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## Mary Astell on Virtuous Friendship

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According to some scholars, Mary Astell's feminist programme is severely limited by its focus on self-improvement rather than wider social change. In response, I highlight the role of 'virtuous friendship' in Astell's 1694 work, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. Building on classical ideals and traditional Christian principles, Astell promotes the morally transformative power of virtuous friendship among women. By examining the significance of such friendship to Astell's feminism, we can see that she did in fact aim to bring about reformation of society and not just the individual.

The seventeenth-century English writer Mary Astell (1666–1731) presents a challenge to some of our modern preconceptions about feminist pioneers. Far from being a radical revolutionary, Astell was a profoundly conservative political thinker. As a High-Church Anglican and a Tory royalist, she was an active campaigner against the toleration of Protestant dissenters in early eighteenth-century England. Unlike her Whig contemporaries, such as John Locke, she did not regard political liberty or freedom from religious persecution as the unquestionable right of all human beings. In terms of political allegiances, she was diametrically opposed to the 'republic of

letters' devoted to universal religious toleration in late seventeenth-century Europe. Recent commentators point to the fact that Astell's religio-political conservatism shapes and informs every aspect of her philosophy—including her feminist ideas.<sup>1</sup> In the 1706 edition of her *Reflections upon Marriage*, Astell observed that not even well-known advocates of resistance, such as John Milton, 'wou'd cry up Liberty to poor *Female Slaves*, or plead for the Lawfulness of Resisting a Private Tyranny'.<sup>2</sup> But it was never her intention to take up where Milton had left off—Astell was not an advocate for the political right of resistance or freedom from slavery for women. For her, women's liberty was a spiritual rather than a political concept: it consisted in a woman's freedom to choose (or not to choose) that which was good for her soul, and it could be exercised by any woman, anywhere, regardless of her social or political circumstances.

For a modern reader, the spiritual focus of Astell's feminism threatens to render it unintelligible or perhaps even contradictory. On the one hand, Astell clearly recognises that women as a social group suffer from significant disadvantages due to the tyranny of men; and in her three major feminist works, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (part I, 1694; part II, 1697) and *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), she suggests ways in which to end male tyranny over the lives of women. But on the other hand, Astell maintains that true tyranny is tyranny over a woman's spiritual life and

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<sup>1</sup> See Patricia Springborg, *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Hilda L. Smith, "'Cry up Liberty": The Political Context for Mary Astell's Feminism', in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, eds. William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 193–204; and Rachel Weil, 'Mary Astell: The Marriage of Toryism and Feminism', in her *Political Passions: Gender, the Family, and Political Argument in England, 1680–1714* (Manchester and New York: 1999), pp. 142–59. These recent studies build upon the earlier insights of Florence M. Smith, *Mary Astell* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916); Joan K. Kinnaird, 'Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism', *The Journal of British Studies* 19, no. 1 (1979), 53–75; Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986); Ruth Perry, 'Mary Astell and the Feminist Critique of Possessive Individualism', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23 (1990), 444–57; and Catherine Gallagher, 'Embracing the Absolute: The Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England', *Genders* 1, no. 1 (1988), 24–39.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage*, in *Astell: Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 46–47.

her capacity to make judgments about right and wrong for the sake of her salvation. To rectify *this* tyranny, women do not need to rectify their disadvantages as a social group: each woman simply needs to improve her own individual capacity for rational deliberation and practical decision-making. In the second part of the *Proposal*, Astell shows how this self-improvement can be achieved through a woman's own efforts, by following Cartesian rules for thinking. By learning to discipline the will, according to Astell, women can redirect their passions to worthy objects, and resist the influence of custom on their judgments about right and wrong. In keeping with her broader political views about passive obedience, Astell urges that women should not rebel against the rule of men, even when they are subject to physical and psychological abuse; the only acceptable course of action is for women to bring about their own self-transformation. As Rachel Weil observes, 'Astell approaches politics in a radically subjective manner: it is not about the rules governing relations between people in civil society, but about people's relationship to themselves and to God'.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, however, I argue that if we focus on Astell's concept of friendship in the first part of her *Proposal*, then her feminism is somewhat more modern than it at first appears. In this *Proposal*, Astell's programme for feminist reform does not consist in self-transformation alone, but also a transformation of other women's moral values. Female friendships play an important role in bringing about this moral development. In a 1693 letter to the English theologian-philosopher, John Norris (1657–1711), Astell voices her intention to use friendship as a consciousness-raising tool. She says that

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<sup>3</sup> Weil, *Political Passions*, p. 146.

I am loath to abandon all Thoughts of Friendship, both because it is one of the brightest Vertues, and because I have the noblest Designs in it. Fain wou'd I rescue my Sex, or at least as many of them as come within my little Sphere, from that Meanness of Spirit into which the Generality of them are sunk, perswade them to pretend to some higher Excellency than a well-chosen Pettycoat, or a fashionable Commode; and not wholly to lay out their Time and Care in the Adornation of their Bodies, but bestow a Part of it at least in the Embellishment of their Minds.<sup>4</sup>

In the following discussion, I show that Astell's design has some affinity with those of recent feminist ethicists, such as Marilyn Friedman, who argue that close female friendships can provide women with a moral vantage point from which to identify, and then challenge, social norms and practices that are detrimental to their well-being.

