

## PHILOSOPHY 201A: MARY ASTELL

Winter 2024

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### *Course Description*

This course focuses on the philosophical views of Mary Astell (1666-1731). Astell was active as a philosopher in England around the turn of the eighteenth century. Some have called her “the first English feminist,” but, as we will see, that is up for debate. She was influenced by a number of different philosophers (notably René Descartes (1596-1650), John Locke (1632-1704), Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715), and, most importantly, John Norris (1657-1712)—a disciple of Malebranche), and influenced a number of other philosophers in her turn (including Mary Chudleigh, author of *The Ladies’ Defence* (1701), Elizabeth Thomas (1675-1731), and Sarah Chapone (1699-1764), author of *The Hardships of the English Laws in Relation to Wives* (1735)). George Berkeley included one of Mary Astell’s famous works, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (Part I, 1694—Part II, 1697), in his *The Ladies’ Library* (1714).

One of the complications involved in studying Astell is that a good deal of her philosophical work assimilates, tweaks, or opposes the views of some of her philosophical predecessors or contemporaries. This makes it difficult to pick up any of her work and read it in abstraction from its intellectual context. At various junctures, it may be necessary or desirable for you to read material that I have not assigned, especially when Astell herself points us to such material. But the focus of the course will be Astell’s own published words, of which there are many. It is better, I think, to spend seminar time reading and discussing her own work than it is to spend more time discussing exegetical controversies and correspondingly less time reading Astell herself. It is difficult to put aside some of her writings, though this is something we will need to do given the limited time available, because important parts of her philosophical system appear in different works and part of the aim of the seminar will be to investigate whether, and, if so, how, it might be possible to interpret her writings as a consistent whole.

For your term paper, I strongly suggest that you read some secondary literature on Astell, starting around one month into the quarter. We will only have time to devote two seminars (at the very end of the quarter) to some of the secondary literature on Astell’s theory of friendship (and its relation to virtue) and her views on marriage (and its relation to slavery). If you are looking for a book on Astell and you can’t find it in Geisel Library, please ask me about it, because it is likely that I have the Geisel Library copy.

**Main Course Texts (all made available as PDF files or available online)**

**SP:** Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest*, Part I (1694) and Part II (1697)

(<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/54984/54984-h/54984-h.htm>)

**MDL:** John Norris, *A Discourse Concerning the Measure of Divine Love, with the Natural and Moral Grounds upon which it stands, on Matthew 22:37*, in *Practical Discourses upon several Divine Subjects, Vol. III* (1693)

([https://www.google.com/books/edition/Practical\\_Discourses\\_upon\\_several\\_divine/MYe-1oxeyBEC?hl=en&gbpv=1](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Practical_Discourses_upon_several_divine/MYe-1oxeyBEC?hl=en&gbpv=1))

**LLG:** Mary Astell and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God, Second Edition* (edited by E. Derek Taylor and Melvyn New—Ashgate, 2005) (1705, first edition 1695)

**DLG:** Damaris Masham, *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1696)

(<https://digitallibrary.sdsu.edu/islandora/object/sdsu%3A3057/datastream/OBJ/view>)

**CR:** Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England, Second Edition* (ed. Jacqueline Broad—Iter, Inc., 2013) (1717, first edition 1705)

**RM:** Mary Astell, *Reflections Upon Marriage, To Which is added a Preface in Answer to Some Objections, Third Edition*, in *Astell: Political Writings* (ed. Patricia Springborg—Cambridge University Press, 1996) (1706, first edition 1700)

**Additional Works (which you may be interested in consulting in reference to your paper)**

Mary Astell, *A Collection of Poems Humbly Presented and Dedicated to the most Reverend Father in God William [Sancroft] by Divine Providence Lord Archbishop of Canterbury*, Appendix D in Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (University of Chicago Press, 1986) (1689)

Mary Astell, *A Fair Way with the Dissenters and their Patrons*, in *Astell: Political Writings* (ed. Patricia Springborg—Cambridge University Press, 1996) (1704)

Mary Astell, *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War in this Kingdom in an Examination of Dr Kennett's Sermon, Jan. 31, 1703/4 and Vindication of the Royal Martyr*, in *Astell: Political Writings* (ed. Patricia Springborg—Cambridge University Press, 1996) (1704)

Mary Astell, *Moderation truly Stated: Or a Review of a Late Pamphlet, Entitul'd, Moderation a Vertue, or, The Occasional Conformist Justified from the Imputation of Hypocrisy* (1704)

(<https://archive.org/details/moderationtruly00asteuoft/page/n13/mode/2up>)

Mary Astell, *Bart'lemy Fair: Or an Enquiry after Wit in which due Respect is had to a Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1709) ([https://archive.org/details/bim\\_eighteenth-century\\_bartlemy-fair-or-an-e\\_astell-mary\\_1709/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_bartlemy-fair-or-an-e_astell-mary_1709/mode/2up))

## ***Course Schedule***

January 9: A Serious Proposal

Reading: **SP**, Part I; **SP**, Part II, Chapters 1 and 2

January 16: A Serious Proposal, Continued

Reading: **SP**, pp. 78-162.

