



Joanna Baillie on Sympathetic Curiosity and Elizabeth Hamilton’s Critique

ABSTRACT: *Scholars working on recovering forgotten historical women philosophers have noted the importance of looking beyond traditional philosophical genres. This strategy is particularly important for finding Scottish women philosophers. By considering non-canonical genres, we can see the philosophical interest of the works of Scottish poet and playwright Joanna Baillie (1762–1851), who presents an account of “sympathetic curiosity” as one of the basic principles of the human mind. Baillie’s work is also interesting for being a rare case of a woman’s philosophical work that was discussed in print by another woman philosopher – in this case, by Elizabeth Hamilton (1758–1816), who argues for the importance of a feature of human nature that she calls the “selfish principle.” The article suggests that focusing on critical engagements between historical women philosophers can help integrate their texts into the history of philosophy without presenting them as “handmaidens” to male philosophers.*

KEYWORDS: Hamilton, Baillie, sympathy, sympathetic curiosity, selfish principle, Scottish philosophers, women philosophers

I. Introduction

The project of recovering long-neglected philosophical texts by women philosophers from the past has rapidly increased its pace since historians of early modern philosophy were first inspired by Eileen O’Neill’s important 1998 paper, “Disappearing Ink.” Historians of philosophy have now expanded the project to identifying and researching women philosophers from the medieval and Renaissance periods, the nineteenth century, and the early twentieth century, and have found works by past women philosophers from across Europe, as well as from Asia.¹

However, the recovery of specifically *Scottish* women philosophers has lagged behind these other projects. This is not for lack of attention to Scottish philosophy more generally, for the Scottish Enlightenment has received considerable scholarly attention since the 1960s, and the founding of the *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* and the International Association for Scottish Philosophy (IASP) twenty years ago encouraged scholarship on Scottish philosophers from other historical periods as

¹ For surveys of medieval women philosophers, see Waithe 1989 and Van Dyke 2022. On nineteenth-century German women philosophers, see Gjesdal and Nassar 2021; on nineteenth-century English philosophers, see Stone 2022b. Women philosophers from the twentieth century are discussed in Waithe 1995. Yungjildang and Jeongildang 2023 contains texts by two Korean women philosophers from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.



well. Although it has been denied as recently as 2019 that women formed any part of Scottish Enlightenment philosophical thought from the long eighteenth century,² a few cases have been found. One is Mary Shepherd (1777–1847), born and raised in Scotland and the author of two philosophical treatises that explicitly engage with major thinkers and themes of the Scottish Enlightenment. Another is educational theorist and novelist Elizabeth Hamilton (1758–1816), whose work has also been shown to be rich in philosophical content (Hutton 2008; Gokcekus 2019; Boyle 2021a and 2021b). But aside from these two, the history of Scottish philosophy seems bereft of women philosophers.³

What explains this lack? One explanation is that Scottish philosophy has tended to be defined in institutional terms – the kirk, the law, and the universities; that is, Scottish philosophy has been seen as the output of preachers, lawyers, and professors (Broadie 2019: 2; see also Graham 2022: ix). But if this is how we define Scottish philosophy, it will be impossible to find early modern or modern women philosophers, since women were not permitted to be preachers, lawyers, or university professors in Scotland until the twentieth century.⁴

Moreover, as Sarah Hutton (2015: 17) has observed, “an enlarged sense of philosophical genre is vital for gauging women’s philosophical activity.” We sometimes need to look outside the genres of the traditional philosophical treatise and dialogue to find women philosophers. To take one well-known example, the philosophical work of Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia can only be found in her correspondence. And while Margaret Cavendish did write philosophical treatises, her poetry, plays, and fiction also make philosophical contributions. When we look at genres other than the traditional ones, then Scottish women philosophers such as Elizabeth Hamilton begin to emerge. In this article I argue that this strategy allows us to add poet and playwright Joanna Baillie (1762–1851) to the ranks of Scottish philosophers. Moreover, Baillie’s work is interesting for being a rare case where one woman’s philosophical work was discussed in print by another woman philosopher – in this case, by Hamilton, who argues that Baillie overlooks a feature of human nature that Hamilton calls the “selfish principle.”

Section 2 introduces Baillie and her accounts of both sympathy *simpliciter* and what she calls “sympathetic curiosity,” relating these to other eighteenth-century conceptions of sympathy. Sections 3 and 4 further analyze sympathetic curiosity through a close reading of Baillie’s “Introductory Discourse.” Section 5 shifts to Hamilton’s account of the selfish principle and its role in her critique of

² Writing about the role of women in the Scottish Enlightenment, historians Roger Emerson and Mark Spencer claim that “as producers of enlightenment, women shone mainly in the drawing-room, at the keyboard and in the writing of songs and poems. They were in the background, and hardly formed any part of the intellectual gatherings, which were often in taverns” (Emerson and Spencer 2019: 24).

³ Graham Gordon (2022: xii) notes that novelist, biographer, and essayist Margaret Oliphant (1828–97) wrote long biographical articles on Berkeley and Hume, but does not claim that her work has philosophical content, writing that “she is more interested, we might say, in mentality than in mind, and in the thinker rather than the thought.”

⁴ Women were not permitted to be preachers in the Church of Scotland until 1968 (Orr 2009). After the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919, the first woman lawyer in Scotland was Madge Easton Anderson; Margaret Kidd was the first woman admitted to the Scottish bar, in 1923 (Cairns 2018: 195–96). The first woman appointed to a professorial chair at any British university was Edith Morley, in 1908 (Morley 2016).

sympathetic curiosity. In the conclusion, I argue for the value of this critical engagement between two historical women philosophers.

