"The Pleasures of the Mind": Themes in Early Feminist Literature in England, 1660-1730

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by Carol Bethune

Shortened Version of Thesis Title:

"The Pleasures of the Mind":
Feminist Literature in England, 1660-1730

Abstract

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This thesis examines the writing in poetry and prose of a small group of English feminist writers of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The best known of these authors was Mary Astell (1666-1731). The influence on the feminists' use of the philosophies of Descartes and of the most prominent English thinkers of the period, the Cambridge Platonists, is described.

The thesis focuses on three main themes in the seventeenth century feminists' writing. These were occupation, education and marriage. Emphasis is put on education as the most important of the feminists' concerns. They believed that the poor education women received in comparison with that received by men put women at a disadvantage in society in general and in personal relationships with men. They also believed that education was vital for personal happiness and spiritual fulfilment. In their writing about occupation, the feminists stated that the things that middle and upper class women were expected to do were unfulfilling. They wanted the right to occupy themselves with reading and writing without facing ridicule. On the subject of marriage the feminists' main concern also centred around education. They believed that women were at a disadvantage in the marriage relationship because they were not as well educated as their husbands. They thought that more equitable marriages were desirable, and that they would exist if women were better educated.

Abrégé

"Les plaisirs de l'espirit"
Les Thèmes du début de la littérature féministe en Angleterre:
1660-1730

Ce mémoire étudie les écrits en vers et en prose d'un petit groupe d'écrivains féministes anglais de la fin du dix-septième et du début du dix-huitième siècle; la plus connue étant Mary Astell (1666-1731). On y décrit l'influence de la philosophie de Descartes sur la pensée féministe; de même que l'influence des plus importants penseurs anglais de cette époque, les Platoniciens de Cambridge

Cette etude analyse trois thèmes principaux des écrits féministes du dix-septième siecle les activités, l'éducation et le mariage. Toutefois, une attention particulière sera portée à l'éducation, la préoccupation la plus importante des féministes. Ceux-ci croient que l'éducation médiocre que reçoivent les femmes, comparativement aux hommes, les désavantage au sien de la société et dans leurs relations personnelles avec les hommes De plus, les féministes pensent qu'une bonne éducation joue un rôle primordial dans la recherche du bonheur et dans l'épanouissement spirituel. Dans les écrits concernant les activités, les féministes affirment que les occupations assignées aux femmes de la classe moyenne et de l'aristocratie sont peu satisfaisantes. Elles réclament la liberté de lire et d'écrire sans se couvrir de ridicule Pour ce qui est du mariage, le souci principal des féministes gravite une fois de plus autour de l'éducation. Ne recevant pas une education aussi solide que leurs époux, les femmes sont placées dans une situation désavantageuse au sein du femmes sont placées dans une situation désavantageuse au sein du mariage. Les féministes coient qu'une meilleure éducation pour la femme établirait un équilibre souhaitable dans le mariage.

For Dorothy Webley Laugher

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In the interest of clarity, spelling and capitalization in all quotations in this thesis has been modernized.

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Introduction

> That the pleasures of the mind are infinitely preferable to those of sense, intellectual delights, the joys of thought, and the complacencies arising from a bright and enlarged understanding, transcendently greater and more satisfactory than those of the body, than those that owe their original to animal life, has, through all ages, been an acknowledged truth, a truth that comes attended with all the convincing evidences that can be desired, and will soon be found to be undeniably so by all such as will be at the pains of making the experiment.[1]
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> -Mary Chudleigh, *Essays on Several Subjects*, 1710

The debate about the nature and proper status in society of women dates back to the origins of western literature. However, before the mid sixteenth century almost all of this writing was done by men. In the mid sixteenth century in England, women entered the debate for the first time.[2] By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the time of Lady Mary Chudleigh who is quoted above, this debate had become centred around the philosophic ideas inspired by the scientific discoveries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, often called the Scientific Revolution. Mary Chudleigh was one of a small group of women who described what they thought their place should be, in the terms of the changing philosophic ideas of the seventeenth century. Her separation of the intellectual and the physical, and her emphasis on the importance of the former at the expense of the latter in the opening statement of her book of essays shows the influence of one of the most important of seventeenth century thinkers, René Descartes. He believed in the separate natures of body and mind, and

[1]Mary Chudleigh, *Essays on Several Subjects*. (London, 1710), p i.
[2]Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus, *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640* (Chicago, 1985) p 20

in the thinking faculty as the thing which defined human existence. Mary Chudleigh's statement also shows the influence of the most prominent group of English philosophers of the seventeenth century, the Cambridge Platonists.

The Scientific Revolution put new philosophical tools in the hands of women as well as men. Its emphasis on change, on judging everything by the criterion of reason and discarding anything that did not live up to reason's standards allowed them to argue that women's situation, especially their education, should change. They argued that if the "pleasures of the mind" were indeed the most important part of life, women should not be excluded from their enjoyment. Mary Chudleigh's statement about this, and her book of meditations on such subjects as truth, love and justice, served to claim a place for herself and other women in this new order.

The first essay to appear in Chudleigh's book, called "Of Knowledge," echoes the views of Mary Astell, the most prominent of the authors who formed the loosely associated group of which Chudleigh was a member, and who has been called England's "first feminist"[3] by modern historians. Mary Astell's writing, published after the civil war, was different from women's writing before 1640. Writing by women about women in the period between 1540 and 1640 was generally in response to misogynist pamphlets which were written in the Renaissance style but rehashed accusations that dated back much further of shrewishness, extravagance, vanity and other sins.[4] The writers who responded to these attacks are not considered "feminist" by historians because they did not call for change in women's roles.[5] In the period after 1640, women's writing about women changed. There were fewer

[3]Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago, 1986), p 98
[4]Henderson, p 24
[5]Henderson, p 30

responses to attacks on women, although these were still written, and more original works of poetry and prose. It is in this period that women's historians seeking the origins of English feminist thought have placed it.

This requires a definition of what is meant by "feminist" in this context, since it was not a contemporary term. The word "feminism" was first used in the late nineteenth century, but it has since come to be used to indicate an attitude or sensibility that can be seen in women's writing in earlier periods. Hilda Smith defined it as view of women as a group "whose social and political position linked them together more surely than their physical or psychological natures."[6] It also contains the idea that the social and political position of women was subject to criticism and could be changed [7] Since it could be argued that women's social and political positions were a result of their being grouped together by their physical natures, perhaps this could better be expressed as a view that the social and political positions that women customarily occupied because of a perception that their physical, spiritual and intellectual natures were inferior, were subject to criticism and could be changed. Mary Astell wrote, "Custom cannot authorise a practice if reason condemns it, the following a multitude is no excuse for the doing of evil "[8] This idea, inspired by the philosophy of the Scientific Revolution, was the foundation of her feminist thought. Along with this rejection of traditions that subordinate women, feminism includes an identification with other women, the desire of the feminist to make changes to benefit other women besides herself.[9] Mary Astell called herself a "lover of her sex," one who wanted as a result of her writing not her own fame but

[6] Hilda Smith, *Reason's Disciples* (Chicago, 1982), p 4
[7] Smith, p 7
[8] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Part II. (London, 1701), Reprint (New York, 1970), p 73. All subsequent references are to this edition
[9] Bonnie S Anderson and Judith P Zinsser, *A History of Their Own*, Volume II. (New York, 1988) p 334-335

"the pleasure of seeing you [women] wise and happy."[10] Though its goals and the method of achieving them have changed over the centuries, feminism has been characterized by a rejection of traditions that subordinate women, an identification with other women, and a hope for a better future for women.[11] Since Mary Astell and her contemporaries expressed all these ideas, it is accurate to call them feminists

Another one of Mary Astell's beliefs was that women did not get enough attention from historians for their achievements. In 1705 she wrote:

> Since the men being the historians, they seldom condescend to record the great and good actions of women, and when they take notice of them, 'tis with this wise remark, that such women acted above their sex. By which one must suppose they would have their readers understand, that they were not women who did those great actions, but that they were men in petticoats![12]

In the course of her lifetime, Astell revealed many such insights, but in this case her comments about historians and what they chose to record proved to be prophetic, since she and other contemporary women authors received little attention in the period between the mid eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is ironic in light of the comment above that the first historian who did pay attention to Astell and her fellow female writers was George Ballard (1706-1755), who published a book called *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain Who have been Celebrated for their Writings or Skill in the Learned Languages, Arts and Sciences* in 1752. A second edition of this book was published in 1775. The most important issue concerning women in George Ballard's day had been whether women could write books as well as men, and this was what he sought to prove by writing about intellectual

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[10] Astell, *Serious Proposal* , Part I, title page ,and Part II, p 52.
[11] Anderson and Zinsser, Vol II, p 335-336.
[12] Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion as Professed by a Daughter of the Church*. (London, 1705), p 293.

women [13] However, by the late eighteenth century feminist ideas were changing In the writing of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) and in the women's movements that followed in the nineteenth century, the emphasis shifted from private education to equal political and legal rights for women, including the right to public education.[14] Where earlier feminists sought private solutions, these feminists believed that the state should be the agency for women's emancipation In the course of these changes the ideas of Mary Astell and her contemporaries became outdated and they were almost forgotten. One person who wrote something about Mary Astell in the early nineteenth century was Lady Louisa Stuart, granddaughter of Astell's friend Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. According to Lady Louisa, Astell was "a very pious, exemplary woman, and a profound scholar," one whose "first wish it was to demonstrate. .the mental equality of the sexes." Though Lady Louisa had seen her grandmother's copy of one of Mary Astell's books, she believed they were generally "long out of print and forgotten."[15]

Despite the long neglect, interest in the late seventeenth century feminists revived in the first two decades of the twentieth century. By this time women had gained access to higher education, and some women historians began seeking information about early English feminists. Among their works were a biography of Mary Astell, an edition of the poetry of

[13] *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752) by George Ballard, edited by Ruth Perry (Detroit, 1985), p 32 This, the first reprint since 1775, contains biographical information on Ballard and is a very useful edition of this important source on late seventeenth century women authors

[14] Bonnie S Anderson and Judith P Zinsser, *A History of Their Own*, Volume II (New York, 1988) p 346-349

[15] Lady Louisa Stuart, Introductory Anecdotes to *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, ed. Lord Wharncliffe (London, 1835) Second Edition ed. W. Moy Thomas, (London, 1893), Vol I p 84-85

Anne, Countess of Winchilsea and an account of learned ladies in England, 1650-1760, which included Mary Astell and Mary Chudleigh.[16]

The most recent period of interest in early modern feminism, which included reprints of the books mentioned above, began with the new activity in the women's movement in the 1960s. Several books about the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century feminists were written in the 1980s. Among these, *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth Century English Feminists* (1982) by Hilda Smith, and *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England* (1982) by Katherine Rogers are useful on the origins and manifestations of feminist expression between the English civil war and the radicalism surrounding the French Revolution. Smith describes the social setting and intellectual background to early feminist writing, and tells about the lives and work of individual authors in the period 1650 to 1720. Rogers describes the two philosophical viewpoints important for this era, rationalism and sentimentalism, and tells about the feminist adherents of each. This book is a good companion to Smith's since it continues the chronological story of early modern feminism and shows how it was influenced by changing ideas in the wider world of philosophical speculation and by changing literary genres, most importantly the growing popularity of the novel as as a form used by women. On individual lives of the feminists, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* by Ruth Perry (1986) stands out as an excellent biography of England's first feminist. Also, many anthologies and reprints of primary material have made sources more accessible to students.[17]

[16]Works include. Florence Smith, *Mary Astell* (New York, 1916), 2nd Edition (New York, 1966), Myra Reynolds, *The Learned Lady in England, 1650-1760* (Cambridge, 1920) 2nd Edition (Gloucester, Mass., 1964)Myra Reynolds, ed. *The Poems of Anne, Countess of Winchilsea* (Chicago, 1903).

[17]Anthologies include Moira Ferguson, ed *First Feminists British Women Writers 1578-1799* (Bloomington, 1985) Dale Spender and Janet Todd, eds. *An Anthology of British Women Writers*, (London, 1989 Roger

In the work that had been done, the main focus has been to consider the lives and works of the feminist authors separately, often listing them in chronological order.[18] Smith and Rogers use chronological organization, as do the anthologies. Though this approach is useful, it does not provide a complete picture of seventeenth century feminism. Many of the seventeenth century feminist authors knew each other, and had similar ideas about women despite differences in other aspects of their lives. It is necessary for an understanding of seventeenth century feminism to go beyond separate biographies of the authors and to compare their writing on thematic lines.

There were three main themes in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century feminist writing: occupation, education and marriage. These same themes were repeated over and over, in books of poetry and prose by authors of both middle and upper class social backgrounds, some of whom held different political and religious opinions from others. Obviously these were compelling issues to seventeenth century female writers who were concerned about the lives of their fellow middle and upper class women, and thus deserve consideration by historians of early modern women.

Lonsdale, ed *Eighteenth Century Women Poets* (Oxford, 1990).
Germaine Greer, ed *Kissng the Rod. An Anthology of Seventeenth Century Women's Verse* (New York, 1989)
Reprints include Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (London, 1701), reprint (New York, 1970) and *Reflections on Marriage* (London, 1730) reprint (New York, 1970) Elizabeth Elstob, *Apology for the Study of Northern Antiquities* (London, 1715), reprint (Los Angeles, 1956) and *Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue* (London, 1715), reprint (Menston, 1968) Bathsua Makin, *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen* (London, 1674), reprint (Los Angeles,1980) Sarah Fyge Egerton, *The Female Advocate*, (London, 1686) reprint (Los Angeles,1976) and *Poems on Several Occasions*, (London, 1703), reprint (Delmar, NY, 1987) Also included is the first reprint of Ballard since 1775 (See Note 11)

[18]For example, Angeline Goreau, Chapter 3 "The Female Pen," in *The Whole Duty of a Woman Female Writers in Seventeenth Century England* (Garden City, NY), 1985

The common thread in all the seventeenth century feminists' work was that of education. The "pleasures of the mind" played an important part in each of their lives, and they wanted to convince other women that education could be important to them as well.

Chapter 1

The Authors

To Almystrea, [Mary Astell] on her Divine Works

Too long! indeed, has been our sex decried,
And ridiculed by men's malignant pride;
Who, fearing of a just return, forbore,
And made it criminal to teach us more.
That women had no souls was their pretence,
And women's spelling passed for women's sense.
When you, most generous heroine! stood forth,
And showed your sex's aptitude and worth.
Were it no more, yet you, bright maid, alone
Might for a world of vanity atone!
Redeem the coming age! and set us free
From the false brand of incapacity.[1]

- Elizabeth Thomas, *Miscellany Poems*, 1722

There are nine authors whose works will form the focus of this study. These are Mary Astell, (1666-1731), Lady Mary Chudleigh (1656-1710), Sarah Fyge Egerton, (1670-1723), Elizabeth Elstob (1687-1765), Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea (1661-1720), Bathsua Makin (1608? -1675?), Lady Damaris Masham (1658-1708), Elizabeth Thomas (1675-1731), and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, (1689-1762). The writings of Daniel Defoe, (1660-1731) on women are also important. All of the authors, with the exception of Makin, were born in the thirty-three years between 1656 and 1689. Defoe is obviously another exception as the only man on the list. The feminist writings of these two generations of women deal with many of the same themes and ideas, despite some differences in their ages, social

[1]Elizabeth Thomas, *Miscellany Poems*, (London, 1722) in Roger Lonsdale, ed. *Eighteenth Century Women Poets* (Oxford, 1990) p 43. This poem was probably written earlier than the publication date, since Thomas and Astell had a falling out over politics sometime around 1700

backgrounds, and religious and political opinions. This chapter will briefly describe their individual lives, and also their common inspirations and their influences on each other.

