

# THE RENAISSANCE OF WOMEN PHILOSOPHERS: TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

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ESSAY

English version

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# THE RENAISSANCE OF WOMEN PHILOSOPHERS: TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY<sup>2</sup>

**El renacimiento de las mujeres filósofas:  
Hacia una historia inclusiva de la filosofía**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

In this paper I argue for the importance of the history of philosophy for women philosophers, including feminist philosophers. I review the progress made in recovering women philosophers in recent years, comparing it to the revival of classical philosophy in the European *Renaissance* (*Rinascimento*). I then consider some of the challenges to be faced when writing an inclusive history of philosophy, highlighting the problem of alterity in women's philosophy. I argue that, by virtue of its capacity of addressing alterity and difference, a contextual approach to the history of philosophy is especially productive for recovering women's philosophy, and is also particularly relevant to the challenges of extending this work of recovery to all philosophical traditions across the world.

**Key words:** history of philosophy, women philosophers.

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**RESUMEN:**

En este artículo defiendo la importancia de la historia de la filosofía para las mujeres filósofas, incluidas las feministas. Repaso los progresos realizados en la recuperación de las mujeres filósofas en los últimos años, comparándolos con el renacimiento de la filosofía clásica en el *Renacimiento* europeo (*Rinascimento*). A continuación, considero algunos de los retos a los que hay que enfrentarse a la hora de escribir una historia inclusiva de la filosofía, destacando el problema de la alteridad en la filosofía de las mujeres. Sostengo que, en virtud de su capacidad de abordar la alteridad y la diferencia, un enfoque contextual de la historia de la filosofía es especialmente productivo para recuperar la filosofía de las mujeres, y también es particularmente relevante para los desafíos de extender este trabajo de recuperación a todas las tradiciones filosóficas del mundo.

**Palabras clave:** historia de la filosofía, mujeres filósofas.

In this paper I argue for the importance of the history of philosophy for women philosophers, including feminist philosophers. My paper is not, therefore, a philosophical paper, but essentially a defence of the history of philosophy. I write from the perspective of someone who works on early modern philosophy, but I believe my remarks are relevant to the philosophy of other periods, and non-European traditions. In the paper I review the progress made in recovering women philosophers, which I compare to the *Renaissance (Rinascimento)* of classical culture in the fifteenth century Italy. I consider some of the challenges to be faced when writing an inclusive history of philosophy, highlighting the problem of alterity in women's philosophy of the past. I go on to argue for the importance of attending to historical context in the history of philosophy, on the grounds that, through their capacity of addressing alterity and difference, contextual approaches to the history of philosophy are especially productive for recovering women's philosophy, and that they are particularly relevant to the challenges faced for extending this work of recovery to all philosophical traditions across the world.

### **WHY FOCUS ON HISTORY?**

It is, I believe important that philosophers know the history of their subject. It is equally important that the history of philosophy reflects what actually happened in philosophy's past. I also believe that it is especially important for women philosophers today to know that there were female philosophers in the past, and to know something about the contexts in which they participated in philosophy. I would add that it is also important that feminist philosophers be aware that there were women philosophers in the past, even if they were not necessarily feminists in the modern sense of the term. To me this seems too obvious to deserve mention. But I am aware that not all feminists agree that the history of philosophy is relevant to feminism, and the relationship of the history of women philosophers and the history of feminist philosophy has not always been a comfortable one (McAlister, "Some Remarks"; O'Neill, "Women Cartesians"). (I shall, in what follows, make some comments on the relationship between them, in order to underline the fact that historians of feminism and those who work on the history of women's philosophy have common cause.) History of philosophy as we know it is not fit for purpose for many reasons. A major reason is the fact that

standard accounts of the history of philosophy overlook women philosophers, even though there have always been women who did philosophy. We therefore need a more inclusive history of philosophy. How do we achieve that?

## BACKGROUND

When I first started working on early-modern women philosophers, there was much discussion about the absence of women in philosophy, and much theorising about the exclusion of women to explain this. But not much was known about women's actual contribution. Nor had there been much progress recovering the few about whom something was known. I quickly came to realise that recovering women philosophers required more than either explaining their absence or reading those few as if they were our contemporaries. To restore women philosophers to visibility, it was not enough to analyse exclusion, as most feminist philosophers were doing at that time. It is, of course, essential to be aware of the exclusion, subordination and silencing visited upon women philosophers, but it is also imperative to focus on their *achievements*, on how the women who did pursue philosophy managed to do so, rather than focusing on what prevented them from so doing. While it is beyond question that women have not enjoyed the same opportunities as men in philosophy, there have always been women who philosophized. We had lost sight of this fact. Since women philosophers had become hidden from history, to focus on what women achieved in philosophy one had to find them first. But there were real problems here. Where were the philosophers? The history of philosophy of that time could not tell you. Most obviously, a historical record was lacking, very few women were known to have written anything, and, more often than not, the few of those who published their writings published anonymously or published in genres not recognised as philosophy. Historically, therefore the problem was just as much a problem of *occlusion* as exclusion.

