In 1696 there appeared a scathing reply to the Astell–Norris letters in an anonymous work titled *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God*. This short tract was written by Damaris Masham, the daughter of Ralph Cudworth and a close friend of the empiricist philosopher John Locke. Ignoring Astell’s criticisms of Norris, Masham attacks both writers for espousing an impractical or ‘unserviceable’ moral theory, rather than one based on common sense. She accuses Astell and Norris of opposing the ‘daily Sense and Experience of all Mankind’. It is obvious, she says, that creatures are designed for a sociable life, and that they can no more love and desire God alone than fishes can fly in the air. In addition to the Astell–Norris letters, Masham targets Norris’s ‘Discourse Concerning the Measure of Divine Love’ and Astell’s first *Serious Proposal to the Ladies.*

Masham’s remarks sparked defensive responses from both Astell and Norris. In their replies, both writers misattribute the work to Locke — a mistake which is understandable given that Masham’s arguments are steeped in the empiricist philosophy of Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human*

---

1 Masham, *Discourse*, p. 92. The *Discourse* was translated into French in 1705 by Pierre Coste, the first translator of Locke’s *Essay* into French, and published in Amsterdam as *Discours Sur L’Amour Divin*. Jean Le Clerc reviewed the translation in his *Bibliothèque Choixie*.


‘To Oates,
Delivered to my Lady Masham
Mrs Astels Proposal to ye Ladies
Mrs Norris’s letters.’ (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Locke MS f. 10, fol. 251)
Understanding (1690). Masham has been variously described as a ‘blue-
stocking admirer’ of Locke, someone who ‘adopted Locke’s views’, a
‘Lockean feminist’, and ‘a clear and ardent exponent’ of Locke’s
ideas. Others have even maintained that Masham ‘sat loyally’ at Locke’s
feet as a pupil, or that she wrote ‘under the inspection of Mr. Locke’.
On the basis of their brief but heated exchange, Masham and Astell
are typically regarded as philosophical adversaries: Astell a disciple of
Norris, Masham a devout Lockean. Commenting on their differences,
Ruth Perry says that ‘All of this was predictable: that Masham’s posi-
tion would be as sensible and down-to-earth as Astell’s was abstract and
idealistic, that Masham would focus on life-on-earth while Astell stressed
preparation for the hereafter. Like seconds in the duel between Locke’s
empiricism and Norris’s idealism, their exchange is a fascinating reprise
of that debate.’ Patricia Springborg also observes that in this debate
‘Astell proved to be the spiritual daughter of Ralph Cudworth and
Masham the Platonist consort of Locke.’

In this chapter, however, I argue that there are many affinities between
the philosophical views of Astell and Masham. In a 12 March 1743 letter
to George Ballard, Thomas Rawlins observes that ‘Lady Masham...was
supposed to be Author of Mrs Astells Serious Proposal to the Ladies.* This supposition is not as absurd as it may seem because both Masham
and Astell are champions of women’s education, and believe that women
ought to improve their rationality to become useful members of society.
In addition, they challenge Norris’s occasionalist metaphysics: they do
not regard material things as causally impotent, they do not believe that
bodies are unable to affect souls, they believe in interaction between the
corporeal and incorporeal worlds, and they both ground these views
on a teleological conception of the created world. These similarities

3 Irvin Ehrenpreis, ‘Letters of Advice to Young Spinsters’, in The Lady of Letters in the Eighteenth
5 Bridget Hill (ed.), ‘Introduction’ to The First English Feminist: ‘Reflections Upon Marriage’ and Other
7 Benjamin Rand (ed.), The Correspondence of John Locke and Edward Clarke, reprint of 1927 edition
10 Thomas Rawlins to George Ballard, 12 March 1743; in the Bodleian Library, University of
Oxford, Ballard MS 41, fol. 231.
11 Although Masham’s feminist ideas do not appear in print until her second work, Occasional
Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life (London: A. and J. Churchil, 1705), in her 1682
poem, ‘When deaths cold hand shall close my eyes’, she touches on the topic of women’s reason.
It is possible that her poetry was passed around scribal publication circles and that, in this way,
between their views can, to some extent, be traced back to their common Cambridge–Platonist backgrounds.

I

Damaris Masham was born in Cambridge on 18 January 1659 and educated by her father, the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth. According to George Ballard, Masham developed a reputation for ‘uncommon learning and piety’ in her youth. She met the philosopher John Locke around 1681 and became his close companion and correspondent for more than twenty years. Locke lived with Masham and her husband, Sir Francis Masham, in Essex for the last thirteen years of his life. In one letter to Philippe van Limborch, dated 13 March 1691, Locke describes Masham developed a reputation amongst her peers for her defences of women. For example, in the poem she says

And our weak Sex I hope will then
disdaine yt Stupid ignorance
w:\ch was at first impos’d by men
their owne high merits to inhance
and now pleads custome for pretense
to banish knowledg witt and sense
Long have we here condemned been
to Folly and impertinence
but then it surely will be seene
There’s in our Souls no difference
when we no longer Fetterd are
but like to them o[ur] selves appeare.


Ballard, Memoirs of Several Ladies, p. 332.

Damaris married Sir Francis Masham (1649–1723) in June 1685. He was the third baronet of Oates in Essex, a member of Parliament, and a widower with nine children. Together they had one son, Francis Cudworth Masham, who was baptised on 8 June 1686.
Masham as ‘a remarkably gifted woman’. ‘The lady herself,’ he says, ‘is so much occupied with study and reflection on theological and philosophical matters, that you could find few men with whom you might associate with greater profit and pleasure.’

Masham’s early letters to Locke reveal a sound understanding of the neoplatonic views of Cudworth, Henry More, John Smith, and Joseph Glanvill. It is also possible that Masham had heard of Anne Conway’s writings. John Covel writes of an occasion when Conway stayed with Cudworth in the Master’s Lodge at Christ’s College, Cambridge, and Masham’s mother, Damaris Cradock, was second cousin to Conway. Francis Mercury van Helmont, one of Conway’s closest friends, was also one of Masham’s guests at her home in Essex, and Leibniz refers to Conway in a letter to Masham, saying that he would not have ventured to discuss intellectual matters with a woman if he had not been familiar with the perspicacity of other English ladies, such as ‘Mad. la Comtesse de Connaway’.

In one letter to Locke, dated 9 March 1682, Masham says ‘That I have no Ill Opinion of the Platonists I confess, nor ought you to wonder at that seeing I have spent the Most of my Life amongst Philosophers of that Sect in whom I have always found the most Vertue and Friendship.’ Later she jokes about her poetry that ‘the Vehicles of the Platonists (whatever the Vortices of Des Cartes were) were Always much more my Favourite then the Muses’. Despite the strong influence of Locke’s empiricism on her mature thought, Masham never fully abandons these Platonist roots.

Besides the Discourse, Masham wrote one other philosophical work, *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Virtuous or Christian Life*, published anonymously in 1705. Among her extant papers are letters to Locke,

---


16 Ibid., nos. 684, 687, 688, 695, 696, 699, and 1040.

17 Dr Covel, Cudworth’s successor, recalls that on one occasion ‘My Lord and Lady Conway & their whole attendance were entertain’d by Dr Cudworth many dayes, & were lodged partly at his private, & partly in the publick Lodgings & they all supped (at a Commencement night) in ye Publick Hall’. See ‘Christ College in Cambridge 1719. An Account of ye Master’s Lodgings in ye College, and of his private Lodge by itself’ in *Correspondence of Dr Covell*, vol. 11 (in the British Library, Add. MS 22,911, fol. 228).

18 See J. C. Whitebrook, ‘Samuel Cradock, Cleric and Pietist (1620–1706) and Matthew Cradock, First Governor of Massachusetts’, *Congregational Historical Society Transactions* 5 (1911–12), 183.

19 Leibniz to Masham, 14/25 December 1703; in Gerhardt (ed.), *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, vol. 111, p. 337.

