



Petticoat Power? Mary Astell’s Appropriation of Heroic Virtue for Women

ABSTRACT: *Several recent studies devote themselves to Mary Astell’s feminist theory of virtue—her ‘serious proposal to the ladies’ to help women obtain wisdom, equality, and happiness, despite the prejudices of seventeenth-century custom. But there has been little scholarship on Astell’s conception of heroic virtues, those exceptional character traits that raise their bearers above the ordinary course of nature. Astell’s appropriation of heroic virtue poses a number of philosophical difficulties for her feminist ethics—heroic virtues are characteristically masculine, exceptional, and individualistic, ill-suited to a community-oriented feminism aimed at ordinary women. In this paper, we seek to investigate—and then dispel—these key difficulties. Our intention is to generate a new understanding of Astell’s theory of virtue as a unique and sophisticated theory that equalizes and naturalizes heroic virtue for women.*

KEYWORDS: Mary Astell, heroic virtue, feminism, masculinity, Cartesianism

Introduction

In her moral-theological treatise, *The Christian Religion* (1705, revised 1717), Mary Astell writes that:

Men being the historians, they seldom condescend to record the great and good actions of women; and when they take notice of them, it is 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! ([1717] 2013: §260)

Although Astell does not make the immediate target of her cutting remark explicit, the most likely candidate is the Tory political pamphleteer, Charles D’Avenant. In an earlier work, Astell had launched an attack on D’Avenant’s *Essays upon Peace at Home, and War Abroad* (1704), complaining about his assertion that Elizabeth I governed well only because she had ‘a mind above her sex’ (D’Avenant

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1704: 180). Astell challenged D’Avenant for suggesting that ‘if women do anything well, nay should a hundred thousand women do the greatest and most glorious actions, presently it must be “with a mind (forsooth) above their sex”!’ (Astell 1704: lii). D’Avenant’s sexist assumption—that in acting heroically women transcend the limitations of their sex—was a common trope, both in historical accounts and in panegyrics dedicated to famous heroines like Elizabeth. In her own writings, by contrast, Astell appropriates heroic virtue for feminist ends and sees no incongruity between being female and performing great and glorious deeds. Indeed, ordinary women will need a fair dose of heroism to achieve equality with men.

While Astell’s theory of virtue is well documented (see Broad 2007, 2015, 2016; Sowaal 2016, 2017; Ahearn 2016), there has been little scholarship on her appropriation of heroic virtues—particularly courage, bravery, and resolution—as part of her liberationist program. Rose (2002) and Kolbrener (2004) touch on the subject, but the account we develop here will differ from theirs by denying that Astell is developing a distinctly female form of heroism or a gendered heroics of action (see section 2.1 below). Astell’s overarching aim is to help women attain happiness and to rise above their oppressive circumstances as a gendered sociopolitical group. She proposes an educational program that ordinary women can carry out because of their natural capacity for reason and goodness. Astell’s appropriation of heroic virtue for her ‘serious proposal to the ladies’ ([1694–97] 2002) raises, however, several philosophical difficulties. The first is that heroic virtues are traditionally masculine. From antiquity through to the early modern period, women were praised for their cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—but rarely ascribed heroic virtues, the highest degree of moral perfection. There were, of course, exceptions. Plutarch’s *On the Bravery of Women* lauds the brave and noble women of antiquity (Plutarch 1931; Antoniou 2020), and in the early modern period, the popular *femmes fortes* genre extolled the heroic deeds of eminent women. Most notable among these is Pierre Le Moyne’s 1647 (translated into English in 1652) *La Gallerie des femmes fortes* [*The Gallery of Heroick Women*], dedicated to Queen Anne of Austria, which documents the heroism of Christian, Jewish, and pagan women throughout history and addresses a sequence of ‘moral questions’ on the ability of women to perform heroic deeds and contribute to the public good. Implicit throughout these accounts is the assumption that, as Le Moyne (1652: 6) describes it, ‘souls of the first magnitude’ can inhabit ‘bodies of the second sex’ by the ‘declaration of God’, rendering heroic virtue among women as exceptional as it is assumed to be among men.

This general presupposition of exceptionalism poses a second problem for Astell. Given its commitment to exceptionalism, heroic virtue appears ill-suited to a moral theory intended to help ordinary women defend their liberty and equality with men. Yet, in her works addressed to a female audience—her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* ([1694–97] 2002), her *Reflections on Marriage* ([1706] 1996), and *The Christian Religion* ([1717] 2013)—Astell advises women to raise themselves to ‘the most eminent pitch of heroick Vertue’ ([1694–97] 2002: 57), to ‘shine as bright as the greatest Heroes’ ([1706] 1996: 75), and to cultivate a wisdom and

goodness that ‘is the most exalted pitch of heroic virtue’ ([1717] 2013: §48). She intends her audience to accept not that the heroism of women is something exceptional (extraordinary and exemplary), but rather something within every woman’s power.

The exceptionalism implicit in heroic virtue can be traced back to its origins. In Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle places at opposite ends of a spectrum the *virtus heroica*, a state of character that is divine and above ordinary human nature, and brutishness, a state of inhuman savagery (NE: 1145a19–20). Given Aristotle’s intention of developing an ethic for natural human beings, the divine connotations sit problematically within his larger theoretical framework. It has been speculated that Aristotle might simply be paying lip service to conventional Greek discourse about the virtues (Costa 2007), but this simply raises other problems. In Greek culture, it would have been near impossible to divorce heroic virtues from the public honors that motivate and reward its practitioners. Heroic individuals live *pro bono publico* (Henry 2008: 13), which is why they are singled out for civic praise and honors. This creates a third problem for Astell, namely, that among the satisfaction conditions for heroic virtues are externally bestowed honors and goods like glory, social status, and material rewards, contrary to the central aim of virtue ethics to render the good independent of things outside the agent’s control through a life devoted to contemplation. The desire for glory and honor can pull the soul in opposite directions from the things toward which the moral virtues tend, threatening the delicate psychological balance between reason and passion that is the mark and foundation of the virtuous soul.

