

**WHAT IS IT WITH DAMARIS, LADY MASHAM?
The Historiography of One Early Modern
Woman Philosopher**

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I suppose it may be of use, to prevail with the busy Mind of Man, to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its Comprehension; to stop, when it is at the utmost Extent of its Tether; and to sit down in a quiet Ignorance of those Things, which, upon Examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our Capacities. (John Locke)

The regnant interpretation of Damaris, Lady Masham's life and thought may be briefly characterized in the following way. Born in January 1658/9 in Cambridge, daughter of the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth, the intellectually promising girl was educated by her father, studying divinity and philosophy, and deeply influenced by and so induced to adopt Cambridge Platonism as her philosophical outlook. This commitment was persistently reinforced by her early life in Christ's College and augmented by a close relationship she developed with the Cambridge Platonist John Norris, who acted as her philosophical mentor, dedicating his *Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life* to her in 1689. Her personal and intellectual life changed considerably as Damaris, after becoming Lady Masham, came under the influence of John Locke upon his return from his Continental exile and eventual residence in her married home at Oates in 1691. She had initially met Locke about a decade earlier while a young woman, and he a middle-aged member of Shaftesbury's household, and then carried on a correspondence with some slight philosophical dimensions during the interval. This correspondence reveals Lady Masham to be a Cambridge Platonist, notably including her initial response to the earliest public articulation of Locke's *Essay* doctrines from that perspective. As she was drawn further within Locke's orbit, Masham made a complete personal and intellectual break with her old friend John Norris.

Some few years later, in the course of her defence of Locke's philosophy in her first book, *A Discourse concerning the Love of God* (1696), Masham attacked Norris's metaphysico-theological conception of divine love as well as Mary Astell and her project for female education.¹ Norris and Astell, stung by Masham's critique, each at least affected to believe it written by Locke himself, and vigorously replied to it, Astell in both *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest*, Part 2 (1697), and *The Christian Religion* (1705). Masham, in her turn, conceived her second book, *Occasional Thoughts In reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (1705),² as a rejoinder to Astell, again betraying a thorough allegiance to Locke's philosophical position. After Locke's death, Masham re-emphasized or reverted to a degree to her roots in Cambridge Platonism, as revealed in her correspondence with G. W. Leibniz, querying his metaphysics, and in letters to Jean Le Clerc concerning Bayle's criticisms of her father's concept of plastic nature.

Such is now, and in the main has long been, the dominant understanding of Damaris, Lady Masham, in outline; it has become increasingly widespread since the late 1980s. There are grave difficulties with this historiography, however. What began as speculation is now taken to be fact; inattentive and inexact scholarship has created, compounded, and uncritically repeated, errors of fact and ill-grounded interpretation; and carelessness and ideological bias have perverted the chronology, purposes, contexts, and even titles, dates, and contemporaneous beliefs about the authorship of Lady Masham's two books.³

¹ Anon. *A Discourse concerning the Love of God* (London: Awnsham and John Churchil, 1696). 8° pp. [iv], 126.

² Anon. *Occasional Thoughts In reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (London: A. and J. Churchil, 1705). 8° pp. [vi], 232.

³ Works on Masham on which this sketch is based include the following: [Abel Boyer], notice of Locke's death in *The History Of the Reign of Queen Anne, Digested into Annals. Year the Third* (London: A. Roper, 1705), 261–3; George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several*

Ladies of Great Britain [Oxford, 1752]; [Ballard], 'Memoirs of the Learned Lady Masham', *The Lady's Magazine*, vol. 5 (London: G. Robinson, 1774), 129–31; Florence Smith, *Mary Astell* (N. Y.: Columbia University Press, 1916), 92, 104, 109–11 and 115; Myra Reynolds, *The Learned Lady in England 1650-1760* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), 100–2 and 452; Ada Wallas, *Before the Bluestockings* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1929), 75–107; John H. Muirhead, *The Platonic Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931), 74; Doris Mary Stenton, *The English Woman in History* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957), 219–21, 223 and 233; Rosalie L. Colie, *Light and Enlightenment: A Study of the Cambridge Platonists and the Dutch Arminians* (Cambridge: CUP, 1957), 27, 34, 38–9, 117, 138, 140–1, and 143; John Hoyles, *The Waning of the Renaissance 1640–1740: Studies in the Thought and Poetry of Henry More, John Norris and Isaac Watts* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1971), 93–5; Sheryl O'Donnell, 'Mr. Locke and the Ladies: The Indelible Words on the *Tabula Rasa*', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, ed. Roseann Runte, vol. 8 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press for ASECS, 1979), 154–5; Richard Acworth, *The Philosophy of John Norris of Bemerton (1657–1712)* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1979); Ruth Perry, 'Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 18 (1985), 483 and 486; Sheryl O'Donnell, "'My Idea in Your Mind": John Locke and Damaris Cudworth Masham', in Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley, eds., *Mothering the Mind: Twelve Studies of Writers and Their Silent Partners* (N. Y.: Holmes and Meier, 1984), 26–46; Ruth Perry, 'Introduction', in George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*, ed. Perry (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985), 26–7; idem, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 75, 87–8, 106, and 486 n. 76; Luisa Simonutti, 'Damaris Cudworth Masham: una Lady della repubblica delle lettere', in *Scritti in onore di Eugenio Garin* (Pisa: Scuola normale superiore, 1987), 141–65; Germaine Greer, et al., eds., *Kissing the Rod: An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Women's Verse* (N. Y.: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988), 315–23; Lois Frankel, 'Damaris Cudworth Masham: A Seventeenth Century Feminist Philosopher', *Hypatia*, 4 (1989), 80–90; idem, 'Damaris Cudworth Masham', in Mary Ellen Waithe (ed.), *A History of Women Philosophers, Vol. 3: Modern Women Philosophers, 1600–1900* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), 73–85 (a slightly revised version of Frankel's *Hypatia* paper); Sarah Hutton, 'Damaris Cudworth Lady Masham: Between Platonism and Enlightenment', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 1 (1993), 29–54; Margaret Atherton, 'Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason', in Louis M. Antony and Charlotte Witt, eds., *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 19–34; Margaret Atherton (ed.), *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 77–95; Patricia Springborg, 'Mary Astell (1666–1731), Critic of Locke', *American Political Science Review*, 89 (1995), 622, 630 and 632 n. 9; idem (ed.), *Astell: Political Writings* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), xv, xix–xx, xxiii, xxxiv, 240–1, 245 and 263; Sir Alan Cook, 'Ladies in the Scientific Revolution', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 51 (1997), 1–12; Sue Weinberg, 'Damaris Cudworth Masham: A Learned Lady of the Seventeenth Century', in Joram G. Haber and Mark S. Halfon, eds., *Norms and Values: Essays on the Work of Virginia Held* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 233–50; Eileen O'Neill, 'Disappearing Ink: Early Modern Women Philosophers and Their

One cannot satisfactorily address all of the problems with the reigning understanding of Masham in one essay. This paper will concentrate on three crucial aspects of it by

(1) assessing George Ballard's *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752) as a source of information and interpretation of Lady Masham's life and works;

Fate in History', in Janet A. Kourany (ed.), *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions* (Princeton: PUP, 1998), 17–62; Springborg, 'Astell, Masham, and Locke: Religion and Politics', in Hilda L. Smith (ed.), *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), 105–25; Margaret J. M. Ezell, "'Household Affaires are the Opium of the Soul': Damaris Masham and the Necessity of Women's Poetry', in Barbara Smith and Ursula Appelt, eds., *Write or Be Written: Early Modern Women Poets and Cultural Constraints* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 49–65; E. Derek Taylor, 'Mary Astell's Ironic Assault on John Locke's Theory of Thinking Matter', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 62 (2001), 505–22; Patricia Springborg (ed.), *Mary Astell, A Serious Proposal to the Ladies Parts I and II* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2002), 17–18, 19, 20, 34 n. 3, 59 n. 1, 66 n. 2, 71 n. 5, 76 n. 1, 77 nn. 2 and 3, 145 n. 1, 166 n. 1, 167 n. 1, 174 n. 2, 232 n. 1, 233 n. 1, and 268 n. 1; Kathryn J. Ready, 'Damaris Cudworth Masham, Catharine Trotter Cockburn, and the Feminist Legacy of Locke's Theory of Personal Identity', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35 (2002), 563–76.

Articles in reference works include: Christabel Osborne, 'Masham, Damaris, Lady Masham (1658–1708)', in *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 412–13; Teri Moore, 'Masham, Damaris, Lady (1659–1708)', in *The Europa Biographical Dictionary of British Women* (London: Europa, 1983), 286–7; Renata Rizzo, 'Masham, Damaris, Lady (1658–1708)', in *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660–1800*, ed. Janet Todd (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1985), 214–15; Ethel M. Kersey, 'Masham, Damaris Cudworth, Lady', in idem, *Women Philosophers: A Bio-Critical Source Book* (N. Y.: Greenwood Press, 1989), 154–5; [?], 'Masham, Damaris (Cudworth), Lady, 1658–1708', in *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 724–5; Jennie Dear, 'Damaris Masham', in *An Encyclopedia of British Women Writers*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 440.

Cf. Jacqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 114–40; idem, 'Adversaries or Allies? Occasional Thoughts on the Masham-Astell Exchange', *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 1 (2003), 123–49; and James G. Buickerood, 'Masham, Damaris (1658–1708)', in *The Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century British Philosophers*, ed. John W. Yolton, John Valdimir Price, and John Stephens (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1999), 2: 599–601; and idem, 'Introduction' to Damaris, Lady Masham, *Philosophical Works of Damaris, Lady Masham* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 2004), v–xliv.

