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Hobbes and Astell on War and Peace

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Abstract: In her political pamphlets of 1704, the English philosopher Mary Astell (1666–1731) argues that rebellion and civil war are never morally justified. Many of her arguments are formulated in opposition to principles that were upheld as “just causes” of the civil wars in England (1642–51): namely, appeals to the broken social contract, the natural right of self-preservation, and the people’s right to depose unjust rulers. In this chapter, I demonstrate that Astell’s criticisms of these principles are by implication directed against Hobbes and so-called Hobbesian ideas. But my overall aim is to show that Astell had more in common with Hobbes than she might have liked to admit. Astell’s writings are notable not only for demonstrating how Hobbes’s ideas about war and peace were received in early eighteenth-century England, but also for showing how they were reconceived by a feminist pioneer.

Keywords: Thomas Hobbes; Mary Astell; civil war; peace; social contract; self-preservation; state of nature; right of resistance; women.

Throughout her political writings, Mary Astell (1666–1731) presents both positive and negative arguments to demonstrate that rebellion and civil war are never morally justified. In keeping with her devout Anglican beliefs, Astell’s positive arguments typically rely on religious injunctions. Christianity, she says, “does no where allow Rebellion ... he that bawls out the Liberty of Conscience and Loss of Religion to vindicate his Rebellion, has too much of Atheism in him, to be a true Christian” (Astell 1996b, 169). Her negative arguments are formulated in opposition to several principles that were upheld in her time as “just causes” of the civil wars in England (1642–51), including appeals to the broken social contract, the natural right of self-preservation, and the people’s right to depose unjust or tyrannical rulers. In this chapter, I interpret Astell’s critique of these principles as engagements with the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). In the past few decades, scholars have examined Astell’s writings in relation to the Hobbesian concept of the state of nature and Hobbes’s theory of the social contract. Ruth Perry has highlighted Astell’s critique of Hobbes’s denial of human interdependence in the natural state (Perry 1990, 454, 457); Penny Weiss has provided a useful contrast between Astell and Hobbes’s conceptions of political authority and the “miserable condition” (Weiss 2009, 146–7); and Patricia Springborg and Karen Green have analyzed Astell’s rejection of Hobbesian contractarianism (Springborg 2005, 122–30; Green 2012, 173–7). These commentators have connected Astell’s criticisms of Hobbes to the early feminist views of her best-known works, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Parts I and II* (1694; 1697) and *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700). They point to her anticipation of recent liberal feminist critiques of social contract theory.

My own analysis will trace Astell’s engagement with Hobbesian ideas concerning war and peace in her three political pamphlets of 1704: *Moderation Truly Stated*, *A Fair Way with the Dissenters*, and *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War*.

Together these anonymous Tory pamphlets constitute Astell's contribution to the "occasional conformity" debates of 1702–4, an ongoing controversy about the dissenter practice of taking occasional communion in Anglican churches solely in order to qualify for public office. In what follows, I begin by highlighting Astell's explicit references to Hobbes in her first two pamphlets. Springborg has claimed that Hobbes was "never named by Astell" (2005, 39), but in *Moderation Truly Stated*, Astell speculates that "*a State of Nature was a meer figment of Hobbs's Brain*" (1704, xxxv), and in *Fair Way with the Dissenters*, she claims that rebellious principles follow "by a Chain of Mr. *Hobbes's* Consequences" (1996a, 97). These named references are useful for revealing how Hobbesian ideas concerning war and peace were received by Astell; they also show that her challenges to Whigs and dissenters of her time can be interpreted as challenges to so-called Hobbesian principles. But my main purpose will be to demonstrate that Astell had more in common with Hobbes than she would have liked to admit. While Astell explicitly vilifies Hobbes as a proponent of just cause theory, in these political pamphlets she implicitly adopts salient aspects of his views concerning the maintenance of peace. More than this, she follows through on the logical implications of his principles, to suggest that sexist opinions about female sovereigns (namely Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Anne), and women's susceptibility to seditious opinion, pose significant threats to the social order. Her writings are thus valuable for demonstrating how Hobbesian ideas concerning war and peace were embraced—and extended—by a feminist pioneer of the early modern era.

Astell on Hobbes and "just causes"

Astell's first explicit reference to Hobbes comes in the "Prefatory Discourse" of her *Moderation Truly Stated*, a long essay written in response to Charles Davenant's *Essays upon Peace at Home, and War Abroad* (1704). Davenant wrote this work to provide Queen Anne

