

winter darkness is "shouted out through open windows" and "poetry lays ambushed in the details; in the blessed dripping from the broken rain gutter, for example."

Wassmo's suspenseful grip on the reader, however, has as its source her powerful depiction of another kind of test for survival. The novel begins with the sentence: "She didn't know when she first became aware of it: the danger." Danger carries the name Henrik. He is Tora's stepfather, in whom the sadism inherent in uncontested power has overcome all bounds, and hence no longer needs to explain itself. For Tora life constantly menaced means familiarity with the dark side of the unpredictable. It means being held over the edge of a cliff which overhangs the ocean; it means being able to identify a person by his/her footsteps in the dark, or listening to steps so silent that only the breathing "they're full of" audibly identifies imminent danger. The notion "A room of one's own" takes on a twist the colour of black lightning. A room of one's own is not sufficient unless it has a door that can be locked, with a lock that holds.

Wassmo's writing reflects keen authorial understanding of how fear affects the human psyche, how it fragments a whole; hence the many images of dismemberment in the novel. It is the hands

that first become visible in the dark. Sensing threat, Tora's heart somehow hangs outside her body and "it takes a while to get it back inside again." Wassmo also links the phenomenon of fragmentation with concretized emotions. Shame is something into which Tora "creeps" or which often "fills her head" as if it were something solid; but since shame is God's invention, it is inescapable. The notion of shame in Wassmo's narrative also emphasizes the unexamined hypocrisy of the socially conventional. In the dramatic language of the religious, Tora is termed an outsider because she is "the result of the wages of sin." In the harshly realistic language of cruel children (all too apt at mimicking their elders) she is called "the German bastard," an identity painful to endure in post-war Norway.

Wassmo's novel can be viewed as representative of feminist fiction to the same degree as we view male writing about the various Huck Finns as representative of male/ist fiction. Her stark realism deglamorizes war and emphasizes its demoralizing effects which last long past the last skirmish. Unmistakably, hatred once unleashed necessarily persists in finding scapegoats and new targets. Moreover, while wartime's embittering experiences happen to both Tora's mother, Ingrid, and Henrik, Ingrid cannot afford to indulge in self-destruction and self-pity. As female

characters — Ingrid, her sister Rachel, Tora's curiously misnamed girl-friend Sol, and most magnificently Tora herself — emerge stronger than some of the male characters, it is also evident that they have no option but to endure at all costs. Thus, in Wassmo's fictional world, male-invested power turns against itself and life goes on although nothing can be fully erased or blotted out. The unarticulated love between Tora and Ingrid, sparsely and movingly sketched, forms an incontestable bond between them. Together Wassmo's characters, male and female, weak and strong, seemingly simple and on reflection complex, make up a fictional mosaic of the unsentimentally human. Significantly, Tora's passage from childhood to adolescence evokes in the reader near-perplexing awe. A menaced child who observes light rising from the grey and blue of the ocean and insists that the glow illuminates the sky against the pragmatic adult commentary to the contrary, is nurturing an inner core which will remain unassailable. In fact, it is in the depiction of Tora's inner growth that Wassmo's narrative skills most manifestly succeed.

In the end the novel, despite its dramatic conclusion, resists easy summations. Rather, it raises some disturbing questions, such as: why is a painfully and deservedly won victory inevitably accompanied by feelings of guilt?

THE CELEBRATED MARY ASTELL: AN EARLY ENGLISH FEMINIST

Ruth Perry. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

THE FIRST ENGLISH FEMINIST: 'REFLECTIONS ON MARRIAGE' AND OTHER WRITINGS BY MARY ASTELL

Edited by Bridget Hill. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.

Ann B. Shteir

Mary Astell (1666-1731) was an essayist and a writer of religious and political tracts, and part of a tradition of femi-

nist polemic which Moira Ferguson has delineated in her *First Feminists* as yet another women's tradition in writing. The two works for which Astell is best known are: *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies For the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest* (Part I 1696, Part II 1697) and *Reflections on Marriage* (1706). In the field of 18th century women's studies two Marys constitute the parentheses around the richness of feminist ferment: Mary Astell at the beginning and Mary Wollstonecraft at the end. They are both Enlightenment rationalists who analyze female oppression within marriage. Both attack prevailing forms of education for women and modes of fashionable behaviour. Both also see sexuality as problematic for women. But whereas Astell's ideal education for women is single-sex, Wollstonecraft's is not. Whereas Wollstonecraft's world is mother-centered, Astell's vision is woman-centered and also celibate. Above all, Wollstonecraft's

critique of women's education is part of a larger social critique, calling for transformation in institutions, whereas Astell writes as a political conservative committed to the institutional status quo. Astell's writing poses problems, therefore, for those who want pure links between feminist critiques of women's circumstances and a call for transformation in the socio-political institutions responsible for women's oppression.

Astell was born into a prosperous family in northern England, and she maintained a level of material comfort throughout her life. She was allied to Anglican ideology and to political views which elevated monarchy over incipient democratic theory. She supported the dominant conservative ideology of her day in many ways. Yet within that she worked fiercely for women. In the ferocity of her commitment to women's education and in her acerbic analysis of marriage, she had no counterpart at her time as a writer.

