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Abstract

In this article I explore how three early modern European feminists—Marie de Gournay, Margaret Cavendish, and Mary Astell—discuss wooing in surprisingly similar ways. Independently and without the benefit of a personal or intellectual relationship, all three highlight how wooing is characterized by deception, insincere flattery, and occasional coercion to secure consent to marriage; they problematize how wooing tricks women into consenting to their own subordination. This is a feminist social epistemological project: Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell recognize wooing as a gendered socio-epistemic harm, for wooing undermines women’s abilities to exercise their epistemic agency over making what was often the single most consequential choice in their lives—who to accept as husband. I argue that for Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell, wooing not only is a gendered socio-epistemic harm but also manifests an epistemic injustice, hermeneutical obscuring, which was deployed by wooers in service of maintaining patriarchal power hierarchies. For Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell, the social practice of wooing manifests patriarchal control via a kind of gendered epistemic tyranny. Successful wooing frustrates epistemic capacities, entrenches gender hierarchies, and traps women in the epistemically and politically subordinating relation of marriage.

Keywords: wooing, marriage, Gournay, Cavendish, Astell, epistemic injustice, early modern philosophy

1. Introduction

Early modern European women philosophers were engaged in a difficult and protracted battle to be taken seriously. Until recently, few were remembered as philosophers at all.¹ Contemporary scholars have been working to ameliorate this historical injustice over the last few decades, thinking through canons and syllabi, examining significant debates, and discovering early modern feminist critiques of

¹ See, for example, Hutton 2015; Bergès 2015.

structures, practices, and values.² Some scholars have flagged the interrogation of marriage in early modern feminist philosophers' writings as advancing philosophical projects: Laura Brace (2000), Deborah Boyle (2013), Jacqueline Broad (2014), and Kelin Emmett (2022) have all published careful accounts of the function of marriage in Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Cavendish, Mary Astell, and Moderata Fonte's works. But few contemporary philosophers working on early modern European women have attended to the wooing that *precedes* marriage. This is unfortunate; as a practice designed to secure a woman's consent to marry, wooing is importantly connected to the ills of marriage.

In this article, I explore how three early modern feminists—Marie de Gournay, Margaret Cavendish, and Mary Astell—discuss wooing in surprisingly similar ways. Independently and without the benefit of a personal or intellectual relationship, all three highlight how wooing is characterized by deception, insincere flattery, and occasional coercion to secure consent to marriage; they problematize how wooing tricks women into consenting to their own subordination. This is a feminist social-epistemological project: Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell recognize wooing as a gendered socio-epistemic harm, for wooing undermines women's abilities to exercise their epistemic agency over making what was often the single most consequential choice in their lives—who to accept as husband. As such, I will argue that for Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell, wooing not only is a gendered socio-epistemic harm but also manifests an epistemic injustice, hermeneutical obscuring, which was deployed by wooers in service of maintaining patriarchal power hierarchies. Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell all recognized, independently of one another, that early modern patriarchy has an epistemic dimension and that wooing instantiates this. They are thus engaged in a sophisticated feminist project.

To make my case, I begin in section 2 with a brief overview of how Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell each discuss wooing, highlighting their shared concerns about three socio-epistemic components of wooing—namely, deception, coercion, and flattery. In section 3, I argue that given their similar problematization of these socio-epistemic elements, Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell should be understood as offering not only an account of wooing as a gendered socio-epistemic harm but one that constitutes a form of epistemic injustice: wooing frustrates women's epistemic agency—as a practice, it manifests patriarchal control via a kind of gendered epistemic tyranny. I turn, in section 4, to the suggestion that Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell's analysis of wooing as a kind of epistemic injustice hints at a larger feminist project: the problematization of an epistemic dimension of early modern patriarchal power. I then consider a class of objections to which Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell might be

² See, for example, Boyle 2018; Broad 2015; Deslauriers 2008; Detlefsen 2016; Green 2013; Lascano 2023; Shapiro 2016; Sipowicz 2021.

vulnerable—specifically, that they were uncharitable to wooers as victims of patriarchy.

2. Accounts of Wooing

Though they are writing in different places, times, and genres, Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell all understand wooing to be the social process by which a man secures a woman's consent to his marriage proposal. Here, marriage is used as a proxy for securing sexual access and confirming traditional gender hierarchies. Interestingly, wooing is always presented in the context of marrying for love—that is, by the woman's consent rather than her family's: it is directed at the woman rather than her family. In Gournay's (2002c) *The Promenade of Monsieur de Montaigne*, a romantic tragedy that foregrounds wooing, all of the wooing takes place outside of the patriarch's influence; similarly, Cavendish's *The Public Wooing* and *The Convent of Pleasure* begin with the heroine being orphaned (Cavendish 1662, 1999). Astell (1996), in *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, is concerned with husbands and wives' true reasons for marrying. Thus, Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell take on wooing as a proxy not for a cultural and class-specific activity but for the gendered power dynamics of early modern patriarchal society. In what follows, I discuss how Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell understand wooing to operate as a social practice fraught with epistemic asymmetries.

2.1. Gournay

Gournay's *The Promenade of Monsieur Montaigne* is ostensibly a romantic tragedy. It is also explicitly concerned with the ways in which wooing instantiates control over what women are able to know and thus how they are able to choose and what they are able to do; the plot unfolds with various interjections from Gournay to Montaigne concerning the narrative and the lessons therein. The plot concerns Princess Alinda's doomed romantic life. She is first coerced into consenting to an arranged marriage to benefit her father and nation, but before her wedding, handsome Leontin woos her. He affirms her unhappiness and her fears, arguing that he understands her and her plight, and that he values her deeply (Gournay 2002c, 38–40). Leontin thus woos Alinda with flattery and disingenuous kind speech, such that “she failed to observe that Leontin was pitying her troubles only so as to multiply them, and was making her swallow the poison of love in the cup of adulation”; as such, Leontin “had too much art and intelligence for the simpleness of that young woman” (Gournay 2002c, 40). Leontin's wooing did not come from a place of genuine sympathy and understanding. He desired to have her as his own from the moment he first saw her (37). Unfortunately, Leontin was successful: Gournay expresses pity for Alinda and observes

the monstrous design that he effected with Alinda. Suffice it to say that, within fifteen days, . . . *he so skillfully hunted down a naïve soul that he reduced her to agreeing to follow him, as her new husband, wherever he might wish to lead her.* (Gournay 2002c, 41; emphasis added)

Leontin's wooing was relentless and eventually came to fruition. Since she has married in violation of her duties, Alinda and Leontin flee as new spouses but are shipwrecked in a strange land. A local nobleman, Othalcus, generously takes them in. Like Leontin, however, Othalcus is determined to possess Alinda for himself. He propositions her, and she declines, given her marriage to Leontin. So Othalcus sends his sister Ortalde to seduce Leontin. Having grown tired of Alinda's distress and bored of dismissing her claims of Othalcus's pursuit, Leontin is all too happy to have amorous relations with a new woman. Once Alinda is sufficiently vulnerable—worn down, ignored by her husband—Othalcus escalates his efforts. Unfortunately for him, this coincides with Alinda learning of Leontin's betrayal and, after writing a letter to excoriate his character, she kills herself.