To provide a coherent theory, Astell must address these three problems posed by the appropriation of heroic virtue. In this paper, we seek to investigate—and then dispel—these key difficulties. Section 1 provides essential background on the perception of exceptional women and the heroic virtues in the early modern era. We show that, historically, exceptionalism allowed heroic virtues to be extended to exemplary women on the condition that their behavior and character emulated that of heroic men. Such tensions reflect the difficulties of maintaining strict dichotomies of sex and gender in the ethical theorizing of the period. Exemplars are drawn from panegyrics for heroic queens that exploit the implicit exceptionalism of heroic language for political ends. It is because of their noble birth and divine right to rule that such queens transcend the ‘weakness of their sex’.

In section 2, we uncover the basis for Astell’s more radical heroic morality, which reconceptualizes exceptionalism through the lens of Cartesian moral psychology and a form of Christian Platonism. The result is an equalizing of heroic virtue between men and women—particularly of bravery and resolution—based on the godlike nobility of mind that can be fostered through a good upbringing and education in lieu of a noble birth. Astell’s emphasis on dignity is also relevant here, *dignitas* being closely connected with heroic virtue, if not itself a classical heroic virtue.

In section 3, we return to consider the tensions between heroic morality and virtue ethics, the first oriented toward the *vita activa*, a life devoted to serving the state and its citizens, the second toward the *vita contemplativa*, contemplation of the highest good. We argue that this tension is not sufficiently addressed by an appeal to

phronesis or right reason although that is necessary for theorizing the unity of heroic and moral virtues. Any reconciliation at least requires the development of a certain kind of socially oriented self-conception. In relation to this, we explore the use to which Astell puts classical organicist conceptions of the body politic and the appropriate desire for honor and reputation in Christian society.

We conclude by advocating a reading of Astell as offering a panegyric to all women who heroically defend their honor in a society that undervalues and oppresses them, without rendering public honors anything but the greatest of external goods. The true good for women remains the good use of their rational wills and right relationship to God. The upshot of our analysis is a greater appreciation of the sophistication of Astell's theory of virtue as a theory that equalizes and naturalizes heroic virtue for women.

1. Exemplary Women in the Early Modern Period

The above-mentioned themes of masculinity and exceptionalism are evident in the appeal to heroic virtues in panegyric literature dedicated to regent women of the period. Here we shall focus on panegyrics for Elizabeth I, Christina of Sweden, and Anne of England, the last of the Stuart monarchs, to illustrate the prominence of these themes.

Panegyrics to Elizabeth I abounded in the form of romantic poetry by courtiers seeking political favoritism, like Robert Devereux, 2d Earl of Essex, or those seeking royal patronage, like Edmund Spenser, whose 1590 heroic epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*, while praising indirectly the queen's virtue, is targeted at inspiring heroism among her male courtiers. There is a clear message throughout that heroism is tied to nobility and is naturally masculine. While glory belongs to the queen—'Gloriana'—*magnificence*, the apotheosis of heroic virtue, is reserved for Prince Arthur. The queen is wise to follow her courtiers' advice. The courtiers' Petrarchan love for their queen is a dominant theme in poetry written for Elizabeth, and, as David Norbrook (2011: 104) has argued, appears designed to overcome the unease felt by men at being subordinated to a woman. Elizabeth herself played into this idea of her reign as an exceptional state, never challenging the patriarchal order (Norbrook 2011: 101).

One can see evidence of Elizabeth's conservatism in her own public statements. In a speech to Parliament in 1586 she announced herself capable of only two kingly virtues—justice and temperance—prudence and magnanimity being exclusive to men (Elizabeth I 2000: 198), and in her famous speech to her troops at Tilbury in 1588, she declares:

I know I have the body of a weak, feeble woman; but I have the head and stomach of a king—. . . rather than any dishonour should grow by me, I myself will take up arms—I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every of your virtues in the field. (Elizabeth I 2000: 326)

Torrance Kirby (2007: 182) has argued of the latter that Elizabeth was likely influenced by reformist theologian, Peter Martyr Vermigli, whose *Epistle to the*

Princess Elizabeth (November 17, 1558) emphasizes her divinely anointed kingship. She is likened to various male Biblical leaders—Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and even to Christ himself (Kirby 2007: 189) as well as to heroic women from history—the ‘holy Deborah’, Artemisia, who fought the battle of Salamis ‘with a manly heart’, and Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra and conqueror of Emperor Gallienus (Kirby 2007: 191). Observing Vermigli’s use of Xerxes’s remark that ‘the men in that battle were women, and the women showed themselves the bravest men’ (191), Kirby draws a bow to Elizabeth’s speech at Tilbury. We note here also Elizabeth’s own gendered assumptions about heroism—that it consists in a certain masculine militaristic courage—as well as the motivating force of her aversion to dishonor. Honor is a central theme, both the queen’s own and that with which she will ‘reward’ her heroic troops.

Similar themes pervade the numerous panegyrics to Christina of Sweden. As Stefano Rota notes (2012: 2), these panegyrics tend to reflect an ‘ideal and exclusive image of man’—aristocratic, royal, and courtly, with direct connections to the divine. In the libretto for the ballet, *Le Monde Reioivi*, performed in Stockholm on January 1, 1645, in celebration of Christina’s accession, the queen is depicted as having transcended her female status through her Swedish blood and ancestral ties, particularly to her father, Gustavus Adolphus, whose ‘glorious’ reign she will continue because she conserves his ‘male strength’ (Rota 2012: 3 n4).