In *A Serious Proposal* Astell criticizes the meagre and shallow opportunities women had for self-enlargement. She urges the establishment of a convent-like college for women who wanted to retire, in the long-term or the short-term, from a world centered on fashion and on men, to choose instead a woman-centered world of religious and intellectual study and good works. She writes this about her ideal community of women:

Happy retreat! which will be the introducing of you into such a Paradise as your Mother Eve forfeited, where you shall feast on Pleasures, that do not, like those of the World, disappoint your expectations, pall your Appetites... Here are no Serpents to deceive you, whilst you entertain yourselves in these delicious Gardens ...

Her women's college would also serve as a temporary refuge for young wealthy women besieged by "desiring men." Astell was passionate about female friendship, and she had a cadre of pious and learned women who were committed to charity work of various kinds. One project they worked on was to establish an actual school for women in London on the model Astell describes in her *A Serious Proposal*, but this was not successful.

Her *Reflections on Marriage* is a more complex document but one which must have struck a responsive chord in the early 18th century, for it was reprinted several times. Written in response to a well-known case of a husband's tyranny over his wife, Astell ranges in this polemic over the oppression of women within marriage, and criticizes the socialization of women which teaches them to have no options in life other than marriage.

Yet Astell is committed to the power of authority within Church and State. She

believes that when a woman marries — if and when she decides to marry — she must accept the authority of her husband, and exercise appropriate submission. Her essay combines unmistakable sarcasm toward marital tyrants with an argument about traditional sexual politics within marriage which makes the essay very disturbing to modern readers. Perry's discussion of this document helps us understand better the complexities around Astell's position.

Ruth Perry's biography of Mary Astell is the first book-length study since a Ph.D. thesis by Florence Smith in 1915. Once again, we see second wave feminism picking up on a topic which first wave feminism offered us, but which then had mainly antiquarian impact. Perry's biography is exemplary for several reasons. It is based on extensive archival work on Astell. Perry dug to excellent purpose into primary and secondary materials to put together her picture of Astell's life. We know more about Astell life than ever before. Perry also presents Astell not in idiosyncratic isolation but rather as a woman of her time, doing important work out of the vocabulary of her historical period. Many stories and many details help us work back into that time. For example, Perry gives us, in an appendix, a list of the hundreds of books in the collection of Lady Ann Coventry, one of Astell's friends, to show what kinds of books an independent learned woman with money would have in her personal library. Another noteworthy part of Perry's volume is the inclusion in yet another appendix of a manuscript collection of verse by Astell as a young woman, which lay unidentified and unpublished until Perry came upon it in the Bodleian Library in Oxford a few years ago. This is an exciting chapter in the historical recovery of women's writing. The poems help to fill

out the picture of the work and thought of an important feminist writer who chose various genres of writing — the religious tract, the political tract, the polemic, and poetry — as ways to direct her formidable voice.

Bridget Hill gives us samples of Astell's voice in her anthology the *First English Feminist*. She presents the full text of *Reflections on Marriage* and substantial extracts from *A Serious Proposal*. As well, she offers one religious tract in its entirety, and excerpts from several others. She includes a few poems too. In all, Hill's anthology gives us the main writings of Mary Astell in accessible form for classroom use and for general reading.

Ruth Perry's biography and Bridget Hill's anthology are part of the very lively arena of women's studies work on the 17th and 18th centuries. Writers on the 19th and 20th centuries have given us many riches concerning women's lives, history and literature. We are now seeing the lens of historical research turned back farther to earlier periods. With respect to Astell in particular, it is no longer possible to write the history of early feminism without reference to her. Nor is it possible to consider British writing of the late 17th century without reference to her. From now on, we can expect to have more revisionist work which enlarges our picture of women's writing in the 17th and 18th centuries. We can expect, moreover, to have new ways of writing the history of British literature and culture. Was there, in fact, an Enlightenment for women? And how will the history of the novel be revamped when we finally take into full account the amplitude of novels by women? In ten years, the history of late 18th century British literature may look very different as a result of feminist work on themes inside novels by women and on how women writers shaped their stories

THOMASINES OPRØR

Klaus P. Mortensen. Copenhagen: G.E.C. GAD., 1986

JOHANNE LUISE HEIBERG. KÆRLIGHEDENS STED-BARN

Bodil Wamberg. Copenhagen: G.E.C. GAD., 1987

Karin Sanders

Two new biographies have cast light on the 'backstage' of the official facade of the 19th century Danish cultural scene: Klaus P. Mortensen's book on one of Denmark's first great women writers, Thomasine Gyllembourg (1773-1856) and Bodil Wamberg's book on the legendary actress Johanne Luise Heiberg (1812-1890).

The fates of Thomasine Gyllembourg and Johanne Luise Heiberg were inextricably linked. Together with Thomasine's son and Johanne Luise's husband, the well known aesthete, philosopher and author, Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860), they formed a unique *menage à trois* that became an important focal point of the cultural life in Copenhagen. Their home became an example of the correct aesthetic, of 'good taste,' and served as a