Gournay highlights two important features of wooing through this narrative: first, the means by which wooers gain power over women—namely, deception and insincere flattery; and second, the role of consent in authorizing that power. Alinda is beset by men who are not honest about who they are and what they want from her. They deceive and flatter her, undermining what she can know about her circumstances and thus how she makes her choices and what she is subsequently able to accomplish. Gournay indicates that deception is a fundamental problem within wooing. Leontin illustrates this with abundance. He speaks sweet words to Alinda, persuading her to throw over her duties to her father and her nation to run off and marry him. This speech is deceptive: he does not really care for Alinda—he does not even truly know her, for his wooing takes place within a fortnight—and the reader knows this not only because Gournay tells them so but also because Leontin abandons her almost immediately. For Gournay, there are two sorts of deception to be aware of when it comes to wooing and the promises of wooers:

Therefore, ladies are quite wrong to accuse men generally of deceit, when they find their promises of love broken. Indeed, there are some who promise like cheaters, having no desire to keep faith, but there are still more of those who promise like fools, without, I say, being aware to what degree the weakness of their minds is incapable of that great virtue of constancy. (Gournay 2002c, 47)

Did Leontin never intend to be faithful, as some of the possessive, desirous language concerning their first meaning might suggest, or was he simply too weak-willed to

resist Ortalde’s advances? This does not matter from Alinda’s perspective: a man who promises to love and cherish is deceptive if he falls short, whatever the reason. Even so, Gournay hints that Leontin’s failure is the former: he lacks loyalty and constancy, he convinces Alinda that her arranged marriage is doomed, and he exploits her fear and vulnerability (Gournay 2002c, 46, 47, 39, 40). Perhaps most damning is that when Ortalde pursues him, he does not immediately rebuff her as Alinda does to Othalcus—someone who is weak but had good intentions would surely take steps to address their weakness. Alinda clearly identifies Leontin as a culpable, intentional deceiver. She rues that her “youthful simplicity was easy to deceive” (Gournay 2002c, 51) and adds,

From now on, let no woman believe a man when he swears; let none hope that the words of a man are trustworthy. While the desiring spirit is keen to get something, they do not shrink from vows or spare their promises. But as soon as the hunger of passion is satiated, they cannot be bothered to hold in awe their words or their perjuries. (Gournay 2002c, 52)

Alinda is crushed by Leontin’s betrayal. It is especially hurtful given his supposed deep understanding and appreciation of her as conveyed in his flattering speech during his wooing of her—itself an instance of deception. Though Gournay does not say much about flattery in *Promenade*, in her later work, *Apology for the Woman Writing*, she suggests that flatterers have no interest in providing meaningful support to their targets (Gournay 2002a, 118). Rather, flatterers are like mercenaries: they give praise because the target’s warmth toward them is beneficial, all while clothing this exchange in the veneer of genuine respect and care (118). Flattery is thus itself deceptive; it is an effort to control what a target knows. Flatterers may seem to prostrate themselves before their target, but this voluntary subordination is disingenuous; it indicates a “diseased” state of morality and an inadequate intellect (119). Leontin deliberately and disingenuously cultivated Alinda’s warm feelings toward him, alternately praising her and sympathizing with her plight as an intended bride. He cast himself as her champion and means of escape, when in fact, he was just another cage. Leontin controlled what Alinda could know—about him, as her would-be rescuer, but also about herself: she thinks herself cared for, valued, and superior in a way that simply is not true. I take it that Gournay is issuing advice to her reader: wooing is, by its very nature, a deceptive practice: a wooer speaks of a future together when in fact he is concerned only with the moment of consent to his proposal and persuading his target so as to cross that threshold. The wooer’s intentions evaporate once his passion is satisfied. As such, women are deceived by wooers who are disinclined to uphold their vows when it is no longer pleasant to do so.

As Gournay shows, there is an epistemic problem with wooing; specifically, there is an epistemic asymmetry between the wooer and the wooed that is disproportionately disadvantageous for women. Alinda comes to believe things about Leontin that are untrue: neither his intentions nor his flattering speech are borne out by his actions. This is troubling, for intentions and esteem cannot be known except as communicated by the person possessing them. The problem is that Alinda and other wooed women must nevertheless make important choices based on the misleading, false, or incomplete information—deception and flattering speech—presented to them in wooing. If Leontin had been honest with Alinda that he was very interested in the short term and less so in the ever-after, she could have made a different choice. His deception and flattery robbed her of that and, eventually, cost Alinda her life. The problem is more than just nonideal decision-making conditions, however, given the gender structures in place. Gournay communicates the severity of this through Alinda's circumstances. While not all wooed women are princesses who must flee their homes after marrying the wrong man, Alinda knows that she cannot return home, having disgraced herself and her family through her marriage to Leontin, and so her only option is to die. This is a dramatic version of the stakes for more common women, too—picking the wrong man is a life sentence; wooing, insofar as it is a process that encourages men to secure consent rather than share honest statements of intention or engage in careful self-examination about what those intentions really are, makes it difficult, perhaps impossible, for women to be able to choose the right man for them. Importantly, however, Gournay does not fault the deceived; their epistemic capacities are operating as they usually do. The problem lies squarely in those who deceive to secure access to women without care for what that will mean for those women. Gournay warns her reader that men are essentially untrustworthy when it comes to wooing: “Ladies, in the final analysis, will discover in books that whoever knows men better distrusts them more” (Gournay 2002c, 53). Presumably, Gournay is advising to believe wooers at your peril, for wooing is inherently deceptive.

Moreover, as Gournay illustrates throughout *Promenade*, wooing is explicitly aimed at securing consent. This is puzzling: not only is consent under such conditions not morally valid, but it also suggests that wooing is not about brute power over (and base sexual access to) women. Leontin did not simply kidnap Alinda, and Othalcus did not assault her, though both actions were within their power. Why does consent matter to wooers? One answer Gournay suggests is that there is something erotic for men in getting women to agree to that which places them in a man's power. Consider Othalcus's pursuit of Alinda. Othalcus wants Alinda for himself and woos her—seeking her consent—to marry her. This is already a difficult circumstance because she and Leontin are stranded foreigners dependent on Othalcus's generosity, so his pursuit of her (a married woman) feels coercive. Alinda is aware of their precarious position: she “faced the dilemma, not of deciding between yes and no for her answer, but of seeking

some form of refusal calculated to flow gently from her, so as not to offend one who had them wholly in his power” (Gournay 2002c, 44). Alinda sees this as a matter of survival; while this echoes women’s conditions in cases where marriage is a means of subsistence, the dynamic is even worse than it first appears. Not only is Othalcus unconcerned with coerced consent; Alinda’s distressed refusal increases his desire for her. As Gournay writes,

Yet it must be acknowledged that neither [Alinda’s] weeping nor this difficulty [of her refusal] made Othalcus despair of the conquest so much as *they made it appear more glorious and desirable to him*, and he at once withdrew without otherwise pressing it, because he had proposed to gain it by gentle means, *so as not to lose the pleasure of acquiescence*, in which consisted, he firmly believed, the tenderest of love’s delights. (Gournay 2002c, 45; emphasis added)

Othalcus is not seeking consent because he respects Alinda, her will, or her desires. He does not seek to become desirable to her. Instead, he elects to undermine her ability to refuse on structural grounds so that he can gain the pleasure of her passive agreement. This is not genuine consent. Othalcus, like many wooers, is not concerned with what his target wants. Nor is what he claims to want, marriage qua relationship, what he is actually pursuing—like Leontin, albeit more nakedly, Othalcus is concerned with gaining unfettered sexual access to Alinda. Thus, the mere appearance of consent, acquiescence, *itself* has erotic value for him: it is a promise of sexual conquest to come. Here, Gournay illustrates that for wooers, the value of consent is not that it represents a real, nondeceptive, noncoercive choice, but rather that it is seen to authorize sexual activity. It represents a woman, Alinda, placing herself in the sexual power of a man, Othalcus. It is a moment that transitions a woman from being another man’s property—her father, her first husband’s—to his to do with as he wishes. If this is what consent is for, then it need not require the ability to do otherwise or full knowledge of to what one agrees. As Gournay demonstrates, wooing is a socio-epistemic practice characterized by deception in ways that solicit consent so as to give the appearance of authorizing control over women’s bodies.

