The Outward and Inward Beauty of Early Modern Women

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1. In this paper, I explore some early modern philosophical thought about the relation of beauty and wisdom. The thinkers I consider most centrally are two women, Lucrezia Marinella and Mary Astell. It will become clear in my discussion why women in particular might have a special interest in pursuing this line of inquiry. However, I do not mean to imply or even suggest that this is a woman's issue. On the contrary, I conclude by suggesting that this strand of thought is connected with a central philosophical question of the early modern period, the nature of thought and consciousness.

While the relation between beauty and wisdom is not, at least within the Anglo-American tradition, currently a philosophically central question, the relation between physical appearance – what we might call outer beauty -- and wisdom have been part of philosophical thought since its originary Platonic writings. In the *Symposium* Socrates reports on Diotima's detailing of the process -- the so-called ascent of desire -- through which we can come to behold the Form of Beauty, "that wondrous vision … an everlasting soul of loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades…"(210e-211a).[1] As Diotima details how we come to grasp Beauty itself,

> One goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end

[1] Plato, *Symposium*, transl. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and DS Hutchinson, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

> at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, so that in end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful. (211c)

The process begins quite pointedly with the appreciation of and desire for "the beauty of one individual body" (210a). Scholars have focused on how best to understand the progression from particular to universal beauty, and so to wisdom, and in doing so they take for granted that there is a live philosophical question to address: What is the relation between the appreciation of physical beauty and wisdom?

Contemporary aesthetics does not seem to address this question. The current concern is rather to understand and articulate the nature of beauty and of our ability to appreciate it, and these discussions are typically removed from epistemological concerns. This gap might lead us to think that the issue simply does not gain philosophical traction. Doing so, however, would be a mistake. To see that this is so, first consider that the Platonic model of the ascent of desire has been taken up within the history of philosophy. Plotinus, in *Ennead* 1.6,[2] also maintains that through Beauty the Soul moves into the realm of Truth. In this way, material and immaterial things share in the same principle of beauty. Material things, through their beauty, communicate to the mind that which flows from the Divine, namely existence, and the mind, or soul, begins to realize its own beauty in apprehending this material beauty. Ultimately, the soul must turn away from material things and towards its own intellective capacity, and in this way, in understanding itself, it is itself beautiful:

> Hence the Soul heightened to the Intellectual-Principle is beautiful to all its power. For Intellection and all that proceeds from Intellection are the Soul's

[2] Plotinus, *The Enneads*, transl. Stephen MacKenna, ed. John Dillon, (London/New York: Penguin, 1991).

> beauty, a graciousness native to it and not foreign, for only with these is it truly Soul. And it is just to say that in the Soul's becoming a good and beautiful thing is its becoming like to God. (*Enneads* I.6.6)

From seeing its own Beauty, the soul strives to apprehend divine beauty, "turning away for ever from the material beauty that once made his joy" (*Enneads* I.6.8) to look inward, and strive for the perfect inner unity (*Enneads* I.6.9*)* that allows us each to become godlike. Equally, it has also been argued that Kant's argument, in the *Critique of Judgement,* that the reflecting power of judgement motivates us to and leads us to grasp the moral order is inspired by, or at least has an affinity with, Diotima's account of thee ascent of desire.[3] Thus, to say that the relation between beauty and wisdom does not currently gain philosophical traction is not to say that it cannot.

In addition, it is worth highlighting the texture of the account of the relation between beauty and wisdom developed the *Symposium*, for it is more nuanced than simply that of the between particulars and universals. Consider how this philosophical issue is raised. We are to start on the climb to Beauty not by contemplating a beautiful object – say, a Grecian urn – nor the sublime beauty of a landscape, say, but rather by appreciating the beauty of a particular human being. Though the focus in Plotinus and in Kant shifts so that we begin by considering any beautiful objects, in the *Symposium* it is *human* beauty that sets us on the course to the wisdom proper to grasping the Form of Beauty, and so to the Good and wisdom. Relatedly, as Diotima sets things out, she seems

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[3] See Michaela Fistioc, *The Beautiful Shape of the Good: Platonic and Pythagorean Themes in Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgement*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002). Fistioc traces both the Platonic idea and Kant's back to a Pythagorean idea that we feel pleasure at patterns or forms, and that pleasure moves us to further knowledge.

to take for granted that this first step in the climb is essentially other-directed. We appreciate particular beauties by admiring the bodies of *others* rather than our own bodies. Nor do we introspect to apprehend Beauty itself. Indeed, it is remarkable that as Diotima details it, we progress from the beauty of bodies to the beauty of souls not by considering our own soul, but 'people's souls' (210b), and the beauty of souls is left off the summary of the account.

It is with these two features – the focus on human bodies, and the place of introspection -- in mind that I jump forward to the early modern period to consider how this philosophical question of the relation between human beauty and wisdom gets picked up by Lucrezia Marinella and Mary Astell, though I will also touch on Aphra Behn, Sarah Scott. I do not intend my discussion to be comprehensive (or even approach comprehensiveness). All the thinkers I consider are women, but more philosophically central is that they all follow Diotima in starting their discussions from human beauty. More familiar early modern discussions of aesthetics -- including that of Kant, as well as of Hutcheson, Diderot and Rousseau–focus principally on the assessment and contemplation of the beauty of objects.

