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**Women in the
History of Philosophy**



**Catharine Trotter
Cockburn**



Ruth Boeker



Cambridge Elements

Elements on Women in the History of Philosophy

edited by
Jacqueline Broad
Monash University

CATHARINE TROTTER COCKBURN

Ruth Boeker
University College Dublin



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Catharine Trotter Cockburn

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Ruth Boeker

University College Dublin

Author for correspondence: Ruth Boeker, ruth.boeker@ucd.ie

Abstract: This Element offers the first detailed study of Catharine Trotter Cockburn's philosophy and covers her contributions to philosophical debates in epistemology, metaphysics, moral philosophy, and philosophy of religion. It examines not only Cockburn's view that sensation and reflection are the sources of knowledge, but also how she draws attention to the limitations of human understanding and how she approaches metaphysical debates through this lens. In the area of moral philosophy, this Element argues that it is helpful to take seriously Cockburn's distinction between questions concerning the metaphysical foundation of morality and questions concerning the practice of morality. Moreover, this Element examines Cockburn's religious views and considers her understanding of the relation between morality and religion and her religious views concerning the resurrection and the afterlife.

Keywords: Catharine Trotter Cockburn, early modern women philosophers, eighteenth-century British moral philosophy, human nature, metaphysics

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1 Catharine Trotter Cockburn's Life and Works

Catharine Trotter Cockburn was a remarkable playwright, writer, and philosopher. As a philosopher she contributed to a wide range of philosophical debates on issues in epistemology, metaphysics, moral philosophy, and religion.

1.1 Life and Career as Writer, Playwright, and Philosopher

Catharine Trotter (later Cockburn) was born in London in the 1670s, probably on 16 August 1679, as the second daughter of her parents David Trotter and Sarah Trotter (née Ballenden).¹ Her parents were both Scottish. Her father David Trotter was a sea captain, working as commander for the Royal Navy, but unfortunately died in 1684. His death left the family in difficult financial circumstances. Sarah Trotter received a widow's pension from Charles II, but following the king's death in 1685, the family had to rely on the support of family and friends and her pension was not renewed until 1702 when Queen Anne acceded to the throne.² Catharine grew up under these financially challenging circumstances and is said to have largely educated herself. For instance, she taught herself how to write and to speak French 'without any instructor' (Birch 1751: 1:iv), but, as her biographer Thomas Birch notes, 'she had some assistance in the study of the *Latin* grammar and *Logic*' (Birch 1751: 1:iv–v).

She started writing at a young age and her literary writings include poetry, a novella, and five plays, which were all performed in London. Her first published work is an epistolary novella, *The Adventures of a Young Lady*, which she published anonymously in 1693 in *Letters of Love and Gallantry and Several Other Subjects, All Written by Ladies* (Briscoe 1693).³ In 1695 her first play, *Agnes de Castro*, was performed and published in 1696. This was followed by *Fatal Friendship* (1698), *Love at a Loss* (1701), *The Unhappy Penitent* (1701), and *The Revolution of Sweden* (1706).⁴ As Kelley (2004) notes, '[h]er drama is notable in this period for its unusually rational and politically aware female characters'. During these years Trotter also started to engage with

¹ According to her biographer, Thomas Birch (1751: 1:iv), she was born on 16 August 1679, but Kelley (2002: 1 n. 1) has found a church record that suggests that she was born five years earlier and baptized on 29 August 1674. However, there is also other evidence that points to a more likely birthdate in 1679. For instance, her gravestone states that she died 'in the 70 year of her age' (Kelley 2002: 1 n. 1). Moreover, Cockburn mentions in a letter to Pope from 1738 that she will soon turn 60 (British Library, Add. MS 4265, fol. 31, Broad (2021: 124 n. 7)). See also Kelley (2004, 2006b: vii).

² See Birch (1751: 1:iii–iv), Kelley (2004).

³ This work was retitled *Olinda's Adventures, or, the Armour of a Young Lady* and reprinted by Briscoe under her name in 1718; it is also reprinted in Kelley (2006a).

⁴ *Fatal Friendship* is the only play that was reprinted in her *Works*. See Kelley (2002) for further discussion. See also Bigold (2013: chs. 3 and 4).

the philosophical debates of her day and published her first philosophical work, *A Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay of Human Understanding*, in 1702, which I will discuss in [Section 1.2.1](#).

