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Meeting of the Aristotelian Society held at Senate House, University of London, on 14 May 2018 at 5:30pm

Fighting for my mind: feminist logic at the edge of enlightenment

*Hannah Dawson*¹

Abstract

In the seventeenth century, men stepped out of the pages of political philosophy as equal and free, their subjection to government a matter of artifice, manufactured through the social contract. By contrast, women's subjection to men appeared as the creation of nature. Less rational and less virtuous than their counterparts, so the story went, they were rightfully inferior to them. This article examines some pre-modern writers, including Jane Anger, Rachel Speght, Judith Drake, and Mary Astell, who wanted to re-carve the boundaries of nature. They argued that with regard to reason and virtue, men and women have equal capacities. They proposed that gender is a construct of power, not of nature. In so doing they marked out anti-essentialist territory that has become central to modern feminism. I propose, however, that their interventions become most legible (and no less urgent) if we situate them in their own contexts, and in particular in the context of the discipline of logic – the art of reason and the bedrock of an early modern education. These writers used recognisably logical tactics to prove the reason of women, and in so doing donned the mask of the logician, thereby doubly claiming for themselves the mark of a rational man. But they also turned to logic, as logicians since Aristotle had done, to cure the sickness and sophisms of their minds. They appropriated and refigured the obstacles to knowledge, identifying three impediments that beset women: the constitutive power of words; the internalised focus on a woman's externality; and the mental corruption caused by oppression.

I

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, political authority was increasingly reenvisioned as the product of human artifice, manufactured through the social contract. However, the power relation between women and men remained stubbornly in the social imaginary as the creation of nature. Men now stepped out of the pages of political philosophy as equal and free, so that – in theory – the only way in which one of them could find themselves legitimately subject to another would be if they wanted it, if they agreed to it. The hierarchy between men and women, by contrast, was often represented, and legitimised, as a result of natural inequality between the sexes. The subordination of women had long been justified on the grounds of their essential inferiority; I do not know if it is customary to quote from the eponymous hero of this Society, but, as Aristotle declared in *The Politics*, 'the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and other is ruled' (Aristotle 1996, p. 17). QED.

¹ I am deeply grateful to Susan James for inviting me to speak to The Aristotelian Society, to Helen Beebe for hosting me so spectacularly when the moment came, to the audience for their imaginative and probing questions, to Guy Longworth for his brilliant, detailed comments subsequently, and to Josephine Salverda for steering me so generously and patiently through to submission. I thank Laura Gowing and Susie Orbach for their transformative thoughts on the paper. I am indebted to my fellow University and College Union members. If it were not for the strike of 2018 I would have continued with my plan to deliver a paper on Hume. Singing songs on the picket line changed my mind.

This kind of inference reveals why nature has always been a central battleground for feminism: if one can prove that women are naturally equal to men, indeed if one can explode the very idea of nature in relation to gender – the idea of men *qua* men, or women *qua* women, having any essential moral, mental, or behavioural characteristics – then the *de facto* dominance of men is exposed as having no foundation in justice. It might be objected that while men and women might be equal, they are not the same. They might be equal in rights, in personhood, but they are essentially different, with different aptitudes, desires and priorities. This would explain why, for example, as a matter of ‘choice’, in Britain in 2018 we find a majority of men in parliament and at the top of businesses, and women still do the lioness’s share of the childcare. Modern feminists have responded that there are no relevant essential differences that adequately explain the organisation of the human world along gendered lines (Butler 1990; Fine 2010; Haslanger 2012). Gender is a construct, as the mantra goes, and any appeal to nature to elucidate or justify either inequality, or distinctions of character, must be ruled out of court.

This article is going to consider a number of pre-modern women who ventured onto the battleground of nature: Christine de Pizan (1364-1430), Jane Anger (*fl.* 1588), Rachel Speght (1597?-1661?), Judith Drake (*fl.* 1596-1723), and Mary Astell (1666-1731). They were provoked by the charge that, as women, they were neither rational nor – relatedly – virtuous. They returned fire with two claims: first, that they did have the capacity for reason and virtue, and second, that if they were deficient in these qualities, this was a function not of nature, but of culture and power. It might be an accidental fact that some women were irrational and vicious, but it was not necessarily so. These writers seem therefore to be rehearsing arguments that feminists continue to make, and, certainly, I hope that this article will bring out the relevance of their words.

As ever, though, in the history of philosophy, voices from the past speak to us most urgently – not least in the sense that we can hear them most distinctly – if we try to understand them in their terms rather than our own. All of these authors are writing in a Christian framework in which women, like men, are servants of God who must tread one decreed path. The women’s liberation that is fantasised about is therefore illiberal in our sense; it is moral and prescribed, freedom from sin and wayward passion, as well as tyrannical men; it is not the case that anything goes. Moreover, all of these writers, with the possible exception of Astell, subscribed to certain views of natural difference, that in turn underpin certain social arrangements, both of which seem foreign to us now. None of these writers, for example, called for women’s ordinary participation in politics (while this is arguably a moot point since there was limited popular participation *per se*, even the

Levellers excluded women when they dreamed in Putney of an equal world). These writers, therefore, did not give up on nature in relation to gender, just as writers of the time more generally clung on to nature as a source of normativity (Dawson 2019). However, in certain ways, I argue, the women buck this trend. They thin out nature in relation to gender to such an extent that in crucial respects it seems to disappear altogether. Morally, spiritually, and intellectually, they argue, women might be on a par with men.

They were not making this argument in a vacuum. It seems to me that the context that makes the most sense of their texts, that throws their speech acts into relief, and that has been hitherto underappreciated in the literature, is the discipline of early modern logic.² Logic was one part of the *trivium*, and alongside grammar and rhetoric, it constituted the bedrock of an early modern education. While grammar taught one to speak, and rhetoric taught one to speak well, or persuasively, logic taught one to reason. It provided the substantial and proper matter for words, the true *res* for one's *verba*. It was taught at school, by private tutors, and at university. It was disseminated not only in textbooks but in more discursive formats, such as Locke's popular *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689). In teaching people to think well, it incorporated a second purpose: to know as much as it was possible to know. And in that second purpose was contained a third: as the art of knowledge logic was also the art of virtue, insofar as if one considered things aright, one could see what was truly good and evil, and would act accordingly. But logic was also bound up with goodness in the sense that it promoted an ethics of understanding. It had always, even in its Aristotelian beginnings, been interested in identifying, refuting and eliminating fallacious reasoning. In the course of the seventeenth century, when the discipline became less formal and discursive and more naturalistic and holistic, it was conceived increasingly as medicine for the mind that would cure it of its errors. This is indicated in the title of Locke's projected *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, begun in 1697, published posthumously in 1706, and intended as an additional chapter for his *Essay*. Logic was as concerned with rooting out falsehood and sophistry, as it was in training the understanding towards truth. Logic therefore both framed the world and reformed the mind. It was the home of reason, truth, and self-improvement, and to dwell there was the mark of a worthy, civilised human being – a being that paradigmatically took the form of a gentleman.³

² On other and overlapping contexts in which these particular texts might be situated, as well as on these texts themselves, see Kahin 1947; Perry 1986; Smith 2001; Speight 2002; Springborg 2005; Broad 2015; Sowaal and Weiss 2016. For further literature on these and other female authors, and more broadly on early modern intersections between women, philosophy, and political thought, see Okin 1979; Pateman 1988; Riley 1988; Sommerville 1995; Hinds 1996; O'Neill 1997; Weil 1999; James 1999; Smith 2002; Hutton 2004; Bennett 2006; Knott and Taylor 2007; Broad and Green 2009; Hughes 2012; Green 2014; Apetrei and Smith 2016; Becker 2017; La Vopa 2017; Broad and Detlefsen 2017.

