



## THE ELOQUENCE OF MARY ASTELL

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## The Christian Religion

In 1705 Mary Astell published her *magnum opus*, *The Christian Religion*. It is her longest work – well over 400 pages – and her most comprehensive and profound.<sup>1</sup> It brings together her ideas about philosophy, politics, education, and women’s issues, and shows them to be consistent with one another, based as all of them are, fundamentally, on her Christian convictions. The work is divided into five sections. The first section, “Of Religion in general; and of the Christian Faith,” she calls the theoretical part of the treatise, laying the groundwork of philosophy on which the remaining parts of the work are based. Having established the theory, she turns to Christian practice: section 2 deals with our duty to God, section 3 with our duty to our neighbour, and section 4 with our duty to ourselves. The fifth section is devoted to refutation, following the pattern of classical rhetoric. She also includes here a summary of the whole. In this chapter, though I shall make reference to the various issues Astell discusses, I am primarily interested in considering the work as a rhetorical project: To what rhetorical genre does the work belong? What is the context? Who are the audiences? And how does she accommodate her various purposes and audiences?

First, the question of genre: again, Astell adopts the letter form. Only *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* has so far not been in the form of a letter addressed to a particular audience. This work is written as a letter addressed to her friend Lady Catherine Jones. Astell does occasionally address the correspondent as “your Ladyship,” but the subject matter, the organization, and the length suggest that it is in fact a treatise. Only in tone does it sometimes suggest a personal correspondence. The convention of the letter is, perhaps, wearing a little thin. It is a transparent device, probably adopted in this work to give some sense of focus and of personal address. Here her style is, as usual, conversational: it is voiced, and her tone is intimate, addressing the audience (for in spite of the letter form, she is manifestly addressing an audience of more than one) like familiar friends, sharing insights and taking them into

her confidence. She wants, if possible, to give immediacy to her subject, as if it is the dominating topic of current conversation. As we have seen, she uses the death of the Duchess of Mazarin as the occasion of *Reflections*. *The Christian Religion* too is presented as an occasional work: "When I borrow'd *The Ladies Religion*, your Ladyship I believe had no suspicion of being troubled with such a long Address, nor had I any design to give you this trouble" (1). It is her reading of this book that she gives as the immediate occasion of her commencing the present work. Since Lady Catherine Jones was her friend and patron, it is probable that she addressed the work to her also to acknowledge her assistance and to honour her.

In thus using the letter genre for what is essentially a treatise, Astell is following a standard Renaissance convention, based on the example of Cicero.<sup>2</sup> In Astell's practice, the use of the letter genre implies the more conciliatory tone typical of *sermo*, instead of the masculine and adversarial *contentio*. Astell's later political pamphlets do adopt a contentious tone, as did *Reflections*. In those works she demonstrates a power of invective unsurpassed in her day. She has taken on the men, and she can match the best of them in a verbal fight. But her letters are always addressed to ladies, and to them she shows deference and tenderness. However, *The Christian Religion*, though ostensibly a letter to a lady, in fact addresses a much wider audience, including Astell's opponents, John Locke and Damaris Masham. In general, her tone is appropriate to *sermo*. It is true that when she is addressing the Masham/Locke opposition, she can be quite sharp, but she never goes to the extremes of vituperative eloquence typical of *Reflections* and her political pamphlets.

Like *A Serious Proposal, Part II*, *The Christian Religion* is a work of instruction, with a very strongly developed persuasive element. It is in fact a treatise on the Christian life. In some respects it reprises and follows up her ideas in the second part of *A Serious Proposal*. However, whereas that work has primarily to do with education, this has a broader scope. Education itself is only part of the larger project of finding out how to live well. As Astell says:

It is to little purpose to Think well and Speak well, unless we *Live well*, this is our Great Affair and truest Excellency, the other are no further to be regarded than as they may assist us in this. She who does not draw this Inference from her Studies has Thought in vain, her notions are Erroneous and Mistaken.

