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Undoing Bayle's Scepticism: Astell's Marginalia as Disarmament

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In 1682, the French sceptic and proto-Encyclopédiste Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) published the first major work of his career, the *Pensées Diverses sur la Comète*.¹ In his opening paragraph, Bayle candidly admitted to his shortcomings as a writer: he warned his readers that if they expected to find method and consistency, then they would be driven to distraction by his work.² One of his contemporary readers, the English feminist Mary Astell (1666–1731), was a thinker who liked method and consistency, and she was indeed driven to distraction by his book. In the opening flyleaf of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's personal copy of the *Pensées*, Astell wrote that Bayle's work was "a loose, rambling, incoherent rhapsody, with all the affectation of Method, Reasoning and Exactness, full of words, with every thing strain'd to a latent ill meaning or else very impertinent and Trifling, or wors[e]." The book was supposedly a critique of superstitious beliefs about comets, but in her opinion it was full of "sly insinuations" and "vile suggestions" that were really targeted "against Christianity, and indeed against all Religion."³

These words will already be familiar to some scholars. In an appendix to her 2005 book on Astell, Christine Sutherland published Isobel Grundy's personal transcription of Astell's flyleaf criticisms.⁴ This transcription consists of a 240-word diatribe against Bayle, in which Astell compares him unfavourably to Blaise Pascal (whom she admires) and summarises one of the main

¹ The first edition of Bayle's *Pensées* was published anonymously as *Lettre à M. L. A. D. C., Docteur de Sorbonne. Où il est prouvé par plusieurs raisons tirées de la Philosophie, et de la Théologie, que les Comètes ne sont point le présage d'aucun malheur*. In March 1683, Bayle published a revised version, *Pensées Diverses sur la Comète*, which is now regarded as the definitive edition. Mary Astell read the first volume of the 1704 fourth edition of the *Pensées* in French (cited below).

² Pierre Bayle, *Pensées diverses sur la comète*, ed. Joyce Bost and Hubert Bost (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), §1; Pierre Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), §1. These are the modern French and English editions respectively.

³ See Astell's notes on the first flyleaf in Pierre Bayle, *Pensées Diverses, Ecrites à un Docteur de Sorbonne, A l'occasion de la Comete qui parut au mois de Decembre 1680*, 4th ed., vol. 1 (Rotterdam: Reinier Leers, 1704), in the private library at Sandon Hall, Staffordshire. I am extremely grateful to Lord Harrowby for granting his permission to refer to the marginalia and to reproduce images from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's personal copy of this edition of Pierre Bayle's *Pensées Diverses* held in the library. In my transcriptions of the marginalia from this volume (henceforth cited as Astell, "Marginalia," with section numbers and page references), I have expanded contractions and abbreviations, and replaced thorns and other symbols, because Astell's shorthand conventions may be unfamiliar to modern readers. In this same volume, several pages have been cropped due to a later binding job, and so some of Astell's marginalia words and letters have been cut off either in whole or in part. I use square brackets to indicate where I have either completed a word myself or taken a guess at a likely missing word or words.

⁴ Christine Mason Sutherland, *The Eloquence of Mary Astell* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), Appendix B, 169. There are several compelling reasons for attributing the marginalia to Astell. First, the handwriting in the commentary bears a striking resemblance to Astell's hand in various autograph items. (In 1963, Robert Halsband jotted a pencil note on the reverse of the title page of Montagu's copy of the *Pensées*, noting "Comments probably in hand of Mary Astell.") Second, the author of the marginalia uses a number of pet phrases and sayings that Astell herself uses in her published works. And third, Astell was known to be a compulsive scribbler: Francis Atterbury once complained that he loaned a manuscript sermon (his own) to Astell, only to have it returned with a sheet of "offensive and shocking" remarks, in which she had attacked him (see George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*, ed. Ruth Perry [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985], 387). The date of the marginalia is a little more difficult to determine with any accuracy. The likely date range is 1715–1731, sometime from the year that Astell and Montagu met, to the year of Astell's death.

fallacies in his reasoning (an equivocation in terms). It is not so well known, however, that Astell follows up this short opening diatribe with hundreds of annotations in the margins of the first volume of Bayle's *Pensées*.⁵ In total, these annotations come to more than 7,000 words, and they appear on more than 50% of the 312 printed pages of the volume. Some of the annotations are pithy and concise remarks or exclamations—such as “Trifler,” “A babler indeed,” and “What means all this ridiculous stuff?”⁶—while other comments take the form of detailed argumentative points, completely filling the available marginal space. Taken as a whole, this marginalia constitutes a lengthy critical commentary on Bayle's text, a work that has been hailed as “a crucial document in the rise of modern rationalism.”⁷

In this essay, I provide an analysis of the key argumentative strategies in Astell's critique of Bayle. I demonstrate that, far from hailing his work as a celebration of rationalism, she regards it as a dangerous and destructive attack on reason and rationality. The purpose of my analysis is to show that the literary form of the marginal note provides Astell with an ideal way of attacking Bayle, a philosopher whose style of argument demands active engagement and immediate disarmament. Scholars have noted that Bayle is someone who relies on his readers to effect their own moral dissolution: because his religious scepticism is only implicit in his texts, it is up to readers to follow through for themselves on his insinuations. In early eighteenth-century England, when a number of Bayle's works were being translated into English (c. 1708–10), there was increasing concern that his tolerationist ideas might lead to social unrest. A number of Anglican Tories were especially concerned about the pernicious influence of his heterodox opinions on unsuspecting and uneducated readers. Seen in this context, I argue, the main strategic purpose of Astell's marginalia is to defuse or “disarm” Bayle's arguments for the benefit of any future reader of the book, but also for one reader in particular—her friend Lady Wortley Montagu (1689–1762).