(2) beginning a re-examination of Lady Masham's supposed early commitment to Cambridge Platonism and reception of Locke's philosophy from that vantage;
and finally,
(3) presenting a sketch of a properly grounded account of the purposes, targets, and scope of Lady Masham's first book, *A Discourse concerning the Love of God* (1696).

Ballard on Lady Masham

On s'ôteint donc que l'on n'évite de citer, qu'afin que personne ne puisse examiner l'Histoire, que l'on raconte, en comparant la narration avec celles des Historiens, qui ont écrit auparavant. (Jean Le Clerc)

George Ballard's *Memoirs* has long been considered an authoritative source of information about some sixty early modern learned women's thought and lives. Ballard was evidently inspired to collect materials about and sketch the lives of these women by the Anglo-Saxon scholar Elizabeth Elstob, a one-time associate of Mary Astell.⁴ Ballard's 1985 editor, Ruth Perry, describes his text as an 'invaluable resource to the modern scholar': the 'painstaking care' he took 'in recording every detail about his learned ladies, with scrupulous attention to their probable veracity, makes Ballard's *Memoirs* a unique repository of information about literary Englishwomen of the past'.⁵ In Perry's estimate, Ballard was not merely thorough and exacting while collecting the information about his subjects, but in presenting his memoirs, he 'monotonously and methodically detailed all the information he had been able to gather ... without interpretation or analysis'.⁶ There is indeed nothing like analysis of Lady Masham's thought in the chapter Ballard devoted

⁴ Perry, in Ballard, *Memoirs*, 24–5.

⁵ Perry, in Ballard, *Memoirs*, 26–7.

⁶ Perry, in Ballard, *Memoirs*, 28.

to her. But I am afraid that this editor's estimate of Ballard's procedure and execution cannot be said to be otherwise accurate. It is quite clear that his presentation of Masham's life and thought is based on unsatisfactory research and is permeated with uncomplimentary speculation and a bias in favour of Mary Astell at the expense of his immediate subject, Lady Masham. Ballard's interpretation of Masham's life and thought is, in short, distorted and inaccurate.

It is due to Ballard's speculative proclivities that we have been treated so often to the confident assertion that Ralph Cudworth educated his daughter Damaris.⁷ The fact is that we know nothing of the details of Damaris's education; while her father may indeed have taught her himself or supervised her education, it is at least equally if not more plausible that her mother, a tutor, or a governess was directly responsible for any tuition she received.⁸ The strikingly detailed, often repeated claim that Masham owed to Locke 'her acquired endowments and skill in arithmetic, geography, chronology, history, philosophy and divinity' seems to be pure Ballard invention.⁹ Ballard's treatment of the relations of Masham and

⁷ Ballard, *Memoirs*, 332.

⁸ Cf. Reynolds, *Learned Lady*, 100–1; Greer *et al.*, eds., *Kissing the Rod*, 315; Springborg (ed.), *Astell: Political Writings*, 240; Cook, 'Ladies', 7; Weinberg, 'Damaris Cudworth Masham', 236; Osborne, 'Masham, Damaris', 412; Dear, 'Damaris Masham', 440; Moore, 'Masham, Damaris', 286. The contention that Ralph Cudworth educated his daughter may well be true, but we have no evidence of it. Moreover, there is the oddity that, on the supposition that he, eminent classicist and Professor of Hebrew, Cambridge University, did educate her, young Damaris acquired no classical or biblical languages. E. S. de Beer provides a welcome note of rigour and restraint when he notes that 'Nothing is known about ... Damaris's early life and education except that, as her letters show, she grew up in her father's circle, the Cambridge Platonists'. John Locke, *The Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. E. S. de Beer, 8 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976–89), 2: 470. Subsequent citations of letters in this collection will identify volume and letter numbers.

⁹ It is characteristic of Ballard that he offers no evidence for this assertion. Compare, for example, Osborne, 'Masham, Damaris, Lady Masham (1658–1708)', 412; Rizzo, 'Masham, Damaris, Lady', 214; Reynolds, *The Learned Lady*, 101, has Locke teaching Damaris Cudworth divinity and philosophy while she was still living in Cambridge.

Locke is decidedly peculiar.¹⁰ In addition to all this, it is evidently Ballard who is originally responsible for the bizarre, persistent confusion over Masham's relations with John Norris and some of his books:

Soon after ... [Damaris] was married, the fame of her learning, piety and ingenuity induced the celebrated Mr. Norris to address and inscribe to her by way of letter his *Reflections upon the conduct of human life, with reference to the study of learning and knowledge*, London, 1689, duodecimo. This began a friendship between them, a friendship which having its foundation in religion, seemed very likely to be firm and lasting. But it seems to have been in great measure dissolved before it had been of any long continuance, occasioned by this lady's contracting an indissoluble friendship with Mr. Locke, whose divinity and philosophy is well known to differ very much from Mr. Norris's.¹¹

Considerable confusion and error infects this passage. Norris's *Reflections* was published in 1690; I do not know whether it is accurate to say it was 'inscribed' to Lady Masham—given the confusion scholars have exhibited in keeping track of Norris's works and their relations to Lady Masham it is worthwhile to state plainly that *Reflections* was 'addressed' to her. Its full title is *Reflections Upon the Conduct of Human Life: With reference to the Study of Learning and Knowledge. In a Letter to the Excellent Lady, the Lady Masham*.¹² Moreover, Masham and Norris must have had some contact before even Ballard's fabricated date of 1689, because Norris had in 1688 *dedicated* a *different* book to her: *The Theory*

¹⁰ More recently, Rosalie Colie and E. Derek Taylor have made the peculiar assertion that Masham was Locke's 'patron'. See Colie, *Light and Enlightenment*, 38; and Taylor, 'Mary Astell's Ironic Assault', 515.

¹¹ Ballard, *Memoirs*, 332.

¹² London: S. Manship, 1690. The book, dated 2 September 1689 at its close, was licensed in November 1689 (sig. A1^v).

and Regulation of Love. A Moral Essay.¹³ It is worth keeping these two books and their relations to Masham distinct; I suspect that Ballard's confusion has caused subsequent scholars to confuse them as they frequently repeat that Norris dedicated *Reflections* to her in 1689, some apparently not even knowing of the 1688 work and never seeing, much less studying, the 1690 volume.¹⁴ According to Norris himself, it was Lady Masham's regard for his previous work that motivated him to dedicate *Theory and Regulation* to her, not any supposed reputation for learning, piety, and ingenuity.¹⁵ But even with the evident earlier contact, there is no evidence of *friendship* between them whatsoever, much less of any teacher–pupil relations that have more recently been predicated on the back of this supposed friendship.

To this point, Ballard has offered nothing true or justified about Lady Masham that is—and was at the time he wrote—not available from superior sources. One more feature of his brief discussion of her may be noted here.¹⁶ This concerns some of the information that

¹³ Oxford: Hen. Clements, 1688. The dedication is dated 26 March 1688, and the book received its imprimatur on 2 January 1688. In the dedication Norris implies some species of communication from at least Masham to him, or at least that he believed that she held his previous writings in some regard (which may have been communicated to him by some third party, for all we know): 'Madam, The Esteem, wherewith your Ladyship honour'd my former writings, has at once *obliged* me to an high measure of *Gratitude*, and *pointed* me out a way of *shewing* it'. Neither the dedication nor the text of the work itself contains anything further about the author's relations with the dedicatee. We do not know which of Norris's earlier publications Masham held in regard. Possibilities include: *Hierocles upon the Golden Verses of the Pythagoreans* (London: Thomas Fickus, 1682); *An Idea of Happiness, in a Letter to a Friend* (London: James Norris, 1683; 2nd ed., 1684); *Poems and Discourses Occasionally Written* (London: James Norris, 1684); *A Collection of Miscellanies* (Oxford: John Crosley, 1687).

¹⁴ See, e. g., Ballard, *Memoirs*, 332; Reynolds, *Learned Lady*, 101; Springborg (ed.), *Political Writings*, 240; Dear, 'Damaris Masham', 440; Moore, 'Masham, Damaris, Lady', 286; Rizzo, 'Masham, Damaris, Lady', 214; Hutton, 'Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham', 35.

¹⁵ See note 13 above.

¹⁶ Ballard's manuscript version of his chapter is some fifteen pages longer than the published version. Most of the excised material consists of lengthy quotations from *Occa-*

he relayed about Masham's marriage, child, and first book. Most of *this* information is accurate; yet this is lifted almost intact from another source, published about the time Ballard was preparing his *Memoirs*, a source which is itself in part quoting Norris's and Damaris Masham's own texts.¹⁷ Ballard tells us that, soon after Norris published the third in his series of *Practical Discourses* and then saw his and Mary Astell's epistolary exchange over the nature of divine love through the press, Lady Masham, 'probably under the inspection of Mr. Locke', composed and anonymously published the duodecimo, *A Discourse concerning the Love of God* (1696). Apart from the possibly gratuitous swipe at Masham's originality, this may be unexceptionable—though we might reasonably ask for evidence for this putative probability.¹⁸ Then Ballard completes this paragraph with a lengthy depiction of the position Masham lays out in her work. This depiction is clearly taken nearly *verbatim* from Thomas Birch's brief biography of Ralph Cudworth, prefacing Birch's 1743 abridgement of the *True Intellectual System of the Universe*.¹⁹ Part of Birch's depiction itself here quotes first Masham's, and then Norris's text, and Birch acknowledges that fact.²⁰ Apart from a few innocuous word changes and omissions, Ballard's account of the book is an unacknowledged quotation of Birch's quotation of

sional Thoughts and his interpretative defence of women's capacities for learning.

