AGENCY AND ACTIVISM:
RECONSIDERING THE EMERGENCE OF EARLY MODERN FEMINISM

by

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Abstract

In an attempt to trace the emergence of feminism in Europe, particularly in England and France, some historians have erroneously ascribed the beginnings of the movement as having taken place during the early modern period. In particular, many historians have claimed that the first early modern feminists in England and in France were Mary Astell (1666 – 1731) and Madeleine de Scudéry (1607 – 1701), respectively, by virtue of the innovative nature of their written works. This thesis will demonstrate, through careful study of early modern womanhood, the *querelle des femmes*, as well as a thorough analysis of Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry's published works, that there is an important distinction to be made between early modern *feminism* and early modern *activism* for women's rights. By considering the contents of Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) as well as Madeleine de Scudéry's *Les femmes illustres* (1642), the nuanced differences which define early modern activism for women's rights are rendered apparent, and clearly demarcate these women from the feminist movement which truly blossomed during the Enlightenment period.

Chapter One: Historiography

In recent years, much scholarship has been published pertaining to the emergence of feminism, tracing its beginnings to early modern Europe in both England and in France.[1] In particular, with respect to this thesis, many scholars have labelled two early modern women, Mary Astell from England and Madeleine de Scudéry, as early modern feminists. This thesis will demonstrate that depicting these women as early modern feminists is an erroneous characterization. I consider them early modern *activists* rather than early modern *feminists*. While the difference may seem slight, it is nevertheless important to underscore. Neither of these women sought to undermine or counter the patriarchal elements that so heavily shaped their lives; rather, they accepted the indoctrination of patriarchy, and merely sought to elevate women's status within it by means of education. Mary Astell wanted education for women so as to enable them to better praise God; Madeleine de Scudéry sought education for women as a means to solidify social status, for salons were "[places] of intellectual and social promotion."[2] Essentially, Mary Astell advocated for education for elite English women within a secluded, feminine sphere (which strongly resembled a

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[1] "These definitional problems were quickly compounded by another problematic discovery, stemming from the fact that French scholars were pioneers in what we now call women's studies. In the course of exploring the early French historiography in women's history, it became apparent that, since 1900, historians and scholars of literary history, as well as contemporary commentators, have taken up the words "feminism" and "feminist," using them anachronistically and with great abandon, only rarely defining their terms or scrutinizing the full content of the ideas they so labeled. In the first decade of the twentieth century, learned books and articles appeared on feminism in antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and especially in the period beginning in the seventeenth century." Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1988): 129-30. A portion of the scholarship about Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry falls into that category; they are labelled as 'early modern feminists' without further consideration of their writing and its acceptance of patriarchal dominion over women.

[2] Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge (Editors), *A History of Women, Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes, III* (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 392.

convent), whereas Madeleine de Scudéry sought to better women's positions within the world of the salon (hosted by women but also frequented by men), which enabled women to "[rise] to prominence as salonnières [acquiring] dignity, respect, and authority based on their skills and contribution to a common endeavour."[3] These nuanced differences with regards to feminism and early modern activism for women's rights will be explored further in Chapter 3. That being said, it is nevertheless necessary to understand the history of the term 'feminism' and its significance. As Karen Offen maintains, some scholars misinterpret the meaning of the term feminism and in doing so erroneously interpret the lives of women in the past.[4] Indeed, a large part of this mislabelling stems from the misunderstanding of the nuances and connotations associated with the term "feminism," as well as its historical significance. It is difficult to ascertain *when*, exactly, early modern feminism began to emerge as a movement in Europe. This difficulty stems, in large part, from the complex connotations associated with the term "feminism."[5] The term "feminism" itself did not surface before the late 18th century, quite possibly coined by the "French social critic Charles Fourier."[6] Notions and ideologies which are today understood as being 'feminist' in nature emerged first and foremost in France in the aftermath of the Revolution, with the publication of works such as the Marquis de Condorcet's *Plea for the Citizenship of Women* (1790) and Olympe de Gouges' *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* (1791).[7] Moreover, in Europe, "feminism" is representative of a sweeping discussion

[3] Susan Mosher Stuard and Merry E. Wiesner, *Becoming Visible – Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 237.
[4] Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1988), 130-131.
[5] Karen Offen, *Signs*, 123-124.
[6] Susan Mosher Stuard and Merry E. Wiesner, *Becoming Visible,* 329.
[7] Susan Mosher Stuard and Merry E. Wiesner, *Becoming Visible,* 329.

pertaining to the gendered difference between both men and women, underscoring the capabilities of women *as* women, rather than in direct juxtaposition to their male counterparts.[8] As Offen has suggested, European feminism "[insisted] on women's distinctive [contributions,] and made claims on the commonwealth on the basis of these contributions."[9]

In such a sense, scholarship about early modern feminism is intrinsically nuanced by authorship, views and understandings about feminism which vary in accordance with cultural provenance. Historians, particularly those interested in gender history, are affected by this linguistic inconsistency.[10] Although the differences seem slight – all agree that feminism is, after all, about the equality, an acknowledgement of systemic discrimination against women, and the liberation of women – it does affect the manner by which scholars identify the beginnings of feminism as a women's movement. Importantly, this thesis will attempt to demonstrate that the difference between feminism and early modern activism is highly relevant to the attribution of the title 'first early modern feminist' given in turn to both Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry in several scholarly publications.[11] This thesis will argue that both of these women, despite their abilities to advocate for women's rights to education, are *not* early modern feminists, and certainly not the *first* ones to emerge in continental Europe.[12] With special consideration attributed to the factors in their lives

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[8] Karen Offen, *Signs*, 124.
[9] Karen Offen, *Signs*, 136.
[10] Karen Offen, *Signs*, 120.
[11] Historians such as Evelyn Bodek, Sara Mendelson, Patricia Crawford, Ruth Perry, et al. Several of these historians will be mentioned throughout this chapter as well as the remainder of my thesis.
[12] Many scholars, including Evelyn Gordon Bodek, are of the belief that 'feminism' is a product of the 18th century, wherein "England and France reformist energies rallied around the ideals of [egalitarianism.]" Evelyn Bodek, "Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3/4 (Spring - Summer, 1976). Other scholars, such as Samia Spencer, upheld that public opinion of women in France in the 18th century was unfavorable, undermining collective efforts for the bettering of women's status. As such, feminism in France emerged as a movement later, despite "distinct

which enable for such a statement to be upheld, this thesis will also explore and compare two of their famous works, Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694)[13] and Madeleine de Scudéry's *Les femmes illustres* (1642),[14] to demonstrate the differences between early modern women's activism and early modern feminism, its manifestation in both France and England, and as well as to present the societal structures that both enabled and disabled the emancipation of women. While there is no question that both Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry were remarkable advocates for women's rights, their erroneous association with early modern feminism is due, in part, to their writing in the midst of the *querelle des femmes*,[15] the implications of which will be considered at length in Chapter 2. Indeed, early modern feminism would not truly take root until a few decades later, during the Enlightenment, by figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges.[16] The ideologies put forward by Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry would not be fully formulated until the Age of Enlightenment in both France and England, where the true beginnings of early modern feminism can be found.

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feminist currents" which occasionally came to the fore, such as the works of Olympe de Gouges. Samia Spencer, *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11.

[13] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Mississauga: Broadview Literary Texts, 2002).

[14] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991).

[15] The *querelle des femmes*, or the Debate of Women, was a movement sparked by the French writer, Christine de Pizan (1364-1430?). Effectively, "*Christine de Pizan a bien réussi non seulement à redresser l'honneur de la moitié féminine de la société, mais aussi à préparer le chemin pour amener les femmes à la gloire.*" Xiangyun Zhang, "Christine de Pizan et Marie de France," *The French Review*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (October 2005), 82. By countering traditional gender roles of her day, de Pizan managed not only to support herself and her family through her written works, but also to advance the cause of women, appealing for equal rights between the two sexes. Her texts were deemed radical at the time and her appeals would not seriously be considered until well into the Enlightenment period. Evelyn Bodek, "Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3/4 (Spring - Summer, 1976) and Jane Donawerth, "Conversation and the Boundaries of Public Discourse in Rhetorical Theory by Renaissance Women," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Spring 1998). The *querelle des femmes* will be considered in greater detail in Chapter 2.

[16] Susan Mosher Stuard and Merry E. Wiesner, *Becoming Visible – Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 328-329.

Scholarship in the Early Modern Period

Education was the basis of early modern women's activism. Women such as Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry lobbied for women's right to education, advocated for social change and the betterment of women's intellect by upholding the importance of education in society. Evidently, the forms of education that would have been made *available* to women varied immensely from those available to men. As historian Barbara J. Whitehead states:

> [Traditional] history excluded women by defining the historical subject matter from a man's perspective, [just as] the traditional definition of education would exclude early modern women from the history of education. Early modern education, defined primarily as formal training in schools and universities with an emphasis on the learning of Latin, would be out of reach for nearly all women of that period. [As such, societal] barriers prevented women from attaining such an education.[17]

Excluded from formal institutions of learning such as universities, women needed to find other means by which to gain knowledge. This ability, or inability, was largely dependent on a woman's social class as well as society's perception of the ideal woman.[18] Indeed, "[with] reference to women, it is necessary to discover the type of woman postulated as ideal in a particular period, in order to understand the education provided for her."[19] Both Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry were women from the upper echelons of society, although Madeleine de Scudéry was of more noble status than Mary Astell. As such, their families had the means to educate their children, male as well as female. When Mary Astell's brother was sent to the Royal Grammar School, her clerical uncle Ralph

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[17] Barbara J. Whitehead, *Women's Education in Early Modern Europe: A History, 1500-1800* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), Introduction, x.
[18] Phyllis Stock, *Better than Rubies: A History of Women's Education* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1978), 14.
[19] Phyllis Stock, *Better than Rubies*, 12.

“[believed] enough in women’s learning to educate her”[20] within the quiet walls of St. Nicholas Church.[21] Similarly, Madeleine de Scudéry was also educated by her uncle, in Rouen, who “had frequented the courts of three kings, and who [lived] in the country, where he raised her with great care.”[22] While the subject of education will be considered in greater detail in Chapter 2, it is nevertheless important to underscore that both Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry’s status is what enabled them to obtain a respectable level of education, unlike many other women in the early modern period. Chapter 2 will also consider the underlying influence of their educators as key determinants in the way they demonstrated and upheld their activism. Indeed, Mary Astell was taught by a religious man, as was Madeleine de Scudéry, who came under the tutelage of a man who was well-versed in courtly mannerisms. Undoubtedly, their educators played a role in shaping their understanding of women’s rights.

