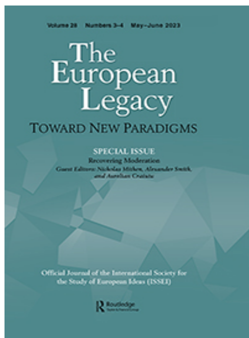

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Mary Astell on Moderation: The Case of Occasional Conformity

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ABSTRACT

In 1704, Mary Astell, known by many scholars as the "first English feminist," published *Moderation Truly Stated*, her contribution to the national debate over "occasional conformity." This was the practice of periodic participation in the sacraments of the Church of England—above all, taking communion—in order to become eligible for public office. This practice was defended as an exercise of the virtue of "moderation," viewed as the opposite of zeal and associated with politeness and reasonableness. In this article I recover Astell's critique on this new notion of moderation, as well as her own alternative conception of the virtue of moderation as *scripture moderation*, which she envisioned as zeal and indifference towards the right ends. My aim is threefold. First, to explore the dangers of conceiving of moderation as an "antidote to zeal," which Astell argued would be detrimental to truth, salvation, and moral progress. Second, to demonstrate that her own conception of moderation as zeal and indifference towards the right ends was a radical subversion of the discourse on moderation at the time. Third, to shed light on the role of the Occasional Conformity debate in the transformation of moderation from a Christian virtue of temperance and control into a "modern" virtue construed as politeness and opposed to zeal, which was to become dominant in eighteenth-century England.

KEYWORDS
Mary Astell; Occasional Conformity debate; moderation; zeal; feminist political thought

> *But Unity and Concord, Peace and Moderation, are Means that You, and I, and all Good Men Agree in, only we are not so well agreed what is Moderation, or what Methods are most like to procure the so desired Peace and Unity.*
>
> —Mary Astell, *Moderation Truly Stated* (1704)

In 1704, Mary Astell (1666–1731), known by many scholars as the "first English feminist,"[1] published the pamphlet *Moderation Truly Stated*. This was most immediately a polemical intervention in a heated partisan debate concerning the practice of occasional conformity, by which dissenters periodically participated in the sacraments of the Church of England, usually by taking communion, in order to become eligible for public office under the Corporation Act and the Test Act, whilst still attending nonconformist religious meetings.[2] The Occasional Conformity debate centred around the Occasional Conformity Bill, first proposed in 1702 by the Tories, which was to ban the practice, and

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so to exclude dissenters from the Church of England from holding public office—including civil, military, university, and religious offices.

The Occasional Conformity debate occurred during what is generally referred to as the "Rage of Party," the period from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 to the death of Queen Anne in 1714.[3] As Brent Sirota has pointed out, historians tend to view the debate merely as "a particularly bitter manifestation of the 'rage of party' between whigs and tories."[4] While Sirota is perhaps right to point out that the Occasional Conformity debate merits more in-depth analysis, nonetheless it remains important to keep in mind that, as Max Skjönsberg has recently demonstrated, "the party question … consistently dominated political discourse" in eighteenth-century Britain, and as such the party question was central, too, in the Occasional Conformity debate.[5]

Astell was, to my knowledge, the only female pamphleteer to contribute to the Occasional Conformity debate. She was a singularly direct and uncompromising opponent to the male intellectuals around her. Her *Moderation Truly Stated* was written as a reply to the Presbyterian minister James Owen's pamphlet *Moderation a Vertue* (1703). In it, Owen defended the practice of occasional conformity, and argued that occasional conformists were not hypocrites but men of "moderation." The true threat to the Church, he maintained, was not occasional conformity, but rather those "zealous Church men" (or women, like Astell herself) who opposed occasional conformity. As this article will show, Astell attacked this increasingly conventional contrast between moderation and zeal directly, and in doing so offered her own moral theory of moderation as a solution to England's constitutional controversies.

Owen wrote a reply to his critics, *Moderation still a Virtue* (1704), but, to Astell's dismay, did not acknowledge her authorship, nor respond to her arguments.[6] Today, *Moderation Truly Stated* is still overlooked. It remains largely ignored by the secondary literature: it was excluded from Patricia Springborg's Cambridge edition of Astell's *Political Writings*, and, along with Astell's *Bart'lemy Fair*, is the only one of her works that has not benefited from a modern edition.[7]

This neglect of *Moderation Truly Stated* in the literature is unfortunate, for it is in this work that we find Astell's critique on moderation as it was conventionally construed in the Occasional Conformity debate, as well as her own alternative conception of *scripture moderation*. In this article, then, I recover both her critique of moderation and her own reimagination of it. My aim is threefold. First, to explore the dangers of conceiving of moderation as an "antidote to zeal," which Astell argued would be detrimental to truth, salvation, and moral progress. Second, to demonstrate that her own conception of moderation as zeal and indifference towards the right ends was a radical subversion of the discourse on moderation at the time. Third, to shed light on the role of the Occasional Conformity debate in the transformation of moderation from a Christian virtue of temperance and control into a "modern" virtue that was opposed to zeal, and as such associated with the anti-zealous dispositions of politeness, neutrality and reasonableness. This notion was to become dominant in eighteenth-century England.

I begin by asking why Astell took issue with occasional conformists, rather than with dissenters in general. This reveals her distinction between "dissenters in conscience" and "dissenters in faction," a distinction explained partially by her personal connections to several "nonjuring" Anglican priests, who refused to take an oath of allegiance to King William. This experience led her to conclude that occasional conformists, not

conscientious dissenters, were a threat to the Constitution due to their hypocrisy and dishonesty. If one could be so moderate as to change from a conformist to a dissenter and back again, so Astell argued, then such moderation was not a virtue, but rather a contemptible "lukewarmness."

Instead, Astell offered her own conception of moderation, namely *scripture moderation* which she defined as zeal and indifference directed towards the right ends. Although she conceived of it as both zeal and indifference, throughout *Moderation Truly Stated* she emphasised zeal, for as she saw it, this was sorely lacking in the Occasional Conformity debate. As such, she reimagined moderation as a righteous zeal towards those things that matter, such as God, religion, and moral progress. In the context of the Occasional Conformity debate, Astell thus sharply observed that the language of moderation could be abused to justify destructive practices, like occasional conformity. What is more, she argued that moderation as the opposite of zeal was not a virtue, but a vice that prohibits subjects from zealously and sincerely discussing the things that mattered most—religion, salvation, and moral progress—while persecuting and excluding important, if often controversial, voices.