¹⁷ One passage occurs in the second paragraph of Ballard's chapter, the relevant portion of which reads: 'She was second wife to Sir Francis Masham, Baronet, of Oates in the county of Essex, by whom she had an only son, the late Francis Cudworth Masham, Esq....' (332). The sections I have underlined are taken verbatim from the text cited in notes 19–21 below. This passage is not of course ultimately derived from the text of Masham's first book.

¹⁸ Ballard, *Memoirs*, 333.

¹⁹ Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe: The First Part.... The Second Edition; In which are now first added ... an Account of the Life and Writings of the Author*, by Thomas Birch (London: J. Walthoe, et al., 1743), 1: xx–xxi.

²⁰ The passages are taken from Masham's *Discourse*, 1–2. Birch misidentifies the pages as 2 and 3.

Masham and Norris, and of Birch himself, with the exception of a couple of interpolations that do nothing else than distance Ballard from Masham's position and introduce a note of doubt regarding the viability of that position. For Masham's position in these passages is diametrically opposed to the commitment of Norris and Ballard's heroine, Mary Astell.²¹ Ballard does not simply report that Masham contends that Norris's (and Astell's) principles will not bear the conceptual weight with which they burden them; she *imagines* these principles inadequate. He does not simply relay the fact that Masham argued that Norris's principle of divine love bears undesirable consequences; he interjects the qualification that *she thought* that they bear undesirable consequences.²²

²¹ Ballard's interpolations of Birch's comments are rendered in bold in this excerpt from Ballard's text. The material taken verbatim from Birch is underlined: 'She begins with observing that whatever reproaches have been made by the Romanists of the want of books of devotion in the Church of England, or by the dissenters of a dead and lifeless way of preaching, it may be affirmed that there cannot anywhere be found so good a collection of discourses upon moral subjects as might be made of English sermons and other treatises of that nature written by the divines of our church. These books are certainly in themselves of the greatest and most general use of any and do most conduce to that which is the chief aim of Christianity: a good life. She then animadverts upon those who undervalue morality, and others who strain the duties of it to an unwarrantable pitch and pretend to ascend by it to something beyond or above it. Afterward she goes on to consider the conduct of those who build their practical and devotional discourses upon principles which not only will not (as she imagines) bear the test, but which oblige them to lay down such assertions of morality as sober and well disposed Christians cannot understand to be practicable. Here she applies herself to the examination of Mr. Norris's scheme in his *Practical Discourses* and other treatises, wherein he asserts that mankind are obliged, as their duty, to love with desire nothing but God only, every degree of love of any creature whatsoever being sinful. This assertion Mr. Norris defends upon this ground (borrowed from Father Malebranche) that God, not the creature, is the immediate efficient cause of our sensations, and whatsoever gives us pleasure has a right to our love. This hypothesis is considered with great accuracy and ingenuity by Lady Masham, and the bad consequences, as she thought, represented in a strong light'. (333)

A comparison of Ballard's tone, diction, and focus in his chapters on Masham and Astell also very strongly suggests that his very apparent admiration for Astell resulted in thoughtless bias against the woman he took to be her antagonist, Lady Masham.

²² Ballard, *Memoirs*, 333.

The overall impression yielded by Ballard's account of Masham's life and thought is of a changeling, faithless, weak-willed sometime friend, dependent on more accomplished men not only for intellectual opportunities but for the content of her thought—thought that was at least questionable, if not clearly erroneous, when opposed to that of Mary Astell. So far from being the unique source of 'much valuable information about' Damaris, Lady Masham, that 'would have been lost' had he not engaged in the work of the *Memoirs*, Ballard provides *not one fact* about this author that is not available from more reliable earlier sources.²³ More importantly, as one can trace the specific errors of fact and interpretative bias found in much subsequent Masham commentary to his work, we can see that Ballard's poor scholarship and his uninformed prejudice have infected and devalued the body of Masham scholarship to the present.

Damaris, Lady Masham and Cambridge Platonism

The Nature of Epistolary Writings in general, disposes the Writer to pass by the mentioning of many Things, as well known to him to whom his Letter is address'd, which are necessary to be laid open to a Stranger, to make him comprehend what is said: And it not seldom falls out, that a well Penn'd Letter which is very easy and intelligible to the Receiver, is very obscure to a Stranger, who hardly knows what to make of it. (John Locke)

(i) Lady Masham and John Norris

As both Miss Cudworth and as Lady Masham, Damaris is routinely said to have been committed to some (usually inexactly delineated) species of Cambridge Platonism. Whatever our interpretation of the pertinent primary evidence for such a claim—her 1682 to 1688 correspondence with Locke and contemporaneous verse is all we have—there *is* little doubt that she was in this period 'steeped in the tenets of the Cambridge Platonists'; but it is not at all

²³ Perry, in Ballard, *Memoirs*, 26.

clear to me that she was then, or should today be ‘considered one of their number’ on the basis of this evidence.²⁴ Of course, this is not the only evidence cited to support this interpretation. The mere fact that Damaris was the daughter of a major figure in that philosophical movement, the contention that she was educated by him, and the putative intellectual intimacy she experienced with John Norris, who is considered a tangential member of this group, are used to make this case as well. Damaris was, doubtless, her parents’ daughter in the usual sense that they conceived, gave birth to, raised her, and at least oversaw her tuition. This neither establishes, nor so much as reasonably suggests, anything with respect to any philosophical views the child may have adopted. I have pointed out that the confident assertion that Ralph Cudworth educated his daughter is groundless. I shall now briefly examine what we know and can reasonably infer about her relations with John Norris, before moving on to examine the evidence for any philosophical commitments she exhibits in her letters to John Locke.

It is a commonplace in the literature that Norris was a Cambridge Platonist. Because of the enormous complexities of the constituent texts and issues, I am not going to address this contentious identification in this essay beyond simply denying the truth of that unqualified claim on the basis of the more obvious facts: Norris was not a Cambridge Platonist, or, rather, there are important foundational differences between the metaphysical and epistemic positions of major Cantabrigians such as Smith, More, and Cudworth himself and those of Norris, such that it is exceedingly misleading to call him one of their number.²⁵ At the very least, the

²⁴ ‘As far as it is possible to judge from her letters, Damaris Cudworth was in her earlier years sufficiently steeped in the tenets of the Cambridge Platonists for her to be considered one of their number’. Sarah Hutton, ‘Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham’, 41. It is not clear who is to do or is to have done the considering here: is this a claim that she was considered a Cambridge Platonist in the seventeenth century, or that twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars can or have or should consider her a Cambridge Platonist?

²⁵ I shall not detail my grounds for this assertion here. For a brief discussion of the differences between Norris and the Cambridge Platonists, see Broad, ‘Adversaries or

characteristic Cambridge Platonist commitment to a ‘vital congruity’ or ‘plastic nature’ between mind and body that enables these two substances to interact is utterly inconsistent with Norris’s Malebranchean doctrine of occasionalism that entails no genuine interaction between mind and body. Here I am most interested in the grounds for any assertions made about any relationship Masham and Norris are to have had up to 1691. It has been variously characterized as ‘intimate’, as a ‘friendship’, as a ‘philosophical alliance’, or as a ‘well-publicized correspondence on the subject of platonic love’, where Norris was teacher and Masham his pupil.²⁶

We have but one brief remark of Lady Masham’s about her relations with Norris. That remark relates only to Norris’s erroneous 1690 assertion that she was then blind.²⁷ We’ve a number of *his* comments about their relationship, and a couple of comments of Locke’s. That is all. Norris’s dedicatory note to *The Theory and Regulation of Love*, dated 26 March 1688, opens with the implication that Masham ‘esteemed’ that author’s ‘former writings’.²⁸ Within little more than a year, the Oxonian clearly saw himself to be

Allies?’, 25–6; and idem, *Women Philosophers*, 98–9.

²⁶ Friendship is asserted, e.g. in Osborne, ‘Masham, Damaris, Lady Masham (1658–1708)’, 413; Ballard, *Memoirs*, ed. Perry, 332; O’Donnell, ‘Mr. Locke and the Ladies’, 155; Springborg (ed.), *Political Writings*, 240; and Dear, ‘Damaris Masham’, 440. Reynolds, *Learned Lady*, 101, asserts that Masham and Norris knew one another well. The claim that the two corresponded is sometimes weirdly embellished into the assertion that they corresponded on platonic love, and capped off by Muirhead with an egregious putative quotation from this correspondence that is in reality a passage from Norris’s *Reflections* (156–7): see, e.g., Reynolds, *Learned Lady*, 101; Muirhead, *Platonic Tradition*, 74; Perry, ‘Radical Doubt’, 486, 487; and Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 75 and 482–3, n. 37. Taylor, in ‘Mary Astell’s Ironic Assault’, asserts without grounds that Masham was one of Norris’s ‘closest philosophical allies’ in 1690 (515, n. 44).