Catharine Trotter was born into an Anglican family but converted to Catholicism at a young age. However, as she devoted more time to philosophical and religious studies and writing and as she also spent more time in philosophical and religious circles in London and Salisbury, she started to question her Catholic faith.⁵ After thorough examination of both faiths, she converted back to Anglicanism in 1707 and published *A Discourse Concerning a Guide in Controversies* (*Works* 1:2–42) with a preface by Gilbert Burnet in the same year. This work outlines her criticism of the Roman Catholic Church. Gilbert Burnet, who was Bishop of Salisbury, his third wife, Elizabeth Berkeley Burnet, and Gilbert Burnet's cousin, Thomas Burnet of Kemnay,⁶ played an important role in Cockburn's conversion back to the Church of England. Indeed, Elizabeth Berkeley Burnet went so far as to write to John Locke in June 1702 and to ask for his assistance to free her from 'a relegion that puts such schacles on the exercise of thought and reason' ([Locke 1976–89](#): letter 3153, 7:638).⁷

In 1708 Catharine married the clergyman Patrick Cockburn (1678–1749), and they moved from London to Nayland, Suffolk, the same year, but returned to London in 1713. Patrick Cockburn lost his appointment as curate when George I became king and Patrick refused to take the oath of abjuration. The subsequent years were financially challenging for the Cockburn family. After further consultation, Patrick Cockburn eventually agreed to take the oath in 1726 and was appointed as minister of the Episcopal Church in Aberdeen. They lived in Aberdeen for over a decade until Patrick was required to take up residence in Longhorsley in Northumberland in 1737. Catharine joined him there sometime between late 1738 and 1740.⁸ Catharine and Patrick had four children: Sarah, Catharine, John, and Grissel.⁹

It is often thought that Cockburn's family duties left her little time for writing and that this explains why she did not publish any works between 1708 and 1726.¹⁰ However, as Melanie [Bigold \(2013\)](#) notes, 'presenting Cockburn's writing from this print-oriented perspective is unfaithful to her lifelong

⁵ For further details concerning these intellectual circles, see [Bigold \(2013: ch. 3\)](#) and [Broad \(2002: ch 6\)](#).

⁶ Selections of Cockburn's correspondence with Thomas Burnet are included in her *Works*.

⁷ Elizabeth Berkeley Burnet started corresponding with Locke in the 1690s. For further details, see [Broad \(2019: ch. 4\)](#).

⁸ See [Broad \(2020: 189 n. 296\)](#).

⁹ Her correspondence with Arbuthnot provides further insight into her family life (see *Correspondence* 125–253).

¹⁰ For instance, see [Birch \(1751\)](#), [Broad \(2002: 156\)](#), [Myers \(1990: 164\)](#).

programme of reading and writing on literary, religious, and philosophical issues' (97). Bigold argues that it is important to consider Cockburn's unpublished manuscripts, in addition to her published works, to gain a fuller appreciation of her writings.¹¹ Bigold notes further that manuscript circulation was common in social and intellectual circles in eighteenth-century Britain and that not all manuscripts were intended for print publication. Moreover, Cockburn lacked the financial means to pay for publication costs herself and depended on patronage. Manuscript circulation helped her not only to share ideas, but also to find patrons to sponsor print publications (Bigold 2013: ch. 3).

Since I will comment further on her major published philosophical and religious works in the [next section](#), I want to highlight here some of her other writings and correspondence that shed light on her philosophical thinking. Between 1731 and 1748 she was engaged in correspondence with her niece Ann Hepburn Arbuthnot. Cockburn takes on the role of mentor and encourages Arbuthnot's independent intellectual development and critical thinking.¹² Cockburn and Arbuthnot regularly exchange and discuss moral and religious books as well as novels and other literature. In their letters they discuss the moral philosophy of the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Samuel Clarke, Joseph Butler, and various other philosophers. Additionally, Cockburn's correspondence with Thomas Sharp (*Works* 2:353–460)¹³ and Edmund Law (Correspondence 254–65) sheds helpful light on her moral philosophy.

Although Cockburn rarely discusses the role of women in her published philosophical works, she was well aware of the challenges that women of her day faced, as her correspondence documents.¹⁴ Moreover, in her 'Letter of Advice to Her Son' (*Works* 2:111–21), she argues for the equality of men and women and criticizes the unjust ways in which many men treat women:

But do not imagine, that women are to be considered only as objects of your pleasure, as the fine gentlemen of the world seem, by their conduct, to do. There is nothing more unjust, more base, and barbarous, than is often practised towards them, under the specious names of love and gallantry; as if they had not an equal right, with those of the other sex, to be treated with justice and honour. (*Works* 2:119)

Cockburn continued her intellectual activities until the end of her life. She was well read in the philosophical and religious debates that took place in Britain during her day and engaged with them with wit and intellectual

¹¹ Cockburn's extant manuscripts can be found in the British Library, Add. MS 4264–7.

¹² See Cockburn, Correspondence 146, 149.

¹³ For letters not included in her *Works*, see British Library, Add. MS 4264 and 4266.

¹⁴ See also Broad (2014) and Hutton (2017) for further discussion of the challenges that women philosophers of the early modern period encountered.