³ See Dawson 2007, pp. 13-40 on the purposes of logic in the early modern period.

I am going to argue that the female writers I consider are coming from within this tradition, or, to put the spatial metaphor more precisely, they are coming from outside this tradition, knocking on the door and asking to be let in. Girls dropped out of school earlier than boys, if they ever got there at all, and were excluded from university. Furthermore, the pedagogic emphases were different for boys and girls – boys being prepared to rule, and girls (oh the irony) for virtue. However, what schooling they did have, together with private tuition for elite girls, and affordable print for many, meant that literacy, and logic in particular, would have filtered through to numerous women. Bathsua Makin attests both to the exclusion of women from education, and their partial inclusion within it. Though she had been educated by her school-teacher father, and was herself tutor to Charles I's daughter Elizabeth, she spelt out her desire in an essay in 1673 to 'admit women' to 'the whole encyclopedia of learning'. Logic is foundational to her proposed curriculum. Having begun, aping the customary male route, with 'Grammar and Rhetoric', so that women might learn to 'speak handsomely', the next step is 'Logic ... because it is the key to all sciences' (Gowing 2012, p. 111; see also pp. 24-25).

The women in this article were positioning themselves as logicians, demonstrating themselves as rational and *thereby* reframing the world. That is to say, they not only proved, logically, that women have potentially rational natures, but, in donning the mask of the logician, they also proved their rationality at a meta level. At the same time, they conceded, just like their male logician counterparts, that there were obstacles on their path to reason and virtue. The obstacles these women identified resemble the familiar obstacles of established logic, the fallacies and sophisms to which logic had long been attentive, such as the abuse of words, or the derailing effect of authority – but they derive their particular shape from the brutality of gender relations, and loom large in the minds of women.

I have identified three kinds of impediment that women writers said stood in the way of their enlightenment. The first are words that do not signify truthfully the things they are supposed to represent. The second is the cultural emphasis on a woman's externality – the way in which fixations with the reputation and appearance of a woman stop her (as well as others) from being able to look inward and work upon her mind. The third is the power relation between men and women that clouds, corrupts, and destabilises the mind. Women articulated these impediments both as a self-therapeutic means to dislodge them, and as a communicative act to prove that if any

particular woman's mind was defective, this was not due to any natural necessity, but rather on account of contingent, and theoretically correctable, circumstance.

I will begin by laying out the early modern view that women were by nature inferior to men, and specifically, that they lacked reason and virtue. I will then explore the responses of women: their two-pronged argument that they did possess these faculties, but were often impeded from realising their full potential. I will show how in presenting this argument they took shelter in the house of logic both to magnify their own authority, and to try and find a remedy for their woes. I will conclude by asking how, and indeed whether, these women thought that the impediments to their reason and virtue might be removed. Or to put it another way: was logic, that seventeenth century therapy for the mind, enough to save their lives?

II

I begin with what they were up against. The title alone of John Knox's 1558 pamphlet, *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, gives a pretty solid indication. While Knox had one specific woman in his sights, Mary Tudor, he did not hold back from generalising about her sex. 'Nature', he declares, 'doth paint them forth to be weak, frail, impatient, feeble and foolish'. 'In the nature of all woman', he elaborates, 'lurketh ... vices'. As with all the texts I consider in this article, Knox's is written in indelibly Christian ink. Nature is God's creation, revealing his design, his will, and his goodness, and is therefore a wellspring of moral instruction. It is, to draw on a popular contemporary metaphor, God's first book, to be read with pious contemplation. And it is continuous in its messages with God's second book, Scripture, in which he revealed his word in language. There, too, says Knox, is ample evidence for women's rightful subjection. Even before the fall (when female nature and divine punishment intertwined forever), a reading of St Paul, who had asserted that woman ought to 'have a power upon her head', demonstrates for Knox that 'in her greatest perfection woman was created to be subject to man'. After the fall, God passed his 'irrevocable sentence' upon Eve and her like, penalising her not only with 'a dolour, anguish and pain as oft as ever she shall be mother', but also with 'a subjection of herself, her appetites and will, to her husband and to his will'. Note here the proposal that a woman is not only unable but also not permitted to think for herself. She is under orders to surrender her whole self – body and mind – to man. But back to the essential 'facts' of her nature: women are fools and full of vice, and this is why, according to Knox, it is unconscionable for them to be in government. They cannot rule themselves, let alone others. A commonwealth ruled by a woman is like a 'monster', he says – a body without head, where the eyes appear 'in the hands, the tongue and mouth beneath

in the belly and the ears in the feet' (Knox 1994, p. 9; 21; 12; 23). A woman, it becomes clear, effectively has no head; the appearance of such a thing is really a vacuum, or an outline, to invoke Rachel Cusk's pointed metaphor in her novel of that name (Cusk 2014). As the King James Bible puts the words of St Paul of which Knox is so fond, and which are wheeled out repeatedly in the period to vindicate male supremacy, 'the head of the woman *is* the man' (1 Corinthians 11.3). Having an 'inferior' nature, it is right that she should be inferior in the world (Knox 1994, p. 10).

This paradigmatic view of the natural hierarchy between men and women is still going strong as the seventeenth century draws to its close. Indeed, it is going strong in the texts of Whigs who are otherwise arguing for the rights of man, such as Gilbert Burnet's *An Enquiry into the Measures of Submission to the Supream Authority: And of the Grounds upon which it may be Lawful or necessary for Subjects, to defend their Religion, Lives and Liberties* (1688). Burnet makes the arrestingly liberal-sounding claim that 'in all the disputes between *Power* and *Liberty*, *Power* must always be proved, but *Liberty* proves it self'. It turns out, however, that this principle applies only to men. While 'the *Law of Nature* has put no difference or subordination among Men', it dictates that 'wives' are subordinate 'to their husbands'. And, as ever, this natural prescription is backed up by the revealed word of God. 'Wives are declared by the Scripture, to be subject to their Husbands *in all things*', he states (Burnet 1688, p. 1; 5). Another man who subscribes to this order of things is John Locke. His 'state of perfect freedom' and 'equality' for 'all men' – which readers often want to glide over as meaning for all *mankind* – excludes women. In a marriage, explains Locke, in a not much-vaunted section of *The Second Treatise of Government* (1689), when husband and wife disagree, the woman must submit her will to the man's. This is not arbitrary; it is the rightful arrangement of nature. Jurisdiction 'naturally falls to the man's share', says Locke, 'as the abler and the stronger' of the two (Locke 1988, p. 269; 321). The rosy fingers of the enlightenment did not extend themselves to women.⁴

III

In response to this pervasive description of reality, a number of women, and a few good men, put their heads above the parapet (for it turned out that women *did* have heads), and made the case that women were not *naturally* inferior to men, but were equally capable where it mattered.⁵ This

⁴ For a smidgeon of the rich and vast literature on women and gender in early modernity, see Amussen 1993; Mendelson and Crawford 1998; Rublack 1999; Gowing 2003; Shepard 2003; Purkiss 2005; Capern 2008; Wiesner-Hanks 2008; Smith 2012; Reinke-Williams 2014.