²⁷ See Masham to Jean Le Clerc, 18 June 1703 (Universiteitsbibliotheek, Amsterdam, MS J.58v.): ‘... my Eyes ... are not strong enough to hold out well for all the use I have, or would Willingly make of them: althō they never were in any Apparant, or Invisible Likelihood, that I know of, of leaveing me in the Dark; as Mr Norris long ago perswaded many that they had done, by a Printed Letter to me to Console me for being Blind’.

²⁸ See note 13 above.

Masham's philosophical instructor or adviser. The text of his 1690 *Reflections Upon the Conduct of Human Life*, dated 2 September 1689,²⁹ includes a number of indications of this presumption in addition to the four-page introduction in which Norris attempts to comfort Masham on the loss of her eyesight. This book is conceived with the consolatory purpose of instructing Masham about the role the pursuit of knowledge ought to have in human life. If Lady Masham is afflicted with sorrow over her publicized disability because she is '*thereby deprived of Conversation with ... [her] Books, and consequently retarded in ... [her] earnest pursuit after Learning and Knowledge*', she must understand and so be comforted by an appreciation of the fact that '*our Learning is generally misplaced, and that such an importunate pursuit after Learning and Knowledge is no way agreeable to the present Station and condition of Man*'.³⁰ We generally pursue knowledge that is irrelevant to the perfection of the understanding; when attempting to acquire knowledge that can lead to such perfection, we generally fail to use due and regular method; and we must beware the unrelenting, over-eager pursuit of knowledge altogether.³¹

²⁹ Norris, *Reflections Upon the Conduct of Human Life*, 161.

³⁰ Norris, *Reflections*, sig. A4^{r-v}.

³¹ These are the theses of Norris's three 'reflections' comprising the body of this book. Specific passages indicating Norris's assumption of the role of instructor or adviser to Lady Masham may be found throughout the book; see, e.g., 2, 8–9, 11–12, 29, and 34. In a book supposedly written for a blind woman, Norris makes what one may take to be an odd comment: 'I deny not but that *Reading* is One way of *Knowing* (otherwise I should not be at the Pains to write this to your Ladyship....' (95–6). Of course, Norris may have reasonably assumed, given his mistake, that Masham would have texts read to her by another. Or possibly not.

Much seems to be made of this book and Lady Masham.³² I see little we can licitly infer about Masham's and Norris's relations from it, however. Merely that Norris makes a claim about Masham, or assumes some role with respect to her, is by itself inconclusive. We do not know on independent grounds whether or not he had a firm grasp of the pertinent facts about her, her interests, her views. We do know that he was wrong in believing her blind. How close, then, are they likely to have been? And the matter is not even quite so simple as this. According to Locke in his 22 February 1697 letter to William Molyneux, Masham had somehow learned of Norris's assumption of her affliction, and had, evidently before publication, written to Norris to rectify his error. Lady Masham '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'.³³ If

³² Examples of the numerous sorts of errors on the title, date, and nature of Masham's relation to Norris's *Reflections* (1690) may be found in Acworth, *Philosophy of John Norris*, 252; Ballard, *Memoirs*, ed. Perry, 332; Dear, 'Damaris Masham', 440; Hutton, 'Damaris Cudworth', 35; Moore, 'Masham, Damaris, Lady', 286–7; Reynolds, *The Learned Lady*, 101; Rizzo, 'Masham, Damaris, Lady', 214–15; Springborg, 'Astell, Masham, and Locke', 106; and Springborg, in Astell, *Serious Proposal*, 145 n.1. Many commentators simply assume Masham's agreement with Norris's theses in this book. Charles J. McCracken provides a welcome divergent interpretation. He reads *Reflections* as Norris's attempt to 'convert' Masham to Malebranche's views. This reading requires evidence not on offer by McCracken, but it is refreshing to see someone trying to understand this material without the hindrance of the established parameters. See McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 6.

³³ 'I read that passage of your letter to my lady Masham which concerned her sight; she bid me tell you, That she hopes to see you here this summer. You will, possibly, wonder at the miracle, but that you must find in Mr. Norris's book. 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, and hoped she never should be.' De Beer (ed.), *Correspondence*, 6: no. 2202. See also letters 2189 and 2221. It may be worth noting that, while it is in places somewhat ironic, Locke's tone in this letter is measured and neutral; it exhibits no hostility to Norris. This letter would appear to have been composed at roughly the time of the release of Masham's *Discourse*. That book is dated 1696, and it was entered in the *Term Catalogues* in the Hilary Term

Locke's claims are true, then, Norris not only erred in supposing Masham blind, he ignored her pre-publication correction of this error and possibly deliberately—at least knowingly—published falsehoods about her.³⁴

Norris's remarks in this book imply other things about Masham in addition to the belief that she was particularly assiduous in the pursuit of knowledge: that she knew and admired and had mastered some of Descartes's and Malebranche's work; that she and Norris had a mutual friend in Henry More; that Norris recognized her to have a quick mind; and that Masham did not at that time share Norris's estimate of the folly of eagerly pursuing learning of doubtful method and value.³⁵ There is little enough here, and little that is univocally verifiable from any independent source.³⁶ Given

(February), 1696/7 (*TC* III, 1).

³⁴ Norris changed the introductory section, deleting all reference to Masham's blindness, in the second edition of *Reflections* (London: S. Manship, 1691). Licensed 1 November 1689. The new introduction contains no apology for the first edition error. Curiously, in the first edition Norris is particularly concerned with Masham's importunate pursuit of knowledge, but still believed her to need instruction regarding the proper objects of knowledge and method of acquiring it, whereas in the second edition, he thinks only his reflections on the over-eager pursuit of knowledge are applicable to her (sig. A7^r).

In *The Philosophy of John Norris* Acworth interprets this episode to Norris's advantage, suggesting without evidence that Masham's letter failed to reach Norris in time for him to change his introduction (252). Possibly; but Norris also apparently failed to respond to Daniel Whitby's criticisms of his theory of divine love in correspondence, which moved Whitby (at least according to his own account) finally to publish these views in *A Discourse of the Love of God* (London: Awnsham and John Churchil, 1697). Acworth claims that these criticisms are inconsequential, and that Norris failed to respond privately to Whitby for that reason (176). Yet, in his 'An Admonition Concerning two late Books call'd *Discourses of the Love of God*', Norris takes these putatively inconsequential criticisms seriously enough to devote over thirty pages to their refutation. Norris, *Practical Dis-courses*, vol. 4 (London: S. Manship, 1698), 386–423 and 425–6.

³⁵ Norris, *Reflections*, e.g. 34, 62 and 75; 74; 111; and 161.

³⁶ We understand from other sources that Masham knew some of Descartes's and Malebranche's works, but whether she 'admired' them or not—or, even if she did, just what such admiration consisted of, whether it reached any point of agreement and precisely what elements of their thought it focused on—is unknown. She did refer to Cartesians as 'friends' in a mid 1680s letter to Locke (de Beer (ed.), *Correspondence*, 3: letter no. 882).

Norris's very public error regarding Masham's blindness and his possible unresponsiveness to her pre-publication correction of that error, and given at least one other curious fact, I am disinclined to believe that there was much more than a courteous acquaintanceship based on mutual respect and some *similar* intellectual interests.³⁷ Certainly there is sufficient reason to resist relying solely on Norris's word for any facts about Damaris.

That last other curious fact I find at least *prima facie* injurious to claims advancing any Masham–Norris intimacy is that there is not one allusion to, not one reference to, not one quotation of Norris in any of Lady Masham's extant correspondence with Locke. This is, admittedly, a much more complex matter than I can properly address in this essay. Yet, that someone is supposed to have been Masham's close friend or philosophical adviser or ally and does not receive so much as one mention or allusion in such correspondence as she had with Locke is noteworthy and I think militates to some degree against claims of any such intimate relations.³⁸ In her letters to

³⁷ On 14 April 1692 Norris wrote to Locke thanking the latter for recommending Norris to Lord Pembroke for the rectory of Bemerton. Locke replied on 6 June of that year that he was happy to so serve a man 'of reason', and did so in the absence of 'the usual motives of relation interest or obligations'. Though scholars repeatedly write that Lady Masham played some role in Locke's recommendation, there is nothing I can find in the correspondence to substantiate this. I do not want to be understood to deny positively that she played any role; indeed, I think it is reasonable to suppose at the least that Locke's knowledge of her acquaintance with Norris lay at some indeterminable distance behind his kindness. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that any talk of Masham's role in this is at best a matter of tentative inference, at worst a matter of rank speculation. See de Beer (ed.), *Correspondence*, 4: letters nos. 1492 (Norris to Locke) and 1505 (Locke's reply).

For what it is worth, we should note that Locke recommended Norris for this position two years after Norris's criticism of the former's *Essay* in 'Cursory Reflections'. This fact suggests that Locke bore Norris no ill will for that critique.

