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# Three Women, Two Spheres, and A Contract: A Comparative Study of Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft Through the Lens of Carole Pateman's "The Sexual Contract"

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**Three Women, Two Spheres, and A Contract:  
A Comparative Study of Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft  
Through the Lens of Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract***

**By**

**Robyn Burke Dabora**

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Graduate Humanities

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the department chair, has been presented to and accepted by the department of Graduate Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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## Abstract

This project examines the writings of Mary Astell (1666-1731) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) regarding women in light of ideas articulated by Carole Pateman (1940- ) in her book, *The Sexual Contract* (1988). In her work, Pateman critiques the prescriptions for the management of society suggested by classic contract theorists such as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704) and cites that their solutions focus solely on men in the public sphere of society. Pateman illuminates the condition of women in the private sphere of the home, and asserts that this realm operates by mechanisms radically different from those of the public sphere. Pateman contends that the inequities experienced by women in Western society will not be eliminated by prescriptions simply reforming the operation of the public sphere, but requires solutions that address the particular circumstances of women in the home. Astell's and Wollstonecraft's depictions of the plight women in society are quite similar. However, as they articulate their prescriptions, their ideas diverge. Wollstonecraft's recommendations are radical and seek to include women in the public sphere as free and equal workers and citizens. Astell, loath to criticize society's institutions, calls for individuals to reform. Pateman's lens exposes the limitations of Wollstonecraft's radical reform, and reveals that Wollstonecraft, like her conservative predecessor Astell, clings to certain societal norms and structures that she believes important to the functioning of the private sphere and society.

## Introduction

Throughout the ages, philosophers have attempted to comprehend what it means to be human, and to articulate prescriptions based on these understandings for how best to structure relations between individuals within societies. A survey of the history of philosophy quickly demonstrates the dominance of men in the effort to answer these questions. Mary Ellen Waithe, a Professor of Philosophy at Cleveland State University, in her series *A History of Women Philosophers*, illuminates a tradition of women thinkers exploring philosophical questions predating the efforts of Socrates and Plato. Waithe wonders what issues would have been considered and prescriptions embraced had women's ideas and writings been accepted within the discipline of philosophy. For instance, Waithe chronicles the early endeavors by Pythagorean women philosophers (600 BCE to 300 AD) to study and apply the concepts of justice and harmony, the basis of men's interactions in the public realm, to the management of the family (XI 17).

In a similar vein, Wendy Gunther-Canada, Chair of the Department of Government at the University of Alabama, argues that for centuries women have participated in debates and written about political theory, but that their contributions, if initially receiving public recognition, were generally excluded from further consideration within scholarly disciplines. She stresses the importance of including women's voices in attempts to gain a richer understanding of the implications of dominant political theories on the lives of individuals, particularly women, in society. She continues, "Our understanding of the historical movement from city state to republic, and from absolutist monarch to social contract, is greatly enhanced by the addition of women's voices to the conversation of political thought" (Gunther-Canada, "Teaching Wollstonecraft" 23). To fully discern the ideas of these women, she encourages the study of their



works in discourse with the works of other scholars of their period. She states, “When we study their writings within the discursive context in which they were written, instead of artificially separating their texts from those of the other individuals who formed their circle, we can better understand women’s contribution to intellectual history as well as gain a richer comprehension of the intertextuality of political thought” (21).

The comments of Waithe and Gunther-Canada became the inspiration for my project. I initially believed my project would examine selected works of two English women, Mary Astell (1666-1731) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) regarding the potential for education to improve the plight of women. In their works, Astell and Wollstonecraft focus on the condition of women in society, and explore the causes of their oppression. Both maintain that women, similar to men, are born with the capacity to reason, and both were proponents for women’s education as a means to improve their condition. However, as my project proceeded, it became apparent that these women were not simply advocating for women’s education, but were grappling with the implications of a new political theory on the lives of women. Astell and Wollstonecraft wrote not only on women’s education, but also publically participated in their generation’s debates regarding political theory, philosophy and religion. The texts of Astell and Wollstonecraft are in discourse with other leading political thinkers of their time as they consider what is at stake for women resulting from these new ideas.

The period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in which these two women wrote was a time of great change in the philosophy of political thought. Social contract theorists such as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704) began to question the old rules of social relations and governing based on status, patriarchy and the divine right of kings. In support of their ideas, these men postulated the attributes of the earliest individuals, and the

conditions that led them to create communities and societies. Such thinkers offered narratives of the individual's original state in nature as their starting point, and justification for their proposals of the mechanisms that should manage the relations of individuals in civil society, and the form that government should take. These social contract theorists suggest an image of the individual in the state of nature as free and equal with all others. Though they differ in important ways, they nonetheless share the belief that individuals create civil societies for their mutual security and are willing to forgo some of their freedom for this protection. Building on this original story of the social contract, the classic contract theorists denounce the old notions of status, patriarchy and monarchy, and claim that consent and agreement or contract are the legitimate mechanisms in society for relations between free and equal individuals, and among citizens and government.

Almost 200 years after the works of Astell, Wollstonecraft and the male social contract theorists, Carole Pateman (1940- ), Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the Department of Political Science at UCLA, published her book, *The Sexual Contract* (1988). Like her female predecessors, Pateman's concern is the plight of women during her time. In particular, she considers the plight of women in the modern capitalistic societies of Australia, Great Britain and the United States, and wishes to understand why the inequities that they face remain so "persistent and intractable" (Pateman x). As she pressed for understanding, she explains, "My discussion began to push against the confines of social contract theory by noting that the classic theorists had left a legacy of problems about women's incorporation into, and obligation within, civil society that contemporary arguments failed to acknowledge" (x).

Pateman asserts that the mechanisms that prevent women's full equality in the public sphere, and perpetuate their subordination in the private sphere are foundational to the original contract envisioned by such thinkers as Hobbes and Locke. To make her case, she returns in her

book to the transformative period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to examine the ideas and assumptions made by each theorist as he developed his version of the social contract. Pateman states, “We hear an enormous amount about the social contract . . . a theory that claims that free social relations take a contractual form” (Pateman 1). However, Pateman contends that the narrative of the social contract tells only half the story. The missing piece, what she labels “the sexual contract,” explains the treatment of women. Pateman argues, “The social contract is a story of freedom; the sexual contract is a story of subjection” (Pateman 2).

Many scholars applaud Pateman’s exposure of the fallacies and contradictions of the social contract and of modern contract theory for women. They consider her articulation of the operations and interdependencies of the public and private sphere as insightful and groundbreaking. However, 200 years earlier, both Astell and Wollstonecraft grappled with the very dynamics outlined by Pateman. In their works, they struggle with the implications of the social contract for women in both the public and private sphere. They identify that changes to the institutions and structures of society justified by the ideas of the classic contract theorists impact women, and their prescriptions reflect and respond to this realization.

For many years, feminists hailed Wollstonecraft’s prescriptions in their embrace of the rights of women as free and equal individuals, while discounting Astell’s work as conservative and traditional. Many lament that Astell’s solutions uphold the constructs of status within a society ruled by patriarchy in the private sphere and by absolute monarchy in the public. Mary Astell born in 1666 was a Tory conservative embracing the authority of the monarchy and the established Church of England. She denounced the Glorious Revolution, bringing William III (1689-1702) to power, that provided greater control to parliament at the expense of the monarchy. She approved of the stances and actions of non-jurors,<sup>1</sup> clergy she deemed defenders

of the established church. Born to an upper class family that saw its prosperity decline, she held tight to her status and as an adult, her established group of women friends and supporters were “high-church Anglican, aristocratic and Tory women” (Springborg, Introduction 9). In her youth, she received instruction in mathematics, philosophy and logic from her uncle, an ex-Anglican clergy (Perry, *The Celebrated Mary* 46).

Astell set off alone for London at the age of twenty with few resources and an insecure future. Upon arriving in London, she requested financial support from the conservative Archbishop of Canterbury and later non-juror, William Sancroft (1617-1693) (66). She sought the mentorship of the last of the Cambridge Platonists, John Norris (1657-1711). The Cambridge Platonists were a group of scholars mainly concerned with issues of religion and theology. Their calling was to defend the “true religion” of the Anglican Church (“Cambridge Platonists”). Beginning in 1693, she began a series of exchanges with Norris involving the genesis of knowledge (Springborg, Introduction 10, 18). She embraced the ideals of Rene Descartes (1596-1650), and the theory of logic proposed by Descartes “constructive critic,” Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694) (31). She critiqued and debated the works of Hobbes and Locke. In her works, Astell rejects the ideas of materialism, natural rights and the proper authority of the government proposed in Locke’s treatises. In “Mary Astell (1666-1731), Critic of Locke,” Patricia Springborg maintains that much of Astell’s work includes some of the earliest critiques of both Locke’ *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) and *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) (622).

At the other end of the spectrum, Wollstonecraft’s stances and politics are very different. Wollstonecraft became involved in the causes of a radical faction of the Whig party that embraced the ideas espoused in the American and French Revolutions. Mary Wollstonecraft,

born in 1759, also came from a prosperous family that saw its fortunes plummet during her childhood (Taylor, *Feminist Imagination* 5). She received a smattering of an education from her mother in early childhood, and at a day school in one of the towns that her family migrated to as its fortune declined (Todd 12-13). Like Astell, Wollstonecraft left home unmarried at the age of nineteen, and she became a lady's companion in Bath (Johnson 16).

In London, Wollstonecraft promoted the ideas of and identified with the causes of the preacher Dr. Richard Price (1723-1791) and the publisher Joseph Johnson (1738-1809) (59). Both men established radical groups opposing the doctrine and primacy of the established Church of England. Price, her mentor, corresponded with Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson (Johnson 42). Joseph Johnson printed Wollstonecraft's first educational work, and she worked as a writer for his *Analytical Review* in the 1780s (Taylor 7). While Astell denounced the Glorious Revolution, Wollstonecraft supported Price's praise of the French Revolution and suggestion "that Britain ought to follow its example and thereby complete the political process that had begun in England's so-called 'Glorious Revolution'" (Johnson 59). In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)*, she rebukes Burke's (1729-1797) rejection of the French Revolution and elevation of monarchy, aristocracy, and the established church (Johnson 60).

This essay considers the arguments of Astell and Wollstonecraft, two women holding divergent philosophical and political views, from a different perspective. Heeding Gunther-Canada's recommendations, the paper presents the works of Astell, Wollstonecraft, and Pateman in discourse regarding the implications of the social contract for women. The project examines Astell's and Wollstonecraft's understanding of the problems facing women in society and their

prescriptions for improvement in light of Pateman's sexual contract. Astell's and Wollstonecraft's depiction of women in the private sphere are quite similar. However, as they articulate their remedies their ideas diverge. Wollstonecraft's solutions are radical and seek to include women in the public sphere as free and equal workers and citizens. Astell, loath to criticize society's institutions, calls for individuals to reform. Pateman's lens exposes the limitations of Wollstonecraft's radical reform, and reveals that Wollstonecraft, like her conservative predecessor Astell, clings to certain societal norms and structures that she believes important to the functioning of the private sphere and society.

Chapter 1 details the underlying assumptions of the social contract that Pateman critiques and the implications of her sexual contract for women. It examines Pateman's appraisal of contemporary efforts to improve the plight of women in Western society. The chapter also considers the potential of using Pateman's ideas to evaluate past prescriptions and contemporary efforts to ameliorate the inequities experienced by individuals in society.

