

RE-READING THE CANON

NANCY TUANA, GENERAL EDITOR

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FEMINIST INTERPRETATIONS OF MARY ASTELL

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From Alice:
To women philosophers of the past, present, and future.

From Penny:
To the Weiswerdas, always.

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Locations and Legacies

Reading Mary Astell and Re-Reading the Canon

Penny A. Weiss

In the critically important *Re-Reading the Canon* series, the Pennsylvania State University Press has provided audiences with new, feminist perspectives on well-recognized canonical works. Of the thirty-four current volumes, seven, surprisingly, focus on female theorists overwhelmingly excluded from that same canon: Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir, Ayn Rand, Mary Daly, Emma Goldman, and Jane Addams. Perhaps these “other” collections reflect the exciting, ever-evolving, and ultimately more radical sense of what it can mean to “re-read a canon.” With this volume on Mary Astell, we bring significant and intellectually stimulating attention to another understudied (though newly and increasingly popular) female philosopher, the first in the series from the late seventeenth century. This anthology, composed entirely of original essays, places

Astell in historical and philosophical contexts and examines her nuanced and sometimes also contentious relationships to both historical and contemporary feminisms.

Twenty years ago, this volume on Astell was almost inconceivable—witness the paucity of references in this collection to secondary works before then. Those writing on early modern philosophy had barely begun to talk about women thinkers from the period. Some feminists were particularly circumspect toward philosophers who, like Astell, identified with rationalism and Cartesian theories. Both (sometimes overlapping) groups were generally uninterested in historical feminist thinkers, whose very existence was frequently contested. This volume, then, is testimony to considerable changes in the academy and beyond.

We had two broad goals in compiling this collection: to continue to fill in the large gaps in the secondary literature on Astell's philosophical views, and to further the debate about the nature of her feminism. Regarding the former, contributors offer philosophical and political readings of Astell's writings, drawing on both historical and contemporary perspectives. The focus is often on such matters as how Astell stands in relation to Descartes and other rationalist philosophers, or how she works with Aristotle's ethics, but also considers how she compares to other historical female and feminist theorists. Regarding the latter, the most basic issue is this: while many contemporary feminists recognize Astell's adamant claims—and powerful theorizing in defense of these claims—that women deserve respect and education, they tend to see these positions as being in tension with her devotion to God, her Tory allegiances, and her defense of conventional marriage. In addressing these issues and tensions, the essays here explore what it means to be an early modern feminist, what the relationship is between modern philosophy and modern feminism, how contemporary feminist theory can help us understand earlier feminisms, and, reversing the roles, what we today can learn from thinkers like Astell. The authors accomplish both goals with sensitivity to the social and historical background against which Astell wrote, with the acumen necessary to raise and to deal with the philosophical puzzles in her texts, and with admirable mastery of both primary texts and secondary literature.

Excitingly, what all of this means is that in at least some cases we are moving beyond the early phases of recovering women philosophers to integrating some, including Astell, into the whole of philosophy, now even understood to include feminist philosophy. Whether our readers are academic philosophers, scholars of the modern period, or historians of feminist thought, their knowledge of Mary Astell will be enriched, we are convinced,

in ways that encourage them to rethink her, modern philosophy, and feminist theory.

In what follows I use the words “locations” and “legacies” to introduce some background to this volume as well as to set the stage for possible new lines of inquiry. By “locations” I mean two things: first, how the questions and perspectives of our authors compare with those of their predecessors—“locating” Astell in a stream or even tradition of interpretations; and, second, into what philosophical conversations our contributors place, or “locate,” Astell. Studying the evolution of commentary about her allows us to see and build upon what others have said, as both changing times and more sophisticated readings make different aspects of her thought visible or important. Developing connections between Astell and other thinkers and schools of thought offers evidence of Astell's breadth and of her significant engagement with consequential figures and core ideas. These connections contribute to her ultimate fate, as well: “Feminists know perhaps as well as anyone that making of a theorist an anomaly—as if he or she came from nowhere and touched no one—is often a philosophical kiss of death” (Weiss and Kensinger 2007, 10). In this volume, then, we expand on existing links and begin work on new ones, hoping for an ever fuller understanding and appreciation of Mary Astell.

