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Chapter 1

Mary Astell's Machiavellian Moment?

Politics and Feminism in

Moderation truly Stated

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In 1998, Paula McDowell highlighted the fact that the overwhelming majority of women's texts in early modern England are polemical or religio-political in nature rather than literary in content.¹ Since that time, the study of early modern women's political ideas has dramatically increased, and there have been a number of anthologies, essay collections, modern editions, and critical analyses of female political writings.² As a result of Patricia Springborg's research, the English philosopher Mary Astell (1666-1731) has risen to prominence as one of the

¹ Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace, 1678-1730* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). McDowell says that 'contrary to the impression given by otherwise invaluable anthologies and studies of early women's writing, the overwhelming majority of British women's (and men's) published writings before 1730 consisted not of fiction or *belles-lettres* but of didactic and polemical materials and religio-political pamphlets and tracts' (*Women of Grub Street*, pp. 15-16).

² For an overview, see Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green, *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

most astute female political commentators of her day. While Astell was once best known as a defender of women, she is now also highly regarded as an early critic of the political philosopher John Locke (1632-1704). The author of two feminist works, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694, part I; 1697, part II) and *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), Astell also published several anonymous pamphlets touching on political obedience, liberty, and toleration, in the early years of the reign of Queen Anne. Springborg examines these pamphlets for what they tell us about Astell's engagement with Locke's Whig politics, and her critique of the Lockean theory of resistance.³

In this paper, I examine Astell's engagement with a different foundational figure in the history of political thought—the Florentine diplomat and political writer, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527). In 1704, Astell published a short pamphlet about occasional conformity titled *Moderation truly Stated* in response to James Owen's *Moderation a Virtue* (1703).⁴ In an essay at the start of her pamphlet, 'A Prefatory Discourse to Dr. D'Aveanant [*sic*] Concerning His late Essays on Peace and War', Astell addresses Machiavelli's political views in an extended critique of

³ See Patricia Springborg, *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Patricia Springborg, 'Republicanism, Freedom from Domination, and the Cambridge Contextual Historians', *Political Studies* 49 (2001): pp. 851-76; Patricia Springborg, 'Mary Astell, Critic of the Marriage Contract/Social Contract Analogue', in Anita Pacheco (ed.), *A Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing* (London: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 216-28; Patricia Springborg, 'Astell, Masham, and Locke: Religion and Politics', in Hilda L. Smith (ed.), *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 105-25; Patricia Springborg, 'Mary Astell and John Locke', in Steven Zwicker (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1650 to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 276-306; and Patricia Springborg, 'Mary Astell (1666-1731), Critic of Locke', *American Political Science Review* 89 (1995): pp. 621-33. See also Springborg's introduction to Mary Astell, Patricia Springborg (ed.), *Astell: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. xi-xxix.

⁴ Mary Astell, *Moderation truly Stated: Or, A Review of a Late Pamphlet, Entitul'd. Moderation a Vertue. With a Prefatory Discourse to Dr. D'Aveanant, concerning His late Essays on Peace and War* (London: R. Wilkin, 1704). There is no modern edition of this text.

Charles Davenant (1656-1714), an author who relies uncritically on Machiavelli's ideas.⁵ I maintain that an examination of Astell's comments about Machiavelli can provide valuable insight into Astell's views about the proper relationship between politics, ethics, and religion, as well as her opinions about female political authority. In particular, I argue that the 'Prefatory Discourse' heralds a small but significant development of the feminist project first begun in Astell's *Serious Proposal*.

In the literature on Astell's political thought, scholars have so far paid little attention to Astell's opinions about Machiavelli. In *Mary Astell: A Theorist of Freedom from Domination* (2005), Springborg mentions Machiavellian politics a number of times, but does not elaborate on the fact that Astell directly engages with Machiavelli's writings.⁶ In a recent analysis of Astell's *Moderation truly Stated*, William Kolbrener highlights Astell's implicit rejection of passivity and martyrdom in favour of political action and opportunism, but does not remark upon Astell's references to Machiavelli.⁷ And, in another recent essay, Mark Goldie briefly observes that, 'in its admiration for Spartan virtue and Roman Stoicism', Astell's 'Prefatory Discourse' contains 'a theme that might be called Machiavellian Toryism'.⁸ But Goldie's main purpose is to show that Astell was not chiefly preoccupied with Locke in this text.⁹

⁵ For Astell's explicit references to Machiavelli, see Astell, 'Prefatory Discourse', in *Moderation truly Stated*, pp. iii, vii, xiii, xviii, xxiv, xxviii, xxxix, and xlii; and *Moderation truly Stated*, pp. 29-30. All subsequent references to *Moderation truly Stated* are cited parenthetically as *MTS*; page numbers from the 'Prefatory Discourse' are in Roman numerals, and those from the main body are in Arabic.

⁶ Springborg, *Mary Astell*, pp. 16, 212, and 218.