During her lifetime, Astell enjoyed many close and enduring friendships with women of high social standing, including her neighbour Lady Catherine Jones, and Lady Ann Coventry, Lady Elizabeth Hastings, and Elizabeth Hutcheson. These female friends were vitally important to Astell's emotional and financial well-being as an unmarried gentlewoman in late seventeenth-century London: they not only provided her with an income (some were her patrons), but also supplied the comfort and support of a family (in her later years, Astell lived with Jones). In one letter to Norris, Astell confessed that she had 'a strong Propensity to friendly Love', and that it

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Astell to John Norris, 31 October 1693; in Mary Astell and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, eds. E. Derek Taylor and Melvyn New (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 80. On the differences between Astell's 'design of friendship' in the *Letters concerning the Love of God* (1695) and that of her first *Proposal*, see William Kolbrener, 'Astell's "Design of Friendship" in *Letters* and *A Serious Proposal, Part I*', in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, eds. William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 49–64.

was difficult to love her friends ‘without something of Desire’;<sup>5</sup> in another, she declared that she loved Jones ‘with the greatest Tenderness’.<sup>6</sup> These remarks have been the focus of some scholarly attention in the past.<sup>7</sup> Here I outline Astell’s normative ideal of friendship, or her idea of what friendship *should* be like, rather than her personal experiences of friendship or her private concerns about falling short of that ideal. In the first part, I describe Astell’s concept of ‘virtuous friendship’, a concept that partly resembles the classical notion of friendship developed by Aristotle and passed on through the centuries by Cicero, Augustine, and others. In the second part, I situate Astell’s notion of friendship in the wider context of early modern debate about whether or not women are capable of friendship. And, in the third and final part, I show how Astell develops the traditional virtue of friendship—and female friendship, in particular—into a force for social change.

### I. Astell’s concept of friendship

In her first published work, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest*, Astell called upon her readers to support the establishment of a female academic institute in England. Calling herself a ‘Lover of her Sex’, she argued that the supposed intellectual inferiority of women was the result of custom rather than nature, and that if young women were provided with a higher education, then they might improve their natural understanding. In order to obtain this improvement, women required a retreat from ‘the noise and trouble, folly and temptation of the world’,<sup>8</sup> and a sanctuary from ‘the rude attempts of designing Men’

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<sup>5</sup> Astell to Norris, 31 October 1693; in Astell and Norris, *Letters*, p. 80. In the context of Astell and Norris’s philosophy of love, ‘desire’ is a non-bodily tendency of the soul to love something as its good.

<sup>6</sup> Astell to Norris, 17 July 1694; in Astell and Norris, *Letters*, p. 66.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, pp. 136–141.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, ed. Patricia Springborg (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1997), p. 20.

(*Proposal I*, p. 39). They needed a ‘*Monastery*’ or a place of ‘*Religious Retirement*’ (*Proposal I*, p. 18), in which they could study the grounds of religion and philosophy for themselves in peace and quiet. The young scholars of this institution would live in the school environs for a number of years, and eat, sleep, and study with other women of a similar age and social status (the daughters of ‘Persons of Fortune’ or ‘Persons of Quality’; *Proposal I*, p. 39). An important feature of the institution is that it would provide women with opportunities to contract friendships with other women. In her institution, Astell says,

You will only quit the Chat of insignificant people for an ingenious Conversation; the froth of flashy Wit for real Wisdom; idle tales for instructive discourses. The deceitful Flatteries of those who under pretence of loving and admiring you, really served their *own* base ends, for the seasonable Reproofs and wholsom Counsels of your hearty well-wishers and affectionate Friends, which will procure you those perfections your feigned lovers pretended you had, and kept you from obtaining (*Proposal I*, p. 19).

The friendships in question do not consist in ‘insignificant dearnesses’ (*Proposal I*, p. 36), or intimacies that are based upon flattery, gossip, and intrigue. Astell’s institution gives women the opportunity to contract ‘noble Vertuous and Disinterest’d Friendship’ (*Proposal I*, p. 20), or ‘the purest and noblest Friendship’ (*Proposal I*, p. 35), or simply ‘Vertuous Friendship’ (*Proposal I*, p. 40) with one or two like-minded individuals. By virtuous friendship, Astell means ‘the greatest usefulness, the most refin’d and disinterest’d Benevolence, a love that thinks nothing within the bounds of Power and Duty, too much to do or suffer for its Beloved; And makes no distinction

betwixt its Friend and its self except that in Temporals it prefers her interest' (*Proposal I*, pp. 36–7). Virtuous friendship consists in mutual acts of unself-interested benevolence between 'two Persons of a sympathizing disposition, the *make* and *frame* of whose Souls bears an exact conformity to each other' (*Proposal I*, p. 37).

This idea of friendship as 'disinterest'd Benevolence' is consistent with Astell's wider theory of love, a theory that closely resembles the moral philosophy of her correspondent, John Norris. Though Norris is often referred to as a 'Cambridge Platonist', he was in fact an Oxford man and the main English disciple of the French philosopher, Nicolas Malebranche. Norris was strongly influenced by Platonist and neo-Platonist views, but his philosophy also incorporated the ideas of Malebranche, Descartes, Augustine, and Aristotle, among others. Following the Scholastic tradition, Norris distinguishes between two types of love: a love of desire or concupiscence (the love that we owe God), on the one hand, and a love of charity or benevolence (the love that we owe other creatures), on the other.<sup>9</sup> In the third volume of his *Practical Discourses* (1693), Norris argues in favour of this distinction with reference to the Malebranchean theory of causation known as occasionalism. Like Malebranche, Norris maintains that all material things are completely without causal power or force, and that they are incapable of directly influencing our souls. He claims that only a being of infinite wisdom and power could produce all things by the immediate efficacy of will, and therefore God is the only true causal agent, and the sole efficient cause of all our sensations. 'Tis not the most delicate Fruit, or the richest Perfume, that delights either our Tast or our Smell,' he says, 'but 'tis God alone that raises

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<sup>9</sup> On Norris's theory of love, see Richard Acworth, *The Philosophy of John Norris of Bemerton* (1657–1712) (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1979), pp. 154–83; W. J. Mander, *The Philosophy of John Norris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 127–67.