My use of “legacies” is perhaps more singular. The term usually refers to a widely recognized past accomplishment; philosophically, it is not unusual to speak of the “legacy” of ancient thinkers, or of a particular school of thought—by which is meant their influence and impact. By and large, however, women theorists have not been permitted legacies, since their diverse writings, their varied political and artistic accomplishments, and even the profound, unambiguous lines of their influence have been erased. I do not use the term, then, to denote Astell's agreed-upon heritage that generations following her have built upon; instead, using only the arguments of our authors, I focus on what they say we *might* or even *should* read as her gifts to us—her legacies, were we to claim and use them.

Locating Astell: Traditions and Conversations

From the earliest research on Mary Astell, scholars have been intrigued by the links they could make between her and other figures and traditions. Some historical ties are relatively apparent, given that an exchange of letters between Astell and Reverend John Norris was published, for example, and that her debates with Lady Damaris Masham and with

Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, were then well known. What scholars note in such cases of actual historical connections are primarily positions on particular political, epistemological, social, and religious issues; the nature, tone, and outcomes of the debates; and, to a lesser extent, any personal relationships between these figures. For example, Florence Smith's 1916 dissertation, *Mary Astell*, the first book-length analysis of Astell, develops numerous such relationships: "From 1704–1705 she was engaged in political and religious controversy. She attacked Defoe in *A Fair Way with the Dissenters and Their Patrons*; she opposed Shaftesbury, in *Bart'lemy Fair or an Enquiry After Wit*" ([1916] 1966, 20), and *Moderation Truly Stated* was "a direct reply to [Reverend James] Owen's *Moderation a Virtue*" (147). The lines of influence go both directions, Smith notes. For example, "Lady Damaris Masham in 1696 published *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God*, intended as a reply to John Norris and Mary Astell" (109). Of central significance in this strain of commentary is the critical acknowledgment that "she was engaged" in the political, epistemological, religious, and philosophical debates of the day (Smith [1916] 1966, 20).

Still, even the quest to make evident actual historical links is not so easy. As Springborg summarizes the problem, "For every George Wheeler who gave unqualified acknowledgment to Astell's influence in *A Protestant Monastery* of 1698, there were ten who stole her ideas without acknowledgment and then satirized her to cover their tracks" (2002, 14). But the search can help encourage us to read Astell carefully and alongside other understudied and overstudied works with overlapping themes, and to reestablish actual lines of influence and philosophical and political connections perhaps even deeper and more revealing than temporal ones.

A second set of links and locations focuses more specifically on Astell's relationships with her "female contemporaries," in order to develop "an important context for understanding a woman like Mary Astell" (Perry 1986, 4). The emphasis here is on networks, audience, influence, and, given the unconventional lives most female theorists led (and Astell's independence and philosophical community certainly fits this description), links between lived experience and positions advocated in writing. What enabled this woman, at this time, to survive and flourish in that political, social, economic, philosophical, religious, and philosophical environment? In this vein, Ruth Perry's *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, the only biography of Astell, explores her relationships with Lady Elizabeth Hastings, Lady Catherine Jones, Elizabeth Elstob, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, among others. In general, research on other female thinkers has also inves-

tigated the female networks that supported them and their work in ways crucial to their intellectual survival (Cook 1977).

Moving beyond the period and circumstances in which she lived and wrote, a third set of conversations and "locations" can be detected in Astell's relations to the individuals and traditions she cited or wrestled with in her writings. Included in this category are figures who died before Astell's birth in 1666 (René Descartes, 1596–1650) or shortly thereafter (Thomas Hobbes, 1588–1679; Sir William D'Avenant, 1606–1688; John Locke, 1632–1704; Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1621–1683), as well as those whose lives overlapped with hers (she died in 1731) for at least a few decades (Daniel Defoe, 1660–1731; Antoine Arnauld, 1616–1698); and, beyond individuals, Tories, the Church of England, and the Dissenters. Scholarly attention here is especially on the comparative philosophies, politics, and theologies of these people and schools of thought, and on their influence—that is, how Astell understood and used them in her work, accepting, rejecting, and/or modifying their ideas, and how she impacted others. For example, Patricia Springborg's *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination* (2005) pays special attention to the philosophical contexts of Astell's ideas, examining figures from Judith Drake to Nicholas Malebranche, with special emphasis on John Locke, as well as larger political ideas and movements such as republicanism and contractarianism. Making Astell more a contending voice in these debates than a mere commentator upon them is, again, critical to reclaiming her true philosophical and political importance.

