

Introduction

There are few scholars outside of the history of philosophy who have heard of Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618–80), Margaret Cavendish (1623–73), Anne Conway (1631–79), Mary Astell (1666–1731), Damaris Masham (1659–1708), and Catharine Trotter Cockburn (1679–1749). These women philosophers are now mere footnotes to the standard historical–intellectual accounts of the early modern period. There is no history of scholarship on their works, and there are no long-standing disagreements or controversies about interpretations of their views. Although a number of their works have been reprinted, the bulk of their writings can be found only in rare-book rooms, and a few of their manuscripts still remain unpublished. Yet in the seventeenth century, these women were the friends and correspondents of famous philosophers of their time, such as René Descartes (1596–1650), Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), John Locke (1632–1704), and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716). Some women discussed philosophy with these men, they raised philosophical questions in letters, and they wrote and published their own thoughts on metaphysics. Male colleagues dedicated books to them, and many of their contemporaries acknowledged their influence or praised their understanding.

Feminist philosopher Mary Astell is a notable case in point. In 1693, Astell took the bold step of writing to the English philosopher–divine, John Norris (1657–1711), to present her criticisms of his views. ‘Sir’, she writes,

Though some morose Gentlemen wou’d perhaps remit me to the Distaff or the Kitchin, or at least to the Glass and the Needle, the proper Employments as they fancy of a Womans Life; yet expecting better things from the more Equitable and ingenious Mr. *Norris*, who is not so narrow-Soul’d as to confine Learning

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to his own Sex, or to envy it in ours, I presume to beg his Attention a little to the Impertinencies of a Womans Pen.¹

Astell then proceeds to highlight inconsistencies in Norris's theory of love. In the seventeenth century, the term 'impertinent' had at least two meanings: it had the modern sense of being 'bold' or 'insolent', but it also had the sense of being 'irrelevant' or 'not pertinent' (*OED*). In 1696, feminist author Judith Drake remarks that her fellow women are often considered 'impertinent', or given to 'a humour of busying our selves about things trivial, and of no Moment in themselves'.² Astell probably intends her comment about women's 'impertinencies' in this sense, to blunt the sharp edge of her objections.

Today the supposed irrelevance or 'impertinence' of early modern women's thought is offered as an explanation for their absence from the history books.³ The philosophical issues that these women debated have passed out of the intellectual mainstream. Philosophy as a discipline no longer primarily concerns itself with questions about the love of God, the divine purpose of the natural world, the connection between faith and reason, and natural philosophy. Yet these were the topics that most interested these women. In addition to choice of content, there are also problems with their choice of style. Although some women published systematic treatises, a number of their philosophical contributions are in the form of letters. In *The Patriarch's Wife*, Margaret Ezell identifies a tendency for historians to ignore any method of intellectual exchange that does not conform to twentieth-century practices.⁴ As a consequence, letters are often overlooked as a source of serious philosophical discussion. But in the seventeenth century, correspondences between philosophers were a formal and well-respected type of intellectual exchange. Women seemed to favour the epistolary form, and often initiated the exchanges themselves. Ruth Perry remarks that 'So common were these epistolary

¹ Astell to Norris, 21 September 1693; in Mary Astell and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God, Between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris: Wherein his late Discourse, shewing That it ought to be intire and exclusive of all other Loves, is further cleared and justified* (London: J. Norris, 1695), pp. 1–2.

² Judith Drake, *An Essay In Defence of the Female Sex. In which are inserted the Characters Of A Pedant, A Squire, A Beau, A Virtuoso, A Poetaster, A City-Critick, and c. In a Letter to a Lady. Written by a Lady*, unabridged republication of 1696 edition (New York: Source Book Press, 1970), p. 82.

³ On the exclusion of women from the history of philosophy, see Eileen O'Neill, 'Disappearing Ink: Early Modern Women Philosophers and their Fate in History', in *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions*, edited by Janet A. Kourany (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 32–9.