Chapter 2 outlines Astell's identification of the conditions of seventeenth century women in society and a critique of her prescriptions for their predicament. The paper focuses on three works by Astell. In her books, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II* (1694, 1697), Astell asserts that women have the capacity to reason and impresses upon them the importance of education in the cultivation of this capacity. In *A Serious Proposal, Part I*, Astell lays out her justification and plan for a women's school she calls a *Religious Retirement* (*A Serious Proposal* 73). Astell in *Proposal II* delves deeper into her arguments regarding women's capacities and outlines her rigorous curriculum for women based on the work of Descartes and Arnauld (Springborg, Introduction 31). In *Some Reflections Upon Marriage: Occasion'd by the Duke & Dutchess of Mazarine's Case; Which Is Also Consider'd* (1700), Astell counsels women

regarding the realities of marriage and attempts to convince them to carefully and reasonably consider this decision. Finally, in the 1706 printing of *Reflections*, Astell in her preface sharply critiques men's demands for rights in the public sphere as they enslave women in the private. Patricia Springborg states, "The works [*A Serious Proposal I and II*, together with *Reflections upon Marriage*] stand to one another in an organic relationship, the central argument of Astell's work on marriage already fore-shadowed in her proposal for a woman's place of academic retirement" (17).

Chapter 3 turns to Wollstonecraft's identification of and prescriptions for the improvement of the condition of women in her eighteenth century society. While Astell articulates her concerns and prescriptions through several works over time, the breadth of Wollstonecraft's project is available in her 1792 work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Following closely on the heels of her 1790 work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* begins with a summarization of her political support for the ideals of the social contract and the natural rights of all men. In this work, Wollstonecraft details women's capacities, the causes of women's oppression, and her prescription for its remedy, which includes her plan for a system of national education.

The paper concludes with a brief distillation of the views of Pateman, Astell and Wollstonecraft regarding the predicament of women in the private sphere. However, as these women philosophers sought to understand and remedy the plight of women during their time, the focus of the conclusion shifts from the past to an examination of contemporary marriage and what remains at issue for individuals within the private sphere. The conclusion explores whether insights garnered by an analysis of selected writings by Astell, Wollstonecraft and Pateman on

women can contribute to the amelioration of the lingering problems facing women and men operating within the private realm.



## Chapter 1: Carole Pateman: The Tale of the Sexual Contract

In her book, *The Sexual Contract*, Carole Pateman asserts that the idea, originating in the tale of the social contract, that free and equal individuals consent to their government and secure their economic needs through agreement with others holds sway in Western democracies.

Pateman states:

An explanation for the binding authority of the state and civil law, and for the legitimacy of modern civil government is to be found by treating our society as if it had originated in a contract. The attraction of the idea of an original contract and contract theory in a more general sense, a theory that claims that free social relations take a contractual form is probably greater now than at any time since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the classic writers told their tales. (1)

However, Pateman contends that there is a missing piece to the story of the social contract that is not told by the classic contract theorists. Pateman states:

The story of the original contract tells of the genesis of a society that is structured into two spheres – although we are usually told only half the story and so we only hear about the origin of the public “universal” sphere. (112)

Pateman elaborates the part of the story that she contends the classic contract theorists ignore, the story of the private sphere. Her tale exposes the dichotomy of the public and private sphere.

While the narrative of the social contract envisions a paradigm of consent and agreement of free and equal individuals in the public sphere, the private sphere of the home does not operate by these mechanisms, but rather by those of the sexual contract. As important, her tale illuminates that the two spheres are inextricably linked, and that the existence of the private sphere operating by the sexual contract is essential if the public sphere is to operate as envisioned.

Pateman shares that the motivation for her book is a concern that feminists attempt to alleviate women’s inequality in Western societies by simply focusing on reforms that further their participation as free and equal individuals in the public sphere. She struggles with the

implications of the social contract for women, and questions the potential for them to gain equality and freedom through institutions based on it. For Pateman, classic and modern contract theory is problematic when dealing with issues regarding women. “I began to appreciate the depth and character of the failure only when I asked specifically feminist questions about the texts and about actual examples of contractual relations” (x). Pateman maintains that reforms that focus on women’s inclusion in the public sphere or changes to contracts involving women will not eliminate the inequities women experience because they do not address the underlying assumptions and unique conditions that perpetuates women’s inequality in the private sphere and hampers their potential in the public realm.

Pateman begins her tale of the sexual contract by questioning the foundational premise of the narrative of the social contract. The classic contract theorists hold that universally free and equal individuals consent to the original agreement establishing their community. Pateman counters that these male thinkers exclude women from the original contract creating society that is an exclusive agreement among men. Underpinning the social contract is an assumption that the natural state of women is that of subordination to men. Pateman maintains that the social contract theorists believe that “men alone have the attributes of free and equal ‘individual’” and “insist that men’s right over women has a natural basis” (41). She concedes that Hobbes grants that women are initially free and equal to men in the state of nature, but that over time, the men, being stronger, conquer women. She states “The assumption must necessarily be made that, by the time the social contract is made, all the women in the natural condition have been conquered by men and are now their subjects (servants)” in Hobbes’ family confederations (49). In Hobbes’ narrative of the originating contract, women enter civil society in a subordinated position to men. (49).

Pateman grants that Locke promotes many progressive limits on men's power over women in his writings, but in the end, he too defends the subordination of women to men as natural. Pateman states, "Locke insists that Adam was not an absolute monarch, so that Eve's subjection was nothing more 'but that Subjection [wives] should ordinarily be in to their Husbands'" (52). She continues, "We know that wives should be subject, Locke writes, because 'generally the Laws of mankind and customs of Nations have ordered it so; *and there is, I grant, a Foundation in Nature for it*'" (52). Locke suggests that women's subordination to men result from a lack of strength and ability (52). Women, lacking the necessary capacities, are excluded from Hobbes' and Locke's originating contracts. "Only men who stand to each other as free and equal master of 'families' will take part" (49) in the originating agreement to create society.

Though Pateman acknowledges that the ideas of the social contract theorists paved the way for the establishment of a new form of relations among citizens and government by limiting the arbitrary power of the monarch, she rejects the notion that these theories contributed to the demise of patriarchy and status in Western society. She recognizes that a classic form of patriarchy, a "social order structured by kinship and the rule of the father" (30), disappeared, but insists a new form took its place. The classic form "was transformed by contract theorists . . . into modern patriarchy" (25) that maintained relations based on status in the private sphere. The narratives of the social contract paved the way for an exclusive fraternal order of males operating by consent and agreement in the public realm. This new order has its own version of absolute power affording each brother the conjugal or male-sex right to a single woman. Women, assumed inferior and subordinated to men, are excluded from the public sphere, and relegated to the private sphere. Men are liberated in society from "the old world of status" (165) dictated by birth to become equal citizens in government and to freely contract with others. While in the

home, status remains intact. Men and women are born into roles of husband and wife with specific duties based on their sex. She states, “To become a ‘husband’ is to attain patriarchal right with respect to a ‘wife’” (158). The sexual contract is this story of women imprisoned in the private sphere governed by patriarchy and status.

In her article “Male Power and Contract Theory: Hobbes and Locke in Carole Pateman’s *The Sexual Contract*,” Joanne Boucher criticizes the credibility and the usability of Pateman’s paradigm of the sexual contract to explain and ultimately contribute to solutions remedying women’s inequality because of the fictions it propagates. Boucher contends that the “law of male sex right” (Boucher 24) underpinning Pateman’s theory overly simplifies the complex factors resulting in women’s oppression. She states, “The use of the notion leads Pateman to focus on sexuality as the lynchpin of women’s oppression at the expense of other equally important dimensions, such as child bearing and child rearing” (24). To cripple Pateman’s overall argument, she attacks Pateman’s interpretations that the narratives of Hobbes and Locke protect the male sex right to women’s bodies, contributing to the subordination of women in the private sphere.

She rejects Pateman’s assertion that Hobbes’ family confederation is the result of men’s violence and dominance of women. Boucher states, “Hobbes does, contrary to Pateman’s contention, argue that there is a natural basis to familial relations – natural sexual attraction between women and men and a natural affection of parents for their children are the foundations of unions which develop in the state of nature and are institutionalized in the family in political society” (27). She quotes Hobbes’ passage from *Leviathan* (1651) as evidence of his position, “the savage people in many places of America, except the government of small Families, the concord whereof dependeth on natural lust, have no government at all” (27). Boucher asserts that

Hobbes' "natural lust" is love, which bond men and women to each other and to their children in the family (27). In "Women and the Making of the Sentimental Family," Susan Moller Okin disagrees with Boucher's depiction of familial caring between members of Hobbes' family contending that for Hobbes, the stakes in the family are the same as in the commonwealth. Okin argues that in the relations of child to parent and wife to husband, there is not affection, just fear and power (66).

With regards to Locke, Boucher takes exception with Pateman's argument that within his works he "concealed" (31) the condition of women in the private sphere. She cites Locke's acknowledgement in his first of the *Two Treatises on Government* (1689) that conquest and male aggression may be involved in sexual relations between men and women as evidence that he did not suppress the condition of women in his works. Boucher quotes Locke, "God in his infinite Wisdom has put strong desires of Copulation into the Constitution of Men, thereby to continue the race of Mankind, which he doth most commonly without the intention, and often against the Consent and Will of the Begetter" (qtd. in Boucher 31). Boucher concludes, "This blunt statement of the possibility of male sexual aggression against women undercuts Pateman's contention that it is concealed in his version of contractualism" (31).

Pateman does not suggest that Locke purposely concealed the narrative of the sexual contract operating in the private sphere or that Hobbes set out to legitimize sexual conquest of males over females, but rather that they along with other scholars of their time considered the condition of women within the private sphere as natural, and did not require discussion. Pateman states, "In these stories, marriage and the patriarchal family appear as the natural, necessary foundation of civil life" (Pateman 110). "The natural foundation already exists (the sexual contract is presupposed) so there is no need to tell a story about its origins" (110). The labeling

of women's natural state as inferior and subjugated to men rendered women's inequality and oppression as normal and acceptable, not warranting consideration. This dismissal of the private sphere also reveals the subtle assumptions about the relative importance of the private sphere and its wifely inhabitant. The social contract and its proponents deem the public sphere as important to society. These male thinkers ponder, consider and study its operations, while they consider the private sphere unworthy of consideration. What occurs in the private realm is unimportant, and can be handled by those of an inferior nature as long as they are absolutely ruled.

Boucher's critique of Pateman's sexual contract is oversimplified because it assumes that Pateman's concern is only with men's access to women's body for sex. Boucher continues that sexual conquest of men by women in the family is not Locke's main emphasis (Boucher 33). His concern was primarily with procreation, caring for children and most importantly the accumulation of property for the next generation (33). Pateman's argument is not simply that men's conquest of women giving them access to their body for sex is the cause of women's oppression. Pateman's concern is the underlying assumptions regarding the status of husband and wife that justifies the sexual dominance of men over women.

