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Marriage, Slavery, and the Merger of Wills:

Responses to Sprint, 1700–01

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In November 1699, a nonconformist preacher named John Sprint (*fl.* 1699–1700) published a forty-four-page pamphlet titled *The Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, outlining the duties of wives to their husbands. This text was based on an original sermon that Sprint had performed at a wedding in Sherbourn, Dorsetshire, on 11 May 1699.¹ This last fact is somewhat surprising and perhaps a little disturbing. If Sprint did indeed present this sermon, then he would have delivered a rather stark message to the new young bride. According to the text, he would have told her: you are morally obliged to please this man, your beloved husband, in absolutely everything. If you don't, it's entirely likely that he will develop a sour and disagreeable temper of mind—he might even become a madman or a 'sot' (an alcoholic). That will be *your* fault. If he does happen to become a madman or a sot, bear in mind that you are still obliged to render obedience to him and to strive to please him in everything. Nothing can absolve you of that duty. This duty is incumbent on you because God created

¹ According to the *Term Catalogues*, the work titled *Bride-Woman's Councillor* [sic]; *containing the Whole Duty of a Married Woman towards her Husband* was first published in November 1699, printed for J. Sprint and G. Conyers in Little Britain. See Edward Arber, *The Term Catalogues, 1668–1709 A.D.; with a Number for Easter Term, 1711 A.D.*, 3 vols (London: Professor Edward Arber, 1903–6), iii, p. 152. For a modern facsimile reprint of Sprint's text, see *Texts from the Querelle, 1641–1701*, selected and introduced by Laura L. Runge, 2 vols (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), i. This first volume also contains responses by Eugenia, Mary Astell, and Mary Chudleigh.

women for the sake and service of men, because the first woman brought about the fall of mankind, and because marital happiness crucially depends upon *your* submission.

Not surprisingly, Sprint's work seems to have generated a certain amount of ill feeling among his female contemporaries. In his 'Epistle to the Reader', he complains that his sermon has been 'unhappily represented to the World, by some ill-natur'd Females'.² Then, from early 1700 to 1701, his pamphlet inspired three impassioned responses from women—Eugenia's *Female Advocate* (1700), Mary Astell's *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), and Mary Chudleigh's *Ladies Defence* (1701)—as well as a later poem by Elizabeth Thomas, who wrote in admiration of Chudleigh's *Defence*.³

Sprint himself says his work was unpopular and these responses attest to that fact. But still we might ask: *why* was it so unpopular? What was the big deal? After all, men had been writing misogynist texts about women for centuries, since before the period of the *querelle des femmes*,⁴ and it was not unusual for writers to defend the religious and legal view that 'the Law of Nature has put her [the wife] under the Obedience of her husband, and hath submitted

² John Sprint, *The Bride-Woman's Counsellor. Being A Sermon Preached at a Wedding, May the 11th, 1699, at Sherbourn in Dorsetshire. By John Sprint* (London: Printed by W. Bowyer and sold by A. Baldwin, 1700), sig. A2r.

³ In her 1722 poem 'To the Lady Chudleigh, The Anonymous Author of the Lady's Defence', Thomas tells of her disgust at reading Sprint's sermon. She thought it might contain sage advice and sacred law, but instead she found that a '*Malignant Humour* lurk'd in ev'ry Line'. See [Elizabeth Thomas], *Miscellany Poems On Several Subjects* (London: Thomas Combes, 1722), p. 146. In a letter dated 19 October 1701, Chudleigh encouraged Thomas to write her own response to *The Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, but in a later letter Thomas declined. See Mary Chudleigh to Elizabeth Thomas, 19 October 1701; in Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Rawlinson Letters 90, fol. 61; printed in Richard Gwinnett and Elizabeth Thomas, *The Honourable Lovers: Or, The Second and Last Volume of Pylades and Corinna* (London: E. Curll, 1732), pp. 247–8; and Elizabeth Thomas to Mary Chudleigh, undated; printed in Richard Gwinnett and Elizabeth Thomas, *Pylades and Corinna: or, Memoirs of the Lives, Amours, and Writings of Richard Gwinnett and Mrs Elizabeth Thomas* (London: Edmund Curll, 1731), pp. 264–6.

⁴ For an overview of this long debate about women's moral and intellectual competence, see Joan Kelly, 'Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des Femmes*, 1400–1789', in *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 65–109.

her Will to his'.⁵ So why should Sprint's pamphlet have prompted these women to respond so ardently in print?

The authors themselves provide some clues as to their motivations. All of them express offence that Sprint wrote as a man of God and not as a wit or satirist. Eugenia takes umbrage at Sprint's suggestion that if women do not practise wifely obedience, then they must face 'Judgment and Damnation'.⁶ She expresses 'wonder to find a Sex attack'd from the Pulpit with more confident Impudence than ever they were on the Stage'.⁷ Astell likewise inveighs against those 'grave Dons, your Learned Men' who write invectives against poor defenceless women. Men of 'profound Wisdoms and exalted Understandings', she suggests, should not waste their time rendering 'those poor Wretches more ridiculous and odious who are already in their Opinion sufficiently contemptible'.⁸ Chudleigh says that she blames Sprint for being 'too angry', and she wishes that he had approached women with 'a respectful Tenderness ... more becoming a Messenger of Peace, the Disciple of a humble, patient, meek, commiserating Saviour'.⁹ As devout Anglicans, Chudleigh and Astell might have also felt justified in criticizing a nonconformist preacher (Sprint was apparently a Congregationalist).¹⁰

⁵ *Baron and Feme. A Treatise of the Common Law concerning Husbands and Wives* (London: Richard and Edward Atkyns, 1700), p. 3.