³⁸ Much hinges on when Masham and Norris began whatever relations they had with one another, and exactly what the nature of this relationship was. If Norris had no contact with Masham long before his March 1688 dedication of *The Theory and Regulation of Love*, she was already married and living not in Cambridge, but Oates, by the time of their first acquaintance. As Norris had contact with Henry More, who lived in Cambridge, as early as January 1684/5, it is just possible that he met Masham in that town, if he in fact travelled there to meet with More. For it appears that More was at the very least dear

Locke, Masham was by no means reluctant to refer and allude to, quote, and discuss pertinent contemporaneous works of Cambridge Platonists and other scholars whom she held in esteem.³⁹ Many of Norris's 1680s publications, including translations of essays on love and friendship; on Catholic ascetic devotional contemplations on the travails of mundane life and joys of the next; on Hierocles on the *Golden Verses of the Pythagoreans* that argues the dangers of man's concentration on subjects other than God; as well as original pieces such as *An Idea of Happiness*, poems, and miscellanies, contain arguments and theses immediately relevant to topics that Locke and Damaris discussed in this correspondence.⁴⁰ Why, then, if she were so close to Norris in thought and by mutual regard, would Damaris have neglected to include his views in her letters? There are a few possible answers to this question, yet that most strongly supported by the available evidence is that these two were never in fact very close at all.⁴¹

to Masham and that suggests close personal contact between these two at times. If any Masham–Norris relationship began only in late 1687 or early 1688, then there are only a very few of her extant letters to Locke in which we could possibly find any reference to Norris, and my point is poorly grounded. If however Masham and Norris knew one another in 1685 and discussed or corresponded about matters of mutual philosophical interest, and if Masham did hold Norris's pre-1688 publications in high regard, then the field of possibility broadens, and my point gains some weight.

³⁹ See e.g. de Beer (ed.), *Correspondence*, 2: letters nos. 684, 688, 690, 695, 699, 779, 784, 830, and 837; also *Correspondence*, 3: nos. 882, 950, 967, 975, 1003, and 1040.

⁴⁰ *Effigies Amoris in English: or the Picture of Love Unveiled* (London, 1682); *A Meditation of Life and Death. Translated with some Alterations out of the Works of the Learned and Ingenious Eusebius Nierembergicus* (Oxford, 1682); *Hierocles upon the Golden Verses of the Pythagoreans. Translated immediately out of the Greek into English* (London, 1682); *An Idea of Happiness, in a Letter to a Friend: Enquiring Wherein the Greatest Happiness attainable by Man in this Life does consist* (London, 1683; 2nd ed., 1684); *Poems and Discourses Occasionally Written* (London, 1684); and *A Collection of Miscellanies: Consisting of Poems, Essays, Discourses, and Letters, Occasionally Written* (Oxford, 1687).

⁴¹ One *highly speculative* possibility would be that Masham wished to avoid communicating to Locke her interest in Norris and his work for strictly personal reasons. Since especially the 1950s Lady Masham has been supposed to have played a critical role in the

(ii) Lady Masham's philosophical commitments in her correspondence with John Locke

If you find not some time or other more faults with my Author I shall suspect that you do not truly give so much Credit to my word as you pretend to do, and then I dare not assure you that I shall not indeed be Angry, which if you value you would not do well to run the Hazard, although I do not believe that either in Jest or Earnest we can have any Quarrels which will ever make me less than I am Your Friend and Servant. (Damaris Cudworth)

Masham's correspondence with Locke is supposed to reveal her to be a Cambridge Platonist.⁴² But does it? I can here give only the briefest survey of this complex issue; my conclusions are tentative and very incompletely grounded in this essay. My purpose here is to cast reasonable doubt on this assumption.

To begin with, we must recognize and adjust to the character of Damaris's letters to Locke. As Sarah Hutton has observed, they are 'shot-through with irony and self-satire. Many of them are cast in philosophical idiom, but the boundary between display of wit and direct philosophical discussion is blurred by her philosophical wordplay and her allusive *façon de parler*. Very often she uses philosophical terms as metaphors for personal feeling'.⁴³ I think this exactly right, and that, moreover, all this irony and playfulness can lead to Masham's occasionally writing the opposite of what she

motivation, purpose, and composition of Locke's three manuscripts criticizing Norris and Malebranche. Almost entirely relying on vague chronology of events and composition, and peculiar rhetorical analysis of these manuscripts, Charlotte Johnston and Richard Acworth have asserted that Locke's three works are really assaults on Norris, that these assaults are more personal than philosophical, and that they were composed in angry reaction to Norris's alleged mishandling of a letter from Masham to Locke in 1692. See Johnston, 'Locke's *Examination of Malebranche* and John Norris', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 19 (1958), 551–8; Acworth, *Philosophy of John Norris*, 251–73; and Acworth, 'Locke's First Reply to John Norris', *The Locke Newsletter*, 2 (1971), 7–8.

⁴² By far the most searching and astute studies maintaining this view are Sarah Hutton, 'Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham', and Luisa Simonutti, 'Damaris Cudworth Masham'.

⁴³ Hutton, 'Damaris Cudworth, Lady Masham', 42.

meant—a not uncommon feature of ironic discourse. Too, and this is clearly a feature of many of her letters, though its dimensions are difficult if not now impossible to delineate, there were a number of running puns, jokes, put-ons, and poses adopted by both Masham and Locke that make for serious interpretative difficulties.⁴⁴ The upshot of all this is that we must be very wary of hermeneutic claims made without strict attention to both the immediate and long-running contexts of any epistolary assertions Masham appears to make.

Indeed, many of Masham's letters used by some as evidence for her maintaining Platonic views are of doubtful value to such an enterprise because of this. Much of this supposed evidence consists primarily or exclusively of Masham's simply referring to, alluding to, or quoting Cambridge Platonists and like-minded scholars, sometimes in contrast to what she takes to be Locke's position on some subject, at least equally often simply in the effort to interpret a Cambridge text, most notably John Smith's *Select Discourses*. She more than once identifies the Platonists as her 'friends', and even cautions Locke not to handle them too roughly inasmuch as she is warmly disposed to them; but none of this amounts to any identification of her views with theirs.⁴⁵

In addition to reading Masham's defence of Smith as safe from enthusiasm, and her sometimes reluctant efforts to interpret his text, some scholars read two letters (nos. 1003 and 1040) as not merely evidence of her alleged Platonism, but as an early response of a member of that movement to Locke's *Essay* doctrines. Yet these letters will not bear such an interpretation readily. The first of the two (no. 1003), written in February 1688, is not in fact about the

⁴⁴ e.g., Masham's affectation of quarrelling with Locke over their reading of Smith. The two most fundamental points of disagreement between them appear to be whether or not Smith was an enthusiast, and whether or not some power beyond reason is necessary to achieve a degree of perfection, to become a Pauline 'new creature' while on earth. See de Beer (ed.), *Correspondence*, 2: letters nos. 684, 687, 688, 690, 693, 695, and 699.

⁴⁵ See especially Masham's letters to Locke, nos. 690, 693, and 695.

earliest published version of the *Essay* at all, but rather about Bayle's *Commentaire philosophique*.⁴⁶ The pertinent material of the second (no. 1040), composed on 7 April 1688, which certainly does concern Masham's reading of Locke's *Abregé*, again consists largely of Masham's unacknowledged, freewheeling quotation and paraphrase of Cambridge Platonist texts. In fact, Masham is quite clear here—as elsewhere—that the disagreement between Locke and the Platonists (here, concerning the existence and nature of innate ideas) is a disagreement between Locke 'and some friends' of hers. And she begs Locke's pardon for relaying the views of her 'friends' (specifically, the views of her father and Henry More) regarding that cognitive faculty 'above that of Sense' against which Locke evidently argued, for she did not intend to argue her friends' case,

⁴⁶ It is, I believe, misidentified by de Beer, and so taken by Hutton (46) to be indicative of Masham's receipt of a copy (or an offprint) of Locke's *Abregé* and initial response to its contents. The text of the letter itself is rather opaque, but it nevertheless pretty clearly does not ground that supposition at all. Indeed, recognizing its continuity with the immediately preceding two letters (nos. 967 and 975), as well as what appears to be the subject of her letter 1003, strongly suggests that Masham is discussing Bayle's book and her agreement with its main thesis there. I am indebted to John Milton and Mark Goldie for corresponding with me about the interpretation of this letter. John Milton suggests to me that letter 1003 cannot refer to the *Abregé*, for the offprints of Locke's *Bibliothèque universelle* contribution were not complete in time for her to have received one by the date of her letter. Milton and James Hill detail the texts and production of that piece in their essay, 'The Epitome (Abrégé) of Locke's *Essay*', in Peter R. Anstey (ed.), *The Philosophy of John Locke: New Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3–25. I am currently drafting an essay, 'John Locke's "little French Man", and Damaris, Lady Masham's Initial Response to Locke's *Essay*', attempting a detailed reading of this letter.

‘not Knowing distinctly enough my owne thoughts to undertake to tell them to Another’.⁴⁷

This letter (again, no. 1040) is especially interesting if we refrain from prejudicially slipping Masham into any philosophical camp, because we are likely thereby to pay more heed to a point she reiterates here, a point closely related to one she very possibly made in earlier letters to Locke (nos. 684 and 699) concerning the correct reading of Smith and the possibility that humans have some ‘higher power’ than reason whereby they may approximate perfection here on earth.⁴⁸ After briefly touching on her twin interests and duties in household affairs and intellectual pursuits, Masham remarks that she thinks she is best occupied in ‘Pursuing the End of these speculations’—presumably those in which Locke is engaged in his *Abregé*—‘then in indeavouring to Extricate those Difficulties that the Witts of Men have Intangled them with, Which being Needless to my self, can be no Part of my Obligations.... Religion is the Concernment of All Mankind; Philosophy as distinguish’d from It, onely of Those that have a freedome from the Affaires of the World’. Masham claims to be interested in such matters as the existence of innate ideas and principles in the human mind and its denial only ‘so far as they may Weaken, or establish in the Minds of Any

⁴⁷ The *Abregé* includes only the briefest précis of book 1 of the *Essay*. Masham, relying solely on that text, would have had little indication of the details of Locke’s critical arguments. Some scholars have come to insist that Locke developed some of his *Essay* positions and arguments in response to Masham’s Platonist criticisms of theses he tries on in his letters to her and in the *Abregé*. A peculiar version of this insistence is Perry’s assertion that there ‘is evidence to suggest that Locke partially worked out the materialist epistemology of the *Essay* . . . in reaction to the platonist arguments of Damaris Cudworth, whom he knew as early as 1671’. Perry, ‘Radical Doubt’, 483. It is enough simply to quote this startling sentence.