2. Baillie on Sympathy and Sympathetic Curiosity

Born near Glasgow in 1762, Joanna Baillie was the daughter of a minister and the niece of renowned surgeons John and William Hunter. After being educated at home by her father, she went at the age of ten to boarding school in Glasgow. In 1790, she moved with her sister and mother to join her brother in London, occasionally returning to Scotland for visits (Carhart 1923: 3–68). Baillie published a short book (Baillie 1831) on the question of whether the New Testament supports Trinitarianism, but she was known in her day for her poetry and plays. She wrote more than two dozen plays, seven of which were actually performed, on stages in Britain and the United States (Carhart 1923: 109–65). Thirteen plays were part of a project that she called *A Series of Plays on the Passions*, published in three volumes. The “Introductory Discourse” (Baillie 2001b; hereafter, ID) to the first volume is of considerable philosophical interest. Here Baillie explains her plan: to write pairs of plays, a tragedy and a comedy, with each pair displaying the rise and progress of one particular passion. Volume 1, published anonymously in 1798, has two plays focused on love and a tragedy on hatred. The companion comedy on hatred, along with two plays on ambition, is in Volume 2, published under Baillie’s name in 1802. Volume 3 (1812) breaks with the plan somewhat by including three plays on fear and one on hope. Additional plays, focusing on jealousy and remorse, were published in the three-volume *Miscellaneous Plays* (1836). In her preface “To the Reader” in Volume 3, Baillie says that she also hoped to write plays on revenge, but that the passions of joy, grief, and anger “are generally of too transient a nature, and are too frequently the attendants of all our other passions to be made the subjects of an entire play” (Baillie 1812: xiv). She also eschews writing on pride and envy, the former being “a dull subject” and the latter “being that state of mind, which, of all others, meets with the least sympathy” (Baillie 1812: xiv).

Like others in the tradition of Scottish philosophy, Baillie is interested in understanding human nature, and especially in identifying innate propensities of the human mind, which include what she terms “sympathetic propensities in regard to our own species” (ID 83). While she never provides an explicit list of these sympathetic propensities, she mentions sympathy (ID 72), “sympathetic good will” (ID 81), and “sympathetic curiosity.” This last feature of human nature is the one about which she has the most to say, and will be my topic here.

Baillie’s conception of sympathetic curiosity has received some attention from scholars of eighteenth and nineteenth century literature, some of whom relate it to conceptions of sympathy in the works of David Hume, Adam Smith, and Edmund Burke – whether as emerging from and resembling one of their views (Dwyer 2000: 24; Duthie 2001: 28, 72n; Forbes 2003: 34, 36–27; Richardson 2004: 133; Whalen 2013) or as critique (Murray 2003: 1049–55; Myers 2004). Maureen Dowd (1998: 474) situates Baillie’s work in the context of late eighteenth-century German melodrama, noting that Baillie’s account of sympathetic curiosity “complements”

Friedrich Schiller's assertion in his 1784 lecture "The Stage Considered As a Moral Institution" that the theater unites the audience members in "brotherly sympathy" (Schiller 1902).

Some caution is needed here, however. Broadly speaking, for Hume, Smith, and Burke, sympathy is the human capacity to come to share the same feeling expressed by another person. For example, in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (2000, cited hereafter as T), David Hume refers to the "propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own" (T 2.1.11.2). In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (2002, cited hereafter as TMS), Adam Smith characterizes sympathy as "our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever" (TMS 1.1.1.5). However, as Turco (1999: 79) has observed, "sympathy is more a 'family' concept than a univocal one"; it can mean, among other things, "a mechanical communication of feelings and passions," "a process of imagination, or of reason, by which we substitute ourselves for others," or "delight in the happiness and sorrow in the misery of other people." In Hume we find the first kind of view, and in Smith we find the second; as Fleischacker (2012: 276–77) puts it, Hume has a "contagion" model of sympathy whereby emotions are transmitted between people just as diseases can pass from one person to another, whereas Smith "insists that mere contagion cannot induce sympathy" and that instead "we need to imagine ourselves into the other person's situation, to project ourselves into his or her shoes, in order to experience any sort of sympathy." Edmund Burke, too, has a projection model, for he says that "sympathy must be considered as a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected" (Burke 2017: 44; see also 52). Given these distinctions, elucidating Baillie's conception of sympathetic curiosity requires more than just pointing out (as Duthie [2001: 72n] does in a footnote; see also Richardson 2004: 133), that Hume, Smith, and other eighteenth-century writers also use the term 'sympathy.'

Moreover, a single author might use 'sympathy' in more than one sense. For example, Knud Haakonssen (1981: 51) has shown that Smith uses 'sympathy' to mean the *process* of imaginative identification with another person's situation, the *feelings* that result from that imaginative exercise, and the *approval* that arises when the spectator's feelings match those of the observed person. Any project that seeks to elucidate Baillie's sympathetic curiosity by examining sympathy in Hume, Smith, and others needs to be sensitive to the distinct meanings of 'sympathy' in those texts, and aware that Baillie too might use the term in more than one way.

Indeed, Baillie does seem to operate with more than one sense of 'sympathy.' Having characterized sympathetic curiosity as a propensity "strongly implanted within us" (ID 69) to attend to and observe the behavior of others in an attempt to understand their mental state (ID 69; see also 72, 74, 76, 83), Baillie writes about people's reactions to someone visibly angry:

Anger is a passion that attracts less sympathy than any other, yet the unpleasing and distorted features of an angry man will be more eagerly gazed upon, by those who are no wise concerned with his fury

or the objects of it, than the most amiable placid countenance in the world. (ID 72)

Her reference to “eagerly gazing” upon the angry person shows that she is describing the exercise of sympathetic curiosity. In saying that we attend to an angry person more than an amiable one, she means that our sympathetic curiosity is *greater* regarding the former than the latter. Yet she also says that anger “attracts less sympathy” than any other passion. In other words, we feel *less sympathy* with, but *more sympathetic curiosity* towards, the angry person than the amiable person. Since sympathy *simpliciter* and sympathetic curiosity can come apart, this suggests that the ‘sympathy’ in sympathetic curiosity may be distinct from sympathy *simpliciter*. A close reading of the text will sort out precisely what Baillie means by these terms.

Regarding sympathy *simpliciter*, Baillie says little, but in the passages that refer to sympathy without also invoking curiosity, she says that to sympathize with someone is to be “moved.” She writes that if poets or novelists “are to move us with any scene of distress,” and if they describe every circumstance and detail of the scene, then it “must be very unnatural indeed if we refuse to sympathize” with the characters (ID 82). She also says that we sympathize more with people who suffer misfortunes “of the more familiar and domestick kind,” so that an ordinary citizen torn from his family will “move our sympathy” more than a dethroned king (ID 89n1). Here, sympathy seems to be a mechanism for coming to share someone else’s emotions, and her suggestion that literature can do this indicates something like Smith’s and Burke’s “projection” models, in which we *imagine* ourselves in the observed person’s situation.

