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UNDOING BAYLE'S SCEPTICISM: MARY ASTELL'S CRITIQUE OF THE *PENSÉES DIVERSES* (1682)

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ROOM: MACK 305

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3:30-5:00



ABSTRACT

Today, historians of philosophy are divided into those who think that the French thinker Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) is a coded atheist, someone whose reasoning ineluctably leads to atheist conclusions, and those who construe Bayle as a fideist, someone who embraces religious beliefs on the basis of faith alone and not reason. In this paper, I examine English feminist Mary Astell's argumentative strategy against Bayle in a little-known manuscript source: her marginal notes in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's personal copy of Bayle's *Pensées Diverses* (1682). Scholars have long known that Astell (1666-1731) wrote a short diatribe against Bayle in the opening flyleaf of this book. But it is not so well known that the same volume contains hundreds of annotations in Astell's handwriting, on 160 of 312 printed pages. Taken as a whole, this 7000-word commentary constitutes a lengthy critique of Bayle's text. In my analysis of this commentary, I show that Astell aims not only to unmask Bayle as an atheist but also to turn his own destructive use of reason against him. More specifically, I demonstrate how Astell uses philosophical argument to 'undo' Bayle's religious scepticism by pointing to errors in his reasoning.