January 23: Norris and Astell on Love

Reading: **MDL**, pp. 1-83; **LLG**, pp. 69-98, Letters I-VI (while reading, look at notes to this material, from 69.9 on p. 146 to 98.10-11 on p. 157).

January 30: Norris and Astell on Love, Continued

Reading: **LLG**, pp. 98-138, Letters VII-XI and Appendix (while reading, look at notes to this material, from 98.38 on p. 157 to 138.32-34 on p. 166).

February 6: Masham's Discourse on Love and Astell's Reply

Reading: **DLG**, pp. 27-77 (note that this is a transcription of Masham's work, which may contain errors – it is, however, very readable, and contains some helpful footnotes, and that is why I am assigning it – if there appear to be problems with the text, please check it against the original, which you can find here:

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A52162.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>)

**CR**, Paragraphs 368-385, pp. 279-294

February 13: The Christian Religion—God and our duty to God

Reading: **CR**, Title Page, Advertisement, and Sections I-II, pp. 43-149.

February 20: The Christian Religion—Duty to Others and Duty to Our Selves

Reading: **CR**, Sections III-IV, pp. 151-265.

February 27: Marriage

Reading: **RM**, pp. 7-80.

### March 5: Marriage and Slavery

Reading: Andrew Lister, "[Marriage and Misogyny: The Place of Mary Astell in the History of Political Thought](#)," *History of Political Thought* 25 (2004): 44-72.

Jacqueline Broad, "[Mary Astell on Marriage and Lockean Slavery](#)," *History of Political Thought* 35 (2014): 717-738.

Karen Detlefsen, "Custom, Freedom, and Equality: Mary Astell on Marriage and Women's Education," in *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell*, edited by Alice Sowaal and Penny A. Weiss (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), pp. 74-92.

### March 12: Friendship and Virtue

Reading: Jacqueline Broad, "[Mary Astell on Virtuous Friendship](#)," *Parergon: Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 26 (2009): 65-86.

Nancy Kendrick, "[Mary Astell's Theory of Spiritual Friendship](#)," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 26 (2018): 46-65.

Allauren Samantha Forbes, "[Astell, Friendship, and Relational Autonomy](#)," *European Journal of Philosophy* 29 (2021): 487-503.

### **Course Requirements**

* One presentation	10%
* Five Reading Reflections (400-600 words each)	15%
* One term paper (preceded by a prospectus)	75%

### **Presentation**

Each presentation is designed to be no longer than 20 minutes. The purpose of a presentation is to summarize the *central* positions and arguments that appear in the readings for the seminar. Please do not attempt to provide a summary of the entirety of the readings. This is both impossible and undesirable. It is a very good exercise to take notes on the readings, in such a way as to end up with a summary of the whole. But that should be the *beginning* of the process of producing a presentation. The rest of the process should involve getting to the heart of the relevant issue(s), leaving aside what you take to be relatively peripheral. I encourage you to devote no more than 5 minutes of the presentation to questions or comments reacting to the contents of your summary. You should be asking yourself whether the central arguments are valid or sound; whether the positions taken by a single philosopher are mutually consistent; whether a central objection articulated by one philosopher criticizing another fails or succeeds. The entirety of your focus should be on the assigned readings. You may bring external information (that is, information not contained in the readings) to bear on your summary or evaluation of the readings, but only on the condition that it will help us understand the readings better. Keep in mind that the rest of the seminar attendees might not be familiar with external information, and that we want to keep the focus of seminar discussion on the readings themselves, not on the external information. Please email me before January 9 with your top three preferences for presentation day. There will be no presentation on January 9.

## ***Reading Reflections***

You need to write five reading reflections during the quarter. Each reading reflection should be 400-600 words long, and should focus, with close attention to the readings for that week, on clarifying a central argument, articulating a central interpretive difficulty and trying to solve it, or finding reasons to object to a central argument. I strongly suggest that you not leave your reflections until the last five weeks of the quarter, but you should feel free to spread them out, and skip writing a reflection for a week when you have a heavy workload for a different course. Ideally, you should aim to produce a reading reflection for weeks 2-6, leaving week 7 to concentrate on your term paper prospectus, which is due in week 8. Please do not write a reading reflection in advance of our first meeting on January 9.

If you decide to write a reflection in advance of a particular seminar, please email it to me and to all the other seminar participants by 5pm the day before the seminar. For example, if you choose to write a reflection in advance of our January 16 seminar, please email it to me and to all other seminar participants before 5pm on January 15.