Historical-Intellectual Background

In early eighteenth-century England, Bayle's writings were as controversial as they were popular.⁸ His best-selling *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (first published in 1696), a vast compendium of information and opinions about historical figures and places, was widely read by the English in French. When a translation was licensed by William III in 1701, and later published in 1710, this new four-volume English edition also became a staple of private libraries in England.⁹ In 1708, an English translation of the *Pensées* appeared in print, titled *Miscellaneous Reflections Occasion'd by the Comet*; in the same year, Bayle's tolerationist work *Commentaire philosophique* (1686) was also published in English as *A Philosophical Commentary*.

⁵ To my knowledge, Isobel Grundy and Heather Jackson are the only scholars who have remarked (briefly) on the marginalia. See Isobel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 194–95; and H. J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 64–65. See also my recent article, Jacqueline Broad, “Mary Astell's Critique of Pierre Bayle: Atheism and Intellectual Integrity in the *Pensées* (1682),” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 27, no. 4 (2019): 806–23.

⁶ Astell, “Marginalia,” §LVII, 102; §LXXVIII, 140; §XC, 172; §CXLI, 278.

⁷ Robert C. Bartlett, introduction to Bayle, *Various Thoughts*, xxiv.

⁸ See Léo Pierre Courtines, *Bayle's Relations with England and the English* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 91; Justin Champion, “Bayle in the English Enlightenment,” in *Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), le philosophe de Rotterdam: Selected Papers of the Tercentenary Conference held at Rotterdam, 7–8 December 2006*, ed. Wiep van Bunge and Hans Bots (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 175–95; and J. A. I. Champion, “‘Most Truly ... a Protestant’: Reading Bayle in England,” in *Pierre Bayle dans la République des Lettres: Religion, Critique, Philosophie*, ed. A. McKenna and G. Paganini (Paris: Honore Champion, 2004), 503–26.

⁹ It is possible that Astell's commentary also targets Bayle's *Dictionnaire*. In her marginalia, she frequently disparages the pretensions of his “Voluminous Writings” (§II, 2), “His labour performance in so many Tomes” (§XLIX, 87), and “so many tedious volumes full of repetition and idle bable” (§XC, 172). Since the fourth edition of *Pensées* was published in two volumes alone, she is likely referring to the *Dictionnaire*, published in four folio volumes amounting to more than a million words.

Astell's marginalia provides fresh historical evidence of the indignation that Bayle's texts provoked among High-Church Anglican Tories.¹⁰ Today's historians of philosophy are divided into, on the one hand, those who think that Bayle was a coded atheist, someone whose reasoning ineluctably leads to atheist conclusions, despite his explicit professions of Calvinism; and, on the other, those who construe Bayle as a fideist, someone who embraces religious beliefs solely on the basis of faith and not reason.¹¹ For Astell, when it comes to the *Pensées*, there is no "Bayle enigma,"¹² or any great difficulty in interpreting his ideas: "his Whole Book seems designed as a Plea for Atheism," she says.¹³ She remarks that Bayle is "evident proof that Atheists have the strongest prejudices, and are not blank paper as he wou'd suppose them."¹⁴ In holding this view, Astell is quite typical of other Tory critics of the time, such as William Law, Thomas Wagstaffe, and anonymous writers for the periodical *Censura Temporum* (July and August 1708).¹⁵

Nevertheless, in her critique, Astell approaches Bayle not just as a Tory critic herself, but also as a philosopher, someone who (like Bayle) is strongly committed to the ideal of intellectual integrity,¹⁶ and to the Cartesian dictum, "not to take any thing for Truth, which we do not evidently Know to be so."¹⁷ For Astell, preserving one's intellectual integrity means submitting one's beliefs to the test of reason and not blindly submitting to custom, prejudice, or authority. For Bayle, too, intellectual integrity consists in refusing to submit blindly to any doctrine, and preserving the wholeness of one's judgment. Unlike Astell, however, he often wields reason as a negative methodological tool with which to question and undermine a given theory, in the spirit of anti-dogmatism. In one of his last works, Bayle says that

Reason is like a runner who doesn't know that the race is over, or, like Penelope, constantly undoing what it creates. ... It is better suited to pulling things down than to building them up, and better at discovering what things are not, than what they are.¹⁸

Penelope, in Homer's *Odyssey*, is under pressure to marry and so promises to choose a suitor, but only once she has finished a death shroud for her father-in-law. While she weaves the cloth in public during the day, she secretly unravels her work at night; and so the shroud is never completed. This tale thus provides Bayle with an apt metaphor: for him, as Richard Popkin remarks, "any rational effort is always its own undoing."¹⁹

¹⁰ On Astell's Tory commitment to High-Church Anglicanism, see Patricia Springborg, *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹¹ For a nice summary of recent debate about how to read Bayle, see Mara van der Lugt, *Bayle, Jurieu, and the Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3–7.

¹² This common phrase originates with Michael Heyd, "A Disguised Atheist or a Sincere Christian? The Enigma of Pierre Bayle," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 39, no. 1 (1977): 157–65.

¹³ Astell, "Marginalia," §CXIII, 223.

¹⁴ Astell, "Marginalia," §CXX, 234.

¹⁵ See *Censura Temporum: The Good or Ill Tendencies of Books, Sermons, Pamphlets, &c. Impartially consider'd, In a Dialogue between Eubulus and Sophronius* (London: H. Clements, 1708). The author of *Censura Temporum* criticises Bayle's *Miscellaneous Reflections* for "His little malicious Intimations and Insinuations to the Prejudice of Religion in general" (August 1708: 228), and for attempting to reconcile religion with "open Atheism" (July 1708: 223).

¹⁶ On this topic in Bayle, see Thomas M. Lennon and Michael Hickson, "Pierre Bayle," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified 11 November 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/bayle/>; Thomas M. Lennon, *Reading Bayle* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 12–41; José R. Maia Neto, "Bayle's Academic Skepticism," in *Everything Connects: In Conference with Richard H. Popkin*, ed. James E. Force and David S. Katz (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 263–76; and Broad, "Mary Astell's Critique of Pierre Bayle," 809–12.

¹⁷ Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2002), 178.

¹⁸ Pierre Bayle, *Réponse aux Questions d'un Provincial*, vol. 2 (Rotterdam: Reinier Leers, 1704–1707), cxxxvii; quoted in Élisabeth Labrousse, *Bayle*, trans. Denys Potts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 61.