Though their feminism sets them apart from most of the other authors of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, these writers were naturally influenced by the intellectual climate of their time. This climate was shaped by changes that had taken place over the preceeding two centuries. These changes, often called the Scientific Revolution, led to the rejection of scholasticism, which dominated centuries of Western thought, and its replacement with a new way of thinking about both the physical world and human life.

Scholasticism incorporated ideas from pre-Christian antiquity and early Christianity. Writers like St. Thomas Aquinas were able to combine Aristotle with St. Paul and St. Augustine to form a philosophy in which the way things in the physical world worked was less important than their metaphysical status, or in other words what their position was in the divinely-created hierarchy of everything in the heavens and on the earth.[2] For example, it was believed that the heavenly bodies such as the sun and the moon were perfectly spherical and unalterable. Observations made by Galileo using a telescope of lunar mountains and sun spots showed that this was not true, but the scholastic philosophers refused to accept this and other scientific discoveries based on observation because they contradicted authorities such as Aristotle whose ideas were so important to the scholastic world view.

The scientific discoveries of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and the failure of the existing philosophy to change to accomodate

[2]Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background* (New York, 1962), p. 12-15.

them led to the development of new philosophic ideas. The new thinkers rejected reliance on Aristotle and other ancient authorities and in their place put reliance on human reason as the guide to truth. Scripture and other ancient writings remained important, but they were no longer the sole sources of truth about the world or about human life Nature, which had been considered the realm of Satan by some medieval theologians, was regarded by sixteenth and seventeenth century thinkers such as Francis Bacon as good rather than evil, a place, along with Scripture, in which God revealed himself to humanity.

The most influential of the new philosophers in England in the seventeenth century were a group known as the Cambridge Platonists. They were called this because they were associated with Emmanuel College at Cambridge university, and because they accepted the ideas of Plato and his disciples in place of the ancient philosophers favoured by the scholastics. This group included Henry More, Ralph Cudworth, Benjamin Whichcote and John Smith. The Platonists' most important concern was to reconcile the scientific discoveries of the previous century with Christian theology. They believed in the importance of reason, which they called "the candle of the Lord"[3] in understanding religion. They believed that faith was not in opposition to rationality, but that they worked together to reveal religious truth. Their adoption of the view of nature as divine instead of evil also meant that the further explorations of natural science being carried out in the seventeenth century did not endanger their Christian faith.

The Platonists thought it was important for Christians to practice their religion, but they were opposed to excessive religious enthusiasm and sectarian disputes over small points of belief or forms of worship. They

[3]C A Patrides, ed *The Cambridge Platonists* (London, 1969), p 12

disliked enthusiasm because it displaced reason with emotion, "hot, wild imagination," as Henry More wrote.[4] They were against arguments over small points of belief because they led to intolerance. Ralph Cudworth said in 1647 in a sermon preached to the House of Commons, a place that would continue to see a great deal of sectarian dispute despite him, that Christ came to inspire love towards God and ethical behaviour, not to spark "angry and peevish debates" over how religion should be practiced.[5] Instead, the Platonists were in favour of toleration among Christians. They allowed "a great freedom both in philosophy and in divinity, from whence they were called men of latitude."[6] Their philosophy of toleration has become known as "latitudinarianism."

Feminist authors were attracted to the Cambridge Platonists' belief in the rationality of the Christian religion, and in the importance of reason rather than authority. Of particular importance to the feminists were John Norris and Ralph Cudworth. Norris was an Anglican clergyman. Though he was educated at Oxford rather than Cambridge, he was a well-known Platonist thinker, sometimes considered the last Cambridge Platonist.[7] He corresponded with Mary Astell, Mary Chudleigh and Elizabeth Thomas. Ralph Cudworth was the father of Damaris Masham, and thus an important intellectual influence.

Biographical information about the seventeenth century feminists is now available in several places. The following biographies are therefore brief, focusing on the social origins, education, marriages, politics and religion of

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[4]Patrides, p. 24

[5]Ralph Cudworth, "A Sermon Preached Before the House of Commons, March 31, 1647," in Patrides, p. 96

[6]Gilbert Burnet, *A History of his Own Time* (London, 1724), p. 188, in Patrides, p. 39

[7]Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago, 1986), p. 73

the authors, where they are known, and give the names of their published works.

Bathsua Makin (1608?-1675?)

Bathsua Makin is the only author of a pre-civil war generation on the list. She is included among these other authors because her book on women's education, *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen*, was published in 1673. Little is known about her life. She was born around 1608 to John Pell, rector of Southwick in Sussex, and his wife Mary Holland.[8] There is no record of who her husband was, or how she was educated, but by the age of thirty she was known for her achievements in languages and mathematics. She became tutor to Princess Elizabeth around 1641, possibly until the latter's death in 1650. Makin was unable to collect a pension awarded to her by the royal family because of the civil war and was unable to collect it after 1660 either, so she had to establish a school and keep on teaching to support herself. Her ideas about women's education were influenced by Anna Maria van Schurman of Utrect, a famous female scholar of the early seventeenth century, with whom Makin corresponded.[9] Around the time of the publication of her *Essay* on women's education, Makin was running a school for girls near London which offered instruction in Latin and other academic subjects as well as more traditionally feminine subjects.

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[8]J.R. Brink, "Bathsua Makin. Educator and Linguist (1608?-1675?)." in J.R. Brink, ed. *Female Scholars* (Montreal, 1980), p 87.
[9]Paula L. Barbour, Introduction to *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen* Reprint, (Los Angeles, 1980), p iii-iv.

Lady Mary Chudleigh (1656-1710)

Mary Lee, later Lady Chudleigh, was the child of Richard Lee, Esq. of Winslade in Devon. George Ballard's comment on her education in *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752) was "She had an education in which literature seems not to have been considered as a thing principally to be regarded, being taught no other language than her native tongue. But her own love of books, her great industry in the reading of them and her great capacity to improve herself by them enabled her to make a very considerable figure among the literati of her time."[10]

In 1674, when she was seventeen, she married Sir George Chudleigh, Baronet, of Ashton, near Exeter, in Devon. The marriage does not appear to have been a happy one. However, by her own account she had ample time to devote to her books and writing.[11]

Lady Chudleigh published both poetry and a book of essays. Her poem *The Ladies Defence; or, the Bride-Woman's Counsellor answered* (1700) was a response to a wedding sermon in which the preacher commanded women to obedience of their husbands. Her next book was *Poems on Several Occasions*, (1703). The second edition of this included *The Ladies Defence* (1709), later editions came out in 1713, 1722 and 1750. Her *Essays on Several Subjects* (1710) contained both prose and poetry.

Mary Chudleigh corresponded with fellow feminist author Elizabeth Thomas. She corresponded with and also visited John Norris.[12] She was an admirer of Mary Astell, to whom she wrote a poem in tribute.

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[10]George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (London, 1752) Reprint: Ruth Perry, ed (Detroit, 1985), p 353

[11] Lonsdale, p 2

[12]Richard Acworth, *The Philosophy of John Norris of Bemerton, (1657-1712)* (New York, 1979), p 10

Lady Damaris Masham (1658-1708)

Damaris[13] Cudworth, born in Cambridge in 1658, was the daughter of Platonist philosopher Ralph Cudworth who was Master of Christ's College, Cambridge. She remembered growing up in the intellectual atmosphere of the Cambridge Platonists, her father's friends.[14] Unlike some of the other authors she received a good education. Her father encouraged her intellecutal interests by hiring tutors for her, one of whom was John Locke. At this time Locke and Cudworth established a friendship that lasted until Locke's death in 1704. Damaris Cudworth became "closer to Locke than any other human being,"[15] thus it is not surprising that he was her most important intellectual influence next to her father. After her marriage to Sir Francis Masham in 1685, Locke became a frequent guest at Oates, their home in Essex. In 1691, when his health made it impossible for him to live in London any longer, Locke moved in with the Mashams and remained there for the rest of his life. Sir Francis was probably not as interested in philosphical speculation as his wife was, despite this he bacame friends with Locke as well and the marriage appears to have been a happy one.[16]

John Locke thought highly of Damaris Masham's abilities. In 1691 he described her to a friend,

> The lady... is so much occupied with study and reflection on theological and philosophical matters, that you could find few men with whom you might associate with greater profit and pleasure. Her judgement is

[13]This was a family name, borne by her mother Damaris Cradock Cudworth.
[14]Damaris Cudworth (later Masham) to John Locke, March 9,1682. in E.S. de Beer, ed. *Correspondence of John Locke*, Volume II (Oxford, 1976), p 493. There are 41 letters from Masham to Locke between 1682 and 1691. Most of his to her have been lost, only 5 remain.
[15]Maurice Cranston, *John Locke* (London, 1957), p 215.
[16]Cranston, p 343-344.

> singularly keen, and I know few men capable of discussing with such insight the most abstruse subjects, such as are beyond the grasp, I do not say of women, but even of most educated men, and of resolving the difficulties they present She was formerly much given to reading, which the weakness of her eyes now hampers, but her mental acumen amply makes up for this.[17]

Damaris Masham became involved in a theological debate with John Norris and Mary Astell, their position being different from that of Locke. She published *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1696) in response to the Norris/Astell *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1694). Masham's book, published anonymously, was attributed to Locke by John Norris. She also published *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Virtuous or Christian Life* (1705). Despite her disagreement with Astell on politics and certain theological points, the two shared many of the same views on women's education and marriage.

Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea (1661-1720)

Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, was born at Sydmonton, Southampton. Her father Sir William Kingsmill was descended from an old Hampshire family. Her mother's name was Anne Haslewood [18] There is no record of her education, which she probably received at home

In 1683, at the age of twenty-two, she became Maid of Honour to Mary of Modena, wife of the Duke of York, who became James II at the death of his brother Charles I in 1685. While at court in this capacity she met her future husband Heneage Finch, (1657-1726) who was a gentleman

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[17]John Locke to Philippus van Limborch, March 13, 1691 E S de Beer, ed. *Correspondence of John Locke*, Vol IV, (Oxford, 1976), p 237-238
[18]Lonsdale, p 4

of the bedchamber to the duke of York and the uncle of the earl of Winchilsea. They were married in 1684. After the 1688 revolution in which James II was deposed, Heneage Finch refused to take the oath of allegiance to the new monarchs William and Mary, thus ending his career in government. The Finches left London, and in 1690, on the invitation of the earl of Winchilsea they settled at the family seat at Eastwell, Kent.[19] Heneage Finch encouraged his wife's writing. The Finch family had already produced one intellectual woman of note in the seventeenth century, Anne Finch, Lady Conway, who corresponded with Henry More and other prominent thinkers

Anne Finch's marriage was a very happy one, and the rural life suited both partners. For the sake of her poetry it is probably fortunate that she had to leave court, since she noted that a "versifying Maid of Honour" was frowned upon there, and this discouragement had almost caused her to abandon her writing.[20] Despite their devotion to quiet country life the Finches kept up an extensive literary acquaintance. Other women poets she knew included Elizabeth Rowe and the Countess of Hertford. She also knew Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, with whom she exchanged verses about the *Rape of the Lock*.

Her poetry enjoyed reasonable success as it started to circulate in miscellanies, which were volumes of poetry by various authors.[21] One volume was published in her lifetime, *Miscellany Poems on Several Occasions* (1713). She held back many of her more personal poems from publication, leaving them in a manuscript folio volume, seemingly intended for

[19]Katharine Rogers, ed *Selected Poems of Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea.* (New York, 1979), p ix-x
[20]Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, "The Preface " in Rogers, *Selected Poems*, p 9.
[21]Lonsdale, p 5

publication after her death. Although she continued to receive attention in the eighteenth century from compilers of poetry, these did not appear until 1903.[22] In the nineteenth century, her natural descriptions and unmannered style were particularly admired by Wordsworth.[23] Interest in her as a feminist author began in the early twentieth century.

Mary Astell (1666-1731)

Mary Astell is probably the best known of the seventeenth century feminists. She was born in 1666 in Newcastle, where her father Peter Astell was a coal merchant. The Astells had been middle class for several generations before her birth and had long standing connections to the Hostmen's guild, which controlled the coal trade. Both her father and her mother, Mary Errington, also had connections to the landed gentry of Northumberland. While her father lived, her family enjoyed a comfortable life. However, he died when Mary was twelve, and her mother had to struggle to make ends meet for her daughter and her husband's maiden aunt, also called Mary Astell, who lived with the family. Mary Astell's brother's career was taken care of by relatives. He followed in the footsteps of many of his male relations and became a lawyer.[24]

It is not known how Mary Astell was able to get what formal education she had. She was a studious young girl, so probably did not need much urging to read as many books as she could get her hands on. She was likely taught by her uncle Ralph Astell, who was a curate. He directed her

[22]Rogers, *Selected Poems*, p xiii
[23]Lonsdale, p 6
[24] Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* p 29-40

towards royalist sympathies and the ideas of the Cambridge Platonists, among whom was Damaris Masham's father Ralph Cudworth.[25]

Mary Astell probably abandoned any hope of marriage during her teens, since her father's death meant that she would not have an adequate dowry to marry a man of her own social class, and she would not marry beneath her. When she was twenty-one, she did something that was very unusual for a single woman of the middle class. She left her family in Newcastle, travelled to London and settled there, where she lived for the rest of her life. Why she did this is uncertain, she may have been seeking to escape from the humiliating life of a single woman, a burden on her relations. She may have been seeking a community of intellectuals that she did not have in Newcastle

Once in London, after an initially difficult period, she was able to find enough financial support and a group of friends both female and male who encouraged her writing. Mary Astell is generally considered the "first feminist" of modern English history, the first woman to write systematically about women's problems and what the solutions to them should be. Her writing is distinguished by its vigour and forthrightness. She had a gift for pointed sarcasm, which she used at the expense of men's attitudes towards and treatment of women throughout her works. She published nine books, on politics and religion as well as those chiefly concerned with the position of women. Her most important ones concerned with women were *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies Part II* (1697), *Letters Concerning the Love of God, Between the author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris* (1695), *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*

[25]Perry, p 46-51.

(1700), and *The Christian Religion, As Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England* (1705).

Other feminist authors looked to Astell for inspiration. Both Elizabeth Thomas and Mary Chudleigh wrote poems expressing their admiration for her. Part of Thomas' poem is quoted above.

Sarah Fyge Egerton (1670-1723)

Sarah Fyge was born four years after Mary Astell, in 1670. Her father was Thomas Fyge, Esq., a physician in London who was descended from a family at Winslow, Buckinghamshire, which owned land there. Her mother's name was Mary Beacham.[26] There is no evidence of her education. She claimed she was a precocious child who was writing poetry around the age of fourteen. If her father helped her become educated, he did not approve of all the results. Her first published work of poetry was *The Female Advocate*, (1686), a response to the misogynist poem *Love Given O'er* by Robert Gould. The appearance of the book led her father to send her out of London to stay with relatives in the country. However, this discouragement did not stop her from writing and publishing poetry. She contributed to two books of poems in 1700, and published her own *Poems on Several Occasions* in 1703.

