

# Some Reflections Upon Marriage

Mary Astell

## GENDER AND RACE

*One of the earliest feminist writers was Mary Astell (1666-1731), the daughter of a Newcastle, England, coal merchant, who, after being educated by a clergyman uncle, spent most of her writing career in London. The selection here is from an essay of the name that she wrote in 1700 and makes, perhaps for the first time, the argument that if absolutist rule is illegitimate in the state, it ought to be so in the family.*

The Reflector, who hopes Reflector is not bad English, (now Governor is happily of the Feminine Gender) guarded against Curiosity in vain: For a certain ingenuous Gentleman, as she is inform'd, had the Good-nature to own these Reflections, so far, as to affirm that he had the Original MS. in his Closet, a Proof she is not able to produce; and so to make himself responsible for all their Faults, for which, she returns him all due Acknowledgement. However, the Generality being of Opinion, that a Man would have had more Prudence and Manners than to have Publish'd such unseasonable Truths, or to have betray'd the Arcana *Imperii* of his Sex; she humbly confesses, that the Contrivance and Execution of this Design, which is unfortunately accus'd of being so destructive to the Government, (of the Men, I mean) is entirely her own. She neither advis'd with Friends, nor turn'd over ancient or modern Authors, nor prudently submitted to the Correction of such as are, or such as think they are good Judges, but with an English Spirit and Genius, set out upon the Forlorn Hope, meaning no Hurt to any body, nor designing any thing but the public Good, and to retrieve, if possible, the Native Liberty, the Rights and Privileges of the Subject.

FAR be it from her to stir up Sedition of any sort: none can abhor it more; and she heartily wishes, that our Masters would pay their Civil and Ecclesiastical Governors the same Submission, which they themselves exact from their Domestic Subjects. Nor can she imagine how she any way undermines the Masculine Empire, or blows the Trumpet of Rebellion to the Moiety of Mankind. Is it by exhorting Women, not to expect to have their own Will in any thing, but to be entirely Submissive, when once they have made Choice of a Lord and Master, though he happen not to be so wise, so kind, or even so just a Governor as was expected? She did not, indeed, advise them to think his Folly Wisdom, nor his Brutality, that Love and Worship he promised in his Matrimonial Oath; for this required a Flight of Wit and Sense much above her poor Ability, and proper

only to Masculine Understandings. However, she did not in any manner prompt them to Resist, or to Abdicate the Perjur'd spouse, though the Laws of GOD, and the Land, make special Provision for it, in a Case, wherein, as is to be fear'd, few Men can truly plead Not Guilty.

'Tis true, through want of Learning, and that of Superior Genius which Men, as Men, lay claim to, she was ignorant of the Natural Inferiority of our Sex, which our Masters lay down as a Self-evident and Fundamental Truth. She saw nothing in the Reason of Things, to make this either a Principle or a Conclusion, but much to the contrary; it being Sedition at least, if not Treason, to assert it in this Reign. For if by the Natural Superiority of their Sex, they mean, that every Man is by Nature superior to every Woman, which is the obvious Meaning, and that which must be stuck to if they would speak Sense, it would be a Sin in any Woman, to have Dominion over any Man, and the greatest Queen ought not to command, but to obey, her Footman: because no Municipal Laws can supersede or change the Law of Nature: So that if the Dominion of the Men be such, the Salique Law, as unjust as English Men have ever thought it, ought to take Place over all the Earth, and the most glorious Reigns in the English, Danish, Castilian, and other Annals, were wicked Violations of the Law of Nature!

If they mean that some Men are superior to some Women, this is no great Discovery; had they turn'd the Tables, they might have seen that some Women are superior to some Men. Or had they been pleased to remember their Oaths of Allegiance and Supremacy, they might have known, that One Woman is superior to All the Men in these Nations, or else they have sworn to very little Purpose. And it must not be suppos'd, that their Reason and Religion would suffer them to take Oaths, contrary to the Law of Nature and Reason of Things....

BUT what says the Holy Scripture? It speaks of Women as in a State of Subjection, and so it does of the Jews and Christians, when under the Dominion of the Chaldeans and Romans, requiring of the one as well as of the other, a quiet Submission to them under whose Power they liv'd. But will any one say, that these had a Natural Superiority and Right to Dominion? that they had a superior Understanding, or any Preeminence, except what their greater Strength acquir'd? Or, that the other were subjected to their Adversaries for any other Reason but the Punishment of their Sins, and, in order to their Reformation? Or for the Exercise of their Virtue, and because the Order of the World and the Good of Society requir'd it?