However, it is also important to consider that despite the origins of their intellectual advancements, one must bear in mind that education in early modern Europe certainly was not limited to sessions with a tutor or hours dedicated to studious reading. Both of these women would have been influenced by their social spheres, their upbringing and cultural norms, which would in turn influence their activism.[23] As historian Phyllis Stock demonstrated in her landmark work *Better Than Rubies*, there is such a thing as formal and informal education, the later which “often escapes the boundaries of the accepted and opens new opportunities to the individual.”[24] Both Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry would

[20] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 42.
[21] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 42.
[22] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 21.
[23] Phyllis Stock, *Better than Rubies*, Preface (11-17).
[24] Phyllis Stock, *Better than Rubies*, 13.

have been educated formally (by learned men) and informally (in response to their publications and social circles). Their ability to better their intellectual capacities throughout their lives is, undeniably, what enabled them to advocate for women's right to education.

Several recent academic publications explore the plight of women who sought to defy, intentionally or unintentionally by virtue of their lifestyle choices (such as staying 'single' and refusing to marry, as Mary Astell did) cultural and societal norms, particularly with regard to education. While Phyllis Stock and Barbara J. Whitehead are recognized for having published comprehensive and thorough works on the history of women's education, historians were considering these important topics by the 1960s. Several factors could have contributed to this renewed focus on education, including second wave feminism which flourished in the 1960s. Feminist scholars from that period sough to disprove several widely held beliefs with regard to women and education in the past.[25]

Indeed, although Phyllis Stock and Barbara Whitehead's works are highly commended by early modernists, they were not the first academics to consider women's education in previous centuries. Several important works appeared in the 1960s, including, in 1967, a book entitled *The Salon and English Letters*, written by Chauncey Tinker. This was one of the first books to compare the two forms of intellectual betterment for women during the early modern period in both France and England. Various societal upheavals, such as changing political parties and the Reformation, affected how women could hope to obtain an education.[26] Tinker's book is divided into sections comparing the French salon

[25] Wileen G. Keough and Lara Campbell, *Gender History: Canadian Perspectives* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2014), Chapter 6.
[26] Chauncey Tinker, *The Salon and English Letters* (New York: Gordian Press, Inc., 1967).

to the English bluestocking circles and the ways by which women were able to educate themselves within these groups. Particular attention is paid to the cultural exchange between England and France.[27] In short, Tinker's work explores the social structures in place during both Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry's lifetimes which would have provided them with the means to better their intellect.

A few years later, Samia Spencer published *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment* (1984). While it deals almost exclusively with sources and material from 18th century France, particularly during the French revolution of 1789, it does contain some chapters pertaining to the 17th century, exploring topics such as education, the role of women in society, as well as women novelists.[28] Spencer provides a thorough analysis of French society, the one which came to be in the years after Madeleine de Scudéry's death, and ultimately argues that the tumultuous 18th century was a time during which French women, from various castes in society, were immensely influential and prolific.[29] Madeleine de Scudéry, then, cannot be considered the first French feminist, if what are hailed as advancements for French women were made in the century after her death.

Over a decade later, the book *Attending to Early Modern Women* (1998) was published by Susan Amussen and Adele Seeff. The text is comprised of several essays by various historians of great repute, all of whom consider early modern women from its beginnings during the Italian Renaissance through to Europe, including England and France. In particular, Jane Donawerth's chapter titled "Changing Our Originary Stories"

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[27] Chauncey Tinker, *The Salon and English Letters*.
[28] Samia Spencer, *French women and the Age of Enlightenment*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 12.
[29] Samia Spencer, *French women and the Age of Enlightenment*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), Foreword (ix-x).

addresses the appeal of early modern women such as Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry for women's rights to education by basing their demands on legacies of the Renaissance. Indeed, Donawerth encourages the reader to consider a new outlook of education during the early modern period, "[an] alternative story of the origins of education in the Renaissance, [one that begins with] Margaret Cavendish duchess of Newcastle, Madeleine de Scudéry, and Mary Astell. (…) These women centered their vision of education on conversation, rather than on lecture or debate."[30] This radical new approach is apparent not only in their writings, but also in the manner by which Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry sought to propagate their ideas and beliefs.[31]

In summary, the history of women's education is relevant to the lives of both Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry as it is demonstrative of their capabilities as educated women. Their status allowed for them to be educated, to learn to read and write, while the vast majority of women in the early modern period were unable to do so. As such, they advocated for women's rights through an awareness of the unsettling truth that categorized the early modern period: that all women simply did not have access to intellectual advancement.

Early Modern Critics and Biographers

During their lifetimes, both of these women were prolific writers and published several works. Mary Astell often engaged in fervent debate over religious topics and beliefs, upholding her duties as a Protestant by condemning what might be perceived as

[30] Susan D. Amussen and Adele Seeff, *Attending to Early Modern Women*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 264.
[31] Susan D. Amussen and Adele Seeff, *Attending to Early Modern Women*, 263-277.

erroneous understandings of the English religion, regardless of the fact that the recipient of her refutations was most often male.[32] Similarly, Madeleine de Scudéry published many of her novels in response to literary trends set by men, and was even the recipient of several literary awards.[33] Evidently, these women managed to obtain and uphold a certain level of respect in society for their work and literary prowess. However, their reputation as remarkable authors was terribly short lived, as Mary Astell was "forgotten almost immediately"[34] upon her passing and Madeleine de Scudéry was disregarded, having "[fallen] into a position of near oblivion and utter contempt"[35] when she passed away.

In fact, Mary Astell does not reappear on the historical record before the publication of the volume *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*, written by the historian George Ballard (1706-1755), "a dressmaker by trade, and an amateur historian and numismatist"[36] in 1752. This encyclopedic volume of notable British ladies took fifteen years to complete.[37] It provides an interesting and thorough description of several notable ladies of Britain over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and is in fact the first source in which Mary Astell is mentioned because of her scholastic abilities and distinguished intellectual pursuits.[38] As such, it is the primary source many historians researching Mary Astell would draw upon in the 20th century, despite the fact that it was penned several years after her death in 1731.

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[32] "Mary Astell," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last modified August 12 2008, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/astell/#Metod.

[33] René Godenne, *Les romans de Mademoiselle de Scudéry* (Genève: Publications Romans et Françaises, 1983), Avant-propos (11-14).

[34] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 324.

[35] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), Preface.

[36] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 325.

[37] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 325.

[38] George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*, ed. Ruth Perry (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985), 382-392.

The chapter devoted to Mary Astell is not terribly long, only approximately ten pages; however, it does provide a concise and detailed account of her life. George Ballard had painstakingly compiled facts about this early modern activist through several years of research, aided by "a network of trained antiquarians whose sources and knowledge would be impossible to duplicate today, and whose political and religious leaning predisposed them to appreciate this rare woman to whom Ballard introduced them."[39] Researching and compiling information about this woman proved difficult, as Mary Astell's "reputation barely survived her."[40] Understandably, there are a few mistakes in Ballard's text, including an erroneous recording of her date of birth (Ballard wrote 1668, while in fact she was born in 1666),[41] yet it is nevertheless a highly relevant source. In recording Mary Astell's life, Ballard effectively recognized her as being a distinguished author, one of the influential women of early modern Britain, and prevented her from being entirely erased from the historical record.[42]

Interestingly enough, Mary Astell was uncovered once more during the late 19th century, as suffragettes and rallying feminists in England combed through historical records to find hallmark women with whom they could identify. For instance, Karl D. Bulbring published an article, in 1891, about Mary Astell in the *Journal of Education*, under the title "Mary Astell: An Advocate for Women's Rights Two Hundred Years Ago," as did Katherine S. Pattinson, in 1893, who published an article titled "Mary Astell" in the *Pall Mall Magazine*. A suffragist and politician, Harriet McIlquham (1837-1910),

[39] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 325.
[40] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 325.
[41] George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*, ed. Ruth Perry (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985), 382.
[42] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 326.

published a widely circulated article in the *Westminster Review* in 1898, entitled "Mary Astell: a seventeenth-century advocate for women." In this article, McIlquham sought to demonstrate that women had been seeking the right to better their persons for centuries, a struggle whose ultimate resolution "women of the nineteenth century [are] still claiming and awaiting."[43] McIlquham effectively suggests that Mary Astell sought to advocate for women like herself, protesting against "[a] steady and stealthy male encroachment [that] had narrowed the circle of women's activities,"[44] making it difficult for them to have access to education or imagine a life for themselves outside of the traditional avenue of marriage. Particular attention is also paid to Mary Astell's social status as *gentry* - an elite class permitted to bear a coat of arms, though not of the noble birth[45] - as it affected not only her own perceptions about societal normalcy in London, England, but also how these beliefs would later shape the ideologies she would uphold in her women's rights movements.

By 1916, Mary Astell's life story was made readily available with the publication of Florence Smith's doctoral thesis work, entitled *Mary Astell*. It was the first text which went beyond George Ballard's account of her life and introduced new archival material about this celebrated author. As Smith states in her biographical notes, "[increased] interest in feminine affairs aroused in part by Mary Wollstonecraft, in part merely one more stage in woman's intellectual development, brought out a number of books (…), all mentioning Mary Astell and basing the facts of her biography upon Ballard."[46] As such, Smith's work was monumental in seeking to gaze further than Mary Astell's standard biography. Such a

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[43] Harriet McIlquham, "Mary Astell: A seventeenth century advocate for women," *Westminster Review*, April 1898, 440.
[44] Harriet McIlquham, "Mary Astell: A seventeenth century advocate for women," 442.
[45] Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "Gentry." http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gentry.
[46] Florence Smith, "Mary Astell," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1916), 171.

project would not be undertaken once more until Ruth Perry's monumental volume titled *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, published in 1986. It is a substantial biography, exploring Mary Astell's life in great detail, from her childhood through to her death in Chelsea.[47] Perry even includes several primary sources, which offer an interesting glimpse into the life Mary Astell lived. Perry's work is now the standard biography researchers draw upon when considering the early modern author.

That is not to say that scholars avoided the topic of early modern women. By the mid-20th century, serious scholarship about women from this era became more readily available, as scholars from both Europe and North America began to take a greater interest in women (especially women who defied traditional roles) from the early modern period. Several academic journals began publishing articles pertaining to Mary Astell and early modern feminism between the 1970s and 1990s. "Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism," published in 1979 by Joan Kinnaird in the *Journal of British Studies*, explored what consisted of early modern feminism and how Mary Astell came to exhibit "feminine assertiveness"[48] in her quest to have women perceived just as capable as men to obtain an education. Kinnaird explains the social factors that shaped Mary Astell's activism, including "[Mary Astell's] defiant praise of woman, [lack of sympathies] for Puritanism, secularism or Lockean political thought."[49] "The Love of Knowledge: Mary Astell" (1997), an essay by Julia Manzanedo, was published online through the University of Barcelona. Her essay pertained to the exclusive nature of education and the limited access women had to intellectual betterment in early modern

[47] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986).
[48] Joan Kinnaird, "Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism," *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Autumn, 1979), 58.
[49] Joan Kinnaird, "Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism," 55.