⁷ William Kolbrener, '“Forced Into An Interest”: High Church Politics and Feminine Agency in the Works of Mary Astell, 1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era 10 (2004): pp. 3-31.

⁸ Mark Goldie, 'Mary Astell and John Locke', in William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (eds), *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender, Faith* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 65-85 (p. 77).

⁹ Goldie also claims that Astell's essay 'displays her familiarity with a range of major political treatises, for she cites Plato's *Republic*, Machiavelli's *Discourses*, More's *Utopia*, Bacon's *New Atlantis*, and Hobbes's *Leviathan*' ('Mary Astell', p. 77). But while Astell mentions More, Bacon, and Plato in passing, she does not cite from their works (see *MTS*, pp. xxxi, xlix); and when

In what follows, I reject any suggestion that Astell supports a Machiavellian approach to politics, or a pragmatic politics of action and opportunism. While ‘Machiavellian Toryism’ might be an accurate description of Davenant’s philosophy, it is not a fitting assessment of Astell’s work. Astell refers to Machiavelli as this ‘famous Politician’ (*MTS*, p. vii), ‘that Great Politician’ (*MTS*, p. xiii), and someone who ‘must be allow’d to be no mean Politician’ (*MTS*, p. 29). But, as we will see, her approving comments about Machiavelli are part of an argumentative strategy—one that relies heavily upon irony and *ad hominem*. I maintain that Astell cites Machavelli’s advice principally in order to turn it against Davenant, someone who does accept Machiavelli’s authority on matters of practical statecraft.

Astell on Machiavelli and faction

In the first few years of the eighteenth century, the political economist Charles Davenant was at the height of his public fame as a political commentator.¹⁰ During this period, he wrote several popular political satires from a moderate Tory point of view, with titles such as *The True Picture of a Modern Whig* (1701) and *Tom Double Return’d Out of the Country* (1702). On the basis of his popularity, Queen Anne commissioned Davenant to write a work of bipartisan propaganda, and that work was eventually published as *Essays upon Peace at Home, and War Abroad* (1704), a call for unity among Tories and Whigs. In this work, Davenant’s chief advice—about how a prince might avoid political faction, and achieve unity at home and victory abroad—is heavily reliant upon Machiavelli’s two most famous works of political thought, the *Discourses upon the First Decade of Titus Livius* (1531) and *The Prince* (1532).¹¹

she refers to Hobbes it is to a passage in the *Philosophical Rudiments*, and not *Leviathan*; see *MTS*, p. xxxv; and Thomas Hobbes, *The Philosophicall Rudiments concerning Government and Society* (London: J.G. for R. Royston, 1651), p. 127.

¹⁰ On Davenant, see Julian Hoppit, ‘Davenant, Charles (1656-1714)’, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7195>, accessed 21 January 2008; and Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), pp. 197-202.

¹¹ In 1695, these works were reprinted in an English translation of Machiavelli’s *Works*. Both Davenant and Astell quote from this edition, titled *The Works of the Famous Nicolas Machiavel, Citizen and Secretary of Florence. Written Originally in Italian,*

In modern times, it would be surprising (and perhaps a little alarming) to encounter a piece of state propaganda that relied upon Machiavellian political thought. But in late seventeenth-century England, the term ‘Machiavellian’ was not unequivocally negative, and there were at least three ‘faces’ of Machiavelli for political writers of the time.¹² First, Machiavelli was regarded as an amoral and godless thinker who had separated the sphere of political action from ethical and religious concerns. In this sense (a sense that is close to the modern meaning of the term), a ‘Machiavellian’ was a supporter of unscrupulous methods for the sake of maintaining political authority. Second, Machiavelli was upheld, both critically and uncritically, as a republican thinker and a supporter of liberty for the people; along similar lines, he was sometimes seen as an advocate of limited monarchical power. Third, Machiavelli was cited in a neutral way as an authoritative writer on matters of practical statecraft. In this respect, a ‘Machiavellian’ might be trusted to provide practical advice about the political world as it really is, rather than offer an idealised notion of how it should be. Davenant draws on Machiavelli in this third sense: without criticism, he cites Machiavelli’s advice about how to deal with warring political factions, and he promotes the Machiavellian ideal of the strong and decisive political leader.

Writing under the pseudonym ‘Tom Single’, in her ‘Prefatory Discourse’ Astell says that she read the *Essays* because Davenant was esteemed to be a good writer with strong arguments. But she had quickly grown disillusioned. She declares that ‘Common Fame they say is a Lyar, and so indeed I found her. For ... I have by me a List of what at present seems to me to be Contradictions, and false Principles, neither agreeable to good Morals, nor Consistent with Government’ (*MTS*, p. lxi). In her essay, Astell’s main purpose is to point to the confusions and inconsistencies in Davenant’s advice to Queen Anne. In particular, Astell highlights the

And from thence newly and faithfully Translated into English (London: Printed for R. Clavel, C. Harper, J. Amery, J. Robinson, and A. and J. Churchil, 1685). This text is hereafter cited as *Works*.

