

## Sarah Hutton

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### **‘Women, Freedom and Equality: Margaret Cavendish and Mary Astell’**

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#### *The author*

Sarah Hutton is one of the foremost intellectual historians of later seventeenth-century England. She was educated at New Hall, Cambridge, where she read English between 1968 and 1971. It was there that her interests took a decisive turn towards the history of philosophy, when in her final year she studied the paper on ‘English Moralists’ (generously defined as ranging from Plato to Marx). After a year studying art at St Martin’s, she went to the Warburg to undertake research for a PhD (1978) under the supervision of D.P. Walker. She was thus at the Warburg in one of its heroic periods, when Frances Yates, Walker and others were transforming the style and content of intellectual history in Britain. Subsequently she held teaching positions at Roehampton and the Universities of Hertfordshire and Middlesex, before moving to Aberystwyth as Professor in English in 2007. She has held visiting positions at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, at Barnard and at Utrecht, and among many editorial commitments is Director of the series the *International Archive of the History of Ideas* for Springer.

She has transformed understanding of two overlapping areas of late seventeenth-century intellectual history in particular, the Cambridge Platonists and the philosophical interests of women. Editions of texts by Cudworth and a Life of Henry More have been complemented by edited volumes and a host of articles devoted to exploring the inter-relation between the philosophical, theological and scientific interests of this still-neglected Cambridge circle. In the second area a major monograph on Anne Conway followed a revision of Marjorie Nicholson’s classic edition of *The Conway Letters*, recommended by Hugh Trevor-Roper as the ‘mirror of a whole society’. She has also written on Margaret Cavendish, and, in the eighteenth century, on the religious convictions of Catherine Macaulay. While here in Cambridge she is preparing a new History of British Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century, commissioned by the O.U.P. Other current projects include participation in a project ‘Rethinking Herbert of Cherbury, and research and the discourse of religion and women’s rights from Astell to Wollstonecraft.

#### *Selected publications*

*Anne Conway, a Woman Philosopher*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)  
*The Conway Letters: the Correspondence of Anne, Viscountess Conway, Henry More and their Friends, 1642-1684*, a revised edition, with a new introduction and new materials, of a collection originally edited by Marjorie Nicolson in 1930. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992)  
A Critical Edition of Richard Ward’s *Life of Henry More*. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000)

Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* and *A Treatise of Freewill*, new edition of both texts, with a critical introduction, notes and glossary. (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

*Platonism at the Origins of Modernity. Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. D. Hedley and Sarah Hutton, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2008)

*Studies on Locke: Sources, Contemporaries and Legacy*, edited with Paul Schuurman. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008)

*Henry More (1614-1687): Tercentenary Studies*, ed. S. Hutton. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990)

'Liberty, Equality and God. The religious roots of Catherine Macaulay's feminism', in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, eds. Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004)

### *Abstract*

In the seventeenth century, the opportunities for women to make sustained contributions to political theory were very limited, and such contributions as they did make often fall outside the generic scope of texts in the history of political thought. The two women whom I discuss, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623–1673) and Mary Astell (1666–1731), both wrote on political issues, and they were well-aware of contemporary political philosophy (principally and respectively, Hobbes and Locke). But their political views often have to be reconstructed from unconventional sources including fiction and religious writings. My paper explores their treatment of liberty and equality, two themes which are staple fare of both political thought in general and feminist history in particular. I show that their treatment of these themes can appear paradoxical if not contradictory from a feminist perspective, particularly in view of Cavendish's endorsement of monarchical and marital absolutism, and Astell's piety and her acceptance of the prevailing political order. I argue that their conception of liberty and equality is coloured by the very specific social and political circumstances within which they lived and wrote, and that it is necessary to grasp this in order to evaluate their feminism. Although there were major differences between them socially, politically and philosophically, there are parallels in their perception of the problems faced by women and the solutions they propose. Both attempt to negotiate with the social *status quo*, within the constraints of which they attempt to enlarge women's scope for free action. And common to both is an ideal of *inner* freedom, which is directly related to their championship of women's education.

### *Further reading*

'Philosophers or Princesses? Anne Conway, Margaret Cavendish and the Revaluation of Philosophical Noblewomen of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in *Das Glück der Vernunft*, ed. Ruth Hagengruber (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010)

'Margaret Cavendish and Henry More'. *A Princely Brave Woman: Collected Essays on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle*, ed. S. Clucas, (London: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 185-98.

'The Ethical Background of the Rights of Women', in *Philosophical Theory and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, ed. W. Sweet. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2003), pp. 26-40.