Occasional Conformists, Dissenters, and Nonjurors

In his influential book, *The Rule of Moderation*, Ethan Shagan argues that in seventeenth-century England, moderation was a term that denoted, at least in part, restraint. This entailed both self-restraint *and* external restraint, in particular the government restraining those it deemed could not be trusted to restrain themselves.[8] As such, he contends that moderation had a dangerous side of coercion and violence. Whether one accepts this thesis or not, Shagan demonstrates that in this period, moderation was invoked as a common rhetorical strategy in religious and political debates for the moral justification of controversial positions. He also gestures towards the fact that in the eighteenth century, the concept of moderation came to mean the opposite of enthusiasm—what Aurelian Craiutu has described as an "antidote to (political and religious) zealotry"[9]—and as such became laden with connotations of reasonableness, politeness and sociability. Shagan writes that "this was essentially the transition from 'moderation' to 'politeness' as the core value of public discourse."[10] As we will see, appeals to moderation on all sides of the Occasional Conformity debate would seem to confirm Shagan's thesis.

As noted earlier, Astell's *Moderation Truly Stated* was written as a reply against Owen's *Moderation a Vertue*, where he argued that occasional conformists were men of moderation, and that for this reason they were beneficial to the Church of England. He presented these "moderate men" as models of charity and politeness who did not "*despise* or *judge* one another."[11] Furthermore, they were men of neutrality and reasonableness because they did not confine their "Communion to any one Sect or Party of Christians" but instead their "*Catholick Spirit*" was universal (12). Owen thus pitted moderation against profanity and judgment of others and connected it with the "*Reformation of Manners*" (25). As Mark Knights has pointed out, in the context of the Occasional Conformity debate, moderation connoted not simply religious neutrality and charity, but also a polite manner of speech, consisting of rational, sober, and dispassionate debate.[12] Furthermore, as Sirota has noted, for defenders of occasional conformity, moderation came to mean "a charity well

beyond mere tolerance," whilst for its opponents it came to signify a worrying religious indifference.[13]

Another important proponent of occasional conformity was the economist and Tory politician Charles Davenant, who was Astell's target in the "Prefatory Discourse" in *Moderation Truly Stated*. His *Essays upon peace at home, and war abroad* (1704) was commissioned by Queen Anne herself.[14] Here, he construed moderation explicitly in "Terms of Neutrality" and argued that only this could transcend political strife and factions. This was why, according to Davenant, occasional conformity should be commended, despite his general disapproval of dissent.[15] It is striking that this notion of moderation was embraced by *both* sides of the political spectrum—for it was not only espoused by Whigs, but also by Tories such as Davenant. This, combined with the fact that contributors to the debate recognised this as a new notion of moderation, supports the thesis that the meaning of moderation transformed in the eighteenth-century from a Christian virtue of temperance and control to a notion of politeness and sociability. As we will see in Section III, in *Moderation Truly Stated* we find Astell's critique of this new meaning of moderation.

First, however, we must consider why Astell, as a Tory devoted to the Church of England, supported the Tory-backed Occasional Conformity Bill. She saw it as a means to secure "the Constitution" (*MTS*, lxii). Time and again she warned that "'tis the *Constitution* they fall foul on, all their endeavours are to break this, and to place it on a new foot" (78). In order to understand why the Bill might secure "the Constitution," we must ask what Astell meant by the Constitution. She clearly believed that it should include the national Church, for "all honest *English-men* are convinced that the Ecclesiastical Constitution is as much part of the Government as the Civil" (31) and that "Regal Authority has no other solid Basis to rest upon but the Church" (xlvi). According to Astell, "Government … is from God" (26) and the "Supreme Magistrate … Acts by Divine Authority" (28).

In England, not only was the Supreme Magistrate—who in this case was a woman, Queen Anne—head of state, she was also head of the national Church. Thus, Astell concluded, one could not be true to the Supreme Magistrate and the Constitution without also being true to the Church of England (31–32). In this sense, the Bill could secure the Constitution by not allowing anyone disloyal or untrue to it to reach a position of power, which would put them in a position to overthrow or undermine it. Only loyal members of the national Church, she argued, should be able to obtain these positions.[16]

This view of the Constitution and of duties of office-holding allowed Astell to perceive occasional conformists as a threat against the Constitution, that is, Church and State, not because they were dissenters, but because they were hypocrites.[17] Throughout *Moderation Truly Stated* Astell was preoccupied with condemning and exposing the hypocrisy of using religion and conscience as a guise for secular, selfish motives. For instance, she wrote, "Secular Interest and Party being the great Wheel that puts the Separation in Motion, *Occasional Conformity* … is made use of by others to Act the Part of an Enemy under the Disguise of a Friend" (95–96). It was "*Secular Interest and Party*," that is, egotism or self-interest, that created faction and separation. However, for Astell, this egotism was not something inherent in all dissent, which becomes clear in her distinction between *dissenters in conscience* and *dissenters in faction*:

> All Dissenters of what kind soever, come under one of these Two Denominations; (I.) Such as Dissent purely for Conscience sake, and these are the Weak, the Ignorant, and the misled. . . . The other sort are such as have little or no Conscience, tho' they make mighty pretences to it . . . these are the Managers, the Leading-Men, who keep up the Separation, and lead the other as they think fit. (91)

Whilst Astell did not think highly of dissenters generally, she evidently took political issue with the latter kind only, since for the former "one has a true Compassion . . . and would allow them all the ease that can be given" (92).

On this view, occasional conformists belonged to the dissenters "in faction." They were the men who made pretences to conscience, but in fact did not have religion in mind at all, but merely their own advancement, thus acting on "a Secular Motive" (34). By contrast, dissenters in conscience were not occupied with "*Secular Interest and Party*," or their own advancement. Whilst Astell saw them as weak and ignorant, they were precisely *not* hypocrites: they listened to their (albeit erroneous) conscience and followed suit.