with advice about how to avoid the political instability caused by dissenting religious and political views in the early years of her reign (see Perry 1986, 197–202; Broad 2011, 11–13). In one part, he suggests that human beings find fault with political authority because they can somehow recall the liberty that they experienced in the state of nature, the natural condition of human beings prior to civil society (Davenant 1704, 352, 355). In order to attain “Ease, Plenty, and Protection,” Davenant says, men gave up this state of nature, relinquished their natural rights, and entered into a contract “for the Benefit of Society” (Davenant 1704, 355). Without openly supporting Hobbes, Davenant appeals to elements of his famous theory to explain how political conflict arises. He alludes to Hobbes’s view that in the state of nature, every man has the right to preserve his life and must be allowed “*the right to use any means and to do any action by which he can preserve himself*” (Hobbes 1998, I.8, 27; see also Hobbes 2012, 198; 1651, 64).¹ According to Hobbes, this condition brings with it an enormous amount of misery and unhappiness; in the state of nature, men are tormented by continual fear of a sudden, violent death (Hobbes 1998, I.13, 30; 2012, 192; 1651, 62). To obtain peace and security, rational men endeavor to get out of this state as quickly as possible. Reason tells them that they must enter into a voluntary agreement with other men: they must either relinquish their right to all things or transfer it to another. To achieve lasting peace, a supreme power with the right of commanding all men is required, and this authority must have the requisite power to compel men to perform their covenants by threat of punishment (Hobbes 1998, V.11, 73; 2012, 210; 1651, 68). Davenant evinces a familiarity with these views, but emphasizes that a man retains a claim on his rights if ever the political authorities break the contract—that is, “if he is neither Happy, nor Safe, through their Fault who rule” (Davenant 1704, 355; see Hobbes 2012, 344; 1651, 114). Davenant suggests that Hobbes’s principles support a citizen’s right to resist those rulers who cannot ensure his peace and safety. When faced with rulers who “have no Right to command him,” a man “is

return'd to the full Liberty his Progenitors enjoy'd in the free State of Nature, and ... may act for himself, and take all the Ways of Consulting and Compassing his own Safety" (355). As a response to dissent, therefore, Davenant advises Queen Anne to avoid having a "loose and weak" administration (355), to be a strong and decisive leader, and to stamp out political faction whenever it arises (56, 58).

With characteristic irony, Astell makes the following response to Davenant's remarks:

Sir, I am to thank you for a Discovery, alas! I have hitherto thought, that according to Moses, we were all of Adam's Race, and that a State of Nature was a meer figment of Hobbs's Brain, or borrow'd at least from the Fable of Cadmus, or Æacus his Myrmidons, till you were pleas'd to inform me 'of that Equality wherein the Race of Men were plac'd in the free State of Nature.['] How I lament my Stars that it was not my good Fortune to Live in those Happy Days when Men sprung up like so many Mushrooms or Terræ Filii, without Father or Mother or any sort of dependency! (Astell 1704, xxxv).

Here Astell recalls a memorable statement in Hobbes's *De cive*, first printed in Latin in 1642, and then translated into English in 1651 as *Philosophicall Rudiments concerning Government and Society*. In chapter eight of *De cive*, Hobbes invites us to "return once again to the natural state and to look at men as if they had just emerged from the earth like mushrooms and grown up without any obligation to each other" (Hobbes 1998, VIII.1, 102). This remark appears in the context of his explanation of how "the right of Dominion [*Dominium*] is acquired over men's *persons*" (VIII.1, 102). There are three ways in which such a right might be acquired—by contract, conquest, or generation. The first of these is made by mutual contract or agreement between men to give up their natural rights to a supreme power "for the sake of

peace and mutual defence” (VIII.1, 102). Through her sarcasm and scorn, Astell challenges the initial step in Hobbes’s account of dominion—she repudiates the idea that there could ever have been a state of equality in which human beings were not somehow dependent on other human beings (on this topic, see Perry 1990, 454, 457).²

Astell’s reference to the mushroom men of *De cive* echoes those of her contemporaries who took up Hobbes’s remarks and drew similarities between Hobbes’s natural men and Cadmus’s mercenary soldiers in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (see Goldie 1991, 604–5). In book three of Ovid’s classic work, Cadmus kills a serpent and then sows its teeth into the ground; shortly thereafter, several armed men rise from the earth and fight one another to the death. Edward Hyde, the first Earl of Clarendon, notes that in developing his theory of the state of nature Hobbes must have appealed to “the authority of *Ovids Metamorphosis*, of the sowing of *Cadmus*’s teeth”; he could not have appealed to divine authority to support such a theory (Clarendon 1676, 38–9). The royalist pamphleteer John Nalson likewise says that Hobbes’s assertion that all men desire to do mischief to one another

is false to every Reason; unless he will revive the old Fable of *Cadmus* in *Ovid*, and slurr it upon us for an Historical Truth; and suppose all Mankind to be like the Harvest sprung from the Serpents Teeth; unnatural Sons of the Earth, born in Arms.
(Nalson 1677, 6)

In a dialogue with a Hobbesian, John Eachard’s speaker mockingly refers to “*your Mushroom state of Men suddainly springing out of the Earth*, without any kind of engagement to each other” (Eachard 1672, 63–4), and he too alludes to “*Cadmus*, that had a *Plantation of Armed Men*” (67). Astell’s own references to Cadmus and *terræ filii* (“sons of the earth”) recall these

late seventeenth-century commentaries. Like these authors, she casts scorn on Hobbes's negative conception of human beings as naturally unsociable and belligerent.