2. Lucrezia Marinella, a Venetian writer of the late 16th and early 17th century,[4] does take on Diotima's suggestion that a grasp of Beauty itself starts from human beauty, but she subtly transforms the framework of the *Symposium*. Marinella wrote her *The Nobility and*

[4] Lucrezia Marinella (1571-1653) was widely recognized as an accomplished intellectual force by her contemporaries, writing in many genres, including not only philosophy but also lyric and narrative poetry and prose. Her epic poem, *Henry, or Byzantium Gained,* is considered a masterpiece of the genre. She lived her life in Venice. Her father was a noted physician and natural philosopher, and two of his works concerned specifically the health of women. She was not forced to enter a convent, and it is clear that she was encouraged in her studies. She married and had two children, though these facts do not seem to figure at all in her writings.

Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men[5] in a direct response to Giuseppe Passi's *The Defects of Women*[6], a work full of invective against women and their wickedness.[7] Her aim, as reflected in the battling titles, is nothing short of a definitive rebuttal. I am particularly interested in the set of arguments she offers in Chapter III of the work, 'On the Nature and Essence of the Female Sex', which aim to establish that women's souls are "from birth nobler and more excellent" than men's from "the effect they [women] have and from the beauty of their bodies" (Marinella, 55). She, herself, summarizes the arguments at the end of the chapter as follows:

> Let us conclude, therefore, that women, being more beautiful than men are also nobler than they are. The reasons for this are first because God's power can be discerned in a blooming and delicate face, which also raises men's minds toward divine goodness; second, because beauty is lovable by nature and attracts every heart, however rigid or bitter; and finally, because beauty is adorned with and full of goodness, being a ray and splendor of excellence. As Marsilio Ficino states: "For all beauty is good." Speusippus and Plotinus say the same, and everyone clearly appreciates how rare it is for an evil soul to dwell in a pleasing, graceful body. (Marinella, 68)

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[5] Lucrezia Marinella, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, ed. and transl. Anne Dunhill, (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1999). Originally published in 1600 and reprinted in 1601 and 1621. Cited internally as 'Marinella' followed by page number.

[6] Passi's work (*Dei donneschi difetti*) was originally published in 1599, though there are some references to a 1595 edition.

[7] For a discussion of the context in which Marinella writes this rebuttal of Passi see Stephen Kolsky, "Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, Giuseppe Passi: An Early Seventeenth Century Feminist Controversy," *The Modern Language Review*, 96, 4, (2001) pp. 973-989.

I want to highlight the third and the first arguments. I follow her original presentation, and consider them in reverse order of the summary.

First, Marinella takes the beauty of women – our physical appearance – to imply their nobility and excellence by a straightforward inference from effect to cause: "Beauty is without doubt a ray of light form the soul that pervades the body in which it finds itself" (Marinella, 57). She goes on to demonstrate that "the soul, therefore, is the cause and origin of physical beauty" (Marinella, 58), by appealing to authorities, from Aristotle and Platonists such as Plotinus and Ficino, to an array of Renaissance poets. While it would certainly be a worthwhile project to examine her appropriation of these sources, that is not my concern here.[8] Rather, I want to focus on two premises she takes as widely accepted: that women are more beautiful than men, and that the soul is the form of the body.

Insofar as the soul is the form of the body, it is the formal cause of the body's actual physical form – the skin tone, hair color, eyes, as well as the symmetry of features and their proportionality, all of which contribute to beauty. This perfection of outer appearance could not come from nothing, and so, the inference goes, the soul too must itself have the perfection and excellence that it causes. In this way, physical beauty is a 'ray and splendor of excellence'. With this appeal to the soul as a formal cause, Marinella implicitly imports a causal dimension into the *Symposium* staircase, one that is not there in the original framework. In Plato's dialogue, it seems rather that we are to make

[8] It would be equally worthwhile to consider how her appeal to authorities compares to Passi's, for they appear to have invoked many of the same sources. In addition, one might consider the very conception of an authority when two opposing sides of a debate each take the same texts as supporting their positions.

inferences from the particular to the general to the Idea of Beauty itself; the connections between the steps of the ascent are logical rather than causal.

A causal connection between the soul and human bodily beauty can also be found at the other stages of Marinella's staircase. Note first an intermediary claim: that women's beautiful nature is actually ultimately caused by the divine essence, and so, by a similar inference from effect to cause, the beauty of women gives us a clear path to the divine. She writes:

> If we take our reasoning further, we will see that God, the stars, the sky, nature, love, and the elements are the origin and source of beauty. Beauty, the home of the graces and of love, is dependent on the supernal light. (Marinella, 58.)