A final set of links and "connections" frequently made (clearly these categories overlap) is with Astell's predecessors and contemporaries who were explicitly feminist advocates and authors. Here, too, the scholarly emphasis is on continuities and discontinuities, as well as possible "traditions" in which feminists critique certain practices and institutions, especially regarding women's education and the institution of marriage, which were central topics in Astell's writings. For example, Bridget Hill's 1986 introduction to the first collection of Astell's writings, erroneously but tantalizingly titled *The First English Feminist*, links Astell's essay on women's education with other analyses and critiques of education, including Clement Barksdale's *A Letter Touching a Colledge of Maids, or a Virgin Society*, Anna Maria Schurman's *The Learned Maid, or Whether a Maid May Be a Scholar*, and Daniel Defoe's *An Essay upon Projects*. Astell's critique of marriage is likewise placed among other appraisals of the institution, including Lord Halifax's *The Lady's New Year Gift; or, Advice to a Daughter*, and Hannah Woolley's *The Gentlewoman's Guide to the Female Sex*.

These last two kinds of links are of the greatest interest and utility to our contributors. They have been the focus of more recent literature on Astell that moves the discussion beyond the early publications referred to thus far. While the earliest pieces helped frame subsequent scholarship, publications from more recent decades have made ever-broader connections. Astell has been examined with respect to Descartes on the topic of reason by Margaret Atherton (1993) and on the topic of sensation by Eileen O'Neill, who also reads Astell against the backdrop of Aristotelian natural philosophers and theologians (2007). Other connections between Astell and early modern philosophers are made by Jane Duran, who sees in Astell "a forerunner of Hume" (2000, 150); Sarah Ellen Zweig, who discusses Astell's entanglement with anti-Spinozism in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (2003); and Penny Weiss, who uses Thomas Hobbes as "a useful backdrop for introducing Astell" (2004, 66), concluding that her incorporation of women into political theory is much more thorough and consequential than Hobbes's. Astell has also been discussed in light of many more theoretical frameworks, including utopianism (Johns 1996), possessive individualism (Perry 1990), and, of course, feminism (about which more in a moment).

In discussing philosophical frameworks and thinkers with whom Astell was in conversation, actual or theoretical, the authors in this volume, like those they followed, make clear that "influence" does not mean mere "imitation" or simple "adoption." Instead, these scholars show what she accepted, what she rejected, what she added, and what she modified, making their work especially important contributions to the literature. The commonalities are as essential to marking Astell's general political and philosophical locations as the differences are to marking her philosophical and political originality and distinction. It requires rigorous scholarship to clarify and understand both the overlap and the deviations.

"Locations" in This Volume

In "Mary Astell's Feminism: A Rhetorical Perspective," Christine Mason Sutherland places Astell in "the rhetorical tradition" dating back to Plato, and sees Astell's role in it as "attempt[ing] to upgrade, theorize, and recommend to her audience of women" the "kind of rhetoric" called "sermo" (154–55). Sutherland also shows the use Astell makes of Descartes's rules of logic and, as important, how Astell adds to his rules as she "accommodates his directions to her primary audience of women" (157). Similarly,

Sutherland shows the strong similarities between Cicero and Astell on the characteristics of sermo, but also how, despite "her debt to Cicero," Astell adds a Christian perspective, "melding . . . classical advice with the precepts of Christian morality," and drawing on Bernard Lamy, whom she also "adapts . . . to her own purpose and her own audience of women" (160). These are novel and exciting contributions.