Astell's second named reference to Hobbes comes in her *Fair Way with the Dissenters*, a pamphlet written against Daniel Defoe's anonymous polemic, *More Short-Ways with the Dissenters* (1704). In his work, Defoe attacks a sermon by the High-Church Tory Henry Sacheverell for upholding a "Whiggish Principle," the idea that "The Regular Administration of Justice, is the Grand End and Design both of Government and Law" (Defoe 1704, 8). Somewhat mischievously, Defoe argues that this notion lends support to resistance because:

If this be true it follows that Justice which is the End, is Superior to the King, that Executes, who is the Means, for the End is always Superior to the Means, and if this be true, Deposing Tyrannick evil Administrating Princes cannot be Criminal, because they Overturn and Destroy the end of Government. (Defoe 1704, 8)

In response, Astell defends Sacheverell against Defoe's spurious reasoning. "Who but a Dissenter," she exclaims, "could ever have had Brains enough to pick this out of Mr *Sacheverel's* Sermon!" Yet she concedes that the conclusion—that it is permissible to depose tyrants—"follows most undeniably by a Chain of Mr. *Hobbes's* Consequences" (Astell 1996a, 97). Here it is difficult to determine exactly what Astell means by "a Chain of Mr. *Hobbes's* Consequences." In *Leviathan*, Hobbes asserts that human beings desire to contract out of the state of nature, and set up civil government, so that they might be assured of peace and safety. To uphold the safety of the people, the sovereign power is obliged to ensure that "Justice be equally administred to all degrees of People; that is, that as well the rich, and the mighty, as poor and obscure persons, may be righted of the injuries done them" (Hobbes

2012, ch. 30; 1651, 180). Thus it might be said (loosely speaking) that, according to Hobbes, the administration of justice is the *end* of government, while the supreme power (whether it be monarchic, democratic or aristocratic) is merely the *means* for bringing about that end.³ We might also surmise, along with Astell, that this theory implies that a supreme power can be overthrown if it ever fails to uphold its obligation to preserve the peace and security of the commonwealth.

Astell was not the only one among her contemporaries to see such hidden consequences in Hobbesian contractarianism. Clarendon comes to similar conclusions in his examination of *Leviathan*, when he identifies a major weakness in Hobbes's theory of political obligation (see Parkin 2007, 318; Goldie 1991, 604). Despite asserting that civil subjects have divested themselves of liberty, and transferred their rights to an absolute sovereign, Clarendon points out, Hobbes allows that they retain an inalienable right to defend themselves (Clarendon 1676, 39). In Clarendon's view, this is antithetical to the maintenance of peace, since this liberty gives subjects "a wonderful latitude" to challenge their sovereigns and destroy the peace whenever they feel threatened (100). The problem, as one of Eachard's speakers notes, is that by Hobbes's principles, a subject may give up his power to the sovereign, only to "call for't again, when he thinks it for his advantage" (Eachard 1673, 242–3). Hobbes's theory leaves it open for any individual to be his own judge of when the sovereign constitutes a danger to his life. Astell raises similar concerns about the same Hobbesian principles, when she wryly observes against Davenant that:

truly who can blame a Man who finds himself not at Ease, or so well as he would be, if he reassumes a Fundamental Right, a Privilege of which no Man can divest himself, and so soon as he can get more Men of his Mind to make his Party strong enough, declares the Contract broken. (Astell 1704, xxxvi)

Like the earlier English writers, Astell points to the inherent risks and dangers in Hobbes's theory that civil society originates in a covenant between men. If subjects retain their right to protect themselves, this leaves the door open for them to break the contract and return to a state of war.⁴

These brief allusions to Hobbes thus give us a fair indication of how Astell perceives Hobbesian political thought. First, for Astell, Hobbes is the originator of the absurd hypothesis of the state of nature, a supposedly natural condition in which men are born equal, with no dependence upon (or subordination to) other human beings, including their own parents. Her dismissive tone suggests that she believes that this state of nature has never existed among men, and that it also fails to provide a useful theoretical tool for thinking about pre-political society. Second, Astell associates Hobbes with a "chain of consequences" in which the rebellion of subjects against their rulers is sometimes justified. According to this Hobbesian logic, if rulers do not arbitrate justice for the sake of peace and safety, then the people might exercise their inalienable right to defend themselves (their right of self-preservation) by force. Once again, Astell's tone suggests that she finds this contractarian logic deplorable.