However, when Baillie refers to sympathy in the context of curiosity, she means something else. She writes, “From that strong sympathy which most creatures, but the human above all, feel for others of their kind, nothing has become so much an object of man’s curiosity as man himself” (ID 67). Here, Baillie characterizes sympathy not as a tendency to share another’s *emotion*, but as a sense of affinity with another creature for being *of the same kind* as oneself. What exactly creatures perceive when they see another as “of their kind” is left unexplained here; does it involve perceiving similar bodily structures, physical abilities, apparently purposive behavior, signs of emotions, or something else? Later, however, in an example that echoes one in Smith’s *Moral Sentiments*, Baillie suggests that creatures perceive others as “of their kind” when they show signs of having the same mental states. She writes,

the transactions of men become interesting to us only as we are made acquainted with men themselves. Great and bloody battles are to us battles fought in the moon, if it is not impressed upon our minds, by some circumstances attending them, that men subject to like weaknesses and passions with ourselves, were the combatants. (ID 76–77)⁵

⁵ Compare Smith: “Whatever interest we take in the fortune of those with whom we have no acquaintance or connection, and who are placed altogether out of the sphere of our activity, can produce only anxiety to ourselves,

Her emphasis on “like weaknesses and passions” suggests that in its role in sympathetic curiosity, sympathy is an affinity we feel for other creatures that appear to have the same kinds of mental lives as us – which is not to say that sympathy in this sense involves an observer coming to *share* the weaknesses or passions of the observed. Someone who sees an angry man might acknowledge to herself that she, too, has been angry like that, but that does not mean she will come to share the other’s anger.

Drawing this distinction between two senses of sympathy in Baillie’s account can help settle the question of what comes first in sympathetic curiosity, the sympathy or the curiosity. Some scholars (Myers 2004: 77) have suggested that sympathy motivates curiosity; others (Judson 2006: 50–53) maintain that the curiosity comes first, to be followed by sympathy. Both views could be right, depending on what ‘sympathy’ means, but insofar as sympathy is a recognition of something like a shared human nature, it precedes and triggers curiosity. Later, once the observer knows more about the other person’s mental states, then the observer might be sympathetic in the sense of being “moved” to share the other’s emotion. To see if this is the case, we need to identify the further components at work in sympathetic curiosity, the topic of the next section.

3. Components of sympathetic curiosity

Having noticed that some creature appears to be like us, the next step of the process occurs: the *curiosity* is triggered. Perhaps echoing Smith, who says we have a “passion to discover the real sentiments of others” (TMS 7.4.28), Baillie says we have a “natural desire. . .to look into the thoughts, and observe the behavior of others” (ID 90; see also 97). Indeed, Baillie says we cannot help but watch someone in the throes of a strong emotion. She describes, again, the effect of an angry man on others:

Every eye is directed to him; every voice hushed to silence in his presence; even children will leave off their gambols as he passes, and gaze after him more eagerly than the gaudiest equipage. The wild tossings of despair, the gnashing of hatred and revenge; the yearnings of affection, and the softened men of love; all that language of the agitated soul, which every age and nation understands, is never addressed to the dull nor inattentive. (ID 72–73)

She also notes that sympathetic curiosity leads us to more closely observe not only extreme displays of emotion, but more subtle displays as well:

Even the smallest indications of an unquiet mind, the restless eye, the muttering lip, the half-checked exclamation, and the hasty start, will set our attention as anxiously upon the watch, as the first distant flashes of a gathering storm. (ID 73)

without any manner of advantage to them. To what purpose should we trouble ourselves about the world in the moon?” (TMS 3.3.9).

Baillie observes that people tend not to *discuss* their observations on these matters. In conversation about others, we often focus not on words and actions that indicate emotions and character traits, but on trivialities such as the “dress and manners of men” (ID 68). This is because it is “easier to express our observations” upon the more trivial matters, such as “how a man wears his wig and cane, what kind of house he inhabits, and what kind of table he keeps,” rather than upon “from what slight traits in his words and actions we have been led to conceive certain impressions of his character” (ID 68). Nonetheless, even if our *conversations* tend to be about the external features of others’ lives, she writes that “there is, perhaps, no employment which the human mind will with so much avidity pursue, as the discovery of a concealed passion, as the tracing the varieties and progress of a perturbed soul” (ID 73).

If Baillie’s sympathetic curiosity were like Hume’s “contagion” model of sympathy, then we would expect her to say that after someone has observed another’s gestures, facial expressions, and so on, then whatever emotion has caused those behaviors is transmitted to the observer. Or, if sympathetic curiosity were like Smith’s or Burke’s “projection” model, then the observer would imagine being in the same situation as the person being observed, and come to feel the same emotion as the other. But Baillie suggests neither of these. Rather, having observed the person’s facial expressions, gestures, words, and other forms of behavior, the observer *infers* the person’s feelings and motivations. Baillie says that the behaviors are “indicative of his supposed state of mind” (ID 73); that is, words, expressions, and behaviors are *clues*, so the mental state is inferred. In another passage, Baillie writes that observable behavior leads us to “comprehend. . .the immediate feeling which gave rise to” some action (ID 75). To *comprehend* a feeling is not necessarily to *feel* the feeling. In other words, for Baillie the effect of the observations is not emotional, but cognitive. Sympathetic curiosity leads us to make a certain judgment about another person’s mind and character.

What follows after this judgment can be more or less sophisticated. Baillie says that most people do not reflect deeply on what they observe in and infer from others’ behavior (ID 75). Generally, she says, “though a native trait of character or of passion is obvious to them as well as to the sage, yet to their minds it is but the visitor of a moment; they look upon it singly and unconnected” (ID 75). Often, then, people do not learn from what they observe through sympathetic curiosity. Indeed, in children and even some adults, Baillie says that sympathetic curiosity results in mere “trivial and mischievous tattling” (ID 68).

But when people *remember* and *analyze* many such observations, sympathetic curiosity becomes a useful tool for moral improvement. Indeed, this is the purpose for which God created this innate propensity (ID 74). Baillie writes that for those “who reflect and reason upon what human nature holds out to their observation,”

[n]o stroke of nature which engages their attention stands insulated and alone. Each presents itself to them with many varied connections; and they comprehend not merely the immediate feeling which gave rise to it, but the relation of that feeling to others which are concealed. (ID 75)

The tendency not to make proper use of sympathetic curiosity is depicted by the character of Miss Eston in Baillie's play *The Tryal*. Miss Eston loves to gossip (Baillie 2001c: 228), and is happy as long as there are "streets and carriages, and balls and ribbons, and parlours and pantries to talk of" (Baillie 2001c: 228). But she has no real interest in drawing further conclusions about human nature from all this; at one point she takes up a book and immediately puts it down because, she says, "'Tis all about the imagination, and the understanding, and I don't know what" (Baillie 2001c: 248). It seems Miss Eston may have picked up Hume's *Treatise* or Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, but she cannot be bothered to direct her curiosity beyond the most trifling forms of human behavior.