20 Damaris Cudworth (later Masham) to John Locke, 9 March 1682; in de Beer (ed.), *The Correspondence of John Locke*, no. 690, p. 493.

21 Masham to Locke, 15 September 1685; ibid., no. 830, p. 735.

22 On this topic, I am influenced by Hutton, ‘Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham’, and ‘Like Father Like Daughter?"
Limborch, Leibniz, Anthony Ashley Cooper (the third Earl of Shaftesbury), and Jean Le Clerc, including the first biographical sketch of Locke, and several poems. Masham also had a correspondence with John Norris prior to the publication of the Discourse. In 1688, Norris dedicated his Theory and Regulation of Love to Masham, referring to 'The Esteem, where with your Ladyship honour'd my former writings'. He praises her as 'a Person of such nice and refined Sense, and whom Nature and your own unassisted Curiosity have Conspired to accomplish beyond what the Present Age can parallel, Or (unless you Ladyship will be persuad'd to bequeath some Monument of your extraordinary Genius to the world) the Future will ever believe'. In his Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life (1690), Norris also compliments Masham for being 'so much a Mistress' of the works of Descartes and Malebranche. It must have been a sad irony for Norris that the first 'monument' to her intellect was the Discourse, an unequivocal attack on his philosophy. Masham's break with Norris was personal as well as philosophical: in 1692, Locke accused Norris of breaking the wax seal on one of his letters to Masham; and Masham apparently became offended when Norris failed to omit a mistaken reference to her 'blindness' in the first edition of the Reflections. At around the same time, Masham also became sympathetic to the empiricist views of Locke, a permanent resident in her home from 1691.

In Masham's arguments against Astell and Norris, she draws on both the common-sense philosophy of Edward Stillingfleet, the Bishop of Worcester, and the epistemology of Locke's Essay. This combination may appear odd, because Stillingfleet is now chiefly remembered as Locke's adversary. But Masham blends their views to challenge what

26 In a letter to William Molyneux, 22 February 1697, Locke says of Masham that 'She has, 'tis true, but weak eyes, which Mr. Norris, for reasons he knew best, was resolv'd to make blind ones. And having fitted his epistle to that supposition, could not be hinder'd from publishing it so; though my lady, to prevent it, writ him word that she was not blind' (de Beer (ed.), The Correspondence of John Locke, no. 2202, p. 9).
27 Masham knew Stillingfleet personally and, prior to her marriage, sometimes stayed with his family in London.
she sees as a tendency toward ‘enthusiasm’ in the writings of Astell and Norris. Stillingfleet maintains that all theological and philosophical explanations of the world must be answerable to common sense. One might say that he wields a ‘common-sense razor’ in his writings: his method dictates that one should never go beyond the bounds of sense without necessity. He practises this methodology to defend orthodox Anglicanism, warning that ‘If once an unintelligible Way of Practical Religion become the Standard of Devotion, no Men of Sense will ever set themselves about it; but leave it to be understood by mad Men, and practis’d by Fools.’

Following Stillingfleet’s lead, Masham sets out to show that a religious or moral theory based on occasionalism is ‘out of the reach of common Sense’. She believes that ‘if it were generally receiv’d and Preach’d by our Divines, that this Opinion of Seeing all things in God was the Basis upon which Christianity was built, Scepticism would be so far from finding thereby a Cure, that it would spread itself much farther amongst us than it has yet done’. In her Discourse, she targets the Astell–Norris view ‘that Mankind are obliged strictly, as their Duty, to love with Desire, nothing but God only’, as well as the metaphysical argument that Norris offers in support of this belief: ‘That God, not the creature, is the immediate, efficient Cause of our Sensations.’ In the first instance, Masham differs from Astell, but in the second, she brings up almost the very same objections to Norris’s occasionalism. In both cases, Masham is against those theorists who advocate a transcendence or conquering of the material world in favour of a life devoted solely to the rational mind.

The primary difference between Masham and Astell lies in their views concerning the love of creatures. Like Norris, Astell believes that creatures deserve only a love of benevolence, a disinterested love motivated by altruism and charity. God, on the other hand, merits a love of desire; she believes that we must desire him as our good. This is the case because an absolutely perfect being could want nothing that we could wish for him, therefore he does not need our benevolence; and the creatures, being imperfect, could never satisfy our desires. Astell maintains that even

29 In seventeenth-century texts, an ‘enthusiast’ is someone who holds extravagant and visionary opinions not grounded in reason.
30 By ‘common sense’ Stillingfleet means that any philosophical explanation must conform to a reasonable person’s everyday beliefs and intuitions.
31 Quoted in Masham, Discourse, p. 6.
32 Ibid., p. 29.
33 Ibid., p. 71.
34 Ibid., p. 7.
35 On Norris’s treatment of the traditional scholastic distinction between a love of benevolence and a love of desire, see Acworth, The Philosophy of John Norris, pp. 156–60.
if bodies were able to affect minds (as she had argued), God would still be the only deserved object of our love of desire:

allowing that Bodies did really better our Condition, that they did contribute to our Happiness or Misery, and did in some Sense produce our Pleasure or Pain, yet since they do not will it, do not act voluntarily but mechanically, and all the Power they have of affecting us proceeds entirely from the Will and good Pleasure of a superior Nature, whose Instruments they are, and without whose Blessing and Concurrence they could not act, therefore they are not proper Objects of our Love or Fear, which ought wholly and entirely to be referred to him, who freely acts upon our Souls, and does us good by these involuntary and necessary Instruments.36

We must love God alone with a love of desire because he is still the author of our good, even when using instruments to perform his will. Arguing by analogy, Astell points out that ‘If a bountiful Person gives me Money to provide my self Necessaries, my Gratitude surely is not due to the Money but to the kind Hand that bestowed it.’37

By contrast, Masham believes that creatures can be loved with both a love of desire and a love of benevolence. While Astell and Norris define love as a movement in the soul towards good, Masham defines it as ‘that Disposition, or Act of the Mind, we find in our selves towards any thing we are pleas’d with’.38 Here Masham echoes Locke’s remark in the Essay that ‘our Ideas of Love and Hatred, are but the Dispositions of the Mind, in respect of Pleasure and Pain in general, however caused in us’.39 Locke claims that ‘the Being and Welfare of a Man’s Children or Friends, producing constant Delight in him, he is said constantly to love them’.40 Masham likewise says, almost verbatim, that we love our child or friend because their being is a pleasure to us.41 But she takes this definition further than Locke by applying it to the distinction between a love of benevolence and a love of desire. The disposition of love, Masham says, ‘cannot be distinguish’d into different Acts of wishing well, and desiring; which are other different Acts of the Mind, consequential to Love, according to the difference of the Object’.42 Benevolence and desire, in other words, are simply acts that follow from love, depending on the loved object. We may love our children with a love of desire when they are away from us, and yet at the same time we may also wish good

36 Astell to Norris, 14 August 1694; in Astell and Norris, Letters, pp. 284–5.
37 Ibid., p. 282.
38 Masham, Discourse, p. 18.
40 Ibid., 11.xx.5, p. 230.
41 Masham, Discourse, p. 18.
42 Ibid., pp. 18–19.
for them. In short, Masham believes that the creatures are capable both of being a good to us and of receiving good from us. The only difference between our love of creatures and the love of God is that we ought to love God above all things. So Masham diverges from Astell in that she believes that we may still desire material things as our good, whether or not they are the efficient causes of our pleasure. If occasional causes are always necessarily accompanied by a particular effect, according to Masham, then they may still be goods to us the same as if they were efficient causes:

Or must we think a beautiful Flower has not the same Appearance, whether it be believ’d that God has lodg’d a power in the Flower to excite the Idea of its Colour in us, or that he himself exhibits the Idea of its Colour at the presence of that Object? If the Flower is either way equally pleasing (as certainly it is) then it is also equally desireable.

