‘The new and untrodden path’: Catharine Cockburn, Philosophy, and the Republic of Letters

M. Cockburn deserveth the first Rank among the best Moral Writers. In Strength & Clearness of Reasoning in force & propriety of Language few have been her Equals. Her Manner & Matter are greatly superior to all the Performances of the Whole Sex in all Ages and Places of the Whole World. Some memorial should be preserved of so extraordinary a Person. The following Account, tho' very imperfect, is the best we have been able to procure.219

Catharine Cockburn (1674?–1749), dramatist, poet, philosopher, religious controversialist, and prolific writer of both fictional and familiar letters has, like Elizabeth Rowe, been characterised as a manifestly exemplary female writer. She never enjoyed the lasting popularity that Friendship in Death and Devout Exercises accorded Rowe, but was nevertheless a consistently good writer in prose, whether epistolary, dramatic, or didactic. For many literary critics, Cockburn’s importance rests on her dramatic career and her appearance as one of the small group of female playwrights who wrote directly after Aphra Behn. Her poetry, though less well known, is also of interest because of what it tells us about her literary processes: much of it is incidental, coterie-produced, and courts patronage through political encomium. However, Cockburn’s most significant claim to fame is that she was an extraordinarily well-versed and educated philosopher and polemicist, and gained the praise of numerous prominent contemporaries for her able defences of John Locke and Samuel Clarke. In addition, the interest of the ecclesiastical and academic communities in Scotland and Cambridge confirm her centrality in debates now seen as crucial to the Enlightenment controversies underway at those

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Catharine Cockburn, as the encomiast quoted above notes, deserves a significant rank in the list of moral writers of the period and wider acknowledgment as one of England’s foremost Enlightenment women writers of the early eighteenth century.

The learned lady and biography

Catharine Cockburn, née Trotter, was the youngest daughter of David Trotter, a Scottish naval captain during the reign of Charles II, and Sarah Ballenden, who was related to several noble Scottish families. According to evidence found by Anne Kelley, the author of the new ODNB article on Cockburn and the recent critical biography on her life and works, Cockburn’s birth date is five years earlier than that provided by Thomas Birch in his eighteenth-century biography, falling on 16 August 1674 and not 1679. Despite the singular difference of dates, both biographies offer a similar outline of her life: her father’s death and the family’s subsequent financial problems; her precocious early education; her literary and patronage connections; her successful publications; her religious conversions; her marriage to Patrick Cockburn (1678–1749) in 1708; her extensive letter-writing network; and her struggle to get many of her works into print. Where they differ is in their contrasting views about the critical representation of Cockburn. Kelley, as her subtitle – ‘an early modern writer in the vanguard of feminism’ – suggests, is interested in Cockburn’s proto-feminism. Such feminist rehabilitation and focus is important; Cockburn is long overdue for rediscovery, and Kelley covers an impressive amount of often-overlooked material (letters included) in her study. However, her tendency to dismiss Birch’s and subsequent writers’ construction of Cockburn as one that touts ‘the exemplary, rather austere, learned lady’ is problematic. Cockburn was a rather austere, learned lady, and the fact that she wrote from a fundamentally religious and philosophical perspective need not be equated with being unfeminist. Indeed, the fact that she was being held up as an eminently qualified philosophical polemicist suggests that her male encomiasts were actively supporting ‘feminist’ claims to learned equality. We need not take the word of male biographers alone in this. Her friend and patron, Sarah, Lady Piers, frequently comments on Cockburn’s strict notions of honourable and virtuous action as the most rigorous, but therefore valuable, aspect of her friendship.

Cockburn, like many early modern women interested in Stoicism and Christian morality, consciously sought to master the art of rational self-government. Therefore, while this sometimes means that contemporary