Ottavio Ferrari’s ballet *Pallas Svecica* (1651) goes further, asserting that Christina is more admirable than heroic men precisely because she must suppress her sexed nature. Men have only to ascend to the apotheosis of their nature, whereas women must transcend theirs: ‘she transcended the law of nature and of her sex, and virtue is therefore even more admirable in a woman, since she has overcome the merits by which men are judged’ (cited in Rota 2012: 5). In these and other ballets performed between 1645 and 1651, it is assumed that the heroic and cardinal virtues are interdependent. As Rota concludes (2012: 5), it is because Christina is guided by reason and has forsaken her passions—her inclinations to marry and study (‘the Muses’)—that ‘the etymologically male virtues can therefore apply exceptionally to her’.

The need to have the right conception of honor—namely, one deserving of civic praise because it is civically oriented—is a dominant theme in *La Naissance de la Paix*, a ballet written in celebration of Christina’s twenty-third birthday and signing of the Treaty of Münster ending the Thirty Years War. The ballet was credited to Descartes by his official biographer, Adrien Baillet (1691: 2.395). The attribution is disputed by Watson (2007), but defended by Rodis-Lewis (1992), Gombay (in Descartes 2019) and Gustafsson (2018). Christina dances the part of Pallas, who with prudence and ‘generous commands’ draws us away from the hazards of war. She stands in opposition to Mars, who seeks only to ‘credit himself with the top honours of war’, but it is ‘Jupiter’s Daughter/Who alone deserves those honours’—‘the sky, the sea, the air and the earth’ (Descartes 1909: 5: 618; translation by Gombay in Descartes 2019: 555). Christina’s heroic virtue is tied to her engaging only in defensive wars. In the final act, Pallas, Peace, and Justice dance with the Muses and Graces—for ‘Pallas alone is both /A war-and-a-peace lover’ (Descartes 1909: 5: 627; 2019: 565).

As with the panegyrics to Elizabeth, the essentially propagandistic function of these ballets is clear. In *Le Monde Reioivi*, Christina is subtly exhorted to continue military action in Germany because it is divinely ordained (Rota 2011, 2012: 3). She was perceived as crucial to Protestant Reformism, an ally to England in the Thirty Years War, and, after 1648, to the stability of the Westphalia Treaty, which she helped secure. The praise of Christina's heroic virtues, dignity, strength, and self-sacrifice—and the use of divine allegories—continued as tropes in Catholic panegyrics following her conversion in 1655, only this time as propaganda against Protestant heresies (Rota 2012: 8).

Within Astell's time, panegyrics to Queen Anne flourished on both sides of the Tory/Whig divide around her coronation in 1702. Anne's accession was plagued by various political anxieties, including controversy about her right to succession and the constant threat of Jacobite uprisings. Hone (2014: 149) argues that the panegyrics to Anne embodied the principle of *laudando praecipere* (teaching by praise) and were aimed at securing certain political allegiances. Whereas *The English Muse* (1702), a Tory pamphlet preceding her coronation, emphasizes themes of Anne's divinity and right to the throne, denigrating William III and his Whig government as illegitimate, *The Female Muse* (1702) by Whig sympathizer, Ann Dyke, presents Anne as inheriting and combining William's virtues with her own. In his *Essays*, D'Avenant also tries to direct Anne in foreign policy and managing factional disputes in parliament, much to Astell's chagrin (see Astell 1704: lii–liii).

Not surprisingly, Tory panegyric literature often emphasized Anne's heroic virtue and hereditary claim (Hone 2014: 149), representing the intersection of both secular and divine law. Having been given 'a suffering Kingdom to Repair', Anne is urged to liken herself to Elizabeth, who 'held the rains [*sic*] with so exact a hand / That she both Parties could command'. Through her wisdom and strength, she will 'bless the State / Not only her Self, but England Great'. She will be 'Ador'd and Rev'renced like a God / By all who've Her divine Perfections seen'. In praising her militaristic strength, Anne is likened to the 'Assyrian Princess', Queen Shammuramat, who ruled Assyria as regent and was revered for her courage and wisdom. The reference alludes both to the exceptional circumstances in which a woman holds the throne and to its temporariness. Anne will thus need to choose her male counsels carefully and beware of 'foreign spies' and the 'faithless, ingrateful, treacherous and unjust' foes of her ancestors. *The Female Muse* (1702) prophesies that Anne will 'maintain Religion's Rights and Laws / And bravely still support Brittain's Cause' alongside the Earl (later, Duke) of Marlborough, John Churchill—whose wife, Sarah, was a close friend of the queen and a Whig sympathizer—as her general (Dyke 1702: 9; Hone 2014: 150). Both poems emphasize the importance of Anne producing male heirs.

From these three examples of heroic queens lauded in the early modern period—Elizabeth, Christina, and Anne—we can glean a fairly clear picture of how heroic virtues were understood in relation to women. Such virtues were only atypically extended to the female sex—that is, to *exceptional* women, outside the ordinary course of nature—women divinely ordained to rule in unusual circumstances and in virtue of their distinctively masculine qualities. While it perhaps goes farther

than most panegyrics in challenging the status quo, Le Moyne's *Gallery of Heroick Women* does not challenge these traditional biases of heroic discourse. It is true that heroic virtue proceeds 'from the heart, not the sex', and women's hearts are of 'the same matter and form' as men's (Le Moyne 1652: 39):

States are not governed by a beard not by an austere Countenance: they are ruled by the strength of wit, and with the vigour and activity of reason: and Wit may be as strong, and Reason as vigorous in the Head of a Woman, as in that of a Man. (Le Moyne 1652: 7)

Nonetheless, as leaders, women must develop a certain masculine heroism—i.e., exhibit a manly valor (bravery, courage, or force) and 'manly thoughts' (Le Moyne 1652: 175) in ruling and safeguarding their country. Their heroic virtues are associated with active leadership, militaristic shows of strength, and courage in the face of danger. Similar themes can be found in other examples from the *femmes fortes* tradition, including Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* (1361–62), Louis Machon's *Discours ou sermon apologetique, en faveur des femmes* (1641), and Madeleine de Scudéry's *Les femmes illustres* (1642).