2.2. Cavendish

Cavendish similarly critiques wooing in her plays *The Public Wooing* and *The Convent of Pleasure*. In *Public Wooing*, Lady Prudence forces all her would-be suitors to present themselves and their vows for the marriage that would follow in public, in front of all. She eventually agrees to marry a man who seems poor and physically undesirable but demonstrates a thoughtful, wise, and fair character. At their wedding, he reveals himself to be young, handsome, and wealthy, having disguised himself so

as not to overpromise what she would be receiving. In *Convent*, Lady Happy inherits a great deal of money and eschews marriage, for “Men are the only troublers of Women; . . . they cause their pains, but not their pleasures” (Cavendish 1999, 220). So, she opens the Convent—a separatist community for women to enjoy life’s pleasures. Soon, a princess from a far-off land joins the Convent; she and Lady Happy fall in love. Near the play’s end, it is revealed that the princess was a prince in disguise;³ he and Lady Happy marry, and the Convent closes. Like Gournay, Cavendish is troubled by the deception, coercion, and flattery that characterize wooing and function as the means of securing women’s consent to marriage. Cavendish’s main concern, however, is the means by which wooing itself makes it difficult, if not impossible, for women to appreciate the reality they inhabit; wooing fundamentally unsettles women’s capacity to know with whom they are interacting and thus to whom they are granting their futures. Though identifying the troubling socio-epistemic structure, content, and results of wooing, Cavendish highlights the ways in which wooing constitutes a gendered epistemic harm.

Cavendish is explicit that there is something wrong with the structure of wooing itself. The main plot of *Public Wooing* is an implicit critique thereof; knowing that wooers misrepresent themselves with impunity when wooing takes place in private, Lady Prudence uses publicity as a metaphorical antiseptic. In forcing her wooers to say only what they would be publicly accountable for, she makes the practice work for her rather than against her. *Convent*, however, approaches the structure of wooing in a more roundabout way. The main plot, the happenings within the Convent’s walls, are interspersed with vignettes from would-be wooers. They desire to possess Lady Happy’s beauty and wealth; they have never even met her or been interested in so doing until she becomes a vulnerable and rich potential target (Cavendish 1999, 217, 221–22). When they discover she is cloistered, they consider appealing to the state to force the Convent to close, setting the Convent on fire and seizing the fleeing women, and dressing as serving women to infiltrate the Convent (Cavendish 1999, 223, 226, 227, 228). While some of this is likely for comedic effect, Cavendish is also laying bare the true structure of wooing and the true intentions of wooers. It might begin as a display of submission and interest, but it is ultimately motivated by entitlement to women and violence when that entitlement is frustrated—something Lady Prudence and Lady Happy both try to get ahead of, albeit in their own ways. The wooers’ strategies run the gamut from flattery, to coercion, to deception. Cavendish is showing her readers that one may be up against a host of attacks on what one thinks one knows—conversations, safety, and community.

³ It is possible that the princess is a trans character and that she is her true self as the princess even if this is not her social identity outside the Convent. While I find this reading attractive, there is insufficient textual evidence to defend it.

Lady Prudence and Lady Happy are both successfully wooed, though to different effects, and in both cases the wooing is characterized by an extreme degree of deception such that who they thought they were marrying is not who they in fact married. Lady Prudence thinks she is marrying a man of good character, which seems to bear out, but while he may not have been deceptive about what kind of man he was, he was deceptive about his identity: her wooer turns out to be a prince who is young, handsome, and wealthy. While this is obviously intended to be satirical—a wooer’s deception working out to the bride’s advantage is clearly intended as comedic irony—as it stands, it does not change the fact that Lady Prudence was misled. Moreover, it hints that perhaps the prince was not as decent as he first appeared; this was an attempt to test Lady Prudence’s virtue (Cavendish 1662, V.xxxii). Lady Happy is similarly misled in being wooed by the princess. The princess claims to join the Convent to escape “a Court of troubles” and seeks to play the part of Lady Happy’s lover in a “Masculine-Habit” (Cavendish 1999, 228, 229). Lady Happy and the princess play the part of a lady and her male lover across various scenes, one of which culminates in an amorous verse, with the two agreeing to marry then dancing around the May Pole as Queen and King. Lady Happy falls in love with the princess, but this confuses and distresses her. She laments, “My Name is *Happy*, and so was my Condition, before I saw this Princess; but now I am like to be the most unhappy Maid alive: But why may not I love a Woman with the same affection I could a Man?” (Cavendish 1999, 234). Lady Happy finds their kissing and embracing confusing (234). It is a tragic moment of frustrated queer love, but Lady Happy can take comfort in knowing that this love can never betray her by leading her into a subordinating marriage. Soon afterward, the princess’s—now prince’s—deception is revealed. He declares his intent to marry her; if his councillors do not permit it, he “will have her by force of Arms” (244).

This wooing was an extended deception. Though the would-be wooers had rejected the possibility of using drag to infiltrate the Convent, the prince was successful. As the princess, he entered their community knowing who he was, but he denied that knowledge to the women, thus undermining what they could know. His deception taints the romance that develops between him and Lady Happy. Would Lady Happy have taken him as a courtly lover, engaged in embraces and kisses, and agreed to marry him had she known that marriage was a live possibility? This is especially striking since he does not, as the prince, ask Lady Happy to marry him and in fact threatens to take her by force—not if *she* fails to agree, but if his advisors disapprove. He secures Lady Happy by way of clandestine wooing capped by consent given under spurious conditions and a threat of coercive force. Indeed, given her critiques of marriage throughout the play, Lady Happy would seemingly *have* to be deceived to agree to it. Cavendish highlights a rich and multilayered deception:

deception about the person, their relationship with Lady Happy, and securing her consent.

Lady Happy claims that women who have the means to support themselves “were mad to live with Men, who make the Female sex their slaves; but I will not be so enslaved, but will live retired from their Company. . . . My Cloister shall not be a Cloister of restraint, but a place for freedom” (Cavendish 1999, 220). Marriage traps women in a relation of unfreedom, and wooing is the prelude; Lady Happy values her freedom too greatly to marry. At the Convent, Lady Happy has the women put on a play about women being harmed by men and marriage, highlighting the risks of childbirth, domestic violence, and wooing done under threat of rape;⁴ its epilogue states that marriage is a cross-class curse for women (Cavendish 1999, 233). If it is madness to choose marriage, why does Lady Happy marry? One answer is the combination of deception and coercion. Lady Happy was deceived into falling for the princess, so presumably had residual positive feelings toward the prince, and she was also coerced with the implied threat of violence. There is a further, less obvious threat here: now that people know that a man was running amok within the Convent with Lady Happy, she will be treated as lacking sexual virtue, a concern that made her want to avoid wooing altogether (220). The prince has hijacked her reasoning and put her in a no-win situation.