⁴ Margaret J. M. Ezell, *The Patriarch's Wife: Literary Evidence and the History of the Family* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p. 64.

relationships between intellectual women and philosophers or divines that they may be said to constitute a minor genre in late seventeenth-century letters.⁵

While early women's philosophy might appear to be 'out of date' in various ways, we must remember that little has been done to make their thought accessible, or to re-assess it in light of recent scholarship. In the late twentieth century, the growing influence of feminist theory, and the call for a more inclusive type of historical scholarship, has led to a renewal of interest in early modern women. From a feminist perspective, these women might be considered daring or 'impertinent' in the more modern sense of the word. As Mary Astell remarks in her *Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), not even the most liberal thinkers of her time 'wou'd cry up Liberty to poor Female Slaves, or plead for the Lawfulness of Resisting a Private Tyranny'.⁶ Yet these women often embrace the philosophies of their male peers to raise the concerns of women. In this sense, their contributions to early philosophical discourse are strikingly original and modern. They reveal not only that women were intellectually active during this time, but that the current feminist movement had an historical precedent long before the twentieth century.

More recently, the process of interpreting the writings of past women thinkers has begun in earnest. While once there was the popular misconception that their philosophy is fragmentary, obscure, and irrelevant to current debate, there are now concerted efforts to re-visit their views in light of modern scholarship. Historians of philosophy regard the early modern period as absolutely crucial for our understanding of philosophy as we now think about it. The ideas of women philosophers provide us with a richer historical background to that significant period. In so far as these women actively engaged in the philosophical enterprise of their time, they also contributed to the development of our current concerns.

In this study, I focus on the changing fortunes of Cartesian philosophy in the writings of seventeenth-century women. I trace the development of women's thought from Elisabeth of Bohemia's letters in the 1640s, to the works of Anne Conway and Margaret Cavendish in the 1660s and 1670s, and the writings of Mary Astell, Damaris Masham, and Catharine Cockburn in the 1690s and early eighteenth century. My particular claim

⁵ Ruth Perry, 'Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18:4 (1985), 482.

⁶ Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage*, in *Astell: Political Writings*, edited by Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 46–7.

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is that these women philosophers – like some recent feminist theorists – are highly critical of dualists of their time.

At first glance, this assertion may appear to be at odds with a common belief that Cartesian philosophy had a profound impact on women writers of the early modern period. Cavendish, Conway, Astell, and Masham were writing during the mid to late-seventeenth century, a period that Sterling Lamprecht calls ‘the Cartesian period in English philosophy’.⁷ During this time, no English intellectual escaped the influence of Descartes’ writings, and recent scholarship has shown that women philosophers were no exception. Ruth Perry, Margaret Atherton, Hilda L. Smith, and others claim that the advocacy of a Cartesian conception of reason is distinctive of seventeenth-century women’s thought.⁸ In ‘Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women’, Perry says that ‘Cartesian assumptions and Cartesian method, ironic as it may seem, liberated women intellectually and thus psychically, by making it possible for numbers of them to participate in serious mainstream philosophical discourse’.⁹ Similarly, in her 1993 essay ‘Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason’, Atherton says of seventeenth-century feminist authors that ‘what encouraged them to write in support of women’s intellectual capacities was precisely the concept of reason that could be found in Descartes’;¹⁰ and this same point is supported by Hilda L. Smith in her pioneering work, *Reason’s Disciples*. Along the same lines, Catherine Gallagher believes that Cartesian metaphysics played a significant role. ‘Many seventeenth century women writers,’ she says, ‘were inspired by Descartes’ dualism to assert their intellectual equality with men; for if, as Descartes argued, mind has no extension, then it also has no gender.’¹¹

⁷ Sterling P. Lamprecht, ‘The Role of Descartes in Seventeenth-Century England’, *Studies in the History of Ideas* 3 (1935), 188. See also Marjorie Nicolson, ‘The Early Stage of Cartesianism in England’, *Studies in Philology* 26 (1929), 356–74.

⁸ See Margaret Atherton, ‘Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason’, in *A Mind of One’s Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, edited by Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 19–34; Perry, ‘Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women’, 472–93; Hilda L. Smith, *Reason’s Disciples: Seventeenth Century English Feminists* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); and Hilda L. Smith, ‘Intellectual Bases for Feminist Analyses: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’, in *Women and Reason*, edited by Elizabeth D. Harvey and Kathleen Okruhlik (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 19–38. See also Katharine M. Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), chapter 2.

⁹ Perry, ‘Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women’, p. 475.

¹⁰ Atherton, ‘Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason’, p. 20.

¹¹ Catherine Gallagher, ‘Embracing the Absolute: the Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England’, *Genders* 1:1 (1988), 34.

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In short, much of the interpretive literature on early modern women credits Cartesianism with providing both the inspiration and the subject matter for their intellectual writings.