As Sutherland puts Astell in the rhetorical tradition, Jacqueline Broad, in "Mary Astell and the Virtues," argues for seeing Astell as a moral philosopher. In particular, while Astell is not a virtue theorist in the strictest sense, Broad locates Astell in "the ancient virtue tradition that originated with Plato . . . and Aristotle . . . , and was later adapted by Stoic and Christian thinkers" (20). According to the virtue tradition, the character of the moral agent is of prime importance in evaluating ethical behavior, and Broad shows how Astell explores themes central to this tradition: virtue, moral education, moral judgment, character, friendship, and the role of the passions in moral action. Specifically, according to Broad, Astell explains how passions can be transformed into virtues when they are redirected such that the mind turns from objects of little worth to those of greater worth. Especially, but not exclusively, for women, "if we train ourselves to love the right objects, then the other passions will follow suit" (24). Friendship, including women's friendships, proper marriages, and communities such as the Religious Retirement for women that Astell advocates, are sources of moral improvement, inasmuch as they involve the Aristotelian notion of "character friendship," rooted in the love of benevolence, familiarity with each other's character, and "the mutual desire to promote another's well-being for her own sake" (27). Broad also develops Astell's links with Aristotle, Malebranche, Norris, Henry More, and Descartes, on subjects from freedom and friendship, on the one hand, to prudence and generosity, on the other. Given the growing interest today in virtue epistemology, looking at Astell as offering an early version of it can mean making greater use of her as the theory continues to develop, especially given the centrality of her attention to women, something still often missing.

In "Mary Astell and the Development of Vice: Pride, Courtship, and the Woman's Human Nature Question," Alice Sowaal focuses on how Astell addresses the "collection of questions" surrounding the issue of whether human nature is basically good or bad. She compares Astell's relatively optimistic view with those of Hobbes and the Calvinists. Sowaal is most interested in the social circumstances that Astell perceives as giving rise to vices that are sometimes thought to be more common in women, and she does that, interestingly, by reconstructing Astell's account

of generosity. Generosity in this account is “a desire to perfect,” which is itself related to a “generous Temper” (65). One of the important links Sowaal makes is to show how Astell’s women have less access to Descartes’s method of doubt than do men. Among other attributes, this piece is a significant addition to literature addressing the relationship between Astell and Descartes.

In “Mary Astell on the Existence and Nature of God,” Marcy Lascano carefully analyzes the intricacies of Astell’s arguments for the existence of God, and connects them to the history of similar arguments and philosophical issues presented by Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Malebranche, Leibniz, and Locke. She shows how, for Astell, *all* created beings have the duty and obligation “to achieve the greatest perfection of which it is capable in order to glorify God,” and to attain happiness, avoid evil, resist the sway of custom, and contribute to the overall moral perfection of the world (180). Lascano, like Sowaal above, especially notes how Astell was in conversation with Descartes, as seen in Astell’s use of Descartes’s definition of the term “self-existence,” and in Astell’s ideas about the mind-body distinction. Lascano also mentions Norris’s influence on Astell, as well as the possibility of Malebranche’s indirect influence via Norris.

In “Further Reflections upon Marriage: Mary Astell and Sarah Chapone,” Susan Glover looks at Astell as the influencer more than the influenced. Glover links Astell with another understudied—maybe even virtually unknown—female figure, Sarah Chapone. Chapone stands in for “the men and women of England who read her [Astell’s] arguments about religion, education, and marriage,” rather than the more famous people who were influenced by Astell (95). Through her reading of Chapone’s correspondence and a pamphlet she published anonymously, Glover claims that “we can observe Chapone’s reception and revision of Astell’s arguments refracted through her own hermeneutical engagement with a range of textual authorities; legal, doctrinal, and fictional” (96). Chapone takes Astell’s ideas a step further and in directions Astell herself may not have supported. For example, according to Glover, Chapone maintains that a woman in a bad marriage does not need to “school her mind to the consolation of the soul,” but “suggests that it is the law, rather than the mind, that must adjust” (100). While there is not yet enough scholarship to fully understand how Astell’s views on marriage were received at the time, Glover’s research on Chapone’s reception of her ideas reveals that Astell’s work was read closely and evaluated by other women of the period. Glover’s piece is a novel and important contribution.

Karen Detlefsen’s essay, “Custom, Freedom, and Equality: Mary Astell on Marriage and Women’s Education,” tackles an ongoing controversy—the seeming incompatibility between Astell’s Cartesian belief in the “unsexed rational soul” and her advocacy of wives’ subordination to their husbands. Detlefsen, too, “show[s] the points of overlap and divergence with Descartes’s thought,” but here the purpose is more “to draw out the feminist character of her Cartesianism” (76). In her re-reading, Detlefsen concludes that Astell is firmly Cartesian in her views of both natural equality and how to improve marital injustices. Wrestling with the precise nature of Astell’s feminism, Detlefsen concludes that Astell offers “a recognizably feminist account of freedom,” linking it to recent feminist theory on autonomy (86). Detlefsen’s contributions, then, are numerous and stimulating.