⁶ Eugenia, *The Female Advocate; Or, A Plea for the just Liberty of the Tender Sex, and particularly of Married Women. Being Reflections On a late Rude and Disingenuous Discourse, Delivered by Mr. John Sprint, in a Sermon at a Wedding, May 11th, at Sherburn in Dorsetshire, 1699. By a Lady of Quality* (London: Andrew Bell, 1700), p. 28.

⁷ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 1.

⁸ Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage*, in *Astell: Political Writings*, edited by Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 58–9.

⁹ Mary Chudleigh, 'To the Reader', in *Essays upon Several Subjects in Prose and Verse*, in *The Poems and Prose of Mary, Lady Chudleigh*, edited by Margaret J. M. Ezell (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 249.

¹⁰ See Runge, 'Introductory Note', in *Texts from the Querelle, 1641–1701*, p. xx.

In this chapter, I explore a deeper philosophical motivation behind their responses. I contend that this spate of pamphlets was a battleground for contesting the limits of women's freedom—or, more specifically, a certain *kind* of freedom for women—within marriage. I think it is no coincidence that two of the authors, Astell and Chudleigh, were serious moral philosophers as well as devout Protestants. As we will see, Sprint presents a notion of freedom for women that is inimical to their moral-theological notion of freedom as rational self-governance. He denies women both moral and intellectual competence, and he insists that they approach their moral duty as one of unquestioning obedience to male authority. For Eugenia, Astell, and Chudleigh, this is morally and spiritually dangerous.

In my opinion, this small dispute has historical-philosophical significance for at least two reasons. First, I think these three women's responses are indicative of a wider shift in moral thinking during the early modern period—one that Jerome Schneewind has characterized as a shift away from traditional conceptions of 'morality as obedience' toward a new conception of 'morality as self-governance'.¹¹ These authors demonstrate that women were active participants in intellectual debates that led to the late eighteenth-century advent of Kantian autonomy, the idea that moral agents ought to be free to follow the laws and principles of their own wills, and not the rules and dictates of others.¹² Second, these women's responses anticipate recent feminist discussions about the moral dangers of marriage and the threat that the marital 'merger of selves' can pose to a woman's autonomy. They reveal that women's moral theorizing about marriage has had a long history—one in which ideas and arguments about personal autonomy have enjoyed a special prominence.

¹¹ J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹² On other female contributions to the invention of autonomy, see Lisa Shapiro's 'Gabrielle Suchon's "Neutralist": The Status of Women and the Invention of Autonomy', and Karen Detlefsen, 'Liberty and Feminism in Early Modern Women's Writing', in this volume.

To illustrate these points, in what follows, I begin by offering an exegesis of Sprint's position concerning the limits of women's freedom, before outlining each female author's arguments against Sprint, and then providing some account of the concept of freedom underlying those arguments. I highlight the fact that a seemingly conservative notion of positive liberty—an internal power of rational self-governance—enables these women to question certain social constraints of their time. To demonstrate this, I conclude by spelling out the similarities between these historical women's claims and those of recent feminist theorists of autonomy.

4.1 Sprint

So, what did Sprint have to say about female freedom? Let us turn to the primary text in question, *The Bride-Woman's Counsellor*. The main purpose of this pamphlet is to defend what Sprint calls his 'doctrine', the proposition that '*Tis a Duty incumbent on all Married Women to be extraordinary careful to content and please their Husbands*'.¹³ First, he points to the view that God has designed woman to be serviceable and helpful to man.¹⁴ According to scripture, a married woman owes her being to this end—if she does not obey her husband and try to please him, then she 'doth wickedly pervert the End of her Creation'.¹⁵ Second, Sprint highlights the fact that a woman, Eve, was responsible for the first transgression and the fall of humankind. It is therefore fitting and just, he says, that a woman should please and comfort her man—as a kind of recompense for the misery and mischief her foremother caused.¹⁶ Third, Sprint contends that the happiness or misery of married life depends upon women doing their duty to their husbands.¹⁷ He allows that marital happiness depends on *men* doing their duty too. But he focuses on women's rather than men's duties, because 'Women

¹³ Sprint, *Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Sprint, *Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, p. 9. Sprint's main textual supports are Corinthians 11:9 and Genesis 2:18.

¹⁵ Sprint, *Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, p. 10.

¹⁶ Sprint, *Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, p. 11. Here he appeals to 1 Timothy 2:14 and Genesis 3:16 ('And thy desire shall be to thy Husband, and He shall rule over thee').

¹⁷ Sprint, *Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, p. 16.

are of Weaker Capacities to Learn than Men’, ‘the Frailty of that Sex is great’, and they suffer from a certain ‘Weakness’.¹⁸ Women therefore require more help and assistance than men in learning their lessons.

Following these justifications, Sprint elaborates on how women might best please and content their husbands. They can do so, he says, by assiduously observing their marital vows to ‘love’, ‘honour’, and ‘obey’. A woman loves her husband as she ought whenever she shares his humour or emotions, agrees with his views, and avoids any dissent or disputation.¹⁹ And a woman honours her husband when she has great esteem, respect, or reverence for him. This honour can be either external or internal: it can manifest in outward, observable behaviour, or it can be interiorized and felt in the mind. A wife’s external honour toward her husband is expressed by ‘giving those Titles which may bespeak the Dignity and Excellency of his Person’, such as calling him ‘*Lord*’ or ‘*Lord and Master*’ rather than Bill or Ted, as if he were a servant or a child.²⁰ Internal honour is about having a high esteem or reverence for her husband in her private thoughts. A woman honours her husband when, in her mind, she genuinely thinks of him as her superior and head, and never entertains a mean or contemptuous thought about him.²¹ On this point, Sprint warns that

tho’ Women may think, that their Thoughts are free, that they are at Liberty to think as they please, yet let them know, that the Heart-searching God takes Cognizance of their Thoughts, and is very much displeas’d when he finds any to be such as are beneath the Dignity and Excellency of the Husband.²²

¹⁸ Sprint, *Bride-Woman’s Counsellor*, pp. 4, 42, 43.