⁵ An example of a male feminist is François Poulain de la Barre, who published *Discours physique et moral de l'égalité des deux sexes, où l'on voit l'importance de se défaire des préjugés* in 1673. He argued that the 'opinion as old as the world' that women are inferior to men is a 'prejudice' contradicted by the evidence. The 'truth' is that 'the two sexes are equal', and that any actual deficiencies in women 'result exclusively from ... education'. (Poulain de la Barre 2013, pp. 119-120); see also Hobbes 1996, p. 139-140.

emphasis on equality marked a departure from the sixteenth century *querelle des femmes*, which batted back and forth the question of which sex was superior – although the women in this article did sometimes edge into this territory. They used various recognisable forms of proof to establish the equality of the sexes; they drew on Scripture, on history, on experience, and on demonstration, and in doing so flexed their logical muscles to attest in both form and content that they too were creatures of reason. Moreover, by answering their opponents' logical niceties with their own objections, they penetrated the masculine domain of Disputation. Boys spent their time formally disputing in grammar schools and beyond. This is how they were taught. This is how they were tested. This is how they became men. As Locke explains, albeit regretfully, 'Disputation' is viewed as 'the Touchstone of Mens Abilities, and the Criterion of Knowledge', and 'Victory' is won by 'him that kept the Field'. To know how to syllogise, says Locke, is to be like a master in 'the Art of fencing' (Locke 1975, p. 600; 679). By taking up their pens, women brought their own swords to the fight, to play men at their own game, and begin to embody the authority of reason.

The first writer I am going to discuss who took to the field was Rachel Speght. In 1617 she wrote *A Mouzell for Melastomus*, which means a muzzle for the black mouth. It was a response to a 1615 text by a man who called himself Thomas Tel-troth, entitled *Arraignement of Lewde, idle, forward, and unconstant women*. Speght exposed the author as one Joseph Swetnam, who was, appropriately enough, a fencing master. Speght herself tried to publish anonymously, though Swetnam exposed her in turn. Her pamphlet, she writes, is a defence of 'EVAHS SEX', in which she sets out to show that women are 'wise' and 'virtuous'. She exposes flaws in Swetnam's own argument to prove her point. His concession, for example, of the particular affirmative that there are *some* 'good' women disproves the universal affirmative that all women are 'lewd, idle, froward and unconstant'. She uses the Aristotelian framework of the four causes to demonstrate the 'equal' 'authority' of the sexes. For example, the 'material cause' of woman was not, as she says, 'Adams foote', which would have made her inferior to him, nor indeed his 'head', which would have made her superior, but rather 'his side, neare his heart, to be his equal'. She suggests that men should help and support women, rather than, as she says 'lay the whole burthen of domesticall affaires ... on the shoulders of their wives', as if women were oxen in a yoke. In arguing her point she declares, in syllogistic terms, 'I may reason *a minore ad maius*', going on to explain that even with 'unreasonable creatures' the two sexes support each other. A male pigeon, for example, sits on the hen's eggs when she 'is weary ... until such time as she is fully refreshed' (Speght 1996, 18; 20-21). If this principle of mutuality applies to dumb animals how much more, she contends, should it apply to human beings.

As we have seen, arguments such as Speght's did not win the day, or the century, for that matter, and in 1696 *An Essay In Defence of the Female Sex* was published anonymously. Or rather, it was declared on its frontispiece to be 'a Letter to a Lady. Written by a Lady'. The choice of dedicatee points to the possibility that women had given up trying to convince men of their virtue; they knew now that they would not be heard, that their voices would be constructed as shrill babble and irritant noise. Instead, they turned to their own kind, self-reflexively and therapeutically convincing themselves of the validity of their minds. Moreover, the anonymity of the female author points to the ambivalence about female authority even as it was being asserted, and to the anxiety about speaking out, for fear of reprisals. As the author says, her experience of the vanity and insecurities of men, has made her 'very cautious', and counselled her 'to keep 'em in ignorance of my name'. By hiding her identity, she says, it will be as though she were to put a blindfold over men in a game of blind man's bluff, in a simile that gives a sense of the huntedness and dread that saturated female experience at this time – and indeed resonates to this day following the violation of the anonymity of the author who would like to be known as Elena Ferrante.

We now know, and from a distance of over 300 years, may say, in a way that celebrates rather than violates her, that the author of *An Essay In Defence of the Female Sex* was Judith Drake. She stresses that 'there is nothing' in her book 'which was not drawn from the strictest reason I was mistress of, and the best observations I was able to make' (Drake 1696, Preface, n.p.). With breath-taking pugnacity she returns the male gaze, revolving the eyes of society away from women and onto men. She looks back at men, who had characteristically been looking at her, and, like the new, experimental philosophers such as Robert Boyle and Robert Hooke who were adding experience to logic, she notes down her own natural history of the opposite sex. By means of painstaking observation, she proves that men are just as (if not more) full of vice as women are alleged to be. She anatomises the male sex, producing a series of mercilessly fleshed out portraits of, for example, 'A Pedant', 'A Beau', and 'A City-Critick'. Her endeavour, she says, is in part simply 'to reduce the sexes to a level' (Drake 1696, sig. A2^v). But she is also concerned with raising the status of women, with proving their capacity for wisdom. She launches a series of arguments 'from nature' as she calls them, attending therefore to the same entity her opponents adduce to prove that women are 'naturally defective', and finds instead that there is 'no difference betwixt male and female in point of sagacity'. She draws silently on Locke, thereby appropriating his authorial power, and quietly placing herself alongside him, to prove that since 'there are no innate ideas ... all the notions we have [being] deriv'd from our external senses, either immediately, or by reflection', there can, says

Drake, be no such thing as a male or female soul. Having consulted ‘experience’, especially the native ‘wit’ and ‘invention’ of women, and found them not only present but overflowing and easily the match of man’s, she concludes that it must be ‘education’ that makes the difference between the sexes. She will not ‘yield’, she says, employing a verb that simultaneously conjures both war and logical disputation, ‘that we are by nature less enabled’, blaming any inadequacies in women on ‘the usurpation of men, and the tyranny of custom’, a problem she identifies ‘here in England especially’ (Drake 1696, pp. 11-20; 3).

Writing contemporaneously with Drake was Mary Astell, although she too forbore to put her name to her works. *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, For the Advancement of their true and greatest Interest*, the first part of which was published in 1694, was announced, simply, to be written ‘By a Lover of Her SEX’. The even more provocative *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700) gave no indication of authorship at all on its title page. It seems that Virginia Woolf was right when she wrote in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) that ‘Anon ... was often a woman’. It is a complex mixture of shame and fear and vanity which possesses women writers, as Woolf puts it, with ‘the desire to be veiled’. ‘Anonymity’, in the end, ‘runs in their blood’ (Woolf 2000, p. 38).