⁴⁸ I have not yet come to any final conclusions about a reading of this complicated letter. It is just possible that Masham is seriously disavowing competence and any real interest in adjudicating logical and metaphysical issues. Reflexive application of the principle that women were disposed to be deferential and modest in intellectual relations with men is an unsatisfactory explanation of her admission. Some grounds for the application of such a principle need to be articulated in any given case.

the foundations of Natural or Reveal'd Religion'. She is not discommoded, therefore, by the fact that 'Men (even those I most Esteeme) differ in these things as well as others Whilst They Agree in Those'.

I am thus inclined to the view that Damaris, as her father's daughter and as Lady Masham, held rather a minimalist view of logical and metaphysical doctrine: so long as one's logic and metaphysics are consistent with what she takes to be the essential beliefs and duties of a Christian, theoretical specifics—and disagreements over them—just do not much matter, except for their possible practical ramifications (which admittedly have great import), matters on which her two books were to focus. So far as I can tell, then, the number of philosophical propositions which we can incontrovertibly attribute to Masham is pretty low. This number includes:

a) It is possible for humans to attain some degree of perfection in this life 'to which the Powers of meere Unassisted Reason will never Conduct' them (letter no. 684).

b) It is impossible to determine if another person is an enthusiast, or genuinely experiencing divine illumination. For, '[t]hings of inward sense being not to be Deny'd ... [just] because wee our selves do not feell them, nor can form any Apprehension of them'. So long as others

(i) can give a rational account of their experience;

(ii) obey God; and

(iii) believe Scripture;

Masham is satisfied that they are not dangerous enthusiasts (letter no. 699).⁴⁹

c) Toleration of divergent religious beliefs is warranted to the extent that public order is not threatened (letter no. 1003).

⁴⁹ Cf. Masham, *A Discourse concerning the Love of God*, 5–6.

One would need to make far more robust epistemic and metaphysical commitments than these to be considered a card-carrying member of the Cambridge Platonists.⁵⁰

A Discourse concerning the Love of God and Mary Astell

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.... (Lady Masham)

One not infrequently reads in the literature on Masham that her two books, *A Discourse concerning the Love of God* (1696), and *Occasional Thoughts In reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (1705), were composed at least in part as attacks on Mary Astell's conception of divine love, as expressed in her epistolary exchange with John Norris in *Letters concerning the Love of God* (1695), and on her vision of an academy for the intellectual sustenance of women in *A Serious Proposal Part I* (1694). At least Masham's first book is to have been an attack on Astell as manifested in these two works, and Masham's second book is to have been a reply to Astell's response to *A Discourse* in her major work, *The Christian Religion* of 1705.⁵¹ We are sometimes invited even to savour the

⁵⁰ A proper assessment of Masham's 1682–8 letters to Locke requires far more careful and detailed examination than I am able to provide in this essay. The matter of her possible commitment to Cambridge Platonism is accordingly much more complex than I have been able to indicate here. I have completely neglected Masham's poetry not because I think it immaterial in this connection, but simply due to the complexity of its interpretation and lack of space in this essay.

⁵¹ Norris and [Astell], *Letters concerning the Love of God* (London: Samuel Manship and Richard Wilkin, 1695); [Astell], *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (London: R. Wilkin, 1694); [Astell], *The Christian Religion, As Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England* (London: R. Wilkin, 1705).

It is noteworthy that with the exceptions of Astell and Norris themselves, I can locate no one writing prior to the appearance of Ballard's *Memoirs* who understood Masham to have responded in any way to Astell. See, e.g. Catharine Trotter Cockburn's correspondence touching on Lady Masham, with whom she was acquainted, in *The Works of*

irony of the suppositious assertion that Masham was then believed to have written *A Serious Proposal Part I*.⁵² But the fact is that we have no reliable evidence whatever on which to ground such a dramatic claim.⁵³ I would like to challenge the view that Masham deliberately focused on Astell's positions, on the grounds of the absence of clear evidence in its favour and the considerable, persuasive evidence to the contrary. I believe that there is more than merely a little confusion fuelling this view; at the least, it would be helpful to master the facts of the matter before engaging in any pointed interpretative effort such as the regnant interpretation assumes.

Mrs. Catharine Cockburn, ed. Thomas Birch (London: J. and P. Knapton, 1751), 2: 185, 189–90, 182, 190, 191, 195, 202, 204 and 207 (N.B. the pagination of this volume is confused; these citations are in order of physical arrangement, despite the numerical disorder); and *Pylades and Corrinna: or, Memoirs of the Lives, Amours, and Writings of Richard Gwinnett Esq...and Mrs. Elizabeth Thomas Junr.*, ed. Sir Edward Northey (London: n. p., 1731), 90–4, 106, 123. See also 'Memoirs of Ralph Cudworth, D. D. Author of The Intellectual System', in *The Present State of the Republick of Letters*, vol. 17 (London: W. Innys and R. Manby, 1736), 30; and Birch's life of Ralph Cudworth in his edition of *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London: J. Walthoe, et al., 1743), xx–xxi.

⁵² See e.g., Perry, *Celebrated Mary Astell*, 87 (cf. 106); Springborg, 'Mary Astell (1666–1731)', 622; idem, 'Astell, Masham, and Locke', 106; idem, 'Introduction', in *Mary Astell: Political Writings*, xix–xx. Each of these cites previous twentieth-century scholars in support of this contention, but all iterations of this claim ultimately owe to Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ballard MS. 41: 231, a letter from Thomas Rawlins to George Ballard. Lady Masham evidently owned copies of both Astell's *Serious Proposal* and Norris's and Astell's *Letters*, for Locke's journal of 22 December 1694 records that he had these books delivered to her at Oates. MS. Locke f.10, p. 251.

⁵³ So far as I can tell, Rawlins backed his assertion with no evidence. It is very late (12 March 1742/3), and contains no independent indication of evidentiary grounds. It is included in what appears to be a postscript, and reads: 'Lady Masham I observed was supposed to be author of Mrs Astells Serious Proposal to the Ladies'. No indication is given as to where or when or exactly what Rawlins claims to have 'observed' as much as forty-six years after the putative event. Without establishing good grounds for accepting this contention, taking it seriously is unacceptable.

Masham's two books were published anonymously.⁵⁴ That, and the similarity of some of the propositions articulated in them to Locke's positions—and, for all we know, contemporary gossip—led to some misattributions of her books to Locke. How wide-spread the misattributions were is unknown and possibly unrecoverable at this remove. Both John Norris in his reply to *A Discourse* (1698), and Mary Astell in her *A Serious Proposal Part II* (1697) and *The Christian Religion* (1705) at least affect to believe that that was Locke's work.⁵⁵ For reasons that are now opaque, Abel Boyer attributed *Occasional Thoughts* to Locke in his 1705 death notice of that philosopher, and Masham's second book was reissued in the mid eighteenth century as *Thoughts on A Christian Life* By John Locke Esq. We can find other eighteenth-century misattributions of *Occasional Thoughts* to Locke such as Richard Gwinnett's, in a 1705 letter to Elizabeth Thomas.⁵⁶ Possibly Norris and Astell in fact

⁵⁴ Sue Weinberg tells us that the title page of *Occasional Thoughts* 'informs us that the book was "Written by y^e Lady of S^r Francis Masham esq and one of the Members of Parliament for y^e County of Essex"' as if this were printed on the title page of the book. In fact what Weinberg quotes here is but a roughly contemporaneous handwritten attribution on the title page of the British Library's copy of *Occasional Thoughts*. See idem, 'Damaris Cudworth Masham', 237. (I am not certain that this transcription is correct, in any case. What Weinberg reads as 'esq' appears rather to be 'B', presumably for 'bart.' (baronet).)

⁵⁵ Norris, *Practical Discourses Upon Several Divine Subjects*, vol. 4 (London: S. Manship, 1698), 381–426; [Astell], *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies. Part II* (London: Richard Wilkin, 1697); [Astell], *The Christian Religion* (London: R. Wilkin, 1705).

⁵⁶ *Thoughts on a Christian Life*. By John Locke, Esq; (London: T. Walter, 1747). *Occasional Thoughts* was attributed to Locke by Abel Boyer in *The History of the Reign of Queen Anne, Digested into Annals. Year the Third* (London: A. Roper, 1705), 262. In the preface to his edition of *The Works of John Locke* (London: W. Strahan, et al., 1777), 1, Edmund Law notes this incorrect attribution and ascribes the work to Lady Masham. See E. S. de Beer, 'Bishop Law's List of Books Attributed to Locke', *The Locke Newsletter*, 7 (1976), 47–54. Gwinnett's 2 June 1705 letter about *Occasional Thoughts* is published in *Pylades and Corinna*, 90–3. He reiterates this misattribution with some emphasis in a subsequent letter (106), though Northey corrected this error in a note on 93–4. Her diction in a 12 November 1705 letter to Burnet suggests that Catharine Trotter Cockburn knew of Masham's authorship of *Occasional Thoughts*. See Cockburn, *Works*, 2: 190.

believed Locke had written these works; possibly Astell genuinely took *A Discourse* to be an attack on her views and character. But, as both would have been incorrect had they believed in that authority, so Astell was incorrect in taking Masham's 1696 book to have been directed at her. I shall look at the evidence provided by the text and those grounds scholars have relied upon—when they trouble to articulate any grounds at all—in assuming the latter of Astell's beliefs.

