

combined with moral and religious discipline. Though the idea was never carried out, it had a broad influence on later plans for educating women as well as on literature. At the end of Johnson's *Rasselas*, both Pekuah's dream of leading a religious order and Nekayah's desire to found a college of learned women owe something to Astell.

To question the customs and laws of marriage is to question society itself, its distribution of money and power and love. During the eighteenth century many of the terms of marriage were renegotiated. The older view of the wife as a chattel, bound by contract to a husband whom others had chosen for her and whom she was sworn to obey, was hotly debated and challenged. The witty arguments of Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700) reflect this growing debate between the sexes. Another work published in the same year, *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, takes a more independent position. Marriage, according to Astell, is all too often a trap. She insists that a woman should be guided by reason, not only in choosing a mate but in choosing whether or not to marry at all (Astell herself never married). So long as the institution of marriage perpetuates inequality rather than a true partnership of minds, women had better beware of flattery and look to themselves or to God, not to men, for the hope of a better life. The debate on marriage continued throughout the century in works such as Defoe's *Roxana*, Hogarth's *Marriage A-la-Mode*, the novels of Samuel Richardson, *Rasselas*, and eventually the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. It still continues today. In her sharp, lively style and the pertinent questions she raised, Astell has come to be seen as ahead of her time.

*From Some Reflections upon Marriage*¹

If marriage be such a blessed state, how comes it, may you say, that there are so few happy marriages? Now in answer to this, it is not to be wondered that so few succeed; we should rather be surprised to find so many do, considering how imprudently men engage, the motives they act by, and the very strange conduct they observe throughout.

For pray, what do men propose to themselves in marriage? What qualifications do they look after in a spouse? What will she bring? is the first enquiry: How many acres? Or how much ready coin? Not that this is altogether an unnecessary question, for marriage without a competency, that is, not only a bare subsistence, but even a handsome and plentiful provision, according to the quality² and circumstances of the parties, is no very comfortable condition. They who marry for love, as they call it, find time enough to repent their rash folly, and are not long in being convinced, that whatever fine speeches might be made in the heat of passion, there could be no *real kindness* between those who can agree to make each other miserable. But as an estate is to be considered, so it should not be the *main*, much less the *only* consideration; for happiness does not depend on wealth.

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But suppose a man does not marry for money, though for one that does not, perhaps there are thousands that do; suppose he marries for love, an heroic action, which makes a mighty noise in the world, partly because of its

1. The text is from the first edition.

2. Social position. "Competency": sufficient income.

rarity, and partly in regard of its extravagancy, and what does his marrying for love amount to? There's no great odds between his marrying for the love of money, or for the love of beauty; the man does not act according to reason in either case, but is governed by irregular appetites. But he loves her wit perhaps, and this, you'll say, is more spiritual, more refined: not at all, if you examine it to the bottom. For what is that which nowadays passes under the name of wit? A bitter and ill-natured raillery, a pert repartee, or a confident talking at all; and in such a multitude of words, it's odds if something or other does not pass that is surprising, though every thing that surprises does not please; some things are wondered at for their ugliness, as well as others for their beauty. True wit, durst one venture to describe it, is quite another thing; it consists in such a sprightliness of imagination, such a reach and turn of thought, so properly expressed, as strikes and pleases a judicious taste.³

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Thus, whether it be wit or beauty that a man's in love with, there's no great hopes of a lasting happiness; beauty, with all the helps of art, is of no very lasting date; the more it is helped, the sooner it decays; and he, who only or chiefly chose for beauty, will in a little time find the same reason for another choice. Nor is that sort of wit which he prefers, of a more sure tenure; or allowing it to last, it will not always please. For that which has not a real excellency and value in itself entertains no longer than that giddy humor which recommended it to us holds; and when we can like on no just, or on very little ground, 'tis certain a dislike will arise, as lightly and as unaccountably. And it is not improbable that such a husband may in a little time, by ill usage, provoke such a wife to exercise her wit, that is, her spleen⁴ on him, and then it is not hard to guess how very agreeable it will be to him.

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But do the women never choose amiss? Are the men only in fault? That is not pretended; for he who will be just must be forced to acknowledge that neither sex is always in the right. A woman, indeed, can't properly be said to choose; all that is allowed her, is to refuse or accept what is offered. And when we have made such reasonable allowances as are due to the sex, perhaps they may not appear so much in fault as one would at first imagine, and a generous spirit will find more occasion to pity than to reprove. But sure I transgress—it must not be supposed that the ladies can do amiss! He is but an ill-bred fellow who pretends that they need amendment! They are, no doubt on't, always in the right, and most of all when they take pity on distressed lovers; whatever they *say* carries an authority that no reason can resist, and all that they *do* must needs be exemplary! This is the modish language, nor is there a man of honor amongst the whole tribe that would not venture his life, nay and his salvation too, in their defense, if any but himself attempts to injure them. But I must ask pardon if I can't come up to these heights, nor flatter them with the having no faults, which is only a malicious way of continuing and increasing their mistakes.