¹⁹ Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 288.

Astell's Critique of Bayle

In her commentary, Astell turns Bayle's own use of reason against him: she "undoes" his scepticism using the same weapon that he himself deploys against rational religion.²⁰ She suggests that there are at least two possible readings of the *Pensées*: it might be read as an open attack on superstitious beliefs about comets as harbingers of misfortune, or as a disguised attack on the Christian religion and on religious belief more generally. In her marginal notes, she aims to unmask Bayle's covert purpose and alert his audience to the second reading. She frequently refers to Bayle as "disingenuous" or insincere,²¹ and she highlights his "banter and grimace," that is, his sham or pretence.²² In one part, she declares that "Such a writer is not honest,"²³ and she repeatedly refuses to take him seriously.²⁴ Astell intends not only to unmask Bayle's plea for atheism, but also to "undo" it, to disarm his destructive use of reason against the Christian religion.

In his book, Bayle's stated purpose is to argue against the view that comets are either the causes or the signs of impending doom and disaster—of plague, war, famine, flood, pestilence, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and great deaths—purportedly sent by God as a punishment for sin. Among his many arguments, Bayle points out that it is absurd to think that such small physical bodies could have any discernible impact on the earth, let alone bring about a flood of evil (§9). Furthermore, he says, neither reason nor sensory experience reveals to us any necessary causal connection between the appearance of a comet and the occurrence of misfortune. Throughout the world, in different times and places, earthquakes happen on a fairly regular basis, even in the absence of comets. So we have little reason to think that a terrible earthquake following a comet would not have happened anyway. We might as well say that a woman who always sees carriages in the street whenever she puts her head out the window is justified in thinking that her appearance at the window causes the passing of carriages (§23). Earthquakes will happen regardless, just like the passing of carriages. Although there has been widespread, almost unanimous consent about the supernatural significance of comets, Bayle says, this consent does not make it true that comets presage misfortune (§45). To defend this claim, he points to numerous counter-examples that have shown seemingly authoritative, generally established opinions to be false (§46).

Bayle also draws arguments from theological premises concerning the essential attributes of God (§§57–78). If, he says, God had intended comets to be miraculous signs of his displeasure, then in his infinite wisdom he would have bestowed upon them an express and explicit meaning, for God does nothing in vain. But instead, the meaning of these signs remains hidden and obscure, or else open to a wide variety of interpretations. Furthermore, historical evidence shows that the appearance of comets in pagan times simply inspired the populace to commit acts of idolatry, to offer human and animal sacrifices, and to worship false gods, in order to atone for their sins. It follows that if comets were intended to be signs of God's anger, they did nothing to bring the pagans to repentance for their wrongdoing. In sum, the view that God intends for comets to be miraculous signs is incompatible with his wisdom and holiness: it suggests that, through these miracles, God deliberately seeks to confuse or to deceive men, and that he knowingly cultivates a blind raging idolatry in their hearts.

In the first section of the *Pensées*, Bayle says that he wrote the work because a friend, said to be a Catholic theologian (but really a fictional device), had requested his thoughts about a comet that had appeared across Europe in the winter of 1680–81. In response to Bayle's "Occasion de l'Ouvrage" (§1), Astell notes that here "He sets up a Jack Straw that he may throw stone[s] at

²⁰ In the following section, I elaborate on a number of argumentative themes also discussed in Broad, "Mary Astell's Critique of Pierre Bayle," 7–13.

²¹ Astell, "Marginalia," first flyleaf; §LX, 105; and §CXL, 276–77.

²² Astell, "Marginalia," §CXIII, 223–24.

²³ Astell, "Marginalia," §CXXXV, 265.

²⁴ Like some modern commentators, Astell suspects Bayle of writing in a serio-comic style (cf. Lennon, *Reading Bayle*, 36). She asks, "Is he in jest or earnest?" (§XLII, 74); "Is he in jest or in earnest when he allows we have a Natural Idea of GOD and Providence?" (§LXV, 114); "Is he in earnest?" (§CXXIII, 237); and "if he is in earnest, this proves that we may conquer our Passions by the assistance that GOD affords" (§CXLIII, 285).

him.”²⁵ In this period, a “Jack Straw” was a generic term for a worthless or inconsiderable man, a trouble-maker, or a “nobody.” Today, the “straw man fallacy” is typically the misrepresentation of an opponent’s position or a flimsy, weakened representation of an argument that can easily be undermined. It is not strictly an error in reasoning so much as a deceptive or misleading tactic that dialecticians use in order to refute their opponents. When Astell accuses Bayle of fighting “with a Jack Straw of his own making,”²⁶ she accuses him of both fighting against nobody and committing this informal fallacy. More specifically, she ridicules him for challenging a superstitious belief that no one (or no “reasonable Person,” “nobody of consideration”)²⁷ actually holds and thus accuses him of misrepresenting the Christian religion as a form of superstition.

While comets were once greeted with panic, fear and trembling across early modern Europe, by the end of the seventeenth century they were typically regarded as natural events without any supernatural significance.²⁸ Other superstitious beliefs of the period, concerning astrology, solar eclipses, and the power of dates and names, had likewise declined in popularity. Accordingly, when Bayle argues that the presages of comets are not supported by sound reason, Astell asks, “Who says they are?”²⁹ When he declares that astrology is “the most ridiculous thing in the world,” she says, “Who doubts it?”³⁰ When he argues that there is no fatal power in names, she replies, “Who of common sense thinks there is?”³¹ And in response to Bayle’s claim that comets are not needed to keep atheism from being established in the world, she asks, “Who ever pretended that they were?” and so on.³² The upshot of Astell’s persistent questioning is to cast doubt on the idea that Bayle’s book was ever targeted against comets and superstition in the first place. In one part, she exclaims,

What wou’d he infer from this pompous [appearance?] of Argument &c? That Comets are not Miraculous, nor Presages? What reasonable Person contends that they are? Here is then a deal ado about nothing. But his business is to Obscure Truth, to confound Ideas, and from some faint resemblances and false suppositions, to draw what Inferences he pleases.³³

Appealing to a distinction that Bayle himself makes, Astell reads his text in terms of Bayle’s *interpretive* intentions rather than his *formal* intentions, that is to say, what he can be reasonably interpreted to mean, despite his avowed meaning or purpose.³⁴ In light of the fact that nobody really holds any superstitious beliefs about comets, Astell infers that the true target of Bayle’s critique is Christianity and religious belief in general.