¹⁹ Sprint, *Bride-Woman’s Counsellor*, pp. 16–17, 25–6.

²⁰ Sprint, *Bride-Woman’s Counsellor*, pp. 33, 34.

²¹ Sprint, *Bride-Woman’s Counsellor*, p. 31.

²² Sprint, *Bride-Woman’s Counsellor*, pp. 31–2.

In Genesis 3:16, as a punishment for the fall, God commands that a woman's 'desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee'.²³ On Sprint's reading of this text, a woman is not only obliged to obey her husband's commands, but also to regulate 'the very Desires of her Heart' to the extent that 'it should not be lawful for her to Will or Desire what she her self liked, but only what her Husband should approve and allow'.²⁴

Finally, in Sprint's view, if a woman loves and honours her husband as she ought, then she will come to obey him. And if the husband commands the wife to do something sinful? Sprint allows that 'God never gave to any Man Authority to command that which is Contradictory to his own Law' or to command that which is impossible. But with these exceptions only, the laws of God and nature have given 'the Husband Authority to Command, and the Wife is bound to Obey, however unnecessary or unfit she may think it to be'.²⁵ A woman practises due obedience to her husband when she neither judges nor rejects her husband's commands, but rather strives to fulfil them without question or resistance.²⁶

Surprisingly, Sprint allows that women might retain a certain freedom to do as they will, through this practice of wifely obedience. An obedient woman, he says, may lead her husband 'captive at her Pleasure' and 'do with him what she pleases', because her husband will be so 'so fast bound in the Golden Fetters of Love'.²⁷ If women follow their duty to please their husbands in everything, then they can obtain 'what they themselves do will and desire';²⁸ they will not encounter any opposition from their husbands, because their husbands will want to please them. In short, Sprint implies that being obedient is an effective way for

²³ Sprint, *Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, p. 11.

²⁴ Sprint, *Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, p. 12.

²⁵ Sprint, *Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, pp. 36–7.

²⁶ Sprint, *Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, p. 38.

²⁷ Sprint, *Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, p. 6.

²⁸ Sprint, *Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, p. 17.

women to exploit or manipulate their husbands' love and affection, to gain what they themselves want. '*An obedient Wife*,' he says (quoting an unnamed source), '*is the Likeliest Woman in the World to command her Husband*.'²⁹

At this point, we might question whether or not Sprint has taken a coherent stance on women's freedom. On the one hand, he urges that women must will and desire as their husbands will and desire—they should not think that their 'Thoughts are free' or 'that they are at Liberty to think as they please'—but, on the other, he allows that women *are* free to will and desire as they please. Does Sprint contradict himself?

To be charitable, I think we might interpret Sprint as advocating a form of *negative liberty*.³⁰ According to the classic Hobbesian notion of negative liberty, a free agent is one who has the ability to do—or to refrain from doing—what she wills or desires, in the absence of physical impediments. On this definition, an agent becomes unfree only if her will is hindered or constrained in such a way that it is no longer the direct cause of her actions.³¹ In his chapter 'Of the Liberty of Subjects' in *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes says that 'when a man throweth his goods into the Sea for *feare* the ship should sink, he doth it neverthesse very willingly, and may refuse to doe it if he will: it is therefore the action, of one that was *free*'.³² In his opinion, true liberty consists in the agent's unimpeded power to act in accordance with the last determination of her will, *regardless* of whether the will is determined by an irrational impulse or passion such as fear. Along the same lines, from a Hobbesian

²⁹ Sprint, *Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, p. 6.

³⁰ Here I follow the widely accepted terminology of Isaiah Berlin's essay 'Two Concepts of Liberty' (first published in 1958), in *Four Essays on Liberty* (London, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 118–72.

³¹ On Hobbes and 'impediments to freedom in the proper signification of the word', see Quentin Skinner, 'Hobbes on the Proper Signification of Liberty', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 40 (1990): 121–51.

³² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Richard Tuck, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 146.

perspective, we might think that if a woman willingly practises wifely obedience—to win her husband over and obtain her own ends—then strictly speaking she still has her liberty. In her everyday interactions with her husband, she might act from a slavish desire to please, or from an inordinate fear of dissent, but she is nevertheless free to refrain from bowing to her husband’s will, if she so pleases. On this reading, the contradiction in Sprint’s text disappears because a woman can both practise obedience to her husband and yet still be free, provided that she obeys him voluntarily and there are no external obstacles or constraints to her will.

So what do Sprint’s contemporary critics have to say about this notion of freedom for women?

4.2 Eugenia

Let us begin with Eugenia’s *The Female Advocate*, a work that bears the pertinent subtitle *A Plea for the just Liberty of the Tender Sex, and particularly of Married Women*. In this short tract, Eugenia’s strategy is to follow Sprint’s arguments from beginning to end, and to raise criticisms along the way. Her main thesis is that even though married women owe a duty of submission to their husbands, this does not entail that wives must render an uncritical or unquestioning obedience, or that husbands must possess an unlimited or boundless power over them. ‘Tis granted the Woman was created for the Man,’ Eugenia says, ‘but we deny that this is any pretence to use the limited Power which Heaven has given him to the Unhappiness and Ruin of a Creature that was made for him.’³³ It is also no reason why married women should become the ‘Slaves and Vassals’ of their husbands.³⁴ In short, though Eugenia accepts that married women must respect the authority of their husbands, she thinks

³³ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 21.

³⁴ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 22.

that women can nevertheless have a greater degree—or, as we will see, a *different kind*—of freedom than the one Sprint allows.