## ***Term Paper Prospectus***

A term paper prospectus is due (by email) before the eighth week seminar on Tuesday, February 27. The prospectus should be 500-600 words (give or take), and it should articulate a main thesis, a rough plan, and a bibliography for your final term paper. Your paper should engage directly with Astell's work and with some of the secondary literature on Astell's philosophy. Your paper should aspire to be the basis for a publishable piece on Astell. In order to meet this goal, it will need to go much further than simply summarizing her views on this or that issue. It could articulate a consistency problem or an interpretive puzzle within her worldview, and then provide a solution to it. It could consider two or three different interpretations of Astell's views on a particular issue (or a set of related issues), criticize them, and articulate your own interpretation. It could take a different form, but you would need to discuss it with me ahead of time. In order to be publishable, your thesis needs to be original (in that it differs from existing theses defended in the secondary literature) and defended on the basis of a close reading of the relevant texts. The paper should **not** take the form of a compare-and-contrast piece, explaining, for example, how Astell's views on this or that issue are in some ways similar to, and in other ways different from, the views of some other philosopher(s). The paper should also **not** focus on an explanation of who influenced Astell, or whom Astell influenced, on this or that issue: it should be an exercise in the history of philosophy, not an exercise in the history of ideas.

In order to craft a workable term paper prospectus, you will need to have read all the works in your bibliography, and in your prospectus you should explain what role they play in your argument. It will not do to include something in your prospectus bibliography that you might want to read, or that you think might be relevant, but haven't read yet. The prospectus should be an actual plan, not a promissory note. If you have any questions about your prospectus, at any stage of the quarter, please do not hesitate to ask.

It is possible that your prospectus will focus on some of the secondary literature that we will be discussing in seminar after the prospectus is due. There is nothing wrong with that, if that is what you choose to do.

I will get back to you with comments on your prospectus after you turn it in. It is possible that I will give you the green light to write the paper on the basis of your prospectus. But it is also possible that I will require you to change the prospectus or come up with an alternative prospectus. It is also possible that I will ask you to meet with me to talk about your prospectus. So, if you are having doubts or you just want to run some ideas by me to make sure that you are on the right track, I recommend making an appointment (with several days' notice) to meet with me in person or by zoom in seventh week.

### ***Term Paper***

Your term paper is due (by email, in PDF format) before 5pm on Thursday, March 21. The term paper should be between 4,500 and 6,000 words long (roughly 15-20 pages, 12 point font, justified, double-spaced, with numbered pages, and a bibliography). The bibliography is not included in the word count, but footnotes should be counted in the word count. On the title page, you should put the title of the paper, your name, and the word count.

### ***Attendance***

Attendance at every seminar during the quarter is mandatory. You are required to attend every seminar during the quarter if you are enrolled in the course, unless you are ill or face a personal emergency or obligation that cannot be avoided and requires you to be absent. If any part of any seminar clashes (or might even possibly clash) with some aspect of your schedule, you need to let me know as soon as possible. If you want to enroll in the seminar, you need to drop any commitment that conflicts with any part of any seminar meeting, unless you have excellent reason to keep the commitment.

### ***Seminar Participation***

Seminars are run on a Socratic model. I will not provide notes or handouts or powerpoint slides. Seminars will consist in open discussion, with the aim of working through the central philosophical aspects of the relevant readings. I expect you to come to seminar with questions or comments or thoughts to share with the other seminar participants (some of which may have already been shared in your reading reflections). Expect me to ask a significant number of questions as a way of guiding discussion and keeping it on track. If we have been talking about a particular issue (or set of issues) and there is more for us to cover, expect me to redirect the conversation by asking a new question. If I do this, please do not understand me as taking a critical view of current discussion. In many cases, it is only with some regret that I will find it necessary to move on to a different issue.

### ***General Terms and Conditions***

1. Improvement counts in your favor if the relevant numerical calculations place you between grades at the end of the quarter.
2. If accommodations are needed for a disability, please contact the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD), and provide me with a letter of accommodation as soon as possible, preferably during the first week of the quarter.
3. If accommodations are needed for any kind of religious obligation, please let me know ahead of time (if possible), and I will do what I can to accommodate you.
4. Auditing the course is permitted, as long as enrollment is robust enough. As of January 2, there are six graduate students enrolled in the course, and that is robust enough to permit auditors. Auditors are expected to read the assigned course material in advance of any seminar they attend, and they may attend as many or as few seminars as they wish. When it comes to seminar participation, preference will be given to enrolled students over any auditors. But if enrolled students do not want to contribute to conversation at a time when an auditor would like to participate, and time allows, auditors should feel free to participate.
5. The Academic Honor Code must be observed in this course. Any form of cheating, including plagiarism or the use of ChatGPT (or other AI) for any purpose, will be treated as a violation of the Academic Honor Code and will be referred to the Office of Academic Integrity. If you are found responsible for any form of violation of the Academic Honor Code, you will receive an F in the course. It is particularly important that you avoid using ChatGPT (or other AI) for any purpose. Most importantly, it should not be used to produce any written work for the course, whether that be a reading reflection, or paper prospectus, or presentation, or term paper.
6. The course requirements and policies are subject to change. Any change will be communicated to you by email.