Pleasure in us by the Occasion of these Bodies.’<sup>10</sup> While material objects may be the conditions or occasions of our sensations, they are not necessary conditions. For this reason, according to Norris, God must be the sole object of our love of desire; because creatures never really cause our sensations of pleasure, they do not merit our love. Though Astell hesitates to accept the metaphysical foundation of Norris’s theory,<sup>11</sup> she accepts his claim that only God deserves a love of desire, because he intentionally brings about everything for our greater good. She also agrees that creatures deserve a love of benevolence alone; we are permitted to wish them well, or to will good for them, but we must not desire them as our good. The love of creatures encompasses not only the love of family members, neighbours, and friends, but also strangers and enemies. When it comes to friends, however, Astell has something more to say: for Astell, the love of benevolence between friends can also play a vital role in their moral development.

To understand the moral value of friendship in Astell’s philosophy, it is useful to consider the similarities between her notion of friendship and the Aristotelian conception of friendship as the mutual desire to promote another’s well-being for her own sake. Though there is no evidence that Astell had read Aristotle (384–322 BC), she puts forward a philosophical concept that has much in common with his normative ideal of friendship. In book eight of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (350 BC), Aristotle identifies three different kinds of friendship: friendship based upon mutual advantage or utility; friendship based upon mutual pleasure; and friendship based

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<sup>10</sup> John Norris, *Practical Discourses Upon several Divine Subjects* (London: S. Manship, 1693), vol. III, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Astell to John Norris, 14 August 1694; Astell and Norris, *Letters*, pp. 131–33. On their exchange, see Broad, *Women Philosophers*, pp. 98–109; Sarah Ellenzweig, ‘The Love of God and the Radical Enlightenment: Mary Astell’s Brush with Spinoza’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64, no. 3 (2003), 379–97; Eileen O’Neill, ‘Mary Astell on the Causation of Sensation’, in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, eds. William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 145–163; Springborg, *Mary Astell*, pp. 58–67; E. Derek Taylor, ‘Mary Astell’s Ironic Assault on John Locke’s Theory of Matter’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62, no. 3 (2001), 505–22.

upon mutual recognition of the other's moral goodness or excellence of character.<sup>12</sup> This last kind of friendship—the highest form of friendship, according to Aristotle—is known as 'perfect' or 'character' friendship. Such friendship requires that two friends develop certain intentions toward one another: it consists in wanting (and actively promoting) a friend's good for her own sake, and not for selfish motives. Character friends love one another for who they essentially are, and not for certain accidental properties or relations.<sup>13</sup> The contracting of such friendship requires that two persons spend enough time together to become familiar with each other's character; and that they share enough of their life to merge their interests and to forge lasting ties of love and affection. Aristotle's concept of friendship had an enduring impact on subsequent western thought, and his ideal still shaped and informed most writings on the topic in the seventeenth century.

In keeping with the Aristotelian tradition, Astell also treats virtuous friends as those who love one another for who they essentially are. Her institution is designed to give women enough time to be careful and judicious in the contracting of such friendships:

But tho' it be very desirable to obtain such a Treasure, such a Medicine of Life, (as the wise man speaks)<sup>14</sup> yet the danger is great, least being deceiv'd in our choice, we suck in Poyson where we expected Health. And considering how apt we are to disguise our selves, how hard it is to know our own hearts much less anothers, it is not advisable to be too hasty in contracting so important a

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<sup>12</sup> On Aristotle's philosophical conception of friendship, see John M. Cooper, 'Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship', *Review of Metaphysics* 30, no. 4 (1977), 619–48; and Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For an overview of classical ideals of friendship, see Dirk Baltzly and Nick Eliopoulos. 'The Classical Ideals of Friendship', in *Friendship: A History*, ed. Barbara Caine (London: Equinox, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Cooper, 'Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship', 635.

<sup>14</sup> Ecclesiasticus 6.16: 'A faithful friend is the medicine of life'.

Relation; before that be done, it were well if we could look into the very Soul of the beloved Person, to discover what resemblance it bears to our own, and in this Society we shall have the best opportunities of doing so. (*Proposal I*, p. 37)

In the wider context of Astell's Cartesian-inspired philosophy, the self is essentially the soul (a non-bodily or immaterial substance) and not the body (a material thing).<sup>15</sup> So when she recommends that we take care to look into 'the very Soul of the beloved Person', she recommends that we learn to love our friend for what she essentially is, and not for certain accidental features, such as physical appearance, social status or personal wealth. The resemblance of the friend's soul to our own is important: Astell says that such friendship can contribute toward a woman's self-improvement because virtuous friends will be as devoted to 'bettering the beloved Person' as they are to bettering themselves (*Proposal I*, p. 37). There can be no envy amongst such friends, for 'how can she repine at anothers wel-fare, who reckons it the greatest part of her own' (*Proposal I*, p. 20)? Virtuous friendship has a special power to deliver us from 'vicious selfishness' (*Proposal I*, p. 36).

Astell also follows the classical tradition by allowing that only virtuous agents can become character friends. In her institution, Astell says, friendships will not be 'cemented by Intrigues nor spent in vain Diversions, but in the search of Knowledge, and acquisition of Vertuous Habits, a mutual love to which was the Origin of 'em' (*Proposal II*, p. 75).<sup>16</sup> Virtuous friendship originates in a mutual love of wisdom and virtue; and such friendship is itself 'a Vertue which comprehends all the rest; none

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<sup>15</sup> See Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter Of The Church of England. In a Letter to the Right Honourable, T.L. C.I.* (London: R. Wilkin, 1705), p. 251.

<sup>16</sup> This common sentiment can also be found in the poem, 'Ode to Friendship', once attributed to Mary Astell but now thought to be the work of Samuel Johnson. For details and a transcription of the poem, see Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, pp. 273–75.

being fit for this, who is not adorned with every other Vertue' (*Proposal I*, p. 36).<sup>17</sup> Astell implies that if a person is a true friend, then her character will cultivate the virtues—such as the traditional virtues of wisdom/prudence, justice, moderation, and courage, as well as the Christian virtues of charity/love, faith, hope, and humility.