England. She explained the relevance of Mary Astell's social networks, the importance of the *querelle de femmes*, and Mary Astell's own personal beliefs in shaping a broader, emergent feminist discourse in England.[50] A year later, "Mary Astell: Defender of the 'Disembodied Mind'"(1998) by Cynthia Bryson was published in the journal *Hypatia* and explored Mary Astell's philosophical tendencies, arguing that while she might not be the first English feminist, she certainly was the first woman to "ascribe to Descartes's methodology in publication, (…) [the] first woman to note and to publicly address the inconsistencies she saw in Locke's epistemological writings, (…) [as well as the] first woman to [denounce] Locke's (…) [nonposition on] women in his social doctrines."[51]

In 2002, Harriet Guest, the author of the journal article "Bluestocking Feminism" published in the *Huntington Library Quarterly*, upheld that the surge of interest in early modern women was born from "[the] drive to unearth hidden ancestors and to meet the pre-feminist family of the past that energized so much feminist enquiry in the 1970s."[52] A few years later, the publication of Sarah Apetrei's article "'*Call No Man Master Upon Earth'*: Mary Astell's Tory Feminism and An Unknown Correspondence," published in 2008 in the journal *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, expanded upon a similar train of thought. Apetrei explored in great detail the religious overtones to Astell's writings and beliefs, as well as the political nuances. Astell was writing in a period fraught with great social change which, inadvertently, affected her writing. Indeed, Apetrei sumarizes her article by stating: "Astell's own contradictions and complexities point to the possibility that some of the greatest theological and political tensions of the period were also working themselves out

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[50] Julia Manzanedo, *The Love of Knowledge*, (Duoda: Univsersity of Barcelona, 1997).

[51] Cynthia Bryson, "Mary Astell: Defender of the 'Disembodied Mind,'" *Hypatia*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Autumn, 1998), 40.

[52] Harriet Guest, "Bluestocking Feminism," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. ½ (2002), 59.

in the minds of individuals."[53] These tensions will be analyzed more thoroughly in Chapter 3 of this thesis. Importantly, however, as scholarship about Mary Astell became more readily available, new considerations came to be placed upon the roles of social and cultural influences that affected her writing and beliefs.

In contrast, no contemporary biographies such as the ones regarding Mary Astell were produced about Madeleine de Scudéry. The first biographical text about her did not appear until several years after her death in 1702. In fact, she was largely forgotten, and dismissed, despite the immense popularity she benefited from during her lifetime. This is possibly due to her status as *salonnière*, often subjected to critique and mockery by learned men, such as Molière.[54] The first substantial biographical text about Madeleine de Scudéry was penned by Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869), a very reputable French literary historian and critic.[55] In 1851, in his *Causeries du Lundi*, which was a series of informal essays he published in several French newspapers,[56] he dedicated several dozen pages to Mademoiselle de Scudéry's life and works, successfully producing a biography and a critique of her most famous pieces.[57] In his introduction, he stated "*on ne lit plus les livres de Mlle de Scudéry, mais on la cite encore*,"[58] possibly alluding to the reason why she disappeared from historical record (indeed, even the literary world) for such an extensive period of time. Importantly, though, even Sainte-Beuve does not give a specific

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[53] Sarah Apetrei, "'*Call No Man Master Upon Earth'*: Mary Astell's Tory Feminism and An Unknown Correspondence," Eighteenth-Century Studies, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Summer, 2008), 520.
[54] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), 10-14.
[55] "Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve," Encyclopaedia Britannica, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/518414/Charles-Augustin-Sainte-Beuve.
[56] "Causeries du Lundi," Encyclopaedia Britannica, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/100453/Causeries-du-lundi.
[57] Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du Lundi* (1851), 121-143.
[58] Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du Lundi*, 121.

reason to explain Madeleine de Scudéry's near disappearance from the historical record. Moreover, while Sainte-Beuve included a useful summary of Madeleine de Scudéry's life, the gist of the article was focused upon an analysis and critique of her writing style, as this was the nature of the journal he was writing for.[59] It is, nevertheless, integral as it provides researchers with the first compilation of biographical information about Madeleine de Scudéry in a concise and widely circulated journal article.

Modern biographers for Madeleine de Scudéry would not emerge before the late 1970s, early 1980s. Nicole Aronson, a "Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures at East Carolina University,"[60] who dedicates a large portion of her research to French feminist writers, published *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, the first substantial biography about the *salonnière*, in 1978. A couple of years later, René Godenne, a literary historian, published *Les romans de Mademoiselle Scudéry* in 1983, only it is less of a biography and more of a literary critique of Madeleine de Scudéry's writing style and novels. Historian Camille Esmein wrote the article "État présent des études sur Madeleine de Scudéry" in the journal *Dix-septième siècle* (2010), which is very interesting as her scholastic research focuses on Madeleine de Scudéry as an early modern woman writer and *salonnière*, making her one of the only contemporary scholars I have come across in my research to consider Madeleine de Scudéry in great detail; however, she has not published any other scholarly texts about her since.

Beyond that, a new academic journal, *Early Modern Women – An Interdisciplinary Journal*, first distributed in 2006, has published a few articles pertaining to Madeleine de Scudéry and early modern women writers. These articles, "A Women's Republic of

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[59] Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du Lundi*, 121.

[60] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), About the Author.

Letters: Anna Maria van Schurman, Marie de Gournay, and Female Self-Representation in Relation to the Public Sphere," by Anne R. Larsen (2008), and "Modeling Female Sexuality in Early Modern Letter Books," by Ian Frederick Moulton (2010) accord special importance to the constraints and societal pressures early modern women writers would have had to counter, as well the themes and topics that would have been deemed socially acceptable at the time for women to broach in their writings. Importantly, however, Madeleine de Scudéry is only briefly mentioned in Ian Moulton's article, in relation to her advocating for women's ability to pen sentimental prose.[61] Indeed, apart from a few other scholastic articles, many of which simply consider Madeleine de Scudéry's writing style in terms of her famous and lengthy novels, rather than the impact and the reputation she benefitted from during her lifetime, Madeleine de Scudéry's life is still largely unknown. She has only, in recent years, begun to resurface amidst academic research.

Conclusion

In summation, this thesis will seek to demonstrate that both Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry cannot be considered early modern feminists, but rather should be deemed early modern women's rights activists. As the historiography of these two women has demonstrated, relatively little has been published with regard to their lives, their intellectual pursuits, or their works. Presently, they are still somewhat unknown historical figures. Among other things, their anonymity is telling of the fact that, in an attempt to demonstrate the long history of the feminist movement, researchers have erroneously ascribed the modern title "feminist" to two women who, while they can certainly be

[61] Ian Frederick Moulton, "Modeling Female Sexuality in Early Modern Letter Books," *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Volume 5, 2010.

considered as pioneers for women's advancement in terms of education, do not uphold the values typically ascribed to the feminist movement. In Chapter 2 of this thesis, a thorough analysis of both Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry's upbringing, their adult lives in the midst of the *querelle des femmes* as well as their social connections will be considered so as to demonstrate their role as women's rights activists. Importantly, this thesis will attempt to generate a new consideration of what encompasses early modern feminism and how to distinguish it from early modern women's activism.

Chapter 2 – The Early Modern Women's Rights Advocate

The objective of this chapter is to ascertain the differences between early modern feminism and early modern activism for women's rights. The written works of Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* and *Les femmes illustres* respectively, are demonstrative of this subtle distinction, for despite advocating for a bettering of women's status within society, neither of these women believed that patriarchy was negative and needed to be subverted. This aspect to their authorship will be expanded upon throughout the chapter, largely through careful study of the historical framework within which these authors achieved their literary success. More to the point, this chapter will consider topics such as the various exigencies of early modern womanhood, the crucial role of the *querelle des femmes* in shaping the stylistic aspects of their writings and enabling female-oriented literary discourse in continental Europe, as well as consider the different manners by which these women promulgated their activism within their respective social spheres.

The Complicated Nature of Early Modern Feminism

Scholarship pertaining to the early modern period is often coloured by 'traditional' historical structures and timeframes, which were often established by male historians and upheld prolifically through academic publications such as monographs and textbooks, despite their paternalistic leanings.[62] These widely accepted historical narratives,

[62] Feminist and gender historians are currently aspiring to reverse this trend by countering the standard, "[traditional] historical structures of material reality, agency and causality." Johanna Alberti, *Gender and the Historian* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2002), 86.

patriarchal in nature and scope, often impact the manner by which research is conducted.[63] In fact, many historians, in conducting studies pertaining to the early modern period, relied upon documents – legal paperwork, land holdings, and the transfer of goods[64] – that were written *by* men, *about* men, for men.[65] It is difficult not only to place women within those archival records, but also to establish the "inestimable value of [the] female experience."[66] Scholarship about women of the early modern period has only recently begun to counter the 'conventional narratives' of men's history,[67] considering research topics which extend beyond the scope of predominantly male avenues.

There is no shortage of material pertaining to the early modern period which lends itself easily to scholarly research, particularly the lives of women. The early modern period was ripe with change, having experienced various political and religious upheavals by the 18th century. Indeed, social stratifications had begun to shift and conform to new ideals and ideologies presented about gender and gender roles, particularly as "England and France reformist energies rallied around the ideals of egalitarianism."[68] These dramatic changes in society's makeup, many of which heavily impacted the lives of women in continental Europe, prompted (on behalf of feminist historians), renewed interest in determining the emergence of feminism in continental Europe.[69]

[63] Johanna Alberti, *Gender and the Historian* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2002), 86-87.
[64] Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), Introduction, 1.
[65] Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 1.
[66] Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 1.
[67] Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 3
[68] Evelyn Gordon Bodek, "Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3/4 (Spring - Summer, 1976), 185-187.
[69] Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1988).

Many feminist scholars have attributed the beginnings of feminism to women writers of the early modern period. In doing so, many of these academics have neglected to underscore the societal changes that enabled these authors to advocate for the improvement of women's status. The lives of notable early modern women such as Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry have largely been considered out of context, devoid of their cultural milieu. It is necessary to understand the views of society with regards to learned women, women's writing, and women's agency in order to understand in what ways various social stratifications allowed for literate women to voice their thoughts on women's education and status. This thesis will attempt to demonstrate the manner in which these factors have affected the authorship of Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry, and ultimately influenced the content and style of their written works.

Although certain feminist historians argue that feminism can be understood as a desire to improve society,[70] I fundamentally disagree with such a stance, as it oversimplifies the meaning of 'feminism.' Such a vague attribution depletes the subject (in this case early modern women writers) of their individual agency by placing them within a uniform group of 'feminist' women, branded as such regardless of their social status or period in history. It is much too superficial to claim that feminism is a label which can easily be ascribed to all women who advocate for women's rights. Therefore, my proposed definition for early modern activism for women's rights is based upon historian Jane Donawerth's study about women's rhetoric during the Renaissance.[71] Effectively, Donawerth stated that conversation, a medium of communication often associated exclusively with women, was

[70] Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 6.