Through the wooing of Lady Prudence and Lady Happy, Cavendish illustrates the ways in which wooing constitutes a gendered socio-epistemic harm. Both princes say and do what they must to get access to the objects of their desire; in misrepresenting themselves in important ways, the princes were determined to circumvent women’s genuine decision-making by way of undermining what and how they can know. This is a kind of gaslighting. When the deception is revealed in *Public Wooing*, the prince *says* that he did not want to overpromise his bride, but *in fact* he was testing her virtue (Cavendish 1662, V.xxxx, V.xxxii). Consider also the princess’s response to the play within a play. As ten scenes of patriarchal horror close, she says, “My sweet Mistress, I cannot in conscience approve of it; for though some few be unhappy in Marriage, yet there are many more that are so happy as they would not change their condition” (Cavendish 1999, 233). This is particularly strange if it is a princess saying it; but once we learn that she is a prince, this takes on a different meaning: it is a rejection of women’s experiences of a major social and political relation as being representative of the truth, perhaps offered so that Lady Happy is primed to accept a different reality—one where she marries the prince. In both plays, Cavendish seems to be saying that men know wooing puts women on the defensive. Thus, their strategies have evolved: one may not even know when those efforts are

⁴ “You had best consent; for, otherwise he will have you against your will” (Cavendish 1999, 233).

underway or who is making them, nor will women's stated experiences—when contrary to wooers' aims—be taken seriously. Women are not seen as knowers when it comes to wooing; they cannot be, else wooing might be ineffective at securing women's agreement to marry.

2.3. Astell

Like Gournay and Cavendish, Astell thinks there is something fundamentally wrong with wooing insofar as it is characterized by deception, coercion, and flattery. Just as Gournay noted that the process of wooing is itself deceptive, and Cavendish flagged that, given its deceptive structure, wooing undermines women's capacity to know their own reality—the truth of the conversations, safety, and community in which they stand—Astell observes that wooing is so deceptive and coercive that it not only undermines what women know about the wooer but also what they are able to know about themselves. Women agree to marry wooers they ought to reject because the very practice of wooing undermines women's epistemic capacities—their ability to know, to choose, and thus to consent as a result of that knowledge. On Astell's view, wooing largely occurs through deceptive flattery.

In *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, Astell excoriates wooers qua flatterers. As she notes, "It were endless to reckon up the divers Stratagems Men use to catch their Prey, their different ways of insinuating which vary with Circumstances and the Ladies Temper. But how unfairly, how basely soever they proceed, when the Prey is once caught it passes for lawful Prize." (Astell 1996, 69). Indeed, flattery is a snare, a design, an artifice to turn women into a prize or possession (Astell 1996, 69, 71, 70). Astell identifies two problems with wooers' flattery: insofar as it is deceptive, it undermines women's abilities to know themselves and to know their wooers. For Astell, this operates as a one-two punch: in unsettling women's self-understandings, they are vulnerable, and insofar as wooing misrepresents the wooers' intentions, wooers are able to capitalize on this vulnerability.

First, wooers use flattery to undermine women's self-knowledge by corrupting their self-esteem. As Andreas Blank has shown, Astell is attentive to how wooers use manipulative flattery to deliberately cultivate a favorable attitude in their targets (Blank 2015, 53–54). This operates in a gender-asymmetrical way: flattery can be used by someone in a superordinate position to condition the subordinate party toward preferred traits or behaviors, making them think highly of themselves for possessing valuable qualities, even if those qualities turn out to be disadvantageous to the subordinate party (Blank 2015, 55). Wooers want women to value themselves incorrectly—to think themselves great, but for the wrong reasons. In *Serious Proposal*, Astell points out that men deliberately cultivate the so-called feminine vices of pride and vanity:

When a poor Young Lady is taught to value her self on nothing but her Cloaths, and to think she's very fine when well accoutred. When she hears say that 'tis Wisdom enough for her to know how to dress her self, that she may become amiable in his eyes; to whom it appertains to be knowing and learned; who can blame her if she lay out her Industry and Money on such Accomplishments. (Astell 2002, 69)

Women who busily cultivate their physical appearances because this is supposedly what matters about them are focusing their efforts on the wrong thing—on their looks rather than their ability to see through wooers' stratagems. Given the lack of education available to women, "she who is kept ignorant of the matter, will take up with such Objects as first offer themselves, and bear any plausible resemblance to what she desires. . . . Her inbred self-esteem and desire of good, which are degenerated into Pride and mistaken Self-love" (Astell 2002, 62–63). This is further entrenched insofar as men are taken to be superior as knowers, given women's supposed natural inferiority (Astell 1996, 9). These background conditions of epistemic inequality explain how flattery works: as Blank (2015, 57) points out, "Flatteries make use of both the high esteem for the flatterer and the high self-esteem for the qualities that attract male attention." In a world where men are socially superior to women, their word carries more weight: if wooers—flatterers—continually praise women for their looks, then women will continue to invest in their physical appearances. This creates an opportunity for wooers: women are less able to withstand their approach, given their incentive structures, and indeed, they do not even understand that this is flattery designed to control rather than praise. As William Kolbrener (2003, 10–11) observes, for Astell, flattery is a deliberate strategy to puff women up only so as to further exploit them for the flatterers' ends; it is humorous that women are "vain enough to snatch at the Bait I throw; there's no danger of your finding out my meaning, or disappointing me of my Ends" (Astell 1996, 44). As such, part of the problem that Astell identifies in the flattery characteristic of wooing is that it exploits both a knowledge and credibility asymmetry: women do not know what is really valuable about themselves, and men are taken more seriously when they praise that which is to their—but not women's—advantage. For Astell, flattery is ultimately about hierarchical power and control: control of what is known to be good and one's self-knowledge. Flattery undermines women's capacities to value rightly.

The other part of the problem of flattery in wooing for Astell is that it instantiates deep deception about not only the wooers' intentions but the actual patriarchal power hierarchy that structures the relationship between wooer and wooed. As Astell says,

Nothing is in truth a greater outrage than Flattery and feign'd Submissions, the plain English of which is this, 'I have a very mean Opinion both of your Understanding and Vertue, you are weak enough to be impos'd on. . . . We who make the Idols, are the greater Deities; and as we set you up, so it is in our power to reduce you to your first obscurity, or to somewhat worse, to Contempt. (Astell 1996, 44–45).

Male flatterers may *seem* to submit to women, but this performance is an inversion of the actual power structure at work (see Kolbrener 2003). “The flatterer not only instrumentalizes the erroneous self-images of women; but the very act of flattery contributes to defining the criteria at work in such self-images. It is part of a strategy that poses as obsequious but in fact expresses a superior hierarchical position of the male flatterer”; thus, this manipulation of female self-esteem through flattery is a form of male domination (Blank 2015, 60). Like Blank and Kolbrener, Alice Sowaal makes a similar point: Astell recognizes that flattery manipulates women who have been rendered prideful into thinking they must be merciful to the prostrated courter (Sowaal 2016, 69). In truth, wooers' aims could not be further from servitude. It is not just that wooers are flattering women, building up their feminine vanity so as to make them better targets for manipulation, but also that having persuaded women that they are superior to men, they profess to seek submission to their lady loves when in fact what they intend, and what they will use marital power dynamics to obtain, is domination over their wives. A wooer

wants one to manage his Family, an House-keeper, a necessary Evil, one whose Interest it will be not to wrong him One who may breed his children, taking all the care and trouble of their Education One whose Beauty, Wit, or good Humour and agreeable Conversation, will entertain him at Home when he has been contradicted and disappointed abroad . . . sooth his Pride and Flatter his vanity. . . . In a word, one whom he can intirely Govern. (Astell 1996, 50–51)

Wooers use flattery to make women vulnerable in order to later rule over them. This is the opposite of what wooers claim: the wooer promises a pleasant dynamic, and then once she is entrapped in having consented to marriage, he reveals his true face. It should be no surprise that this is so, Astell suggests, for

who can believe a Man, Proud and Vain as he is, will lay his boasted Authority, the Dignity and Prerogative of his Sex, one Moment at her Feet, but *in prospect of taking it up again to more advantage*; he may call himself her Slave for a few days, but *it is only in order to make her his* all the rest of his Life. (Astell 1996, 44; emphasis added)