From this historical perspective, it would seem very difficult for ordinary women to exhibit heroism or to do so while remaining feminine or effeminate. They must 'un-sex' themselves and transcend the ordinary course of nature to attain heroic virtue. What scope is there, then, within heroic virtue for a truly feminist ethic?

2. Heroic Virtue and the Feminist Cause

As we have seen, for Astell, heroic women are not 'men in petticoats' ([1717] 2013: §260), and thus the assumption that heroic virtue is essentially masculine is simply false. But how far could she push this point when her own references to heroic women are full of praise for their military roles in leading armies in war, their political power, and the spoils of their conquests and victories? In her *Reflections on Marriage*, Astell praises Anne for protecting the empire and conquering foreign lands—not for self-interested reasons but simply for 'the Royal Pleasure of doing Heroically' ([1706] 1996: 31; see also Barash 1992: 67–69). Clearly, we shall have to dig deeper to see how far Astell challenged both the masculinist and militaristic connotations of heroic virtue.

Astell's examples of specific heroic virtues include courage, bravery, constancy, and resolution ([1717] 2013: §§98, 99, 160, 275), with the assumption that these virtues operate in conjunction with the cardinal virtues. By 'heroic virtue' Astell means 'the utmost degree of perfection of which human nature is capable' ([1717] 2013: §99). This aligns with the classical Aristotelian formulation of heroic virtues as representing the apotheosis of human nature and a divine element. Astell suggests that heroism consists in becoming godlike, in being above ordinary human beings. In a passage of her *Christian Religion*, she advises her female readers how they might attain 'the highest degree of heroic virtue' provided that they endeavor to do the best things 'constantly and vigorously', despite opposition. Their 'illustrious character' will be demonstrated by using adverse

circumstances as a ‘theatre’ to display their prudence, exercise their fortitude, and exert their strength ([1717] 2013: §160). Such passages display Astell’s commitment to a core thesis of several virtue theories, namely, that it is not possible to have one virtue without the others. To have one excellence of character, such as courage, one must have the other excellencies as well, including prudence, temperance, and justice, to determine how to be courageous in the right measure, on the right occasions (for a critical analysis, see Badhwar 1996). We call this the *unity thesis*.

The question is whether in accepting traditional ideas about heroic virtues, Astell also commits herself to what we have outlined are three central problems attending their integration into a feminist virtue ethics. We present these problems—and the paradoxes they generate—as follows:

1. *The problem of masculinity.* Heroic virtues are traditionally masculine. Women cannot therefore attain heroic virtue and remain feminine or effeminate (they must ‘un-sex’ themselves to be heroic).
2. *The problem of exceptionalism.* Heroic virtue presupposes exceptionalism. To be heroic is to rise above ordinary human nature; yet, in Astell’s view, ordinary women live up to the dignity of their nature when they exhibit heroic virtues.
3. *The problem of individualism.* Heroism warrants and is motivated by the desire for public esteem in the form of civic honors, fame, glory, political power, and an elevated social status. The esteem accompanying virtue is both within an agent’s power yet outside their power.

We address the first two of these problems in the next two subsections, and the third in the third section.

2.1 Response to the Problem of Masculinity

One possible solution for Astell is suggested by Mary Beth Rose in her study of heroism in the early modern era. Rose (2002) traces a transformation in cultural conceptions of heroism from the late sixteenth century to the early eighteenth century. She argues that, in this period, the heroics of action closely associated with men (mainly aristocratic men) is replaced by a heroics of endurance that is aligned with values typically associated with women, femininity, and slavery (Rose 2002: 113). She observes that prior to the seventeenth century heroism was often conceived as a form of public idealized masculinity. The ‘questing, striving, and conquering’ of the heroic subject is represented as the exclusive province of men, particularly socially elevated men who are actively engaged in war and politics (Rose 2002: xi). The legitimate hero is a man who embraces leadership, exploration, and conquest—the heroics of action. In light of this masculinized conception of heroic virtue, women face a paradoxical situation: they must choose between their identity as women and the perfection of their rational natures, but they cannot have both.

The historical shift from a masculinized heroics of action to a feminized heroics of endurance is seemingly reflected in Astell's assurances that heroic virtue can be attained in ways that are 'not misbecoming' (i.e., unbecoming) to women and femininity. In a section of *The Christian Religion* titled '*Courage necessary; and not misbecoming a woman*', Astell says

"the weapons of our warfare are not carnal," they enable us indeed to conquer the world, and which is more, ourselves, but all this without doing violence to any person. A woman may "put on the whole armor of God" without degenerating into a masculine temper; she may "take the shield of faith," "the sword of the spirit," "the helmet of salvation," and "the breast-plate of righteousness" without any offence to the men, and they become her as well as they do the greatest hero. I could never understand why we are bred cowards; sure it can never be because our masters are afraid we should rebel, for courage would enable us to endure their injuries, to forgive, and to despise them! ([1717] 2013: §98)

Despite her praise of the conquests of exemplary queens like Anne, Astell here points to a non-militaristic, non-masculine form of heroism, which Rose construes as equivalent to women's exceptional endurance.

