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FEMALE Philosophers

There is a rich and diverse tradition of women philosophers in the history of British thought. Scholars have only recently begun to acknowledge the true extent of this tradition. In the past, the few women thinkers who were recognized were seen as the followers or helpmeets of their more famous male peers. A few women were regarded as philosophers in their own right, but typically only in so far as their ideas conformed to accepted paradigms of philosophy. If the women's texts did not fit these paradigms, then those texts tended to be examined in a piecemeal fashion or ignored altogether. More recently, however, there has been a shift in perspective in the historiography of women's philosophy. Some scholars assert that if women's writings do not fit our modern paradigms, then it is the paradigms that have to be abandoned or re-evaluated, not the texts. The study of women's ideas enables us to see that British philosophy in earlier periods is much more varied and complex than modern philosophers tend to acknowledge. There is now an awareness that in early modern philosophy the lines between politics, morality, theology, metaphysics, and science were often blurred. Many women who would not pass as philosophers today were almost certainly regarded as philosophers in that time. Research into the history of women's philosophy enables us to pay tribute to the influence and significance of past philosophical movements, such as Cambridge Platonism, and to see familiar philosophers, such as René Descartes and John Locke, from new perspectives.

The seventeenth century was a crucial period for women's participation in philosophy in England. Like their male contemporaries, English women were influenced by a new egalitarian approach to philosophy popularized in the writings of Descartes and Thomas Hobbes. According to these men, book learning and a classical education can be a hindrance to the pursuit of philosophical truth, because a good philosopher must approach every question with an open mind. Lacking a formal tertiary education, women were quick to embrace this new emphasis upon the philosopher's natural intellect. In the preface to her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, hopes that no-one will censure her for her lack of learning, but asserts that she would rather prove 'naturally wise' than learned and foolish. In this work, she self-consciously develops a monistic-materialist philosophy based upon the revelations of her own sense and reason rather than the opinions of others. Cavendish wrote no fewer than six philosophical works explaining and defending her theories, including the *Philosophical Letters* (1664) and *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668). A generation later, in 1693, Mary Astell initiated a correspondence with the Malebranchean philosopher, John Norris, by asserting that 'though I can't pretend to a Multitude of Books, Variety of Languages, the Advantages of Academical Education, or any Helps but what my own Curiosity afford; yet, *Thinking* is a Stock that no Rational Creature can want, if they know but how to use it' (*Letters*, p. 2). In *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695), she demonstrates these rational skills by pointing to weaknesses in Norris's moral theology and occasionalist metaphysics.

The new philosophy provided the inspiration behind some of the earliest feminist arguments in England. In her most famous work, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (part 1, 1694; part 2, 1697), Astell argues that if women are intellectually

inferior, it is because custom prevents them from sharpening their minds. She urges women to improve their reasoning by following a method based upon the ‘Port Royal logic’ of the Cartesians Pierre Nicole and Antoine Arnauld. Along similar lines, in the preface to *The Ladies Defence* (1701), Mary Chudleigh suggests that if women are less rational than men, it is due to the inadequacies of their education. Chudleigh appeals to the writings of another Cartesian, Nicolas Malebranche, to support her point that with proper attention some women might prove to be capable and learned. In her *Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (1696), Judith Drake draws on Lockean epistemology to argue that because there are no innate ideas, a woman’s intellect cannot be regarded as naturally defective. Drake was not the only woman to be influenced by Locke’s new way of ideas. In *Occasional Thoughts* (1705), Damaris Cudworth Masham acknowledges a debt to Locke’s *Thoughts concerning Education* (1693). Masham, a close friend and correspondent of Locke, argues in favour of the intellectual education of girls. Mothers, she points out, are typically responsible for the early tuition of male children; if women are not properly educated, then the education of men will suffer too.

It is possible that later British female philosophers knew about these earlier women. In 1803, Mary Hays included entries on Cavendish, Astell, Chudleigh, and Masham in her *Female Biography*, a six-volume celebration of learned women of the past. Although these entries are based upon George Ballard’s *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752), there is some reason to think that Hays and her colleague, Mary Wollstonecraft, were familiar with the ideas of the early modern figures. In her *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* (1798), Hays examines whether or not masculine superiority is founded on ‘the eternal and immutable laws of nature’. Like Astell, Hays concludes that if women are mentally

inferior, then men are to blame, because it is they who deny women the chance to improve their talents and capacities. Similarly, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft emphasizes that women's ethical standards must be based on the same immutable principles as those of men. She advocates a programme for reform based on the conviction that both sexes are capable of rational and moral improvement. In the nineteenth century, Irish feminist Anna Doyle Wheeler read both Hays and Wollstonecraft. Together with her fellow philosopher, William Thompson, she co-wrote *The Appeal of One Half the Human Race* (1825), a response to James Mill's assertion that women's political rights are redundant because women's interests are 'covered' by men. Thompson and Wheeler argue in favour of female political equality and a woman's right to vote. Later, in the mid nineteenth century, English woman Harriet Taylor exerted both a personal and intellectual influence on her husband, John Stuart Mill, author of *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Taylor herself wrote 'Enfranchisement of Women' (1851), an essay in favour of a woman's right of suffrage, and a call for the improvement of female educational and employment opportunities. Echoing the arguments of Wollstonecraft, Taylor bases her conclusions upon an impartial application of the principle of justice to all human beings.