And all her Eloquence is but an empty noise, who employs it in any other design than in gaining Proselytes to Heaven. (*Serious Proposal II* 147)

In pursuance of this project, then, Astell continues her instruction of women to include directions for developing Christian spirituality. As she articulates it to “her Ladyship,” her purpose is to put forward her own ideas as an alternative to what she considers the mistaken notions of the writer of *The Ladies Religion*. This work, which she professes to find very similar to Locke’s *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (*Christian Religion* 83), is unacceptable because of its manifest deism and its emphasis upon the importance of morality as opposed to faith (F. Smith 115). She proposes to discuss “what I think a Woman *ought* to Believe and Practise, and consequently what she *may*” (3). However, although Astell identifies her reading of *The Ladies Religion* as the immediate occasion of her engagement in the project, this is not the only work she is concerned to challenge. During the years preceding the publication of *The Christian Religion*, there had been a number of addresses to such questions as these: What is the philosophical basis for belief? How does it relate to politics? And more specifically, what are the duties of the individual Christian believer? One of these works, *The Whole Duty of Man*, Astell praises as excellent. She believes it to have been written by a lady, though she does not specify the author.<sup>3</sup> She also has kind words to say of the author of *The Ladies Calling* and *The Gentleman’s Calling* (*Christian Religion* 2), though she must have disagreed with his conviction of the natural inferiority of women and his recommendation of obedience, silence, and subjection (F. Smith 41ff.). But most of the works written at about this time Astell finds wanting: as well as *The Ladies Religion*, she is also concerned to refute certain arguments in other works, including, but not limited to, many of the works of John Locke: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and *Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), and *Two Treatises of Government* (1690). She also addresses the arguments in *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1696), the attack by Damaris Masham on *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, her correspondence with John Norris. It is here, not in *A Serious Proposal, Part II*, that Astell answers the objections put forward by Masham in that work. She may have considered it to have been written by Locke, and it was indeed most probably strongly influ-

enced by him. She also takes issue with some of the sermons of Archbishop Tillotson (403–07).

These works, then, provide the textual context in which she writes. Her ultimate purpose may be inferred from the epigraph, printed on the title page – a quotation from Jeremiah 6:16: “Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways and see, and ask for the Old Paths, where is the good Way, and walk therein, and ye shall find Rest to your Souls.” This suggests that in this work Astell is responding to what she sees as an alarming tendency to latitudinarianism, to the reduction of the Christian faith to a kind of secular morality that ignores the mysterious elements that she holds to be essential. What she has in mind, then, is to set forth the basic principles, the philosophy of the faith, in opposition to the current ideas of more modern thinkers, and then to apply these principles to Christian living. She begins by setting forth the principles of the Christian faith, entailing a discussion of natural religion and of revealed religion in section 1. She concludes that although natural religion or reason could have told her that she, like all other human beings, was a sinner, without revealed religion she could not have known that “Adam’s Sin was the cause of this” (50). Similarly, however much she desired forgiveness, she would not have known how it might be available: “For that GOD wou’d send His Son, at what time, and in what matter [*sic*] to Reconcile the World unto Himself, was what no Created Understanding cou’d ever have attain’d the knowledge of, unless GOD had thought fit to reveal it” (50).

She concludes, therefore, that although some truths may be established by reason and experience, others can come only by divine revelation. It is true that she must use reason to establish that revelation is genuine: she must “enquire [...] whether that which is call’d Divine Revelation, is so in reality, for thus far my own Reason is a proper judge” (13). Having satisfied herself in this respect, however, she must not allow reason to overrule revelation:

Reason can judge of things which she can comprehend, she can determine where she has a compleat, or at least a clear and distinct Idea and can judge of a *contradiction in terms*, for this is within her compass; but she must not affirm in opposition to Revelation. (14)