Masham clearly presents the purpose of *A Discourse* when she writes in her preface to that book that

The ensuing Discourse is Publish'd with this View: It being intended to show the unserviceableness of an Hypothesis lately recommended to the World for a Ground of Christianity, and Morality; As likewise, the farther injuriousness of that Hypothesis to True Religion, and Piety: Which, I think, I may securely affirm, neither ever have suffer'd, or ever can suffer so much, from the Arguments of any Opposers, as from theirs, who induced by Weakness, Vanity, or any other Motive, have undertaken, or pretended to Support them, upon false Grounds, and wrong Reasonings. (sig. A2^{r-v})

There is no question but that Masham displays here and throughout the book a disposition to the *ad hominem*, but in no case that I can see does she actually commit that fallacy. Her topic, the object of her criticism, it is worth emphasizing in the present scholastic atmosphere, is a thesis, a position: not a person or persons. Nevertheless, Masham does explicitly identify the authors of the thesis that she attacks: Norris and Malebranche. She has set herself the task, that is, 'to show the weakness, and extravagance of such of Mr. N's late Practical Discourses as are built upon the Principles of Pere Malebranche' (sig. A3^{r-v}). It is not even Norris's views *in toto* that Masham claims to criticize; it is *Malebranche's* position, as dangerously implemented in the Church of England lately by John Norris, that Masham identifies as her target. Her claim is borne out by the development of her position and criticism. And it is underscored by her references and allusions to works and positions insufficiently attended to by commentators.

Masham's most fundamental interest here appears to be the pursuit of 'the chief Aim of Christianity, a good Life. For whatsoever else its Professors, divided into Parties, may contend about; This they must all agree in, That we ought to be a People zealous of good Works' (2). Religious literature—theological, devotional, practical—is valuable only to the extent that it promotes and enables us to live consonant with the dictates of scripture and reason. Especially dangerous to such an endeavour is what she notes Stillingfleet called in 1671 'an unintelligible way of practical *Religion*', for 'no men of sense and reason will ever set themselves about' such a standard of devotion, but instead 'leave it to be *understood by madmen and practised by Fools*'.⁵⁷ Such a reflection is one that

it were to be wish'd all would make, who may be tempted by Affectation of Novelty, Fondness of an Hypothesis, or any other better Reason, to build their Practical and Devotional Discourses upon Principles which not only will not bear the Test, but which oblige them to lay down such Assertions in Morality, as sober and well disposed Christians cannot understand to be practicable: Than which, I think there never was any more evidently so, than that Mankind are obliged strictly, as their Duty, to love with Desire, nothing but God only; Every Degree of Desire of any Creature whatsoever, being Sin. This Assertion, though not altogether new, yet has been but lately brought into our Pulpits, and been pretended to be set on Foot upon a Philosophical, or Natural Ground, viz. *That God, not the Creature, is the immediate, efficient Cause of our Sensations: For whatever gives us Pleasure* (say they who hold this Hypothesis) *has a right to our Love; but God only gives us Pleasure, therefore he only has a right to our Love.* (6–7)

It is Norris's not so long before published sermon on Matthew 22:37, 'A Discourse concerning *The Measure of Divine Love, with the Natural and Moral Grounds upon which it stands*', that Masham identifies as that work 'lately brought into our Pulpits' pretending

⁵⁷ Edward Stillingfleet, *A Discourse Concerning the Idolatry Practised in the Church of Rome* (London: Henry Mortlock, 1671), 335; quoted by Masham, *Discourse*, 6.

to establish the imperative that we love only God.⁵⁸ The grounds upon which Norris attempts to establish this prescription are two: ‘1. *That God is the only Cause of our Love*’, and ‘2. *That he is also the only proper Object of it*’ (8).⁵⁹ Norris himself briefly associates the French philosopher Nicolas Malebranche’s metaphysics with his own understanding of causality in this sermon, and in a postscript to it, recommends the Jesuit Jeremias Drexel’s devotional compositions as providing a useful discussion of the requisite conformity of human will with the divine.⁶⁰ Masham expressly quotes, alludes, or refers to Norris’s sermon at least twenty-six times in the course of her criticism; she deliberately quotes, alludes, or refers to Malebranche’s work ten times; and she *explicitly* quotes, alludes, or refers to the Norris–Astell *Letters* a total of three times.⁶¹ In those last, she refers to and quotes only Norris’s letters; *never* Astell’s.

As a basis for Christianity, the metaphysical hypothesis that creatures are but occasional causes of our pleasure, and its correlate that we see all things in God, is simultaneously weak and dangerous, argues Masham. Accept Malebranche’s hypothesis, with or without Norris’s dress, and ‘Scepticism would be so far from finding thereby a Cure, that it would spread it self much farther amongst us than it has yet done; And ... many who find Christianity a very Reason-

⁵⁸ Acworth claims that this sermon was probably not delivered orally, but provides no grounds for this assertion; see Acworth, *The Philosophy of John Norris*, 168. Lady Masham clearly believed that the sermon was ‘Preached to a Country Congregation’ (*Discourse*, 80).

⁵⁹ Quoted from Norris, *Practical Discourses*, 3 (1693), 12–13.

⁶⁰ Norris, *Practical Discourses*, 3 (1693), 22, and 341–2. Norris’s reference is presumably to Jeremias Drexel, S. J., *Heliotropium, seu, Conformatio humanæ voluntatis cum divina* (Monachii: Nicolaus Henricus, 1629). I can find no seventeenth-century English translation of this work. It appeared in numerous Latin editions. Drexel unsurprisingly opens his first chapter with a citation of Matthew 22:37.

⁶¹ *Practical Discourses* quoted, etc.: sig. A3^v, 8 (twice), 9, 11, 12, 19–20, 35, 36, 37, 37–8, 38, 81–2, 84–5, 87, 89, 90, 91, 92, 94, 114, 115, 116, and 119; Malebranche quoted, etc.: 71, 72–3, 74, 74–5, 75–6, 103–4, 107, 108, 120–1, 122, and 125; *Letters* quoted, etc.: 15, 20, and 121.

able Religion in the Scriptures, would think it a very unaccountable one in a System that ... adds also further, That the Desire we have to the Creature, is the Punishment of Sin, not the Institution of Nature: For this Concupiscence is transmitted to us from our first Parent' (71–2).

Masham seized upon the connection—a connection she recognized that Norris himself had made to some extent—between Norris's own position here and that of that strain of Augustinian Roman Catholicism that tended to mystical vision and the advocacy of humans' withdrawal from the world of sense and society to a retreat to religious houses, of which Malebranche is qualifiedly representative. This she sees as enthusiastic and dangerous, and she was by no means alone in understanding Malebranche and even Norris to be an enthusiast.⁶² This is the subject of her opening pages, as she expresses her concern that some 'carry their Zeal for the Doctrinal Part of Religion so far, that they seem to lay little Stress on the Performance of those Vertues recommended by our Saviour Christ, as the Way to Eternal Life', and instead strain the duties of morality to 'an impracticable Pitch; or pretend to ascend by

⁶² See, e.g. William Molyneux's letter (no. 2221) to Locke, 16 March 1697, describing Norris as 'an Obscure Enthusiastical Man'. (Cf. his 26 March 1695 letter to Locke [no. 1867].) Malebranche's hypothesis of seeing all things in God was attacked as enthusiastic in J[ohn] S[ergeant], *The Method to Science* (London: Thomas Metcalf, 1696), sig. d^v; Richard Burthogge, *An Essay upon Reason, and on the Nature of Spirits* (London: John Dunton, 1694), 115–16 (cf. 109); and John Keill, *An Examination of Dr. Burnet's Theory of the Earth* (Oxford: at the Theater, 1698), 8–9.

Acworth devotes little attention to Masham's criticism of Norris on what appear to be two grounds: that she failed utterly to understand Norris's position, and that she 'saw in Norris's teaching ... less a philosophical theory which ought to be discussed in order that its merits and its weak points should be brought to light, than a manifestation of religious fanaticism which needed to be stifled'. The latter point in particular is clearly inaccurate; Acworth suggests that Masham's *Discourse* fails both to attend to what Norris wrote, and to provide arguments in support of her position, neither of which suggestions is true (*The Philosophy of John Norris*, 179). On the whole, Acworth's treatment of Masham and Locke, so far as their post-1690 relations with Norris are concerned, is unfortunately based upon assumptions and speculation about the personal feelings of these three people toward one another, a subject of which we know virtually nothing, and the relevance of which to their ostensibly intellectual endeavours needs substantial supporting argument.

it to something beyond, or above it' (2, 3). This is the terrible fault in Roman Catholic devotional literature represented by Augustine Baker's *Sancta Sophia*, to which Masham points as exhibiting the dangerous consequences of taking the line against which Stillingfleet warned us (5).⁶³ And this is the direction toward which Malebranche's hypothesis itself points, as the Oratorian himself unabashedly advertises in the closing dialogue of *Con-versations chrétiennes*, the work on which Masham concentrates her critical attention in the concluding fifth of her own book.⁶⁴

It is Masham's concern with the radical withdrawal from the senses and human community as the natural means by which and the context in which human salvation is to be earned, recommended by Malebranche on metaphysical grounds and vigorously taken up by Norris, that constitutes the immediate context in which she hazards remarks that have been uncritically assumed to have been directed at Astell:

These Opinions of Mr. N. seem also to indanger the introducing, especially amongst those whose Imaginations are stronger than their Reason, a Devout way of talking; which having no sober, and intelligible sense under it, will either inevitably by degrees beget an Insensibility to Religion, in those themselves who use it, as well as others; By thus accustoming them to handle Holy things without Fear; Or else will turn to as wild an Enthusiasm as any that has been yet seen; and which 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. And this the Author of the *Christian Conversations* foresaw very well must be the Consequence; Or rather conformably to his Religion and Profession, might perhaps have it in his View and Design, to justifie those things by this his Hypothesis. (120)

This passage and one other have been taken without argument to be

⁶³ Baker, *Sancta Sophia. Or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation* (Doway: John Patte and Thomas Fievet, 1657).