¹² On this topic, see Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli: A Changing Interpretation, 1500-1700* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), Chapter 7.

contradictory nature of Davenant's opinions concerning political faction, and his views about female political leadership.

Davenant argues that we should stamp out faction whenever its discord threatens the 'right Harmony of Government', such that 'Care and Consideration of the Publick is abandon'd'.¹³ In his defence, he refers the reader to 'the Opinion of our wise *Florentine*, who was no incompetent Judge of these Matters' (*Essays*, p. 109), pointing out that '*Machiavel* exhorts Princes not to suffer Factions in the State. He says they never do good' (*Essays*, p. 108). Citing *The Prince*, Davenant warns that if the country is invaded, then it is inevitable that the weaker party will fall off to the enemy; whilst left alone, the stronger party will be too weak to conquer the enemy, and the country will be ruined. Nevertheless, at the same time, Davenant also observes that the liberties of the people may not always be safe in a 'perpetual calm' (*Essays*, p. 54). Astell (rightly, I think) attributes this opinion to Book I, Chapter 4 of the *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli's pro-republican account of the political strengths and weaknesses of ancient Rome. In this chapter, Machiavelli observes that faction, or 'tumults' between the people and the Senate, played a vital role in preserving the liberties of the people in ancient Rome. Their struggles eventually resulted in the founding of good laws, and those laws ensured that the liberties of the people were protected for centuries to come.

In response, Astell criticises Davenant for putting forward two opposing approaches to faction, and for failing to specify the conditions under which one applies and the other does not. She says that

if there is a Time when Faction makes us *abandon all Care and Consideration of the Publick*: And a Time when it does not *interrupt the right Harmony of Government*; all true Lovers of their Country ought to distinguish these Times, by giving us their Marks so plainly and precisely, that we may not be

¹³ Charles Davenant, *Essays upon Peace at Home, and War Abroad. In Two Parts*, second edition (London: James Knapton, 1704), pp. 56 and 58. This work is hereafter cited parenthetically as *Essays*.

mistaken in a matter of such Consequence, since the applying wrong Medicines may be the ruin of the Body Politick (*MTS*, p. iii).

Astell proposes instead that 'Faction ought never to be suffer'd, much less encourag'd and is only to be endur'd when the Government is too weak to suppress it; and if it is a Wise one, it will use all Lawful Means to recover its Strength, and exert its Just Authority' (*MTS*, p. iii). Along the same lines, she takes issue with Davenant's advice about how to deal with individual ministers who have engaged in political corruption. Davenant recommends that although they should be removed from power, for the sake of national unity their faults should be 'as far overlook'd, and forgotten, as is possibly consistent with the Being of the Constitution' (*Essays*, p. 114). Astell points out that, on this subject, Davenant's advice is inconsistent with that of his main authority, Machiavelli. She says

Therefore either Punish them Justly and Equitably if they Deserve it, and if you have a Mind to shew your Justice: Or else forgive them Generously and Entirely, if you mean to Magnifie your Mercy. Either of these ways may quiet their Minds and the Nation's Distempers; but part one, and part t'other, does only nourish Faction and keep us in endless Broils. Nor is this only my Opinion, for looking into *Machiavel* a little after I had wrote this, I found that Great Politician exactly of my Mind; in his Discourses on *Livy* B. 2 Chap. 23 (*MTS*, p. xiii).

It is understandable that, upon reading such comments, someone might conclude that Astell endorses Machiavelli's approach to politics. It is not the only place in which Astell seemingly advocates Machiavelli's ideal of princely government. In another context, she says

methinks if a Man will needs be a Villain, his best way is to be a *Bold* one. For if Conscience lays no Restraints upon us, what other Consideration can? And what are your half Saints and your half Villains good for? The first has not Virtue enough to carry him to Heaven; nor the other Villainy

enough to make him Considerable upon Earth; and here again I agree with *Machiavel*, that *half honesty* is good for nothing (*MTS*, p. xviii).

Astell also appeals to Machiavelli's views on the potential of poverty to inspire bravery and creativity. She says that

Prosperity and *Power* indeed corrupt Men, so that when one observes a Change, 'tis very natural to enquire whether the Person who Changes is not lately got into Prosperity and Power? There being nothing more necessary, next to the Grace of GOD, towards the Making or Keeping Men Honest, than their being *humbled by Adversities*. Even *Machiavel* who was no very heavenly minded Christian, ascribes the Bravery of the *Romans*, and the Conservation of their Liberties to their Poverty: He tells us Poverty is more useful to Mankind than Riches; that it has produc'd and improv'd many excellent Arts, which Riches and Luxury have destroy'd. And yet notwithstanding the judgment of this famous Politician, there are some among our Moderns, who cannot forbear a certain hankering after *Honour* and *Advancements* (*MTS*, p. vii).