[71] Jane Donawerth, "Conversation and the Boundaries of Public Discourse in Rhetorical Theory by Renaissance Women," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Spring 1998), 181-199.

the medium through which, ultimately, women advocated for the advancement of their sex by means of education.[72] Importantly, in writing, 'conversation' was always employed as a style, as the authors often addressed themselves to their audience directly, "treating writer and reader as conversational partners."[73] This style of advocacy was first brought about by women writers of the Middle Ages, such as Christine de Pizan, whose radical texts were made to be to be read, aloud, to an audience.[74]

By writing as though conversing with the reader, women writers such as Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry remained firmly entrenched within the societal standards of womanly virtue whilst advocating for change. Importantly, as Donawerth explains, they were not attempting to undermine patriarchal authority; rather, "these women theorists radically revised classical rhetoric by centering their theories on conversation,"[75] demonstrating that conversation was a womanly virtue and that the only manner by which to expand upon woman's capability to converse was to provide her with the means to enrich her rhetorical lexicon, in other words, to acquire an education.[76] Even in arguing for women's advancement through rhetorical means, Mary Astell upholds its use primarily to better one's relationship with God, while Madeleine de Scudéry advocates that through speech women a "woman may achieve agency,"[77] providing her with the means to better

[72] Donawerth, "Conversation and the Boundaries of Public Discourse,"181-199.

[73] Jane Donawerth, "Conversation and the Boundaries of Public Discourse in Rhetorical Theory by Renaissance Women," 181.

[74] Thérèse Moreau, "Promenade en féminie: Christine de Pizan, un imaginaire au féminin," *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Féminisme et Littérature (2003), 25.

[75] Jane Donawerth, "Conversation and the Boundaries of Public Discourse in Rhetorical Theory by Renaissance Women," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Spring 1998), 198.

[76] Jane Donawerth, "Conversation and the Boundaries of Public Discourse in Rhetorical Theory by Renaissance Women," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Spring 1998), 198.

[77] Jane Donawerth, "Conversation and the Boundaries of Public Discourse in Rhetorical Theory by Renaissance Women," 186.

infiltrate aristocratic French society.[78] Neither of these women were attempting to undermine the political structures that inhibited women's advancements, nor were they critiquing women's subjugation to men, as historians Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford would have us believe.[79] Rather, these women were trying to carve out a space for women *within* their patriarchal societies, without feeling the need to inherently change their subservient status. Their early modern activism for women's rights can be described as a public discourse maintained, through writing, in the hopes of granting women the means to obtain an education, in a virtuous, womanly manner. This strategy would allow women to better their persons, but keep them firmly entrenched within a patriarchal society. Feminists in *later* centuries would maintain these arguments and expand upon them,[80] which is why feminism, as we understand it today, has its roots in 19th century Europe, not early modern Europe.

The Traditional Gender Roles of Early Modern Europe

In order to understand the challenges both Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry faced and needed to overcome when advocating, through their publications, for women's right to education, one must first understand how these women countered society's normalized conception of what it meant to be an early modern woman.

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[78] Jane Donawerth, "Conversation and the Boundaries of Public Discourse in Rhetorical Theory by Renaissance Women," 181-199.

[79] Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 6.

[80] Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1988).

The lives of most early modern women, in both France and England, tended to be centred on the domestic sphere.[81] Overwhelmingly, early modern society was influenced by "[academic] theories and popular beliefs [which] constructed woman as secondary or 'other' in relation to man (…)."[82] As such, not only did women understand themselves based on society's propagation of misogynist male views,[83] but were also subjected to a life in which "the axiom of female dependency shaped the patriarchal characters of institutions, their hierarchical rules and organization."[84] Stepping outside of these gendered norms was not only incredibly difficult, it was also poorly viewed, and discouraged by society, as patriarchal thought was thoroughly embedded in early modern society.[85]

In England, great emphasis was placed upon women within the familial unit. As young girls, they were expected to emulate their mothers and uphold the same values of domesticity, as many young girls would become mothers in turn.[86] With time, they would be expected to marry, maintain a household, bear children and ultimately strive for pious widowhood.[87] Women during this period were largely valued for their capabilities as child bearers, especially among the noble classes. England was heavily segregated by class during the early modern period, and, as a member of the gentry, Mary Astell would have been subjected to standard societal pressures associated with the elite. Her mother, Mary Astell, née Errington, was very class conscious and would have inculcated the same beliefs into her daughter.[88] In fact, seeing as Mary Astell's father passed away when she was only

[81] Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), Chapters 2 and 3.
[82] Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 71.
[83] Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 71.
[84] Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 71.
[85] Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 74.
[86] Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 78.
[87] Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, Chapters 2 and 3.
[88] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 39.

twelve years of age, she was not left "a sufficient dowry for an alliance with a gentleman of her own social standing (…), [but never would have] considered marrying beneath her."[89] Status and class in early modern England meant that "[whether an early modern woman] was single, married, or widowed, [her] social and economic position affected the circumstances in which she lived."[90] Mary Astell was no exception to this; she preferred to renounce marriage rather than to submit herself to a lowering of social status, which set her apart from the vast majority of women who would experience matrimony as well as motherhood.

In France, many of the same cultural traditions found in England prevailed. The French family was a patriarchal one, where "the husband and father ruled as a monarch ruled his kingdom (…). In the traditional patriarchal family, wives and children were clearly subordinate to their husbands and fathers, who exercised both legal and actual power over their property and persons."[91] Marriage was largely a means to appropriate some form of economic advantage and status, rather than a union for personal fulfilment, especially among the higher classes.[92] Madeleine de Scudéry was of old nobility, and as such had great status in society.[93] As a noblewoman, Madeleine de Scudéry would have been expected to marry and have children, and yet the economic strain placed upon her family

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[89] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 42.
[90] Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 125.
[91] Ideas concerning women's inherent subjugation to men hark back to Ancient Greece. The works of philosophers such as Aristotle, which emphasized an ostensibly "scientific basis for the traditional Greek belief in female inferiority," continued to influence Western civilization well into the Enlightenment period. Aristotle effectively "began a revolution, in the sense that he provided a new definition of what it meant to be male or female." Leigh Ann Whaley, *Women's History as Scientists – A Guide to the Debates* (Santa Barbara and Oxford: ABC CLIO, 2003), 2-3.
[92] Samia Spencer, *French Women and the Enlightenment*, 97.
[93] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), 10.

in the wake of both her father's and mother's passing when she was still quite young, prohibited her from doing so.[94] Placed under the tutelage of her uncle, and later her brother Georges de Scudéry, she renounced the possibility of marriage, as it simply was not economically feasible. Madeleine de Scudéry had status but little money to her name, obliging her to stay dependent upon her brother well into adulthood. In order to keep publishing her work, she wrote using his name, and allowed him to subsequently pocket the profits without giving Madeleine de Scudéry her due share. As such, Madeleine de Scudéry's life was often influenced by domineering male personas, such as was the cultural norm in France in the early modern period. Indeed, "the dominant view of women was profoundly negative and did not improve during the [seventeenth century]. Officially, woman remained an imperfect man, a weak vessel, a victim of her body in general and her uterus in particular."[95] Georges de Scudéry would have, in accordance with society's views, deemed it necessary to preside over his sister in nearly all matters, as he was the male, the patriarchal head of household, and she was the subservient female.

Importantly, both of these women, Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry, on the cusp of adulthood, opted to hold back from experiences that most early modern women, in both England and in France, associated with society's understanding of ideal womanhood – they remained single, unencumbered by the responsibilities (and dangers) of motherhood. Their upbringing and consequential refusal to marry provided both women with the means to begin their careers not only as women writers, but also as activists for women's education. By countering traditional understandings of the roles of women, Mary Astell and

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[94] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), 10-11.
[95] Samia Spencer, *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11.

Madeleine de Scudéry were in fact liberated, to a certain extent, from patriarchal values in regards to marriage. As single, virginal women, they could afford to be activists for the subservient and subjugated majority of early modern women. Their aspirations and intentions as women's rights activists through writing were echoed, on certain occasions, by other women around them.[96] These appeals for change were rendered possible due to the immensely important cultural phenomenon, the *querelle des femmes*.

The Legacy of the *querelle des femmes*

Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry were able to lobby for women's right to education due to their literary skills and prowess. As previously stated, most early modern women were not educated beyond the domestic sphere. Importantly, institutions of learning, such as universities, were barred to women, effectively preventing them from learning Latin, which was the language by which knowledge was propagated within the educational system.[97] As such, women needed to appropriate another means by which to ensure their intellectual pursuits. The manner by which they would do so became apparent with the emergence of the *querelle des femmes*.

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[96] Women in England were able to do so to an extent unseen in France. In England, during the early modern period, more people tended to become aware that the situation women found themselves in, especially with regard to education, needed to be rectified. Notable women, with whom Mary Astell tended to frequent, such as Margaret Cavendish, Elizabeth Montagu, and others, shared many of her views on women's education but, restricted within the domestic sphere as wives and mothers, did not lobby as forcefully as she had. As a conservative group of women, many of whom would later form the Bluestocking group, they did not "obviously or vociferously attempt to reform the condition or treatment of women." Harriet Guest, "Bluestocking Feminism," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. ½ (2002), 59. In France, discourse about women was much less progressive, as French society was heavily patriarchal and did not uphold women's activism, regarding even the salon as lowly and frivolous. Samia Spencer, *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11.

[97] Barbara J. Whitehead, *Women's Education in Early Modern Europe: A History, 1500-1800* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 110.

Christine de Pizan (1364 – 1430) was the pioneering force behind the *querelle des femmes*, a debate which enabled women to express, through literature, their feelings of oppression in response to the "new secular culture of the modern European state."[98] Indeed, "Christine wrote a series of works in which she set herself up as a defender of her sex, criticizing and rebutting the sharp turn toward misogyny in the attitudes and reading of her time."[99] Widowed at 25 years of age, with "*toute une maisonnée à sa charge*,"[100] including her children, her mother, her niece as well as herself to support, she managed to make a living through her written works.[101] She transcribed several notable texts, in many ways continuing the career her late husband had held, but gradually began publishing "*des ouvrages moraux et didactiques,*"[102] rather than simply publishing eloquent chivalric poetry. Her works, including the famous *La Cité des Dames* (1405),[103] advocated for women's rights to education through the written word, upholding that women did not deserve to be subjected by men into a world of ignorance.[104] Christine de Pizan became an illustrious advocate for women's rights by virtue of her own experiences and paved the way for women writers in years to come. She was the harbinger of a novel literary discourse which would be maintained well into the Enlightenment period, but reach its peak in the midst of the early modern period. Pizan began a long-standing debate which reacted against what was perceived to be "[societal] changes over which [women] seemed to have no

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[98] Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des femmes*, 1400-1789," *Signs*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Autumn, 1982), 5.
[99] Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des femmes*, 1400-1789," 9.
[100] Thérèse Moreau, "Promenade en féminie: Christine de Pizan, un imaginaire au féminin," *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Féminisme et Littérature (2003), 20.
[101] Thérèse Moreau, "Promenade en féminie: Christine de Pizan, un imaginaire au féminin," 19-20.
[102] Thérèse Moreau, "Promenade en féminie: Christine de Pizan, un imaginaire au féminin," 21.
[103] Thérèse Moreau, "Promenade en féminie: Christine de Pizan, un imaginaire au féminin," 22.
[104] Thérèse Moreau, "Promenade en féminie: Christine de Pizan, un imaginaire au féminin," *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Féminisme et Littérature (2003), 21-22.

control."[105] Her style of writing, one which emphasized conversation and rhetoric, would be the standard style in which early modern women writers, such as Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry, would express themselves in later years.