Like Pascal, one of her intellectual heroes, Astell believed that reason and revelation each have their own particular sphere and must not trespass into the other's territory.<sup>4</sup> This position she had already clearly set forth in *A Serious Proposal, Part II*:

There is not such a difference between Faith and Science as is usually suppos'd. The difference consists not in the Certainty but in the way of Proof: the Objects of Faith are as Rationally and Firmly Prov'd as the Objects of Science, tho by another way. As Science Demonstrates things that are Seen, so Faith is the Evidence of such as are Not Seen. And he who rejects the Evidence of Faith in such things as belong to its Cognizance, is an unreasonable as he who denies the Propositions in Geometry that are prov'd with Mathematical exactness. (103)

Having thus laid down the ground rules, the premises upon which their thinking should be based, Astell insists that people – all people, and especially women – must think for themselves and not rely upon what they have been told. Here, as in *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*, in thus preferring *logos* to the non-rational means of persuasion, *ethos*, and *pathos*, Astell shows herself to be a child of the Enlightenment. Although in many ways she looks back to the past – her epigraph, referred to above, is a case in point – in this emphasis upon reason she is typical of her age, though her allegiance is to the rationalism of Descartes, not to the empiricism of Locke. Her respect for reason is also consistent with her Neoplatonist philosophy: in *The Christian Religion* she refers to “the candle of the Lord” (17), this being the phrase used by the Cambridge Platonists to designate reason and to assert their belief that it is innate.

The conviction of women's intellectual powers – at least equal to those of men – is central to Astell's beliefs: “If GOD had not intended that Women shou'd use their Reason, He wou'd not have given them any, for He does nothing in vain” (6). As in *A Serious Proposal, Part II* (upon which this work expands), she insists that it is not enough for women simply to learn what they ought to do: they must also understand the reasons for the injunctions. Women have been too thoroughly trained in obedience, in deference to those who constitute themselves their superiors:

I therefore beg leave to say, That most of, if not all, the Follies and Vices that Women are subject to, (for I meddle not with the Men) are owing to our paying too great deference to other Peoples judgments, and too little to our own, in suffering others to judge for us, when GOD has not only allow'd, but requir'd us to judge for our selves. [...]

What is it that engages Women in Crimes contrary to their Reason, and their very natural Temper, but the being over-perswaded and over-rul'd by those to whose conduct they commit themselves? And how do they excuse these Crimes, but by alledging the examples and opinions of other People? (36,37)

It is in the context of setting forth these philosophical principles that Astell finds it necessary to refute some of the ideas of Locke. Yet in spite of her refutation, it is obvious that she respects him. She gives him the benefit of the doubt whenever possible, even to the point of accepting some of the ideas he puts forward. Ultimately, though, she finds his position inconsistent with both the evidence of Scripture and the traditions of the church as found in the earliest creeds. Locke has claimed (according to Astell) that “the coming of the Messiah, the Kingdom of Heaven, and the Kingdom of GOD are the same and was what John the Baptist Preach'd: And that this same Doctrine and nothing else was Preach'd by the Apostles afterwards” (71). Astell is not satisfied: “The former part of this Assertion we shall allow him, the latter is the point in question” (71). She then proceeds to prove her point by referring to the account in Acts 19 of the disciples at Ephesus who had been baptized only with John's baptism and had not received the Holy Ghost.<sup>5</sup>

Astell also takes issue with Locke for ignoring the doctrine of the Trinity “since his profess'd design is to speak of those Truths, and of those only which are absolutely requir'd to be believed to make any one a Christian” (75). Initiation into the Christian church, Astell points out, involves baptism in the name of all three Persons of the Trinity. Obviously, then, the doctrine of the Trinity is essential to Christianity. How then can Locke fail to mention it? Astell refutes Locke cogently, drawing on her profound and extensive knowledge of Scripture. She obviously respects him as a philosopher, but she cannot go along with his conclusions. What Locke is recommending, she believes, is not Christianity at all. The reasonableness of Christianity should not consist in removing

all those elements that might promote conflict, which she sees as Locke's purpose:

But, as appears to me, the Reasonableness of Christianity does not consist in avoiding such Arguments as Men object against, but in these two great Truths, viz. 1. That there is not any thing so Reasonable as to believe all that GOD has Reveald, and to practise all that he has commanded. 2. That GOD has given such proofs and evidences as are sufficient to satisfie any Reasonable Person, That the Christian Religion is a Divine Revelation. (65)

Naturally, one of the works Astell is most concerned to refute is Damaris Masham's *Discourse Concerning the Love of God*, which attacks Astell and Norris's *Letters Concerning the Love of God*. I have argued earlier that in *A Serious Proposal, Part II* Astell postpones her refutation of this work to a later occasion. It is here, in *The Christian Religion*, that she fully engages with her opponent. Most of this refutation is to be found in section 2, which deals with the duty of human beings toward God. As the titles of both Astell's and Masham's works suggest, the main issue is the question of love. In Astell's view, the chief duty of Christians toward God is to love him, and only him: their obedience is predicated on their love for him. This is, of course, very similar to the theology of Augustine of Hippo, that only God is to be loved for himself alone; other people and things are to be loved for his sake.<sup>6</sup> Masham finds this definition far too pietistic, accusing Astell of engaging in "Pompous Rhapsodies" (27) and suggesting as a better definition something more secular and grounded in empiricism: "Love simply [...] is that Disposition, or Act, of the Mind, which we find in our selves towards any thing we are pleased with" (51).

Taking a side swipe by way of the rhetorical device of *paralepsis*,<sup>7</sup> Astell proceeds with a *tu quoque* and then launches on a full-scale refutation:

This is not the place to take notice how those who are so severe upon their Neighbours for being wanting (even in Private Letters writ without a design of being Publish'd)<sup>8</sup> in that exactness of Expression which is to be found in Philosophical Definitions, do themselves confound the notion of Love with the sentiment of Pleasure, by making Love *to consist barely in the act of the Mind*



*towards that which pleases.* I shall only observe, as more proper to my present Business, That the Love of our enemies is by no means consistent with that account of Love that is given by our great Men [...] . (132)

Astell proceeds to refute Masham's argument by referring to the commandment of Jesus Christ to love one's enemies (Matt. 5:44). Since "we cannot be pleas'd with our Enemies, consequently we cannot Love them" (132). Masham's definition of love must be mistaken, then, since it is inconsistent with the words of Jesus. The refutation of Masham's definition of love continues for several pages, embracing also references to Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*. Astell argues shrewdly and tellingly; however, it is apparent that she and her opponents are basing their arguments on different premises and therefore their minds will never meet. Locke and Masham wish to argue from experience, Astell from authority. For Astell, the authority of the revelation in Scripture is paramount; for her opponents, it is not. Both sides cite Scripture, but they do not give it the same weight.

Not only are the two sides arguing from rather different premises; they also have fundamentally different values and temperaments. Masham obviously finds Astell a pious prig; she has no understanding of, no sympathy with, Astell's contemplative spirituality. For her, the world of sense is there simply to be enjoyed; for Astell, that world is dangerous unless controlled by a primary allegiance to the will of God. Their very different premises and schemes of values are naturally played out in the discussion of the political issues that concern them both. For Astell, the constraint upon government must come from religion; for Masham it should come from the people. Here is Astell's response to Masham's position:

[W]hat but the Love of GOD can justly restrain Sovereign Princes from being Injurious, or excite them to be Just and Gracious to their People? Those who think the Awe of GOD's Sovereignty but a poor Restraint, and are therefore for Subjecting them to the Coertion [*sic*] of the People, against the Laws of this Nation as well as against the Doctrine of the Church, against Scripture, and Common Sense, shew too little regard to any Religion, whatever they may talk about it, to be look'd upon by any but a heedless Mob as its Defenders; and are in truth what