In his sermon, Sprint insists that ‘nothing but what is *contradictory to God’s Laws, or impossible in it self, is excluded from the compass of a Husband’s Authority*’.³⁵ In response, Eugenia points out that, on pain of damnation, Sprint requires a number of performances from women that *are* both impossible and contrary to divine law. First, psychologically and epistemologically speaking, it is simply impossible for women to have an internal honour toward their husbands when their husbands don’t merit it. ‘But what if so strange a thing should happen that a Man should be really a Fool,’ Eugenia asks, ‘must a Woman call him *Solomon?*’³⁶ Though a woman might *behave* as if she thought him wise, it would not be in a woman’s power to *really believe* that he is so—only reason and evidence could compel such a belief. It is ‘very hard, and a strange Doctrine indeed,’ Eugenia observes, ‘that they [women] must not be allow’d to have contemptible thoughts, no not of Persons and Things that are in themselves contemptible to the last degree’.³⁷ It should suffice that women tamely submit to their ‘Lords and Masters’ in outward form, and do not openly contradict them to their faces.³⁸ To expect an interiorized submission,

is a Tyranny ... that extends farther than the most absolute Monarchs in the World; for if they can but fill their Gallies with Slaves, and chain them fast to the Oar, they seldom have so large a Conscience to expect they should take any great pleasure in their present Condition, and that the very *Desires of their Hearts* should strike an Harmony with the clattering Music of their Fetters.³⁹

³⁵ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 46.

³⁶ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 44.

³⁷ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 41.

³⁸ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 28.

³⁹ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 28.

To support her claims, Eugenia draws out her readers' intuitions about similar or analogous relationships. If we were to adopt Sprint's doctrine as a rule, she says, then certain 'strange Inferences' would naturally follow for other unequal power relationships, such as those between masters and servants, lawyers and clients, or physicians and patients:

'tis you'll say the duty of these Servants, Clients, and Patients to be govern'd and submit: But a Servant may be abus'd by his Master, a Client cheated and impoverish'd by his Lawyer, and the Patient genteely dispatch'd by his Doctor. Now certainly any Man would be of a *weak Capacity* to endure these things, and therefore the Duties of Servants, Clients, and Patients must always be rung in their Ears, and the Duties of Masters, Lawyers, and Physicians, never. Who sees not the mighty force, and feels not the close girds of so sinewy an Argument?⁴⁰

Here Eugenia presents a kind of *reductio*. She appeals to the intuition that it is absurd to expect any subordinate to endure such abuse without complaint. It is also unjust to accuse a subordinate of incompetence (or 'weakness') in enacting her duties when the dominant party acts with cruelty. 'I suppose, if Men were to learn the same Lesson [as women],' she wryly observes, 'their Capacities would be as weak.'⁴¹

Another implicit point for Eugenia is that unequal power relationships can be either good or bad. They are good when the subordinate party lives under the authority of her superior, and yet that superior respects the interests of his subordinate and acts accordingly. But, according to Sprint's doctrine, in the marital relationship,

a Woman (if a Husband pleases) is bound to do a thousand foolish and ridiculous things. If it be his Will and Pleasure, his House must be her Prison all the days of her

⁴⁰ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 14.

⁴¹ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 13.

Life, she must never speak a word but to him, she must never eat but what he leaves, and the Dogs and she may scramble for the Bones.⁴²

In Eugenia's view, this is not a 'goodly Dominion'.⁴³ At their husbands' bidding, women might be obliged to do 'a multitude of other cruel and ridiculous things', simply because those things are not impossible or contrary to divine law—they might be imprisoned, starved, and treated like animals.⁴⁴ 'Can it be the Glory of a Man,' she asks, 'to trample upon, and enslave, and render the Life of such an excellent Creature as miserable as he can?'⁴⁵ Clearly, this kind of treatment of other persons is morally unconscionable.

What, then, is Eugenia's own view of freedom? What does she mean by the '*just Liberty*' of her title? An answer can be found in her negative response to Sprint's notion of freedom for women. In one passage, she refers to Sprint's perplexing claim that if women are pliant and yielding to their husbands' desires, then they might do what they please, saying

And here agen he hath another Paradox, and tells us that if the Wife becomes *pliant and yielding* (that is, becomes a good easy tractable Slave) *to her Husbands Desire, she then may do e'en what she pleases with him*: Which is as much as to say, If she be a perfect Slave, she may have her Liberty. I shall never be persuaded that such Gentlemen who desire the subjection of their Wives, and are willing to confine them to the treatment of Servants, have any great opinion of their Persons or their Liberty.⁴⁶

Sprint says that if wives bend to their husbands' will, then they will be granted all their requests. The problem, however, is that to please their husbands, women 'will not dare to make any request, but such as they know before-hand are according to their Husbands

⁴² Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, pp. 46–7.

⁴³ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 46.

⁴⁴ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 47.

⁴⁵ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 41.

⁴⁶ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 17.

minds'.⁴⁷ Women are therefore likely to anticipate their husbands' wishes and desires, such that they will forsake their own self-defined concerns—they will not have any requests of *their own*.

Sprint's notion of freedom for women, according to Eugenia, is morally dangerous. In her view, it poses a threat to the ideal of moral self-preservation.⁴⁸ 'There is indeed a very strong Inclination in us for the preservation of those things call'd Reason, and the Liberty of Rational Creatures,' she says.⁴⁹ Yet Sprint would have ignorance to be the mother of a woman's devotion to a man: a woman 'must not use her Reason so far as to judg of the Laws that are pronounc'd to her: No! [she] must obey by implicit Faith'.⁵⁰ Clearly, this is wrong-headed: a woman must always be permitted to act according to her reason, in order to preserve that which is essential to her self and her salvation. Otherwise, her husband might lead her blindly into sin and damnation.

In sum, against Sprint, Eugenia holds that true freedom is the freedom to make one's own rational choices in the interests of moral self-preservation. She supports a concept of freedom as self-governance in the sense of having rational control over one's moral choices and actions.

