**“Since All the World is mad, why should not I be so?”**

**Mary Astell on Equality, Hierarchy, and Ambition**

Teresa M. Bejan

**Contact:**

[teresa.bejan@politics.ox.ac.uk](mailto:teresa.bejan@politics.ox.ac.uk)

Department of Politics and International Relations

University of Oxford

Manor Road

Oxford, OX1 3UQ

United Kingdom

**Biographical Sketch:** Teresa M. Bejan is Associate Professor of Political Theory and a Fellow of Oriel College at the University of Oxford. Her research brings early modern perspectives to bear on questions in contemporary political theory. She is the author of *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Harvard University Press, 2017).

**Abstract:** Ever since Mary Astell was introduced as the “First English Feminist” in 1986, scholars have been perplexed by her dual commitments to natural equality and (social, political, and ecclesiastical) hierarchy. But any supposed “paradox” in her thought is the product of a modernist conceit that treats equality and hierarchy as antonyms, assuming the former must be prior, normative, and hostile to the latter. Seeing this, two other crucial features of Astell’s thought emerge: her *ethics of ascent* and her *psychology of superiority*. These, in turn, illuminate her lifelong fascination with ambition as a feminine virtue, as well as her curious embrace of Machiavelli. Astell’s politics and ethics are thus worthy of recovery as the product of a singularly brilliant early modern mind and as a fascinating but forgotten vision of “equality before egalitarianism” that sheds light on the persistent complexities of equality, hierarchy, and ambition to this day.

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