Astell's view of nonjurors sheds some light on her compassion for dissenters in conscience. There were those, generally Tory and High Church Anglicans, within the Church of England who did not take the Oath of Allegiance to the new regime of King William III, after the so-called "Glorious Revolution" of 1688. They felt that it would contradict the previous oath they took to King James II as former head of state and church. As a result of this schism, the so-called "nonjurors" lost their benefices. A friend and patron of Astell, William Sancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury, was one of the most prominent nonjuring bishops. When Astell arrived in London as a young woman, alone and lacking financial means, she wrote to Sancroft asking him for help. He not only agreed to help her financially, but also introduced her to her future publisher and enabled her to move in social circles befitting a gentlewoman.[18] Later in life, Astell corresponded with other well-known nonjurors such as George Hickes and Henry Dodwell.[19] As such, her own interest and personal experience with nonjurors may have influenced her assessment of the politics of conscience. She seemed to adopt the nonjurors' assessment of conscience as a religious judgment, rather than that of Tories like William Sherlock, who attempted to soothe consciences with a *de facto* justification of William III's rule.[20]

It is important to keep in mind that dissenters were not only comprised of those who turned away from the Church of England. After all, nonjurors were *also* conscientious objectors in that they created a schism within the Church of England. In Astell's view, however, England had nothing to fear from them—despite the fact that the "Mobb" identified them as the main threat to the Constitution—since nonjurors "were so conscientious as to suffer rather than take an Oath, they judg'd Unlawful, now that they have sworn to Her Majesty they will never break their Oaths" (105). For Astell, conscientious dissent could be legitimate, even if it was ecclesiastically damaging.

Furthermore, Astell made it clear that the real culprits were not nonjurors, nor the papists who openly declared animosity rather than *pretend* loyalty, but rather those ambitious and factious men who merely pretended to conscience: "False Friends who wear her Livery that they may more effectually betray her [the Church of England], are abundantly more dangerous than open and declared Enemies" (*MTS*, 37). On this argument, being openly partisan and righteous, much like Astell herself, was preferable to polite pretence.

It is not the case, however, that Astell found dissent altogether unproblematic. She sometimes seemed to take dissent to be at the heart of all faction, and that faction in turn could lead to the destruction of Church and State.[21] However, even if all faction was rooted in dissent, it does not logically follow that therefore all dissent would *necessarily* lead to faction and the subsequent destruction of the Constitution. In *Moderation Truly Stated*, there is a lengthy historical account (53–58) of times when Protestant dissenters either showed "Visible Proofs that they design to disturb the State" (xi) or had indeed brought about the ruin of the state. The point of this historical discussion was not, however, to illustrate that the dissenters ruined the state due to their very act of dissent. Rather, Astell's point seems to have been that these "Factious and Ambitious Men" (117) never truly acted from religious motives, but again, rather from their own selfish and egotistical motives of temporal advancement. These were all dissenters in faction, then, not in conscience.

Hypocrisy and Conscience

Why did Astell think occasional conformists were necessarily disloyal to the Constitution? Why did they fall into the category of "dissenters in faction"? One could argue that their willingness to at least *occasionally* conform showed that they were in fact true to it—truer than other dissenters, perhaps. It will prove helpful here to look at what I consider to be Astell's knock-down argument against the practice of occasional conformity:

> [I]f the Dissenter can Conform sometimes, either he thinks Conformity is not absolutely Unlawful, and then what can justifie his Separation, so opposite to many plain Precepts, and so contrary to the very Design of the Gospel? Or if he judges Conformity to be absolutely Unlawful then his Conscience can allow him *sometimes*, in that which he owns to be Unlawful; and what must every honest Man think of such a Conscience? So that upon the whole matter, it can't be Conscience, whatever else it is, that keeps him from the National Church, and if not Conscience as He pretends, (because nothing but Conscience can excuse his Separation) consequently he dissembles in Matter of Religion; his *Occasional Conformity* is not founded on a Religious, but on a Secular Motive, and therefore he is a Hypocrite. (*MTS*, 34)

We can summarise Astell's main point here as follows: legitimate dissent can only ever be dissent from conscience; if one's dissent is a matter of conscience, then it is impossible to conform *occasionally*—for one's conscience either agrees or disagrees with the Church of England. It cannot be so fickle and weak as to sometimes agree and sometimes disagree, hence, if one *does* conform occasionally, then clearly one is *not* acting from conscience, but from secular interest.

The occasional conformist was thus a man who pretended both that he dissented and occasionally conformed for religious reasons, when in fact there was no other explanation than that he did the latter for political and personal advancement. Regarding the former, for Astell, if a dissenter truly dissented for religious reasons, he would not engage in the practice of occasional conformity.[22] The occasional conformist was thus by definition a hypocrite.

For Astell the hypocrite was the opposite of her definition of a good person, someone who acted from integrity, rather than from sinister and selfish ends (*MTS*, xxvi). This person had "*One Heart and One Mouth*" (42). In other words, the good man was sincere. The hypocrite, for Astell, was the most dangerous threat to the Constitution, and occasional

conformity would enable him to reach a position of power. It was in the ambitious, factious occasional conformist's interest that there be a different Constitution, one in which the national Church was abolished and in which their "Party or Secular Interests" were better represented.[23] Herein, for Astell, lay the ultimate danger of the practice of occasional conformity.

One might question the validity of this last step from "one does not act from conscience" to "one must have a secular motive." Here it is important to look at Astell's conception of conscience—which as mentioned was closely related to the nonjurors' definition of conscience, namely, "that Judgment which determines a Man in the Practice of Religion" (48). As has been pointed out by Jacqueline Broad and Ruth Perry, time and again Astell urged her readers, and the general public, to make up their own minds.[24] If someone came to the conclusion that the doctrine of the National Church was wrong, then, she argued, they must follow their own judgment and dissent.

However, if someone dissents, then he could not occasionally, that is, when it suited him, conform to the Church of England—for that was simply not how conscience worked. If the dissenter's religious judgment could align with the National Church, then "what can justifie his Separation"? If he could not align his religious judgment with the National Church, then only secular motives could explain his occasional conformity.

Astell's conception of conscience also explains why she took dissenters in conscience to be weak, ignorant and misled, for which they should be treated with compassion (*MTS*, 91–92). Their judgment, from Astell's orthodox point of view, was erroneous, which led them into dissent in the first place. For her, the Church of England simply was right.[25] Interestingly, she claimed that "Every Church-Man at least *must* grant, that they Dissent out of Weakness and Ignorance, *otherwise he ought to go over to them*" (92, my emphasis). This is akin to partisan righteousness—if someone took the conscience of dissenters *not* to be erroneous, but in fact rather to have good reason to dissent, then why did they not dissent too? Similarly, if a dissenter did not think that the doctrine of the Church of England was mistaken, he should in turn conform to it.

