

Mary astell: england's
first feminist or
product of the
patriarchy?



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Mary Astell is often attributed as being England's first feminist because of her writing which questioned gender politics of the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century. For the time period, Astell's writing was groundbreaking. She examined the nature of gender bias in a manner that overturned commonplace conceptions of gender and marriage and supported female autonomy and equal education opportunity. In *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Astell explores the role of custom in the perpetuation of female subjugation, and she asserts that it would be most beneficial for women to ignore the custom of favoring the physical body over the mind in exchange for a focus on mental and spiritual development. Astell writes about the importance of female thought, and she strongly believes that women should focus on expanding their minds rather than obsessing over their bodies. In *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, Astell continues her early feminist examination of gender politics. Astell examines the marriage customs of the time period, and she subverts from the idea that a woman's one true purpose is to marry and have children. The rigidly gender biased climate that Astell lived in made her writing seem radical at the time, but modern feminist critics may recognize that Astell's version of feminism was particularly conservative in comparison to modern feminism. While Astell was very much in favor of some degree of female autonomy, her writing demonstrates a clear influence from the overpowering patriarchal views of her environment that weakens her position as a feminist by modern perspectives. Some aspects of Astell's argument on gender demonstrate an incredibly forward way of thinking for the 17th century and 18th century.

In *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Astell blames societal customs for the subjugation of women and the women's acceptance of their subjugate roles. She contends that society's emphasis on beauty and the physical self forces women to ignore their spiritual selves. Astell writes, "'Tis custom therefore, that tyrant custom, which is the grand motive to all those irrational choices which we daily see made in the world, so very contrary to our present interest and pleasure, as well as to our future" (356). Astell's exploration of the source of gender bias is very much aligned with modern feminist ideology. There is still a modern belief that societal customs, such as the sexual objectification of women, continue to impact the perception of femininity and the role of women in society. In *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Astell*, Alice Sowaal and Penny A. Weiss note the contemporary ideology of Astell's assertions. They write: Recent scholars have highlighted the modern feminist sentiment in these words. [...] Astell suggests that women are disadvantaged compared to men—or that they have a certain "incapacity" by virtue of their womanhood—but that their incapacity is a social construct rather than the product of nature or biology. (Sowaal and Weiss) Astell's logic in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* seems strongly feministic in its defense of women and their capabilities. Like modern feminists, Astell recognizes the role that societal norms play in a woman's ability to be seen as equal. In writing *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Astell was not necessarily meaning to be a proponent of radical women's equality. Astell, a supporter of the Church of England, only wished to encourage women to seek the same comprehension skills as men so that the women could understand their religion on a deeper, more spiritual level. Astell "argued that reason infuses human beings with divinity" (Johns 31). Her <https://assignbuster.com/mary-astell-englands-first-feminist-or-product-of-the-patriarchy/>

desires were to bring women closer to their spirituality, but this implies that she believed that women were, in fact, not then capable of using reason on their own accord. By modern feminist standards, it could be argued that Astell was slightly misogynistic in her perception of women being base and currently incapable of critical thought. Modern feminists may recognize that, although Astell seems to be in favor of some form of equality, her ideology is based on patriarchal assumptions of women. Astell writes, " By a habitual inadvertency we render ourselves incapable of any serious and improving thought, till our minds themselves become as light and frothy as those things they are conversant about" (356). This ideology is inadvertently influenced by patriarchal views.

Although Astell means to improve women with her writing, it can be seen that her perception of women was very much influenced by the societal norms of the time period. For Astell to believe that women need improvement, she is acknowledging the belief that women are, like patriarchal ideals suggest, insufficient in their current form and have something to improve upon. She presents women as being almost oblivious to and unconcerned with their proposed shortcomings. This notion can be viewed as a reinforcement of the emptyheaded female stereotype of Astell's time and of today. Astell's " proto-feminism," as it is branded by William Kolbrener in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith*, was certainly much more accommodating to the existing notion that women were inferior or flawed, whether from inherent corruption or societal influence, than modern feminism allows (193). Indeed, Astell's feminism is so notably different from modern feminism that it necessitates a new word to describe it. " Proto-

feminism” perfectly describes Astell’s ideology. While Astell did produce feministic concepts, they were truly conservative by today’s standards. Astell’s staunchly conservative religious and political views were in disagreement with any of her feminist ideals, and this weakens her position as a feminist, at least by modern perspectives.

Kinnaird notes, “ In A Serious Proposal she makes no plea that the universities should admit women as well as men to enter the professions and take part in the public part of the nation” (Kinnaird 64). Astell’s concerns in A Serious Proposal were largely religious and did not necessarily champion women’s rights as a whole. In fact, she wants her readers to recognize that she is not speaking too far in favor of women’s equality. She writes, “ We pretend not that women should teach in the church, or usurp authority where it is not allowed them; permit us only to understand our own duty” (361). She was more concerned with the female relationship to God than the female role in society when she explores the idea of the female autonomy, and she explicitly states that she does wish to change a woman’s role in society. Rather, she implies that women have false piety, and she offers them advice on how to improve their spiritualities. Astell is, by nature of the work itself, criticizing women in a manner that is incongruent with modern feminism. Her implication that women are incapable of understanding religion because they are suppressed by trivial customs casts a negative light on the female will, and it reinforces patriarchal stereotypes of women.

In Reflections upon Marriage, Astell asserts a more firm grounding for future feminist ideals in her examination of a gender politics in marriage. Still, her conflicting views are clear, and the contradictive nature of her arguments <https://assignbuster.com/mary-astell-englands-first-feminist-or-product-of-the-patriarchy/>

makes it difficult for modern feminists to agree with her writing entirely. As Patricia Springborg notes in *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination*, the conflict between Astell's religious and political views and her championing for women's causes "seems anomalous to modern readers" (32). When reflecting upon marriage, Astell tells women to choose their husbands wisely because they may otherwise be stuck with a tyrannical leader for a husband. Astell also suggests that women might live more happily if they never marry. Her religious convictions pervade her reflection on marriage, as seen in the multiple Biblical references to female subjugation. Her feminist views and her religious views conflict a great deal in her *Reflections upon Marriage*. She establishes as a fact that once married, males are superior and females are inferior. She offers no advice on how to improve female subjectivity in marriage; rather, she suggests that the one solution is that women must be more careful in choosing their husbands. Modern feminists, if examining female subjugation in marriage, might recognize and criticize the presence of male entitlement, which Astell does, but she also focuses on the female role in choosing a husband, as if females are partially to blame for their subordination. Modern feminism is less in favor of laying blame on women than Astell's proto-feminism is.

In conclusion, Mary Astell's position as England's first feminist is secure, but her feminism is very conservative in comparison to modern feminism. Astell theorized gender politics in a groundbreaking manner in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* and *Reflections upon Marriage*, but some of her ideology conflicts with a modern feminist perspective. Astell's writing demonstrates shortcomings in its feminist assertions, and this can be attributed to her

religious and political convictions and the predominant view of female inferiority that existed in her society. Although Astell was a supporter of female autonomy to some extent, effects of patriarchal ideology pervade her writing and weaken her feminist stance. In *A Serious Proposal for the Ladies*, she suggests that females are quite flawed and must improve in order to be considered intellectual equals. In her *Reflections upon Marriage*, her argument is disagreement with modern feminism in suggesting that women are the ones who must improve instead of men. Astell was a feminist by definition of the late 17th century and early 18th century, but her acceptance of certain aspects of patriarchal ideology is condemned by modern feminism.

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