Kathleen Ahearn argues for the importance of women’s self-esteem in Astell. She links and compares Astell to a range of figures in “Mary Astell’s Account of Feminine Self-Esteem,” including Henry More, Descartes, Aristotle, and Norris. She clarifies Astell’s critique of Norris’s theory of love, shows how Astell works with the Cartesian theory of self-regulation, and argues that she uses and expands upon Aristotle’s ideas of *phronesis* and friendship. Like Detlefsen, Ahearn connects Astell to contemporary problems and practices not limited to or identified only with individual thinkers, including care relationships, virtue ethics, and “the problem of embodiment.” Like Broad, Ahearn discusses the regulation of the passions, noting the role of proper self-esteem, which emerges when women align their true selves with God, through what Astell calls “that particle of Divinity” within us (51). The vexing and consequential problem of women’s low self-esteem remains with us today around the world, so an account of its importance and how to raise it can be especially valuable. Again, we see that philosophical issues have more of a feminist history than has been presumed or acknowledged.

Ahearn and Broad both discuss love as the leading passion for Astell. Ahearn explains that love for Astell is not self-sacrificial but self-preserving, even though being long-suffering, and obedient are popularly defined as feminine virtues. Broad writes that, for Astell, “if we train ourselves to love the right objects, then the other passions will follow suit” (24). She argues that Astell’s “paradigmatic feminist claim about *custom versus nature*” in *Serious Proposal* is in fact a claim about women’s capacity for Aristotelian prudence, which requires a reformation in moral education, and allows happiness, freedom, and the other virtues to develop (27).

Several authors begin to introduce readers to more contemporary ideas that Astell can be linked with (among them care ethics, virtue ethics, self-esteem, embodiment, and justice in marriage). In other chapters, authors focus more closely on such connections. For instance, in "Mary Astell: Some Reflections upon Trauma," Elisabeth Hedrick Moser uses recent "trauma theory as a lens through which to read Astell" in order to make "visible the more insidious layers of the consequences of abusive power" in Astell's thought (112). Hedrick Moser also uses recent developments in feminist epistemology, especially Amanda Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice, to make the unjust situation Astell confronts and criticizes more visible and urgent.

In "'From the Throne to Every Private Family': Mary Astell as Analyst of Power," Penny Weiss continues this more political analysis, linking Astell with major issues treated by theorists of power. She begins with "Foucault fatigue," noting that "those who read political theory today, even including feminist political theory, might understandably reach the erroneous conclusion that Foucault's writing on power was without precedent (especially without female precedent)" (130). She argues that feminists, including Astell, "have been urging us for several centuries down many of the paths Foucault has more recently and much more famously traveled regarding power" (130). Again and again the essays here raise the question of how our understanding of certain ideas and traditions would be enriched were we to consider Astell's contributions to them. What would it mean to footnote Astell's intricate and insightful theory of power just half as often as Foucault's ideas are cited? Hope springs eternal.

The variety of approaches and "locations" visible in this volume is its strength rather than its weakness. Using multiple lenses and connections is part of what it means to take a philosopher seriously. Granting any woman this degree of credibility is still relatively new. To assume Astell's writings have such richness and complexity that they can both enlighten and be enlightened by other theories and theorists is to grant authority where it has not generally been recognized before. And what fruit this diverse method bears! Interestingly, many of the authors in this volume argue with Astell themselves even as they argue about her "objectively." In doing so, these authors contend that a number of ideas, schools of thought, and disciplines that they find worthy would be elevated by a more serious engagement with Astell's thought. Such will no doubt be the task for a good while to come, as we truly engage in a re-reading of the

Legacies

Across the board, women thinkers, Astell included, have generated very little scholarship. For many women, we have more biographies than monographs—meaning that we take the lives of women more seriously than their ideas. There are more arguments about why women should not be considered philosophers, or original, or influential, than there are inquiries into what women actually said, how what they said fits into and/or disrupts various traditions or theories, and who read, used, stole, built upon, and reworked their ideas. Naming "legacies" marks someone as worth reading, and certainly every scholar in this volume, all of whom are familiar with numerous figures, theories, and eras besides Astell and her milieu, advances our understanding of her influence, impact, and importance. They thus illuminate why she intrigues and impresses readers across academic disciplines. A "legacy," after all, is by definition a "gift," bestowed by a predecessor; accordingly, Astell without question has left us a bounty. So, were we to take Astell even more seriously, what, according to some of our authors, would be among her legacies?