4.3 Astell

⁴⁷ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 33.

⁴⁸ Eugenia refers to 'Self-preservation' as 'an old-fashioned principle' that Sprint would have women abandon (*Female Advocate*, p. 45). I refer here to *moral* self-preservation so as not to confuse Eugenia's notion with that of Hobbes and Locke, both of whom regard self-preservation as the right to preserve the embodied self—including its life, liberty, and limb—from destruction. In the passage in question, it is clear that Eugenia is referring to the preservation of the soul from sin and damnation.

⁴⁹ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, pp. 48–9.

⁵⁰ Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, pp. 47–8.

Let us now turn to similar ideas in Mary Astell's well-known tract, *Some Reflections upon Marriage*.⁵¹ In this work, Sprint is not Astell's main target—she explicitly addresses the infamous case of Hortense Mancini, the duchess of Mazarin, a woman who separated from her abusive husband. But there are several textual references that, I think, cue us to Astell's invectives against Sprint. The clearest reference is in the following passage, in which she quotes verbatim from *The Bride-Woman's Counsellor*:

She who Elects a Monarch for Life, who gives him an Authority she cannot recall however he misapply it, who puts her Fortune and Person entirely in his Powers; nay even the very desires of her Heart according to some learned Casuists, so as that it is not lawful to Will or Desire any thing but what he approves and allows; had need be very sure that she does not make a Fool her Head, nor a Vicious Man her Guide and Pattern, she had best stay till she can meet with one who has the Government of his own Passions, and has duly regulated his own Desires, since he is to have such an absolute Power over hers.⁵²

For several pages following this quote, Astell repeatedly refers to husbands as 'Lords and Masters' and critiques the idea that women are required to love, honour, and obey their husbands on pain of damnation. 'Indeed, your fine Gentleman's Actions are now adays such,' she wryly observes, 'that did not Custom and the Dignity of his Sex give Weight and Authority to them, a Woman that thinks twice might bless her self, and say, is this the Lord and Master to whom I am to promise Love, Honour and Obedience?'⁵³

⁵¹ The *Term Catalogues* record that the *Reflections* was published in November 1700 (Arber, *Term Catalogues*, iii, 217), but another source, *Bibliotheca Annuæ* ([London]: A. Roper and W. Turner for J. Nutt, 1700), suggests that it was published before March 1700. This would place the publication of Astell's work shortly after the appearance of Sprint's pamphlet.

⁵² Astell, *Reflections*, pp. 48–9. My italics here indicate the verbatim quotation from Sprint, *Bride-Woman's Counsellor*, p. 12.

⁵³ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 49. The other references to 'Lord and Master' are: 'to be denied ones most innocent desires for no other cause, but the Will and Pleasure of an absolute Lord and Master, whose follies a Woman with all her Prudence cannot hide, and whose Commands she cannot but despise at the same time she obeys them; is a misery none can have a just Idea of, but those who have felt it' (Astell, *Reflections*, pp. 33–4); 'to what a fine pass does she bring her self who purchases a Lord and Master' (p. 51); 'what must they do to make

So, assuming that Sprint is one of Astell's targets (in spirit, at least, if not in fact), what is her stance on his doctrine? And what is her own notion of freedom for women?

First, like Eugenia, Astell makes the point about the epistemological impossibility of willing oneself to believe something that is contrary to reason. 'But some refractory Woman perhaps will say, how can this be?' says Astell. 'Is it possible for her to believe him Wise and Good who by a thousand Demonstrations convinces her and all the World of the contrary?'⁵⁴ She, too, suggests that women cannot be morally obliged to do that which is impossible.

Next, there are clues to Astell's positive notion of freedom, contra Sprint's negative concept, in the following two passages. Astell says,

Superiors indeed are too apt to forget the common Privileges of Mankind; that their Inferiors share with them the greatest Benefits, and are as capable as themselves of enjoying the supreme Good; that tho' the Order of the World requires an *Outward* Respect and Obedience from some to others, yet the Mind is free, nothing but Reason can oblige it, 'tis out of the reach of the most absolute Tyrant.⁵⁵

Superiors don't rightly understand their own interest when they attempt to put out their Subjects Eyes to keep them Obedient. A Blind Obedience is what a Rational Creature shou'd never Pay, nor wou'd such an one receive it did he rightly understand its Nature. For Human Actions are no otherwise valuable than as they are conformable to Reason, but a blind Obedience is an Obeying *without Reason*, for ought we know, *against it*.

the Matrimonial Yoke tolerable to themselves as well as Pleasing to their Lords and Masters?' (p. 59); 'Hope of being Lord and Master' (p. 66); and 'acting like a Lord and Master' (p. 67).

⁵⁴ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 62.

⁵⁵ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 56.

GOD himself does not require our Obedience at this rate, he lays before us the goodness and reasonableness of his Laws, and were there any thing in them whose Equity we could not readily comprehend, yet we have this clear and sufficient Reason on which to found our Obedience, that nothing but what's Just and Fit, can be enjoy'd by a Just, a Wise and Gracious GOD ...⁵⁶

In the first paragraph, Astell points to the inner freedom of the mind. She suggests that freedom consists in exercising or regulating one's will in accordance with reason, toward the attainment or enjoyment of 'the supreme Good'. In the second passage, we are alerted to the fact that the law of God permits us to question the apparent 'goodness and reasonableness' of the laws of men, and to reject those laws whenever we find they are not 'conformable to reason'. In short, a woman is free to the extent that she is a rational creature capable of exercising her will in accordance with reason, and of raising objections or passing critical judgments on the unreasonable commands of others.

