self, or derive it from some other Being. Now Creatures cannot have their perfections from themselves because they have not their Being, for to suppose that they Made themselves is an Absurdity too ridiculous to be seriously refuted, 'tis to suppose them to Be and not to Be at the same time, and that when they were Nothing, they were able to do the greatest Matter. Nor can they derive either Being or Perfection from any other Creature. For tho some Particular Beings may seem to be the Cause of the Perfections of others, as the Watch-maker may be said to be the Cause of the Regular Motions of the Watch, yet trace it a little farther, and you'll find this very Cause shall need another, and so without End, till you come to the Fountain-head, to that All-Perfect Being, who is the last resort of our Thoughts, and in whom they Naturally and Necessarily rest and terminate. (130)

Astell's intention in this passage is to demonstrate to her readers that they do not have to be trained as philosophers in order to argue philosophically. This kind of discussion should be for them both interesting and possible. In the first place, she hopes to arouse their curiosity about such questions: how much more worthwhile it is to discuss the existence of God than what dress to wear at the next party. Then she wants to demonstrate that such mental activity is not beyond their powers. She therefore makes her argument as simple as possible to show her readers that they can reason effectively merely by using the method she has just laid out for them.

Astell's theory of logic, then, is her own distillation of the thoughts of some of the foremost philosophers of the seventeenth century – Descartes, Arnauld, and Nicole – combined with her own good sense and her understanding of the needs and capacities of her primary audience of women. She draws, therefore, on all available sources but she never merely repeats their ideas. What is of the greatest importance to her in this particular work is to give

her audience of ladies what they require in order to embark on the life of the mind. Guided by their needs, therefore, she simplifies the theories of those philosophers whose work on the subject she has herself studied and offers her audience a workable procedure for them to follow.