Like her fellow anonymistes, Astell turns her inquiring attention to the supposed ‘*Natural Inferiority* of our Sex, which our Masters lay down as a Self-Evident and Fundamental Truth’. She finds, she says plainly, in the manner of an unbiassed scientist, ‘nothing in the Reason of Things, to make this either a Principle or a Conclusion, but much to the contrary’. She goes on to advertise her strict, recognisably Lockean, logical method, insisting that knowledge can only arrive by means of first-hand understanding, as opposed to second-hand testimony, by means of *verba* filled with *res*. She insists that ‘the only way to remove all doubts, to answer all objections, and to give the mind entire satisfaction, is not by affirming, but by proving, so that every one may see with their own eyes, and judge according to the best of their own understandings’ (Astell 1996, p. 9; 10; see also Locke 1993, p. 12). She also, because logic is never far from contest, takes up her sword-pen, and parries her adversaries’ sophistry. She counters, for example: ‘If they mean that *some* Men are superior to *some* Women this is no great discovery’. Like Speght before her, she goes on to explain that the universal is not entailed by the particular. Then she draws a distinction between facts and values to prove that just because women happen to *be* subordinate (by custom, not nature) this does not mean that they *ought* to be. To use her own words: ‘That the Custom of the World has put Women, generally speaking, into a State of Subjection, is not deny’d; but the Right can no more prov’d from a Fact, than the Predominacy of Vice can justify it’. The fact of power does not

give men an entitlement to it. As Astell elaborates, ‘if mere Power gives a Right to Rule’, then a highwayman with his gun to our head has a right to our money. Reprising the point in a different context, and going now for the jugular of patriarchal authority, Astell takes on the much vaunted commonplace of Eve’s subjection to Adam after the Fall. Far from proving ‘Adam’s natural right to rule’, says Astell, God was simply stating what would happen. The text was ‘foretelling what would be’; it was not saying ‘what ought to be’ (Astell 1996, p. 9; 10; 16; 19-20).

In addition to deploying the fact/value distinction, Astell also drills head-on into the notion of a fact. The ‘facts’ that her opponents exploit to explicate and validate their damning verdict on women, and the related inequality between the sexes, are not facts of nature, she says, but rather of nurture – though this is too kind a word for what she has in mind. That some women appear, or are, vacuous, or silly, or vicious is not a necessary feature of their nature. It is an accidental product of brute force and cultural hegemony (while Astell does not call it this either, we will see below that this, or something like this, is what she means). She therefore tilts at the ‘nature’ invoked by writers such as Knox, Locke, and William Nicholls, whose fourth discourse in his *The Duty of Inferiours towards their Superiours, in Five Practical Discourses* (1701) was entitled: ‘The Duty of Wives to their Husbands’. Infusing her logical distinction between contingency and necessity with humour and ridicule, further trademarked weapons in the logical-rhetorical armoury, Astell tries to make her reader see what seems obvious to her by making a comparison with something that will seem obvious to them: ‘just as it may be any Man’s Business and Duty to keep Hogs; he was not Made for this’ (Astell 1996, p. 11). Astell’s overall position, then, is that the fact that women are ruled by men does not mean they must be. Neither nature nor morality requires it. The world, as it is played out at present, does not have to be like this. It might be rearranged, the facts of our behaviour replaced with new ones on the basis of the deeper fact of the potential rationality of human nature.

A further argument against the view that nature is unequal, that women are naturally irrational and vicious, is that it implies some fault with the creator of that nature. Is it blasphemy to think that God made women imperfect, or gave them reason and virtue only to soil or subordinate these capacities? Speght says that Swetnam is damning his immortal soul because his attack on women amounts to ‘disparaging of, and opprobrious speeches against the excellent work of Gods hands, which in his great love he perfected for the comfort of man’. She goes so far as to say that ‘God will one day avenge’ the ‘sinne, of some men’ who write against women, that is, ‘against Gods handie worke’ (Speght 1996, p. 8; 26). Astell drives at the same point more politely: ‘GOD made all things for Himself, and a Rational Mind is too noble a being to be Made for the Sake and Service

of any Creature' (Astell 1996, p. 11). The anti-woman position is further destabilised if one considers the corollary of the suggestion that God is responsible for women's nature; if God is to blame then women themselves must be blameless. It might be – and was – objected in Augustinian fashion that, possessed of free will, women were responsible for both their fall and the just punishment that ensued. We have, however, seen Knox state, and with relish, that women's defects pre-dated the fall. It seems therefore that those who argued for the unreason and vice of a woman's nature did not feel derailed by the reminder that God was the creator of this nature. Rather, undeterred by the logical hole in their argument, they were content to repeat the view that women were to blame for it all.

Before moving on from the question of the nature of women, it is important to note that the anonymistes did not deny that women were different to men, and they conceded, or rather they accepted almost without a second thought, that juridical differences did and should follow from this. Speght gives the starkest example of this radically foreign conceptual landscape. Lining up behind the Pauline platitude, she goes so far as to say that 'a truth ungainsayable is it, that the *Man is the Womans Head*', and that while this does not give men a licence to treat their wives as servants, it does give them a 'title yet of Supremacie'. Somewhat paradoxically to our ears, she uses the inequality between the sexes to argue that more blame lies with Adam, who should have known better, than with Eve. 'He being better able', she elaborates, 'than the woman, to have resisted temptation, because the stronger vessel' (Speght 1996, p. 23; 15). Drake states nonchalantly that unlike men who are the 'rugged' sex, 'there is a tender softness in the frame of our minds, as well as in the constitution of our bodies, which inspires men' (Drake 1696, p. 10). Astell explains that it is not her intention to 'undermine' 'the Masculine Empire', and counsels wives to 'obey' their husbands (Astell 1996, p. 8; 62). Even a century later, when Mary Wollstonecraft comes to write *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she insists that her proposed liberation of women will not turn the world upside down. Rather, nature will still discriminate between men and women and apportion specific roles. She imagines this gorgeous future thus: 'Let there be no coercion *established* in society, and the common law of gravity prevailing, the sexes will fall into their proper places' (Wollstonecraft 1995, p. 70).

For these women, then, nature makes distinctions of gender that are not just physical but normative too. However, while these writers swim about in the discursive water of their time (how could they not?), we have started to see their attempts to haul themselves onto the shore. We have seen them re-carve the boundaries of nature so that men and women have more in common than

what divides them, and that where it counts, they are identical and equal. As Speght proclaims, ‘God hath made [women] equall with themselves [men] in dignity’ (Speght 1996, p. 26). ‘All souls are equal’, chimes in Drake (Drake 1696, p. 11). Women are capable of reaching ‘the most eminent pitch of heroick vertue’, confirms Astell (Astell 2002, p. 57). If women do not reach these heights, as Astell herself mournfully believes to be often the case, this is not owing to some irrevocable limitation of their nature, but rather to some revocable set of circumstances, the most reparable of which is their lack of education. Our writers turn their attention to rectifying the situation – to improving their own education, and in doing so, as we will see, gesturing towards a revolution of early modern education and society more broadly.