She takes this claim to echo the Platonist view that "external beauty is the image of divine beauty" (Marinella, 60), and so provide a segue to the third argument (the first in the summary), in which Marinella directly appropriates Diotima's speech regarding the ascent of desire in the *Symposium.*

> I would not merely call beauty a staircase. I believe it to be the golden chain referred to by Homer that can always raise minds toward God and can never, for any reason, be dragged down toward earth. This is because beauty, not being earthly but divine and celestial, always raises us toward God, from whom it is derived…The first link of our golden chain that, descending from heaven, gently carries away our souls is corporeal beauty. This is gazed at and considered by the mind, through means of the outer eye, which enjoys and finds moderate pleasure in it, but then, conquered by supreme sweetness, ascends to the second link and contemplates and gazes with the internal eye at the soul, that, adorned with

> celestial excellence, gives form to the beautiful body. Not stopping at this second beauty or link, but avid and desirous of a more vivid beauty and almost inflamed by love, the mind ascends to the third link, in order to compare earthly and celestial beauties and raise itself to heaven. From there it contemplates the angelic spirits, and finally this contemplative mind seats itself within the great light of the angels, and thus of the one who supports the chain. So the soul, taking delight in Him, is made happy and blessed. (Marinella, 66)

Like in the *Symposium,* an appreciation of physical beauty serves as the first experience of beauty from which one ascends. For Marinella, however, we do not ascend a staircase but rather move up a golden chain. With this shift in metaphor, Marinella makes explicit her modification of the Platonic story into a causal account. The 'staircase' model, for her, is one in which each step is independent of the previous one. A 'golden chain', on the other hand links together the stages of aesthetic appreciation, and so properly captures the causal links that can be drawn between them. On her account men appreciate the physical outward beauty of women, and come to apprehend women's inner beauty, the excellent soul that gives form to the body. That apprehension in turn leads to the contemplation of God, as the ultimate cause of all things. And this grasp of the Divine leads men to true happiness, and, so too virtue.

One has to appreciate the genius of Marinella's appropriation of Plato. She makes it a virtue to admire a beautiful woman, whereas Passi, and presumably others, saw nothing but the seeds of vice and temptation. The desire of such outward beauty is not, in her view, to be seen as a kind of repetition of the Adam's fall in the Garden of Eden, but rather as the way to salvation and the contemplation of the divine.

While it would be of value to explore further Marinella's blending of Platonic and Aristotelian elements here and to work through the details of how the causal links between stages of aesthetic appreciation are meant to work, I want rather to consider the other premise Marinella takes as incontrovertible: that women are more beautiful than men. This premise is of course another point of difference between Marinella's and Plato's ladders of desire: Plato is focused on male rather than female beauty, and he does not rank the beauty of the sexes. But there is another more philosophically substantive point of difference. To see this consider that while Marinella's argument, like that of the *Symposium,* is premised on someone appreciating the beauty of a body, in the *Symposium,* we need never consider how one of the beautiful bodies comes to see himself as beautiful. With Marinella, the project of the work makes it of some moment to ask: How are women to recognize their own beauty? Marinella's argument is supposed to convince not only Passi (or at least his readers), but also the women who are being beaten down by him, of Passi's profound error. For Marinella's argument to truly succeed, women, it would seem, need to recognize their own beauty in order to be able to draw the causal inference, become aware of their own nobility and excellence, and become immune to Passi's invective. With awareness of their own beauty, women can gain knowledge of the Divine, and this self-knowledge would be central to women being deemed more noble and excellent than men. In this way, within Marinella's account there is a space for a reflexive question that is not easily found in Plato's.

While it would certainly be open to Diotima to consider how one of the beautiful bodies might recognize his own beauty and so begin to move up the staircase of desire, it is not clear what would motivate that turn in the Platonic picture. For Marinella,

however, the question of how women might recognize their beauty arises naturally not only out of her project -- to counter the denigration of women by Passi -- but also out of concern about whether she might have undermined her argument. If women are not able to recognize their own physical beauty, do they have a way of knowing God?

Marinella does not herself seem particularly interested in this reflexive question, but there are at least three sorts of answers that she might give. First, she might claim that women are to follow men in beholding their own (outward) beauty, or perhaps that of fellow women, and thereby themselves move from link to link on the golden chain. Marinella would thus be either endorsing an attentiveness to external appearances – some might call this vanity – or alternatively, a kind of lesbianism. I don't find much evidence of the latter, but at the end of the work she is quite clear that she has no problem with women's concern with their own appearance.[9] She writes:

> Why should it be a sin if a woman born with considerable beauty washes her delicate face with lemon juice and the water of beanflowers and privets in order to remove her freckles and keep her skin soft and clean? Or if with columbine, white bread, lemon juice and pearls she creates some other potion to keep her face clean and soft? I believe it to be merely a small one. If roses do not flame within the lily pallor of her face, could she not, with some art, create a similar effect? Certainly she could, without fear of being reproved, because those who possess beauty must conserve it and those who lack it must make themselves as perfect as possible, removing every obstacle that obscures its splendor and grace. (Marinella, 167)

[9] Interestingly, Marinella's father, Giovanni Marinelli, authored a practical manual of personal hygiene and beauty, *Women's Ornaments (Gli ornamenti delle donne,* Venice, 1562). (See Marinella, 3.)

Marinella does not want to go so far as to endorse a wholly artificial look, but she sees nothing wrong with highlighting one's strengths and downplaying one's weaknesses. While it is not clear whether women's ability to modify their outward beauty through artifice is consistent with Marinella's causal argument, that physical beauty implies a beauty of soul, Marinella's appeal to attention to one's proper appearance does suggest that women can begin to work their way through the links while first seeing and then contemplating their own reflection in the mirror. Nonetheless, this same concern with one's own appearance would seem to invite concerns about narcissism and vanity, and the vices they evidence, which Marinella does not engage directly either.