Nevertheless, Astell does not support the view that friends must be fully or perfectly virtuous and that friendship is the sole province of moral saints or morally exceptional persons. In her second *Proposal*, she expresses scepticism about the possibility of being a fully virtuous friend and successfully meeting the friend's duty to 'better the beloved Person' without losing the friendship. She says that

this is so nice a matter, so laborious a task, that the more I consider it the more unable I find my self to give fit Directions to the performance of it. They who wou'd do that, must have a more exact Knowlege of Human Nature, a greater Experience of the World, and of those differences which arise from Constitution, Age, Education, receiv'd Opinions, outward Fortune, Custom and Conversation, than I can pretend to. (*Proposal II*, p. 175)

While a virtuous friend must possess the virtues (in part or to some degree), she does not have to be fully or perfectly virtuous herself in order to become a friend in the first place.<sup>18</sup> Later we will see that this qualification is important: in Astell's view, the value of virtuous friendship lies in its power to promote moral growth; if virtuous friends are already morally perfect, then friendship will be redundant in this respect.

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<sup>17</sup> In book eight of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle also classes friendship as 'a kind of virtue'; see Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson, revised with notes and appendices by Hugh Tredennick, with an introduction and bibliography by Jonathan Barnes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 258.

<sup>18</sup> On this notion in Aristotle, see Cooper, 'Aristotle on the Forms of Friendship', 627–29.

## II. Women and friendship: the early modern discussion

Astell was not the only writer of her time to conceive of virtuous friendship as a means to moral improvement. In the seventeenth century, a number of religious thinkers, such as Jeremy Taylor, John Norris, and Richard Allestree, resurrected the classical notion of friendship as a form of the Christian ideal of charity. Like other Christian moralists before them, such as St Aquinas, St Augustine, and Aelred of Rievaulx, they emphasise the role of virtuous friendship in the attainment of salvation and the soul's ultimate union with God. Taylor and Norris are noteworthy for the fact that they highlight the question of a woman's (and not just a man's) capacity for friendship. These men are key influences on Astell's own discussion of friendship—though, as we will see, she takes the topic of women and friendship much further than they intended.

In his *Discourse of the Nature, Offices and Measures of Friendship, With Rules of conducting it* (1657), Taylor (1613–67) answers the poet Katherine Philips' queries about the possibility of friendships between men and women. In this work, he defines friendship ('*the greatest love, and the greatest usefulness*') as a special or limited form of the Christian charity that we owe to everyone.<sup>19</sup> In a direct address to Philips, Taylor boasts that, unlike certain morose cynics, he does not deny women the capacity for such noble friendship (or virtuous friendship), and he concedes that some women have been brave and trustworthy friends. If we accept that imperfect men can be friends (because 'no man is perfect'), he says, then we must also accept that women—despite their imperfections—can be friends too. We cannot debar women from friendship simply because they are not more perfect than some men. If we were to do

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<sup>19</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *A Discourse of the Nature, Offices and Measures of Friendship, With Rules of conducting it. Written in answer to a Letter from the most ingenious and vertuous M.K.P.* (London: R. Royston, 1657), p. 5.

so, then we would have to concede that all men are capable of perfection, yet few would be willing to admit such a blind partiality to the male sex.

And when we consider that few persons in the world have all those excellencies by which friendship can be usefull and illustrious, we may as well allow women as men to be friends; since *they* can have all that which can be necessary and essentiall to friendship, and *these* cannot have all by which friendships can be accidentally improved. (*Discourse*, p. 90)

Taylor was not the first writer to take this stance on male-female friendships—his opinion in fact echoes that of Aristotle in book eight of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In a chapter on ‘unequal friendships’, Aristotle allows that friendships can exist between persons of unequal social standing.<sup>20</sup> Though an ideal friendship consists of friends of equal status, it is still possible for one friend to recognise good qualities of character in another friend of lower social status. Such friendship, however, will be characterised by an asymmetry of affection, in which the person in authority receives more affection from the subordinate party, and the subordinate receives less from the superior. Aristotle classes friendships between husbands and wives as ‘friendships between unequals’. He does not appear to allow that men and women can ever have equal character friendships (the highest kind). In his *Politics*, Aristotle suggests that the subordination of wives to husbands is justified given that women are incapable of acquiring prudence, or the capacity to distinguish between good and bad in their practical deliberations (the prime virtue of rulers). A woman’s lack of prudence is demonstrated by the fact that, although she is capable of rational deliberation, she is

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<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 269–71.

nevertheless unable to control her passions and act upon her understanding.<sup>21</sup> Due to this ‘incontinence’, it seems to follow that there is no possibility of equal male-female friendships. Because women are inferior in virtue, they will always be in the position of the ruled, while men will be the rulers; men and women will always be unequal partners.<sup>22</sup>

In the sixteenth century, the French thinker Michel de Montaigne (1533–92) echoed Aristotle’s viewpoint when he denied that women had the capacity to sustain lasting friendships with their husbands in marriage. In his essay ‘Of Friendship’, Montaigne claims that ‘the ordinary Talent of Women, is not such, as is sufficient to maintain the Conference and Communication required ... nor do they appear to be endu’d with Constancy of Mind, to endure the pinch of so hard and durable a Knot’.<sup>23</sup> He points to the fact that ‘the Ancient Schools ... wholly rejected’ the idea that women have the capacity for full and perfect friendships.<sup>24</sup> Like Montaigne, Taylor also denies ‘that Women are capable of all those excellencies by which Men can oblige the World’ (*Discourse*, p. 88). He concedes that some virtuous women can be partners in noble friendships with men, but the best female friends will never be on a par with the best male friends. Though female friends may be ‘useful to some purposes’ (they ‘can adde so many moments to the felicity of our lives’, and provide the ‘prettinesses of friendship’), their usefulness does not extend as far as that of male friends (*Discourse*, pp. 89, 90). A woman might be an adequate friend in our days of joy, but a ‘man is the best friend in trouble’ (*Discourse*, p. 89). In Taylor’s view,

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<sup>21</sup> See Leah Bradshaw, ‘Political Rule, Prudence, and the “Woman Question” in Aristotle’, *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 24, no. 3 (1991), 557–73 (esp. pp. 566–67, 572).