This focus on sincerity might remind us of John Locke's arguments on toleration: when it came to the question of who should be included or excluded, he, too, foregrounded sincerity. As Mark Goldie points out, for Locke, "[t]o search sincerely after truth, even if failing to arrive, is held to be more valuable than to possess truth merely through happenstance or outward conformity."[26] Although there is no evidence that Astell had read Locke's works on toleration, either the *Essay* or the *Letter*,[27] it seems that she would have agreed with this. Yet she used this consummately Lockean, and indeed Whig, premise to end up at a very different place. Where Locke concluded that one should therefore refrain from punishing or restricting sincere dissenters, Astell concluded that whilst conscientious dissenters ought to be tolerated, and are even deserving of our sympathy, they must not to be given political power.

Locke would, presumably, have been against occasional conformity because it forced sincere dissenters to become insincere in order to avoid punishment. He would have been in favour of granting sincere dissenters positions of power in the government. Indeed, as Teresa Bejan points out, "*An Essay Concerning Toleration* suggested that dissenters who demonstrated their sincerity by suffering the consequences were generally better and more trustworthy citizens than the orthodox."[28] By contrast, for Astell, even sincere dissenters should not be allowed to hold office, for it would be impossible for them to

be true to the Constitution, of which the Church of England was such a crucial part. And as we will see, she did not see being barred from office as punishment. Women such as herself, of course, would never be allowed to hold office, regardless of their religious creed.

Astell's *Scripture Moderation*

We have seen that moderation was a heavily contested term in the Occasional Conformity debate. As the titular quote demonstrates, Astell was well-aware of this. She observed sharply that the term moderation was invoked by all parties to suit their own agenda: no one would call themselves "immoderate." Her self-proclaimed aim, then, in writing *Moderation Truly Stated* was to "endeavour as well as I can to settle the Point and to find out the true Meaning of Moderation" (3). What was Astell's verdict on the meaning of moderation, truly stated? She wrote:

> [T]hat *Moderation* which Scripture enjoins, and the only way of rendering *Moderation* a Vertue, is the *proportioning our Esteem and Value of every thing to its Real Worth*. When we are warm and assiduous about such things as deserve our Solicitude, and indifferent to that which is not worth our Application and Care, we are then *Moderate*. (6)

Astell's conception of moderation was thus not opposed to zeal but opposed to zeal or indifference *towards the wrong thing*. As such, it was immoderate to be indifferent about religion for instance, or to be zealous about material things. She rendered "St *Paul's* notion of *Moderation*" as "a contempt of the World and the things thereof" (10). The earthly world did not deserve our solicitude, but God and the afterlife did. Her definition of moderation was thus very different from that of the "Modern Advocates for *Moderation*" (10) in the early eighteenth century.[29] Tellingly, many proponents of occasional conformity also drew on St Paul—namely, his admonition to Philippians (4:5), "Let your moderation be known to all men, for the Lord is at hand."[30] Astell here suggested that St Paul's notion of moderation was in fact an argument *against* occasional conformity, not in favour of it.

It was of course neither the first nor the last time that Astell turned traditional interpretations of scriptural texts on their head. She did so perhaps most famously in *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700). Here, she discussed Corinthians 1:11, which was traditionally used to justify the subordination of women. She wrote that, "For by all that appears in the Text, it is not so much a Law of Nature, that Women shou'd Obey Men, as that Men shou'd not wear long Hair. Now how can a Christian Nation allow Fashions contrary to the Law of Nature, forbidden by an Apostle and declared by him to be a shame to Man? Or if Custom may make an alteration in one Case it may in another, but what then becomes of the Nature and Reason of things?" (*SM*, 11–12). We can thus see her reinterpreting St Paul's notion of moderation as another instance of Astell's tendency to question commonplace readings of scriptural texts.

Construing moderation as a conjunction of zeal and indifference might seem puzzling at first, as they are contradictory terms. Yet Astell's *scripture moderation* entailed zeal and indifference directed towards different ends, and as such they are not contradictory but rather complementary. On this interpretation, there are two conditions for moderation. First, we must be indifferent towards unimportant matters, such as fashion, popular praise, or bodily desires. Second, we must be zealous towards important matters, such

as religion, truth, and moral progress. One might note that since Astell emphasised that moderation entailed indifference towards this world, she contradicted herself in her zealous engagement in the Occasional Conformity debate. Was this debate—concerned as it was with the question of who gets to hold political power—not a very mundane debate indeed? Was *Moderation Truly Stated* not an expression of *zeal*, rather than indifference, for this world?

Yet, as we have seen, Astell thought that the very Constitution was under threat. She wrote to defend the Church of England, which in her eyes was the true faith and the key to salvation. While the question of who got to hold positions of political power might seem a very "earthly" question, for Astell it had repercussions for the truly important matters of religion and truth, and as such it was a matter that was to be approached with zeal, rather than indifference.

It may be objected here that Astell's point is simply that moderation should be seen as a scriptural virtue, and that it is the political approbation of moderation that was hypocritical and wrong. As we will see, her *scripture moderation* was closely related to the Christian virtue of temperance, as both virtues advocated a focus on the next world and God. However, Astell did not think moderation had no place in politics. *Moderation Truly Stated* rather shows us that whilst religious virtues like *scripture moderation* should have a place in politics, they were often used as veils for secular or private interest instead.

It is striking, however, that despite Astell's conception of moderation as both zeal *and* indifference, throughout *Moderation Truly Stated* her emphasis is primarily on zeal. As such, in the remainder of this article, I foreground Astell's conception moderation as *zeal*, and focus less on the component of indifference. Astell thought that zeal, not indifference, was sorely lacking in the Occasional Conformity debate. As we have seen, she argued that advocates of occasional conformity were motivated by a dangerous lukewarmness and neutrality in religion, or in other words, an indifference. What is more, "modern advocates" of moderation condemned zeal, regardless of the end it was directed towards. As Astell saw it, it was therefore zeal that was under threat, not indifference, and therefore *Moderation Truly Stated* should be construed as a defence of zeal, and less so of indifference.