She was married twice, neither time particularly happily. Her first husband was Edward Field, a lawyer. After his death she married Rev. Thomas Egerton, whom she unsuccessfully sued for divorce on grounds of cruelty.[27]

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[26]Lonsdale, p 26

[27]Constance Clark, Introduction to the reprint of Sarah Fyge Egerton, *Poems on Several Occasions (1703)*, (Delmar, NY, 1987), p 3-7

Elizabeth Thomas (1675- 1731)

Like Sarah Fyge Egerton, Elizabeth Thomas was born in London. Her father was also a professional. He was a lawyer of the Inner Temple, named Emmanuel Thomas. Thomas's father did not participate in her education since he died when she was very young. However, she remembered a very early interest in reading, which was encouraged by her mother Elizabeth Osborne Thomas Elizabeth Thomas wrote about herself as a child, "Give her a book, and she would sit poring over it from noon to night, without knowing one letter This early passion was improved by her mother, who, herself, taught her how to read betimes: so that before she was five years old, she had read the whole Bible three times over; and before she was six, finished the little learning that was ever bestowed on her; which was some Latin, writing and arithmetic...She transcribed chapters, compiled little common-place books, and was forever a scribling."[28]

She continued to improve her education in adulthood, with the assistance of John Norris' advice. She introduced herself to Norris in 1696 by sending him an ode dedicated to him which she had written, and asked his advice about how to proceed with her studies, which he gave her.[29] He suggested that she should read Malebranche's *Recherche de la Verité*, then Descartes, and a number of other books including Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* He also gave her directions on how to teach herself French so she would be able to read in that languages as well as English.[30] Thomas

[28]Elizabeth Thomas, "The Life of Corinna" *Pylades and Corinna* (London, 1731), p viii
[29]Acworth, p 11
[30]John Norris to Elizabeth Thomas, No date. *Pylades and Corinna*, p 203-205.

also wrote to John Dryden, who suggested to her the literary name "Corinna," which she adopted.[31]

Elizabeth Thomas corresponded with feminist author Mary Chudleigh, who also knew John Norris. She became acquainted with Mary Astell through Norris, and wrote a poem addressed to her, quoted above, though apparently the two women did not become close because Astell did not like Thomas's politics, finding her "too much a Williamite," according to Norris' wife.[32]

Thomas was never married. She had a very long engagement of sixteen years to Richard Gwinnett, who wanted to defer marriage until he could support her well. Unfortunately, he died shortly after coming into his estate, before the couple could be married. He left her £600 in his will, but due to the interference of his family she was only able to collect about £200 of this. She spent the last decade of her life struggling against bankruptcy, being imprisoned for debt from 1727-29.

Her published works include an anonymous poem contributed in Dryden's memory to *Luctus Britannici* (1700). She published her *Miscellany Poems* in 1722, (editions 1726, 1727). Her last book was *The Metamorphosis of the Town: or, A View of the Present Fashions* (1730). Her correspondence with Gwinnett and other letters and works by both of them, including an incomplete autobiography by Thomas, were published posthumously in two volumes, *Pylades and Corinna* (1731) and *The Honourable Lovers, or Pylades and Corinna* (1732).[33]

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[31]John Dryden to Elizabeth Thomas, November 12, 1699 "The Life of Corinna" in *Pylades and Corinna*, p i. Dryden does not give any reason why he thought this would be an appropriate name

[32]Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p 42

[33]Lonsdale, 32-33

Elizabeth Elstob (1683-1756)

Elizabeth Elstob, born in Newcastle like Mary Astell, devoted her intellectual life primarily to the study of the Anglo-Saxon language. Her defenses of women's learning were written as part of her books which were translations of Anglo-Saxon writings, and an Anglo-Saxon grammar. Her other important contribution to early modern feminism was in inspiring George Ballard to write his *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain who have been Celebrated for their Writings or Skill in the Learned Languages, Arts and Sciences*, (1752) a "landmark in the history of feminism," which gave accounts of varying lengths about over sixty learned English women from the middle ages to the late seventeenth century.[34]

Like Elizabeth Thomas, Elizabeth Elstob remembered a love of books that began early in her life. "From her childhood she was a great lover of books, which being observed by her mother, who was also a great admirer of learning, especially in her own sex, there was nothing wanting for her improvement, so long as her mother lived " However, her parents died when she was a child and she was raised by her uncle, Rev. Charles Elstob, D.D., prebendary of Canterbury, of whom she wrote that he, "was no friend to women's learning." Her requests to him for more education were "being always put off with that common and vulgar saying, that one tongue is enough for a woman " However, despite her uncle's discouragement she continued to read and study, and eventually she was credited with having mastered seven languages.[35]

[34]Perry, ed Introduction to George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*, p 13 and 21.
[35]Mary Elizabeth Green, "Elizabeth Elstob "The Saxon Nymph" (1683-1756) " in J R Brink, ed *Female Scholars*, (Montreal, 1980) p 144.

In 1702 she went to live with her brother William in London. The contrast between their formal educations is striking. William was at Eton for five years, then briefly at Cambridge, and finally at Queen's College, Oxford, a centre of Saxon learning. It was probably from him that Elizabeth learned Old English. During the period from 1702 until William's death in 1715 the Elstobs lived together and worked on Anglo-Saxon texts. Her work was also supported by the scholar George Hickes, but he also died in 1715.[36]

During her productive period Elizabeth Elstob published *An English-Saxon Homily on the Birthday of St Gregory* (1709), her first Anglo-Saxon translation. In the Preface to this book she defended women's learning, and the usefulness of the study of Anglo-Saxon.[37] She also wrote *The Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue* (1715), which was her last complete book. Her next project was to have been a collection of the Anglo-Saxon homilies of Aelfric, Archbishop of Canterbury. However, her brother's death left her without a way to support herself and continue her work. Very little is known about her life between the years 1718 and 1735, except that she struggled with poverty, and may have been in debt. The story picks up again in 1735, when George Ballard found Elstob teaching in a small school in Worcestershire. Ballard had been directed to find her when he became interested in learning Anglo-Saxon himself.[38] He and his friend Sarah Chapone decided to find her a better position, which they eventually did, as tutor to the children of the Duchess of Portland. She held this position from 1739 until she died, in 1756.[39]

[36]Green, p 144-145.
[37]Green, p 148
[38]Perry, ed "Introduction," to Ballard, p 21
[39]Green, p 155

Daniel Defoe (1660-1731)

Daniel Defoe is included among this list of authors, even though he cannot be definitely called a feminist. It is difficult to determine exactly what Defoe thought about women, as it is difficult to know exactly what he thought about other subjects, since he wrote contradictory things. There is no doubt that he was concerned about women's place in society, because he wrote a large volume of material about them, for example two major novels, items in his periodicals, and conduct books.[40] Whatever his attitudes finally were, if even he knew for sure, he wrote several things that are important to the study of early modern feminism, including *Moll Flanders*, (1722) *Roxana*, (1724) "An Academy for Women" in his *Essay upon Projects* (1697), and some mentions of women's roles in *The Complete English Tradesman* (1726).

It will not be necessary to go into a great deal of detail about his life here, since there are many biographies available. Defoe was born in 1660 in London. Unlike the feminist authors, he was not a member of the Anglican Church. He was educated at an academy for dissenters and was a supporter of Whig politics. He wrote on a wide variety of subjects, both non-fiction and fiction, though he is mostly remembered as one of the first English novelists. Why he had a particular interest in the status of women is not known. It may have been because he had several daughters, and since he was always in financial difficulty he worried about their futures, and those of other women like them.[41]

[40]Shirlene Mason, *Daniel Defoe and the Status of Women*. (St Alban's, Vt, 1978), p 1.
[41]Mason, p 4.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762)

Though she was younger than the other feminist authors of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Mary Wortley Montagu can be included among them because she was influenced by the ideas of Mary Astell, who was a close friend. Mary Wortley Montagu was the daughter of Evelyn Pierrepont, who became Earl of Kingston shortly after her birth, and later Marquess of Dorchester and Duke of Kingston. Her mother's name was Lady Mary Fielding. Like many of the other authors, Montagu was for the most part self-educated, using her father's libraries. Among other things, she taught herself Latin. She wrote to a friend in 1709, "I am now so much alone, I have leisure to pass whole days in reading ... my study at present is nothing but dictionaries and grammars. I am trying whether it be possible to learn without a master; I am not certain (and dare hardly hope) I shall make any great progress; but I find the study so diverting, I am not only easy, but pleased with the solitude that indulges it."[42]

She married Edward Wortley Montagu in 1712, despite her father's objections. Unfortunately, the marriage was not very happy. The Montagus eventually separated, and Lady Mary lived in Italy from 1739 to 1762, returning to London shortly before her death.

Mary Astell became a close friend of Mary Wortley Montagu despite the difference in their ages. Montagu's granddaughter Lady Louisa Stuart wrote that Astell "felt for Lady Mary Wortley that fond partiality which old people of ardent tempers sometimes entertain for a rising genius in their own line. Literature had been hers, and she triumphed in Lady Mary's

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[42]Mary Pierrepont (later Wortley Montagu) to Anne Wortley, August 8, 1709. Robert Halsband, ed. *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*. Volume 1 (Oxford, 1965), p. 6.

talents as proof of what it was her first wish to demonstrate, namely, the mental equality of the sexes; if not the superiority of woman to man."[43]

Lady Mary had a wide literary acquaintance, and some of her poetry and prose was published during her lifetime, but for the most part she shunned publication, despite the urging of Mary Astell. It is clear that she wanted her *Embassy Letters*, written in 1716-18 while she and her husband had lived in Turkey to be published, but not until after her death. The first edition of this book appeared in 1763 with a Preface that Mary Astell wrote for it when she first saw it in 1724. In this she wrote, "...let us freely own the superiority of this sublime genius as I do in the sincerity of my soul, pleased that a woman triumphs, and proud to follow in her train."[44]

As a group, these authors had several things in common. They were all members of the middle and upper classes. Of the six whose education we know anything about, Mary Chudleigh, Mary Astell, Elizabeth Thomas, Elizabeth Elstob and Mary Wortley Montagu were mostly responsible for their own learning beyond the early stages. Only Damaris Masham had tutors to help develop her intellect. By their own account their learning set them apart from most other women of their social classes. They were like other women of their classes in that the majority were married. Only Mary Astell, Elizabeth Thomas and Elizabeth Elstob never married. Bathsua Makin, Mary Chudleigh, Anne, Countess of Winchilsea, Mary Wortley Montagu and Damaris Masham were married once, Sarah Fyge Egerton married twice.

[43]Lady Louisa Stuart, "Introductory Anecdotes" to Mary Wortley Montagu, *Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, ed Lord Wharncliffe (London 1835), 2nd edition ed W. Moy Thomas, (London, 1893), Volume I, p 85

[44]Mary Astell, "Preface" in Halsband, ed *Complete Letters*, Volume 1, Appendix III, p 467

Though it might be an exaggeration to call early modern feminism a movement, the feminist authors were not simply a number of people who happened to hold similar opinions. They knew each other and were aware of each other's work. It is more appropriate to call them a group, since this implies a looser, less self conscious association.

One of the best sources of evidence for the friendship and support for each other's writing between these authors is the collection of Elizabeth Thomas' letters which was published immediately after her death as *Pylades and Corinna* (1731-32)[45]. These letters show that Thomas knew Mary Astell and Mary Chudleigh, and read at least some of their feminist books. There is a reference to Astell's *Serious Proposal*, showing that Thomas sent the book to her fiancé Richard Gwinnett for him to read as well.[46] Thomas also wrote a poem in tribute to Astell, quoted at the beginning of this chapter. They met in person at least once according to an account in *Pylades and Corinna*,[47] and since they both lived in London they may have seen each other there. The two had a falling out, but this disagreement seems to have been over politics, not feminism.[48]

The friendship between Elizabeth Thomas and Mary Chudleigh is also documented in *Pylades and Corinna*. They read each other's poetry and exchanged letters, and also met in person at Mary Chudleigh's home in Essex and in London. On her *Defense of the Female Sex*, Thomas wrote to Chudleigh,

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[45]This book appeared in two volumes. The first was called *Pylades and Corinna*, the second *The Honourable Lovers*. Corinna was Thomas' literary name, Pylades was the literary name of her fiance Richard Gwinnett.
[46]Richard Gwinnett to Elizabeth Thomas, September 3, 1700. *Pylades and Corinna*, (London, 1731), p 21.
[47]Elizabeth Thomas to Richard Gwinnett, No date. *The Honourable Lovers*, (London, 1732), p 80-81.
[48]Richard Gwinnett to Elizabeth Thomas, October 26, 1700, and editor's footnote to this letter. *Pylades and Corinna*, (London, 1731), p 29.

> I could again renew my thanks for that elegant *Defense* you made for us; but when you seem to decline our vindication by wishing us a better champion, I must take leave to complain that your modesty is too partial to be judge in its own cause; no, Madam, we can never wish for a more expert General.. Pursue then that conquest you have so auspiciously begun, and deliver your poor sex from the insufferable insolence of our malicious enemies...[49]

An incident described in the Thomas letters at which Mary Astell, Elizabeth Thomas and Mary Chudleigh were all present shows that Chudleigh and Astell knew each other.[50] They probably knew each other fairly well, since Elizabeth Thomas asked Mary Chudleigh when she wanted to know why Mary Astell was upset with her. Like Elizabeth Thomas, Mary Chudleigh also wrote a poem in tribute to Astell. Though it is not her best poetry, it shows again that the feminists were inspired by each other's efforts.

> But taught by you, she may at length improve,
> And imitate those virtues she admires:
> Your bright example leaves a tract divine,
> She sees a beamy brightness in each line,
> And with ambitious warmth aspires,
> Attracted by the glory of your name,
> To follow you in all the lofty roads of fame.[51]

The influence of Mary Astell's ideas can be seen in Mary Chudleigh's other writing For example, Chudleigh's essay "On Knowledge" reflects Mary Astell's ideas about education [52]

All three also had a common acquaintance in John Norris (1657-1712). Norris was sympathetic to the cause of women's education, and became friends with several of the feminist authors because of this. He

[49]Elizabeth Thomas to Mary Chudleigh, No date, *Pylades and Corinna*, p 265
[50]Elizabeth Thomas to Richard Gwinnett, No date *The Honourable Lovers*, p 80-81.
[51]Mary Chudleigh, "To Amystrea," *Poems on Several Occasions*, 3rd edition, (London, 1722) p 24
[52]Mary Chudleigh, "On Knowledge," *Essays on Several Subjects*, (London, 1710) p 1-19 passim.

became rector of Bemerton, Exeter in 1705 thanks to a recommendation by his friend John Locke, with whom he later quarrelled.[53] Mary Chudleigh visited him there, supplying the only surviving description of him in a letter to Elizabeth Thomas, who corresponded with him but never met him in person.[54] Mary Astell began corresponding with him in 1693 after she read one of his books, *Discourses upon the Beatitudes* (1690). Their letters were published in 1695 as *Letters Concerning the Love of God, Between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris*. Astell's friendship was important to Norris. She "became a capable defender of his views in the controversies which did not cease to surround him."[55] Norris was important to Astell and the other feminists because he took their intellectual aspirations seriously and provided useful advice, as illustrated by his letters to Elizabeth Thomas about how to proceed with her self education, including his method for learning to read French in a period of months.[56] John Norris was also friendly with Damaris Masham before his argument with John Locke.[57]

The writing of Damaris Masham was also known to Richard Gwinnett and Elizabeth Thomas. However, when they read Masham's *Occasional Thoughts* (1705), they clearly thought it had been written by John Locke. A footnote in *Pylades and Corinna* indicates the correct authorship, so Thomas may have learned of the mistake after she first read the book.[58] Damaris Masham was aware of Mary Astell, though no direct

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[53]Acworth, p. 9

[54]Mary Chudleigh to Elizabeth Thomas, No date. *The Honourable Lovers*, (London, 1732), p. 250

[55]Acworth, p. 10-11

[56]John Norris to Elizabeth Thomas, No date. *The Honourable Lovers*, (London, 1732), p. 202-205

[57]Acworth, p. 9

[58]Richard Gwinnett to Elizabeth Thomas, June 2, 1705. *Pylades and Corinna*, p. 92

communication between them is known. They disputed each others' positions on theological issues, partly fueled by the disagreement between Astell's friend Norris and Masham's friend Locke.[59] Masham's *Occasional Thoughts* appeared after Astell's *Serious Proposal* and *Reflections on Marriage*, and may have been influenced by them since their views on education and marriage, as expressed in these books, are similar.