<sup>22</sup> For a recent discussion on women and friendship in Aristotle, see Ann Ward, ‘Mothering and the Sacrifice of Self: Women and Friendship in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*’, *Thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture* 7, no. 2 (2008), 32–57.

<sup>23</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Essays of Michael Seigneur De Montaigne. In Three Books. With Marginal Notes and Quotations of the cited Authors. And an Account of the Author’s Life*, trans. Charles Cotton (London: Printed for M. Gilliflower, W. Hensman, R. Bentley, and J. Hindmarsh, 1693), p. 290.

<sup>24</sup> Montaigne, *Essays*, p. 290.

male-female friendships inevitably fall into the Aristotelian categories of ‘pleasure’ and ‘advantage’ friendships, those lesser kinds of friendship founded solely upon the pleasure and utility that friends bring to one another, and not on the mutual recognition of moral excellence of character.

John Norris takes a slightly more positive stance than Taylor toward women’s capacity for friendship. In a short essay on ‘The Measures of Friendship’ in his *Theory and Regulation of Love* (1688), Norris acknowledges that his work is heavily indebted to Taylor’s *Discourse*.<sup>25</sup> Like Taylor, Norris defines friendship as a form of Christian charity, or

a Kind of *Revenging* our selves upon the *Narrowness* of our Faculties, by exemplifying that extraordinary Charity upon One or Two which we both owe, and are also *ready* and disposed, but by reason of the Scantiness of our Condition, are not sufficiently *able* to exercise towards all. (‘Measures’, p. 104)

Norris also affirms the possibility of male-female friendship when he observes that marriage is ‘the strictest of Friendships’ (‘Measures’, p. 108). But in ‘A Letter concerning Friendship’ in his earlier *Collection of Miscellanies* (1687), Norris goes further than Taylor by allowing that husbands and wives can enjoy equal friendships. In this ‘Letter’, he asks ‘whether in propriety of speaking there may be *strict Friendship* between a man and his wife?’<sup>26</sup> To demonstrate that husbands and wives may be friends, Norris spells out the necessary conditions of friendship. First, he says (following the classical tradition), a friend must be a good or a virtuous person—a bad

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<sup>25</sup> John Norris, ‘Measures of Friendship’, in *The Theory and Regulation of Love. A Moral Essay, In Two Parts. To which are added, Letters Philosophical and Moral between the Author and Dr. Henry More*, second edition (London: S. Manship, 1694), p. 105.

<sup>26</sup> John Norris, ‘Letter concerning Friendship’, in *A Collection of Miscellanies: Consisting of Poems, Essays, Discourses, and Letters, Occasionally Written* (Oxford: the Theater, 1687), p. 450.

person could never exercise true charity; second, a friend must be good-natured or have a ‘*liberal, sweet, obliging temper*’ in order to love his friend with an intenseness of affection; third, true friends must enjoy a ‘*likeness of disposition*’ or an ‘*agreeableness of humours*’, otherwise their friendship is unlikely to endure; and fourth, true friends must be ‘*few in Number*’, because ‘tis impossible our love can be very intense when divided among many’ (‘Letter’, p. 452). Norris then observes that marriage can meet all these requirements of friendship, and that husbands and wives are therefore capable of being friends. He allows that there is an inequality between husbands and wives ‘both as to *Sex* and as to *Conjugal Relation*’ (‘Letter’, pp. 453–54): the male sex is superior to the female, and husbands are superior to their wives. But unlike Taylor, Norris denies that such an inequality (whether it be natural or socially constructed, he does not say) constitutes a barrier to equal friendships. ‘Tis not absolutely necessary that Friends should stand upon a *Level*, either in respect of Fortune, State or Condition’ (‘Letter’, p. 454). The only equality that friendship requires is an equality of disposition and affection.

In her *Proposal*, Astell explicitly draws on Norris’s Christianised conception of friendship (and, by implication, that of Jeremy Taylor). In one part of her work, Astell defines friendship as ‘nothing else but Charity contracted; it is (in the words of an admired Author) a kind of revenging our selves on the narrowness of our Faculties, by exemplifying that extraordinary charity on one or two, which we are willing but not able to exercise towards all’ (*Proposal I*, p. 36). Norris is, of course, the ‘admired Author’ in question, and this definition is taken almost verbatim from his ‘Measures of Friendship’ (quoted above).<sup>27</sup> In her *Reflections upon Marriage*, Astell also echoes

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<sup>27</sup> In her annotations to the *Proposal*, Springborg notes that John Norris ‘may well be the “admired Author”’, but mistakenly attributes these sentiments to the *Letters concerning the Love of God*, and not his *Theory and Regulation of Love* (see *Proposal I*, p. 62, n. 203).

Norris's conception of marriage as a strict friendship that 'admits but of *one*' ('Measures', p. 108). Against the critics of marriage, she says

Is it the being ty'd to *One* that offends us? Why this ought rather to recommend Marriage to us, and would really do so, were we guided by Reason, and not by Humour or brutish Passion. He who does not make Friendship the chief inducement of his Choice, and prefer it before any other consideration, does not deserve a good Wife, and therefore should not complain if he goes without one. How we can ever grow weary of our Friends; the longer we have had them the more they are endear'd to us; and if we have One well assur'd, we need seek no further, but are sufficiently happy in Her.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, Astell differs from both Taylor and Norris by moving beyond male-female friendships to consider the value of female-female friendships alone. In theory, neither Taylor nor Norris rules out the possibility that women are capable of equal virtuous friendships with other women. But they do not explicitly mention female friendship as a means by which women might come to rival men in terms of virtue and wisdom. Astell promotes their Christian conception of virtuous friendship as an intense form of the charity or disinterested benevolence that we owe to everyone. But she goes further than Taylor and Norris by considering such friendships between women as a way in which they might attain 'all those excellencies by which Men can oblige the World' (Taylor, *Discourse*, p. 88).