IV

These writers used the authority and punch of logic to refigure nature, to prove – both in the argument, and in the act of arguing – the equality, rationality and virtue of women. But they also clung on to logic as the means by which equality, rationality and virtue might come to pass – in themselves, as much as in their readers. They knew that the capacity for reason lived within their sex, and if it was not germinating, it could. While many of the causes of their poor lot were external to them, the art of reason, especially the new, natural art of thinking that was revolutionising the discipline of logic, lay within them. As Locke says, ‘native rustick reason’ is both adequate and superior to ‘any scholastick proceeding by the strict rules of mode and figure’. Picking a resonant example in the context of this paper, Locke illustrates his point by asking us to imagine ‘a country gentlewoman’. She has no need of syllogisms to work out that she should not ‘go abroad thin clad ... after a fever’ when the wind is south-westerly and the sky full of dark clouds (Locke 1975, p. 679; 672).

In good Stoic fashion, the writers I am considering, weighing up their bad fortune, focused on what was within their control, and set about trying to get their mental house in order. It is striking in the history of feminism that for a long time what women asked for was the not the vote, but education. This was the real first wave. Despite calling her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft is interested in one right above all others (if she is interested in rights, at all): the right of a woman to develop her reason, and that for moral rather than liberal purposes. In part, Wollstonecraft and her predecessors did not demand civil rights because structural oppression ran in their blood; they simply did not have the conceptual and affective resources to demand these rights. It was, one might go so far as to say, impossible to feel entitled to civic equality. But the single-issue campaign for education also speaks to the primacy, and even the primal nature, of that

desire. Up it bubbled, as they watched boys with their books peel off into the world, a fusion of envy, self-loathing, and self-belief, emanating in a yearning for both intellectual correction and transcendence.

They wanted to do what Locke had done, when he sat down to write his *Essay* and turned the eye of the mind inward, to hone it to glorious acuity, to get the candle of the lord burning bright and attentive to moral duty (Locke 1975, p. 43; 46). They wanted to train their own minds in an exercise of self-reformation, as much as an act of external transformation. In an echo of Locke's reflexive move, Astell calls herself 'the Reflector', declaring that she will not 'shut her eyes to the light of truth', but will put on 'as many glasses' as will help her 'sight' (Astell 1996, p. 10). Astell also draws on another new logic of the time, itself influential on Locke's, Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole's *La Logique or l'art de penser*, or the *Port-Royal Logic* (5th edn. 1683). Astell goes so far as to add to the first part of *A Serious Proposal* a second part in 1697 which is redolently subtitled 'Wherein a Method is offer'd for the Improvement of their Minds'. There she borrows and adapts Arnauld and Nicole's rules for reasoning, such as not to let prejudice overwhelm the evidence of one's perception, that is, 'to judge no further than we perceive, and not to take any thing for truth, which we do not evidently know to be so' (Astell 2002, p. 178; cf. Arnauld and Nicole 1996, p. 23; 259). Although she is overtly writing a logic for women, one cannot help but feel the barbs for readers who disparage women. Just as Locke's personal epistemological journey had devastating consequences for Aristotelian and Cartesian worldviews, so the beam of the autodidactic (female) eye was intended to bring enlightenment not only to the inquirer as it pierces the truth of things, but also a challenge to those who see things differently – although, as I have wondered already in this article, and will wonder again at the end, it might be that these women give up hope of revolutionising the vision of others and try only to find solace in the freedom of their minds.

As Astell and Drake establish, it is not nature, but lack of education that explains the contingent poverty of women's minds, so they take it upon themselves to assist in their emendation. Women's 'ignorance is ... pitiable', says Astell, but it is their 'misfortune', not their 'crime' (Astell 1996, p. 10). 'The defects we labour under', she says, can be 'ascribed to the mistakes of our education; which like an error in the first concoction, spreads its ill influence through all our lives. The Soil is rich and would, if well cultivated, produce a noble harvest'. All of us as divine human creatures have 'a desire to advance and perfect' our being, but our difficulty, says Astell, sounding remarkably like Locke in his chapter '*Of Power*', is that we cannot weigh in our minds the true value of things we desire; we cannot recognise our true good, which is virtue. Denied the means of examining and

judging things aright, says Astell, we ‘chuse amiss’, and so it falls out ‘that ignorance is the cause of most feminine vices’ (Astell 2002, pp. 59-60; 62; cf. Locke 1975, pp. 233-87). Luckily, says Drake, agreeing that ‘the greatest difficulty we struggled with, was the want of a good art of reasoning’, the problem might be solved by none other than ‘the greatest master of that art Mr Locke, whose essay on human understanding makes large amends for the want of all others in that kind’ (Drake 1696, p. 54). However, as Locke himself had said, it takes ‘labour’ to train the mind, and as Drake admits, ‘we are naturally lovers of our ease’ (Locke 1975, p. 43; Drake 1696, p. 55). Astell is religious about our duty to self-reform. She wants it for all women. As she pleads in her aptly entitled *Serious Proposal*, ‘I would have you live up the dignity of your nature’ (Astell 2002, p. 57).

In order to live up to the dignity of their nature and achieve their full rational potential, women, as anyone embarking on the solemn business of logic knew, had to begin by ‘clearing the ground a little’, as Locke put it, and ‘removing some of the rubbish, that lies in the way to knowledge’. Locke characterised himself as an ‘under-labourer’, identifying and getting rid of the obstacles to intellectual vision, such as innate ideas, or terms that we have the terrible, lazy habit of ‘taking ... for things’, such as ‘substantial forms’ or ‘real essences’. Locke is particularly worried about the ‘imperfections’ and ‘abuses’ of words. While ideas flit over the mind, like the wind over fields of corn, words fix themselves there (Locke 1975, p. 10; 48-103; 497; 502; 475-524; 151). Often coming from other people, containing prejudice and errors, imbibed whole and unscrutinised, they literally write the world for us. Far from seeing with our own eyes, that great goal of logic, we see what the words tell us to see. As Locke writes, explaining his preoccupation with language:

‘But when ... I began to examine the extent and certainty of our knowledge, I found it had so near a connexion with words, that unless their force and manner of signification were first well observed, there could be very little said clearly and pertinently concerning knowledge: which being conversant about truth, had constantly to do with propositions. And though it terminated in things, yet it was for the most part so much by the intervention of words, that they seem’d scarce separable from our general knowledge. At least they interpose themselves so much between our understandings, and the truth, which it would contemplate and apprehend, that like the medium through which visible objects pass, their obscurity and disorder does not seldom cast a mist before our eyes, and impose upon our understandings. If we consider, in the fallacies, men put upon themselves, as well as others, and the mistakes in men’s disputes and notions, how great a part is owing to words, and their uncertain or mistaken significations, we shall have reason to think this no small obstacle in the way to knowledge’ (Locke 1975, pp. 488-9).