In Astell's third political pamphlet of 1704, *An Impartial Enquiry*, her explicit targets are Whigs and dissenters of her own time, but these same "Hobbesian" principles come under repeated attack. In this work, Astell responds to Bishop White Kennett's *Compassionate Enquiry into the Causes of the Civil War* (1704), a sermon presented on the anniversary of Charles I's execution. In his sermon, Kennett laments the fact that the King did not allay public fears about tyranny and arbitrary power during his reign. If the people had thought themselves secure in their rights, he says, then they would not have resorted to war and rebellion. But instead they were led to believe that their liberties and estates were endangered,

and “under that Prospect and Persuasion they must have been drawn in for the *Meaning* at least of Self-preservation” (Kennett 1704, 18–19). Astell takes issue with Kennett’s presupposition that the right of self-preservation is a just reason for going to war in the first place (Astell 1996b, 141–3). Her point is that, if perceived violations (or even *real* violations) of the right of self-preservation are always just causes, then they can be used as pretexts in any situation (189). The same excuses have been used to justify war and rebellion against good men (such as Charles I, in her opinion) as well as bad ones. “The Peoples Right to shake off their Oppressor,” she says, has been “equally destructive of the Best, as well as the worst Princes” (148); so we cannot rely on such precepts for moral guidance. In Astell’s view, it is inevitable that some unscrupulous men will have a vested interest in making pre-emptive strikes against a regime, for the sake of ambition or avarice or to gratify their passion for revenge (147). They will cry up “liberty” and “self-preservation” against the sovereign, merely to serve their own interests.

In this pamphlet, Astell’s argumentative strategy is to depict the Whigs as proponents of a long historical tradition of resistance theory, as well as the holders of principles that led to civil war and the execution of the “Royal Martyr,” Charles I. But her comments against Davenant and Defoe—about Hobbes’s state of nature and “a Chain of Mr. *Hobbes’s* Consequences”—suggest that she also means to associate the Whigs with reviled Hobbist principles. Astell frequently recalls Hobbes’s hypothesis about men “giving up their liberties” in order to contract out of the hateful state of nature. “They discover Plots which themselves have made,” she says of rebellious men, and “they give up Liberties upon a valuable consideration, and when time shall serve, know how to procure to themselves the Honour of Retrieving them” (Astell 1996b, 196). She also challenges the moral status of the “right of self-preservation” as the right to preserve one’s body, civil liberties, and material property. “Beware of every one,” she says, who would “draw you in by the old Cant of *Self-*

Preservation” (141; see also 142, 143, 189, 196). These are the same dangers that Astell identified in the Hobbesian state of nature and Hobbesian contract theory in her previous pamphlets.

Astell and Hobbes on the maintenance of peace

Astell’s named references to Hobbes are reflective of a popular if somewhat distorted conception of Hobbesian politics in her time. As we have seen, her English contemporaries, Clarendon, Eachard, and Nalson, also presented Hobbes as the advocate of natural human aggression and self-interestedness (see Parkin 2007, 288–98, 313–22; Goldie 1991, 602–5). More recently, however, scholars have presented us with a different Hobbes—not the proponent of rampant psychological egoism, but rather someone whose major concern was the avoidance of civil war and the maintenance of peace and social order (Gert 2010; see also Thivet 2008; Jaede 2018). I turn now to Astell’s own views about how to avoid civil war, to demonstrate that she has much in common with this peace-theorist Hobbes of modern-day scholarship. We will see that Astell’s dismissive references to Hobbes cloak her more positive engagements with Hobbesian principles concerning the maintenance of peace.

There are, to be sure, many important and fundamental differences between Astell and Hobbes (for details, see Perry 1990; Springborg 2005; Weiss 2009; Green 2012). They wrote their polemics in vastly different periods, in response to radically different political concerns. Hobbes wrote during the tumultuous periods of the Fronde, the Thirty Years’ War, and the English civil wars; while Astell wrote in the period following the (relatively bloodless) Glorious Revolution of 1688–89 and during the early reign of Queen Anne. Hobbes has a secular and conventional theory of the origins of political obligation; Astell has a religious or natural one. Hobbes claims that the ultimate basis of allegiance to our rulers is the pursuit of good for ourselves; Astell maintains that the ultimate basis of submission to our rulers is the

deference that we owe to the divine authority of the office. Hobbes was a supporter of absolutist monarchism; Astell was an advocate of constitutional monarchy. Yet despite these differences, the two thinkers share common ground in their practical theories concerning the maintenance of peace.⁵

The most striking similarity is in their view that the spreading of false and seditious opinions—including both political and religious beliefs—poses the most significant threat to peace and stability in civil society. In Hobbes’s state of nature, according to Richard Tuck (1996; 1999), the war of every man against every man is essentially an *epistemic* conflict or “a conflict of *belief*” (Tuck 1996, xxvii). In this natural state, conflict arises because each man is his own judge about the best means to his self-preservation, and people inevitably form incompatible judgements about what really matters (Tuck 1999, 131). Controversies result from the differing opinions of men about “*mine and yours, just and unjust, useful and useless, good and bad, honourable and dishonourable, and so on*” (Hobbes 1998, VI.9, 79; see also Hobbes 2012, 196; 1651, 63). In civil society, such disagreements are avoided because the power of judging the best means to our preservation lies with the sovereign alone. This supreme power provides the ultimate arbitrator and preventative for epistemic controversies, because only this power may decide whether any future action is just or unjust, good or bad, and so on (Hobbes 1998, VI.8–9, 79; 2012, 220; 1651, 71–2). The sovereign thus shows us “the royal road” or the “high-way” to peace (Hobbes 1998, Preface, 10). Toward this end, it is crucial that the sovereign’s power be single and uncontested. Simplicity and unity of rule is a necessary condition for reaching consensus about what might be considered just and unjust. “[I]t is required,” according to Hobbes, “that there be a *single will* [*una voluntas*] among all of them in matters essential to peace and defence. This can only happen if each man subjects his *will* to the *will* of the *single* other ... that is, of one *Man* [*Hominis*] or of one *Assembly* [*Concilium*]” (Hobbes 1998, V.6, 72). In civil society, every man has given up his power to