Indeed, this scene reinforces another point in the "Introductory Discourse," that sympathetic curiosity can be triggered and satisfied not just in real-life interactions, but also through books and the theater. Works by "moral writers" are "more interesting and instructive" when their authors "have exercised within themselves this sympathetick propensity of our nature, and have attended to it in others" (ID 76). Baillie does not identify particular authors, but she evidently means philosophers who wrote on the topic of human nature – Hume, Smith, Thomas Reid, or Dugald Stewart, for example. Here, too, she emphasizes sympathetic curiosity's cognitive effects, for books based on close observations of human nature have "struck the imagination more forcibly, convinced the understanding more clearly, and more lastingly impressed the memory" (ID 76). Histories can also provide insight into human nature, so long as they focus on humans rather than merely laws and policies (ID 77); only a focus on individuals will "employ our understanding as well as our memory" (ID 77–78). Novels, romances, and poetry can satisfy sympathetic curiosity so long as the writers in these genres depict "what we really are, and what kind of beings we belong to" (ID 79–80) and do not get carried away with "wonderful incidents, dark mysteries, and secrets revealed" (ID 79).

But theatrical productions are especially apt for exercising sympathetic curiosity, according to Baillie. She writes, "Formed as we are with these sympathetick propensities in regard to our own species, it is not at all wonderful that theatrical exhibition has become the grand and favourite amusement of every nation into which it has been introduced" (ID 83). Tragedies can be the most informative, by "unveiling the human mind under the dominion of those strong and fixed passions, which seemingly unprovoked by outward circumstances, will from small beginnings brood within the breast" (ID 91). Comedy can be effective, too, although Baillie distinguishes between types of comedy, insisting that only "characteristic comedy" accurately "represents to us this motley world of men and women in which we live," thereby providing "in its varied scenes an exercise of the mind analogous to that which we all, less or more, find out for ourselves, amidst the mixed groupes [*sic*] of people whom we meet with in society" (ID 98). Again, Baillie emphasizes the *cognitive* effects of satisfying sympathetic curiosity when we watch such a comedy. It makes us *think*; it "exercises the mind" and "will naturally call up in the mind of the spectator moral reflections. . ." (ID 99).

This is not to say sympathetic curiosity does not also produce feelings. Again, however, Baillie does not say that the observer comes to share the observed

feeling. Rather, she says that exercising our propensity to sympathetic curiosity tends to “animate” us (ID 83) and is “universally pleasing to man” (ID 98) because we feel delight when we see others like us.⁶ This is due to a broader propensity Baillie thinks humans have, a propensity to feel delight whenever we observe something natural in human behavior (ID 79; see also 75, 83, and 100).

In sum, our observations of human behavior, triggered by a curiosity that is itself due to a sympathetic interest in others we perceive to be like us, have both cognitive effects, that is, inferences about the person’s mental state, and emotional effects, the feeling of delight in “discerning what is genuinely natural” in a person, and, hence, in ourselves (ID 78–79).

4. The purpose of sympathetic curiosity

Baillie says God created humans with sympathetic curiosity to help us become better people, specifically through better understanding *ourselves*. As she puts it, “in examining others we know ourselves” (ID 74). Again, she writes that “it is only from creatures like ourselves that we feel, and therefore, only from creatures like ourselves that we receive the instruction of example” (ID 87). The instruction helps us become better in several ways. First, a broad understanding of how motives and emotions are connected to behavior is practically useful, because understanding “the varieties of human mind” will

fit a man more particularly for the most important situations of life. He will prove for it the better Judge, the better Magistrate, the better Advocate; and as a ruler or conductor of other men, under every occurring circumstance, he will find himself the better enabled to fulfill his duty, and accomplish his designs. (ID 76)

It is unclear why Baillie emphasizes the practical benefits for *men’s* “important situations of life” rather than for women’s. But the practical effect of exercising and satisfying sympathetic curiosity that Baillie considers most important, and that applies to both sexes, is that it helps us to regulate our own emotions, thereby enabling us to be more virtuous.

Baillie holds that we are all naturally subject to passions such as fear, anger, despair, hatred, revenge, affection, and love (ID 72–73); we also have an “inward consciousness of what is right and becoming” (ID 74) as well as “feelings of humanity” (ID 89). In the normal human condition, our emotions are frequently in tension with what reason tells us we should do. In fact, Baillie criticizes playwrights who present characters that are either “perfectly wicked” or “perfectly virtuous” (ID 89), and who are thus not “creatures like ourselves” (ID 87). Of playwrights whose protagonists embody perfect virtue, she writes:

⁶ Whalen (2013: 668–69) suggests that Baillie thinks watching theatrical productions helps people improve their own sympathetic responses.

Thus, great and magnanimous heroes, who bear with majestic equanimity every vicissitude of fortune; who in every temptation and trial stand forth in unshaken virtue, like a rock buffeted by waves; who, encompassed with the most terrible evils, in calm possession of their souls, reason upon the difficulties of their state; and, even upon the brink of destruction, pronounce long eulogiums on virtue, in the most eloquent and beautiful language, have been held forth to our view as objects of imitation and interest; as though they had entirely forgotten that it is only from creatures like ourselves that we feel, and therefore, only from creatures like ourselves that we receive the instruction of example. (ID 87)

Such perfect heroes are not “real and natural characters” (ID 90), and so observing them is not helpful. Nonetheless, that Baillie considers such heroes to be examples of “perfect virtue” shows that she thinks this is the model to which we should aspire, even if we can never fully reach it. The goal is to be, like those heroes, “in calm possession” of our souls, with reason in charge rather than emotions.

Because the Introductory Discourse focuses on sympathetic curiosity, Baillie says little there about virtue and its development, other than that sympathetic curiosity helps people learn to recognize emotions as they first begin and to see the deleterious effects of letting emotions strengthen until they hold the reins. However, her plays are a rich source of examples of characters who let emotions get the better of reason—and typically come to grief because of it—as well as of some who have learned how to suppress potentially strong emotions in their early stages so that those emotions develop no further.