I do not dismiss or debunk the ‘Cartesian interpretation’ of early modern women’s writings. But it is important to distinguish between different aspects of Descartes’ philosophy, such as his concept of reason, his method of doubt, his rationalism, his soul–body dualism, and his mechanistic theory of matter. It is undeniable that *some* aspects of Cartesian thought were inspirational for seventeenth-century women. In particular, Descartes’ style of writing is accessible to those individuals who have received no institutional education in philosophy. Not only is his prose conversational and anecdotal rather than weighty and abstract, but his new method could be practised without books, language skills, or a classical training. This made his works highly appealing to upper-class women who had received no education beyond the feminine accomplishments of singing, dancing, and sewing. His *Discourse on the Method of rightly conducting one’s reason* (1637) taught women that all human beings possess reason or ‘common sense’, a natural ability to distinguish between truth and error. From this basis, feminist writers such as Cavendish, Astell, Masham, and Cockburn were able to point out that if women were intellectually slow, it was only because society had prevented them from sharpening their minds by denying them a proper education.

Cavendish remarks that ‘through the careless neglects, and despisements of the masculine sex to the effeminate’ women had become ‘like worms that onely live in the dull earth of ignorance, winding our selves sometimes out, by the help of some refreshing rain of good education which seldom is given us’.¹² Cockburn likewise ascribes women’s ignorance to their disadvantages in a society that discourages women intellectuals. Masham suggests that women be raised by their mothers to use their reason rather than trust the opinions of others; and Mary Astell goes so far as to suggest that a formal academic training and the study of Cartesian method could improve women’s natural reason. Furthermore, while Elisabeth and Anne Conway cannot really be called feminists, their intellectual careers are proof that women could practise the new method. Elisabeth is well known for her philosophical exchange with Descartes, and Conway began her studies by taking what Sarah Hutton calls ‘the

¹² Margaret Cavendish, *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions, Written by her Excellency, the Lady Marchionesse of Newcastle* (London: J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1655), ‘To the Two Universities’, sig. B 2^v.

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earliest correspondence course in Cartesian philosophy'.¹³ In a general sense, Cartesian method also encouraged the challenging of preconceived opinions, and welcomed doubts and criticisms of former beliefs. This enabled women to criticise their male contemporaries without fear of being considered too daring or bold.

The problem with the 'Cartesian' interpretation, however, is that it threatens to render early women's philosophy 'irrelevant' in another sense. Modern feminist writers such as Genevieve Lloyd, Susan Bordo, Freya Mathews, Val Plumwood, and others¹⁴ have criticised the radical split between mind and body, the reduction of matter to mere extension (with no inherent motion or life), and belief in the soul as a self-sufficient entity. Dualist theories of the mind and body are said to have had negative consequences for women because femaleness is typically associated with the body and the non-rational, whereas men have associated themselves with the superior categories of mind and reason. Perhaps most famously, in *The Man of Reason*, Genevieve Lloyd presents a feminist critique of the sex-specific characteristics of matter and reason. According to Lloyd, 'Rational knowledge has been construed as a transcending, transformation or control of natural forces; and the feminine has been associated with what rational knowledge transcends, dominates or simply leaves behind.'¹⁵ With regard to Cartesian method, Lloyd reminds us that this procedure involves putting aside or transcending the senses and the body. She believes that as a consequence of Cartesianism, a distinction arose between a highly abstract mode of thought and our everyday, ordinary thought processes. This difference, according to Lloyd, has been exploited to mark a gender distinction: women have become associated with the lesser type of reason, men with the superior.

Lloyd also claims that Descartes' method must be seen in the context of his dualism, the theory that the soul and body are distinct substances. In particular, she identifies an alignment in Cartesian method between the body and untrained reason. A true philosopher, Descartes

¹³ Sarah Hutton, 'Ancient Wisdom and Modern Philosophy: Anne Conway, F. M. van Helmont and the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Interchange of Ideas', in *Quaestiones Infnitae* (Utrecht: Department of Philosophy, Utrecht University, 1994), p. 3.

¹⁴ See Susan Bordo, 'The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11:3 (1986), 439–56; Susan Bordo (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (London: Methuen, 1984), chapter 3; Freya Mathews, *The Ecological Self* (London: Routledge, 1994); Val Plumwood *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); and Janna Thompson, 'Women and the High Priests of Reason', *Radical Philosophy* 34 (1983), 10–14.