The assumptions underlying the status of husband and wife determines the occupants' role in the private sphere, but also their potential in the public one. Husbands are independent, rational, and capable, wives are creatures of dependence, sensibility and lack the natural ability to participate in the public realm. In the private sphere, the status of husband bestows on the man the conjugal right not only to access a woman's body for sex, but also to demand her obedience and to control her labor, her property, and her wealth. A wife, a woman, because she is inferior must be obedient, and accept the rule of a husband. Pateman's paradigm of the sexual contract explains how husbands acquired not merely the right to sex, but a host of services from an

unpaid laborer. Pateman's women, born a wife, forgotten, non-participants of the originating contract, are relegated to the private sphere, operating as in the state of nature where the strong conquer and control the weak, under absolute rule of the husband, a man.

The status of husband in the private sphere signifies that men own the attributes allowing for their participation as free and equal individuals in the public sphere. The status of husband allows men to move freely between the spheres. The status of wife signifies that women inherently lack the attributes of the free and equal individual necessary for public participation. Only the efforts of the husband ruling in the private sphere and participating as a citizen and economic agent in the public sphere have value. The status of wife becomes a position of little value or worth in the public sphere deemed important for the proper functioning of society. This status to which women are born into simultaneously imprisons her in the private sphere, and greatly limits her participation in the public sphere. As important, this status defines her worth in both realms.

Remaining in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Pateman demonstrates how a woman's status as wife became established in law. Pateman explains that women during this period were allowed to freely enter into the marriage contract. This public sphere contract governed by the legal principle of coverture upheld the "patriarchal political right" of a husband over his wife in the private sphere, and denied women a civil identity in the public sphere (Pateman 114, 118). The legal principle of coverture, dating back to the medieval period, maintains that a woman upon marriage forfeits her legal identity, which her husband subsumes (Kesselring and Stretton 7). In *Married Women and the Law: Coverture in England and the Common Law World*, Krista J. Kesselring and Tim Stretton point out, "Upon marriage a wife lost the ability to own or control property, enter into contracts, make a will, or bring or defend a

lawsuit without her husband” (7). Pateman concurs, “Under the common law doctrine of coverture, a wife, like a slave, was civilly dead” (119).

In the private sphere, these contractual and civil policies established the division of labor between husband and wife. Pateman states, “A sexual division of labour is constituted through the marriage contract” (118), “a division of labour in which women are subordinate to men” (119). In marriage, women became wives performing labor in the home for their husband. The wife, like a slave, did not work for a wage, but for subsistence. Pateman acknowledges that in larger, wealthier households wives often occupied an elevated position over slaves and servants, but maintains that the civil policies of the period equated the relationship of husband and wife to that of master and servant (125). Pateman anecdotally adds, “Mary Astell’s pointed comment was that a woman ‘has no Reason to be fond of being a Wife, or to reckon it a Piece of Preferment when she is taken to be a Man’s Upper-Servant’” (125). Men had the right to sell their wives and to sue in civil court for third-party injuries that prevented his wife from performing housework, childcare or providing sexual services (127). These policies not only established the right of husbands to wield absolute authority over wives, but also constituted the status of wife as a position of inferiority, dependence and subordination. As wives, women, forced to provide labor, like a slave, for subsistence were stigmatized as born to a role of little importance or value.

These policies, directly impacting the lives of married women, affected the lives of all women. Kesselring and Stretton note that coverture impacted the legal, economic and civil rights for single women as well. Often authorities denied the rights of single women, because, as Kesselring and Stretton state, “She may be independent now, but that is liable to change” (6). The marriage and civil policies of coverture restricting the access of all women to governmental



institutions and industry of the public sphere forced women from it and coerced them into marriage (Pateman 132). For most women, given the lack of available education and limited potential to participate in industry, marriage was their best, if not only, economic opportunity.

Pateman quotes the “utilitarian socialist” William Thompson (1775-1833):

So by male-created laws, depriving women of knowledge and skill, excluding them from the benefit of all judgment and mind-creating offices and trust, cutting them off almost entirely from the participation, by succession or otherwise, of property, and from its uses and exchanges – are women kindly told ‘they are free to marry not.’ (qtd. in Pateman 132).

Women were allowed to freely enter into the marriage contract, a contract of subordination to a husband where they exchanged freedom for the only subsistence available to them (Pateman 132-133). These civil policies institutionalized the assumption that the natural state of women is the status of wife subjected to the authority of the husband in the private sphere. This assumption also justified the denial of opportunities and participation in the public sphere. The belief that all women are born to the status of wife, a status of subordination and inferiority, perpetuated their imprisonment in the private sphere by denying them access to the public sphere.

Some critique the limitations of Pateman’s framework that illuminate the inequities experienced by a narrow spectrum of women, white, middle to upper class. In “Women as Wives, Servants and Slaves: Rethinking the Public/Private Divide,” Barbara Arneil accuses Pateman of attempting to create a universal theory of women’s subordination that does not account for the different experiences of women due to class and race. Arneil’s complaint is similar to that lodged by Pateman against the classic contract theorists who proposed principles supposedly universal to all individuals but applied only to white males. For example, instead of exploring Locke’s treatment of the different classes of women, Pateman simply ignores this

condition. “For Locke, women exist as wives, servants and slaves, but perhaps most critical to a full analysis of his views of women in the private sphere are the different levels of authority he accords these three groups . . .” (Arneil 37). She quotes Locke:

That the *Master of the Family* has a very distinct and differently limited Power, both as to time and extent over those several Persons that are in it; for excepting the Slave . . . he has no Legislative Power of Life and Death over any of them, *and none too but what a Mistress of a Family may have as well as he.* (qtd. in Arneil 37)

Arneil’s work makes evident that the inhabitants of the private sphere are not a homogeneous group, and probably encountered radically different conditions of inequality and oppression. A limited or partial understanding of the oppression and inequity encountered by women in the private sphere results from theories that do not consider the experiences of women of different classes and races. Arneil concludes, “When one begins a commentary by incorporating both gender and race into an analysis of the private sphere, both historical and theoretical differences between women become immediately clear” (Arneil 50). Race and class often trumps gender as the factor contributing to oppression and inequality, and Arneil contends its absence and the universality of women’s experience in the private sphere Pateman assumes limits the applicability of her paradigm.

Janice Richardson in *The Classic Social Contractarians* warns of the dangers that “false universals” and abstraction pose when attempting to extrapolate a theoretical framework to incorporate divergent groups of people (Richardson 12). Pateman mentions the elevated position of wives over servants and slaves in the private sphere, but does not explore its implications. Pateman concedes that her examinations does not cover all aspects the problem. She acknowledges:

In order to bring out as sharply as possible something of what is at stake in alternative readings of the original contract, I have exaggerated and described the sexual contract as half the story. The story of political genesis needs to be told again from yet another

perspective. The men who (are said to) make the original contract are white men, and their fraternal pact has three aspects; the social contract, the sexual contract and the slave contract that legitimizes the rule of white over black. (Pateman 221)

However, this critique does not negate the potential of Pateman's framework to provide a richer understanding of the inequity and oppression experienced by women and by extension other groups in Western societies. The social contract proclaims the universality of the individual, "the idea of the individual as owner, an individual whole is so like all other to be interchangeable" (223). "Freedom is enjoyed by all 'individuals', a category that potentially, pertains to everyone, men and women, white and black alike" (222). Pateman reveals that the universally free and equal individual of the originating contract and the public sphere is a husband, a man. Her framework calls into question any attempts to alleviate conditions of inequality in society based on this abstraction, the supposed norm representing the condition of all individuals in society. Her study makes evident that the prescriptions for society outlined by the social contract theorists assumed a norm that is not only a fallacy for women, but for other groups.

Pateman recognizes that changes to the marriage contract and reforms in the public sphere to include women as citizens and workers have improved the conditions of women in Western society. In her 2008 article, "Golden Anniversary Reflections: Changes in Marriage After Fifty Years," Ann Laquer Estin printed in the *Family Law Quarterly* of the American Bar Association points out that as late as 1958 many statutes upholding the common law principle of coverture remained in effect in the United States. Families generally consisted of a man and a woman fulfilling the gender roles of bread winning husband and homebound wife (Estin 333). The number of people obtaining marriage was high, and the ability to obtain divorce remained difficult except in particular circumstances (333). Estin in her article reflects on the changes that

have occurred in the realm of marriage and family law in the United States, and details the legislative and court efforts that have reformed the marriage contract and dismantled the laws of coverture over the last 50 years. Pateman concurs, “After a century or more of legal reform women are near juridical equality with men and all but a few reminders of coverture have been swept away” (227).

Pateman still cautions that efforts to improve the plight of women by giving them access to the rights of free and equal individuals in the public sphere that has “males in mind as the ‘norm’” of the individual will not achieve the equality desired (Richardson 12). Richardson notes that the problem with using “false universals” to create prescriptions for social ills “comes, not from abstraction per se, but from the way in which some abstractions operate to lose details that do matter” (13). Efforts to reduce inequities experienced by women in society by merely making them free and equal individuals of the public sphere do not consider the unique position, conditions and history of women. Pateman claims that, to be fully free, women must have autonomy, but with “the caveat . . . that women’s equal standing must be accepted as an expression of the freedom of women *as women*, and not treated as an indication that women can be just like men” (Pateman 231).

The illumination of the sexual contract, the private sphere of modern patriarchy and status, highlights the unique obstacles that must be surmounted if women are to achieve full equality. Reforms to include women as participants in the public sphere do not address the interdependency between the spheres that sustains the inequality of women in the home. Pateman states, “The private and public spheres of civil society are separate reflecting their natural order of sexual difference, and inseparable, incapable of being understood in isolation from each other” (131). She continues, “Or to make this point another way, the construction of

the ‘worker’ presupposes that he is a man who has a woman, a (house) wife, to take care of his daily needs” (131). The worker in the capitalist economy of Western society assumes that women fulfill their status of wife in the private sphere providing their husbands free labor in the form of management of home and family. Pateman argues that changes to the marriage contract and women’s entry into the public sphere have not disrupted this interdependency between public and private sphere.

Further, reforms to include women in the public sphere as free and equal individuals do not address the pernicious assumptions regarding the status of wife to which women are born. This status once constituted by law is now supported by tradition. The status of wife remains one of subordination to the husband and his needs. The division of labor in the private sphere remains a family matter, and Pateman asserts that these duties remain primarily the responsibility of the wife (228). Women still fill the traditional role of wife, mother and caregiver. If women work, they are typically labeled working mother or wife. In society, wages or payment for work connotes value and this payment occurs in the public sphere. Work in the private sphere remains unpaid and does not have quantifiable value. Though not paid, the work of childrearing, household management and elder care is work, important work. Women as working wives are valued for the work performed in the public sphere, and not always for the duty and obligations they fulfill as wives in the private. Pateman suggests that women’s equality can be achieved only by freeing women from their status of wife, a birthright burdened with assumptions of subordination and inferiority.

In *The Sexual Contract*, Carole Pateman exposes the dichotomy of the public and private sphere. She explains how the theories of the social contract theorists articulating the universality of free and equal individuals agreeing to create community resulted in two very distinct spheres

operating very differently. The social contract freed men to become equal citizens and producers in the public sphere, and husbands ruling over wives in the private sphere. Women born to the status of wife were excluded from the public sphere and relegated to the home. The condition of women in Western societies has improved through reform of the marriage contract and attainment of rights. However, Pateman concludes that full freedom and equality cannot be obtained for women merely through their inclusion as free and equal individuals, and solutions must address the persisting assumptions regarding women's status as wives that hamper them in both realms. Pateman's critique of the social contract and exposure of the sexual contract makes space for the consideration of theories, ideas from the past and present, in a different light, a light not tinged by the aura that the social contract of free and equal individuals is available to everyone, or the prescriptions it justified are the right solution for all.