The relationship between Mary Astell and Mary Wortley Montagu has already been noted in the biography of Lady Mary. Another feminist known to Mary Astell was Elizabeth Elstob, who is mentioned in a letter from Astell to Lady Anne Coventry, which shows that Astell was helping to collect subscriptions for Elstob's translations of Anglo-Saxon homilies.[60] Elizabeth Elstob was also familiar with the poetry of the Countess of Winchilsea. She used an example from one of Winchilsea's poems in the Preface to *The Rudiments of Grammar for the English Saxon Tongue* (1715), not to make a point about women but because she was giving examples of ancient and contemporary poems using monosyllabic words to defend against those who criticized the Anglo-Saxon language for its monosyllabic nature.[61]

Sarah Fyge Egerton moved in a different circle, a group of women who were playwrights and poets, and who also supported each other's efforts. At the beginning of Egerton's *Poems upon Several Occasions* (1706) there are poems written by these friends praising Egerton's talents. She was aware of

[59]For details of their disagreement on theological issues see Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p 87-97

[60]Mary Astell to Lady Anne Coventry, June or July 1714 (?) printed in Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, Appendix C "Mary Astell's Letters 1693-1714," p 366

[61]Elizabeth Elstob, *Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue*, (London, 1715), p xxviii

John Norris, as a poem she wrote in tribute to him shows.[62] Since she was an admirer of his she might also have read the *Letters Concerning the Love of God* by Mary Astell and Norris, and perhaps Astell's other books as well.

What gave this group of women the courage to speak out against women's disadvantages when they seemed so firmly entrenched in English society? None of them could remember the time when classical education for women had been acceptable among the upper class, yet they believed unwaveringly in the importance of better education for women's well-being. It took courage to publish their feminist writing, even anonymously, in a period when publishing of any writing by women was considered immodest, and by extension unchaste, the worst defect of character that a woman could be guilty of, according to contemporary moralists.

Some explanation can be found in changes in the intellectual atmosphere of the early modern period. Feminists were able to ignore the male "authorities" who told them they were hopelessly intellectually inferior, and embraced those who confirmed their feelings that their minds could be developed, and that their ideas could be valid Following the method of Descartes, they came to believe that it was possible for someone who did not have formal education to develop her intellectual powers Along with the advice of sympathetic men like John Norris and the support they offered to each other, this gave these women a reassurance that allowed them to challenge those who labeled women as naturally ignorant.

The direct influence of Descartes on the thinking of one of these women can be seen in the record of her the development of her religious ideas

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[62]Sarah Fyge Egerton, "To Mr Norris, on his Idea of Happiness," *Poems on Several Occasions*, (London, 1703), p 27-31

in Elizabeth Thomas' autobiography. In it she described how she was concerned about whether a belief in predestination was correct. She decided it was not reasonable to expect to know God's will for certain in this life. After that, she decided to continue inquiring into the correctness of the Anglican faith

> I think, therefore, I am; was the *postulatum* on which Des Cartes founded his whole system. I have a rational soul, (thought she to herself,) a will of election, and must be saved by my own faith, and not another's: I am bred a Protestant, and hope I am right, but I may be wrong: Shall I therefore go on, *errare cum patribus*, and not make use of the faculties God has given men, by judging for myself; and being able to say, why I am a Protestant, and not a Quaker, or a Roman Catholic.[63]

She read some more, then "after this, she applied herself with the utmost integrity, to search into the three chief branches of the Reformation, viz. The Church of England, the Lutherans, and the Calvinists; and having impartially considered all, found no true satisfaction, but in the first, as by law established On which she entered into, and lived always in communion with her."[64] This kind of confidence in their ability to read, think, and ultimately trust their own judgement had to be a contributing factor in the feminists' confidence in their convictions about women's disadvantages in society, and education's power to improve their position.

Since religion was another important cultural and personal influence, it might seem strange at first glance that all the feminist authors were members of the Church of England rather than dissenters. Since women were prominent in many of the Puritan sects earlier in the seventeenth century, and these sects were less hierarchical than the established Anglican church with its bishops and archbishops and its tie with the monarchy, they would seem to be likely vehicles for late seventeenth

[63]Elizabeth Thomas, "The Life of Corinna," *Pylades and Corinna*, p xvii
[64]Thomas, "The Life of Corinna," *Pylades and Corinna*, p xix.

century feminism. However, membership in the Anglican church may have provided more freedom of thought than it might appear at first glance. The Anglican church and the universities, especially through the Cambridge Platonists, had accepted the new philosophy of the seventeenth century which was so important to the feminists' self-confidence. Mary Astell expressed this in a letter to John Norris, who was a member of the Anglican clergy,

> For though I can't pretend to a multitude of books, variety of languages, the advantages of academical education, or any helps but what my own curiousity affords; yet, thinking is a stock that no rational creature can want, if they know but how to use it; and this, as you have taught me, with purity and prayer...is the way and method to true knowledge.[65]

Cartesian philosphy was also important in the books written by Anglican women such as Mary Astell. In contrast, a book about women written by the Quaker leader Margaret Fell Fox, *Womens Speaking Justified* (1666), contained arguments based only on Scripture. It is also noteworthy that Fox was imprisoned more than once for her Quaker activities after the Restoration.[66] As members of the established church, the feminists were free from this kind of persecution. Also, the atmosphere of toleration encouraged by the latitudinarianism of the Cambridge Platonists may have helped them feel they could publish their ideas without being condemned by the Church.

The feminists were certainly aware that other options existed, but they chose to remain with the established church For example, Elizabeth Thomas mentioned Quakerism in her consideration of religion, but rejected

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[65]Mary Astell to John Norris, September 21, 1693 in Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, Appendix C, p 355.
[66] David J Latt, Introduction to the reprint of Margaret Fell Fox, *Womens Speaking Justified* (1666), (Los Angeles, 1979), p iv.

it. Mary Astell stated repeatedly in her books that she was an Anglican because her reasoned consideration of Christian theology had led her to believe that it was the right church to belong to. She was against any woman being a Christian simply because it was customary. She urged all women to use their God-given reason to read and discover why Christianity was to be believed. "Most of, if not all, the follies and vices that women are subject to (for I meddle not with the men) are owing to our paying too great a deference to other peoples judgements, and too little to our own, in suffering others to judge for us, when God has not only allowed, but required us to judge for ourselves "[67] Again, this argument shows the importance of the belief that using individual reason to discover truth was better than simply relying on established authority.

If it is paradoxical that Mary Astell stayed with the Anglican Church and Tory politics, as has been noted by more than one modern author,[68] the same paradox seems to apply to several of her contemporaries in early feminism. Another political event that may have encouraged the feminists to publish their books and poems was the accession of Queen Anne in 1702. The existence of a female monarch helped to justify the idea that women had a place in public life.[69]

Finally, when historians attempt to explain why certain people act against the prevailing opinions and expectations of their time there is always an aspect of personality involved that defies easy explanation. What gave women like these, and perhaps many others of whom no trace remains, their unusual convictions, and the courage to stand by them in the face of

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[67]Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England* (London, 1705), p 36
[68]Hilda Smith, *Reason's Disciples* (Chicago, 1982) p 117.
[69] Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p 188-189.

ridicule and scorn, cannot be completely explained by cultural and or even personal influences.

Chapter 2

Occupation

Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,
Such an intruder on the rights of men,
Such as presumptuous creature is esteemed,
The fault can by no virtue be redeemed.
They tell us we mistake our sex and way;
Good breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing, play,
Are the accomplishments we should desire;
To write, or read, or think, or to enquire,
Would cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time,
And interrupt the conquests of our prime;
While the dull manage of a servile house
Is held by some our utmost art and use.[1]

- Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea

At the end of the seventeenth century, the long transition from the situation of the women of the middle ages, whose activities were essential to economic life at all but the very highest ranks of society, to the situation of women in the nineteenth century when all those above the working class were expected to concern themselves only with domestic life, was already underway. It is not clear exactly how these changes took place, but it is clear that feminists authors like the Countess of Winchilsea and other writers felt that women lacked useful things to do at the middle and upper class levels of society in the early modern period. This discontent with the socially prescribed role for middle and upper class women led to the discussion of occupation as one of the most important themes in the writings of the early feminists.

[1]Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, "The Introduction " in Katharine Rogers, ed. *Selected Poems of Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea*, (New York, 1979), p 5

This change in the role and status of women which concerned the feminist authors formed a part of larger societal changes which took place during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. One important characteristic of the early modern period is that it represented a stage in the gradual transition in English society from the medieval, agriculture based economic and social system in which most people lived in the countryside, to the modern commercial based system in which most of the population lives in cities. Though this process began before the seventeenth century, it accelerated during this period Although there is a great deal of debate about exactly why and how this happened, several important changes took place in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries about which we can be fairly certain. One of these was an increase in population. By 1680, the population of England was about 5 million, approximately twice what it had been in the 1520s [2] While the overall population doubled, the population of London increased almost ten times, from 50,000 - 60,000 in the 1520s to 575,000 by 1700,[3] showing that the city was becoming more important relative to the rest of the country. Other important changes were increases in both external and internal trade, and improvements in agriculture, all of which made this a wealthier society than that of the middle ages. However, this increase in wealth was not evenly distributed among the population. It seems that this more populous society was becoming a more polarized one as well, with the upper ranks of society becoming wealthier, while the lower ranks became poorer.[4]

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[2]Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680*. (New Brunswick, NJ, 1982), p 122.
[3]Wrightson, p 128.
[4]Wrightson, p 140

An increasingly important part of the upper ranks of society was the middle class, including merchants, professionals and prosperous tradesmen, who were increasing in numbers, wealth and influence. Some older occupations such as trade expanded, and new ones, such as the civil service, were created. As the income of these people, the middle class or the "middling sort" in contemporary language, was rising, their living standards increased along with it.[5] They in turn became customers for the goods and services of others, further stimulating trade and commerce, and fueling urban growth [6] For the women of the middle classes, these changes meant they led different lives from those of the women of the upper ranks of society of the past. Overall, the increased wealth meant that these women lost their productive work Where women had been partners with their husbands in business and trades, they were becoming dependents whose status as ornaments was more important than their possible contribution to economic activity.[7]

Many members of the middle class continued to practice occupations that were not new to this period. What was different was that there was a tendency for women to withdraw from business as it developed [8] In the towns of the middle ages, craftspeople lived and worked in the same place. The women of these households shared in the shopwork. If her husband died, a widow often carried on the trade, continuing her membership in the gild and taking apprentices if she wanted them.[9] Also, women practiced various trades themselves, with

[5]Wrightson, p 140
[6]Geoffrey Holmes, *Augustan England: Professions, State and Society 1680-1730* (London, 1982), p 14
[7]Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*. (London, 1982), p 9-10.
[8]Clark, p 10-11
[9]F. W Tickner, *Women in English Economic History*. (London, 1923), p 51.

their own apprentices, their own property, and responsibility for their own debts. These occupations were often indicated by the suffix "ster," as in brewster, webster, baxter. The Statute of Artificers, which was passed in 1364 in an attempt to regulate industries and wages allowed women to act as brewsters, bakers, carders, spinners and workers in wool, linen or silk.[10]

Evidence of the extent to which women were partners in their husbands' businesses is seen in the frequency with which widows conducted business after their husbands' deaths, and in the custom of assigning widows as executrixes in wills Evidence of change is seen in the decline of this custom.[11] Further signs of change can be seen in the history of the gilds. This shows a progressive weakening of the position of women in such associations even though the corporations of this period still regarded a wife as her husband's partner.[12] Overall, according to Alice Clark in *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, still the standard work on this subject, women's contact with business was declining in the seventeenth century, especially after the Restoration [13]

Work that has been done since Clark's with the idea of examining in more detail the nature of women's work and the changes that took place has shed more light on this process In a study of the city of Oxford from 1500 to 1800, Mary Prior discovered that sexual division of labour did exist, but that it was not a rigid division. It was the nature of women's work to adapt itself to the needs of the situation What women did was determined by changes within the family, such as the death of the

[10]Tickner, p 53-54
[11]Clark, p 39.
[12]Clark, p 10.
[13]Clark, p 35, 38

husband, and also by change in the economic fortunes of the town as a whole.[14] The evidence, taken from apprenticeship agreements, indicates that the pattern was for women to occupy a stronger role as workers both for the family and for the community in bad economic times than in good.[15] If the example of Oxford is applicable to other areas of the country, it helps to explain why, in a time of increasing prosperity, there was a rise in idleness and ornamental status among middle class women who would traditionally have been more involved in their husbands' businesses.

Increasingly, what replaced business activity was a life of leisure. For these women who had been "dispossessed of all meaningful activity save marrying and breeding,"[16] romantic love and marriage came to occupy a central place in their lives. This preoccupation meant that the education of girls tended to focus on pretty "accomplishments" rather than practical knowledge. This served to reinforce women's status as ornaments rather than fit them for any serious occupation.

Expectations for upper class women were similar after the Restoration. The medieval occupation of upper class women was the supervision of the family estate, especially while the lord was away fighting. This could include supervising food preparation and preservation, keeping the accounts, directing servants, child care and early education, and dispensing charity.[17] For example, the Paston Letters, a record of the life of a Norfolk family over several generations, show that a medieval woman like Margaret Paston could take care of the business and

[14]Mary Prior, "Women and the Urban Economy: Oxford 1500-1800" in Mary Prior, ed. *Women in English Society 1500-1800*. (London, 1985), p 98-100.
[15]Prior, p 96 and 109-110.
[16]Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters and the Novel* (New York, 1980), p x.
[17]Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*. (Urbana, 1956), p 111.

protection of an estate very capably, even adding to its value through good management.[18] Women were traditionally excluded from public and political matters, in which they were exhorted not to meddle by moralists.[19] In spite of this, medieval women could share in the elections for offices such as churchwarden, Sheriff, Marshal or High Constable, or hold these offices themselves.[20] During the Civil War and Interregnum, a number of noble women defended their homes and pleaded on behalf of their husbands who were imprisoned for fighting on the royalist side. One example is Lady Herbert, whose adventures are told in her memoirs. After the battle of Naseby she went there herself and found her wounded husband. Later he was captured and put in the Tower, and she helped him escape. Finally, after the Restoration she petitioned to get the family estate back, and succeeded.[21] However, when political stability returned, and with the court atmosphere of Charles II, the emphasis on upper class leisured living increased.[22] Although upper class women still maintained a supervisory role over their estates, the increase in the number of professional estate managers, a new occupation of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries,[23] may have reduced upper class women's productive work when they were away from court even more

This was the situation to which the feminists were responding. Within their writing about occupation several ideas were prominent. The first was the feeling that the authors lacked anything meaningful to do,

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[18]Tickner, p 33
[19]Kelso, p 110- 120
[20]Tickner, p 33
[21]Lady Stepney, *Memoirs of Lady Russell and Lady Herbert 1623-1723*. (London, 1898), p 209-244. See Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel* (London, 1984) for others
[22]Tickner, p 66-68
[23]Holmes, p 24

and that the things they were expected to do; needlework, visiting, dressing, were shallow and stupid. Several of the authors were unequivocal in blaming custom, which they often referred to as a tyrant, for their predicament. For example, Sarah Fyge Egerton wrote:

> Say tyrant custom, why must we obey,
> The impositions of thy haughty sway,
> From the first dawn of life, unto the grave,
> Poor womankind's in every state, a slave.[24]

Saying that it was customary for women to lack worthwhile occupation seems to be at odds with the image of the woman of the middle ages as very busy, and also with the opinion expressed by some of the authors that women had lost occupations practiced by them in the past. However, by blaming custom they were emphasizing that the situation was a creation of human society, not God or nature, and it could be changed. Both the idea that women's status had declined and the idea that custom held them in check were expressed by playwright Aphra Behn in *Sir Patient Fancy* (1686),

> What has poor woman done, that she must be
> Debarred from sense, and sacred poetry.
> Why in this age had Heaven allowed you more,
> And women less of wit than heretofore?
> We once were famed in story, and could write
> Equal to men; could govern, nay, could fight.
> We still have passive valour, and can show,
> Would custom give us leave, the active too,
> Since we no provocations want from you.[25]

The question of education was also important within the occupation theme. Many of the authors saw better education for women and the chance to read and write seriously that came with it as the answer to women's lack of worthwhile activities. However, they believed that

[24]Sarah Fyge Egerton, "The Emulation," *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1703), p 108.
[25]Aphra Behn, *Sir Patient Fancy* (1686) in Angeline Goreau, *The Whole Duty of a Woman*, (Garden City, NY, 1985), p 216

women's attempts to learn were impeded by men's contempt for their mental abilities and their belief that women's purpose was to entertain men, and that they should concern themselves with that and leave more serious matters alone. In the poem by the Countess of Winchilsea quoted above, she condemned the idea that ornamental accomplishments were the appropriate pastimes for women, not reading and writing

The feminists also wrote about the results of the lack of occupation. These included spleen, boredom and frustration for many, and a lack of money for some. This aspect did not seem to concern the authors as much as the question of education despite the financial hardships suffered by many of them The question of how idleness affected a woman's religious life concerned Mary Astell in particular, who was worried that lives wasted on unworthwhile things could put women's salvation in jeopardy

All of the most prominent themes were clearly expressed by the poets, as the following examples will show Anne, Countess of Winchilsea, Sarah Fyge Egerton, Elizabeth Thomas and Lady Mary Chudleigh described the problems faced by women who wanted to defy society's and particularly men's expectations of what they should spend their time doing.