Why would someone with so much power give it up, if not as a pretense to secure future, permanent control? The successful wooer persuades her to agree to marry on certain terms, but as husband, he then has total authority over her. He will ‘persuade’ her “*willingly*, to give up what she did vainly hope to obtain, and what she thought had been made sure to her. . . . For Covenants betwixt Husband and Wife, like Laws in an Arbitrary Government, are of little Force, the Will of the Sovereign is all in all” (Astell 1996, 52). The wooer-*cum*-husband knows he just needs to secure her agreement *into* marriage, for he will have absolute power afterward. This is a deliberate deception, a willful misrepresentation of what appears to be a negotiation. Flattery is manipulative, and most women were not financially independent; even if they were, bad custom taught that marriage was the chief end of a woman’s life (e.g., Astell 1996, 45, 60; see also Forbes 2019). So, why make a pretense of subordinating oneself before a potential bride? Flattery in wooing is about “the Hope of being Lord and Master, [who in courtship] appears with all the Modesty and Submission of an humble an unpretending Admirer” (Astell 1996, 66; see also Sowaal 2016). Flattery and wooing are about exerting epistemic control over one’s target in order to secure practical, political control over her, as one’s wife, forever after. Indeed, Astell is more explicit than Gournay and Cavendish that at least some men, wooers, engage in these epistemic manipulations knowingly and therefore viciously. For Astell notes that, in wooing, if a woman is not amenable to incentives, some wooers turn to threats—if deceptive flattery does not work, then wooers may turn to coercion.

Sometimes a Woman is cajol’d, and sometimes Hector’d, she is seduc’d to Love a Man, or aw’d into a Fear of him: He defends her Honour against another, or assumes the Power of blasting it himself He might be admitted at first to be *her jest*, but he carries on the humour so far till he makes her *his*. (Astell 1996, 69–70)

The above threat to her honor is particularly dangerous, for if a woman acquires a reputation as lacking honor (i.e., sexual virtue), this might permanently undo her standing. If one renders a woman unmarriageable, she will have no choice but to accept one’s proposal. Perhaps this is why Astell (1996, 51) describes courtship as violent.

For Astell, marriage is a state of unfreedom.⁵ In agreeing to marry, a woman places herself wholly in the power of her husband: “The Domestic Sovereign is without Dispute Elected” (Astell 1996, 17). It is through women’s assent to marriage

⁵ Broad (2014) argues that Astell saw marriage as Lockean (not chattel) slavery—that women were subject to the absolute, arbitrary will of their husbands. I put aside the question of marriage as slavery here as that is beyond the scope of this article.

that the wooer-cum-husband is imbued with *absolute*, tyrannical rule over her: women's consent to marriage is seen to legitimize the tyrannical structure of the relationship (17). This makes the stakes of wooing clearer. It is not just a deceptive practice, depriving women of knowledge; it is an extended manipulation designed to undermine what women know about themselves, their wooers, their very reality—what they can expect for the rest of their lives. As Astell says, when it comes to marriage, “a Woman indeed can't properly be said to Choose, all that is allow'd her, is to Refuse or Accept what is offer'd” (Astell 1996, 43). Presumably, this is because wooing undermines women's capacity to exercise epistemic agency. As such, if wooing through deceptive flattery is aimed at securing marriage, and flattery is a chosen, knowing practice, then Astell conceives of it as a practice of overriding women's intellectual capacities to make them willingly unfree.

For Astell, wooing undermines women's epistemic capacities in a variety of ways. In flattering speech, wooers puff women up through methods that disincentivize intellectual development and that are ripe for further exploitation, thus undermining women's abilities to know themselves and their true value. So too does wooers' flattery, rendered possible through women's corrupted, inflated self-esteem, constitute a significant deception that undermines women's potential to know the true intentions of their wooers—that is, domination—but also the true power hierarchies at play. Women might know that husbands can rule wives, but if a man grovels before you, seeking your hand, it is hard to imagine that he would exploit that patriarchal system to his benefit. The choices that women make are not only limited—acceptance or refusal—but predicated on flattering, deceptive, and potentially coercive lies; wooing frustrates women's epistemic capacities in knowing and understanding themselves, their wooers, and their futures.

3. Wooing as Epistemic Injustice

Though Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell were thinking and writing about wooing in different times, places, and genres, their views have much in common. All three problematize wooing as deceptive: it interferes with what women can know about their wooers, themselves, and their circumstances. When deception fails, some wooers turn to coercion. Women are rendered unable to know, to understand, and to choose—to judge—because wooing undermines women's grasp on their social and political realities. Insofar as wooing is a gendered practice, it seems clear from the accounts above that wooing is a gendered epistemic harm. In this section, I argue that Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell should be understood as offering not only an account of wooing as a gendered epistemic harm but a view of wooing that constitutes an epistemic injustice. Wooing is a systematic unspooling of women's epistemic agency to render and keep them under patriarchal control; it manifests a gendered epistemic tyranny. I approach this argument in two parts: first, to discharge concerns about

anachronism, I demonstrate that epistemic injustice is, as a concept, already present in Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell's writings. I then turn to a consideration of what sort of epistemic injustice wooing might be, canvassing some recent options in the literature. While there are important similarities with concepts already in use, I suggest that wooing manifests a distinct epistemic injustice that I refer to as hermeneutical obscuring.

3.1. Background Conditions

Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell were aware of women's impoverished epistemic conditions. A common way of drawing the reader's attention to this element is to point out women's lack of formal education and so their lack of access to epistemic goods.⁶ As Gournay says, "If, therefore, women attain less often than men to the heights of excellence, it is a marvel that the lack of good education—indeed, the abundance of outright and blatantly bad education—does not do worse and prevent them from doing so entirely" (Gournay 2002b, 81). Likewise, Astell is well-known for her arguments in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* about the need for a women's college where women can "expel that cloud of ignorance, which Custom has involv'd us in, to furnish our minds with a stock of solid and useful Knowledge." (Astell 2002, 77). And, as scholars such as Karen Detlefsen (2012) and Erin Lang Bonin (2000) have pointed out, Cavendish persistently associates education and reason with freedom—and women's lack of education with their truncated intellectual and political liberty—in her nonfiction, fiction, and letters).

Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell also note epistemic injustices emerging from women's impoverished epistemic conditions. Gournay identifies herself as experiencing epistemic injustice in not being taken seriously as a knower in conversations. In *Ladies' Complaint*, she notes,

If women possessed the arguments and thoughts of Carneades, there is no man, no matter how puny he may be, who would not put them in their place with the approval of most of the company, when, with merely a smile or a slight nod of the head, his silent eloquence would communicate, "It's only a woman speaking." (Gournay 2013, 74)

This is a straightforward case of *testimonial injustice* where an identity prejudice about the speaker prevents the hearer from taking her seriously as a knower (Fricker 2007, 20). Gournay notes two manifestations of this: first, a man who refuses to engage with women at all, and second, one who, even if he accepts women as intellectually *capable* of debate, refuses to engage with any specific woman "because he borrows

⁶ See, for example, Detlefsen 2012, 2016.

his understanding of propriety from what is commonly believed—which is to despise women in this respect” (Gournay 2013, 75). In the former case, he thinks it impossible for a woman to be a knower, and in the latter, he is sufficiently prejudiced such that no specific woman can clear the bar. In either case, the man further insults a woman’s intellectual capacities by refusing to meaningfully engage with them, thus making a mockery of her and the debate itself. Worse yet, “This vulgar man, uttering many silly remarks, will always win the contest either because he has a beard or displays a proud simulated ability that her and his companions measure according to what is fashionable or useful” (Gournay 2013, 75). The audience is simply not equipped to perceive women as interlocutors because they share that same prejudice against women as knowers. These “displays of gallantry” extend to the printed page, too: men do not read women’s writings seriously. This makes Gournay (2013, 76) “suspect that, even when they read men’s writings, they perceive the shape of their authors’ beards better than the structure of their arguments.” In such a world, gender-based testimonial injustice is endemic.