On the one hand, we agree with Rose that Astell emphasizes the endurance of women and more so, perhaps, than men writing about heroic virtue in the period. In her *Christian Religion*, Astell writes: 'to be singularly wise and good in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, and in spite of all the persecutions we suffer for being so, is the most exalted pitch of heroic virtue' ([1717] 2013: §48). And in her *Reflections on Marriage*, she writes as if marriage were itself a form of martyrdom:

For she who Marries purely to do Good, to Educate Souls for Heaven, who can be so truly mortify'd as to lay aside her own Will and Desires, to pay such an intire 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. ([1706] 1996: 78; see also Stanton 2007)

On the other hand, it is a mistake to construe from passages such as these that Astell is reconceptualizing heroic virtue as a distinctively feminine form of endurance. Historically, endurance was often conceived as an essential element of the virtue of fortitude. In his *Summa Theologiae* (II-II, q.123, a.6), Aquinas, for example, glosses fortitude as the trait of standing immovable amid danger rather than attacking it. Fortitude represents firmness and constancy in the face of hardship, but it can also translate into acts of courage and daring, such as risking one's life for the sake of the polis in a just war (Reichberg 2010: 347). And so, when Astell advises women to practice endurance, she need not be interpreted as

reconceiving courage and bravery in terms of a distinctively feminine form of heroism. A gendered interpretation would neglect the varied forms that fortitude has taken as one of the cardinal virtues.

In addition, were Astell redefining courage and bravery as endurance alone, she would run the risk of reducing the heroism of women to the endurance of their subordinated status in society. For all her political conservatism, this is clearly not what Astell intends for women. Accordingly, she is not averse to using the language of action and conquest herself: ‘But let us leave them (men) to their conquests while we push on in ours; and with undaunted bravery pursue the great design of Christianity, by advancing to the utmost degree of perfection of which human nature is capable’ ([1717] 2013: §99). Her references to endurance serve instead to persuade women that their having endured subjugation gives them more reserves, more strength within, than men, to overcome their oppression through heroic action. In her *Proposal*, she argues that:

One wou’d therefore almost think, that the wise disposer of all things, foreseeing how unjustly Women are denied opportunities of improvement from without, has therefore by way of compensation endow’d them with greater propensions to Vertue, and a natural goodness of Temper within, which if duly manag’d, would raise them to the most eminent pitch of Heroick Vertue. ([1694–97] 2002: 57)

For these reasons, we prefer to read Astell not as feminizing heroic virtue but rather as seeking to de-gender it.

We also see Astell as pointing to the tension within traditional virtue ethics between the unity thesis and the assumption that heroic virtue is essentially masculine. For if women are paragons of cardinal virtues, and if anyone capable of the cardinal virtues is also capable of heroic virtue, then the unity thesis entails that women are just as capable of heroic virtue as men because it is not possible to have one virtue without the others. It is not ‘misbecoming’ of a woman to be heroic because there is nothing essentially gendered about heroic virtue.

2.2 Response to the Problem of Exceptionalism

As noted above, the idea that heroic virtue is divine poses particular problems for any virtue ethics aimed at characterizing the good ‘in this life’ for ordinary, mortal human beings. The very exceptionalism presupposed in heroic virtue stands at odds with the naturalistic and egalitarian undercurrents of virtue ethics.

A corresponding tension can be seen in Astell’s remarks that seem to accept that heroic virtues are exceptional and yet also allow that every woman is capable of heroic virtue. In her *Christian Religion*, she is at pains to emphasize that every woman can aspire toward perfection, including herself, whom she regards as ‘a woman who has not the least reason to imagine that her understanding is any better than the rest of her sex’s’ ([1717] 2013: §401). A weak response to this puzzle, we submit, is to read Astell as simply making room on the stage for heroic women—as maintaining that while all human beings, including women, are

capable of achieving heroic virtue, only a few will ever do so. Let us call this the *capacity view*. Many might be denied the opportunity for heroism, lacking the power or means to exercise their capacity. Some passages suggest that this is Astell's view. In the dedication to Anne in the second part of her *Proposal*, Astell writes:

The Chief Prerogative of the Great is the power they have of doing more Good than those in an Inferior Station can. . . . It is by the Exercise of this Power that Princes become truly Godlike, they are never so Illustrious as when they shine as Lights in the World by an Eminent and Heroic Virtue. ([1694–97] 2002: 117)

While all human beings might have the capacity for heroism, she suggests, only those in socially elevated positions will be able to realize that capacity.

Nevertheless, we advocate a stronger reading than the capacity view. Astell's Cartesian-Platonist metaphysics of mind identifies the will as the divine element within the soul, and it is in the good use of this will—which is within any person's grasp—that the supreme perfection of human agents lies. While virtue is thus independent of fortune, it does not consist in the mere capacity for good acts but requires actively choosing and pursuing the best and just outcome. Let us call this the *actuality view*. This implies that all women—not only the elite—can actually achieve heroic virtue.