There is no reason why the love of creatures should exclude the love of God, any more than ‘the Love of Cherries should exclude the love of our Friend that gives them us’.

Furthermore, in Masham’s view, we can love God only after we have loved other people: ‘if we lov’d not the Creatures, it is not conceivable how we should love God’. Following Locke, Masham denies that we have any innate moral principles; all our ideas are derived from sensation or reflection on the mind’s activities. No human being is born with the notion that ‘we ought to love and desire God alone’; it is not a self-evident truth. Human beings must ‘know many other Truths before we come to know this; which is a Proposition containing many complex ideas in it’; and we are not capable of framing such propositions ‘till we have been long acquainted with pleasing Sensations’. In other words, we can love God only if we have an idea of love; and to attain the idea of love, we

---

43 Ibid., p. 24.
44 Masham says that because God is the most perfect being, we ought to ‘pay the highest Tribute of Affection, and Adoration, to him that our Natures are capable of’ (ibid., p. 45).
46 Ibid., p. 88.
48 In the later work, Occasional Thoughts, Masham is more explicit:

To see what light we receive from Nature to direct our Actions, and how far we are Naturally able to obey that Light, Men must be consider’d purely as in the state of Nature, viz. as having no extrinsic Law to direct them, but indu’d only with a faculty of comparing their distant Ideas by intermediate Ones, and Thence of deducing, or inferring one thing from another; whereby our Knowledge immediately received from Sense, or Reflection, is inlarg’d to a view of Truths remote, or future. (Occasional Thoughts, pp. 60–1)

49 Masham, Discourse, p. 66.
must first experience sensations of pleasure in our interactions with other creatures. It is therefore unreasonable to propose that humans can love God alone, in the same way that it is unreasonable for the Fishes (if they were capable of it) to propose, or pray to God, that they might fly in the Air like Birds; or Ride Post-Horses as Men do.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 82-3.} It is obvious, according to Masham, that human beings are designed by God to love other creatures. "To say that Religion unfitts us for it, is to reproach the Wisdom of God as highly as it is possible."\footnote{Ibid., p. 124.}

Finally, Masham also explicitly attacks Astell for her Letters and the Proposal. In "The Preface" to the Letters, Astell modestly describes her own writings as 'crude Rapsodies'. Masham replies that 'Pompous Rhapsodies of the Soul's debasing her self, when she descends to set the least part of her Affections upon any thing but her Creator... are plainly but a complementing God with the contempt of his Works, by which we are most effectually led to Know, Love and Adore him.'\footnote{Ibid., p. 78.} Masham also claims that Astell's letters are 'not the Productions of Philosophical Disquisition'\footnote{Ibid., p. 78.} and describes her as 'a young Writer, whose Judgment may, perhaps, be thought Byassed by the Affectation of Novelty'.\footnote{Ibid., p. 120.} She warns that Norris's opinions are in danger of 'introducing, especially amongst those whose Imaginations are stronger than their Reason, a Devout way of talking'.\footnote{Ibid., p. 120.} She even makes pointed references to the Proposal, stating that Norris's type of unbridled enthusiasm 'can End in nothing but Monasteries, and Hermitages; with all those Sottish and Wicked Superstitions which have accompanied them where-ever they have been in use'.\footnote{Ibid., p. 125.} The basis of Masham's criticisms is the view that it is more reasonable to assume that God has created human beings to enjoy a sociable life. Masham concludes the Discourse by saying that

As for Monasteries, and Religious Houses, (as they are call'd) all who are acquainted with them, know that they are nothing less than what is pretended; And serve only to draw in Discontented, Devout People, with an imaginary Happiness. For there is constantly as much Pride, Malice, and Faction, within those Walls, as without them; And... very often as much licentiousness.\footnote{Ibid., p. 125.}

Masham sees the Proposal for an academy for women as a natural extension of Astell's view that we must love God alone with a love of desire, and thus rejects Astell's feminist plans as impractical and utopian. She interprets Astell as encouraging women to withdraw from the world, rather than offering a reasonable proposal for social reform.

\footnote{Ibid., pp. 82-3.} \footnote{Ibid., p. 123.} \footnote{Ibid., p. 27.} \footnote{Ibid.}
In sum, Masham’s Lockean views on morality set her apart from Astell. Like Locke, Masham believes that our idea of love originates with our sensations. On these grounds, Masham rejects Astell and Norris’s distinction between love of benevolence and love of desire, and claims that **we must love the creatures before we can love God, else we can have no idea of love.** Consequently Masham rejects a life devoted solely to the life of the mind.

In these respects, Masham also disrupts what Lloyd sees as the basis of women’s exclusion from intellectual discourse in that period: a stark polarisation between the superior ‘masculine’ trait of reason, and those inferior categories metaphorically associated with femininity, such as the body and the senses. When Masham argues against the Astell–Norris conception of love, Masham emphasises that the love of other creatures is necessary if we are to love the deity: we would not be able to love him unless we loved these things first, because the idea of love can be acquired only through sensory experience of other creatures. For this reason also, Masham’s moral thought is interpreted as stereotypically ‘feminine’ in that she emphasises the social ties between human beings. Lois Frankel points out that theorists such as Nancy Chodorow believe that child-rearing practices encourage males to define their masculinity in terms of detachment and separation. Females, on the other hand, are raised to see their identity in terms of relation and connection. Frankel claims that Masham’s moral theory is representative of the ‘female experience’ in that it emphasises a social life rather than a solitary, contemplative existence. Although it is difficult to accept that there is a homogenous ‘female experience’, it cannot be denied that Masham raises the moral status of those metaphysical categories that have been traditionally associated with the feminine in philosophical texts of the early modern period, such as the senses, the body, and matter.

Masham’s book provoked responses from both Norris and Astell. Norris wrote ‘An Admonition Concerning two late Books call’d Discourses of the Love of God’, appended to the fourth volume of his Practical Discourses (1698). His essay is also a response to Daniel Whitby’s Discourse of the Love of God (1697), another attack on Norris’s theory of love. In his ‘Admonition’, Norris mistakenly attributes Masham’s Discourse to Locke. Norris criticises ‘him’ (Masham) for the ‘unkindness and disrespect he expresses towards me’; and complains that there is a ‘spiteful Ayr’

---

running throughout the book. But he does not engage with Masham on a philosophical level. Toward the end of the essay Norris says: 'I was inclining once to have made some Remarks upon the particular Arguments, together with other incidental Passages that run through the Bulk of their Discourses, but a Kind and Ingenious Hand has saved me that Pains in relation to Mr. L.' Mary Astell is the 'kind pen' to whom Norris refers, and her response is *The Christian Religion*.

Although *The Christian Religion* was published nine years after the *Discourse* appeared, Astell takes particular offence against Masham's remarks about 'pompous rhapsodies' and 'driving Folks into Monasteries'. Astell says that

This is not a place to take notice, how those who are so severe upon their Neighbours for being wanting (even in Private Letters writ without the design of being Publish'd) in that exactness of Expression which ought to be found in Philosophical Disquisitions, do themselves confound the notion of Love with the sentiment of Pleasure, by making Love to consist barely in the act of the Mind toward that which pleases.

Astell believes that equating love with pleasure poses a problem for moral agency: since we cannot help being pleased with that which pleases, then this type of love is beyond our voluntary control; if we love something bad or evil, we are not free to do otherwise. For this reason, it is far better to define love as an intellectual endeavour of the soul toward good. Astell also takes up Masham's assertion that every man's experience confutes the view that no creature is a good to us, saying she would allow this 'just so much and no more than they will allow me, What the daily sense and experience of Mankind disproves what a great Philosopher asserts when he tells us, That Flame is not Hot and Light, nor Snow White and Cold, nor Manna White and Sweet'. Astell suggests that if all philosophical explanations must be answerable to common sense (as Masham suggests), then, by the same light, Locke's theory of secondary qualities is highly questionable. Overall, Astell apparently finds nothing in the *Discourse* to make her revise her opinions about the love of God and his creatures.