The contrast is especially clear in *Count Basil*, a play set in sixteenth century Italy in which two characters’ lives are ruined because they are driven by emotion rather than reason: the eponymous Count Basil, who is a general in Charles V’s army, and Victoria, the daughter of the Duke of Mantua. Count Basil appears at the beginning of the play as eschewing love (Baillie 2001a: 127/I.2.160–170)⁷ and single-mindedly pursuing military glory (Baillie 2001a: 124/I.2.50–57; see also 131/II.1.5–7). Already, then, he is depicted as prone to excessive passions; his devoted older kinsman Rosinberg says that “His too great love of military fame/ Destroys his thoughts” (Baillie 2001a: 124/I. 2.51–52). When Basil sees Victoria in Mantua, he is smitten. We learn that he had first seen Victoria two years before, and that although “her form has oft upon [his mind] returned” (Baillie 2001a: 139/II.2.94), he had told no one. Upon seeing Victoria the second time, Basil becomes “bewitched” (Baillie 2001a: 139/II.2.75; 185/IV.3.79) and “enthralled” by her (Baillie 2001a: 186/IV.3.86). At first he resolves not to let his passion derail his military career (Baillie 2001a: 127/I.2.161–63), yet he soon delays his plan to join Charles V for battle at Pavia, staying in Mantua to try to win over Victoria. Rosinberg tries to reason with Basil to get him to move his troops as planned, telling Basil that he is risking his military fame through “blind passion” (Baillie 2001a: 187/IV.3.144), but Basil persists, and, unsurprisingly, this leads to

⁷ References to *Count Basil* include the page number in Baillie 2001a, followed by act, scene, and line number.

disastrous results. Baillie thus suggests that Basil's feelings for Victoria are an example of "small beginnings" that "brood within the breast" and eventually become "strong and fixed passions" (ID 86), so that "with small assistance from outward circumstances, [they] work their way in the heart, till they become the tyrannical masters of it" (ID 94).

We might be tempted to think that Basil is, by nature, unable to curb his strong emotions. Indeed, Rosinberg, Basil, and the Duke (among others) all claim that their own and others' character traits are due to nature (Baillie 2001a: 152/III.1.18–22; 182/IV.2.192; and 144/II.3.131–33). At the beginning of the play, Gauricio (one of the Duke's ministers) describes Basil's pursuit of military glory and says he is made of "flinty matter" (Baillie 2001a: 123/I.2.10); he is "hot and fiery in his nature" (Baillie 2001a: 141/III.1.31) and easily sparked. But while Gauricio suggests that this is due to Basil's nature, Baillie intimates that it is, in fact, due to an overly indulgent upbringing. We learn that Basil was raised by Rosinberg, who is accused of "foolish admiration" for Basil (Baillie 2001a: 123/I.2.18), and who admits he indulged Basil as a child, even having done his schoolwork for him (IV.3.182/188). After unsuccessfully trying to persuade Basil to move his troops to Pavia, Rosinberg gives in to Basil with a rueful "Indulge thy will" (Baillie 2001a: 188/IV.3.190). Baillie thus hints that with a less indulgent guardian, Basil might have turned out differently, able to regulate his emotions so that neither the love of military glory nor the love of Victoria would overpower reason.

Victoria, too, is unable to control her passions with reason. She petulantly accuses her friend Isabella of cheating at chess (Baillie 2001a: 146/II.4.3), extols the powers of her beauty to conquer men (Baillie 2001a: 146/II.4.23–27), has adopted (from the arms of his nurse) a little boy she saw in a park because she wanted him as a "little pet" (Baillie 2001a: 149/II.4.119), and makes the child sleep in a room overlooking a cemetery because she "loves it for the lofty trees" even though he finds it terrifying (Baillie 2001a: 171/III.3.287–96). Her own governess, Countess Albini, thinks little of Victoria's character, saying she is as changeable as "vapour . . . which highly rises on the morning air,/ And shifts its fleeting form with ev'ry breeze," and "the sober dignity of virtue wear[s] not" (Baillie 2001a: 193/IV.4. 52–62). In sharp contrast, Victoria's deceased mother is described by Albini as "perfect" (Baillie 2001a: 149/II.4.95; see also 120/I.1.40–44), and Albini says of her that

If foolish vanity e'er soil'd her thoughts
She kept it low, withheld its aliment;
Not pamper'd it with ev'ry motley food,
From the fond tribute of a noble heart,
To the lisp'd flatt'ry of a cunning child. (Baillie 2001a: 148/II.4.68–72)

Victoria's mother exemplifies what Baillie says in the Introductory Discourse is needed for virtue, that powerful passions not "increase and nourish themselves" on any "aliment" (ID 92); Victoria, however, "pampered" her vanity "with ev'ry motley food" (Baillie 2001a: 148/II.4.70).

Victoria's character also contrasts with that of the wise and virtuous Albini. Saddened by Victoria's desire for male admiration, Albini says to herself :

O! I could hate her for that poor ambition
Which silly admiration only claims,
But that I well remember, in my youth
I felt the like—I did not feel it long;
I tore it soon, indignant from my breast,
As that which did degrade a noble mind. (Baillie 2001a: 194/IV.4. 70–75)

She chastises Victoria for not being able to “subdue” the “spirit” in her “which vainly covets all men’s admiration” (Baillie 2001a: 193/IV.4.31–34). But we also learn that Countess Albini was governess to both Victoria and her mother (Baillie 2001a: 149/II.4.94), so, again, we might wonder if there is simply some innate factor that explains their different responses to emotions. However, the difference seems to be due to their upbringings by Albini. Albini says to Victoria that although Victoria’s mother was “perfect,” “I know not that she went so near my heart/ As thou, with all thy faults” (Baillie 2001a: 149/II.4.95–97), and in her monologue about Victoria’s character, she describes Victoria as “my most tormenting, and most pleasing charge” (Baillie 2001a: 193/IV.4.51). Baillie seems to be suggesting that Albini’s affection for Victoria has made her too indulgent, and that this is why Victoria has not developed the same virtuous character that her mother had. For Baillie, one’s character is significantly shaped by early education, and is not innate.

This is reinforced by passages in other plays, and by Baillie’s commentary in the Preface to the Reader in Volume 3 of *A Series of Plays*. Commenting about the main character in *The Siege*, a comedy on fear, Baillie says that Baron Valdemere’s cowardice is not “constitutional”; rather, “cowardice in him has been cultivated by indulgence of every kind; and self-conceit and selfishness are the leading traits of his character, which might have been originally trained to useful and honourable activity” (Baillie 1812: xi). When Valdemere’s mother accuses him of lacking “prudence and economy,” he replies, “Notable virtues indeed, Madam; but where was I to learn them pray? Did you ever before recommend them to me, by either precept or example?” (Baillie 1812: 216/II.3).