judge the best means to his self-preservation to the supreme power. Private citizens do not have the power to judge for themselves what is a “just” or an “unjust” means anymore. When they submit to a governing authority, its judgements about the best means to their preservation—and the preservation of the commonwealth as a whole—must thereafter become their own. For Hobbes, this is the best safeguard against the war of all against all. Sovereigns have the right to govern according to their own judgement, and citizens must not challenge or rebel against those judgements.

Along similar lines, Astell affirms that no citizen has the right to judge for themselves about the justness of rebellion against their sovereigns. In one part of her *Impartial Enquiry*, Astell explains why she holds this view with reference to Henry Foulis’s *History of Romish Treasons and Usurpations* (2nd edn, 1681). In that work, Foulis says that

If we allow that People may lawfully Rebel against Princes, and at the same time be Judges of the justness of the Reason; to be in Authority will be a Slavery, the Word Monarch absolute Nonsense, the King oblig’d to obey every man’s Passion and Folly; nor Peace nor Justice can be expected, the Nation being in a perpetual Hurly-burly every other day ... (Foulis 1681, 74; quoted in Astell 1996b, 168–9)

Foulis’s point about judgement is crucial for Astell’s case against civil war in the *Impartial Enquiry*. If citizens have the right to judge for themselves about the best means to their preservation, she suggests, the nation would be in “a perpetual Hurly-burly,” a state of chaos and confusion. They would be throwing the monarch “out of the Saddle” on the slightest pretext and all political stability would be lost (Astell 1996b, 168). For the sake of peace and quiet, the power of judgement must lie solely with the supreme political authority. In *Moderation Truly Stated*, Astell puts this same sentiment in her own words. She says that in

civil society an “Absolute or Unaccountable Power, or which is the same thing, a last Appeal, must be lodg’d some where; otherwise there is, there can be, no Government, whatever Men may talk, but all is in Confusion” (Astell 1704, xxxviii). To attain political stability, “the only way is for the Supreme Power wherever it is Lodg’d, to Govern it self, and to take all its Measures according to the Direction of the Laws; which, tho’ they may not be Infallible, are yet the Supreme Wisdom of the State” (xxxviii). Like Hobbes, Astell regards obedience to a common power as a practical necessity, to avoid epistemic conflict and maintain peace and harmony in society. In language that is partly reminiscent of Hobbes, Astell declares:

allowing that the People have a Right to Design the Person of their Governour; it does by no means follow that they Give him his Authority, or that they may when they please resume it. None can give what they have not: The People have no Authority over their own Lives, consequently they can’t invest such an Authority with their Governours. And tho’ we shou’d grant that People, when they first enter into Society, may frame their Laws as they think fit; yet these Laws being once Establish’d, they can’t Legally and Honestly be chang’d, but by that Authority in which the Founders of the Society thought fit to place the Legislature. (Astell 1996b, 170)

Despite her ridicule for Hobbes’s state of nature, Astell concedes that if human beings do contract to “enter into Society,” they do not retain any authority to challenge the supreme power later. Similarly, while Hobbes maintains that civil war and “the right of the *private Sword*” are much worse than subjection to any kind of civil authority (Hobbes 1998, VII.4, 93), Astell asserts that acts of rebellion are “perhaps more Grievous than Tyranny, even to the People; for they expose us to the Oppression of a multitude of Tyrants” (Astell 1996b, 197).

Astell suggests that the people give up their right to stand in judgement on “tyrannical” rulers, in return for the long-term stability offered by a single sovereign power.

