

Early Modern Women Philosophers and the Canon: Back to the Drawing Board?

abstract

As scholars have by now established (see e.g. Vanzo 2016), the standard narrative of early modern philosophy, with its distinction between empiricism and rationalism and its corresponding grouping of the “big six” (DescartesSpinozaLeibniz vs LockeBerkeleyHume), is, by and large, a Kantian narrative which was standardized as the Western early modern canon only at the turn of the twentieth century. Moreover, they have pointed out that while the philosophical views, frameworks and strategies transported via this narrative have undoubtedly contributed to and shaped philosophy as we practice it today, the history it tells is also exclusionary along multiple dimensions. Its epistemological paradigm severely restricts the scope of what can count as ‘philosophy’ under its purview, its euro-centricity makes the non-European world largely disappear from sight, it flatly subsumes ethics and aesthetics under epistemology, and, last but not least, it features an all-male cast despite the clearly discernible presence of female thinkers in the period.

It is thus certainly a development to be welcomed that in recent decades historians of early modern philosophy, spurred on by the pioneering work of Eileen O’Neill, Sarah Hutton, Jacqueline Broad and others, have sought to remedy the latter omission by unearthing the philosophical thought of female thinkers such as Astell, Cavendish, Conway, Cockburn, Holst, De Grouchy, De Scudery, Du Châtelet, Macaulay and Suchon, among many others. They have shown that these women contributed to a wide array of philosophical topics (see e.g. *Early Modern Women on Metaphysics* (CUP, 2018) *Early Modern Women and the Problem of Evil* (Routledge, 2015); *Women and Liberty, 1600–1800: Philosophical Essays* (OUP, 2017)) and that they did so across a wide geographic space (see e.g. *A History of Women’s Political Thought in Europe, 1400–1700* (CUP, 2009); *Women Philosophers of Eighteenth-Century England* (OUP, 2020); *Women and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (OUP, 2021). These scholars have also aimed to revive these thinkers, it deserves to be emphasized, not only in the hopes of restoring some gender balance to an overwhelmingly male canon, but also in the hopes of adding voices to the history of early modern philosophy that may contribute to enriching our view of what this period in the history of philosophy may actually be about.

At the same time, their attempts to integrate female voices also illustrate a challenge we must face when it comes to extending our canon – one that, as I will argue in this talk, is not to be underestimated. I begin by presenting and motivating this challenge, which I frame as a revised version of what Mary-Ellen Waithe (2005, 28) has called the ‘ghetto problem’: If we mainly market the works of these women philosophers as works by *women*, then we risk that these authors do not in fact make it into the canon, but only “into the more limited and easy to ignore ghetto: the canon of women philosophers.” The danger here, I suggest, is further amplified by what Gordon-Roth & Kendrick (2019) have labelled the ‘*ad feminam* fallacy’: the widespread tendency, fuelled by long-standing biases to undervalue or ignore positions advanced by women, despite once best intentions, which is, of course, exacerbated by our present tendency to market the female thinkers in question as *female*.

Prima facie, this problem appears to have a simple solution. For why not just market their works as works of *philosophers* instead? After all, it seems that all we need is a way to integrate them, *qua* philosophers, into our existing, universally acknowledged narratives, or – if we can't manage that – to redraw the map and show that we can generate not only different, but also better narratives which do feature them. As I will go on to show, however, things are not quite as easy they seem. By means of a selection of short case studies featuring different strategies to effect such integration – either by means of inserting women philosophers as interlocutors of existing members of the philosophical canon, or by inserting them as self-standing contributors to a ‚philosophical’ history of philosophy – I argue that each of these ultimately presents us with a number of further, deeper challenges that we will only be able to overcome if we are prepared to fundamentally revise our idea of early modern philosophy, but also our idea of philosophy *tout court*.

keywords: early moder women philosophers, canonization, “ghetto problem” (Waithe)