Recent research shows that British women thinkers were concerned not only with gender issues but with political philosophy more generally. During the Civil War era in England, a number of women spoke out in favour of religious toleration and liberty of conscience. In a petition titled *A True Copie of the Petition of the Gentewomen, and Tradesmens-wives* (1642), a group of women assert their right to worship God in their own way without fear of persecution. These women were influenced by the political ideals of the Levellers, an early democratic movement in England. In her *Justification of the Independant Churches* (1641), another Leveller-

inspired woman, Katherine Chidley, argues in favour of the separation of church and state. She asserts that true freedom of worship requires that individuals are free from the arbitrary tyranny of their rulers; and such freedom is not possible when the state dictates the religious beliefs of its subjects. Of the women pamphleteers of the mid-seventeenth century, Quakers were the most prolific and outspoken sectarian group. Like Chidley and the petitioners, Quaker women, such as Margaret Fell Fox and Anne Docwra, make political demands to separate themselves from the national church, and they assert the equality of all human beings, of both sexes, in the eyes of God. Later in the century, royalist or Tory women question these radical concepts of liberty and equality. Probably influenced by Hobbes, Cavendish opposes the toleration of dissenting political groups within a commonwealth. In her *Orations of Diverse Sorts* (1662), she asserts that a severe ruler is, somewhat paradoxically, the protector of human liberties: only by voluntarily giving up their absolute liberty to such a power can human beings have the peace and security they desire. Astell similarly emphasizes the importance of obedience to one's rulers in her Tory political pamphlets, *A Fair Way with the Dissenters* (1704), *An Impartial Enquiry* (1704), and *Moderation truly Stated* (1704).

But in the late eighteenth century, English women once again reveal a sympathy for radical politics. In her *Loose Remarks on Certain Positions to be found in Mr. Hobbes* (1767), Catharine Macaulay presents a critique of Hobbes's *De Cive* (1642). She maintains that life under a Hobbesian monarchy would be more intolerable than that under a state of nature, in which every man is at war with every man. In her view, the democratic form of government alone can protect the virtue, happiness, and liberty of citizens. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), an attack on Edmund Burke, Wollstonecraft likewise defends civil and religious liberty

as a sacred human right. Then, in the nineteenth century, Harriet Taylor is thought to have exerted a profound influence on *On Liberty* (1859), John Stuart Mill's famous statement of the limits of the power of the state over the individual.

Both conservative and radical women alike demonstrate a strong interest in religion and moral theory. In the seventeenth century, the group of thinkers known as the Cambridge Platonists had a significant influence on the moral theology of women philosophers. In their writings, the Cambridge men are committed to the intellectualist idea that God's primary attributes are his supreme wisdom and goodness rather than his will and omnipotence. They argue that there are certain 'eternal and immutable' features of the created world that not even God can change. In the 1670s, Anne Conway, a close friend and correspondent of the Cambridge Platonist Henry More, developed her theory of the perfectibility of all creatures. In *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (first published posthumously in Latin in 1690), Conway argues that it is not possible for a perfectly wise and benevolent God to create a being that is incapable of attaining perfection or salvation. Along similar lines, in her second *Proposal*, Astell maintains that God has granted reason and the passions to human beings for the sake of their spiritual welfare. Following More's *Account of Virtue* (1690), Astell asserts that an infinitely wise God would not have given us passions if they did not play a vital part in the attainment of virtue. In her *Occasional Thoughts*, Masham also reveals a sympathy for the theological principles of More and her father, the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth. Later, in a 1705 letter to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Masham defends her father's theory of plastic nature against Pierre Bayle's assertion that this theory makes God redundant. Cudworth's influence extends into the late eighteenth century through the writings of Richard Price, an ethical rationalist who is indebted to

Cudworth's *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* (1731). Price seems to have had a notable impact not only on Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, but also on Macaulay's *Treatise on the Immutability of Moral Truth* (1783).

The metaphysical writings of early modern women philosophers are also permeated with theological concerns. For this reason, their readings of Descartes and Locke, among others, sound quite different to our modern-day readings of these men as epistemologists. In Conway's *Principles*, Descartes is first and foremost a mechanist rather than a rationalist. Conway argues that Descartes's mechanistic theory of nature, in which matter is lacking in life, self-motion, and perception, is inconsistent with our conception of God as perfectly wise and benevolent. In *The Christian Religion* (1705), Astell is critical of Locke's religiously controversial idea of thinking matter. In her view, it is simply not possible for God to endow an essentially material thing with the power of thought. By contrast, in her *Defence of Locke* (1702), Catharine Trotter Cockburn challenges Thomas Burnet's unfavourable interpretation of Locke's metaphysics as irreligious in tendency; and in her *Vindication of Mr Locke's Christian Principles* (1726), Cockburn once again defends Locke's religious standing against his critics. Later, in the nineteenth century, Mary Primrose Shepherd challenges several 'atheistic' conceptions of the external world. In her two treatises, *An Essay upon the Relation of Cause and Effect* (1824), and *Essays on the Perception of an External Universe* (1827), Shepherd addresses the views of George Berkeley and David Hume.

In the twentieth century, the number of female philosophers dramatically increased as educational and employment opportunities for women improved. Modern

women philosophers – such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Iris Murdoch, Mary Midgley, and Philippa Foot – have continued to demonstrate a strong interest in moral theory.

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