Astell and Hobbes also share similar ideas about the importance of encouraging a *disposition* toward peace in citizens. According to Hobbes, a state of war does not consist in the act of fighting alone, but rather a period of time in which individuals are known to have a certain attitude or disposition to fight: the “will to contend by force,” as Hobbes says (Hobbes 1998, I.12, 29–30; see also Hobbes 2012, 192; 1651, 62). It follows from his definition of the state of war that, for Hobbes, peace is not merely the absence of violent conflict, but rather a state of affairs or “a tract of time” in which we are assured that our fellow human beings have a peaceful disposition toward us (Hobbes 2012, 192; 1651, 62; see also Lee 1989, 189; Thivet 2008, 703). For Hobbes, a lasting state of peace requires more than just the suppression of violence by a powerful sovereign; it requires the kind of security that is promoted through public education and increased knowledge (Jaede 2018, 35, 96). In *De cive*, Hobbes outlines those laws of nature that can be derived from the first fundamental law of nature, “*to seek peace*” (Hobbes 1998, II.2, 34; 2012, 200; 1651, 64). One law is mercifulness or forgiveness for those who repent their past actions (Hobbes 1998, III.10, 48); another is the law that revenge and punishment should be inflicted only for the sake of future good and never without reason (III.11, 49); and other laws recommend against pride in favor of humility and modesty, which require recognition of the moral equality of human beings (III.13–14, 50). Hobbes suggests that the cultivation of the virtues of mercy, forgiveness, humility, and modesty will ensure that individuals are inclined to be accommodating to one another, and thereby bring about an enduring peace.

In her later work, *The Christian Religion* (1705), Astell also recommends the cultivation of forgiveness, humility, and meekness, and the avoidance of unnecessary resentment and revenge, for the sake of peace. “The peace of the world,” Astell says, “is

promoted by nothing so much as by the meek, forgiving, and ... 'passive' doctrines which are in a most peculiar manner the doctrines of the gospel" (Astell 2013, 285). She says that

We imagine the world will trample on us unless we resent injuries; but the lamb of God assures us, that the way to be happy, even in this world, is to be 'meek'; that revenge will continue and increase injuries, and that he who passes them by, both possesses his own soul in patience, whereby he is an impregnable fortress. (107)

Astell emphasizes the importance of taming the passions, especially those of pride, anger and resentment, since these are the main causes of quarrel (196–9; see Broad 2015, 164). Like Hobbes, Astell places emphasis on what kind of moral character should be cultivated in order to avoid the principal causes of conflict. She agrees with Hobbes that while the threat of punishment by the sovereign might provide an external motive for human beings to overcome their disposition to quarrel, only a concomitant change in the general human character can give the assurance of long-lasting peace. In this respect, Hobbes's and Astell's recommendations regarding moral virtue and peace are surprisingly similar, despite the fact that Astell offers a somewhat religious theory, while Hobbes offers an outwardly naturalist one.

Astell on women and peace

We will now see that Astell takes these Hobbesian ideas further by highlighting (1) the need to challenge prejudicial opinions concerning female sovereigns, and (2) the importance of educating women to avoid being persuaded by "Seditious Demagogues, and Popular Haranguers" (Astell 1704, 93). Unlike Hobbes, Astell maintains that a failure to recognize

women's moral and intellectual equality might precipitate the kind of civil unrest that arises from the spreading of seditious opinion.

First, Astell suggests that sexist opinions about female sovereigns can constitute seditious tools in the hands of unscrupulous men. In *Moderation Truly Stated*, she takes offence at Davenant's remark that Elizabeth I enjoyed a successful reign because she had "a Mind above her Sex," and his later suggestion that Elizabeth demonstrated that, to practice good government, "no more Skill, no more Policies are requisite than what may be comprehended by a Woman" (Davenant 1704, 180, 364). In Astell's view, these prejudicial statements are not only incompatible with each other, they are insulting to Elizabeth's political authority. Elizabeth enjoyed such success in her reign, Astell suggests, not because she had the mind of a man or because Elizabethan statecraft was a simple art form. Rather, "the Felicity of Queen *Elizabeth's* Reign is generally ascrib'd to the goodness of her Ministry, and her excellent choice of all the hands that she imploy'd" (Astell 1704, 29), and because the queen was "Constant in her Maxims of State, and firm in executing her Resolutions" (Astell 1704, 82). Elizabeth was an active and decisive political leader. If one were to object that Elizabeth's good governance was due to her male counsellors rather than herself, Astell responds by citing Machiavelli's maxim that princes can never be well advised if they have no wisdom of their own; good counsellors will be ineffectual if their advice is never heeded (Astell 1704, 30). Astell defends Elizabeth against the view that, as a woman, she did not have the intellectual capacity to rule in her own right.

Astell then applies these lessons concerning Elizabeth to the reign of Anne, the first English queen to rule independently since Elizabeth's time. In a crucial passage of *Moderation Truly Stated*, Astell imagines a scene in which a female speaker intervenes in a conversation between two male opponents, each of whom uses Davenant's words to defend his case. The woman says:

Whatever other Arts ... you gentlemen may excel in, methinks you have not given your selves much trouble in studying the Art of Decorum and good Manners, since in a Lady's Reign, and even in Books that you Dedicate to Her Majesty, you take upon you to tell the World that in this Kingdom no more Skill, no more Policies are requisite, than what may be comprehended by a Woman [Davenant 1704, 364]. As if there were any Skill, any Policy that a Woman's Understanding could not reach! So again, if Women do any thing well, nay should a hundred thousand Women do the Greatest and most Glorious Actions, presently it must be with a Mind (forsooth) above their Sex! [Davenant 1704, 180.] Now if Women be such despicable Creatures, pray what's the plain English of all your fine Speeches and Dedications to her Majesty, but Madam we mean to Flatter you? (Astell 1704, lii–liii)