Returning to the earliest literature, Smith says that Astell's "contribution to the history of education lies . . . in her practical application of her ideas and in her clear view of the social possibilities lying back of the education of women and of the economic changes necessary to bring about new ends" (1966, 61). Smith adds that it is "her attempt to show the relation between woman's education and her economic position in marriage that calls attention to her to-day" (1966, 166). By contrast, among contemporary scholars, Patricia Springborg sees Astell's legacy in her offering of "not only the first but perhaps also the most sustained contemporary critique of Locke's *Two Treatises* (1995, 629), and she reads Astell's *Reflections upon Marriage* as "perhaps the first articulated critique of the analogue between the marriage contract and the social contract on which early modern natural rights theories so heavily depend" (Astell 1996b, 4). Even more recently, in her monograph on Astell's political theory, Springborg concludes that Astell's "contribution to the print debate that surrounded the constitutional battle over toleration and dissent in Britain, one of the most vigorous and democratic of early modern political debates[,] . . . was among Astell's signal public achievements. . . . Her contribution to the critique of morals and mores surrounding women's education and marriage was another. Her role in the reception of Descartes and the Platonist philosophical debate . . . is [also] of great importance" (2005, 237). Smith, like Springborg, delineates a legacy for Astell that is broad and weighty:

nonetheless, the payoff from increasing, and increasingly serious, attention to Astell over time is obvious in the range and specificity of claims made by the two scholars.

“Legacies” in This Volume

In this volume, authors continue to explore the nature of Astell's contributions to diverse disciplines and schools of thought. Like Springborg, Lascano makes a bold claim for Astell's significance within a number of particular debates, and shows how she challenges the very terms of those debates (an amazing accomplishment, really, named by several of our contributors). For example, “Astell actively engages in the debates regarding God's existence and nature. In doing so, she provides unique arguments for the existence of God” (186).

The legacy that Sutherland focuses on has the added benefit of challenging those who contend that the relatively “conservative” Astell was essentially uninterested in social change. She argues that Astell's advice on rhetoric amounts to “training” that could “alleviate the troubles” of many women (153). Like any feminist, Astell attempts to enable women to resist “immoral gentlemen,” and “to improve the lot of the ladies . . . [and] enable them to be useful in their world”—that is, to “make a contribution to the public good” (155, 162). In enlarging women's possibilities through speech, “Astell is an important figure in both the history of rhetoric and the history of feminism” (167).

Detlefsen finds in Astell a precursor to the recent feminist argument for “relational autonomy.” Significantly, “Astell imagines that her prototheory of relational autonomy could hold not only among women in the religious retreat but also between a woman and a man in the marriage bond” (88). Many things are interesting in this argument, but as far as legacy goes, one idea may be dominant: despite her debt to Descartes's epistemology, Astell, unlike Descartes, understands how this idea can lead to “acknowledg[ing] the importance of good communal relations, relations which are anything but the highly individualistic” ones found in Descartes (89). “So, ultimately, Astell's feminism is based upon an acknowledgment of our essential, communal inter-relatedness,” a topic of continuing interest to communitarian-minded feminists today, as well as scholars of Astell and Descartes (89).

Broad, like Detlefsen, works to “uncover” in Astell “something of philosophical interest to modern feminist ethicists” and to clarify her

distinctive feminism (19). That version of feminism, Broad argues, “is grounded on promoting *excellence of character* in women rather than the consistent application of political concepts and principles, such as the principles of equality and justice, to women in the public sphere” (19). While Broad finds some weakness in this approach, she nonetheless concludes that Astell's “emphasis on excellence of character might be considered a strength . . . of her feminist philosophy,” one that in fact some feminist ethicists today can use as a precedent (30). An important and even inspiring part of Astell's legacy is how she “reconceives the classical virtues of courage, friendship, and generosity as essential tools in the service of female emancipation” (31). This “reconceiving” of patriarchal concepts and practices is a project many contemporary feminists are drawn to, but too often without the benefit of feminist predecessors such as Astell.

