

Mary Astell

By Mrs. J. E. H. Gordon

SHELLEY's mother-in-law, the famous Mary Wollstonecraft, vindicated the rights of women in a powerful and somewhat disagreeable book, which was published in 1792. For many years she has been believed to be the first pioneer of the higher education of women, and the first wailer over their wrongs, of any power and distinction ; but Mary Wollstonecraft, though she possessed many merits as a writer, was herself too much absorbed by her own private matrimonial troubles to make her a competent judge of the wrongs of other women.

A century before Mary Wollstonecraft there lived another Mary whose surname was Astell, who never married, and who, as far as we can gather from her writings, had no private grievances of her own to ventilate in print, and therefore her arguments have a special value. Two centuries ago this remarkable woman strove to rouse the consciences of her sister women, and tried lustily to make them take up a healthier attitude of mind towards the opposite sex.

Mary Astell was born at Newcastle, and the appreciative Ballard in his memoir records of her,* "that she had a piercing wit, a solid judgment,

* "Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain who have been celebrated for their writings, or skill in the Learned Languages, Arts, and Sciences." George Ballard : Oxford, 1752.

judgment, and a tenacious memory, so that she could make herself complete mistress of anything she attempted to learn with the greatest ease imaginable."

An uncle undertook her education, and she appears to have studied philosophy, mathematics, logic, and French. She was not a Latin or a Greek scholar, nevertheless she states in one of her publications that her "favourite heathen authors were Xenophon, Plato, Tully, Seneca, Epictetus, Heraclitus, and Marcus Antoninus." So, taking into consideration the times in which she lived, she must have been a learned lady, even though she was only able to study the classics in translations.

When she was twenty years old she came to live in Chelsea, and supported herself by writing theological tracts of an exceedingly orthodox character, which are all of them very dejecting reading, though occasionally a vigorous phrase or an apt adjective brightens their dreary controversial pages. But in 1694 Dame Astell published anonymously a queer little brown volume of quite another order of merit. This little seventeenth century bomb-shell was entitled "*A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest. By A Lover of Her Sex.*"

This volume deserves to be rescued from oblivion, not only for its own intrinsic merit, but because there is little doubt that Daniel Defoe (the first male advocate for the better education of women) derived many of his ideas upon the training of girls from its authoress, and though he differed from her conclusions on some few material points, yet he cannot be credited with originating all the reformatory schemes set forth in his "*Essay on Projects.*" I think it is not too much to say that "*The Serious Proposal to the Ladies*" contains the embryo of the ideas which were developed and expanded by a later generation into Newnham, Girton, and all the other ladies' colleges. A considerable portion
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of the book is taken up with long religious dissertations, such as were appreciated by the women of the times in which, and for which, they were written ; but shorn of the conventional sententiousness suitable for that period, Mary Astell's ideas will be found to be so much in advance of her age, that it is not difficult to understand why her drastic wit and uncompromising candour scandalised the bishops and clergy of her day, and made for her many enemies among her own sex, whose foibles and frivolities she so sarcastically derided. This stringent dame was of opinion that "Women value men too much and themselves too little—and that they should be capable of nobler things than the pitiful conquest of some worthless heart." She thinks that, "Were men as much neglected, and as little care taken to cultivate and improve them as is spent upon women, they would sink into the greatest stupidity and brutality," and that ladies "who have comely bodies should not tarnish their glory with deformed souls." She pleads eloquently for a better education for their minds, and implores them not to be content "to be in the world like tulips in a garden, to make a fine show and be good for nothing."

The pages of this quaint little book abound in sprightly sayings, but the pith of her "Serious Proposal" was, that a Monastery (*sic*) should be erected, and so organised that it should fit women, by education and discipline, to do the greatest good in the world that their natures and characters were capable of. The establishment was to be conducted upon the principles of the Church of England, *but* the religious education was to be supplemented by sound mental instruction. One can imagine what a startling proposition this must have been to the gay ladies of the seventeenth century, and one smiles to think how they must have cackled and argued over this audacious proposal.