Astell's speaker criticizes Davenant for his condescending attitude toward Anne's intellect. While Davenant pretends to tell the queen "*what is Right and Safe, and what her Gracious Wisdom and Noble Compassion ought to do*" (Davenant 1704, dedication), in reality his opinions undermine her political authority by highlighting her apparently inferior status as a woman. By making sexist judgements on her decision-making skills, Davenant is no better than the seditious demagogues he condemns. In response, Astell asserts that the queen herself is "*better able to discern what is fit for Her to do, than these Wise Men are to inform Her*" (Astell 1704, liii). To ensure peace and unity in her reign, the best path forward is for men such as Davenant to

leave Her Majesty to Her own Superior Judgment, and the Integrity of Her own English Heart ... let Her exert Her Self, according to Her own Good Sense, Right

Principles, and Generous Inclinations, with that undaunted Courage and Royal Magnanimity, that has never been wanting to those Ladies that have adorn'd the English Throne. (Astell 1704, liv–lv)

Davenant's conflicting advice does nothing but "perplex" the case: it introduces an instability where there would have been none if only he had trusted the sovereign's judgement. The instability that results from continual assaults on Anne's authority can have only pernicious consequences for the commonwealth as a whole. These can serve only to render a government "weak," "despicable," and "Contemptible" (Astell 1704, 30, 31); they lead to "the Majesty and Authority of Government" losing "its Reverence in the Peoples hearts" (Astell 1704, 31). Astell says:

And since by the continual Struggle of contending Parties, the Government is render'd uneasy and precarious, the Prince whose true Grandeur consists in the Prosperity and Dutiful Affections of his People, by being made uneasy on his Throne, finds himself unable to attend the Publick Good as a Wise and Vertuous Prince desires, and is forc'd to apply himself only to provide for his own Security. The People are alarm'd and harrass'd, the Benefit of Society is in a great measure lost, it being better to Live alone, than to always in fear, always in Arms and upon the Guard; and much more easy to have only wild Beasts to contend with, than to be ever at variance with those of the same Nature, nay it may be with our nearest Relations. (Astell 1704, 117).

Astell's references to the "Prince" here allude to Queen Anne (the word is typically gender-neutral in the period). In Hobbesian terms, Astell suggests that repeated assaults on Anne's

sovereignty rob the people of that “common Power to keep them all in awe,” and drive them to become anti-social out of fear of their fellow citizens (Hobbes 2012, 192; 1651, 62). They lead to situations in which “the Common Safety is neglected” and subjects are no longer afforded the protection that they ought to receive from their sovereign (Astell 1704, 39). For the sake of peace and quiet, Astell implies, Davenant should keep his sexist opinions to himself.

Astell also recalls Hobbes’s sentiments when she warns of the dangers of seditious opinion among female citizens. Like Hobbes, she seeks to avoid the political instability that arises when citizens believe they are entitled to make private judgements about their preservation. It is a short step from holding this opinion, in Hobbes’s view, to taking up arms in defence of it. As a safeguard against conflict, the sovereign power must be the sole “Judge of what Opinions and Doctrines are averse, and what conducing to Peace.” In the “well governing of Opinions,” Hobbes says, “consisteth the well governing of mens Actions, in order to their Peace, and Concord” (2012, ch.18; 1651, 91). Astell elaborates on this idea by highlighting the need to govern the opinions of women, and to improve their reasoning skills, to help them resist the arguments of popular opinion-makers. In *Moderation Truly Stated*, Astell’s speakers discuss those “noisy *Women*” whom Davenant singles out for forming cabals and intrigues against the government (Davenant 1704, 200; Astell 1704, li). One speaker, “Nokes,” complains that:

if the Young and the Handsom, the Witty and the Gay, the Intriguing and Politick Ladies are all on the Factious Side; and only the Old and the Ugly, the Praying and the Women of Thought, are on the other, the former without Controversie will have much the stronger Party, and greatest number of Followers; and alas what shall the Government do? its Friends are not an equal Match! (Astell 1704, li).

Adapting Davenant's words, Nokes claims that "whoever has a Mind to disturb the State will always Court" such women (Davenant 1704, 254); seditious men will always find it in their interests to bring attractive women over to their side, to gain additional followers to their cause. The other speaker, "Styles," also observes that the dissenters have among them "not a few of the Female Sex," and that "*if the Ladies should put themselves in the Head of these Multitudes, what a formidable Insurrection would it make!*" (Astell 1704, xlix). Astell highlights the danger of foolish women being seduced into becoming battering rams at the doors of authority.