Astell has good reasons for making this inference. For a large part of his book, Bayle defends his position against the objection that it is far better for men to fall into idolatry than into atheism, because atheism causes the destruction of human societies. On this view, God uses comets not to foment idolatry but *to prevent atheism*, an end that is entirely compatible with his wisdom and holiness. In response, Bayle argues that atheism (in this context, meaning simply ignorance of the

²⁵ Astell, “Marginalia,” §1, 1.

²⁶ Astell, “Marginalia,” §CIV, 211.

²⁷ Astell, “Marginalia,” §CIV, 210; §XLIX, 87.

²⁸ Eric Jorink notes that “around 1700, the *fine fleur* of intellectual Europe regarded the traditional belief that comets were ill omens as childish nonsense, and not as science”; see Eric Jorink, “Comets in Context: Some Thoughts on Bayle’s *Pensées Diverses*,” in *Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), le philosophe de Rotterdam: Selected Papers of the Tercentenary Conference held at Rotterdam, 7–8 December 2006*, ed. Wiep van Bunge and Hans Bots (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 57. For a similar point, see Lennon, *Reading Bayle*, 113.

²⁹ Astell, “Marginalia,” §III, 3.

³⁰ Astell, “Marginalia,” §XVII, 24.

³¹ Astell, “Marginalia,” §XXX, 50.

³² Astell, “Marginalia,” §CIV, 211.

³³ Astell, “Marginalia,” §CIII, 210.

³⁴ In §88, Bayle writes that “you know well what is said in philosophy against those who do not have an intention to get drunk. They are told that if they do not have this intention *formally*, they have it at least *interpretively*, that is, that they have an intention that can reasonably be interpreted as one to get drunk” (*Various Thoughts*, 110). In response, Astell writes, “this reason holds as to this writers attempt against Christianity” (“Marginalia,” §LXXXVIII, 164).

existence of God) is not a greater evil than idolatry. In pagan times, he points out, belief in the existence of gods did not prevent men from committing terrible crimes, such as incest, infanticide, and prostitution. But unlike atheists, these pagans performed their abominable actions knowing full well that they were forbidden and out of malice and scorn toward their deities. This makes them *worse* than atheists, he says, since atheists do not perform their crimes in contempt of God because they do not know or believe Him to exist (§§118, 132). Bayle then goes on to suggest that some present-day *Christians* are open to the same criticism. With his discussion of pagans, then, he prepares or “grooms” his readers to accept that Christian superstition, idolatry, and immorality are worse than atheism, since these too are performed in contempt of God.

According to modern scholars, here Bayle specifically targets the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church in early modern France, including belief in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist, as well as the worship of the Virgin Mary, the saints, and the relics.³⁵ Although Bayle pretends to be Catholic himself (apparently with the aim of publishing his book in Paris), he uses this device to effect an internal critique. But I think Astell is right to interpret Bayle as extending this critique beyond Catholicism to religion in general. Bayle argues that if citizens are good and virtuous, this must be imputed to the effectiveness of human laws, not to the efficacy of religious belief. In his view, people will follow their passions regardless of their religious principles; the only real potential check or “brake” on their actions is their fear of punishment, their hope of praise, and their desire to uphold a good reputation. From both reason and revelation, Christians know that they must sacrifice their passions and regulate their sensual appetites according to reason, in order to attain everlasting happiness. Yet the majority of Christians do not do so; they typically fail to follow the path of virtue, if it contradicts their dominant passions, the inclinations of their temperament, the force of their habits, and those tastes and sensitivities that they have acquired through their upbringing (§135). According to Bayle, therefore, bodily passions, inclinations, habits, and tastes—and not the mind’s knowledge—are the true wellsprings of human action (§§136, 143). Religious conviction is incapable of making human beings into virtuous moral and political subjects; it follows from this, he says, that a society of virtuous atheists is entirely possible.

Astell highlights the faulty inferences that lead Bayle to these conclusions. Reading his arguments interpretively, as veiled attacks on religion, she challenges Bayle’s rejection of the claim that “generally established opinions are true” [*que les opinions generalement établies sont vraies*] by pointing out that “sometimes the[y] are, and sometim[es] they are not.”³⁶ Bayle singles out astrology as a counterexample to the generalisation that unanimous consent about a belief is a mark of its truth; he notes that “in the matter of presages, either of comets *or of anything else whatever*, the universal opinion of peoples should be counted as nothing” (my italics).³⁷ In the margin, Astell points out that just “because so[me] Vulgar opinions are false it does not follow that the common sense and reason of Mankind is so.”³⁸ In her view, common sense and reason support the truths of the Christian religion: “the Truths of Religion which he underhand attacks, have bin prov’d again and again against all Cavillers.”³⁹ If Bayle thinks that religion is incompatible with sense and reason, then he should just say so. “To what purpose is all this Jargon [i.e., nonsense, gibberish]?” she says, “What connexion between the Prophecy recorded in Scripture, and our Authors ridiculous presages? If he wou’d put them on a foot let him speak out, and *prove* (not insinuate falsely) that the one is of no more Authority than the other.”⁴⁰ Along similar lines, in one part Bayle highlights the fact that people’s superstitious and religious convictions have often been exploited for nefarious

³⁵ For an extended analysis of Bayle’s use of Protestant arguments against Catholicism in the *Pensées*, see Walter Rex, *Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), 30–74.

³⁶ Astell, “Marginalia,” §XLV, 81.