Since then, there has been a radical change, although this has happened relatively recently. The last thirty years have witnessed a drive to recover women philosophers from the dust of history, to study their philosophy, to understand their philosophical interests and priorities, and to trace their legacies. This work of recovery was originally pioneered by scholars like Mary Ellen Waithe in the 1980s (*A History of Women Philosophers*). Initially the take-up of this pioneering

work was mainly in early modern philosophy, through work on Margaret Cavendish, Anne Conway, Damaris Masham and Elisabeth of Bohemia, and, in the Spanish-speaking world, through Oliva Sabuco de Nantes y Barrera and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. This work extended to philosophers of Renaissance Italy (Tullia d'Aragona, Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, Arcangela Tarabotti), and to eighteenth-century France (Emilie du Châtelet and Gabrielle Suchon). This body of work is now being rapidly matched by new work across the chronological spectrum, from women in ancient philosophy (Pomeroy, *Pythagorean Women*; Pellò, "Non solo uomini") to nineteenth and twentieth-century women philosophers<sup>3</sup>. As a result of this work of recovery, it is no longer possible to ignore the presence of women in philosophy's past. There is, now unprecedented interest in the contributions made by women to philosophy. The drive to recover them has been boosted by students and younger scholars who are demanding to learn about them<sup>4</sup>. For those of us who recall the early days when there was resistance to the idea that there were any women worth attention, this development is nothing short of extraordinary. What we are witnessing is a Renaissance of women philosophers.

Women are not the only philosophers who have gone missing in the history of philosophy. In fact, the history of philosophy is full of "lost philosophers". Some of the most famous names were forgotten for centuries: for example, Plato, and Plotinus whose philosophy was recovered in fifteenth-century Italy in the period of cultural recovery and rediscovery in Western Europe, known as the Renaissance. The resulting re-insertion of ancient philosophers into the philosophical conversation had a big impact on European philosophy from that time forward. This process is now being repeated as scholars turn their attention to finding women philosophers. As with the recovery of classical philosophy, by

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<sup>3</sup>On nineteenth-century British and American Philosophers, see Stone and Alderwick (*Nineteenth-Century Women Philosophers*). For the twentieth century, the 'In Parenthesis' research project, directed by Rachael Wiseman and Clare Mac Cumhail focuses on the twentieth-century English philosophers, Iris Murdoch, Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot and Mary Midgley. <http://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk>.

<sup>4</sup>Dissatisfied with the absence of women from university curricula some students have even taken it upon themselves to compile resources. Such is the case with *The Philosopher Queens*, a crowd-funded project published by Unbound, which was put together by two graduate British students, Rebecca Buxton and Lisa Whiting (*The Philosopher Queens*).

Renaissance Humanists, the recovery of women's philosophy has involved the recovery of original texts; editing and translating those texts, discovering previously unknown philosophies and philosophical works. As in the European Renaissance, the recovery of women's philosophy holds the prospect not just of discovering the forgotten philosophical women of the past, but also of enriching philosophy by the addition of new themes in philosophy, different ways of doing philosophy, and generating new philosophies. The point to draw from this parallel between the European Renaissance of the fifteenth century and the recovery of women is that the Renaissance precedent is an upside to the challenges presented by recovering the forgotten women of the past.

### **MIND THE GAP**

However, achieving a more inclusive history of philosophy is not just a matter of who might be included in it, but it is also a matter of how to set about it. The most notable project of this kind is Peter Adamson's admirable on-going project, "The History of Philosophy without any gaps", which has the aim of rectifying the history of philosophy by restoring the figures who have been overlooked—men as well as women, and philosophers from other non-European traditions (for example Arabic philosophers). "The History of Philosophy without any Gaps" consists of a collection of podcasts which is continually growing. As it stands today, it gives a snapshot of the state of the history of philosophy. And one of the things it reflects is the under-representation of women—something which is in the process of being rectified, in so far as it can be. The project now includes some sections on women, with more planned. At the time of writing, the women who figure include Fatema Mernissi, Anna Komnene, Christine de Pizan (336), Italian Women Humanists Cassandra Fedele, Isotta Nogarola, and Laura Cereta (337). However, to put women philosophers into the historical narrative is not a straightforward matter of filling gaps, as one might fill potholes in a road, or replace *tessera* which have fallen out of a mosaic. You cannot put back what was never there in the first place. Besides, the filling-the-gaps metaphor implies a static picture of philosophy's history. But refurbishing the history of philosophy to make it more inclusive is not like restoring a painting or a mosaic. The picture itself must change. Furthermore, for earlier periods, retrieving women philosophers involves a process that can seem more like excavation.