St Paul and his Fellow Christians were *falsly* accus'd of being,  
The *Men that have turn'd the World upside down*. (144)

Perhaps despairing of the possibility of persuading her opponents by reason, since their premises are so mutually incompatible, Astell resorts to irony:

[A]s the World now goes, it is most for GOD's Service that we keep what we have got, and add as much to't as we can. For this enables us to be Patriots, to purchase Heads and Hands, and to Fight for Religion upon occasion; and in the mean while to do abundance of good to Mankind, by applying our selves to all their Inclinations whatever they be, that so we may bring them over to the Righteous side! (145)

Astell also answers Masham's attack upon monasteries. Conflating Astell's position in *Letters Concerning the Love of God* with her design to erect a Protestant monastery for women, put forward in *A Serious Proposal, Part I*, Masham had dismissed the suggestion as having no value, indeed as pernicious:

As for Monasteries, and religious Houses, (as they are call'd) [they] serve only to draw in Discontented, Devout People, with an imaginary Happiness. For there is constantly as much Pride, Malice, and Faction, within those Walls, as without them; And (if we may believe what is said, and has not wanted farther Evidence) very often as much licentiousness. (126)

Connecting this attack with an earlier comment of Masham's – "if we had no Desires but after God, the several Societies of Mankind could not long hold together, nor the very Species be continued" (83) – Astell protests that she has been (wilfully?) misunderstood:

[T]hat which they seem most affraid [*sic*] of, is dispeopling the World and driving Folks into Monasteries, tho' I see none among us for them to run into were they ever so much inclin'd; but have heard it generally complain'd of by very good *Protestants*, that Monasteries were Abolish'd instead of being Reform'd: And tho' none that I know of plead for Monasteries, strictly so call'd, in *England*, or anything else but a reasonable provision for the Education of one half of Mankind, and for a

safe retreat so long and no longer than our Circumstances make it requisite. As is so plainly exprest in what has been said in this business, that none can mistake the meaning, without great disingenuity and an eager desire to cavil. (142)

On the question of readership, there is no doubt that Locke and other philosophers of his persuasion were part of the intended audience. Astell implies as much when she refers to the fact that Locke died before the publication of *The Christian Religion*: “And to me the greatest difficulty of all, is in starting any Objection against an Author when he has left the World, and therefore can’t explain and answer for himself, which is a misfortune I am already fallen into (with relation to Mr L.) by these Papers being so long in the Press” (408). However, Locke and others with whom she disagrees are by no means the primary audience she has in mind. Although much of what she says is equally applicable to men, and she does not exclude them from her audience, her reason for writing the work, as she states it at the beginning, is to provide an alternative to the false ideas in *The Ladies Religion*: she intends the work to be read by women. It is obviously appropriate, then, to look at the passages in which she specifically mentions women or issues of gender. These fall into three categories: references to Queen Anne, self-references, and more general references to questions of gender.

First, then, Astell’s references to Queen Anne. Her satisfaction at having a woman on the throne is apparent in every work of hers published after Anne’s succession. She hoped that under a female monarch the lot of women might improve: “May we not hope that She will not do less for Her own Sex than She has already done for the other; but that the next Year of Her Majesties Annals will bear date, from Her Maternal and Royal Care of the most helpless and most neglected part of Her Subjects” (143). These great hopes may have been inspired by looking back to the triumphs of Queen Elizabeth I’s reign. That Queen had been herself a fine scholar and a superb rhetorician, and women’s education, at least in the upper classes, had been encouraged by her example. If so, Astell was probably disappointed that so little was in fact achieved under Anne, who, unlike Elizabeth, was not a strong monarch.