---

Nevertheless, Masham and Astell do agree on one key issue: unlike Norris, they oppose any theory in which real interaction between souls and bodies is denied. In the *Discourse*, Masham seems to arrive independently at Astell’s objection that Norris’s theory ‘renders a great Part of God’s Workmanship Vain and Useless’. Masham argues that if material beings are causally ineffectual, and if it is God himself who represents the idea of material things to our souls, then our sensory organs must be completely superfluous. But if this is so, she says, then it is contrary to the idea that God is supremely wise, because a perfect being would have eliminated any arbitrary features from his design. Hence Masham accuses Norris of detracting ‘from the Wisdom of God, in framing his Creatures like the Idols of the Heathen, that have Eyes, and see not; Ears, and hear not, & c.’ She says that if we believe that creatures are the occasional, rather than the efficient causes of our sensations, then the Wisdom of God cannot herein be equally admired, because it is not equally conspicuous. For if God immediately exhibits to me all my Idea’s, and that I do not truly see with my Eyes, and hear with my Ears; then all that Wonderful Exactness and curious Workmanship, in framing the Organs of Sense, seems superfluous and vain; Which is no small reflection upon infinite Wisdom.

In addition, Masham repeats Astell’s assertion that Norris’s theory does not comport well with God’s majesty. Astell implies that it would be beneath a perfect being to be constantly intervening in earthly events, as Norris believes he does. Similarly, Masham says that it is ‘unworthy of, and mis-becoming the Majesty of the great God, who is of Purer Eyes than to behold iniquity, to be as it were at the beck of his sinful Creatures, to excite in them Sentiments of Delight and Pleasure, whenever they are dispos’d to transgress against his Laws’. Masham takes the same argument further than Astell to claim that Norris’s theory forces God to be ‘a partner in our wickedness’. An unacceptable consequence

---

67 Astell to Norris, 14 August 1694; in Astell and Norris, *Letters*, p. 278.
70 *Ibid.*, p. 102. Here Masham’s comments resemble those in Locke’s ‘Remarks’, written at Oates in 1693. Locke writes ‘And so, whatever a man thinks, God produces the thought; let it be infidelity, murmuring, or blasphemy. The Mind doth nothing; his mind is only the mirror that receives the Ideas that God exhibits to it, and just as God exhibits them, the man is altogether passive in the whole business of thinking’ (‘Remarks’, p. 52). If this is so, according to Locke, then Norris resolves all, ‘even the thoughts and will of men, into an irresistible fatal necessity’ (‘Remarks’, p. 52).
71 Masham, *Discourse*, p. 102.
of Norris’s theory is that it implies that God intended human beings to have sinful desires. On Norris’s view, every act that carries our desires towards the creature is sinful, or ‘a kind of Spiritual Adultery’.\(^7^2\) He believes that we love creatures only because we mistakenly believe that they are the cause of our pleasure. This last notion takes an interesting turn in the writings of Nicolas Malebranche, Norris’s mentor. In his *Christian Conversations*, Malebranche claims that women are principally to blame for our early inclinations toward sensible objects.\(^7^3\) He says that

there is no Woman that has not some traces in her Brain, and motion of her Spirits, which carry her to something sensible. Now when the Child is in the Womb of its Mother, it has the same traces, and the same motion of the Spirits: Therefore in this estate it knows and loves Bodies, and consequently is born a Sinner.\(^7^4\)

Masham is also opposed to this view. If God is the only true cause of our pleasure, then he is responsible for creating our desires. In other words, ‘we are necessitated by God himself’\(^7^5\) to that which Norris and Malebranche call idolatry, therefore women cannot be blamed.

In short, in her *Discourse*, Masham repeats Astell’s final objections to Norris’s occasionalist metaphysics: she too believes that his theory is contrary to the wisdom and majesty of God. Not only would it be beneath God’s majesty to be constantly exciting pleasure and pain in his creatures, it would also vilify his wisdom and benevolence.

In addition, Masham raises similar objections against Leibniz’s system of pre-established harmony. Masham began a correspondence with the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in early 1704. Leibniz took an interest in almost every notable woman thinker of the seventeenth century. He shared an intellectual correspondence with his friend and patron, Electress Sophie of Hanover, as well as her sister Elisabeth of Bohemia, Sophie’s daughter, Queen Sophie-Charlotte of Prussia, and Caroline of Ansbach, later Queen of England (1683–1737). During his time as family historian for the House of Hanover, Leibniz kept Sophie well informed of the latest philosophical trends. Sophie’s skills as

\(^7^4\) Quoted in Masham, *Discourse*, p. 75.  \(^7^5\) *Ibid.*, p. 66.
a philosopher were not as refined as those of Elisabeth; but she was extremely curious about intellectual matters, and encouraged the philosophical interests of her daughter, Sophie-Charlotte. At around the same time that Leibniz was urging Sophie and her family to campaign for the English succession, he was also expressing an admiration for English women philosophers. Leibniz makes comparisons between his own philosophy and that of Anne Conway; he praises Mary Astell’s part in the correspondence with Norris; and he commends Catharine Trotter Cockburn’s defence of Locke. In Hanover, he met with the devotional writer, Elizabeth Burnet, the wife of Gilbert Burnet; and he may have also been familiar with Sophie’s correspondent, the feminist polemicist Mary Chudleigh. Not surprisingly, in his first letter to Masham, Leibniz says that he has an extremely good opinion of the minds of English women.

In early 1704, Leibniz heard that Masham intended to send him a copy of her father’s *True Intellectual System of the Universe*, and wrote to express his admiration for Gudworth. Leibniz told her that he had himself ‘discovered a new country in the intelligible world’ and had thereby added a little to Cudworth’s system. Masham responded to Leibniz by asking him to spell out his theory of substance. She had read his ‘Système nouveau’ in *Journal des savants* (1695) and the comments on that essay in the first edition of Pierre Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1696), but she required his clarification on certain points.

In the ‘Système nouveau’ Leibniz expresses his theory of the true relationship between the soul and body. In the first half of the essay, he claims that matter is nothing but a collection or aggregation of parts.
Located within matter are certain principles of action and perception that Leibniz calls 'substantial forms', 'atoms of substance', 'souls', 'first entelechies', and 'primary forces'. The nature of these substantial forms consists in force; they are the incorporeals that, when united to an extended mass, organise it into a unified body.\(^8\) The human soul is like a superior type of substantial form, endowed with the capacity for abstraction and forming universal ideas. On the question of soul–body interaction, Leibniz says that he can find no intelligible way of explaining how the body transmits or communicates anything to the soul, or vice versa. Yet despite agreeing that no created substance has any real influence upon another, Leibniz rejects occasionalism. He says that advocates of this theory have an unacceptable preference for miracles over natural explanations, and that the 'reason and order of the divine wisdom demands we make no needless recourse to miracles'.\(^8\) Instead, he claims, there is a 'perfect agreement' or an 'adaptation of the soul to the body'.\(^8\) God created the soul so that everything must arise in it from its own inner nature, with a perfect conformity to the things outside it.

In his response to Masham, dated May 1704, Leibniz expands on these points:

For we have experience of bodies acting on one another according to mechanical laws, and of souls producing within themselves various internal actions, but we see no way of conceiving action of the soul on matter, or of matter on the soul, or anything which corresponds to it. For we cannot explain, by the example of any machine whatever, how material relationships – that is to say, mechanical laws – could produce a perception, or how perception could produce a change in the velocity or the direction of animal spirits or other bodies, of whatever subtle or gross kinds.\(^8\)

The inconceivability of any other explanation, he says, and the admirable uniformity of nature, has led him to believe that the soul and the body follow their own separate laws, without corporeal laws being affected by the soul and 'without bodies finding windows through which to exert their influence over souls'.