The *querelle des femmes* promoted, in many regards, education for women. Barred from educational institutions within society in both England and France, women needed to create their own spaces of learning. In England, this was done through social connections, as learned women met together to discuss and promote intellectual advancement. In time, these women would be known as "Bluestockings," although in the beginning elite English women simply gathered together and discussed relevant topics. Social networks enabled them to obtain an education, which allowed women "[to] present themselves as models of acceptable or traditional notions of feminine virtue."[106] In France, this was done through the literary salon, held within elite women's homes. These were social gatherings at which the hostess, a *salonnière*, presided over intellectual discussions and debates.[107] It is within these social milieus that both Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry begin their careers as early modern women's activists. Below, I will consider these women and explore the social spaces in which they advanced their intellect, as well as how these milieus were affected by the gendered perceptions of women in their respective countries, influencing the manner by which they were able to pursue their activism for women's rights.

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[105] Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des femmes*, 1400-1789," *Signs*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Autumn, 1982), 6.
[106] Harriet Guest, "Bluestocking Feminism," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. ½ (2002), 61.
[107] Evelyn Gordon Bodek, "Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3/4 (Spring - Summer, 1976).

Mary Astell: Social Networking and Studious Scholarship

Mary Astell was a recluse of sorts; her first biographer, George Ballard, describes her as being "over severe"[108] in her ways, upholding that "[in] abstinence, few or none ever surpassed her, for she would live like a hermit for a considerable time (…). She would say that abstinence was her best physic,"[109] enabling her to counter the effects of overindulgence so as to better dedicate herself to her studies and be in "devout service of [her] creator."[110] Evidently, Mary Astell placed huge importance upon her ability to gain and further her knowledge. She also valued relationships in which she could not only commend the virtues and benefits of education for women, especially women of the higher echelons of society, but also partake in a wider discourse on education with other learned women who shared her beliefs.[111]

Importantly, Mary Astell spent most of her adult life in a milieu where such values were not only upheld but encouraged. In her early twenties, she moved, single and unmarried, to Chelsea, in London. This proved to be a very wise and fruitful decision for her, since a large portion of the population in Chelsea (as revealed by tax records from 1694), nearly one fifth, were single women, paying taxes on properties they owned themselves.[112] Living alongside like-minded women, Mary Astell was able to surround herself with a female community, all of whom would provide her, throughout her writing career, "emotional and financial support."[113] This was important on many levels. Surely,

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[108] George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*, ed. Ruth Perry (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985), 391.
[109] George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*, 391.
[110] George Ballard, *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*, 391.
[111] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986): The Company She Keeps, Chapter 8, 232-281.
[112] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 242.
[113] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 243.

Mary Astell benefitted immensely, on a personal level, from close companionship with women who shared similar life experiences; however, these women were also largely of elite and noble classes, able to support themselves comfortably on independent incomes, and, due to their status, able to educate themselves.[114] Indeed, their love of learning spurred a desire to form a society of sorts, a supportive educational enclave for women. "[These women with whom Mary Astell surrounded herself] maintained a web of connections with many women – including the relative of their personal servants – and each manifested an impulse to support, encourage and educate other women (…), whether by teaching servants how to read, interesting herself in the schooling of a favourite niece (…), [etc]."[115] Like Mary Astell, these women were educated, and, as we have determined already, these learned women exerted power in society the likes of which typically were not obtained by early modern women.[116] By fostering bonds of friendship with them, and ultimately upholding a lifestyle that was not deemed 'traditional' in early modern society, Mary Astell could very easily conceive of a world in which women gained greater social status by virtue of education. These women, many of them notable and highly respected figures in society, would have supported each other, standing as precursors to the Bluestockings, which would emerge as a group nearly three decades later, based upon the same shared values of philanthropy and piety.

While Mary Astell's primary instruction came from her clerical uncle, she was able to expand upon her knowledge and better her education during her time in Chelsea, where she was able to benefit from her close connection with other learned women. By keeping

[114] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 244.
[115] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 244.
[116] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 244-45.

company with these women, she acquired an 'informal' education of lived experiences, was able to instruct herself further through the reading of philosophical texts acquired in many of her friends' prestigious libraries, and based her idealized society of learned women, her college for ladies, upon the very society she found herself living within[117] (this school for girls was suggested in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, and will be discussed further in the third chapter of this thesis). In a sense, Mary Astell was able to advocate for women's rights because she found herself living in a milieu which countered societal understandings of gender and the rights of women in regards to education, and surrounded herself with learned women who believed, just as much as she did, that girls needed to be educated. There was no structure to this companionship, no set of rules by which these friendships were fashioned. Even in later decades, with the emergence of Bluestocking women, these social gatherings would be lacking the rigidly formal structure of the French salon, a similar social phenomenon.[118] Mary Astell believed in "[the] practical application of her ideas and in her clear view of the social possibilities [pertaining to] the education of women"[119] – supported by her social networks comprised of learned women, all of whom admired her "eloquence, learning, and familiarity with the world of scholarship."[120]

Madeleine de Scudéry: The Literary Salon and Noble Status

Madeleine de Scudéry, similar to Mary Astell, was a prolific writer, hugely respected and widely acclaimed for her literary skill, as well as her educational and entertaining *Salon*

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[117] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986): The Company She Keeps, Chapter 8, 232-281.
[118] Evelyn Gordon Bodek, "Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3/4 (Spring - Summer, 1976), 193.
[119] Florence Smith, "Mary Astell," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1916), 61.
[120] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 244.

du samedi. As a child, under the tutelage of her noble and respectable uncle, she was taught how to read, write, and draw; she became fluent in both Spanish and Italian, studied Greek and Latin, and, importantly, was also inculcated in the fine arts of homemaking, as would have been expected of a woman of her class and status.[121] Elite women in France could sometimes obtain an education, as was the case with Madeleine de Scudéry. Overwhelmingly, however, French society simply did not value education for women; there was "poor quality of [formal] education"[122] for girls, however, some women (those who had the economic means to do so, as well as the time) "were able to complete their own education independently."[123] By the late 17th century, there came to be a growing awareness in society of the need to formalize education for girls, as is demonstrated by Fénélon's *L'Éducation des filles* (1687), and the creation of Mme de Maintenon's boarding school for girls, Maison Royale de Saint-Louis, founded in 1686.[124] These are perceived as being important steps towards the institutionalization of education for girls; however, both Fénélon's text and Mme de Maintenon's boarding school upheld ideals for women in which education centered on domesticity, and "emphasized the importance of moral virtues and strength."[125] In Madeleine de Scudéry's case, however, as a member of respected nobility, most of her education would have been completed in the home. Typically, a governess tended to subjects pertaining to reading and religion, whereas private tutors generally focused on subjects such as singing, dancing and music.[126] Madeleine de Scudéry's uncle

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[121] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), 10.
[122] Samia Spencer, *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 84.
[123] Samia Spencer, *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, 84.
[124] Samia Spencer, *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 84.
[125] Samia Spencer, *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, 84.
[126] Samia Spencer, *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, 85.

was quite progressive in his thinking and assumed responsibility for his niece's education, ensuring that she could read and write with considerable skill.

Key aspects of Madeleine de Scudéry's education would extend beyond her uncle's teachings, even beyond her own studious and voracious readings.[127] Ultimately, she would receive worldly education in the midst of a highly respected salon, the salon of Madame de Rambouillet, in 1637.[128] Here, Madeleine de Scudéry would receive her literary education, placed among women of noble and elite status, observing, listening and watching their mannerisms and courtly behaviour.[129] The French literary salon was a place of learning; indeed, "[in] spite of the general prejudice against the learned lady there was one place in which women could exhibit their learning, (…) the literary salon."[130] The salon was depicted as an informal university of sorts, headed by an intelligent hostess (*salonnière*), where women were encouraged to sharpen their intellect.[131] Importantly, these were the only socially acceptable places in French society where women could hope to better their knowledge, and even at that, were often satirized by male writers of the period, including Molière, who negatively depicts *salonnières* in his *Les précieuses ridicules* and *Les femmes savantes*.

The salon was in many ways an emulation of court life, a place for aristocratic and noble women, based upon notions of "morality, honour and politesse."[132] Given the

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[127] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), 10.
[128] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres*, 12.
[129] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres*, 12.
[130] Evelyn Gordon Bodek, "Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3/4 (Spring - Summer, 1976), 185.
[131] Evelyn Gordon Bodek, "Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism," 185.
[132] Evelyn Gordon Bodek, "Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3/4 (Spring - Summer, 1976), 186.

political upheaval in France at the time, newly emerged from thirty crippling years of "violence and turmoil during the wars of religion,"[133] French women of noble birth sought to counter the brutal and crude mannerism that became prevalent in court.[134] "French ladies established their salons, creating a miniature leisured society within which one could calmly and civilly discuss almost anything and expect intelligent feedback."[135] Educated, well read and of old nobility, Madeleine de Scudéry quickly became acclimatized to Madame de Rambouillet's salon. In fact, after several years, Madeleine de Scudéry opted to start her own salon, le *Salon du Samedi*, in 1653.[136] It was within these walls that she penned remarkable pieces of literature, many of which were immensely popular. While she was still publishing under her brother's name, nearly everyone reading her works understood that this famous *salonnière* was the true author of the publications.

Madeleine de Scudéry's attitudes were greatly influenced by her appreciation for societal understandings of femininity, as well as her brother's presence in her life.[137] Madeleine de Scudéry was fully entrenched in the literary style associated with the *querelle des femmes*, more so than Mary Astell. Her novels and shorter publications pertained to the classical period of both Greece and Rome, much like Christine de Pizan, and nearly all are 'conversations' between illustrious women. She attributed characteristics of French women from her salon onto remarkable women from the past, advocating for change by demonstrating that several hundred years ago women had agency, more so than in

[133] Evelyn Gordon Bodek, "Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism," 186.
[134] Evelyn Gordon Bodek, "Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism," 186.
[135] Evelyn Gordon Bodek, "Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism," 186.
[136] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), 15.
[137] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres*, 8-9.

contemporary times. Her stories are fictitious and laced with patriarchal overtones; nearly all of these women are subservient to men, except, possibly, Sappho, with whom Madeleine de Scudéry identifies (a topic which will be more thoroughly explored in the third chapter). In short, Madeleine de Scudéry advocates for social change in France through the mouths of ancient, respected women, who come to life within her pages.

In conclusion, it is evident that in their quest to determine the roots and emergence of early modern feminism, historians have downplayed the importance of the *querelle des femmes* and largely ignored its impact upon early modern women's lifestyles and writing. It is necessary to reconsider the *querelle des femmes* and explain its relevance to both Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry's writing, as it provided the literary means which made activism for women's rights possible.