Francis Bacon had also anxiously identified various elements of our psyches that stop us from seeing things clearly – what he called the idols of the mind. At the outset of the metamorphosis of

logic that culminated with Locke, he had offered his own *Novum Organum* (1620), a work whose title instantly announces its insurgent intention to displace the old, Aristotelian organon. As ever, though, with the new philosophy, traces of Aristotle leak through, and his idols, like Locke's 'fallacies' and mental mist, were reworkings of the fallacies and *ignes fatui* that it had always been the task of logic to dispel. Bacon itemises four idols. There are the 'Idols of the Tribe', which are the deep deceptions of sense and perception, the gulfs between appearance and reality that the recovery of ancient scepticism had brought to early modern attention. The 'Idols of the Cave' are 'specific to individual men' and derive from their prejudices, interests, and, drawing here on a favourite *topos* of the scientific revolutionaries, from 'the authority of those whom [one] respects and admires'. Then there are the 'Idols of the market-place', the long-standing dangers of language that Bacon formulates in alarmingly far-reaching terms. The problem, according to him, is nothing less than the use of language in conventional speech, whereby words are applied wrongly to things. As Bacon complains, 'words plainly do violence to the understanding, and throw everything up into confusion, and lead men into ... fictions'. Finally, there are the 'Idols of the Theatre'. These are the dogmas and theories of influential thinkers and traditions that, like 'so many stage plays' create 'fictitious and imaginary worlds'. The project of logic is to exorcise these idols, so that, as Bacon says, the human understanding might be cleaned and polished, like a mirror, 'to receive the true rays of things'. His new organon will, to use his telling words, 'purge' the understanding, and provide it with a 'cure' (Bacon 1994, pp. 54-6; 23).

It seems to me that the women who put pen to paper in defence of their sex were simultaneously and self-consciously struggling with their own specifically gendered idols of the mind. They felt sick; they felt the world was sick; and they too were looking for a cure. I am now going to pick out three obstacles that women felt blocked their understanding.

V

The first obstacle tyrannises the early modern logical imaginary more generally. It is the constitutive power of words.⁶ Just as their male contemporaries worried about language casting the world in its own image, so these women felt themselves enveloped and trapped in an intricate web of mis-namings. Words were applied to them – 'Vanity, Impertinence, Enviousness, Dissimulation, Inconstant', to take some of Drake's examples – and however great the gap between the word and the referent, however violently they struggled to wriggle free of the false names – the names only

⁶ See Dawson 2007 for an analysis of the anxious preoccupation with language in early modern philosophy.

seemed to tighten faster about them (Drake 1696, p. 60). Men had written women's reality, and it was almost inconceivable to erase.

We see this phenomenon vividly in Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405). There she describes how she sat in her study, eager for knowledge, surrounded by books, looking for one about *her*, but all she could see were tomes written by men about how 'female nature is wholly given up to vice'. She goes on to describe the destabilising sensation of the fissure that opens up for her sex between language and experience, selfhood and authority, subjectivity and objectivity, and how it might send one mad. I will quote her in full:

'As I mulled over [the idea that women are vicious] in my mind again and again, I began to examine myself and my own behaviour as an example of womankind. In order to judge in all fairness and without prejudice whether what so many famous men have said about us is true, I also thought about other woman I know, the many princesses and countless ladies of all different social ranks who have shared their private and personal thoughts with me. No matter which way I looked at it and no matter how much I turned the question over in my mind, I could find no evidence from my own experience to bear out such a negative view of female nature and habits. Even so, given that I could scarcely find a moral work by any author which didn't devote some chapter or paragraph to attacking the female sex, I had to accept their unfavourable opinion of women since it was unlikely that so many learned men, who seemed to be endowed with such great intelligence and insight into all things, could possibly have lied on so many different occasions. It was on the basis of this one simple argument that I was forced to conclude that, although my understanding was too crude and ill-informed to recognize the great flaws in myself and other women, these men had to be in the right. Thus I preferred to give more weight to what others said than to trust my own judgement and experience.

I dwelt on these thoughts at such length that it was as if I had sunk into a deep trance. My mind became flooded with an endless stream of names as I recalled all the authors who had written on this subject. I came to the conclusion that God had surely created a vile thing when He created woman. Indeed, I was astounded that such a fine craftsman could have wished to make such an appalling object which, as these writers would have it, is like a vessel in which all the sin and evil of the world has been collected and preserved. This thought inspired such a great sense of disgust and sadness in me that I began to despise myself and the whole of my sex as an aberration in nature' (De Pizan 1999, pp. 6-7).

Here, then, the ground going from under her feet, her mind cracking as the evidence of her perception is gainsaid by the words of learned men, de Pizan bows to the logic of authority, internalises her own degradation, and descends into shame. To be sure, there is irony in her performance here, most razor-like in the damning deduction that we saw her successors deploy above, that if the men are right and women are naturally vicious, responsibility must lie with God their creator – a deduction she knows would horrify her opponents. But, as so often with bitter sarcasm, there is pain beneath the words, truth to de Pizan's stated abjection. It is at this point that three ladies appear to her: Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice. They proceed to remake

and rectify de Pizan's reality, building a city out of heroic and splendid women, the walls of which will provide a sanctuary for all women from the harassment and slander of men. Lady Reason's first act, recalling, or rather foretelling, Locke's own first act in the *Essay*, is 'to carry away this first load of earth' – that is, the view that women are by nature an abomination. With this clearing of the ground, this cleaning of the slate, Lady Reason will 'help' de Pizan 'see more clearly how things stand' (De Pizan 1999, p. 17).

In 1589, a book appeared entitled 'Jane Anger her Protection for Women'. We do not know if the author was really called Jane Anger; it was a perfectly normal name for the time, but it also named the fury that the author felt for the ways in which men misname women as wicked. 'Fie on the falsehood of men', she cries, 'whose minds go oft a-madding and whose tongues cannot so soon be wagging, but straight they fall a-tattling! Was there ever any so abused, so railed upon, or wickedly handled undeservedly, as are we women?' Anger declares that she will 'stretch the veins of her brains' to unveil the deceit that passes for truth about her sex. The central lever of her text pivots on the 'lying lips' of men, and the trusting naivety of women, who believe, for example, that men 'love' us, when such empty flattery will in fact see men 'essay the scaling of half a dozen of us in one night'. This deception and gullibility is a deadly vicious circle that Anger is determined to break. 'The smooth speeches of men', she says, 'are nothing unlike the vanishing clouds of the air, which glide by degrees from place to place till they have filled themselves with rain, when, breaking, they spit forth terrible showers'. Men's words are like the weather: an all-consuming presence, wielding unpredictable and extreme force. Anger wants to reveal them as a mirage. The problem is not simply that the male voice is dominant and duplicitous, but that the female voice is twisted, mocked and questioned so as to lose all validity and credibility. As Anger writes, 'our good counsel is termed nipping injury in that it accords not with their foolish fancies. Our boldness 'rash' for giving noddies nipping answers, our dispositions 'naughty' for not agreeing with their vile minds, and our 'fury' dangerous because it will not bear with their knavish behaviours'. Anger's analysis of the way in which female speech, action, and emotion is radically re-described by men insofar as it goes against their interests demonstrates the enormity of the obstacle of language. Power dictates the names of things, suggests Anger – and power is difficult to budge. The only possible response, she says, is never to believe it. 'The greatest fault', she explains, 'that doth remain in us women is that we are too credulous' (Anger 1985, p. 32; 33; 42; 41; 36; 35). Men spin the world relentlessly for us; Anger's solution is to withdraw our trust.