Second, Marinella might claim that women come to recognize their own beauty through the appreciation they get from men. While Marinella's appeals to poets, who are invariably male, and their homage to the beauty of the female body might suggest she is open to this kind of route, it does not seem to me that Marinella would want to countenance a woman's appreciation of the Divine as being dependent on the male gaze. This would, effectively, subvert the hierarchy for which she is arguing: women insofar as they are nobler and more excellent than men should not depend upon them.

There is, however, a third way Marinella might go. She might want to claim that women, simply in virtue of their nature – that is, their noble souls – are capable of immediate self-understanding and so of grasping their intrinsic value, independently of their physical beauty. With this immediate apprehension of their own nature, they can then understand their own cause – that is, the Divine. In effect, in taking this line, Marinella would be claiming that women by nature have a head start on the path towards grasping the nature of God. While women *might* work their way up the golden chain by

considering the physical beauty of another, just as men do, unlike men, they *need* not. Rather they can effectively skip a link, grasping the nature of their own soul, and thereby *its* nobility, to take the next step to apprehending the Divine.

I am inclined to think that this third account is the way Marinella herself would go. It is the most compatible with her overall argument in the work. But it is also an interesting position philosophically, for it introduces a new question into the mix. How are women to grasp the nature of their soul? Are they to perceive their soul in a way analogous to that in which a body is perceived? Or is there a distinctive kind of awareness which affords a grasp of their own nature? This question of how women are to grasp the nature of their own soul can be seen as foreshadowing the project of Descartes' meditator, who, through a distinct awareness, apprehends his own nature and goes on, also through a causal argument, to apprehend the Divine. This Cartesian innovation can thus be seen in a new light, as potentially connected to Platonist appropriations of the *Symposium* argument from the ascent of desire.

3. Let me now turn to consider Mary Astell's[10] *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*.[11] Astell's work, though at least partly polemical, is a serious appropriation of Cartesian

[10] Mary Astell (1666-1731) moved to London in her early twenties, where she became part of several intellectual circles, and became an accomplished theologian and philosopher. Her correspondence with John Norris regarding the degree to which human motivation and cognition depends on God was published in 1695. In that work, and in Part II of the *Serious Proposal*, she argues against a Lockean epistemology, drawing on Arnauld and others in the Cartesian tradition. She published a number of political essays, including *Reflections on Marriage*, as well as other works on religious toleration.

[11] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2002). Cited internally as "Astell" followed by the page number. This edition includes both Parts I and II of the *Proposal.* Part I was originally published in 1694, and republished in 1695. Part II followed in 1697.

philosophy in defense of women's innate rational capacities and the need for proper women's education to ensure realization of women's proper freedom. Understandably, much Astell scholarship has been focused on this central core of the work.[12] My focus is a little different. I want to consider Astell as further reconfiguring the question of the relation of beauty and wisdom.

It is striking that Astell opens the *Serious Proposal* by asserting that her intent in the work "to improve your Charms and heighten your Value, by suffering you no longer to be cheap and contemptible. Its aim is to fix that Beauty, to make it lasting and permanent, which Nature with all the helps of Art cannot secure: and to place it out of the reach of Sickness and Old Age, by transferring it from a corruptible Body to an immortal Mind" (Astell, 51). She sweetens the offer, claiming further that her proposal "wou'd procure them *inward* Beauty, to whom Nature has unkindly denied the *outward*; and not permit those Ladies who have comely Bodies, to tarnish their glory with deformed Souls" (Ibid.).[13]

Without doubt, Astell here appeals to feminine beauty as a rhetorical ploy. She writes as a consummate salesperson, recognizing that her female audience is preoccupied with their titles, their dress, and self-ornamentation, and she preys on their sense of how fleeting their youthful appearance is to convince them to pursue the distinctly more

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[12] See for instance: Patricia Springborg, *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination* (New York/Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005); Alice Sowaal, "Mary Astell's *Serious Proposal*: Mind, Method and Custom," *Philosophy Compass,* 2 (2007) 227–243. doi: 10.1111/j.1747-9991.2007.00071.x; Cynthia Bryson, "Mary Astell: Defender of the Disembodied Mind," *Hypatia*, 13, 4 (1998), 40-62; Penny Weiss, "Mary Astell: Including Women's Voices in Political Theory," *Hypatia*, 19, 3 (2004) 63-84.

[13] The title of this paper is taken from this passage.

durable good of honing their faculty of reason: “Time that mortal Enemy to handsome Faces, has no influence on a lovely Soul, but to better and improve it” (Astell, 55).

However, Astell’s allusions to beauty here are not mere rhetoric. Her remarks have philosophical import. It is not inconsequential that Astell begins with the problem of aging; her doing so can be seen as a response to Marinella. Marinella herself does not consider the effects of aging, though it is perhaps the obvious objection to make to her argument. Within Marinella's formal causal explanatory framework, it would seem that as women age and their natural beauty fades, we can no longer infer that women are noble and have natural excellence. The effects of aging thus undermine the force of her argument. However, without entitlement to infer from effect to formal cause, the physical signs of aging would not imply a parallel deterioration of the rational soul, and one could insist that our rational soul remains intact through the aging process. That is, one could block the objection by denying that the rational soul plays a formal causal explanatory role. Astell deploys just this strategy. As her opening passage indicates, Astell rejects the formal causal relation between human soul and the human body. For her, outward beauty might well be elusive, but that is no indication of an inward ugliness, and by the same token, an outward beauty, though not incompatible with an inward beauty, does not imply it. Astell’s argument depends upon the contrast between the corruptibility of the body and the immortality of the soul.