3. Cf. Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* 2.297–304 (pp. 496–97).

4. Bad temper.

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But, alas! what poor woman is ever taught that she should have a higher design than to get her a husband? Heaven will fall in of course; and if she make but an obedient and dutiful wife, she cannot miss of it. A husband indeed is thought by both sexes so very valuable, that scarce a man who can keep himself clean and make a bow, but thinks he is good enough to pretend⁵ to any woman; no matter for the difference of birth or fortune, a husband is such a wonder-working name as to make an equality, or something more, whenever it is pronounced.

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To wind up this matter: if a woman were duly principled and taught to know the world, especially the true sentiments that men have of her, and the traps they lay for her under so many gilded compliments, and such a seemingly great respect, that disgrace would be prevented which is brought upon too many families; women would marry more discreetly, and demean⁶ themselves better in a married state than some people say they do.

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But some sage persons may perhaps object, that were women allowed to improve themselves, and not, amongst other discouragements, driven back by the wise jests and scoffs that are put upon a woman of sense or learning, a philosophical lady, as she is called by way of ridicule, they would be too wise, and too good for the men. I grant it, for vicious and foolish men. Nor is it to be wondered that he is afraid he should not be able to govern them were their understandings improved, who is resolved not to take too much pains with his own. But these, 'tis to be hoped, are no very considerable number, the foolish at least; and therefore this is so far from being an argument against their improvement, that it is a strong one for it, if we do but suppose the men to be as capable of improvement as the women; but much more if, according to tradition, we believe they have greater capacities. This, if anything, would stir them up to be what they ought, not permit them to waste their time and abuse their faculties in the service of their irregular appetites and unreasonable desires, and so let poor contemptible women, who have been their slaves, excel them in all that is truly excellent. This would make them blush at employing an immortal mind no better than in making provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof, since women, by a wiser conduct, have brought themselves to such a reach of thought, to such exactness of judgment, such clearness and strength of reasoning, such purity and elevation of mind, such command of their passions, such regularity of will and affection, and, in a word, to such a pitch of perfection as the human soul is capable of attaining even in this life by the grace of God; such true wisdom, such real greatness, as though it does not qualify them to make a noise in this world, to found or overturn empires, yet it qualifies them for what is infinitely better, a Kingdom that cannot be moved, an incorruptible crown of glory.

5. Aspire or lay claim.

6. Behave.

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Again, it may be said, if a wife's case be as it is here represented, it is not good for a woman to marry, and so there's an end of human race. But this is no fair consequence, for all that can justly be inferred from hence is that a woman has no mighty obligations to the man who makes love to her; she has no reason to be fond of being a wife, or to reckon it a piece of preferment when she is taken to be a man's upper-servant;⁷ it is no advantage to her in this world; if rightly managed it may prove one as to the next. For she who marries purely to do good, to educate souls for heaven, who can be so truly mortified as to lay aside her own will and desires, to pay such an entire submission for life, to one whom she cannot be sure will always deserve it, does certainly perform a more heroic action than all the famous masculine heroes can boast of; she suffers a continual martyrdom to bring glory to God, and benefit to mankind; which consideration indeed may carry her through all difficulties, I know not what else can, and engage her to love him who proves perhaps so much worse than a brute, as to make this condition yet more grievous than it needed to be. She has need of a strong reason, of a truly Christian and well-tempered spirit, of all the assistance the best education can give her, and ought to have some good assurance of her own firmness and virtue, who ventures on such a trial; and for this reason 'tis less to be wondered at that women marry off in haste, for perhaps if they took time to consider and reflect upon it, they seldom would.

1700

7. High-ranking servant. "Preferment": advancement in rank.

ANNE FINCH, COUNTESS OF WINCHILSEA 1661-1720

orn into an ancient country family, Anne Kingsmill became a maid of honor at the court of Charles II. There she met Colonel Heneage Finch; in 1684 they married. During the short reign of James II they prospered at court, but at the king's fall in 1688 they were forced to retire, eventually settling on a beautiful family estate at Eastwell, in Kent, near the south coast of England. Here Colonel Finch became, in 1712, earl of Winchilsea, and here Anne Finch wrote most of her poems, influenced, she said, by "the solitude and security of the country," and by "objects naturally inspiring soft and poetical imaginations." Her *Miscellany Poems on Several Occasions, Written by a Lady* were published in 1713. One poem, "The Spleen," a description of the mysterious melancholic illness from which she and many other fashionable people suffered, achieved some fame; Pope seems to refer to it when he invokes the goddess Spleen in *The Rape of the Lock*. But Finch's larger reputation began only a century later, when Wordsworth praised her for keeping her eye on external nature and for a style "often admirable, chaste, tender, and vigorous."