In the aforementioned passages, Astell articulates the Machiavellian ideal of *virtù* (from the Latin *virtus*), a word that can be variously translated as 'boldness', 'determination', 'energy', 'vigour', or 'strength'. Machiavelli's concept of *virtù* is not to be confused with the Renaissance humanist concept of virtue as opposed to vice: in his writings, the word *virtù* translates as virtue in only rare instances.¹⁴ In fact, in Machiavelli's view, the man of *virtù* might not always have the characteristics of a conventionally good or virtuous man. In some circumstances, a ruler might be compelled to be 'other than virtuous' in order to maintain his state and avoid ruin. A good ruler must above all be adaptable and flexible in order to rule well, and to see the state through difficult times. If the times and circumstances change, and a ruler does not change his moral

¹⁴ See Quentin Skinner and Russell Price, 'Note on the Vocabulary of The Prince', in Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (eds), Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 103.

character and methods accordingly, then he and his state are likely to go under. Above all, the Machiavellian man of *virtù* is self-reliant: he does not depend for his political success merely on favourable conditions or chance circumstances.¹⁵

In the penultimate chapter of *The Prince* (Chapter 25), Machiavelli famously defines the man of *virtù* in terms of his attitude toward the goddess Fortune or *fortuna*. Like the word *virtù*, *fortuna* is not easily translatable into English: it has connotations of both good and bad ‘luck’, of ‘favour’ and ‘success’, of ‘circumstances’ and ‘conditions’, and of a ‘storm’ or a fateful ‘force’ that brings with it damage and destruction.¹⁶ While in some Renaissance literature the concept of fortune has fatalistic overtones, Machiavelli allows that a determined individual can sometimes meliorate, or safeguard against, the ravages of fortune. Hence, Machiavelli says,

I conclude ... that since circumstances vary and men when acting lack flexibility, they are successful if their methods match the circumstances and unsuccessful if they do not. I certainly think that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because fortune is a woman, and if you want to control her, it is necessary to treat her roughly. And it is clear that she is more inclined to yield to men who are impetuous than to those who are calculating. Since fortune is a woman, she is always well disposed towards young men, because they are less cautious and more aggressive, and treat her more boldly.¹⁷

Another modern translation of this passage reads that ‘because Fortune is a woman ... it is necessary in order to keep her under, to cuff and maul her’.¹⁸ In both these translations,

¹⁵ On Machiavelli’s ideal of princely government, see Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), I, pp. 128-38; and J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), Chapters 6 and 7.

¹⁶ See Skinner and Price, ‘Note on the Vocabulary of *The Prince*’, in Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 105.

¹⁷ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. by Skinner and Price, p. 87.

¹⁸ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, trans. by Allan Gilbert, 3 vols (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1965), II, p. 92.

Machiavelli's metaphorical subtext is obvious: the conflict between the man of *virtù* and the woman of fortune is (figuratively speaking) a sexual conquest.¹⁹ For Machiavelli, as Hanna Pitkin observes, *virtù* is the characteristic of a real man, a manly man who shuns the 'effeminate' or 'feminine' characteristics of cowardice, weakness, and lack of determination.

By contrast, in *Moderation truly Stated*, Astell explicitly rejects the idea that necessity may sometimes compel a politician to do other than good. In her view, God has made human beings such that they are always free to pursue the best course of action. A wise, just, and benevolent God would never compel a man to do an unjust or dishonourable action for the sake of maintaining the state. As human beings (and not mere animals) everyone has the power of free will, or the liberty of choosing or not choosing that which is good. In a passage outlining her own positive political views, Astell says that

As to Policy in general, we can't think the Maxims and Practice of a States-man and true Politician, so opposite to the Principles of Religion as some have taught, and others by their Actions would make us believe. For Government is necessary, it is from GOD, and therefore there can be no Necessity of doing an Immoral thing to Conduct and maintain it; unless we will charge GOD foolishly, and make Him the Author of our own Wickedness. Reason of State is never contrary to Moral Honesty, when a Wise Man Manages it (*MTS*, p. 26).

Those leaders who 'do an Unjust or Dishonourable Action', do it either from a lack of wisdom or from an over-abundance of 'the wisdom of this World, which is properly Cunning

¹⁹ For an in-depth analysis of this topic, see Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Fortune Is A Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli*, with a new Afterword (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999). Curiously, the sexual conquest imagery is largely absent from the 1695 English translation used by Davenant and Astell: 'I am of opinion ... that 'tis better to be hot and precipitate, than cautious and apprehensive, for Fortune is a Woman, and must be Hector'd, to keep her under; and 'tis visible every day she suffers her self to be managed by those who are brisk and audacious, rather than by those who are Cold and Phlegmatick in their Motions, and therefore (like a Woman) she is always a Friend to those who are young; because being less circumspect, they attack her with more security and boldness' (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, in *Works*, p. 234).

and not Wisdom'. But whatever the reason for being 'forc'd into crooked Paths', Astell says, 'let him not charge his Calling with it, as if being a Statesman made it necessary for him to be a Knave, but let him blame himself where the blame only is due' (*MTS*, p. 27).