If Mankind had never Sinn'd, Reason would always have been obeyed, there would have been no Struggle for Dominion, and Brutal Power would not have prevail'd. But in the lapsed State of Mankind, and now, that Men will not be guided by their Reason but by their Appetites, and do not what they ought but what they can, the Reason, or that which stands for it, the Will and Pleasure of the Governor, is to be the Reason of those who will not be guided by their own, and must take Place for Order's sake, although it should not be conformable to right Reason. Nor can there be any Society great or little, from Empires down to private Families, without a last Resort, to determine the Affairs of that Society

by an irresistible Sentence. Now unless this Supremacy be fix'd somewhere, there will be a perpetual Contention about it, such is the Love of Dominion, and let the Reason of Things be what it may, those who have least Force or Cunning to supply it, will have the Disadvantage. So that since Women are acknowledged to have least Bodily Strength, their being commanded to Obey is in pure Kindness to them, and for their Quiet and Security, as well as for the Exercise of their Virtue. But does it follow, that Domestic Governors have more Sense than their Subjects, any more than other Governors have? We do not find that any Man thinks the worse of his own Understanding, because another has superior Power; or concludes himself less capable of a Post of Honor and Authority, because he is not prefer'd to it. How much Time would lie on Mens Hands, how empty would the Places of Concourse be, and how silent most Companies, did Men forbear to censure their Governors, that is, in effect, to think themselves wiser. Indeed, Government would be much more desirable than it is, did it invest the Possessor with a superior Understanding as well as Power. And if mere Power gives a Right to Rule, there can be no such Thing as Usurpation; but a Highway-Man, so long as he has Strength to force, has also a Right to require our Obedience.

AGAIN, if absolute Sovereignty be not necessary in a State, how comes it to be so in a Family? Or if in a Family why not in a State; since no Reason can be alleged for the one that will not hold more strongly for the other? If the Authority of the Husband, so far as it extends, is sacred and inalienable, why not that of the Prince? The Domestic Sovereign is without Dispute elected; and the Stipulations and Contract are mutual; is it not then partial in Men to the last Degree, to contend for, and practice that Arbitrary Dominion in their Families, which they abhor and exclaim against in the State? For if Arbitrary Power is evil in it self, and an improper Method of Governing Rational and Free Agents, it ought not to be practis'd any where; nor is it less, but rather more mischievous in Families than in Kingdoms, by how much 100,000 Tyrants are worse than one. What though a Husband can't deprive a Wife of Life without being responsible to the Law, he may, however, do what is much more grievous to a generous Mind, render Life miserable, for which she has no Redress, scarce Pity, which is afforded to every other Complainant, it being thought a Wife's Duty to suffer every thing without Complaint. If all Men are born Free, how is it that all Women are born Slaves? As they must be, if the being subjected to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary Will of Men be the perfect Condition of Slavery? And, if the Essence of Freedom consists, as our Masters say it does, in having a standing Rule to live by? And why is Slavery so much condemn'd and strove against in one Case, and so highly applauded, and held so necessary and so sacred in another.

'TIS true, that GOD told Eve after the Fall, that her Husband should Rule over her: And so it is, that he told Esau by the Mouth of Isaac his Father, that he should serve his younger Brother, and should in Time, and when he was strong enough to do it, break the Yoke from off his Neck. Now, why one Text should be a Command any more than the other, and not both of them be Predictions only; or why the former should prove Adam's Natural Right to Rule, and much less

every Man's, and any more than the latter is a Proof of Jacob's Right to Rule, and of Esau's to Rebel, one is yet to learn? The Text in both Cases foretelling what would be; but neither of them determining what ought to be.

BUT the Scripture commands Wives to submit themselves to their own Husbands. True; for which St. Paul gives a Mystical Reason (Eph. v. 22, &c.) and St. Peter, a Prudential and Charitable one, (I Pet. iii.) but neither of them derive that Subjection from the Law of Nature. Nay, St. Paul, as if he foresaw and meant to prevent this Plea, giving Directions for their Conduct to Women in general, I Tim. ii. when he comes to speak of Subjection, he changes his Phrase from Women, which denotes the whole Sex, to Woman, which in the New Testament is appropriated to a Wife.