One of the critics of social expectations of women was Anne, Countess of Winchilsea In "The Spleen," one of her poems known best to her contemporaries,[26] she wrote of her desire to write poetry even though

[26]The preface "The Bookseller to the Reader" in *Miscellany Poems on Several Occasions* (1713) the only book on her poems published in her lifetime says, "The town having already done justice to the Ode to the Spleen, and some few pieces in this volume, when scattered in other miscellanies I think it will be sufficient (now that permission is at last obtained for the printing this collection) to acquaint the reader, that they are of the same hand, which I

it was unusual, and she condemned the uselessness of the activities a woman of her status was expected to engage in.

> Whilst in the Muses' paths I stray,
> Whilst in their groves and by their secret springs
> My hand delights to trace unusual things,
> And deviates from the known and common way;
> Nor will in fading silks compose
> Faintly the inimitable rose,
> Fill up an ill-drawn bird, or paint on glass
> The Sovereign's blurred and undistinguished face,
> The threatening angel and the speaking ass.[27]

In another poem "A Description of One of the Pieces of Tapestry at Long-Leat.." Winchilsea expressed a definite sense of loss of the genuinely artistic occupations of women of the past, as opposed to the useless ones described above. She seems to have been inspired to write a poem about a particular tapestry, to illustrate the contrast between the tapestry-maker's time and her own. She also expressed the opinion that men were at least partly responsible for the change by deliberately keeping women from developing their talents.

> Thus tapestry of old, the walls adorn'd,
> Ere noblest Dames the artful Shuttle scorned:
> Arachne, then, with Pallas did contest,
> And scarce th' Immortal work was judg'd the best.
> Nor Valorous actions, then, in Books were fought;
> But all the fame, that from the field was brought,
> Employ'd the loom, where the kind Consort wrought:
> Whilst sharing in the toil, she shar'd the fame,
> And with the Heroes mixt her interwoven name.
> No longer, Females to such Praise aspire,
> And seldom now we rightly do admire.
> So much, All arts are by the Men engross'd,
> And our few talents unimprov'd or cross'd;[28]

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doubt not will render this miscellany an acceptable present to the public."

[27] Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, "The Spleen," *Poems by Anne, Countess of Winchilsea*, ed. John Middleton Murry, London Harper & Brothers, 1928 p 59.

[28] Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, *Miscellany Poems on Several Occasions* London 1713 p 66-67

She went on to compare this loss of the art of tapestry weaving and the role as recorders of history with "the censures of the world" that discouraged her from writing poetry.

Another poet, Sarah Fyge Egerton, also denounced social expectations of women's activities and expressed her intention to defy them, with an emphasis on personal conduct in this poem which is different from Winchilsea's primary concern with reading and writing. A similarity to Winchilsea's poem is her comment on the emptiness of the expected activities for women and condemnation of custom for perpetuating these expectations.

> Shall I be one of those obsequious fools,
> That square their lives, by custom's scanty rules;
> Condemned forever, to the puny curse,
> Of precepts taught, at boarding-school[29], or nurse,
> That all the business of my life must be,
> Foolish, dull, trifling, formality.
> Confined to a strict magic complaisance,
> And round a circle, of nice visits dance,
> Not for my life beyond the chalk advance:
> The Devil censure, stands to guard the same,
> One step awry, he tears my ventrous fame.[30]

In a poem called, "On Sir J- S- saying in a Sarcastic Manner, My Books would make me Mad. An Ode," another poet, Elizabeth Thomas, addressed each of the main themes regarding occupation. These were the tyranny of custom, the stupidity of the things women were required to do, how they were denied the opportunity to learn because men believed that education was their prerogative, not to be shared with women, and finally

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[29]See Chapter 3, page 6, for more about girls' boarding schools
[30]Sarah Fyge Egerton, "The Liberty," *Poems on Several Occasions.* (London· 1703), p 19

the idea that one of women's important purposes in life was to entertain men.

> Unhappy sex! how hard's our fate,
> By Custom's tyranny confined
> To foolish needlework and chat,
> Or such like exercise as that,
> But still denied th' improvement of our mind!
> 'Women!' men cry, 'alas, poor fools!
> What are they but domestic tools?
> On purpose made our toils to share,
> And ease the husband's economic care.
> To dress, to sing, to work, to play,
> To watch our looks, our words obey,
> And with their little follies drive dull thoughts away.
> Thus let them humbly in subjection live;
> But learning leave to man, our great prerogative.'[31]

Another poem, by Lady Mary Chudleigh, also contains some of these themes. *The Ladies Defence: or, The Bride-Woman's Counsellor Answered*, was written in response to a wedding sermon preached by Rev. John Sprint, in which he declared that complete obedience to her husband was a wife's duty. The poem is a dialogue between four speakers, Sir John Brute, Sir William Loveall, Melissa, which was Lady Chudleigh's pseudonym in some of her poems, and a Parson, representing Sprint. In one part of the poem the author has the Parson expressing his contempt for women's intelligence compared to men's and his opinion that women should only do unimportant things.

> Nothing's too hard for our almighty sense:
> But you, not blest with Phoebus' influence,
> Wither in shades; with nauseous dullness curst,
> Born fools, and by resembling ideots nurst.
> Then taught to work, to dance, to sing and play,
> And vainly trifle all yours hours away;
> Proud that you've learned the little arts to please,

[31]Elizabeth Thomas, "On Sir J- S- saying in a Sarcastic Manner, My Books would make me Mad An Ode" In *Eighteenth Century Women Poets*, Ed. Roger Lonsdale. (Oxford, 1990), p 40.

As being incapable of more than these:[32]

Several pages later Melissa expressed her regret that even men who were more sympathetic towards women than the Parson still did not try to help them improve their lot. The comparison of women's lot with slavery and the idea that men thought that women were made to entertain them appear in this work as well as in those of the other poets.

> Those generous few, whom kinder thoughts inspire,
> And who the happiness of all desire;
> Who wish we were from barb'rous usage free,
> Exempt from toils, and shameful slavery,
> Yet let us, unreproved, mis-spend our hours,
> And to mean purposes imploy our nobler pow'rs.
> They think, if we our thoughts can but express,
> And know but how to work, to dance and dress,
> It is enough, as much as we should mind,
> As if we were for nothing else designed,
> But made, like puppets, to divert mankind.[33]

The poets were not the only ones to condemn the lack of serious occupation in middle and upper class women's lives. Other authors were concerned about what the results of too much leisure were for women whose economic contribution was not needed. Mary Astell was particularly concerned that the ornamental, non-intellectual activities expected of women kept them from giving things of the mind, especially religion, the serious consideration they deserved. The boredom and frustration resulting from idleness concerned Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and also some non-feminist authors such as Richard Steele. Like the poets, Montagu and Astell believed that education was important for women who did not have to work.

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[32]Lady Mary Chudleigh, "The Ladies Defence: or, the Bride-Woman's Counsellor Answered." In *Poems on Several Occasions by the Lady Chudleigh* (London, 1722) p245.
[33]Chudleigh, p 257-258

Another similarity between Mary Astell and the poets was that Astell refused to fill her time with things she considered trivial. What she preferred to do was read and write about religious and political subjects, as her published books show. She believed strongly in the value of these occupations, and it distressed her to see other women spending their time and abilities on superficial, ornamental things. In her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, she urged women to rebel against social custom and turn their attention from their physical appearances to intellectual and religious pursuits.

> For shame let's abandon the old, and therefore one would think, unfashionable employment of pursuing butterflies and trifles! No longer drudge on in the dull beaten road of vanity and folly which so many have gone before us, but dare to break the enchanted circle that custom has placed us in, and scorn the vulgar way of imitating all the impertinencies of our neighbours. Let us learn to pride our selves in something more excellent than the invention of a fashion, and not entertain such a degrading thought of our own worth, as to imagine that our souls were given us only for the service of our bodies, and the best improvement we can make of these, is to attract the eyes of men. We value them too much, and our selves too little, if we place any part of our desert in their opinion, and don't think our selves capable of nobler things than the pitiful conquest of some worthless heart.[34]

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu had first hand knowledge about the difficulties of having too little to do. In letters to her husband in December of 1712 she wrote about how she had little else to do but read and write, and about her efforts to keep spleen and melancholy at bay.

> This long Letter I know must be particularly impertinent to a man of business, but idleness is the root of all evil. I write and read till I can't see, and then I walk; sleep succeeds; and thus my whole time is

[34]Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, 4th edition (London, 1701, Reprint 1970) p 3-4

> divided. If I was as well qualified all other ways as I am by idleness, I would publish a daily paper called the *Meditator*.[35]

Despite her complaints about too much reading and writing, it was important enough to her that later in her life she wrote to her daughter Lady Bute from her home in Italy advising her to encourage her daughters if they had any interest in reading, because she knew from experience how important it was that they be able to keep themselves busy in this way and avoid the unhappiness that could otherwise overwhelm them

> Ignorance is as much the fountain of vice as idleness, and indeed generally produces it. People that do not read or work for a livelihood have many hours they know not how to employ, especially women, who commonly fall into vapours or something worse.[36]

It was not only feminist authors who noticed the discontent among middle and upper class women. The impression of the bad effects of idleness on a woman's state of mind was also expressed by another contemporary author in *The Tatler* of November 9, 1710. Richard Steele contrasted the virtues of exercise and activity to the fashionable, affected languidness of many ladies of the upper classes. The author described the situation of young women "who spend their hours in an indolent state of body and mind, without either recreations or reflections." He continued:

> It is with great indignation that I see such crowds of the female world lost to human society, and condemned to a laziness, which makes life pass away with less relish than in the hardest labour Palestris, in her drawing room, is supported by spirits to keep off the returns of spleen and melancholy, before she can get over half of the day for want of something to do, while the wench in the kitchen sings and scours from morning to night.[37]

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[35]Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to Edward Wortley Montagu, December 6, 1712 and December 8, 1712, *Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* Ed Robert Halsband Volume 1, 1708 1720. (Oxford, 1965), p 172-175.
[36]Mary Wortley Montagu to Lady Bute, January 1750, *Complete Letters* Volume II, p 450
[37]*The Tatler*, no 248, Thursday, November 9, 1710.

Steele's proposed solution for Palestris' distress was physical exercise and better education. This would provide both the "recreations and reflections" that were missing from middle and upper class women's leisured lives.

While unhappiness and frustration arising from idleness were a problem for wealthier women, middle class women could experience the more urgent problem of trying to support themselves despite a scarcity of employment and the unreliability of other sources of income. Contemporary authors were also interested in the more practical side of the lack of work for middle class women In *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex*, Judith Drake wrote that she thought it was to the disadvantage of English women that they were not involved with the businesses of their husbands like Dutch women were.

> Let us...view our sex in a state of more improvement, amongst our neighbours the Dutch. There we shall find them managing not only the domestick affairs of the family, but making and receiving all payments as well great as small, keeping the books, ballancing the accounts, and doing all the business, even the nicest of merchants, with as much dexterity and exactness as their, or our, men can do. And I have often hear'd some of our considerable merchants blame the conduct of our countrymen in this point; that they breed our women so ignorant of business.[38]

She added that if women could take over the sedentary jobs occupied by men, the men would be free to pursue more physically demanding employment, which would benefit the nation. Also, women themselves would also benefit from understanding their husbands' businesses if they became widows

> Beside that it might prevent the ruine of many families, which is often occasion'd by the death of merchants in full business, and

[38][Judith Drake], *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex*, London, 1696, p 16-17.

> leaving their accounts perplex'd, and embroil'd to a widow and orphans, who understanding nothing of the husband or father's business occasions the rending, and oftentimes the utter confounding a fair estate; which might be prevented, did the wife but understand merchants accounts, and were made acquainted with the books.[39]

One author who was aware of the changes taking place in the economic role of women in the early modern period was Daniel Defoe. He expressed opinions similar to Judith Drake's in *The Complete English Tradesman*, in which he included an entire chapter on the importance of tradesmen's wives having a knowledge of their husbands' businesses. Defoe thought there had been a change in the role of the wives of these middle class businessmen. He believed that in the past the wives of tradesmen had been involved in the running of the businesses and knew all about how they worked, but by the time he wrote the book in the early eighteenth century the wives would "scorn to be seen in the counting-house, much less behind the counter; despise the knowledge of their business, or act as if they were ashamed of being tradesmen's wives, and never imagined to be tradesmen's widows."[40] He thought this was a bad thing because tradesmen's widows were increasingly unable to take over businesses and provide for themselves and their children, as Drake also wrote.

> In former times tradesmen's widows valued themselves upon the shop and trade, or the warehouse and trade that was left them; and, at least, if they did not carry on the trade in their own names, they would keep it up till they put it off to advantage...And I may venture to say, that where there is one widow that keeps on the trade now, after a husband's decease, there were ten, if not twenty, that did it then.[41]

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[39][Drake], p 17.
[40]Daniel Defoe, *The Complete English Tradesman*, (London, 1765, Reprint New York, 1970) p 213
[41]Defoe, *The Complete English Tradesman*, p 216-217

He thought that the reason for this situation was not any lack of ability on the part of the women, but rather that both the wives and the tradesmen were motivated by concern about social status rather than the practical needs of business. He thought that some of the tradesmen's wives who did not know about their businesses did not wish to learn because they had been born to higher ranking families and thought that learning about trade was beneath them even though it supported them. However, he did not assign the blame to the women only. He also thought some tradesmen did not want their wives involved in business because of a misguided desire to keep their wives idle and thus to appear more genteel.

> The tradesman is foolishly vain of making his wife a gentlewoman, forsooth; he will have her sit above in the parlour, receive visits, drink tea, and entertain her neighbours, or take a coach and go abroad; but as to the business, she shall not stoop to touch it...[42]

This evidence indicates that people were aware that middle class women were losing their place in economic life, and that there was nothing to replace this but the kinds of things the feminist authors condemned. The chapter from Defoe's book shows that the middle class idea of the desirability of female idleness and its association with increased social status that we usually think of as a feature of nineteenth century cultural life was also present in the pre-industrial period.

