

Mary Astell (1666 - 1731)

We read the preface (in BB's Course Material) to *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700) by Mary Astell, who challenged traditional beliefs that women should always obey their husbands and should silently suffer even terrible abuse. Her beliefs about women were progressive for her time, but her political and religious views were conservative. She was for the absolute power of kings and against religious toleration. Her conservatism even affected her gender views. She compared a wife's duty to obey her husband to the duty of subjects to obey their king: A woman who marries, she claimed, chooses a king for life. But Astell's involvement in political debate led her to protest aspects of male authority. Her work on marriage is filled with Enlightenment language that stressed freedom from bad kings (tyrants), the rights of all people, and attacks on slavery and oppression. Astell uses the political philosopher John Locke's claim that *men are born free*, instead of being born subjects to a king or prince. Astell asks, "If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?" Such questions expose the hypocrisy of men who were for freedom from the tyranny of kings and yet who refused to extend such liberty to women in marital relationships.