## Chapter 2: Mary Astell: An Unexpected Liberator

Recent research on Astell explores the complexity of her arguments that scholars previously dismissed or labeled as examples of late seventeenth century religious and political conservatism. These studies evaluate Astell's work within the context of the dynamic changes occurring in Western society during this period. In "‘Call No Man Master upon Earth’: Mary Astell's Tory Feminism and an Unknown Correspondence," Sarah Apetrei concurs, "Astell's own contradictions and complexities point to the possibility that some of the greatest theological and political tensions of the period were also working themselves out in the minds of individuals" (520).

Though they applaud her early articulations of the plight of women in Western society, many still struggle to understand her solutions that appear to leave women trapped in the situation she so insightfully identifies. They have difficulty reconciling Astell's conservative views of religion, monarchy and patriarchy with the feminist stances she takes regarding women's education and marriage. They question the possible benefit of her prescriptions given her focus on the predicament of upper class women. Astell's arguments are complex and in stark contradiction to solutions that embrace the liberal tenets of Western democracy. However, her works anticipate the potential of the perpetuation of women's oppression resulting from the split of the public and private sphere underwritten by the premises of the classic contract theorists. Her prescriptions to improve the conditions of women through reform within the existing institutions reflect her realization, and Pateman's concern, that the tenets of the social contract are not available to all and particularly not to women.

In her writings, Astell exposes the injustices suffered by women in marriage subjected to the will of husbands who act as absolute rulers, and often tyrants. Astell proclaims that women

are powerless both in the affairs of courtship and marriage. A woman does not choose or select a husband, but rather “all that allow’d her, is to Refuse or Accept what is offer’d (Astell, *Some Reflections* 23). She makes clear to her upper class women, that a husband’s prerogative has no bounds. In marriage, a woman not only gains an absolute ruler, but loses all rights to her wealth and property. Astell states:

She who Elects a Monarch for Life, who gives him an Authority she cannot recall however he misapply it, who puts her Fortune and Person entirely in His Power . . . she had best stay till she can meet with one who has the Government of his own Passions and has duly regulated his own Desires, since he is to have such absolute Power over hers. (32-33)

She warns upper class women against marrying a man from a lower class. Her nobility and status will not protect her from her chosen absolute ruler, and regardless of differences in birth, his right will not be denied. Women have no recourse from the abuses of their selected master for men have all the power to force their wives into submission. Astell cries, “He who has Sovereign Power does not value the Provocations of a Rebellious Subject, but knows how to subdue him with ease, and will make himself obey’d” (28). Law and custom grant husbands the right to demand obedience of their wives in all matters. Astell points out, “Because she puts her self entirely into her Husband’s Power, and if the Matrimonial Yoke be grievous, neither Law nor Custom affords her that redres which Man obtains” (28).

Pateman illuminates the classic contract theorists’ contention that the natural state of women is that of subordination to men. She details their arguments that women’s inferiority justified their relegation to the private sphere under the dominion of a husband. Astell corroborates Pateman’s assertions. Astell denounces the claims that women by nature are inferior to men and should be subjugated to their rule. She challenges those holding this position to prove their claim using Reason. Astell protests, “She [Astell] was ignorant of the *Natural*



*Inferiority* of our Sex, which our Masters lay down as a Self-Evident and Fundamental Truth” (*The First English Feminist* 71). “She [Astell] saw nothing in the Reason of Things, to make this either a Principle or a Conclusion, but much to the contrary” (71).

Astell wonders how men can accept the leadership of their current female monarch if women are naturally inferior. She cries out, “It wou’d be a Sin in *any* Woman to have Dominion over *any* Man and the greatest Queen ought not to command but to obey her Footman, because no Municipal Laws can supersede or change the Law of Nature” (71). When men cite scripture to support their claims that women are by nature inferior, Astell counters with Bible examples of women in positions of leadership and authority. She proclaims, “Whatever other Great and Wise Reasons Men may have for despising Women, and keeping them in Ignorance and Slavery, it can’t be from having learnt to do so in Holy Scripture” (84).

Astell claims that women’s servitude to men is not the result of their natural inferiority. Similar to Hobbes and Locke, Astell points to men’s strength and power as a primary reason for their initial dominance. However, unlike the contract theorists, Astell does not accept that men’s strength justifies their power over women. Astell compares the subjection of women under men to that of the Jews and Christians under the Romans. She states, “But will any one say that these had a *Natural Superiority* and Right to Dominion? that they had a superior Understanding, or any Pre-eminence, except what their greater Strength acquir’d” (75). She likens that the arbitrary rule of men over women to the power of a highwayman or thief over his victims. Astell states, “And if mere Power gives a Right to Rule, there can be no such thing as Usurpation; but a Highway-Man so long as he has strength to force, has also a Right to require our Obedience” (76).

Astell grants that men’s capabilities currently surpass those of women. However, she maintains that this condition is not natural. On the contrary, men receive a generous education,

while women receive none. She states, “It undeniably follows, that Men’s Understanding are superior to Women’s, for after many Years Study and Experience they become Wise and Learned, and Women are not Born so!” (85). Further, Astell argues that to men goes all opportunity and advantage. She explains:

Men are possess’d of all Places of Power, Trust and Profit, they make Laws and exercise the Magistracy, not only the sharpest Sword, but even all the Swords and Blunderbusses are theirs, which by the strongest Logic in the world, gives them the best Title to every thing they please to claim their Prerogative. (85)

With time, tradition and custom enshrined the notion of men’s superiority over women and became an accepted truth. She points out, “That the Custom of the World has put Women, generally speaking into a State of Subjection, is not deny’d” (72), while “his Prerogative is settled by an undoubted Right and the Prescription of many Ages” (*Some Reflections* 45). Women’s inferiority and subordination is not natural, but rather men’s dominance of women was initially the result of their physical strength and power, became established through opportunity and advantage, and ingrained as truth by custom and tradition.

Though she identifies these inequities, Astell’s prescriptions and solutions seem to recommend that women contently and obediently accept their situation. Astell makes clear that her intention is not to destabilize the institutions, the structures, and the status of participants in society. She exclaims, “Nor can she [Astell] imagine how she any way undermines the Masculine Empire, or blows the Trumpet of Rebellion to the Moiety of Mankind” (*The First English Feminist* 70). Though she counsels women of the importance of their marriage decision, Astell refuses to condone the rebellion of wives against husbands. She admonishes:

But if she goes on to infer, that therefor he has not these Qualifications, where is his Right? If he misemploys, does he not abuse it? And if he abuses, according to modern Deduction, he forfeits it, I must leave her there. A peaceable Woman indeed will not carry it so far, she will neither question her Husband’s Right nor his fitness to Govern. (*Some Reflections* 97)

Astell suggests to women upon discovering the poor qualities of their marriage partner to consider it an opportunity to cultivate virtue. She explains, "If Discretion and Piety prevails upon her Passions she sits down quietly, contented with her lot, seeks no Consolation in the Multitude of Adorers since he whom only she desir'd to please, because it was her duty to do so, will take no delight in her Wit and Beauty" (15). She asserts that the "Affliction" the wife suffers resulting from her husband's neglect provides her the best instruction in virtue. This situation is "the sincerest Friend, the frankest Monitor, the best Instructor and indeed the only useful School that Women are ever put to" (17). She instructs that their cultivation of virtue will make them better mothers, wives and members of society. She guides women to regard any difficulties in marriage as the trials that they must endure in preparation for what is the true end purpose of any reasoning being, to spend eternity with their God.

Given her seeming acceptance of the plight of women and prescription for wives to obediently submit to the rule of their husbands, is there nothing more to be garnered from Astell's writings? Astell simply provided insightful understandings of women's condition very similar to those suggested two hundred years later by Pateman. In "Gendering the Modern: Mary Astell's Feminist Historiography," William Kolbrener maintains that Astell lashes out against what she sees as the inequality and inauthentic culture of her period and desires to return to the "*integritas*" of a previous era that he defines as a nostalgic view of the past as one of wholeness, completeness and integrity (2). Astell's prescription for women is not simply a return to Kolbrener's past of nostalgic wholeness, completeness and integrity, but is a pragmatic reaction to the changing political dynamics of her period that she believes jeopardizes the precarious position of women in society. Astell identifies Pateman's concern that the social contract

envisioned by thinkers such as Locke and Hobbes excludes women and her solutions reflect this understanding.

In the introduction to *The First English Feminist: Reflections Upon Marriage and other Writings by Mary Astell*, Bridget Hill advances that Astell wanted the best for women. Astell was a woman that loved women; she cared about them and demanded much of them (14). Astell professes, “My earnest desire is, That you Ladies, would be as perfect and happy as ‘tis possible to be in this imperfect state; for I Love you too well to endure a spot upon your Beauties, if I can by any means remove and wipe it off” (*A Serious Proposal* 56). In *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, Ruth Perry agrees that Astell loved women as a “statesmen of whom it could be said ‘loved his people’” (18).

However, Astell was also practical about their current, neglected position. Given their weakened and ill-prepared state, she does not demand their rebellion. Astell tempers, “I do not propose this to prevent a Rebellion, for Women are not so well united as to form an Insurrection” (*The First English Feminist* 86). Women, lacking education and training, are at severe disadvantage. She defends, “There are strong and prevalent Reasons which demonstrate the superiority and Pre-eminence of the Men” (84). “For in the first place, Boys have much Time and Pains, Care and Cost bestow’d on the Education, Girls have little or none” (85). She understands their reluctance to agitate for change and sympathizes, “They are for the most part Wise enough to Love their Chains, and to discern how very becomingly they set” (86). In this light, Astell’s statements criticizing the idea that women should rebel against their masters can be viewed not simply as efforts to protect the status quo, but rather to protect women who are not adequately prepared for such a revolt.

Though she loves women and thinks the utmost of their potential, her views of men are not so positive. Men cannot be trusted, do not act with reason, and are slaves to their appetites.

Astell argues:

If Mankind had never sinn'd, Reason wou'd always have been obey'd, there wou'd have been no struggle for Dominion, and Brutal Power wou'd not have prevail'd. But in the laps'd State of Mankind, and now that Men will not be guided by their Reason but by their Appetites, and do not what they *ought* but what they *can*. (75)

Astell denounces the efforts of these men to garner their freedom in the public sphere, while treating their wives at best as upper class servants and at worst as slaves. She questions the right of men to demand obedience of a wife in the private sphere that she claims is contrary to men's demands for liberty and freedom in the public arena. She asks, "If Absolute Sovereignty be not necessary in a State, how comes it to be so in a Family? Or if in a Family why not in the State" (76). Astell wonders how men can demand freedom from their monarch as they grip tight to their monarchy at home. Astell presses, "For whatever may be said against Passive-Obedience in another case, I suppose there's no Man but likes it very well in this; how much so ever Arbitrary Power may be dislik'd on a Throne, not Milton himself wou'd cry up Liberty to poor *Female Slaves*, or plead for the Lawfulness of Resisting a Private Tyranny" (*Some Reflections* 29).