Drake, as we have already seen, is on a mission to rename women as virtuous, but she too is sensitive to the scale of the task. Like Anger, she evokes the way in which power operates to amplify certain voices and silence others, so that truth has no power at all. 'How weak a defence innocence is against calumny', she bemoans, 'how open the ears of all the world are, and how greedily they suck in any thing to the prejudice of a woman'. Here is the circulation of negative stereotypes and unconscious bias, the truth falling on deaf ears, a woman's reality effaced by those invested in its negation. Men – and it is men, in this case – believe what it serves them to believe. They lap it up. Drake evinces a situation in which the stories in which women find themselves are being, and have been, told by men. History, as she explains, is written by men, and if by any chance any histories were written by women, 'the malice of men have effectually conspir'd to suppress 'em'. Moreover, the non-vulgar, learned languages such as Latin and Greek are unavailable to women, being for the most part uneducated. This bars women from those vast fields that languages offer 'imagination to rove in', especially that particularly fertile field of antiquity in which their male counterparts frolicked (Drake 1696, Preface, n.p.; p. 23; 37). For Drake, therefore, a woman's exclusion from language is double.

Astell joins the fray, also making the point that we live in a reality scripted by men. 'Histories are writ by them', she says, where 'they recount each others great exploits, and have always done so'. Not only do men misapply words to the world, but the words themselves are often subtly encoded with their worldview, words implicitly connoting other words in an invisible but asphyxiating skin. 'A Philosophical Lady', for example, is, says Astell, a term of 'Ridicule', whereas 'the very word' 'Man' conjures up 'not only the greatest strength of body, but even greatest firmness and force of mind'. If a woman's words are heard at all, it is, says Astell, because she is ventriloquising for a man. 'The world will hardly allow a woman to say any thing well, unless as she borrows it from men' (Astell 1996, p. 77; 76; 54; 23).

Astell spells out the troubling consequence of misnaming women: women internalise the falsehood. Call someone 'vacuous' enough and they will come to believe it. This is how oppression works. It colonises the minds of the oppressed and sets up residence there. As Astell explains, the way in which women are educated, and spoken to and about, destine them 'to folly and impertinence', 'weaken[s] and corrupt[s] their minds, to give them wrong notions' (Astell 1996, 65). 'If from our infancy', she mourns, 'we are nurs'd up in ignorance and vanity; are taught to be proud and petulent, delicate and fantastick, humourous and inconstant 'tis not strange that the ill effects of this conduct appear in all the future actions of our lives' (Astell 2002, p. 61). Picking up

the same point that Jane Anger had made about the lethal combination of gullibility and false words, Astell worries about the way in which a woman's:

'inbred self-esteem and desire of good ... will easily open her ears to whatever goes about to nourish and delight them; and when a cunning designing enemy from without, has drawn over to his party these traytors within, he has the poor unhappy person at his mercy, who now very glibly swallows down his poyson, because 'tis presented in a golden cup; and credulously hearkens to the most disadvantageous proposals, because they come attended with a seeming esteem. She whose vanity makes her swallow praises by the whole sale, without examining whether she deserves them, or from what hand they come, will ... think she must needs be merciful to the poor despairing lover whom her charms have reduc'd to die at her feet. Love and honour are what every one of us naturally esteem, they are excellent things in themselves and very worthy of our regard; and by how much readier we are to embrace what ever resembles them, by so much the more dangerous, it is that these venerable names should be wretchedly abus'd and affixt to their direct contraries, yet this is the custom of the world: and how can she possibly detect the fallacy who has no better notion of either than what she derives from plays and romances?' (Astell 2002, pp. 62-4).

It had been the task of logic to recognise and extirpate fallacies since Aristotle. 'I admire you' is just as much a possible fallacy for women as 'you are stupid', but both embed themselves so deeply as to make their deceptions imperceptible. Language forms the horizon of the thinkable; it is hard to see beyond it, and hard not to take it at face-value. Words, therefore, what Bacon had called the idols of the marketplace, suffused as they are with gendered stereotypes and hierarchies, confuse and weaken women's minds, and must be reformed.

VI

The second idol of a woman's mind is her culture's – and therefore her – obsession with appearance. If women are valued according to their beauty, if men are not interested in their minds, indeed if they are threatened or repulsed by a strong female mind, then women come to believe that their attractiveness is the most important and only permissible thing about them. This causes them not only to neglect and denigrate their minds in favour of their bodies, but actively to corrupt them by sowing the seeds of vanity there. Astell entreats: 'let us ... not entertain such a degrading thought of our own worth, as to imagine that our souls were given us only for the service of our bodies, and that the best improvement we can make of these, is to attract the eyes of men. We value them too much, and our selves too little, if we place any part of our worth in their opinion'. Astell's Cartesian distinction between body and soul, and her faith that the latter will have an afterlife, sharpens her sense that it is a catastrophic, topsy-turvy thing to concentrate on the former. 'How can you be content', she asks rhetorically, 'to be in the world like tulips in a garden, to make a fine shew and be good for nothing; have all your glories set in the grave, or perhaps much

sooner?’ (Astell 2002, p. 55; 54). Astell’s interest is not only with heaven, but also with authenticity on earth. We should be our own centres, rather than continually alert to what men think of us. If esteem is going to have any stability, it must come from within, rather than billow and collapse in relation to a man.

Even if we manage to tear ourselves away from our looking glasses, and reflect on our own minds, we still – as women – have to take care of our reputations. Reputation was a punitively gendered phenomenon in early modernity.⁷ A woman’s reputation was particularly fragile, its ‘tenderness’, to quote Drake, necessitating extreme ‘caution’ (Drake, Preface, n.p.). A woman’s ‘good name’, which was one of the only things she might be said truly to own during this period, could be lost at the slightest rumour or ‘suspicion’, says Anger, let alone actual transgression (Anger 1985, p. 38). As Astell agrees, ‘a woman cannot be too watchful, too apprehensive of her danger’ (Astell 1996, p. 65). Snares lie everywhere in wait, the double standard not only snapping extra fiercely at women, but operating inversely towards men. As Drake observes, a woman’s ‘ruine’ goes hand in hand with a man’s ‘triumph’ (Drake 1696, p. 115). The slut/stud rule, booming in the seventeenth century, puts women in further danger.

Here, then, is a variation on the theme that we first encountered on the frontispieces of these authors works, where they hid themselves from sight behind the guise of anonymity. A woman could not let down her guard even for a moment. She had to be vigilant, her eyes like watchtowers in the night. This complicated, defensive act of (self-)surveillance was another drain on a woman’s mind.