In his *Essays*, Davenant suggests that a prince is sometimes compelled to be bad because the 'Circumstances of the times may be such as to make it dangerous to tread in the best Path' (*Essays*, p. 191). Astell responds that 'tho' you have *Machiavel's* Authority for it, I can by now means allow it' (*MTS*, p. xxiv). In short, Astell rejects the Machiavellian ideal of *virtù*, and she is critical of Davenant's support for the Machiavellian separation of politics from ethics and religion. In her view, a 'Great Statesman' is always 'an honest Man and a good Christian' (*MTS*, p. 28); he will never be compelled to be other than virtuous or pious. True state policy 'requires nothing of us that is unreasonable or unjust, or contrary to Religion and its Interests' (*MTS*, p. 28). Though the supreme magistrate is human and fallible, he must nevertheless strive to imitate God in his holiness and virtue, and have no other aim or interest in mind but the good of the people (*MTS*, pp. 28-29). A wise and good man who 'pursues worthy Ends by worthy means' will always be fortunate, even if his glory must be enjoyed 'in the World to come' (*MTS*, p. 27).

We might now re-consider Astell's references to Machiavelli in light of her explicit ethico-religious stance on politics. On first reading, Astell seems to endorse Machiavelli's advice when she recommends that corrupt ministers are either punished 'Justly and Equitably if they Deserve it', or else forgiven 'Generously and Entirely' (*MTS*, p. xiii). But in Book II, Chapter 23 of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli admires the Romans for the extreme measures that they took to prevent subjects from hurting the government. In their dealings with rebellious subjects, the Romans always avoided the middle path: they either took away the subjects' means to hurt them, or else they did subjects so much good that they no longer wished to change their circumstances. In the first instance, Machiavelli observes that they practised a great cruelty, they utterly razed their enemies, and put them to the sword. In her advice on faction, Astell adapts Machiavelli's advice by recommending a 'just' and 'equitable' punishment for corrupt ministers—gone is the

rhetoric of cruelty and severity recommended by Machiavelli. Instead Astell advises that the magistrate must exhibit one of two traditional princely virtues: he must be either just or merciful, but not vacillate between them. In this case, Astell cites Machiavelli because he is an authority for Davenant, but she re-writes his sentiments in her own political language.

In her statement on bold villainy, Astell's support for Machiavelli is also qualified. Astell makes the conditional statement that 'if a Man will needs be a Villain, his best way is to be a *Bold* one' (*MTS*, p. xviii). But according to Astell's own outlook, 'Reason of State is never contrary to Moral Honesty, when a Wise Man Manages it' (*MTS*, p. 26). She therefore denies the antecedent clause of the conditional: it is never necessary for a wise statesman to become a villain. While she agrees that '*half honesty* is good for nothing' (*MTS*, p. xviii), it is clear that she supports full honesty rather than a complete abandonment of the virtue. Likewise, in her remark that adversity is necessary 'toward the Making or Keeping Men Honest' (*MTS*, p. vii), Astell adds that eternal rewards and punishments ought to be the first compulsion to honesty. Here we do not see an unambiguous admiration for 'Spartan virtue' and 'Roman Stoicism'—we see Astell's usual Christian emphasis on worldly renunciation and contempt for material things. With her final remark about those who hanker after 'Honours and Advancement' (*MTS*, p. vii), Astell takes yet another shot at Davenant: by accepting honours and advancement in government, she implies, Davenant has once again ignored Machiavelli's advice.

Astell on Machiavelli and female political authority

Throughout his *Essays*, Davenant points to Queen Elizabeth I as a role model for rulers in terms of avoiding 'intestine Broils' and overcoming divisions within the kingdom. In her 'Prefatory Discourse', Astell highlights Davenant's contradictory propositions about the reign of Elizabeth I: first, Davenant's statement that, as a successful ruler, Elizabeth I had 'a Mind above her Sex' (*Essays*, p. 180); and second, his observation that 'For the Good Government of a free country, such as this Kingdom, no more Skill, no more Policies are requisite than what may be comprehended by a Woman, as was seen in the Instance of Queen Elizabeth' (*Essays*, p. 364).

Placed side by side, the contradiction is obvious: on the one hand, Elizabeth is a successful political leader because she has a mind that is above that of an ordinary woman; and on the other, she is a successful leader because the rules of statecraft are so simple that they can be understood by an ordinary woman. Elizabeth has both the mind of a woman, and yet a mind 'above that' of a woman.