Astell fears the outcome for women of a government of free and equal men justified by the social contract theories of Hobbes and Locke. In "Mary Astell and Feminist Critique of Possessive Individualism," Ruth Perry argues that Astell was an early critic of the theories of Hobbes, Locke and other social contract theorists that justified the new forms of government given their stance regarding women. Perry states, "To her mind [Astell], republicanism licensed an ever-changing groups of men to compete and fight with one another for political power with inevitable bloodshed and suffering for all ("Possessive Individualism" 448). Astell believes that

these factions will lead to disruption and instability in society. Astell exclaims, “By how much 100000 Tyrants are worse than one” (Preface 76).

Given the limits of their bodily strength and their current disadvantages, women will be the victims of the instability resulting from the fighting between groups of men vying for political power. In her view, the best political structure is that of a single ruler, a monarch, with the authority to mitigate the fighting amongst men, to keep order and peace, and more importantly to protect women. Astell states:

Nor can there be any Society great or little, from Empires down to private Families, without a last Resort, to determine the Affairs of that Society by an irresistible Sentence. Now unless this Supremacy be fix'd somewhere, there will be a perpetual Contention about it, such is the love of Dominion, and let the Reason of things be what it may, those who have least Force, or Cunning to supply its will have the Disadvantage. So that since Women are acknowledg'd to have least Bodily strength, their being commanded to obey is in pure kindness to them for their Quiet and Security, as well as for the Exercise of their Vertue” (75).

She urges men to honor the institutions and maintain their allegiance to their monarch in the public sphere as they demand of their wives in the private sphere, “She heartily wishes that our Masters wou'd pay their Civil and Ecclesiastical Governors the same Submission, which they themselves extract from their Domestic Subjects” (70).

Astell's prescriptions for women not only reflect her concern for their peace and security in a society fomenting from factions of unreasonable men competing to govern, but for the loss of what little power women have in society given the possibility of these changes. Perry states, “She recognized from the beginning that the rhetoric of the ‘government of the people’ was never intended to include women” (“Possessive Individualism” 447). Astell's ideas derived from her belief that the individualism spawned by the social contract theorists were selfish, detrimental to the condition of women, and would result in the erosion of women's political power (448). Perry argues that Locke's ideas in his *Second Treatises on Government*

“announced a paradigm shift from a political world populated by men and women involved in a web of familial and sexual interconnection to an all-male world based solely on contractual obligation” (449-450). She cites Linda J. Nicholson’s work, *Gender and History: The Limits of Social Theory in the Age of the Family*, suggesting that the creation of the public sphere reduced the power and autonomy of women of Aristocracy by disrupting the court and kin relations where women had a seat (450). Astell’s positions do not merely embrace the past, but are the result of the political upheavals and changes in the ideas of her time that she considered detrimental to women’s conditions and further eroded what limited political power they had.

Astell in her writings anticipate the detrimental outcome to women of this public and private sphere split. Her response is a rejection of the individualism spawned by these new theories and an embrace of community, obligation and duty. Astell’s vision of community is not the social contract theorist’s group of solitary individuals negotiating with others through contract, but rather is a group of individuals with duties and obligations to each other. Astell states, “When we consider that we are but several parts of one great Whole, and are by Nature so connected to each other, that whenever one part suffers the rest must suffer with it” (*A Serious Proposal* 211).

Within this paradigm, Astell attempts to protect the position of aristocratic women. Within the community, the individual’s obligations and duties to others derive from her capacities, and the opportunities and advantages afforded her. She states:

For unless we have very strange Notions of the Divine Wisdom, we must needs allow that every one a placed in such a Station as they are fitted for. And if the necessity of the world requires that some Person shou’d Labour for others, it likewise requires that others shou’d Think for them. (201-202)

Those having greater capacity and advantage have greater duties and obligations to the community. Those having greater responsibility to their community must be given greater

authority to ensure that the needs of the community are met. Given that God has bestowed upon them advantages and capacities not available to others, Astell believes that her upper class women have significant obligations to society, and therefore must have authority in it. In her community of obligation and duty, Astell's upper class women retain their political power.

Astell fears that upper class women are in no position to use or protect this authority. She laments the derogatory view of upper class women as emotional, frivolous and spoiled that she believes they are culpable in creating. Astell seeks to reform the insidious behaviors of her women that she perceives results from their blind acceptance of custom and tradition. Astell laments, "'Tis Custom therefor, that Tyrant Custom, which is the grand motive to all those irrational choices which we daily see made in the World, so very contrary to our *present* interest and pleasure, as well as to our Future" (67-68). The disrupter of the disastrous hold of custom on women is education. To this end, Astell calls for the establishment of an institution of higher learning for young, upper class women that she calls a "*Religious Retirement*" (73).

Granted education for Astell is to prepare women for what she sees as any reasoning beings ultimate purpose, to be with their God in the hereafter. However, Astell also has an earthly motive for educating upper class women. Astell's plan is to provide women the tools to think rationally and independently. In "Mary Astell: Defender of the 'Disembodied Mind,'" Cynthia Bryson argues that Astell proposes an educational method of reasoning based on "clear and distinct ideas" devoid of "Prejudice and Passion" reflecting her reading and adoption of Descartes' methods (42). Astell refines Descartes' ideas and the theories of Antoine Arnauld into seven rules of reasoning on a particular subject of interest (Springborg 31). Astell's instructions advise her women to disregard all outside influences. Astell recommends, "Disengage our selves from all our former Prejudices, from our Opinion of Names, Authorities, Customs and the like,



not give credit to any thing any longer because we have once believ'd it, but because it carries clear and uncontested Evidence along with it" (*A Serious Proposal* 133). She directs her students to carefully consider a problem before them by exercising their mind and unleashing their innate ability to reason and think. She explains:

Reason will that we shou'd think again, and not form our Conclusions or fix our foot till we can honestly say, that we have with our Prejudice or Prepossession view'd the matter in Debate on all sides, seen it in every light, have no bias to encline us either way, but are only determined by Truth it self, shining brightly in our eyes, and not permitting us to resist the force and Evidence it carries. (135)

The goal of her educational plan is to disrupt the hold of custom and tradition on women, and to imbue them with independence by training them to think and to judge using their innate capacities. Astell proclaims:

And by that Learning which will be here afforded, and that leisure we have, to enquire after it, and to know and reflect on our own minds, we shall rescue our selves out of that woful incogitancy we have slipt into, awaken our sleeping Powers and make use of that reason which GOD has given us. (95)

Bryson asserts, "What Astell sees in Descartes's method is the opportunity for self-determination, a goal which any individual who feels her or his social group has been denied it would wholeheartedly embrace" (43). Bryson maintains that Astell gravitates toward Descartes' ideas not only because of the autonomy that it affords women, but also for the equality that Cartesian duality provides them. She states, "One of the main reasons why women, such as Astell, had so widely accepted and embrace Descartes's philosophy was 'that his rule and method for discerning truth could be used by anyone of either sex'" (46). She continues, "His dualistic separation of mind and body strengthened the . . . concept of mind as a place 'where there is no sex'" (46). Education provides Astell's upper class women the potential for intellectual equality with men, and the freedom to think, to reason, and to judge.

Education is not merely to make women obedient to men and content with their plight, nor to simply enable them to think and judge rationally. Her plan is to empower upper class women to determine using Reason their future, and to institute change where they can. Astell prescribes two viable choices for her upper class women. They marry by selecting a partner based on their use of Reason rather than bowing to Custom, or forgo marriage. Regardless of decision, Astell maintains that women have obligations and duties that must be fulfilled. “Permit us only to understand our own duty, and not be forc’d to take it upon trust from others; to be at least so far learned, as to be able to form in our minds a true Idea of Christianity” (*A Serious Proposal* 81). Imbued with the autonomy to decide and an understanding of their duties and obligations, Astell believes her educated women can reform their position, reform men, and change society.

Astell frees her unmarried women from the tyranny of men in the private sphere. She states, “She will not here be inveigled and impos’d on, will neither be bought nor sold, nor forc’d to marry for her own quiet, when she has no inclination to it” (102). These unmarried women can remain at her *Religious Retirement* to study and to create “virtuous friendships” with other women. Participation in her community of women requires no religious obligations or vows (89). Further, Astell questions the right of just any man to assert dominion over unmarried women. She declares, “Only let me beg to be inform’d, to whom we poor Fatherless Maids, and Widows who have lost their Masters, owe Subjection?” (*The First English Feminist* 85). She continues, “It can’t be to all Men in general, unless all men were agreed to give the same Commands; do we then fall as Strays to the first who finds us” (85). Perry concurs that Astell arguments support the right of unmarried women for self-determination and autonomy. Perry argues:

Astell's construction of herself as a free British citizen, subject to no one but her monarch, was a radical reconception of women's place in the polity. In bypassing the political contract made by men, Astell at once invoked the earlier doctrine of the divine right of monarch over all subjects alike and at the same time denied the power of all men over all women. (452)

Astell's unmarried women do not retreat from the world. Much to the contrary, Astell unleashes these women to actively engage in the world. Astell points out, "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 by a due mixture of both retain all the advantages and avoid the inconveniences that attend either" (*A Serious Proposal* 76). She continues, "It shall not so cut you off from the world as to hinder you from bettering and improving it" (76). Astell's prescription for her women forgoing marriage is to cultivate their capacities in order to work actively with other women in the world. For her unmarried women empowered with autonomy and self-determination, Astell envisions, "To all great things that Women might perform, Inspir'd by her Example [Queen Anne (1702-1714)], Encourag'd by her Smiles and supported by her Power!" (*The First English Feminist* 87).

To those choosing marriage, Astell's prescription for women on closer inspection is not one of simply advising women to submissively obey and accept their plight. Her prescriptions do embrace the institutions of society that she sees lending to its stability and the protection of women in their current condition. Astell does not suggest any radical changes to the institution of marriage. She maintains that marriage is a sacred institution and states, "The Christian Institution of Marriage provides the best that may be for Domestick Quiet and Content, and for the Education of Children; so that if we were not under the tye of Religion, even the Good of Society and civil Duty would oblige us to what that requires at our Hands" (*Some Reflections* 11). Similarly, she does not call for radical change in the status of husband and wife, and

upholds the authority of the husband in the private sphere. Instead Astell endeavors to reform the participants of marriage, in particular men, who she believes are not fulfilling their duties and obligations either in marriage or in society given their advantage and capacities. “Not upon the State it self, if they are just, but upon the ill choice, or foolish Conduct of those who are in it, and what has Marriage, considered in its self, to do with that?” (9).