Thus, the early feminists' discontent with the socially prescribed role for middle and upper class women took several forms. The poets wrote about their anger at the custom they felt confined them to things they disliked. Others wrote about the effects of idleness on women's happiness and financial security. One common theme was

[42]Defoe, *The Complete English Tradesman*, p 219.

disparagement of the things women were expected to do: visiting, fashion, dancing, needlework, another was the belief that better education and social acceptance of women's efforts at writing would be the best way to improve their situation.

This stress on intellecual pursuits rather than on trade and commercial activity might have arisen because the femmists were members of a leisure class, and were still influenced by the attitudes of that class even thought they sought to reject some of them. However, this cannot be the only explanation because several of the femmists experienced poverty in their own lives and were thus aware of the practical problems facing women in their society. It seems likely that their belief that intellectual activity was the most important aspect of life, following the influence of Descartes and the Cambridge Platonists, led them to be more concerned about it than about economic activity.

Chapter 3

Education

Say tyrant custom, why must we obey,
The impositions of thy haughty sway;
From the first dawn of life, unto the grave,
Poor womankind's in every state, a slave.

We yield like vanquished kings whom fetters bind,
When chance of war is to usurpers kind;
Submit in form; but they'd our thoughts control,
And lay restraints on the impassive soul:
They fear we should excell their sluggish parts,
Should we attempt the sciences and arts.
Pretend they were designed for them alone,
So keep us fools to raise their own renown.[1]

-Sarah Fyge Egerton, *Poems on Several Occasions*, 1703

In *The Lady's New-Years Gift; or, Advice to a Daughter*, first published in 1688, Lord Halifax wrote,

> You must first lay it down for a foundation in general, that there is inequality in the sexes, and that for the better economy of the world, the men, who were to be the law-givers, had the larger share of reason bestow'd upon them; by which means your sex is the better prepared for the compliance that is necessary for the better performance of those duties which seem to be more properly assigned to it [2]

Thus, Lord Halifax urged his daughter to accept that men had greater powers of reason than women. However, he went on to reassure her that women could still exercise power over men despite their stronger reason through such acceptably feminine avenues as influence over boys in early childhood, and the persuasive power of female beauty and tears. "You have more strength in your looks, than we have in our laws," he

[1]Sarah Fyge Egerton, "The Emulation," Poems on Several Occasions (London, 1703), p 108-109.
[2]Lord Halifax, *The Lady's New Years Gift; or, Advice to a Daughter.* (London, 1700, Reprint Stamford, Conn , 1934) p 16.

wrote, "and more power by your tears, than we have by our arguments."[3]

Further, Halifax believed that the different natures of men and women were complementary, an idea that continued to be popular into the nineteenth century. "We are made of differing tempers, that our defects may the better be mutually supplied: Your sex wanteth our reason for your conduct, and our strength for your protection: ours wanteth your gentleness to soften, and to entertain us."[4]

We have already seen that the feminist authors did not accept the idea that one of women's important purposes in life was to entertain men, and we shall see in this chapter that they also did not accept the idea that reason was the sole province of men, and that women should simply concentrate on their appearance as their only source of power and personal satisfaction and be content to leave things of the mind to the men.

The educational situation of women in the late seventeenth century was the result of several centuries of change in the philosophies and provision of education. Through the early modern period girls could receive primary education, which was basic reading and sometimes writing, in English only. There is evidence that they did this and that no objections were generally made about the suitability of it as long as they did not continue beyond the primary level. For example, the statutes of one grammar school existing in 1594 stated that girls could be admitted, but none were to stay there "above the age of nine nor longer than they may learn to read English." However, not all of the grammar schools

[3]Halifax, p 17
[4]Halifax, p 17

admitted girls for even this much training.[5] The area of contention in early modern writings about women's education was whether women should be given access to education beyond a basic level of literacy. The question of the appropriateness of women's study of learned subjects was considered by writers such as Juan Luis Vives, Erasmus, Thomas More and Thomas Becon. Those who opposed women's study said that it was not necessary because women were not involved with public or church life. Counter arguments stressed the influence of learning on personal character and religious piety. While this debate was going on, education for boys continued to develop, both in provision and in social importance, while education for girls did not.[6]

In the late middle ages an important change took place in education for upper class boys. The grammar schools and universities began to teach students who did not intend to enter the church, but who were there to acquire a basic knowledge of arts and letters. There was a corresponding rise in interest in books and education among the upper class. Literary and statutory evidence shows a growth in literacy among the middle and lower classes as well.[7] Although women did not have access to most grammar schools or the universities and had less money for books, there is evidence of literacy and book ownership among women.[8] Girls could learn to read from nunnery or village schools, or fathers, brothers or family chaplains.[9] There was also the custom of placing children in other families for education and possible social

[5]Dorothy Gardiner, *English Girlhood at School A Study of Women's Education Through Twelve Centuries* (Oxford, 1929), p 200
[6]Gardiner, p 197
[7]Michael van Cleve Alexander, *The Growth of English Education 1348-1648.* (London, 1990), p 28-38
[8]Alexander, p 40-41
[9]Alexander, p 40

advancement.[10] Girls could get basic education in these ways, but grammar schools, universities and the Inns of Court did not admit women. Thus, the system of higher education that was expanding and playing a more important role in secular life in the late middle ages made no provisions for them. Women played important roles as patrons of these institutions, showing that they believed in the importance of education despite their lack of access to it. The greatest of these patrons was Lady Margaret, Countess of Richmond, the mother of Henry VII.[11]

In the sixteenth century, higher education for both sexes in England was affected by Humanist ideas and the revival of interest in the classical period which characterized the Renaissance. The fundamental stress of the Humanists on the education of laymen for life outside of the church reinforced educational developments that were already underway.[12] Some Humanist thinkers advocated classical education for women as well as men. These included Juan Luis Vives, Erasmus and Thomas More. They believed that an educated woman made a better companion to her husband, and that education would improve women's character and capacity for self control, an area in which women were believed to be naturally deficient.[13] A number of very capable women benefited from classical instruction, such as More's daughters, the daughters of Sir Anthony Cooke, Lady Jane Grey, and Queen Elizabeth. However, in spite of these examples of female capabilities, no permanent change in the provision of higher education for women took place.[14] Higher education for women continued to be

[10]Gardiner, p 114-115
[11]Alexander, p 67-71.
[12]Alexander, p 43
[13]Gardiner, p 159-163
[14]Gardiner, p 189.

subject to changing fashions, and to rely on the goodwill of a father or other male relative since no institutions equivalent to the grammar schools, Inns of Court or the universities existed for women.

The next major intellectual movement to affect English education in the sixteenth century was the Reformation. From 1529 to 1547, progress that had been made slowed down as the dissolution of the monasteries and convents destroyed the schools they had housed and scattered their libraries.[15] While the dissolution of the convents hurt women's education, men's was less affected. This was partly because Henry VIII's use of educated men in his government regardless of their social background encouraged educational advances to continue. Training for boys was becoming essential, either at the Inns of Court, or the universities Although some aristocratic parents still feared that boys would be persuaded to take holy orders if they went to the universities, more boys from landed families were entering them after the Reformation than before it [16] Another effect of the Reformation was the increased emphasis on reading ability for both sexes in order to allow people to read the Bible for themselves. By 1538 all churches were required to obtain English Bibles for literate parishoners to read. Since women were included in earlier government attempts to restrict Bible reading, it seems there was some literacy among them.[17] However, evidence gathered by counting how many people could make signatures on documents and how many made only marks shows a very low literacy rate for women that did not improve until the seventeenth

[15]Alexander, p 113
[16]Alexander, p 116, 122-124
[17]Alexander, p 107-112

century. However, since this information is undifferentiated by class,[18] it is not very useful for determining the educational level among middle and upper class women

After the dissolution of the nunneries in the mid sixteenth century, replacing them with Protestant institutions became important especially since some noble families had been sending their daughters to the continent for Catholic education.[19] The first known "public school" for girls was the Ladies Hall at Deptford in Kent, founded about 1617. In the London area, Hackney, Chelsea and Putney became popular locations for girls' schools and remained so throughout the seventeenth century. However, these schools were different from boys' public schools in that the curriculum focused on accomplishments such as music, dance, needlework and deportment and manners. Reading and writing were taught, but the focus was not on academic achievement.[20] In one account of education at these schools given in a dialogue between two young ladies, one of them describes her time at school by saying, "there I learned to dance and sing; to play on the bass, viol, virginals, spinet and guitar. I learned to make wax work, japan, paint upon glass, to raise paste, make sweetmeats, sauces, and everything that was genteel and fashionable."[21] Descriptions like this one of what the young ladies at school spent most of their time doing bear a striking resemblance to the things the feminists denounced in their writing about occupation

Thus, the opportunities for education for most middle and upper class women were clearly inferior to that of most men of their classes.

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[18]David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order* (Cambridge, 1980), p 121-128
[19]Gardiner, p 207
[20]Gardiner, p 209-214
[21]Myra Reynolds, *The Learned Lady in England, 1650-1760.* (Boston, 1920), p 259-260.

Since there continued to be no institutions of higher learning accessible to women, the obtaining of such an education was a haphazard matter. A woman of talent with a sympathetic father, brother or husband could become quite well educated. If parents or other relatives were unsympathetic, it could be more difficult, though not impossible if the woman was persistent enough. If a woman was not determined, she was likely to wind up "educated" only in how to make herself pretty and charming.

In the seventeenth century women writers entered this discussion for themselves. The contrast between educational provisions for women and men was obvious, and the feminist writers were stung by the contempt of men for the intelligence of women, and frustrated by a lack of worthwhile things to do, as we saw in the second chapter. Damaris Masham, in light of her own good education provided by her father, condemned upper class parents for allowing their daughters to be poorly educated

> How few parents are there of quality, even among such as are esteemed the most virtuous, who do not permit their daughters to pass the best part of their youth in that ridiculous circle of diversions, which is pretty generally thought the proper business of young ladies, and which so engrosses them that they can find no spare hours, wherein to make any such improvements of their understanding, as the leisure which they have for it exacts from them as rational creatures [22]

Daniel Defoe agreed with this assessment. He echoed other writers' accounts of the inferiority of education generally given to women, "Their youth is spent to teach them to stitch and sew, or make

[22]Damaris Masham, *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Virtuous or Christian Life* (London, 1705), p 151

baubles: they are taught to read indeed, and perhaps to write their names, or so; and that is the heighth of a woman's education "[23]

The popularity of the kind of training given at the girls' schools may have come at least in part from the popularity of Castiglione's *The Courtier*, which first appeared in English translation in 1561. In this book the importance of manners and accomplishments were stressed over academic knowledge.[24] However, the feminists believed that the issue of power was a more important reason why men favoured this kind of education for girls over the learned education that had enjoyed a brief vogue in the sixteenth century. Some authors suggested that men deliberately kept women from learning out of fear that women would outdo them, or out of a desire to control them more easily. One of the most clearly reasoned statements of this idea was made by Judith Drake. She wrote that "nothing makes one party slavishly depress another, but their fear that they may at one time or other become strong or courageous enough to make themselves equal to, if not superior to their masters."

> This is our case; for men being sensible as well of the abilities of mind in our sex, as of the strength of body in their own, began to grow jealous, that we, who in the infancy of the world were their equals and partners in dominion, might in the process of time, by subtlety and stratagem, become their superiors; and therefore began in good time to make use of force (the origin of power) to compel us to a subjection nature never meant; and made use natures liberality to them to take the benefit of her kindness from us. From that time they have endeavoured to train us up altogether to ease and ignorance; as conquerors use to do to those, they reduce by force, that so they may disarm them, both of courage and wit; and consequently make them tamely give up their liberty, and abjectly submit their necks to a slavish yoke.[25]

[23]Daniel Defoe, "An Academy for Women," in *Essay upon Projects* (London, 1697), p 282-283
[24]Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York, 1977), p 203
[25][Judith Drake] *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex*, (London, 1696), p 20-21

One who agreed with Drake was Elizabeth Johnson. In her Introduction to an edition of Elizabeth Rowe's poems, she equated the lack of knowledge with a lack of power, using the metaphor of slavery that was common in this literature.

> We are not unwilling to allow mankind the brutal advantages of strength; they are superior to ours in force, they have custom on their side, and have ruled, and are like to do so...But when they would monopolise sense too, when neither that, nor learning, nor so much as wit must be allowed us, but all overruled by the tyranny of the prouder sex ..we must then ask their pardons if we are not yet so completely passive as to bear all without so much as a murmur. We complain, and we think with reason, that our fundamental constitutions are destroyed; that here is a plain and open design to render us mere slaves, perfect Turkish wives, without properties, or sense, or souls; and are forced to protest against it, and appeal to all the world, whether these are not notorious violations on the liberties of freeborn Englishwomen?[26]

Thus, the feminists believed that if women were as well educated as men, men would no longer have the chance to use their knowledge to take advantage of them Whatever the motives behind them, late seventeenth century arguments against women's education being improved as summarized by Jonathan Swift were that women should be too busy with their children and households to have time for learning, and that reading books was bad for their characters and would make them pretentious and pedantic.[27] The feminists denied that these arguments were valid. For example, Elizabeth Elstob addressed them in the introduction to her first book.

> But there are two things usually opposed against women's learning. That it makes them impertinent, and neglect their household affairs. Where this happens it is a fault. But it is not the fault of

[26]Elizabeth Johnson, "Preface" to Elizabeth Singer Rowe, *Poems on Several Occasions, Written by Philomena* (London, 1696) in Angeline Goreau, *The Whole Duty of a Woman* ((Garden City, NY, 1985), p 90.
[27]Jonathan Swift, "Of the Education of Ladies," in *A Proposal for Correcting the English Tongue, Polite Conversation etc* ed Herbert Davis and Louis Landa. (Oxford, 1964), p 226-227.