³⁷ Bayle, *Various Thoughts*, §32, 48; *Pensées*, §XXXII, 55 [*Ce qui fait voir que sur le chapitre des presages, soit des Cometes, soit de quelque autre chose que ce soit, l’opinion universelle des peuples ne doit être comptee pour rien*].

³⁸ Astell, “Marginalia,” §XXXII, 55.

³⁹ Astell, “Marginalia,” §XCI, 174.

⁴⁰ Astell, “Marginalia,” §CI, 201.

political ends, to obtain political advantage. But it does not follow from this, Astell says, that all religion is a convenient political tool. In the margins to §63, she mocks his reasoning thus:

Some cheats have counterfeited Banknotes therefore All Banknotes are Counterfeit!
Pickpockets get into Crouds, therefore All Crouds even at Court are full of Pick
Pockets! Some Men are Knaves for Money; Therefore All Men are Knaves without
Interest or against it!⁴¹

In sum, Astell charges Bayle with distorting or misrepresenting religion as a species of superstition and falsely insinuating that all his arguments against superstition apply to religion as a whole, when this inference is unjustified. In short, she says, “This is a supposition of his own; he fights with a Jack Straw of his own making.”⁴²

In her marginalia, Astell also highlights Bayle’s “*équivoque*” (equivocation), his “play upon words,” and his “pun[n]ing” and “quibbling” on words.⁴³ In her view, the crucial equivocations or ambiguities in meaning occur in Bayle’s use of the words “Christian” and “Atheist.” In her summative statement on the first flyleaf of the *Pensées*, she writes,

The *Equivoque* is the grand figu[re] that adorns the whole work; the forc[e] of his Arguments lies in confounding w[hat] ought to be distinguish’d. Thus he every where confounds the *Nomina[l]* with the *Real* Christian; the *Practical* Atheist with the *Speculative*.

According to Astell, the word “Christian” can mean either *real* Christian, that is, someone who is genuinely convinced of the truths of the Christian religion, or it can mean *nominal* Christian, someone who is a Christian in name only, a pretender who is not fully persuaded of religious truths. “Atheist” can mean either a *practical* atheist, someone who believes in God but conducts themselves as though God does not exist, or it can mean a *speculative* atheist, someone who is ignorant of the existence of God.⁴⁴ In her notes on Bayle, Astell highlights these equivocations in order to show that once we properly disambiguate the terms “Christian” and “atheist,” and hold those separate meanings constant, Bayle’s conclusions do not follow from his premises.

To begin with, Astell notes that “even according to Mr. B. True Religion consists in Renouncing Vice, and practising Vertue.”⁴⁵ Even Bayle allows that right reason (reason informed by revelation) teaches Christians that they must honour God by actively giving up their vices and pursuing the virtuous path (§69). Unlike Bayle, however, Astell thinks that if a reasonable person is fully persuaded of this truth, then they will act appropriately. “He who really believes there is a Treasure in the Field,” she says, “does not hesitate about the Purchase. And he who has *faith enough to believe the* Truths of the Gospel, acts like a Fool, or a Madman if he does not live accordingly.”⁴⁶ In Bayle’s opinion, though human beings might be convinced of the truths of the Christian religion, this does not prevent them from living an unregulated, immoral lifestyle. This is because religious principles are not the true motivators of their actions (§143); the Christian religion and religious convictions more generally have no power to make people virtuous. According to Astell, Bayle’s conclusion does not follow: only nominal Christians fail to live up to their religious convictions, not real Christians.

⁴¹ Astell, “Marginalia,” §LXIII, 110.

⁴² Astell, “Marginalia,” §CIV, 211.

⁴³ Astell, “Marginalia,” §CXL, 276–77; §CXXXVII, 269; §CL, 300–1.

⁴⁴ This distinction between different kinds of atheist was commonplace in the period; see, for example, John Tillotson’s well-known 1664 sermon, “The Wisdom of Being Religious.” Astell herself refers to “practical atheists,” in *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England*, ed. Jacqueline Broad (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies and Iter Publishing, 2013), §133.

⁴⁵ Astell, “Marginalia,” §LXIX, 121.

⁴⁶ Astell, “Marginalia,” §CL, 300–1.

Bayle claims that human beings will inevitably be led by their passions, their hopes, their fears, and desires. Astell concurs. But in her view, real Christians will regulate their passions in accordance with their understanding of religious truths; they will fear God, they will hope for everlasting happiness, and they will desire to pursue the virtuous life. They will *feel* the right emotions in accordance with their convictions and then act accordingly.⁴⁷ “Did they believe the Christian Doctrines, as firmly as a Merchant believes he may get an Estate in India,” she says, “they wou’d live like Christians.”⁴⁸ Against Bayle, she notes that “whoever is heartily persuaded of the truth of Christianity, will Practise it,” and “no man can be said to be truly persuaded of it who does not regulate his life according to the persuasion.”⁴⁹ It follows therefore that *real* Christians do make faith the rule of their conduct, while *nominal* Christians (i.e., those “who call themselves Christians, and know little but the name and some outward observances”) do not.⁵⁰ Against Bayle, she says that

all he would insinuate in prejudice of true Religion, is only pun[n]ing on the word, and confounding the form and pretence of Religion with the Real sense of it. For this always influences the Heart and regulates the Actions in the main For Perfection is not found in a Mortal state.⁵¹

Much of Astell’s marginalia is thus devoted to catching out Bayle’s equivocal use of the word Christian.⁵² She warns the reader that “the poor man seems to have made a collection of all the follies that ever were in the world and to charge upon Christians in general the absurdity off [*sic*] a few nominal Christians.”⁵³

Astell challenges Bayle’s reasoning about atheism along similar lines, to reject his claims that atheists are morally superior to idolaters and that a society of virtuous atheists is possible. According to Astell, once we clarify the word “atheist,” we can see that these theses are open to question. First, if we consider that some *practical atheists* are really just *nominal Christians* and that nominal Christians are, by definition, lacking in virtue,⁵⁴ then it seems that some practical atheists are no better than idolaters. Second, Astell contends, it is not possible for there to be a society of virtuous *speculative* atheists, because (a) it is unlikely that any such atheists have ever existed,⁵⁵ and (b) if there were any such atheists, they would be devoid of reason and incapable of true virtue.⁵⁶

Finally, Astell’s commentary points to one further logical problem at the heart of Bayle’s book: the problem of dialectical self-refutation. A thesis is self-refuting in this sense if the disputant puts it forward in a dialectical context and yet automatically commits herself to conceding the truth of the opposite thesis. This meaning of the term “self-refutation” is much broader than the one used in philosophy today, but it was current in philosophical debates of the Hellenistic period and still a

⁴⁷ On this topic, see Jacqueline Broad, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell: An Early Modern Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 84–106.