Virtue, for both Descartes and Astell, is *générosité* or legitimate self-esteem, and its heroic elements are part of a general ascendancy of heroic virtues in the period (Greaves 1964; Brown 2006: 192). Replacing the crowning virtue of Aristotelian ethics, *megalopsychia*, *générosité* carried connotations of nobility and dignity (Shapiro 1999) that loom large in Astell's ethics, but it also has a distinctively heroic cast (Brown 2006: 189–202). Generosity is defined in two parts: first, in the recognition that 'nothing truly belongs to oneself but the freedom to dispose one's volitions and that one should be praised or blamed according to whether one uses the will well or badly', and second, in the 'firm and constant resolution to use the will well', that is, 'never to lack the will to undertake what one judges to be best' (Descartes 1650: a.153; 1909: 11: 445–46; 1984–91: 1: 384). Heroic virtues of constancy and resolution are thus built into the very definition of moral virtue, as is courage in the extended analysis, for generosity 'renders us in a certain way like God by making us masters of ourselves, provided we do not lose the rights it gives us through timidity' (Descartes 1650: a.152; 1909: 11: 445; 1984–91: 1: 384). Although God's will is infinitely more powerful, the human will is godlike because it is free and unlimited; human limitation resides with the finite intellect, not the will (1909: 7: 57–58; 1984–91: 2: 40). The fact that the will is wholly within our own power bestows us with dignity and 'greatness of soul', enabling us to become good through our own efforts. Similar themes find their way into Astell's *Proposal*. 'There is a sort of Bravery and Greatness of Soul', she says,

which does more truly ennoble us than the highest Title, and it consists in the living up to the dignity of our Natures, scorning to do a mean

unbecoming thing; in passing differently thro' Good and Evil Fortune, without being corrupted by the one or deprest by the other. For she that can do so, gives evidence that her Happiness depends not on so mutable a thing as this world; but, in a due subserviency to the Almighty, is bottom'd only on her own great Mind. This is the richest Ornament, and renders a Woman glorious in the lowest Fortune. ([1694-97] 2002: 111)

In *Moderation Truly Stated*, Astell highlights this same 'greatness of mind' when she praises the great Roman heroes, Cincinnatus, Curius Dentatus, Fabricius, Decius, Fabius, and Regulus, each of whom makes an appearance in Niccolò Machiavelli's *Discourses upon the First Decade of Titus Livius* (1531), a text cited several times in Astell's work. These heroes display 'true Greatness of Mind'—'Good Sense, Courage and Conduct, Just and Vertuous Actions'—enabling them to withstand hardship and adversity (1704: 108). It is their heroic virtues that account for their endurance.

Because constancy, resolution, and courage are built into the concept of generosity and because generosity is a virtue tied to the rational will, the capacity for heroic virtue is equally distributed. The moral equality that follows from generosity being defined as tied to the will is explicit in Descartes:

Those who possess this knowledge and this feeling about themselves [i.e., generosity] readily come to believe that any other person can have the same knowledge and feeling about himself, because this involves nothing which depends on someone else. That is why such people never have contempt for anyone. (Descartes 1650: a.154; 1909: 11: 446-47; 1984-91: 1: 384)

Generosity is first a passion and then (when habitual) a virtue, and as such it assists the soul in the regulation of its more exogenously controlled and unruly passions, directing the movements of the spirits toward the soul's virtuous ends (Descartes 1650: a.161; 1909: 11: 453-54; 1984-91: 1: 387-88; Brown 2006: 203). It is thus a condition for the self-regulation and self-sufficiency that accounts for the tranquility of the virtuous psyche. The *généreux* think themselves neither inferior to others who have greater wealth, honor, intelligence, or any other perfection that is inequitably distributed or outside their control, nor superior to anyone else, and nor do they desire external goods excessively or for their own sake: 'For all these things seem to them to be very unimportant, by contrast with the virtuous will for which alone they esteem themselves, and which they suppose also to be present, or at least capable of being present, in every other person' (Descartes 1650: a.154; 1909: 11: 448; 1984-91: 1: 384).

Like Descartes, Astell regards the will as a divine-like faculty equally distributed among all human beings. But her Christian-Platonist influences prompt her to take this idea even further. In his *Enchiridion Ethicum* (1666; English translation 1690), the Cambridge Platonist Henry More adapts Descartes's ethical philosophy of the passions and extols the virtue of generosity. But unlike Descartes, More

insists that God grants human beings a ‘boniform faculty’, enabling them to take pleasure in the good and naturally to will the best course of action. This capacity to will the good is ‘the most divine thing within us’; it is by virtue of this ‘Celestial Particle’ or ‘Heavenly Spark’ that we ‘are made most like unto Almighty God’ (More 1690: 17, 35, 19). Following More, whom she cites in the *Proposal* ([1694-97] 2002: 218), Astell highlights that ‘particle of Divinity’ within human beings ([1694-97] 2002: 53), urging the reader to consider ‘in whose Image her Soul was Created’ (146) and to use those faculties that ‘bespeak in us somewhat too Divine’ to be wasted (211). (On Astell and More, see Broad [2007: 174–75], Sowaal [2017: 183–84], and Schmitter [2013: 453, 463].) In short, for Astell, the godlike will is the source of a woman’s capacity to become more than merely human—to approach moral perfection—through her choices and actions. It is not a rare or exceptional capacity but part and parcel of every human being’s resemblance to God.

The resolution of the second paradox is now clear. It consists, first, in retaining the traditional connection between heroic virtue and the divine, but in rendering the divine element not a gift from God to the ‘anointed’ few but an essential element of every person’s rational soul. To achieve heroic virtue requires activation of the good will, however. Generosity does not transform from a passion to a virtue without habit-forming actions governed by right reason. Morally and intellectually, for Astell, equality must be wrested from men by women, and it will take more than traditionally feminine virtues. Exceptionalism is a function of the perfectionism implied by her Platonized adoption of Cartesian generosity as the apotheosis of human nature. Exceptionalism lies in the supreme perfection of self-control, self-sacrifice in the name of public interest, the unity of the virtues, and the good use of that most exceptional part of the human being, the rational will, among those seeking to remove obstacles to women’s happiness. On this basis, Astell can coherently espouse that while all women have the same capacity for heroism, heroic action takes a supreme effort of will. Heroism is likely, then, to remain an ideal for many women, but an ideal to which all should nonetheless aspire.