As for his not suffering Women to speak in the Church, no sober Person that I know of pretends to it. That learned Paraphrast, indeed, who lays so much Stress on the Natural Subjection, provided this Prerogative be secur'd, is willing to give up the other. For he endeavors to prove, that Inspir'd Women, as well as Men, us'd to speak in the Church, and that St. Paul does not forbid it, but only takes Care that the Women should signify their Subjection by wearing a Veil. But the Apostle is his own best Expositor, let us therefore compare his Precepts with his Practice, for he was all of a Piece, and did not contradict himself. Now by this Comparison we find, that though he forbids Women to teach in the Church, and this for several Prudential Reasons, like those he introduces with an "I give my Opinion, and now speak I, not the Lord," and not because of any Law of Nature, or positive Divine Precept, for that the Words they are commanded (I Cor. xiv. 24.) are not in the Original, appears from the Italic Character, yet he did not found this Prohibition or any suppos'd Want of Understanding in Woman, or of Ability to teach; neither does he confine them at all Times to learn in Silence. For the eloquent Apollos, who was himself a Teacher, was instructed by Priscilla, as well as by her Husband Aquila, and was improv'd by them both in the Christian Faith. Nor does St. Paul blame her for this, or suppose that she usurp'd Authority over that great Man; so far from this, that as she is always honorably mention'd in Holy Scripture, so our Apostle, in his Salutations, Rom. xvi. places her in the Front, even before her Husband, giving to her, as well as to him, the Noble Title of, his Helper in Christ Jesus, and of one to whom all the Churches of the Gentiles had great Obligations....

SOME Men will have it, that the Reason of our LORD's appearing first to the Women, was, their being least able to keep a Secret; a witty and masculine Remark, and wonderfully Reverent! But not to dispute whether those Women were Blabs or no, there are many Instances in Holy Scripture, of Women who did not betray the Confidence repos'd in them. Thus Rahab, though formerly an ill Woman, being converted by the Report of those Miracles, which, though the Israelites saw, yet they believed not in GOD, nor put their Trust in his Word. She acknowledges the GOD in Heaven, and, as a Reward of her faithful Service, in concealing Joshua's Spies, is, with her Family, exempted from the Ruin of her Country, and also, has the Honor of being named in the Messiah's

Genealogy. Michal, to save David's Life, exposes her self to the Fury of a Jealous and Tyrannical Prince. A Girl was trusted by David's grave Counselors to convey him Intelligence in his Son's Rebellion; and when a Lad had found it out, and blab'd it to Absalom, the King's Friends confiding in the Prudence and Fidelity of a Woman, were secur'd by her. When our LORD escaped from the Jews, he trusted Himself in the Hands of Martha and Mary. So does St. Peter with another Mary, when the Angel deliver'd him from Herod, the Damsel Rhoda too, was acquainted with the Secret. More might be said, but one would think here is enough to show, that whatever other great and wise Reasons Men may have for despising Women, and keeping them in Ignorance and Slavery, it can't be from their having learnt to do so in Holy Scripture. The Bible is for, and not against us, and cannot without great Violence done to it, be urg'd to our Prejudice.

HOWEVER, there are strong and prevalent Reasons which demonstrate the Superiority and Pre-eminence of the Men. For in the first Place, Boys have much Time and Pains, Care and Cost bestow'd on their Education, Girls have little or none. The former are early initiated in the Sciences, are made acquainted with ancient and modern Discoveries, they study Books and Men, have all imaginable Encouragement; not only Fame, a dry Reward now a-days, but also Title, Authority, Power, and Riches themselves, which purchase all Things, are the Reward of their Improvement. The latter are restrain'd, frown'd upon, and beat, nor for, but from the Muses; Laughter and Ridicule, that never-failing Scare-Crow, is set up to drive them from the Tree of Knowledge. But if, in spite of all Difficulties Nature prevails, and they can't be kept so ignorant as their Masters would have them, they are star'd upon as Monsters, censur'd, envied, and every way discouraged, or, at the best, they have the Fate the Proverb assigns them, Virtue is prais'd and starv'd. And therefore, since the coarsest Materials need the most Curing, as every Workman can inform you, and the worst Ground the most elaborate Culture, it undeniably follows, that Mens Understandings are superior to Womens, for, after many Years Study and Experience, they become wise and learned, and Women are not bom so!

AGAIN, Men are possessed of all Places of Power, Trust and Profit, they make Laws and exercise the Magistracy, not only the sharpest Sword, but even all the Swords and Blunderbusses are theirs; which by the strongest Logic in the World, gives them the best Title to every Thing they please to claim as their Prerogative: Who shall contend with them? Immemorial Prescription is on their Side in these Parts of the World, ancient Tradition and modern Usage! Our Fathers, have all along, both taught and practiced Superiority over the weaker Sex, and consequently Women are by Nature inferior to Men, as was to be demonstrated. An Argument which must be acknowledged unanswerable; for, as well as I love my Sex, I will not pretend a Reply to such Demonstration!