Cavendish shared Gournay’s frustrations. In her “To the Two Universities” preface to *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, Cavendish requests only that her work not be automatically rejected for inclusion in their libraries just because a woman wrote it. There must be at least nominal acknowledgement of women’s capacities for intellectual endeavors—which they would grant by accepting her books—because women are already subject to

the carelesse neglects, and despisements of the masculine sex to the effeminate, thinking it impossible we should have either learning or understanding, wit or judgment, as if we had not rational souls as well as men . . . we are shut out of all power, and Authority by reason we are never imployed either in civil nor marshall affaires, our counsels are despised, and laught at, the best of our actions are troden down with scorn, by the over-weaning conceit men have of themselves and through a dispisement of us. (Cavendish 1655)

Karen Detlefsen (2022) argues that in identifying the preemptive rejection of women as knowers, Cavendish is articulating a kind of testimonial injustice with which she and other women had to contend. Like Gournay, Cavendish lays bare the larger socio-epistemic conditions that shaped her world. Women’s views are treated as contemptible, ridiculous, obscene. Cavendish casts this as being in part related to men’s high esteem for themselves, an esteem partially predicated on women’s inferiority.

This concern is a central motivating feature of Astell’s works, too, especially in the context of her discussion of what Alice Sowaal (2007, 231) has called the women’s

defective nature prejudice—the common view that claims women are naturally both morally and intellectually inferior to men. Astell discusses bad custom as the persistent social and political practices and beliefs that convey and perpetuate this prejudice. Bad custom is a cloud of ignorance that traps women into believing their own inferiority; bad custom is a tyrant and a disease that controls and infects women’s minds (Astell 2002, 67, 72). This is troublesome for Astell because, as I have argued elsewhere, women come to internalize this conception of themselves as nonknowers, and this instantiates a kind of epistemic injustice called *epistemic internalization injustice* (Forbes 2019).

Clearly, Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell were familiar with gendered epistemic asymmetries generally and at least some specific forms of epistemic injustice. As all three noted, there is a deep pattern of epistemic disregard for women in the early modern period. One of the central battles of the *querelle des femmes*—a long-standing dispute about the supposedly inferior nature and status of women—concerned women’s education and, specifically, whether it was even worth trying to educate them at all (Kelly 1982). In a world where even accomplished women like Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell are not taken seriously as knowers, where much of society thinks education would be wasted on women, it is easy to see how bad epistemic practices like deceptive flattery in wooing would become ubiquitous and accepted. I take it that Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell highlight the epistemic features of wooing partly because they are trying to draw attention to wooing as a gendered epistemic harm.

3.2. Wooing as Epistemic Injustice

Wooing appears in a social context rife with gendered epistemic asymmetries and epistemic injustice. It is not only an epistemic harm, as discussed above, but also a manifestation of epistemic injustice. Wooing, a widespread and gendered social practice aimed at soliciting a woman’s consent to marriage, is an affront to women’s epistemic agency that occurs on a social systemic level; as such, it seems to meet the criteria Miranda Fricker (2007) identifies as the core components of epistemic injustice. Moreover, wooing is a practice that wooers engage in knowingly; as Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell all note, wooers deliberately capitalize on gendered epistemic asymmetries to gain a wife over whom they will have absolute control. But even though it seems plausible, at least *prima facie*, that wooing manifests epistemic injustice, what sort of epistemic injustice might it be?

Given Gournay’s and Cavendish’s familiarity with testimonial injustice, and some recent scholarship on Astell, perhaps wooing instantiates epistemic internalization injustice. This occurs beneath a woman’s notice, where the persistence of bad custom and prejudices about women’s deficient moral and epistemic natures persuade her into assigning herself an inappropriately low level of credibility in

interpreting or understanding her own experiences. Given bad socio-epistemic practices, perhaps wooed women come to think of themselves as unreliable narrators when they think that their wooers are too good to be true. If he says that he will be her loving servant, even though she knows that early modern marriages are famously gender unequal, she thinks that *she* is the foolish one for having doubts at all. While that might be happening, it is not helpfully explanatory of what is going wrong in wooing as Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell discuss it. Wooing is very clearly something that is being done, epistemically and practically, to women; epistemic internalization of injustice occurs at the level of custom or social norms and is thus a more passive, background injustice than wooing. Moreover, in wooing, the wooer takes on deceptions and insincere flattery, is manipulated and perhaps even coerced; it is not that she dismisses her own claims of knowledge, but that what she *thinks* she knows is a misrepresentation of her socio-epistemic reality. The wooer has provided the mere appearance of knowledge about the woman, his intentions, and the relation between them. Were the wooed not to take themselves seriously, as is the case in epistemic internalization injustice, flattery and deception simply wouldn't be as important as they are for wooing.

Perhaps, then, given the disruptions to one's knowledge of one's socio-epistemic reality, the epistemic injustice manifested in wooing is gaslighting, which is the intentional misleading of someone about the nature of their experience for one's own ends: "No, you did not see the gas lights dim. You must be mad" (see Abramson 2014). As Veronica Ivy (2017, 167) discusses it, gaslighting is a form of testimonial injustice insofar as it is a failure to take seriously the claims of a speaker due to an identity prejudice about the speaker. One might be inclined to suggest that something more insidious is happening here. A gaslighter does not merely deny that something happened; they suggest that there is something epistemically wrong with their target—that they are mad or paranoid and thus incapable of seeing things as they really are. The gaslighter denies reality and supplies their own to serve their interests—namely, to ensure that their target does not come to know something disadvantageous to them.⁷

Wooers do seem to be gaslighting insofar as they are supplying a version of reality more amenable to their aims. Gournay explicitly notes that Alinda was gaslit

⁷ Compelling accounts of gaslighting can be found in both Nora Berenstain's (2020) and Elena Ruiz's (2020) accounts, though they focus on gaslighting as a structural phenomenon—as an injustice committed not necessarily by an individual but by a group or class—such as white feminists failing to take Black, Indigenous, and racialized women seriously as knowers. I leave a discussion of this out because even though wooing is a social practice and thus was engaged in men and aimed at women, it is not wooers/men *as a class* that gaslight the wooed/women.

about Othalcus's relentless romantic pursuit of her, and the princess seems to gaslight Lady Happy about the true circumstances that follow from marriage after the play within the play. Wooers are aware of and are exploiting an epistemic asymmetry; not only does their target not have crucial pieces of knowledge (the wooer's intentions, for example, as Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell all show), but the wooer is actively obscuring that knowledge, perhaps doing damage to their target's ability to exercise their capacity of judgment along the way. Both the gaslighter and the wooer engage in this behavior knowingly and deliberately for their own ends. Thus, there seems to be a solid case for wooing as gaslighting.

While gaslighting is closer to wooing than was epistemic internalization injustice insofar as gaslighting is something that one individual does to another, it still falls short for two reasons. First, gaslighting is a response to a claim about what is going on, while wooing ensures that the target does not, cannot, see what is really going on. To put this another way, I cannot be gaslit until I make a claim about the world. I must first claim to see the gaslights dimming inexplicably for you to gaslight me by saying that I am mad. Similarly, in Ivy's central case, Victoria's colleague cannot gaslight her about being mispronounced until Victoria tells her colleague that she was just mispronounced by a supposed ally to the trans community. Wooing does not involve the wooed party making any claims at all, so it cannot be an unspooling of her social reality in so explicit a manner. Second, gaslighting functions to undermine someone's sanity. The woman seeing the gaslights dim is mad! The trans woman being *mis-pronoun-ed* is hysterical! (see Abramson 2014; Ivy 2017). Wooing cannot, and does not function to, render its target mad, for wooing is successful only when it culminates in consent to marry, and the consent of a madwoman to marriage would not authorize the transfer of power to a husband. The point is that women must have the *veneer* of epistemic authority, knowledge, and choice in wooing—no matter that it is, in fact, a farce. The appearance of correct epistemic function is crucial. As such, wooing does something more subtle, though no less evil, than gaslighting.