Moreover, the theme of Beauty is not left off once her audience has been drawn into the proposal. Rather, it appears throughout the work.[14] Interestingly, Astell does not

[14] Astell's invocation of beauty serves to distinguish between ill-founded conceptions of self-worth and proper self-esteem, and is thus linked to truth and knowledge. In Part I, in addition to the passages discussed below, see (Astell, 54, 66, 71, 75, 77, 87, 108, 110).

want her readers to simply reject their concerns with outward beauty. Rather, she wants to effect a 'transfer' of beauty from the outwardly directed body inward to the soul. And this transfer is at least analogous with the inference from particular to universal made by Plato and the causal inference made by Marinella from physical beauty to the beauty of the soul. What does this move from outward to inward beauty involve for Astell?

First, we might think that what constitutes beauty is to be transferred inward. Consider attention to outward beauty. In concerning ourselves with our appearance, we attend to how the different elements of our presentation fit together. Does the colour of our dress make our skin tone look healthy or sallow? Does its cut highlight some features rather than others and keep our body in proportion? Do accessories complement or detract from the balance of the whole? If we are to think a concern with beauty as involving precisely this attention to the proper organization of the parts into the whole, the notion of inward beauty makes some sense. Astell writes:

> She who rightly understands wherein the perfection of her Nature consists, will lay out her Thoughts and Industry in the acquisition of such Perfections. (Astell, 62)

We might read her as suggesting a concern with inward beauty will lead a woman to 'lay out' her thoughts, that is, presumably, to organize them properly so as to ensure that they stand in proper relation to one another. Inward beauty, then, just like outward beauty, consists in the proper organization of the parts into the whole. The important parts, however, are no longer physical properties but thoughts. There is an interesting implication of this line of thought. If effecting beauty is simply a matter of perfecting the

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This connection between beauty and truth continues in Part II. See (Astell, 122, 151-154, 164, 189, 191, 258, 272f).

organization of parts, the skills mastered in the domain of outward appearance, should transfer to the inward domain. If this is so, Astell could offer an interesting twist to Marinella's argument: women are better reasoners than men, and so more inwardly beautiful, because they are more practiced at affecting outward beauty.

In order to transfer a concern with outward beauty to inward beauty, however, one must, presumably, recognize that one is capable of that inward beauty in oneself. We are thus brought back to the question suggested by Marinella's work. How are we to recognize our own inward beauty, so that we might cultivate it? Astell is not deaf to this question. Consider the following remark:

> This is a Matter infinitely more worthy your Debates, than what Colours are most agreeable, or what the Dress becomes you best? Your Glass will not do you half so much service as a serious reflection on your own Minds which will discover irregularities more worthy your correction, and keep you from being either too much elated or depressed by the representations of the other. (Astell, 52)

Here, Astell compares two different kinds of reflection. The first, of one's image in a mirror, makes one aware of one's external beauty, and Astell contrasts this with 'reflection on our own Minds'. How we are to understand this contrast impacts how we are to see Astell as conceiving of our awareness of our inward beauty.

On the one hand, the comparison between our reflection in a mirror and reflection on our own minds can seem to imply that our perceptions of beauty, inward and outward, are also analogous. That is, we can read Astell as seeing no difference in kind between the *act* of perceiving one's image in a glass and that of reflecting on the nature of mind. Rather the difference lies in the *objects* of our gaze. She wants us simply to turn our gaze

from our outward appearance to the more proper object of focus, our mind. On this reading, Astell seems to be adopting a Lockean model of reflection as the perception of the workings of our own mind.[15] What is distinctive about our self-awareness is it is focused on ideas already in the mind, ideas that a perceiver has access to and others do not. There's nothing special about the perceiving itself.

While Astell's antipathy to Locke's philosophy might on its own argue against this reading, there are independent reasons for rejecting it. For there is another aspect to the contrast Astell is drawing. For her, our reflection in the mirror cannot but involve a misapprehension of ourselves. In the mirror, we see our bodies, but more importantly, we see ourselves as others see us, and judge our value according to the opinions of others. These opinions can be shaped by conventions of self-presentation -- which color is judged to suit one's complexion, which dress style is judged most flattering might well change from season to season or year to year. Equally, others see us as we appear, and their evaluations are formed on the basis of appearances. For Astell, our external appearance cannot be a reliable basis for any insight into our true nature and so our true worth. Astell is clear:

> And not entertain such a degrading thought of our own *worth*, as to imagine that our Souls were given us only for the service of our Bodies, and that the best improvement we can make of these, is to attract the eyes of men. We value *them*

[15] Locke, in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, writes: "The Mind receiving the *Ideas* ... from without, when it turns its view inward upon it self, and observes its own Actions about those *Ideas* it has, takes from thence other *Ideas*, which are as capable to be the Objects of its Contemplation, as any of those it received from foreign things." (ECHU 2.6.1)

too much, and our *selves* too little, if we place any part of our worth in their Opinion. (Astell, 55)

In judging our worth by examining our reflection in the mirror, we rely on the opinions of others, and so effectively have a distorted sense of ourselves and our worth.