In her article, “Mary Astell on Virtuous Friendship,” Jacqueline Broad suggests Astell’s promotion of virtuous friendship between women at her institution of learning is an example of her vision of reform. Broad points out that Astell’s concept of virtuous friendship has much in common with Aristotle’s highest form of friendship in Book 8 of *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle describes this friendship:

But complete friendship is the friendship of good people similar in virtue; for they wish goods in the same way to each other insofar as they are good, and they are good in their own right. [Hence they wish goods to each other for each other’s own sake.] (122)

Astell’s friendship is also unselfish and one in which each participant wishes the best for the other. Broad quotes Astell:

The greatest usefulness, the most refin’d and dinteress’d Benevolence, a love that thinks nothing with the bound 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 prefer her interest. (*A Serious Proposal* 99)

However, Broad maintains that Astell’s goal is for the friends to not only want the best for one another, but to encourage the other to improve and reform. Broad asserts, “Astell’s programme for feminist reform does not consist in self-transformation alone, but also transformation of other women’s moral values” (67). Astell’s “virtuous friendship” is not merely one of companionship or mentorship, but a relationship that encourages the participants to take an active interest in the betterment of their friend. Astell states:

What shou'd hinder them from entering into an holy combination to watch over each other for Good, to advise, encourage and direct, and to observe the minutest fault in order to its amendment. The truest effect of love being to endeavour the bettering the beloved Person. (*A Serious Proposal* 100)

Though Broad demonstrates the transformative power of Astell's "virtuous friendship" between women, she does not consider whether Astell extends the potential of reform through friendship to the relationship of men and women in marriage. Broad points out that in the seventeenth century many thinkers believed in the power of friendship to reform the moral values of individuals (73-74). One of these thinkers is Astell's mentor John Norris. While many male scholars believed that friendship could lead to moral reform, they limited the possibility of reform to friendship between men. They discounted the possibility of true friendship between men and women due to what they perceived as women's limited capacity and inferiority. Broad advances that Norris held different views and he "affirms the possibility of male-female friendship when he observes that marriage is the 'strictest of Friendship'" (76).

Similarly, Astell does not dismiss the importance of friendship in marriage. Given her refusal to accept the inferiority of women and her educational plan that develops the capacity of a woman to be a reasoning being equal to a man, friendship becomes an important criteria in marriage. She states, "He who does not make Friendship the chief inducement to his Choice, and prefer it before any other consideration, does not deserve a good Wife" (Astell, *Some Reflections* 10). A friendship in marriage is what Astell envisions for her educated women. In a marriage of friendship, she hopes that her graduates of her institutions of education can improve the overall morality and behavior of men.

She advocates not for a submissive relationship between men and women in marriage, but one of equality though each partner's authority, obligations and respective duties may differ.

A man by qualification may have more authority in the family, but this authority does not allow him to rule arbitrarily or to neglect his responsibilities. Astell states:

Nor will it ever be well either with those who Rule . . . even from the Throne to every Private Family, till those in Authority look on themselves as plac'd in that Station for the good improvement of their Subjects and not for their own sakes; . . . but as the Representative of GOD whom they ought to imitate in Justice and Equity of their Laws, in doing good and communicating Blessings to all beneath them." (47-48)

Though Astell admonishes a woman not to question "Her Husbands Right or fitness to govern" (97), she does urge her to question how he governs. She demands that men should not govern "as an absolute Lord and Master, with an Arbitrary and Tyrannical sway, but as Reason Governs and Conduct a Man, by proposing what is Just and Fit" (97). She argues that women should only obey what is reasonable, not what is arbitrary. Astell states:

A blind obedience is what a Rational Creature shou'd never Pay, nor wou'd such an one receive it did he rightly understand its Nature. For Human Actions are no otherwise valuable than as they are conformable to Reason, but a blind Obedience is an Obeying without Reason, for ought we know, against it." (87)

Armed with the self-determination and autonomy to think, to judge and decide, Astell suggests that the duty of the wife is to reform the practices of the husband. In a marriage of friendship wanting the best for the other, the wife should attempt to improve the moral understandings of her husband. She asserts, "This would shew her what Human Nature is, as well as what it ought to be, and teach her not only what she may justly expect, but what she must be Content with; would enable her to cure some Faults, and patiently to suffer what she cannot cure" (86). To her educated women accepting marriage, Astell proclaims, "To their destroying those worst of Tyrants Impiety and Immorality, which dare stalk about in her own Dominions" (*The First English Feminist* 87).

Astell's ideas and thoughts do appear conservative and in some cases, regressive. However, as argued by Apetrei, her thinking is complex and nuanced, and the result of the

dynamic changes occurring during her period. Astell anticipates Patemen's sexual contract and the detrimental implications for women of the changes to society underwritten by the ideas of the social contract theorists. Astell does embrace the conservative stances of monarchy, patriarchy and status, but not for nostalgic reasons. In Astell's view these structures provide the best means to protect women given their disadvantaged state. Her writings focus on the plight of upper class women because she fears the erosion of their power. Astell believes that given their advantages and capacities, these upper class women have the authority and duty along with upper class men to manage their society. Her prescriptions are not radical, but she does not believe women are in a position to execute on radical proposals. Her project is to educate women to use Reason, to understand their duty and obligations, and to empower them to reform others in their family and community. Her solutions reject the individualism promoted by the social contract theorists, and require individuals to understand their duties and obligations to the whole. Her desire is to peacefully and orderly reform society so that men and women can live harmoniously. Astell wishes:

In a word, to those Halcyon, or if you will Millennium Days, in which the Wolf and Lamb shall feed together, and a Tyrannous Domination which Nature never meant, shall no longer render useless if not hurtful, the Industry and Understandings of half Mankind!  
(87)

However, true to the complexity of her thought, she hints at the possibility of more radical actions. If conditions do not improve and when the time is right for women, she urges them:

If they have Usurpt, I love Justice too much to wish Success and continuance to Usurpations, which tho' submitted to out of Prudence and for Quietness sake, yet leave every Body free to regain their lawful Right whenever they have power and Opportunity.  
(*Some Reflections* 95)

### Chapter 3: Mary Wollstonecraft: Creator of SuperMom

Astell's work focuses on the plight of aristocratic women, suggests solutions that embrace monarchy, and critiques the social contract that she considers detrimental and unavailable to women. Wollstonecraft's strategy is radically different. In her effort to improve the plight of women, Wollstonecraft rejects the structures of monarchy and aristocracy. She believes that these structures degrade society by elevating the pursuit of sensual pleasure over the development of virtue, and obedience to authority over freedom and equality. She cries out, "It is the pestiferous purple which render the progress of civilisation a curse, and warps the understanding, till men of sensibility doubt whether the expansion of intellect produces a greater portion of happiness or misery" (19). Her ideas uphold the natural rights of men and women. She states, "That the society is formed in the wisest manner, whose constitution is founded on the nature of man, strikes, in the abstract every thinking being so forcibly" (14). While Wollstonecraft labels aristocracy as corrupt, she promotes the "middling" class of people that she claims acquires virtue through industry. She advocates for an egalitarian society of industrious, virtuous citizens that through civil participation manage society.

In "Mary Wollstonecraft: Eighteenth-Century Commonwealth Woman," G.J. Barker-Benfield argues that the primary purpose of much of Wollstonecraft's writings was to fight for the liberty and freedom of the common man and his inclusion in the social contract (103). In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft declares that the goal of her project is "to render . . . the social compact truly equitable, and in order to spread those enlightening principles" to women (Wollstonecraft 190). Astell identifies in the ideas of the social contract theorists the coming divide between the public and private sphere, and the loss of what little power women possess in society. Wollstonecraft too identifies this coming divide between



public and private sphere. However, Wollstonecraft embraces the tenets espoused by the social contract theorists, and demands women's inclusion as free and equal individuals of the originating contract. Wollstonecraft's plan grants women the rights and responsibilities of workers and citizens in the public sphere. However, she perpetuates their status as wives based on their sex in the private sphere. For their rights in the public sphere, Wollstonecraft obligates women alone to bear the duties of the home, and subordinate their needs to those of their husband and family.

Like Astell, Wollstonecraft rails against the tyranny of men over women in society. Throughout *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft equates a woman's condition to that of slavery. In "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Problematic of Slavery," Moira Ferguson suggests that Wollstonecraft employs the imagery of slavery to communicate a variety of messages regarding women's circumstances. She asserts that in her text, Wollstonecraft "favored a discourse on slavery that highlighted female subjection" and that "the constituency Wollstonecraft champions – the white middle-class women – is constantly characterized as slaves" (Ferguson 82).

In the private sphere, Wollstonecraft decries a wife's status in society as that of "trusted servant" to her husband. She laments the instruction young women receive from their selfish and indulgent parents that prepare them "for slavery in marriage" (168). She bemoans that the desired outcome of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1788) curriculum for the education of a young woman is to make her a "coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire" (28). Employing this imagery, Wollstonecraft makes apparent that her concern is not only for women's experience in the private sphere, but also in the public. Wollstonecraft extends the imagery of slavery to denounce the treatment of women in the public sphere (Ferguson 92).

She puts forth, “When, therefore, I call women slaves, I mean in a political and civil sense” (Wollstonecraft 183). Through the imagery of slavery, Wollstonecraft articulates the existences of the private and public sphere divide and the inequity experienced by women in both realms. Wollstonecraft illuminates women’s predicament in the private sphere as servants, slaves, and coquettish objects of desire, but also illustrates that in the public sphere, women, like slaves, have no civil or political rights.

Like Astell before, Wollstonecraft’s prescription to abolish the slave-like conditions that women experience in both realms stresses the importance of a proper education for women. Astell advocated for schools dedicated exclusively to the training of young, upper class women. Her plan removes young women from the corrupting influences of society, develops their capacity to reason and think critically, and encourages “virtuous friendships” with other women. Wollstonecraft’s method moves away from instruction such as Rousseau’s focusing on obedience and sensuality toward an emphasis on the cultivation of women’s capacity to think and reason. However, her plan does not advocate for a separate education for young women meeting their specific needs. Her plan is to teach girls alongside boys. Wollstonecraft rhetorically poses the question, “Girls and boys still together? I hear some readers ask” (184). She replies, “Yes” (184).

Many scholars contend that the objective of Wollstonecraft’s educational plan is to make women into men. As evidence for their assertions, they cite Wollstonecraft:

But if it be against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talent and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character... all those who view them with a philosophic eye must, I should think wish with me, that they may every day grow more and more masculine. (2)

They point to her views of marriage, criticism of sensual love, devotion to simplicity of dress and orderliness of thought and manners as examples of Wollstonecraft de-feminizing women. In her introduction to Wollstonecraft's work, Barbara Taylor asserts that to free woman, Wollstonecraft stripped her of any sexuality or sensibility leaving her a masculinized, asexual identity navigating solely by reason (Introduction xxxi).

Wollstonecraft's educational plan is not simply to make women into men. She understands that this step is not enough, and that many men, common men, are in the same predicament as women. She states:

I have turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but what has been the result? – a profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore. (Wollstonecraft I)

Wollstonecraft seeks to rectify the detrimental conditions that she believes plagues many of both genders. She states, "I have sighed when obliged to confess that either Nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial" (Wollstonecraft I). She equates the condition of inequality between men and women to that among different classes of men. A primary cause is the poor education received by all women and lower class men.

In "Cultivating Virtue: Catherine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft on Civic Education," Wendy Gunther-Canada argues that Wollstonecraft's project is sweeping. Gunther-Canada asserts that Wollstonecraft's educational ideas are revolutionary, and her plan is "geared toward creating virtuous citizens of both sexes" ("Cultivating Virtue" 58). In the eighteenth century, most men along with women did not participate at all in the affairs of government (49). Wollstonecraft's vision calls not only for the education of girls with boys, but also for upper with lower classes. Wollstonecraft argues that "to make men citizens" of the social contract,

children's instructions must occur in an environment where they spend a "great part of their time, on terms of equality, with other children" (173). Her educational aspirations for children aligns with her project "to render . . . the social compact truly equitable" for all people of all classes, not just women.