Women philosophers of the past will not leap fully formed like Minerva from the head of Jove. They must be excavated. Even then we won't necessarily find complete statues of Minerva. And what we find is more likely to be fragments, or traces than full profiles of philosophical women, complete with writings.

Recovering women philosophers raises some basic but important questions: Who counts as a philosopher? What do we mean by philosopher? How do you set about finding women philosophers? And, how do you recognise a woman philosopher when you find one? Before such questions can be answered there are many challenges to be faced.

A major problem is lack of sources: much of the philosophy by women has been lost. We know the names of many more women than we have writings for them. Most of the philosophical women of classical antiquity are just names, and even then, there are problems identifying them, as in the case of Theano and other Pythagoreans (Pellò, "Non solo uomini"). Lack of sources is a problem in later periods too. In some cases, the only evidence for a woman's interest in philosophy comes from other types of writing which tell us little or nothing about their philosophical views. In the case of Eleonora Barbapicola (1702-c.1740), who translated *Descartes's Principia philosophiae* into Italian (*I principi della filosofia di Renato Descartes*, 1722), this translation is the only evidence for her interest in philosophy. For another Cartesian, Aurelia d'Este, Duchess of Limatola (1683-1719), the only writings that testify to her philosophical interests are her sonnets.

In many cases, the sources for women's philosophy are incomplete. For example, the only philosophical writings by Elisabeth of Bohemia are her letters to Descartes. And even where there are more substantial sources for women's philosophy, original texts have disappeared. This is the case with Anne Conway, both versions of whose philosophical treatise are translations: although written in English, it appeared first in a Latin translation (*Principia philosophiae antiquissimae ac recentissimae*, 1690), which was then translated back into English (*The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 1692).

Where writings by women philosophers have survived, it is not always easy to make sense of what we find. It frequently happens that women did not present their philosophical views in the ways with which we are familiar today or use what

are now regarded as standard philosophical terms. There were, of course, women philosophers who wrote in standard formats—for example the Italian mathematician and philosopher, Maria Getana Agnesi (1718-1799) who published *Propositiones philosophicae* in 1738 and *Instituzioni analitiche ad uso della gioventù italiana* in 1748. But many more women wrote in genres which are untypical of mainstream philosophy today. For example, the Mexican philosopher Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695) wrote in verse, while the *Filosofia de la naturaleza del hombre* (1587), of the Spanish philosopher Oliva Sabuco de Nantes y Barerra (1562-c.1626), takes the form of conversations between shepherds. Madame de Scudéry's *Conversations morales* (1686) and *Entretiens de morale* (1692) are fictional conversations based on the discussions at her *salon* in Paris. This kind of writing does not, of course, constitute systematic philosophy, but it does not follow that women did not or could not think in a philosophically systematic way.

The problem of unfamiliar genre is compounded by the fact that philosophers worked in different philosophical traditions from those with which we are most familiar today. For example, women thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries like Anne Conway and Lucrezia Marinella, who wrote in the Platonic tradition. Disconnection from the current mainstream means that we have lost touch with the philosophical traditions within which they practised philosophy. This is a problem which besets non-canonical philosophers in general, not just women, but with women philosophers it is more challenging because for most of history they have been forgotten, so there is no history of interpretation on which to draw.

Such problems are further complicated by the fact that the philosophy of the past does not necessarily reduce to the concerns of the present day. The writings of women philosophers highlight the fact that philosophers in the past were often trying to solve different sets of problems from ours, or that they addressed them in ways unfamiliar to us. Many of the topics and problems which they discuss are different even from what we now consider to be the mainstream in the history of philosophy—for example love is a prominent theme among Renaissance women philosophers, but is not considered a mainstream topic, notwithstanding its treatment by other women philosophers (e.g., Iris Murdoch). Of course, the fact that women's philosophy often deals with unfamiliar topics does not mean that

they have nothing to say to us now, or that they were never concerned with similar issues. For example, it is striking that arguments for female education and gender equality are to be encountered repeatedly across the centuries, from Arcangela Tarabotti in the Renaissance through to Damaris Masham in the seventeenth century, Catharine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth and Harriet Taylor in the nineteenth century. But such familiar topics were often treated in unfamiliar ways<sup>5</sup>.

A further difficulty is the fact that the standard categories in use for classifying philosophers are not helpful when discussing women, because they were drawn up without women's philosophy—or indeed the philosophy of other forgotten philosophers, who did not necessarily contribute to the themes and arguments which have been used to shape the history of philosophy. In consequence, women's contribution does not fit the standard narratives in the history of philosophy.