In response, Astell highlights the importance of all citizens learning to distinguish true beliefs from falsehoods, so that truth "*might Triumph over that painted Syren, Popular Eloquence, and all those pernicious Arts with which Falshood and Cunning bewitch Mankind*" (Astell 1704, lxv). The people must be taught to be wary of the snares and traps of wicked men, to realize that the people might throw their sovereign out of the saddle only to "*become in a little time mere Slaves to the Arbitrary Rule of some of the worst of their Fellow Subjects, those Popular Demagogues who drove them into these pernicious ways*" (xxxvii–xxxviii). To avoid the misery that accompanies rebellion and civil war, Astell advises her reader:

to take nothing upon Trust, but to see with his *own* Eyes, and to judge according to his *own* Understanding; to be of no Party, no Opinion, because this Relation, or that great Man are of it; because it is popular or plausible, because it will serve a present Turn, or make a Fortune, or even because one has been of this Opinion formerly. (3–4)

It is crucial, in her view, that the people vow to call “no Man Master upon Earth” and refuse to follow popular speakers and party leaders who urge them to swallow seditious principles only in order to achieve their own ends (Astell 1996b, 177).

Although Astell does not say so explicitly, this advice in her pamphlets is consistent with her earlier calls for women to receive a proper education in reason and religion. In her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Astell argues for the establishment of a learned academy in which women might study the Christian religion and Cartesian rules of reasoning, to cultivate virtuous habits and critical thinking skills. This higher education, she says, will keep women safe from those designing men who court and flatter them for selfish purposes. In *The Christian Religion*, she also reminds her female readers “to receive no man’s opinion on his bare word, nor to swallow his arguments without examining them” (Astell 2013, 309); rather, she insists that women assert their “just and natural” right to judge for themselves (49). In her political pamphlets, these same themes re-emerge in Astell’s suggestion that all citizens must be alert to the specious arguments of rebellious men. If they are not taught to resist the eloquence of popular speakers, then their actions might precipitate the ruin of the state. Without an education in critical thinking—without learning to think for themselves—female citizens, too, might be led into rebellion whenever they are persuaded that someone other than the supreme power can ensure their safety and protection.

Conclusion

We have seen that Astell’s explicit criticisms of Hobbes conceal an implicit endorsement of Hobbesian ideas concerning war and peace. While Astell openly rejects Hobbes’s state of nature and his contractarian logic concerning the origins of civil society, she echoes Hobbes’s sentiments when she warns her readers about the dangers of epistemic conflict and of descending into a state in which we are “always in fear, always in Arms and upon the Guard”

(Astell 1704, 117). While Astell cautions that the “Cant of *Self-Preservation*” is often used as an alluring “bait” that covers the “hook” of rebellion (Astell 1996b, 141, 168), like Hobbes, she agrees that long-term preservation can be attained only when citizens have cultivated a standing disposition toward peace and pledged unquestioning obedience to the sovereign. But she takes these ideas even further than Hobbes, to suggest that a failure to recognize women’s moral and intellectual equality is pernicious for the state, since it is likely to lead to civil unrest. To attain lasting peace and security, we should be intolerant of prejudices about female sovereigns and we should realize that, without a proper education, female citizens are susceptible to seditious opinion. Astell builds on Hobbes’s views by suggesting that recognition of women’s moral and intellectual competence can play a positive role in the maintenance of peace.⁶

Notes

¹ References to Hobbes (1998) will provide chapter and section numbers (e.g., I.8 refers to chapter I, section 8).

² To be fair to Hobbes, there is evidence that he too regards the state of nature as a mere theoretical state of affairs, and that his “mushroom men” are simply an imaginative device to explain social contract theory (on this point, see Gert 2010, 63, 113). A key difference between Astell and Hobbes, however, is that Astell regards this device as offering an unrealistic and therefore unhelpful conception of human beings in the natural state.

³ It must be allowed, however, that this interpretation is open to question, given Hobbes’s assertion that nothing can be just or unjust in the natural condition (2012, 196; 1651, 63), and so justice cannot strictly be the goal of entering into the social contract.

⁴ To be fair, it should be noted that, according to Hobbes, subjects have the right to defend themselves only in those cases in which the sovereign poses an imminent threat to their lives (see 2012, 202; 1651, 69–70). It is not clear that Hobbes grants subjects the right to resist any perceived threats to their long-term self-preservation, as Astell and her contemporaries imply.

⁵ Weiss also identifies similarities between the views of Astell and Hobbes on the “significance of security,” observing that they “look with equal alarm at resistance, disobedience, and revolution as threats to the state” (Weiss 2009, 151, 143). She says that Astell’s *Reflections on Marriage* suggests that “inattention to gender may unwittingly invite into the commonwealth the potential for revolt Hobbes sought to eliminate” (152). My analysis takes these observations further by investigating Astell’s theory of peace in her political pamphlets.

⁶ A much earlier version of this essay was presented at the International Peace Research Association Conference at the University of Sydney in July 2010. I owe a debt of gratitude to Michael Deckard, both for inviting me to that event and for sharing his conference paper

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