This is not to say that Baillie thinks *passions* are not innate. As we have seen, she thinks that sympathetic curiosity is “strongly implanted within us” (ID 69), and she says this is just one among various “other propensities and passions” that God has given humans “for wise and good purposes” (ID 74). But she does hold that the ability to *regulate* these passions is learned. Indeed, the benefit of theater is that it can help people learn just that. Good guidance in childhood is needed, but learning to regulate one’s passions does not end then; it is an ongoing process, assisted through exercising sympathetic curiosity. Baillie writes that “unless when accompanied with passions of the dark and malevolent kind, we cannot well exercise this disposition without becoming more just, more merciful, more compassionate” (ID 74). By seeing how others respond to their own emotions, we

learn what to watch out for in ourselves, so we are “prepared for distressing and difficult situations” (ID 74).

Thus by understanding how strong passions can develop and affect the mind, we can protect ourselves from them. In a “tempest” of strong emotion, we might be unable to “listen to the voice of reason,” but if we know something about human nature, we can “foresee its coming, we can mark its rising signs, we can know the situations that will most expose us to its rage, and we can shelter our heads from its coming blast” (ID 92). Baillie is especially concerned with trying to show the “pernicious and dangerous nature” of “bad passions” (ID 108) such as hate, jealousy, pride, envy, revenge, and anger. These “malevolent” and “strong” passions develop from “small beginnings” (ID 86, 91); it takes “very slight cause” to stir them up (ID 103), and they are “aided by circumstances of little importance” (ID 108; see also ID 94). As she puts it, powerful passions “will increase and nourish themselves on very slender aliment. It is from within that they are chiefly supplied with what they feed on” (ID 92). Through sympathetic curiosity, we can learn how to detect these passions when they are still mere “small beginnings” and thus be prepared to squash them before they become full-blown.

Baillie’s *A Series of Plays* project elicited mixed responses (Duthie 2001). In an 1800 review, the *Literary Leisure* called the then-unidentified author of the first volume a “genius” for the plan of focusing on particular passions, and praised the Introductory Discourse for “a depth of reasoning, an acuteness of penetration, and accuracy of observation, not often to be met with” (Duthie 2001: 426). On the other hand, Francis Jeffrey complained in an 1803 review in the *Edinburgh Review* – by which time Baillie’s authorship was known – that it was “plainly impossible” to “confine the attention, and tie down the sympathies to the observance of one master passion through a whole play,” because any passion must “encounter and overcome” another passion in order to show the strength of the former, and because “a certain portion of our sympathy must necessarily be reserved for the fate and the feelings of those who are the objects and the victims of this ruling passion in the hero” (Duthie 2001: 431). Reviewers focused on the practicality of the plan, and on the plots, dialogue, and characters of the plays themselves; as Peter Duthie (2001: 55–56) points out, the reviewers frequently made sexist comments. However, regarding the theory of human nature and sympathetic curiosity expressed in the Introductory Discourse, Elizabeth Hamilton seems to have been the first to comment.

5. Elizabeth Hamilton’s “Science of Mind”

The first two books that Elizabeth Hamilton (1758–1816) published were, despite their unlikely titles, novels: *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796) and *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800). Hamilton later published a third novel, *Cottagers of Glenburnie* (1808) and a biography of Agrippina (1804). She adopted an epistolary style in *Letters on Education* (1801, also published in 1801 under the title *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education*) and *Letters Addressed to the Daughter of a Nobleman* (1806). Her two-volume *A Series of*

Popular Essays (Hamilton 1813, hereafter *SPE*, citing volume and page) is, of all her works, the one most recognizable as a philosophical treatise. It offers an account of the “science of mind” (*SPE* 1:xvi) in the tradition of Hume and Reid, aimed at “the improvement of the understanding, the imagination, and the heart” (*SPE* 1:xiv–vx).

Hamilton’s *Series of Popular Essays* begins by describing various mental faculties – perception, conception, judgment, reasoning, imagination, and taste. Her claim is that the proper development of these faculties requires that, from earliest childhood, a person’s *attention* be directed to the right kinds of objects. Without attention to the “proper objects” (*SPE* 1:55) of perception, conception, and so on, these mental faculties become “languid or defective” (*SPE* 1:83, 1:102–103). For example, Hamilton says that girls are raised to attend primarily to their clothes and to observe closely the fashions and the dress of those around them (*SPE* 1:80), so much so that they may become “so void of perception, with regard to other objects, as to pass many of the most striking, both in the works of nature and of art, without perceiving their existence” (*SPE* 1:80). She generally advises that children should learn “habits of general observation” (*SPE* 1:84) by having their attention directed to a “multiplicity of objects” (*SPE* 1:126; see also 1:77). Like Baillie, Hamilton stresses that attending to others’ motives, emotions, and actions helps people develop virtuous character; in the person who fails to attend to others, his “conceptions of what is generous, or noble, or amiable in sentiment or conduct, are so dull and languid, that he seems utterly incapable of discerning the excellence or utility of such modes of thinking or acting” (*SPE* 1:102–103). Here, however, Hamilton suggests that children’s attention should be directed not to the full range of human behavior but only to others’ qualities of “justice, mercy, benignity, truth, purity, &c,” in order to develop those virtuous traits and “benevolent affections” themselves (*SPE* 1:xl; see also 1:102).⁸ Hamilton has a religious aim here, for she thinks that Jesus provides the best model of benevolent action and emotions (*SPE* 2:387).

In the fourth essay, Hamilton turns to a new topic, identifying a human propensity that she thinks has not been properly distinguished by anyone else from self-love and selfishness. “Strange to tell,” she writes, “this active principle is still without a name” (*SPE* 1:272), although it is actually the most active of all the principles governing human nature (*SPE* 1:279). She calls this the “selfish principle” (see Boyle 2021a). By the time Hamilton was writing, it was customary to distinguish self-love from selfishness; this distinction occurs in the writings of Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft, both of whom Hamilton mentions in *Memoirs* (see Rousseau 1992: 91; Wollstonecraft 2009: 266). But Hamilton emphasizes that although the “selfish principle” has “been usually confounded either with selfishness or with self-love” (*SPE* 1:xxix), it is distinct from both. Self-love, essential for survival, is “simply the desire for happiness” (*SPE* 1:273). Selfishness is “an inordinate desire of self-gratification” (*SPE* 1:273). The selfish principle, however, is a tendency in the human mind “to enlarge the idea of the