In her later work, *The Christian Religion* (1705), Astell elaborates on these same points.⁵⁷ She says that true liberty 'consists not in a power to do what we will, but in making a right use of our reason, in preserving our judgments free, and our integrity unspotted, which sets us out of the reach of the most absolute tyrant'.⁵⁸ God has made his creatures such that 'He and he only is a freeman who acts according to right reason'.⁵⁹ Our freedom is frequently compromised by the mind's willing subjection to the 'most grievous and ignominious' slavery of the passions (the emotions). The passions are a product of the mind's intermingling with the body, an essentially non-thinking substance. As a Cartesian, Astell regards reason as

⁵⁶ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 75.

⁵⁷ For further details on Astell's views in this work, see Alice Sowaal's chapter in this volume, 'Mary Astell on Liberty'.

⁵⁸ Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England*, edited by Jacqueline Broad (Toronto: Iter and Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2013), §249.

⁵⁹ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §249.

an essential attribute of the immaterial soul.⁶⁰ To liberate the self from the slavery of the passions, then, we must regulate the will in accordance with reason. More than this, however, to be morally responsible for our choices and actions, we must avoid being dependent on other people's judgments about right and wrong. To live up to the dignity of our natures as free and rational beings, we must exercise 'that most valuable privilege, and indefeasible right, of judging for ourselves where God has left us free to do so'.⁶¹ In short, we must learn to judge for ourselves and avoid slavishly following the opinions of others.

At first glance, it is difficult to see how this concept of freedom could enable early modern women to challenge the social constraints of their time, such as those within marriage (as suggested by Sprint). On Astell's view, a married woman is free to the extent that she is capable of judging for herself, independently of her husband's commands. But this 'indefeasible right' does not entail any right to resist her husband's authority, or provide any justification for marital law reform. A woman's emancipation can always take place in her head alone, it seemingly does not need to involve any changes to social institutions. Nevertheless, I think there is greater feminist potential in this concept than first meets the eye—I will elaborate on this point shortly.

4.4 Chudleigh

Before I do so, let us turn to the sentiments of Chudleigh's *Ladies Defence*. Though Chudleigh had been writing in manuscript for decades prior to 1701, this work was her first foray into print. In a letter to Elizabeth Thomas dated October 1701, she says that she wrote the work because

⁶⁰ On Astell's Cartesian-inspired arguments for the mind-body distinction, see Jacqueline Broad, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell: An Early Modern Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 64–70.

⁶¹ Astell, *Christian Religion*, §256.

I was troubl'd to see them [i.e., the female sex] made the Jest of every Vain Pretender to Wit, and Expos'd by a *Scurrilous Pamphlet*, rather than a *Sermon*,⁶² to the Malicious Censures of invidious Detractors, of Men, who think they cannot be *obedient Wives*, without being *Slaves*, nor pay their *Husbands* that *Respect* they owe them without sacrificing their *Reason* to their *Humour*.⁶³

In the *Ladies Defence*, Chudleigh raises many of the same points as Eugenia and Astell, but in the form of a dramatic dialogue between a parson (a mouthpiece for Sprint), a brutish husband, a young unmarried man, and a woman named Melissa (a mouthpiece for Chudleigh). In the preface, Chudleigh makes the by-now-familiar claim about the epistemological impossibility or difficulty of willing and desiring according to someone else's irrational will and desire.⁶⁴ Her character Melissa also articulates a kind of rationalist soft determinism, according to which we are most free when we are determined by our reason, and 'to our Reason private Homage pay'.⁶⁵ And Melissa conceives of freedom as rational self-governance, or the capacity to control one's own moral choices and actions in accordance with reason: "'Tis in our Minds that we wou'd Rule alone', she says.⁶⁶

Chudleigh elaborates on these ideas in her later moral work, *Essays upon Several Subjects* (1710). More specifically, she appeals to a Stoic ideal of freedom as rational self-mastery—an ideal derived from Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, among others.⁶⁷ Like these Stoic thinkers, she urges her readers to become 'Mistresses of themselves' in all the

⁶² On the manuscript, there is an editor's note (crossed out) in the left-hand margin: '†Which was preached by one *Sprint* Fanatick Teacher.' See Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Rawlinson Letters 90, fol. 62.

⁶³ Mary Chudleigh to Elizabeth Thomas, 19 October 1701; in Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Rawlinson Letters 90, fol. 61; printed in Gwinnett and Thomas, *Honourable Lovers*, pp. 247–8.

⁶⁴ See Mary Chudleigh, 'Preface to the Reader', *Ladies Defence*, in *Poems and Prose of Mary, Lady Chudleigh*, p. 14.

⁶⁵ Chudleigh, *Ladies Defence*, p. 34.

⁶⁶ Chudleigh, *Ladies Defence*, p. 34.

⁶⁷ For Chudleigh's explicit references to Stoic authors, see *Ladies Defence*, pp. 7–8; *Essays*, pp. 291, 314, 319, 320–1, 323.

circumstances of life, to gain self-control or self-determination in all their moral choices and actions.⁶⁸

What constitutes the ‘self’ to be mastered, controlled, or determined, according to Chudleigh? Her answer is that it is *the soul* and not the material body or the soul-body composite. Like Astell, Chudleigh upholds a Cartesian conception of the self as an immaterial substance. This self is non-extended and indivisible, and thus not liable to decay or mutation (it is immortal). The self must forever possess the perfection that is essential to its nature—a perfection that comes directly from God.⁶⁹ According to Chudleigh, this perfection consists in living up to the dignity of one’s nature as a rational creature. The self can never be fully free, or truly self-determining, so long as it is imprisoned in the ‘close gloomy Cell’ of the body.⁷⁰ But the self can nevertheless attain a greater degree of freedom to the extent that it can rise above the body and the bodily influences of the senses and the passions.