⁴⁸ Astell, “Marginalia,” §CXXXVIII, 272.

⁴⁹ Astell, “Marginalia,” §CXLIII, 284–85; §CLIV, 311.

⁵⁰ Astell, “Marginalia,” §CXLIII, 284–85.

⁵¹ Astell, “Marginalia,” §CXXXVII, 269.

⁵² See, for example, Astell, “Marginalia,” §XCII, 175 (“not Christians who understand and practise their Religion”); §XCIII, 176 (“he shou’d say a few ignorant or vitious Nominal Christians”); §CL, 301 (“He all along plays on the ambiguity of words supposing him a Christian who is so only in name”).

⁵³ Astell, “Marginalia,” §C, 200–1.

⁵⁴ Astell, “Marginalia,” §CXXXIV, 263 (“He justifys his Atheists only by reproaching Nominal Christians, who are indeed practical Atheists”).

⁵⁵ See Astell, “Marginalia,” §CXVIII, 232; §CXXXIX, 273 (“The belief of a Diety [*sic*] is so connatural to the Mind, that I cannot think there are any speculative Atheists, tho some woud fain be so”).

⁵⁶ See the flyleaf opposite p. 312. In this note at the end of the volume, Astell summarises Bayle’s own disparaging remarks about (speculative) atheists that “They who deny the Existence of GOD, show a horrible blindness, a prodigious ignorance of the Nature of things, a Mind that overthrows all the laws of Good Sense, and whose way of Reasoning, is, beyond expression false and irregular” (§123).

feature of early modern discourse. Myles Burnyeat notes that the Greeks were more open to this wider concept of self-refutation because

in their logical reflections they have constantly in mind the situation of a thesis being presented and discussed in dialectical debate. If a thesis is such that submitting it for dialectical debate will commit you immediately to conceding defeat, and hence to acknowledging the truth of its contradictory opposite, that is enough for them to call it self-refuting.⁵⁷

A case in point can be found in Epicurus's response to the determinist thesis that everything happens as a matter of necessity. In one fragment of "On Nature," Epicurus observes that the determinist's position is ultimately self-refuting. Whenever a determinist steps forward and begins to argue his case, he immediately commits himself to the view that his opponent is capable of freely changing her mind in light of his reasoning; that is to say, "he goes on imputing to himself the responsibility for having reasoned correctly and to his opponent that for having reasoned incorrectly."⁵⁸ His behaviour as a disputant belies his own thesis that everything happens under necessity and that we are never truly responsible for our actions.

Bayle undoubtedly writes as a dialectician,⁵⁹ as someone who attempts to persuade others through the give-and-take of discussion: in this case, in an exchange of letters. In one key piece of marginalia, Astell points to a dialectical self-refutation in the *Pensées*. She observes,

Either Man is a Rational Animal or not. If not, to what purpose does our Author write? Why is he not content to eat, drink and sleep with his fellow Brutes. But if Man is Rational, the History of his Actions is an unanswerable [*sic*] proof of his Liberty. For while Brutes who act by Instinct, move uniformly and obtain their End, Man is the only irregular Creature. GOD made him Upright and left him to his Choice, and by the abuse of his Liberty, he finds out many Inventions to become wicked and of consequence miserable.⁶⁰

Bayle contends that rational knowledge is incapable of correcting the vices of men. In response, Astell demands to know: if Bayle is so convinced that people never act upon their rational convictions, then why is he arguing against superstitious beliefs at all? Won't people continue to be superstitious, regardless of what he says? So why doesn't he just give up the dispute, and go and live an animal life devoted solely to his passions, inclinations, and habits? By entering into dialectical debate, however, it is clear that Bayle *does* believe that his arguments can influence people's actions, and thus he immediately concedes the contradictory opposite of his own thesis; he refutes himself.

Astell concludes that Bayle must allow that human beings have free will and that they are capable of freely acting upon their understanding of the truths of the Christian religion; unlike the brute animals, they are not slaves to their bodily constitutions. Human beings "are not all of the same temperament, of the same taste &c as Animals of the same kind are, but they determine themselves freely."⁶¹ In another passage, she concludes that "This Worthy Author, having made the most of his Fallacys is forced to confess the Truths that refute them."⁶²

Astell's Strategic Purpose

⁵⁷ Myles Burnyeat, "The Upside-Down Back-to-Front Sceptic of Lucretius IV 472," *Philologus* 122, no. 2 (1978): 205.

⁵⁸ See Epicurus, *On Nature*, 34.26–30, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, trans. and ed. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1:103.

⁵⁹ On this topic, see Lennon, *Reading Bayle*, 24, 27.

⁶⁰ Astell, "Marginalia," §CXXIV, 239–40.

⁶¹ Astell, "Marginalia," §CXXXVI, 267.

⁶² Astell, "Marginalia," §CXLVI, 291.