Reflection on our own minds, however, leads us in stages to greater awareness of what we are. In grasping our essence properly, we recognize

> that Goodness is the truest Greatness, to be wise for your selves, the greatest Wit, and *that* Beauty the most desirable, which will endure to Eternity. (Astell, 56)

With inward reflection we find a true incorruptible beauty, in virtue of the immortality of the mind, or soul. External reflection leads only to frustration in trying to preserve that which is by its nature corruptible. Equally, in contrast to the distorted self-conceptions deriving from our examining our reflections in the mirror, these inward self-examinations lead to a proper sense of self and self-worth. Continuing on from the passage quoted earlier:

> She who rightly understands wherein the perfection of her Nature consists, will lay out her Thoughts and Industry in the acquisition of such Perfections. …. [S]he who has nothing else to value her self upon, will be proud of her Beauty, or Money, and what that can purchase; … Her inbred self-esteem, and desire of good, which are degenerated into Pride, and mistaken self-love, will easily open her Ears to whatever goes about to nourish and delight them…. (Astell, 62-63)

With these sorts of remarks, Astell seems to be suggesting that inward beauty is importantly different from outward beauty.

There are two things to note in this regard. First, the difference between outward and inward beauty presses the question of how Astell's readers are meant to transfer their concern with outward beauty to a cultivation of inward beauty. It does not seem that, as I originally suggested might be the case, practice in outward beauty simply transfers to inward beauty. In this regard, Astell's move invokes Plotinus.[16] While, as noted above, Plotinus does maintain that material things give us a window into truth through the unity which affords their very existence, his discussion begins by rejecting an account of beauty derived from a focus on bodies: that beauty consists in the symmetry or organization of parts. This account, he suggests, cannot account for the beauty of ways of life, of excellent laws, of abstract thought, of virtue, that is, the beauty of the soul. It is from here that he turns to arrive at an alternative account of beauty, one that is proper to the soul, but that still applies equally to bodies. This resonance with Plotinus's account can elucidate the way in which Astell aims to connect outward and inward beauty. A concern with outward beauty need not be for naught, for an appreciation of outward beauty allows for an analogy that can afford the insight into the true principle of beauty: the unity of material things -- whether of the parts of a house or the harmonies of a piece of music or the components of an outfit -- is still a unity, the same principle of unity proper to intellectual and divine beauty.

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[16] Astell would have been familiar with Plotinus and other Platonists; she was taught about Cambridge Platonism by her uncle as part of her education. In addition, her correspondence with John Norris depends upon her familiarity not only with Malebranche but also the Cambridge Platonists and Platonism more generally. The Astell-Norris correspondence spans the year 1693-1694 and was published shortly after. For a modern edition, with a helpful introduction, see *Mary Astell and John Norris: Letters Concerning the Love of God*, eds. E. Derek Taylor and Melvyn (New, Hertfordshire: Ashgate, 2005).

This reading of Astell leads to the second point. For while Astell exhorts her readers to become aware of their inward beauty, she does not tell us how we are to do so. What is it to turn inward? Plotinus is little help here, for he simply directs us to "withdraw into yourself and look" (*Enneads* I.6.9). This analogy with vision can lead us back to the Lockean model of reflection, the model we have already seen is problematic in drawing the distinction between inward and outward beauty. But the analogy can also leave us with unanswered questions: What are we to look at? What should we be looking for? Astell does suggest an answer to these questions insofar as she connects inward beauty with our nature. To flesh out this suggestion it makes sense to look to Descartes. For her response might follow the plot of Descartes's *Meditations*. As we use our mind, thinking, in virtue of the awareness or consciousness proper to thought, we come to recognize that this ability to think is constitutive of who we are. Further, in the *Meditations*, after the meditator recognizes his nature as a thinking thing, he goes on to discover more about that nature, including how to use it properly: by affirming only clearly and distinctly perceived ideas. For Astell too recognizing that our proper nature and worth rests in our mind comes with a desire to correct the 'irregularities' found there. Presumably, the recognition of the irregularities of mind derives from a sense of what the unity of thinking – the mind's beauty – should be.[17]

One might worry, though, that even if Astell aims only to draw attention to the nature of thinking, her project might inevitably encourage the Lockean sort of reflection on the mind. Not only would be directed to attend to our nature as thinking things, things

[17] Further support to interpreting Astell along this Cartesian line can be drawn from Part II of the *Serious Proposal*, where Astell repeatedly invokes Descartes's standard of clear and distinct perception as the aim of the educational program she outlines.

with the particular awareness proper to thought, but we would also become self-conscious of that awareness, concerned about every detailed element of our thoughts, distinguishing one thought from another and aiming to clarify each distinct thought with unending vigilance. That is, just as concern with outward beauty can descend into vanity all too easily, so too can a newfound concern with inward beauty degenerate into a vicious self-consciousness. Indeed, it might seem as if the language of beauty could only encourage this vice. Rather, I want to suggest that the language of beauty is meant to do quite the contrary – to caution against this sort of error. For one, talk of outward beauty brings with it the caution against vanity. One is thus invited to ask what the comparable vice might be for inward beauty. But the language of inward beauty also does *positive* as well as cautionary work. Here Astell's gestures towards Plotinus are illuminating. For Plotinus, recall, the principle of beauty lies not in the symmetry or organization of parts, but rather the unity that is constitutive of existence. Astell's talk of inward beauty thus points to a particular unity of awareness. Vicious self-consciousness, unending reflection on our thoughts in efforts to clarify and distinguish them, undermines the unity of thought. The radical doubt of the First Meditation suggests as much, disorienting the meditator to the point where he cannot tell true from false. Thus, the unity constitutive of inward beauty affords us the consciousness proper to thought without a self-consciousness that would mar and undermine our intellectual nature. What is this elusive unity of awareness or inward beauty?