¹⁵ Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, p. 2.

says, must avoid entanglement with the senses because they will not yield certainty; clear and distinct thought can be attained only by dissociating the mind from the material body. Thus, according to Lloyd, the ‘foundations of [Descartes’] enquiry into truth demanded that the mind rigorously enact the metaphysical truth of its separation from the body’.¹⁶ This theory of mind, she says, paved the way for a powerful version of the sexual division of mental labour in which women are assigned responsibility for ‘that realm of the sensuous which the Cartesian Man of Reason must transcend, if he is to have true knowledge of things’.¹⁷

For the modern feminist philosopher, seventeenth-century women’s thought thus presents something of a paradox. On the one hand, historians highlight the fact that an egalitarian conception of reason formulated and promoted by Descartes and his followers was the catalyst for a female intellectual awakening in the seventeenth century. Yet, on the other hand, recent feminists identify a male bias in the dominant philosophies of the early modern period, particularly in Cartesianism. This bias, they say, reinforced and facilitated the exclusion of women from philosophy, and fostered a common perception that women have a lesser capacity for reason than men. How, then, are we to deal with this difficulty?

Two scholars explicitly address the disparity between modern feminists and their seventeenth-century counterparts: Margaret Atherton in her ‘Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason’, and Hilda Smith in her ‘Intellectual Bases for Feminist Analyses: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’. Atherton asks how Descartes’ texts could lead ‘both to a decline in the status of women and to arguments for improving their status? How can Descartes’ concept of reason be seen both as having deprived women of a mind of their own and as having encouraged them to take control of their own minds’?¹⁸ Atherton’s solution is to point out that Lloyd’s interpretation of Cartesian reason is flawed. She claims that Lloyd faces difficulties in trying to make Descartes’ trained and untrained reason fit with our stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Atherton believes that Astell and Masham, on the other hand, remind us that there is another conception of Cartesian reason, one in which the general characteristics underlying all human thought processes are emphasised without distinguishing between the trained and untrained mind.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁸ Atherton, ‘Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason’, p. 20.

Hilda Smith also challenges Lloyd's interpretation of early modern philosophy and its implications for women. Smith denies that there is any conflict between reason and femininity. She says that to argue that reason is a masculine concept, as Lloyd does, is to fall into 'the mother earth understanding of female nature', to accept 'the Cartesian mind-body split', and that it 'simply glorifies what philosophy has traditionally portrayed as subordinate emotions and natural functions'.¹⁹ She also says that Lloyd's critique does a disservice to seventeenth-century feminists, since it leads to further marginalisation of their work. Smith says that

Partly because of their limited access to serious learning, early feminists glorified women's rational abilities. Surely, they would not have appreciated the irony that later scholars and feminists have fully sided with their male and conservative critics at the time in maintaining that reason and learning were traps, catching would-be feminists in the structures, principles, and practices that were, indeed, a male preserve.²⁰

Nevertheless, there are problems with Atherton and Smith's critiques. First, it is undoubtedly a misrepresentation of Lloyd's position to claim that she 'accepts the mind-body split' and 'falls into the mother earth understanding of femininity'. Lloyd simply *describes* the role of Cartesian dualism in the 'sexual division of mental labour'; she does not condone the historical and cultural associations between maleness and reason. Nowhere does Lloyd endorse the claim that 'women have their own truth, or that there are distinctively female criteria for reasonable belief'.²¹ It is simply that in Lloyd's view masculinity has come to be associated with Descartes' highly abstract mode of reasoning, and, on the reverse side, the feminine has been symbolically associated with a lack of rigorous thought. But these associations are historical and contingent rather than necessary.

Furthermore, it is difficult to deny the basic empirical claim that women were associated with a lesser form of reason following the rise of Cartesianism. A number of seventeenth-century texts support this view both literally and metaphorically. The exclusion of women from the search for knowledge is explicit in the work of Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715), one of Descartes' immediate successors. In *The Search After Truth* (1674–5), Malebranche devotes half a chapter to 'the imaginations of women', whom he claims are 'incapable of penetrating to truths that are slightly difficult to discover'. He says that 'everything abstract is

¹⁹ Smith, 'Intellectual Bases for Feminist Analyses', p. 35. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²¹ Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, p. ix.