It was not necessarily remarkable that Astell accused the occasional conformists of being hypocrites—although her arguments are more compelling and elaborate than those of many of her fellow Tory pamphleteers—nor that she asserted that the term moderation was misused by her opponents. However, it *was* remarkable that she decidedly did not view moderation as the opposite of zeal or passion, as it was viewed by nearly everyone in the Occasional Conformity debate—and would be the dominant view, too, throughout the eighteenth century—but instead radically reimagined moderation as zeal.

This means that Astell criticised not only the Whigs who were in favour of occasional conformity, but *anyone* who embraced moderation construed as the opposite of zeal. Given that she did not merely advance the Tory cause, but indeed also criticised fellow Tories such as Davenant for their embrace of the "new'" notion of moderation, means that it is not only Davenant's *Essays* that can be considered bipartisan, but that *Moderation Truly Stated* also works as a bipartisan broadside. To view Astell as merely another Tory hack is therefore unwarranted.[31]

In what might be a uniquely feminine perspective on exclusion, Astell used her conception of *scripture moderation* to argue that the ban on occasional conformity was not a form of persecution, because a truly moderate Christian

> will not therefore think himself injur'd, but oblig'd, by being disengag'd from this World, and left at full Liberty to pursue the great Concerns of the next. For that the Business of a Christian . . . is *to seek the Kingdom of GOD and his Righteousness*. (35)

In a sense, Astell claimed that being excluded from government was a *good* thing as it leaves one to pursue true moderation. Women, of course, could never hold public office, whether they were dissenters or adhered to the Church of England. As Astell pointed out in *The Christian Religion*, "the sphere allotted to us women who are subjects, allows us no room to serve our country either with our counsel or our lives . . . we are not allowed a share in the honourable offices in the commonwealth" (§291). This is not to imply, however, that Astell argued that women should be allowed to hold public office.[32]

Astell greatly admired Queen Anne, whom she described as "the Breath of our Nostrils" for "we know not how to Live if this fails us" (*MTS*, xxviii). Anne held the highest political office: she was the head of the Constitution. This was an advantage of the English as opposed to the French monarchy, as the former allowed women to come to power in this way at least. Astell's "Prefatory Discourse" to *Moderation Truly Stated* ended with an imagined debate between a Tory, Mr. Nokes, and a Whig, Mr. Styles, on the Occasional Conformity Bill. In the midst of their debate, a lady suddenly appeared and interrupted them: "Now if Women are such despicable Creatures, pray what's the plain English of all your fine Speeches and Dedications to her *Majesty*. . . . I would gladly be inform'd how many Men there are that Act above their Sex, or even equal to it?" (lii–liii).

An earlier feminist, Margaret Cavendish, similarly remarked that "all heroick Actions, publick Imployments, powerfull Governments, and eloquent Pleadings are denyed our Sex."[33] Again, this does not mean that Cavendish thought that women *should* be allowed to hold office. Instead, she, like Astell, denied that being barred from public office was truly a loss, for

> Nature be thank'd, she hath been so bountiful to us, as we oftenere inslave men, than men inslave us; they seem to govern the world, but we really govern the world, in that we govern men; for what man is he, that is not govern'd by a woman more or less?[34]

Men of course—both those in favour of occasional conformity, such as Owen, as well as those opposed to it, such as the dissenter Daniel Defoe—*would* have seen it as an affront to be barred from public office on the basis of one's religion, yet not on the basis of one's sex. It did not cross their minds to see holding office as a privilege that could be revoked, rather than a right that should be recognised. But of course, a woman would see it as such. *Scripture moderation* was precisely a reason why the Bill would *not* be intolerant or injurious to dissenters: not holding public office was a blessing in disguise, as true moderation required one to focus on God, religion and salvation, rather than on the mundane matter of political power.

Temperance

We might wonder why Astell rejected the conception of moderation espoused by defenders of occasional conformity. There is of course a long history of women being excluded from public discourse by being labelled unreasonable, hysterical, fanatical, or angry. Astell herself had experience with this: she was often deemed a nuisance by her male contemporaries and had ample experience with being shunned and ridiculed.[35]

Indeed, Owen himself accused her of being "*verbose and virulent*" (*MV*, 5, 24). In her pamphlet *A Fair Way with the Dissenters* (1704), published months after *Moderation Truly Stated*, she defended herself against this charge by noting that "if there appears any Bitterness in this, it arises only from the Plainness and Force of Truth, which ill Men cannot bear" (*FW*, 126).[36] In other words, for Astell, truth trumped politeness and sociability. It is tempting to think that she rejected moderation in this sense and embraced zeal because she knew that she would not be included in that "ideal of dispassionate, moderate, sober, rational ... discourse."[37] Whether or not this is the case, we do know that she decidedly thought this conception of moderation was a vice, not a virtue.

In Astell's "Prefatory Discourse," she engaged with Machiavelli's political thought. It may seem puzzling that Astell, a devout Anglican and Tory conservative, would have been attracted to the political thought of Machiavelli, the infamous Florentine political theorist. Indeed, in one of the few scholarly treatments of Astell's engagement with Machiavelli, Broad argues that Astell did not earnestly engage with Machiavelli at all, but merely used him as a strategic ploy.[38] Bejan has already suggested that this reading neglects the fact that Machiavelli's analysis of faction and ambition would have appealed to her.[39] Yet there is another feature in Machiavelli's thought that would have attracted Astell which Bejan neglects: namely, his rejection of moderation in the sense of "the middle course." Indeed, Machiavelli time and again rejected the middle course, or what Bernard Crick has called "the great 'either/or' theme" that runs through Machiavelli's writings.[40] For instance, Machiavelli wrote that he who steers the middle course "is very harmful; for they do not know how to be wholly good nor yet wholly bad" (*Discourses*, I.26). In a similar vein, Astell asked: "what are your half Saints and your half Villains good for?" (*MTS*, xviii) and noted that, "*methinks if a Man will needs be a Villain, his best way is to be a* Bold one ... and here again I agree with Machiavel, that half honesty is *good for nothing*" (xviii).