On the topic of female-female friendship, Astell may have been inspired by the addressee of Taylor's *Discourse*, Katherine Philips (1632–64), the poet popularly

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<sup>28</sup> Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage*, in *Astell: Political Writings*, p. 37.

known as the 'Matchless Orinda'. In the poem 'A Friend' (written after Taylor's *Discourse*, and possibly as a response), Philips says that

If Soules no Sexes have, for Men t'exclude  
 Women from Friendship's vast capacity,  
 Is a Design injurious or rude,  
 Onely maintain'd by partial tyranny.<sup>29</sup>

Philips' implication is that if true friendship is a friendship of souls (and not of bodies), then social inequalities should not preclude women from having equal friendships with either men or women. But Philips' main interest lies with friendships between women.<sup>30</sup> In her poem 'To Mrs. Mary Awbrey', she writes

Soul of my Soul, my joy, my crown, my Friend,  
 A name which all the rest doth comprehend;  
 How happy are we now, whose Souls are grown  
 By an incomparable mixture one ...<sup>31</sup>

Philips conceives of female friendship as a source of moral strength for women against the 'Envy, Pride and Faction' of 'the dull World'.<sup>32</sup> In the *Proposal*, Astell openly displays her admiration for Philips, emphasising the importance of female role models, and urging her readers to remember 'the famous Women of former Ages' and

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<sup>29</sup> Katherine Philips, 'A Friend', in *Poems, By the most deservedly Admired Mrs. Katherine Philips The matchless Orinda* (London: J.M. for H. Herringman, 1667), p. 95.

<sup>30</sup> On this subject, see Harriette Andreadis, 'Re-configuring Early Modern Friendship: Katherine Philips and Homoerotic Desire', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 46, no. 3 (2006), 523-42.

<sup>31</sup> Philips, 'To Mrs. Mary Awbrey', in *Poems*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>32</sup> Philips, 'To Mrs. Mary Awbrey', in *Poems*, p. 71.

‘the *Orinda’s* of late’ (*Proposal I*, p. 7). She hopes that ‘our own incomparable *Orinda*’ will ‘excite the Emulation of the English Ladies’ (*Proposal I*, p. 24). She may also be deliberately echoing Philips when she says that ‘Friendship is a Vertue which comprehends all the rest’ (*Proposal I*, p. 36). Astell builds upon Philips’ insight that female friendships can act as ‘props’ or support networks for women who hold unconventional or unfashionable views. In this last respect, Astell’s feminist programme moves beyond a radical subjectivity (the project of self-transformation alone) to an other-centred project of moral reformation in which friendship plays an important role.

### III. Friendship, moral growth, and social change

Recent feminists have also focussed on the morally transformative power of friendship. In her 1993 work on feminism and moral theory, *What are Friends For?*, Marilyn Friedman addresses a problem posed by some recent versions of communitarian theory. In opposition to the abstract individualism of liberal theory, the communitarian maintains that the self is constituted by its personal, social, and communal (or community) ties.<sup>33</sup> The problem is that the ‘moral starting points’ of communitarian theory—families, schools, churches, and neighbourhoods—have often played a key role in perpetuating social roles and structures that are oppressive to women.<sup>34</sup> For a feminist philosopher, this presents the difficulty ‘of accounting for the possibility of social criticism and resistance on the part of the self who is constituted by the very social relationships and cultural traditions that would be the target of her

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<sup>33</sup> Marilyn Friedman, *What are Friends For? Feminist Perspectives on Personal Relationships and Moral Theory* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993). See also Marilyn Friedman, ‘Feminism and Modern Friendship: Dislocating the Community’, in *Friendship: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Neera Kapur Badhwar (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 285–302.

<sup>34</sup> Friedman, *What are Friends For?*, pp. 233, 236. Friedman borrows the phrase ‘moral starting point’ from the communitarian philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre.

resistance'.<sup>35</sup> An individual woman, after all, does not always have the personal resources necessary to challenge the moral community into which she was born and raised. Friedman observes that true moral growth occurs 'when we learn to grasp our experiences in a new light or in radically different terms'; and such growth 'involves a shift in moral paradigms, in the basic values, rules, or principles which shape moral thought and behaviour'.<sup>36</sup> To gain this shift, we often require the assistance of other people, and especially those individuals who are committed to promoting our best interests. This is where friendship becomes important. Friends can help us to reorient our moral thinking and thus reflect critically on our 'moral starting points'. For Friedman, friendship can also be a socially and politically disruptive force—it can help us to challenge the subordination of women in our communities of origin, and thus initiate social change.

On first reading, it is not clear that Astell's conception of friendship is meant to be socially or politically disruptive in this sense. We might regard Astell's conception of friendship as a mere extension of her Christian views about the importance of 'being dead to the things of this world' (*Proposal I*, p. 34) and focusing on one's spiritual life and the path to salvation. In Astell's view, it is not the role of friends to encourage the overthrow of traditional religious beliefs and practices, but rather to apply the principles underlying those beliefs (and especially those of the Anglican religion) diligently and consistently. Above all, we must be concerned about the friend's soul and about setting her on the right path to salvation. In short, this is friendship as a contraction of Christian charity, the kind of friendship promoted by Taylor and Norris.

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<sup>35</sup> Friedman, *What are Friends For?*, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Friedman, *What are Friends For?*, p. 196.