3. Heroism and Social Identity

What tempers the exceptionalism inherent in classical conceptions of heroic virtue in appropriations like Astell’s is thus an equalizing of its foundation in the rational will. Her reliance on Cartesian generosity and self-esteem raises, however, the specter that heroic virtue is still too individualistic and self-centered to fit an overarching virtue ethics. Those who act heroically are often motivated by the desire for public honors, rewards, and rank. How is this consistent with the idea that virtue must depend only on things within the agent’s control? Relatedly, how might we reconcile the conflicting ends of heroic and classical virtue ethics—the former drawing individuals into political life, the latter encouraging a private retreat into the contemplative life? The tension is explicit in Astell’s ‘serious proposal’, which calls upon women both to defend their dignity publicly and to enter a semimonastic retreat for the study of the Christian religion.

A similar paradox was recognized in earlier historical treatments of heroic virtue, and the solution generally adopted was to acknowledge that while external rewards were deserved, the true hero does not act for the sake of such goods but for the sake of virtue. Both Aristotle (NE: 1116.a16-a.18) and Aquinas (1993: 245ff.) describe at length the difference between true and counterfeit civic fortitude, the former for the sake of virtue, the latter for the sake of honors. Plutarch notes that true courage presupposes the principles of a democratic state and is subordinate to justice (Plutarch 1931: 253c). Marcus Aurelius describes the true hero as wary of ‘empty conceit about conventional honors’, ‘public applause’ and ‘flattery’ (Aurelius 2013: 6). But as Stuart Lawrence points out (2005: 19), even in those accounts such as Aristotle’s that seek to distinguish true courage from its baser (interestingly, masculinized) form—*politike andreia* (courage grounded in fear of legal repercussions for cowardice and the desire for honors)—the tension and tendency toward self-centeredness remains. As Lawrence observes (2005: 20–21), the tragic literary figures of Sophocles’s Ajax and Homer’s Hector illustrate the clash of individualistic and social values in heroic virtue, the former turning against the community he feels insufficiently honors him, and the latter so focused on his heroism that he is prepared to die rather than be of service to his family and community. Christina Sorum writes: ‘The hero must aim to be best, to obtain the greatest possible prestige, and thus differentiate himself from the group. It is only within the community, however, that prestige can be won or recognized’ (Sorum 1986: 362; cited in Lawrence 2005: 30). What mechanisms might help temper the individualism inherent in heroic virtue? And what, if anything, could Astell do to settle this score?

Drawing on Annas (1993: 67, 73), Lawrence (2005: 22) points to the importance of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) in ethical decision-making. Not deliberating for the right amount of time or not considering bravery in the context of the demands of other virtues, especially justice, and so not being able to provide a clear justification for one’s actions is not virtuous. But lengthy deliberation is not always practical, and uncertainty is commonplace in moral decision-making, a salient concern of Descartes who recognizes the virtue of an action performed by a firm will even when a true conception of the good is unavailable (Brown 2006: 194–95). Nor does the appeal to *phronesis* target the problematic self-conception that lies at the heart of the paradox of individualism in heroic virtue. In its classical formulation, the problem is that the hero must rise above others to serve them best and see himself as doing just that.

What Ajax and Hector arguably lack is a true conception of themselves in relation to the polis. A common trope among Stoic authors who appeal to heroic virtue is an organic conception of the relationship between subjects and the body politic. Originating from Plato’s idea of the cosmos as a living, intelligent animal (*Timaieus* 30a6–c1), mereological conceptions flourished in Stoic philosophy. Citing Democritus, Seneca (2015: 37) writes: ‘One person counts as a nation with me, a nation as one person’. As the animal is an organic whole composed of cooperating bodily organs, so, too, the state is an organically integrated composite of people. I cannot be angry with my relative, Marcus Aurelius writes, because ‘we were born for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of

upper and lower teeth' (Aurelius 2013: 9). No real conflict, therefore, is possible between what is good for an individual and what is good for the whole.

What is brought by the nature of the whole and what maintains that nature is good for each part of nature. Just as the changes in the elements maintain the universe, so too do the changes in the compounds. Let these things satisfy you; let these always be your doctrines. (Aurelius 2013: 10)

One must 'always keep in mind these things'—the nature of the whole, how one's nature is related to the whole, what kind of part one is, and how to act in accordance with the nature of which one is a part (Aurelius 2013: 11).

The true hero is defined by his social self-conception—he is 'dyed to his depths with justice' (Aurelius 2013: 16). He is indifferent to the praise of many as well as to power, wealth, and enjoyment of pleasures. Only 'the lover of glory thinks that his own good consists in the activity of other people' (Aurelius 2013: 49). Keeping one's 'guardian spirit pure and upright', 'waiting for nothing and running away from nothing' in accordance with nature, results in 'heroic truth' and the supreme good for a human being (Aurelius 2013: 18–19).

Given Astell's immersion in Stoicism and Roman histories, it is unsurprising to find her adapting this solution to her own political ends. First, she makes a distinction between the false heroism of those motivated by vicious 'vainglory' to engage in self-serving conquests and the true heroism of those who seek only to serve and honor God:

In a word, a Christian endeavor to obtain a good reputation is distinguished from vainglory, by the *motive*, which in the former is obedience to God, in the latter the mere pleasing of ourselves; by the *method*, which is only good and upright actions in the one, and in the other any arts and ways that will take with men; by the *value* set upon our reputation, the vainglorious preferring it before a good conscience, to which the Christian makes it always give place; by the *end* proposed, and the *use* that is made of it, the vain man seeking nothing but his own exaltation and temporal interests; while the Christian proposes only the honor of God at present, expecting hereafter that real glory which God will bestow upon all His faithful servants. ([1717] 2013: §300)