As we have seen in Sections I and II, Astell clearly preferred open enemies to the Constitution over those who *pretended* to be its friends—those "half Villains" who occasionally conformed, and occasionally dissented. She preferred openly zealous Churchmen and openly zealous dissenters to "moderate" churchmen and "moderate" dissenters, especially occasional conformists. Her attack on the "modern notion" of moderation, then, can also be seen as an instance of her aversion to the middle course. In *The Christian Religion*, we find Astell remarking that "virtues of the middle rank are most commended, but the greatest and most excellent are not understood, being too frequently miscalled by the names of vice" (§302). Examples that Astell gives of great virtues that are often understood as vices, are pride and ambition, which we will return to in more depth later.[41] This, too, seems in line with Machiavelli's remark that steering the middle course means that one does "not know how to be *wholly* good" (*Discourses*, I.26).

What united Astell and Machiavelli, then, among other things, was an aversion to moderation in the sense of steering the middle course. We can thus see that Astell, in the context of the Occasional Conformity debate, rejected both the "modern" notion of moderation as a rejection of zeal and associated with politeness and reasonableness, but also rejected moderation as "the middle course." Occasional conformists steered the middle course between conformity and dissent, which Astell viewed as the worst possible course, as Machiavelli had before her.

In her book *The Philosophy of Mary Astell*, Broad argues that Astell's *scripture moderation* is similar to Aristotle's doctrine of the mean: "in any given situation, the moderate

person determines the most appropriate or proportionate response to her circumstances." According to this interpretation, to be moderate was to "feel and act in accordance with the right reason, with the right intentions, toward the right goals" and as "a disposition to feel or to act in a certain way—to be angry, indignant, zealous, or greedy—in accordance with the worth of an object."[42] Broad draws a further parallel in arguing that for Astell, as for Aristotle, the mean or the moderate disposition was *relative to us, depending on our particular circumstances*. Yet this interpretation is not necessarily warranted by Astell's position that *everyone* ought to be zealous towards God, religion and moral progress, and indifferent towards this world. This did not seem like something that was relative to one's circumstances.

Instead, it will prove more fruitful to draw a parallel between Astell's *scripture moderation* and the Christian virtue of temperance.[43] Moderation and temperance have always been closely related. Both virtues stem from the Greek *sophrosyne*, a virtue of which Plato was one of the most influential theorists.[44] Indeed, he posited it as one of the four cardinal virtues, alongside justice, prudence, and fortitude. Whilst it is difficult to point to a precise definition of the virtue, it was to do with "the mastery of certain kinds of pleasures and desires." Plato noted that "[p]eople indicate as much when they use the phrase 'self-control' and other similar phrases."[45]

Additionally, Plato construed *sophrosyne* as a kind of harmony, where not only the ruling part agrees to rule over the other parts, but the ruled parts in turn agree to being ruled. As such, the virtue is closely related to Plato's concept of the tripartite soul. When the rational part rules over the spirited and appetitive parts, and these parts in turn agree to be ruled by the rational part, this creates harmony and balance in the soul. Helen North defines Plato's *sophrosyne* as "the virtue that controls pleasure and produces order and harmony."[46] What is more, for Plato it was this virtue that rendered us closer to the image of God. In the *Laws*, to the question of "what conduct recommends itself to God and reflects his wishes?" it is answered that "the *sôphrôn* is God's friend, being like him, whereas the immoderate and unjust man is not like him and is his enemy."[47]

As North points out, positing *sophrosyne* as the virtue that makes us most like God is what prompted early Christian moralists to adopt, and in turn transform, the Greek virtue. As a result of this transformation, temperance now had connotations of purity and chastity.[48] St. Augustine was an important contributor to this transformation of the Greek virtue of *sophrosyne* into the Christian virtue of temperance (*temperantia*). Augustine saw as its primary function the "restraining and quieting the passions which make us pant for those things which turn us away from the laws of God and from the enjoyment of His goodness."[49] It thus meant to turn away from bodily temptations, and instead turn one's attention to the divine. Whereas for Aristotle and later on for Aquinas, the scope of temperance was restricted to desires of food, drink and sex, Augustine took a much broader view. For him, temperance meant not only to "scorn all bodily delights" but also "popular applause" in order "to turn the whole love to things divine and unseen."[50]

Since Astell defined *scripture moderation* as a turning away from, or indifference towards "the World and the things thereof" and zeal towards the "next world," we can see how closely related it is to the Christian virtue of temperance—albeit with important differences. For many Christian theorists of temperance, including Augustine, it was the antithesis of pride, and as such was closely connected to humility, which essentially denoted a lowly regard of oneself.[51] Indeed, as the English Presbyterian church leader

Richard Baxter put it, humility was to have a "self-abasing, self-condemning judgment on ourselves."[52] One consequence of having a low opinion of oneself was to be able to bear insults well. The ability to "turn the other cheek" was an important sign of humility.[53] It entailed not only valuing God and the next world over oneself and this world, but also a condemnation of pride.[54] Indeed, the sin of pride, to have a high opinion of oneself, was seen as the opposite of the virtue of humility.

However, while Astell clearly did hold that we ought to value the next world *over* this world, she did not argue that we ought not to value this world, and our lives in it, at all. Indeed, in her *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies II* (1697) she writes that "if we disregard the Body wholly, we pretend to live like Angels whilst we are but Mortals; and if we prefer or equal it to the Mind, we degenerate into Brutes" (*SP II*, 231).[55] Similarly, in *The Christian Religion* (1705), Astell argued that whilst we must value the spiritual over the temporal, the temporal ought to be valued nonetheless (*C*, §164, §172). Additionally, since this world functioned as a probation for the next world, she argued that we ought to value it at least to this extent, which meant that we ought to try our best for this life and this world.

A more substantial difficulty is that far from condemning them as vices, Astell reimagined pride and ambition as virtues. In *The Christian Religion*, she asserts that one should aspire "to be in reality as good as he can be, for doing what the scripture commands" even though "*this is plainly what some people mean by pride*" (*C*, §237, my emphasis). For Astell, aspiring to perfection was "a very laudable and necessary ambition" (§99). Interestingly, she stated that it was bad to be "humble and unaspiring in some cases where we ought not to be so" (§283).[56] Far from viewing pride and ambition as vices or sins, as was the predominant view especially among Christians, Astell viewed them as virtues. While her *scripture moderation* therefore seems inspired by the Christian virtue of temperance, she remains unconventional, even in this tradition.