Even on a conservative reading, however, we cannot ignore the fact that, for Astell, virtuous friendship is essentially *other*-centred or *other*-interested rather than *self*-centred or *self*-interested in nature. In so far as virtuous friendship is about ‘bettering the beloved Person’, such friendship promotes a moral transformation beyond the individual herself. And while, in Astell’s view, virtuous friendship should not lead women to question their given religious beliefs, it can lead women to identify, and then resist, society’s deviations from Christian teaching. Astell promotes the power of female friendships to counter the customs and conventions of seventeenth-century England, and especially those that degrade a woman’s spiritual or intellectual worth. The chief purpose of her ‘Amicable Society’ is to ‘disarm’ custom and to re-programme the moral orientations of women, such that they no longer do as their neighbours do, ‘meerly in compliance with an unreasonable Fashion’ (*Proposal I*, pp. 20, 37, 15). Astell would agree with Friedman that, as pre-eminent relationships outside of the family, friendships can permit women to reflect critically on their ‘moral starting points’.

On the subject of moral growth, Astell’s views are reminiscent of those of Cicero (106–43 BC) in his *Laelius, De amicitia* (*Laelius on Friendship*, 44 BC). Though there is no explicit acknowledgement, Astell echoes his advice about the importance of mutual admonition among friends. Cicero says that

’tis the property of cordial *Friendship* mutually to admonish and to be admonish’d, and as the one is to be done with all Freedom, but without any Sharpness, and the other to be taken with all Patience and without any

murmuring: so we may be sure that there is no great Canker to *Friendship* than Flattery, fawning and assentation.<sup>37</sup>

On the one hand, a friend's admonition must be without severity, or else she risks losing her friend's affection; but on the other, a friend should be willing to hear reproofs, and glad that a friend has been honest and upfront about her faults.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, in Astell's view, friends have a duty 'to watch over each other for Good, to advise, encourage and direct, and to observe the minutest fault in order to its amendment' (*Proposal I*, p. 37). Female friendship is about correcting other women's faults, and setting other women on the right path to virtue and wisdom, 'by sweetness not severity; by friendly Admonitions, not magisterial Reproofs' (*Proposal I*, p. 28).

In her later work, *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter Of The Church of England* (1705), Astell expands at length on this theme, by spelling out the crucial difference between friends and flatterers.<sup>39</sup> She emphasises that a flatterer 'only means to *Serve himself*', whereas a friend 'has no design but to do *us Service*' (*Christian Religion*, p. 227). In particular, a friend will serve us in our 'most important Interest' (*Christian Religion*, pp. 231–32), and 'do good to the Mind' or soul (*Christian Religion*, p. 233). Friendship is a form of Christian charity, and we do the greatest charity to someone when we 'watch over his Soul, and ... promote his

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<sup>37</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Cicero's Laelius. A Discourse of Friendship. Together with a Pastoral Dialogue Concerning Friendship and Love* (London: William Crooke, 1691), p. 61. Astell may have been familiar with this late-seventeenth-century English translation.

<sup>38</sup> In mid-seventeenth-century England, this aspect of friendship is once again highlighted in the tremendously popular religious work, *The Whole Duty of Man* (1658). This anonymous work is now thought to be by Richard Allestree (1619–81), an author whom Astell greatly admired. On Astell and Allestree, see Hannah Smith, 'Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), and the Anglican Reformation of Manners in Late-Seventeenth-Century England', in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, eds. William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 31–47 (esp. pp. 37–38).

<sup>39</sup> Astell may have been acquainted with Plutarch's highly influential essay on this subject, 'How to know a Flatterer from a Friend', in his *Morals*. Plutarch's text was widely available in English translation in the late seventeenth century.

Perfection to the utmost' (*Christian Religion*, p. 231). For this reason, a virtuous friend will not hesitate to admonish her friend, if it may do her good. Admonition prompts us to improve in virtue, whereas flattery merely leads us to complacency.

Astell says that

I cou'd never understand the meaning of some who call themselves our Friends, to be sure I cou'd never comply with them, when they expect to be follow'd Right or Wrong in their Principles, Party, and Passions, looking for a blind Approbation, or if they are more Refin'd, an Artful Pretence of being convinc'd of the Reasonableness of all they propose. ... Who will not be help'd to be in Reality, those Excellent Persons which every one must wish to be; but who wou'd be Flatter'd as if they were so already, when alas! they are nothing like it. (*Christian Religion*, pp. 232–33)

While a flatterer might provide us with some immediate pleasure, they do us a greater disservice in the long run. Like Cicero, Astell also adds that it is the duty of friends not only to admonish but to be admonished. She says

But tho' it were the utmost baseness to submit to their Usurpation and Tyranny, by parting with that most valuable Privilege, and indefeasible Right, of judging for our selves where GOD has left us free to do so; yet far be it from us to pretend to Infallibility and Self-sufficiency; to despise any one's Lights, or to reject their Advice, with whatever Spirit it may be offer'd. For as I plac'd Christian Friendship in giving frank Advice, so I now reckon the taking it among the Duties we owe to our Selves. Nor can we be more unkind to our own

Souls, or guilty of a greater Folly, than by supposing we are too Great, or too Wise, or too Good to be Advis'd. (*Christian Religion*, pp. 288–89)

To consider examples of such admonition, we need go no further than Astell's own exhortations to her readers in the *Proposal*. Nearly all of her reproofs are directed against a woman's concern with attracting the eyes of men to her body. Astell asks women 'How can you be content to be in the world like Tulips in a Garden, to make a fine *shew* and be good for nothing?' (*Proposal I*, p. 7).<sup>40</sup> She insists that women should take pride in more than 'the invention of a Fashion' (*Proposal I*, p. 8), and the having of 'a more ingenious Taylor or Milliner than her neighbour' (*Proposal I*, p. 13). They should value themselves on something more than their clothes, and should not fret about the signs of aging in their face (*Proposal I*, p. 29). They should be unconcerned about being called an 'Old Maid' (*Proposal I*, p. 43), and they should ignore the scoffs of 'ludicrous Wits and pert Buffoons' (*Proposal I*, p. 44). They should not waste their precious time in pursuit of 'idle Amusements' (*Proposal I*, p. 29), such as plays and romances, and they should avoid gossip or 'uncharitable and vain Conversation' (*Proposal I*, p. 24). They should not pride themselves on the 'delicacy' of their humour, or become unreasonably anxious and irritable about trivial matters (*Proposal I*, p. 31). They should be indifferent to 'a sounding Title or a great Estate' (*Proposal I*, p. 5), and to the admiration of 'vain insignificant men' (*Proposal I*, p. 8). They should not respect someone merely 'in proportion to that Pomp and Bustle they make in the world' (*Proposal I*, p. 30).