Chapter 3: A Comparative Analysis

The following chapter consists of a comparative study of Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) and Madeleine de Scudéry's *Les femmes illustres* (1642). Both of these literary works gained much acclaim for their respective authors, and are normally hailed as their hallmark 'feminist' works. In Mary Astell's case, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* established her reputation as a virtuous, respectable woman who was highly capable of advocating for an all-girls college through prose fuelled by her intrinsic belief in the moral aptitudes of notable ladies.[138] It was her first publication, in which she argued for the establishment of an intellectual retirement for notable ladies in England who preferred to abstain from marriage and motherhood. "[The] ideas were original and compelling and the author a novelty: her tones were the recognizable tones of an elegant society woman. [One] function [the book] probably had was to establish her right to speak."[139] Despite choosing to remain anonymous, and thus identifying herself only as A Lover of Her Sex,[140] her book "burst upon London in 1694 and was read and talked of from Pall Mall to Grub Street."[141] Religious thinkers, cultural enthusiasts, philosophers and elite members of society read this particular book,[142] breathing life into the very 'proposal' Astell sought to advance, in the hopes of bettering "women's second-class place in society."[143] The resounding popularity of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* in early

[138] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 99.
[139] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 99.
[140] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Mississauga: Broadview Literary Texts, 2002), cover page of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*.
[141] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 99.
[142] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 100-101.
[143] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 101.

modern English society, as well as its activist undertones, certainly warranted consideration and further study. Likewise, Madeleine de Scudéry's book *Les femmes illustres*, was also widely read and highly acclaimed. Although it was not her first publication (*Ibrahim ou l'Illustre Bassa* was her first novel),[144] it certainly was one of the most widely read, notable for its unique, conversational style (which was stylistically very different from her first work), and, more importantly, was praised for its eloquent rhetoric, something which had been deemed unattainable for women.[145] It is also within this text that she first voiced, through ancient heroes of the Pantheon,[146] her belief in education for respectable women. Scudéry appropriated the stories of heroic figures from Antiquity – such as Cleopatra, Artemis, and Sappho, to mention only a few – not only to conform to the literary trends of the period, but also in the hopes of demonstrating the extent of women's intellectual capabilities, their refined spirits, and delicate discourse.[147] It is necessary to consider *Les femmes illustres* more closely in order to uncover what ideals and notions underpinned Madeleine de Scudéry's early modern activism for women's rights.

Having demonstrated the relevance of both Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* and Madeleine de Scudéry's *Les femmes illustres*, a critical analysis of these texts will enable the reader to understand how these early modern authors, through their literary works, advocated and promoted discussion pertaining to women's rights, particularly women's education. As previously stated in Chapter 2, while early modern society

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[144] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), preface, 23.
[145] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres*, preface, 24.
[146] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres*, preface, 24.
[147] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres*, preface, 25-26.

generally tended to regard female intelligence unfavourably,[148] the *querelle des femmes* allowed for a reconsideration of women's ability to participate in a broader scholastic discourse. Defined as a movement in which women advocated for a reconsideration of their status and privileges through writing, it enabled the literary world of early modern Europe to burgeon with the works of new female writers. Effectively, "women [in Restoration England] had begun to write and publish in increasing numbers,"[149] as well as in France.[150] Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry wrote in the midst of this tumultuous period and, by consequence, two of their highly acclaimed works, both *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* and *Les femmes illustres* are demonstrative of the alternative, changing views which emerged with regards to women, writing, and education at the time.

By considering the content of their publications, this chapter will attempt to demonstrate in what ways these authors countered what is perceived today by many scholars as an early modern feminist movement.[151] The subservient, deferential language employed by both of these early modern authors with regards to women's capabilities, coupled with their contrary depictions of paternalistic mechanisms in society serve to represent, instead, these women's apparent activism for women's rights. In truth, neither of these women sought to undermine societal trends or even to counter popular ideologies

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[148] "Feminine intelligence was depicted not as true wisdom but as an intuitive leap or a manifestation of low cunning." Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 64.

[149] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 113.

[150] Conversations pertaining to schooling and education for young ladies, as well as women's intellectual abilities, were well underway in Scudéry's lifetime, with publications made by well-known persons such as Fénélon, Madame de Maintenon and even, by the early 18th century, the Marquise de Lambert. Samia Spencer, *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), Women and Education, 84-88.

[151] The introduction for this book discusses the nuances of early modern feminism in England. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 6.

with regards to women in the hopes of obtaining equal status to their male counterparts.[152] Instead, both of these writers attempted to work *within* their societal niches, inherently maintaining gendered traditions and perpetuating notions of class-based divisions in society. In so doing, they sustained idealizations (prevalent at the time) regarding "gender, class and age,"[153] paying heed to factors which ultimately undermined women "in a patriarchal society."[154] For instance, Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry accorded great importance to class in their publications. If one considers that class and hierarchical divisions were concepts generated by patriarchal structures within society, these authors were ensuring the continuance of the very institutions which rendered them intrinsically dependent upon men.[155] Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry wrote for a select group of respectable ladies from noble echelons in society, seeing as "[aristocratic] women enjoyed many elements of a common lifestyle with gentlemen and noblemen,"[156] and could afford such privileges like education, while the poorer classes needed to focus on survival.[157] Neither of these authors believed that all women needed to be educated, only a select few, "the Children of Persons of Quality"[158] for whom education might be considered a form of agency, a means to refine their persons, and enable an elevation in status.

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[152] These conclusions are based upon close reading of both *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* by Mary Astell and *Les femmes illustres* by Madeleine de Scudéry, and will be further explored throughout Chapter 3.
[153] Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 200.
[154] Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 201.
[155] Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 71.
[156] Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 125.
[157] Education was simply not deemed necessary for the lower classes. Phyllis Stock, *Better than Rubies: A History of Women's Education* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1978), 68-70.
[158] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Mississauga: Broadview Literary Texts, 2002).

Conversely, much of the scholarship concerning Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry's so-called feminist ideologies were based upon their appeals for women's education, often disregarding the fact that these elite, noble authors plainly believed that education was only meant for women within certain classes in society. While there is no denying that their literary achievements were extraordinary (both of these women aptly defied gendered norms through their written work and their ability to secure an education for themselves), these actions nevertheless do not render them *feminists*. Rather, they merely demarcate them as activists for social change within a male-dominated society – importantly, activists for a certain group of women. Bearing this in mind, the following section will attempt to demonstrate in what ways their activism was nuanced by societal understandings of gender and class, by critically and comparatively analyzing *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* and *Les femmes illustres* and underscoring the historical relevancy of their publications.

"For the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest"[159]

A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, 1694, by Mary Astell

On the title page of her publication, Mary Astell declared herself "A Lover of Her Sex,"[160] but did not actually provide her name. While there was evidently a desire for anonymity in circumventing ownership of her text, Mary Astell nevertheless declared to

[159] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Mississauga: Broadview Literary Texts, 2002), 50.
[160] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 50.

her readers, in her introduction, that she was a woman writer, publishing on behalf of their "greatest interest."[161] In making such a statement, Astell meant her proposal for a female retreat of sorts, wherein women could dedicate themselves to study, particularly religious study. Indeed, Astell advocated for a retreat in which religion "[was] its *main*, I may say its *only* design (…), since Religion is the adequate business of our lives."[162] While Astell's main goal in publishing *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* lay in securing interest in and funding for "the establishment of a college for unmarried women,"[163] she nevertheless presents poignant theories which directly pertain to her activism for women's rights.

The Complexities of Astell's Proposal

Simply put, Mary Astell firmly believed that women had the right to an education, and deserved to be educated. Despite what early modern society understood of women's limited intellectual capabilities, she believed in the beauty of women's minds, that women's bodies were merely the shells within which their souls, "infinitely more bright and radiant,"[164] resided. Indeed, Astell downplayed the importance of the physical self, focusing instead upon the importance of the mind. At the time, women's bodies were largely valued for their physical attributes, such as their youth, child-bearing capabilities, and homemaking skills,[165] rather than the non-physical characteristics of the mind. It is upon becoming aware of this gendered perspective on the usefulness of women, coupled

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[161] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 50.
[162] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 76.
[163] Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 171.
[164] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 54.
[165] Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 200-201.

with her own personal conviction of what was expected of an elite noble English woman, which compelled her to write *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. Her text is an essay[166] proposing a possible amendment to the problem: a scholastic and religious retirement. The mind consisted of the true worth of women, infinitely more valuable than her vanity; as Astell argued, "[the] true Commendation and the only thing that exalts her; the loudest Encomiums [sic: *praise*] being not half so satisfactory as the calm and secret Plaudit [sic: *approval*] of her own Mind."[167]

This proposed school for ladies, effectively an intellectual Retirement[168] (as stated in her book), was a milieu wherein women of elite status could find solace, surrounded by like-minded women who wanted to learn and be united by their love of religion. Effectively, in such a retreat, women could "[live] up to the dignity of [their] Nature, and express [their] thankfulness to GOD."[169] This proposed school was, in many ways, a space for religious contemplation more than it was for actual educational advancement. Indeed, as Mary Astell states: "[such] a course of Study will neither be too troublesome nor out of the reach of a Female Virtuoso; for it is not intended she shou'd spend her hours in learning *words* but *things* (…). Nor need she trouble her self [sic] in turning over a great number of Books (…)."[170] It is apparent that Mary Astell's views and understandings of femininity and female gender are rooted in a broader patriarchal discourse. Whilst advocating for women's right to education, she nevertheless stresses women's inherent fragility, upholding that the curriculum will not be too 'troublesome' for women's intellectual

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[166] Towards the end of her proposal, Mary Astell calls her text an "essay" of sorts. Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Mississauga: Broadview Literary Texts, 2002), 112.
[167] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 64.
[168] Spelled this way in the text. Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 50.
[169] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 57.
[170] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 78.

capabilities. Instead, greater emphasis was placed upon the religious elements and benefits of her retreat: women within her retirement could lead lives devoid from the pressures and ills of the outside world, focussing solely on the bettering of their souls and minds. Alluding to the creation myth, she states, "[Here] there are no Serpents to deceive you, whilst you entertain your selves in these delicious [Gardens, no] Provocations will be given in this Amicable Society (…)."[171] In many ways, Mary Astell sought to create an educational haven for women, and yet the overtly religious connotations she attributed to it in her Proposal garnered much criticism from Protestant religious figures. Indeed, "[patronage] was thwarted by men's fears that the college would be too much like a nunnery,"[172] which had been banned under the Reformation.[173] In rebuttal, Mary Astell underscored the differences between her proposed retreat and a convent, maintaining that while her establishment did consider religion to be an important area of study, its ultimate purpose was to alleviate "the enormous problems encountered by single women in a culture that had no place for them."[174] Its main focus was to bring women – of the same social class as herself – together in a milieu where they would not be subjected to loneliness and poverty. Instead, the establishment would forge camaraderie among its female tenants, nurturing their souls as well as their minds. The institution, she had hoped, would "[turn] self-indulgent high-livers into serious scholars, given to prayer and good works."[175] Moreover, the women who were placed within her intellectual retirement were free to leave as they

[171] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 74.
[172] Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 171.
[173] Phyllis Stock, *Better than Rubies: A History of Women's Education* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1978), 60.
[174] Christine M. Sutherland, *The Eloquence of Mary Astell* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), 53.
[175] Christine M. Sutherland, *The Eloquence of Mary Astell*, 54.

pleased.[176] Ultimately, while the retreat Mary Astell discussed in her proposal strongly resembled a convent – which had been banned in Protestant countries[177] – it was more so in structure than in content, emphasizing intellectual improvement.