⁸ Baillie might agree with this, for children if not for adults. Baillie’s discussion of the role of theater seems to be focused on how adults can hone their understanding of vice and virtue, not on how children develop it in the first place.

self” (*SPE* 1:272). Each person has an idea of their own self, and the selfish principle seeks to “enlarge” this idea of self so that one sees oneself as more important or otherwise better than others. Hamilton says this occurs through the association of ideas (*SPE* 1:310, 397), when the original idea of self is conjoined with, and thereby identified with, another idea (or ideas). This can occur in a variety of ways. One of Hamilton’s examples is of a “lady of fashion” who links the “skill of the artisan, the ingenuity of the manufacturer, the taste of the dressmaker” with her own idea of her self, even though, considered apart from their connection to herself, she views those individuals “with utter contempt” (*SPE* 1:290). In associating her idea of herself with the ideas of their skill, ingenuity, and taste, her idea of herself is now larger, referring to more than just herself. Hamilton says this process of association of ideas can be performed with any number of ideas, such as one’s distinguished or wealthy acquaintances (*SPE* 1:283–84); possessions such as fine clothes, dogs, or horses (*SPE* 1:287); one’s country (*SPE* 1:xxxx), school, college, or university (*SPE* 1:353, 2:73–74); one’s ancestors (*SPE* 1:312–13), children (*SPE* 2:217), and future descendants (*SPE* 1:321–22); and even, somewhat absurdly, one’s future funeral and headstone (*SPE* 1:318).

Hamilton thinks that, unless care is taken by a child’s caregiver to limit the effects of the selfish principle, then that principle will be the driving force in forming the child’s character. The selfish principle will tend to “mingle” with the child’s thoughts and passions (*SPE* 1:277, 329), making those thoughts and passions “subservient to its gratification” (*SPE* 1:276). If the selfish principle mixes with an existing “malevolent” passion such as pride or envy, it will make that passion even stronger, leading to vicious rather than virtuous behavior. The selfish principle can even corrupt what would otherwise be benevolent passions. Hamilton offers an example of a woman who does virtuous charity work but who is nonetheless not so virtuous as to have tamed the selfish principle; if “her idea of self mingles with her zeal to serve,” her just pride in her charity work will be magnified into vanity (*SPE* 2:219). What caregivers must do, Hamilton advises, is to properly direct children’s attention, away from such things as clothes and horses, and towards the good and noble qualities and actions of other people. Only thus can benevolent passions be cultivated that will minimize the effects of the selfish principle.

As we have seen, Hamilton thinks almost all writers on the “science of mind” have failed to note the distinctive way that the selfish principle operates, in contrast to selfishness and self-love. And she thinks that Joanna Baillie’s account of sympathetic curiosity also needs to be supplemented by taking the role of the selfish principle into account.

6. Hamilton’s Critique of Baillie

Baillie and Hamilton were at least acquaintances. In an 1809 letter, Baillie mentions Hamilton and the success of her recently published novel *Cottagers of Glenburnie* (Baillie 2010: 45), and Hamilton’s *A Series of Popular Essays* contains two references to Baillie. One is just a passing reference (*SPE* 2:246), but the other is more substantive, and critical. Hamilton quotes a long passage from the beginning

of Baillie's Introductory Discourse about how sympathetic curiosity leads people to observe others' manners, words, and actions in order to gain insight into their motives and emotions. As we saw earlier, Baillie says that gossiping and tattling can result from sympathetic curiosity, which is the same principle at work in the comments and writings of "satirist[s] and wit[s]" (SPE 1:355, quoting ID 67–68). But Hamilton does not entirely accept Baillie's analysis. Noting that Baillie has called it "sympathetic" curiosity, she asks, "But why should the gratification of this curiosity produce *mischievous tattling*?" (SPE 1:356; emphasis added). That is, she suggests, if it were really a *sympathetic* kind of curiosity, it should result in *benevolent* behavior.

It seems that in her critique of Baillie, Hamilton understands "sympathy" rather differently than Baillie does. For Baillie, the "sympathy" in sympathetic curiosity is merely a recognition of a shared human nature, while for Hamilton, sympathy produces benevolent emotions. On Hamilton's account of sympathy, it is a "law of nature" that kindness and other benevolent actions are "productive of correspondent emotions through sympathy" (SPE 2:362); sympathy is inherently virtuous (see Boyle 2021a). So, when Baillie says that sympathetic curiosity can lead to unkind behavior, Hamilton's response is that the unkindness shows that *another* principle is in play – not sympathy (at least not as Hamilton understands it), but the selfish principle. Hamilton writes,

Were it not for the degree in which the selfish principle operates, sympathy with our fellow-creatures would naturally excite in us a desire to discover and proclaim the virtues which have escaped the notice of the world. (SPE 1:356)

The fact that people seek out some character flaw or malevolent passion in another shows that they are trying to gratify the selfish principle that encourages them to think more highly of themselves than of others (SPE 1:356). Hamilton holds that Baillie is wrong to characterize this curiosity as "sympathetic," not just because the two women have different conceptions of what sympathy is but also because Baillie – like everyone else, according to Hamilton – has failed to notice the pervasive effects of the selfish principle.

Hamilton also quotes the passage where Baillie acknowledges that, in conversation, people tend to focus on people's "dress, manners, and domestic arrangements" (SPE 1:358, quoting ID 68). "To all this I willingly subscribe," says Hamilton, yet, she says,

It remains to be shewn why, in communicating our remarks on the dress, manners, and domestic arrangements of others, we should delight to find in these somewhat to censure, to ridicule, or to condemn. Whence does it proceed, that an exact conformity to our own peculiar ways, and modes, and habits, is the only passport to our approbation? (SPE 1:358)

Again, her answer is that another propensity is in play in human nature, the selfish principle, which Baillie has not recognized. That is, according to Hamilton, the

phenomenon Baillie describes occurs because the selfish principle tends to bend sympathetic curiosity in the wrong direction, making us look for bad qualities in people so we can feel better about ourselves. Hamilton evidently thinks Baillie's sympathetic curiosity will only help improve the characters of people who are already benevolent and virtuous. For those in whom the selfish principle dominates, sympathetic curiosity will never advance beyond "trivial and mischievous tattling" (ID 68).