In one part of her essay, Astell uses a dialogue between two men ('Nokes' and 'Styles') to highlight the contradictory nature of Davenant's opinions. Using the exact language of Davenant's *Essays*, these men debate the *pros* and *cons* of tolerating the practice of occasional conformity in Anglican churches. During their dispute, 'A Lady in the Company' interjects:

Whatever other Arts, *says she*, you Gentlemen may excel in, methinks you have not given your selves much trouble in studying the Art of *Decorum* and good Manners, since in a Lady's Reign, and even in Books that you Dedicate to Her Majesty, you take upon you to tell the World that *in this Kingdom no more Skill, no more Policies are requisite, than what may be comprehended by a Woman*. As if there were *any* Skill, *any* Policy that a Woman's Understanding could not reach! So again, if Women do any thing 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!*²⁰ Now if Women be such despicable Creatures, pray what's the plain *English* of all your fine Speeches and Dedications to her Majesty, but *Madam we mean to Flatter you?* But I would gladly be inform'd how many Men there are that Act above their Sex, or even equal to it? (*MTS*, pp. lii-liii)

²⁰ Astell also addresses this remark in her 1705 work, *The Christian Religion as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England*. She says that 'Men being the Historians, they seldom condescend to record the great and good Actions of Women; and when they take notice of them, 'tis with this wise Remark, That such Women *acted above their Sex*. By which one must suppose ... That they were not Women who did those Great Actions, but that they were Men in Petticoats!' See Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter Of The Church of England* (London: R. Wilkin, 1705), p. 293. A modern edition of this text will soon be forthcoming with The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe series: Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion as Professed By a Daughter of the Church of England*, ed. by Jacqueline Broad (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies).

Astell interprets Davenant's remarks about Elizabeth I as an expression of his contempt for women and their intellectual capacities. To highlight his mistaken attitude—and to defend the idea that Elizabeth herself must have had wisdom and prudence of her own—Astell once again draws Machiavelli into the discussion. She points Davenant to the main body of *Moderation truly Stated*, where she says

By what has been said, it appears that the Welfare of a Nation depends in great measure on the choice of those hands to whom the Prince commits the Administration. And to confirm it by Example, the Felicity of Queen *Elizabeth's* Reign is generally ascrib'd to the goodness of her Ministry, and her excellent choice of all the hands that she imploy'd. Not that it is any derogation to that Prince, as if the praise of her good Government was rather due to her Counsellors than to herself. For tho' it has been observ'd that *Nations,²¹ and ours in particular, Flourish more under a Feminine than under a Masculine Regiment: yet, it is not for that silly reason which envious Men assign, to wit, that under a Queen the Men really Govern *Machiavel*, [*In his Prince* Chap. 23] who must be allow'd to be no mean Politician, nor was he over complaisant to the Ladies, tells us, that tho' "there are those that believe, that a Prince who creates an Opinion of his Prudence in the People, does it not by any excellence in his own Nature, but by the Counsels of those who are about him, yet without doubt they are deceiv'd; for this is a general and infallible Rule, *That that Prince who has no Wisdom of his own, can never be well advis'd.*"²² And he gives his Reasons ... concluding *That good Counsels (from whomsoever they come) proceed rather from the Wisdom of the Prince, than the Prince's Wisdom from the goodness of his Counsels* (MTS, pp. 29-30).

In light of this view, even Machiavelli, Davenant's authority on political matters, would have supported the idea that Elizabeth I had her own prudence and wisdom, otherwise she could not have been advised well. Again, Astell herself does not explicitly advocate the Machiavellian

²¹ Astell inserts a marginal note about the strength of nations headed by women: "*Thus the Foundation of the Spanish Monarchy was laid by Queen Isabel of Castile. Margaret of Denmark was the greatest Prince of the North; And not to be tedious, Zenobia Queen of Palmyra, was the greatest Prince of her Age, or perhaps, that the World has ever produc'd*" (MTS, p. 30).

²² Astell quotes *verbatim* from Machiavelli, *Works*, pp. 231-32.

ideal of princely government—she uses Machiavelli to turn him against his disciple, Davenant. This is an *ad hominem* argument in John Locke’s sense of a way ‘to press a Man with Consequences drawn from his own Principles, or Concessions’.²³ If Davenant is a true supporter of Machiavelli’s principles, and if he concedes that Elizabeth I was well advised, then he must allow that women can have all the virtues of good governors.