You will then ask how this agreement of the soul with the body comes about. The defenders of occasional causes hold that God continually adjusts the soul

---

\(^8\) For this point, I am grateful to Eileen O'Neill.
\(^8\) Woolhouse and Francks (eds.), *Leibniz's New System*, pp. 211–12.
\(^8\) In Leibniz's first letter to Masham, in early 1704, he calls this a 'little system of pre-established harmony between substances' (Woolhouse and Francks (eds.), *Leibniz's New System*, p. 203).
\(^8\) Leibniz to Masham, May 1704; *ibid.*, p. 206.
to the body, and the body to the soul. But since that would mean that God had to keep disturbing the natural laws of bodies, it could only involve miracles, and so is not very suitable for philosophy, which has to explain the ordinary course of nature. That is what made me think that it is infinitely more worthy of God’s economy and of the uniformity and constant order of his works to conclude that from the start he created souls and bodies in such a way that each following its own laws would match up with the other. It cannot be denied that this is possible for one whose wisdom and power are infinite.\textsuperscript{85}

In her reply, dated 3 June 1704, Masham criticises this non-interactionist account of soul–body relations. Leibniz says that his new system is ‘more than a hypothesis’, but Masham demurs:

it appears not yet to me that this is more than an Hypothesis; for as Gods ways are not limited by our Conceptions; the unintelligibleness or inconceivableness by us of any Way but one, dos not (methinks) much induce a Beleefe of that’s being the way which God has chosen to make use of. Yet such an inference as this from our Ignorance, I remember P. Malbranche (or some other asserter of his Hypothesis) would make in behalf of Occasional Causes: to which Hypothesis, amongst other exceptions, I think there is one, which I cannot (without your help) see, but that yours is alike Liable to and that is from the Organization of the Body; wherin all that Nice Curiositie that is discoverable seeming useless; becomes Superfluous, and Lost labour.\textsuperscript{86}

By ‘some other asserter’, Masham obviously means John Norris. She could not abide by Leibniz’s system of pre-established harmony for the same reason that she could not accept Norris’s occasionalism: it makes material bodies superfluous and redundant. According to Leibniz, any causal connection between souls and bodies is merely apparent; in reality, they are entirely unrelated to each other. Rather than see this account as a celebration of God’s perfections, Masham views it as an affront to divine wisdom. If the soul is self-sufficient, then bodily organs can serve no purpose in creation. Her objections to Norris and Leibniz arise from the same source as Astell’s objections to Norris: her intellectualist conception of God’s relationship to the natural world.

Masham’s criticisms of occasionalism and pre-established harmony are undoubtedly influenced by her father’s theological principles. One of Cudworth’s main theses in \textit{The True Intellectual System} is that nothing in nature ‘floats’ without a head and governor, and that God presides.

\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{86} Masham to Leibniz, 3 June 1704; in the Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek zu Hanover, MS 612, fols. 8–9; and Woolhouse and Francks (eds.), \textit{Leibniz’s New System}, p. 209. She also says ‘To this difficultie likewise let me add that I conceive not why Organisme should be, or can be thought, (as you say is) \textit{Essential to Matter}’ (ibid.).
over everything. Cudworth opposes those mechanical theories that render God an ‘idle Spectator’ in his creation, thus making ‘his Wisdom altogether Useless and Insignificant, as being a thing wholly Inclosed and shut up within his own breast, and not at all acting abroad upon any thing without him’. But he also challenges the view that God does everything ‘Immediately and Miraculously’. The theory of plastic nature is essential to Cudworth’s system, because it strikes a medium: it is ‘a living Stamp or Signature of Divine Wisdom’ in the created world, and yet it does not require God to exert a ‘Sollicitous Care or Distractious Providence’.

In her letters to Leibniz, Masham defends Cudworth’s theory of plastic nature. From 1703 to 1706, Jean Le Clerc published selections from *The True Intellectual System* in his new journal, *Bibliothèque Choisie*. Masham wrote to Le Clerc on 18 June 1703 to thank him for the respect he showed her father.

Your extract of the first Chapter of the *Intellectual System of the Universe*; wherein you have given so advantageous an Idea of that work, as Joyn’d to the Authoritie your Judgment Carrys, will (I doubt not) Highly recommend it to all the Learned World; to whom I have too often desir’d it should be more knowne, not to be extremly Pleas’d in your Resolution of makeing it be so.

But Masham had cause to be dismayed when controversy grew up around the publication. As each issue of the periodical appeared, the French scholar Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) published his own highly critical response to Cudworth’s philosophy.

Plastic nature or ‘plastic powers’ are the executors of God’s grand design, his causal instruments in the natural world. These incorporeal spirits have the formative power to determine the organisation, growth, vitality, and movement of living things. But while plasti cal powers within the universe act like minds in that they are purposeful, they

---

88 Ibid., p. 150.
89 Ibid., pp. 150, 155.
91 Masham to Le Clerc, 18 June 1703; in the Amsterdam University Library (UvA), MS J.58v. In a later letter to Le Clerc, dated May 1704, Masham writes that ‘No one can have more respect for the memoria of a Dead Parent or Freind than I have for my Fathers; and it is no little satisfaction to me to see that a work of his, thought excellent by the best Judges of such a Performance, will be by your means more knowne in the World than it has hitherto been’ (MS J.57b).
92 These rejoinders were published in Henri Basnage de Beauval’s *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savants* and in Bayle’s *Continuations des pensées diverses sur la comète*. 
are also unconscious and non-deliberative in their activities. Against this view, Bayle claims that Cudworth’s theory of an insensible plastic nature implies that matter might conceivably exist and act by itself, independently of God. Bayle suggests that the doctrine is atheistic in tendency, because it makes it unnecessary to suppose that wherever purpose is exhibited, God must be at work; in short, it appears to make God superfluous.

In a letter to Le Clerc, dated 21 June 1705, Masham says ‘I could heartily wish that you were at Libertie to answer the objections of Mr Bayle.’ She expresses her fears that no one will be able to present convincing arguments against him:

Of what I have read, some Things seem’d to me very well; and others I fear’d Mr Bayl would take advantage from. The Systematical Men will hardly I doubt be able to answer him thorowly, but especially the Calvinistical; in whose Orthodoxy he is so intrench’d, that those Divines can scarce have one faire Blow at him. And it is really sad to see that whilst such Teachers of the People do with so cruel heat (as they too often do) fall upon some men onely for dissenting from them in Opinions which are no Doctrines of Christianitie; and represent for dangerous Heretics such (for example) as You are; they at the same time are forc’d patiently to hear Religion ridicul’d without dareing to oppose the man who dos it, from a Feare (but too Just) that they should thereby afford him matter of greater Triumph.

In frustration, it seems, Masham formulates her own counter-objections in a letter to Leibniz, dated 20 October 1705. Masham criticises Bayle for saying that God cannot make an unconscious agent act for wise ends unless God himself is giving perpetual direction to material causes (i.e., unless occasionalism is true). Masham says:

my Fathers Hypothesis is methinks sufficently secur’d from the Retorsion of Atheists, without being in the same case with any one which makes God the immediate Efficient Cause of all the Effects of Nature. Since my Father dos not therein assert (as Mr Bayle says he dos) That God has been able to give to Creatures a Facultie of Producing Excellent Works (viz such as is the Organization of Plants and Animals) separe from all Knowledge &c.; but onely a Facultie of Executeing instrumentally his Ideas or Designs, in the Production of such Excellent Works: so that (according to him) there

---

93 Masham says that plastic natures can be likened to ‘habits’ in humans, such as ‘those of singing and dancing; which shall oftentimes direct the motions of body, or voice without any consideration of what the next note, or motion should be’ (Masham to Leibniz, 20 October 1705; in Hanover, MS 612, fol. 23r). Here she echoes Cudworth, True Intellectual System, p. 157.