Although Baillie did not reply in print to Hamilton's critique, she surely would have agreed with this last point. Although she calls sympathetic curiosity "our best and most powerful instructor" (ID 74), she also mentions, as we saw earlier, that sympathetic curiosity only makes us "more just, more merciful, more compassionate" so long as it is not "accompanied with passions of the dark and malevolent kind" (ID 74), and so long as we remember and reflect on our observations (ID 75). Sympathetic curiosity assists and maintains virtuous actions and feelings; Baillie never meant to suggest, as Hamilton seems to assume she did, that it is itself an inherently virtuous disposition.⁹

7. Conclusion

I have aimed to show that although Baillie was primarily known as a poet and playwright, her Introductory Discourse contains a philosophically interesting theory of sympathetic curiosity, and that her plays can be mined for her views on the relationships among passions, motives, and actions. By looking beyond the traditionally philosophical genre of the treatise or dialogue, it can be shown that talented Scottish women were not merely "in the drawing-room" and "in the background" (Emerson and Spencer 2019: 24), but were doing philosophical work of their own. More broadly, even outside the Scottish context, by expanding the types of texts they are willing to work with, historians of philosophy can identify more women who were doing philosophy in the past.

Furthermore, when we consider Hamilton's critique of Baillie, we see something unusual: a woman philosopher discussing, in print, work by another woman philosopher. That Hamilton seems to have misread Baillie should not vitiate the importance of this exchange. A few other cases of explicit engagement by one woman philosopher with the work of another have been previously identified by scholars. Damaris Masham's *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1696) was a critique of the views of Mary Astell and John Norris in their *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695) (see Broad 2003). While Astell is not named in the *Letters*, she is characterized as a "young gentlewoman" (Norris 1695: A3),

⁹ Hamilton is read by various scholars as a conservative, anti-Jacobin novelist (Kelly 1993; Grenby 2001). In *Memoirs*, she mocks both the radical political philosopher William Godwin and the writer Mary Hays (Kelly 1993: 149). Might her political conservatism have contributed to her uncharitable reading of Baillie? I find this unlikely, for Hamilton tempers her criticism by noting that it is Baillie's own benevolent nature that led her to think that our curiosity about others is sympathetic (*SPE* 1:355). That is, Hamilton seems to have had a favorable view overall of Baillie's work. Moreover, it does not seem that Baillie was considered in her day to be a radical thinker. Scullion (1997: 167) refers to Baillie's "conservative politics," although, as Judson (2006: 66n10) points out, there is no scholarly consensus regarding Baillie's political views.

so Masham knew one of her opponents was female. In another case, Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (2009: 109–10 and 145) briefly criticizes Madame de Staël and quotes approvingly from Catherine Macauley (see Hill 1995: 186–89; Frazer 2011: 606–607; Coffee 2019). In an 1884 essay, Frances Power Cobbe criticizes Annie Besant’s defense of utilitarianism, rather than religion, as the proper basis of morality (Stone 2022a: 90–91), and Cobbe also engages with the work of Harriet Martineau (Stone 2021: 1101). In some cases, it is primarily because of women scholars that historical women philosophers have been remembered at all. Margaret Cavendish was briefly mentioned in Bathsua Makin’s 1673 *Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen*, but otherwise her writings on natural philosophy were simply ignored until the late twentieth century, when scholars such as Susan James and Eileen O’Neill made the case that Cavendish’s philosophy was worth taking seriously (James 1999; O’Neill 2001). Or consider Mary Shepherd, who offered careful critiques of the views of several male philosophers, including Hume and Berkeley, but whose own philosophical works, despite being praised in print by a handful of male philosophers in her own day, received no critical attention until Margaret Atherton’s work in the 1990s (Atherton 1996).

And even now that historical women philosophers are receiving the attention they deserve, they are often either taught with or interpreted in terms of the work of a male philosopher. As Alison Stone (2022b: 9811) has observed, “It is relatively rare for historical work on past women philosophers to look at these women’s relations to one another rather than to their male contemporaries.” This does not mean the work of past women philosophers should *not* be read in the context of their male contemporaries or predecessors. Understanding Princess Elisabeth’s letters would be impossible without reading them in the context of Descartes’ works and letters to her. Cavendish’s distinctive accounts of causation and sensory perception need to be read in light of Hobbes and Descartes, and Shepherd’s views in light of Hume and Berkeley. Yet as Mary Ellen Waithe (2015: 23) has pointed out, we risk treating women philosophers as “handmaidens” to male philosophers, that is, as merely “building upon, explaining, critiquing, etc. that which has come before.” Male philosophers who do this often manage to “make it into the canon as original thinkers,” whereas when women philosophers do this they get “relegated to that servile second-class status” (Waithe 2015: 23).

One way to avoid presenting historical women philosophers as mere “handmaidens” to male philosophers is to identify, research, and teach texts in which women philosophers engage with each other.¹⁰ However, to highlight ways that women have engaged with the work of other women in the past, our criteria should not be too strict; we might want to include texts that *seem* to have been

¹⁰ We can think of such texts as passing something like the “Bechdel test.” The test can be found first stated in a 1985 comic strip by cartoonist Alison Bechdel, who credits a friend with the original idea (Bechdel 2014). One of the characters says she will only watch movies that meet three criteria: (1) having at least two women characters, who (2) talk to each other, (3) about something other than a man. The Bechdel Test has been the basis of some research into gender roles in film (Appel and Gnams 2023); in a 2014 blog post, Helen de Cruz suggested an analogous test for current-day philosophy papers (De Cruz 2014); and Marshall (2014: 82) has suggested something like this for philosophy syllabi.

influenced by the writings of another woman philosopher, even if the latter is not explicitly named, as well as texts where a woman author was not aware that her interlocutor was another woman, as when Astell assumed in the *Christian Religion* (Astell 1705: 130–31). that Damaris Masham’s anonymously-published *Discourse* was by Locke (Broad 2002: 114). We might even want to include texts where one or more of the interlocutors is fictional; this would include Margaret Cavendish’s *Philosophical Letters*, where Cavendish responds in her letters to a fictional female correspondent raising questions about Cavendish’s views.

The existence of texts where women philosophers responded to each other shows that women were not, and did not think of themselves as, mere handmaidens to male philosophers. In the broad sense of the “conversation model for philosophical history” identified by Sarah Hutton (2015: 17–18), in which philosophical interlocutors across time use “debate, dialogues, objections-and-replies, commentaries, glosses, and correspondence,” the existence of what Hutton calls “women-only conversations” shows that even when women’s philosophical views were neglected or not taken seriously by men, there were nonetheless other philosophers – female ones – who did take those views seriously.¹¹

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Competing interests

The author declares none.

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