In “Mary Astell and the Development of Vice: Pride, Courtship, and the Woman's Human Nature Question,” Sowaal, too, looks at questions of character. She sees Astell's legacy as an argument for the goodness of human nature that was original at the time, primarily because Astell wrestled with a “version of the question . . . that specifically addresses woman's nature” (59). Astell was able to move away from then well-known arguments for both the goodness and badness of human nature and offer a novel social, moral, and epistemological account of how women “degenerate into vice” (64). Again, according to Sowaal, Astell shifts the debate a bit through her attention to how issues of gender underlie the questions we ask and where we look for answers.

For Weiss, Astell's legacy is a profound seventeenth-century critique of patriarchy. It includes her important condemnation of women's deep and constructed dependence and vulnerability; her understanding of how “[p]atriarchy infiltrates and organizes the supposedly separate public and private, the male and the female, attitudes as well as institutions” (138); her recognition of “the hatred of all things female that is (part of) patriarchy, and the practices it leads to and requires” (139); and the ways she models and encourages forms of resistance. Overall, Weiss imagines those who wrestle today with power and authority would do well to use Astell as a resource and a model.

Ahearn also finds in Astell a worthy feminist foremother, whose theorizing is intended “to emancipate women from inner and outer forms of oppression.” Ahearn shows how Astell makes use of a theory of “sensible Congruity” to understand how women are particularly prone to loving incorrectly because they are beholden to male desires (37–40). More practically

Ahearn finds in Astell's social account of feminine self-esteem a combination of respect for the worth of self and others, practical care for the self, and negotiation with others, including in love relationships. In a twenty-first-century world where sacrificing the self for others is still connected to femininity, and self-injurious and self-destructive practices from cutting to anorexia occur primarily among women, this self-preserving account may be a depressingly contemporary legacy, complete with due recognition for the particular hurdles patriarchy erects to such self-esteem.

Concluding Thoughts

My claims here, and the claims of the volume overall, are that new, more rigorous and open-minded readings of Astell are necessary, and that through such novel interpretations we will come to understand Astell, modern philosophy, and feminism in important, useful, and unprecedented ways. These are not modest claims, especially as they revolve around a thinker still unread by most philosophers and feminists.

We also hope that readers will see the essays in this volume as being in conversation with one another, even if not explicitly so. There are multiple discussions of "human essences" and "human nature," especially as these relate to equality. Many essays focus on the moral, epistemological, and political consequences of "patriarchy." Readers will find several accounts of Astell's views on how to enact change, from moral education and coming-to-voice to spiritual development and political resistance. The interaction between Astell's theology and ethics is central to several pieces. A number of links are made with Descartes, especially regarding the mind-body relationship and, related to it, the passions. In fact, several contributors give accounts of Astell's views of particular passions: love, prudence, generosity, self-esteem, courage, and vanity among them. There is a conversation between the chapters on communities and friendships, especially which kinds are beneficial and lead to moral and intellectual improvement, on the one hand, and which kinds are destructive and lead to vice, on the other. Knowledge is compared to faith and linked with freedom, healthy relationships, and gender. Finally, and perhaps least surprisingly, there is repeated attention to marriage: what type of institution it is, what kinds of relationships are possible and beneficial between spouses, the impact on marriage of courtship and social customs, and the character of the real and

atic philosopher, Astell addresses abstract issues of God, the soul, and bodies; structural issues of patriarchy, marriage, and custom; and personal issues of care, friendship, and love.

In her own day, Mary Astell was known (and ridiculed) as one of the "philosophical ladies" (Smith 1966, 27), widely read and influential in political, philosophical, and theological debates and circles. Would that it could be so again! For as we can see from the entries in this collection, re-reading the canon with Astell in the conversation has the potential to lead to understanding early modern versions of virtue ethics and communitarian feminism; to develop a fuller understanding of rhetorical, political, and theological traditions; and to reckon with broader understandings of oppressive power and the conditions that might sustain respectful relations and inclusive practices. May we continue to find ways to read and connect Astell's thoughts and writings such that we, and the next generations of philosophers and feminists, will gain a richer picture of our intellectual past and move toward an expansive vision of our future.