95 Masham to Le Clerc, 21 June 1705; in the Amsterdam University Library (uva), MS 1.57.c.

96 Masham crosses out ‘(in effect)’ here.
is (differently from what M' Bayle asserts of his Hypothesis) an inseparable union betwixt the Power of Produceing Excellent Works, and the Idea of their Essence, and manner of Produceing them: and it seems to me that there can be no pretence to the Retorsion of Atheists unless it were asserted, That God had been able to give to Creatures a Facultie of Produceing excellent works; the Ideas whereof never were in any understanding: But my Father is so far from asserting any such thing as this, that he holds the Operations of the Plastick Nature to be essentially and necessarilie Dependent on the ideas in the Divine Intellect. 97

In short, God gives creatures a faculty of executing his ‘ideas’ instrumentally. These ideas or essences must have existed prior to the existence of the creatures, and, moreover, they must have existed in a mind. From this we can conclude that plastic nature is essentially and necessarily dependent on the ideas in the divine mind: the plastical powers could never be autonomous. 98 Matter does not have the power to act independently of God; it has ‘only a Pow’r to Execute the Ideas of a Perfect Mind; if there were no Mind in the universe; this Pow’r in the Matter must Lye for ever Dormant and unproductive, of any such Excellent Work as is spoken of. 99

From these remarks, it is not obvious that Masham holds Cudworth’s theory as her own. Nevertheless, her argument does depend upon a presupposition that underlies her earlier objections to Norris and Leibniz. In her defence of Cudworth’s doctrine of plastic nature, Masham once again makes the divine mind or divine wisdom a fundamental premise in her argument. 100 Like Astell, Masham has an intellectualist conception of the divine attributes. Her aim is to promote the wisdom of God against the imputations of occasionalism, and to affirm the harmony and order he has established in the world. 101 This is why Masham’s views bear similarities to those of Astell. In defending her father’s theory of plastic nature, Masham emphasises the connections, relations, and interactions between matter and spirit. Material things are not radically separate or detached from spirits and God. Just as Astell draws

97 Masham to Leibniz, 20 October 1705; in Hanover, MS 612, fols. 22–3; and Gerhardt (ed.), Die Philosophischen Schriften, vol. 111, pp. 370–1.
98 Cudworth writes that ‘if there had been no Perfect Mind or Intellect in the World, there could no more have been any Plastick Nature in it, then there could be an Image in the Glass without a Face’ (True Intellectual System, p. 172).
99 Masham to Leibniz, 20 October 1705; in Hanover, MS 612, fol. 23; and Gerhardt (ed.), Die Philosophischen Schriften, vol. 111, p. 371.
100 For this point, I am indebted to Hutton’s ‘Like Father Like Daughter?’
101 In Occasional Thoughts, Masham’s intellectualism is more explicit. She says that the divine will is ‘one steady, uniform, unchangeable result of infinite Wisdom and Benevolence, extending to and including All his Works’ (p. 69).
upon the idea of a plastic faculty connecting the soul to its material body, so too does Masham emphasise the spiritual aspects of material things.

Masham’s wider theories about soul and body are, however, more radical than Astell’s. While Masham is passionate about defending her father’s views, in other parts of the correspondence with Leibniz, she expounds her own independent theories on substance, drawing together the views of Locke and Henry More. In an early letter to Leibniz (8 August 1704), Masham argues against the system of pre-established harmony by stating that she has no positive idea of the essence of ‘atoms of substance’. She says that

> your Negation of theire haveing any Dimensions, makes theire Existence (I confess) inconceivable to me; as not being able to conceive an existence of that which is No Where. If the Localitie of these substances were accounted for by theire being as you [say] they are always in Organiz’d Bodies, then they are somewhere: But if these Atomes de Substance are somewhere then they must have some extension, which you deny of them.¹⁰²

Instead Masham believes that ‘Extension is…inseparable from the notion of All Substance’.¹⁰³ On this point, she goes against her father’s teaching. In the preface to The True Intellectual System, Cudworth says that distinct from the body there is a substance that is indivisible, penetrable, and self-active. But whether ‘this Substance be altogether Unextended, or Extended otherwise then Body,’ he says, ‘we shall leave every man to make his own Judgment’.¹⁰⁴ In his fifth chapter, however, he claims that those who cannot conceive of unextended substances allow their imaginations to impose on their reason. He says that the notion that ‘whatsoever is Unextended, and hath no Distant Parts, one without another, must therefore needs be Nothing, is no Common Notion, but the Spurious Suggestion of Imagination only, and a Vulgar Error’.¹⁰⁵

But Masham’s views do have an affinity with Cudworth’s Cambridge colleague, Henry More, who had argued that the soul is extended. Masham adds weight to More’s arguments by appealing to Locke’s claim that knowledge can come only from our perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas. More specifically, she says that

¹⁰² Masham to Leibniz, 8 August 1704; in Hanover, MS 612, fols. 8v–9; and Woolhouse and Francks (eds.), Leibniz’s New System, p. 216.
¹⁰³ Masham to Leibniz, 8 August 1704; in Hanover, MS 612, fol. 12v; and Woolhouse and Francks (eds.), Leibniz’s New System, p. 216.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 780.
wherever I have no Idea of a thing; or Demonstration of the Truth of any Proposition the Truth of which is inconceivable by me, I cannot, and conclude that I ought not to assent to what is asserted of either: since should I once do this I know not where I should stop; what should be the Boundaries of Assent. Or why I might not Beleeve alike one thing as well as another.  

Masham tells Leibniz that she cannot form a positive idea of unextended substance, and therefore she has no conception ‘from whence I can affirm, or Deny, any thing Concerning it’. On the other hand, she does have some conception of two substances, one of extension without solidity, the other of solid extension.

The same principles that lead Masham to affirm that all substances are extended, lead her also to the Lockean view that it is conceivable for God to annex thought to a system of solid extension. Locke’s observation about ‘thinking matter’ stems from his belief that we have only an obscure and confused idea of substances. Drawing on Locke’s argument in the Essay iv.iii.6, Masham asks whether God could not conceivably add (if he so Pleas’d) the Power of Thinking to that Substance which has Soliditie? Soliditie and Thought being both of them but attributes of some unknown Substance, and I see not why it may not be one and the same which is the common support of Both these; there appearing to me no Contradiction in a co-existence of Thought and Solidity in the same Substance.

Masham says that this hypothesis is just as conceivable as Leibniz’s hypothesis of God creating an unextended substance and then uniting it to an extended thing. In both cases, the substances underlying the attributes are unknown. Yet, according to Masham, Leibniz’s theory is at a disadvantage for two reasons: first, his system makes material things redundant, and, second, it is not possible to conceive of unextended substances. Although we have only an obscure idea of substance in general, it is reasonable to affirm ‘that God should give Thought to a Substance which I know not, but whereof I know some of its attributes [e.g. extension], than to another suppos’d Substance of whose Being I have no Conception at all [i.e. unextended substance].'

---

106 Masham to Leibniz, 3 June 1704; in Hanover, MS 612, fol. 9; and Gerhardt (ed.), *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, vol. 111, p. 351.
107 Masham to Leibniz, 8 August 1704; in Hanover, MS 612, fol. 12v; Woolhouse and Francks (eds.), *Leibniz’s New System*, p. 217.
109 Masham to Leibniz, 8 August 1704; in Hanover, MS 612, fol. 13; and Woolhouse and Francks (eds.), *Leibniz’s New System*, p. 217.
Masham was not the only early modern woman to perceive difficulties in Leibniz’s metaphysics. Sophie, Electress of Hanover, also raises objections to Leibniz’s view that the rational soul is immaterial. In a letter to Leibniz, dated 2 June 1700, Sophie reports a dispute between her son and Gerhard Wolter Molanus, the Abbot of Loccum.¹¹¹ Her son, the Elector George Louis, claims that thought must be material in so far as it is composed of things that come to us through the sensory organs: ‘one cannot think of anything without making for oneself an idea of things that one has seen, heard, or tasted’.¹¹² Molanus responds along Cartesian lines that the soul is a thinking thing and really distinct from the body. Sophie rejects his position, taking the side of her son; and she asks Leibniz to act as a mediator in their dispute. In his reply (12 June 1700), Leibniz agrees with Molanus, but rejects the Cartesian viewpoint. Instead Leibniz claims: (i) that we obviously have thoughts that are not acquired through the senses (such as the ideas of force, unity, and so on); and (ii) that we only acquire the representations or ideas of material things through the senses, not the things themselves. He elaborates with reference to his theory of ‘unities’ or monads, as well as the system of pre-established harmony. But his arguments fail to convince Sophie: in a later letter (27 November 1702), she confesses that for her the term ‘immaterial’ is in fact unintelligible.