Dr. Karl Bulbring in an article contributed to the *Journal
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of Education upon Mary Astell and her influence over Defoe,* points out that Defoe writes of this book by the title of "Advice to the Ladies," and that he asserts in the Preface to his "Essay on Projects" that he was not influenced in any way by Mary Astell's ideas upon education. I have carefully read over Defoe's essays and compared them with the "Serious Proposal," and I feel sure that any fair-minded person who has examined these two books (as well as Defoe's and Mary Astell's respective writings upon the lives and characters of the country gentleman of those times) must acknowledge the remarkable resemblance of their ideas, and methods of expressing them. But Mary Astell's "Serious Proposal" was published three years before the famous "Essays on Projects," and therefore it is difficult to give whole-hearted credence to Defoe's assertion, that his ideas were formed long before Mary Astell's were made public. But whatever controversy the curious may like to engage in as to the priority of these ideas, it is at any rate a remarkable fact that a woman writer in those days should have attracted the notice of a man like Defoe, and that he should have condescended to review her schemes in his book. Though the accordance of many of his ideas with those of Mary Astell is so apparent and so remarkable, there was yet one prominent point in the ladies' "Proposal" of which the gentleman could not, and did not approve, for with regard to the monastery for "Religious Retirement and Mental instruction," Defoe observes :

" Saving my respect to the sex, the levity which perhaps is a little peculiar to them (at least in their youth) will not bear the restraint ; and I am satisfied nothing but the height of bigotry can keep up a nunnery. Women are extravagantly desirous of going to heaven, and will

* *Journal of Education*, April 1, 1891.

will punish their pretty bodies to get thither ; but nothing else will do it, and even in that case sometimes it falls out that nature will prevail. When I talk therefore of an Academy for Women, I mean both the model, the teaching, and the government different from that which is proposed by that ingenious lady, for whose proposal I have a very great esteem, and also a great opinion of her wit ; different too from all sorts of religious confinement, and above all from vows of celibacy."

Ballard in his Memoirs relates that Mary Astell's scheme for an educational monastery for ladies, although it was first received with approval by some influential persons, was yet ultimately frustrated through the influence of Bishop Burnet. "A certain great lady" promised the sum of £10,000 towards carrying out this proposal, but was dissuaded from her intentions by the aforesaid bishop.

Poor Dame Astell seems to have excited the enmity of all the clergy of those times, for it is recorded that she was preached against from many pulpits ; and Dr. Atterbury, Bishop of Rochester, wrote in a letter to Dr. Smallridge concerning her :

"had she as much good breeding as good sense she would be perfect, but she has not the most decent manner of insinuating what she means, but is now and then a little offensive and shocking in her expressions, which I wonder at, because a civil turn of words is what her sex it always mistress of. She is, I think, wanting in it."

In 1697 Mary Astell published the second part of the "Serious Proposal to the Ladies, wherein a Method is offered for the Improvements of their Minds." This book, in spite of a few stalwart paragraphs, is not so engaging as its predecessor. The second appeal met with no more response than the first had done.

It is difficult to discover any materials for writing a biography of Mary Astell, for with the exception of a few allusions to her schemes

schemes in contemporary writings and the "Memoirs of Ballard," from which I have already quoted, nothing more is known of her except what we can deduce ourselves from her vigorous little books.

The "Dictionary of National Biography" gives only a short summary of Mary Astell and her writings. The article in the second volume was, I believe, contributed by Canon Overton, who does not even mention another very remarkable book published by her in 1697, which appeared anonymously under the title "An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex," in which Mary Astell discusses the position and education of women, and protests against their subjection to men. Dr. Karl Bulbring, in the article from which I have already quoted, records that two editions of this book were issued in the first year, and the third in 1697. The title-page states that the book is dedicated to Princess Anne of Denmark, who, according to the remarks at the end of the volume, caused her to write the Essay. The astute Dr. Bulbring (to whom, I believe, must be accorded the credit for practically re-discovering Mary Astell) points out that this volume, as well as the more famous "Proposal," appeared before the publication of Defoe's essays, and before the publication of his "Compleat English Gentleman."

Being much interested in Mary Astell and her influence over the author of "Robinson Crusoe," I have not only read all her works and compared them with Defoe's in the British Museum, but I have (by patient advertising and searching of booksellers' catalogues) acquired possession of all her books myself. They are delectable reading, and have acquired a place of honour in my cherished library as much for their own value as for their historical interest.

"The Defence of the Female Sex" is even more entertaining reading than her former volume. In it she naïvely enquires,

"Whether

"Whether the time an Ingenious Gentleman spends in the Company of Women may justly be said to be misemployed or not?"

She then proceeds to point out most insinuatingly the great advantages that the ingenious gentleman would secure by providing himself with a better educated helpmate, and the profit that would be derived by the nation at large by teaching women arithmetic and other arts which require not much bodily strength, so that lusty men could be sent whither hands and strength are more required.

She remarks on page 19 of this same book :

"I know our Oposers usually miscall our quickness of Thought, Fancy, and Flash, and christen their own heaviness by the specious Names of Judgement and Solidity; but is easie to retort upon 'em the reproachful Ones of Dullness and Stupidity with more Justice."