However, it is apparent that in emphasizing the importance of a secluded, safe place for single, unmarried women (wherein ladies are spared "[those] inconveniences to which [they] are expos'd by living in the World"[178]), Mary Astell was, undoubtedly, attempting to address the very obstacles that she would have faced on the cusp of adulthood. More to the point, "[contemporary] wisdom declared that woman was made for man, [therefore] any adult woman without a husband was an anomaly."[179] In acknowledging the difficulties she often found herself in need of surmounting – economic instability, societal judgement, a desire to learn, a love of God – she sought to create a space, a societal and intellectual haven that she would have benefitted from in the formative years of her life. Consequently, Mary Astell's efforts to erect an institution for young women whose intrinsic values were rooted within the foundations of a patriarchal society, rather than in opposition to it, demonstrate how her views were those of an early modern women's rights activist rather than those of an early modern feminist. She did not attempt to look beyond patriarchal institutions or social doctrines – instead, she hoped to provide a more suitable milieu for women *within* them. Moreover, she believed, by virtue of her own elevated societal status, that only well-bred women deserved an education: "[The business of the retreat] shall be to give the best Education to the Children of Persons of Quality (…) forming their minds

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[176] Christine M. Sutherland, *The Eloquence of Mary Astell* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), 57.
[177] Christine M. Sutherland, *The Eloquence of Mary Astell*, 16.
[178] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Mississauga: Broadview Literary Texts, 2002), 89.
[179] Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 165.

shall be the particular care of those of their own Rank."[180] Although elite women had the means of obtaining an education by virtue of their status, it was often coloured by the roles they were expected to uphold later in life, as wives and mothers. Mary Astell's proposal was shaped by her activism in that she believed women were deserving of an education which bettered their persons, rather than simply making them marriageable material.

The Dark Matter of Youth and Beauty

The entirety of Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* is based upon the notion that aristocratic women in early modern England needed a place within which they could dedicate themselves to a life of religious learning, free from temptation or possible corruption. Importantly, she addressed what she perceived to be an infatuation with 'the self', that women were far too consumed with their appearances. However, this was by no fault of their own, because in being denied the means to better their intellect, they had no choice but to better their bodies. Indeed, "[she] who has nothing else to value herself upon, will be proud of her Beauty, or Money (….); and think her self [sic] mightily oblig'd to him, who tells her that she has those Perfection which she naturally longs for."[181] Astell wanted to rectify this perception, and stated: "[Let] us learn to pride ourselves in something more excellent than the invention of a Fashion."[182] Her activist beliefs pertaining to women's physiques translated into her writings, since she maintained that women's bodies were intrinsically bound to render service to the soul, meaning that to better themselves,

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[180] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Mississauga: Broadview Literary Texts, 2002), 103.
[181] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Mississauga: Broadview Literary Texts, 2002), 62.
[182] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 55.

women must attribute greater importance to their intellectual abilities.[183] She did not believe that women's bodies were their only merit.

Men's Systematic Exclusion of Women in Education

Astell accorded special importance to the manner by which men excluded women from institutions of learning. She wrote, "[Women should be] invited to taste the tree of knowledge,"[184] which, she argued, had been monopolized by men for centuries.[185] It is through these quips, which challenged society's patriarchal attitudes, that Astell asserted her activism for women's rights most forcefully. "For since GOD has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them?"[186] Overwhelmingly, however, Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* does not read as a criticism of misogynist attitudes and patriarchal structures within her community.

Mary Astell "[wrote] as a representative female, with the emotional realities, activities and behaviours of other eighteenth century women."[187] Knowing and appreciating the hardships that many women faced in terms of acquiring an education, having laboriously developed her own intellectual capacities despite great adversity, Mary Astell believed that women's status in early modern England with regards to education, particularly among the elite, was "intolerable"[188] and needed to be reconsidered. She proposed a plan for the construction of a school for ladies wherein they could not only

[183] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 55.
[184] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 83.
[185] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 83.
[186] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 80.
[187] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 119.
[188] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 119.

develop an understanding of "useful Authors,"[189] but also fortify their souls so as to better serve God.[190] Her institution for respectable ladies would have enabled women to pursue an education, as well as withdraw from worldly pressures such as marriage, motherhood and widowhood, if they so desired. Moreover, her school would have provided a solution to economic realities that many women, especially women of higher status, would have had to face in the event that they were unable to find an adequate suitor.[191] In proposing the establishment of such a retreat, Mary Astell had hoped to provide a solution for women who, like her, could not face the shame of marriage below their elite status or quite simply did not wish to become wives and mothers. Instead, they could withdraw to this proposed retirement, pay the humble entrance fee, and be spared further hardships.[192] Indeed, Mary Astell argued:

> Nor can I think of any expedient so useful as this to Persons of Quality who are overstock'd with Children, for thus they may honourably dispose of them without impairing their Estates. Five or six hundred pounds may be easily spar'd with a Daughter, when so many thousand would go deep; and yet as the world goes be a very inconsiderable Fortune for Ladies of their Birth; neither maintain them in that *Port* which Custom makes almost necessary, nor procure them an equal Match, those of their own Rank (…).[193]

Mary Astell's proposed institution of learning for young ladies went beyond merely aspiring to make young women more intellectually inclined – it was an appeal for change in society, one which permitted women to step outside of traditional gender roles (as mothers and wives) and be considered as entities separate from their male counterparts,

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[189] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Mississauga: Broadview Literary Texts, 2002), 78.
[190] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 57.
[191] Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 105.
[192] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Mississauga: Broadview Literary Texts, 2002), 107.
[193] Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg, 107.

capable of intellectual pursuits. However, Mary Astell only believed this was possible by *removing* women who desired such a lifestyle from society. She could only reasonably envision such a future for women within an enclosed, all-female institution, accessible only to ladies of noble status. Instead of appealing for the reconsideration of patriarchal attitudes and ideologies which prevailed in England, she opted to create an institution, which greatly resembled a convent in structure, in order to eliminate paternalistic pressures within the walls of her retreat. While her ideas were radical in demonstrating that women truly were capable of exhibiting intellectual prowess, she should not be considered an early modern feminist. She did not seek to restructure society in an egalitarian way. Instead, she wanted to carve out a place for women amidst a heavily patriarchal culture. The ideas presented in some of her writings would not fully be explored until several decades later, with the works of authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft and the dawn of the Enlightenment in England. It would take centuries, with the arduous lobbying of the suffragettes and women's groups, before the unjust gender roles forced upon women would be reconsidered.

“Women Are Naturally so Eloquent”[194]

Les femmes illustres (1642), Madeleine de Scudéry

Unlike Mary Astell, who declared herself a lover of her sex on the very cover of her publication, Madeleine de Scudéry did not announce that she was a woman writer; instead, she used her brother’s name, Georges de Scudéry, essentially identifying herself as male. There are many supposed reasons for her anonymity, including a desire to refute critiques regarding the story of her birth, as it is believed that she might have exaggerated her noble status,[195] and also possibly because she was convinced that women of noble birth did not partake in literary endeavours.[196] More to the point, identifying as male, especially a well-established and respected playwright in Paris at the time,[197] would have enabled Madeleine de Scudéry to publish her works with the relative assurance that she would not be refused by publication houses merely on the grounds that she was a woman. Anonymity, by virtue of her brother’s name and status, *allowed* for her to write: “[it] was a secret known to all that Madeleine de Scudéry (…) was her brother’s collaborator, if not the sole author of the novels accredited to him.”[198] Whilst writing and corresponding with some of her friends, Madeleine de Scudéry “openly acknowledged the authorship of the novels.”[199] Undeniably, there certainly would have been a few readers who were unaware of the true authorship of *Les femmes illustres* and attributed the writing to a male author, yet the overwhelming

[194] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), 28. Author’s translation.
[195] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 18.
[196] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, 20.
[197] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, 18.
[198] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, 18.
[199] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, 19.

majority of readers would have known a woman had penned the works, speaking as a woman for the advancement of women's education.

Madeleine de Scudéry's book *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques* is divided into *harangues*, a French word which (like its English equivalent) means lectures, speeches which often carry moralizing or solemn content.[200] Similar to the English author Mary Astell, Madeleine de Scudéry writes using the literary style established by the *querelle des femmes*, one which emphasizes conversation and rhetoric.[201] Madeleine de Scudéry also freely employed this style by virtue of her own great appreciation for smart, gallant conversation.[202] "[She] detested pedantry and loved the joys of witty [conversation…] [she had a taste] for puns, witticisms and [jokes.]"[203] As previously established, conversation was deemed feminine by nature; by mingling in a milieu defined by intelligent and smart conversation, effectively the literary salon of the 17th century (where Madeleine de Scudéry makes her mark[204]), Madeleine de Scudéry complied with traditional, gendered norms of the period. For instance, although her salon provided her with the means to advance her literary career, "[it] must be remembered that the main purpose of the salon [at the time] was for amusement."[205] The salon permitted an elegant way of life, especially as Madeleine de Scudéry was the highly esteemed *salonnière*.[206]

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[200] Larousse dictionary, "Harangues," http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais-anglais/harangue/38973?q=harangues.

[201] Jane Donawerth, "Conversation and the Boundaries of Public Discourse in Rhetorical Theory by Renaissance Women," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Spring 1998), 181-199.

[202] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 53.

[203] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, 27.

[204] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, 24.

[205] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, 39.

[206] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, 39.

Nevertheless, conforming to society's gender idealizations did not undermine her literary prowess. Madeleine de Scudéry was a very perceptive writer and was able to change her writing styles so as to better suit the current literary trends.[207] She benefitted from "the greatest of renown and critical acclaim (…) [her novels] were at the top of the bestseller list."[208] She employed her intelligence in embracing the stylistic conventions associated with women writers entrenched within the *querelle des femmes*. For instance, her book *Les femmes illustres* consists of harangues from various notable women who graced the Ancient period, whether in Rome, Greece or even Egypt, women such as Cleopatra, Artemis, and Lucretia, who were role models of the classical era. In *Les femmes illustres*, these celebrated women engage in powerful and well-versed soliloquies, captured at pivotal moments in their lives. For instance, Cleopatra implores Marc Anthony for him to understand her motives and ambitions before ultimately taking her own life; Artemis speaks to the male architect, Isocrates, in the hopes of convincing him to build a grand mausoleum for her husband in which she, too, might pass away; and Lucretia beseeches her husband to avenge both her honour and her untimely death. As previously stated, looking to the past for examples to draw upon in a contemporary setting was a mark of the *querelle des femmes*.[209] Although most of these women were not fictitious themselves, the conversations that Madeleine de Scudéry draws upon in order to project her harangues are rooted in fiction. Apart from knowing their historical relevance, Scudéry creates a fabricated dialogue in which these women justify their actions and beliefs in an eloquent,

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[207] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, Preface.