Of course, as a sceptic, Bayle would have been completely unperturbed by Astell's criticisms. The ancient thinker Carneades once conceded of his own scepticism that "the dialectic ends by destroying the steps which came before like Penelope unweaving her cloth."⁶³ Bayle echoes Carneades when he notes that reason is "like Penelope, constantly undoing what it creates."⁶⁴ In the spirit of ancient scepticism, Bayle regards reason as a methodological tool to rigorously examine opposing positions in a debate, rather than establish any positive or dogmatic truths. Some scholars claim that Pyrrhonic scepticism is the key to understanding Bayle's fideism: the only way out of this impasse is to take the great leap of faith, to place one's trust in revelation and not reason.⁶⁵ Others claim that, in accordance with Academic Scepticism, Bayle thinks that the best we can hope for is mere "probability": that is, that one position might be found more convincing or persuasive than another, but not absolutely true.⁶⁶ In any case, Bayle would be unconcerned by criticisms like Astell's that highlight the merits of both sides in a disagreement. Of his critics, he once said that he did not find their dissent deplorable: as soon as a greater probability presented itself, he was happy to take it on board, in shameless abandonment of his former views.⁶⁷

Notwithstanding this, I think that Astell's marginalia still offers a powerful antidote to Bayle's arguments. Several scholars have noted that Bayle relies on his readers to effect their own corruption. In the absence of explicit statements and positive theses, he leaves it up to readers themselves to follow through on the anti-Catholic insinuations and atheistic implications in his sub-text.⁶⁸ In early eighteenth-century England, as Bayle became more widely read, there was both "increasing anxiety about the intellectual consequences of reading Bayle" and fears about what might happen if his works fell into the hands of the unlearned.⁶⁹ Astell's marginal notes act as a continual warning to the reader against following through on Bayle's ideas. Furthermore, I think the strategic purpose of her marginalia is to disarm Bayle's arguments for the benefit of *one* reader in particular: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.

Astell's opening diatribe on the flyleaf of the *Pensées* begins with an apology to Montagu: "I ask pardon for scrib[i]ng in Your Ladyships Book," she says.⁷⁰ Ruth Perry notes that Astell and Montagu "did not come to know one another well ... until 1715 or so, when the younger woman was already married, and Astell had for some years been retired from public life."⁷¹ In the course of their friendship, Astell often spoke to Montagu about her Christian duties and about the importance of preserving a good reputation.⁷² There is certainly manuscript evidence of Astell's spiritual mentorship of Montagu.⁷³ For example, in one poem that Astell wrote for Montagu, Astell mocks the pretensions of an unwanted suitor.⁷⁴ The main theme of this poem, called the "Anti-Song," is that a man must be a fool to think that a wise and virtuous woman would "ruin" herself, simply in order to satisfy his lusts. In addition, among the papers in the Harrowby manuscripts at Sandon Hall, there is a telling fragment of a letter from Astell to Montagu. It reads

⁶³ Cicero, *Academica*, 2.95.

⁶⁴ Bayle, *Réponse aux Questions*, cxxxvii.

⁶⁵ See Labrousse, *Bayle*, 56–59; Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 287–88.

⁶⁶ On Bayle's Academic Scepticism, see Lennon and Hickson, "Pierre Bayle"; Lennon, *Reading Bayle*, 12–41; and Maia Neto, "Bayle's Academic Skepticism," 263–76.

⁶⁷ Maia Neto, "Bayle's Academic Skepticism," 272.

⁶⁸ Labrousse, *Bayle*, 22.

⁶⁹ Champion, "Bayle in the English Enlightenment," 176; Courtines, *Bayle's Relations with England*, 85.

⁷⁰ In Grundy's transcription, this line reads "I ask pardon for scrolling in Yr Laps Book." Scrolling is a perfectly apt reading (it means "scrawling" in this period), but the word on the page is perhaps more accurately transcribed as "scribbling," since a "b" clearly follows what appears to be an "i" with an otiose stroke. Jackson records "scribbling" (see Jackson, *Marginalia*, 64).

⁷¹ Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 271.

⁷² Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 144.

⁷³ On their relationship more generally, see Harriett McIlquham, "Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Mary Astell," *Westminster Review* 151, no. 3 (1899): 289–99.

⁷⁴ See Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 21–22.

Give me leave to tell my dream, tho my waking, most reasonable and tendrest thoughts, are it seems not worth notice.

Methought I saw you last night with agony of Soul, Shipwreckt, struggling for Life with the insulting billows . . .⁷⁵ indifference. I cry'd, I beg'd, but all in vain that they wou'd take a Boat that lay by them and try to assist you. Not one wou'd run the least hazard, or so much as spoil their fine clothes in your service. Whereupon I threw myself out of the window into the Sea, resolv'd to save [or Perish with?] you.⁷⁶

In this period, the term “shipwreck” was a figurative expression that meant to bring about destruction or ruin. In her *Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), Astell uses the term to refer to the duchess of Mazarin as “an unhappy Shipwrack to point out the dangers of an ill Education and unequal Marriage,” and Astell cautions that “we are all so well assur'd of our own good Conduct, as to believe it will bring us safe off those Rocks on which others have been Shipwrackt.”⁷⁷ Seemingly then, in the letter fragment, Astell conceives of herself as the one person devoted to saving Montagu's soul from spiritual ruin. Many years later, Lady Louisa Stuart, Montagu's granddaughter, recalls an intense discussion of some religious matter between Astell and Montagu, in which Astell confessed to the younger woman that she had a terminal illness and would soon be in the grave. “If departed spirits be permitted to revisit those whom they have loved on earth,” Astell told her, “remember I make you a solemn promise that mine shall appear to you, and confirm the truth of all I have been saying.”⁷⁸ The spirit did not appear. But Stuart remarks that, “cordially loving as well as admiring Lady Mary Wortley,” Astell “had nothing so much at heart as to promote her spiritual welfare.”⁷⁹

The marginalia in the *Pensées* can be read in light of Astell's efforts to provide spiritual guidance to Montagu and to save her from moral and social shipwreck. In response to Bayle's passing observations about women (§142), Astell echoes some of her published remarks on “the rude attempts of designing men,” those men who would ruin a woman's reputation, solely in order to gratify their brutal appetites. In her commentary, Astell is scathing about those men who have “ill designs” after a woman's honour and those who “strive to corrupt their Principles” by undermining a woman's religious beliefs; “for the restraint of Religion being got over, all other restraints will soon be overcome.”⁸⁰ Of a man who “makes love” to a married woman, she says, “this is certainly a gross abuse, and the highest affront he can offer her, being founded on a scurvy supposition” (i.e., a worthless, contemptible supposition) (Figure 1 and 2).⁸¹ In one section (§142), Bayle remarks that women are not naturally inclined to impiety and atheism, and Astell responds sarcastically,

Women are oblig'd to Bayle (as they are to most Men) for this noble character! And so long as they take up their Religion upon trust, and because it is the custom of the Country, they will be Superstitious or Irreligious as it happens, as the Company they keep influences them, and as it serves the designs of the Men who seek their Ruin. But did Women spend as much time and thought upon Religion, as they do upon

⁷⁵ Page torn.