Given Gournay and Cavendish's apparent familiarity with testimonial injustice, perhaps wooing manifests a kind of hermeneutical injustice, an injustice that occurs "when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences" (Fricker 2007, 1). Fricker's paradigm case of this concerns the term *sexual harassment*: women who were subjected to sexual harassment before the term existed experienced hermeneutical injustice on top of the harassment in lacking this term—their experiences had not been taken seriously, so they were not able to be the subject of social understanding or even to fully understand their own experience (Fricker 2007,

150–51).⁸ Developing the term *sexual harassment* was a crucial move in part because until then, available terms—such as *flirting*—were being misapplied, and this further distorted the problem. A sexual harasser is not a flirt: flirting is sensitive to social cues from the other and is not inflected by power dynamics.⁹ Real flirting, as Lucy McDonald (2022) has illustrated, is a reciprocal game of push-pull moves; when one’s boss won’t stop touching one’s lower back or saying sexually inappropriate things, this is all push and no pull. Perhaps, then, wooing is a hermeneutical injustice akin to “flirting” or, rather, the behavior now known as sexual harassment—something for which we do not have an adequate linguistic identifier and thus something that people cannot properly understand.

There are some structural similarities between this misapplication of flirting—that is, “flirting,” aka sexual harassment—and wooing. Both “flirting” and wooing involve leveraging gendered sociopolitical dynamics along a gendered asymmetry: one party knows that he is up to no good, and the other is being willfully misled about the nature of their interaction. Consider this: an employer sexually harasses his women employees but, when pressed, dismisses his actions as harmless flirting. He knows that we live in a world where men’s claims are taken more seriously, especially when the women on the other side of the exchange can be painted as overly sensitive, frigid, bitches, and so on. He also knows that he should not be propositioning his employees,¹⁰ but part of the sexual harasser’s pleasure is the (mis)use of power dynamics. Similarly, the wooer knows that he has a gendered epistemic advantage. Wooers crystallize what is already a bad epistemic circumstance into a precise and deadly instrument against the epistemic agency of their targets. Like the “flirt,” a wooer knows what he wants—to secure a woman’s hand in marriage—will be much more advantageous to him than it will be for her; marriage, for women, is a kind of unfreedom, as Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell all observe. Thus, the wooer conceals his true intent in flowery language and false fronts. This is even more insidious insofar as it impersonates epistemic authority. Women *think* they are experiencing a

⁸ Some scholars, such as Nora Berenstain (2020), have recently argued that there are grievous moral and structural errors with Fricker’s articulation of hermeneutical injustice—most centrally, that it fails to ascribe epistemic agency to women of color and their epistemic resistance; this is white feminist gaslighting. I use this case as a starting point because what happened prior to having the term *sexual harassment* is usefully illustrative of the epistemic injustice in wooing.

⁹ I take as a background assumption that flirting is not sexual harassment, even if they can sometimes look alike. Sexual harassment is only about securing/deriving sexual pleasure from exercising one’s sexual agency over and against another, contrary to their comfort/ability to decline without consequence.

¹⁰ Even if he truly did not know, it would be a culpable ignorance.

particular kind of hierarchical relation through the deception and insincere flattery that characterize wooing, and they *think* they are judging and choosing to marry based on genuine knowledge, but they are not. The wooers *know* this and facilitate this illusion. The wooer obscures the genuine epistemic features of their interaction; as Astell says, he pretends she has power over him to secure her subordination to him.

And yet, despite these similarities between “flirting” and wooing, wooing cannot be an instance of hermeneutical injustice as Fricker defines it. Hermeneutical injustice obtains when the resources to understand the experience do not exist because some folks were left out of the process of meaning-making. This cannot be the epistemic injustice instantiated in wooing because this behavior is already labelled—namely, as wooing. Moreover, the resources to understand it exist, and folks like Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell were trying to communicate them to a wider audience through their works. So, it is not a matter of a missing concept so much as an asymmetric understanding of how a concept operates. Wooing clearly instantiates an epistemic injustice: it undermines what women can know about themselves, their wooers, and their socio-epistemic realities. Unlike nearby candidate forms of epistemic injustice, wooing tricks women into thinking of themselves as knowers, as reliable judges of their own socio-epistemic and political circumstances, and it both requires and encourages a false veneer of epistemic authority in its targets, even as it undermines the proper functioning of their judgment and understanding. Wooing concerns knowledge and knowing and it undermines the successful exercise of women’s epistemic agency so as to get women to agree to marriage in a world where wives are unfree.

As such, I want to suggest that wooing instantiates a distinct form of epistemic injustice that I will call *hermeneutical obscuring*. In hermeneutical obscuring, the perpetrator of the epistemic injustice simultaneously props up his target’s apparent knowledge—making deceptive claims and engaging in deceptive flattery, ensuring that she has the veneer of epistemic authority—so as to supplant his target’s grasp of her social reality with his own while evading her notice. It is deliberate refashioning of a familiar concept—the social practice of securing a woman’s hand in marriage—in a way that obscures the epistemically and politically deleterious effects afoot. Like the hermeneutical injustice in “flirting,” the description and the reality of what he is doing do not match in order to maintain his power over her, and like in gaslighting, the true social reality is deliberately obscured from the target’s view in order to control what she knows and what she does with that knowledge, all to the wooer’s advantage.

4. Wooing, Patriarchy, and What about the Men?

I suggest that the collective view of wooing as hermeneutical obscuring that emerges from Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell’s concerns is best understood as part of a much larger feminist project; namely, a problematization of an epistemic dimension

of early modern patriarchal power—specifically, that the epistemic dimension of patriarchal power to which early modern European women were subject is a kind of epistemic tyranny. Viewing patriarchal power as a form of tyranny might strike one as an insight more at home in contemporary feminisms than in early modern writings, but this need not be the case. As Marguerite Deslauriers (2019) has argued, at least three Italian women philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, and Arcangela Tarabotti—offered just such an analysis. As Deslauriers (2019, 733) illustrates, what has gone wrong in patriarchal relations is that men, particularly fathers and husbands, “exercise power over women in ways that conform to the motives and practices of tyrants.” This is unjust and tyrannical because women have free will and rational capacities—they can and must rule themselves (733). Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell would agree with their Italian contemporaries that women are rational and free, and certainly all are critical of structures and individuals that regard women as less than this. Moreover, Deborah Boyle (2013) and Penny Weiss (2016) have noted the ways in which Cavendish and Astell objected to patriarchal power as unjust.