VII

The third and final obstruction with which a woman in search of enlightenment had to contend was her structural relation to the opposite sex. Men, as a class, had power over women, as a class, which got in the way of mental cultivation. This is why the *querelle des femmes*, as it was then called, is not a ‘sex war’ as it is still sometimes called. The deck was not evenly stacked. As Drake says, to compare women and men, and to congratulate men for doing better, is to call a man courageous when he beats someone in a fight whose hands are tied (Drake 1696, p.20). Jane Anger has a series of animal metaphors that evoke the experience as well as the reality of the dominion of mankind. Man is a wolf, even if he sometimes dresses in sheep’s clothing. Man is a cat, and will chase mice – even if women ‘clothe [themselves] in sackcloth’, says Anger, the cats will come after them. And

⁷ See Thomas 1959; Gowing 1996; Capp 1999.

my favourite of Anger's metaphors: the snake and the eel. It is in the nature of the snake 'to sting', and of the eel 'not to be held' (Anger 1985, p. 44; 38; 41). Astell simply calls women men's 'prey' (Astell 1996, p. 69).

Astell characterises the specific relation between husband and wife in terms that Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit have helped us to understand as neo-Roman, or republican (Skinner 1998; Pettit 1997). That is, a wife is unfree insofar as she lives under the absolute, and therefore arbitrary power of her husband. Even if her husband happens to be kind, and does not in fact hurt or abuse her, she is a slave insofar as she is dependent on his will. As Astell famously asks, 'If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves? As they must be if the being subjected to the unconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of men, be the perfect condition of slavery?' (Astell 1996, pp. 18-19). She is quoting Locke here (Locke 1988, p. 284), and goes on to ask why, if arbitrary power is unconscionable in the state, it should be permissible in the home? We have already heard Locke's answer to this question, but it is worth remembering the experience of insecurity that Astell's male contemporaries point to as the result of being dependent on the will of another. If you cannot be sure that you will be treated with respect, if you are the recipient of privileges not of rights, then you become unconfident, apprehensive, and anxious. You spend your time currying favour with your master, bowing and scraping and flattering, less and less interested in truth, and fearful of speaking it to power. Your juridical status as a slave turns you into a slavish character. This same absence of 'security', psychological as well as physical, applies to wives, says Astell, who have 'nothing else to do but to please and obey' (Astell 1996, p. 51; 62).⁸

VIII

To conclude, the women I have been discussing turned to the art of reason both to prove and to exemplify their rationality and therefore their virtue, and in these regards, their natural equality with men. But they also turned to logic to cleanse their reason and to wash away false ideas, to embark on the same journey of self-actualisation that they saw men take. Reflecting on and re-examining the fog that logicians like Locke had described as getting in the way of knowledge, they identified the fog that engulfed women specifically, and thereby developed a gendered ethics of understanding. I want to end by asking whether they thought they could purify their minds, and

⁸ There is a debate in the literature about the role of experience in the neo-Roman/republican theory of freedom (see Halldenius 2014). It seems important for the theory for it to be the case that one might be unfree even if one does not know or feel it, but equally it looks as though the lived experience of unfreedom (uncertainty, anxiety, bowing and scraping) is important in capturing what is so peculiarly wrong and harmful with being dependent on the will of another.

free them of their idols – and, even if they thought they could, whether that would suffice; indeed, whether individual mental freedom was all they wanted.

Men might lock women up and lock women out, but as Woolf swears, ‘there is no gate, no lock, no bolt, that you can set upon the freedom of my mind’ (Woolf 2000, p. 76). And certainly, in certain moods, the freedom of women’s minds looks like Astell’s sole ambition, and one she thinks women will be able to achieve. Women, she insists, are as ‘capable’ as men of perfecting their minds, and as she puts it, ‘tho’ the order of the world requires an outward respect and obedience’ to men, ‘yet the mind is free, nothing but reason can oblige it, ’tis out of the reach of the most absolute tyrant’ (Astell 1996, p. 56). While the world might rage about us in storms of injustice, we can withdraw into the tranquillity of our minds.

But Astell is also sensitive to the fact that we are social creatures, with social minds, that the line between culture and individual is porous, the former trickling, or flooding, into the latter. This is especially so where there is a fiercely policed imbalance of power, when the thoughts, words and values of the oppressor seep into the minds of the oppressed. An absolute governor, which is what a husband is, may, as Astell puts it, ‘form’ his wife ‘to his will and liking’. A wife must submit her reason to ‘the imperious dictates of a blind will’ (Astell 1996, p. 51; 50). If you are dependent on a person’s will, then it is likely – it is pragmatic in all sorts of ways – that you will end up bending yourself to this will. It is all very well to say that a woman must bear responsibility for her own mind, but what if the conditions of her mind are out of her control? Astell et al. are trying to expose epistemic injustice, whereby a woman is, as Miranda Fricker puts it, ‘wronged in her capacity as a knower’, that is, ‘to be wronged in a capacity essential to human value’ (Fricker 2007, p. 44). The minds of early modern women faced exceptional subversion, and it was not obvious, even to those who were alert to the wrong, whether the wrong could be redressed.

Even if it were possible to free one’s mind under oppression, questions remain about whether this is really where their ambition ends. Again, Astell, who is most focused on internal freedom, emanates ambivalence. She does often suggest that we should pursue our solitary path towards heaven, and that the brutal, stupid world we inhabit for but an instant from the perspective of eternity, can go hang, not least since it hangs us. But now that she has done the under-labouring that Locke had stipulated as the task of a logician, and she has revealed the truth of things to be *not* as Locke and other men had found it, and indeed has identified hitherto unnoticed idols in men’s minds, is she not interested in returning the favour and helping them ascend to the heights

of her superior vision? Locke had seen clearly, but she saw more clearly still. He had fractured the complacent logical invocation of ‘the’ mind (different men have different ideas, he explained), but she saw deeper still how gender makes further distinctions, raising some minds up and stamping on others, and how these gendered minds project false images of the world. Now that Astell has faced up to the beams in her own eye, should the new philosophers face up to the motes in theirs? What happens when the tutee sees things more distinctly than the tutor? Is it not then time for a rewriting of the textbooks and the world that they describe? I think that this is what Astell wanted, even as she despaired of its coming to pass. She knew that it is a stubborn impossibility for privilege to see itself as such. While Astell saw sexism, while it was blindingly obvious to her, her critics honestly saw nothing at all. So far, so familiar. Civil rights might have been won, but the idols of the mind persist.

In addition to wondering whether Astell wanted women simply to change themselves, or the world as well, I wonder too, whether she was satisfied with the solitude that she prescribed. She is certainly drawn to the voyage into one’s own mind, a place of refuge as well as the most precious treasure, in a move that re-enacts Locke’s retiring to his study, or Descartes finding the truth of his existence in a German stove. But Astell also points to the intellectually enriching opportunities of friendship and solidarity – in her proposed women’s academy and even, if the husbands are intelligent enough, in marriage. This reverse move, from the study to society, is one that de Pizan had executed most extravagantly. She began suffocating in her room filled with books that told her she was worthless, and in her solitary mind that took her down a hole of dejection. Her life was transformed by letting other women in, by reaching beyond her unstable ego and building a city of ladies.

The distinctively female logic that I have sketched in this article takes its lineaments from an understanding of the situatedness of human reason. While their logical forebears had imagined that mind might be abstracted from culture, Astell et al., like feminists today, knew that the psychological cannot be disentangled from the social. They both perceived the interdependency between the mind and society, and felt torn between the two, and between their correlates – between reason and passion, fear and love, withdrawal and embrace, quietism and revolution, privacy and danger, safety and rage – in a pattern of tension that still pulls on women today.

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