Secondly, there are the self-references. These are more numerous and of greater significance. The first comes relatively early in the treatise: “Shall I then receive the Bounty of GOD in

vain? GOD forbid! and therefore did I know or cou'd find out, a nobler Employment than the making my Calling and election sure, Woman though I am, I would employ all my Thoughts and Industry to compass it" (114). The force of this comment appears to be a recognition of the weakness and helplessness commonly ascribed to women, and perhaps a denial of it. Quite different is the self-reference that occurs toward the end, near the beginning of the final section, which sums up the whole: "Some perhaps will think there's too much of the Woman in it, too much of my particular Manner and Thoughts" (391). Here she refers not so much to her gender as to her distinctive personality. But later in the same paragraph she says something highly relevant to questions of gender: "[I]f these Papers shall survive me, by speaking Truths which no Man would say, they will appear to be genuine, and *no Man* will be blam'd for their Imperfections. I am sensible that by giving this account of Christianity according to its Truth and Purity, I have made a sort of Satyr on my self and others, whose Practice falls so very short of our Profession."

Here (irony aside) she obviously assumes that she is writing in a style specific to women. In general Astell makes very few concessions to differences of gender, her main thrust usually being that women are full human beings, whose capacities are no different from those of men. What, then, does she mean by "Truths that no Man would say"? An observation she makes further on in the passage may offer a clue:

For Moral Discourses unless they are very particular do no good upon a Reader, every one being apt to justify or excuse his own Conduct, and to believe he is unconcern'd. So that a Book is only so many words to no manner of purpose, except the Reader, even him whom the Author never so much as heard of, finds his own Picture in it, and is forc'd to say to himself, *I am the Man*. I design to do all the Good I can, which seems to me to be a Christian's Duty, and those who Won't suffer us to do it one way, must be content to receive it another. If any are offended at my manner of doing it, let them be pleas'd to show me a better, and I shall thankfully follow it. (393)

It seems from this passage that Astell believes that no man would write with such intimacy, such honesty, such self-disclosure. This particular style she sees as essentially feminine. Moreover, she sees

it as a great advantage because it forces the readers to make direct application to themselves. The passage is especially interesting from a rhetorical point of view because it sheds light upon Astell's concepts of reception. The vividness and immediacy of which she speaks is part of the classical concept of *enargia*.<sup>9</sup> But Astell has added to it her own concept of the role of intimacy of style, of the importance of self-disclosure as a means of reaching the reader and forcing an application to the self.

The most extended passage of self-reference occurs a few pages later, where she compares her work favourably with other works of the same kind, slyly quoting from Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, and referring also to *The Ladies Religion* – she has, she asserts, written nothing inaccessible to the uneducated:

No, not *the Day Labourers and Tradesmen, the spinsters and Dairy Maids*, who may easily *comprehend* what a Woman cou'd write. A Woman who has not the least Reason to imagine that her Understanding is any better than the rest of her Sex's. All the difference, if there be any, arising only from her Application, her Disinterested and Unprejudic'd Love to Truth, and unweari'd pursuit of it, notwithstanding all Discouragements, which is in every Womans power as well as in hers. And I assure you, Madam, she consulted no Divine, nor any other Man, scarce any Book except the Bible, on the Subject of this Letter, being willing to follow the thread of her own Thoughts. (403)

The force of this passage is that she believes she has done a much better job of informing the general public, especially those less educated, than any of her rivals or attackers, in part at least because she is a woman. The audience can understand without difficulty "what a Woman cou'd write."

Thirdly, there are references to women in general and to questions of gender. A number of these are complaints made about women themselves, rather than about the way they are treated. For example, she rather sourly complains about the worldliness of women of fashion: "For no time, no Care, no Pains, is thought too much for the acquisition of Honour, or Pleasure, Or Riches, tho' we may be taken from them very soon, and are sure we cannot long possess them. The making their Fortune as Men call it; or with us Women the setting our selves to purchase a Master" (113). Later, she complains again of the fashionable woman's lack

of ambition to make herself “Wise and Good in her Generation,” since she is “afraid of Censure, and dares not cross the vogue of the World, nor by doing what is unfashionable, hazard her Character tho’ to improve it!” (315). And in exasperation, she exclaims that it is “easier to make some Ladies Understand every thing, than to perswade them that they are capable of Understanding any thing” (291).<sup>10</sup>