While Astell does not discourage women from having the ambition to attain external goods such as glory, honor, and esteem, she still does not make them the ends of heroic action. Although vainglory and the desire for 'true honor' might be grounded in the same movement of animal spirits, they are metaphysically and psychologically distinguishable by their formal objects—by the reasons behind their manifestation:

Some virtues and some vices bear a great resemblance in the mere outward act, so that they are not to be distinguished but by the intention, the reason, and the end of the action. Thus he who lets his light shine before men in obedience to God's commands, and he who does his good works only to be seen of men, do the same thing as to outward appearance, though the one only seeks a good report for his master's honor, and the other is vainglorious. ([1717] 2013: §303)

It is thus in aligning one's actions with what God wills, and for which one is rewarded in heaven, that one can attain truly heroic virtue. Only by setting one's sights on heaven will one direct appropriately 'that Ambition which all Generous Minds are fill'd with' and thus enable one's soul to 'shine as bright as the greatest Heroes' ([1706] 1996: 75). External conquests are legitimized only when premised on an inner conquest: 'For her Heroick Soul is too great to ambition any Empire but that of her own Breast' ([1694–97] 2002: 86–87).

Second, the rewards of heaven flow not to those who seek the good for themselves but to those who seek the good for the whole of which they are an interdependent part—a whole they view as greater than themselves. It is because all human beings have equal moral value that they each have dignity and deserve respect and recognition as parts of one great whole. Using the same kind of mereological language adopted by Marcus Aurelius, and which also appears in Descartes (1909: 4: 293; 1984–91: 3: 266) and Christine de Pizan (see Green 2019), Astell reminds her readers that we are all parts of one great whole and the body of Christ (Perry 1986: 373; Broad 2015: 121–22). 'We are not made for ourselves' ([1694–97] 2002: 76): women must contribute to the flourishing of society as a way of living up to the dignity of their nature as rational—and socially embedded—creatures. While human happiness does not depend on 'Foreign supports', 'we are all of one Nature & Family . . . our Minds are nearly related' (Perry 1986: 373). In her *Christian Religion*, Astell writes:

I consider myself therefore as a part of one great whole, in the welfare of which my own happiness is included. And without regarding any particular or separate interest, endeavor always to pursue that which in itself and absolutely speaking, is the most public, universal, and greatest good. ([1717] 2013: §170)

It is because the heroine operates with this social self-conception, exercising a love of benevolence, a disinterested 'wishing well' toward others for the sake of their well-being, not for the sake of private, selfish interests, that she does not need to 'stand above' or apart from others to serve them.

The third paradox is now somewhat alleviated. True heroism presupposes a social self-conception as part of a body politic that one identifies as one's own larger self, and it is the good, the honor, and the well-being of that whole that motivates the true hero to act. But have we now only dissolved one paradox to create a second? If women direct their heroic efforts toward preserving a society in which they are subjugated, will they not just be reinforcing an oppressive status quo? There are

larger issues than can be addressed here related to the tension between Astell's egalitarianism and her Tory conservatism (for details, see Kinnaird 1979; Springborg 2005), but what does seem clear is that Astell does not equate patriarchal society with a healthy organism. It is good neither for men nor for women, nor reflective of Christian values. The onus is thus on all members of the body politic, men and women, to create a more just society.

It is in this spirit that we should reconsider the tension in Astell between the push for political engagement and the pull of the contemplative life embodied in her idea of a religious sanctuary. Astell's proposal for a 'happy society' of women away from men and the corrupting influence of custom can now be seen for the social experiment it is. It is a genuine whole greater than the sum of its parts—'one body' whose soul is love, animating and informing it ([1694–97] 2002: 87). The love that permeates this happy society is not a sensual love of desire, which is never satiated, but a love of benevolence that derives from the love of God (Broad 2015: 117 n55). Pure moral equality is encapsulated in the notion of friendship that 'makes no distinction betwixt its Friend and its self' ([1694–97] 2002: 99; see also [1717] 2013: §288) and that binds this 'Amicable Society'—'Noble, Vertuous and Disinterest'd'—in which women love their souls above all else and watch over those of other women ([1694–97] 2002: 75).

By looking on our own Acquisitions as a general Treasure, in which the Whole have a Right, we shou'd Pretend to no more than a share; and considering our selves as Parts of the same Whole, we should expect to find our own account in th'improvement of every part of it, which wou'd restrain us from being puffed up with the Contemplation of our Own, and from repining at our Neighbours Excellencies. ([1694–97] 2002: 155–56)

The parts of society should thus be 'by Nature so connected to each other, that whenever one part suffers the rest must suffer with it' ([1694–97] 2002: 155; see also [1717] 2013: §179), which is why women's suffering under patriarchy is like Marcus Aurelius's 'tumour on the universe' that injustice and violence create (Aurelius 2013: 13). Any one individual's injuring another is an injury to their own self. The self that is loved in the self-love of the generous person is one inextricably and self-consciously united with others.

4. Conclusion

We have explored here three tensions in Astell's endeavor to incorporate heroic virtues into her feminist virtue ethics: (1) their historically masculine characterization; (2) their exceptionalism; and (3) their connection to individual ambition for externally endowed goods. The extension of heroic virtue to powerful women throughout history is not inconsistent with these assumptions, and while such extensions may set the stage for Astell's theorizing about the virtue of women in heroic terms, her account is not free from the problems and paradoxes that attend such an endeavor. We see in Astell, however, the

development of a more radical heroic virtue than the one perceived as legitimate in her own time—essentially de-gendered and grounded in that ‘particle of divinity’ in all, the rational will. The result is a picture of human heroism more consistent perhaps than that of many of her predecessors and better suited to delivering on her own political ambitions for her sex.

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