Wollstonecraft's prescriptions attempting alleviate the inequity of all people explain the scholars' divergent opinions regarding the women to whom Wollstonecraft speaks. Astell spoke of the experiences of upper class women and to them. Moira Ferguson suggests that the women to whom Wollstonecraft speaks are those of the middle class. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft speaks of and to many categories of women. She derides upper class women for their vice and corrupt natures, and praises middle class women as the most virtuous. At other times, she scolds her middling group for vying to be just like the upper class women that she detests.

In her dedication to the M. Talleyrand – Perigord, Late Bishop of Autun, Wollstonecraft throws open the possibility that she does not speak to any particular class of women, but to all women. As she requests for the gentleman to wisely consider her plan for women's rights and education, she states, "I plead for my sex" (Wollstonecraft 7). In "Vindicating Paradoxes: Mary Wollstonecraft's 'Woman,'" Kirsten R. Wilcox argues that in her work, Wollstonecraft actually creates an abstract version of woman that does not correspond to any form of reality. She states, "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* seeks to vanquish these insidious preconceptions and to emphasize the gross disparity between 'women' as they are and the abstract 'woman' of her title, the form women would take in a more just world" (Wilcox 44).

But Wollstonecraft project reaches further and she wishes a just and egalitarian world for all people. In this vein, Wollstonecraft stresses the common humanity of women and men. In

her introduction to *A Vindication to of the Rights of Woman*, she derides the characterization of females “as women” rather than “human creatures” (Wollstonecraft I). Yet again, Wollstonecraft groups women with men. Wollstonecraft speaks to all classes of women along with all classes of men. Like her educational plan for children, Wollstonecraft does not suggest prescriptions specific to women and their plight in the private sphere. The ultimate aim of her project is to provide prescriptions that ensure to all the rights of free and equal individual of the social contract.

Though she prescribes solutions available to all people, central to her plan is to rectify a problem she considers particularly vexing to women. Invoking yet again the imagery of slavery, Wollstonecraft asserts that women’s lack of proper education makes them slaves to their senses. Wollstonecraft exclaims, “Let me return to the more specious slavery which chains the very soul of woman, keeping her fore ever under the bondage of ignorance” (156). She continues, “Their uncultivated understanding make them entirely dependent on their senses for employment and amusement” (31). The result of this slavery of ignorance and reliance on their sensibilities is their dependence on men. Women are not only slaves to men, but are dependent on them for advice, for judgment, and for protection. Wollstonecraft derides, “And, made by this amiable weakness entirely dependent, excepting what they gain by illicit sway, on man, not only for protection, but advice” (66). She sneers, “In the most trifling danger they cling to their support with parasitical tenacity, piteously demanding succor; and their natural protector extends his arms” (66-67). An outcome of her effort to educate women properly is to free women from their slavery of dependence on their senses, and ultimately on men.

A key component of her educational plan is to cultivate women’s independence. She expounds, “Independence I have long considered as the grand blessing of life, the basis of every

virtue; and independence I will ever secure by contracting my want, though I were to live on a barren heath” (7). Independence plays a prominent role in the lives of Wollstonecraft’s women. For Astell, independence to reason, to judge and to decide is the primary goal, but for Wollstonecraft that is simply not enough. Wollstonecraft expects her women to be independent in all regards. To be free and equal individuals participating with others in the public sphere, women cannot be dependent on others for their judgments and decisions, but more importantly, they cannot be dependent on another for their economic subsistence. Wollstonecraft argues that women, whether married or single, must be economically independent. A wife, she claims “must not be dependent on her husband’s bounty for her subsistence during his life, or support after his death” (158). Her goal is to not to make her women into men, but rather her goal is for them to be rational individuals, independent of thought and economically self-sufficient.

Wollstonecraft bestows on her independent women the status of free and equal individual of the social contract holding rights in the public sphere. She exclaims, “But to render her really virtuous and useful, she must not, if she discharge her civil duties, want individually the protection of civil laws” (158). She continues, “I really think that women ought to have representatives instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed in the deliberations of government” (158). Astell rejects the social contract theorists’ vision of individuals conducting relations in the public sphere through contract as selfish and prone to instability as individuals fight for their rights and for power. She laments that the social contract elevates the needs of the individual and disrupts society by dismantling the individual’s obligations and duties to society. However, Wollstonecraft does not envision an individualistic society devoid of duty and responsibility.

Wollstonecraft also believes that as members of their community individuals have duties and obligations to one another. With the freedom and rights that she demands for her independent women, come obligations and duties. Astell maintains that education will enable her upper class women “to understand our own duty” (*A Serious Proposal* 102). For Wollstonecraft the individual’s acquisition of her rights imposes on her the obligation to perform her duty to community and family. She states, “For without right there cannot be any incumbent duties” (Wollstonecraft 156), “take away natural right, and duties become null” (158). Like Astell, Wollstonecraft’s world is one of duty and obligation. However, an individual, a woman, must be given their rights in the public sphere before they can be expected to perform these duties.

Cornerstone to these duties is the responsibility of parents to their children.

Wollstonecraft considers marriage to be “the cement of society,” and the family key to the education of children (181). Wollstonecraft advances the importance of friendship in marriage. After years of marriage the initial passion cools, and if there is friendship there is the potential for a lasting relationship. Further, she believes that friendship, versus passion, between husband and wife produces a calm family environment that is the best for the nurturing of healthy children. Many scholars assert that Wollstonecraft advocates for equality in her marriage of friendship. In “Back to the Future: Marriage as Friendship in the Thought of Mary Wollstonecraft,” Ruth Abbey points out, “She [Wollstonecraft] envisages a form of marriage that incorporates the major features of the classical notion of higher friendship such as equality, free choice, reason, mutual esteem and profound concern for one another’s moral character” (79). Others concur citing Wollstonecraft’s emphasis on providing women equal education, demanding their rights in the public sphere and promoting their economic self-sufficiency. The

husband and wife of equal standing and relating to one another as friends will fulfill their duties and obligations to the family and to their children.

In “The Radical Ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft,” Susan Ferguson maintains that Wollstonecraft’s prescriptions depend on the link between private virtue and the public good. She argues that for Wollstonecraft, the family provides a vital role in ensuring that public good prevails. Key to the preservation of the common good in the public sphere is the cultivation of the bond and relationships nurtured in the family of the private sphere. Wollstonecraft contends that “to make men citizens . . . which seem directly to lead to the desired point” that “the domestic affections, that first open the heart to the various modifications of humanity would be cultivated” (173). Ferguson concludes, “In their reformed state, the household becomes the fundamental social unit, morally and economically of the new society: the preservation of ‘private virtue’ is ‘the only security of public freedom and universal happiness’” (446).

Wollstonecraft does not suggest that children should be sent away to private institutions far from home, but believes that children beginning at the age of five should receive their schooling at “national establishments” close to home. (178). Wollstonecraft firmly believes that the development of good citizens essential to the public good requires the nurturing environment of the home. She states, “If you wish to make good citizens, you must first exercise the affections of a son and a brother” (177). She continues, “This is the only way to expand the heart; for public affections, as well as public virtues, must ever grow out of the private character” (177). Thus, the success of the public sphere depends on the development of virtue in the private.

In the public sphere, the duties and obligations are those of citizen in participation with others to provide for the management and functioning of the community. Astell believes that those of the upper class given the advantages and opportunities of their status should have



greater authority in and obligation to their community. Wollstonecraft derides as corrupting and detrimental to society the titles, position and status granted to individuals because of heredity. She states, “For whilst rank and titles are held of the utmost importance, before which Genius ‘must hide its diminished head’” (Wollstonecraft 14). In the public sphere she does not relinquish the concept of position within society. Instead of status based on birth, Wollstonecraft demands that merit, “Genius,” determines the individual’s position and respective authority and duty within society (14).

In this competition for position based on merit, Wollstonecraft does not dictate how women will fair. She even considers that men may prove superior. Kirsten R. Wilcox asserts that Wollstonecraft’s agenda is not to insist “on the equality of the sexes but on the equality of expectation and opportunity” (452). Wollstonecraft states, “If women are by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality, if not in degree, or virtue is a relative idea; consequently their conduct should be founded on the same principles, and have the same aim” (Wollstonecraft 28). Wilcox notes Wollstonecraft’s willingness to cede that woman may not have the capacities of men, and that men may prove themselves superior (451). Wollstonecraft continues:

Further, should experience prove that they cannot attain the same degree of strength of mind, perseverance, and fortitude, let their virtues be the same in kind, though they may vainly struggle for the same degree; and the superiority of man will be equally clear, if not clearer; and truth, as it is a simple principle, which admits of no modification, would be common to both. (39)

Given Wollstonecraft’s demand for equitable education, equality in marriage and participation in the public sphere as citizen and worker, the chance for parity between men and women seems possible.

However, in the private sphere, Wollstonecraft forgoes her demand for equality in the division of duty and promotes family responsibility based on gender. Women in the public sphere are free and equal individuals competing alongside men for position based on merit. In the private sphere, Wollstonecraft's women are born to Pateman's status of wives.

Wollstonecraft's free and equal participant in the social contract of the public sphere becomes a gendered individual in the private sphere. She states:

The being who discharges the duties of its station is independent; and, speaking of women at large, the first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens, is that which includes so many, of a mother. (157)

Women to garner their rights in the public sphere and participation in government must be economically independent. To make a wife economically independent of her husband, Wollstonecraft suggests, "Women might certainly study the art of healing, and be physicians as well as nurses" (159). Given their rights in the public sphere, Wollstonecraft imposes on them gender based duties and obligations in the private sphere. Wollstonecraft does not eliminate a wife's duty to act as physicians and nurse to her family in the home. Wollstonecraft grants women title of citizen, worker and mother. She places women in a triple bind of providing for her community, her family and herself.

In "Teaching Mary Wollstonecraft: Women and the Canonical Conversation of Political Thought," Wendy Gunther-Canada argues, "Wollstonecraft did indeed focus on women's duties as mothers but she always emphasized that these were secondary duties' a woman's first duty was to herself alone" (25). For Wollstonecraft, the duty of a rational creature is to unfold their capacity to reason, to gain their economic independence and their rights. Such a first duty, once she becomes a citizen does not seem to alleviate her of the duties of mother. In "Freedom as Independence: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Grand Blessing of Life" Alan M. S. J. Coffee

concurr, "It is not that we have a duty to ourselves to be independent that takes precedence over our other duties." He continues, "The duties of motherhood are not subordinated by independence. They are made possible" (Coffee 916).

Though Wollstonecraft suggests friendship between men and women in marriage, and scholars point to the potential for equality in this relationship, Wollstonecraft's division of labor in the family appears far from egalitarian. Of men she demands their performance of their duty as citizen, but of women she demands so much more. She states:

By supposing that society will some time or other be so constituted, that man must necessarily fulfill the duties of a citizen, or be despised, and that while he was employed in any of the departments of civil life, his wife also an active citizen, should be equally intent to manage her family, educate her children and assist her neighbors. (Wollstonecraft 158)

The reason that Wollstonecraft gives for assigning these duties to wives over husbands is because they are the "peculiar duty of their sex" (Wollstonecraft 196). The role of wife remains a status to which Wollstonecraft's women are born to fulfill.