The problem, according to Chudleigh, is that human beings are ‘inlav’d by their Passions’,⁷¹ the passions are ‘domineering’,⁷² and they put ‘a resistless Force on the Will’.⁷³ The passion of anger, for example, ‘overturns the Reason, [and] shatters the Understanding’,⁷⁴ and the passion of grief exerts a kind of tyranny over our thoughts.⁷⁵ By allowing such passions to hold sway, human beings are thus ‘accessary to their own Captivity, and do as much as in them lies to reduce their Souls to the worst Slavery’.⁷⁶ To gain ‘a wonderful Strength and

⁶⁸ Chudleigh, *Essays*, p. 247.

⁶⁹ Chudleigh, *Essays*, pp. 274–5.

⁷⁰ Chudleigh, *Essays*, p. 275.

⁷¹ Chudleigh, ‘Of Avarice’, in *Essays*, p. 369.

⁷² Chudleigh, ‘Of Riches’, in *Essays*, p. 298.

⁷³ Chudleigh, ‘Of Anger’, in *Essays*, p. 311.

⁷⁴ Chudleigh, ‘Of Anger’, in *Essays*, p. 311.

⁷⁵ Chudleigh, ‘Of Grief’, in *Essays*, p. 294.

⁷⁶ Chudleigh, ‘Of Self-Love’, in *Essays*, p. 304.

Liberty of Mind',⁷⁷ Chudleigh recommends that human beings learn 'to brighten and refine their Reason, and to render all their Passions subservient to its Dictates'.⁷⁸ By gaining sovereignty or dominion over the passions in this way, a woman can regain her freedom.⁷⁹

Above all, Chudleigh suggests, the individual must acknowledge what is and is not in her control. We can overcome our anger and our grief by 'learning to distinguish between what is and what is not ours; what we may bestow upon our selves, and what is given us by another'.⁸⁰ If we come to estimate these external goods appropriately, then our passions will not be inflamed when we lose those goods or when they are taken from us. In Chudleigh's view, women can retain their liberty even in the midst of imprisonment within four walls, because 'the Thoughts cannot be immur'd, they enjoy an entire Liberty: All that have the Use of their Reason may, if they please, make themselves easie'.⁸¹

Once women attained this outlook on life, according to Chudleigh, they would not 'be under the Temptation of selling their Liberty; they would, in their Marriages, prefer Virtue before a Title, good Sense before an Estate, and chuse a Man of Honour in Rags, rather than a vicious Prince, though he were Master of the World'.⁸² She says,

Again, that Person is properly my Lord and Master, who hath it in his Power to gratify my Wishes, or make me afraid; to give me what I desire to have, or to take from me what I'm unwilling to part with: The only way then to preserve one's Liberty, is to

⁷⁷ Chudleigh, 'Of Knowledge', in *Essays*, p. 256.

⁷⁸ Chudleigh, 'To the Reader', in *Essays*, p. 247.

⁷⁹ Chudleigh, *Essays*, pp. 247–8, 256.

⁸⁰ Chudleigh, 'Of Grief', in *Essays*, pp. 287.

⁸¹ Chudleigh, 'Of Grief', in *Essays*, pp. 292–3.

⁸² Chudleigh, 'Of Riches', in *Essays*, p. 299.

restrain one's Passion, and to have neither Desire nor Aversion for any thing in the Power of others; for he that does not so, is sure to be a Slave as long as he lives.⁸³

In her *Ladies Defence*, Chudleigh raises similar points against Sprint, albeit in an abridged form. In 'To All Ingenious Ladies', she advises women that if it is their misfortune to be married to an inhumane monster, then they must 'consider what those things are which they can properly call their own, and of which Fortune cannot deprive 'em, and on these alone they ought to terminate their Desires, and not vainly extend 'em to those things which are not within their Power'.⁸⁴

In sum, Chudleigh advocates a remarkably similar ideal of inner freedom to that of Eugenia and Astell. This is an ideal of freedom as the liberty that an agent obtains by exercising her will in accordance with reason, for the sake of attaining a moral ideal, such as that of moral self-preservation, perfection, virtue, happiness, or eternal salvation.

4.5 Feminist Autonomy

At first glance, we might think that this ideal accords with Isaiah Berlin's classic notion of *positive liberty*, according to which freedom is freedom *to* become someone or achieve something, instead of freedom *from* external impediments. The agent of positive liberty desires to control her own destiny, to be 'self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own, and realizing them'.⁸⁵ The problem, of course, is that there are many goals that the agent will never be able to realize—they will simply be out of her reach. To master her destiny, therefore, she must strive to attain only those goals that *are* in her power—those goals that depend on the exercising of her will and

⁸³ Chudleigh, 'Of Anger', in *Essays*, p. 322.

⁸⁴ Chudleigh, 'To All Ingenious Ladies', in *Ladies Defence*, p. 6.

⁸⁵ Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', p. 131.

her reason, for example. She must not desire (or love, or fear, or envy) any of those things that do not depend on her.

In Berlin's view, it is no coincidence that, historically speaking, positive liberty has been the popular resort of subjects caught up in oppressive external circumstances. But, for him, it is difficult to describe the 'retreat to the inner citadel' as an enlargement of liberty.⁸⁶ If I escape a home intruder by locking myself in a panic room, he suggests, then I might retain a greater degree of liberty than if he had seized upon me; but am I any freer than if I had confronted the intruder and physically forced him to leave my home? The problem is that the positive ideal leaves certain external preventing conditions unchallenged. It is, instead, a 'sour grapes' response to the loss of negative liberty: the agent affects indifference to freedom from physical impediments, when presumably she would be pleased to possess such freedom, if only she could.

So is this the kind of freedom these early modern women are advocating? I think the answer is not straightforwardly Yes, as we might expect, because the early modern women *do* recognize that external preventing conditions have to be removed in order for women to gain the inner liberty that comes from rational self-governance. That is to say, for them, the absence of spousal domination or arbitrary power in marriage is necessary for women to attain their own positive capacity for self-governance. To illustrate this point, it is useful to highlight the similarities between their criticisms of Sprint and recent feminist analyses of the moral dangers of intimate relationships between men and women.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', p. 135.