Mary Astell was not only very advanced in her views about women's education, but I think she must also have been an advocate, more or less, of the now called "modern side" education of boys, for she says on page 27 of this same book that :

"Scholars, though by their acquaintance with Books and Conversing much with Old Authors . . . yet lose their way at home in their own parish. They are mighty admirers of the Wit and Eloquence of the Ancients; yet, had they lived in the time of Cicero and Cæsar, would have treated them with as much supercilious Pride and disrespect as they do now with reverence. They are great hunters of ancient Manuscripts, and have in great Veneration anything that has scap'd the Teeth of Time and Rats, and if Age have obliterated the Characters, 'tis the more valuable for not being legible. But if by chance they can pick out one Word, they rate it higher than the whole Author in Print, and wou'd give more for one Proverb of Solomon's, under his own hand, then for all his Wisdom. These

superstitious, bigotted Idolaters of time past, are Children in their understanding all their lives ; for they hang so incessantly upon the leading Strings of Authority, that their Judgements like the Limbs of some Indian Penitents, become altogether cramp't and motionless for want of use."

On page 37 of these same Essays, the discriminating lady remarks that for conversational purposes it is

"not requisite we should be Philologers, Rhetoricians, Philosophers, Historians or Poets ; but only that we should think pertinently, and express our thoughts properly on such matters as are the proper subjects for a mixed conversation."

She considers that pleasant conversation between the sexes should turn upon lively topics—love, honour, gallantry, morality, news, raillery, and a numberless train of other things, copious and diverting. Religion, she argues, is too tender a subject ; business too dry and barren ; points of learning too profound ; and abstruse speculations and nice politics too argumentative to awaken the good humour or raise the mirth of the company.

After summing up the many interesting subjects there are that women can study, she remarks that :

"nothing but discouragement or an Idle Uncurious Humour can hinder us from Rivalling most Men in the Knowledge of great Variety of Things without the help of more Tongues than our Own ; which the Men so often reproachfully tell us is enough."

Mary Astell must have been somewhat of a Socialist as well as an advocate for the better education of her own sex, for she devotes several scathing pages to describing the country gentry of her times, who

"for eight or nine years are whipt up and down through two or three counties, from School to School, when, being arriv'd at sixteen or

or seventeen years of age, and having made the usual Tour of Latin and Greek Authors, they are call'd home to be made Gentlemen."

Her description of the after careers of these so-called gentlemen is withering, and must have been rather unpleasant reading for her male acquaintances.

Mary Astell has been somewhat fortunate in finding an illustrator with some sense of humour, who has contributed a frontispiece to her book, depicting "The Compleat Beau" admiring himself in his looking-glass, and dexterously applying a patch to his chin, while an anxious-faced barber powders his wig at the back. Below the engraving these lines are printed :

" This vain gay thing sets up for man,
But see w^t fate attends him
The powdering Barber first began,
The Barber Surgeon ends him."

It was hardly to be expected that a pioneer lady (of even the seventeenth century) should be content to leave the marriage problem alone, and therefore it is not surprising to find that Mary Astell, like many women of the present day, rushed into print to give the world as forcibly as she dared her ideas upon this subject. In 1700 she published a fiery little volume entitled, "Some Reflections upon Marriage," which was republished in 1705 and 1706, and as it attained three editions it must have attracted considerable attention. Therein, she endeavours to point out that one of the principal reasons of unhappiness in married life is the want of solid education upon the part of the wife, and also that a woman is forced to marry from the custom of the world, and to be preserver of the family. "A woman," she remarks, "can't properly be said to choose ; all that is allowed her is to refuse or accept what is offered."

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With regard to the choice of the man, the acid-minded lady remarks :

"there is no great odds between Marrying for Love of Money, or for the Love of Beauty ; a man does not act according to reason in either case, but is govern'd by Irregular Appetites. But he loves her Wit perhaps, and this you will say is more spiritual, more refin'd ; not at all, if you examine it to the Bottom for what is that which now a days passes under the name of Wit ? A bitter and illnatured Raillery, a pert Repartée, or a confident talking at all. It is not improbable that such a Husband may in a little time by ill usage provoke such a wife to exercise her Wit, that is her Spleen, upon him, and then it is not hard to guess how very agreeable it will be for him."

Mary Astell devotes several pages to pointing out how many unhappy matings arise by reason of the false notions in which women are educated, and most of her able arguments would apply equally forcibly to the average pre-matrimonial education of the present day.