Conclusion

The role of moderation in the Occasional Conformity debate supports Aurelian Craiutu's assertion that in early modern Europe, moderation came to be seen as an "antidote to (political and religious) zealotry, fanaticism, and extremism."[57] Additionally, it supports the idea that the meaning of moderation in eighteenth-century England transformed from Christian notions of temperance, control and governance to a political ethic of polite discourse, willingness to compromise, and neutrality on controversial questions.[58] It also suggests that the Occasional Conformity debate played a significant role in this transformation, which is all the more reason to take this debate seriously, and not view it as just another instance of the "Rage of Party." This "new" conception of moderation in eighteenth-century England foregrounded social agreeableness and rejected zeal. It privileged the importance of form, or "a concern with the manner in which actions were performed" over substance.[59] As Lawrence Klein points out, this insistence on form entailed perhaps not so much a total rejection of sincerity, though it certainly implied a devaluation of its importance, as Astell had warned.[60]

Astell's attempt to change the discourse on moderation from a rejection of zeal to an appreciation of zeal shows that she was deeply concerned about the emergence of this new ideal of moderation as opposed to zeal and associated with politeness, neutrality, and reasonableness. Those who would come to count as moderate in this sense—such as

occasional conformists—were precisely those lacking in virtue, as she saw it. Frank, zealous, and even impolite disagreement was always preferable over polite, reasonable falseness.

Interestingly, when it comes to Astell's argument in favour of the Occasional Conformity Bill, she used *scripture moderation* to argue that it was not necessarily a bad thing to be excluded from office. Occasional conformists and dissenters alike should not be allowed to hold office because they could not possibly be true to the Constitution. But like those also excluded—namely, women—they could practice true, virtuous *scripture moderation* from the sidelines.

Recently, Sirota has argued that the Occasional Conformity debate constituted an exception to Shagan's argument that moderation was used as a justification of controversial practices. For in this context, Sirota argues, moderation was not used to defend "illiberal positions" but rather to defend the liberal position, namely, that of occasional conformity and toleration. On the other hand, the "onslaught" against moderation came from the *illiberal* position, namely that of nonjurors and High Churchmen like Astell.[61] However, as we have seen, Astell was not opposed to toleration. Furthermore, what her intervention in the Occasional Conformity debate has shown was that the practice of occasional conformity certainly *was* controversial not only to High Churchmen or nonjurors, but also to dissenters who were critical of occasional conformity.

Astell not only sharply observed that the language of moderation was used to justify what she argued was a dangerous practice, but, more importantly, she showed that the "new" meaning of moderation as the "enemy" of zeal, had a dangerous side.[62] If we were unable to zealously and sincerely discuss those things that mattered most, then important, albeit controversial, voices would be excluded and persecuted. In her view, this would be detrimental to the discovery of truth, salvation, and moral progress, and as such to society as a whole. What is more, perhaps she recognised that she would not be included in this new moderate ideal of dispassionate, sober and rational discourse. What makes Astell's contribution to the Occasional Conformity debate worth recovering, then, is not only her rejection of the "new" virtue of moderation but also her own radical reimagining of moderation as zeal towards the right ends.

Finally, we might wonder whether to reject moderation as an antidote to zeal, only to offer a version of moderation as zeal in its place, is not just the partisan ploy of which Astell was so fond. Was her positing of s*cripture moderation* an ironic ploy, or was she sincere in offering her own conception of virtuous moderation? The fact that she argued that it was a blessing to be barred from office, as this meant one could focus all one's attention on God, seems ironic indeed. If you are so religious, the thought seemed to be, as you "moderate" men claim, then why would you lament being at liberty to pursue "the Business of a Christian"?

However, if we view her notion of *scripture moderation* in light of her intellectual commitments, as well as the life she led, we have reason to take Astell to be genuine in offering us a different way of thinking about the virtue of moderation. Besides, in *A Fair Way* she hinted at her sincerity in positing *scripture moderation*: "Why was it *truly Stated*, but in order to *Recommend it?*" (117). Astell had great, uncompromising zeal for the Church of England, as is evident from the sharp-penned pamphlets she wrote during the first decade of the eighteenth century. She was zealous for the betterment of the position of women: she worked hard to give them access to education, and to help them focus on

their intellect as opposed to their appearance. It is also clear that Astell did not avoid conflict or confrontation, as we see in the controversy with George Hickes, for instance.[63] She has been described as a "savage and effective tory polemicist,"[64] and clearly cared less about sociability and politeness than she did about frankness and truthfulness. This is demonstrated in her clash with Francis Atterbury, the husband of a friend. Astell asked him if she could read over his sermon, which he happily obliged, only to have it returned to him with her copious critical thoughts and comments attached. He complained:

> 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 ... I dread to engage her*.[65]

Astell was thus a singularly direct, challenging, uncompromising opponent to the male intellectuals around her. For her, the "virtue" of moderation as an antidote to zeal was unnecessary and dangerous. As she saw it, zeal towards the right ends, towards God, religion, and moral progress, was *truly* a virtue. In a world dominated by men, in order to further the causes she found important, and in order to make her voice heard, Astell had to be uncompromising, zealous and righteous. One cannot help but think that she was right: if she *had* been polite and reasonable, we would not be talking about her today.

Notes

1. See Hill, *First English Feminist*.
2. Clark, *The Later Stuarts*, 224.
3. Skjönsberg, *Persistence of Party*, 5.
4. Sirota, "Occasional Conformity Controversy," 82.
5. Skjönsberg, *Persistence of Party*, 328.
6. In a later pamphlet, *A Fair Way with the Dissenters and their Patrons* (1704), Astell noted that Owen did not include her in the reply to his critics, saying that "he did wisely in over-looking *Moderation truly stated*, for to have consider'd it would have lost him one half of his Book" (114–15). Hereafter the works by Astell are abbreviated and cited with page or paragraph numbers in the text: *A Fair Way with the Dissenters = FW; Moderation Truly Stated = MTS; The Christian Religion = C; Some Reflections upon Marriage = RM; Serious Proposal I & II = SP I, SP II.*
7. Astell, *Political Writings*; Bejan, "Mary Astell on Equality, Hierarchy, and Ambition," 3.
8. Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation*, 7–8.
9. Craiutu, *Courageous Minds*, 27.
10. Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation*, 330.
11. Owen, *Moderation a Vertue*, 9. Hereafter abbreviated as *MV* and cited with page numbers in the text.
12. Knights, "Occasional Conformity," 57.
13. Sirota, "Occasional Conformity Controversy," 97.
14. Broad, "Astell's Machiavellian Moment," 11.
15. Davenant, *Essays upon Peace*, 239–64.; Cf. Sirota, "Occasional Conformity Controversy," 95.
16. Astell did not idealise members of the national Church: "I do not affirm that the Dissenters and their Patrons are the only Men who want the Vertues of a Patriot; or that all the Friends of the Church are Saints and Heroes, would to GOD they were!" (*MTS*, 110).
17. For the former and predominant view, see Zook, "Religious Nonconformity," 101; Broad, *Theory of Virtue*, 164; Goldie, "Mary Astell," 65–85.
18. Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 68.
19. For a discussion on a clash between Astell and Hickes, see Apetrei, "Astell's Tory Feminism," 507–23.