When it comes to her positive ideas about princely government, Astell does not define her ideal ruler in terms of the masculine ideal of *virtù* pitted against the feminine forces of fortune. In the *Essays*, Davenant evidently subscribes to the Machiavellian ideal when he says that ‘As to Fortune, ‘tis the Refuge of none but the weak Men to blame Her, Who, as *Machiavel* says, Shews her Power where there is no predispos’d Virtue to resist her, and turns all her Force and Impetuosity where she knows there are no Banks, and no Fences to restrain her’ (*Essays*, p. 232). In response, Astell says that ‘Fortune is a meer Chimera’: it is *God* and not Fortune who crowns ‘Dispatch, Celerity, and Vigour in Action’, as well as ‘Honest and Proper Methods’, with success (*MTS*, p. vii).²⁴ Again, Astell advises that a good prince will never be compelled to do anything by necessity: ‘Let him never be *Compell’d* to receive any Man into his Service, or to exclude him out of it; but let his own Prudence Govern, and not the Artifice or Insolence of any of his Subjects’ (*MTS*, p. x). In this subtle reference to Davenant’s confused advice to Queen Anne, Astell harks back to the Renaissance humanist ideal of princely government. According to this ideal, a good ruler is someone who exhibits the cardinal virtues of justice, prudence, fortitude and temperance. Like her humanist predecessors, Astell considers prudence—or the capacity to discern between good and bad in one’s practical deliberations—to be a chief political virtue. But Astell departs from tradition when she allows that *women* might cultivate this virtue. In

²³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), IV.xvii.21, p. 686.

²⁴ Elsewhere, Astell says that ‘For whatever it is Fortune or Prudence that helps a Prince to a good Ministry, *shall not be here argu’d*; this is certain, that it is but by Accident that he can be a good Minister who is not a good Man’ (*MTS*, p. xxxix).

his *Politics*, Aristotle implies that women lack the capacity for prudence (or *phronesis*), and thus he supports the exclusion of women from political authority, as well as their subordination to men, and their lack of qualification for full citizenship.²⁵ In the early modern period, the political thinkers John Knox and Jean Bodin continued to promote the Aristotelian view that women were incapable of good political leadership. By contrast, in the voice of her female speaker, Astell tells Davenant that Anne does not stand in need of his advice, because ‘she is better able to discern what is fit for Her to do’ (*MTS*, p. liii)—she has prudence of her own. The speaker concludes

If therefore these Men would leave Her Majesty to Her own Superior Judgement, and the integrity of Her *own English Heart*, would they let Her exert Her Self, according to Her own Good Sense, Right Principles, and Generous Inclinations, with that undaunted Courage and Royal Magnanimity, that has never been wanting to those Ladies that have adorn’d the English Throne, I make no question but we shall be a most Happy People, and the Envy of all our Neighbours. But if they will be Medling, Advising, Trimming, and Perplexing the Case, I know not what will come of us. Only I comfort my self in this, that Her Majesty will give them full Demonstration, that there’s nothing either Wise, or Good, or Great that is above Her Sex (*MTS*, pp. liv-lv).

A female political leader does not have to become a man in order to obtain honour, glory, and fame. In Astell’s view, an ordinary woman has everything she needs within her to become a strong and effective political authority.

These passages about female leadership might be seen as a continuation of Astell’s feminist project in the *Serious Proposal*.²⁶ In her earlier work, Astell aims to dispel the view that ‘Women are naturally incapable of acting Prudently’ (*SPLI*, p. 9) and she argues that the

²⁵ For a critical analysis of Aristotle’s views on women, see Richard Mulgan, ‘Aristotle and the Political Role of Women’, *History of Political Thought* 15, 2 (1994): pp. 179-202.

²⁶ Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, ed. by Patricia Springborg (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1997). References to the first and second parts of this work are hereafter cited parenthetically as *SPLI* and *SPLII*.

‘Incapacity, if there be any, is acquired not natural’ (*SPLI*, p. 10). In her view, female intellectual inferiority is the result of a lack of education rather than a lack of natural ability. As a result of neglect, women suffer from ‘a want of understanding to compare and judge of things, to chuse a right End, to proportion the Means to the End’ (*SPLI*, p. 13); they lack the ‘judgment to discern when to fix’ upon a steady course of action (*SPLI*, p. 31). Only ‘a great deal of Prudence and a rooted Vertue’ will enable women to overcome the effects of a poor education (*SPLI*, p. 14). Astell therefore calls upon women to acquire a ‘true Practical Knowledge’ (*SPLI*, p. 24), and a clear ‘Judgment to overlook the Prejudices of Education and Example and to discern what is best’ (*SPLI*, p. 33). In the second part of her *Proposal*, a work that is dedicated to Anne (then Princess of Denmark), Astell provides a method for women to improve their minds through their own efforts. When outlining this method, Astell calls on women to acquire the ‘Art of Prudence’, which is ‘the being all of a Piece, managing all our Words and Actions as becomes Wise Persons and Good Christians’ (*SPLII*, p. 120), as well as drawing advantage from everything that happens, and ‘accommodating all the Accidents of Life to the great End of Living’ (*SPLII*, pp. 162-63).