4. In this regard it is interesting to note that in some English literary works of the period the remarking of the beauty of the female characters suggests that the notion of a

beautiful woman was aligned with a sense of awareness of self that does not degenerate to self-consciousness. I focus on two works: one by a near contemporary of Astell's, Aphra Behn, *The Wandering Beauty,*[18] and another written a bit later, in the mid-18th century, by Sarah Scott, *Millenium Hall*.[19]

The Wandering Beauty is a short story of a young woman from an affluent family, Arabella, whose beauty attracts the affections of significantly older man, one of her father's friends. Her parents are somehow persuaded to consent to his marriage to their daughter, and Arabella, rather than follow through with her duties, contrives to run away. She disguises herself by discoloring her skin with walnut oil and exchanging clothes with a peasant girl, travels from kind stranger to kind stranger until she is offered food and lodging by Christian Kindly and his wife. She heals Eleanora's, their daughter's, eyes, restoring her sight, and is hired as Eleanora's governess, all the time not revealing her origins. Arabella, under the assumed name Peregrina, is courted by two men. One of them, the local pastor, takes her unknown provenance to be beneath him. The other, Lucius Lovewell, though he came to court Eleanora, is smitten by Arabella's beauty and character, and recognizes these qualities, rather than her familial origins, as what is of value. The two marry, and Arabella reconciles with her family.

Millenium Hall is narrated by a 'gentleman traveler', who recounts his accidental visit to a somewhat remote women's 'society'. The narrative begins by painting a utopian picture of a community that both tends to the flourishing of its own inhabitants, through

[18] *The Wandering Beauty* was originally published in 1698 with 'The Unhappy Mistake', and later reprinted in1700 in Vol 2 of Behn's *Histories, Novels and Translations*, published for Samuel Briscoe.

[19] *Millenium Hall* was first published in 1762, and is considered a foundational Bluestocking text. Scott, at age 28, left her husband of only a few months to devote herself to writing and to promoting secular separatist female communities.

the development of their practical and intellectual skills, and enables those around them – including the destitute, the disabled, and the elderly – to flourish as well. Readers are then introduced to the women of the society, who each tell the traveler their personal histories, recount how they came to join the society. In the course of these tales, we are introduced to a series of dangers facing young women, which though somewhat disturbing are also not extraordinary.[20] In this work too, beauty figures prominently in the way the characters, both the women of the society and the other figures in their lives, are presented.[21] It is clear that beauty plays some role in communicating the moral of the story, just as it does in 'The Wandering Beauty'.

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[20] Ms. Louisa Mancel, for instance, loses both her parents, but is taken in by her aunt until the aunt dies. Apparently fortuitously, a Mr. Hintman is near at the time of the aunt's death, and, moved by both the tragedy of the circumstance and the 10 year old's 'extraordinary beauty', agrees to be her guardian and to pay for her education at a French boarding school. There, Louisa develops her mind, and her character, through her friendship with Ms. Melvyn. Ms. Melvyn had been sent of to this finishing school through the machinations of her stepmother, who wanted her out of the way. The friendship is truly fortuitous, as Ms Melvyn had "been taught to employ herself as rationally as if she had been arrived at a maturer age" (87) and imparts all her previous wisdom to Ms. Mancel. The two grow intellectually together through the gifts of books, and supplies for lessons in music and drawing, from Mr. Hintman. This idyllic existence begins to be disrupted, however, by a series of events wherein the two young women lose their autonomy. First, Mr. Hintman's interactions with Ms. Mancel become inappropriate. But then he dies, and while one danger is avoided, it is revealed that Ms. Mancel has all of 100pounds to her name. While a plan is devised for her settle near Ms. Melvyn who is returning, as soon as Ms. Melvyn returns home her stepmother connives to marry her off to a particularly brutal man, Mr. Morgan, with a particularly ugly sister, who insists on controlling every aspect of Ms Melvyn's life. Louisa manages to find a post as a companion to the old woman, and she also finds love with her son Edward, but of course because of their different socio-economic circumstances they cannot be together. Edward goes off to war to escape his sorrows, while Louisa is reunited with her mother (who wasn't dead after all) and has some fortune. However, this discovery is too late to save Edward from his becoming a war casualty Coincidentally, Mr Morgan has a stroke and dies three month later. At that point the two women join force and aim to realize the utopian vision in Millenium Hall.