Sophie’s last point echoes Damaris Masham’s claim that she cannot have an idea of unextended substance. On the question of genuine soul–body interaction, Leibniz says he can find no intelligible way of explaining how the soul has a causal influence on the body, or vice-versa. But Masham cannot accept his non-interactionist theory of causation for the same reason that she cannot accept occasionalism: it makes matter redundant and superfluous. Instead Masham appears to favour an alternative, almost anti-dualist, viewpoint that blends both Cambridge–Platonist and Lockean presuppositions concerning substances: the view that every substance has extension, and the idea of thinking matter.

It is not difficult to see how Masham’s views may have feminist significance. In the theories of Norris, Malebranche, and Leibniz, matter occupies an inferior place and has no real connection with the spiritual-intellectual world. Lloyd sees this radical separation between mind and matter as a typical feature of western philosophy; she believes that such theories opened the way for women, who are traditionally associated

¹¹¹ For details of this dispute, I am indebted to Zedler, ‘The Three Princesses’, pp. 48–9; and Aiton, Leibniz, pp. 257–62.
¹¹² Sophie to Leibniz, 2 June 1700; quoted in Zedler, ‘The Three Princesses’, p. 49.
with matter and the body, to become associated with a lesser intellectual character. In Malebranche’s theory, the metaphorical association is made literal. Women, he says, are primarily to blame for our love of bodies; a child is born a sinner by virtue of its physical contiguity with its mother. But in Masham’s writings there is no such denigration of matter, nature, and the body; instead material things are a necessary feature of reality, capable of interacting with spirits. As Lois Frankel says

Male philosophers have traditionally associated women with nature, the earth, the body, and everyday or ‘worldly’ things in general, while associating men with God, the spirit, and ‘otherworldly’ things. One form of feminist response might be to reject such dualistic stereotypes; another, which Masham embraces to a certain extent, is to rehabilitate the female side of the dichotomy.113

This ‘rehabilitation’ is certainly evident in Masham’s rejection of occasionalism and her belief in the causal efficacy of matter. Masham also disarms the Cartesian dualist theory of substance by maintaining that all substances are extended, and by supporting Locke’s suggestion that it is possible for matter to think.

III

I now show that Masham premises her feminist arguments on the same presuppositions as Astell. Typically, the origins of Masham’s feminist arguments are traced to the new egalitarian concept of reason prevalent in the seventeenth century.114 But there is scant evidence that Cartesian reason or method, in particular, is the inspiration behind Masham’s feminism. Like Astell, Masham believes that the ignorance of men is to blame for the inferiority of women: men deprive women of the valuable education needed to cultivate their reason. And, like Astell again, Masham’s feminist anger originates in certain teleological principles.

Masham’s only feminist work, *Occasional Thoughts*, was written around 1703, and was revised and corrected for publication in 1705 after Locke’s death in 1704. Like the *Discourse*, this work has been attributed to Locke and was even published as *Thoughts on Christian Life by John Locke esq* in 1747. Richard Gwinnett writes to Elizabeth Thomas about *Occasional Thoughts*, in June 1705, saying that

113 Frankel, ‘Damaris Cudworth Masham’, p. 82.
114 See, for example, Atherton’s ‘Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason’, p. 20.
This little *Posthumous* Treatise of Mr Locke, I take to be nothing inferior to the more elaborate Works of that ingenious Author, except in the Stile, which is sometimes perplexed, and in many Places forced and stiff; not unlike the Writings of Mr Boyle, which may be reasonably attributed to the hasty and negligent Manner wherein these Thoughts were penned... However, the Excellency of the Matter, and the Usefulness of the Observations, contained in this small sketch, makes sufficient Compensation for all the Faults that can be found in the Expression.⁵

The work was popular in women's intellectual circles: Locke's friend Elizabeth Burnet offered to lend Masham's book to Catharine Trotter Cockburn;⁶ and Elizabeth Thomas appears to have read it on Gwinnett's recommendation.⁷

Ruth Perry believes that Masham partly re-wrote the work in response to some of Astell's points in *The Christian Religion*.⁸ But Perry's reasons for saying this are unclear. There is actually more evidence that Masham was positively inspired by the second part of Astell's *Proposal* (1697). In this work, Astell claims that women will find knowledge useful, not just for their souls, but for the management of their families and relations with their neighbours. The education of children, she wryly observes, should 'be laid by the Mother, for Fathers find other business, they will not be confin'd to such a laborious work, they have not such opportunities of observing a Childs Temper, nor are the greatest part of 'em like to do much good, since Precepts contradicted by Example seldom prove Effectual'.⁹ The idea that the improvement of women's reason will benefit the education of children, is taken up by Masham in the latter half of *Occasional Thoughts*.

The foundation of Masham's feminism, like Astell's, is the belief that a supremely wise and benevolent God would not have endowed women with reason, if he did not intend for them to exercise their rational faculties toward perfection. Masham points out that no one is Born into the World to live idly; enjoying the Fruit and Benefit of other Peoples Labours, without contributing reciprocally some way or other, to the good of the Community answerably to that Station wherein God... has

---

⁶ Trotter (Cockburn) to Burnet, 12 November 1705; in Cockburn, *The Works*, vol. 11, p. 190.
⁷ See Thomas and Gwinnett, *Pylades and Corinna*, p. 93. Gwinnett also comments on *Occasional Thoughts* that 'what in my opinion deserves the highest Praise, is the principal design of the Book, which is to recommend the Improvement of the Fair Sex, by a more ingenious and learned Education that is now customary, or even commendable among them' (p. 92).
⁸ Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, p. 96.
Women, Masham says, must be educated for the sake of order and harmony in society. Mothers, after all, are the early educators of men, and if mothers are not educated, then the education of men will suffer too. She observes that if women are lacking in knowledge, then they are ‘much more to be pitty’d than blam’d’, because the information and improvement of the Understanding by useful Knowledge, (a thing highly necessary to the right regulation of the Manners) is commonly very little thought of in reference to one whole Sex, even by those who in regard of the other, take due care hereof. But to this omission in respect of one Sex, it is manifestly very much to be attributed, that that pains which is often bestowed upon the other, does so frequently, as it does, prove ineffectual. Since the actual assistance of Mothers, will (generally speaking) be found necessary to the right forming of the Minds of their Children of both Sexes; and the Impressions receiv’d in that tender Age, which is unavoidably much of it passed among Women, are of exceeding consequence to Men throughout their Lives, as having a strong and oftentimes unalterable influence upon their future Inclinations and Passions.

Masham refers to the ‘impression’ that women make on their children, just as Malebranche refers to the influence of mothers on foetuses. In both cases, the influence is negative: women are made responsible for those prejudices and passions that prevent men from attaining knowledge. But Masham’s point is obviously very different. Malebranche simply aligns women with those material influences that must be ignored or transcended in the search for truth. Masham, on the other hand, says that because women make an impression on the minds of children, we ought to improve women’s understanding. Like Astell, she emphasises that women are intellectual beings, rather than mere material objects.