One the most important passages on women is found in section 4, *Of Our Duty to our Selves* (296) – the most important because it clarifies Astell’s approach to the question of women’s participation in public life:

And since it is allow’d on all hands, that the Mens Business is without Doors, and their’s is an Active Life; Women who ought to be Retir’d, are for this reason design’d by providence for Speculation: Providence, which allots every one an Employment, and never intended that any one shou’d give themselves up to Idleness and Unprofitable amusements. And I make no question but great Improvements might be made in the Sciences, were not Women enviously excluded from this their proper Business. (296)

Here is a particularly interesting twist on the customary confinement of women, and their exclusion from public affairs. Astell believes that a woman’s person should be kept private: as she says in *A Serious Proposal, Part II*, women “have no business with the Pulpit, the Bar or *St Stephen’s Chapel*” (143) (where Parliament met). Yet at the same time she believes that “the true Christian seeks a Reputation from Vertues of a Public, not of a Private Nature” (*Christian Religion* 325). However, a woman, by her very exclusion from appearing in public life, has a great opportunity to contribute to it. What Astell appears to be suggesting here is that scholarship ought to be the particular province of women, since they have both the intelligence and the leisure to engage in it and their contribution to the public good can be made from afar, without intruding their persons into the public world itself. As Ruth Perry has pointed out, “this (Cartesian) introspection which required leisure, isolation, and the willful doubting of all previous knowledge, was a mode of intellectual activity available to almost all literate middle-class and aristocratic women” (“Radical Doubt” 479). As we have seen, in using the genre of the ostensibly private

letter for public purposes, Astell worked in the tradition of the Renaissance humanists. John Tinkler argues that this kind of writing was possible only to men of leisure: “[T]he literary *sermo* was above all the literature of *otium*” (287). Cicero produced his works of scholarship when he was out of political office, and “a surprising number of the humanist works we think of as most important were written at leisure” (Tinkler 287). Although Astell herself does not draw this parallel, it is interesting that she recommends women to use their leisure in pursuit of scholarship to an extent that men who are fully engaged with the business of the world cannot.

The references to women, however, are not numerous. Their very scarcity would suggest that Astell has more than women in mind as her audience, and that her purpose goes beyond a discussion of feminist concerns, important as these are, as it also goes beyond mere refutation of philosophers with whom she disagrees. The greater proportion of the whole work is devoted to a detailed discussion of Christian principles and how to put them into practice, and most of it is relevant to both women and men.

*The Christian Religion* gives the fullest, the most complete statement of Astell’s ideas. To a modern audience, the title is misleading, suggesting a work exclusively devoted to theology. In Astell’s time, however, and most especially in her own thought and practice, religion necessarily had implications for the whole of life, including philosophy, politics, education, and personal morality. In this work, too, she addresses her broadest audience yet. Although her address is purportedly to a single individual, Lady Catherine Jones, and her specific direction is to the ladies, she has in mind a much wider public. It includes, but is not limited to, those who disagree with her – Locke, Masham, and Tillotson. It might be argued that her political pamphlets and *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* are directed to a wider audience still; however, these address readers specifically engaged in the discussion of particular contemporary issues. *The Christian Religion* has a much wider view and a less ephemeral relevance.

Her style in this work shows little of either the devastating satirical bite of the political pamphlets and of *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* or the maternalism of *A Serious Proposal*. Of all her works, it is the most philosophical. Here she refutes the criticism of her opponents, something that the purpose of *A Serious Proposal, Part II* made inappropriate. Yet although the positions are closely and tellingly argued, the style remains intimate. Perhaps its fore-

most characteristic is its obvious sincerity: Astell not only believes, she deeply cares about the truths she is setting forth. One of the least regarded – it is still not available in a modern edition – *The Christian Religion* should nonetheless be considered Astell's greatest work.