⁷⁶ Mary Astell to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, undated; in Sandon Hall, Staffordshire, Harrowby MSS 255:101. I am grateful to Lord Harrowby for granting his kind permission to refer to this manuscript.

⁷⁷ Mary Astell, “Reflections upon Marriage,” in *Astell: Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 33, 71.

⁷⁸ Lady Louisa Stuart, “Introductory Anecdotes,” in *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, ed. W. Moy Thomas (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1893), 86.

⁷⁹ Stuart, “Introductory Anecdotes,” 86.

⁸⁰ Astell, “Marginalia,” §CXLII, 279.

⁸¹ Astell, “Marginalia,” §CLI, 303.

trifling amusements they wou'd find it their Wisdom and happiness to be real Christians.⁸²

In Astell's view, Bayle aims to convince his readers that they are the slaves of their bodily constitutions (their passions, temperaments, and habits) and that knowledge gained through reason is not strong enough to overcome the tastes and sentiments of their early upbringing. In response, Astell's commentary continues the consciousness-raising efforts of her earlier feminist works, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694; 1697), *Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), and *The Christian Religion, as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England* (1705). She responds to Bayle "that the grace of GOD has enabled multitudes of Men and Women to conquer their appetites and passions, and wou'd enable us if we wou'd but use it, and were not wanting to ourselves."⁸³ She suggests that we should not "run on blindly with the Herd" and "take it [religion] as we find it where we happen to be born,"⁸⁴ but rather exert ourselves and subject our beliefs to the light of reason. In her opinion, "Reason shews the right way, and our Passions drag us into the wrong."⁸⁵ Contrary to what Bayle says, it is possible to change our conduct in light of religious beliefs based on reason.

In sum, Astell's notes insist that there is still some point to using reason, to challenging assumptions, and refusing to swallow others' arguments without question. Through her marginalia, Astell urges Montagu to preserve her independence of judgement, since judgements based upon reason *can* make a difference to moral conduct; they can help to prevent the destruction of the soul.

* * * * *

On the whole, Astell's commentary on Bayle reveals how marginalia has an immediacy and an intimacy that cannot be easily replicated by any other form, even by a letter or a hand-written essay. In this case, marginal notes offer Astell the perfect means to take the sting out of Bayle's arguments *as* they are being presented. If Astell had published a printed pamphlet or sent a letter or an essay to Montagu, these might have been conveniently ignored. But if Montagu ever ventured to read the first page of the *Pensées*, she would have been struck by Astell's observation that the book is "Vox & præterea nihil [voice and nothing more]. A labour'd nothing."⁸⁶ If she had continued to read on, then at every turn of the page she would have been met with Astell's insistent handwritten notes—rude, indignant, and impossible to ignore. And, if she had persisted to the end, she would have been left with Astell's final parting shot: that Bayle "is so full of inconsistencies [*sic*] and contradictions that it matters not what he says."⁸⁷

Bayle scholar Thomas Lennon once remarked that

if Bayle is at all worth reading, the result should be an attempt to engage his texts in just those terms that have made him seem enigmatic. A text in response to Bayle should itself be open-ended and allow for independence of personal voice by extending the argument, or at least showing how it ought to be extended. It should enter the conversation.⁸⁸

Mary Astell proves herself to be a remarkably adept reader of Bayle. With her marginalia, she engages Bayle on his own terms, using his own methodology of rational demolition to effect a critique of the *Pensées*. Her text is open-ended and conversational—it largely consists in rhetorical

⁸² Astell, "Marginalia," §CXLII, 280.

⁸³ Astell, "Marginalia," §XCII, 175.

⁸⁴ Astell, "Marginalia," §CXXXVII, 246–47.

⁸⁵ Astell, "Marginalia," §CXXXV, 264.

⁸⁶ Astell, "Marginalia," §I, 1.

⁸⁷ Astell, "Marginalia," §CXXXVII, 271.

⁸⁸ Lennon, *Reading Bayle*, 183.

questions and exclamations and sarcastic asides—and she extends his arguments, by identifying their true targets, removing their equivocations, and following them through to their logical conclusions. Of course, a Bayle scholar might point out that Astell’s commentary fails to offer any rationally compelling reason to categorise Bayle decisively as either an outright atheist or a Calvinist fideist; she does not solve the puzzle of the “Bayle enigma” by offering us “the real Bayle.”⁸⁹ But this criticism is rather beside the point if we look to the strategic purpose behind her notes. Like Penelope’s unravelling of the cloth, Astell’s “undoing” of Bayle’s *Pensées* is an act of love and loyalty, in this case for the sake of a younger friend’s spiritual welfare. Astell’s purpose is simply to weave doubts about Bayle himself, to warn her reader to approach him with circumspection, and to cast suspicion on the soundness and cogency of his reasoning. She intends to leave her reader with a *feeling* about Bayle, not a rational conviction. With regards to achieving this purpose, marginalia offered Astell the ideal form.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ For my challenge to this viewpoint, see Broad, “Mary Astell’s Critique of Pierre Bayle.”

⁹⁰ For their help in the writing of this essay, I am grateful to Patrick Spedding, Michael Bosson, and participants at various departmental seminars in 2017. In September-October 2017, I presented an earlier version of this paper at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, the University of Guelph, Guelph, McGill University, Montreal, and the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, as part of a two-week trip funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, organised by Lisa Shapiro. The travel for my original archival research in 2015 was generously funded by an Australian Research Council Future Fellowship (FT0991199).

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