⁸⁷ I draw similar comparisons in Broad, *Philosophy of Mary Astell*, pp. 182–3.

Modern theorist Sandra Lee Bartky maintains that even today intimate heterosexual relationships can be disempowering for women.⁸⁸ The problem is that, as a result of certain norms and stereotypes of femininity, a woman will often provide greater emotional sustenance to her man than she will receive in return. This gender imbalance in the boosting of confidence (the ‘feeding of egos’) and repairing of emotions (the ‘tending of wounds’) can have a negative impact on a woman’s sense of self. The provision of emotional caregiving requires a woman sincerely to uphold the worth and importance of her man’s values and interests. When the emotional nurturance is unreciprocated, according to Bartky, a woman might be led to abandon her own values and interests in favour of those of her partner. A woman can come to interiorize the male’s importance, assimilate *his* epistemic and ethical perspectives, and adopt *his* life projects as her own. ‘The woman in intimacy,’ Bartky says, ‘loses herself, so to speak, in her work.’⁸⁹

Marilyn Friedman claims that this ‘merger of selves’ in intimate relationships can seriously undermine a woman’s autonomy. Friedman defines an autonomous person as someone who is capable of reflecting on her deepest values and commitments, as well as reaffirming them, and then acting in accordance with them, in the face of at least minimal opposition. To count as autonomous, an agent must be capable of engaging in a process of ‘self-reflective reaffirmation’: she must be able attentively to reflect on her own wants and values, and then her reaffirmation of those wants and values must correspond to salient aspects of her character, or in some sense reflect *who she is*.⁹⁰ Self-reflective reaffirmation thus bestows a special status on an agent’s choices and actions—it authorizes them as her own.

⁸⁸ Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 102.

⁸⁹ Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, p. 105.

⁹⁰ Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 5, 6.

In heterosexual love relationships, however, a loss of autonomy can occur when a woman abandons those wants and values of her own in favour of those of her lover. ‘Traditions of love and gender,’ Friedman says, ‘still hold women more responsible than men for sacrificing their own independent selves to sustain heterosexual love relationships.’⁹¹ This sacrifice can take an extreme form in abusive relationships, in which both real and threatened violence forces a woman to direct her attention to anticipating the wants and values of her abusive partner.⁹² In such circumstances, it can be difficult for a woman to hold onto her own deeper concerns, or to reaffirm her own interests, in the face of her partner’s opposition. Friedman thus highlights the importance of non-oppressive interpersonal relationships, those relationships that provide ‘enabling’ conditions for a woman’s autonomy, by contrast with ‘disabling social contexts’ that diminish a woman’s capacity to pursue her own self-defined concerns.⁹³

Both Bartky and Friedman emphasize that certain external conditions are necessary for the realization of personal autonomy. Along similar lines, I think, Eugenia, Astell, and Chudleigh suggest that the early modern marital state inhibits women from listening to their reason, from realizing their own policies and goals, and from making their own choices. Against Sprint, Eugenia suggests that for married women to have their ‘just liberty’, the husband must not be permitted a boundless or unlimited power over his wife. Astell observes that a husband-tyrant will be ‘obstinately bent on his own way with or without Reason’, and will expect his wife to slavishly follow ‘in all his unreasonable steps’.⁹⁴ In light of her moral commitment to rational self-governance, it would appear that she thinks women *shouldn’t* get

⁹¹ Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, p. 132.

⁹² Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, p. 142.

⁹³ Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, p. 18.

⁹⁴ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 47.

married, if they don't have to.⁹⁵ Chudleigh likewise advises women not to 'be under the Temptation of selling their Liberty' by getting married.⁹⁶ All three women conceive of the ideal marriage as a companionate relationship—a union of two friends who are mutually interested in promoting each other's well being.⁹⁷

Like their modern-day successors, then, these early modern women acknowledge that certain social contexts—those circumstances external to 'the inner fortress' of the mind—play a crucial role in either facilitating or thwarting positive liberty in the sense of rational self-governance. They would agree with Friedman that true liberty is a matter of living life in accordance with the deeper wants and values of the true self, and they recognize that certain conditions must obtain in marriage in order for a wife to have proper self-determination in her choices and actions. In short, though they do not use the term, they acknowledge that it is difficult for women to be *autonomous* in conditions of domination and dependence within marriage. By responding to Sprint, these women thus give voice to the idea that freedom from domination in marriage is a necessary pre-condition for a woman's attainment of rational self-governance.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ On this point, see Andrew Lister, 'Marriage and Misogyny: The Place of Mary Astell in the History of Political Thought', *History of Political Thought* 25, no. 1 (2004): 44–72; and Jacqueline Broad, 'Mary Astell on Marriage and Lockean Slavery', *History of Political Thought* 35, no. 4 (2014): 717–38.

⁹⁶ Chudleigh, 'Of Riches', in *Essays*, p. 299.

⁹⁷ See Eugenia, *Female Advocate*, p. 20; Astell, *Reflections*, p. 37; Chudleigh, *Ladies Defence*, pp. 12–13.

⁹⁸ For helpful feedback on an early draft of this essay, I am especially grateful to Lisa Shapiro, Karen Detlefsen, two anonymous OUP readers, and participants in the 'Women on Liberty, 1600–1800' symposium at Prato, Italy, in June-July 2014. I would also like to acknowledge the generous financial assistance of the Australian Research Council. This paper was written as part of an ARC-funded Discovery Project on women and liberty (grant no. DP140100109) and during my time as an ARC Future Fellow in the School of Philosophical, Historical, and International Studies at Monash University, Melbourne.