[208] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry* , Preface.

[209] Jane Donawerth, "Conversation and the Boundaries of Public Discourse in Rhetorical Theory by Renaissance Women," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Spring 1998), 181-199.

précieuse fashion.[210] This is the essential structure of *Les femmes illustres*. Notable women from Antiquity, as portrayed by Madeleine de Scudéry, speak about events in which their moral character, effectively, their souls, had been tried through grievous experiences. In surmounting obstacles (the death of a spouse in battle, or the loss of a parent – "*le culte des hommes*"[211]), women were supposed to maintain idealized conceptions of honour, piety and loyalty. The only woman whose harangue differs from the others in that it does not pertain to an overtly tragic event (war or death) is Sappho.[212]

Sappho, the Learned Greek Woman

Rather than speak eloquently of men's exploits, as the harangues before her had done, Sappho discusses the benefits of an education for women, contending that, apart from slight genetic differences, women are just as capable as men at reasoning and partaking in academic pursuits.[213] Attempting to convince her pupil, Erinne, to write, Sappho states "*l'étude des belles-lettres devrait plutôt être permise aux femmes qu'aux hommes (…), [nous] ne dérobons rien au public ni à nous-même, au contraire, nous nous enrichissons sans appauvrir les autres, nous illustres, et sans faire tort à personne, nous acquérons beaucoup de gloire.*"[214] Sappho believes that it is natural for women to write, even necessary – men are consumed with waging wars, while women have the opportunity to busy themselves with the advancement of their intellect through reading and learning.[215]

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[210] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), 30-31.
[211] Claude Aragonnès, *Madeleine de Scudéry – Reine du tendre* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1934), 149.
[212] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), Sappho à Erinne, 154-163.
[213] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), Sappho à Erinne, 154-163.
[214] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien, 159.
[215] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien, 158-59.

More to the point, Sappho's importance to Scudéry extends beyond that of her harangue. In her salon du Samedi, Scudéry went by the name of Sappho.[216] The appropriation of this learned Greek woman's name is quite telling not only of how Madeleine de Scudéry perceived herself, but also how she valued intelligence and literacy[217] and believed in the intrinsic importance of education for noble women. Sappho would have represented not only intelligence, but *female* intelligence – she would have been an exemplary role model for Madeleine de Scudéry, who was herself a highly intelligent woman.[218] By speaking through Sappho and attempting to emulate what she stood for, Madeleine de Scudéry was injecting herself within this classical world, speaking through an extraordinary woman of the past. Indeed, Sappho was noble, intelligent, unencumbered by the domineering presence of men in her life[219] – Madeleine de Scudéry, with her salon du Samedi, attempted to replicate this for her own intellectual advancement and growth.

It is for this reason, given Madeleine de Scudéry's obvious leanings towards a particular learned Greek woman of Antiquity, as well as its relevance to the scope of this thesis pertaining to women's right to education, that Sappho's harangue (*Sappho à Erinne*[220]) will be given greater consideration than the other *harangues*. This harangue sustains and justifies the others – it is Scudéry's closing call to arms, as it associates literacy with women and renders it a medium by which women's rights advocates can appeal for

[216] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 19.
[217] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, 19.
[218] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, 27.
[219] Katherine L. French and Allyson M. Poska, *Women and Gender: In the Western Past* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 44-45.
[220] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), 154-163.

change.[221] The following section is a discussion of the main themes present in Sappho's harangue to Erinne, her pupil.

The Importance of Beauty

Madeleine de Scudéry, in speaking through Sappho, equates women's beauty with male valor; "*la beauté est en notre sexe ce que la valeur est en celui des hommes*."[222] Beauty, according to Sappho, is certainly something to be commended as an estimable quality in a woman; however, she also stresses that beauty is not eternal – if women were meant to be only beautiful ornamental creatures and devoid of intellect, they would be beautiful until their death.[223] In such a sense, women's worth cannot be measured solely in terms of their beauty. To do so is to belittle and effectively tarnish a woman's merit. Moreover, Sappho, despite being stunningly beautiful herself,[224] contends that it is not given to all women to be beautiful (interestingly enough, Madeleine de Scudéry herself was often described as being rather unfortunate looking, seeing as she had a dark complexion and a rather plain visage[225]). Further into the harangue, Sappho appeals for Erinne to understand that a woman's true beauty lies within her mind and her intellectual abilities. She claims that in leaving some vestige of oneself in history, such as prose or poetry, one effectively becomes immortal ("*le temps, la vieillesse et la mort ne vous*

[221] Marianne Legault, *Female Intimacies in Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Ashgate: Ashgate e-books, 2012), Chapter "From Sexual Fantasy to Apprehension."
[222] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), 156.
[223] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), 155.
[224] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), 163.
[225] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 27.

dérobent que des roses et n'emportent pas toute votre beauté"[226]). This stance is accurately mirrored in Madeleine de Scudéry's own life: "the freedom of her education had an extremely healthy effect on Mlle de Scudéry, whose nature was a happy one."[227] Through Sappho, she is attempting to communicate to her female audience the benefits and the importance of obtaining some form of education, for the improvement of one's spirit and the 'immortality' of one's intellectual beauty.

Women as Writers

Understandably, this harangue, portrayed by an Ancient Greek poet, would discuss the importance of literacy and prose. Sappho believes that women are naturally inclined to write, that by virtue of their societal standing (largely confined to the home, catering to the men in their lives) they have plenty of available time to dedicate to the studies of letters, time which men, busied as they are with matters such as warfare, legal business and the governing of provinces, simply do not have.[228] She upholds that for men to be given strong bodies and courage, women should be allowed to expand upon their wits and imaginations, so that they might become worthy of admiration for something beyond their looks.[229] Sappho argues that if men are to be permitted to maintain their dominion over women, women should at least have the liberty "*de connaître toutes ces choses dont notre esprit est capable*."[230] This was similar to Mary Astell's proposal for an institution of learning for

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[226] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), 162.
[227] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 23.
[228] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien (Paris: Côtés-Femmes Éditions, 1991), 158.
[229] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien, 158.
[230] Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, ed. Claude Maignien, 159.

young ladies. Indeed, Madeleine de Scudéry (speaking through Sappho) did not seek to reconsider societal perceptions and understandings of gender roles, entrenched as they were within an overwhelmingly paternalistic discourse. Instead, Sappho merely states that women should be granted more liberties *within* their patriarchal society. Evidently, she is aware (as Madeleine de Scudéry would have been) of injustices with regard to gender, but does not seek to counter them.

Madeleine de Scudéry was a *fille savante*[231] at a time when many respectable *demoiselles* (ladies) were terribly ignorant and poorly educated, despite their elevated status in society.[232] Her works were immensely popular and widely read upon publication, she was famous for her amusing, witty Salon du Samedi, and, importantly, was highly respected in literary society for her stylistic skills and virtuous nature.[233] One can only speculate as to why she essentially disappeared from historical records and why so little has been published, lately, pertaining to her life and works. Certainly, Madeleine de Scudéry represents a very important facet of French society during the 17th century, not only as an advocate for women's rights to education, but also in terms of literary novelty, constantly adapting and conforming to new literary trends. Whereas Mary Astell often wrote in response to contemporary events, Madeleine de Scudéry tended to conform to literary fashions. Indeed, her flexibility with regards to prose enabled her to be deemed one of the leading figures for the *préciosité* movement, and her epic heroism novels are among the best of the genre.[234] More research certainly must be done to retrieve Madeleine de Scudéry from the shadows of the past and reinstate her as an important historical figure.

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[231] Learned woman.
[232] Claude Aragonnès, *Madeleine de Scudéry – Reine du tendre* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1934), 15.
[233] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), Preface.
[234] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, Preface.

Conclusion: The Relevancy of Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry

This thesis has argued that the complex and extraordinary lives of two early modern women, Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry, both highly intelligent authors, sought to rectify society's views and understandings pertaining to women's intellectual capabilities by acting within dominant patriarchal frameworks. By considering scholarship pertaining to the early modern period, in particular the various ways women's lives were shaped by paternalistic values and beliefs, this thesis has demonstrated that while Mary Astell and Madeleine de Scudéry published works which sought to advocate for women's right to education, they cannot be considered feminists. Importantly, neither of these women writers advocated for greater equality between the sexes or even for a modification of the overtly derogatory attitudes expressed towards women. They simply strove to maintain spaces within their societies wherein elite women could be free to express themselves intellectually. Indeed, Mary Astell, in accordance with religious beliefs and societal trends of the time, argued that respectable ladies *deserved* to be educated. After facing daunting challenges with regards to her own singlehood (in terms of monetary income as well as respectability), she strove to create an institution within which women of high birth could abstain from the pressures and calamities of the world, choosing instead to devote themselves to the amelioration of the mind and soul for the purposes of better serving God.[235] Madeleine de Scudéry perpetuated traditional French beliefs with regards to social status and the exclusionary influence of nobility, and sought to uphold and maintain spaces

[235] "[The] practical problem was how to manage a respectable life in London without a fortune, without a husband, and without a paying profession. Where were women to go, how were they to live, if they chose not to marry and if gentlewomen like herself, without means, could not afford to run their own establishments? (…) At the time she wrote *A Serious Proposal* this was a [pressing] concern to Mary Astell (…)." Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 121.

of learning within which women (as well as a few respectable men) could discuss a broad range of ideas and topics in a courtly, refined manner, and in so doing, improve their intellectual affinities.[236] The salons of 17th century France were spaces in which women could seek to educate themselves, despite the overwhelmingly belief, maintained by the vast majority of French society, that women were subordinate and were not deserving of any form of education.[237] Madeleine de Scudéry's works, penned under her brother's name, were fully entrenched in the rhetoric of the *querelle des femmes*. To advance her concerns about women's intrinsic subordination to men, Madeleine de Scudéry spoke through notable women from Antiquity, using their reputations and notable deeds as vehicles to communicate her own vision, particularly with regards to education for women. Importantly, while both women believed that women deserved to be educated, their beliefs were sharply influenced by their understandings of class and social status. Not all women deserved to be educated – only the elite could aspire to such treatment. Moreover, neither Mary Astell nor Madeleine de Scudéry undermined the political institution of patriarchy. Whilst outlining the unjust treatment of women, these women did not propose radical reconsiderations of societal values. Instead, Mary Astell upheld the power of the monarchy as well as the might of the Church of England (a stringently patriarchal institution), just as Madeleine de Scudéry actively participated in noble circles, dominated by men, in which women were often devalued. As this thesis has attempted to demonstrate, there is a plethora of knowledge pertaining to the lives of early modern women to be found in a closer study of these two writers. Their published works provide the modern scholar with fascinating

[236] Nicole Aronson, *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, 22-23.
[237] Leigh Ann Whaley, *Women's History as Scientists – A Guide to the Debates* (Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2003), 3.

insight into a historical period in which the lives of women were dramatically affected by social turmoil.

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