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<sup>40</sup> It is possible that Astell borrows her turn of phrase from Taylor's *Discourse*. In that work, Taylor warns that, when contracting a friendship, one should look for a worthy friend who will profit as well as delight: 'I had rather see Time [i.e. Thyme] and Roses, Marjoram and July flowers that are fair and sweet and medicinal,' he says, 'then the prettiest Tulips that are good for nothing' (*Discourse*, pp. 39–40).

It is possible to see how such ‘friendly admonition’ might lead to a reformation in one or two of our closest friends. It is also apparent how friendships of this nature might lead us to reflect critically on gender attitudes in our families. Astell’s friendly institution is designed as a retreat not only from predatory men but also from family pressures. In these environs, she says, a woman ‘will be neither bought nor sold, nor be forc’d to marry for her own quiet, when she has no inclination to it’ (*Proposal I*, p. 39). But it is not immediately clear how such female friendships might bring about social reform in a more general sense. There are one or two passages, however, that suggest that Astell conceives of female friendship as a socially disruptive force. At the start of an extended passage on friendship, Astell says that

Probably one considerable cause of the degeneracy of the present Age, is the little true Friendship that is to be found in it; or perhaps you will rather say, that this is the effect of our corruption. The cause and the effect are indeed reciprocal; for were the World better, there wou’d be more Friendship, and were there more Friendship we shou’d have a better World. But because *Iniquity abounds*, therefore the *love of many* is not only *waxen cold*,<sup>41</sup> but quite benumb’d and perish’d. But if we have such narrow hearts, be so full of mistaken Self-love, so unreasonably fond of our selves, that we cannot spare a hearty Good-will to one or two choice Persons, how can it ever be thought, that we shou’d well acquit our selves of that Charity which is due to all Mankind? (*Proposal I*, p. 36)

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<sup>41</sup> Matthew 24:12: ‘And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold’.

Here Astell explicitly promotes the power of friendship (as a form of Christian charity) to lead to the moral improvement of society at large. In another passage, she indicates *how* her institution might inspire such wider social change. She says

because we were not made for our selves, nor can by any means so effectually glorify God, and do good to our own Souls, as by doing offices of charity and Beneficence to others; and to the intent, that every Vertue, and the highest degrees of every Vertue may be exercis'd and promoted to the most that may be; your Retreat shall be so manag'd as not to exclude the good Works of an *Active*, from the pleasure and serenity of a *contemplative* Life, but a due mixture of both retain all the advantages and avoid the inconveniences that attend either. It shall not cut you off from the world as to hinder you from bettering and improving it, but rather qualify you to do it the greatest Good, and be a Seminary to stock the Kingdom with pious and prudent Ladies; whose good Example it is to be hop'd, will so influence the rest of their Sex, that Women may no longer pass for those useless and impertinent Animals (*Proposal I*, p. 21).

In short, as a contraction of Christian charity, virtuous friendship prepares us for the performance of charitable acts in the wider world. Once female friends have left the retreat, their virtue is likely to inspire the emulation of their fellow women and thereby bring about 'a Reformation in others' (*Proposal I*, p. 41).<sup>42</sup> By their example, other women would also be prompted to see that 'God has given Women as well as

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<sup>42</sup> Astell herself partly succeeded in inspiring such emulation: her discussion of friendship clearly influenced Mary Chudleigh's essay on the subject. See Mary Chudleigh, 'Of Friendship', in *The Poems and Prose of Mary, Lady Chudleigh*, ed. Margaret J. M. Ezell (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 343–52. Unlike Astell, however, Chudleigh directly challenges Norris's conditions for friendship (see p. 347).

Men intelligent Souls' (*Proposal I*, p. 22), and would come to value themselves accordingly. Such social change would not be widespread or revolutionary in the modern political sense, but it would nevertheless be social change to the extent that it would involve a transformation in social attitudes, norms, and practices toward women.

At this point, we might be tempted to say that Astell's high regard for friendship gives her something in common with her political enemies, the Whig tolerationists and the 'republic of letters' for whom friendship was also a means to moral improvement.<sup>43</sup> But such comparisons would be hasty. Like Astell, the members of this circle—including John Locke, Philip van Limborch, Jean Le Clerc, and others—were committed to the 'disarming' of custom; but they valued friendship primarily as a means by which to challenge unquestioned preconceptions and prejudices, and thereby become less dogmatic and more open to the discovery of truth.<sup>44</sup> By contrast, Astell emphasises that friends can assist us in holding onto conservative religious views (such as those of the Anglican faith), and urge us to apply them consistently, especially in the face of opposition from family and society; friends can help us to become more dogmatic, rather than less so.

In conclusion, we might think that, given the conservative religious nature of her views, Astell's feminism must remain unpalatable to our modern sensibilities. Many modern feminists would certainly blanch at her failure to 'cry up Liberty to poor *Female Slaves*' (*Reflections*, pp. 46–7) or to challenge those social and political structures in which women are subordinate to men. But it is still the case that Astell embraces friendship as a way in which to bring about social reform: 'were there more

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<sup>43</sup> For a recent study, see John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>44</sup> On this subject, see Richard Yeo, 'John Locke on Conversation with Friends and Strangers', also in this volume.

Friendship,' she says, 'we shou'd have a better World' (*Proposal I*, p. 36). With this desire to see 'a better World' for women—in the here and now, and not the hereafter—Astell has more in common with modern feminists than previously thought.<sup>45</sup>

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