[21] From the first time we meet her, Louisa Mancel is described as "the most beautiful child I ever beheld", and this refrain continues throughout her development. It is revealed

It is clear that both Scott and Behn want to align beauty and virtue, and so effectively adopt a Marinella-like argument that outward appearance offers us insight into a person's character or soul. However, the narrative structure of each work complicates their philosophical import. While the narrator clearly recognizes the protagonists as beautiful, what about the protagonists themselves? Are they aware of their own beauty? I suggest that the attitude of the central characters towards their own outward beauty exemplifies the kind of awareness that Astell might be after in her exhortations to women to focus on inward beauty. These women are identified as beautiful, but it is quite clear that they are not vain. Nor is it the case that they are oblivious to their outward beauty. While it is not made explicit in the narratives, it seems clear that these women characters are in some sense conscious of their beauty. That consciousness is reflected in their confidence in their engagement with others, their sense of how to navigate seamlessly through some quite precarious social situations, their comportment. But to say that they are conscious of themselves as beautiful individuals is not to say that they are self-conscious of it. That is, their attention never dwells on their beauty, even when the behaviour of others – for instance, the inappropriate advances of much older men, or of religious men – draws their attention to that beauty. It is not so much that they are conscious of their beauty, that is, that their beauty is an object of consciousness. Rather,

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that Ms. Melvyn's stepmother scuttles her away because she perceives her as more attractive, and "though not so striking at first sight, was filled with attractions." As the two develop, their resilient beauty is marked, and contrasted with the vanity of Lady Melvyn, and the ugliness of Mr. Morgan's sister Susanna. Moreover, this pattern of identifying characters by their beauty is repeated for each of the members of the society. They are in turn described as beautiful (Lady Mary Jones), or if not the most beautiful then the most pleasing (Miss Selwyn), or 'as extremely handsome and engaging' (Harriot Trentham), and so on.

their beauty consists at least in the way they inhabit the world, a kind of self-possession that is integral to the way they move about in the world, their actions.

These exemplars of outer beauty, I want to suggest, offer a paradigm for an awareness that would be constitutive of inner beauty that Astell is after. Having a beautiful mind consists not in vain displays of cleverness, nor does it consist in a self-consciousness, a kind of obsessive attention to the order of one's thoughts. The metaphor of outward beauty allows for a characterization of the awareness or consciousness proper to thought as a kind of inward form self-possession, a grip on one's thoughts, a confidence in making the moves of reasoning proper to thinking. Part of Astell's invocation of beauty is rhetorical, but part of it is also doing philosophical work, using the norms and conventions of discussions of outward beauty in her own time to provide an account of the mind as a thinking thing, of inner or true beauty.

5. Plato, in the *Symposium,* raises questions not only of the nature of beauty but also of how apprehension of beauty relates to achieving wisdom, or a beautiful mind. Platonists, like Plotinus, follow in pursuing this line of philosophical inquiry, though Plotinus does shift the focus of our initial apprehension of beauty from a human body to other material things. In the seventeenth century, just as with Plato and Plotinus, minds are also deemed beautiful, and apprehension of a beautiful mind follows that of a beautiful body. I have highlighted two aspects of early modern discussions on this matter that are particularly interesting: the reflexivity of the move from apprehending outward beauty to cultivating and apprehending inward beauty, and who is pursuing the line of inquiry.

It is perhaps not an accident that the principal figures in the early modern discussion are women. Women, after all, are those most explicitly admired for their beauty -- as Marinella documents with her appeals to poetic authority -- and equally, as Astell recognizes, pressures are placed on women to appear beautiful. But women were not only judged to be beautiful, they could also be held captive by those judgements, to remain within the domain of beauty to the exclusion of the domain of reason.[22] Women thinkers, those who want to assert the rationality of women, had particular incentive to find argumentative strategies that could turn what was deemed to be a female weakness into a source of strength. Platonic and Platonist texts provide particularly appropriate points of departure.

Secondly, both Marinella's and Astell's discussions, perhaps precisely because they have a female audience, invite a question that was not present in Plato, and was not seen as particularly problematic in Plotinus: How is the beautiful person herself to recognize her own beauty? The answer involves not an invitation to look into a mirror and consider herself as a beautiful object, but rather to a reflective moment, a turn inward, to recognizing one's true nature as a rational being, a thinking thing. My suggestion is thus that these early modern appropriations of Platonism in discussions of inward beauty, or the beauty of mind, are tied to one of the central innovations of early modern philosophy: an account of consciousness. Contextualizing questions about

[22] Madeleine de Scudéry, in the Twentieth Harangue of her *Les femmes illustres, ou, Les harangues héroïques* (Paris: Antonin de Sommaville and Augustin Courbé, 1642), argues against the idea that women are naturally more beautiful than men. She argues that the claim is not only demonstrably false, it also debilitates women in their efforts to use their mind, to pursue study of the arts and letters, to read, and most importantly, to write. An English translation of this harangue is included in: Madeleine de Scudéry, *The Story of Sapho,* ed. and trans. Karen Newman, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

consciousness within a discussion of outward beauty, however, highlights an aspect of consciousness that is often overlooked. While there are important differences between outward or bodily forms of beauty and inward or intellectual beauty, there is also a similarity, one that is important to the move from a concern with outward beauty to a focus on inward beauty. Just as there are norms governing outward appearance, so too are there norms of inward beauty. And just as too much attention to the norms of outward beauty runs the risk of vanity, so too inappropriate attention to the norms of a beautiful mind, comes with a risk of falling prey to a vice analogous to vanity – an excessive self-consciousness. Interestingly, examples of a how a truly beautiful woman carries her beauty offers a model of the virtuous form of consciousness. [23]

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