⁶⁴ Masham, *Discourse*, 102–26; see Malebranche, *Christian Conferences: Demonstrating the Truth of the Christian Religion and Morality* (London: J. Whitlock, 1695), 178–91 (Dialogue 10).

ill-natured, abrasive allusions to Mary Astell and her vision of a female academy, and thus to have licitly motivated Astell's ire. Patricia Springborg, for instance, repeatedly returns to this passage, doggedly using it as evidence of Masham's ill treatment of Astell, at one place informing us that *this* passage shows Masham to imply that 'Astell, as demonstrated in her correspondence with Norris, was no more than his acolyte'.⁶⁵ In another, Springborg asserts that this passage constitutes an *accusation* 'against Astell's proposal for a woman's retirement'. This passage is unashamedly advertised to *refer to* 'Astell's ecstatic faith', and to be Masham's *accusation* (again) against Astell 'of "as wild an Enthusiasm as any that has been yet seen"'.⁶⁶ One very serious problem here—and this is characteristic of this literature—is that no reason, no evidence, is articulated in justification of such tendentious interpretation. In this case, one does not know if Springborg is going by anything more than the denigratory reference to monasteries, connecting that with her knowledge of Astell's advocacy of a female intellectual institution to ground it, or if she takes the remark about people 'whose Imaginations are stronger than their Reason' to signify women to do so. The latter is clearly preposterous, as Masham very clearly did not accept such a characterization of women in general any more than Astell did; the former ignores precisely what Masham wrote. If this passage *does* contain an 'accusation' against Astell, it is equally an accusation that whoever holds the view under attack by Masham risks succumbing to enthusiasm and having only recourse to hermitages in order to lead a virtuous, Christian life. There is no basis whatever for believing Masham had Astell particularly in mind in composing this passage, especially in the light of the overwhelmingly Malebranchian context in which it appears. It is *Malebranche*, whom Lady Masham correctly identifies as this passage continues, who contends that it is 'absolutely necessary to renounce

⁶⁵ Springborg (ed.), in Astell, *Serious Proposal*, 18.

⁶⁶ Springborg (ed.), in Astell, *Serious Proposal*, 71, n. 5.

the World, and betake our selves to Woods and Desarts' (120).

If the reasonableness of reading this passage as a demeaning barb aimed at Astell (to whom—with one exception to be addressed presently—Masham never directly refers or quotes in *Discourse*) is doubtful, still less plausible is the reading of the second passage claimed by both Springborg and Perry to be a condescending allusion to the younger woman. In the course of pointing out the dangers of misstating the grounds for that respect in which we must hold our duty to love God, Masham curtly reveals the potential incongruity devolving on certain pretences to piety: '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, (however well they may possibly be intended) are plainly but a complementing God with the contempt of his Works, by which we are the most effectually led to Know, Love, and Adore him' (27).

Whether one reads this as simply 'curt,' as I do, or as 'sneering,' as Perry does, one cannot reasonably contend that this assertion is directed toward Astell without putting inordinate weight on the occurrence of the perfectly common non-technical term, 'rhapsodies.' This passage is 'riding hard' over Astell's modest disclaimer to the *Letters*, asserts Perry blithely: 'sneering' at Astell's 'crude Rhapsodies,' 'mocking, deriding' her 'idealism.'⁶⁷ All this fuss over a putative allusion might be well viewed as insightful and helpful were it based on something substantial, such as the allusive use of a unique or characteristic or technical theoretical term, analysis, position, method, or even character sketch. But as things stand, I think rather that some scholars are straining too hard to ferret out personal antagonism where there is at most criticism of a

⁶⁷ A seventeenth-century usage of 'rhapsody' ignored by commentators, though it is quite likely pertinent here, is to signify a miscellaneous collection, a string, medley, or confused mass of materials. Quite arguably this is a fair characterization of much of Norris's published work to the 1690s. This usage is illustrated in, e.g., Robert Boyle, *A Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature* (London, 1686), Preface.

thesis by implication.⁶⁸

Ironically, this ill-intentioned search for slights of Astell in Masham's *Discourse* has failed to uncover the one passage in that book that does seem to refer to Astell, a passage that has been identified by Jacqueline Broad. On the heels of her first foray against Malebranche's occasionalism, Masham remarks that 'how unserviceable or injurious soever it really is to Piety, it has yet been Seriously and Zealously pretended to be of great Use to Religion; And that not only by a young Writer, whose Judgment may, perhaps, be thought Byassed by the Affectation of Novelty; But also it is made the very Ground of Christianity, by a Man of an establish'd Character in the World for Philosophical Science' (78). As Norris's co-author of *Letters* is identified in the preface to that book as a 'young gentlewoman', there appears to be satisfactory ground for taking this passage to refer to Astell.⁶⁹ But this is hardly the stuff of intellectual antagonism and vituperative exchange, however much Astell may have read personal insults into Masham's text, and notwithstanding the fact that she attacked the older woman for that reason, quite apart from straightforwardly intellectual motivations.

The fact of the matter is that apart from this one, arguably benignly intended, criticism, there are no clear references or allusions to or quotations from Astell in Masham's *Discourse*. There is insufficient reason, then, in my judgement, to believe that Masham was attacking or harrying the younger woman in her first book. Unquestionably, Lady Masham was attacking a view to which Astell was then drawn, and so to that degree was attacking the young gentlewoman's philosophical position. But, even though Astell may have taken umbrage and attacked Masham in her turn in later years, this hardly justifies the contention that, at this stage, there was any

⁶⁸ Perry, *Celebrated*, 88; cf. Springborg, 'Astell, Masham, and Locke', 117.

⁶⁹ My thanks to Jacqueline Broad for pointing this passage out to me, and for making a strong case for reading it as an allusion to Astell. For Norris's reference to Astell as a young gentlewoman, see *Letters*, sig. A3^r.

Masham–Astell dispute.

Concluding remarks

Veritas fere imo puteo latet, nos summam saepe pro ea aquam libamus, aliena praesertim fide, tanquam haustis usi. (Markus Welser)

So, what is it with Lady Masham? Why has the scholarship touching on her been so unsatisfactory in the respects discussed here? In the first place, the writing of this ‘fair and intolerably Witty Lady’, as Anna Grigg described Masham—especially, but not only her correspondence—is extremely difficult to understand—‘sometimes perplexed, and in many Places forced and stiff’, in places evidently composed in a ‘hasty and negligent Manner’.⁷⁰ A greater portion of the answer is that she was early nominated as an antagonist of a deservedly admired proponent and exemplar of women’s rights and intellectual excellence, Mary Astell. Uncritically zealous presentation and defence of Astell, identified chiefly as a woman, and as a champion of women’s education and civil rights, has thus almost hypnotically inclined her advocates to slight those whom they identify as her opponents. This is compounded by the (again, uncritically assumed) identification of Masham’s views as largely determined by the positions of the intellectually-dominant men in her life—first the putative train of Cambridge Platonists, then Locke. Finally, there is the fact that so much of Masham’s life is a nearly perfect void to us. We have no information about so much of her life and character. And as some scholars loathe a vacuum, they are disposed to personalize even intellectual relations to avoid one. Yet there is neither justification nor excuse for the presumptuous, voyeuristic predication of petty motives and feelings of Masham (and Locke) to explain their intellectual activities in the absence of

⁷⁰ Grigg to Locke, 20 April 1685, in de Beer (ed.), *Correspondence*, 2: letter no. 820 (‘intolerably’ as in excessively or irresistibly); and Richard Gwinnett (Pylades) to Elizabeth Thomas (Corinna), 2 June 1705, in *Pylades and Corinna*, 90.

clear supporting evidence. That Masham's writings have not yet been studied with any serious attempt at objectivity is not up for anything like reasonable debate. Until scholars begin to ask far harder questions of traditionally accepted readings and evidence, to actually study her writing, we cannot pretend to have anything resembling a grasp of this inter-esting writer and intriguing personality.

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Acknowledgements

My thanks to the Keeper of Western Manuscripts, Bodleian Library, for permission to quote from papers in the Lovelace Collection and from the Ballard manuscripts. Thanks also to the Universiteitsbibliotheek, Amsterdam for permission to quote from manuscripts of Masham's letters. I am very grateful to Jacqueline Broad for discussing much of this argument, helping me clarify some of my views.