> learning, which rather polishes and refines our nature, and teaches us that method and regularity, which disposes us to greater readiness and dexterity in all kinds of business.[28]

Like Drake and Johnson quoted above, Elstob was suspicious of the motives that might be behind arguments made against women's education. She added, "I do not observe it so frequently objected against women's diversions [ie. visiting, dressing, cards], that they take them off from household affairs."[29]

As well as challenging the common arguments used by opponents of women's education, the feminists claimed a theological basis for women's right to education. They argued that God created all people, men and women alike, with rational souls. Women were entitled to as much learning as men because of this spiritual and rational equality of the sexes. For example, Bathsua Makin wrote, "Had God intended women only as a finer sort of cattle, he would not have made them reasonable."[30] Mary Astell argued, "For since God has given women as well as men intelligent souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them? Since he has not denied us the faculty of thinking, why should we not (at least in gratitude to him) employ our thoughts on himself their noblest object, and not unworthily bestow them on trifles and garties and secular affairs?"[31] She concluded, "Let such therefore as deny us the improvement of our intellectuals, either take up his paradox, who said that women have no souls, which at a time when the most contend to have them allowed to beasts, would be as unphilosophical as it is

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[28]Elizabeth Elstob, *An English-Saxon Homily on the Birthday of St Gregory* (London, 1709), p ii-iii
[29]Elstob, *Homily*, p iii
[30]Bathsua Makin, *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen*, (London, 1673, Reprint Los Angeles, 1980), p 23
[31]Astell, *Serious Proposal*, p 18

unmannerly, or else let them permit us to cultivate and improve them."[32] She was confident in the correctness of her reasoning, and believed therefore that men could only oppose women's learning out of a desire to preserve their privilege "The ladies, I'm sure, have no reason to dislike this proposal, but I know not how the men will resent it to have their enclosure broke down, and women invited to taste of that tree of knowledge they have so long unjustly monopolized. But they must excuse me, if I be as partial to my own sex as they are to theirs, and think women as capable of learning as men are, and that it becomes them as well."[33]

However, not all men acted this way. Daniel Defoe agreed with Astell in his argument for women's learning, that they had God-given rationality which they should be able to develop "And tis manifest, that as the rational soul distinguishes us from brutes, so education carries on the distinction, and makes some less brutish than others: This is too evident to need any demonstration. But why then should women be denied the benefit of instruction? If knowledge and understanding had been useless additions to the sex, God Almighty would never have given them capacities, for he made nothing needless."[34]

Thus, the feminists argued that women did not have less capacity for rational thought than men did, and that women were deserving of education to develop their powers of reason. They emphasized that since women were not made less intelligent than men by God or nature, only the misguided custom of educating women poorly stood in their way. In this context, they often referred to custom as "tyrannical" or

[32]Astell, *Serious Proposal*, p 19
[33]Astell, *Serious Proposal*, p 20
[34]Defoe, *Essay on Projects*, p 283-284

"barbarous," for example, in the poem by Sarah Fyge Egerton quoted at the beginning of this chapter Mary Astell justified the rejection of custom by arguing that reason, not tradition, should determine right and wrong. "...Custom cannot authorise a practice if reason condemns it, the following a multitude is no excuse for the doing of evil "[35]

The theological argument was a strong one for two reasons. Anyone who wanted to oppose it would either have to deny that education was good for spiritual development, or deny that women were capable of spiritual development, as Mary Astell explained Second, it was useful because the feminists wanted to emphasize the need for education outside of its usefulness for public employments Rather than arguing that women should enter public life and the professions, as later feminists did, they emphasized the value of education for personal happiness and spiritual development. Mary Astell thought poor education put women at a disadvantage for the reasons of power stated above, and also because it denied them the pleasure to be derived from the exercise of a rational mind. It is clear that Astell believed that the greatest, most reliable and enduring source of happiness was the exercise of reason, especially used in contemplating religion and by extension, political issues connected to them Mary Astell also got a sense of pride from her ability to defend women from men who claimed they lacked intellectual ability. In one poem she wrote, "Their sophistry I can control,/ Who falsely say that women have no soul "[36]

Mary Chudleigh also wrote about the importance of reading and writing to her happiness. She began her *Essays on Several Subjects* with

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[35]Astell, *Serious Proposal, Part II*, p 73
[36]Astell, "Ambition," in Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, Appendix D "The Rawlinson Manuscript of Mary Astell's Poetry, 1689" p 405

a statement to the reader about the enjoyment and sense of independence she got from study.

> That the pleasures of the mind are infinitely preferable to those of sense, intellectual delights, the joys of thought, and the complacencies arising from a bright and enlarged understanding, trancendently greater and more satisfactory than those of the body...has, through all ages, been an acknowledged truth, a truth that comes attended with all the convincing evidences that can be desired, and will soon be found to be undeniably so by all such as will be at the pains of making the experiment.[37]

Mary Chudleigh also mentioned in her letters to Elizabeth Thomas how important her books were to her, contrasting her life with those of women who did not have the same opportunity.

> The greatest part of my time is spent in my closet; there I meet with nothing to disturb me, nothing to render me uneasy; I find my books and my thoughts to be the most agreeable companions, and had I not betime accustomed myself to their conversation, perhaps I should have been as unhappy as any of my sex: But now, I thank God, I cannot only patiently, but cheerfully, bear a great many things which others would call afflictions... [38]

Having discovered the value of reading and writing, the feminists wanted other women to be able to have this experience as well. As we have seen, institutional provision of serious education for women did not exist. To people who believed so strongly in the importance of education, there was an obvious need for something more. In the late seventeenth century there was at least one effort to run a public school for girls that would emphasize academic achievement. Bathsua Makin, former tutor to Princess Elizabeth, published a pamphlet called *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673) as a defense of learning for

[37]Mary Chudleigh, *Essays on Several Subjects*, (London, 1710), p 1.
[38]Mary Chudleigh to Elizabeth Thomas, No date. *The Honourable Lovers*, (London, 1732), p 252.

women and an advertisement for her school. She used the words "ancient education" to emphasize the idea that there had been many intellectual women in the past, and there could be again if the recently established custom of poor education for women was changed. In her school girls would learn the expected social graces, but also subjects such as Latin, history, mathematics, and geography.[39] Makin used a teaching method for language instruction which was different from the usual memorization of grammar, and which she claimed allowed girls to learn Latin as well as modern languages in less time than boys learned by the usual method.[40] It is not known how many students she may have had, but her school probably did not exist for very long, since she died sometime around 1675.

Probably the most well-known proposal for an institution of higher education for women was Mary Astell's. In her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) her vision of an educational institution for women was opposed to the existing schools where all attention was focused on the outward attractiveness of the students and almost none on their minds. She began by explaining what she thought was wrong with women's situation, namely that too much attention was paid by women to their outer selves, and not enough to their minds. She believed this was not because women were innately empty-headed and vain, as some men alleged, but because they had been deliberately kept from learning, and encouraged instead to be frivolous. After explaining this she made the serious proposal of the title, which was that an institution of learning for women should be established. There, she told the ladies, "You will only

[39]Makin, p 24
[40]Makin, p 36-41.

quit the chat of insignificant people for an ingenious conversation; the froth of flashy wit for real wisdom; idle tales for instructive discourses."[41] "One great end of this institution shall be, to expel that cloud of ignorance which custom has involved us in, to furnish our minds with a stock of solid and useful knowledge, that the souls of women may no longer be the only unadorned and neglected things."[42] Anticipating opposition, she used two arguments to support her position. One was that women had been well educated in the past, and thus were capable of it, the other was that women had reason as well as men, and therefore should be allowed to develop it.

Astell's *Proposal* attracted interest among the feminists and many others. It went through three editions between 1694 and 1696. In 1697 Astell wrote a Part II to her proposal, which instructed women about how to go about improving their minds themselves since there was still no academy for them to go to. Two more editions with the two parts together appeared in 1697 and 1701. After he read the book, Richard Gwinnett wrote to Elizabeth Thomas. "I...give you my thanks for the agreeable entertainment which Mrs Astell has afforded me. I am pleased with her project, but do not think it likely to succeed, for I hardly ever knew a multitude choose the same end, and the same means of attaining it, where there was no worldly advantage to be gained thereby."[43] Although there was a lot of interest in Astell's proposal among London society, Gwinnett proved to be right. She was never able to establish her academy. There was apparently a wealthy woman,

[41]Astell, *Serious Proposal*, p 15.
[42]Astell, *Serious Proposal*, p 17.
[43]Richard Gwinnett to Elizabeth Thomas, September 3, 1700. *Pylades and Corinna* (London, 1731), p 21

possibly Princess Anne, who was prepared to provide money for the academy, but was talked out of it by Bishop Burnet, who was convinced the plan was too much like a Catholic convent.[44]

Despite the failure of her plan, another proposal for an institution for women came shortly after Astell's. Daniel Defoe's "An Academy for Women," published as part of his *Essay Upon Projects* (1697) shows that the subject was of interest to others besides the feminist authors and their friends. He agreed with them that the custom of allowing women to remain uneducated was to blame for apparent faults in their characters. "I have often thought of it as one of the most barbarous customs in the world," wrote Defoe, "considering us as a civilized and a Christian country, that we deny the advantages of learning to women. We reproach the sex every day with folly and impertinence, while I am confident, had they the advantages of education equal to us, they would be guilty of less than ourselves."[45] Defoe's proposed academy was less convent-like than Astell's, and was to be modelled after the public schools for boys.[46] His curriculum included languages, especially French and Italian, "I would venture the injury of giving a woman more tongues than one," he added.[47] "They should be brought to read books, and especially history, and so to read as to make them understand the world, and be able to know and judge of things when they hear of them." No subjects were to be denied to any student who had ability, but the chief purpose was to cultivate the students' understandings.

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[44]Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, Note 35, p 502. Elizabeth Elstob supplied this information to George Ballard.
[45]Defoe, *Essay on Projects*, p 282
[46]Defoe, *Essay on Projects*, p 286
[47]Defoe, *Essay on Projects*, p 292

Despite the interest in them, these efforts to establish serious schools for girls were unsuccessful. The feminists' response to this was to urge women to work on improving their intellectual abilities on their own. Elizabeth Elstob wrote her *Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue* (1715) in English rather than Latin so that other women could use it to study the Saxon language.[48] In 1697 Mary Astell published a second part to the *Serious Proposal* in which she wrote that she was discouraged by the failure of her proposal despite the attention it received She still thought her college was important for women and might eventually be built, but until then women would have to continue to study on their own. The purpose of Part II was to supply in the mean time more specific directions for developing the ability to think critically for women who wanted to learn.[49]

It is obvious that the early feminists had an overwhelming faith in the power of education to improve women's lives. Their belief in the importance of education was a reflection of the philosophical climate of their times, but it was not just based on theory about the nature of human understanding and the effects of learning on it. The power of education was proven by the difference it had made in each of their own lives. The pleasure the feminists got from learning provided intellectual independence and a happiness that did not depend on circumstances. It also put women at less of a disadvantage in their relationships with men. In the poem quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Sarah Fyge Egerton compared lack of knowlege to captivity. For her and the other feminist writers, the keys to freedom were found in their books.

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[48]Elizabeth Elstob, *Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue*, (London, 1715), p ii

[49]Astell, *Serious Proposal, Part II*, p 59.

Chapter 4

Marriage

To the Ladies

Wife and servant are the same,
But only differ in the name:
For when the fatal knot is tied,
Which nothing, nothing can divide.
When the word obey has said,
And man by supreme law has made,
Then all that's kind is laid aside,
And nothing left but state and pride:
Fierce as an eastern prince he grows,
And all his innate rigour shows:
Then but to look, to laugh, or speak,
Will the nuptual contract break.
Like mutes she signs alone must make,
And never any freedom take:
But still be governed by a nod,
And fear her husband as her God:
Him still must serve, him still obey,
And nothing act, and nothing say,
But what her haughty Lord thinks fit,
Who with the power, has all the wit.
Then shun, oh! shun that wretched state,
And all the fawning flatterers hate.
Value yourselves, and men despise,
You must be proud, if you'll be wise.[1]

-Mary Chudleigh, *Poems on Several Occasions*, 1722

Marriage, like occupation and education, was another important theme in the feminist writing of authors like Mary Chudleigh, whose poem appears above. As illustrated by Chudleigh's poem, feminists thought that men had too much power in the marriage relationship, by custom and by law. They thought that marriage should be a relationship based on mutual affection and respect, which would make both partners

1Mary Chudleigh, *Poems on Several Occasions* 3rd Edition (London, 1722), p 45

happy. The feminists were not the only writers of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to discuss marriage. Both authors sympathetic to feminism, such as Daniel Defoe and Elizabeth Thomas' financé Richard Gwinnett, and authors not apparently interested in feminist ideas like Lord Halifax, believed that there were many unhappy marriages, perhaps more than happy ones, and were concerned about what could be done to prevent or improve them.

It is difficult to tell what marriage was like for most people in the late seventeenth century. Demographic historians have been able to determine that the average age for first marriages in the seventeenth century was 24 years for women, 28 for men. Upper class men and women married slightly younger.[2] Apart from demographic information, there has been disagreement about what married relationships were like. Lawrence Stone believes that over the period 1500 to 1800, the institution of marriage in the middle and upper classes changed from a practical economic and political alliance in which emotion was secondary in importance, to a relationship between spouses that was based on mutual affection. Others have argued that the idea of companionate marriage was not new to the late seventeenth century.[3]

Stone argues that the major change that was taking place over the period 1500 to 1700 was the increasing importance of the nuclear family, and the decline in importance of the kinship and clientage connections that were so vital to medieval landed society.[4] By the late seventeenth century this change gave husbands more power over their

[2]Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (New York, 1971), p 85- 86
[3]Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1982), p 92.
[4]Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800.* (New York, 1977), p 123

wives and children than they had before. However, in practice husbands may not have had as much power as some evidence makes it appear they did. For example, although wife beating was legal, it seems to have been disapproved of generally.[5] The law gave husbands other advantages over their wives. For example, upon marriage a woman's legal identity was replaced by her husband's. Common law put any property a woman might own under her husband's control, but equity could offer some legal protection against complete control over a woman's property by her husband. However, this was usually used only in the cases of women who owned or were in the postion to inherit large amounts of land.[6]

At one extreme, if a husband exploited his legal and customary rights to the fullest, the result could be an intensely oppressive relationship. On the other end of the scale, happy, respectful, loving relationships like that of the Earl and Countess of Winchilsea also existed. The most reasonable assumption is that most people's marriages fell somewhere in between the extremes

Ideas about marriage did not exist independently of other social institutions. Further clues about the nature of early modern marriages can be found in political and religious ideas. For example, as the state became more centralized, gathering more power and demanding more loyalty for itself at the expense of the kinship connections among the upper class, it reinforced patriarchy within individual families.[7] It can be argued that "patriarchy within families is a characteristic of societies with strong authoritarian state systems, a phase of development

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[5]Wrightson, p 98-99
[6]Janelle Greenberg, "The Legal Status of the English Woman in Early Eighteenth Century Common Law and Equity," *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* Volume 4 (1975) p 174- 176
[7]Stone, p 132-135

characteristic of sixteenth and early seventeenth century England." It does not matter whether one is the cause and the other the effect, or which is which, because they are mutually supportive ideas and social systems.[8] Although the late seventeenth century, especially after the revolution of 1688, was a period in which the authority of the king was being reduced in law by the upper class, and the contract theory of government was gaining credence over the divine right monarchy philosophy, the social system did not immediately disappear. Defenders of the rights of kings used the metaphor of the king as father of his subjects. Evidence of the effect of this political philosophy on ideas about marriage can be seen in a letter written by Damaris Masham in 1685, in which she used the same metaphor in reverse, comparing a husband to a king, and a wife to a subject. She wrote to Locke that "[she] (following the example of some other sovereign powers) might after a long and glorious reign perchance resign her authority, and submit herself henceforwards to the more humble quality, and condition, of a subject."[9] Supporters of Whig politics could not be counted on to call for equality in marriage either, according to Mary Astell, who could not resist the opportunity to point out an inconsistency in their positions. "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 soever arbitrary power may be disliked on a throne, not Milton, nor B H.-, nor any of the advocates of resistance, would cry up liberty to poor female slaves, or plead for the lawfulness of resisting a private tyranny."[10] Milton had written about

[8]Stone, p 152
[9]Damaris Cudworth (later Masham) to John Locke, June 5, 1685 E.S de Beer, ed *Correspondence of John Locke*, Volume II (Oxford, 1976), p 723

the relationship between the sexes, "He for God only, she for God in him."[11]

Probably more important than politics in changing people's expectations of marriage were changes in the Church's view brought about by the Reformation. The Protestant view of marriage was different from the traditional Catholic one. In this view, virginity was the ideal, most holy state. Marriage existed to limit sexual activity and to produce legitimate children. In Protestant thinking, both Anglican and Puritan, marriage was considered the ideal state for a Christian, and its role in the happiness of both partners was emphasized. In 1549, Archbishop Cranmer added to the Anglican Prayer Book that marriage existed for "Mutual society, help and comfort . . in prosperity and adversity."[12] Some Puritans, like Milton, carried this one step further and advocated divorce and remarriage in the case of unresolvable incompatibility between spouses.[13] This point of view was possible because Puritans believed that marriage was not a sacrament, but should only be a civil contract between the spouses. During the Interregnum the Marriage Act of 1653 required marriages to be performed by JPs only, marriages in church were declared illegal. However, this was very unpopular and was virtually unenforceable.[14] Though some members of Parliament at this time thought divorce should be permitted in cases of adultery or desertion, this was not included in the 1653 legislation and was never made legal. In contrast, the Anglican doctrine from the time of the

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[10]Mary Astell, *Reflections on Marriage*, 4th edition, (London 1730, Reprint, New York 1970), p 34-35

[11]John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk iv, 299, in Myra Reynolds, *The Learned Lady in England 1650-1760* (Boston, 1920), p 25

[12]Stone, p 136

[13]Stone, p 138

[14]Lawrence Stone, *Uncertain Unions: Marriage in England 1660-1753* (Oxford, 1992), p 20

Elizabethan settlement was that marriage was sacramental in nature, and thus should be performed by a clergyman and administered by the ecclesiastical courts.[15] After 1660 the Anglican position became dominant again and the possibility of divorce being made legal was eliminated.