Not all these points apply to *all* women philosophers. And most of them hold for non-canonical male philosophers as well. Most of these problems concern *alterity*, and addressing them requires both recognising and understanding *difference*. Many of them are largely a matter of unfamiliarity with the philosophical idiom, and modes of argument in which philosophers of former times wrote. As we become accustomed to dealing with them by learning more about forgotten traditions, the unfamiliarity will diminish. Nevertheless, the important point is that these problems highlight the fact that one of the main challenges in recovering women's philosophy is the problem of strangeness and difference in the thought of women from earlier periods.

This challenge has been addressed in various ways, among which I want to highlight four. First, we have had to take a wider view of the genres in which past philosophers philosophized (e.g., to recognise that letters and fictional writing can be a philosophical source). Secondly, understanding difference has meant having a more generous view of what counts as philosophy—and a more informed view of what counted as philosophy in the times when a woman philosopher lived (e.g., acknowledging the importance of religion for most women

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<sup>5</sup> For different treatments of liberty, for instance, see Broad and Detlefsen, *Women and Liberty*.

in philosophy's history). Thirdly, recovering women philosophers has involved finding out about forgotten philosophical traditions which are considered dead and buried, and about forgotten philosophers (often dismissed as 'minor figures') with whom women philosophers engaged. Fourthly, we have had to learn to respect the fact that philosophers of the past had different priorities and concerns from our own, that we cannot study past philosophers simply by interpreting them as if they were part of the dominant philosophical traditions of the present. Recognising this means trying to understand the issues which *they* considered important and finding a way to understand them in their own terms.

### **INCLUSIVITY AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

All four points are related to something which I want to stress: the importance of historical context for writing a more inclusive history of philosophy. What has been forgotten in standard histories of philosophy was not just that women pursued philosophy, but the particular circumstances in which they did so. Being alive to history, therefore, is not mere antiquarianism, nor is it just what some philosophers disparagingly call 'history of ideas' (Hutton, "Intellectual History and the History of Philosophy"). Understanding the context in which women philosophized in the past is key to understanding what they thought as well as how it was that they were able to philosophize in the first place. While this is also true for male philosophers, contextualized history of philosophy is particularly important for knowledge of the intellectual disadvantage faced by women by comparison with men. This is especially important since, in all periods of history, most women have faced educational disadvantages. To be able to philosophize meant overcoming deep-seated customs and prejudices about women's capabilities and social destiny. The fact that women have not had the same educational advantages as men and have been constrained socially by their gender roles (e.g., domestic duties, or the expectation that they should confine mental activity to spiritual matters) is still true today. Even when women philosophers have successfully navigated those conditions, it is only when we pay attention to the context in which female philosophers practised philosophy that those conditions become apparent.

Awareness of historical context is relevant to how we continue to read and discuss women philosophers of the past meaningfully, i.e. in terms that make

sense to us now. This also holds for the lesser-known male philosophers. How far context is important for women philosophers who are closer to us in time and place is an open question. But the work that is currently being done on nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers is showing that it is important there too (Stone and Alderwick, *Nineteenth-Century Women Philosophers*). And it is not irrelevant to the pressing issue of how to integrate women into both the history of philosophy and philosophy teaching. A contextual approach which addresses alterity and difference also offers a way forward to research philosophers from different philosophical traditions and the hitherto uncharted territory of non-European women philosophers.

Contextualized history of philosophy also exposes the relevance of the history of women's philosophy to the history of feminism and feminist philosophy. Given the disadvantageous social and cultural conditions attendant on her pursuit of philosophy, by practising her chosen pursuit despite restrictive gender norms, every woman philosopher defied those norms. Such women were often regarded as untypical of their sex, even as 'masculine', as exceptions which proved the rule that women can't think, or that women are defective in reason. However, such women were (and are) living reproofs of such age-old prejudices. Whether or not they thought and wrote about women's issues, they belong to the history of feminism, just as surely as those who did. A more historically informed understanding of what philosophy was in the past has made it possible for early feminists such as Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft to be recognised as philosophers (Broad, *The Philosophy of Mary Astell*; Bergès and Coffee, *Social and Political Philosophy of Wollstonecraft*).

One area where the recovery of women philosophers meets its limits is with the women philosophers who are little more than names. But even names contribute to a more inclusive sense of philosophy's past. Importantly, even where their philosophy has been lost, the well-testified names of female philosophers bear witness to the fact that women philosophers were not rare exceptions to a supposed general rule that women are by nature unsuited to intellectual pursuits.

There is no question that great progress has been made in the recovery of women philosophers. However, the Renaissance of women's philosophy is far from complete. With honourable exceptions (e.g., Benitez, "Sor Juana Inés" and "Sensibilidad en el pensamiento epistemológico") most of the work on the recovery of women philosophers has, until now, been undertaken by European and North American scholars. The task now is for it to be carried forward by scholars elsewhere, in South America, Asia and Africa to recover women philosophers from their own and other philosophical traditions.

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