The little old copy of "Some Reflections upon Marriage," which is in my possession, has evidently been read with much dissent by one Mr. Robert Grace, upon whom the book had been bestowed by a lady friend of the name of Mrs. Eversfeild. He records his robust male objections in various marginal notes, question, and exclamation marks, and on one page (where the authoress insists very strongly upon the necessity of women rousing their understanding and opening their eyes, that they may distinguish between truth and appearances), the indignant Mr. Robert Grace breaks into verse, and pens along the margin the following lines :

Give me a wife with countenance full smiling,
With gentle courtesy and temper willing,
Whose speech unmix't with gall shews her whole heart.
Then will I say "My Wife my Love thou art!"

Mr. Robert Grace,

Mr. Robert Grace, it is to be hoped, was better qualified to be a husband than he was to be a poet !

Later on in the same volume Mary Astell evidently becomes frightened of her own dawning opinions, her relations had perhaps been worrying her about them, and many candid friends had been telling her, how pernicious and foolish her schemes were, for on page 58 she draws in her argumentative horns, and says :

" How can a woman scruple intire subjection, how can she forbear to admire the worth and excellence of the Superior Sex, if she at all considers it ? Have not all the great Actions that have been perform'd in the World been done by Men ? Have they not founded Empires and overturn'd them ? Do not they make Laws, and continually repeal and amend them ? Their vast minds lay kingdoms waste, no bounds or measures can be prescrib'd to their desires. What is it that they cannot do ? They make Worlds and ruin them. Form systems of universal Nature, and dispute eternally about them. She then who Marries ought to lay it down for an indisputable Maxim that her husband must govern absolutely and intirely, and that she has nothing else to do, but to Please and Obey. She must not attempt to divide his Authority, or so much as dispute it to struggle with her yoke will only make it gall the more, but must believe him Wise and Good, and in all respects the Best, at least he must be so to her. She who can't do this is in no way fit to be a wife."

She continues this kind of dissertation for several pages more, but the discriminating reader will not fail to notice that in this honeyed sop thrown to the male Cerebus, there is a good deal of hidden satire, and the culmination of all her argument is :—Pray educate us women a little better that we may be the more capable of adequately admiring you men, which argument shows that there was a good deal of Mother Eve in this ancestor of ours. But in spite of the clerical and feminine influence brought to bear on her,

Mary Astell's

Mary Astell's robustness of character occasionally breaks free of their shackles, and towards the end of the volume she exclaims :

"A Woman should always remember that she has no mighty obligation to the man who makes love to her ; she has no reason to be fond of being a wife, or to reckon it a piece of preferment when she is taken to be a man's upper servant. . . . If a woman were duly taught to know the world, especially the true sentiments that men have of her, and the Traps they lay for her under so many gilded compliments—women would marry more discreetly and demean themselves better in a married state than some people say they do. A woman would then duly examine and weigh all the circumstances, the good and evil of the marriage state, and not be surprised with unforseen inconveniences, and either never consent to be a wife, or make a good one when she does it."

In a preface to the third edition she becomes even more courageous, and bravely asks :

"To whom do we poor Fatherless Maids and Widows who have lost their Masters owe subjection ? It can't be to all Men in general, unless all Men are agreed to give the same commands ; do we then fall as Strays to the first who finds us? from the Maxims of some Men, and the Conduct of some Women, one wou'd think so."

I have now given extracts from Mary Astell's three most remarkable volumes, to wit, "A Serious Proposal to the Ladies," "An Essay in Defence of her Sex," and "Some Reflections upon Marriage ;" and only wish that I had space wherein to quote more of her wise, witty, and sarcastic sayings. Tenderness was a quality that Mary Astell evidently did not possess.

Ballard tells us in his Memoirs that she had a very sincere friendship with Lady Elizabeth Hastings, who he relates gave her as much as four score guineas at one time. During the time she lived

lived in Chelsea she much resented her studies being interrupted by gossiping visitors, and when she accidentally saw needless callers coming, who she knew to be incapable of discoursing on any useful subject, but come for the sake of chat and tattle, she would look out of the window and jestingly tell them, "Mrs. Astell is not at home."

The end of her life was a very sad one, and she proved that her physical must have been as great as her moral bravery. For many months she concealed a terrible cancer in the breast. In the hopes that an operation might be successful, she went privately to a physician, and (remembering that chloroform was not known in those days) we cannot but admire her fortitude when we read that she "refused to have her hands held, and did not discover the least timidity or impatience, but went through the operation without the least struggling or resistance, or even so much as giving a groan or a sigh." But in spite of her stoical courage, she subsequently endured some years of suffering which she bore with the greatest fortitude, and died in 1731 at the age of sixty-three.