20 In his pamphlet *Plain Case*, Sherlock wrote, “the Present Power is King De Facto; and if we allow of God’s Providence, he is… ordained and anointed of God, and therefore is King De Jure.” Quoted in Goldie, *Tory Political Thought*, 86–87.
21 See e.g., Astell wrote: “Faction it self… *being* in its Nature pernicious, and producing more Fatal Mischiefs than Foreign War, Sickness, Famine, or any other Evil the Anger of Heaven brings down upon us: And therefore it ought to be the Concern of every private Man to put as quick an End as possible to what is so destructive to the whole” (*MTS*, iii).
22 This is also what Daniel Defoe initially argued. Cf. Defoe, *An Enquiry*.
23 Astell wrote, “whatever the Pretended Reasons of Revolutions may be, the true Reason is always the Change of hands; that Party which was neglected endeavouring to get into the Saddle” (*MTS*, 105).
24 For example, Astell wrote: “I would intreat him [my Reader] neither to believe Me or any other Writer on our bare word… but to see with his *own* Eyes, and to judge according to his *own* Understanding” (*MTS*, 2).
25 Interestingly, in *The Christian Religion*, Astell argued that if she had been born in Africa and had seen a Bible, she would have ended up as a member of the Church of England as well, which was the “most agreeable to God’s word” (cf. *C*, §54–57).
26 Locke, *Toleration and Other Writings*, Introduction.
27 We know that Astell read, and was impressed with, Locke’s *Essay Concerning the Human Understanding*, and that she read his *Two Treatises on Government*, which she did not think highly of. Locke’s works on toleration were published anonymously.
28 Bejan, *Mere Civility*, 123.
29 Astell wrote: “To be Moderate in Religion is the same thing as to be Luke-warm, which GOD so much abhors. … To be *Moderately* Honest is to be honest no longer than ‘tis for our turn. … To be *Moderately* Sober, is to guard our Temperance so long as Inclination, Company and Example don’t tempt us out of it. … A *Moderate* Friend is one that will do you no hurt… but he will do you as little good” (*MTS*, 5).
30 Sarkela, “Moderation, Religion, and Public Discourse,” 62.
31 For example, Weil, *Political Passions*, chap. 6; Smith, “English ‘Feminist’ Writings,” 729; Goldie, “Mary Astell,” 74–76; Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, 269, 359.
32 Although Astell did seem to think it unjust that women were denied political power: “The course of the world does not often lodge *power and authority* in women’s hands, though by the use is made of them, when providence has placed them there, one may reasonably conclude, that as it does not show the justice, so neither is it for the interest of men to withhold them” (*C*, §318); and “a little practice of the world will convince us, that ladies are as grand politicians, and every whit as intriguing as any patriot of the good old cause” (*C*, §150).
33 Quoted in Boyle, “Margaret Cavendish,” 527.
34 Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 61.
35 Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, esp. chap. 7.
36 See also Astell, *FW*, 117.
37 Knight, “Occasional Conformity,” 57.
38 Broad, “Astell’s Machiavellian Moment,” 11.
39 Bejan, “Mary Astell on Equality, Hierarchy, and Ambition,” 17.
40 Crick, ed., Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, 23; As Catherine Zuckert puts it in her discussion of Machiavelli on prudence: “Indecision is never good—or even possible. A decision not to take sides or to do nothing is nevertheless a decision that will have consequences.” Zuckert, *Machiavelli’s Politics*, 95.
41 See Astell, *The Christian Religion*, §99, §158, §236, §283; Cf. Bejan, “Mary Astell on Equality, Hierarchy, and Ambition.”
42 Broad, *Theory of Virtue*, 153.
43 I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.
44 North, *Sophrosyne,* 150–51.
45 Plato, “Republic,” 430e, in Cooper, *Complete Works*, 1062.
46 North, *Sophrosyne*, 192.

47 Plato, "Laws," 716c–d, in Cooper, *Complete Works*, 1402–3.
48 North, *Sophrosyne*, 312.
49 Augustine, *Of the Morals of the Catholic Church*, I.19.35.
50 Ibid, I.19.36.
51 Konkola, "Meek Imperialists," 10.
52 Baxter, *The Practical Works*, VIII:6. Quoted in Konkola, "Meek Imperialists," 10.
53 Ibid, 11.
54 Ibid, 7; Dunnington, *Christian Virtue Theory*, 71.
55 Astell, *Serious Proposal II,* 231.
56 Interestingly, among the books at Magdalene College Old Library that were recently discovered by Catherine Sutherland to have been part of Astell's personal library, there is a book on humility, *A Practical Discourse of Humility* (1681) by William Allen. In the margins, Astell wrote: "a dejected & sneaking S^{pt} in Adversity to sign of Humility, but is oftenest seen in those who are puft up wth Prosperity" (Cambridge, Magdalene College Old Library, B.17.8, p. 5). Those who often *seem* most humble by outward signs, are in fact the least humble. For more on the Astell book collection, see Sutherland, "Books Owned by Mary Astell."
57 Craiutu, *Courageous Minds*, 27.
58 Cf. Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation*, 330; Klein, "Politeness," 874.
59 Klein, "Politeness," 874.
60 Ibid.
61 Sirota, "Occasional Conformity Controversy," 83.
62 Shagan seems to recognise this when he acknowledges that "[o]f course, politeness was often still coercive," nonetheless, he argues that "While coercion had been understood as an outcome or even a facet of moderation, it was an exception to politeness." Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation*, 330.
63 See Apetrei, "Astell's Tory Feminism."
64 Weil, *Political Passions*, 142.
65 *Biographia Britannica*, 3713 (my emphasis.)

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