Masham further believes that it is essential for women to be educated for the sake of their own spiritual welfare. She emphasises that ‘Women have Souls to be sav’d as well as Men.’ They are endowed by God with rational abilities that enable them to understand the principles behind their religious beliefs. She believes that all things in nature are fitly disposed ‘to the All-wise ends of their Maker’. But, she says,
be Nature ever so kind to them in this respect, yet through want of cultivating the "Tallents she bestows upon those of the Female Sex, her Bounty is usually lost upon them; and Girls, betwixt silly Fathers and ignorant Mothers, are generally so brought up, that traditionary Opinions are to them, all their lives long, instead of Reason. They are, perhaps, sometimes told in regard of what Religion exacts, That they must Believe and Do such and such things, because the Word of God requires it; but they are not put upon searching the Scriptures themselves, to see whether, or no, these things are so.\textsuperscript{125}

Instead women must be taught that ‘their Duty is not grounded upon the uncertain and variable Opinion of Men, but the unchangeable nature of things’.\textsuperscript{126} As part of the educational process, women must come to value and cherish their minds as well as their bodies. Chastity, according to Masham, is an over-rated virtue because stress on chastity gives the impression that a woman’s moral duty consists in regulating her body alone.\textsuperscript{127} Masham observes that although chastity is a duty for both sexes, ‘a Transgression herein, even with the aggravation of wronging another Man, and possibly a whole Family thereby, is ordinarily talk’d as lightly of, as if it was but a Peccadillo in a Young Man, altho’ a far less Criminal Offence against this Duty in a Maid shall in the Opinion of the same Persons brand her with perpetual Infamy’.\textsuperscript{128}

There is evidence, in turn, that the second part of Astell’s \textit{Proposal} is influenced by the \textit{Discourse}. Masham’s arguments may have encouraged Astell to see individual persons not as self-sufficient entities, but as parts dependent on a larger whole. There are early indications in the \textit{Letters} that Astell finds it difficult to accept Norris’s extremism. On 31 October 1693, she wrote that

\begin{quote}
Sensible Beauty does too often press upon my Heart, whilst intelligible is disregarded. For having by Nature a strong Propensity to friendly Love, which I have all along encouraged as a good Disposition to Vertue, and do still think it so if it may be kept within the due Bounds of Benevolence. But having likewise thought till you taught me better, that I need not cut off all Desire from the Creature, provided it were in Subordination to, and for the sake of the Creator: I have contracted such a Weakness, I will not say by Nature (for I believe Nature is often very unjustly blam’d for what is owing to \textit{Will} and \textit{Custom}) but by voluntary Habit, that it is a very difficult thing for me to love at all, without something of Desire.\textsuperscript{129}
\end{quote}

Masham’s criticisms of the \textit{Letters} may have prompted Astell to strengthen these views about love of other people. In the second part of the \textit{Proposal}, Astell writes that

Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century

It was not fit that Creatures capable of and made for Society, shou’d be wholly Independent, or Indifferent to each others Esteem and Commendation; nor was it convenient considering how seldom these are justly distributed, that they shou’d too much regard and depend on them. It was requisite therefore that a desire of our Neighbours Good Opinion shou’d be implanted in our Natures to the end we might be excited to do such things as deserve it.\textsuperscript{130}

Astell, like Masham, emphasises that all human beings are ‘Parts of one Great whole, and are by Nature so connected to each other, that whenever one part suffers the rest must suffer with it’\textsuperscript{131}.

At the end of the seventeenth century, Mary Astell and Damaris Masham were engaged in a dispute about the love of God. In this exchange, Masham attacks Astell’s theory that God ought to be the sole object of our love, and, on Lockean grounds, Masham dismisses Astell’s moral views as an affront to everyday experience. Years later, Astell responds to Masham in equally hostile terms, and criticises Masham’s definition of love as consisting in nothing but the bare sentiment of pleasure. As a consequence of this exchange, commentators regard these women as opponents or ‘seconds in the duel’ between Locke and Norris. To some extent, this is a fair evaluation of the moral positions of Masham and Astell. There are, to be sure, important and fundamental differences between their philosophies due to their respective allegiances to Locke and Norris. But despite their exchange of insults, Masham and Astell also have a surprising amount in common. If Masham had paid closer attention to Astell’s writings, she would have detected a common theological outlook, inspired by Cambridge Platonism. In Norris’s occasionalist philosophy, matter is rendered causally impotent and incapable of affecting the mind. Both Masham and Astell, however, object to any view of matter that suggests that a supremely rational God has rendered it causally ineffective or purposeless. Their objections to Norris depend on the teleological presupposition that God has designed a harmonious order, where each part is suited to its end, and where there is no waste or ‘lost labour’. In his infinite wisdom, according to Astell and Masham, God would not have created material things if they did not serve some purpose. Likewise, a supremely wise being would not have endowed women with a rational faculty if he had not wished them to use it.

\textsuperscript{130} Astell, \textit{Proposal II}, p. 95. \textsuperscript{131} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 159.
Conclusion

There is a prevailing opinion that women philosophers of the seventeenth century were positively inspired by the new Cartesian conception of reason. But the writings of a number of early modern women show that a reverence for reason and dualist theories of the soul and body do not necessarily go hand in hand. Profoundly influenced by the Cambridge Platonists, these women are critical of Cartesian metaphysics and the theories it influenced, such as occasionalism, and pre-established harmony. In the 1640s, Elisabeth of Bohemia challenges Descartes’ account of soul–body interaction, and develops a more extensive definition of the soul and the soul–body relationship. Following in her footsteps, Margaret Cavendish and Anne Conway are opposed to the real distinction between soul and body; to the view that the soul is unextended, indivisible, and penetrable, and that material things lack life, self-motion, and perception. Although Conway’s cosmology is commonly labelled as ‘spiritualist’, her system is not much different from Cavendish’s ‘materialist’ philosophy. Both Conway and Cavendish defy typical seventeenth-century classifications by ascribing material attributes to spirit, and spiritual properties to matter. Mary Astell and Damaris Masham oppose the view that there is no genuine interaction between the soul and body. Despite their philosophical differences, they criticise the occasionalist philosophy of John Norris because it makes material things superfluous features of God’s creation. Astell suggests that there might be a ‘sensible congruity’ between the soul and body, something like Henry More’s theory of a vital congruity between the body and the plastic part of the soul. In her letters to Leibniz, Masham goes even further to suggest that all substances are extended, and that it is possible that God could give matter the power to think. Cockburn is likewise sceptical about the idea of ‘substance’, and suggests that the categories of ‘soul’ and ‘body’ may not be exhaustive.
Conclusion

These women each have a different response to dualist theorists of their time, yet each is critical of any theory in which there is a radical separation between material and immaterial substances, and in which matter is rendered causally impotent or purposeless. Furthermore, many of these women – in varying ways – avoid negative associations between materiality and femaleness. Cavendish subverts the typical alignment of women and the body; Conway advocates an interdependent relationship between female/material and male/spiritual principles; and Astell, Masham, and Cockburn reject the common stereotype of women as mere machines or bodies, devoid of rationality.

In *The Man of Reason*, Genevieve Lloyd says that ‘the denigration of the “feminine” is one of the most salient aspects of the maleness of the philosophical tradition’.¹ The contributions of female philosophers of the past reveal that the history of philosophy can have positive implications for women. By being ‘impertinent’, or by ‘meddling’ in what is beyond the feminine province, these women are able to raise serious philosophical objections, and to offer their own unique, independent contributions to the philosophical enterprise of their time. Although they are inspired by the popular Cartesian conception of ‘natural reason’, their reverence for reason does not entail an unquestioning acceptance of dualist theories of the soul and body.

In the writings of Elsabeth, Cavendish, Conway, Astell, Masham, and Cockburn, those metaphysical categories now culturally associated with the ‘feminine’, such as matter, nature, and the body, are not derogated, ignored, or suppressed. Whether they reject dualism outright, or simply defend the possibility of genuine soul–body interaction, each writer raises the status of matter by emphasising its connection or affinity with the intellectual world.