In the *Proposal*, Astell recommends the ‘art of prudence’ for the sake of an *individual’s* well-being: the capacity for prudence enables a woman to discern between good and bad for the sake of attaining the good life. In *Moderation truly Stated*, the capacity for prudence is clearly a political virtue: it is the ability to discern between good and bad for the sake of the *community’s* well-being. Astell refers to ‘a Prince who creates an Opinion of his Prudence in the People’ (*MTS*, p. 29), and to that ‘Prudence that helps a Prince to a good Ministry’ (*MTS*, p. xxxix). She emphasises that a woman, Queen Anne, is more than capable of exercising prudence in the government of the realm. Davenant should let Anne’s ‘own Prudence Govern’ (*MTS*, p. x) and leave her to her ‘own Superior Judgement’ (*MTS*, p. liv). In the 1706 edition of her *Reflections upon Marriage*, Astell continues this defence of female political authority, pointing to numerous examples of women rulers in past and present times. Among others, Astell mentions Sampson’s

mother, who 'so prudently answer'd' the vulgar fears of her husband, and the wise woman 'of *Abel*, who 'by her Prudence deliver'd the City and appeas'd a dangerous Rebellion'.²⁷

If we re-consider Astell's *Proposal* in light of her later comments about female political prudence, we can read her work not just as a defence of women's natural powers of reason, but also a defence of women's natural leadership abilities. The *Proposal* might be construed, in other words, as a political text. Though the first part was published before Mary II's death in 1694, the second part was published whilst Anne's supporters were waging their campaign against William III's solo leadership. In this context, we might infer that when Astell suggests that an ordinary woman can practise the 'art of prudence', she is also implying that a female leader (Anne) can attain that political virtue without having a man by her side or without having to rise 'above her sex'.²⁸

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In the past few decades, scholars have begun to recognise the true extent of women's participation in the political debates and controversies of the early modern period. This scholarship is valuable not only because it enhances our appreciation of women's intellectual history, but because it enlarges our understanding of the parameters of political philosophy itself. While the early modern period might have witnessed the emergence of modern political ideals, such as liberty, toleration, and equality, the political texts of the time do not make a decisive break with the old world approach; and, in this respect, they open our eyes to a different way of thinking politically. The writings of Mary Astell aptly demonstrate this point. In a time when the political vocabulary was turning to the language of rights, property, and self-preservation, she still subscribed to the ancient political language of virtue and the good, and promoted the

²⁷ Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage*, in *Astell: Political Writings*, p. 24.

²⁸ On the symbolic importance of female monarchy in Astell's work, see Carol Barash, "'The Native Liberty ... of the Subject': Configurations of Gender and Authority in the Works of Mary Chudleigh, Sarah Fyge Egerton, and Mary Astell', in Isobel Grundy and Susan Wiseman (eds), *Women, Writing, History 1640-1740* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1992), pp. 55-69.

Aristotelian approach to politics as a branch of ethics. In her opinion, good rulers must never change their moral character in order to suit the times and circumstances: good rulers always strive to embody the princely virtues of justice, prudence, fortitude and temperance, and they always aim to practise the Christian virtues of goodness and piety. If their efforts are not enough to maintain the state, then they must bow to the circumstances, and wait for their eternal reward from God. Good rulers do not use any means necessary to fight against the ravages of fortune—they use only those means that are consistent with virtue and true religion. In all these respects, Astell's views are diametrically opposed to those of Machiavelli. If Astell were a Machiavellian or a 'Machiavellian Tory', then she supported an almost unrecognisable, toothless kind of Machiavellianism. But it seems more reasonable to suppose that Astell's remarks in support of Machiavelli were rhetorical devices in her main argument against Davenant, an uncritical advocate of Machiavellian ideas. For Astell, Machiavelli was 'no very heavenly minded Christian' (*MTS*, p. vii), the inventor of 'politick religion', and therefore an enemy to everything she held dear.

Finally, the study of early modern women writers performs another service for the history of political thought: it prompts us to look at familiar political ideas and figures from a woman-centred point of view. Astell was making only a passing observation when she noted that Machiavelli was someone who was not 'over complaisant [i.e. pleasantly disposed] to the Ladies' (*MTS*, p. 29). But this observation shows that Astell recognised another 'face' of Machiavelli in her time—one that has only recently been highlighted by feminist scholars.²⁹ Some might say that Astell recognised an inherent misogyny in his characterisation of the man of *virtù* and the woman of fortune, and a fundamental association between gender and political success in Machiavelli's thought. But Astell does more than this: in her critique of Davenant, Astell cleverly turns Machiavelli's principles against him. She shows that, by the lights of his own philosophy,

²⁹ For an overview, see Maria J. Falco (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Niccolò Machiavelli*, Re-reading the Canon series (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2004).

and in the wake of Elizabeth I's legacy, a Machiavellian ought to allow that a woman can govern with prudence of her own. In this respect, we might say that Astell out-Machiavellis Machiavelli: she uses his ideas to show that ordinary women are capable of embodying all the virtues of strong and effective political leaders.³⁰

³⁰ I would like to thank the participants in the *Women Writing 1550-1750 (Revisited)* conference in January 2008, for their helpful comments and suggestions. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the School of Philosophy and Bioethics at Monash University, Melbourne. This essay was completed during my time as an Honorary Research Associate of the School in 2008.