Another influence of Protestantism on the family was that it strengthened the role of husband as the head of the household by making him the spiritual as well as the secular head of the family. Further, Protestant preachers, Puritan and Anglican as well, stressed the subordination of wives to husbands in innumerable sermons. For example, the "Homily on Marriage" that preachers were ordered to read in church every Sunday starting in 1562 stated the inferiority of wives in no uncertain terms, "ye wives be in subjection to obey your husbands...for the husband is the head of the woman, as Christ is the head of the Church." In the seventeenth century sermons such as the one preached by Rev Sprint in 1699 that so infuriated Mary Chudleigh continued to exhort women to obedience of their husbands. Of course, it is difficult to know exactly what effect the rhetoric of preachers and moralists had on individual women and men.[16] The writings of the feminists are evidence that some women were angered by the public insistence on their innate inferiority, both intellectual and spiritual, by various preachers and writers. Whether or not the late seventeenth century was a period when husbands had more power over wives than before, the feminists thought men had altogether too much power in the marriage relationship, by

[15]Robert Michel, *English Attitudes Towards Marriage 1643-1657.* (MA Thesis, Montreal, 1969), p 74

[16]Stone, p 198-199

custom and by law. The slavery metaphor was used here too, as in Mary Chudleigh's poem, at the beginning of this chapter, and in Sarah Egerton's "The Emulation,"

> Then comes the last, the fatal slavery,
> The husband with insulting tyranny
> Can have ill manners justified by law;
> For men all join to keep the wife in awe.
> Moses who first our freedom did rebuke,
> Was married when he writ the Pentateuch;
> They're wise to keep us slaves, for well they know,
> If we were loose, we soon would make them, so.[17]

The feminists also noted that even though they took the same vows men had more freedom than women after marriage, especially the freedom to seek emotional and sexual release with other women

> For when two bind themselves in marriage bands,
> Fidelity in each, the Church commands:
> Equal's the contract, equal are the vows,
> Yet Custom different licences allows:
> The man may range from his unhappy wife,
> But woman's made a property for life
> To no dear friend the grief may be revealed,
> No, she, poor soul, must keep her shame concealed:
> And, to the height of doting folly grown,
> Believe her husband's character her own.[18]

A contemporary suggestion for dealing with this legal and customary power imbalance was made by Lord Halifax, quoted at the beginning of the previous chapter. He told women that although men technically had much more power, their feminine wiles could reduce their disadvantages. "You have it in your power not only to free your selves, but to subdue your masters, and without violence throw both their natural and legal authority at your feet."[19] His book dispensed

[17]Sarah Fyge Egerton, "The Emulation," *Poems on Several Occasions*, (London, 1703), p 108
[18]Elizabeth Thomas, "Epistle to Clemena," in Lonsdale, p 34
[19]Halifax, p 17

Machievellian advice on how to deal with various kinds of bad husbands, among these were alcoholic, ill-tempered, weak and so on. Halifax thought women should also accept the double standard that applied to sexual behaviour, finding satisfaction in having the "honour of families" in their care. As Thomas wrote above, Halifax thought a woman whose husband was unfaithful had better keep it to herself. "Next to the danger of committing the fault your self, is seeing it in your husband. Do not seem to look or hear that way. If he is man of sense, he will reclaim himself; the folly of it, is of itself sufficient to cure him. if he is not so, he will be provoked, but not reformed."[20] Thus, Halifax thought that women should not try to get any of the legal or customary power enjoyed by men, they should just learn to make the best of their positions. He thought a clever woman was one who knew how to take advantage of the opportunities she had within the status quo.

Beyond this matter of fact account of married life were popular satires against marriage and women's nature in general. One of these was *Love Given O'er* (1682), by Robert Gould, which made Sarah Egerton so angry she wrote a response to it, *The Female Advocate* (1687).

Readers will not be surprised to learn that as far as Mary Astell was concerned, the ideas of writers like Halifax and satirists like Gould were not acceptable. Astell thought that marriage was ordained by God as a blessing, "for mutual comfort and assistance," and as the only honourable way to continue the human race.[21] If married people were unhappy, and the institution had fallen into disrepute with the satirists

[20]Halifax, p 21 22
[21]Astell, *Reflections*, p 15-16

and the wits it was only due to human abuse of it.[22] Damaris Masham also condemned the prevailing satirical opinion of marriage, "It seems therefore one of the worst marks that can be of the vice and folly of any age when marriage is commonly condemned therein, since nothing can make it to be so but men's averseness to, or incapacity for those things which most distinguish them from brutes, virtue and friendship."[23]

In her *Reflections on Marriage*, (1700) which she wrote in reaction to an account of the unhappy marriage of the Duchess of Mazarin, who had become a neighbour of hers in Chelsea, Mary Astell wrote about the causes of unhappy marriages as she saw them. She thought that a man who married for money, for love of beauty or wit, or who married his parents' choice without consideration about whether he could care for the woman, would end up unhappy. "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, and therefore should not complain if he goes without one."[24] She pointed out that women could make bad choices too, but that all they could really do was accept or refuse offers, not make them, therefore men had more responsibility for bad marriages.[25] Mary Astell assumed in this statement that the people who married, not their parents, were responsible for choosing their spouses. However, comments by Mary Chudleigh indicate that this did not always happen. She thought that it was important for good marriages that people be able to make their own choices. "There is one thing which I think does more contribute to the unhappiness of the

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[22]Astell, *Reflections*, p 16-17
[23]Damaris Masham, *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Virtuous and Christian Life* (London, 1705), p 217
[24]Astell, *Reflections*, p 18
[25]Astell, *Reflections*, p 29

married state... and that is, parents forcing their children to marry contrary to their inclinations...And is it rational to suppose, that such matches can ever be fortunate?. .there cannot be that friendship, that tenderness, that unity of affection which ought to be in that sacred state."[26]

Astell believed what would make a happy marriage was not the Machiavellian managing of husbands by wives suggested by Halifax, but a wise choice based on Christian principles. "What then is to be done? How must a man choose, and what qualities must incline a woman to accept, that so our married couple may be as happy as that state can make them? This is no hard question; let the soul be principally considered, and regard had in the first place to a good understanding, a virtuous mind, and in all other respects let there be as much equality as may be. if they are good Christians and of suitable tempers all will be well."[27] Damaris Masham also agreed that married couples could be happy under these conditions. "But where there is mutually that predominant disposition to virtuous love, which is the characteristic of the most excellent minds, I think we cannot frame an idea of so great happiness to be found in anything in this life, as in a married state."[28]

The Countess of Winchilsea also wrote about the happiness of a marriage that was a true partnership of love and respect. In her "Petition for an Absolute Retreat," she described the things she would want in her ideal world. One of these was one person to share her retreat with, comparing this companionship with Eden before the Fall.

[26]Mary Chudleigh, Preface to *The Ladies Defence*, in Moira Ferguson, ed. *First Feminists* (New York, 1985), p
[27]Astell, *Reflections*, p 45-46
[28] Masham, *Occasional Thoughts*, p 217.

Give me there (since Heaven has shown
It was not good to be alone)
A partner suited to my mind,
Solitary, pleased and kind;
Who partially may something see
Preferred to all the world in me;
Slighting, by my humble side,
Fame and splendour, wealth and pride.
When but two the earth possessed,
'Twas their happiest days, and best;
They by business, nor by wars,
They by no domestic cares,
From each other e'er were drawn
But in some grove or flowery lawn
Spent the swiftly flying time,
Spent their own, and nature's prime
In love: that only passion given
To perfect man, whilst friends with heaven.[29]

Though the feminists agreed that this kind of emotional, intellectual and spiritual partnership was ideal for marriage, Mary Astell was pessimistic about the possibility of these kinds of partnerships for most women, because of what was missing from their education and the imbalance of power between the sexes that resulted from it. After describing how the choice should be made, she went on to say that conduct after marriage was also important. Men should be grateful to women for the sacrifices they had to make, and treat them with respect instead of demanding obedience. "But how can a man respect his wife when he has a contemptible opinion of her and her sex?" she asked,

> When from his own elevation he looks down on them as void of understanding, full of ignorance and passion, so that folly and a woman are equivalent terms with him? Can he think there is any gratitude due to her whose utmost services he exacts as strict duty? Because she was made to be a slave to his will, and has no higher end than to serve and obey him?[30]

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[29]Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, "Petition for An Absolute Retreat," *Miscellany Poems on Several Occasions*, (London, 1713), p 39
[30]Astell, *Reflections*, p 52

Once again, education was the thing that would give women more power in their relationships with men. Daniel Defoe agreed that education was necessary for the sexes to live more equally, and that a companionate relationship was more desirable than servitude "I cannot think that God Almighty ever made them so delicate, so glorious creatures, and furnished them with such charms, so agreeable and so delightful to mankind, with souls capable of the same accomplishments with men, and all to be only stewards of our houses, cooks and slaves...I would have men take women for companions, and educate them to be fit for it."[31] However, Mary Astell expressed again the conviction that men kept women from learning in order to take advantage of them, and would not easily be persuaded to give up this privilege. "It being a certain maxim with the men, though policy or good breeding won't allow them to avow it always, that the women were made for their sakes and services, and are in all respects their inferiors, especially in understanding, so that all the compliments they make, all the address and complaisance they use, all the kindness they profess, all the service they pretend to pay, has no other meaning, no other end, than to get the poor woman into their power, to govern her according to their discretion."[32] Thus, Mary Astell did not expect marriage to become more equitable any time in the immediate future

Overall, the feminists believed custom and law gave men too much power in marriage, but they concentrated their suggestions for change on custom as it applied to individual relationships. With better education for women and wiser choices of partners, they believed marriages could be

[31]Defoe, *Essay on Projects*, p 302-303
[32]Astell, *Reflections*, p 67-68

made happier and more equitable. Once again, they believed in the power of education to improve women's lives if custom could be overcome by reason.

Conclusion

"How can you be content to be like tulips in a garden, to make a fine show and be good for nothing?"[1] wrote Mary Astell to her female readers. She, and the other feminist authors, were determined that it should not be the fate of their fellow middle and upper class women to spend their lives in pursuit of beauty and charm, but nothing else.

Despite other differences of opinion, the feminists all thought that being denied education was the source of women's disadvantages. They did not blame anonymous social forces for this, they thought that men were directly responsible for keeping women from education, and compounded their sins by ridiculing the efforts of those who managed any intellectual achievement. According to the feminists, the "pleasures of the mind" would provide personal happiness and fulfilment, as the phrase suggests, and would also be a source of power in women's relationships with men, in marriage and in the wider world. One of the most important reasons why they believed this to be so has to be that education had these effects on their own lives. It worked for them, and it could work for others too, if only the "barbarous custom to breed women low"[2] could be changed

If seventeenth century feminists authors could criticize one custom that pertained to women, then why not all of them? If they criticized the laws which gave men so much power in marriage, why didn't they demand that those laws be changed? It could be that they were held back from demanding sexual equality by the influence on their minds of the "Christian patriarchal political and cultural system" and its

[1] Astell, *Serious Proposal*, p 3
[2] Makin, *Essay to Revive*, p 3

assertion of men's God-given right to rule over women.[3] However, their reasons for demanding change only in this one area may have been more pragmatic. For example, to Mary Astell wider social change still seemed beyond immediate possibility, but not unimaginable for the future. In 1700 when she wrote her *Reflections on Marriage*, Mary Astell looked forward to an age of sexual equality, which she described as "those halcyon, or if you will, millenuim days, in which the wolf and the 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!"[4] That she wrote this for publication shows that it was not too outrageous a thought to express publically, but her use of the word "millenium" to describe a time when sexual equality would exist suggests that she was convinced that such a thing could not happen in her own lifetime. Twenty two years after her death, some fifty years later, this was still a daring thought according to Mary Wortley Montagu, the woman who in her youth had been Mary Astell's friend and protegée. She wrote in a letter to her daughter,

> The same characters are formed by the same lessons, which inclines me to think (if I dare say it) that nature has not placed us in an inferior rank to men, no more than the females of other animals, where we see no distinction of capacity, though I am persuaded if there was a commonwealth of rational horses (as Doctor Swift has supposed) it would be an established maxim amongst them that a mare could not be taught to pace.[5]

At the same time that she expressed her opinion that there was no difference in men's and women's innate abilities, she recognized that many men would not accept the idea. Even Mary Astell's comparitively

[3]Sheryl O'Donnell, "Mr Locke and the Ladies: The Indelible Words on the *Tabula Rasa*," *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, Volume 8 (1979), p 161

[4]Astell, *Reflections*, p 128

[5]Mary Wortley Montagu to Lady Bute, March 6, 1753. *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, Robert Halsband, ed. Volume III (Oxford, 1965), p 27

modest goal of the establishment of an academy for women had proved to be unobtainable, so it is not unrealistic to say that simple pragmatism was part of what held her back from making greater demands for change for women.

In the years which followed Mary Astell's death in 1731, many female authors turned to the novel as a form that was increasingly being written and read by women. At this time there was also a reaction against the emphasis on the rational at the expense of the emotional that had characterized seventeenth century thought, including that of the feminists of that era. Sentiment was reaffirmed in the literature of the eighteenth century as an important aspect of the life of the mind.[6] The generations of women authors who followed in the eighteenth century, whether feminist or not, do not appear to have been directly influenced by Astell and her contemporaries. However, many of their important ideas were expressed in women's novels of the eighteenth century. For example, in *Millenium Hall* (1762) by Sarah Scott, five women create a place for themselves that remsembles Mary Astell's academy, in which they pass their time studying and teaching young girls and providing a haven for poor gentlewomen [7] In *De Valcourt* (1800), Agnes Maria Bennett's description of the happy marriage of the heroine Matilda sounds like the seventeenth century feminists' ideal of intellectual equality. In this relationship Matilda and her husband "constantly spent their mornings in pursuing, separately, some useful employment or improving study; while the communication of their progress in knowledge or utility furnished their evenings with rational delight, and prevented that yawning indifference and stupid insipidity, which too often, in the married life, succeeds the first months of

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[6]Katharine Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England* (Chicago, 1982), p 119.
[7] Rogers, p 156.

rapture."[8] The seventeenth century feminists' criticism of women's expected activities was also echoed in later novels like *Euphemia* (1790). In this book Charlotte Lennox created a character called Mrs. Bellenden, who was educated in all the proper accomplishments and nothing else, and was thus an inadequate person because of her "trivial mind and narrow sympathies."[9]

These examples show that the seventeenth century feminists' concerns remained important to women writers in the century following the publication of their books. However, by the end of the eighteenth century ideas like these were being overshadowed by the increasing importance of political and legal rights in feminist thinking. The emergence of new ideas like the radical politics of the French Revolutionary period provided a different basis for feminist arguments than rationality or sentimentality had. As feminist thought evolved in a new direction, the seventeenth century feminists were forgotten. Still, their ideas did not become completely irrelevant. The first college for women in England, Queen's College, was founded in 1848. Though it is likely that no one present when the college opened had heard of Mary Astell, its establishment prepared the way for her rediscovery by women scholars of the early twentieth century whose curiousity about intellectual women of the past led them to open her long neglected books again.

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[8]Agnes Maria Bennett, *De Valcourt* (1800), p 265, in Rogers, p 157.
[9]Rogers, p 159.

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