ONLY let me beg to be inform'd, to whom we poor Fatherless Maids, and Widows who have lost their Masters, owe Subjection? It can't be to all Men in general, unless all Men were agreed to give the same Commands; Do we then fall as Strays, to the first who finds us? by the Maxims of some Men,

and the Conduct of some Women one would think so. But whoever he be that thus happens to become our Master, if he allows us to be reasonable Creatures, and does not merely Compliment us with that Title, since no Man denies our Readiness to use our Tongues, it would tend, I should think, to our Master's Advantage, and therefore he may please to be advis'd to teach us to improve our Reason. But if Reason is only allow'd us by way of Raillery, and the secret Maxim is, that we have none, or little more than Brutes, 'tis the best way to confine us with Chain and Block to the Chimney-Corner, which, probably, might save the Estates of some Families and the Honor of others.

I do not propose this to prevent a Rebellion, for Women are not so well united as to form an Insurrection. They are for the most part wise enough to love their Chains, and to discern how very becomingly they fit. They think as humbly of themselves as their Masters can wish, with respect to the other Sex, but in regard to their own, they have a Spice of Masculine Ambition; every one would Lead, and none would Follow. Both Sexes being too apt to Envy, and too backward in Emulating, and take more Delight in Detracting from their Neighbor's Virtue, than in Improving their own. And therefore, as to those Women who find themselves born for Slavery, and are so sensible of their own Meanness, as to conclude it impossible to attain to any thing excellent, since they are, or ought to be best acquainted with their own Strength and Genius, She's a Fool who would attempt their Deliverance or Improvement. No, let them enjoy the great Honor and Felicity of their tame, submissive and depending Temper! Let the Men applaud, and let them glory in this wonderful Humility! Let them receive the Flatteries and Grimaces of the other Sex, live unenvied by their own, and be as much belov'd as one such Woman can afford to love another! Let them enjoy the Glory of treading in the Footsteps of their Predecessors, and of having the Prudence to avoid that audacious Attempt of soaring beyond their Sphere! Let them Huswife or Play, Dress, and be pretty entertaining Company! Or, which is better, relieve the Poor to ease their own Compassions, read pious Books, say their Prayers, and go to Church, because they have been taught and us'd to do so, without being able to give a better Reason for their Faith and Practice! Let them not by any Means aspire at being Women of Understanding, because no Man can endure a Woman of Superior Sense, or would treat a reasonable Woman civilly, but that he thinks he stands on higher Ground, and, that she is so wise as to make Exceptions in his Favor, and to take her Measures by his Directions; they may pretend to Sense, indeed, since mere Pretenses only render one the more ridiculous! Let them, in short, be what is call'd very Women, for this is most acceptable to all sorts of Men; or let them aim at the Tide of good devout Women, since some Men can bear with this; but let them not judge of the Sex by their own Scantling: For the great Author of Nature and Fountain of all Perfection, never design'd that the Mean and Imperfect, but that the most Complete and Excellent of His Creatures of every Kind, should be the Standard to the rest.

TO conclude; If that GREAT QUEEN who has subdued the Proud, and made the pretended Invincible more than once fly before her; who has Rescued an

Empire, Reduced a Kingdom, Conquer'd Provinces in as little Time almost as one can Travel them, and seems to have chain'd Victory to her Standard; who disposes of Crowns, gives Laws and Liberty to Europe, and is the chief Instrument in the Hand of the Almighty, to pull down and to set up the great Men of the Earth; who conquers every where for others, and no where for her self but in the Hearts of the Conquer'd, who are of the Number of those who reap the Benefit of her Triumphs; whilst she only reaps for her self the Laurels of disinterested Glory, and the Royal Pleasure of doing Heroically; if this Glory of her own Sex, and Envy of the other, will not think we need, or does not hold us worthy of, the Protection of her ever victorious Arms, and Men have not the Gratitude, for her sake at least, to do Justice to her Sex, who has been such a universal Benefactress to theirs: Adieu to the Liberties, not of this or that Nation or Reign only, but of the Moiety of Mankind! To all the great Things that Women might perform, inspir'd by her Example, encouraged by her Smiles, and supported by her Power! To their Discovery of new Worlds for the Exercise of her Goodness, new Sciences to publish her Fame, and reducing Nature it self to a Subjection to her Empire! To their destroying those worst of Tyrants Impiety and Immorality, which dare to stalk about even in her own Dominions, and to devour Souls almost within View of her Throne, leaving a Stench behind them scarce to be corrected even by the Incense of her Devotions! To the Women's tracing a new Path to Honor, in which none shall walk but such as scorn to Cringe in order to Rise, and who are Proof both against giving and receiving Flattery! In a Word, to those Halcyon, or, if you will, Millennium Days, in which the Wolf and the Lamb shall feed together, and a Tyrannous Domination, which Nature never meant, shall no longer render useless, if not hurtful, the Industry and Understandings of half Mankind!