What familial duties does Wollstonecraft impose on the husband? Coffee states, "Nevertheless, although it is encouraging to read that men have natural duties within the family, without further specification we cannot assume that both sexes would be burdened equally" (Coffee 916-917). How does Wollstonecraft in her text express the duties required of the husband? Wollstonecraft depicts:

The chastened dignity with which a mother returns the caresses that she and her child receive from a father who has been fulfilling the serious duties of his station is not only a respectable, but a beautiful sight. I have seen her prepare herself and children, with only the luxury of cleanliness, to receive her husband, who, returning weary home in the evening, found smiling babes and a clean hearth. (Wollstonecraft 154)

The husband comes home from a long day to angelic home prepared by his wife, the citizen, the worker, his children's mother.

Wollstonecraft seems to perceive the triple bind and heavy expectations she places on women. Her attempt to alleviate this burden reveals the limitation of prescriptions based on Richardson's "false universal" (12) of women rather than one that considers the particular conditions of a group, be it gender, class or race. Wollstonecraft knows that upper class women will be able to manage the additional duties of citizen. She scoffs at the abundance of ill used time and resources that upper class women have. She states, "Women, in particular, all want to be ladies" (Wollstonecraft 159). "Which is simply to have nothing to do, but listlessly to go they scarcely care where, for they cannot tell what" (159). Wollstonecraft realizes that the effort she imposes on her woman of "middling" class may require that they receive additional help and support. She states, "I have then viewed with pleasure a woman nursing her children, and discharging the duties of her station with perhaps merely a servant-maid to take off her hands the servile part of the household business" (154). But what of the servant-maid, what support will she have? Susan Ferguson points out that Wollstonecraft's prescriptions do not encompass lower class women who must also work to maintain their subsistence and do not have help fulfilling their responsibilities as citizen, worker, and mother (432).

Coffee argues that the additional duties that Wollstonecraft places on women will be alleviated by support from the community (Coffee 917). Coffee makes this suggestion, but does not provide any evidence from Wollstonecraft's text demonstrating that she expects community support for her citizen wives. He continues, "This does not mean, however, that mothers are compelled to take up demanding careers while also meeting their childcare responsibilities as one horn of 'Wollstonecraft's dilemma' would have it" (Coffee 917). His position is that independence is compatible with "mutual interdependence," and all that is required is that the parties can relate to one another as equals (Coffee 917). His assertion holds no weight. In the

public sphere, Wollstonecraft's economically, independent women must compete based on merit for their position, while they maintain home and hearth. This situation highlights the true link between public and private sphere, the detrimental one that Wollstonecraft imposes on her women. She burdens her woman born to her status of wife with the primary responsibilities of the home, while in her universal role of citizen and worker, she must compete for position and economic self-sufficiency against men in the public sphere. Wollstonecraft's plan places women in a no-win situation. Wilcox concurs, "Wollstonecraft is prepared to accept the consequences of an 'unbalanced' social order in which 'the superiority of man' is a given and women 'vainly struggle' to achieve parity' (451).

Two hundred years later, Pateman asserts that the interdependency of the public and private sphere hampers women in modern society. A man's success as a worker and citizen in the public sphere is dependent on the existence of a woman in the private sphere to take care of his needs and those of the children and the home. Wollstonecraft's vision for abolishing women's slavery in society by making them free and equal individuals of the social contract fails to free them because as Pateman warns she does not take into consideration their unique condition as women. Barbara Todd asserts, "Wollstonecraft identified the dilemma at the center of all feminism past and present: how is it possible to be both a woman and a full and equal human subject?" (viii). Wollstonecraft plan demonstrates the dangers of making women free and equal, while ignoring the specific conditions of their womanhood.

Wollstonecraft advocates for the education of women and the opportunity to cultivate their reason. She demands for women the rights of free and equal individual in the public sphere, while in the private sphere she encourages friendship in a marriage between equals. Her prescription expects women to compete with men in the public sphere, and simultaneously fulfill

their obligations of wife and mother. Wollstonecraft leaves women trapped in the home in their role of wife born to specific duties based on their sex. Though she demands that women perform the “peculiar duties” (196) of their position, she fails to acknowledge the burdens that these duties place on them. As she races to reformulate women into reasoning, economically independent citizens, she, like the social contract theorists, dismisses the realities of their condition. She leaves her women alone in the private sphere to act as mothers, educators, caregivers, and household managers. For the man of the house, she retains the benefits of Pateman’s sexual contract. The man of the house, the worker and citizen, retains access to the physical labor of his woman. Wollstonecraft leaves intact the right of a husband to the labor of his wife in the home, while his duties are simply citizen and provider of his half of the family’s subsistence.

## Conclusion

In the book *The Sexual Contract*, Carole Pateman critiques the prescriptions of the classic contract theorists that focus solely on the public realm of society, while dismissing as irrelevant the private sphere. Her work illuminates the private sphere, and the condition of women residing within it. She argues that the private sphere does not function by the same mechanisms of the public sphere in Western society. While consent and agreement or contract direct relations between free and equal individuals, and among citizens and government in the public sphere, the private sphere operates by a modern form of patriarchy and status. This modern form of patriarchy affords a man, the husband, a political right to the being of a woman, a wife. As wives, women are relegated to the home, and denied participation in government and industry. The status of wife to which a woman is born is one of inferiority and subordination to a husband. Pateman explains how this status of subordination was constituted through the marriage contract in Western society. Pateman questions the efforts to improve the plight of women that simply look to provide them participation in the public sphere as free and equal individuals without addressing their wifely status in the private sphere, and the assumptions of inferiority underpinning it. Pateman's work demonstrates the limitations of solutions that do not consider the totality of society, its public and private spheres, and do not account for the unique histories and experiences of individuals.

In their writings, Astell and Wollstonecraft focus on women's subordination to men in the private sphere and suggest prescriptions to remedy their predicament. Both proclaim the capacity of women for rational thought and advocate for their education to counteract the assumption that their natural condition is that of inferiority to men. Both seek to make women independent and autonomous beings through education. These women of divergent political

views grapple with the implications of the social contract for women. Astell's solution does not call for the rights of women in the public sphere, but encourages her upper class women to decide independently whether to live in community with other women or to accept a husband based on their judgment of his capacities. In either case, her goal is for women to live in harmony, peace and stability, and where possible to reform those around them. Wollstonecraft recommends a different approach and embraces the tenets of the social contract as a way to free women from their condition. She demands for her educated, independent women access to the public sphere as workers to earn their subsistence and as citizens with rights.

These women believe that marriage is important to the proper functioning of society. While Wollstonecraft demands individual rights for women, she, like Astell, asserts that individuals have duties and obligations to their community and family. Both women view the private sphere not as one of free and equal individuals operating by contract, but rather one in which participants perform their duties and obligations as members of a family. In marriage, Astell accepts that men and women are born to fulfill the status of husband and wife, and upholds the authority of the husband over the wife. However, she suggests friendship between them, asserts the equality of their intellectual capacity, and attempts to reform both to behave in marriage by the principles of Reason. Wollstonecraft also advocates for a marriage of friendship between husband and wife. As friends, Wollstonecraft believes that each parent will uphold their duty and obligation to the family and to the children. Though many argue that Wollstonecraft advances equality in marriage, Wollstonecraft's women are gendered entities fulfilling the wifely duties of mothers, caregivers and household managers. Though Astell and Wollstonecraft argue that the status of wife should not be one of inferiority, neither frees their women from the status of wife or reforms the duties and obligations of this role in the private sphere.



In her review of the changes to marriage over the last 50 years in the United States, Estin asserts, “The law has largely abandoned the moral discourse that once surrounded marriage and divorce, and the status norms that once defined the rights and obligations of husbands and wives” (335). She asserts that the hegemony of the traditional, religious view of marriage and family has been upended as people enter into unique marriage contracts, cohabitate, establish single parent households, and engage in no-fault divorce. Estin suggests, “Americans still place a high value on marriage” and cites studies indicating that 90% of people in the United States believe at some point in their lives they will get married (352). She asserts that in their effort to process these changes to the institution of marriage, Americans are working out how to balance competing priorities, the desire for “social stability and tradition” with concerns for “their own freedom to form and leave unions and further their own individual happiness” (351). Americans wrestle, as did Pateman, Astell and Wollstonecraft, with the delicate balance between their needs as individuals versus their obligations and duties to their family.

In comments regarding marriage in a paper presented at the Aristotelian Society in 2013, Clare Chambers states, “Currently, it [marriage] is associated with gendered division of labour, with women taking on the lion’s share of domestic and caring work and being paid less than men for work outside the home” (125). Though the legal status of wife as a subordinated position has been overturned, tradition dies hard, and women are still expected to perform the majority of family duties. To ensure their individual happiness and to promote the freedom and equality of women is it best to extend rights and contract to all levels and sectors of society, public and private? Should the justice of the public realm be applied to the management of the private sphere as the Pythagorean women philosophers recommended centuries ago? Ruth Abbey in her article suggests feminist hold a variety views with some advocating for the extension of justice

into the private realm, while others fear the imposition of the state in the private affairs of the family (78 80). Pateman too wonders if people truly want to implement a “contractarian conception of social life,” one that maintains that “there is contact ‘all the way down’; social life is nothing more than contract between individuals” (Pateman 59).

In the United States, Estin maintains that efforts have been made to encourage marriage given evidence that suggest, “children raised within marriage generally do better than children raised in other settings” (346). However, many factors impact the success of a child, and in the same article Estin maintains that higher rates of marriage occur amongst wealthier and more educated people (352). Many would also consider the level of parental education and availability to economic resources as contributing to the success of a child. Another attribute of marriage that may contribute to a young person’s success and well-being is the commitment, duty and obligation that members exhibit to one another within a family. Does this commitment require traditional marriage or does a loving committed relations of individuals co-habiting provide such an environment? Perhaps full women’s equality and liberation from the status of wife will only occur if society through legal reform and cultural changes accepts and embraces all families, opposite-sex, same-sex, cohabitating, single parent and grandparent households. In these families, the assumption-laden status of husband and wife becomes irrelevant and is replaced with caring parent and significant other.

And what of relations between individuals in the family? Is it best to dispense with obligation, duty, and care for other members in the family, be it child, spouse or parent. Is it best to apply justice to all aspects of the private realm or should the idea promoted by Astell and Wollstonecraft that family members have a duty and obligation to care for each other be retained in the private sphere? But what of the individuals who accept the responsibilities of the private

sphere obligations without compensation for their energy of love and for the loss of their own economic well-being in the public sphere?

Pateman and Wollstonecraft recognize the interdependency of the public and private sphere. Both suggest that the operation of the public sphere depends on certain functions in the private sphere. Pateman suggests that the worker in the public sphere of Western capitalistic societies assumes a wife in the private sphere providing free labor to support her husband. Wollstonecraft argues that good citizenry in the public sphere depends on the cultivation of virtue in the private sphere. Astell and Wollstonecraft are correct that obligation and duties of family members to care for their loved ones is important. Equally important is to ensure the well-being and the future potential of those family members, men and women, that remain in the private sphere or limit their opportunities in the public sphere to fulfill these duties. In this case, perhaps the operation of the public sphere must be modified to ensure the cultivation of this duty and obligation so essential to the dynamics of the private sphere and the well-being of all individuals.

### **Note**

1. Non-jurors were Anglican clergy that refused to swear allegiance to William III crowned in 1688 after the abdication of the Roman Catholic James II. William Sancroft was a key leader in this movement of passive disobedience.

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