The sense of patriarchal power in operation here is, as Deslauriers discusses, male power; that is, power wielded by men in virtue of structural, gendered advantages they possess over women and to women’s disadvantage. Shortly before her death, Alinda recognizes her enslavement to the whims of Leontin and Othalcus (Gournay 2002c, 64); Lady Happy notes that men make women their slaves through marriage (Cavendish 1999, 220); and Astell famously notes that women are born slaves subject “to the inconstant, uncertain, arbitrary Will of Men” who, especially as husbands, seize on “a Tyrannous Domination which Nature never meant” (Astell 1996, 18, 31). Women’s subjection to men is nearly complete. But while true, marriage being a state of unfreedom in the seventeenth century is unsurprising and uncontentious. So, though Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell are explicit that marriage is tyrannical, one might think that wooing, as a distinct activity prior to marriage, is free from association with this tyranny. Wooing does not literally enslave women; however, when it is successful—when women are tricked into consenting to marriage—they have been epistemically ensnared. Wooing is an activity specifically in service of securing a wife by way of changing a woman’s knowledge and disposition toward the wooer—how she sees herself in relation to him—in order to secure her permanent subordination by securing her consent to marry. Wooing is a process of epistemic ensnarement in service of formalizing political and practical unfreedom via marriage. Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell’s discussion of wooing as a kind of epistemic injustice that leads to political unfreedom suggests that their understanding of patriarchal, tyrannical power is not limited to the public political domain but includes the underlying epistemic domain too.

Despite social and political norms that made marriage nearly inevitable for seventeenth-century women, wooers pretend that consent matters. They flatter, deceive, and coerce to secure that consent. Some wooers, like Othalcus, find acquiescence itself erotic. Assuming that most wooers do not share Othalcus's sentiment, one must wonder: What is the function of trying to secure consent through wooing? For consent cannot genuinely matter, or else wooing would not be rife with deception and deceptive flattery.

The function of wooing as a practice that obtains consent to marriage is to create the veneer of women's complicity in their subordination to tyrannical, patriarchal power. It does this by making women *think* that it is a true choice, while their wooers *know* that what appears to be a choice is the result of deliberate and coordinated epistemic injustice: women do not appreciate what their agreement is because they are rendered incapable of understanding what their relation to the wooer is and because they are subjected to hermeneutical obscuring. In short, it seems that if agreement to marriage truly authorizes husbands' supreme power over the shape of women's lives, if Astell is correct that wives elect a tyrant for life, then women must be *choosing* it for themselves. But they would not and could not make this choice. So, hermeneutical obscuring allows wooers to manipulate women into a facsimile of choice. Wooing, as hermeneutical obscuring, is a pretense of civility that disguises the abject unfreedom awaiting new wives. It is a willful misrepresentation of the central epistemic features of an exchange in order to make women unfree. It is epistemic tyranny—control over what should be, and naturally is, free.

Thus, hermeneutical obscuring is a crucial element of patriarchal power: in changing the apparent terms of the engagement, one side of the exchange can stack the deck in their favor and solidify their hierarchical standing through the sociopolitical institution of marriage. Were women aware of what was really going on—if they knew that wooers were untrustworthy and deceptive—more would find ways to do without marriage, as did Gournay and Astell. For, as Astell points out, the hermeneutical obscuring is all the more dangerous because the false inversion of the gender hierarchy incites men to a greater injustice: "She will not find him less a Governor because she was once his Superior, on the contrary, the scum of the People are most Tyrannical when they get the Power" (Astell 1996, 51). Wooing is thus a means of further entrenching patriarchal power. Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell suggest that there is something wrong not only with marriage but so too with what comes before.

One might worry that Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell—and, by extension, I—have been uncharitable to wooers and men more generally. Insofar as patriarchy is a pervasive social, epistemic, and political miasma, surely it also shapes men. I turn now to a question that may form the basis of a series of objections to my argument: What about the men? This worry takes two forms: First, that men may not be willfully

misrepresenting their intentions. Second, men may be acting out of benevolent paternalism—acting in women’s best interests even if women cannot see it for themselves. If true, men are not malicious in the way that Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell have suggested. Indeed, they may also be victims of sexist norms and practices, albeit less so than women.

If there are background conditions of epistemic injustice, then obviously women are at a significant epistemic disadvantage. But one might think, charitably, that this extends to men. If, as in Astell’s case, women are subjected to bad custom, why would men not also be in its thrall? Perhaps men have been conditioned to act unreflectively in the context of wooing, as this is simply what it is to be a man of a certain age and class, or this is a game by which one acquires a wife. Perhaps Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell ascribe an unfair degree of self-knowledge to men also embroiled in epistemically deficient social conditions. This challenge seems plausible. We know, for example, that well-intentioned white people can still uphold white supremacy and that men can enforce patriarchal norms even as those norms undermine their own flourishing. Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell do not discuss how men think about themselves or the demands of masculinity. By their lights, at least some men *are* engaging in wooing with self-knowledge and accountability. Why might this be?

One answer comes from Astell. If men are ignorant about what it is that they are up to—if they really are not deliberate in how they are systematically making use of asymmetries and are accidentally obscuring the genuine epistemic features of an interaction—then this is a culpable ignorance. They *could* know what is really going on, since men may be subject to bad custom insofar as it dictates how women (and men’s relations to them) are understood, and yet men are not barred from formal education and the means by which one could see through bad custom; wooers choose not to know because it is easier.¹¹ And yet, Astell might point out that at some point it is no longer an accident of fate that one has the social-hierarchical perspective one has; eventually, it becomes a deliberate unseeing to preserve one’s favorable self-understanding. Grant Silva (2019) has argued that one way to understand racism is not as hatred or implicit bias but as a corrupted form of *amour propre*, love of the particular, socially hierarchical self that one is. Such a response seems at the heart of Astell’s (and Gournay’s and Cavendish’s) worries about men’s malice toward women. Not all wooers are villains, but all value themselves as social and political superiors to women: they must, given how they treat women; but moreover, they fail to attend to clear, salient moral facts about women as epistemic agents, and so wooing is deliberate and can be described as malicious.

¹¹ This preference for easy ignorance is akin to Charles Mills’s (2007) discussion of white ignorance.

The second aspect of this worry is the possibility that men may be deliberately engaged in hermeneutical obscuring but may be doing so with benevolent, paternalist intentions. Perhaps wooers think they are acting in women's best interests, even if women would not think so—hence the deception. This also seems plausible. After all, bad custom casts women as vicious nonknowers and, so, as needing to be saved. Marriage is one way to do this, and if women cannot be reasoned with, then perhaps it is best to simply trick them into it. Wooers are still epistemically unjust, but with good intentions.

It seems unlikely that this answer would satisfy Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell. Even with the best intentions, wooers are still deliberately undermining the proper function of women's intellectual and moral faculties in a way that exaggerates the already bad circumstances this objection acknowledges—women's socio-structurally subordinate epistemic position. Furthermore, if men had good intentions, why would they engage in hermeneutical obscuring rather than appeal to women's vicious interests (such as wealth)? Making a show of prostrating oneself only to turn that dynamic on its head once the marital ink is dry cannot easily be interpreted as a well-intentioned if poorly executed strategy for women's improvement. Disguising oneself and undermining meaningful choice rather than appreciate a woman's well-being within the Convent is not the act of someone committed to another's flourishing. To be clear, Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell would agree that patriarchal bad custom is bad for men too, but men are not their focus except insofar as wooers deliberately, maliciously co-opt bad socio-epistemic circumstances to secure what they desire from women. This need not include every instance of wooing, but it is their assumption that it will capture the majority.

5. Conclusion: A Better Account of Wooing

Although wooing has largely been overlooked in favor of the more obviously unjust relation of marriage, the collective account of wooing as drawn from the independent though mutually supporting discussions of Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell illustrates that wooing is not only a gendered epistemic harm but also a manifestation of the epistemic injustice of hermeneutical obscuring. As such, wooing is an important iteration of and means of upholding epistemic tyranny, an epistemic dimension of early modern patriarchal power. Though men may also be victims of patriarchy, that fact is not a reason to suppose that the ills of wooing are any less bad, nor that the wooers themselves are not rightly held accountable for their deceptive manipulations of women's socio-epistemic realities. Gournay, Cavendish, and Astell were, independent of one another, engaged in the same sophisticated feminist social-epistemological project.

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