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incomprehensible to them', and the reason for this is the 'delicacy of the brain fibers', which are best suited to understanding the senses rather than seeking truth.²² Malebranche believes that women cannot use their imaginations for deciphering 'complex and tangled questions', they are easily distracted, and they are usually only concerned with surface details. He says that 'the style and not the reality of things suffices to occupy their minds to capacity; because insignificant things produce great motions in the delicate fibers of their brains, these things necessarily excite great and vivid feelings in their souls, completely occupying it'.²³ Malebranche generalises that 'there is no Woman that has not some traces in her Brain, and motion in her Spirits, which carry her to something Sensible'.²⁴ In sum, Malebranche argues that women cannot practise Cartesian method because they can neither avoid the prejudices of their senses nor conduct their thought in a rigorous manner.

Women themselves also promote negative conceptions of female intellectual capabilities. Indeed, they often appeal to this inferiority as an excuse for any perceived deficiencies in their work. In *The Worlds Olio* (1655), Margaret Cavendish writes that the softness of the female brain is the reason why women are not mathematicians or logicians. She says that

Men have great Reason not let us in to their Governments, for there is great difference betwixt the Masculine Brain and the Feminine, the Masculine Strength and the Feminine; For could we choose out of the World two of the ablest Brain and strongest Body of each Sex, there would be great difference in the Understanding and Strength; for Nature hath made Mans Body more able to endure Labour, and Mans Brain more clear to understand and contrive than Womans; and as great a difference there is between them, as there is between the longest and strongest Willow, compared to the strongest an[d] largest Oak.²⁵

Here again, men are perceived as capable of attaining clear ideas, while the female intellect is regarded as weak and lacking in rigour. Likewise, Mary Chudleigh (1656–1710), the author of the feminist polemic *The Ladies Defense* (1701), uses both Cartesian and Lockean terminology to criticise women's reasoning skills:

²² Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, translated by Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 130–1.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁴ Quoted in Damaris Masham, *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (London: Awnsham and John Churchil, 1696), p. 75.

²⁵ Margaret Cavendish, *The Worlds Olio. Written By the Right Honorable, the Lady Margaret Newcastle* (London: J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1655), 'The Preface to the Reader', sig. A4^r.

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I know most People have false Idea's of Things; they think too superficially to think truly; they find it painful to carry on a Train of Thoughts; with this my own Sex are principally chargeable: We are apt to be misled by Appearances, to be govern'd by Fancy, and the impetuous Sallies of a sprightly Imagination, and we find it too laborious to fix them; we are too easily impos'd on, too credulous, too ready to hearken to every soothing Flatterer, every Pretender to Sincerity.²⁶

These common attitudes toward women's intellectual capacity provide some support for Lloyd's claims. The ideals of Cartesian reason (specialised, rigorous thought) are celebrated as ideal character traits for men, whereas the denigrated aspects (the disorderly progression of ideas and an unquestioning reliance on the senses and the imagination) are associated with women and femininity.

In my approach to the paradoxical relationship between recent feminist philosophy and the writings of early modern women, I do not challenge Lloyd's analysis. Instead, there is another way to dispel the tensions. In addition to highlighting each woman's indebtedness to reason and rational method, I examine their metaphysical views – particularly their anti-Cartesian and anti-dualist views, and their representations of the stereotypically 'feminine' categories of matter, nature, and the body.

In assuming that matter, nature, and the body are culturally coded as 'feminine', I follow the practice of modern feminists, such as Lloyd and Bordo.²⁷ I allow, however, that the cultural and symbolic associations between femaleness and materiality might have been over-exaggerated or simplified. There are, to be sure, a number of metaphorical connections between *maleness* and materiality (in terms of brute strength, lasciviousness, and so on). But I do not delve into these issues here. Regardless of whether one accepts the modern feminist analysis, it cannot be denied that early modern women *themselves* have a much more complex approach to femaleness and materiality. They do not perceive women as purely bodily creatures, and nor do they regard matter and the body as entirely separate from the soul and the spiritual realm in general. If one does support the modern feminist stance, however, then these responses to dualism are further illustrative of a metaphysical outlook that avoids reinforcing male values to the exclusion of women.

Elisabeth of Bohemia is the first woman to express anti-Cartesian sentiments, in her letters to Descartes on the soul–body union. In this

²⁶ Mary Chudleigh, *Essays Upon Several Subjects in Prose and Verse* (1710), in *The Poems and Prose of Mary, Lady Chudleigh*, edited by Margaret J. M. Ezell (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 348–9.

²⁷ See Bordo, 'Introduction' to *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes*, p. 2.